THE BLACK BOX

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A Tale of Monmouth's Rebellion

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLACK BOX ***

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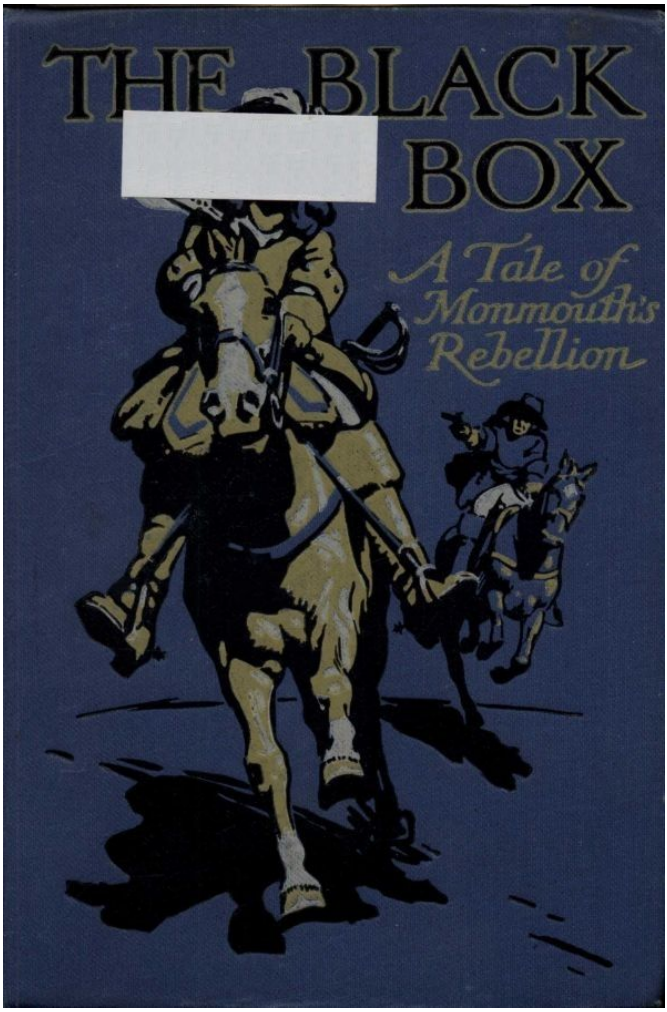

Cover art

"AS HE FLEW BY HE AIMED A SAVAGE BLOW AT ME" (Page 217)

BY

W. BOURNE COOKE

Author of "Madam Domino" "Bellcroft Priory"
"The Cragsmen" &c.

Illustrated by John de Walton

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TO
MY FRIEND
WILL TURNER
OF "OXHOLME"
EDWALTON
NOTTS

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THE BLACK BOX

Prologue

My friends, beware of slim-legged, nimble-footed, white-faced men, in sober grey, who tell long tales! They make for mischief. Nor do I warn you without reason; for of such an one I reaped great trouble.

It was in the cool of a still June evening, as I rode leisurely among these pleasant Dorset lanes of ours, that I came upon him sitting on the roadside, beneath a larch tree, hugging his bony knees and muttering like a soothsayer.

His hat–an ancient, greasy thing–lay on the ground beside him; his grizzled hair seemed to grow upright on a strange-shaped head which ran into a veritable peak towards the centre; while his face was so lined and bloodless that it looked for all the world like crinkled parchment. As for his small, pale eyes, they rose and fell beneath a pair of quivering lids which kept time with his lips.

But what, I think, surprised me most was that although he must have heard me, he took no heed whatever–his lips and eyelids went on fluttering as though the road were empty.

All this was so unlikely and amazing that, on coming level with the fellow, I pulled up to look at him; yet, notwithstanding that I fairly blocked his view, he gave no sign of seeing me, but went on jabbering like the apes which sailors bring ashore. Verily, it seemed he must be either deaf and blind, or daft; therefore,

"What ails thee, friend?" I cried. To my no small astonishment he sprang up as one shot, and for a moment stood there staring at me in a lost, dazed manner; then, raising both hands to his egg-shaped head, he murmured:

"Save us! So I was not out there among the Indies?"

He pointed with a long, thin finger seaward.

"Nay, friend," I answered soothingly, for indeed I now made certain he was daft. "Thou wast sitting on a tussock in a Dorset lane, three miles from Lyme."

"Lyme!" he muttered. "King's Lyme! Lyme Regis, say you?"

"The same," said I.

"Ah! then Heaven be thanked!" says he, shuddering as he hugged his slim, gaunt body. "For, look you, methought for certain I was out among the blacks again. Wast ever in the Indies, friend, among the man-eaters?" he added, glancing swiftly up at me with slit-like eyes.

"Nay," I answered, laughing. "I was never nearer them than Portland, yonder."

"Then have you much to give thanks for," said he, raising his fingers tip to tip, as priests do. "Yea, verily, ye cannot be too thankful that the heathen are unknown to you. I, who have witnessed their abominations, tell ye so. For, look you, friend, two long accursed years I lived among the savages, and was partaker, willy-nilly, in their wickedness. It fell out thus. I and eight others were wrecked upon a little island in the far South Seas. Perchance 'twas a judgment on us, for our captain was a buccaneer who spared not anyone. Howsoever that may be, 'tis certain we were wrecked, and out of six-and-twenty souls but nine of us reached land, nor was the captain one of these. That island, friend, was glorious to behold; a Paradise of beauty. Methinks I see it now" (he shut his eyes)–"its waving palms, its many-coloured birds and flowers. Aye, truly, it was, as I said before, a Paradise!"

He continued after a slight pause. "But we did not enjoy its beauties long, for as on the second night we lay asleep beneath the stars (not having seen a soul upon the island, and therefore feeling safe),–as we thus slept, I say, we were set upon by savages, and I, even I alone, was left alive to tell this tale. We had saved some muskets from the wreck, and thus, aroused by the shrieks of my hapless comrades who had been speared to death while yet asleep, I, who had lain some distance from them, leapt up and fired into the murderous wretches, killing one of them. At that the others stood stock-still for a moment, like dumb, frightened beasts–Heavens! how amazed they looked!–then, to my great astonishment (for I made certain my last hour was come), they all, as one man, dropped face downwards on the ground, and, rubbing their noses in the earth and patting their ugly heads, broke forth in dismal wails. But, verily, I understood the matter. They had never heard a musket-shot before; they took me for a god; they worshipped

me. Nor was I slow to make the most of it. First I recharged my piece, then with a cry which made them turn their wicked faces up, I pointed to it. Then, may I die if one and all did not come crawling up to lick my feet like dogs.

"Well, friend, to make few words of it, when those thrice-accursed fellows departed to their own island in canoes, I went with them; and there, for two long, weary years I reigned among them like a king. I was accounted to have power to heal all sickness. My frown brought death. Moreover, I had some skill in tricks of hand and eye, the which I played upon them to a right good purpose. Look you, this is one of them."

Here he brought forth from his pocket six small carven balls of wood, about the size of pistol-bullets, and throwing them up swiftly one by one, caught each in his mouth as it descended. Then, by what means I know not, he contrived to make them seem to reappear by way of eyes, and ears, and nose, and sleeves–yea, verily, from everywhere except his mouth; until the last of them was found inside his hat, which, as I can swear, he had not touched.

"'Tis naught," quoth he, when this was finished, and I was yet marvelling at his cleverness. "I have at least a score such tricks, far better. But now, to finish what I was a-telling. Two years lived I with those savages, and had wellnigh given up all hope of ever leaving them, when, on a certain blessed night, as I sat watching for the ship that never came, I saw a light far off upon the water. Soon I made out that it was coming nearer. I did not wait another moment, but creeping down on to the shore, took one of the canoes which always lay there, and paddled off with all my might.

"The night was dark, the sea was smooth as glass, and so, with all things favouring me, it was not long before I drew near enough to hail the vessel. Heavens, friend, how I shouted, and how my voice rang out across the silent waters! At first they took no heed; but at length there came an answering shout, and then, to my exceeding joy, I knew by the change of lights that they were heaving to. Then did I speed again towards the ship and soon came up with her. Yet when at length I drew alongside, and lanterns made me plain to those aboard, they eyed me with ill-favour, and had some mind to keep me off. Nor do I wonder at it; for truly, friend, what with my streaming hair and beard, and garments made of beast skins, they must have looked upon me as both mad and dangerous.

"But I was not to be denied, and so, notwithstanding that two years among the savages had mightily confused my English, I yet made shift to tell those wondering seamen swiftly of my sorry plight. Still they must needs fall to muttering among themselves ere they would hoist me to the deck; but this they did at last, and straightway fed and clothed me. This very suit of grey was given me by a gentleman aboard that ship–Heaven's blessing on him! True, 'tis a trifle large for one so thin, but 'tis of a fine good cloth, and serves me well. After a voyage of

many months they brought me home, and so–well, here am I; and thus doth end a story true as holy gospel. Say, friend, what think you of it?"

"Fine!" I answered warmly. "Why, man, 'twould make a book!"

He gave a cracking laugh and said:

"Nay, no writing books for me, friend; my skill lies not in that direction; nor, if it did, would I attempt such work. Rather would I clean forget the horrid business. But alack! I cannot, for ever and anon it comes upon me suddenly, even as it did just now when you rode up; and then I see naught, hear naught, save those black-skinned murderous knaves as they leapt about us on that awful night. Faith!" he added, rising quickly and passing a hand across his forehead, "let us talk of something else before the vision comes once more upon me. Say you that Lyme is but three miles from here?"

"Well, to be quite exact, between that and four."

"And know you much about the place?"

"Just a little, seeing that I have been born and bred there."

"Ah! say you so? Then, truly, you must know many people there?"

"A few."

"Didst ever come across one Gilbert Fane?"

"Well, now," I answered, smiling, "'tis not unusual for one to come across one's father, is it?"

At that the fellow gave a little start.

"What!" says he. "Your father! He is alive, then?"

"Aye, truly, that he is," I answered, laughing. "At least, he was an hour ago."

"Well, well, now, just to think of it!" he murmured, rubbing his chin as though in deep perplexity. "Save us! 'tis strange, indeed!"

"How so?" I asked. "Dost know my father?"

"Nay, that I do not; but 'tis passing strange that I should meet his son upon this road and tell him what I have."

"How so?" I asked again. "What mystery is this?"

"'Tis no mystery, friend," he answered, looking out to sea, "but truly it is passing wonderful. Listen. I did not tell you that the man who gave me this grey suit fell sick, died, and was buried while we were still at sea. But so, alas! it was; and as I sat beside him when he lay a-raving in high fever, the name of Lyme was ever on his lips, together with the names of divers people, and one of these I swear was Gilbert Fane; for, although I took small notice at the time, your mention of it brings it clearly back to me. Now say, friend, is not all this strange beyond compare?"

"It is, indeed," I murmured, looking at him fixedly, as he stood with half-closed eyes before me. "And what was this luckless fellow's name?"

"Would that I could tell you; but I cannot. They picked him up at some

outlandish place, and methinks 'twas that which made him treat me with such kindness; but when he died he left naught save his clothes, some knick-knacks, and a sword. There were no papers. The captain had his sword and clothes. One day as we sat a-talking he did let fall his name as if by accident; but then I took no heed, and so have clean forgotten it. Yet, if I heard it now, methinks I might remember it."

"But say, what manner of man was he?"

"A fine, upstanding fellow, with a ruddy face."

"Ah, there are, and have been, many such in Lyme. But, look you, if you care to come with me to our house, The Havering, methinks my father might assist you."

"Ah, many thanks, good friend, but 'twould be of no avail. I am but come to Lyme because he talked so much of it; and because I thought, by searching among the gravestones in your churchyard, I might perchance light on his name, and thus remember it. Aye, verily, I loved that man."

"How long have you been in England?"

"I came ashore three days ago at Bristol, and have been walking ever since."

"You must be weary, then."

"No; but I am wondrous poor. Look you, friend, I am so needy that for a groat I would climb this towering larch tree, and swing among the branches at the top."

"Do it," said I, by way of proving him.

Instantly he sprang upon the tree, and went up it like a monkey. And when he reached the top he leapt from branch to branch, whistling and swinging, till I felt certain he must miss his hold and come tumbling down.

"Bravo! Well done!" I cried. "Come down for your reward."

Down he came at a speed which fairly took my breath away, and then stood, cap in hand, before me, as calm as if he had never left his tussock.

Bringing forth a handful of silver pieces (I never lacked for money) I picked a shilling out and gave it to him.

"This is too much," quoth he, with shaking head; "and were not my necessity so great I would not take it."

"Nay, 'tis well earned," I answered; "but may I ask a favour? The trick you showed me with the little balls–wilt do that again?"

"With all my heart," says he; and forthwith did it; and many others, too, still more astonishing.

"More work, more pay," said I, when he had finished. "Here is another shilling. And, look you, if you care to call at our house, The Havering–'tis a lonesome place a mile or so from Lyme, and well-beknown to all–if you choose to call, I say, you may be certain of a welcome. My father, I'll wager, would

rejoice to see those tricks of yours. And that reminds me; you have my name, friend–prithee, what is yours?"

"Well, 'tis a passing curious one," he answered, grinning like a skull. "Nay, worse than that, 'tis downright heathenish and wicked–Tubal Ammon–as black a name, I trow, as ever was."

"Well, well," said I, consolingly, "you did not name yourself; and 'tis at least one easily remembered. So now, friend Ammon, here is a right good evening to you; and, as I said before, if you choose to call upon us at The Havering you may be certain of a right hearty welcome."

With that I would have ridden off, but he touched my arm and said:

"Stay! I would fain return such kindness by showing thee some very curious things. See," he added, bringing forth a little carven case, "here is a tiny bow and arrows. Toys, say you? and yet the veriest scratch from one of these fine points means death; for they are poisoned. Again, this amulet, the which I keep so thickly wrapped in cloth: behold how richly it is carved, how beautiful and innocent it looks; but wear it for an hour and you are dead, for, likewise, it is poisoned. And, yet again, this tiny wooden dart, scarce bigger than a tailor's needle; one prick from it means death–poisoned also. The wretches that I lived with use these things, and many more besides, for secret killing. Take them in your hands, good sir, I pray you. Your gloves will save all harm. Examine them and see how finely they are wrought."

I did so; and was bending over them in gloating fashion when a gentle click aroused me, and, turning suddenly, I found the muzzle of a pistol close beside my head, with an evil, grinning face beyond it.

"Good friend," said Tubal Ammon, "thou art rich and I am very needy. Give me all thou hast, and give it quickly."

This was an ugly business, sure enough. I was unarmed, while a bullet with scarce a foot to travel could not fail to hit the mark. Yes; the pressure of a finger meant sure death, nor did I doubt the rascal's villainous intention, even if I gave him what he asked; for either he would shoot me as I got the money out or as I turned to ride away. My horse was just the very thing he wanted. Thus I argued swiftly with myself, and saw that to dissemble was my only hope.

"Well, now," said I, looking straight along the pistol into his squinting face, "this is indeed a poor return for favours; still, advantage counts for everything, and needs must when the devil drives. So, if you will kindly lower your weapon, friend, for fear of accidents, I will oblige you."

He fell into the trap. Down went the pistol, and, with a greedy look, he drew quite close. Next moment I had kicked him in the wind with all my might, and sent him flying backward to the ground. Then, as he lay there gasping, I threw his poisonous relics over him, and with a gay "Good morrow to you, Master

Ammon!" galloped off.

"A murderous footpad–nothing more or less," I muttered, as we dropped into a walk. "Well, 'tis a handsome warning not to ride again unarmed on byways, even on a summer's evening; and at least the rascal got a warning too."

That was how I summed the matter up; but, as you will see hereafter, it had been greatly better for us all if Tubal Ammon had been lying dead upon the road behind me.

CHAPTER I
Concerning "A Certain Person"

It was on the tenth day of June, in the year sixteen hundred and eighty-five (and three days after my first meeting with Tubal Ammon), when, as you know, King James the Second had scarce been three months on his quaking throne, that I, Michael Fane, of Lyme Regis, in the county of Dorset, fell headlong, as it were, and quite unwittingly, into such a pother of adventure, mystery, and trouble, as few men–let alone a youth, as I then was–may hope to come through with their lives. That, however, by a rare good fortune, having been my lot, I am minded, now in these peaceful days, when good King William rules us with a firm, wise hand, to set down, for all of you who care to read it, a full and true account of what befell me in those throbbing months of blood and warfare.

To begin, then (as my old preceptor, Master Pencraft, used to put it), at the right end of the rope, I was summoned before breakfast on that bright June morning to my father's study, in our old house, The Havering, just outside the town, where we two lived together, my mother having died three years before.

Now, although we were ever early risers at The Havering, I had never known my father require me to attend on him at such an hour (it being scarcely half-past six); but recollecting that I was eighteen that very day, the thought of some present being at the bottom of the matter added speed to the steps of filial duty as I hurried to the study.

I found my father seated, quill in hand, very stiff and upright at his table, on which some papers were spread out before him; while at his elbow stood the hour-glass to which he still clung, because, as he said, the ticking of a clock disturbed his thoughts. The sunlight falling on his whitened hair and beard made them shine like silver; and I remember, too, that through the open window came

the gladsome morning song of birds. In truth, there could scarce have been a sight which promised more of peace and less of violence.

As I entered, my father looked up at me with those keen, deep-set eyes which could still flash fire for all their nearly seventy years of use.

"Good morning to you, Michael!" said he.

"Good morning to you, sir!" I answered, feeling some uneasiness, for the flickering smile with which he greeted me had scarcely touched his face before it vanished, leaving him grave and solemn as a judge; so that I stood there with my hand upon the door-latch, wondering swiftly which of my many sins had found me out.

"Be seated, Michael," said my father, pointing with his pen-point to a chair in front of him; and down I sat, with some such qualms as I was used to have when paying those private visits to my schoolmaster which were wont to end in certain flagellation.

For what seemed quite an age, my father sat there looking at me in a fixed, abstracted way which made me feel still more uncomfortable; then, having laid down his pen and turned the hour-glass, he leaned back in his chair with folded hands and said:

"Michael, my son, you have passed another milestone on life's road; you are eighteen to-day–a man, in fact."

Here he paused, as though expecting me to speak: but although his words had mightily relieved me, and made me feel a good inch taller, too, I could think of no answer for them; and so I only nodded–sat a little straighter in my chair, and wondered what was coming next. Perceiving this, he thus continued:

"Yes, Michael, you are now old enough to play the man in right good earnest. 'Tis high time that you were up and doing in the world. For, mark you, I would not have a son of mine an idle, useless popinjay."

"Nor would I choose the part," I put in bluntly.

"Nay, I am sure you would not," rejoined my father proudly. "You come of a wrong stock for that. But, look you, you spoke of choosing parts; what part, what calling, would you choose if you were able?"

"Fighting–soldiering, that is," I answered readily.

A blazing, warlike gleam leapt suddenly into the old man's eyes, and as he sat bolt upright in his chair, and glanced with glowing pride at that well-tried sword of his which hung upon the wall, I thought I never saw so fine a man.

"'Tis well and bravely said," he murmured. "Fighting–soldiering! A young man could not make a better choice than that. And, as you know, Michael, I speak from great experience. In the days of good King Charles the Martyr–God rest his soul!–I fought in nigh a dozen battles, counting skirmishes. And gladly would I fight again if I were able. Ah, yes! there is no finer work for any man

than fighting for his king."

"His king!" I echoed. "Must I then fight for James?"

"Certes," replied my father with an astonished look. "For whom else would you fight, my son?"

"I know not, but I hate King James," I blurted out. "He is a cruel man, a poltroon, and a—-"

"Hush!" broke in my father, raising a warning hand; and even as he spoke there came a sound like that of someone stirring stealthily among the shrubs outside the window.

We both rose and looked out searchingly, but as there was nothing to be seen, sat down again.

"What was it, think you?" I asked.

"A cat, perhaps; or maybe the dog," replied my father.

But I was far from satisfied; for I had distinctly heard that which, his hearing being somewhat hard, had escaped the old man's notice–to wit, what sounded like cautious, slinking footsteps. However, as the thing could not be proved, I let it pass.

"You spake without due thought, son Michael," said my father gravely. "Such words as you just now used are as dangerous as wild. Kings must vary, even as mankind itself doth vary. There must be good and bad in everything; and sometimes 'tis the kingship that we fight for, not the man. And mark you, Michael, even a bad king were far better than no king at all–aye, a thousand times!"

I felt far from sure of that, but my father was no man to argue with, especially upon one's birthday, so I did not press the matter.

"But is there no other king that I can fight for?" I asked. "John Cornish went from Lyme here, as you know, into the Netherlands, fought for the Prince of Orange, and became a captain. Can I not do the same, sir?"

My father frowned and stroked his beard, as was his wont when not well pleased.

"That is fortune-soldiering," he answered gravely; "a thing I do not favour. For although it certainly hath bred good fighters, 'tis apt to lead to looseness–selling the sword, that is, for money to the highest bidder. Nay, Michael, I would not have my son do that. Fight for your king and country when the time comes, and let that suffice."

"But how and where, then, shall I fight?" I asked. "Since Monmouth cut the Covenanters up at Bothwell Brig there hath been naught worth the name of fighting; and although 'tis said the Duke of Argyle is in Scotland with some followers, that will not touch us: he will soon be done for. Nay, sir, I see no chance of fighting here in England. All is peace."

"Yes, but methinks it will not be so long, Michael," rejoined my father with a knowing look.

"What mean you, sir?" I asked.

"I mean," he answered, leaning forward with his arms upon the table and speaking in a whisper, "I mean that I have certain knowledge that at any moment bloody civil war may again break out among us."

"How, sir, and what proof?" I cried, springing to my feet.

"Sit down," replied my father quietly. Then, opening a drawer, he drew therefrom a letter. "Here is my proof," he said, unfolding it, "though certes it was not for me; I found it wedged inside a larger document which came by post last night. Thus it had been overlooked. I opened it unthinkingly, and, when I saw the nature of its contents, kept it; and that rightly, as it seems to me. Read it," he added, holding the paper out across the table.

'Twas addressed to a man well known to us; one who had fought with Blake when he held Lyme so stoutly against Prince Maurice in the Civil Wars.

The writing was a poor scrawl enough, and hard to read in parts, but this is how it ran:–

"Dated from London, 8th June, 1685.

"FRIEND,

"These are to advise thee that honest Protestants forthwith prepare and make themselves very ready, for they have notice here at Court that a Certain Person will forthwith appear in the West, which puts them here at Court into a most dreadful fear and confusion; 'tis hoped, therefore, that all honest men who are true Protestants will stick together and make ready for the trumpet call of Freedom. Argyle have had great success in Scotland, and have already destroyed great part of the King's forces there; and we hear from good hands that he hath sure an army that doth increase so mightily daily that nothing can oppose them; and if they be once up in the West they would suddenly be up in all parts of England, all Protestants being certainly prepared and resolved rather to die than to live Slaves and Papists. Therefore make good use hereof, and impart it to such as you can trust, that you may all be prepared and ready against the appearance of a Certain Person, which will be forthwith if not already.

"**From your friend**, "F.R."

"This is a pretty riddle, sir," said I, laying down the letter.

"Nay," quoth the old man, smiling at my puzzled look; "'tis plain as any horn-book. Who, think you, is the Certain Person named herein?" He touched the letter.

"Nay, sir, I cannot tell," I answered.

"Guess! The name begins with M."

But as I knew several names beginning with that letter this information did not greatly help me; and though I was soon astonished that it had not done so, I could only shake my head and say:

"I cannot guess."

"Well, then, I will tell thee," said my father. "The Certain Person is none other than James, Duke of Monmouth."

This time I sprang up so vehemently that over went my chair and I came near to following it.

"What!" I cried. "Monmouth! That pretty fellow whom I saw five years ago at Colyton when he rode through the West so proudly, with thousands of fine gentlemen behind him?"

"The very same," replied my father gravely.

"But is he not an exile in the Netherlands?" I asked, amazed.

"That is his portion," said my father, looking mighty stern. "Or, rather, was."

"Then, what comes he here for?"

"To stir up rank rebellion; to play the fine Pretender; in a word, to try and wrest the crown from him who rightly wears it, to wit, his uncle, our King James."

"That being so," said I, drawing myself up very straight and feeling mightily important, "I fight for Monmouth."

'Twas now my father's turn to show amazement, the which he did by springing to his feet with such suddenness and anger that I fell back a step or two.

"Stop!" he hissed across the table. "You know not what you say. Such words as those would hang a man if they were overheard. Wouldst fight for a usurper?"

"They say he is the rightful heir," said I.

"'They say'! Who say?" returned my father hotly.

"Why, those who have a right to know," I answered glumly, for my pride was hurt.

"Then know that 'they' say wrong," he scornfully rejoined. "This Monmouth hath no more title to the crown than you or I have."

"But, sir, is he not the eldest son of Charles the Second?"

"They have no proof who say so. Therefore I say again, he hath no claim, no title to the throne of England."

This seemed a crushing answer right enough, and so for a moment I was

silent. But I had read and heard–as no doubt you have also–of some mysterious written proof of Charles's marriage to one Lucy Walters, Monmouth's mother. 'Twas said to have been hidden in a black box somewhere, which, when the needful time arrived, was nowhere to be found; and even they who had professed to having seen the very document in question, roundly denied all knowledge of it when brought before the Council. To be quite honest, I had but small belief in it myself, but now, in my fallen pride, it served my purpose; so—-

"What of the Black Box?" I said, looking as wise as any parrot.

I had expected that my father's answer to this question would be short and sharp–indeed, perhaps nothing save a scornful laugh; but, to my great astonishment, he dropped back straight into his chair and stared at me like one possessed, while his breath came thick and fast, as though he had suffered some great shock.

"What do you know of that?" he gasped at last.

"Nothing, father," I answered carelessly by way of calming him, for knowing that he suffered from a weakness of the heart I was afraid lest harm should come to him. "Nothing, that is, beyond what others know. Indeed, I thought 'twas common knowledge."

"Common knowledge!" echoed my father with a fearful start. "What do you mean?"

"Why, the report that there is somewhere written proof of Charles's marriage. Is it not common knowledge? I remember hearing of it when I was a boy at school."

"Yes, yes; but the box in which 'twas said to have been hidden! What do you know of that?"

He put this question with a feverish eagerness and then gazed at me searchingly, if indeed not suspiciously.

"Nothing," I answered firmly; "absolutely nothing."

On hearing this my father heaved a sigh of deep relief, and for a space stared at me in a far-off, wondering manner, as though he were scarce certain of my presence; then, leaning slowly forward on the table, he said:

"Michael, 'tis passing strange that you should be the first to mention that which I have brought you here to speak of, but, having done so, the need for a preamble is at least removed. Know, then, that the tale of the Black Box, albeit so bedecked and garnished with absurdities by the tongue of busy gossip, is not entirely fabulous. For, verily, that box exists. I have it here."

When I heard this I was as one struck dumb. To think that in that quiet, book-lined chamber there lay a hidden secret which, as it seemed to me, might have the power to turn a kingdom upside down! I was aghast, and as I gazed in blank bewilderment about the room it was as though black boxes had usurped the very shelves and lurked in every corner. Thus for a moment I was speechless,

then my eyes went slowly back to him from whom this most astounding news had come, and who now sat watching me intently.

"You have it, sir!" I said in a voice that sounded strange and distant to my ears. "Where? How?"

"That you shall know presently. All in good time," replied my father with a curious little smile, which I can see again distinctly as I write these words. "But, first of all, I ask your promise as a man and son that not a word of what I show and tell you shall pass your lips so long as I am living. When I am gone you may do as you choose, but until then this matter must be treated as a bounden secret sacred to us two, and to us alone. Have I your oath that this shall be so, Michael?"

"You have," I answered. "Here is my hand upon it."

Our hands met firm and solemnly across the table. Then my father rose, and taking down a picture of my mother which hung upon the wall, pressed with his fingers on the wainscoting beneath. Instantly a panelled door flew open, revealing a secret cupboard big enough to hold two men.

After some groping in a bottom corner of this chamber, he discovered what he sought, and, returning to the table, laid thereon a little box of ebony, about eight inches square.

CHAPTER II
The Secret of the Black Box

Sitting with his hands upon the box as though 'twere something which might jump away, my father tapped it gently, saying:

"That which I am about to show you, Michael, is what no eye save mine hath seen except one other. Yours will make a third; which goes to prove how thoroughly I trust you."

Unbuttoning his vest, he brought forth a curious-looking key, which hung by a narrow ribbon from his neck. With this he solemnly unlocked the box, and having thrown the lid back, laid it again upon the table. 'Twas lined with purple velvet, and, so far as I could see, contained two separate papers neatly tied with silk. The undermost of these he took out first and laid it on the table.

"Read that," he said, "and tell me what you think of it."

Greatly wondering, I undid the cord and scanned the contents of the paper. Then my hand shook, for this is what I read:

"Know all men, that our eldest and well-beloved child, James, Duke of Monmouth, is our rightful heir, in proof whereof we herewith give the marriage contract made between his mother, Lucy Walters, and ourselves.

"Given at our Palace of Whitehall, this sixteenth day of August, in the Year of Grace 1679.

"CHARLES R."

"Well, what think you of it?" asked my father, as our eyes met.

"Why," I answered eagerly, "it proves exactly what I said: that Monmouth is the rightful King of England."

"Ah! you say so," quoth my father grimly. "Now read this."

This was none other than the marriage contract mentioned in the foregoing letter. 'Twas dated from Cologne, set forth every detail of the matter, and was also signed by Charles.

"Well, and what now?" asked my father gloatingly, as I laid the parchment on the table.

"Well, 'tis clear as any pikestaff," I replied. "Monmouth should be King without a question."

"Ah! you think so," said my father shrewdly. "Small wonder either; but be not too hasty in your judgments, Michael. Now read that," he added, handing me the final paper with a glowing look of triumph.

This writing was my father's well-known hand, and 'tis small wonder that I read it with amazement; for this is how it ran:

"I, Gilbert Fane, of The Havering, by Lyme, in the County of Dorset, writing with full knowledge of the matter, do hereby solemnly declare the documents inside this Box to be rank forgeries.

"GILBERT FANE."

When, dumbfounded and bewildered, I raised my eyes from this amazing statement 'twas to find my father's fixed upon me with a hungry look.

"Ah! and what now?" he asked, drumming the table with his fingers.

For a moment I could find no words, then:

"Forgeries!" I fairly gasped.

"Yes, rank forgeries," replied the old man grimly.

"But–sir–" I stammered, "'tis the King's own writing."

"You are sure of that, eh?"

"Yes, sure as death."

"And why?"

"Because I saw a letter from King Charles at Sir John Berkeley's house but a week ago. 'Tis framed and hangs upon the wall; and the writing is the same as that," I added, pointing to the documents.

"You have good cause for saying that; yet 'tis not so."

"Well, at any rate two peas were never more alike. I remember thinking that the 'Charles' looked more like Charley–just as this one does. Yes, 'tis wonderfully like it."

"Ah! I am with you there," rejoined my father grimly. "As you say, 'tis wonderfully like indeed–and why? Because 'twas written by a wonderfully clever man."

"And who was that?" I asked point-blank.

"One Robert Ferguson," replied my father slowly.

"What! the great Ferguson?" I cried, astonished.

"Great if you choose to call him so," came the answer, in the same deep, measured tones. "But wicked, I should say. Ferguson the plotter!"–(here he raised his voice)–"Ferguson the traitor, liar, thief, and hypocrite! As black a scoundrel as e'er set foot upon God's earth!"

As, with blazing eyes and ever-rising voice, my father poured forth this fierce denunciation, my amazement broke all bounds. I knew this man, this wicked rogue, by cold repute–as who did not? for his name and deeds were blazoned everywhere. How he had been Churchman, Presbyterian, Independent, Writer, and Preceptor–everything by turn. How he had used religion as a cloak for vilest ends; how he had played false with every party; and how, in the end, when the Rye House plot leaked out (of which he was prime mover), he had, with a mocking laugh, abandoned his accomplices to their fate, while he, disguised, escaped abroad.

Yes, I knew this brazen, barefaced rogue right well; but that these documents–these fresh examples of his falsity and cunning–should have come into our house, was what so amazed me; and this perplexity was swiftly noted by my father, for while I yet sat there in blank bewilderment he smiled and said:

"This matter sorely puzzles you, I see."

"Puzzles me!" I cried. "Aye, sir, that it does and more. What can you have had to do with Ferguson, and how came you by those papers?"

"That is a natural question," he said, "and I will answer it as briefly as may be. About six years ago I met this man, this rogue, this Ferguson, in London; though I did not then know that 'twas he, for, as you know, he went by divers names, and had a separate lodging for each name. With me he passed as one Elijah Annabat, a scrivener, in the city; and, oh! shame on me for my blindness, Michael, but his words and ways were such that I counted him a right good fellow cursed with an ugly face. Nay, worse, I even trusted him with money. But I overrun my tale.

"At last we became so friendly that I went to visit him at his lodging in the Chepe, and there it was that I first saw him working on these forgeries. Night after night I found him bending over them, working like one possessed. He said

that he was making copies for a man in high estate; but one night he chanced to leave a sheet uncovered at the bottom, and there I read 'Charles R.' 'Ah! "high estate" indeed', thought I, but of course said nothing. Well, to make few words of it, another night I chanced to catch him locking up his precious papers in this very box. This time methought he had an evil, hunted look upon his ugly face, but, though I had my doubts, I did not see my way to question him; and as my business took me home upon the morrow, I bade Elijah Annabat farewell. Now, as I said, I had been surpassing fool enough to trust him with some money, on which he did profess he could obtain great usury within a month. Well, I had been home at least two months, and yet had had no tidings of the matter, so I wrote to him. Another month passed, but no answer came. I wrote again; but still there was no answer. Then, while I was yet turning over in my mind what course to take, the Black Box tale leapt over England, and with it flashed into my memory what I had seen in London. 'Ah! I will pay a visit to Elijah Annabat,' said I: and forthwith posted up to town.

"By rare good chance I found him in, and, what was still more to my liking, there was he seated at a table with the Black Box in his hands. As I came suddenly upon him he turned a savage glance towards me; then, having quickly hid the box beneath some papers, he rose, and, holding out his hand, grinned like a cat and said:

"'Well met, good Master Fane!'

