АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

MICAH CLARKE

Артур Конан Дойл

Micah Clarke

Дойл А.

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Arthur Conan Doyle
Micah Clarke / His Statement as made to his three grandchildren Joseph, Gervas and Reuben During the Hard Winter of 1734

Chapter I. Of Cornet Joseph Clarke of the Ironsides

It may be, my dear grandchildren, that at one time or another I have told you nearly all the incidents which have occurred during my adventurous life. To your father and to your mother, at least, I know that none of them are unfamiliar. Yet when I consider that time wears on, and that a grey head is apt to contain a failing memory, I am prompted to use these long winter evenings in putting it all before you from the beginning, that you may have it as one clear story in your minds, and pass it on as such to those who come after you. For now that the house of Brunswick is firmly established upon the throne and that peace prevails in the land, it will become less easy for you every year to understand how men felt when Englishmen were in arms against Englishmen, and when he who should have been the shield and the protector of his subjects had no thought but to force upon them what they most abhorred and detested.

My story is one which you may well treasure up in your memories, and tell again to others, for it is not likely that in this whole county of Hampshire, or even perhaps in all England, there is another left alive who is so well able to speak from his own knowledge of these events, or who has played a more forward part in them. All that I know I shall endeavour soberly and in due order to put before you. I shall try to make these dead men quicken into life for your behoof, and to call back out of the mists of the past those scenes which were brisk enough in the acting, though they read so dully and so heavily in the pages of the worthy men who have set themselves to record them. Perchance my words, too, might, in the ears of strangers, seem to be but an old man's gossip. To you, however, who know that these eyes which are looking at you looked also at the things which I describe, and that this hand has struck in for a good cause, it will, I know, be different. Bear in mind as you listen that it was your quarrel as well as our own in which we fought, and that if now you grow up to be free men in a free land, privileged to think or to pray as your consciences shall direct, you may thank God that you are reaping the harvest which your fathers sowed in blood and suffering when the Stuarts were on the throne.

I was born then in the year 1664, at Havant, which is a flourishing village a few miles from Portsmouth off the main London road, and there it was that I spent the greater part of my youth. It is now as it was then, a pleasant, healthy spot, with a hundred or more brick cottages scattered along in a single irregular street, each with its little garden in front, and maybe a fruit tree or two at the back. In the middle of the village stood the old church with the square tower, and the great sun-dial like a wrinkle upon its grey weather-blotched face. On the outskirts the Presbyterians had their chapel; but when the Act of Uniformity was passed, their good minister, Master Breckinridge, whose discourses had often crowded his rude benches while the comfortable pews of the church were empty, was cast into gaol, and his flock dispersed. As to the Independents, of whom my father was one, they also were under the ban of the law, but they attended conventicle at Emsworth, whither we would trudge, rain or shine, on every Sabbath morning. These meetings were broken up more than once, but the congregation was composed of such harmless folk, so well beloved and respected by their neighbours, that the peace officers came after a time to ignore them, and to let them worship in their own fashion. There were Papists, too, amongst us, who were compelled to go as far as Portsmouth for their Mass.

Thus, you see, small as was our village, we were a fair miniature of the whole country, for we had our sects and our factions, which were all the more bitter for being confined in so narrow a compass.

My father, Joseph Clarke, was better known over the countryside by the name of Ironside Joe, for he had served in his youth in the Yaxley troop of Oliver Cromwell's famous regiment of horse, and had preached so lustily and fought so stoutly that old Noll himself called him out of the ranks after the fight at Dunbar, and raised him to a cornetcy. It chanced, however, that having some little time later fallen into an argument with one of his troopers concerning the mystery of the Trinity, the man, who was a half-crazy zealot, smote my father across the face, a favour which he returned by a thrust from his broadsword, which sent his adversary to test in person the truth of his beliefs. In most armies it would have been conceded that my father was within his rights in punishing promptly so rank an act of mutiny, but the soldiers of Cromwell had so high a notion of their own importance and privileges, that they resented this summary justice upon their companion. A court-martial sat upon my father, and it is likely that he would have been offered up as a sacrifice to appease the angry soldiery, had not the Lord Protector interfered, and limited the punishment to dismissal from the army. Cornet Clarke was accordingly stripped of his buff coat and steel cap, and wandered down to Havant, where he settled into business as a leather merchant and tanner, thereby depriving Parliament of as trusty a soldier as ever drew blade in its service. Finding that he prospered in trade, he took as wife Mary Shepstone, a young Churchwoman, and I, Micah Clarke, was the first pledge of their union.

My father, as I remember him first, was tall and straight, with a great spread of shoulder and a mighty chest. His face was craggy and stern, with large harsh features, shaggy over-hanging brows, high-bridged fleshy nose, and a full-lipped mouth which tightened and set when he was angry. His grey eyes were piercing and soldier-like, yet I have seen them lighten up into a kindly and merry twinkle. His voice was the most tremendous and awe-inspiring that I have ever listened to. I can well believe what I have heard, that when he chanted the Hundredth Psalm as he rode down among the blue bonnets at Dunbar, the sound of him rose above the blare of trumpets and the crash of guns, like the deep roll of a breaking wave. Yet though he possessed every quality which was needed to raise him to distinction as an officer, he had thrown off his military habits when he returned to civil life. As he prospered and grew rich he might well have worn a sword, but instead he would ever bear a small copy of the Scriptures bound to his girdle, where other men hung their weapons. He was sober and measured in his speech, and it was seldom, even in the bosom of his own family, that he would speak of the scenes which he had taken part in, or of the great men, Fleetwood and Harrison, Blake and Ireton, Desborough and Lambert, some of whom had been simple troopers like himself when the troubles broke out. He was frugal in his eating, backward in drinking, and allowed himself no pleasures save three pipes a day of Oronooko tobacco, which he kept ever in a brown jar by the great wooden chair on the left-hand side of the mantelshelf.

Yet for all his self-restraint the old leaven would at times begin to work in him, and bring on fits of what his enemies would call fanaticism and his friends piety, though it must be confessed that this piety was prone to take a fierce and fiery shape. As I look back, one or two instances of that stand out so hard and clear in my recollection that they might be scenes which I had seen of late in the playhouse, instead of memories of my childhood more than threescore years ago, when the second Charles was on the throne.

The first of these occurred when I was so young that I can remember neither what went before nor what immediately after it. It stuck in my infant mind when other things slipped through it. We were all in the house one sultry summer evening, when there came a rattle of kettledrums and a clatter of hoofs, which brought my mother and my father to the door, she with me in her arms that I might have the better view. It was a regiment of horse on their way from Chichester to Portsmouth, with colours flying and band playing, making the bravest show that ever my youthful eyes had rested upon. With what wonder and admiration did I gaze at the sleek prancing steeds, the steel morions, the plumed hats of the officers, the scarfs and bandoliers. Never, I thought, had such a gallant company

assembled, and I clapped my hands and cried out in my delight. My father smiled gravely, and took me from my mother's arms. 'Nay, lad,' he said, 'thou art a soldier's son, and should have more judgment than to commend such a rabble as this. Canst thou not, child as thou art, see that their arms are ill-found, their stirrup-irons rusted, and their ranks without order or cohesion? Neither have they thrown out a troop in advance, as should even in times of peace be done, and their rear is straggling from here to Bedhampton. Yea,' he continued, suddenly shaking his long arm at the troopers, and calling out to them, 'ye are corn ripe for the sickle and waiting only for the reapers!' Several of them reined up at this sudden out-flame. 'Hit the crop-eared rascal over the pate, Jack!' cried one to another, wheeling his horse round; but there was that in my father's face which caused him to fall back into the ranks again with his purpose unfulfilled. The regiment jingled on down the road, and my mother laid her thin hands upon my father's arm, and lulled with her pretty coaxing ways the sleeping devil which had stirred within him.

On another occasion which I can remember, about my seventh or eighth year, his wrath burst out with more dangerous effect. I was playing about him as he worked in the tanning-yard one spring afternoon, when in through the open doorway strutted two stately gentlemen, with gold facings to their coats and smart cockades at the side of their three-cornered hats. They were, as I afterwards understood, officers of the fleet who were passing through Havant, and seeing us at work in the yard, designed to ask us some question as to their route. The younger of the pair accosted my father and began his speech by a great clatter of words which were all High Dutch to me, though I now see that they were a string of such oaths as are common in the mouth of a sailor; though why the very men who are in most danger of appearing before the Almighty should go out of their way to insult Him, hath ever been a mystery to me. My father in a rough stern voice bade him speak with more reverence of sacred things, on which the pair of them gave tongue together, swearing tenfold worse than before, and calling my father a canting rogue and a smug-faced Presbytery Jack. What more they might have said I know not, for my father picked up the great roller wherewith he smoothed the leather, and dashing at them he brought it down on the side of one of their heads with such a swashing blow, that had it not been for his stiff hat the man would never have uttered oath again. As it was, he dropped like a log upon the stones of the yard, while his companion whipped out his rapier and made a vicious thrust; but my father, who was as active as he was strong, sprung aside, and bringing his cudgel down upon the outstretched arm of the officer, cracked it like the stem of a tobacco-pipe. This affair made no little stir, for it occurred at the time when those arch-liars, Oates, Bedloe, and Carstairs, were disturbing the public mind by their rumours of plots, and a rising of some sort was expected throughout the country. Within a few days all Hampshire was ringing with an account of the malcontent tanner of Havant, who had broken the head and the arm of two of his Majesty's servants. An inquiry showed, however, that there was no treasonable meaning in the matter, and the officers having confessed that the first words came from them, the Justices contented themselves with imposing a fine upon my father, and binding him over to keep the peace for a period of six months.

I tell you these incidents that you may have an idea of the fierce and earnest religion which filled not only your own ancestor, but most of those men who were trained in the parliamentary armies. In many ways they were more like those fanatic Saracens, who believe in conversion by the sword, than the followers of a Christian creed. Yet they have this great merit, that their own lives were for the most part clean and commendable, for they rigidly adhered themselves to those laws which they would gladly have forced at the sword's point upon others. It is true that among so many there were some whose piety was a shell for their ambition, and others who practised in secret what they denounced in public, but no cause however good is free from such hypocritical parasites. That the greater part of the saints, as they termed themselves, were men of sober and God-fearing lives, may be shown by the fact that, after the disbanding of the army of the Commonwealth, the old soldiers flocked into trade throughout the country, and made their mark wherever they went by their industry

and worth. There is many a wealthy business house now in England which can trace its rise to the thrift and honesty of some simple pikeman of Ireton or Cromwell.

But that I may help you to understand the character of your great-grandfather, I shall give an incident which shows how fervent and real were the emotions which prompted the violent moods which I have described. I was about twelve at the time, my brothers Hosea and Ephraim were respectively nine and seven, while little Ruth could scarce have been more than four. It chanced that a few days before a wandering preacher of the Independents had put up at our house, and his religious ministrations had left my father moody and excitable. One night I had gone to bed as usual, and was sound asleep with my two brothers beside me, when we were roused and ordered to come downstairs. Huddling on our clothes we followed him into the kitchen, where my mother was sitting pale and scared with Ruth upon her knee.

'Gather round me, my children,' he said, in a deep reverent voice, 'that we may all appear before the throne together. The kingdom of the Lord is at hand-oh, be ye ready to receive Him! This very night, my loved ones, ye shall see Him in His splendour, with the angels and the archangels in their might and their glory. At the third hour shall He come-that very third hour which is now drawing upon us.'

'Dear Joe,' said my mother, in soothing tones, 'thou art scaring thyself and the children to no avail. If the Son of Man be indeed coming, what matters it whether we be abed or afoot?'

'Peace, woman,' he answered sternly; 'has He not said that He will come like a thief in the night, and that it is for us to await Him? Join with me, then, in prayerful outpourings that we may be found as those in bridal array. Let us offer up thanks that He has graciously vouchsafed to warn us through the words of His servant. Oh, great Lord, look down upon this small flock and lead it to the sheep fold! Mix not the little wheat with the great world of chaff. Oh, merciful Father! look graciously upon my wife, and forgive her the sin of Erastianism, she being but a woman and little fitted to cast off the bonds of antichrist wherein she was born. And these too, my little ones, Micah and Hosea, Ephraim and Ruth, all named after Thy faithful servants of old, oh let them stand upon Thy right hand this night!' Thus he prayed on in a wild rush of burning, pleading words, writhing prostrate upon the floor in the vehemence of his supplication, while we, poor trembling mites, huddled round our mother's skirts and gazed with terror at the contorted figure seen by the dim light of the simple oil lamp. On a sudden the clang of the new church clock told that the hour had come. My father sprang from the floor, and rushing to the casement, stared up with wild expectant eyes at the starry heavens. Whether he conjured up some vision in his excited brain, or whether the rush of feeling on finding that his expectations were in vain, was too much for him, it is certain that he threw his long arms upwards, uttered a hoarse scream, and tumbled backwards with foaming lips and twitching limbs upon the ground. For an hour or more my poor mother and I did what we could to soothe him, while the children whimpered in a corner, until at last he staggered slowly to his feet, and in brief broken words ordered us to our rooms. From that time I have never heard him allude to the matter, nor did he ever give us any reason why he should so confidently have expected the second coming upon that particular night. I have learned since, however, that the preacher who visited us was what was called in those days a fifth-monarchy man, and that this particular sect was very liable to these premonitions. I have no doubt that something which he had said had put the thought into my father's head, and that the fiery nature of the man had done the rest.

So much for your great-grandfather, Ironside Joe. I have preferred to put these passages before you, for on the principle that actions speak louder than words, I find that in describing a man's character it is better to give examples of his ways than to speak in broad and general terms. Had I said that he was fierce in ins religion and subject to strange fits of piety, the words might have made little impression upon you; but when I tell you of his attack upon the officers in the tanning-yard, and his summoning us down in the dead of the night to await the second coming, you can judge for yourselves the lengths to which his belief would carry him. For the rest, he was an excellent man of

business, fair and even generous in his dealings, respected by all and loved by few, for his nature was too self-contained to admit of much affection. To us he was a stern and rigid father, punishing us heavily for whatever he regarded as amiss in our conduct. He bad a store of such proverbs as 'Give a child its will and a whelp its fill, and neither will strive,' or 'Children are certain cares and uncertain comforts,' wherewith he would temper my mother's more kindly impulses. He could not bear that we should play trick-track upon the green, or dance with the other children upon the Saturday night.

As to my mother, dear soul, it was her calm, peaceful influence which kept my father within bounds, and softened his austere rule. Seldom indeed, even in his darkest moods, did the touch of her gentle hand and the sound of her voice fail to soothe his fiery spirit. She came of a Church stock, and held to her religion with a quiet grip which was proof against every attempt to turn her from it. I imagine that at one time her husband had argued much with her upon Arminianism and the sin of simony, but finding his exhortations useless, he had abandoned the subject save on very rare occasions. In spite of her Episcopacy, however, she remained a staunch Whig, and never allowed her loyalty to the throne to cloud her judgment as to the doings of the monarch who sat upon it.

Women were good housekeepers fitly years ago, but she was conspicuous among the best. To see her spotless cuffs and snowy kirtle one would scarce credit how hard she laboured. It was only the well ordered house and the dustless rooms which proclaimed her constant industry. She made salves and eyewaters, powders and confects, cordials and persico, orangeflower water and cherry brandy, each in its due season, and all of the best. She was wise, too, in herbs and simples. The villagers and the farm labourers would rather any day have her advice upon their ailments than that of Dr. Jackson of Purbrook, who never mixed a draught under a silver crown. Over the whole countryside there was no woman more deservedly respected and more esteemed both by those above her and by those beneath.

Such were my parents as I remember them in my childhood. As to myself, I shall let my story explain the growth of my own nature. My brothers and my sister were all brownfaced, sturdy little country children, with no very marked traits save a love of mischief controlled by the fear of their father. These, with Martha the serving-maid, formed our whole household during those boyish years when the pliant soul of the child is hardening into the settled character of the man. How these influences affected me I shall leave for a future sitting, and if I weary you by recording them, you must remember that I am telling these things rather for your profit than for your amusement; that it may assist you in your journey through life to know how another has picked out the path before you.

Chapter II. Of my going to school and of my coming thence

With the home influences which I have described, it may be readily imagined that my young mind turned very much upon the subject of religion, the more so as my father and mother took different views upon it. The old Puritan soldier held that the bible alone contained all things essential to salvation, and that though it might be advisable that those who were gifted with wisdom or eloquence should expound the Scriptures to their brethren, it was by no means necessary, but rather hurtful and degrading, that any organised body of ministers or of bishops should claim special prerogatives, or take the place of mediators between the creature and the Creator. For the wealthy dignitaries of the Church, rolling in their carriages to their cathedrals, in order to preach the doctrines of their Master, who wore His sandals out in tramping over the countryside, he professed the most bitter contempt; nor was he more lenient to those poorer members of the clergy who winked at the vices of their patrons that they might secure a seat at their table, and who would sit through a long evening of profanity rather than bid good-bye to the cheesecakes and the wine flask. That such men represented religious truth was abhorrent to his mind, nor would he even give his adhesion to that form of church government dear to the Presbyterians, where a general council of the ministers directed the affairs of their church. Every man was, in his opinion, equal in the eyes of the Almighty, and none had a right to claim any precedence over his neighbour in matters of religion. The book was written for all, and all were equally able to read it, provided that their minds were enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

My mother, on the other hand, held that the very essence of a church was that it should have a hierarchy and a graduated government within itself, with the king at the apex, the archbishops beneath him, the bishops under their control, and so down through the ministry to the common folk. Such was, in her opinion, the Church as established in the beginning, and no religion without these characteristics could lay any claim to being the true one. Ritual was to her of as great importance as morality, and if every tradesman and farmer were allowed to invent prayers, and change the service as the fancy seized him, it would be impossible to preserve the purity of the Christian creed. She agreed that religion was based upon the Bible, but the Bible was a book which contained much that was obscure, and unless that obscurity were cleared away by a duly elected and consecrated servant of God, a lineal descendant of the Disciples, all human wisdom might not serve to interpret it aright. That was my mother's position, and neither argument nor entreaty could move her from it. The only question of belief on which my two parents were equally ardent was their mutual dislike and distrust of the Roman Catholic forms of worship, and in this the Churchwoman was every whit as decided as the fanatical Independent.

It may seem strange to you in these days of tolerance, that the adherents of this venerable creed should have met with such universal ill-will from successive generations of Englishmen. We recognise now that there are no more useful or loyal citizens in the state than our Catholic brethren, and Mr. Alexander Pope or any other leading Papist is no more looked down upon for his religion than was Mr. William Penn for his Quakerism in the reign of King James. We can scarce credit how noblemen like Lord Stafford, ecclesiastics like Archbishop Plunkett, and commoners like Langhorne and Pickering, were dragged to death on the testimony of the vilest of the vile, without a voice being raised in their behalf; or how it could be considered a patriotic act on the part of an English Protestant to carry a flail loaded with lead beneath his cloak as a menace against his harmless neighbours who differed from him on points of doctrine. It was a long madness which has now happily passed off, or at least shows itself in a milder and rarer form.

Foolish as it appears to us, there were some solid reasons to account for it. You have read doubtless how, a century before I was born, the great kingdom of Spain waxed and prospered. Her ships covered every sea. Her troops were victorious wherever they appeared. In letters, in learning, in all the arts of war and peace they were the foremost nation in Europe. You have heard also of the

ill-blood which existed between this great nation and ourselves; how our adventurers harried their possessions across the Atlantic, while they retorted by burning such of our seamen as they could catch by their devilish Inquisition, and by threatening our coasts both from Cadiz and from their provinces in the Netherlands. At last so hot became the quarrel that the other nations stood off, as I have seen the folk clear a space for the sword-players at Hockley-in-the-Hole, so that the Spanish giant and tough little England were left face to face to fight the matter out. Throughout all that business it was as the emissary of the Pope, and as the avenger of the dishonoured Roman Church, that King Philip professed to come. It is true that Lord Howard and many another gentleman of the old religion fought stoutly against the Dons, but the people could never forget that the reformed faith had been the flag under which they had conquered, and that the blessing of the Pontiff had rested with their opponents. Then came the cruel and foolish attempt of Mary to force upon them a creed for which they had no sympathy, and at the heels of it another great Roman Catholic power menaced our liberty from the Continent. The growing strength of France promoted a corresponding distrust of Papistry in England, which reached a head when, at about the time of which I write, Louis XIV. threatened us with invasion at the very moment when, by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, he showed his intolerant spirit towards the faith which we held dear. The narrow Protestantism of England was less a religious sentiment than a patriotic reply to the aggressive bigotry of her enemies. Our Catholic countrymen were unpopular, not so much because they believed in Transubstantiation, as because they were unjustly suspected of sympathising with the Emperor or with the King of France. Now that our military successes have secured us against all fear of attack, we have happily lost that bitter religious hatred but for which Oates and Dangerfield would have lied in vain.

In the days when I was young, special causes had inflamed this dislike and made it all the more bitter because there was a spice of fear mingled with it. As long as the Catholics were only an obscure faction they might be ignored, but when, towards the close of the reign of the second Charles, it appeared to be absolutely certain that a Catholic dynasty was about to fill the throne, and that Catholicism was to be the court religion and the stepping-stone to preferment, it was felt that a day of vengeance might be at hand for those who had trampled upon it when it was defenceless. There was alarm and uneasiness amongst all classes. The Church of England, which depends upon the monarch as an arch depends upon the keystone; the nobility, whose estates and coffers had been enriched by the plunder of the abbeys; the mob, whose ideas of Papistry were mixed up with thumbscrews and Fox's Martyrology, were all equally disturbed. Nor was the prospect a hopeful one for their cause. Charles was a very lukewarm Protestant, and indeed showed upon his deathbed that he was no Protestant at all. There was no longer any chance of his having legitimate offspring. The Duke of York, his younger brother, was therefore heir to the throne, and he was known to be an austere and narrow Papist, while his spouse, Mary of Modena, was as bigoted as himself. Should they have children, there could be no question but that they would be brought up in the faith of their parents, and that a line of Catholic monarchs would occupy the throne of England. To the Church, as represented by my mother, and to Nonconformity, in the person of my father, this was an equally intolerable prospect.

I have been telling you all this old history because you will find, as I go on, that this state of things caused in the end such a seething and fermenting throughout the nation that even I, a simple village lad, was dragged into the whirl and had my whole life influenced by it. If I did not make the course of events clear to you, you would hardly understand the influences which had such an effect upon my whole history. In the meantime, I wish you to remember that when King James II. ascended the throne he did so amid a sullen silence on the part of a large class of his subjects, and that both my father and my mother were among those who were zealous for a Protestant succession.

