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COLD STEEL

M. P. SHIEL

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Cold Steel

By

M. P. Shiel

Author of

'Prince Zaleski,' 'The Yellow Danger,' etc.

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Grant Richards

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À MA PETITE FAFEMME,

LINA,

QUE J'AIME BEAUCOUP.

After this work was printed off, it was pointed out that the title, 'Cold Steel,' had already been used for a work on swordsmanship by Captain Alfred Hutton. The title, however, by Captain Hutton's courtesy, has been allowed to stand.

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Cold Steel

CHAPTER I

THE FORDS

'Yet they live again in the dreamer's brain,
As deeds of Love and Wrong,
Which pass with a sigh, and seem to die,
Survive in the poet's song.'

BARRY CORNWALL.

THE literary historians have not always recorded the most interesting, or the most important, facts of history. They tell us of the Battle of the Spurs, but not of the incidents of Luther's youth; of the Edict of Nantes, but not of the case of Bessie Ford.

Yet these unrecorded were more interesting and important than those recorded events.

As for Bessie Ford, she was like a pebble dropped into water, round which float out and widen slow circles; only, in *her* case, instead of the circles fading as they widened, they still gathered depth and height, they filled a sea, till at the horizon they rolled away in sombre billows, mountain-high.

Bessie Ford lived the most intensive part of her life during the second reigning decade of that strong English monarch, Harry VIII.

Let us state at once that the whole motive and mainspring of her life lay in a sister, called Laura Ford. We say 'called' with special meaning, for it is doubtful if Ford could have been the girl's real

name. It was more probably Garcia, or Gomez, or Perez.

Bessie was a girl of humble though worthy class, born in Hampshire, both her great-grandfather and grandfather having been noted in their small world as good Lollards, men who walked with God in this their journey, and His, through the great Deep; her father also having been for years a chorister in Winchester Cathedral. But once, when she was three years old, some Spanish noblemen connected with the Court came, with retinues, on an Autumn visit to my Lord Bishop of Winchester. And to the Episcopal Palace Bessie's mother, then a widow, often took eggs and butter to sell.

And so (as we suspect) it came about that, whereas Bessie Ford was a girl of quite plain and homely seeming, her sister Laura, four years younger, was a creature of simply gorgeous world-loveliness, flamboyant as sunset, Spanish in type.

At the age of twenty Bessie came to great London to work. It was at the invitation of mine host of the Bell in Eastcheap, who was the uncle of her mother. Laura then was seventeen years, and half a head taller than Bessie; she looked in her heeled cordovans like a young birch in Spring sprung lithe from the hill-side. And Bessie loved Laura foolishly, and was infinitely proud of Laura, and lived in a constant tremble and trouble of fear for Laura.

Bessie was slim and quick, with a perfectly erect back and neck, her hair being nut-brown, and combed flat in two clean curves over a great broad forehead. Below this dome of brow was a rather small triangle of face, but very chastely lined. Her brown eyes were small and grave, with little eyelash, and set far apart in the head one from the other.

By her labours at the inn she was able to keep Laura living almost luxuriously in a lodging near the Whitefriars; and since Laura could not, or would not, wholly be made a nun, all Bessie's musings among the gallants at the bar were of the perils, and the abominations, and the tribulations of Babylon.

There was one name at which, above all other names, she started: it was the name of Henry, the King.

One night she dreamt that the King, passing on horseback through the streets, looked up and saw the face of Laura at her window. And Bessie leapt from sleep with wild eyes, and rushed, crying out, toward the door. . . .

Already the fame of the King as the dragon-gallant, the Blue Beard of his female subjects, had spread through England.

Bessie, being lately come to Babylon, did not yet fully recognise the difference between its dimensions and those of a country-village. It got into her head that the danger of a meeting between Laura and the King was always imminent, just about to culminate; and she divined, with woman's instinctive accuracy, that one glance of those royal eyes at the face she cherished would be enough to ruin all her Hope in life.

She could not dream that there existed on the earth any Beauty comparable to that of her child; and, perhaps, in fact, there did not.

King Henry became Bessie Ford's nightmare. He loomed upon her imagination as a vast monster, girl-eating; his name changed the colour of her face.

Besides this big dominant terror which never left her, she had a hundred others. She used to listen with eager ears to the many love-adventures recounted in the inn, if haply she might catch that name of Laura.

She had not been two months in London when, already, she knew that Laura had a lover.

This one, however, did not excite in her any unqualified terror. She had looked into his face, and seen it honest and gentle; but he was young in his nonage, and very poor. Her dream, her ideal, for Laura was—Marriage.

His name was Mark Bonner.

He began by passing very often along an alley in the Whitefriars, and glancing at a certain casement; and across this casement, sometimes, a Face with a daintily-

built head of black hair would saunter with a musing, coquettish slowness.

Bonner was a scholar, and eighteen. The future held in it for him this vision of glory—the Bachelauriat of Arts. He had heard of Aristotle, and dreamed of him; he had read Terence; he knew Cicero by heart.

He attended classes at the new Paul's School of Master Colet in threadbare sarcenet doublet. In odd ways he eked out a livelihood, hanging often about the courtyards of my Lord Cardinal, and running errands.

Wolsey knew his face, and once, in the clock-yard at Hampton, had honoured him with the memorable favour of a glance.

Mark Bonner bought a new velvet bonnet at a frippery-store with his last angel, and set it jauntily on. He began to pass and repass in the Whitefriars, shot to the reins.

He had a very spiritual face on his lank body. The forehead widened as it went up, and the chin lengthened down into a delicate, quaint point. His thin lips were like the scarlet rouges of kermes on the stained Greek marbles and ivories, and his eyes were large and luminous, and swam in melancholy.

And Laura from that overhanging small-paned window could divine all this.

CHAPTER II

THE HEART-CRY

'Sorrow with sorrow sighing, hope with hope
Exulting, heart embracing heart entire.'

POLLOK.

BEFORE the second month Laura began to pout. She had on her upper lip a downy growth of just-visible black hair, which added a poignant something of humanity to her divinity—one of those striæ which enhance and ravish. When she pouted in her sulky way, this hinted moustache made her little thick pale-rose mouth an object of foolish worship.

She pouted, and decided that she was neither a nun, nor a nursery-flower, nor a King's-prisoner.

She began to steal out in tentative promenades to the top of the next byeway and back.

Once she knew that she was being followed by a bearded warrior, and took to her heels; once she was chucked under the chin by a marshalman, and reddened; once she was seized and kissed by a hostler, and meditated on it all the day.

But she continued her walks, and daringly extended them. Of all this she said not a word to Bessie.

Once Mark Bonner saw her picking her steps in the mud of the street. Here was that for which he had wildly hoped. But instead of being in heaven, he was rather in hell. He could not address her: his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. As he brushed by her with hung head, she saw his white face and the trembling of his veined white hand.

The next day she received a love-poem with the last

line of each verse in Latin. She could by chance read the English tongue, but Latin was far beyond her. Still, she conceived a great reverence for the scholar, and a week later a jolly Augustinian, who came to collect abbey-dues (for the house was within the manor of the Hospital of St. Barts), told her with a fillip that the meaning of 'Te dulcem meam amo' was this: 'I love thee, my sweet one.'

Twice more they carefully met, and hurriedly passed, like ships on the sea, without voice; but the third time Laura, with ice-cold hands and bounding heart, laughed a challenging giggle to herself, and Mark, hearing it, stopped, hesitated in the throes of a thousand indecisions, and turned; he whispered huskily to her in a throat so parched that the words were lost.

However, he walked by her side, and when they parted, he uncovered and laid his lips upon her hand.

Rising and looking from her window in the dead of night, she saw him standing there below; and the lonesome gleam of the rare candle-light of the alley showed his uplooking face.

After that they met daily, and a great mystery was revealed to Southern-blooded Laura Ford. Within these two began to stir that Spirit which from the seed brings forth the Harvest. Then suddenly it was as though a great Sun dazzled their eyes.

'How lovely you are!' he said.

'And you also,' she replied.

Laura's face was washed in morning dew. They fell to speaking in a language that resembled song rather than simple speech. At this time they did not know each other's name.

Onward from the Fleet down to Westminster was mostly open field and tree-land, varied by the palaces of my Lords Essex, Arundel, Somerset. And hither, as evening fell, and hardly a hay-cart drawled in sight, they wandered, or halted by the river, or whispered their intense secrets under bowers of the ducal grounds.

'Faith, here is the thought that gives me pause—if I had never seen you!' he said.

'That would not have been possible.'

'Faith, but 'twas by sheer hazard of my good star!'

'What would you have done?'

'I? I should even have died! By the Rood, what could I have done? You are my very life!'

'What, you love me so, sir?'

'Stars of the Night, bear witness!'

'And always—from the very first sight you had of me—I knew that it was so with you.'

'From the first sight, and before.'

'How—*before?*'

'Oh, long I have known you. When a little boy, I saw once your face in a clear running brook of the wood; I have divined you in my reading of Helen, the Greek; I have foreknown you in miraculous dreams of the night. Nothing in the earth is potent, sweet, which does not resemble you. In the faces of new-born children, and in the smells of dungs and flowers, and in the corn-shocks of harvest, and in all the motions and method of the World, I have had hints and presages of you, oh, my dearest dear!'

She looked at him with eyes in trance.

'Our Saviour—what a music 'tis you speak! 'Tis surely so the angels in heaven chant, sir!'

'You love me?'

'Ah—I cannot speak such words as you——'

'But you love me? You love me?'

'Ah——'

Her sigh fainted in the anguish of its utterance; she was in torture for lack of expression; her fulness was a pain. She reached up her pale pouting mouth in abandoned offering to his. Then, after awhile:

'But my sister—Our Saviour! she will sure, sure, wot!'

'And how, prithee?'

'She even will!'

'Is she gentle and good?'

'Oh, she is very good, my sister. But——'

'You must tell her.'

'An I dare!'

'Let *me*.'

'Is it that we will be married?'

'Why, my pig's-eye—yes.'

'When?'

'Ah, when! I lack substance! When the wind shall fill my sail! I have twice attracted the great Cardinal's eye; and he is, you know, the patron of poor scholars. Like you poverty?'

'No.'

'Not?'

'No.'

'But to me it were heaven with *you*.'

'I like not poverty, I. Have you seen the interior of a great palace? *I* have, at Winchester. Oh, the mighty mansion-house, the gaudy menials, and the bravery! I like *that*. An I had that, and you also, then were I happy indeed.'

'But of the two you prefer—which?'

'I like both.'

'But you prefer—which?'

'Why, you.'

'Crowned saint!'

'But my sister. Our Saviour! what shall be done?'

'I will speak to her.'

'An that be indeed the best——'

'Why, yes, as I deem it.'

They rose to walk homeward, and on the morrow Mark Bonner was at the Bell. He stammered his tale. But under the considering eyes of Bessie Ford he felt the sensation of scrutiny, and chill reception.

CHAPTER III

'CROM ABOO'

'There came a certain lord. . . .'
SHAKESPEARE.

THE Bell was full of uproar.

From the dim winding street, paved with oval pavers and grass-grown, one descended by three stone steps through a hooded doorway into a room so sombre that for a time the eye saw nothing.

Some faint light, however, came in from a passage which led to a yard at the back.

In the front, at the centre of the four gables of the house, stood a post bearing the sign of a black Bell on a red ground.

It was three in the afternoon.

A horseman came eastward. A noise of revelry went out to him as he approached. He had been in London five weeks, and each day had made the Bell his haunt. But to-day he hesitated.

He had in his holster two letters of high importance. One was to the Governor of the Tower of London, one to my Lord Wolsey. Both were from the King, writ with his own hand. The latter letter contained thoughts, arguments, State-secrets, which King Harry, for a new province, would not have had an eye other than his Cardinal's peruse.

The noise of revelry came out to him, but the horseman went past the Bell, going eastward to the Tower.

He was a man of very great size, standing six feet above his spurs. His russet-leather jerkin covered a heroic swell of chest, a broadsword hanging at the buff-

belt, and on the other side a pair of pistols, and a dudgeon dagger.

He went past the sign-post—and turned again.

On his broad, massive face was a smile now. It was a genial face, clean-shaven over-all; with humour in the lines of the mouth, whose ends were lengthened into two little folds; and phrenological bosses on the forehead. That forehead was white, but the expanse of face was ruddy and tanned, and crossed with many a hack. Surely, Garrett Oge Fitzgerald had been in the wars.

He was a bastard son of a bastard branch of the great Geraldines of Kildare, his great-half-uncle being even then the King's Deputy at Dublin. Yet Garrett Oge was the possessor of one only harry-noble in his slop-pouch.

He called 'Hi!', threw his reins to the hostler, and, as he sauntered with his laggard gait into the parlour, waved his arm round, and cried:

'*Crom aboo!*'

It was the war-cry of the Geraldines.

He was received by a shout of welcome, and a lifting of the six-hooped pots.

Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, in the midst of that uproar, touched with his finger the slit in the murrey taffeta lining of his riding-cloak, to assure himself that his letters were there; he had taken the precaution to remove them from his holster to his person, and he was not a cautious man.

New brooms sweep clean: he had that morning, after five weeks' care and contradiction, been admitted into the King's Guards, one harry-noble, as we say, being left in his slop-pouch.

He cried above the din:

'A stoup of your spiciest canaries, mine host! Who's for drinking with me the King's health? Ah, little wench——'

He touched Bessie Ford under the chin.

Very singular, certainly, is the secrecy of the Heart Between these two—little Bess and big Fitz—there subsisted some natural affinity, some mutualness of

Terror and Longing, Hope and Love, indescribably vague, yet deep, deep, real as Life and Death—perhaps the affinity between two Valours. Yet if such was suspected by either, it was very dimly, and by Bessie; certainly not yet by Fitz.

Sometimes, bearing the tankards, she would giggle clandestinely at his jokes and quips; and he would throw his head back and look at her, smiling lordly approval of her appreciation.

'He *is* a one . . .' she would say to herself.

'But the King's health?' cried a mercer of London Bridge. 'Adding two and two to make four, one would say that Master Fitzgerald has e'en won his entry into the King's service at the last.'

'Uds daggers, my masters, the King has e'en won his entry into the service of Master Fitzgerald, an that's what you would say!'

So said Fitzgerald, and the laugh rang high. Now all were happy, having in their midst a tongue that bred merriment; and the tongue itself was happy, having before it a pot of mulled sack, sunlight-coloured, placed there by silent, assiduous Bessie Ford.

As Fitzgerald poured down his first draught, a hand fell upon his shoulder, and a voice said in the lower tone of friendship:

'What, Fitz——'

'What, Mac, my good friend and ingle! Beshrew my heart, but I saw thee not before.'

'Is it so with thee? Is it true?'

'About the King? Ay, true as a cup of clary is bright.'

'Fitz, I congratulate thee from my heart.'

'Congratulate the King, Mac.'

'Both, Fitz. But tell me the manner o't, lad. How did the King take to an unthrift and scant-o'-grace like thyself?'

Their voices were now higher raised. From the tables over the redstone floor, from the black-oak corners, gathered the revellers, pewter flagons and tankards in hand. As for Bessie Ford and the tapster, they plied busily between spigot and tables, and every

faucet of the sack-butts flowed. Master Somers, mine host, a heavy old widower, lolled drinking muscadine at a table with his guests.

'Well, it was on this wise,' said Garrett Oge Fitzgerald. 'For four weeks, as you wot, I have been loitering at the levée-time in the antechamber at Westminster; but never a chance had poor Fitz in the busy going-and-coming, and that shoulder-rubbing of great dukes, and Corinthians, and gallants. Oh, 'tis a brave show there o' mornings, my masters—ambassadors, princes, courtiers, Frenchman and Spaniard, doublets pinked with Venice gold, and inlaid foils that water a fighting-man's mouth. And says Fitz to himself, "How through all this bedizenment shall a poor soldier of fortune arrive at the King's eyes to show his proportions?" For it was even the King himself, I deemed, that must needs see a man like me, and no linsey-wolsey captain of the service. So I dallied from day to day, till yester morning a great lord with lackeys and much ado comes sauntering through, and what name should I hear announced but my very own—"Garrett Oge Fitzgerald." It was my great-uncle, the Deputy, whom, God wot, I never saw afore. If now, I thought, I can get that name sent in on my own count, and so slip in to the King, all's well. So next morning, with a high head, I gave that name to a myrmidon. He eyed my apparel, but said never a word from his scorning lips, nor did he cry me out, while many another came and went. So I, at the last, was slouching down the great staircase, when into the courtyard came a lady. She was unattended, her face had an aspect forlorn, and she was all in robes of black. I was not such a chuff as not to divine in her the Queen, and she had no sooner put brodequin from the coach than I was there to her assisting. She drew from me somewhat. "Would you see the King, madam?" said I. "Yes; and who are you, sir?" says she. "Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, madam," said I. She bowed and smiled, leaned on my arm, and in two minutes the Queen Katherine and Oge Fitzgerald were cried together. The King was walking to and fro,

hands behind, and on his brow sat thought. He turned and saw us, and "Ha, coz!" cries he, "how goes the morning with you? But this is strange companionship—you and my Lord Fitzgerald—Ha, sirrah! who the pestilence art thou?" "Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, sire," said I reproachfully. Gallant he is, the King, when he frowns and puts on kingly anger, tall and massive, cocking one well-turned leg afore, with a face large and strong, not unlike mine own, my masters, and a way of twisting his lips aside and gnawing the pout at a corner. Just so he contemplated me, now gnawing his wry-pushed lips, now drawing in a moustache-end with his tongue to gnaw, meditating upon me, angry; and very chill and threating is the regard of his eyes, and severe, and hard to bear without a pallor, my masters all. And he says, "So, cullion," says he, "thou wouldst mock at me, then?" "Far be that from me, sire." "What is thy name?" "Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, sire." "Ha! again thou liest." "It is you, rather, sire, for that is even my name." "Hi, there, my Guards!" cries the King; "thy neck for this, caitiff!" Before I was fluttery, but now cool as a gaze-hound's nose at the near bracing danger. Three minions ran with drawn swords, but I spoke: "Your Majesty is really astray, for that is my name in baptism. 'Tis true I bear a bar-sinister on my coat, and 'tis true the Lord of Kildare claims my identical name, but without my approbation or consent. The Queen here will bear me out: she straightway scented me real and only Fitzgerald, sire." I had no sooner said, than back went the King's head in a shout of sudden laughter. The Queen, methinks, is no longer favourite there, and her foreign mistakes and ineptitudes become food for scornful mirth. But for me, I was saved, and—"Unhand him, knaves," says the King; and to me: "What is thy true name, sirrah?" "Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, sire." "Thou hast served in the wars, methinks?" "In the Low Countries, sire, and in Ireland." "Art thou leal and trusty?" "Try me, sire!" "Thou deservest for thy audacity either to taste the Tyburn tippet, or to enter

the King's own service : what think'st thou ?" " I seem like to do both, sire, taking the least exalted first." " Thou appearest Kildare to thy tongue's-tip, villain. Send me thy name in an hour." And so, my masters, was it that I come to have in my cloak here two letters—one to my Lord Wolsey, and one to the Tower—letters of high and solemn import, writ by the King's own hand. Already he hath in Fitz the confidence of old friendship. A right royal personage is he—do me right, my masters all—and here's to him !'

' But thy tongue, thy tongue, Fitz, runs too furiously fast,' whispered his friend Macdonald. ' Gad-a-mercy, man ! hast thou no inkling of prudence ?'

CHAPTER IV

THE FATAL ACT

'Great God! what perils do environ
The man who meddles with cold iron!'
'HUDIBRAS.'

'Te, soror, nunquam volo esse securam, sed timere, semperque tuam fragilitatem habere suspectam.'—ST. AUGUSTINE.

AT this reproof Fitz looked up in demure surprise. He had the massive, staid face of a statesman, and the simple heart of a child. He was a man more loved than respected, Fitz, till his white forehead flushed, and he chanced to draw his sword: and then he was much more respected than loved.

As for Macdonald, he was a fellow built on a smaller scale, but well-knit, agile, yet weighty-looking. Between the parting of his moustache one saw how the upper lip pressed like strength itself upon the lower, and the bright brown eyes glinted shrewd and hard as cold steel beneath the lowered lids.

He was somewhat of a dandy, with an eye to his apparel, for his doublet was laid down with two galoon laces, and on his head was a slouch hat with drooping feather, and in his Turkey-leather sword-belt a poniard of Milan arabesque-work: a fellow neat, and wary, and canny, a Scot, having a care for his life. He had fought both at Guinegate and Flodden, and was a Wolsey-man.

His eyes saw many things, and as Fitz spoke about the King's letters, he had seen the start and the slow advance toward the table of a man who, he was sure, was a foreigner—a tall man, muffled in a black riding-

cloak, wearing the plumed bonnet of a hidalgo. He was all in black and silver—a silver buckle, a silver brooch, a silver hilt to his rapier—and what one saw of his regular-featured face proved him Spanish.

'Tush, comrade!' said Fitz to Mac; 'care killed a cat. The King knows to whom he trusts his letters. I say, my masters, 'tis whispered among the Guards that the King is in love again.'

'By my sooth!' said a gruff botcher from the Cheap, ''tis the forty-fifth tale of kingly love within a month!'

'Ay,' answered Fitz, 'a damsel and a half a day.'

'And who is the new Lindabrides?'

'A certain Mistress Anne Boleyn.'

'Gramercy! that is an oldish tale enough,' observed mine host.

'He hath fallen in love with her afresh, forgetting that he had done it afore,' said Fitz: 'I heard the news as new.'

'New, quotha!' cried a tipsy reeve of the Abbot of Paul's, 'why, the fame of her has long been everywhere: she's the cream of dainty moppets.'

'Tush!' cried Fitz.

'You gainsay me? Why, is she not known for the prettiest piece of femaledom in all the breadth of England?'

'Tush!' said Fitz

'By the Mass, here's a paltering fellow talks like a new-returned from the Spanish Indies! He knows not the fame of Mistress Anne!' said a King's Pursuivant, loitering here with a King's-warrant in his doublet-breast.

'In faith, I'd give not one peeled codling for your Mistress Annes!' said Fitz, and looked round challengingly.

'Come, Fitz,' said Macdonald, with laughter in his eyes, ''tis clear thou hast been following thy master's ensample, and hast been caught by one fairer, for thou hast a beam of prejudgment in thine eye. The Lady Anne is indeed fair, for I have seen her.'

'Tush, tush," said Fitz.

The eyes of Fitz were directed upward upon one

black ceiling-joist, and they were full of tasty musings, and on his lips was the smile of pleased remembrance. Looking up, he uttered this judgment slowly, with calm authority:

'The King never, never saw a lovely wench.'

As he said it, a mug, dropped by Bessie Ford, smashed upon the tiles, spilling costly wine of Alicant.

'Come, my masters, draw near—Master Fitzgerald hath e'en an adventure upon his tongue!' cried the mercer.

'Provided it concerns not any of the great folk, Fitz,' whispered Macdonald warningly.

Fitz suddenly took his eyes from the ceiling, and, smiting the table, cried:

'She is the rarest, the gloriousest, the gaudiest little perroquet that ever flashed from bough to bough!'

'Who, then?'

'The damsel which is mine.'

'What, already?'

'She *will* be to-morrow at this time.'

'And her name?'

'Her name I tell not. Bah! why not?—her name is Laura, an you would wot.'

'Laura—what?'

'That I wot not.'

'And you rencountered her—where?'

'In the Whitefriars—in the hiddenest nook——'

'When, though?'

'Three days since.'

'And you had speech with her?'

'Troth, yes. Oh, 'tis the shrewdest minx! coy, yet sly, showing impudent blushes, pouting compliances. She would speak, and yet would not; she would say "No," and mean "Yes." Oh, 'tis the naughtiest bit of purity!'

The poor little chamberlain of the Bell Inn tripped over someone's foot, and sent flying a stoup of good Sheres wine; it was the second bit of broken crockery within two minutes.

'Why, Bessie lass,' said old Somers, now fuddled, 'what make you there?'

The little face was white; a string of rowan-tree berries about her low-clad neck wavered with strong agitation. She hid away her face.

'But what is thy plan, Fitz?' said Macdonald. 'Wilt thou——?'

'I never make a plan, Mac, till I am in the carrying out thereof.'

'But you swim in the tide of luck, my master,' said the crafty-eyed Pursuivant, pushing out his ivory wedge-face; 'for you may e'en present this beauty before the King's Majesty. Nay, frown not like the devil o'erlooking Lincoln Town——'

'The first duty of a King's Guard is to guard the King,' answered Fitz—'and from presumptuous follies above all. Count upon Fitz to do his devoirs there, my master.'

'But the manner of thy courting, Fitz?' said Mac, feasting upon his friend's free-tongued simplicity; 'tell, tell.'

'Oh, 'twas in an alley: there she tripped, stepping with shown instep and fragile ankle. And "Mamsel," ko I, "sure for a lock of that soft and black-brown hair I would carry you all your journey in my arms." And she: "'Tis useless, sir, to waste your time, for I have a gallant whom I love, and a sister whom I fear." "Uds daggers, mamsel," I riposted, "that knot were easy cut: for the gallant whom you love shall wed the sister whom you fear (or I will wed his costard to my poniard), and you, well rid of both, shall wed with me." She laughed, and, "Our Saviour! 'tis a witty solution, sir," ko she, "and a most hasty proposition." "Mamsel, I am a Fitzgerald of Kildare." "I suppose 'tis a noble family, sir, with mansions and demesnes?" "It is, mamsel." "Still, 'tis useless: I know one which, though poor, I prefer to all your quarterings—though he be not so great and manful, I avouch." "Do you affect a great and manful man, mamsel?" "Well, sir, young maidens are pleased by such men." "Then, here is one for you, mamsel—the very thing—this sounding chest, this fair brow, this sword, mamsel." "Our Saviour, sir!" ko she, with tittering, "you

retail your points like a frippery-man: yet I say not 'tis unhandsomely done." "Thou art the choicest morsel, mamsel, that goes uncooked in Europe." "But you, sir, must needs munch other sweet-meats: for I am not for you." "By the Mass, the choicest morsel thou, the daintiest minx, the cosiest pig's-eye——" "*Thou* me not, prithee, sir, for I am another's——" and she laughed the mockingest mavis-laugh. "By blood and nails, thou shalt be mine, mamsel!" "In faith, not by fair means, sir," says she. "Then, by blood and nails, mamsel, by foul!" "Our Saviour, sir, you fire quickly; I swear you frighten me!" "Wilt thou say me a yea?" "Faith, you make me laugh and cry together, sir. Only by force could I be won by you." "Where dost thou dwell?" "That will I not declare, sir; 'tis true, I pass hereby each day about this hour." I left her then, and tracked her to her domicile. And this was the manner of our first courting-time.'

'But thy scheme, Fitz!' said Macdonald; 'wilt thou be using force, thou gamesome gibbet-carrion?'

'Force, ay, and this very night.'

'What! and whither wilt thou bear her?'

'To an old grand-dame's, where I have made terms in Billingsgate.'

'But by the damsel's will?'

'Nay, but by force.'

'Oh, thou merry gaol-crow, Fitz!'

'Nay, 'tis honourable. Steal a broad-piece, and thou art felon; steal ten thousand, and thou art exchanger; steal that most precious, a woman, and thou art gallant.'

'But how wilt set to work?—thou most frolic villain!'

'I will set well to work; for I shall have drawn sword in hand.'

There was a square black-oak post, upon which for one moment Bessie Ford staggered and leant. But by a power of will which was hers, she kept from fainting.

'A drawn sword, sir, say you?' said a voice—the voice of the black-dressed stranger.

'Ay, sir, I said that,' said Fitz, looking round and up.

'Bah! your whole tale of the girl is a mere currish fantasy of your invention,' said the stranger.

Fitz's little gray laughing eyes opened wide, looking about the room in amazement.

'Uds daggers, my masters,' he said, 'here is a gentleman who gives the unprovoked lie to a Geraldine.'

Macdonald whispered low:

'He seeks for his own ends to pick a quarrel with thee: answer him not, or fell him with thy fist.'

Fitz took no notice.

'Say you that I lie, sir?' he asked, turning in wonderment on his stool to face the stranger.

'Yes. You lie.'

'*Crom aboo!*' cried Fitz, springing up, a brand of red on his forehead, his sword half drawn.

'Fitz, Fitz,' said Macdonald.

'But surely the gentleman is not in his serious earnest?' said Fitz; 'are you in your serious earnest, my master?'

'You lie.'

'Then, by Christ's wrath, I spatter your brains for it!'

Fitz's quick blood grilled. He looked now a very noble species of giant, his big head thrown back, and his mantle hanging from a shoulder. But he said quietly enough:

'Draw, sir.'

'Hold!' cried mine host, drunk now; 'all combats in the back-court, my masters, I pray you.'

The stranger waved a courtly invitation toward the passage; and at once the whole roomful of fuddled men made in that direction. Fitzgerald, on the way, hurriedly undid his cloak to disencumber himself, and flung it casually upon a table. The King and his letters had clean vanished from that heated brain.

Through the passage they trooped—mine host, too, the tapster, the hostler—out into a wide court paved with dislocated flags, a well-and-bucket in a corner, some hens and a cock, some stables, and sweet water wimpling leisurely, like melted diamond, over the pantiles of the gutter. Here had been the last scene of many a man.

'Ready, sir—draw!'

It was begun at once, without ceremony.

The foreigner had retained his mantle, and wrapped it thick round his left forearm as a shield. He was nearly as tall as Fitzgerald, though much more slenderly built. And from the very first passes it became clear that he was an antagonist of great skill.

Macdonald drew in his breath. He had an eye of clearest judgment: and Fitzgerald, he knew, had in him a quart of the Bell's strongest canaries. But if Fitz fell, there would be a second trial of skill: Mac secretly examined his own edge.

Clash, clash, with a continual motion, to and fro, back and fore, at the lithe-sheering hips of the fighters. The revellers stood around, with breathless comments, eager peerings.

Always the stranger smiled. He parried Fitzgerald's strong strokes with a wrist of steel, and ever with the same precision. The face of Fitzgerald heated, and suddenly, at a quick foin made high up by the foreigner, down the left cheek of the Geraldine came winding a scarlet thread. Sure, Fitz was drunk.

'Steady, Fitz, steady . . .' whispered Macdonald.

But steadiness was soon no longer part of the game. Both men's mouths were open now. The combat began to stagger like epilepsy, hither and thither, within some four feet of area. The crowd opened wider, stooping forward, hands on knees, souls in eyes.

Fitzgerald had not got in a scratch. The fight, from moment to moment, became brutal. The Geraldine had met the Devil. In his surprise, his rage of incredulity, he grew crazy for blood, hacking with the fury of a man extinguishing a flame. The rapier of the stranger must have been tempered in Damascene forges to resist that operating, imperious blade; and his science was fine. Yet he, too, was amazed: never had he encounted wrath so shrewd and quick as the wrath before him now.

Wider the combat staggered. There was a rip of cloth, a spout of blood, wet red on the paving-tiles.

The stranger's rapier had entered the left upper arm of Fitzgerald and, with swift outward wheel, torn through the flesh; at the same time he staggered over a cocked-up tile-edge, and Fitzgerald's blade plunged into the mass of cloth round his hand, to come away with a long ripping noise of rent fabric, in time to strike into air the rapier making prone for his heart.

Chink, chink, they go afresh: but now the combat fills the yard, and the spectators are cringing against the wall, and on its top the hens and cock look on silent, with round, sage, sideward eye—alternately bent—as though, forsooth, the right may have seen wrong, and lo, one now must try with the left. Fitzgerald's redness has turned to mottle, and on both sides coolness is gone, and they rush round, stooping, with murderous stare, and an audible humph of their gasping bosoms. The sallow face of the foreigner is now a face of mere wild ecstasy. He darts anew upon Fitzgerald, and in a moment of opportunity hacks between neck and shoulder; Fitzgerald feints a hew at the head; up goes the parrying rapier; Fitzgerald makes the *tierce* thrust, and enters between the third and fourth rib; back comes a second time the wild rapier between neck and shoulder, and up flies the broadsword in a tardy attempt at parry; now the stranger has him: the broad breast is undefended; the stranger foins at *quarte;* the rapier is in prone career for Fitzgerald's heart; but he lurches backward—the rapier pricks his abdomen; and at that instant the flapping rags of the stranger's cloak are in his eyes. 'Hew, Fitz, hew!' hisses Macdonald. Fitz hews. His blade, feeble now, drops upon the stranger's skull. The rapier leaps far, with clattering fall; there is a thud, a head strikes the flags; Fitz falls upon the stranger, and immediately leaps up, and with wry mouth—laughs a little, awaked from a drunken nightmare.

But that poor heart in the dimness of the parlour yonder! It was worse with her than with the stranger lying in his blood.

She, a girl from the country—a simple wench—and what a thing was this which she was about to do!

The hand she held out fluttered like reeds; there

was a panic stare in her eyes; her breath came raspingly, like the breath of Fitz in the court.

For her, a simple country-girl, fresh come to London, ignorant of the unguessably vast consequences of her act, it was an awful deed to do!—a thing more daring than the leap of horseman into some bottomless chasm.

But she did not hesitate at all. She saw the fall of the stranger; she saw Fitzgerald stand, hale and hearty—she saw him laugh. He was the man who that night was to despoil her nest and ravish her life. She put out her hand.

Oh, Fitz would have quite other cares, altogether different sorts of occupation that night, than the abducting of innocent damsels! He would clean forget the very existence of Laura Ford!

Out went the little fluttered hand. That brow, with its clean, chaste curves of hair, was wrinkled with the horizontal lines of wide-eyed scare; her little nose was pinched; her little heart seemed beating itself to death. But never in the bosom of Cœur de Lion, or aggressive dragon-fly, beat one bolder, more audacious.

She did not hesitate at all. Her hand was in the cloak of Garrett Oge Fitzgerald. She glanced once crazily round the room: it was wholly deserted. She touched the letters, held them, drew them out.

Then she ran, hunted by terrors.

Here was the mortal act of her life.

CHAPTER V

THE ALCHYMIST

'Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage.'
GOLDSMITH.

THEY came trooping back into the sombre, low parlour. Instantly, the duel ended, their wild interest died down into mere dead indifference. The stranger was left lying with upturned face.

'Well, well,' said the Pursuivant, fumbling at papers in his doublet-breast, 'late I am this day. This comes of loitering and lingering. Yet one half-pottle-pot of bastard, mine host, and then away on the King's business.'

'What, so early gone, Master Pursuivant,' said the mercer, 'when good-fellowship only begins to warm? And whither away?'

'A neat's tongue, mine host, an you love me,' shouted Fitzgerald, above the din of tongues, doing on his cloak, 'and with it a warm culiss, or such a thing as a dish of spitchcocked eels.'

Mine host went hobbling with bustling cares, burdened with orders, somewhat sobered.

'Where's the lass? Where's Bessie Ford, John?' he went asking. 'In faith, 'tis ever so—few hands to many needs. Is she above-stairs, then——?'

''Tis the alchymist, Calvo, whose arrest I go to make,' said the Pursuivant. 'I should e'en now be at London Bridge with my warrant.'

The air was full of tongues. Cups left half-empty were being drained.

'But the man is not dead,' said the Cheap botcher.

'' 'Tis pity he be left weltering like a stabbed ox without chirurgeon's aid.'

'But Calvo! What, the alchymist?' cried the mercer. 'Why, 'tis a name known over half England. And wherefore arrest him, prithee?'

'Witchcraft, friend,' answered the Pursuivant dryly. '' 'Tis a deadly one, a dark and evil one, this Mauro Calvo. A man long suspected, and over him the King's sword has hung this many a day. And to-day, by my sooth, it falls.'

'Truly, I believe you,' said a scrivener of the Jewry to the botcher; 'the man needs chirurgeon's aid. Hi, mine host!—the man is not dead that lies yonder.'

'Softly, my masters,' answered mine host; 'each thing in his own time. Seen to he shall be, and by Master Bygood, of Bishop's Gate, the druggist. For as fair a gentleman was he as ever spoke, and here hath lodged five nights, paying his shot like an earl—but each thing in his own time.'

'Yet 'tis a strange happening, this warrant of arrestment,' said the mercer, 'for Signior Calvo is a fellow in high favour among the common folk o' London, and hath been known to tell them things that came afterwards to pass like Holy Writ. Sure, 'tis a wight of strange foreknowledges and wisdoms, my master.'

'' 'Tis even wherefore his skin shall burn. 'Tis an unclean beast, having conference with spirits of evil, a fellow which vanishes before your very eyes—pah! But three days shall see the faggots crackle round his members.'

'But——' said the mercer.

He got no further. A terrible outcry of alarm—a shout as of horror—came from the table where Fitzgerald had seated himself. He had touched the slit in his cloak, and he had made—a discovery.

'By God's death . . .!'

He drew in his breath. The first swift thought that flashed upon him was this: that he was even on his trial—that this was his first day in the King's service—that he had yet been strangely trusted—that now he

had been weighed in the balances and found most woefully wanting—that the letters were gone !

He stamped. He flushed with imperial rage. Then he sank to his seat, faint. All his left arm and shoulder was soaked with blood.

'Fitz, Fitz, what hast thou ?' whispered Macdonald.

Fitzgerald pointed to his cloak. At his shout a hush had fallen upon the war of tongues. Macdonald looked round.

'Who has left this room ?' he asked.

It was discovered that three of the revellers had gone away after the duel.

'No man now shall depart till he has been searched,' cried out Macdonald.

The news spread consternation. The landlord paled. Each man seemed to see bent upon himself the intolerable frown of King Harry for his mere presence at such a sacrilege.

All came forward readily, parading the innocent nooks of their apparel from ruff to hose. Fitz did not look. His head leant on his hand, and on his nose were the wrinkles of pain. Macdonald cried :

'They have, then, been abstracted by one of those three, else by one of the inn-keeper's myrmidons. 'Sdeath, mine host, your house must even be searched.'

A movement was made toward the staircase behind the bar. But Macdonald returned, and whispered to Fitz where he sat :

'Tut, man, mourn not like a nun in Holy Week. At what hour was the letter to be handed to my Lord Wolsey ?'

'Before Vespers.'

''Tis not now far from that. Here's my counsel, Fitz : Leave the tracking of the letters to *me ;* I wager odds that I recover them. But before then, my Lord Wolsey, expecting the letter, and not receiving, will send messengers to the King, or the King, for some cause, may send messengers to my lord, and so will thy case be declared, and all thy fat be on the fire. Now, thou knowest the little hedge-lane of yew and holly-bush that leads from the south postern of the

Westminster Palace wall. Thereby must messengers both to and from the King pass, and 'tis my counsel that thither thou hie, and there take stand, with drawn sword defending from any soul to pass this way or that, if it be not over thy body. Quick, Fitz! and there await till I come.'

Macdonald had his hand on the shoulder of Fitzgerald, his face stooped to Fitzgerald's; and the thing, being an affair of desperate action, pleased Fitz. He sprang, nodded to his friend, and with fresh energy swung toward the outer door. Macdonald heard the clattering hoofs go galloping into faintness and silence.

Then he rejoined the party of search. They were near the top of the stairs.

That little fluttering heart beat with a more poignant ecstasy. She heard them come. She stood listening in her own bed-chamber—the letters in her hand—her eyes wide.

It was certain that with such an army of searchers the house held no hiding-place. To tear the papers would mean discovery of the shreds, to burn them she had no fire. But even so, the thought of destroying the King's letters never occurred to her: to that immensity of daring her mind did not rise; she was a simple country-girl, full of awes. The steps came nearer, hunting her down.

She fell to her knees, and, with eyes turned white to heaven, prayed to that Mother who was a Virgin.

But the steps had rounded the corner of the corridor which led to her chamber; they seemed to be making straight for her. Her forehead struck the floor, so low she doubled.

But she sprang, all wild and white, for the steps were very near. Apart from heaven, on earth there remained for her but one refuge now—the refuge of Mauro Calvo.

Mauro Calvo was a man who knew, in addition to other things, the Future; for this was revealed to him by the stars of night. To very many, for the sum of two groats, he had told the future of their lives; and to Bessie, who had quickly heard of him, he had twice told the future of Laura Ford's life.

One of Bessie's nightly tasks, as she lay pondering many things in her head upon her bed, was to harmonize those two futures which Mauro Calvo had said that Laura should live. Laura could not live both, yet, so strange is the mind, Bessie had not the least doubt of either.

Bessie believed that Mauro Calvo was the profoundest soul who ever deigned to walk this earth, and perhaps was not very far wrong. At all events, she had strong confidence in his wisdom and goodness.

And they were very good friends, she and Calvo. Calvo forgot in an hour many a face of his pilgrims: but he remembered the face of Bessie Ford.

Bessie did not know that the pile of faggots intended for Calvo's roasting was already dry, though Calvo himself, being a divining man, well knew it.

To him the thoughts of her panic turned. When the steps were nearly at her door, she slipped through another into a tiring-room, thence down a winding stair, and so to the front-door of a gable. And down the street she went running with hasting pattens, in that pretty hatless freedom usual then everywhere, and still in France.

London Bridge was near; it was a street broad at bottom, narrow above, where sombre old gables left an irregular line of sky. Here was market, and money-changer's, the mercer, and the stout, capped apple-woman. The bridge lay upon sixteen very large blocks of masonry, some of them hollow, with windows. Within one of them was a Chapel of St. Catherine; within another, the twelfth, nearer the Surrey side, was the laboratory and den of Mauro Calvo. At high-tide the surface of the river ran half a foot above his head.

Bessie Ford, still running, traversed three-fourths of the now-quiet bridge, and sped into a dark doorway on the west side. She ran down a passage. From above, through the still evening, there came to her with unreal vagueness the scolding of a housewife.

Four steep ladder-steps led her to some very narrow and high stone steps, the descent of which involved a

series of downward jerks. At the bottom, where the darkness was absolute, she tapped at a locked door.

In a minute she was admitted into a narrow room, reeking of the brews which sent their chymic fume from a den still beyond.

An azure flame beneath an alembic on a tripod gave some light, which was hardly augmented by the yellowish blotch in a lanthorn of horn on a stand.

Before Bessie Ford stood Mauro Calvo. And he said:

'Surely, now, it is you. Why, I knew you would be coming.'

CHAPTER VI

THE MESSENGER

'In the deep dungeon of some Gothic dome
Where night and desolation ever frown.'

BEATTIE.

CALVO poured a piggin of Malvoisy wine from an earthenware cruche, and held it to the lips of Bessie. She gulped a throatful. He seated her on a stone stool, held his ear a moment to the simmering alembic, and sat on a small table beside her.

He was a man of forty-five, but looked older. The underlids of his eyes were drawn down awry, the left showing a triangle of the red flesh, but the shapeless, goggle eyes were full of a sage calm. Whatever hair he had was concealed by a close-drawn skull-cap of black cloth, which, however, left visible a broad prominence of pallid brow. He was dressed in hopelessly begrimed black velvet, with pantofles.

'But the letters you hold in your hand,' he said—'surely they are King's letters!'

There was a shout and ado of some overboiling crucible in the eastern apartment, and Calvo rushed away. In a minute he was by her side again.

With heaving breath she told her awful tale—why she had stolen, why she had brought the letters to him to keep. Calvo heard with sideward head, one side of his face screwed up to listen. She ended with these words:

'You told me—you *told* me—that she should be—married.'

'Did I say that, now?'

'Yes.'

'Well, so she shall.'

'But—*when?* I cannot wait, sir. Oh, I shall die if she be not married!'

'As to when, now. The stars are not quite precise as to the *when*, you see.'

He spoke in a rather absent way. At that moment he was not thinking of Bessie Ford at all. He was thinking of himself. The profound man had an—idea. He was walking on the road to the stake. These King's letters, if they contained secrets, would surely save him. And as he listened with absent air, he mused.

Not that Mauro Calvo feared the actual stake, or the King, or the Church, or the powers of the land. On his side was Nature and her secrets. He could escape. But the laboratory of a scientist is not made in a day, nor was it pleasant to be molested, and driven out, and hunted by the myrmidons of Power.

'Never fear,' he said, absently patting Bessie's shoulder, 'she shall be married; that is quite settled.'

'But, Master Calvo, to-morrow—the next day—this man will outlive the loss of the letters, and return to thoughts of taking her off! I took the letters but as a temporary device. Oh, sir, I could not bear to live through another day——'

'But I thought it was the King which you feared——'

'But did you not promise me that the King should never, *never* see her—— ?'

'I think I did, I think I did. Oh, well, all will be right, never fear.'

'But to-morrow, sir! if the man should re-think of her to-morrow?'

'He will not.'

'Oh, he may—he *may*.'

'Never fear.'

'I cannot bear it!'

'Then, what would you have?'

'Let her be married to-night—this self-same night!'

'How!—to-night? That cannot be.'

She fell to her knees with clasped hands and pleading eyes, and, weeping, she said:

'Help me! you can do whatever you will: pity a poor maiden in her sore tribulation, for that pity which is Above! You cannot say me nay—see, your hand is on my head, and your heart is most fatherly kind. Help me, sir! I have heard tell of such things—by a dispensation of the Abbot. Say that she shall be wedded this night!'

She was engaging the whole attention of Calvo now. His hand passed and repassed over the smooth glossy convex of her hair.

'Well, well, weep no more. If I can—— But to-night, say you? Have you, then, a lover ready to which to wed her?'

'Yes, sir—a student of goodly dispositions—a poor lad—but a husband none the less.'

'Well, I will see to it. Have you any money?'

'I have fifteen hoarded crowns.'

'That is ample. I will disburse the fees, and you shall disdamage me after. I know a good frater of the Crouched Friars which pays me frequent visits. Trust me, he will do your affair. He shall be here with cross and book immediately after Compline, and 'tis your part to bring the maiden and her lover hither at that hour. So now, you see, you have not prayed the diabolist, Mauro Calvo, in vain.'

He looked momentary kindliness, and again rushed to right some crisis of his brewing cauldrons. And she, on his return, put her lips to his hand with the fervour of a *dévote*.

'Good father to me you are, sir! May the prayers of all the distressed return upon you with blessing!'

'Well, well.' He touched her cheek, and 'Away now, away,' he whispered bustlingly.

He closed the door behind her. For a moment he stood near the light, the letters in his hand, hesitating. He looked aside, thinking. Then he smiled. With a bistoury he cut the silken thread of the letter to my Lord Wolsey.

He read it, and coolly he said:

'Just the very thing.'

He went at once to the stairs, toiled a little way up, and began to call, 'Tommy! Tommy!'

Above he occupied the topmost stage, where was his observatory and optic tube. Tommy was a child of the house and a quirister in St. Catherine's near. He was also a messenger pressed into the service of Calvo, his great reward being an occasional sight of the simmering stews, of the entanglement of retorts and twisted tubes, of gaudy chromes, and clotted precipitates, and working menstrua, and hissing limbecs, and festering fermentations.

By the time Tommy appeared, breathless and wide-eyed, Calvo had written a note. He said:

'Thou wilt take this note to Thames Street, Tommy, the number 12, and ask for Master Mark Bonner, into whose hands thou wilt deliver it.'

While Tommy was gone, the skirt of his buckram cassock, leather-belted, flying behind his legs, Calvo stood leaning sidewards upon a shelf, inditing two letters, one to his friend, the frater, one to the King.

'If the King's most gracious majesty would deign to guarantee to his slave, Mauro Calvo, free immunity in the performance of his lawful occupations from the persecutions of the King's myrmidons, then Mauro Calvo would undertake to keep privy in his own bosom certain momentous secrets written that morning by the King to my Lord Wolsey, secrets of which he, Mauro Calvo, by his science, had knowledge.' So wrote Calvo.

But in so writing, though his reasoning was good, he hardly took into account the clearness of King Henry's mind, or the fury of his rage, or the implacability of that will of steel.

Henry was a perfectly enlightened and materialistic person. To tell him that Calvo had discovered the secrets *by his science*, was an insult to that strong intelligence.

As Calvo finished the letter, Mark Bonner stood panting within the room. Here he had often stood before, drinking with greed from the lips of Calvo that for which he thirsted—Knowledge.

'Thou knowest Brother Bruno of the Crouched Friars, I think, Mark?' said Calvo.

'Yes, worthy master.'

Mark had reason to know. Many a day he fed free at the Friary 'frater' when the wolf was at his entrails.

'Then thou wilt bear this letter to him; with this broad-piece thou wilt buy a ring for a bride's finger, which the good brother will marry here to-night, and with the other letter thou wilt then make with speed to the Westminster Palace, burrowing as near the King's person as thou canst before delivery. 'Tis urgent, Mark, and I wish thee a soon return.'

Mark bowed, and was gone, both he and Calvo being ignorant of the fact that he had been sent to purchase his own wedding-ring; or that Garrett Oge Fitzgerald stood with drawn sword, three wounded men lying about him, in the path where Mark must needs pass.

At this time Bessie Ford was at Mark's lodging, waiting for him. Mark was from home that night.

She waited half an hour, walking, standing, muttering orisons, under the high projecting garret where Mark lodged. Stepping back, she could see far up his broad, low window-leaf, criss-crossed with leads, stand open, and hanging from the sill a trunk-hose, drying. She wrung her hands, mourning, 'Oh my! oh my!'

If things should go other than she willed that night, of all nights! If the Destiny which infects and shapes the lives of men were against her! and on that night! She tapped again, and left a message for Mark: he was to meet her beneath the river at Calvo's. And off she went, running. The night now had come.

If the wedding, after all, should lack a bridegroom . . .! That would be hard.

Her bosom strained with the stressful prayer of her lifted heart; on her lips was a constant mutter of prayer.

'Virgin,' she said, and again, 'Virgin.' Only a Heavenly Maid could comprehend the cry of her pure heart.

She had not yet seen Laura. On leaving Calvo, she had hurried back to the Bell, and in a few words had

told mine host that she must even be absent for some hours that night—willy-nilly, she must. In her fear of all the world concerning Laura, she had not even acquainted the simple good man of her sister's presence in London. She distrusted his tongue among the gallants of the inn. Her outings o' nights, when she went to Laura, she explained in various ways, never, however, uttering direct falsehood.

From the Bell she had gone to Bonner's lodging; thence she hurried to the Whitefriars.

She ran up some low, broad stairs, with massive brown-oak banisters, to the first landing—to the second—to a half-open door: and she cried an 'Ah!' of joy. Laura was in her arms.

'Thou didst not expect me?'

'No.'

'Kiss me!'

Laura kissed her.

'Again.'

Laura kissed her.

'Oh, harder 'n that—longer 'n that.'

Laura kissed her harder and longer, minutely obedient.

'I did not expect thee. This is not thy night. . . .'

'No. Laura, thou wilt be married this very night.'

'In truth?'

'This night.'

'Whom to?'

'Oh, sweetard—art not very sweet? Dost love me, Laura? But what a query! Why, to Bonner, sure!

Laura clapped her hands a little. The prospect of marriage so near was agreeable—marriage with Mark Bonner above all.

'Art glad, Laura?'

'Oh, I like being married, I!'

She clapped her hands a little.

'But——' she said.

'Well, sweetard?'

'He has nothing.'

'I know it. But he is learned: he will be a wise and worthy man, Laura. I predict it of him. Oh, thou must love him, love him alway more than life itself!'

'Oh, I love him, I. But he has not a noble to buy me a fore-part.'

'Nay, but for the present he shall live with thee here; and what I earn will nourish you both.'

All this time it never occurred to Laura to question the cause of this sudden marriage. She simply acquiesced in a pleasant thing, confiding in her sister's devices.

'But—ah, Laura,' said Bessie, 'I have need to scold thee warmly, minx, for a thing. Dost talk with strangers?—nay, nay, I cannot scold thee. I have pined so to see thee! How much dost love thy Bess? Come, kiss me more, girl, girl, and tell it me in mine ear!'

Laura, in the act of kissing her, cried:

'But——!'

'Well, pig's-eye?'

'I saw him not one half-hour agone, and he said naught of this marriage.'

'Who?'

'Master Bonner.'

'Oh!' Bessie leapt up. In her lover-like preoccupation with Laura she had half-forgotten her quest of Bonner, as the mind in moments of awful stress is sometimes captured by trifles. 'Oh, then, thou hast seen him? Methought perchance thou hadst. Faith, I was in so great scare, seeking him high and low.'

'He is easy found,' said Laura. 'He was on his way to the King's Palace with a missive, and stopped midway to have speech with me.'

'Then I must even go thither—now. Perchance on the road I may meet him.'

'Why, and I, too,' said Laura.

'Haste, then! All will yet be well.'

She lifted her eyes in a prayer of praise.

A minute or two afterwards the sisters were hurrying together westward through that lane in the fields which is now the Strand.

CHAPTER VII

HOW A WEDDING UNDER THE RIVER FELL OUT ILL

'Then shall those creatures all forlorn
Warie the hour that they were born.'
LINDSAY.

'Il n'y a guère d'homme assez habile pour connaître tout le mal qu'il fait.'—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

AT that precise moment Mark Bonner stood confronted with Garrett Oge Fitzgerald.

It was in the hedge-lane of yew and holly-bush leading from the south postern of the palace-wall.

Mark came whistling, his bonnet far back on his fall of golden ringlets. There was a moon. But he did not see the three wounded men in his path, though there, standing huge, he saw their wounder.

'Hold!' said Fitz. 'What make you, sirrah?'

'I am a messenger to the King,' answered Mark.

'From whom?'

'I may not say.'

'Then return to him that sent you, and say that Garrett Oge Fitzgerald bars your way.'

'I may not pass?'

'That may you not.'

'Nay, but I must.'

'Then pass.'

'Sheathe first that ominous-looking sword.'

'Nay, friend, I am in no humour for jests to-night, by my halidame. Go thy way in peace.'

'Wherefore may one not pass?'

'I will tell thee, lad. There is a danger that the

King receive to-night unpleasant tidings. Now, I am a King's Guard: and 'tis the first duty of a King's Guard to guard the King—from unpleasant tidings, above all. So go thy way unpricked, lad.'

'Then I will tell you from whom I have the letter.'

'From whom?'

'From Signior Mauro Calvo.'

'Who's he?'

'The great chymist of London Bridge.'

'Ay, I recollect. No, lad, no letters from any wizard-men to the King to-night.'

Mark was confounded. He could not rush upon a sword. He turned back upon his way, hesitatingly, uncertain what to do. Finally, he rested his foot upon a fence-bar, and leant upon the top, whistling, looking at the moon.

He heard near footsteps, turned, and saw Bessie and Laura Ford.

'Ah, this is happy meeting!' cried Bessie.

'What make you here?' asked Mark, astonished.

'We shall be married this very night!' blurted Laura, with one hand-clap.

'Say you——?'

Bessie took Mark aside, and explained how all was ready, and what her will was.

'In Signior Calvo's studio, say you?' asked Mark.

'Even there. Is he not as a father to me and mine?'

'Then 'twas my own wedding-hoop I have purchased!' cried Mark. 'Oh, the abounding of my lucky star! I bless thee, sweet Bess, I thank thee from my heart!'

'Then come, for the time is not far off. Hast thou delivered thy letter to the King?'

Bessie glanced timorously at that awful palace. Even its exterior was to her a terror.

'Nay, I have not delivered it, inasmuch as a pestilent outrageous fellow stands yonder to prevent me with drawn sword.'

''Tis pity. Yet must thou come now. From whom was the letter?'

'Even from Signior Calvo.'

'Say'st thou——? from *him?* Oh, 'tis most great pity thou shouldst return and not deliver his missive!'

To Bessie, in the poignant grip of her gratitude to Calvo, this seemed a monstrous indelicacy, to return to the enjoyment of the alchymist's favours, leaving his will undone.

'But why art thou debarred?' she asked.

'Faith, the knave is somewhat incoherent. He would guard the King from unpleasant tidings. He stands yonder at the turn of the hedge.'

'But sure, in Master Calvo's missive would be no unpleasant tidings; 'tis rather some request which he tenders,' she said musingly. Then suddenly: 'Come with *me*—for a woman's soft tongue may more persuade than a man's strut. And 'twere most great pity to return, having failed Master Calvo.'

She had wondrously little dread of cold steel: all her terrors being for another, and moral in their character.

They went forward, she and Mark before, Laura walking listlessly a little way behind, not knowing nor caring why she went. Mark flung back at her a 'Sweet!', and she smiled.

There, standing, was Fitzgerald. But Bessie was quite near to him before she recognised him. Suddenly she screamed. Fitz, hearing footsteps, had looked round, and recognised both Bessie and his sweetard, Laura. In an instant Bessie had turned, seized the hand of Laura, whispered an impassioned 'Run!', and was gone with her sister flying down the path. Fitz was after them.

He was a man whose mind could bear the stress of only one impulse at a time. While it lasted, he forgot all else.

The race was intense, though Laura was weakly and no runner, and Fitz's long legs were rather weary; but he meant to overtake them, and ran hard. On the whole, however, they distanced him at first. Behind all came Mark Bonner, running, and wondering why.

Suddenly the race ended. A man had rushed into the path from a by-way, and in his course collided

heavily with Fitzgerald. They fell together. It was Fitz's friend, Macdonald, come to report the final failure of his search for the letters.

Mark Bonner, meanwhile, had stopped, and seeing the fall of Fitz, and that the two girls were now safe, took to his heels in the direction of the palace, and almost as soon as the two men were on their feet, had entered the postern.

'But is't *thou?*' said Macdonald. 'What cherry-pit is this thou playest?'

''Tis the little perroquet, of whom I told thee to-day, that I chase. She came strangely near me of her own will, and flies yonder with little Bessie of the Bell. Hast found the letters?'

'No, no. But Bessie of the Bell, sayest thou?'

'Ay.'

'Phew!' went Macdonald, pondering with eyes glinting close.

'What of her?' asked Fitz.

''Tis she hath the letters, sure, blockhead!' cried Macdonald.

'How makest thou that?'

'I think only of the fact that she is in visible friendship with the pretty moppet whom thou this day blurtedst thy will to steal. 'Tis clear enow: she hoped to do thee some injury for thy misbehaving to her friend. Never once did I suspect her. But now I recollect—I saw her not at all after the letters disappeared, though we searched the inn thorow. She must e'en have slipped away, bearing them somewhither. Quick, Fitz! we must after and track them.'

At once the two men took to running. The girls, by this time, thinking themselves out of harm, had fallen to a panting, rapid walk. Within ten minutes the men spied them afar; and they, too, slowed their pace, clinging to the shadows, wary of their footfalls, tracking the girls at a distance of some forty yards.

On by the orchard-wall of Essex House, crowded with blooming espaliers, and a ghostly whiteness of blossomy fragrance, and on by the shafted-windows and oriels of

the Knights Templars, through the desert loneliness of black tree-shadow, and broad, white moonlight.

Suddenly Laura Ford thought that she would like to be married in a hat.

'Well, then, Laura, thou must e'en run fleetly to get it,' said Bessie, 'for the hour is near, by my credit. Heaven grant that Mark Bonner be not tardy . . .!'

And at once they doubled down a dark alley in the Whitefriars. To the men behind, this sudden run seemed precisely like purposed flight: and cried Macdonald:

'They have spied us, and run, Fitz. After them, lad . . .!'

They, dropping caution, started the chase with loud footsteps; and at the same time Bessie Ford exclaimed:

'Oh, my mother, we are still pursued!'

The girls redoubled speed, spurting like gaze-hounds. But Bessie's wits did not forsake her: she knew that Fitzgerald knew the abode of Laura; to that abode, therefore, there must be no return now. Down another alley she darted, dragging panting Laura, and into the first open doorway. Here all was dark and still. They waited in a corner of the hall, hardly daring to breathe their laboured breaths. In a little while they heard the two men run past.

The men, missing the quarry, made for Laura's lodging. They ran up the stairs, alarmed the household, demanded her room, and searched it. But by the time they had finished, Laura and Bessie were well on their way through Paul's to London Bridge.

Fitz and Mac descended and stood in the alley. Whither now should they turn, what do?

'Whither away now, Mac?' asked Fitz.

''Tis a vile business, this,' said Mac, at a loss.

They hooked arms, and strolled listlessly down to the river's bank, pondering on emptiness. To Inanity there is no solution, nor can the Void be added up.

Here they remained a long time, perhaps an hour, strolling to and fro, watching the darkly-bushed banks, and the broad play of the rippled water into which the moonshine beat and sweltered.

'Tis a filthy business!' said Mac.

'By now the King knows,' said Fitz.

'Most like.'

'I knocked on the head three several messengers from my Lord Wolsey. There will be the very devil to answer for, Mac. Beside, there was a fourth——'

'Who?'

'A messenger from a wizard-man of London Bridge.'

'Say you—— ?'

'But hold! why, this same boy was with the maidens!'

'And this fellow who was with the maidens bore a message from Calvo?'

'He did.'

'Gadamercy, Fitz! why saidst thou not this before?'

'How so?'

'Uds daggers! 'tis clear that 'tis the wizard hath the letters! Know'st thou not this man? He is called Calvo, and not a wench but holds in reverence his dark powers. 'Tis to just such an one that the girl would have borne the letters for their keeping; and if his messenger was with her, s'death! 'tis not a long guess. Come, Fitz—to the wizard's den, lad!'

They took to their heels eastward with new impulse.

Meanwhile, in the den beneath the river, Bessie Ford and Laura waited, and Brother Bruno and Mauro Calvo waited. All was ready, but a bridegroom lacked.

Had the Fates in whom she trusted not been against her, Bessie would ere now have seen her sister's finger hooped, for the hour was well past, and she lifted her eyes, and her hands were damp in one intense, long clasp of fear, and Brother Bruno showed fervent impatience, and Mark Bonner did not come.

Calvo went about, decocting his brews, holding vials to the light, adjusting a still, smelling a fishy jelly, seeking ever to bind volatile Hermes, who would not be bound. And now he would tap Bessie Ford on the cheek, saying:

'Never fear, never fear. . . .'

'Pray he come anon,' said Brother Bruno. 'Even a Crouched Friar cannot subsist without eating.'

He was a portly bonhomme, Brother Bruno, with an asthmatic throat-groan, and a depth of abdomen equal to his breadth of shoulder. He drained at a gulp a piggin of Calvo's wine, and sat his broad overlapping bulk on a stool with short-winded sigh. The long cross of his order heaved in spasms on his chest. Bessie Ford noted the signs of his growing unrest with a wan agony.

'Oh, Something is against me, sure!' she muttered.

Calvo expounded a scientific theory to Bruno, who did not care, holding a test-tube and tiny balance before the friar's eyes.

Laura noticed her sister's careworn face, and leaned, and said:

'Don't fret! he will come. . . .'

It was really she that held Brother Bruno. His eyes fed upon her. Here was the gayest flash of womanhood those epicure looks had yet blinked at.

'And he should be the happiest groom, too, in the King's realm—he should, yes,' he said. 'Wherefore comes not the mumping knave?'

Would he never, never come? A slow hour drawled away.

Bruno rose to go.

Mark, meanwhile, was coming, swiftly, on horseback; and with him, swiftly, on horseback, was coming King Henry the Eighth.

Mark had sent in his letter to the King after half-an-hour's waiting in an ante-chamber; and as soon as ever Henry read the words, he ordered the messenger to be detained.

King Henry at this time was in the first fulness of his vigour; the blood ran red in his veins; and never was a King more vividly a Man.

He had the power of deliberation in the midst of his most arrogant passions. The first thing he saw on reading Calvo's letter was that Calvo had his letter to Wolsey, and had read it. That letter, then, lay open: and it contained secrets which, for a large part of his

kingdom, he would not have another eye peruse. Like lightning, he resolved that he himself, and no other, must recover that open letter; also, that the eye which had read it must never see another sunrise.

All the time he thought thus coolly, his face was the very expression of royal rage.

He had expected some despatches from Wolsey in answer to his own, and understood now why they had not come. He remembered, too, the messenger he had employed—the newly-tried Kildare fellow. This gibbet-crow, then, had proved miscreant. . . .

The King sat again at his escritoire, and took up some paper-of-state, to finish its perusal; but as he read, he cast it down, and smote with his fist, crying:

'Well, by the Splendour of God . . .!'

He went stalking to and fro in the chamber, stretching his sculptured, close-clad legs.

'Tell three Guards to await me in the palace-court with two saddle-horses,' he said to a gentleman-in-waiting.

He resumed his striding. He tossed up a breath of bitter laughter on the words:

'By the Splendour of God . . .!'

In about ten minutes he reappeared from a withdrawing-room, bonneted and muffled in a cloak. In the anteroom he cast a casual eye upon Mark Bonner as he passed, and said:

'Lead the way to this Calvo.'

Mark was trembling like aspen.

The cavalcade set off, with a lanthorn. Mark led. They went galloping, the Guards behind. In fifteen minutes King Henry was jerking down the steep stone steps of Mauro Calvo's dark den.

The door was half-open. It was pulled back. Laura and Bessie Ford leapt up, expecting Mark. Bruno was just about to go.

For Mark they saw King Henry. The first face upon which the King's eye rested was the face of Laura Ford.

He started: and immediately turned his look away.

The light was very dim, and came only from the yellow blotch of the horn-lanthorn.

Mark and the Guards entered. The arms of Bessie Ford were trembling in visible up-and-down jerks like spasms. She knew the King, and had seen him look —*and turn his look away*.

As for Calvo, he stood erect, near the further door, eyeing the King with calm, goggle eyes. Here were two kings, and not one. Though Henry's visit was sudden as thunder-bolt, and the reason was readable in his face, yet Calvo did not flinch.

Why did not the King speak? He had his outstretched finger covering the alchymist, and on his tongue were the words: 'Arrest me that stinking rat!', but instead, he turned his head, and said:

'La, mamsels, what make you here . . .?'

His face wore a coarsely sheepish expression of some dawning, sly purpose.

Bessie Ford, cold with horror, had cringed and backed, as from some deadly snake, toward the further end, instinctively near to the protection of Calvo, drawing her sister with her.

At that moment, Fitzgerald and Macdonald came bounding into the room and saw—the King! Fitz hung his head, as the King's hard eyes rested a moment upon him.

Again the King's finger went out, and this time he said:

'Seize me that lousy stinkard!'

Even at that moment of his peril Mauro Calvo's eyes rested upon the face of Bessie Ford, and saw its anguish. And, even at that moment, he had room in his brain to pity her. He remembered that the thing which she feared had come upon her.

Suddenly, as the Guards moved to seize him, the room was in nether darkness. At a mere touch of his finger the lanthorn had gone out.

A dagger now at his heart would not have surprised King Harry.

'Quick—light . . .!' he cried.

The Guard who had carried a lanthorn had deposited it on a step outside, where he had stood to light down the King. He rushed out, and perhaps within a minute after the darkness there was again light.

But where was Mauro Calvo? He was gone. And where were Bessie and Laura Ford? They were gone, too.

The men rushed into the inner room. They ransacked it; in rushing search they tapped the walls; they looked toward the ceiling; they looked at the floor. The wizard had vanished on the devil's wing; the girls had thinned to air.

Harry wry-pushed his lips and gnawed the pout at a corner, meditating with scowling brow. He took in with his tongue-tip his moustache end, to gnaw.

His first words were a surprise: they showed that the centre-of-gravity of his interest had changed.

He said to Mark Bonner, speaking very low:

'Knowest thou that maiden?'

'Which, sire?' faltered Mark.

'The taller.'

'Yes, sire.'

'What is thy name?'

'Mark Bonner, sire.'

'Find her, and tell me where, and I will make of thee what thou wilt.'

He turned to Fitzgerald:

'Well, villain—my letters!'

Fitzgerald said:

'I deserve to be hanged, sire.'

The King lowered his voice:

'Sawest thou that maiden even now?'

'Yes, sire.'

'Art thou truly a shrewd fellow?'

'I believe it, sire.'

'Then prove it. Find her, and thou hast my favour. What is thy name?'

'Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, sire.'

'I remember. An thou hast need of a full purse, bear this ring to my Chamberlain.'

He turned to Macdonald:

'Fellow, thou art in my Lord Wolsey's service, I see.'

'I am, sire.'

'And a comrade of this knave here?'

'Yes, sire.'

'I know thy face. What is thy name?'

'James Craigie Macdonald, sire.'

'A Scot?'

'Yes, sire.'

'Then a shrewd fellow, I warrant.'

'It is like, sire.'

The King's voice dropped:

'Sawest thou that maiden even now?'

'Yes, sire.'

'Tell my Lord Wolsey that the King takes thee henceforth into his service. Find her, knave, through whatever difficulty, and thou reap'st a fair harvest. Go first to my Chamberlain with Fitzgerald and Bonner, and have thy purse well filled. But find her —fail me not an thou lovest life.'

'I will do what trying can, sire.'

'And thou?' he said to Fitzgerald.

'Why truly, sire.'

'And thou?'

He turned to Bonner.

Bonner did not answer, though he felt himself, willy-nilly, one of the League formed by the King.

But the King did not notice his silence, and at once went fumbling from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FUGITIVES

'Freedom all solace to man gives:
He lives at ease that freely lives,
And should think freedom more to prize
Than all the gold in world that is.'

BARBOUR.

WE have said of Bessie Ford that she was more important than the Battle of the Spurs; also that she was like a pebble dropped into water, round which float out and widen slow circles: only, in *her* case, instead of the circles fading as they widened, they still gathered depth and height—they filled a sea—till at the horizon they rolled away in sombre billows, mountain-high.

From her partly sprang that Reformation which shook the world.

Let us follow, circle by circle, the widening reach of her life, and watch its culmination. Of this she is worthy: for really heroic was the Virtue of the girl, and great her passionate unselfishness, and her strong patience, and her pious valour.

When Mauro Calvo vanished from King Harry, as it were on the wing of Sathanas, taking with him Bessie and Laura, in reality, of course, Satan had nothing to do with that matter. The escape was effected in the darkness through a hole which did not at all seem to be there. On one side, the wall slanted inward toward the roof, and in this wall was a circular window near the bottom, shut with a slab of stone-work. The inner surface of this slab was coated with

cobalt, and touched a ledge in the wall, coated with loadstone, then called 'Lydian-stone'; the slab was thus kept in place by magnetic force, and it was only necessary to present an artificial magnet to its upper edge to cause it to fall by its own weight upon the palm. On its hidden surface was a handle, and Calvo had no sooner whispered Bessie and Laura, and pushed them through, than, himself following with a bag, he replaced the slab with perfect noiselessness, and left the wall impenetrable.

The fugitives groped their way up some steps in the thickness of the wall. At the top was a similar window, opening inwards, and before the window a little boat, lolling in the thick shadow of London Bridge, fastened to a staple.

They hurried in. Calvo pushed off, and plied an oar.

