# THE WHITE HORSES

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# THE WHITE HORSES

BY

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*Author of "Ricroft of Withers," "The Open Road,"*

" Old Squire Metcalf, as he went out to meet him, broke into a roar of laughter." (Page 84.)

*The White Horses]* *[Frontispiece*

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*"A Chateau in Picardy," "The Strength of the Hills," etc.*

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To my Sister's Memory

## CONTENTS.

## Illustrations



# THE WHITE HORSES.

## CHAPTER I.

### WHO RIDES FOR THE KING?

Up through the rich valley known now as Wensleydale, but in those days marked by the lustier name of Yoredale, news had crept that there was civil war in England, that sundry skirmishes had been fought already, and that His Majesty was needing all leal men to rally to his standard.

It was an early harvest that year, as it happened, and John Metcalf, of Nappa Hall, stood at his garden-gate, watching the sunset glow across his ripening wheat. There were many acres of it, gold between green splashes of grass-land; and he told himself that they would put the sickle into the good crop before a fortnight's end. There was something about Squire Metcalf—six feet four to his height, and broad in the beam—that seemed part of the wide, lush country round him. Weather and land, between them, had bred him; and the night's peace, the smell of sweet-briar in the evening dew, were pleasant foils to his strength.

He looked beyond the cornfields presently. Far down the road he saw a horseman—horse and rider small in the middle of the landscape—and wondered what their errand was. When he had done with surmises, his glance roved again, in the countryman's slow way, and rested on the pastures above the house. In the clear light he could see two figures standing there; one was his son Christopher, the other a trim-waisted maid. Squire Metcalf frowned suddenly. He was so proud of his name, of his simple squiredom, that he could not bear to see his eldest-born courting defeat of this kind. This little lady was niece to his neighbour, Sir Timothy Grant, a good neighbour and a friend, but one who was richer than himself in lands and rank, one who went often to the Court in London, and was in great favour with the King. Squire Metcalf had seen these two together in his own house, and guessed Christopher's secret without need of much sagacity; and he was sorely troubled on the lad's account.

Christopher himself, away at the stile yonder, was not troubled at all except by a pleasant heartache. He had youth, and Joan Grant beside him, and a heart on fire for her.

"You are pleased to love me?" she was saying, facing him with maddening grace. "What is your title to love me, sir?"

"Any man has the right to love," Kit protested sturdily. "He cannot help it sometimes."

"Oh, granted; but not to tell it openly."

"What else should a man do? I was never one for secrets."

Joan laughed pleasantly, as if a thrush were singing. "You speak truth. I would not trust you with a secret as far as from here to Nappa. If a child met you on the road, she would read it in your face."

"I was bred that way, by your leave. We Metcalfs do not fear the light."

"But, sir, you have every right to—to think me better than I am, but none at all to speak of—of love. I had an old Scots nurse to teach me wisdom, and she

taught me—what, think you?"

"To thieve and raid down Yoredale," said Kit unexpectedly. "The Scots had only that one trade, so my father tells me, till the Stuarts came to reign over both countries."

"To thieve and raid? And I—I, too, have come to raid, you say—to steal your heart?"

"You are very welcome to it."

"But do I want it?" She put aside her badinage, drew away from him with a fine strength and defiance. "Listen, sir. My Scots nurse taught me that a woman has only one heart to give in her lifetime; that, for her peace, she must hide it in the branches of a tree so high that only a strong man can climb it."

"I'm good at tree-climbing," said Christopher, with blunt acceptance of the challenge.

"Then prove it."

"Now?" he asked, glancing at a tall fir behind them.

"Oh, sir, you are blunt and forthright, you men of Nappa! You do not understand the heart of a woman."

Kit Metcalf stood to his brawny six-foot height. "I'm needing you, and cannot wait," he said, fiery and masterful. "That's the way of a man's heart."

"Then, by your leave, I shall bid you good e'en. No man will ever master me until——"

"Until?" asked Kit, submissive now that he saw her retreating up the pasture.

She dropped him another curtsey before going up the steep face of the hills. "That is the woman's secret, sir. It lives at the top of a high tree, that 'until.' Go climbing, Master Christopher!"

Kit went back to Nappa, in frank revolt against destiny and the blue face of heaven. There was nothing in the world worth capturing except this maid who eluded him at every turn, like a butterfly swift of wing. He was prepared to be sorry for himself until he came face to face with his father at the garden gate.

"I saw two young fools at the stile," said Squire Metcalf. "I've watched you for half an hour. Best wed in your own station, Kit—no more, no less. No Metcalf ever went dandying after great ladies yet. We've our own proper pride."

Christopher, in spite of his six feet, looked a small man as he stood beside his father; but his spirit was equal to its stubborn strength. "I love her. There's no other for me," he said sharply.

The Squire glanced shrewdly at him. "Ah, well," he said at last, "if it goes as deep as that, lad, you'll just have to go on crying out for the moon. Sir Timothy has been away in London all the summer—trouble with the Parliament, and the King needing him, they say. He'd have taken Miss Joan with him if he'd guessed

that a lad from Nappa thought he could ever wed into the family."

"We've lands and gear enough," protested Kit.

"We have, but not as they count such matters. They've got one foot in Yoredale, and t'other in London; and we seem very simple to them, Kit."

Shrewd common sense is abhorrent to all lovers, and Kit fell into a stormy silence. He knew it true, that he felt rough, uncouth, in presence of his mistress; but he knew also that at the heart of him there was a love that was not uncouth at all.

The Squire left Kit to fight out his own trouble, and fell to watching the horseman who was more than a speck now on the landscape. The rider showed as a little man striding a little mare; both were weary, by the look of them, and both were heading straight for Nappa Hall. They had a mile to cover.

"Father, I need to get away from Nappa," said Kit, breaking the silence.

"Ay," said the Squire, with a tolerant laugh, "love takes all men that way in the first flush of it. I was young myself once. You want to ride out, lad, and kill a few score men, just to show little Miss Joan what a likely man o' your hands you are. Later on, you'll be glad to be shepherding the ewes, to pay for her new gowns and what not. Love's not all mist and moonshine, Kit; the sturdier part comes later on."

Up the lane sounded the lolopping pit-a-pat of a horse that was tired out and near to drop; and the rider looked in no better case as he drew rein at the gate.

"You're the Squire of Nappa, sir?" he said, with a weary smile. "No weary to ask the question. I was told to find a man as tall as an oak-tree and as sturdy."

"Yet it would have been like seeking a needle in a bundle of hay, if you hadn't chanced to find me at the gate," the other answered. "There are six score Metcalfs in this corner of Yoredale, and nobody takes notice of my height."

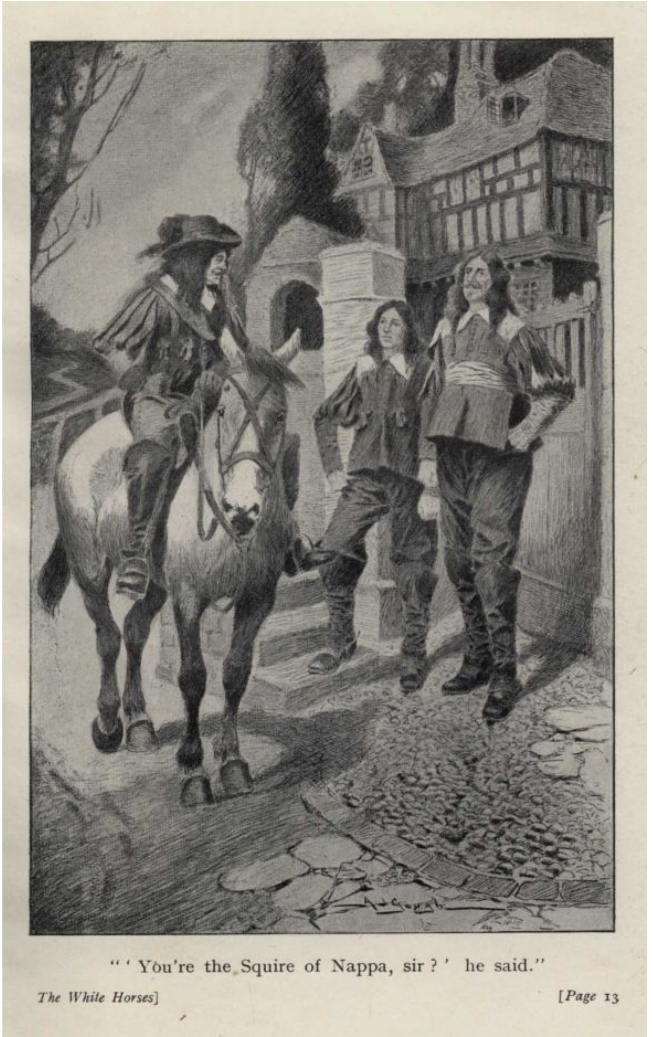
"The jest is pretty enough, sir, but you'll not persuade me that there's a regiment of giants in the dale."

"They're not all of my height—granted. Some are more, and a few less. This is my eldest-born," he said, touching Christopher on the shoulder. "We call him Baby Kit, because he's the smallest of us all."

The horseman saw a lad six foot high, who certainly looked dwarfed as he stood beside his father. "Gad, the King has need of you! Undoubtedly he needs all Metcalfs, if this is your baby-boy."

"As for the King, the whole six score of us have prayed for his welfare, Sabbath in and Sabbath out, since we were breeked. It's good hearing that he needs us."

"I ride on His Majesty's errand. He bids the Squire of Nappa get his men and his white horses together."



"'You're the Squire of Nappa, sir?' he said."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 13

*"'You're the Squire of Nappa, sir?' he said."*

"So the King has heard of our white horses? Well, we're proud o' them, I own."

The messenger, used to the stifled atmosphere of Courts until this trouble with the Parliament arrived, was amazed by the downright, free-wind air the Squire of Nappa carried. It tickled his humour, tired as he was, that Metcalf should think the King himself knew every detail of his country, and every corner of it that bred white horses, or roan, or chestnut. At Skipton-in-Craven, of course, they knew the dales from end to end; and he was here because Sir John Mallory, governor of the castle there, had told him the Metcalfs of Nappa were slow to leave the beaten tracks, but that, once roused, they would not budge, or falter, or retreat.

"The King needs every Metcalf and his white horse. He sent me with that message to you, Squire."

"About when does he need us?" asked Metcalf guardedly.

"To-morrow, to be precise."

"Oh, away with you! There's all my corn to be gathered in. I'll come nearer the back end o' the year, if the King can bide till then. By that token, you're looking wearied out, you and your horse. Come indoors, man, and we'll talk the matter over."

The messenger was nothing loath. At Skipton they had given an importance to the Metcalf clan that he had not understood till now. This was the end of to-day's journey, and his sole errand was to bring the six score men and horses into the good capital of Craven.

"I ask no better cheer, sir. Can you stable the two of us for the night? My little grey mare is more in need of rest than I am."

Christopher, the six-foot baby of the clan, ran forward to the mare's bridle; and he glanced at his father, because the war in his blood was vehement and lusty, and he feared the old check of discipline.

"Is it true, sir?" he asked the messenger. "Does the King need us? I've dreamed of it o' nights, and wakened just to go out and tend the land. I'm sick of tending land. Is it true the King needs us?"

The messenger, old to the shams and false punctilios of life, was dismayed for a moment by this clean, sturdy zest. Here, he told himself, was a cavalier in the making—a cavalier of Prince Rupert's breed, who asked only for the hazard.

"It is true that the King needs a thousand such as you," he said drily. "Be good to my little mare; I trust her to you, lad."

And in this solicitude for horseflesh, shown twice already, the messenger had won his way already into the favour of all Metcalfs. For they loved horses just a little less than they loved their King.

Within doors, as he followed the Squire of Nappa, he found a warm fire of

logs, and an evening meal to which the sons of the house trooped in at haphazard intervals. There were only six of them, all told, but they seemed to fill the roomy dining-room as if a crowd intruded. The rafters of the house were low, and each stooped, from long habit, as he came in to meat. Kit, the baby of the flock, was the last to come in; and he had a queer air about him, as if he trod on air.

There was only one woman among them, a little, eager body, who welcomed the stranger with pleasant grace. She had borne six sons to the Squire, because he was dominant and thought little of girl-children; she had gone through pain and turmoil for her lord, and at the end of it was thankful for her pride in him, though she would have liked to find one girl among the brood—a girl who knew the way of household worries and the way of women's tears.

The messenger, as he ate and drank with extreme greediness, because need asked, glanced constantly at the hostess who was like a garden flower, growing here under the shade of big-boled trees. It seemed impossible that so small a person was responsible for the six men who made the rafters seem even lower than they were.

When the meal was ended, Squire Metcalf put his guest into the great hooded chair beside the fire of peat and wood.

"Now, sir, we'll talk of the King, by your leave, and these lusty rogues of mine shall stand about and listen. What is it His Majesty asks of us?"

The messenger, now food and liquor had given him strength again, felt at home in this house of Nappa as he had never done among the intrigues of Court life. He had honest zeal, and he was among honest men, and his tongue was fiery and persuasive.

"The King needs good horsemen and free riders to sweep the land clear of Roundheads. He needs gentlemen with the strong arm and the simple heart to fight his battles. The King—God bless him!—needs six-score Metcalfs, on horses as mettled as their riders, to help put out this cursed fire of insurrection."

"Well, as for that," said the Squire, lighting his pipe with a live peat from the hearth, "I reckon we're here for that purpose. I bred my sons for the King, when he was pleased to need them. But I'd rather he could bide—say, for a month—till we get our corn in. Take our six-score men from the land just now, and there'll be no bread for the house next year, let alone straw for the beasts."

The messenger grew more and more aware that he had been entrusted with a fine mission. This plain, unvarnished honesty of the Squire's was worth fifty protestations of hot loyalty. The dogged love he had of his lands and crops—the forethought of them in the midst of civil war—would make him a staunch, cool-headed soldier.

"The King says you are to ride out to-morrow, Squire. What use to pray for him on Sabbaths if you fail him at the pinch?"

Metcalf was roused at last, but he glanced at the little wife who sat quietly in her corner, saying little and feeling much. "I've more than harvesting to leave. She's small, that wife of mine, but God knows the big love I have for her."

The little woman got up suddenly and stepped forward through the press of big sons she had reared. Her man said openly that he loved her better than his lands, and she had doubted it till now. She came and stood before the messenger and dropped him a curtsey.

"You are very welcome, sir, to take all my men on the King's service. What else? I, too, have prayed on Sabbaths."

The messenger rose, a great pity and chivalry stirring through his hard-ridden, tired body. "And you, madam?" he asked gently.

"Oh, I shall play the woman's part, I hope—to wait, and be silent, and shed tears when there are no onlookers."

"By God's grace," said Blake, the messenger, a mist about his eyes, "I have come to a brave house!"

The next morning, an hour after daybreak, Blake awoke, stirred drowsily, then sprang out of bed. Sleep was a luxury to him these days, and he blamed himself for indolence.

Downstairs he found only a serving-maid, who was spreading the breakfast table with cold meats enough to feed twenty men of usual size and appetite. The mistress was in the herb-garden, she said, and the men folk all abroad.

For a moment the messenger doubted his welcome last night. Had he dreamed of six score men ready for the King's service, or was the Squire's honesty, his frank promise to ride out, a pledge repented of already?

He found the Squire's wife walking in the herb-garden, and the face she lifted was tear-stained. "I give you good day," she said, "though you've not dealt very well with me and mine."

"Is there a finer errand than the King's?" he asked brusquely.

"My heart, sir, is not concerned with glory and fine errands. It is very near to breaking. Without discourtesy, I ask you to leave me here in peace—for a little while—until my wounds are healing."

The Squire and his sons had been abroad before daybreak, riding out across the wide lands of Nappa. Of the hundred odd grown men on their acres, there was not one—yeoman, or small farmer, or hind—but was a Metcalf by name and tradition. They were a clan of the old, tough Border sort, welded together by a loyalty inbred through many generations; and the law that each man's horse must be of the true Metcalf white was not of yesterday.

Christopher's ride to call his kinsfolk in had taken him wide to the boundary of Sir Timothy Grant's lands; and, as he trotted at the head of his growing company, he was bewildered to see Joan step from a little coppice on the right of

the track. She had been thinking of him, as it happened, till sleep would not come; and, like himself, she needed to get out into the open. Very fresh she looked, as she stepped into the misty sunlight—alert, free-moving, bred by wind and rain and sun. To Kit she seemed something not of this world; and it is as well, maybe, that a boy's love takes this shape, because in saner manhood the glamour of the old day-dreams returns, to keep life wholesome.

Kit halted his company, heedless of their smiles and muttered jests, as he rode to her side.

"You look very big, Christopher! You Nappa men—and your horses—are you riding to some hunt?" She was cold, provocative, dismaying.

"Yes, to hunt the Roundheads over Skipton way. The King has sent for us."

"But—the call is so sudden, and—I should not like to hear that you were dead, Kit."

Her eyes were tender with him, and then again were mocking. He could make nothing her, as how should he, when older men than he had failed to understand the world's prime mystery.

"Joan, what did you mean by 'until,' last night at the stile? You said none should master you until——"

"Why, yes, *until*—— Go out and find the answer to that riddle."

"Give me your kerchief," he said sharply—"for remembrance, Joan."

Again she resented his young, hot mastery, peeping out through the bondage she had woven round him. "To wear at your heart? But, Kit, you have not proved your right to wear it. Come back from slaying Roundheads, and ask for it again."

Blake, the messenger, meanwhile, had been fidgeting about the Nappa garden, wondering what was meant by the absence of all men from house and fields. His appetite, too, was sharpened by a sound night's sleep. Remembering the well-filled table indoors, he turned about, then checked himself with a laugh. Even rough-riding gentry could not break fast until the host arrived.

Presently, far down the road, he heard the lilt of horse-hoofs moving swiftly and in tune. The uproar grew, till round the bend of the way he saw what the meaning of it was.

Big men on big white horses came following the Squire of Nappa up the rise. All who could gather in the courtyard reined up; the rest of the hundred and twenty halted in the lane. They had rallied to the muster with surprising speed, these men of Yoredale.

All that the messenger had suffered already for the cause, all that he was willing to suffer later on, were forgotten. Here were volunteers for the King—and, faith, what cavaliers they were! And the big men, striding their white horses, liked him the better because his heart showed plainly in his face.

The messenger laughed suddenly, standing to the the height of five-foot-six that was all Providence had given him. "Gentlemen," he said, with the music of galloping horses in his voice, "gentlemen, the King!"

The Squire and he, after they had breakfasted, and the mistress had carried the stirrup-cup from one horseman to another, rode forward together on the track that led to Skipton. For a mile they went in silence. The Squire of Nappa was thinking of his wife, and youngsters of the Metcalf clan were thinking of maids who had lately glamoured them in country lanes. Then the lilt of hoof-beats, the call of the open hazard, got into their blood. A lad passed some good jest, till it ran along the company like fire through stubble; and after that each man rode blithely, as if it were his wedding-day.

A mile further on they saw a little lady gathering autumn flowers from the high bank bordering the road. She had spent a restless night on Kit's account, had he known it, and was early abroad struggling with many warring impulses. The Squire, who loved Christopher, knew what the lad most needed now. He drew rein sharply.

"Men of Nappa, salute!" he cried, his voice big and hearty as his body.

Joan Grant, surprised in the middle of a love-dream, saw a hundred and twenty men lifting six-foot pikes to salute her. The stress of it was so quick and overwhelming that it braced her for the moment. She took the salute with grace and a smile that captured these rough-riding gentry. Then, with odd precision, she dropped her kerchief under the nose of Kit's horse.

He stooped sharply and picked it up at the end of his pike. "A good omen, lads!" he cried. "White horses—and the white kerchief for the King!"

Then it was forward again; and Joan, looking after them, was aware that already her knight was in the making. And then she fell into a flood of tears, because women are made up of storm and sun, like the queer northern weather.

## CHAPTER II.

### SKIPTON-IN-CRAVEN.

"It's a pity about that corn o' mine, all the same," said the Squire, with a last backward thought. "There never was such a harvest year, since back into the 'twenties."

"There'll be such a harvest year, I trust," laughed Blake, "as will bring more

like you to the King. I would that every dale of the north gave us a company like yours—men and horses riding as if they'd been reared together from the cradle. I tell you sir, Prince Rupert would enrol you all at sight, if there were not more urgent need for you at Skipton."

"As a plain man to a plain man, what does the King ask of us?" asked the Squire of Nappa. "Mr. Lambert, you say, is laying siege to Skipton. He should know better. I knew him as a lad, when he lived out yonder at Calton-in-Craven, and he had naught in common with these thick-headed rogues who are out against the King. He's of the gentry, and always will be."

"He has lost his way in the dark, then," said the other drily. "He's training his cannon on Skipton Castle as if he liked the enterprise."

"So you want us to ride through Lambert's men and into the castle to help garrison it?" asked Squire Metcalf, with his big simplicity, his assurance that the men he led would charge through any weight of odds.

"Heaven save us, no! The governor has enough men to feed already, men of usual size; your little company would eat up his larder in a week."

"We *have* fairish appetites," the Squire admitted. "Big sacks need a lot of filling, as the saying goes. Still, you said the King wanted us, and we've left a fine harvest to rot where it stands."

The messenger captured a happiness he had not known for many days. There were no shams about this Squire. In all sincerity he believed that King Charles had personal and urgent need of him; he asked simply what it was the King commanded. It was so remote, this honesty, from the intrigues of those who fought for places in the Court, and named it loyalty, that the messenger was daunted for a moment.

"You are a big company, sir," he said, turning briskly round in saddle; "but you seem oddly undivided in loyalty to the King and one another. Strike one Metcalf, or do him a kindness, and six-score men will repay in kind. You have the gipsy creed, my friends."

"Ay, we're close and trusty. It seems you know the way of us Nappa folk, though I never set eyes on you till yesterday."

"It is my business to know men. The King's riders must make no mistakes these days, Squire." He glanced back along the chattering group of horse, with quick pride in the recruits he had won from Yoredale. "You're all well horsed, well armed."

"Why, yes. We heard trouble was brewing up 'twixt King and Parliament, and we got our arms in order. What else? Folk sharpen sickles when the corn is ripening."

"And you have these lusty rascals at command—sharp to the word?"

Squire Metcalf smiled, a big, capacious smile. "They've felt the weight o'

my hand lang syne, and know it. My father before me trained me that way—as you train a dog, no more, no less."

He drew rein and whistled sharply. The horsemen, fifty yards behind, pressed forward, and the heir of Nappa galloped at their head, drew rein, saluted his father with sharp precision, and waited for commands.

"Oh, naught at all, Christopher," said the Squire. "This guest of ours doubted whether I could whistle my lads to heel, and now he knows I can."

The messenger said nothing. The quiet, hard-bitten humour of these northerners appealed to him; and Mallory, the governor of Skipton, had been right when he sent him out to Nappa, sure that the Metcalf clan would be worth many times their actual number to the Royalists in Yorkshire.

They came to the rise of the road where Bishopdale, with its hedges of fast-ripening hazel nuts, strode up into the harsher lands that overlooked Wharfedale. They rode down the crumbly steep of road, past Cray hamlet, set high above its racing stream; and at Buckden, half a league lower down, they encountered a hunting-party come out to slay the deer. They were too busy to join either party, King's or Parliament's, and offered a cheery bidding to the Metcalf men to join them in the chase.

"We're after bigger deer," laughed the Squire of Nappa. "Who rides for the King?"

Hats were lifted, and a great cheer went up. "All of us," said a grey, weather-beaten horseman.

"Ay, it seems like it," growled the Squire. "Much good you're doing Skipton-in-Craven by hunting deer instead of Roundheads."

"Skipton can stand a twelve months' siege. She can whistle when she needs us, like any other likely lass. There's no need to lose a hunting-day till Sir John Mallory needs us."

The Squire found his first disillusionment along this road of glamour. He had thought that a company of picked horsemen, armed for the King and riding with a single purpose, would have swept these huntsmen into line. Some few of them, indeed, had ridden forward a little, as if they liked his message; but the grey-headed horseman, who distrusted all enthusiasm because long since he had lost his faith in life, brought them sharply back.

"It will be all over in a week or two, and the crop-heads back in their kennels. No need to lose a hunting day, my lads."

The white horses, carrying big men, trotted forward, through Starboton and Kettlewell, where the Danes had raided, wooed, and settled long before a Stuart came to reign over gentler times. It was not till they reached Linton, quiet and grey about its clear, trout-haunted stream, that the Squire of Nappa broke silence.

"I told those hunting gentry that the King needed them, and they wouldn't hearken. It seems Royalists are deaf these days to the plain road of honesty."

"They are," said the messenger, with the surprising calm that he had learned from lonely errands, ridden oftener by night than daytime. "So are most men and most women. My heart's singing by that token. I'm bringing in six-score Metcalfs to the King, all as honest as God's sunlight. My luck is in, Squire."

The Squire would have none of blandishment. He could ride a good horse or a grievance hard. "They doffed their hats when I named the King," he growled.

"They did, but not their heart-coverings. If they'd been keen to ride—why, they'd have ridden, and no child's game of deer slaying would have stopped them. Skipton is better off without such laggard arms to help her."

"But the King needs them," said Metcalf stubbornly, "and we showed them the plain road."

They rode on through Cracoe, where the trees were red-gold in their pride of autumn, and again the Squire of Nappa broke the silence. "What does the King ask of us? If it is not to garrison the town——"

"It is a pleasanter occupation. The Governor would change places with you willingly, Squire. He told me so when mapping out the work for you men of Nappa. You're well horsed and drilled. You are too strong to be attacked except in force, and they can spare few men from the assault. Your business is to patrol the open country, to intercept and harry Lambert's reinforcements—to come like the wind out of nowhere, and vanish as suddenly, till the Roundheads learn that Skipton is attacking and besieged, both at the same time."

"There's one big load off my mind," said Metcalf soberly. "We shall have the sky over our heads and room for a gallop. I was in mortal fear of being shut up in Skipton Castle, I own, day in, day out, and never a wind from the pastures. We were not bred for indoors, we Nappa folk, and I doubt a month of it would have killed us outright."

The Squire did not understand the fine breadth of strategy that underlay this plan mapped out for him. But the messenger was well aware of it, for Sir John Mallory had a soldier's instinct for the detail of campaign, and he had explained this venture yesterday with what had seemed a mixture of sagacity and sheer, unpractical romance. Since spending the night at Nappa, and journeying with the Metcalfs for half a day, Blake realised the Governor's sagacity more fully. As for romance—that, too, was vivid enough, but entirely practical. Six-score men on big white horses were enough to feed the most exacting poet's fancy; they were sufficient, too, to disturb the thick-headed, workaday routine of Lambert's soldiery.

They came to Rylstone, fair and modest as a maid, who hides from men's intrusions. Rylstone, the village beyond praise, bordered by grey houses and the

call of ancient peace—Rylstone, that dalesmen dream of when their strength has left them for a while and their hearts are tender.

"She's bonnie," said the Squire of Nappa, checking his horse from old instinct.

"Yes, she's bonnie," Blake agreed. "Rylstone bred me, and a man should know the debt he owes his mother."

Then it was forward up the hill again. Blake was thinking of life's surprises—was picturing the long impatience of his manhood, because he stood only five-foot-six to his height in a country that reared tall men. Since then he had learned to pit strength of soul against body height, and now he was bringing in the finest troop of cavalry that ever rode the dales. He was content.

As they drew near to the house known as None-go-by, Blake was full of the enterprise planned out for these jolly Metcalf men. He did not propose to take them into Skipton, but left-handed into the bridle-track that led to Embsay. There was news that a company of Fairfax's men was coming round that way from Otley, to help the Roundhead siege; and he would have fought a battle worth the while—for a small man, not too strong of body—if he ambushed the dour rogues with his cavalry brought out from Nappa.

Yet his well-laid plan was interrupted. All the quiet ways of the countryside had been thrown into surprising muddle and disorder by this civil war that had come to range friends of yesterday on opposite sides of the quarrel.

It should have been market-day, and the road full of sheep and cattle, sleepy drovers, yeomen trotting on sleek horses. Instead, there was silence, and the Nappa folk had all the highway to themselves until they neared the rutty track that joined their own from Thorlby and the Gargrave country.

A stream of horsemen was pouring down this track—Parliament men riding from the west to help Lambert with the siege. They rode slowly, and the Nappa men, as they drew rein and looked down the hill, counted two hundred of them. Then came three lumbering waggons, each with a cannon lashed to it by hay-ropes plaited fourfold, and each drawn by a team of plough-horses that roused Squire Metcalf's envy. Behind the waggons, more horsemen rode at a foot-pace, till it seemed the stream would never end.

"Mr. Lambert is needing more artillery, it seems," said Blake drily. "His anxiety must be great, if three cannon need such a heavy escort."

The Squire of Nappa did not hear him. For a moment he sat quietly in saddle, his face the mirror of many crowded thoughts. Then suddenly he raised a shout—one that was to sound often through the Yorkshire uplands, like the cock grouse's note.

"A Mecca for the King!" he roared, lifting the pike that was as light as a hazel wand to his great strength of arm.

Blake was at his right hand as they charged. He had only his sword, but the speed and fury of the battle made him forget that not long since he had longed for the strength to wield a pike instead, as all the men of Nappa did.

It was all confusion, speed of white horses galloping down-hill to the shock, thud of the onset. The Roundhead guard had faced about to meet this swirling, quick assault. They saw a company of giants, carrying pikes as long as their own bodies, and they met them with the stolid Roundhead obstinacy. It was a grim fight, and ever across it rang the Squire of Nappa's lusty voice.

Between the two companies of Roundhead horsemen were the three farm-waggons carrying the guns. Those on the Skipton side were trying to ride uphill to help their comrades; but the din of combat had sent the plough-horses wild. They were big and wilful brutes, and their screams rose high above the babel of men fighting for their lives. Then they bolted, swerved across the road, and brought themselves and all they carried into the ditches on either side. The cannon, as they fell, ripped the waggons into splintered wreckage.

Between the fallen horses, through the litter of broken waggons, the men of Nappa drove what had been the rearguard of the convoy. They picked their way through the fifty yards of broken ground, lifted their white horses to the next attack, and charged the second company of Roundheads. Those of the shattered rearguard who could not draw aside were driven down pell-mell into their upcoming friends, bringing confusion with them. And through it all there rang the Squire's voice, with its keen, insistent cry of "A Mecca for the King!" In that hour the Parliament men learned that the Stuart, too, had downright servants at command, who were not made up of dalliance and lovelocks.

The men of Nappa would not be denied. They asked no quarter and gave none; and they drove the Roundheads—who contested every step with stubborn pluck—down the hill and up the gentle rise past Skipton Church, and into the broad High Street that was the comeliest in Yorkshire. The Castle, with its motto of "Désormais" carved in stone against the blue autumn sky, looked down on this sudden uproar in the street; men's faces showed above the battlements, eager with question and surprise.

The tumult reached Lambert's ears, too, as he stood beside the cannon on Cock Hill. Knowing that reinforcements were coming over the Lancashire border, he thought the garrison had made a sortie; and he gave a sharp command to fire on the Castle as fast as they could load their clumsy cannon, to bring the sortie party back to the defence. The Roundhead luck was out altogether, for the first cannon-ball flew high above the carved motto of "Désormais," and the second, falling short, killed three of the horsemen who were retreating, step by step, before the Nappa men.

Sir John Mallory, the governor, was one of the men who looked down from

the battlements. He had a zealous heart, and his thirty years of life had taught him that it was good to live or die for the King. Below he saw a swarm of giants striding white horses; saw the little messenger he had sent to Nappa fighting as merrily as any Metcalf of them all; saw the Roundheads retreating stubbornly. As he watched, a cannon-ball whistled by, a foot or two above his head, and ruffled his hair in passing as a sharp wind might do.

"My thanks, Lambert," he said impassively. "One needs a breeze after long confinement."

Then he went down the slippery stair; and a little later the drawbridge rattled down, and he rode out with twenty others who were sick from lack of exercise.

It was a stubborn business. The Roundheads left behind with the overturned guns, up the Rylstone road, recaptured the courage that no man doubted, and came driving in at the rear of this pitched battle. Lambert himself, the increasing tumult coming up to him through the still, autumn air, got thirty of the besiegers together. They had ridden in at dawn, and their horses were picketed close at hand. As they galloped up the High Street, they were met by the weight of their own retreating friends from Lancashire; and it was now that Lambert showed the leadership, the power of glamouring his men, which none among the Roundheads had since Hampden died.

"Friends," he said,—the Quaker instinct in him suggesting that odd form of address when battle was in progress—"friends, I trust you."

Just that. He had found the one word that is magical to strong men. They answered him with a rousing shout, and drove up against the King's men. For a moment even the Nappa riders gave back; but the recoil seemed only to help them to a fiercer onset. They had both Cavalier speed and Roundhead weight, these Metcalf men and horses; and Sir John Mallory, fighting beside them for mastery of the High Street, was aware that Yoredale had given the King a finer troop of horse than even Rupert could command.

Across the thick of it Mallory caught Lambert's glance, and an odd smile played about their lips. The same thought came to both between the hurry of the fight. Not long ago they had dined together, had talked of the winter's hunting soon to come, had smoked their pipes in amity. Now each was thanking God that the shifting issues of the battle did not bring them sword to sword; for civil war is always a disastrous and a muddling enterprise.

The glance, and the memories that went to its making, were over in a second. It was a forward plunge again of King's men meeting Roundheads, hard to drive. And suddenly there rose a cry keen as winter in the uplands and strong as sun at midsummer.

"Now, Metcalfs," roared the Squire of Nappa, "into the standing corn—and

God for the King, say I!"

Into the standing corn they went, and it was open flight now down the length of Skipton Street. Time after time Lambert strove to rally his men, using oaths that had not been taught him by the Quakers, but the retreat swept him down, carrying him with it. A great gentleman, whichever side he took in this fierce quarrel, was learning for the first time the sickness of defeat.

The Nappa men were only turned from pursuing the enemy into the teeth of the guns on Cock Hill by Mallory, who rode forward sharply, reined about and fronted them.

"Gentlemen of Yoredale," he said, quiet and persuasive, "the King does not command you to be blown to bits up yonder. He has other need of you."

"I like to sickle the whole field once I make a start," said Squire Metcalf.

"Ay, but there's a biggish field in front of you. You'll need to sleep betweenwhiles, Squire."

When they turned to ride up the High Street again, the Squire, among all this muddle of wounded Metcalfs, and horses that were white and crimson now, saw only a little man slipping from the saddle of a little mare. He rode up in time to ease his fall, and afterwards felt the man's wounds gently, as a woman might. And the tears were in his eyes.

"It's Blake, the messenger, and God knows I'm sorry. He fought like the biggest rogue that ever was breeked at Nappa."

"His soul's too big for his strength," said Mallory, with his unalterable common sense. "He'll just have to lie by for a while."

"There's naught much amiss, save loss o' blood, may be. We'll get him to the Castle gate, and then—why we'll just ride up the Raikes and spike those cannon lying in the ditch."

"You're thorough, you men of Nappa," said Mallory, with a sudden laugh.

"Men have to be, these days," the Squire answered soberly. "If a body rides for the King—well, he rides for the King, and no two ways about it."

Kit drew apart from the turmoil, and searched for the kerchief Joan Grant had dropped in front of his horse, away in Yoredale yonder. It was white no longer, but reddened by a wound that he had taken. And quietly, in the stillness that comes after battle, he knew that he was to follow a long road and a hard road till he was home again. It was better—in his heart he knew it—than dallying at country stiles, sick with calf-love for a maid too high above him.

"You look happy, lad," said the Squire, as he drew rein beside him.

"I'm climbing a tree, sir, a big tree. There's somebody's heart at the top of it."

"Ay, Miss Joan's," growled Squire Metcalf. "Well, go on climbing, lad. You

might have chosen worse."

## CHAPTER III.
### SOME MEN OF FAIRFAX'S.

Joan Grant, when she bade Christopher climb a high tree if he sought her heart, had not told him that she was taking a journey. When afterwards she waved a farewell to him, as he rode out with his kinsfolk, she had given no hint that she, too, was following adventure on the morrow.

The day after the Metcalfs, a hundred-and-twenty strong, journeyed to serve King Charles, she set out on a more peaceful quest. Her aunt, Lady Ingilby of Ripley, had commanded this favourite niece of hers—all in my lady's imperious, high-handed way—to join her in the widowhood that her husband's absence with the Royal army enforced on her. Her own father was somewhere in Oxfordshire with the King, her brothers with Prince Rupert, and in their absence Lady Grant had decided that her daughter must obey the command.

"I was always a little afraid of my sister of Ripley," she explained, in her pretty, inconsequent way. "She would not forgive me if I kept you here; and, after all, the roads may not be as dangerous as one fancies. You must go, child."

Joan took the road with some pomp. All the younger men had gone with the master to the wars; but her chaise was guarded by two old menservants who had pluck and good pistols, if no great strength to fight pitched battles; and she had her maid Pansy with her in the chaise.

"Do you know, mistress, what I found at the gate this morning?" asked the maid, as they went through the pleasant vale of Wensley.

"I could not guess, Pansy."

"Why, a stirrup-iron. Horseshoes are lucky enough, but a stirrup-iron——"

Joan laughed eagerly; she had the country superstitions close at heart, because she, too, was a daleswoman. "There's a knight riding somewhere for me, Pansy."

"Knights are as knights do," said the other, with the Puritan tartness ingrained in her. "For my part, I'll hope he's better than most men. It's not asking much."

"In the doldrums, girl? I shall have to train you. It's easier to laugh, than cry—that's the true Royalist faith."

Pansy—half maid, half confidante, and altogether spoiled—began to whimper. "It's easy to laugh, with all the road in front of you, and a riding knight ahead. I've no man to think of, and that leaves a woman lonesome-like."

"It is not for want of suitors," said Joan, humouring her maid as good mistresses do. "You had your choice of the dalesmen, Pansy."

Pansy bridled a little and shifted her headgear to a more becoming angle. "Ay, but they're rough." Her speech relapsed into the mother-tongue she had tried often to forget. "A lass that kens more doesn't mate with the li'le bit less. She has her pride."

The mistress did not answer, but fell into a long reverie. What was true of the maid was true of herself. Young Kit Metcalf, riding for the King, was just "the li'le bit less," somehow. She had a regard for him, half real and half fanciful; but he seemed shut off from her by some intangible difference that was not uncouthness, but something near to it. He was big and forthright, and shocked her daintiness.

They went through the pleasant dale. In Wensley village they met a waggon coming home with corn, ingathered for the threshing. All down the valley men were reaping in the fields. The land yielded its produce, and folk were gathering it as if no blight of civil war had fallen about the land. This, too, disturbed Joan Grant. She had pictured her journey to Ripley as one long road of peril—a battle to every mile, and danger's swift excitement scudding on before her.

"There's no war at all, Pansy," she said fretfully, watching mile after tranquil mile go by. "They gather in their corn, and the peace is undisturbed."

"We should be thankful for the mercy," said the maid austerely.

"Oh, we should, girl, but we're not. Undoubtedly we are not thankful."

At Skipton, the day before, there had been battle enough, as the Riding Metcalfs knew. When the fight was ended, and they had spiked the guns lying wide across the highway of the Raikes, they gathered for the forward ride. A hundred-and-twenty of them had ridden out, and not one was missing from their number, though half of them were carrying wounds.

Old Metcalf—"Mecca," as his kinsfolk had the name—rounded up his company. "The Governor tells me, lads, that a company of Fairfax's men are coming through. We've to go wide of Skipton and ambush them."

Battle sat finely on the man. He had no doubts, no waywardness. He was here for the King, to take orders from those placed above him, and to enforce them so far as his own command went.

"A Mecca for the King!" roared Christopher, the six-foot baby of the flock.

The cry was to sing like a northern gale through the Yorkshire highlands; and now the running uproar of it drifted up the Raikes as they came to the track that led right-handed down to Embsay village. Down the pasture-lands they went, and through the small, grey township, and forward on the road to Bolton

Abbey. Half between Bolton and Long Addingham they met a yeoman jogging forward at a tranquil trot.

"Why, Squire Metcalf, it's a twelve-month and a day since we set eyes on each other," he said, reining up. "Are you riding for Otley market?"

"Ay," said Metcalf, with a dalesman's wariness. "Is there aught stirring there, Demaine?"

"Nay, nowt so much—not enough to bring all your Nappa men with you, Squire. Maybe it's men you're seeking, instead of ewes and cattle."

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't."

"Well, if it's men you're seeking, you'll find 'em. I overtook three hundred of Fairfax's soldiery just setting out from Otley."

"Oh, you did? Were they horsed?"

"No, they were going at a sharp marching pace. They were a likely set o' lads to look at—thick in the beam, but varry dour of face. I take no sides myself in this business of King and Parliament. I only say, Squire, that a nod's as good as a wink in troubled times."

"Thanks, Demaine," said the Squire of Nappa.

"Nay, no need. Neighbour knows neighbour, and good day to ye."

The whole intimacy of the dales was in that brief greeting—the freemasonry that ran like quicksilver in between the well-laid plans of ambitious generals. Fairfax had sent three hundred of his men to strengthen Lambert's attack on Skipton Castle. A country squire and a yeoman met on the highway and talked a while, and there was an ambush in the making.

"Hi, Christopher!" said the Squire, beckoning the lad to his side. "Ride forward on the Otley road till you see those men of Fairfax's. Then turn about and gallop."

Kit saluted gravely, as he or any Metcalf of them would have saluted if the chief bade them ride through the Fiery Gate. His wounds smarted as he rode for Otley, and he relished the keen pain. He was young, with his eyes to the stars, and suffering for the King's sake was haloed by romance.

He went through Ilkley. Its straw-thatched cottages clustered round the brown stream of Wharfe; and, half a mile beyond, he saw a company of men on foot marching with quick and limber step. He forgot his wounds. With a boy's careless devilry, he galloped to meet them and reined up within twenty paces.

"Are you my Lord Fairfax's men?" he asked. "If so you're needed at Skipton. Put your best foot forward."

"We're Lord Fairfax's men, sir," said the officer in command. "Do you come from Captain Lambert?"

"From Skipton—yes, I come from Skipton. There's need for haste."

With a laugh and a light farewell, Kit reined about and spurred his horse.

When he came to the top of the hill overlooking the wonderful, quiet sweep of river that rocked despoiled Bolton Priory into dreams of yester-year, he found his kinsmen waiting on the rise.

"What news, Kit?" asked the Squire.

"Sir, it will be butchery," said the lad, stirred by generous pity. "There's a big company of them, all on foot, and I—have led them into ambush."

Squire Metcalf snarled at his baby-boy. "The King will be well rid of his enemies. Men do not fight, Kit, on milk-and-water fancies."

A laugh went up from the Metcalfs—a laugh that was not easy for any lad to bear. "I've given my message, sir. Put me in the front of the hazard, if you doubt me."

The Squire had one of his sharp repentances. This son of his had shamed him, and for a moment he strove with the hot temper that was the inheritance of all the Metcalf breed.

"You shall lead us, Kit," he said at last.

The time seemed long in passing before the three hundred men of Fairfax's came marching at a stubborn pace into the hollow down below. Then, with a roar of "A Mecca for the King!" Christopher was down among them with his kinsmen.

When all was done, there was nothing left of the three hundred except a press of fugitives, some prisoners, and many bodies scattered on the highroad. The garrison at Skipton might sleep well to-night, so far as recruits to the besieging forces went.

It was the prisoners who troubled the Squire of Nappa. His view of war had been that it was a downright affair of enemies who were killed or who escaped. He glanced at the fifty captives his men had taken, massed together in a sullen company, and was perplexed. His roving troop of horse could not be burdened with such a dead weight of footmen. The garrison at Skipton Castle would not welcome them, for there were mouths enough to feed there already.

"What shall I do with them, lads?" he asked, riding apart with his men.

Michael Metcalf, a raking, black-haired fellow, laughed carelessly. "Best take powder and pistols from them and turn 'em adrift like sheep. They'll bleat to little purpose, sir, without their weapons."

The Squire nodded. "Thou'rt not noted for great strength of head, Michael, save so far as taking blows goes, but that was sage advice."

The Metcalfs, trusting first to their pikes, and afterwards—the gentry-sort among them—to their swords, were disposed to look askance at the pistols as tools of slight account, until Michael again found wisdom. King's men, he said, might find a use for weapons the enemy found serviceable.

When the arms had been gathered, Squire Metcalf reined up in front of the prisoners. "Men of Fairfax's," he said bluntly, "you're a ragged lot to look at, but

there are gentlemen among you. I do not speak of rank or class. The gentlemen, as the price of freedom, will take no further part in the Rebellion. The louts may do as they please, but they had best not let me catch them at the fighting."

The words came hot and ready, and though the dispersed company of prisoners laughed afterwards at the Squire's handling of the matter, they warmed to his faith in them. They had volunteered from many occupations to serve the Parliament. Blacksmiths and clothiers and carpenters from Otley were mingled with farmers and slips of the gentry from the outlying country. All answered to the keen issue Squire Metcalf had given them. They were trusted. On the next day twenty of them lost hold of his message, and went in search of arms; but thirty were constant to their pledge, and this, with human nature as it is, was a high tribute to the Squire's persuasiveness.

The Metcalf men rode quietly toward Skipton. For the first time since their riding out from Nappa, they felt lonely. They had fought twice, and their appetite was whetted; but no other battle showed ahead. They were young to warfare, all of them, and thought it one happy road of skirmish, uproar, and hard blows, from end to end of the day's journey.

The only break in the monotony came as they rode up the steep track to Embsay Moor. At the top of the hill, dark against the sunlit sky, a solitary horseman came into view, halted a moment to breathe his horse, then trotted down at a speed that the steepness of the road made foolhardy. He did not see the Metcalf company until it was too late to turn about, and trotted forward, since needs must.

"On which side of the battle?" asked Squire Metcalf, catching the bridle.

"On which side are you, sir?"

"The King's, but you are not. No King's man ever bandies questions; he answers straight to the summons which side he stands for."

They found a message after diligent searching of his person. The message was in Lambert's neat Quakerish handwriting, and was addressed to a captain of horse in Ripon, bidding him take his men to Ripley and keep watch about the Castle. "That termagant, Lady Ingilby, is making her house a meeting-place for Cavaliers," the message read. "Her husband at the wars is one man only. She rallies twenty to the cause each day. See to it, and quickly."

"Ay," said the Squire, with his rollicking laugh, "we'll see to it."

It was astonishing to see the change in this man, who until yesterday had been content to tend his lands, to watch the dawn come up and sunset die over the hills he loved, and get to his early sleep. His father and his grandfather had handled big issues in the open, though he himself had chosen a stay-at-home squire's life; and the thing that is in the blood of a man leaps forward always at the call of need.

Squire Metcalf, with brisk courtesy, claimed the messenger's horse. "Lest you ride back to Skipton with the news," he explained, "and because a spare horse is always useful these days. For yourself, get back at leisure, and tell Mr. Lambert that the Riding Metcalfs have carried the message for him."

Without another word, he glanced at the sun, guessed hastily the line of country that pointed to Ripley, and rode forward at the head of his good company. It was rough going, with many turns and twists to avoid wet ground here, a steep face of rock there; but at the end of it they came to a high spur of moor, and beneath them, in a flood of crimson—the sun was near its setting—they saw the tower of Ripley Castle and the long, raking front of house and outbuildings.

The Squire laughed. His face was aglow with pride, like the sunset's. "I've few gifts, lads, but one of them is to know Yorkshire from end to end, as I know my way to bed o' nights. I've led you within sight of Ripley; the rest lies with lad Christopher."

Michael, the black-haired wastrel of the flock, found voice.

"Kit will be saddle-sore if he rides all your errands. Give one o' them to me, sir."

The Squire looked him up and down. "You've a heart and a big body, Michael, but no head. I tell you, Kit must take this venture forward."

So Michael laughed. He was aware that, if wits were asked, he must give place to Kit, whom he loved with an odd, jealous liking.

"What is your errand, sir?" asked Christopher.

The Squire put Lambert's letter into his hand, bade him read it over and over, then snatched it from him. "Have you got it by heart, Kit?"

Kit repeated it word by word, and his father tore the letter into shreds and threw them to the keen west wind that was piping over the moor. "That's the way to carry all messages. If you're taken, lad, they can turn your pockets inside out and search your boots, but they cannot find what's safe inside your head, not if they tap it with a sword-cut."

There was a high deed done on the moor at this hour of the declining day. Without a tremor or regret, the Squire of Nappa sent his son—the one nearest his warm heart—to certain danger, to a hazard from which there might well be no returning.

"Find Lady Ingilby," he said gruffly, "and beware of Roundheads guarding the approaches to the house. Give her the message."

"And then, sir?"

"It is this way, Kit," said the Squire, after a restless pacing up and down the moor. "Take counsel with Lady Ingilby and any Cavaliers you find at Ripley. Tell them the Metcalfs have picketed their horses here on the moor, and wait for orders. If she needs us, we are ready. And so good-bye, my lad."

The Metcalfs, by habit, were considerate toward the hale, big bodies that asked good feeding. On the way they had contrived to victual themselves with some thoroughness, and now they unstrapped each his own meal from the saddle. When they had eaten, and crowned the meal with a draught of water from the stream, Michael laughed that easy, thoughtless laugh of his.

"When the King comes to his own, I'll petition him to make the moors run ripe October ale. I never thrive on water, I."

"It's not in you to thrive, lad," snapped the Squire. "You've no gift that way, come ale or water."

They had not been idle, any of them, since yesterday's riding out from Nappa; and now they were glad to lie in the heather and doze, and dream of the cornfields ripe for harvest and the ingle-nook at home. The Squire, for his part, had no wish for sleep. To and fro he paced in the warm, ruddy gloaming, and his dreams were of the future, not the past. Ambition, that had taken his forbears to high places, was changing all his old, quiet outlook. The King had summoned him. About his King there was a halo of romance and great deserving. It was good to be asked to fight for such a cause.

Metcalf did not know it, but his soul was ripening, like his own harvest fields, under this fierce sun of battle and peril and hard riding. Instead of a pipe by the hearth o' nights, he was asked to bivouac on the moor, to throttle sleep until Kit rode back or sent a messenger. He was content. Better a week of riding for the King than years of safety in home-fields.

He had not cared specially for thinking, save of crops and horses and the way of rearing prime cattle for market; but to-night his mind was clear, marching out toward big issues. Little by little it grew plain to him that he had been given a leadership of no usual sort. There were a hundred-and-twenty of them, keen to charge with the whole weight of men and horses; but each of the six-score could ride alone on errands needing secrecy, and summon his kinsmen when any hazard pressed too closely. The clan was one man or six-score, just as need asked, and the Squire was quick to realise the service they could render. It might well be that, long afterwards, men would tell their bairns, close huddled round the hearth on winter nights, what share the Riding Metcalfs had in crushing the rebellious Parliament.

As he thought about it all, his heart beating like a lad's, his imagination all afire, a step sounded close behind him. He turned to find Michael at his elbow.

"Well, scapegrace?" he asked. "It all goes bonnily enough."

"Ay, for Christopher," growled the other. The black mood was on him, and at these times he had no respect of persons. He was, indeed, like one possessed of an evil spirit. "Kit was a favourite always, and now he gets all errands."

"He can keep his temper, Michael, under hardship. I've proved him, and I

know. A soldier needs that gift."

Michael met the rebuke sullenly, but made no answer, and a restless silence followed.

"My lad," said the Squire by and by, "you broke into a fine dream of mine. There were six-score Metcalfs, I fancied, pledged to ride together. Now there is one less."

"How so? We've a few wounds to boast of between us, but no dead."