My childhood was, as I have already said, a gloomy one. Now and again when there chanced to be a fair at Portsdown Hill, or when a passing raree showman set up his booth in the village, my dear mother would slip a penny or two from her housekeeping money into my hand, and with a warning finger upon her lip would send me off to see the sights. These treats were, however, rare events,

and made such a mark upon my mind, that when I was sixteen years of age I could have checked off upon my fingers all that I had ever seen. There was William Harker the strong man, who lifted Farmer Alcott's roan mare; and there was Tubby Lawson the dwarf, who could fit himself into a pickle jar – these two I well remember from the wonder wherewith they struck my youthful soul. Then there was the show of the playing dolls, and that of the enchanted island and Mynheer Munster from the Lowlands, who could turn himself round upon a tight-rope while playing most sweetly upon a virginal. Last, but far the best in my estimation, was the grand play at the Portsdown Fair, entitled 'The true and ancient story of Maudlin, the merchant's daughter of Bristol, and of her lover Antonio. How they were cast away on the shores of Barbary, where the mermaids are seen floating upon the sea and singing in the rocks, foretelling their danger.' This little piece gave me keener pleasure than ever in after years I received from the grandest comedies of Mr. Congreve and of Mr. Dryden, though acted by Kynaston, Betterton, and the whole strength of the King's own company. At Chichester once I remember that I paid a penny to see the left shoe of the youngest sister of Potiphar's wife, but as it looked much like any other old shoe, and was just about the size to have fitted the show-woman, I have often feared that my penny fell into the hands of rogues.

There were other shows, however, which I might see for nothing, and yet were more real and every whit as interesting as any for which I paid. Now and again upon a holiday I was permitted to walk down to Portsmouth – once I was even taken in front of my father upon his pad nag, and there I wandered with him through the streets with wondering eyes, marvelling over the strange sights around me. The walls and the moats, the gates and the sentinels, the long High Street with the great government buildings, and the constant rattle of drums and blare of trumpets; they made my little heart beat quicker beneath my sagathy stuff jacket. Here was the house in which some thirty years before the proud Duke of Buckingham had been struck down by the assassin's dagger. There, too, was the Governor's dwelling, and I remember that even as I looked he came riding up to it, red-faced and choleric, with a nose such as a Governor should have, and his breast all slashed with gold. 'Is he not a fine man?' I said, looking up at my father. He laughed and drew his hat down over his brows. 'It is the first time that I have seen Sir Ralph Lingard's face,' said he, 'but I saw his back at Preston fight. Ah, lad, proud as he looks, if he did but see old Noll coming in through the door he would not think it beneath him to climb out through the window!' The clank of steel or the sight of a buff-coat would always serve to stir up the old Roundhead bitterness in my father's breast.

But there were other sights in Portsmouth besides the red-coats and their Governor. The yard was the second in the kingdom, after Chatham, and there was ever some new war-ship ready upon the slips. Then there was a squadron of King's ships, and sometimes the whole fleet at Spithead, when the streets would be full of sailors, with their faces as brown as mahogany and pigtails as stiff and hard as their cutlasses. To watch their rolling gait, and to hear their strange, quaint talk, and their tales of the Dutch wars, was a rare treat to me; and I have sometimes when I was alone fastened myself on to a group of them, and passed the day in wandering from tavern to tavern. It chanced one day, however, that one of them insisted upon my sharing his glass of Canary wine, and afterwards out of roguishness persuaded me to take a second, with the result that I was sent home speechless in the carrier's cart, and was never again allowed to go into Portsmouth alone. My father was less shocked at the incident than I should have expected, and reminded my mother that Noah had been overtaken in a similar manner. He also narrated how a certain field-chaplain Grant, of Desborough's regiment, having after a hot and dusty day drunk sundry flagons of mum, had thereafter sung certain ungodly songs, and danced in a manner unbecoming to his sacred profession. Also, how he had afterwards explained that such backslidings were not to be regarded us faults of the individual, but rather as actual obsessions of the evil one, who contrived in this manner to give scandal to the faithful, and selected the most godly for his evil purpose. This ingenious defence of the field-chaplain was the saving of my back, for my father, who was a believer in Solomon's axiom, had a stout ash stick and a strong arm for whatever seemed to him to be a falling away from the true path.

From the day that I first learned my letters from the horn-book at my mother's knee I was always hungry to increase my knowledge, and never a piece of print came in my way that I did not eagerly master. My father pushed the sectarian hatred of learning to such a length that he was averse to having any worldly books within his doors. (Note A, Appendix) I was dependent therefore for my supply upon one or two of my friends in the village, who lent me a volume at a time from their small libraries. These I would carry inside my shirt, and would only dare to produce when I could slip away into the fields, and lie hid among the long grass, or at night when the rushlight was still burning, and my father's snoring assured me that there was no danger of his detecting me. In this way I worked up from Don Bellianis of Greece and the 'Seven Champions,' through Tarleton's 'Jests' and other such books, until I could take pleasure in the poetry of Waller and of Herrick, or in the plays of Massinger and Shakespeare. How sweet were the hours when I could lay aside all thought of freewill and of predestination, to lie with my heels in the air among the scented clover, and listen to old Chaucer telling the sweet story of Grisel the patient, or to weep for the chaste Desdemona, and mourn over the untimely end of her gallant spouse. There were times as I rose up with my mind full of the noble poetry, and glanced over the fair slope of the countryside, with the gleaming sea beyond it, and the purple outline of the Isle of Wight upon the horizon; when it would be borne in upon me that the Being who created all this, and who gave man the power of pouring out these beautiful thoughts, was not the possession of one sect or another, or of this nation or that, but was the kindly Father of every one of the little children whom He had let loose on this fair playground. It grieved me then, and it grieves me now, that a man of such sincerity and lofty purpose as your great grandfather should have been so tied down by iron doctrines, and should imagine his Creator to be so niggard of His mercy as to withhold it from nine-and-ninety in the hundred. Well, a man is as he is trained, and if my father bore a narrow mind upon his broad shoulders, he has at least the credit that he was ready to do and to suffer all things for what he conceived to be the truth. If you, my dears, have more enlightened views, take heed that they bring you to lead a more enlightened life.

When I was fourteen years of age, a yellow-haired, brown-faced lad, I was packed off to a small private school at Petersfield, and there I remained for a year, returning home for the last Saturday in each month. I took with me only a scanty outfit of schoolbooks, with Lilly's 'Latin Grammar,' and Rosse's 'View of all the Religions in the World from the Creation down to our own Times,' which was shoved into my hands by my good mother as a parting present. With this small stock of letters I might have fared badly, had it not happened that my master, Mr. Thomas Chillingfoot, had himself a good library, and took a pleasure in lending his books to any of his scholars who showed a desire to improve themselves. Under this good old man's care I not only picked up some smattering of Latin and Greek, but I found means to read good English translations of many of the classics, and to acquire a knowledge of the history of my own and other countries. I was rapidly growing in mind as well as in body, when my school career was cut short by no less an event than my summary and ignominious expulsion. How this unlooked-for ending to my studies came about I must now set before you.

Petersfield had always been a great stronghold of the Church, having hardly a Nonconformist within its bounds. The reason of this was that most of the house property was owned by zealous Churchmen, who refused to allow any one who differed from the Established Church to settle there. The Vicar, whose name was Pinfold, possessed in this manner great power in the town, and as he was a man with a high inflamed countenance and a pompous manner, he inspired no little awe among the quiet inhabitants. I can see him now with his beaked nose, his rounded waistcoat, and his bandy legs, which looked as if they had given way beneath the load of learning which they were compelled to carry. Walking slowly with right hand stiffly extended, tapping the pavement at every step with his metal-headed stick, he would pause as each person passed him, and wait to see that he was given the salute which he thought due to his dignity. This courtesy he never dreamed of returning, save in the case of some of his richer parishioners; but if by chance it were omitted, he would hurry after the culprit, and, shaking his stick in his face, insist upon his doffing his cap to him. We youngsters, if

we met him on our walks, would scuttle by him like a brood of chickens passing an old turkey cock, and even our worthy master showed a disposition to turn down a side-street when the portly figure of the Vicar was seen rolling in our direction. This proud priest made a point of knowing the history of every one within his parish, and having learnt that I was the son of an Independent, he spoke severely to Mr. Chillingfoot upon the indiscretion which he had shown in admitting me to his school. Indeed, nothing but my mother's good name for orthodoxy prevented him from insisting upon my dismissal.

At the other end of the village there was a large day-school. A constant feud prevailed between the scholars who attended it and the lads who studied under our master. No one could tell how the war broke out, but for many years there had been a standing quarrel between the two, which resulted in skirmishes, sallies, and ambuscades, with now and then a pitched battle. No great harm was done in these encounters, for the weapons were usually snowballs in winter and pine-cones or clods of earth in the summer. Even when the contest got closer and we came to fisticuffs, a few bruises and a little blood was the worst that could come of it. Our opponents were more numerous than we, but we had the advantage of being always together and of having a secure asylum upon which to retreat, while they, living in scattered houses all over the parish, had no common rallying-point. A stream, crossed by two bridges, ran through the centre of the town, and this was the boundary which separated our territories from those of our enemies. The boy who crossed the bridge found himself in hostile country.

It chanced that in the first conflict which occurred after my arrival at the school I distinguished myself by singling out the most redoubtable of our foemen, and smiting him such a blow that he was knocked helpless and was carried off by our party as a prisoner. This feat of arms established my good name as a warrior, so I came at last to be regarded as the leader of our forces, and to be looked up to by bigger boys than myself. This promotion tickled my fancy so much, that I set to work to prove that I deserved it by devising fresh and ingenious schemes for the defeat of our enemies.

One winter's evening news reached us that our rivals were about to make a raid upon us under cover of night, and that they proposed coming by the little used plank bridge, so as to escape our notice. This bridge lay almost out of the town, and consisted of a single broad piece of wood without a rail, erected for the good of the town clerk, who lived, just opposite to it. We proposed to hide ourselves amongst the bushes on our side of the stream, and make an unexpected attack upon the invaders as they crossed. As we started, however, I bethought me of an ingenious stratagem which I had read of as being practised in the German wars, and having expounded it to the great delight of my companions, we took Mr. Chillingfoot's saw, and set off for the seat of action.

On reaching the bridge all was quiet and still. It was quite dark and very cold, for Christmas was approaching. There were no signs of our opponents. We exchanged a few whispers as to who should do the daring deed, but as the others shrank from it, and as I was too proud to propose what I dare not execute, I gripped the saw, and sitting astraddle upon the plank set to work upon the very centre of it.

My purpose was to weaken it in such a way that, though it would bear the weight of one, it would collapse when the main body of our foemen were upon it, and so precipitate them into the ice-cold stream. The water was but a couple of feet deep at the place, so that there was nothing for them but a fright and a ducking. So cool a reception ought to deter them from ever invading us again, and confirm my reputation as a daring leader. Reuben Lockarby, my lieutenant, son of old John Lockarby of the Wheatsheaf, marshalled our forces behind the hedgerow, whilst I sawed vigorously at the plank until I had nearly severed it across. I had no compunction about the destruction of the bridge, for I knew enough of carpentry to see that a skilful joiner could in an hour's work make it stronger than ever by putting a prop beneath the point where I had divided it. When at last I felt by the yielding of the plank that I had done enough, and that the least strain would snap it, I crawled quietly off, and taking up my position with my schoolfellows, awaited the coming of the enemy.

I had scarce concealed myself when we heard the steps of some one approaching down the footpath which led to the bridge. We crouched behind the cover, convinced that the sound must come

from some scout whom our foemen had sent on in front – a big boy evidently, for his step was heavy and slow, with a clinking noise mingling with it, of which we could make nothing. Nearer came the sound and nearer, until a shadowy figure loomed out of the darkness upon the other side, and after pausing and peering for a moment, came straight for the bridge. It was only as he was setting foot upon the plank and beginning gingerly to pick his way across it, that we discerned the outlines of the familiar form, and realised the dreadful truth that the stranger whom we had taken for the advance guard of our enemy was in truth none other than Vicar Pinfold, and that it was the rhythmic pat of his stick which we heard mingling with his footfalls. Fascinated by the sight, we lay bereft of all power to warn him – a line of staring eyeballs. One step, two steps, three steps did the haughty Churchman take, when there was a rending crack, and he vanished with a mighty splash into the swift-flowing stream. He must have fallen upon his back, for we could see the curved outline of his portly figure standing out above the surface as he struggled desperately to regain his feet. At last he managed to get erect, and came spluttering for the bank with such a mixture of godly ejaculations and of profane oaths that, even in our terror, we could not keep from laughter. Rising from under his feet like a covey of wild-fowl, we scurried off across the fields and so back to the school, where, as you may imagine, we said nothing to our good master of what had occurred.

The matter was too serious, however, to be hushed up. The sudden chill set up some manner of disturbance in the bottle of sack which the Vicar had just been drinking with the town clerk, and an attack of gout set in which laid him on his back for a fortnight. Meanwhile an examination of the bridge had shown that it had been sawn across, and an inquiry traced the matter to Mr. Chillingfoot's boarders. To save a wholesale expulsion of the school from the town, I was forced to acknowledge myself as both the inventor and perpetrator of the deed. Chillingfoot was entirely in the power of the Vicar, so he was forced to read me a long homily in public – which he balanced by an affectionate leave-taking in private – and to expel me solemnly from the school. I never saw my old master again, for he died not many years afterwards; but I hear that his second son William is still carrying on the business, which is larger and more prosperous than of old. His eldest son turned Quaker and went out to Penn's settlement, where he is reported to have been slain by the savages.

This adventure shocked my dear mother, but it found great favour in the eyes of my father, who laughed until the whole village resounded with his stentorian merriment. It reminded him, he said, of a similar stratagem executed at Market Drayton by that God-fearing soldier Colonel Pride, whereby a captain and three troopers of Lunsford's own regiment of horse had been drowned, and many others precipitated into a river, to the great glory of the true Church and to the satisfaction of the chosen people. Even of the Church folk many were secretly glad at the misfortune which had overtaken the Vicar, for his pretensions and his pride had made him hated throughout the district.

By this time I had grown into a sturdy, broad-shouldered lad, and every month added to my strength and my stature. When I was sixteen I could carry a bag of wheat or a cask of beer against any man in the village, and I could throw the fifteen-pound putting-stone to a distance of thirty-six feet, which was four feet further than could Ted Dawson, the blacksmith. Once when my father was unable to carry a bale of skins out of the yard, I whipped it up and bare it away upon my shoulders. The old man would often look gravely at me from under his heavy thatched eyebrows, and shake his grizzled head as he sat in his arm-chair puffing his pipe. 'You grow too big for the nest, lad,' he would say. 'I doubt some of these days you'll find your wings and away!' In my heart I longed that the time would come, for I was weary of the quiet life of the village, and was anxious to see the great world of which I had heard and read so much. I could not look southward without my spirit stirring within me as my eyes fell upon those dark waves, the white crests of which are like a fluttering signal ever waving to an English youth and beckoning him to some unknown but glorious goal.

Chapter III. Of Two Friends of my Youth

I fear, my children, that you will think that the prologue is over long for the play; but the foundations must be laid before the building is erected, and a statement of this sort is a sorry and a barren thing unless you have a knowledge of the folk concerned. Be patient, then, while I speak to you of the old friends of my youth, some of whom you may hear more of hereafter, while others remained behind in the country hamlet, and yet left traces of our early intercourse upon my character which might still be discerned there.

Foremost for good amongst all whom I knew was Zachary Palmer, the village carpenter, a man whose aged and labour-warped body contained the simplest and purest of spirits. Yet his simplicity was by no means the result of ignorance, for from the teachings of Plato to those of Hobbes there were few systems ever thought out by man which he had not studied and weighed. Books were far dearer in my boyhood than they are now, and carpenters were less well paid, but old Palmer had neither wife nor child, and spent little on food or raiment. Thus it came about that on the shelf over his bed he had a more choice collection of books – few as they were in number – than the squire or the parson, and these books he had read until he not only understood them himself, but could impart them to others.

This white-bearded and venerable village philosopher would sit by his cabin door upon a summer evening, and was never so pleased as when some of the young fellows would slip away from their bowls and their quoit-playing in order to lie in the grass at his feet, and ask him questions about the great men of old, their words and their deeds. But of all the youths I and Reuben Lockarby, the innkeeper's son, were his two favourites, for we would come the earliest and stop the latest to hear the old man talk. No father could have loved his children better than he did us, and he would spare no pains to get at our callow thoughts, and to throw light upon whatever perplexed or troubled us. Like all growing things, we had run our heads against the problem of the universe. We had peeped and pryed with our boyish eyes into those profound depths in which the keenest-sighted of the human race had seen no bottom. Yet when we looked around us in our own village world, and saw the bitterness and rancour which pervaded every sect, we could not but think that a tree which bore such fruit must have something amiss with it. This was one of the thoughts unspoken to our parents which we carried to good old Zachary, and on which he had much to say which cheered and comforted us.

'These janglings and wranglings,' said he, 'are but on the surface, and spring from the infinite variety of the human mind, which will ever adapt a creed to suit its own turn of thought. It is the solid core that underlies every Christian creed which is of importance. Could you but live among the Romans or the Greeks, in the days before this new doctrine was preached, you would then know the change that it has wrought in the world. How this or that text should be construed is a matter of no moment, however warm men may get over it. What is of the very greatest moment is, that every man should have a good and solid reason for living a simple, cleanly life. This the Christian creed has given us.'

'I would not have you be virtuous out of fear,' he said upon another occasion. 'The experience of a long life has taught me, however, that sin is always punished in this world, whatever may come in the next. There is always some penalty in health, in comfort, or in peace of mind to be paid for every wrong. It is with nations as it is with individuals. A book of history is a book of sermons. See how the luxurious Babylonians were destroyed by the frugal Persians, and how these same Persians when they learned the vices of prosperity were put to the sword by the Greeks. Read on and mark how the sensual Greeks were trodden down by the more robust and hardier Romans, and finally how the Romans, having lost their manly virtues, were subdued by the nations of the north. Vice and destruction came ever hand in hand. Thus did Providence use each in turn as a scourge wherewith to chastise the follies of the other. These things do not come by chance. They are part of a great system

which is at work in your own lives. The longer you live the more you will see that sin and sadness are never far apart, and that no true prosperity can exist away from virtue.'

A very different teacher was the sea-dog Solomon Sprent, who lived in the second last cottage on the left-hand side of the main street of the village. He was one of the old tarpaulin breed, who had fought under the red cross ensign against Frenchman, Don, Dutchman, and Moor, until a round shot carried off his foot and put an end to his battles for ever. In person he was thin, and hard, and brown, as lithe and active as a cat, with a short body and very long arms, each ending in a great hand which was ever half closed as though shutting on a rope. From head to foot he was covered with the most marvellous tattooings, done in blue, red, and green, beginning with the Creation upon his neck and winding up with the Ascension upon his left ankle. Never have I seen such a walking work of art. He was wont to say that had he been owned and his body cast up upon some savage land, the natives might have learned the whole of the blessed gospel from a contemplation of his carcass. Yet with sorrow I must say that the seaman's religion appeared to have all worked into his skin, so that very little was left for inner use. It had broken out upon the surface, like the spotted fever, but his system was clear of it elsewhere. He could swear in eleven languages and three-and-twenty dialects, nor did he ever let his great powers rust for want of practice. He would swear when he was happy or when he was sad, when he was angry or when he was loving, but this swearing was so mere a trick of speech, without malice or bitterness, that even my father could hardly deal harshly with the sinner. As time passed, however, the old man grew more sober and more thoughtful, until in his latter days he went back to the simple beliefs of his childhood, and learned to fight the devil with the same steady courage with which he had faced the enemies of his country.

Old Solomon was a never-failing source of amusement and of interest to my friend Lockarby and myself. On gala days he would have us in to dine with him, when he would regale us with lobscouse and salmagundi, or perhaps with an outland dish, a pillaw or olla podrida, or fish broiled after the fashion of the Azores, for he had a famous trick of cooking, and could produce the delicacies of all nations. And all the time that we were with him he would tell us the most marvellous stories of Rupert, under whom he served; how he would shout from the poop to his squadron to wheel to the right, or to charge, or to halt, as the case might be, as if he were still with his regiment of horse. Of Blake, too, he had many stories to tell. But even the name of Blake was not so dear to our old sailor as was that of Sir Christopher Mings. Solomon had at one time been his coxswain, and could talk by the hour of those gallant deeds which had distinguished him from the day that he entered the navy as a cabin boy until he fell upon his own quarter-deck, a full admiral of the red, and was borne by his weeping ship's company to his grave in Chatham churchyard. 'If so be as there's a jasper sea up aloft,' said the old seaman, 'I'll wager that Sir Christopher will see that the English flag has proper respect paid to it upon it, and that we are not fooled by foreigners. I've served under him in this world, and I ask nothing better than to be his coxswain in the next – if so be as he should chance to have a vacancy for such.' These remembrances would always end in the brewing of an extra bowl of punch, and the drinking of a solemn bumper to the memory of the departed hero.

Stirring as were Solomon Sprent's accounts of his old commanders, their effect upon us was not so great as when, about his second or third glass, the floodgates of his memory would be opened, and he would pour out long tales of the lands which he had visited, and the peoples which he had seen. Leaning forward in our seats with our chins resting upon our hands, we two youngsters would sit for hours, with our eyes fixed upon the old adventurer, drinking in his words, while he, pleased at the interest which he excited, would puff slowly at his pipe and reel off story after story of what he had seen or done. In those days, my dears, there was no Defoe to tell us the wonders of the world, no *Spectator* to lie upon our breakfast table, no Gulliver to satisfy our love of adventure by telling us of such adventures as never were. Not once in a month did a common newsletter fall into our hands. Personal hazards, therefore, were of more value then than they are now, and the talk of a man like old Solomon was a library in itself. To us it was all real. His husky tones and ill-chosen words were

as the voice of an angel, and our eager minds filled in the details and supplied all that was wanting in his narratives. In one evening we have engaged a Sallee rover off the Pillars of Hercules; we have coasted down the shores of the African continent, and seen the great breakers of the Spanish Main foaming upon the yellow sand; we have passed the black ivory merchants with their human cargoes; we have faced the terrible storms which blow ever around the Cape de Boa Esperanza; and finally, we have sailed away out over the great ocean beyond, amid the palm-clad coral islands, with the knowledge that the realms of Prester John lie somewhere behind the golden haze which shimmers upon the horizon. After such a flight as that we would feel, as we came back to the Hampshire village and the dull realities of country life, like wild birds who had been snared by the fowler and clapped into narrow cages. Then it was that the words of my father, ‘You will find your wings some day and fly away,’ would come back to me, and set up such a restlessness as all the wise words of Zachary Palmer could not allay.

Chapter IV. Of the Strange Fish that we Caught at Spithead

One evening in the month of May 1685, about the end of the first week of the month, my friend Reuben Lockarby and I borrowed Ned Marley's pleasure boat, and went a-fishing out of Langston Bay. At that time I was close on one-and-twenty years of age, while my companion was one year younger. A great intimacy had sprung up between us, founded on mutual esteem, for he being a little undergrown man was proud of my strength and stature, while my melancholy and somewhat heavy spirit took a pleasure in the energy and joviality which never deserted him, and in the wit which gleamed as bright and as innocent as summer lightning through all that he said. In person he was short and broad, round-faced, ruddy-cheeked, and in truth a little inclined to be fat, though he would never confess to more than a pleasing plumpness, which was held, he said, to be the acme of manly beauty amongst the ancients. The stern test of common danger and mutual hardship entitle me to say that no man could have desired a stauncher or more trusty comrade. As he was destined to be with me in the sequel, it was but fitting that he should have been at my side on that May evening which was the starting-point of our adventures.