In the middle of the river he stopped, and looked up at a black sky, crowded with stars. He thought of his optic tube, quite lost now to him, and was pettish.

'Well, now, you see what you have brought me to,' he said.

Bessie Ford's hands were clasped in a passion of gratitude.

'Sure, my good father, may the good God——' she whispered.

'Yes, yes: but you see what you have brought me to now, don't you?' he said.

In reality, of course, Bessie had not brought him to anything. This sudden separation from his retorts, and alcahests, and alchemies had been occasioned by his own letter to Henry; and even before that letter, as he knew, his doom had been settled. But upon poor Bess he poured the blame.

Laura leant her lovely forehead upon Bessie's shoulder, which trembled. Calvo, looking up, observed old Aldebaran and Boötes, and the drifting planets.

'Mumping chuff, that King!' he said. 'What, i' God's name, to do now?'

There was silence.

'Sure, Master Calvo,' suggested Bessie, 'my uncle

of the Bell would not be slow to give hiding to so good a friend to me as you.'

'The Bell, is it? Are *you* going back to the Bell?'

'Why, yes, sir, as I suppose.'

'Very well. Go your own way, go your own way. I have nothing to do with you, you know—nothing at all—you are to remember that, prithee. But did you see that chuff of a King look at your sister?'

'Alas, Master Calvo, yes.'

'And did you understand the full meaning of that look?'

'Alas, alas, yes, sir.'

'Well, then, take my word for it: before morning he'll have all London searched to find her.'

'Oh, holy Mother!'

'Go to the Bell, if you like, and take her with you. That will be the first place his paltering priers will hie to, be sure. But 'tis no affair of mine, you understand. As for me, ere morning I shall be far enow from London.'

'Then—then shall I be left fatherless in good sooth, my master!'

'Well, well, don't start, don't start crying.'

'You foretold me, sir, that the King should never, *never* see her!'

'Did I say that, now? Well, he *has* seen her, you see. The stars mean not always what they say, young woman. But never mind—I can't abye the crying, you know—we shall see, we shall see.'

He patted her head.

There was silence.

'Do you mean that you will be taking us with you into the country, sir?' Bessie asked with timid voice.

'What! encumber myself with two young women—perfect strangers to me—in that way?'

'By my credit, no, that in truth would be asking a world too much, Master Calvo.'

'It would, it would. Gramercy! I am not your father, I suppose, hey? And I without a groat to buy myself a platter of furmity withal! No, no, no—what are you talking about? You go your way,

and I go mine. Only, whatever you do, don't cry, don't cry.'

Listlessly he patted her head, his goggle, misshapen eyes wandering over the sown and straying firmament.

Laura lifted her fatally-fair face to make an observation.

'I don't like the country, I,' she pouted.

'Why, Laura—sh-sh-h, dear,' whispered Bessie.

'Hullo! here's another of them,' said Mauro Calvo. 'What! you like not the country, hey? Well, into the country you go, then! 'Tis you, with your face, that's the cause of all. What! not like what your sister wishes, hey? Into the country you go!'

Bessie's heart bounded. By the side of Calvo she felt an arm of mighty protection underneath and about her. She divined continually that his heart was fatherly and his brain potent; and that both were hers.

She waited. He had taken the oar again, and was paddling toward the north bank, in the direction of the Old Swan steps.

Presently he spoke good words: he said:

'Have you any money?'

'Why, *yes*, Master Calvo; fifteen hoarded crowns in a coffer at the Bell.'

'Very well. Go and get them, and make a bundle of them with some clothes. Take your sister with you, and get into the house secretly, letting nobody at all know that you are there. Give heed you be not followed in the streets now, and look out for me in an hour. I will give three whistles. I am going now to get horses for us.'

Bessie Ford whispered into Laura's ear:

'Isn't he *good!*'

The boat's prow touched the green old slime of the steps. The sisters went running, hand in hand, northward. Calvo glided into darkness still further eastward in the skiff, past Botolph's Wharf toward Billingsgate.

CHAPTER IX

THE SPANIARD

'And up and down they pace with frantic air,
And scorn a comforter, and will despair.'

CRABBE.

LONDON now lay well asleep, and the watchman's lanthorn dawdled, blinking, through a glum, cemetery quietude. Only yonder, in Bridewell, was there sound and movement, where a *soirée* went forward in the palace of Queen Katherine; and also, close by, in the Bridewell Palace of my Lord Cardinal of York, was light, and some stir, and the smiting of a horse's fore-foot.

Eastward, in the yard of the Bell, were also four moving feet, Bessie's and Laura's. They descended, with stealthy trepidations, some steps to the cellar-door, of which Bessie, the inn's chamberlain, kept the key in a hip-pouch. Through a trap-door they ascended to her room, and here, within five minutes, groping without sound, Bessie had busily pinned together a little bundle.

Laura sat on a bed on the floor, embracing her knees. Her left lid had a droop, making the lovely brown brightness of that eye smaller than the lovely brown brightness of the right, and this droop gave to her beauty a certain melancholy, purely Spanish, when she held her head sideways in a brooding moment. So now she sat, woefully meditating.

There was yet an hour to wait for Mauro Calvo. Bessie sat by Laura with the bundle, and presently there was low speech.

'Well, Laura girl, it has really come to that—the King has seen thee.'

'Is it that we shall go back again into the country?'

'Why, certes, as thou know'st. Do not fret now, nor be cruel.'

'I like being in London, I.'

'But thou wilt like the country also, sweet—Be sweet and good, now—oh do! Shall I not be with thee always and always?—and Master Calvo, also?'

'What, that old lobcock——'

'Laura, sh-h-h! Oh, Laura!'

'But is it that I shall not be married any more with Mark Bonner?'

'Why, yes, of course, of course, if the good God shall be our friend. But not now! That King, Laura. . . .'

Laura's hands met gaily in a single silent clap.

'I saw him looking at me!'

'Laura, thou didst?'

'He is very big and handsome, the King.'

'I hate him! Oh, I hate him, hate him!'

'He had five big rings on his left hand, and round his neck was a baldrick thick with balasses.'

'But that look, Laura! Didst thou see it? Oh, there was a world of evil in that look! There was no good in that look of King Henry!'

'They say he is a great one for pretty girls, the King.'

'But let him beware of *one* pretty girl, Laura Ford! If that man meddles with thee, I will *kill him.* Thou hear'st me? I will *kill* him—God forgive me!'

'Our Saviour! thou art not jealous of the King, Bess? Phew! I would not desert thee for him, not I! Phew!—thank you, sirs—not I!'

Bessie wrapped her in a passionate kiss. Never could she quite believe in her actual possession of so glorious a thing as Laura. Laura seemed ever on the point of taking everlasting flight from her arms, and every rare word of love uttered by her sister made her glow, and she treasured it long, like a rare coral, in her memory.

'But,' said Laura, 'how came the King in that old hoball's den?'

'Oh, love, speak not so of Master Calvo, I prithee! he came, 'tis clear, to arrest Master Calvo. And I suspect 'twas because he knew, someways, that Master Calvo had the letters.'

'Which letters, Bess?'

'Why, the letters of the King which I took from Master Fitzgerald.'

'Thou took'st some letters?'

'Ah, thou dost not wot, I forgot. I will tell thee all.'

So she told how, to save Laura from the Irishman, she had stolen from his cloak the King's letters, while he fought a wager of battle with the foreigner in the Bell's yard; and how she had taken them to her good ingle, Mauro Calvo; and how, perhaps, as she divined, the King had heard of this, and come and seen—and seen——

And she had hardly finished the tale when both leapt to their feet with stifled cries. For there before them, holding a light, a bandage round his bruised skull, in a *déshabille* of camisole and hose, stood that very foreigner with whom Garrett Oge Fitzgerald had done battle.

He put finger on lips, and bowed low.

Almost before his eyes could rest upon the lovely face, Bessie Ford had cast over it a capote lying near, and pushed Laura toward the tapestry. And at once she stepped toward the stranger, puffed out his taper-light, and stood pale, in challenging expectancy before him.

'Mamsel,' said the gentleman, 'such precautions, by my faith of a caballero, are unnecessary with me: from me you have nothing to fear.'

'Then what make you here, sir?' said Bessie.

'I come to serve you.'

'How wot you that we have need of service, sir?'

'Troth, lady, I have been put to bed in the neighbouring chamber with my broken skull, and the door lies open. I avouch that I have harkened to the most of your palabras, having heard the name of the King oft repeated by you.'

'The King, sir?'

'Why, yes, the King. If now I say that the King

clearly seems no friend to you, and if I add thereto that I, at this hour, am no friend to the King, then it ensues that you and I are friends.'

'But, sir, I know you not——'

'Nay, but if I tell you who I am, then will you know me better. I am the servant of the King of Spain, sent express to England to search into certain allegations respecting the King in relation to Queen Katherine, who happens to be aunt to my master, the King of Spain. This is the real truth, on my faith of a caballero; so now you see that I can be no great friend to the King of England, who is no great friend to you.'

'But, sir——'

'Nay, nay, lady, I tell you candidly that I have need of you. Again I vouch you assurance that no hurt is meant you; but the Infanta of Portugal and the daughter of Ferdinand is a personage of some importance, even in this currish land. And you hear?—that is one lock secured. I am going to leave the house, and you will wait here till I return. And now the other.'

The Spaniard, as he spoke, had rushed from one to the other of the two doors, locking them and seizing the keys. In a minute he was heard in the next room, fumbling, striking a light, hurrying on his clothes.

Bessie Ford's wild eyes wandered round the blank darkness for help or hope. And she wailed:

'Oh, my mother, what is this? Master Calvo will come, and we locked in! Oh, sure, sure, Something is against me, sure——'

CHAPTER X

THE CIRCLES SPREAD

'Ah! then and there was hurrying to and fro,
And gathering tears, and tremblings of distress.'
BYRON.

'He was a man of that magnanimity and prudence, understood so well which way men were to be wheedled or destroyed. . . .'—MACHIAVELLI.

THE Spaniard cautiously butted his way toward a front gable-door, drew the bolts, and went running down the slumbering Cheap toward Bridewell.

At this time, King Henry, long since grown tired of Spanish Catalina, his dead brother's wife and also his own, was playing the gallant with a maid-of-honour of Catalina's Court, Anne Boleyn. The answer of Anne, who had guile and unbounded ambition, was a persistent: 'No—I have a fancy for passing through the gate of Marriage.' Whereupon King Henry, whose will, once roused and crossed, was like a West Indian cyclone, said to himself: 'Anne I must have, since I will it: but how?' Suddenly it occurred to him that the death of the male heirs borne him by Katherine was a dispensation of Heaven for his sin in marrying a brother's wife—a superstition with which this potent mind so impressed the English people, that, in an amusing form, it remains part of our social life to this hour.

The word Divorce accordingly arose in the kingly brain. And on the subject of Divorce he began to write argumentative letters to my Lord Cardinal of York, receiving in reply argumentative letters from my Lord Cardinal on that very subject.

Unfortunately, a nephew of Katherine was the Emperor Charles V., of Spain and Austria, the most powerful of monarchs: and in close league with him was—the Pope.

Now, a whisper of how matters stood was in the air, and Katherine had written letters to Charles, her nephew, full of complaint and despondency: the King no longer cared for her, the King, the King, the King. So Charles had sent over, in reply, a secret agent, the Condé Christoval Alvarada d'Ossorio, a redoubtable fighter and courtier, instructed at all costs to gather furtive information.

The Condé Alvarada d'Ossorio, hearing Garrett Oge Fitzgerald boast of secret letters of the King in his riding-cloak, fought him in the yard of the Bell, hoping for a glance of those letters, and had been knocked on the head.

In fact, one of those letters did relate to Queen Katherine, and the King's tender conscience, and the killing charms of Mistress Anne; and it contained that word Divorce. So that when Calvo wrote to Henry his veiled threat of publishing this letter, he knew well that were its contents just then to meet the eye of Charles, its effect would be an instant conflagration of war between Spain and England.

Alvarada, however, had been balked of a sight of it by the great sword of Garrett Oge. He lay bruised on his bed, when, lo, there had come voluntarily to his ears, from the next room, yet another tale of Henry's vagrant passions.

Down past the Cheap, past Paul's, he went running toward Bridewell.

Now, it happened that that night was the eve of the Vigil of St. John, on which day the standing and marching watches, levied from each ward, with mayor, sheriffs, and waytes of the City, filed past the King and Queen —a great day. And because this was the eve of that Vigil, the masque at the Bridewell Palace was nocturnal, in contrast with the mid-day functions then everywhere usual.

In a hall of the palace sat Queen Katherine on a

daïs. The hall was gay with green birch, long fennel, orpin, St. John's wort, and white lily, in honour of the occasion. A band of minstrels in the great cave of an oriel played the tabouret, the virginals, the lute, the rebeck. And before the Queen a refulgent crowd of flushed beauties and priests and nobles danced that more stately gavotte, the pavan.

At that time the sun was hot, and the heart of Europe young. Women knew how to be born beautiful, and men admired them with gusto; also, everyone's tongue ran free, and extraordinary things were said.

But the Queen was a contrast to her surroundings. The Spanish melancholy was upon her. She had taken to wear the sad-coloured fabric called Lombardines; and though her placard was an embroidery of diamonds, and her vest brocaded gold, and her cloak a crimson velvet of Genoa, ermine-furred, yet she remained a figure of grief. Her ears continually awaited a sound which did not come. She expected the King.

After a long time he came. He had returned to the Westminster Palace after the fiasco in Calvo's den; and then, with a 'Pah!' of disgust, he remembered his Queen's masque.

He threw on a Russian masquerade, and as he stepped into a whirlecote, accompanied by the Earls of Essex and Fitzwater, he hissed to himself, 'Christ! 'tis a luscious bit . . .!'

Presently, Queen Katherine's straining ears heard a sennet of hautboys and trumpets, and the herald-cry:

'Henry, King of England and France, and of the provinces of Gascoigne, Guienne, Normandy, Anjou, Wales, and Ireland!'

The Queen arose, and stepped down. The dance ceased. In the lane that formed, two eyes—the eyes of Anne Boleyn—waited for a meaning glance. But no glance came. Henry walked through, a plump and stalwart figure. He took the Queen's hand, saying listlessly: 'Ah, lady mine.' He sat sideways by her, sticking out a straight left leg. And presently, with a slap of the hand, he cried: 'Dance it, then! dance

it! Let the music knock it!', and sat listlessly again, his head on his hand.

At once the hall slid into rhythmic movement to the lilt of the lively canary-dance.

Once Anne Boleyn, tripping near the royal seat, armed her eyes with an under-glance of coquettish flame; but at that moment Harry was taking from a cup-bearer a goblet of gingered ypocras, and did not even glance at her. Her eyebrows lifted, and her flush turned to mottle.

And once again she came: she was a girl of bold heart, prompt to action, iron in purpose—qualities which she concealed under the levity and *abandon* of a Parisian dancing-girl. She was like a rock invisible under foam. Dancing slowly near, she said to her partner, loud enough for the King's ears:

'Sure, to-night the King is glum. Gogsnouns! he hath the sweating-sickness, sure.'

Henry, starting at the prick of the challenge, cried:

'God! the Lady Anne is observant to-night. Sweating-sickness, quotha! Ha, mamsel, can you see beneath my clothes, then?'

'Why, sure,' said Anne, 'a king is oft a naked thing to his female subjects' eyes.'

A ribald jest leapt to the lips of Henry. But, instead, he waved her wearily off, saying:

'Nay, nay—go to—none of thy banterings to-night, lady.'

Anne wheeled away with a raging heart. Those simple words were to her nothing less than a huge calamity, the shattering of a thousand dreams. Suddenly, at the brusque rebuff and dismissal, a whole fabric collapsed—all seemed lost. She went dancing down the tiled floor a crushed and wounded thing, with white face.

She was a girl of twenty, French in manners (having lived at the French Court as maid of Queen Claude), with a far out-push of kerchiefed bust; with solid *embonpoint;* with frizzy, straw-coloured hair; neither tall nor short; with a low, broad brow; and a delicate, freckled nose; and a broad mouth, having character

in its pressure; and a brownish mole on the firm-fleshed short upper-lip.

As for Henry, the face of *another* filled his brain that night—one far lovelier than Anne, who, too, was lovely.

Five minutes after the King the Condé Alvarada d'Ossorio arrived at the palace, running. He handed to a gentleman yeoman an *écrin* containing half a ring; the yeoman, mounting the stairs, gave it to Anne; Anne, kneeling, presented it to Katherine.

On the face of Katherine was a broad smile: she had seen the King's rebuff of Anne, and was happy.

She took the *écrin* without opening it, though Anne had already peeped into it, knew whence it came, and waited for a message of reply.

Katherine said:

'Do not wait, lady.'

And she called another maid, in whom she had perfect confidence, and whispered:

'In the *salle d'attente* below you will see a nobleman with the wyvern of Aragon in a silvern brooch. Bid him watch for the King's departure, and then await me in the palace-orchard.'

Anne was now walking down the brown-oak hall, fierce at heart. Making his way through the crowd to meet her came Monsignor du Ballay, the French Ambassador, a portly, tall Churchman (Bishop of Bayonne), who could use his sword.

To no one in the world was the progress of Henry's love-matter with Anne of greater interest than to him. His soul sweated elaborately to advance it. For Henry was the balancing element between Francis, the French king, and Charles, the Spanish: into whichever scale he threw his sword, that scale must sink. If Henry mortally offended Charles, France would be supreme. Hence Du Ballay loved Anne like the apple of his eye: and a minute since he had seen her coldly dismissed by Henry. He went urging his way towards her, meaning to drop a hint of what Anne well knew—that that rebuff was not without some specific cause; that Anne, for the love of Heaven, must keep both eyes open, nor harbour despair.

Anne, on her part, had every intention to keep both eyes open. Before Du Ballay could reach her, the trusted lady-of-honour whom Katherine had sent down to the Spaniard, passing close to Anne, whispered airily:

'Guess you, child!—a secret meeting with the Condé d'Ossorio in the palace-orchard!'

Instantly Anne resolved to be there. She started straight for an opening in the storied arras; and after her Du Ballay urged his way.

She did not see him, but in a dim corridor, hearing following footsteps, and anxious at once to conceal herself in the orchard, she took to her light heels. Du Ballay, quickening his heavier pace, was only just in time to see her fly down an outer escalier of wood, bowered above in jasmine. Still eager to have speech with her, he, too, descended. But she was quite lost to him now. He went rummaging through the rank vegetation of the manor-close.

A few minutes later Harry rose brusquely from his seat, said *bonsoir* to the Queen, and stalked with discontented brow from the hall.

Immediately the Queen, too, rose and left it.

Now, the grounds of the Queen's Bridewell Palace abutted upon the grounds of the Bridewell Palace of my Lord Cardinal of York, nor was there any definite boundary between. Wolsey's was a magnificent place, once belonging to Henry's VII.'s Empson, and given to Wolsey by Harry. Its grounds contained twelve distinct gardens, and an orchard.

Toward ten that night Wolsey had come hither from Hampton. At the moment when Anne concealed herself in the Queen's orchard, he was walking in the spiced and blossomy air of his close, under the star-lit, black sky.

Clad in Cardinal frock he walked—cassock, rochet, and mosette—both hands flat on his chest; stout as an old woman, with the quick-planted steps of a vexed old woman; on his fat-necked head sat the four-cornered baretta of red, and on his frowning red brow sat—Deliberation.

The Divorce! the Divorce!—that now constantly

recurring word: this was the burden of his thoughts, of his angry musings.

He was dead against it. He saw that it must fatally offend Charles; and Charles was the Pope's friend, and Wolsey aimed at becoming, some day, Pope. At least, if Henry's will must have its way, if Spain *must* be against England, Wolsey decided that, as a set-off, France must be gained. He had therefore determined that the Duchesse d'Alençon, sister of Francis, must replace Katherine, since Katherine had to go. As for Anne Boleyn, he detested her, he detested her name. She was his obstacle, his danger, his evil Fate.

Suddenly, as he walked there in the garden, a fresh hope came voluntarily to him—a Hope in the person of Laura Ford.

An old pistoler came running from the mansion, in buckram cassock, with the words on his breath:

'My Lord Cardinal——'

'What is it?' said Wolsey.

'James Macdonald, one of your Grace's ewerers, hath importuned me to crave speech of your Grace for him.'

'Go away. You see I am meditating.'

'He said 'twas urgent.'

'Get you gone.'

'Well, well——'

The old man turned to hobble off. Wolsey said:

'Is it that young Scot which I sent with letters to Stirling Castle?'

'The same, the same——'

'Send him here.'

In three minutes James Craigie Macdonald, the good friend and ingle of Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, was bowing before Wolsey.

Wolsey continued his vexed old-womanish walk of short, decided steps, hands on chest, his stubby nose in air, and his bright eyes calm, deliberative; and Macdonald, like a towed boat, followed.

Their steps went toward the orchard, where hedges were high and the foliage thick.

After some time Wolsey said:

'Well, what have you?'

At this time Du Ballay was still seeking for Anne, hopelessly now. His steps had unconsciously led him into the Cardinal's grounds, and hearing near the voice of Wolsey, he stole closer, stooped with a grimace behind a shrubbery, and listened.

Luck is the finishing touch of the perfect diplomatist; to peep through the right hole in the nick of time—here is the art of Courts.

At that very moment Anne was straining her ears to catch the Spanish talk of Katherine and the Condé d'Ossorio not far off.

'What have you?' said Wolsey.

'I came to acquaint you, sir—the King would have me leave your service straightway, and enter his,' said Macdonald.

Wolsey stopped his walk, and examined Macdonald from head to foot.

'So. What for, princox?'

'He has imposed upon me a special devoir, sir.'

'What devoir?'

'Must I needs acquaint your lordship's grace?'

'Art not my sworn man? Give it me.'

Macdonald, eyeing the ground, waltzed his steel cap round his forefinger. He was now in armour.

'Come, Scot, you keep me waiting. Give it me, man.'

'An I enter the King's service, I keep his secrets,' said Macdonald boldly.

'Palterer! a murrain on thy trifling! Come, sirrah, give it me, now—into my ear——'

'Gogsnouns! I would liefer not, your Grace.'

But of the two Wolsey was the more cunning, and the less honest. He said:

'Then, marry, thou wishest expressly to displeasure me? Dream'st thou that I do not already know, and do but try you? The matter relates to a wench.'

The guess that a secret of King Harry's related to a wench was not a very far one; but its confirmation of Wolsey's reputation for omniscience conquered Macdonald. He said:

'In faith, my lord, it doth.'

'What wench?'

'Her name, I learn, is Laura Ford.'

'When and where did the King see her?'

'Even now, in the den of the alchymist—Calvo—under the river.'

'So—so. He was there: in the den of the alchymist—Calvo—under the river. Yes, I knew—I knew. And there he saw her—and her name is Laura Ford. And thou, Scot—hast thou, too, seen her?'

'I have, my lord.'

'Is she—art thou a fellow which know'st a pretty wench when thou seest her?'

'Marry, my lord, why, yes.'

'Is she hitting? Doth she spank the eye?'

'Bread and salt, my lord, she doth.'

'She is spicy, eh? Thou hast seen her. She tickles the regard, eh, Scot? She's a cockle, a solace, a peppermint—eh, fellow?'

'Bread and salt, my lord, she is!'

'Hast ever seen the Lady Anne Boleyn?'

'Why, this thrice, my lord.'

'Then tell me—reflect first and then answer me: wouldst thou liefer cuddle, varlet, the Lady Anne, or this Laura Ford?'

'Why, Laura, my lord, twenty times o'er, since you ask me. I tell your Grace, 'tis the curiousest, the flashiest moppet I ever laid look upon.'

'So. 'Tis fair and good. So. And now tell me: when the King saw her, how looked he?'

'Faith, he looked, sir, like one dazzled.'

'He did? He looked like one dazzled, did he? Oh, 'tis fair and good. Yes—go on—tell me, Scot. And what happened?'

'Before the King could have speech with them, Mauro Calvo darkened all the den, and vanished with the maidens.'

'Maidens, thou sayest? There were more than one.'

'The other is sister to Laura. She is called Bessie Ford.'

'Is she lovely, too?'

'Nay, but plain and homely.'

'Ah: one or other is bastard then. Are they girls of the people?'

'Yes, my lord. Bessie is chamberlain to the Bell Inn in Eastcheap.'

'The Bell Inn in Eastcheap. And when they vanished thus, what said the King?'

'He momently formed a league of my own self, one Fitzgerald, and one Bonner, a lad, to hie in search of the maiden on his behoof.'

'Is he not a Prince of most royal will?—prompt in purpose—eager in action? He is in earnest, then, in this matter. But stay—hast found the girls?'

'Nay, my lord, we have had scant time for that; we have but hied to the Westminster Palace to fill our purses and procure us horses. We go now to the Bell, where there is some small chance that the maidens are, and on the way I stopped to tell you that I am now, by your good leave, no more your man, but the King's.'

For half a minute Wolsey, intensely thinking, said nothing. Then he spoke:

'I grant thee the leave thou cravest, Scot. But do not yet set out: thou wilt wait in the palace with thy friends for half an hour, till I have further speech with thee.'

Macdonald bowed.

But to Du Ballay, listening behind the shrubbery, this question occurred: '*Why* the half-hour's delay?' And when, Macdonald having disappeared, he saw Wolsey instantly go trotting in heavy haste towards the mansion, he guessed the natural answer. The half-hour's delay could only be due to Wolsey's purpose of himself seizing Laura Ford before the King.

Now, since Wolsey was as much the enemy of Anne as Du Ballay was her friend, whatever was his design in seizing Laura Ford, it was clearly a design inimical to Anne. And this, to Du Ballay, was a quite sufficient reason to make him hie from the spot as if pursued, with the purpose of himself anticipating Wolsey in the capture.

His palace was near, in the chase north of the Knight's Templars. He, too, in heavy haste, went trotting through the Queen's manor-close with agitated

cymar of white damask-silk, out into the open lanes, and so home. Within ten minutes the horses of himself and four men-at-arms were clattering eastward through the startled Cheap.

As Du Ballay hurried from the Queen's palace, the Queen, in her orchard, was saying:

'Yes, you will seize this girl, my good Condé. Poor King Henry!—he is frail in this way. And I, you know, am only a woman—I cannot bear another infidelity just now.'

'If *she* is removed, the Lady Anne Boleyn remains,' said Alvarada bitterly.

'Yes; but I have a notion that the Lady Anne will whistle in vain after her flown eyas, if one were to guess from what I have witnessed to-night. The dear changeling no longer hankers after that hussy. Let us deliver him from this new temptation, and he may be again my own good lord.'

'To seize the girls I need help: it was therefore that I came to your Majesty.'

'Yes; help you shall have, and now, since the girls, having fled from the King, will instantly be chased by him. The valiant Sir John Perrot, who is my very good friend, and Lidcott, and James Burdet, shall be with you. You will send the lovely girl across the seas, good Condé, far from my lord's sight. Separate not the sisters, I prithee, and provide well for their sustenance. Come, come.'

But in the thickness of the foliage there listened one whose lips curled at the Queen's shallowness. 'How little,' thought Anne, 'must this woman know her husband, when she imagines in this fashion to cure him of a passion! An he doth not possess Laura Ford, he will hunt her with mad and growing vehemence to his dying day!'

And Anne had no intention that Henry should hunt Laura to his dying day: she willed rather that he should hunt herself. And that, she saw clearly, he would never do till the day when, like a gnawed bone, he flung Laura Ford aside, a discarded thing—since there could be no question of marriage between the

King and Laura. And in order to hasten that day, she, Anne, would have the girl in *her* own hands; would present her, a free-will offering, to her King. And since Katherine was hasting in the opposite sense, surely, on her part, too, there was need for haste.

She went tripping, with held-up skirts, stealthily treading, through the lanes of the close.

She darted, prone as an arrow, through the intricacies of the palace, and in the dancing-hall, with hasty breath, said at a young man's ear:

'Percy—quick—come here!'

She led him into a corridor. He was the heir of the Earl of Northumberland, broad-shouldered, bow-legged, a lad of twenty-two, blue-eyed, with hair of flaxen silk. With him, a year before, Anne had had a flagrant love-affair, nipped by Wolsey. She panted:

'Thou art to go—quickly—sans dallying—and a buss for thee, boy, on the lips, you hear?—if thou succeed'st—to the Bell—in Eastcheap! Two girls—locked in a room, I think—thou must seize and bear them away with thee—anywhere—but quick. Take three or four with thee—and fail not. An they be not there, hunt them—hunt them—far and wide! Fail me not, Percy, coz, an thou lov'st me! The Bell in Eastcheap—now!'

Percy squeezed her at the waist, dashed back his hair, and rushed away. He ran, dodging his impassioned way among palfreys and whirlecotes in the lane before the palace; and in a very few minutes was clattering eastward, with four men, through the Cheap.

About the same time three Wolsey-men galloped from the Cardinal's palace. Alvarada, with three Queen's-men, had already galloped from the Queen's palace, and Du Ballay's five from the Ambassador's palace.

If Anne was profound, Wolsey was more profound still, and knew his King. His reasoning was this: 'The King will continue to love this Laura Ford, to the exclusion of the Lady Anne, up to the week after he gets her into his hand: that week Anne will regain her power. The King must not, therefore, get her

into his hand, but I, Wolsey. And lest the King's flame for Laura, by the lack of fuel, grow cool, I, having her, will continually reincite him by sights of her, by new hopes of her, under such conditions that he shall see only, and hope only, but shall not handle. She shall elude him like a Jack-o'-lantern; he shall stretch out his hand for her, and she shall not be there. Thus will the influence of Laura grow, and be permanent, and the defeat of Anne be permanent also.'

So reasoned Wolsey: and hence it was that at the moment when his gallopers had set out for the Bell, the King's seekers, Fitzgerald, Macdonald, and Bonner, still sat in the Cardinal's *salle d'attente*, holding their chins, waiting through that 'half-hour' of the Cardinal's command.

Till Garrett Oge, lifting his great big body, and releasing his chin, said:

''Tis wearisome this. Is it meet, my masters, that a Geraldine should wait on a Cardinal?'

''Tis a nice abstract proposition in Logics,' said Bonner with a smirk.

Garrett Oge Fitzgerald laughed. In a single hour the face and words of this slim student-stripling had grown exceeding pleasant to the warrior's fancy.

''Tis a proposition in Theology, boy,' said Garrett Oge: 'I call it a Cardinal sin.'

'Still, we must needs stay,' said Mac.

'And wherefore?' replied Fitz.

'Since the Cardinal bids us stay.'

'But the King bids us go, Mac.'

'The Cardinal is the King's king, Fitz.'

'He is therefore a King with but one subject, and his kingdom is contracted to a point—say a Cardinal point. Thou and I are withouten his bounds, Mac.'

'Still, Fitz, maugre that — caution, lad! The Cardinal's wrath is red.'

'His frock also, and his nose. Yet they burn not, Mac.'

'Which,' said Bonner, 'proves the maxim of the Schools, that the converse of every true proposition is

not true: for though all mice have tails, yet are all things with tails no mice, as when big Sir John Perrot personates the devil in a pageant. So are all burning things red, yet all red things burn not.'

Fitz laughed, intimately tickled by this quaint personality. And 'Yea, boy,' he cries, 'but though our red Cardinal burn not now, yet burn enow, my troth, he shall—down yonder. But that apart, Mac, I say thee this: that this day twice hath the King entrusted me the executing of his will. The first time I failed him like a base-born tyke: this time I have no intent to fail him encore. *Why* wait we here, Mac? Come, come, let us begone!'

Macdonald said:

'By my faith, thou hast reason. If thou art bent upon going, I am with thee.'

Fitz jumped up.

'Come then, Cardinal or no Cardinal. Come, boy, come. . . .'

Bonner wondered why *he* was going, and what would be the end. Yet he went—with a hand on Fitzgerald's shoulder.

Their horses were in the courtyard. In three minutes they were galloping past Paul's eastward.

As soon as ever they entered Eastcheap, they were aware of a tremendous hoop-hoop and to-do in the neighbourhood of the Bell. There was a block of armed men on horses. There were shouts, threats, brandished swords, rearing steeds. There were flaring cressets. There were bangings and batteries at the doors of the inn, startling the night. There was the nightcap of the round-eyed landlord, who savoured still in his nose the savour of midnight snores, popped in amaze from an upper window.

Fitz and Mac drove spurs into their horses' flanks, and dashed toward the fracas, Fitz crying to Bonner:

'Keep close to me, boy! *Crom Aboo*, by God!' And out with a rushing sound leapt his sword.

Thus, as round a pebble, did the circles widen round Bessie Ford and her strong Virtue.

CHAPTER XI

THE STORM OF THE BELL

'Mit Stürmen sich herum zu schlagen . . .!'
GOETHE.

MOST of the five parties—the King's, the Queen's, Anne's, Du Ballay's, and Wolsey's—come to seize Bessie and Laura Ford, were astonished at the presence of all the others at the Bell.

They were nineteen: the King's three—Fitz, Mac, and Bonner; Du Ballay, with four French knights, on steeds caparisoned in goodly trappings with purfles; hot-headed young Percy of Northumberland, sent by Anne, with three stout livery-men; the Condé Alvarada, with the ferocious huge Sir John Perrot and two Queen's-men; and, lastly, three blood-hounds of Wolsey, gentlemen of his bed-chamber, gallants famed for tilting at the quintain, running at the ring, or jousting in single combat.

Of all these, Alvarada alone knew that the girls were locked in a chamber, and where. The keys of the chamber he had in his doublet.

The first to arrive were Du Ballay and his knights. They commenced to pound at a door of the Bell, but before the landlord had time to start from bed, the Spaniard with his three dashed up. Now, the Spaniard, on leaving the inn, had left one of the gable-doors unfastened, though closed, and on arriving made for it. His surprise at seeing some men thundering at another gable-door was increased when he was promptly attacked by those men. Du Ballay

wrongly surmised that these were the Wolsey-men whom he expected to come: and at once spurred, and, with waving blade, drove upon Alvarada, who had dismounted.

Alvarada was on lower ground, having descended two of the steps leading to the door. He parried a blow at his head, and ripped his skilled rapier along the horse's throat: and at once the animal dived prone on kneeling knee, pitching the stout Churchman into a bundle of defeat in the depression before the house.

Meantime the hoofs of seven horses were striking fire-works out of the smooth large cobble-stones, for the four Frenchmen had spurred at the three English, and were plunging in circular fight, with hacking blades, around them. In another minute Alvarada had leapt to his saddle and joined the affray. After two passes he pricked a French knight through the gorget, and sent him rolling, and towering Sir John Perrot, one of the fiercest of fighters, cleft the helm and brain of another, in spite of the heavy armour then worn. The French were now reduced to two, and the mêlée would have been short: but at that moment young Percy, with his three henchmen, armed each with the bow-and-arrow, spear, and demi-lance, arrived on the scene; and feeling his big sorrel mare go wheeling at a blow on her polished haunch, Percy cried 'Northumberland!', hurled up his short battle-axe, and commenced to hew at whom he met.

His men joined in, and the fight was general. A persistent chopping clash, mingled with struggling hoofs, spattering sparks, was heard over an area of fifteen yards of street. And now the landlord's head was out, and down the double length of drowsy households night-caps craning from high gables peered beneath the held-up rushlights.

The fighters, for the most part, wore black masks, or visors, and were unknown to one another. Alvarada, quite unarmoured, was parrying the fierce brusquerie of Percy's onslaught, and Sir John Perrot had shattered the arm-piece of Bishop Du Ballay, who

had risen and fought on foot, when Wolsey's three gallants arrived, and galloped right into the brawl before they could rein impetus. Two, attacked at the same moment, set to work with instant briskness, rising in their step-ropes. The third, their leader, upon whom Wolsey had impressed the need for urgent haste, forged beyond the region of the chopping chaos of steel, and leaping into the depression, began to pound with far-echoing hubbub at a door.

While the landlord still peered paralyzed upon this entangled nightmare, yonder, to westward, was raised the cry of '*Crom Aboo!*'—and the sword of Garrett Oge was in the air.

Instantly he divined that those fighters were battling for the possession of Laura Ford—some of them, perhaps, sworn-men of Wolsey, who in that case had played false in bidding Fitz and Mac tarry at his palace. And partly for the King's sake, whom he had already once that day failed, he galloped forward with something like enthusiasm.

Partly for the King's sake, and partly—so complex are the workings of the mind—for Bessie Ford's. For now Garret Oge knew somewhat more of Bessie Ford, and at the thought of her jerked his head with reflective twist. At least, if the lovely sister were to be torn from the plain, he, Fitz, himself, and not another, should tear her, and for no other than the King himself. So resolved Fitz.

In a moment he was in the fight, his hand against every man's, his potent broadsword raging everywhere, like the very tooth of pestilence in his hand—sure token of coming death.

And ever and again, even in the thick and acme of his contests, he glanced about him to note where young Mark Bonner was, and how the stripling fared.

With two swift-successive downward cleaves he sent to heaven a gallant of Wolsey and a gentleman-waiter of Queen Katherine.

His curvetting horse, brought down from a rear by the forward impulse of his last hew, slipped on the smooth pavers, and in the midst of a clattering fracas

of sparks was struggling to right itself, when Fitz was impetuously attacked on the left hind-flank by Sir John Perrot, who was helmless, and on his face a mask of blood. Fitz, twisting sideways in his heaving saddle, received the first blow obliquely on his tingling elbow, and the quick rain of the next three he received with agile parry on his sword-edge in a clash, clash, clash, of three distinct musical notes. The next moment four front-teeth of Sir John lay loose in his bubbling mouth, and at the same time Fitz was attacked simultaneously, in front and on the other flank, by Alvarada and young Percy.

His position now was dangerous: for though his helmet was of good Milan flutes, and his corselet strong ring-mail, he wore neither visor, gorget, armpiece, nor greaves, while, of his assailants, two were armed cap-à-pie, and all were terrible in fight. Macdonald was engaged some distance away, and as for Bonner, though he had been given a sword, he had not drawn, but sat haloed in golden ringlets beyond the region of battle, musing on abstract things.

Fitzgerald was already winded, when he found himself the centre of this tempest of steel. His energy might have succumbed, but a street lantern showed him dimly the general lineaments of the very Spaniard with whom he had that day fought in the Bell's yard. At the sight his rage of effort redoubled. He executed a swift *demi-volte* to the right, with a hack at Percy's haunch which drove the Northumbrian mare at full shock upon Sir John, whereupon Sir John and Percy engaged; and Fitz, with a *demi-volte* to the left, had the Spaniard *vis-à-vis*. And now, round wheeled the two horses, head to head in stepping dance, with little runs and curvets, spattering sparks, as the blades went chink; but before the event up came Macdonald at a steady canter, and joined against the Spaniard.

If Fitz fought like a storm, Mac fought like a rock—without heat, without fail, with the pressure of his upper lip visible between the parted moustache, and eyes that glinted intense, like cold steel, beneath their lowered lids.

But before he could bring his horse into position to aim a single cut, there was an outcry from the inn. The Wolsey-man, who had been thumping ineffectually at one of the gable-doors, had moved on to thump at another, and that other was the one left open by the Spaniard. He perceived that it was open, and shouting, 'Jack! Jack! an open door!', in he dashed. This Alvarada heard, and, fearing the loss of all his plans, slid hurriedly from his horse, leaped the depression, and slipped within the house.

At this moment Mauro Calvo sat on a mule serenely regarding the affray. He had just arrived, having come, as arranged, for Laura and Bessie, leading by the halters two jennets, procured by the contrivance of Brother Bruno.

At once the disappearance within the inn of the two Wolsey-men and Alvarada was the signal for a general rush. The fighting-men left alive leapt from their saddles, and, with here and there a mutual cut, made for the inn, squeezing and shouldering through the doorway.

And Mauro Calvo said:

'Well, now, a murrain on these cattle. This will never do for me, young women. Go ye your way, and I go mine. I'm off.'

But he muttered very low, as if ashamed:

'Though 'tis a worthy soul, that Bess. A spirit, I fancy, of uncommon chemistry.'

CHAPTER XII

CALVO'S BAG

'In that wight's pouch were oddish ends,
Strange relics, gews, and witcheries.'
OLD TALE.

IN turning, however, Calvo perceived Mark Bonner, who lingered in the street.

'Well, what make *you* here?' he asked.

'Faith, master, I have the smallest notion,' answered Mark with doffed cap.

'Who are these brawlers?'

'They are King's-men, as I surmise, come to attaint the person of my sweetheart, Laura: yet, strangely, they hew one at the other in the way you see, having, as is like, more sword than sense.'

'That chuff of a King? What! so soon would he be at that poor Bessie Ford?'

''Tis Laura he would be at.'

'Laura, yes: but who cares aught about Laura? 'Tis of the poor little sister that I think.'

'I pity both.'

'That mumping chuff!'

'A King is a King.'

'Were it not for one thing, I'd——'

'Prithee, Master Calvo, if you can succour them——'

'Believe me, I have a mind—yes, I will. Have her he shall not, the chuff!'

At once he turned his mule, and before the house gave the three pre-arranged whistles, hoping for an answering face at the window. But no face came. There came only into the street the vague uproar that

filled the house. He dismounted and made fast his animals to the inn's sign-post. He cried, 'Come, boy,' and taking his bag, smuggled from his river-den, entered the inn.

The searchers by this time had spread themselves over the upper floor, searching blindly, each for himself. Only Alvarada had exact knowledge of where the girls were locked, and held the keys. He, however, had no idea of opening the locked room in the presence of so many opponents, only stationing himself near to watch.

The fighting had, for the moment, ceased in the dispersal of the searchers; till young Percy, wild with hot wounds, running with held-up battle-axe and torch, found himself stopped by a locked door, and commenced to hew the woodwork; for Anne had told him something of 'a locked room.'

Alvarada at once stepped out, and, at a run, inflicted a rather foul stab from behind in the crevice between humerus and back-piece; and even as Percy turned to fight, he commenced, finding himself thus wounded, to bawl, 'Clubs! clubs!'—a cry of the period meaning 'help'—in order to summon those of his henchmen who searched behind him.

Fitz and Mac, who were running past, attracted by the row, rushed into the room. Percy had stuck askew in a sconce the pine flambeau, which, at the inn-door, he had snatched: and Macdonald, seeing the chopped door, cried: 'Here the girls are, Fitz, my brave! Kill first these cullions!' and commenced with his bill to batter at the door.

Fitz turned upon Percy and Alvarada, but at once two of Percy's Northumbrians, together with three other fighters, including Sir John Perrot and the Bishop of Bayonne, dashed into the room. The mere sight of Macdonald heaving furiously at the door made that door the centre of interest for all, and a hot mixed scrimmage, wild as it was hot, and bloody as it was wild, began to transact itself within the small apartment.

At the open door stood Mauro Calvo looking

with calm eyes. Three men had already fallen when he shut the door upon them all.

The struggle round the locked door led him, too, to the conclusion that the sisters were probably in the room beyond it. To reach them, therefore, he must pass through that door, and before any of the fighters. He laid his bag on the ground, and opened it. It was a goodly sack made of thin russet-leather, and bulged by the mass of objects with which Calvo, foreknowing his expulsion, had long since stuffed it. Its top was opened and closed by a running string of pigskin.

The air of the very limited space in which the combatants fought already grew foul with their passionate breathing: the room was thickly tapestried round; there was no window, and the only ingress for air consisted in the two key-holes. Against one of them the face of a dead man, fallen in a sitting posture, pressed; and the other Mauro Calvo stuffed with tow from his bag. He then quickly bored a hole in the door with a gar; into the hole he inserted the pipe of a baggy sort of bellows made of Spanish foot-cloth; and this he began to work.

At that moment, for the third time that day, Fitzgerald was engaged with Alvarada; while Macdonald, jammed in a corner, was defending himself against the bill of a Wolsey-man and the demi-lance of a Northumbrian. As for Percy, he had fallen from loss of blood; and big Sir John Perrot, his sword shattered, had grasped Du Ballay round the middle, and was heaving and slanting the equilibrium of the portly bishop to effect a throw. But now the breaths of the fighters grew wondrous short; they gasped in an agony of effort strange in fighting men; their contortions acquired an extravagance of cat-o'-mountain fury; their faces grew crimson, then black; their eyes bulged; the room was full of raucous breaths, of the heaves of groaning and despairing bosoms.

Sir John and Du Ballay fell together, a thumping mass of carcass, and, having fallen, did not move. Macdonald, with a last sigh and gasp, resigned himself

to die; and as he resigned himself, the bill and the demi-lance failed, too, and the three men dropped together. Down upon the skull of the Spaniard sped the avenging blade of Fitz; but the sword failed, and Fitz failed, and the Spaniard failed: and together, with a dying gasp, they dropped like lead. And over the room in limp oblivion lay the bodies of the warriors; and without, Mauro Calvo, with steady, calm pump, worked his implement.

Anticipating by over a century the famous invention of Otto von Guercke, Calvo, darkly working in his temple beneath the river, had contrived an air-pump of rude, yet effective, construction. When he was certain that hardly any air was left in the chamber, he opened the door. The door opposite was already half-demolished by sword and axe-hack. Stepping among the prostrate men, Calvo muttered 'Silly cattle,' and with one thump of his back against the locked door, was in the next room.

Bessie stood holding Laura by the hand. In her face was awe, even despair—hardly fear. Suddenly she uttered a cry:

'Oh, bless God!'

'Get you gone,' said Calvo. 'Have you the bundle? You will find two horses in the street below: away on them, and await me in front of Essex House. Get you gone now, get you gone.'

He spoke calmly, like a calm god to Bessie's ear.

Even as the girls picked their way among the fallen warriors, there was a stirring among them, and a rubbing of dazed eyes, and a rising on the elbow.

Bessie noticed Fitz lie stricken there. But the girls were already well on their way before Fitz, the first to recover, leapt to his feet.

At that time Mauro Calvo, shouldering his bag, was going through the rooms of the inn, methodically, without haste, calling:

'Hi, there, hi! landlord, mine host! Hi, hi!'

Presently, in a high garret, he came upon the old fellow hiding in an ague.

'Why, sir, sir!' cried mine host, 'what may betoken

all this battery and morris-dancing in an honest house-of-call at this blessed hour of the night ?'

'That you may discover for your own self, friend,' replied Calvo. 'All I need tell thee is that your niece is in danger, and I am her friend, I being that Mauro Calvo whom you know. Therefore is it that you will not fail in the following mission: You will seek out one Brother Bruno of the Crouched Friars, and deliver him a letter which I shall now hand to you, with a message from me that he expedite the same, without delay, to the address in the Kingdom of France thereon writ. You understand ?—Brother Bruno of the Crouched Friars.'

Mine host was all bowing compliance, while Calvo took from the well-packed bag a cista, containing ink-horn, pen, a seal, black resin, and parchment. And leaning sideways against a buffet to write, he muttered:

'Now, Master King, let us see whether we cannot pit against thee an antagonist worthy thy steel. Never met such a mumping chuff in all my life!'

He wrote:

'To Francis the First, King of France, from Mauro Calvo these presents.

'The most surpassing maiden in the world, of whom Mauro Calvo, it is now four years gone, prophesied to Francis the First the dominion and jouissance, is now in the Kingdom of England. She is to be found in the cathedral-city of Winchester, or in that environ, and standeth in instant peril of capture at the hands of Henry, King of England, Wales, and Ireland. Mars being in conjunction with Sol in the Fourth Shamaîm, and Venus retrograde in the Sixth House, it is betokened that around the maiden shall spread conflicts; nor, save by prowess of arms, can she be won.'

Mauro Calvo re-read his letter with smiling lip and scornfully-wrinkled brow, and he said:

'That will fetch the other chuff over.'

He handed the letter, sealed, to mine host. With quickened steps he descended, mounted his mule, and rode westward. The fighters were still searching in the inn, and with them Mark Bonner, who, in the dark and confusion, had lost trace of the sage.

CHAPTER XIII

AT HOUNSLOW

Ποίησον αμπελούς μοι !
ANACREON.

IT was not long before the searchers in the inn, no more barred by any locked door, decided that the girls were no longer there.

'Phew, comeradoes ! but I could drink well a pottle of posset,' gasped Fitzgerald, staggering out to the street.

'Well, Fitz, hast had thy bellyful to-night, lad?' asked Mac, staggering too.

'Nay, Mac, but would have it, as I say. Posset, ye saints, browsed of warm cow's milk and boon Porto, well sugared and cinnamoned ! How good ! Or a draught of ypocras, or ale—even ale. Oh, my lusty throat !'

'Fitz, lad, never had I a heavier arm.'

'Nor yet I. I have brained—how many ?—five : one for each sense, to give it wholesome appetite. But, by the Holy Rood !—where is that boy ?'

'Which boy ?'

'Why, the boysie Bonner, sure. . . .'

'Faith, I know not.'

'He is killed !' cried Fitz ; 'sure, sure !'

'Nay, but he lives, for there is he.'

Bonner appeared at the doorway, sauntering out. Fitz ran to meet him, and threw an arm round his shoulder.

'Why, boysie——' he said in a low voice.

'I live to tell the tale—in hexameters,' said Mark.

'What are hexameters, boysie?'

'Verses with six feet.'

'But six-footed things do crawl, boysie, and thy verse should go brisk, like the action described.'

'Nay, but verses, unlike other polypeds, go not on all feet at once, you perceive, but hop-wise, foot by foot, which faculty is called their Scansion.'

'Then are they like hopping *z*anies, or saltimbanques, boy, and should be away with.'

'Nay, but——'

'Come Fitz!—come!' cried Mac from some distance.

'What now, Mac? Hast found some posset in the street?'

'Nay, but some traces of the fugitives, perchance.'

'Sayest thou—— ?'

Fitz went to the spot.

'See there,' said Mac, 'the red hoof-prints of two horses that have trod in blood, and gone off close together, galloping — thou observest their length of stride? If the maidens were verily in the inn, and have escaped, then this must be——'

'Hath anyone seen aught of Master Calvo?' asked Mark.

'What! was the wizard here?'

'Even he.'

'And in the inn?'

'Why, yes.'

'Then 'twas that cozener that rescued them!' cried Mac—'Fitz, man, to horse!'

'Hold, Mac: I leave not a goodly inn full of fluids behind me, with my weasand dry as a corned rey——'

'Ah, but there 'twas not the real Fitzgerald that spake,' said Mac, 'but a thirsty weakling. Come, Fitz, be whetting thy manhood, man, and leave thy throat to wet itself. Our devoir to the King—and those vile black-riders within, who will be out anon—and we without a moment to throw away——'

'Well, then, an you put it so——'

Fitz's nature, prone always to drop back into pleasant sloth and dalliance, stiffened at the reproof of the harder-souled Mac, and he ran promptly forward.

Four of the nineteen horses which had lately thronged the street now strayed, insolently cropping the grass-grown pavers with lowered neck, and a swagger pose of one projected fore-leg; the others were dead or fled. Three of the four, with a mere fling-away and pretence of flight, accepted capture. Fitz cried:

'Come, boysie, haste thee!'

And they mounted just in time: for even as they rode away, the searchers came trooping from the inn, and someone sent after the riders a random bullet.

At the door one Wolsey-man said:

'Yon flyers were e'en fighters in the inn: whither away are they in such haste?'

'Ay, whither?' answered the other: 'after the maidens, marry, most like.'

'Gogswounds! 'tis even so, or I'm a beggar's brat! Let's after!'

'No steeds.'

'Pah! then home for steeds o' God's name let's hie!'

These two started westward. In another three minutes the same reasoning was agitating every brain of the searchers, and westward for steeds became the *mot d'ordre*. In twos and threes, far-scattered now on their divers ways, they went running with prone trot through a London dead and buried in slumber.

Meanwhile, Fitz and his fellows, galloping past Somerset House, had encountered a watchman callously sauntering with steps that tolled through the hushed midnight. The riders drew rein.

'Hast seen, Master Watchman, a pair of females and a man on horseback pass this way?' asked Mac.

'Two females on horseback,' said the deep-voiced watchman, who had learned observation from solitude and the stars, 'and a man on muleback. The females wore neither porringer, coif, nor bonnet, the man a skull-cap of black silk; and they made haste toward Westminster.'

''Tis they, Fitz! Give rein——'

They were off, cantering; Fitz and Mac abreast, Bonner behind. At Westminster, from a club-man

sleeping forlorn on a doorstep, they learned that twenty minutes since the fugitives had taken the way to Hounslow village. And they were off, cantering through open Middlesex country now, under open heaven.

'Why should I be constrained into the chase of my own sweetheart and wife-that-is-to-be?' observed Mark Bonner, his mass of golden hair jumping in measured spasms on his galloping shoulders.

'Poor boysie! Yet is it better to be constrained into a chase than chased into constraint, as thou well might be,' said Fitz.

'Wife that *was*, not is, to be, lad,' added Mac; 'what is a King if he hath not right to the person of his subjects?'

'I refer you for answer to "The Republic" of Plato,' said Bonner.

'Wah, Mac—*there* is a hard nut for thee to crack!' cried Fitz, delighted, his bossed and blue-white brow pouring perspiration down his tanned face.

'A truce to thy Plato, lad,' said Mac. 'The King is in his earnest about this Laura, hark ye. And have her he will, and droitly, say I.'

'Have her in her entirety he cannot,' answered Bonner: 'for her mouth I have already kissed so sore, that she will bawl an it be but touched.'

Fitz slapped his thigh.

'Is it not a philosopher?' he cried. 'Doth it not take his whipping gaily, the boy, in light scorn of all things and Kings? But nay, nay, Mac, I fall not wholly in accord with thee. If the boy loveth his Laura, and Laura loveth her boy, 'tis a nice question, meseems, to which Laura belongeth, whether to the King, or to the boy.'

''Tis rank heresy, Fitz: she belongeth, certes, to the King.'

'Well, have it so. But that Bess——'

'What of her, Fitz?'

'Is she verily sister to Laura, as thou saidst, boysie?'

'Why, yes,' said Bonner.

''Tis Bess I think of, Mac.'

'What of her?'

'That lass, many a time in the tap-room of the inn, I have chucked under the chin, man—lightly done it! —mockingly done it!—and knew not what I did, nor whom I chucked!'

'Ay, 'tis a lass built of strange timber,' assented Mac.

'Of old English oak, methinks, Mac—tough as hell, and sending back the sledge that smites it with a bounce. And I have chucked it under the chin!'

''Twas a bold deed that, the taking of thy King's-letters, Fitz; and one worthy a stout heart, I avouch.'

'But, Mac, consider that flight with her sister from the King! Consider what of rough old virtue is thereby betokened! Sure, man, there's not a ladyship of the land which, having a daughter with Laura's face, but would have hurried her hie to Court, that she might incur the honour of becoming what thou wot'st to our jolly Harry. And Bessie Ford—a country wench—Oh, 'tis incredible! Oh, it troubleth the eyes!'

'Ay, faith, 'twas seemly done; yea, I avouch, 'twas virtuously achieved.'

'She ran from the King, Mac.'

'That did she, Fitz.'

'She tumbled not to her knees, Mac, when the King beheld her sister, to thank God that now should she have waving oak-lands and a thousand livery-men; but she ran in fear, Mac—she took to flight——'

'Oh, I avouch, I avouch—'twas virtuously achieved —'twas seemly done.'

'Ha! ha! ha! ha! and I have chucked it under the——'

A '*phoo—o!*' of spasming laughter puffed between the hand that rushed to cover Fitz's down-bent mouth. But in a moment the redness of his laugh turned to mottled pallor, and he said:

'Rude grampus I must have been! Pah! I have shame on it——'

'Nay, Fitz,' said Mac, 'but thou takest the matter with too much unction, coz: being apt, I observe, to run into extremes always, goring prone like a mad bull

for one red point, nor seeing a whole business in its entirety. Sure, our main concern is not now to prate about the virtues of this Bess, but to catch the maidens for the King.'

Fitzgerald put spurs to his horse, and said nothing.

After some minutes, passing through Hounslow, he drew rein at the sight of moving lights in the Cross Hands.

'Nay, Mac, no more to-night, no more,' he said; 'I feel three burning smarts on my body, and my throat screaks for a cup of clary.'

'And my belly is void for neat's tongue and capon pasty,' said Mark Bonner.

'Well, well, ye are like two boys,' answered Mac. 'But as you will: who knows if we shall not find our quarry even here?'

Fitz set to pounding the door with his dagger-handle. The landlord of the Cross Hands popped his head out o' window, and cried:

'What! more o' ye this night?'

'Fitz,' whispered Mac, 'I'll lay a ban-dog to a beagle that they are in this very inn.'

Fitz made no reply.

The moment the landlord appeared at the door, Mac slipped a broad-piece into his hand, and, whispering, said:

'We pay scot and lot, mine host, and command a goodly collation. But first we need to know—have a pair of bare-headed lasses and a man in skull-cap arrived at you but now?'

'Why, even so: they are just a-feed in the pantry yonder.'

'And to the pantry how many doors?'

'But one, opening upon the inn-buttery.'

'Fair and good. Say naught of us to these good folk on consideration of yet a rose-noble for yourself, and conduct us to this buttery anon. Give us there what cheer you have with speed, and our steeds send to stable without unsaddling. And as we feed, seek us out a length of rope for money's worth, we prithee. Fitz, we have them, lad!'

'Have them or no, to me 'tis pretty equal, Mac. Hast any Alicant in buttery, landlord?'

'Sh-h!' said Mac; 'talk low. And while we feed, since feed we must, and mine host seeks rope to bind the wizard, prithee mum, now. For if the wizard scents us here, 'tis a miscreant full of tricks. Bonner, make but one wilful sound, and I stick thee.'

'Well, Mac—but hast any Alicant in buttery, landlord?'

'Why, a pipe or so in cellar, my master.'

'Then up with a brimming flagon, quick.'

They followed mine host to the inn-buttery, with soft tread, and, in the midst of casks and cupboards, sat lolling in poses of abandoned weariness round a deal table. Mine host spread a soiled portpane, and busily laid on good cold viands: caviare, a haunch of veal, stuffed yern, and roasted byster, with oats-bread. The three, cutting with knives and feeding the gorged mouth with forkless left fingers, set to work. Under the table Mark Bonner swung a jubilee leg, and hummed inaudible madrigals. His head presently dropped to the massive shoulder of Fitzgerald, and so, reposing sideways, ate gladly. And Fitz, inwardly conscious of the resting head, ate gladly also.

'But,' cried Fitz suddenly, 'a murrain on that landlord! Wilt never bring that Alicant, mine host?'

'Fitz, Fitz!' hissed Macdonald bitterly, 'this is crazy folly.'

Bessie Ford leapt, blanched, to her feet. She whispered to Calvo:

'I have heard the voice of Master Fitzgerald in the next room! We are lost!'

'You are certain of his voice?' asked Calvo, still munching.

'Oh, quite, quite. . . .'

The landlord bustled in, closing the door. The trap-door into the cellar was in the pantry; he lifted it. Calvo said:

'You descend for wine, mine host?'

'Why, yes.'

'For guests?'

'Why, yes.'

'Wine of what sort?'

'Alicant.'

'What! you keep Alicant?'

'Even so.'

'Sure, I did not know. Bring me also a flagon.'

The landlord descended. Calvo hurriedly took from his bag a three-ounce vial.

Mine host re-emerged with his vesper in one hand, and two tapering pewter flagons, held by the handles, in the other.

To reclose the opening, he laid the flagons on the floor; and as he led the door, stooping, to its drop, Calvo, leaping from the table, approached him.

'Which is mine?' he said.

'Either.'

Calvo took one flagon, emptying, as the door dropped, his vial into the other. The vial had contained a distillation of essential alcohol.

Fitz, as he drained his first cup, nodded the remark: 'Boon and heartsome, this!'

And Bonner, draining his, hummed quite aloud.

Fitz's arm went round Bonner's head, and he knocked the head against his corselet, saying: 'Boysie.'

Mac drank with much more deliberation, pondering his flavours; but even *his* eyes swam.

Fitz drained another cup, and cried aloud:

'Ha! ha! ha!'

Bonner another, and threw himself frankly on Fitz's breast, sobbing.

In the other room Mauro Calvo said to the girls:

'Now! You will dart with all your legs through the next room; the door is right opposite; we make for the stables. Our animals stand saddled, and the knaves can't follow us, being drunk. Our landlord is against us—we must not tarry here. To Kew, then—away.'

Calvo flew first, close on his steps Laura, then Bessie, with sudden spurt. They were in the middle of the room before Mac saw, and started to his feet. But even as he rushed, he stumbled. Fitz, with thrown-back head, was shouting the red laughter of alcohol.

Bessie, in her swift passage, noted him—the flushed, jolly face; Mac, too, she saw; but as for Bonner, his face was hidden on the breast of Fitz.

Mac at once recovered his legs, having drunk little, and dashed to the door; but there, barring his way, stood Fitzgerald, staggering with outspread arms.

'Ha! ha! ha!' he laughed, with fainting breath; 'what, art after the little Bess, thou Mac? Oh, gamesome princox! 'Tis not Laura—'tis *the little Bess* thou wouldst be after for thy little dainty wife—God, thy little sweet, sweet wife! Nay, but thou shalt not—shall he, Bonner, boy? Shall he, now? Little, dainty, tricksy Bess. . . .'

Mac had his arms round Fitzgerald's body, and after a brief tussle, they fell together. It was some minutes before Mac could wriggle himself free. He ran staggering out, but only to hear a sound of hoofs go galloping into faintness and silence.

When he returned to the room, Fitz and Bonner were inextricably cuddled into a heap on the floor, quite drunk.

CHAPTER XIV

AT KEW

'As fresh Aurore of mighty Tithone spouse
Unshut the windows of her large hall. . . .'
GAWIN DOUGLAS.

WITH earliest dawn Bessie awoke, after three hours' sleep at the Blue Bottle, Kew. She hurried on her clothes, and, having put her lips to Laura's open mouth, descended into the yard at the inn's back, and, mounting on a bench, was able to scan far back the London Road. It was empty, and she breathed with thankfulness the fresh summer air of a balmy morning. There by the bench she knelt, crossed herself, kissed her thumb-nail, and prayed.

Her milk-white brow, lined with two chaste curves of dark hair, touched the wood-work. Beneath was a rather small triangle of face, but chastely lined. There was little eye-brow or eye-lash; her hair, as was mostly the way then with maidens, fell in a 'natte' or plait—not a long one—long as a hand. On her cheek-bones were bright carmine spots; and her thin lips were scarlet.

Long she prayed, to many saints—little for herself, much for Laura, much for Mauro Calvo—and devoutly, with awe-struck, believing heart—not as men and maidens pray now.

As she rose, she saw far off, as if in sad inverted answer to her prayer, a cloud of rising dust. She clasped her hands, and, 'Oh, Master Fitzgerald, sir!' she whispered, 'if you only knew what you are doing, sure you would not——'

She was about to run to rouse the sleepers, when she noticed a hole, long since made, five feet deep and broad, at one corner of the garden. Beside it was a dung-heap, bricks, old earth, and battered tin, and rubbish, sufficient to fill the hole; and beside these, spades and garden-tools. She had a sudden inspiration, and ran within.

First up to the room where Calvo slept. The alchymist snored, his bulging brow pallid in contrast with his black cap. Bessie put on his forehead a kiss. She would not wake him yet, cherishing with economy each precious moment of his repose: their animals fed saddled; there was still a little time.

She knew, for he had shown her, that he had the King's-letters, which she had given him to keep, in a box in his bag. She opened the bag, searched, took the letters, and with them an inkhorn, pen, and parchment. This occupied five minutes. She hurried to Laura's bedside.

Laura, deep in dreams, resisted the rousing hand with objecting elbow, and 'Let me alone' she droned drowsily, and flung herself into another pose of slumber.

It took Bess another five minutes to wake her. Then she ran to a window commanding the London Road.

The hasting cloud of dust was near now. She saw that time would fail her for her scheme. But even as she looked, there arose a hope. The horsemen stopped at another inn—the Crown—which stood alone in fields half a mile nearer Hounslow. They dismounted and hammered at the door. They were not Fitzgerald's party at all, but another of the searching parties.

Bessie hurried back to Laura, who sat nude, wantonly yawning in bed, showing her little teeth; and 'Write, Laura, write,' said Bessie.

The bed was on the floor, and near it a chest. Laura took pen in hand, for she could write; but as for Bessie, she did not know the alphabet.

Laura waited. Bessie, sitting on the bed's edge, pondered, seeking for expression. After a minute, her little scarlet mouth twitched with humour, and she said:

'The real and only Fitzgerald——'

Laura wrote with flourished letters:

'The real and only Fitzgerald——'

'Is sure a gentleman,' said Bessie.

Laura wrote it.

'Why, then, should he hunt down to death,' said Bessie, 'two poor maidens who bear him only good will and good remembrance?'

Laura wrote that.

'Sign: "Bessie Ford."'

It was signed.

'Now, on this other piece write: "Here lie the King's-letters taken from Master Fitzgerald's cloak."'

It was written.

Bessie leapt up; she wrapped the King's-letters, together with her letter to Fitz, in a piece of blank parchment. Then, with winged feet, she hied to the garden, dropped the packet into the hole, and commenced with vigour to shovel in the earth and rubbish. Her frame was vigorous and vital, and the work swift, for the loose refuse ran freely, in lumps and thumps. Ever and anon she stamped upon the rising level in the hole to consolidate the mass; and on the surface, when all was finished, she impaled with a dry twig the words: 'Here lie the King's-letters.'

What in a few minutes she had thus buried would require, perhaps, hours to recover: and in this way she counted upon retarding her pursuers.

She ran in now, and woke Calvo, and soon they were ready to set out.

The wife of mine host, a kindly soul who had spoken with Bessie on her arrival, rose from bed to receive her reckoning; and to her at the last moment Bessie said:

'Prithee, Mistress Perkins, an a stranger named Master Fitzgerald come hither to-day, conduct him to the hole in the back garden. 'Tis a masterful great gentman, with large and humoursome face *sans* hair on it, and sky-blue eyes that twinkle. Sure, you could not miss him when once you saw him, for 'tis an Irish gallant like few.'

Mistress Perkins promised; and the party set off, bound for Colnbrook through Brentford.

CHAPTER XV

AT COLNBROOK

'A good man there was of religion
That was a poore parson of a town.'
CHAUCER.

SINCE Mauro Calvo knew that his westward flight was now tracked by his pursuers, it entered his calmly meditative brain that his best course would be to make them pass him on the road, and rush onward seeking him, while he, in his serene way, ambled after them at leisure on his mule. Therefore he made haste through the scented morning toward Colnbrook, where he had old acquaintance with a priest; and the girls followed at a canter.

In that day, when all travelling was by horse, everyone could ride. Laura's dark face flushed to carmine; her hair loosened somewhat to a wanton slovenness; jollity was on her breath. And Bessie, seeing her so, a flash of galloping loveliness still near her, was inwardly content. Calvo said:

'By all that's rigolo! here's a beautiful occupation for a man like me.'

They were descending slowly a stony path through over-arching beeches.

'Oh, 'tis your exceeding wondrous goodness, Master Calvo!' said Bessie.

'A truce to my goodness, young woman. You have reason to talk of my goodness, methinks. Gadding over the country with two moppets on galloping tits behind me, and a lot of silly mad cattle on my track! What do you call that?'

'Oh, Master Calvo, 'tis even exceeding abundantly gracious——'

'Well, well. Don't distress yourself—can't you see you bother and worry me? Everything gone to rack and ruin—all my plans—all gone. I had in my mind the doing of—a thing! Aha! And now, where is it? —gone! And I was just preparing an electuary for that old hag Gammer Welch's sore chest: now, I suppose, the old fool will die. And here am I gadding about this blessed morning with two young women—perfect strangers to me—and everything gone to hell. And all through that mumping chuff of a King—my God!'

Laura, behind, pulled a wrinkled nose and down-turned mouth at Calvo; and Bessie, shrinking painfully at every grumble, went with bent and guilty head.

They came to the top of Colnbrook village-street. It lay dozing in tranquil sunlight, three cows loitering down it. They proceeded to the bottom, past the church, searching for the presbytère.

'Where the pestilence *is* the presbytère?' grumbled Calvo.

They came back, searching. An old gaffer, clad in hempen gabardine, stepped from a door. To him Calvo spoke.

'Is Father Anstrewther still the priest here?'

'Ay,' said the yokel.

'Where the pestilence is the presbytère?'

'Why, yonder, back o' the church, behind the rows of yews.'

Thither they turned again, and found that the house lay quite concealed in a waving meadow-land behind three thickly-founded lines of yews. This was unfortunate for them, for, three hours after they had been received by the good Father, Macdonald, galloping toward Colnbrook, spied the identical gaffer whom Calvo had questioned ditching by the roadside. And said he:

'Hast seen a pair of girls, with a man, pass riding, gaffer?'

'Ay, the same as went to the presbytère, no doubt.'

'How long since?'

'Nigh on three hours, maybe.'

'''Sdeath! they must have gone further by this. Come, Fitz, ride—to the presbytère!'

They clattered up the blinking, white street, which drowsed in a languishment as of slow cud-chewing opium-eaters. Failing to find the house, they turned back, and questioned two women who, with elbows akimbo, expatiated by the gurgling pump. Far-sunken now, those two, down into the dim dark: but there on that hot mid-day in Colnbrook street, they did authentically discuss, minutely careful, with rough arms akimbo.

From the church-yard to the presbytère there wound a little path through the screen of yews. Along this went Fitz, Mac, and Bonner.

They were three hours behind the fugitives, for the reason that it had taken Fitz two hours to dig up the King's-letters buried by Bessie at Kew. The letters Fitz had given into the keeping of Bonner for safety, since he himself anticipated more fighting, and possible death. But as for Bessie's missive—'The real and only Fitzgerald is sure a gentleman'—he had put it into his own pouch.

They had then taken to horse, and ridden hard for Colnbrook. And down the path through the yews they went to the presbytère.

''Tis sure they are gone onward by now,' said Mac, 'for why should they linger here to be captured?'

'Sure enough,' said Fitz.

'Except the good Bess tarry for confession before Vespers,' suggested Bonner.

'Tush!' answered Mac, 'you lisp like an urchin. Folk tarry not to make confession when fears urge them forward.'

'Which proves that you know naught of Bess: for she's devout as a seraph, and bold as a dragon-fly.'

'Being devout as a seraph, she hath naught to confess,' said Fitz.

'Hath she not on her conscience the stealing of thy letters, addle-pate?'

'But being bold as a dragon-fly, she will cry "buzz!" to her conscience.'

'Oh, they will sure not be here,' said Mac: 'yet no harm to question the good Father.'

They had arrived at a low odd-gabled manse, buried in greenery; they knocked.