"One of us is dying by slow stages. Jealousy is killing him, and I tell you, Michael, I'd rather see the plague among us than that other pestilence you're nursing. The sickness will spread. When times are slack—food short and nothing to be done by way of blows—you'll whisper in this man's ear and in that man's ear, and turn their blood to ice."

A great, overmastering repentance swept Michael's devilry away. He was himself again. "I love Christopher," he said very simply, "though I'm jealous of him."

"Ay, I know! But take this warning from me, Michael,—when the black dog's on your shoulder, shake him off. Jealousy's your prime failing. It will break up our company one day, if you let it."

## CHAPTER IV
### THE LAST LAUGH.

Christopher, his shoulders very straight and his head somewhere up among the stars, had trotted quietly down to Ripley village. His own failing was not jealousy, but an extreme, foolhardy belief that luck was with him always, and that blue sky watched over every day's adventure. As he reached the top of the street, he was thinking less of Lady Ripley and his errand than of Joan Grant, who had sat on a stile in the home-country while he made love to her, and had bidden him climb high.

He was roused from his dream by a company of Roundhead soldiery that blocked the way, twenty paces or so ahead. It did not occur to him—his wits were country-reared as yet—that they need not know for which side he rode, or that he was the bearer of a message. Moreover, there was adventure to his hand. He put spurs to his horse, lifted his pike, and rode in among them. The big-hearted simplicity of his attack bewildered the enemy for a moment; then they closed

round him, plucked him from the saddle, and held him, a man gripping him on either side, while Ebenezer Drinkwater, their leader, looked him up and down.

"So you're for the King?" said Drinkwater.

"I have that privilege."

"Ay, you've the look of it, with your easy laugh and your big air. Have you never heard of the Latter Judgment, and what happens to the proud folk?"

"I've heard much of you canting cropheads," said Christopher suavely. This was not the adventure he had hoped to meet, but he accepted it blithely, as he would have met a stiff fence fronting him in the middle of a fox-hunt.

"You're carrying a message to Ripley Castle?"

"I am."

Drinkwater, a hard man, empty of imagination, could make nothing of this youngster who seemed to have no thought for his life. He ordered one of his men to search the prisoner. Boots and pockets, shirt and the inner lining of his coat were ransacked. And Christopher felt no humiliation, because laughter was bubbling at his heart.

"Well?" asked the prisoner.

Drinkwater, dour, persistent, believing what his arid experience had taught him—that each man had his price—found a rough sort of diplomacy. "You can go safe if you tell us where the message is."

"I never cared too much for safety," said Kit, with great cheeriness. "Offer another bribe, good crophead."

Ebenezer, fond of food and good liquor, fell into the usual snare, and measured all men's appetites by his own. "You look starved and empty. A good supper, say, and a creaming mug of ale to top it?"

"I'll take that draught of beer. Supper I'm in no need of for an hour or two."

Drinkwater laughed, without merriment, as he bade one of his men go to the tavern and bring a measure of home-brewed. It was brought to Christopher, and the smell of it was good as he blew the froth away.

Between the cup and the drinking he halted. "Let us understand the bargain. I drink this ale—I'm thirsty, I admit—and in return I tell you where I hide the message."

"That is the bargain," assented Drinkwater. "I always knew every man was to be bought, but your price is the cheapest I've heard tell of."

Kit lingered over the draught. "It is good ale," he said. "Send for another measure."

"Well, it's not in the bond, but you can have it. Now, youngster," went on Drinkwater, after the second measure had been despatched, "where's that message of yours?"

"In my head, sir," said Kit, with a careless nod. "Safe behind wooden walls,

as my father put it when he bade me learn it all by rote."

"No jesting," snapped Drinkwater, nettled by a guarded laugh from one of his own men. "The bargain was that you told us the message."

"That I told you where it lay—no more, no less. I have told you, and paid for that good ale of yours."

Drinkwater was no fool. He saw himself outwitted and wasted no regrets. After all, he had the better of the jest.

"Tie him by the legs and arms," he said dourly, "and set him on the bench here till we're ready to start. There are more ways than one of sobering a King's man."

Christopher did not like the feel of the rope about his limbs, nor did he relish the attentions of stray village-folk who came and jeered at him after his captors had gone in to supper. One can despise louts, but still feel the wasp-sting of their gibes.

Into the middle of it all came two horsewomen; and to Kit, seeing the well-known horses, it was as if a breath of Yoredale and the spring came to him. He knew the old men, too, who guarded the horse-women, front and rear. Under his gladness went an uneasy feeling that yesterday's hard riding and hard lighting, or Drinkwater's ale, or both, had rendered him light-headed. It was not possible that she could be here in Ripley.

Joan Grant was tired of the uneventful journey, tired of her maid Pansy, whose tongue ran like a brook. "This should be Ripley, at long-last," she said fretfully. "Tell me, girl, am I grey-headed yet? It seems a lifetime since the morning."

Pansy, looking through the right-hand window of the coach, saw a tavern-front, its windows soft with candle-light. On the bench in front of it, lit by the ruddy gloaming, was a man bound with ropes, a man who threw gibe for gibe at a company of Ripley's cowards who baited him.

"He carries no knight's air just now," said Pansy, with a bubble of laughter; "but it was not for naught I found that stirrup-iron at the gate this morning."

Joan Grant looked, and, seeing Kit there, friendless and courageous, she felt a quickening of the wayward thing she called her heart. She got down from the carriage, and stepped to the bench that stood under the inn wall; then, seeing the welcome in Kit's eyes—a welcome near to adoration—she withdrew a little.

"So this comes of riding for the King?" she asked, with high disdain.

And something stirred in Christopher—a new fire, a rebellion against the glamour that had put his manhood into leading-strings.

"If this comes, or worse, I'm glad to ride for the King," he said.

"If I loosed your hands and bade you take a seat in my coach——"

"I should not take it; there is other work to do."

Joan, under the smart of the rebuff, was pleased with this man of hers. Something had happened to him since yesterday. He was no longer the uncouth boy, thinking he could have the moon by asking for it.

"You're rough and uncivil, sir."

"I am. These lambs of the Parliament are teaching me new manners."

She bowed carelessly, drew her skirts away from the litter of the roadway, and went perhaps ten paces toward her carriage. Then she turned. "I can be of no service to you, then?" she asked coldly.

His face grew eager, but not with the eagerness that had pleased and affronted her just now; and he tried to beckon her nearer, forgetting that his hands were tied. She guessed his meaning, and came to his side again; and this time she began cutting at his bonds with a knife borrowed from her coachman; but the villagers intervened, saying they dared not be party to the venture.

"Yes, you can be of service," he whispered, when the onlookers had given back again, leaving them to what they fancied was a lovers' leave-taking. "Lady Ingilby lives close by—it will scarcely be out of your way to take a message to her."

"So little out of the way that we are bound for the Castle, my maid and I, at the end of a fatiguing journey. If this is civil war, I'd as lief have peace. There were no adventures on the road."

Kit could not understand her gusty mood—for that matter, she could not understand herself—but he was not concerned with whimsies. Folk were dependent on him, and he was answerable for their safety. He recalled that she was kin to the folk at Ripley Castle, and accepted this surprising fortune.

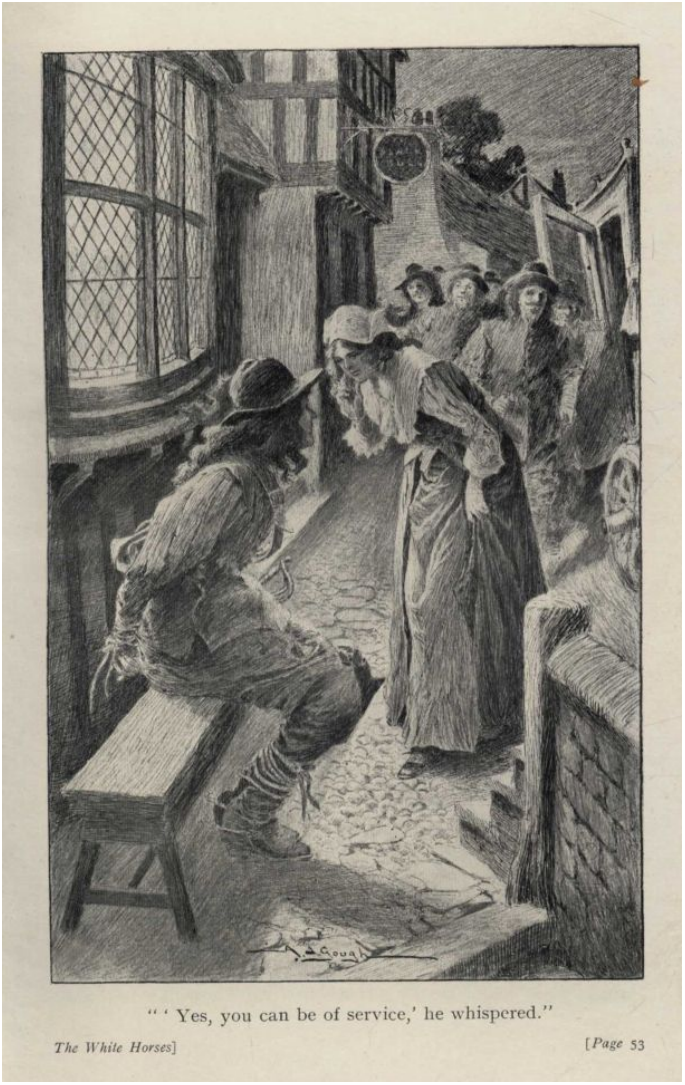
"Listen, and remember," he said sharply. "These lambs may quit their supper any moment and disturb us. Tell Lady Ingilby that we caught a messenger on his way from Skipton. His letter was to the Roundheads here in Ripley. 'That termagant, Lady Ingilby, is making her house a meeting-place for Cavaliers'—have you that by heart?"

"Oh, yes," assented Joan, laughing at herself because he was not the suitor now, but the lord paramount, who must be obeyed. "Proceed, Captain Metcalf—or have they made you colonel since yesterday? Promotion comes so quickly in time of war."

"You can flout me later," said Christopher, with country stolidness.

He repeated the rest of the message, and made sure that she had it by heart. "My folk are up the moor," he finished. "They're waiting near the High Cross till they hear what Lady Ingilby asks of them."

Joan Grant again, for no reason that she understood, grew lenient with this man's bluntness, his disregard of the glamour she had been able once to weave about him as a spider spins its threads.



"'Yes, you can be of service,' he whispered."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 53

*"'Yes, you can be of service,' he whispered."*

"Your folk are as near as High Cross, and you ask no more of me?"

"What is there to ask, except that you get into your carriage and find Lady Ingilby? My work's done, now that I have a messenger."

She looked him in the face. In all her life of coquetry and whims, Miss Grant had never stood so close to the reality that is beauty. She smiled gravely, turned without a word, and got into her carriage.

"Pansy," she said, as they were covering the short journey to the Castle, "I have met a man to-day."

"Snares o' Belial, most of them," murmured Pansy.

"He was tied by ropes, and I think he was in pain, his face was so grey and drawn. It did not seem to matter. He had all his folk at call, and would not summon them, except for Lady Ingilby's needs. He forgot his own."

"Knighthood," said Pansy, in her practical, quiet voice. "He always had the way of it."

So Miss Grant boxed her on the ears for her pains. "Small use in that, girl, if he dies in the middle of the business."

She stopped the carriage, summoned old Ben Waddilove, who rode in front to guard her journey. "Ben, do you know the High Cross on the moor?" she asked.

"I should do, Miss Joan, seeing I was reared i' this country before I went to Nappa."

"Then ride for it. You'll find Squire Metcalf and his men there. Tell him that his son is sitting on a bench at Ripley, tied hand and foot."

After the loiterers of the village had watched Miss Grant's carriage out of sight, they turned again to baiting Christopher, until this diversion was interrupted by Drinkwater coming with his men from supper in the tavern. Whether the man's digestion was wrong, or his heart out of place, only a physician could have told; but it happened always that a full meal brought out his worst qualities.

"Tired of sitting on a bench, lad?" he asked, with what to him was pleasantry.

"No," said Kit, "I'm glad to have a bench under me, after the riding I've done lately. A bench sits quiet—not like a lolopping horse that shakes your bones at every stride."

"About this message that you carry in your head? Would a full meal bribe you?"

"The message has gone to Lady Ingilby, as it happens. There's consolation, Puritan, in having the last laugh."

For a moment it seemed that Drinkwater would strike him on the mouth, but he conquered that impulse.

"So the message was to Lady Ingilby?" he said. "I guessed as much."

Kit reddened. To salve his vanity, under the humiliation he was suffering,

he had blurted out a name that should have been kept secret. What would the old Squire say of such imprudence?

"You're a lad at the game o' war," went on Drinkwater. "The last laugh is with us, I reckon. We shall keep a stricter watch than ever on the Castle."

Remembering the burden of the message, Kit was more keenly aware that he had blundered. "Perhaps I lied," he suggested.

"Most men do, but not you, I fancy. You've a babe's sort of innocence about you. Now, listen to me. You can go free if you repeat that message."

"I stay bound," said Kit impassively.

A butcher in the crowd pressed forward. "He sent it on by a slip of ladydom—a King Charles sort o' lass, every inch of her, all pricked out with airs and graces. The lad seemed fair daft about her, judging by his looks."

"Thanks, friend," said Drinkwater grimly. "See you, lad, you can go free to kiss her at the gate to-night, if you'll tell us what Lady Ingilby knows by now."

Kit was young to the pillory, young to his fine regard for Joan Grant. An intolerable pain took hold of him as he heard her name bandied between Drinkwater and the rabble. "You lout," he said, and that was all. But the quietness of his loathing pierced even Drinkwater's thick hide.

Joan meanwhile had got to the Castle and had been welcomed by her aunt with something near to effusiveness.

"I've been so lonely, child," Lady Ingilby explained. "If one doesn't happen to care for one's husband, it is fitting he should go to the wars; but if one does—ah, if one cares!"

A little later Joan explained that she had met a mad neighbour of hers sitting on a bench in front of the Ripley inn. The man had showed no care at all for his own safety, but had been zealous that she should carry a message for him.

Lady Ingilby's face grew harder as she listened to the message, but still her unconquerable humour stayed with her. "So they know me as 'that termagant.' Good! I'm making this house a training-school for Cavaliers. I stay at home while my husband rides for the King; but I, too, am riding. Joan, the suspense would kill me if I had no work to do. Sometimes he sends word that he is hale and busy down in Oxfordshire, and always he calls me sweetheart once or twice in these ill-written, hasty letters. At my age, child, to be sweetheart to any man!"

Something of the spoiled days slipped away from Joan as she breathed this ampler air. The aunt who had been a little cold, austere, in bygone years was showing her true self.

"What of your mad neighbour?" asked Lady Ingilby, repenting of her softer mood. "You did not leave him on the bench, surely, tied hand and foot? You cut the ropes?"

"The villagers would not allow it—and, indeed, why should I regret? He

was rough with me—cold and uncivil."

"There, child! Never wave the red flag in your cheeks. Folk see it, like a beacon fire. You're in love with the madman. No denial, by your leave. I'm old and you are young, and I know my world."

"He is uncouth and rude. I hate him, aunt."

"That proves it to the hilt. I'll send out a rescue-party. Men who have no care for their own lives are precious these days."

"You have no need," said Miss Grant. "I forgave him for his roughness."

"Tut, child! Forgiveness won't untie his hands."

"But I sent word, too, to his kinsmen, who are near."

"So!" laughed Lady Ingilby. "How fierce your loathing burns, you babe just come from the nursery!"

On the moor guarded by the High Cross the Squire of Nappa was pacing lip and down, halting now and then to watch his kinsfolk as they slept beside their horses. He envied them their slumber, would have been glad to share it after the turmoil of the last two days, but, under all casual temptation to lie down and sleep, he knew that he was glad to be awake—awake, with the free sky overhead and the knowledge that so many Metcalfs needed him.

"We ought to do well for the King," was his constant thought. "If we fail, 'twill not be for lack of wakefulness on my part."

As dusk went down the hill, and on the edge of dark a big moon strode above the moor's rim, he heard the faint sound of hoofs. None but ears sharpened by a country life could have caught the sound; but the Squire was already handling his pike. As the rider drew nearer, his big horse scattering stones from the steep drift of shale, Metcalf gripped the shaft of his weapon and swung it gently to and fro.

The moon's light was clear now, and into the mellow gold of it the horseman rode.

"Who goes there?" roared the Squire, lifting his pike.

It was a quavering voice that answered. "Be ye going to fight Ben Waddilove? I'm old and home-weary, and we were lads together."

The Squire's laugh should have roused his company. "Why, Ben, I came near to braining you! What brings you here so far from Nappa?"

"Oh, Miss Joan! She's full of delicate, queer whimsies. Told me, she did, I had to ride up the moor, as if my knees were not raw already! Said li'le Christopher, your son, was sitting on a bench in Ripley, tied hand and foot by Roundhead folk. So he is. I saw him there myself."

Without pause or hesitation, the Squire turned to his sleeping kinsfolk. Some he shook out of slumber, and kicked others to attention. "We're for Ripley, lads!" was all his explanation.

With astonishing speed they unpicketed their horses and got to saddle. The discipline of farm and field, out yonder at Nappa, had not gone for naught. They knew this rough-tongued Squire who meant to be obeyed.

Ben Waddilove tried to keep pace with them as they skeltered down the moor, but gave it up at last. "Nay," he muttered, "I'm not so young as I was. I'll just be in at the death, a bit later on."

Drinkwater and his lambs were tiring of their prisoner, who would not speak, would not budge or accept a price for liberty, when a trumpet call rang down the village street.

"A Mecca for the King!" roared the Squire, his voice like a mountain burn in spate.

When all was done, and Kit's hands loosened, the lad knew his weakness and the galling pains about his limbs. He lifted his head with the last rally of his strength.

"Sir, where is Drinkwater?" he asked his father.

"Dead, my lad. He ran against my pike."

"That's a pity. I wanted you to—to tell him, sir, that I had the last laugh, after all."

## CHAPTER V.
### THE LADY OF RIPLEY.

They carried Christopher into the tavern, and the Squire thrust the gaping onlookers from the room and shut the door. He thought the lad was dying.

Kit lay on the lang-settle. The dancing firelight showed the pallor of his face, the loose, helpless surrender of limbs and body.

"I cared for the lad too much, maybe," growled the Squire. "He was littlish, as we Metcalfs go, and a man's heart yearns, somehow, about the baby of a flock."

For two hours he watched, and then Kit stirred. "The louts bandied Joan's name about," the lad murmured.

"Ay, so they did. Get up and fight, lad Christopher—for Joan."

Kit obeyed the summons with a promptness that dismayed the Squire. He got to his feet, looked about him, and moved across the floor; then his legs grew weak under him, and he tottered to the settle.

"Tell her it doesn't matter either way," he said. "Tell her I'm for the King,

as all the Metcalfs are."

He slept that night like a little child; and the Squire, watching beside him, returned to his own childhood. The bitterness of fever was over. Kit would live, he thought.

Pansy was early astir next morning, and moved among the servants of the Castle with an aloofness that enraged the women, with a shy, upward glance of her Puritan eyes that enthralled the men. She was demure and gentle; and when a lad came into the yard with his milking-cans, and said that there had been a bonnie fight in the village overnight, Pansy asked him how it had fared with Master Christopher.

"Oh, he?" said the lad, his eyes big and round at sight of her. "He was ready to die last night; but he's thought better of it, so they say."

Pansy did not take the news to her mistress, whose moods were not to be reckoned with these days, but to the lady of the house. Already she had learned, with her quick instinct for character, that Lady Ingilby and she had much in common.

"The Riding Metcalfs are in Ripley, by your leave," she said, with downcast eyes.

"I'm vastly glad to hear it. Miss Grant has told me of their loyalty. Well?"

"Master Christopher lies wounded in the tavern—he that carried the message so well. It seems a shame that he should stay there with only men to nurse him."

"Ah, Master Christopher! I've heard of him, Why do you bring the news to me, girl, instead of to your mistress?"

"Because, my lady, she's deep in love with him, and does not know it. I'd as lief meet a she-wolf in the open as talk of him to the mistress."

The other laughed whole-heartedly. It was the first real laugh she had found since her husband left her for the wars. "You've a head on your shoulders, child, and a face rather too pretty for the snares of this world. I thank you for the news."

An hour later Lady Ingilby went out, alone and on foot, into Ripley street. There was a press of Metcalfs about the roadway—brawny men who had slept beside their horses wherever they could find room about the fields, and who had gathered for the next day's call to action.

"Is the Squire of Nappa here?" asked Lady Ingilby.

"He's indoors," said Michael, with his graceless ease of bearing, "tending Christopher, the darling of our company."

"Go in and tell him that Lady Ingilby commands."

When the Squire came out, a little dizzy with his vigil, and altogether glad that Kit had so far slept off his weakness as to ask for breakfast, he saw a lady

with a high, patrician nose and keen, grey eyes, who smiled at him.

"Sir, I come to inspect your company. In my husband's absence I undertake his duties."

"Madam," he answered with rough grace, "my men are honoured. The King may have better soldiers, but has he six-score to set side by side with mine for height and girth?"

He bade his men get to horse—as many of them as the street afforded room for—and marshalled them briskly into line. Lady Ingilby was astounded by the discipline they showed. It was as if their leader scarcely needed to give an order; their readiness seemed to go with the command, as if one brain guided the whole company.

She took the salute with lively satisfaction. "You dwarf our houses, Metcalfs. I never guessed how low the inn roof is. You are all for the King? Good! That was a lusty roar."

They faced each other, the cavalry and the slim, straight lady whose husband was at the wars. And the Nappa men answered her laugh; and from this day forward they were comrades, she and they, and she could command them anything.

"Undoubtedly prayers are answered, if one prays long enough," she said, in her odd, imperative way. "There's been a siege of Ripley Castle, a stealthy siege, and I've needed men about me."

"We are free for your service," said the Squire. "Indeed, we were in fear of idleness, after doing what was asked at Skipton yesterday."

"There's no speed of attack in this venture." She read the man's need for blows and the gallop, and would not tempt him into a promise rashly given. "You will understand, Mr. Metcalf, that my house is a hospital just now. Whenever a Cavalier takes wounds too hard for him, he drags himself to Ripley. The countrymen all know my mind; and, when they find a lame dog of the King's, they bring him to my gate. The garrison of my good castle, I tell you frankly, is made up of women and sick men."

"But we're no nurses," protested the Squire, with laughable simplicity. "You'd have six-score other ailing men if you shut us up indoors."

Lady Ingilby laughed, for the second time since her husband rode for the King. "We could not house you, sir. If there's scarce room for you in Ripley's street, you would overfill the castle. I have other work for you."

"In the open?"

"Ah, your eagerness! Yes, in the open. Keep our gates safe from without, sir. There are few hale men among the garrison, and these are wearied out with sleeplessness. Prowling companies of Roundheads come this way, giving us no rest. They know Sir William Ingilby is with the King, they know I keep open

house here for Cavaliers——"

"Bid your household rest," the Squire broke in. "There are six-score of us here—judge for yourself whether we're big enough to guard you."

"Big enough," she assented, with a brisk, friendly nod. "But how to feed your company, sir?" she added, returning to the prose of housewifery.

"We feed ourselves," laughed the Squire. "It seemed a fat country as we rode through. Mutton—and corn for our horses—wherever these are, there's a meal for us."

Kit had left his half-finished breakfast at the sound of Lady Ingilby's voice outside. It was not her quality, or the courage she was showing under hardship, that stirred his pulses. As she turned to go in at the tavern door, saying she must see the wounded man, Christopher himself crossed the threshold.

"My faith, sir," she said tartly, "you should be in your bed, by the look of you. You can scarce stand."

"Miss Grant is with you?" he asked, a sudden crimson in his cheeks.

"Oh, yes. The most wonderful maid that ever came to Ripley—her eyes like stars—she feeds on thistledown."

"You are pleased to jest," he said, aloof and chilly.

"Not so hasty, by your leave. You've a message for this girl who sups on moonbeams?"

Some kindness in her voice arrested Kit. "Tell her that I wish her very well."

"I shall tell her nothing of the kind, my lad. D'ye want to win her? Then I shall tell her you were thinking of the wars—that, when I asked if you had any message, you seemed to have forgotten her. I shall make much of that ugly scar across your face—taken yesterday, by the look of it—and hazard that you may live a week, with some good luck to help you."

"You've no heart," he said, the Metcalf temper roused.

"An older heart than yours—that is all. I have lived through your sort of moonlight, and found the big sun shining on the hill-top. My man went out to the wars, and I—I would not have him back just yet for all the gold in Christendom. Absence is teaching me so much."

"I need her. You do not understand."

"Tut-tut! You'll have to wait till you've proved your needing." She looked at the Castle front, saw a star of light flicker and grow clear in a window on the left. "That is her room, Sir Love-too-well," she said, with the gentlest laugh. "When you are weary of guarding the Castle, glance up and picture her yonder, sipping dew, with all the fairies waiting on her."

"I thank you," said Kit, with childish gravity. "I shall know where to look when all else in Ripley seems drab and tawdry."

Lady Ingilby beckoned Squire Metcalf to her side. "Your son is no courtier,

Mr. Metcalf," she said tartly.

"He was not bred that way. I licked him into shape."

"And yet he is a courtier. He loves well. Only, by your leave, defend my gate against all women from the Yoredale country. I've Joan Grant here, and her maid Pansy, and between them they're turning our men's wits. Two pretty women can always outflank a troop of horse."

The Riding Metcalfs had a busy season between October of that year and the next year's spring. So far as history-making went, the Civil War was quiet enough. Pym, with his sane strength, died as Christmas was nearing, and left the Parliament in a muddle of divided leadership. The King summoned a Parliament at Oxford, but nothing fruitful came of it. Yet in Yorkshire the Metcalfs found work enough to do. Loyal to their pledge, they always left some of their number to guard Ripley Castle; the rest of them went harrying Puritans wherever they could find them. Sometimes they made their way to Skipton, creating uproar and a diversion of the siege; at other times they paid minute and embarrassing attention to Otley, for, of all the Parliament's officers, they detested most the Fairfaxes, who, as old Squire Mecca had it, should have learnt better manners from their breeding.

Kit was divided between two allegiances now. One was owing unalterably to the light which Lady Ingilby had shown him shining from Joan's upper room. The other was Prince Rupert's. Through all the muddled rides and skirmishes and swift alarms of that hard winter, the Metcalfs had heard constantly the praises of two men sung—Rupert's and Cromwell's. Rupert had succeeded in the raising of a cavalry troop that already, rumour said, was invincible; Cromwell was building up his Ironsides, grim and heavy, to meet the speed and headlong dash of Rupert's men. Gradually, as the months went on, Kit shaped Prince Rupert to the likeness of a hero—a little less than saint, and more than man. Whenever he came home to Ripley, he roamed o' nights, and looked up at Joan's window, and shaped her, too, to the likeness of a maid too radiant for this world. He was in the thick of the high dreams that beset an untrained lad; but the dreams were building knighthood into the weft and woof of him, and no easy banter of the worldlings would alter that in years to come.

Joan played cat's-cradle with his heart. She would flout him for a day, and meet him at the supper-board thereafter with downcast eyes and tender voice; and Squire Metcalf would suppress his laughter when Kit confided to him that women were beyond his reckoning.

Soon after dawn, on a day in late April, Kit stole out for a glance at the left wing of the Castle, where Joan's window grew ruddy in the sunlight. Rain was falling, and a west wind was sobbing up across the sun. And suddenly he fancied that women were not beyond his reckoning. They were April bairns, all

of them—gusty and cold, warm and full of cheer, by turns. He remembered other Aprils—scent of gilly-flowers in the garden far away in Yoredale, the look of Joan as she came down the fields to greet him—all the trouble and the fragrance of the days when he was giving his heart to her, not knowing it.

He felt a sharp tap on his shoulder. "Day-dreaming, Kit?" laughed the Squire of Nappa. "Oh, she's there, my lad, safe housed. I was about to knock on the gate, but I fancy you'd best take my message to Lady Ingilby."

Kit was glad to take it, glad to be nearer by the width of the courtyard to that upper window. Women—who, for the most part, are practical and ruled by household worries—must laugh often at the men who care for them with true romance.

When the gate was unbarred, and he had passed through, a kerchief fluttered down—a little thing of cambric, ladylike and foolish. Kit did not see it. His glance had roved to the upper window, and there, framed by the narrow mullions, was Joan's face.

"You do not care to pick it up," she said with a careless laugh. "How rough you are, you men of Yoredale."

Kit saw the favour lying at his feet, and pinned it to his hat. When he glanced up again, the window overhead was empty, and Lady Ingilby, standing at his side, was bidding him good-morrow.

"I have urgent news for you," he said, recovering from confusion.

"Not so urgent but a kerchief could put it out of mind. But come indoors, lest a snowstorm of such favours buries you. You'll have many such storms, I hazard—you, with your big laugh and your air of must-be-obeyed."

When they had come into the oak-parlour, and Lady Ingilby had seen that the door was close-shut against eavesdroppers, Kit gave his message.

"A man rode in an hour ago from York. The garrison there is near to famine. They're besieged by three armies—Lord Fairfax at Walmgate Bar, my Lord Manchester at Bootham Bar, and the Scots at Micklegate. My father sends me with the message, and asks if you can spare the Riding Metcalfs for a gallop."

"Six-score to meet three armies?"

"If luck goes that way."

She stood away from him, looking him up and down. "My husband is of your good breed, sir. I gave him to the King, so I must spare my six-foot Metcalfs to the cause."

Joan Grant came into the parlour. Kit, seeing the filtered sunlight soft about her beauty, thought that the world's prime miracle of womanhood, a thing dainty, far-away, had stepped into the room.

"Can I share your secrets?" she asked diffidently.

"I've none," said Kit, with a sudden laugh. "I carry your kerchief, Joan—at

least, my hat does, whenever I wear it in the open, for men to see."

Again she was aware of some new self-reliance, some ease of speech and carriage that had been absent in the Yoredale days. A few months of peril had accomplished this; she asked herself, with a queer stab of jealousy, what a year of soldiery would do.

"I dropped the kerchief by chance, sir," she said coldly. "You will return it."

"By and by, when it has been through other chance and mischance. Lady Ingilby, you shall be judge between us. Is the kerchief mine?"

The older woman laughed. "Yours—when you've proved your right to wear it. Meanwhile, it is a loan."

"Women always forsake each other at the pinch," said Joan, with a gust of temper.

"To be sure, girl. Our men-folk are so often right, in spite of their absurdities. This venture toward York, Mr. Metcalf? You propose to ride against three armies—a hundred and twenty of you?"

"No, by your leave. We hope to get near the city in one company, and then decide. If York is leaguered by regiments, there'll be an outer rim of Metcalfs, waiting their chance of capturing news going in or coming out."

"Good! I begin to see how strong you are, you clan of Metcalfs. You are one, or two, or six-score, as need asks. I think you are well advised to go to York."

Joan Grant turned from the window. Her aloofness and disdain were gone. "Would you not stay to guard our wounded here?" she asked.

The mellow sunlight was busy in her hair. Her voice was low and pleading. Kit was dizzied by temptation. And Lady Ingilby looked on, wondering how this man would take the baptism.

"We fight where the King needs us most—that is the Metcalf way," he said at last.

"If I asked you not to go? Of course, I care nothing either way. But suppose I asked you?"

With entire simplicity and boyishness, Kit touched the kerchief in his hat. "This goes white so far as I can guide it."

"Ah," said Lady Ingilby. "The King should hear of you, sir, in days to come."

When he had gone, Joan came to her aunt's side. "He—he does not care, and I would we were home in Yoredale, he and I. I was free to flout him there."

"Never trust men," said Lady Ingilby, with great cheeriness. "He does not care, of course—no man does when the battle music sounds."

"But he—he was glad to wear my kerchief."

"It is the fashion among our Cavaliers. That is all. He would not care to take the field without a token that some poor gentlewoman was dying of heart-break for his wounds."

Joan found her dignity. "My own heart is sound," she protested.

"Then don't accuse it, child, by protests."

"I'm so glad that he's gone—so glad!" She crossed to the window again, looked out on the sunlit street. "How drab the world is," she said pettishly. "There'll be snow before night, I fancy; it grows chilly."

"The world's drab," assented Lady Ingilby. "What else does one expect at my years? And our six-foot Metcalf will forget you for the first pretty face he meets in York."

"Is he so base? Tell me, is he so base?"

"No; he forgets—simply, he forgets. Men do."

Without, in Ripley street, there was great stir of men and horses getting ready for the York road. Lady Ingilby, hearing the tumult of it, crossed to the window, and her heart was lighter by twenty years as she watched the cavalcade ride out.

"The White Horses, and six-score giants riding them! They'll make history, girl. The pity is that not all of those six-score will sit a saddle again. They have the look of men who do not care how and when they die, so long as King Charles has need of them."

"Kit will return," said Joan, in a chastened voice.

"That is good hearing. How do you know it, baby-girl?"

"Because I asked him to return. Just to nurse his wounds would be—Paradise, I think."

The Metcalf men were a mile on the York road by now. Michael, the reputed black sheep and roysterer of the clan, rode close beside Christopher, and chattered of a face he had seen at an upper window of the Castle.

"A face to lead a man anywhere," he finished, "Hair like wind in the rusty brackens."

Kit touched the favour in his hat. "It is she I fight for, Michael—for the King and Joan."

"Are you always to have luck, just for the asking?" growled Michael.

"This time, yes, unless brother fights with brother."

For a moment they were ready to withdraw from their kinsfolk and settle the issue in some convenient glade. Then Michael yielded to the queer, jealous love he had learned, long since in Yoredale, for this lad.

"Oh, we'll not quarrel, Kit. There'll be another face for me at the next town we ride through. There are more swans than one, and all turn geese in later life."

Squire Mecca, hearing high words from the rear, rode back to learn what the uproar was about. "So you're at your brawling again, Michael?" he roared.

"No, sir. I was wishing Kit good luck for the lady's favour he is wearing in his hat."

"You're a smooth-tongued rascal! As for you, Kit, lady's favours can bide till we're through with this rough work. Moonshine is pretty enough when the day's over, but the day is just beginning."

They rode by way of Tockwith village, long and straggling, and forward over a heath studded thick with gorse and brambles, and set about with black, sullen wastes of bog.

Squire Metcalf, for all his hardihood, was full of superstition, as most folk are who have good wits and healthy souls. A little wind—of the sort named "thin" in Yoredale—blew over Marston Moor, chilling the warm sunlight.

"There's a crying in the wind," he said, turning to Kit, who was riding at his bridle-hand. "I trust it's sobbing for the end of all foul traitors to the King."

## CHAPTER VI.

### HOW MICHAEL CAME TO YORK.

They crossed the moor, and so, through Long Marston, made forward on the York road till they reached a hamlet three miles from the city. Here they captured a shepherd, known to the country speech as "an old, ancient man," who was driving a flock of ewes from a neighbouring pasture. They asked him if he knew anything of the to-and-froing of the Parliament troops.

"I've seen a moil o' horsemen scummering out to York for three days past. But they asked me no questions, and so I asked them none. Reckoned they were riding to a hunt. Gentlefolk must fill up their time, one way or another."

"But, man," snapped old Metcalf, "d'ye live so close to York and not know there's war between King and Parliament?"

"Nay. I've been tending sheep. Have they fallen out, like, King and Parliament? Well, let 'em fratch, say I. I'm a simple man myself, with ewes to tend."

Squire Metcalf broke into that big laugh of his that seemed to set the world to rights. "Forward, Mecca lads!" he said. "We've ewes to tend ourselves; but, bless you, this shepherd brings a wind from Yoredale to us."

A half-mile further on they met a company of Fairfax's horse, foraging for meat and drink. There were fifty of them, and the Metcalfs went through them like a sickle cutting through the bearded corn. Ten were killed, and they let all but one of the retreating forty go. From him, before they freed him, they learned that it was unwise to venture further than a mile on the York road, unless they

wished to try conclusions with outposts of the Scots at Micklegate.

"One of us must find a way into York Castle," said the Squire, calling a council of war about him.

It was part of the man's downrightness, his faith that Providence was kind to every stark adventure, that he was able to make the forlorn hope seem a deed already done.

"*I* claim the venture, sir," said Michael, with his unalterable smoothness and the air of one who jests. "Kit, here, has had his share already."

"Well, well, 'twill keep you out of mischief for a while. Get you from saddle, Michael. Steal into York as privily as may be, and ask my Lord Newcastle what service six-score Metcalfs can do him in the open. We shall be waiting for you, here or hereabouts, when you return."

Michael, as he trudged along the road, overtook a tall fellow who walked beside a donkey-cart piled high with vegetables. "I'll buy that donkey, friend," he said, "and all your cart holds, and the clothes you stand up in."

"For how much?" asked the countryman, stolidly indifferent to all except the call of money.

Michael took a guinea from his pocket, and watched cupidity brighten in the rascal's eyes as another coin was added. Then they went aside into a little wood beside the road, exchanged clothes there, and the bargain was complete.

"Clothes make a difference," chuckled the countryman. "Here's thee, looking as gaumless a lad as ever brought produce into camp; and here's me, the gentleman fro' my head to my riding-boots. All I need is to steal a horse; then I shall be the gentleman quite. I knew the feel o' stirrups once, before I drank away a snug little farm and had to take to the road."

Something in the man's voice, something in his sturdy height, the devil-may-care acceptance of life as it was, roused Michael's interest. "You sell your wares to the Roundhead army?" he asked sharply.

"Ay, but that doesn't say I hold wi' them. I've my living to earn, and sell in any market."

"Have a care, man. You're for the King, I fancy, apart from trade. And how do you know that I'll not take you by the ear and lead you into camp for a traitor to the Commonwealth?"

The rogue looked up and down the road. "There's none to come in between us," he laughed. "I care never a stiver on which side you be. I'm for the King, and always was; and, if you say nay, we can fight it out here with our fists. We're much of a height and girth."

This was the sort of wayfaring that tickled Michael's humour. "My lad," he said, between one break of laughter and the next, "it would be a pity for two King's men to fight. Go back a mile along the road to Ripley, and find a company

of rascals as big as you and me. When they ask your errand, say 'A Mecca for the King,' then tell them that I've sent you with the news that all speeds well."

"This is fair dealing?" said the countryman, after a puzzled silence.

"Take it or leave it. We Metcalfs never trust by halves."

The other clapped his hand suddenly into Michael's. "That's a bargain," he said. "I'd liefer join your company than sell cabbages to these durned Cropheads."

The donkey was waiting patiently in the road until they had settled their differences. When the new master put a hand on the bridle and urged her forward, the brute lashed out a hind leg and scarred his leg from knee to heel.

"Ah, there, be gentle!" laughed the rogue who was wearing Michael's clothes. "My name's Driver—Will Driver, at your service—and I allus said—said it to gentle and simple, I did—that, though I'm named Driver, I willun't be druv." He came and patted the brute's face, talked to its elemental obstinacy, praised some qualities that only he could find to praise. "There, mister! She willun't be druv. Treat her kindly. That's the password. Don't drag her bridle, thinking she's going to gallop for the King. You're no horseman now—just a sutler bringing his wares to camp."

Michael, out of the harum-scarum years behind, had learned one good thing at least—the gift to pick up sound advice when he found the rare type of man who was fit to give it.

On the road to York his patience was sorely tried. It was easier to lead a squad of cavalry than this crude ass that dragged a cart of garden produce. He tried cajolery of Will Driver's kind, but had no gift for it. He tried force. Nothing served, until it occurred to him to turn her, by sheer strength, with her face to Ripley. She turned instantly about, with her face to York, and thereafter the going was quick and pleasant.

"Women have taught me something, after all," chuckled Michael, as they went forward.

When he came into the lines, he found a press of soldiery about him. They were ravenous, and ate raw cabbages from his cart as if they were beef-steaks.

Michael had not known what hunger meant until he saw the faces of these Roundheads who were beleaguering York. He went among them with ears open, heard that they had eaten bare the fat lands round about, until no food was left. However it was faring with the garrison behind the city walls, it was certain that the besiegers were thin and mutinous from lack of food.

When his wares were sold, he went up and down the camp, the simplest countryman that ever brought a donkey-load to market; heard of the dissensions among the leaders; knew, once for all, that the Puritans, with all their dour talk of heaven waiting for those who denied all joy in life, were much as usual men are—needing food and liquor, and finding a grim temper when ale and victuals

were denied them. He brushed shoulders with a thickset, rough-faced officer, who hurried by on some business connected with the siege, and was astonished when he learned that so plain a man was no other than Oliver Cromwell, of whose genius for warfare and hard blows all Yorkshire had been talking lately. Later in the day, too, he saw Cromwell's Ironsides, and their hefty, rugged air roused a wild impulse in him. If only they would pick six-score of their number, and ride out to battle with the Metcalf clan, what a fight would be in the doing!

He was losing himself in a daydream, when a musket-ball, fired from the city wall, whizzed so close to his cheek that he put a hand up, thinking he had taken a wound. So then he took his cart to the rear of the camp, got the donkey out of harness and picketed it. The soldiery were digging trenches or taking their ease, some reading Bibles, others passing lumbering jests with the women who attend on every camp. He passed among them unheeded, and went the round of York, seeking some way of entry. He saw none, till in the dusk of the April evening he found himself on the river-bank near the grey old bridge. With all his random handling of life, Michael had this in common with the Riding Metcalfs—he answered always to the high call of trust. He was pledged to his folk to make an entry somehow into York, and pass on his message. One way or another he must do it.

As he stood there, the lap-lap and gurgle of the river began to thread itself into his thoughts. There must be some road into York—that was the burden of Ouse river's song. And then the thing grew clear. The way into York was here beside him. He doffed coat and boots, dived in, and came up to the top of the roaring current just under the grey bridge. The stream was strong, but so were his arms, thickened by plough-work, field-sports, and many swims in the deep pool of Yore that lay beneath his home at Nappa. He struck out for the left bank, found it, stepped up the muddy foreshore. When he gained the roadway up above, a sentry came bustling through the April moonlight and challenged him.

"A Mecca for the King goes here!" laughed Michael, in high good spirits after his battle with the river.

"That's not the password," said the other, fingering his pike.

"It's all you'll get, friend. I seek my Lord Newcastle."

The sentry, his wits none too sharp at any time, was bewildered by this huge man who had come dripping from the river, this man who talked of the King and my Lord Newcastle. As he halted, Michael rushed forward and snatched his pike from him.

"My lord's lodging—where is it?" he asked, with his big, easy-going air. "Your pike in return for the news. And, by the word of a Mecca, I'll come back and drown you in the river if you lie to me."

The sentry began to surmise that this man was not human, but a ghost

risen from the stream that flowed over many dead. Moreover, it was death to him to-morrow if he were found without his weapon at the change of sentry. So he directed Michael to the house where Lord Newcastle was lodged, took the pike in his hands again, and spent a chilly vigil by the river until relief came from his duty for the night.

Michael pressed forward through the streets and byways until he found the house he sought. A sentry was on guard here, too. He answered the challenge by running sharply in, closing with his man, and putting him into the street. Then he opened the door, and, after he had barred it behind him, went down a wide passage, and heard voices from a chamber on the right. He pushed open that door also, and the men who were holding a council of war within glanced up in sheer astonishment. They saw a giant of a man standing there without boots or coat, Ouse river running down him in little runnels that made pools about the bees-waxed floor.

Lord Newcastle was the first to recover. He glanced across at Michael with a scholarly, quiet smile. "Your errand?" he asked.

"I carry a message from the Riding Metcalfs to the garrison of York," answered Michael, forgetting all his disarray.

"A damp sort of message," hazarded Newcastle.

"I had to swim under York bridge to bring it; and, after that, two sentries challenged me. Will you listen, gentlemen, when I tell you that I'm for the King? Or will you, too, challenge me?"

Truth is a clean sword-blade that always makes a road in front of it. They knew him for a man who had no lies or secrecies about him; and Newcastle, with his quick sympathy, suggested that he should drink a bumper to counteract the chill of Ouse river before giving them his message.

"By your leave, not till my errand is done," said Michael, with that random laugh of his. "When I get near a bumper, I have a trick of forgetting many things."

They laughed with him, as men always did; and with the same easy air, as if he jested, he told them of the Riding Metcalfs, of their readiness to carry messages or to serve the garrison in any way in the open country wide of York. Before his coming there had been high words, dissensions, warring plans of campaign; this talk of six-score men, zealous for the King, united in their claim to serve beleaguered York in any way that offered, brought a breath of fresh air into the council-chamber. It was Newcastle who first found voice.

"Go find Rupert for us," he said.

"Ay, find Rupert," echoed the others, with a hum of sharp agreement.

"We're shut up here in York," went on Newcastle, "and all the news we have is hearsay, brought in by messengers as greatly daring as yourself. Some of them say Prince Rupert is with the King at Oxford, some that he's busy in Lancashire,

raising sieges there. We know not where he is, but you must find him."

Michael reached down to touch his sword-belt, but found only the wet breeches he had borrowed from the sutler. "On the sword I do not carry, gentlemen, I pledge one or other of the Metcalfs to bring Rupert to you."

A jolly, red-faced neighbour of Lord Newcastle's glanced across at Michael. "Ah, there's the Irish blood in your veins, God bless you! Who but an Irishman could have swum the Ouse and then pledged faith on the hilt of a sword he left behind him?"

"Bring Rupert to us," insisted Newcastle. "Tell him that the mere news of his coming would put heart into the garrison—that his presence would light a fire among our famine-stricken folk. I dined on a tough bit of horseflesh to-day, and was glad to get it."

"We'll bring Rupert to you," said Michael.

When they pressed him to take a measure of the wine that was more plentiful, for a week or so to come, than food, Michael glanced down at his disarray. "I would borrow decent raiment before I pledge His Majesty. Indeed, I did not guess how ashamed I am to be wearing such rough gear."

They found him a suit, and the Irishman, in a storm of liking for this man, buckled his own sword on the messenger. "That's the sword you'd have sworn by, sir, if you hadn't left it behind," he explained, with entire gravity.

Michael lifted his glass to the King's health, and drained it at a gulp. Responsibility always made him thirsty. He drained a second measure; but, when the Irishman was filling a third for him, he checked his hand.

"My thanks, but I must get out of York at once, I shall need a clear head for the venture."

"Friend, you've done enough for one day," urged Newcastle. "Sleep here to-night."

"My folk are waiting for me," said Michael, with grim persistence.

When they asked how he proposed to make his way out of a city surrounded on all sides, he said that he would return as he came—by water. He added, with a return of his old gaiety, that he preferred this time to ride river Ouse like a horse, instead of swimming in deep waters.

"There are boats in York?" he said. "I know the way of oars, and there's a moon to light me."

"You're the man to send in search of Rupert," laughed Newcastle. "Undoubtedly we must find a boat for you."

A half-hour later Michael was rowing swiftly up the Ouse. Twice he was challenged from the banks; once a pistol-ball went singing over his head. He reached the bridge, was nearly wrecked against a pier—the eddies of the current were troublesome—and came through that peril into the moonlit beauty of the

open country. He was challenged now by Roundhead sentries, and a shot or two went playing dick-duck-drake across the water. He rowed on, and suddenly, across the stillness, a donkey brayed.

Michael, left alone with Nature, was yielding to the call of superstition in his blood. He remembered that luck had come with buying of a sutler's donkey, and would not leave the brute to the tender mercies of the soldiery. He turned his boat for the right bank, grounded her in the sloping bed of sand, and pushed her out again into the stream—lest the Roundheads found a use for her—and went cheerfully in the direction of the braying. The whole procedure was like the man. He was right, perhaps, to trust luck always, for he had known no other guidance from the cradle.

Guided half by the music of her voice, half by recollection of the spot where he had picketed her, he found the donkey. Two hundred yards or so behind he heard the restless clamour of the besieging camp. In front was the open country.

In the moonlight Michael and the donkey regarded each other gravely. "I came back for you, old sinner," he explained.

The brute seemed to understand him, and put a cool snout into his hand.

"I had a thought of riding you," went on Michael, pursuing his heedless mood, "but consider the stride of my legs. We'll just have to jog forward on our six feet, you and I."

Michael had a sound knowledge of any country he had trodden once, and came without mishap or loss of route to the clump of woodland where his people waited for him. Old Squire Metcalf, as he went out to meet him, broke into a roar of laughter.

"Here's Michael and one of the company he's wont to keep."

"True, sir," assented Michael. "Look after this friend of mine; she has had little to eat to-day, and I begin to love her."

For an hour they could not persuade him to tell them what he had learned in York. All his kinsmen's misunderstanding of him in old days—their distrust of the one man among them, except Christopher, who asked more than the routine of every day—came to a head. He was like the donkey he had brought back from York—answerable to discipline, if it came by way of sympathy and quiet persuasion.

The Squire understood this scapegrace son of his better than he thought. "There, you'll bear no grudge, lad," he said, with quick compunction. "I only jested."

There was a look in Michael's face that none of them had seen there in the old days. "Was it a jest, sir?"

"A jest. No more."

"Then I'll tell you what I learned at York. The Roundheads have eaten

bare the countryside. Their leaders are at variance. Within the city the garrison is eating horseflesh, and little of that. Lord Newcastle bade me give you the one message. Find Rupert, and bring him here to raise the siege. That is the message."

"Then we've work to do," said the Squire.

"*I* have work to do," put in Michael peremptorily. "I took the hazard, sir. See you, the business would be noised abroad if six-score of us went galloping across to Lancashire, or to Oxford, wherever he may be. I pledge myself to find Rupert and to bring him."

"Since when did you find gravity?" asked the Squire testily.

Then Michael laughed, but not as he had done of yore. "Since I found my comrade and bought her for two guineas, with some market produce thrown into the bargain. Our folk will see to the welfare of this donkey, sir? She's our luck."

An hour later, as he was getting to horse, he saw Christopher come through the clump of woodland.

"What did you learn in York, Michael?" he asked.

"What you'd have learned, if you had not been up the hill to see if you could catch a glimpse of Ripley Castle," said Michael, roughened by a sharp gust of jealousy. "Ah, the guess goes home, does it? How does it fare with Mistress Joan?"

"Oh, very well, the last I heard."

"And it fares very well with me. I go to bring Rupert from the West—to bring Rupert. Ah, your face reddens at the thought of it!"

Kit was lost in one of his high day-dreams. All that he had heard of Rupert—the tales hard-fighting men, simple and gentle, told of him—had been woven into a mantle of romance that separated the Prince Palatine from those of common clay. And Michael had the venture.

The elder brother fought a private battle of his own. Then something in Kit's eager, wistful face—some recollection, maybe, of old days in Yoredale—conquered his jealousy. "I should ride the better for Kit's company," he said, turning to the Squire. "Give him to me for the journey."

"As you will," growled Richard. "He'll be out of the worst o' harm, at any rate. Ladies' eyes are pretty enough in times of peace, but they don't match with war."

Every Metcalf of them all, save Kit himself, laughed slily. They had forgotten sundry backslidings of their own, in Ripley here and on the many journeys they had taken. And then Michael and his brother rode out, not knowing which way led to Rupert, but following the setting sun because it led them westward.

"Nobody seems to know, even in Ripley, that catches most news, where the Prince is. We'd best make for Lancashire."

Kit was already at his dreams again. "I care not," he said cheerily, "so long

as we find him in the end."

"D'ye think he wears a halo, lad?" snapped Michael.

"Not for you to see, perhaps."

"Ah, a neat counter! Not for my blurred eyes, eh? Kit, you've been reading fairy-lore with Mistress Joan."

So they went forward into the red of the gloaming, and each was busy with the self-same dream—to find Rupert, and to remember Joan Grant.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A HALT AT KNARESBOROUGH.

