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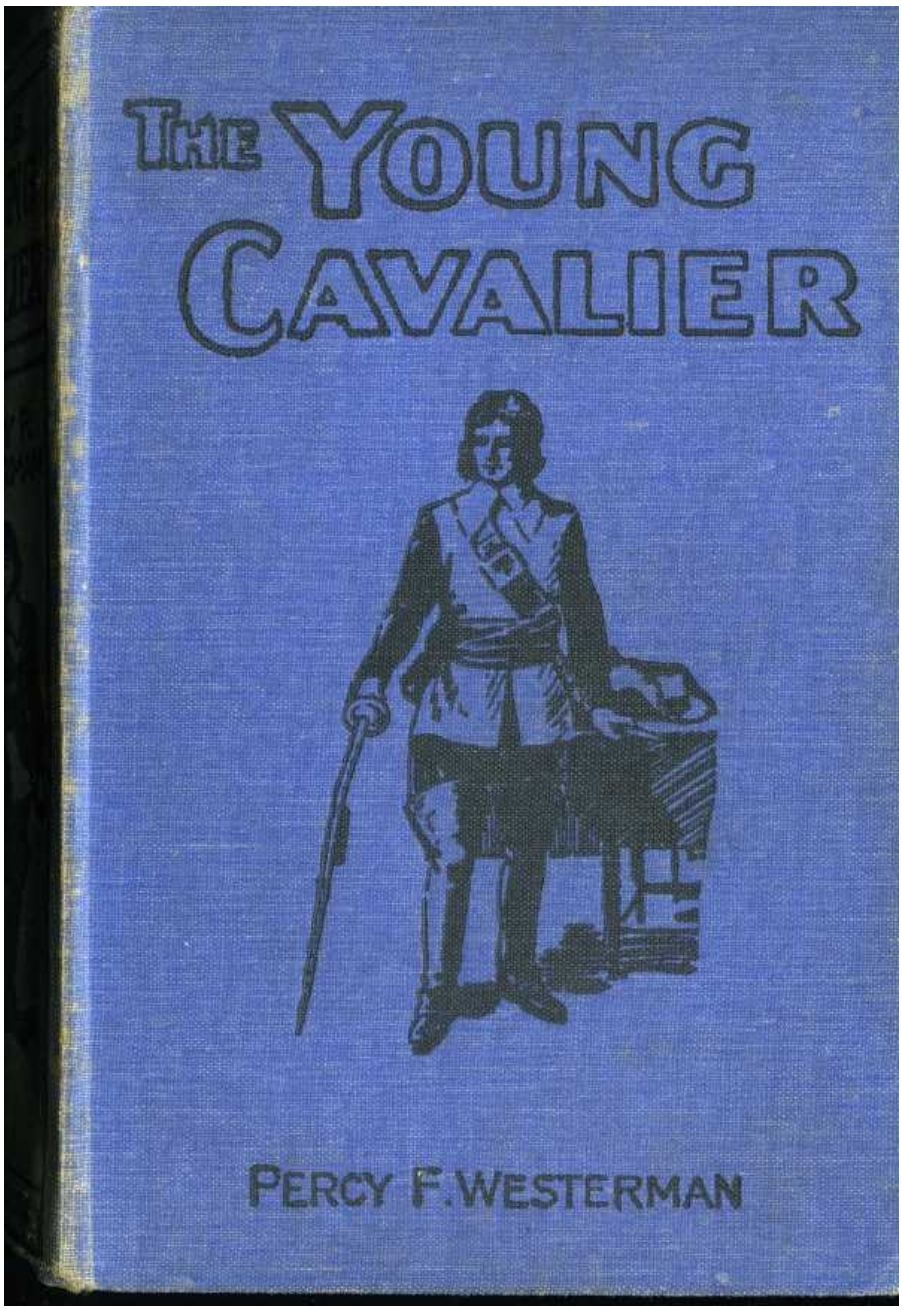

[Illustration: cover art]

[Frontispiece: *The next instant a pair of hands grasped the gunwale, and the dripping head of a man appeared over the side.*]

THE YOUNG CAVALIER

A STORY OF THE CIVIL WARS

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

**Author of "'Midst Arctic Perils," "Clinton's Quest"
"The Nameless Island," "The Young Cavalier"
"The Treasure of the Sacred Lake," etc.**

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE YOUNG CAVALIER

CHAPTER I

THE OUTBREAK OF CIVIL WAR

WELL shall I ever remember the last day of August in the year of grace 1642. The shadow of war, and civil war to boot, lay heavily over the length and breadth of the kingdom, and the usually peaceful Isle of Wight was no exception to the rule.

It was owing to this fact that I, Humphrey Markham, was compelled to remain at school during the holidays instead of spending them, as was my wont, at my father's castle of Ashley, which lies betwixt the borders of Hamptonshire and Sussex, hard by the town of Petersfield.

The call of duty had obliged my father to travel northward to attend on the King's person, so that, much to my disappointment, I was compelled to forego one of my twice-yearly visits to my home.

Yet, fortunately for me, I was not alone in my "exile," as I was tempted to call it. My closest companion, Ralph Granville, a nephew of the staunch Royalist, Sir Bevil Granville, of the Duchy of Cornwall, also remained at school for similar reasons, as did a score or more of other scholars, and, thanks to the kindness of the dominie, we were permitted a considerable amount of freedom, the only condition being that we should be within gates every night ere sundown.

On that fateful day, Granville and I had left Newport early in the morning, and had wandered far over the country towards the frowning heights of St. Catherine's Down, and already the afternoon had far advanced ere we gained the summit of Pan Down, a lofty ridge of chalk that overlooks the capital of the Isle of Wight on its southern side.

Before us lay the town of Newport, the golden rays of the setting sun falling athwart the yellow sandstone of the tower of St. Thomas' Church, and the red-tiled roofs that clustered densely around the dominating edifice. Beyond we could trace the narrow, thread-like estuary of the Medina, as it carved its way between the low hills to join the blue waters of the Solent; while, on the far side, we could see the dim outlines of the Hamptonshire coast, separated by the broad expanse of Southampton Water, the tree-clad masses of the New Forest contrasting vividly with the eastern portion of the bare ridge of Portsdown.

Away on our left rose the stern, grey outlines of Carisbrooke Castle, the Royal banner hanging limply in the still air from the flagstaff on the summit of the keep.

"Dost think these rebellious knaves will fight?" asked Ralph.

"Fight? Nay," I replied. "A slight bickering here and there, and all signs of defiance to His Majesty will be stamped out with a heavy hand."

"I don't know about that. Some of the adherents of the Parliament seem to be made of stern stuff.

For my part, I think there will be fighting, and much of it."

"And what of it? The King has but to raise his hand, and loyal gentlemen from all parts of the kingdom will flock to his banner, even as my father has already done."

"What will you do if war breaks out?"

"Do? Why, make my way over to Hamptonshire find out where my father is, and join him."

"But, Humphrey, you are only fifteen! What can a lad of fifteen do?"

"A lot when he makes up his mind," I replied, stoutly. "Besides, I am as tall and as strong as many a lad of nineteen."

"Be that as it may, we must look to the present," rejoined Granville. "'Tis nearly sunset, and, if we want to ramble afield to-morrow, it behoves us to hurry back to-night, for the dominie will surely forbid us leave if we are late in returning. Ah! What's that?"

We were already stepping briskly down the grassy slope, when a dull booming reached our ears. Instinctively we paused, and, looking in the direction of the sound, which continued without intermission, we saw a thick, white cloud of smoke rising in the direction of Portsmouth.

"A salute!" exclaimed Granville.

"A salute, forsooth!" I replied, contemptuously. "'Tis an irregular discharge of ordnance. Mark my word, they have come to hand-grips! But 'tis no good purpose to tarry here; possibly, in the town we'll hear tidings."

So saying, we resumed our rapid pace, and, gaining the level road at the foot of the down, we made for Shide, which lay betwixt us and Newport.

Hardly had we reached the outskirts of the little village, when the noise of an approaching cavalcade caused us to stop and look behind us.

Riding furiously, with loose rein, came a score or so of horsemen, richly dressed, and armed with swords and pistols, their curls floating behind them in disorder.

Next came a lumbering chariot, drawn by six horses with outriders, and within it we had a momentary glimpse of a lady, stern-faced, yet handsome withal.

The carriage was immediately followed by a number of bronzed and bearded soldiers, accoutred with breastplates, steel helmets, leather breeches, and jack boots, each man carrying a musquetoon on his hip, a pair of pistols in his holsters, and a stout broadsword hanging from a cross-belt of buff leather, which was counterbalanced by a fully charged bandolier.

We had barely time to flatten ourselves against the chalk bank at the side of the road before the troop had passed us, leaving a thick cloud of white dust, which hung motionless in the still air for several minutes after they had disappeared along the road leading to the castle of Carisbrooke.

Wondering what might be the meaning of this swiftly moving cavalcade, we resumed our steps towards the town of Newport; but hardly had we come within sight of the market-place when we perceived, by the great concourse of townsfolk present, that something untoward was taking place.

At this all thoughts of gaining the school gates before sunset vanished out of our heads, and, by dint of pushing and edging between the tightly packed masses of people, we succeeded in working our way to the forefront of the crowd.

Standing on a flight of stone steps outside a half-timbered house was a tall, lean, ill-conditioned man, dressed in a sombre garb of russet, set off only by a plain white linen collar and a buff sword-belt, while his thin, pale face, disfigured by a wide, thin-lipped mouth, long nose, and small black ferrety eyes, was surmounted by a steeple-crowned hat, which, resting on a pair of huge, projecting ears, almost concealed his close-cropped hair.

"'Tis the mayor," whispered Ralph. "Hark! He talks rank sedition."

"And will ye, my friends," exclaimed this worthy magistrate in a thin, piping voice, "allow this man, Charles, to ride rough-shod over your heads? Or will ye join with the people of England in putting down this sink of iniquity in our midst? What of our ancient rights and privileges—have they not been trodden in the dust and our birthright sold by this son of Belial for a mess of pottage? Up! up! I say, and join in the undoing of the tyrant. Where is this man Charles? He hath fled—fled from the City of London, and no man knoweth whither! News hath arrived that the trainbands have sided with the Parliament, the seaports have declared for liberty and freedom, and even now George Goring holds Portsmouth against the——"

"Nay, Master Mayor," shouted a bull-lunged spectator. "Therein thou art wrong. Goring hath declared for His Majesty King Charles, whom God preserve; and even now thy foul rabble yap round the gates of that town, afraid to venture therein!"

Cheers and groans greeted this announcement, and for the moment the traitorous mayor was taken aback.

"How know you that this be true, Master Rich?" he asked suspiciously.

"Considering I came hither but this morning, I am well prepared to abide by what I have said," replied the interrupter boldly. "And I tell thee, Mr. Mayor, what thou hast said shall be duly recorded against thee, and within a week thy head will grace the tower of St. Thomas."

Upon this there was a considerable tumult, some siding with the Royalist, though the majority upheld the mayor, till above the noise came a hoarse, authoritative voice shouting:

"Way! Way! I ride on affairs of State!"

The crowd gave way right and left, and, urging a restive horse through the press, a mail-clad man rode towards the spot where the mayor stood.

The new-comer was a heavy, thick-set man, with a bronzed face, pointed beard, and an upturned moustache, while his iron-grey hair was cut close to his massive head.

He was bareheaded, his steel cap hanging from his saddle-bow, and his buff-coat and breast-plate were flecked with dust, while his steaming and foam-covered steed showed that he had not spared the spur.

"The chief magistrate of the town of Newport?" he demanded curtly.

"I am he, worthy sir," replied the mayor, all bravado having, for the moment, left him.

Without speaking, the messenger put on his steel cap, drew his sword, and saluted the startled mayor; then, returning the weapon to its scabbard with military smartness, he handed him a sealed packet.

Tearing the seals, the mayor read the contents of the letter in silence, and then looked at the messenger as if undecided as to his reply.

"Read! Read it aloud!" shouted the crowd, and, his courage slowly returning, the mayor raised his hand for silence, and then began to deliver the message in an almost inaudible voice.

"Louder! Louder!" was the cry and the chief magistrate handed the letter to the clerk, who stood at his elbow.

"'His Majesty, having raised his standard at Nottingham, doth hereby confer upon me authority to take active measures against rebels now assembled within the Isle of Wight, that lieth within my jurisdiction. I hereby order and request all loyal and liege subjects of His Majesty to repair to the castle of Carisbrooke. His Majesty hath desired it to be known that, should the emergency and the great necessity to which he is driven beget any violation of law, he hopes it shall be imputed to the authors of this war, and not to him, who hath so earnestly laboured to preserve the peace of the kingdom. —Signed, Portland, Governor of the Wight.'"

A confused babel of cheers, shouts, and groans greeted the governor's message, and the mayor, noting that hostile demonstrations held the uppermost hand, spoke up:

"You see, my friends, the perjurers of our liberty would have the blame placed upon the Commons and the people of England. This is an infamous lie."

Then, turning to the messenger:

"Tell His Grace of Portland that the townsfolk of Newport are prepared to repair to Carisbrooke—but to wrest the castle from the hands of the malignants."

"Crop-eared hound!" exclaimed the messenger, whipping out his sword. "Had I not been enjoined to deliver the message to the mayors of Newtown and Yarmouth ere midnight, I would right willingly give my life's blood to hew that head from off thy shoulders," and, drawing his horse almost on its haunches, the Royalist wheeled, and rode defiantly through the crowd, with head erect and drawn sword, none offering to bar his passage.

"Up, and smite the sons of Belial!" was the cry, and the more timorous of the townsfolk began to make for their homes.

"Yea, up and smite them, hip and thigh!" exclaimed the mayor. "News has this moment reached my ears that the wife of this malignant, the Earl of Portland, has taken refuge in Carisbrooke Castle, and has vowed to hold it against the Parliament and the people of England. Repair to your homes, arm yourselves, and assemble in the market-place within an hour, and I'll warrant that before to-morrow's sun hath set the castle will be in our hands."

Rapidly the crowd dispersed, and once more the thought of returning to school crossed our minds. It was now quite dark.

"Ralph," I exclaimed resolutely, "I've made up my mind. I'm not going back to school."

"Not?"

"No, I'm going to offer my services to the King. I can use a musket, push a pike, or wield a sword as well as a good many men."

"Then I'm with you," replied Granville. "But where shall we go?"

"Ah, where?" I replied, for that question had not occurred to me. "Either to the castle, or else make for home; I know my father would place no obstacles in my way."

"The castle gates may be already closed," objected Ralph. "And, on the other hand, how are we to get across to the mainland? How much money have you?"

"Two shillings," I exclaimed ruefully.

"And I have but a crown—hardly enough to pay for a boat to take us over! Never mind, we'll decide which course to take, and lay our plans accordingly. A spin of the coin will decide—heads, Carisbrooke; tails, Ashley."

The coin flashed dully, and, peering at in the darkness, we found that His Majesty's effigy had fallen head downwards. "Home it is, Ralph!" I exclaimed. "Then how do you propose to journey there?"

"Thus, I mean to take a boat from the quay. Didst notice that evil-looking villain close to your elbow, who did continually applaud that arrant traitor, the mayor?"

"Ay, 'twas Cripps, the boatman."

"The same; though I wot not that you knew him. As he sides with the enemy, for such they be now, since the King has raised his standard, it matters not what we take of his, for I'll warrant he'll not hesitate to help himself, should the castle be taken and sacked. Therefore, I propose to take his largest boat, drop down the river, and cross to the Hamptonshire shore, which we can easily do in a matter of four or five hours. But, hist! We are still going straight towards the school, and someone approaches. 'Tis the dominie!"

In the excitement of discussing our plans we had unconsciously turned our steps towards St. James' Street, and were already within a few paces of the Grammar School. Hastily drawing into a low doorway, we awaited in breathless silence the passing of our master, and it was with mixed feelings of regret and relief that we saw the dim outlines of his familiar figure shuffle noiselessly by, though so intent on some abstruse proposition that, even had we been in the roadway, I doubt whether he would have observed us.

Dear old dominie, in spite of all his apparent severities! Little did I think of the events in store for me ere I saw his stern yet kindly features once again.

"Then, concerning arms and provisions," continued Granville.

"That I have given thought to. There's Sutton, the armourer of Holyrood Street. He is well acquainted with my father, having served under him before he set up for himself in the island, and he will willingly provide us with the proper equipment. Let us hasten thither, for, if I mistake not, 'twill be a busy night for him."

A few minutes' walk brought us to the door of the armourer's shop. Not a light was visible, and the windows were shuttered and heavily barred.

I knocked, and, after a little while, finding there was no reply, I knocked louder.

"Who's there?" exclaimed a deep voice. "And what d'ye lack?"

"'Tis I, Humphrey Markham."

"Lord love you, Master Markham! What brings you here this time o' night? Wait but a moment, and I'll unbar the door."

The door was cautiously opened, and, followed by Granville, I entered. The old armourer, holding a candle lantern, ushered us into an apartment which comprised both a shop and a living-room, but, contrary to its usual appearance, the place was practically bare.

The armourer was a short, broad-shouldered man, with massive, muscular arms that ill matched a pair of short, thin legs, which, as if unequal to bear the weight of his body, had assumed a bow-like appearance; while his round, good-humoured face was partially covered by a thick crop of raven-black hair, which surrounded a bald and shiny pate.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a ringing laugh, as he noticed my perplexed glances at the almost empty room. "Looks a bit different to when you were here last? Well, Will Sutton can read the signs of the times pretty clearly, I can assure you. Knowing that the arms would be taken in the name of the people, I sent them up to the castle yester-night, and I hold Colonel Brett's receipt for them. Already the mayor has sent thrice for them, but this time he's too late."

"We're come here to get some arms, also," I announced.

"You, Master Markham! What for?"

"To fight with, I expect. We are on our way to join my father."

"'Tis grave news," he remarked. "Though you are but young, the King will require every man fit to

bear arms, I trove. Still, I think I have sufficient to equip both you and your companion."

"Now, concerning the payment——"

"Nay, never mind that," he interrupted. "I have little doubt but that His Grace the Earl of Portland will well repay me for what I have already delivered; if not, I know too well that your father will recompense me for any slight service I can do for his son. Come this way, and we'll see what can be done."

So saying, he took the lantern and went upstairs, we following.

From under a bed he, with the aid of our united efforts, dragged out a heavy box, and, throwing back the lid, disclosed a store of weapons.

"Here, Master Markham, is a fine piece of steel," he exclaimed, handing me a sword in a black scabbard of Spanish leather. "Draw it, and try its temper."

An indescribable feeling of pleasure possessed me as I handled the blade, which, even in the dim candle-light, flashed like a thousand diamonds.

"Don't be afraid of it," said the armourer as I cautiously bent the steel with my hands. "A better piece of steel was never welded. See!"

And, taking the beautiful weapon from me, he bent the tempered blade till the point touched the guard, letting it fly back to its natural position.

"'Tis just suited to your height and strength, Master Markham, for a greater mistake cannot be made than to give a man a heavier sword than he can profitably wield; and, moreover, I pray you, remember it has a point. I'll show you what I mean."

So saying, he placed a small cube of oak upon a heavy stool, and, retaining the light weapon, he gave me a heavy broadsword.

"Now, young master, mind the beam overhead, and make a shrewd stroke at that junk of wood."

Grasping the broadsword, I raised my arm till the point touched the beam, then, putting all my strength into the blow, I struck at the wooden block. The next instant the blade had sunk deep into the stool on which the block had been standing; but, to my surprise, the block itself was nowhere to be seen.

"Well," asked the armourer, laughing, "where is the junk of oak?"

"Truly, I know not, unless I have shorn it in two! My arm aches with the force of the blow."

"Did I not tell you that this weapon had a point?" he exclaimed, producing the light sword, on which the cube was firmly fixed. "'Tis what might have happened in actual fight. Whilst you were bringing the heavy blade down I pinked the wood with the light one, and you were not one whit the wiser. Now, take the weapon, and remember the words they engrave on trusty blades, 'Never sheath me, save in honour.' Here, too, is a sword for your friend, not quite so fine as yours, but a goodly blade withal. And here are a brace of small pistols apiece, with a score of charges in a waterproof case. How are you going to cross over?" he added.

In a few words I told him.

"Capitally planned," he exclaimed. "Cripps, the waterman, was one of those rogues who would have despoiled anybody of his stock. You know the channel?"

"Passably."

"'Tis easy; keep well in the centre, and you'll not go far wrong. 'Twill be high water at one hour before midnight, but, when you get to Cowes Castle, drop anchor and pretend to fish till you see the tide making to the east'ard. A matter of five or six hours that'll be; but 'twill be no use starting before, and then you'll have a fair tide right the whole way over. What place do you make for?"

"Portsmouth, I hope."

"They say the place is assailed by the rebels, though perchance they do not keep a strict blockade." A few more words of good advice, and we took our leave of the kindly armourer, who also provided us with food; then, walking boldly through the now deserted streets, we came to the quay.

CHAPTER II

COLONEL NICHOLAS FIRESTONE

NEARLY a score of boats of various sizes were moored to the quay, their outlines barely discernible against the placid surface of the dark water.

Handing my sword to my companion, I carefully lowered myself into the nearest boat, and made my way slowly from one to the other, till I found the one we sought.

Fortunately, the oars had been left on board, and, what was more, a small sail rolled round a short mast lay on the thwarts. The craft, though barely fifteen feet in length, had plenty of beam, so that, although cumbersome to row, it would doubtless prove an able boat under sail.

As I had had considerable experience in the art of managing a boat, having frequently made short voyages with the fishermen during the holidays, I had no misgivings as to the handling of this craft, although Granville did not regard my capabilities in the same light as I did.

"Hasten," I whispered, fearful lest some belated passer-by might overhear us; "jump in, and cast off that rope."

It was the work of a few moments to stow the arms carefully away, unfasten the rope that held the boat to the side of the quay, and to push off. Then, by dint of slow and careful strokes, we urged the heavy craft towards the centre of the channel, and pointed its bow in the direction of Cowes.

A few minutes' steady rowing sufficed to take us clear of the buildings lining the quay, and, looking astern, our eyes becoming more accustomed to the darkness, we could see the tower of St. Thomas' Church standing out against the blackness of the night.

Not a sound came from the town, save the occasional barking of a dog; but in the direction of Carisbrooke a subdued roar, like the distant sound of waves breaking on the shore, came faintly to our ears, and from the summit of the keep we could discern the flare of the wood fires as the garrison plied the cressets with more fuel.

"They lie thick around the castle," remarked Ralph. "And spare not their lungs though it seems that they have not yet opened the attack."

"No," I replied, "I can hear no sounds of ordnance. Perchance they are afraid to attempt an escalade, for 'tis certain Colonel Brett will not hesitate to fire on the rebels, should they draw nigh the walls."

After all, it was better for us that fate, or, rather, the spin of a coin, decided against our throwing in our lot with the garrison of Carisbrooke, for we afterwards learnt that there were but three days' provisions, and but four small barrels of powder within the fortress, the garrison of which was composed mostly of invalided and wounded soldiers from the Scottish wars. So it came about that the valiant Countess of Portland appeared on the ramparts with a lighted match in her hand, and threatened to fire the first cannon on the rebels, and to hold the castle to the last extremity, unless she and the garrison were permitted to march out with all the honours of war. The rebels, little knowing the weakness of the defenders, and probably glad of the opportunity of foregoing the risk of combat, gladly agreed to the Countess' terms, and on the following day the garrison retired in good order to Yarmouth.

The tide was now running out, yet, in spite of steady labouring at the heavy oars, it was a matter of nearly two hours ere we reached the mouth of the river, where the two castles of Cowes kept watch and ward, though whether for or against the King we knew not.

Mindful of the armourer's warning, we cast anchor close to the edge of a mud-bank, and waited till the tide turned, for there was little or no wind, so that 'twould have been a forlorn hope to attempt to stem the adverse current.

For over an hour, as it seemed (for we were unable to measure the time), we lay thus, talking of the future, yet during that space neither did the tide show signs of slackening, nor did the dawn commence to show in the east.

Suddenly, through the darkness, came the flashes of muskets, fired in quick succession, and a babel of voices at no great distance, while a bullet whistled above our heads, causing us to lie cowering under the frail shelter of our boat's side.

Other shots came at intervals, till at length the firing ceased, and we summoned sufficient courage to sit up and look around.

"What's amiss?" asked Granville.

"Nay, I cannot tell," I replied, "unless it be that one of the castles has been attempted."

"The firing was too close for that," he rejoined. "Much too close to my liking."

"And mine also."

We relapsed into silence, straining our ears for every sound. Presently we heard above the confused noise of men's voices the creaking of tackle and the sound of oars being thrown into a boat.

"They are lowering a boat from some ship near at hand," I whispered. "Quick, now! Get the fishing

tackle, and cast the lines overboard, or we are undone."

Hastily we groped in the stern-locker for the lines; but, just as we were about to make them ready, we heard a sullen splash in the water close to our craft.

The next instant a pair of hands grasped the gunwale, and the dripping head of a man appeared over the side.

I doubt who was the more confused—we, at the sudden apparition, or the swimmer at the sight of two figures in what he had reasonably thought to be an empty boat, for we had been both kneeling on the bottom boards engaged in clearing the lines.

"Hist!" he whispered. "If ye be true King's men, give me shelter."

"Right willingly," I replied in a low voice, and, leaning over the side so that the gunwale almost dipped, we seized the man's clothing and helped him on board.

"A sorry shelter, but one that doth not come amiss," he remarked, noticing that our craft was entirely open. "I see a sail rolled up yonder; cover me up, and, if ye bear any love for His Majesty, betray me not. They will be looking for me here anon."

It was no time for questions or explanations. The fugitive crept underneath the forward thwarts and curled himself into a small compass by the side of the mast, which we had already stepped in order to lose no time when the tide changed.

Quickly I unfurled the sail, and, tossing it over the thwart, I noticed with considerable satisfaction that it fell in apparent and natural disorder over the place where the man lay huddled up.

Then, putting a brave face on the matter, we cast our lines and waited.

Before long we heard the sound of oars, and, rowing aimlessly hither and thither, there came a large boat. In the bows stood a man holding a lantern, which cast long reflections on the rippling waters, and no doubt dazzled more than served him.

"He's gone, sure enow, Baldwin," exclaimed a voice. "That first volley must have settled him."

"I was nearer than that at Newburn, and a whole platoon missed me," was the scornful reply. "Pull more this way, I pray you."

"Even if we had missed him," answered the other, "he had his jack-boots on when he jumped overboard. Against the tide he can do nothing."

"Pull this way, I say again," interrupted the man with the lantern. "I see a boat."

In another moment the pursuers' craft rubbed alongside our boat, and the light was flashed in our faces.

"Who be you, young masters?" exclaimed the holder of the lantern roughly. "And what are ye doing at this time o' night?"

"Fishing, sir. We be come from Newport," I replied, imitating as well as I could the tongue of the fisher-folk, though my heart was in my mouth.

"Didst see a man swimming?"

"Nay," I replied truthfully enough, for the fugitive had finished swimming the moment he had grasped the gunwale. "But we were sore afraid of the shots."

"What hast got under that sail?" he demanded suspiciously, holding the lantern above his head and shortening a small pike which he held in his right hand.

"Shame on thee, Baldwin," exclaimed another man. "Wouldst spoil an honest fisher-folk's sail with a pike thrust? Come on, let's away; we are but losing time."

The men released their hold of our gunwale, and their boat, drifting rapidly with the tide, disappeared in the darkness, only the faint glimmer of the lantern betraying their whereabouts.

"They're gone," I whispered to the fugitive.

"Yes, I know it," he replied; "but, with all due respect to you, I'll tarry here longer, for I am in no mood to take to the waters again. Canst put me ashore in a little while?"

"Where would you land?"

"It matters little, though I have a preference for the Hamptonshire coast, if gold can work the oracle."

"'Tis not a matter for payment," I replied with as much dignity as I could command. "And if you're for the King, we'll gladly place you on the nether shore, for, as fate would have it, we ourselves purpose journeying to Portsmouth."

"I perceive by your manner of speech that you are not fisher-folk," he continued, "though I cannot judge by your appearance. Nevertheless, I shall be heartily glad to stretch my cramped limbs once more, and then we'll talk further on the matter."

"Be careful that you do not raise your voice," I continued. "The sound travels afar on the water, especially on a quiet night."

"Ay," he assented, throwing off the sail and stretching his huge legs, which were still encased in jack-boots, under the thwarts. "Now I feel more at ease. Did I have but a pipe of stinging tobacco and a jugful of strong waters I'd be content. But why do you wait here at anchor?"

"Till the tide turns."

"Then a murrain on the tide, say I. Twice hath the tide treated me scurvily. Once as we left the port of Cherbourg, and again off Hurst Castle, where but for the force of the current I could easily have swum ashore. Knowing that you have not betrayed me, I'll tell my mission. Hast ever heard of Nick Firestone?"

"I remember my father speaking highly of one Nicholas Firestone, who gained great and honourable distinction in the Low Countries."

"Great, I admit, but I must needs cavil at the honourable, though 'twas only when hard pressed that I had to think of a whole skin before honour. And who is thy father?"

"Sir Reginald Markham, of Ashley, in the county of Hamptonshire."

"As good and brave a knight that ever set hand on hilt. And I'll warrant his eye is as keen and his arm as strong as it was when he and I fought side by side in the retreat from Rhé. Certes! A dozen such as he and things would have gone far different in that miserable affair."

"And what of your mission?" I asked, curious to know what circumstances had caused him to swim off to our boat.

"I'll tell you. Upon my person, sealed, and proof against water, I bear despatches in cipher from the King of France, to be delivered at all costs to His Majesty, the purport being unknown to me, though I know it is of inestimable value. Another trusted messenger, bearing a duplicate, has left for Dover, and a third has sailed from Cherbourg to Fowey. The last has the better chance, seeing that Cornwall is ever devoted to His Majesty."

"True, true, Master Firestone," exclaimed Granville, speaking to him for the first time.