"'Well met, indeed, good Master Annabat!' quoth I, remaining stiff and frowning by the door. 'Where is my money?'

"His face changed instantly, as though a mask had fallen from it; and for a time he stood there stroking his bristly chin and shooting glances at me from beneath his heavy eyebrows.

"'Hum!' he said at last. 'Your money, eh, friend? Ah, to be sure, your money. Yes, of course. Well, friend, I fear 'tis like the sheep of which we read in Holy Scripture–lost!'"

"On hearing this, I paused a moment: then suddenly a wild idea seized me. 'That being so,' I said, 'I will have your Black Box in exchange for it.'

"Never have I seen a man so struck as he was by those words. His face went white, then red; and then, without a moment's warning, he sprang on me like a tiger.

"He was a younger and a stronger man than I, and moreover had the advantage of attack; but, as you know, I was something of a wrestler in my youth, and so by a well-proved trick I sent him flying from me. Reeling back, his head struck full upon the wall, and there he lay like one dead. Nor was this all, for, as he fell, a paper left his pocket. Picking it up I read 'To Robert Ferguson, Esquire.' That was enough for me. Taking the box I left him lying there, and started

straightway on my homeward journey.

"As for Ferguson, I hoped devoutly he was killed, and still regret he was not; but, alack! within a fortnight from that time the Rye House Plot came out, and he was forced to flee the country, and, thank Heaven, hath never dared to show his wicked face in England since. So there you have the answer to your question, Michael," said my father, in conclusion. "Is all now clear to you, my son?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, "it is clear enough how you met Ferguson and got his box; but why, having such clear proof of his amazing falseness, did you not expose him to the world?"

"Because I dared not, Michael," replied the old man slowly. "Wrong breeds wrong, and violence violence. In my anger I had taken that to which I had no right; but, as you see, there is naught save my written word to prove I was not privy to these forgeries; nor would those in authority have believed it was not so. And remember that the law was even then, as ten times more so now, gathered up in one foul, cruel fellow–that bloody-minded man, Judge Jeffreys. Yea, verily, to be found with this," he added, tapping the box significantly, "would then, as now, have spelt death to any man. And although, even six years ago my days were not many, I had no wish to cut them short by dangling at a rope-end. Wherefore I kept the box, and–well, here it is."

"And Ferguson made no stir about it?"

"Nay, by the same token that he dare not, for would they not have asked how he had knowledge of it? What now? Hast any further questions, Michael?"

"Nay, sir," I answered, after thinking for a moment, "I have no more questions, but, if I may, I would make one suggestion."

"Ah, certainly; what is it?"

"Why, that in your written statement you should add unto the words 'Rank forgeries'–'by Ferguson, the Plotter.'"

"A right excellent suggestion, too," rejoined my father. "It shall be done forthwith."

Taking up his pen he did it, and was replacing the papers in their small black house, when I saw him add the letter concerning "A Certain Person", which, as you know, did not belong to him.

"Stay!" I interrupted, "why that one, sir?"

"Because 'tis the safest place for it," he answered, as he closed and locked the lid. "To give it to its rightful owner would need explanations, and those would be risky and might lead to trouble. Therefore let it rest here. And now," he added, pushing back the box, "I have told you everything. I always meant to do so on your eighteenth birthday, and glad am I 'tis done, for the sharing of a secret trustily brings great relief. As to the future; well, as I said before, when I

am gone–when the secret is again one man's–you will do exactly as you please, but I would counsel you, when that time comes, to burn the box and all that it contains."

"Why not burn it now," I put in eagerly, "and be done with it for ever?"

My father drew the box towards him, and, as it seemed to me, caressed it.

"Because," he said, "I could not bring myself to do it. 'Tis perchance naught save an old man's foolish fancy, Michael, but I tell you I have kept this little thing so long that I–I love it, even as I fear it."

"Then why not burn the papers only?" I suggested.

"Ah! that would leave an empty shell indeed; and what is a body when the heart is taken from it? Nor would I trust the flames. No, no! When I am dead, burn as and what you please, but until then my little friend goes back into his resting-place. Come! let me show you how the panel may be opened."

With that, he replaced the box in its dark corner, and, having closed the cupboard door, was just showing me the secret of the spring, when we were once more startled by a noise outside–this time like that of snapping twigs.

For a moment we both stood stock-still, listening, then running to the window, looked out anxiously. But again there was nothing to be seen. The ancient, broad-leaved chestnut tree which grew quite close above a neighbouring wall and threw deep shadows on the lawn beneath, gave forth no sign.

"Ah, Michael," quoth my father, smiling, though his look was most uneasy, "methinks it is a case of guilty consciences begetting fearful thoughts. A bird, an animal it surely was, or—-" He stopped; for suddenly, from nowhere, as it seemed to me, a great black cat sprang into view and fled helter-skelter down the garden walk, with a goodly length of narrow cord trailing from its neck.

We started back as though it had been the Evil One himself; then, as the brute dashed out of view, turned to each other and broke out a-laughing. But verily it struck me that our mirth was far from being hearty; and, looking back, it seems a mockery that we laughed at all.

"So much for the disturber of our peace," remarked my father. "A poor beast, doubtless tortured by some cruel lad, hath saved himself from–hanging."

"'Tis a case of gallows cheating, then," said I; "and one of blackness, too–a black cat there, a black box here."

I said this lightly, but my father cast a swift, uneasy glance towards the secret panel.

"That's true enough," he answered quickly. "But now for brighter matters. This is your eighteenth birthday, Michael, and I have here for you two presents which may help you on that way of soldiering which, as I knew, would be your choice."

Going to a corner he brought therefrom two parcels, a long one and a short

one, neatly wrapped in cloth, and laid them on the table. The larger one he undid first, and there, to my great delight, I saw as fine a sword as any man could wish to wear; then, while I yet stood enraptured at so grand a thing, he brought forth from the other package a brace of handsome pistols with holsters all complete.

"Take these with a father's blessing," said the old man, bowing graciously. "And may you use them well and worthily, my son!"

"Sir!" I began, and forthwith tried to thank him, but the words came stumbling awkwardly.

Then he must needs strap on the sword himself, and make me stand while he surveyed the hang of it like any captain on parade.

"Yes, 'tis well enough, 'twill do," he said at last; "but remember, Michael, that the truest blade is naught unless there be a good, true heart behind it."

"Aye, sir, I will remember that," I answered solemnly.

"Ah, I am sure of it," rejoined my father. "And now I have it in mind to write to my friend Lord Feversham concerning you. It may be that he hath an ensignship or cornetcy to offer. Would that suit you?"

"With all my heart," I answered eagerly; "and may the chance to use this sword come soon!"

My father smiled.

"Ah, never fear," he said, "'twill come quite soon enough; perhaps too soon."

"You have no doubt, then, as to the meaning of that secret letter?"

"None whatever."

"And you feel certain that the Duke is coming on us?"

"Yes, quite certain, Michael."

"And where, think you, will he land?"

"Ah! there you ask too much. That is beyond my knowledge. But 'twill be somewhere in the West, beyond a doubt."

"Will you not warn them up in London, then, of such grave danger?"

"Ah, I have thought of that. But where would be the use? The King, and those around him, must know far more of this than I. Besides, rightly to warn, the letter must be shown, and that, as I said before, is fraught with real danger in such times as these."

I saw the truth of that, and was silent for a moment; then a thought struck me.

"What if Monmouth landed here at Lyme?" I said.

My father started at the words.

"God forbid!" said he. "Our little town hath had enough of fighting for all time. Enough! Let us leave warfare for the present, Michael; 'twill come quite soon enough–too soon, methinks. But that reminds me; I have been thinking much about your meeting with that cut-throat rascal on the road a few nights

ago; and the more I think of it, the stranger doth it seem. His name, now, I am not sure of it–what was it?–Tubal something."

"Tubal Ammon."

"Ah, yes; and what a name it is! It rings of wickedness and cunning. Still, I greatly doubt if it be his real name; as I also doubt that fine long tale he told you of the Indians."

"Yet what of those strange things he showed me?"

"Ah, they do not greatly count, methinks; for as a sailor he might well have come by them in far-off countries. Perchance his story was half lies, half truth. But what most puzzles me, what in fact I cannot put away, is the man he told you of who died aboard that ship, and spoke of me and Lyme. If that be true, 'tis very strange."

"I scarcely think it was true, sir, but rather a piece of trickery to hold me in the lane. Having found out my name, that is, he made a tale to fit it."

"Perhaps you hit it rightly, Michael–and yet—-"

"Well, sir, at any rate I fear it is impossible for us to prove it; for no doubt the rascal is far enough away by now."

Barely had I said those words when from without there came the loud snapping of a tree branch, followed by a heavy thud, and this again by the sound of swiftly-running feet.

Springing to the window, I looked out. As I have said, a lusty chestnut tree grew close above a neighbouring wall. This time its leaves were shaking violently, while a broken branch lay lodged upon the wall top; but there was no one to be seen, and so it was clear that whoever had fallen must have gone down on the far side of the wall, that is, the one on which the tree was rooted.

"What is it?" asked my father in an anxious whisper, leaning over me.

"A broken branch," I answered. "Someone was certainly in yonder tree."

The hand upon my shoulder trembled.

"Ah! say you so? Who could it have been?"

"That I will try to find out."

Climbing through the casement, which was but some ten feet above the ground, I dropped lightly to the lawn. Midway in the garden wall a little door led to a small demesne, of shrubbery and orchard. Full carefully I opened this, and, passing through, stood listening. Not a sound was to be heard, and as the grass had been mown but a day or two before, and still lay in a thick swath, there was little chance of finding tracks.

Going to the chestnut tree I examined it carefully, but found no marks upon the trunk. Beyond the broken branch (a smallish one) there was no sign of him who had disturbed us, save for a hollow in the hay beneath, where he had fallen.

Having made sure of this, I again paused to listen; then, as no sound reached

me, I went in and out among the trees and shrubs, probing the latter with my sword and searching every likely place. In this fashion I had covered three parts of the ground, and had wellnigh given up all hope of finding anything, when suddenly there came a rending crash from the far end of the orchard, and by the sound of it not twenty yards from where I was then engaged in exploring the recesses of a laurel bush.

Darting off in the direction of the noise, I soon perceived the cause of it. Someone had gone by sheer force through a lofty hedge of privet, which served as a boundary to the orchard. Where one had thus escaped, another might be counted on to follow; taking a run, I hurled myself fiercely at the hedge, and after much struggling (for it was wondrous thick and strong) tumbled head foremost, out upon the other side.

Here a narrow foothold ended in a high, steep bank, and such was my eagerness that I had much ado to keep from rolling to the bottom; but by clutching at the grass I saved myself, and rising, looked about me. Below me lay a well-grown spinney, and from thence, though no one was in sight, came the sound of swiftly-running feet.

Next moment I was down the bank and speeding round the outskirts of the wood, with flying footsteps right ahead of me. I was reckoned very fleet in those days, but he whom I now pursued flew like the wind; and what with that, and the many bends and juttings of the wood, he beat me: run as I would I could not get a sight of him.

In this mad fashion we must have circled round the wood at least three times, and I was just wondering what the end of such a giddy chase would be, when suddenly the running footsteps of my quarry ceased behind a clump of bushes thirty yards or so ahead. Breathless, I stopped to listen. The hurried pad of feet was followed by a curious scraping noise–then all was still again.

Drawing my sword I crept up to the bushes and took a cautious peep beyond them. But there was no one visible, and, indeed, I had not thought there would be. Still, I was greatly puzzled, for it seemed certain that the fellow could neither have run on nor through the wood without my hearing him. Where, then, was he?

Asking myself that question, I fell to searching carefully with hand and sword among the bushes. But they proved innocent of harbourage; no one was there. In doing this I came beneath a thick-leaved oak tree, and chancing to glance up, was startled by the vision of a pair of shoeless, grey-hosed feet, which dangled from a lofty branch; no more of their owner was visible to me, the rest of him being hidden by the foliage.

So astonished was I by this sight, that at first I could do naught save stare in blank amazement. Then an idea came to me. Walking off as though I had

not noticed anything, I covered twenty yards or more, then turned suddenly and faced the tree. Barely had I done this ere a pistol shot rang out, and, as the bullet whistled past my head, I saw the evil, crinkled mask of Tubal Ammon peering at me from the oak leaves.

CHAPTER III
Up a Tree

Too utterly amazed either for speech or action, I stood stock-still and watched the pistol smoke curl slowly up above the tree; while Tubal Ammon, shooting forth his ugly head until it hung out like a green-framed gargoyle, surveyed me with a hideous leer. Thus for a moment there was a tense silence as we stared at one another.

"Well met!" said I at last.

"And badly aimed," quoth he, grinning as though the thing were but a jest.

"Quite well enough for me," I answered, folding my arms and frowning on him. "Another inch or so and—-"

"Aye, that is true," he broke in quickly. "Yet doth an inch make all the difference betwixt a good shot and a bad one. But, verily, the leaves were in my way, nor, to tell the truth, was I very steady on this branch."

"Make no excuses," I replied: "you did your best to kill me; that is quite sufficient."

"Nay, 'twas a chancy accident," said he, bringing his monkey head a little farther out. "Look you, when you walked away just now I took a thoughtless aim–'twas habit–nothing more. Then when you swung round suddenly I started on this perch of mine and fired by accident."

"That is a lie!" I thundered.

"Nay, friend, 'tis gospel truth. If I had wished to kill you should I not have done it while you lurked beneath this tree?"

"No; for you could not see me then, by reason of the leaves."

"Ah, there you err most grievously. I saw you well. You made a lovely mark. I could have shot you easily."

"Enough!" I answered sharply. "We shall gain naught by arguing the matter. Listen, friend Tubal Ammon, this is our second meeting. Three nights ago you would have killed me on the road—-"

"Nay, wrong again," he put in eagerly. "'Twas but an empty threat; and greatly did I suffer for it. Yea, verily, I still can feel the kick you gave me. Yet do I not complain," he added with a snivel. "'Twas well deserved."

"It was, indeed," said I; "and a pistol bullet had been more so. But let that pass. Say, what brought you lurking round our house just now?"

"My conscience!"

"Ho! ho!" I mocked. "The conscience of one Tubal Ammon, eh? A groat for it!"

"Nay, 'tis above all price," he whined, shutting his eyes and drawing down the corners of his ugly mouth. "A fortune would not buy it."

"Quite so," said I. "You cannot buy a shadow. Again, what brought you spying on us from the tree?"

"A guilty conscience," he replied; "for did I not reward great goodness with a base ingratitude? Yea, verily. Ever since I treated you thus shamefully black thoughts have been my portion. I could not rest. I felt that I must look upon the house of him whose kindness had been thus wickedly requited. Perchance, thought I, I may behold him also. Therefore I got me into your orchard while it was still dark, and waited. Soon after daylight came I heard the opening of a casement, and looking from my hiding-place behind a bush beheld an old man standing at a window. As fine a gentleman as I have ever seen. Say, friend, was that your father?"

"Yes. Go on," I answered sharply.

"Ah me! Now just to think of it!" quoth Tubal Ammon, drawing in his breath softly. "The very man whose name I heard so oft from him who was so good to me aboard that ship. Well, friend, I watched your father till he left the window, and presently I heard your voice. Then, creeping up beside the wall, I climbed that tree and gazed into the room. I could just see you both; and twice you heard me and looked forth."

"And didst hear what we talked about?" I asked.

"Nay, I caught nothing save a hum of voices," he answered readily.

"And what of the black cat?"

He started at those words; then, with a little shudder, answered:

"Ah, an evil beast as ever was. I found it just above me in the tree, and cast a noose about its neck, meaning to strangle it for fear it should betray me, but it shot off and took my cord along with it. Soon afterwards the faithless branch broke, and–well, you know the rest. Thus ends my true confession, friend–what say you?"

"Why, this," I answered sternly; "the conscience part of it is little to my liking; for 'tis my firm belief you came to spy, and afterwards to rob. If it be not so–if my judgment is at fault, come down and prove your words."

"How so? What mean you, friend?" he asked.

"Come down, and let me take you to my father," I replied.

"Nay, nay!" cracked Tubal Ammon, shaking his head until the leaves around it fairly danced. "I dare not."

"And why not?"

"Because methinks that you would hold me prisoner and deliver me to justice."

"Nay, have no fear of that. You are not worth the trouble. Come, then, and tell my father what you have told me. No harm will come of it. You shall go free. You have my word for that."

"I will consider it," said Tubal Ammon, and with that disappeared behind the leaves.

As I stood listening a gentle click came from the tree.

"What are you doing there?" I shouted.

"Wrestling with my thoughts," came back the high-pitched answer.

"Or reloading–which?" I asked. "If 'tis the latter, save yourself the trouble, for, look you, I am safe from bullets."

With that I slipped behind a tree-trunk, and for wellnigh a minute there was silence. Then out popped Ammon's shaven head again.

"'Twould seem your faith in me is small," he sang.

"Truly it is not very great," I answered. "Why have you reloaded?"

"Because necessity is best served by readiness, good friend."

"You are not coming down, then?"

"Nay, I have considered it most carefully. I am not coming down."

"What, then?"

"Well, friend, it doth appear to me that we are quits. You have no pistol, and therefore cannot come against me; nor can you even leave that tree with safety. By the same token I am swordless, and therefore 'twould be a matter of exceeding risk for me to descend; for if I fired and missed, what then? Thus, you are there, and I am here."

"Yes, and you would kill me if you could for all your priceless conscience."

"Nay, put it not thus harshly, friend. Say, rather, that I must be free at all cost."

"Which goes to prove a guilty conscience."

"No, a ready wit. But let us not waste words. *Verbum sat sapienti.* Truly my Latin needs a little furbishing; still, 'twill serve. Look you, friend, I offer thee a clean, straight bargain. Go thy way and let me go mine."

"The time has gone for bargaining," I answered sternly. "I will stay here till help arrives. 'Twill not be long, I fancy."

On hearing that his thin lips parted in a grin which showed two rows of

firm-set teeth and made his face a picture of maliciousness.

"Ah, say you so?" he hissed. "Then I am ready. *In omnia paratus.* And yet again, *eventus stultorum magister.*"

With that he disappeared from view, the branches shook, and in a flash I knew that he was bent on swift pursuit and murder. But scarcely had he moved when a cry rang out behind me, and turning round, I saw my father speeding round the wood-end, twenty yards off, with a pistol in his hand.

"Have a care! Come not too close!" I shouted, pointing to the tree. "He is up there, with a pistol!"

"Who?"

"The man we want."

"He is fairly caught, then," quoth my father grimly, as he stopped and cocked his pistol.

"Be not too sure of that," I answered.

Even as I spoke, there came a great commotion from the tree, as of one struggling desperately; and then a frantic, gurgling cry broke out:

"Help! caught by neck! Strangling. Help!"

"'Twould seem as though swift justice had him," said my father. "Come, let us see," he added, moving forward.

"Nay, have a care," said I. "I trust him not. He is as crafty as Old Nick. To go beneath the tree might mean a well-aimed bullet."

"Nathless, we cannot see the villain hang. What's to be done? Is he high up, think you?"

"Yes, near the top; or so at least he was."

"Ah, then, I have it. We must get a ladder. There is that long one hanging on the garden wall. The very thing. Come, Michael, let us fetch it. Hark! he is surely strangling," he added, as the cries grew still more guttural and frantic. "Come, quickly!"

So off we sped, and having got the ladder, and a brace of loaded pistols, returned full quickly to the spot. But there were no cries now; leaves lay thick beneath the oak tree, but its erstwhile shaking branches were quite still, and not a sound was to be heard.

"Belike enough the miserable wretch is dead by now," remarked my father, as we laid the ladder down and listened for a while. And with that he would have gone straight forward to the tree; but my knowledge of the "miserable wretch's" ways enjoined greater caution.

"Stay! Let us try this first," I said.

Drawing a pistol from my belt, I fired into the tree and listened carefully; but there was neither sound nor movement, save where the bullet tore its way.

"Dead, sure enough!" exclaimed my father.

"Well, we will prove it now," said I, though far from certain of the risk we ran in doing so.

Soon we had the ladder reared against a lofty branch: then, taking a pistol in my hand, I climbed up cautiously into the tree.

At first I could see little, by reason of the thickness of the foliage; but as I neared the top 'twas quickly evident that Tubal Ammon was not there. Some broken twigs betrayed the place where he had sat; but that was all the sign there was of him.

"Well!" cried my father from below. "What see you, Michael? Is he there?"

"No, sir; he is not here," I answered. "'Tis as I thought–we have been fooled; our bird has flown."

"Well, well; no matter," said my father, with, methought, a touch of disappointment in his voice. "'Twere better so than that he should be hanging."

"Be none so sure of that," I murmured to myself, descending quickly to the ground. And there we stood and faced each other, like the beaten men we were.

"Dost know who he was?" enquired my father with a searching look.

"Yes, full well," I answered.

"Ah! and who then was he?"

"Tubal Ammon!"

My father started back.

"What!" he cried, "the man who held thee on the road three nights ago?"

"The very same, sir," I replied.

"Then, indeed, it hath an ugly look. What, think you, brought him prowling round our place?"

"The hope of thieving, sir, I fancy."

"Ah! so you think he is then but a common thief?" exclaimed the old man hopefully.

"Nay, far from common," I replied; "for, verily, he spouted Latin by the yard."

"Latin!" echoed my father, with a start. "A footpad quoting Latin? That makes the thing more ugly still. I like it not. Michael," he added, laying a hand upon my arm, and lowering his voice, as though afraid of listeners, "think you that he heard or saw what passed betwixt us?"

"Nay, I scarcely think so; in fact, I asked him and he said he did not–though, verily, the word of such a prick-eared knave is little to be valued. But even if he did both see and hear, methinks he would make little of it."

"Well, well; 'tis to be hoped your way of looking at it is the right one. Michael" (he dropped his voice into a whisper and glanced quickly round about him), "Michael, what if he were a creature of that rascal Ferguson?"

"Nay, sir," I laughed, though feeling far from easy; "it seems to me you set too great a store upon the knave. He is a thief, and nothing else: perchance one

who hath seen better days–and, therefore, the worst kind of thief. But 'tis my firm belief that he has earned a handsome lesson, and that he will not trouble us again."

My father stroked his chin and gravely shook his head.

"I like it not," he murmured; "and certainly the window shall be watched for many nights to come." He cast a far-off look towards the hills. "Michael, it is as though I saw great trouble brooding over us. If that comes, we two will stand together firmly side by side to meet it. Is that not so, my son?"

"Ah, that we will, indeed!" I answered, grasping his outstretched hand.

Just then the breakfast bell clanged forth, and taking up the ladder, we went home in broody silence.

CHAPTER IV
Three Ships

Youth has two suns to every cloud: when one is hid the other shines. Therefore, notwithstanding all the turmoil of the early morning and the knowledge that our house concealed a secret which could hang us both, I soon, for the time at any rate, clean forgot these matters. And so, when about ten o'clock I buckled on that fine new sword and stepped (nay, swaggered were a truer word for it) down townwards, there might have been no forgeries, no Ferguson the Plotter, no Tubal Ammon, and no Black Box in existence.

For one thing, 'twas as fine a day as any man could wish to see. A fresh breeze stirred the leaves; the birds were singing gaily; while through the trees came glimpses of our glorious bay, flashing like diamonds in the sunlight. Thus I was as happy as a king (nay, happier than most kings!), and as I strode along, with hand on sword-hilt, I gave a cheery nod to old acquaintances; frowned sternly on ill-mannered boys; and cast gay smiles at pretty girls who, ever and anon, peeped out from upper windows.

Enough, it was a fine bright morning, and I was in fine feather, with as little thought of coming evil as the larks which soared above my head. Yet I had scarce set foot inside the town before 'twas clear that some strange business was afoot. For the women-folk stood gossiping excitedly at doors, while every man I came across seemed to be hurrying seaward.

"What is the news?" I asked of one who sped towards me.

"News!" he answered, turning his head upon his shoulder as he ran. "Three ships, black ships!"

"Well, what of that?" I shouted; but, heeding not, he fled upon his way.

Perceiving that there was little to be gained by questioning, I joined the merry rout which swarmed towards the sea-front. And there, sure enough, beating to windward in that part of the bay we call the Cod, were three strange foreign-looking vessels–one, by the rig of her, a frigate, though she showed no guns; the other two small merchantmen. And now I understood the cause of all this great excitement; for neither of the three ships flew a colour, and somehow, in that first swift glance, I felt they boded ill for little Lyme.

However, there was small room for thought just then. You know the Cobb, that world-famed mole of ours, which curves out seaward like a mighty shepherd's crook, and serves us for a harbour, quay, and everything? Well, everyone was making for that point of vantage, and so you may be sure I lost no time in following.

The far end of the Cobb (that is, the sea end) was already thickly covered with an excited, wondering crowd, and, shouldering my way into the front line, I soon learned much. How that these three mysterious craft had first been seen at daybreak beating in slowly against a northerly wind. How, later on, a ten-oared boat had put off from the largest vessel, with three men seated in her stern, and made for Seatown, a little creek some five miles farther down the coast; and, having landed there her passengers, had presently returned to the ship bearing but one of them. And, moreover, in conclusion, how an hour before (that is, before I reached the Cobb) Master Thomas Tye, surveyor of the port of Lyme, and some of his men, had rowed out to the ships themselves for information, gone aboard the frigate, and had not since been seen.

Most of this I learned from our deputy searcher of customs, Master Samuel Dassell, who, armed with his powerful telescope, stood close to me, and kept an eye on everything.

Again, some thought the vessels Dutch, some French (I remember Dassell stood quite firm for Dutch); some dubbed them pirates, others privateersmen: but one and all agreed 'twas passing strange they flew no colours, and that the frigate veiled her guns; and therefore that the whole thing had an ugly look.

You may be sure I did not hear all this without thinking of the amazing things which I had seen, read, and heard that very morning at The Havering. Indeed, the more I stared at the three black invaders of our bay, the more my thoughts flew inland to that which lay hid behind the secret panel in my father's study, until at length the ships and box of ebony seemed joined in one black plot.

But, as our old sergeant used to put it when he caught us loose–let us have no mooning. Nor was there much chance for it that morning; for just as I was

squinting at the ships through Dassell's spyglass, the crowd behind us swayed about, and a fisherman came elbowing and panting through it.

"Well, and what now, Joe Rockett?" asked Dassell, turning on him sharply. "Dost bring us news from Seatown, then?"

"News?" gasped the fellow, wiping the sweat from his forehead, for 'twas mighty hot. "News? Aye, that I do, sir. Cargoes of it!"

"Then let us have it quick," says Dassell. "What is it?"

"Why," replied the fellow, pointing to the ships, "you see them vessels, sir?"

"See 'em!" says Dassell, with a scornful laugh. "Good Lord, yes! Haven't we been staring at 'em for at least three hours?"

"Well," says the man, "just after daybreak a ten-oared boat put off from yonder frigate and came ashore at Seatown creek."

"I know that, Rockett," says the deputy, closing his spy-glass with a snap.

"Aye, maybe you do, sir," continued Rockett, "but maybe neither you nor these gentlemen here know what it brought?"

"No, that I don't. What was it?" asked the deputy.

"Why, what think you now?" says Rockett, casting a swift glance at the enquiring faces gathered round him. "Well, I'll tell 'ee. Three fine pretty gentlemen, wi' swords and pistols, stepped ashore from her, and came along to where some of us was a-spreading out our nets upon the sands, and behind 'em came a seaman carrying a basket filled wi' bottles of canary and neats' tongues. Well, up they comes, gave us the top o' the morning, like the fine gentlemen they were, and then, what think you, friends?–well, if they didn't ask us to join 'em in the neats' tongues and canary! Yes, by my soul they did!"

"And you didn't refuse, eh? No, I'll warrant me you joined them, Rockett," says Dassell, smiling grimly.

"Aye, you'm right there, sir, we did," grinned Rockett, smacking his lips; "and it were wondrous good."

"I'm sure of that," said Dassell. "And what next?"

"Why, then one of 'em asked us if we'd any news to give. And we told him as how 'twas said there was rebellion by the Duke of Argyle up to Scotland.

"'And is that all you've got for us?' he asked; and we told en yes.

"'Well, then, we've got more than that, my man,' says he. 'For, look you, there's rebellion in Ireland, and there's like to be one in England too.' Says we, we hoped not, being much amazed and troubled at the saying. But at that they only laughed and fell a-talking to each other in some unknown tongue. Just then a waft were hoisted from the frigate yonder, and the finest of the three stepped back aboard the boat and rowed away; while t' other two asked us the nearest road to Haychurch, and away they sped as though 'twere life and death wi' 'em."

"And is that all, my man?" asked Mr. Dassell.

"Yes, fore-right it be so, sir," says Rockett.

"And who knows of this at Seatown?"

"Well, there be the Surveyor o' the Customs there. He came down to the shore after these merry gentlemen had gone their way, and we told en all about it. 'Um,' says he, 'the Mayor o' Lyme must know,' and off he goes to Chidcock for his horse; and I came here along the shore. What make you of those vessels, sir?"

"I make no good of them," replied the deputy. "I wager that they're up to mischief."

"Aye, sure," says Rockett. "A ship as flies no flag is like a robber wi' a mask."

"Ah! what's this?" exclaimed the deputy, who was looking through his spy-glass. "Yes, 'tis old Sam Robins in his boat. They hail him from the frigate; he goes alongside. Fool! e has handed up his fish and gone aboard!"

"Blid and 'ouns!" sang Rockett. "Like enough he hath been made a prisoner!"

'Twas true enough; old Robins had been swallowed up, even as Tye and his men were, two hours earlier. Faith! 'twas like the messengers whom Joram sent to Jehu; for whosoever went aboard those ships came not back again. Alas for poor Sam Robins' his sale of fish that morning was to prove the worst he ever made, and cost him dearly in the future.

"I go to seek the Mayor," quoth Dassell, and so passed through the crowd and left us.

With all the happenings of that fateful day I will not weary you. Hour by hour excitement grew, till everyone was on the tiptoe of perplexity and expectation.

As for the Mayor of Lyme, one Gregory Alford, he was wellnigh beside himself because of these three mysterious ships which thus kept beating up and down our bay, and (though a gun was fired from shore) refused to answer or to send the King's boat back to land. A Royalist to his finger-tips, and owner of two vessels doing a fine trade in cloths with the merchants of Morlaix, he was also a bitter persecutor of the Nonconformists, and, at that very time, had the minister and leaders locked up snugly in the jail. For the which he was much hated, Lyme being then a hot-bed of dissent. Thus, when, scarce knowing what he did, he had the town drums beaten, and called out the town guard (a sorry tag of ill-armed men), the people laughed and jeered, and asked how that was going to help the matter.

Not till the afternoon was well advanced did I bethink me to go home, and then 'twas to find the place deserted, save for old Anne, the housekeeper; and she, poor soul, was sorely deaf. After much bawling, I made out that news of the ships had reached even to this quiet spot, and that all our faithless hands–groom,

gardener, boy, and everyone–had gone down to the Cobb. As for my father, she handed me a letter from him. It told me that he had received an urgent summons eight miles inland to the bedside of an old friend who lay dying, and that he would not return till nightfall. A *post scriptum* bade me watch the garden when the dusk came.

This suited me right well. Laughing at the thought of Tubal Ammon, I saddled my mare (the ever-faithful Kitty), rode back to the town, and, having put my horse up at the "George" there, hurried seawards.

'Twas now high tide, and thus the Cobb was cut off from the land;[1] but a great crowd was gathered on the shore, with the drums and town guard in the rear.

[1] The Cobb did not then, as now, join the land, but was out off from it at high water.

Pushing through the throng, I gained a spot near Dassell and the Mayor, and added two more eyes to those already fixed upon the ships, which had now come to anchor in the bay.

"Well, well, what make you of it now?" I heard the Mayor ask Dassell anxiously.

"Rank mischief," snapped the deputy.

"What's to be done, then?"

"Naught can be done, sir. The time for doing has gone by. Had I had my way, the scoundrels should have answered long ago, or been the heavier by some cannon-balls. But now it is too late. We can do naught save watch."

The Mayor groaned aloud; the councillors behind him stared like frightened sheep; but no one had a helpful word to offer.

And so we stood and watched; watched till our eyeballs ached; watched till the sinking sun caught all three vessels in a dazzling glare and made them stand out black as ink, like things of ugly fate. Then, just on sunset, we heard a great commotion on the ships; the ring of sharply-given orders, the hurried tread of feet upon the decks, the creak of pulleys–all these reached us clearly across the smooth, still waters. As for seeing, the glare of sun was all too blinding, and the ships too far away, for us to make out anything beyond a dim, blurred mass of swiftly-moving forms which showed above the bulwarks.

"What is it, think you, Dassell?" asked the Mayor in a fearful, gusty whisper.

"Lowering boats on the off side, I fancy, sir," replied the deputy, as calm as though he had been speaking of the weather.

"Boats!" gasped Gregory Alford, raising his hands. "Boats! What! do you

mean to say they're going to land?"

"I fancy so," said Dassell. "Nay, I am certain sure of it!" he added, raising his voice and pointing. "Hark! here they come!"

Even as he spoke we heard the splash of many oars; and presently five great boats laden with men, and with the captured King's boat following, drew from behind the ships.

At first they seemed to be making for the Cobb itself, but passing that by they swung round to the west of it and headed straight for shore. On seeing this we all ran pell-mell down to the sea. Heavens! how the shingle flew beneath our feet, and what a breathless, anxious crowd it was which gathered near the water! Verily, it seemed as if all Lyme stood waiting. Men, women, children, young and old were there, yet scarce a word was spoken; all eyes were fixed upon those sweeping oars, which brought we knew not what towards us. There was silence on the water, too–no sound save the creak and splash of oars; and I have oft thought since, when standing on that fateful spot, that perchance some dread presentiment of future ill hung over both the comers and the watchers!

The boats drew nearer, until at length we could make out a thick array of sword-hilts, pistol stocks, and muskets. Then, indeed, the crowd buzzed with excitement, and glancing at the Mayor I saw that he fairly quaked with fear, and that his face was deathly white. He tried to speak to Dassell, but he could not.

But there was little time to think of Master Alford, for now the foremost boat had grounded on the shingle, and in a twinkling those aboard were leaping for the shore. Some reached it dry-shod, others jumped short and splashed into the water; but one and all were quickly on the beach. For the most part they were white-wigged, fine-dressed gentlemen, with swords at their sides and pistols in their belts, while many carried muskets also.