Nothing happened along the road as Michael and his brother rode forward on their haphazard errand. All was made up of an English April—primroses in the hedgerows, bleating of lambs and fussy ewes, wayfaring farmer-folk about their lands.

They had decided to seek Rupert in Lancashire, and their best road westward lay through Knaresborough, and so forward by way of Skipton and the good town of Colne.

"The game grows dull," grumbled Michael. "We had primroses and lambs in Yoredale till I wearied of them. I thought Blake promised war and blows when we rode out to Nappa."

"The swim into York and the return—they were not enough for you?"

"I yawned so much in Yoredale," said the other, with his careless laugh. "There's much leeway to make up, babe Christopher."

As they neared Knaresborough, Michael felt his heart beat again. The sun was free of clouds, and shone full on a town beautiful as a man's dreams of fairyland. At the foot, Nidd River swirled; and from the stream, tier on tier, the comely houses climbed the steep cliff-face, with trees and gardens softening all its outline. It was a town to live at ease in and dream high dreams, thought Kit, until the wind of a cannon-ball lifted his hat in passing.

"Ah, we begin to live," said Michael. "Your hat is doffed to the King, God bless him!"

At the turn of the road they found a sortie from the garrison hemmed in by fifty odd of Fairfax's dour Otley men. So Michael raised a shout of "A Mecca for the King," and Kit bellowed the same cry. The Fairfax men thought an attack in

force had come; the sortie party—twenty of them, and all wounded—found new hope, and, when that affair was done, the Metcalfs rode with their new friends through the gateway of the town.

"I give you great thanks, gentlemen," said young Phil Amory, the leader of the sortie, as the drawbridge clashed behind them. "But for you, there'd have been no Knaresborough for us again."

"Oh, we happened to ride this way," laughed Michael. "Life is like that. And I'm devilish hungry, since you remind me of it."

"Sir, I did not remind you. We are trying to forget our stomachs."

"You have tobacco in the town?" asked Michael anxiously. "Good! It's better than a meal. I smoked my last pipeful yesterday."

"Good at the fight and the pipe," said Amory. "I like you, sir."

So they came in great content—save for three of the company, whose wounds bade them grumble—to the slope that led them to the Castle gateway, and were met here by a handful of friends who were riding to relieve them. The ladies of the garrison ran down from the battlements, and Kit was dizzied by the adulation shown him by the women. They had bright eyes, these ladies, and a great longing for hero-worship in and between the tiresome hardships of the siege. Michael was at home on the instant; battle and ladies' favours had always been his hobbies. But Kit drew apart and remembered Mistress Joan, and a mantle of surprising gravity was draped about him.

There was food of a kind in the dining-hall, with its chimney wide enough to roast an ox. Something that was named beef—though the garrison knew it for cold roast dog—was on the table. There was a steaming bowl of hot-pot, and none inquired what went to strengthening the stew of honest peas and lentils. But there was wine left, as at York, and across the board hale good fellows, and good fellows who were not hale at all, pledged Christopher and Michael.

It was a moment of sheer triumph for these two, for no healthy man can resist the praise of soldiers approving tried soldiers in their midst. When the toasting was done, a man in sober garments rose, lifting his glass with a queer contralto chuckle.

"To the King, gentlemen, and to all good sorties on His Majesty's behalf. For myself, as Vicar of the parish, I have no part in politics. I take no sides in this vexed question of King and Parliament." He let the ripple of mirth go past him, and maintained his gravity. "As a man, the case is different. As a man, you understand, I drink to His Majesty, and confusion to all Cropheads!"

When the toasts were ended, there was much chatter of what was doing in the outer world. The Metcalfs, coming from the open country, were like a news-sheet to these prisoned loyalists. They had to tell all that was afoot in the north, so far as they had learned the to-and-froing during their last months of adventure

in the saddle, till at last Christopher remembered the errand they were riding on to-day.

"Gentlemen, it is time we took horse again," he said, with all the Metcalf downrightness. "York is a bigger town than yours, and we've her safety in our keeping."

He glanced up, sure that his brother would back the protest. He saw Michael at the far end of the room, preening his feathers under the kind eyes of a lady who palpably admired him. And a little chill took him unawares, as if the season were mid-winter, and some fool had let the wind in through an open door.

"So two men keep the safety of all York," laughed one of the garrison. "There's a fine Biblical sound about it, Vicar."

"So much to the good, then," said the Vicar quietly. "To my mind, those days are here again, and King Charles righting the good fight. Hey, my masters, you're deaf and blind to the meaning of this trouble." He turned to Christopher with a touch of deference that came pleasantly from an old man to a young. "How do you hold York's safety?" he asked. "What is your errand?"

"To find Rupert for them."

"And you're riding, two of you, to search England for him?"

"That is our errand, sir."

"Ah, that is faith! I wish good luck to your horses' feet."

"We need Rupert as much as York needs him," said Phil Amory. "It's a far cry, though; from here to Oxford."

"To Oxford?" echoed Kit, with sharp dismay. "We thought to find him in Lancashire."

"The last news we had," said the Vicar—"true, it is a month old by now—was that they kept Rupert in Oxford, making peace between the rival factions, attending councils—playing maid-of-all-work there, while the North is hungry for his coming. Why, his name alone is meat and drink to us."

"So they said in York, sir."

"Ay, and so they say wherever men have heard his record. Without fear, with a head on his shoulders and a heart in the right place—undoubtedly you ride on a fine errand. If I were younger, and if my cloth permitted, I would join you in the venture."

Christopher, seeing his brother still intent on dalliance, went down the room and tapped him on the shoulder. "We get to saddle, Michael," he said.

Michael, for his part, was astounded at the lad's air of mastery. He was aware, in some vague way, that dalliance of any kind was a fool's game, and that the man with a single purpose assumes command by a law of Nature.

"I dandled you on my knee, li'le Christopher, not long ago," he said, with

his easy laugh.

"My thanks, Michael. I stand higher than your stirrup now, and York needs us."

Michael had an easy-going heart and a head that was apt to forget important matters; but he rose now, obedient to the baby of the Metcalf clan. He paused to kiss the lady's hand, to murmur a wish that he might live to see again the only eyes worth looking into; and then he was a man of action once again, keen for the ride.

Miss Bingham rose and swept them a grave curtsey. Then she glanced at Christopher. "If you have a fault, sir—and all paragons have—it is a seriousness that reminds one of the Puritan."

She had drawn blood. It flamed in his cheeks for a moment, then died down. "I'm neither paragon nor Puritan—and no ladies' man," he added, with a touch of downright malice.

"So much is obvious. You lack practice in the art, but you will learn in time."

Kit, in some odd way, felt youthful and ashamed. This girl, little older than himself, disdained his singleness of purpose, his fervour for the cause. "Oh, I leave that to Michael," he said, clumsily enough.

She was tired of warfare and the siege, and bore Kit a grudge because he had interrupted the diverting game of hearts that she and Michael had been playing. "You are riding to find Rupert?" she asked, her voice like velvet. "He's the Prince to you—a paragon indeed—no ladies' man. Sir, when you find him, ask how it fares with the Duchess of Richmond, and see if his face changes colour."

"It is not true," said Kit passionately.

"How downright and fatiguing boys are! What is not true, sir?"

"All that you left unsaid."

Michael clapped him on the shoulder. "Good for you, li'le Kit! All that women say is enough to drown us; but what they leave unsaid would sink a navy."

"Go, find your Prince," said Miss Bingham, with the same dangerous gentleness; "but, on your honour, promise to remind him of the Duchess. I should grieve to picture such a gallant without—oh, without the grace women lend a man."

"Michael, we're wasting a good deal of time," said Kit, disliking this girl a little more. "There'll be time enough for nonsense when we've brought Rupert into York."

Michael stood irresolute for a moment, divided, as his way was, between the separate calls of heart and head. And into the midst of his irresolution a guest intruded rudely. There had been a steady cannonading of the town, as reprisal after the sortie, and one among the lumbering iron balls crashed through the

wall of the dining-chamber, near the roof, passed forward and brought down a heavy frame—known as a "bread-creel" in the north here—on which oat-cakes were spread out to dry. With fuel scarce, they had learned to make kitchen and dining-chamber one. The cannon-ball buried itself in the masonry beyond. The bread-creel missed Miss Bingham's pretty head by a foot or so. One end of it struck Kit on the shoulder, reopening a new wound; the other tapped Michael on the skull, and put dreams of Rupert out of mind for many a day.

The men at the far end of the hall ran forward. They found Michael lying prone. One cross-piece of the creel was broken, where it had encountered his tough head, and all about the floor was a drift of the brittle oat-cake that had been drying overhead a moment since.

"A queer beginning for their ride," said young Phil Amory.

Michael opened two devil-may-care eyes between one forgetting and the next. "Life's like that, my lad. One never knows."

They carried him to an inner room, and Miss Bingham watched Amory and another trying to stanch Kit's wound.

"You're clumsy at the business," she said, putting them aside. With deft hands she fastened a tourniquet above the wound, and dressed it afterwards. Then she brought him wine; and, when a tinge of colour returned to his face, she crossed to the window and stood there, watching the red flare of cannonry that crossed the April sunlight.

"My thanks, Miss Bingham," said Kit, following her.

"Oh, none are needed! I am a little proud of my nursing skill, learned here in Knaresborough. Believe me, I would have done as much for any trooper."

"Still, any trooper would find grace to thank you."

Her eyes met his. There was blandishment in them, withdrawal, enmity. Men were a game to her. Spoiled and flattered, accustomed to homage that had never found her heart, she thought men heartless, too, and the game a fair one.

"Thanks mean so little. Would you have had me watch you bleed to death? Is there no one in the world who would have missed you?"

"I do not know," said Kit, with a thought of Yoredale and the light in Ripley Castle.

"Ah, there's another secret out! She has flouted my dear Puritan."

"I will not have that name! There was never a Metcalf yet but stood for the King."

The cannonade outside grew louder, and Miss Bingham looked out again at the red spurts of flame. "A painter should be here," she said, turning at last. "My six-foot Puritan, what a picture it would make—the blue April sky, and the little tufts of cloud, fleecy as lambs'-wool, and the outrageous crimson flaring from the guns! Will they contrive to hit the Castle again, think you? It is time their

marksmanship improved."

"I was thinking of Prince Rupert," he said stubbornly. "If Michael cannot ride with me, I must go alone."

Miss Bingham's heart was touched at last. This man, who could scarce stand from loss of blood, disdained her coquetry, and had one purpose—to find Rupert for the raising of the siege at York. Selfless, reliant in the midst of weakness, he saw the one goal only.

He bade her farewell, and asked Amory to find his horse for him. "But, sir, it is death to sit a saddle," protested the other. "Your wound——"

"It must heal or break again. That is the wound's concern. Mine is to find Rupert, as I promised."

Amory glanced quietly at him and wondered at the hardness of the man. "How will you get through the besiegers? Their cannon are pretty busy, as you hear."

"I had forgotten the besiegers. I must leave my horse, then, and find a way out on foot."

He got half-way to the outer gate, his weakness palpable at every step. Then his foot tripped against a cannon-ball that had fallen yesterday. He fell on his right shoulder, and the wound reopened in grim earnest.

Miss Bingham was the most troubled, maybe, of all the Knaresborough garrison during the week that followed. By all past knowledge of herself Michael should have been her chief concern. He was so gay and likeable, as he recovered slowly from his head-wound; his tongue was so smooth, his heart so bendable to the lightest breeze of a woman's skirts. Yet she found herself constantly at Kit's bedside, fighting the evil temper that had mastered him. He was consumed with rebellion against this weakness that kept him abed, and his persistent cry was that Rupert needed him, and would know that he had failed. He was still so young to the world that he believed all England knew what the Riding Metcalfs were doing for their King.

On the fourth day, to ease his trouble, Miss Bingham lied. She said that Michael was hale and well again, and had gone out in search of Rupert. Kit took the news quietly, and she slipped away to see that his noon-day meal was ready. When she returned with the tray, she found Christopher up and dressed. He was fumbling at the buckle of his sword-belt with all a sick man's impatience.

"What are you doing, sir?" she cried, in frank dismay.

"Getting ready for the road. Michael is too easy-going to be trusted single-handed; and York, I tell you, needs the Prince."

"It will see him none the sooner if you die by the roadside now, instead of waiting till you're healed."

"But Michael—you do not know him. He means so well and dares so much;

but the first pretty face that looks out o' window draws him."

"To be frank, he is in no danger of that kind," said Miss Bingham demurely. "He lies in the next room and talks to me as Colonel Lovelace might—deft flattery and homage and what not. I thought all Cavaliers were smooth of tongue, as he is—until I met my Puritan."

"You said that he had gone to seek Rupert."

"Oh, I said. What will not women say? Their tongues are wayward."

"For my part, give me men," said Kit, with blunt challenge.

The end of that escapade was a high fever, that taxed Miss Bingham's skill and the patience that was foreign to her. Michael, too, in spite of all his gaiety, saw death come very close to his bedside. It was not the blows they had taken here in Knaresborough that had knocked their strength to bits. In the months that had passed since the riding out from Yoredale, each had taken wounds, time and time again, had tied any sort of bandage round them, and gone forward to the next sharp attack. They were proud of their tough breed, and had taken liberties with a strength that was only human, after all. And now they were laid by in a backwater of life, like riddled battleships in need of overhauling.

It was when Kit was in that odd half-way land between great weakness and returning strength that a sudden turmoil came to him. His memory of Joan Grant grew weak and fugitive. With him day by day was Miss Bingham, who had forgotten long since how to pick a quarrel. The beauty of an experience new to her spoiled life gave warmth and colour to a face that had once been merely pretty.

On one of these afternoons—a spurt of rain against the windows, and the sullen roar of guns outside—he lay watching her as she sat by the bedside, busy with a foolish piece of embroidery. She was very near, had nursed him with devotion, had smoothed his pillow many times for him.

"Agnes," he said, "what will you say to me when my strength comes back, and I've brought Rupert into York?"

So then she knew that battle is not only for the men. She met her trouble with a courage that surprised her. "I—I should bid my Puritan go seek the lady who once flouted him. Oh, boy, you're in a dream! When you wake, remember that I nursed you back to health."

Two days later Kit was so far recovered that he was allowed to move abroad; and, while his strength was returning, the Vicar was his close companion. Something in Kit's bearing—dour hardihood half concealing some spiritual fire that burned beneath it—had attracted this parish priest since the lad's first coming. He showed him the comely parsonage, with its garden sloping to the wide bosom of the Nidd; talked of the town's beauty and antiquity—topics dear to him. Then, one afternoon, near gloaming, he led him up the steep face of the cliff to

St. Robert's cell.

What is sown in the time between great sickness and recovery—good or ill—is apt to abide with a man, like impressions of the earlier childhood. And Kit, until he died, would not forget this hermitage, carved out of the solid rock that bottomed the whole town of Knaresborough. Without, facing the world that St. Robert had known, was his coat-of-arms, as if daring gossip to deny his record in the stress of battle. Within was a narrow chamber, roofed and floored by rock; at one end an altar, at the side a bed of stone—that, and the water dripping from the walls, and a strange sense of peace and holiness, as if a spirit brooded round about the place.

"Here is peace, sir," said Kit, a quick fire glowing in his eyes.

"Ah, yes. You would feel it, I was sure. I bring few guests to this sanctuary."

Kit glanced at him. The kindly smile, the trust and friendship of the parson's voice, brought back Yoredale and a flood of memories. When they went out into the dusk again, a red flare spurted from the Castle battlements, and in return there came the din of Roundhead cannon, and Kit's face hardened suddenly.

"True," said the Vicar, touching his arm. "Such as you must go through blare and gunshot before they tame their bodies. Good luck to you, lad, and strike shrewdly for the King."

The next day Kit was so far recovered that he would not stay under the same roof with Miss Bingham; Memories of Joan, who was far away, warred with his liking for this maid, who came less often to cajole and tease him back to health. It was easier to go out and rough it in the honest open. He was haunted, moreover, by the mystery and calm of that stone cell, where a dead man had left his living presence.

Michael had been fit for the road three days before, but would not leave his brother, since he had promised him the venture. And, moreover, Miss Bingham was kind again, after a season of indifference and neglect.

The old question was revived—by what means they should get through the besieging force. "There is only one way, obviously," said Michael, with his rollicking laugh. "We must go horsed. Will not Phil Amory lead a sortie?"

"Phil Amory will," agreed the youngster cheerily. "These rogues have been pelting us long enough with cannon-balls."

The Governor assented willingly. Hazard in the open was healthy for these high-mettled lads, who were pining under the inaction of the siege. "You shall go as you came, gentlemen," he said, with his grave smile. "One good turn deserves another."

They waited till one of the sentries on the battlements sent word that the besiegers were at their mid-day meal. He added that words had passed between himself and three of their men, who had shouted that pluck was dead in Knares-

borough.

"Ah!" said Phil Amory.

They mounted—forty of the garrison and the two Metcalfs—and the gate opened for them. It was Kit—a free man again, with the enemy close in front—who lifted the first battle-cry.

"A Mecca for the King!" he roared, and his horse went light under him, as if it trod on air.

The besiegers ran hurriedly to their horses. Some mounted, others had no time. Into the thick of them crashed the sortie, and the work was swift and headlong in the doing. Through the steam and odours of the interrupted meal the attack crashed forward, till the sortie party, breathless, with a queer glee fluting at their hearts, found themselves at the far side of the town.

"You made a lane for us once," said Phil Amory. "Now we've made a lane for you. There's no time for farewells, friends—put spurs to your horses and gallop."

He gave Michael no time for the protest ready to his lips, but turned about, and, with a bugle-cry of "Knaresborough for the King!" dashed through the enemy again. The Metcalfs waited till they saw the gate close on the forty who had hacked a way to liberty for them, and Michael half hoped they would be needed, because Miss Bingham was sheltered by the Castle walls.

"We have the road to Rupert, now," said Kit.

"So we have, lad."

"Then why look back at Knaresborough? You're in a dream, Michael."

"The prettiest eyes in England set me dreaming. I've good excuse."

So Kit, a little sore on his own account, and with a heartache hidden somewhere, grew serious as only the very young can do. "There is Rupert waiting for us," he snapped.

"Ah, true, grave brother. Let's get to Oxford, and the Duchess of Richmond will cure me of this folly, maybe. There, lad, not so fiery! It's no crime that a duchess should have pleasant eyes. Even princes must warm themselves at the hearth just now and then."

"What route to take?" asked Kit by and by, coming down from his pedestal of high, romantic gravity.

"We'll go by the sun so far as the winding roads will let us. Oxford lies south-west. Chance and the sun, between them, shall decide; but we had best keep free of towns and garrisons."

"Undoubtedly," growled Christopher. "There would be the finest eyes in England glancing at you through the lattices."

In this odd way the brothers, different in experience and outlook, but bound together by some deep tie of affection, took up the hazard of a ride that was to end, they hoped, at Oxford. There was a fine, heedless simplicity about it all, a

trust in open country and the sun's guidance, that was bred in the Metcalf men.

## CHAPTER VIII.
### HOW THEY SOUGHT RUPERT.

They had not gone seven miles before they heard, wide on their bridle-hand, the braying of a donkey. It was not a casual braying, but a persistent, wild appeal that would not be denied.

"Brother calls to brother," said Michael, with his diverting obedience to superstition. "One of his kind helped me into York. We'll see what ails him."

They crossed a strip of barren moor, and came to a hollow where some storm of wind and lightning had long since broken a fir coppice into matchwood. And here, at the edge of the dead trunks and the greening bracken, they found five of their kinsmen hemmed in by fourteen stiff-built rascals who carried pikes. On the outskirts of the battle a donkey was lifting her head in wild appeal.

With speed and certainty, Michael and his brother crashed down into the fight. The surprise, the fury of assault, though two horsemen only formed the rescue-party, settled the issue. And in this, had they known it, the Metcalfs were but proving that they had learned amid country peace what Rupert had needed years of soldiery to discover—the worth of a cavalry attack that is swift and tempestuous in the going.

"We thought you far on the road to Prince Rupert," said the Squire of Nappa, cleaning his sword-blade on a tuft of grass.

"So we should have been, sir, but we happened into Knaresborough. Kit here swooned for love of a lady—on my faith, the daintiest lass from this to Yoredale—and I could not drag him out until—until, you understand, the elder brother stepped in and made havoc of a heart that Kit could only scratch."

"Is this true, Christopher?"

"As true as most of Michael's tales. We fell ill of our wounds, sir, that was all."

The donkey had ceased braying now, and was rubbing a cool snout against Michael's hand. "Good lass!" he said. "If it hadn't been for your gift of song, and my own luck, there'd have been five Metcalfs less to serve His Majesty."

The old Squire pondered a while, between wrath and laughter. "That is true," he said, in his big, gusty voice. "I always said there was room in the world,

and a welcome, for even the donkey tribe. Kit, you look lean and harassed. Tell us what happened yonder in Knaresborough."

Kit told them, in a brief, soldierly fashion that found gruff approval from the Squire; but Michael, rubbing the donkey's snout, must needs intrude his levity.

"He forgets the better half of the story, sir. When we got inside the Castle, the prettiest eyes seen out of Yoredale smiled at him. And the lad went daft and swooned, as I told you—on my honour, he did—and the lady bound his shoulder-wound for him. A poor nurse, she; it was his heart that needed doctoring."

"And it was your head that needed it. She made no mistake there, Michael," said Squire Metcalf drily.

When the laughter ceased, Kit asked how they fell into this ambush; and the Squire explained that a company of Roundheads had come in force to Ripley, that they had roused a busy hive of Metcalfs there, that in the wild pursuit he and four of his clan had outdistanced their fellows and had found themselves hemmed in. And in this, had he known it, there was a foreshadowing of the knowledge Rupert was to learn later on—that with the strength of headlong cavalry attack, there went the corresponding weakness. It was hard to refrain from undue pursuit, once the wine of speed had got into the veins of men and horses both.

"We're here at the end of it all," laughed the old Squire, "and that's the test of any venture."

"Our gospel, sister," said Michael, fondling the donkey's ears, "though, by the look of your sleek sides, you've thrived the better on it."

The Squire took Kit aside and drew the whole story from him of what he hoped to do in this search for Rupert. And he saw in the boy's face what the parish priest of Knaresborough had seen—the light that knows no counterfeit.

"So, Kit, you're for the high crusade! Hold your dream fast. I've had many of them in my time, and lost them by the way."

"But the light is so clear," said Kit, tempted into open confidence.

"Storms brew up, and the light is there, but somehow sleet o' the world comes drifting thick about it. You go to seek Rupert?"

"Just that, sir."

"What route do you take?"

"Michael's—to follow the sun and our luck."

"That may be enough for Michael; but you sleep in Ripley to-night, you two. You need older heads to counsel you."

"Is Joan in the Castle still?" he asked, forgetting Knaresborough and Miss Bingham.

"Oh, yes. She has wings undoubtedly under her trim gown, but she has not flown away as yet. We'll just ride back and find you quarters for the night."

Michael, for his part, was nothing loth to have another day of ease. There

was a dizzying pain in his head, a slackness of the muscles, that disturbed him, because he had scarce known an hour's sickness until he left Yoredale to accept shrewd hazard on King Charles's highway.

"How did my friend the donkey come to be with you in the fight?" he asked, as they rode soberly for home.

"She would not be denied," laughed Squire Mecca. "She made friends with all our horses, and where the swiftest of them goes she goes, however long it takes to catch us up. No bullet ever seems to find her."

"Donkeys seldom die," assented Michael. "For myself, sir, I've had the most astonishing escapes."

When they came to Ripley, and the Squire brought his two sons into the courtyard, Lady Ingilby was crossing from the stables. She looked them up and down in her brisk, imperative way, and tapped Christopher on the shoulder—the wounded shoulder, as it happened.

"Fie, sir, to wince at a woman's touch! I must find Joan for you. Ah, there! you've taken wounds, the two of you. It is no time for jesting. The Squire told me you were galloping in search of Rupert."

"So we are," said Christopher. "This is just a check in our stride."

"As it happens, you were wise to draw rein. A messenger came in an hour ago. The Prince is not in Lancashire, as we had hoped. He is still in Oxford—I can confirm your news on that head—lighting small jealousies and worries. Rupert, a man to his finger-tips, is fighting indoor worries, as if he were a household drudge. The pity of it, gentlemen!"

It was easy to understand how this woman had been a magnet who drew good Cavaliers to Ripley. Heart and soul, she was for the King. The fire leaped out to warm all true soldiers of his Majesty, to consume all half-way men. She stood there now, her eyes full of wonder and dismay that they could keep Rupert yonder in Oxford when England was listening for the thunder of his cavalry.

Joan Grant had not heard the incoming of the Metcalfs. She had been ill and shaken, after a vivid dream that had wakened her last night, and changed sleep to purgatory. And now, weary of herself, prisoned by the stifled air indoors, she came through the Castle gate. There might be battle in the open, as there had been earlier in the day; but at least there would be fresh air.

Michael saw her step into the sunlight, and he gave no sign that his heart was beating furiously. Deep under his levity was the knowledge that his life from this moment forward was to be settled by the direction of a single glance.

Joan halted, seeing the press of men that filled the street. Then, among the many faces, she saw two only—Michael's and his brother's. And then, because all reticence had left her, she went straight to Christopher's side.

"Sir, you are wounded," she said, simple as any cottage-maid.

For the rest of the day Michael was obsessed by gaiety. Whenever the Squire began to talk of Rupert, to map out their route to Oxford, Michael interposed some senseless jest that set the round-table conference in a roar.

"Best go groom the donkey," snapped the Squire at last. "If ever the Prince gets York's message, it will be Kit who takes it."

"Kit has the better head. By your leave, sir, I'll withdraw."

"No, I was hasty. Stay, Michael, but keep your lightness under."

That night, when the Castle gate was closed, and few lights showed about the windows, Christopher met Joan Grant on the stairway. He was tired of wounds that nagged him, and he needed bed. She was intent on drowning sleeplessness among the old tomes in the library—a volume of sermons would serve best, she thought.

They met; and, because the times were full of speed and battle, she was the cottage maid again. All women are when the tempest batters down the frail curtains that hide the gentle from the lowly-born. "Was she very good to see?" she asked, remembering her last night's vision—it had been more than a dream, she knew.

So Kit, a rustic lad in his turn, flushed and asked what she meant. And she set the quibble aside, and told him what her dream was. She pictured Kharesborough—though her waking eyes had never seen the town—spoke of the gun-flare that had crossed the window-panes sometimes, while a girl watched beside his pillow.

"I was weak with my wounds," said Kit, not questioning the nearness of this over-world that had intruded into the everyday affairs of siege and battle.

"How direct you Metcalfs are! And the next time you are wounded there will be a nurse, and you'll grow weak again, till your heart is broken in every town that holds a garrison."

"I leave that to Michael," he said quietly.

All that he had done—for the King, and for the light he had watched so often in her room at Ripley here—went for nothing, so it seemed, because he had blundered once, mistaking dreams for substance.

"I thought you were made of better stuff than Michael."

"There's no better stuff than Michael. Ask any Metcalf how he stands in our regard—easy-going when he's not needed, but an angel on a fiery horse when the brunt of it comes up. He's worth two of me, Joan."

Again Joan was aware that soldiery had taught this youngster much worth the knowing during the past months. He was master of himself, not wayward to the call of any woman.

"We're bidding farewell," she said.

"Yes," said Christopher. "To-morrow we set out for Oxford. Do you remem-

ber Yoredale? Your heart was at the top of a high tree, you said."

"So it is still, sir—a little higher than before."

"By an odd chance, so is mine. I chose a neighbouring tree."

She was silent for a while, then passed by him and down the stair. He would have called her back if pride had let him.

Then he went slowly up to bed, wondering that some freak of temper had bidden him speak at random. For an hour it was doubtful whether tiredness or the fret of his healing wounds would claim the mastery; then sleep had its way.

"What have I said?" he muttered, with his last conscious thought.

He had said the one right thing, as it happened. Knaresborough had taught him, willy-nilly, that there are more ways than one of winning a spoiled lass for bride.

Next day he woke with a sense of freshness and returning vigour. It was pleasant to see the steaming dishes ready for Michael and himself before their riding out, pleasant to take horse and hear the Squire bidding them God-speed, with a sharp injunction to follow the route he had mapped out for them. But Joan had not come to say farewell.

Just as they started, Lady Ingilby summoned Kit to her side, and behind her, in the shadow of the doorway, stood Joan.

"She insists that you return the borrowed kerchief," said the older woman, with a gravity that wished to smile, it seemed.

Kit fumbled for a moment, then brought out a battered bit of cambric that had been through much snow and rain and tumult. The girl took it, saw dark spots of crimson in among the weather-stains, and the whole story of the last few months was there for her to read. The tears were so ready to fall that she flouted him again.

"It was white when I gave it into your keeping."

Kit, not knowing why, thought of St. Robert's cell, of Knaresborough's parish priest and the man's kindly hold on this world and the next. "It is whiter now," he said, with a surety that sat well on him.

The truth of things closed round Lady Ingilby. Her big heart, mothering these wounded gentry who came in to Ripley, had been growing week by week in charity and knowledge. It had needed faith and pluck to play man and woman both, in her husband's absence, and now the full reward had come.

Quietly, with a royal sort of dignity, she touched Kit on the shoulder. "The man who can say that deserves to go find Rupert."

While Kit wondered just what he had said, as men do when their hearts have spoken, not their lips only, Joan Grant put the kerchief in his hand again. "I should not have asked for it, had I known it was so soiled. And yet, on second thoughts, I want it back again."

She touched it with her lips, and gave him one glance that was to go with him like an unanswered riddle for weeks to come. Then she was gone; but he had the kerchief in the palm of his right hand.

"Women are queer cattle," said Michael thoughtfully, after they had covered a league of the journey south.

"They've a trick of asking riddles," asserted Kit. "For our part, we've the road in front of us."

So then the elder brother knew that this baby of the flock had learned life's alphabet. The lad no longer carried his heart on his sleeve, but hid it from the beaks of passing daws.

They had a journey so free of trouble that Michael began to yawn, missing the excitement that was life to him, and it was only Kit's steady purpose that held him from seeking some trouble by the way. They skirted towns and even villages, save when their horses and themselves needed rest and shelter for the night. Spring was soft about the land, and their track lay over pasture-land and moor, with the plover flapping overhead, until they came into the lush country nearer south.

When they neared Oxford—their journey as good as ended, said Michael, with a heedless yawn—Kit's horse fell lame. It was within an hour of dark, and ahead of them the lights of a little town began to peep out one by one.

"Best lodge yonder for the night," said Michael.

They had planned to bivouac in the open, and be up betimes for the forward journey; but even Kit agreed that his horse needed looking to.

Through the warm night they made their way, between hedgerows fragrant with young leafage. All was more forward here than in the northland they had left, without that yap of the north-easter which is winter's dying bark in Yoredale. Peace went beside them down the lane, and, in front, the sleepy lights reached out an invitation to them through the dusk.

On the outskirts of the town they met a farmer jogging home.

"What do they call the place?" asked Michael.

"Banbury," said the farmer, with a jolly laugh; "where they keep good ale."

"So it seems, friend. You're mellow as October."

"Just that. Exchange was never robbery. First the ale was mellowed; then I swallowed ale, I did, and now I'm mellow, too."

With a lurch in the saddle, and a cheery "Good night," he went his way, and Michael laughed suddenly after they had gone half a mile. "We forgot to ask him where the good ale was housed," he explained.

In the middle of the town they found a hostelry, and their first concern was with Kit's horse. The ostler, an ancient fellow whose face alone was warranty for his judgment of all horseflesh, said that the lame leg would be road-worthy

again in three days, ”but not a moment sooner.” So Kit at once went the round of the stable, picked out the best horse there, and said he must be saddled ready for the dawn.

”Oh, lad, you’re thorough!” chuckled Michael, as they went indoors.

”One needs be, with Rupert only a day’s ride away.”

There was only one man in the ”snug” of the tavern when they entered. By the look of him, he, too, had found good ale in Banbury. Squat of body, unlovely of face, there was yet a twinkle in his eye, a gay indifference to his own infirmities, that appealed to Michael.

”Give you good e’en, gentlemen. What are your politics?” asked the stranger.

”We have none,” said Kit sharply.

”That shows your wisdom. For my part—close the door, I pray—I’m a King’s man, and have flown to drink—so much is obvious—for solace. Believe me, I was never in a town that smelt so strongly of Roundheads as does Banbury. They meet one in the streets at every turn, and in the taverns. One might think there was no Royalist alive to-day in England.”

The man’s bombast, his easy flow of speech, the intonation now and then that proclaimed him one of life’s might-have-beens, arrested Michael.

”Tell us more, friend,” he said lazily.

”Gladly. I need help. I am making a tour, you understand, of the chief towns of England, staying a day or more in each, until the Muse arrives. I was ever one to hope; and, gentlemen, by the froth on my pewter-mug, I swear that many noblemen and gentry will buy my book of verses when it’s all completed.”

”So you need our help?” asked Michael, humouring him.

”Most urgently. I have a most diverting ditty in my head, about this town of Banbury. It runs in this way:

”Here I found a Puritan one
Hanging of his cat on a Monday
For killing of a mouse on a Sunday.”

”Good!” laughed Michael. ”It’s a fine conceit.”

”Ah, you’ve taste, sir. But the trouble is, I find no rhyme to ’Puritan one.’ To find no rhyme, to a poet, is like journeying through a country that brews no ale. Believe me, it is heartache, this search for a good rhyme.”

”Puri*tane* one—the lilt running that way——”

”I have tried that, too,” said the other with sorrow, ”and still find no rhyme.”

The door opened sharply, and the landlord bustled in. ”Supper is served,

gentlemen. I trust you will not mind sharing it with some officers of the Parliament quartered here?"

"Nothing would please us better," assented Michael. "Will our friend here join us, host?"

"Oh, we none of us heed Drunken Barnaby. Leave him to his rhymes, sir."

Yet Michael turned at the door. "I have it, Barnaby," he chuckled. "Here I found a Puritane one: bid him turn and grow a sane one'—that's the way of it, man."

"It rhymes," said Barnaby sadly, "but the true poetic fire is lacking. Leave me to it, gentlemen."

As they crossed the passage Kit drew his brother aside. "Remember what the Squire said, Michael. We need quiet tongues and a cool head if we're to find Rupert."

"Youngster, I remember. That was why I played the fool to Barnaby's good lead. All men trust a fool."

When they came to the parlour, they found a well-filled board, and round it six men, big in the beam, with big, cropped heads and an air of great aloofness from this world's concerns; but they were doing very well with knife and fork. The two Metcalfs answered all questions guardedly; and all went well until Kit saw a great pie brought in, a long, flat-shaped affair with pastry under and over, and inside, when its crust was tapped, a wealth of mincemeat of the kind housewives make at Christmas.

"Michael, this is all like Yoredale," said Kit unguardedly. "Here's a Christmas pie."

To his astonishment, the Puritans half rose in their seats and glanced at him as if he had the plague. "There are Royalists among us," said one.

"What is all this nonsense, friends?" asked Michael, with imperturbable good temper.

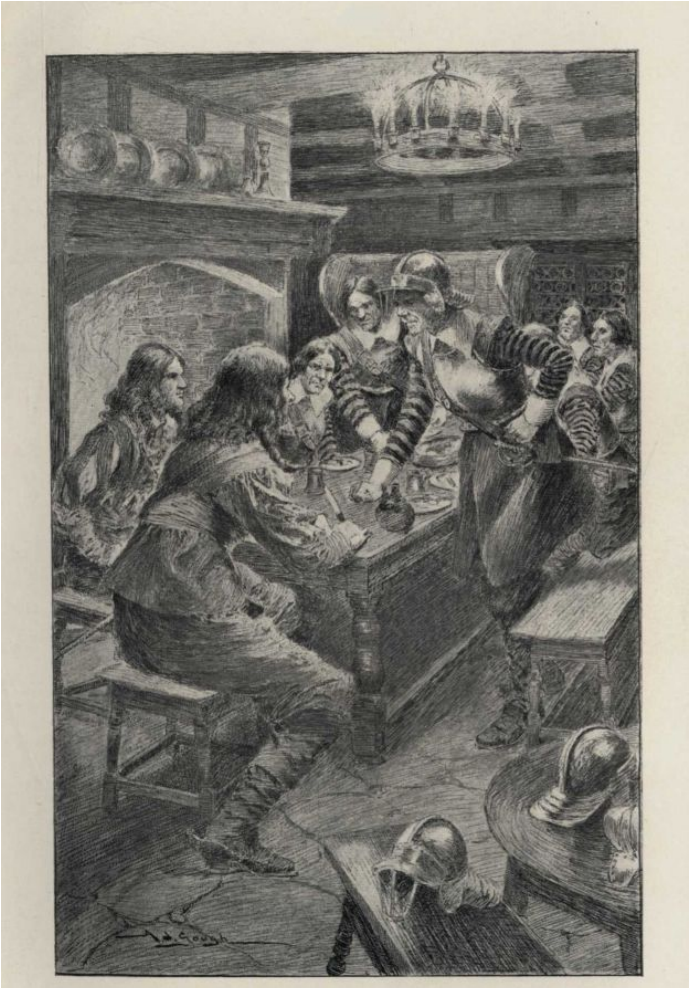
"We call it mince-meat now. None of your Christmases for us, or any other Masses. None of Red Rome for us, I say. Banbury kills any man who talks of Masses."

"We've blundered somehow, Kit," whispered Michael nonchalantly.

"Say, do you stand for the King?" asked the Roundhead. "Yes or no—do you stand for the King?"

"Why, yes," said Kit. "Come on, you six crop-headed louts."

This was the end of Kit's solemnity, his over-serious attention to Prince Rupert's needs. And then they were in the thick of it, and the weight of the onset bore them down. When the battle ended—the table overturned, and three of the Roundheads under it—when Kit and Michael could do no more, and found themselves prisoners in the hands of the remaining three, the landlord, sleek and



" ' Say, do you stand for the King ? ' "

*The White Horses* [Page 114

*"'Say, do you stand for the King?'"*

comfortable, bustled in.

"I trust there is no quarrel, gentlemen?" he entreated.

"None, as you see," said Michael airily. "We had a jest, host, about your Christmas pie. They tell me none says Mass in Banbury because the town is altogether heathen."

So then a blow took him unawares, and when Kit and he woke next day, they found themselves in the town's prison.

Michael touched his brother with a playful foot. "You blundered, Kit, about that Christmas pie."

"Yes," said Christopher; "so now it's my affair, Michael, to find a way out of prison."

But Michael only laughed. "I wish we could find a rhyme to Puritane one," he said. "It would help that rogue we met last night."

The grey of early dawn stole through the window of the gaol and brightened to a frosty red as Michael and his brother sat looking at each other with grim pleasantry. Charged with an errand to bring Prince Rupert to the North without delay, they had won as far as this Roundhead-ridden town, a score miles or so from their goal, and a moment's indiscretion had laid them by the heels.

"Life's diverting, lad. I always told you so," said Michael. "It would have been a dull affair, after all, if we had got to Oxford without more ado."

"They need Rupert, yonder in York," growled Kit.

"Ah, not so serious, lest they mistake you for a Puritan."

"It is all so urgent, Michael."

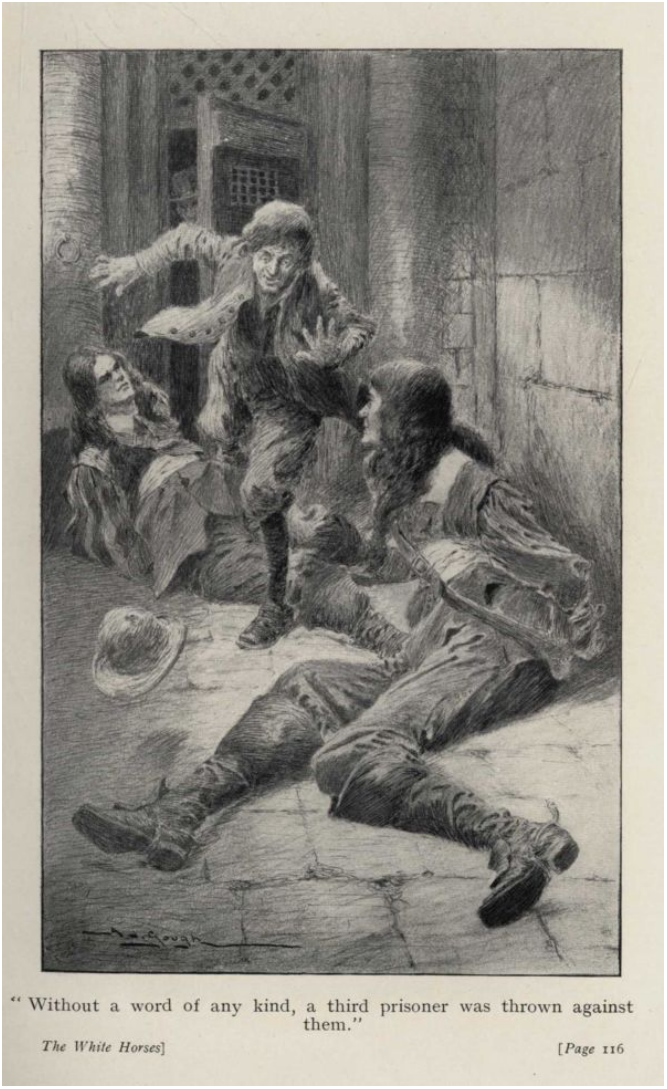
"True. The more need to take it lightly. Life, I tell you, runs that way, and I know something of women by this time. Flout life, Kit, toss it aside and jest at it, and all you want comes tumbling into your hands."

"I brought you into this. I'll find some way out of gaol," said the other, following his own stubborn line of thought.

The window was narrow, and three stout bars were morticed into the walls. Moreover, their hands were doubled-tied behind them. All that occurred to them for the moment was to throw themselves against the door, each in turn, on the forlorn chance that their weight would break it down.

"Well?" asked Michael lazily, after their second useless assault on the door. "High gravity and a long face do not get us out of gaol. We'll just sit on the wet floor, Kit, and whistle for the little imp me call Chance."

Michael tried to whistle, but broke down at sight of Kit's lugubrious, unhumorous face. While he was still laughing, there was a shuffle of footsteps outside, a grating of the rusty door-lock, and, without word of any kind, a third prisoner was thrown against them. Then the door closed again, the key turned in the lock, and they heard the gaoler grumbling to himself as he passed into the street.



" Without a word of any kind, a third prisoner was thrown against them."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 116

*"Without a word of any kind, a third prisoner was thrown against them."*

The new-comer picked himself up. He was dripping from head to foot; his face, so far as the green ooze of a horse-pond let them see it, was unlovely; but his eyes were twinkling with a merriment that won Michael's heart.

"Sirs, I warned you that Banbury was no good place for Cavaliers. I am pained to see you here."

Michael remembered the man now—a fellow who had jested pleasantly with them in the tavern just before they were taken by the Roundheads. "We forgot your warning, Mr. Barnaby," he said drily, "so we're here."

"I thank you, sir. Drunken Barnaby is all the address they give me nowadays. Perhaps you would name me Mr. Barnaby again; it brings one's pride out of hiding."

So then they laughed together; and friendship lies along that road. And after that they asked each other what had brought them to the town gaol.

"You spoke of Christmas pie, with Puritans about you?" said Drunken Barnaby. "I could have warned you, gentlemen, and did not. I was always a day behind the fair. They loathe all words that are connected with the Mass."

"We have learned as much," said Michael. "For your part, Mr. Barnaby, how came you here?"

"Oh, a trifle of ale-drinking! My heart was warm, you understand, and I roved down Banbury street with some song of glory coming for King Charles. I'm not warm now, but the cool o' the horse-pond has brought me an astonishing sobriety."

"Then tell us how to be quit of these four walls," snapped Kit, thinking ever of York and the need the city had of Prince Rupert.

"Give me time," said Drunken Barnaby, "and a little sleep. Between the forgetting and the waking, some gift o' luck will run my way."

"Luck!" laughed Michael. "She's a good mare to ride."

Barnaby, with his little body and the traces of the horse-pond about him, had seemed to the gaoler of mean account, not worth the trouble of tying by the wrists. The rogue sat up suddenly, just as he was falling off to sleep.

"It is a mistake, my gentles, to disdain an adversary," he said, with that curious air of his, roystering, pedantic in the choice of phrases, not knowing whether he were ashamed of himself and all men, or filled with charitable laughter at their infirmities. "Our friend with the blue-bottle nose left my hands free, you observe, while yours are bound. Much water has gone into my pockets—believe me, I shall dislike all horse-ponds in the future—but the knife-blade there will not have rusted yet."

With a great show of strategy, still laughing at himself and them, he drew a clasp-knife from his breeches-pocket, opened it, and cut their thongs.

"That's half-way on the road to Oxford," laughed Kit, rubbing the weals

about his wrists. "It was kind of you to drink too much ale, Barnaby, and join us here."

Michael glanced at his young brother. "Humour returns to you," he said, with an approving nod. "I told you life was not half as serious as you thought it."

They tried the window-bars, the three of them, but found them sturdy. They battered the doorway again with their shoulders; it did not give. Barnaby drew a piece of wire from his pocket, and used great skill to pick the lock; he might as well have tried to pierce steel armour with a needle.

"There's nothing to be done to-night, gentles," he said, with a noisy yawn; "and, when there's nothing to be done, I've found a safe and gallant rule of conduct—one sleeps. Some day, if I find the Muse propitious, I shall write an ode to sleep. It is the fabled elixir of life. It defies all fevers of the daytime; it is the coverlet that Nature spreads about her tired children. But, gentlemen, I weary you."

"You make me laugh," asserted Michael. "Since I left Yoredale, I've met none who had your grasp of life."

They settled themselves by and by to sleep, as best they could, on a wet floor, with the warmth of the new day rousing queer odours from their prison-house. There was the stealthy tread of rats about their bodies. It was Barnaby, after all, who was false to his gospel of deep slumber. At the end of half an hour he reached over and woke Michael from a thrifty dream of Yoredale and corn yellowing to harvest.

"What is it?" growled Michael.

"I cannot sleep, sir. You recall that, in the tavern yesterday, I confessed myself a poet. The rhymes I have made, sir, are like the sands of the sea for multitude. I was never troubled till I came to Banbury."

"Then journey forward. There are other towns."

"You do not understand me. Towns to be taken by assault, by any rhymes that offer, do not entice me. It is the hardship of attack that tempts your true soldier. You will grant me that?"

"I'll grant you anything, Barnaby, so long as you let me sleep on this wet floor. I dreamed I was lying on a feather-bed."

"But the rhyme? You remember how the poem went: 'Here I found a Puritan one, hanging of his cat on a Monday, for killing of a mouse on a Sunday.' A fine conceit, sir, but I can find no rhyme for *Puritan* one, as I told you."

Kit, for his part, was awake, too, and some jingle of a poem, in praise of his mistress at Ripley in the north, was heating his brain. But the lad was learning wisdom these days, and held his peace; there was no need to bring other men to Joan Grant by undue singing of her praises.

"Believe me, this verse-making is a fever in the blood," protested Barnaby.

"Naught serves until the rhyme is found. It is a madness, like love of a lad for a maid. There is no rhyme to Puritan."

"Friend," said Michael, "I need sleep, if you do not. Remember what I said last night. Puri*tane* one—try it that way. Get your man round to the King's cause, and he becomes a *sane one*."

"But, sir——"

Michael smiled happily. "We have a saying in Yoredale: 'I canna help your troubles, friend; I've enough of my own.' Take it or leave it at Puri*tane* one. For myself, I'm going to sleep."

Barnaby sat wrestling with the Muse. His mind, like all men's, was full of hidden byways, and the most secret of them all was this lane that led into the garden of what, to him, was poetry. A tramp on life's highway, a drinker at taverns and what not, it was his foible that he would be remembered by his jingling verses—as, indeed, he was, centuries after the mould had settled over his unknown grave.

It might be five minutes later, or ten, that Kit stirred in sleep, then sat bolt upright. He heard steps on the cobbled street outside, the turning of a rusty key in the lock. Then the door opened, and he saw the squat figure of the gaoler, framed by a glimpse of Banbury street, grey and crimson in the clean light of the new day. Without haste he got to his feet, stretched himself to the top of his great height, then went and picked the gaoler up and swung him to and fro lightly, as if he were a child.

"Michael," he said, "what shall we do with this fellow? Michael, wake, I tell you!"

When Michael came out of his sleep, and Drunken Barnaby out of his rhyming, they sat in judgment on the gaoler. They tried him for high treason to King Charles. They sentenced him to detention in His Majesty's gaol *sine die*, and went into the street, locking the door behind them.

"You shall have the key, Mr. Barnaby," said Michael. "Release him when and how you like. For ourselves, we ride to Oxford."

"Nay, you walk," said Barnaby, with great solemnity. "Oh, I know your breed! You're all for going to the tavern for your horses. It will not do, gentles. The town is thick with Roundheads."

"How can we walk twenty miles, with our errand a day or two old already?" said Kit.

"Beggars must foot it, when need asks. Do you want to sing 'Christmas Pie' again all down Banbury street, and have your errand spoiled? Listen, sirs. This town does not suit my health just now; it does not suit yours. Permit me to guide you out of it along a byway that I know."

Kit was impatient for the risk, so long as they found horses; but Michael

saw the wisdom underlying Barnaby's counsel. The three of them set out, along a cart-track first, that led between labourers' cottages on one hand and a trim farmstead on the other, then into the open fields. A league further on they struck into the Oxford highway, an empty riband of road, with little eddies of dust blown about by the fingers of the quiet breeze.

"Here we part, gentles," said Barnaby, with his air of humorous pedantry. "Oxford is for kings and prelates. I know my station, and my thirst for a brew of ale they have four miles over yonder hill."

They could not persuade him that, drunk or sober, he had rescued them from Banbury, that they would be glad of his further company. He turned once, after bidding them farewell, and glanced at Kit with his merry hazel eyes. "I've got that song of Banbury," he said. "It all came to me when I saw you dandling the gaoler with the blue-bottle nose. Strife and battle always helped the poets of a country, sir, since Homer's time."

"There goes a rogue," laughed Michael, listening to the man's song of Banbury as he went chanting it up the rise. "Well, I've known worse folk, and he untied our hands."

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LOYAL CITY.

They jogged forward on the road, and the day grew hot with thunder. The slowness of a walking pace, after months in the saddle, the heat to which they were unused as yet, after the more chilly north, seemed to make a league of every mile. Then the storm burst, and out of nowhere a fierce wind leaped at them, driving the rain in sheets before it. The lightning played so near at times that they seemed to be walking through arrows of barbed fire.

"A pleasant way of reaching Oxford, after all one's dreams!" grumbled Kit.

"Oh, it will lift. I'm always gayest in a storm, my lad. The end on't is so near."

The din and rain passed overhead. A league further on they stepped into clear sunlight and the song of soaring larks. Here, too, their walking ended, for a carrier overtook them. He had a light load and a strong, fast horse in the shafts; and, if their way of entry into the city of his dreams jarred on Kit's sense of fitness, he was glad to have the journey shortened.

The carrier pulled up at the gateway of St. John's, and the wonder of their day began. Oxford, to men acquainted with her charm by daily intercourse, is constantly the City Beautiful; to these men of Yoredale, reared in country spaces, roughened by campaigning on the King's behalf, it was like a town built high as heaven in the midst of fairyland. As they passed along the street, the confusion of so many streams of life, meeting and eddying back and mixing in one great swirling river, dizzied them for a while. Then their eyes grew clearer, and they saw it all with the freshness of a child's vision. There were students, absurdly youthful and ridiculously light-hearted, so Kit thought in his mood of high seriousness. There were clergy, and market-women with their vegetables, hawkers, quack doctors, fortune-tellers, gentry and their ladies, prosperous, well-fed, and nicely clothed. A bishop and a dean rubbed shoulders with them as they passed. And, above the seemly hubbub of it all, the mellow sun shone high in an overworld of blue sky streaked with amethyst and pearl.