"Then I take it you are of Cornish stock? I rejoice to hear it, though I know not your name; but, at the same time, I would inform you that I am Colonel, and not Master, Firestone."

"And he is named Ralph Granville," I informed him. "But concerning your perilous voyage?"

"I left Cherbourg four days agone in the barque *Endeavour*, of Lymington, and the first intimation of the inevitable rupture 'twixt the King and his rebellious Parliament occurred in a rude fashion by the Endeavour being boarded when off the Needles by the ship *Bonaventure*, lately held by His Majesty, but recently seized by the rebels, and forming part of the fleet that lay against Portsmouth."

"Though we carried naught that might be reckoned as munitions of war, some of the officers of the *Bonaventure* recognised me, and, thinking rightly that I was on the service of the King, they detained me, searching my baggage and person for any documents. Therein they were foiled, but how I'll explain anon. Finding nothing, they clapped me in a close and dirty cabin on the *Bonaventure's* main deck, allowing me to take the air on deck every four hours."

"At yester-midday the vessel came up under all sail through the Solent Channel, and stood over so close to Hurst Castle that I hoped to seize the chance of jumping overboard and swimming ashore; but so strong flowed the tide, surpassing the trotting pace of a horse, that the *Bonaventure* was swept back and compelled to anchor in one of the bays on the island shore."

"With the turn of the tide we made the harbour of Cowes, and again anchored for the night. Here I feigned sickness, and asked to be brought up on deck, and, fortune favouring me, I sprang into the sea, followed by a volley from the muskets of the soldiers on board, for, to give the men credit, they stood more quickly to their pieces than I expected."

"It was a narrow escape, for one of the bullets grazed my hand, and several splashed up the water all around; but, thanks to Providence, I found myself swimming straight for your boat, and the rest you are well acquainted with. But now, Master Markham, I perceive that the tide runs but weakly, and the breeze is springing up. Actions, not words, must prevail, for in another half an hour day will be breaking."

We immediately set about getting the boat under way, and, pulling up the anchor, shipping the rudder, and hoisting sail, we slipped quietly out of the harbour, and shaped a course in the direction which we supposed Portsmouth to lie.

While these preparations were going on, the dawn began to glimmer in the east, and I could now see what our new companion was like, though he still sprawled on the bottom boards, fearful lest he

should be seen from the *Bonaventure*, which we could dimly make out away towards the western side of the harbour.

Colonel Nicholas Firestone was now revealed in the person of a tall and wiry-looking man, yet possessing a massive frame, which carried little beyond bone and muscle.

His face was thin, while a mass of deep wrinkles covered his cheeks and forehead, which a short dark brown pointed beard, upturned moustachios, shaggy eyebrows, and a thick crop of grizzled hair all but concealed. He was soberly dressed, so that his apparel, which, being wet, clung to his frame, gave no indication as to whether he was for or against the Crown.

[Illustration: *"I sprang into the sea."*]

As far as we could judge, he was unarmed, but, strangely enough, his feet were still encased in heavy riding boots and spurs.

As we rounded the Castle Point the sun rose above the horizon a deep red ball of fire, while the wind, which hitherto had been light, now increased, causing the little craft to plunge and stagger as she breasted the short, steep waves.

Glancing astern, we saw the *Bonaventure* still at anchor, though her sails were shaken loose, ready to get under way.

"'Twill be a good half-hour before she can follow, and, should the breeze hold, as I think it will, we'll be well over to the opposite shore ere then," remarked Colonel Firestone, raising himself slowly, as if cramped by the long confinement, and awkwardly making his way aft to the stern-sheets. "So it matters little whether they see us or not, though, I doubt not, they have a perspective-glass or two bearing this way."

"There are several ships of war ahead," I exclaimed, pointing in the direction of a number of dark objects standing out clearly against the light almost on the skyline.

"We must hug the shore closely and take our chance. A small craft like this might escape notice."

Even as Colonel Firestone spoke a cloud of smoke, followed by a muffled report, sprang from one of the ships, and immediately the firing became general. The attack upon the town of Portsmouth had been renewed.

From where we were the fortress was invisible, being hidden by a long, low tongue of shingly beach, surmounted by a thick belt of furze; but, judging by the direction of the sounds, we concluded that Goring was offering a stubborn resistance.

At length, with wind and tide, we rounded the intervening shore, and the town came into full view. I knew the place but slightly, having only passed through it on my journeys 'twist Ashley and Newport, but Firestone showed that he was no stranger to the fortress.

"The rebels press closely on all sides save the eastern," he exclaimed. "Look, they have thrown up batteries on Gosport shore, and by the smoke I perceive the northern side is assailed also. See the Royalist batteries on the Platform—they are not backward, and the Round Tower holds its own. Canst make out the tower of the church? Is it afire, or have they mounted cannon therein?"

"I cannot tell," I replied. "The smoke lies over all like a cloud, though 'tis certain the town is afire in more places than one."

"Ay, it is not to be expected that the town comes off scatheless. Dost see that stone fortalice to the east of the town? 'Tis Southsea Castle, which in truth is the key of the position. Betwixt it and the Platform is a stretch of beach, whence, if we can effect a landing, 'tis but an easy matter to gain the postern."

"Before so doing we must run the gauntlet of the rebel ships."

"Ay, but perchance they'll be too busy to mind us."

Bidding us lie down, the colonel took the helm, and, standing boldly over towards the beach, we passed between the ships and the town batteries, the shot flying thickly overhead, though, fortunately, as both sides were firing at long range, the cannon-balls attained the highest point in their trajectory above our heads, save a few that, either by accident or design, fell unpleasantly close to us.

We had arrived within half a mile or so of the beach when we saw that the nearest warship had lowered a couple of boats, which started in close pursuit of us.

Without a moment's hesitation Nick Firestone called upon me to take the tiller, and, grasping the heavy oars, he rowed strongly towards the shore, the boat, under oars and sail, making a long wake astern.

"They gain on us," he muttered. "Hast weapons on board?"

"A brace of pistols apiece," I replied, telling Granville to produce them from the stern-locker.

"Handy enough at twenty paces," was his contemptuous remark, "though they may serve to gain our end. Load all four, Master Granville, and place them by my side."

A stern chase is ever a long one, yet the two pursuing boats came on apace, each urged by twelve rowers, whose efforts were encouraged by their officers.

Meanwhile the batteries ashore, seeing that something untoward was happening, began to fire at our pursuers, though their aim was wild, and bid fair to harm us as well as our foes.

Suddenly a bullet struck our light mast, and, cutting through the halyards, brought the sail down with a run.

Uttering a fierce exclamation, Firestone tore away the folds of the canvas that enveloped him, and, calling on me to keep the boat on her course, resumed rowing, though I imagined it to be a forlorn hope, for, glancing over my shoulder, I saw one of the rebels' boats was but six lengths astern.

Even as I looked a huge column of water sprang into the air, and fell in a shower of spray to the accompaniment of a crashing and rending of wood and shrieks and shouts of surprise and terror. A chance shot from the batteries had wrought havoc with the leading boat, and her crew were struggling in the water.

The second boat made to the rescue, and at the same moment we saw a troop of dragoons riding furiously along the shore from the Castle—yet, though within easy range, they forbore to fire on their discomfited foes.

Another twenty strokes and our craft's forefoot grounded on the beach.

We were safe within the lines of the beleaguered fortress.

CHAPTER III

FRIEND OR FOE?

SCRAMBLING awkwardly ashore, Colonel Firestone made straight for the captain of the dragoons, while, having secured our arms, Granville and I followed, leaving the boat to its fate.

It was the first time we had seen our companion on dry land, and I was struck by his peculiar gait as he shuffled his jack-booted feet in a very indifferent manner of walking.

The captain of dragoons, a slender, dandified man, looked with mingled astonishment and amusement at the strange figure approaching him.

"Who are you, fellow, and what is your condition?" he demanded in an affected drawl.

"Why should I declare my name?" replied Firestone sternly, his voice belying his appearance. "Sufficient it is to state that I am on the King's service."

"I am but doing my duty," rejoined the officer, though with considerably less affectation.

"Then do it. Conduct us to Colonel Goring. I am indebted to you for your good services, Captain whatever your name may be, but I tell you plainly I like not your style."

"Chaloner is my name," said the other haughtily.

"And mine, since you have so far unbended, is Nicholas Firestone, holding His Majesty's commission as colonel. Perchance, Captain Chaloner, my name is not wholly unfamiliar to you?"

Instantly the other's manner underwent a complete change.

"A thousand pardons," he exclaimed, "though, by the manner of your arrival, I was misled."

And, ordering three of his men to dismount, he offered their steeds to Firestone, Granville, and me.

By this time the rebel boat had picked up the crew of her unfortunate consort, and, heavily laden, was slowly making her way back to the nearest man-of-war, still under fire from the guns of the fortress.

Meanwhile the troop had remounted, the three steedless dragoons were told to follow without delay, and at the word of command the party set off towards the town.

Our road lay between the sea on the left hand and a large expanse of furze-covered common on the right, with hardly a building to break the deadly monotony of the landscape. As far as I could see, there was not a natural piece of ground that was twenty feet above the level of the sea.

Before us rose the fortifications of Portsmouth, and as we drew nearer we saw that the damage done by the rebels' shots was considerable, the Gothic tower of the church and several of the houses being very severely handled.

The cannonade continued without intermission, several of the shots from the ships ploughing the ground in front and behind us, and, though neither Firestone nor the troopers paid the slightest attention to them, Granville and I were considerably startled, while Captain Chaloner was manifestly ill at ease.

Outside the walls we dismounted, the dragoons holding the horses under the shelter of a low bank of shingle, and, led by Chaloner, we crossed a narrow wooden bridge and reached the postern. Here the captain gave the countersign, and the next moment we were in the town of Portsmouth.

"Where is Colonel Goring, sirrah?" demanded Chaloner of a man who wore the Governor's livery.

"On his way to breakfast, sir."

Upon this we directed our footsteps towards the Governor's house, where, with little delay, we were ushered into Goring's presence.

Although he professed great pleasure in meeting Colonel Firestone once more, George Goring's delight seemed somewhat too effusive to be genuine. Nevertheless, he gave orders for the paymaster to advance twenty pounds to meet our present needs, and wrote out an order on an armourer in St. Nicholas' Street to equip us with whatever weapons or armour we required.

"You must be our guest for some time to come, willing or unwilling," he exclaimed, "for the force of the Parliament hems us in by land and sea."

"But I must needs hasten to the King's camp," remonstrated Firestone.

"Then your wits must find a way, for a dog can scarce crawl out of the town without being shot at. 'Tis a mystery how you managed to get in."

"Then I'll get out by the same means as I came in," replied our friend stoutly. "But tell me, can you hold the town?"

For answer Goring held up a large iron key which hung from his waist by a strong chain.

"Dost see this?" he asked pompously. "I swear 'fore God that as long as I live the key, which is that of the Town Mount Gate, shall never fall into the hands of the King's enemies."

"Amen," replied Firestone piously. "But how goes the garrison? Are the munitions and provisions like to last out?"

"Powder and shot in plenty. Twelve hundred and fifty barrels of powder lie in the Square Tower, and two hundred in the vaults of the Town Mount; but of provisions we are sorely short. Witness my breakfast, a piece of rusk bread and a herring. If you will do me the honour, comrade, perchance we may find enough for us all."

We were certainly nearly famished with hunger, and even a sorry meal of bread and fish, washed down with ale, was welcome.

Finally, the Governor dismissed us, saying that pressing work was before him, and we filed out of his presence.

At the door I happened to glance behind me, and to my surprise I saw a waiting-man stealthily thrust a paper into Chaloner's hand; but, treating the matter as of small moment, I soon forgot the incident.

In the street we parted, the captain expressing his intention of returning to his post, for he had been entrusted with the holding of Southsea Castle, which Colonel Firestone had described as the key of the position, while the colonel, Granville, and I repaired to a lodging in Little Penny Lane.

Tired with our exertions, though 'twas but eleven o'clock in the morning, we retired and rested well till the following day.

We were early abroad, for Colonel Firestone was anxious to obtain proper arms and equipment on the strength of Goring's order.

At the armourer's in St. Nicholas' Street he carefully selected a stout and heavy broadsword, a pair of pistols, and a petronel, while a breastplate, tassettes, and a steel cap with barrets completed his soldierly equipment.

Strangely enough, he still retained his salt-stained jackboots, refusing the suggestion that a pair of Spanish riding-boots would better suit his purpose.

The armourer had no difficulty in fitting me with a breastplate and steel cap, for my frame was as great as many a man's; but Granville's slighter build was encased in a steel covering which fitted so loosely that I could not refrain from jesting with him on the matter.

"Never mind, Master Granville," said Firestone. "A few months' active service and I'll warrant you'll fill it right enow."

There was nothing about our appearance to mark us as cavaliers, save our long hair, and I remarked this to Firestone.

"Faith," he replied, "I am well aware of it, though 'tis a small matter to conceal our locks under our steel caps. But, as 'tis certain we must break away and join the King as soon as possible, strategy must needs play its part."

"And your plan——?"

"Is to find a way out—how, I know not at present. The countryside must be alive with these rebels, so that we must be prepared where necessary to give and receive hard knocks. As your father, Sir Reginald, is with the King, 'tis best to make for Ashley, gain definite information, and then ride northwards as hard as we can travel."

"What think ye of Goring?" I asked boldly.

He looked strangely at me for a moment, then replied

"He is a vainglorious boaster. Already he has played the turncoat, and, in spite of his brave words, I'll warrant he'll betray his trust and Chaloner, who holds Southsea Castle, is no better."

Thereupon I told him of the message stealthily conveyed by the serving-man.

"I would you had told me of this before, and I would have challenged the young pup on the spot. Nevertheless, I'll mark him well, and at the first sign of treachery I'll make him answer to the King with his life."

A few days after our arrival in the beleaguered town, Colonel Firestone, who had been entrusted

with the keeping of the postern by which we had entered, returned to our lodgings after dark with a look of intense excitement on his face.

"You are both young, but active and fit to be trusted," he exclaimed. "Art willing to adventure your lives in a hazardous service?"

We both assented.

"Then, hearken! My doubts concerning Goring's lukewarmness and Chaloner's treachery are gaining ground. Did I not say that who holds the castle commands the town? Yet Chaloner has withdrawn most of his dragoons and quartered them in the town, where they are no better than common musketeers! In the castle there are left but twenty pikemen, five dragoons, and twenty musketeers, and, though the castle is likely to be attempted at any time, Chaloner comes nightly into the town to carouse with the Governor. Moreover, I saw him give a missive to the same man who acts as servant at Goring's house, and I feel certain that the man has left for the rebel lines."

"Then what do you want us to do?"

"I mean to return with Chaloner to the castle to-night, you accompanying us. Then, should the rebels attempt an escalade, I'll seize Chaloner if he play false, and hold the castle against them, should the garrison stand by me."

"And if not?"

"Then I'll slay the traitor with my own hands, and in the darkness we'll attempt a passage through the rebels' lines!"

"And now," he continued, as he made ready his arms, "it wants but two hours to midnight, yet in that time much remains to be done. Let us be up and doing."

"Yes," repeated Colonel Firestone, as he finished charging his pistols, "it is time for us to be up and doing."

So saying, he led the way from the house, and, keeping well in the shadows, we traversed several side streets till we gained the Landport Gate, hard by the Town Mount. Thence, after a few whispered words with the guard, we passed through the gateway, crossed the moat, and were soon in the flat, open country that lies without the walls.

A walk of less than half a mile brought us to a few deserted houses, standing hard by a ruined windmill, for at the commencement of the siege the inhabitants of Coleharbour, as this hamlet is called, had abandoned their homes and taken refuge in the town. 'Twas well for them that they did, for, being in the line of fire, the buildings had already suffered from the batteries of both forces.

Taking up our position in the angle of a partially demolished outbuilding, we waited. Nor were we kept long in suspense, for gliding stealthily along the road a cloaked figure loomed up in the darkness.

'Twas the man who had left for the rebel camp with some secret message from the treacherous captain.

"Now!" exclaimed the colonel, and, dashing out upon the startled man, we bore him to the ground.

In a few minutes he was bound and gagged, and left to await discovery in the doorway of one of the houses, while we were speeding back to the town with a written message to Captain Chaloner in our possession.

At the Landport Gate Firestone led us into a well-lighted room, where we could examine the intercepted letter. Fortunately, it was not sealed, but merely secured by a silken cord.

"Ah!" exclaimed the colonel. "'Tis as plain as daylight: '*Before the morning watch, I say; before the morning watch*.' Chaloner will receive his message, but let him take heed."

So saying, he refolded the missive, giving it to a pikeman to deliver to Chaloner at the Governor's house.

"Will he not want to know why his messenger has not delivered the letter in person?" I asked.

"Where wine is in the wit is out," replied Firestone oracularly. "But now, to the postern! The hour is at hand!"

Just before midnight we waited close to the postern for the faithless captain, and, before a quarter of an hour had passed, two cloaked figures, reeling with the effects of strong drink, staggered towards us.

"Hist! 'Tis Goring and Chaloner," whispered Firestone, dragging us into a recess.

Our companion had already given instructions to the guard, who, turning out smartly, saluted their worthless Governor, Goring.

"Fare thee well, Chaloner," said the latter unsteadily and with mock sadness. "I feel that I'll not see thee to-morrow."

It was a lengthy parting, but at length Goring returned towards his quarters, while Chaloner, hardly able to return the salute of the guard, staggered across the footbridge over the moat.

Hardly had he gained the open ground when Firestone gave the signal, and we followed, treading softly lest the captain should hear us while still within hailing distance of the fortifications.

It was a clear night, and we could distinctly see the lurching figure of our quarry against the sky-line. Away at Spithead the stern lanterns of the blockading ships glimmered like gigantic glow-worms, while away to the north flickered the watch-fires of the rebels' camp.

When Chaloner had covered half the distance 'twixt the town and the castle, Colonel Firestone increased his pace, and overtook the drunkard.

The captain showed no sign of alarm at our approach, merely stopping and looking at us in a half-dazed manner, then resuming his staggering gait.

"Captain Chaloner, we bear you company to the castle to-night," announced Firestone sternly.

"Delighted, I'm sure," replied he, turning and extending his hand, almost falling through the effort of standing still.

Without replying, the colonel seized his shoulder in a vice-like grip, and urged him towards the castle.

At the gateway we were challenged by a sleepy pikeman, and Chaloner mechanically giving the countersign, we gained the courtyard. Save for the pikemen, the castle appeared to be deserted, the guns standing unattended on their platforms, with neither match nor charge at hand, while, from a small outbuilding, came sounds of revelry.

Presently, from one of the embrasures, arose the dark, great-coated figure of a man, and, descending by a stone staircase, the watcher made towards us, producing a lantern from the folds of his cloak. At least, then, one man was on the alert.

"Who are you?" demanded Firestone.

"Sergeant Lawson, sir."

"Then take your captain to his quarters, and lock him in," continued the colonel. "And turn out those rascals I hear yonder."

Chaloner meekly submitted to be led away, and on his return the sergeant expressed his fears that an attack was imminent.

"What is to be done, sir," he exclaimed, "when the men are drunk and full of insubordination, taking Captain Chaloner as their example? Already the rebels are under arms, but whether they intend to attempt the castle or the town I know not."

Telling the sergeant to follow him, Firestone crossed over to the soldiers' quarters, where, in all stages of drunkenness, the men lay across the table or on the floor, heedless of their duty and indifferent to their danger.

Without a moment's hesitation, the colonel seized the nearest man, a big, bull-necked dragoon, and with the least apparent effort flung him headlong out into the open air. Another and another followed, but the fourth, a pikeman, drew his sword.

The next instant the weapon was flying across the room, and its owner lying stunned upon the floor. Seeing they had a man to deal with, the rest followed, forming up in the courtyard with more or less military precision.

They were immediately despatched to carry powder and shot to the platforms, port fires were lighted, and the guns manned; yet our leader knew that little reliance was to be placed upon the besotted garrison, Sergeant Lawson being the only dependable man.

"Listen, sergeant," exclaimed Colonel Firestone "How many horses are there within the walls?"

"Fifteen, sir."

"I take it you are resolved to support us?"

"To the death, sir."

"Then see to it that four of the best horses are saddled and tethered close to the gate."

We then began a tour of the platform, the colonel admonishing the semi-stupefied men, or, in some instances, appealing to their loyalty, while he personally undertook the sighting of every piece of ordnance, taking care that they were properly charged and primed.

Hardly had these preparations been completed than the steady tramp of armed men sounded through the darkness, and presently a line of lighted matches gleamed along the entire landward front of the castle. With quickening pulse I watched the approach of the assailants, wondering dimly what the end would be, as I cast about a musket, and made ready to fire.

Then came the sounds of men's voices singing in a deep bass, and I could distinguish the words of the 68th Psalm:

"*Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered.*"

One of our men uttered come coarse jest, but our leader sternly reproved him, and in silence we awaited the attack.

Suddenly a voice hailed us from the rebel ranks:

"Surrender to the forces of the Parliament of the Realm of England!"

"We hold no parley with rebels!" shouted Colonel Firestone. "Another step, and we open fire!"

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than a raucous voice came from a window of the keep.

"Go away, men, go away."

A shout of derisive laughter from the rebels greeted this speech of the tipsy Chaloner. By the light of a port fire I could see our leader biting his lip to conceal his anger.

"Your reply?" demanded the rebel officer.

"This!" shouted Firestone, and, seizing a match, he applied it to the nearest cannon.

A blinding flash and a deafening roar was succeeded by a hundred spurts of flame from the darkness beneath us, and the next moment we could hear the hurried tramp and the hoarse cries and shouts of the assailants as they rushed forward to the attack.

Hardly had the first scaling ladder been placed against the wall, when our rascally garrison threw down their arms and bolted from the platforms.

In vain Firestone cut two down; panic had done its work, and, as the heads of the first of the stormers appeared over the parapet, only the colonel, Granville, Sergeant Lawson, and I remained.

Seeing that resistance was useless, Firestone called on us to follow, and, descending to the courtyard, we reached the tethered horses just as the rebels, with shouts of triumph, were driving the panic-stricken garrison into the keep.

Cutting loose our steeds, we mounted, and, with sword and pistol, rode slowly towards the gateway. Here the sergeant unbarred the door and threw it suddenly open, and before the rebels, who were making for the gateway, were aware of our intention, the drawbridge had fallen with a run, and the four riders were urging their horses through the dense mass of men.

Taken by surprise, the musketeers, their pieces discharged and unloaded, gave way right and left, and, although a few pikemen amongst them tried to bar our way, our weight was irresistible.

I have a dim recollection of shearing off the head of an opposing pike, and seeing its holder's terror-stricken eyes, as he went down beneath my horse's hoofs. There was a crackle of pistol-shots, a flashing of steel, and we were through, tearing madly across the broad expanse of common on our bid for safety!

CHAPTER IV

THROUGH THE REBEL LINES

We were by no means out of danger, for the whole of the Portsea Island, save the small portion occupied by the town of Portsmouth, was held by the rebels, and the difficulty was to avoid meeting any straggling bands of soldiers before we could cross the narrow creek that separates the island from the mainland.

Drawing rein under the shelter of a thicket, we debated as to the best course to pursue, Sergeant Lawson, owing to his long residence in the castle, being well acquainted with the by-paths over the eastern side of the island.

Fortunately, none of us sustained serious hurt in the brief encounter with our assailants, although Lawson's face bled freely from a slight flesh wound in the cheek, and my left arm had received a heavy blow, though at the time I was unaware of it.

"We lack the countersign," quoth the sergeant. "Had we that knowledge, we could well pass for members of Ridge's troop."

"As we have it not, 'tis useless waiting here, for daylight will be on us anon, and the precious time will have been wasted," said Colonel Firestone. "Our horses seem fresh enough for fifty miles, so

lead on, sergeant, and we'll follow."

After a time the common and marsh land gave place to a narrow lane, running between tall hedges. Here we slackened down to a slow trot, the sound of the horses' hoofs being muffled by the thick dust.

Away on our right burned the watch-fires of one of the rebel outposts, while at a greater distance on our left gleamed the lights of the main rebel camp.

At a cross-road Sergeant Lawson reined in his steed, and held up his right hand in warning. We could distinguish the steady clatter of hoofs.

"How many think ye, sergeant?"

"But one, sir."

"Then bar his passage at all costs."

Concealed behind the tall hedge, we waited in breathless suspense the approach of the solitary rider, Firestone, Sergeant Lawson, and I dismounting and giving the reins to Granville.

Waiting till the horseman was almost within arm's length, we then dashed forward. The colonel seized the stranger's bridle arm, whilst Lawson gripped the reins of his steed.

"Surrender yourself, or resist at your peril," hissed Firestone.

For answer the man struck spurs to his horse, and attempted to draw a pistol; but the colonel's sinewy arms were around his waist, and, with a mighty heave, flung him out of the saddle, while the sergeant assisted to hold him down, his iron fingers clutching at the throat of the fallen man.

'Twas a rebel without doubt, as, worn crosswise over his left shoulder, was an orange scarf. Gamely he tried to free himself, till, realising the helplessness of his position, he ceased his efforts and lay motionless.

"Of what regiment are ye?" demanded Firestone, thrusting forward his grim face till it almost touched that of his prisoner.

[Illustration: *Colonel Firestone flung his arms about the man's waist, and dragged him out of his saddle.*]

"Colonel Garth's dragoons," was the reply.

"And who holds the bridge at Hilsea?"

"Ridge's regiment of foot."

"And the countersign?"

The prisoner made no reply, and Firestone repeated the question, without result.

"A charge from your bandolier, sergeant."

Lawson handed a cartridge to the colonel, who, deliberately breaking the paper, ostentatiously scattered the grains of powder over the right knee of the prostrate man.

"Make ready flint and steel, sergeant," said our leader. "Now, sirrah," he added to his prisoner, "for the last time—the countersign?"

The man was still silent for a moment then he answered sullenly:

"'The sword of Gideon.'"

"Ah, we have it," explained Firestone. "Now, help me truss this man up."

A few moments sufficed to bind our prisoner, a gag being placed in his mouth, while our leader tied his scarf over his own shoulders. Lawson thereupon removed the man's pistols from his holsters, and hobbled his horse. Our captive was lifted to the other side of the hedge, and in high spirits we remounted and resumed our way.

Hardly had we ridden two hundred yards, however, when, to our surprise, we heard a shout followed by the sound of a galloping horse.

"A plague on the man!" exclaimed Firestone.

"He has slipped his bonds, and has ridden to give the alarm. Ten thousand countersigns will avail little, should he reach the bridge before us!"

Relentlessly we spurred our steeds, and, in a quarter of an hour, we drew rein before Portsbridge. By the glow of a huge wood fire we could see the motionless, yet alert, forms of the musketeers and pikemen mounting guard, while the firelight flickered on the gaping muzzles of a park of artillery.

"'Twill be touch and go, should the password be false," muttered the colonel, and, loosening our swords in their scabbards, we trotted daringly towards the outpost.

The countersign satisfied the sentries, but, on gaining the far side of the creek, an officer demanded who we were and what was our business.

"Captain Hosea Smith, and dragoons, of Garth's regiment, with despatches for Colonel Voysey at Petersfield."

"How fares our cause against the malignants?"

"The castle has fallen."

"The enemies of the Lord are as ripe corn before the sickle. Pass, captain, and fare ye well."

We lost no time in taking our departure, for already my quick ear detected the sound of approaching horsemen along the distant Portsmouth road; and barely had we left the outpost a hundred paces behind us when a fierce hubbub arose from the Parliamentary troops, while a musket-shot gave the alarm that something was amiss.

"They'll be at our heels within five minutes," exclaimed Lawson. "Ride straight for the hill!"

Clattering through the sleeping village of Cosham, we turned aside from the main road that leads to the City of London, and gained the grassy sward, and I began to realise that our horses were slowly and laboriously climbing a long and steep ascent.

At the summit was a hard chalk road, and here we dismounted to rest our weary steeds, and, throwing ourselves on the damp grass, we listened intently for any sounds of pursuit.

We were at a considerable height above the sea, for almost below us, as it seemed, were the watch-fires of the rebel outpost at Portsbridge, which we had ridden through but twenty minutes before. The camp was in a state of uproar, men shouting, horses neighing, while from the road below came the sounds of a body of horses rapidly galloping in the direction they had supposed us to have taken.

At length the day began to dawn, and, led by Sergeant Lawson, whose knowledge of the country was surprising, we descended the hill by a more gradual slope, keeping a safe distance from, but following the general direction of, the London road.

At intervals we passed several countrymen, who gazed at us with open-mouthed astonishment, for as yet the horrors of this disastrous civil war had not been brought home to them. The common hind still ploughed his land or tended his sheep, careless of the affairs of the kingdom, but before long the constant levy upon his crops, by foragers of both sides, goaded the peasant into a state dangerous both to Royalists and rebels.

On emerging from a wood hard by the village of Catherington, I saw before us a tall, grass-covered hill crowned by a windmill, and, to my delight, I recognised a well-known landmark within sight of our castle of Ashley.

Boldly crossing the deserted highway, we rode through the village of Chalton, every step of the way now being familiar, and, just as the sun appeared above the downs, we came in sight of my ancestral home.

Snugly ensconced between two lofty spurs of the South Downs, Ashley Castle, though more of a dwelling than a fortress, was well able to be put in a state of defence, and, in the absence of artillery, which an enemy would be at great pains to draw over the rough hill-roads, it could be relied upon to withstand a lengthy siege.

Notwithstanding the early hour, the castle was astir, thick clouds of smoke arising from the kitchen chimneys, while at the gate stood a pikeman, his steel headpiece glittering in the rays of the sun.

The drawbridge over the moat was raised, and, on our approach, there was a rush of armed men to the walls, and, though the garrison appeared but few in number, it was not lacking in watchfulness.

Removing my steel cap, I waved it above my head, and, being instantly recognised, the drawbridge slowly sank into position, and we passed beneath the gateway, where my mother and sister were awaiting us.

In a few words I introduced my companions, and explained the circumstances of my home-coming, and, to my surprise, my mother expressed her approval of my action in leaving Newport.