They took no heed of us, save that one of them, who seemed to be a leader, turned, and holding up his hand, bade us fall back to make more room–the which we straightway did.

Meanwhile the other boats had drawn close in, and those aboard were leaping shoreward with a will. Eighty odd in all I counted. In the stern of the last boat a man sat all alone. He was arrayed in purple and a big plumed hat, with a single glittering star upon his breast, and wore a jewel-hilted sword. When all else had landed, and he came forward to the bows to follow, someone ran back into the sea, and, uncovering, made a knee for him, in order that he might not wet his feet, and with a gracious bow of thanks he stepped lightly from it to the shore. And then I knew him; for notwithstanding that five years had left some mark upon it, there could be no mistake about that face of almost girlish beauty: and as he stood there for a moment in the slow of the sunset methought it was small wonder that the common people worshipped him.

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THE LANDING OF THE DUKE OF MONMOUTH

THE LANDING OF THE DUKE OF MONMOUTH

"Monmouth!"

At first the magic word sped through the crowd from mouth to mouth in startled whispers; then, suddenly, as though by one consent, a great shout rent the air:

"A Monmouth! A Monmouth! Liberty! The Protestant religion!"

Again and yet again the ringing cry uprose, until the grey old cliffs behind us seemed mad with echoes; then, as the last shout died away, a voice which sounded like a puling child's after such tumult broke out upon the outskirts of the throng:

"Traitors! Treason!"

Looking round that way I saw good Master Gregory Alford speeding for the town as fast as two fat legs could carry him, his coat-tails flying wide upon the wind.

Verily the Mayor of Lyme had proved full bitterly that high estate is apt to have its drawbacks; and also that "A Certain Person" had made no bad choice of landing-places.

The drums and town guard had already disappeared; so also had friend Dassell.

CHAPTER V
The Man with the King's Evil

'Twas plain to see by the glowing look upon his handsome face how touched the Duke was by these joyous acclamations. Doffing his hat he bowed both graciously and long; then, as he raised his hand for silence, a sudden hush fell on the eager throng before him.

"Dear friends," said he, in a voice that rang out clear and sweet upon the stillness, "I thank you more than words can tell for the thrice-hearty welcome ye have given me back to that country from which, as ye know, I have so long been exiled. Dear people, this is neither time nor place for speech-making, but as for the reason of my coming–well, methinks the cries which just now fell upon mine ears proclaim how thoroughly ye are aware of it. Truth, like good wine, needs little bush, and certainly those words of yours rang true as Spanish steel; for verily, dear friends, I am Monmouth, your Monmouth, son of your late beloved King, the champion of that Protestant religion which ye hold so dear, and of those

liberties which are the very birthright of our country."

At this another mighty shout went up of "Monmouth! our Monmouth! Liberty! The Protestant religion!" and while the air still rang with it, a woman, well advanced in years, ran from the crowd, and kneeling at the Duke's feet, caught up his hand and kissed it. At first he started back, then, having looked keenly at her face, raised her tenderly and kissed her on the cheek.

It turned out afterwards that she was some old servant who had known him when a boy; and you may be sure that this gracious act endeared him still more greatly to the simple-hearted folk who witnessed it. Indeed, it seemed as if they were all bent on following the ancient dame's example, for with a loud, glad cry the crowd surged towards the Duke, and had not those about him held them back he must have been wellnigh pressed into the sea.

Then Monmouth once more raised his hand for silence.

"Good people all," said he, "ere we set forth upon our enterprise I would have you join in giving thanks to God for merciful deliverance vouchsafed us from the King's ships while at sea."

Uncovering, the Duke knelt down upon the shore, and nearly all the rest did likewise.

To me he seemed to pray both well and earnestly, and none the less so for that his prayer was short. Ah, how little did we think just then that in a few short months many of us would hear prayers and speeches on that very spot from lips which would soon be closed for ever!

On either side of Monmouth knelt two men, who, by the look of them, might also well have let go a prayer, for both were dressed as ministers. He on the right was short and stout, with a rounded, happy face. His eyes and mouth were tightly closed; his hands were clasped before him. The man upon the left was tall and bony, with a face that ill accorded with his garb, being sharp and crafty, and, as I found out when he turned it suddenly towards the glowing sky, blotched scarlet with king's evil. A tousled wig hung down upon his forehead, and beneath it two small villainous black eyes went to and fro as though they were on wires. Throughout the prayer he never ceased to rub his bony hands together like one who washed; while, ever and anon, he jerked forth hallelujahs through his nose. I knew him not from Adam then (I was to know him all too well thereafter!), but, verily, I hated him upon the spot.

Prayer being ended, the Duke unsheathed his sword, and holding it high above his head, cried:

"I draw this weapon in the cause of liberty and true religion, and may God bless the work that lies before us!"

A loud "Amen!" broke from the crowd, and Monmouth said:

"Forward, and let those who are well disposed towards us follow!"

Then Monmouth's men formed up in double file, a blue flag was unfurled, in front of which the Duke took up his place, with a fine-dressed gentleman on either side of him; then those of our townsmen who had the courage of their voices (some hundred odd) fell in behind, and so they all went marching to the market-place.

Here beneath the flag, which bore the motto, *Pro religione et libertate*, a proclamation was read aloud by the lanky, black-eyed minister, whose evil looks had struck me so upon the shore; and as he read he fell at times into the broadest Scotch, which it is quite beyond me to describe. Moreover, what he read was far too long to set down here. Suffice it to say that 'twas one long indictment of the King (or, as they put it, James, Duke of York), charging him, among other crimes, with having poisoned his brother, the late King Charles, and ending with these words:

"Now let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God; and the Lord do that which seemeth good unto Him."

While the reading of this long tirade was going forward I sought some information.

"Who are those two fine-dressed men who stand on either side the Duke?" I asked of a sour-faced fellow at my elbow.

"Those are Monmouth's generals," he answered with a snivel. "He on the right is Lord Grey of Wark, of whom I cannot say much; but he on the left is Master Fletcher of Saltoun, a man well skilled in carnal warfare, a godly man to boot."

"Ah, and that round-faced minister who tries to look so solemn and yet cannot. Who is he?"

"'Tis Master Hooke, the Duke's private chaplain, a worthy man, I trow, though somewhat Popish of appearance."

Just then the reader of the declaration turned himself to get a better light, and the setting sun fell full upon his blotched, scorbutic cheek and made it look as though 'twere stained with blood.

I gazed upon him spellbound for a moment, then I asked:

"And prithee, who is he that reads?"

The voice of my informant dropped into a solemn whisper, as though 'twere something sacred that he spoke of, as he answered:

"That is Doctor Robert Ferguson, chaplain to Monmouth's army, and a terror to all workers of iniquity."

On hearing this I started round as though the man had struck me, and barely saved myself from crying out.

"What's that?" I gasped. "Ferguson the Plotter?"

The fellow glowered upon me for a space, looking me up and down with

angry eyes.

"Thy tongue wags over free for one so young," snarled he at last. "Nay, Ferguson the godly. See how his face lights up with blazing zeal!"

But that was enough for me. Gaining the outskirts of the crowd I hurried to the "George" to get my horse, pursued by such a hornet's nest of wild, bewildering thoughts as fairly made my head sing.

On coming near the jail I heard a great commotion going forward, and there, as I live, was Simon Jackson, the Nonconformist blacksmith, bare-armed and sledge in hand, raining fierce blows upon the stout, nail-studded door. He had already burst the town-hall open to make a storage place for Monmouth's baggage, and was now bent on setting free his brother Nonconformists, who, as I have said, had lately been imprisoned by the Mayor.

Even as I looked the door flew open with a crash, and out stepped half a score of white-faced, startled men, among them old Sampson Larke, the grey-haired Anabaptist minister.

"There," methought as I turned away, "falls the pride and power of Master Gregory Alford!"

I found the inn yard humming with excitement. Serving men and maids ran to and fro distracted; for the news had already reached outlying villages, and men poured in from every quarter, some armed and eager, others idly curious, but all of them hot and thirsty, and calling loudly to be served with ale: while on a top step stood the landlord, surveying the giddy sight like one bedazed. The name of Monmouth was on every lip, and each new-comer added to the din.

Shouldering my way through the buzzing, drinking throng I made for my horse. The stable in which I had left her lay round a dark, far corner of the yard, and on turning this I noticed that the door was closed and that a flickering light showed underneath it. This surprised me not a little, and hurrying up I tried the door. To my great astonishment I found it fastened on the inner side. I called, but no one answered save my mare, who gave a joyous whinny. Listening for a moment I made out voices talking in a whisper, and thus feeling certain that some mischief was afoot I put my shoulder to the door (an ancient, rickety affair) and burst it open. Then indeed I started back, as well I might, for there was my horse already saddled, while beside her stood two burly, steel-capped fellows, armed with sword and pistol. One of them held a lantern, the other Kitty's bridle, and both regarded me with guilty, startled faces, like the thieving dogs they were.

Just then the mare turned round her pretty head to look at me, and neighed again.

"Is this thy mare?" asked he who held the bridle.

"Well–yes," I answered; "at least, that is, I thought it was; but now it seems as though I must have been mistaken."

"Thou hast a mocking tongue, young man," whined he who held the lantern.

"Yet that were surely better than a thieving hand," quoth I.

"What mean you?" he asked, taking a step towards me.

"Exactly what I say," I answered slowly. "In other words, you are a pair of sneaking thieves."

At that each laid a hand upon his sword and eyed me fiercely, while he with the light came forward in a threatening fashion.

"We are no thieves," he hissed, showing his yellow teeth. "We claim thy mare for the cause."

"And, prithee, what cause is that?" I asked.

"The cause of liberty and truth," whined he.

"The cause of Monmouth, eh?"

He nodded frowningly.

"Then," said I, "if liberty and truth go hand in hand with thieving, may God help the Duke! Let go that bridle," I added, striding up to the fellow who had laid a hand on it again.

He hesitated for a moment, glaring upon me with a pair of angry, bloodshot eyes; but, though only eighteen years, I topped him by a good three inches, and doubtless my face told tales besides. Growling something anent "godless upstarts" he drew back sulkily and joined his comrade by the door which he had closed. And there they stood muttering together and casting ugly glances at me.

Turning Kitty round, I took her bridle on my arm and moved towards them.

"Open that door," I said, "and let me pass."

But they were two to one, and odds give courage even unto cowards. Whipping out their swords they set themselves against the door.

"You leave that horse or go not," said one.

"Aye, verily," quoth the other.

Stopping, I also drew my sword and said:

"Ah! say you so? Listen; do you know that I have but to call, and half a score good friends will come to teach you honesty? Again, I say, open that door and let me pass."

"Ah!" jeered the fellow who had closed it. "You come not over us with that, young man. Know you that we also have some friends without; not half a score, but three score–well-armed withal, and zealous in the cause to boot."

There was ugly truth in that. I thought swiftly for a moment. Yes, 'twas my only chance!

"Fools!" I cried. "You do not know what business I am bent on!"

"Nay, how should we know it?" growled the bridle man. "What is it?"

"Why, such as, if you knew it," I replied, "methinks would make you open

that door with right goodwill."

"Prithee then, tell us what such mighty business is," sneered the other. "Whom doth it concern?"

"One Robert Ferguson," I answered slowly.

At that the fellows started as though my words had been a pistol barrel.

"Ferguson!" quoth one of them uneasily. "Our godly chaplain!"

I nodded, though more than doubtful of the godliness; and he added:

"Why, then, didst not tell us this before, friend?"

"What now!" I shouted with a show of anger as I sheathed my sword. "Am I, then, to cry my business out to every brace of thieves I meet?"

"You speak with heat, not knowing," whined the lantern-bearer. "Verily, we are no thieves, but honest fighters for the cause, seeking horses, which are sorely lacking. And if we had known the nature of thy business, we—-"

"Fool!" I broke in fiercely. "Cease thy prating, and open that door at once, or methinks 'twill be the worse for you. One word of this delay to Dr. Ferguson, and—-"

Back flew the door, and, as I moved slowly forward, the opener of it laid a trembling hand upon my arm, saying:

"Pray you, sir, get not two honest fellows into trouble. 'Twas done in ignorance."

"I will consider that," I answered sternly, striding beside my mare into the yard with great relief. Truly, one Ferguson had served my purpose handsomely!

Turning to the left, in order to avoid the crowded yard, I passed down a well-known entry, and so came out into a dark and now quite deserted street.

"That was a narrow squeak, old girl," I whispered, stroking Kitty's silken neck, and, as though she understood, the pretty creature whinnied gently. Then I mounted, and away we fled for home.

In view of what had happened at the stable, I judged it best to keep as far as possible to by-ways; and so, instead of going through the town (the nearest road), I struck into a narrow, high-banked lane with sheltering trees on either side.

'Twas now dusk. Far off I heard the tumult of the town, rising and falling in a ceaseless hum; but here all seemed silent and deserted. Yet, even so, it was not long before I proved that Monmouth's men were guarding even such unlikely avenues; for just as Kitty, with a hill before her, dropped into an easy trot, I suddenly made out a group of fellows gathered near the top, beneath the shadow of a tree.

This was plaguy awkward, but yet more so when, as I drew nearer, they spread themselves across the road, and I made out they were armed with muskets. Still, there was nothing for it save to put a bold face on the matter; so, bringing

Kitty to a walk, I went forward whistling carelessly, and had come within fifty yards of them, when one, who seemed to be a leader, stepped out, and holding up his hand, cried:

"Stop! Thy name and business, friend!"

At that I pulled up the mare, and shouted back:

"What's that you say?"

Fingering his musket-lock, he came a few steps nearer me, and bawled:

"Thou'rt somewhat hard of hearing, friend. I said, Thy name and business? Prithee, give both quickly."

"My name is of small account," I answered; "and for my business, know that it concerns one Robert Ferguson."

That name had done so well for me before, that I could think of nothing better; but, alack! it failed me this time.

"That will not serve thee, friend. 'Tis not sufficient," quoth the man sternly. "If thy business indeed concerns our chaplain, show thy pass, or give the watchword."

"Aye, verily! thy pass or watchword," sang another who had now come up with him.

Here, truly, was an ugly state of things. To turn and flee might mean a musket-ball for me or Kitty. I thought a moment. Yes, to surprise them was my only chance.

"The watchword, say ye? Yes, with all my heart."

So saying, I bent forward in the saddle, and, pressing my knees upon the mare's flanks, spoke softly to her. She gave an angry snort, down went her ears, and next instant she was rushing forward like a mad thing.

'Twas all so sudden that, for the nonce, those valiant keepers of the road were utterly confounded. With startled cries, they broke and fled towards the banks. Yet barely was I past them ere a musket-shot rang out, and a ball sang dangerously near my head. Another and another followed, but by that time I was beyond their reach.

Not till I was well past Uplime did I draw rein; then, pulling up beside a little wood, I stopped to breathe and think. Truly, my mare and I had already had a taste of what rebellion meant. A few short hours had made our quiet roads unsafe for honest men. "'Tis a pretty thing," I muttered, "if a fellow cannot ride home peacefully without the danger of a pistol bullet through his head. If this be the way of 'honest Protestants', then give me Popery! The sooner I am at The Havering, the better."

With that I turned my horse, and, entering a lonely lane, which, as it seemed, was certain to prove empty, cantered on my way. But I had not gone far before I overtook some half-score fellows who were hurrying Lymewards.

As they drew aside to let me pass, I reined up suddenly and scanned their faces. They were heavy, lumbering yokels, farm hands for the most part, and several were known to me.

"Well, and whither go you?" I asked.

"Up over, into Lyme," said they, "to join the Duke o' Monmouth. Hast not heard the news, sir?"

"Yes, I have heard it right enough," I answered; "but, if you would be warned in time, go home again, for methinks your present way leads straight to hanging."

Their mouths fell open at my words, and for a moment there was silence; then one of them, a big-limbed fellow, cried:

"A Monmouth! Down with Popery! The Protestant religion!"

The others joined in lustily, and so I left them and rode on. Alack! I was to see three of those simple-minded rustics dangling from a rope-end in the days to come!

On drawing near Hay House (a lonely place), where lived the Mayor of Lyme, I saw a horse come out into the road, with two men on it, riding double.

This seemed so strange that I must needs pull up to look at them, and so, as they came abreast of me, I found the foremost one was Dassell. Both had swords and pistols.

"What now?" said I.

"Hush!" said he. "The very trees have ears to-night. I ride to raise the country on these rebels–to Crewkerne first–and friend Thorold here goes with me."

"Yes, but why ride ye so?" I asked.

"Because there is no other way," he answered, smiling grimly. "'Tis certainly a heavy beast–a coach-horse surely; but 'twill serve, methinks. At any rate, 'twas the only horse in Master Gregory's stable."

"And is the Mayor at home?"

"Nay, there is no one save his sister. All his men have joined the rebels. The Mayor fled long ago to Exeter, to warn the Duke of Albemarle."

"And save his skin!" said I. "Well, have a care. The roads are guarded, and 'tis but a chance that I am not the heavier by a bullet."

"Ah! is that so?" quoth Dassell, glancing at his pistols.

"It is," said I, and, wishing them God-speed, rode on my way.

On reaching home I found the yard deserted, and so, vowing vengeance on our truant fellows, I led Kitty to the stable. There I had removed her harness, fed and watered her, when I heard a footstep just outside; and turning, found my father standing in the doorway with a lantern in his hand.

"Is that you, my son?" he asked, in a voice which methought was strange and hollow.

"Yes, sir," I answered, and was about to start forth on a full account of all that I had seen and heard, when, as my father raised the light, I noticed that his face was deathly white, and that his eyes were full of fear, a look which I had never seen in them before. Then, and not till then, I thought of Tubal Ammon, and the guarding of the window.

"What is it, sir?" I asked with great anxiety.

"Come, quickly, Michael," he replied, and turning, led the way towards the house.

He took me straight into the study, where one glance sufficed to prove that something bad had happened. The window, a pane of which above the fastener had been broken, lay wide open; papers were littered on the floor; while with a thrill of fear, I noticed that my mother's portrait was displaced.

"Father, what is wrong?" I asked, turning to the spot where he stood staring at me in dumb, frightened fashion.

He made no answer, but going over to the secret panel, opened it, and pointed to a darkened corner.

With trembling hand I took a candle from the table, and, kneeling, looked inside.

The Black Box was not there!

CHAPTER VI
"Too Late"

When I glanced up, amazed and stupefied, it was to find my father's eyes fixed on me with a look that I shall ne'er forget. 'Twas one of fear, and bitterness, and deep reproach. For a moment I was stricken dumb, then, scarce knowing what I said, I gasped:

"Gone! How?"

My father waved a hand towards the window, and, in a low voice, answered:

"You have failed me, Michael."

I did not, could not answer him, and so he went on in the same low, crushing voice:

"Yes, Michael, you have failed me utterly. You have placed your father in the shadow of the gallows."

Those words to me were like the plunging of a knife into my heart. Shame,

self-reproach, could silence me no longer.

"Sir!" I cried, springing to my feet, and facing him with tight-clenched hands, and burning cheeks, "you judge me harshly! I did not fail you willingly! I—-"

"You did not get my letter, then?" he put in sternly.

"Yes, sir, I got your letter, but other stirring things clean drove it from my mind."

"And, pray, what stirring things are those?"

"Why, hast not heard the news?"

"I have heard naught. I have not long returned, and though methought I heard a sound of some commotion in the town, I took but little heed. My thoughts were far away. My friend is dead. But, say, what news is that which made you fail your father?"

"Duke Monmouth landed here, at Lyme, to-night!"

With one deep, sobbing groan, my father staggered back into a chair, and there sat, limp and helpless, like a man bereft of reason.

"Monmouth–landed–here–at–Lyme!" he gasped at length. "Then are we utterly undone, and both may look upon the gallows as our own. For, verily, the words I spake this morning are now proven. He who hath thus put us into jeopardy is in truth a creature of that plotter, Robert Ferguson, and—-"

"Nay, sir," I broke in desperately, like one who grasps at silken threads to save himself; "it surely is not proven yet–perchance some other—-"

In speaking I had moved a step towards my father, and now, as if to mock me and to prove his words, a something grated underneath my foot. Stooping, I picked it up; and holding it upon my outstretched palm, stared at it fixedly.

"'Tis proven now," I murmured.

"What's that?" rejoined my father, starting forward in his chair.

"The sign of Tubal Ammon," I replied, still gazing hard at what lay in my hand. "'Tis one of those small carven balls he did his trick with by the roadside. He has been here beyond a doubt."

"I knew it, and no proof was needed," groaned my father, sinking back again. "And not only hath he robbed me, but he most likely heard and saw all that passed between us here this very morning. Oh, Michael, Michael! to think that you, my son, should thus have failed me!"

He wrung his hands.

"Yes, yes! and I will make amends for it," I answered fiercely, as, hand on sword, I turned towards the door.

"Stay! whither go you?" cried my father.

"To seek this fellow out," I answered savagely. "To find him, and–to kill him."

"Then save yourself the trouble," rejoined my father firmly. "Two follies never made a wise thing yet, and never will. And this were rankest folly. For, look you, this fellow Ammon will be far away by now; aye, verily, perchance aboard ship, making for his master."

"Not so," said I, "for his master is already here in Lyme."

"What!" cried the old man, springing to his feet. "Ferguson in England?"

"Yes, he landed with Monmouth here to-night." And in a few hot, breathless words I told him all that I had seen and heard that day; while he paced to and fro, now stopping for a moment, now spreading out his hands, and all the time casting wild, hunted glances round the room.

"Michael," he said when I had finished, "the bolt is shot, and nothing now can save me from the gallows; nay, verily, I feel the noose about my neck already."

"No, no!" I cried out in my desperation. "Say not that. I cannot bear it. There is still hope that naught may come of it."

"There–is–no–hope," replied my father, slowly. "Whatever comes of this rebellion, Ferguson will still have power to bring me to account–to crush me! Nor will he stay his hand. I know him well. To be avenged is very life to him. Yes, Ferguson the Plotter will have vengeance! There is no hope! Oh, why is this? Why have I lived to see this awful day?"

Clenching his hands, he raised them high above his head, and stood before me thus–a haunting picture of despair and anguish, awful to remember. It seemed as though the hands were raised to curse me; but it was not so, for, as I stood there with bowed head, they came down gently on my shoulders.

"Michael," he said, "take not this thing too much to heart. You spoke truly–I have judged you harshly. The fault is mine, not yours; for had I not first trafficked with this Ferguson, for the sake of usury, for filthy lucre, this had not happened. Yes, yes, the fault is mine, and whatever evil comes of it, no harm shall come to you. I swear it. Forget my hasty words."

A curse had been much easier to bear than this.

"Nay, sir, I will not have it so," I almost shouted. "The fault is mine. I have been faithless, as you said, and would now make amends for it. What can be done?"

"Hush!" said my father gently. "Naught can be done–to-night. I would think this matter over quietly, alone, here. Therefore, leave me, Michael; go to rest. We may see clearer in the morning. Good-night, my son!"

Our hands met in a long, firm grip, even as they had done in the early morning of that selfsame day, when I had sworn strict secrecy concerning that which now, alas! through my unfaithfulness had thus been turned into a power of threatening danger.

Going over to the fatal, mischief-working window, I slowly closed the tell-

tale casement; then once more turned towards my father; and spite of all his efforts at concealment, I read within his eyes the awful words "Too late!" And so I left him.

CHAPTER VII
The Plotters

Such had been the throbbing interest and excitement of that eventful day, that I had taken scarcely anything to eat or drink–I had not thought of it–and now my only craving was for water. Of that I took a long, cold draught, then went up to my lonely bed-chamber. But not to rest; there could be no rest for me now!

Pacing the room I thought bitterly of the state of things, and how different it might all have been but for my own surpassing carelessness; thought, too, of the old man who sat lonely and disconsolate below; of Tubal Ammon and his mischief-working master.

Thus to and fro I went, I know not for how long, while shame and self-reproach hung close and heavy at my heels: but at every turn the hopelessness and desperation of my mind increased, until at length I could endure my thoughts no longer. The confines of that little chamber seemed to grow smaller and more suffocating every moment, until they were as those of some pestiferous dungeon in which I was a maddened prisoner. I must do something–take action, no matter how preposterous and wild–or lose my senses.

Going over to the open window I stood there looking out across the bay. A cool sea breeze played most refreshingly upon my heated face; I drew it in with thankfulness.

The tumult in the town had sunk to silence, the night was dark and still as death. Far off I saw the bobbing lanterns of the three black ships whose coming had so altered everything.

It all seemed like a dream or ugly nightmare, and I was thinking so when suddenly I saw a tiny twinkling light upon the cliffs, it might be half a mile away. On this–I know not why, unless it was presentiment–my eyes became fixed in a fascinated stare. Who at such an hour ('twas now close on midnight) had business in so desolate and wild a spot? Barely had I asked the question, when another light, a trifle larger, blinked forth in answer, some distance from the first one. Even as I watched, they quickly drew together, got close enough to make them

seem one light, and then were lost to me.

Here, then, was what I craved for–chance of action! Some mystery was afoot there on the cliffs. I would endeavour to make out the nature of it.

Recking nothing of the risks I ran, careless of everything save blessed movement, I stuck two loaded pistols in my belt, crept downstairs with a noiseless stealth, and left the house.

If ever youth went forth blindfolded on a reckless, wild adventure, I surely was that youth; if ever mind was nearly bursting with a hare-brained folly, such certainly was Michael Fane's as he passed out into the darkness of that fateful night. Yet, had I been assured that Death himself was waiting to embrace me in his icy clasp, 'tis certain I would still have gone. Fate urged me on, nor did I need much driving.

As I have said, the night was dark, the moon being hidden by a mighty bank of clouds: and naught was to be seen save here and there a twinkling light among the distant houses of the town, where doubtless some late sitters talked upon the happenings of that stirring day, or those engaged upon rebellion laid their plans. Thus I had nothing more than chance to guide me to the spot where the two tell-tale lights had drawn so close together and then vanished.

Going full cautiously, stopping every now and then to listen, I crept across the open space which lay between me and the cliffs. Bush and bracken broke the ground at intervals, and thus, with no clear path discernible in such a darkness, it behoved me to move warily, lest by stumbling I might warn instead of catch.

Thus going in and out among the shrubs and ferns, and ever moving like some beast of prey, I came at length upon the narrow path which runs along the cliff-top. There, beaten, and inclined to curse my foolishness, I stood straight up and listened.

A rabbit scuttered somewhere close at hand, the sea moaned plaintively upon the shore below me, but not another sound was to be heard; it seemed, indeed, as though the silence whispered of my folly!

Had, then, my eyes deceived me? Had a seething, maddened brain struck lights where no lights were! It seemed so; or, if not, the bearers of those lights had gone their way, for I was certain that I was not far from where they had thus strangely met and disappeared. Yes, truly, I was minded to call one Michael Fane a fool!

Stay, though, what was that? A hundred yards or so away, across the scrub, I caught the sudden twinkle of a lantern. With bated breath I watched it for a moment, then, dropping down upon the ground, moved towards it like a slinking tiger. Scarcely had I started ere the light vanished just as quickly as it came, but that did not stop me. On hands and knees, feeling for every bush, I crawled on through the darkness. The cracking of the tiniest twig seemed like a gunshot to

my anxious, straining ears, my tight-held breathing like the roaring of a grampus.

So slow and stealthy were my movements that a score yards took near half as many minutes: and having covered double that without result except a good array of scratches, I had again begun to doubt my eyes and mutter at my folly, when, as I paused a moment to consider matters, a sound like that of humming voices reached me from ahead.

Kneeling, I listened breathlessly, and with an eagerness as though my very life depended on the act, and yet, for all I knew, it might have been but poachers setting out their snares; therefore 'twould seem indeed as though black fate and dread presentiment went hand in hand that night.

As near as I could tell, the voices came from a spot not far away, and straight ahead of me, but so low and muffled were they that 'twas no easy matter to judge rightly on this point.

For a time I knelt there listening with all my might, first cocking this ear and then that, but all in vain–not one word reached me: the buzzing hum continued in a maddening fashion; indeed, it might have been a hive of droning bees for all that I could make of it.

Down on all-fours I went again, and, with the sound to guide me, crawled towards it.

Some twelve yards farther on I once more stopped to listen, and thus discovered that the talkers were on the far side of a ridge or hillock up which I had commenced to climb; and what was more, I made out that which stiffened me with dread, and set my heart off thumping like a hammer. For now I was near enough to separate the voices, low though they were, and one of them spoke in broadest Scotch–'twas Ferguson's; while the other there was no mistaking either–Tubal Ammon's!

Digging my fingers deep into the turf, for very fear lest overmastering astonishment should cause me to exclaim and so betray myself, I paused a moment, then, with cat-like stealth, crept up the bank.

'Twas a risky, daring business sure enough; the snapping of a twig, the rattle of a stone, and I had brought on me two desperate fellows, who would as soon take life as toss a penny. Still, as it seemed to me, 'twas worth a world of danger–nay, 'twas a stroke of glorious luck–to come thus on those two arch-plotters in their midnight tryst, catch them red-handed, as it were, and, perchance, confound them. And had I needed any goad to urge me forward (which I did not), there was the thought of him whom I had wronged, and who doubtless even then sat lonely and distracted in his study, brooding helplessly upon the dangers which beset him.

Thus I crept up, foot by foot–nay, inch by inch were nearer to the mark, my going was so slow–until at last I was near enough to make out wellnigh every

word as it was spoken. Then, stretched full length upon the cool, soft turf, I lay there with a thumping heart and listened, drinking in all I heard as greedily as ever thirst-parched man drank water.

"'Tis so, then," Ferguson was saying; "you come here to drive a hard and grievous bargain, eh?"

"Aye, truly," answered Ammon; "no words could put it better: a bargain–a hard and grievous bargain if you will."

"And not to serve the godly cause?" whined Ferguson.

"Pish to your godly cause!" sneered Ammon. "I trow its value is the same to both of us–and that is money."

"What's that?" returned the chaplain fiercely.

"Cold truth, and nothing else," replied the other. "Look you, Doctor Robert Ferguson, methinks we know each other well–at least 'tis time we did. You, for a groat, would kill a man; by the same token, so would I. Let that suffice us both. We came not here to warble sweet religion through our noses, but to bargain. Let us therefore to the business of the night, without more vain pretence, or, by the Lord, I will away and leave you wanting what you hoped to gain."

"Enough!" groaned Ferguson. "A godless man is not to be persuaded of his evil-doing."

"Nor yet beguiled," snapped Ammon.

"Tut, tut, no more of that. You named a price. Let's see, now" (here I heard him scratch his tousled wig), "was it not fifty guineas?"

"The godlessness is on your side, methinks, friend Ferguson," sneered Ammon. "For verily you have a lie upon your lips. Full well you know the price was double that."

"What?" cracked Ferguson. "A hundr-r-ed guineas! Why, 'tis shee-r-r madness, man! Pr-r-e-poster-rous!" (His "r's" rolled like a drum.)

"Nathless, 'tis my price," returned the other coldly.

"But, man, good man! I have not such a wicked price upon me!"

"Another lie! for verily I see your pockets bulging with it. Have a care, friend Ferguson, or it may well go higher still."

"Nay, nay, that were impossible. Come, friend, let us bargain fairly. Say eighty guineas, and 'tis yours this instant."

"A hundred guineas!" answered Ammon sharply, "and that also instantly, or verily I take the thing away with me for ever. Look you, friend Ferguson, for over half an hour we have sat parleying here, and still you clutch your filthy gold and strive to trick me of my due. Have I not risked my very life to get this paltry thing, and was not the price agreed upon between us? Aye, verily; and unless 'tis paid down now, before these lips of mine have counted ten, that which you crave is gone from you for ever. Methinks I might make more of it elsewhere.

One–two—-"

"Stay! the box is with you, is it?" asked the chaplain, as a man who clutches at a straw.

"Fool!" snapped Tubal Ammon. "Have I not told thee so at least a dozen times already. Three–four–five—-"

"Then prove it! Let me see it. Thou hast not done that yet."

"True, by my life, for once. Then here it is. Six—-"

"Ah, my wee, black, bonny bairn! How dear thou wast to me! Wilt let me hold it, friend?"

"Yes, when the gold is counted out. Not till. Seven–eight. Nine!"

"Hast the key to it?"

"Nay, how should I? But 'tis easily forced open."

"Then I must prove the contents ere I pay so vast a sum. That is but fair; for, look you, friend, the box might very well be empty."

"'Tis not so," answered Ammon. "Listen!" He shook it, and I heard the fatal papers rustle.

"But other papers might have been put in," persisted Ferguson. "Therefore, I say, it must be proven. Burst it open, friend; but have a care in doing so, for verily I love it as a child."

The love of Tubal Ammon for it did not seem to count for much, for, with what sounded like a savage crack, he forced the lock and dragged the papers forth.

"Ah, let me see them! Give them to me," said the chaplain eagerly.

"Nay, not so quick, friend Ferguson," quoth Ammon. "Not till the price is paid, that is. Mayst see them if you will, but nothing more. Look you, here they are!"

I heard him smooth the parchments out; then caught the flicker of a lantern as he held it up for Ferguson to see them.

"What? there are three of them!" exclaimed the chaplain. "Well, that boots not. The one I want is there–the one you hold in front. Now, place them here betwixt us, underneath the box, while I count out thy most extortionate reward."

He gave a cracking laugh, of which the other took no heed; then came the clink of slowly-counted gold, the counting of a usurer who weighed each piece and loathed to part therefrom. "Thou art a hard, tight-fisted fellow, Tubal Ammon," snarled Ferguson when all was ready. "Here, then, is thy hard-wrung price, and may the Lord requite thee for the taking of it from a man so poor as me!"

Here Tubal Ammon laughed (or barked, were a truer name for it) and said:

"'Tis well; now we are quits, methinks, for each hath what he sorely wanted. As for your poverty, most worthy chaplain, I would right gladly barter

it for mine. Yea, friend, I always thought you rich, yet was not sure of it; and now that it is clearly proven–now I learn that thou art poor! Enough; we never know the truth. *Docendo discimus.* Pardon such faulty Latin. But, what say you, shall we now let go a psalm upon the night? Truly, our voices are a trifle cracked, but yet methinks 'twould make a fine duetto. Hark you! Like this–join in!"