"Was the dream worth while?" asked Michael, with his easy laugh.

"A hundred times worth while. 'Twould have been no penance to walk every mile from Yoredale hither-to, for such an ending to the journey."

They went into the High Street, and here anew the magic of the town met them face to face. Oxford, from of old, had been the cathedral city, the University, the pleasant harbourage of well-found gentry, who made their homes within sound of its many bells. Now it was harbouring the Court as well.

Along the street—so long as they lived, Christopher and Michael would remember the vision, as of knighthood palpable and in full flower—a stream of Cavaliers came riding. At their head, guarded jealously on either side, was a horseman so sad and resolute of face, so marked by a grace and dignity that seemed to halo him, that Kit turned to a butcher who stood nearest to him in the crowd.

"Why do they cheer so lustily? Who goes there?" he asked.

"The King, sir. Who else?"

So then a great tumult came to Christopher. When he was a baby in the old homestead, the Squire had woven loyalty into the bones and tissues of him. Through the years it had grown with him, this honouring of the King as a man who took his sceptre direct from the hands of the good God. Let none pry into the soul of any man so reared who sees his King for the first time in the flesh.

With Michael it was the same. He did not cheer as the crowd did; his heart was too deeply touched for that. And by and by, when the townsfolk had followed the cavalcade toward Christ Church, the brothers found themselves alone.

"It was worth while," said Kit, seeking yet half evading Michael's glance.

They shook themselves out of their dreams by and by, and, for lack of other guidance, followed the route taken by the King. The Cavaliers had dispersed. The

King had already gone into the Deanery. So they left the front of Christ Church and wandered aimlessly into the lane that bordered Merton, and so through the grove where the late rains and the glowing sun had made the lilacs and the sweetbriars a sanctuary of beaded, fragrant incense.

From Merton, as they dallied in the grove—not knowing where to seek Rupert, and not caring much, until the wine of Oxford grew less heady—a woman came between the lilacs. Her walk, her vivacious body, her air of loving laughter wherever she could find it, were at variance with the tiredness of her face. She seemed like sunlight prisoned in a vase of clouded porcelain.

Perhaps something of their inborn, romantic sense of womanhood showed in the faces of the Metcalfs as they stepped back to make a way for her. One never knows what impulse guides a woman; one is only sure that she will follow it.

However that might be, the little lady halted; a quick smile broke through her weariness. "Gentlemen," she said, with a pretty foreign lilt of speech, "you are very—what you call it?—so very high. There are few men with the King in Oxford who are so broad and high. I love big men, if they are broad of shoulder. Are you for the King?"

"We are Metcalfs of Nappa," said Kit. "Our loyalty is current coin in the north."

The little lady glanced shrewdly at them both, her head a little on one side like a bird's. "Are you of the company they call the Riding Metcalfs? Then the south knows you, too, and the west country, wherever men are fighting for the King. Gentlemen, you have a battle-cry before you charge—what is it?"

"A Mecca for the King!"

She laughed infectiously. "It is not like me to ask for passwords. I was so gay and full of trust in all men until the war came. The times are *difficile, n'est pas*, and you were unknown to me. What is your errand here?"

"We came to find Prince Rupert," said Kit, blurting his whole tale out because a woman happened to be pretty and be kind. "The north is needing him. That is our sole business here."

"Ah, then, I can help you. There's a little gate here—one goes through the gardens, and so into the Deanery. My husband lodges there. He will tell you where Rupert finds himself."

Michael, because he knew himself to be a devil-may-care, had a hankering after prudence now and then, and always picked the wrong moment for it. If this unknown lady had chosen to doubt them, and ask for a password, he would show the like caution. Moreover, he felt himself in charge just now of this impulsive younger brother.

"Madam," he answered, his smile returning, "our errand carries with it the

whole safety of the north. In all courtesy, we cannot let ourselves be trapped within the four walls of a house. Your husband's name?"

"In all courtesy," she broke in, "it is permitted that I laugh! The days have been so *triste*—so *triste*. It is like Picardy and apple orchards to find one's self laughing. You shall know my husband's name, sir—oh, soon! Is it that two men so big and high are afraid to cross an unknown threshold?"

Michael thrust prudence aside, glad to be rid of the jade. "I've seldom encountered fear," he said carelessly.

"Ah, so! Then you have not loved." Her face was grave, yet mocking. "To live one must love, and to love—that is to know fear."

She unlocked the gate with a key she carried at her girdle, and passed through. They followed her into gardens lush, sweet-smelling, full of the pomp and eager riot of the spring. Then they passed into the Deanery, and the manservant who opened to them bowed with some added hint of ceremony that puzzled Michael. The little lady bade them wait, went forward into an inner room, then returned.

"My husband will receive you, gentlemen," she said, with a smile that was like a child's, yet with a spice of woman's malice in it.

The sun was playing up and down the gloomy panels of the chamber, making a morris dance of light and shade. At the far end a man was seated at a table. He looked up from finishing a letter, and Christopher felt again that rush of blood to the heart, that deep, impulsive stirring of the soul, which he had known not long ago in the High Street of the city.

They were country born and bred, these Yoredale men, but the old Squire had taught them how to meet sharp emergencies, and especially this of standing in the Presence. Their obeisance was faultless in outward ceremony, and the King, who had learned from suffering the way to read men's hearts, was aware that the loyalty of these two—the inner loyalty—was a thing spiritual and alive.

The Queen, for her part, stood aside, diverted by the welcome comedy. These giants with the simple hearts had learned her husband's name.

"I am told that you seek Prince Rupert—that you are lately come from York?" said the King.

He had the gift—one not altogether free from peril—that he accepted or disdained men by instinct; there were no half measures in his greetings. Little by little Christopher and Michael found themselves at ease. The King asked greedily for news of York. They had news to give. Every word they spoke rang true to the shifting issues of the warfare in the northern county. It was plain, moreover, that they had a single purpose—to find Rupert and to bring him into the thick of tumult where men were crying for this happy firebrand.

The King glanced across at Henrietta Maria. They did not know, these

Metcalfs, what jealousies and slanders and pin-pricks of women's tongues were keeping Rupert here in Oxford. They did not know that Charles himself, wearied by long iteration of gossip dinned into his ears, was doubting the good faith of his nephew, that he would give him no commission to raise forces and ride out. The King and Queen got little solace from their glance of Question; both were so overstrained with the trouble of the times, so set about by wagging tongues that ought to have been cut out by the common hangman, that they could not rid themselves at once of doubt. And the pity of it was that both loved Rupert, warmed to the pluck of his exploits in the field, and knew him for a gentleman proved through and through.

"Speak of York again," said the King. "London is nothing to me, save an overgrown, dull town whose people do not know their minds. Next to Oxford, in my heart, lies York. If that goes, gentlemen, I'm widowed of a bride." He was tired, and the stimulus of this hale, red-blooded loyalty from Yoredale moved him from the grave reticence that was eating his strength away. "It is music to me to hear of York. From of old it was turbulent and chivalrous. It rears strong men, and ladies with the smell of lavender about them. Talk to me of the good city."

So then Michael, forgetting where he stood, told the full tale of his journeying to York. And the Queen laughed—the pleasant, easy laughter of the French—when he explained the share a camp-follower's donkey had had in the wild escapade.

"You will present the donkey to me," she said. "When all is well again, and we come to praise York for the part it took in holding Yorkshire for the King, you will present that donkey to me."

And then the King laughed, suddenly, infectiously; and his Queen was glad, for she knew that he, too, had had too little recreation of this sort. They went apart, these two, like any usual couple who were mated happily and had no secrets from each other.

"How they bring the clean breath of the country to one," said Charles. "Before they came, it seemed so sure that Rupert was all they said of him."

"It was I who made you credit rumours," she broke in, pretty and desolate in the midst of her French contrition. "I was so weary, and gossip laid siege to me hour by hour, and I yielded. And all the while I knew it false. I tell you, I love the sound of Rupert's step. He treads so firmly, and holds his head so high."

The King touched her on the arm with a deference and a friendship that in themselves were praise of this good wife of his. Then he went to the writing-table, wrote and sealed a letter, and put it into Michael's hands.

"Go, find the Prince," he said, "and give him this. He is to be found at this hour, I believe, in the tennis-court. And when you next see the Squire of Nappa tell him the King knows what the Riding Metcalfs venture for the cause."

Seeing Kit hesitate and glance at him with boyish candour, the King asked if he had some favour to request. And the lad explained that he wished only to understand how it came that the Riding Metcalfs were so well known to His Majesty.

"We have done so little," he finished; "and the north lies so far away."

The King paced up and down the room. The fresh air these men had brought into the confinement of his days at Oxford seemed again to put restlessness, the need of hard gallops, into his soul.

"No land lies far away," he said sharply, "that breeds honest men, with arms to strike shrewd blows. Did you fancy that a company of horsemen could light the north with battle, could put superstitious terror into the hearts of malcontents, and not be known? Gentlemen, are you so simple that you think we do not know what you did at Otley Bridge—at Ripley, when the moon shone on the greening corn—at Bingley, where you slew them in the moorland wood? It is not only ill news that travels fast, and the Prince, my nephew, never lets me rest for talk of you."

To their credit, the Metcalfs bore it well. Bewildered by this royal knowledge of their deeds, ashamed and diffident because they had done so little in the north, save ride at constant hazard, they let no sign escape them that their hearts were beating fast.

The King asked too much of himself and others, maybe, stood head and shoulders above the barter and cold common sense of everyday. The Metcalf spirit was his own, and through the dust and strife he talked with them, as if he met friends in a garden where no eavesdroppers were busy.

They went out by and by, the Queen insisting, with her gay, French laugh, that the donkey should be presented to her later on. They found themselves in the street, with its pageantry of busy folk.

"Well, Kit," asked Michael. "We've fought for the King, and taken a wound or so. Now we've seen him in the flesh. How big is he, when dreams end?"

"As big as dawn over Yoredale pastures. I never thought to meet his like."

"So! You're impulsive, lad, and always were, but I half believe you."

They came again into the High Street. It was not long, so far as time went, since these Nappa men had fancied, in their innocence, that because a messenger rode out to summon them to Skipton, the King and all England must also know of them. Now the King did know of them, it seemed. Six months of skirmish, ambush, headlong gallops against odds, had put their names in all men's mouths. Quietly, with a sense of wonder, they tested the wine known as fame, and the flavour of it had a sweetness as of spring before the languor of full summer comes.

"We were strangers here an hour since," said Kit, watching the folk pass, "and now we come from Court."

"What did I tell you, babe Christopher, when I tried in Yoredale to lick your dreaming into shape? Life's the most diverting muddle. One hour going on foot, the next riding a high horse. We'd best find the tennis-court before the King's message cools."

A passer-by told them where to find the place. The door was open to the May sunlight, and, without ceremony or thought of it, they passed inside. Prince Rupert was playing a hard game with his brother Maurice. Neither heard the Metcalfs enter; in the blood of each was the crying need for day-long activity—in the open, if possible, and, failing that, within the closed walls of the tennis-court. The sweat dripped from the players as they fought a well-matched game; then Rupert tossed his racquet up.

"I win, Maurice," he said, as if he had conquered a whole Roundhead army.

"It is all we do in these dull times, Rupert—to win aces from each other. We're tied here by the heels. There's the width of England to go fighting in, and they will not let us."

Rupert, turning to find the big surcoat that should hide his frivolous attire between the street and his lodging, saw the two Metcalfs standing there. He liked their bigness, liked the tan of weather and great hardship that had dyed their faces to the likeness of a mellowed wall of brick. Yet suspicion came easily to him, after long association with the intrigues of the Court at Oxford, and instinctively he reached down for the sword that was not there, just as Michael had done when he came dripping from Ouse river into York.

"You are Prince Rupert?" said Michael. "The King sends this letter to you."

Rupert broke the seal. When he had read the few lines written carelessly and at speed, his face cleared. "Maurice," he said, "we need play no more tennis. Here's our commission to raise forces for the relief of York."

He was a changed man. Since boyhood, war had been work and recreation both to him. In his youth there had been the Winter Queen, his widowed mother, beset by intrigue and disaster, with only one knightly man about her, the grave Earl of Craven, who was watch-dog and worshipper. Craven, hard-bitten, knowledgeable, with the strength of the grey Burnsall fells in the bone and muscle of him, had taught Rupert the beginnings of the need for warfare, had sown the first seeds of that instinct for cavalry attack which had made Rupert's horsemanship a living fear wherever the Roundheads met them. First, he had had the dream of fighting for his mother's honour; when that was denied him he had come into the thick of trouble here in England, to fight for King Charles and the Faith. And then had come the cold suspicion of these days at Oxford, the eating inward of a consuming fire, the playing at tennis because life offered no diversion otherwise. It is not easy to be denied full service to one's king because the tongues of interlopers are barbed with venom, and these weeks of inaction here had been eating

into his soul like rust.

The first glow of surprise over, Rupert's face showed the underlying gravity that was seldom far from it. The grace of the man was rooted in a rugged strength, and even the charm of person which none denied was the charm of a hillside pasture field, flowers and green grass above, but underneath the unyielding rock.

"Maurice, these gentlemen are two of Squire Metcalf's lambs," he said, "so the King's letter says. For that matter, they carry their credentials in their faces."

"Tell us just how the fight went at Otley Bridge," said Maurice, with young enthusiasm. "We have heard so many versions of the tale."

"It was nothing," asserted Kit, still astonished to find their exploits known wherever they met Cavaliers. "Sir Thomas Fairfax came back one evening from a skirmish to find we held the bridge. He had five-score men, and we had fifty. It was a good fight while it lasted. Forty of our men brought back wounds to Ripley; but we come of a healthy stock, and not a limb was lost."

Rupert had no easy-going outlook on his fellows; his way of life did not permit such luxury. He was aware that rumour had not lied for once—that the magic of the Metcalf name, filtering down from Yorkshire through many runnels and side-channels, was no will-o'-wisp. Two of the clan were here, and one of them had told a soldier's tale in a soldier's way, not boasting of the thirty men of Fairfax's they had left for dead at Otley Bridge.

"I shall be for ever in your debt," he said impassively, "if you will answer me a riddle that has long been troubling me. Who taught you Metcalfs the strength of cavalry, lightly horsed and attacking at the gallop?"

"Faith, we were never taught it," laughed Michael. "It just came to us as the corn sprouts or the lark sings. The old grey kirk had something to do with it, maybe, though I yawned through many a sermon about serving God and honouring the King. One remembers these little matters afterwards."

"One does, undoubtedly," said Rupert. "Now, sir," he went on, after a grave silence, "I have a great desire. I'm commissioned to raise forces for the relief of York, and I want you men of Yoredale for my first recruits. They are already busy in the north, you'll say. Yes, but I need them here. Six-score of your breed here among us, or as many as their wounds permit to ride, would bring the laggards in."

"With you here?" said Kit impulsively. "The laggards should be stirred without our help."

"By your leave, they are tiring of me here in Oxford. The tales of your doings in the north are whetting jaded appetites. Bring your big men south on their white horses, and show the city what it covets. I'll send a horseman to York within the hour."

"That need not be," said Michael. "We wasted a whole night in Banbury,

and your messenger need ride no further than that town, I fancy. The first of our outposts should be there by now."

"You will explain, sir," put in Rupert, with grave question.

"It is simple enough. Six-score men—and I think all of them will ride, wounded or no—cover a good deal of country, set two miles apart. That was my father's planning of our journey south—a horseman playing sentry, on a fresh horse, at every stage, until we sent news that you were coming to the relief of York."

"Thorough!" said Rupert. "Strafford should be here, and Archbishop Laud—they understand that watchword."

The Prince was housed at St. John's, where Rupert had known lightheartedness in his student days. That evening the Metcalfs supped there—just the four of them, with little ceremony about the crude affair of eating—and afterwards they talked, soldiers proven in many fights, and men who, by instinctive knowledge of each other, had the self-same outlook on this dizzy world of battle, intrigue, and small-minded folk that hemmed them in. To them the King was England, Faith, and constancy. No effort was too hard on his behalf; no east wind of disaster, such as Rupert had suffered lately, could chill their steady hope.

"There's one perplexity I have," said Rupert, passing the wine across. "Why are your men so sure that they can find fresh horses for the asking at each two-mile stage? Horses are rare to come by since the war broke out."

So Michael explained, with his daft laugh, that a Yorkshireman had some occult gift of scenting a horse leagues away, and a stubborn purpose to acquire him—by purchase if he had the money, but otherwise if Providence ordained it so.

"Has the rider gone to Banbury?" he asked.

"Yes, two hours since, by a messenger I trust, He is from Yorkshire, too—one Nicholas Blake, who never seems to tire."

Kit's eagerness, blunted a little by good fare and ease after months of hardship, was awake again. "Blake?" he asked. "Is he a little man, made up of nerves and whipcord?"

"That, and a pluck that would serve three usual men."

"I'm glad he has the ride to Banbury. It was he who first brought us out of Yoredale into this big fight for the King. When last I saw him, he was limping in the middle of Skipton High Street, with blood running down his coat—I thought he had done his last errand."

"Blake does not die, somehow. Sometimes, looking at him, I think he longs to die and cannot. At any rate, he rode south last autumn with a letter for me, and I kept him for my own private errands. One does not let rare birds escape."

The next moment Rupert, the gay, impulsive Cavalier, as his enemies ac-

counted him, the man with grace and foolhardiness, they said, but little wit, thrust the *débris* of their supper aside and spread out a map upon the table. It was a good map, drawn in detail by himself, and it covered the whole country from London to the Scottish border.

"I am impatient for the coming of your clan, gentlemen," he said. "Let us get to figures. Mr. Blake is at Banbury already, we'll say, and has found your first outpost. *He* covers two miles at the gallop, and the next man covers two, and so to Knaresborough. How soon can they win into Oxford?"

"In five days," said Michael, with his rose-coloured view of detail.

Prince Rupert challenged his reckoning, and the puzzle of the calculation grew more bewildering as the four men argued about it. They had another bottle to help them, but the only result was that each clung more tenaciously to his opinion. Maurice said the journey, allowing for mischances and the scarcity of horses, would take eight days at least; Kit Metcalf hazarded a guess that seven was nearer the mark; and at last they agreed to wager each a guinea on the matter, and parted with a pleasant sense of expectation, as if a horse race were in the running. Soldiers must take their recreations this way; for they travel on a road that is set thick with hazard, and a gamble round about the winning chance is part of the day's work.

"I give you welcome here to Oxford," said Rupert, as he bade them good-night. "Since the tale of your exploits blew about our sleepy climate, I knew that in the north I had a company of friends. When the Squire of Nappa rides in, I shall tell him that he and I, alone in England, know what light cavalry can do against these men of Cromwell's."

The Metcalfs, when they said farewell, and he asked where they were lodging for the night, did not explain that they had come in a carrier's cart to Oxford, without ceremony and entirely without change of gear. They just went out into the street, wandered for an hour among the scent of lilacs, then found a little tavern that seemed in keeping with their own simplicity. The host asked proof of their respectability, and they showed him many guineas, convincing him that they were righteous folk. Thereafter they slept as tired men do, without back reckonings or fear of the insistent morrow. Once only Kit awoke and tapped his brother on the shoulder.

"They'll be here in seven days, Michael," he said, and immediately began to

snore.

## CHAPTER X.
### THE RIDING IN.

Through the quiet lanes Blake, the messenger, rode out to Banbury. Nightingales were singing through the dusk; stars were blinking at him from a sky of blue and purple; a moth blundered now and then against his face. He understood the beauty of the gloaming, though he seemed to have no time to spare for it. Prince Rupert had sent him spurring with a message to the big rider of a white horse, who was to be found somewhere on the road leading from the north to Banbury; and the password was "A Mecca for the King." That was his business on the road. But, as he journeyed, a strange pain of heart went with him. The nightingales were singing, and God knew that he had forgotten love-songs long ago, or had tried to.

Spring, and the rising sap, and the soft, cool scents of eventide are magical to those climbing up the hill of dreams; to those who have ceased to climb, they are echoes of a fairyland once lived in, but now seen from afar. It had all been so long ago. Skirmish and wounds, and lonely rides in many weathers, should have dug a grave deep enough for memories to lie in; but old ghosts rose to-night, unbidden. If it had been his sinning, he could have borne the hardship better; he had the old knightly faith—touched with extravagance, but haloed by the Further Light—that all women are sacrosanct. If he had failed—well, men were rough and headstrong; but it was she who had stooped to meaner issues. And it was all so long ago that it seemed absurd the nightingales should make his heart ache like a child's.

Fame was his. The Metcalfs, big on big horses, had captured the fancy of all England by their exploits in the open. Yet Blake, the messenger—riding alone for the most part, through perils that had no music of the battle-charge about them—had his own place, his claim to quick, affectionate regard wherever Cavaliers were met together. They laughed at his high, punctilious view of life, but they warmed to the knowledge that he had gone single-handed along tracks that asked for comrades on his right hand and his left. But this was unknown to Blake, who did not ask what men thought of him. It was enough for him to go doing his journeys, carrying a heartache till the end came and he was free to

understand the why and wherefore of it all.

It was a relief to see the moonlight blinking on the roofs of Banbury as he rode into the town. There were no nightingales here; instead, there was the hum and clamour of a Roundhead populace, infuriated by the news that two Cavaliers had broken prison in the early morning and had locked the gaoler in.

Blake found his bridle seized roughly, and it was doubtful for a moment whether he or his high-spirited mare, or the two of them, would come to grief.

"Well, friend?" he asked of the burly Puritan who held the bridle.

"Your business here?"

"To sell cloth. I come from Oxford, and have done much business there with the Court."

"Then why come selling wares in Banbury? Court fashions find no favour here."

"Cloth is cloth," said Blake impassively, "and I've some remnants going cheap."

A woman in the crowd pressed forward. "How much the yard?" she asked.

With his tired knowledge of the world, he named a price that made the woman ask eagerly for a sample. "I have no samples. The cloth itself will come in by carrier to-morrow. I'm tired and hungry," he said, smiling at the man who held his rein. "Perhaps you will direct me to a lodging for the night?"

"Was there great stir among the sons of Belial in Oxford?" asked his captor, with a shrewd sideways glance.

"They were like bees in a busy hive," assented Blake cheerily.

"You learned something, maybe, of their plans?"

"I did, friend."

"That might be worth free lodging to you for the night, and a supper of the best. What did you learn?"

"Why, that they planned to buy a good deal of my cloth. That's how I measure a man—with the eye of a merchant who has cloth to sell. You, sir—your clothes are of the shabbiest, if you'll pardon my frankness. Will you not come to the tavern to-morrow, after the carrier has brought my bales, and let me show you some good broadcloth—cloth of a sober colour, suited to the pious habits you profess? To-day I clothe a Cavalier, to-morrow a gentleman who fights on the Parliament side—a merchant knows no niceties of party."

Blake had thrust home. This man, named gentle for the first time in his busy life as tradesman, traducer of the King's good fame, and the prime stirabout of anarchy in Banbury, was filled with a heady, spurious pride. This merchant had sold cloth to the dandies of the Court, perhaps to the King himself, and now it was his turn. There were men of this odd, cringing habit among the sterner Roundhead stuff, and Blake knew them as a harpist knows the strings he plays

on.

The end of it was that he was directed to a comfortable tavern, was given, though he scarcely seemed to ask for it, the password that ensured him the freedom of the streets, and parted from his captor with an easy-going reminder that the cloth should reach Banbury about nine of the next morning.

The password was useful to him more than once. It saved much trouble with soldiery who held him up at every turn. It saved appeal to the pistol he carried in his holster; and that would have meant the rousing of the town, and odds against him that would put his whole errand into jeopardy.

He halted once only, at the front of the tavern which had been recommended to him. An ostler was standing at the door, chewing a straw and waiting for some fresh excitement to stir these strenuous days. Blake slipped a coin into his hand, and explained that, about nine of the next morning, a townsman would come asking for a merchant who had cloth to sell.

"You will explain, ostler, that I am called away on business—business connected with the two Cavaliers who broke gaol last night. Explain, too, that I hope to return to your town in a few days' time. The townsman's name was Ebenezer Fear-the-Snare—I remember it because of its consuming drollery."

With a cheery nod and a laugh that might mean anything, Blake left the other wondering "what devilment this mad fellow was bent on," and rode out into the beauty of the summer's night that lay beyond the outskirts of Banbury. Here, again, the nightingales assailed him. They could not rest for the love-songs in their throats; and ancient pain, deep where the soul beats at the prison-house of flesh, guided his left hand on the reins until, not knowing it, he was riding at a furious gallop. Then he checked to a sober trot.

The land was fragrant with the warmth of wet soil, the scent of flowers and rain-washed herbage. The moon shone blue above the keen white light of gloaming, and the road ahead stretched silver, miraculous, like some highway of the old romance that was waiting for the tread of kings and knights, of ladies fair as their own fame.

Old dreams clambered up to Blake's saddle and rode with him—wild heartaches of the long ago—the whetstone of first love, sharpening the power to feel, to dare all things—the unalterable need of youth to build a shrine about some woman made of the same clay as himself. They were good dreams, tasted again in this mellow dusk; but he put them by at last reluctantly. He had a live ambition before him—to bring a company of riders, bred in his own stiff Yorkshire county, for the Cavaliers of Oxford to appraise.

He slackened pace with some misgiving. The two Metcalfs, when he bade farewell to them in Oxford, had been so sure that one of their kinsmen would have reached the outskirts of Banbury, would be waiting for him. The horseman,

they had explained, would not approach the town too closely, knowing its fame as a place of Parliament men who watched narrowly all Oxford's incoming and outgoing travellers; but Blake had travelled three miles or so already, and he grew impatient for a sight of his man.

Through the still air and the complaint of nightingales he heard the whinny of a horse. His own replied. The road made a wide swerve here through the middle of a beech wood. As he rounded it and came into the open country, he saw a broken wayside cross, and near it a horseman mounted on a white horse as big and raking in the build as its rider.

"A Mecca?" asked Blake, with the indifference of one traveller who passes the time of day with another.

"Nay, that will not serve," laughed the other. "Half a sixpence is as good as nothing at all."

"A Mecca for the King, then, and I was bred in Yorkshire, too."

The freemasonry of loyalty to one King, to the county that had reared a man, is a power that makes all roads friendly, that kills suspicion and the wary reaching down of the right hand toward a pistol-holster.

"How does Yoredale look," went on Blake, with a little, eager catch in his voice, "and the slope of Whernside as you see it riding over the tops from Kettlewell?"

"Bonnie, though I've not seen either since last year's harvest. This King's affair of ride and skirmish is well enough; but there's no time to slip away to Yoredale for a day and smell the wind up yonder. Are Kit and Michael safe?"

"They are in Oxford, accepting flattery with astounding modesty."

"They've found Prince Rupert? The Metcalfs—oh, I touch wood!—keep a bee-line when they know where home lies."

"That is no boast, so why go touching wood? I tell you the King knows what your folk have done and hope to do. The Prince is raising cavalry for the relief of York, and will not rest until you Metcalfs join him. How soon can your company get south?"

The horseman thought the matter over. "It will take five days and a half," he said at last.

"Good for you!" snapped Blake. "Even your brother Christopher, with the starry look o' dreams about his face, was sure that it would take seven days. I wager a guinea to a pinch o' snuff that you're not in Oxford in five days and a half."

"That is a wager?"

"I said as much, sir."

"Then lend me the pinch of snuff. I emptied my box in waiting for you, and was feeling lonely."

Blake laughed as he passed his box over. There was an arresting humour about the man, a streak of the mother-wit that made the Metcalf clan at home in camp or city. "I'll see you to the next stage," he said, reining his horse about—"that is, if you care for an idle man's company. I've nothing in the world to do just now."

The other only nodded, touched his horse sharply with the spur, and Blake found himself galloping with a fury that, even to his experience of night adventures, seemed breakneck and disastrous. At the end of a mile their horses were in a lather; at the end of two they had to check a little up the rise of a hill. On the top of the hill, clear against the sky, they saw a horseman sitting quiet in saddle. They saw, too, that his sword was out, and naked to the moonlight.

"A Mecca!" panted Blake's companion.

"Cousin does not slay cousin," said the man on the hill-top, rattling his sword into the sheath again. "Have they found Rupert?" The second rider was given his errand briefly and without waste of breath. Then he flicked his horse, and Blake was tempted to follow him, too. There was something uncanny, some hint of mystery and deep, resistless strength about this picketing of the road north. Blake had a quick imagination; he saw this chain of riders, linking York with Oxfordshire, spurring through a country fast asleep—only they and the moon and the nightingales awake—until, kinsman passing the message on to kinsman at each two-miles stage, the last rider came in with his tale of "Boot and saddle."

Indeed, Blake urged his mare to follow the second horseman; but she was reluctant, and was sobbing under him after the headlong gallop.

"I had forgotten. She has carried me from Oxford already," he said, turning to his companion.

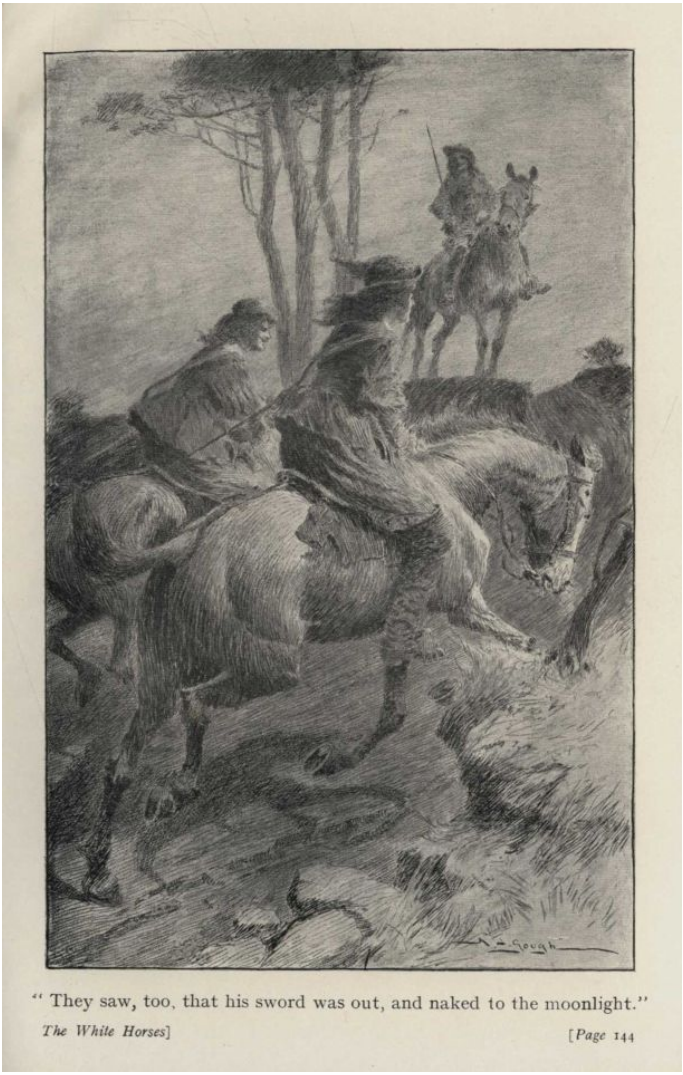
"She's a good little mare," said Metcalf, with instinctive judgment of all horseflesh. "She will have time to rest if you're minded to share the waiting time with me."

"Your five days and a half?" laughed the other, as they returned at a quiet pace to their first meeting-place. "Yes, I shall stay, if only to claim my wager. It is not in human power for your company to muster in the time."

"It is a game we have played often during these last months. Lord Fairfax, in the north, swears there's witchcraft in it, because we have carried news from York to Skipton, from Skipton into Lancashire, while single messengers were spurring half-way on the road."

"*I* am a messenger of the lonely sort," put in Blake—with a touch of spleen, for he was tired. "Well, I propose to see what comes of your new way of galloping."

"The first that comes"—Metcalf yawned and stretched himself with an air



" They saw, too, that his sword was out, and naked to the moonlight."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 144

*"They saw, too, that his sword was out, and naked to the moonlight."*

of complete strength and bodily content—"will be my Cousin Ralph, who took the message on just now. When he has passed it on, he rides hitherto. We may expect him in a half-hour or so."

Blake, himself something of a mystic, who rode fine errands by help of no careful planning, but by intuition, was interested in this man, who stood for the Metcalf thoroughness, in detail and in hot battle, that had made their name alive through England. He learned, here in the moonlight, with the *jug-jug* of nightingales from the thickets on their right, and the stir of moths about their faces, how carefully the old Squire had planned this venture. The clan was a line of single links from Oxford to the north, so long as the message needed to be carried swiftly; but afterwards each messenger was to ride back along the route to Banbury, until the company mustered on its outskirts grew big enough to hold attack from the town in check.

As they talked, and while Metcalf was pushing tobacco—borrowed, like the snuff, from Blake—into the bowl of a clay pipe, there came a little sound from up the road. It was a rhythmical, recurrent sound.

"That is my Cousin Ralph," said Metcalf unconcernedly.

The music grew louder by degrees, till the din of nightingales was lost in the rat-a-tat of hoofs.

"The first to the tryst," laughed Blake, as the new-comer dismounted and picketed his horse close to their own. "We have a wager that your folk will not be in Oxford within five days and a half."

"For my part," said Ralph, "I have a hunger that eats inwards. Have you found nothing for the larder, cousin, all this time of waiting?"

Will Metcalf had, as it happened. Near sundown he had set two traps—simple contrivances of looped wire—in a neighbouring rabbit burrow; and, a little while before Blake rode out from Banbury, he had dismounted to find a coney in each snare.

"We shall do well enough," said Will.

Again Blake was astonished by the downrightness of these people. Ralph, who had not tasted food since noon, was sure that his cousin would have made due provision. Methodically they sought for a likely hollow, screened from the rising wind, gathered brushwood and fallen branches, and made a fire. While it was burning up, they skinned and cleaned the rabbits.

"Gentlemen," said Blake, while their meal was in the cooking, "do you give no homage to the god known as chance? All is planned out, from here to York; but I've travelled the night-roads—have them by heart, as a man knows the whimsies of his wife. Suppose some of your men were thrown badly, or killed by Roundheads, how would it fare with the message up to York?"

Ralph Metcalf turned the rabbits with nice regard for the meal overdue.

Then he glanced up. "If there was a gap of four miles, instead of two, the rider would gallop four. If he found another dead man at the next stage, he would gallop six."

So then Blake laughed. "We are well met, I think. I was jealous of your clan, to be candid, when I was told their speed put us poor night-riders to shame. Yet, friends, I think we carry the same loyalty."

Their meal was scarcely ready when again there came the fret of distant hoof-beats. Another giant joined their company. In face and sturdiness he was like the rest; but he happened to be six-foot-four, while his kinsmen here were shorter by two inches. He, too, was hungry.

"That's good hearing," said Ralph. "I was puzzling how to carve two rabbits into three, but it's easy to split them into twice two."

"Half a coney to feed my sort of appetite?"

"Be content. If it had not been for Will here we'd have had no food at all."

The newcomer drew a bottle from the pocket of his riding-coat. "I forget whether I stole it or paid honest money. It's a small bottle, but it will give us the bite of the northern winds again."

When they had ended this queer supper, and had borrowed from the store of tobacco that to Blake was better than a meal, they fell into silence. The languorous beauty of the night wove its spell about them; and the fourth Metcalf, when he rode in presently, jarred them roughly out of dreams. The newcomer, as it happened, had contrived to snatch supper while he waited, six miles further north, to take on the message. He did not ask for food; after picketing his horse, he just wrapped himself in the blanket hastily unstrapped from saddle, turned over once or twice in a luxury of weariness, and snored a litany to the overarching heavens.

Through that night Blake did not sleep or ask for slumber. The nightingales were tireless, as if their throats would break unless they eased them. The Metcalf riders were tireless, too. At longer and at longer intervals they came in from the north, their horses showing signs of stress. Two miles from outpost to outpost was a trifling distance; but, before the last of that night's company joined the muster here at Banbury, he had travelled forty miles.

Blake lay, his face to the moonlight, and could not stifle memory. The sleepy fragrance, the scent of moist earth and flowering stuff, took him, as by sorcery, to a walled garden in Knaresborough and a summer that had been, and the end of blandishment. There had been no nightingales—it lay too far north, that garden, to tempt them—but a stronger song had stirred him. And there had been the same lush smell of summer, the same hovering of bats across the moon's face.

It was as if she sat beside him again—they two listening to the ripple of

Nidd River far below—and her voice was low and tender as she chided him for love-making. There had been other meetings—stolen ones and brief—and all the world a-maying to Blake's view of it.

He would not let the dream go—played with it, pretended he had not learned long since what it meant to love a light-of-heart. Her face, of the kind that painters dote on when they picture maiden innocence, the shifting play of light and colour in her eyes, the trick she had of making all men long to be better than they were—surely he could rest this once from many journeyings, and snatch another stolen meeting, there in Knaresborough, with all the roses blowing kisses to them.

As he lay there, the two Metcalfs who were sentrying their little camp grew tired of pacing to and fro, each on his own short beat, and halted for a gossip. Blake did not heed them until they began to talk of Knaresborough, of Michael's dash into the Castle, of a Mistress Bingham he had met there.

"Michael met his match for once," laughed one sentry. "You know his gift of finding the finest eyes in England housed under every other woman's brows? Well, Mistress Demaine plays a good game at hearts, too, they say. Michael was touched in earnest this time. Oh, the jest of it!"

"It would be a better if they began by playing, and ended with the silken noose. Can you picture Michael wedded—Michael, with cut wings and drooping comb, seeking no more for fairest eyes?"

Blake left his dreams as if they scorched him. So Mistress Bingham had been two years ago; so she would be, doubtless, when the King had come to his own again, and had reigned long, and passed on the crown. There is a stability about inconstancy, Blake realised.

He got to his feet, crossed to where the sentries stood, and yawned. "Gentlemen," he said, "I cannot sleep for hunger; and there will be others in my case before the night ends. Can I borrow two of your company to make up a forage-party?"

One of the sentries pointed to a distant belt of wood, high up against the sky. "When dawn rides over the trees yonder, our watch is ended. We'll join you, Mr. Blake, if only because you have the most diverting laugh I ever heard, except Michael's when he's seen a pair of pretty eyes."

A half-hour later they kicked the fresh sentries out of sleep. Then Blake and they went up the pasture-lands on foot. It was a good night for foraging; every pitfall of the ground, every farmstead sleeping in the bosom of its guardian trees, showed clear in the dawn-light. And none of the three men had qualms about the business, for the Banbury country, through and through, was traitorous to the King.

They returned two hours later in high spirits. The Metcalfs asked for a

good deal of feeding, after a night in the open had set a razor-edge to appetite; and the scouting-party had commandeered a farmer's horse and gig to bring their booty into camp.

"Who goes there?" snapped the sentries, running to meet this intrusion on the night's quiet.

"A Mecca, lad," laughed the driver, "bringing fowls and cheese, and good home-cured bacon—ay, and a little barrel of rum that nearly bounced out o' the gig when I came to a rutty place in the road."

"'Twould have been a pity to have lost the rum. Where are Blake and your cousin Nicholas?"

"Oh, following! The gig would not hold us all. As for Blake, he has few cares in life. Not one to have his heart touched by a woman—he. He laughs by habit, till you're forced to laugh with him."

## CHAPTER XI.

### BANBURY CAKES.

At Oxford, there was expectation threading the routine of Court life. The fine light of devotion to lost causes—causes lost because they were ever too high for mean folks' understanding—had cradled this good city. Chivalry, the clean heart and the ruddy, fervid hope, had built her wonderland of colleges and groves and pleasant streets. Men of learning, of passionate fervour for the things beyond, had lived and died here; and such men leave about the place of their bodily sojourn a living presence that no clash of arms, no mire of human jealousies, can overcome.

For this reason, all Oxford awaited the coming of the Metcalfs. They in the north—men well content, not long ago, to follow field-sports and the plough—were different in breed and habits from these folk in the comely city. But, in the matters that touch dull workaday into a living flame, they were of the same company—men who hoped, this side or the other of the veil, to see the Standard floating high above life's pettiness. And, for this reason, Oxford waited the Metcalfs' coming with an expectancy that was oddly vivid. The gamesters of the Court wagered heavily as to the hour of their arrival. Grave dons, who happened to be interested in the mathematics more in favour at the sister University, drew maps of the route from Banbury to York, calculated the speed of

messengers spurring at the gallop north, and the return pace of riders coming south on horses none too fresh. These had recourse to algebra, which seemed only to entangle the argument the more.

Queen Henrietta Maria and the ladies of the Court made no calculations. Michael and Christopher were here, big, wind-browned men, who seemed unaware that they had done anything worth praise; and the Queen, with her French keenness of vision, her late-learned English view of life, knew that two gentlemen had come to Oxford, men made in the image of chivalry, ready to live or die with gallantry.

So the two brothers were spoiled outrageously, until, on the second day, Kit was despatched alone to Lathom House in Lancashire.

"Take all the quieter byways," said Rupert, as he saw him get to saddle. "Tell the Lady of Latham to hold out a little longer. And tell her from me, *Well done*!"

Rupert sighed as he turned away. He was fretting to be at Shrewsbury, raising his company for the relief of York; but he was kept in Oxford here by one of those interminable intrigues which had hampered him for months past. The older men whose counsel the King trusted—Culpepper, Hyde, and the rest—were jealous of Rupert's conspicuous genius for warfare. The younger men were jealous of the grace—a grace clean-cut, not foppish, resolute—which endeared him to the women of the Court. He was accused of treachery at Bristol, of selling his honour for a sum of gold; it was said that he dallied here in Oxford for reasons known to the Duchess of Richmond. No lie was too gross to put in circulation, by hint, or question, or deft innuendo. Day by day, hour by hour, men were dropping poison into the King's ear and the Queen's; and at the Councils, such as this that kept him here just now, he saw across the table the faces of men obstinately opposed to him. Whatever he suggested was wrong because he was the spokesman; whatever was in blunt contradiction to his view of the campaign was applauded. The Duke of Richmond, his friend and ally, was with him, and one or two younger men who had no gift of speech in these times of stress. For the rest, he was alone, a man of action, with his back to the wall in a battle of tongues.

He carried himself well enough even to-day, when the meeting was more stormy than usual. His dignity was not a cloak, but an inbred strength that seemed to grow by contact with adversity.

"So, gentlemen," he said, at the close of the Council, "you have had your way so far as talk goes. Now I have mine. I hold a commission from the King to raise forces for the relief of sundry garrisons. I shall relieve those garrisons in my own way. Meanwhile, you may hold Councils without number, but I would recommend tennis to you as a healthier pastime."

They watched him go. "The d—d young thoroughbred!" spluttered Culpep-

per. "We'll get a bit between his teeth, one of these days, and teach him discipline."

Rupert made his way across the High Street, a curious soreness at his heart. Discipline? He had learned it in his teens—the self-restraint, the gift of taking blows and giving them with equal zest. But this new school he was passing through was harsh, unlovely. There was York, waiting for relief; there was Lathom House, defended with courage unbelievable by Lady Derby and a handful of hard-bitten men; there were twenty manors holding out in hope of the succouring cavalry who did not come; and he was kept here to attend a Council, to listen to veiled jealousy and derision, when all he asked for was a horse under him and grace to gather a few thousand men.

As he neared Christ Church, intent on seeking audience of the King, and stating frankly his own view of his enemies, he encountered Michael Metcalf crossing hurriedly from a side street.

"Well, sir?" he asked, with a sense of friendship at sight of a man so obviously free of guile. "Have they done wagering in Oxford as to the hour your kinsmen ride in?"

"I think the play runs even faster. Some learned dons have brought the heavy guns of algebra to bear on it, and all the town is waiting for their answer to the riddle."

"All's topsy-turvy," laughed the Prince. "If dons have taken to giving the odds on a horserace, where will Oxford end? But you were hurrying, and I detain you."

Michael explained that the King had commanded his presence at the Deanery; and the other, after a brief farewell, turned on his heel. After all, his own business with the King could wait until this reigning favourite in Oxford had had his audience.

Just across the way was Merton, where the Queen's lodging was. Rupert had had his fill of disillusion and captivity here in the loyal city; he was human, and could not hide for ever his heartache to be out and doing, lest it ate inward with corrosion. He crossed to Merton, asked for the Queen, and was told that she had gone out a half-hour since to take the air. The Duchess of Richmond was within, he learned in answer to a second query.

The Duchess was stooping over a table when he was announced. She added a few quick strokes to the work she was engaged on, then rose.

"You, my Prince?" she said, with frank welcome. "You come from the Council? I hoped that you would come. Were they as always?"

"My lord Cottington's gout was at its worst, and he in the same mood as the disease. Digby's mouth was more like a Cupid's bow than ever, and he simpered well-groomed impertinences. How I loathe them, Duchess."

"You would."

She turned for a moment to the window, looked out on the May sunlight and the dancing leaves. All the vigour of their loyalty to the King—her husband's and her own—all the dreams they had shared of monarchy secure again, and rebellion trampled underfoot, were summed up in Rupert's person. He had done so much already; he was resolute to go forward with the doing, if the curs of scandal and low intrigue would cease snapping at his heels.

She turned from the window. "My Prince," she said, touching his arm with the grace that gives courage to a man, "you do well to come here for sanctuary between the pauses of the battle. If you knew what my husband says of you, if you guessed the many prayers I send you——"

The keen, happy smile broke through from boyhood's days. "Duchess," he said very simply, "I am well rewarded. What were you busy about when I intruded?"

She showed him her handiwork. "One must do something these dull days," she explained, "and it was you who taught me this new art of etching. Am I an apt pupil?"

Rupert looked at the work with some astonishment. The art was in its infancy, and difficult; yet she had done very well, a few crudities apart. The etching showed a kingfisher, triumphant on a rock set in midstream; at its feet lay a half-eaten grayling.

"It is not good art, because it is an allegory," she explained, with the laughter that had been oftener heard before the troubled days arrived. "You, my Prince, are the kingfisher, and the grayling the dull-witted fish named Parliament."

At the Deanery Michael was in audience with the King, whose imagination had been taken captive by the exploits of the Riding Metcalfs, by the stir and wonderment there was about the city touching the exact hour of their coming. Michael, because wind and hazard in the open had bred him, carried himself with dignity, with a reverence rather hinted at than shown, with flashes of humour that peeped through the high gravity of this audience. He explained the wagering there was that York would be relieved, spoke of the magic Rupert's name had in the north. At the end of the half-hour the King's face was younger by ten years. The distrust of his nephew, wearing faith away as dropping water wears a rock, was gone. Here, by God's grace, was a gentleman who had no lies at command, no private grudge to serve. It was sure, when Michael took his farewell, that the commission to raise forces for the relief of York would not be cancelled.

The King called him back, bade him wait until he had penned a letter. The letter—written with the sense that his good angel was looking over his shoulder, as Charles felt always when his heart was free—was a simple message to his wife. He had not seen her for a day, and was desolate. He could not spare time to cross

the little grove between this Merton, because he had letters still unanswered but hoped to sup there later in the day. He was a fine lover, whether of Church, or State, or the wife who was lavender and heartsease to him; and, after all, they are three kingly qualities.

He sealed the letter. "You will be so good as to deliver it into the Queen's hand, Mr. Metcalf; there may be an answer you will bring."

Michael, when he knocked at the gate of Merton, was told the Queen was abroad. He said that he would wait for her return; and, when the janitor was disposed to question, he added that he came direct from the King, and, if he doubted it, he would pitch him neck and crop into the street. He was admitted; for the janitor, though sturdy, was six inches shorter.

When he came into the room—that would have been gloomy between its panelled walls, if it had not been for the sunlight flooding it with gold and amber—he saw Rupert and the Duchess of Richmond standing near the window. Sharp, like an east wind from Knaresborough, where he had marked time by dalliance with pretty women, he heard Miss Bingham's voice as she bade him, when he came to Oxford, ask Rupert how the Duchess of Richmond fared.

Michael did not need to ask. With a clean heart and a conscience as easy as is permitted to most men, he saw these two as they were—loyal woman helping loyal man to bind the wounds that inaction and the rust of jealousy had cankered.

"By your leave," he said, "I have a letter for the Queen."

"It will be safe in my hands, Mr. Metcalf."

The Prince was surprised by the other's gravity, his air of perplexity. "I would trust all I have to you," said Michael, "all that is my own. But this letter is the King's, and he bade me give it to the Queen herself. I can do no less, believe me."

"Sir," said Rupert coldly, "you risk your whole advantage here at Court—make me your enemy for life, perhaps—because you stand on a punctilio the King himself would not ask from you."

The Duchess watched the faces of these men. Michael had been the laughter-maker in the midst of disastrous days; his gift of story, his odd susceptibility to the influence of twenty pairs of bright eyes in a day, had made him a prime favourite. Now he was as hard and simple-minded as his brother Christopher. She approved the man in his new guise.

"I stand on the strict command the King gave me," said Michael quietly. "Sir, how could a man do otherwise?"

Rupert turned suddenly. "Duchess," he said, "we stand in the presence of a man. I have tried him. And it always clears the air, after Councils and what not, to hear the north wind sing. I wish your clan would hurry to the muster, sir, if they're all as firm as you are for the King."

An hour later the Queen returned, read the letter, penned a hasty answer. "Ah, it is so good to see you, Monsieur Metcalf, so good! You have the laughter ready always—it is so good to laugh! There is—what you call it?—too much salt in tears, and tears, they fall so quick if one allows it. Now, you will tell me—before you take my letter—when does your big company ride in? Some say to-day, others two, three days later. For myself, I want to see your tall men come. They will make light the King's heart—and he so *triste*—ah, *croyez-vous* that he is *triste*!"

With her quick play of hands and features, her pretty broken English, the air of strength and constancy that underlay her charm, the Queen touched Michael with that fire of pity, admiration, selfless love, which never afterwards can be forgotten. She had bidden him laugh, lest for her part she cried. So he made a jest of this ride of the Metcalfs south. He drew pictures, quick, ludicrous pictures, of men calculating this queer game of six-score men travelling fast as horseflesh could bring them to the loyal city. He explained that he alone had the answer to the riddle, because he was unhampered by Christopher's obstinacy on the one hand, by the grave algebra of dons on the other. All Oxford had been obsessed by the furious gallop of horsemen north between stage and stage. They could reach York in fifteen hours. It was the return journey, of units gathering into companies, of companies resting their horses when need compelled, that fixed the coming of the White Horses into Oxford. And the last of these—the one mustered nearest York—was of necessity the one that guided the hour of coming.

In the north ride, speed and road-dust under the gallop; in the canny muster toward the south, a pace of tiresome slowness.

"How long since we came in, Christopher and I?" asked Michael.

"Six days," said Rupert. "They's been leaden days for me, and so I counted them."

"Then look for our folk to-morrow, somewhere between dawn and sunset."

On the northern road, beyond Banbury, there had been a steady muster of the Metcalfs day by day. Blake, the night-rider, watched the incoming of these northern men—each day a score of them, big on their white horses—with wonder and a keen delight. Those already mustered were so sure of the next day's company; and these, when they rode in, carried the same air of buoyancy, of man-like hardihood and child-like trust.

A new, big dream was stirring round Blake's heart. Six days ago he had lain awake and heard two sentries talk of Miss Bingham, of the coquetry she practised still in Knaresborough, and his old wound had opened. He had staunched the bleeding with prompt skill; and now his heart was aching, not for fripperies over and done with, but for the thing that Oxford was to see, if all went well. He had ridden out to spur the first Metcalf forward with his message to the north. He

would bring this gallant company into the city—he, small of body, used only to the plaudits of barn-owls and farmhouse dogs as he galloped over hill and dale on lonely errands—he would come into the full sunlight of Oxford's High Street with the stalwarts he had gathered in.