The Father in person opened. He was a broad-faced old man, red and stout, with defiant, autocrat eyes.

'What make you, friends?' he asked aggressively.

'We seek a pair of girls and a wizard-man, who were here three hours gone, Father.'

'By what authority?'

'By the King's.'

'Deliver me your warrant.'

'We have no warrant.'

'Then are ye mere strolling Corinthians. Get you gone.'

'Nay, 'tis insolently said, Father. Abase, prithee, that high stomach. Are the maidens here—yea or no?'

'And an they be? Here, Grip—at 'em, dog!'

The priest whistled. A huge ban-dog bounded bristling from nowhere, and was sprawling in the air, making with vicious spring for Bonner's throat. But it dropped in two wheeling parts. Fitzgerald's sword had whisked through its neck.

'Father, are the maidens here—yea or nay? We take your sacred word,' said Mac.

'I will not give it.'

'Then we search the manse.'

The priest clapped loudly three times.

''Tis a signal to the fugitives, Fitz!' cried Mac. 'They are here, sure!'

'In, then!' responded Fitz, with rising colour.

The two brushed past the priest, and went with prone outlook, ransacking every room and nook. Only one locked door checked them: it was a great Gothic portal of thick oak, barred and studded with iron, the entrance to the priest's library.

'They are behind this door,' said Mac.

''Tis so, Mac, but naught less than a culverin could bring it down.'

'Hi, there, hi!' cried Mac, pounding.

There was no answer.

'What now, Mac?' said Fitz. 'By the Rood, I have a deadly thirst. Let us e'en ravish the curate's buttery.'

'Nay, to the inn, Fitz. Escape us now they cannot, if once we get them from this hole. Let us away, and consult.'

They started for the Rose and Nettle, not fifty yards away; but the priest, jumping to a conclusion, hurried to the fugitives with the news that the searchers, failing to find them, had ridden off in further pursuit. Mauro Calvo supposed that his scheme had now succeeded; he resolved to tarry there till nightfall, and then proceed leisurely on his way behind his pursuers. Meantime, Macdonald, feeding at the Rose and Nettle, with the environs of the presbytère under his eye, said:

'Faith, Fitz, here's what I see not: wherefore squandered they three good hours waiting here?'

'God knows. The alchymist tarried to marry with little Bess on the road, mayhap.'

'They must have had some design, sure?'

'God knows.'

'I have explained to you that the good Bess tarried to confess,' said Bonner with demure smirk.

'To confess her envy of the kisses her sister hath sipped of thy cherry lips, boysie,' remarked Fitz.

'Nay, 'tis rather *thy* rough warrior-busses that the little Bess would be after: for she hath writ thee a letter of amorous challenge that laughs while it weeps, for saith she: "The real and only Fitzgerald is sure a——"'

'A truce to that, boysie!'

'But by the eleven Virgins!' cried Mac suddenly, 'if the boy hath reason, after all?'

'How mean you, Mac?'

'If Bess hath not indeed tarried to confess, but if, being for whatever reason here, she *do* confess.'

'Well, what then?'

'Why, then we have her! and having her, we have her sister.'

'How have we her?'

'Gramercy, we seize her in the church.'

'Bah! Bess is too wary a wype for that. If she be

indeed bent upon confession, she steals like a wind to the church, and there hides in some locked nook of the sacristy, till her turn come.'

'But as she kneels confessing, we grab her!'

'But the old priest whisks her into his box, and slams us out.'

'Then we lay siege to the box!'

'She escapes by some little door or trap-door, and leaves us whistling.'

'Then, by blood and nails, we pinion the priest beforehand!'

'Say'st thou?'

'Aye, by thunder! We lie in wait about the manse, and as the old Father steps out, we gag and bind him. Then I don his robes and hie to the confession-box, there to wait till the lass comes kneeling: then I have her.'

'Aye, 'twill do—*an* she come.'

'She will—'tis odds she will. The boy, who knows her manners, says it. And 'tis her first occasion since she stole the letters.'

'But 'tis *I* will don the curate's robes.'

'Thou?'

'Aye, Mac.'

'As thou wilt. But wherefore not I?'

'Oh, I wot not. Swipes! 'twere like a morris-dance o' May-day to hear Bess lisp confession!'

'But, Fitz, thou wilt not fail the King?'

'Fail? I?'

'Once afore hast failed him with his letters, lad: a *second* time were a wee too much——'

'Sure, 'tis not to me thou pratest, Mac? *I* fail? By the sacred wounds! I'll pin the misproud little minx, I swear, as rudely as a beagle his hare o' Christmas Eve!'

Fitz said it angrily, and Mac went: 'H'm!'

All day they kept close in the inn till the dusk deepened, then went out on foot.

As the Father put a leg from his threshold, he was seized in vigorous arms. As his mouth opened to roar, it was dumb.

Without noise they laid him in a near room of the presbytère, after taking his hat, surtout, and beads.

Mac, with Bonner in tow, ran to lurk among the yews, if perchance Bessie should pass, that he might seize her.

Bessie, however, sat already in the church, easy of capture without the trick of the confessional: for she supposed the pursuing party gone far past Colnbrook by now, and an hour before the liers-in-wait had come to lurk among the trees round the manse had gone openly to the holy place, to string together and lay up for herself in heaven that day a long litany and treasure of devotions.

As for Fitz, he hied to the church in the black frock. As he passed, a sexton tending the graves doffed his hat. The evening dusk had deepened.

Through a side-door Fitz flitted into the sacristy. He flung on indiscriminately the priest's alb and chasuble and stole hanging there; thence he slipped by an open door into the confessional.

It was a small den, with one window and two doors. In two adjacent sides were two little gratings fitted with sliding shutters, one of them in one of the doors. Fitz made sure by trial that this door opened and swung freely, that he might pounce out with quick ease. In the den, by the gratings, were two high-backed, old, brown-oak chairs. He sat, drew back a shutter, and his small blue eyes twinkled.

A buxom village-wife came; and, kneeling on a hassock outside, said:

'Prithee, Father, give me thy blessing, for I have sinned——'

Fitz muttered a deep monotone. Sitting with averted face, he said:

'Say an act of contrition, daughter.'

Here and now the dusk had grown to a brown, religious gloom. She confessed to 'scolding,' related her part in a brawl, and a night of perry, and an opus carnis. With smitten breast she said her 'Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.'

Fitz, in absolution, muttered a longer monotone of indistinguishable nonsense-words, and imposed a chemin de croix. The woman, with an upward glance of question, went away.

Fitz closed that shutter and opened the other. There a woman knelt, confessed, and went away.

Then, with bowed head, came Bessie Ford, and knelt, with a 'Prithee, Father, give me thy blessing, for I have sinned——'

There spread a pallor under the tan of Fitzgerald's face.

The very last tints of the summer-evening sun shone through the stained needle-window, and lotioned her smooth hair in a vision of faint other-world hues.

Fitzgerald's will was on the spring to seize her then and there, but his body sat still. Imitating the priest's gruff voice, he bid her say her Act.

Then she confessed in a voice lowly as the moaning evening breeze.

Her crimes were deep-dyed before God, red as crimson: she admitted two—the sin of Theft, and the sin of Idolatry.

She had stolen some King's-letters from the cloak of a fighting-man in order to save from him her sister, Laura Ford; and she adored Laura Ford sinfully, with idolatrous lechery, as the creature should not be adored, but only the Creator.

'But in thus abstracting the letters thou didst treason to the King,' Fitzgerald growled in the voice of the Father.

''Twas for my sister.'

'And thou broughtest anigh the Tyburn tippet the poor fighting-man's neck from which thou stolest them.'

Her bent head bent very low; her voice dropped to the lowliest whisper:

''Twas for my sister.'

'So, an 'twere to do again, wouldst do it?'

'Why, Father, I fear me—yea.'

'Then art thou not truly contrite.'

'Oh, I am crooked as sin, Father, and the root of evil is rank within me.'

'Not truly contrite, I say. What! wouldst again brave the King's wrath?'

'Oh, the King's wrath, Father, that your poor penitent

could lightly abye, an that were all! The King's wrath frights me not a toe.'

'But the wrath of God——'

'Aye mi! 'tis there, by my credit, that my sickness of soul is evidently seen, good Father, since for that girl's sake I would even rush upon the damnation of Hell.'

'What! and writhe in flames for ever under the pitiless pelt of Christ?'

'Oh, 'tis my soul's flaw! By my credit, 'tis my nature's fault, good Father!'

'Why, 'tis a wondrous love! 'Tis a wild and deathly passion!'

'She is my little sister—she is all I have—I die every moment for her!'

''Tis a rank idolatry!'

'Father, 'tis a most wicked idolatry.'

''Tis a most noble idolatry!'

'Say you, Father?'

'Tis a most divine idolatry!'

'Then, Father, you absolve me? Oh, my heart! But the wicked theft, Father?'

''Twas a glorious theft! Oh, 'twas a most brave and royal theft!'

'From the poor gentman, Father, whose life I thus imperilled?'

'From the wretched caitiff who would have robbed thee of thy lamb! Curse him!—'twas nobly done!'

''Twas not, then, Father, a most deadly sin?'

'Contradict me not! 'Twas most virtuously achieved—'twas highly transacted! Oh, to think of it, it troubleth the eyes! But that poor fighting-man, tell me, hadst thou no thought for him and his peril?'

'I had, yes: not at that moment, but afterwards —even with tears.'

'What, *tears*, thou sayest?'

Her voice dropped to a lower whisper:

'Why, Father, yes——'

'Tears for *him?*'

Her lips moved, but without sound.

'What is his name?'

'He is called Garrett Oge Fitzgerald.'

'Thou knowest him well, then?'

'Well.'

'And thou bearest him no secret malice in thy heart?'

'Oh, *I!* none.'

'What! And he would have ravished thee of thy idol!'

''Tis a gentman of gallant and bounteous temperament, Father, tossed on impulses. If evil be within him, methinks it cannot be deep—oh, no, no. Or, it may be—I wot naught of him.'

'Thou said'st that thou knowest him well.'

'I think—I thought so. It may be—I wot not at all, Father. How should such as I wot of a gentman such as he? He is even now hunting after me as a goss-hawk hunts a linnet——'

'Why, 'tis most foully done!'

''Tis *hard*—'tis very hard. But, by my credit, I say not 'tis foully done.'

'Oh, 'tis a most miscreant crime!'

'He but obeys the King's behest, good Father. He is the King's sworn servant——'

Down sledged Fitzgerald's fist upon the chair-arm, and—'A murrain on the dirty King!' he cried, with red face, in his natural voice. 'Oh, generous Bess! Oh, large and wholesome Bess!'

Bess then, for the first time, glanced upward. It was dark: the hues from the window were all dead gray: but his voice she knew, and felt.

In his passion he made a movement to rush to her: a movement infinitely sad and tragic in its final results. He had come to seize her, and she had won him: but his rush impressed her only with the fact that he had come to seize her.

A crazy instinct that his words of sympathy were only part of the whole *ruse* flitted instantly through her brain: and she was gone like a roe—he after her.

She dodged behind the sacrarium, leapt the altar-rail, and he lost her in the dark church. He went trotting after her, calling woefully: 'Good Bess! Sweet Bess!'

Then out from the church he ran, his eyes swimming

in tears, towards the yews; and to meet him ran Mac and Bonner.

Fitz put both hands on Mac's shoulders, holding him away. He could not speak; a lump in his throat struggled with his spittle.

'How now! the maiden, Fitz!'

'Oh, 'tis the rarest spirit!'

'Fitz, thou——!'

'Hear me, Mac; hear a man——'

'Hast sure not failed *again*, Fitz?'

'Hear me. We cannot hunt her more, nor thou, nor I. She said there was no ill in me, Mac; that the ill in me was not deep; "oh, no, no," said she.'

'But, Fitz——'

''Tis a very angel, Mac. She'd move and melt Beelzebub. Oh, if thou couldst hear but one half her gentle, gentle whisperings that I have heard but now!'

Mac's eyes glinted keen, like cold steel, between his lids in critical, close thought.

'Well, and what said she?'

'She said that for love of the little Sis, Mac, she'd brave, not only the wrath of ten thousand Kings, but the eternal wrath of God Himself!'

'Well, 'twas boldly said.'

'And she said that like goss-hawks hunting a poor little linnet—a poor little fluttering linnet, Mac, coz—so thou and I were hunting her.'

'Said she that?'

'The little thing, Mac! the little helpless soul, my friend. Oh, by God—no more! no more!'

'I avouch, 'tis piteous.'

'Aye, but hear the whole! Hear a man out! She said 'twas not foully done, Mac. "Nay," said she, "by my credit, I say not 'tis foully done: for they but do the King's behests, being his sworn men."'

'Said she that, verily?'

'She said it, Mac. She sought pretexts and loving pleadings for rude, unmanly tykes like thee and me.'

Mac's glinting eyes moved between their lids in close, keen reflection.

'Well, 'twas finely said.'

'Then draw thy sword, Macdonald!'

'And wherefore?'

'Bonner, boysie, draw thy sword!'

'But wherefore?' reiterated Mac.

'To take oath with me, who am thy true friend and ingle, James Macdonald. Hunt her without me thou wilt not, sure; and hunt her more with me thou shalt not, by the Holy Rood of Christ! Swear, then, with me, that we escort them into safety now, and, now and always, with our bodies do succour, shield, and champion them against Cardinal, or Pope, or King, or Hell, with all their dastard myrmidons. Swear—wilt thou?'

'Nay, but this is rash impulse that will pass. Faith, faith, I act not in that way, Fitz.'

Fitz put his arm close about his friend's neck.

'Come, Mac, come, coz—for me, if not for her. Drop that hard brow, and be still thy old friend's friend. Else draw thy blade and stick me!'

Fitz persuaded, as he fought, like a whirlwind. He had a will as passionate as the will of Bessie Ford, whom he championed.

'Fitz, Fitz,' said Mac, 'hast weighed all the awful consequences of this change? The King——'

'Consequences! King! But nay, Mac: men of rich blood think not of Kings and consequences—never, lad, never! A poor little thing, in sore distress, most chaste, most sweet, braving all alone in her innocence the high Puissances of the land that hunt her, hath need of us. Consequences, quotha?'

Mac studied the ground with slanting frown, perplexed. Suddenly he threw up his head. His pressed lips were smiling.

''Tis heroically said, Fitz, lad! But remember: I, if I swear, abye my oath, not for a day or two, but for ever.'

'For ever, aye! There 'twas Mac that spake. Draw, draw, my brave!'

In a moment three swords, with rushing sound, leapt into the air. Three mouths kissed the hilts.

'I swear!' cried Mac.

'I swear!' cried Bonner.

'By God's light, I swear!' cried Fitz.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

'Fly, fair ladies! Oh, fly! fly!'
SHAKESPEARE.

THE swords dropped back into their scabbards.

'Our first gear must be to hie to the manse,' said Fitz, 'and acquaint them that we fight now, not against, but for them.'

'This night shall I see Laura!' cried Bonner, with backward-shaken head and wriggling locks; 'we shall have long rendezvous beneath the trees.'

'And to-morrow night beneath the sheets, boysie: for, by the Rood, the good Father here shall wed ye before another sunset.'

'Sheets or trees 'tis indifferent, sir: both being conductors of lightning in their way.'

'Yet hold to sheet-lightning, boysie, as the less dangerous of the two sorts. Only, who then shall be my sweetheart, when Laura takes thee from me?'

'I will give thee the little Bess,' said Bonner with his smirk.

'A truce to that, boy!' growled Fitz.

And Mac went: 'H'm!'

They ran up the three green-black wooden steps of the front gable, and into the manse.

'What if they be gone?' said Mac.

'But nay, Bess cannot have yet returned from the church to bid them fly,' said Fitz: 'thou and Bonner must have spied her in the coming. They will be here.'

Bess, however, *had* returned. From the church, dreading an ambush among the yews, she had warily

made a wide, breathless détour, speeding down the village street, and so round to the back of the manse. She had entered it with the word 'fly' panting to start from her tongue-tip.

In her passage, she saw the priest lying bound on the floor. A bitter 'Fie! Oh, fie!' directed against Fitzgerald, passed her lips. Wild as she was to be away, she stopped, and in an agony of flurry freed the kerchiefed mouth and bound limbs. A moment after, in the room where Calvo sat, the palpitating prone word burst loose, and 'Fly!' she cried, 'oh, fly!'

Hence, when the three searchers now approached the great library-door, they saw it this time open. At the same moment the old priest, with quick step and menacing scowl, came up. He lifted his hand to utter anathemas.

'Nay, 'tis useless, Father,' said Fitz; 'now we are nothing but your friends. Where lurk the maidens and the wizard-man?'

'Gone, ye lilburns! gone, ye daws——!'

'Bah! 'tis false——'

But it was true. The next moment, hearing a thud of hoofs, all rushed to a library-window to see.

From a little outhouse, where the mule and horses had been secreted, the girls and Calvo were just galloping off.

Fitzgerald sent after them a passionate cry:

'Hi! good Bess, halt! Hi, girl, hi!'

Two seconds, and the fugitives were hidden behind trees.

'And we without a blessed nag!' moaned Fitzgerald.

'To our inn, Fitz, for the steeds!' cried Mac. 'They ride but sorry tits: in ten minutes we shall be up with them!'

Back to the Rose they ran, were delayed some minutes in trapping their horses and paying their score, then mounted, and, with loose rein, were away.

As they went off, the landlord, lounging by the inn-door, remarked to a neighbour:

'So God me save! there be brisk riding about country to-day with one and another of them!'

'What's stirring?'

'"Tis my question, too. Yon's the third cavalcade to-day. This morning, foreday, comes a troop of three gallants, and ko one: "Landlord, hast thou in herbergage two maidens a-horse, with bare heads, and a man a-mule in skull-cap?" "No," ko I. "Then," ko he to his mates, "are they fled onward to Slough," and away they hie. Then, it being *none* in the afternoon, come those three who have even now ridden off; and it is twenty minutes agone, another five, with the self-same question anent the two maidens with bare head, and the man in skull-cap.'

'What answered you to those?'

'Why, that I wot naught of the matter. "Then," ko one of the five, "are they fled onward to Slough." And away in deathly haste they hie.'

'Why, 'tis a very plague of scampering cross-country cavalcades.'

'"Tis so.'

'But hold! Did not Dame Higginbottom's grandchild aver that old Gaffer Meux had babbled somewhat of three folks asking the way to the manse——'

'By St. Hubert!' cried the landlord, 'I'm a lost spirit if here comes not yet another troop o' them——!'

In a minute a sweating cavalcade of six drew rein at the inn-door. They desired to know whether the landlord knew aught of a party of two maidens with bare head and a man in skull-cap. They were Alvarada's party, with Sir John Perrot and four others.

The foreday party of three, of whom the landlord spoke, were Wolsey-gallants; the evening party of five were Anne's emissary, Percy of Northumberland, with four serving-men.

At about eleven that night Du Ballay arrived at Colnbrook with a party of six knights.

Meantime, even as mine host of the Rose answered the fierce queries of Sir John Perrot, Fitz, Mac, and Bonner, with loose rein, were hot in loving pursuit upon the trail of the fugitives.

But now the twilight had deepened almost into night, and the girls were quite lost to sight.

Calvo, in the urgent moment of his flight, had left

the main Bath Road, and now was travelling hotly through bye-ways, across country, with a very vague idea of direction.

Here the Bucks country undulates in hillocks, rendering escape easier.

'Ride, Mac, like furies!' cried Fitz. 'Miss them now we must not! Spur, spur, Bonner!'

'An we miss them, captured they will be, certes, wizard or no wizard,' answered Mac. 'Royal Harry will sweep the country with five, with fifty thousand men, an need be, till he have them. Anyway, Fitz, we've entered on a biggish game of shovel-board!'

'Thou falterest not?'

'I? No.'

'On, then.'

'Give rein, lad!'

They went in single file, pattering through a winding lane of soft, dried mud. In reality, they were in no danger of missing the fugitives, for they were galloping in the right direction, though on a different path, and their cattle were travelling greatly faster.

And suddenly clear sheen overspread the country from a risen moon, and as they came to a wide level of hedged meadow-land, out cries Macdonald:

'There, Fitz, are they—near ahead—to the left!'

'I see. But, blood and nails——'

'Look!' cried Bonner excitedly.

'Oh, they are pursued!' exclaimed Mac with conviction; 'there's fighting, Fitz!'

Still further to the left, galloping obliquely upon the fugitives, appeared a party of cavaliers, five in number, somewhat nearer to the fugitives than Fitz and Mac. They were Percy of Northumberland and his four.

There was nothing to do but cut them off, by taking three hedges, a five-barred gate, and the intervening fields. And at the first bend of the path, over a bramble-hedge with easy vault slid Fitz, and over after him, in supple succession, slid Mac and Bonner with easy vaults. And now, with deep-driven spur, they scampered across field, bounding the hedges in supple succession, Fitz foremost. And 'Hi, there! stop, stop,

or we fight!' called Fitzgerald in clear bell-tones when he was near. But young Percy, not being of a mettle that stops, advanced: and in another moment there sounded the shock of their meeting.

Percy's men were themselves galloping in mid-field, but, intent upon the fugitives, had held their course till nearly the last. They were, therefore, caught in demi-flank, and at once two riderless horses went trotting across the meadow.

Two fighting-men fastened upon Macdonald, and the steels of Fitz and Percy met. Bonner, too, with chilly heart, had drawn sword, and, at the first shock, given one blind hack at someone's armoured back without effect. Then, as if of its own accord, his horse had backed: and quiet sat Bonner with lifted sword and vigilant eyes and panting nostrils, as who should say: ''Twere dangerous to approach me, yet prithee do it not.'

At the same time, Mac did battle with a demi-lance on one flank, a bill on the other. Under these conditions his defence was as faulty as the light was dim. The lance pricked his horse's shoulder; in the rear-up he received a wound through his mail on the breast-bone, and he tumbled backwards over his croupe.

That moment would have been Percy's last—for his battle-axe was wheeling away in air, and Fitz had his two-handed sword heaved almost behind his back to hew once and make an end—but there rang a shrill, affrighted cry of 'Clubs! clubs!', and the blow did not descend. The cry was Bonner's, upon whom Mac's victors were riding full. Like tempest flew Fitzgerald to his aid, and it was astonishing in what swift succession the two men tumbled dead. Of one he ripped the abdomen; the other he split through helm and brain. At once he turned back to Percy: but Percy saw, not only Fitz, but Mac on foot running upon him; and he was wounded in the forearm, and weaponless. He at once turned and fled.

Mac's trained horse, meantime, had run away but a short distance. The three, without delay, started in renewed chase after the girls.

But in the short interval of the fight Calvo had descended behind a hill-slope, and there cunningly changed his course. Fitz, Mac, and Bonner scoured the country till far into the morning: but the dear fugitives were lost to them.

CHAPTER XVII

WANDERINGS

'Dear is my little native vale,
The ring-dove builds and murmurs there;
Close to my cot she tells her tale,
To every passing villager.
The squirrel leaps from tree to tree,
And shells his nuts at liberty.'

ROGERS.

IN a week Calvo had traversed the spur of Berks which separates Bucks from Hampshire. To not one of his pursuers was either his direction or his exact position now known, though, ever and anon, as he journeyed, rumours of armed cavalcades, galloping hot, and reining for hurried inquiries, reached his ears at the taverns. One or more of the parties, it was clear, had preceded him; the others, he guessed, were near him, behind or around.

He reached Coxton in safety, a hamlet south of Odiham, umbrageously sequestered in a little deep-wooded Hampshire vale. They arrived at matins, and being miserably weary, Calvo threw himself upon a mattress in the dim loft—a piled chaos of odorous hay—to which guests were conducted. And Laura's lovely head dropped near his knee; her pale-rose lips opened; she breathed in heavy sleep.

Bessie, however, did not drop in sleep. Three hours later, when Calvo and Laura awoke and hurriedly descended, she was not to be seen. They called; Calvo fretted; the animals, brought round to the inn-door, waited.

Calvo, with irritable brow, went down the side

passage into the long inn-yard, cobble-paved, behind. There, by the pump, stooped hard-souled little Bess, intently washing and kneading with turned-up sleeves; a heap of washed woollens, hemps, and linens was near her; and the landlord's wife stood inspecting the Augean work, arms akimbo.

'Come there, come!' cried Calvo peevishly. 'What make you there at all? You keep me waiting!'

'Oh . . .!' leapt from Bessie's mouth. She ran with a swift whisper to the woman, and then to Calvo; behind him she walked in silence to the horses.

Calvo asked the way to another village of the landlord, went a little in that direction, and then turned another way. This was a ruse continually adopted to baulk his pursuers.

'What made you with that washing?' he asked on the road.

Bessie averted her face. Her fifteen crowns—their all—was spent. She had implored of the landlord's wife the washing job to settle for Calvo's and Laura's hay-bed.

'Sure, Master Calvo——' she faltered.

Calvo was the most unpractical of men, with a head in the clouds. That the fifteen crowns with which Bessie paid their way might fail did not occur to him.

'Whatever could have been your motive for keeping me waiting in that way?' he said with corrective severity.

Bess could not answer. Laura gaily pointed out an aspiring lark.

'Oh, 'tis minion!' quoth she, grinning sweetly; 'tis a frolic chansonnette!'

'Silence, you, with your face,' said Calvo.

But at Witton, four leagues thence, concealment as to the state of the exchequer was no longer possible. The supper and cider could not be paid for.

'But, thou silly daw, why didst not tell me before?' asked Calvo.

'Sure, you have gear enow to occupy you, Master Calvo, by my credit, without curing of these things.'

'So that was the secret of the washing at Coxton, when thou wert sore travel-worn, hey?'

'Not that I was so travel-worn, Master Calvo; for, by my credit, I have a tight back-bone, too, though minion in stature.'

'Well, well. Thou art a Bess. We shall see.'

That night they slept at Witton. The next morning Calvo slung his russet-leather bag to his back in evil humour, and went out afoot. Bessie, who was up, seeing him, followed wondering, and he, seeing her, turned and said:

'This is rigolo! To think that a man like me should go gadding forth to trap halfpennies like some vile zany or touring punchinello!'

'Oh! is that your purpose, Master——?'

''Tis need that I feed thee, I suppose, girl? and that maudit sister of thine, who eats like the seven elephants of King Sut? What hast done with all the money thou hadst, hey?'

'Sure, sir, 'tis a miracle—what with horses' provender——'

'And sea-swallow pasties for that sister, hey? and thou thyself thinning with meagre fastings, like the Mater Dolorosa! What atest thou yester-eve?'

'A great portion of rye bread, sir, thick with rich Hampshire butter, and nigh a pint of ale to swill it.'

'No viand, then?'

''Twas a Friday, Master Calvo——'

'Nay, then, I have no further interest in thee and thy affairs! Do as thou wilt, thou stiff and naughty spirit! Friday, quotha! 'Twas not too much Friday, methinks, to stuff thy sister with boiled picarell, and duck, and Rhenish, hey? And myself also—well, well——'

They had reached the street-top. Calvo took from the bag a little stick of brass, and a brass bowl of carved Hindoo work. With the stick the sage beat a ran-tan on the bowl. Something pathetic there was in that beating in mid-street, and something incongruous with those sage, calm owl-eyes, and with the bulging brow where dwelt Reason, and with the savant's skull-cap, concealing all his hair.

By his side stood Bessie, rather pale. Her 'natte' of plaited hair—long as a hand—was tied with a little bow of black ribbon.

Faces began to look from tiny sweet casements, lovely as that old dead England. Calvo beat his ran-tan.

Presently there was movement in the street, a tendency toward him. As the moon the tides, as the pied piper his rats, so he drew them. For such is the interest of Man in Man.

In ten minutes there was an agitated crowd before him. Calvo handed the bowl to Bessie, and, eyeing them calmly, he said:

'I wish you joy, friends, for the lucky fortune which has brought me into your midst this day. I am a physicianer, trained at the feet of the illustrious Magister Antonio Bartolomeo of Padua, who discovered the philosopher's-stone. I am known at the Universities of Padua, Paris, Boulogne, Orléans, Montpelier, Salamanca, and Bourges. I am a distiller of simples of every sort and species. I am a witch-finder, a necromancer, and a cheiromancer. I possess the secret of the grand magisterium, and I sell talismans and cabalas, tessaras and amulets, that counteract the Evil Eye. I cure the King's-evil and the dance of St. Vitus. In this magic bag which ye even now behold is that orvietan, or miraculous Venice-treacle, which is the antidote for all poisons; there is saltartare, argaile, cinoper, alkaly, and that arsenic, which, taken in small doses, protects from cold feet at night, but in large, has just the contrary effect. There also is turmeric, gum-mastic, marygold, sorrels, burnett, rue, hartshorn, spavin, and every wholesome medicament that completes the mediciner's elaboratory. Come, friends, open your purses; open, open. For a groat I cure the lumbago with the marvellous unguent of the Magister Sachs of Amsterdam; for a groat the sweating-sickness; for three halfpence I strike a cow with the plegia, by means of the famous abracadabra of the Persian magi, or else by common witch's-elm. Open, open: set briskly to it. Here are plasters, spasmadraps, waters, lotions, solutions, decoctions,

ointments, poultices, and clysters. I tell fortunes, not solely by palmistry, but by the stars, being skilled to astrologize, or star-gaze; and I cure cast-in-the-eye by virtue of a magic sapphire-stone, discovered on Mount Ararat by the great Hasn-us-Sabah. Draw near: open, open. I see a good man yonder with rheumy nostrils: him will I medicine with an electuary of honey, olive-oil, and mint. Another hath the air of one who mourneth after a stray sheep: I am a discoverer of stolen goods by the Greek method, and a tracer of strayed animals by the Tartar method of striking the spittle. Another, as I see, hath the toothache, for the wrench of grief is in that wry jaw: him will I cure with the panacea of the Dominie Y'hudah Benisrael, else will I draw the evil fang with a waxed hemp tied in a knot which I learned in the Lazarro at Salamanca; for you, gammer, with the jaundiced face and dull eye, I have an elixir decocted from the Mexican herb——'

'Ha! ha! ha! 'Tis all false!' cried a most weird, shrill voice, whose laugh ended in a wail.

Calvo looked up calmly.

'"Believe not all you hear" is a good proverb, friends,' said he, 'yet "Disbelieve not all" were a better proverb still. There now sits a young man on a horse who would have none of me, and my nostrums, and my catholicons; yet that young man, believe me, is suffering agonies through all the nerves of his face; and, an he would but come to me, in two seconds would I, without recompense, send him laughing on his journey.'

''Tis Flying Sidney!' said one of the crowd.

''Tis crazy Sidney Boleyn of Ormond!' went the rumour.

He had come galloping at a frantic pace through the village, and, seeing the crowd, had drawn rein to listen.

He was an extremely thin lad, with the blank pallor of wax, with eyes large, wild, black, and elfin, and a ribbed suggestion of outstanding sinews about his meagre face and jaw.

His movements had in them the swiftness of a

spirit's. The words of invitation were hardly out of Calvo's mouth, when Boleyn had flung himself from his horse, and was standing before the sage.

'Here am I, quacksalver! cure me!' he said in his high, trilling cry.

'You perceive, he calls me quacksalver,' said Calvo to the crowd: 'now we shall see.'

'Shall what see? *Z*any! Saltimbanque! Charlatan!'

'He calls me, you see——'

'Arlequin! Polichinelle! Buffo! Pantalon!'

'Calm your excitement. I am not altogether a pantalon—not altogether a charlatan.'

'Why, thou art!'

'No. Have I reason in saying that you have a torment, or nevralgia, in the face?'

'Yea.'

'And this many a year?'

'Since I was born.'

'Swallow that.'

Calvo, having dived into his bag, had taken out a box divided into squares. From two squares he took vials, and mixed a few drops of the liquids in a piggin.

Sidney Boleyn, with a wild hilarity of mockery and desperation, tossed the brown fluid down his throat.

There followed an interval so long as when a man swallows some novel wine and ponders the flavour in his gorge, gazing into nothingness. The crowd gaped silent. Calvo put back the vials and reclosed the box.

As he did so, Boleyn burst into passionate tears, and dropped, as if shot, to his knees. For the first time for twenty years he felt rest, he experienced sanity.

Calvo patted the bowed head. Bessie's eyes filled with tears of worship. The half-crazy lad sobbed piteously. After two minutes he raised himself, walked to his horse without a word, and went down the street with bent head, holding the bridle.

'Now, good friends, you see——' said Calvo.

They had seen: and during an hour he did good trade, the coins raining into Bessie's bowl.

As they walked to return to the inn, Calvo said:

'Well, now, you see, we are rich. No more hard

washing, then, for little travel-worn lasses; and the sister with the face shall gorge herself with pasties.'

'Ah, my master,' quoth she, 'great you are, and *good*——'

'Well, well. But hullo! here is our man after us again——'

Sidney Boleyn was following deferentially, pervaded with his new surprise of painlessness, bowed with gratitude, full of adoration, behind them.

'Well, does that go well?' asked Calvo dryly.

'Yes! yes!'

'Don't call me charlatan again, then. What is your name?'

'Sidney Boleyn.'

'What, not a son of Sir Thomas?'

'Yes.'

'And brother to the Lady Anne?'

'A half-brother.'

'H'm! And what make you here, so far from home?'

'Oh, I am always far from home. I never leave the saddle—I am crazy—I fly—I fly always. I am a servitor in my father's household: but they let me go, and I ride, ride. They know my pain.'

'Well, poor lad! Keep courage. And when the pain comes again——'

'It will come again?'

'I fear me so.'

'Ah! But I reck not! I have felt pleasure! I shall remember this hour! Master, what is your name?'

'I do not wish it known: but I will tell *you*, since you are my friend. I am called Mauro Calvo.'

'Mauro Calvo—I have heard the name. May I come——?'

'Nay, nay. But return to your home, taking these liquids, which, mixed a few drops each with each, will relieve the pain, an it return. Good-bye.'

He gave the two vials, and the young man went reluctantly away, leading his horse.

CHAPTER XVIII

PALM SUNDAY AT MIDSUMMER

'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.'

GRAY.

FROM Witton, in a south-west direction, the nearest village is Skipley Rising; and here the fugitives spent a night.

The next day, on the road from Skipley Rising to Littlebush, passing between two chalk ridges, they saw above them a horseman, who, though he vanished, appeared to follow.

It was Sidney Boleyn, known through Hampshire as Flying Sidney.

Caught in a sort of fascination for the Magister who had given him painlessness, he was hanging in this way upon the course of Calvo, tracking him from point to point. The fugitives got to be aware of his furtive and Jack-o'-lantern attendance, though, having once been dismissed by Calvo, he did not sufficiently approach for speech. But by the time they reached Hadleigh-Stoy, some rumour, or new whim, must have enticed his flighty brain, for, for some days, he disappeared.

About here the country dips into a succession of vast vales, almost saucer-shaped, each an entity in itself, shut away from the world. Viewed from the encircling hills, each spreads out in dreamy panorama of uberant oak-land, toy pastures and orchards, bosky dingles, wheat-field and stream, knoll and lake—all

delicately and daintily distinct, like images mirrored in an eye—an earth in little, good to smell, melting afar in azure haze—at which the sight swoons with love: the difference between now and then being an enormous decrease now in the proportion of forest to the whole, the villages then being quite buried away in umbrages.

Still on ambled Calvo, from hamlet to hamlet, tending south-westward always, cheating day after day his pursuers by nothing but a marvel of luck, ever and anon, as he went, bringing forth his bag, ringing his ran-tan, and dryly prophesying lies which were partly true.

But at Mede Down, which lies nearly at the centre and bottom of Arling Vale, he received a warning.

'Sure,' said a little apple-cheeked inn-chamberlain to Bessie, 'you be the very souls with which a party of three gentmen would be coming up.'

'Mamie,' said Bess, 'oh mi! and when were they here?'

'Yester-eve, near compline.'

'And what asked they?'

'Had we seen, ko they, aught of a pair of damsels a-horse with bare head, and a man a-mule with skull-cap.'

'And how looked they, mamie?'

'Two were martialists, sure; and one a stripling with flowing blonde locks, and burning-red lips, and eyes large, pleasing to the regard.'

'A stripling with flowing blonde locks——? I cannot divine——'

She thought of Mark Bonner, but could not imagine how he could be in the company of two fighting-men, following her.

'What had he on for apparel?' she asked.

'A princox sarcenet doublet, a velvet cap, and threadbare hose.'

'Sure—sure—'twas Bonner! And *he* was with the martialists, say you?—in their company?'

'Even so.'

'And they—how looked they, mamie?'

'One was small-knit in comparison with the other, who is mighty and deep-chested, and hath a walk like

a lazy, laggard, swaggering giant-man; but the steps of the small one are quick and neat.'

'My mother!—it is they——!'

'You know them, methinks?'

'Most like. What eyes had the great gallant?'

'Small eyes—blue—very droll and twinkling, under a large bossy brow.'

'Oh! 'twas he! And hair on the face——?

'No hair on the face: and I should wot, for the malapert took the privity of kissing me.'

'Of——?'

'Kissing me. And "Faith," ko he, "a tasty little moppet, thou——"'

Bessie glanced quick with a half-terrified interest at her. In a moment it was over.

'Sure, I pray thee divulge me none of thy lightnesses, girl,' she said, turning away. 'Is this the chamber? 'Twill serve. Prithee, get gone.'

'Bessie, girl!' cried Mauro Calvo from below. 'Come! I start forth to the green.'

Calvo was going to harangue, and gather groats. As they set out, Bessie told him the inn-chamberlain's tale.

'Well, let the cattle come,' answered Calvo, 'all of them. But let 'em come quickly, an they love their skin's salvation! for, an I be not far at fault, by this there is arrived in England a Sword that will make 'em skip a morris-dance to the tune of *Placebo, Dilixi* by St. Louis!'

Bessie did not understand, knowing naught of Calvo's summons to Francis of France. Later she understood.

He laid down his bag, and set to beat his rantan.

The village was in a singular state, which, as he had just arrived, he could not comprehend. Knots of twos and threes discussed in the open; yonder, by the little church-door near the green, sat two gammers with baskets containing box-twigs, and to everyone that came they handed a twig; box-twigs were in windows, in doors, in gabardines, in the hand. The church-bell

was ringing in a tone of larum. Some stir was in the air. Three boys only gathered round Calvo.

Even these were in clean stiff buckrams; the poorest in decent Sunday trim of sober russet: yet it was not Sunday.

The bell ceased to ring; the last of the villagers trooped into the church. Calvo and Bess were left alone.

The high sun dappled the green with the vague wandering trellis-work of the chestnut-shadow, beneath which Calvo stood. All was sleepy, still. A sleepy breeze ran ruffling, with soft rush and vast rumours and raids of tittering whispers, through the leafage of the embowered little empty hamlet, as when faint airs stir the hair of some noon-day slumberer.

'Well, now, what make these silly cattle?' asked Calvo.

'By my credit,' said Bessie, 'meseems as though they celebrate Palm Sunday.'

'What! but this is not Sunday; and we are nearer Midsummer than Easter: for to-morrow, an I mistake not, is the fête of St. Philip and James.'

''Tis like, sir,' said Bess.

No sound in the hamlet; only, yonder above, through the ocean of leafage that giggled as if tickled, pelted with soft rush and rape the breezes, in tittering troops of whispers, wide-rumouring: hush! shibboleth, shibboleth.

'Let us to the church, and see what is toward,' said Calvo.

They started, he shouldering his bag.

The building was nearly full. At the altar-rail stood a deep-girthed, heavy-faced Augustinian, with tiny eyes, blubber lips, and tonsured skull. He was explaining to the rude little flock that he had called them together that morning for their souls' salvation. Owing to the remarkable length of the winter that year, he had appointed no Lent; and he was there now to tell them that, things being as they were in this most sleepy world, that was the day, though not a Sunday, on which they should hold the procession of Boughs, and the Sunday that followed he decreed should be Easter Sunday.

In fact, the good simple Brother, drowsing through

that particular nook of sixteenth-century Time in which his life was cast, had wholly lost count of saint-days and seasons, nor was there anyone in Mede Down to remind him. His calendar had run crazy. The Year became to him a burden and an enigma; only the Day was sweet and soluble. Ignoring Time, he napped serene in a blank Eternity of threescore years and twenty. And like him was Mede Down. The little flock sat listening now with quiet faith, believing in what proceeded from his mouth, that it was good.

But the Brother's awakening to a consciousness of Time on that particular morning was not without a cause. In his stream of monotonous days there had arisen an Event: he had received a letter with a date.

When he saw the date, he had rubbed his little fat eyes. And when he saw Calvo enter the church, he stretched his fat forefinger, crying out:

'My children, my children, seize that man——!'

The letter with the date had been handed him that morning by a mounted messenger from one Mr. Justice Newton, of Alton.

It was now that Calvo first felt the length of Thomas Wolsey's arm, an arm longer than that of King or Emperor.

Wolsey, for his own political ends, was as fixedly resolved to possess Laura Ford as was Anne or Henry, more fixedly than was Katherine or Du Ballay. And he knew his way.

He had lately sent messengers all over England to every High Sheriff of a County and Constable of a Hundred, with instructions that these in turn should send to each Head-borough and Justice, and these again to every Reeve of every Abbot, and through them to every priest of every parish, describing Calvo and the maidens, and directing their arrest.

There were now, therefore, several thousands of persons in England on the look-out to effect the seizure of the wizard and the girls.

And at once, as the oblong finger of the Mede Down Brother stretched upon him, Calvo divined the facts, and knew that now, at last, his feet were in the net.

In a moment all the church was in a flutter, but the calm, tumble-down eyes of the sage remained calm. Before any of the astonished yokels could move to touch him, he whispered Bessie, 'Follow me close,' and went with swift decision toward the altar-rail. The monotonous old lump of a Brother saw him come with alarm, raising both averting hands; but, or ever he could run, Calvo had his mouth at his ear.

The scientist, frowning, whispered in a tone of authoritative and severe reproof. He said:

'I am astonished at you, Brother Augustinian, for your manner of tending the little flock here. It is incredible to me that you should have the stupid audacity to introduce Palm Sunday into Midsummer in this wise. And no Lent, quotha? And no Good Friday? And the souls of the poor sheep perishing for the hunger which they have of the ordinances of Christ's Church. Fie! fie! A fine tale, verily, to open to the Bishop! And to these poor sheep, if now I turn and declare how matters are! And that your motive for wishing my seizure is but fear of my honest tongue? Fie upon you for a sloven dotard, I say! Keep them here, therefore, every one, during a ten minutes' space, till I be gone upon my way, or it were an ill case with you, I promise!'

The sheepish tongue of the Brother poked his cheek. Calvo gravely walked to a near side-door, leading Bessie by the hand. There was a movement, as of pursuit, among the people, but the Brother waved them back, speaking comfortable words.

In five minutes the fugitives were galloping hie from Mede Down.

Calvo was angry. Whither now to fly? England was divided into squares, like backgammon, each square a trap, to catch him.

'This should be Wolsey,' he said, 'that bladder of hog's-lard! It is Wolsey; it is like him, the pork. Why the devil don't you ride, you two?—for, look you, I have had enow of you by now, young women, methinks—both of you—you, Bessie, with your ways, and that silly daw, your sister, with her face. It is rigolo

—it is rigolo—this scampering over the earth by a man like me with two hussies on tits, and all the empty-pated chuffs of Christendom on my track! I call it rigolo, by God! But wait—wait: perhaps I have yet a card to play. Well, well——'

Calvo knew by now that his pursuers were many, divided into parties, some, for some reason, inimical to others, perhaps each to all, and a plan for destroying them all had formed vaguely in his brain. This was the reason that he travelled south-westward always, in the direction of the city of Winchester, and of Southampton.

Suddenly, as he galloped from Mede Down, his plan congealed into definiteness: for suddenly there came to him definite news, and his case now was desperate.

A horseman, galloping with wild haste in the opposite direction, almost collided with him, before either could draw rein. It was Flying Sidney Boleyn.

His dead-white face almost blushed, and his elfin eyes dropped, at the sight of Calvo.

'Well, now, you see, you want to ride me down, who have done you good,' said Calvo.

'Oh, your pardon, master!' cried Sidney in his falsetto.

'How does that go with the pain?'

'Oh, 'tis clean gone to-day!'

'But you grow tired, I see, in your gratitude, like the rest of you: naught have I seen of you for days.'

'I have been galloping further down south.'

'And whitheraway now so fast?'

'To London! To London!'

'And wherefore?'

'To tell the King!'

'Tell the King what?'

'Of the strange Knight, and his exploits.'

'Ah . . .?'

'My father hath sent me with a dispatch.'

'Soh! Which strange Knight?'

'Oh, you have not heard? Yet he is near. Oh, I could not tell you—'tis past belief!'

'Nay, tell me.'

'He is from across the sea: his ship, I know, lies in

Southampton Water, for I have seen her. Such a ship!—she is crazily glorious! Her sails are of cloth of gold, damasked; she is painted all of gold and blue, and hath four masts and a bowsprit, all square-rigged, with a hundred and ten guns in port-holes on a battery-deck and on two gun-decks afore and aft. Sure, she must be near equal to our English *Henri Grâce à Dieu*, for she hath, I guess, eight hundred tons in burthen, and from her mainmast there flutters a streamer, most wondrous long and exorbitant, of sky-blue silk with a single fleur-de-lys.'

'Fleur-de-lys, say you?'

'Yes.'

'Very good. Continue.'

'And she hath, O, for her figure-head——'

'Never mind the ship: tell me of the man.'

''Tis the strangest wight! 'Tis a fellow most tall and lank——'

''Tis Francis of France,' muttered Calvo. 'Good. 'Tis he.'

'Tall and lank, and his mission, guess you, is to search out a beauteous maiden—for so it seems from the queries which he everywhere makes—a beauteous maiden in the vicinity of Winchester.'

'Yes, 'twas to Winchester that I bid him come,' muttered Calvo.

'And since he was not long,' proceeded Sidney, 'in hearing that others, as it seems, are seeking for that very maiden, neither was he long in meeting them, some or all; and that joust, I, master, saw, and 'twas royster, O!'

'You saw it?'

''Twas not far from here, near Penton, and yester evensong.'

'How many were with the Knight?'

'Seven only, and of the others seven. And they met. Oh, by the Rood, I'm all a-glee to think of it! He rides a battle as a ship a boisterous sea! With his own arm I saw him mow down four, as easy as a hunter takes a hedge. Oh, triumphant is his sword!'

'Well, I suppose the chuff will do,' muttered Calvo.

'You know him, then, by sight?'

'I know him like my father, though he wears a fluted Milan visor of glittering steel.'

'Could you find him?'

'Why, yes. His band carry a vast shimmering banner of sky-blue silk with one fleur-de-lys, and from a window of every inn at which he bides out floats the ensign.'

'That will do, then.'

Calvo's mule was standing near to Laura Ford's horse. He turned to her; he put his hand beneath her chin, holding up her face. He said:

'Turn a little more this way, that I may see you.'

Laura resented, but was compliant. Calvo, with goggle, contemplative eyes, coldly regarded the miracle of beauty. Then he let go the chin, and muttered:

'Yes—that will make a fool of him. But he must see it: his enthusiasm must be awaked.' To Sidney Boleyn he said:

'So you are hurrying to London?'

'Yes, master.'

'But if *I* ask you to turn back a little way for me beforehand?'

'Why, sure, most pronely will I do it!'

'I thank you. Know you well the country hereabouts?'

'Every pebble.'

'Then can you tell me of some river or stream with good steep, high banks to it?'

'Why, the little Renney, a mile or two on the yon side of Chipping, hath that.'

'Well, then——'

Calvo dropped from his mule, and took from his bag writing materials and a string. Holding the parchment against his saddle, he leaned sideways and wrote:

'To Francis the First, King of France, from Mauro Calvo these presents.

'If Francis the King will perambulate alone close by the water-edge of the stream Renney, a mile or two on the southern side of the village of Chipping, to-morrow even at the crepuscule, or it may be the morrow after

at the crepuscule, this day being a Thursday, then Mauro Calvo will, by his science, so work and elaborate, that Francis the King shall have at least a sight of that most surpassing maiden of all, of whom Mauro Calvo long since prophesied to the King the dominion and jouissance.'

He bound the letter, and handed it to Sidney.

'You will deliver this to the Knight in person,' he said, 'and you will not mention that I am hereabouts, or say from whose hands you received it.'

Sidney, as he took it, reverently kissed Calvo's fingers. The next minute he was gone.

'Come, come,' said Calvo, mounting.

Bessie Ford woke from reverie with quite a start, and a little frown, vexed at herself.

'By my credit,' she muttered, 'thoughts are childish things: else am I a most childish maiden. . . .'

She had been allowing her mind to wander with a vague wonder on the kiss which that great warrior, Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, had given to the apple-cheeked little chamberlain at the inn at Mede Down.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RENDEZVOUS

'. . . fairy damsels met in forest wide
By Knights of Logres, or of Lyones,
Lancelot, or Pelleas, or Pellanore.'
MILTON.

'Therfore sayd Arthur vnto syr Bedwere, "Take thou Excalybur my good swerde. . . ." '—MALORY.

THE plan which congealed into definiteness in Mauro Calvo's brain when he had definite news of the advent of Francis was this: He would first give Francis a mere glimpse of the face of Laura Ford, in order to arouse his ardour to the utmost; then he would hurry back some twenty or thirty miles from the neighbourhood which Francis then haunted, sleeping in woods, and seeking in every way to cheat the long, thousand-handed arm of Wolsey; then he would again advance upon the neighbourhood of Francis; but this time, as he passed hurriedly through each village, he would take care to leave behind him approximately accurate information as to his next destination: thus would he be sure to draw gradually together upon his trail all the various pursuing parties; and thus would he lead them all upon Francis, for destruction at the hand of Francis, or at the hand of each other, or both.

His mounted and martial enemies being thus disposed of, he hoped by disguises, sleeping in woods, and precautions, to elude the civil watch-dogs of Wolsey as far as the coast, where he might obtain a boat, and sail for French land.

That night on which he sent his rendezvous to Francis, the three slept in a wood of oaks, six miles south of Mede Down; and here Laura felt a pang of that vacuum which her nature abhorred.

Yonder the picketed horses cropped close; and anon, as they moved a pace, cropping close, they smote a hoof that tolled. Near by a brooklet murmured through the night.

Careful Bessie had in her bundle a woollen sheet, in which the sisters lay naked—the universal custom then, as still in France, Spain and Italy.

Calvo went some distance to lie upon a slope of warm verdure; and, as he stooped to lower himself, addressing the Deity, he muttered for evening prayer: 'This is rigolo, my God!'

Bessie's orisons were longer, and must have winged vastly higher. As she scuttled between the draps into close friendship with Laura, quoth the beauty:

'But what a life is this I am leading here, our Saviour! —following that old hoball about, into woods and all. Phew! thank you, sirs—phew! not for me.'

Laura was cross, feeling the vacuum.

'Why, Laura!' said Bess.

'I have a horrible hunger. 'Tis too much to expect of me, at the end of the tale.'

'Oh, my dearest life, don't say anything!—do, Laura, bear with me—till the morning——'

'And why should I lead this life? phew! I have a pretty face, at the end of the tale—I am a plump and well-made girl——'

Bess rose on her elbow.

'What art talking about, lass?' she said with knit, puzzled brow.

'Many and many a gallant, rich and high, the King's self, were glad to have me——'

'*Silence!*' hissed Bessie, with a serpent intensity that cowed the other. But Laura under her breath went:

'Phew!'

There was a good long pause, during which Bessie, frowning, leant on an elbow over Laura, poring upon her in the darkness. Laura said, whiningly:

'I have hunger. . . .'

'My mother! but I have naught to give thee——'

'Well, let it pass. Thou'dst give it pretty quick an thou hadst it, I know, Bess—and I pity thee——'

Down fell Bessie sobbing upon her, gathering her passionately, sobbing, sobbing.

'Oh, my dear soul—my darling pig's-eye! Wait—bear with me—my little one—— !'

So presently, being wearied, they fell lullabied into sleep, under the old hushing susurration and shibboleth of the moving forest.

All the next day, till near even, Calvo and Laura remained in the wood; only Bessie, by twice asking her direction, made her way alone to a hamlet to get their nooning, and came back well provisioned, having forgotten nothing, and bought cheap.

Near curfew, Calvo informed Bess that he intended to take Laura with him a little distance, while Bess remained behind. Bessie's nostrils panted once in vague dismay, but to her what Calvo did was well.

Only Laura dared to question the sage's purpose.

'But wherefore this?' she asked.

'Laura, sh-h-h, dear,' said Bess.

The two set out together, Calvo binding a kerchief round his head to hide the skull-cap.

Laura on the road complained lackadaisically.

'Oh, I am fatigued!' quoth she; 'I can't walk far.'

'Your fatigue, I assure you, is of no consequence,' said Calvo. 'Come, now, walk, walk.'

Chipping was only two miles way; they went through it undisturbed, and yet a mile beyond, tracking the brawling course of the Renney.

Nearly all the way there rose from both banks fairly steep, cliff-like slopes, ten to twenty feet high, leaving only, down below, a narrow foot-way of moss by the water-edge.

Calvo selected a point where the slope was highest, and was distant only by some twenty yards from a fairly thick green-wood. There standing, he spoke seriously to Laura.

'A Person,' said he, 'will be passing down yonder presently upon which I would practise a jape. You are to understand that the least flaw in the executing thereof will be followed by the gravest results, so be intelligent, sure and attentive—if so be you have such qualities in your pate. You will stand at the edge even here, still and steady, during two minutes' space from the moment when the Person rounds the bluff yonder and sees you. Then you will drop suddenly to the ground on your face; and, as you drop, you will pour out the contents of this vial. Then, bending low so that he see you not, you will run to that point of the wood there, where stands the blasted elm. And there shall I be, awaiting you. All is simple—there need be no error—you know the English tongue—have you understood me?'

'I am not such a daw but that I understand,' said Laura, 'but wherefore all this?'

'Silence you, and do it.'

He handed her a vial full of a red liquid—the liquid bromine—which, when poured into the air, sends up a profusion of brown vapours. The idea was to convince Francis that the vision of Laura had vanished into an ascending incense of brown vapour—leaving a smell behind.

Francis differed from Henry in this, that he was a real believer in the operations of witchcraft—in the witchcraft of Mauro Calvo above all, who, long since, had acquired a strong ascendency over the French King's credulities. And this Calvo knew.

Laura took her stand; Calvo retreated toward the wood. Unfortunately, half an hour elapsed, and no Person came. This made the miracle of beauty restless. She pouted; her right ankle, which was weak, continually jerked outwards. She said: 'What a life! 'tis too much to expect of me, at the end of the tale.' She forgot the vial in her hand.

Then he came—he saw her.

Stalking kingly he came, tall and lank, in armour, but without visor. He had a profusion of glossy black hair, and a hairless face, brown and dry as an autumn leaf,

and lean as the east-wind; a face far from good, with an expression in it of the satyr, of the he-goat. Only, the eyes were royal, and flashed battle with black and gallant glow.

But what a bow bowed he! A wave of consummate humble grace, well worthy a prince of the Palace of Armida. Then, starting back, he shaded his eyes with horizontal palm, in the knightly pretence that her beauty dazzled him like a sun.

'Pretence,' we say: but only during the first moments, when he had not seen her well. In another few seconds he was genuinely dazzled, for her face was great, and akin with the sun and the moon.

He could hardly believe his eyes. He made a quick step nearer to watch, and wonder. The twilight had deepened into dun gray.

His next instinct was to rush, and seize, and ravish.

Laura Ford stood, rather pale, with opening nostrils, regarding this man, her spirit and posture on a sort of frightened tip-toe.

Francis was not a man to hesitate. He lived in a continual Now. She saw him rush toward her point of the cliff, and with a scream, was gone.

As she ran, she had a dim consciousness of the vial in her hand, and tossed it obliquely backward. It fell into a tuft of grass, and did not break.

Many men could not have scaled the cliff at all. Francis was over it in half a tick. Before Laura Ford was half-way to the near green-wood she was shrieking in his arms.

Francis lifted her as lightly as a plump down-pillow, and went running with her, as one trots hastily with a burning barrel, toward the point where he had dismounted.

At that point the run of cliff-wall dipped into a low curve, and in the grassy depression here browsed the picketed horse. Francis dropped Laura, sprang to his seat, and as she ran again, with a stoop he plucked and gathered her at a canter, and was off with loose rein, he hardly knew whither.

She, before him, beat with sweet provocation upon

his tough face, wriggling, calling, with visage all inflamed, upon Bessie and upon Master Calvo.

Francis rushed through a space of greenwood, and came out into a tract of undulating grass-land. He slackened speed, and looked about, but saw no village. A house—an inn—this with all speed, was what he wanted. He was unfamiliar with the country. 'Better keep straight on,' he thought.

Off at full speed he set again, and in two minutes was galloping through a forest-path. His steed was a massive war-horse of Norman blood, more powerful than swift, the battery of whose hoof-beats was strong and ponderous. This, perhaps, was the reason that, as he plunged into an open flat glade, he called fire from heaven, bitterly annoyed: for yonder, from a nearly opposite avenue, came three riders, pelting prone upon him.

They were Fitzgerald, Macdonald and Bonner. These, at Mede Down, to which they had just returned, had learned that another pursuing party of six had not ten minutes before left Mede Down, taking the way to the forest; also, that the six had taken that way, for the reason that, as *they* had learned, the fugitives had taken that very way on the previous day. Hearing which, Fitz had cried: 'Shall we after them, Mac?' and staunch, unemotional Mac had replied: 'What else, Fitz?' and with loose rein the three had set out after the six; the six being Alvarada, Sir John Perrot, and four Queen's-men.

And passing through the dim forest in pursuit, the three heard the ponderous battery of the Norman blood's hoof-beats, were attracted, deflected their course, and came pelting upon Francis in the glade.

The impetus of the double advance was terrific. Francis had between his arms a still-struggling girl, whom, at the first glance, Fitzgerald recognised, and snatched his sword. Francis, seeing that he lacked space to rein, turn, and run, with dogged obstinacy persisted in his hold upon the girl, managing at the same time, by help of his elbows, to draw also. And at the awful impending crash of those on-rushing steels,

Laura Ford sent through the wood an impassioned shriek of fright.

The shriek took the form of the one shrill word:

'*Bessie!*'

And this cry Bessie, waiting for the return of Calvo and Laura not two hundred yards away, heard and knew. As a shepherd the bleating of his lamb, or as a young mother the cry of her babe, so she heard and knew it.

'Oh, my mother——!' gasped she.

Fluttering, deadly white, she flew to her palfrey, tightened in a moment the loosened girth, and was away.

But though she heard the cry, and knew it, she had no idea of direction. The voice had seemed to come from the heart of space, from the depths of nowhere.

But a minute before ever Bessie had mounted, Laura was already free, having tumbled on her length to the ground an instant before the meeting of the blades. Terror gave her power: she picked herself up, and went running wild, with bloodless, lovely face, through the wood.

Fitzgerald and Francis met, Greek with Greek.

King Francis had a sword, made specially for him by the world-famous artist of Toledo, Sylvester Agara, whose steeling was tempered to so fanciful a pitch of perfectness, that its solidity depended entirely upon the manner in which it was held. In any hand but that of Francis, it would have splintered at a first blow; in *his*, neither keen nor solid could resist that edge. Its steel-coated core was of soft iron; and it could be bent into a complete circle, which, at the instant of release, flitted back into perfect straightness. In sunlight it had the appearance of a rippling silver flame.

Two chops each, on steeds that stepped circling, head to head, they made; the four ineffectual, save that after the second of Fitz, a deep gap notched his blade. Informed by that instinct by which fighters feel their match, they drew deep breaths, strung, hundred-eyed, full of plots. Francis, by an intensely

swift double-wheel of his blade in air, met the descending sword of Macdonald, who had attacked in flank, whereupon Mac's sword dropped like a pack of cards in sherds. Fitz at that moment hissed: 'Now!' but even as the hack came down, Francis bowed as easily as one stoops to avoid the tendrils of a bindweed, and the blow slipped upon his back-piece. Now, however, his back was completely at the mercy of Fitz: but before the next chop, the two were literally torn apart by a very tempest of force. Alvarada and his five, at rushing rate, had galloped up.

There was still sufficient gleam in the brown, and now rapidly thickening, twilight of the glade to distinguish forms: and at once it was seen that the entire new party of six concentered upon Francis, with design, the venom of their blades. He fought positively surrounded by them.

And now the sight was good to watch the warrior's nimble rage. His fate, indeed, under such conditions, was certain, for with every passing instant he had at least two blades to baulk; but in perhaps ten seconds he had beheaded a horseman, and driven another armless and *hors de combat;* and at a light and almost flippant movement of his busy sword, which sent Sir John Perrot's steel cap pirouetting high, out cried Fitzgerald, the fighter:

'Why, lightly done, Sir Knight—bravo! 'Tis an assassination this——'

And with that cry the contest was all but ended: for Fitz, shouting 'We fight a couple, Sir Knight!' spurred into the row, and after him Mac, who had snatched Bonner's sword.

It was precisely then that Flying Sidney Boleyn, posting hot to London with news of Francis for King Harry, drew sudden rein, and watched the fray from near. Fitzgerald cleft to the breast a martialist of Queen Katherine, and Francis sheared to the bone Sir John Perrot's bridle-arm, whereupon Sir John's horse bolted, and ran from the glade, Macdonald after him. The one remaining Queen's martialist, losing heart, took to flight, hacking as he went the skull of Bonner's

nag, which dropped; and Alvarada, finding himself alone with the blades which he judged the two best in Europe, turned, too, and fled. Flying Sidney saw Fitzgerald and Francis disappear in chase behind him, and he knew Fitzgerald: for now, with his curiosity for facts and inn-news, he knew all the searchers after Laura Ford, their faces, and names. He started afresh on his pelting way, bound for London, big with news.

Meanwhile, Sir John Perrot, after a long ride, finding himself still hotly followed, and weak with loss of blood, drew a blunderbuss, and sent a random shot at Macdonald. The shot entered Mac's horse's brain, which dropped.

About the same time, Alvarada, who had fled a different way, and rode a swift Arab, dodged his pursuers down a path, and escaped. Fitz and Francis drew rein.

Francis turned upon Fitz with his large bow.

'La! I have to tender you thanks, comrade,' said he, in mincing, lisping English. 'To you I owe the saving of my life.'

'And the losing of a wife,' said Fitz, twinkling.

'Ah, so true, so true! But, as I have a hundred wives, at the least, and but nine lives——'

'On your conscience, you would say?'

'La! more upon my conscience, sir! but nine upon my saddle, I would say, which being less tough, beareth less. But on the word of a——knight'—he half said 'king'—'I tender you good thanks. You fight well.'

'Tush!' said Fitz, knowing not to whom, ''tis nothing.'

'But if *I* say 'tis something? And—'tis my will that you accept this sword of me.'

'Why, nay——'

'No nays, prithee, lest I call you neighing ass. For this priceless blade which you refuse hath but one brother in all the earth, and that, too, is mine. Take, sir!'

His tone was both *bonhomme* and commanding. Fitz, with blushing forehead, obeyed.

''Tis a most gracious gift,' said he.

'La! as to that, say nothing. But learn it nicely in soft practice, I warn you, till you know its secret jars and tempers, before trying fight, or it will shiver in your hands. And now, my good will, and *au revoir*. To our next meeting, sir! Ha! ha!'

Francis at once galloped away; Fitz back to the glade.

To his surprise, Mac was not there, and Bonner had disappeared.

Bonner, being horseless, had run after a stray nag that, after the fight, had passed trotting through the glade. The nag, with stoppings to crop, and runs, had refused capture, and tempted him far. He was now, as Fitz waited, trying in vain to rediscover the glade.

Fitz lingered with hot impatience some half-hour, puzzled. He did not know that either Mac or Bonner had lost horse.

'Perchance are they gone onward to Chipping together,' said he, and, with that thought, started for Chipping.

Mac, when he reached the glade on foot, found no one. He concluded that Fitz and Bonner had gone back to Mede Down, and thither went on weary foot.

Bonner, in the midst of his hopeless search, flung himself, desperate, upon a bank, and slept a supperless night in the forest. The three were mutually lost one to another.

As for Laura Ford, running with blanched face from the battle, her flight had unknowingly led her to the little spot which they had made their home for a night and day. She recognised it, and stopped. But Bessie—she was not there. Bessie had gone out after that cry which she had heard, and known. Laura called timorously:

'Bess! Bessie!'

Suddenly she heard cantering hoof-beats—approaching. They were the hoof-beats of a riderless horse fled from the battle. But fear took her. 'Our Saviour . . .!' quoth she.

She ran to where the animals fed; tightened the loosened girth of her nag, leapt up, and was away.

Some ten minutes afterwards, Mauro Calvo arrived from the rendezvous, holding his chin, concerned and guilty, saying:

'But whatever can I find to tell the elder sister? That silly daw—— !'

He approached with lingering foot. But when he came, Bessie was not there. He looked, and saw the two nags gone. He held his chin.

'In that case,' he mused, 'Laura must have escaped from Francis, and now gone somewhither with Bessie, for here are the nags evanished. But whither away? And why? Or are they captured? Taken to Mede Down? Or Chipping?'

He walked to and fro, bent, holding his chin, quickly.

'I pity her from my heart,' said he ruefully.

Inquietude would not let him be still. He mounted the mule, making for Mede Down.

About a half hour afterwards Bessie came back, weary of search. There was no one there.

'Oh, I can't find her!' she moaned. 'Oh, sure, sure, Something is against me, sure. . . !'

And away, again, with her bundle, she rode.

CHAPTER XX

HENRY HEARS

'De quelle manière Ulrich Gallet fut envoyé à Picrochole.'
RABELAIS.

HENRY was floating on the river when Flying Sidney reached the Placentia palace at Greenwich.

In London the 'sweating-sickness' was abroad—a malady of which Royal Harry had a most head-prone and indigestible horror. So at the report of each fresh outbreak, he would flurriedly pack for Windsor, for the palace at Richmond, for the palace at Greenwich.

It was noon, an hour after the royal dinner, for Royalty, then as now, 'dined late' at eleven a.m., ten being the more usual hour of the forkless feast. Henry sat canopied in the stern of a high-prowed barge, rich-liveried in cramoisi velvets whose gold frounces trailed; and with him sat and talked the two Howards (Edward and Edmond), Surrey (my Lord Treasurer), Sir Thomas Lovel (Constable of the Tower), Knevet (Master of the Horse), and some gentlemen-archers and body-knights.

Sidney Boleyn got into a skiff at the palace landing-steps. The day was bright, and had in it the spacious charm of the summers that then were. The fringes of the barge, trailing, drew two wavering lines that widened to their languid death on the dappled and brindled surface, fading in the water just as the trail of that lazy summer-day, with its lazy breezes, and its spacious lazy charm, has faded now in the River of Time.

Flying Sidney came up with the slow royal Argo opposite West Ham. He hung on forward and sent

word aft that he bore a despatch from Sir Thomas: and soon he was standing before the King.

Harry's shapely left leg stretched stiff, his right elbow on knee, forefinger on brow, and thumb on cheek; and as he read the letter, lo, he gnawed a wry-pushed pout at a corner; he took in with his tongue-tip his moustache-end, to gnaw.

'H'm!' went he; and again: 'H'm!'; and at last: '*Ha!*'

Let it be understood that Francis and Henry were life-long and bitter rivals in the two favourite pursuits of both—Love and War. In both, Francis feared the growing fame of Henry; and Henry detested and envied the established fame of Francis. In the matter of fighting, it was almost certain that Francis was the better man; though it was currently believed at the time that with the bow-and-arrow, and in barrier-combat with axes, Henry took the palm. But in the matter of Love, the question of superiority was more wholly in dispute: here they remained the patterns and paragons one of the other: if Henry was a dragon, Francis was an ogre; if Henry was a ghoul, Francis was a vampire. They surpassed each other.

And the mere mention of the name of one in the presence of the other acted precisely in the manner of a prick, spurring to further exploit.

'Ha!' went Henry; and, turning upon Flying Sidney, he said:

'Well, what's all this affairing?'

'What the letter declares you, sire,' said Sidney.

'Hast seen this knight, thou?'

'And his ship!'

'Ship? How looks this ship?'

Sidney described the glowing nautilus. And at once something like certainty dawned upon Henry: only kings possessed such ships. He jerked up his straight leg, and turning from side to side his nodding head, he cried:

'Well!'

'She's a thing of glory, sire! Damasked sails of gold-cloth, and——'

'The fustian hulk! But this knight's self, varlet?'

'He is most tall and lank, sire, and he wears a visor of fluted Milan steel——'

'Ha!'

'Milan steel, and carries a shimmering banner of blue silk with one *fleur-de-lys*, with a *fleur-de-lys* wrought on his horse-trappings——'

'Oh, but this is strong, my gentlemen! this is a bit strong——!'

'And he fights, sire——'

'Ha! how fights he——?'

'He fights with grand ease, sire; he fights as a soaring lark showers her jolly carols; he fights as the wild-drake gallantly breasts a choppy tarn——'

'Thou brazen cur! and with whom fights he——?'

'He fights with all the different cavalcades that are seeking the lovely maiden.'

'Cavalcades? Maiden? *Which* maiden?'

'A maiden called, as I hear, Laura Ford, who travels in our neighbourhood with her sister and the good wizard.'

'Aha? . . . Aha? . . . 'tis so, eh? Aha? Well!'

'The cavalcades——'

'*Which* cavalcades?'

'Oh, there are several after the girl. Beside Fitzgerald, Macdonald, and Bonner, which now fight on the knight's side, as I have seen with my own eyes, there are——'

'Fitzgerald? *Which* Fitzgerald? But he is *my* man. He fights, say you, on the *knight's* side——?'

'Why, yes, sire.'

'Then the dark gizzard of that louse for it! 'Tis the second time—Ha! And 'tis this same maiden that the knight, too, is after?'

'Why, yes.'

Henry leapt up with a stamp.

'Oh, come, come, my gentlemen,' cried he with red brow, 'this is a bit strong—by the splendour of God, 'tis strong! Ha! What! in my own dominions? sniffing after my own subjects, the goat—in my own God's land? What! he hath dared, then? in my own, own England, which is mine from Heaven right down

to Hell? Aha! He shall see! My gentlemen! this is a bit strong, you know! Round with the boat's prow there, you! You see, gentlemen, don't you, how this Frenchman—this good friend and brother of France—ha! seeks a quarrel with me? Well, let him have a taste of English iron, then! To arms, I say! to arms! Dig it with the oars, there—to the palace with her! Well!'