He raised a rasping, high-pitched voice, and sang a note or two.

"Stop, fool!" hissed Ferguson. "Wouldst bring danger on us? We know not who may be in earshot of such owlish screeching! Art clean daft?"

"Nay, only wondrous happy," answered Ammon.

"Yes, and why?" growled Ferguson. "Because, like Shylock, thou hast claimed thy pound of flesh?"

"Yea, verily, and got it; which is much more to the point."

"Yes, got it," quoth the chaplain bitterly. "Wrung it from me like the clutching Jew you are. Let that suffice, and add not gibe to injury."

"Ah, no! was ever miser yet who could bear parting with his gold, no matter how it had been earned?" sighed Ammon mockingly.

"The devil take thee!"

"Nay, I am his already–thanks to thee, most godly chaplain."

"Provoke me not too far," hissed Ferguson. "I am not to be trifled with. You know me well, friend Ammon."

"Yes, verily, I know you far too well."

"Then keep your rasping tongue still. There was more inside the box than I had bargained for; and I would scan these papers carefully in peace."

"And by the same token, sir," mocked Ammon, "I would fain count my money, lest, haply, thou hast overpaid me. Thus are we quits again."

Here, then, I had the real Tubal Ammon, so different from the sly, tale-telling wretch whom I had met beside the road; and here also was the real Ferguson. But of him I had already known so much that his present character seemed quite in keeping with my knowledge of him.

And now the crackling of parchment and chink of gold was all that reached my ears.

I lay there listening for a while, and then an overmastering desire came over me to look upon these workers of iniquity. Next moment I was moving like a serpent up the bank, holding my breath and fearful lest the very thumping of my heart might give the scoundrels warning and undo me.

At last I gained the ridge, and, having paused a moment, took a cautious peep beneath a little bush. And there I saw a sight indeed. 'Twas worth the risk. The rays of a lantern, set within a cleft, fell on the wicked, red-blotched face of Ferguson, as he sat there, with knees drawn up wellnigh to his chin, poring over his ill-gotten gain; it fell, too, on the evil, cunning face of Tubal Ammon,

as, crouching low, he counted up his money with a greedy care. And, midway between them lay the rifled box. Never have I seen a sight more diabolical, and 'tis, perhaps, small wonder that the thought came rushing to my mind: Two Satans, with the light of Hades on them!

From my hiding-place behind the bracken I stared at them like one bewitched, till Ammon, having dropped the last gold-piece into a leathern pouch, glanced up at his companion. Then, fearing lest he might arise, I ducked my head and drew back down the bank a foot or two.

"Right to a single piece," quoth Tubal, jingling the pouch.

"I knew that well enough," growled Ferguson. "Have you a piece of cord wherewith to fasten up the box?"

"Yes, by my life, here is the very thing," replied the other. "Truly my usefulness exceeds all reckoning."

The chaplain murmured something which I did not catch, then, as it seemed to me, he folded up the papers, placed them in the box, and having tied the cord around it, said:

"And now to further business, friend."

"With all my heart; name it, I pray you," answered Tubal Ammon.

"These Fanes, then; you have seen them both?"

"Yes, more than once. Moreover, the coxcomb of a son I have twice come near killing."

"Ah, and what kind of man is he?"

"A great big lusty fellow, over six feet high. I owe him much, and will repay it. Yea, verily, his days are numbered."

"See thou to that. 'Tis no concern of mine. I have no quarrel with the son. But the old man, the father, Ammon" (here he lowered his voice into an ugly whisper), "he who robbed me–str-r-uck me down–I would have vengeance on that man. Yea, I would have him swept from off the earth. Canst do it?"

"Yes, easily."

"How, then? By pistol, bullet, or by knife?"

"Neither. I have a softer way than those, though no less sure."

"What's that?"

"Why, look you," answered Ammon, after fumbling in his coat, "see here–this tiny bow and arrows; things for boys to play with, say you? And yet a prick from one of them would kill the strongest man within an hour. Naught could save him, for they are dipped in deadliest poison."

"No, no! away with them! away with them!" cried Ferguson. "I could not think of it. 'Twere cruel, heathenish, nay, worse, 'twere rankly wicked!"

"Then, verily, our sense of wickedness is far from tallying, friend," sneered Ammon. "Killing is killing, as it seems to me, and the way of doing it makes little

difference."

"Yes, but poison, friend, poison, I say, were cruel, heathenish; any way but that!"

"Well, we will leave the way, then. You want this man, this Gilbert Fane–well, let us say, removing. Is that so?"

"Yes; for not only do I hate him, but I also fear him somewhat."

"And you would have me do it for you?"

"Yes."

"Then I will do it–at a price."

"Price!" snapped Ferguson. "Oh, thou grasping, greedy fellow. Doth not the hundred guineas cover this small extra service also?"

"Nay, by life it doth not," answered Ammon slowly. "One bargain doth not drive a second."

"Well, well," groaned Ferguson. "What is your price, then? Name it."

"Ten guineas."

"What!" almost shrieked the chaplain. "Ten guineas just to kill a man?"

"Yes, and a low price too. I run great risk in doing it."

"Oh, thou extortioner! thou greedy leech! But, come, 'tis surely but a jest. Say five and I am with thee."

"Ten guineas."

"Eight."

"Ten."

"No, no! I will not pay a sum so wicked."

"Then Gilbert Fane lives on for all I care, and with him, as you just now showed, your fear and hatred of the man."

"O Lord!" sighed Ferguson, "when will this cruel bleeding of me cease? Right well hast thou been named, thou godless, grasping Jew; for was not Tubal one of Shylock's friends? But, say, if I agree with thee, when wilt thou wipe this fellow off the earth? The Duke rides forth from Lyme within a day or two, and I would be assured that Gilbert Fane is dead before I leave. What, then?"

"He shall be dead before this time to-morrow," answered Tubal Ammon firmly.

"But what proof shall I have that it is so?"

"Good proof, sure proof, a proof there can be no gainsaying."

"Name it, then."

"The key that fits that box," replied the other slowly. "It hangs by a ribbon round his neck. I saw it as I watched him through the window. That will I bring as proof."

"Enough, then; 'tis a bargain. Bring me that key and I will pay thy cruel, wicked price. And now let me away before I am clean ruined."

Here both men rose; but now it was my turn. Throughout their foul plotting my blood had risen pell-mell, till now, with the dastardly completion of their bargain, 'twas surging through me like a burning flood, which drowned all power of reasoning, and seemed to make me someone that I knew not. 'Twas wildly, madly planned, I know–nay, 'twas not planned at all. I had done better to have crept up to the ridge and tried to shoot them thence without their knowing it. I had done ten times better still, to have used the knowledge I had gained to save my father and gone off silently, leaving those thrice-accursed fellows in their ignorance. I see that clearly now. But then the power to reason, plan, nay, even think, had clean forsaken me; while as for caution, danger, fear–I knew them not. One fierce, ungovernable wish was mine–namely, to kill these would-be murderers of my father and regain the box.

Drawing a pistol from my belt I rose suddenly and sprang upon the ridge. Ferguson had just picked up the lantern, but now he flung it far away, and uttering one loud, whelping cry of terror, fled off–with both hands raised above his head–into the night. I took a flying shot at him, but all in vain, for he had vanished ere I pulled the trigger.

'Twas far different with Tubal Ammon; snatching up his money-bags he leapt back with a ringing oath, and there I could just make him out, a dim, black, post-like blotch amid the darkness. In haste I whipped the other pistol from my belt.

CHAPTER VIII
A Fight for Life

Click!–click! went both our pistol locks together, and, an instant later, two shots rang out as one. Nor was there much to choose between the aims. Tubal Ammon's bullet grazed my right side beneath the arm-pit; while mine went smash into his money-bag, and ripping it, brought forth a stream of coins which jingled thick and fast upon the ground. Had it not been for this protection, it had most surely been a stream of blood instead, for he had held the bag pressed tightly to his side. Strange that gold should save the life of one who had but just been bartering life for gold!

Again, had it not been for that wild, chancy shot at Ferguson I might have had friend Tubal now, for, instead of fleeing, he dropped straight down and grov-

elled in the gold, filling his pockets with it while he muttered oaths and curses terrible to hear. Doubtless greed held him as its own just then, for though my second pistol had been fired, he must have known he ran great risk; and indeed I might have got him with my sword before he could have saved himself. But the truth is, that the pistol flashes had discovered that which for the nonce made Tubal Ammon seem of small account. The Black Box, bound with cord, lay there straight below me on the turf, dropped or for gotten, as I judged it, by the chaplain in his terror-stricken flight.

Down I jumped into the hollow, and having seized my prize, was up again before you could have counted ten.

Having stuffed the precious thing into my pocket, I stood upon the ridge and once more looked at Ammon. He had risen and gone back a little; thus much I could make out but nothing more, for now he was wellnigh invisible. Dead, awful silence followed, and for the first time since leaving home I felt afraid; afraid, that is, because I could not see this murderous villain clearly, because he was now but a lurking, threatening shadow in the darkness. But just as I was thinking swiftly whether to speed home with what I had so luckily secured, or draw my sword and try to end the mischief-working fellow's life, the heavy westward clouds behind me broke; the moon burst forth; and, in a moment, we were made plain to one another.

There, stiff and straight, stood Tubal Ammon with his hands behind him, as motionless as though he had been carved in cold grey stone. The moon shone full upon his yellow, wrinkled face, and, seen by that ghostly light, he was, indeed, as much like Satan as a man could be. The very gold-pieces, glistening here and there, deep red, among the grass, were to my startled fancy as great drops of blood.

Thus, for the second time within the rounding of the clock, did I and Tubal Ammon face each other; and 'tis small wonder that I, stiff as he, stared at him like one spell-bound. And as I stared, I remember wondering vaguely what had possessed him to remain thus, when he might easily have fled to safety in the dark-ness. Surely not the gold, for he had gathered most of that! What, then? Well, I was very soon to know.

Meanwhile the silence grew appalling, unsupportable. It must be broken.

"Once more!" I shouted.

"Once more," he answered, though in a voice so low and still as barely moved his lips.

"What would you have?" I asked, scarce knowing what I said.

Another silence followed, and then two words came hissing through it like a knife-thrust:

"Your life!"

Although this was no news to me, the utterance of it thus was something of a shock. A threat made face to face gains ugly meaning, especially from such a man as he who stood before me. I paused a moment, then said, slowly:

"Yes, truly, you would kill me and my father also. I am forewarned of that. For, look you, Tubal Ammon, all your foul plans are known to me. I have been listening long enough to hear them one and all."

At that he gave a little start, so small as scarcely to be noticed, then murmured:

"Ah! 'twas well done, friend, well, indeed!"

"Well or ill, 'twas done!" I answered hotly; "and now, listen, thou wicked, murderous jail-bird: before this time to-morrow, the law shall have both you and your accursed master by the heels."

"Ah, say you so?" quoth Tubal Ammon, with a mocking grin. "Well, now, the law is what I take no great account of. It may be well enough for some; but me it neither helps nor hinders, therefore, I say, it comes not in my reckoning."

"That being so," I thundered, whipping out my sword, "I will dispense with it and settle with you now!"

With that I sprang into the hollow bent on killing him, but even as I did so, his hands came from behind him, and in them I beheld the little bow with one of its poisoned arrows ready fitted to the string.

"Stop!" said he. "I give thee warning. Truly this will not carry far, some twenty paces maybe; but come against me and I will promise thee sure death within an hour. Go back, or die! Which shall it be, friend? Choose!"

I did so instantly; for this was like waging warfare with the devil, not with man. Shuddering with horror I leapt back to the crest and once more faced my enemy.

"You have chosen wisely, friend," said he.

"I have chosen as a man must choose when matched against a cruel, murderous demon such as you," I answered.

"Well, now, there is some truth in that," replied the shameless knave.

"Yes, but more in this," I put in fiercely. "Listen Tubal Ammon, limb of Satan, as you surely are! Standing here I utterly defy you, dare you, as an honest man may dare the devil! Do your worst or best, I care not! Nay, I flout both you and your accursed master with those murderous plans which I have overheard this night. I care no more for them or you than that!"

Here I shook my sword at him, and having sheathed it with a loud, emphatic smack, turned and strode down the bank and made for home.

That I was far from easy as to what lay behind me needs no saying, and doubtless it was this that made me hurry when I reached the level ground. Hurry, at least, I did, with long, quick strides; and thus, with a moon to light the way, I

should have reached The Havering (whose chimneys rose above the distant trees) in no time, but for the wicked wiles of Tubal Ammon.

I had left him standing, bow in hand, when I turned my back upon the ridge; and it seemed to me assured that ere he moved he would gather up the gold that yet remained strewn upon the grass: so much seemed certain in a man so greedy, and, by way of proving it, I more than once glanced cautiously behind me.

I had thus gone perhaps a hundred yards, when suddenly I heard what sounded like the gentle clink of coins.

Turning, I drew my sword and looked back, listening carefully, but there was nothing to be seen or heard. The night was still as death, and so, perhaps, thought I, the sound of Ammon gathering up his gold had carried thus far.

At any rate, I saw no reason for alarm, and therefore, with my sword still drawn in readiness, strode on again a little quicker.

Another dozen yards or so, then–chink! chink! chink! Yes, there could be no doubt about it; and 'twas nearer this time.

Remembering my experience with the oak tree, I went on a few more steps as though unheeding, then turned sharply round. The plan succeeded well; for there, sure enough, some fifty yards away, I saw a head pop down behind a gorse bush.

And then, as in a flash, I saw it all. This was Tubal Ammon's latest plan for dealing death; this was why he had remained and waited, and allowed me to depart, as it appeared, without the least concern. I understood. He had meant to follow me in stealth–to creep upon me from behind, and shoot me in the back!

On realizing this I broke out in a sweat of fear and horror. I am no coward, and vow that had it been a clean, straight sword-fight, man to man, I would have waited for my foe without a qualm. But to be done to death in that heathenish and most atrocious fashion was utterly beyond me. I could not face it. Sheathing my sword I turned and fled for my very life.

A low, fierce cry, and the pad of swiftly-running feet broke out behind. Ammon was after me. Taking a quick, back shoulder glance, I saw him coming like the wind. His feet seemed scarce to touch the ground. It was as though the Evil One himself were in pursuit. Never before, I trow, had such a breathless race 'twixt life and death gone forward on those ancient, wave-washed cliffs.

Putting forth all the strength and length of limb which God had given me, I strove to win, but all in vain. The light-toed villain gained upon me every yard, the clink of gold grew nearer, louder, every moment, until there could not have been twenty yards between us, and I could even hear his hissing breath. At any moment now the poisonous prick might come. The thought was unendurable. Better turn round and face sure death than wait for it to strike me from behind, I knew not when.

With this thought in my head, I leapt aside, and such was Ammon's speed that he had gone flying past a good ten yards ere he could stop himself; then, as he turned, I drew my sword out and rushed at him. But he was all too quick for me; with one great, cat-like spring, he saved himself, so that my upraised weapon clave the air: then, as I turned to face him, I saw his evil eye beyond the little bow as he took a hurried, deadly aim.

Hiss! the murderous arrow struck me full in the breast and quivered there, while by the sound of it, it had cut clean through to the bone.

I felt no pain–nay, not a prick–and yet, so certain was I that a slow and hideous death would surely follow, that in the terror of that awful moment my strength seemed to forsake me, my sword fell to the ground, and thus I stood and stared at Tubal Ammon, as some dumb stricken beast might at the giver of its death-blow. I saw his drooping eyelids rise and fall, his body quivered for a moment, then, with a ravening cry, he sprang upon me.

So fierce and sudden was his rush that I had no chance to pick my sword up, and as he leapt upon me I was driven staggering backwards for a yard or two. Then such a fight began beneath that staring moon as makes me shudder when I think upon it.

My strength must have been three times that of Ammon's in the way of common wrestling, but so close and snake-like were his methods that from the first he had the best of it. His legs and arms wound round me like the tentacles of an octopus, every moment tightening with a crushing, suffocating power.

In vain I struck and tore and wrenched: he seemed to have no flesh to bruise, no bones to break; a thing of steel and hide had not been more impervious to blows. His fetid breath was on my face, his cruel eyes were close to mine; it was a very nightmare of a fight, in which all skill and knowledge counted for nothing and were powerless to avail.

Thus to and fro we swayed like one, first this way and then that, until my strength and breath began to fail by reason of the hopeless, stifling struggle. With one last desperate wrench I tried in vain to cast the clinging demon from me. His bony hand shot out and gripped me by the throat, his left leg wound about my right, I staggered for a moment, then fell crashing backward. My head struck something hard, the moon shot zigzag down the sky, and with it went the grinning face of Tubal Ammon. Black darkness followed.

CHAPTER IX

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"THEN SUCH A FIGHT BEGAN AS MAKES ME SHUDDER WHEN I THINK UPON IT"

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The Shadow of Death

"Coome, now, zur, another soop o' this and you'm a man agen."

The words fell on my muffled ears as though the voice were calling from a distance; then the murmur of the sea broke in upon me like a sullen roar, as, with a wild, bewildering rush I rose to life again.

And thus I found that I was sitting up (or lolling like a sack of flour were better words for it), with a knee and arm behind me, while my head, which ached abominably, lay back upon a shoulder. So much I made out in that first dim gleam of consciousness, but for the rest of it I was still half-dazed and could not think.

"Another drop–joost one, zur," urged the voice again.

Something (a leathern bottle, as I found out afterwards) was pressed against my lips. I drew upon it with a will, then nearly choked. Hot, burning stuff it was, that sent the blood a-dancing through my veins like wildfire.

"Brandy!" I gasped, as soon as breath would let me.

"Aye, aye, you'm right, zur. Brandy it be–best French, too."

The cloud of black bewilderment was passing–the voice was now familiar. Glancing up I met the keen grey eyes of Daniel Ratlaw (or Rat as he was called), the greatest thorn in Dassell's side, because he was the king of cargo runners.

"Smuggled?" said I.

"Right agen," he nodded, with a wink. "Smuggled sure enough it were, but mebbe none the worse for that."

"Nay, surely, Rat," I murmured; then sat silent for a time, striving to collect my scattered thoughts, which so far had remained a wild unruly throng. The moon, which I had last seen shooting down the sky with Ammon's head for company, now shone brightly; and what was that which flashed its light back from the grass? My sword! When I saw that, the past rushed on me pell-mell. The poisoned arrow! Surely it was time that death was stealing over me! The throbbing of my head–was that not part of it?

I gave a shuddering downward glance towards my breast. The murderous little shaft was hanging from my coat. Ratlaw's eyes had followed mine and seen it also.

"Whoy, what be that?" says he, and tried to seize it, but I dashed his hand away.

"Have a care!" I cried, "'tis poisoned!"

And with that I plucked the arrow out and cast it clear into the bushes at my back.

"Poisoned!" gasped Dan, and very nearly let me drop.

"Yes," said I, "tipped with deadly poison. Say," I added, "do I look strange? Is my face black, or green, or blue?"

He laughed and answered:

"Nay, 'tis a lovely red, I vow."

That relieved me greatly; still, being far from satisfied, my hand went creeping to the spot where, as it seemed, the arrow had struck clean through to the breastbone, and there, beneath my coat, I felt the Black Box.

"Heaven be thanked!" said I aloud. "It saved me."

"What saved thee, friend?" asked Ratlaw with a puzzled look.

"Nothing," I answered quickly; then added, "or rather, you did, surely."

"Mebbe I did," said he; "you'm right agen, I reckon. Another minute–and—-"

"Yes, yes," I put in eagerly; "pray, tell me all about it"–for indeed it seemed astonishing that Tubal Ammon had not finished me while yet he had the power to do so.

"Well, 'twere like this," quoth Ratlaw. "As I were a-cooming 'long oop over from–well, from minding that as needs the minding, I saw what looked like one great whopping man a-swaying in the moonlight. 'Twere a terror of a thing, I tell 'ee, and I were just a bit afeard; but on I coome, and then may I be drownded if that whopping man did not break clean in two, and one half of it (that's you) went flop. I heard your head go crack upon yon stump, then t'other half jumped on you, and I saw the flashing of a knife. I were close by then–a dozen yards away, not more–so I whips out my hanger here and cooms on roarin' like a lion. Joost in toime and only joost. The knife wor raised to stroike, when, hearing me, he joomps oop, snarls at me loike any dog, and flies off cursing. And oh, the face of en! Zur, if 'twere not the Evil One hisself, who wor it?"

"The Evil One himself," I answered slowly.

"Aye, sure, or you had killed a dozen such as he wi' that." He pointed to my sword.

I nodded, then asked:

"How long have I been here?"

"Mebbe the quarter of an hour."

"Ah! so long? And which way ran this villain?"

"Ran? 'Twere no running, zur," replied Dan Ratlaw. "He flew! Yea, as I live, he sailed above yon bushes like a bat. And may I be clean drownded, zur," he added in an awful whisper, "if blazing fire did not drop from en as he flew."

I understood. Ammon had shed gold in flight.

"But which way did he go?" I asked again.

"Straight for The Havering yonder," answered Rat, "and like enough he'll be a-perching on the roof of it."

Then, for the second time that night, a clammy sweat broke out upon my face. Ammon! The Havering! My father!

"Rat," said I, "I must for home at once."

"Whoy, zur, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Naught, but I must away at once."

"I be afeard thou canst not walk," said he. "Take one more pull at this fust."

He held the bottle to my lips.

"No, not a drop. Give me a hand up, man, that's all," said I.

He did it, and, staggering to my feet, I stood there swaying for a moment, giddy and bewildered. Then, when I had mastered this unsteadiness, I took Dan's hand and said: "You've saved my life, and I shall not forget it."

The trusty fellow rubbed a sleeve across his mouth but answered nothing; then his hand went down into his pocket and came forth glittering with gold.

"See here," said he, with something of a shame-faced look, "I found this on the grass beside thee. Doubtless he meant to take it with him, but—-"

"Nay," I put in quickly, "'tis not mine. 'Twas his, and now is yours by right. Therefore keep it."

"What, his?–the–the devil's?"

"Yes; and, look you, if you search the way he fled you will, methinks, find more of it. That was the falling fire you saw. His pockets bulged with gold."

So saying, I picked my sword up from the ground, and, leaving Ratlaw gaping with amazement, sped for home.

How I ran I know not, for my head was singing like a sea-shell, and my thoughts (if thoughts they could be called) were such a seething medley as it beats me to describe aright. And thus it came about that, scarce knowing how (as one but half-awake, that is), I reached The Havering gates. There I stopped a moment; then, passing through, crept like a thief into the house, and, having gently closed the door behind me, listened. All was silent, save for the mournful ticking of the great hall clock, which in such awful stillness broke on me like a death-knell.

Pressing both hands upon my throbbing head, I tried to think. My father might perhaps yet be up there wrestling with his trouble. If so, I must be ready with that great surprise which could not fail to put his care to flight.

Filled with this hopeful thought, I lit a candle, brought the Black Box forth, untied the binding cord, and opened it. Then, with a throttled cry, I staggered back, as though a blow had struck me. The box was empty! Ferguson had put the papers in his pocket–not in this; and, in his hurried flight, had left behind what was to me of no more value than a stone!

I could have cursed, or wept, or both, at such a bitter mockery as that; but I did neither. For a moment I stood staring blankly at the gaping box; then, having

taken off my shoes, I seized the faithless thing, and, stealing silently upstairs, knocked at the study door. No answer came. I tried the latch. The door was locked. Strange! I had never known my father lock his door by night, though, to be sure, he sometimes did so in the day-time when he did not wish to be disturbed. I knocked again–much louder. Still no answer; then, listening, I heard a stealthy, creeping noise within. I did not wait a moment longer; hurling myself upon the door, I drove it crashing inwards.

Even as I thus burst in, the figure of a man shot past me, and, springing through the open casement, disappeared. Running to the window I looked forth, and saw the black, satanic form of Tubal Ammon fleeing down the moonlit garden. I watched him till he vanished like an evil shadow in the darkness of the trees; then, turning slowly, cast a fearful glance about the room.

At first I could make nothing out, for the candle had burned down into its socket, and all was dark; but, as I left the window, a straggling moonbeam, struggling through the chestnut tree (that fatal chestnut tree!), fell on a silvery patch above a high-backed chair. Slowly, with feet of lead, I moved towards it for a step or two, then stopped. My father sat there, with bowed head, as though he slumbered. What!–had he slept through such a turmoil?

Shaking from head to foot, I went close up and laid a trembling hand upon his shoulder–spoke to him. He neither stirred nor answered. Nay, he would speak no more, for when I took him in my arms I found that he was dead!

CHAPTER X
I Make a Solemn Vow

It may be that I am of a different make from other men–I know not; but in that awful moment, when heaven and earth alike were crashing round me, and my very life itself seemed rent asunder, I neither grieved nor wept. It was, indeed, as though a band of steel had forged itself about my heart and turned me into stone.

If it be hard to have no softened feelings at a time like that, then am I hard as granite; if it be wicked to be filled with vengeful thoughts in face of death, then am I wicked as the Evil One himself: for as I stood there with my father's icy hand in mine (the hand of him who had been everything to me), one thought, and only one, possessed my mind–the fierce resolve to be avenged on those who were his murderers, as truly as was Cain the murderer of Abel.

There was no mark of violence on him, save that his vest had been ripped open, and the key (that proof which was to win the price of blood!) torn from its ribbon. He had been dead some time–the brave, albeit weakened heart had given way at last beneath the strain of threatening danger, and Tubal Ammon, coming to give death, had found it there before him.

So much I noted, swiftly, clearly, as I stood there in that moonlit room of death; then, with the sense of having added years, in moments, to my life, I drew my sword, and holding it above the poor, bowed head, took one deliberate vow of vengeance.

Even as I did so, heavy hurrying footsteps sounded on the stairs, and glancing round, I saw a bunch of wondering, awestruck faces staring at me from the doorway. My crashing entrance had aroused the house, and here, half-dressed and ghost-like, were the servants.

The very sight of such a gaping, helpless throng stirred wild, unreasoning anger in a brain which hitherto had felt like lead. I must have turned upon them with a threatening fierceness, for they one and all fell backward with a fearful look.

"What now! What do you here?" I said.

"Oh, by the love o' Heaven, sir, what be wrong?" asked Tom, the groom, who held a flaring candle high above his head.

I paused a moment, then pointed to the chair, and answered:

"Your master sits there, dead!"

No cry or movement followed, but the glances cast upon me and my naked sword spoke plainly of the awful thought which filled each horror-stricken mind. Yes, for one throbbing instant it was clear to me that I was counted my father's slayer.

"Dead!" gasped Tom at last. "How, sir? Not–not killed?"

The hand which held the candle shook.

"No, not killed;" I answered slowly, for even in that blank, bewildering moment it flashed upon me that the truth could not be told to anyone without great danger. "No, not killed; he died as he had always wished to die–swiftly. Come now," I added, in a voice that sounded strange and far-off to my ears, "help me to bear him to his chamber."

No more was spoken.

The dawn of that the blackest day in all my life broke with a mocking splendour. The sun rose gloriously upon a green glad earth; the joyous song of birds, the scent of many flowers, the gentle whisper of the soft June breeze, the murmur of the sea–all these, the joyous signs of one more resurrection from the things of

darkness, were there in plenty; but as I stood and looked down on my father's white, set face, I took no heed of them; they were less than nothing. The present was as a thing I had no part in; the past alone seemed real. A thousand memories of bygone years came flooding over me. It was as though I lived through all my life again, within that silent room of death.

Yet, notwithstanding this, my heart was still like stone; nor grief nor tears were mine. Instead, I vowed fresh vengeance. There should be no rest for me till both Ferguson and Tubal Ammon had been made to answer for their wickedness; until, that is, they had been hunted down and killed. The sword which had been girded on me by the hands now cold and stiff should also know no rest until it had avenged its giver's death. Henceforward that should be its work and mine.

So much I swore, and felt the better for it, yet not without some vision of the perils and the pitfalls which must certainly beset me ere my vow could be fulfilled.

And first among these stumbling-blocks there came the thought that none could help me. The truth about my father's death was one with which I could not trust a living soul; the threatening danger which had hovered over him, and killed him, now just as surely hovered over me; the secret which he had confided to my keeping scarce a day before was still a secret, though now known to three instead of four. Henceforth, in fact, 'twould be a deadly, silent warfare betwixt one and two, and well I knew that God's earth did not hold a blacker pair of villains than the chaplain and his creature Tubal Ammon. But that did not dismay me; nay, rather was I heartened by the thought that now, at least, I had a real work (however desperate) in life. For the rest of it, come rack, come rope, I would not flinch or turn aside. My course was clearly marked, and I was minded to run it with a will. My father's blood flowed in my veins, and though a cruel fate had snatched him from my side, he still was mine, and this that I was bent upon seemed but a poor plain duty due to one who had done everything for me. At any rate, 'twas all I could do now for him, and I would gladly give my life for its accomplishment.

It was such feelings and such fierce resolves as these which kept me up and made me adamant (I know it now–for afterwards, long afterwards, the crash came), and, looking back through many years, I see no reason to regret it; for it was this alone which made it possible for me to go about my many pressing duties firm-jawed, silent, and clear-headed. And this, I knew, was as my father would have had it, for he had ever little tolerance or sympathy for those who wailed and whimpered in the face of sorrow.

I will not dwell upon the many happenings of that dolorous day, for, indeed, they have no business in these pages, and so may be told swiftly in fewest words.

First, then, summoned hastily, came the family physician, an old grey-

headed, owl-eyed man, who, as I always felt, knew far more about me than he ought to. He asked divers questions, got, I fear, short answers; then shook his head, and murmured:

"Ah! 'tis as I feared; 'tis as I always said; the heart hath failed."

He said this with a solemn sadness, but yet, as it seemed to me, with some small pride in that his prophecy had been fulfilled.

Next, eagerly (for ill news flies apace, and many messengers had been dispatched) came kith and kin, flocking like crows into the old ancestral tree, and, for the most part, trying hard (but vainly) to hide an eager curiosity by means of sighs and tears. In truth, their plaintive caws were little to my liking; and verily they must have thought me something of a hardened monster as I moved about among them, dry-eyed, immovable, and, as it seemed, bent only on cold business.

Thus the day passed swiftly, crowded as it was with thronging duties (for, in spite of everyone and everything, I had decided that my father should be buried on the morrow), and evening came before I found a chance of going out. But when the sun had set, I left the dismal cawing of the family crows, and, slipping forth, went down by unfrequented ways into the town. Moreover, I went fully armed, for who could tell what ugly violence or treachery might be abroad?

CHAPTER XI
I Live and Learn

The little town was all agog with men both young and old (farm hands for the most part), who had come in to join a cause which ignorance persuaded them would turn the kingdom upside down and make them so much richer by the doing of it. Most of them were armed; some wore green boughs stuck in their hats, while others waved them wildly; and everyone was shouting out these words, which already I was sick of hearing:

"A Monmouth! Liberty! The Protestant religion!"

Faith, 'twas as if the countryside had gone clean mad. "If this be how they go about the changing of a king," thought I, "then Heaven have mercy on them!"

There were many in this bawling throng who knew me, and not a few showed signs of speaking to me of my loss; but I would have none of it, and so passed by with nods or scanty greetings.

The Duke, I learned, had taken up his quarters at the "George", and thither,

though scarce knowing why, I went; and what a sight and babel greeted me on drawing near the inn-yard! That of the previous night had been as nothing to it.

The yard, and half the narrow street besides, were packed with men whose one desire in life appeared to be to get inside the inn itself as speedily as possible; and, to that end, they elbowed, pushed, and wellnigh fought each other. They shouted, waved green boughs, sang hymns and psalms; while ever and anon an oath or curse rang strangely out as some poor wretch was crushed beyond endurance.

I watched them from a distance for a while in wondering silence, then going up I touched a burly, pushing yokel on the arm, and asked what was the meaning of so great a pother.

"Whoy, dost not know?" says he, regarding me with pity. "They be a-takin' down the na-ams i'soide thur, and we be all a-goin' to sign on."

"For Monmouth, eh?" said I.

"Aye, sure," says he. "Who else?"

"Have many joined?"

"Aye, hun'reds–thoosands! And you'm be just the sort o' man they be a-wantin', zurr," he added, looking me up and down admiringly. "Coom on! Coom! We be a-moovin' now. Kape tha' close behoind me, zurr."

And spreading out his arms he booed and barked as though the crowd before him were a flock of sheep intended for the slaughter–as, alas! full many of them were.

But although his words had made me quite as keen as he to get inside the "George", methought I knew an easier, swifter way of doing it than his, which, as it seemed to me, must surely take some hours.

So I forsook the crowd, which was far too busy to take heed of me, and slipping round into that quiet street from which I had escaped the night before, went up a narrow passage to the private side door of the inn. 'Twas fast, as had I imagined it would be, but when I knocked the bolts were hastily withdrawn, the door was opened cautiously, and there before me stood one of the thieving rascals who had tried to rob me of my horse.

He started back and stared. I frowned upon him boldly.

"What now?" said he when we had taken our fill of one another. "What is thy business, friend?"

His speech was thick, his face deep red, while as he stood there with a hand upon the door, he swayed a little.

"The same as yesternight," I answered.

"Ah–our–our–godly–chaplain, eh?" jerked he.

I nodded sternly.

"Ah, and what then?" he mumbled, stroking his beard as though unable to

collect his thoughts. "Look you, friend, my orders are to keep the door 'gainst all intruders. Yet an your business be in truth with—- Ah, by my soul, friend, yes–that's it–the password of the night; what is it? Give it quickly, and pass on."

At first I felt inclined to turn and flee for it while yet there was a chance, not knowing whom the drunken lout might bring about my ears; but second thoughts constrained me to go boldly through with it, for verily I was in that state which cares not what may happen. Therefore I said:

"I do not know the password of the night."

"What's that?" roared he. "Business with godly chaplain and don't know password? Ho! ho! now, if that be not pretty!"

With that he put his arms akimbo and burst into a roaring laugh, so that for a moment I had half a mind to knock him down and stride across his barrel of a body. But cautiousness prevailed.

"Pretty enough, but true," said I. "For, look you, I have been away on very urgent business of the chaplain's since yesternight, and have but just returned here. Prithee, what is the password, friend?" I added quickly.

Perhaps it was the very brazenness of such a question that threw the muddled fellow off his guard; at any rate, he lurched towards me, and whispered underneath his ale-soaked breath:

"'Tis Zion, friend–Zion–mark you, Zion. Make sure on't, for it may serve thee well enough ere night be ended."