Telling the grooms to take charge of our horses, and giving directions for a meal to be spread, she led the way to the great panelled hall.

"You are just in time, Humphrey," she said. "In a few days a wain-load of supplies for His Majesty leaves the castle, and ye can bear it company."

"Where is my father?"

"With the King, but I wot not where that may be. Sir Reginald sent a letter, which arrived here yesternight, asking for the supplies to be sent to Oxford, though at the time of writing he was in camp at Shrewsbury, whither the King had journeyed from Nottingham."

"And what supplies are we sending, mother? Surely the King's army is not in such need of food that it must needs be provisioned from Ashley?"

"Nay," she replied, with a sad smile. "Royalty needs, and loyalty must. Look around the hall, Humphrey. The sideboard and yonder shelves—dost notice the difference?"

"They are bare," I exclaimed. "Where is the silver plate—the wassail bowls and our silver-gilt chargers?"

"Gone to the smelting-pot," replied my mother, in a tone of triumph mingled with regret. "Fifty stout pikemen and twenty musketeers will they provide!"

After our repast, Granville and I went to the kitchen, where, in a huge smelting-pot, the remains of our family plate were at molten heat, old Giles, the butler, having been appointed founder, a task which he performed as if brought up to it from his youth, although many were the sighs he gave as the rich vessels, over which he had spent much care, vanished into the pot.

On the flagged floor were moulds of sand and clay, into which the molten metal was ladled, for it was necessary, in view of the dangers of the road, to convey the silver in as compact a form as possible.

With the exception of Wat, the pikeman who was on guard at the drawbridge on our arrival, and a lad of about fifteen years of age, the whole of our male servants, twenty in all, remaining in the castle, were over sixty years of age, for the able-bodied men my father had taken with him. Nevertheless, such was the faithfulness and devotion of these servants that, in spite of their years, they were ready to defend the castle to the last extremity, should things come to the worst.

From the kitchen we made our way towards the tower, for Ralph had expressed a wish to be shown the whole of the castle.

Passing through the great hall, we saw Colonel Firestone sitting in a high-backed chair, one slippered foot resting on a stool, while the other, still cased in his worn and stained jack-boot, was thrust out as stiff as a ramrod. He was smoking, blowing huge clouds of tobacco smoke that surrounded him like a shroud; but, seeing us, he removed his pipe and called me by name.

"I would fain journey with the waggon," said he, "for 'tis safer, and I'll warrant that my despatches will reach His Majesty before those messengers who attempt to pass through Dover and Fowey. That excellent lady, your mother, hath commended you to my care, and, by your conduct of yesternight, I wish for no better charges. For the present, then, we'll be comrades three."

Both Granville and I were delighted with the news; but, on leaving the apartment, my companion remarked, "Didst notice anything strange about Colonel Firestone?"

"In what way?"

"Why, his jack-boot. Methinks he sleeps in it, for never have I seen him without it," said my friend.

"Perchance, like many a veteran, he feels at ease only when booted and spurred; still, he is a fine old soldier, and a right worthy gentleman."

Through the picture gallery we passed, giving but slight heed to the portraits of my ancestors, and, on gaining the leads, we found that four culverins and two small pieces of brass ordnance had been carried thither from the armoury and placed so as to command the approach to the gateway. At the south-western angle of the building stood the tower, which is entered by a narrow doorway from the roof, on which we were standing.

A spiral staircase of forty-five steps brought us to the summit, whence a magnificent view over a tract of well-wooded country extended southwards, terminating with a glimpse of the sea, but on the other quarters the tall outlines of the beautiful South Downs restricted the outlook.

"What a fine home you have, Humphrey," exclaimed Granville enthusiastically. "Is the castle very old?"

"This part is," I replied. "There are dungeons underneath, and secret passages all over the place, though the entrance to the secret passages is built up. The hall and the guest-chambers are new, my grandsire having had them built less than fifty years ago, on his return from Hispaniola."

"And Ashley Castle will belong to you some day?"

"I suppose so," I replied carelessly, for I had hardly before given thought to the matter.

"And those dungeons and passages—how I should like to explore them!"

"We may some day, but the present important matters leave no time for that," I answered, little thinking the service those secret passages were to render in times to come.

Several days passed in active preparations for our journey. The smelting of the silver had been completed, our field equipment provided, and a great part of the time was spent in martial exercises, Colonel Firestone and the sergeant devoting great attention in teaching us the use of the broadsword, with which weapon we became quite proficient.

On the day previous to that fixed for our departure, news arrived that Portsmouth had fallen, and we learned of the manner in which Colonel Goring had fulfilled his boasting promise.

On the morrow, after the capture of Southsea Castle, the rebels turned the guns upon the town, whereupon the Governor threatened to fire the magazine, and level every building in the place by the explosion. It was, no doubt, an idle threat, but Goring hoped to excuse his conduct by such empty bragging.

In the end the rebels agreed to terms of honourable surrender, the garrison being permitted to march out with drums beating, matches lighted, and colours flying, while Goring was allowed to take ship for the Low Countries.

Then it was that he took the key of the Town Mount magazine, the same that he had shown us, and cast it into the sea, thereby redeeming his plighted word.

Very bitter was Colonel Firestone when he heard the news, vowing that he would denounce Goring to his Royal master, and expressing his intention of being the means of having the traitorous Chaloner hanged, should he fall within his clutches.

But it was no time for revengeful thoughts, for the time had come when immediate action was required on our part to carry out the task of conveying the treasure from the castle to the Royal camp.

CHAPTER V

CONVOYING THE TREASURE

THE morning of our departure dawned grey and misty, while a keen, damp wind stirred the tree-tops, though it was not sufficient to disperse the wreaths of vapour that obliterated every object beyond the distance of a few yards from us.

The waggon stood in the courtyard, four powerful dray horses being already harnessed to it. The silver bars were compactly stowed away in the bottom of the wain, covered by a layer of straw. On this were placed a number of articles intended for my father's and our own personal use, including an air bed, my sire having mentioned that the effects of a hard bed on the ground had begun to show in the nature of rheumatism.

This contrivance had but lately been introduced, and, in the words of the worthy Richard Royston,

in his treatise on fortification, "it is blown up to bear its owner from the damp and unwholesome humidity of the earth, the which I call a 'ventilet,' signifying a bed of wind."

Above the chattels came another load of straw, hiding everything, while a tarpaulin protected the contents from the rain.

Colonel Firestone was to play the part of a country yeoman, wearing a plain buff coat over his armour, though he carried his sword and pistols openly, for it was the custom, nay, a necessity, for travellers to go armed when making far journeys.

Roger, the waggoner, had pistols close at hand in the cart, though I had my doubts, as did the colonel, whether his natural stupidity and timidity would ever be overcome should we be molested; but Walter, the pikeman, who rode within the waggon, was made of sterner stuff, and could be relied upon in a tight place.

Granville and I, together with Sergeant Lawson, all soberly clad and armed, were to ride at some distance behind the waggon, so as to present the appearance of a party of travellers having no interest in the convoy and we had agreed, when putting up for the night, to treat Colonel Firestone as a chance acquaintance, so as to disarm any suspicions which the presence of a body of armed men would give rise to.

The final farewells were said, and the gates were thrown open. Then, with a dull rumble, the waggon lumbered over the lowered drawbridge, and our journey to the King's camp at Oxford had begun.

Directly we struck the highway we took up the order agreed upon; but so slow was the pace that Granville and I exercised our steeds by galloping over the green sward which bordered the road on either side, though keeping well within sight of our precious charge.

Up the tedious ascent of Butser Hill the waggon crawled at a snail's pace. At frequent intervals parties of horsemen passed us, either bound for London, or else making towards Portsmouth, and, though most of them were undoubtedly rebels, they hindered us not, though many were the sour and distrustful glances they shot at us.

Hard by the town of Petersfield the waggon turned oft to the left, to avoid the town, which, rumour said, was full of the Parliamentary troops, and, moreover, the inhabitants of Ashley Castle were well known to the countryside.

Winchester was, we learned, in the hands of the Royalists, and thither we directed our way, intending to cross the downs to Newbury, and so on to Oxford, our only fear being that we should fall in with the Parliamentarians marching to join the Earl of Essex.

It was nearly sunset ere the waggon turned in under the archway of the King's Head, and a quarter of an hour later Granville and I galloped up, followed by Lawson.

Granville and I having arrived at the inn, I demanded in an imperious voice accommodation for the night, asking at the same time whether there were other travellers staying there?

"None save a country gentleman and a merchant from Southampton," replied the landlord. "Right worthy company you'll find them, sirs."

"I hope so, too," I replied, and, dismissing the sergeant, for whom lodging was provided above the stables, Granville and I joined the colonel, keeping up the pretence by craving the liberty of introducing ourselves to him and to the merchant of Southampton, who gave his name as Henry Cutler.

The latter was a keen-eyed, black-browed man, with pale, thin features, and lank, raven hair. His dress was rich and even gaudy, while his long, white fingers were loaded with rings.

The conversation flagged somewhat till Firestone called for a bottle of Canary, and presently the colonel and the merchant were trying to outvie each other by telling tales of their adventures both at home and in the countries of western and southern Europe.

"I do perceive that ye are Royalists and honest men," remarked the merchant, fixing his keen eyes on us each in turn. "Therefore, I'll take ye into my confidence, an ye be willing."

"I will not promise you that I'll take you into mine," replied Firestone bluntly.

"I do not ask it," continued the other carelessly. "I can read most persons' minds like an open book. For example, you, young sirs, are journeying to give your personal services to His Majesty. And you, sir, are an old soldier, who also is on the same errand?"

"How knowest thou that?" inquired the colonel, with considerable amazement.

"Never mind," replied the other, with a slight smile. "But, that being so, why should we not travel together? I am taking a present to His Majesty, which will, I trove, relieve him of all anxiety regarding money matters. To be brief, I tell you, in confidence, I possess the secret of the philosopher's stone, concerning which so many wise men have laboured in vain."

"What!" exclaimed Firestone, "canst convert base metal into gold and silver?"

"Ay, and I'll prove it forthwith," replied the merchant calmly. Producing a small glass bottle from his pocket, he held it up for our inspection.

"'Tis not a stone, but a powder that works the marvel," he continued. "The secret thereof was bestowed upon me by Master Hans Oest, the world-known alchemist of Antwerp. See, here is a piece of lead. Take and examine it carefully, lest you say it is not base metal."

The piece of lead was eagerly handed round, the colonel cutting it with a knife to make certain that there was no deception about it.

"With this powder, lead becomes silver; silver becomes gold, though its virtues cannot produce gold from lead, through the medium of silver. I see an earthenware platter yonder; wouldst mind handing it to me?"

In breathless silence we watched the merchant place the bar of lead on the platter and carefully sprinkle a small quantity of the powder upon it.

With a taper, he applied a light to the powder, and immediately there appeared a fierce blue light which dazzled our eyes, and a thick yellowish smoke that made us gasp for breath.

The light disappeared as quickly as it had come, leaving us blinking in the sudden change from the brilliant glare to the semi-darkness of the room; but, when our eyes grew accustomed to the change, there, on the plate, lay a bar of pure silver!

"And now, concerning the conversion of silver into gold?" asked Colonel Firestone.

"Ah, I have excited thy curiosity, then?"

"I would see the whole business through."

"Then ye shall, though, by necessity, it takes longer than doth the production of silver. Hast any silver articles upon your person?"

"None, save a crown or two."

"Silver, if tarnished, doth not lend itself to the action of the powder," continued Master Cutler, looking at the dull coins which the colonel had produced. "I see a silver tankard yonder. I'll take liberties with it, for, without doubt, our host will not object. But one important thing must be seen to. Hast gold on thy person?"

"A small sum," replied our companion.

"And you, sir?"

"Ten broad pieces," I replied.

"And you?"

"Five," said Granville.

"Then take them away, and leave them in your sleeping places, for 'tis impossible to create gold where gold is already present."

So, acting on these instructions, we obediently placed our money, some fifty pounds in all, upon a table in one of the other rooms, and returned eagerly to see the marvellous effects of the Antwerp alchemist's powder.

"I read your thoughts, sir," remarked the merchant to Firestone on our return. "Do you not think that by craft I changed the lead bar for a like one of silver hidden in my sleeve?"

"Ay, I did," replied the colonel bluntly and truthfully. "But now I know that 'tis impossible to have a tankard of that size concealed about your person."

"I will be frank with you, and entrust some of the precious powder into your keeping, and, lest ye think that I am a common charlatan, I'll absent myself from your company for a while. But, mark well these directions. Gold, of necessity, takes longer to produce than silver; therefore, when the powder is sprinkled on yonder tankard, and fire applied, count from one up to three hundred, exercising faith and patience in the counting thereof. I'll stand just without the door, and await your summons."

Bowing gravely, Master Cutler left the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

"He seems fair and above board," remarked the colonel. "Come on, let's to work."

The tankard was placed in the centre of the table, and Colonel Firestone proceeded to scatter the grains of powder on its broad rim, and on the bottom of the bowl.

"Forty good ounces of solid gold will not be amiss," he said meditatively. "By my faith, I see no reason why, considering the good cause, our waggon-load of silver should not reach His Majesty in the form of virgin gold."

I applied a light to the powder, and, as it spluttered, flared up, and smoked villainously, the colonel counted in a slow, sonorous voice.

Before he had finished fifty the room was full of dense, choking vapour, and the powder was nearly consumed, yet there were no signs of the expected change.

At a hundred the flame had died out, leaving only the candlelight shining dimly through a dense yellow fog, so that we could not see whether the silver was in a state of transition or not.

At three hundred the colonel was well-nigh stifled, an his voice reduced to a mere croak. Lifting up the tankard, he bore it close to the candelabra and examined it carefully. Then he burst into a loud, hearty laugh.

"Come in, Master Cutler; come in, and see the result of our handiwork," he shouted. "Your powder has played ye false this time!"

There was no reply. Simultaneously, our jaws dropped in amazed disappointment, whilst the colonel dashed to the door and flung it open.

Master Henry Cutler had vanished!

With vague suspicion in our minds, we rushed towards our room, but, before we had covered half the length of the darkened corridor, I tripped over a bar of wood, which had been placed there by design, and fell headlong, Granville and Colonel Firestone joining me company in a struggling heap on the floor.

Hastily regaining our feet, we burst into the bedroom.

Our worst fears were realised, for our gold had likewise vanished. "Fool! Dolt that I am," shouted the colonel furiously; "could I but lay hands on the rogue!"

Alarmed by the noise, the landlord appeared, while in the street a crowd of citizens collected, thinking, by reason of the dense cloud of smoke that poured from the house, that a fire had broken out.

By our foolish simplicity our host's silver tankard was spoiled, our money had been stolen, and the thief had got clear away in the confusion. And next morning, in order to pay for our accommodation and the damage done, we were obliged to take a bar of silver from the waggon and sell it at a third of its value to a rascally silversmith. So, lighter in pocket, yet improved in wisdom, we resumed our journey.

Over the extensive down towards Whitchurch our progress was tediously slow, so that Granville and I rode on ahead with Sergeant Lawson, keeping, as usual, to the grass by the roadside. For some distance there was not a tree to break the deadly monotony of the landscape but at length we came in sight of a small clump of firs hard by the highway.

Here we were compelled to take to the road again, and barely had our horses' hoofs struck the hard ground than there came a shout for help.

Without a moment's hesitation, Sergeant Lawson set spurs to his horse, and, dropping the reins and drawing sword and pistol, dashed towards the wood, guiding his steed solely by his knees. We followed, sword in hand, and as we gained the edge of the clump of firs we heard the sound of heavy bodies crashing through the brushwood on the farther side.

Bound to the tree trunk was a man, his head bleeding from the effects of a blow from a bludgeon, and his pockets turned inside out. At his feet lay the pieces of a broken sword, while, a short distance away, a horse was tethered to a branch.

[Illustration: *There was a yell of terror, and the robbers made a frantic effort to rein in their steeds.*]

With a couple of swift strokes of his sword, the sergeant severed the ropes that bound the luckless stranger; then, calling on us to follow, he urged his horse through the grove in pursuit of the man's assailants.

The latter had already gained possession of their horses, and were riding at break-neck pace across the open country. There were but two of them, well mounted and lightly clad, while we were encumbered with armour, and were riding heavy cavalry horses. Nevertheless, we held them in hot pursuit, neither gaining nor losing perceptibly.

After a while we straggled somewhat, I being well in front, Lawson a hundred yards or more behind, and Granville still farther away, while the two highwaymen kept closely together. At length I found myself gaining on them, and, in the excitement of the chase, I forgot the peril I was running, for they could well afford to turn and attack me before the sergeant came up.

At intervals I saw them turn their crape-covered faces and glance at me over their shoulders, till suddenly they both wheeled, whipped out pistols, and fired.

They missed, though I felt the bullets whizz past my head and, unable to rein in my horse, I felt myself being carried straight towards the two robbers, who, drawing hangers, waited my approach.

When within a few paces they hurled their discharged weapons full at my head, one grazing the top of my steel cap, while the other I turned aside with my sword.

Whether I liked it or not, I had to close, and, turning slightly, I avoided passing between them, as they had intended. Our blades met without effect; then, on succeeding in drawing in my horse, I found that the Villains had resumed their flight, but in a slightly different direction to their previous course, and that this incident had enabled Lawson to gain considerably.

My senses were cooled by the encounter, so, permitting the sergeant to overtake me, we rode in company, regardless of Ralph, who was still floundering along a quarter of a mile behind, our eyes fixed upon the two fugitives.

Suddenly we heard a yell of terror, and saw a frantic effort on the part of the robbers to pull in their steeds. For a brief moment it seemed as if the horses were sliding on their haunches, their riders leaning back till we could see the tips of their noses above their black masks as they tore at the animals' reins. Another instant and they had disappeared, and it was only the greater stretch of intervening ground that saved us from a similar fate.

Hastily dismounting, we cautiously approached the place where the villains had disappeared, and, to our horror, we found that they had fallen down an unfenced pit, the like of which abound in the chalk downs of the south of England, their presence being almost invisible even at a close distance, save to a trained eye.

Looking over the treacherous edge, we saw a mangled heap of motionless men and horses at the bottom of the pit.

"It has saved us a dirty business," remarked the sergeant grimly, "for, had we taken them alive, 'twould have meant a long wait at the nearest town when we had handed them over to the authorities."

"Are they killed?" I asked.

"Ay," replied he. "'Tis certain they were strangers in this part, and knew not the existence of this pitfall."

"We can do no good staying here," I observed as Granville rode up, spent and breathless with his exertion. "Let's make our way back to the road."

It was a long ride, for in the excitement of the pursuit time and distance had been ignored, but, on regaining the highway, we found that Colonel Firestone and the man we had rescued in timely fashion were engaged in wordy strife, the latter having possessed himself of his horse.

After tendering his thanks at our opportune arrival, the stranger exclaimed, "I see ye are all birds of a feather, and, in accordance with the times, we should now be flying at each other's throats. But I rejoice, in spite of party strife, that Englishmen are still willing to help one another in adversity."

"But you have not proved to me that you are in the right," said the colonel courteously.

"Neither can I convince you that you are in the wrong," replied the other. "Like the rest of the nation, you have your opinion, and I have mine, though, I trove, we need not go the length of forcing our opinions at the sword's point, especially as you are the stronger."

"Nay, I bear ye no ill-will," exclaimed Colonel Firestone, "and these gentlemen are only too pleased to render you a slight service."

"Which at some time I may be able to repay," replied the Roundhead. "My name is Dawe, captain in Waller's troop; with your permission, I'll bear you company to Whitchurch, till we are clear of this robber-infested country."

In spite of his antagonistic principles, Captain Dawe proved to be a level-headed and well-bred man, far different from most of the rebel officers whom I met in after times, though, as we rode together, he talked on military matters with little reserve, whereby our leader, with well-feigned disinterestedness, gained much information as to the disposition and strength of the rebels in the field.

However, his presence saved us from an unpleasant incident at Whitchurch, where we encountered a company of rebel foot, marching towards Andover and Salisbury, for, on declaring himself and showing his commission to the captain of the soldiers, they refrained from searching our waggon.

Here we parted, Captain Dawe setting out for the west by the same road as the rebel foot were going, while we pursued our way northward towards Newbury, where we halted for the night.

The following day we arrived at Oxford without further incident, and, duly handing over the treasure to the officer in charge of the Royal treasury, we awaited definite information of the Royal Army before setting out to join the King's forces in the field.

CHAPTER VI

EDGEHILL

DURING our stay at Oxford various reports and rumours reached us concerning the position of the

King's forces, and at length definite information was brought that the Royalists were marching from Shrewsbury to give battle to the Earl of Essex, who was supposed to be retiring to prevent the King's advance on the rebel City of London.

Colonel Firestone deemed it impracticable to attempt to join the Royal camp with the rebels lying betwixt it and us; so we were forced to remain in galling inactivity till the road northward should be free of the enemy.

Early one morning a spent and mud-stained horseman drew in his jaded steed at Carfax, and immediately the news spread that the King had gained Banbury, thus putting himself between the rebels and London, while a battle was imminent on the following day.

Without a moment's delay we set out for the Royal camp, our party consisting of Colonel Firestone, Granville, and myself, with Sergeant Lawson and Wat in attendance, while two spare horses carried our baggage.

Two hours' hard riding brought us in sight of the town of Banbury, outside of which were the tents of the Royalists. On reporting ourselves to Prince Rupert—for we were to be attached to his troop of horse—we were shown to a tent and told to rest, yet to hold ourselves in instant readiness for an attack on the rebel forces.

But rest for us was an impossibility. Granville wandered about the lines, to see whether any of his Cornish relatives were serving in the Prince's cavalry, while I naturally wished to see my father as soon as possible, though I was told that Sir Reginald Markham was away on special service, and would not return to the camp before nightfall.

Colonel Firestone wished to hand his precious documents personally to the King; I never saw the papers, and often wondered where he kept them; and, on being informed that His Majesty was not within the camp, and that his whereabouts were to be kept secret, the colonel's disappointment was most marked.

He was resolved, like many other officers, to fight under Rupert's standard as an ordinary gentleman, and, seeing that it was impossible to approach His Majesty, he spent the time writing, reading pocket-books on military matters, and overhauling his weapons.

Just as the sun was setting, a small band of horsemen dashed into the camp, and, dismounting, made their way to the Prince's tent, and one of the party I knew full well. It was my father.

"Wait a moment, Humphrey," exclaimed Colonel Firestone, "and I'll go with you. Your sire will not be long with the Prince, I trove."

Together we made our way through the press of roystering soldiers, till we reached the tent, where two armed troopers kept guard over Prince Rupert's person, and in less than five minutes my father reappeared.

He greeted me with great affection, commending my loyal resolution in throwing in my lot with the King's forces, assuring me that there were many youths of gentle birth who were also in the field.

"And hest not a word of welcome for an old comrade?" exclaimed my companion.

"Nay, I know you not," replied my father, looking steadfastly into the colonel's face. Then, after a pause, he exclaimed:

"Why, 'tis Nick Firestone!"

"The same," replied the colonel, wringing my father's hand. "Have I changed so much that my old companion-in-arms cannot call me to name? How is it with thee?"

"A man may change much in a score years," said my father, "but, thanks to an active life, I feel as strong and as well as in the dark days of 'twenty-seven, save that my legs are somewhat cramped with rheumatism, though my arm is as strong as of yore. Where lies your tent?" he asked.

"Next but one to your own, sir," I replied. "At least, that is what I have been told."

"'Tis well," he replied, "for twelve hours in the saddle is apt to give one a keen hunger, to say nothing of an aching frame."

"I have brought an air bed for you from home," I exclaimed.

"An air what, forsooth?" asked my father.

I hastened to explain the nature of this admirable contrivance as given by worthy Master Royston, and, on arriving at our lines, I sent Lawson to get the novel article from the baggage.

We talked till late in the evening, my parent plying me with questions concerning affairs at home, and telling us of the events of the last few weeks.

"Dost know that, according to the rebel order, Ashley Castle no longer belongs to the Markhams?" asked my father.

"Nay, sir," I replied. "What dost thou mean; is it a jest?"

"Hardly a jest, Humphrey. Only yester-night we surprised a rebel despatch-bearer on the road near Stratford, and amongst other papers was a list of manors and castles to be bestowed by the Parliament on their chief supporters, and amongst the places named was mine own castle."

"And on whom is it bestowed?"

"On one Captain Chaloner."

"Captain Chaloner!" exclaimed Firestone. "Why, 'tis the man who allowed the rebels to seize Southsea Castle, the same who was hand in glove with the turncoat, Goring."

"He's to gain possession of Ashley Castle first," rejoined my father grimly; "and 'tis certain that, so long as my wife keeps watch and ward, no doubly-dyed rebel will set foot over my threshold—but how came Portsmouth to fall, considering it was well fortified and supplied with munition of war?"

We thereupon had to tell my father the events that led to Goring's feeble and faint-hearted pretence of holding the town for the King, and, at the story of Chaloner's treacherous incapacity, my parent shook his fist in impotent rage.

At length it was time for us to retire to our own tent, and, having inflated the air-bed for my father's use by means of a pump, we bade him good night.

Late into the night sounds of revelry disturbed the camp, men gaming or singing in uproarious discord, till gradually the babel died away, and silence reigned over the sleeping town of tents, broken only by the frequent voices of the sentries on guard without the lines.

It was my first experience of camp life, and sleep seemed a stranger to me. The hard ground found out the weak places in my anatomy, till my shoulder-blades and hips were sore and aching, for as yet I knew nothing of the old campaigners' trick of hollowing out the earth to accommodate these protuberances and I lay and longed for the dawn.

Suddenly an alarm echoed through the stillness of the night, and instantly the camp was alive with men rushing hither and thither.

Our tent turned out to a man, and, putting on our steel caps, and buckling on our sword-belts as we ran, we formed up in an irregular line outside the camp, in expectation of a sudden attack, yet, though an outpost of musketeers discharged their weapons, there came no answering volley from the supposed enemy.

Nor was the alarm confined to our lines, for, on our left, the musketeers of Sir Jacob Ashley's infantry were also formed up with matches lighted, and on our right the cannoniers under Sir John Heyden were advancing their ordnance to meet the attack.

In the midst of the confusion a tall, dark figure mounted on a restive horse rode towards us, followed by a body of cavalry.

It was Prince Rupert.

"Back to your tents, gentlemen!" he shouted, and it seemed that his voice was broken with suppressed laughter. "'Tis but a false alarm!"

And ere long the whole camp knew the cause of the sudden uproar—my father's air-bed had burst, and, finding himself flung all of a heap on the ground, he had imagined, being roused from sleep, that the rebels were upon us, and had raised the shout that roused the camp!

Daylight found the camp astir, for, with the knowledge that the rebels were within ten miles of us, excitement ran high. For my part, I must confess the principal thought that ran uppermost in my mind was not that of the coming conflict, but a vague uneasiness as to what was happening at home —whether that traitorous villain, Chaloner, had actually made an attempt to secure Ashley Manor, illegally bestowed upon him by the very side he had professed to abhor.

Firestone, on his part, was in a state of feverish anxiety, for, though, like an old soldier, he was longing for the clash of arms, he was burning with impatience to deliver his despatches personally to His Majesty, this being the express injunction laid upon him ere he quitted the French court.

But again his hopes were thwarted, for the King had, we now learned, gone overnight to sleep at Nellthorpe House, and, up to the actual moment of the army taking up a battle formation, he had not put in an appearance, as a council was being held in the town of Banbury. It was considerably after midday ere we received orders to march, and, on gaining the brow of a steep hill, I saw the rebel host in close array on the plains beneath us.

Presently I heard the dull boom of a cannon away on our left, followed by a heavy fire, to which the rebels answered, though not so vigorously.

But we were not left long in that suspense which is so trying to the nerves of a soldier, for Prince Rupert, standing in his stirrups, waved his sword for our cavalry to advance.

Prince Rupert having given the signal for the cavalry to advance, I set my teeth tightly, spurred

my steed, and joined in the charge, being in the second rank, with Firestone on my left and my father on my right.

Before us lay the dense serried masses of Essex's cavalry, but, to my surprise, just before the trumpets sounded the charge, a whole troop of the enemy suddenly rode towards us with signs of friendship. Wheeling by our right, they fell in with our cavalry, and at once prepared to charge their former comrades.

This troop, I afterwards learned, were Sir Faithful Fortescue's troopers, who had but recently returned from Ireland; but, being unable to make their way to the Royal camp, had feigned to throw in their lot with the rebels until a favourable opportunity occurred to declare themselves openly.

The next instant we were launched at full gallop upon the rebel cavalry, and of what happened during the next few moments I have but a dim recollection. It was cut, thrust, and parry. Men went down, still striking madly at their assailants, whilst riderless horses added to the confusion; but I knew that we had the best of the struggle, because we were ever advancing.

Suddenly Firestone's horse plunged violently and fell on its knees, while its rider, slipping from off his saddle, rolled over, vainly endeavouring to throw himself clear of his floundering steed.

At that moment one of the rebel dragoons, a veritable Anak, received a cut in the face, and, half blinded and maddened by the pain, he slashed furiously right and left.

I wheeled to escape the resistless sweep of his sword, and, to my horror, I saw the weapon bury itself in Colonel Firestone's leg, shearing through jack-boot, limb, and even the saddle.

The next instant I was urged onward by the rush of the combatants, and, much as I desired to, I was unable to help my luckless comrade. In a few minutes the rebel cavalry had broken and were in hot flight, while at their heels came our triumphant troopers, slashing and hewing at the fugitives without mercy.

In the excitement of the pursuit time and distance were forgotten, till at length, breathless and triumphant, our cavalry gave up the chase, re-formed, and prepared to return to that part of the field of battle where, by the sound of heavy firing, we knew the contest still raged furiously.

Before this was done, however, we were assailed by a body of rebel horse, which, launching itself on our rearguard, played havoc till driven off by superior numbers.

When at length we regained our former position we were confronted by a solid phalanx of pikemen and musketeers, who presented such a redoubtable appearance that Prince Rupert hesitated to order a fresh charge. So with an occasional cannonade the battle ended just as night drew in upon the scene.