There's no stimulus so fine as a dream nurtured in good soil. Blake went foraging by day, taking his share of other camp work, too; and, when his sleep was earned o' nights, he lay watching the stars instead and pictured this good entry into Oxford. The dream sufficed him; and, unless a man can feel the dream suffices, he might as well go chewing pasture-grass with other sleepy cattle.

On the sixth evening, when a grey heat-mist was hiding the sun an hour before his time, the last of the Metcalfs came in, the old Squire of Nappa at their head. And Blake put a question to the Squire, after they had known each other half an hour—a question that none of the others had known how to answer, though he had asked it often. "We have had excursions and alarms from Banbury, sir—a few skirmishes that taught them the cost of too great inquisitiveness—and I asked your folk why we gathered here, instead of skirting a town so pestilent."

"They did not tell you," chuckled the Squire, "because they could not, sir. I am used to asking for obedience. My lads learn the reason later on. But you shall know. I shall never forget, Mr. Blake, that it was you who brought me in my old age to the rarest frolic I ever took part in."

He explained, with a jollity almost boyish, that Banbury was notorious in Northern gossip as a hotbed of disloyalty, its folk ever on the watch to vex and hinder Oxford. So he proposed to sweep the town as clean as might be before riding forward.

Soon after dawn the next day, men and horses rested, they set about the enterprise. The sentry posted furthest north of Banbury ran back to give word that the camp was astir; the soldiers and townsmen, not knowing what was in the mind of this company that had been gathering on its borders these six days past, got to arms and waited. And then they heard a roar, as it were of musketry, as the Metcalfs gave their rally-call of "A Mecca for the King!"

There was no withstanding these men. They had more than bulk and good horses at their service. The steadfastness that had brought them south, the zeal that was like wine in their veins, made them one resistless whole that swept the street. Then they turned about, swept back again, took blows and gave them. The Banbury men were stubborn. They took the footman's privilege, when matched against cavalry, of trying to stab the horses; but the Metcalfs loved the white horses a little better than themselves, and those who made an essay of the kind repented it.

At the end of it Squire Metcalf had Banbury at command. "We can breakfast now, friends," he said, the sweat streaming from his jolly face. "I told you we could

well afford to wait."

His happy-go-lucky prophecy found quick fulfilment. Not only was the place rich in the usual good food dear to the Puritans, but it happened that the wives of the town had baked overnight a plentiful supply of the cakes which were to give Banbury its enduring fame. "They're good cakes," laughed the Squire of Nappa. "Eh, lads, if only Banbury loyalty had the same crisp flavour!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### PAGEANTRY.

Oxford was keeping holiday. The Queen, sure that her husband was facing trouble at too short a range, persuaded him—for her own pleasure, she asserted—to hold a pageant in a field on the outskirts of the city. It was good, she said, that well-looking cavaliers should have a chance of preening their feathers until this dull waiting-time was over—good that tired ladies of the Court should get away from men's jealousies and wrangles, and air their graces. So a masque had been written and arranged within a week, the zest in it running side by side with the constant expectation of the Metcalfs' coming.

The masque was fixed for twelve o'clock; and, an hour before noon, the company of players began to ride up the High Street on their way to the playing field. Mary of Scots passed badinage with a Franciscan friar as they rode in company; a jester went by, tickling Cardinal Wolsey in the ribs until the great crowd lining either side the street laughed uproariously. The day was in keeping with it all—sunlight on the storied houses, lush fragrance of the lilac, the song of birds from every branch of every tree.

From up the street there came, sudden as a thunder-clap, the clash of horses' feet. The masqueraders drew aside, to right and left, with little heed for wayfarers. And down the lane, bordered thick with faces, there came a band of men who did not ride for pageantry.

In front of them—he had been thrust into leadership by the Squire of Nappa, who had guessed his ambition and his dream—rode a little man on a little, wiry mare. Blood was dripping from a wound on his cheek; his right arm hung limp. He did not seem to be aware of all this disarray, but rode as a conqueror might do. The dream sufficed him.

A draper in the crowd, whose heart was bigger than the trade that hemmed

him in, raised a strident cry: "Why, it's little Blake! Wounds over him, from head to foot—but it's little Blake."

And then Blake's dream came true. To the full he tasted the incense of men's praise, long worked for, yet unsought. All down the High Street the running murmur went that Blake was here; and the people saw his wounds, the gay, courageous smile in answer to their greeting, and their cheers redoubled.

The pageant-makers, thrust aside by the steady, uncompromising trot of the Metcalfs, lost their first irritation—forgot the boredom that had settled on them during these idle days—and raised a cheer as lusty as the townfolks'. The street was one sunlit length of white horses moving forward briskly, four by four; the big men on them were white with dust, and ruddier splashes of the warfare at Banbury showed here and there. It was as if the days of old were back again, and Northmen riding, with a single heart and purpose, to a second Flodden. They moved, not as six-score men, but as one; and when the old Squire drew rein presently, they, too, pulled up, answering the sharp command as a sword answers to the master's hand.

"By your leave, sir," said the Squire, "we come in search of Prince Rupert. Can you direct us to his lodging?"

It happened that it was Digby he addressed—Digby of the soft voice, the face like a cherub's, and the tongue of an old, soured woman. "I could not say," he answered. Of all the Cavaliers there, he only was unmoved by the strength and fine simplicity of these riders into Oxford. "If I were aware where the Duchess of Richmond is to be found, I could direct you."

A stormy light came into the Squire's grey eyes. "We have heard of the Duchess. Her name is fragrant in the North, sir, save where ostlers gather at the tavern and pass gossip on for gaping yokels."

"Countered, you dandy!" laughed Digby's neighbour. "Grooms in Oxford and grooms in the North—hey, where's the difference?"

"We shall prove it, sir, at dawn to-morrow," said Digby, his hand slipping to his sword-hilt.

"Oh, content. I always liked to slit a lie in two, and see the two halves writhe and quiver."

The Squire of Nappa, looking at these two, guessed where the danger of the King's cause lay. Men see clearly when heart and soul and purpose are as one. If two of his own company had offered and accepted such a duel openly, he would have taken them, one in either hand, and knocked their heads together, in the interests of discipline. In Oxford, it seemed usual that private differences should take precedence of the King's service, and the Squire felt chilled for the first time since he rode out from Yoredale.

Prince Rupert had shared a late breakfast with the Duke of Richmond and

the Duchess, who was, in heart and soul, a great lady beyond the reach of paltry malice. Rupert was moody, irritable. He was sick for pageantry in the doing—gallop of his cavalry with swords glancing on Roundhead skulls—blows given for the health of the reigning King, instead of play-acting to the memory of buried monarchs. He was passionately disdainful of this pageant in which he was to play a part, though at the moment he was donning mediaeval armour.

"I should have held aloof from it all," he protested.

"No," said the Duchess. "There could have been no pageantry without you. Believe me, it is good for us to have action, if only in the playing—it lights dull days for us."

Rupert strode up and down the floor with his restless, long-legged stride. "I'm to figure as Richard the Crusader," he said, tired of himself and all things. "I ask you, friends, do I show like a Crusader?"

"Your temper of the moment does not, but a man's past goes with him," she broke in, with her soft, infectious laugh. "Of all the King's gentlemen I know, my husband here, and you, stand nearest to the fine crusading days. To please us both, you will play your part?"

Rupert was beyond reach of blandishment. There was a fire from the overworld about him; men and women grew small in the perspective, and only the vigour and abiding zeal he had for the King's service remained to guide him, like a taper shining through a night of trouble.

"Friends," he said, simply as a child, "I had a dream last night. I dreamed that prayers were answered at long last, and that the sea rode into Oxford—a gallant sea, creamed with white horses riding fast."

"How should that be?" laughed the Duke. "It was a tired man's dream."

"It was more," said Rupert sharply. "It was a true vision of the days to come. I tell you, the white horses rode into Oxford like a crested sea. I knew they came to help me, and I grew tired of pageantry." He smiled at his own gravity, and reached out for his Crusader's sword. "Come," he broke off, "Coeur de Lion should be punctual to the tryst."

They came into the High Street, the three of them; and Rupert checked his horse with a thrill of wonderment. Not until now had he guessed what the strain of these last idle days had been. He saw the gallant sea ride into Oxford, as in his dream—saw it ride down to meet him, creamed with white horses moving at the trot. He was a free man again.

And then the crowd's uproar ceased. They saw Rupert, their idol, spur forward sharply, saw the company of Metcalfs halt as one man when their Squire drew rein.

"You are the Metcalfs, come from York, I think," said Rupert. Ten years seemed lifted from him in a moment. "Gentlemen, we've waited for you. The

King will make you very welcome."

"We came to find Prince Rupert," said the Squire of Nappa, uncovering, "and, God be thanked, I think we've found him. You are like my picture of you."

The Squire's errand was accomplished. By hard stages, wakefulness o' nights, banter or the whiplash of his tongue by day, he had brought these high-mettled thoroughbreds into Oxford. It was a relief to take orders now, instead of giving them.

"Sir, they're asking for pageantry in Oxford," said the Prince, "and, by Richard Coeur de Lion, they shall have their fill. Permit me to command your troop."

The Duchess, not for the first time, was surprised by the right-to-be-obeyed that Rupert carried with him. Instinctively the Metcalfs made a lane between their sweating horses, and she found herself riding through the pleasant reek of horseflesh until they came to the end of this long avenue of men.

Rupert was himself again—no longer an idler, exchanging growls with enemies in Council, but a man, at the head of the finest cavalry even his proved judgment had encountered so far. When they came to the pageant field, he bade them dismount and do as they pleased for an hour; at the hour's end they were to be ready and alert.

When the King arrived by and by with his Queen, a great wave of loyalty went put to greet them. However it fared with his shifting fortunes, he was here among friends, and knew it. The knowledge was heartening; for Charles had gone through bitter struggle to keep an unmoved face when all he loved seemed racing to disaster.

The pageant moved forward; but the crowd was lukewarm until Richard the Crusader came, and then they went mad about the business.

"How they love him!" said the King, his face flushed with pleasure.

The Queen touched him on the arm as only wives do who have proved their men. "And you—how the good city loves you! To have captured Oxford's heart—ah, will you not understand how big your kingdom is? In London—oh, they are shopkeepers. In Oxford there is the great heart beating. Gain or loss, it does not matter here."

When the Crusading scene was ended, and while some affair of royalty granting a Charter to dull-witted burgesses was in the playing, Rupert came to the King's side. "There's a modern episode to follow, sir, if you are pleased to watch it."

"Ah, no!" pleaded the Queen, with her pretty blandishment. "It would be a pity, Rupert, to be less than Coeur de Lion. The armour fits you like a glove."

"I think you lived once in those days, Rupert of the fiery heart," laughed the King; "but no man thrives on looking back. Go, bring your modern mummers in!"

Rupert brought them in. He doffed his mediæval armour somewhere in the background of the field, and donned the raiment he liked better.

"Are you ready, Metcalfs?" he asked, pleasantly.

With the punctilio that was part of the man, he insisted that the Squire of Nappa should ride beside him at the head of this good company. They thundered over the field, wheeled and galloped back. It was all oddly out of keeping with the pageantry that had gone before. In playing scenes of bygone centuries men gloss over much of the mud and trouble of the times; but here were six-score men who had the stain of present traffic on them.

The King himself, grave and reticent since the troubled days came, clapped hands as he watched the sweeping gallop, the turn-about, the precision of the troop when they reined in and saluted as if one man had six-score hands obeying the one ready loyalty. But the Queen grew pitiful; for she saw that most of these well-looking fellows carried wounds and a great tiredness.

"What is this scene you play?" asked the King.

"Sir, it is the Riding Metcalfs, come to help me raise recruits for the relief of York. Coeur de Lion died long ago, but these Northmen are alive for your service."

"My thanks, gentlemen," said Charles. "By the look of you, I think you could relieve York without other help."

Rupert pressed home his point. "Grant us leave, sir, to go wide through Lancashire and raise the siege of Lathom first. My Lord Derby was here only yesterday, after long travel from the Isle of Man."

The Queen, knowing how persistently Lord Derby had been maligned, how men had poisoned the King's mind against him, caught Rupert's eye and frowned at him. His nimble wit caught the challenge and answered it.

"Sir," he said, with the swiftness and assurance of a cavalry attack, "remember Lady Derby there at Lathom. She has held out for weary months—a woman, with a slender garrison to help her—has held out for the honour of the Stuart. Give me my Metcalfs, and other troops to raise, and grant us leave to go by way of Lathom House."

The King smiled. "I thought you a fighter only, Rupert. Now you're an orator, it seems. Go, rescue Lady Derby; but, as you love me, save York. There are only two cities on the map to me these days—York and Oxford. The other towns count loss and gain, as tradesmen do."

Long stress of misunderstanding, futile gossip of courtiers unemployed, dripping poison into the King's mind, were swept away. "As God sees me, sir, I ride only for your honour. The Metcalfs ride only for your honour."

"Ah, Coeur de Lion," laughed the King, "have your own way of it, and prosper."

At Lathom House, three days ago, there had been a welcome addition to the garrison. Kit Metcalf—he of the sunny smile, because he loved a maid and was not wedded to her whimsies yet—had ridden to the outskirts of the house, had dismounted, left his horse to roam at large, and had crept warily through the moonlight that shone on sleeping men and wakeful sentries. On the left of the moat, near the rounded clump of sedge that fringed its turning, he saw two sentries chatting idly between their yawns.

"It's a poor affair, Giles, this of keeping awake to besiege one woman."

"A poor affair; but, then, what could you look for from an officer of Rigby's breed? Sir Thomas Fairfax had no liking for the business. We've no liking for it."

Kit ran forward through the moonlight, gripped them with his right hand and his left—neither hand knowing just what the other was doing—and knocked their skulls together with the strength given him by Providence. They tumbled forward over the brink of the moat, and Kit himself dived in.

When he came to the water's top again, he swam quietly to the further bank, then went in great tranquillity up the grassy slope that led him to the postern gate, and was surprised when he was challenged sharply. Remembering what he had gone through for the Stuart, he thought, in his simple country way, that comrades of the same breed would know him, as dog knows brother-dog, without further parley. When he was asked who went there, his temper fired, though the wet of his crossing should have damped its powder.

"A Mecca for the King, you wastrel! Have you not heard of us?"

"By your leave, yes," said the sentry, with sudden change of front. "All Lancashire has heard of you. What is your business here?"

"To see Lady Derby instantly."

He was passed forward into the castle, and a grey-headed man-servant came to meet him. Again he said curtly what his business was.

"It is out of question, sir," the man protested. "My lady has had three sleepless nights. She gave orders that she should not be roused till dawn, unless, indeed, there was danger from the enemy."

Kit was headstrong to fulfil his errand to the letter. "Go, rouse her!" he said sharply. "I come from the King at Oxford, and my news cannot wait."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE LADY OF LATHOM.

All folk, even grey and pampered servants, obey the ring of true command in a man's voice; and after Kit had waited for what seemed a week to his impatience, a great lady came down the stair and halted at a little distance from him, and looked him up and down. Her face was lined with trouble; there were crows'-feet about her eyes; but she was dressed fastidiously, and her head was erect with challenge.

"Well, sir?" she asked sharply. "You rob me of sleep for some good reason, doubtless. Sleep? You could have asked no dearer gift. But the King himself commands, you say?"

Kit faced her ill-temper, and she liked him for it.

"My lady," he said, "Prince Rupert bids me tell you that he comes your way, for the relief of Lathom. He bids me tell you that Lathom House has lit a fire of loyalty from one end to the other of your county."

"So Rupert comes at last?" she asked eagerly.

"As soon as he can gather forces. Meanwhile, he sends me as his deputy, and that's one more sword-arm at your service."

Again she looked him up and down; and smiled. "I like big men. They help to fill this roomy house I'm defending for my husband and the King—for the King and my husband, I should say, if I were not a better wife than courtier."

Kit, for his part, could not take his eyes away from her. Two women of the breed he had seen before, and two only—the Queen, with courage gloved by French, disarming courtesy, and the downright mistress of Ripley Castle. As Lady Derby stood there, the traces of her twelve months' Calvary were apparent, because she had been roused suddenly from sleep, and pride had not asserted full control as yet. Under her tired eyes the crows'-feet showed like spiders' webs; her face was thin and drawn; and yet there was a splendour about her, as if each day of each week of hardship had haloed her with grace. She was, in deed as in name, the great lady—so great that Kit felt dwarfed for a moment. Then his manhood returned, in a storm of pity to protect this woman.

"Go sleep again," he said. "I was wrong to rouse you with my news."

She laughed, low and pleasantly, like a breeze blowing through a rose-garden. "I slept with nightmares. You are forgiven for rousing me with news that Rupert comes."

Then she, too, saw how weary this Riding Metcalf was, and touched him on the arm with motherly admission of his tiredness. "You need food and wine, sir. I was thoughtless."

The grey old servant, standing like a watch-dog on the threshold, caught her glance, and came in by and by with a well-filled tray.

"Admit that we are well-provisioned, Mr. Metcalf. The siege has left some niceties of the table lacking, but we do well enough."

"'Well, sir?' she asked sharply. 'You rob me of sleep for some good reason doubtless?'"

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 174

*"'Well, sir?' she asked sharply. 'You rob me of sleep for some good reason doubtless?'"*

She nibbled at her food, intent on keeping his riotous appetite in countenance. By the lines in his face, by the temperate haste with which he ate and drank, she knew him for a soldier older than his years.

"Tell me how it sped with your riding from the North?" she asked.

"It went bonnily—a fight down Skipton Raikes, and into the market-place. Then to Ripley, and running skirmishes; and, after that, the ride to Oxford. I saw the King and Rupert, and all the prayers I ever said were answered."

"Oh, I'm tired here, waiting at home with gunshots interrupting every meal. Tell me how the King looked."

"Tired, as you are—resolute, as if he went to battle—and he bade me give you the frankest acknowledgment of his regard."

"Ah, he knows, then—knows a little of what we've done at Lathom?"

"He knows all, and Rupert knows."

On the sudden Lady Derby lost herself. Knowledge that the King praised her, sheer relief that the Prince was marching to her aid, came like rain about her, breaking up the long time of drought. Then she dried her eyes.

"I, too, have fought," she explained, "and have carried wounds. Now, sir, by your leave, are you rested sufficiently? Well, then, I need you for a sortie by and by."

From the boy's laughter, his sharp call to attention, she knew again that he was of the soldier's breed.

"Weeks ago—it seems years by now—this Colonel Rigby who besieges us planted a mortar outside our gates. Our men sallied and killed many, and brought the mortar in."

"Good," said Kit. "I saw it as I came through the courtyard, and wondered whether you or they had put it out of action."

"My folk put it out of action. And now they've brought up another mortar. We dare not let it play even for a day on crumbling walls. There's to be a sortie within the hour. One of my officers is dead, and two are wounded. Sir, will you lead a company for me?"

"Luck always comes my way," assented Kit.

"But you do not ask what strength you have to follow you?"

"What strength you can give me. I am at your service."

When Lady Derby mustered all she could spare from her slender garrison, Kit found himself the leader of twenty men, some hale enough, others stained with the red-rust that attends on wounds.

"Friends," he said, "the moon is up, and there's light enough to guide us in the open."

They liked him. He wasted no speech. He was mired with travel of wet roads, and his face was grey and tired, but they knew him, for they had seen

other leaders spur them to the hazard.

Some went out through the main gate of Lathom, and waited under shadow of the walls. Others joined them by way of little doors, unknown to the adversary. They gathered, a battered company, led by officers half drunk with weariness, and ahead they saw the moonlight shining on the mortar, reared on its hillock.

Beyond the hillock a besieging army of three thousand men slept in security, save for the hundred who kept guard about the mortar. These five-score men were wakeful; for Colonel Rigby—a weakling cloaked in self-importance—had blustered round them an hour ago, had assured them that Lady Derby was the Scarlet Woman, known otherwise as Rome, and with quick invective had threatened them with torture and the hangman if they allowed this second mortar to go the way its predecessor had taken weeks ago. He had sent an invitation broadcast through the countryside, he explained, bidding folk come to see the mortar play on Lathom House to-morrow.

Through the dusk of the moonlight Kit and the rest crept forward. Quick as the sentry shouted the alarm, they were on their feet. They poured in a broadside of musketry at close range, then pressed forward, with swords, or clubbed guns, or any weapon that they carried. It was not a battle, but a rout. In ten minutes by the clock they found themselves masters of the field. The mortar was theirs, and for the moment they did not know what to do with it. From behind came the sleepy roar of soldiery, new-roused from sleep by the retreating guardians of the mortar, and there was no time to waste.

One Corporal Bywater, a big, lean-bodied man, laughed as he touched Kit on the arm. "Had a wife once," he said. "She had her tantrums, like yond mortar—spat fire and venom with her tongue. I cured her with the help of a rope's end."

Bywater, remembering the previous escapade, had lashed two strong ropes about his body, in readiness for this second victory. The cordage, as it happened, had saved him from a death-wound, struck hurriedly by a Parliament man. He unwrapped it now with a speed that seemed leisurely. Rigby's soldiery, from the moonlit slopes behind, buzzed like a hornet's nest. There was indeed no time to waste.

Christopher Metcalf was not tired now, because this hazard of the Lathom siege had captured his imagination. His soul was alert, and the travel-stained body of him was forgotten. Captain Chisenhall detached fourteen of the sortie party to drag the mortar into Lathom House. The rest he sent forward, raised a sudden shout of "For God and the King!" and went pell-mell into the first of Rigby's oncoming men. Though on foot, there was something of the dash of cavalry in this impetuous assault, and for a while they drove back the enemy; then weight of numbers prevailed, and Kit, his brain nimble, his heart singing some old pibroch of the hills his forefathers had tilled, entrenched his men on

the near side of the earthworks Rigby had built to protect his mortar. There was some stark, in-and-out fighting here, until the Roundheads began to deploy in a half circle, with intent to surround Kit's little company. Then he drew back his men for a score yards, led a last charge, and retreated to the Lathom gateway in time to see the mortar dragged safely into the main courtyard.

When the gate was closed, and Kit came out of the berserk madness known as war, he saw the Lady of Lathom in the courtyard.

"But, indeed, sir, you've done very well," said she, moving through the press of men to give him instant greeting.

"It was pastime." Kit's voice was unsteady yet, his head swimming with the wine that drips, not from red grapes, but from the sword that has taken toll of human life. "We brought the mortar in."

"You did, friends. Permit me to say good-night. I have need to get to my knees, thanking God that he sends so many gentlemen my way."

After she was gone, and the men were gathered round the peat fire in the hall, Kit was aware that he was at home. All were united here, as the Metcalfs were united. Private jealousies were lost in this need to defend Lathom for the King. Captain Chisenhall was here, stifling a yawn as he kicked the fire into a glow, Fox, and Worrall and Rawstorn, and others whose faces showed old with long service to this defence of Lathom—the defence that shone like the pole star over the descending night that was to cover kingship for a while.

They asked news of the Riding Metcalfs; and that, in turn, drew them to talk of Lathom's siege. They told him of Captain Radcliffe, who had led twelve sorties from the house, and had spread dismay among the enemy until they feared even the whisper of his name.

"I was never one for my Lady Derby's prayerful view of life," said Rawstorn, his gruff voice softening, "but Radcliffe was on her side. He'd slip away before a sortie, and we knew he was praying at the altar of the little chapel here. Then he would come among us, cracking a jest; but there was a light about his face as if the man were glamoured."

"I know that glamour, too," said Kit, with his unconquerable simplicity. "There's a cracked bell rings me in on Sabbath mornings to our kirk in Yoredale."

"What do you find there, lad?" asked a rough elder of the company.

"Strength undeserved, and the silver sheen of wings."

So then they were silent; for they knew that he could fight and pray—-two qualities that men respect.

It was the big-jowled elder who broke the silence. "Say, laddie, can you drink?" he growled.

"A bucketful, if I'm not needed on this side of the dawn."

Comfort of the usual kind might be lacking here at Lathom, but the cel-

lar was well filled. And Kit, as the wine passed round, learned the truth that comes from unlocked tongues. They talked of the siege, these gallants who had kept watch and ward; they told how Lady Derby had trained her children not to whimper when cannon-shot broke roughly into the dining-hall; they told how Captain Radcliffe, his head erect, had gone out for the thirteenth sortie, how they had warned him of the ill-omen.

"Oh, he was great that day," said Rawstorn. "'If I were Judas, I should fear thirteen,' said he. 'As the affair stands, I'm stalwart for the King.' He was killed in an attack on the east fort; and when we sortied and brought his body in, there was a smile about his lips."

Little by little Christopher pieced together the fragments of that long siege. Lady Derby's single-mindedness, her courage and sheer charm, were apparent from every word spoken by these gentlemen who drank their liquor. The hazards of the men, too—the persistent sorties, the give-and-take and pathos and laughter of their life within doors—were plain for Kit to understand. At Oxford and elsewhere there had been spite and rancour, jealousy of one King's soldier against another. Here at Lathom there was none of that; day by day of every month of siege, they had found a closer amity, and their strength had been adamant against an overpowering force outside their gates.

Kit learned much, too, of Colonel Rigby, who commanded the attack. A hedge-lawyer by training—one who had defended night-birds and skulkers of all kinds—he had found himself lifted to command of three thousand men because Sir Thomas Fairfax, a man of sound heart and chivalry, grew tired of making war upon a lady. Rigby enjoyed the game. He cared never a stiver for the Parliament, but it was rapture to him to claim some sort of intimacy with the titled great by throwing cannon-balls and insults against my Lady Derby's walls.

"As for Rigby," said the man with the big jowl, "I wish him only one thing—to know, to the marrow of him, what place he has in the thoughts of honest folk. Mate a weasel with a rat, and you'll get his breed."

Captain Chisenhall, who had been pacing restlessly up and down the hall, halted in front of Kit. "It was a fine device of yours, to entrench on this side of their own earthworks. I never had much head myself, or might have thought of it. But, man, you're spent with this night's work."

"Spent?" laughed Kit. A sudden dizziness took him unawares, and their faces danced in a grey mist before his eyes. "I was never more wide-awake. D'ye want another sortie, gentlemen? Command me."

With that his head lolled back against the inglenook. He roused himself once to murmur "A Mecca for the King!" then slept as he had done on far-off nights after harvesting of hay or corn in Yoredale.

"There's a game-pup from over the Yorkshire border among us," laughed

Chisenhall. "Let him sleep. Let me get up to bed, too, and sleep. Of all the toasts I ever drank—save that of the King's Majesty—I like this last bumper best. Here's to the kind maid, slumber, and good night to you, my friends."

The next morning, soon after dawn, Kit stirred in sleep. Through the narrow mullions great, crimson shafts of light were stealing. A thrush outside was recalling bygone litanies of mating-time. Sparrows were busy in the ivy. It was so like Yoredale and old days that he roused himself, got to his feet, and remembered what had chanced last night. He had slept hard and truly, and had profited thereby. His bones were aching, and there was a nagging cut across his face; for the rest, he was ready for the day's adventure.

Last night, when he returned from battle, the moonlight had shown him only a littered courtyard, full of men and captured cannonry. He could not guess where the most valiant of cock-throstles found anchor for his feet; and, to settle the question, he went out. The song greeted him with fine rapture as he set foot across the doorway; and in the middle of the yard he saw the trunk of a big, upstanding walnut-tree. Three-quarters of the branches had been shot away, but one big limb remained. At the top of the highest branch a slim, full-throated gentleman was singing to his mate.

"Good Royalist!" said Kit. "Go singing while your branch is left you."

His mood was so tense and alert, his sympathy with the throstle so eager, that he started when a laugh sounded at his elbow. "I knew last night a soldier came to Lathom. He is a poet, too, it seems."

The wild, red dawn—sign of the rainiest summer known in England for fifty years—showed him Lady Derby. The lines were gone from her face, her eyes were soft and trustful, as a maid's eyes are; it did not seem possible that she had withstood a year of siege.

"I was just thanking God," she explained, "that picked men come my way so often. There are so many Rigbys in this world, and minorities need all their strength."

She was so soft of voice, so full of the fragrance which a woman here and there gives out to hearten roughened men, that Kit began to walk in fairyland. So had Captain Chisenhall walked long since, Rawstorn and the other officers, the private soldiery, because the Lady of Lathom was strong, courageous, and secure.

"How have you kept heart so long?" asked Kit, his boy's heedless pity roused afresh.

"And you, sir—how have you kept heart so long?" she laughed.

"Oh, I was astride a horse, plying a sword or what not. It was all easy-going; but for you here——"

"For me there was the bigger venture. You have only one right hand for the

spear. I have control of scores. My dear soldiery are pleased to love me—I know not why—and power is sweet. You will believe, sir, that all this is pastime to me."

Yet her voice broke. Tired folk know tired folk when they are climbing the same hill of sadness; and Kit touched her on the arm. "Rough pastime, I should call it," he said, "and you a woman."

She gathered her courage again. Laughter played about her charitable, wide mouth.

"You're in love, Mr. Metcalf—finely in love, I think, with some chit of a girl who may or may not deserve it. There was a reverence in your voice when you spoke of women."

Kit's face was red with confession of his guilt. "There's none else for me," he said.

"Ah, then, I'm disappointed. This zeal last night—it was not for the King, after all. It was because some woman tempted you to do great deeds for her own pretty sake.'

"We've been King's men at Nappa since time began," said Kit stubbornly. "My father has sounded a trumpet from Yoredale down to Oxford. All England knows us stalwart for the King."

Lady Derby allowed herself a moment's happiness. Here was a man who had no shams, no glance forward or behind to see where his loyalty would take him. There was nothing mercantile about him, and, in these muddled times, that was so much to be thankful for.

"Believe me," she said very gently, "I know your breed. Believe me, too, when I say that I am older than you—some of the keen, blue dawn-lights lost to me, but other beauties staying on—and I ask you, when you meet your wide-eyed maid again, to put it to the question."

"I've done that already."

Again laughter crept round Lady Derby's mouth. "I meant a deeper question, sir. Ask her whether she had rather wed you and live at ease, or see you die because the King commands."

"She would choose death for me—I should not love her else."

"One does not know. There are men and women who have that view of life. They are few. Put it to the question. Now I must go indoors, sir, to see that breakfast is readying for these good men of mine. Pluck is a fine gift, but it needs ample rations."

Kit watched her go. He was amazed by her many-sidedness. One moment tranquil, fresh from her dawn-prayers; the next a woman of the world, giving him motherly advice; and then the busy housewife, attentive to the needs of hungry men. Like Strafford, whose head was in the losing, she was in all things thorough.

He went up to the ramparts by and by. The sentry, recognising him as

one who had shared the sortie over-night, saluted with a pleasant grin. Kit, as he looked down on the trenches, the many tokens of a siege that was no child's play, thought again of Lady Derby, her incredible, suave courage. Then he fell to thinking of Joan, yonder in the North. She, too, was firm for the cause; it was absurd to suggest doubt of that. Whether she cared for him or no, she would be glad to see him die in the King's service.

He was in the middle of a high dream—all made up of gallop, and a death wound, and Joan weeping pleasant tears above his prostrate body—when there came a sharp, smoky uproar from the trenches, and a bullet plucked his hat away.

"Comes of rearing your head against the sky," said the sentry impassively; "but then they're no marksmen, these whelps of Rigby's."

Another bullet went wide of Kit, a third whistled past his left cheek; so that he yielded to common sense at last, and stooped under shelter of the parapet. The besiegers then brought other artillery to bear. A harsh, resonant voice came down-wind to them:

"Hear the news, you dandies of Lady Derby's! Sir Thomas Fairfax has routed your men at Selby. Cromwell is busy in the east. Three of our armies have surrounded your Duke of Newcastle in York. Is that enough for my lady to breakfast on, or would you have further news?"

The sentry—old, taciturn, and accustomed through long months to this warfare of the tongue—bided his time. He knew the habits of these spokesmen of Rigby's. When no answer came from the ramparts, further taunts and foul abuse swept upward from below. Still there was no reply, till the man, in a fierce rage of his own making, got up and showed head and shoulders above the trench. The sentry fired, without haste.

"One less," he growled. "It's queer to see a man go round and round like a spinning top before he tumbles out of sight."

"Was his news true?" asked Kit, dismayed by the tidings.

"Ah, that's to prove. Liars speak truth now and then. Stands to reason they must break into truth, just time and time, by chance."

Kit left the rampart presently, and found a hungry company of men at breakfast.

"Why so grave, Mr. Metcalf?" laughed Lady Derby, who was serving porridge from a great bowl of earthenware. "You are hungry, doubtless. There's nothing else brings such gravity as yours to a man's face."

"I was thinking of last night's sortie," said Kit.

"So that hunger, too, grows on you as on my other gentlemen? But, indeed, we propose to rest to-day. Even we have had enough, I think."

He told them the news shouted from the trenches. Rough-riding, zeal, and youth had given him a persuasiveness of his own. "The news may be true or

false," he said, looking down at them from his full height; "but, either way, it will put heart into the enemy. By your leave, we must harass them."

He had his way, and, knowing it, sat down to a breakfast that astonished all onlookers.

"I find many kinds of admiration for you, sir," drawled Captain Chisenhall, "but especially, I think, for your gift of feeding that fine bulk of yours."

"I'm just like my own homeland in Yoredale," assented Kit; "it needs feeding if strong crops are to follow."

That night they made three sorties on the trenches, five on the next, and for a week they kept the pace. A few of the garrison were killed, more were wounded, but speed and fury made up for loss of numbers, and Colonel Rigby sent a messenger galloping to Manchester for help in need. The besiegers, he explained, were so harassed that they were dropping in the trenches, not from gun-fire, but from lack of sleep.

The sentries on the walls had no chance nowadays to pick off orators who rose from cover of the trenches to shout ill tidings at them. From their vantage-ground on the ramparts they could hear, instead, the oaths and uproar of a disaffected soldiery who voiced their grievances.

On the seventh morning, an hour before noon, a man came into Lathom, wet from the moat, as Kit had been on his arrival here. He told them that Prince Rupert, the Earl of Derby with him, had crossed the Cheshire border, marching to the relief of Lathom.

"So," said Captain Chisenhall, "we'll give them one last sortie before the frolic ends."

Lady Derby smiled pleasantly. "That is your work, gentlemen. Mine is to get to my knees, to thank God that my husband is so near to me."

When they sortied that night, they found empty trenches. The moonlight showed them only the disorder—a disorder unsavoury to the nostrils—that attended a forsaken camp. One man they found with a broken leg, who had been left in the rear of a sharp retreat. He had been bullied by Rigby, it appeared, and the rancour bit deeper than the trouble of his broken limb. He told them that Rigby, and what were left of his three thousand, had pushed down to Bolton, and he expressed a hope—not pious—that all the Cavaliers in England would light a bonfire round him there.

When they gathered for the return to Lathom, the futility about them of hunters who have found no red fox to chase, Kit saluted Captain Chisenhall. "My regards to Lady Derby," he explained; "tell her I'm no longer needed here at Lathom. Tell her that kin calls to kin, and where Rupert is, the Metcalfs are. I go to warn them that Rigby lies in Bolton."

"Good," said Chisenhall. "Rigby has lied in most parts of the country. Go

hunt the weasel, you young hot-head."

When they returned, Lady Derby asked where Kit Metcalf was, and they told her. "Gentlemen," she said, with that odd, infectious laugh of hers, "I have no favourites, but, if I had, it is Kit Metcalf I would choose to bring Prince Rupert here. There's the light of youth about him."

"There is," said Chisenhall. "I lost it years ago, and nothing else in life makes up for it—except a sortie."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A STANLEY FOR THE KING.

Christopher Metcalf had learned the way of hazard, the need to say little and hear all. As he rode from Lathom House through the summer's dawn, the land was full of blandishment. Last night's heavy rain had brought keen scents to birth—of primrose and leafage in the lanes, of wallflowers in the homestead gardens that he passed. Scents tempt a man to retrospect, and he wondered how it was faring with Joan—remembered the nearness of her and the fragrance, as they roamed the Yoredale hills together in other springs.

He put blandishment aside. There was no before or after for him—simply the plain road ahead. Wherever he found a countryman to greet, he drew rein and passed the time of day, and got into talk with him. Before he had covered six miles, he learned that Rigby, with the three thousand men withdrawn from the siege of Lathom, had in fact retreated behind the walls of Bolton, and that the town was strongly fortified. A mile further on his horse cast a shoe, and, while he waited at the door of a wayside smithy, he joined a company of gossips seated on the bench outside.

"Thanks be, the Lady o' Lathom is safe," said a grey old shepherd.

"A rare game-bird, she," assented the jolly yeoman on his left.

"Ay. She's plucked a few fine feathers from Rigby. Rigby? I mind the time when he was skulking in and out—trying to find wastrel men who'd pay him to prove black was white in court. And now he calls himself a Captain."

"Well, he's as he was made, and of small account at that," said the yeoman. "The man I blame is Colonel Shuttleworth. One o' the gentry, he, and likeable. There's no good comes, say I, when the gentry forget their duty to their King. They go to kirk each Sabbath, and pray for the King's health—well, they mean it,

or they don't mean it, and there's no middle way."

Kit felt at home. These men were of the country stock he knew by heart. "Friends," he said, "I'm a stranger here in Lancashire. Who is Colonel Shuttleworth?"

"Oh, just a backslider!" The yeoman's face was cheery by long habit, even when he condemned a man. "He's sent fifteen hundred men to help Rigby garrison the town of Bolton. The likes of him to help the likes of Rigby—it makes us fancy the times are upside down."

Kit Metcalf, when his horse was shod, rode forward swiftly. A league this side of Bolton, where the track climbed steep between banks of ling and bilberry, he saw a man striding a white horse. Man and horse were so big that they blotted out a good part of the sky-line; so he knew that there was a kinsman waiting for him.

"Yoi-hoi!" yelled Kit. "A Mecca for the King."

The horseman shielded his eyes against the sun as he watched the upcoming rider. Then a laugh that Kit remembered floated down-wind to him.

"Why, Michael, what are you doing here?" he asked, as he drew near.

"To be frank, I was yawning just before you came. I've been waiting since daybreak for some messenger from Lathom. And at the end of it you come, white brother of the Metcalf flock—you, who have the luck at every turn."

"I had luck this time—fifteen sorties since I saw you last. Michael, you should have been there with us. We brought their mortar in——"

"Good," drawled Michael. "You had the luck. For my part, I've been sitting on a horse as thirsty as myself for more hours than I remember. Let's get down to camp and a brew of ale there."

"And afterwards we sortied—sortied till we drove them into hiding, like rabbits. The Lady of Lathom welcomed us home each night, her eyes on fire."

"No doubt, brother. The tale will warm me by and by. Meanwhile I don't care a stiver what fire shone in my lady's eyes—blue, or grey, or black. Give me honest ale, of the true nut-brown colour."

"You're a wastrel, Michael," laughed the younger brother, glad to pass badinage again with one of his own folk.

"I am, my lad, and know it. There's luck in being a wastrel—folk expect nothing from a man. He goes free, while such as you—babe Kit, if you guessed how prisoned up you are! They look for sorties, gallops against odds, moonshine of all sorts every day you live. You've a nickname already in Oxford. They name you the White Knight."

"Oh, be done with banter," snapped Christopher. "There's little knighthood about me. Let's get down to camp and see the colour of that ale of yours."

When they came to the heathery, rising land wide of Bolton, and the sentry

had passed them forward, Kit found himself face to face with Prince Rupert once again.

"The White Knight brings news," Michael explained in his off-handed way.

"Pleasant news?" the Prince asked. "Is Rigby dead, or the siege raised?"

"By your leave," said Kit, "the siege is raised. Rigby has gone to Bolton-le-Moors, to hide there. He has what are left of his three thousand men, and fifteen hundred others. The town is strong."

"Good, sir!" Fire—deep, glowing fire—showed in Rupert's eyes. "Lady Derby is a kinswoman of mine; and if Rigby is in Bolton, I know where to find the fox she loathes."

A big, tired figure of a man pushed his way through the soldiery. "I heard someone speak of Lady Derby?" he said.

Prince Rupert touched him on the shoulder. "*I* did, friend," he said, with a quiet laugh. "There's none so touchy as a husband who chances to be his wife's lover, too. My Lord Derby, this is Mr. Metcalf, known otherwise as the White Knight. He brings news that Rigby the fox has slunk into Bolton. Best put our hounds in and drive him out of cover."

"Give me the assault," said Lord Derby drily.

"I cannot. Your name glamours Lancashire. I will not have you risk all in driving a red fox into the open."

Derby yielded to the discipline engrained in him, but with a bad grace. The Prince, himself eager for the assault, but ashamed to take a leadership which on grounds of prudence he had refused the other, asked for volunteers. When these were gathered, the whole force marched on Bolton and halted within five hundred yards of the stout walls. Then the assaulting party came forward at the double.

"Not you, Mr. Metcalf," said Rupert, detaining Christopher as he ran forward to join in any lively venture. "We cannot spare you."

What followed was a nightmare to the lookers-on. They saw the volunteers reach the wall and clamber up—saw a fierce hand-to-hand struggle on the wall-top, and the assault repulsed. And then they saw the victors on the rampart kill the wounded in cold blood.

Some pity, bred of bygone Stuart generations, stirred Rupert. Wrath and tears were so mingled that his voice was harsh. "I give you freedom, Derby, to lead the next attack."

Without pause or word of thanks, Lord Derby got his own company together.

"We fight for my wife, who holds Lathom well," he said to his men.

Then they ran to the attack. Kit, looking on, was astonished to see that Prince Rupert, who had talked of prudence where lives of great men were con-

cerned, was running with the privates of Lord Derby's company. So he, too, ran.

The fight on the wall was bitter, but the King's men prevailed. Over the bodies of their friends, massacred against all rules of war, they leaped into the town. The first man Lord Derby met was a groom, lately in his service at Lathom, who had gone over to the enemy. The man struck a blow at him with the clubbed end of a musket, and Derby parried it, and gave the rogue a better death than he deserved—at the sword's point.

They pressed forward. Once they were hemmed in—six of them—after a fierce rally of the garrison had swept the Royalists aside. One of the six was Prince Rupert; and Kit Metcalf felt the old Yoredale loyalty stir in his veins—a wildness and a strength. He raised a deep-bellied cry of "A Mecca for the King!" cut down the thick-set private who was aiming a blow sideways at Rupert's head, and then went mad with the lust of slaying. Never afterwards could he recall that wonderful, swift lunacy. Memory took up the tale again at the moment when their comrades rallied to their help and thrust back the garrison.

Three of the six were left—the Prince, and Kit, and a debonair, grey-eyed gentleman whose love-locks were ruddied by a scalp-wound. The three went forward with the rest; and, after all was done, they met again in the market-square.

"You, my White Knight?" said the Prince, touching Kit on the arm. "Are you touched? No more than the gash across your cheek? I'm glad of that. Captain Roger Nowell here tells me that I should be lying toes up to the sky if your pike had not been handled nicely. For my part, I saw nothing but Roundhead faces leering at me through a crimson mist."

The instinctive, boyish romance came back to Christopher. He had always been a hero-worshipper, and turned now to the grey-eyed gentleman, who was bandaging his head with a strip torn from his frilled shirt. "You are of the Nowells of Reed Hall?" he asked.

"I am, sir—a queer, hot-headed lot, but I'm one of them."

"My nurse reared me on tales of what your folk did in days gone by. And at Lathom they told me of your sorties. Sir, they thought you dead in your last effort to break through the lines, to bring relief in. They will be glad."

The Prince and Nowell glanced at each other with a quick smile of sympathy. Here, in the reek and havoc of the street, was a simple-minded gentleman, fresh as dawn on the hills that bred him—a man proved many times by battle, yet with a starry reverence for ancient deeds and ancient faith.

"May your nurse rest well where she lies," said Roger Nowell, the laughter in his grey eyes still. "In spite of a headache that throbs like a blacksmith's anvil, I salute her. She reared a man-child. As for those at Lathom, I share their gladness, I admit. A bandaged head is better than none at all."

Then all was bustle and uproar once again. Men came bringing captured colours to the Prince; and in the middle of it Lord Derby found them.

"Welcome, Derby," said the Prince, "though, for the first time since I knew you, you wear the favours of both parties."

"Be pleased to jest," laughed the other. "For my part, I know my wife will soon be seeing me at Lathom."

"But, indeed, you wear both favours—rebel blood on your clothes, and a warmer crimson running from your thigh."

Derby stooped to readjust the bandage. Sickness of body was nothing. Long battle for the King who did not trust him was forgotten, as a service rendered freely, not asking for return. "It is permitted, these bleak days, that a man ask grace to love his wife and hurry to her side?"

"Get home to Lathom, but not just yet. I have a gift for that brave wife of yours."

Through the uproar came other zealots, bringing captured colours in, until seven-and-twenty were gathered in the market-square.

"These speak for the strength of the attack on Lathom," said Rupert, his voice lifted for all men to hear. "Take them to Lady Derby as a token of my high regard. Tell her that it is easy for men to charge at speed and win their battles, but hard for women to sit behind crumbling walls and hold the siege. If I were my Lord Derby, I should be proud of such a wife."

"Your Highness would," assented Derby with sharp, humorous simplicity. "I have husbanded her, and know her mettle."

Again the ebb and flow of the battle scarcely ended swept across their talk. A hot-headed band of Cavaliers was bringing fifteen prisoners through at the double.

The captain of the Royalist band, drunk with the wine of victory, laughed stridently. "To the ramparts with them. Give them short shrift on the walls! Measure for measure, say I, and curse these psalm-singing butchers."

Through the laughter of the troop came Rupert's voice, harsh and resonant. "Who are these, Captain Sturgis?"

Sturgis saluted. He had heard that voice more than once in the thickest of the onset, while Rupert was winning his spurs as a leader of light cavalry. The wine of victory left him. "A few crop-headed folk, your Highness," he said lamely. "We proposed to make them a warning to other butchers of Cromwell's following."

"Captain Sturgis, I am sorry. We have shared many fights, and yesterday you were a gentleman of the King's."

There was silence in the market-place; and presently Sturgis saluted Rupert with extreme precision. "To-morrow, by your leave, I shall report myself. I shall

spend a sleepless night."

Rupert laughed pleasantly. "There's no need to waste a night's sleep, Sturgis. It was a madness, and it has left you, that is all."

Then all again was uproar as men pressed up and down the street, some with prisoners, others hurrying to slake their thirst at a convenient tavern.

"Where's Rigby?" asked Lord Derby suddenly "I have a long account to settle with him."

A jolly yeoman caught the question as he went by. "Gone away, like the fox on a hunting morn. I had a thrust at him myself just now, but missed him; and he leaped the ramparts where we broke it at the coming-in."

"So!" growled Derby. "The fox will give us sport another day."

"My lord," said the Prince, his voice grave and full of courtesy, "I give you twenty-seven standards, captured from Rigby's forces. I give you a hundred of my men as a guard of honour. Eat and drink, and then get forward to Lathom, where your wife awaits you. Let the red fox skulk until a more convenient date."

"And you?"

"I stay on here for a while. It seems to be my business these days to batter walls down, and to stay on afterwards to build them up again. This town is worth defending for the King. Tell Lady Derby that my march to the relief of York will go by way of Lathom, if I may claim her hospitality."

Kit Metcalf found himself among the hundred chosen to accompany Lord Derby; and he was glad, for in Oxford—with its deep, unconquerable love of attaching mystic glamour to a person or a cause—the Lady of Lathom had grown to be a toast drunk silently, as if she were above and beyond the noise of praise.

That evening, as the sundown reddened over Lathom House—the sultry, rain-packed heat aglow on broken battlements—they came through the camp deserted lately by Colonel Rigby. A sentry challenged them; and Lord Derby laughed as any boy might do.

"A Stanley for the King! Have I been away so long, Thornthwaite, that you do not know your lord?"

The master, as usual, had the keener vision. In the clear light he had recognised the sentry as one old in service to his household. They passed through; and in the courtyard Lady Derby was standing near the captured mortar, talking of ways and means with one of her captains.

To Kit, looking on, it was like fairyland come true. Lady Derby heard her husband's step, glanced up, and ran to meet him.

"My lord—my dear, dear lord, have you come back?"

"Ay, like a bridegroom, wife."

They forgot the onlookers, forgot turmoil and great hardship. There comes seldom to any man and wife so fine a forgetting. It was well, Kit thought, to carry

three wounds to his knowledge—and some lesser ones that did not count—to have seen these two with the red halo of the sundown round them.

"The Prince sends me with the twenty-seven standards, wife, that beleaguered you."

"Oh, my thanks; but, my lord, he sends me you. What care have I for standards?"

## CHAPTER XV.

### TWO JOLLY PURITANS.

Three days later Rupert came in, after seeing to the needs of Bolton. He came for rest, before pushing on to York, he asserted; but his way of recreation, here as elsewhere, was to set about the reconstruction of battered walls. Christopher Metcalf, raw not long ago from Yoredale, wondered, as he supped with them that night, why he was privileged to sit at meat with these gentles who had gone through fire and sword, whose attire was muddied and bloodstained, for the most part, but who kept the fire of loyalty like a grace that went before and after the meat they ate hungrily. He was puzzled that Lord Derby toasted him, with the smile his own father might have given him—was bewildered when the men rose to the toast with a joyous roar.

"The young Mecca for the King—the White Knight for the King!"

All he had dreamed in Yoredale was in the doing here. Kit was unsteadied by it, as if wine were mounting to his head.

"My thanks, gentlemen," he said. "Be pleased to nickname me. For my part, I feel like the ass Michael rode to York—patient and long-suffering, but no knight at all."

"How did Michael ride to York?" asked Derby, with a gust of laughter.

So then Kit told the tale, losing his diffidence and pointing the narrative with dry, upland humour.

"Good, Mr. Metcalf," said Lady Derby. "I have not laughed since my lord rode out, until to-day. Where is this Michael who rode to York?"

"With the rest of the good Metcalfs," said Rupert. "I left the whole fine brood to guard Lathom from without. They go north with me in two days' time. You shall see them—six-score on their white horses." A shadow crossed his face; the so-called failing of the Stuart temperament was his, and he counted each man

lost as a brother to be mourned for.

"Why the cloud on your face, Prince?" asked Lady Derby.

"There are only five-score now. When we counted our dead at Bolton, there were some gallant Metcalfs lying face upward to their God."

A sickness came to Christopher. He turned aside, and longed for the mother who had sheltered his young days. Bloodshed and wounds he had foreseen; but to his boy's view of life, it seemed incredible that any of the jolly Yoredale clan should die—should go out for ever, beyond reach of hand-grip.

"Was my father with the slain—or Michael?" he asked by and by.

"Neither, lad." Rupert came and touched him on the arm. "Oh, I know, I know! The pity of one's dead—and yet their glory—it is all a muddle, this affair of war."

It was on the second morning afterwards, while Rupert was getting his army in readiness for the march on York, that Lady Derby saw Christopher standing apart, the new sadness in his face.

"You are thinking of your dead?" she said, in her brisk, imperative way. "Laddie, do you not guess that the dead are thinking, too, of you?"

"They rest where they lie," he said, stubborn in his grief.

"Oh, go to kirk more often, and learn that they know more than we do. These twenty Yoredale men, they are not dead—they watch you from the Heights."

"My lady," said Christopher, with a smile made up of weariness, "I am a plain man of my hands, like all my folk. I have no gift for dreams."

"Nor I," she agreed. "When wounds conquer all your pride of strength—when you are laid by, and weak as a little child—ask yourself if I spoke dreams or living truth."

He glanced once at her. There was an odd look about her, a light in her eyes that he could not understand.