We pulled out beyond the Warner Sands to a place half-way between them and the Nab, where we usually found bass in plenty. There we cast the heavy stone which served us as an anchor overboard, and proceeded to set our lines. The sun sinking slowly behind a fog-bank had slashed the whole western sky with scarlet streaks, against which the wooded slopes of the Isle of Wight stood out vaporous and purple. A fresh breeze was blowing from the south-east, flecking the long green waves with crests of foam, and filling our eyes and lips with the smack of the salt spray. Over near St. Helen's Point a King's ship was making her way down the channel, while a single large brig was tacking about a quarter of a mile or less from where we lay. So near were we that we could catch a glimpse of the figures upon her deck as she heeled over to the breeze, and could bear the creaking of her yards and the flapping of her weather-stained canvas as she prepared to go about.

'Look ye, Micah,' said my companion, looking up from his fishing-line. 'That is a most weak-minded ship – a ship which will make no way in the world. See how she hangs in the wind, neither keeping on her course nor tacking. She is a trimmer of the seas – the Lord Halifax of the ocean.'

'Why, there is something amiss with her,' I replied, staring across with hand-shaded eyes. 'She yaws about as though there were no one at the helm. Her main-yard goes aback! Now it is forward again! The folk on her deck seem to me to be either fighting or dancing. Up with the anchor, Reuben, and let us pull to her.'

'Up with the anchor and let us get out of her way,' he answered, still gazing at the stranger. 'Why will you ever run that meddlesome head of yours into danger's way? She flies Dutch colours, but who can say whence she really comes? A pretty thing if we were snapped up by a buccaneer and sold in the Plantations!'

'A buccaneer in the Solent!' cried I derisively. 'We shall be seeing the black flag in Emsworth Creek next. But hark! What is that?'

The crack of a musket sounded from aboard the brig. Then came a moment's silence and another musket shot rang out, followed by a chorus of shouts and cries. Simultaneously the yards swung round into position, the sails caught the breeze once more, and the vessel darted away on a course which would take her past Bembridge Point out to the English Channel. As she flew along her helm was put hard down, a puff of smoke shot out from her quarter, and a cannon ball came hopping and splashing over the waves, passing within a hundred yards of where we lay. With this farewell greeting she came up into the wind again and continued her course to the southward.

'Heart o' grace!' ejaculated Reuben in loose lipped astonishment. 'The murdering villains!'

'I would to the Lord that King's ship would snap them up!' cried I savagely, for the attack was so unprovoked that it stirred my bile. 'What could the rogues have meant? They are surely drunk or mad!'

'Pull at the anchor, man, pull at the anchor!' my companion shouted, springing up from the seat. 'I understand it! Pull at the anchor!'

'What then?' I asked, helping him to haul the great stone up, hand over hand, until it came dripping over the side.

'They were not firing at us, lad. They were aiming at some one in the water between us and them. Pull, Micah! Put your back into it! Some poor fellow may he drowning.'

'Why, I declare!' said I, looking over my shoulder as I rowed, 'there is his head upon the crest of a wave. Easy, or we shall be over him! Two more strokes and be ready to seize him! Keep up, friend! There's help at hand!'

'Take help to those who need help' said a voice out of the sea. 'Zounds, man, keep a guard on your oar! I fear a pat from it very much more than I do the water.'

These words were delivered in so calm and self-possessed a tone that all concern for the swimmer was set at rest. Drawing in our oars we faced round to have a look at him. The drift of the boat had brought us so close that he could have grasped the gunwale had he been so minded.

'Sapperment!' he cried in a peevish voice; 'to think of my brother Nonus serving me such a trick! What would our blessed mother have said could she have seen it? My whole kit gone, to say nothing of my venture in the voyage! And now I have kicked off a pair of new jack boots that cost sixteen rix-dollars at Vanseddar's at Amsterdam. I can't swim in jack-boots, nor can I walk without them.'

'Won't you come in out of the wet, sir?' asked Reuben, who could scarce keep serious at the stranger's appearance and address. A pair of long arms shot out of the water, and in a moment, with a lithe, snake-like motion, the man wound himself into the boat and coiled his great length upon the stern-sheets. Very lanky he was and very thin, with a craggy hard face, clean-shaven and sunburned, with a thousand little wrinkles intersecting it in every direction. He had lost his hat, and his short wiry hair, slightly flecked with grey, stood up in a bristle all over his head. It was hard to guess at his age, but he could scarce have been under his fiftieth year, though the ease with which he had boarded our boat proved that his strength and energy were unimpaired. Of all his characteristics, however, nothing attracted my attention so much as his eyes, which were almost covered by their drooping lids, and yet looked out through the thin slits which remained with marvellous brightness and keenness. A passing glance might give the idea that he was languid and half asleep, but a closer one would reveal those glittering, shifting lines of light, and warn the prudent man not to trust too much to his first impressions.

'I could swim to Portsmouth,' he remarked, rummaging in the pockets of his sodden jacket; 'I could swim well-nigh anywhere. I once swam from Gran on the Danube to Buda, while a hundred thousand Janissaries danced with rage on the nether bank. I did, by the keys of St. Peter! Wessenburg's Pandours would tell you whether Decimus Saxon could swim. Take my advice, young men, and always carry your tobacco in a water-tight metal box.'

As he spoke he drew a flat box from his pocket, and several wooden tubes, which he screwed together to form a long pipe. This he stuffed with tobacco, and having lit it by means of a flint and steel with a piece of touch-paper from the inside of his box, he curled his legs under him in Eastern fashion, and settled down to enjoy a smoke. There was something so peculiar about the whole incident, and so preposterous about the man's appearance and actions, that we both broke into a roar of laughter, which lasted until for very exhaustion we were compelled to stop. He neither joined in our merriment nor expressed offence at it, but continued to suck away at his long wooden tube with a perfectly stolid and impassive face, save that the half-covered eyes glinted rapidly backwards and forwards from one to the other of us.

'You will excuse our laughter, sir,' I said at last; 'my friend and I are unused to such adventures, and are merry at the happy ending of it. May we ask whom it is that we have picked up?'

'Decimus Saxon is my name,' the stranger answered; 'I am the tenth child of a worthy father, as the Latin implies. There are but nine betwixt me and an inheritance. Who knows? Small-pox might do it, or the plague!'

'We heard a shot aboard of the brig,' said Reuben.

'That was my brother Nonus shooting at me,' the stranger observed, shaking his head sadly.

'But there was a second shot.'

'Ah, that was me shooting at my brother Nonus.'

'Good lack!' I cried. 'I trust that thou hast done him no hurt.'

'But a flesh wound, at the most,' he answered. 'I thought it best to come away, however, lest the affair grow into a quarrel. I am sure that it was he who trained the nine-pounder on me when I was in the water. It came near enough to part my hair. He was always a good shot with a falconet or a mortar-piece. He could not have been hurt, however, to get down from the poop to the main-deck in the time.'

There was a pause after this, while the stranger drew a long knife from his belt, and cleaned out his pipe with it. Reuben and I took up our oars, and having pulled up our tangled fishing-lines, which had been streaming behind the boat, we proceeded to pull in towards the land.

'The question now is,' said the stranger, 'where we are to go to?'

'We are going down Langston Bay,' I answered.

'Oh, we are, are we?' he cried, in a mocking voice; 'you are sure of it eh? You are certain we are not going to France? We have a mast and sail there, I see, and water in the beaker. All we want are a few fish, which I hear are plentiful in these waters, and we might make a push for Barfleur.'

'We are going down Langston Bay,' I repeated coldly.

'You see might is right upon the waters,' he explained, with a smile which broke his whole face up into crinkles. 'I am an old soldier, a tough fighting man, and you are two raw lads. I have a knife, and you are unarmed. D'ye see the line of argument? The question now is, Where are we to go?'

I faced round upon him with the oar in my hand. 'You boasted that you could swim to Portsmouth,' said I, 'and so you shall. Into the water with you, you sea-viper, or I'll push you in as sure as my name is Micah Clarke.'

'Throw your knife down, or I'll drive the boat hook through you,' cried Reuben, pushing it forward to within a few inches of the man's throat.

'Sink me, but this is most commendable!' he said, sheathing his weapon, and laughing softly to himself. 'I love to draw spirit out of the young fellows. I am the steel, d'ye see, which knocks the valour out of your flint. A notable simile, and one in every way worthy of that most witty of mankind, Samuel Butler. This,' he continued, tapping a protuberance which I had remarked over his chest, 'is not a natural deformity, but is a copy of that inestimable "Hudibras," which combines the light touch of Horace with the broader mirth of Catullus. Heh! what think you of the criticism?'

'Give up that knife,' said I sternly.

'Certainly,' he replied, handing it over to me with a polite bow. 'Is there any other reasonable matter in which I can oblige ye? I will give up anything to do ye pleasure-save only my good name and soldierly repute, or this same copy of "Hudibras," which, together with a Latin treatise upon the usages of war, written by a Fleming and printed in Liege in the Lowlands, I do ever bear in my bosom.'

I sat down beside him with the knife in my hand. 'You pull both oars,' I said to Reuben; 'I'll keep guard over the fellow and see that he plays us no trick. I believe that you are right, and that he is nothing better than a pirate. He shall be given over to the justices when we get to Havant.'

I thought that our passenger's coolness deserted him for a moment, and that a look of annoyance passed over his face.

'Wait a bit!' he said; 'your name, I gather is Clarke, and your home is Havant. Are you a kinsman of Joseph Clarke, the old Roundhead of that town?'

'He is my father,' I answered.

'Hark to that, now!' he cried, with a throb of laughter; 'I have a trick of falling on my feet. Look at this, lad! Look at this!' He drew a packet of letters from his inside pocket, wrapped in a bit of tarred cloth, and opening it he picked one out and placed it upon my knee. 'Read!' said he, pointing at it with his long thin finger.

It was inscribed in large plain characters, 'To Joseph Clarke, leather merchant of Havant, by the hand of Master Decimus Saxon, part-owner of the ship *Providence*, from Amsterdam to Portsmouth.' At each side it was sealed with a massive red seal, and was additionally secured with a broad band of silk.

'I have three-and-twenty of them to deliver in the neighbourhood,' he remarked. 'That shows what folk think of Decimus Saxon. Three-and-twenty lives and liberties are in my hands. Ah, lad, invoices and bills of lading are not done up in that fashion. It is not a cargo of Flemish skins that is coming for the old man. The skins have good English hearts in them; ay, and English swords in their fists to strike out for freedom and for conscience. I risk my life in carrying this letter to your father; and you, his son, threaten to hand me over to the justices! For shame! For shame! I blush for you!'

'I don't know what you are hinting at,' I answered. 'You must speak plainer if I am to understand you.'

'Can we trust him?' he asked, jerking his head in the direction of Reuben.

'As myself.'

'How very charming!' said he, with something between a smile and a sneer. 'David and Jonathan – or, to be more classical and less scriptural, Damon and Pythias – eh?' These papers, then, are from the faithful abroad, the exiles in Holland, ye understand, who are thinking of making a move and of coming over to see King James in his own country with their swords strapped on their thighs. The letters are to those from whom they expect sympathy, and notify when and where they will make a landing. Now, my dear lad, you will perceive that instead of my being in your power, you are so completely in mine that it needs but a word from me to destroy your whole family. Decimus Saxon is staunch, though, and that word shall never be spoken.'

'If all this be true,' said I, 'and if your mission is indeed as you have said, why did you even now propose to make for France?'

'Aptly asked, and yet the answer is clear enough,' he replied; 'sweet and ingenuous as are your faces, I could not read upon them that ye would prove to be Whigs and friends of the good old cause. Ye might have taken me to where excisemen or others would have wanted to pry and peep, and so endangered my commission. Better a voyage to France in an open boat than that.'

'I will take you to my father,' said I, after a few moments' thought. 'You can deliver your letter and make good your story to him. If you are indeed a true man, you will meet with a warm welcome; but should you prove, as I shrewdly suspect, to be a rogue, you need expect no mercy.'

'Bless the youngster! he speaks like the Lord High Chancellor of England! What is it the old man says?

"He could not ope
His mouth, but out there fell a trope."

But it should be a threat, which is the ware in which you are fond of dealing.

"He could not let
A minute pass without a threat."

How's that, eh? Waller himself could not have capped the couplet neater.'

All this time Reuben had been swinging away at his oars, and we had made our way into Langston Bay, down the sheltered waters of which we were rapidly shooting. Sitting in the sheets, I

turned over in my mind all that this waif had said. I had glanced over his shoulder at the addresses of some of the letters – Steadman of Basingstoke, Wintle of Alresford, Fortescue of Bognor, all well-known leaders of the Dissenters. If they were what he represented them to be, it was no exaggeration to say that he held the fortunes and fates of these men entirely in his hands. Government would be only too glad to have a valid reason for striking hard at the men whom they feared. On the whole it was well to tread carefully in the matter, so I restored our prisoner's knife to him, and treated him with increased consideration. It was well-nigh dark when we beached the boat, and entirely so before we reached Havant, which was fortunate, as the bootless and hatless state of our dripping companion could not have failed to set tongues wagging, and perhaps to excite the inquiries of the authorities. As it was, we scarce met a soul before reaching my father's door.

Chapter V. Of the Man with the Drooping Lids

My mother and my father were sitting in their high-backed chairs on either side of the empty fireplace when we arrived, he smoking his evening pipe of Oronooko, and she working at her embroidery. The moment that I opened the door the man whom I had brought stepped briskly in, and bowing to the old people began to make glib excuses for the lateness of his visit, and to explain the manner in which we had picked him up. I could not help smiling at the utter amazement expressed upon my mother's face as she gazed at him, for the loss of his jack-boots exposed a pair of interminable spindle-shanks which were in ludicrous contrast to the baggy low country knee-breeches which surmounted them. His tunic was made of coarse sad-coloured kersey stuff with flat new gilded brass buttons, beneath which was a whitish callamanca vest edged with silver. Round the neck of his coat was a broad white collar after the Dutch fashion, out of which his long scraggy throat shot upwards with his round head and bristle of hair balanced upon the top of it, like the turnip on a stick at which we used to throw at the fairs. In this guise he stood blinking and winking in the glare of light, and pattering out his excuses with as many bows and scrapes as Sir Peter Witling in the play. I was in the act of following him into the room, when Reuben plucked at my sleeve to detain me.

'Nay, I won't come in with you, Micah,' said he; 'there's mischief likely to come of all this. My father may grumble over his beer jugs, but he's a Churchman and a Tantivy for all that. I'd best keep out of it.'

'You are right,' I answered. 'There is no need for you to meddle in the business. Be mum as to all that you have heard.'

'Mum as a mouse,' said he, and pressing my hand turned away into the darkness. When I returned to the sitting-room I found that my mother had hurried into the kitchen, where the crackling of sticks showed that she was busy in building a fire. Decimus Saxon was seated at the edge of the iron-bound oak chest at the side of my father, and was watching him keenly with his little twinkling eyes, while the old man was fixing his horn glasses and breaking the seals of the packet which his strange visitor had just handed to him.

I saw that when my father looked at the signature at the end of the long, closely written letter he gave a whiff of surprise and sat motionless for a moment or so staring at it. Then he turned to the commencement and read it very carefully through, after which he turned it over and read it again. Clearly it brought no unwelcome news, for his eyes sparkled with joy when he looked up from his reading, and more than once he laughed aloud. Finally he asked the man Saxon how it had come into his possession, and whether he was aware of the contents.

'Why, as to that,' said the messenger, 'it was handed to me by no less a person than Dicky Rumbold himself, and in the presence of others whom it's not for me to name. As to the contents, your own sense will tell you that I would scarce risk my neck by bearing a message without I knew what the message was. I am no chicken at the trade, sir. Cartels, *pronunciamientos*, challenges, flags of truce, and proposals for waffenstillstands, as the Deutschers call it – they've all gone through my hands, and never one, gone awry.'

'Indeed!' quoth my father. 'You are yourself one of the faithful?'

'I trust that I am one of those who are on the narrow and thorny track,' said he, speaking through his nose, as was the habit of the extreme sectaries.

'A track upon which no prelate can guide us,' said my father.

'Where man is nought and the Lord is all,' rejoined Saxon.

'Good! good!' cried my father. 'Micah, you shall take this worthy man to my room, and see that he hath dry linen, and my second-best suit of Utrecht velvet. It may serve until his own are dried. My boots, too, may perchance be useful – my riding ones of untanned leather. A hat with silver braiding hangs above them in the cupboard. See that he lacks for nothing which the house can furnish. Supper

will be ready when he hath changed his attire. I beg that you will go at once, good Master Saxon, lest you take a chill.'

'There is but one thing that we have omitted,' said our visitor, solemnly rising up from his chair and clasping his long nervous hands together. 'Let us delay no longer to send up a word of praise to the Almighty for His manifold blessings, and for the mercy wherewith He plucked me and my letters out of the deep, even as Jonah was saved from the violence of the wicked ones who hurled him overboard, and it may be fired falconets at him, though we are not so informed in Holy Writ. Let us pray, my friends!' Then in a high-toned chanting voice he offered up a long prayer of thanksgiving, winding up with a petition for grace and enlightenment for the house and all its inmates. Having concluded by a sonorous amen, he at last suffered himself to be led upstairs; while my mother, who had slipped in and listened with much edification to his words, hurried away to prepare him a bumper of green usquebaugh with ten drops of Daffy's Elixir therein, which was her sovereign recipe against the effects of a soaking. There was no event in life, from a christening to a marriage, but had some appropriate food or drink in my mother's vocabulary, and no ailment for which she had not some pleasant cure in her well-stocked cupboards.

Master Decimus Saxon in my father's black Utrecht velvet and untanned riding boots looked a very different man to the bedraggled castaway who had crawled like a conger eel into our fishing-boat. It seemed as if he had cast off his manner with his raiment, for he behaved to my mother during supper with an air of demure gallantry which sat upon him better than the pert and flippant carriage which he had shown towards us in the boat. Truth to say, if he was now more reserved, there was a very good reason for it, for he played such havoc amongst the eatables that there was little time for talk. At last, after passing from the round of cold beef to a capon pasty, and topping up with a two-pound perch, washed down by a great jug of ale, he smiled upon us all and told us that his fleshly necessities were satisfied for the nonce. 'It is my rule,' he remarked, 'to obey the wise precept which advises a man to rise from table feeling that he could yet eat as much as he has partaken of.'

'I gather from your words, sir, that you have yourself seen hard service,' my father remarked when the board had been cleared and my mother had retired for the night.

'I am an old fighting man,' our visitor answered, screwing his pipe together, 'a lean old dog of the hold-fast breed. This body of mine bears the mark of many a cut and slash received for the most part in the service of the Protestant faith, though some few were caught for the sake of Christendom in general when warring against the Turk. There is blood of mine, sir, Spotted all over the map of Europe. Some of it, I confess, was spilled in no public cause, but for the protection of mine own honour in the private duello or holmgang, as it was called among the nations of the north. It is necessary that a cavaliero of fortune, being for the greater part a stranger in a strange land, should be somewhat nice in matters of the sort, since he stands, as it were, as the representative of his country, whose good name should be more dear to him than his own.'

'Your weapon on such occasions was, I suppose, the sword?' my father asked, shifting uneasily in his seat, as he would do when his old instincts were waking up.

'Broadsword, rapier, Toledo, spontoon, battle-axe, pike or half-pike, morgenstiern, and halbert. I speak with all due modesty, but with backsword, sword and dagger, sword and buckler, single falchion, case of falchions, or any other such exercise, I will hold mine own against any man that ever wore neat's leather, save only my elder brother Quartus.'

'By my faith,' said my father with his eyes shining, 'were I twenty years younger I should have at you! My backsword play hath been thought well of by stout men of war. God forgive me that my heart should still turn to such vanities.'

'I have heard godly men speak well of it,' remarked Saxon. 'Master Richard Rumbold himself spake of your deeds of arms to the Duke of Argyle. Was there not a Scotsman, one Storr or Stour?'

'Ay, ay! Storr of Drumlithie. I cut him nigh to the saddle-bow in a skirmish on the eve of Dunbar. So Dicky Rumbold had not forgotten it, eh? He was a hard one both at praying and at fighting.

We have ridden knee to knee in the field, and we have sought truth together in the chamber. So, Dick will be in harness once again! He could not be still if a blow were to be struck for the trampled faith. If the tide of war set in this direction, I too – who knows? who knows?'

'And here is a stout man-at-arms,' said Saxon, passing his hand down my arm.' He hath thew and sinew, and can use proud words too upon occasion, as I have good cause to know, even in our short acquaintance. Might it not be that he too should strike in this quarrel?'

'We shall discuss it,' my father answered, looking thoughtfully at me from under his heavy brows. 'But I pray you, friend Saxon, to give us some further account upon these matters. My son Micah, as I understand, hath picked you out of the waves. How came you there?'

Decimus Saxon puffed at his pipe for a minute or more in silence, as one who is marshalling facts each in its due order.

'It came about in this wise,' he said at last. 'When John of Poland chased the Turk from the gates of Vienna, peace broke out in the Principalities, and many a wandering cavaliero like myself found his occupation gone. There was no war waging save only some petty Italian skirmish, in which a soldier could scarce expect to reap either dollars or repute, so I wandered across the Continent, much cast down at the strange peace which prevailed in every quarter. At last, however, on reaching the Lowlands, I chanced to hear that the *Providence*, owned and commanded by my two brothers, Nonus and Quartus, was about to start from Amsterdam for an adventure to the Guinea coast. I proposed to them that I should join them, and was accordingly taken into partnership on condition that I paid one-third of the cost of the cargo. While waiting at the port I chanced to come across some of the exiles, who, having heard of my devotion to the Protestant cause, brought me to the Duke and to Master Rumbold, who committed these letters to my charge. This makes it clear how they came into my possession.'

'But not how you and they came into the water,' my father suggested.

'Why, that was but the veriest chance,' the adventurer answered with some little confusion of manner. 'It was the *fortuna belli*, or more properly *pacis*. I had asked my brothers to put into Portsmouth that I might get rid of these letters, on which they replied in a boorish and unmannerly fashion that they were still waiting for the thousand guineas which represented my share of the venture. To this I answered with brotherly familiarity that it was a small thing, and should be paid for out of the profits of our enterprise. Their reply was I that I had promised to pay the money down, and that money down they must have. I then proceeded to prove, both by the Aristotelian and by the Platonic or deductive method, that having no guineas in my possession it was impossible for me to produce a thousand of them, at the same time pointing out that the association of an honest man in the business was in itself an ample return for the money, since their own reputations had been somewhat blown on. I further offered in the same frank and friendly spirit to meet either of them with sword or with pistol, a proposal which should have satisfied any honour-loving Cavaliero. Their base mercantile souls prompted them, however, to catch up two muskets, one of which Nonus discharged at me, and it is likely that Quartus would have followed suit had I not plucked the gun from his hand and unloaded it to prevent further mischief. In unloading it I fear that one of the slugs blew a hole in brother Nonus. Seeing that there was a chance of further disagreements aboard the vessel, I at once decided to leave her, in doing which I was forced to kick off my beautiful jack-boots, which were said by Vanseddars himself to be he finest pair that ever went out of his shop, square-toed, double-soled – alas! alas!'

'Strange that you should have been picked up by the son of the very man to whom you had a letter.'

'The working of Providence,' Saxon answered. 'I have two-and-twenty other letters which must all be delivered by hand. If you will permit me to use your house for a while, I shall make it my headquarters.'

'Use it as though it were your own,' said my father.

‘Your most grateful servant, sir,’ he cried, jumping up and bowing with his hand over his heart. ‘This is indeed a haven of rest after the ungodly and profane company of my brothers. Shall we then put up a hymn, and retire from the business of the day?’