Round went the barge, while Flying Sidney, anxious to be away once more, descended to his skiff. He paddled briskly back to the palace, mounted his spent horse, and made for the Bridewell Palace of Queen Katherine. He bore a letter from his father to his half-sister, Anne.

In that letter was a passing mention of the advent of the strange knight in the county.

Anne set Sidney before her, and fixed him with her keen blue eyes. She was the only person in the world of whom Flying Sidney stood in mortal fear.

'You have seen this knight, Sidney?' she said.

'Yes, mistress.'

'Describe him minutely.'

Sidney described him, and at once Anne muttered:

'Oh, 'tis Francis.'

'And the girl,' she said aloud, 'and her companions, and her other pursuers—have you seen them?'

'Why, yes—all.'

'Tell me of them.'

'I—you mean no hurt to the wizard, Mistress Anne? —I would not—he is my good friend and saviour——'

'Sh-h-h. Be good enough to answer my query.'

Sidney told and described, while Anne listened, her needle clicking in her embroidery. When she had heard every detail she went to a window, looking out upon the flowering manor-close, her hands behind her back.

'So 'tis Francis!' she muttered.

And she knew Francis well. If Francis sought Laura Ford, he would not fail to find, and possess; and if he possessed, then could not Henry; and until Henry possessed, she was certain that the Queenship of England would not be Anne Boleyn's.

She left her station at the casement with a tottering gait, which was feigned. And with tottering gait she passed a corridor into a parlour where the Queen, with five ladies-in-waiting, wrought in six pieces a Flanders tapestry. Anne's hand lay across her brow, and in her eyes was the glaring stare of fever.

'Oh!' said she. And again 'Oh!'

'Why, lady——' said the Queen.

'Madam, oh!'

'Why, lady, thou art ill!'

'Madam—I fear me—I have the sweating-sickness.'

'Heaven's mercy! sayest thou?'

'Madam—I pray you—let me depart straightway into the country—to my father—oh!'

The Queen leapt to support her, as Anne tottered upon a sofa.

In fifteen minutes she had set out, accompanied by Flying Sidney and a servitor. As she passed from the palace-gate she tossed her pretty head, and giggled.

Two hours later Henry himself was *en route*. He was accompanied by a hundred and ten men, multifariously armed—brigandined archers, scarlet-doubleted yeomen with halberds, catafracts with partisans, arquebuse, pike, and caliver, swordsmen, mounted bill-men, axe-men; amongst them Knevet, handsome Charles Brandon, dissolute Thomas Howard, Lord Nevil, fighting-men all, with fames.

Down through the city trailed worm-like the procession of cavaliers, rolling a long rattle and pattering fracas of showering hoof-falls, Henry in disguise behind. He sat glittering upon a charger, whose bases and bards were embroidered with roses and pomegranates of gold; and before him a marshalman bore a white banner of silk with St. George in red.

And Wolsey, who had been forewarned of the King's departure, looking from an oriel of his Bridewell Palace, saw the train move down the Strand, and heard the long pattering fracas of showering hoof-falls: and bridling his fat chin and his proud fat neck, he smiled his little superior smile.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TWO KINGS

'. . . Tilting furniture, emblazon'd shields,
Impresses quaint, caparisons and steeds,
Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights . . .'
MILTON.

'One gusty day, now stormy, and now still.'
CRABBE.

HENRY, in his bombastic way, and passion for mummery and make-believe, went out precisely in the manner of a General who takes the field, with camp-accoutrements, provision of forage, herald-king-at-arms, sentry-guards, and small siege-train; his own tent being a lofty pavilion of purple Lyons silk, gold-fringed and passmented: the same as once used by him at his meeting with Francis on the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Travelling in a strict *incognito*, he became known on his line of march as the Golden Knight, from the fulsome glow in sunlight of his rich gilt armour and horse-trappings; while Francis, for a similar reason, had acquired among the Hampshire villages the sobriquet of the Black Knight.

When Henry reached Mede Down, Francis was still prosecuting his search round Chipping, only nine miles away.

About noon of that day two of Henry's out-riders galloped into camp: they brought news of the exact whereabouts of Francis.

Henry was tilting with Charles Brandon, their lances being tipped with the globular braces called 'rockets.' For the third time Brandon was going down under

Henry's *coup de cœur*, amid cheers, when the scouts came in. And at once Henry, at the news, jumped with uncouth ease from his horse.

'Come, Charles,' he cried; 'see what I say to this swart-faced French goat!'

He entered his pavilion: he sat on a stool before a chest upon which he spread parchment, with quill and ink. He was a great writer and scholar, was Henry.

He held the pen, thinking. At all times his breath vented from his nostrils in a roughish wind, whose measured fan was faintly audible to one standing near —a proof of his stern strength and energy of personality. Brandon, leaning near, hands on knees, heard the breaths now come vehemently: for Henry was angry at this French invasion, and hot.

His letters he wrote nearly all in French. After a minute, pressing wide the points of the skating pen, he wrote flowingly:

'Celui que l'en appelle le Chevalier d'Ore vueil tantost scavoir ce qui aye esmeu le très parfaict Chevalier que l'en appelle Chevalier Noir à vaguer et naiger ès le bon pais d'Angleterre à ce temps-cy, quel prouffit, louenge, fame, honneur, ou renommé, quelle enqueste, ymaginacion, ou entreprins, quel gaing ou avantaige à achapter, quel meschief ou deffaulte, ou quelle Chaleur ou aultre chose, aye esguillonné et point le dessusdict très parfaict Chevalier Noir à vuyder de son pays pour venir vaguer ès le susdict bon pais d'Angleterre. Sans doubte repondra que son mestier illec a pour but de chercher et avoir en sa disposicion, administracion, et gouvernement une très belle, gente, doulce et debonnaire demoiselle que l'en appelle Laura Ford; en quel cas ne prendra de desplaisance ne tristesse que le dessusdict Chevalier d'Ore, à cause du roy d'Angleterre et France, et des Provinces de Gascoigne, Guienne, Normandye, Anjou, Galles, et Irlande, fasse l'entreprinse *d'estraindre incontinent* la Chaleur du susdict très parfaict Chevalier Noir; en quel but passera ce soir avecques ses forces dans les champes entre les villages de Mede Down et Chipping une heure avant soleil reconscé. Vecy doncques que je requiers à Dieu à

jointes mains, et que Dieu ne vueille pas qu'il advienne le contraire!' [He who is called 'The Golden Knight' desires at once to know what could have moved the very perfect Knight, who is called the Black Knight, to wander and sail into the good land of England at this time; what profit, praise, fame, honour, or renown; what quest, fantasy, or enterprise; what gain or advantage to acquire; what wrong or default, or what Heat, or other thing, could have pricked and spurred the above-said very perfect Black Knight to leave his land to come to wander in the said good land of England? Without doubt will he reply that his business here is to seek out and have in his power, sway, and government a very beautiful, high-born, sweet, and charming damsel, called Laura Ford: in which case he will not take it ill that the said Golden Knight—on behalf of the King of England and France, and of the Provinces of Gascoigne, Guienne, Normandy, Anjou, Wales, and Ireland—undertakes to *quench quick* the Heat of the said very perfect Black Knight; to which end he will pass this evening with his forces in the fields between the villages of Mede Down and Chipping one hour before sunset. And this I require of God with joined hands, and may God not bring the contrary to pass!]

Francis was made aware of the advent of this letter by a herald mouthing the shattering cry of a silver bugle in Chipping street. Another minute, and King-at-arms, in a motley which was half his dress of office, and half new-fangled, handed the letter to Francis, who, with three of his knights, lolled under the thick greenage of the inn-porch in half-dress, playing the new game of cards, primero.

The King broke the seal, which was not the seal of Henry; but with one glance at the handwriting, he recognised his good friend and brother of England, and showed a set of extremely white small teeth in a smile. He promptly called for pen and ink, and wrote:

'Celui que l'en appelle le Chevalier Noir n'a qu'aulcuns motz à respondre ne proposer aux raisons du très parfaict Chevalier d'Ore, qui est renomé en

clergie et science par toute la terre, veue que la plume du Chevalier Noir, la mercy Dieu, soit mesmement son espée. Le Chevalier d'Ore n'a pas mal diviné ne raysonné que je cherche une gracieuse, doulce, belle, bien adressée, et très gente et parfaicte demoiselle que l'en appelle Laura Ford, pour l'avoir dans ma disposicion, administracion, et gouvernement, ce que je fais jà sans decepcion ne mal engin, contre le Roi d'Angleterre et France, et des Provinces de Gascoigne, Guienne, Normandie, Anjou, Galles et Irlande. Et pour mieux faire *estraindre incontinent* ma Chaleur de la manière que, se la Fortune me donne tant d'heur, je vueil, je passeraie ce soir dans les champs entre les villages de Mede Down et Chipping, une heur avant soleil reconscé. Vecy doncque que je requiers à Dieu à jointes mains, et que Dieu ne vueille pas qu'il advienne le contraire!' [He who is called the Black Knight has but few words to answer or propose to the arguments of the very perfect Golden Knight, who is renowned in learning and science in all the earth, seeing that the pen of the Black Knight is, thank God, even his sword. The Golden Knight has not ill-guessed or judged that I seek a gracious, sweet, lovely, well-nurtured, and very high-born and perfect damsel called Laura Ford, to have her in my power, sway, and government, which thing I do verily without deception or secrecy against the King of England and France, and of the provinces of Gascoigne, Guienne, Normandy, Anjou, Wales and Ireland. And in order the better to have my Heat *quick quenched* in the manner which, if Fortune so befriend me, I intend, I will pass this evening with my forces in the fields between the villages of Mede Down and Chipping one hour before sunset. And this I require of God with joined hands, and may God not bring the contrary to pass!]

Francis stamped the missive with a *cachet-de-chiffres*, and having tied it with scarlet silk thread, deposited it in an ambergris-scented sachet of purple Genoa velvet, gloriously broidered with diamond and seed-pearl. He bowed, showing his teeth, as he handed it to the herald.

'Might I ask,' he lisped in mincing English, 'how many fighting-men are with your seigneur?'

'Something over a hundred, sir.'

He did not start; he bowed—though he felt a chill of heart, as on that day when, afterwards, he wrote:

'All is lost, save honour.'

With him were only six men. But they were the very cream and acme of French chivalry.

And that evening, an hour before sunset in the Vale of Arling, two dust-clouds rolled across the vast lowland to meet—one trailing long in enveloping whorls of galloping smoke, one short and globular. Nearer, spying each other, they drew, Henry with his hundred, Francis with his audacious six; and the sunlit glint of brandished steel flitted in the dust like a fire-dance in smoke.

Nearer they drew, and at the last Henry's host was thundering at a gallop down the incline of a long road, Francis thundering up it in gallant carelessness of his certain doom, when Henry drew breath and rein together.

'Well, but——!' said he.

Not five hundred yards separated now the two cavalcades.

'Sire——?' said Charles Brandon, half halting.

'Blue death, man! canst not see? Why, there are not twenty of them!'

'Not ten, sire.'

'Then why dost not cry halt, thou stupid dolt? Cry halt there, Nevil! Halt, there, I say! *Morbleu!* we are not Hounslow butchers——'

Halt, halt, went the impassioned word. And in another minute Francis, too, drew rein. One horseman only was in motion — Thomas Howard, galloping towards Francis with fluttered flag of truce.

Francis riding out to meet him, Howard proclaimed loud message: That the Golden Knight, having with him one hundred men, admitted himself vanquished, yielding arms to the higher prowess of the Black Knight who had with him but few; yet, if the Black Knight, would graciously spare his prisoners, then would the Golden elect an equal number of champions—six, as it seemed—to polish the Black Knight's armour accord-

ing to the old-time English fashion—*sur le champ*—then and there: and may God defend the right!

Francis lisped an answer crammed with courtly knighthood. There where he stood he awaited battle.

Henry had already selected his six. They stood grouped a-field toward the rear of the hundred, when a yeoman, left behind in Henry's camp, galloped up hot with news. Before Howard could deliver Francis's message, the yeoman delivered his.

'Sire,' said he, 'a countryman, searching in your behoof after the maiden Ford, has just hied into camp. On the skirt of Halford Wood, two leagues on the yon side of Mede Down, he hath spied the maiden on a palfrey, she at the time being hotly pursued by three martialists on chargers.'

'Ha!' cried Henry, and at once the heat and flame of his interest blew from Francis to Laura Ford. *Her* first—and afterwards tourney, and joust, and chivalric play. The advent of Francis into England—Henry's terror lest the Frenchman should beat him in the game of girl-seeking—had made his eagerness for possession a thousand-fold more instant and intense. 'Tell the Black-face I'll send him other rendezvous,' he tossed hurriedly behind him, as Howard cantered up with Francis's answer, 'and lead back to camp there. Ha! you six—come—ride it, ride it!'

They went at once galloping north-westward across-field, while Howard bore the message to Francis; Francis, on his part, received it with meaning smile, and instantly galloped off southward.

And with design: for he was aware that this sudden *volte face* of his good friend and brother at the moment of impending battle could be motived only by some superlative interest; and what interest on the earth was superlative save the finding of the superlative loveliness, the new Helen? He made a wide detour round a wood to conceal his purpose of pursuit, and then turned, galloping in the self-same direction as Harry.

Now, however, Harry and his six were lost to sight; and Francis and his six rode vainly till far into the darkness, following vague way-side rumours and directions.

They were passing at a languid walk through a

forest-path after midnight, seeking some hamlet for rest, when in a near glade they spied embers glowering red in thick blackness.

'What if those be they?' said Francis.

'Then we fall upon them and take them at disadvantage,' answered the Chevalier d'Arcy.

'Hold my horse—halt,' whispered Francis.

He slipped to his feet and went steathily treading through thick trees and under-wood toward the glade.

They were Henry and his six, who had scoured in vain a large tract of country round Halford Wood for Laura and her pursuers, and in this other wood had lost all sense of direction, overtaken weary by midnight. On the broad, deep-breathing face of Henry Francis saw the dim fire-gleam glower.

He stepped nearer; now the embers shed a shine on his own lean, brown wedge-face. One of the picketed horses shrilled a strong chest-neigh. He stopped, and showed his little teeth, going: 'Sh-h-h!'

Still further, with fearless rashness, he stepped, leaning prone forward on semi-tiptoe his lank strip of body. If a horse stamped, he stopped, with held-up forefinger, smiling.

Now he was in the very midst of the seven sleepers, in a situation of sevenfold and instant danger. But he was under an insupportable obligation to Henry for the knightly clemency of that day's encounter: and the motto of his life was to surpass Henry at every point—in the matter of chivalry above all.

Henry's sword-belt lay lax under him, near him his battle-axe and a horse-pistol. Francis with swift noiselessness drew the sword, and took the axe and pistol. Within three minutes he was making off, burthened with all the arms of all the seven.

And had they been the 'Seven Sleepers' of fable, they must have leapt into wakefulness at the sound which, a minute afterwards, broke upon their ears—a cry of 'Charge, charge!" and a sound of hoofs galloping upon them. Henry and his warriors sprang wildly to arms that were not there; and when the hoof-sounds galloped away into faintness and silence, they stared at

the dim ghosts one of the other, all pale and bewildered men. After a time said Charles Brandon:

'Tis sure that swart-faced goat, sire——'

'Thou speakest of a King, Charles,' said Henry, with brooding underlook.

'Pardon, sire,' muttered Brandon.

Then suddenly flaming, Henry cried:

'The black French goat! If I stick him not for this——!'

His brow was red as brand. He was still raving at all gods and men at nine the next morning, an hour after his return to camp, when one of Francis's knights rode up to the purple pavilion with flag of truce, loaded with the mass of purloined arms.

He bore a letter from Francis, in a sachet of jet-and-pearl-work, costly as gold. The Black Knight, having found the accompanying arms in a glade of the forest, presented them to the very perfect Golden in token of the Black's profound homage. And if the Golden, with six, would meet the Black, with six, on the left side of the chasm called Rendeep Fell that evening at sunset, then and there might trial by combat ensue. And this the Black Knight required of God with joined hands, praying that God might not bring the contrary to pass.

Henry sent answer confirming the rendezvous in a chryselephantine enamelled casket of Limoges, and spent the day, though rainy, with his six in the practice of arms.

It was not till his party were half-way to the rendezvous that it occurred to someone to ask:

'But *which* is "the left bank" of the chasm called Rendeep Fell?'

About the same time the same thought occurred to Francis; he had forgotten that a chasm is not a river, with sides 'left' and 'right.'

Clouds which had lowered all day were now pouring heavy rain, dashed by squalls. Premature twilight deepened; but both parties pushed on, in hope of meeting.

The chasm is an irregular cleft between Mede Down and Weedon in hilly country of chalky formation, winding two miles long, and, in places, four hundred

yards wide. Open spaces round its edges, its solitude, and its character as a landmark, made it a good rendezvous for trial by combat. It runs east and west.

Francis arrived on its south edge, and, after five minutes, saw Henry's group vaguely indicated on the north.

Henry, at the very edge, shouted:

'Wait there; we come!'

Francis, who heard a voice mingling with the dashed and huddled rain, but no words, vehemently called:

'Good, good; we come!'

Henry, who heard a voice, but no words, set out, turning away somewhat eastward in a path between hills; and Francis, seeing him dimly take that course, galloped eastward also to a meeting at the chasm's end.

But Henry's path, after a curve, led him westward, and in fifteen minutes he was standing at the south edge where Francis had lately stood, peering at peering Francis on the north edge, where *he* had lately stood.

Francis shouted, Henry shouted, each hearing a voice in the streaming air, but no words. And now each could hardly distinguish forms across the chasm, for the darkness thickened fast.

Once more they changed places, in a bewilderment of mixed purposes, Henry to the north, Francis to the south. Henry swore; Francis, with thrown-back throat, laughed lightly.

At last, by a law of chance, they stood at the same moment on the same side of the chasm, at different points, each peering across to detect the other. Masses of mountain rock interposed between them; the last bleak twilight had left only darkness, and the parties now were lost to each other.

The same hour, on returning angry to camp, Henry heard news as to the whereabouts of a man whom he concluded to be Mauro Calvo. Where Mauro Calvo was, there, he supposed, was Laura Ford. And with little delay he broke camp and set out south, with his following.

At the same time he sent a messenger to Francis at Chipping, appointing that day week for a meeting on the shores of Ross Water, by Lipton.

CHAPTER XXII

MARK BONNER FAILS

'Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on aime, on aime ce que l'on a.'
MARMONTEL.

AT this time the three fugitives, separated, were vainly seeking one another through the woods and ways and hamlets of Hampshire; so also Fitzgerald, Macdonald, and Mark Bonner, separated, sought one another.

Bessie, on the night of the separation, had in her possession three crowns, the earnings of Calvo's street-meetings. The next morning she rode to three several hamlets, and at two inns sat through an hour with a hostess, and at a third inn with a host. The winning might of her simple and sincere character was extraordinary. At the end of the third hour she had three staunch friends.

At the first inn she left a crown, at the second a crown, at the third a crown; in each case receiving a promise that if a girl answering to Laura's description, or a man answering to Calvo's, should appear in the village, then they should not be utterly destitute: the crown should be there for them.

She knew that now there must be no more street-prophesying for Calvo; Wolsey's many-handed arm was stretched to seize him; and money he would have none.

But now she herself was penniless. She gave that not a thought. Laura was gone. . . .

Her face was like the face of a man in the act of tumbling through endless space—a face of awful scare.

But not yet of despair—though she had heard that scream in the forest, and knew it. She left the crowns

at the inns with the faint hope that her sister might yet be at liberty, in a position to use them.

Only on the fifth day did she reach the last depths of woe. She had come toward evening from a wood to beg a morsel of rye-bread, since many chestnuts and acorns left her craving still; and at an inn-door she heard two men discuss the great news.

Henry had come! . . . He was here! The very Dragon himself! In person he had followed Laura into Hampshire! As she heard it, her heart beat and hovered like the stick of a beaten drum.

The identity of the Golden Knight with King Harry was rather an open secret in Hampshire: his magnificent way, the nature of his quest, suggested it. One of the two men discussing asserted that the Golden Knight was none other than he; the second shook a doubtful head; but Bessie, quite sure, moaned:

'Oh, 'tis he . . .!'

Now she divined the meaning of that cry in the wood! She did not hear from the yokels the *when* of the King's coming, nor knew that at the hour of Laura's scream he had not left London. She only jumped at the guess that the scream might be due to the coming; that Laura might, *even then* . . .

She begged no rye-bread that night. In the dark and deeps of the wood she lay on her face by her cropping palfrey through all the night, chill and still as a thing of senseless stone, dead to the hungry pangs that rived her. But when gray morning came, a thought had possessed her brain.

'Oh, I will go to this man, and kneel, and kneel——' she said.

And now hot tears relieved her piteous grief. An hour later, and she had a new thought—with her harmlessness of doves mingling a wisdom of serpents. If she could present herself to the King, suppliant indeed, yet having in her hand for trump card the King's-letters which she had stolen from Fitzgerald!

Bitterly now she regretted that she had returned them to Fitzgerald. But there remained a hope. From the inn-chamberlain at Mede Down she had

heard that Mark Bonner was with Fitzgerald, seeking her. That Mark was genuinely in his heart hostile to her she could not believe, though she divined that he had some reason for pretending hostility, being in such a company. And Mark was shrewd and clever: for her, sure, if she could communicate with him, he would some-way get the letters from Fitz.

In fact, Mark had the letters actually in his slop-pouch, for to him Fitz had given them to keep.

How she might possibly communicate with Mark, after a time she thought: at inns she would win friendship with some chance scribe and leave letters for Mark, who, since he searched, surely travelled. Chance and tide which were against her would sure not be against her always, and on the earth was hope.

The King, she had heard, was near Mede Down, seven leagues now from her. At the instant of resolve and completed plan she started; and at the first village, after an hour's delay, left rendez-vous for Bonner, appointing for the meeting the great chestnut on the village-green of Mede Down, one hour after the third sunset from the day of writing.

Toward evening of the second day her palfrey fell lame near Lipton, having cast an off-shoe, and finally refused to budge. She led him limping to the village, and left him on future terms, conditioning forfeiture, at a farrier's, who would work no more that day. Down a short lane to the shore of Ross Water she went, resigned that her further weary way must now be a-foot.

But there, by the water's edge, stood a group of six village-women on the point of embarking in the nightly lug-sailed transport which bridged Lipton with Halford, near a mile away. The chance and hope of avoiding the long foot-sore detour made Bessie mendicant. She begged low at the ferry-man's ear, and he granted her a passage.

The last sunlight blotched the breadth of water with winking patches of bloody dragon-scales, coming through a depression of the hills which all round embowered the cosy lakelet. Evening breezes ran with chasing heels upon it, smiting the dragon-flakes into

whipped wine, and all the lake into flying black blushes. From the west they came, and the boat, running with loose sail before them, made good way.

The place and the scene was full of the earth's ancient sidereal peace, and the vague pathos of man's most weird romantic residence on it. The women sat mostly silent on two thwarts astern, three with babes at the breast, waiting inactive that the boat should run, and the journey be done. Bessie's brow leant on her hand at the port side, and so piteously undone was she, that her head nodded there in semi-sleep.

Suddenly a most hoarse and wild outcry from the water startled her. The boat was then half-way across.

A tiny skiff, rowed in the opposite direction by a single oars-man, with a single oar, had passed near; and that oars-man, as the two floating things cleared each other, had for an instant seen her face. It was Garrett Oge Fitzgerald.

But the bigger boat was making such speed with her bulging lug, that by the time Bessie had started, rubbed her eyes, and looked around, she could arrive at no more definite knowledge than that a big man stood in a staggering skiff, stretching impassioned arms of appeal towards her. And she heard a shout, and even she thought that she vaguely heard her name.

'Oh, Bess!' he cried, 'stop, for Christ's sake! Oh, good Bess—dear soul—for——!'

But to the lugger it was a shout merely, and to Bessie merely a cause of fresh terror: terror doubled when she saw the oars-man sit again, turn his bow, and attempt, with wild right and left delvings, to follow the sailed boat. His effort, indeed, was foolishly futile: but, none the less, she ran to bury herself in a wood at the instant of her arrival at Halford.

The next afternoon she arrived at Lee, two leagues from Halford, famished. Here a school-dominie wrote a new letter for her to Mark Bonner, which she left at the Blue Bombard.

She was now only seven miles from Mede Down.

This was the day of her rendezvous. She set out, keeping to deserted ways.

Not two hours afterwards Mark Bonner sauntered into the Blue Bombard. When he opened the letter, his feet slid into a hint of dancing, and he fell to kissing the written words.

'Oh, dear Bess—found at last! Well, my abounding star——!' he went.

A lady through an open parlour-door was watching him and his capers of joy. She had arrived at the inn a half-hour before him. She, too, with baleful purpose, was a seeker after Bessie Ford. It was the lady Anne Boleyn. And she very well knew Mark Bonner from the description of him given by Flying Sidney, in London.

Mark felt a finger touch his back, and, starting round, saw a low brow in an aureole over dancing blue eyes, and the brown beauty-spot on her short, firm-fleshed upper lip, and the tilted cap of white velvet, ringed with emeralds, stuck with a jaunty feather: a face bewitching as it was strong: and the out-push of her kerchiefed bust.

'You are Mark Bonner,' she said.

'The initials,' he answered, with smirk and bow, 'standing for *Maître-ès-Beaux-arts*, my mistress.'

'Ha! ha! ha!'—her laugh was like a carillon of silvery things—'you are witty, knave.'

'And you—pretty—for the sake of the rhyme.'

'Oh, 'tis so the wind sits, then? Sit you here.'

'Woe's me! I must be away.'

'Ungallant swain! when a lady bids——'

''Tis even for a lady's behoof that I go.'

'What, for Laura's?'

Bonner started, and blushed.

'Sure, you know me well——'

'Did I not know your name, booby? All concerning you I know——'

'Yet I know not you.'

'I am called Anne Boleyn.'

'What, the King's——'

'Friend.'

'Why, madam——'

'Oh, no *madam*; I am only a girl, Mark, and you a pretty boy, by my halidom! Where didst get those

rolling and wreathing locks, princox? Come, sit and confess: 'tis to Laura that you go——'

'No, to Bess.'

'But Bess is the sis; to go to Bess *meaneth* to go to Laura. Is't so?'

'I suppose 'tis so. Yet 'tis to meet Bess that now I hie.'

'Then go—go to thy Laura, boy.' She pushed him. 'But I am—jealous, then.'

Now she pouted a baby's mouth, and threw herself averted.

'Nay, but—*jealous?*' gibed Bonner, flattered from toe-tips to scalp.

Anne threw herself again to face him.

'Is she really—so lovely?'

'Who—Bess?'

'You dare play the daw with me! No—Laura.'

'She is even exceeding lovely.'

'Then, wherefore tarry? Go in speed to her, booby.'

'Faith, I'd liefer stay.'

'Oh, no lies.'

'I would.'

'Because, forsooth, I am the prettier girl of the two, eh? Would'st dare say that, gallant?'

She fixed a keen, earnest under-leer on his embarrassed face.

'Oh, I say not the prettier of the two!' he answered, 'but only as pretty. You are diverse in glory: you, the glad dawn—she, midnight, with all its stars——'

'And of the two you prefer—— ?'

'Why, faith, the dawn.'

High carilloned Anne's laughter. She leapt up, and, with a winged movement of the elbows, and a swaying suggestion of flight—though she was plump—danced to a window, looking out with hands behind her, thinking a moment. She turned again with dimples in her cheeks. On the face of Bonner was the flush of amorousness; he was now a mere plaything in her hand.

'So you stay?' said she, coming near.

'Since I must.'

'Silly boy!' Her hand was on his shoulder. 'What canst expect of me?'

'One——'

'Malapert! You forget who I am?' She fillipped his ear.

'No; forgive me. But I remember what you told me——'

'What?'

'That you are a girl——'

'Brought up in the French Court, eh, Mark?'

'Perhaps.'

'But Laura—thou lov'st her, varlet.'

'You now only—I swear, by Venus——'

'Thy tastes in ladies coincide strangely with Royalty's, meseems, Mark.'

''Tis true the King does me the honour to pursue my discarded sweetheart.'

'And thou his—in my person.'

'I have outrivalled him with the first—if I could with the second!'

'So thou hast hope? In what? In thy pretty cherry-lips and Jovian locks, rose-bud? Think'st thou I am so frail?'

'Oh, in your dear clemency only have I hope! Look into mine eyes——!'

'Oh, thine eyes. Well, they are large and swimming: but to resist them, friend, it is but necessary for a girl who would not perish in the regarding not to look too long that way, *morbleu!*'

'That sweet French lisp you have! If you chatter so, I'll crush you in a kiss!'

'Try it, then! I'll brawl right out! You love Laura!'

'Not I!'

'You do!'

'I swear——!'

'You do! Why else make you now to her sister?'

'I? Oh, I am but taking her some King's-letters, which I have here in my slop-pouch.'

'King's-letters? Writ to whom?'

'To my Lord Wolsey.'

'In truth—to my Lord Wolsey? So, boy? And how came they——?'

''Tis a long story. You believe now——?'

'Wait—not yet. Where is it thou must meet with Bess to-night?'

'I—should not say, perhaps.'

'What, not to *me?* Here's the worth of boys' devotion, I swear to God! Am I not the friend of the girls, as thou mightest well divine from my knowledge of them? An thou wouldst have me believe half the japing thou spakest but now—then tell me.'

''Twas *true!* I am all on fire——'

'Tell then.'

'For a recompense?'

'I give, Mark, to such as you: I do not sell.'

''Tis under the great chestnut-tree on Mede Down green that I meet her.'

'When?'

'One hour after sunset.'

Anne had dimples in her plump, firm-fleshed cheeks.

'*Now?*' whispered Bonner, bending over her.

Anne leapt up, and with her bird-like flightiness of swaying motion went running round the room, he with encrimsoned visage after her. Once she flung a chair in his path, once a stool; then, pretending defeat, she sank upon the settee whence she had risen, and resigned herself with a sigh. He put crazy lips to hers; and as for her, one hand round his neck pressed him long to her: the other was in his slop-pouch. It was a bag with a flap, hanging from a leather at his waist.

At that moment Garrett Oge Fitzgerald, come so far from Ross Water in his search for Bessie, stood in the parlour's doorway.

Bonner was found! That fact, and with it a quick leap of joy, at once filled his consciousness; then, in an instant, a stab of jealousy: for Bonner, if not his, was Laura's, and Laura was Bessie's.

'Why, boy . . .!' said he, and in his tone was severe reproof.

Bonner glanced behind him: and, swifter than light-

ning-wink, new sanity at that instant filled him, and a consciousness of wrong.

'Oh, God!' he whispered quick to Anne, 'say naught of what I have told thee as to Bess. He is mad in love with her!'

He jerked himself straight from his kiss. Anne, under the scowl of Fitzgerald, slipped from the room, and down to the inn-door. She at once took horse for Mede Down, the King's-letters being in her bosom.

At that time Bessie was hasting with beating heart toward the great chestnut-tree on Mede Down green.

As for Bonner, though guilty and trembling, he was yet about to tell Fitz of the rendez-vous, and to set out, when suddenly he discovered that the letters were gone. And now confusion and cowardly shame involved and abashed him. He escaped from his friend, and spent half the night in random, headlong, and bare-headed wanderings in the solitudes of that neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XXIII

EIGHTEEN PIECES OF CANNON

'She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like the pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson-barred.'

KEATS.

WHEN Bessie arrived travel-worn, with languished head and aching soles, at the green of Mede Down to await Mark Bonner and the King's-letters, Harry had already broken camp, and set out further; and no purple pavilion was there.

Nor did Mark come, being abashed by confusion and cowardly shame. But Anne Boleyn came instead.

At an inn-window she stationed herself, and thence presently saw a lonely, meek figure, carrying a small bundle, take stand under the chestnut. It was now night, but a full moon was working through sombre expeditions of wet cloud, and shed some shine.

Anne could make out no face, and curiosity spurred her. She gathered her murrey-velvet riding-dress, and went out.

She took no pains to conceal her interest in the poor toil-worn wayfarer that now sat with slung knee on a stone beneath the tree; but with neck that revolved backward in proportion to her advance, she passed and repassed several times, like a stepping peacock, near the humble waiter.

Bessie's eyes lifted, and she observed the face of her observer.

'My mother!' quoth she to herself, 'how this lady is for regarding me . . .'

Also an instinctive enmity, a surge of rancour, quickly repelled, swelled within her against this woman. Anne's face, dim-lit by the moon, was for an instant hateful to her as ratsbane and copperas and the finger of Doom. It was an intuitive sub-consciousness which she had of her worst, her fatal enemy.

Anne had fairly sure hope now of tracking Laura, having found Bessie, not suspecting that the sisters were separated. Bessie stayed there an hour motionless. Anne returned to her station at the inn-window to watch.

Suddenly, in another direction, there happened for Anne a lucky event: a party galloped into the village. They were her emissary, young Percy of Northumberland, arm in sling, with a fresh following of seven. She saw his face pass below, and at once sent down the chamberlain to summon him.

The eight weary horses being a world too many for the little inn's accommodation, the fighters loosed girths, and picketed them to crop the green round the great chestnut. Bessie, sitting with slung knee, like a stone on a stone, was in the midst of horses. Still she waited, and Mark Bonner did not come.

Meanwhile, brisk-eyed, bow-legged Percy broke, all in black armour, into Anne's parlour. His short curls of liquid blonde silk burst, as from ripe cocoon, beneath his steel morion. He caught her bodily in one arm, and boisterously bussed her lips.

'As though thou hadst earned that right, saucy boy!' said she. 'Where is the girl I sent thee to find?'

'That girl!' he cried, with snapped finger and thumb: 'I have stuck five men, and, 'sdeath! lost nine, in her coneying, and yet I have her not.'

'*Who*, then, are these her defenders?'

''Sdeath! I know not: but this I trow, that many an armed man is abroad on the count of her.'

'King's-men and Queen's-men all?'

''Sdeath! I know not. It strikes me they be not all nor King's-men nor Queen's-men.'

'Knowest thou, Percy, if my Lord Wolsey hath haply had hand in all this matter?'

''Twere like enough. Methought that first night at

the Eastcheap inn I met a Wolsey-man, and, 'sdeath! I snipped his weasand.'

Anne started. To this moment she had no knowledge that Wolsey was in the hunt. If *his* hand was against hers——! She ran with her bird-like, uplifted motion to the window, to make certain that Bessie sat still there on the stone. Back she soared with swaying lightness, to put her hands on his steel shoulders.

'Hast encountered the King's host, Percy?'

'Even now I passed by it. He camps to-night not five miles hence, on this side Lee.'

'Ah, but Francis would beat him in this search, an *I*—— Hast heard of Francis?'

'Which Francis?'

'The Black Knight.'

''Sdeath, yea! Is the Black Knight Francis?'

'Booby-boy, yes; stupid, fighting, blue-eyed baby, yes. Think'st thou thou couldst fight Francis, and kill him for me?'

'Francis? 'Sdeath! Am I not a Percy? Francis of France, quotha? 'Sdeath! I'd spit him like a moor-cock!'

'Art sure, now? He is a true Colbrand in war, thou knowest, and in Love, too—I hear.' She giggled a little.

'Hath made love to thee, hath he?'

'Perhaps! Perhaps!'

''Sdeath! I'd spit him——'

'Nay, I love thee, booby; Francis thou must not fight, for *my* sake: he'd quench for ever that hot pate in half a trice, I warn thee. But there is *another* whom I would have thee kill for me, this hour——'

'Hear her! Francis of France? 'Sdeath! I tell thee there is not arrow a one of them can stand one pigeon-dunging's space before this axe, except——'

'Well?'

'One knave. Pah! I spit upon him. But, faith, he fights like ten thousand thunder-claps, Anne! 'Sdeath! he can fight. I love him like my brother.'

'And who is this warrior?'

'His name, they say, is Fitzgerald—an Irish louse. 'Sdeath! I'll cleave him yet.'

'Fitzgerald? Why, 'tis *he* I mean! You have him now—this hour. He is at the inn at Lee—alone. Percy——!'

Anne suddenly was deadly in earnest; her face reddened. Two hours since, she had left the inn at Lee under the scowling brow of Fitz; and Fitz, this great champion, was (Bonner had said it) in love with Bessie Ford. She feared and hated him.

'He is there,' said Anne, 'now. You have seven. He is alone—go!'

'But—my left arm is in bandage——'

'You have seven——'

'But seven against one—oh, come! 'Sdeath! fair play and roast ox, Anne——'

She drew herself severely back.

'Do you cavil, then, at my behests, boy? Hands off, prithee! This Fitzgerald whom I bid thee kill, not one hour since, seized me roughly, and would have kissed my mouth——'

At this lie Percy's hand fell clapping upon his smooth axe-handle, and his sharp teeth hissed a ''Sdeath!'

'Go, go,' said Anne, pushing his shoulder; 'no, not one buss, till thou return. And, Percy, leave me here two of thy servitors: I may need them.'

He went prone on new impulse, with busy, bow-legged roll, scattering behind a careless hand-wave, and out on the green called:

'Hi, Bennett! Hi, Yates—all of you—here!' approaching, as he called, the tree, where the men, their work of picketing just ended, stood. 'Quick,' said Percy, 'swallow a cold repast: I give you fifteen minutes, watch in hand. Fitzgerald—you know, the fighter—is at Lee inn. 'Sdeath! we finish him this self-same night. He is alone. Bennet, Thwaite, and Wright upon him first, and an he lard you three, then, 'sdeath! three more! Come, line your bellies; 'sdeath! and to horse——'

They trooped after him to the inn, to feed. And Bessie Ford, who had heard, sat, a stone on a stone, her heart seeming jammed in her dry throat.

He was doomed to die! He was at Lee inn, alone, and eight fighting-men, who hated him, knew! What though he was hunting after her life? In the thought of his death, somehow—she knew not at all wherefore—lay for her a horrid bitterness of world-loneliness. From side to side she slowly rocked, and with her rocking body rocked the woeful knee slung in her clasped fingers.

Only fifteen minutes, watch in hand, for the cold repast! And they were horsemen, she a-foot, sore travel-worn, ready to drop dead with her many griefs.

But she sprang up: she would at least try—though she perished—though he seized and slew her—to warn him. As she went running, in her gait was mixed a limping failure of the left leg.

Anne, from the window, saw, rushed down and out, and followed, sure now of Laura.

Lee lay six to seven miles westward by an undulating high-road, inclining mostly upward, bordered chiefly by bramble-hedge, but at one part traversing an extensive deer-forest—celebrated for a Henry I. anecdote—called Eleanor Wood.

Anne followed with extreme caution at a hundred yards, using the hedges and turns of road, well able to keep pace with the limping runner. But once, when Bessie was at the bottom of a depression, she chanced to look above and behind, and saw a skirt which vanished.

'By my credit,' thought she, 'one might aver that I was followed by a woman . . .!'

She trotted on at the same pace till the next hill-brow concealed her from anyone behind it, and then, with all her speed, ran down. At the bottom the road abruptly entered the wood; and as she passed into the brooding gloom, she darted sideways into the thickness of the trees, intending no more to use the highroad. Two minutes afterwards, Anne realized that the crafty fugitive was lost to her.

But Bessie had not proceeded half a mile upon her detour when she found it impossible to advance. She had become involved in a jungle of forest-growths,

which first confused her sense of direction, and finally barred her way.

'Oh, my mother!' she muttered, 'I am only losing time with my foolishness. Pray, good, kind saints above, give me your hand to guide me. . . .'

She lost five agonized minutes in fumblings, and then refound the curving highway. As she entered it, Anne, who, with a sense of defeat, had languidly continued her way, spied her near, and slipped behind an oak.

The next moment a scream rang through the wood—a scream of piercing joy. Bessie had Laura in her arms.

Laura, with Calvo, was passing along the road in the opposite direction. They two had been led together by Flying Sidney Boleyn, who, in general, knew the whereabouts of everyone in Hampshire; and now Sidney was with them, taking them to meeting with Bessie at Mede Down, where he had secret knowledge that Bessie was.

Sidney was leading his horse, and Laura hers, which was woefully lame. Calvo, in his wanderings, had lost his mule.

'Come, master,' said Sidney now; 'I will escort you to a right fair domicile for the night not one half-mile hence, safe enow, though near, I avouch, to the King's camp——'

Calvo was grinning; he patted Bess twice on the back as she ate and hugged at Laura; and he said:

'Well, well.'

They followed Sidney's lead into the forest. There was here no path; yet he knew his way. Last of all, Anne, flitting from her tree with held-up skirt, dodged warily from trunk to trunk, tracking them.

Sidney's objective was a vast elm, old as the Scipios and the fall of Carthage, a roomy hollow within. It stood on a grass mound, solitary; and here, sitting, Bessie turned the face of Laura to the moving moon to watch it. She had forgotten Fitzgerald and his doom.

The lovely face was duskily thin now, divinely haggard, like Venus sea-sick, like Helen in crapes. The Beauty was as frail as beautiful, and did not take

kindly to escapades and weariness; she sat languid and sad, and her small left eye drooped smaller, looking out Spanish melancholy.

Calvo, a little distance from the tree, was conversing low with Sidney.

From a village cider-house a quarter-mile away came vaguely a sound of revelry, flute and laugh and virginal, and the twinkle of tambourines: for the King was hereabouts, and money was brisk.

'And these letters left at inns for me,' Calvo was saying: 'art sure they are on the part of my lord Wolsey?'

'Oh, sure,' answered Sidney. 'In each case have they been left by a gallant called Havard, who searches in company with four. And Havard, I wot, is a gentleman-almoner of my lord Cardinal of York.'

'What can the pork have to say to me?' mused Calvo.

'Some favourable offer, I would wager, from the manner of it.'

'And as to the Black Knight now—finish thy story.'

'There is but scant to add: pricked by the King's ensample, he hath summoned to him eighty men from his ship in Southampton Water; and these, now on the march, bring four howitzers, three culverins, five falconets, two sakers, and four mortars, making eighteen pieces of enginry in all.'

'Well, but the chuffs—with what object——?'

Here a sharp outcry startled them: a quick 'Oh!' from Bessie Ford. She had remembered Fitz and his doom, and ran towards Calvo and Sidney, crying out:

'Oh, Master Sidney! a poor man at Lee inn stands in sore peril at the hand of eight fighters, who even now hie thither——'

'What name?'

'Master Fitzgerald, I think, he is called——'

'Why, the gallant fighter——'

He was interrupted by a galloping tramp that passed on the high-road.

'Oh! 'tis piteous—holy Mother! those are even they!' went Bessie.

'Don't cry, I shall be there within time,' called Sidney; and, almost as he spoke, he was away, tossing behind, with a shout, a tied parcel of rye-cake and meat.

Calvo, before he was fully off, ran a little, calling:

'Be here with the morning: I have need of thee!'

Sidney's animal knew him and the taste of his spur: in three minutes he had Percy's party behind; five minutes before them he arrived at Lee. He informed Fitzgerald that fifty armed men had sworn to take his life that night; and hot Percy found the inn without a tenant.

Thus did Bessie save the fighter: but as though, in truth, Something was against her, her mercy wrought her woe: for there, behind a tree, lurked the Lady Anne, regarding her.

CHAPTER XXIV

KING AND MAID

'Then forth she rode, clad on with chastity.'—TENNYSON.

'How are thy servants blessed, O Lord !
How sure is their defence !
Eternal wisdom is their guide,
Their help Omnipotence.'

ADDISON.

THERE were thus four persons near together in the wood when Sidney rode away. Suddenly there were but two: for Anne, seeing the sisters disposing themselves to rest for the night, stole away to fetch for the seizure of Laura the two Percy-men left at Mede Down for her; and Calvo, too, with slow-planted step, went through the wood, making for the hamlet whence came the sounds of revelry. There, Sidney had told him, a letter awaited him. And, going, he murmured:

'Whatever can the pork have to say to me . . .?'

As for Bessie, her head dropped in dead prolapse; though she was famished, her effort to eat failed in a sigh. They two heaped all their clothes in a mass and lay nude together, wrapped in Bessie's woollen sheet, in the farthest gloom of the hollow elm. Instantly they slept.

In fifteen minutes Calvo returned from the inn. He had with him Wolsey's letter.

If Mauro Calvo, the magister, it said, would visit the Abbey-ruin in the eastern regions of Eleanor Wood any fore-day that week at two o'clock, he would meet there an ambassador of the Cardinal; and he had the word of a churchman and a gentleman that no incon-

venience should result to him from the granting of that interview.

Calvo re-read the letter thrice. He saw how easily, in case of bad faith, he might be seized at a rendezvous, or tracked after it. He went 'H'm!', armed himself with some strange-looking objects taken from his bag, and lay down to sleep, some yards from the elm, near to where Laura's lame horse cropped.

He slept placidly till one; then sat up and looked at his heavy Limoges watch of porcelain. The moon had now worked and won her way far westward through a cloudy heaven, whose sombre travel her glimpses whitened in patches of lunacy; some spears of beginning rain spat through the trees; and still there came from the cider-house the vague twinkling sounds of the incessant waking tambourine.

Calvo rose, and walked away eastwards. He had little difficulty in discovering the Abbey-ruins, for they were vast, though their distance from the elm was considerable. Precisely at two there was a rush in the bushes, and Havard, a servitor of Wolsey, draped in a cloak, stood before the sage.

'Mauro Calvo?' he said.

'The same, sir.'

'I come to you with an offer from my lord Cardinal. Sheer frankness betwixt us, methinks, were meet in this our conference: and frank I shall be. Promise you no less?'

'Let me hear,' said Calvo.

'My lord Wolsey, for his own ends, the which concern neither you nor me, desireth to have in his custody the person of your ward, Laura Ford, and this month near hath so desired. Now, consider my lord's surprise that a wench like this should through so long weeks thwart his purpose; right or wrong, he attributeth her escaping to the potent wit and working of the sage, Mauro Calvo. And since he knoweth that others seek the maiden—the King himself with his troop—two Kings—many warriors—and that there be need for urgent haste in this matter, therefore it is that he sendeth me to you.'

'I see. He would have me betray this poor girl into his hand——'

'Nay! not so. But he believes that, without you, she would by necessity be his within some hours only. He would merely have you leave the sisters to their own devices.'

'And, in quittance, what offers he?'

'Safety, quiet, staid habitation to prosecute your studies—all that you most desire.'

For some minutes Calvo said not a word. Surely the temptation was strong. He had in mind the doing of a profound thing——! And for it he needed only safety, quiet, staid habitation.

He was silent, and during that silence Anne Boleyn, stooping behind a broken buttress, clapped her hands noiselessly.

'Too late, my lord Cardinal!' she muttered. 'Trumps, trumps! the girl is mine!'

She had been riding from Mede Down with the two Percy-men to the seizure of Laura, when she saw Havard's tied horse near the road. Having heard Flying Sidney tell Calvo of the Wolsey-letters awaiting him, she had divined, from the Cardinal's baretta stamped large on a boss of the horse's trappings, that hereabouts and now was rendez-vous between Calvo and a Wolsey-man. She had bid her men wait, had dismounted, and through the under-wood tracked the signs of Havard's advance to the ruins.

Now, however, noting the silence of Calvo, the tokens of his yielding, she realized that there was need for haste. She rose, and first crept, then ran, back to her horse. And now with plied whip she made, with the two servitors, for the elm.

When Calvo at last spoke, he said:

'I have the Cardinal's promise that no harm be done me, nor trial made to track me hence, whatever my answer. Is't so?'

'You have also my own solemn pledge,' said Havard.

'Then my answer to the Cardinal is this: That I deny not the greatness of his offer; but that I am a fool, and—I refuse.'

'You stick to the maidens?'

'Yes. Say that the great Mauro Calvo—great as King or Cardinal in his way—is doddering to his dotage. He refuses.'

''Tis final, then?'

'Aye.'

Havard bowed.

'There remains but this to add,' said he. 'If at any future time, the girl being not then in the Cardinal's custody, you be moved to accept my lord's offer, then you leave your acceptance in writing at the Thistle Inn, at Halford; and my lord Cardinal's known love for the learned, despite your naughty obstinacy, will still stand you in good stead.'

Calvo was pleased in his recesses.

'Well, now,' he said, when Havard was gone, ''tis handsomely done. The pork's not altogether a chuff and thick beast, like those other chuffs. And here is poor forlorn Mauro Calvo tempting the great man's patience, all on the count of that Bess—well, well.'

He took the precaution, in returning, to make a protracted detour, fearing watching eyes. At one time he heard a far sound of several galloping hoofs. It was the sound of Anne and her two.

Within twenty yards of the elm, she whispered halt. Dismounting, she went forward alone to determine that all was well for the seizure.

At the moment when she should need her men, she arranged to run back a little, and utter a yodling summons.

She stole near the tree. It was drizzling steadily; but the opening looked westward, and the moon, now old in fore-day vigil, and westering far in lucid immarcessible silver, was as an aged saint who, after many a cloudy strife, at last in trance spies opening heaven, and a shining smites his face. Thus, every detail in the hollow tree was lit; and as Anne, with picked-up skirt and craning neck, on tip-toe, pried within, she saw—and started!

Laura was not there. Bessie only was there, with limbs tossed in deep-breathed slumber, hardly covered

by the tumbled sheet. And, beside her, a small heap of clothes.

An intense sense of defeat—the bitter thought of Wolsey—filled Anne. Had Calvo *already* betrayed? That was hardly possible. Where, then, was Laura Ford? Now she must be Anne's, or never. If not *now*, then was she Wolsey's.

She turned to hunt, and instantly turned again to the tree. There was Bessie—— Had she a dirk with her, she would then and there have struck it, in her rage, into the sleeper's bosom. As it was, with the double object of searching further without fear of Bessie's interference, and of doing a wanton turn to the poor, worn dreamer, she stalked prone on balancing tip-toe into the tree, swooped up the poor little garments on her arm, picked and gathered the sheet with dainty fingers, and was gone.

Through her deep sleep a stab of apprehension pierced Bessie Ford; she shook herself together with a shudder; she turned sharply round, with wild eyes, with groping hand: bitter emptiness—Laura was not there.

Her very first thought was King Harry: the Dragon's camp was near; she knew it; she knew whereabouts; she had heard from Flying Sidney.

The next impulse of her stunned consciousness was toward her clothes; her clothes were not there; she was naked; the sheet was gone. She was a prisoner.

She rushed to the opening. 'Master Calvo!' she called: Calvo was not there.

She was a prisoner—*if* the earth held bands to bind her! *if* the strong social ages, and their strong growth of world-idea and sentiment, was stronger than the fibre of her tough hero-soul!

Happily, she knew where Calvo had his bag among leaves. The bag contained a sharp-bladed knife. She ran, all flurried, to it, and took the knife—for King Harry's bosom, or for the bosom of Laura Ford!—she knew not which, nor cared.

A thought—which was almost a bitter suspicion—shaped itself in her brain: *why* had not Laura, on being seized, cried out?

There stood Laura's nag, cropping. With fluttering hand she girthed him, untied his halter. Having mounted, she moved south-westward.

The rain was not heavy, but steady, and soon trickled from the end of her little plaited 'natte'—long as a man's hand—down her bare back. Her clear, immaculate whiteness, as she moved among the trees under the glimpsing moon, gave her a bluish ghostliness.

Her motion was very slow. The nag was reluctant, and, being quite lame, limped deeply. With vehement powerlessness she beat it with the short halter-end. The nag quickened a moment his walk, and fell back into his stumping limp.

'Oh go, horse!' quoth she severely.

Among the trees she wound, always south-westward, to where, according to Sidney, the King's camp lay.

Even the impulse to beard the Lion in his den was brave; thus to continue doggedly on her slow way was strong, truly: for Henry had acquired in her imagination the vast dimensions and the baneful leer of Satan himself: it was therefore into the jaws of death that she rode, and into the mouth of Hell.

On she rode, on a limping nag through the dark and dripping wood, clad in a string of rowan-tree berries —a knife in her left hand. Her direction, however, was, as might be expected, not precisely that in which the camp lay, since her information was vague. As she came to the end of the wood, she saw that the day was breaking, the sky eastward being already like a field of chrysolite ploughed into fresh, rough furrows of broken gold. And she saw no camp.

For some time she rode at random in open country, with wild haste, with little speed, powerlessly beating the horse's neck with the halter-end, like a man who fights in nightmare, but his forceless blows fail and faint.

She could not weep, her face was dead white, and had a rigour as of death. She suffered despair, having no doubt that the King really now held Laura.

Now she wet her lips with her tongue, and now she looked about with feeble and woeful eyes, saying:

'By my credit, it is morning——'

Suddenly she heard a clear-calling bugle-sound chortle in the air. As it were mechanically, she turned in that direction, and found that the King's camp lay quite close, behind the shoulder of a hill.

She marked the lofty purple pavilion standing at the end of a street of tents, and blocking the street into a *cul-de-sac*. The camp stood on a gentle hill, strewn with flint-boulders and dotted with trees, the pavilion being higher than the other tents.

Bessie's horse continued its deeply-limping walk, descending the hill-shoulder, and in a couple of minutes was limping up the tent-street.

Now, at that bugle-call the whole little army was awake and up. And Henry, who was ever a stirrer before the lark, was lolling at his tent-door, talking to Charles Brandon.

On went the nag, limping through a double row of eyes that stared in a silence of blank amaze through a full minute. But at the end of that time there was sound: the lame pastern of the palfrey struck a boulder; down he dived upon both knees; Bessie, with a pathetic 'Oh!' clutched at his mane; and at that stumble and feeble, pathetic 'Oh!' of her feeble womanhood, down the two rows of tent-doors, from top to bottom, rose and rang a unanimous shout of laughter.

Bessie rode west; Harry looked east. The first fore-running brilliance of the sun was in his eyes. He shaded them with horizontal palm under peering brows, to see.

At twenty feet from him a yeoman caught Bessie's bridle to stop her. Harry called:

'Let be . . . ! Let be . . . !'

He had not yet seen quite well, nor realized. She limped nearer. Suddenly, back went his merry head, and he cried:

'Ha! ha! ha! Why, mamie——'

Instantly she was down before him, shivering like the sheeted dead, knife in hand.

'You are the King,' she gasped; 'give me my sister!'

'Oh, come, mamie, this is a bit strong,' said Henry, making a ribald pretence of hiding away his eyes from her: 'by God, 'tis strong, Charles! Ha! ha! ha! ha!'

Charles Brandon was doubling with merriment, hands on knees.

'Give her back to me!' she exclaimed passionately.

'An the Queen were *here*——!' cried out Brandon, squeaking the last word in a climax of laughter.

'Mamie, mamie!' said Henry, with shaking abdomen, 'I am a married man: there is the Queen to be considered, with her Spanish jealousy—oh, 'tis strong, Charles!'

'Is she here? Oh, will you not give her to me? My mother! believe me, I'll *kill* you——'

She raised the knife. And now the situation changed: Henry held up averting hands: Charles Brandon gripped the raised arm in deadly seriousness.

'My sister——'

'Hold, hold, she speaks of a sister——' said Henry.

'Which sister?' queried Charles Brandon.

'You know! You know! You have her in the tent there——'

Henry and Charles exchanged wondering glances.

'No, mamie, we've got no sis,' said Henry with gentle sincerity.

'What sister speak'st thou of?' queried Charles again.

'The sister you've come out to hunt and chase; oh! give her to me——'

Now Henry glanced quick at her face, and recognised it. He had seen it in Mauro Calvo's den, under London Bridge.

''Tis Laura's sister,' he whispered at Brandon's ear; and aloud: 'Why, my poor dear, we have her not.'

And at that word, '*My poor dear*,' down fell Bessie at the King's feet, tears pouring on her face.

'God's pity!' said he, 'it weeps——'

And with the words, he snatched from a stool his riding-cloak, and with face of painful compassion, cast it round her body, stooping to clasp it at her neck.

This new clemency was too much for poor Bess: her heart broke, and in a paroxysm of sobs she spoke bubbling words of lost meaning, while Henry, bending over her, muttered:

'God's pity! it weeps! it weeps! Tut, tut! 'tis an honest, brave soul!'

'Don't do it'—at last the words came with some audibleness from the midst of her choking gasps—'you declare me that she is not here, and, by my credit, I am believing you. But don't do it—don't hunt after her narrow more—don't you! It is hard on a poor sister's heart—it is not right—her mother left her to me—I don't think the angels in Heaven, and the good God—don't you do it! Sure, there is Something which sees and judges even a King—and hears the sobs of the helpless—and the cry of their appeal—in the day—of their sore—calamity. Don't you! Leave her be! Oh do! Do now! She has nought but one riches—despoil her not of that!—houses and lands cannot give her back her soul's stand and quality—and it would kill me dead, I know, oh my! Hear the prayer of your poor subject, do, great King. . . .'

At that moment the strong will of Harry yielded to the winning power of this girl, and he was truly a King and Shepherd of his people. His one hand lay on her bowed and spasming head; his other dashed a moisture from his eyes. He had a bosom quick and generous, and as he muttered for the tenth time: 'Oh, but God's pity! 'tis an honest, good soul——!', in his heart he renounced the pursuit of Laura Ford.

It was a mighty moment in the life of Henry—when the choice between Right and Wrong lay definitely before him—and the whole character of his Future, had he known it, depended upon his decision.

Really, one could almost imagine that at such a moment of crisis in a great man's biography all the potentates of Heaven and Hell do silent battle for his soul in the air about him: something so horribly momentous seems to lie in a human creature's power of moral choice.

There was a moment, we say, when the great river

of that royal will was stemmed and turned by this Bessie. His hand on her bobbing head, his face stooped low to hers, he said:

'Why, weep not, good Bess—stanch it, stanch it—am I not thy good Father and King, then——?'

He stopped, hearing a sound: a faint, fluted sound from far away—*a bugle-sound.* At the same time Charles Brandon happened to utter this one word:

'*Francis*——'

Down came Henry's foot in a stamp of royal rage, and 'Away with her!' he cried with encrimsoned visage. 'Ha! 'tis to *me* thou darest come, then, with thy whines and paltering pleadings? Charles Brandon! have the wench conveyed from my sight—quick, lad! Faith, she makes a fool of me. . . .'

His words, begun in a roar, ended in a grumble of shame, and he beat a hurried retreat into the pavilion.

Charles followed him to say:

'Perchance, the girl, if tracked hence, might yield us some trace of her sister——'

'Oh, don't be a dirty hound!' grumbled Henry. 'Let her begone, and have fair play. Toss her on a sound nag, and send her packing.'

He sat grumpy, leaning back, his head heavy on his hand, his bosom a rumbling cave of silent Sinai thunders, muttering awfully that he was Wrong.

If there be not God, whose is this dreadful, familiar Voice that we hear so close?

As for Bessie, in five minutes she was cantering down the tent-street, wrapped in the King's riding-cloak.

The King had not Laura! Where, then, was Laura? Wherever she might be, Bessie was no longer in despair. It was Harry, Harry the Dragon, whose defiling breath she feared.

Laura at this time sat at the opening of the elm, wondering after Bessie.

She had awaked in the night refreshed, and heard a persistent twinkling sound of tambourines, far laugh, and virginal, and flute. Her hands had met in a single clap. Her light nature leapt always to the mere sound of dance and free jollity, from which now she was long

divorced. She had stolen from Bessie's embrace, peeped out, seen that Calvo was not there, whisked on her clothes, and gone to lurk and watch behind a hedge which backed the gay tavern-yard. When she returned, wet, Bessie was gone.

Through high day it was that Bessie galloped back to the elm, for fresh search in the forest; and seeing Laura there, and with her, Calvo, she uttered a cry, leapt, ran, trailing far the King's cloak, and fell almost fainting upon her sister's bosom.

CHAPTER XXV

WOLSEY'S RAGE

'Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchise, be feared, and kill with looks.'
SHAKESPEARE.

IT had been Calvo's cynical plan, as we said, to draw and concentrate upon him his pursuers—Francis, Harry, and all—to their mutual destruction, while he escaped to the coast. When on the point of putting it into execution, he was frustrated by his accidental separation from the girls. But the moment he found himself reunited with them, his mind recurred to it.

When Bessie arrived at the elm in the King's cloak, Calvo was standing some distance from it, looking out for Sidney Boleyn, whom he had bid come to him with the morning. And very soon the pale-faced Rider appeared. He slipped to the ground and stood by Calvo, cap in hand.

'I am going to confide a thing of great importance to you,' said Calvo. 'I trust you, you see.'

Sidney, with hands together, said:

'My great and good master——'

'How goes the pain?'

'For three merry days not a twitch.'

'Well, I deserve thy gratitude for that. I will tell thee. Thou knowest that there are a number of armed parties out after me and that poor girl's sister. The sister with the face I could leave to her tholing without a single itch, but for the girl's self I have, I confess, a sort of care. So now I am serious in my will to baulk these cattle, and my plan is to lead them all after my

traces, and, at the last, have them gathered round a house or inn, where I can actually at a casement discover to them the silly face, to the intent that they shall rage with storm and brulziement within, working upon one another mutual havoc in narrow space, while I, with the girl and the sister, by a surely secret exit, do make good my escape. There should, I wager, be some such house or inn in Hampshire: and thy mete now it is to tell me it.'

Sidney pondered, searching the ground with shifting legs. He said:

'There is the tavern at Baneleigh——'

'Tell me of it.'

'It lies six leagues hence, eight stone-throws only from Broughton Castle, and not two miles from my father's seat. Oh, I know the landlord well; you could steal thither through field and wood, and for me, if you mention him my name, he would sure conceal you till your plan worked to ripeness——'

'But the exit——?'

'The tavern makes part of the old Saxon Abbey of Baneleigh. It was the Abbot's quarters, and from its cellars there leads an underground passage to the abbey-ruins, by which, as they tell, the Abbots were wont to surprise the jolly monks in refectory, though, more-like, 'twas but a sewer; and in this passage, oft and oft when a boy, I have spent dark days, rolling with pain.'

'And the ruins are how far from the tavern?'

'Say a hundred yards or less. The tavern stands by itself near the centre of a flat vale called Broughton Vale. It is made of gray-stone, with stone-shafted oriels of Purbeck. In front it looks west upon the flat land round Broughton Castle; at its side, to the north-east, are the ruins, covered in forest; and all betwixt ruins and castle, and at the castle back, is store of rich forest-land: so your flight would be well hid.'

'Any villages?'

'Only one within a mile of the tavern; but all about the low hills encircling the valley you have little hamlets.'

'What names?'

'Fletcherfield, Stroud, Cleve, East Hythe, Winton, Little Baneleigh, and Sudbury Rye.'

Calvo muttered after him the names on his fingers, storing them in his bulging hard brow.

'Very good,' said he; 'I dare say it will answer. Wilt accompany me, thou?'

'Alas! I cannot now.'

'How so?'

'I encountered my half-sister Anne, two hours since, at Lee inn. She requisitions me to bear her a letter in haste to London; 'twas even with difficulty I escaped her to come but now to you.'

'Thou canst not say her nay?'

Sidney drew in his breath with a siffle.

'Nay,' said he; 'her anger is most terrible——'

'And to whom is it that thou bearest her letter?'

'To my lord Cardinal.'

'Aha! Well, go thy way, go thy way.'

Calvo waved him languidly off, and Sidney—with an obeisance to him, and a wave toward where Laura, with galloping volubility and hand-gestures, recounted to Bess her week's adventures—mounted, and was gone.

To Lee inn he went, where Anne was preparing her letter to Wolsey.

The mere fact of her recent discovery that Wolsey, too, was hunting Laura Ford had given to Anne a scare, and upset her nerve. He could have no possible motive but her ruin. As Anne's game was to give Laura into the King's hands, so Wolsey's must be to keep her out of the King's hands, having her meanwhile in his own. And against all the searchers after the beauty Anne would have pitted her wits with an inward certainty of winning, but Wolsey was a different matter.

When she looked into the elm and saw Laura gone, her heart had sunk to her heel; when she searched all the wood and found no trace of her, she had despaired. For Wolsey, the great tempter, was at the ear of Calvo, and Calvo, she believed, would betray.

She despaired—almost. There was yet a hope—a card to play.

She had in her bosom the King's letter to Wolsey

which she had picked from the slop-pouch of Mark Bonner. That letter contained the word 'divorce,' and also Anne's own name. Its publication, a hint of its contents to Charles of Spain, would precipitate upon the head of Wolsey a world of trouble with Charles, with the Pope; would dash his secret ambitions; would prepare for his taste a wormwood, and for his back a scourge.

With this knowledge she wrote her letter, casting off reserve, avowing open enmity, being all in a flurry and intensity of feminine scare. Only on the condition that Wolsey would withdraw at once and wholly from the chase of the girl Ford, would she, Anne, tormented, persecuted, and innocent maiden that she was, refrain from using to the utmost the powers which the possession of the King's letter gave. This, on five pages of close-written French, she said.

With the letter Sidney started about noon. Near Odiham he changed horse; at Chertsey he supped; near Staines he stopped late at a mareschal's for a shoe. Far into the night he rode at his habitual pace, crouching like a ghostly monkey on the stretched neck of his horse. At fore-day he reached London. Wolsey was at Hampton.

Off he went again. About nine he was bowing on the airy, flower-jewelled lawn before the great priest-man.

Here Wolsey, in cardinal red, took the air with short, quick-planted step, a little manual held open between thumb and finger; and behind him an old untidy gospeller shambled in black buckram, burdened with large books in pig-skin.

Wolsey, glancing down from the height of his thick stiff neck, saw the handwriting. He put out his hand, his superb coarse lips smiling their eternal smile of insolence. And as he read, he stepped, carrying his bulk in the very manner of a fat and haughty old dowager.

As he read, he smiled, and, having read, he smiled. He turned upon white-faced Sidney.

'Art tired, poor lad?' said he.

'Yea, my lord.'

'Then get thee through the archway there into the

court, and bid a henchman let the carver feed thee full, and stable thy nag.'

He waited motionless till Sidney had disappeared, and twice his bright brown eyes moved from side to side in strenuous, agile, and potent thought.

Then he himself, almost at a run, went toward the palace. And now his brown visage was of the redder brown of passion.

He was a stupendous worker; he worked like the whirlwind. Here, in fact, was his main characteristic: that he worked like the whirlwind.

The travail of ten men through a week he would crowd with herculean rage into a single intense night's vigil.

Long before Sidney was half through his meal, he had set off with ten trusty men for Hampshire, he himself riding in a tylsent frock of simple Dominican black, a black mask over his brow and nose.

Like some frowning thunder-cloud he went, with spinning speed. And as he went, he said to himself: 'To-night, to-night, she must be in my hands. . . .'

Few people lived who could have stirred him to action so furious. But for Anne Boleyn, who was, in truth, his evil destiny, his nature cherished a bitter hate. Her letter of threat had lit into raging flame his whole mine of supercilious arrogance. With spinning speed he went.

He had been kept well posted as to events in Hampshire—the movements of Francis, of Harry, of everyone, by his servants there. Already he knew of Havard's meeting with Calvo in the wood, and its results. He had been content to direct from Hampton the capture of the girl: but Anne's letter altered the matter. It gave him the first knowledge which he had that Anne, too, was a searcher. At once he pierced her motive. And he revered her wits, as she his: her presence on the spot necessitated his also. Expedience, therefore, urged his setting out; but chiefly whipped and flaming arrogance urged him.

The risk, however, of this his expedition was awful. If Harry should get scent of it——! and should get scent that his Cardinal's motive was to baulk and

thwart him in his quest——! Then would there be wrath and a stamping of the foot. Wolsey put on a black frock and mask.

He reached Mede Down at vespers, and there he had news of Mauro Calvo; he galloped on to Lee, and there he had news of Calvo; he went on to Halford, and there again he had news of Calvo.

His brow now was working profoundly: in this mere regularity of news his strong insight detected a mystery which as yet he did not solve.

At Mede Down, about noon of the previous day, three forest-keepers in Lincoln green, with buckhounds in leash, and jessed falcons on wrist, were passing through the village to the manor-house near, when a man in skull-cap rode up, and asked the way to Fletcherfield. He volunteered the information that to Fletcherfield with two maidens he was bound. The keepers realized that here was that Calvo for whom eyes were everywhere being kept open on behalf of my lord Wolsey. But before they could seize him, Calvo rode off. And this Wolsey heard at Mede Down.

Outside the village, in thick wood, Calvo had left Laura and Bessie—new-clad by the gift at a farm-house of a home-spun gown of camlet-cloth—to await him, he being on the horse given to Bessie in the King's camp, and the girls afoot. From Mede Down they had proceeded to the neighbourhood of Lee, outside which, near curfew-toll, Calvo had left the maidens, and ridden into the village in undisguised skull-cap. There some local fête was in progress, for round a merry Maypole, fluttering with bandrols, three minstrels played recorders, sackbut, and kettle-drum. He trotted into the crowd, and asked his way to Sudbury Rye, volunteering the information that thither, with two maidens, he was bound; and while the yokels still meditated upon his face and skull-cap, had ridden off. And this Wolsey heard at Lee.

At Halford, the next matins, Calvo had trotted in and surprised a young inn-wife, who outside the inn-door leant, shouting morning salutations to gossips' windows, parading a brand-new stomacher of mohair

powdered with minever.* To her Calvo spake, begged a piece of pasty, and volunteered the information that 'twas for two maidens, with whom he was even then making for Little Baneleigh. And while she meditated upon his face and skull-cap, he, seeming to take fright, had ridden off. And this Wolsey, that same night, heard at Halford.

That Calvo had designedly published these three destinations, Wolsey divined at once, also that all were false, given out to mislead pursuers, since all could not be true. It was only when he rode on to Lipton, on the western side of Ross Water, that a possible truth in all these differing destinations was revealed to him, and instantly he saw light. Here Calvo had left the rumour that his destination was Stroud. Wolsey perambulated the inn-parlour with agitated, quick-planted step, rustling a *frou-frou* of his black tylsent frock, masked, hands on chest. A man of fierce countenance was he that night.

'And where is Stroud?' he asked.

''Tis a-top of Broughton Vale, your worship,' answered the landlord.

'Broughton Vale—where stands the castle of Sir James Broughton?'