He forgot it all when he joined his folk to ride behind Rupert for the relief of York. The high adventure was in front, like a good fox, and his thoughts were all of hazard and keen blows. They crossed the Lancashire border; and, when Kit learned that the route lay through Skipton-in-Craven, his heart warmed to the skirmish that his fancy painted. He was looking backward to that crashing fight—the first of his life—when the White Horsemen drove through the Roundhead gun-convoy and swirled down to battle in the High Street. He was looking forward, as a boy does, to a resurrection of that fight, under the like conditions.

Instead, he found the business of market-day in full swing. The Castle was silent. Lambert's guns, away on Cock Hill, were dumb. Farmers were selling ewes and cattle, were standing at inn doors, wind and wine of the country in their honest faces.

"What is all this?" asked Rupert of a jolly countryman.

"Skipton Fair—naught more or less. There's a two days' truce, or some such moonshine, while either side go burying their dead. For my part, I've sold three heifers, and sold 'em well. I'm content."

Rupert had had in mind to go into the Castle, and snatch a meal and an hour of leisure there while he talked with the Governor. He could not do it now. Punctilio—the word spelt honesty to him—forbade it. He glanced about and saw Kit close beside him.

"Knock at the gate, Mr. Metcalf, and bid Sir John Mallory come out and talk with me."

The drawbridge was down in accordance with the truce, and Kit clattered over it on his white horse. He knocked at the gate, and sent Prince Rupert's message forward. In a little while Mallory came out, a pleasant gentleman, built for hard riding and all field sports, whom Providence had entrusted with this do-nothing, lazy business of sitting behind walls besieged.

"The Prince commands you, Sir John," said Kit, with great precision.

Formality was ended on the instant; for Mallory clapped him on the shoulder and laughed like a boy let loose for play. "By the Lord Harry, I'm glad to get out of doors—and for Rupert, of all men."

In the great sweep of roadway that mounted to the Castle gate—the grey, comely church beside it—Prince Rupert met Mallory with hand outstretched.

"Well done, friend! If it had not been a day of truce, I had hoped to come indoors and crack a bottle with you. As matters stand, we hope to slake our thirst at a more convenient time."

"There's no hindrance, your Highness. Lambert, who besieges us, is doubtless entertaining friends at the Quaker meeting-house in this good town. Why should you not accept the warmer sort of hospitality we Cavaliers affect?"

"Oh, a whim. I can tell you in the open here—No Man's Ground—what I came to tell you. It would not be fair to hide my news behind closed gates."

Mallory glanced sharply at him. Rupert's fury in attack, his relentless gallop through one battle after another—-the man's whole record—had not prepared him for this waywardness of scruple. The next moment Rupert's face was keen and hard.

"We ride for York, Sir John," he said, "and I give you the same errand I shall give Knaresborough's garrison later on. Keep Lambert busy. Sortie till these Roundheads have no rest, day or night. Turn siege into attack. The Lady of Lathom has taught us what a slender garrison may do."

"Does she hold out still?" asked the other eagerly. "We have so little news these days."

"She has captured twenty-seven standards, friend, and is rebuilding her

walls in preparation for the next siege."

"God be thanked!" said Sir John, lifting his hat. "There are so few great ladies in our midst."

"And so few great gentlemen, Mallory. Nay, friend, do not redden because I praise you to your face. We know Skipton's story."

Lambert was not at the Quakers' meeting-house, as it chanced. He was on Cock Hill, passing the time of inaction away by looking down on the Castle that had flouted him so often. His thrifty mind was busy with new methods of attack, when he saw Rupert with his advance-guard come up the High Street. The light—a strong sun beating down through heavy rain-clouds—-showed a clear picture of the horsemen. By the carriage of their heads, by the way they sat their horses, Lambert knew them for Cavaliers. As he was puzzling out the matter—loth to doubt Sir John Mallory's good faith—a man of the town came running up.

"The truce is broken, Captain Lambert. Here's a rogue with love-locks—they say he's Prince Rupert—come with a press of horsemen. He's talking with Sir John Mallory fair in front of the Castle gateway."

Lambert's temper fired. What he had seen accorded with the townsman's view. Something quixotic in the man's nature, that always waited on his unguarded moments, bade him go down and ask the meaning of it all. It seemed to him that his faith in all men would go, root and branch, if Sir John Mallory were indeed less than a simple, upright gentleman. He reached the High Street, and made his way through the press of soldiery and townsfolk till he reached the wide space, in front of church and Castle, where the Prince stood with Mallory.

"Sir John," he said very coldly, "I come to ask if you break truce by free will or compulsion."

"By compulsion, sir," said Rupert, with a quick smile. "I ride too fast for knowledge of each town's days of truce. Sir John here came out at my request, to talk with me. You are Captain Lambert, I take it? Ah, we have heard of you—have heard matters to your credit, if you will permit an adversary so much freedom."

Lambert yielded a little to the other's easy charm; but it was plain that the grievance rankled still.

"Well, then, I'll give you punctilio for punctilio, sir," went on Rupert. "The King's needs are urgent I could not wait—truce or no, I had to give my orders to Sir John here. To be precise, I urged him to harry you unceasingly. I told him that we were pressing forward to the relief of York. Is honour satisfied? If not, name a convenient hour for hostilities to open. My men are here. Yours are on the hill yonder, where your guns look down on us."

Lambert's humour, deep-hidden, was touched at last. "Press on to York, by your leave. Mallory, I'm in your debt. I doubted your good faith just now."

"That was unwise, Lambert. Eh, man, the troubled days will soon be

ended—then, if we're both alive, come sup with me as of old."

Kit, when they took the road again, was bewildered a little by the shifting issues of this madness known as civil war. The Prince, Lambert, and Sir John—three men conspicuously survivals from Crusading days—had talked in the High Street of honour and punctilio—-had shown the extreme courtesy of knights prepared to tilt against each other in the ring at any moment—-and all this with the assault of Bolton and the red havoc of it scarcely ended, with rough fights ahead, and York's garrison in piteous need of succour.

"Why so moody, li'le Christopher?" asked Michael, riding at his brother's bridle-hand.

"I fancied war was simple, and I'm losing myself among the mists, somehow."

"An old trick of yours. Mistress Joan taught it you. There was a lady, too, in Knaresborough, who gave you lessons in the pastime."

"But this Captain Lambert is besieging Skipton, and Mallory defends it, and one asks the other to sup with him when the affair is over. That is not stark fighting, Michael."

"Why not, lad? Lambert's cannon will thunder just as merrily when the truce is ended. The world jogs after that fashion."

It was when they were pressing on to York the next day—after a brief night's sleep in the open and a breakfast captured by each man as best he could—that the Prince rode back to the white company of horses that carried the Metcalf clan. He reined about on finding Michael.

"You found your way into York once for me, sir. You will do it a second time. Bid them be ready. Tell them we travel as quickly as may be, and sorties from their three main gates, when the moment comes, will be of service."

"My thanks for the errand. May I ask a second boon, your Highness?"

"Oh, I think one would grant you anything in reason. A man with your merry eyes is privileged."

"I had a sutler's donkey with me in the first attempt. She brought me luck, undoubtedly—we had the like temperament, she and I—but we lost her during these forced marches. Can I have Christopher here to share the venture?"

Kit reddened, then laughed the jest aside. And the Prince, as he looked at these two, so dissimilar and yet so full of comradeship, thought of his own brother Maurice, and wished that he were here.

"Ay, take him with you," he said; "he will steady your venture. And, gentlemen, take your route at once."

"You heard what he said?" asked Christopher, after the Prince had spurred forward to the main body. "I shall steady your venture. There's a counter for your talk of donkeys, Michael."

Michael said nothing. As one who knew his brother's weakness, he waited till they were well on their way to York, and had reached a finger-post where four cross-roads met.

"We might go by way of Ripley," he hazarded, pointing to the left-hand road.

"Why, yes," said Kit unguardedly. "It is the nearest way, and the road better—

"The road even viler, and the distance a league more. I said we *might* take the Ripley way. In sober earnest, we go wide of Mistress Joan."

"Who spoke of Joan Grant?"

"Your cheeks, lad, and the note in your voice. Nay, no heat. D'ye think the Prince gave us this venture for you to go standing under yon Ripley casement, sighing for the moon that lives behind it? York would be relieved and all over, before I steadied you."

"You've no heart, Michael."

"None, lad; and I'm free of trouble, by that token."

And Kit, the young fire in his veins, did not know that Michael was jesting at the grave of his own hopes. That upper chamber—the look of Mistress Joan, her pride and slenderness—were matters that had pierced the light surface of his life, once for all.

"The York country was eaten bare when I last went through it," he said, after they had ridden a league in silence. "It will be emptier now. Best snatch a meal at the tavern here, Kit, while we have the chance. Our wits will need feeding if we're to find our way into York."

They found a cheery host, a table well spread with cold meats. When the host returned with wine, ordered hastily, he glanced at his guests with an air that was half humorous and half secretive.

"Here is the wine, Mr. Metcalf," he said—"the best of a good cellar, though I say it."

"Eh?" drawled Michael, always most indolent when surprised. "You know my name, it seems."

"Well, sir, if two big, lusty gentry choose to come riding two white horses—and all the Plain o' York ringing with news of the Riding Metcalfs—small blame to me if I guessed your quality. I'm a King's man, too."

"You'd best prove it quickly," said Michael, with a gentle laugh. "The business we ride on asks for sacrifice, and a fat host or two would not be missed."

"I am asking to prove it." The way of the man, the jolly red of his face, and the eyes that were clear as honesty, did not admit of doubt. "In the little room across the passage there are three crop-headed Puritans dining—dining well, and I grudge 'em every mouthful. They're not ashamed to take their liquor, too; and whether 'twas that, or whether they fancied I was as slow-witted as I seemed,

they babbled of what was in the doing."

"I always had the luck," said Michael impassively. "Had they the password through the ranks besieging York?"

"Ay, that; and more. They had papers with them; one was drying them at the fire, after the late storm o' rain that had run into his pocket, and it seemed they were come with orders for the siege. I should say they were high in office with the Puritans, for they carried the three sourest faces I've seen since I was breeked."

"The papers can wait. What was the password, host?"

"*Idolatry*. It seemed a heathenish word, and I remembered it."

"Good," laughed Michael. "To-morrow it will be Mariolatry, doubtless, and Red Rome on the next day. How these folk love a gibe at His Majesty's sound Churchmanship! They carry papers, you say? It is all diverting, host. My brother here will not admit that luck, pure and simple, is a fine horse to ride. Kit, we must see that little room across the passage."

Michael got to his feet, finished his wine in three leisurely gulps, then moved to the closed door, which he opened without ceremony. The three Parliament men had their heads together at the board, and one was emphasising an argument by drumming with a forefinger on the papers spread before them. They turned sharply as the door opened, and reached out for their weapons when they saw Michael step into the room, followed by a lesser giant.

"*Idolatry*, friends," said Michael suavely.

The three looked at each other with puzzled question. These strangers wore their hair in the fashion dear to Cavaliers, and they carried an intangible air that suggested lightness of spirit.

"You have the password," said one; "but your fashion is the fashion of Belial's sons. What would you?"

"We come with full powers to claim your papers and to do your errand with the forces now besieging York. To be candid, you are suspect of eating more and drinking more than sober Parliament men should—and, faith, your crowded table here bears out the scandal."

The three flushed guiltily, then gathered the dourness that stood to them for strength; and Kit wondered what was passing through his brother's nimble brain.

"Your credentials," snapped the one who seemed to be leader of the three.

Michael, glancing round the board, saw a great pasty, with the mincemeat showing through where the knife had cut it. "Oh, my own password is *Christmas-pie*, friends! I encountered the dish at Banbury, and a great uproar followed when my brother gave it the true name."

And now the Roundheads knew that they were being played with. So great

" They turned sharply as the door opened, and reached out for their weapons."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 210

*"They turned sharply as the door opened, and reached out for their weapons."*

was their party's abhorrence of anything which savoured of the Mass, that a dish, pleasant in itself, had long since grown to be a shibboleth.

The first man raised a pistol—a weapon that seemed out of keeping with his preacher's garb—but Kit, longing for action instead of all this play of words, ran in with a jolly laugh, lifted his man high, as one lifts a child in frolic, and let him drop. The pistol fell, too, and the trigger snapped; but the Parliament man, however strong his trust in Providence might be, had forgotten Cromwell's other maxim—that he should keep his powder dry.

Michael's voice was very gentle. "I said we came with full powers. It would be wiser not to play with fire. Indeed, we do not wish you ill, and, in proof of friendship, we are willing to change clothes with you."

A little later Michael and Christopher came out, locking the door behind them. They asked the astonished host for scissors, and bade him clip their locks as close as he could contrive without knowledge of the barber's art. And it was odd that these two, who six months ago had been close-cropped in Yoredale, resented the loss of the lovelocks they had grown in deference to fashion. To them it seemed as if they were losing the badge of loyalty, as if the fat host played Delilah to their Samson.

"Keep that easy carriage of your bodies down, gentles, if you're bent on play-acting," said Boniface, with a cheery grin.

"How should we walk, then?"

"With a humble stoop, sir—a very humble stoop—that was how the three Parliament men came in and asked for the best victuals I could give 'em."

Michael's laugh was easy-going; but, for all that, his orders were precise and sharp. Their horses, of the tell-tale white, were to be stabled securely out of eyeshot, and well tended until called for. He and Kit would ride out on the pick of the three Roundhead cattle.

"As for that, sir, there's no pick, in a manner of speaking. They rode in on the sorriest jades I ever saw at a horse-fair."

"We'll take the rough luck with the smooth."

Yet even Michael grew snappish when he saw the steeds they had to ride. It was only when Kit laughed consumedly at sight of them that he recovered his good humour.

"After all, sir," suggested Boniface, "it proves the loyalty of the country hereabouts. They couldn't get decent horseflesh, for love or money. Our folk would only sell them stuff ready for the knacker's yard."

"That has a pleasant sound for us, with all between this and York to travel."

"Take two o' my beasts, gentles, if there's haste. You're cropped enough, and in quiet clothes enough, to ride good horses—always granting their colour doesn't happen to be white. As for these two o' mine, one is a roan, t'other a

darkish bay."

Michael was arrested by the host's thoroughness and zeal, his disregard of his own safety. "And you, when you unlock the door on these rogues?"

"I shall fare as I shall fare, and not grumble either way. For your part, get away on the King's business, and God guide him safe, say I."

"But at least there's our reckoning to pay."

"Not a stiver. Nay, I'll not hear of it. Am I so poor a King's man that I grudge a cut from the joint and a bottle to the Riding Metcalfs?"

Michael warmed afresh to the man's loyalty. "Our thanks, host. As for the three in yonder, they'll not trouble you. I told them the door would be unlocked in an hour's time, explained that my folk were in the neighbourhood, and warned them to save their skins as best they could. You'll laugh till there are no more tears to shed when you see two of them in their bravery. Till I die that picture will return—their two sad faces set on top of our gay finery."

With a nod and a cheery call to his horse, he took the road again; and Kit and he spurred fast to recover the lost ground until they reached a steep and winding hill. For their cattle's sake they were compelled to take a breather at the top, and Kit looked over the rolling wolds with a heart on fire for Rupert and the errand. Somewhere yonder, under the blue, misty haze, lay York, the city old to courage and the hazard. New hazards were in the making; it behoved Michael and himself to give no spoiled page to York's long story.

"What a lad for dreams it is!" said Michael, in his gentlest voice.

Kit turned, and the sight of Michael habited in sober gear, with a steeple hat to crown the picture, broke down his dreams. It is good that comedy and the high resolve are friends who seldom ride apart. "The two we changed gear with, Michael—you would not laugh at them if you could see yourself."

"I have a good mirror, Kit, in you."

So they eyed each other for a while, and took their fill of merriment. Then they went forward. What the end of the venture was to be, they hazarded no guess; but at least they had papers and a garb that would pass them safely through the lines at York.

Another Royalist was abroad, as it happened, on a venture that to her own mind was both hazardous and lonely. The donkey that had helped Michael to secure his first entry into York—the patient, strong-minded ass that had followed the Riding Metcalfs south and had grown to be the luck of their superstitious company—had been lost on the march between Lathom House and Skipton. She had been stolen by a travelling pedlar, who found her browsing in a thistle-field a mile behind the army she hoped to overtake a little later on. He owned her for a day; and then, high spirit getting the better of dejection, she bided her time, shot out two hind-feet that left him helpless in the road, and set out on the quest

that led to Michael—Michael, who might command her anything, except to go forward in the direction of her head.

To Elizabeth—her name among the Metcalfs—the forward journey was full of trouble and bewilderment. She followed them easily enough as far as Skipton, and some queer instinct guided her up the High Street and into the country beyond Otley. Then tiredness came on her, and she shambled forward at haphazard. At long last she blundered into Ripley; and, either because she knew the look of the Castle gateway, or because she gave up all for lost, she stood there and brayed plaintively.

A sentry peered from the top of the gate-tower. "Who goes there?" he demanded gruffly.

Elizabeth lifted up her head and brayed; and presently William Fullaboy, guardian of the little door set in the main gateway, opened and peered out into the flood of moonlight. Lady Ingilby came running, with Joan Grant, to learn the meaning of the uproar; alarms and sharp assaults had been frequent since the Metcalfs left to find Prince Rupert.

"Why, 'tis Elizabeth, my lady," laughed William—"Elizabeth, the snod, li'le donkey we grew so fond of."

"Give her supper and a warm bed for the night," said Lady Ingilby. "The luck comes home at last."

"But does it?" asked Joan Grant, a pitiful break in her voice. "We have lain warm abed while Kit was nursing his wounds on the open moors——"

"True, girl. He'll be none the worse for it. Lovers have a trick of coming home, like their four-footed kindred."

She would listen to no further trouble of Joan's, but patted Elizabeth's smooth ears, and talked to her, and fed her. The wife of a strong man, and the mother of strong sons, is always tender with four-footed things.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE SCOTS AT MICKLEGATE.

Michael was in high spirits as he rode for York with Christopher. He wore Puritan raiment, and it was troublesome to keep his steeple-hat safely on his head; but the wine of adventure was in his veins, and clothing mattered little.

"Once into York, my lad," he said, breaking a long silence, "and we shall get

our fill of turmoil. There'll be sorties and pitched battle when Rupert comes."

Kit was always practical when he had his brother for companion. "We are not into York as yet. What plan have you, Michael?"

"My usual plan—to trust to luck. She's a bonnie mare to ride, I tell you."

"But the papers we took from the three Roundheads in the tavern—we had best know what they pledge us to."

"The Prince was right, after all. He said that you would steady me. It is odd, Kit, but it never entered my daft head to look at the papers; it was enough that they were our passport."

They drew rein, and Michael ran his eye down the papers. "They say that Rupert is marching fast for the relief of York—that will be no news to them by this time—that the Prince has inflicted disastrous reverses on their cause, at Bolton and by relieving Lathom House, and that, at any cost of life, York must be reduced before his coming. Oh, my lad, how all this plays into Rupert's hands!"

There was only one weakness in Michael's gay assurance that all was speeding well. When they reached the outposts of the enemy's lines, their way led them, as it chanced, to that quarter of the city which the Scots beleaguered. Their garb, Michael's peremptory demand that the sentry should pass them forward to the officer in command, backed up by showing of his papers, had their effect. It was when they found themselves in the presence of five Parliament officers, seated at a trestle table ill supplied with food, that they began to doubt the venture.

"Who are these?" asked one of the five, regarding the strangers with mingled humour and contempt.

"They were passed forward by the sentry, Captain. That is all I know."

"Who are they?" laughed a young lieutenant. "Why, Puritans, both of them, and preachers, too, by the look of their wearing-gear. It needs no papers to prove that."

Michael was always steadied by surprise. They had garbed themselves so carefully; they were acknowledged as friends of the Parliament cause; he was at a loss to understand the chilliness of their reception. "Puritans undoubtedly," he said, with a hint of his old levity, "but we've never been found guilty of the charge of preaching."

Captain Fraser glanced through the papers, and his air of rude carelessness changed. "This is of prime importance. By the Bruce, sirs, the Parliament has chosen odd-looking messengers, but I thank you for the bringing of your news."

Within ten minutes the Metcalfs were ushered into the presence of a cheery, thick-set man, who proved to be Leslie, the general in command of the Scots. He, too, read the papers with growing interest.

"H'm, this is good news," he muttered. "*At any cost of life.* That leaves

me free. I've been saying for weeks past that famine and dissensions among ourselves will raise the siege, without any intervention from Prince Rupert. Your name, sir?" he asked, turning sharply to Michael.

Michael, by some odd twist of memory, recalled Banbury and the name of a townsman who had given him much trouble there. "Ebenezer Drinkwater, at your service."

"And, gad, you look it! Your face is its own credential. Well, Mr. Drinkwater, you have my thanks. Go seek what food you can find in camp—there may be devilled rat, or stewed dog, or some such dainty left."

Kit, who did not share his brother's zest in this play of intrigue, had a quick impulse to knock down the general in command, without thought of the consequences. The insolence of these folk was fretting his temper into ribbons.

"Come, brother," said Michael, after a glance at the other's face. "We can only do our work, not needing praise nor asking it. Virtue, we are told, is in itself reward."

A gruff oath from Leslie told him that he was acting passably well; and they went out, Kit and he, with freedom to roam unmolested up and down the lines.

"What is your plan?" asked Kit impatiently.

"We must bide till sundown, and that's an hour away. Meanwhile, lad, we shall keep open ears and quiet tongues."

They went about the camp, and everywhere met ridicule and a hostility scarcely veiled; but there was a strife of tongues abroad, and from many scattered drifts of talk they learned the meaning of the odd welcome they had found. The Scots, it seemed, had found the rift grow wider between themselves and the English who were besieging York's two other gates. The rift had been slight enough when the first joy of siege, the hope of reducing the good city, had fired their hearts. Week by week had gone by, month after month; hunger and a fierce drought had eaten bare the countryside, and hardships are apt to eat through the light upper-crust of character.

The Metcalfs learned that the dour Scots and the dour Puritans were at enmity in the matter of religion; and this astonished them, for they did not know how deep was the Scottish instinct for discipline and order in their Church affairs. They learned, too—and this was voiced more frequently—that they resented the whole affair of making war upon a Stuart king. They had been dragged into the business, somehow; but ever at their hearts—hearts laid bare by privation and ill-health—there was the song of the Stuarts, bred by Scotland to sit on the English throne and to grace it with great comeliness.

It was astounding to the Metcalfs, this heart of a whole army bared to the daylight. There had been skirmishes, they heard, between Lord Fairfax's men and the Scots. The quarrel was based ostensibly on some matter of foraging in each

other's country; but it was plain that the Scots were glad of any excuse which offered—plain that they were more hostile to their allies than to the common enemy. Then, too, there was mutiny breeding among the soldiery, because their scanty pay was useless for the purchase of food at famine prices.

"We must find a way in," said Michael by and by. "The garrison should know all this at once. They could sortie without waiting for the Prince's coming."

The Barbican at Micklegate was too formidable an affair to undertake. What Michael sought was some quieter way of entry. They had reached the edge of the Scottish lines by now. The clear, red light showed them that odd neck of land bounded by Fosse Water and the Ouse, showed them the Castle, with Clifford's Tower standing stark and upright like a sentry who kept watch and ward. Within that neck of land were Royalists who waited for the message, as lovers wait at a stile for a lady over-late.

"We *must* win in," said Michael.

"Well, brothers," said a gruff voice behind them, "are you as sick to get into York as we are? You're late come to the siege, by the well-fed look of you."

"Just as sick," assented Michael cheerfully. "By the look of you, you're one of Lord Fairfax's men at Walmgate Bar. Well, it is pleasant to be among good Puritans again, after the cold welcome given us by the Scots at Micklegate."

So then the trooper talked to them as brother talks to brother. Within five minutes they learned all that the English thought of their Scottish allies, and what they thought would not look comely if set down on paper.

Michael warmed to the humour of it. The man with the heart of a Cavalier and the raiment of a Puritan hears much that is useful from the adversary. He told of their late errand, the safe delivery of their papers, and the contents. He explained—confidentially, as friend to friend—that he had an errand of strategy, and must get into York before sundown. Was there any quiet way of entry?

"Well, there's what they call a postern gate nigh handy," said the trooper, with the burr in his speech that any Wharfedale man would have known. "D'ye hear the mill-sluice roaring yonder? Though it beats me how she can roar at all, after all this droughty season."

"It has been a dry time and a dreary for our friends," put in Michael, with unctuous sympathy.

"Drear? I believe ye. If I'd known what war and siege meant, the King might have bided at Whitehall for ever—Star Chamber taxes or no— for aught I cared. At first it rained everything, save ale and victuals; and then, for weeks on end, it droughted. There's no sense in such weather."

"But the cause, friend—the cause. What is hardship compared with the Parliament's need?"

"Parliament is as Parliament does. For my part, I've got three teeth aching,

to my knowledge, and other-some beginning to nag. You're a preacher, by the look o' ye. Well, spend a week i' the trenches, and see how it fares with preaching. There's no lollipops about this cursed siege o' York."

Kit could only marvel at his brother's grave rebuke, at the quietness with which he drew this man into talk—drew him, too, along the bank of Fosse Water till they stood in the deafening uproar of the weir.

"There's the postern yonder," said the trooper—"Fishgate Postern, they call it. Once you're through on your errand, ye gang over Castle Mills Brigg, and the durned Castle stands just beyond."

Michael nodded a good-day and a word of thanks, and hammered at the postern gate. A second summons roused the sentry, who opened guardedly.

"Who goes there?" he asked, with a sleepy hiccough.

Kit thrust his foot into the door, put his whole weight against it, and only the slowness of rusty hinges saved the sentry from an untimely end. "You can talk well, Michael, but give me the doing of it," he growled.

Kit gripped the sentry, neck and crop, while Michael bolted the door. Then they pushed their captive across Mills Bridge, and found themselves in the evening glow that lay over St. George's Field. For a moment they were bewildered. The roar of the mill-sluice had been in their ears so lately that the quietness within York's walls was a thing oppressive. The sounds of distant uproar came to them, but these were like echoes only, scarce ruffling the broad charity and peace of the June eventide. They could not believe that eleven thousand loyalists, horse and foot, were gathered between the city's ramparts.

The sentry, sobered by the suddenness of the attack and Kit's rough handling, asked bluntly what their business was. "It's as much as my skin is worth, all this. Small blame to me, say I, if I filled that skin a trifle over-full. Liquor is the one thing plentiful in this cursed city. What is your business?"

"Simple enough," said Michael. "Go find my Lord Newcastle and tell him two Puritans are waiting for him. They are tired of laying siege to York, and have news for his private ear."

"A likely tale!"

"Likelier than being throttled where you stand. You run less risk the other way. What is the password for the day?"

"Rupert of the Rhine," said the other sullenly.

"That's a good omen, then. Come, man, pluck your heart out of your boots and tell Lord Newcastle that we knocked on the gate and gave the counter-sign. Tell him we wait his pleasure. We shall shadow you until you do the errand."

The sentry had a gift of seeing the common sense of any situation. He knew that Newcastle was in the Castle, closeted with his chief officers in deliberation over the dire straits of the city; and he went in search of him.

Newcastle listened to his tale of two big Puritans—preachers, by the look of them—who had found entry through the postern by knowledge of the password. "So they wait our pleasure, do they?" said Newcastle irascibly. "Go tell them that when my gentlemen of York go out to meet the Puritans, it will be beyond the city gates. Tell them that spies and informers must conform to their livery, and come to us, not we to them. If they dispute the point—why, knock their skulls together and pitch them into Castle Weir."

"They are big, and there are two of them, my lord."

A droll Irishman of the company broke into a roar of laughter. The sentry's face was so woebegone, his statement of fact so pithy, that even Newcastle smiled grimly. "Soften the message, then, but bring them in."

To the sentry's astonishment, the two Puritans came like lambs at his bidding; and after they were safely ushered into the Castle dining-hall, the sentry mutely thanked Providence for his escape, and went in search of further liquor. As a man of common sense, he reasoned that there would be no second call tonight at a postern that had stood un-challenged for these three weeks past.

Michael, when he came into the room, cast a quick glance round the company. He saw Newcastle and Eythin, and a jolly, red-faced Irishman, and many others; and memory ran back along the haps and mishaps of warfare in the open to a night when he had swum Ouse River and met just this band of gentlemen at table. He pulled his steeple-hat over his eyes and stood there, his shoulders drooping, his hands crossed in front of him.

"Well," demanded Newcastle, his temper raw and unstable through long caring for the welfare of his garrison. "If we are to discuss any business, you may remove your quaint head-gear, sirs. My equals uncover, so you may do as much."

"Puritans do not, my lord," Michael interrupted. "What are men that we should uncover to them?"

"Men circumstanced as we are have a short way and a ready with cant and steeple-headed folk."

"Yet the password," insisted the other gently. "*Rupert of the Rhine*. It has a pleasant sound. They say he is near York's gates, and it was we who brought him."

The Irishman, thinking him mad or drunk, or both, and irritated beyond bearing by his smooth, oily speech, reached forward and knocked his hat half across the room.

"Oh, by the saints!" he roared; "here's the rogue who came in last spring, pretty much in the clothes he was born in, after swimming Ouse River—the jolly rogue who swore he'd find Rupert for us."

"At your service, gentlemen—as dry as I was wet when we last encountered.

Will none of you fill me a brimmer?"

Lord Newcastle, if something raw in experience of warfare and its tactics, was a great-hearted man of his world, with a lively humour and a sportsman's relish for adventure. He filled the brimmer himself, and watched Michael drain half of it at one thirsty, pleasant gulp. "Now for your news," he said.

"Why, my lord, I pledged the Metcalf honour that we'd bring Rupert to you, and he lies no further off than Knaresborough."

"Good," laughed the Irishman. "I said you could trust a man who swore by the sword he happened not to be carrying at the moment."

"And your friend?" asked Newcastle, catching sight of Christopher, as he stood moving restlessly from foot to foot.

"Oh, just my brother—the dwarf of our company. Little, but full of meat, as our Yoredale farmers say when they bring small eggs to market. To be precise, Kit here is worth three of me. They call him the White Knight in Oxford."

So Kit in his turn drank the heady wine of praise; and then Michael, with swift return to the prose of everyday, told all he knew of Rupert's movements, all that he had learned of the famine and dissension outside the city gates.

"The Prince bade you all be ready for the sortie when he came," he finished. "For my part, I think we might sortie now and save him the trouble of scattering these ragabouts."

"Ah, life's a droll jade," murmured the Irishman. "We fancied they were doing fairly well out yonder, while we were cooped up here like chickens in a pen. Will you give me the sortie, my lord? The light's waning fast."

"Ay, lead them, Malone," laughed Newcastle. "I shall be glad to give mettled colts their exercise."

The sentry at the Mills postern gate was suffering evil luck to-night. He had scarcely settled himself on his bench inside the gate, a tankard of ale beside him, and a great faith that the odds were all against his being disturbed twice in the same evening, when there came a splutter of running feet outside and a knocking on the door. Memory of the earlier guests was still with him, sharpened by the sting of aches and bruises.

"No more gentle Puritans for me," he growled. "They can knock as they list; for my part, I'm safer in company with home-brewed ale."

He listened to the knocking. Drink and his rough experience of awhile since, between them, brought a coldness to his spine, as if it were a reed shivering in some upland gale.

Then warmth returned to him. A voice he knew told him of what had happened outside York, and insisted that its bearer should bring the good news in.

"Why, Matthew, is it only thee?" asked the sentry, his mouth against the

spacious keyhole.

"Who else? Open, thou durned fool. My news willun't bide."

Lord Newcastle had scarcely given consent to the sortie, when the sentry came again to the dining-chamber, pushing in front of him a lean, ragged figure of a man who seemed to have found a sudden shyness, until Michael burst into a roar of laughter. "Here's a gallant rogue! It was by his help I won into York last spring. Sutler, I thank you for the donkey purchased from you."

"Is she well, sir?" asked the other eagerly. "I aye had a weakness for the skew-tempered jade."

"Come, your news?" snapped Newcastle.

"It's this way, gentles. I can talk well enough when I'm selling produce for the best price it will fetch—and prices rule high just now, I own—but I'm shy when it comes to talking wi' my betters."

"Then put some wine into your body," laughed Malone. "It's a fine remedy for shyness."

"And thank ye, sir," said the rogue, with a quiet, respectful wink. "I'm aye seeking a cure for my prime malady."

"Well?" asked Newcastle, after the cup was emptied.

"It tingles right down to a body's toes, my lord—a very warming liquor. As for what I came to say, 'tis just this. I'm for the King myself. I never could bide these Parliament men, though I sell victuals to 'em. I come to tell ye that there's no siege of York at all."

He told them, in slow, unhurried speech, how news had come that Rupert lay at Knaresborough, how the Parliament men had gone out to meet him on the road to York, glad of the chance of action, and trusting by weight of numbers to bear down the man who had glamoured England with the prowess of his cavalry.

Confusion followed the sutler's news. Some—Newcastle himself among them—were eager to send out what men they could along the Knaresborough road to aid Rupert. Others insisted that the cavalry, men and horses, were so ill-conditioned after long captivity that they could not take the road to any useful purpose. A sharp sortie, packed with excitement, was a different matter, they said, from a forced march along the highway.

When the hubbub was at its loudest, another messenger came in. The Prince sent his compliments to Lord Newcastle, and had taken his route by way of Boroughbridge, "lest the enemy should spoil a well-considered plan," that Goring was with him, that they might look for him between the dusk and the daylight. The messenger added that the Prince had his good dog Boye with him, and he knew that the hound carried luck even in fuller measure than his master.

"Ah, the clever head of the man!" said Malone. "I never owned that quality myself. He'll be meaning to cross Swale by way of Thornton Brigg, and all as

simple as a game of hide-and-seek."

It was not quite so simple. An hour later word came that Rupert had encountered a strong force of Parliament men at the Brigg. They were guarding a bridge of boats that stretched across the Swale; but Rupert had scattered them, and still pressed forward.

Throughout York the contagion spread—the contagion of a fierce unrest, a wild thanksgiving, a doubt lest it were all a dream, too good to take real shape and substance. For this they had longed, for this they had suffered hunger and disease—hoping always that Rupert of the Rhine would come on a magic horse, like some knight of old, to their relief. And he was near.

The watch-towers were crowded with men looking eagerly out into the gloaming; but a grey mist shrouded all the plain beyond the walls. Women were sobbing in the streets, and, when asked their reason by some gruff passer-by, explained that they must cry, because joy hurt them so.

And then, after long waiting, there came a shouting from the mist outside, a roar of horsemen and of footmen. And they knew the good dream had come true at last.

There is a grace that comes of hero-worship:—grace of the keen young buds that burst in spring. It knows no counterfeit.

Rupert was here. Privation was forgotten. Wounds became so many lovers' tokens, and the world went very well with York.

"As God sees me, gentlemen," said Lord Newcastle to those about him, "I take no shame to bend my knees and thank Him for this gallant business."

A message came from Rupert. He would camp outside the walls that night, and would be glad if my Lord Newcastle and his friends would come to him on the morrow. "We shall breakfast—if any is to be had—a little late," the message ended. "My men have had a forced march."

"Ay, always his men and their needs," laughed Malone, the Irishman. "What a gift he has for leadership."

When the morrow came, Michael and Kit were astonished that Lord Newcastle bade them join the few officers he took with him to meet the Prince outside the walls.

"It was you who brought him to us, gentlemen," he explained, with a cheery nod. "We hold you in peculiar honour."

The meeting itself was unlike Kit's hot-headed pictures of it, framed beforehand. Prince Rupert, straight-shouldered and smiling, was obviously dead weary. His body was that of a usual man, but his head and heart had been big enough to guide some thousands of soldiers who trusted him from Oxford to the plain of York; and none goes through that sort of occupation without paying the due toll. His eyes were steady under the high, wide brows; but the under-

lids were creased and swollen, and about his mouth the tired lines crossed and inter-crossed like spider's webs. Only Boye, the hound, that had gathered superstition thick about his name, was true to Kit's dream of the meeting; and Boye, remembering a friend met at Oxford, came and leaped up to lick his hand.

"Homage to gallantry, Lord Newcastle," said Rupert, lifting his hat. "The defence of York goes beyond all praise."

"It was well worth while," said Newcastle, and got no further, for his voice broke.

"The day augurs well," went on the other by and by. "I like to fight in good weather. Wet clothes are so devilish depressing."

"But the siege is raised, your Highness. All York is finding tattered flags to grace your welcome in."

"They are kind, but flags must wait. We propose to harry the retreat."

"The retreat," said Eythin quietly, "is so ready for civil war among itself that we should be well advised to leave it to its own devices."

Michael, with the eye that saw so much, caught a glance of challenge that passed from Eythin to the Prince. And he guessed, in his random way, that these two were enemies of long standing. He did not wonder, for he had met few men whom he misliked as he did Eythin.

"Indeed," put in Newcastle, in great perturbation, "we are very rusty. Our men and horses are cramped for want of exercise and food."

"Ah, the gallop will unstiffen them. My lord, we pursue and give battle. It is my own considered judgment—and, more, the King's orders, which I carry, are explicit on that point."

So Newcastle heaved a sigh of relief. The King commanded, and that decided the matter. For himself, he was so glad to be free of wakeful nights and anxious days, so willing to hand over the leadership he had carried well, that imminent battle was in the nature of recreation.

Rupert had mapped out his plans with a speed as headlong and unerring as his cavalry attacks. The rebel army was encamped on the high ground bordering Marston Moor. He would take the route at once, and my Lord Newcastle must follow with the utmost expedition. He could wait with his men, before giving battle, until the garrison of York joined forces with him. Even united, they would be outnumbered; but they were used to odds. They must this day sweep treason out of the North, once for all, and send good news to the King.

Rupert carried them with him. He was on fire with victories won, with faith in victories to come. The one man unmoved was Eythin, who, disappointed in himself and all things, had long since kennelled with the cynics.

"The higher one flies, the bigger the drop to ground," he muttered.

"Ay," said Michael, who was standing close beside him, "but the man who

never dares to fly—he lives and dies an earthworm."

"I shall cross swords with you for that pleasantry," drawled Eythin.

"Here and now, then," snapped Michael.

Rupert, who never forgot the record of friend or enemy, interposed. "Gentlemen, I am in command. You may kill each other afterwards, if Marston Moor does not dispatch the business without further trouble. Mr. Metcalf," he added, "you will ride with me—and your brother. It is as well to keep spark from gunpowder just now, and Lord Eythin has work to do in York."

When they set out along the dusty road, the brothers mounted on horses going riderless about the late Roundhead camp, Rupert would have them trot beside him, and chatted pleasantly. They could not understand the quiet deference and honour given them at every turn of these rough-riding days. But Rupert understood. Into the midst of jealousies at Oxford—petty rivalries of man against man, when the crown and soldiers' lives were in the losing—had come the Riding Metcalfs, honest and selfless as God's sunlight, brave to fight well and to be modest.

The day grew insufferably hot. Rupert's promise of good weather proved him no true prophet. Any farmer could have told him what was meant by the stifling heat, the steely sky, the little puffs of wind that were hot and cold by turns.

"A lover's wind," said Rupert lightly, as a fiercer gust met them up the rise of Greet Hill. "It blows east and west, twice in the same minute."

"It blows for a big storm, your Highness," Kit answered, in all simplicity. "The belly of the hills is crammed with thunder."

"Let it break, then, if it must. Meanwhile, our clothes are dry. And, talking of lover's weather, Master Christopher, I was entrusted with a message to you from Knaresborough. I met a lady there, as we passed through—a pretty lady, well-gowned and shod in spite of these disastrous times—and she asked me if a little six-foot youth of the Riding Metcalfs were still alive."

"But who should ask for me in Knaresborough?"

"Were there so many, then? I begin to doubt you, my White Knight."

It was later, as they neared Marston, that the Prince drew Christopher aside. He seemed to have a queer tenderness for this lad to whom life showed a face of constancy and trust. "I told Miss Bingham you were in rude health; and I break confidence, maybe, when I tell you that her eyes filled with tears. Well, forget her till after this day's work is done."

Kit answered nothing, and showed instinctive wisdom. Miss Bingham was no more than a pleasant ghost who had nursed his weakness, and afterwards had sat beside him on the ferry-steps that dipped to the waters of Nidd River. His thoughts lately had been all of battle and of high endurance; but now, as he

remembered Joan Grant and the way of her, and the primroses that had starred the lanes of his wooing time in Yoredale, he knew that he must do well at Marston Moor.

The dust and swelter of the ride grew burdensome. Boye, the hound, ran beside his master with lolling tongue.

"Never look so woebegone," laughed Rupert, leaning from saddle to pat the brute's head. "We're to have a glorious day, Boye, and you the luck of it."

Kit had first realised at Oxford how deeply Boye was embroiled in this war of King and Parliament. To the Royalists he was their talisman, the touchstone of success. To the enemy he was a thing accursed, the evil spirit harbouring the body of a dog; they had essayed to shoot and poison him, and found him carrying a charmed life. Their unkempt fancy ran so wild as to name him the worst Papist of the Stuart following, because he went often with Rupert to kirk, and showed great reverence in a place holy to his master. Christopher recalled how the Prince had laughed once when a friend had told him what the Roundhead gossip was. "It's an odd charge to lay against a dog," he had said, "that he's a better Catholic than they."

And now, with battle close ahead and the big deed in the making, Rupert had found leisure to see Boye's hardship and to cheer him forward on the dusty road. He caught Christopher's glance of wonder—as, indeed, he saw most things in these days of trouble—and smiled with disconcerting humour.

"After all, Master Christopher, I've found only three things to love in my hard life—loyalty to the King, and my brother Maurice, and the good Boye here. Love goes deep when its bounds are set in such a narrow compass."

He said nothing of his fourth love—the high regard he had for the Duchess of Richmond—the love that had so little of clay about it, so much of the Pole Star's still, upleading glamour. Instead, he bustled forward on the road; and about noon the vanguard of his army found itself on Marston Moor. It was a wild country, clumps of bog and gorse and heather islanding little farmsteads and their green intaken acres. On the slopes above, wide of Tockwith village, they could see the smoke of camp fires and the passing to and fro of many Roundheads, hefty in the build.

"They were ever good feeders," said Rupert lightly.

His whole face was changed. The lines of weariness were gone. The surety of battle near at hand was stirring some vivid chord of happiness. It was a sane happiness, that sharpened brain and eye. The country was so flat that from the saddle he could see the whole range of this battlefield in prospect. He marked the clumps of intake—bean-fields white with flower, pastures browned by the drought, meadows showing fresh and green after last week's ingathering of the crop. He saw Wilstrop Wood beyond, and the ditch and ragged fence half be-

tween Wilstrop and the hill on which the Parliament men were eating a good dinner for the first time in many months.

"My right wing takes position this side the ditch," said the Prince at last, pointing to a gap in the hedge where a rough farm-lane passed through it. "Now that is settled, gentlemen, I'm free of care. Mr. Metcalf," he added, turning to Michael, "go find your kinsmen and bid them join me. It is the only honour I can give them at the moment; and the King's wish—my own wish—is to show them extreme honour."

Christopher remained in close attendance on the Prince. The most surprising matter, in a nine months' campaign of surprises, was Rupert's persistent memory for the little things, of grace and courtesy, when battle of the starkest kind was waiting only for the arrival of Lord Newcastle and the garrison of York.

"They'll not be here within the hour," said Rupert, "and this is a virgin country, so far as food goes. My men shall dine."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### PRAYER, AND THE BREWING STORM.

He knew his men. After a rousing charge, and a red lane mown along the track their horses took, he had no control of them; they must pillage as they listed. Before the combat, he could trust their pledge to take no more than an hour to dine, to be prompt at the muster afterwards, as he trusted his own honour.

It was an odd hour of waiting. Messengers galloped constantly from the York road, saying there was no speck of dust to show that Newcastle was coming with reinforcements. Rupert's men, with the jollity attending on a feast snatched by unexpected chance, began to reassemble. Two o'clock came, and the heat increasing. Overhead there was a molten sky, and the rye-fields where the enemy were camped showed fiery red under the lash of a wild, pursuing wind.

It was not until another hour had passed that Rupert began to lose his keen, high spirits. He was so used to war in the open, to the instant summons and the quick answer, that he could not gauge the trouble of York's garrison, the slowness of men and horses who had gone through months of wearisome inaction. It is not good for horse or man to be stabled overlong out of reach of the free pastures and the gallop.

About half after three o'clock some of his company brought in to Rupert a

big, country-looking fellow, and explained that they had captured him spying a little too close to the Royalist lines.

"What mun we do to him?" asked the spokesman of the party, in good Wharfedale speech. "We've hammered his head, and ducked him i' th' horse-pond, and naught seems to serve. He willun't say, *Down wi' all Croppies*."

"Then he's the man I'm seeking—a man who does not blow hot and cold in the half-hour. Your name, friend?"

"Ezra Wood, and firm for the Parliament."

"We hold your life at our mercy," said Rupert, with a sharp, questioning glance. "Tell us the numbers and disposition of Lord Fairfax's army."

"As man to stark man, I'll tell ye nowt. My mother sat on one stool while she nursed me, not on two."

Rupert had proved his man. The pleasure of it—though Ezra Wood happened to be fighting on the other side—brought the true Prince out of hiding. Through fatigue of hurried marches, through anxiety because York's garrison lingered on the way, the old Crusader in him showed.

"Is Cromwell with your folk?" he asked.

"He is—staunch in prayer and staunch indeed."

"Then go free, and tell him that Prince Rupert leads the right wing of the attack. I have heard much of his Ironsides, and trust to meet them on the left wing."

Ezra Wood had no subtleties, which are mistaken now and then for manners. He looked Rupert in the face with a hard sort of deference. "So thou'rt the man they call Rupert?" he said. "Well, ye look it, I own, and I'll carry your message for ye gladly."

"And you will return, under safe-conduct, with his answer."

About five of the afternoon—all Marston Moor ablaze with a red, unearthly light—the first of the York men came in. Rupert's impulsive welcome grew chilly when he saw that Lord Eythin led them; and Boye, whose likes and dislikes were pronounced, ran forward growling.

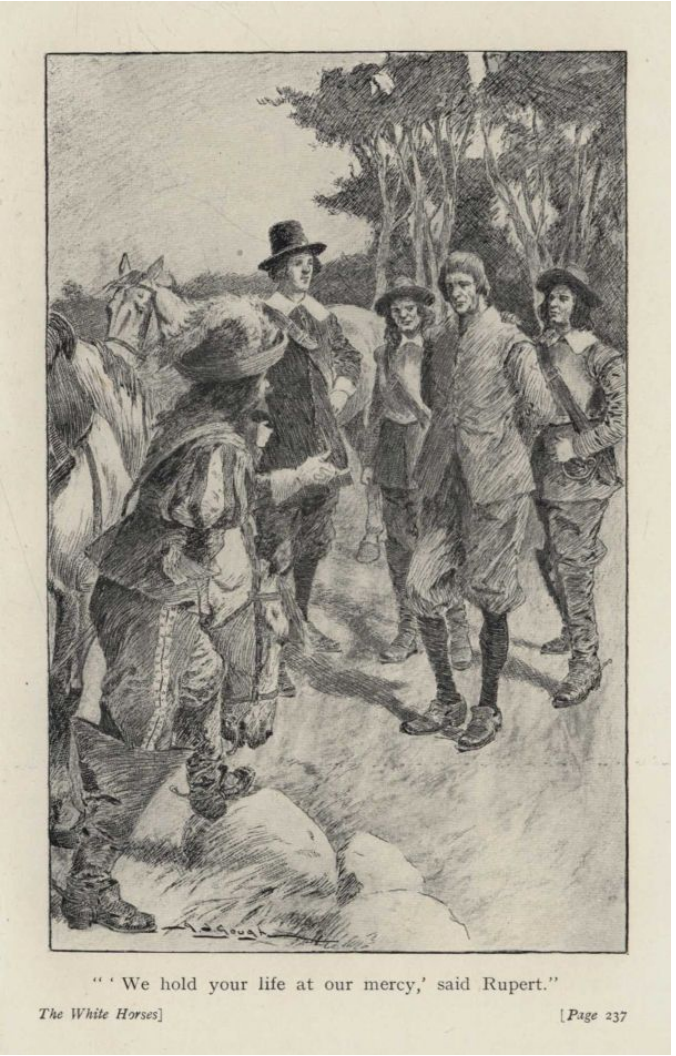
"Whistle your dog off, sir—whistle him off," said Eythin irritably.

Rupert, with a lazy smile, watched Boye curvet round Eythin in narrowing circles. "Why should I?" he asked gently. "He never bites a friend."

Eythin reddened. Memory of past years returned on him, though he had thought the record drowned in wine and forgotten out of sight. He asked fussily what plans Rupert had made for the coming battle.

"Monstrous!" he snapped. "Oh, I grant you've a knowledge of the charge, with ground enough in front to gather speed. But what are your cavalry to make of this? You stand to wait their onset, and their horses are heavy in the build."

Rupert nodded curtly. "Get your men into line, sir. You are here to fight



" ' We hold your life at our mercy,' said Rupert."

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 237

*"'We hold your life at our mercy,' said Rupert."*

under orders, not to attend a council of war."

As Eythin withdrew sullenly, a sudden uproar came down the wind. Then the shouting, scattered and meaningless at first, grew to a rousing cry of "A Mecca for the King!" Michael glanced at Christopher, and pride of race showed plainly in their faces.

"Ah," laughed Rupert, "it was so they came when we played pageantry before the King at Oxford. Go bring your folk to me, Mr. Metcalf."

They came, drew up with the precision dear to Rupert's heart, saluted briskly. "Gentlemen," he said, "I am proud to have you of my company. Is my Lord Newcastle near Marston yet?"

The Squire of Nappa explained that those under Newcastle's command had suffered during the late siege—men and horses were so weak from illness that no zeal in the world could bring them faster than a foot-pace. He knew this, because he had passed them on the road, had had speech of them. Lord Newcastle himself, a man no longer young, had kept a long illness at bay until the siege was raised, and now he was travelling in his coach, because he had no strength to sit a horse.

"Oh, I had forgotten!" said Rupert. "All's in the losing, if they take overlong. I should have remembered, though, that the garrison needed one night's sleep at least."

While they talked, Ezra Wood returned with the trooper sent to give him safe-conduct through the lines and back again. He did not salute—simply regarded Rupert with dour self-confidence. "General Cromwell sends this word to Prince Rupert—that, if his stomach is for fighting, he shall have it filled."

Rupert was silent. Cromwell, it seemed, had missed all the meaning of the challenge sent him; war had not taught him yet the nicer issues that wait on bloodshed. He stooped to pat Boye's head with the carelessness that had angered many a council of war at Oxford. Then he glanced at Ezra Wood.

"There is no General Cromwell. The King approves all commissions of that kind. Go tell Mr. Cromwell that we are waiting for him here."

Cromwell, when Ezra Wood returned and found him, was standing in the knee-deep rye, apart from his company. His eyes were lifted to the sky, but he saw none of the signs of brewing storm. He was looking into the heaven that he had pictured day by day and year by year when he rode in the peaceful times about his snug estate in Rutland. Then, as now, he was cursed by that half glimpse of the mystic gleam which hinders a man at times more than outright savagery. Always he was asking more than the bread and meat of life; always he was seeking some antidote to the poisonous self-love, the ambition to be king himself, which was his hidden sore. And now he was praying, with all the simplicity his tricky mind permitted, for guidance in his hour of need.

As one coming out of a trance, he listened to Ezra Wood, repeating his mes-

sage for the fourth time. The light—half false because it was half mystic only—left his face. Its borrowed comeliness passed by. He showed features of surprising plainness—eyes heavy-lidded, thick nostrils, and a jaw broad with misplaced obstinacy.