My father willingly agreed, and we sang ‘Oh, happy land!’ after which our visitor followed me to his room, bearing with him the unfinished bottle of usquebaugh which my mother had left on the table. He took it with him, he explained, as a precaution against Persian ague, contracted while battling against the Ottoman, and liable to recur at strange moments. I left him in our best spare bedroom, and returned to my father, who was still seated, heavy with thought, in his old corner.

‘What think you of my find, Dad?’ I asked.

‘A man of parts and of piety,’ he answered; ‘but in truth he has brought me news so much after my heart, that he could not be unwelcome were he the Pope of Rome.’

‘What news, then?’

‘This, this!’ he cried joyously, plucking the letter out of his bosom. ‘I will read it to you, lad. Nay, perhaps I had best sleep the night upon it, and read it to-morrow when our heads are clearer. May the Lord guide my path, and confound the tyrant! Pray for light, boy, for my life and yours may be equally at stake.’

Chapter VI. Of the Letter that came from the Lowlands

In the morning I was up betimes, and went forthwith, after the country fashion, to our quest's room to see if there was aught in which I could serve him. On pushing at his door, I found that it was fastened, which surprised me the more as I knew that there was neither key nor bolt upon the inside. On my pressing against it, however, it began to yield, and I could then see that a heavy chest which was used to stand near the window had been pulled round in order to shut out any intrusion. This precaution, taken under my father's roof, as though he were in a den of thieves, angered me, and I gave a butt with my shoulder which cleared the box out of the way, and enabled me to enter the room.

The man Saxon was sitting up in bed, staring about him as though he were not very certain for the moment where he was. He had tied a white kerchief round his head by way of night bonnet, and his hard-visaged, clean-shaven face, looking out through this, together with his bony figure, gave him some resemblance to a gigantic old woman. The bottle of usquebaugh stood empty by his bedside. Clearly his fears had been realised, and he had had an attack of the Persian ague.

'Ah, my young friend!' he said at last. 'Is it, then, the custom of this part of the country to carry your visitor's rooms by storm or escalado in the early hours of the morning?'

'Is it the custom,' I answered sternly, 'to barricade up your door when you are sleeping under the roof-tree of an honest man? What did you fear, that you should take such a precaution?'

'Nay, you are indeed a spitfire,' he replied, sinking back upon the pillow, and drawing the clothes round him, 'a feuerkopf as the Germans call it, or sometimes tollkopf, which in its literal significance meaneth a fool's head. Your father was, as I have heard, a strong and a fierce man when the blood of youth ran in his veins; but you, I should judge, are in no way behind him. Know, then, that the bearer of papers of import, *documenta preciosa sed periculosa*, is bound to leave nought to chance, but to guard in every way the charge which hath been committed to him. True it is that I am in the house of an honest man, but I know not who may come or who may go during the hours of the night. Indeed, for the matter of that – but enough is said. I shall be with you anon.'

'Your clothes are dry and are ready for you,' I remarked.

'Enough! enough!' he answered. 'I have no quarrel with the suit which your father has lent me. It may be that I have been used to better, but they will serve my turn. The camp is not the court.'

It was evident to me that my father's suit was infinitely better, both in texture and material, than that which our visitor had brought with him. As he had withdrawn his head, however, entirely beneath the bedclothes, there was nothing more to be said, so I descended to the lower room, where I found toy father busily engaged fastening a new buckle to his sword-belt while my mother and the maid were preparing the morning meal.

'Come into the yard with me, Micah,' quoth my father; 'I would have a word with you.' The workmen had not yet come to their work, so we strolled out into the sweet morning air, and seated ourselves on the low stone bankment on which the skins are dressed.

'I have been out here this morning trying my hand at the broadsword exercise, 'said he; 'I find that I am as quick as ever on a thrust, but my cuts are sadly stiff. I might be of use at a pinch, but, alas! I am not the same swordsman who led the left troop of the finest horse regiment that ever followed a kettledrum. The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away! Yet, if I am old and worn, there is the fruit of my loins to stand in my place and to wield the same sword in the same cause. You shall go in my place, Micah.'

'Go! Go whither?'

'Hush, lad, and listen! Let not your mother know too much, for the hearts of women are soft. When Abraham offered up his eldest born, I trow that he said little to Sarah on the matter. Here is the letter. Know you who this Dicky Rumbold is?'

'Surely I have heard you speak of him as an old companion of yours.'

'The same – a staunch man and true. So faithful was he – faithful even to slaying – that when the army of the righteous dispersed, he did not lay aside his zeal with his buff-coat. He took to business as a maltster at Hoddesdon, and in his house was planned the famous Rye House Plot, in which so many good men were involved.'

'Was it not a foul assassination plot?' I asked.

'Nay, nay, be not led away by terms! It is a vile invention of the malignants that these men planned assassination. What they would do they purposed doing in broad daylight, thirty of them against fifty of the Royal Guard, when Charles and James passed on their way to Newmarket. If the royal brothers got pistol-bullet or sword-stab, it would be in open fight, and at the risk of their attackers. It was give and take, and no murder.'

He paused and looked inquiringly at me; but I could not truthfully say that I was satisfied, for an attack upon the lives of unarmed and unsuspecting men, even though surrounded by a bodyguard, could not, to my mind, be justified.

'When the plot failed,' my father continued, 'Rumbold had to fly for his life, but he succeeded in giving his pursuers the slip and in making his way to the Lowlands. There he found that many enemies of the Government had gathered together. Repeated messages from England, especially from the western counties and from London, assured them that if they would but attempt an invasion they might rely upon help both in men and in money. They were, however, at fault for some time for want of a leader of sufficient weight to carry through so large a project; but now at last they have one, who is the best that could have been singled out – none other than the well-beloved Protestant chieftain James, Duke of Monnmouth, son of Charles II.'

'Illegitimate son,' I remarked.

'That may or may not be. There are those who say that Lucy Walters was a lawful wife. Bastard or no, he holds the sound principles of the true Church, and he is beloved by the people. Let him appear in the West, and soldiers will rise up like the flowers in the spring time.'

He paused, and led me away to the farther end of the yard, for the workmen had begun to arrive and to cluster round the dipping trough.

'Monmouth is coming over,' he continued, 'and he expects every brave Protestant man to rally to his standard. The Duke of Argyle is to command a separate expedition, which will set the Highlands of Scotland in a blaze. Between them they hope to bring the persecutor of the faithful on his knees. But I hear the voice of the man Saxon, and I must not let him say that I have treated him in a churlish fashion. Here is the letter, lad. Read it with care, and remember that when brave men are striving for their rights it is fitting that one of the old rebel house of Clarke should be among them.'

I took the letter, and wandering off into the fields, I settled myself under a convenient tree, and set myself to read it. This yellow sheet which I now hold in my hand is the very one which was brought by Decimus Saxon, and read by me that bright May morning under the hawthorn shade. I give it to you as it stands;

'To my friend and companion in the cause of the Lord, Joseph Clarke. – Know, friend, that aid and delivery is coming upon Israel, and that the wicked king and those who uphold him shall be smitten and entirely cast down, until their place in the land shall know them no more. Hasten, then, to testify to thy own faith, that in the day of trouble ye be not found wanting.

'It has chanced from time to time that many of the suffering Church, both from our own land and from among the Scots, have assembled in this good Lutheran town of Amsterdam, until enough are gathered together to take a good work in hand. For amongst our own folk there are my Lord Grey of Wark, Wade, Dare of Taunton, Ayloffe, Holmes, Hollis, Goodenough, and others whom thou shalt know. Of the Scots there are the Duke of Argyle, who has suffered sorely for the Covenant, Sir Patrick Hume, Fletcher of Saltoun, Sir John Cochrane, Dr. Ferguson, Major Elphinstone, and others. To these we would fain have added Locke and old Hal Ludlow, but they are, as those of the Laodicean Church, neither cold nor warm.

‘It has now come to pass, however, that Monmouth, who has long lived in dalliance with the Midianitish woman known by the name of Wentworth, has at last turned him to higher things, and has consented to make a bid for the crown. It was found that the Scots preferred to follow a chieftain of their own, and it has therefore been determined that Argyle – M’Callum More, as the breechless savages of Inverary call him – shall command a separate expedition landing upon the western coast of Scotland. There he hopes to raise five thousand Campbells, and to be joined by all the Covenanters and Western Whigs, men who would make troops of the old breed had they but God-fearing officers with an experience of the chance of fields and the usages of war. With such a following he should be able to hold Glasgow, and to draw away the King’s force to the north. Ayloffe and I go with Argyle. It is likely that our feet may be upon Scottish ground before thy eyes read these words.

‘The stronger expedition starts with Monmouth, and lands at a fitting place in the West, where we are assured that we have many friends. I cannot name the spot lest this letter miscarry, but thou shalt hear anon. I have written to all good men along the coast, bidding them to be prepared to support the rising. The King is weak, and hated by the greater part of his subjects. It doth but need one good stroke to bring his crown in the dust. Monmouth will start in a few weeks, when his equipment is finished and the weather favourable. If thou canst come, mine old comrade, I know well that thou wilt need no bidding of mine to bring thee to our banner. Should perchance a peaceful life and waning strength forbid thy attendance, I trust that thou wilt wrestle for us in prayer, even as the holy prophet of old; and perchance, since I hear that thou hast prospered according to the things of this world, thou mayst be able to fit out a pikeman or two, or to send a gift towards the military chest, which will be none too plentifully lined. We trust not to gold, but to steel and to our own good cause, yet gold will be welcome none the less. Should we fall, we fall like men and Christians. Should we succeed, we shall see how the perjured James, the persecutor of the saints with the heart like a nether millstone, the man who smiled when the thumbs of the faithful were wrenched out of their sockets at Edinburgh – we shall see how manfully he can bear adversity when it falls to his lot. May the hand of the Almighty be over us!

‘I know little of the bearer of this, save that he professes to be of the elect. Shouldst thou go to Monmouth’s camp, see that thou take him with thee, for I hear that he hath had good experience in the German, Swedish, and Otttoman wars. – Yours in the faith of Christ, Richard Rumbold.

‘Present my services to thy spouse. Let her read Timothy chapter two, ninth to fifteenth verses.’

This long letter I read very carefully, and then putting it in my pocket returned indoors to my breakfast. My father looked at me, as I entered, with questioning eyes, but I had no answer to return him, for my own mind was clouded and uncertain.

That day Decimus Saxon left us, intending to make a round of the country and to deliver his letters, but promising to be back again ere long. We had a small mishap ere he went, for as we were talking of his journey my brother Hosea must needs start playing with my father’s powder-flask, which in some way went off with a sudden fluff, spattering the walls with fragments of metal. So unexpected and loud was the explosion, that both my father and I sprang to our feet; but Saxon, whose back was turned to my brother, sat four-square in his chair without a glance behind him or a shade of change in his rugged face. As luck would have it, no one was injured, not even Hosea, but the incident made me think more highly of our new acquaintance. As he started off down the village street, his long stringy figure and strange gnarled visage, with my father’s silver-braided hat cocked over his eye, attracted rather more attention than I cared to see, considering the importance of the missives which he bore, and the certainty of their discovery should he be arrested as a masterless man. Fortunately, however, the curiosity of the country folk did but lead them to cluster round their doors and windows, staring open-eyed, while he, pleased at the attention which he excited, strode along with his head in the air and a cudgel of mine twirling in his hand. He had left golden opinions behind him. My father’s good wishes had been won by his piety and by the sacrifices which he claimed to have made for the faith. My mother he had taught how wimples are worn amongst the Serbs, and had also demonstrated

to her a new method of curing marigolds in use in some parts of Lithuania. For myself, I confess that I retained a vague distrust of the man, and was determined to avoid putting faith in him more than was needful. At present, however, we had no choice hut to treat him as an ambassador from friends.

And I? What was I to do? Should I follow my father's wishes, and draw my maiden sword on behalf of the insurgents, or should I stand aside and see how events shaped themselves? It was more fitting that I should go than he. But, on the other hand, I was no keen religious zealot. Papistry, Church, Dissent, I believed that there was good in all of them, but that not one was worth the spilling of human blood. James might be a perjurer and a villain, but he was, as far as I could see, the rightful king of England, and no tales of secret marriages or black boxes could alter the fact that his rival was apparently an illegitimate son, and as such ineligible to the throne. Who could say what evil act upon the part of a monarch justified his people in setting him aside? Who was the judge in such a case? Yet, on the other hand, the man had notoriously broken his own pledges, and that surely should absolve his subjects from their allegiance. It was a weighty question for a country-bred lad to have to settle, and yet settled it must be, and that speedily. I took up my hat and wandered away down the village street, turning the matter over in my head.

But it was no easy thing for me to think seriously of anything in the hamlet; for I was in some way, my dear children, though I say it myself, a favourite with the young and with the old, so that I could not walk ten paces without some greeting or address. There were my own brothers trailing behind me, Baker Mitford's children tugging at my skirts, and the millwright's two little maidens one on either hand. Then, when I had persuaded these young rompers to leave me, out came Dame Fullarton the widow, with a sad tale about how her grindstone had fallen out of its frame, and neither she nor her household could lift it in again. That matter I set straight and proceeded on my way; but I could not pass the sign of the Wheatsheaf without John Lockarby, Reuben's father, plunging out at me and insisting upon my coming in with him for a morning cup.

'The best glass of mead in the countryside, and brewed under my own roof,' said he proudly, as he poured it into the flagon. 'Why, bless you, master Micah, a man with a frame like yours wants store o' good malt to keep it up wi'.'

'And malt like this is worthy of a good frame to contain it,' quoth Reuben, who was at work among the flasks.

'What think ye, Micah?' said the landlord. 'There was the Squire o' Milton over here yester morning wi' Johnny Ferneley o' the Bank side, and they will have it that there's a man in Fareham who could wrestle you, the best of three, and find your own grip, for a good round stake.'

'Tut! tut!' I answered; 'you would have me like a prize mastiff, showing my teeth to the whole countryside. What matter if the man can throw me, or I him?'

'What matter? Why, the honour of Havant,' quoth he. 'Is that no matter? But you are right,' he continued, draining off his horn. 'What is all this village life with its small successes to such as you? You are as much out of your place as a vintage wine at a harvest supper. The whole of broad England, and not the streets of Havant, is the fit stage for a man of your kidney. What have you to do with the beating of skins and the tanning of leather?'

'My father would have you go forth as a knight-errant, Micah,' said Reuben, laughing. 'You might chance to get your own skin beaten and your own leather tanned.'

'Who ever knew so long a tongue in so short a body?' cried the innkeeper. 'But in good sooth, Master Micah, I am in sober earnest when I say that you are indeed wasting the years of your youth, when life is sparkling and clear, and that you will regret it when you have come to the flat and flavourless dregs of old age.'

'There spoke the brewer,' said Reuben; 'but indeed, Micah, my father is right, for all that he hath such a hops-and-water manner of putting it.'

'I will think over it,' I answered, and with a nod to the kindly couple proceeded on my way.

Zachariah Palmer was planing a plank as I passed. Looking up he bade me good-morrow.

‘I have a book for you, lad,’ he said.

‘I have but now finished the “Comus,”’ I answered, for he had lent me John Milton’s poem. ‘But what is this new book, daddy?’

‘It is by the learned Locke, and treateth of states and statecraft. It is but a small thing, but if wisdom could show in the scales it would weigh down many a library. You shall have it when I have finished it, to-morrow mayhap or the day after. A good man is Master Locke. Is he not at this moment a wanderer in the Lowlands, rather than bow his knee to what his conscience approved not of?’

‘There are many good men among the exiles, are there not?’ said I.

‘The pick of the country,’ he answered. ‘Ill fares the land that drives the highest and bravest of its citizens away from it. The day is coming, I fear, when every man will have to choose betwixt his beliefs and his freedom. I am an old man, Micah boy, but I may live long enough to see strange things in this once Protestant kingdom.’

‘But if these exiles had their way,’ I objected, ‘they would place Monmouth upon the throne, and so unjustly alter the succession.’

‘Nay, nay,’ old Zachary answered, laying down his plane. ‘If they use Monmouth’s name, it is but to strengthen their cause, and to show that they have a leader of repute. Were James driven from the throne, the Commons of England in Parliament assembled would be called upon to name his successor. There are men at Monmouth’s back who would not stir unless this were so.’

‘Then, daddy,’ said I, ‘since I can trust you, and since you will tell me what you do really think, would it be well, if Monmouth’s standard be raised, that I should join it?’

The carpenter stroked his white beard and pondered for a while. ‘It is a pregnant question,’ he said at last, ‘and yet methinks that there is but one answer to it, especially for your father’s son. Should an end be put to James’s rule, it is not too late to preserve the nation in its old faith; but if the disease is allowed to spread, it may be that even the tyrant’s removal would not prevent his evil seed from sprouting. I hold, therefore, that should the exiles make such an attempt, it is the duty of every man who values liberty of conscience to rally round them. And you, my son, the pride of the village, what better use could you make of your strength than to devote it to helping to relieve your country of this insupportable yoke? It is treasonable and dangerous counsel – counsel which might lead to a short shrift and a bloody death – but, as the Lord liveth, if you were child of mine I should say the same.’

So spoke the old carpenter with a voice which trembled with earnestness, and went to work upon his plank once more, while I, with a few words of gratitude, went on my way pondering over what he had said to me. I had not gone far, however, before the hoarse voice of Solomon Sprent broke in upon my meditations.

‘Hoy there! Ahoy!’ he bellowed, though his mouth was but a few yards from my ear. ‘Would ye come across my hawse without slacking weigh? Clew up, d’ye see, clew up!’

‘Why, Captain,’ I said, ‘I did not see you. I was lost in thought.’

‘All adrift and without look-outs,’ quoth he, pushing his way through the break in the garden hedge. ‘Odd’s niggars, man! friends are not so plentiful, d’ye see, that ye need pass ‘em by without a dip o’ the ensign. So help me, if I had had a barker I’d have fired a shot across your bows.’

‘No offence, Captain,’ said I, for the veteran appeared to be nettled; ‘I have much to think of this morning.’

‘And so have I, mate,’ he answered, in a softer voice. ‘What think ye of my rig, eh?’ He turned himself slowly round in the sunlight as he spoke, and I perceived that he was dressed with unusual care. He had a blue suit of broadcloth trimmed with eight rows of buttons, and breeches of the same material with great bunches of ribbon at the knee. His vest was of lighter blue picked out with anchors in silver, and edged with a finger’s-breadth of lace. His boot was so wide that he might have had his foot in a bucket, and he wore a cutlass at his side suspended from a buff belt, which passed over his right shoulder.

'I've had a new coat o' paint all over,' said he, with a wink. 'Carramba! the old ship is water-tight yet. What would ye say, now, were I about to sling my hawser over a little scow, and take her in tow?'

'A cow!' I cried.

'A cow! what d'ye take me for? A wench, man, and as tight a little craft as ever sailed into the port of wedlock.'

'I have heard no better news for many a long day,' said I; 'I did not even know that you were betrothed. When thou is the wedding to be?'

'Go slow, friend – go slow, and heave your lead-line! You have got out of your channel, and are in shoal water. I never said as how I was betrothed.'

'What then?' I asked.

'I am getting up anchor now, to run down to her and summon her. Look ye, lad,' he continued, plucking off his cap and scratching his ragged locks; 'I've had to do wi' wenches enow from the Levant to the Antilles – wenches such as a sailorman meets, who are all paint and pocket. It's but the heaving of a hand grenade, and they strike their colours. This is a craft of another guess build, and unless I steer wi' care she may put one in between wind and water before I so much as know that I am engaged. What think ye, heh? Should I lay myself boldly alongside, d'ye see, and ply her with small arms, or should I work myself clear and try a long range action? I am none of your slippery, grease-tongued, long-shore lawyers, but if so be as she's willing for a mate, I'll stand by her in wind and weather while my planks hold out.'

'I can scarce give advice in such a case,' said I, 'for my experience is less than yours. I should say though that you had best speak to her from your heart, in plain sailor language.'

'Aye, aye, she can take it or leave it. Phoebe Dawson it is, the sister of the blacksmith. Let us work back and have a drop of the right Nants before we go. I have an anker newly come, which never paid the King a groat.'

'Nay, you had best leave it alone,' I answered.

'Say you so? Well, mayhap you are right. Throw off your moorings, then, and clap on sail, for we must go.'

'But I am not concerned,' said I.

'Not concerned! Not – ' he was too much overcome to go on, and could but look at me with a face full of reproach. 'I thought better of you, Micah. Would you let this crazy old hulk go into action, and not stand by to fire a broadside?'

'What would you have me do then?'

'Why, I would have you help me as the occasion may arise. If I start to board her, I would have you work across the bows so as to rake her. Should I range, up on the larboard quarter, do you lie, on the starboard. If I get crippled, do you draw her fire until I refit. What, man, you would not desert me!'

The old seaman's tropes and maritime conceits were not always intelligible to me, but it was clear that he had set his heart upon my accompanying him, which I was equally determined not to do. At last by much reasoning I made him understand that my presence would be more hindrance than help, and would probably be fatal to his chances of success.

'Well, well,' he grumbled at last, 'I've been concerned in no such expedition before. An' it be the custom for single ships to engage, I'll stand to it alone. You shall come with me as consort, though, and stand to and fro in the offing, or sink me if I stir a step.'

My mind was full of my father's plans and of the courses which lay before me. There seemed to be no choice, however, as old Solomon was in dead earnest, but to lay the matter aside for the moment and see the upshot of this adventure.

'Mind, Solomon,' said I, 'I don't cross the threshold.'

'Aye, aye, mate. You can please yourself. We have to beat up against the wind all the way. She's on the look-out, for I hailed her yesternight, and let her know as how I should bear down on her about seven bells of the morning watch.'

I was thinking as we trudged down the road that Phoebe would need to be learned in sea terms to make out the old man's meaning, when he pulled up short and clapped his hands to his pockets.

'Zounds!' he cried, 'I have forgot to bring a pistol.'

'In Heaven's name!' I said in amazement, 'what could you want with a pistol?'

'Why, to make signals with,' said he. 'Odds me that I should have forgot it! How is one's consort to know what is going forward when the flagship carries no artillery? Had the lass been kind I should have fired one gun, that you might know it.'

'Why,' I answered, 'if you come not out I shall judge that all is well. If things go amiss I shall see you soon.'

'Aye – or stay! I'll hoist a white jack at the port-hole. A white jack means that she hath hauled down her colours. Nombre de Dios, when I was a powder-boy in the old ship *Lion*, the day that we engaged the *Spiritus Sanctus* of two tier o' guns – the first time that ever I heard the screech of ball – my heart never thumped as it does now. What say ye if we run back with a fair wind and broach that anker of Nants?'

'Nay, stand to it, man,' said I; for by this time, we had come to the ivy-clad cottage behind which was the village smithy. 'What, Solomon! an English seaman never feared a foe, either with petticoats or without them.'

'No, curse me if he did!' quoth Solomon, squaring his shoulders, 'never a one, Don, Devil, or Dutchman; so here goes for her!' So saying he made his way into the cottage, leaving me standing by the garden wicket, half amused and half annoyed at this interruption to my musings.