Little knowing how prophetic were those latter words, he drew aside; then, as I would have passed him by, he plucked me by the sleeve, and, with a knowing wink, said:

"A favour, friend, a favour. Speak well of one John Coram to his reverence, for verily my zeal is most abounding. Hark!" he added, raising a shaking hand as a great shout reached us from the street. "Doth not the Lord's cause prosper mightily? Yea, I trow it doth indeed. And what am I, John Coram, to be spoken well of to his reverence? Friend, it might seem to thee that I am overfull of ale, but 'tis not so; nay, I vow I never touch the stuff. 'Tis burning zeal which fills me, nothing else. Zeal, I say, zeal! zeal!"

Nodding heavily, he staggered over to a bench, and crashing down thereon, sat staring in amazement at his jack boots.

But having got thus far I craved some information.

"Where is the Duke?" I asked.

The fellow waved his hand and said:

"He sits in yon great room receiving followers."

"And is the chaplain with him?"

"Aye, verily, why not? Our godly chaplain is the friend of kings, and nigh as full of zeal as me, John Coram. Ho! ho! methinks that's good; ah, passing

good be that. Ho! ho!"

I waited till his roaring laugh had sunk into a rumble, then fired a random shot.

"Did'st ever meet a man called Tubal Ammon?"

John Coram tapped his steel-cap, shook his head, and answered:

"Never heard that name; but say, what be he like?"

"A tall, thin, bony fellow; legs like broomsticks; face like parchment; eyes like slits; and short-cropped hair that grows straight up like grass. Moreover, he—-"

"Stop!" broke in Coram, who had been following me with wondering eyes and gaping mouth. "What did you call him?"

"Tubal Ammon."

"Ah, then, it cannot be the same, and yet 'tis very like the man I met five years agone. His name was Israel Stark. 'Twas said that he had been a preacher of the Word, though when I knew him he was more a breaker of it, though, to be sure, he had some store of Latin ever ready on his tongue. Yet, for all that, he was the swiftest runner that I ever came across. Moreover, he could climb a tree like any squirrel. Aye, right well I mind me how I once did see him go clean up a—-"

"Stay," I put in eagerly, "'tis the same man sure enough, in spite of names."

"What! hast thou met him too, then, friend?" asked Coram.

"Yes, I have met him too," I answered grimly.

"When?"

"Not many hours ago."

"And where?"

"Not very far from here."

John Coram rose up slowly from his seat, and so stood staring at me for a moment in a hungry fashion; then said he:

"I would with all my heart it had been me instead of you, friend; for with these hands of mine I would have wrung his wicked skinny neck."

"Ah, so you have a grudge against him, eh?" I asked, as carelessly as well-nigh throttling eagerness would let me.

"A grudge!" growled Coram. "Aye, friend, that doth not name the tithe of it. I would account it heaven itself to kill the fellow; for, verily, there's not a blacker villain on God's earth than Israel Stark, and well I know it."

"Ah, and how so?"

"Why, hearken. He came to me in sore distress–half-starved–a thing of skin and bones. He told me tales of savages and shipwrecks. I listened to those tales, had pity on him, took him in, fed, clothed him. And in the end he robbed me vilely; moreover, would have murdered me had not a friend come in the nick

of time and saved my life. That friend he slew, and so escaped."

"Ah, then, we are one," said I.

"What mean you?" asked John Coram wonderingly. "Hath he injured thee as well, then?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"No matter. We are one, I say, and this our meeting may be fortunate for both of us. Listen! I would give you five gold pieces if you could find this Stark or Ammon for me so that I might kill him."

"What!" gasped Coram. "Five–gold–pieces–to do that which I would gladly do for nothing! But say, friend, if you met this fellow but a few hours back, hast now no sort of knowledge where he is?"

"No, none."

"Nor is that any cause for marvel," rejoined Coram; "for verily the fellow is a thing of darkness, passing like a shadow–well I know 'tis so. But count on me, friend, count on me; for if this mischief-worker still be in these parts, and catchable, he shall be caught. But stay, how shall I let thee know? Where shall I find thee, friend, in case of news?"

I paused a moment, looking fixedly at Coram. Could I trust the fellow? Yes, methought I could. "You will find me at The Havering," I said, "a house out yonder on the Uplime road. 'Tis a well-known place, and anyone will guide you thither."

"The Havering, The Havering," murmured Coram slowly, like one who conned a lesson. "Yes, methinks I've got that. And now for thy name, friend?"

Again I paused to scan his face; for verily the whole thing struck me as a most uncanny echo of that fateful meeting by the roadside less than a week before. But now, for all his bloodshot eyes and ale-marked face, it seemed as though I stood before a lusty, honest fellow. Moreover, when I came to think on it, a risk the more or less was of but small account, for who could suffer now except myself? Therefore:

"Fane–Michael Fane," I answered.

"Fane!" muttered Coram, with a thoughtful stroking of his beard. "Fane! That sounds familiar. Where did I hear it, now? Ah, I have it! 'Twas yesternight, as I kept guard in yonder street, I heard two fellows muttering round a corner. Their voices were so low that I could make little of the conversation, but more than once I caught the words 'Black Box' and 'Fane'. I tried to creep a little closer, but they heard me, and, coming out, slunk off."

"Ha! so? And could you see them? Didst make out who they were?" I asked, scarce able to prevent my hands from clutching him.

"Nay, for the moon was hid, the night full dark, and they passed by upon

the other side. But they were friends–not foes–of that I am assured, for when I challenged them they gave the password of the night."

"You could make nothing of them, then?"

"Nay, naught; save that both were tall, and one–him nearest to me–wore a long black cloak."

"And did you mark which road they went?"

"Aye, verily, I followed them a little way, and saw them hurrying off towards the sea. But, say, why show you so much interest in this matter? Truly, they used thy name, but that doth count for little, being friends. Stay, though," he added quickly, "hast lost anything–a box, for instance?"

"No," I answered slowly. "I have lost my father."

John Coram eyed me for a moment in a startled fashion.

"Not killed?" said he at last.

"No; but lost no less for that," I answered.

"Aye, lad, I see–I know–I understand, for I, too, lost mine when I was young like thee. Yea, 'tis a grievous thing, indeed, to lose a father."

The bloodshot eyes that gazed into my own were sad; the voice, though rough and thick, yet rang with kindness. The things about me seemed to fade away, and I saw nothing save that waxen, upturned face at home. John Coram's voice recalled me. "Say, friend," said he, laying a hand upon my arm, "what secret lies behind this matter? Go you in fear of anyone?"

For a moment I was tempted to trust the fellow and tell everything, but wisdom pointed otherwise.

"In fear of anyone!" I echoed with a mocking laugh. "Nay, save me that, I pray you. 'Twas but an idle fancy, nothing else. I only wondered (foolishly enough) if Stark could have been one of them."

"Stark!" cried Coram, springing back. "Now, by my life, how came you to think that?"

"An idle fancy, as I said before, and nothing else. These fellows gave the password of the night, and so were friends. They used my name; and, pray, why not, when it is free to all? Enough, let's say no more about it." I stopped and looked at him, then put a last, most daring question, saying: "I wonder if our godly chaplain knows Israel Stark or Tubal Ammon (to give him both his names). Think you he does?"

On hearing this, John Coram drew away, and stared at me as though I had gone daft; then, throwing back his head, laughed loud and long.

"Ho! ho! if that be not a merry jest, then show me one," cried he. "Doth Master Ferguson know Israel Stark? Oh, by my life, 'tis good–'tis passing good. But, look you, friend, I'll answer it by asking thee a question. Doth Satan mix with angels?"

"It seems to me it may be so," I answered darkly.

John Coram started back, and cast a swift, uneasy glance at me.

"What mean you by such words as those?" he asked.

"Naught," I answered quickly; "nor must I tarry longer. Remember, five gold pieces if you bring me certain news of Tubal Ammon's whereabouts; and here, by way of token, is a crown-piece on account."

"Thou art a rare good fellow, friend," he murmured, staring at the coin; "strange, indeed, but passing good. Nor will I fail thee. True, there is much mystery in the matter, yet I ask no questions. We both want Israel Stark–that's quite enough for me. Yea, 'tis a handsome bargain, friend, and I, John Coram, will stick unto it like glue."

He held a big rough hand out, and I grasped it tightly, for, notwithstanding too much ale and a rather muddled pate, I looked upon him as a kind of brother.

"Yes," said I, "'tis true there is some mystery in this affair; but, as we have one end in view, that matters nothing. Let us not fail each other, that is all."

"Aye, true," said he; "but, look you, friend, 'tis said the Duke rides out of Lyme within a day or two from now. What then?"

"Ah! what then?"

"Well, go you with us?"

"I know not where I go," I answered, turning with my hand upon the door-latch; "but much may happen ere the Duke rides forth. In the meantime I will not lose sight of you; rely on that."

With that I would have gone, but Coram stopped me.

"Stay! one moment, friend," said he, raising his blinking eyes no higher than my waist-belt. "That small affair about thy horse last night. Is it forgiven me?"

"Forgiven and forgotten," I replied.

He heaved a mighty sigh; and I went forth to seek the "godly chaplain".

CHAPTER XII
How I was Saved from Rashness

Turning down a stone-flagged passage, I made for a small, snug parlour, where I had oft held private converse with the landlord and his daughter Miriam, especially the latter. I found the door wide open and the room deserted, but that

did not prevent my entering, for indeed the house had ever been a sort of second home to me; and, as things were just then, I did not crave for any company, and silence seemed a blessed thing.

So, standing with my hands behind me, and back towards the empty fireplace, I took swift thought, if thought it could be called–for what a medley filled my brain! John Coram's words had let in such a blinding light upon the question nearest to my heart that I was fairly dazzled and bewildered by it. Thus, there was the mischief-working demon with two names; his meeting on the previous night with Ferguson, not a stone-throw from the spot where I was standing; their slinking by the very man who was as zealous to kill Ammon as I was myself; and, finally, the mocking thought that, in his ignorance, John Coram looked on the murderous chaplain as a thing of spotless righteousness–fit company for angels.

A bitter laugh escaped me when I thought of that, and what the ale-soaked trooper would have said and looked like if I had told him all I knew about his saintly reverence.

This led me to consider whether I could trust myself so far as to look on Ferguson just then–supposing Coram had been right in stating he was with the Duke. For might I not, in spite of cooler, better judgment, be constrained to fire a pistol at him, and thereby bring swift death upon me? Yes, in my then fierce, desperate state, it seemed most likely that I should thus lose myself. What then? Why, to begin with, Tubal Ammon would live on, unless John Coram found and settled with him–which I doubted, for indeed there seemed in him no sort of match for Ammon's wriggling craftiness. Thus, in attempting to kill Ferguson (and such a wild excited shot might easily miss its mark!) I should be foiled of doing that which lay still nearer to my heart's desire. Again, my father must be buried on the morrow, and that he should be laid to rest without his son to mourn him was unthinkable.

No, my life, barren and blighted though it was, must not be risked that night, too much depended on it. For a time, at least, I must restrain myself, meet craftiness with craft and guile with guile.

These thoughts, which were so strange a mixture of cold reckoning and burning hate, left me where I had been. A hot and overmastering desire was on me to watch Ferguson, gloat over him, and see how one who had so vilely bargained for my father's death could play the part of holiness before Duke Monmouth and his followers. The very words with which he had thus bartered life for gold rang in my ears; and once again the vision of my father's white set face rose up before me. And then I muttered something, loosed my sword within its sheath, and cast a hungering glance down at the pistols in my belt.

From close at hand there came the heavy tramp of those who went to join the "Cause", while from the street beyond the cries of "Liberty and pure religion!"

rose and fell unceasingly.

With curling lip I listened for a space to what, for me, was now a bitter mockery, by reason of one Ferguson the Plotter; then with tight-clenched teeth I strode across the room, bent on I scarce know what, though if ever man had thought of murder in his heart that had I just then. But ere I reached the door there came the rustle of a dress, and Miriam, the landlord's daughter, stood before me.

It may have been the altered look upon my face, or simply great surprise at seeing me, which was the cause of it, I know not; but with a little cry she clasped her hands and started back, while I stood dumb as Lucifer before an angel.

I tried to murmur something, but I could not; nor was there any need; for now she came to me, took both my hands in hers, and looking up with big sad eyes, said softly:

"Oh, Michael, I am very, very sorry for thee."

Her sweet voice trembled, and her pretty head was bowed.

Those were the gentlest, truest words that I had heard throughout that awful day, and so there is no shame in saying that I could not answer her. Instead I drew her close, and for a moment there was silence in that little room. The setting sun shone in upon us; and, for a time at least, I knew what power a woman has to save man from himself.

This is no tale of love, nor, if it were, would this be any place in which to prate of it; but yet I should be something of a thankless coward were I not to state that Miriam Hope was very dear to me. We had been friends from childhood, and looking backward through the long, long years I know how much I owe to her. And speaking of that night, she saved me from I know not what mad act.

"And how came you here?" she asked, when we had talked a while of other things.

"By the side door yonder," I replied.

"Ah, verily," sighed she, "the front is crowded like a fair. The fearful din hath made my head ache sorely. How, think you, Michael, will this sorry business end?"

"I fear in hanging for the most part, Miriam," was my answer.

"Ah, that is what my father says. 'Tis terrible to think of."

"And so the Duke is in the Great Room yonder?"

"Yes, and a very gracious, kindly gentleman he seems. His smile is very sweet. Aye, 'tis a thousand pities that he ever landed on so wild a business."

"Yes, ten thousand pities," I agreed, though not because I thought of Monmouth's peril.

"My father says he cannot win."

"No; there is little chance of that, methinks."

"And what if he be beaten, Michael?"

"Why, then 'twill be a case of hunt and hunted. But say, Miriam, are many of the gentry coming in to join him?"

"Nay, very few, if any. They are nearly all rough country men, more used to scythes than swords. I pity them, for verily they look like stupid boys let loose from school."

"Yes, yes," I murmured, for my mind was set on other things just then. "Is Ferguson the chaplain with the Duke?"

"Yes; but him I like not," answered Miriam with a little frown. "He may be great and clever as they say, but I go by faces, Michael, and never saw I such an ugly, evil one as his. His little eyes glint out beneath his old torn wig like those of rats, and when he walks he shuffles like a camel. Why the Duke makes so much of him, and trusts him so, 'tis past me to imagine, for verily I would not trust him with my shoes."

"Ah, then he must be bad," said I; then fearing lest my face might tell a tale, I added quickly: "Now for the Great Room, Miriam; I would go there."

She started back from me, glanced fearfully about her, then with a searching look said:

"You would not join these rebels, surely, Michael?"

"Nay, I would only see the fun," I answered carelessly.

"But even that might well be dangerous," said she. "Remember there be wicked, desperate men abroad just now."

I could have told her so much, but I only laughed and said:

"Nay, have no fear, sweet girl, for, look you, I am fully armed and care for no man. But, say, how shall I get into the room through such a press?"

"Why, if you must really go," said she, "I will take you through the antechamber, and that will bring you well into the room, not far from where the Duke is sitting."

"Most excellent!" quoth I. "I pray you lead the way at once, dear Miriam."

She turned as if to go, then stopped and gazed upon me in a sad, reproachful fashion.

"Michael," she murmured, "how can you talk of seeing fun when your poor father is thus lying—-"

"Stop! stop!" I broke in swiftly. "We will not speak of that, dear girl. You do not understand. It may be that I seek to drown my thoughts. Lead on, I pray you."

And so I followed Miriam, and was ushered in.

CHAPTER XIII
In the Great Room–and Afterwards

The room was packed; and never saw I such a piteous sight as was presented by that crowd of gaping, moon-struck faces, which, as it seemed to me, stared forth like poor penned cattle into certain doom. On each was writ in fatal characters the one word–Death! Yet all were mighty eager to be signing on; in truth, by the pressing and the jostling it might have been the statutes at a fair.

On a little platform at one end of the room, and not far from where I was standing, sat Monmouth with his officers–Lord Grey, Fletcher of Saltoun, Old Dare (as he was called), the Taunton goldsmith, and others whom I knew not. The Duke, all smiles and bows, watched everything with eager, anxious eyes, and even spoke a word or two when one big strapping fellow, towering high above the rest of them, stepped up to volunteer.

But for me there was small interest either in Monmouth or those who flocked to serve him. My eyes were fixed upon a wry-wigged gentleman who sat before a little table taking down the names. Yes, there, in all his blotch-faced ugliness–a hulking, bony, ill-dressed heap of perfidy–sat Robert Ferguson, the Plotter. His pen was whirling like a windmill; he seemed to catch a name up with the feather of his quill and run it down on paper wellnigh as soon as it was spoken; and all the time he never ceased to jerk forth jests and mock encouragement to those who, in their ignorance, were little more than clay within his hands. Thus, as I entered, he was saying:

"Come on, my friends, come on! Ah, what amazing, lovely zeal is this which moves your hearts! Fear not, the Lord of Hosts is with us, as the Scripture hath it, and verily we must prevail. The next–the next! ... Now, by my life, if such a fine upstanding man as thou shouldst not be captain in a month or so! Yes ... yes ... or more, perchance. Come on! the next! Oh, who shall stand against such zeal as this upon the day of battle? Ah, who, indeed? Not those, I trow, whose hands are stained with blood! Not those who have forsworn the Lord of Hosts and set up their abominations in high places. Not those, I say, not those! The next, the next! Come on, I pray you, speedily, or we shall hear the cock crow ere we've finished. What's that you say, friend? Yes, yes, I have you down quite clearly

to the very letter: Uriah Smite–and may you smite full lustily! That is a merry jest, but something to the point, I vow. Back, friend, I pray you, and make room for him who stands behind.... Ah, what's that? You fought with Cromwell, say you? Truly, a handsome warrant for your zeal; and may you fight as well for us. Grey hairs, when mixed with zeal and wisdom, count for much. And as for that sword-cut on your face, well, what adornment could outvie it in true loveliness? ...

"Next, next! Remember that there is something for you all. Here a little–there a little–everywhere a little, and much for those as are right valiant. The Duke is not one to forget, I tell you. No, no, the sowers shall indeed reap heavily! What now, there, you who hold back, muttering? Hath Satan put a craven fear within your hearts? If so, take courage from my case. Look on me! I'm that man, that Ferguson, for whose unworthy life five hundred pounds were offered. Yea, I am he who years ago was driven forth from England, as a thing accurst, by those whose wickedness rose up to heaven like foul black smoke. I say again, I am that man, that Ferguson, who was accounted carrion for the evil-doers, a thing to be cast out and trodden underfoot like Jezebel of old. Yet here am I this day among you, called forth to be the scourge of them who would have slain me. What then! will you, whose road to victory is as broad and easy as the king's highway–will you, I say, hold back like frightened sheep when such a work is calling? Nay, nay, methinks I read a better tale than that upon your faces! Again, I say the Lord of Hosts is on our side, and your enemies shall crumple up before you like a scroll of parchment. Hark to the shouts of them who press behind you in the street! 'A Monmouth! True religion! Liberty! Down with the Scarlet Woman!' Ah, friends, what sweet, melodious, heavenly music! It sounds like Miriam's song of victory in mine ears! Come on, come boldly on, and let there be no Didymus among us!"

I will not weary you with more of the amazing wretch's sayings; but for me, who watched and listened, and knew him for the foul, cold-blooded murderer he was, his every word and movement were alive with grim suggestiveness. In very truth he held me spellbound as a thing scarce human. It seemed as though the Evil One himself sat there taking toll for Hades.

Nor was it less astonishing to note the swaying power he exercised upon a crowd of stalwart, sinewy fellows, who, had they known him rightly, might have torn him limb from limb. His strength in this respect made Monmouth and the rest of them appear like grinning images, whose fate this wicked, frowsy villain juggled with like dice. And as I watched him the desire to put a bullet through his wicked head grew stronger every moment. His ugly, working mouth was what I would have aimed for, and more than once my fingers crept towards a pistol-stock; but, verily, the crowd which was for ever moving straight in front of me would have made shooting something of a risky business even had the power of

self-restraint been lacking; and so I stood there with my back against the wall and feasted greedily on Ferguson's each word and movement.

When he had filled a sheet 'twas handed to a messenger, who took it to the town hall, followed by the men whose names it bore, who there received their arms and so passed on to drill.

It was during one of these short breaks that the Duke held up his hand and said:

"Remember, we have arms for all who join–that is, for any number."

"Yes, yes," cried Ferguson, "for thousands! Muskets, pistols, armour plates, and swords for all! And will ye not look fine, my bonnie men? Arms for thousands, arms for thousands, as His Grace the Duke hath said!"

Now this was very far from being true, as those who had to fight with scythes and sickles, bound on staves, were soon to prove; but now the statement was received with shouts of joy, and as the news passed out into the street a deafening babel rent the air.

The Duke smiled glowingly; the chaplain waved his pen; while those in front, whose heads had spoilt my view, moved quickly to the table. At the same time Monmouth raised his eyes in my direction, looked at me enquiringly a moment, then, seeing that I did not move, held up a beckoning hand and said:

"What now, young man? You are the very kind we need. Why, then, hold back? Are you not for us?"

The chaplain's pen stopped writing, and all eyes were turned upon me. Uncovering, I stepped up to the table.

"No, my lord," I answered with a sweeping bow. "I am for neither side at present."

"Ah, that is badly put, young man," said Monmouth smiling. "For, look you, friend, the middle of the road is empty in this matter."

"Aye, verily," snapped Ferguson, casting a swift glance at me from beneath his ragged wig. "His Grace speaks truly. 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve'–friend–as the Scripture hath it."

"Methinks we sometimes twist the Scriptures to our use," I answered, staring at him fixedly. "Even a murderer might find some text to serve him if he searched for it," I added in a lower voice.

"How now, friend?" put in Monmouth smilingly. "You come here fully armed, the very picture of the man we need, and yet you say you are for neither side! What, then, brings you hither?"

"Mere curiosity, my lord; a wish to see, that is," I answered.

"Or a wish to spy–which?" sneered Ferguson, stabbing his pen into the ink-horn.

I was hard put to it to keep my fingers off his throat, and, indeed, I only

saved myself by locking them behind me. Bending over him I answered slowly:

"No, sir, I am no spy. I leave such dirty work for those whose nature suits them to it."

The chaplain strove to hide a start by dipping savagely into the horn again, then cast a swift, uneasy glance at me, and said:

"We are not here to deal in parables, but men, nor have we time to waste on empty words. If you be not for joining us, make way for those that are. Next! Next!"

He waved his quill as though dismissing me.

"Stay! one moment, friend!" cried Monmouth. "I pray you give your name, and say how 'tis that one so likely—- Aye, I would promise you a cornetcy–is that so, my lord?–(he turned to Grey, who nodded)–ah, yes, a cornetcy–if not a captaincy. How is it then, I say, that one so likely hesitates to join our righteous cause?"

"My lord, my name is Michael Fane," I answered, dwelling on the latter words.

The chaplain's pen, which had set out to write my name, stopped with a spluttering squeak and made an ugly blot instead. Its owner started, and though he did not raise his face, it seemed to me as if the blotch thereon lost something of its bloodlike redness. I cast a searching glance at him and then went on again: "As for your other question, my lord, I deal not with a cause that sets up murderous villains in high places."

The crowd behind me buzzed with startled wonder; I saw Lord Grey and Fletcher whisper eagerly together; while Old Dare scratched his short-cropped head in great perplexity. As for the Duke, he coloured somewhat, and, leaning forward in his chair, regarded me with marked uneasiness. It may be that my words had brought back to his memory a lawless deed of his wild early days, when, in some drunken prank, he killed a beadle up in London. I know not; but at any rate his look was something of a guilty one, and he was fain to run a hand across his face ere he could regain his easy self-composure.

"Murderous villains in high places!" echoed he at last. "Those are strong words, young man. What mean you by them?"

"Alas! my lord, I mean exactly what I say," I answered firmly. "I mean that you have one about your person, holding high estate, who is not fit to sit with honest men, much less to be a counsellor in great affairs."

"Ah, then, I pray you name the murderous villain," quoth the Duke, with mocking emphasis upon the last two words, and also, as it seemed, with some relief at finding that it was not he.

I paused a moment, thinking swiftly, and, while I did so, Ferguson sat there below me in an agony of guilty fear. I knew it by the way he gnawed the feather

of his pen and hooked his long thin legs together.

What, then? If I denounced him on the spot, who would believe me? No one; for what proof had I to offer? None. Again, if I drew a pistol suddenly and shot him (as I could have done), I knew my fate was sealed. The wild, benighted crowd behind, who looked upon him as a miracle of strength and godliness, would kill me in a twinkling. Therefore:

"No, by your leave, my lord," I said, "I will not name him now. This is no place for doing so, nor would it serve my purpose just at present. Time and other things will surely name him quick enough."

An angry growl ran through the room, and things looked ugly; but at that moment a man I knew leaned over Ferguson and whispered quickly in his ear. The chaplain nodded eagerly; then, turning to the Duke, said:

"By your leave, my lord, I understand the matter fully now. This poor young fellow" (here he waved his pen at me, but did not dare to look) "lost his father suddenly this morning, and doubtless such a shock hath—-" he tapped his head and added: "Yes, 'tis plain enough."

"Ah! if that be true—-" began the Duke in no unkindly voice.

"'Tis true in part, my lord," I broke in scornfully, "as far as it regards my loss, that is. The other is rank folly. I vow my head is quite as sound and clear as this your godly chaplain's. For the rest, I would repeat my warning. Scripture hath fluttered somewhat freely here to-night, therefore, I pray you, let me add my quota to it, namely: 'Beware of those who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves'. Yea, have a care, my lord. I wish you well."

With that I bowed, took one last look at Ferguson, then, passing through the crowd, went forth as I had come, and left them to their own devices.

Being in no mood for conversation, I turned towards the kitchen regions, hoping thus to slip out unobserved, except by servants, with whom there was no need to traffic. Kind fortune favoured me in this respect, for, save a hot, perspiring scullion, I met no one, and so I gained my quiet, lonely street again without the utterance of a word.

Oh, how fresh and sweet the cool air was after that crowded, reeking room! I drank it in like nectar, and felt mightily refreshed. What next? Whither should I go? The thought of home (two days before the dearest place on earth for me) was now abhorrent to my soul. The hum of whispering, mournful voices; the reddened eyes that followed me about with pitying looks–nay, by my life I would not, could not face them. To be alone, to think in solitude, was what I needed. Just then the murmur of the sea broke in upon my ears. Ah! what better place than that? I had communed with it, told it many a secret in the past, and now it seemed like some old friend who would not fail me in the hour of need.

Striking across some fields, in order to avoid the town, I made a wide sweep

for the eastern shore. To do this I must needs go through the churchyard, and there I chanced upon the sexton finishing a grave–whose I knew full well. I did not stop, but, as I passed, the old man raised a sweating face to glance at me; then, seeing who it was, he touched a dripping forelock, shook his head, and, mumbling sadly, bent o'er his task again; while I–with what black thoughts you may imagine–descended by a narrow cliff-path to the beach, and set off swiftly towards Charmouth.

Dusk was now falling fast, and as I strode along, scarce knowing whither, the cool breeze fanned my burning cheeks refreshingly, the ceaseless thunder of a full-tide sea fell like some soothing music on my ears, until at length a strange deep calm came stealing over me. Rousing myself, I took a backward glance (I know not why), and saw two figures–blurred and indistinct by such a failing light–following in the distance far behind. "Two Charmouth fishers going home," thought I. "Wise men, who will not risk their necks e'en for the pretty Duke of Monmouth." With that I clean dismissed them from my mind, and so pressed on again.

In this aloof, abstracted state I must have gone two miles or more, when, coming to a low, inviting rock, I sat down thereon and let my thoughts go wandering where they pleased. A silver moon tipped Gold Cap; the waves broke loudly close beneath my feet, and cast their welcome spray right over me. I seemed a part of nature, nothing else. The blackened past–Ammon, Ferguson, my father's death, and even that which had just happened in the Great Room at the "George"–all these were like so many ugly dreams from which I should awake to find my old sweet life the only real thing.

How long I sat there brooding thus I know not; but suddenly my reverie was broken by a sound like that of footsteps close enough to be just hearable above the turmoil of the waves. "Ah! they of Charmouth," thought I; and with that was about to turn and look, when, like a flash, two men rushed in upon me from behind.

CHAPTER XIV
"Zion!"

Even great strength (as mine then was) when taken unawares avails but little; and so, ere ever I could move–much less draw a weapon–I was borne down,

crashing on the shingle; and there I lay, stretched out upon my back, with two great lusty knaves above me. One of them had a knee upon my chest and pinned my arms down, while the other threw his weight upon my legs; and thus, although I wrenched and strained (not caring to be mastered like a sheep), and made the villains hiss forth oaths, my struggles gained me naught beyond a woeful loss of breath. Indeed, such posture, with that crushing knee upon my breast, was hopeless, as anyone is free to prove who cares to try it. Besides, the horrors of the night before, coupled with loss of rest, had left their mark upon me; therefore, 'tis little to my shame to state that I was vanquished.

Panting, I lay and stared into the face that almost touched my own. The moonlight showed it to me as a coarse one, blotched and hairy; while there was that about the eyes which spoke of desperate deeds, and life held cheap as dust. In truth, the man looked a ruffian of the lowest kind, who would have bartered whatsoever soul he had for money. I doubted not whose tools both he and his companion were.

"Well, and what now?" I asked, as well as want of breath would let me.

Grinning, he pressed still harder on my chest, and answered:

"Well said! What now?"

"Off with that knee of yours," I gasped, "unless you wish to kill me."

"Well, now, it might e'en go as far as that. Can't say. Hi! Dick," he called across his shoulder to the other, "take you his sword and pistols."

Forthwith my legs were loosed, and, thus freed, I would certainly have broke out struggling afresh, had not the galling knee made closer friendship with my heart until it wellnigh stopped its beating.

"Brute!" I gasped again, "you're killing me."

"Nay, not yet, methinks," quoth he, biting his lip and gloating o'er my agony. "Hold you his left hand, and gi' me a pistol, Dick," he added, with another cruel jab that fairly made me groan.

The other, who had withdrawn my weapons, hasted to obey, and next moment I was staring up the barrel of a pistol which threatened me between the eyes.

"Make one sound," hissed my tormentor savagely, "and there's a bullet through your head in no time."

His face endorsed the statement, and certainly I was not going to put it to the proof. At least his knee had left my chest, and for so much I was more than thankful. I took a long, deep breath, then gazed at each of them intently, as they knelt beside me, holding down my hands and threatening me with pistols–and those, alas! my own. Both were as ill-favoured, wicked-looking rascals as one could hope to see, armed with swords and knives, hired desperadoes fit for anything. In truth, things had an ugly look enough, but I was minded to know

something of my future fate if it were possible.

"Well, and what next?" I asked.

"You come with us," said he who had been kneeling on me.

"Ah! and where to?"

"Where bidden and where led."

"Who sent you on this business?"

"That's our concern. Ask no more questions."

I had no wish to do so; and, indeed, I knew the answer to my last one just as well as they did. Yes, their master's name was graven on their evil faces. The tools of Ferguson were not to be mistaken.

"Wilt let me rise?" I asked.

Their answer was to free my arms and draw back a little, though still covering me with both pistols. So I sat up and stared at them afresh, the while I strove to form swift plans for their destruction. But this seemed hopeless beyond measure, for my sword lay well behind them; I had no weapon save my fists, and what were they against two pistol bullets, which the slightest threatening movement would most assuredly bring crashing through my skull? Nor would a shout for help be any less disastrous, even supposing help were to be had in such a lonely place at such a time. But I had little chance to think upon such profitless affairs, for, bringing the pistol nearer to my face, the leader said:

"Put your hands close together, that we may bind them. The rope, Dick!"

There being nothing else for it, I instantly obeyed, and held them out; while the man he called Dick brought forth a knot of cord and hasted to unwind it. Thus it seemed that, notwithstanding all my strength, I should soon be bound and helpless–entirely at the mercy of these two conspiring villains. But in that pressing moment some words of Coram's flashed into my brain.

"Stay!" I said, "there's surely some mistake."

He with the rope grinned mockingly, while his companion jerked the pistol threateningly and growled:

"What's that? What mean you?"

"Why, this," I answered, lowering my hands apart. "'Twere well to make quite sure of things before you act."

"What riddle's that?" asked he.

"No riddle," I replied. "A warning. Again I say, there's some mistake about this matter."

"Pish!" quoth he, "I'll take my chance of that. There's no mistake, I fancy, save on your side. Keep a still tongue, and hold your hands out. Dick, do you bind him instantly, We've lost good time enough already."

"All right!" I put in, as the other bent to do his work; "but don't blame me when it turns out that you have bound the wrong man after all."

Both started somewhat.

"Wrong man!" mocked he who held the pistol. "Not much, I fancy. A spy, a dangerous malcontent, an enemy to Monmouth's cause! What say you?"

"Why, this," said I, "that I am neither, therefore have a care. Listen," I went on slowly; "do enemies of Monmouth know his secret passwords?–Zion!"

The cord which had gone once around my wrists dropped off; the pistol jerked aside. With my left hand I struck the would-be binder in the chest and sent him flying backwards; while with my right I seized the barrel of the pistol. It went off with a deafening bang, and the bullet, missing my head by scarce an inch, went singing to the cliffs behind. Leaping up I wrenched the smoking weapon from its holder's grasp and brought the butt-end down with all my might upon his shoulder.

With a loud, fierce cry he staggered back, thus giving me the chance I needed. Snatching up the other pistol and my sword, which lay close by the water, I took a hurried aim at him; but the spray had got into the pan, and so when I pulled the trigger nothing came of it except a flash of flint and steel. Casting the faithless thing away, I turned a keen look on my foes. Their amaze was great, nor do I wonder at it, for indeed the change had been both sudden and bewildering. Thus for a moment we stood staring at each other, then out flew their swords.

Now, two to one is no great odds provided that the one cannot be taken in the rear; but as I then stood such a thing was more than possible. Therefore I made a sudden rush between the half-dazed fellows, and reaching the cliffs, which rose some dozen yards behind, stood with my back thereto and faced them.

"Come on!" I shouted, jeeringly. "The sooner this is settled now the better!"