"So he is waiting?" he said grimly. "Well, princes must wait these days. We shall seek him by and by."

In that queer mood of his—half prayer and half keen calculation—which went before his battles, Cromwell had found a plan of action. He crossed the field with quick, unwieldy steps, found the other leaders, and stated his own view of the attack. As usual, his ruggedness of mind and purpose carried the day; and Rupert, down below, was left to wonder why the enemy did not take advantage of his rash challenge and attack before the main body of his reinforcements came.

It was an eerie day—clouds that came packing up, livid and swollen with rain that would not fall—a wind that was cold and scorching hot by turns—a frightened rustle of the leafage in Wilstrop Wood—a rustle that sounded across the flat waste of Marston Moor like the sound of surf beating on a distant shore. Boye kept close to Rupert's side, and whined and growled by turns. He knew his master's restlessness, as four of the afternoon came and still Lord Newcastle had not reached the field.

At half-past four the pick of Newcastle's men rode in, and were marshalled into their appointed place between the left wing and the right. Rupert galloped down to give them the good cheer he lacked himself.

"Welcome, Whitecoats. You look tired and maimed; but they tell me you have sworn to dye those coats of yours a good, deep crimson—your own blood or the Roundheads'."

The sound of his voice, his strong simplicity of purpose that burned outward like a fire, lifted their jaded spirits. York was forgotten, and its hardships.

"For God and the King!" they answered lustily.

"I need you, gentlemen," said Rupert, and passed on to where Lord Newcastle's coach was standing at the roadside.

He was shocked to see the change in Newcastle—the weariness of mind and body palpable, now that an end had come to his guardianship of York.

"My lord, you have served the King too well," he said, putting a hand on the other's shoulder with instinctive deference to age and great infirmity.

"Oh, nothing to boast of—a little here and there, to keep our walls secure. Tell me, is there to be a battle to-day? I'm good for a gallop yet, if the battle does not last too long."

"There's no chance of it at this late hour. They saw our weakness from the hill, and yet would not attack. They're tired out, I think, as we are."

"Good," said Newcastle, with his gentle laugh. "For my part, I shall claim

an old man's privilege—to step into my coach and smoke a pipe or two, and then get off to sleep. I shall be ready when you need me."

"Would my hound, Boye, disturb you?" asked Rupert, turning after he had said good-night. "I like to have him out of harm's way at these times."

"Is he a good sleeper?" demanded Newcastle whimsically.

"With a friend, the staunchest sleeper that I know."

Boye demurred when he was bidden to get inside the coach; but, like Rupert's cavalry, he knew the tone of must-be-obeyed, and scrambled in with no good grace.

Near seven of the evening a strange thing happened on Marston Moor. On the hill above there was the spectacle of Parliament men standing with bowed heads as Cromwell sent up fervent prayers. On the moor below, the chaplain of the King's men was reading evensong. Over both armies was a sky of sullen wrath.

As the service closed, Lord Eythin protested, with an oath, that now this child's play was over, he proposed to go in search of food.

"My lord," said Rupert sharply, "wise men do not mock at prayer, in face of what is waiting for us all to-morrow."

Eythin, nettled by the hum of approbation, lost his temper. "I was never wise, your Highness, as you know, but wise enough to advise you that this escapade is madness."

"We shared another battle, long ago when you were General King." Rupert's voice was icy. "Do you remember it?"

The Riding Metcalfs, this once again, were dismayed by the private quarrels, the jealousies, that were threaded through the skein of war. Eythin's insolence of bearing, his subtle incitement to distrust of his commander, asked no less from Rupert; but the pity of it, to bluff Squire Metcalf, single of heart, owing none a grudge except the King's enemies, was hard to bear.

From the extreme left of the camp, just as the Royalists were settling down for a brief night's slumber, there came a running yelp, a baying, and a splutter of wild feet. Lord Newcastle had left the window of his coach open when he had smoked his third pipe and found the sleep he needed; and Boye, his patience ended, had leaped out into the freedom that spelt Rupert to him. When he found him, he got to his hind legs, all but knocked down his master in his tender fury, and licked his face with a red and frothy tongue.

"Boye!" said Rupert. "Oh, down, Boye—you smother me. I was to have a lonely supper, I fancied, and you come. There's all in the world I care for, come to sup with me."

From over the hill, where the Parliament men had scarcely finished their devotions, there came a clap of thunder and a light spit of rain.

"We shall be wet to the skin to-night, Boye, you and I," laughed Rupert. "We've proved my tent, and it is not weather-sound."

He had scarcely finished some beef collops, ready for him in his tent, and was cajoling Boye to perform a newly-taught trick of begging for a morsel, when the flap was pulled aside. Michael Metcalf, framed by the red light out of doors, showed bigger even than his wont.

"They are coming down from the rye-fields," he said, with a reckless laugh. "Let it go how it will, sir, so long as we drive Cromwell out of bounds."

"I have promised him as much," said Rupert gravely.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### MARSTON MOOR.

Rupert got to horse, and rode through the press and uproar of the camp. Confusion was abroad. To the Cavaliers, though some of them might regard evensong lightly, it meant at least a truce until the next day's dawn; and now they were attacked by an enemy who did not scruple to combine prayer with craftiness. Down from the rye-fields they saw the horsemen and the footmen come, and only Rupert could have steadied them in this black hour.

"We meet Cromwell's horse," he cried, getting his own men into line this side the little ditch, "and, gentlemen, we owe Cromwell many debts."

Stiff and stour it was, that fight at the ditch. The old, stark battles were recalled—Crecy, and Agincourt, and Flodden—for it was all at pitiless close quarters. First they exchanged pistol-shots; then, throwing their pistols in each other's faces with a fury already at white heat, they fell to with sword and pike. Overhead the storm broke in earnest. The intermittent crackle of gunshots, from the sharpshooters lining the hedges, mingled with the bellow of the thunder and that clamour of hard-fighting men which has the wild beast note.

Newcastle, asleep in his coach at the far side of the Moor, was roused by the uproar. He did not know what had chanced, but the waking was of a piece with the nightmares that had haunted his brief slumber. His limbs ached, the weariness of York's long siege was on him, but he ran forward, sword in hand, and asked the first man he met what was in the doing. Then he sought for his company and could not find them, except a handful of the gallant Leightons; so he pressed forward, unmounted, crying his name aloud, and asking all who heard

him to make up a troop. He gathered drift and flotsam of the running battle—he whose dream had been of a mounted charge, with picked cavalry behind him—and they fought on the left wing with a wild and cheery gallantry.

On the right, the Ironsides still faced Rupert's men, and neither would give way. Once, in a lull of the berserk struggle, when either side had withdrawn a little to take breath, a great hound pressed his way through the Royalists and came yelping forward in search of Rupert. He came into the empty space between the King's men and Cromwell's, and a gunshot flashed; and Boye struggled on the sodden ground, turned his head in dying search for Rupert, the well-beloved, and so lay still.

From the Ironsides a storm of plaudits crossed a sudden thunder-clap. "There goes the arch-Papist of them all," came a voice drunk with battle.

And something broke at Rupert's heart. It was as if he stood alone entirely—as if the world were ended, somehow. "Ah, Boye," he murmured. And then he led a charge so furious that the Ironsides all but broke. It was Cromwell rallied them, and for an hour the fight went forward. The hedge was levelled now, and the ditch filled in by the bodies of the slain. Time after time Rupert found himself almost within striking distance of Cromwell. They were seeking each other with a settled, fervent purpose. And the fight eddied to and fro; and the rain came down in wild, unending torrents.

The chance sought by Rupert came to Michael Metcalf, as it chanced. Pushed to one side of the press, he found himself facing a rough-hewn Parliament man in like case, and parried a fierce sword-cut with his pike. Then he drew back the pike, felt it quiver like a live thing in his hands, and drove it through the other's fleshy neck. It was only when the man wavered in saddle, and he had leisure for a moment's thought, that he knew his adversary. A trooper of the Parliament snatched the wounded rider's bridle, dragged his horse safely to the rear, and Michael raised a wild, impulsive shout:

"Cromwell is down! A Mecca for the King."

Rupert heard the cry, and drew his men a little away, to get speed for the gallop. His crashing charge drove back the Roundheads twenty paces, and no more. They were of good and stubborn fibre, and the loss of Cromwell bade them fight with sullen hardihood. At the end of, it might be, fifteen minutes they had regained a foot or two of their lost ground, and Cromwell, getting his wound bandaged at the thatched cottage up above, asked another wounded Roundhead, who came for the like succour, how it fared.

"As may be," growled the other. "If so thou'rt not dead, as we fancied, get down and hearten them."

"I've a thick throat, and the pike took the fleshy part," said Cromwell, with a deep, unhumorous laugh. "I'll get down."

He mounted with some difficulty. Pluck cannot always conquer in a moment great loss of blood and weakness of the body. Once in the saddle, his strength returned to him; but he rode down too late. Rupert's men had followed their old tactics, had retreated again to gain speed for the onslaught, and were driving the enemy before them in hot pursuit.

Cromwell, after narrow escape of being ridden down by his own folk, after vain efforts to rally them again, found himself alone. The wound in his throat was throbbing at its bandages. The rain ran down him in rivulets, and the world seemed filled with thunder and the cries of men. Word reached him that Eythin, too, had broken through, and that all Parliament men were bidden to save themselves as best they might. And so he left the field; and the sickness of defeat, more powerful than body-sickness, caught him as he neared the smithy, this side of Tockwith village. A farm-lad, returning from selling a cow at Boroughbridge, found him in the roadway, fallen from his horse, and carried him into the smithy-house. They tended his wound. Within an hour his lusty strength of purpose came to his aid. He asked for meat and ale, and said he must get ready for the road. He was known by this time; but even the blacksmith, Royalist to the core of his big body, would not hinder his going. A man of this breed must be given his chance, he felt.

"After all," he muttered, watching Cromwell ride unsteadily down the moonlit road, "they say Marston Moor has lost Yorkshire to the Parliament for good and all. Some call him Old Noll, and othersome Old Nick—but he'll do little harm i' these parts now, I reckon."

"A soft heart and a big body—they go always fools in company," said his goodwife. "I'd not have let him go so easy, I."

"Ay, but ye wod, if I'd been for keeping him. Ye're like a weather-cock, daft wife. When I point south, thou'st always for veering round to north—or t'other way about, just as it chances."

Cromwell rode back toward Marston, to find his men. He was kin to Rupert in this—disaster or triumph, he must find those who needed him. At the end of a half-mile he met a rider cantering up the rise. The moonlight was clear and vivid, after the late storm, and the rider pulled his horse up sharply.

"The battle is ours, General, and I've my Lord Fairfax's orders for you."

"The battle is ours?" demanded Cromwell gruffly. "I do not understand."

"None of us understand. Fairfax was three miles away, sleeping in a farmstead bed-chamber, when we roused him with the news. It was Leslie's men who broke their centre and drove round Rupert's flank. The thunder was in all our brains, I fancy."

Cromwell laughed. All his austerity, his self-pride warring against the humility he coveted, were broken down, as Rupert's cavalry had been. "Then it's

for the siege of York again?" he asked.

"Fairfax says the risk is too great. The Moor is full of our dead, and we're not strong enough. He bids you get your men together and hold Ripley, going wide of Knaresborough—which is a hornet's nest—until further orders reach you. That is my message, General."

"Good," said Cromwell, tightening the bandage round his throat. "Where are my men?"

He found them—those who were left—in scattered companies. And a lusty roar went up as they saw him ride through the moonlight, swaying on the thick farm-cob that carried him.

"It's fourteen miles to Ripley, lads, but we'll cover it."

On Marston Moor the Royalists had pursued their advantage to the full. Rupert's men and Eythin's had run wild on the ridge-fields up above. And Leslie saw his chance. With his Scots he charged down on the White Coats, weakened by siege before the fight began. They kept their pledge; their coats were dyed with crimson martyrdom—and so they died to a man, resisting Leslie's charge.

Leslie himself paused when the work was done. "They were mettled thoroughbreds," he said huskily. "And now, friends, for the ditch that Rupert leaves unguarded."

It was so, in this incredible turmoil of storm and fight and havoc, that the battle of Long Marston was lost to the King. Rupert, getting his men in hand at long last, returned to face another hand-to-hand encounter. With the middlewing past sharing any battle of this world, the affair was hopeless. Rupert would not admit as much. The Metcalfs, a clan lessened since they joined in evensong an hour ago, would not admit it. To the last of their strength they fought, till all were scattered save a few of them.

Down the rough lane past Wilstrop Wood—a lane pitted deep with ruts—the Royalists fled headlong. And at the far side of the wood, where the lane bent round to a trim farmstead, there was a piteous happening. A child, standing at the gate in wonderment at all the uproar and the shouting, saw a press of gentry come riding hard, and began to open the gate for them, bobbing a curtsey as the first horseman passed. He did not see her. Those behind did not see her, but, pressing forward roughly—pressed in turn by those behind—the weight of them was thrust forward and broke down the gate.

After their passing a woman came from the farmsteading, eager to go out and see how it had fared with her husband, a volunteer for Rupert. Under the broken gate she found a little, trampled body; and all her heart grew stony.

"Lord God," she said, "Thou knows't men make the battles, but the women pay for them."

On Marston Moor the Squire of Nappa had found his coolness return when

it was needed most. The Prince, and he, and Christopher, their horses killed under them long since, had just won free of a hot skirmish at the rear of their retreating friends, and were left in a quiet backwater of the pursuit.

"Best get away," he said. "You're needed to see to the aftermath of this red harvest."

His sturdy common sense had struck the true note. Rupert had had in mind to die fighting, since all else was lost. And now the little, fluting note of trust came to him through the havoc. He was needed.

They came, these three, to the clayey lands—wet and sticky to the feet—that bordered Wilstrop Wood. The storm, tired of its fury, had rent the clouds apart with a last soaking deluge, and the moon shone high, tender as a Madonna yearning to bring peace on earth.

A fresh pursuit came near them, and they turned into a field of flowering beans on their left. They heard the pursuit go by. Then they heard a litany of pain come out from Wilstrop Wood, where wounded Cavaliers had taken refuge. And from Marston Moor there was the ceaseless crying—not good to hear—of horses that would never again, in this world, at least, find the stride of a gallop over open fields.

To these three, hidden in the bean-field, came an odd detachment from the pity and the uproar of it all. Nothing seemed to matter, except sleep. The heat, and rain, and burden of that bitter hour just ended were no more than nightmares, ended by this ease of mind and body that was stealing over them. It was good to be alive, if only to enjoy this pleasant languor.

The Squire of Nappa laughed sharply as he got to his feet. "At my age, to go sleeping in a field of flowering beans! As well lie bed-fellow with poppies. D'ye guess what I dreamed just now? Why, that I was crowned King in London, with Noll Cromwell, dressed as Venus, doing homage to me."

"Ah, don't rouse me, father," grumbled Kit. "I'm smelling a Yoredale byre again, and hear the snod kine rattling at their chains."

But Rupert, when at last he, too, was roused, said nothing of his dream. It had been built of moons and Stardust—made up of all the matters he had lost in this queer life of prose—and he would share it with no man.

When they got to the pastures again—blundering as men in drink might do—the free, light air that follows thunder blew about their wits. It was Rupert who first spoke. He remembered that men in flight were trusting him, were needing a leader.

"Friends," he said, "I'm for York. Do you go with me?"

The noise from Wilstrop Wood, the cries from the Moor, grew small in the hearing as they made their way to a speck of light that showed a half-mile or so in front. Two farm-dogs sprang out on them when they reached the farmstead;

but the fugitives knew the way of such, and passed unhindered.

"Are ye fro' Marston, gentles?" asked the farmer, limping out to learn what the uproar was about. "Ay? Then how has the King sped?"

"We are broken," said Rupert simply.

"Well, I'm sorry. Step in and shelter. Ye'd be the better for a meal, by the look o' ye. 'Tis the least I can do for His Majesty, seeing my two rheumy legs kept me fro' riding to his help."

"Have you three horses we can borrow, friend?"

"Nay, I've but two. You're welcome to them; and they're sound-footed, which is more than their master can say of himself."

While they snatched a meal of beef and bread, Christopher glanced at the Prince. "I know my way on foot to Ripley, and they may need me there," he said.

"The fields will be packed with danger, lad. Run at my stirrup, till by good luck we find a third horse on the road to York."

"Let him be," growled the old Squire. "There's a lady lives at Ripley. Lovers and drunkards seldom come to harm, they say."

"Ah, so!" For a moment there was a glow of tenderness in Rupert's sombre eyes. "It is good to hear the name of lady after the late happenings. Get forward, sir, and guard her."

Christopher saw them get to horse and take the track that led to York. Then he fared out into the moonlit pastures, took his bearings, and headed straight for Ripley. The distance was less than twelve miles by the field-tracks; but, by the route he took, it was slow to follow. The clay-lands were waterlogged by the late storm; the hedges to be broken through were high and thorny; but these were not the greatest of his troubles. It had been no velvet warfare, that hour's fight on the Moor. Constantly, as Kit went forward, he heard a groan from the right hand or the left, and stayed to tend a wounded comrade. There was peril, too, from horses roaming, maddened and riderless, in search of the masters they had lost.

The first two miles were purgatory, because Kit's heart was young, and fiery, and tender, because he felt the sufferings of the wounded as his own. The flight, on this side of the Moor, went no further; and for the rest of the journey he had only trouble of the going to encounter. He came late to Ripley Castle; and the sentry who answered to his knocking on the gate opened guardedly.

"Who goes?" he asked.

"Christopher Metcalf, sick with thirst and hunger."

The door was thrown open suddenly. In the ill-lighted hall he saw Ben Waddilove, the old manservant of the Grants, who had ridden—long since, when last year's corn was yellowing to harvest—in charge of Mistress Joan.

Marston Moor was forgotten. The troubles of the day and night were for-

gotten, as sunlight dries the rain. Kit was a lover. "How is the mistress, Ben?" he asked.

"Oh, her temper's keen and trim. Mistress Grant ails naught. I suppose Marston's lost and won? Well, it had to be, I reckon. Who brought the news to Ripley, think ye?"

"I couldn't guess, you old fool."

"Oh, may be old—but not so much of a fool, maybe. He's in yonder, closeted wi' Lady Ingilby in the parlour. I kenned him at first sight by the lap of his ugly jaw. Come hitherto on the tips of your toes, Master Christopher."

The parlour door stood open, and within Kit saw a scene of such amazing oddity that he did not know whether he watched tragedy or comedy in the doing. The hearth was red with crackling logs. At the far end of the table sat Lady Ingilby, a cocked pistol lying close to her right hand; seated opposite her was a thick bulk of a man, with a rusty bandage tied round his neck; between them were four candles, burning with a tranquil flame.

"So you come, Mr. Cromwell, to quarter yourself here?" Lady Ingilby was saving.

"I do, madam."

"You come alone, knowing we are a house of women and of wounded men? Oh, the courage of you! And even our wounded have left us—not one of them so crippled but the news of Rupert's coming spurred him on to Marston."

"The news of Rupert's going will comfort them, maybe," growled Cromwell.

"He thrashed you handsomely. Oh, we have the news! First, a runner came, telling how Lord Fairfax and the leader of the Ironsides had left the field."

Cromwell's quick temper took fire. "You claim a woman's privilege——

"No, my pistol's. We talk as man to man. I say that we have the news. And then a second runner came and told us Leslie's Scots had won the battle. And we sorrowed, but not as if it had been you who claimed the victory."

The man was dead weary; but her scorn, quiet and assured, roused him. "Am I so hated, then, by your side of this quarrel?"

"Hated? That is a little word."

"Good! Any wayside fool can be loved—it takes a man to earn hatred."

"A man of sorts—granted. You will tell me, Mr. Cromwell, what your purpose was in coming to this house. My husband may be lying dead on Marston Field. Perhaps you came, in courtesy, to distract my grief."

"I came because Lord Fairfax bade me," said Cromwell bluntly. "We have no courtesy in Rutland, as you know. Mere folly must have bidden me leave my men outside, lest they intruded on you over-roughly."

"How many of them did Rupert leave you for a guard?" She was aware of an unexpected courtesy in the man's voice. It seemed no more than smooth

hypocrisy.

"A few within call. They are not gentle."

"Nor I. As man to man—I stand for the husband who may return or may not—we are here, we two. You have a body of surprising strength, but it is I who hold the pistol. Believe me, Mr. Cromwell, I have learned your proverb well; I trust in Providence and keep my powder dry."

Christopher, watching them from the dusk of the passage, turned away. It did not seem that Lady Ingilby needed him. Yet he turned for a last glance—saw Cromwell's head fall prone on his hands. Weariness had captured him at length. The mistress of Ripley sat with upright carriage, seeing dream-pictures in the glowing fire of logs; and some were nightmares, but a silver thread ran through them—the knowledge that, whether he lived or lay dead, she had her husband's love.

"She bested him, and proper," chuckled Ben Waddilove. "When he came in, he looked like a man who might well go to sleep for good and all. We'll hope as much—and I was ever a prayerful man, as men go."

At the turn of the passage, where a lamp was smoking evilly, Kit saw a ghost come with unsteady step to meet him—a comely ghost, in white, fleecy draperies, a ghost that carried a sputtering candle. After Marston, and the carnage, and the desolate, long journey from the Moor to Ripley here, Christopher was ripe to fancy all beauty an illusion. It was only when he saw the red-brown hair, falling disordered about the whiteness of her gown, that his eyes grew clear.

"So you have come?" asked Joan Grant. "I did not summon you."

"Is that true, Joan?"

She would not meet his glance. "Why should I summon you?"

"Oh, that's for you to know. As we lay in the bean-field—the Prince, and father and I—you came and whispered."

"I travelled far, then, and must have galloped home at speed."

Old Waddilove, who knew his world, moved down the passage noisily. "For my part," he said, talking to himself, and thinking he only murmured, "I allus said like mun wed like, choose what pranks come between. They're fratching already, and that's a good sign. A varry good sign. There was niver two folks fit for wedlock till they've learned how to fratch. It clears their heads o' whimsies."

The draughty passage seemed full of Ben's philosophy. They could hear nothing else, except the steady swish of thunder-rain outside. And Joan laughed, because she could not help it.

There was no concealment then. Laughter opens more doors than the high gravity that lover-folk affect.

"My dear, you know that you came," said Kit.

"I know that I lay awake, sick with terror for you. I saw you fighting—oh,

so gallantly—saw Rupert steal, a broken man, into a field of flowering beans, with only the Squire and you to guard him. And then I fell asleep—as if the bean-scent had stifled me, too—and I dreamed——"

"Well, Joan?"

"That you were hindered, somehow. That you came to great honour and forgot me."

"And that troubled you?" said Kit adroitly.

"Oh, till I woke! Then it seemed to matter little. My heart sits on the top of a high tree, Master Christopher, as I told you long ago."

All that he had fancied in the gaining seemed lost, all that the suffering and long anxiety of war had taught him. She was dainty, elusive, provocative, just as she had been in Yoredale, before her baptism of fire.

"Then why were you sick with terror for me?" he asked, as if downrightness served as well with women as with men.

"Why? Because, perhaps, it is rather cold in the tree-tops, and a heart comes down now and then for a little warmth. I shall bid you good-night, sir. You're in need of rest, I think."

"Joan," he said, "I love you very well."

She halted a moment. The light from her candle showed Kit a face made up of spring-time in a northern lane. Long battle, long abstention from a glimpse of her, brought the old love racing back at flood. And yet it was a new love, deepened and widened by the knowledge gained between the riding out from Yoredale and the stark misery of Marston Moor.

"You will let me go," she said at last. "Is it a time for ease of heart, when our men are dead, or dying, or in flight? They have told me how it sped at Marston—and, Kit, what of the King, when the news goes spurring south to him?"

What of the King? Their own needs—for one caress, one taste of happiness amid the rout—went by. Their loyalty was not a thing of yesterday; its roots lay thick and thrifty in soil centuries old.

"God forgive me," said Christopher. "I had forgotten the King."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### WILSTROP WOOD.

At four of the next morning Lady Ingilby's vigil was ended. There came a Parlia-

ment man to the gate of Ripley, asking urgently for General Cromwell. When he was admitted to the dining-chamber, he saw Cromwell with his head still prone upon the table—saw, too, the grim figure of a lady, who turned to level a pistol at his head.

"Your errand?" asked Lady Ingilby.

"With General Cromwell. He is needed at Long Marston."

"They are welcome to him. He's not needed here."

Cromwell shook himself out of sleep. "Who asks for me?" he said, getting to his feet.

For the moment he thought he was tenting in the open, with only one eye and ear closed in sleep before the next day's march began. Then he glanced round the parlour, saw Lady Ingilby's grim, contemptuous face. When the Parliament man had whispered his message, word for word, Cromwell, with grim irony, thanked his hostess for the night's hospitality, and asked if he were free to take the road.

"None more free. On the road, sir, you will meet the democracy whom you befriend—will meet your equals."

Humour had some hiding place in Cromwell's soul, after all. As they passed out, the messenger and he, he laughed quietly. "She's of Rupert's breed. They'd make good Parliament men, the two of them, if we could persuade them to our side of the battle."

Lady Ingilby opened the parlour window, listened till Cromwell's sharp command had brought his troopers into line, and heard them go on weary horses down the street. Then she went to the hall, in search of cloak and hood, and encountered Christopher.

"Good morrow, Mr. Metcalf," she said, after the first start of surprise. "One of your clan always comes when I'm most in need of you. My husband—does he lie dead on Marston Moor?"

"He was alive when we broke Cromwell's Ironsides, for I heard his cheery shout. After that Leslie routed us, and—I do not know."

"He may be alive, you think?"

"Why not? I shared the trouble with him, and I'm here."

Impetuous, strong for the deed, and strong for yielding to emotion afterwards, she came and touched him on the shoulder. "My thanks—oh, indeed, my thanks. Only to fancy him alive is peace to me. I need you," she added briskly. "You will take charge of my women-folk here, until I return from—from an errand of mercy."

"Let me take the errand."

"Ah, but you could not. Only I can do it. Sir, is it no welcome change for you to tend helpless women? You have had your holiday at Marston."

"It was a queer merry-making."

"But your wounds show to the public eye—wounds of honour. You carry the red badge of knighthood, sir, while I have only a few more grey hairs to show for all these months of waiting."

"You cannot go alone," he protested. "The roads will be full of raffish men."

"The roads must be as they will. For my part, I have to take a journey. Come, saddle me a horse, sir, by your leave. My grooms were all out with the King's party yesterday."

When they crossed to the stables, a shrill cry of welcome greeted them; and, for all the gravity of what was past, Kit could not check a sudden laugh. "Why, 'tis Elizabeth, the good ass that helped Michael into York! We thought to have lost her somewhere between this and Lathom House."

Elizabeth came and licked Kit's face; even if he were not Michael, the master well-beloved, he was at least near the rose. And then Kit pushed her aside; it was no time for blandishment.

There were two horses only, left behind because unfit for battle. They looked oddly lonesome, with the six empty stalls beside them stretching out into the lights and shadows thrown by the lantern.

"A man's saddle," said Lady Ingilby briskly. "You'll find it in the harness chamber yonder."

Kit, when the livelier of the two horses was ready, understood why she had chosen a man's saddle. It carried a holster; and into this, after looking at the priming and uncocking it with masculine precision, she slipped the pistol that had over-watched Cromwell's slumbers not long ago. And his wonder grew; for, during months of intimacy with Ripley's household, he had learned that Lady Ingilby, at usual times, was motherly, unwarlike, afraid of powder and the touch of sharpened steel.

As he led her horse to the mounting-steps at the far side of the stable-yard, the lilt of tired hoofs came up the roadway. Young dawn was busy up the hills, and into the grey and rosy light rode Michael. He was not dressed for a banquet. His clothes were yellow with the clay of Marston Moor, his face disordered by wounds lately dried by the night's east wind. But the soul of him was Michael's—wayward and unalterable.

"At your service, Lady Ingilby," he said. "I heard a donkey bray just now, and fancied it was Elizabeth, crying over milk spilled at Marston."

"It was no white milk, Mr. Metcalf, by the look of you."

"The thunder-rain was red in the ditches. It was a good fight, and it's ended. So, baby Kit, we're first to the tryst, we two. I've been wondering, all from Marston hitherto, whether you were dead or living."

Christopher found one heartache stanched. The sense that Michael was

here, instead of on the wet ground of the Moor out yonder, was vivid happiness. "Elizabeth will be glad," he said indifferently. "She was crying for you not long ago."

Then he was urgent that Michael should be left here on guard, and he had his way. He borrowed the other's horse; and, after all, Lady Ingilby was glad to have an escort through the roads.

"You have news of my husband?" she asked Michael, without hope of any answer that sufficed.

"None," said Michael, "save that we were in the thick of it—Kit, and he, and I—and I heard a man near me say that Ingilby was fighting as if three men's strength were in his body."

"That is no news," said the other drily. "He was ever that sort of man."

When they had ridden out, she and Kit, and had come to the hollow where dog-roses and honeysuckle were blooming spendthrift to the warmer air of dawn; she turned in saddle. "Your brother spoke of coming to a tryst. What tryst?"

"It was this way. Before the relief of York, it was agreed among the Riding Metcalfs that, if the battle sped, Ripley could look to its own needs. If the fight was lost, we were to come soon or syne—those left of us—to guard you."

Lady Ingilby reined in—an easy matter with the pensioner that carried her. "In these evil modern times, are there still so many of the elder breed? One here and there I could understand, but not six-score of you."

"There are fewer now. We lost a few at Bolton, and Marston Moor was worse. Those who are left will come in. Their word is pledged."

The spaciousness of summer on the hills returned to Lady Ingilby. Siege, and hardship, and the red fight at Marston went by. Here was a man who had fought, lost blood and kindred to the cause—a man simple, exact to the promise made.

"I am glad of your escort, after all," she said. "You were breeked in the olden time, I think."

"What is our route?" asked Christopher by and by.

"To Marston. If my husband is abroad, well. If he's dead or dying, he may need me."

It seemed to Kit, through all the perils of the road, through the instant dangers that beset them from the thievish folk who hang upon the skirts of war, that a little, silver light went on ahead, guarding their passage. But he was country-born and fanciful. At Ripley, Michael the careless went indoors and found the old man-servant fidgeting about the hall.

"Well, Waddilove," he said, throwing himself on the long-settle, and holding his hands to the fire-blaze, "it seems long since I knew you as body-servant to Sir Peter Grant in Yoredale. I've fought and marched, and had my moments—ay, Ben,

moments of sheer rapture when we charged—and now I come from Marston, and all's ended, save a thirst that will drink your cellars dry before I slake it."

Waddilove did not know "Maister Michael" in this mood of weariness. "Ye used to be allus so light-hearted, come shine or storm," he muttered.

"That is the worst of a high reputation. One falls to earth, old sinner. I've no jest, no hope, nothing but this amazing thirst. If there's wine left in the Castle, bring it."

Ben was literal in interpretation of an order. When he returned, he brought two bottles of Madeira and a rummer-glass.

"Oh, good!" said Michael, with something of his old laugh. "Fire and wine—I need them." He kicked the logs into a blaze. "It seems odd to need warmth, with midsummer scarce past, but I've brought a great coldness from the Moor. Gentlemen of the King's—men who should be living for him—are lying where they fell. There was no room for a horse's hoofs; one had to trample the loyal dead. Wine, Ben! Pour me a brimmer for forgetfulness."

And now Waddilove understood that this gay wastrel of the Metcalfs was on the edge of sickness—not of the body only, or the mind, but of the two. In his eyes there was a fever and a dread. Not knowing what to do—whether wine were friend or adversary—he obeyed the order. Michael drained the glass in one long, satisfying gulp. "One can buy peace so easily—at a price," he said. "Fill again for me, Daniel, and we'll drink confusion to Noll Cromwell."

While the wine was between the bottle and the glass, a little lady came into the hall. She had a carrot in her hand, and trouble was lurking in her young, patrician face.

"Who is this, Ben?" she asked, withdrawing a step or two, as she saw the patched and mud-stained figure on the settle.

"Michael Metcalf, at your service. No need to ask your servant vouch for me."

He had risen. From his great height, shivering and unsteady, he looked down at her.

"But, sir, you are unlike yourself. Your eyes are wild."

"So would your pretty eyes be, Mistress Joan, if you'd shared Marston Fight with me. I've seen a King lose his cause—his head may follow."

Joan was aware of some new strength behind the man's present disarray. "Does your love for the King go so deep, then? We thought you light of heart."

"Always the same gibe. I have talked with the King, and I know. Our lives were slight in the losing, if we had given him the battle. But we lost it. What matters now, Joan?"

"This, sir—that the King still needs his gentlemen."

Michael stood to attention. She had always bettered his outlook on life,

even in his careless days. Now, with every nerve at strain, she showed him a glad, narrow track that went upward, climbing by the ladder of adversity.

"As for that," he said, with an odd smile, "I thank you for a word in season. It will keep Sir William's cellars from a period of drought."

Waddilove, watching the man, could only wonder at his sharp return to self-control. He did not know that, so far as Michael was concerned, Joan Grant brought always the gift of healing.

"Heartsease, that's for remembrance," said Michael, after a troubled silence, "and carrots, they're for Elizabeth the well-beloved."

She caught the sudden hope, the challenge in his glance. Clearly as if he had put the thought into speech, she knew that he clung to the old love, told more than once in Yoredale. He hoped—so wild a lover's fancy can be—that, because she fed his ass with dainties, she did it for the master's sake.

"Ah, no," she said sharply. "It is not good to play at make-believe. There is trouble at our doors—the King's cause drowning, and men lying dead out yonder. I go to feed Elizabeth, and you, sir, will stay here to guard the house."

Michael kicked the logs into a blaze, and watched the flames go up with a steady, thrifty roar. He turned presently, to find Waddilove asking whether he did not need a second brimmer of Madeira.

"To-morrow, you old fool! For to-night, I've the house to guard. Meanwhile, I've lit a lively fire—all my hopes, Ben, and most of my prayers, have gone scummering up the chimney-stack. I trust they find good weather out o' doors."

Christopher and Lady Ingilby, about this time, were nearing Marston Moor. As they reached Tockwith village, and were passing the farmstead where Cromwell had dressed the wound in his neck not long ago, five men rode out at them through the rosy light of dawn. Christopher, with battle still in his blood, shot the first at close quarters—a red and messy business. Then he reined about, with the instinct taught him by Rupert's cavalry, turned again, and charged the four remaining.

He found himself in the stour of it; for they were thick-set rogues, and had little to lose in this world or the next. It seemed that they must bear him down, after he had accounted for another of their number with his sword. Then a second pistol-shot rang out, and the man nearest Kit dropped from saddle as a fat, red plum falls from an autumn branch. His horse stampeded, and the two riders left galloped headlong for the woods.

Kit returned to find Lady Ingilby with a smoking pistol in her hand. Her voice was tremulous.

"Sir, if this is to feel as men do—ah, thank the good God I was born a woman. I aimed truly, and—and I have no pride in it."

Through the sunrise and the hot, moist scent of flowering hedgerows they

made their way down the narrow farm-track which was henceforth to be known as Rupert's Lane. At the ditch and the battered hedgerow where Cromwell's horse had been driven back, a man on foot asked sharply who went there.

"Lady Ingilby, come to see whether her husband lives or is dead for the King."

"I cannot tell you, madam. There are so many dead, on both sides of the battle."

"But I must know. Give us free conduct through the lines, my friend here and myself; it is a little thing to ask."

The Parliament man was muffled in a great-coat, an unwieldy hat drawn over his eyes. But Christopher knew him, though Ingilby's wife, her heart set on one errand only, saw beyond and through him, scarce knowing he was there save as an obstacle to progress down the lane.

"It is granted," said the Roundhead, "if you permit me to bandage your eyes until we come to the place where Sir William fought. I know the place, because our men brought in high tales of his strength and courage."

"But why the bandage?" she asked peremptorily.

"Because, between here and where he fought, there are sights not good for any woman's eyes."

"Ah, tut! I've nursed men at Ripley who were not good to see. Their wounds were taken for the King, and so were pleasant."

They went through what had been the centre of the King's army—went through all that was left of the Whitecoats, thick-huddled with their faces to the sky. For a moment even Ingilby's wife was dizzy and appalled. There was no scent of summer hedgerows now. Then she took hold again of her unalterable courage.

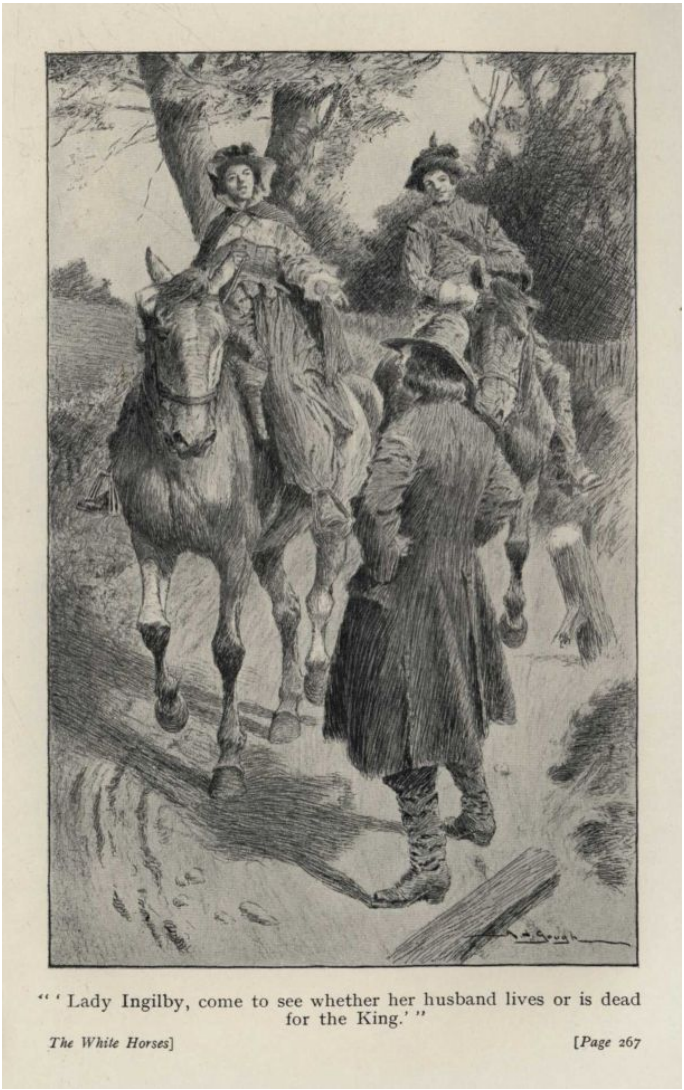
"Oh, they died well. Lead on."

They came to the place where Sir William's company had fought; and the sun, gaining strength already to drive through the mists of last night's thunder-storm, showed her the faces of many folk remembered, but not her husband's.

"I thank God," she said simply. Then, as she turned to retrace her steps, the inbred courtesy of the woman surmounted the pain that had gone before, the passionate thanksgiving that followed. "I thank you, too, for conduct through the lines. What is your name, that I may remember it in my prayers?"

"At Ripley they would name me Noll Cromwell. I ask no thanks, and need none."

It was all muddled and astounding, as the battle of last night had been. The man she had scolded not long ago at Ripley—the man whose soul she had whipped raw, though she did not guess it—had offered courtesy. For this hour, at any rate, Cromwell was a mystic, seeing with the clearer vision and knowing



"'Lady Ingilby, come to see whether her husband lives or is dead for the King.'"

*The White Horses*] [*Page 267*

*"'Lady Ingilby, come to see whether her husband lives or is dead for the King.'"*

the kind lash of penance. Since this wild campaign began, drawing him from his quiet estate in Rutland, he had known no happiness till now. This woman had flouted him; yet he was glad, with an amazing gladness, to succour her in need.

A man came running, and said that General Cromwell was needed in Tockwith village, where some trouble had broken out among his men. The mystic disappeared. The Cromwell of sheer flesh and blood showed himself. "Trouble, is there?" he snapped. "I've a short way with trouble of that sort. As for you, Lady Ingilby, the password is *Endeavour*, and I would recommend you to secure your retreat at once."

With a half-defiant salute he was gone, and, as they came again to the place where the Whitecoats lay, a party of Roundhead horsemen, riding by, halted suddenly.

"You are on the King's side," said the leader, with a sharp glance at Christopher. "I am Captain Murray, at your service, of Leslie's horse. I know you because you all but killed me in that last rally Rupert made. What, in the de'il's name, are you doing here—and with a lady?"

"We are under safe-conduct through the lines. Cromwell gave us the word *Endeavour* not five minutes since."

"Well, I need you, as it happens. There are many of your dead in Wilstrop Wood, and General Leslie has a soft heart—after the fight is done—like most Scotsmen. He sends me to find a King's man who can name the dead. 'They have wives and bairns, nae doot,' said Leslie in his dry way, 'and ill news is better than no news at a', for those who bide at hame.'"

Lady Ingilby was not sorry when her request to go with Kit was refused. After all, she had breakfasted on horrors and could take no further meal as yet.

"If he is there, Christopher," she whispered, "you will take me. If you do not find him, well. Either way, there is the God above us."

When they came to Wilstrop Wood—Lady Ingilby staying on the outskirts with three dour Scotsmen as a guard of honour—the wind was rustling through the trees. And from the ground there was a harsher rustle—the stir and unrest of men who could not die just yet, however they longed for the prison-gate of flesh to open.

The red-gold sunlight filtered through the cobwebs spun from tree to tree of Wilstrop Wood. And even Murray, who counted himself hard-bitten, stood aghast at what he saw. The underwood was white with bodies of the slain.

A great wrath and pity brought Kit's temper to a sudden heat. "Captain Murray," he said, "these dead have been robbed of all that hides their nakedness. I say it is a foul deed. Better have lost the fight than—than this."

"You will tell it to the world?" stammered Murray.

"Yes, if I win free of this. It shall be blazoned through the North, till there's

none but knows of it."

Murray halted irresolute. If the Scotsman had been of grosser make, Kit would have joined the company of King's men who slept in Wilstrop Wood. It was easy, with the men he had at call, to silence this hot-headed youngster.

"That is your resolve?" he asked slowly.

"D'ye doubt it? Captain Murray, it is a loathsome business enough to pick the pockets of the dead, but to take clothes and all——"

"The Scots had no hand in it, I tell ye. Our lads hae over-muckle care for the dead of either side. But I aye mistrusted those Psalm-singing rogues. Will ye take it at that?"

"There's a sickness in the middle of me," said Christopher, with tired simplicity. "What is your business with me here in Wilstrop Wood?"

Murray conquered his first impulse to put Kit's tongue out of harm's way once for all. "As I told you, sir, General Leslie's heart is tender as a maudlin woman's—now the battle is won, and his own wounds patched up—and needs must that you identify the dead."

Christopher, who seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve, was a true Dalesman. By letting the world see the froth and bubble of the upper waters, he hid the deeper pools. As they went through the wood, the sunlight filtering through on ground for ever to be haunted, he knew, by the whiteness of their skins, that the greater part of the fallen were gentry of the King's. Instinct, quick to help a man, told him it was unwise to admit the loss of so many officers to the cause, though he knew many faces there—faces of men who had shared fight or bivouac with him somewhere between this and Oxford.

"They must rest where they lie, for all the help I can give you," he said impassively, "and may God have mercy on their souls."

"Sir, I wonder at your calm," snapped Murray; "but now I understand. All you Papists have that quiet air of ease."

"Up in Yoredale we heard nothing of the Pope, but much of prayers for those who crossed the fighting-line ahead of us."

Murray thought he made nothing of this lad; yet at heart he knew that, through all the moil and stench of Marston, he, too, was going back along the years—going back to the knees of his mother, whose prayers for him he thought forgotten long since.

As they were making their way through the wood again, a slim youngster, stark naked, lifted himself on an elbow and babbled in his weakness. "Have we won, friend?" he asked, looking at Kit and Murray with starry, fevered eyes.

"Aye," said Murray, Scottish pity warring with regard for truth. "We've won, my laddie."

"Then unfasten this bracelet from my wrist. Oh, quick, you fools—the

time's short! Take it to Miss Bingham, out at Knaresborough yonder, and tell her I died as well as might be. Tell her Marston Moor is won for the King."

And with that there came a rattle in his throat. And he crossed himself with a feeble forefinger.

"Dear God," said Murray, "the light about his face! You simple gallants have the laugh of us when it comes to the high affair of dying."

Christopher said nothing, after closing the eyes of a gentleman the King could ill afford to lose. And so they came out of Wilstrop Wood, and found Lady Ingilby again.

"Does he lie there?" she asked sharply.

"I did not see him," answered Kit.

"I am almost—almost happy. You did not find him? Come; they'll be needing us at Ripley."

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE HOMELESS DAYS.

Marston Moor was fought and ended. A mortal blow had been struck at the King's cause in the North; and yet the Metcalfs, rallying round Lady Ingilby at Ripley, would not admit as much. The King must come to his own, they held, and Marston was just an unlucky skirmish that mattered little either way.

York capitulated, and Squire Metcalf, when the news was brought at supper-time, shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a pity," he said. "We must get on without the good town of York—that is all."

Lady Ingilby glanced across at him. For the first time since Marston Moor she smiled. "And if all is lost, will you still believe that the world goes very well?"

A great sob broke from the Squire, against his will or knowledge. "Lady Ingilby, there are fewer Metcalfs than there were," he explained shame-facedly. "I went through Marston Fight, moreover. It is not my faith that weakens—it is just that I am human, and my courage fails."

None spoke for a while. The mistress of Ripley, on her knees in the chapelry, or busying herself about her men's needs, had learned what the Squire had learned. Those who had gone through the stress and anguish of the late battle, and the women who had waited here between closed walls for news to come,

all caught the wonder of this moment. It was as if some Presence were among them, interpreting the rough strife of sword and pike.

"If there were two Metcalfs left of us all," said the Squire, his big voice humorous in its gentleness, "we should still believe that all was well with King Charles. And, if one fell, t'other would be glad to be the last to die for His Majesty."

The moment passed. It was too intimate, too filled with knowledge of the over-world, for long continuance. Metcalf filled his glass afresh. The men were glad to follow his good example.

"Your health, Lady Ingilby—your good health," said the Squire.

While they were drinking the toast, the outer door was opened hurriedly, and a little, wiry man came in. His face was tired, and his clothes were stained with rain and mud.

"Gad, here's Blake!" laughed Kit Metcalf. "Blake, the rider—I saw him bring the Metcalfs into Oxford."

Blake nodded cheerily. "Life has its compensations. I shall remember that ride down Oxford High Street until I die, I think. Lady Ingilby, I've a message from your husband, for your private ear."

A great stillness had come to Lady Ingilby, a certainty of herself and of the men about her. "He was always a good lover. You can give his message to the public ear."

"He escaped from Marston with twenty men, and hid in Wilstrop Wood. There was carnage there, but your lord escaped. And afterwards he fell in with Prince Rupert, returning with volunteers from the garrison at York. He bids me tell you he is safe."

"Was that all his message, Mr. Blake?"

"No, it was not all, but—but the rest is for your private ear, believe me."

"I—am very tired. My courage needs some open praise. What was my lord's message?"

Blake stooped to whisper in her ear, and Lady Ingilby laughed. Keen youth was in her face. "Gentlemen, it was a vastly tender message. I am proud, and—and a woman again, I think, after all this discipline of war. My husband bids me hold Ripley Castle for as long as may be, if the Metcalfs come."

"There never was much 'if' about a Metcalf," said the old Squire. "Our word was pledged before ever Marston Fight began."

"Oh, he knew as much, but you forget, sir, that many hindrances might have come between your pledged word and yourselves. You might have died to a man, as the Whitecoats did—God rest them."

The Squire's bluntness softened. The tenderness that is in the heart of every Yorkshireman showed plainly in his face. "True. We might all have died. As it

is, there are many gaps that will have to be explained to the goodwife up in Yoredale."

And again there was a wonder and a stillness in the hall, none knowing why, till Lady Ingilby broke silence. "Such gaps need no explaining. They are filled by a golden light, and in the midst of it a rude wooden cross, and over it the words 'For Valour.' There, gentlemen, I weary you with dreams. Lest you think me fanciful, let me fill your glasses for you. It will do you no harm to drink deep to-night, and the sentries are ready at their posts."

They could make nothing of her. Gay, alert, she went about the board, the wine-jug in her hands. The message from her lord that Blake had whispered seemed to have taken a score years from her life, as strong sun eats up a rimy frost. When she bade them good-night and passed out, it was as if a spirit of great charm and well-being had gone and left them dull.

On the morrow there was work enough to keep them busy. The fall of York had sent Cromwell's men like a swarm of bees about the land. Dour and unimaginative in battle, they ran wild when victory was theirs. Men who had been plough-boys and farm-hinds a year since were filled with heady glee that they had helped to bring the great ones low. Some of their officers could not believe—honestly, each man to his conscience—that there was any good or usefulness in gentlemen of the King's who wore love-locks because it was the habit of their class, and who chanced to carry a fine courage under frivolous wearing-gear.

The Squire of Nappa was roused, somewhere about five of the clock, by a din and shouting from the courtyard underneath his bed-chamber. At first he fancied he was back on Marston Field again, and raised a sleepy challenge. Then, as the uproar increased, he got out of bed, stretched himself with one big, satisfying yawn, and threw the casement open.

The summer's dawn was moist and fragrant. His eyes, by instinct, sought the sky-line where, in Yoredale, hills would be. Here he saw only rolling country that billowed into misty spaces, with a blurred and ruddy sun above it all. The fragrance of wet earth and field flowers came in with the warm morning breeze. He was a countryman again, glad to be alive on a June day.

Then he returned to soldiery, looked down on the press of men below, and his face hardened. "Give you good-morrow, Cropheads," he said gently.

"And who may you be?" asked the leader of the troop.

"A Mecca for the King. Ah, you've heard that rally-call before, I fancy. Your own name, sir?"

"Elihu Give-the-Praise."

"Be pleased to be serious. That is a nickname, surely."

A storm of protest came from the soldiery, and Elihu took heart of grace

again.

"Idolaters and wine-bibbers, all of you," he said, vindictiveness and martyrdom struggling for the mastery. "Since I forswore brown ale and kept the narrow track, men know me as Elihu Give-the-Praise."

"Then, as one who relishes brown ale, I ask you what your business is, disturbing a Riding Metcalf when he needs his sleep?"

"Our business is short and sharp—to bid you surrender, or we sack the Castle."

"Your business is like to be long and tedious," laughed the Squire, and shut the casement.

He crossed to the landing and lifted a hale cry of "Rouse yourself, Meccas! What lads you are for sleeping!" And there was a sudden tumult within doors louder than the din of Puritans outside. It was then, for the first time, that Lady Ingilby, running from her chamber with a loose wrap thrown about her disarray, understood the full meaning of clan discipline.

The men who answered the rally-call were heavy with sleep and in no good temper; but they stood waiting for their orders without protest. When the Squire told them what was in the doing, their faces cleared. Sleep went by them like a dream forgotten. The Roundheads underneath fired some random shots, as a token of what would follow if there were no surrender; and, in reply, spits of flame ran out from every loophole of the Castle front. They were not idle shots. Elihu Give-the-Praise, with a stiff courage of his own, tried to rally his men, in spite of a splintered arm; but a second flight of bullets rained about them, and panic followed.

"A thrifty dawn," said the Squire of Nappa, as if he danced at a wedding.