As it proved, the sailor had no very great difficulty with his suit, and soon managed to capture his prize, to use his own language. I heard from the garden the growling of his gruff voice, and a good deal of shrill laughter ending in a small squeak, which meant, I suppose, that he was coming to close quarters. Then there was silence for a little while, and at last I saw a white kerchief waving from the window, and perceived, moreover, that it was Phoebe herself who was fluttering it. Well, she was a smart, kindly-hearted lass, and I was glad in my heart that the old seaman should have such a one to look after him.

Here, then, was one good friend settled down finally for life. Another warned me that I was wasting my best years in the hamlet. A third, the most respected of all, advised me openly to throw in my lot with the insurgents, should the occasion arise. If I refused, I should have the shame of seeing my aged father setting off for the wars, whilst I lingered at home. And why should I refuse? Had it not long been the secret wish of my heart to see something of the great world, and what fairer chance could present itself? My wishes, my friend's advice, and my father's hopes all pointed in the one direction.

'Father,' said I, when I returned home, 'I am ready to go where you will.'

'May the Lord be glorified!' he cried solemnly. 'May He watch over your young life, and keep your heart steadfast to the cause which is assuredly His!'

And so, my dear grandsons, the great resolution was taken, and I found myself committed to one side in the national quarrel.

Chapter VII. Of the Horseman who rode from the West

My father set to work forthwith preparing for our equipment, furnishing Saxon out as well as myself on the most liberal scale, for he was determined that the wealth of his age should be as devoted to the cause as was the strength of his youth. These arrangements had to be carried out with the most extreme caution, for there were many Prelatists in the village, and in the present disturbed state of the public mind any activity on the part of so well known a man would have at once attracted attention. So carefully did the wary old soldier manage matters, however, that we soon found ourselves in a position to start at an hour's notice, without any of our neighbours being a whit the wiser.

His first move was to purchase through an agent two suitable horses at Chichester fair, which were conveyed to the stables of a trusty Whig farmer living near Portchester, who was ordered to keep them until they were called for. Of these animals one was a mottled grey, of great mettle and power, standing seventeen and a half hands high, and well up to my weight, for in those days, my dears, I had not laid on flesh, and weighed a little under sixteen stone for all my height and strength. A critic might have said that Covenant, for so I named my steed, was a trifle heavy about the head and neck, but I found him a trusty, willing brute, with great power and endurance. Saxon, who when fully accoutred could scarce have weighed more than twelve stone, had a light bay Spanish jennet, of great speed and spirit. This mare he named Chloe, 'after a godly maiden of his acquaintance,' though, as my father remarked, there was a somewhat ungodly and heathenish smack about the appellation. These horses and their harness were bought and held ready without my father appearing in the matter in any way.

This important point having been settled, there was the further question of arms to be discussed, which gave rise to much weighty controversy between Decimus Saxon and my father, each citing many instances from their own experiences where the presence or absence of some taslet or arm-guard had been of the deepest import to the wearer. Your great-grandfather had set his heart upon my wearing the breastplate which still bore the dints of the Scottish spears at Dunbar, but on trying it on we found it was too small for me. I confess that this was a surprise, for when I looked back at the awe with which I had regarded my father's huge proportions, it was marvellous to me to have this convincing proof that I had outgrown him. By ripping down the side-leather and piercing holes through which a lace could be passed, my mother managed to arrange it so that I could wear it without discomfort. A pair of taslets or thigh-pieces, with guards for the upper arm and gauntlets, were all borrowed from the old Parliamentary equipment, together with the heavy straight sword and pair of horse pistols which formed the usual weapons of a cavalier. My father had chosen me a head-piece in Portsmouth, fluted, with good barrets, padded inside with soft leather, very light and yet very strong. When fully equipped, both Saxon and my father agreed that I had all that was requisite for a well-appointed soldier. Saxon had purchased a buff-coat, a steel cap, and a pair of jack-boots, so that with the rapier and pistols which my father had presented him with, he was ready to take the field at any time.

There would, we hoped, be no great difficulty in our reaching Monmouth's forces when the hour came. In those troublous times the main roads were so infested by highwaymen and footpads, that it was usual for travellers to carry weapons and even armour for their protection. There was no reason therefore why our appearance should excite suspicion. Should questions be asked, Saxon had a long story prepared, to the effect that we were travelling to join Henry Somerset, Duke of Beaufort, to whose household we belonged. This invention he explained to me, with many points of corroboration which I was to furnish, but when I said positively that I should rather be hanged as a rebel than speak a falsehood, he looked at me open-eyed, and shook his head as one much shocked. A few weeks of campaigning, he said, would soon cure me of my squeamishness. For himself, no more truthful child had ever carried a horn-book, but he had learned to lie upon the Danube, and looked upon it as a necessary part of the soldier's upbringing. 'For what are all stratagems, ambuscades, and outfalls but

lying upon a large scale?' he argued. 'What is an adroit commander but one who hath a facility for disguising the truth? When, at the battle of Senlac, William the Norman ordered his men to feign flight in order that they might break his enemy's array, a wile much practised both by the Scythians of old and by the Croats of our own day, pray what is it but the acting of a lie? Or when Hannibal, having tied torches to the horns of great droves of oxen, caused the Roman Consuls to imagine that his army was in retreat, was it not a deception or infraction of the truth? – a point well brought out by a soldier of repute in the treatise "An in bello dolo uti liceat; an apud hostes falsiloquio uti liceat." And so if, after these great models, I in order to gain mine ends do announce that we are bound to Beaufort when we are in truth making for Monmouth, is it not in accord with the usages of war and the customs of great commanders?' All which specious argument I made no attempt to answer, beyond repeating that he might avail himself of the usage, but that he must not look to me for corroboration. On the other hand, I promised to hold my speech and to say nothing which might hamper him, with which pledge he was forced to be contented.

And now at last, my patient listeners, I shall be able to carry you out of the humble life of the village, and to cease my gossip of the men who were old when I was young, and who are now lying this many a year in the Bedhampton churchyard. You shall come with me now, and you shall see England as it was in those days, and you shall hear of how we set forth to the wars, and of all the adventures which overtook us. And if what I tell you should ever chance to differ from what you have read in the book of Mr. Coke or of Mr. Oldmixon, or of any one else who has set these matters down in print, do ye bear in mind that I am telling of what I saw with these very eyes, and that I have helped to make history, which is a higher thing than to write it.

It was, then, towards nightfall upon the twelfth day of June 1685 that the news reached our part of the country that Monmouth had landed the day before at Lyme, a small seaport on the boundary between Dorsetshire and Devonshire. A great beacon blaze upon Portsdown Hill was the first news that we had of it, and then came a rattling and a drumming from Portsmouth, where the troops were assembled under arms. Mounted messengers clattered through the village street with their heads low on their horses' necks, for the great tidings must be carried to London, that the Governor of Portsmouth might know how to act. (Note B, Appendix.) We were standing at our doorway in the gloaming, watching the coming and the going, and the line of beacon fires which were lengthening away to the eastward, when a little man galloped up to the door and pulled his panting horse up.

'Is Joseph Clarke here?' he asked.

'I am he,' said my father.

'Are these men true?' he whispered, pointing with his whip at Saxon and myself. 'Then the trysting-place is Taunton. Pass it on to all whom ye know. Give my horse a bait and a drink, I beg of ye, for I must get on my way.'

My young brother Hosea looked to the tired creature, while we brought the rider inside and drew him a stoup of beer. A wiry, sharp-faced man he was, with a birth-mark upon his temple. His face and clothes were caked with dust, and his limbs were so stiff from the saddle that he could scarce put one foot before another.

'One horse hath died under me,' he said, 'and this can scarce last another twenty miles. I must be in London by morning, for we hope that Danvers and Wildman may be able to raise the city. Yester-evening I left Monmouth's camp. His blue flag floats over Lyme.'

'What force hath he?' my father asked anxiously.

'He hath but brought over leaders. The force must come from you folk at home. He has with him Lord Grey of Wark, with Wade, the German Buyse, and eighty or a hundred more. Alas! that two who came are already lost to us. It is an evil, evil omen.'

'What is amiss, then?'

'Dare, the goldsmith of Taunton, hath been slain by Fletcher of Saltoun in some child's quarrel about a horse. The peasants cried out for the blood of the Scot, and he was forced to fly aboard the ships. A sad mishap it is, for he was a skilful leader and a veteran soldier.'

'Aye, aye,' cried Saxon impatiently, 'there will be some more skilful leaders and veteran soldiers in the West presently to take his place. But if he knew the usages of war, how came it that he should fight upon a private quarrel at such a time?' He drew a flat brown book from his bosom, and ran his long thin finger down the table of contents. 'Subisectio nona' – 'here is the very case set forth, "An in hello publico provocatus ad duellum privatae amicitiae causa declinare possit," in which the learned Fleming layeth it down that a man's private honour must give way to the good of the cause. Did it not happen in my own case that, on the eve of the raising of the Anlagerung of Vienna, we stranger officers having been invited to the tent of the General, it chanced that a red-headed Irisher, one O'Daffy, an ancient in the regiment of Pappenheimer, did claim precedence of me on the ground of superiority of blood? On this I drew my glove across his face, not, mark ye, in anger, but as showing that I differed in some degree from his opinion. At which dissent he did at once offer to sustain his contention, but I, having read this subsection to him, did make it clear to him that we could not in honour settle the point until the Turk was chased from the city. So after the onfall – '

'Nay, sir, I may hear the narrative some future day,' said the messenger, staggering to his feet. 'I hope to find a relay at Chichester, and time presses. Work for the cause now, or be slaves for ever. Farewell!' He clambered into his saddle, and we heard the clatter of his hoofs dying away down the London road.

'The time hath come for you to go, Micah,' said my father solemnly.' Nay, wife, do not weep, but rather hearten the lad on his way by a blithe word and a merry face. I need not tell you to fight manfully and fearlessly in this quarrel. Should the tide of war set in this direction, you may find your old father riding by your side. Let us now bow down and implore the favour of the Almighty upon this expedition.'

We all knelt down in the low-roofed, heavy-raftered room while the old man offered up an earnest, strenuous prayer for our success. Even now, as I speak to ye, that group rises up before mine eyes. I see once again your ancestor's stern, rugged face, with his brows knitted and his corded hands writhed together in the fervour of his supplication. My mother kneels beside him with the tears trickling down her sweet, placid face, stifling her sobs lest the sound of them make my leave-taking more bitter. The children are in the sleeping-room upstairs, and we hear the patter of their bare feet upon the floor. The man Saxon sprawls across one of the oaken chairs, half kneeling, half reclining, with his long legs trailing out behind, and his face buried in his hands. All round in the flickering light of the hanging lamp I see the objects which have been so familiar to me from childhood – the settle by the fireplace, the high-back stiff-elbowed chairs, the stuffed fox above the door, the picture of Christian viewing the Promised Land from the summit of the Delectable Mountains – all small trifles in themselves, but making up among them the marvellous thing we call home, the all-powerful lodestone which draws the wanderer's heart from the farther end of the earth. Should I ever see it again save in my dreams – I, who was leaving this sheltered cove to plunge into the heart of the storm?

The prayer finished, we all rose with the exception of Saxon, who remained with his face buried in his hands for a minute or so before starting to his feet. I shrewdly suspect that he had been fast asleep, though he explained that he had paused to offer up an additional supplication. My father placed his hands upon my head and invoked the blessing of Heaven upon me. He then drew my companion aside, and I heard the jingling of coin, from which I judge that he was giving him something wherewith to start upon his travels. My mother clasped me to her heart, and slipped a small square of paper into my hand, saying that I was to look at it at my leisure, and that I should make her happy if I would but conform to the instructions contained in it. This I promised to do, and tearing myself away I set off down the darkened village street, with my long-limbed companion striding by my side.

It was close upon one in the morning, and all the country folk had been long abed. Passing the Wheatsheaf and the house of old Solomon, I could not but wonder what they would think of my martial garb were they afoot. I had scarce time to form the same thought before Zachary Palmer's cottage when his door flew open, and the carpenter came running out with his white hair streaming in the fresh night breeze.

'I have been awaiting you, Micah,' he cried. 'I had heard that Monmouth was up, and I knew that you would not lose a night ere starting. God bless you, lad, God bless you! Strong of arm and soft of heart, tender to the weak and stern to the oppressor, you have the prayers and the love of all who know you.' I pressed his extended hands, and the last I saw of my native hamlet was the shadowy figure of the carpenter as he waved his good wishes to me through the darkness.

We made our way across the fields to the house of Whittier, the Whig farmer, where Saxon got into his war harness. We found our horses ready saddled and bridled, for my father had at the first alarm sent a message across that we should need them. By two in the morning we were breasting Portsdown Hill, armed, mounted, and fairly started on our journey to the rebel camp.

Chapter VIII. Of our Start for the Wars

All along the ridge of Portsdown Hill we had the lights of Portsmouth and of the harbour ships twinkling beneath us on the left, while on the right the Forest of Bere was ablaze with the signal fires which proclaimed the landing of the invader. One great beacon throbbed upon the summit of Butser, while beyond that, as far as eye could reach, twinkling sparks of light showed how the tidings were being carried north into Berkshire and eastward into Sussex. Of these fires, some were composed of faggots piled into heaps, and others of tar barrels set upon poles. We passed one of these last just opposite to Portchester, and the watchers around it, hearing the tramp of our horses and the clank of our arms, set up a loud huzza, thinking doubtless that we were King's officers bound for the West.

Master Decimus Saxon had flung to the winds the precise demeanour which he had assumed in the presence of my father, and rattled away with many a jest and scrap of rhyme or song as we galloped through the darkness.

'Gadzooks!' said he frankly, 'it is good to be able to speak freely without being expected to tag every sentence with a hallelujah or an amen.'

'You were ever the leader in those pious exercises,' I remarked drily.

'Aye, indeed. You have nicked it there! If a thing must be done, then take a lead in it, whatever it may be. A plaguy good precept, which has stood me in excellent stead before now. I cannot bear in mind whether I told you how I was at one time taken prisoner by the Turks and conveyed to Stamboul. There were a hundred of us or more, but the others either perished under the bastinado, or are to this day chained to an oar in the Imperial Ottoman galleys, where they are like to remain until they die under the lash, or until some Venetian or Genoese bullet finds its way into their wretched carcasses. I alone came off with my freedom.'

'And pray, how did you make your escape?' I asked.

'By the use of the wit wherewith Providence hath endowed me,' he answered complacently; 'for, seeing that their accursed religion is the blind side of these infidels, I did set myself to work upon it. To this end I observed the fashion in which our guard performed their morning and evening exercises, and having transformed my doublet into a praying cloth, I did imitate them, save only that I prayed at greater length and with more fervour.'

'What!' I cried in horror. 'You did pretend to be a Mussulman?'

'Nay, there was no pretence. I became a Mussulman. That, however, betwixt ourselves, as it might not stand me in very good stead with some Reverend Aminadab Fount-of-Grace in the rebel camp, who is no admirer of Mahmoud.'

I was so astounded at the impudence of this confession, coming from the mouth of one who had been leading the exercises of a pious Christian family, that I was fairly bereft of speech. Decimus Saxon whistled a few bars of a sprightly tune, and then continued —

'My perseverance in these exercises soon led to my being singled out from among the other prisoners, until I so prevailed upon my gaolers that the doors were opened for me, and I was allowed out on condition of presenting myself at the prison gates once a day. What use, think ye, did I make of my freedom?'

'Nay, you are capable of anything,' said I.

'I set off forthwith to their chief mosque – that of St. Sophia. When the doors opened and the muezzin called, I was ever the first to hurry into devotions and the last to leave them. Did I see a Mussulman strike his head upon the pavement, I would strike mine twice. Did I see him bend and bow, I was ready to prostrate myself. In this way ere long the piety of the converted Giaour became the talk of the city, and I was provided with a hut in which to make my sacred meditations. Here I might have done well, and indeed I had well-nigh made up my mind to set up as a prophet and write an extra chapter to the Koran, when some foolish trifle made the faithful suspicious of my honesty.

It was but some nonsense of a wench being found in my hut by some who came to consult me upon a point of faith, but it was enough to set their heathen tongues wagging; so I thought it wisest to give them the slip in a Levantine coaster and leave the Koran uncompleted. It is perhaps as well, for it would be a sore trial to have to give up Christian women and pork, for their garlic-breathing houris and accursed kybobs of sheep's flesh.'

We had passed through Fareham and Botley during this conversation, and were now making our way down the Bishopstoke road. The soil changes about here from chalk to sand, so that our horses' hoofs did but make a dull subdued rattle, which was no bar to our talk – or rather to my companion's, for I did little more than listen. In truth, my mind was so full of anticipations of what was before us, and of thoughts of the home behind, that I was in no humour for sprightly chatter. The sky was somewhat clouded, but the moon glinted out between the rifts, showing us the long road which wound away in front of us. On either side were scattered houses with gardens sloping down toward the road. The heavy, sickly scent of strawberries was in the air.

'Hast ever slain a man in anger?' asked Saxon, as we galloped along.

'Never,' I answered.

'Ha! You will find that when you hear the clink of steel against steel, and see your foeman's eyes, you will straightway forget all rules, maxims, and precepts of the fence which your father or others may have taught you.'

'I have learned little of the sort,' said I. My father did but teach me to strike an honest downright blow. This sword can shear through a square inch of iron bar.'

'Scanderbeg's sword must have Scanderbeg's arm,' he remarked. 'I have observed that it is a fine piece of steel. One of the real old text-compellers and psalm-expounders which the faithful drew in the days of yore, when they would:

"Prove their religion orthodox,
By Apostolic blows and knocks."

You have not fenced much, then?'

'Scarce at all,' said I.

'It is as well. With an old and tried swordsman like myself, knowledge of the use of his weapon is everything; but with a young Hotspur of your temper, strength and energy go for much. I have oft remarked that those who are most skilled at the shooting of the popinjay, the cleaving of the Turk's head, and other such sports, are ever laggards in the field. Had the popinjay a crossbow as well, and an arrow on the string, or had the Turk a fist as well as a head, our young gallant's nerves would scarce be as steady over the business. I make no doubt, Master Clarke, that we shall make trusty comrades. What saith old Butler?

"Never did trusty squire with knight,
Or knight with squire ere jump more right."

I have scarce dared to quote "Hudibras" for these weeks past, lest I should set the Covenant fermenting in the old man's veins.'

'If we are indeed to be comrades,' said I sternly, 'you must learn to speak with more reverence and less flippancy of my father, who would assuredly never have harboured you had he heard the tale which you have told me even now.'

'Belike not,' the adventurer answered, chuckling to himself. 'It is a long stride from a mosque to a conventicle. But be not so hot-headed, my friend. You lack that repose of character which will come to you, no doubt, in your more mature years. What, man! within five minutes of seeing me you would have smitten me on the head with an oar, and ever since you have been like a bandog at my heels,

ready to hark if I do but set my foot over what you regard as the straight line. Remember that you go now among men who fight on small occasion of quarrel. A word awry may mean a rapier thrust.'

'Do you bear the same in mind,' I answered hotly; 'my temper is peaceful, but covert threats and veiled menace I shall not abide.'

'Odd's mercy!' he cried. 'I see that you will start carving me anon, and take me to Monmouth's camp in sections. Nay, nay, we shall have fighting enow without falling out among ourselves. What houses are those on the left?'

'The village of Swathling,' I replied. 'The lights of Bishopstoke lie to the right, in the hollow.'

'Then we are fifteen miles on our way, and methinks there is already some faint flush of dawn in the east. Hullo, what have we here? Beds must be scarce if folks sleep on the highways.'

A dark blur which I had remarked upon the roadway in front of us had resolved itself as we approached into the figure of a man, stretched at full length, with his face downwards, and his head resting upon his crossed arms.

'Some reveler, mayhap, from the village inn,' I remarked.

'There's blood in the air,' said Saxon, raising up his beak-like nose like a vulture which scents carrion. 'Methinks he sleeps the sleep which knows no waking.'

He sprang down from his saddle, and turned the figure over upon his back. The cold pale light of the early dawn shimmering upon his staring eyes and colourless face showed that the old soldier's instinct was correct, and that he had indeed drawn his last breath.

'Here's a pretty piece of work,' said Saxon, kneeling by the dead man's side and passing his hands over his pockets. 'Footpads, doubtless. Not a stiver in his pockets, nor as much as a sleeve-link to help pay for the burial.'

'How was he slain!' I asked in horror, looking down at the poor vacant face, the empty house from which the tenant had departed.

'A stab from behind and a tap on the head from the butt of a pistol. He cannot have been dead long, and yet every groat is gone. A man of position, too, I should judge from his dress – broadcloth coat by the feel, satin breeches, and silver buckles on his shoes. The rogues must have had some plunder with him. Could we but run across them, Clarke, it would be a great and grand thing.'

'It would indeed,' said I heartily. 'What greater privilege than to execute justice upon such cowardly murderers!'

'Pooh! pooh!' he cried. 'Justice is a slippery dame, and hath a two-edged sword in her hand. We may have enough of justice in our character as rebels to give us a surfeit of it. I would fain overtake these robbers that we may relieve them of their *spolia opima*, together with any other wealth which they may have unlawfully amassed. My learned friend the Fleming layeth it down that it is no robbery to rob a robber. But where shall we conceal this body?'

'Wherefore should we conceal it?' I asked.

'Why, man, unused to war or the precautions of a warrior, you must yet see that should this body be found here, there will be a hue and cry through the country, and that strangers like ourselves will be arrested on suspicion. Should we clear ourselves, which is no very easy matter, the justice will at least want to know whence we come and whither we go, which may lead to inquiries that may bode us little good. I shall therefore take the liberty, mine unknown and silent friend, of dragging you into yon bushes, where for a day or two at least you are like to lie unobserved, and so bring no harm upon honest men.'

'For God's sake do not treat it so unkindly,' I cried, springing down from my horse and laying my hand upon my companion's arm. 'There is no need to trail it in so unseemly a fashion. If it must be moved hence, I shall carry it with all due reverence. 'So saying, I picked the body up in my arms, and bearing it to a wayside clump of yellow gorse bushes, I laid it solemnly down and drew the branches over it to conceal it.

‘You have the thews of an ox and the heart of a woman, ‘muttered my companion. ‘By the Mass, that old white-headed psalm-singer was right; for if my memory serves me, he said words to that effect. A few handfuls of dust will hide the stains. Now we may jog upon our way without any fear of being called upon to answer for another man’s sins. Let me but get my girth tightened and we may soon be out of danger’s way.’

‘I have had to do,’ said Saxon, as we rode onwards, ‘with many gentry of this sort, with Albanian brigands, the banditti of Piedmont, the Lanzknechte and Freiritter of the Rhine, Algerine picaroons, and other such folk. Yet I cannot call to mind one who hath ever been able to retire in his old age on a sufficient competence. It is but a precarious trade, and must end sooner or later in a dance on nothing in a tight cravat, with some kind friend tugging at your legs to ease you of any breath that you might have left.’

‘Nor does that end all,’ I remarked.

‘No. There is Tophet behind and the flames of hell. So our good friends the parsons tell us. Well, if a man is to make no money in this world, be hanged at the end of it, and finally burn for ever, he hath assuredly wandered on to a thorny track. If, on the other hand, one could always lay one’s hands on a well-lined purse, as those rogues have done to-night, one might be content to risk something in the world to come.’

‘But what can the well-filled purse do for them?’ said I. ‘What will the few score pieces which these bloodthirsty wretches have filched from this poor creature avail them when their own hour of death comes round?’