* Notice the rich dress of this woman. The author remembers now, on reading final proofs, that his motive for detailing it was to show the easy way of life of *the common peasant people* of that time, having in mind the fact that the appropriation of English land by a small number of ignoble Noblemen had not then advanced to anything like the degree of guilty theft with which we are familiar in these our impossible days of 'phossy jaw,' 'lead-workers' convulsions,' and, gentle reader, 'potter's rot.' In fact, the difference between our Royal Harry and his meanest peasant subject in physique, dress, and manners was very slight, England then greatly resembling France and Spain then, or even France and Spain now. I have read that somewhere about 1460 a Sumptuary Act was passed prohibiting ploughmen and their wives from wearing silver girdles and costly head-dresses—as though, forsooth, Parliament now should start prohibiting our 'potter's-rot' classes from wearing silks and point-lace! The misery of it is, that the curse against Wrong is two-edged, ruining both the despoiler and the despoiled, there being a species of rot in the world even more damned than 'potter's rot'—if we call it *dry*-rot! Between 'fatness of soul' and the 'fat of the land' the choice of the present writer is unhesitating.

'The same.'

'Stay: Fletcherfield—knowest where it lies?'

'Fletcherfield, sir? 'Tis a village in Broughton Vale, too.'

'And where is Little Baneleigh?'

'Why, even a-top of Broughton Vale.'

'And where is Sudbury Rye?'

'Why, so God me save, even in that very Vale, at the top, your worship's honour.'

Wolsey stopped his walk, scowling in thought.

'Hath any person made search here to-day after this man?'

'There was a lady, your worship, at the hour of sext, and a party of three about none, your honour's worship. I gave them to know that his way lay toward Stroud, and for Stroud they went pelting.'

And at once Wolsey muttered:

'Oh, then, I have the crafty knave.'

He hurried to the door; without a minute's delay he was galloping with his ten from the village.

He remembered with intense self-complaisance that Sir James Broughton was under his thumb, his man, strongly bound to him. The castle, therefore, would afford a secure place of sojourn for him and his captives for that night at least, without the slightest chance that Henry should get wind of the capture, or of Wolsey's presence in Hampshire. For of a capture Wolsey was now certain. Calvo, he saw, was voluntarily surrounding himself with his pursuers, since all the destinations he had given out were round Broughton Vale, and his motive could only be their mutual destruction. To effect that, he must bring them into contact, must himself be in their centre: must have, too, for himself some sure way of escape. Wolsey knew nothing of Baneleigh tavern, little of Broughton Vale, but he divined, long before he reached it, that somewhere about its centre must be a subterranean passage.

Not once did he draw rein till he was clanging the belfry bell at the outer drawbridge of Broughton Castle. There was need for spinning haste, he knew. . . .

Had not a lady called at Lipton 'at the hour of sext'? —a lady, he guessed, with wit as quick as his!

As a matter of fact, Anne Boleyn had all that day been learning at the villages the identical facts which Wolsey learned, and her astute brain had reasoned in his very manner, to arrive at his very conclusions: only with swifter decision, for she had old, familiar knowledge of the subterranean passage between tavern and ruins.

Wolsey's first question at the castle was as to the existence of such a passage in the neighbourhood.

Even as he asked it, Calvo, with Bessie and Laura, were feasting on calvered salmon, and perch in foyle, in the tavern-buttery, where they had been sumptuously received by the landlord on Calvo's mention of his friend, Flying Sidney. It was well past midnight, just that hour when, yonder in the dismal monastery ruins, the ghost of many an ancient monk flitted from dorter to chapel at the alarum of the bell for primes.

Calvo, with full mouth, was impressing upon a hostler at his side the order in which he should forthwith ride to the various villages, pretending to come from the landlord, with the news that the girls were at the inn.

He knew that, led by his voluntary droppings of hints at villages, Francis, with eighty, now lay in tents upon Sudbury Rye; Henry camped at Little Baneleigh; Alvarada and Sir John Perrot occupied Stroud; Fitzgerald and Bonner, reunited now with Macdonald by the pursuit of a common trail, were at Fletcherfield; Northumbrian Percy, and also some Wolsey-men, were at Winton; Du Ballay and his knights at East Hythe. They lay an almost complete circle of arms and armour around Broughton Castle and Baneleigh tavern.

Calvo, with absolute cynical coolness, was on the point of sending out his messenger to bring them all upon the tavern, when carmine faded from Bessie Ford's cheek-bones, and the sage's heart thumped once: for there was heard a furious, imperative battery at the inn-door.

Seven armed retainers from Ormond Hall stood

there, hacking at the massive portal, among them their mistress. Anne was forcing the situation, bent upon driving Calvo through the subterranean passage before the moment of his plan was ripe. In the ruins, at the other end of the passage, waited three more of her father's men.

At once, at the sound of that battery, Calvo knew that in his lute was a rift, in the scheme a flaw: and his heart thumped once.

Before the inn-door fell in, the landlord put his head out of window, offering to open; whereupon Anne, leaving instructions with her seven to rush in and scour every nook, took to her brodequined heels, and went running up a holly-lane, splashing her surcoat of crimson velvet engrained, to watch the capture in the ruins.

Anne had risen from a feast at Ormond Hall, two miles off, to effect the capture. She had ready there a room to receive the long-searched fugitives.

But she had hardly run from the tavern-door, when a party of fifteen came up from Broughton Castle, among them Wolsey and his ten. He saw Anne's seven just pelting into the opened inn-door, and cried 'Halt,' divining at once that the lady who had called at Lipton 'at the hour of sext' was saving him trouble.

'Let her pick the apples, and I will eat them,' he thought, bridling with his smile. And he lifted his voice, adding: 'Be ready now to fall upon some caitiffs in the ruins, men. Forward with you.'

And forward through the holly-lane they went at a brisk march.

The lane ended in a wilderness of thorn-bush, trampled at one point into the indication of a path; then came a vista of bright-hued greensward between solemn, gnarled oak and wide-rooted beech; then a fragment of wall, part of the old Cellarer's Building; then three low flagged steps.

The party picked their echoing way up a nave of broken columns, roofless to the moon, and as they turned an angle where once was a corrider of cloister-dalles, and now only bushy growth mixed with stones,

Anne, standing by a broken carrel-wall near the old refectory, saw them.

Her first impulse was to run to warn her three waiting men, her next to watch. She slipped behind the carrel, and as Wolsey passed, stepping quick, with an awful start, and a heart of ice, she knew him beneath his mask.

He had beaten her, he with his fifteen, she with her three. . . . In a craziness of rage she heaved up her clenched hands on high, grating them, and down again she swung them, and, catching a stone, heaved it up, screwing it to powder into the masonry, going, 'Oh, I must kill this man, or die! Oh, I must, I must——'

At the same time she heard three distinct sword-clashes; her three, surprised by the fifteen, had struck once, and run.

The flooring of the refectory had long disappeared, and it was on the cellar-level that Wolsey now entered between two still-standing walls. At one point some steps descended into a paved and pillared gallery, round the opening of which the men fell flat to wait, while Wolsey lurked behind a bramble-bush.

He had not waited a minute, when running feet sent up echoes from below. Calvo, hunted from behind by Anne's seven, was coming—was come. Bessie held Laura by the hand. Suddenly all were prisoners.

Calvo, for a minute, brooded calmly upon Wolsey's bulk through his tumble-down eyes, and muttered, 'The pork!' And Wolsey, for a minute, from the height of his bridled fat neck, looked smiling upon Calvo, and said, 'Now, Master Alchymist, you see. . . .'

Bessie and Laura clung each to the other, held each by a man on either side, till the procession moved, and they were torn apart.

The way led through the forest which still lies between Broughton Castle and the ruins. As they went, Anne Boleyn was behind, tracking them. And no sooner was she sure that the castle was their destination, than sudden new hope leapt in her rancorous heart. The King was near . . .!

She turned at once and ran like a tom-boy for the tavern. Her seven were even then streaming out. She rushed past them, crying, 'Mine host!' and when he appeared in a corridor, her gasp was, 'Ink! ink! and a pen!'

At that moment she spied Flying Sidney, who had arrived from London, and come hither to see how Calvo fared.

'Sidney!' cried Anne, renouncing her purpose of writing, 'hither! The King's camp is at Little Baneleigh: go thither—flying, thou hearest?—and seek out Charles Brandon. Tell him I say that Laura Ford is now—this moment—in Broughton Castle, taken there by Wolsey. Stay not gaping, fool! Get gone—fly!'

Flying Sidney, who cherished a deep terror of Anne, was impelled to obey: and flying he went. But by now he well divined that Anne was, in some way, for some reason, hostile to Calvo, and he reasoned that, if the news communicated to Henry were communicated also to the other parties, whose whereabouts he knew from the landlord, then would the evil he was bound to do to the Master be counteracted.

He had, therefore, no sooner whispered to Charles Brandon the great news than he was off to Stroud, where lay Alvarada; and thence to Sudbury Rye, to the camp of Francis; and thence to Fletcherfield, where were Fitz, Mac, and Bonner; and to Winton, where was Percy; and to East Hythe, where was Du Ballay. And when his hard ride was accomplished, and his reeking horse swayed to drop, he saw a glimmering of morning in the East.

And when, an hour later, the full day broke, it saw the plain before Broughton Castle dotted white with leaguering tents, and champing steeds, and batteries of cannon, and groups of glittering armour—for all had come.

CHAPTER XXVI

BEFORE THE CASTLE

'Hark! hark! the trumpet swells
A deep soul-thrilling strain!'
SIGOURNEY.

THE castle-front looked East, and well to its South lay the purple pavilion of Henry, surrounded with tents; while to the North, a mile perhaps away, close on an edge of forest, a still more resplendent erection of cloth-of-gold of baudekin, raised with flowers-de-luces of bullion-gold, marked the centre of Francis' camp, a great ensign on its summit shaking from out its shimmering silken folds lazy whispers of War.

Henry and Francis had met—this time assuredly to try a bout together.

The castle was strong, of old Norman building, the front and sides being defended by two parallel curtains bastioned at intervals with those semi-circular bastions called 'roundels,' before each curtain being a fosse and drawbridge, and before the outermost drawbridge an outwork barbican with palisades. The donjon-keep was a square pile of smooth stone.

Two of the investing parties, Percy's and the Wolsey-men, seeing the castle front watched by others, took station at the castle back, which likewise was defended by parallel bastioned curtains, thus to cut off the fugitives' escape that way: for the Wolsey-men, through Sidney's crafty silence, were without suspicion that their master was anywhere in Hampshire.

This was the disposition of things when, at seven in the morning, Sir James Broughton, a burly, bald-

headed man of fifty years, broke into the chamber where Wolsey slept.

'My good lord Cardinal,' he blurted with opening arms, 'the whole castle, north, south, east and west, is invested with tents and armed men!'

Wolsey's start shook the massive low bedstead. There broke from his lips the terrified question:

'Is *the King* among them?'

'Among them, yea, my lord! Hark! A bevy of six heralds with pursuivants e'en now approach the outer drawbridge blaring fanfares on horns and bugles! Oh, my lord!—they come from the King with his demands!'

'Well, let them come.'

Already Wolsey smiled, though with agitated underlip.

'My lord——!'

'The King is a naughty child, and sometimes needs the birch, Sir James.'

'And there is that other one—Francis!'

'You will not yield.'

'What! not to the King?'

'No.'

'Why, my lord——'

'Listen to *me*, prithee——'

'But my neck, my neck, my good lord Cardinal!'

'Round your neck is the arm of *my* protection, Sir James. The King will proffer his demands in the name of the Golden Knight, I think—yes, I think'—he was frowning, reading as in a page the secrets of Henry's character on the wall—'in the name of the Golden Knight. And you know not at all the Golden Knight, Sir James, nor whence he is. You will refuse, refuse. How many men with you?'

'Some sixty in the castle.'

'Enough. Myself will captain them. Leave me.'

Sir James hurried away, while Wolsey cautiously levered and lowered himself from the bed.

The horn-blasts were now blaring at the outer castle-gate. The drawbridge there was down, and as they came blowing, their horns hanging big silken bandrols,

a rumble of chains announced the rising portcullis. The foremost of the heralds, carrying an ensign emblazoned with argent, a cross, and gules—the arms of St. George—passed the first escarpment—over the bridge—under the dark portcullis-arch; and there, to meet them, came the castle-seneschal, backed by half a dozen pikes and carabines.

'Embassy, embassy, my masters,' said he.

Herald-king-at-arms cocked forth one cordovan buskin, held up a parchment, and read pompously:

'The puissant Knight, who hath acquired throughout all Christendom the style and cognisance of "the Golden," demandeth forthwith the persons of the three fugitives who, pending and during the night, have taken refuge within this stronghold from the lawful quest of the said Golden Knight: and this under menace of instant storm with arrow, steel, and shot, from the part of the said Golden Knight.'

Not a word concerning Wolsey in this summons; for though Flying Sidney had delivered Anne's message that Wolsey it was who had seized the fugitives, to Henry this was incredible, and, with wrinkled brow, he had said: 'This, faith, cannot be. . . .'

But great now was his surprise when his heralds returned with a flat refusal from the castle-seneschal. Sir James Broughton had no knowledge of the Golden Knight; and Sir James contemned the misproud pretension of the said Knight to the person of any person within the precincts of Broughton.

This was an answer dictated word for word by Wolsey; and Henry, hearing it, frowned a most piercing frown, astonished, wondering at the motive of Sir James Broughton, with a thought of Wolsey rising a moment in a back corner of his brain.

He stamped; and 'Ha!' cried he, 'knows he not the Golden Knight, then? But the stupid addle-pate shall know in a banging lesson before——! Knevet, Nevil, Charles——!'

He was interrupted by a blare, coming from northward yonder across the plain; six heralds of Francis

in doublet and hose of gold-cloth, and blue velvet cloaks pounced with *fleur-de-lys* and Venice twists, were at the outer drawbridge.

Henry, hearing the sound, went down a street of tents, and stood looking, surrounded by his gentlemen. The heralds entered the gates. Above yonder on the battlements were signs of unusual stir; burdened men throwing their burdens into heaps near the bartisans, runnings to and fro, a group placing a springal in position, and dream-shouts from afar calling something in the morning sky.

Already it was difficult to observe the movements of the heralds at the drawbridge: for the plain was filling with creatures of all sorts, women with butter and poultry, lazy forage-carts, paniered donkeys, mules with water-butts, 'sturdy beggars,' loiterers, samples of all Hampshire, esquires, butchers, publicans, and yonder in serried march a troop of ten 'martialists,' retainers of a neighbouring hall, who, having scented the battle from afar, came to offer their prowess to the seneschal, or to the leaguering camps—little it tided which.

So that now, as it were suddenly, the quiet plain was a-move, by miracle: as when one looks through a glass at what, to the bare eye, was dead matter, and, lo, it is all a-crawl, and swarms into movement.

Back through this crowd, not yet immense, but thickening every minute into immensity, came the heralds of Francis—and came without the fugitives.

Henry stood looking, gnawing his pout, measuring with a nervous contraction at the cheek-bones, as though he tasted acid, the events born here and now before him for his manipulation.

'Well, you see, the black-faced's heralds return with their tails between their legs,' said he.

'Francis, sure, will storm the castle, sire,' said Charles Brandon—'unless anon you order its surrender in your proper title as King.'

'Thou talk'st like a—— Ha! and have that Goat saying that I made unknightly use of my chance of kingship to out-do him in a strange land? 'Tis what

he *would* say, the chattering Ape. Nay, we storm, we storm : here are no kings, Charles, but only knights.'

'And when we have done all the hard work of storming, Francis slips in, and is off with the girl, sire.'

'He ! off with that girl ? He ? Oh so ! Aha ! I tell thee, Charles Brandon, within seven days from the day he touches her, I land seventy thousand fighting-men on the Norman coast to burn and harry all they meet !'

'Amen, sire, I say. But, meseems, some arrangement must be come to——'

'Hold—who the pestilence are those ?'

'Those seem like one of the searching parties, sire.'

Henry flew into a passion.

'Who the pestilence, man, are these searching parties ? Searching parties, quotha ? *Who* are these lousy rats I hear of ? With what motive, and by what right, search they where I search ? By God's light, this is something new to me, you know ! 'Tis a bit strong ! Searching parties, quotha ? *Who* are they, *where* are they, *what* are they ?'

Brandon shrugged his shoulders.

'Faith, I know not, sire. There is one fellow I have heard of called Fitzgerald ; and also I have heard it whispered that my lord Wolsey——'

'My lord *who ?*'

'My lord Wolsey, sire.'

'You babble, man, you babble like a daw ! He wouldn't dare—I tell you he wouldn't *dare*—Ha ! and this Fitzgerald, what of him ?'

'He is one of the searchers, sire.'

'But he should be searching for *me*, the base tyke ! If not for me, then for whom ? Yet someone declared me that he had been seen to fight for Francis ! What *means* it all ?'

'If that be he yonder, as is like from his stature, sire, then he must even be a searcher on his own proper count ; for, faith, the effronted knave seems about to summon the castle.'

It was true that up the very gentle slope to the barbican and drawbridge Fitzgerald did, at that moment, saunter ; by his side stepped natty Mac ; and

before him Bonner, having at his scarlet lips a horn, borrowed but now from one of the race of butcher-boys, who, at that time, went their rounds a-horse, with horns.

And, 'Boy,' quoth Fitz, as he went sauntering hugely with lazy and laggard swagger, 'sure thou blowest a herald's clarion like a flute. Give wind! 'Tis not Laura which thou serenadest, but a castle which thou summonest.'

Bonner, blowing with both cheeks, did not hear.

'Well, if this be not a hardy thing we do——!' said Mac, throwing up his head with a laugh.

'I take it that we be two hardy fellows, Mac.'

'No chance, Fitz; no chance.'

Fitz ground his teeth.

'Chance there shall be!'

'But how?'

'Pah! I know not. But this I say: 'ware the man that lays a finger on yon maiden while one last whiff of breath dwells in this carcase. Mac, lad, we have sworn an oath.'

'Aye—I remember it well. But—I see no chance here,' said Mac, who looked at facts and saw the future soberly; 'they are many, we are two.'

'Two and a herald, Mac—give wind, boysie!—and two who have sworn. And, maugre all, why not a chance? This King and the French champion here will sure storm; and, at the *entrée*, *we* rush in and take the prize——!'

Here Bonner, with thrown-back long-ringleted head, blew from his bladder-cheeks a final blast as they stepped over the springy drawbridge.

They entered. Bonner pronounced his demand for the fugitives; and the seneschal, having finished his laugh, said:

'Nay, my masters, better drop the pleasant jape ye play, and come aid us defend the castle against the rest.'

'You yield them not——?' said Fitz.

'Why, nay.'

'Then, sir, we take your castle by storm.'

Having said which, the three turned, and walked back to their station between the two royal camps.

This whimsical notion of demanding the girls, under threat of storm with four arms, had arisen in the mind of Fitz in a moment of levity and twinkling eyes; Mac had thrown up his head with a laugh; and Bonner had said: 'Make me your herald, and, as Jericho, so shall Broughton fall, to the blare of a horn.'

But no sooner was the whim in progress of quixotic execution, than the Condé Alvarada, who had taken station two stone-throws from Fitzgerald, found it highly knightly and pleasant to his fancy; so that Fitzgerald was hardly back, when another party of four—Alvarada, Sir John Perrott, and two Queen's-men—one blowing a horn, were on the way to the drawbridge.

And now the contagion of bombast spread. Du Ballay, with four knights, followed, demanding surrender in a fictitious name. The French Ambassador, indeed, had long since discovered the identity of the Black Knight, his master; but his master's purpose in the search being personal, and his political, and antagonistic, he had chosen to maintain his incognito and separateness.

Henry still stood looking at all this blowing and flourishing with a sort of angry wonder. It was high noon, when the Wolsey-men, having got wind of the prevailing passion for castle-summoning, came from the castle-back, blaring a fanfare, marching solemnly through a lane of gapers up to the drawbridge. In a fictitious name their leader demanded surrender.

And last of all, as these went back to station, came Percy and seven Northumbrians, he, with his busy bow-legged roll, bearing the great ensign of Alnwick through a lane of gapers, while from the tense cheeks of all the seven brayed a fervent bravura, whose flagrant, rough blare reached far to Baneleigh tavern.

But at that blast the walls of Broughton did not fall, and Percy came back without the fugitives. And now the lane of gapers disappeared in the swarm of waiting loiterers.

CHAPTER XXVII

HENRY AND FRANCIS

'Then those two Kings anigh they drew
Withouten Berwick-town;
There were steeds that flew, and trumps that blew,
And pacings up and down.'

'THE JOUST.'

BUT it was a day of embassies. In five minutes another lane had formed between the camps of Francis and Henry, and down it paced in passmented velvet buskins, and gorgeous cloaks fastened with aiglets of diamonds, six French heralds, escorted by six knights with band-roled lances, on chargers housed and purfled in gold and ermine. And on, blowing a blare, they passed slowly to the purple pavilion, on their banner a cognizance of *fleur-de-lys*.

They bore a proposition from Francis: since the castle was strong, for what cause should not the Black Knight and the Golden amicably unite forces in its attack, up to the moment of its impending fall—in case it fell—thereupon to cease concert, and thenceforth act each for himself in the seizing of the final prize?

Henry packed back the heralds, promising reply; and in half an hour his own six, with pursuivants, accompanied by yeomen with gilt pole-axes, paced blaring through the lane of gapers to the blazing pavilion of Francis.

Henry agreed, but added a condition. Up to the moment of impending fall, concert—each general captaining his own forces: but then, single combat between the two knights to decide right to the possession of the fugitives; then again, disinterested concert in the taking of the stronghold.

Francis sent back the heralds, promising reply; and in half an hour his six appeared, blaring, pacing toward the camp of Henry.

He agreed. But called the attention of the Golden Knight to the fact that the Black and the Golden Knights were not the only knights, having the same objects, then on the field; and though the forces of those others were not magnificent, yet knightly courtesy was not wholly a dead thing in Christendom—a slap that stung the cheek of Henry to crimson. He proposed in addition: Concert between all the assembled knights up to the moment of impending fall, then single combat between the two leaders who first had arrived that morning on the field; then combat between the victor and the leader who third had arrived on the field, and so on, till each leader had fought; and the final victor should have right to the possession of the fugitives; then again, concert of all in the taking of the stronghold.

To and fro went the gaudy, solemn processions across the plain, blaring always, filling the long day with unnecessary noises. The hot afternoon sun sloped far westward. The great ensign of Francis drooped without a stir. Yonder over the stately battlements of the square donjon drooped, too, the red Broughton standard, blazoned with the house's hatchment, martletts and a patonee, without a stir. A smoke from the midst of Henry's camp galloped straight up, unrolling itself on high into a perfect Prince of Wales' plume, without a stir. The plain, thronged now, festered in sultry swelter. The noise of the morning had died into a low, universal buzzing murmur. A bleating of sheep, and a lowing of oxen, was plainly heard, during each lull of the flourished trumpets, in the two camps. Ten thousand mouths gaped stupidly at the passing and blaring heralds.

For Henry had refused to recognise the other searchers; and Francis had insisted, the Frenchman's *motif* being partly his native amiability, and partly a pretension to a finer degree of knightly nicety than Henry's—Henry's *motif* a haughty disdain to enter into competition with his own subjects, dogs for whom he

intended, when he came to know and seize them, only the Tyburn halter. And so there arose and wrangled an angry deadlock.

It was only toward sunset that Henry, at the earnest prayer of all his gentlemen, gave way: for Francis at that hour sent the threat to make the proposed terms with all the parties, excluding only the party of the Golden Knight, an arrangement which would have combined against Henry at the in-rush a phalanx of skilled force, fatal to his purpose. He dashed down a pen, and stamped, and yielded: for he was in frantic earnest now to have Laura Ford within his tent.

Then came more fanfares and heraldings, as the twilight deepened. Three of Francis' heralds, in solemn deputation with three of Henry's, went seeking the parties of knights. The Wolsey-gallants they found noisily drunk round the vast cave of one of the hatchmented fireplaces of old Baneleigh tavern; and in the long-dead Abbot's solar, lolling in the embrasure of a stained window, Fitzgerald and Bonner drunk, and Mac sipping mead. But not too drunk to apprehend and assent; for 'Bravo,' cried Fitzgerald, 'for the Black Knight, who is as gallant a gentleman as ever stuck a kern! and long may he live, if not on earth, in heaven; for here, boysie, have I the sword he gave me, and an I chance to meet him, as is like, I'll draw it, boysie, I will——'

Fitz drew the flashing excalibur, and held it aloft.

By this time Du Ballay, Percy, and Alvarada had each received and agreed to the offers of the kings; and there remained only the question of leadership of the united forces. Back and forth through the now deserted plain went still the heralds, lighting the darkness with cressets and pole-torches. The Black Knight proposed the leadership to the Golden; the Golden proposed the leadership to the Black. Neither would yield, and there arose and wrangled a new deadlock of courtesy.

Three of the smaller parties now lay in tents provided them by Francis, all well beyond artillery-range from the battlements, except Percy, whose sentinels

watched the castle-back under the shelter of forest-trees. And to all, once again, paced the loud and torch-lit herald-band on the question of Leadership. The Wolsey-men and Fitz at the tavern slept sound, but Macdonald gave his voice for Francis; and so did all, except young Percy, who claimed Henry for general. And so Francis yielded with his smile and bow, and was leader of the siege.

Now the castle-clock tolled midnight, and in the abbey-ruins many a raw-eyed ghost rose at that sound for matins; over the plain the far yelping and whining of some forlorn wolf was heard, and around the battlements the sentries walked like soldiers of wood.

At this hour my lord Cardinal, sitting at a table, and bending his red-veined bastion of a brow over a plan of the castle and its defences, said to a liveryman:

'Bring me hither that Calvo.'

Calvo and the girls had been placed in three roomy apartments intercommunicating at the castle-back behind a locked portal.

He came in ten minutes walking slow, with a push-forward of alternate shoulders, hands behind.

Wolsey, now quick-stepping about the hall, presently stopped and faced the sage; from the high-tower of his bridled neck he smiled, with pressure of his upper lip, his superior little smile of insolence.

'Now, Mr. Alchymist, you see——' said he.

'See what, my lord of York?'

'You are my prisoner.'

'I see, yes, I see. I thought you had more sense.'

'How mean you?'

'Is it not rigolo for a man like me to be in such a position with respect to a man like you? Have you not yet travelled so far in thought as to know that I am a better man than your Excellency, since I see more, know more?'

'You are wrong, sir. The value of an Eye consisteth not at all in what, by much study, it hath seen, but solely in what it is capable of seeing: in other words, not knowledge, but Wisdom, is the testimony of worth, and the core of greatness. Thus, you have more

knowledge of chymics than I, but I more wisdom of life than you—and so have made you my prisoner, sir. Come, now!'

'With ten armed men 'tis not methinks a wisdom so vastly profound to make one man a prisoner!'

'But, by wisdom, should you have calculated that I have these ten armed men ever at command, and skill to guide them; and so should you have embraced my offer of terms when I made it you.'

'I did not choose to abandon the girls, that is all.'

'Are they parents of yours?'

'No, no, perfect strangers: but helpless without me.'

'So? Then was pride in your single skill, and a naughty contumacy, the causes of your resistance to my will.'

'Yes, that was it, that was it, you may be sure.'

'Was not my offer large and liberal?'

'Wondrous large and liberal: even for the making thereof I thank and praise you.'

'Then why refused you?'

'I chose, that's all—I chose.'

''Twas pride——'

'Ah! that was it.'

'Or was it not rather a good benevolence toward the maidens, meriting praise and honour——?'

'What is it you want me for, sir? I prithee, preach not to me: 'twere rigolo, verily; my heart is hard.'

Wolsey stepped twice through the room; returning to Calvo he held out his hand, intending that the sage should kiss it: but Calvo languidly shook it, with forced politeness.

'I consider you honest,' said Wolsey, 'and my eyes are good. After this siege you may call me patron.'

Calvo bowed low.

'You wot that there *is* a siege, by the way? Archimedes at the siege of Syracuse invented burning glasses, and destroyed the enemies' ships for the town's-folk. May we expect something similar from you?'

Here was the real design of this interview, and Wolsey knew how to wrap his flatteries in honey. At the comparison with Archimedes, Calvo was inwardly soothed and pleased, and he said:

'If I think of anything, I will tell you: and for the kind proffer of your puissant protection I really give you hearty thanks.'

He bowed, and was led away, and locked behind the portal.

And with that idea of 'thinking of something' he paced a long time through the three chambers of his prison; ascended by a short ladder-stair to the battlements, and there paced; descended, and paced. The three rooms were exceedingly spacious and lofty, and had once been rich, being tapestried with light sendal; but now, at one point, the flooring was decayed, and repairs were in progress, for in a corner leant four or five very long planks, with a great basket of osiers containing tools and sawdust. And suddenly Calvo, looking at the silken hangings and the long planks, stopped short and slapped his brow. And after awhile he muttered:

'Hot air is lighter than cold—*much* lighter even. And why should not that fact be applied to practice? Why not? Seeking hog-wash for the pork, I may have found mainemy-royal for myself.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SIEGE

'The loudest blast
That ever filled Renown's obstreperous trump.'
KIRKE WHITE.

THAT night, for several leagues round Broughton, every inn was crammed, and every village awake with revelry. From far and wide, from many a hall and manor, from many a chase and forest-side, castle and abbey, had come jaunting both lord and lady, keeper and esquire, seneschal and liveryman, tramp and yokel and friar, justice and reeve and martialist. The Bishop of Winchester, gallant prelate of the Order of the Garter, slept at Sudbury Rye; the High Sheriff of the County at Baneleigh tavern.

For their life was easy and jocund, not hopelessly ugly and heavy; and the lust of the eye was fresh.

Even when morning broke, roads were still streaked with trains of horses jogging all toward Broughton Vale: for the fame of this joust of arms had travelled, stirring the tough and merry heart of England.

But when the sun was high the castle-plain was empty, for it was a place of danger now. Only, far back toward the tavern, was visible a region of human heads stretched out wide into innumerable vagueness.

On the plain was a rattle of the old kettle-drums named nakers, pattering to arms; and bugles were calling in the air; and the battlements of the donjon were lined with men. And now down the escarpment from the outer drawbridge came a trotting cohort to the sally-port of the barbacan, among them three of the

seven castle-priests, and a fourth priest, not of the castle, who carried his black-robed bulk with quick-planted step, and directed in person the defence.

An early meal was over now in the two camps; and as three batteries of eighteen pieces swept out from the French camp, and galloped with blundering row after ponderous Norman horses south-westward over the field, a battery and a half of nine pieces swept out from the camp of Henry, and galloped north-westward to meet the three. And as they met a shower of arblast-arrows from a bastion of the curtains whizzed in the air, and fell far short. So commenced the day.

And immediately from both royal camps burst two gallant arrays of horsemen, showing pennoned lances and drawn swords, cantering in unanimous phalanx, Francis and his troop raven from their floating casque-plumes to their steel-shoes, and Henry's band winking gaudy as a patch of sunset on a wobbling water. And as the artillery advanced at a walk, these two troops fell in behind it, the troop of Francis containing all the small parties engaged in the quest of Laura Ford, except those watching the castle-back.

Suddenly the barbacan barked: a great stone ball from a thirty-three pounder demi-cannon plunged into the earth, and spurted gravel upon the besieging limbers thirty yards away. The artillery horses reared and plunged, and Francis behind his beaver laughed, for he liked that sound.

Down the straight-ruled front of the bristling phalanx he pricked briskly, riding with easy adeptness the choppy sea of his curvetting and caracoling charger, noting the disposition of Henry's men, where were the axes, where the pikes and carbines, and how many, and in what formation; and Henry, collared with the collar of the Garter, and all a blaze of golden points, eyed him sullenly behind his visor, gnawing his pout. And as Francis began to speak, well he knew that shrill and jocund voice.

'I propose,' Francis said in syllabled English, 'that we attack first the outwork, beginning with cannon, and at the just moment making dash with scaling-ladders,

petards, and grenadoes. My aim, you surmise, is not so much the barbacan itself, as the expelling of its defenders: an event which will induce the warders of the first drawbridge to lower the bridge for passage of their friends, while we are yet busied on the outwork. Now, a lowered drawbridge is the soldier's chance, as saith the proverb. Yon archers, you halberds, yon carbines, and the left half of my front-line men, will therefore dismount, now, at the lifting of my sword; and their chargers will be led backward to picket by the rest, to yonder hillock beyond the reach of shot. There will the non-fighters stand, dismounted, to the moment when my clarion from the barbacan shall announce the defenders in retreat; and then will they spring to horse, gallop like black-riders, and grip by surprise one —or ha!—*both* of the bridges at the edge of the sword. Artillery—halt! Knights and warriors — I lift my sword!'

Bustling movement followed his cry: men leaping from horses, snatching at implements, half the host cantering backward with led horses, among them Henry, keenly piqued at a post of inaction. At the same time a puff of gray left an embrasure of the barbacan, and another thirty-three pounder from a mortar's mouth arrived, almost as soon as the report, with smash and fracas upon a scaling-ladder borne on a gun-carriage, crushing a gunner, and thence pitching far down the slope.

The answer was swift: the line of the assailants' artillery, now within the eight hundred yards' range of its twenty-four pounder sakers, and seventeen-pounder culverins, opened, at the signal, unanimous fire; and at once it was as though there had popped above-ground the broad visage of some ogre, breathing fumes, with twenty-seven bleared eyeballs of baleful flame.

The shock was almost like a single hoarse hoot—the ogre's exclamation; and in half a minute the barbacan appeared nothing but a drifting cloud of powdered stone. From the cloud, however, came voices, and spouts of fire: and balls of stone played in the air,

beyond the skill of juggler's hand. Along the line of assailing cannon black-faced gunners wrought fiercely in a flutter of action, cleaning, spying into muzzles, ramming hard for life; and first done first shoot; so that now the fire was in the quavers and semi-quavers of that thundering organ-board, two notes with quick bang-bang, or three, then pause and minim, then competitive mixed howl and barking chord of many a throat, then quick semi-quaver bang-bang, in twos and threes. And suddenly yonder, half way down the key-board of gleaming cylinders, there darts into the air a swarm of splintered metal, and flying wood, mixed with smoke and limbs of men; for a falconet, with huge hubbub and detonation, has burst as it shot, as falconets were apt to do. And of the many juggler's-balls in the air, some fall well, cracking carriages, horses and men, or ploughing pebbles that shoot like pistol-shots; two swooping even among the infantry twenty yards to rear, crushing in their midst two chasms of emptiness where full hearts had beat; only Francis, riding between artillery and infantry, and anon ducking with half-playful upward glance, they cannot and must not touch: for the jealous observation of Henry is upon him.

It lasted three full hours, till the sun was hot in the forenoon; and eleven of the twenty-seven pieces of ordnance were burst, and *hors-de-combat;* twenty gunners mangled; the rest parched and nerveless; and the barbacan, where Wolsey was the marksman, stood whole.

Francis put hand to side, and blew the bugle-call of retreat. The two troops rode back, bearing seven wounded, each to its camp; the stagnant smoke, which grew like ghost-cotton from all the wide plain, thinned slowly; and the sun stole from noon to hot afternoon amid a waiting silence profound as the waiting silence of the grave.

It was broken by sudden trumpet-call from Francis' camp. This was near two.

Again swept out the two artilleries with blundering row, and the black host, and the golden, to take stand as before, in the same disposition.

And with hope: for the face of the round barbacan was now deep-eaten, and battered rough; and at the very first new round, the assailants shouted cheers, for from the top there disengaged itself a cake of battlements and fell in powder; in twenty minutes an irregular breach appeared; and Francis, tossing his bridle to a servitor, went prone, calling, inviting, with forward-pointing sword.

Then came the hot 'dash,' rolled all in smoke, riddled with shot, and galled with arrows, as when one urges blinking, bitter way against storm-dashed hail. Fast now fell the fighters, as they pressed nearer and nearer within range of quarrel-headed shaft, and shot of every size and form, rained not only from the barbacan itself, but from the nearest of the first-curtain bastions. Backward through the on-pelting host of the assailants streamed and bickered many a flare of red—pine-torches snatched from the gun-carriages to fire the petard-fusees; and ten scaling ladders, over-lying the bent and pushing phalanx, sailed steadily toward their goal; the guns, meanwhile, of both battery and barbacan still flashing in demi-semi-quaver bang-bangs, or brawling chords of competitive uproars; while Francis, ever in advance, called and invited, with one prone-bent knee, and wildly-pointing sword.

But though the dash was hot, and costly, and rash, the result was swift. A scalding *bouillon* of liquid lead thrown freely from window-slit and battlement, and ladders flung backward with all their freight, could not save. Petards and grenadoes, thrown through breach and over battlement, were cracking in an ear-splitting distraction of darting fury, doing red-hot execution everywhere, popping back, some of them, with shout of spouting fire upon their throwers. The erection was divided into two stories, the breach made by the cannon being in the upper; but too high for the defenders on the upper floor to repel the inrush from ladders placed outside that point; and at the intrusion of the shoulders of Francis, a general cry of: '*Sauve qui peut!*' went up to the men on the roof. Down they rushed pell-mell, their leader among them, his face

black as his robe ; and after a short sword-scrimmage with three of the assailants, they contrived, all but four slain, to scuttle through the trap to the lower stage, and slam down and secure above their heads the iron slab called ' peerplate.'

The assailants were now swarming, all of them, over the barbacan, it being part of the *ruse* of Francis to leave the ground quite empty: for in the lower stage the defenders might have held out some time, if danger barred their retreat, since the sally-port was of thick iron-work. Accordingly, the assailants were set to beat upon the peerplate, as if concentrating their purpose upon it, while Francis crouched behind a battlement above. After some minutes, the sally-port opened; then followed an out-rush of the defenders; and as they rushed, the drawbridge moved downward; and as it moved, Francis put bugle to lips.

Now was the chance of Henry. The cavalry, waiting half a mile away, spurred forward. And all the castle, from donjon to curtain, in an alarm of surprise, flew to its self-defence.

The horsemen rode therefore into a pelt of missiles which thickened continually as it advanced ; but before the barbacan-men were half-way across the bridge, the knights were dashing on foot upon it, their abandoned horses ranging for the time over a plain already sown with carcasses of men and beasts. Here the assailants were not far from the two nearest first-curtain bastions, which poured in upon them a blistering fire; but now the won barbacan turned its still-acting guns against its own mother; and the assailants' artillery, too, galloped near, and talked; and all the air was a hubbub of complex war, filled with crackle, and whizz, and boom.

And still on pressed the cavaliers, fresh men against faint, Henry foremost, and after him Brandon, Nevil, and Knevet. Once, at the last moment before the portal, some of the flying barbacan-men turned sharp with cocked blunderbusses and horse-pistols, one covering with his muzzle the royal bosom. And they fired. But the weapon aimed at Henry was knocked

up by a swift hand—the hand of Wolsey, who hissed only 'Stupid daw!', and rushed on.

The next moment the outer drawbridge was won; the warders slain; the chains axed; and since the inner remained aloft, the fugitives, after a short, unequal, and ever-retreating hand-to-hand struggle against the operating axe of Henry and the knights, flung themselves down the escarpment of the inner moat, to become in the black water the target of occasional wanton missiles from the victors.

The captors of the barbacan had now descended to join in the storm. Three of the outer bastions were taken at the sword's edge, and occupied: and to defend the castle there were now left hardly forty men. After the stationing of guards, the clarion of Francis blew. The castle seemed all but won. The sun was low to its setting.

On a planchette within one of the boldly-projecting machicolations near the donjon-battlements sat Bessie Ford, wide-eyed, tightly holding the hand of Laura. Laura, since she had the liberty to ascend a small stair and gain the top, could not be kept from seeing, and constantly clapped a single hand-clap. Bessie had followed to protect, though, in fact, the donjon was as yet safe from shot. She had her chin in her hand, gazing numb through all the long day's loud action and to-do. And the thought in her heart was this:

'Well, my mother! Can all this affairing be on the count of my sister Laura? Oh, my boding heart!—my heavy, boding, boding heart!'

But, as for Calvo, he was below in their three rooms, working hard, forgetting the siege, Bessie Ford, himself, and all things: full only of interest in a Thought of Nature, a New Thing which he would do with his brain.

Ever as he worked, he said to himself:

'Hot air *is* lighter than cold. . . .'

He had cut from the long planks, leaning there, two circles of wood; and in the circumference of these he had cut regular square notches all round, and into the projecting cogs bored holes to admit a wire; then he

had set to work to saw with the workmen's saw long laths of planking, and these he had cut up into limber strips an inch wide, a quarter inch thick, very long and pliant, and warily cut, till he had eight of them. At each end of each he bored a hole through the width to admit a wire, for he had left the strips thicker at their ends; and with a stout wire taken from his bag he secured these at both ends within the notches of the two circular pieces which he had cogged and bored; he then took down the light, but strong, sendal-silk hangings from four walls, cut them into strips, plaited them rudely, and thus got a rope some thousand yards in length; he then bored two holes in the two circular pieces, and passed the rope, largely knotted at one end, so that it could not slip, through them. By placing this immensely long double umbrella firmly in position, and manœuvring by drawing the rope, he could now open it into a huge orange shape.

The rooms were in a lumber of disorder due to repairs going forward, and he felt no apprehension that the shock-headed servitor who bore their meals would take active observation of his operations. Even an attempt at escape must seem, he knew, beyond all things absurd, the situation of his prison being what it was.

Toward midnight of the first day's siege he had advanced thus far in his intense and silent labours.

CHAPTER XXIX

ARMS AND A MAN

'"Lo! yonder the thane of Crumbauchty!"
The tother woman said again:
"Of Moray yonder I see the thane."
The third then said: "I see the King."'
ANDREW OF WYNTON.

THE great vague crowd that had watched from a distance the first day's siege reassembled at a distance with the next foreday.

The sun rose, and the people waited for the loud sounds of arms: but no sounds came. Only, on the plain, in a natural flat cricket-pitch, bordered by rising ground on both sides, and beyond range of castle shot, they saw men driving stakes. By twos and threes, by tens and hundreds, with gathering boldness, they drifted nearer: the men, they perceived, were inclosing the length of the pitch in palisades, leaving open doorways at the narrow ends: they were creating the lists for a tournament of arms. And at once a glad thrill excited the multitude.

But now there broke a blare of horns like the blares of that first day of heralds: and again there came pacing solemn a richly tricked-out embassy, in an emblazoned splendour of gold and taffeta and tissue-cloth, cordelière and egrette and cordon, quite different from the emblazoned splendour of that first day—differing as one star from another in glory. From the Black Knight they came, and they made for the camp of the Golden.

It was necessary to arrange the minuter conditions of the coming joust, what constituted defeat, the arms, the hours, the marshals of the ceremony, the umpire. Back and fore paced the heralds blaring; a clouded sun climbed from nine to ten, from ten to eleven, and still they paced and blared.

Now a vague misty drizzle, which persisted through the day, began to haunt the air. But the people budged not from round the thronged lists, some provided with pic-nic cheer, most forgetting their stomachs. Hour by hour they stared at the repassing embassies.

At last, before noon, a sign of business was seen: ten mounted trumpeters, red-clad, in mantelets of Venice-gold, rode slowly into the lists and took stand at a corner of the oblong; while from the other camp ten in cloth-of-tissue cloaks raised with pearls of silver damask, took stand diagonally opposite. The herald-pacing ceased: terms had been arranged, and the minor parties formally apprised.

Then came a body of men-at-arms, riding back the multitude from the lists with cries of 'Field! Field!', and immediately followed a number of servitors, bearing tents. One they pitched near the north, narrow end of the lists, outside the palisade, for Francis; one at the south, for Henry; three also on the east long side, and four on the west, on the rising ground, for the other fighters: all being as richly wrought and gaudily barbaric as the tents of ancient Asiatics.

Now expectation stood on tiptoe, for the trumpeters blared unanimously as the two marshals of the day entered at opposite ends; and even as the castle clock tolled noon, the crowd fell back both north and south before two galloping parties, one Henry's, the other Francis'; and as these dismounted at their tent doors, there were other gallopers: and soon the seven tents had occupants.

Then occurred an interval, during which the two marshals, one Charles Brandon, the other the Chevalier d'Arcy, met and conferred. To the crowd the moments were hours; and Bessie Ford, peering through a machicolation of the donjon, saw well through a

pair of very sound and seeing eyes, but knew not what.

At last Charles Brandon, stepping back, called out:

'The Knight of Norfolk, and The Seeker!'

Down the lists in opposite directions went he and his fellow at a trot, each crying prone three times: 'The Knight of Norfolk, and The Seeker!'

And while the trumpets stormed the ear, two horsemen slowly entered the lists, one at the northern, one at the southern, gate.

The first-arrived before the castle was to fight the second-arrived; the victor the third; and so on: this being the order of the day. The first-arrived were the Wolsey-men; and their leader, Havard, having stripped from his horse every cognizance of the Cardinal, had adopted the style of 'the Knight of Norfolk.' The second-arrived was Alvarada, and he, under the style of 'the Seeker,' advanced now to meet Havard.

He was cased in simple Spanish plate-coat, complete from greaves to neck-piece, a morion on his head. But he wore no visor, and his classic-featured face was visible to Henry, who, at his tent door, sat, palm on knee, sullenly watching. As for Francis, he stood tattling among his chevaliers, casually glancing anon at what went forward.

The lists, five hundred yards long, gave room for impetus: the two riders spurred; the chargers, with frisked tail, spurted to combat; galloping fast, faster, they drew near—met—hacked quick, stretching far sideways, two whistling hacks—and passed.

To spin with swift wheel, and re-engage. Not a breath of sound now from all that intense and tip-toeing multitude of onlookers, while chop, chop, went the clashing steels. But the contest was short: from the first *botte* it was seen that, in this fight, 'the Seeker' was dominant, and the aggressor; and at a raising of the sword-arm of his antagonist to strike over-helm, Alvarada deftly inserted his blade into a joining of the cuirass, and pierced the heart: so that Havard toppled dead.

The riderless charger scampered through the lists,

dragging him a little by a stirrup, and went spreading a random noise of confused alarm among the furrowed multitude. The trumpets stormed the ear; Alvarada pricked once round the lists, then back to his tent; servitors came and laid the dead on a litter; they covered him with a cerecloth; they bore him thence for ever. While Henry, sitting, tilted his head behind a goblet of gingered ypocras; and Francis was lisping to a chevalier: 'The English girl is to the French as a peach is to an oyster. . . .'

Now again the marshals conferred during an incomprehensibly long interval; till Charles Brandon, stepping back, cried: 'The Seeker and The Knight-Courtman!' And down the lists went the two Marshals trotting, crying that thrice.

'The Knight-Courtman' was the style assumed by Du Ballay; and into the lists from opposite ends came Alvarada and the portly, militant Churchman, the latter cap-à-pie in heavy plated mail, very minutely arabesqued in silver, his horse also heavy with steel. And the two riders spurred: the chargers, with frisked tail, spurted to combat; galloping fast, faster, they drew near—met—hacked quick, stretching far sideways, two whistling hacks—and passed.

But with swift check, and wheel, they re-engaged. There were seconds crowded with intense mixed chops, —then pause and readjustment of the two stepping horses—then seconds crowded with mixed chops, in thick squalls and spasms of virulence. At last Du Ballay's heavy blade split the corselet of Alvarada at the collar-bone, drawing a stain of red; whereupon the Spaniard reared on his haunches, and as he came down, the horses were side by side, head to haunch and haunch to head. The quicker hand and wit was now the victor: each had the other's nape; and both, almost simultaneously, chopped. But at the instant of the fall of Du Ballay's hew, he experienced a violent cuff on the chest, inflicted by Alvarada's left fist, which had abandoned its bridle: his stroke faltered: at the same time the Spaniard cut twice, quick and deep; and Du Ballay dived over his saddle-bow, blood spurt-

ing from his visor-bars, to stretch his bulk on the ground.

Alvarada pricked once round the lists, while the trumpets blared, then rode back to tent.

Fitzgerald, sitting at his door on the wet sward, chin cocked on hand, remarked:

'That is sure the carle with which I fought at the Bell Inn, Mac.'

'It is,' said Mac. 'A sound fighter that, a sound fighter.'

'He learned war in his ten minutes with Fitz,' suggested Bonner.

'Boysie,' said Fitz, and laid his hand on Bonner's.

The prostrate knight was removed. The trumpets blared, the marshals conferred. The sun, no brighter than a haloed moon, stood half-way in his setting quadrant. And ever the vague drizzle haunted the air, like the ghost of rain, damping tree, and sward, and mail, and the patient, gazing multitude, and all it found.

Charles Brandon at last exclaimed:

'The Seeker and George Percy!'

And this having been thrice cried, Alvarada for the third time entered the lists, confronted now with the martial youth of Percy of Northumberland, who was the fourth arrived. Percy was borne on a huge and rather raw-boned animal of Wold-breed, in shabby trappings. Heavily armoured, his fresh Roman face was yet bare, and under his morion popped, as from ripe cocoon, the bunch of flaxen silk.

Looking short on his big mare, his right palm lay back on her haunch as he went coolly forward at a walk. Anne Boleyn, watching near in the thick crowd, felt a tightening of the heart, for she had loved him. Bessie Ford, too, from her watch-tower, knew him. And Henry, seeing the face, as it passed close, vented from bosom and nostril a low 'H'm!' of meditative surprise.

They pricked—they galloped near. Here was a contest between sword and battle-axe. Percy's bridle-arm, wounded by Fitzgerald, was still sick, but could do its work; on the other hand, Alvarada had in his

chest a slash which, but for the tension of that hour, might have laid him on his back.

But he galloped forward with undiminished gallantry, his black eyes bright with the inspiration of a cup of Xeres just drained.

They met; and at once with clattering *brusquerie* and spurts of sparks the engagement commenced, the white and whetted steel of Percy's slenderly-curved axe-blade operating fiercely, notching the sword of Alvarada, and cleaving his armour, every time. The defect, however, of the axe in armoured combat is its inability to pierce, its effects being for the most part flesh wounds—a defect which gave rise to the invention of the halberd; and at a moment when the cuirass of the Spaniard ran three streams of red, a sudden deft prick in the ribs caused Percy to close his spurs in an involuntary spasm: his mare leapt forward; as his sick left arm tore at her mouth, there was an ooze of blood from the elbow-joint; at that moment, as he turned to hew, the head of the Spaniard's horse forged forward to his saddle-bow, and Alvarada twice plunged his sword into the other's hip; once more Percy's spurs touched his flanks; his axe cleft only air; grinning, with a face of pallid death, he gagged his horse, and turned again to hew; but his eyes closed; his saddle rolled with blood; Anne Boleyn uttered a little cry; the martial boy lay bloodily bloodless on the ground.

Alvarada pricked once round the lists, as the trumpets stormed the ear, then returned to tent. Meanwhile, Henry stood up at the tent door where he had sat, and shook himself. He was the fifth-arrived.

There followed a longer interval than usual. Francis sent from his tent a fresh coat of mail to the Spaniard, with the Black Knight's admiring gratulations. The marshals conferred. The trumpeters set to blaring at a wrong moment, and were hushed with frantic gesticulations by the marshals. At Henry's tent Nevil and Knevet and ten others were nervously and flurriedly busy. There stood the King's horse, a gleaming black, not big, just able to wield Henry's weight, with arched neck, meaningly nibbling the bit, with nods.

When at last Harry was seen to be mounted and waiting, the marshals bustled. Charles Brandon ran, calling some final thing to one body of the trumpeters in a loud whisper; the Chevalier d'Arcy ran after him; Charles turned; they flurriedly whispered something unguessable; Charles turned again and shouted his momentous whisper: and all was ready.

'The Seeker and the Golden Knight!' they shouted thrice, and the trumpets blared.

For the fourth time Alvarada entered by the northern end, Henry by the southern, he being a mere blaze, his horse in latticed trappings of pearled and damasked cloth-of-gold, with buckles and pendants of fine fretted bullion, his sword-hilt red with rubies, the blade a Toledo, damascened with gold.

And under the King was the Man-Boy, with two thick hands, an ardent brain, and good blue eyes.

They pricked, they galloped briskly near, they met. Francis yonder pretended still to tattle and chatter, but his eyes were fixed upon that meeting, and soon the pretence itself halted on his lips. Hold! has the Spaniard lost the trick of victory? Step by step the sorrel is backing, and step by step the black with tossing neck is encroaching, while Henry, with encroaching dominancy, is raining a vehement rain on the stranger's crest. But with damage only to steel, and to one slashed ear: for Alvarada, dumfounded by that onslaught, is yet not resourceless; he spurs in a *demi-volte*, parrying, even as he does it, a descending chop, and is at Henry's flank, disengaged from that rough weather.

The horses sidle, prancing; there is a full minute's manœuvring into fresh relationship; now the Spaniard's lids are keenly lowered over eyes hawk-like in their close intensity: the two right arms lift, ready, waiting, while the chargers step a little. Chop, chop, twice, comes Henry's sudden blade upon Alvarada's left arm, but upon metal; and chop, once, comes Alvarada's upon Henry's, but upon bone!

Henry is all one tingling pain; with face red under his visor, he drives spurs to ribs, and goes racing, as if

in flight, northward, the Spaniard after him, but languidly in comparison. Suddenly, with sharp wheel, Henry is galloping the other way—at really furious speed; and with him, laid in rest, comes a demi-lance of good steel and ashen shaft, unslung from his saddle. The double speed is monstrous and deadly now: they meet, they crash. Alvarada's sure eye does not fail: he actually does strike up the firm-held lance, but too soon, or too weakly; it redescends to its exact *atteinte*, meeting his gorget in the little depression at the centre in front; the steel bends, and bends, till tip-toe expectation waits the pop and shivery clash—but it does not break. Backward lean man and horse—backward still more, under that urgent, coaxing impulse: now is the decision of the balance, now the moment, the overthrow: over, with abandoned shock, thumps the whole dead mass to earth. Alvarada's nape strikes a stone, and he lies there without movement.

Henry passed once, rising in his stirrups, round the lists, a trotting splendour.

'Now,' said Francis to a knight, showing his little teeth, 'will you see my Heat "*quick quenched*"——'

For the Black Knight was the sixth arrived before the castle: and his turn was come.

As for Henry, alighted at his tent-door, he drank wine, the breath venting in strong audible fan from his stern nostrils.

Upon his burly form the eyes of Bessie Ford in her watch-tower were fastened with mesmerised stare, fascinated as a bird's upon a snake. She would have known him under all disguise, or felt the horror of his presence in the thickest midnight. Also she had a consciousness that all this bouting at arms was somehow for the possession of Laura. And *he*, so far, was victor: her hands were clammy, and the space beneath her eyes jaundiced and haggard.

Clammy, too, were the hands of Anne Boleyn, as she saw the lank, close-armoured form of Francis saunter into his tent: for she knew his arm, and had fear for her Queenship and ambitions; and clammy were the hands of Wolsey, looking from the donjon,

for he had a secret love for this Harry, his King-Servant, and knew him to stand in fearful peril now.

Yonder, at the side of the lists, lying at lazy length with propped chin on the drizzled sward, Fitzgerald resettled to comfort his great athletic limbs, remarking:

'I bet on the Black, Mac.'

'A sound fighter is the Golden,' said Mac with judicial nod, 'a sound fighter.'

'Goes too earnest to his work,' criticised Fitz, 'nor light enow. A fighting-man is not a woodman felling oaks, now. I knew an Irish kern who pricked off twelve Pale-men together, whistling the whilst. A furious levity—that's it. A great fighter must be a man of humour, born so. Faith, I bet on the Black.'

'Oh, Fitz, Fitz,' cried Bonner, 'if thou wilt quench them all for me, Black, Golden, and all, under that smothering sword of thine, two kisses shall I give thee on each hacked cheek! for then shall Bessie be thine, and Laura mine!'

Fitz pressed the hand of his boy.

The interval was long. The sun began to in-gather the blurred hues of his setting. Even the trumpeters at one time deserted the empty lists. And always the enwrapping drizzle acted, like a law of nature.

Then there was movement and revival. The clarions, for some reason, blew. Suddenly all felt that the moment, the crisis, was here. Brandon and D'Arcy laid mysterious heads together. And presently, amid a great vague tumult of the multitude, like a noise of far waters, Francis and Henry were sighted mounted at their tent doors.

The marshals went trotting, bawling thrice to the four winds:

'The Golden Knight and the Black Knight!'

And at once, even from the gates, the two horses burst at full speed, plunging like buffaloes at the grinding spur; and with them flashed two lances in rest.

In that minute Henry's face was a savage crimson, and the teeth of Francis grinced.

Here was a meeting of rivals—the final decision—all

life crowded into one bursting and tip-top moment. And Fitzgerald, gazing, threw behind him a 'Look! there flies Style on horseback, an you like it!', for Francis bounds lightly as a flower jaunting on the billows of some rushing flood: and Mac whispers 'Sh-h-h!', just as the two steeds meet with horrid check, slipping on their wrinkled and struggling haunches, and the two steels, with chilly shrill clash, splinter on the two helms. But the sherds have hardly reached the ground when two swords have leapt: they cross and lounge and chop, the Black Knight sitting straight-backed on his saddle, the Golden standing on his stirrups, reaching prone. The management of both horses is perfect: they step and move as by instinct, in nice steady relationship: there is no pause: the blades continue their desperate parley, their ticklish intercourse, a minute, two, three. Francis, in a movement too accentuated of his horse—a movement half-voluntary on his part—receives at the bottom of the neck-piece a chop which penetrates, and draws blood. At that moment his eyes glow like two bright black moons behind his bars: for now, at last, he sees his way. As the sword of Henry descends quick to the same spot again, and rests on solid, Francis, with his excalibur, hews it fiercely. It falls in jangling sherds; and as Henry curses Heaven, Francis feints an over-helm chop; Henry bridles sharply upon his haunches; Francis plunges his blade deep into the chamfron of the charger—deep, deep into its brain. Henry is already ready with battle-axe as the animal lowers dead from its rear, and dives crashing. Out goes the heavy King's right arm, like some reaching swimmer's, as he pitches prone, tossing far the battle-axe. But he is agile: with swift scramble he is on his legs again—his hand seeks his dagger, seizes it, lifts it a little, and flings it to the ground in writhing pain and rage. The arm which had saved his fall is dislocated, and he stands *hors de combat*.

He was only a grown and bearded boy, ill-disciplined, ill-bred, obstreperous, half-savage: and he took his beating badly.

As he stamped in shockingly bad form from the field, his visage all impassioned, his nose wrinkled, he hissed with bitter, biting venom :

'Cursed black-faced Goat! Ugly French Beast! In my own God's land! But I'll have her—I'll have her—*I'll have her*—so help me—— !'

Now, as never half before, he was determined upon Laura Ford.

As for Francis, he cantered lightly once round the lists, and returned to his tent laughing.

Macdonald had leapt up. He was at Fitz's charger, stooping, tugging at the bardwise trappings, trying the steadiness of the saddle-bow, smoothing a pastern, muttering counsels into the horse's nostrils. Fitz's former animal had fallen sick during his period of separation from his friends; and this new horse was a present of the day of siege from free-handed Francis, who had given it with axe, lance, and harness complete.

Fitz with his friends was the seventh, and last, arrived: for they, without horses, had come to the castle on foot.

It was no longer day, but beginning twilight, when he rose from his length on the grass, and shook himself like the mighty gallant that he was. He looked keenly from under his large brows at the castle-front, and remembered that behind it was little Bessie Ford. And she, gazing intently through the grey air, saw his stature, and with fainting heart muttered :

'Isn't he a big one. . . . ?'

Francis was anxious to finish the tourney before further darkness, so as to proceed to preparations for the taking of the stronghold. He quickly reappeared, mounted, before his tent, sipping from a cup handed him by a chevalier.

Now the delay was short. The trumpets blared; and as the marshals called, Fitz, with one foot on the stirrup, drew Bonner's head to his side, with fondling smile; and Bonner, nestling it there, said :

'Fight roughly, Fitz, an you love me !'

To the four winds went the prone cry :

'The Black Knight and Garrett Oge Fitzgerald!'

And into the lists cantered the champions, Francis from the north, Fitz from the south, he passing close to Harry sitting there, who went 'H'm!', and looked with intense secret interest of desperate hope at the coming combat.

The speeds intensify: Francis has given well, like a royal good fellow, and Fitz's horse flies blithely to the spur: Fitz's sword is the gift of Francis, his spear, his axe: and all are very good. He is full of elation as he gallops, like one taking exercise in the element to which he was born: his simple, jolly heart does not think of defeat; he is largely confident; and so, too, is Francis largely confident, for both are Masters, easily omnipotent, buoyant on the roughest tip-top surface—as the Master always is! Fitz, in the nick of time, perceives that Francis as he comes, borne on his bounding flood of flesh, comes with lance in rest: he has just space to dash his sword into scabbard, snatch his lance, and lay it firmly to the *atteinte*. They meet: the two steels shrilly shiver. They draw: and with quick exquisite interaction ply those blades of supremest craftsmanship, whose fellows are not in the world; quick, like the quick winking of sheet-lightning, they ply: and the least fraction of an inch's fault on either side will bring on instant ruin.

They cannot conquer one the other: here Mars has met Ares—each his match. Francis is perhaps a shade the more agile, the iron of Fitz's wrist perhaps a shade the more inexorable. By the twinkling of a second's space Francis sights an advantage: he chops largely at the collar-bone, and must enter, if he meets it: for Fitz wears absolutely no armour save a steel morion, and a scanty ring-mail habergeon, sleeved to the elbow, bulged by his buxom breasts. But, as the precious blade of Francis descends, it is met with sharp impact by the equally precious blade of Fitz; and click go the two great falchions, split like glass, mutually destructive, and dropping in common ruin.

Now is the regime of the axe—but it lasts not one half minute. The horses step into such an obtuse-

angled head-to-head relation, that the destruction of both, given two such fighters, is quite certain. Francis hews at the chamfron; Fitz, a half-second later, farther back between the ears; both steeds dive from their rear with instant suddenness. Of the two men, Francis can hardly be said to fall: by some miracle of agility he is disengaged from his horse almost as it drops; Fitz tumbles ponderously, and rolls once.

Reason enough now has he to bless his lightness of armour; for in a flash the edge of Francis is impending upon him: but that edge meets with the top-ring of his axe-hole, and the next moment he is towering upon Francis, aggressive, urgent, wielding his weapon like Jove; there is a minute during which he raises such outcries from the clattered metal of the French King, that the lists ring with the clangour of it: the front of his own mail-shirt is stained, but Francis' cuirass runs with blood. And 'Gallant Fitz!' hisses Macdonald, shivering on tip-toe yonder, 'hew, fool! hew!' Fitz hews, nor fails. Francis staggers to his back: Fitz, over him, has a dagger at his bars.

'Oh, I yield, I yield,' laughs Francis—leaps up lightly, with light sobbing laugh—falls again—leaps again, trying, with sobbing laugh, to shake Fitz's hand —and faints in the arms of Fitz.

On the battlements yonder Bessie Ford has jumped upright, with bright face, with clapping hands.

'Oh, by my credit! the greatest of warriors, the chief of gallants, he——!' cries she.

But the next moment she collapses, sobbing, remembering that he too, even he, is against her.

And Harry, also, at his tent door was upright, with clapped hands. Francis had been vanquished! And Christendom should know it! And Laura Ford was Fitzgerald's!—and Fitzgerald, and the gallows at Tyburn-hill, were *his!*

CHAPTER XXX

HOT AIR

'Il amusa le peuple de la ville en faisant sortir toutes les nuits du fonds d'un puits un corps lumineux semblable à la Lune, qui portait sa lumière jusqu'à la distance de plusieurs milles.'—D'HERBELOT.

OF all this Mauro Calvo saw nothing: he was busy that day and far into the night, like a man who, having found hid treasure, forgets the world in digging.

His operations now were so evident, that, but for the wild pre-occupation which filled the castle, even the stolid servitor who bore him food must have been pricked to curiosity.

For Calvo had now taken down all the dusty sendal hangings in two of the rooms, and had cut them with a knife from his bag into eight equal-sized canoe-shaped pieces; also, lying along the floor of the large rooms, for anyone to see, was his arrangement of eight laths, strung at both ends by wires between the sixteen cogs of two circles of wood. But of this the servitor took no notice, perhaps associating it in his mind with the repairs. He had no thought of the prisoner's escape: it was, indeed, perfectly easy for Calvo to lower himself by a rope, if he had one; for outside a door which looked upon the castle-back was a stone platform with a coping, in which was a stout staple; but had he climbed down there, he would have descended into the back castle-courtyard, within the bastioned curtains, where his capture would have been coolly effected. There was not therefore in the mind of anyone the least thought of his escape.

His next work was to cut in the inner surface of one of the circles of wood, near the circumference, a deep round groove, into which the bottom of a water-cup in the room could be firmly fixed; and into this same circle he made, also, near the circumference, a hole to admit the hand. Into the cup he put some coal found half-burnt in a fireplace, with some pieces of shellac from his bag, freely wetting the whole with inflammable naphtha; and he fixed the cup in the groove.

About this time Bessie and Laura came down from the summit: for the tournament was over. Calvo took not the least notice of them. They had for him now absolutely no interest, save as the parts of an experiment.

He next proceeded to cover his framework of eight laths with the eight pieces of canoe-shaped sendal-silk. Glue or gum he had not, but with a small gar, or awl, he bored holes along the length of the lathes, and, with a string of sendal, fastened two edges of the canoe-shapes along each lath, the string running over and under alternately. He was half through this slow work, when he heard, far off, the renewed boom of cannon, and started.

It was now late night. He left his work, ran to the door opening upon the platform, and looked out. It was drizzling, and dark, and bleak. A rough wind had arisen, which moaned round the crenaux and bartisans of the donjon. With inward satisfaction he saw that it blew from the north-east.

Back he ran to his great, doubtful, momentous task; his heart misgiving him; his brain spurring him. The thought that hot air was lighter than cold had become a numb mania with him: he had eaten no food that day: he muttered with his lips.

Swiftly, tremulously, worked now his cunning fingers. Strange, eager, dying sounds reached his ears from beyond the locked portal. Momentary uproars of distracted petards burst and crackled; there were shouts, and echoes, running feet, and violin-sounds like wails, and still the rare vague boom of cannon. The rush-light which he had stuck near flickered upon a face

pallid, and even awful, the lips being pressed tight, sweat beading the bulging corpse-brow, and the calm of the misshapen eyes changed all to wildness.

The edges of the eight canoe-shapes were now taped to the eight laths and to the two circles, and all was fairly air-tight. Where there seemed a crevice, he melted some shellac in the rush-light, and smeared the parts thinly.

As he did this, he heard three strokes of the castle clock through the noise of the two raging storms. It was midnight.

He rushed to the basket lying in a corner, and upset upon the floor the mass of shavings, tools, and oblongs of sawed wood which it contained. He began to tie in its stout rim eight pieces of sendal rope, which he had prepared for that purpose. They were all equal in length, about seven feet.

Suddenly he sniffed, lifted his head, and looked round: the room was pervaded with thin smoke. He ran out to the platform: all the air was luridly red, and far to the west there went out from the building, solemnly informing the night, a stream of sparkling fume. The castle, it was clear, was in flames.

He ran back to his task, crying to Laura and Bessie:

'Prepare yourselves, you two——!'

They, sitting on the floor in fear, knew not in the least what he meant; but they rose.

He attached all the eight strings to the basket in a fury of haste; then shouldered his slender silken work. The length was great, the weight little. He manœuvred the turning end through the door, out upon the platform. Held upright, its top reached well beyond the battlements. A new fear of the streaming sparks beset him, and his movements became intensely flurried.

Leaning the long spar of silk against the battlements, he pressed with his left fist against the lower circle of wood, pulling at the same time, with the right hand, the rope which, knotted largely at the top, passed through the two circles. The straight spar began to bulge into needle-shape; he pulled—it bulged into melon-shape; still he pulled, straining, with reddening

face—it bulged into orange-shape; and now a plug of wood plaited into the rope inside met the lower circle; quickly he inserted another plug into an opening left in the plaiting under the circle: and now the orange-shape was fixed. He tied the great globular bag to the staple in the coping. Its rockings and bumps were moderate, the castle's bulk shielding it from the east-wind.

Even there he could hear that the castle was full of shouts. The assailants had, in fact, now pelted into the burning building, the inner drawbridge and fosse having been carried, slaying all they met, Francis and Fitzgerald foremost, and Henry, too, prone in the van. Calvo quickly and firmly secured the eight basket-ropes to the peg beneath the lower circle, and called:

'Come, come, you. . . .!'

Bessie and Laura stood at the door wondering at this strange, great, light, round monster which rocked and bumped. They could no more divine its purpose than the things that are done on Saturn.

The basket lay on the platform with lax ropes; and Mauro Calvo said:

'Get in there. . . .'

Laura Ford drew back with parting nostrils, in extreme fear of this new thing. Bessie, lion-hearted, at once said:

'Come, Laura . . .,' and led her by the hand.

The basket was large and deep-rimmed. They sat: Calvo ran with trembling legs, and returned with his bag; ran again, and returned with the shaded rush-light. He pushed it through the hand-hole in the lower circle, and turned the flame to the naphtha-cup. The spirit popped into flame. Calvo undid the rope from the staple, and scuttled into the basket.

He waited. Gradually the lax ropes stirred, straightened, tightened. He waited still in a horror of expectation.

The conflagration of the donjon was now in full swelter, and from many a casement roared a flame, while on high the spangled black gonfalon of Ravine floated through a vault lurid as the dawning of day in

Tophet. All in the loud air were tones and sounds, as when men in sleep shout weakly in the centre of the thundering of cataracts.

The ropes tightened—but the basket did not move. Calvo waited, and it did not move, and lift. As when the treasure-digger finds the casket there, but empty, and the world all rags and hunger still, so was the sage's face.

Yet the ropes between basket and silken bag were taut—the bag wanted to ascend, if it could—the hot air within it being lighter than the cold around it: this, of itself, was a triumph for the thinker. After a minute, seeing it, he had a joy in his despair. He threw out his bag, and at once the basket thrilled and creaked; in his mad urgency to watch the fruit of his brain, he got up, stepped over the rim—and was tossed sprawling upon the platform, tripped by the edge of the now ascending basket. Never did fall fill a man with glee so rapturous. He was on his feet in a moment, snatched at the running rope, wrapped it once round the staple, and so held it as it paid furiously out, gazing the while upward with adoring eyes.

From the air there reached him an awful shriek—the shriek of Laura Ford, as she felt the strong aspiring leap of the unknown thing that bore her. Bessie exclaimed: 'My mother!', and the next moment, white herself, was hushing her sister's loud terrors.

But the bag had hardly reached an elevation of forty feet from the platform when its ascension ceased, it paused, and yielding to the weight it carried, began to sink, rushing all the time at the rate of fifty miles an hour down the north-eastern wind under a canopy of smoke and sparks from the castle.