"Hast seen Colonel Firestone?" asked Granville, as he wiped his dust-and blood-stained face with a handkerchief of delicate cambric.

"Down yonder, I fear," I replied sadly, indicating the darkening plain on which the indistinct forms of the fallen could still be seen. "I saw him hurled from his horse with his leg shorn off at a single blow."

"Perchance he still lives."

"But I could scarcely believe that. He is more likely to have bled to death," said I. "Be that as it may, however, we'll make an effort to find him."

And, giving our horses in charge of a camp follower, we sought out Sergeant Lawson, who willingly agreed to accompany us.

Bending as we went—for the enemy's matches still glimmered in readiness to open fire—we cautiously made our way over the ground in the direction clearly indicated by the slain who fell during our brilliant charge.

Here and there maimed horses still kicked and writhed in agony, while at intervals a man would implore our pity and help, though most of the slightly wounded had managed to regain the shelter of our lines. At length we came upon a confused jumble of men and horses, and pinned down by the weight of his dead charger lay our hapless friend.

By our combined efforts we managed to extricate his body from beneath the animal, and to our great surprise and intense delight the brave colonel opened his eyes.

A brief examination showed that his right leg had been cleanly hewn through, the upper part of his boot still remaining over his knee; but again with infinite surprise I noticed that there was no trace of blood, and the next instant the truth flashed across my mind.

Colonel Nicholas Firestone had a wooden leg!

Stooping down, Lawson grasped the colonel under his arms, while Granville lifted his remaining leg, and cautiously we began our perilous journey back to the camp; but hardly had we gone a few paces when Firestone whispered:

"Bring the pieces with you, Humphrey. My severed leg, I mean, for 'tis of much consequence that this be done."

Wondering what he meant, yet loth to thwart what I took to be the whim of a half-dazed man, I returned, picked up the severed boot with its wooden contents, and overtook my comrades, and half an hour later we were safely within the Royal lines.

Here, with considerable difficulty, we procured a rough litter, and, placing our wounded friend upon it, we bore him towards the camp, in company with a constant stream of burdens, for the most part far sadder than our own.

As we approached I noticed a group of officers standing in a respectful attitude at a short distance from a slender, heavily cloaked figure. Instinct told me it was our Sovereign, who, having by his courage inspired his troops to fight a brilliant though indecisive action, was not slow in sympathising with those who had fallen in his cause.

"'Tis the King," I whispered to our wounded companion.

"Then hand me my severed leg," he rejoined with astonishing imperativeness.

My surprise prevented me from asking the reason, and without a word I did as he requested.

As the litter approached His Majesty, I noticed Firestone feverishly employed in taking the remains of his wooden leg from the encasing leather boot, and, having done this, he began to unscrew a portion of the limb. A few turns and the leg came apart, disclosing a cavity, from which the colonel drew a lightly rolled packet of papers.

"Art badly hurt?" asked His Majesty, as the glimmer of a lantern fell upon the figure in the stretcher.

"No, sire," replied Firestone cheerfully. "'Tis not a case for the surgeon; a carpenter will suffice."

"How so, sirrah?" exclaimed the King with astonishment.

In a few words Colonel Firestone explained the circumstances, and handed the precious despatches to His Majesty.

Tearing open the covering, the King called for the lantern to be brought nearer to enable him to read the contents, and by the feeble light I saw his clear-cut features brighten as he perused the message.

"Gentlemen," he explained, addressing the officers in attendance, "we have just received an important and encouraging message from our cousin of France, but of this more anon. But why didst thou risk these papers in the battlefield instead of handing them to us?" he added, addressing Colonel Firestone.

"Acting under direct orders, sire," he replied, "that these despatches were to be given only into Your Majesty's hands."

"And yet with these in your possession you risked your life and these despatches on the battlefield?"

"My life is my own, and I chose to risk it in Your Majesty's cause," replied Firestone stoutly. "But as for the papers, I took precautions to ensure them reaching Your Majesty's hands should I have fallen."

"We'll not ask a gallant soldier to explain the matter," said the King, "for 'tis certain his arrangements were well made. The fact remains that he has performed his mission to our satisfaction, a matter which we will bear in mind."

And, motioning the stretcher-bearers to proceed, the King returned the colonel's salute and directed his attention to the next arrival of that seemingly endless procession.

Having seen our charge safely within his tent, we sent for a carpenter to replace his severed stump, a task which, though roughly performed, the colonel considered satisfactory. But the severe shaking he received by his fall prevented his taking the field again that night, and we were compelled to leave him and again take our place in the line of battle.

All that night and during the next day we lay under arms, both sides facing each other, yet refraining from exchanging shots, and as evening drew in we were greatly surprised and not a little delighted to see the rebel army withdrawing in the direction of Warwick.

The approach of winter necessitated both armies going into winter quarters, and, having obtained permission to withdraw, my father, accompanied by Colonel Firestone and myself, determined to return to Ashley, while Ralph Granville set out for his Cornish home.

He and I were sorry indeed to part company, and, sure enough, there came times, of which you are now to hear, when I could have done well with so trusty a friend at my right hand.

CHAPTER VII

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH

ASHLEY CASTLE presented its wonted appearance as my father and I approached it on our return journey.

The banner of the Markhams still proudly floated over the tower, the drawbridge was still guarded by a pikeman in the Markham livery, and the smoke still floated upwards from the kitchen chimneys in the keen autumnal air.

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed my father, raising his plumed hat, and I knew that a great load had been lifted from his mind—a burden which I felt hardly less deeply than did he.

The warm-hearted greeting over, we eagerly asked for tidings concerning the renegade, Captain Chaloner, but on this matter we could not obtain any information, for, although it was known that the rebel captain had had the castle bestowed upon him by the Parliament, he had taken no active steps to secure possession of it.

Relying on the loyal support of his tenantry, my father knew that there was little chance of a surprise, yet he in no wise relaxed his vigilance.

Every available firearm was carefully examined, barrels of powder bought and stored in the capacious cellars, while piles of shot were placed in readiness by the side of the small pieces of ordnance on the leads of the hall. Vast quantities of imperishable provisions were collected, and an additional well was sunk within the inner courtyard, so that our water supply was assured.

Yet our preparations were seemingly in vain. Many months passed, and still no rebel Chaloner appeared to press his claim, while my father, owing to his increasing infirmities, was compelled, much against his will, to remain at home instead of giving his services to His Majesty in the field.

Colonel Firestone, however, had taken part in the affairs of Chalgrove Field and Newbury, and from time to time news came from him concerning the progress of the fearful civil war.

At length, in the month of May, 1644, the colonel himself arrived at Ashley Castle with the news that he was on his way, by Royal command, to take part in the operations in the west against the rebels under the Earl of Essex, and, at the colonel's suggestion, my father consented to let me go with him, greatly to my satisfaction.

Two years had made a great difference in my appearance. Although but very little taller, I had increased in girth, being broad-chested and full-limbed, while few would believe that I was but seventeen years of age. Thanks to clean-living and plenty of exercise in martial and open-air pursuits, I was strong, muscular, and active, yet withal (though I say it) I was of sound judgment, quick to act, and blessed with no small stock of intelligence.

It was a long journey by way of Winchester, Salisbury, and Exeter, but with little adventure we crossed the Tamar at a place called Calstock, and reached the Duchy of Cornwall.

It was nearly night when we reached this village, a collection of stone-built cottages rising in tiers from the west side of the river, which here describes a magnificent curve between lofty banks of tree-clad hills.

Our arrival caused no little stir amongst the villagers, for armed men were comparatively scarce in the neighbourhood, as the troops of either party, who were continually pouring into the Duchy, usually entered by the road betwixt Tavistock and Callington, or else between Plymouth and Saltash.

"Is there a decent and well-conducted inn hereabouts?" asked my companion, addressing a red-haired fellow in a grey smock.

"What do 'ee say?" replied the countryman, scratching his poll in obvious perplexity.

"An inn, dolt! An inn."

"There be one up yonder," said the man in a singsong voice. "'E be called the King's 'Ead, if 'ee be for the King, and the Stamford Arms, if 'ee be for the Parleymun. It be no worry to we, anyway."

"Let's try the King's Head," I remarked. "Though 'tis to be hoped that those who dub it after the Earl of Stamford may be not present."

"So be it," replied my companion, and riding up to the door of the inn, we dismounted and knocked.

From within came the sound of many voices engaged in lively conversation, and, finding that our summons was unanswered, Firestone pushed open the door and entered.

At the end of a stone passage was another door, partly opened, and to our surprise a well-known

voice was heard:

"This, gentlemen, fully demonstrates the sovereign virtues possessed by my inimitable powder, of which I am agreeable to sell small portions at the price of one penny—one penny only, I say. Each portion capable of acting on four ounces of lead. 'Tis only in the goodness of my heart that I offer this priceless powder to His Majesty's subjects, and——"

"'Tis the arrogant rogue who bested us at Winchester!" I whispered.

"Ay! I knew it the moment I heard his voice. Listen."

"I ask no man to buy," continued the huckster. "'Tis to be regarded as a gift—no, sir, it must not be used under an hour, being but this evening made up—as a gift, I repeat; but to prevent an injudicious distribution, I am compelled to ask but one penny for this small quantity. I have demonstrated its powers to you, as I have done before princes of the blood, knights and gentlemen in London, York, Lincoln, Norwich, Exeter——"

"And Winchester, you rogue!" exclaimed the colonel, bursting into the room. "Where are our fifty pounds in gold?"

The self-styled merchant of Southampton was terrified at the sight of our sudden appearance. His knees smote together, his jaw dropped, and his lank, raven hair almost stood upright.

Gripping his shoulder, I forced him against the wall, and, thrusting back his sleeve, we discovered a cube of lead similar in shape to the one of silver which still lay on the table. Seeing the deception, the crowd, who had regarded us with little favour, began to cast imprecations on the impostor.

"We'll have this on account," said Colonel Firestone, pocketing the silver. "And now turn out his purse."

Eleven pounds in gold and over a pound in silver and copper were shaken out on the table, the wretched man making no resistance.

"Thirty-eight pounds to the had. What say you, sirrah?" demanded the colonel sternly. "Is it the hangman at Bodmin, where perchance thou'lt be cropped by the ears and branded on the face, and finish by dangling at the end of a stout hempen rope? What say you, I repeat?"

The wretch had sunk on his knees, mumbling incoherently. Suddenly he whipped out a long knife from the folds of his boot and lunged viciously, like a cornered rat, at the colonel. But ere the blow struck home I kicked the weapon from his grasp, sending it spinning to the low, raftered ceiling, where it stuck and vibrated with the force of its ascent.

"Wouldst add attempted murder to the list of your accomplishments?" asked Firestone contemptuously. "'Tis a pity we cannot waste time to see thee spinning round at the end of a halter, but we must needs take the law into our own hands. Canst swim?"

The man shook his head.

"Then up with him and cast him into the river," continued my companion, addressing the surrounding throng.

Eager hands seized the wretched purveyor of quack powders and bore him towards the river, Firestone and I following at the heels of the crowd.

"Shall us tie a stoane round the neck of he?" asked one of the villagers.

"Hither, my friend," replied Firestone, and as the man came nearer he continued in a low voice, inaudible to the miserable rogue: "We do not mean to kill the man, Get ready a rope to throw to him. And canst swim?"

"Ay," replied the villager. "Only the other day they gave I a jar o' small beer for swimmin' from Morwell'm——"

"Then I'll give you another if you have to go in and fetch him out; but don't go in, mind you, unless I give you word."

At the edge of the river was a small stone quay, below which the water flowed gently, only a few feet from the top of the wharf, it being nearly high tide. It was nearly dark, but the other bank was just discernible.

The men who had been cheated out of their hard-earned spending money entered into the punishment of the rascal with a will. Seized by the arms and legs by half a dozen lusty quarrymen, the terrified rogue was swung to and fro for a few seconds, his screams for mercy adding to the zest of his tormentors. Then, to the accompaniment of a loud shout, the men hurled him far into the river, where he disappeared with a heavy splash.

"He must be dead. He sank like a stone," I exclaimed, after what seemed to me a long interval.

"We've overdone it," shouted the colonel excitedly. "Quick, you; after him. Perchance he was winded by the fall," he added to the man who had boasted of his swimming prowess.

But before the man could throw off his heavy boots, the lank black hair of the Southampton merchant—as he termed himself, though falsely, as we knew too well—appeared above the surface, half-way across the stream, and with astonishing swiftness he struck out for the opposite shore.

"Why, the villain has cheated us again," I exclaimed. "See, he swims well."

"Try him with your pistols, sir," said the host of the inn.

"Nay, let him go, for he deserves it by his cunning," replied Firestone, and in silence we saw his dim outline draw itself from the water, and, rat-like, slink to cover in the shelter of the woods.

We returned to the inn, where Colonel Firestone repaid the men who had been duped by the rascal's ingenuity, out of the remaining money, retaining the leather purse as a trophy of the encounter, while our popularity was further assured by our host being ordered to broach a barrel of old ale at our expense, and till late in the night the simple countrymen sat carousing, singing quaint songs in their strange dialect, in blissful disregard of the fact that nearly the whole kingdom was torn asunder by civil war.

Next morning we were up betimes, and amid the cheers of the villagers, who had gathered to wish us good-speed, we resumed our journey westward, intending to reach Tregetty Castle, the Granvilles' home, before sunset.

Barely had we gone a couple of miles when the road, which was little better than a narrow lane, descended abruptly into a deep and dark valley, the pine trees throwing a sombre shade over our path.

Suddenly three horsemen appeared, reining in their horses to bar our path. There was no mistaking their intentions, and by their buff coats, iron caps, and clean-shaven visages we knew them to be Roundheads.

"Straight at them!" exclaimed Firestone, drawing sword and pistol, while I followed his example; but ere we could close, their numbers were increased by nearly a score.

Wheeling our horses, we essayed flight, but at the same moment a swarm of dismounted men leapt from the banks in our rear. We were hopelessly trapped.

Resistance was useless, and in a moment the troopers were upon us. We were deprived of our weapons, and rough hands seized us, binding our arms tightly behind our backs, while with many ribald jests at the hapless malignants they urged our horses in the same direction that we had been going.

But before we emerged from the valley the troopers halted, save a sergeant, who disappeared by a narrow path on the left-hand side of the lane. In a few minutes he returned, accompanied by two of the rebel officers, and with an involuntary exclamation of surprise and dismay I recognised one of them to be the traitor, Captain Chaloner.

Close behind him, his face distorted with a malevolent grin, was another acquaintance, Master Henry Cutler, the Southampton "merchant," whom, but a few hours previously, we had seen swimming across the Tamar.

"You have them securely, I hope, sergeant?" said Chaloner, rubbing his gloved hands in evident enjoyment.

"Safely bound, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"'Tis well. Now, sirrahs, what have you to say for yourselves? Malignants and robbers to boot, ye are arrested in the name of the Parliament of England and charged with robbing with violence this man, Henry Cutler. What have ye to say?"

"My purse! My purse!" exclaimed the huckster, producing his leather bag from the colonel's pocket. "See, sir, this proves my story. My papers are still in it."

"They are guilty beyond doubt," replied Chaloner, "e'en though they speak not a word. Hi! Bring hither the halters!" he shouted to a trooper.

Without delay a noose was placed round each of our necks, while another trooper climbed to the lowermost branch of a pine tree that overgrew the road.

After one or two attempts he caught the ends of the ropes, passed them over the bough, and let the free end fall to the ground. Five or six men grasped each rope and awaited the signal to haul us, kicking and struggling in our death agonies, from the backs of our horses.

In those awful moments my senses were completely numbed. I was dimly conscious only of the noise of the trickling stream and the notes of the feathered songsters overhead. Even this ignominious ending by being hanged did not seem to trouble me, for I understood in a measure the meaning of the words, "The bitterness of death is past." What I could not quite understand was the fact that our executioners delayed their work.

Then, above the babbling of the stream, I heard the sound of horses rapidly approaching, and, the mist clearing before our eyes, I saw a knot of Parliamentary officers gallop up.

"What's this? Who commands this troop?" demanded the senior officer, a tall, thin, yet not unpleasant-looking man, whose clear-cut features were partly hidden by a heavy bristling moustache and a tuft of hair on his chin.

"I, sir, Captain Chaloner," replied that worthy, saluting with his drawn sword.

"Then pray explain the circumstances of this summary act; are these prisoners of war?"

"They are malignants, murderers, and highway robbers to boot," said Chaloner.

"Nay, sir, 'tis false," interjected Colonel Firestone. "We are soldiers of His Majesty, 'tis true, but neither murderers nor highwaymen. I look to you, sir, to protect us from the indignity of being strung up without the chance of a word in our defence."

"I will go further into the matter anon," said the Roundhead officer. "Captain Chaloner, where is the rendezvous of your troop?"

"At the town of Lostwithiel, sir."

"Then take your prisoners thither. I hold you responsible for their safety and custody. Be assured," he added, addressing us, "that you will have a fair and impartial trial. If found guilty of robbery, on my solemn word I'll have you strung up as a warning to others; if not. I must needs keep you as prisoners of war."

Chaloner again saluted as his superior and his officers rode off; then, scowling blankly with ill-concealed hatred, he ordered his troop to fall in, and, with Firestone and I still bound in their midst, the Roundheads set off at a trot towards their headquarters.

CHAPTER VIII

OUR ADVENTURE IN LOSTWITHIEL CHURCH

THE troopers kept up their rapid pace, as if anxious to reach the shelter afforded by Lostwithiel without delay, and as we proceeded the nature of their anxiety became apparent.

A burly dragoon rode between us, sternly checking any attempt at conversation, while the sergeant, who had possessed himself of my sword—the gift of the armourer at Newport—placed a couple of men, armed with petronels, immediately behind us, giving them orders to shoot us through the head at the first sign of an attempt to escape.

This order was, I felt certain, given to the sergeant by Chaloner, who would have been only too glad to get us out of the way, knowing that we were acquainted with his past treachery, and also because he was aware of the fact that I was the son of Sir Reginald Markham, who still held Ashley, in spite of the Parliamentarian mandate bestowing it upon the renegade.

Long before midday we had passed through Liskeard, where the inhabitants were manifestly in sympathy with us, though overawed by the menaces of Chaloner's troopers.

About four miles beyond the town we came to the fork roads, where one road leads to Bodmin and the other to Lostwithiel, and hardly had we proceeded a hundred yards along the latter when two dragoons, who had been riding some distance ahead, came back at a gallop with the intelligence that a troop of malignant cavalry were drawn up beyond the brow of the hill.

My spirits rose at the thought of a rescue, though, at the same time, it occurred to me that, should an affray take place, Chaloner would have no scruples in shooting us, and putting the blame on the bullets of our friends.

The Roundheads lost no time in preparing to receive the threatened attack. The dragoons dismounted, one man in every three being told off to hold the reins of their comrades' horses. We were sent to the rear under guard, while the soldiers vigorously plied their swords, cutting down brushwood and small branches of trees which they placed across the road to render more difficult the charge of their opponents.

In a few moments we saw the cavalry appear, and, drawing up against the sky-line, they halted, while their leaders trotted slowly forward, as if to reconnoitre the Roundheads' position.

Apparently, however, the Cornish Royal troops thought the numbers of their enemies too great to attempt an onslaught, for, greatly to my disappointment, the horsemen wheeled and retired, amidst the ironical laughter and gibes of our captors.

But the Roundheads had reckoned too lightly with their enemies, for shortly afterwards the

Royalists appeared in our rear, opening a steady fire at long range.

Chaloner was manifestly ill at ease, and, as usual, his craven spirit showed itself in its true colours. With the opening of the rearguard action he took his place at the head of the troop, exhorting them to increase their pace till their progress was little better than a flight.

On our part, Colonel Firestone and I were subjected to the awkward predicament of being under the fire of our own party, the bullets whistling unpleasantly above our heads. Although several of the dragoons essayed to make a stand, their pursuers drove them back with the loss of three killed and five wounded, till at length the chase ended at Lostwithiel Bridge, by the timely arrival of a strong body of musketeers from the Roundhead stronghold.

Here Chaloner handed us over to a captain of pikemen, who conducted us to the church, where, still bound, we were placed in a corner of the sacred edifice under a strong guard.

The floor of the nave was strewn with straw, some twenty or more horses being stabled here, while gathered in small groups were the rough soldiery, polishing their arms.[1]

Presently there entered an officer, whom I recognised in a moment. It was Captain Dawe, the man we had befriended when attacked by robbers near Whitchurch, and the recognition was mutual, though the Roundhead captain placed his finger meaningly on his mouth.

"Why are these men trussed up in this fashion?" he demanded.

"By Captain Chaloner's orders, sir," replied one of the men who mounted guard over us.

"'Tis unduly harsh. Cast off those ropes. Have they been questioned?"

"I know not, sir."

"Then stand aside while I obtain information of the malignant forces."

Our bonds were unfastened, and we stood upright, glad to stretch our cramped limbs.

"More I dare not do," said Captain Dawe in a low tone. "But seize the first chance of escape, for 'tis certain this Captain Chaloner is intent on your deaths. Your outposts are in possession of Restormel Castle. Dost know where it lieth?"

"No," I replied.

"But a mile and a half from the north gate. Gain it, and all will be well, for I foresee that we are sore beset by your troops. To-night, perchance, I'll try to make your way still easier, but till then—farewell."

Our benefactor went out, while our guards resumed their places, one having brought us some food, which we ate with avidity, having been without refreshment since early morning. Then, making ourselves as comfortable as the hard oak pews would permit, we feigned sleep.

Immediately after Captain Dawe's departure a scene of rioting began, ending in an uproar that filled me with disgust.

"Can we sit here idle, and gaze upon this vile work?" I whispered fiercely to my companion, for I was beside myself with fury.

"Not I," replied Firestone.

"Then let's fall upon them," I exclaimed in a low voice.

The next instant I had pushed aside our guards and sprung on the pew, the colonel following almost as quickly, in spite of his wooden leg.

Before the noisy fellows could grasp the meaning of our sudden onslaught, I had seized the leading spirit by the throat. With an almost superhuman effort, I dashed his head against the font, the stonework stopping his blasphemy for the time being.

Firestone served another in a similar manner, and, as if by mutual agreement, we dashed towards the doorway leading to the tower. Up the spiral staircase we flew, and, before the first of the astonished rebels had grasped the situation, we had gained the wooden ladder leading to the belfry.

In another moment we had drawn the wooden ladder up after us, and lay breathless and panting, yet safe for the present, upon the floor of the steeple.

Anon we heard growls of the soldiers, who, having reached the top of the stone staircase, had found the ladder removed.

"On your head be the blame, Hosea Standfast," exclaimed one of the troopers.

"Nay, why on mine?" replied another. "You were told off to keep watch and ward as well as I."

"A truce to your bickering," interrupted a third, "and help to get your men down. Send a messenger to Captain Chaloner, and inform him of the circumstances."

"Cannot we secure them without the captain knowing aught of the matter?" asked the first speaker. "Try, but I'll warrant the rogues will sit tight," replied the third man, evidently a corporal of horse.

Threats, persuasions, and entreaties met with no results, for, intoxicated with the success of our attempt, we laughed at the discomfited soldiers, till at last one of them reluctantly departed, to inform the renegade, Captain Chaloner, of our escapade, and in a very short time that infuriated officer made his appearance, accompanied by a file of musketeers.

"I'll fetch you down," he exclaimed, and immediately ordered the musketeers to make ready their pieces.

Peering cautiously over the edge of the trap-door, I could see the men lighting their matches, and casting about to load. Observing these preparations, I assisted Colonel Firestone to clamber astride the top of a large bell, while I followed his example, for, though the stout oak planking of the belfry floor might not be proof against the bullets, it was certain that the huge metal cylinders would form ample protection.

We had not long to wait before a musket was fired, the report making a prodigious noise, while the bullet struck the floor with a dull, heavy thud.

The next shot passed between a crevice in the rough timbers, and hit the lip of the bell, which gave forth a resonant ring.

The intermittent fusillade continued for about ten minutes, and, although the bells were struck at least a dozen times, we came off unscathed, keeping up a running fire of derisive remarks at the enraged captain and his impotent musketeers.

"I'll have you yet," shouted the renegade, beside himself with fury, and, ordering his men to follow, he led the way down the spiral staircase.

"I wonder what he intends to do next?" I remarked to my companion, as we stepped from our unsteady perches and gained the floor.

"He'll stop at nothing," replied the colonel. "But we'll know soon enough. In the meantime haul up those ropes, for methinks we'll have need of them ere long."

We pulled up the bell-ropes as far as the knots for the ringers' hands would allow, then set laboriously to work to chafe through the stout hempen cords by the edge of one of the bells. We had barely sawn through three ropes, and detached their other ends from the massive wheels, when we heard the noise of scuffling feet hastily making the way up the worn steps of the spiral staircase, accompanied by the unmistakable rustle of straw.

[Illustration: *Seized by the arms and legs, the terrified rogue was hurled into the river.*]

"They are going to burn us out," I exclaimed.

"Trying to, you should say," replied Firestone. "Unless they actually set fire to the steeple, which Heaven forfend, we can laugh at them."

Piling a heap of straw and hay on the stone floor of the tower immediately below the trap-door of the belfry, the rebels called on us once more to come down.

The only reply was a piece of wood, small 'tis true, but thrown with unerring aim. It caught one of the soldiers fairly on the top of his bare head, for he had removed his steel cap, and, with a yell of pain, he dashed for the doorway of the spiral staircase, not knowing in his fright whether he had been shot at or not.

Coming into violent contact with another man who was bringing up some more straw, the twain fell in a confused heap, and we could hear them bumping and jolting down the narrow steps.

"Capitally done, Humphrey!" exclaimed the colonel. "Had we but a goodly store of missiles, we could hold them at bay."

"Which we have not, unfortunately," I rejoined.

Experience had taught the rebels a lesson, for, having donned the steel cap, another soldier set match to the heap of straw, and the next instant a pillar of flame shot upwards, the fiery tongues actually licking the sides of the trap-door, by which we were lying.

But to destroy us by fire was not their object, for one of the men soused the fiercely-burning mass with water. The clear flame gave place to a dense column of blinding smoke, and in a few seconds we were choking and coughing furiously. Firestone gripped me by the shoulder, and, forcing our way through the smoke, we reached a little doorway in one of the hexagonal sides of the steeple, which gave access to a narrow platform surrounded by a parapet.

Here we stood, once more in God's good sunshine, half blinded and suffocated. Drawing in the pure air to our smoke-laden lungs, we had no thoughts for anything but the delights of the life-restoring atmosphere, till the thud of a bullet on the stonework close to our heads warned us that our enemies had expected our appearance, and were firing at us from the street.

Instinctively we dropped behind the parapet, lying in the lead gutters, still taking in copious draughts of air, while from the doorway through which we had emerged came thick columns of smoke.

Bullets still pattered thickly against the stonework of the steeple, while, in addition to the reports of the muskets, the hoarse shouts of the baulked rebels added to the din.

After a while we plucked up courage, and, raising ourselves cautiously, we looked over the edge of the parapet.

In spite of our danger, we could not help admiring the prospect. Bathed in the slanting rays of the setting sun, the town of Lostwithiel and the surrounding country made a delightful picture, that, were it not for the presence of the rebels, would have been typical of an English countryside.

On the east beyond the red-tiled roofs of the timbered houses we could see the road by which we had come, looking like a white thread amidst the dense masses of dark green foliage and the lighter tints of the well-laden fields. Across the silver thread that showed the course of the Foy stream was the old stone bridge, its townward end closed by a rough barricade, through the gaps of which were four pieces of ordnance trained to command the road.

Here were strong parties of pikemen and musketeers supporting the gunners, while, on the north side of the town, the rebels were actively engaged in throwing up earthworks. Further up the valley, on the low hills to the left, we could discern a small castle, on which a flag hung motionless in the still air.

"Canst make out yonder standard?" asked Firestone, indicating the flag.

"Nay, 'tis o'er far," I replied.

"It must be the castle of Restormel, of which Captain Dawe spoke. That being so, 'tis the standard of the Hoptons that flies over it."

"The rebels are in a great state of activity," he continued, "and, judging by their defence works, I trove that they expect an attack. But we must keep an eye on the trap-door, lest the rogues make an attack under cover of the smoke."

By this time the fire had died out, and, though the atmosphere within the belfry was charged with choking fumes, we could breathe with but little difficulty. Looking down, we saw the lower room was deserted, and the ominous silence filled us with misgivings.

The sun had set, and twilight was drawing in apace. Thirst and hunger began to make their presence felt, and in desperation I suggested to Firestone that, when it grew dark, we should descend by means of the bell-ropes knotted together, and take the risk of capture rather than starve where we were.

"Yes," he replied shortly. "We can but try."

We immediately set about unfastening the remaining ropes, out of which we made one stout rope of double thickness, sufficiently long to reach the ground.

The oppressive silence still continued, although from the church itself came the discordant sounds of the lawless soldiery.

"Hist! Someone comes!" I whispered, as the now familiar noise of footsteps stumbling up the spiral staircase became audible.

"For the last time, dogs!" came Chaloner's voice—"will you give yourselves up?"

"This is not Southsea Castle," I replied sneeringly. "We do not give up without sufficient cause."

"Then take the consequences," replied the renegade. "For a barrel of powder is even now placed underneath the tower, and in five minutes you will be blown skywards. Fare ye well, and a pleasant journey!"

And, with a mocking laugh, he disappeared.

The horror of the situation held us spell-bound.

Here we were eighty feet above the ground, with a barrel of powder ready to burst asunder the very foundations of the tower, while above us was a mass of stone another seventy feet in height, or thereabouts, which, at the moment of the explosion, would crumble, collapse, and bury us beneath its stupendous weight.

Nor was escape possible, for the churchyard was filled with rebels, and we knew full well that to accept Chaloner's offer of surrender was to deliberately throw away our lives, seeing that the man would have had us shot in cold blood under the plea of armed resistance. Colonel Firestone was the first to recover his composure.