‘True,’ said Saxon dryly; ‘they may, however, prove useful in the meantime. This you say is Bishopstoke. What are the lights over yonder?’

‘They come, I think, from Bishop’s Waltham,’ I answered.

‘We must press on, for I would fain be in Salisbury before it is broad day. There we shall put our horses up until evening and have some rest, for there is nothing gained by man or beast coming jaded to the wars. All this day the western roads will be crowded with couriers, and mayhap patrolled by cavalry as well, so that we cannot show our faces upon it without a risk of being stopped and examined. Now if we lie by all day, and push on at dusk, keeping off the main road and making our way across Salisbury Plain and the Somersetshire downs, we shall be less likely to come to harm.’

‘But what if Monmouth be engaged before we come up to him?’ I asked.

‘Then we shall have missed a chance of getting our throats cut. Why, man, supposing that he has been routed and entirely dispersed, would it not be a merry conceit for us to appear upon the scene as two loyal yeomen, who had ridden all the way from Hampshire to strike in against the King’s enemies? We might chance to get some reward in money or in land for our zeal. Nay, frown not, for I was but jesting. Breathe our horses by walking them up this hill. My jennet is as fresh as when we started, but those great limbs of thine are telling upon the grey.’

The patch of light in the east had increased and broadened, and the sky was mottled with little pink feathers of cloud. As we passed over the low hills by Chandler’s Ford and Romsey we could see the smoke of Southampton to the south-east, and the broad dark expanse of the New Forest with the haze of morning hanging over it. A few horsemen passed us, pricking along, too much engrossed in their own errand to inquire ours. A couple of carts and a long string of pack-horses, laden principally with bales of wool, came straggling along a byroad, and the drivers waved their broad hats to us and wished us God-speed. At Dunbridge the folk were just stirring, and paused in taking down the cottage shutters to come to the garden railings and watch us pass. As we entered Dean, the great red sun pushed its rosy rim over the edge of the horizon, and the air was filled with the buzz of insects and the sweet scent of the morning. We dismounted at this latter village, and had a cup of ale while resting and watering the horses. The landlord could tell us nothing about the insurgents, and indeed seemed to care very little about the matter one way or the other. ‘As long as brandy pays a duty of six shillings and eightpence a gallon, and freight and leakage comes to half a crown, while I am expected

to sell it at twelve shillings, it matters little to me who is King of England. Give me a king that will prevent the hop-blight and I am his man.' Those were the landlord's politics, and I dare say a good many more were of his way of thinking.

From Dean to Salisbury is all straight road with moor, morass, and fenland on either side, broken only by the single hamlet of Aldersbury, just over the Wiltshire border. Our horses, refreshed by the short rest, stepped out gallantly, and the brisk motion, with the sunlight and the beauty of the morning, combined to raise our spirits and cheer us after the depression of the long ride through the darkness, and the incident of the murdered traveller. Wild duck, widgeon, and snipe flapped up from either side of the road at the sound of the horses' hoofs, and once a herd of red deer sprang to their feet from among the ferns and scampered away in the direction of the forest. Once, too, when passing a dense clump of trees, we saw a shadowy white creature half hidden by the trunks, which must, I fancy, have been one of those wild cattle of which I have heard the peasants speak, who dwell in the recesses of the southern woods, and are so fierce and intractable that none dare approach them. The breadth of the view, the keenness of the air, and the novelty of the sense of having great work to do, all combined to send a flush of life through my veins such as the quiet village existence had never been able to give. My more experienced companion felt the influence too, for he lifted up a cracked voice and broke into a droning chant, which he assured me was an Eastern ode which had been taught him by the second sister of the Hospodar of Wallachia.

'Anent Monmouth,' he remarked, coming back suddenly to the realities of our position. 'It is unlikely that he can take the field for some days, though much depends upon his striking a blow soon, and so raising the courage of his followers before the King's troops can come down upon him. He has, mark ye, not only his troops to find, but their weapons, which is like to prove a more difficult matter. Suppose he can raise five thousand men – and he cannot stir with less – he will not have one musket in five, so the rest must do as they can with pikes and bills, or such other rude arms as they can find. All this takes time, and though there may be skirmishes, there can scarce be any engagement of import before we arrive.'

'He will have been landed three or four days ere we reach him,' said I.

'Hardly time for him with his small staff of officers to enrol his men and divide them into regiments. I scarce expect to find him at Taunton, though we were so directed. Hast ever heard whether there are any rich Papists in those parts?'

'I know not,' I replied.

'If so there might be plate chests and silver chargers, to say nothing of my lady's jewels and other such trifles to reward a faithful soldier. What would war be without plunder! A bottle without the wine – a shell without the oyster. See the house yonder that peeps through the trees. I warrant there is a store of all good things under that roof, which you and I might have for the asking, did we but ask with our swords in our grip. You are my witness that your father did give and not lend me this horse.'

'Why say you that, then?'

'Lest he claim a half of whatever booty I may chance to gain. What saith my learned Fleming under the heading "an qui militi equum praebuit, praedae ab eo captae particeps esse debeat?" which signifieth "whether he who lendeth a horse hath a claim on the plunder of him who borroweth it." In this discourse he cites a case wherein a Spanish commander having lent a steed to one of his captains, and the said captain having captured the general of the enemy, the commander did sue him for a half share of the twenty thousand crowns which formed the ransom of the prisoner. A like case is noted by the famous Petrinus Bellus in his book "De Re Militari," much read by leaders of repute.' (Note C. Appendix.)

'I can promise you,' I answered, 'that no such claim shall ever be made by my father upon you. See yonder, over the brow of the hill, how the sun shines upon the high cathedral tower, which points upwards with its great stone finger to the road that every man must travel.'

‘There is good store of silver and plate in these same churches,’ quoth my companion. ‘I remember that at Leipsic, when I was serving my first campaign, I got a candlestick, which I was forced to sell to a Jew broker for a fourth of its value; yet even at his price it sufficed to fill my haversack with broad pieces.’

It chanced that Saxon’s mare had gained a stride or two upon mine whilst he spoke, so that I was able to get a good view of him without turning my head. I had scarce had light during our ride to see how his harness sat upon him, but now I was amazed on looking at him to mark the change which it had wrought in the man. In his civil dress his lankiness and length of limb gave him an awkward appearance, but on horse-back, with his lean, gaunt face looking out from his steel cap, his breastplate and buff jacket filling out his figure, and his high boots of untanned leather reaching to the centre of his thighs, he looked the veteran man-at-arms which he purported to be. The ease with which he sat his horse, the high, bold expression upon his face, and the great length of his arms, all marked him as one who could give a good account of himself in a fray. In his words alone I could have placed little trust, but there was that in his bearing which assured even a novice like myself that he was indeed a trained man of war.

‘That is the Avon which glitters amongst the trees,’ I remarked. ‘We are about three miles from Salisbury town.’

‘It is a noble spire,’ said he, glancing at the great stone spire in front of us. ‘The men of old would seem to have spent all their days in piling stones upon stones. And yet we read of tough battles and shrewd blows struck, showing that they had some time for soldierly relaxation, and were not always at this mason work.’

‘The Church was rich in those days,’ I answered, shaking my bridle, for Covenant was beginning to show signs of laziness. ‘But here comes one who might perhaps tell us something of the war.’

A horseman who bore traces of having ridden long and hard was rapidly approaching us. Both rider and steed were grey with dust and splashed with mire, yet he galloped with loosened rein and bent body, as one to whom every extra stride is of value.

‘What ho, friend!’ cried Saxon, reining his mare across the road so as to bar the man’s passage. ‘What news from the West?’

‘I must not tarry,’ the messenger gasped, slackening his speed for an instant. ‘I bear papers of import from Gregory Alford, Mayor of Lyme, to Ins Majesty’s Council. The rebels make great head, and gather together like bees in the swarming time. There are some thousands in arms already, and all Devonshire is on the move. The rebel horse under Lord Grey hath been beaten back from Bridport by the red militia of Dorset, but every prickeared Whig from the Channel to the Severn is making his way to Monmouth.’ With this brief summary of the news he pushed his way past us and clattered on in a cloud of dust upon his mission.

‘The broth is fairly on the fire, then,’ quoth Decimus Saxon, as we rode onwards. ‘Now that skins have been slit the rebels may draw their swords and fling away their scabbards, for it’s either victory for them or their quarters will be dangling in every market town of the county. Heh, lad? we throw a main for a brave stake.’

‘Marked ye that Lord Grey had met with a check,’ said I.

‘Pshaw! it is of no import. A cavalry skirmish at the most, for it is impossible that Monmouth could have brought his main forces to Bridport; nor would he if he could, for it is out of his track. It was one of those three-shots-and-a-gallop affrays, where each side runs away and each claims the victory. But here we are in the streets of Salisbury. Now leave the talking to me, or your wrong-headed truthfulness may lay us by the heels before our time.’

Passing down the broad High Street we dismounted in front of the Blue Boar inn, and handed our tired horses over to the ostler, to whom Saxon, in a loud voice, and with many rough military oaths, gave strict injunctions as to their treatment. He then clanked into the inn parlour, and throwing

himself into one chair with his feet upon another, he summoned the landlord up before him, and explained our needs in a tone and manner which should give him a due sense of our quality.

'Of your best, and at once,' quoth he. 'Have your largest double-couched chamber ready with your softest lavender-scented sheets, for we have had a weary ride and must rest. And hark ye, landlord, no palming off your stale, musty goods as fresh, or of your washy French wines for the true Hainault vintage. I would have you to understand that my friend here and I are men who meet with some consideration in the world, though we care not to speak our names to every underling. Deserve well of us, therefore, or it may be the worse for you.'

This speech, combined with my companion's haughty manner and fierce face, had such an effect upon the landlord that he straightway sent us in the breakfast which had been prepared for three officers of the Blues, who were waiting for it in the next apartment. This kept them fasting for another half-hour, and we could hear their oaths and complaints through the partition while we were devouring their capon and venison pie. Having eaten a hearty meal and washed it down with a bottle of Burgundy we sought our room, and throwing our tired limbs upon the bed, were soon in a deep slumber.

Chapter IX. Of a Passage of Arms at the Blue Boar

I had slept several hours when I was suddenly aroused by a prodigious crash, followed by the clash of arms and shrill cries from the lower floor. Springing to my feet I found that the bed upon which my comrade had lain was vacant, and that the door of the apartment was opened. As the uproar still continued, and as I seemed to discern his voice in the midst of it, I caught up my sword, and without waiting to put on either head-piece, steel-breast, or arm-plates, I hurried to the scene of the commotion.

The hall and passage were filled with silly maids and staring drawers, attracted, like myself, by the uproar. Through these I pushed my way into the apartment where we had breakfasted in the morning, which was a scene of the wildest disorder. The round table in the centre had been tilted over upon its side, and three broken bottles of wine, with apples, pears, nuts, and the fragments of the dishes containing them, were littered over the floor. A couple of packs of cards and a dice-box lay amongst the scattered feast. Close by the door stood Decimus Saxon, with his drawn rapier in his hand and a second one beneath his feet, while facing him there was a young officer in a blue uniform, whose face was reddened with shame and anger, and who looked wildly about the room as though in search of some weapon to replace that of which he had been deprived. He might have served Cibber or Gibbons as a model for a statue of impotent rage. Two other officers dressed in the same blue uniform stood by their comrade, and as I observed that they had laid their hands upon the hilts of their swords, I took my place by Saxon's side, and stood ready to strike in should the occasion arise.

'What would the maitre d'armes say – the maitre d'escrime?' cried my companion. 'Methinks he should lose his place for not teaching you to make a better show. Out on him! Is this the way that he teaches the officers of his Majesty's guard to use their weapons?'

'This raillery, sir,' said the elder of the three, a squat, brown, heavy-faced man, 'is not undeserved, and yet might perchance be dispensed with. I am free to say that our friend attacked you somewhat hastily, and that a little more deference should have been shown by so young a soldier to a cavalier of your experience.'

The other officer, who was a fine-looking, noble-featured man, expressed himself in much the same manner. 'If this apology will serve,' said he, 'I am prepared to join in it. If, however, more is required, I shall be happy to take the quarrel upon myself.'

'Nay, nay, take your bradawl!' Saxon answered good-humouredly, kicking the sword towards his youthful opponent. 'But, mark you! when you would lunge, direct your point upwards rather than down, for otherwise you must throw your wrist open to your antagonist, who can scarce fail to disarm you. In quarte, tierce, or saccoon the same holds good.'

The youth sheathed his sword, but was so overcome by his own easy defeat and the contemptuous way in which his opponent had dismissed him, that he turned and hurried out of the room. Meanwhile Decimus Saxon and the two officers set to work getting the table upon its legs and restoring the room to some sort of order, in which I did what I could to assist them.

'I held three queens for the first time to-day,' grumbled the soldier of fortune. 'I was about to declare them when this young bantam flew at my throat. He hath likewise been the cause of our losing three flasks of most excellent muscadine. When he hath drunk as much bad wine as I have been forced to do, he will not be so hasty in wasting the good.'

'He is a hot-headed youngster,' the older officer replied, 'and a little solitary reflection added to the lesson which you have taught him may bring him profit. As for the muscadine, that loss will soon be repaired, the more gladly as your friend here will help us to drink it.'

'I was roused by the crash of weapons,' said I, 'and I scarce know now what has occurred.'

'Why, a mere tavern brawl, which your friend's skill and judgment prevented from becoming serious. I prythee take the rush-bottomed chair, and do you, Jack, order the wine. If our comrade

hath spilled the last it is for us to furnish this, and the best the cellars contain. We have been having a hand at basset, which Mr. Saxon here playeth as skilfully as he wields the small-sword. It chanced that the luck ran against young Horsford, which doubtless made him prone to be quick in taking offence. Your friend in conversation, when discoursing of his experiences in foreign countries, remarked that the French household troops were to his mind brought to a higher state of discipline than any of our own regiments, on which Horsford fired up, and after a hot word or two they found themselves, as you have seen, at drawn bilbo. The boy hath seen no service, and is therefore over-eager to give proof of his valour.'

'Wherein,' said the tall officer, 'he showed a want of thought towards me, for had the words been offensive it was for me, who am a senior captain and brevet-major, to take it up, and not for a slip of a cornet, who scarce knows enough to put his troop through the exercise.'

'You say right, Ogilvy,' said the other, resuming his seat by the table and wiping the cards which had been splashed by the wine.' Had the comparison been made by an officer of Louis's guard for the purpose of contumely and braggadocio, it would then indeed have become us to venture a passado. But when spoken by an Englishman of ripe experience it becomes a matter of instructive criticism, which should profit rather than annoy.'

'True, Ambrose,' the other answered. 'Without such criticism a force would become stagnant, and could never hope to keep level with those continental armies, which are ever striving amongst themselves for increased efficacy.'

So pleased was I at these sensible remarks on the part of the strangers, that I was right glad to have the opportunity of making their closer acquaintance over a flask of excellent wine. My father's prejudices had led me to believe that a King's officer was ever a compound of the coxcomb and the bully, but I found on testing it that this idea, like most others which a man takes upon trust, had very little foundation upon truth. As a matter of fact, had they been dressed in less warlike garb and deprived of their swords and jack-boots, they would have passed as particularly mild-mannered men, for their conversation ran in the learned channels, and they discussed Boyle's researches in chemistry and the ponderation of air with much gravity and show of knowledge. At the same time, their brisk bearing and manly carriage showed that in cultivating the scholar they hail not sacrificed the soldier.

'May I ask, sir,' said one of them, addressing Saxon, 'whether in your wide experiences you have ever met with any of those sages and philosophers who have conferred such honour and fame upon France and Germany?'

My companion looked ill at ease, as one who feels that he has been taken off his ground. 'There was indeed one such at Nurnberg,' he answered, 'one Gervinus or Gervanus, who, the folk said, could turn an ingot of iron into an ingot of gold as easily as I turn this tobacco into ashes. Old Pappenheimer shut him up with a ton of metal, and threatened to put the thumbikins upon him unless he changed it into gold pieces. I can vouch for it that there was not a yellow boy there, for I was captain of the guard and searched the whole dungeon through. To my sorrow I say it, for I had myself added a small iron brazier to the heap, thinking that if there should be any such change it would be as well that I should have some small share in the experiment.'

'Alchemy, transmutation of metals, and the like have been set aside by true science,' remarked the taller officer. 'Even old Sir Thomas Browne of Norwich, who is ever ready to plead the cause of the ancients, can find nothing to say in favour of it. From Trismegistus downwards through Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, Raymond Lullius, Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, and the rest, there is not one who has left more than a cloud of words behind him.'

'Nor did the rogue I mention,' said Saxon. 'There was another, Van Helstatt, who was a man of learning, and cast horoscopes in consideration of some small fee or honorarium. I have never met so wise a man, for he would talk of the planets and constellations as though he kept them all in his own backyard. He made no more of a comet than if it were a mouldy china orange, and he explained

their nature to us, saying that they were but common stars which had had a hole knocked in them, so that their insides or viscera protruded. He was indeed a philosopher!'

'And did you ever put his skill to the test?' asked one of the officers, with a smile.

'Not I, forsooth, for I have ever kept myself clear of black magic or diablerie of the sort. My comrade Pierce Scotton, who was an Oberst in the Imperial cavalry brigade, did pay him a rose noble to have his future expounded. If I remember aright, the stars said that he was over-fond of wine and women – he had a wicked eye and a nose like a carbuncle. 'They foretold also that he would attain a marshal's baton and die at a ripe age, which might well have come true had he not been unhorsed a month later at Ober-Graustock, and slain by the hoofs of his own troop. Neither the planets nor even the experienced farrier of the regiment could have told that the brute would have foundered so completely.'

The officers laughed heartily at my companion's views, and rose from their chairs, for the bottle was empty and the evening beginning to draw in. 'We have work to do here,' said the one addressed as Ogilvy. 'Besides, we must find this foolish boy of ours, and tell him that it is no disgrace to be disarmed by so expert a swordsman. We have to prepare the quarters for the regiment, who will be up to join Churchill's forces not later than to-night. Ye are yourselves bound for the West, I understand?'

'We belong to the Duke of Beaufort's household,' said Saxon.

'Indeed! I thought ye might belong to Portman's yellow regiment of militia. I trust that the Duke will muster every man he can, and make play until the royal forces come up.'

'How many will Churchill bring?' asked my companion carelessly.

'Eight hundred horse at the most, but my Lord Feversham will follow after with close on four thousand foot.'

'We may meet on the field of battle, if not before,' said I, and we bade our friendly enemies a very cordial adieu.

'A skilful equivoque that last of yours, Master Micah,' quoth Decimus Saxon, 'though smacking of double dealing in a truth-lover like yourself. If we meet them in battle I trust that it may be with chevaux-de-frise of pikes and morgenstierns before us, and a litter of caltrops in front of them, for Monmouth has no cavalry that could stand for a moment against the Royal Guards.'

'How came you to make their acquaintance?' I asked.

'I slept a few hours, but I have learned in camps to do with little rest. Finding you in sound slumber, and hearing the rattle of the dice-box below, I came softly down and found means to join their party – whereby I am a richer man by fifteen guineas, and might have had more had that young fool not lugged out at me, or had the talk not turned afterwards upon such unseemly subjects as the laws of chemistry and the like. Prythee, what have the Horse Guards Blue to do with the laws of chemistry? Wessenburg of the Pandours would, even at his own mess table, suffer much free talk – more perhaps than fits in with the dignity of a leader. Had his officers ventured upon such matter as this, however, there would have been a drum-head court-martial, or a cashiering at the least.'

Without stopping to dispute either Master Saxon's judgment or that of Wessenburg of the Pandours, I proposed that we should order an evening meal, and should employ the remaining hour or two of daylight in looking over the city. The principal sight is of course the noble cathedral, which is built in such exact proportion that one would fail to understand its great size did one not actually enter it and pace round the long dim aisles. So solemn were its sweeping arches and the long shafts of coloured light which shone through the stained-glass windows, throwing strange shadows amongst the pillars, that even my companion, albeit not readily impressed, was silent and subdued. It was a great prayer in stone.

On our way back to the inn we passed the town lock-up, with a railed space in front of it, in which three great black-muzzled bloodhounds were stalking about, with fierce crimsoned eyes and red tongues lolling out of their mouths. They were used, a bystander told us, for the hunting down of criminals upon Salisbury Plain, which had been a refuge for rogues and thieves, until this means

had been adopted for following them to their hiding-places. It was well-nigh dark before we returned to the hostel, and entirely so by the time that we had eaten our suppers, paid our reckoning, and got ready for the road.

Before we set off I bethought me of the paper which my mother had slipped into my hand on parting, and drawing it from my pouch I read it by the rushlight in our chamber. It still bore the splotches of the tears which she had dropped on it, poor soul, and ran in this wise: —

'Instructions from Mistress Mary Clarke to her son Micah, on the twelfth day of June in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and eighty-five.

'On occasion of his going forth, like David of old, to do battle with the Goliath of Papistry, which hath overshadowed and thrown into disrepute that true and reverent regard for ritual which should exist in the real Church of England, as ordained by law.

'Let these points be observed by him, namely, to wit:

'1. Change your hosen when the occasion serves. You have two pairs in your saddle-bag, and can buy more, for the wool work is good in the West.

'2. A hare's foot suspended round the neck driveth away colic.

'3. Say the Lord's Prayer night and morning. Also read the scriptures, especially Job, the Psalms, and the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

'4. Daffy's elixir possesses extraordinary powers in purifying the blood and working off all phlegms, humours, vapours, or rheums. The dose is five drops. A small phial of it will be found in the barrel of your left pistol, with wadding around it lest it come to harm.

'5. Ten golden pieces are sewn into the hem of your under doublet. Touch them not, save as a last resource.

'6. Fight stoutly for the Lord, and yet I pray you, Micah, be not too forward in battle, but let others do their turn also.

Press not into the heart of the fray, and yet flinch not from the standard of the Protestant faith.

'And oh, Micah, my own bright boy, come back safe to your mother, or my very heart will break!

'And the deponent will ever pray.'

The sudden gush of tenderness in the last few lines made the tears spring to my eyes, and yet I could scarce forbear from smiling at the whole composition, for my dear mother had little time to cultivate the graces of style, and it was evidently her thought that in order to make her instructions binding it was needful to express them in some sort of legal form. I had little time to think over her advice, however, for I had scarce finished reading it before the voice of Decimus Saxon, and the clink of the horses' hoofs upon the cobble-stones of the yard, informed me that all was ready for our departure.

Chapter X. Of our Perilous Adventure on the Plain

We were not half a mile from the town before the roll of kettledrums and the blare of bugles swelling up musically through the darkness announced the arrival of the regiment of horse which our friends at the inn had been expecting.

'It is as well, perhaps,' said Saxon, 'that we gave them the slip, for that young springald might have smelled a rat and played us some ill-turn. Have you chanced to see my silken kerchief?'

'Not I,' I answered.

'Nay, then, it must have fallen from my bosom during our ruffle. I can ill afford to leave it, for I travel light in such matters. Eight hundred men, quoth the major, and three thousand to follow. Should I meet this same Oglethorpe or Ogilvy when the little business is over, I shall read him a lesson on thinking less of chemistry and more of the need of preserving military precautions. It is well always to be courteous to strangers and to give them information, but it is well also that the information should be false.'

'As his may have been,' I suggested.