Those of the assailants who guarded the castle-back saw with straining necks, and the wildest wonder, that floating visitant, that novel moon, lit and yellow, sailing in solemn mystery above their heads. As the shepherds who, tending their flocks by night, were aware of sudden brightness in the air, and sweet preamble of heavenly harps, so these wondered. The last thing that occurred to them was that here was a thing of human making.

It passed over a stretch of forest and bumped with some heaviness on a rising ground some seven hundred yards from the castle. As the girls attempted to get out, they were flung to the ground, and up, with instant buoyancy, it shot again, running away fast with the rope. Calvo, however, by giving the rope another turn round the staple, was able to check its flight; and now, with straining effort, equal almost to the effort of lifting together the two girls, he commenced to draw it in. Once and again he had perforce to pause, holding it by help of the turns on the staple. But after some ten minutes, he at last threw his bag into the basket, himself after it, cut the rope, and shot high.

His course was more adventurous than that of the girls. His weight being less, he was borne upon a far more extended descending curve; also, the wind which entered the silken bag by the hand-hole, at every gust blew the flame into horrid proximity either with the outer covering, or with the cord that connected the two circular pieces at their centres. Thus it happened that, at a moment when the flame had begun to expire, and the contrivance was descending some mile and a half from the castle, Calvo noticed in the covering a hole rimmed with spreading red. He glanced with horror below: the earth was forty feet away. In another twenty seconds he was crashing through a shubbery: he clutched instinctively at his bag; and the next instant, the air-horse, relieved of the weight, leapt high. He saw the wasting silk shrivel and consume before a writhing edge of flame, till with steep drop it fell among trees ten yards away.

At that time, the castle was being ransacked for Calvo and the girls; and though the exact place of their confinement was unknown to the assailants, it quickly became certain that they were not in the building.

Henry himself entered the very rooms whence the wizard had lately vanished, and he was hurrying back along a corridor rolled in smoke, when before him he saw a sight at which he started: Wolsey coming toward him.

An expression of fury flitted over the King's face: here was confirmation of the incredible rumour that Wolsey was in the castle, had brought the girls thither, was opposing the purposes of the King, had resisted his demand for surrender.

'How now, my lord Cardinal? You here! *You!*' said Harry.

Wolsey was large in cardinal red and hat; and with him were most of his ten men. He had been hiding in a locked room, finding all escape cut off, till he was certain that Harry had passed beyond it inward. Now he came stooping forward, an expression of frank gladness on his face.

'Your Majesty is safe!' he cried.

'*You* here, my lord? *You!*'

'I am this moment arrived from London, Sire. I had tidings that my King was in peril——'

'From London, say you? This moment, eh? My lord, your arriving is wondrous well timed!'

Henry was regarding him with a most stern brooding underlook of suspicion.

'You make me the more happy, Sire.'

'But 'tis said that you were in the castle all the time!'

'Which castle, Sire?'

'God in Heaven, man, there are not five million castles! *This* castle.'

'But—Sire——'

'You falter, my lord Cardinal! You halt, you falter! 'Tis an ill sign, by Heaven's light, when a man falters——'

'But—Sire—hear me——'

'You *but* me, man—you *but* me overmuch——!'

'I am at your Majesty's feet. Sire, if some enemy hath abused your ear with this weird tale, 'twere but due to me to declare me who.'

'Who, Brandon, was it said that my lord Wolsey was in the castle?' asked Henry.

'One Sidney Boleyn, Sire,' said Brandon.

'A brother of the Lady Anne?' queried Wolsey.

'Yes, my lord.'

'But, Sire,' said Wolsey, 'she is my enemy!—avowed——'

'Well, that she is no doubt, I admit.'

'My enemy, Sire!' said Wolsey, with opening arms, working upon Henry's generous candour in the presence of facts.

'Well, I hope I wrong you not, my lord Cardinal—yet 'tis strange, you know—'tis strange——'

At this point Knevet ran up, crying:

'No sign of the fugitives, Sire!'

And on the instant the agile brain of Wolsey divined that the sagacious mind of Calvo had somehow saved his skin, and if so, then Wolsey's as well. At once he said:

'I believe that the ears of your Majesty have been greatly abused by the conceited fiction of an impudent girl. And the proof that the part of it which concerned me was false, is seen by the fact that the other part was false, too.'

'What other part, my lord?'

'Sire, there were here no fugitives.'

'What! *dared* she that?'

Wolsey was sweetly tickled.

'Sire,' said he, 'the whole was concocted. There were here no fugitives, credit me. I have even now encountered Sir James Broughton, who hath given me that assurance. This Mistress Boleyn, Sire——'

'She shall smart for it, then! My lord Cardinal, forgive me——'

The hands of King and Priest met in a grip of renewed friendship, Wolsey smiling from the height of his proud neck his little superior smile.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE WOOD

'The virtuous soul pursues a nobler aim,
And life regards but as a fleeting dream.'
GAY.

CALVO, from the castle, had observed the whereabouts of the girls' fall from the air-car: and within few minutes after his own fall was rejoined to them.

Now their plight was worse than ever: their enemies in hosts beset them round; they were without horse, or food, or coin. They sought out the deepest recess of the forest, peeringly advancing, and there slept.

This vast dark wood, which was called Broughton Wood, was peopled with rabbits and hares: and the next day Calvo contrived a trap, set it near, and waited long, with back turned upon his hope; but the rabbits of the period, wise in that their dim, far-sunken generation, divined the whole mind of the sage, and squatted in their jungled sylvan glooms, content to leave the baitless trap alone.

Laura complained, saying that it was too much to expect of her, at the end of the tale. Calvo's nose had the wrinkles of fretfulness. About three in the afternoon, good Bessie rose, saying that she would go and beg, they to await her there.

Off, then, she went, winding on a way that she knew not through the sunless shade. The storm of the night had died now to a breeze. All the forest crackled and sang and squeaked with unseen life. Above, the great ocean of foliage was very good Gileadite, and could say the *sh* in 'shibboleth.'

And, as she went, sadly meditating upon the bright green-sward, her dress somewhat torn, and her little plait reaching no lower than her low-cut bodice-neck, suddenly, two hands from behind pressed over her eyes, drawing back her head, and two lips shot a fugitive kiss at her ear, and laughed a little.

She was released at once; and, looking, saw a lank strip of body high above her, and a lean brown face. Mournfully she smiled, and, without the least appearance of being startled, said:

'By my credit, sir, you startle me. . . .'

She knew him at once for the Black Knight, having seen him visored in the lists, and Laura, whom he had seized, had described him. Also, she had heard village-rumours that the Black Knight was none other than the King of France.

But as for him, he had no notion that here was the sister of that Beauty which he coveted. He kissed her ear for the simple reason that she was a girl in the romantic gloom of a wood.

'And why here, and whither-away, mamsel?' quoth he.

'I am faring through the forest, sir, to seek some nourishment for me and mine.'

'Little English body . . .' he said, contemplating her, smiling, pleased with her little way, and English demureness.

'And whither-away you, my lord?' said she.

'I? Why, I seek here—but come, thou art not angry, I think, that I bussed thy cheek?'

'Why, no, sir! By my credit, 'twere more than that would anger me, seeing 'twas merry and fairly done. But you *seek* someone, my lord?'

'La, yes. Hath it not come to thine ears that a goodly number of cavaliers search a gentle special demoisel through this country-side? I, know, am even one of them: and, catching this morning a wind of rumour that she lies concealed within this wood, I with some comrades wander here a-search. La! and now am I in double dilemma, for neither demoisel nor comrades find I. Moreover, I have three sore gashes in my chest, and am faint, *mon Dieu!* An, now, I had that

little lap whereon to lay my head, pending but a ten minutes' space——'

'Why, sure, sir, an you will it so——' said Bessie, turning upon him the full regard of her candid eyes. They met a leer not quite fair and good: yet she did not blush, nor turn away.

'Here, then . . .,' he said.

She sat on a swell of sward in brown obscurity under an oak; and lying at his length, with head raised on her lap, he looked up into the breeze-tickled leafage.

Once two babes, exposed in a forest, were found by a she-wolf. There were ten million chances against one chance that she would tear and eat them: but that one chance, which verily exists in the elfin Heart of Nature, worked and won. She suckled them.

Even such was Bessie's risk in resting here with Francis of France; and she had an instinctive consciousness of it: but her heart was strong, and her eyes candid.

'Thou hast rencountered none of my friends, I take it?' said he after a minute.

'Not I, sir.'

'Of the maiden which I seek hast heard tell in thy village?'

'I have heard tell of her, my lord.'

'How knowest thou I am milord?'

'Sure, your good and gracious way with a poor maiden bewrayeth you high and gent, sir.'

He kissed her hand.

'Thinkest thou I would harm thee?'

'*You*, my lord? Not you!'

'Faith, then, I would not.'

'Why, I wot it, sir.'

'But as to this maiden—canst give me no guidance? For I could wager she is somewhere in this wood.'

'An I *could* give you guidance, my lord, think you I would?'

'La! and wherefore not?'

He jerked up in surprise his hairy head, all about which the breezes toyed.

'Because, sir, 'tis sure you seek her not for her good.'

'There you err fondly: precisely for her good I seek

her; 'twere my will to lavish round her beauty all the jouissance of life, by Crisscross!'

'For how long, my lord?'

'Why, so long as her life, mamsel.'

'But life is not long, my lord. Sure, you can give her no jouissance in the grave.'

'Who talks of graves, mamsel?'

Again, as he asked, Francis jerked up, glancing at her, wondering at so broad outlook in village maid.

'Sure, sir,' she said, 'tis nought oddish if I talk of graves, for, by my credit, graves are all about us, and near enow; and a life, were it King's or village-maid's, is just like last Summer, which lasted not long, and is evanished now, and buried deep away, no man any more thinking thereon at all for ever.'

'*Mortbleue!* 'tis true, girl. La—true. Yet while that Summer dured, 'twere well, methinks that it shone blithe and merry, since it so soon passed.'

'So hold I, too, my lord. And fain am I, I avouch, of flute and tabouret, and dancing under-moon on the green, and the warming of strong ale, and specially of grand Hampshire cider, sir, and sweet lover's-whisperings above all, my lord, had I—aye me—but a lover, sir! For though I talk of graves, ill were it to me to die, who am full of life, by my credit, too much, perchance. But, sir——'

'Well, I hearken, I am hearkening. Say it through, say it right through.'

'Sir, the things of jouissance you would be giving to that poor wench resemble not really the good, brave shining of a Summer, but rather, meseems, flashes of lightning in a lowering sky. Faith, something assures me that I say true. I see well that she would gain a drop, and lose the sea.'

'What lose, then?'

'Why, sir, sure there is something in simple innocence that more warms the bones than an ale-house fire at Christmas Eve, and a jig into which the clear heart anon breaks merrier far, by my credit, than galliard, or brawl, or corantoes; and a secret *Wine*, sir—ah! nay, I cannot say all I would——'

The heart of Francis burned strangely within him as she so communed with him. Looking up into the moving tree, he lisped dreamily:

'Say it on—say it on——'

'Why, sir, sure,' said she, 'there is that in the world which speaks, and we hear it, though not with the ear: and like an angel-lover it sings and soothes, or like a storm it brawls. Oh, faith, to act well appeareth a great alchemy, and fine ducket-gold in the pouch, my lord!—for 'tis then with the soul as though it went jaunting on a grand upward march in good company with the sun and the moon and all the train of the stars—oh, my lord, look out! look out!'

Her words ended in a cry: and out, with swift, protective impulse, rushed her hand over the brow of the French King. The hand was pierced by a small bullet, which penetrated, and drew blood from him also. She had seen a puff of smoke start from a thicket ten yards away, glimpsed a bullet, and acted with the instancy of thought.

Francis in a moment was on his feet, and, with drawn sword, was gone like the wind in pursuit.

CHAPTER XXXII

AT ORMOND HALL

'Distinguish all the floods that are
Mixed in that watery theatre. . . .'
HERRICK.

THE shot had been fired by a retainer of Ormond Hall, of whom three, with Anne, were in the forest searching for Laura Ford. Anne, looking through bush, saw Bessie, and, to her astonishment, the head of Francis on Bessie's lap. She was seized with fright, concluding now that Bessie had compounded with the French King—that Laura was in his hands. The thing or man, were he a King, that came between her and her ambition she doomed without hesitation, and 'Shoot me quick that man!' she whispered to a liveryman.

Francis, at the pistol-crack, went dashing in search; but pursuit in such a wood was hopeless. He found no one. After a random hunt of ten minutes, he stopped.

He put his hand to his forehead, and took it away red from a flesh-wound. He remembered now that she had laid her hand there, and saved him; must have been herself pierced.

His heart had burned strangely within him, moved and touched by some sweetness of pity in her tones, some dear light in her eyes, or some profundity of hoary world-wisdom in her words. He ran now swiftly, pantingly, to find her. But he was uncertain of his way. Not till after a half-hour did he come to a tree which he believed to be the tree he had lain by: there were many oaks in the forest. Bessie, however, was not there.

Had he been bespoken by some affable and wise Angel in homely disguise, resting here in the shade mid-way on her high wayfaring betwixt world and world? Some such fancy passed in his mind. He was full of a sense of loss.

The tree to which he returned was indeed the same: but Bessie had now gone forward on her errand of food-seeking. She had sprung up, agitated, immediately after Francis, and had stood some minutes, waiting what should betide. Nothing happened: and when Francis did not come, she went onward.

Anne Boleyn, even in hasting out of Francis' path, had kept her eye on Bessie, who was the key to Laura; and as Bessie moved through the wood, followed, guessing now that since she went forward without Francis, then Francis had not yet Laura.

Bessie happened, without special motive, to take her way north-westward, hoping to come upon cottage, or hamlet, or castle. And half a mile north-westward lay Ormond Hall.

The thought leapt in Anne's mind:

'If now she should go to the Hall, and I hold her safe there under lock and key!'

There was no danger that Bessie should discover her tracker: the anguish of her hand occupied her; anon she held it aloft, shaking it cherishingly as it panged. She had rent a strip of under-garment, and bound the wound.

A thickness in the forest made her change direction, and in the new course she continued.

But Anne was now besieged by the idea of having her at the Hall. It seemed clear that Bessie was not now making for the spot where Laura hid, being now too near the wood's edge; she was therefore going from that spot. To reach Laura, it would be only necessary to search somewhere in the opposite direction. But Anne's first tactical task was the securing of Bessie, if that was possible without scaring her. For this pure sister of her intended victim Anne had acquired an extraordinary detestation, evil as sin; merely to do her hurt was pleasant to Anne. When Bessie changed direction, Anne threw over her face a folded veil of gold

gauze, quickly caught up the lowly pilgrim, and passed her a little.

It was in a narrow green-sward between tree-trunks, deep-gloomed and cool. The afternoon was well advanced toward twilight. But here it seemed almost night.

Anne's dress was very different now from her dress beneath the chestnut at Mede Down: her skirt being of rich cloth-of-tissue, with a surcoat of crimson silk, and plumed cap of white cloth-of-gold. Bessie, as the lady passed, drew back respectfully, and waited. At five paces' distance Anne turned, saying:

'Hast lost thy way, girl?'

Now, for the first time in her life, Bessie heard that voice. It was a deep and rich contralto.

'Why, no, mistress, not that wholly. But——'

'What seekest?'

'Why, a hamlet, mistress, or a hall, imports not which.'

'Thou goest hardly right, then, meseems. Art a stranger? What is thy need?'

'Truth to tell, I go to beg a morsel of food——'

'Why, poor lost soul, follow me straight, I bid thee! Not five minutes hence is Redmond Castle, where thou shalt be richly regaled, I promise!'

Anne, a consummate actress, walked on at once, without waiting, and Bessie followed with laggard steps. If her good angel in some remoteness of her consciousness whispered her halt, she hardly heard: for the angels whisper low, thinking our ears celestial like their own, and they are mortal ears—not made by *us*, for that matter.

Ormond Hall was a grey square mass of low building, with a multitude of windows, half of them on fire now with sunset. It stood lonely in the middle of wide lawn-land, which was quite surrounded by a circular edge of forest.

Not till Anne emerged from the wood did Bessie see her well. And at once something—a fear, a memory, an instinct—troubled her. But it was very indefinite: and yonder was the house; and hunger pressed:

she followed, continually quickening her laggard steps.

Yet a hundred yards, and Anne was at the house-front, which looked east. She beckoned. Bess came to the long frontage-steps, and halted.

'Come, come,' said Anne busily.

'Shall I not make round to the back, mistress?' asked Bess, wondering.

'No—this way! Come.'

'My mother . . .' muttered Bess.

She followed. Anne passed through the antlered and hatchmented antechamber, through a salon, up a wide 'stair-case,' along a corridor, into a room. At the door Bessie halted, with panting nostrils.

'Come, come——' said Anne.

It was a long room on the first floor, containing three windows in the front of the house and two in an adjacent side. Its furnishing was heavy and august—storied tapestry, ebon chairs, a table for shovel-board, a Spanish foot-cloth of needlework bound in buckram, a massive beaufet of shining wood, a massive escritoire of oak, Venice mirrors in silver filigree, and at one end an elevated gallery with fat-bellied balustrades. It had two doors, one permanently locked; and a mass of court-letters on the escritoire, and of embroidery on a settee, showed that it was a room of Anne's.

Bessie entered. Anne returned to the door, shut it, locked it. Then she leant her back there, tossed up her thick veil, and with mocking sideward underlook, turned her face upon Bessie.

Now Bessie recognised her, and uttered a cry. And in that cry was not fear alone, but enmity and rage also.

'Why, lady,' said she, with white face and opening nostrils, 'what is your will of me?'

'Oh, Innocence!' mocked Anne, 'chaste village *naïveté* embodied, I swear! Canst not guess?'

'Why, lady, not I!'

'Yet thou knowest me, I see well. I followed thee once—thou fled'st from me. Now—is it not so?—I have thee.'

'Have me? You? By what right have you me, lady?'

'So, thou hast a pert tongue to question, I see, and art not all village-*naïveté* and chastity, after all! The head of Francis the First, King of France, on the lap of an innocent, sweet village-lass in a forest is sign of far progress in the paths of chastity, for that matter. Oh, by the Rood, thou naughty, naughty Bess!'

Bessie's white face flushed into peony crimson.

'Prithee—let me hence——' she faltered, all crushed with shame—'oh! your thoughts—your tongue——'

'Was it not, then, very naughty, Bess? Poor Francis is so frail—thou hast no notion! and hath, 'tis said, a weakness for both of two sisters——'

'Oh, lady, lady, may I not fare hence?'

'Why, nay, Bess. The door, you see, is locked.'

The key, however, remained in it.

'Now may God me keep from doing you hurt with my hands, lady!' exclaimed Bessie Ford, holding back her stiffly-clenched fists.

'I hope He even will, girl: for this, you must know, is not Redmond Castle, as I told you, but Ormond Hall, my father's house. And, an you stir against me, my servants rend you limb from limb; nor, look you, am I myself wholly a wren-chick, I swear to you!'

'I hear you, lady; yea, by my credit, you have all the strength on your side. But therefore 'tis that you should the less wrong me, who, faith, am a poor creature, sore beset, God wot, come hither to beg of your ladyship a morsel of rye-bread. Wherefore keep, and crush, and madden me? What part hath a lady such as you in my forlorn and woeful estate? Prithee, let me hence! Prithee, prithee! Who, lady, are you?'

Anne was open, bluff frankness itself when no motive urged diplomacy.

'Oh, I am the Lady Anne Boleyn,' she said; 'now canst guess what I need with thee?'

'Why, lady, by my credit, nay!'

'Art dullard, then! King Henry of England, thou seest, was hot to make me his queen this day month

agone. Thou must sure have heard. But, being the great mumping fool that he is, he hath flung me clean over, to the intent that he might run agape after thy silly sister, good Bess——'

'My sister! What have you with my sister, lady? Oh, good mother!'

'Your sister I seek, that I may have her in my hands, that I may give her into the hands of Henry, that Henry may give into my hands the Kingdom of England, that so on, and so on, in the manner of the House which Jack built, chaste Bess.'

'Why, woman, you are black with sin!'

'And would you know precisely why I hold you *now*, chaste Bess? Wait—I will even show you!'

Anne soared to the escritoire, which was near the locked door, and scribbled a few words, while Bessie stood with heaving chest, her eyes roaming round the chamber like a new-caged creature's. They fell at last upon the open escritoire. There on the drawn leaf she saw, with a start, a folded paper which she had every reason to know well, and instantly recognised. It was the King's-letter to Wolsey, taken by her from Fitzgerald's cloak.

'There!' said Anne, leaping up. 'This, Bess, is a billet to a young nobleman called Percy of Northumberland, who lies rather sick with wounds at Fenley, one three-quarter mile hence. And the billet has it: "Go with seven or eight armed men, sans delay, in an eastern and southern direction from Ormond Hall through Broughton Wood, passing close by the cress-pool on its northern side. The Girl is sure there. I have her sister. Do thou endeavour to go in thy proper person, maugre thy wounds. Francis lurks thereabouts.—ANNE."'

Now it happened that this note pretty accurately described the real whereabouts of Laura Ford; and as Bessie heard it, hope left her, and her knees were weak.

They remained a minute motionless, confronted, vice with purity, Bessie's eyes wildly haggard, Anne smiling venomously: till Anne moved to a bell-rope hanging

near the elevated gallery, to summon a messenger; and that movement broke the spell of Bessie's terror.

Crying: '*You shan't!*', with a swift snatch she had the note crumpled in her own hand.

The venomous smile passed now from Anne's face, and flaming rage was there. Stepping upon Bessie with the menace of a Billingsgate-wife, she cried:

'That billet, wench!—lest I strangle you—quick——!'

'Oh, I fear not the stranglings of such a woman as *you!*' answered Bessie, even as down upon her cheek came the brisk palm of Anne with scarlet smart; and in a moment they were engaged in a panting struggle for the letter. Of the two women Anne was the more largely built, but Bessie Ford was very vigorous and knit, having the vital good sap of England in her birth and making.

She had no intention to yield the paper, and Anne, tugging with bitten under-lip, and gradually-failing force, found a wrist and fist stern as a locked portal. With tottering stumbles, with wild swayings, in an intense silence of effort, save for their fervid breaths which vehemently filled the room, they fought. At the last Bessie, though tortured by her wound, with a strong push of both fists freed herself, and sent Anne staggering to a backward crouch; and at once she slipped the letter into her bosom.

'Now you die, you little marmot!' gasped Anne with threatening head-shake, as she rushed anew to the bell.

But here again Bessie was beforehand. With pelting speed she darted to the spot, and, even as Anne's hand rose, leapt, caught the rope, and hung all her weight upon it. It was made of twisted wool, and came away from the metal a-top, dropping in a snake.

And now Bessie ran to the locked door; but before she could turn the key, Anne's hand was upon it. Bessie, with swift craft, in an unexpected jerk, drew the key, and from where she stood tossed it through a window, which splintered, out upon the lawn.

Now, if she was a prisoner, so was Anne. They stood there equal, woman to woman, Anne without help from without.

Bessie's weight had, indeed, rung the bell in a hard clang, followed by two weak tinklings as the rope broke; and this Anne knowing, waited half a minute at the door, expecting coming footsteps. But the single bell-clang had aroused no one. And Anne, crouching agonised, at length commenced to cry out: 'Hi, Bertha! Wallis! Hi!'

But at once Bessie, springing upon her, put both palms to her mouth, and so urged and flung her backward. From her crouch Anne leapt up shivering with passion; and in this passion, now, was a qualm of physical cowardice.

'Look you—girl—if you dare lay—hands on me—!' she panted.

'Hold—your voice, then!' responded Bessie's pant, 'do but lift—it and—I tear your skin—I beat—you blue!'

'Then would you need—your man, Fitzgerald—here to aid you—base gutter-hen——!' gasped Anne, her strong sense all breaking up now into mere childish spite and femininities.

Bessie, in a lower tone of surprise, and transferred interest, said: 'Master Fitzgerald? sure, I wot naught of whom you mean. Will your wicked tongue be fastening now upon him also?'

'Him! the rottenest profligate that man in all England——!'

Here was feminine arrow shot at random, which hit and pierced.

'Oh, most like 'tis a foul lie, like all you say!' cried Bess with impatient bitterness, harsh as terebinth. 'Corrupted is your tongue, and only evil from its root! And how if I, since you so madden me, since you *dare* so slander the innocent, do make straight hence to where the King lies encamped, and straight declare him of you; reveal him this your letter lying in my bosom here; point to whom 'tis writ—most like, your paramour; and tell of wherefore you would trap my poor little sister—of all your unwomanly pitilessness—your foul, unhandsome thinkings—your virtueless and ungentle works—and all your shame! Oh, fie, fie, lewd

lady! Nay, and 'tis what I even *shall* do—yea, verily, by my credit, exposed you *shall* be——!'

At this hideous threat out blazed Anne's eyes like a virago's, and showing her grinced teeth, she advanced with shuddering opening arms upon Bessie: but stopped, fearing her; and sought with feminine instinct how to stab and slay her with the venomed weapon of the tongue.

'So you would expose me?' cried she with forced hysterical laughter. 'Ha! ha! Anne Boleyn exposed by Bessie Ford!—a theme for the play-house at Southwark, I swear to God, I swear to God! O cameradoes! Then, sure must I call Mark Bonner to witness against you!'

The last words were, in a high degree, hysterical, without special meaning, except in so far as they introduced the name of Bonner with the hope of wounding.

'And what of Mark Bonner now, an it please you?' said Bessie.

'He! O, the accepted lover of the sister! By God, that boy kisses a woman like a trout biting a bait!'

'Who, Mark Bonner? Sure, 'tis some mistake you make, then . . .'

'A woman mistakes not the man which kisses her, daw! He has kissed and tongued me, that boy——!'

'Mark Bonner?' said Bessie, white as paper: for if Bonner was false to Laura, what hope remained?

'Faith, never was I so hotly tackled!' cried Anne.

'Nay, but *what* a wanton must you be!' went Bessie, faintingly, turning away her shamed face.

''Tis so said. Yet never have I borne in my lap the head of Francis—in a wood!'

'But have you indeed led that poor youth astray? Oh, have you verily?'

''Twas he led me astray! As *you* have led poor Francis!—whose taste, by the Rood, degenerates of late, thou bosomless skelet!'

'Oh, then, if this you have done, I could almost curse you! Filthy are you in the regard of honest eyes! I could almost say: may your life fail upon you—ending in as sharp a stroke as now you have——!

Nay, I curse you not, for that were ignorantly done, by my credit! But I do most foully hate, and spit upon you. I do loathe you with my soul as a thing unclean and spotted as snakes! Dangerous and deadly are you; yet, by my credit, I fear you not, for stronger is that better is: and yet may you know it, though now your understanding be a world too dark to scent a truth so bright. And as for the letter that lies there, no right have you to it, I trow, and with me now shall it rest——'

She had cunningly backed as she spoke towards the escritoire, and with a sudden movement seized the King's letter to Wolsey.

Anne, forgetting every fear, rushed to seize it—for here was her last weapon against the Cardinal. But she was too late: the letter was in Bessie's bosom, and Anne received a stern thrust-back at the neck, the better here being indeed the stronger.

If the quick temperament of Anne had flamed before, now it raved. There where she stood, she threw back her throat, and she piled shriek on shriek, yelling 'Help! help! help!', and as she yelled, foam sprinkled from her mouth, and speckled her nether lip, and her dishevelled face was all like tumbled sunset.

Now she was heard: from some remote region of the great house Sir Thomas came running, as did a dozen retainers.

And still she called and yelled; and as she yelled Bessie Ford, transported too, beat and beat upon her upturned face and mouth, gasping: 'Hush—hush—or I beat—you blue!' And even in that moment of hysterical collapse and distraction, Anne remembered the dart, the venom which kills, the poison of asps which was under her tongue. And she shrieked, and sobbed, and jerked, while Bessie beat:

'You might divine—whence I got—the letter——'

'Little it tides whence—hold—your voice! Hush—or I beat—you blue——'

''Twas from *him!* He is wild—in love—with me——'

'You said—it before. I heed not—hush, I say——!'

'Not him—not Bonner—Fitzgerald——'

'*Who?*'

'Fitzgerald——'

'Oh, you liar!—take that!—take it!—if he loved a filth like you—I'd stab—I'd stab—him to—the heart!'

'He loves—me mad!'

'You lie—take it——!'

''Twas he—that gave—the letter—he gave me when—he knew—you were—expecting it——'

'*He!* Oh, now you *hurt*—have mercy——'

She swerved back crouching, with covered face, deep stabbed, conquered, sobbing — for the lie was so plausible to her. But now the door was rudely shaken without—there were calls, voices, urging shoulders.

Instantly Bessie recovered herself, and flew to a window to leap—a bold leap of twenty-five feet. Anne, swiftly roused to a sense of the practical, was after her. As Bessie put her shoulders out of window, Anne's hands were upon them, dragging her back. Now with cat-o'-mountain fury they struggled, with spitting rancour, with rent clothes, their womanhood all naked to its foundations, ugly as harridans. And as in this turbulency of action they fought, heaving like the angry sea, Anne glimpsed on the lawn two retainers, run round here to see what they could see. At that moment Bessie was all but freed from her; Anne let her wholly go, drove her head out of window, and shrieked:

'Go to Fenley—a wounded man there—tell him—!'

But Bessie, with visage all inflamed, was by her side again, looking out, too, shouting a passionate monotone, drowning Anne's words, anon beating Anne's face. The two men could not hear. Meanwhile, the other party of retainers behind were battering the door with truncheons and quarter-staffs; but of this neither of the women, in the crazy ecstasy of that moment, was actively conscious.

At last, Anne, with a cunning feint, ran from the window to the middle, and thence, with quick spurt, to another window. Before Bessie reached her, she had cried half her message; and the rest she shrieked through Bessie's shouting, bending perilously prone, with

the concentrated rage of the pearl-diver who sees the prize near, and his wind is wholly done, yet will he reach, or burst ; her throat being now hoarse, and her lips blubber and shiny with blood and serum.

The men at last nodded.

'Have you heard?' howled Anne.

They nodded yes.

'*Then go!*'

Off they went running.

The fury of Bessie Ford now transcended all bounds. The messengers were on their fatal way, and as a mother when the she-wolf is in steep career upon her babe, so was she. Again she leapt to a window, and again Anne was at her. The fierce, loud battery of the door continued, soon now to cease.

But now Bessie Ford had the vigour of quite two, or three, ordinary women. Long, Anne saw, she could not be held. Terribly the fight gasped, and gnashed, and hissed, and swayed. Another window went clattering upon the grass. Three horsemen without were cantering leisurely toward the house across the lawn ; and both must have seen them ; but seen them like things in another world, unrelated and remote. Nothing in the earth was of interest, save the moment, the gall and lash of their intense Present. Anne fought to her last conscious gasp : but she sighed, gave up, and lapsed upon the ground a disfigured and sluttish heap. At the same time Bessie stood on one of the front window-sills, hesitated, and leapt.

Her feet touched ground as buoyantly as a bouncing ball—her fall broken by two strong arms in which she was caught. They were the arms of Garrett Oge Fitzgerald.

He, with his two friends, being in an unknown neighbourhood, had been seeking an inn to eat at, when they spied the Hall. They had advanced with the certainty of feeding there, such being the hospitable freedom of the age. Fitz, in front of the two, saw a woman hesitating on the window-sill, spurred, leapt, and caught her with such yielding force, that her feet touched ground with quite buoyant lightness.

Then for a moment he saw her face—she his.

She, still venomous, her countenance marred and red, his name still ringing in her ears in the voice of Anne, flung him from her with the impassioned force of a jealous woman, hissing:

'*Beast!* — let me *go!* — filthy, heartless, cruel herd——!'

One might have knocked down Fitzgerald with a feather: so tigerish, unexpected, was her attack. She had run quite ten yards before he started in chase; and twenty more before he perceived that he was hardly gaining upon her, her legs and wind being excellent.

'Oh, good God,' he called, 'hold, Bess! Why, 'tis I—hold, I prithee—sure, 'tis *I*——!'

Anguished at the thought of again, this time, losing her, pale with the terror of it—for the forest was not sixty yards thence—he hesitated between persisting on foot, and returning for his animal: hesitated, and was lost. He ran back, crying to Mac and Bonner: 'After! After!' But they, behind, had realized not at all what was toward. By the time Fitzgerald regained his steed, and mounted, Bessie was but thirty yards from the wood. The three started together in stretched chase, Mac and Bonner being horsed from the plenty left riderless by the castle-siege. But almost as they started, Fitz perceived that the hunt was hopeless now; also, that *another* figure, in addition to Bessie Ford's, was before him, whence sprung he knew not, a man flying after her, so close upon her that Fitz had fear to fire.

From this runner, certainly, Bessie could not escape; for he ran with the fleet feet of a slot-hound. As the girl disappeared into the wood, he turned a moment, and sent a random bullet at the riders; crying out a moment afterwards in high falsetto:

'Stay, mamie, prithee! fly not from *me*—I am Sidney Boleyn!'

Hearing the commotion in Anne's withdrawing-room, he had suspected mischief to the fugitives, and run to spy the front windows. He had arrived at the hall-door at the moment when Bessie leapt, and as Fitz

started in chase on foot, he had started, too, behind. Fitz, running back in somewhat changed direction for his animal, had not seen him, till mounted.

Sidney, since the fugitives' escape from the castle, had been busy. He had purchased a small house, standing solitary outside the village of Maddox, and he had put within it a stock of provisions: then he had waited, alert for the first hint of the fugitives' hiding-place.

Now he put his hand on Bessie's shoulder. She led him to the thicket where lurked Calvo and Laura. The shades of evening were now gathering; and the three went cautiously through the wood, following the good leading of Sidney.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FRANCIS AND BESSIE

' Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon Thy face.'
WORDSWORTH.

MEANWHILE the two messengers of Anne were hasting to Fenley. It was a fair-sized village, with a street which contained two inns.

In one of these Percy had lain with a grievous hip-wound; but at noon that day, when signs of delirium supervened, he was taken by his men in one of those horse-litters called ' charres ' to the town of Alresford, where was a mediciner.

An hour afterwards Alvarada, Sir John Perrot, and their two, arrived at this inn, Alvarada's handsome face being of the colour of weak coffee-and-milk, and his hurts serious. He went at once to sleep on the inn-parlour bench.

About half-past five Francis returned to the other of the two inns, which he had left that noon to go a-search in the forest. He had met none of his chevaliers, who, having set out with him, had scattered in the wood; nor were they yet returned. His camp lay back of the village in a field; his ensign, from a window, drowsed over the winding and muddy street, domain of speculative ducks. On entering, he washed the blood from his brow, and, being faint, threw his long lean body on a short settee, to dream a vague dream of that fugitive Angel who, on her high passage, had spoken to him of life and death, of good and evil, eternal words.

The two messengers were sent to 'a wounded man at Fenley': so Anne, in her haste, had described Percy. At the porch of Alvarada's inn they found an old woman: sitting there was she in gammer's coif, and as the sun without rest nor haste went down, so without rest nor haste she sewed.

And 'Gammer,' said one of the men, 'is it that a wounded man lies in this inn?'

'Why, yea,' said she, nor ceased to sew, 'here lies a wounded man. Aye, and at the Wheatsheaf yonder also lies a wounded man.'

In her proneness to speech lay perplexity. And said one of the men:

'Which will it be, coz?'

And the other replied:

'Faith, that I wot not.'

But the first, being by nature profound, said:

'Fail we cannot, an we give to *both* the message.'

And this, as soon as uttered, seemed an axiom, though, like axioms, it was very wrong. And so one ran down to the Wheatsheaf, while one entered the Lymington Pot.

Francis was quickly aroused, and ahorse alone; but it was not till some fifteen minutes afterwards that Alvarada, more grievously hurt, set out with his three.

They could not doubt the description: it was explicit: south-eastern from Ormond Hall through Broughton Wood, passing north of the great cress-pool, which was a feature of the wood: and both concealed their surprise at receiving it, divining a lucky mistake.

Now Fenley lies south-west of Ormond Hall: and to reach Ormond Hall from Fenley (if one does not go through the forest), one travels by a road which leads directly north for half a mile, and then turns sharply eastward. The north-and-south road goes on beyond the turning in a footpath to Maddox village, where Sidney had the empty house for Calvo: and so it was that as Francis galloped north, he saw four persons before him on the road, not far from the turning, their backs toward him.

Sidney was now leading the fugitives to Maddox; even as the messengers of Anne were delivering their message, the four had hurried through fields past Fenley.

Hearing the hoofs, they looked in terror behind: and at once Francis knew Laura's face; moreover, slung on Sidney's shoulder was the bag of Calvo—one of the clues to the fugitives. And 'Hi, friends! halt there!' shouted Francis.

Escape now was not for Laura: except on the one condition, that the four scattered running, and Francis should pursue the wrong girl: an improbable contingency, since the gloaming air was yet clear transparent purple. Other hope, however, was none, for all around was open field. So Sidney wildly whispered:

'Tis the Black Knight! An we run divers ways——'

On came the impending hoofs. Calvo looked round once, and, flying recognition by Francis, said: 'Well, do it——!', running to the right from the road, while Laura spurted straight northward, Bessie and Sidney obliquely to the left, but haltingly she, with head continually turned to watch the rider.

In a minute it was clear that Francis was not deceived, he keeping his onward course after Laura, not turning across-field after Bessie. He was thirty yards from his prize—he was twenty-five—he was twenty. Bessie Ford stopped her halting and backward-hankering flight; she turned; she ran with desperate speed—back toward the road.

She reached it at a moment when the horse was not six yards from her. It was a mere country-path, not broad, intermittently bordered by bramble-hedge. There in the middle she stood, with spread arms, facing the galloping charger.

Francis, astounded by this wildness of audacity, saw that she must inevitably be trampled, and passionately shouted: '*Vide! Vide!*' in self-unconscious French.

At the same time he pulled at the bridle; but the impetus could not now be checked. An instant before he was upon her, he recognised her—the girl of the

forest, who had infected him with fancies of weird sweetness: it was she—the resting Angel—this time barring his impious way, not with flaming sword, but more irresistibly with her bare bosom and simple high devotedness. With all the force of his straining tendons, with his whole grinning energy of effort, he tore, he tugged, he reined. The heavy animal reared —immediately above the head of Bessie. But as it rose, she rose with it, wielded aloft with horrid shock by the snatch of the head-harness, to whose wrenching impetus she clung by one frail left arm; and down with it again she swung to her back, white and wincing, but alive.

Francis' eyes were given up to her, fastened fast upon her. There was no chance that he should sight the flashing steel that was winging straight, as a swallow darts with folded wing, for his left side. It was a dagger hurled with good aim by Flying Sidney; and now Francis wore for armour only a simple shirt of ring-mail.

And again the pierced palm of Bessie was rent. She leapt a little with lifted arm, and touched the weapon as it flew, the four sharpened edges slitting the thin bandage and skin. The dagger, deflected, lightly struck the flank of the horse, which started, with twitching ribs.

'Again?' said Francis, bending low, gazing playfully, with solemn smile, 'what, *again!*'

She, too, smiled, very sweetly through her pallor.

''Tis the second time, my lord,' quoth she, and held up two fingers, with a head-shake.

'But you are very brave! La! *are* you not very, very brave?'

'Am I, sir?'

'This galloping charger—by the prowess of a Cœur-de-lion! And the dagger!—prithee, prithee, let me see your hand! Crisscross—'tis a-bleed!'

He leapt down in a flurry, and was on a knee before her, bending upon the wounded hand.

'How may I ever thank, and enow extol, this little hand? La! little hand—little, little martyr-hand——!'

He fondled it; he kissed it.

'Nay, 'tis not so much as that, my lord,' quoth she. 'By my credit, I've been athwart worse than that!'

From a portmantle at his saddle-bow he whipped a square of broidered silk, and tied it mincingly round the hand, going:

'Little princess-hand!—wilt come with me to the land of France? Why, prithee! Then shalt thou demurely instruct me every day how highly to live "in the company"—what was it?—"of the sun, and the moon, and all the train of the stars." La! that were strange, new beginning of life for poor rotten Francis, by our holy Mother!'

'But the girl is running away all the time, my lord,' said Bessie, with bold self-confidence, and confidence in him.

'Which girl?' he asked quickly.

'Laura Ford, my lord.'

Up he leapt.

'La, by Crisscross, I had forgotten her! Mamie, and thy motive for arresting me thus boldly in this my pursuit?'

'She is my sister, my good lord.'

He smote hands, and drew back a step, gazing at her for a full minute, struck dumb. When he spoke he said:

'Now, may every blessed saint forgive me!'

Bessie smiled.

'Sure, my lord,' said she, 'you take it too lourdly——'

''Tis *thou* that art the sister?'

'Why, by my credit, yea, my lord! She will declare it you herself, an you will it.'

'Good angel! gentle girl! I pledge thee, on the honour of a knight, that I knew not what I did.'

Bessie with uplifted voice called 'Laura!', beckoning. Her good insight into men had perceived that open confidence in Francis touched the best in him, and warmed his chivalry; but Calvo, from the field, heard her call with angry surprise.

Laura, wondering, hesitating, came; while Francis,

his back turned upon Bessie, stood with lifted arm, and bowed head. He was silently swearing that no man, he being alive, should take from this girl her sister, not himself, not Henry, no man. And as he swore, and turned, Laura, panting, with coquettish underlook, was before him.

Again he started: for she was beautiful. He shaded his eyes with horizontal palm, pretending dazzlement, bowing largely, while Bessie smiled.

But his mood was, for the moment, turned and changed. It was Bessie now, and not Laura, by whom he was won and enraptured.

Undoubtedly in the world there is a something more beautiful than Beauty itself—more ravishing far than a perfect nose—and touched more with Aurora and the weird tints of Grace than the rose of the loveliest lip. Call it Wisdom—or call it fair Virtue—Francis cared not: but, for the time at least, the worldly King did certainly catch a bewitching glimpse of it in the clear spirit of Bessie Ford.

And he lisped, bowing:

'My adoration, mamsels. Paris, the Greek, gave his apple to Venus; his modern namesake, the city, proffers in the person of me, its King, asylum to Minerva. Will you accept my protection? Will you sail with me?—wilt *thou?*'

'Why, my good lord—this were too gracious of you!' cried Bessie.

'Oh, gracious of *you*, an you accord it. Would'st trust the sister to a darkling, God-forgotten rogue like Francis of France? I am a King, wot you? Yet, if so thou honourest me, prouder were I than of sceptre and diadem. And here in your England is naught of safety or escape for you, be sure, be sure! Henry . . . la! Wilt sail with me? Say!'

'Sure, my good lord,' answered Bessie, who searched deeply into his glowing eyes, and thought she saw honour there, 'there is naught that Master Calvo, and myself also, could more desire——'

'Calvo!' said Francis, 'is *he* with thee——'

But before he received answer, he was surprised by

a sound of galloping hoofs. Alvarada, Sir John Perrot, and two Queen's-men, were coming pelting.

Francis, from afar, recognised Alvarada.

'By Crisscross!' he cried, 'here come some of your seekers, with which I must anon cross sword: one, two, la,—four! And since one against four hath end uncertain, faith, 'twere best you take straight to running, mamsels! But stay, where meet we?'

'Oh, sir, I know not! Prithee have a care! Are you not faint with wounds——?' cried Bess.

'La! not too faint to pick a cuirass or two, Minerva, I warrant thee! Where meet we, say? Whither now away?'

'We go now to Maddox. See, they pelt near, my lord——!'

'I see, I see: I keep one constant eye upon them. Maddox? Ah yes, I know. What place, or house?'

''Tis a house, sir; but I wot not the name.'

'Wot not the name. Well, I will tell you where—yes, I see they come, I see—Maddox. Now, in two days my ship were ready to sail, my camp to pack; this, then, being Thursday, I meet you Saturday eve at compline—at compline. Fear not—I see—through the corner of mine eye. Let them come on. North of Maddox is a wood with a cascade; near the cascade a road; from the road there goes an old stone wall; on still, a pool lies; and beyond the pool, a shed. In that shed, o' Saturday eve, at compline, I meet you for a prompt start coast-ward. 'Tis agreed?'

'Why, yea, my lord! yea! Look out!

'Now, away!'

The girls, hand-in-hand, went running northward, Sidney and Calvo, who had kept their distance, running to join them.

Francis remained yet some seconds standing: then sprang to horse, and with drawn sword galloped to meet the four.

And as they met, Bessie Ford was looking backward, trotting lingeringly the while, to see him do battle for her.

In reality the fight was but one to three, for Sir John,

wounded by Macdonald, had his sword-arm slung, his only weapon being a pistol. As Francis dashed near, Sir John sighted steadily along the two silver sights: there was the jar of cocking, the trigger clicked: the percussion-cap, as was its way, did not explode. Again cocked Sir John, and as he pulled again, the sword of Francis, with a chop of disdain, swept upon his hand, and, in a backward slash, upon his horse's head.

Then, during a minute's space, plied the King's blade with that easy, triumphant nimbleness and graceful Achillean rage which characterised him. Alvarada, indeed, could hardly fight, being sorely sick: but he inflicted upon Francis' back a slash through the mail, at a moment when Francis was eagerly engaged with the two Queen's-men. In a wink, however, one of these dropped, run through the heart; and a moment afterwards Alvarada was vomiting blood on the grass, carved to the lung. The remaining Queen's-man, left alone, turned in flight, but Francis, overtaking him, stabbed his horse in the groin, and, contemptuously leaving the man, went at a grave walk in the gathering dark toward Fenley, so faint, that anon his brow fell to rest on his horse's mane.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DEVIL AT MADDOX

'The rills of pleasure never run sincere;
Earth hath no unpolluted spring.'
WATTS.

'In the territory of Istakhar there is a kind of apple, half of which is sweet, and half sour.'—EBN HAUKAL.

ALVARADA was now grievously wounded, but not fatally.

It seems certain that in martial ages, when wounds were a commonplace of life, the body received them with less gravity and despair. This trick of Nature scientists call 'adaptation to environment.'

Sir John Perrot, whose horse was slain, and himself quite *hors de combat*, contrived, with the help of the remaining Queen's-man, to recapture Alvarada's, and place his comrade on its back.

'Whither now, Count?' said he.

'On to Maddox,' said the Spaniard.

He had definitely seen the fugitives take that way.

Maddox is one of the loveliest embowered villages at the foot of a wooded mountain-face. Before it, runs east and west a rapid and angry stream, called the Winney, with irregular broken banks of mossy rock and large pebble, where wives wash clothes aloof, in cosy sequestration. Nothing could be sweeter than the vast mournful plume-waving of the rich mountain-face, where peeps an ancient windmill, a wooden black old water-mill, a hanging long cascade, perched manse, and, at the top, some grey castle-turrets. It resembles a corner of Granada.

It was a cottage thus embowered on the mountain-side that Sidney Boleyn had procured, and stocked, for the fugitives. And thither, by a roundabout path, he conducted them in safety, and left them, on the understanding that there in perfect isolation they should abide, never to venture from the cottage-door.

That night, as they ate, Bessie and Calvo discussed the offer of Francis.

'Dost trust that chuff?' asked Calvo, with cynically raised eyebrow.

'By my credit, Master Calvo, I do,' said Bess.

'Ah, I know him better than thou, thou seest. Fair enow, doubtless, he means to-day—but next month, next year? Yet, perhaps thou hast reason—perhaps thou hast. There is good in some of these cattle——'

He drank largely of good malvoisey.

'Why sure, Master Calvo, is not this proffer of the King like sudden light in a dark place? By my credit, 'tis to me like the plain working of the hand of God. 'Tis hope so strange! 'Tis salvation, sir!'

'Well, well,' said Calvo, 'have it thy own way,' and he drank again.

Calvo was not enthusiastic, on his own account, as to Francis' offer, though, for Bessie, he perceived inwardly that it was a very great thing, and the one way. As a matter of fact, his motives and thoughts were now corrupted by the offers of Wolsey, and tinged with selfishness. For one thing, he wished to maintain in the mind of Francis the notion that Mauro Calvo had verily announced Laura to the King by virtue of his star-gazing: to be seen in the company of Laura were hopelessly to dispel that superstition—and Calvo, vain, was touched with charlatanism. Moreover, if he could possibly live in England under Wolsey, he preferred England. France he had tried, protected by Francis, and yet had run from the strong Church. The civil arm of Wolsey was many times stronger than the French King's. He preferred England—he wanted Peace to do a thing.

But, on the whole, he fell in with the offer of Francis,

which was immediate and tangible, and drinking Sidney's malvoisey, he patted Bess on the head.

Here and now he tasted happiness: he was in a house, unmolested. Taking hardly the time to finish his meal, he hurried to a little bowered pantry-portico at the back, and spread the contents of his bag on a table. He began to plan, to do.

The next morning he rose almost with Bessie, and set to work, as busy as she, who went to and fro preparing their nooning. Laura, lying abed, well-fed now and content, saw beaming sunlight, and heard a mavis at her latticed casement. And 'Oh, 'tis minion!' she grinned, and went to look. The rollick laugh and aspect of the wooded world pleased her well. The hour was blithe with revel, birds screaming with glee, the tickled trees, the wedding-morning smell and freshness, and all the gala ostentation of Summer. She threw on her clothes, looked long with considering underlook into a small mirror, and crept on tip-toe down the stairs.

Her whims were imperious, and, having a whim, she was a mere mule in prone obstinacy. Nothing could bar her. Now, luckily, Bess was busy. Laura, knowing that it was forbidden, went out.

Her steps led her through the multitudinous forest towards the sound of the cascade; and here she saw that, by stepping on some rocks in a swirling pool, she could enter a cave immediately behind the falling flood. And this she did.

Sitting on a rock in the cave was a man, who rose and said: 'Pardon'; adding immediately to himself: 'This should be she.'

It was Alvarada. Once before he had glimpsed her at the Bell Inn, in Eastcheap, but only for a second's space. He was not absolutely sure that here was the girl he sought; but he had a kind of surety. In England it was improbable that two things so passionately fair could breathe, and heave the breast.

'I will—leave you——' said he, bowing.

Laura, who had a natural eye for perfect bowing, was charmed.

'Why, nay,' said she, 'it is rather I, sir, who am at fault. . . .'

Here was invitation, and an opening of the arms of welcome, for Alvarada.

'Yet, if you go, then shall I be desolated,' said he, and bowed.

'Why, then, sir, I will stay, since you so speak,' quoth she, with coy dalliance.

Alvarada, who could hardly stand, and had crawled without to heal his wounds with morning mountain oxygen, sat again in thick moss, while she, too, leant upon a verdant slope, wrought into rich mosaic with violet and hyacinth. Before them the cascade, robed like a bride in frothy frippery, rushed chaunting down, shouting that same sound of the moving trees, the mysterious 'sh' of Nature's shibboleth. The continual dust-spray, haunting here, watered into a greenery fresh as the limpid emerald of a cat's eye both trembling maiden-hair and plushy moss, acanthus, and many a bowering odorous shrub, and bright-eyed flower. And when the Spaniard heaved a sigh of half-real, half-pretended swoon, Laura, who was happy here, said:

'Sir!—you are sick.'

''Tis nothing, lady,' said he; 'I—I was attacked two nights since by brigands, and wounded. 'Twill pass —an you will but lend me your hand.'

His carved nose was the picture of hers; his eyes were a mournful dead black; his coffee-colour made him handsomer. When she gave him her hand, the thought struck him that he might have Laura Ford, if this were indeed she, without the employment of force: and since he had little force at command, against force he decided.

His tongue was polished and glib; he told her frankly that he was a Spaniard, and a man of high estate; he told of Spain and Europe; he recounted adventures, the dress of ladies, the things of Courts. After half an hour, she allowed him to kiss her.

'Oh, I must go now,' she said, agitated.

'To-morrow morning at this same hour?'

'Our Saviour, I cannot! I have a sister!'

Now Alvarada was certain.

'But you dwell where?'

'Down yonder in a house apart.'

'That yonder whose thatch appears?'

She nodded.

'I shall come and see you there this very night!'

'Our Saviour! you would not! Nay, you could not! You forget my sister!'

'Fear nothing: she will sleep. I will come—can I help it? Oh, I will come! You, awake, will hear me mouth a recorder, and show your face, lady; your divine countenance, dearest girl!'

At this threat of passion she was filled with both horror and pleasure. Holding herself from him, she kissed him bent, and ran. She entered the cottage noiselessly.

At eleven that night she heard the soft complaining flute. At the cottage-back in a bowery wilderness, bridal with flowering vetch and fairy jasmine, he stood. Trembling lest Bessie or Calvo should hear, she worked herself from the bed, tossed round her her outer garment, wrapped her head picturesquely, and looked out.

No moon shone, but she could divine his stretched clasped hands of adoration, and his serenader-pose.

'Will you come?' said he.

'Sh-h-h!'

'Oh, come!'

He called it with unnecessary loudness. And now she was at his mercy—he could make '*the sister*' hear.

Putting up a confidential hand, bidding wait, she turned inward, arranged her dress, and crept down to him. She opened the little lattice-door, robed in honeysuckle and white briony, of the pantry-portico appropriated by Calvo: and into this room she admitted him.

They were a long while there, Alvarada holding her hand, murmuring continually, speaking this time seriously, she listening with divine bowed head, and hair-draped face. He made her large offers, chateaux,

menials, and last of all, marriage, though he was married. He asked her if she would run with him.

She made the same extraordinary reply which once she had made to Fitzgerald:

'Only by force could I be won, sir.'

This merely meant that she willed, but was afraid. And Alvarada understood, and rose to go.

In doing so, he put his left hand to the table to lever himself, being very weak. And that hand sank into a buttery mass which Calvo had there, a mass which shone feebly in the dark.

Having gone out, he noticed afresh the unclean sensation, and put the hand to his face to smell it; and the hand accidentally touched the face.

His little inn was on the other side of Maddox: it was necessary, in order to reach it, to pass through the village, long since fast asleep.

But it happened that the village-priest, accompanied by the sexton, was precisely then wending homeward, bearing the elements of the holy supper from a dying bed, just visited; and these saw Alvarada's face—his face and his left hand alone.

That face and hand shone with an unearthly faint luminosity in the dark night; also, the phosphoric butter with which he had touched his nostrils affected his breath, too, which came from him in two divergent hazes of white and wannish fire.

The priest, aghast, struck a cross, muttering a '*Vade retro Sathanas.*' The sexton struck a cross. And there was a huge sensation and to-do in Maddox that very night. For even as Alvarada slipped unperceived into his inn and to bed, the church-bell was calling and clanging loud alarum. Maddox started terrified from dreams, and pelted to the church. The priest, with fainting breath, announced that the Devil had been authentically seen in the village that night. He sprinkled his entire flock with holy water.

And with amazing rage and rapidity that news spread, from village to village, through Hampshire, like a fire. Satan had been authentically seen at Maddox.

The very next day Henry heard it, for the news, like the air, was everywhere. Anne Boleyn heard it, Fitzgerald, Du Ballay's party, Percy's party—all heard it. And all these instantly concluded that with such a phenomenon the alchymist must in some way be connected; that Calvo, undoubtedly, must be in or near Maddox; and upon Maddox without delay they all proceeded to move.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE ABANDONMENT

'Friend after friend departs.' . . .
MONTGOMERY.

IT was on Friday night that Laura Ford said to the Spaniard, Alvarada:

'Only by force can I be won, sir.'

It was on Saturday eve, at nine—the then hour of compline—that the fugitives were to meet Francis in the hut, to fare under his wing to French land.

The Saturday was spent by Alvarada's Queen's-man in riding five leagues to procure a pillion; and by sunset this was affixed to the haunches of the Spaniard's fine horse.

At this time, all the parties of search, except Percy's, were about Maddox; some tents of Henry lay in a depression between hillocks on the other side of the stream—the south side—Wolsey being now with the King. Anne Boleyn was moving patiently all among the boscage of the mountain-face, spying evilly as Satan when he peered round Eden. Du Ballay's party, shunning attack from other stronger ones, were in the prior's-solar and guesten-hall of a Carmelite friary, on the yon side of the mountain, but near; on the yon side of the mountain, too, at a hamlet, were Fitzgerald, Macdonald, and Bonner. And all, in their various ways, were full of search, thrilling at trails and rumours which were false.

It was not a night propitious for quests and clues. Almost as the sun set, it was dark; a wind arose, and blustered; and rain dashed down in spasms, like bursts

of tears, and almost ceased, and dashed again. The stream, which had all the day been angrily swollen, rolled now higher, and went rushing free in noisy soliloquy, like a delirious Cassandra with brawling torch, its loamy billows almost splashing the two plank-bridges which spanned it near Maddox.

About eight Alvarada had his wet horse in a thicket at the fugitives' cottage-back. He blew a long soft flute-note, which only a listening ear would detect. Laura flew to her lattice. Bessie was giving her finishing cares to their evening meal.

'"Tis useless—O, I must not come, sir!' whispered Laura.

Alvarada had no time to waste in words.

'Dearest girl,' said he, 'haste you, I beg! All is ready; the horse waits yonder a-hind the bush. Prithee, prithee, haste! Else must I enter the house——'

The moral courage to have her intrigue revealed Laura absolutely did not possess. She considered the argument of force final. Stooping low, she whispered loud:

'Then must you wait yet a while. . . .'

She had spent the day in writing clandestine short notes to Bessie; as:

'DEAR SISTER: I am gone off with a Spanish nobleman, which is very rich, with five castles, and menials. He will marry me. I will be sending thee a collar of balasses like the King wore.—Thy dearest sister, LAURA FORD.'

And this, after a while, she tore, and wrote:

'MY DEAR SISTER BESS: I hope thou wilt not be angry with me, for I have gone off with a mighty, great Spanish nobleman, with seven castles, and menials. He will marry me. Thou knowest I love thee, Bessie, but it was too much to expect of me, at the end of the tale. If ever thou seest Mark Bonner, tell him I love him until death. I will be sending thee some collars of balasses like the King wore, and some armlets pounced with diamonds and sapphires.—Thy loving sister, LAURA FORD.'

This she had torn, and written another, and another.

Turning now from the lattice, she heard the voice of Bessie call her below. She held the rushlight, and saw her white face in the mirror, and ran down.

They three sat, Calvo, as he ate in shirt-sleeves of Holland linen, leaning an elbow on the table-edge, brooding.

'Well, is all ready for this rencounter in the wood?' said he.

'Yes, sir,' answered Bess.

'Aha! And how feelest thou, girl, at this prospect of embarking for strange land which thou knowest not?'

'By my credit, sir, I feel bold and spree, for sure the good hand of God has led me, and will lead——'

'See what you have brought upon the sister, you with the face,' said Calvo, with a fillip at Laura's hand.

That face of Laura was very sallow. She half-rose, and sat again; and, after a minute, rose again, and said weakly, with a throat-cough of agitation:

'I will return. . . .'

Bessie looked after her, as she went toward the latticed pantry-portico, supposing that she went for a bodily office.

Within the minute she was on the pillion of Alvarada, having dropped her final note to Bessie upon Calvo's table.

After a walk, the horse broke into galloping, making for the spot where, higher up the mountain-side, Sir John Perrot and the Queen's-man waited the Spaniard.

Five minutes, eight, passed; Bessie awaited Laura, glancing oft at the door. Laura came not, but instead, a man dashed in, wrapped in a drenched riding-cloak, which hooded his wan, thin face. It was Flying Sidney.

'My good master,' he broke out, 'great and momently is your peril! Wot you that your pursuers are crowded round you? Also, Mistress Anne—woe's me that I could not come afore——'

'Know they where I am?' asked Calvo.

'Not the house; they divine, nevertheless, that you are at Maddox, since the priest and sexton saw yesternight the devil——'

'But *I* am not the devil, lad.'

'Nay, but a man they saw with face showing shine in the dark, and breathing haze like Milky-way——'

'Why, that must have been phosphorus.'

'And something so they all have guessed, saying: who hereabouts but the alchymist could be so daubed with chymic essences? Have you not been abroad from the cottage, good master?'

'I?—not I. But stay—but stay—— Some derangement I did observe this morning in a pot of amalgam——'

'Then hath one entered the house!'

'Nay, lad, none.'

'So I hold, sir! Prithee haste you now to gain the shed where you have rendezvous, or all were yet lost! Not a house on the mountain-side but will be spied. My half-sister, Anne——'

'Bessie, come!' said Calvo with promptitude, 'we set out this moment. Call the sis, call the sis. Why, lass, what have you?'

Bessie stood with deathly face in the doorway, holding in one hand a lamp, and in the other a letter.

Spurred by growing unrest she had peeped into the adjacent pantry, and seen the paper on the table.

Read she could not, but she knew the look of Laura's writing, and her boding heart divined some horror.

Without word she handed the letter to Calvo, standing bolt, with stern white face, as he slowly read aloud.

When he finished, she tossed herself sideward to a stool, dropped her head, with its little up-sticking plait, upon her arms over the table, and wept there, her mouth stretched back like indiarubber in the poignant strain and tension of her piteousness.

Calvo was walking to and fro in a great passion. For poor Bess in that hour he had no mercy. The burden of the iniquity he put equally upon her poor

little shoulders, involving both sisters in a common anathema; and said he, washing his hands of them:

'Well, I have done now—I have done. Enow have I had of you both, and, God wot, more than enow. This is the very last of all. Now, certes, 'tis finished, by God! You seem to forget, both of you, that you are perfect strangers to me—that all I have done and suffered for you was done in pure doddering and dotage kindness of heart. And yet you dare do this! Well, my God! Sidney! shoulder that bag! Aha! . . . so this is the meaning of the devil in Maddox!—that marmot, your sister, hath e'en lured a man hither, and he hath dared meddle with my physics! And you see the result? Your persecutors surround you afresh, this time, most like, without reprieve—I hope so. Art proud of thy Laura, now, eh? Art proud of the slubberdegullion? I told you how 'twould be—but hear you would not. Thou wouldst cling to thy Laura, eh? Thou wouldst cling, and cling, and cling to the silly daw with infatuated bigotry, with blind-struck, wilful obstinacy: and now thou seest what she was—a silly slut, a putrid hop-heels, a run-away wanton—nay, shake not thus thy head! faith, I could smite thee on the cheek, girl! Defend her, were it but by one motion of the head, and I promise thee I souse thee smartly on the cheek! Oh, 'tis a bit too much! Well, may you fare well. As for me, I am off——'

This rage of Calvo, though he did not know it, was complex. His mind and motives, we have said, were corrupted by the offers of Wolsey. He preferred England to France. But in order to abandon Bessie Ford, he needed the sweep and impetus of a passion. Laura gave him the excuse for heat, and his own lash whipped it to whiteness. The heart knows not the full secret of its own impurity.

When he threatened to smite her on the cheek, it was in loud answer to Something in his bosom which, with tongue in cheek, was slyly whispering: 'Thou deservest, Calvo, that she should smite thee on the cheek!'

Sidney had Calvo's bag. The whole interest of this

lad in the fugitives was concentred in Calvo alone: for Bessie and Laura he had no special care. Yet he looked with a lingering pity on the bowed head, as he preceded the Magister up a sanded step, through a passage, to the front door.

Bessie Ford lifted her head, and was alone. The Desolation of her life scared her. She leapt up, and ran.

An over-branched foot-path led her to the road. This, with undulations, went rather steeply up the bushy mountain-side from Maddox. She ran desperately downward, a sound of 'Oh-h-h . . .' coming from her. After a few minutes she heard steps before—Sidney's horse, and Calvo's voice. The night was quite black, and washed with gusts of rain.

Wolsey's instructions were explicit: If the Sage should decide to adopt the offered patronage, he should leave his acceptance in writing at the Thistle Inn, Halford. The journey to Halford Calvo resolved to begin that very night, openly, not now fearing capture, or its effects.

Near Maddox-village he heard a voice close behind:

'Master Calvo!'

He turned angrily.

'Well, now, what is it?'

'Don't you leave me, sir——!'

'Now, away with you and your tears, my girl! Faith, 'tis finished now.'

'Oh, don't you, sir——!'

'Why, you talk like a child! Is it not your own fault? Certes, 'tis not mine.'

'Master Calvo, *for Christ's sake*——!'

'Stop it, stop it. You are trying to work upon my feelings, and you wot as well as I that you cannot. Your own fault, your own fault.'

'I admit it, sir! But don't you leave poor Bessie Ford!'

'You see, you weep, you weep. I told you not to weep. Bide I, or go I, what have you to hope? The fool of a sister is gone past recall.'

'Yet don't you be leaving me, Master Calvo, don't

you. . . . When we set from London, I told you, sir, I *told* you, that naught feared I, I said, were you with me. And so it has been. Sure, many a trouble, many a scathe, have I passed through since, and well escaped, for you were by me, sir, my good right arm you were, good kind father that you have been to me and mine—oh my, oh my. And even yet, an you stay with me, even in this last black darkness, who knoweth but that the good hand of God——'

'Bide I, or go I, 'twill be the same to you, the same to you, I promise you.'

'Why nay, sir! I tell you nay! My sure talisman and good fortune are you for ever, whilst you bide. But go you from me, then all, all, all, all were lost! Oh! I swear it by the Cross of Christ, Master Calvo! Something tells me—something here in my panging bosom, sir—a lumpy pang like the last pang of death, my master—oh God, sir, God, God, God. . . .'

She choked utterly with sobbing. Her eyes were a fountain of tears. In that her hour, which brooded black upon her as Gethsemane, she saw the vision of her life all palled in crape, and forefelt its final tragedy with presage of bane dark as a rayless universe.

There was silence: only her sobs were heard mixed with the rain.

'Come with me, an you like,' said Calvo.

'Why, sir—now?'

'An you like.'

'But, sir, must I not go meet the foreign King in the wood?'

'To what end? Laura is gone. You desire not to go to France alone: nor do I.'

'But I must sure go tell him——'

'Tell him, no! Let him go to the devil.'

'Faith, what would he think of me, which made most faithful rendezvous——?'

'Very good, you choose him, you see, rather than me Your own fault all thorow. Farewell, farewell.'

'Master Calvo, you abandon me!'

Her cry wailed high and far on the night-wind.

And the answering words rose to his lips:

'Why, I'd liefer abandon life and all it holds, you little fool!'

But, instead, he only said:

'You may go to the devil!'

Such a brutal pleasure lies in self-torture, common, apparently, to many men. Thus, a kind man may anon be murderously cruel, because his cruelty he feels to be a cruelty to himself also. He revels venomously in his own pangs: so dark and subtle is the heart.

With Calvo it was so. He said 'the devil' when he meant 'my darling.'

He moved on; she followed him: and again she cried:

'Master Calvo, *you abandon me!*'

'Well, you can come, an you like,' he said.

And as he said it, she stood fixed. She would not go. Her excuse, which she thought real, was her rendezvous with Francis: but her motive was subtly complex: in reality, she cherished a secret obstinacy of reluctance to leave the spot whence Laura had gone, without first knowing whither she had gone; a secret hope that she might not be far, a secret desperation of fidelity, a vowed and passionate waywardness of loyalty, which only the snatch of wild horses, or the opening of the earth, could have overcome.

Onward went Calvo, she following with stops and runs. He reached one of the two bridges. Here she finally stopped, and would no further go.

There was a sound of galloping hoofs. The sage was half-way across the bridge. Close beneath his feet the swollen Winney rushed free with Bacchant feet, a brawling soliloquy.

In the south distance, whence sounded the hoofs, were seen lanthorn lights, which slowly moved.

'The King, sir, must have news,' said Sidney—'hither, meseems, come some of his riders.'

At that moment from the other side, Calvo heard in the air the high, calling voice of Bessie, piteously calling.

'Good-bye, Master Calvo, sir!'

'Fiendly cattle — fiendly, cruel cattle!' muttered

Calvo, with shaken fist at the approaching horsemen, venting all his secret self-bitterness upon them, 'to hunt a poor, forlorn, and wo-ridden lass like a wounded leveret! Be ye man or be ye devil? If devil, how now if I send you pelting to your place, ye herds! Sidney, here—quick—my bag! And get you with your horse off the bridge till I come.'

Calvo's bag had in it a slender saw, abstracted from Broughton Castle. He took it, stooped, and began to saw the bridge.

It was simply a plank not three feet wide, with a rude rail, supported by a single pile at the centre.

He sawed furiously, till the riders were close. Then he sprang, and ran, and hid within a near grove of elders.

They came well lighted with horn-lanthorns, trotting; and Bessie, even as she halted on the verge of running, saw and realised what happened.

All saved themselves by a halt upon their haunches, except the first two. These, entering confidently upon the bridge at a quick walk, plunged with the sawed plank into the stream.

The others went along the bank, watching with held-up lanthorns the death-struggle of horse and rider. And as they went so down the stream, they sighted the second bridge, which Calvo did not know, or had forgotten; and, with precautions, they passed over.

Meanwhile, somewhat more than half of the sawn bridge was left intact on its supporting pile.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANNE AND BONNER

'When fired by fever's phantom chase,
We fling aside the curtain's fold,
It shows a face—a pitying face——'

BETHUNE.

ALVARADA, with two comrades, galloped up the mountain-road, Laura sitting on a pillion behind him. At this time Fitzgerald, Macdonald and Bonner were also *en route*, having heard from a yokel the empty rumour that the devil, breathing Milky-way, had been again seen to stand, not one hour since, at a door above Maddox: whereupon they had rushed to horse, and were away to the Maddox-side; and, some minutes later, to Du Ballay's party at the friary the same news was carried: and these, too, pelted to horse.

And anon, as Fitz and his friends galloped up to the hill-brow, they heard ghosts of hoof-beats behind, and were aware that a cavalcade of knights were after them, and knew whom, and why. They stretched their steeds to topmost speed, giving rein, and whip, and spur.

Bonner bore an agitated lanthorn, so did Mac; also Alvarada's Queen's-man bore a torch to light his way, which winked and flinched from the rain.

There was but one road: the going and coming parties could not miss encounter. Before Fitzgerald saw her, he heard the scream of Laura; then he saw her, and drew rein and sword together.

Mac flung his lanthorn to Bonner, and drew; and the affray was almost momentary. Alvarada, weak as he was, had the effrontery to hack once at Fitz, at the

same time lifting his horse with spur and rein to a sideward leap over a bordering hedge-row. But the animal, chopped at the moment of effort, and without impetus, merely dived into bramble, pitching all its freight overhead; and while Fitzgerald leapt to snatch the girl from the *mêlée* of hoofs, Sir John, incapable of combat, overrode, as he fled, his prostrate comrade, who cried out in torture; and the Queen's-man, after two passes with Macdonald, received a wound, and disappeared with Sir John down the hill.

From the down-rush of these two a solitary wayfarer who was toiling up the hill drew aside a moment. It was Bessie, bereft now of Calvo, and of all.