At first they did not move, but stood there staring in the moonlight, dumb-stricken as it seemed by such a turning of the tables. Then they came on slowly, cautiously, their heads thrust forward and their swords held back.

I waited for them eagerly, with blade-point lowered, impatient of their slowness and the space that lay betwixt us. Here was the very thing I longed for, sure enough–a clean, straight sword-fight–no one to disturb us, a kindly moon by way of light, and risk enough to make the matter pleasant. 'Twas as near as I could get to Robert Ferguson just then; besides, I owed these his varlets something, and was minded to repay the debt with usury.

On they came, creeping step by step, as though expecting I might rush upon them, until they were within three yards of me, and there they stopped. Then he whose knee I had such painful knowledge of made shift to speak.

"Hearken!" said he. "Wilt yield, or must we kill thee?"

"That is a question easy of the answering," said I. "Kill me if you can; but as for yielding–go to, now, act like men, not craven cowards. Fight, I say!"

I took a threatening step towards them, and they fell back hurriedly.

"Not so," quoth he, and verily methought I saw him quake with fear. "You have outwitted us, I own it freely. That being so it seems to me 'twere fair to strike a bargain. Thus, we will leave you here in peace and go our way."

"A very pretty plan," I answered mockingly; "but one which scarce commends itself to my desire. Listen! you go not from this place alive if I can help it."

That settled it. They drew together whispering for a moment, then came upon me with a desperate rush.

CHAPTER XV
Tells How I Fleshed My Sword

A moment later and the clash of steel rose merrily above the thunder of the waves; and with each movement of my sword the eager blood rushed faster through my veins and gave new zest to life. In short, I revelled in the business, and thought no more of lurking death than you do when you breathe. I had learned swordsmanship beneath my father's trained and watchful eye; the blade I wielded was his gift to me; my foes were Ferguson's own hirelings. What more could any man require to give him skill and courage? I needed nothing else at any rate; and so, with tight-set lips and watchful eye, I fought beneath the moon.

As for my adversaries, notwithstanding that they had been made to fight against their will, and thus lacked spirit, they yet soon proved themselves to be no paltry swordsmen; indeed, they showed such knowledge of the game that I was more than once hard put to it to save myself from thrust or cut. But, verily, my length of reach exceeded theirs by many inches–moreover, zeal and hatred count for much–and so it was not long before I sent one of them (he who had tried to bind me) reeling with a sword-thrust in the heart. His death-cry echoed loud above us in the cliffs, then down he crashed, a harmless heap, upon the shingle.

At that the other leapt back panting, and stared at me with fearful, terror-stricken eyes.

"Enough!" gasped he. "I yield!"

"Down with your sword, then," I answered sternly.

He cast his weapon to the ground, and, turning, would have fled; but in a moment I had darted after him and seized him by the neck.

"Hold! not so fast!" I said, shaking him till his teeth clicked. "To save your miserable life is one thing, to spread tidings is another."

"I swear to spread no tidings," came his chattering answer.

"Well said," quoth I; "you will not get the chance." Here my eye fell on the cord which had fallen from his hand when I had knocked him over. I led him to it. "See," I said, "you would have bound me with that rope; now let me do so much for you. On your back, I pray you."

Down he went, and lay thus while I tied him hand and foot.

"Good!" said I, regarding him intently when my task was finished. "That is another way we have with those who serve one Robert Ferguson. Be thankful that you do not lie as still as your companion yonder."

"The sea!" he gasped. "I pray you drag me nearer to the cliffs lest I be drowned."

"Nay, have no fear," said I, "'tis now high water; a little spray will serve to cool your blood. So now, good morrow to you, friend, and when you see your master tell him that his plans have failed for once."

With that I picked my pistols up and turned to leave him; but as I looked along the shore towards Lyme, I saw, to my dismay, three men come running in the moonlight; and by the way the foremost of them waved a hand to those behind I knew that they had seen me also.

What now? I wondered. Well, friends or foes, I judged it best to meet them ere they came upon my handiwork, and so I strode straight on towards them. Soon I made out that they were armed, for when some twenty yards away they stopped, drew swords, and thus stood waiting for me.

Moving boldly on as though they were not there, I had come within a dozen paces, when one of them stepped forward, right across my path.

"Halt!" cried he. "Who art thou?"

"Zion!" said I, stopping.

"Ah! and thy business?"

"Such as brooks no delay," I answered firmly, moving on again.

"Stay!" said he, while those behind pressed forward in a threatening fashion. "We heard pistol shots a little while ago; what was it?"

"Some fellows brawling on the shore up yonder," I replied; "but, look you, as I said before, my business brooks not dalliance. Go and make search yourselves."

With that I made to leave them, and by the look of things they were for letting me depart in peace; but at that very moment a ringing cry broke out behind us. I started round, and saw a sight which seemed to spell disaster. The wretch whom I had left for helpless on the shore had managed to break free, and now came running on with waving sword.

"Stop him! Hold him fast! Make sure of him!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XVI
Concerning one Dan Foe–A Friend in Need

My state was now more desperate than ever, for, in the twinkling of an eye, three swords were pointed at me, to which a fourth would soon be added. Drawing my own I went back slowly to the cliffs, they following.

This time the odds were overwhelming, and there seemed little chance enough of winning through; but still I was resolved to fight it out until I either did so or was killed. Take me alive they should not–that I swore.

At first I was for making one big dash for it; cutting my way right through the knaves, that is, and so escaping: but a moment's thought convinced me that 'twere madness to attempt it, for who could safely hope to turn aside three ready swords at once? One would be sure to find a place inside my body. No, there was nothing for it save to wait and play the ugly game out to a finish–whether life or death. And even as I told myself this was so, up came number four.

What with the struggle he had had to free himself, and then the run, his breath was wellnigh sped, and so he stood there, pumping out his very heart, the while he pointed at me with his sword.

"Well, and what now?" enquired the leader sternly. "Why gape you thus? Know you this fellow?"

"Know him!" gasped the bond-breaker. "Know him! Aye, verily!"

"Who is he, then?"

"One–Michael–Fane ... Spy ... malcontent ... murderer! I, Dick Harland, tell you so."

"Ah! whom hath he murdered?"

"My goodly comrade Adam Blunt. He lies up yonder stricken through the heart by this same fellow's sword."

"Is this thing true?" enquired the leader, turning to me.

"'Tis true enough that I have killed the rascal," I replied; "but 'twas a fair straight fight–not murder."

"This hath an ugly look," quoth he, stroking his beard the while he frowned upon me. "Why killed you him?"

"'Twas either that, or being killed myself," I answered; "and most of us

choose life in place of death."

He paused a moment with a puzzled look, then turned to Harland, saying:

"You would have killed this man, then, eh?"

"Nay, not so. We had him down and were about to bind him, when he escaped us by a trick. Then we called on him to yield, but he withstood us."

"And why would ye have bound him?"

"Because our orders were to take him, dead or living."

"Ah! whose orders?"

"Our godly chaplain's."

"What! Dr. Ferguson's?'"

"The same. He bade us take this fellow at all costs. Two pounds was the reward for him if dead, and five if—-"

He stopped and glanced around him foolishly. In his excitement he had let out a secret which he had not meant to. I started at his words: so did the leader.

"Two pounds if dead," he murmured to himself, "and five if living. Verily, the fellow hath some value, then. But, come," he added quickly, "you say that he escaped you by a trick. What trick was that?"

"Why, as we held him safely on the ground he gave the password of the night, and when, in our amazement, we drew back, he freed himself and laid about him handsomely."

"Ah, a dangerous fellow, by my life," rejoined the other, in whom, no doubt, the thought of promised gold was working. "He also gave it unto us just now. How came you by that word, young man?"

"I got it from a friend," I answered.

"Liar! liar!" broke in Harland fiercely. "He is a spy–a malcontent! He hath no friends among us."

"Stop!" said the leader, holding up a hand. "Such ranting will not help us. Young man," he added, frowning on me, "'tis clear that you are up to no good purpose; and now I come to think of it, you did deceive me when I spoke about the pistol shots we heard. Yea, verily, methinks the statement of our comrade here is true. But say, now, are you for us or against us?"

"Neither."

"Ah, there you stand condemned. A man who fights and kills as you have done this night, and then claims that he takes no side, is little to my liking. I trust him not. Therefore, lay down your sword and pistols and come with us peaceably. So shall your words be proven, whether they be true or false. Down with your arms, I say!"

I did not move, but gripped my sword a little tighter, and stood ready for the worst.

"You will not yield, then?" he went on, after watching me intently for a

moment.

"Try me and see," I answered curtly.

"Which means a threat of further violence," quoth he.

"Nay, a simple invitation," I replied.

"Ah, so you mock me, eh?"

He took a threatening step towards me.

"Have a care! I pray you have a care!" sang Harland from behind. "That sword of his is over-ready, as my poor comrade Adam Blunt proved to his cost."

"Perchance your comrade lacked my skill," returned the leader sneeringly. "Again I ask, young man, wilt yield?"

"And again I answer–try me and prove the matter," I replied.

"I pray you let us fall upon him in a heap," cried Harland. "His pistols count for naught, for one of them hath been discharged and the other hath been soaked with water. Let us fall to, I say, and smite him hip and thigh."

"What now!" rejoined the other, turning on him angrily. "Dost take me for a craven coward? Do I, who fought in Cromwell's Ironsides, and who with this same blade have slain a good score of lusty fellows; do I, I say, need help from such as you against this stripling? Nay, verily, I trow not. I give you one more chance, young man," he added turning to me. "Wilt yield?"

"Not while I have a sword and life," I answered firmly.

"Your blood be on your head, then, not on mine," said he. "Friends, bear witness that I would have spared this fellow; also mark well my strokes, from which ye may learn something. Now, back with you and give us room."

They fell back hurriedly, and next moment we were at it tooth and nail.

That was a fight indeed, and one which even now, with over forty years between, still sets my blood a-tingling when I think of it.

This time my foe was no half-hearted fellow, but a battle-seasoned soldier, who by his own account–and as I doubted not–had fought in Cromwell's Ironsides, and smitten many a skilful swordsman to the death. As I write these words I see again the stern, set face, the gleaming eyes that flashed beneath his headpiece, the moonlight glimmering on his breastplate, the sword that seemed to be alive–so swift and ready were its movements. His height was little less than mine, and though I judged his years to be well over fifty, his quickness, both of hand and foot, was wonderful to see.

At first there was a look of mockery, if not of pity, on his face, but when he found how well I knew my business this soon changed to one of crafty eagerness. He thought me worth the killing, and he meant to do it; while I, on my part, had then a no less firm intention.

Thus round and round we went upon that narrow strip of shore, each fighting for his life beneath the staring moon; while those who watched us made no

sound except to gasp when a stroke or thrust of more than common deadliness seemed to foretell the end.

At times our feet were fairly covered by the swirling foam, and once I was driven, knee-deep, back into the sea by a sudden, mighty rush that took me unawares, and came near finishing the business. But I saved myself by springing out of reach, and then, with an answering rush, drove my opponent back towards the cliffs.

And now it was that youth began to tell. The Roundhead's breath came faster than it had done, and there was more of fury in his fighting, less of tempered skill. Perceiving this, I played a luring game, and, retreating slowly, encouraged him to press me fiercely, content to guard myself while he attacked. His blows and thrusts came fast and furious, and one false movement would have surely meant my death, but I contrived to parry everything, and soon the tale began to tell upon him sorely. His breath rushed forth in gasps, and in the end I knew that I should kill him if the fight continued. But I had slain one man that night and had no desire to add another to the list if I could help it. Therefore I sprang back suddenly and cried:

"Hold! Let us end this business while we have the chance. You have fought well, indeed, but I am the younger man and have no wish to kill you. Let then each of us depart in peace while he hath both life and honour to his credit."

"What's that!" he wellnigh shrieked. "A beardless stripling such as thou doth offer quarter to a man like me? Behold my answer to your mockery!"

With that he charged upon me like a maddened bull, and, with a diving movement, aimed a blow at me which must have brought his very hilt against my ribs had it gone fairly home.

"How's that?" he hissed as he delivered it.

'Twas thus–with one swift, glancing stroke I turned his sword aside and ran him through the body. Our eyes met as I drew my blade out, and ne'er shall I forget the look in his; 'twas one of such startled horror and surprise as haunts me to this day.

He stood there swaying for a moment, staring at me like some stricken beast, then, with a sobbing cry of "Help! I'm done for!" reeled and fell back dead.

Heaven knows that when I saw him lying there a poor misshapen heap upon the shingle I felt no glory in the deed, but rather sorrow. He had fought manfully, and had, moreover, scorned to take advantage of my lonely state when urged to do so.

But there was little time for vain regrets, for barely had he fallen ere the other three came on with angry shouts and threatening swords.

"Have at him! Down with him!" they cried, and so pressed forward with a will, albeit with some caution also.

I fell back slowly till I reached the cliffs, then, having those behind me as a rear-guard, stood alert and ready, waiting for the onslaught; nor was it long in coming. There was a pause, then, as one man, they rushed upon me.

A dazzling flash of steel broke out beneath my eyes as three long shining blades shot forward in the moonlight. With one great swinging stroke I swept them all aside, then with a downward blow clave Harland through from chin to chine.

That was good start enough for anything, and made the other two draw back in doubtful wonder. But indeed they were fine lusty fellows, who by the look of them had known much fighting, and so next moment they came on again with still greater fierceness and determination.

For a time I held my own, parrying their deadly strokes, and checking every artful trick for mastering me; but no man can go on against such odds for ever, and what I had already gone through now told a woeful tale. My breath and strength began to fail, together with that quickness, both of hand and eye, which meant everything to me just then.

Suddenly my sword-arm stung with pain, and, by warm blood trickling down beneath my sleeve, I knew that I was wounded. At that I made a forward rush, then sprang aside and sought to gain some breath; but, perceiving how things stood, they got between me and the cliffs and drove me slowly back towards the sea.

My firm resolve now was to die fighting; take me alive, I swore they should not. I would, at any rate, save Ferguson three of his proffered pounds. Thus, as they came slowly on, I watched their every movement, and, by the look of exultation on their faces, I knew that they accounted me as vanquished, and only waited for a good safe chance either to make me prisoner or cut me down. But just as everything seemed hopeless, and I was meditating one last desperate effort, a loud voice hailed us from the cliff-top, crying:

"What's that? Who are you?"

"Help! help!" I answered, caring naught in my extremity whether I called on friend or foe.

That which followed was so utterly bewildering that I scarce know how to set it down with clearness. Fearing, doubtless, lest help might be at hand, and bent on ending matters ere it could arrive, my adversaries made a sudden furious rush, which forced me back, waist-deep, into the sea. Next moment, as it seemed, a man came running from the bottom of the cliffs with upraised sword.

"What now? What now?" he shouted. "Have at you for rank cowards!" and reaching my would-be slayers, he laid on with such a right good will that they turned and fled at headlong speed towards Charmouth.

Hot, breathless, and confused, I staggered from the water, and sinking down

upon a rock, sat staring at my rescuer like one bedazed.

He was a sturdy, well-set man, some few years older than myself, with a fine, bold face and manner.

"Why, thou art wounded, friend," said he, pointing with his sword at the blood which trickled slowly from my sleeve.

"Nay, 'tis but a prick," I answered.

"Well, we had best make sure of that," said he, and kneeling down, pulled up my sleeve and found the wound. A small vein had been pierced, but nothing more. Taking a kerchief from his neck, he bound it tightly round the spot, then, rising, said:

"You were hard pressed, methinks."

"Yes, I have fought with five this night," I answered, "and have slain three of them–two here, and one up yonder."

"Good, now, by my life! Most excellent!" cried he. "I dearly love a man who wins to victory against such odds."

"The victory was far from being mine," I answered; "for, had you not thus come in the nick of time, I should most surely have been lying dead beneath the sea by now. You saved my life, sir, and I owe you much."

"Nay, 'twas naught," he murmured, sheathing his sword and gazing out across the moonlit water. "Faith, I scarcely struck a blow; 'twas but a nimbleness in coming down yon cliff-path. But to have killed three men out of five! Ah! that was lovely; that was worth the doing. Yes, by my life, such lusty deeds as those have made Old England what she is, and will, methinks, make her still greater and more feared in years to come."

"Well, well," said I, not wishing to dwell further on my work of death, "and whither go you, pray?"

"To Lyme, to join the Duke."

"Ah! I also go to Lyme, though not to join the Duke; but rather to my bed."

"Good, then by your leave I'll bear you company," said he. "So, when you are ready—-"

"And that is now," I answered, rising.

He paused a moment to gaze down upon the two dead men, then off we went together.

"Know you who those coward rascals were?" he asked me as we strode along.

"Some of Duke Monmouth's men," I answered.

He stopped and looked at me, then broke into a laugh.

"What now?" I asked.

"Why, just to think of it," said he, "that I should start my fighting for the Duke's cause by drawing sword against his followers! But, say, why did these

fellows thus attack you?"

"Because I stand in no high favour with a man named Robert Ferguson."

"Ah! a canting rogue. I know him well. And so you are not for the Duke?"

"Nay, I am for the King," I answered boldly, having now made up my mind on that point.

Again he laughed in merry fashion.

"Oh, what a mocking whirligig is life!" said he. "Here walk I side by side with one with whom perchance I may cross swords in battle."

"Aye, like enough," I answered grimly; "but, say, why stand you for the Duke?"

"Well, now, it might well be for the same reason that you join King James; but, to tell honest truth, it is because his side doth seem to promise most of fine adventure. I love adventure; I was made for it; and some day I will make my name thereby, though not with sword–with pen."

"Ah! you are a writer, then?"

"Nay, but a sorry scribbler as yet; but, look you, some day I will write a book which shall assuredly set all England tingling in my praise. In short, I will be famous. Mark well those words, and think upon them in the years to come."

"That I will," I answered wonderingly.

Talking of many things, we reached at length the place where he must turn aside into the town, while I, who thought it wisdom to avoid the haunts of men, intended to go home along the shore. There he took my hand, and said:

"I would crave one favour ere we part."

"Aye, twenty, and they are granted if 'tis in my power to do it," I answered warmly.

"Nay, 'tis but a little one," said he. "I would know the name of one who used his sword so well."

"My name is Michael Fane; and may I, too, know that of one who saved my life?"

"Dan Foe–a name unknown at present, but one which, as I told you, shall hereafter be as common and familiar as the King's. And so, friend Fane, good night; and if we meet in battle, may we fight fair and bravely, like true Englishmen!"

With that he grasped my hand again, then turned and sped towards the town.

And thus it was that I met one who, as Defoe (a name he took long afterwards), is known to all of you as the writer of that wondrous history of a shipwrecked man upon a lonely island.[1]

[1] The author of *Robinson Crusoe* was out in the Monmouth Rebellion joining the Duke at Lyme.

On leaving him I hurried on my way along the silent shore with strangest thoughts for company. Once someone shouted from the cliffs, and, yet again, some fellows hailed me from a boat which lay close inshore; but I heeded not, save to increase my speed, for, truly, my adventures for that night were all-sufficient.

So, in the end, I reached The Havering without mishap, and there, tired out in body and in mind, I sought my bed, and slept like any dog.

CHAPTER XVII
Tells how I had Speech of Ferguson

Sound sleep works wonders on a healthy body, and so the morning found me mightily refreshed; nor did it trouble me to think that three dead men lay out upon the eastern shore. I had not sought the quarrel, but had only fought for life and liberty; therefore I felt no guiltiness, and let the matter rest: and, truly, there was quite enough to occupy my thoughts in other ways.

I will not dwell upon the saddened doings of that day. Ere noon we laid my father in his grave, high up above the sea–fit resting-place for one who had been born and bred in hearing of its solemn music, and who had ever loved it dearly.

Few people (scarce a dozen) gathered round us in the churchyard; nor was I sorry, for at such times a crowd of staring eyes is little to my liking. A week before it had been vastly different; scores would then have flocked to see the last of him who had been known by everyone. But now the town was rife with rank rebellion. Its people had gone mad with frenzied hopes as vain and empty as a shadow, but which, alas! within a few short weeks were turned into a scourge of death too horrible to contemplate. Yes, verily, Lyme Regis had gone daft in Monmouth's cause. The turmoil of it reached us like a sound of mockery in which we had no part; and, gazing down into the silent grave, I felt that it was well indeed with him who lay therein. And so we left him there, in peace, beside my mother.

That sad business done, the hours dragged by in dreary fashion, for at such times the mourners lag behind to mope and weep, as though 'twere sinful to be brave and cheerful, as though, in fact, there were no hope beyond the tomb. The

only time I caught a change–a glint of hopefulness upon their dolorous faces–was at the reading of the will; and even that soon passed, for everything was left to me.

But all things, whether good or evil, have an end, and ere sunset I had waved a glad good-bye unto the last of those my doleful guests, and so was free to dwell in silence on my future plans. And truly there was plenty to be done, and little time in which to do it; for I had resolved to ride forth with the dawn to Exeter, where lay the Royalist army, commanded by the Duke of Albemarle.

I had come suddenly to this decision after that affair upon the shore, though not from any great love of the King's cause; rather had I reached it on account of what, to me, at any rate, seemed three good reasons. First, having once drawn my sword I felt that I must either go on fighting or go daft; secondly, I could no more fight for Monmouth, knowing what I did, than for the Evil One himself; and thirdly, I had a growing hope that I might meet both Ferguson and Tubal Ammon on the battlefield. Truly, I might kill the former while he yet stalked bare-faced in our midst; but that would mean sure death, and life had still some sweetness left for me. As for Ammon, well, it was far from likely that he would show himself in Lyme again. And even if he did, and we were favoured with a meeting, my killing of him would, I felt assured, be just as fatal to me as the slaying of his wicked master.

Thus you will see that I had no desire to draw my sword against my wretched and misguided fellow-countrymen; but to compass the destruction of the two arch-villains who, by their abominable machinations, had thus turned my life into a barren wilderness. 'Twas not a very clear or hopeful plan, I own, but still it was the best that I could frame; and at any rate, it would afford me plenteous room for vigorous action–the thing I needed most of all just then.

Meanwhile, as I have said before, there was a great deal to be done, and very little time in which to do it. First of all I called up Anne, the housekeeper, and Tom, the groom, into the study, and swiftly told them that I was going to leave them for a space, and that The Havering would be in their sole charge till my return. They were amazed, but seeing how firm-set and sharp I was about the business, they swore fidelity and asked no questions. That done, I locked up my father's papers, together with the broken Black Box, in our iron-bound deed-chest, and then bethought me to pay a final visit to the town; partly to learn the latest news concerning Monmouth, and partly (let me freely own it) that I might say farewell to Miriam at the "George". In doing this I ran some risk, but what were risks to one who had already fought, and killed three men?

Thus, when the dusk began to fall, I walked down into Lyme, as bold as brass. My mission to the "George" proved unavailing, for Miriam was not in; and though her father was I did not tarry. He had strong views upon the Monmouth

rising (as indeed he had on everything), and would fain have set them out before me at great length, but time was far too precious. So, leaving messages for Miriam, I betook me to the Market Place, and found it full of soldiery and gaping townsfolk.

News had come in that the Dorset militia had marched into Bridport (a town some eight miles east of Lyme), and after hasty counsel with his generals, Monmouth had decided to attack them. As near as I could judge the force drawn up within the market square consisted of about five hundred foot, including fifty musketeers, together with some fourscore or so of horsemen. They were commanded by Lord Grey, and for the most part were trained soldiers who had seen hard fighting in the past.

The bright blue banner floated bravely in the wind, and beneath it sat the Duke on horseback. Just as I arrived upon the scene, he raised his hand; the crowd was hushed to sudden silence; and then, in a few clear, ringing words, he wished his little army God-speed, victory, and a safe return. At that a great shout rent the air; kerchiefs and hats were waved aloft, while on all sides the cry uprose:

"Monmouth! Our Monmouth! Liberty! The Protestant religion!"

It was, indeed, a stirring scene, and as I think upon it now, and see again the Duke, all gracious smiles and bows, deep sadness holds me that the consummation of such zeal and great devotion should have been the hangman's rope–the headsman's axe!

But at the time I had small thought for anything save him who stood a few yards from the Duke, waving his hat, and shouting till his red-blotched face seemed like to burst into a ravening fire. Yes, Ferguson, the plotter, led the loud hosannas with a will; his voice rang high above the rest; and when the cries began to lull 'twas he who started fresh ones. I watched him for a moment, then, scarce knowing why, pressed through the crowd until I stood beside him. Turning my way, he saw me, ceased shouting, put on his hat, and drawing his cloak about him, moved away. Following, I plucked him by the sleeve, and, with a mocking smile, said:

"Good evening to you, Master Ferguson! That plot of yours last night proved somewhat of a failure, did it not?"

The face he turned upon me at those words was such as I shall ne'er forget; if looks could kill a man, I had most surely been dead then, as, with one fierce, hateful glance, and dog-like baring of the teeth, he turned his back upon me. But for all that I had not done with him. Following, I caught him by the sleeve again, and said:

"Stay, one moment, reverend sir, I pray you! Listen, I have at home a sweet memorial of your godliness; to wit, a small black box. And you hold that which

lay therein; use such power against me as you will–I care not; but be assured of this, that you and I will meet again, and that I will have vengeance on those black-souled, murderous villains, Tubal Ammon and Elijah Annabat."

He started at that latter name, and so, with one long meaning stare I strode away, and took my stand right opposite the Duke.

From thence I saw friend Ferguson speak hurriedly to four rough, evil-looking men, the while he pointed at me; I saw them nod and rub their chins; I saw them move away. Then someone touched me on the shoulder and a voice said in my ear:

"Fool! Why run this risk? Was not last night enough?"

Turning, I found Dan Foe behind me.

"Ah, you!" said I. "What now?"

"What now!" he echoed sharply. "Why, this. I have seen everything, and they will surely have you by the heels unless you run for it at once."

There seemed to be some truth in that, and I was more than half inclined to act upon his seasonable warning, when a horseman clattered up behind us and forced his way into the crowd, crying:

"Make way! Make way!"

'Twas Fletcher of Saltoun, and the steed he rode was such as made one break the tenth commandment. Indeed, I never saw a finer horse.

The crowd fell back on either side to let him pass, and he was making straight towards the standard, when Old Dare of Taunton stepped out suddenly and seized the bridle.

"How now!" said he. "How came you by that horse?"

"I took it from its stable at the 'George'," replied the other.

"Then know that it is mine, and take it back," rejoined Old Dare with heat.

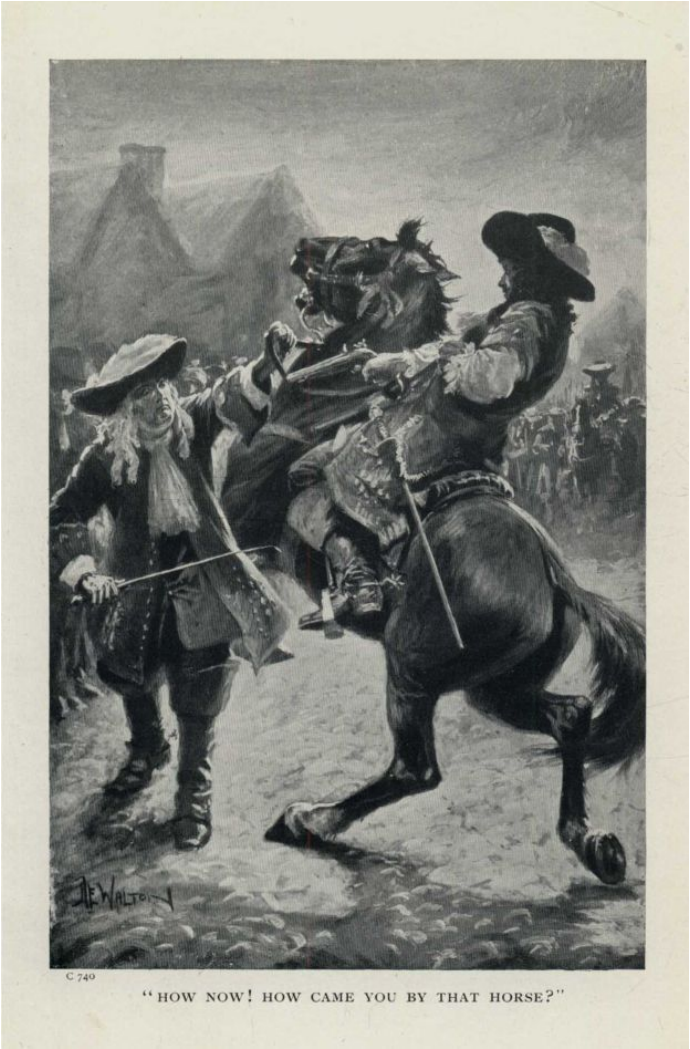
"Nay, friend," said Fletcher calmly, "you err most grievously; for are not all things common to the Cause? Let go her head, I pray you."

"Nay, but I will not," rejoined the old man stoutly. "No legs save mine have stridden her, nor shall they."

"Ah! there you surely err again," laughed Fletcher, "for are not mine astride her at this very moment?"

That angered Dare beyond endurance; putting forth all his strength he strove to turn the horse, while Fletcher, using rein and bridle, urged it forward. At this Old Dare went clean beside himself with rage; let go a string of oaths and curses terrible to hear; and, when the other mocked him, drew a riding-switch from out his boot and struck him full across the face. 'Twas a cruel, maddening blow, and, in an instant, Fletcher snatched a pistol from his saddle-bow and shot the old man dead.

A moment's gasping silence was followed by a ravening roar of voices, and



"HOW NOW! HOW CAME YOU BY THAT HORSE?"

verily the people would have torn young Fletcher limb from limb (for Dare was much beloved by Western folk) had not the Duke of Monmouth ridden up and saved his life by ordering him aboard the frigate as a prisoner. I did not wait to see the end of it, but, taking advantage of the turmoil, broke out from the crowd and made all speed for home. There I fell to making final preparations for the morrow, and midnight struck before I was abed. Soon after three I was astir again, and ere four was riding on my way to Exeter. The past few days had brought me many strange and perilous adventures; but these were as nothing when compared with those which lay before me in the unknown future. Should you doubt that statement, you have but to follow me to prove its truth.

CHAPTER XVIII
A Timely Warning

As I rode along amid the old familiar scenes that bright June morning, with the gladsome singing of the birds for company, my thoughts were strange indeed. It seemed as though I had set foot upon the threshold of another life, and that the past–so near and yet so far–had been for ever buried in the grave which held my father. Those days–those happy days–were now as nothing but a darkened memory.

Less than a week before I had been riding on this selfsame road, as blithe and free from care as yonder soaring lark, and now—-!

Pulling up, I turned a wistful gaze upon the sunlit sea. The ancient, wave-worn Cobb–strong and immovable in spite of kings and factions–stretched forth its long, curved, weather-beaten arm into the glittering water, as though it would fain gather in to safety those who dared the perils of the deep. Beyond it, straining at their anchors, lay the three ill-fated ships which henceforth would be part of one appalling tale of blood and failure.

A bright blue ensign fluttered gaily from the frigate, whose deck young Fletcher of Saltoun–a few hours back the hope of Monmouth's side–now trod a sorry prisoner, doomed to exile; his talents, hopes, and zeal all scattered to the wind by one mad act of rage.

This brought into my mind Old Dare of Taunton, lying dead there in the town–slain, to no purpose, in a brawl which boys might well have jeered at. Then, as other thoughts of death more ugly and disquieting arose, I moved on

slowly–a prey to gloomy memories.

But, after all, I communed with myself, what mattered it? The past was gone; the future, rich in unknown adventures–wherein I had a certain mission–lay like a winding lane before me; while for the rest of it–that is, the present–I was well armed, had a good horse beneath me, lacked not money, and was sound in mind and body. What more was needed? Nothing! Let danger dog my heels at every step–I cared not anything, so long as in the end I might meet Ferguson and Ammon face to face and sword to sword.

Stooping, I patted Kitty's neck, and she, who knew my every mood and touch, broke out into a joyous canter, and away we flew along the springing turf which fringed the road. 'Twas all so like old times to be thus rushing through the cool, refreshing air, that for the moment everything seemed banished from my mind.

We had gone thus a mile or so, and I was vaguely thinking that, in spite of all, 'twas fine to be alive, when suddenly the sound of other horse-feet at a gallop reached me from behind. Someone was following us in furious haste, and by his speed he rode upon no common errand.

Remembering what peril I had already gone through, and how little loved I was by certain folk in Lyme, I pulled my mare in, and drawing up behind a thorn bush, sat there listening, the while I peeped forth cautiously in the direction of the thundering hoofs.

Soon round a distant bending of the road a steel-clad horseman shot to view, a very Jehu of a fellow, riding furiously.

Who could it be that thus betimes wore out good horse-flesh, and what might be the nature of his breakneck business? A Monmouth man, perhaps! I knew not–but, as things stood, it seemed to me to be prepared for anything was everything. Therefore I drew a pistol from my saddle, and, having cocked it, sat there ready to be friend or foe.

On, with loose reins and head bent low, the horseman rushed towards us, and judging by his speed would certainly have passed me by unnoticed; but just as he came close, Kitty must needs prick up her ears and give a loud, shrill neigh. At that the rider pulled his lathered steed up with a suddenness that wellnigh shot him from the saddle, and there, red-faced, open-mouthed and panting, sat John Coram, staring at me like a man bedaft.

"Th–h–ank H–ea–ven!" he gasped.

"Yes, truly, for you might have broke your neck by pulling up thus sharply," I replied, and could not keep from smiling.

"Nay–friend–'tis naught–to–jest upon," quoth he severely. "Faith!–but–I–I fairly boil within."

"Then pause and rest awhile," said I.

"I must," quoth he.

Unbuckling his head-piece he hung it on his arm, and verily his breath roared from him like a blacksmith's forge. Thus bared, and with the sunlight shining on his great bald pate, he looked so fat and peaceful–so unwarlike–that I was sorely put to it to save myself from laughing.

"Friend," said he at last, "I count the whinnying of that mare of thine a mercy; but for it I might well have passed thee by."

"True," I agreed; "but, say, what brings you after me in such a headlong fashion?"

John Coram fastened on his head-piece with all the care of some old dame a-tying on her cap, looked up and down the lane, then drawing closer, said:

"Because thou art in peril, friend."

"Ah! and from whom?" I asked, stroking my mare's neck carelessly, for indeed I had got used to peril.