For that day, and for three days thereafter, there was little sleep within the Ripley walls. Parliament men, in scattered companies, marched to replace the slain and wounded. There were sorties from the Castle, and ready fire from the loopholes overhead; and in the courtyard space lay many bodies that neither side could snatch for decent burial. There was not only famine sitting on the Ripley threshold now, but pestilence; for the moist heat of the summer was not good for dead or living men.

In the middle watch of the fourth night, Squire Metcalf heard a company of horsemen clatter up to the main gate. He thrust his head through a casement of the tower—the loopholes had been widened in these modern days—and asked gruffly the strangers' errand.

"Surrender while you can, Nappa men," said the foremost horseman.

"It is not our habit."

"There's a company of Fairfax's men—a thousand of them, more or less—within call."

"Ay, so are a thousand cuckoos, if you could whistle them to hand. Who are you, to come jesting at the gates?"

"Nephew to Lord Fairfax, by your leave."

"That alters matters. I'm Metcalf of Nappa, and aye had a liking for the Fairfaxes, though the devil knows how they came into t'other camp. Their word is their bargain, anyhow."

Fairfax laughed. The sturdy bluntness of the man was in keeping with all he had heard of him. "That is true. Will you surrender—leaving all arms behind you?"

"No," said the Squire of Nappa. "Bring your thousand cuckoos in, and I promise 'em a welcome."

He shut the casement, called for his son Christopher to take his sentry-place, and sought Lady Ingilby.

"There's a good deal to be done in five minutes," he said, by way of breaking the news to her.

"Oh, you think only of speed these days, and I—believe me, I am tired."

"'Tiredness butters no haver-bread,' as we say in Yoredale. There are two ways open to us—one to surrender by and by, the other to ride out to-night."

"But my husband—-oh, he left me here to hold the Castle."

"For as long as might be. He'll not grumble when he learns the way of our riding out. Better leave Ripley now, with honour, than wait till they starve us into surrender."

He had his way. In silence they made their preparations. Then Metcalf lifted a noisy rally-cry as he led his men into the courtyard. And the fight was grim and troublesome. When it was done, the Metcalfs turned—those who were left—and came back for the womenfolk; and some of the white horses, saddled hastily, fidgeted when for the first time they found women's hands on the bridle.

Michael was one of those who gave his horse, lest a woman should go on foot; and at the courtyard gate, while the press of folk went through, he halted suddenly.

"Kit," he said, "there's li'le Elizabeth braying as if all her world were lost. 'Twould be a shame to forget her, after what she did for me at York."

Christopher was young to defeat. "It's no time to think of donkeys, Michael," he snapped, humour and good temper deserting him in need.

"I defend my own, lad, whether Marston Moor is lost or won. I'm fond of Elizabeth, if only for her skew-tempered blandishments."

When he returned from the humble pent-house where they had lodged the ass, the Squire had got his company ready for the march, and was demanding roughly where Michael was.

"Here, sir," said Michael, with the laugh that came in season or out.

"Making friends with your kind, lad," snapped the other. "Well, it's a thrifty sort of common sense."

The odd cavalcade went out into the dewy, fragrant dawn. About the land was one insistent litany of birds—merle and mavis, sleepy cawing of the rooks, and shrill cry of the curlews and the plover. A warm sun was drinking up lush odours from the rain-washed fields and hedgerows.

"Eh, but to see my growing corn in Yoredale!" sighed Squire Metcalf. "As 'tis, lads, we're heading straight for Knaresborough, to learn how they are faring there."

Joan Grant had been content, till now, to sit Christopher's horse and to find him at her stirrup.

"I do not like the Knaresborough country," she said, with gusty petulance.

"Not like it? Their garrison has kept the Cropheads busy."

"Oh, ay, Master Christopher! There's nothing in the world save sorties and hard gallops. To be sure, we poor women are thrust aside these days."

"What is it?"

"What is it, the boy asks. I thought you grown since Yoredale days; and now, Kit, you're rough and clumsy as when you came a-wooing and I bade you climb a high tree—if, that is, you had need to find my heart."

They rode in silence for a while. Christopher thought that he had learned one thing at least—to keep a still tongue when a woman's temper ran away with her. But here, again, his wisdom was derided.

"I loathe the tongue-tied folk! Battle, and audience with the King, and wayfaring from Yoredale down to Oxford—have they left you mute?"

"Less talkative," he agreed; "I've seen men die."

For a moment she lost her petulance. "You are older, graver, more likeable. And yet I—I like you less. There was no need—surely there was no need to—to let others tell me of the ferry-steps at Knaresborough."

"The ferry-steps?"

"So you've forgotten that poor maid as well. I pity Miss Bingham now. Why do women hate each other so? Instead, they should go into some Sisterhood of Pity, hidden away from men."

"They should," assented Christopher; "but few of them do, 'twould seem."

"And now you laugh at me. Oh, I have heard it all! How pleasantly Nidd River runs past the ferry-steps. She is beautiful, they tell me."

"I have no judgment in these matters. Ask Michael—he was there with me in Knaresborough."

Michael had chanced to overtake them at the moment, Elizabeth following him like a dog. "Nidd River—yes, she is beautiful."

"It was Miss Bingham we talked of. I—oh! I have heard such wonderful

tales of her. She glamours men, they say."

Michael, for a breathing-space or two, was silent. Then he recaptured the easy-going air that had served as a mask in harder times than this. "She glamoured me, Miss Grant—on my faith, she did—whenever Kit would leave her side. The kindest eyes that ever peeped from behind a lattice."

"Miss Bingham seems to be prodigal of the gifts that heaven has given her."

"True charity, believe me—to spend what one has, and spend it royally."

"She seems, indeed, to be a very perfect hoyden. Oh, I am weary! Marston Moor is lost. Ripley is lost. Are we going to ride for ever along dreary roads?"

"Three of us go on foot—Kit the baby, Elizabeth and I. We have no grumbles."

She turned on him like a whirlwind. "If the end of the world came—here and now—you would make a jest of it."

"'Twould sweeten the end, at any rate. There's Irish blood in me, I tell you."

From ahead there sounded a sharp cry of command. "Hi, Meccas, all! The enemy's in front."

War had lessened the ranks of the Metcalfs, but not their discipline. Michael and his brother clutched each a horse's bridle, after helping the women to alight, and sprang to the saddle. Even Elizabeth shambled forward to take her share of hazard, and Joan found herself alone. And the gist of her thoughts was that she hated Kit, and was afraid that he would die.

She watched the Metcalfs spur forward, then slacken pace as they neared the big company coming round the bend of the road. The old Squire's voice rang down-wind to her.

"King's men, like ourselves? Ay, I see the fashion of you. And where may you be from, gentles?"

"I'm the late Governor of Knaresborough, at your service."

"And I'm the Squire of Nappa, with all that the Cropheads have left of my Riding Metcalfs."

The Governor saluted with extreme precision. "This almost reconciles me to the loss of Knaresborough, sir. We have heard of you—give you good-day," he broke off, catching sight of Michael and Christopher. "We have met in happier circumstances, I think."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### SIR REGINALD'S WIDOW.

"'If the end of the world came—here and now—you would make a jest of it.'"

*The White Horses*] [*Page* 282

*"'If the end of the world came—here and now—you would make a jest of it.'"*

There is nothing so astounding, so muddled by cross-issues and unexpected happenings, as civil war. Not long ago Marston Moor had heard the groans of Cavaliers as they lay naked to the night-wind, and prayed for death in Wilstrop Wood. York had surrendered. The garrisons of Knaresborough and Ripley, met together on the dusty highroad here, were weak with famine and privation. Yet they stood chatting—the ladies of both garrisons passing laughter and light badinage with the men—as if they were gathered for a hunting-party or falconry. The intolerable pressure of the past months was ended for a while, if only by disaster; and from sheer relief they jested.

Joan Grant, in the middle of the chatter, edged her mare near to a sprightly horse-woman who had just dismissed Michael with a playful tap of her whip across his cheek.

"You are Miss Bingham? Ah, I guessed it."

"By what token?"

"By your beauty, shall we say? Gossip has so much to tell about it, and about the Vicarage garden, with Nidd River swirling past the ferry-steps."

They eyed each other with the wariness of duellists. "The good Vicar is fortunate in his garden," assented Miss Bingham, with the most charming courtesy.

"And in his water-nymphs, 'twould seem. I think you would be like some comely dream—on an April evening, say, with the young leafage of the trees for halo."

"Oh, it is pleasant to be flattered! But why this praise of me? We were strangers not an hour ago."

"I have heard so much of you. You were so kind to the men who sortied from Knaresborough and returned with wounds. You sat by the ferry-steps—all like a good angel—and bound their hurts afresh when they smarted. Oh, indeed, we have heard of your pleasant skill in healing."

While they faced each other, there came the thud and racket of horse-hoofs down the road. The rider drew rein amid a swirl of dust, cleared his eyes with a hand that trembled, and looked from one face to another. His tired face lit up when at last he saw the Governor of Knaresborough.

"Give you good-day, sir. I was riding to seek aid from you."

"The devil you were," growled the other. "The man sups lean who trusts to my help, Graham. Knaresborough's in other hands since—since Marston."

"It would be. I had forgotten that. But you're here."

"What is your need, lad?"

"A few men to help me, over at Norton Conyers. I rode to ask if you could lend them me."

"All of us, if we're needed. We were jesting on the road here, for lack of

other occupation. What is it? But, first, is your uncle safe—tough Reginald Graham? I love him as I love the steep rock-face of Knaresborough."

"It was this way. My uncle would have me near him at Marston. We were with Rupert on the right wing, and were close behind one of the Riding Metcalfs—I know not which, for they're all big men and as like as two peas in a pod—and saw him cut Cromwell through the throat. We were together when we broke the Roundheads and pursued too far. It was when we came to the ditch again, and found Leslie there with his Scots, that I lost Sir Reginald. I took a wound or two in the stampede that followed, and was laid by in a little farmstead near Wilstrop Wood. The good-wife was kind to me—said she had lost a bairn of her own not long since, trampled down by flying horsemen at the gate."

"Ay, lad; but why d'ye not get forward with your news of Sir Reginald?"

"Because I cannot trust myself to speak of him without some folly in my throat. Give me time, sir—give me time. I got about again in a day or two, and stumbled home somehow to Norton Conyers. And I—I met a black procession—all like a nightmare, it was—journeying to the kirkyard. So I joined them; and one man nudged another, and asked who this was coming in his tatters to the burial without mourning-gear. And I pointed to my wounds and laughed. 'Mourning-gear enough,' said I. 'Mourners go in blood and tatters since Marston.' And then, they tell me, I fell, and lay where I fell. That was all I knew, till I got up next day with all my limbs on fire."

There was silence among those looking on—a deep and reverent silence. This youngster, out of battle and great pain, had captured some right-of-way to the attention of strong men.

"When I was about again, they told me how it chanced. Sir Reginald took a mortal hurt at Marston, but rode with the best of his strength to Norton Conyers. He found Lady Graham at the gate, waiting for news of him; and he stooped from saddle, so they say, and kissed her. 'I could not die away from you, wife,' he said."

"Ay," growled the Governor, "he was like that—a hard fighter, and a lover so devout that his wife had reason to be proud."

"She tried to help him get from horse; but he shook his head. 'The stairs are wide enough,' was all his explanation. Then he rode in at the main door and up the stair, and bent his head low to enter the big bed-chamber. He got from the saddle to the bed, lay with his eyes on fire with happiness, and so died."

"A good ending," said the Squire of Nappa roughly, because he dared not give his feelings play. "What I should call a gentleman's ending—leal to King and wife. Oh, you young fool, no need to make a tragedy about it!"

Graham answered gamely to the taunt that braced him. "As for that, sir, tragedy is in the making, if no help comes to Norton Conyers. We had word this morning that a company of Roundheads was marching on the Hall—the worst of

the whole brood—those who robbed the dead and dying in Wilstrop Wood."

It was not the Governor of Knaresborough who took command. Without pause for thought of precedence, Squire Metcalf lifted his voice.

"A Mecca for the King, and bustle about the business, lads!"

The road no longer showed like a meeting-place where idle gentry foregathered to pass the time of day. The Governor, with some envy underlying all his admiration, saw the Metcalfs swing into line behind their leader.

"Our horses are fresh," explained the Squire over shoulder, with a twinge of punctilio. "Do you follow, sir, and guard the women-folk."

"I shall guard them," said the Governor, laughing quietly.

Miss Bingham saw Joan watching the dust swirl and eddy in the wake of the Riding Metcalfs, saw that the girl's face was petulant and wistful. "He did not pause to say good-bye," she said, with gentlest sympathy.

"I did not ask him to."

"But, indeed, men are fashioned in that mould. I am older than you, child."

"So much is granted," said Joan sharply.

"And women are fashioned in their mould, too, with feet of velvet and the hidden claws. Yes, I am older. You drew blood there."

"Miss Bingham, I am in no mood for petty warfare of our sort. Our men have done enough, and they are riding out again. We women should keep still tongues, I think, and pray for better guidance."

"How does one pray? You're country-bred and I am not." The voice was gentle, but the sideways glance had venom in it. "It comes so easily to you, no doubt—scent of hay, and church bells ringing you across the fields, and perhaps *he* will meet you at the stile, to share the self-same book—is that what prayer means?"

"No," said the Governor, interposing bluntly. "Ask Lady Derby what prayer means—she who has made Lathom House a beacon for all time. Ask Ingilby's wife, who held Ripley for the King's wounded—ask Rupert——"

"The Prince—is he, too, among the listeners to church bells?" asked Miss Bingham airily.

"To be precise, he is. I talked yesterday with one who was at York when Rupert came to raise the siege. The Prince was spent with forced marches, dead-weary, soul and body. He had earned his praise, you would have thought; but, when they cheered him like folk gone mad, he just waited till the uproar ceased, and bared his head. 'The faith that is in me did it, friends, not I,' he said, and the next moment he laughed, asking for a stoup of wine."

"He cared for his body, too, 'twould seem," murmured Miss Bingham.

"A soldier does, unless by birth and habit he's an incorrigible fool. I've even less acquaintance than you with prayer; but I've seen the fruits of it too often,

child, to sneer at it."

"To be named child—believe me, sir, it's incense to me. Miss Grant here was persuading me that I was old enough to be her mother. I was prepared to kneel at the next wayside pool and search there for grey hairs."

"Search in twenty years or so—time enough for that. Meanwhile, we have to follow these hot-headed Metcalfs, and discipline begins, Miss Bingham."

"Oh, discipline—it is as tedious as prayer."

The Governor cut short her whimsies. "The tedium begins. This is no ballroom, I would have you understand."

Miss Bingham sighed as their company got into order. "Why are not all men of that fashion?" she asked languidly. "It is so simple to obey when one hears the whip, instead of flattery, singing round one's ears."

Joan glanced at her in simple wonderment. She had no key that unlocked the tired, wayward meaning of this woman who had played many games of chess with the thing she named her heart.

The Metcalfs, meanwhile, had gone forward at a heady pace. As of old, one purpose guided them, and one rough master-mind had leadership of their hot zeal. They encountered many piteous sights by the wayside—stragglers from Marston, Knaresborough, York—but the old Squire checked his pity.

"It's forrard, lads, forrard!" he would roar from time to time, as they were tempted to halt for succour of the fallen.

His instinct guided him aright. When they came through the dust of thirsty roads and the dead heat of a thunderstorm that was brewing overhead, to the high lands overlooking Norton Conyers, they caught a glint below them of keen sunlight shining on keen steel.

"It's always my luck to be just in time, with little to spare," said Blake, the messenger, who was riding at the Squire's bridle-hand. "D'ye see them yonder?"

Metcalf saw a gently-falling slope of pasture between the Roundheads and themselves, with low hedges separating one field from another. "Tally-ho, my lads!" he laughed. "I'll give you a lead at the fences—a Yoredale sort of lead."

The Parliament men checked their horses, gaped up at the sudden uproar, and had scarce braced themselves for the encounter when the Metcalfs were down and into them. The weight of horseflesh, backed by speed, crashed through their bulk, lessening the odds a little. Then it was hack, and counter, and thrust, till the storm broke overhead, as it had done at Marston, but with a livelier fury. They did not heed it. Time and again the yell of "A Mecca for the King!" was met by the roar of "God and the Parliament!" And Squire Metcalf, in a lull of the eddying battle, found the tart humour that was his help in need.

"Nay, I'd leave half of it out, if I were ye, after what chanced in Wilstrop Wood. Fight for Parliament alone, and all its devilries."

That brought another swinging fight to a head; and the issue shifted constantly. The lightning danced about the men's armour. The thunder never ceased, and the rain lashed them as if every sluice-gate of the clouds were opened.

Very stubborn it was, and the din of oaths and battle-cries leaped out across the thunder-roar, stifling it at times.

"The last shock, Meccas!" cried the Squire. "Remember Wilstrop Wood."

In the harsh middle of the conflict, the Squire aimed a blow at the foremost of the Roundheads who rode at him. His pike dinted the man's body-armour, and the haft snapped in two. Little Blake rode forward to his aid, knowing it was useless; and, with a brutish laugh, the Roundhead swung his sword up.

And then, out of the yellow murk of the sky, a friend rode down to the Squire's aid—rode faster than even Blake had done on the maddest of his escapades. Kit, unpressed for the moment after killing his immediate adversary, saw a blue fork of flame touch the uplifted sword and run down its length. The Roundhead's arm fell like a stone dropped from a great height, and lightning played about horse and rider till both seemed on fire. They dropped where they stood, and lay there; and for a moment no man stirred. It was as if God's hand was heavy on them all.

The Squire was the first to recover. "D'ye need any further battle, ye robbers of the dead?" he asked.

Without further parley they broke and fled. Panic was among them, and many who had been honest once in the grim faith they held saw wrath and judgment in this intervention.

The Metcalfs were hot for pursuit, but their leader checked them. "Nay, lads. Leave the devil to follow his own. For our part, we're pledged to get to Norton Conyers as soon as may be."

His kinsmen grumbled at the moment; but afterwards they recalled how Rupert, by the same kind of pursuit, had lost Marston Field, and they began to understand how wise their headstrong leader was.

The sun was setting in a red mist—of rain to come—when they reached Norton Conyers; and an hour later the Governor of Knaresborough rode in with the mixed company he guarded. The men of his own garrison, the women-folk of Knaresborough and Ripley, odds and ends of camp followers, made up a band of Royalists tattered enough for the dourest Puritan's approval.

"Where is li'le Elizabeth?" asked Michael plaintively. "For my sins, I forgot her when the Squire told us we were hunting the foxes who raided Wilstrop Wood."

"Who is Elizabeth?" snapped the Governor, in no good temper.

"Oh, a lady to her hoof-tips, sir—loyal, debonair, a bairn in your hands when she loves you, and a devil to intruders." He turned, with the smile that brimmed

out and over his Irish mouth. "Meccas all, the Governor asks who Elizabeth is. They knew in Oxford, and praised her grace of bearing."

A lusty braying sounded through the lessening thunder-claps, and a roar of laughter came from Michael's kinsmen.

"Twins are never far apart, if they can help it," said Christopher. "It is daft to worry about Elizabeth, so long as Michael's safe."

From long siege on land there comes to men something of the look that manners have whose business is with besieging seas. The Governor's eyes were steady and far away. He seemed bewildered by the ready laughter of these folk who had ridden in the open instead of sitting behind castle walls. But even his gravity broke down when Elizabeth came trotting through the press, and look about her, and found Michael. She licked his hands and face. She brayed a triumph-song, its harmony known only to herself.

"One has not lived amiss, when all is said," said Michael. "You will bear witness, sir, that I have captured a heart of gold."

The Governor stopped to pat Elizabeth, and she became an untamed fury on the sudden, for no reason that a man could guess.

"I—I am sorry, sir," Michael protested.

"Oh, no regrets! She is a lady to her hoof-tips, as you said, and my shins are only red-raw—not broken, as I feared."

It was well they had their spell of laughter in between what had been and what must follow. When they came to Norton Conyers, it was to find the mistress dull with grief, and hopeless. All she cared for lay buried, with pomp and ceremony enough, in the kirkyard below. She was scarcely roused by the news that fire and rapine would have raided the defenceless house if the Riding Metcalfs had not come on the stroke of need.

"I thank you, gentlemen—oh, indeed, I thank you. But nothing matters very much. He waits for me, and that is all."

She was past argument or quiet persuasion. They ate and drank their fill that night, because they needed it—and their needs were the King's just now—and on the morrow, when they had cursed their wounds, and prayed for further sleep, and got up again for whatever chanced, they found Graham's widow still intractable. They told her that the safety of many women-folk was in her hands.

"I trust them to you," she said. "There's an old nurse of mine lives up in a fold of the hills yonder. They will not find me there, and I care little if they do. Meanwhile, I shall get down each night and morning to pray for the soul of a gallant gentleman who has unlocked the Gate"—her eyes were luminous with a temperate fire—"unlocked it a little ahead of me. He has left it on the latch."

The Squire bent to her hand. "Madam," he said, his roughness broken up, as honest moorland soil is broken when it is asked to rear pleasant crops—"madam,

I've a wife in Yoredale, I. She carries your sort of heart, I think. Of your charity, pray for her till I come."

"I shall pray, sir."

And so the Riding Metcalfs went from Norton Conyers, with an added burden of women-folk, but with a sense of rosemary and starshine, as if they had tarried for a while in some wayside Calvary.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### MISS BINGHAM.

It was no usual comradeship that held between the Royalists who gathered in one company after Marston Moor was lost to the King. They travelled through vile roads—roads broken up by incessant rains—they camped wherever they found a patch of drier ground for the night's sleep. But never for a moment did they lose the glamour that attached to the person of King Charles. Like a beacon-light, the thought of the half-vanquished Stuart went steadily in front of them. Their strength lay in this—that, whether death or life arrived, they knew the venture well worth while.

The life had a strange savour of its own. The Nappa Squire, the late Governor of Knaresborough and his officers, Lady Ingilby—all had known the weight of harsh responsibility so long as the King's cause was alive in the North. The cause was dead now. There was no need to be at strain, sleeping or waking, with the sense that it rested with each of them to keep the monarchy secure. There was asked of them only a haphazard and stimulating warfare, of the sort dear to all hillmen.

Scarborough Castle fell, and when the news was brought—they were dining at the moment in a wooded dell between Beamsley and Langbar—the Governor lifted his hat with pleasant gravity.

"God rest the gentlemen of Scarborough. They have earned their holiday, as we have."

Michael was busy with the stew-pot, hanging gipsy-wise on three sticks above a fire of gorse and fir-cones. "It's hey for Skipton-in-Craven," he said with a cheery smile. "I aye liked the comely town, and now the King will know that she was the last in all the North to stand for him."

"Maybe Skipton has fallen, too, by this time," chided the Squire. "You were

always one for dreams, Michael."

Michael was silent till the meal was ended. Then he mowed a swath of thistles with his sword, and brought the spoil to Elizabeth, tethered to a neighbouring tree. She brayed at him with extreme tenderness.

"Now that we're well victualled, friends," he said lazily, "who comes with me to hear how it fares with Skipton?"

The Governor did not like the venture—the hazard of it seemed too great—but Squire Metcalf did.

"How d'ye hold together at all, Michael?" roared the Squire. "So much folly and such common sense to one man's body—it must be a civil war within yourself."

Michael glanced at Joan Grant with an instinct of which he repented instantly. "It is, sir. Since I was born into this unhappy world, there has been civil war inside me. I need an outlet now."

"You shall have it, lad."

"And you call this common sense?" asked the Governor, with good-tempered irony.

"Ay, of the Yoredale sort. A blow or two in Skipton High Street—who knows what heart it might give the garrison?"

"I must remind you that we have women-folk to guard, and our wounded."

"But, sir, this is a Metcalf riding, all like the olden time. We never meant your Knaresborough men to share it."

Yet some of the Knaresborough men would not be denied; and the Governor, as he saw the sixty horsemen ride over and down to Beamsley-by-the-Wharfe, wished that his private conscience would let him journey with them. He stood watching the hill-crest long after they had disappeared, and started when a hand was laid gently on his arm.

"It is hard to stay?" asked Lady Ingilby.

"By your leave, yes. Why should these big Metcalfs have all the frolic?"

"Ah, frolic! As if there were naught in life but gallop, and cut and thrust, and——sir, is there no glory in staying here to guard weak?"

The Governor was in evil mood. He had seen the King's cause go, had seen Knaresborough succumb, had watched the steadfast loyalty of a lifetime drift down the stream of circumstance like a straw in a headlong current.

"Lady Ingilby," he said wearily, "there is no longer any glory anywhere. It has gone from the land."

"It is here among us. Till we were broken folk, I did not know our strength. None but the Stuart, friend, could have kept us in such friendliness and constancy. Oh, I know! I saw you glance round for your horse when the Metcalfs went—saw your struggle fought out, sir—and, believe me, you were kind to stay."

They finished their interrupted meal at leisure; and it was not till about four of the clock that Miss Bingham, who had strayed afield to pick a bunch of valley lilies, came running back to camp. The two men in pursuit blundered headlong into the enemy before they saw their peril; and they found scant shrift.

Miss Bingham, thoroughbred beneath her whimsies, halted a moment to regain her courage. "These are but outposts, sir," she said. "From the hill-top I could see a whole company of Roundheads."

"Their number," asked the Governor—"and are they mounted?"

"More than our own, I think, and they go on foot."

"And half of us wounded. Come, gentlemen, there's no time to waste."

His weariness was gone. Alert, masterful, almost happy, he bade the women get further down the hill, out of harm's way. He gave his men their stations—little knots of them cowering under clumps of gorse and broom—until the land seemed empty of all human occupation. Only Elizabeth, the wayward ass, lifted up her voice from time to time, after finishing the last of the thistles Michael had given her. And suddenly, as they waited, the Governor let a sharp oath escape him.

"This comes of letting women share a fight. In the name of reason, why is Miss Bingham running up the hill again?"

They peered over the gorse, saw the tall, lithe figure halt, clearly limned against the sky-line. They heard her voice, pitiful and pleading.

"Parliament men, I am alone and friendless. Will you aid me?"

A steel-capped Roundhead showed above the hill-crest. "There are plenty to aid such a comely lass as thee," he said, his rough Otley burr cutting the summer's silence like a blunt-edged knife.

"Then follow quickly."

The Governor laughed gently as he watched Miss Bingham turn and race down the hill. "A rare plucked one, she," he muttered, "kin to Jael, I fancy, wife of Heber the Kenite."

She passed close by him on her breathless run down hill and joined the women-folk below. And the next moment the red havoc of it began. The Roundheads saw their leader race forward, and followed in close order. Down the slope they poured, and every clump of gorse spat out at them with a red and murderous fire. Then the Knaresborough men were up and into them, and when their leader got back to Otley with the remnants of his men, he protested that "he'd fancied, like, they'd ta'en all the hornets' nests i' Yorkshire, but some few thrifty wasps were breeding still."

"Why do you laugh?" said Lady Ingilby, when the Governor came down to tell her all was well.

"Because luck is as skew-tempered as the jackass braying yonder. Have the

Metcalfs had such frolic out at Skipton, think ye? And I was keen to ride with them—Miss Bingham, I owe you reparation. When I saw you move up the hill yonder, I cursed you for a woman."

"That was unwise, sir. As well curse Elizabeth because she is a donkey, and yearns for absent friends; or the jack-snipe, because his flight is slanting; or any of us who are made as we are made."

"We thought you light of heart, child, in the old days at Knaresborough. Yet none of us could have planned a neater ambush."

"It was my old pastime, after all. How often you've chided me for luring men into folly. Oh, what wise and solemn discourses you have given me, sir, on the unwisdom of it!"

"There was wisdom in it this time. But for the ambush, we could not have faced the odds."

For the next hour she busied herself with bandaging the men's hurts; then, with a restlessness that had been growing on her since the Metcalfs went, she climbed the hill again. Only Blake saw her go. Unrest had been his comrade, too, since he found himself sharing this odd gipsy life with the woman he asked least to meet on this side or the other of the grave.

He followed with reluctance and a smile at his own folly. She was standing on the hill-crest, one hand shading her eyes, as if she looked for some one to arrive.

"Does he come, Miss Bingham?" asked Blake.

She turned with a fury that died away and left her helpless. There was derision, heart-ache, pity, in Blake's mobile face.

"Is all forgot, then, Mr. Blake? There was a time in Knaresborough, at the ferry-steps, when you thought kindly of me."

"There was. I ask you for some explanation of the madness. To my shame, the memory came and weakened me years after—when I found myself in Oxford, to be precise, and heard the nightingales. Answer the riddle. How can a thing so slight and empty hinder a grown man?"

"You are bitter, unforgiving."

"Neither. I've ridden too many evil roads to remember bitterness. It is simply that I'm tired and filled with wonder. Tell me why Oxford and the nightingales opened an old wound afresh."

"It goes back to Eve's days, I think," murmured Miss Bingham.

Demureness, coquetry, the hint of tears and laughter in her eyes—all should have disarmed Blake.

"Ay, find other shoulders for the blame," he said impassively.

"As Adam did."

Again the easy insolence failed her at need. She was aware that no nim-

bleness of tongue could help her now. Blake stood there like some judge whose bias against the prisoner at the bar was hardening.

"After all, you owe me gratitude," she went on hurriedly. "If it had not been that I'm fickle—oh, I admit as much—you would not stand where you stand now. I remember you so well—gay, easy-going, with a tongue that made one half believe your flattery. And now? You're Blake the rider—little Blake—Blake who never tires. I see men lift their heads when your name is mentioned, and hear their praise. Did I do so ill at Knaresborough, to set you on the road?"

"You broke my heart. If that was to do well—why, my thanks, Miss Bingham."

It was then, for the first time, that knowledge came to her, as if a veil were lifted. She saw the years behind. Vanity, pride of conquest, zest in the hunting for hunting's sake—these had been her luxuries. She had not guessed that the sport might cripple men for life.

"Why do you tell me this—you who are so proud and reticent?"

"Not for my pleasure," he answered drily. "There's a lad of the Metcalfs I have a liking for. I would save him from my sort of fate, if that could be."

He could not understand the change in her. She was fierce, vindictive. Through the velvet dalliance of her life the claws flashed out. Then, in a moment, she repented. Her voice grew smooth and insolent again.

"Oh, Puritan, because you have forgotten how to play, you would put all light-hearted folk in prison. Sir, by your leave, I wait here till one Christopher Metcalf returns from Skipton town. I wish him very well."

"Then heaven help him, madam," said Blake, and went down the hill in search of better cheer.

The Metcalfs long ago had come to Embsay, and up the further hill that gave them a clear view of Skipton. The long, grey church, the Castle's sturdy front, the beautiful, wide street, rich in the summer's greenery that bordered it, lay spread before them in the golden sunlight. The market-square was packed with men, and the hubbub of the crowd came up the rise.

The Squire of Nappa had called a halt because their horses needed a breathing-space before they put their project into action. More than once, during the ride out, they had laughed at the humour of their plan, though most men would have been thinking of the extreme hazard. They proposed, in fact, to get behind the Roundheads' position on Cock Hill, to charge them unexpectedly from the rear, and to capture their cannonry by sheer speed of onset.

"It will be a tale to set the whole North in a roar," said the Squire. "And the Royalists up hereabout, God knows, have need of laughter these days."

"Ay, but look yonder, sir," put in Christopher gravely.

The Squire followed the direction of his hand. In the sunlit market-square

they saw Mallory, the Governor, ride over the lowered drawbridge. After him came the gentry and the ladies of the garrison, then soldiery on foot; and, last of all, the stable-boys and cooks and scullions, who had ministered for two long years to the needs of those besieged.

Mallory was erect and buoyant. Standards waved in the merry breeze, their colours glowing in the sunlight.

"What does it mean?" asked Christopher. "It is no sortie; yet they ride with heads up, as if life went very well with them."

The old Squire passed a hand across his eyes. Feeling ran deep with him at all times; and now it was as if he looked years ahead and saw the King himself go out in just this fashion, proud, resolute, content with the day's necessary work.

"It means, my lad," he said roughly, "that Skipton-in-Craven has yielded at long last. But she goes out with the full honours of war, and she can boast till the Trump o' Doom that she was the last in Yorkshire to stand for the King's Majesty."

They rode a little nearer to the town. And now they could see that the crowd thronging the High Street was made up of Parliament men, who moved to one side and the other, clearing a route for the outgoing garrison. They saw Lambert ride forward, salute Sir John Mallory with grave punctilio—heard Mallory's voice come lightly on the wind, as if he exchanged a jest—and then the long procession passed, with banners flying, and the tale of Skipton's siege was ended.

"Best turn about, Metcalfs," growled the Squire. "We can do nothing here. There'll be the women wanting us out Beamsley way, and Michael has his donkey to attend to."

"True," assented Michael. "All's gone—Marston, York, Skipton—but Elizabeth is with us still. There's many a kick left in li'le Elizabeth."

So—with laughter, lest they cried—the Metcalf men took route again for Beamsley. And the Squire rode far ahead, with a stormy grief and a sense of utter desolation for companions.

Kit, seeing his father's trouble, was minded to spur forward and help him in his need; but Michael checked him.

"He has the black dog on his shoulders. Best leave him to it."

"Why, yes. That is the Metcalf way, I had forgotten, Michael."

When they neared the hill that was the last of their climb, up and over into Beamsley, they saw the slim figure of a woman, tall against the sky; and, as they came nearer still, Michael—whose sight was like a hawk's—told them that Miss Bingham was waiting there to bring them back.

"Kind and sonsy, she," laughed one of the late garrison at Knaresborough.

"You will unsay that, sir," said Christopher.

"There's nothing to unsay. Kind and sonsy—daft hot-head, you might say that of your own mother."

"In a different tone. You will unsay it."

"And why? We Knaresborough men seldom unsay anything, until our windpipes are cut clean in two."

"There's for a good Irishman!" said Michael, putting his bulk between the combatants. "He'll talk, says he, when his windpipe is in two. They could not better that in Donegal."

So the quarrel was blown abroad by the laughter of their fellows; but Michael, as they jogged up the hill, grew dour and silent. Kit's sudden heat astonished him. He had not guessed that the lad's regard for Miss Bingham went deeper than the splash of a pebble in a summer's pool.

When they reached the hill-top, a fresh surprise awaited him. Miss Bingham was standing there, with pale, drawn face; and her eyes searched eagerly for one only of the company, and disdained the rest.

Michael could not believe it. Her easy handling of the world she knew by heart—the levity that cloaked all feeling—were gone. She put a hand on Kit's bridle-arm as he rode up, and forgot, it seemed, that many folk were looking on.

"You are wounded. No? Then how fares it out at Skipton?"

The old Squire had seen the drift of things with an eye as keen as Michael's; and in his present mood he was intolerant of women and all gentler matters. "It has sped bonnily," he snapped. "Skipton has gone down-stream with the flood, Miss Bingham, and there's no more to do, save tend women's vapours and feed Michael's jackass."

She smiled pleasantly at this man in evil mood. "Sir, that is not like you. If your courtesy towards women has gone, too, then chivalry is ended for all time."

The Metcalfs waited for the Squire's rejoinder. None guessed how the rebuke would take him; but all knew how deep he was wading in the chill bog of adversity. They saw him lift his head in fury, saw him relent with hardship.

"Miss Bingham," he said, "there was a sorrow and a madness at my heart. You are right. If I forget courtesy toward women, I forget the wife who bred tall sons for me in Yoredale."

He went apart that night and took counsel of his God, on the high lands where the birds seemed to rise for matins almost as soon as evensong was ended. He came down again for early breakfast in the woodland camp, with all the grace

" Her eyes searched eagerly for one only of the company, and disdained the rest."

*The White Horses]* [*Page* 305

*"Her eyes searched eagerly for one only of the company, and disdained the rest."*

of youth about him, in high spirits, ready for the day's surprises.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### YOREDALE.

From that day forward, the first strangeness of their gipsy life grew to be familiar, usual. Little by little the Parliament soldiery went south or westward, to share in the attack on Royalist garrisons still unaffected by the disastrous news from Yorkshire; but the country was infested by roving bands of cut-purses and murderers—men who had hung on the skirts of civil war, ready to be King's men or Levellers, when they knew which side claimed the victory.

It was the exploits of these prowling rascals that set many a story going of the outrages committed by true Roundheads, who had no share in them; but the Squire of Nappa was not concerned with public rumour or the judgment of generations to come after. His whole heart—all the untiring watchfulness that had made him a leader of picked cavalry—were centred in this new, appalling peril. Day by day the raff and jetsom of the country moved abroad in numbers that steadily increased. They were not dangerous in the open against the disciplined men of Knaresborough and Nappa; but they asked for constant vigilance, as if the wolf-packs of old days had returned to haunt these moorland solitudes.

They were heading by short stages to Nappa; for, as the Squire explained, there was room enough in house and outbuildings to house them all, and they might well hold it for the King, if the chance of war brought the tumult North again.

"A hard-bitten bull-dog, you," said the Governor of Knaresborough.

"Ay, maybe. I guard my own, and there's a sort of bite about a Mecca when he's roused."

"There is, sir—a Yorkshire bite, they say."

Their route was hindered, not only by prowling vagabonds, but by the men who fell sick by the wayside, now that the stress of the big fight was ended, and they had leisure to take count of wounds. Miss Bingham went among the fallen, bandaging a wound here, giving a cup of water there, bringing constantly the gift she had of soothing sick men's fancies.

Once—it was when they camped on Outlaw Moss, and the gloaming found her nursing little Blake—the Governor and Squire Metcalf halted as they made

their round of the camp.

"So Blake has given in at last," said the Squire. "Pity he didn't learn that lesson years ago."

"That is true, sir," said Miss Bingham gravely. "With a broken heart, there's no shame in lying down by the wayside. He should have done it long since."

The Governor laughed, as if a child's fancy had intruded into the workaday routine. "The jest will serve, Miss Bingham. We know Blake, and, believe me, he never had a heart to be broken. Whipcord and sinew—he rides till he drops, with no woman's mawkishness to hinder him."

"No mawkishness," she agreed. "I give you good-night, gentlemen. He needs me, if he is not to die before the dawn."

"Oh, again your pardon," said the Governor roughly. "You played in Knaresborough—you were always playing—and we thought you light."

"So I am, believe me, when men are able to take care of themselves. It is when they're weak that I grow foolish and a nurse."

Metcalf and the Governor were silent as they went their round, until the Squire turned abruptly.

"My wife is like that," he said, as if he had captured some new truth, unguessed by the rest of a dull world. "Ay, and my mother, God rest her. Memories of cradle-days return, when we are weak; they show their angel side."

"There's only one thing ails Miss Bingham—she's a woman to the core of her. Eh, Metcalf, it must be troublesome to be a woman. I'd liefer take all my sins pick-a-back, and grumble forward under the weight, and be free of whimsies."

Through the short summer's night, Miss Bingham tended Blake. She heard him talk of Knaresborough and the ferry-steps—always the ferry-steps. She learned all that she had seemed to him, and wondered how any man could view any woman through such a pleasant mist of worship. Then she listened to the tale of his rude awakening, and winced as he spoke in delirium words that could never be forgotten. And then again they were watching Nidd River swirl beneath them, and he was busy with a lover's promises. When he slept at last, wearied by the speed of his own fancies, she sat watching him. A round, white moon had climbed over the edge of Outlaw Moss. She saw the lines of hardship in his face—lines bitten in by harsh weather of the world and of the soul.

"Poor Blake," she thought, "ah, poor li'le Blake!"

From the foolery that had been her life till now there came a gust of sickliness. Blake could not live till dawn. She would go afield while they were hiding him under the earth, would bring wild flowers and strew them broadcast over his resting-place. She would pray tenderly at his graveside.

Already she half believed these pious exercises would recompense Blake for the loss of all he had cared for in this life. He would know that she was there,

and look down on the fret and burden of his heartbreak as a thing well worth the while. She would smother his dead grief with flowers and penitence.

It was Blake himself who disordered the well-planned poetry. He did not die at dawn. They waited three days on Outlaw Moss till they knew that he would live, and four days afterwards until his old laugh returned, and he could get his knees about a saddle. Then they went forward another stage on the slow journey out to Nappa.

Miss Bingham stood between the old world and the new; and that experience, for any man or woman's soul, is hazardous. She saw herself in true outline. As others gambled with gold and silver pieces, she had played with hearts. She had not known the value of the stakes; but now she understood. One by one, in memory's cold procession, she saw them pass—Blake, his young soul on fire with worship; Anstruther, who had persisted in throning her among the stars, and who was now, they said, no company for any gentry save those of wayside taverns. She hid her eyes. Spoiled, wayward, she resented the discipline of penance. Day by day she thought more of Christopher, and welcomed his sturdy self-reliance as a shield against her past.

Day by day, too, Joan Grant grew more silent, more aloof from the haphazard routine of their life among the hills. And the whole camp looked on, afraid for their idol, Christopher, afraid for Joan, great loathing for Miss Bingham growing in their midst.

Miss Bingham, well aware of the hostility, did not know whether her heart were hardened or softened by it. It was as if she stood in the thick of a northern March—sunshine on one side of the hedge, sleet and a bitter wind on the other. But there came a day when she carried her troubles to a little, ferny glen hidden deep among the pastures and the heather. Their morning's route had brought them near to Hawes, the grey village that gathers the spreading Yorkshire dales into its hand as a lady holds an open fan. The camp was busy, dining on odds and ends—mutton, cabbage, herbs, all stewing fragrantly in a pot reared gipsy-wise over a fire of wood—and Miss Bingham heard their laughter come up the breeze.

They had purchased a barrel of home-brewed ale from a neighbouring tavern, and were toasting Blake at the moment.

"Here's to li'le Blake, who never tires," said the Squire.

"Why should he?" put in Michael. "Women have never troubled him, I wager."

"At your age, youngster, to go flouting the good sex!" growled the Governor.

"Your pardon, sir. The sex has flouted me. I'm envying Blake because he had mother-wit to steer wide of trouble. Even Elizabeth, who dotes on me, is full of the most devilish caprices."

Kit grew impatient of it all. He was in no mood for the banter and light

jests that eased the journey home to Nappa. There was a fever in his blood, a restlessness whose cause was known to every man in camp except himself. He sought some hiding-place, with the instinct of all wounded folk; and his glance fell on a wooded gorge that showed as a sanctuary set in the middle of a treeless land.

He came down the path between the honeysuckle and the flowering thorns. There was a splash of water down below, and he had in mind to bathe in some sequestered pool and wash away the heat and trouble of the times.

He found the pool, green with reflected leafage, deep and murmurous, and saw Miss Bingham seated at its brink. She turned with a smile of welcome.

"I knew that you would come, my Puritan. There is room beside me here. Sit and tell me—all that the waterfall is singing—the might-have-beens, the fret and bubble of this life—the never-ending wonder that men should die for their King when there are easier roads to follow."

"Ask the stream." Kit's laugh was unsteady, and his voice seemed to come from far-away. "To die for the King—it may not be ease, but surely it is happiness."

"Talk to me. Tell me how he looked—the King—when you saw him there in Oxford. And Rupert? His name alone brings back the old Crusading days, before we grew tired of poetry."

She beguiled him into talk. She spun a web about him, fine as gossamer and strong as hempen rope. All the route south to Oxford—the return by way of Lathom House—the queer way of their entry into York—took on a new significance and glamour as she prompted him with eager, maidish questions.

"So you came to York as a Puritan? There would be no great disguise in that, as I have told you often. Ah, no wrath, I pray you! Women laugh at—at those they care for, lest they care too much."

Kit seemed to be in some poppyland of dreams. He had travelled that country once already in Miss Bingham's company—at the ferry-steps in Knaresborough. Then he had been weak of body, recovering slowly from a sickness she had nursed. Now he was hale and ruddy; but there is a weakness of great health, and this found him now. Gallop and trot over perilous roads, rude bivouacs by night and rough-handed war by day—these had been his life since, long ago, he had left the ripening Yoredale corn. He was weary of the effort, now that it was over; and all the gardens he had known, all the ease and softness of summer skies, were gathered round this woman who shared the glen with him.

"And there was Marston," she said, breaking the silence.

"Ay, God knows there was Marston. Rupert, the Squire, and I—the three of us lying in a bean-field, listening to the wounded there in Wilstrop Wood—I can hear the uproar now."

"Ah! forget it. It is over and done with. You have earned your ease."

Kit believed it. The poppy odours were about him, thick as the scent of flowering beans that had all but sent Rupert and himself to their last sleep at Marston. The strong, up-country gospel whispered at his ear that no man earns his ease this side the grave. He would not heed the whisper. It was good to be here with the lapping water, the smell of woodland growth, the woman who cast pleasant spells about him.

A great pity stirred in her, against her will. She grew aware of things beyond the dalliance of each day's affairs. Here, weak in her hands, was a man to be made or marred; and he seemed well on the way to lose all because she bade him. Compunction came to her. She was minded to laugh out of court this grave affair, and send him out, as she had done others, with great faith in her own instability.

Yet she was powerless. The war her men-folk had waged against the adversary—their simple faith in kingship threading all their days, of fight and drink and banter, with a golden skein—had touched the heart that had been cold till now. By his own strength he must win through this combat she had forced on him—or by his own weakness he must take her hand and lead her through the years that must for ever be made up of broken vows.

Kit got to his feet, paced up and down irresolutely. He was fighting for the kingship of his soul, and all the glen went dizzying by him. It was a simple matter that brought back the memory of ancient loyalty and faith—just the song of the water as it splashed down its ferny bed. He glanced sharply round, saw the fall of the stream, with sunlight and the glint of shadowed leafage on its ripples. He remembered just such a waterfall, just such a sheltered glen, away in Yoredale.

The poppy-sleep was on him still. Yoredale was far away, and Joan's tongue was barbed with nettle-stings these days. Better to take his ease, and have done with effort. He glanced again at the water splashing down its steep rock-face; and suddenly he stood at attention, as if the King confronted him. It might be his fancy; it might be some chance play of light and shade, made up of dancing water and leafage swaying in the summer's breeze; but the thing he saw was a sword, silver-bright—a big, two-handed sword with its hilt clear against the sky, and its point hidden in the pool below. He stood for a moment, bewildered. Then a great sob broke up the grief and hardship that had been his since Marston.

She followed the pointing of his finger, but saw nothing save water slipping down the cool rock-front.

Then she glanced at his face, and saw that the days of her sorcery were ended.

A forlorn self-pity numbed her. If he had broken faith with Joan Grant, she would have recompensed him—have been the tenderest wife in Christendom, because he had found her womanhood for her—had taught her heart to beat,

instead of fluttering idly to every breeze that roamed.

"Sir, I hate you most devoutly," she said. "Get up the wood again. I used to laugh at all good Puritans, and the memory would hurt me if you stayed."

Kit was never one to hide his light or darkness from a prying world. The whole camp had seen his madness, had marvelled at the change in him—his sudden tempers, his waywardness, his hot impatience for fight of some kind—with his fellows or with any roaming band of enemies that chanced to cross, their path. Now they wondered that he went among them with a new light about his face, a gaiety that was not so heedless as of old, but riper and more charitable.

"The Babe grows up," said Michael to the Squire, as they jogged forward over sultry roads.

"It will be a thrifty growth, lad. If I could say as much of thee, I'd be content."

"Oh, I'm past gibes, sir. Elizabeth, alone of you all—she understands me. We have long ears and long wits, she and I. Believe me, we are wise."

They came at last to their own country, and the Knaresborough men wondered why jest and high spirits ceased among the Riding Metcalfs. They did not guess how rooted in the homeland were the affections of these men who had gone abroad to play their part in the big issue of King and Parliament. They could not divine the mist of tenderness and yearning that veiled their eyes as they saw the slopes of Yoredale run to meet their eager gallop. Wounds, havoc of battlefields that had seen brave hopes lost, all were forgotten. They were back among the greening corn again.

The Squire lost courage, for the first time since the riding out, when he reached the gate of his own homestead and saw his wife run forward in answer to the rousing challenge of "A Mecca for the King!"

She came to his saddle, lifted up her face, as a bride might do for the nuptial kiss. She looked for Kit, the well-beloved, and for Michael. Then her glance ran to and fro among the company, seeking for remembered faces; and memory found many gaps. She faced her husband. There was accusation in her voice; for she had sat at home with weariness and fear and abnegation, and all her strength was gone.

"Where are the rest?" she asked.

"Serving the King, wife, wherever they be. I'll go warrant for a Metcalf beyond the gates of this world."

With a coldness that dismayed them, she counted her living Metcalfs. "A hundred and twenty rode out. Fifty and two return. The sunshine hurts me."

"They did well—no man can do more."

Those looking on saw courage struggle through her weakness, and in their hearts they knew that warfare had shown nothing finer. "I—I shall pray that this bitterness may go from me. I shall hope to tell them—oh, a little later on—that it

is good to die for the King's Majesty."

They saw her waver, saw the old, indomitable pride return.

"Metcalfs, well done—oh, well done! I am proud of my living—and my dead."

"God rest their souls, wife. They have harvested their corn."

As the weeks passed on, and grief and wounds alike were healing, a new disquiet stole in and out among the men quartered in Nappa's hospitable house and outbuildings. They were idling here. If Marston Moor had killed the cause in the north, there was battle doing further south.

The Squire's wife watched it brewing, this new menace to all that was left of her happiness. She knew, that it was idle to resist or to persuade. She had bred men-sons for the King's service, and must abide by it.

Joan Grant was younger to experience. First-love was hindering her vision of what her man must do before he came to his kingdom; and she quarrelled openly with Christopher, as they came home together through the gloaming August fields.

"So you are weary of me in a month?" she said, halting at the stile. "Ah, the pity of it. It was here—or have you forgotten?—that I bade you climb high if you would find my heart. And you climbed and—and found it, and now you talk of battle—only of battle and the King."

All his world seemed to fail him—the will to ride out again until there was no more asked of him but to return and claim her—the certainty that she would be the first to give God-speed to his errand—all were drowned in this storm of tears and petulance that broke about him. Yet he remembered the sword that had stood, its point in the woodland stream, its hilt against the clear, blue sky above. He did not waver this time, for his love was no beguilement, but a spur that urged him forward.

"I go," he said roughly.

"And if you lose me in the going?"

"Then I lose you—there's no choice."

She got down from the stile, rebellious, fitful as a gusty spring. It was only when they neared the homestead that she turned, her eyes bright and eager, and touched his hand. "I am glad—oh, I am glad!" she said.

Late that afternoon Miss Bingham and little Blake had gone for a moorland ride together. Blake had made a false recovery from his weakness, as soon as he learned that there was to be another riding-out, and had urged that he must get his mare in trim again by daily rides. And Miss Bingham had insisted that his nurse went with him, lest he fell by the way.

In all her wide experience of men she had not met one so gay, so tranquil, so entirely master of what had been, of what was to come, as this little Irishman

whose health had gone down the stream of high adventure. With a broken heart and a broken body, he thought only of the coming rides through lonely night-roads, of Meccas riding again for the King they served, of the dust and rain of circumstance. He remembered droll stories, flavoured by Irish wit and heedlessness. He fell, between whiles, into passionate hope of what was to come, when the King came to his own in the south country, by help of the Riding Metcalfs, and drove the rebels from the north. Then, with a gentleness that laughed at itself, he explained that it was good to have sat on the ferry-steps at Knaresborough.

"I lost—but the stakes were well worth winning. The Blakes were ever gamblers."

She had great skill in tending the wounded. In the man's face she read many signs of bodily weakness. His voice—his detachment from the gross affairs of life—told their own tale. But she did not look for it so soon.

At the gate of the farmstead, just as he dismounted, Blake fell prone in the roadway, and tried to rise, and could not.

When Joan and Kit Metcalf returned—it might be a half-hour later—they found Miss Bingham kneeling at the dead man's side. And her face, when she lifted it, was a woman's face—grave, charitable, tender with some forward hope.

"Here's little Blake," she said. "He rides very well, my friends."

THE END.

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