"Perchance, 'tis but an idle threat," he exclaimed. "Yet, even if they fire the powder, its effects may not be so disastrous as they think. I call to mind the springing of a mine at the causeway of Rhé, when those nearest escaped nearly scot-free, and the greatest damage was done by the falling stones on the Frenchmen, who caused the explosion. Nevertheless, if we are to die, let's get to the open air once more."

Taking the ropes with us, we made our way out on to the parapet.

It was now dark. But few lights twinkled in the houses of the town, though the watch-fires of the troops surrounded Lostwithiel like a circle of glimmering points of light. Looking straight down, we could distinguish the heads and shoulders of the troops in and around the churchyard.

"Why not lower ourselves on to the roof of the nave?" I exclaimed.

"The idea seems good," replied Firestone, and we immediately ran round the leads to the opposite side of the tower. Twenty feet below was the ridge of the tiled roof that sloped down on either side to a parapeted gutterway.

"Fools we were not to have thought of this before," exclaimed the colonel. "Quick! Make fast the rope round this piece of stonework. Once we gain the roof, we are safe."

The rope was secured but, just as I was about to clamber over the edge, there was a glimmer of a match on the farthest end of the roof, then a flash, and a loud report, and a bullet whizzed past our heads.

"The rogues have done us!" muttered the colonel. "They have placed musketeers on the roof to shoot us down."

Hastily crouching behind the sheltering stonework, we drew up the rope and waited, in dead silence, for the threatened catastrophe.

In obedience to an order, there was a hasty stampede on the part of the rebels from the church, and, in our anxiety, we imagined we could hear the spluttering of the slow-match.

Regardless of the possibility of being shot at, Colonel Firestone stood erect and defiant, his figure showing clearly against the starlit sky.

"God save the King, and confusion to all his enemies!" he shouted, receiving in reply a chorus of ribald jests and laughter.

"Stand firm, Humphrey," he exclaimed, gripping my hand. "'Tis soon over, if 'tis to be."

Silence had now fallen upon the crowd of rebels and townsfolk, the former eager to see the result of their vile work, the latter, doubtless filled with grief at the wanton destruction of their venerable edifice, which for nearly four hundred years had been the pride of this Cornish borough.

Suddenly the massive tower shook like a leaf. There was a blinding flash, a deafening roar, a cloud of sulphurous smoke, followed by the rattle of hundreds of pieces of stonework. Gasping and nearly blinded and deafened by the explosion, I could not for a minute grasp the fact that I was still alive. Gradually it dawned upon me that I was not injured, and that, moreover, I was still on the tower.

Then I stretched out my hand, and, to my delight, I gripped that of Colonel Firestone.

"Art hurt, Humphrey?"

"Nay, I think not—only shaken. And how is it with you?"

"Little the worse. We must brace ourselves together, for now is our time. Canst slide down the rope?"

"I hope so."

"Then explore the roof of the nave, for 'tis certain the men have taken themselves away ere the explosion. I must needs stay here to cover your retreat if needful, and also to guard against an attempt by the trap-door. We need not fear for lack of missiles, I take it." In truth the parapet was littered with broken tiles, each of which would make an effective impression if hurled at a man's head.

I swung myself over the ledge and descended the rope. At length one foot touched the roof, and instinctively I put out my other to gain a footing, but, to my surprise, there was a gaping hole. I had lighted upon one of the massive oaken rafters of the nave, for the explosion had stripped the whole of the tiles off the roof close to its junction with the tower.

Even as I looked down the evil-smelling smoke was still filtering through the ragged gaps between the beams. Men with torches and lanterns were already pouring into the building.

Fortunately for us, the effects of the explosion had followed the line of least resistance. The massive outer walls of the tower had withstood the shock, but a thin wall separating it from the nave had been blown into the church, and, as I said before, the roof had borne the brunt of the catastrophe.

Steadying myself by the rope I walked cautiously down the beam, till I gained the lead-lined parapet. Here I made fast the rope, and proceeded on my tour of inspection, keeping a careful watch lest any of the rebels should have remained on guard on the leads.

At length I neared the part above the east window, when suddenly I stumbled over the body of a man. It was one of the rebels who had fired at us on our previous attempt to descend. He still lived, having been only stunned by a fragment of flying masonry that had caught him on the right temple.

Just then I heard men's voices. A detachment of rebels was coming up to the roof by means of a ladder. Retracing my footsteps, I paused but for a moment to relieve the senseless soldier of his musket and bandolier; then, seizing the rope, I swung myself back to where my comrade was anxiously awaiting me.

"Is it safe to make the attempt?" he asked.

"Nay, the rebels are even now on the roofs. Listen!"

I showed him the musket I had gained possession of, whereat he expressed great approval.

"We must needs wait till the small hours of the morning," he continued. "And the best way to forget one's hunger is to gain sleep. I'll take the first watch, so the sooner you fall asleep the quicker you'll forget your troubles."

So saying, he took the musket, loaded and primed it, and sat down at the edge of the trap-door. For my part I lay down on the dust-covered floor of the belfry, and, worn out by hunger, fatigue, and excitement, I fell into a dreamless slumber.

I was awakened by Firestone shaking me by the shoulder.

"Time to be up and doing," he exclaimed.

It was broad daylight, and the sun's rays played strongly upon the blackened stonework of the tower, and across the gaping rafters of the roof of the nave.

"Why did you not waken me before?" I asked reproachfully, for the colonel presented a sorry appearance; his gaunt features were drawn with hunger, his face blackened with smoke and dirt, and his, clothes smothered with dust and particles of charcoal.

"You wanted rest more than I," he replied, with a grim smile. "A few hours' vigil makes but little difference to a war-worn veteran. But see!" he added, holding up an arrow for my inspection.

At first I thought the rebels had resorted to this bygone instrument of offence in the hope that its noiseless flight might have taken us unawares. Its point was blunted, but whether by design or by reason of its striking the stonework I knew not.

"'Twas shot by a friendly hand," continued Colonel Firestone. "Here is a paper that was folded round the shaft."

Taking the scrap of paper, I saw written in a scrawling hand: "*Be o goode cheere, for the rebells are leaving Listithiel this day.*"

"I would be fuller of good cheer had I a square meal!" replied I, dolefully, as a savoury smell was wafted to our nostrils.

We looked cautiously over the parapet. Through the shattered roof we could see the floor of the church, where several of the rebels were engaged in cooking their food in large iron cauldrons suspended from rough tripods, the fires being fed with pieces of oak, which the troopers had relentlessly hacked from the pews. The soldier whom I had found insensible in the gutterway had been removed, but the fork of his musket still remained. Soldiers were busily engaged in clearing away the mass of rubble that blocked the entrance to the spiral staircase leading to the tower, so it was evident that they had not despaired of taking us—a further proof of the vindictiveness of the renegade Chaloner.

Could I gain possession of the musketeer's rest before the passage was cleared, a means would be at our disposal whereby we could obtain much-needed food; so, descending by the rope, I reached the shelter of the parapet of the nave, and immediately secured the instrument left behind by the wounded sentinel.

It was about five feet in length, made of wrought iron, and terminated in a double prong.

Requesting the colonel to throw me a length of rope, of which, fortunately, we had plenty, I bent the rest into the form of a large hook. To this I secured one end of the rope, then, leaning cautiously along one of the beams, I slowly lowered my improvised fishing tackle down into the interior of the church.

To my delight, none of the soldiers noticed the descent of the hook, owing possibly to the smoke, and by dint of careful manoeuvring I succeeded in hooking a large iron pot that, full of savoury stew, was boiling over a brisk fire.

The next instant, amid the shouts of the astonished and enraged rebels, pot and tripod were being rapidly drawn upwards; but ere I could secure my prize, a musket-shot pierced the bottom of the vessel, tearing a ragged hole. By the time I had unhooked the pot nearly the whole of the precious contents had escaped, but Colonel Firestone and I had the great satisfaction of breaking our fast by making a sorry meal from the sticky mixture that still adhered to the sides of the utensil.

Later on, though still in the early morning, we could discern large bodies of troops pouring into the town from the direction of Liskeard, and 'twas evident that the rebels had met with a reverse.

But we had no time to observe what was going on outside the town, for our own lives were in jeopardy.

Having cleared away the rubbish that obstructed the staircase, the musketeers, with fierce shouts, began the ascent.

"Stand to it," exclaimed Firestone, encouragingly, as a bullet whizzed close to my head. "Can we but hold our own for another five minutes, all will be well!"

"Shall we open fire on them?" I asked, making ready with the musket I had taken from the insensible man on the roof.

"Nay," replied the colonel. "Keep them in ignorance of the fact that we possess a weapon. Then, if the rebel Chaloner appears, I'll put a bullet through his traitorous head."

But the musketeers contented themselves by firing several volleys up through the floor of the belfry, which, however, as we took the same precaution as heretofore, did us no harm. After a while they went down again, leaving a soldier on guard.

We kept perfectly quiet, so that, evidently thinking we were without the steeple, the man relaxed his vigilance, and, seating himself in a low wooden chair, he drew a portion of a loaf and some cheese from his pocket.

Following this he produced a pipe and a metal box of tobacco, and, after looking from the food to the tobacco with evident indecision, he leant back in the chair, stretched his limbs, and gave a terrific yawn.

I could see Firestone's eyes fixed longingly on the tobacco, while I looked with equal avidity upon the bread and cheese. In a moment my mind was made up. Holding up the end of the rope to my companion, who nodded knowingly, I gathered myself up at the edge of the trap-door and made ready to spring.

I alighted fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the unsuspecting rebel. He fell backwards in one direction, I in another; but I was instantly on my feet, and, seizing the man's musket, prepared to stun him should he offer resistance. But he lay motionless whether the fall had killed him or merely deprived him of his senses, I knew not.

Gathering up the food, tobacco, and pipe, and hitching the end of the rope round the man's musket, I swarmed up to our place of refuge, and drew up the weapon.

Hardly had I done so when the rest of the party, alarmed by the noise, rushed up the stairs, only to find to their mystification the senseless body of their comrade.

The sight of the muzzles of the two muskets caused them to beat a hasty retreat, although we suffered them to remove the body of their luckless fellow-soldier.

Assured of no further molestation in this direction, we went out on to the leads, and found that at that very moment an attack was being made upon the rebel position, both sides keeping up a continuous artillery fire, though the defence was conducted in a spiritless manner that promised a speedy release from our captivity.

We shared the captured food, and the colonel filled the pipe, which fortunately had been unused, lighting it with a portion of the slow-match obtained with the bandolier we had previously taken.

Suddenly my companion pointed to a company of men forming up in the churchyard.

"There he is—there's that villain Chaloner," he exclaimed, and, starting to his feet, he seized and levelled his musket. But as he applied a match I struck up the piece, and the bullet went singing over the house-tops.

The colonel turned on me, livid with anger.

"Why this foolishness?" he demanded.

"We are not assassins," I replied.

"That man with his treachery has placed himself without the pale," he retorted. "Therefore I am justified in shooting him like a dog. Mark my words, Humphrey, you'll rue the day you made me miss my aim."

"Nevertheless, 'tis a craven act to shoot a man unawares. I, too, have an account to settle with Chaloner, and with more cause than you have, I trove; but Heaven forfend that I strike him after the manner of a hired assassin."

Happily, Firestone soon regained his accustomed composure, and, after reloading his piece, we watched the progress of the assault.

A ring of smoke encircled the town, for the cavaliers had drawn a cordon round it, and already their advanced works were within musket-shot of the bridge, whence the cannon behind the bridge kept up a steady fire on the attackers.

It was low tide, and the river ran but an insignificant stream, barely two feet in depth beneath the arches. Even as we looked we heard a flourish of trumpets, and with a wild, irresistible rush a squadron of Royalist cavalry, with loose rein and flowing mane, charged headlong for the bridge as only our horsemen can charge.

Saddles were emptied, but, regardless of the losses, the attackers deployed right and left, plunged into the river, and the next instant the barricade was charged in the rear, and the gunners cut down or made prisoners.

The horsemen were ably seconded by a strong body of Cornish pikemen and musketeers, and, the guns being turned to command the principal approach to the bridge, the town was at the mercy of the Royal troops.

There was a roll of drums, and, bearing a white flag, a rebel officer rode from the headquarters of the Parliamentarian army towards the Royal lines.

"They are treating for terms," exclaimed the colonel. "While the armistice lasts, there's no reason why we should not try to take advantage of it."

And without let or hindrance we did indeed descend the tower, pass through the now deserted church, and gain the street. Soon we were safely within the outposts of the Royal army.

We were immediately taken to a tent, where the Royalist officers were engaged in drafting out the terms of capitulation, and, thinking we might be of service to them, they asked us for an account of our adventure.

"Chaloner, say you? Chaloner, the renegade?"

"The same, sir," replied Firestone.

"Mark him down. Mark him down, scrivener," exclaimed one of the officers, addressing a scribe who was laboriously writing out the terms of surrender at a roughly constructed table.

"Him we must have at any price. Let me think. His name will be third. There's the rebel Colonel Hobbs, formerly a waggoner, who ruthlessly burned Pentillie; the ex-miller, Captain Gale, who unlawfully strung up five of our men at Looe; and the traitor Chaloner. The other officers we will suffer to depart on parole."

While the clerk's quill pen was scratching and spluttering over the parchment, the officer turned to us once more.

"You were on the way to join the Cornish army. What regiment did you intend serving in?"

"In Sir Bevil Granville's."

"In Sir Bevil Granville's? But I grieve to say Sir Bevil is dead, and the regiment well-nigh cut to pieces at Cropredy Bridge."

"And his son——"

"Sir Ralph Granville, as he must now be styled, has joined his sorry remnant to the command of Sir Ralph Hopton."

"Then under Sir Ralph Hopton will suit us."

"'Tis well. Malpas!" he shouted to a sergeant who was on guard without the tent. "Conduct these gentlemen to the camp of Sir Ralph Hopton, for, methinks, rest and refreshment will not come amiss. Fare ye well."

With a salute we left the staff-officer's tent, and, under the guidance of the sergeant, we were taken to a spot where a triple Line of weather-worn tents and rough huts of boughs and bushes marked the temporary camp of the redoubtable Royalist.

Here we were hospitably received, for, though in common with most of the cavaliers, there was scarcely a gold piece to be found amongst a score of them, such was their devotion to His Majesty, both in personal service and gifts of money, they gave us plenty to eat and insisted on our going to sleep.

When I woke up I found, to my joy, Ralph Granville sitting at my side. A complete change of apparel and a serviceable equipment of armour and weapons were placed at our disposal, which, I afterwards learnt, were contributed from the joint store of this particular company.

"How goes it with you, Ralph?" I exclaimed, wringing my friend's hand.

"Passably," he replied, "though 'tis but the fortune of war."

"I heard of your father's gallant end."

"Ay. My father and twenty-two of our tenantry fell before Waller's pikes, and now I have just heard that our house at Tregetty has been burnt to the ground, so nothing remains but my sword."

I hardly knew what to reply. For all I knew I might even now be in a similar position. Ashley Castle might be razed to the ground, and my parents dead beneath its ruins. It was, as Ralph had observed, the fortune of war, and we had but to look around and see the devastating effects of this struggle, in which Englishmen were flying at each other's throats.

Further conversation was interrupted by the trumpets sounding the assembly, and, mounting our chargers—two passable horses which had belonged to two cavaliers who had fallen in the charge on Lostwithiel Bridge—Firestone and I took our places in the ranks of our new comrades, Granville being my left-hand man.

Everyone was in high spirits, for the articles of capitulation had been accepted by the rebels, and we were even now on our way to witness the surrender of the Parliamentary army of the west.

Other regiments had preceded us, and by the time we crossed the old bridge once more, this time in the midst of a troop of horse with standards flying, and not as prisoners in the centre of a body of sour-faced Roundheads, the greater part of the King's army was drawn up in a long double line.

Our troop formed up facing the church, and as I looked up at the smoke-blackened tower and shattered roof I could not help wondering how near we had been to death, and how Providence had safely guided us through perils innumerable.

My reveries were cut short by a roll of drums, followed by a hoarse order, which was taken up all along the double line by the company commanders. Instantly the swords of the cavalry flew from their scabbards, while the pikemen stood to their pikes and musketeers shouldered their pieces.

The march of the surrendered army was about to begin.

[1] It must be borne in mind that Humphrey Markham's narrative deals with the Civil War from the standpoint of an ardent young Royalist. Both sides were doubtless guilty of many excesses.

[Illustration: *With undiminished speed the horse shot into space.*]

CHAPTER IX

MY MEETING WITH AN OLD FOE

FOR over an hour a continuous stream of men in soiled buff coats passed in more or less military precision. Their arms, save those of the officers, had been piled or stacked, their colours handed over, and their cannons, most of which they themselves had spiked, were already parked and placed under a strong guard.

In many instances the men were still suffering from wounds, bandaged heads and limbs in slings being numerous.

The completeness of the surrender was, however, marred by the fact that on the previous night the rebel Earl of Essex had escaped from the town and taken boat to Fowey, whence, we afterwards learnt, a brig had conveyed him to Plymouth.

Nor was the renegade Chaloner to be found amongst the prisoners, much to the Royal commander's disappointment; whether he were dead or alive no one knew. The other two rebel officers, Hobbs and Gale, against whom serious counts were proved, had already been strung up in

front of the Shire Hall.

Sixty of the common rank and file alone were retained, and under a strong guard these were compelled to cleanse out the dishallowed church and to restore it, as far as possible, to its former condition.

Directly the surrender was completed, the troops were dismissed, precautions being taken against a surprise, though 'twas evident that the rebellion in this part of Cornwall had been stamped out.

As soon as we were at liberty Colonel Firestone and I turned our horses over to the care of a camp follower, and made our way to the place where the rebels' arms had been given up, for I was anxious to regain my sword, while my companion was equally solicitous on behalf of his own weapons.

As we passed by the Shire Hall, before which the bodies of the two rebel officers still swung to the gaze of a curious throng of soldiers and townsfolk, we saw the crowd being parted by a body of armed men, who had great difficulty in preventing the infuriated townspeople from tearing a prisoner from their midst, while shouts and threats filled the air.

Planting ourselves firmly in the midst of the crowd, so that the armed guard would pass within a few feet of us, we jostled with the surging mass, till at length we could see the features of the prisoner.

Instinctively an exclamation of surprise burst from my lips. Stripped of coat and doublet, his face cut and bruised and stained with dried blood and dirt, was—not Chaloner, but the so-called Southampton "merchant," the charlatan Cutler!

Half dead with fear, his legs hardly able to support his trembling body, the wretched man was urged onwards by his guards, as, with his hands pressed to his ears as if to shut out the threats and execrations of the crowd, he was marched towards the provost's quarters.

"What has he done?" I asked, laying a detaining hand on the shoulder of a dragoon who, carrying the trickster's torn coat, was following the guards.

"Done?" he replied. "Dost know the villain?"

"I know that he has done us more than once," I replied grimly.

"I trove he'll do you no more, for he'll dance at the end of a rope within the hour," said the soldier, preparing to move on. "For he has been caught in the act of robbing the dead."

"Then we've seen the last of Master Cutler," remarked my companion as we resumed our way. "At least, unless we see his body gracing a gallows."

Upon arriving at the ground where the arms of the surrendered army had been deposited, we were somewhat dismayed at the magnitude of our task; but upon our applying to the camp marshal for permission to try and recover our weapons, that officer was able to inform us of the probable place where Chaloner's dragoons had stacked their arms.

Muskets had been piled in a military manner, but stands of pikes, swords, pistols, breastplates, morions, Swedish feathers, and other arms of offence and defence lay heaped in indescribable disorder.

For over an hour we searched without success, till I suggested that we might question some of the prisoners who had been retained to clean out the church, and, my comrade falling in with the idea, we returned to the scene of our recent adventures.

After a short conversation with the captain of the guard, an officer of Hopton's troop, with whom Firestone was acquainted, we entered the building.

"There's our man," exclaimed the colonel, pointing to the sergeant of dragoons who had so brutally used us on the day of our capture by Chaloner.

"Come hither, sirrah," said Firestone, and the man, now thoroughly frightened, obeyed.

"What did you do with our arms when your men mishandled us?"

"I know not," stammered the man.

"Think again," continued my companion, "or we must needs refresh your failing memory."

"I know not," repeated the sergeant.

"Two rebels even now dance at the end of a rope outside the Shire Hall," remarked Firestone in a dry, casual sort of voice. "They murdered their prisoners and burnt the houses of loyal Cornishmen; methinks I know of a third who ill-treated men having the misfortune to fall into his hands."

"I did but carry out mine orders," replied the dragoon.

"Brutality is not necessary to the obedience of orders," snapped Firestone. "Come, now, say where our arms were placed, or the provost will have speech with you, with the great possibility of the gallows to finish up with. Now, sirrah, what say you?"

"They were sold at Liskeard."

"To whom?"

"To the host of the 'Stag.'"

"For how much?"

"A barrel of cider."

"You rascal!" shouted Firestone, shaking his fist in the man's face. "You rascal! To sell the arms of two loyal gentlemen for a barrel of cider. Get back to your work, you prick-eared rebel, lest I forget myself."

And, wild with rage, my comrade stalked out of the building.

For my part my indignation was almost as great, and I resolved at the earliest opportunity to regain possession of my sword, the gift of the armourer of Newport. However, as the countryside was overrun with the remnants of the surrendered army, it was deemed wise to defer the journey for a few days at least.

One morning, however, I was seized with a sudden impulse to ride alone over to Liskeard, a distance of twelve miles, and to offer a reasonable sum to the innkeeper for the weapons, or, failing to obtain them in this manner, to threaten him with a visit from our men for illegal trafficking with rebels; and, having executed my mission, the result would be a pleasant surprise to Nick Firestone.

It was after midday ere I obtained the necessary permission from the provost to leave the camp, and, having made an excuse to my comrade, I saddled my horse and rode off.

This animal was not the one I had ridden from home, neither was it the passable nag that I had had given me on joining Hopton's camp, but a powerful black charger which I bought immediately after the surrender of the rebel army, and was, in consequence, ignorant of its temper.

In under two hours I arrived at Liskeard, where I found the host of the "Stag" most amenable to my request, and, protesting that he had been compelled to take my sword and a brace of pistols belonging to Firestone in payment for the cider, he handed them over in consideration of the sum of a crown—a far less amount than I had expected to have had to pay.

Delighted with the success of my mission, I had refreshment, and afterwards set out on my journey back to the camp. But I had barely covered half the distance when my horse began to show symptoms of restlessness, and before I was fully aware of the fact, it suddenly plunged, bounded forward, and, regardless of my effort to retain it, tore headlong over the dusty road.

Thinking it would soon tire itself out, and consoling myself that I was still going in the direction of the camp, I let the creature have a loose rein, till at length it suddenly turned, cleared a low stone wall with a bound, and headed across a field.

Now I sought to rein in the frantic animal, but in vain. Across country it tore, till it reached a wild tract of open country two miles from the highway, and, sinking to its knees in a marsh, I was able to leap from the saddle.

Tugging at the exhausted creature's reins, I succeeded in extricating it from the bog-land; then, loth to take further risk, I walked it in the direction from which I had come.

At length I espied a stone hut, or hovel, from which a thin column of smoke was rising. In the excitement of my wild ride I had failed to notice it before. As I drew nearer I saw that at one time it must have been an ancient British cromlech, a massive slab of granite resting upon two uprights. A rough wall of stone had converted the cromlech into a rude dwelling, and here apparently human beings existed. Door there was none, a gap in the wall serving that purpose.

The soft, springy turf deadened the sound of my approach, and, gaining the entrance, I stooped down and peered within, having tied up my horse to a thorn bush, and taken the precaution of holding one of my pistols in my hand.

In front of the fire a hare was roasting on a rough spit, while the smoke and the sudden change from the glare of the sunlight made it impossible to distinguish things clearly. Lying on the ground was a man. He was fast asleep, and even my voice failed to rouse him. The floor of this singular dwelling had been excavated to a depth of about two feet below the surface of the ground outside, so that there was a height of nearly seven feet between the floor and the roof of solid rock.

I stepped within and stirred the sleeper with my foot.

With a sudden start he awoke and jumped to his feet. It was Captain Chaloner!

It was Captain Chaloner, in spite of his scared face, unkempt hair and beard, his torn and travel-stained clothes. Doubtless he thought that a troop of horse stood without.

"Yield yourself, Captain Chaloner," I exclaimed, holding up my cocked pistol.

"I yield," he replied, without hesitation, somewhat to my discomfiture, for I knew not where I was, neither did he know that I was alone, so what was I to do with my prisoner?

"Make ready to go," I continued, "for we must needs journey to Lostwithiel."

"Promise me that your men will not harm me," he said imploringly, whereat I unthinkingly informed him that there was no one without.

"Then on what authority do you arrest me?" he exclaimed, with a sudden change of tone.

"The authority of right and might," I replied, showing him the pistol once more. "You must needs walk five paces ahead of me, and at the first sign of escape I shoot you down."

"What must needs be," he rejoined. "But, Master Markham, consider a moment. I am of opinion that the matter of Ashley Castle being bestowed upon me is the cause of your hatred towards me, though I swear it was not through my asking."

"You are right, though I'll not believe you did not ask it to be conferred upon you."

"Then why seek my life?"

"I do not seek your life, although by doing my duty I have little doubt but that you'll be hanged for your treachery. Had I not struck up the barrel of a musket, you would certainly have been shot down from the tower of Lostwithiel Church when you tried your utmost to burn or blow us up."

"Good lad! Good lad!" sneered Chaloner. "I thank you for the service."

"And now make ready," I continued, ignoring his insolent manner. "For 'tis late in the afternoon, and we must needs be in camp ere sunset."

"Since you are alone, Master Markham, can you not forego the honour of taking me into the Royalist camp? Consider, sixteen good miles of rough road, darkness long before we arrive there, and the chance of meeting some of my men. For, look you, I am not alone. Furthermore, if you let me go free, I'll promise, on my word of honour——"

"Your word of honour!" I repeated scornfully.

"Ay, I'll swear it, if you will, that I'll hand over the deed of settlement of Ashley Castle, and take ship overseas till the war be at an end. I mean what I say," he continued as I shook my head at his base proposal. "See, I have the document here."

Stooping down, he lifted up a pile of clothing that lay on the floor.

There was a sudden flash, a loud report, and I reeled backwards with a sharp pain like a hot iron searing through my shoulder.

I had a dim recollection of firing my pistol straight at him as he still remained huddled on the floor, and seeing him half spring to his feet, only to fall forward with convulsive struggles. Then, with a red mist swimming before my eyes, I staggered to where my horse was tethered, clambered into the saddle, and gave spur.

After a while my senses became clearer. My left arm was paining me, while a dark stain flooded the shoulder and front of my doublet. My horse had settled down to a trot, though whither 'twas bearing me I knew not nor Hardly cared. I had some consolation in the thought that I was being borne somewhere, and, providing I could keep my saddle, all would be well at the next village or homestead I came to.

The sun was close on the time of setting, and by the fact that its ruddy glare came from the direction slightly behind my right shoulder, I knew we were heading southwards.

As my senses returned the pain of my wound increased, the incessant jolting causing the blood to flow freely. I could not help wondering what might have been my fate had I fallen from the saddle during the period of unconsciousness, for my feet were firmly wedged in the stirrups, and, if unable to disengage them, I would have been a shapeless mass of shattered pulp. I had seen a similar thing at Edgehill, and knew full well what it meant.

At length the horse gained the summit of a lofty hill, and before me stretched the seemingly boundless expanse of the English Channel, a gentle declivity of about half a mile separating me from the water, though on either hand a spur of the hill in what must be a pair of rugged headlands.

Suddenly the horse was seized with the same unseen terror that had caused it to bolt on the highway. It reared almost on its haunches, and only by keeping a tight grip on its mane with my sound arm was I able to retain my seat. Then, with its freshly-found wind, the startled animal bounded forward.

"'Tis time to cry halt," I exclaimed to myself, and, putting all the strength of my unwounded limb into the pull, I strove to rein in the animal, as I saw that what I took to be a gentle slope actually terminated in a cliff, though considerably lower than the adjacent portions of the coast.

My efforts, as before, were useless, and only tended to increase the horse's pace and fury. Several times I tried to turn its head, but in spite of this the animal kept straight for the sea.

Not a moment was to be lost. I determined to shoot the brute and risk a headlong fall on the soft turf. Forgetting my wound for the moment, I took the reins in my left hand. Then, drawing my

remaining pistol from its holster, I snapped it at the horse's forehead but, to my dismay, there was no report.

The weapon had missed fire.

At that moment I realised that there were persons riding to my aid. At least a score of horsemen were galloping furiously down the spur on my right, with the evident intention of intercepting my runaway steed and diverting its flight. Some of them had carbines, and made ready to fire, though I had misgivings as to their marksmanship. But the efforts of the horsemen were in vain; my horse thundered past the leader at more than twenty paces, and, defying pursuit, continued its mad flight.

Throwing away the useless pistol, I drew my sword, determined to slay the animal before it carried me to destruction; but before I could shorten the blade for a stroke we had gained the edge of the cliff.

The horse gave a neigh, whether of triumph or of terror I knew not, and with undiminished speed shot into space. In a few brief seconds I must have turned completely round; I saw the red sheer face of the cliff appear to shoot upwards, the air whistled past my head, and with a heavy splash my horse and I struck the surface of the water simultaneously.

Then everything became a blank.

CHAPTER X

ON BOARD THE "EMMA FARLEIGH"

I AWOKE to consciousness with the sensation of being tossed upon the waves, though, fortunately, not in them.

I was lying upon the wet deck of a small fishing craft; my head was supported by a coil of rope, while my coat and doublet had been removed and a bandage placed around my shoulder. My left arm was in a sling.

A man was kneeling by my side to prevent my being slung bodily to lee'ard with the heel of the craft, for a steady breeze hummed through the rigging, making the vessel lie over to it as she tore on her course, while ever and again a sting of salt spray came dashing over the low bulwark.

It was just growing light, a grey misty morning, while in the east a rosy red betokened the dawning of a stormy day.