Again John Coram glanced about him, this time taking in the trees as well, as though they might hold danger; then he drew still closer, and, in a low voice, answered:

"Israel Stark!"

At that I started somewhat, for, as you are aware, he named no ordinary open foe, but rather one who lurked in secret places privily to murder. Therefore I paused a moment, looking hard into the steel-framed face before me ere I murmured:

"Ah! so Tubal Ammon is abroad, eh?"

"Yea, and that somewhere on this very road," replied John Coram in a fearful whisper.

'Twas now my turn to glance around and scan the trees, especially a thick-leaved oak just opposite.

"How know you this?" I asked at last.

"Why, in this fashion," answered Coram. "As I stood on guard last night a mile or so from here, I heard sly, slinking footsteps coming from the shadow of a wood. 'Who goes there?' I cried, and someone gave the password of the night."

"Zion!" I put in with a smile, remembering how well the word had served me also. John Coram started.

"Yea, verily," said he; "but–but how came you by it?"

"Why, man," I laughed, "you gave it me last evening at the 'George'!"

"Now, by my life," he muttered, "I have a dim remembrance that 'twas so, though verily my pate was somewhat addled with–Hum! where was I? Ah! as I was saying, that fellow gave the word and so I let him pass. Off he went, a long-cloaked thing of black, into the darkness. But when he was some half-score yards beyond me he turned his face, the moonlight caught it, and I knew it instantly

for Israel Stark's."

"Ah! and what did you then?" I put in eagerly.

"Did!" echoed Coram, spreading out his hands. "Friend, I did naught, and shame on me for it. So struck was I that I could neither draw a pistol nor pursue. I stood as stiff as any post, and watched the varlet fly. And fly he did; for, look you, he had known me also by that glance, and so sped off into the darkness like some spirit. The Evil One himself could not have vanished swifter. Heavens, friend! it makes me go quite chilly just to think on't!"

"'Twas a fine chance lost," I murmured ruefully; then, as another view of it came into mind, I added: "and yet it gives me cause for gratitude, for had you killed him you had robbed me of a pleasure."

But Coram shook his head.

"Ah, but all danger had been ended then," said he.

"How long was this ago?" I asked.

"About two hours; 'twas just before the dawn."

I paused a moment. Had Ammon once again been spying on me, and thus got wind of my intentions?

"Art certain that he came this way?" I asked.

"Aye, verily, I am. Would that I were not, for who knows where so sly a villain may be hiding, ready to work mischief on thee?"

Here we both glanced uneasily around. Truly this had a far from pleasing look. The lane was narrow, and bordered thick with trees and bushes–Thrusting such ugly thoughts aside, I asked another question:

"But how came you to know my whereabouts?"

"Why, in this wise: no sooner was I free than I went unto your house, The Havering, in order to report this matter. There I found that you had ridden forth for Exeter. So borrowed I a horse and rode amain."

"Thou art a right good friend, John Coram, and have well earned what I promised thee."

Bringing forth my pouch, I would have given him the money, but—-

"No," said he, "I came not out to seek reward," and verily his honest face upheld the statement. "I came to warn thee, save thee from a peril, and having done so I am mightily content; while if you slay this fellow my reward is great indeed."

"Be sure my best endeavour shall go to that end," said I: "but still, a bargain is a bargain. Therefore, I pray you, take this money."

At first he would not; but after much pressing I contrived to give him two gold pieces, for the which his thanks were fervid.

"And now I must be riding back again ere I be missed," said he. "Besides, there is this horse which I have borrowed—-"

"Or stolen, which?" I asked maliciously.

"Nay, friend, you said that sorry business was now clean forgiven and forgotten."

"And so it is," I answered laughing. "But, say, before you go, hast any news for me from Lyme?"

"Aye, plenty. Old Dare was slain last night by Fletcher of Saltoun. A pretty brawl, 'tis said, about a horse. And Fletcher hath been sent a prisoner to the ship. Thus lose we two good men at once. A grievous loss, indeed."

"Yes, true. I heard of it," said I. "And hath aught else been forward?"

"Yes. Three of our men have been slain on the shore nigh Charmouth."

Again this was no news to me; yet I contrived to say, surprisedly:

"Ah, so! By whom?"

"I know not," answered Coram; "there is some mystery about the matter, but they were slain by sword, and that by one who knew his business well, according to report."

"Well, well," I murmured, "such is war. But, say, how went it with the fight at Bridport?"

"Ill enough for us. Our men were beaten back by the militia. They fled like frightened sheep, and 'tis whispered that my Lord Grey was the worst of all; 'tis said he ne'er drew rein till safe in Lyme again.

"Now, by my life, that was a bad beginning, sure enough!"

"Aye, verily, yet scarce a thing to marvel at, for, look you, how can untrained ploughboys and the like expect to stand an onslaught e'en though it be but that of rough militiamen?"

"Ah, how indeed?" I murmured. "And know you when the Duke rides forth from Lyme?"

"Nay, that I don't, nor, as it seems to me, doth anyone for certain. Some say to-morrow, others Monday. Yet still they dally, signing on fresh men."

"Ah, they still come in to join, then?"

"Aye, that they do–by hundreds; but, oh, such lumbering louts! Save me, if we should not do as well with cows and sheep. And now, to make it worse, we've lost Old Dare and Fletcher. Faith, but I like it less each day, and were it not for Ferguson, Duke Monmouth's cause might whistle for John Coram."

"Ah, so Ferguson doth count for much," I murmured, stroking Kitty's neck to hide my face.

"Yea, much indeed," quoth Coram warmly. "He is a leader born–a man of parts withal; but surely, friend, you know 'tis so as well as I," he added with a searching look, "for have you not had pressing business with our godly chaplain?"

"Yes, by my life I have, and have it still," I answered. "I ride upon it now."

"Another reason why I should not tarry, then," said Coram. "And so

farewell, friend. Have a care of Stark, and make sure to kill him if you get the chance."

"Be sure of that," said I.

"My blessing on it," answered Coram fervently, and with that cantered off. At the bending of the lane he turned and waved a hand. I answered with a will, then also sped upon my way, though with a watchful eye for every tree and bush.

CHAPTER XIX
The Affair at the Barn

As the day grew older and a blazing sun climbed up behind me the heat upon my back became wellnigh unbearable, and a decorous walk was all that Kitty made of it, nor did I wish for more. I was well ahead of Monmouth–therefore of friend Ferguson–and could bide my time.

As I passed along the shady lanes thus leisurely, you may be sure I had continual thought for Tubal Ammon, and when the sound of beast or bird disturbed the leafy silence, my eyes and ears were swiftly turned in that direction. But no harm came of it, and beyond some honest farm hands, who, too wise to change scythe for sword, were laying low the tall, rich grass with measured swing and swish, I chanced on no one. Doubtless the chief reason of this was that, both for purposes of shade and solitude, I kept to bypaths and eschewed the highway. Also, I strove to keep as near the sea as possible, in order that what little breeze there was therefrom might make things more endurable.

But such slow, winding methods take much time, and so, what with that and many stoppages for Kitty's sake, 'twas close on noon ere we had put, maybe, twenty miles behind us, which, reckoning for byways, was little more than half the distance to be covered.

The sun was now at its meridian, and beating down upon us with a fiery heat which threatened danger to my mare, if not to me, for we had now drawn clear of sheltering lanes and come out on a stretch of treeless moorland which ran for miles along the coast. Here the hot air fairly danced above the scorched-up grass and bushes, and naught was to be heard except the languid hum of bees among the gorse. The very sea seemed hushed to languorous silence.

To press on in such a state were cruelty to man and beast, therefore I called a halt and looked about me for some shady place in which to rest. But this was

easier sought than found. As far as eye could reach, the barren moor rolled on beneath the shimmering heat, with nothing taller than a stunted thorn bush visible.

As I sat gazing wearily upon this arid sight, while Kitty pawed the turf impatiently and cursed distracting flies (so far as horse was able) with her ears and tail, I saw, far off, a man dart straight across the track and disappear as though the earth had swallowed him, upon the other side.

So quickly had he vanished in a place thus bare of cover that I watched the spot expectantly with shaded eyes, feeling certain he must come to view again. But nothing came of it; indeed, it might have been a rabbit which had gone to earth for any more I saw of him.

This was strange and puzzling beyond measure, and, sun or no sun, must be enquired into. So, marking down the spot, I urged Kitty to a canter and soon reached it. Then that which from a distance had been so mysterious was instantly made plain. A high bank on the left was here divided by a deeply-rutted, and, by the look of it, now unused lane which wound down through a maze of bushes to the sea; and doubtless it was this which had thus swallowed up the flitting figure.

So far so good; but having proved the manner of his disappearance I was minded to explore the matter further.

With this intent I turned my mare into the cutting and rode slowly down the winding track. On either side of me there was a tangle of thick scrub, and on this I kept a ready eye, for a bullet or a poisoned arrow might well prove deadly at so short a range. But nothing stirred, and so at last I came out upon a wide expanse of utter desolation. It was as though the land had slid down seaward and there broken out again in such an uncouth medley of rank, twisted growth as seemed to be scarce English. 'Twas chaos, with the rock-strewn shore beyond.

Who could it be that, flashing as it were from space across my path, had sped to this wild, lonesome place and vanished in its dreary solitude? Ah, who? As I put the question to myself I swept the dreary waste with anxious eyes and thought uneasily of Coram's warning.

My vision of the man had been so sudden and his flight across the path so swift and stoat-like, that, at such a distance, I had been able to make nothing of him. Nor did he now vouchsafe to help me by discovering himself to my enquiring gaze. Not he. Sun-loving insects hummed amid the stifling heat, a dragon-fly hung poised above a bush–a thing of glorious blue–a gull screamed high aloft, while here and there the twittering of tongue-parched birds broke forth in sleepy fashion. But these were the only signs of life; no human being showed himself; my man had vanished like a dream.

What then? To hunt for him among that tangled wilderness in such a blazing heat were folly worse confounded, for, to begin with, I must do the thing on

foot–a weary, hopeless task indeed, and risky also if the object of my search were armed with pistol and a bad intention. Yes, there seemed nothing for it but to let the mystery go unsolved, and leave the haunter of this desolation lurking in his hiding-place.

Reluctantly, and not without misgiving, I turned and rode back through the opening to the moor, still musing wonderingly on that which lay behind me. But such thoughts, pressing as they were, gave way at last before my former keen desire for shade. And this time fortune favoured me, for, having ridden on another quarter of a mile or so I saw, not far away, an old grey barn tucked snugly up against the bank, with bushes overshadowing it. What could be better for our sweating needs?

A minute later we were up with it. The entrance lay upon the other side–that is, the shady side–and here a stout oak door hung idly open, thus inviting entrance. How came this stony friend in such a wild deserted spot as that? I could not tell–nor did I care; but verily it was as welcome as an oasis amid the desert. With a blessing on its unknown builder, I dismounted and led Kitty in.

The place was sweet and clean, and thickly carpeted with well-dried bracken, while a gentle sea-breeze found its way inside, thus adding to a most refreshing coolness.

Small wonder that my pretty mare let go a gladsome neigh and rubbed her velvet muzzle on my shoulder. Doubtless she looked upon our new-found quarters as a stable. Having first eased her girths I looked around for water. This I found not far away–a bubbling stream amid the rocks. When poor thirsty Kitty had refreshed herself thereat I led her back to the barn and put her nose-bag on. Then I fell to with a will upon the food that old Anne's forethought had provided. And so, while Kitty munched her oats, I ate my bread and cheese and pasty and drank my wine, and each of us was mightily content. After this refreshment, being wondrous sleepy, I decided to remain there till the sun should have lost something of his fierceness. But, first of all, remembering that flashing vision of a man across the track, I judged it wise to close the heavy door and fasten it, the which I did by running my sword (for lack of wooden pin) through two stout iron staples, thus making it impossible for anyone to attempt an entrance without my hearing him. This done, I lay down on the bracken close beside the door and very soon was wandering in the land of Nod.

Now I count not among my virtues (or, if you will, my vices) that of being what is called a heavy sleeper. Slight noises will awaken me, and so it came about that, while I was slumbering thus, a gentle rattling aroused me thoroughly.

Someone had tried the door, and, as the staples were full long, my sword allowed it to be opened quite four inches. This had been done, and, even as I stared in breathless silence, a great brown hand crept in and groped about in

search of that which barred all further entry.

If you have never seen a hand thus armless–lopped off and blindly feeling, as it were–no words of mine can picture it aright for you. 'Twas horrible beyond compare; and though the light which flickered through two narrow slits set high up in the wall was dim enough, it was yet all-sufficient to make plain a sight so awesome–four straining fingers and a thumb which lacked a guiding eye!

I stared like one bewitched until at last the fingers closed upon the sword-hilt; then, with a sudden spring, I tried to seize the wrist, but failed. The hand shot back ere I could even touch it, while next moment swiftly-running feet proclaimed its owner's flight.

Pulling my sword out from the staples, I drew it, and rushed forth in pursuit. Yet, though I had thus lost scarce half a minute, there was no sign of anyone outside; and not a sound came from the bushes which grew thickly all around, and were the only means of hiding near.

Baffled and perplexed, I walked silently along the turf a little way, stopping every yard or so to listen. Still naught was to be heard. That sly disturber of my sleep had disappeared as if by magic.

This was an ugly state of things–indeed, I liked it not; and so, bethinking me that to go farther might spell danger to my mare, I ran back to the stable.

The sun had now moved down considerably (thus proving that I must have slept some hours), and the heat, though still oppressive, was not so overpowering as it had been; but, even had it still been like a furnace, I would not have tarried longer in that haunted place. So, with the memory of a clawing hand to hurry me, I tightened Kitty's girths, and, having led her forth, was just about to mount, when something hissed close past my face and stuck quivering in a tree-stem. It was a small black arrow! The mystery was explained at last, and the knowledge that my dreaded enemy lurked thus close to me was so appalling that I shame not to confess my knees smote one against the other, while a clammy sweat broke out upon my forehead.

Leaping to the saddle I urged Kitty forward, at the same time bending low by instinct; and well it was I did so, for next moment a pistol cracked behind me and the bullet whistled just above my shoulder. Two inches lower and I had been hit!

Glancing back, when we had covered some three hundred yards, I saw no sign of Tubal Ammon, and was just thanking Heaven for such a merciful deliverance, when suddenly my mare stopped dead and broke out trembling with fear.

The cause of this was just ahead, for there an old man lay upon his back among the heather. Going close up I gazed down on him, and, to my horror, found that he was dead. His eyes stared up at me with awful fixedness. Moreover, he

had met his death by violence, as was clearly proven by the gaping knife-wound in his breast. Stabbed through the heart!

He was well dressed (a yeoman farmer by the look of him), and wore riding boots with spurs. Thus it was clear he had been riding when death overtook him. What, then? How came he thus? Where was his horse? These questions were full quickly answered; for barely had I put them to myself when from behind there came the sound of thudding hoofs, and, starting round, I saw Tubal Ammon galloping towards me on a long-legged, bony beast.

This made things clear indeed; yea, verily, I understood it all as in a flash. Keeping far ahead of us throughout the morning, running when we walked (though ever making sure of our direction), the miscreant had reached this lonely spot before us, had met this poor old man and slain him for his horse, and, having hidden it, had lurked about in hope of falling me as well by stealth. This having failed, he now pursued me on his blood-bought steed, intent on further mischief.

As this rushed through my mind, I, too, rushed through the air, and such a wild, mad race began as never was. Kitty knew little of the spur, but now I used it on her without knowing that I did so. Heavens, how we flew! The pace we made was such as beggars words. The ugly brute behind, for all his great long legs and furious speed, gained not a yard upon us, for what advantage he possessed in length of limb my mare outwitted by her lightness and agility.

Mile after mile we had covered in this headlong, reckless fashion, when suddenly a shrill cry reached me, and glancing back, I saw that Tubal Ammon's horse was down, while he himself had been shot yards in front of it.

Perceiving this, I stopped to look. Perchance the luckless beast had stumbled in a rabbit burrow, while, by the way its head dropped back when Ammon pulled upon it with the bridle, I judged it to be either broken-necked or broken-hearted. And doubtless its rider shared the same opinion, for, after divers vicious tugs and kicks he dropped the reins, and, turning, shook a fist at me. I answered in like fashion, then trotted on my way.

And here it seems to me that you may well be wondering why, in the name of fortune, I did not instead ride back and try to kill the wicked wretch whose death I so much coveted. But verily, my friends, the chances were not what, to you, they may appear to have been; nay, rather were they all against me. For, look you, thick cover lay on every side, and long ere I could have come up with him, friend Tubal would have darted into hiding; while, having just most providentially escaped from death, I had no mind to seek for it again.

So I pressed on towards Exeter, whose grey cathedral towers were even then just visible, far off, against the glowing sky. But, feeling safe from that which lay behind, I did not hurry, for Kitty's state was truly piteous. Her flanks were streaming, while the foam dripped from her mouth. Thus I walked and trotted

her by turns, and the sun was nearly down when at last we clattered noisily along the ancient city's streets.

Here was mighty bustle and excitement, with no little fear mixed up therewith. The streets were all alive with eager, anxious crowds, and many, taking me to be a special messenger bearing news of Monmouth, tried to stop and question me; but, turning a deaf ear to them, I cantered on to Albemarle's head-quarters.

I found him seated at wine in company with divers gay-dressed cavaliers, who, by the look of them, thought more of drinking than of fighting. At first they were inclined to flout me; but, verily, a sturdy, well-armed, six-foot stripling of eighteen, with his wits about him, is something of a match for such as they. I tossed them back their gibes with interest, and when 'twas found that I came straight from Lyme, they changed their tune and pestered me with questions, which I answered coldly.

"And so you come to join us, eh, young man?" said Albemarle, when I was sick of being catechized.

"Yes, sir," I answered, and added that my father was an old friend of Lord Feversham, Commander-General of the forces.

That made the Duke sit up and stare at me as though I were a thing of more importance than he had imagined.

"Ah, by my life!" said he at last, "then sink me if I find thee not a cornetcy. What say you, gentlemen?"

With one accord the red-faced fellows smote the table with their fists, and swore it should be so; then, rising, drank my health.

And thus it came about that, after passing safely through another day of peril, I went to bed a soldier of King James.

CHAPTER XX
At Sedgemoor Fight

This record deals not mainly with the bold, ill-starred designs of Monmouth, but rather with the lesser doings of one Michael Fane; therefore I will not dwell upon the marchings and the counter-marchings, the petty skirmishes, the knock-kneed weaknesses and pitiable indecision which led the hapless Duke at last to bloody Sedgemoor and destruction.

Sweeping aside, then, as it were, these matters, which, though contributory

to the final great catastrophe, were of themselves but small affairs, I come to the night of 5th July, 1685, when we of the Royalist army, scarce four thousand strong, were encamped upon that wild, vast tract of bog and moorland known as Sedgemoor; while, not far away, inside the ancient town of Bridgewater (which had proclaimed him king), lay Monmouth with some eight thousand followers.

'Twas a Sunday, and all day long 'tis said the rebel army had been engaged in deep devotions (a thing I cannot say for our side); while their preachers, wearing red coats, great jack-boots and swords, held forth with fiery words from wagons and the like. The far-off, fervid singing of their psalms and hymns had reached us on the plain, and brought forth many a ribald jest from men whose earnestness, at least, was not comparable with theirs.

Thus the day dragged by in stifling heat, until at last that fatal night came on which was to usher in such awful carnage. Again, 'tis no part of my plan to give a detailed story of the fight. To begin with, I have not the wherewithal to do it; a man who fights in battle has quite enough to do, it seems to me, to use his weapons properly, and so can know but little of the whole design. At least 'twas so in my case; and even were it otherwise I would scarce attempt it, for the tale has been already told full oft by abler men than me, and in such glowing words as I could never hope to compass. Still, as one who fought upon the side of victory (if such a butcher's shambles can be rightly called so), I would make bold to say that but for some blind blundering on the part of Monmouth's scouts and guides, together with the accidental firing of a pistol, a vastly different story might have come down to your ears. For 'tis certain that we had no previous knowledge of this well-planned night attack, and therefore, but for an eleventh-hour warning, should have been taken unawares by an army which, notwithstanding all its ill-armed, untrained state, yet outnumbered ours by two to one, and moreover, was aflame with burning zeal. With that statement of cold fact I will content myself, and so press forward, hot-foot, on my own affairs.

It was a full-mooned, starry night, yet for all that a fog so low and thick hung over marshy Sedgemoor that naught was visible at fifty paces. The night was still, with scarce a breath of wind to stir the rushes which abounded; and save for the dismal booming of a bittern, a roughly-given password or command, and the far-off, muffled sound of revelry, where heedless officers still sat at their wine–except for these, I say, no sound was to be heard.

As many of you know, the moor is drained to some extent by means of broad, deep ditches (called Rhines in those parts), and crossed here and there by causeways. For the most part they are filled with mud and water, and on the bank of one of them (that called the Bussex Rhine–a name which surely might have been found graven on poor Monmouth's heart)–I, who had now joined Feversham, stood with my men that night.

'Twas nearly one o'clock, and I was pacing idly to and fro, full sick of everything, when suddenly a pistol shot rang out upon the silence, followed quickly by the deeper note of muskets; then came loud, warning cries, the furious galloping of horses; and in a moment all was turmoil and confusion.

In this manner did we first get news that Monmouth's army had crept close upon us in the darkness. But, alack for such a well-planned scheme, they had either overlooked or clean forgot the Bussex Rhine; and as they now pressed on, they found their way barred by a great broad ditch some twenty feet across, with no near means of crossing it; and thus it was that we were saved from a surprise attack which might have cost us dear enough.

As I stood there listening keenly, and wondering what all this pother was about (for of course I did not know), I heard the heavy tramp of many feet, coming as it seemed towards me from the other side, and presently a dark, blurred mass of men hove dimly through the fog, then stopped suddenly, and broke out muttering–dismayed, no doubt, to find an unexpected ditch before them.

Bidding my men draw back, I stepped up to the edge.

"Who's that? Whom are you for?" I called across.

"The king," a voice replied.

"Which king?" I asked.

"King Monmouth!" came the loud, bold answer, and then, as if by one consent, the Rebel battle-cry rolled forth like thunder:

"God with us!"

I never heard so great a shout, and as it spread among the teeming thousands on the moor behind, it seemed to shake the very earth; it was as though all England raised her voice to Heaven.

Barely had that great cry died away when drums and bugles sounded, matchlocks broke out in a dazzling blaze, and bullets screamed across the ditch by hundreds. Our infantry had now come up, while Churchill with the horse, having found a crossing lower down, charged like a whirlwind on the rebel flank and rear. The battle had begun in right good earnest. And what a battle! The fog-bound darkness, which made it hard to tell a foe from a friend, added to its horrors. The crash of musketry; the roar of cannon and the clash of steel; the cries, and shrieks, and groans–all this still rises up before me like some ugly nightmare, even as I write these words.

And what was my own part therein? Well, as I said before, I had no desire to kill my fellow-countrymen, but when a roaring, wild-eyed fellow comes a-mowing at you with a pike, or scythe stuck endwise on a pole, you must do something, and–well, I did it; and, as the fight went on, I had to do it many times, until at length the sword which had been girded on me by my father in that quiet study had indeed a sorry tale of death to tell. And here, my friends, a word of

warning, or at least of clean confession. The rack of battle raises Cain in man, until he comes to kill unthinkingly, if not with grim delight. Beware!

And now the fight raged fiercely on all sides; but, though furious and bloody, it did not last long. Indeed, how could it? Those poor benighted, ill-trained fellows were no match for men who were, at least, well-armed and had some claim to being disciplined. Confused, hemmed in, and badly led, they surged to and fro like flocks of frightened sheep, an easy prey for sword and bullet; and though full many of them fought with dogged courage, and others with the fury of despair, there could be but one end to it. Their horses, for the most part utterly unused to warfare, were so maddened by the deafening noise of guns and muskets that they turned and galloped headlong back to Bridgewater. Nor was it long before many of the rebel foot were fleeing in a like direction; for, with our infantry across the ditch, the fight became a rout in no time.

Meanwhile I had mounted Kitty, and was in the very thick of it, slashing and thrusting for my life at every turn. And thus it was I met at last a tall, red-coated fellow on a big black horse. He came towards me at a furious gallop, waving his sword and shrieking like a madman:

"The God of Abraham! The God of Abraham!" As he flew by he aimed a savage blow at me. Just then a matchlock blazed and lighted up a red-blotched face. I knew him instantly. 'Twas Robert Ferguson.

So sudden and bewildering had this vision been that for a space I sat there staring like a man bedazed; but Sedgemoor was that night the last place to be mooning in, and when a lanky yokel rushed upon me with a scythe I came back to my senses quick enough. Yet, even so, it was my mare that saved me. She had seen far too much already to be caught thus napping. To save her legs from being lopped off by that murderous blade, she sprang aside; and as the fellow thus foiled swung round, mowing at the air, I cut him down.

Next moment I was flying headlong after Ferguson, with no thought for the battle left behind. But the time which I had lost since meeting him, though scarce a minute, yet proved enough to make my chase a hopeless one; and though I kept a keen eye on all red-coats, I saw no sign of him I sought.

Still, in what mad hope I know not, I tore on, until at length, having got clear alike of those who fought and those who ran, I realized my folly, and, pulling up, was just about to turn, when, from ahead, there came the ringing sound of steel on steel, I listened. Yes, swords were clashing there not far away behind a straggling wood; and by the noise of it the combat was a fierce and deadly one. Who could it be who thus fought out their quarrel in this lonely spot two miles from where a battle raged?

Bent on an answer to that question I moved slowly forwards, but had not gone far before a piercing cry rang out. Dead silence followed. The clash of

swords had ceased.

Then I moved on again, this time at a canter. The fog had lifted hereabouts, while the first dim light of dawn was in the sky. And thus, on coming round the bushes, I could just make out a man with naked sword standing above another who lay prone upon the ground. On catching sight of me he sheathed his sword and fled with wondrous speed. Passing the stricken man, I followed; but he had a goodly start, and though I kept him well in sight, he beat me at the far end of the wood. There I could see no sign of him.

Puzzled, I looked around, and saw a light some fifty yards away upon the left. For this I made, and soon found out its cause. Here was an old stone hovel, used either for the ponies or the cattle which roam, half wild, on Sedgemoor. Someone (perchance a guard) had been camping there that very night, and a fire of faggots still glowed on the floor, thus lighting up the place.

Dismounting, I went in and glanced about. Nothing was there except a manger full of straw–so bulging full, in fact, that I was minded to explore it. But barely had I gone a step when methought I heard a rustling of the straw, and sure enough next moment something bright came poking through. A pistol barrel! With a diving leap, I seized and turned the threatening thing, forcing the muzzle upwards; and not a whit too soon, for even as I did so it exploded, and the bullet crashed into the rafters. Then as I clutched a bony wrist, and twisted it, a smothered cry arose, the pistol fell, a close-cropped head shot forth, and I was face to face with Tubal Ammon.

Letting go my hold I sprang back, whipped out my sword, and stared at him as one would at a fearsome apparition, while he sat up and fixed me with his cunning eyes.

"At last!" I hissed, as soon as I could find my voice.

"Aye, verily," grinned he, shaking the straw from off his shoulders; "'twould seem that you and I, friend, were ordained to come across each other; 'tis indeed as if our horoscope were cast in—-"

"Enough of that," I broke in fiercely. "Come forth, you dog!"

He instantly obeyed. Leaping out, he stood there with folded arms, his ugly head thrust forward, and his eyes fixed hungrily upon the doorway towards which my back was turned.

"What now?" he asked at last, and though he grinned, I saw that fear lurked on his face.

"Why, this," I answered, slowly. "I should do well to put a bullet through so foul a cur, but that is scarcely to my liking. No, Tubal Ammon, I will kill thee in a closer fashion. Therefore, draw sword and fight for it."

Out flashed his blade, while by his look I knew that he was mightily relieved to have so fine a chance, and thought to kill me.

"Art ready?"

"Yes."

"Then, have at you for a murderer and a villain!" With that our swords crossed, and even on that night of battle, with its many hand-to-hand encounters, no fiercer, deadlier combat could have raged than that which now commenced inside that lonely building. If ever two men strove amain to kill each other, we were those two; if ever steel shot forth with hate behind it, that steel was surely ours.

My foe soon proved himself a skilful, wary swordsman, but had he been the finest then in England, methinks I would have mastered him at last. Fearing, if chance afforded, that he might dart out into the night and thus escape me, I kept a stolid back towards the doorway. Thus it was he who did most of the attacking, and so swift and furious was it that more than once his point came dangerously near my heart.

At last I tried a sudden twist (learnt from my father), and thereby forced Ammon's weapon from his grasp. He sprang back hissing like a cat, and doubtless thought his hour was come. But though I longed to kill him that was not my way of doing it. I bid him take his sword again–an act of fairness which came near costing me my life; for presently, presuming on it, he made pretence to lose his weapon yet again, and when I motioned him to take it, made a sudden, upward thrust at me ere I was ready for him. But at last the craftiness of Tubal Ammon failed him utterly. I turned his blade aside so that it ran beneath my arm, and, as he thus rushed blindly forward, my sword shot straight into his breast. Staggering to the wall, he stood there glaring at me for a moment, while the life-blood spurted from him; then with a vengeful cry he tried to spring upon me–failed, and crashed dead at my feet.

Thus died Tubal Ammon, King of Subtlety, and verily it seemed to me the manner of his end was one which well befitted him. 'Twas in a barn that he had tried to kill me privily–'twas in a hovel that I left him dead.

One half of my vow thus happily accomplished, I went in search of him whom Ammon's sword had smitten. I found him lying with his shoulders partly propped up by a tree, to which he had made shift to crawl. His hands were spread in front of him, his chin hung down upon his breast, and so I thought that he was dead. But on kneeling down beside him I found that he still breathed. Having taken off his steel cap I raised the drooping head, then nearly let it fall again, for the bloodless face, on which a setting moon shone, was none other than John Coram's.

His eyes were closed, but when I called his name he opened them and gazed at me in a dim, dazed fashion.

"You here–you?" he murmured.

"Yes, yes; how came it thus?" I said.

"Stark!" he gasped. "We met in battle–I pursued–he led me on–then turned upon me here–and–faith, his accursed sword hath gone clean through my lungs. I bleed within. I die."

"Stark is dead," I said by way of comfort.

"What! didst kill him?"

"Yes. He lies dead scarce two hundred yards from here."

"Good–good!" he murmured fervently. "But stay–it grows amazing dark! Come near, friend."

I put my ear close to his mouth.

"That money which you gave me, friend," he whispered faintly, "'tis in my pocket with some more besides. I have a wife and little girl in Bridgewater. Wilt see they get it?"

"It shall be done," I answered.

Seeking my hand he pressed it closely, saying:

"Thanks, good, true friend; now can I die in peace."

With that he closed his eyes again, his head sank back upon my shoulder, and I thought his life had sped; but suddenly he looked forth with a wild, unearthly stare, and pointed skywards, saying:

"See! see! A mighty army which no man can number! Hark to the tramp of feet! They march, and I must join them! Let me go, friend!"

Springing to his feet, he stood there swaying like a drunken man; and, waving a hand above his head, cried:

"Monmouth! Liberty! God with—-"

The choking blood gushed up into his throat, and so he staggered back into my arms–a corpse.

I laid him gently down, folded his hands upon his breast, and having said a simple prayer above him, rode swiftly back to other scenes of death.

CHAPTER XXI
I Leave the Service of King James

When I reached the battle-field, the dawn was breaking and the fight was all but done. Only the gallant men of Somerset still held their ground–a handful of doomed heroes, who scorned to yield to anything save death, which rushed upon

them from all sides. 'Twas a moving sight indeed to see these brave, misguided fellows standing there–hemmed in on every side; deserted by their comrades; mowed down by dozens every minute: yet still fighting manfully with pike and scythe and musket for the cause they held so dear. In the midst of them stood a tall, red-coated minister waving a sword in one hand and a Bible in the other, the while he shouted words of exhortation and encouragement; but just as I drew close a musket bullet struck him in the mouth, and down he went to everlasting silence. Almost as he fell their firing slackened, and a wild, beseeching cry broke from them:

"Powder! for God's sake, powder!"

Their only answer to this piteous appeal was another furious onfall of the Royalist horse, which swept them clean away–and all was over. The struggle for a kingly crown had once more been decided by the sacrifice of innocent and simple men.

The Duke had long since fled the field. While there was hope he fought with bravery (or at least 'tis said so, for I never saw him), leading his men on foot, with pike in hand. But no sooner did defeat seem certain than he galloped off with Grey–his general of horse, and Buyse, the German soldier–leaving his hapless followers to their fate; an act of perfidy, it seems to me, which must for ever brand him as a coward. Yet it availed him nothing, for, as ye know, he was taken two days afterwards, hiding in a ditch at Ringwood, in Hampshire–a wretched, half-starved, bearded creature, disguised in shepherd's clothing, and so changed that those who captured him scarce knew him for the handsome, smiling fellow who had stepped ashore at Lyme less than a month before. From Ringwood he was borne to London, and, notwithstanding all his abject cries for pardon to the king, his uncle, he lost his head within a week on Tower Hill.

But to return to Sedgemoor. The fight was over, and what had it cost? Well, a thousand of the Duke's men lay there dead upon the moor, with some three hundred of our own to keep them company. But this was only the beginning of such wanton butchery as sent all England cold with horror when the tidings of it spread abroad. For throughout those western counties men were harried day and night–hunted down like vermin–and either shot, stabbed, or hanged; while those who escaped so swift a death were driven into the towns chained together like great flocks of sheep, and there cast into prison to await a no less certain doom when Jeffreys came his bloody rounds.

The frightened tithing-men, fearful lest lack of zeal might be construed into a favouring of the rebels, made haste to set up rough gibbets in wellnigh every village, and thereon, day in, day out, hanging went forward at a sickening pace. Nor was this all. It did not stop at hanging. Commands went forth that drawing and quartering was to follow; and so heads and trunks, well seethed in pitch,

were scattered broadcast, to be set up as warnings to a people who were already far too terrified to need them.