Above, the Queen's-man's torch, flinching, where it had dropped, from the rain, flickered upon a lovely face contorted with pain. The left hip of Laura was sprained. Fitzgerald held her up under the arm-pits; she could hardly stand.

'Where is thy sister Bess?' he asked.

'Lower down,' she gasped, 'there is a side-path——'

'By Heaven, Fitz!' cried Mac, 'there is need for haste here, lad! There are those above which pelt down upon us!'

Fitz sprang to horse, and plucked up Laura before him. They started at risky pace down the steep wet road.

Bonner held up a lanthorn, and said: 'Why, Laura——', and smiled.

And she, too, smiled a smile of pain.

Yet a minute, and he lifted the lanthorn again to her face, and said again: 'Laura——'

And as he so held the light, there shrilled from the road this passionate cry of bliss and terror:

'*Laura!*'

Bessie saw her in Fitzgerald's arms.

And there, with a valour reaching now the sublime and the divine, she stood with outstretched arms in the path of the spattering prone stampede of hoofs.

Aided by her cry, they discerned her in time, and drew rein.

''Tis Bessie!' whispered Laura to Fitzgerald.

He knew it.

'Here, good Bess,' cried he with quick breath, 'take her, take her, she is lamed—and get you quickly from this path, I bid thee, for others come, and we return anon to fight—— !'

Her soul reeled within her. Bewilderment was the world. But this one light-beam shone steady in that wheeling mist: it was *he* who had brought her Laura! he, the warrior of warriors, was—somehow—for some reason—on her side! he was not against her any more!

At the moment she was crazily distraught, caught in the sweep of tempest emotions. As he lowered Laura to her arms, she, with thrown-back head, was showing a drawn and witless grin. And hardly conscious of any meaning in her act, she put hand to bosom, pulled out a letter, and held it up, flaunting it like a trophy, with twisting wrist.

It was the King's letter to Wolsey, snatched by her from Anne's escritoire. The dim meaning in her consciousness, as she so flaunted it, was this: 'It was not you, really, who gave it to her! It could not have been! My surmising heart divines you, and dances!'

To Fitz this held-up paper had no significance, nor did he even recognise it; only Bonner, standing near with the lanthorn, recognised it with a start.

Small space was there for speech! Fitz and Mac threw their horses round. Distinctly now from above came the sounds of hoofs.

They were off, Fitz, in the urgency of the moment, forgetting to make rendezvous with her.

She called after him.

'Master Fitzgerald!'

He did not stop, but advanced only at a walk, she trotting bedraggled after him, leaving Laura to stand as she could.

'You are on my side!' she cried.

Fitz, twisted backward, with a palm on his animal's haunch, screwed his face into listening effort, with showing top-teeth.

'What say you? Quick!' he called impatiently.

'You are on my side!'

'Why, sure——'

'Whither go you?'

'To fight.'

'Where meet we?'

'I wot not—hereabouts say.'

'Higher stands a wall to the right hand, still on, a pool, and then a hut: there shall I be awaiting you, Master Fitzgerald!'

'Good—good. Away, Mac——!'

Away went the three riders, unaware against what odds.

Alvarada, lying with slow, regular groans by the road-side, heard them gallop past, and still up.

Then, five minutes later, he heard other steps and loud sighs, the wincing sighs of Laura in her effort to limp. A groan came from him.

'My mother! someone is here in pain,' said Bessie.

'Oh, my hanch, my hanch!' sighed wincing Laura.

'Water, water!' groaned Alvarada.

The lashed rain-pour could not quench that mortal thirst. Bessie made a step that way, and groped—for the Queen's-man's light had flinched ever smaller into final darkness—and touched a face.

'Ah, I am very poorly,' said the Spaniard.

'Can you not stand, my master?' asked Bessie.

'That can I not, alas!' said he.

''Tis, sure, Bess — the Spanish nobleman — who would have—taken me—by force,' moaned wincing Laura.

'Ah, 'tis you,' said Alvarada; 'and with your sister. So 'tis well. Have you no water, no water?'

Bessie's palm rested across his brow.

'Naught, sir,' said she, 'can I do for you now, since my sister is lamed. But her will I place in safety, and return anon.'

Helping the limper with a hand round her body, the other beneath her arm, Bessie continued some ten yards up-hill, peering close on the right for the massive green-grown wall—supposed to be Roman—which ran at right angles from the road. She touched it finally,

and went by a quite dry, foliage-covered foot-path along it, skirted next a deeply-sombrous pool, and, at its furthest end, found a one-roomed hut of thatch and wattle, standing with tumble-down slant on a knoll, but rain-proof in the shelter of a den of greenery.

Francis had not come, though it could not now be far from the hour of compline. Bessie deposited Laura upon dry leaves, kissed her, and closed the door upon her. But the door, hinged with hide, hung askew, and as soon as released, swung sullenly back.

Off she set running, her feet shod with Mercy, to refind Alvarada. About the same moment Anne Boleyn, hasting up the mountain-road, stumbled over the Spaniard's legs, pshawed an 'Oh, silly!', and continued her eager upward way.

That Laura Ford was in the neighbourhood of Maddox Anne was absolutely certain; that many men were seeking her all that afternoon she knew; she herself, with maniac energy, had searched inn-cellar and forest, cottage and dingle and hut. That one or other of the searching parties would now find was, she knew, highly probable; that the finder might be attacked was also probable. When, therefore, she heard two pistol-shots, and saw lights and flashes far up the road, she ran toward the *mêlée*, her eyes eager as gimlets with inquisitive lust.

This noise of *mêlée* which she heard arose at the meeting of Fitz with the Du Ballay party, five in number, Du Ballay himself, wounded at the Broughton-joust, being absent in the farmery of the Carmelite friary.

Mark Bonner, seeing his friends thus out-numbered, being in high-wrought state at the fresh sight of Laura, rushed with desperate heart and drawn sword into the fight, the very first incident of which was his headlong tumble into a grassy depression by the way-side, he well wounded in the loins.

But the two warriors of Bessie Ford proved hard nuts to these her enemies. Mac, with set lips, fought with the resistance of bluffs in a sea-storm, and the high aggressive valour of the arm of Fitzgerald nothing

that night could withstand. He was near his hope: he fought with a laugh.

One of the French knights he cleft, through ring-mail, from shoulder to heart; one he stabbed through the mouth; a third, wounded by Mac, himself wounded by a bullet, turned and fled up the road with his two comrades. But in the dim lanthorn-shine, it was not seen that this third man was wounded: and the flight of three before two was suspicious: Fitz feared further trouble from them—though, in fact, their flight was merely due to lack of motive for strenuous combat, in the absence of their commander. But Fitz and Mac gave chase.

As they galloped away up the mountain, Anne reached the spot. Lying there, doubling over with torture, she saw Bonner in the light of two over-turned lanthorns.

She peered upon him, and he saw her face, pretty yet foul, a lady's yet a hag's. Her hair sprawled in muddy streaks to her hips; in her cheek were no killing dimples, but ugly exhaustion; her eyes glared; her voice was cracked and hoarse.

Seeing him, she had a throe of joy.

'Why, Mark——' said she.

'Faith, I am dying!' he said, and writhed.

'Dying, no! Wounds slay not, Mark, save those from ladies' eyes——'

'Faith, I am sore wounded. Oh, the sword went right in. Oh——'

'Did it? Did it?'

She whispered it, kissing him evilly, stooping over him.

'Oh! you are the Lady Anne. How came you here? Faith, you are very good. You have no idea—faith, I am sore wounded——'

'Whine not, whine not, boy. See, I kiss you. Tell me, *where* is Laura?'

'Oh, 'tis bitter—the bitter, bare, cold steel——'

'Why, you whine like a girl! Like you my kisses, Mark? Love you them, sweetard? Do tell me now—darling—*where* is Laura?'

'Why, you are very good. But Laura! Nay, I would not tell you for all the world. Gar—it aches—it aches——'

'Doth it? Why, poor ousel. Shall I not kiss the place and make it well in a pigeon-dunging's space? So you wot, then, where Laura is? Then wherefore refuse to tell?'

'Because—why, 'tis too unthinkable!—the outrage of the cold steel upon the soft, warm flesh, lady——'

'A truce to the soft, warm flesh! Tell me!—wherefore refuse? Am I not Laura's good friend and helper?'

'Oh that can I not now credit! Did not you abstract from my slop-pouch the King's-letter I bore to Bess? Ah, sure, a wound is a fearful thing—a wound, above all, above all, in the loin——'

'Abstract! the King's letter! I? Yea, but did I not abstract it in order to give to Bess? Sure, you had no horse, and I one. By Christ's Cross, Mark, I gave it her! sure, Mark, I swear I gave it her, I did, I did, I swear to God! Prithee, tell me, boy—tell me!'

'Faith, it pangs, lady—it pangs too close and bitingly! Oh, say you so? 'Twas *you* gave the letter to Bess?'

Continually writhing, he remembered now that but lately he had seen the letter flaunted by Bessie's twisting wrist.

'Oh, you wot, then, that she hath it?' answered Anne, incessantly kissing him: 'and whence, think you, dear, could she have it, but that *I* gave it?'

'Oh, then are you verily her good friend and helper. Faith, kiss me still—so—it dulls the pain. Wot you?—it went right in, right in. You pity poor Mark Bonner, don't you? Kiss me still—that soothes so nicely—I like it. Her good friend and helper, I swear—oh!'

'Poor fellow! Let me rock thee in mine arms—so. Likes it that? Now tell me—*where* is she?'

'I wot not precisely—oh! I heard Bess tell Fitzgerald—there is a wall—then a pool—then a hut: and in the hut are they—oh!'

Anne knew wall, and pool, and hut! In the hut had searched thrice that day! As the words passed Bonner's lip, with brutal callousness she flung his head from her lap, and was gone into the darkness.

She took not the trouble to descend the road to find the wall, but plunged at once into the forest, making obliquely, south-eastward, for the hut. In such a darkness, however, with her imperfect knowledge of the wood, such a course was over-bold. The line she took was not precisely right. She passed the hut and went beyond.

With hideous self-intolerance of impatience, she ran fumbling about, spitting a thousand blasphemies. Soon she lost all sense of direction, and the north became to her both the west and the east. Well divining that the moments were precious, she reviled earth and Heaven.

At last, after some minutes, her hand, groping blindly, and led by the fate which doomed her life to hateful tragedy, touched woven dry wattle. And now as a castaway who, a sail in sight, cries 'Saved!', so was she.

She groped round to the door-way and felt the opening. She stood listening—no sound. She peeped within, and could discern nothing.

Her heart sank horribly; she believed that she had failed. But when, before turning away, she intruded a cautious hand, and felt a buskin, then she was as the castaway who sees the stalking regiment of approaching oars. She waited yet a moment, and detected now a breathing. Weakly-built Laura, exhausted and shocked, was asleep.

Now Anne ran; but only a few steps, then stopped. She had lost sense of direction. She looked for the pool, and did not see it. Nor did she remember whether the door, just left, looked toward the pool or away from it. She ran on at hazard, not knowing whither, though, in fact, the direction she chose was practically right.

At this time Bessie Ford was bending over the Spaniard at the other extremity of the pool. The weary load of Alvarada she had drawn and borne and

manœuvred on her little shoulders all the way hither, toward the shelter of the hut, from the road. But now all the Spaniard's self-help failed, and she failed, too. He lay on the grass, she over him, her hand in his. His breathing was very rapid and feeble.

With quick fan his breath said :

'Girl, I am dying——'

There was silence. She pressed his hand.

'Art verily the sister of Laura Ford ?' said he.

'Yes, master.'

'Wot you that I am one of her chasers ? That 'tis I which this day bore her off from you ?'

'By my credit, sir, 'twere ill talking of that now. Sure, repentance is as wise and fair as spotlessness, though 'tis later wise; and since you so talk, my master, think you I give you not all my heart in this your hour ?'

'Dost thou ?'

'Why, sure, I *do*.'

'And I all *my* heart to thee—all, all ! Could I but live two days, my arm, my life——'

'Prithee, speak not, sir, but compose your soul. Oh, sure, 'tis a mighty, fair, and wondrous thing to die !'

'Give me thy lips that I may kiss them, Bessie—so. Sweet, and wise, and merciful art thou, girl, and very fair to me revealed in this my dying hour—very fair—very fair. Now turn up my steel shirt at the bottom.'

She turned it up.

'Now intrude thy hand beneath my silken girdle.'

She did so.

'What find'st thou ?'

'A key, sir.'

'A key—ah, my moment is come—is come, fair Bess. A key. I seem to see a whole universe of slowly-sailing moons volving in an emerald twilight. The key—ah, yes. It opens a coffre-fort, which lies for me in the keeping of mine host of the Bell Inn, in Eastcheap. Thou seest, I fail—I fail. The coffre-fort contains 27,000 golden rose-nobles—they are thine. The wyvern at my collar is pledge agreed for their

delivery. Take it quick, lest thou despoil, despoil—a dead man——'

With his own feeble hand he tore the pledge from his collar, and gave it her. A minute afterwards she felt and knew that he was dead.

Her reverent hand rested on his brow. He was dead. And death was—what? A minute she sat wondering. Was it verily a multitude of pallid moons volving slow in an emerald twilight? Her fancy saw the innumerable wan orbs, and the most weird and glowering green glamour. Much lately she had fallen into thinking of that very thing—of death—she, a girl in her nonage, full of tough health. And now with her thought of death was all mixed up the thought of her new riches: she had the key, the silver cognisance. She was rich, by my credit. Twenty-seven thousand gold rose-nobles she had—a sum not measureable, King's-wealth, quite infinite. She would go sometimes and visit them in their mighty great mansion in France, the married couple, Master and Mistress Mark Bonner! No longer she believed Anne's tale of Bonner's kisses: Anne, who had lied as to Fitz, might have lied as to Bonner also, to madden her. There, sitting, she had a brief happiness, and a tear of gratitude fell from her upon Count Alvarada's brow—a tear, sure, which must have weighed well for the Spaniard at the bar of Heaven. But the sudden thought of Calvo—her sure talisman, gone now—spurred her. She leapt up.

To hurry to the hut. And as she moved three steps, someone going the opposite way brushed by her: a woman—Anne.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE ORDEAL

'I hear Him in the mighty roar
That rusheth through the forests hoar
When winds are raging loud.'

ANONYMOUS.

ANNE, feeling that someone was near, stopped; she was hopelessly bewildered as to direction; and she said:

'Oh—are you of the Maddox folk? I have lost my way!'

Even as she spoke, Bessie, without fail, knew her in the roots of her consciousness—knew her bitterly. And this fact branded the girl's soul like the scorch of a hot iron: that Anne came from the direction of the hut wherein Laura lay; also that Laura was lame, and could neither run nor walk.

It was in a voice strange, unlike her own, yet not simulated, that Bessie answered:

'Whither would you go, lady?'

Anne, famished and over-driven, her wild spirit spinning now on a tip-toe of crazy ecstasy, was no longer capable of cautious, retarding thought. Her conduct was precisely the conduct of a lunatic, sane on one point: and in answer to Bessie's 'whither,' she replied:

'To the King's camp across the river.'

There was a silence, horrible enough there in the dark and dripping wood: a murderous stillness: and in a voice hoarse, and evil as sin, Bessie Ford said:

'*I* will lead you, lady, an you follow my steps.'

Instead of turning west to the mountain-road, where Anne would at once have recognised her whereabouts,

Bessie turned south, so to gain the river through the wood. In a voice hardly audible, guilty as crime, she repeated:

'Follow my steps. . . .'

She it was not who remembered that Calvo had sawn through the Maddox bridge! but something in her brain which thought it for her, and said: Do it, do it, I bid.

Onward she went through the utter dark, not admitting to herself that the bridge was sawn, not thinking at all, nor conscious at all, except of this one thing: that *Hell* led her, as she led Anne, lifted her feet, and planted them for her—always in the same direction—and that this was sweet, though awful.

Anne was going to the King, and Anne was coming from Laura: the inference was clear that Anne was going to bring the King to Laura. But Bessie did not infer anything, nor consciously reason. Only, her numb spirit was taught — with even instantaneous certainty—by the dark doom-voices that admonish souls, that if now she did not do to Anne the thing which she was bid, then would Anne, without fail, heap upon her head a horror of woe.

Onward she went, quite numb, through the utter dark, her face pinched and ghastly, her teeth anon chattering a little. But so small a thing as her robe caught in a bramble sufficed to prick her mind. She stopped to disengage it; and as she again went onward, muttered:

'Now, may the good God keep my hands from evil. . . .'

But the prayer was without force, or faith. It was self-hypocrisy added to murder, and blasphemy to crime.

She hated Anne: even with viperous venom, and the rancour of cobras thrice distilled she hated her—as only females hate. But now, not even hate was it that led her, for she was without sensation: it was the strong thing that moved her feet, and set her going like a wound clock.

As a man receives a stroke of paralysis, or shock of

apoplexy, so he receives a stroke, or shock, of crime-mood. The moral nature collapses: a squall leaps out, smites the little sail, and with just the easy suddenness of a wink over goes the skiff. To every infamy, as Goethe says, each man is liable. Happy the well-built craft that rights herself—with a shudder from keel to pennant.

The night was dark, the forest thick-wooded, and here was no path. Hence the clock-work figure that led Anne to her death met obstructions, at each of which mere mechanism, incapable of advancing, found thought essential. And so the habit of thought grew: till, near the end, Bessie's spirit, with angry impatience, was ejaculating:

'Oh, save me, save me, from this!'

But she prayed as one struggling in nightmare, bound hand and foot; and persistently she advanced, without haste nor rest, and Anne followed her sounds.

Now the Winney, its bands forgot, running free between its banks (as an athlete spurts light with elbows close), began to surround them with its growing shout. To Bessie it noised like some weird river in the pale Kingdom of Death, its wash filling the world, mingling with the beat of her blood, welling and swirling within her ears.

Always her grinning teeth-edges met in chatterings like bird-peckings: but now she was actually reasoning to herself in a species of lucid lunacy.

'This woman,' she thought, 'whom, sure, I have never wronged, how hath she hunted and beset me! I hate her, for first hath she hated me. I will choke her life in the water, and hear the glad bubbling cry of her agony, for first willed she to choke my every good hope in shame and horror. I will not stop—no, I will walk straight on to the bridge, the ghastly bridge. I can hear the water shout, and I know precisely how she will feel at the instant when her foot steps on air, and the world turns all into unsolid rushing floods to her. Sure, I am not a bad-hearted girl, meaning fair and well to everyone, and how hath she hunted and beset me! How hath she hunted and beset me!

I hate her with rage and bile, and the bitterness of aloes and verdigris, for first she hated me. God will sure not judge me harsh, for now, if I lead her not to the ghastly bridge, and choke her life in the unsolid rushing flood, whose shout grows and fills the whole pale Kingdom of Death in mine ears, then will she still hunt and beset me, and now, *this night*, will work me final woe. For what one knows, one knows: and this I know. Well and fair have I meant, God wot, and if I love my little girl, is that my fault? By my credit, who could help to love her? She should have let me be, that woman, she should not have kindled the flaming malice of Hell in my bosom, who, sure, am a well-meaning girl in my way; nor should she have hunted and beset me, nor hated me first. I will not stop—no, I will walk straight on to the ghastly, ghastly bridge. 'Tis God—perhaps—who hath wrought it so to a chance most wondrous rare, and given her into my hand, just when she would work me final woe, that I might choke her life in the unsolid rushing flood, and be for ever rid of her, rid, rid of her, that woman. My mother! how the shout of the great pale waters grows, and fills one's poor ears! I hardly can hear the sound of her feet behind me. Sure, we are near now—we are not far off. Oh, save me, save me from this. . . .!'

At this last heart-cry—a real emotion now—she tossed her face upward with irritable and impious impatience. The smitten boat, well-built, was straining, in vain, to right itself. It was a question of Time.

She did not stop, but moved steadily in the tow of a Power. And the Power said: 'Do it! Laura is *lame!* and thy chance is wondrous rare, one in a thousand thousand millions: thou wilt not touch her even with the finger: she asks the way, thou guidest her right: the bridge is there: *thou* knowest not that it is sawn—how *could'st* thou know?'

It was a question of Time: but they drew very near the bridge. The forest ended, and they were slushing through a muddy field. Here Anne said:

'On, on,—faster, good woman!'

Bessie quickened not her steps: but on stolidly, with-

out pause nor haste, went she. They passed through a lane of six dark and slumbering houses of scattered Maddox: and now they were on the river-strand.

And here, at once and suddenly, Bessie Ford's prayer was answered, her temptation solved: and she was saved from murder. Anne panted hurriedly:

'I give you thanks—now I know my way——'

For yonder across the water gleamed lights of Henry's camp.

Anne bent forward into running, knowing the position of the bridge relative to the lights. But she stopped, remembered the good woman's guidance, returned, groped, and scrambled a crown into Bessie's hand: and Bessie took it, and said nothing.

She was saved from murder, she saw! Anne ran toward the bridge in voluntary suicide. Bessie, sure, had not led her thither: the bridge was quite ten yards along the strand from where she stood.

But she ran after Anne, not knowing why, her teeth now chattering a steady tattoo.

Anne reached the bridge, and entered upon it with hurried, prone gait. Bessie Ford at the end, one foot on the plank, stood and peered, her soul focussed in her eyes.

'Go not on!' she tried to cry, but the words choked in her throat.

Her responsibility was gone: the voice which had said 'Do it!' no longer spoke, since nothing remained to do. But now the test of her integrity was a million-fold heightened, it being no longer a question of virtual Murder, but of active Mercy: not of negatively refraining from wrong, but of doing positive good. And so complex in its generous operations is a noble mind, that she who had found the easier negative hard, rose naturally and gallantly, like a swamped life-boat, to the height of the positive harder.

She was in time, as the virtuous are. She irritably cleared her raucous throat, and pitching her voice to a triumphant cry of passionate valour, she halloed:

'Why, woman, go not on! *the bridge is broken. . . .*'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CAPTURE

'Ah, I maun crush amang the stour
Thy slender stem :
To save thee now is past my power,
Thou bonnie gem.'

BURNS.

THE Voice which whispers with lover's languishment, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' is full of honeyed promise and consolation; yet, certainly, it may be heard amid the intensest earthly misery.

Bessie, having uttered her cry, and run north from the bridge, heard the good Voice; but none the less, her frame trembled in a continuous jerky ague of boding anguish, as she made her way up the mountain-road: an ague which hardly left her to the hour of her death.

The situation of her affairs, viewed rationally, gave no *prima facie* reason for this extreme mental agony: for she knew instinctively that it must be past the hour of Compline, and her defender, Francis, should even now be at the hut awaiting her; Fitzgerald, too, according to promise, should be there—her warrior! With these four arms alone, the most potent in Europe, she should be strong. But she did not view her situation thus rationally. Her heart, knowing its own secret, boded, boded waywardly; and the strong hand of a continuous ague shook her frame, and chattered her teeth.

And, in fact, when she reached the hut, neither Francis nor Fitzgerald was yet there; only Laura

breathed heavily in sleep on the dry leaves; and Bessie, sitting, took knees in arms, and shook there with bowed head and sideward-leering eyes, listening in terror, waiting in craven collapse.

Anne, meanwhile, having heard the warning cry, had turned, and found her guide vanished. She was puzzled: this disappearance, and something in the tone and manner of the cry, made her think of Bessie Ford. But she dismissed that notion easily. 'Sure, *she* would not be the daw to warn me!' she muttered.

She knew that there was another bridge lower down the stream, and toward this with flying heels she ran, found it, made her way cautiously over it, and so over hillock and plain to Harry's tents.

She approached them at slower pace, and stealthily. There were five, one of considerable size, four smaller, under trees. From all, at the flaps, gleamed ruddy streaks. The largest, which was Henry's, she avoided, and stepping on tip-toe to the nearest of the four, lifted an edge of flap, and peeped. Some men lolled on the ground among harness, saddles, and arms, playing backgammon, and eating a mess of cowheel-and-bacon. She went on to the next, lifted a flap, and saw what she wanted: Charles Brandon nosily dicing on a chest-top with Knevet, a brass-work cruse-lamp between them, a flagon of Lachrimæ in Charles' grasp. She put in her head, and whispered:

'Charles. . . .'

'Who goes?' said he.

'Anne—Anne Boleyn.'

'Anne! you?' cried Charles, half drunk, in the loud voice of surprise.

Now, from the apex there fell a curtain, dividing the tent into two equal parts; and on the other side of the curtain reclined my Lord Cardinal, writing; and he heard Charles Brandon, in the loud voice of surprise, say: 'Anne! you?'

He was not therefore slow in slipping through the flap-door of his side, and creeping half-way round the tent. He heard the momentous, breathless news: the description of the whereabouts of the hut in the wood;

Anne's whole gasping passion of tidings. And even as Charles Brandon cried, 'Knevet, we have the girl!' and darted towards Henry's tent, Wolsey was carrying his bulk at an earnest trot toward another tent near, where lay seven of his own men.

He intruded his head, and hissed: 'Burrows!', and when a man ran to him, he whispered with intense haste and emphasis:

'To horse all of you, secretly and instantly! At a noiseless walk go hence ten yards, then gallop like devils! Up the mountain-road, a wall to your right, a pool, then a hut. In the hut the two girls. Whip them off to Baneleigh Tavern! Two of you there remain in guard, the rest return in secret. Burrows, Burrows, be swift and silent, I charge thee! No light take: and remember the demolished bridge. Nothing forget—all do. Be gone——'

Wolsey, having dropped his whisper, trotted his bulk clandestinely back to his own tent, reclined, took pen in calm fingers, and wrote as before.

And, in fact, quite ten minutes before Henry—whose very extremity of heavy flurry retarded him—the servants of Wolsey were galloping toward Maddox.

Bessie Ford, meanwhile, sat by the side of sleeping Laura on dry leaves, knees in arms, ague-shaken, with bowed head and sideward-leering eyes, listening in terror, waiting in craven collapse.

Waiting for Francis, waiting for Fitzgerald, waiting for doom! And Francis and Fitzgerald came not: but doom came.

Both Francis and Fitz, however, were coming at tearing gallop, Francis accompanied by six of his knights. He was, in reality, the soul of punctuality, the French King. But the narrow foot-way which leads from Fenley to Maddox had been lost by the cavalcade in the darkness; they had gone askew, and found it necessary to return on their steps, losing twenty minutes.

As for Fitz and Mac, they had pursued the three Du Ballay-men quite up to the mountain-brow, and beyond it, without overtaking, though every moment pressing them harder. Now, however, the agonized heart of

Fitz, thinking of Bonner lying wounded by the roadside, would let him no further advance. They turned and degringoladed at break-neck pace the mountain-side, till they came upon the wounded scholar: and here was more delay.

Finally, after some minutes, the wound was bandaged with a belt; and Bonner, uttering querulous complaints, was before Fitz on his charger. And now, bound at last for Bessie and the hut, they set off down the hill. They had not, however, proceeded ten yards, when the thronging spatter of near up-galloping hoofs startled them; and since the unknown party was without lights, when in a moment or two it met the three comrades, it seemed to burst out of the dark upon them.

The wary prohibition as to lights was, in fact, the weak point of Wolsey's enterprise. The wall, except to one who knew its *locale*, was not an obvious landmark: and the Wolsey-men, expecting something obvious, had galloped up well past it.

The two parties met. Fitz, as he drew, dropped Bonner with what gentleness he could, and Mac, flinging aside the lanthorn which he carried, tackled Wolsey's Burrows. Fitz, whose aim was to hack his way through the six now left to his one arm, and so fly to the hut, entered the fray with grand and terrible impetuosity, his sword thrashing like flails. But the Wolsey-men, who had at once known him by the lanthorn-shine, offered a dogged resistance: and four he had cut down before he found his path open, and himself free. And now, abandoning Mac for Bessie, he spurred downward at rushing pace. But his head dropped like a nodding sleeper's, his eyes closed, and he moaned in dream. After some yards, he toppled forward, then heavily sideward, crashing into bramble. He was deeply chopped in the back over the left lung.

At the same time, the Wolsey-men, pressed to do their errand, went on their upward way, leaving stubborn unconquerable Mac alive on his two legs, with several wounds. At the same time, also, Henry, with five, turned, lower down, from the high-road to the right, going along the wall.

Bessie Ford, sitting with continuous moan and shiver, heard the approaching hoofs: and knew with as clear an assurance as though she saw them, that here were the sounds of neither Francis nor Fitz.

She did not rise, nor move. She sat, and rocked her body and knees, with continuous moan and shiver.

Then light was in her eyes. Henry entered first, and with that chill horror which she had of him, she felt his presence, and flinched gnashingly, as when through a man's flesh a razor slowly moves.

It was some minutes before her eyes would lift a little: and then she saw that Henry was supporting Laura round the waist with the right arm, while with the left fore-finger he held up her chin. And a man near lifted a lanthorn to reveal the lovely face.

Laura Ford's eyes were bashfully cast down, and her lips were—smiling.

At that moment, a man with wild, blood-washed face, and drawn sword, dashed through the King's gentlemen at the hut-door: a sturdy, tough spirit, he, who had sworn to defend Bessie Ford, and did not forget. It was James Macdonald.

The words which he cried, with a jerk of the head, were:

'Have them you shall not, while I live, Sir King——!'

But Henry spoke in time.

'Cut me down this mad dog,' said he.

And at the doorway itself the swords clashed. Stubbornly, in his stolid, firm-lipped, rock-browed way, though quite weak now, Macdonald defended himself against five blades during two full minutes' space. Then, washed from head to foot in blood, he gave in, and drooped, and fell dead.

And seeing him fall—so gorily, and so tragically, and so loyally—Bessie Ford lost her woe in swoon.

CHAPTER XXXIX

BESSIE'S GREATNESS

> . . . 'On her now
> A curtain, blacker than the night, is dropped
> For ever!' . . .
>
> ROGERS.

THE girls were captured by Henry at twenty minutes past compline on a Saturday night.

They were at once taken to the King's tents, a separate guarded one being assigned them. And it was not till five minutes afterwards that Francis, with three, arrived at the hut—three of his six having been precipitated at the broken bridge into the Winney. He found the hut empty, save for dead Macdonald lying there.

At five on the Sabbath morning, a party of ten, led by Charles Brandon, set out from Henry's tents, bound for London, the two girls, well mounted — though Bessie was in a condition of agued debility—being in their midst. And at London, at two in the dark Monday morning, they arrived safely. Meanwhile, Henry, with Wolsey and some twenty, had rejoined the larger portion of his camp lying at Fletcherfield, and with his whole following set out for London, which he reached about noon on Tuesday, the serene array of horses rolling through the streets a long rattle and pattering fracas of showering hoof-falls, the expedition over, the war won, and the boys strangely here again.

As for Fitzgerald and Bonner, their wounds, though grave, were, none of them, what doctors call 'dangerous'; and in a week's time, Fitz and Bonner were occupying

a little garret between the Old Wool-market and Almoner's Yard, Westminster, where lay Caxton's press. And these two, sleeping three or four hours in the twenty-four, were searching London for the sisters.

Francis, too, was assured by the departure of the English royal camp that Henry had the prize. And spurred by many spurs—by love and veneration for the resting Angel who had bespoken him in the wood, by gratitude to her, by intense jealousy of Henry, by the spirit of enterprise—he had sent back his camp to ship in Southampton-water, and accompanied only by the Chevalier d'Arcy, prosecuted in a strict disguise from a solitary house near St. Botolph, beyond the city-wall at Bishop's Gate, a strenuous search for the sisters.

Wolsey, too, never despaired. Even though Laura was within the adamant grasp of Henry, he still searched—and with infinite secrecy, complex skill. But he found them not.

Anne Boleyn, returned to London, knew of these efforts, and smiled. She said to herself: 'Now that Henry hath her, no power in earth or heaven will rob him of her, till he wants her no more.'

All this time Bessie and Laura were in a Bank-side house, the personal property of Lord Thomas Howard.

'Bankside' at this date was a swelling hill-land, scrubby and blasted, at the back of Southwark High-street, extending, we imagine, from the south end of London Bridge, where stood St. Mary Overie, quite as far as Lambeth Palace. At its east end, overlooking the river, were Rochester House and Winchester House; and a little back and west of these, a collection of slum-houses of the old timber-frame sort, called 'The Stews.' Still west of The Stews, at about six stone-throws, stood, on a plateau of risen ground, a very ancient house, low and black, the summit only of whose roof, and a turret-top, was visible behind a square enclosure of battlemented wall. It was called Rain (Reine?) House, was in the mortmain of the Dukes of

Norfolk, and now Lord Thomas'. And behind the gloomy secrecy of these walls lay the sisters.

For a week nothing happened. But at the end of that time, Fitzgerald, Wolsey, and Francis had, each on his own account, decided that here was probably the hiding-place they sought.

Wolsey knew with perfect assurance that Henry had not yet seen Laura since her arrival in London: for his hundred eyes were upon the King. It was not therefore too late for enterprise.

Francis and Fitz both divined that Henry, for many reasons of shame, of secrecy, of slow courtship, would not act hastily; and hoped that it was not too late for enterprise.

On the eighth midnight, Fitzgerald was over the battlemented wall. He made his way through a wilderness of unkempt vegetation to the old wood-building. He broke a shutter, leapt through a low lattice, struck light to a rush. He proceeded to search through the vacant, brown, and dust-exhaling halls. He had come certain of death, expecting an opposition of overwhelming force. But he was met only by a little woman in undress, bearing a lamp—a buxom, dimpled woman of middle-age in pinked porringer, who perked, and seemed greatly surprised; and behind her peered an elderly man, who frowned fatherly reproof. They seemed the comptrollers of the old deserted mansion.

Fitz said: 'Yield me the two maidens ye hold, lest I run you thorow instanter.'

They seemed very alarmed. No maidens, sure, held they there, they swore, and offered to lead him through the house, what though he merited the Marshalsea for infraction. And this they did: and Fitz went away sure that his suspicions had misled him.

Two hours afterwards Francis and d'Arcy effected forced entrance, met the same experience, and went away sure that their suspicions had misled them. And the next midnight a body of Wolsey-men, masked, entered the close through a wide-opened portal, searched the house, and went away sure that their suspicions had misled them.

The girls were in a turret connected with the house by a wooden cause-way. Each of the searchers, having entered this turret, had found themselves in a large square apartment, with floor and vaulted ceiling of stone. The turret was not high, and the infallible impression conveyed was that all above this ceiling was only solid masonry. A secret slab, however, removed from the flooring, would have revealed a narrow stairway, which, after descending, mounted in the thickness of the wall to an iron portal, and to two low rooms, above.

These two rooms were separated by a rude wall, containing a Gothic oaken door, iron-studded, very thick and ponderous. In this door was a great key, projecting outward toward the little iron portal by which entrance was effected from the stairs. At every curfew the buxom dimpled woman in pinked porringer, having watched their evening repast, led Bessie Ford to bed in the inner room, and locked the door of communication, Laura sleeping in the outer, or stair-room. After the third day, however, Laura noticed that the key was never withdrawn; she hated loneliness in the dark; and thenceforward, as soon as the woman retired, the sisters were reunited, and slept together in Bessie's bed, till they judged morning come.

There was no window, and no sunlight. Candles burned in iron sconces all the day. Bessie Ford was deadly sick, and, in general, sat wrapped in her arms, cowering in an ague.

Laura, on the other hand, thrived in this dark confinement and stuffy air. Here and now she fared sumptuously, and with steady appetite: here was venison pasty and ypocras jelly, here halibut engrailed, godwit, and heron, and peacock. She fattened like a duck, and her loveliness swelled royal and authoritative. But Bessie, a poor mean-clad figure, incongruous with the rich-velveted chair where she sat and cowered sideways, only moaned and shivered, and hardly ate.

On the ninth day they were led down and out into the jungled close, and here they breathed deep of the free air; the buxom, dimpled woman in pinked porringer

followed, making herself hideously pleasant, with many a perk and knee-curtsey, and praise of the beauty of Laura. It was a broad and glorious summer-day, though into the rank close the light came like light asleep, like shade a-trance in far and magic lands, where lady-birds sail the Arabian air, and boozy coccinellæ, cruising, trawl a musing boom. At the portal, through gratings in a wicket, they could see the glistering river, flitted with small-sailed craft, like muscæ in the sunlight; or anon a nobleman's barge glided, low and long, like a gondola, with high in-curved prore, toward the King's Stairs. There landed the cloaked nobleman, passed beneath the Clock Tower of Old Palace Yard, by Westminster Hall, by St. Stephen's Chapel, and so to the Palace, to disappear full of purposes which seemed momentous, and were not.

Yonder, eastward, rose visible the high needle of St. Paul's; visible, too, the mouth of the little rapid Fleet, and the Queen's Bridewell Palace, and the frater-roof of the Grey Friars; the turrets also of Savoy Palace, fluttering flags, and Somerset Place, and St. Mary's Hospital, and Durham House, and the Whitehall of Wolsey. To a little opening in the land near came an open punt with horses, here being Stangate Horse-Ferry. The pinnacles of the Westminster Palace waved six flags in gala polychrome of yellow and blue and crimson, fluttering small in the vast Walhalla-hall of the vacant and jubilee heaven.

There are days when the conspiracy of the unseen Powers to vulgarise man's life in his own eyes fails: and the world is perceived to be, in truth, an elfin world, musing through region after region of romance; an earth set in a far nook of the universe, where haunt gnome and kobold, faun and peeping sylph; lit by a rabid day-star; and swooning at the angelus-bell in the lazuli grot of Fairy Night through a lamp-lit bazaar of stars.

Such was this first day of the sisters' airing; but as they so stood, looking upon the bright world, something black and ominous molested them.

Laura stepped back with the cry:

'Our Saviour. . . . ! 'Tis sure token of Death. . . . !'

Three crows, with rough and stertorous caw, had rushed low by the portal, flapping so palpably close their raven augury of ill, as almost to strike the arch.

The buxom woman, also, saw it, and took them each by an arm. After an hour's breath, they were conducted back to the turret.

Now they were regularly led out every noon. Laura grew nothing less than gay, and would grin beautifully at a caught butterfly, with an 'O, 'tis minion . . . !' Bessie waited, watchful, surprised at this grace, never ceasing her chronic shivering.

Why did not Henry come? It was because, like men at a great crisis, he was being pulled two ways. He remembered the divine face of Laura Ford, and would come; and he remembered the divine voice, and words, of Bessie Ford, and would not.

He was intelligent—in comparison with other Kings; and he was conscientious. His crime loomed almost so monstrously large in his eyes as, in fact, it was. Day after day he passed in lonely, ever-repeated agony, forgetting tax, forced loan, and Council Chamber. Bessie Ford had called him '*Father*,' and her tone was in his ears. She had said: 'Don't you do it—*don't you!*' And one day, deeply disguised, he had taken boat at the Palace Stairs to go, and quite near Stangate Horse-Ferry on the Surrey side, had ordered the bow round again.

'By Heaven, 'tis an honest poor soul . . .,' he had whispered from the depths of his struggle.

If he was not, in truth, the 'Father' of a poor little storm-tossed subject of his Kingship like Bessie Ford, what was the good of him?

But never once, had he known his own heart, did he really, in the deeper depths of his Purpose, give way. For, lo, 'he was a prince of most royal courage; and sooner than miss any part of his will, he would endanger one half of his Kingdom.' So said Wolsey of him.

About the twelfth day, the buxom, dimpled woman

in pinked porringer said to Laura, the three sitting on a bench in the deep shade of an ivy-tod :

'Will you come with me, dearie? *I would show you a thing.*'

This woman and her wheedling ways Bessie Ford had grown now to abhor. She started.

'Shall I not come with my sister, Mistress Haliday?' said she.

The woman, dimpling, said :

'Why, no harm meant, my faith, to your sweet, sweet sister, girl. Lord's light, how pretty she is looking to-day, too! Her lips are as soft as butter, I swear, and her eyes shine like a bullock's! No, troth, I'd liefer she came alone——'

'Yet will I go with her.'

Bessie stood up.

But as she stood, the elderly man of the house appeared by miracle through the bushes, put a rough hand on her shoulder, and sternly said :

'Such demeaning of yourself, girl, is not meet, and can further you nothing! Here you tarry!'

She fell helpless to the seat, face in hands, while the woman, taking Laura by the arm, said :

'Come, you darling.'

The intenser woe of the situation here lay not in the fact that the sisters were in the grip of a Force which could do with them what it would : but in the fact that Laura did not *resist* the Force. After a reluctant shake of the left shoulder, she went with the pinked porringer, curious to see what that thing was which would be shown her.

She was led toward the mansion, and was away from Bessie twenty minutes.

The two were then led back to the turret, and left alone.

There was a silence. They sat side by side in cushioned chairs in Laura's room. Bessie waited for Laura to recount. Laura said nothing.

'Well, Laura——' said Bess.

'Darling Bessie,' said Laura.

'What led she thee to see, Laura?'

'Phew! 'twas some gallant who would be for courting me—phew!'

'Twas King Henry the Eighth, and this Laura knew, but said nothing as to that.

'A gallant, Laura Ford? And what said he to thee, Laura?'

'Naught but a heap of blag and stupid folly! Our Saviour—I paid no heed to what he said!'

Bessie's reading eyes were upon her face.

'And what did he, Laura?'

'Oh, naught did he. What could he, Bess? Thou knowest gallants' foolish play—he only touched my cheek with his finger-tips.'

'Did he, Laura? And, Laura, thou lettest him do that?'

'I? Phew! not I! I knocked his hand right away——'

Bessie, in her woe, felt a solace, and inward charm. She went to kneel by her sister, and adore.

Again the next day Laura was taken away for twenty minutes, while Bessie, guarded in the ivy-tod, waited. But that day the answers of Laura, on their reunion, were not so satisfactory. There was confusion in her looks.

And thenceforth every day, for three days, the sisters were separated, each day for twenty minutes. And on the third day Laura returned with a face encrimsoned as morning.

What now was eating into the heart of Bessie Ford was the canker of a mad jealousy. Laura's answers had become vague, irritable, sometimes self-contradictory, obviously false. With the horror of Bessie's great Fear now mingled a rage, and a yellow gall, and a world-hate which seemed to parch her soul within her. There were moments when she distrusted her sister with jaundiced spleen, and distrusting, detested her. But, ten minutes afterwards, she would be sobbing out her heart upon Laura's bosom, imploring, even for Christ's sake, her love and loyalty.

In this state of crazy, flaming jealousy was she on the fourth day that Laura, with hardly any pretended

vexation, was led by the pinked porringer to the mansion. Bessie sat on a bench in the shade; and the elderly man, by her side, had his restraining hand on her.

She could no longer bear it: of the identity of *the gallant* who daily saw her sister she had acquired a suspicion which was like a red-hot dagger in her flesh: her necessity now to *see*, at whatever cost, was absolute. This day, she suddenly wrenched her arm from the man, and took to her fleet heels—towards the house.

The man, in great scare, was after her: but she distanced him easily.

Approaching the one-storied mansion at its side, she saw before her in a little gable a Gothic door, consisting of two parts, upper and lower. The upper swung open; and legging over the lower, she latched the upper within, shutting out her pursuer: and she darted forward.

In two minutes, running, she had traversed a complexity of sombrous and cob-webbed halls and passages; antic triangular rooms, little stairs of three steps, dark-arrased tiring-rooms, rotting bed-chambers: an intricacy of deserted and ghost-haunted oddity of ancient building; till, having run along a corridor of some length, she was about to turn into another, when, at the corner, she saw, and stopped, and gasped, cold as death.

This second corridor was dim, but a lattice at a far end diffused some twilight: and she could see.

Laura and a man stood in the middle there. His two hands rested on her shoulders; he was speaking earnestly to her, underlooking a little: for her head hung quite down, her face shaded with draping hair.

A black mask which the man wore had been lifted, and now stuck above the horizontal from his forehead. Bessie, with a deathly failure at the knees, saw well that it was Henry.

Oh, without fail, it was he. . . .!

There were the shapely legs, tight-clad, one projected; the sculptured protrusion of the knees; the thick body in girdled black-velvet jerkin. She noticed the look of complicity here: the earnestly confidential face of the self-sure and masterful lover.

Low, low, hung Laura Ford's head, draped in hair; and her face now was pale.

Bessie saw the bent head nod slowly once: it seemed a nod of consent. Then the earnestly confidential lover spake a minute, and she saw the bent head nod slowly once again: and it seemed a nod of consent. . . .

But now a sudden hand was over Bessie's mouth, clapped from behind, and she was hurriedly dragged round the corner by the buxom woman in pinked porringer.

That day the sisters, when rejoined in the turret, did not speak, and shunned each other's eyes. About mid-afternoon the woman brought up a basket containing a repast: and Bessie, with jealous rage, observed that now Laura ate with no effusive approval of the good things, and little appetite. Laura was subdued, and mused.

Between angelus and compline came another repast. Laura ate not at all; but when the woman handed her a goblet of Tokay, she nodded royal consent, took cheek from hand, and drank largely.

Both beds that day had been relaid with clean stiff covertures, sheets of cambric, and down-coverlets of basted white silk. The woman, now, as she looked finally round before departure, inspected like a backing drill-sergeant the bed of Laura from the judicial distance of her held-back head; then tugged finishingly at here a corner, there a cambric-edge. And this poor Bessie Ford saw with still under-look.

The woman said 'Come' to Bessie. Bessie kissed Laura on the brow. The woman led her into the inner room, put out her lights, shut the door, and turned the key. That night, for the first time, she did not put out Laura's lights, and kissed Laura with fussy benediction on the cheek, and backed away with curtseys, Laura palely smiling with one shoulder-shrug.

Now each sister was alone, Laura with two lights, Bessie in dead darkness. It was Laura's nightly custom, after some minutes, to rejoin her sister. But this night Bessie waited, and Laura did not come.

Laura was in her bed, sitting up; Bessie crouching at the door, silent, waiting.

Poor abandoned heart, in that hour she tasted all the inhumanity of man, and the bitter cold of the world. Laura did not come to her. It was just as though there was no God in Heaven, and no care anywhere for a poor honest soul wanting help. If a good man or woman is not stronger than a stupid King, or a locked door, how can there be a God? She wept there, shuddering, shuddering, tasting all Gethsemane, kneeling on her knees, her arms thrown up against the strong oak, and her bent head sweating great drops.

But a certain greatness of mind which was hers, that invincibility of high spirits, saved her from utter collapse. She rose after an hour, and began to pound at the door.

Laura heard, and started with a terrified whisper of 'Our Saviour!': but she did not open, having the excuse that the sounds were faint.

Soon, however, came other sounds, loud bangs, produced by a stool which Bess, with fierce brow, was hurling against the door. With every bang Laura's heart thumped, and her body started, as though struck by the operating stool. This mean-clad woman who was her sister the beauty had in genuine awe, and feared with a deep-seated fear.

After a while, no longer able to withstand that strong summons, Laura cast up her eye-whites, stealthily hurried from the bed, and turned the key. Very lovely was she that night in her nudity, pale, her hair well turned and built.

She met the eyes of a judge there.

'Wherefore camest thou not to my bed to-night, girl?' said Bess.

'Sure, Bess,' said she timorously, 'I fell asleep——'

'Asleep, girl? Asleep? And wherefore opened'st not when I knocked?'

'Our Saviour! thou knocked'st so soft——'

'So soft, so soft,' moaned poor Bess, covering her face, weeping with stretched-back lips.

But she pulled herself together; and she looked steadily at Laura, who looked on the ground.

'To-night,' said Bessie, 'I will sleep in thy bed, thou in mine.'

'Why, nay, Bessie, nay!' protested Laura. 'Be reasonable, do—'tis too much, you know, at the end of the tale——'

Royal was Laura's beauty that night: but here not she, but her sister, was the real Queen and Sovereign. Bessie Ford stretched her forefinger.

'Do it, girl,' said she, 'do it, do it. You see that stool? There where you stand I brain you therewith, an you do not now my will!'

A push at the shoulder sent Laura into the dark room. Bessie closed the door, and turned the key.

After a time she put out the two lights. She went to bed.

Like a boat's sail ruffling in the wind's eye, so, lying there, she shuddered.

Later, she heard that the key of the small stair-portal moved with stealthy creakings in the lock. Then she felt that someone was with her in the nether blackness of the room. And after a second or two, a hand was on her shoulder.

'Laura . . . pig's-eye. . . .'

Bessie Ford gasped this word:

'*Sire*. . . .'

That most chill horror which she had of him shook her now with strong fundamental shudder.

But as a lamb led to the slaughter, so was she: not one sigh of pain, or groan of mortal shame, escaped her lips. Only, her upturned, martyr eyes appealed to God. . . .

CHAPTER XL

TWENTY-SEVEN THOUSAND NOBLES

'Then forth the chest he brought:
They pressed the secret spring:
With pearls 'twas fraught and broidries wrought,
And many a gleaming thing.'

OLD BALLAD.

SOMETHING like what she had hoped really came to pass. She had the inward certainty, like a consciousness, that this sacrifice of her girlhood would lead to her sister's liberation and ultimate salvation. And so it was.

The next morning at ten the woman in pinked porringer entered the room, and saw Bessie Ford lie in deep, oblivious sleep, there where she thought to see Laura; she took note of the look of the sleeper's face: and she clapped a hand upon her mouth.

Here before her, she well perceived, lay a tragedy.

And the tragedy was due to *her* laxity of discipline. The key, on that night, at least, should have been removed from the separating door.

Her dimples vanished, her face paled. That this event must become known if the girls remained was certain, and, with terrible consequences, it would be ascribed to her. After many doubts and trepidations, she decided that their immediate escape would be the lesser of her two evils.

Accordingly, when at noon the prisoners were led down for air in the close, they found themselves alone in the neighbourhood of the portal, and presently perceived that this was open. Bessie caught Laura by

the hand, and, with what of power remained to her, ran from that evil place.

South-eastward they ran across barren fields, past The Stews, and so into Southwark High Street, and up it, till, at a sombre archway, Bessie pointed, saying:

'Wait thou there.'

The manner of the elder sister was now calmly grand, irresistibly authoritative. This day, to the bottom of her soul, Laura feared and shrank from her, almost as from some risen spirit, or superior essence.

The arch was some steps only from the carved frontage and barge-board roofs and gables of Chaucer's Tabard Inn; and under the hoary pendants and quaint finials disappeared Bessie in haste.

She would speak with mine host in private: and for ten minutes she spoke, part of that time on her knees. After which, she ran for Laura, and the two followed the good man to a gable-garret overlooking the street. He had promised her silence and shelter; and she locked the door upon herself, and sat waiting.

Except those three words: 'Wait thou there,' she had not spoken that day to Laura; and now, too, they sat silent, dim-lit beneath the low roof, Laura Ford slinking mouse-quiet, dreading to make a sound or move a finger.

Bessie waited for darkness. Her one hope now was to get Alvarada's twenty-seven thousand rose-nobles from the Bell Inn, find Mark Bonner—and die.

Very good now seemed to her the grave, and sweet the oblivious clods of the valley. But so far, she had conceived no method of self-destruction, nor had even formally thought of that. Only, she felt that sure there was some natural working in the Loom of the World which would not deny her death also, and, somehow, must bring it to pass.

After curfew she went out, locking the door upon Laura, without saying anything. She passed by the inn's back over deserted Bankside, took ferry-boat at the water's edge, and landing at some stairs near Old Scotland Yard, passed through Holbein's Gate, and by the tower of Charing Cross into the Strand-fields. A

lonely and lowly figure went she, her plait reaching no lower than her rowan-tree necklace and low-clad neck, seeming not great, nor important, though she was both. And now, crossing the Fleet-bridge, through the Ludgate she passed, and at the Bell Inn went down the side-passage, and entered the court-yard at the back.

Mine host himself, her great-uncle, opened to her knock at a buttery-door, and his eyes were round.

'Bessie Ford!' went he, ''tis thou. And many a searching of heart has been mine these weeks for thy poor mother's child, my troth! Wherefore leavedst thou me, girl, without congee or farewell word?'

'By my credit, Master Somers, that were long in the telling, sir,' said she. 'Prithee, let me sit me here a moment.'

'Art sick, then, girl?'

'Not so quick and hearty as I have been, sir.'

'Goes all not well with thee, Bessie Ford?'

'Not all, Master Somers—not all, sir.'

She had lowered herself carefully to a stool, while he, with parted legs and round blue eyes, stood regarding her. After a minute she took from her bosom Alvarada's key and silver wyvern, and presented him the wyvern.

'The Spaniard's pledge!' cried he.

'The coffre-fort is mine, Master Somers, an so be you will deliver it me.'

Somewhat askance he eyed her.

'Bessie, thou hast come honestly by this, my girl? Honest a man was thy father as ever breathed, and as to thy mother——'

She rose impatiently.

'Honestly enow, Master Somers. The gentman who gave it me is dead, and gave it with fair and good intent in dying hour. Prithee, deliver me the box.'

The light was dim, and mine host observed not the ghastly apprehensive pallor of her face. He hesitated, taking a turn or two through the room, and there was need for haste: for one no less than the Queen of England was at that moment hasting in a close whirlcote eastward to seize this very coffre-fort of Alvarada.

However, there was no gainsaying the Spaniard's

pledge. Mine host finally led the way upward, and in Alvarada's once bed-chamber on the first floor, dived into a chest, and produced an iron box, green-painted, of massive weight. Bessie put in the key, and in a moment saw gold pieces lie thick as flaking wafers.

'Heaven's mercy, here's riches!' said old Somers; 'girl, girl——'

He trembled; but now Bessie was calmer, and less pale.

'Master Somers,' said she, 'you are parent of mine by the mother's side, and sure, to boot, my good friend. In this matter, I wot, you will even help me. All this wealth you here behold is verily mine: but bear it about with me I cannot. What, then, must I do, sir?'

'Why, Bessie, here thou mightest leave it, girl, to use as thou hast need, an so thou will'st it.'

'Nay, Master Somers, for myself this pile of gold were useless, by my credit: for my case is this, that I have an ailing, sir, and an aching, which, sure, in brief space must take me from the world, somehow, someways. But you wot that I have a sister, Laura? She is here in London now, and her I hope to marry before I die, if, sir, I can but find the bridegroom for her. And for them, since I would not have them live in London after I am gone, I would lay up the money in some ceremony-place, whence they could draw it with surety——'

'Why, then, a banker of Lombard Street would do thy affair, girl.'

'Of Lombard Street—a banker. Why, yea, sir, there you just hit my meaning; and since I would not be in the streets by day, would you, Master Somers, place the money in the banker's hand in my stead, giving afterwards into my hand his acknowledgment?'

'Why, that will I. When see I thee again, then?'

'In two days—three—an come I can. Sure, my way is hard and beset. There are those that seek me, I wot well. An I cannot come——'

'Where bidest thou?'

'Oh, 'tis secret, Master Somers, 'tis secret, sir! An I tell you——'

'By bread and salt, with me 'twere secret as the grave.'

'We bide at the Tabard, sir, in Southwark. If I return not in nine days, you bring to me the acknowledgment, asking after me in the name of Stanley——'

'Fair and good, that will I. But, Bessie Ford, what is this talk of ailing, and aching, and dying, girl? A young sprig like thee, now——'

He stopped with a start, the lamp's flicker falling at the moment upon her face: he saw an ineffable face, as it were of lightning, weird with the pale grandeur of suffering past, like the risen Lord's.

She took from the box ten of the coins, and not till she was about to close it, noticed that, built in a corner of it, was a smaller box, closed by a lid half-hidden by the coins. She raised the lid, and saw some papers. Judging them private papers of Alvarada's, which the Lombard Street banker need not see, she put them in her bosom, locked the coffre-fort, and gave to her uncle the key.

On each cold cheek with strangely tender reverence he kissed her then, as she went away.

Eastward still she fared in moonlight, hugging every shadow, till she saw the White Tower, and, on the Place of Execution, the cubical erection, and beyond Great Tower Hill, the Postern Gate. A few paces northward led her past Allhallows Church, Barking, to the Crutched Friars.

She passed down an alley to the bell-cot of the south-eastern gate-house; and she rang. The friary-bell was even then tolling its forlorn monotonous call to compline.

Bessie leant with weary abandonment upon the portal, till the door-keeper brother came peering.

She said that she would have speech with the good Brother Bruno, and was admitted.

Through the burial-ground path she went to the narrow friary-parlour between chapter-house and cale-factory, where on a stone bench she sat, till Bruno, summoned from the garth, came heaving his puncheon mass past the south transept, along the east cloister,

by slype and chapter, to the parlour. With a hand on her head, he said:

'Now, what hast thou?'

'I am sister to the girl which once you were for marrying in Master Calvo's elaboratory, sir,' said she.

'Ah, I mind, yes. That lovely child, yes——'

'Could you tell me, sir, where Master Calvo is now?'

'Not I, no. He suddenly left the Bridge—by'r Lady, not I, no.'

Her heart sank bitterly. Brother Bruno made always a stertorous kind of asthmatic throat-groan at the end of each sentence, which, as he said: 'Not I, no,' his throat dwelling grievously on the 'no,' hurt her in her deathly strait like a cruelty of indifference.

'Oh, could you not tell me, sir?' cried Bessie Ford.

'Not I, no.'

Her hope was that both Calvo and Bonner had returned to London: in which case, Calvo would know the whereabouts of Bonner, his disciple and messenger. Her one plan of finding Bonner lay in her finding of Calvo.

'I thought you would know, sir,' said she, 'being such a friend of Master Calvo.'

'Not I, no, not I. Hast thou done?'

He turned, thinking little of her, and much of supper and convent routines.

'I had also to pray you, sir,' she said, following him, 'that you do the needful offices to the speedy marriage of my sister, Laura Ford, with Mark Bonner—say, the morrow, or the morrow after—I offering a donation of fifteen rose-nobles for the prior's camera, and fifteen more for a mass.'

Brother Bruno started at this munificence.

'Why, thou?' said he. 'Fifteen *plus* fifteen is nineteen, twenty, twenty-five—thirty! Yes. Whence——?'

'I have it, sir: little it tides whence.'

'And the names?'

'Laura Ford——'

'Ford, yes.'

'And Mark Bonner.'

'Bonner, yes.'

'All will be preste and ready, sir, when I come?'

'All, yes.'

The bell ceased its plaintive and forlorn calling, and Bruno hurried away. Bessie Ford set out to retrace her steps to Southwark.

At this very time Queen Katherine in person was alighting in great flurry at the Bell Inn. Only one hour since had she heard at Bridewell of the death of Alvarada from Sir John Perrot, just arrived with many a bandaged wound; and, hearing, she had wept.

But with a start of scared suddenness had her tears been arrested, she exclaiming:

'But — found you not on his body a key and wyvern?'

'No such thing,' had said Sir John.

And the Queen had almost fainted.

She well knew, for Alvarada had told her, that in his coffre-fort were collected documentary evidences of Henry's frailties, of his cruelties toward his Queen; documents which Alvarada had promised to deliver to Katherine, lest they should meet the eye of her nephew, the Emperor Charles. Also, in that collection were letters of Katherine herself to Charles, written in hours of spite and passion: which, now that she had hope of winning back Henry from Anne, she would not, for ten kingdoms, have reach their destination: which, once seen either by Charles or Henry, must, without fail, result in conflagration, perhaps in the consummating of that thing whose name had already been whispered and written—Divorce.

But as she threw round her head a thick veil, and with Sir John and five attendants made haste eastward, the papers were already in the bosom of Bessie Ford.

The expedition was on the very point of setting out, when Anne Boleyn hurried down to the palace-hall, and whispered to Flying Sidney, who, having accompanied her return to Court, sat there among retainers:

'You see the Queen's whirlecote in the yard there. Follow it, Sidney! and fail not to give me in my bedchamber to-night whither it goes.'

Sidney, following on his fleet feet, saw it stop at the Bell Inn.

Here old Somers, trembling, surrounded by these sudden visitors whom he perceived to be great as they were sudden, led them to Alvarada's room. He dared not refuse to produce both coffre-fort and key.

The Queen fumbled the fluttering key, and could not insert it. Sir John having opened, she pounced upon the coffre-fort, upset the gold, and groped distractedly; then lifting the lid of the now empty little box in the corner, she uttered a cry of failure, and fainted.

The fist of big, ferocious Sir John went out, threatening Somers, whose knees were weak as he flurried for water to dash the Queen's face, muttering: 'Not a coin, not a coin has been touched. . . .' But even as he returned, the pallid lady opened her eyes, sighing out:

'Sir John Perrot, no hope, no hope?'

'Why, that,' answered Sir John: 'too desperately takes Your Majesty the outfall. Let us question our good-man here, and, look thee, Master Host, answer as thou lovest thy skin's entirety: who was't, as thou sayest, opened this box but now?'

'Even my niece, Bessie Ford.'

'How! the Beauty's good sister?' asked the Queen, looking up with new interest, like a sad sun through pausing rain.

'Aye, she is a good lass, and hath a sister,' answered Somers.

'And she it was which duly presented the wyvern-pledge?'

'Even she, lady.'

'Said she that she had it from the Count himself?'

'In his dying hour, lady.'

'Why, the good Alvarada! how it was I see well now. Won by her virtuous demeaning, the kind heart would have left to her the gold here, while the dying head forgot the papers. But, Sir John, if the maidens are indeed in the privy custody of my lord King, how comes Bessie Ford here but now?'

'She hath even escaped, then,' said Sir John.

'But she will be recaptured, sure, Sir John, by the King! And she hath these papers upon her person—God give me strength——'

'Marry, is the girl then a King's-prisoner?' asked Somers aghast. 'Sure, now I see light—for hence grew her strange talk of dying——'

'Of what, sir?' said the Queen.

'Of dying within few days, lady. For, quoth she, "An ailing have I, and an aching"——'

'Oh, here is worse on worse!' exclaimed Katherine with clasped hands of terror—'for this of dying, Sir John, but betokens that, the King having performed his evil, evil will upon her sister, the poor good child hath it now in mind to make away with herself! And, an she escape the King's recapture, then will the writings be found upon her dead body, making my woe sure either way—ill-happed Queen and woman that I am this night!'

'And thou wottest not at all, mine host, the girl's lurking-place?' asked Sir John.

'Not I, my lord,' replied Somers, with scratched head.

'But, at least, thou canst declare which way she passed hence, varlet!'

Now, after his effort of reticence, Somers, oppressed, spoke truth.

'I saw her go Leadenhall and Aldgate way, my lord.'

'How long since?'

'One half-hour——'

'Sir John—after with speed!' cried the Queen, whereupon Sir John, with three attendants, rushed down to gallop eastward, the Queen, with a lady-of-honour and one cavalier, returning to the palace.

Bessie Ford, on her homeward way, had nearly reached the great quadrangle of Leadenhall, when she was aware of the approaching hoofs of Sir John. Being in a state of morbid suspiciousness, conceiving the world against and after her, she stopped scared, glanced about, and saw an open doorway, into which she pitched. It was the house of a solid haberdasher of

the Jewry, over whose doorway burned a lamp. She was, therefore, seen to run, and Sir John sent after her an excited roar of his gross voice.

The riders, before they could halt, passed the doorway, and three, dismounted, were running back to enter it, when Bessie, having found no hiding-place, spurted out, like a hare started from covert, almost into their hands. Doubling, however, southward into a near by-street, she summoned all her failing powers, and ran well, while behind her she heard both shouts and pelting feet. Happily, this part of London was thickly housed in a complexity of short, steep, or winding streets, which now were desert, save for the occasional lanthorn of the night-watchman and his tolling tread. Her instinct led her, darting from street to street, in a direction rather east of south, where the building was denser. But in spite of her dodging agility, they tracked her during five minutes, till, near Billingsgate, she spied the deep-embrasured arch of a yard, where, bathed in moonlight, stood timber-stacks. Her pursuers now were desperately near, though hidden, and, bolting, she hid in a nook, black between two timber-stacks, her body rowing shudderingly in quick-repeated dying efforts to breathe.

Here she lost the pursuing sounds; waited some minutes; and ran again, judging the yard too obvious a hiding-place.

She came out, running, upon the river at Billingsgate, slipped with a cry foot-long down three slimy ladder-steps, and on a strip of moon-lit strand hid in blackness under a pile-propped cellar, open to the wash of high tides.

But everywhere in the world seemed to her moon-lit and obvious: and hearing echoes that ran, she, too, ran again, westward now; until emerging from a street upon Botolph's Wharf, she hasted far out to the end, down the five steps, and balancing along a tide-washed horizontal beam, sat there in darkness among old green-bearded piles.

A strangely long time she sat there, her bursten buskins hanging in the water. All among the aged

timbers sluggishly flopped the moving river, and in a language of sobs spake with dumb and sloppy tongue. Here were odours, dreams, suggestions. Some boats and barges lay by the wharf's side in the land-opening there, and were at rest: for Day was done, and great Night, wherein no man can work, was in and over all. At rest, at rest. Only, afar, like a passing bell, tolled the watchman's tread.

Bessie Ford put her hand in the water, and raised some, and let it trickle through her fingers. Here, here, here, was Rest. . . .

But with a start of horror she roused herself; stole stealthily up and away; ran till she reached St. Magnus; then, at a less guilty pace, crossed London Bridge, and so by the Bridge House, St. Mary Overie, Suffolk House, reached the Tabard after midnight.

CHAPTER XLI

THE CIRCLES SPREAD

'Eager ambition's fiery chase I see ;
I see the circling hunt of noisy men,
Pursuing and pursued, each other's prey.'
YOUNG.

DURING those very days Anne Boleyn knew that the fate of her ambitions and Queen-ship was being worked out : and she lived on a tip-toe of activity.

Even while the Queen was sighing ineffectually at the Bell Inn, she was ardently intriguing with Charles Brandon, whom she had summoned from Westminster to rendezvous in a little room opening upon the close of the Bridewell Palace.

'Charles,' said she, 'you no longer please me ; and you should, for I am going to be your Queen.'

Brandon, a languid gallant, with dreamy blue eyes, which yet could be shrewd and hard, stretched his legs, and throwing a weary sideward look, said :

'You are already my Queen, dear Anne.'

'Nay, but I mean *really*, Charles : a Queen at which you will bow, you wot ? and not yawn.'

'Royal little woman——' he said, drawing his palm down her cheek, for long since had she given him these her easy favours.

'Only fools are modest, Charles. Am I so o'er-confident ? Doth not my little star twinkle bright and minion ? Laura Ford is in Henry's hands, young sir !'

'What of that ?'

'Never yet was male man who could see, I swear !—

except that pork they call Thomas Wolsey. Laura Ford in Henry's hands meaneth sure and certain return of Henry's heat for me day after the morrow, without fault!'

'You make me deadly jealous of my King, dear Anne. 'Faith, I'm serious, you do. But art so sure?'

'Sure? Is not my sister the King's paramour, ninny? From her alone, if from naught else, I'd know King Henry of England. Possession with him meaneth instant surfeit; his whim unfinished, a latent flame. Dost not yet wot that, ninny Charles?'

'I suppose you have reason. Abstract thinking bothers, Anne. Women are made to think for men, and men to think of women. But, being so sure, what more would'st have?'

'You wot! you feign the imbecile! There is always the eternal Wolsey against me.'

'I hate Wolsey: talk not of him.'

'But because I hate him, therefore I talk, talk, talk, of him, till I do pierce and slay him with my tongue-tip!'

'Then, o' God's name, talk of him, I care not: though I have known thy tongue-tip pierce, and yet not slay, sweet Anne——'

''Twill slay *thee*, and yet not pierce, an thou palterest when I bespeak thee at the pitch and acme of seriousness, Charles Brandon. Listen—there remains *Wolsey!* Before thy poor friend can touch greatness, Wolsey must lose credit, hope, estate. And 'tis not so hard, I swear to God, Charles Brandon! He hath his weak spot—his Spain. And because he would be the friend of Spain and Pope, and have the friendship of Spain and Pope—therefore hate I both Spain and Pope, and would court their enmity.'

'Enmity of Spain meaneth union of Spain and France against England, Anne.'

'I wot it, and I care not!'

'A sorry patriot thou, Anne, Anne.'

'But an egregious Boleynist, Charles! Are you not with me, Charles Brandon?'

'I am always with thee, Anne. But I have a sort of scurvy liking for England.'

'England is all right! Countries take care of themselves. But you perceive, don't you, that there must be a *row*, Charles, a row between Henry and Spain, before he can be led to the nice and definite point of divorce. And this row I have it in my hand to make—an you would but help me! The King's letter to Wolsey, in which is that very word "Divorce," lies in the bosom of Bessie Ford; and you wot where she is, and this week gone have I prayed and prayed you therefor, and yet I have it not! Charles, *where* are the sisters?'

'No; that I tell thee not, Anne.'

'Charles, *tell* me!'

'No.'

'I'll give thee——'

'No, Anne, no. 'Tis the King's secret, pretty.'

'But, ninny, am I not on the King's side in this matter? What a thing is a male man! What harm? *Tell* me!'

'Oh, no—no. I could not.'

'Then keep thy stupid secret, and I will make thee suffer. But tell me this: Has the King yet gone—has he done——'

'Yester mid-night.'

'And has he revisited to-day?'

'No.'

'What, so soon distasted? Ha! ha! But, Charles, *now* is *thy* chance to visit the hiding-place, and have the letter from the wench. Promise, promise. To-night? Oh, promise! I will do for thee what thou darest not hope, when—— look, Charles, deep into mine eyes. Dost promise, then? For the sake of thy love for me, of thy hate for Wolsey—say yes!'

'Well, I promise,' said Charles, and shook himself, and rose, having as yet no knowledge of the sisters' escape.

An hour later Anne had from Flying Sidney the news of the Queen's visit to the Bell Inn: and stealing from the sleeping palace, she made her way eastward, accom-

panied only by Sidney, who roused the Bell landlord about midnight.

In a secret interview Anne plied old Somers with gold, and got from him the whole story of the documents taken by Bessie, of the Queen's fainting agitations, and, most momentous of all, of Bessie Ford's talk of death. Only the old man kept in his bosom that word: the Tabard Inn.

Often had Anne, with hissing malice, invoked the death of Bessie Ford: now, with all the intensity of her soul, she desired the prolongation of her life.

Like the Queen, she divined that this talk of death portended suicide: and suicide meant the loss, or the falling into wrong hands, of both the King's letter, and the Alvarada documents.

Quickly on her return to the palace she sent Sidney packing with a letter to Du Ballay's palace, standing near in fields between Rolls Place and Fetter Lane, composed then of but six houses.

The French Ambassador's objects differed only from Anne's in that they were two-fold: firstly, the alienation of Spain from England; and secondly, the union of Spain and France against England. But in this they were at one: the alienation of Spain. And hence the political friendship and collaboration of these two.