"Better?" asked the man with a peculiar grunt, as I opened my eyes.

"Where am I?" I asked drowsily.

"Safe aboard th' *Emma Farleigh*," he remarked, "an' well-nigh half-way over."

"Over where?" I exclaimed wonderingly.

The man regarded me for a few moments with mouth agape.

"You'd best bide quiet a bit," said he. "Maybe you'll still be wandering in t' head."

"No, I am not," I maintained. "I was shot at, and my horse carried me over the cliff. But where is this craft bound for?"

The man did not answer me, but whistled down a small hatchway.

"Here, Dick, on deck wi' ye."

A man appeared, his burly head surmounted by a shock of matted red hair, and his ruddy face hidden by a long beard of similar hue.

"I be afeard Maäster Jarge be queer in 'is 'ead," whispered the first seaman in a loud aside. "He axed where we was bound for."

"France, Maäster Jarge, France," said the ruddy one in a tone that was meant to be soothing. "Us'll drop ye safe in Cherbourg afore night if this breeze 'olds."

"I am not Master George, whoever he may be," I exclaimed with considerable heat. "And I don't want to go to France, so why am I being taken there?"

Both men looked at me in astonishment.

"Lie down an' bide quiet a bit, maäster," repeated the first.

"What? Will you not take my word for it?" I shouted, raising myself on my elbow. "I am Humphrey Markham, of Hopton's Regiment, now in camp at Lostwithiel." And as I proceeded briefly with my tale, I saw the look of incredulity on the men's faces give place to expressions of astonishment.

"Put your hellum hard up," shouted Dick to the steersman. "And let we get back as fast as us can. 'Twould ha' been a sorry pass if we hadna taken the broad pieces from they afore us started."

"You'll not be from Carnwall, young maäster?" asked one of the fishermen.

"No, from Hamptonshire," I replied. "But I know several people in Cornwall, and my greatest friend is Master Ralph, or, rather, Sir Ralph Granville, of Tregetty."

"I knows Tregetty well," said Dick. "Two brothers o' we were on th' estate. But why Sir Ralph? I thought as 'twas Sir Bevil."

"Sir Bevil has fallen in the fight with twenty of his followers," I replied.

"Fifty curses o' St. Winnow on the rebels," exclaimed the Cornishman, shaking his fist in the direction of the invisible English coast. "But, ne'er mind, young maäster, a frien' o' Sir Ralph be a friend o' we; us'll put ye ashore safe an' sound."

"Breeze be freshenin', Dick," shouted the man at the tiller. "'Twill be as much as us can do to make Plymouth."

"Keep her at it as close as she'll lie," replied Dick, giving a swift glance to windward. "One port's as good as another to we, for a bit."

I felt hungry and thirsty, and one of the men brought me a kind of pasty and a cup of cider, and as I ate they told me, in a rich Cornish burr, of the circumstances that led to my being rescued from the sea.

The *Emma Farleigh*, of the port of Looe, had been engaged to cruise off Lantivet Bay, in order to embark the young Squire of Trevarthake, who, having slain in a duel a relative of an influential gentleman of Bodmin, sought to flee the country.

News of his intended flight had been noised abroad, and a party of horsemen had tried to intercept him. These were the men whom I had seen, and who tried to get between me and the sea just before my horse took a flying leap. In mutual ignorance, I took them to be friends, and they imagined me to be the man they were to arrest.

The crew of the *Emma Farleigh* saw me take the leap from the cliffs full forty feet above the sea, and never doubting that I was the young Squire of Trevarthake, they lowered a small boat and picked me up in an unconscious condition, and, strange to say, my sword was still gripped tightly in my right hand. They had, they told me, to force my fingers from the hilt.

When they had me safe on board the *Emma Farleigh* they found that I had a pistol bullet embedded in my left shoulder, but, being ignorant of surgery and unable to extract the ball, they washed and bandaged the wound the best they were capable of doing, and now, finding that I was not the Squire of Trevarthake, they had put their vessel about and were making for land.

About midday the wind veered and increased to a regular gale from the sou'-west, and with the least possible show of canvas the staunch little craft flew before the howling tempest.

I begged to be allowed to remain on deck, but Dick and his crew were obdurate, and insisted on carrying me below, where in a small and stuffy cabin I was tossed hither and thither, racked with pain, and showing symptoms of fever, while at every pitch of the vessel I thought she was plunging to the bottom. How long I remained below I know not, but suddenly the hatch was lifted off, and a flood of bright light filled the little compartment. The next instant Dick and one of his crew crawled down the steep ladder, and, lifting me in their arms, began to make their way back on deck.

Directly I was taken on deck they closed down the hatch, and, laying me on the heaving, slippery planks, passed a rope round my body to prevent my being thrown against the lee bulwarks. All three men were on deck, looking anxiously ahead. As the vessel heeled I could see a range of lofty rugged cliffs, its foot being beaten by a long line of boiling white water, which at intervals leaped high against the dark, frowning face of the rock.

"Can ye do't?" asked one of the men in a stentorian voice that was barely audible above the howling of the wind.

"Must, or sink," shouted Dick grimly as he relieved the man at the long tiller.

We had reached the end of the line of cliffs that terminated in a towering peak, dropping sheer into the sea, and, having cleared this iron-bound shore, Dick thrust his huge bulk against the tiller.

Slowly the *Emma Farleigh's* head swung round, and now right ahead I could see a bay of storm-tossed water, with a rocky, though lower, line of cliffs in the background, and a long line of milk-white foam stretching from shore to shore.

With a roll that threatened to shake the masts out of her, the *Emma Farleigh* was soon in the thick of it; broken water poured over the bows and both quarters at the same time, while Dick was

heaving at the tiller to try and keep the boat on her course.

Crash into the line of white foam she bore; there was a shock that made the vessel quiver from keel to truck; another heave, followed by a slighter yet sickening thud; then, as if sliding down a steep hill, the *Emma Farleigh* glided into deep water.

We had crossed the bar.

Now the high land sheltered us, and, gliding over a nearly calm sea, the craft ascended a narrow creek, on the left side of which I could distinguish a castle bristling with guns, while the light played upon the steel caps and morions of the soldiers, who were intently watching our progress.

Then a little straggling village came in sight, and at an order the sails fell on deck in a confused heap, the anchor was dropped, and the staunch little craft lay riding to her hempen cable against the swift-running tide.

"Where are we?" I asked faintly.

"Salcombe," he replied. "An' yon's Fort Charles that still holds out for the King."

And even as I looked everything seemed to fade from my view, and I sank senseless on the deck.

* * * * *

When I opened my eyes I found myself in a wainscoted room, with large beams running across the ceiling.

I particularly noticed these beams, possibly because they were the first objects that met my eyes, for I was lying in bed. Spotlessly white were the bedclothes, sweet-smelling flowers were placed about the room, while through the open casement window I could see a stretch of placid water with boats passing up and down, while the hillside in the distance was covered with yellow fields of ripening grain.

"Where am I?" I asked myself, and "Why am I here?" And gradually I remembered the incidents that had taken place during the eventful period since I left the camp at Lostwithiel.

I tried to raise myself, but a dull pain in my shoulder and an utter feeling of weakness prevented me, and I had perforce to lie still and think.

Presently the door was quietly opened and a woman came softly into the room.

She was middle-aged, with calm, sweet-natured features, and her linen frills and ruffs were as white as snow. She noticed that I was awake, and coming over to my bedside, she asked me how I felt.

I replied that I hardly knew what to say, and then asked where I was, and what was I doing here?

"The *Emma Farleigh* has left," she told me.

"Left," I repeated blankly. "When?"

"Three weeks agone," she answered.

"Have I been here three weeks?" I asked, amazed.

"More than that; 'twill be four come next Thursday. Now, drink this, and try to sleep once more, for you've been very ill."

Obediently I did as I was told, and after a long sleep I awoke feeling considerably refreshed.

"Art better, Master Markham?" asked my most attentive nurse.

"Ay, mistress; but what is your name, and how came you to know mine?"

"They of the Cornish fishing boat that brought you here told me about you," she replied, smiling. "And my name, an it please you, is Widdicombe."

"How can I thank you for your kindness, Mistress Widdicombe? But tell me, how came I here?"

Briefly she told me that the men of the *Emma Farleigh* had brought me ashore, and, filled with compassion—for, she said, I bore a strong resemblance to her only son, who had been slain at Stratton fighting bravely for His Majesty—she had brought me to her house. Here a surgeon from Fort Charles, skilled in the treatment of gun-shot wounds, had probed and extracted Chaloner's bullet, and for nearly four weeks I lay unconscious.

During that time either Mistress Widdicombe or her husband, who was a sergeant of foot under Sir Edmund Fortescue, had watched day and night at my bedside, and I undoubtedly owed my life to the generous devotion of this worthy Devonshire couple.

Thanks to a healthy constitution, together with the fact that I had led a rigorous outdoor life, my wound healed rapidly, and before the autumn leaves had begun to fall I was able to get about.

My intentions for the future were torn by various influences. My duty towards my home urged me to return to Ashley Castle, for even now the Roundheads might be hammering at its gates, though, thanks to my pistol-shot, I had little to fear from the renegade, Captain Chaloner, while my sense of duty towards my sovereign called me to rejoin the army in Cornwall.

Then came the news of the second affair at Newbury, and that the King had retired into winter quarters at Oxford.

"'Tis no use thinking to rejoin your comrades in Cornwall, Master Markham," remarked Sergeant Widdicombe one morning as he came from Fort Charles, where the work of strengthening that fortress was progressing rapidly.

"And why not?" I asked anxiously, fearing that some disaster had overtaken the King's forces in the west.

"Because the army is disbanded," he replied. "News has just arrived that the rebellion has been stamped out beyond the Tamar. Only a few fortresses are to be garrisoned, and the rest of the troops have been dismissed."

I could not help feeling glad at this intelligence, as my mind could now be made up as to what course I ought to pursue, and I resolved to bid adieu to my kindly benefactors directly I was strong enough to undertake the journey home.

At length Sergeant Widdicombe was ordered to ride over to Dartmouth Castle with a party of men to bring back some barrels of powder, and, as it was a chance for me to begin my homeward journey, it was arranged that I should accompany him, for there were greater possibilities of getting a passage on a vessel from Dartmouth than there were from a little fishing village like Salcombe.

Mistress Widdicombe, I could see, was sad at the thought of my leaving, and, for the matter of that, so was I, for I had taken a great liking for the kind, motherly Devonshire woman.

However, the time for parting arrived, and I braced myself up to say good-bye. Mistress Widdicombe was sitting in the large tiled living-room, and as I entered I saw to my delight something I had never hoped to see again, for on the oaken table lay my sword.

Stained with sea water was the Spanish leather scabbard, yet the metal hilt looked as fresh as of yore. Almost reverently I drew the blade, and, marvellous to behold, the steel glittered like a ray of light.

"I thought 'twould be a surprise for you, Master Markham," exclaimed the good dame, as I lovingly handled the trusty blade. "Dick brought it home the day before he sailed. Sure, 'twas dull and tarnished with sea water, but a little polishing soon set that right. But now, Master Humphrey, you must needs be off. May God be with ye and take care of ye." And with a hearty sounding kiss that completely took me aback, the motherly Mistress Widdicombe pushed me out of the room, as if unable to control her feelings. Such was indeed the case, for as I passed by the window I saw her sitting by the table with her head buried in her arms.

The sergeant, her husband, saw her too.

"Poor old Mary," he exclaimed. "'Tis like losing a second son. Faith! I never saw her so much downcast since the news o' Peter's death at Stratton."

The soldiers were already waiting in the boat we took our places, and were soon shooting across Salcombe Harbour, and as we reached the little quay at Portlemouth I saw a white kerchief fluttering from the window of the house I had just left.

I waved my hand in return; then, with a gulping sensation in my throat, I turned away. A huge lumbering waggon, drawn by six powerful horses, was awaiting us. Telling me to take my place within, Sergeant Widdicombe gave the order, and the convoy set out on the road to Dartmouth.

After we had gained the summit of a long steep hill, the sergeant gave his horse to a trooper to lead, and joined us in the waggon. It was slow work, continually up and down, and I asked my companion why they had gone by road instead of by an easier passage by sea.

"You'll see anon," he replied gravely, and immediately changed the subject.

It was early morn when we started, and about noon we reached the brink of a steep declivity. Below us was a stretch of level road, quite two miles in length, which separated the sea from a lagoon-like expanse of water.

At the end of the road, as far as I could see, the land rose to a great height, terminating in frowning cliffs, while away in the distance several rocky islands broke the sky-line.

But what attracted my attention most was the presence of a number of men-of-war, their lofty yellow and black sides shining in the brilliant sunshine as they rode at anchor about a mile from the shore.

"There," exclaimed Sergeant Widdicombe, indicating the ships—"there is the reason why we could not sail round. The rebel fleet keeps a strict blockade upon Dartmouth."

"Then I cannot take ship from Dartmouth?" I asked.

"A small vessel might slip out and stand in between the rocks you see yonder," he replied. "But that is no affair of mine, though you'll find out soon enough."

"Think we can manage it, Fox?" he continued, addressing a trooper, "or shall we take the inland road, though 'tis far more hilly?"

"'Twill be safe enow if half the troop ride inside the waggon and the rest follow us later with the led horses," replied the man addressed.

"Very well, then," said Widdlcombe, "we can but try."

So half the soldiers dismounted and took their seats under the covered waggon; two more, putting waggoners' smocks over their buff coats and stowing their iron caps under the seat, accompanied the cart, one driving, the other sheltering close to the side of the hood.

The rest of the troopers, with their comrades' horses, remained behind under cover of a clump of trees, and at the word of command the waggon began to descend the hill.

Directly it gained the level road, the driver whipped up the horses, and the cumbersome wain jolted along at a quick pace but barely had it gone a hundred yards than we saw boats being lowered from the rebel ships.

"Don't spare the whip," exclaimed Sergeant Widdicombe. "Heaven forfend they do not open fire."

"'Tis useless for the men to tarry behind," urged Fox, the corporal. "Make them ride on ahead and hold the road."

In obedience to a signal the rest of the troopers galloped up, and, soon overtaking us, gained the rising ground in front. The horses strained at their traces, the waggon swayed, groaned, and rattled, and all the while Widdicombe kept a sharp eye on the advancing boats.

As the keel of the first touched the sand, we tore past the place where the rebels had intended to cut us off, greatly to their rage and mortification; and at the rate at which we were going pursuit seemed hopeless, and the soldiers gave vent to a hearty cheer.

But their exultation was short-lived, for at that moment a cloud of smoke burst from the side of the nearest ship, and the next instant our two leading horses were stricken down by a round shot.

It was the work of a few seconds to cut the traces and drag the mangled carcases from the road, but with the reduced number of our team the progress of the waggon was proportionately slower, and it was evident that our pursuers would overtake us.

When we reached the foot of the steep road that wound its way up the hillside in a gigantic curve, the jaded beasts were exhausted. Jumping from the waggon, the soldiers strove their utmost to push it up the incline, but after less than twenty yards the hopelessness of the task became apparent. The rebels, breathless with running, were less than a hundred yards behind.

"Swing the waggon round!" shouted Widdicombe. "And cut the traces."

The next instant the heavy waggon was drawn across the road, while the horses were led further up the hill to the shelter of a dense wood.

Unslinging their petronels and ordering their muskets, the troopers lay behind the waggon or under the cover afforded by the rocks by the roadside, whilst I, unable by reason of my arm being still in a sling to load a pistol, could only wait, sword in hand, for the possibility of the rebels coming within sword's reach.

There were at least eighty of the enemy against our twenty-two men, though the nature of our position counted for much. Had Widdicombe so wished, he could, by abandoning the waggon, easily have made a retreat, all his party being mounted, but flight was far from his thoughts.

"Lie down!" he exclaimed sternly to me, and barely had I taken shelter behind a fern-clad bank than both sides opened fire.

Splinters flew from the woodwork of the waggon, bullets knocked up little clouds of white dust as they struck the road behind us, yet with the greatest coolness the sergeant continued to give the words of the firing manual to his trained men, as, blowing, priming, casting about, and discharging their pieces, the soldiers of the convoy kept up a steady fire upon the enemy.

Thick smoke enveloped us, but through the drifting vapour I could get an occasional glimpse of the Roundheads, who, in an ever-increasing semicircle, strove to take us in front and on our right flank. Our left, fortunately, consisted of an almost sheer face of rock.

"Two men are down, sergeant," exclaimed a white-faced soldier on my left. He was a mere boy compared to me in size, though no doubt older, and it was his first time under fire.

"What odds if twenty are down?" retorted Widdicombe grimly. "Go on firing," and plucking up courage by the sergeant's example, the recruit bore himself right manfully.

For half an hour the firing continued, without the rebels gaining any material advantage, but Widdicombe began to look grave, for I knew his thoughts were on the limited supply of ammunition.

Another man was down, writhing with a ball through his shoulder, and in addition five men had expended their charges. These latter he sent to remount their horses in readiness to cover their retreat.

"We must needs abandon the wain, Master Markham," he said. "Though I call you to witness I did my best to save it."

"'Tis but a waggon," I replied, wondering at the stubbornness with which he defended it.

"Ay," he replied. "But most of Sir Edmund Fortescue's gold plate is hidden between the double bottom!"

Just then two of the men who were lining the roadside knelt up and discharged their pieces at some of the rebels who daringly attempted to scale the rocks on our right, and on looking to see the nature of the attack, Widdicombe gave a shout of encouragement.

"A rescue! A rescue!"

Splashing through the shallows of the lake past which we had come was a whole regiment of horse.

Re-forming on the level road, they drew swords, and with loose rein dashed to take our foes in the rear. A few remained behind, and, unslinging their musketoons, opened fire on the boats, causing the boat-keepers to push off in terror.

Caught in a trap, the rebel fire slackened, and although a few shots fired from the ships whistled over our heads or rolled harmlessly along the soft ground, nothing could stop the headlong charge of the Royalist horse.

Like a whirlwind the cavalry were upon their demoralised foes, and after a few sweeps of glittering blades as the remainder of the rebels, who still showed fight, fell before the resistless onslaught, the combat was over.

The timely yet unexpected arrival of Forde's regiment of horse from Dartmouth saved the convoy, and the rebel fleet, under Admiral Batten, had the mortification of seeing thirty-two soldiers and seamen marched off as prisoners of war, while twenty-eight more were killed, either during their attack upon us or in the charge of the horse.

"Ay, 'tis the last of Sir Edmund's gold plate," remarked Sergeant Widdicombe as he rejoined me, "though none of the regiment save I knew of it. The first part was sent to His Majesty at the commencement of the war, and all that Sir Edmund has left is the silver, though, methinks, that must also go for the upkeep of Fort Charles."

Without further incident the convoy reached Dartmouth Castle. The sergeant handed in his precious charge and received the required barrels of powder; then, having brought me to the notice of a captain who was responsible for the transport service, he bade me farewell.

Generous at heart, courageous in body, Sergeant Widdicombe had gained my greatest admiration and esteem, and as he went I felt that another link of friendship—the second that day—had been ruthlessly severed.

CHAPTER XI

THE "HAPPY ADVENTURE"

"WOUNDED, and wants to go home, eh?" was the comment of the Governor of Dartmouth Castle, when Captain Dixon, the transport officer, made known my request. "Beshrew me, 'tis but a continuous stream of men from Dorset and Hamptonshire clamouring for passages, and most of them unscathed. What's thy name?"

I told him, and his abrupt manner changed.

"A relation of Sir Reginald Markham, of Ashley, perchance?"

"His son."

"I know Sir Reginald well by name, though I cannot call him to mind. Yet I would not be doing my duty if I refused to aid the son of a loyal cavalier. Let him have a passage by the first vessel, Dixon, if he be willing to take the risk of capture."

For the next three days I was at liberty to look around the town, for until Batten's squadron

relaxed its vigilance or a kindly fog swept down upon the sea, escape was almost an impossibility.

The journey by road was not to be thought of, for the Roundhead cause was strong in Dorchester, Poole, Salisbury, and, in fact, nearly every village and town in Wiltshire and Dorset, and no man, not a declared Parliamentarian, could travel through those districts in safety.

On the morning of the fourth day after my arrival a thick mist hung over the harbour, blotting out everything more than a hundred yards away. The outlines of the hamlet of Kingswear could just, and only just, be discerned, while the ships in the river looked like enormous shadows as they swung to the strong tide.

"Bestir yourself, Master Markham," said Captain Dixon, "if you want to get away to-day. The *Happy Adventure* is to make an attempt to sail in an hour's time, if the mist holds."

As my personal belongings consisted solely in what I stood up in, my preparations were soon completed, and in five minutes I was being rowed off to the vessel which, if Providence willed, was to take me homewards.

The *Happy Adventure* was a large fishing-smack, which had the reputation of being the fastest sailer betwixt Start Point and Portland Bill, yet withal she was bluff-bowed and had a good amount of freeboard.

Her crew consisted of three men and a boy, besides which there were two passengers, a cornet of Lyle's Horse, and myself.

She was to bear despatches to Littlehampton, whence the cornet had to ride with the precious missives to Arundel Castle, as the Governor of Dartmouth thought that the quickest and safest method of communicating with that castle would be by water.

The huge brown sails were hoisted and the moorings slipped, and with a cool breeze that swept down from the hills in sudden squalls, the *Happy Adventure* headed for the open sea. The blurred images of the castle and St. Petrox appeared to glide past on our starboard hand, and the next instant the coast was blotted out in the ever-increasing fog, which soon grew so thick that we could scarce see from one end of the boat to the other.

Away on our larboard bow came the dull roar of beating surf, but the master treated this with perfect composure.

"'Tis but the Mewstone," he remarked. "We must stand in more if we would avoid the rebels' boats. Bear away, George," he added, addressing the helmsman, "and try to clear the rock by the boat's length."

As we approached the roar became louder, but above the noise of the breakers we heard the sound of oars, and a hoarse voice shouted, "Heave-to!"

"Ay! ay!" replied the master, rushing to relieve the man at the tiller.

"What! You are not going to give up without an effort?" exclaimed the cornet. But with an oath the master bade him hold his tongue.

Ahead a boat loomed through the mist, manned by a dozen rowers, with several musketeers in her stern-sheets. The men's matches were lighted, and their muskets at the ready.

"Heave-to, once more, I say, and throw us a line," shouted an officer.

"I hear you, sir," replied the master. "Down sail!" he shouted to the crew; but, obeying a motion of his hand, the men remained motionless.

The next instant the master had thrown his whole weight against the tiller; the *Happy Adventure* seemed to swing round as if on a pivot, and her bluff bows crashed into the rebels' boat.

A shattering of wood, a chorus of shouts and shrieks, and the stout craft had overridden the frail long-boat, Then, within a little more than an oar's length of the towering pinnacle of rock under our lee, the *Happy Adventure* spun round and resumed her course, the mist swallowing up the figures of the struggling men, though for long their cries were heard above the roar of the surf.

"I owe you an apology for mistrusting you," exclaimed the cornet, holding out his hand to the imperturbable master; but the stiff old sea-dog of Devon only bade him remember he was but a mere passenger, whereupon my fellow-voyager retired in confusion.

This was our only meeting with the vessels of Batten's squadron, and with the favouring breeze that soon dispersed the mist, the *Happy Adventure* bore steadily eastwards.

Shortly after midday the Bill hove in sight; then the wind failed, and until darkness set in the smack was rolling in the oily waters of Lyme Bay, with the distant sounds of the terrible Race being faintly borne to our ears in the calm atmosphere.

About an hour after dark the cornet and I went to sleep, having only the rough comfort afforded by a heap of sails but, thanks to our hardy life, we slept none the worse.

Our rest was fated not to be of long duration, for we were aroused by the master giving orders in a

loud and excited voice.

Springing to our feet, we peered into the inky blackness of the night, and straight ahead we saw a row of glimmering lights arranged in series of three, of which the middle one was slightly higher than the two outside.

They were the stern lanterns of a fleet.

"We are overhauling them fast," said the master "though we can scarce hope to pass by them ere daylight. If we are to avoid them we must needs stand in Poole Bay."

"I care not what ye do, as long as we are not taken," replied the cornet, who still smarted under his previous rebuff.

The breeze had freshened again, and we had run past Portland and were, so the master told us, abreast of St. Alban's Head. Resolving to stand more inshore, he altered the helm, and gradually we brought the endmost lights under our quarter.

Day dawned and found us within a couple of miles to leeward of the squadron, with Christchurch Head about four miles to larboard. We were soon perceived, for a frigate altered her course and fired a gun for us to bring to, whereupon the master, seeing flight out of the question, ordered the *Happy Adventure* to shorten sail, at the same time sending us down below.

In the cramped, close cabin we were unable to see what was taking place, though we heard the hails from the frigate and our master's replies.

"Luff up under my stem and let's have a look at you," shouted an authoritative voice. "Where are you from, and where are you bound?"

"From Poole to Cowes," answered the master.

"And the cargo?"

"Clay."

"Lay-to while I send a boat," shouted the officer, and we distinctly heard the scurrying of bare feet and the creaking of the tackle as the seamen prepared to lower one of the quarter-boats.

"They'll have us right enough," whispered the ensign, as he prepared to rush on deck to throw his despatches, already weighted with lead, into the sea; but even as his foot was on the ladder we heard the voice continue, "Carry on with you." The bos'un's whistle sounded, and we heard the blocks creak as the frigate's yards were swung round.

Our vessel also resumed her course, and after some time had elapsed the cornet insisted on leaving the cabin.

"Who told you to come on deck?" bawled the master, his speech accompanied by a string of nautical oaths. "You jack-booted, brainless weathercock your tin figurehead has undone us!"

His words, though unceremonious, were quite true, for the frigate was keeping a sharp eye on us, and perceiving the cornet's steel cap emerge from the hatchway, the rebels concluded that they had made a mistake in not searching us.

Her yards were trimmed once more, and she started in pursuit. A spurt of flame followed by a cloud of smoke burst from one of her bow ports, and a shot struck the water fifty yards from our quarter, rebounding twice ere it sank.

Making sure that every stitch of canvas was drawing, the master kept the *Happy Adventure* on her course, casting anxious glances over his shoulder at the pursuing frigate, which was barely two miles astern.

"We gain a little," he remarked after a while, as the shots fell farther and farther astern; but ahead was a belt of flat calm, and unless the breeze held our capture seemed inevitable.

The rest of the squadron had borne away more to the south'ard, heading towards the Needles Channel. Astern the frigate was crowding on sail, ahead were the guns of Hurst Castle, and we knew that we were fairly entrapped.

[Illustration: *The darting rays fell on my face, and with a stifled cry of terror the soldier turned to flee.*]

The cornet suggested running the vessel ashore, but to this proposal the master gave a stern refusal.

"We have a chance, a bare chance," he said. "And as long as my craft floats I'll take it."

Fortunately the breeze held in front of us, the belt of unruffled water receding still farther as we progressed, and the *Happy Adventure* showed that her reputation for sailing was no idle one. The frigate, too, finding that we were out of range had ceased firing, but had set her royals.

Staggering under her press of sail, she evidently found that the wind was too much for her, and shortly afterwards we could see the royals being clewed up. Then a blinding rain set in, almost blotting out the outlines of our pursuer, whereat the master whistled blithely.

"Edge her off a bit," he ordered, "or we'll be hard and fast aground." And, to my surprise, the smack was steered, not as I thought towards the open sea, but nearer the shore. Though I dare not question this fiery-tempered son of Devon, he doubtless saw the look of inquiry on my face.

"'Tis the Shingles, young sir," he explained. "A vast bank just below the surface. If yon vessel holds on her course she'll run herself aground."

The frigate did not attempt to sheer off, and, as the master had predicted, she struck hard, her fore-topmast going by the board.

"That's settled her for the nonce," remarked the master. "But now for the guns of Hurst Castle."

Once more we were to be shown the art of "bluffing." Trusting to his proverbial luck, the master steered direct for the fortress, instead of heading away for the more distant shore of the Isle of

Wight.

Hurst is not a large castle; it is merely a stone fort, heavily mounted with guns, and occupies the extremity of a low spit of shingle. Between it and the island the tide was surging in a manner the like of which I had never seen before, Tumbling and rolling in a confused mass of broken water, the sea was running as fast as a horse can trot—at least, that is what it appeared to me—but close to the castle a strong eddy was making in an opposite direction to the main flood.

Into this eddy the *Happy Adventure* was steered. The frigate was now nearly lost in the rain cloud, though we could see that she was still fast aground. Against the counter-current the smack only just held her own, and, edging so close to the fortress that we could almost have jumped on to the beach, she came within easy hailing distance.

"What ship is that?" shouted an officer, whose appearance could not be taken for anything else than a rebel. He was supported by a file of musketeers, while we could see some gunners cluster round a piece of ordnance, that grinned at us through a wide embrasure.

"The *Happy Adventure*, of Poole. We are chased by the malignants. Can we take shelter in Keyhaven?"

"What is the name of the ship?"

"I know not; she is a frigate, and is aground on the Shingles."

"Carry on, and bring up in the haven."

"Very good, sir."

The smack kept close inshore, making slow progress till the entrance to the narrow creek behind the castle became visible then, before the rebels could understand that they had been tricked, the *Happy Adventure* shot into the main tide, and with the wind and current was quickly out of gunshot.

We saved our tide right through the Solent. At the sight of Cowes Harbour my thoughts flew back to the finding of staunch old Nicholas Firestone. I often wondered whether I should see him again. And Ralph Granville, too, where was he?

Then the low-lying fortifications of Portsmouth were seen three miles or more on our larboard bow, and the sight of Southsea Castle, over which the rebel flag was doubtless floating, brought back memories of the double-dealing Chaloner. I had an easy conscience concerning the slaying of that man, for he was both a traitor to the King and a personal enemy to our house.

"I'll stand in a bit, young sir," said the master, pointing to a low tree-clad shore. "Maybe, a fisherman will take you ashore. 'Tis the mouth of Chichester Harbour you can see yonder, and 'twill save you a long journey, though I cannot place you ashore here myself."