'Nay, nay, the words came too glibly from his tongue. So ho, Chloe, so ho! She is full of oats and would fain gallop, but it is so plaguy dark that we can scarce see where we are going.'

We had been trotting down the broad high-road shimmering vaguely white in the gloom, with the shadowy trees dancing past us on either side, scarce outlined against the dark background of cloud. We were now coming upon the eastern edge of the great plain, which extends forty miles one way and twenty the other, over the greater part of Wiltshire and past the boundaries of Somersetshire. The main road to the West skirts this wilderness, but we had agreed to follow a less important track, which would lead us to our goal, though in a more tedious manner. Its insignificance would, we hoped, prevent it from being guarded by the King's horse. We had come to the point where this byroad branches off from the main highway when we heard the clatter of horses' hoofs behind us.

'Here comes some one who is not afraid to gallop,' I remarked.

'Halt here in the shadow!' cried Saxon, in a short, quick whisper. 'Have your blade loose in the scabbard. He must have a set errand who rides so fast o' nights.'

Looking down the road we could make out through the darkness a shadowy blur which soon resolved itself into man and horse. The rider was well-nigh abreast of us before he was aware of our presence, when he pulled up his steed in a strange, awkward fashion, and faced round in our direction.

'Is Micah Clarke there?' he said, in a voice which was strangely familiar to my ears.

'I am Micah Clarke,' said I.

'And I am Reuben Lockarby,' cried our pursuer, in a mock heroic voice. 'Ah, Micah lad, I'd embrace you were it not that I should assuredly fall out of the saddle if I attempted it, and perchance drag you along. That sudden pull up well-nigh landed me on the roadway. I have been sliding off and clambering on ever since I bade goodbye to Havant. Sure, such a horse for slipping from under one was never bestridden by man.'

'Good Heavens, Reuben!' I cried in amazement, 'what brings you all this way from home?'

'The very same cause which brings you, Micah, and also Don Decimo Saxon, late of the Solent, whom methinks I see in the shadow behind you. How fares it, oh illustrious one?'

'It is you, then, young cock of the woods!' growled Saxon, in no very overjoyed voice.

'No less a person,' said Reuben. 'And now, my gay cavalieros, round with your horses and trot on your way, for there is no time to be lost. We ought all to be at Taunton to-morrow.'

'But, my dear Reuben,' said I, 'it cannot be that you are coming with us to join Monmouth. What would your father say? This is no holiday jaunt, but one that may have a sad and stern ending. At the best, victory can only come through much bloodshed and danger. At the worst, we are as like to wind up upon a scaffold as not.'

‘Forwards, lads, forwards!’ cried he, spurring on his horse, ‘it is all arranged and settled. I am about to offer my august person, together with a sword which I borrowed and a horse which I stole, to his most Protestant highness, James, Duke of Monmouth.’

‘But how comes it all?’ I asked, as we rode on together. ‘It warms my very heart to see you, but you were never concerned either in religion or in politics. Whence, then, this sudden resolution?’

‘Well, truth to tell,’ he replied, ‘I am neither a king’s man nor a duke’s man, nor would I give a button which sat upon the throne. I do not suppose that either one or the other would increase the custom of the Wheatsheaf, or want Reuben Lockarby for a councillor. I am a Micah Clarke man, though, from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet; and if he rides to the wars, may the plague strike me if I don’t stick to his elbow!’ He raised his hand excitedly as he spoke, and instantly losing his balance, he shot into a dense clump of bushes by the roadside whence his legs flapped helplessly in the darkness.

‘That makes the tenth,’ said he, scrambling out and clambering into his saddle once more. ‘My father used to tell me not to sit a horse too closely. “A gentle rise and fall,” said the old man. Egad, there is more fall than rise, and it is anything but gentle.’

‘Odd’s truth!’ exclaimed Saxon. ‘How in the name of all the saints in the calendar do you expect to keep your seat in the presence of an enemy if you lose it on a peaceful high-road?’

‘I can but try, my illustrious,’ he answered, rearranging his ruffled clothing. ‘Perchance the sudden and unexpected character of my movements may disconcert the said enemy.’

‘Well, well, there may be more truth in that than you are aware of,’ quoth Saxon, riding upon Lockarby’s bridle arm, so that there was scarce room for him to fall between us. ‘I had sooner fight a man like that young fool at the inn, who knew a little of the use of his weapon, than one like Micah here, or yourself, who know nothing. You can tell what the one is after, but the other will invent a system of his own which will serve his turn for the nonce. Ober-hauptmann Muller was reckoned to be the finest player at the small-sword in the Kaiser’s army, and could for a wager snick any button from an opponent’s vest without cutting the cloth. Yet was he slain in an encounter with Fahnfuhrer Zollner, who was a cornet in our own Pandour corps, and who knew as much of the rapier as you do of horsemanship. For the rapier, be it understood, is designed to thrust and not to cut, so that no man wielding it ever thinks of guarding a side-stroke. But Zollner, being a long-armed man, smote his antagonist across the face with his weapon as though it had been a cane, and then, ere he had time to recover himself, fairly pinked him. Doubtless if the matter were to do again, the Oberhauptmann would have got his thrust in sooner, but as it was, no explanation or excuse could get over the fact that the man was dead.’

‘If want of knowledge maketh a dangerous swordsman,’ quoth Reuben, ‘then am I even more deadly than the unpronounceable gentleman whom you have mentioned. To continue my story, however, which I broke off in order to step down from my horse, I found out early in the morning that ye were gone, and Zachary Palmer was able to tell me whither. I made up my mind, therefore, that I would out into the world also. To this end I borrowed a sword from Solomon Sprent, and my father having gone to Gosport, I helped myself to the best nag in his stables – for I have too much respect for the old man to allow one of his flesh and blood to go ill-provided to the wars. All day I have ridden, since early morning, being twice stopped on suspicion of being ill-affected, but having the good luck to get away each time. I knew that I was close at your heels, for I found them searching for you at the Salisbury Inn.’

Decimus whistled. ‘Searching for us?’ said he.

‘Yes. It seems that they had some notion that ye were not what ye professed to be, so the inn was surrounded as I passed, but none knew which road ye had taken.’

‘Said I not so?’ cried Saxon. ‘That young viper hath stirred up the regiment against us. We must push on, for they may send a party on our track.’

‘We are off the main road now, ‘I remarked; ‘even should they pursue us, they would be unlikely to follow this side track.’

‘Yet it would be wise to show them a clean pair of heels,’ said Saxon, spurring his mare into a gallop. Lockarby and I followed his example, and we all three rode swiftly along the rough moorland track.

We passed through scattered belts of pinewood, where the wild cat howled and the owl screeched, and across broad stretches of fenland and moor, where the silence was only broken by the booming cry of the bittern or the fluttering of wild duck far above our heads. The road was in parts overgrown with brambles, and was so deeply rutted and so studded with sharp and dangerous hollows, that our horses came more than once upon their knees. In one place the wooden bridge which led over a stream had broken down, and no attempt had been made to repair it, so that we were compelled to ride our horses girth deep through the torrent. At first some scattered lights had shown that we were in the neighbourhood of human habitations, but these became fewer as we advanced, until the last died away and we found ourselves upon the desolate moor which stretched away in unbroken solitude to the shadowy horizon. The moon had broken through the clouds and now shone hazily through wreaths of mist, throwing a dim light over the wild scene, and enabling us to keep to the track, which was not fenced in in any way and could scarce be distinguished from the plain around it.

We had slackened our pace under the impression that all fear of pursuit was at an end, and Reuben was amazing us by an account of the excitement which had been caused in Havant by our disappearance, when through the stillness of the night a dull, muffled rat-tat-tat struck upon my ear. At the same moment Saxon sprang from his horse and listened intently with sidelong head.

‘Boot and saddle!’ he cried, springing into his seat again. ‘They are after us as sure as fate. A dozen troopers by the sound. We must shake them off, or goodbye to Monmouth.’

‘Give them their heads,’ I answered, and striking spurs into our steeds, we thundered on through the darkness. Covenant and Chloe were as fresh as could be wished, and soon settled down into a long springy gallop. Our friend’s horse however, had been travelling all day, and its long-drawn, laboured breathing showed that it could not hold out for long. Through the clatter of our horses’ hoofs I could still from time to time hear the ominous murmur from behind us.

‘This will never do, Reuben,’ said I anxiously, as the weary creature stumbled, and the rider came perilously near to shooting over its head.

‘The old horse is nearly foundered,’ he answered ruefully. ‘We are off the road now, and the rough ground is too much for her.’

‘Yes, we are off the track,’ cried Saxon over his shoulder – for he led us by a few paces. ‘Bear in mind that the Bluecoats have been on the march all day, so that their horses may also be blown. How in Himmel came they to know which road we took?’

As if in answer to his ejaculation, there rose out of the still night behind us a single, clear, bell-like note, swelling and increasing in volume until it seemed to fill the whole air with its harmony.

‘A bloodhound!’ cried Saxon.

A second sharper, keener note, ending in an unmistakable howl, answered the first.

‘Another of them,’ said he. ‘They have loosed the brutes that we saw near the Cathedral. Gad! we little thought when we peered over the rails at them, a few hours ago, that they would so soon be on our own track. Keep a firm knee and a steady seat, for a slip now would be your last.’

‘Holy mother!’ cried Reuben, ‘I had steeled myself to die in battle – but to be dogsmeat! It is something outside the contract.’

‘They hold them in leash,’ said Saxon, between his teeth, ‘else they would outstrip the horses and be lost in the darkness.

Could we but come on running water we might put them off our track.’

'My horse cannot hold on at this pace for more than a very few minutes,' Reuben cried. 'If I break down, do ye go on, for ye must remember that they are upon your track and not mine. They have found cause for suspicion of the two strangers of the inn, but none of me.'

'Nay, Reuben, we shall stand or fall together,' said I sadly, for at every step his horse grew more and more feeble. 'In this darkness they will make little distinction between persons.'

'Keep a good heart,' shouted the old soldier, who was now leading us by twenty yards or more. 'We can hear them because the wind blows from that way, but it's odds whether they have heard us. Methinks they slacken in their pursuit.'

'The sound of their horses has indeed grown fainter,' said I joyfully.

'So faint that I can hear it no longer,' my companion cried.

We reined up our panting steeds and strained our ears, but not a sound could we hear save the gentle murmur of the breeze amongst the whin-bushes, and the melancholy cry of the night-jar. Behind us the broad rolling plain, half light and half shadow, stretched away to the dim horizon without sign of life or movement. 'We have either outstripped them completely, or else they have given up the chase,' said I. 'What ails the horses that they should tremble and snort?'

'My poor beast is nearly done for,' Reuben remarked, leaning forward and passing his hand down the creature's reeking neck.

'For all that we cannot rest,' said Saxon. 'We may not be out of danger yet. Another mile or two may shake us clear. But I like it not.'

'Like not what?'

'These horses and their terrors. The beasts can at times both see and hear more than we, as I could show by divers examples drawn from mine own experience on the Danube and in the Palatinate, were the time and place more fitting. Let us on, then, before we rest.'

The weary horses responded bravely to the call, and struggled onwards over the broken ground for a considerable time. At last we were thinking of pulling up in good earnest, and of congratulating ourselves upon having tired out our pursuers, when of a sudden the bell-like baying broke upon our ears far louder than it had been before – so loud, indeed, that it was evident that the dogs were close upon our heels.

'The accursed hounds!' cried Saxon, putting spurs to his horse and shooting ahead of us; 'I feared as much. They have freed them from the leash. There is no escape from the devils, but we can choose the spot where we shall make our stand.'

'Come on, Reuben,' I shouted. 'We have only to reckon with the dogs now. Their masters have let them loose, and turned back for Salisbury.'

'Pray heaven they break their necks before they get there!' he cried. 'They set dogs on us as though we were rats in a cock-pit. Yet they call England a Christian country! It's no use, Micah. Poor Dido can't stir another step.'

As he spoke, the sharp fierce bay of the hounds rose again, clear and stern on the night air, swelling up from a low hoarse growl to a high angry yelp. There seemed to be a ring of exultation in their wild cry, as though they knew that their quarry was almost run to earth.

'Not another step!' said Reuben Lockarby, pulling up and drawing his sword. 'If I must fight, I shall fight here.'

'There could be no better place,' I replied. Two great jagged rocks rose before us, jutting abruptly out of the ground, and leaving a space of twelve or fifteen feet between them. Through this gap we rode, and I shouted loudly for Saxon to join us. His horse, however, had been steadily gaining upon ours, and at the renewed alarm had darted off again, so that he was already some hundred yards from us. It was useless to summon him, even could he hear our voices, for the hounds would be upon us before he could return.

'Never heed him,' I said hurriedly. 'Do you rein your steed behind that rock, and I behind this. They will serve to break the force of the attack. Dismount not, but strike down, and strike hard.'

On either side in the shadow of the rock we waited in silence for our terrible pursuers. Looking back at it, my dear children, I cannot but think that it was a great trial on such young soldiers as Reuben and myself to be put, on the first occasion of drawing our swords, into such a position. For I have found, and others have confirmed my opinion, that of all dangers that a man is called upon to face, that arising from savage and determined animals is the most unnerving. For with men there is ever the chance that some trait of weakness or of want of courage may give you an advantage over them, but with fierce beasts there is no such hope. We knew that the creatures to whom we were opposed could never be turned from our throats while there was breath in their bodies. One feels in one's heart, too, that the combat is an unequal one, for your life is precious at least to your friends, while their lives, what are they? All this and a great deal more passed swiftly through our minds as we sat with drawn swords, soothing our trembling horses as best we might, and waiting for the coming of the hounds.

Nor had we long to wait. Another long, deep, thunderous bay sounded in our ears, followed by a profound silence, broken only by the quick shivering breathing of the horses. Then suddenly, and noiselessly, a great tawny brute, with its black muzzle to the earth, and its overhung cheeks napping on either side, sprang into the band of moonlight between the rocks, and on into the shadow beyond. It never paused or swerved for an instant, but pursued its course straight onwards without a glance to right or to left. Close behind it came a second, and behind that a third, all of enormous size, and looking even larger and more terrible than they were in the dim shifting light. Like the first, they took no notice of our presence, but bounded on along the trail left by Decimus Saxon.

The first and second I let pass, for I hardly realised that they so completely overlooked us. When the third, however, sprang out into the moonlight, I drew my right-hand pistol from its holster, and resting its long barrel across my left forearm, I fired at it as it passed. The bullet struck the mark, for the brute gave a fierce howl of rage and pain, but true to the scent it never turned or swerved. Lockarby fired also as it disappeared among the brushwood, but with no apparent effect. So swiftly and so noiselessly did the great hounds pass, that they might have been grim silent spirits of the night, the phantom dogs of Herne the hunter, but for that one fierce yelp which followed my shot.

'What brutes!' my companion ejaculated; 'what shall we do, Micah?'

'They have clearly been laid on Saxon's trail,' said I. 'We must follow them up, or they will be too many for him. Can you hear anything of our pursuers?'

'Nothing.'

'They have given up the chase, then, and let the dogs loose as a last resource. Doubtless the creatures are trained to return to the town. But we must push on, Reuben, if we are to help our companion.'

'One more spurt, then, little Dido,' cried Reuben; 'can you muster strength for one more? Nay, I have not the heart to put spurs to you. If you can do it, I know you will.'

The brave mare snorted, as though she understood her riders words, and stretched her weary limbs into a gallop. So stoutly did she answer the appeal that, though I pressed Covenant to his topmost speed, she was never more than a few strides behind him.

'He took this direction,' said I, peering anxiously out into the darkness. 'He can scarce have gone far, for he spoke of making a stand. Or, perhaps, finding that we are not with him, he may trust to the speed of his horse.'

'What chance hath a horse of outstripping these brutes?' Reuben answered. 'They must run him to earth, and he knows it. Hullo! what have we here?'

A dark dim form lay stretched in the moonlight in front of us. It was the dead body of a hound – the one evidently at which I had fired.

'There is one of them disposed of, 'I cried joyously; 'we have but two to settle with now.'

'As I spoke we heard the crack of two pistol-shots some little distance to the left. Heading our steeds in that direction, we pressed on at the top of our speed. Presently out of the darkness in front

of us there arose such a roaring and a yelping as sent the hearts into our mouths. It was not a single cry, such as the hounds had uttered when they were on the scent, but a continuous deep-mouthed uproar, so fierce and so prolonged, that we could not doubt that they had come to the end of their run.

'Pray God that they have not got him down!' cried Reuben, in a faltering voice.

The same thought had crossed my own mind, for I have heard a similar though lesser din come from a pack of otter hounds when they had overtaken their prey and were tearing it to pieces. Sick at heart, I drew my sword with the determination that, if we were too late to save our companion, we should at least revenge him upon the four-footed fiends. Bursting through a thick belt of scrub and tangled gorse bushes, we came upon a scene so unlike what we had expected that we pulled up our horses in astonishment.

A circular clearing lay in front of us, brightly illuminated by the silvery moonshine. In the centre of this rose a giant stone, one of those high dark columns which are found all over the plain, and especially in the parts round Stonehenge. It could not have been less than fifteen feet in height, and had doubtless been originally straight, but wind and weather, or the crumbling of the soil, had gradually suffered it to tilt over until it inclined at such an angle that an active man might clamber up to the summit. On the top of this ancient stone, cross-legged and motionless, like some strange carved idol of former days, sat Decimus Saxon, puffing sedately at the long pipe which was ever his comfort in moments of difficulty. Beneath him, at the base of the monolith, as our learned men call them, the two great bloodhounds were rearing and springing, clambering over each other's backs in their frenzied and futile eagerness to reach the impassive figure perched above them, while they gave vent to their rage and disappointment in the hideous uproar which had suggested such terrible thoughts to our mind.

We had little time, however, to gaze at this strange scene, for upon our appearance the hounds abandoned their helpless attempts to reach Saxon, and flew, with a fierce snarl of satisfaction, at Reuben and myself. One great brute, with flaring eyes and yawning mouth, his white fangs glistening in the moonlight, sprang at my horse's neck; but I met him fair with a single sweeping cut, which shore away his muzzle, and left him wallowing and writhing in a pool of blood. Reuben, meanwhile, had spurred his horse forward to meet his assailant; but the poor tired steed flinched at the sight of the fierce hound, and pulled up suddenly, with the result that her rider rolled headlong into the very jaws of the animal. It might have gone ill with Reuben had he been left to his own resources. At the most he could only have kept the cruel teeth from his throat for a very few moments; but seeing the mischance, I drew my remaining pistol, and springing from my horse, discharged it full into the creature's flank while it struggled with my friend. With a last yell of rage and pain it brought its fierce jaws together in one wild impotent snap, and then sank slowly over upon its side, while Reuben crawled from beneath it, scared and bruised, but none the worse otherwise for his perilous adventure.

'I owe you one for that, Micah,' he said gratefully. 'I may live to do as much for you.'

'And I owe ye both one,' said Saxon, who had scrambled down from his place of refuge. 'I pay my debts, too, whether for good or evil. I might have stayed up there until I had eaten my jack-boots, for all the chance I had of ever getting down again. Sancta Maria! but that was a shrewd blow of yours, Clarke! The brute's head flew in halves like a rotten pumpkin. No wonder that they stuck to my track, for I have left both my spare girth and my kerchief behind me, which would serve to put them on Chloe's scent as well as mine own.'

'And where is Chloe?' I asked, wiping my sword.

'Chloe had to look out for herself. I found the brutes gaining on me, you see, and I let drive at them with my barkers; but with a horse flying at twenty mile an hour, what chance is there for a single slug finding its way home?' Things looked black then, for I had no time to reload, and the rapier, though the king of weapons in the duello, is scarce strong enough to rely upon on an occasion like this. As luck would have it, just as I was fairly puzzled, what should I come across but this handy stone, which the good priests of old did erect, as far as I can see, for no other purpose than to provide

worthy cavalieros with an escape from such ignoble and scurvy enemies. I had no time to spare in clambering up it, for I had to tear my heel out of the mouth of the foremost of them, and might have been dragged down by it had he not found my spur too tough a morsel for his chewing. But surely one of my bullets must have readied its mark.' Lighting the touch-paper in his tobacco-box, he passed it over the body of the hound which had attacked me, and then of the other.

'Why, this one is riddled like a sieve,' he cried. 'What do you load your petronels with, good Master Clarke?'

'With two leaden slugs.'

'Yet two leaden slugs have made a score of holes at the least! And of all things in this world, here is the neck of a bottle stuck in the brute's hide!'

'Good heavens!' I exclaimed. 'I remember. My dear mother packed a bottle of Daffy's elixir in the barrel of my pistol.'

'And you have shot it into the bloodhound!' roared Reuben. 'Ho! ho! When they hear that tale at the tap of the Wheatsheaf, there will be some throats dry with laughter. Saved my life by shooting a dog with a bottle of Daffy's elixir!'

'And a bullet as well, Reuben, though I dare warrant the gossips will soon contrive to leave that detail out. It is a mercy the pistol did not burst. But what do you propose to do now, Master Saxon?'

'Why, to recover my mare if it can anywise be done,' said the adventurer.' Though on this vast moor, in the dark, she will be as difficult to find as a Scotsman's breeches or a flavourless line in "Hudibras."'

'And Reuben Lockarby's steed can go no further,' I remarked. 'But do mine eyes deceive me, or is there a glimmer of light over yonder?'

'A Will-o'-the-wisp,' said Saxon.

"An *ignis fatuus* that bewitches,
And leads men into pools and ditches."

Yet I confess that it burns steady and clear, as though it came from lamp, candle, rushlight, lanthorn, or other human agency.'

'Where there is light there is life,' cried Reuben. 'Let us make for it, and see what chance of shelter we may find there.'

'It cannot come from our dragoon friends,' remarked Decimus. 'A murrain on them! how came they to guess our true character; or was it on the score of some insult to the regiment that that young Fahnfuhrer has set them on our track? If I have him at my sword's point again, he shall not come off so free. Well, do ye lead your horses, and we shall explore this light, since no better course is open to us.'

Picking our way across the moor, we directed our course for the bright point which twinkled in the distance; and as we advanced we hazarded a thousand conjectures as to whence it could come. If it were a human dwelling, what sort of being could it be who, not content with living in the heart of this wilderness, had chosen a spot so far removed from the ordinary tracks which crossed it? The roadway was miles behind us, and it was probable that no one save those driven by such a necessity as that which had overtaken us would ever find themselves in that desolate region. No hermit could have desired an abode more completely isolated from all communion with his kind.

As we approached we saw that the light did indeed come from a small cottage, which was built in a hollow, so as to be invisible from any quarter save that from which we approached it. In front of this humble dwelling a small patch of ground had been cleared of shrub, and in the centre of this little piece of sward our missing steed stood grazing at her leisure upon the scanty herbage. The same light which had attracted us had doubtless caught her eye, and drawn her towards it by hopes of oats and of water. With a grunt of satisfaction Saxon resumed possession of his lost property, and leading her by the bridle, approached the door of the solitary cottage.