The next morning, Du Ballay, still stiff with wounds, awaited Anne between two ivied side-turrets of St. Bartholomew the Great, where Anne that morning piously attended *missa matutinalis;* and presently she came running, her large-kerchiefed bosom a-heave, her back poised far forward on her haunch, plumb as a Nubian water-carrier's, and her veil lifted to the nose-tip to show her fleshly smile, above being some scratches of Bessie Ford's hand.

She spoke with gossipy volubility:

'My lord Bishop—others are with me—in the church—we make hasty conference—one half-minute! Tell me, my lord, yea or nay—is Francis in London?'

'*Must* I say?' smiled Du Ballay.

'But yea! Are we not——?'

'He is, then.'

'I thought so. Then, my lord, you will whisper him anon that in the bosom of Bessie Ford lies a letter of strong unfriendliness against Spain and the Queen, writ by Henry's hand; also some documents of Alvarada, at whose loss the Queen swoons, I swear, like a yawsey hen; tell him, my lord Bishop, that Bessie Ford has escaped from Henry; that she momently plans her own death—momently, my lord! that, if he loves his hopes, if he detests Henry, then he must find this girl before either her death, or her recapture by Henry, or her capture by the Queen, who also, this very day, be sure, be sure, will be hunting through London after her. My lord Bishop, be prompt and urgent, I implore! You yourself will seek the girl, and I, and Francis, above all—— I have done——'

She awaited no answer, but ran, with lifted skirt, her tom-boy run, back to the façade, and into the church, which in some minutes she persuaded her companions-of-ceremony to leave.

As she passed through the Bridewell fore-court, Flying Sidney whispered her:

'Charles Brandon awaits you in the vestibule of your withdrawing-room. . . .'

She ran up without inquietude, expecting only that Charles had come with the stale news of Bessie Ford's escape. But he had other tidings.

On hearing at Rain House from the pinked porringer the surprising tale of the girls' escape, his hard-headed shrewdness had divined a purpose, and a secret: and with his sword at the woman's breast, he had won from her fears a confession of Bessie Ford's sacrifice of her girlhood for her sister.

'Anne,' said he brusquely, on Anne's entrance, 'the girls have escaped.'

'You are nine months late, Charles,' she replied, un-pinning her cap, 'like Lady Westcott on marrying the day of her first-born's birth. I knew.'

'But this you know not, Anne—Bessie Ford has cheated the King, and Laura is gone intact.'

She frowned, paled, and heaved the bosom, saying:

'What say you?'

He explained, and as he explained all colour vanished from her skin; she swayed as if to fall, and she sighed the self-contradictory words:

'That all-cunning strumpet. . . . ! This, then, explains the threatened suicide . . . !'

The next moment she was on her knees before Charles Brandon, smoothing his hands, down and down.

'Charles! knows the King as yet?'

'No.'

'Then, Charles, you will not be telling him! Pity me, boy! All, all, all, were to recommence again, an you do! He will love this Laura more crazy than ever, an he hears. For me, Charles, do it not, my son! Look you, that girl has in her bosom letters of the Queen to the Emperor, as well as Henry's to Wolsey, which I have but now told Francis of: Francis will be seeking, and more likely finding, the girls, than Henry, and an Henry have not Laura——'

She was interrupted by Brandon, whose face had flushed.

'What!' cried he, 'is Francis in London?'

'He is,' said Anne, and immediately regretted having said, for Brandon stamped.

''Tis insolence!' he cried; 'this is not his country, the black goat! Wherefore goes he not back to his own country to play his japes there? The rank impudence of it! Henry will storm into a fine passion when he hears of this——'

She smoothed his hands, down and down.

'But, Charles, you will not *tell* him this—for me!'

'Tell him I *will!*'

'Oh, addle-pated male! But of Bessie Ford's act—you will not tell him, Charles? Oh, you dream not what I will *do* for you! Promise, dear, dear Charles!'

'As to Bess? Well, I wot not. God! 'tis a grand girl that—a grand, noble, all-sufficient creature. Think of it, Anne! what a superb thing!'

'Superb fiddlesticks! Will you *promise* me——?'

'Wot you, Anne? you'd swear that 'tis Bess, and not Laura, with which the King is in love, an you heard him these last days. For myself, I swear I have the

thought to seek the girl out and marry her—I were capable of it!'

'Capable of devil's lunacy, Charles Brandon. Listen to me—listen. Will you *promise*—— ?'

'I'll consider it.'

'Promise.'

'No.'

He had a will of steel, the loose gallant, and would not promise, though he was himself reluctant to tell Henry of Bessie's act. Anne, indeed, trusting in her power over him, and judging from his manner, believed that he would not tell. But the same day, in telling of Francis' presence in London, he told all: of Bessie's sacrifice; even of the documents which she carried; of her probable suicide.

The effect upon Henry was astonishingly different to Charles Brandon's expectation. For when the King heard what the girl had done and suffered, and how she had taken up her cross, and how she had given herself in meek resignment, not counting her life dear to her, then he fell, and, with his arms cast over a table, he was rived by sobs and the loud bursting gasps of a strong man throed with bitter pity.

And she would die, he heard: she was near to die. It seemed to him then that if she died, then he, for grief, must die also.

He was thus better than Anne's divination of him. Not of Laura, at that moment, did he think with lust, but of Bessie with sobs. The same hour he had twenty men searching London for her.

An hour afterwards Wolsey knew all from Knevet, whom Brandon had told, Knevet being secretly in the counsels of Wolsey. And by evening Angelus, Wolsey, tremblingly eager to have these papers in his possession, had some score of men searching London for Bessie Ford.

The quest of Laura had ceased; the quest of Bessie begun.

Anne, meanwhile, had written to Du Ballay a spurring letter, explaining the motive of Bessie Ford for her supposed purpose of self-destruction, and the urgency

of the case: and Du Ballay galloped through Bishop's Gate with the news to Francis.

The French King, hearing what had been done to his little friend of the wood, spake nothing. He was profoundly moved, and dashed a tear from his eyes. Presently rising, he lifted his arm, and muttered, with deep frown:

'Now, may the great God who ruleth in heaven, and mixeth Himself with the rolling of the world, give to my arm strength to avenge this most ugly, inhuman, and filthy crime!'

By compline, including men sent out by the Queen, Anne, and Du Ballay, there were some seventy persons engaged in the search for Bessie; many, from Chelsea to the Tower, keeping watch in line by the riverside to guard against the expected suicide.

CHAPTER XLII

FRANCIS AND CALVO

'The household of continuance.'—HOWARD.

FRANCIS had no knowledge that the skull-capped man whom, as the companion of the sisters, he had sought in Hampshire was the sage, Mauro Calvo, whom he knew; but had thought that Calvo was in London, and genuinely by means of his 'science' had announced to him Laura Ford.

And soon, on learning the news of poor Bessie Ford, of her act, her awful sacrifice, her impending death, his mind, urged to invent, thought of Calvo.

An hour, with arms folded on chest, he paced the room. And, 'Poor Minerva,' he muttered mournfully, 'how have the fates and the powers conspired upon thee, and storms wrecked thy little bark! La, what an offering up of herself was here!—worse to her, as, I divine, than many deaths. Yet "Ill were it to me to die," said she in the wood that day. And—what was it?—something about "jaunting on a grand upward march with the sun, and the moon, and all the train of stars," said she. Poor Minerva! My heart bleeds intimately for this rent lamb: for, by Criss-cross, a bloody sacrifice, a foul incestuous pollution, was there! And with what a sweetness of simplicity trusted she Francis of France, too, rotten Francis, bad old Francis. And what now for her can Francis do? Even as I loiter here, she may taste the last bitterness of death. And "Ill, by my credit," said she, "were it to me——" Faith, what a day was that! To my fantasy it appeareth the one holy day of my life: there beneath

the tree I lay, my head on Minerva's lap: and 'tis wholly like a dream of blessedness, the gentle breezes, the waving tree, my musing doze, and the fugitive girl whose words for ever will infect my memory. Calvo! yes—I will discover the seer's place, and invoke his science to her discovery. . . .'

To discover Calvo's former abode was not difficult: for London knew it. But on learning it, Francis learned also that the sage had left it.

And now his mind was left blank and deviceless. But his necessity for action was absolute. That night late he was on the Bridge; and passing by the spot described as Calvo's den, he entered the dark house-passage and jerked down the black stairs, though without hope.

But behind the portal upon which he butted, he heard sounds; and when he knocked, the door opened. To his surprise, he saw before him the skull-cap, the bulging brow, the goggle eyes, which he knew.

In fact, Calvo had decided that the place from which he was known to have been driven was precisely the most unguessable place of tranquility and hiding. Not that he was any longer in pressing fear of disturbance: for on a finger he bore an intaglio of a biretta, a ring of his new protector, Wolsey.

The sage started as Francis, with a laugh, raised his mask—showed the dry, brown face—and entered.

'You knew not that I was in this city, I perceive, Signior Calvo,' said Francis.

Calvo coughed.

'I—divined it, Sire,' said he: 'but your visit, I avouch, startled me. Pray, seat yourself on this little stool.'

'Pest! your work-shop stinks like a badger's burrow, Signior.'

''Tis the odour of Knowledge, Sire. In the mouth 'tis bitter, but in the belly sweet.'

'Well said. Now, I come to test and consult your science. Your letter with regard to the lovely, gent and amiable damsel, Laura Ford, I had, and came, as you must wot, to England in her pursuit. La, in this

I failed. The King of England hath caught them—her and a sister, Bessie. But they yesterday escaped him: and this Bessie, in special, I now seek. I seek her ardently; I would resign, Signior Calvo, five years' revenue of my kingdom to discover her. I seek her for her own sake; and I seek her for the sake of certain most momentous State-papers which she bears about. But chiefly I seek her for her own sake. Can you, Calvo, reveal me where she is—yea, or nay?'

Calvo, wholly charlatan at the spur and surprise of that moment, possessed by vanity, answered:

'Why, yea—I hope it.'

'Well said, very well said—and when?'

'I must first consult, and work, and elaborate.'

'Consult—work—and elaborate. I see. Then—I wait. My abode is the Grey House, outside Bishop's Gate, at Saint Botolph. There will I await your news. La, do this, and your guerdon shall be what you will. Only—be speedy, be speedy: she meditates suicide.'

'Who?'

'The girl—Bessie.'

'Suicide?'

'La, I fear, I fear!'

'But you said, Sire, that she had escaped this King. Sure, you said that, Sire!'

'I did, yes. But, by Criss-cross, a most foul outrage has been accomplished upon her——'

'Upon *Bessie?*'

'Yes.'

'By Henry?'

'Yes.'

Calvo's wan forehead burst into sweat. He could hardly hide his agitation.

'God——' he muttered.

'Had you no hint or intimation of her fate from your science?' asked Francis.

'Science? I? Oh, I see your meaning—none, none—that is to say, a vague indication I may have fore-had anent a near parent of the girl with the face——'

'Well, I say you *bonsoir*,' said the King, rising in

haste, 'and speedy success to your vigils, Signior Calvo.'

He fumbled his way up the steps, stooping prone his lank body, and did not reach his bed till four o'clock lauds were singing in the London convents, and the silent workings of earliest dawn were in the east.

CHAPTER XLIII

ANNE'S HINT

'Ea serpentium populatur ova, gratissimamque ex his escam nidis suis refert.'—SOLINUS.

LEFT alone, Mauro Calvo, standing with his foot on a stool, elbow on knee, propped his brow, and so for a long time mused, while something which boiled shouted and fussed over, unregarded.

He had abandoned her: and she had been caught. Bitterly had he abandoned her: and she had suffered wrong.

'Master Calvo, sir, you abandon me!' That cry he heard again, close, as it were, in his ears.

Still, Francis' story was singular—almost incredible: he hardly believed it.

'Well, well,' sighed he with a start, rousing himself. He rushed now to the shouting brew. But even as he rescued it, he lost interest. That night he could not work.

He threw round him a voluminous cloak with capote, hiding his face, and went out.

'Whither,' he thought, 'should she go, having escaped, and having no money, save to the Bell Inn?'

So to the Bell Inn he went, and in an interview with old Somers, played the wizard, pretending to more knowledge of the facts than he had, and so won from mine host an account of Bessie's visit. But Somers, remembering Bessie's injunction, kept that secret—the Tabard Inn.

Thence Calvo went westward to Almoner's Yard, where he knew that Bonner, who had visited the

London Bridge den on his arrival, had a garret with Fitzgerald. And having called down Bonner, he said:

'Bessie Ford has escaped from the King——'

'Oh, happy vein!' cried Mark.

'Hold thy enthusiasms, and listen,' said the sage; 'she hath been to the Bell Inn to her uncle there: and him have I bespoken. Where she now is he swears that he knows not; but know he doth, for I am not blind. The hope of finding her therefore must lie in a strict watch upon the Bell: for either mine host will pass to her, or she to him, he having in his custody a pile of money, left her, says he, by a Spanish count. So you, Mark, and this Fitzgerald, by turn, will watch from some coign the Bell exits and entrances every moment of every hour of the twenty-four——'

'My troth, Fitz will even dance for joy!' cried Bonner.

'Ah . . . let us hope it. Go now, one or other of you two, to the Bell. Come to see me every day. And remember my counsel.'

The sage paced home to a troubled pillow, and Bonner that night watched the Bell.

But the watch, maintained steadily for eight days, resulted in nothing.

Meanwhile old Somers lived in a flutter of apprehension. Bessie did not come for the banker's acknowledgment, though her money had been duly deposited at Lombard Street.

Bessie all this time remained cowering in her locked garret at the Tabard. The chase through the East-Thames region by Sir John Perrot on her very first going-out had scared her from a second attempt. Daily when the landlord, faithful to his pledge of secrecy, tapped at her door, she had from him tales of many men who, below, sought news of two sisters. The whole world seemed to hunt and beset her.

As the days passed, hope in the business that remained to her to do left her. Where to find Bonner she knew not at all, since of Calvo's whereabouts she knew nothing. Through the days a sickly inertia of fear possessed her, and she sat silent, hugging herself

like one shivering in Arctic cold; and Laura, mouse-quiet always, regarded her stealthily, as one might regard with interest the movements of a ghost.

Only toward midnight Bessie would go out a little, creeping thievishly down the stairs, to the back-court, and so, lifting a gate-latch, out upon Bankside. A stone's-throw from the inn, at the bottom of a depression, lay a sedge-pond, stagnant and green, inhabited by frogs, and watched by three blasted willows. Here, for a long time, at the very water's-edge, would she crouch, and pore, and gloat.

This hydrophilia had rapidly grown with her into a mania since that night when, under Botolph's Wharf, she had soaked her buskins in the Thames. A sinister fascination for water-sides, for the sight, the neighbourhood of *water*, informed and led her by the nose. Laura, who furtively watched her every movement, observed that from these expeditions she returned exhausted, with a more emaciated pallor, her buskins soaked, her clothes bedraggled. And the notion of horror took rise and grew in Laura's brain that one night, having gone, she might never-more return.

Here was not a modern, but a sixteenth-century, mind. A modern girl, all rationalized, having performed such an act as hers, with motive so pure and high, would feel clearly that the act itself was of no importance, involved no real stain, and was, in fact, itself ennobled by the motive. But in such a century as the sixteenth, glamour was the world. The act, the dogma—apart from reason—whatever the circumstances—was the point. In her heart Bessie must have heard stifled whispers of the approving Voice; but across her brow the staid mind felt branded, in characters of shameful and shocking red, that word: Polluted. And the river became her lover.

Poor hunted girl, she did not even suspect the weak point in her hope of resting yet some days at the Tabard: for now she was incapable of connected thought. On the ninth day old Somers was to come to her, as she had bid him, with the banker's acknowledgment, and old Somers was being watched, not

alone by Fitzgerald and Bonner, but by five or six other men as well, each of her searchers reasoning that if she had gone once to the Bell, she might again go.

Toward evening Angelus of the ninth day, old Somers set out, and made straight across the Bridge for the Tabard, stolidly unconscious of the watchers who, at various distances, loitered before and behind him. Two had risen from the Bell bar-parlour on his departure; two had run down from windows opposite the inn; Bonner had followed from the shade of a manger-arch near. All saw him enter the Tabard.

When they, too, entered, Somers was not there, nor the landlord. The inference was not obscure: Somers had been led by the landlord to his niece.

And now, the spies, one after the other, with all their legs, ran their various ways—to Henry, to Francis, to Wolsey, to Du Ballay, to Anne, to Katherine, to Fitzgerald.

Bonner was the first of them to rush from the inn, his quicker wit being the first to realise; also he noted the unusual number of men who entered the Tabard in that minute. And as he ran toward the Bridge along Southwark High Street, he spied a one-stirruped butcher-boy's nag stand with empty saddle, and gaze into a casement. He was not slow to spring to its back, drive his heels to its ribs, and be away.

In fact, he reached the Wool-market and Fitzgerald some minutes before the nearest of the seekers had heard the news. Their spies reached Anne, Katherine, and Du Ballay's palace about the same time; but Du Ballay was at court at Westminster, and Anne and Katherine, radiant at the discovery, each believing herself alone in the secret, lost something like an hour without action, Anne at that very time having to keep rendezvous with Brandon.

Henry, Wolsey, and Francis were practically equidistant from the Tabard: but Wolsey was at vespers at St. Margaret's; and the race lay between Francis, Henry, and Fitzgerald.

Fitz had just awaked from brief sleep, when Bonner rushed in with the panted news; and he had hardly

heard, when he was pelting down the stairs, with doublet hung askew, as one who, prone to fight, half jerks off his coat. At the bottom, he saw the butcher-boy's nag, and flung a leg over it: but his swinging toes touched the ground, and he felt the little nag throe indistinctly under him in a kick-out. He slid off, and ran a-foot river-ward.

Now, just beyond the Gate House of Old Palace Yard, there stood in an angle of the wall a street-pulpit of lovely marble, sculptured corbel and crocket, flute and fruit, a cornucopia of chiselling; and from it, at this hour, a jocular Austin friar was preaching a succession of jests to a little giggling and answering crowd. And said he:

'But to leave laughing, good folk, and to come to what is rather matter for tears—for tears follow upon laughter, as a wroth husband upon a bussed wife, or as scurvy Monday morning upon jolly Sunday night——'

'Bah!' cried Charles Brandon from the crowd, 'since thy laughter maketh us weep, good friar, sure thy tears will but make us laugh——'

'Now, here have you a Corinthian,' exclaimed the friar, 'which, an I mistake not, is that very scion of the Brandons which——'

'Come, no more,' said Charles to two young gentlemen of the King's bed-chamber who, with him, had stopped to hear the friar's jibes: 'I have a rendezvous.'

'Near?'

'But here.' He put his mouth to the ear of one, whispering: '*Anne!*'

But as he spoke, he started, and with quick breath hissed close and pantingly:

'There—there—is the knave, Fitzgerald! Quick—follow—! we must have him—Henry would be hanging him——!'

Fitz was running at the moment through the Gate into Palace Yard to reach the King's Stairs, and the ferry there: and the three were after him.

They were close upon him, at the other side of the yard, before Brandon cried: 'Halt, fellow!' and Fitz

had hardly time to stop, twist to guard, and draw, when he was confronted by the three active blades.

There are, however, mental conditions when the spirit rises easily above material obstruction, as if proving that it, and not matter, is master here: so that Fitzgerald regretted this attack only because of the delay, since no blades could long check him in this his quest. And cried he: 'Why, sirs, look out for your pates, then . . .!' and began to ply and operate.

The Yard was deserted, and the shuffling feet and mixing swords sounded in dumb echoes. Thrice Fitzgerald shifted his ground, retreating always. At the third time, he had the three rapiers in the exact position which his fencing had designed for each: one lifted to hew to the left, one thrusting before him, one cutting at the right. The first weapon he sent wheeling five yards with the hand that held it, the second he parried, the third he struck downward, receiving a deep horizontal slash in the thigh—all in one triumphant movement of his blade. An instant more, and he had the second of Brandon's friends spitted through the throat, and springing backward, cried to Brandon: 'You yield?' Brandon, famed as a swordsman, did not yield. With rash enterprise he came on; the two edges, edge on edge, jostled and jarred lingeringly, with slide and pause, till Brandon's wrist gave with a jerk to the urgent compulsion of Fitzgerald's blade, and the gallant sighed, staggered with lifted sword-arm, and fell heavily upon the pavers, well ripped in the breast.

As Fitzgerald turned, he saw a lady, peering nearer with dainty step. At the same time she knew him and recognised Brandon, his faintly-smiling agony: and she uttered a little cry.

It was Anne come to rendezvous.

She ran to stoop over Brandon, but even in the act, her face flushed with malicious rage against this all-conquering warrior of Bessie Ford; and she turned to him as he moved, and touching his shoulder, said:

'Master Fitzgerald, will you, then, kill all one's friends with this your sword? And always for the cause of the

same fantasy? Is it that you still seek Bessie Ford, then? Spare yourself and desist, an you take my hint. She is at this moment the King's mistress—Bessie, remember, not Laura.'

His ears heard the words, but hardly with realization. He frowned a moment upon her; his lips muttered something. Then he ran: he had no time. . . .

But at the King's Stairs he saw the boat half-way across, going. He had to wait ten minutes.

A strange sickness took him. During the row across, he leant over the tilting boat, and vomited: it may have been his wound, which left a stain on the boat's thwart; or the words of the slanderer. . . .

On the other side, he set off running toward the Tabard across Bankside; but he was a world too late.

CHAPTER XLIV

AT THE TABARD

'But wae the thane which bears the bane
O' waeful maiden wronged.'

OLD BALLAD.

THE first, in fact, to arrive at the Tabard, was Henry, who, at the whispered news, had flung from a sitting of Council composed of the Lord Chancellor, Suffolk, Surrey, Gardiner, and Fisher; and meeting Thomas Howard waiting in the Lobby of the Chamber, had, with him alone, taken boat at the Palace Stairs, and, both deeply disguised, landed at Stangate Horse-Ferry on the other side.

They entered the inn-yard at the back, and Howard having run in and summoned the landlord, he came out, and stood on the flags before Henry. The twilight was now darkening; and the yard, not large, was made obscure by the low eaves of mangers and outhouses. Old Somers had, some time since, gone home to the Bell.

'I require thee straightway to deliver me the two girls thou hast here in hiding,' said Henry.

There was some tone in that voice which abashed mine host. But he was staunch, and said:

'Girls, my master?'

'Silly addle-pate, come, come,' said Henry, and lifted his mask a moment.

Now mine host trembled, and led the way through a passage and upward. He tapped the agreed tap at a tiny, wry-hanging door.

Bessie opened. Henry and Howard entered.

Here it was so dark that, for a time, they saw nothing. But soon Henry perceived that Bessie Ford was standing drawn up to her height as far as possible from him, her back against the one perpendicular wall, holding Laura by the arm. Looking at them, he lifted his mask.

Bessie had an instant of the intensor pallor of death; but it passed. Her neck was erect and proud.

'So, mamie, thou rannest away from me?' said Henry.

There was no answer. Laura Ford's head hung, and her heart beat thickly. She thought that he spoke to her, but it was to Bessie that he spoke.

The difference between a good and a beautiful woman is even this: that the beauty of the good symbolises eternity, being constant through the day and night; but the beauty of the beautiful symbolises time, depending upon the sun, and ceasing at midnight.

Here so simple a thing as the dimness of the garret abolished poor Laura, but Bessie it left intact and potent.

The King, with sideward, cajoling head, said:

'I fear me, alas, that I am fallen into the bad graces of mamie. Stands it not so?'

No answer.

'Tell me now.'

No answer.

'Well, thou wilt not be gracious, then. Thou seest I come pilgrim and penitent. 'Faith, sweetheart, I grieve for thee, and have grieved; and taking all into account, I praise thee, Bess, I extol thee more than words. Come, now, I have said, and we are friends again. Speak to me—stands it not so?'

No answer.

'Why, then am I in thy bad graces, in troth. Is it that thou hast yet fear for the sis? Nay, but have it no more. Even as Christ offered an all-sufficient offering in our stead, so, believe me, hast thou for this the sis. Henceforth is she safe from me, and from all: I myself will be her protector.'

Now Bess was moved to speech.

'*You ?*' said she.

'Why, even I.'

'Now, may every saint forefend !'

'Ah, thou seest, thou keepest bile, thou keepest bile !'

'Sir, since here you come with soft words, I pray you tell me wherefore. My sister, you say, you would no more pursue. Then what have you with me ?'

'Now would I be thy Father, mamie, in every good office——'

'Father and ravisher in one were evil mixing !' she said spitefully.

'Ha ! thy tongue can bite, then, girl. Yet once only have I wronged thee, and hath not Christ enjoined forgiveness till seventy-times and seven—— ?'

Here Thomas Howard tittered, and Henry, turning, said : 'Silence, Howard !' even as Bessie Ford exclaimed :

'Oh, talk not of Christ with your tongue, sir . . . !'

'Aha ! now thou showest open naughtiness. Yet, I swear, I pardon thee, seeing that the roots of all noble valour are in thee, girl. And, maugre thyself, I will be to thee what I have said, thy good friend. Thy sister, I vow thee, I wed to one of my own gentlemen. And thyself I place high, among the great of this land, where is thy due and proper place——'

Bessie Ford interrupted him with a wail, covering her face :

'Oh, cannot you let me die in peace—oh, prithee, let me be ! let me be !'

'As to that—no !' answered Henry. 'Thou comest now with me.'

She left her place by the wall and fell upon her knees before him with supplicating hands.

'Pity me—if only for the sake of what I have been to you—— !'

He took her hands, and kissed them, and raised her by force.

'Come, come, Bessie,' he said.

There was no resisting. The four left the room, she with rigid face, but without tears. Above the first

landing was a window; and the light streaming in, suddenly recreated Laura. Henry, overwhelmed afresh by her face, started, with the murmur:

'Christ! 'tis a luscious bit . . .'

His repentance had been more emotional than profound, and nearness with Bessie Ford dulled his sense of her pathos. Christs, seen near, with broken boots, lose glamour.

They had half descended the back-stairs, when they heard an altercation below between a man and mine host, who sought to bar his way; the stranger's voice was raised shrilly, and the instant that Henry heard it, he paled.

The next moment his face rushed into crimson rage, and his sword leapt.

'Back—back to thy chamber, and there await!' he whispered to Bessie; and to Howard: 'The French goat below! God's light! in my own capital city—we stick him now!'

Down rushed the two men, so prone that Francis and d'Arcy, standing in the passage near the back-door, had but time to pitch recoiling into the yard, d'Arcy being wounded in the shoulder before he could draw.

But in another moment, the four sprang to guard, Henry engaging Francis, Howard d'Arcy.

Three of the combatants fought with prone impetuosity—heavy, earnest Henry having his bottom-lip between his teeth; only Francis, easily calm, showed a broad smile below his mask, parrying attack, rather than attacking. And with constant chink, chink, for the space of two minutes, without incident, interacted the four blades, Howard and d'Arcy almost stationary, Francis' gawky legs skedaddling over half the yard in spasmodic rushes and manœuvrings. And presently, his edge is fitted to the edge of Henry in slippery, sliding, jostling wedlock; a moment he grinces hard with red-faced effort, and instantly smiles again—for now he would do a feat. Every incident, not of his own duel only, but of the other also, is marked by him, as though his ears were eyes. And suddenly Henry's

urged sword slips sideways, and in a moment his mask is spinning high, while the blade of Francis, without break of sweep and impetus, comes down upon the nape of Howard, whom he has observed near: and Howard drops. And now, seeing with his ears that d'Arcy is turning to his aid, Francis calls: '*Laisse! laisse!*', for alone he would 'quench quick' that heat before him, and abash that bleeding face. Nor is it now difficult, Henry being quite demoralized by the snatch-away of his mask and the fall of Howard. With wilder and wilder earnest come his *bottes* and hews, till Francis, with a perpendicular chop, bangs his sword to the ground, and at once strikes him between the breast and left shoulder. Henry, in his heavily bad form, drops gasping:

'God! the beast has killed me. . . .!'

Not a moment tarried Francis now; in, past the landlord, who stood gaping paralysed at this fray, he rushed, in eager earnest to secure this time his little friend. In two minutes he had every nook searched: but the girls were gone.

Seizing her chance, Bessie, holding Laura, had run down by the front way into the dangerous High-street; and wildly she ran north-eastward toward London Bridge, wildly, blindly, knowing not wherefore.

Passing by the Bridge House, she heard galloping hoofs behind, and doubled her panting pace, almost dragging Laura, who was much less fleet. Whither to fly, she knew not; she thought of Botolph's Wharf; but the hoofs, which, in reality, had no relation to her, hunted near. Suddenly, she caught sight of a doorway with which she was familiar, doubled, and darted in. It was the doorway above Calvo's den.

She ran along the passage, and scuttled down the steps, where in the complete darkness she might find temporary hiding. And here, sitting, they panted, and presently Laura began to cry and sob.

The thought that Calvo might be behind the dark door there, never at all occurred to them. But at Laura's sobbing the door was pushed back; they saw light; a peering form was before them.

Bessie leapt toward him with a sob, and Calvo, pleased as Punch, his arm around her, patting her head, said:

'Well, well.'

Thus, by the Powers that led her, was she led to him.

CHAPTER XLV

CRUTCHED FRIARS

'Whose yielded pride and proud submission,
Still dreading death, when she had markèd long,
Her heart gan melt in great compassion,
And drizzling tears did shed for pure affection.'

SPENSER.

WHEN Calvo told her that he knew where Mark Bonner was, her heart felt ease. All that remained to her to do seemed easy now.

Calvo appointed them his chamber in the garret, and manœuvred a narrow settee down the dark stairs for his own bed.

By the time these works were finished, Laura complained of weariness, and was led to sleep. And for a long time, in the den, Bessie and Calvo conversed.

'Well, we have sought thee far and wide, all and some, girl,' said he.

'Me, sir?'

'Thee in especial.'

'And who, sir?'

'Francis for one, which is in London, has sought thee; and because thou hast with thee certain papers, others among the great have sought thee; also myself, Bonner, Fitzgerald——'

'Master Fitzgerald, sir?'

'Why, sure——'

'What would he with me, Master Calvo?'

She asked it with opening eyes of fear.

'Why, hath he not sought us all through our Hampshire wanderings, since the day that thou confessedst

to him in Colnbrook Church? and we, silly cattle, knew not that he was for us——'

'But *wherefore* was he for us, Master Calvo?'

'Why, an thou askedst me, girl, I'd say he was mad in love with thee.'

'With *me*, sir?'

'Why, yes.'

'Oh, not with *me*, sir!'

'Even with thee, Bess. Why, the carl's face is grown hollow and haggard——'

The effect upon her of these words was a panting terror. She rose, gasping:

'I must go hence, anon. . . .!'

'Why, what hast thou now?' asked Calvo, astonished.

'Oh, God, sir—you wot not, you wot not—this man may find me here!'

'Well, and what an he doth?'

For answer she covered her face, melting for sheer self-pity into tears, wailing inaudibly thinly:

'Oh God, sure Something must be against me, sure. . . .'

He loved her!—she heard the strange, glad tidings with her ears!—and across her brow, branded visibly, was the Stigma of her taint.

She was obstinate: no pleadings, no threats of Calvo, no fears for Laura, could hold her. When it was dark, she went out, leaving Laura behind, having appointed a place where she would meet Bonner the next compline.

When she had gone, Calvo stood a long time silent, meditating.

'Can it be,' said he, 'that that King hath verily done her hurt. . . .?'

He could not understand, nor credit it: the 'wrong' hinted at by Francis was, he had decided, improbable. 'Not Bessie, sure,' he said, 'but Laura, was what Henry was after. . . .'

As for her, she sat shivering an hour that night under Botolph's Wharf, and later found an obscure lodging at a watchman's, whom she followed to his house by the water east of Billingsgate, resolved that no one —not Laura, nor Bonner, nor Calvo—should know her

hiding-place. Worse than she had ever dreaded Henry she dreaded now Fitzgerald.

In the lane leading steeply to Botolph's Wharf she met Bonner the next compline. He came jauntily, having but lately drunk of Laura's lips, and hair, and eyes at Calvo's, all the world showing rose in his eyes.

Bessie Ford considered long his face before she spoke, remembering Anne Boleyn's accusation of him. But of this she said not a word. His large, swimming eyes had a look of grave sincerity: sure, if he was weak in his nonage, he was yet honest.

She appointed the next evening after vespers for the marriage. And she said:

'The morrow morning after terce, prithee go thyself to Brother Bruno, and acquaint him, appointing one half hour before compline as the time, and enjoining his secrecy. It is my will, Mark, since King Francis hath so shown himself my good, kind friend, that thou, and thy wife, and the great wealth that thou hast, do fare with him to the land of France, an so he be still of the same kindly mind to me and mine. And know, Mark Bonner, that I palm not off upon thee a wife tainted and touched, and unworthy thy mating, but one equal to any queen, boy, pure as snow! And cherish her, boy, cherish, cherish her, for Jesu's sake—all thy life—I prithee, Mark——'

She turned her face from him, her mouth working.

'But,' cried Mark, 'Fitz will himself come to France, an so thou will it, and therefore thou also, good Bess!'

'What art talking about, Mark?' she asked, with that scared look, as of one prone to fly and hide. 'Art, then, distraught?'

'How! wed'st thou not with Fitz at the same altar with me and Laura?'

'Oh, thou talkest but destructive folly . . .,' she said faintly.

'Why, Bess, sure I thought Master Calvo had told thee all. Know, then, that Fitzgerald loves thee, and with no common passion, but even with idolatrous and heroic flame; he wastes for thee; faith, he perishes for thee. Oh, Bess, and anon he swears that thou lovest

him, too, thinking of that night on the mountain-side at Maddox, and thy calling after him; and anon he swears that thou hatest him, thinking of thy leap from Ormond Hall, and thy beating upon his face. Sure, an thou sawest and heardest him, thou couldst not help but pity the great-hearted childish giant that he is; and sawest thou his big frame sob, sure thou must even die of love——'

'What, *sobs* he for me?'

'Aye, and very care and sighing doth nip his faded cheek, good Bess.'

'My mother! the pity on it——!'

'Dost pity him, Bess?'

'Aye—aye.'

'His eyes are wan and worn with vigils for thee, good Bess——'

'The pity, the pity on it!'

'Then will I tell him that thou, too, lovest——'

'Why, no! no! Do but *dare*, and I hate thee for ever, Mark Bonner! Listen! And bear what I now tell thee to this man. . . .'

Then she recounted her shame, not hiding her virtuous aim, but dwelling upon the act, the dogma, the ineffaceable shame. Never, she said, would she have this man address to her word or message more.

But Bonner kept the tale of shame in his own bosom, and that night told Fitz only that Bessie kicked against marriage, and must be won by force and strategy, though she loved.

'But will she not even once see me?' asked Fitz.

'Not once,' said Bonner; 'and not Laura, not Calvo even, knows her hiding-place.'

'Why, pity me, then, boysie, for a wrecked soul! Oh, the dear hope that I had, how like a bladder is it burst!'

'But, nay, Fitz, the case is not wholly so, I pledge thee. Bessie *loves* thee, my brave——'

'Oh, then, wherefore——?'

'She is even in a weird and crooked temper which, anon, will pass. Wot you, Laura has told me that she

had fears but lately that Bess would be making away with herself—in the river——'

Fitzgerald paused in his uneven swaying tread about the room, frowning into the soul of Bonner.

'How!' cried he, 'make away with herself?'

Somehow, his mind connected these words with those wild and crazy ones of Anne's, sown like a rank weed there: 'Bessie Ford is the King's mistress. . . .'

'I but say it, Fitz, to reveal thee the wayward unevenness of her present temper,' said Bonner soothingly. 'Faith, lad, Bessie loves thee well.'

'Sayest thou?'

'She loves thee well.'

'Art sure and certain?'

'Faith, Fitz, I do swear it.'

'Oh, then, God bless thee, boy, for thy ravishing mouth! And how looks and speaks she? Hath she yet the little plait upon her bare neck, and the active half-turn of the little body when she speaks?'

'Oh, 'tis ever the same neat, good Bess.'

Fitz lowered his voice.

'But art sure they both escaped unscathed that King . . .?'

'Oh, sure and certain, Fitz,' said Bonner, swinging a sheepish leg, averting always unpleasant things.

'An it be not so . . .!' went Fitzgerald, jerkily poking the air and imaginary King's-bowels with venomous sword-point, a savage *thoo!* hissing from his teeth.

''Tis so, verily, Fitz,' said Bonner. 'Faith, all is clear and plain enow. A little force—a little strategy. The morrow compline I wed Laura; to the good friar I give warning of a double marriage; as Bess assists at my joining, *thou* appearest, and, will she nill she, wed her. Thy arms once around her shy neck, and I know —I am certain—that she is thine.'

In this Bonner spoke honestly, and divined with good insight. The sight of Fitzgerald's haggard cheeks, the sensation of his enfolding arms, could hardly fail to overpower the gentle heart, assuage its terror, and calm its anguish of self-loathing.

Fitz leapt at the suggestion, crying out:

'Boy, I will!'

'Twere easy as reading Cæsar, or misunderstanding Plato,' said Bonner.

'But sure and secret to work, boy! Not a word to her!'

'Why, no, not a word. Moreover, I shall not see her till the marriage.'

But he did. The next sext he received a message from Calvo, bidding him come to the den to receive new rendezvous with Bessie. He then heard that Laura had taken the whim to be married in velvet brodequins, a stomacher and placard of wrought black velvet, a cap of crimson velvet, and a surcoat of murrey sarcenet: nor could all the eloquence in the world dissuade her. The woman of the house had undertaken to procure them for Bessie, who had come to the den on leaving Bonner the previous night. But all this could not be done in a day.

At compline, therefore, Bessie and Bonner met again in the Botolph Wharf lane. Bessie told him that the marriage should be for the next night: but this he knew from Calvo: and now it was not clear why she had summoned him to meet her. She herself knew as little as he.

The deeper vague purpose in her poor heart may have been to hear him speak, if for the last time, of her adored.

And presently Bonner, after a silence, said:

'Bess, I told Fitz. . . .'

'Prithee,' she answered with her scared look, 'speak not to me of this man: I have naught with him. . . .'

'To see him now were to pity him, Bess!'

'What hath he?'

'Sure, the poor man is blighted and undone; anon he paces the room with mutterings; anon he tumbles prone, and groans; or he would be ripping his breast for very woe. . . .'

'Is he so low?'

'That is he. To see him were sure to pity him. Wilt see him?'

'That will I never.'

'Oh, do!'

'Didst tell him explicitly of my fall, Mark?'

'Why, sure. But that to him were equal, if *thee* he hath——'

'Said he that?'

'Why, sure.'

'Art certain sure?'

'Why, sure. Many, many, many times he said it.'

'Yet me he cannot have, shall not have, as I loved, and love, him!'

She said it in a cry.

'There 'twas a Bess that spake!' exclaimed Mark —'"as I loved, and love, him!" Now hast thou openly betrayed thyself! And shall I tell thee a secret, Bess?—he means to have thee, willy, nilly.'

'How?' She started back in affright.

'The morrow compline he will be even at the altar with ready ring to wed thee! He swears it. Escape thou canst not, Bess, Bess, unless thou would'st not see thy Laura wedded!'

At these words, Bessie Ford was as one stricken into stone, and she made no answer, till, suddenly covering her face, she wailed:

'Oh, he hath not the right, he hath not the right!'

But that night Bonner told Fitzgerald, with just confidence in his divination, that Bessie had consented to be won by force: though perhaps unable to read the secret of her own consenting heart.

Fitzgerald paced the chamber like a pauper to whom the morrow will bring Golconda.

At about ten, Bonner descended and went out, bearing a platter. Near by, at the south end of King's Mews, almost opposite Charing Cross Tower, a famous fat old woman, known though London as Madame Dessaulx, sold dimly by rush-light at a booth both soused pig's-feet and cowheel-and-bacon. And to visit her for their supper, Bonner sallied out with his platter.

But Fitz ate no supper that night. Bonner was returning with his mess, when a charre bearing a couple

of ladies passed close by him under a lamp. They were ladies-of-honour returning to Bridewell from attendance upon the Queen, who, in turn, attended at the Westminster Palace upon the wounded King. One of them was Anne Boleyn.

Seeing a bevy of three tip-staves marching westward, she alighted, ran to them, and whispered:

'You know me—the Lady Anne. That youth yonder —look! you can see him go there—I charge for being mixed in the late wounding of your King. Haste, now, —arrest!'

They were gone, and in a couple of minutes scared and protesting Bonner was in their clutches *en route* for the Marshalsea.

For again Bessie was lost to Anne, and Anne reasoned that Bonner would know, and, were it by means of the rack, could be made to tell.

Fitzgerald waited unquiet as the time passed: but no boy came. Toward midnight he went out to seek without clue. Many hours he searched and roamed, now languid with weariness, now wild with distraction; and only returned to brief sleep when the day broke.

During the day he visited Calvo in vain: the boy was not there. His great strength seemed to fail beneath his load. He visited Bruno in the friary-parlour, and arranged for the double wedlock that night; he bought in the Jewry a ring for his bride's finger: but languidly—with a boding heavy upon his heart.

After vespers, he was strolling by the Marshalsea, and bethought him to enter. He passed under the great archway into the pavered court-yard. Here all was still, save that from two door-ways on the right of the quadrangle came sounds of voices. He walked toward them. Here, he knew, was the room called the Common Room, open to any stroller, where prisoners summarily-arrested were kept. He walked in, and as he walked in, he heard the glad cry of Bonner.

It was a vast, low room, divided into two equal parts by an iron railing forming a series of arches at the top, which nearly reached the ceiling. Everything

else was unhewn and window-less stone, so that the light was very dim.

Behind the *grille* were six or seven prisoners, one with feet in the stocks, and before it quite fifteen or twenty persons, gossips, relatives, warders and tip-staves. Two prisoners had their faces squeezed between the bars, shouting ribaldries; and now, also, Bonner was there, ecstatic.

'Oh, boysie, boysie,' said Fitz with sad smile, 'how do I find thee?—a prisoner, save for thy nose——'

'Oh, Fitz, bitter, bitter have been my agonies!' cried Bonner, taking himself in deadly serious: 'here have I been all a night and day, and now 'tis sure already the hour for my wedding.'

'But how camest thou here?'

'Little, God wot, I know of it. Some tip-staves chased me, and the pig's-feet were spilled, and the platter lost. Oh! 'tis sorer this constraint than the wound I had at Maddox! How is my evil star ascendant! Yet sure, Fitz, I knew thou wouldst come in time to deliver me——'

'Boysie, boysie, deliver thee!—and how?'

'Canst thou not, then? Oh, say not that! the hour of my wedding must sure be so poignantly nigh now——'

His face was puckered with anxious care. Fitz gazed up, and round, and down, examining the room. He suddenly whispered:

'An thou standest on the shoulders of one of thy fellow prisoners, meseems thou couldst reach the railing-top, and leap, and run. Sure, thou couldst! Try it!—consult them—bribe them with this.'

He put the four broad-pieces in his pouch into Bonner's hand, and for ten minutes strolled unconcernedly about.

Then again he saw the woeful face at the *grille*, and went.

'They will not hear of it,' whispered Bonner, 'not one: for, say they, 'twill bring upon them the public stocks, sure. Oh, Fitz! canst do *nothing* for thy poor boy?'

Fitz looked upon Bonner long, with mournful eyes, smiling faintly.

Some voice within him seemed to howl warningly: 'If thou miss her to-night, Fitz——! *if thou miss her to-night*——!'

But his heart was entrapped by this beautiful, weak boy: and shaking his head mournfully, he said:

'Oh, boysie Bonner! What a thing it is I do for thee . . . !'

Then, without hesitation, he strode away, singled out a tip-staff, and brought his palm smartly down upon the man's face.

There arose an outcry—a shout of 'Clubs!' Fitz was seized by six hands, and hustled toward the railing-gate; it opened and jangled upon him on the other side.

He signalled Bonner to hold no speech with him, and for ten minutes lay in a far corner. Then, at the dimmest end of the *grille*, when he was unobserved, he stood, and in a jiffy had Bonner flung to his high firm shoulders.

'Tell Bess why I came not,' he whispered loud, 'and run hard, run hard——'

Bonner's drop startled the whole room, but he was out of the door before he was sighted, and half-way to the great gate before he was chased. Terror and hope were his wings, and his escape was soon assured.

The western portal of the Crutched Church was only separated from the street by the breadth of the Cellarer's Buildings and the convent-wall, whose north-western gate lay now open: so that even as Mark doubled breathless into the grounds, he could see a party stand in dim perspective before him at the nave-altar. He was late.

There, leaning backward on the credence-table, book in hand, was thick Brother Bruno, looking more wide-spread in rochet and stole, and there was the sacrist by the bride, and there Calvo with protruding corpse-brow in skull-cap, and Bessie in her plain garb, but cleaned, and the resplendent bride.

Sure, never was noon-day sun so shudderingly ablaze

as Laura that night in the eyes of Bessie Ford. Queen ten times crowned and enthroned was she. Bonner, entering, looked too mean for her valet.

Bessie, hearing that foot-fall come, looked round in a panic, expecting *another* with it, and missing it, her brain swam in a dizzy and dark universe.

The service was gabbled, Bonner giving his responses pantingly. He had the very ring which once in Calvo's den he would have used, and did not. And still as the ceremony went forward, Bessie Ford, white as the dead, expected that footfall with panic—perhaps with hope.

But when at last she saw her Queen verily wedded wife before her, then she forgot herself, Fitzgerald, and all: and falling to her knees, she clasped Laura round the legs, wailing thin: '*O Laura . . . !*', with stretched-back mouth, and free-flowing tears.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE FLEET

'They parted—ne'er to meet again!
And never either found another
To free the hollow heart from paining.'
COLERIDGE.

WEDDED Laura went close-veiled with her husband, in the charre which had brought her close-veiled, to a lodging, engaged for them by Calvo's house-woman, outside the city-wall, eastward, near St. Mary's Spittal; and Bessie went home in dark loneliness to the watchman's house by Billingsgate.

Bonner, in his haste, had forgotten to mention to her the cause of Fitzgerald's absence . . . the name even of Fitzgerald. . . .

That night there dawned upon her, for the first time, a baleful suspicion. . . .

In two days it was fairly confirmed in her mind. In the course of time she would be a mother. . . .

Meanwhile, Fitzgerald had been taken before the Southwark justice, charged with 'striking': for his complicity with Bonner had not been observed. Professing sorrow, he received a sentence of only two hours in the stocks: and before the prison-wall during that time sat in bulky ignominy in the sun—he, Garrett Oge of Kildare.

Thence he went direct to Calvo, who was jaunty on the subject of the recent wedding, promising that his should be the next, his should be the next. As to Bessie's place of lodging he could say nothing, but he had his plan.

'Her notion,' said he, 'is that the married couple shall sail hence with Francis of France for security from Henry. Now, I know in what house Francis abides, and she knows that I know. She will therefore come to me one night soon to be posted; and on that night shall I make her rendezvous here for another night, when Bruno shall come with book and ring, and yourself also. Never fear, never fear. All shall be well.'

'Now, may God bless you, Master Alchymist, for that word!' cried Fitz.

'Meantime, I feel certain she hides in some nook round about Billingsgate, and 'twere no harm an you search and run her down. What is wrong with her I cannot divine.'

All this while Calvo had communicated no word to Francis of his discovery, by the stars, of the sisters: for the fact that Laura was in his house had a sub-lunar look; and Bessie's lodging he did not know. He cherished a vain and obstinate reluctance to be detected in charlatanry by Francis, his ancient dupe.

Francis, meantime, waiting for Calvo's word, desisted not from roaming London through the night, mostly alone, and chiefly in the neighbourhood of the river, though he well divined that now his life must be in considerable danger. Now, too, all through the East-river region Fitz dallied and roamed by night.

Once, having made her way with elaborate secrecy to the married-couple's lodging, Bessie heard that earlier in the evening Fitzgerald had been there. She rose scared at once, shying now at the mere sound of his name.

Sure, Something was against her! Fitz now was too late. The material reason of motherhood, added to the moral of shame, was not less overwhelming than Fate itself.

Once, he chased a skirt which he fancied might be hers, and was, in fact, hers. She had stolen from her lodgings about midnight to crouch, and pore, and gloat at what was now to her a loved spot: the tressy piles and rotten beams beneath Botolph's Wharf. On her

returning he spied her from far, and gave chase: but she doubled, and slipped into her doorway, leaving him without trace.

Three days after the wedding she came to Calvo by night to discover Francis. He did not tell her the house; he appointed two nights thence for the second coming, and on that night the trap of marriage was laid for her.

But that Something which was against her relented not. As she turned on the east side to enter London Bridge, she saw across the street in the dim off-shine of a lamp the great form which she loved. He was turning to enter the Bridge on the west side.

And as though flying from pestilence and hunting ruin, she was gone—instinctly eastward toward her home. And Fitzgerald, calling piteously, was after her.

'Oh, this time I have you, Bess—this time, by God!' he groaned, with ground teeth.

He had an unhealed gash in the right thigh which impeded him, and mixed a limping gait with his run.

Past St. Magnus Church she flew, pelted down some steps to a lower street, then back of Botolph's Wharf; and a little beyond, conscious that his footsteps grew upon her, she spurted down a lane to the right, into an open yard-gate, and, mad with terrors, hearing the footsteps come, instantly spurted out again, hissing venomously:

'Christ! how this man is for following me . . . !'

Now again he saw her, and passionately called. She was running direct upon the river, where it washed a warehouse flush; and she must have been caught, for no alley opened eastward, had she been unwitted by her instinct of reaching home. But an opening westward presenting itself, she darted into this, running close at the back of Botolph's Wharf, this time toward London Bridge.

Between the wharf and St. Magnus there lay a very narrow court, closed both north and south, and broken into a higher and lower level by three steps. And she, not knowing the *cul-de-sac*, ran up the steps northward. For the moment the sound of his footsteps was lost;

but even as she shocked against the blind wall, she heard him enter the court and run southward. The lampless court was dark, and she stood there, still but for her labouring chest, ignorant that the south end was blind also. Soon, with wildest panic she heard his echoes turn and come—she heard him gasp some oath or prayer—and his feet stumble up the steps. Distraction urged her, and she ran to meet him. To stand still would have been to rend her heart in a shriek.

Close to the wall on her right she ran, in the mad hope of dashing past him; but her flight brought her into impact with an open-swung door; she halted sharp, bolted into a passage, ran, and immediately stumbled and fell.

Here was a smell of tar and ropes, stale odours, fishy brines, and osmæ of the sea. On the further side she could see an arched door, framing vague lamp-light. And stumbling her impassioned way among kegs, coils, nets, and tackle, she came out upon pavered street, and saw St. Magnus near.

Now again she ran, with hope, always onward, past the church, past the Bridge, to the back of Fishmongers' Hall, still westward. And here, as she doubled riverward for Cold Harbour, she heard again the echoing steps, and that raucous, lamentable call.

'*This man . . .*' she went, with intense breath.

Their love now was touched with venom, and rather resembled hate. For why, he dimly thought, did she not abide, and face, and brave him, with yea or nay? Why divined she not that were she shame clad in rags, King's-mistress, as the lying slanderer had said, or other horror, instead of the exceeding brightness that she was, still were she to him his soul's very breath? Sure a man must needs care for his own life! and 'twas for his life he chased her. And why, she dimly thought, divined he not that she *could* not abide, and face, and brave him with a nay; and that 'twas even for *his* sake that she so fled him, and was being hunted down to death, the bitter-sweet.

Round the curve of strand called Cold Harbour she ran, and at its further end came upon a cyclopean wall

running north-and-south, where the Steel Yard began. Here, though death were behind her, she could no more fly, and leaning her forehead on a ledge where the wall broadened to its base, began to vomit, with coughs and retches of nausea. Suddenly her eyes, stretched sideways like a wary rabbit's, saw the long shadow of his head sweep over the strand into the lapping river, and with a groan she was gone.

There was some sort of diffused light in the night from a moon, mostly hidden behind low clouds. But the air was sombrous and stagnant.

Past the Steel Yard westward down a steep paved street, on which the feet slipped, to the Cranes, she ran; and he, blood trickling down his right leg, ran after her.

At the bottom of this street he saw her, only ten yards before him, double riverward again down the alley-bank of the little stream which flowed to Broken Wharf. At that moment two river-men and a night-watchman, passing southward in company, ran into his path to stop him, with a 'What ho, for a disturber of the King's peace!' He, horrified at possible delay, shouted: 'O' God's name, avaunt . . . !' and such a tempest of energy scattered them, two being felled by his fist, that in some seconds he was free again, and prone in chase.

After the Cranes, whose arms stretched sheer over deepish river, the river had strand all along by Broken Wharf to Queen Hythe, where the building again bluffed into the water, till one came to Baynard Castle and the Fleet, where again was a little strand.

At Broken Wharf he heard her feet run on sounding boards, and himself coming out on the shore, could discern her twist northward at Queen Hythe, her passage there along the river being blocked. And now, for some time, he lost both her and her foot-falls. For very breathlessness he slackened pace, inhaling, as it were, through ears and pores. Her wind was as good as his, her body as tough and vital.

Up by Queen Hythe he, too, went, but did not see her. She, with strange fascination, hoping, perhaps,

for some wharf such as Botolph's, beneath which to hide, had once more bolted riverward.

Beneath the rough and frowning roundel-towers of Baynard Castle she dashed out upon a narrow stubbly strand, not knowing the river-side, nor why she came. But she had not run ten yards when she stopped with a cry: before her was only water, where the Fleet, washing flush the west wall of the Castle, hurried down to its meeting with the Thames; she had hasted, like a bird to the snare, into a trap.

Back she ran, and as she ran, with a terror now ecstatic and boundless, she saw him come. Back again she twisted toward the Fleet, some few steps, then back again toward him, then back again toward the Fleet, with steady, headlong run. And now, all suddenly, a shivering fear pierced him, and 'Stop! I hold. . . !' he called—too late. Deaf and blind she ran, she plunged. He heard the splash; and some half-minute afterwards, he, too, splashed after her.

They were swept out into the near main-stream, where, after some random gropings of whimpering madness, Fitzgerald, who could swim well, discovered her as she rose. But even in the drenched drowse of that Elysium where the half-drowned linger, she fought hard for death, wrestling against him with a venom, and a force, which seemed miraculous. When at last he rose with her on the shore in front of Baynard Castle, he had somewhere in him a consciousness that she was dead.

Up he emerged from the river, bubbling a lugubrious 'Oh . . . ! Oh . . . !' of Tartarus and bleared-eyed Titans damned; she burdening his left shoulder, caught at last. And since he could no further bear her little weight, he went to lay her in the black embrasure of the castle-portal, when he felt his back touched, and heard a high voice cry mincingly:

'La, rascal, draw for thy life. . . !'

Francis, straying down hither, had discerned by stealthy peering the face of his little friend, but knew not that she was dead, nor knew of any relation between Fitz and her.

Fitz drew, hesitated, rushed with his burden to the near arch, and ran out again, and fought.

His mind was benumbed — all whelmed, orbless, deaf. Why he fought, with whom, he realized not; he dreamed only that someone would take her from him: and the sword was his habit.

With chink, chink, in the dim night plied the steels, but during half a minute only. For the delicate sword of Francis, Fitz, winded and drowned in tragedy, was that night no match. He made, after some passes, a wild and rash cut over-head, which Francis negligently knocked away. 'Thy chance, knave . . . kill, kill . . . ' muttered Fitzgerald; and Francis ran him through the body.

Even as Fitzgerald fell, and the red sword dropped back to sheath, Francis ran to the archway; peered over her on a knee; and quickly discovered that she was dead.

There a long time he sat by her; and 'O Minerva, Minerva,' quoth he, 'and is it so with thee at the last? And to this have they indeed brought thee down? Oh, I could weep upon thee, Bessie, thou gent and valorous little heart! . . . How high-born was she in all her works, choosing a royal highway for her little life, and tussling it there with hard stubbornness, to make kings seem serfs and fustian-clad. La! I see it! I see!— now that she lies dead and finished, I seem to see it clear: that Well-doing, though seeming common in the doing, is an illustrious linen garment, smelling of camphor, old cedared chests, and spices, and the furred robes of kings and ladies but wormy rags. Yet to what end thy little hard strivings, O Minerva, Minerva? There now thou liest low enow under baleful star: so weird, so dark, this life of men! "And ill," quoth she, "were it to me to die, by my credit!" "Ill, by my credit" —the little thing! La, Henry of England!—'twas *he* that brought thee hither, girl! Then, by Criss-cross, would Francis not change places in Hell with him! And what this wit and arm can do to avenge thee, Bessie Ford—— La! but she hath, 'twas said, some papers in her bosom——'

He searched, found, and kept them. Afterwards he bore her tenderly on his shoulder through the now desert streets to London Bridge, and Calvo's den.

There on the settee, lately brought down for Calvo's bed, they laid her out; and Calvo, kneeling with the working jaw and showing tongue-tip of grief, at last dropped his head upon her bosom, and gave himself to sobs.

'You abandon me, Master Calvo!' she had cried. . . .

During silent hours they sat there, King and Alchymist, poring upon her, the horn-lanthorn shining mournfully at her head. Till Francis whispered:

''Tis clear you knew her, Signior.'

Calvo bowed assent.

'You told me not that.'

'Because I would not, Sire.'

There was silence again.

Then Calvo, lifting his bleared red eyes, said with hushed voice:

'But where found you her?'

'In the arms of a man—a great fighter named Fitzgerald, one of her sister's seekers, which I slew.'

'*Slew?*'

'Why, yes.'

'But he is Bessie's lover; and Bessie, I'll swear, was taken with him, too.'

'Then here is tragedy, Signior, fourfold: for I who loved her slew her lover.'

'Was she dead when you met him?'

'Dead in his arms.'

'Then—'tis strange! She must even have run from him into the river. And an she did it, then, sure, what you told me, Sire, of an outrage by Henry of England upon her is most true. Aye—here—*here* was her motive——'

'Oh, outrage there *was*—I never doubted it.'

Calvo lifted his fist. After some minutes he turned upon the King an earnest gaze.

'And, King Francis, in the name of God and of Chivalry, will you let this crime pass unavenged?—you, a great King——'

'Not unavenged, I swear, Signior. Wait, you shall see.'

They spoke low, and long silences followed few words.

The night waxed old apace toward morning. Calvo took two tapers from a table-drawer and stuck them, lighted, in their own grease in a nitch near her head. The ooze from her drenching soaked into the straw beneath her, and through it, dripping slow. Upon her, leaning forward on stools, they pored, seeking ever to comprehend, and ever baffled, her calm eternal lids, and poppied brow.

The silence was awful there in the depths of the river.

Calvo said low:

'A spirit, I thought, of uncommon chemistry. . . .'

'She appears to have been a simple country maiden,' said Francis. 'If the country maidens of England are like this, England anon must shine forth as the glory of Christendom.'

'Many in England are like her, meseems, and yet not she,' answered Calvo. '*She* was infinitely rare.'

She was in no way disfigured, though all the carmine had left her cheek-bones, and her eyelids vaulted. She seemed taller, neither smiling nor frowning, hands folded on breast, stretched in regal sleep. Regal—though her broken buskins were there to see, and the simple little string of rowan-tree berries round her low-clad neck.

Near daybreak Calvo, with lips venomously compressed, said:

'Ah! I will settle my score with Henry of England yet!'

'Ah?' said Francis.

'I will sit me down, your Majesty, and compose this man a letter frankly writ, were I thereby to resign all—elaboratory, patronage, head, and all——'

'Under what patronage bide you now, Signior?'

'Under my Lord Wolsey's, Sire.'

'La—rotten! Wolsey will fall—soon, sir. Little malice bear I that great man: yet fall he must whose

greatness now hangs upon the friendship of Spain and Pope with England. Take my hint, Signior: I have this very night resolved within me to nip that friendship at any sacrifice, and win to myself alliance with my brother of Spain; and I have here papers, taken from that poor girl's bosom, which will furnish the very blade I need to the hilt of my intent. La! trust not to Wolsey, man!'

'Understand I rightly your Majesty to hint me offer of herbergage in French land?'

'Most heartily, an you will.'

'Most heartily I accept, and thank your Majesty. The morrow night, after the burial of this martyred saint, I were ready to start——'

'And I! But Laura——?'

'Laura, Sire, is wedded wife.'

'By Criss-cross!'

'Wedded some nights since to a youth chosen for her by Bessie. It was the defunct's will that they should sail with you to France, they having now a great fortune of seventy thousand gold rose-nobles. I may tell you, Sire, that Bessie Ford's confidence in you, as though she had known you long, was absolute——'

'Was it, Calvo? Say you?'

'Absolute, Sire——'

Francis passionately kissed her lips.

'An, then, you consent, Sire, to their sailing——'

'La, consent! Why, even gladly, as to that. But where, then, is this wedded pair?'

'I wot where, Sire.'

'You wot all, Signior. Now, I pose you a query frankly, Calvo, as man to man: were you verily led to acquaintance with these maidens, and knowledge of them, by any aid of thy star-gazing, yea or nay?'

'Nay, Sire. Lie to you I could not in the presence of that sainted corpse. Nay, nay, not by any aid of the stars, sir. O King Francis, I tell you, the stars give not any guidance to us poor mortal men! To the mariner's bark on her watery way the Polar-star is compass, and to the Arabian herdsman, halted at mid-

night by the solitary desert-pool, the constellations speak. But ah, Sir King, upon the darkling generations that pressing gaze, and gazing founder, in all this lonely Deep and Desert of Time, they wink their lidless eyes in vain, and do seem to strive to tell, yet tell not! Never a word, sir—never, never one word! Their shout across the inter-space—an shout they do—is swallowed in the Wind of the million-distanced Gulf, and hardly a wistful echo, as of sea-shell murmuring, comes to haunt the ear. Oh, Sire, look but upon this poor dead girl, and ask me *why;* or wither your eyeballs with one life-long upward gaze, asking why; or cry question to the raving North-wind that with dumb and shuddering tongue doth seem to strive to tell, yet tells not, and ask it why. Answer anywhere is none, none: and, for himself, poor Mauro Calvo begins to feel that we beat in vain against these prison-walls. Well, well. Ah, well. Faith, I believe 'tis wide day above already——'

He absently wiped a moisture from his worn and goggle eyes: and Francis, having stooped to lay his lips upon the snowy brow, made rendezvous for the evening, and went away.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE CIRCLES SPREAD

'Ah, mark that potter's wheel—that metaphor!'
BROWNING.

'Un son nous fait désirer celui qui doit lui répondre, et quand le second rétentit, il nous rappelle celui qui vient de nous échapper.'
—MADAME DE STAËL.

SOME four weeks afterwards, the brow of Henry of England was wrinkled, and anxious Care sat there.

He was like a man driven into a corner, faced by enemies, who has no resource but to fight, or sink.

The strong influence of Bessie Ford, and her Fate, had reached and caught him; and her coils were about him with strangling twine. He had heard of her death: and as he had spared not, so he hoped for no sparing. His heart hardened. With defiance and chafing rage it was that he heard the Voice say: 'There are Crimes for whose pardon Time is too short: only in Eternity, after the period of many æons, can they be washed.' Therefore, with the outward strain and calamity of his circumstances was mixed an inward condition of intolerant, bitter, and arrogant spleen. And each increased and intensified the other.

That day, as always, he woke early: and as he stood between two gentlemen of the bed-chamber, who kneeled assiduous with buckling and with buttoning, the Lord Chamberlain was admitted. He bore urgent letter from the High Sheriff of Norfolk, which Henry, standing, read. It said that the late disturbances in the Eastern Counties had swelled beyond bounds, and bore

now the name of Insurrection, a brigade of the rioters having filled King's Lynn and Fakenham with fire and sword.

To cry 'Ha!' royally quenches no fire: and he swaggered aggressively to *levée* that morning with a heat in his brow, which was destined to grow hotter.

It was at the Westminster Palace. He sat in a square bare oak-chamber on a raised chair-throne canopied with Utrecht velvet, red and stamped; and in his train stood there Gardiner, Norfolk, Sir Thomas Lovell, and a scattering of yeoman-guards.

There was a calling at the door:

'His Grace the Bishop of Bayonne, to have audience!'

Henry started: he knew that the weekly *paquebot* from Calais had arrived the previous noon.

Du Ballay, his face lit up, advanced with homages.

'Well, my lord Bishop, and what of thy master's news?' asked Henry bluffly, though the pink of his cheek mottled, and his under-look was piercingly anxious.

'I bear no letters this time for your Majesty,' said Du Ballay.

'Well, my lord Bishop, out with it, out with it, man, for my day is short. What news?'

'I have instructions to acquaint your Majesty——'

'Aye, instructions to acquaint your Majesty, and the rest of it! Then acquaint him straightway and have it off thy stomach, man!'

'Francis, my master, and the Emperor Charles have signed a Convention of Alliance at Bagnères de Luchon, Sire——'

'Ha! ha! ha! my good friends and brothers of France and Spain! A Convention of Alliance, have they! *I'll* ally them, by the Splendour of God—! I say, you, Norfolk, where the pestilence is Wolsey?'

'At the White-hall, Sire.'

'Have him here, have him here!'

Henry rose, and began to stalk and perambulate: with rough fan vented the breath from his nostrils that day.

But Wolsey, after matins, had taken horse for

Hampton. It was not till two hours after the King's nooning that he arrived.

And while Henry awaited him, from an entrance-door there rose the cry:

'The Condé Ferondo of Spain to have audience!'

It was the Spanish Ambassador: and he bore to Henry a letter from Charles.

It was a scathing letter, Charles averring openly that he had seen Henry's letter to Wolsey containing that word 'Divorce,' and the Alvarada and Katherine documents taken from the bosom of Bessie Ford by Francis. Charles fulminated threats that read like threats of war; and he fulminated something more—the announcement that an Order in Council had been already promulgated for inhibiting the English wool-trade with Flanders.

Here was something vital, and it touched deep. And the news, new to Henry, had five days since been guessed in the City of London, where it created something like panic. Laden ships had returned unladen; expected ships had not come in. At that very hour, an angry mob, swelling as it advanced, and sending before it a gathering roar, was marching westward from the City upon the Palace.

Henry's frown and flush deepened as he read. And 'Ha!' went he, and again 'Ha!' But royal 'Ha's' efface no past, and wash no crime.

At last came Wolsey trotting to his presence.

'My lord, hast heard the news?' said Henry, glowering.

'Sire, I have had letters . . . Sire, Sire. . . .'

'Well, my lord, you must throw your Spain over! I mean to ruffle it with this Charles, by God! Mark me, my lord, no paltering!'

To and fro stalked Henry, passionately settling his elbows in his sleeves.

'Sire, what would you do?'

'Divorce! Divorce! By God's light, my lord, I'm a dangerous man to drive into a corner! Divorce! He defies me, I defy him! And I wager you my crown that the mere serious threat of it, backed with the

Pope's sanction, shatters this new League to Hell Henry for ever, by God!'

'But the Pope's sanction, Sire? That were difficult, impossible now, he having the strength of Charles with Francis at his back.'

'Wolsey, Wolsey, you palter! Believe me, you palter, man! By Heaven, 'tis an ill sign when a man palters! Pope's sanction, quotha? Have I not it already, secretly given, locked fast in yon cabinet?'

(Clement VII. had, in truth, under pressure of some other political juncture, given virtual consent to the divorce four months previously.)

Before Wolsey could answer, Thomas Howard, with scared face, looked in, and urgently craved to speak.

He came with the hot news of the advancing City mob.

'Let the foul tykes come!' cried Henry. 'Ha! there lies worse in store for them than this! My Lord Wolsey, summon me a Council! And, without delay, call me a Parliament!'

He strode from the chamber, and crossing a corridor, was handed a letter, which bore the seal of Francis: and he broke it eagerly open. But it was from Mauro Calvo.

Calvo wrote freely, heading his letter with the words:

'Concerning Bessie Ford.

'. . . Thou God-forsaken wretch. . . . This the stars say concerning you. Well, you believe not in stars, and you have reason—verily, they tell us nothing. Yet *inner* twinklings of light there are by which the wise be not wholly left without horoscope and augury. And hear this curse and prophesy of Mauro Calvo against thee . . . thou shalt be hunted by the Avengers of Blood through all thy filthy and corrupted years . . . from crime to crime shalt thou advance . . . the fair promise of thy life shall turn to a shame of bloated and ignominious misery . . . them thou lovest shall hate thee, and in turn be hated of thee . . . thou shalt stir in thy sleep and curse God every hour, and every hour be cursed by Him . . . thou shalt die of rottenness. . . .'

As Henry crushed the letter in his fist, the Palace was surrounded by a roar.

But he was not done with the slaps of Fate that day. By far the most momentous came, when a Papal Legate, but new-arrived from France, ushered in by Wolsey, presented the King a letter. It was from Clement.

Under pressure of Charles, Clement now made a complete *volte face:* for no reason, he wrote, could he countenance Divorce, were he even driven to employ in threat such words as Interdict and Excommunication: though he might consent to issue a Commission to try the case.

Seeing himself thus beset at every point, Henry, pricked to ecstasy by the sting of the moment, broke into apoplectic fury, and stalking quick, he poured forth a foaming passion of invective.

'The Pope!' cried he. 'The Pope! Oh, just, impartial, and kind Father of Christendom! Not trembling in his holy aloofness at the becks and grins of Charles of Spain! Oh no! Not licking the stale and stinking spittle of Francis of France! Oh no! The Pope, eh? The Pope? God! and do I bow, and cringe, and stoop to this? I? Oh so? Aha? I'll toss my crown into the nearest gargoyle-gutter first! You hear me, Wolsey? You, sirrah, Pope's-legate, or whate'er you call yourself—you hear me? Then bear me, you two, witness to the four winds of Christendom: I *defy* the lousy Pope. . . .'

Now, for the first time since the death of the Messiah, were such words, in such tone, uttered by human tongue.

King Henry of England furiously stamped the foot.

And with that stamp Mediæval England ended: and Modern England sprang.

It is probable that as the general Salvation of the whole world needed, and had, its great Martyr, so every lesser epochic movement and salvation, needs, and has, its lesser Martyr, often unknown. If, then, we call little Bessie Ford the Martyr of the English Renaissance . . .?

For the way of things is so. The Shadowy Hand is never less novel and mysterious than it is awful. As it is said: 'The way of God is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His foot-steps are not known.'

Or as a modern writer, rising once in a grave moment beyond all limit, even to psalmist-prophetic strain, has it written down:

> 'He steadfast drifts,
> and rudderless steers,
> an Argonaut blind,
> his Bark.'

THE END.

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