Fortunately there were fishermen at work just below the Outer Pole Sands, and one of them expressed his willingness to land me. A quarter of an hour later the *Happy Adventure* was nearly lost to sight as she headed through the drizzling rain towards the Looe Stream.

The fishing-boat, a frail-looking craft with a tall, narrow sail set up by a single halyard on a slender mast, after the fashion of these parts—for there were half a dozen similar craft racing for the harbour—was not long in making the passage up the mud-banked channel, and just as the sun was setting I set foot in my native county once more, at the town of Emsworth. After giving the fisherman one of my two remaining shillings, I inquired the way, and stepped briskly out in the gathering darkness, knowing that a good many miles lay between me and Ashley Castle.

CHAPTER XII

THE POWDER MINE

THE night was dark. The drizzle had increased to a continuous downpour, rendering walking a matter of difficulty, and from the time I left Emsworth till the time I came within sight of my father's home I never met a solitary wayfarer.

It must have been nearly midnight ere the black masses of the castle loomed indistinctly against the darkness, and at the sight of the familiar building my heart throbbed violently.

It was a certain amount of satisfaction to find that the castle had not been reduced to a heap of stone, like many I had seen in various parts of the country; but the question arose in my mind, Did it still belong to the Markhams, or were my people driven out by the rebels?

A solitary light gleamed through the narrow window above the gatehouse, so that I knew that watch and ward was being kept. The drawbridge was raised, and at my feet were the dark waters of the moat.

I shouted, but my voice was lost in the howling of the wind. Groping around, I found a small stone, which I hurled at the door, smiling to myself, in spite of my fears, at the strange method of craving admittance to mine own home.

Instantly the light was extinguished, and a voice shouted:

"Who goes there?"

"A friend," I replied, unwilling to disclose my identity. "I would see Sir Reginald Markham."

There was a short interval, and then torches flared on the battlements, the light falling on steel morions and breastplates. Then the drawbridge fell, and ere I could cross a tall figure advanced to meet me.

For a moment I hesitated, but the light of the lantern he held above his head fell on his features, and I recognised, to my great joy, the soldierly features of Sergeant Lawson.

At the same time the darting rays fell on my face, and with a stifled cry of terror and amazement the soldier turned to flee.

"Stand firm, sergeant," I exclaimed, "I am no ghost."

Thereupon he returned, almost overthrowing me in his delight.

"Mind my arm, sergeant," said I, laughing, for he had not perceived that it was in a sling. "Fie on you! One moment you run from me, and the next you would push me into the moat."

I was instantly surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic retainers and servants, and directly I was in the gateway the drawbridge was drawn up. A man ran to convey the news to my father, and before long I was welcomed home not only by my parents, but also by Colonel Firestone and Ralph Granville.

In spite of the lateness of the hour, we remained talking, questioning and cross-questioning, while I attacked a hearty supper with great spirit, being well-nigh famished.

It appeared that directly my absence was noticed a strong body of troopers, led by Firestone and Ralph, and accompanied by a skilled Cornish tracker, had gone out to search for me. They traced my horse's footsteps when it had turned from the highway, and had followed it to the cromlech. Here they found one of Firestone's pistols and saw drops of blood and a number of diverging tracks, so that they concluded I had been waylaid, robbed, and murdered.

Upon the disbandment of the army in Cornwall Colonel Firestone resolved to ride to Ashley to break the news, and Granville, now that his father was killed and himself made homeless, agreed to accompany him, so that everyone thought I was dead, and hence honest Sergeant Lawson's terror at what he took to be a supernatural appearance.

For my part, I told them briefly of my adventures, and when I narrated how I had shot down the treacherous Captain Chaloner, I saw my father's face visibly brighten. Yet it seemed strange that the search party had not found the caitiff's body, and that fact gave me some misgivings, although I argued that some of the captain's friends must have removed and buried his corpse.

Then I asked how it fared with them at home.

"'Tis not as bad as it might be," replied my father, who, alas! had aged considerably through the combined attacks of old age, infirmity, and trouble. "We must, of necessity, lie close within doors, for there is no telling when the rebels will appear over the hill. No doubt we owe much to the fact that His Grace of Winchester still keeps the Roundheads at bay, although for eighteen months they have laid close siege to his house at Basing."

In truth, Ashley Castle was nominally in a state of blockade, for within a few miles a large force was engaged in trying to reduce the Marquis of Winchester's stronghold, while bodies of rebels roamed with little opposition throughout the length and breadth of the country, robbing with impunity, committing acts of sacrilege, and burning down the dwellings of all who offered resistance.

The next morning I could form some idea of the state of affairs.

Before I had left for the west much had been done towards putting the castle into an efficient state of defence, but the recent changes astonished me. A clump of trees that grew within a hundred yards of the gate had been cut down, as they were regarded as being capable of affording protection to musketeers at close range. The outer walls had been banked up with earth, so that a steep slope led directly from midway up the walls to the edge of the moat. This would render the task of escalade considerably harder, while it afforded additional protection against heavy ordnance. Most of the tenantry lived within the castle, and, when not busy collecting provisions, were employed upon making gabions, which were placed around the walls to give better protection to the gunners.

In a state of prolonged suspense we passed the winter, and with the return of spring our anxieties increased.

My father, by reason of his growing infirmities, was unable, much against his will, to rejoin the

King's forces, and ere the summer was well advanced he was scarce able to walk. But it was the news of the terrible disaster to His Majesty's forces at Naseby that literally broke his loyal spirit.

One morning he called me to his room, where I found him sitting at a table littered with papers.

"You are now eighteen years of age, Humphrey," he began, "and up to the present I have little fault to find with you, whether it be in home matters or in conduct in the field. May you continue in the way you have gone, and, above all things, remember to be an upright and God-fearing subject of His Gracious Majesty."

"Now concerning our private affairs," he went on, after I had made fitting reply. "I have much to speak about, and must needs do so quickly, for I fear my days are drawing to a close. Here are the deeds and other documents relating to the castle. In these troublous days 'tis not safe to trust to a lawyer, hence these papers I have kept here. They must be concealed in safety at all costs, for, mark ye well, Ashley Castle will be invested within a week, though I may not live to see it."

Keenly alive though I had been to my father's precarious state, these last words gave me a shock. But it was no time for me to display weakness. I sought to rally him, but he persisted.

"As 'tis unwise to lock up the secret solely within your own breast," he resumed, with a splendid fortitude, "for any day might see you stricken down, I would charge you to share the knowledge of the hiding-place with those worthy gentlemen Sir Ralph Granville and Colonel Firestone, who, I feel sure, will not betray their trust. Therefore I leave the matter entirely in your hands, knowing that you will prove worthy of my confidence."

So saying, he handed me a packet containing the legal documents, which I took away to my own room till I could conveniently dispose of them.

On my return with Ralph and Colonel Firestone, my father asked me to assist him to rise, and, leaning heavily on my shoulder—which was by now perfectly healed—he led the way towards the underground cellars, where the provisions of an imperishable nature had been stored, my comrades following closely.

Through a narrow grated window the pale light that entered was barely enough to see with, but, with a confidence only gained by familiarity, my father limped towards the furthermost wall. Here four massive pillars, supporting the groined arches of the roof, were walled in by stonework of a more recent date.

"Now follow carefully what I am about to do," said he, and touched a concealed spring. Part of one of the pillars swung round, disclosing a yawning cavity; yet so closely did the moving stonework fit the rest of the column that the most practised eye would fail to detect the mechanism, especially in the dim light.

Taking a lantern from a bench, my father directed me to close the sliding door and set light to the candle.

This I did, and reopening the secret aperture, my father painfully crawled through, and we followed. There was a dry, musty smell about the vault, and, as our eyes grew accustomed to the feeble light, we saw barrels and barrels ranged along the floor.

"Hold well the lantern," said my father, giving it into my hands. "A slip and we are all undone, for every cask contains powder."

"Then there is no chance of our running short of ammunition," remarked Firestone.

"Nicholas," exclaimed my father reproachfully, "'tis not for that purpose. I would have you remember that the magazines are nearer the ordnance, according to the custom of warfare. See," he exclaimed, raising his voice and speaking with considerable vehemence. "Here is a train, and I have sworn that no rebel shall set foot within Ashley Castle. I require each of you to promise me that, should the castle be rendered untenable, you will fire the train."

We gazed at him in amazement, for his resolution filled us with mingled consternation and admiration.

"Nay," he continued, with a faint smile, "I would not that ye sacrificed your lives heedlessly, for see, I have provided a means of escape. Stoop down, Humphrey, and wrench at that iron ring in the floor."

Handing the lantern to Granville, I bent and grasped the ring.

Putting forth all my strength, I lifted a square stone, revealing a deep hole, while the uppermost of a flight of steps became visible.

"There is your retreat," resumed my father. "When needs must, enter fearlessly and pursue your way to the remote end, taking care to close two doors on the way. 'Tis a lengthy step, and where it emerges will doubtless surprise you. There is a secret door at the far end, which can be opened only from within. 'Tis easily done, but, I pray you, do so with care, and, above all things, take torches with you. Now, promise me, my son, and you, too, my friends, that my wishes shall be carried out?"

In that chamber, filled with potent horror, we made a solemn promise; then, replacing the stone

and retracing our way, we returned to the great hall.

"Devotion to His Majesty has impoverished most of us," continued my father, "and we are not exceptions. Of actual coin of the realm I have but little. Here is a bag filled with crowns give to every man of the garrison four apiece ere the castle falls, of the residue share it amongst yourselves. And now, Humphrey, get ye gone and conceal the papers I have spoken of, and see me on your return."

Accompanied by my two companions, and bearing the precious documents in a stout iron chest, I stole out by the postern, crossed the drawbridge, and made for the wooded downs. Here under the spreading roots of a gnarled oak we buried the box, taking care that no curious or prying eyes were about, and carefully replacing the turf over the spot. 'Twould be against mine own interests to indicate the particular tree, though any one of us could find it without difficulty. This done, we returned home, and I hastened to acquaint my father of the accomplishment of the deed.

"'Tis well," he exclaimed feebly, for the exertion of the morning had sore tried him, and he had taken to his bed.

"Now, concerning your mother, sister, and yourself," he went on after a lengthy pause. "Directly I am no more, send your mother, with your sister, away to her brother's house at Midhurst, so that they may be spared the horrors of war. For their future I have provided. As for yourself, 'twould be unwise, should the castle fall, to retire to Midhurst, for it is but jeopardising your liberty and destroying your mother's retreat, and bringing the vengeance of the rebels upon that most harmless and peace-loving man, your uncle. Therefore, 'tis best that you return to the Isle of Wight, and settle in obscurity till the King's star shall rise again, and to that end I have placed the sum of five hundred pounds into the hands of that most worthy man, Doctor Scott, your former dominie."

After a few more instructions he gave me his blessing and sent me to bring my mother to his bedside.

Master Cox, the surgeon of Catherington, was soon in attendance, and he expressed his opinion that the end was nigh. Thereupon we sent for Dr. Palmer, the vicar of our church at Chalton.

The less I dwell on the events of the next few hours the better it is to my peace of mind; sufficient it is to say that ere midnight my father had quitted this earthly wilderness, and that I was Sir Humphrey Markham.

We laid him to rest within the little church at Chalton, half the garrison standing to their arms while the rest attended the obsequies. Two days later I sent my mother and sister with an ample escort to Midhurst, as I had been directed, and thereupon took over the task of preparing to hold the castle.

In this I was ably assisted by the colonel and Ralph, both of whom signified their intention of fighting to the last.

At length the tedious suspense came to an end, for one afternoon towards the end of September two farmers rode hotspur to the castle with the news that two regiments of foot and one of horse were on their way to reduce our stronghold.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SIEGE OF ASHLEY CASTLE

THE strength of our little garrison was but thirty-three men, of whom but seven had had experience in the art of war. Yet I felt certain that every one of the defenders could be trusted to the core, and would acquit himself right manfully, and a glance at their set, resolute features strengthened my opinion.

Of provisions we had plenty, while the two wells relieved us of all anxiety regarding the supply of water. Ammunition, too, was sufficient for a twelve months' siege, so that, provided the rebels did not bring ordnance, we felt able to hold out till a turn in the King's affairs might free us from the unwelcome attentions of the Roundhead forces.

Over the grassy sward of the rolling down poured the rebel cavalry, thinking, no doubt, to take us by surprise by their sudden appearance. The slanting rays of the sun glinted on the armour-clad troopers of Old Noll's own regiment of Ironsides (who had been detached from the siege of Basing House) and on the musketoons of a strong body of dragoons.

Finding the drawbridge raised, the rebel horse halted, and in serried masses on the steep hillside they presented a mark too tempting to ignore. Sergeant Lawson gave the signal, the gunners applied their linstocks, and next instant our ordnance had opened fire.

This was more than they expected, for the guns, being well masked by the gabions, were invisible to the rebels, though the latter soon became acquainted with their contents, and, with shouts of

baffled rage, they wheeled and withdrew out of range, leaving two of their number on the ground, while several others were wounded.

"First blood," exclaimed Firestone, with a laugh. "But we'll have the whole swarm about our ears ere long."

It was as he said. The infantry took up an extended position on the downs on either hand, and began to throw up rough earthworks, while the horse, moving towards the open ground to the south of the castle, completed the hedging circle of steel.

"They are without ordnance," I remarked to the colonel, as we watched in silence the closing of the hostile lines.

"That is true," he replied. "Yet their artillery might be following, for 'tis impossible for the ordnance to keep pace with the foot over this hilly country. But see, a pair of horsemen advancing."

"They bear a white flag," exclaimed Granville.

"Keep our men in hand," said Firestone. "And let us learn the meaning of this parley."

When within two hundred yards of the gateway the rebel horsemen halted, and one blew a long note on the trumpet.

Hoisting a white flag had not occurred to us, so before we could reply one of our men had to hasten to the living-apartments and procure a tablecloth. This we fastened to a pike, and held it aloft over the gateway.

Upon this the envoys advanced without hesitation. One was a young cornet of dragoons, the other but a common trooper.

At the edge of the moat they drew rein, waiting doubtless for the drawbridge to be lowered, but this was not our intention.

"Your message, sir?" I asked.

"My message is for the ears of Sir Humphrey Markham, now within the residence known as Ashley Castle."

"I am he," I replied. "And if your message cannot be heard by ears other than mine, 'tis best left unsaid."

"Have it then," said the cornet. "'Tis this: General Cromwell offers a safe-conduct to Sir Humphrey, his officers and garrison, on certain conditions, amongst which the castle must be delivered, without malicious damage, into the hands of Captain Chaloner."

"Captain Chaloner?" I asked amazedly.

"Ay, Captain Chaloner. I trove he is already known to you? Failing which, the castle will be carried by storm, and no quarter given to the garrison or inmates."

"Is that all?"

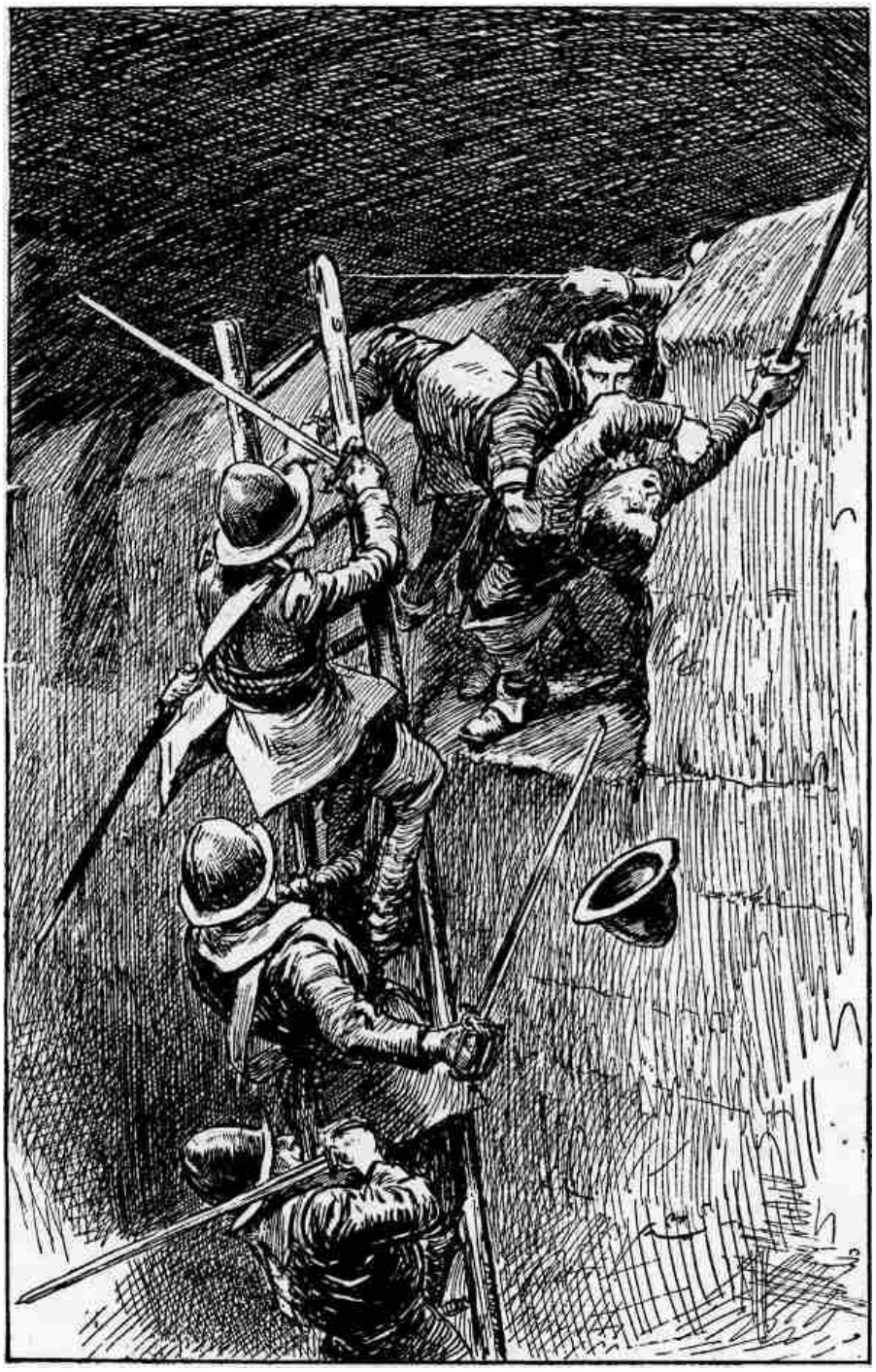
"Verily, 'tis enough," replied the cornet haughtily. "And most comprehensive, even to a malignant."

"Withdraw, sir!" I exclaimed hotly, "or your flag of truce will not protect you. This message to the renegade Chaloner: If he want the castle, let him come for it in person!"

"Which he will do ere long," retorted the cornet, and, wheeling his horse, he galloped back to the rebel lines.

So I had not slain Chaloner, after all. The news astounded me. Surely the villain must bear a charmed life. But I resolved to take the first opportunity of preventing the recreant officer from ever setting foot within the castle, save as a prisoner or a corpse.

The enemy lost no time in ordering the attack. The dismounted dragoons and musketeers, under cover of their trenches and the woods nearest the castle, opened a hot fire, and soon there was a semicircle of white smoke drifting lazily upwards in the still air of that memorable afternoon.



[Illustration: *Ralph Granville and the pikeman were locked in an unyielding embrace, and, before I could prevent the catastrophe, Ralph was dragged through the embrasure and disappeared.*]

We paid no heed to their fire, being well protected by the walls and gabions. Of arms we had plenty, every man having not less than six loaded muskets lying within arm's length, while each piece of ordnance was loaded to the muzzle with small shot.

After a while the rebels, thinking no doubt that their fire had demoralised us, sent out a strong body of pikemen. Many of them bore bundles of hay and straw; others long planks and ladders, with which they hoped to cross the moat and carry the walls by storm.

The most experienced commander would have found no fault with our men, for in perfect silence and under complete control they kept behind the breastworks, ready to spring up and open a furious fire on the advancing pikemen. Firestone, his head enclosed in a steel motion, walked slowly up and down the roof of the hall, smoking a long clay pipe, which he removed at intervals to give a word of advice to the men on the handling of their pieces.

Granville and I took up our position on the gatehouse tower, where ten of the best of our musketeers were held in readiness, while at the narrow window of the ground floor more men were placed to open fire on those of the pikemen who succeeded in reaching the brink of the moat.

"Are any of our men hit?" I asked of Sergeant Lawson, who had just joined us with a message from Colonel Firestone.

"No, sir," he replied. "The sly dogs lie close."

"'Tis well. Can we but keep them unscathed till the time to open fire, 'twill enable them to keep their courage up, for 'tis disheartening to see a man fall and be unable to reply to the rebels' fire.

Not that I want to lose a single man, though 'tis too much to expect to come out without a scratch."

Meanwhile the pikemen had been advancing slowly, as if inclined to husband their strength for a final rush. The loads that some of them were bearing also accounted for their slow progress, for those who carried only their arms would not outstep their comrades. With them was a sprinkling of dismounted dragoons, but I failed to see at their head my especial enemy, Chaloner, though, knowing the man's natural cowardice, I was not surprised.

It was not till the close ranks of the pikemen were within twenty yards of the moat that the order to fire was given, and simultaneously thirty muskets and three pieces of ordnance crashed their contents into the press.

It seemed as if the solid wall of men was beaten down by a single blow, for when the smoke had cleared away, most of the pikemen were lying in a confused, struggling heap. Those who were not killed or wounded had been overthrown by the shock and the surprise, or dragged down by their stricken comrades.

A few here and there were left standing, and, joined by those who were not touched, they pressed dauntlessly forward to the forlorn attack. In spite of the fact that they were our foes, I realised that they were Englishmen—and Englishmen of the good old fighting stock.

Staggering onward with their heavy burdens, the attackers strove to throw a bridge across the moat, but the hay and straw merely floated on the surface, the planks were too short, and the ladders too fragile to use as a means of crossing; and then, and only then, seeing the hopelessness of the assault, the pikemen slowly retired, bearing with them their dead and wounded comrades, on whom our men refrained from firing.

The besiegers had learnt a rough lesson, and henceforward contented themselves by drawing a closer line of rough trenches round the castle. For the next five days they did not offer to make an attack, though at most unexpected intervals a volley would be fired from all sides into our position, probably in the hope of striking some of us down, or keeping us in a state of suspense.

At night we durst not show a light, otherwise there would be a heavy fire poured in its direction, but later we adopted a plan of placing shutters over all the apertures commanding the outside of the castle, and we were in consequence free from molestation during the hours of darkness.

If the rebels thought to starve us out, they were greatly disappointed, for food there was, as I have said, in plenty. The inaction told on the men's nerves more than anything else, and so, partly in the hope of keeping them actively employed, and also for the purpose of tricking our foes, Firestone ordered the garrison to make a number of dummy men dressed in old buff coats, breastplates, and steel caps.

These were shown just above the walls, and our men derived great amusement by moving them slowly to and fro, while the rebels merely wasted their ammunition.

Under the hail of musket bullets the windows of the great hall had suffered considerably, the stained glass being shattered and the delicate tracery splintered and chipped beyond repair. Thanks to the stout oaken boards, however, none of the missiles entered the apartment, though at times there was a continuous rattle like the noise of a drum upon these serviceable barricades.

On the morning of the sixth day of the siege we sustained our first casualty. A musketeer, one of the two farmers who had brought in the news of the rebels' advance, was drawing water from the well in the courtyard when a shot struck him in the forehead, laying him out dead beside the bucket he had just raised.

From the nature and direction of the wound, 'twas evident the Roundheads had opened a dropping fire with reduced charges, and for the future none but mail-clad men were allowed to cross the courtyard.

That night, in order to convince our foes that we had food in abundance, we lowered ten sheep from the battlements to graze on the scanty pasture between the wall and the moat, keeping the ropes still fastened to them, so as to recover their carcases should any of the animals be struck down by a chance shot. By this means we also husbanded our supply of provender.

Granville, tired of the monotony of our position, next proposed that we should make a sortie on the first favourable night, but to this I would not agree, seeing that no good was likely to arise out of the enterprise, though many valuable lives might be lost; but shortly afterwards we had an episode that provided sufficient excitement to satisfy my comrade's ardour.

It was a dark night. The rain beat down in blinding torrents, and, exposed to the fury of the elements, our sentinels on the battlements had a down-hearted task. Firestone, having had a very heavy day, was fast asleep, but Granville and I determined to keep watch all night, visiting the men at their posts at frequent intervals to prevent a possible surprise.

We had discarded our defensive armour, and drawing our cloaks tightly around our bodies, we ascended the battlements for the third time that night.

At length we came to the lowest part of the walls, which here were not more than thirty feet above the level of the moat, the inner edge of which was not more than twenty feet from the base of the stonework.

The sentinel was at his post, and reported nothing amiss, but just as we were midway between his post and the next we heard a grating sound against the coping. It was barely audible above the hiss of the beating rain, but fortunately we stopped to discover the meaning of it.

Through the darkness loomed the top rungs of a scaling-ladder and the steel cap of a rebel pikeman.

Without a moment's hesitation Granville leant over the wall and gripped the intruder by the throat, calling out to me to push away the ladder.

Seizing a ramrod and giving the alarm, I put my whole might into the thrust.

The ladder was heavy with armed men, yet my strength prevailed, and I felt the mass of men and timber tremble as it slowly rose to a vertical position. Then, to the accompaniment of cries of terror, the ladder fell backwards, and, to my horror, I found that Granville and the pikeman were locked in an unyielding embrace, and ere I could prevent the catastrophe, Ralph was dragged through the embrasure and had disappeared.

There was an appalling crash of broken wood and falling steel, a heavy splash, and another outburst of shouts and cries.

Meanwhile the guard had arrived, and the rest of the garrison were soon under arms, yet we were loth to open fire for fear of hitting Granville, and also we dared not show a light.

At length there came the sound of retreating footsteps, and then all was quiet.

"He is either dead or a prisoner," said Colonel Firestone, who, clad in nothing but his invariable jackboots, long cloak, and steel headpiece, had been one of the first of the sleeping garrison to arrive on the scene.

"If he be a prisoner, we must rescue him," I cried.

"Who's for a rescue party?"

Several men signified their willingness to attempt the hazardous work, but Firestone refused to listen to the proposal, pointing out the hopelessness of the undertaking, when by now my companion, if not dead, would be beyond help within the rebels' lines.

While we were still debating, there came the report of a musket from the gatehouse; and fearing another attack, half of our party hurried to the spot.

"There's a knocking at the postern, sir," explained the sentry, "but I wouldn't open it."

"Quite right, quite right," replied Firestone, and striding over to the wicket, he threw open a sliding hatch; then, keeping well to the side for fear of a treacherous shot, he demanded, "Who goes there?"

"'Tis I, Granville," came my comrade's well-known voice.

With a shout of delight I made to unbar the gate, but Firestone laid a detaining hand on my arm.

"Art alone?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, save for a half-drowned rebel," replied Granville, with a slight laugh, and fearing no surprise, we thereupon threw open the postern.

The next instant my companion came into the torchlight, pale, drenched to the skin, and with blood streaming from a cut on his forehead, while with him he brought the insensible body of a man, whose booted legs trailed heavily over the stone cobbles.

"Do what you can for the rogue," he said breathlessly, for the man, cased in breastplate and leather coat, was no light weight.

"Art hurt?" I asked anxiously.

"'Tis but naught," he replied, "though I would fain get rid of these wet clothes."

While changing his garments he told us of what occurred after he had been dragged over the wall. Fortunately, he had been thrown clear of the ground, and, still gripping his foe, he had fallen headlong into the moat, which at that place was barely five feet in depth.

With the shock of the sudden plunge the pikeman had relaxed his grip, and, weighted down by his armour and accoutrements, he would have surely been drowned had not Ralph held on to him and dragged his senseless body to the edge of the moat. Keeping perfectly still in the darkness, with the water up to his neck, Granville allowed the rest of the discomfited rebels to recross the moat and make their way back to their camp. Then, directly everything was quiet, he emerged from his hiding-place, dragged the still insensible pikeman to the postern, and regained the shelter of the walls.

The rest of the night passed without incident, but next morning a tangle of broken ladders showed that the scalers had all but succeeded in effecting an entry.

Then the question arose what was to be done with our prisoner? He had now recovered, and seemed grateful to us for his good treatment.

At first it was suggested that he should be sent back, as we could ill afford the trouble of keeping him in ward and also of feeding him; but Colonel Firestone pointed out that he might come in useful as a hostage or for purpose of exchange, so he was placed under guard in one of our underground chambers beneath the gatehouse.

Later on in the day Firestone interrogated him, and obtained the disquieting information that several pieces of heavy ordnance were expected from the camp before Basing House, and that Cromwell, having heard of Captain Chaloner's cowardice (he having refused to lead his dragoons at the first assault), had ordered him to be the first in the breach, under the penalty of being shot as a disgrace to the Parliamentarian arms.

"Depend upon it," remarked Firestone, as he concluded his statement, "before to-morrow we shall be in a tight corner."

CHAPTER XIV

SPIKING THE GUNS

HARDLY had the colonel spoken these words than there came a loud shout from one of the men on the roof.

"The cannon, sir—six of them!"

With grave faces we ascended to the leads, and looking in the direction of the road to Chalton, we saw the heavy pieces of ordnance descending the hill, the horses making slow progress on the slippery chalk surface, which, by reason of the heavy rains, was little better than a quagmire.

"The fools have learnt wisdom," grumbled the colonel, as he saw the cannon unlimbered while still beyond musket range. Not even our small ordnance could throw a ball that distance, so we were perforce to remain inactive under a destructive fire.

Seeing that it would be madness to keep the garrison at their posts, I ordered the men to withdraw and take shelter within the courtyard, where, save for an occasional dropping fire from the musketeers, they were in comparative safety, the double thickness of the walls preventing the cannon-balls from passing completely through.

Hardly was the last man down than a sudden roar burst upon our ears, followed by an appalling crash of falling masonry.