Chapter XI. Of the Lonely Man and the Gold Chest

The strong yellow glare which had attracted us across the moor found its way out through a single narrow slit alongside the door which served the purpose of a rude window. As we advanced towards it the light changed suddenly to red, and that again to green, throwing a ghastly pallor over our faces, and especially heightening the cadaverous effect of Saxon's austere features. At the same time we became aware of a most subtle and noxious odour which poisoned the air all round the cottage. This combination of portents in so lonely a spot worked upon the old man-at-arms' superstitious feelings to such an extent that he paused and looked back at us inquiringly. Both Reuben and I were determined, however, to carry the adventure through, so he contented himself with falling a little behind us, and pattering to himself some exorcism appropriate to the occasion. Walking up to the door, I rapped upon it with the hilt of my sword and announced that we were weary travellers who were seeking a night's shelter.

The first result of my appeal was a sound as of some one bustling rapidly about, with the clinking of metal and noise of the turning of locks. This died away into a hush, and I was about to knock once more when a crackling voice greeted us from the other side of the door.

'There is little shelter here, gentlemen, and less provisions,' it said. 'It is but six miles to Amesbury, where at the Cecil Arms ye shall find, I doubt not, all that is needful for man and for beast.'

'Nay, nay, mine invisible friend,' quoth Saxon, who was much reassured by the sound of a human voice, 'this is surely but a scurvy reception. One of our horses is completely foundered, and none of them are in very good plight, so that we could no more make for the Cecil Arms at Amesbury than for the Gruner Mann at Lubeck. I prythee, therefore, that you will allow us to pass the remainder of the night under your roof.'

At this appeal there was much creaking of locks and rasping of bolts, which ended in the door swinging slowly open, and disclosing the person who had addressed us.

By the strong light which shone out from behind him we could see that he was a man of venerable aspect, with snow-white hair and a countenance which bespoke a thoughtful and yet fiery nature. The high pensive brow and flowing beard smacked of the philosopher, but the keen sparkling eye, the curved aquiline nose, and the lithe upright figure which the weight of years had been unable to bend, were all suggestive of the soldier. His lofty bearing, and his rich though severe costume of black velvet, were at strange variance with the humble nature of the abode which he had chosen for his dwelling-place.

'Ho!' said he, looking keenly at us. 'Two of ye unused to war, and the other an old soldier. Ye have been pursued, I see!'

'How did you know that, then?' asked Decimus Saxon.

'Ah, my friend, I too have served in my time. My eyes are not so old but that they can tell when horses have been spurred to the utmost, nor is it difficult to see that this young giant's sword hath been employed in something less innocent than toasting bacon. Your story, however, can keep. Every true soldier thinks first of his horse, so I pray that you will tether yours without, since I have neither ostler nor serving man to whom I may entrust them.'

The strange dwelling into which we presently entered had been prolonged into the side of the little hill against which it had been built, so as to form a very long narrow hall. The ends of this great room, as we entered, were wrapped in shadow, but in the centre was a bright glare from a brazier full of coals, over which a brass pipkin was suspended. Beside the fire a long wooden table was plentifully covered with curved glass flasks, basins, tubings, and other instruments of which I knew neither the name nor the purpose. A long row of bottles containing various coloured liquids and powders were arranged along a shelf, whilst above it another shelf bore a goodly array of brown volumes. For the rest there was a second rough-hewn table, a pair of cupboards, three or four wooden settles, and

several large screens pinned to the walls and covered all over with figures and symbols, of which I could make nothing. The vile smell which had greeted us outside was very much worse within the chamber, and arose apparently from the fumes of the boiling, bubbling contents of the brazen pot.

'Ye behold in me,' said our host, bowing courteously to us, 'the last of an ancient family. I am Sir Jacob Clancing of Snellaby Hall.'

'Smellaby it should be, methinks,' whispered Reuben, in a voice which fortunately did not reach the ears of the old knight.

'I pray that ye be seated,' he continued, 'and that ye lay aside your plates and headpieces, and remove your boots. Consider this to be your inn, and behave as freely. Ye will hold me excused if for a moment I turn my attention from you to this operation on which I am engaged, which will not brook delay.'

Saxon began forthwith to undo his buckles and to pull off his harness, while Reuben, throwing himself into a chair, appeared to be too weary to do more than unfasten his sword-belt. For my own part, I was glad to throw off my gear, but I kept my attention all the while upon the movements of our host, whose graceful manners and learned appearance had aroused my curiosity and admiration.

He approached the evil-smelling pot, and stirred it up with a face which indicated so much anxiety that it was clear that he had pushed his courtesy to us so far as to risk the ruin of some important experiment. Dipping his ladle into the compound, he scooped some up, and then poured it slowly back into the vessel, showing a yellow turbid fluid. The appearance of it evidently reassured him, for the look of anxiety cleared away from his features, and he uttered an exclamation of relief. Taking a handful of a whitish powder from a trencher at his side he threw it into the pipkin, the contents of which began immediately to seethe and froth over into the fire, causing the flames to assume the strange greenish hue which we had observed before entering. This treatment had the effect of clearing the fluid, for the chemist was enabled to pour off into a bottle a quantity of perfectly watery transparent liquid, while a brownish sediment remained in the vessel, and was emptied out upon a sheet of paper. This done, Sir Jacob Clancing pushed aside all his bottles, and turned towards us with a smiling face and a lighter air.

'We shall see what my poor larder can furnish forth,' said he. 'Meanwhile, this odour may be offensive to your untrained nostrils, so we shall away with it. He threw a few grains of some balsamic resin into the brazier, which at once filled the chamber with a most agreeable perfume. He then laid a white cloth upon the table, and taking from a cupboard a dish of cold trout and a large meat pasty, he placed them upon it, and invited us to draw up our settles and set to work.

'I would that I had more toothsome fare to offer ye,' said he. 'Were we at Snellaby Hall, ye should not be put off in this scurvy fashion, I promise ye. This may serve, however, for hungry men, and I can still lay my hands upon a brace of bottles of the old Alicant.' So saying, he brought a pair of flasks out from a recess, and having seen us served and our glasses filled, he seated himself in a high-backed oaken chair and presided with old-fashioned courtesy over our feast. As we supped, I explained to him what our errand was, and narrated the adventures of the night, without making mention of our destination.

'You are bound for Monmouth's camp,' he said quietly, when I had finished, looking me full in the face with his keen dark eyes. 'I know it, but ye need not fear lest I betray you, even were it in my power. What chance, think ye, hath the Duke against the King's forces?'

'As much chance as a farmyard fowl against a spurred gamecock, did he rely only on those whom he hath with him,' Saxon answered. 'He hath reason to think, however, that all England is like a powder magazine, and he hopes to be the spark to set it alight.'

The old man shook his head sadly. 'The King hath great resources,' he remarked. 'Where is Monmouth to get his trained soldiers?'

'There is the militia,' I suggested.

‘And there are many of the old parliamentary breed, who are not too far gone to strike a blow for their belief,’ said Saxon. ‘Do you but get half-a-dozen broad-brimmed, snuffle-nosed preachers into a camp, and the whole Presbytery tribe will swarm round them like flies on a honey-pot. No recruiting sergeants will ever raise such an army as did Noll’s preachers in the eastern counties, where the promise of a seat by the throne was thought of more value than a ten-pound bounty. I would I could pay mine own debts with these same promises.’

‘I should judge from your speech, sir,’ our host observed, ‘that you are not one of the sectaries. How comes it, then, that you are throwing the weight of your sword and your experience into the weaker scale?’

‘For the very reason that it is the weaker scale,’ said the soldier of fortune. ‘I should gladly have gone with my brother to the Guinea coast and had no say in the matter one way or the other, beyond delivering letters and such trifles. Since I must be doing something, I choose to fight for Protestantism and Monmouth. It is nothing to me whether James Stuart or James Walters sits upon the throne, but the court and army of the King are already made up. Now, since Monmouth hath both courtiers and soldiers to find, it may well happen that he may be glad of my services and reward them with honourable preferment.’

‘Your logic is sound,’ said our host, ‘save only that you have omitted the very great chance which you will incur of losing your head if the Duke’s party are borne down by the odds against them.’

‘A man cannot throw a main without putting a stake on the board,’ said Saxon.

‘And you, young sir,’ the old man asked, ‘what has caused you to take a hand in so dangerous a game?’

‘I come of a Roundhead stock,’ I answered, ‘and my folk have always fought for the liberty of the people and the humbling of tyranny. I come in the place of my father.’

‘And you, sir?’ our questioner continued, looking at Reuben.

‘I have come to see something of the world, and to be with my friend and companion here,’ he replied.

‘And I have stronger reasons than any of ye,’ Sir Jacob cried, ‘for appearing in arms against any man who bears the name of Stuart. Had I not a mission here which cannot be neglected, I might myself be tempted to hie westward with ye, and put these grey hairs of mine once more into the rough clasp of a steel headpiece. For where now is the noble castle of Snellaby, and where those glades and woods amidst which the Clancings have grown up, and lived and died, ere ever Norman William set his foot on English soil? A man of trade – a man who, by the sweat of his half-starved workers, had laid by ill-gotten wealth, is now the owner of all that fair property. Should I, the last of the Clancings, show my face upon it, I might be handed over to the village beadle as a trespasser, or scourged off it perhaps by the bowstrings of insolent huntsmen.’

‘And how comes so sudden a reverse of fortune?’ I asked.

‘Fill up your glasses!’ cried the old man, suiting the action to the word. ‘Here’s a toast for you! Perdition to all faithless princes! How came it about, ye ask? Why, when the troubles came upon the first Charles, I stood by him as though he had been mine own brother. At Edgehill, at Naseby, in twenty skirmishes and battles, I fought stoutly in his cause, maintaining a troop of horse at my own expense, formed from among my own gardeners, grooms, and attendants. Then the military chest ran low, and money must be had to carry on the contest. My silver chargers and candlesticks were thrown into the melting-pot, as were those of many another cavalier. They went in metal and they came out as troopers and pikemen. So we tided over a few months until again the purse was empty, and again we filled it amongst us. This time it was the home farm and the oak trees that went. Then came Marston Moor, and every penny and man was needed to repair that great disaster. I flinched not, but gave everything. This boiler of soap, a prudent, fat-cheeked man, had kept himself free from civil broils, and had long had a covetous eye upon the castle. It was his ambition, poor worm, to be a gentleman, as though a gabled roof and a crumbling house could ever make him that. I let him have

his way, however, and threw the sum received, every guinea of it, into the King's coffers. And so I held out until the final ruin of Worcester, when I covered the retreat of the young prince, and may indeed say that save in the Isle of Man I was the last Royalist who upheld the authority of the crown. The Commonwealth had set a price upon my head as a dangerous malignant, so I was forced to take my passage in a Harwich ketch, and arrived in the Lowlands with nothing save my sword and a few broad pieces in my pocket.'

'A cavalier might do well even then,' remarked Saxon. 'There are ever wars in Germany where a man is worth his hire. When the North Germans are not in arms against the Swedes or French, the South Germans are sure to be having a turn with the janissaries.'

'I did indeed take arms for a time in the employ of the United Provinces, by which means I came face to face once more with mine old foes, the Roundheads. Oliver had lent Reynolds's brigade to the French, and right glad was Louis to have the service of such seasoned troops. 'Fore God, I stood on the counterscarp at Dunkirk, and I found myself, when I should have been helping the defence, actually cheering on the attack. My very heart rose when I saw the bull-dog fellows clambering up the breach with their pikes at the trail, and never quavering in their psalm-tune, though the bullets sung around them as thick as bees in the hiving time. And when they did come to close hugs with the Flemings, I tell you they set up such a rough cry of soldierly joy that my pride in them as Englishmen overtopped my hatred of them as foes. However, my soldiering was of no great duration, for peace was soon declared, and I then pursued the study of chemistry, for which I had a strong turn, first with Vorhaager of Leyden, and later with De Huy of Strasburg, though I fear that these weighty names are but sounds to your ears.'

'Truly,' said Saxon, 'there seemeth to be some fatal attraction in this same chemistry, for we met two officers of the Blue Guards in Salisbury, who, though they were stout soldierly men in other respects, had also a weakness in that direction.'

'Ha!' cried Sir Jacob, with interest. 'To what school did they belong?'

'Nay, I know nothing of the matter,' Saxon answered, 'save that they denied that Gervinus of Nurnberg, whom I guarded in prison, or any other man, could transmute metals.'

'For Gervinus I cannot answer,' said our host, 'but for the possibility of it I can pledge my knightly word. However, of that anon. The time came at last when the second Charles was invited back to his throne, and all of us, from Jeffrey Hudson, the court dwarf, up to my Lord Clarendon, were in high feather at the hope of regaining our own once more. For my own claim, I let it stand for some time, thinking that it would be a more graceful act for the King to help a poor cavalier who had ruined himself for the sake of his family without solicitation on his part. I waited and waited, but no word came, so at last I betook myself to the levee and was duly presented to him. "Ah," said he, greeting me with the cordiality which he could assume so well, "you are, if I mistake not, Sir Jasper Killigrew?" "Nay, your Majesty," I answered, "I am Sir Jacob Clancing, formerly of Snellaby Hall, in Staffordshire;" and with that I reminded him of Worcester fight and of many passages which had occurred to us in common. "Od's fish!" he cried, "how could I be so forgetful! And how are all at Snellaby?" I then explained to him that the Hall had passed out of my hands, and told him in a few words the state to which I had been reduced. His face clouded over and his manner chilled to me at once. "They are all on to me for money and for places," he said, "and truly the Commons are so niggardly to me that I can scarce be generous to others. However, Sir Jacob, we shall see what can be done for thee," and with that he dismissed me. That same night the secretary of my Lord Clarendon came to me, and announced with much form and show that, in consideration of my long devotion and the losses which I had sustained, the King was graciously pleased to make me a lottery cavalier.'

'And pray, sir, what is a lottery cavalier?' I asked.

'It is nothing else than a licensed keeper of a gambling-house. This was his reward to me. I was to be allowed to have a den in the piazza of Covent Garden, and there to decoy the young sparks of the town and fleece them at ombre. To restore my own fortunes I was to ruin others. My honour,

my family, my reputation, they were all to weigh for nothing so long as I had the means of bubbling a few fools out of their guineas.'

'I have heard that some of the lottery cavaliers did well,' remarked Saxon reflectively.

'Well or ill, it way no employment for me. I waited upon the King and implored that his bounty would take another form. His only reply was that for one so poor I was strangely fastidious. For weeks I hung about the court – I and other poor cavaliers like myself, watching the royal brothers squandering upon their gaming and their harlots sums which would have restored us to our patrimonies. I have seen Charles put upon one turn of a card as much as would have satisfied the most exacting of us. In the parks of St. James, or in the Gallery at Whitehall, I still endeavoured to keep myself before his eyes, in the hope that some provision would be made for me. At last I received a second message from him. It was that unless I could dress more in the mode he could dispense with my attendance. That was his message to the old broken soldier who had sacrificed health, wealth, position, everything in the service of his father and himself.'

'Shameful!' we cried, all three.

'Can you wonder, then, that I cursed the whole Stuart race, false-hearted, lecherous, and cruel? For the Hall, I could buy it back to-morrow if I chose, but why should I do so when I have no heir?'

'Ho, you have prospered then!' said Decimus Saxon, with one of his shrewd sidelong looks. 'Perhaps you have yourself found out how to convert pots and pans into gold in the way you have spoken of. But that cannot be, for I see iron and brass in this room which would hardly remain there could you convert it to gold.'

'Gold has its uses, and iron has its uses,' said Sir Jacob oracularly. 'The one can never supplant the other.'

'Yet these officers,' I remarked, 'did declare to us that it was but a superstition of the vulgar.'

'Then these officers did show that their knowledge was less than their prejudice. Alexander Setonius, a Scot, was first of the moderns to achieve it. In the month of March 1602 he did change a bar of lead into gold in the house of a certain Hansen, at Rotterdam, who hath testified to it. He then not only repeated the same process before three learned men sent by the Kaiser Rudolph, but he taught Johann Wolfgang Dienheim of Freibourg, and Gustenhofer of Strasburg, which latter taught it to my own illustrious master – '

'Who in turn taught it to you,' cried Saxon triumphantly. 'I have no great store of metal with me, good sir, but there are my head-piece, back and breast-plate, taslets and thigh-pieces, together with my sword, spurs, and the buckles of my harness. I pray you to use your most excellent and praiseworthy art upon these, and I will promise within a few days to bring round a mass of metal which shall be more worthy of your skill.'

'Nay, nay,' said the alchemist, smiling and shaking his head. 'It can indeed be done, but only slowly and in order, small pieces at a time, and with much expenditure of work and patience. For a man to enrich himself at it he must labour hard and long; yet in the end I will not deny that he may compass it. And now, since the flasks are empty and your young comrade is nodding in his chair, it will perhaps be as well for you to spend as much of the night as is left in repose.' He drew several blankets and rugs from a corner and scattered them over the floor. 'It is a soldier's couch,' he remarked; 'but ye may sleep on worse before ye put Monmouth on the English throne. For myself, it is my custom to sleep in an inside chamber, which is hollowed out of the hill.' With a few last words and precautions for our comfort he withdrew with the lamp, passing through a door which had escaped our notice at the further end of the apartment.

Reuben, having had no rest since he left Havant, had already dropped upon the rugs, and was fast asleep, with a saddle for a pillow. Saxon and I sat for a few minutes longer by the light of the burning brazier.

'One might do worse than take to this same chemical business,' my companion remarked, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. 'See you yon iron-bound chest in the corner?'

'What of it?'

'It is two thirds full of gold, which this worthy gentleman hath manufactured.'

'How know you that?' I asked incredulously.

'When you did strike the door panel with the hilt of your sword, as though you would drive it in, you may have heard some scuttling about, and the turning of a lock. Well, thanks to my inches, I was able to look through yon slit in the wall, and I saw our friend throw something into the chest with a chink, and then lock it. It was but a glance at the contents, yet I could swear that that dull yellow light could come from no metal but gold. Let us see if it be indeed locked.' Rising from his seat he walked over to the box and pulled vigorously at the lid.

'Forbear, Saxon, forbear!' I cried angrily. 'What would our host say, should he come upon you?'

'Nay, then, he should not keep such things beneath his roof. With a chisel or a dagger now, this might be prized open.'

'By Heaven!' I whispered, 'if you should attempt it I shall lay you on your back.'

'Well, well, young Anak! it was but a passing fancy to see the treasure again. Now, if he were but well favoured to the King, this would be fair prize of war. Marked ye not that he claimed to have been the last Royalist who drew sword in England? and he confessed that he had been proscribed as a malignant. Your father, godly as he is, would have little compunction in despoiling such an Amalekite. Besides, bethink you, he can make more as easily as your good mother maketh cranberry dumplings.'

'Enough said!' I answered sternly. 'It will not bear discussion. Get ye to your couch, lest I summon our host and tell him what manner of man he hath entertained.'

With many grumbles Saxon consented at last to curl his long limbs up upon a mat, whilst I lay by his side and remained awake until the mellow light of morning streamed through the chinks between the ill-covered rafters. Truth to tell, I feared to sleep, lest the freebooting habits of the soldier of fortune should be too strong for him, and he should disgrace us in the eyes of our kindly and generous entertainer. At last, however, his long-drawn breathing assured me that he was asleep, and I was able to settle down to a few hours of welcome rest.

Chapter XII. Of certain Passages upon the Moor

In the morning, after a breakfast furnished by the remains of our supper, we looked to our horses and prepared for our departure. Ere we could mount, however, our kindly host came running out to us with a load of armour in his arms.

'Come hither,' said he, beckoning to Reuben. 'It is not meet, lad, that you should go bare-breasted against the enemy when your comrades are girt with steel. I have here mine own old breastplate and head-piece, which should, methinks, fit you, for if you have more flesh than I, I am a larger framework of a man. Ah, said I not so! Were't measured for you by Silas Thomson, the court armourer, it could not grip better. Now on with the head-piece. A close fit again. You are now a cavalier whom Monmouth or any other leader might be proud to see ride beneath his banner.'

Both helmet and body-plates were of the finest Milan steel, richly inlaid with silver and with gold, and carved all over in rare and curious devices. So stern and soldierly was the effect, that the ruddy, kindly visage of our friend staring out of such a panoply had an ill-matched and somewhat ludicrous appearance.

'Nay, nay,' cried the old cavalier, seeing a smile upon our features, 'it is but right that so precious a jewel as a faithful heart should have a fitting casket to protect it.'

'I am truly beholden to you, sir,' said Reuben; 'I can scarce find words to express my thanks. Holy mother! I have a mind to ride straight back to Havant, to show them how stout a man-at-arms hath been reared amongst them.'

'It is steel of proof,' Sir Jacob remarked; 'a pistol-bullet might glance from it. And you,' he continued, turning to me, 'here is a small gift by which you shall remember this meeting. I did observe that you did cast a wistful eye upon my bookshelf. It is Plutarch's lives of the ancient worthies, done into English by the ingenious Mr. Latimer. Carry this volume with you, and shape your life after the example of the giant men whose deeds are here set forth. In your saddle-bag I place a small but weighty packet, which I desire you to hand over to Monmouth upon the day of your arrival in his camp. As to you, sir,' addressing Decimus Saxon, 'here is a slug of virgin gold for you, which may fashion into a pin or such like ornament. You may wear it with a quiet conscience, for it is fairly given to you and not filched from your entertainer whilst he slept.'

Saxon and I shot a sharp glance of surprise at each other at this speech, which showed that our words of the night before were not unknown to him. Sir Jacob, however, showed no signs of anger, but proceeded to point out our road and to advise us as to our journey.

'You must follow this sheep-track until you come on another and broader pathway which makes for the West,' said he. 'It is little used, and there is small chance of your falling in with any of your enemies upon it. This path will lead you between the villages of Fovant and Hindon, and soon to Mere, which is no great distance from Bruton, upon the Somersetshire border.'

Thanking our venerable host for his great kindness towards us we gave rein to our horses, and left him once more to the strange solitary existence in which we had found him. So artfully had the site of his cottage been chosen, that when we looked back to give him a last greeting both he and his dwelling had disappeared already from our view, nor could we, among the many mounds and hollows, determine where the cottage lay which had given us such welcome shelter. In front of us and on either side the great uneven dun-coloured plain stretched away to the horizon, without a break in its barren gorse-covered surface. Over the whole expanse there was no sign of life, save for an occasional rabbit which whisked into its burrow on hearing our approach, or a few thin and hungry sheep, who could scarce sustain life by feeding on the coarse and wiry grass which sprang from the unfruitful soil.

The pathway was so narrow that only one of us could ride upon it at a time, but we presently abandoned it altogether, using it simply as a guide, and galloping along side by side over the rolling plain. We were all silent, Reuben meditating upon his new corslet, as I could see from his frequent

glances at it; while Saxon, with his eyes half closed, was brooding over some matter of his own. For my own part, my thoughts ran upon the ignominy of the old soldier's designs upon the gold chest, and the additional shame which rose from the knowledge that our host had in some way divined his intention. No good could come of an alliance with a man so devoid of all feelings of honour or of gratitude. So strongly did I feel upon it that I at last broke the silence by pointing to a cross path, which turned away from the one which we were pursuing, and recommending him to follow it, since he had proved that he was no fit company for honest men.

'By the living rood!' he cried, laying his hand upon the hilt of his rapier,' have you taken leave of your senses? These are words such as no honourable cavaliero can abide.'

'They are none the less words of truth,' I answered.

His blade flashed out in an instant, while his mare bounded twice her length under the sharp dig of his spurs.

'We have here,' he cried, reining her round, with his fierce lean face all of a quiver with passion, 'an excellent level stretch on which to discuss the matter. Out with your bilbo and maintain your words.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.