During those awful days I saw such sights as make this quill of mine pause, shuddering, when I think of them. I will not harrow you by dwelling on them, but here is one instance, out of many, which will go to prove my statement. A youth, but little older than myself, was taken prisoner, and, being famous as a runner, begged for a chance to save his life by racing with a wild moor colt. This, to the captain of the troop which captured him, seemed something of a merry jest. A colt was straightway caught, and they were started off together. Ye will scarce credit it, but the youth kept well ahead for half a mile or more, then dropped. When they came up with him he rose and claimed his life for having won the race. But, no. The cruel brutes made haste to hang him for his pains upon the nearest tree!

Enough–let us leave these awful matters. They are among the blackest annals of our country, and one man at any rate still goes hot with shame to think he only saw such horrors.

After the battle my Lord Feversham posted up to London, there to receive his honours, and left one Colonel Kirke in command at Bridgewater. This fellow was as vile and merciless a wretch as e'er drew sword, while the men of his own regiment (called Kirke's Lambs in bitter mockery) were not a whit less cruel than their master. Nor age nor sex was spared by them.

To this monster (man I cannot call him) was left the task of hunting down the wretched fugitives, and I, perforce, served under him; though 'tis something to my comfort to remember that, at the risk of life itself, I helped more than one poor creature to escape; nor was I in Kirke's service long, as you will see.

Having worked his will at Bridgewater, he moved on to Taunton, taking with him a long string of prisoners, chained two and two, while others who were wounded lay with their wounds undressed (heaped in a wagon). More were caught upon the way, and so, when at last we marched into the town, whose people, not a month before, had strewn flowers in Monmouth's path, and given him a rich-worked banner, we drove before us such a herd of poor distracted creatures, of all ages, as might have made a Spartan pitiful.

And now there happened that which made me think it shame instead of honour, to be serving as a soldier of King James.

At Taunton Kirke took up his quarters at the White Hart Inn, and straightway turned the very sign thereof into a gibbet. Thus, seated at the window, drinking with his officers, he laughed and jested while dozens of his hapless fellow-countrymen were swung to death upon this homely gallows. And when they kicked and struggled in their agony he bade the drums beat, saying he would give them music for their dancing.

Nor was this all. On pain of instant death, if he refused, they had forced a hapless yokel to be quarterer (Tom Boilman, as he was thenceforward known throughout that countryside by shuddering men and women, who would not go within a yard of him). And there he stood beneath the gallows, working for very life amid the blood and boiling pitch. That was enough for me. Rushing to Kirke's room, I told him hotly that I would not serve another hour on such a frightful business.

He sprang up, and, with his sword half-drawn, cried:

"What's that, you saucy dog?"

"Why, this," I thundered, "that I will not serve another minute under such a bloody-minded wretch as you! Here is my commission." And I threw it on the table.

His face and head went red with anger; the veins upon his neck stood out like cords; and for a time he could not speak.

"Whelp!" he hissed at last. "You shall smart for this! Yea, verily," he added, with an awful oath, "but you shall dance like yonder rebel!" He pointed to a struggling figure which had just been raised aloft.

"My Lord Feversham may have a word to say on that point," I answered coldly. "For the rest, I take my chance."

Just then the drums began to beat, and so I turned upon my heel and left him, as he stood there clawing at the air with rage.

Going out I mounted Kitty, and, with my back towards those scenes of butchery, galloped forth for Lyme.

CHAPTER XXII
In which I become a Prisoner

I found all well at home, though Lyme itself was trembling with fear; as well it might, considering the active part which it had played in Monmouth's luckless venture. The little town, which but a month before had been as blithe as any in the kingdom, now lay beneath a cloud of jeopardy. Indeed, the place seemed half-deserted, for scores of its inhabitants had fled the wrath to come; while those who still remained crept in and out with frightened looks, and trembled when a horseman clattered through the cobbled streets.

Many questioned me about the late rebellion, and not a few, with tearful

eyes, implored me to protect them; but, though I strove to soothe them, the comfort that I could offer was a poor, cold thing indeed. For what was I? A youth who, without zeal therein–to serve his own ends, that is–had fought upon the winning side; then, for good reasons, had thrown up the business, and thereby brought upon his head the dire displeasure of a man who, by acts of vilest, wanton cruelty, was mounting higher every day into the royal pleasure. I, who had started out from Lyme three weeks before in search of great revenge, had found it–or at least a part thereof–yet what had it availed me? Nothing. And here, as one who proved its truth to the uttermost, I put on record that revenge when won is but an empty husk. The striving after it is all that counts (that well may stir the blood and make a man a demon, as indeed it does); but the thing itself, when gained, is worse than vanity.

Thus when news came that Ferguson (plotting to the end) had managed to escape from England, the tidings moved me little, and though, had I met him then, I would still have killed him, the keen desire to hunt him down at any price had vanished.

The days and weeks sped by, and I (sad at heart and feeling older by some years) went to and fro, unhindered, on my business, until at last it seemed that, after all, Kirke's threat had either been an empty one or clean forgotten. But like a thunder-clap there came the proof that this was not so; and also that one Robert Ferguson, for all his dash for life, had yet contrived to work me mischief.

One day towards the end of August (on the twenty-seventh of that month, to be exact) a troop of horse drew up before The Havering, and, when I went forth to enquire the cause of it, a captain, with a paper in his hand, strode up to me.

"Are you Cornet Michael Fane?" he asked.

"I am Michael Fane, but cannot claim the rank," I answered coldly, for his bearing was both bold and insolent.

"That matters not," quoth he. "I hold a warrant here for your arrest."

"Ah, so! And, prithee, on what grounds?" I asked.

"Why, on the best of grounds," he answered, opening the paper with a flourish. "For having aided and abetted rebels; for having spoken seditious words against His Majesty, King James, et cetera, et cetera."

"It is a lie!" I thundered.

"Then come and prove it so before my Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys, at Dorchester," said he, folding up the paper with great care.

Dorchester, whose prison was already full to overflowing! and Jeffreys, the heartless monster, who had just sent grey-haired, saintly Alice Lisle to death! I stood and stared until the horsemen, sitting there before me, seemed to vanish like a vision. But I was soon brought back to the grim reality of things.

"Come!" said the captain, striking his jack-boot with the warrant. "There is no time to lose. We have a spare horse here; so, when you're ready—-"

There was nothing for it but to go. Calling Tom, the groom, I told him quickly how things stood, at which his terror and amazement were such that he could only stand there dumb and gaping. So I mounted, and away we went.

As we passed through the town the people stared at me as though the end of everything was come: but I took no heed of them; the world and everything therein seemed as nothing to me then. Thus that night found me in the jail at Dorchester.

On the terrors of that pestilential place I will not dwell. Over three hundred prisoners were crowded there like cattle in a pen, and almost every one of them was doomed to certain death. The air was foul and stifling, while cries and groans of anguish made up such a scene of horror as no pen could properly describe.

There were several faces there well known to me, and barely had I entered when a little wizened man came darting through the crowd and seized my hands. 'Twas old Samuel Robins, who, as you will remember, sold fish to Monmouth's men aboard the frigate and was kept there. That was his crime.

"Oh, Master Fane," he cried, looking up at me with wild imploring eyes, "what do it mean? What be Oi here for? I sold them fish as fair and straight as any man; fore-right I did, and how were Oi to know as it were Monmouth's ship? Zur, zur! My pretty boo-at! What be they a-goin' to do wi' me and her? Get back, zur; go you to the King and tell en old Sam Robins ne'er did harm to any man."

He tried to drag me to the door. Alas! he did not understand that I was just as helpless as himself. I tried to comfort him as best I could, but he only raved the louder, wringing his hands and asking God to save him and his "pretty boo-at".

Many of the prisoners were sick, and some still suffering from wounds. Amongst these moved a grey-haired gentleman, endeavouring, by word and touch, to give relief. His name was Dr. Temple, and he told me that he hailed from Nottingham, but had been in the Netherlands some years; that when Monmouth's expedition sailed thence he had shipped as surgeon, being told that they were bound for western seas, and had not found out the truth until they had been two days at sea. At Sedgemoor he had worked zealously among the wounded of both sides–and this was his reward!

"I am old," said he, "and if death comes it finds me well upon the road to meet it. But you are young and strong, and it troubles me to see you here."

Far into the night we two sat talking, until at last, in spite of stifling heat and groans, we fell asleep.

I dreamt prodigiously, and, strange as it may seem to you, my dreams were not unpleasant–being for the most part of old, happy days long passed–but, oh,

the grim awakening!

CHAPTER XXIII
"The Scourge of the West"

For one long, awful week I had lain a prisoner in that foul den, when at length, on the third day of September, the roll of drums and blare of trumpets told us that Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys was come into the town to hold assize. Next morning he attended service at St. Mary's Church, and 'tis said that when the preacher mentioned mercy Jeffreys laughed aloud; and I can well believe it, for with him "the quality of mercy", so far from being "strained", was utterly unknown.

That day the bloody work began. Prisoners were hurried off in batches to the court-house to be tried, and soon returned with faces which told plainly of the sentence passed upon them. It had been pressed upon us by our jailers that our only chance of pardon lay in pleading guilty, but this was quickly found to be nothing save a wicked trap to hasten on the business; for no sooner did a man plead guilty than he was condemned to death. Never shall I forget the woeful, desperate looks of those poor fellows as they were thrust back into the prison with the shadow of the gallows over them. It was as though each had the noose already round his neck.

All day long this branding for the death went forward, until at last, when the judge rose from his labours, nearly a hundred had been sentenced; Dr. Temple, old Sam Larkyns, and Sampson Larke, the grey-haired Baptist minister of Lyme, among them.

Next day the ugly tale was taken up afresh–over another hundred were condemned. Then Sunday brought a pause–but what a pause! The fate of two parts of the prisoners was already sealed, while for the rest the future held no sort of hope; nay, rather was that Sabbath but a black suspense which lay between us and our doom. Despite the jailers, hymns and prayers went up through that day of gloom, and when night fell a simple, fervid faith had brought real fortitude to many, though here and there loud cries and sobs betokened broken hearts which naught could heal.

My turn came on the Monday, and I recollect how sweet it seemed, in spite of that which lay before me, to pass from such pestiferous foulness into the sunlight and breathe the cool, refreshing air again. But we (there were some eighty

of us) had little time to drink in these delights, being hurried, under strong guard, along the streets and so into the court-house.

The hall was hung with scarlet (fit colour for so murderous a place!), and at the far end, seated in a high-backed chair upon a crimson-covered dais (as though he swam in blood), I beheld the man whose very name was already a terror and a byword, not only in the stricken West, but throughout the length and breadth of England–the infamous Judge Jeffreys. At a table beneath him sat the Crown lawyers, barristers and others, shuffling and docketing their papers with much show of zeal, as if, forsooth, the trial were a fair and righteous one rather than the ghastly farce it was. On his left, in a sort of long narrow pew, sat the jury–twelve fat, well-liking fellows–picked men from the county, who could be counted on to send their fellow-countrymen to death at Jeffreys' bidding.

But though all this was new and strange to me it was the judge himself who most surprised me. I had pictured him an ugly, coarse-faced fellow, with something of the butcher in his bearing, but instead thereof I found a not ill-featured man of under forty, who, notwithstanding that debauchery had set its mark upon him, had still some claim to handsomeness.

As he sat there, with his chin upon his hand, watching us in a dreamy, thoughtful fashion as we filed into the hall, it seemed scarce credible that this was the wild, ferocious brute whose ravening thirst for blood had made a mockery of law and justice. But the grim truth soon crashed on us like a thunderbolt.

As soon as we were all assembled there was dead silence for a good half minute, then Jeffreys suddenly shot up and for a time stared at us with a look of startled horror, as though he knew not who we were. At last he leaned slowly forward with his hands upon the chair and said:

"What have we here? Can it be? Another batch of wickedness already! How many do they number?"

"Eighty-and-eight, my lord," replied a clerk, rising with swift readiness.

"Eighty-and-eight!" exclaimed the judge in horrified amazement. "Eighty-and-eight more workers of iniquity! Eighty-and-eight more traitors to as good and kind a king as e'er wore crown! Eighty-and-eight more sinks of villainy and rank rebellion! Good Lord! when shall we reach the end of this long tale of wickedness? Heavens! if it doth not make me ill to think on't! Yes, verily, it breaks my heart!"

He sank back, groaning, in his chair and sobbed aloud. But this was quickly past, and then he broke out on us with such a wild vehemence as made the very lawyers gape upon him in amazement. He waved his arms, stamped his feet, and struck the desk before him; his face went red and white by turns, his throat swelled out until it seemed as though his words would choke him. I never saw such blind, ungovernable fury. It was as though some inward demon strove to

rend him.

I will not make the vain attempt to set down here that mad harangue, for no pen could do it rightly. Not till his breath forsook him did he stop; then, having rested for a moment and refreshed himself with wine, he started straightway on his work of butchery, sending men to their doom at such a pace as gave them scarcely time to realize what had befallen them. The dock was filled and emptied, filled and filled again. No witnesses were called, and though a lawyer, briefed by the Crown, was there for our defence, he soon proved but a puppet in the one great farce, for when he spoke, a look or word from Jeffreys sent him, white and trembling, into ignominious silence. And, if a prisoner dared to raise his voice, he was immediately shouted down, with threatening violence, by the judge.

Thus did that cruel, heartless work go on until at last it came to my turn.

As I stepped forward and faced that demon in the wig and gown, the court and all that it contained, save him–lawyers, jury, prisoners, and everything–seemed to vanish, leaving us two alone. A pair of cruel, ravening eyes I saw, and nothing else. Yet 'tis certain that I felt no fear; and, indeed, I should have been a poltroon if I had, after seeing how some four-score simple fellows had already faced this bullying monster with unflinching courage and met their fate like heroes. Therefore, with such brave examples as my guide, and looking on my fate as settled, I only wished to get the business over speedily, and to show Jeffreys that, although he had the power to kill me, nothing he might say or do could shake my fortitude.

Thus, for what seemed to me some minutes, we stared at one another; then Jeffreys leaned slowly forward, and, in a purring voice, like some great cat about to spring, said:

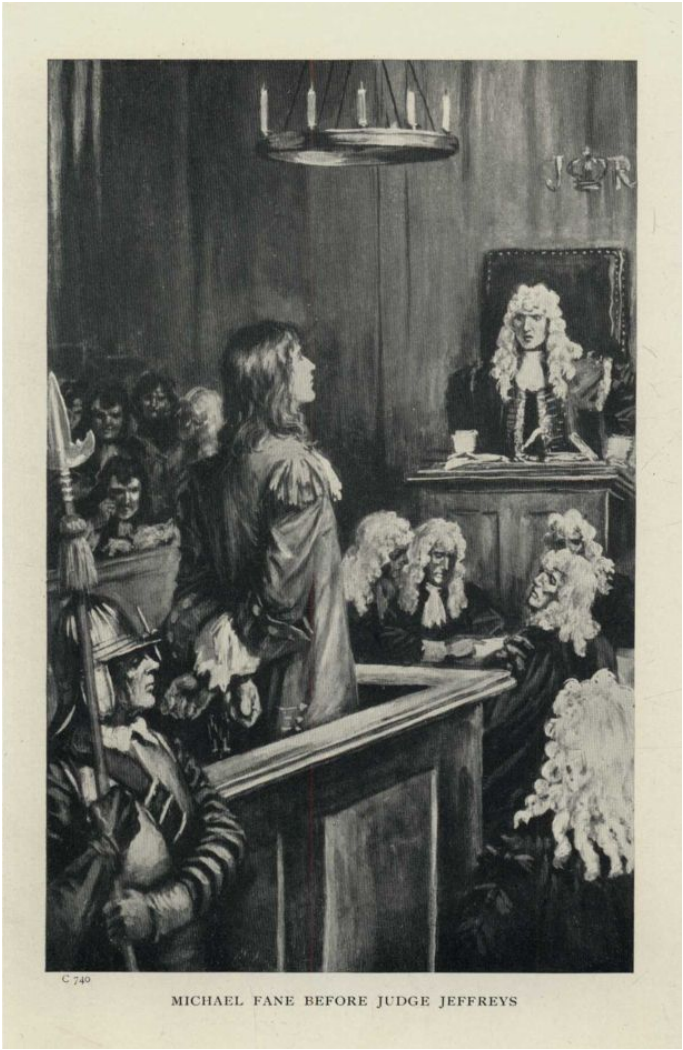
"So you are Michael Fane, eh?"

"That is my name," I answered coldly.

"Ah! Michael Fane," he went on in the same low tones, "thou overgrown young shoot of perfidy; thou offshoot of that gnarled old tree of evil, Gilbert Fane, I—-"

"Stop!" I broke in hotly. "Your power to hang me doth not include the right to smirch a fair, good name. My father was as true and brave a gentleman as e'er—-"

"What's that, sirrah?" shrieked the judge with throttling fury. "You dare to interrupt me! Behold him, gentlemen!" he added, turning to the jury, while he waved a hand at me. "Hark how yon mountain of iniquity doth brazenly affront and flout me! Didst ever hear the like of such amazing impudence? Oh, Michael Fane, thou cunning, treacherous dog, have a care, yea, have a care, or 'twill be bad indeed for thee! Again I say you are the offspring of as traitorous and false a sire as—-"



MICHAEL FANE BEFORE JUDGE JEFFREYS

MICHAEL FANE BEFORE JUDGE JEFFREYS

"And I say again—-" I began; but at that his fury burst forth like a cataract.

"Sirrah," he shouted, waving his arms and thumping the desk in front of him, "you dare to interrupt again! Have a care, yea, have a care, you bellowing bull of Bashan! Another word, and, by my life, I'll have you swung off now from yonder beam! Ah! that tames you, does it? Say, how tall are ye?"

"Six feet two."

"Six feet two! Behold him, gentlemen! Measure him with your eyes! Seventy and four inches of such vileness as you ne'er set eyes upon before! And how old are ye, pray?"

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen!" cried Jeffreys, raising both hands as though amazed. "Eighteen, say ye! Gentlemen, gentlemen! Just consider it! To think that such a sapling should have brought forth such a crop of wickedness! Heavens, if it doth not almost make my heart stop beating! Oh, Michael Fane, thou lusty limb of infamy! doth it not seem to you a mockery that I should have to ask what plea you make? Yet, as the law is fair and merciful e'en to such rogues as you, I must. What is it, counsel?"

The lawyer who, as I have said, was there for our defence, rose tremblingly and answered:

"The prisoner pleads not guilty, your lordship."

"What!" shrieked the judge, addressing me. "You dare to make so false a plea? Are ye not afraid of instant judgment from above for uttering so black a lie? Zounds! if I think not that this very court is in rank peril from avenging thunderbolts while we share it with such a Jonah of a villain! Not guilty, quotha? You, who like a wolf in sheep's skin, made pretence to fight at Sedgemoor, and, as I'll warrant me, killed many a king's man under cover of the darkness! You, who aided and abetted rebels! You, who defied that zealous soldier, Colonel Kirke, and strove to stop him in his duty! You, who with rank insolence deserted your sovereign's service! What say ye to these charges, fellow?"

"It seems as though 'twere folly to say anything," I answered. "Yet will I swear that I fought not treacherously at Sedgemoor, but fair and straight, and that 'twas only Colonel Kirke's abominable cruelty to helpless prisoners which made me—-"

"Stop! stop!" shrieked the judge, thumping the desk before him with both hands. "Such brazen, lying impudence beats everything! I will not listen to it!"

And, as he plugged his ears up with his fingers, 'twas useless for me to proceed.

"Ye hear him, gentlemen, ye hear him!" he continued, perceiving I was silent. "Mark well his words. Remember them; yet know that what already hath been said is not the twentieth, nay, nor the hundredth part of that which stands

against him. Listen! On a morning in June last, yon wretch, while holding guilty converse with his villain of a father, was overheard to utter vile, seditious words against his king. But even that is nothing when compared with this, for here I have such evidence against him as would hang a hundred men."

Then, indeed, I started, for in the parchment which Jeffreys waved triumphantly above his head I recognized the Black Box documents.

"Ah! ye may well turn white and tremble," quoth the judge, regarding me with a malicious grin which bared his teeth. "Behold him, gentlemen, and see how even such brazen wickedness and cunning is at last brought low. Here is the corner-stone of his amazing falsity. For what are these?" he added, spreading out the parchments. "Why, nothing more nor less than written lies which seek to prove that Monmouth (who hath already met so well-deserved a fate) was the rightful heir to England's throne. Ye have all heard that monstrous story of a Black Box. Well, here at last we have the secret of it. Forgeries, rank forgeries! the work of that prince of plotters, that sink of falsity, one Robert Ferguson, who hath not thought it shame thus to forge the signature of our late sovereign, King Charles of blessed memory; and who, Heaven grant, may yet be caught. Again, with these vile productions there is a letter to a man, one Jones of Lyme (who, by my life, shall swing for it on a tree in his own garden), warning him secretly of Monmouth's landing. And where, think ye, gentlemen, all these accursed documents were found? Ah! ye may well shake your heads, and ye will scarce credit it when I tell ye that they were found in yonder false, designing miscreant's house! They reached me but this very morning, coming from one unknown, who signs himself 'a friend of good King James'–and truly so, for a friend he is indeed; yea, and 'tis a thousand pities that he hides himself, for otherwise he should have been most handsomely rewarded. Take them, read them for yourselves, and then tell me if ye ever saw so villainous a piece of make-believe."

While the jury, with heads clubbed together, were examining the documents, Jeffreys fixed me with a murderous look and hissed:

"Well, sirrah, and what say ye now? Wilt, perhaps, deny that they were found inside your house, eh?"

"I do nothing of the kind," I answered. "They were there, and they were stolen from it by one of Ferguson's tools."

"Ah! a pretty tale, quotha! But, say, how came ye by the Black Box which, as reported, held these treasonable things?"

"My father took it years ago from Ferguson himself by force."

"What!" cried Jeffreys, starting upright in his chair. "Attention, gentlemen, attention! Ah! so your father was a friend of Ferguson?"

"He was no friend of his," I answered curtly. "My father met Ferguson in London, not knowing that 'twas he, for he called himself Elijah Annabat, and

professed to be a scrivener in the city. My father trusted him with money, and, when robbed of it, took the Black Box instead."

"Lies! lies! lies!" broke in Jeffreys like a maniac, waving his hands and fairly frothing at the mouth. "Oh, Michael Fane, thou wicked son of Anak! Truly, thou art the child of Ananias, of whom we read in Holy Scripture, and, like him, shalt pay the penalty. Ye hear him, gentlemen, how he doth add unto his infamy by mocking us with lying tongue. Was ever so much villainy encompassed in one man before? It seems scarce possible that only eighteen years can have borne so great a crop of evil fruit. The very sight of such a monster of iniquity doth make my eyes sore and my blood run cold. To think that our all-generous, wise, and loving king hath this creature for his subject is more than I can bear; yea, verily, it bursts my heart."

With that he leaned forward, with his head upon his arms, and broke out sobbing.

While he was thus engaged in grieving for my many sins, a man came pushing through the crowded court until he reached a place in front. To my astonishment I found that it was Dassell, who, as ye well remember, was so much to the fore at Monmouth's landing. He turned and gave me one swift, meaning glance, then stood waiting till the judge at length looked up; then he spoke.

"My lord," said he, "by your leave, I would say a word for yonder prisoner."

"What's that!" roared Jeffreys, glaring at him fiercely. "Have my senses left me? Ye would speak for yonder heap of infamy! Who are ye, fellow?"

"I am Samuel Dassell, my lord, deputy searcher of the port of Lyme."

"Ah, and what would ye say?" asked Jeffreys, with a heavy frown.

"Why, this, my lord," said Dassell with great haste, "that I have known the prisoner, Michael Fane, and his father many years, and have ever found them true and loyal gentlemen. I never heard a whisper against either of them, and if—-"

"Stop!" roared the judge, bringing a fist down on the desk. "What fresh infamy is this, that you should dare to speak in favour of yon villain? Think ye it not a burning shame that you, who serve the King and eat his very bread, should raise your voice in favour of his enemies? Ah! Samuel Dassell, you are surely in the wrong place; ye should be either in the dock or else in prison. Yea, verily, methinks I see you dancing at a rope-end even now. Deputy searcher, quotha! Go ye and search for the loyalty ye lack! Away with ye! I say, before my zeal doth tempt me to lay hands upon you. Go!"

And with a long sad look at me, poor Dassell left the court-house.

Then Jeffreys swept the hall with one swift, flashing glance, and, turning to the jury, said:

"Gentlemen, ye have surely heard enough, aye, and far more than that,

concerning yonder giant of iniquity. Have ye, then, your verdict ready?"

"We have, your lordship," said the foreman, rising with eager readiness.

"And it is—-"

"Guilty, your lordship."

"Ah, by my life, and I should think so," roared Jeffreys. "Guilty, indeed! guilty as any man who ever faced a judge. Listen, Michael Fane! Ye have tried lying, brazen impudence, and every other wile to save your neck, but all have failed you. One more question: Where is the box in which 'tis said these documents were stored?"

"How should I know, seeing they were stolen from us?" I answered warily, not meaning to enlighten him on that point. "Ask those who stole them."

"Ah! so we flout and snarl unto the end, eh? Well, well, it matters not, for verily that mocking tongue of yours will soon be put to silence. Listen, Michael Fane! Ye die, and would that I only had your wicked father here, that I might send him to his death along with you. He hath sorely cheated me by dying of his own accord. Ye die, I say, and as ye hail from Lyme–that sink of rank rebellion–there ye hang, and that as near as may be to the spot where Monmouth landed. If ye be not quartered also, 'twill be marvellous. I have already twelve more knaves to hang at Lyme–some who came ashore there with their pretty Duke, and some who waited for his coming. Ye make thirteen–a good round baker's dozen! (Make a note of that, clerk–Michael Fane to hang at Lyme with others on the twelfth of this month; and mark it that he dies the last of them.) Oh, Michael Fane, thou lusty scoundrel, doth not even a heart so base as yours feel some small gratitude that I have it in my power to end a life so wicked in its early days? Consider what ye would have grown to, and use what little time remains to you on earth in thinking deeply on your awful sins. Away with ye!"

He waved his hands, the warders seized me, and so, like one a-dreaming, I was hurried back to prison. I found it much less crowded than it had been, for many had already gone to death. Many, also, were to die upon the morrow, and for all of us who gathered there that night there was not left a single ray of hope.

CHAPTER XXIV
Beneath the Gallows

Early in the morning on the twelfth, those who were to die at Lyme (Sam Robins,

the fisherman, Sampson Larke, the minister, Dr. Temple, and myself among them) were brought forth from the prison, placed in two carts, and driven on our way to death.

As we rumbled through the ancient streets of Dorchester, the trembling, sad-faced townsfolk watched us go, and many tears were shed. Thus we passed out into the silence of the lanes. 'Twas a glorious, sunny morning, and to me the world had never seemed so fair a place as it did then.

"'Tis hard," said Dr. Temple, who stood next me, "that we should have to say good-bye to all this brightness."

He waved his hand around.

"'Tis hard, indeed," I answered. "Naught is left us now, except to go through bravely with the business."

"True, true," he murmured: "and I, who have seen death, and fought him too in almost every ugly form, should be the last to fear him now. Sir, my thoughts are chiefly set upon my native town of Nottingham. Wast ever there?"

"Nay, sir, but my father was, and he hath told me of it."

"Ah! 'tis a lovely place, set high upon the hills, with a noble river winding by it through the meadows. And on its highest hill there stands a fine old church–St. Mary's it is called. Its great tower rises up before me even now. There was I baptized, confirmed, and married; and there my young wife lieth buried. Ah! if I could but see that spot once more, methinks I should die happier!"

He turned his face away, and I was silent. There was much singing on the way, and Sampson Larke, the minister, spoke many ringing words of hope; for though his poor old wife lay dying even then in Lyme, he hid his own grief manfully, and strove amain to comfort those about him. He was a fine, upstanding fellow, and as he stood there in the cart behind us with his long hair streaming in the wind, his hand raised, and his face aglow with zeal, he made a picture that brought into my mind the ancient prophets.

As for little Samuel Robins, he bore up bravely, joining with a high shrill voice in hymn and psalm, until at last the great blue bay of Lyme burst suddenly in view. But this was too much for him. Stretching out his hands towards it, he broke down utterly and sobbed like any child.

Soon after this a strange thing happened; for as we gained the bottom of the hill and neared the sea, the horses utterly refused to face it. They kicked and plunged, and neither word nor blow could urge them forward. It seemed as if the poor dumb beasts rebelled against the duty forced upon them. So, in the end, we were taken out and marched on foot down to the place of death.

The gallows (two stout uprights with a cross-beam) had been set up behind the Cobb–that is, upon the western side of it, not twenty paces from the spot where Monmouth landed. Here a silent, awe-struck crowd was gathered, and

as we passed between the lines of saddened, tearful faces, 'twas like a funeral procession.

Around the gallows stood the sheriff and his officers, together with some soldiers with a captain in command. The latter had a list of victims ready in his hand, and no time was lost in going forward with the brutal business. The way of it was this. Standing ready, with the noose around his neck, the prisoner was asked if he had aught to say. If he had, he said it (providing it was not too long or violent), then he climbed up a ladder reared against the scaffold, and was at once turned off therefrom.

Ye may guess how sickening a sight this was to me who came the last of them! 'Twas worse than death itself to see my friends swung thus into eternity; yet though I tried to look another way I could not.

Number ten was Sampson Larke, and he, who had fought with Cromwell, and had girded on his sword again for Monmouth, was not the man to tremble now. He spoke both fearlessly and long–so long, in fact, that the captain stopped him.

"Then," said he, "I will speak to One who I am sure will hear me."

With that he uttered one swift prayer, and having blessed the people, climbed the ladder and went bravely to his death.

A gasping groan ran through the crowd and sobs broke out on all sides, for he was much beloved, and not a few there would have gladly died for him.

"Number eleven! Benjamin Temple."

The doctor grasped my hand, said "God bless thee, friend. Farewell!" then stepped firmly to his place. He told the people what was known to me already–namely, that he hailed from Nottingham, and was entirely innocent, having had no knowledge that the Duke was bent upon rebellion when he sailed with him from the Texel; also, that he died at peace with all men. This done, he made a simple prayer, then climbed to death.

Little Sam Robins was the next to go, and to me, at least, he was the saddest sight of any. He showed no fear, he neither spoke nor faced the people, but turning to the sea he said a long good-bye to what had been so dear to him, and with his eyes still fixed thereon he died.

"Number thirteen! Michael Fane."

My turn had come at last, and I was more than glad. A murmur ran among the people, for I had been known to most of them since childhood; yet when I stood beneath the gallows with the noose about my neck, it was as though the crowd had vanished into space. I saw them not at all. My whole life flashed before me like a dazzling blaze, and, strange as it may seem to you, the only thing I noted was a certain far-off spot where, as a boy, I had first climbed the cliffs.

"Have you aught to say, sir?" asked the captain.

No, I was there to die and not to speak, and therefore had naught to say; or rather, what I had to say was said full swiftly underneath my breath, to Someone else. Then I turned to mount the ladder: but I never did it, for even as I set my foot upon the bottom rung, a distant cry broke out behind me; and glancing round, as everyone was doing, I saw a horseman coming headlong down the hill towards us, waving a paper high above his head and shouting as he rode.

Soon he was near enough for us to catch his words.

"Stop! in the King's name, stop!" he shrieked.

And then I knew him. It was Dassell. The crowd made instant way for him, as well they might, for such was his furious speed that otherwise he would most certainly have rushed straight into them. In the shadow of the gallows he drew up. His horse was lathered in sweat, and dripping foam, while he himself was wellnigh fighting for his breath.

"Well, and what now, sir?" asked the captain, staring in amazement.

"A–pardon–from–His–Majesty–the–King–for–Michael Fane!" gasped Dassell.

What followed is not very clear to me, but I know a mighty shout of joy arose, and that, later on, I walked, like one a-dreaming, with good friend Dassell to my home, The Havering. And there I heard from him the story of my wonderful deliverance. Here it is, exactly as he told it me:–

After being snuffed out by Jeffreys in the courthouse at Dorchester, he lingered till my fate was settled, then posted up to London. There he sought and found Lord Feversham, whom he urged to plead with James on my behalf: and his lordship, having known my father well, and also me, was not averse to doing it. So he went straightway to the King, bearing Dassell with him.

They found His Majesty in no great mood for pardoning anyone just then, but hearing that my father had served his father (King Charles I) with zeal; and, moreover, wishing to please Lord Feversham, who then stood in high favour, he gave his gracious promise to think carefully upon my case.

Two other things there were which favoured me: one was the fact that Kirke had gone too far, and had been recalled to London in disgrace; the other, that the King was mighty glad to think that the mystery of the Black Box had been solved. Thus the outcome of it was that my pleaders were to call at Whitehall on the morrow, for His Majesty's decision. This they did, and found him in a rare good humour. The Black Box documents had come to hand, and so the King was pleased to sign my pardon.

Then Dassell started on his journey westward with a will. One horse fell dead beneath him; but he got another, and riding through the night, was just in time to save me. How near a thing it was, and how he snatched me from the very

jaws of death, ye know already.

I fought no more for King James–indeed, there was no chance of doing so, even had I wished it; for, until the Prince of Orange landed at Torbay and drove his faithless uncle flying from the kingdom, England was at peace, if persecution can be called so. But for good King William I have, thank God (along with Kitty, who still flourishes), fought much; and as I am still upon the sunny side of forty, may I have the chance to draw sword for him again! Aye, verily, my father's words ring often in my ears: "There is no finer work for any man than fighting for his king and country".

Yet, sometimes, when I pace the Cobb or shore, I see again the fine brave landing of Duke Monmouth, whose coming brought such suffering and disaster to the West. Or, when wind and sea moan plaintively, I seem to hear the mournful voices of those brave, misguided men whom I so nearly followed to a violent death. Then, with a heavy heart, I come back to The Havering and think sadly of it all.

What more is there to say? Well, very little, for now I have reached the end of that which I set out to tell you. If it hath been done clumsily, forgive me, for, indeed, I have small skill in writing. But at any rate, I swear it is a fore-right statement, as we say in Lyme. I have left nothing out, nor have I added anything.... Stay, though! Yes, by my life, I have left something out; for as I sit here writing in the quiet study where, seventeen years ago, I took the first step in the strange adventures here recorded, there stands that at my very elbow which seems to cry aloud for notice. It bears clear signs of mending; it is, in fact, a small Black Box; but though the sight of it brings back dark memories, it holds no terrors for me now.

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