The bombardment had commenced,

"If this continue, we shall have nothing but a breastwork of fallen stone to protect us," exclaimed Granville.

"'Tis better than nothing at all," replied the colonel, who was calmly smoking his pipe. "Rubble masonry will serve the purpose better than standing walls. Look!" he exclaimed, pointing through a window. "'Twould have been farewell to us all had we remained on the roof."

The second discharge had blown in a part of the hall, and the roof, together with the culverins, had fallen in with a crash and a thick cloud of dust.

"It has cut off our retreat to the cellars," cried Granville, crestfallen.

"There is another entrance from the buttery," I replied. "But 'tis not yet time to think of retreat."

The cannonade continued for over an hour, during which time thirty-two men clustered in helpless suspense against the inner wall; though at intervals the colonel, dauntless in danger, made his way through the ruined hall to make sure that the pikemen were not advancing to the assault.

The firing had been directed almost at one spot, with the intention of making a wide breach, and in this object the rebels succeeded. To our surprise, however, we heard a trumpet sound a parley, and another envoy appeared summoning us once again to surrender at discretion, otherwise a general assault would be made at daybreak on the morrow. To this proposal we gave a stern refusal.

"At daybreak to-morrow," quoth the colonel. "It gives us a chance. Now is the proper time to ask for volunteers, and to-night I'll lead a party to attempt to spike the guns."

Both Ralph and I expressed our intention of accompanying him, but to this he objected, saying that our place was within the walls of the castle. Upon calling for volunteers, not less than twenty showed their willingness to make the attempt, and of these Colonel Firestone selected six.

For the rest of the day we were unmolested, and making the most of this respite, we set about strengthening the battered walls and repairing the breach with a wall of rough masonry faced with earth and straw.

As night drew on, the men selected for the forlorn attempt were mustered. Each of these was provided with a hammer and a couple of steel spikes, and in addition they were armed with swords and pistols.

The colonel gave the word in a low tone, and in perfect silence handgrips were exchanged, and the little party filed out through the postern.

Directly they had vanished through the darkness, the rest of the garrison manned the walls, where, with matches ready to light, we waited in deadly silence the result of the hazardous enterprise.

We relied upon the guns being in the same position they had occupied during the day. Although well in the rear of the rebel lines, they commanded a clear front, so that, had the enemy neglected to post sentinels in the intervening gap, our men would doubtless be able to reach the object of their endeavours without hindrance.

Half an hour elapsed without any signs of the movements of our friends, though several of the watchers declared they heard the blows of the hammers as the spikes were driven in—a manifest impossibility, owing to the distance between the castle and the guns.

Suddenly the darkness was pierced by a bright flash, followed by a report of a musket.

Other flashes came in quick succession, and the next instant the whole of the rebel lines became a ring of spitting fire.

The sortie had been discovered, and the besiegers in the trenches, not knowing the cause of the alarm, had expected a sudden attack, and in a panic had opened fire on all sides.

For over a quarter of an hour the fusillade continued, till we could hear the trumpets sounding and the voices of the rebel officers calling to their men to desist then all became quiet.

Although the postern was ready to be opened at the first signs of their return, none of our gallant friends reappeared, so with sorrowful hearts we realised that seven good men were lost to our little garrison.

Even had Firestone succeeded in spiking the guns, our position was indeed desperate. Scarce a mere handful of worn men remained to hold the shattered walls; and, at any moment, the rebels were likely to throw all their foot into the breach to attempt to carry the castle by escalade.

Would we see the setting of the morrow's sun? None could say.

"Poor old Firestone," said Granville. "I fear we shall never see him again. He ought never to have gone."

"His leg was against him; he never had a fair chance," I replied.

"Then why did we allow him to go?"

"Ah, why?" I echoed bitterly.

Brave in conflict, crafty and wary in danger, and possessed of iron nerve, Firestone was undoubtedly a severe loss to us. Strangely enough, when he proposed to lead the forlorn hope, none of us gave a thought to his one physical defect. On horseback he was the equal of any man, but when on foot the circumstances were totally different, and we blamed ourselves for letting him go.

For us sleep was out of the question; and, impatiently pacing the ruined terrace, we awaited the dawn.

At length the pale grey sky began to brighten in the east. A thick, rolling mist filled the valley, while above the banks of vapour the dark, tree-clad downs assumed distorted and indistinct shapes.

Now, of all times, was the rebels' opportunity, but though the breach was lined with our musketeers, there came no sign of the promised assault.

As the day drew on the slanting rays of the rising sun gradually dispersed the mist, and presently we could see the rebel lines, marked by thin columns of smoke, where the men were preparing their morning meal. Then the ground on which the cannon had stood became visible, but instead of the six pieces of ordnance only three remained, each surrounded by a crowd of soldiers.

As we looked, one of the guns was limbered up, and made off in the direction of Chalton village, and shortly afterwards another followed.

Only one now remained, its muzzle threateningly trained on the castle, yet 'twas evident that something was amiss, for men were hard at work on it.

"Firestone has not thrown himself away without reason," I exclaimed. "See, they must have spiked every gun."

"Five of them hopelessly so, it seems," replied Ralph. "Though perchance this one is not totally disabled, and even yet we may get a taste of it."

"The threatened attack at daybreak has not taken place, nevertheless," I observed. "The rebels are not standing to their arms."

"Perchance they await the support of an artillery fire. But let's to breakfast, for later on we may have other work on hand."

We lost no time in falling in with Granville's suggestion, and immediately after we set the men to work on constructing thick wooden mantlets, under the cover of which we still further repaired the breach in the walls.

Unfortunately, a great part of the dislodged masonry had fallen outwards, almost filling in the moat immediately in front of the weakest part of our defences; but behind the breach we built up a second wall, breast high, backed by a platform of earth, so that we could the better hold our own in a chance hand-to-hand conflict.

Barely had we completed these preparations when there came the deep boom of a cannon. The rebels had unspiked their sole remaining piece of ordnance, and were renewing the attack.

The first shot, being totally unexpected, was particularly disastrous, for three men were struck down, two being killed outright, and one grievously wounded.

While the cannonade lasted, we, as before, could do nothing, but presently we observed the pikemen and musketeers massing in solid ranks, slightly to the left of the line of fire of the cannon. Then two dismounted officers made their way to the front, and took a long and careful look at our defences.

"There's Chaloner!" I exclaimed, pointing to one of the pair, who were clad in complete breast and back pieces over their buff coats, and wore steel motions protected by guards. These accoutrements were not worn by the dragoons, and Granville remarked about the fact.

"'Tis certain the rogue makes himself secure from pike-thrusts," he remarked, with a scornful laugh.

The rebel ranks were set in motion, and, with matches lighted and pikeheads gleaming in the sunlight, they advanced to the attack, the pikemen in the centre and the musketeers on either flank.

So intent were we on the oncoming danger that we almost failed to notice a solitary horseman riding furiously down the hill-side from the clump of trees, from which he had emerged.

Spurring towards the deserted trenches, his horse cleared them at a single bound, and ere either we or the rebels could grasp the meaning of it, the rider was halfway across the intervening ground.

"'Tis Firestone!" exclaimed Ralph and I simultaneously; and we were not mistaken. The musketeers had now opened fire on the daring rider, and the bullets whistled past him on all sides, some tearing up the turf under his horse's hoofs; but he seemed to bear a charmed life, and, untouched, he gained the edge of the moat.

As he slipped from the saddle a bullet struck down his horse, but without hesitation the colonel jumped into the moat, and was soon safely within the postern.

It was no time for explanations, so, picking up a musket, he took his stand with us at the breach, and prepared to receive the shock of battle.

We lay close for fear of the musketeers' fire, till the first line of pikemen, headed by Chaloner, gained the foot of the breach; then, pouring in a heavy discharge of muskets, we caused the line of pikes to waver. But by sheer dint of numbers they pressed on, shouting, "No quarter!"

Pistol and musket shots still rang out, a thick smoke enshrouding both sides, but the brunt of the work was done by sword-cut and pike-thrust. Men shouted in anger, or shrieked in mortal pain, but still the slashing and hewing continued with unabated fury.

For my part, carried away by the heat of the struggle, I was unconscious of what was taking place beyond my immediate front; but presently I found myself face to face with my arch-enemy, Chaloner.

Doubtless his faith in his armour and the fear of Cromwell's threat had tamed his spirit of cowardice, for he fought bravely. Defending myself from his sweeping cuts, I succeeded in delivering some thrusts that, were it not for his steel plating, would have been mortal.

At length I put in a thrust beneath his guard, and the blade struck home through the bars of his helmet.

With a cry, he turned; but ere he could get clear my sword passed between the top of his back-plate and the unguarded part of his bended head. Had he carried his head erect this would have been impossible, but his cowardly instinct caused him to assume that posture, and 'twas his undoing.

Before I could withdraw my blade I saw the butt of a musket descending upon my head, and, with

a blinding red glare before my eyes, I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET PASSAGE

WHEN I came to, I found myself lying on the grass of the courtyard, with my friends Granville and Colonel Firestone kneeling by my side.

The former had a blood-stained scarf bound round his head, while Firestone's steel cap bore a dent that was a silent testimony to his valour. It was nearly dark, but there was sufficient light to see that on the ground were several motionless objects that but a few short hours before had been the living defenders of my home.

The assault had failed, but the solitary gun still kept up a steady fire.

"How goes the day?" I asked feebly, for my head was whirling, and my throat parched with thirst. "We hurled them back," replied Ralph. "Chaloner's dead we found his body in the breach. At the last moment, when we thought everything was lost, one of the rebels raised a cry that the breach was mined, and they gave back in confusion."

"And how have we fared?"

"Badly. Nine good men killed, and five sorely wounded. There are not ten men left whole. I fear we cannot withstand another onslaught."

"Then we must make use of the secret passage!" I exclaimed, starting painfully to my feet. "None can say that we have not borne ourselves with honour."

Beyond being knocked senseless by the musketeers weapon I was unhurt, and after partaking of food and drink, I felt stronger, though weak in the limbs. For some unexpected reason the rebels did not offer to renew the attack, and in consequence we were able to enjoy a good night's sleep.

Early the following day we had the mournful task of burying the bodies of those who had fallen in the defence of the castle. Especially mournful 'twas as far as I was concerned, since I had known every one of them, save one, from my earliest days. The exception was Sergeant Lawson, who, after slaying four men with his own hand, was shot down at close range by a musketeer.

This done, we inspected the breach, where the bodies of the slain rebels lay thick.

As I looked at Chaloner's corpse, stiff and cold, with the dishonourable wound in the back of his neck plainly visible—for in falling his helmet had come off—I could not help remembering my father's injunction never to let the renegade's footsteps cross our threshold.

I had indeed carried out my sire's instructions, for my enemy had never planted his feet within our walls, though 'twas a near thing.

While at breakfast—the last meal I was fated to partake of within those walls—I questioned the colonel concerning the spiking of the guns.

"'Twas of little avail," he replied. "The mischief was already done. Had we managed it before the breach was made, the result might have been different, and we could still make good our defence. True, we spiked them, but the rebels discovered us ere we made a proper business of the last. I gave the word that each man should look to himself, but I fear they were all overtaken and shot down. For my part, I knew that running was out of the question, so I crawled beneath the gun till those in pursuit had passed by. Then I made good my escape to the woods, but did not hesitate to steal a horse belonging to a rebel officer, and biding my time, rejoined you. As I said, 'twas of little avail, and a matter which anyone could perform."

"A gallant deed, notwithstanding," replied Granville warmly.

"A truce to compliments, young sir," rejoined the colonel. "Look yonder!"

One glance sufficed to show that the rebels were massing for another attack, and if we wished to save ourselves, no time was to be lost.

Our first act was to convey our wounded to the entrance to the secret passage, leaving a man with a lighted lantern to facilitate our retreat. This done, we deliberated whether we should give the rebels warning of our intentions of blowing up the castle, or involve as many of them as possible in the explosion.

Firestone favoured the latter course, arguing that they were rebels, that they refused us quarter, though forsooth we had not asked it, and also that such were the usages of warfare; but Granville and I were opposed to his suggestion.

"They are Englishmen, though they be rebels," I argued, "and the men are acting under the orders of their officers. For my part, I have the satisfaction of knowing that Chaloner will never own this heap of stones, though the rebels seek to gain possession of the castle; but that is no reason why I should like to take life heedlessly."

"As ye will, then," grumbled the colonel. "You were ever a strange lad in such matters. Then we had better take immediate steps to acquaint them with the fact."

We then liberated our sole prisoner, and bidding him inform the Roundhead officers that we intended to blow up the castle, and warning them to keep away, as they valued the safety of their men's lives, we sent the captured pikeman back to the rebel lines.

Meanwhile I had sent a man to the stables for the purpose of shooting our six remaining horses, for though I could not bear to see the deed done, 'twas better than to leave them to the mercy of a horde of rebels, supposing they survived the explosion.

Mustering the survivors of our little band, I informed them, much to their surprise—for they had fully expected to perish to a man in the assault—that we were able to evacuate the castle without further loss of life.

I next paid them according to my father's orders, thanking them for their loyal services both to His Majesty and to our house. Thereupon they gave three lusty cheers, showing that their courage and patriotism even in danger and defeat were undiminished.

Led by Granville, the men marched in good order and without undue haste through the powder magazine, and down the steps leading to the underground passage. Firestone and I tarried to give a final glance back; then, descending the shattered staircase of the tower, we made our way to the magazine.

Here a double train was already laid, and a light close at hand. With the utmost deliberation Firestone applied a flame to each of the sinister ribbons; then, after making sure that both were well kindled, we hurried down the steps to the passage that led to safety.

By the glare of a pair of torches and a lantern we could see our way without difficulty, though our progress was slow by reason of the transport of the wounded men. The tunnel was paved with rough slabs of stone, while the walls and arched roof were composed of flints set in hard cement. The smoke from the torches dispelled any noxious odours, but of damp we found no trace.

We passed three massive doors in quick succession, and bearing in mind my father's warning, we closed and bolted them as we passed. Then, in silence, broken only by the dull rumble of our feet that re-echoed along the hollow passage, we slowly continued our way.

Suddenly there was a deep boom like the noise of distant thunder, and the solid ground beneath our feet trembled with the shock.

The explosion had taken place. Ashley Castle was no more!

Neither Granville nor Firestone spoke to me, for which I felt thankful, my heart being too full of grief and mortification. Like Ralph, I was now homeless, and except for the fact that I had not laid down my life, I had paid the price of loyalty to the utmost farthing.

Of the future I cared not one jot, though before I was clear of the passage my thoughts, thanks to the buoyancy of youth, assumed a more hopeful nature.

We must have walked for the best part of half an hour, and I was wondering where we should emerge, being ignorant of the direction of the tunnel, when the men who were on in front halted.

"The place is blocked up!" exclaimed one of them, who, holding a torch, was examining the rough flintwork.

Firestone and I were quickly at the spot, and we too could see no signs of an aperture, the tunnel ending in a half-moon-shaped wall.

"Surely we are not caught like rats in a trap!" asked Firestone. "Your father doubtless never explored the passage?"

"He would not have shown it us had it been a trap," I replied. "There must be some signs of a doorway or secret entrance. Perchance we have already passed it."

"If we cannot find it, we have tools wherewith we can dig a way out," said the colonel, indicating our weapons, which we one and all, save the wounded men, retained. "I'll warrant the surface of the ground is not ten feet above our heads."

"If the passage leads under the Downs, it may be five hundred," exclaimed Ralph moodily.

"Talking will not find it, so let's to work," said the colonel cheerfully, and taking a torch from one of the men, he began to retrace his footsteps, looking both at the sides and roof of the tunnel as he went.

"The air seems fresh enough," he said. "So we need not fear suffocation for a while, at any rate.

But there's no sign of an opening, though your father expressly mentioned 'twas easy enough to find."

At length he returned to the end of the passage, where we had remained, endeavouring to dislodge some of the flints with a stout knife, but without avail. The man who had built that passage must have meant it to last, for the cement was as hard as the flints.

"Let me mount on your shoulders," said I to one of the men, a tall, broad-shouldered farmer from Compton. From this height I could examine the roof, which at no part was more than seven feet in height, though my face was almost touching the jagged flints of the crown of the arch.

In one place it looked as if a crack existed in the cement, and taking the knife from its owner's hands, I scratched the point against the supposed joint in the stonework.

My efforts met with no success, but just at that moment the knife slipped from my hand and fell to the ground. A shout from Firestone caused me to look down in alarm.

"Has it struck your foot?" I asked anxiously.

"Foot? No," he replied. "Fool that I was not to have thought of it before. Look at the knife!"

The steel was deeply embedded in the floor.

I descended from the farmer's shoulders, and stood by while the colonel directed a man to remove the thick deposit of dust that everywhere covered the floor of the tunnel. This done, a square of wood with a rusted iron ring in its centre was laid bare.

"'Tis evident we must go down ere we go up!" remarked Firestone, with a laugh. "Now—pull together!"

Accordingly, the big farmer and another strong yeoman tugged at the ring, but the next instant they were sent crashing into the stone wall of the tunnel, which alone saved them from falling backwards, with the rusted iron held firmly in their hands.

"It has broken off short we must be careful lest we are unable to make use of what is left in the ring," cautioned the colonel, and directing the men to secure a better grip of the fragment of iron that still remained in the slab by means of a strip of cloth, while others used their weapons as levers, the barrier between us and freedom was removed.

Another short flight of steps, followed by a passage less than twenty feet in length and lower than the one we had just traversed, terminating in a spiral staircase.

At the top of these steps was a massive stone slab, balanced on a heavy iron pivot, while two strong bolts kept it in position, so that it could not be moved, save from the side on which we were.

Remembering that extreme caution was necessary, we carefully withdrew the bolts, and slowly pushed the stone, Without a sound, the whole slab turned easily on its pivot, and, to my great surprise, I found that we were looking into a building, while my astonishment was even greater when I discovered it was none other than Chalton Church!

Many a time had I noticed a large tomb in one corner of the church, with a brass showing the effigy of a knight with his legs crossed at the knees and his feet resting on a lion, while I had often tried to decipher the almost illegible writing, "Ci gist..." But up to that very moment I had not the faintest idea, nor had anyone else in or around Chalton, I feel certain, that the tomb was in reality not a tomb, but the egress from a secret tunnel from Ashley Castle.

It was a tedious struggle to worm our bodies through the narrow slit; especially so was it with the wounded men, and deep groans involuntarily rose from their lips as we literally dragged their helpless forms through the aperture.

At length we succeeded, and as we closed the movable slab we heard a faint click. The bolts on the inside had by some ingenious mechanism slipped back into their places, and the exit from the underground passage was firmly closed. Nothing short of the demolition of the spurious tomb would ever reveal the secret tunnel.

Fortunately, the church was deserted, and no one had witnessed our appearance; not that any of the villagers would have betrayed us, for they were stamped with unswerving loyalty, but for the benefit of those who were to inhabit Ashley Castle at some future date (for I had a presentiment that a new castle would rise phoenix-like from the scorched ruins of the old) it was undesirable that the secret should be public property.

I then addressed the sorry remnant of my faithful garrison once more, urging them to return as quickly and secretly to their homes as they were able, and requested them honourably to preserve the secret of their means of escape.

This they promised most readily to do, and after telling the men, ere they set out for their homes, to take their wounded comrades across to the Red Lion till they should recover—for Master Anthony, the worthy host, was as staunch a Royalist as could be found in Hamptonshire—I bade them farewell.

Then, accompanied by Firestone and Ralph, I crossed the little green, and entered this inn, where I made arrangements for the accommodation of the wounded, forcing Master Anthony, much against his wish, to accept a sum of money to recompense horn for his assistance.

As the rebel horse was swarming over the neighbourhood—nay, over the whole county—'twould be unwise for the three of us to travel together, so we resolved to separate and each take his own chance. But before doing so we had a farewell dinner, the last we were likely to have together for many a long day, while our host kept a careful watch for fear of roving parties of the rebel troops.

Firestone had resolved to make his way westward once more, and naturally Granville desired to do the same, so they agreed on a rendezvous at Stoney Cross, in the heart of the New Forest, the colonel journeying by way of Southampton, and Ralph through Bishopstoke and Romsey. Each agreed to wait three days for the other, and if one failed to keep this tryst, the other would continue his journey alone, concluding that some misfortune had befallen his would-be companion.

For my part, I was determined to seek a quiet retreat in the Isle of Wight, and to live there in strict seclusion till the dawn of better days. Little did I dream how Fate was to cross my wish, and what exciting times were in store!

In the midst of setting our plans word was brought that a body of rebel horse was approaching. Our wounded men were already placed in bed in the upper rooms of the inn, and Master Anthony concealed us in some huge barrels that stood on a low oaken bench at one end of the large drinking-room.

Barely were we safely hidden than the door was unceremoniously thrown open, and several soldiers—a dozen at least by the noise they made strode into the room.

Roughly ordering the landlord to bring them drink, and plenty of it, they sat down, removed their steel caps, and began to discourse on the events of the day.

They were, judging by the manner of their conversation, dragoons of Chaloner's regiment, and held their late leader in scant respect, for they even expressed satisfaction at his death. Rough soldiers they were, with a true contempt for cowardice, and Chaloner's behaviour on several occasions had not escaped their notice; while, on the other hand, they confessed to a certain amount of admiration at our desperate deed of self-sacrifice, for, in common with every man in the rebel host that had lain around the castle, they firmly believed that the devoted garrison had perished in the explosion.

The barrels in which we had taken refuge were large, so that we were by no means cramped, but the one in which I lay hidden was encrusted with dried lees of wine, and before long I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to sneeze. Clapping both hands on my mouth, I strove to suppress the sound.

"What's that noise?" demanded one of the dragoons. There was instant silence in the room, though I felt my heart thumping violently against my ribs. Had I not stood in the centre of the cask, I felt certain the barrel would have shaken.

"Ho, there!" shouted one of the soldiers, bringing his tankard down with a crash upon the oak table. "Come hither, rascal!"

I heard Master Anthony shuffling down the stoneflagged passage.

"What do yonder casks hold, sirrah?" demanded the dragoon.

"They are empty, sir," replied the landlord, in a trembling voice.

"Empty, thou lying rogue? I heard someone sneeze!"

"'Twas I, sir. A bad cold, I assure you," pleaded the landlord.

"You are getting light-headed in your cups, Dick!" exclaimed another half-tipsy trooper. "But I'll swear there's good liquor in those casks."

Master Anthony vehemently protested that they were empty. Then, to my horror, I heard another man exclaim:

"Stand aside, you knock-kneed ale-seller! A pistolbullet will show whether you speak the truth."

"Wouldst spoil a good man's casks?" protested the landlord; but his words were of no avail, and I heard the dragoon cock his pistol.

There were, I remember, four of these casks in a row, and three were occupied by us, while one of the two middle ones was empty. There was a chance that the empty one would be the target of the rebel's pistol, but directly I heard the sound of the pistol being cocked, I squeezed myself close to one side of the cask, so that my body was clear of the centre. Then I braced myself up, resolving, even if I were hit, to endeavour to suppress a cry lest I and my companions should be discovered.

It seemed ages ere I heard the report, and with a splintering of wood a hole was drilled through the cask where I stood, the bullet passing close to my knees, and burying itself in the opposite side.

"The old rascal is right, the cask is empty," said one of the men, with a laugh.

"I'll wager a tankard of cider that you'll not nick my mark," exclaimed the soldier who had fired.

"Done cried the other. I tell you, you've lost already."

"A truce to this foolery," interrupted another, evidently a sergeant. "We must needs be back in the camp outside Basing ere dark, and 'tis well over a good twenty miles. To horse! To horse, I say!"

Grumbling and swearing, the soldiers trooped out of the inn, and for the present our peril was past.

At dusk three men in rustic garb emerged from the Red Lion. One set off at a swinging pace down the lane leading to Clanfield, the second strode with awkward gait along a pathway over the hills towards Horndean, and the third, carrying a load of faggots, turned off down the Havant road. 'Twas the parting of the three staunch comrades.

My love-locks had been shorn close to my head, a rough smock covered a suit of worn clothes that would ill become even a farmer, while the faggots I bore served a twofold purpose. They formed a fitting complement to my disguise as a countryman, while in the centre of the bundle reposed my trusty sword, which I would not part with under any circumstances.

I had thought to return under cover of darkness to the thicket on the downs where I had buried the iron box containing the deeds and other documents relating to my home. But on further consideration I came to the conclusion that 'twould be best to let the box remain till a more convenient season.

So, shouldering my burden, I took a long last look in the direction of the distant ruined castle, and then set off resolutely along the southern road.

CHAPTER XVI

WITHOUT THE WALLS OF CARISBROOKE

I TOOK up my abode in a little cottage overlooking Wootton Creek in the Isle of Wight, hard by the village of Wootton. It was a peaceful spot, where the tide of war had not swept, though near enough, 'tis true, to see the scenes of many a stern conflict in former days.

On either side of the creek, well-wooded hills sloped down to the water's edge when the tide was up, or to the fringe of the mudflats when 'twas low water. Just within shelter of the land the creek was of sufficient depth to float a few fishing boats, whence a narrow, winding channel led to the blue waters of the Solent.

My life, or rather existence, at Wootton was of a particularly quiet nature. I lived at peace with my neighbours, and though at first they were certainly inquisitive to the extreme, after a while they found that nothing could be obtained of my former life, and in consequence I was little troubled in that respect.

I thought it advisable to adopt another name, and finally I selected that of Giles White, which seemed sufficiently common to avoid further inquiries of my antecedents.

Of the events that were taking place in the kingdom at large I heard but little for a time.

Of Colonel Firestone and Ralph Granville I heard not a word. Whether they were alive or dead, and how they had fared after leaving Chalton, remained a mystery as far as I was concerned, yet I had a conviction that ere long things would mend, and that I should once again see my old comrades.

Then news began to come in apace. A fisherman brought the tidings that His Majesty had escaped from the power of the Independents, and had sought refuge at Titchfield House, whence he had been escorted by Colonel Hammond to the castle of Carisbrooke. To me, a loyal Cavalier, the news was encouraging, for, though nominally a prisoner, the King was within a few miles of the place where I existed in comparative poverty and obscurity.

One evening I was returning in a small boat from a day's fishing off the mouth of the creek, and just as I was rowing past the little hard on the Fishbourne side, I saw three men standing under the trees. For a while they watched me intently, then one of them called, "Ho, fisherman, can you put us across?"

"Right willingly," I answered, inwardly smiling at their mistake, which was natural enough under the circumstances, and running the boat aground, I told them to jump in.

"What sort of road lieth betwixt here and Newport?" inquired one, a dark-featured man dressed in russet cloth, and armed with rapier and pistols.

"Hilly, but not easily mistaken," I replied. "'Tis an hour and a half's good walk."

Two of the men were sitting astern, and one in the bows. As we neared the opposite side of the creek I turned my head to see how the boat was heading, and, to my surprise, the stranger who sat in the bows gave me a resounding smack on the back.

"Markham!" he cried. "By the powers! What are you doing here—and in this garb?"

In a moment I recalled the man's features 'twas Captain Dixon, the same who was the transport officer at Dartmouth Castle. A few words sufficed to explain my presence in the Isle of Wight then the captain interrupted me by asking:

"And you know the island well?"

"As a fox knows its lair."

"Then come with us if ye be a true Cavalier. In Brading Harbour lies the *Happy Adventure*. I trove you remember her full well? Peste! A wretched mess we have made of things up to now, for we have been hopelessly lost amid these winding lanes. Canst lead us to Carisbrooke ere midnight?"

"With ease," I replied confidently.

"Then do so, and a greater service to His Majesty you'll never again perform."

By this time the boat had reached the opposite shore, and tying it safely to an iron ring, I set off briskly for the hill, the three cavaliers panting at my heels. Seeing that they were armed, I left them for a time to get my sword from the cottage, then once more we resumed our journey.

Naturally, I was curious to know the nature of our midnight errand, and the three officers (for they were all of Sir Henry Cary's regiment) were not loth to tell me.

"With the blessing of Heaven we hope, ere dawn, to have his sacred Majesty safely aboard the *Happy Adventure*, and well on his way to France!" explained Captain Dixon. "All preparations are complete; swift horses are in readiness in Carisbrooke Village, where Fire—Fire——"

"Firestone?" I asked eagerly.

"Nay, but I cannot call the man's name to mind."

"'Tis Firebrace, His Majesty's page," explained another, Major Hosken.

"Ay, Firebrace. Well, where Firebrace has arranged to meet us."

"His Majesty is a close prisoner?"

"Close after a fashion, though not so unguarded as before poor Captain Burley's blundering attempt at rescue. No good came of it, for His Majesty was detained within the walls, and Burley was hanged, drawn, and quartered for his pains. Heaven forfend that will not be our lot."

"Burley had courage, but lacked caution, and his hotheadedness was his undoing. We, I take it, have laid our plans aright, using discretion tempered with bravery. Therein lies the difference; though we be willing to risk our lives in His Majesty's cause, we take good care to keep open every possible channel of escape."

Talking of their possibilities of success, the three officers kept up the hot pace I had set, and it was just before eleven as we descended the steep hill leading into Newport.

The familiar streets of the old town were almost deserted, and, unchallenged, we passed along the High Street, and gained the outskirts on the Carisbrooke side.

In the village hard by the church, a man, his features muffled in a dark cloak, was waiting under the shadow of a row of trees. Feigning to ignore him, we passed on; but bef ore we had gone a few steps he tapped thrice with a stick against the stump of a tree. Thereupon we retraced our footsteps, and the man introduced himself as the royal page, Firebrace.

Without further parley, for each man seemed thoroughly to understand his work, we turned down N a side street, through which a brook babbled, the rippling of the water sounding in the night air. Then we began to climb the steep hill on which the castle stands.

Neither lights nor any other signs of human beings were to be seen, and without misadventure we gained the base of the barbican. Here we took shelter in the dry moat, concealing ourselves underneath the centre of three low arches that carried the road from the outwork of the embattled gateway.

Captain Dixon pulled out a gold watch, and holding it close to his face, announced in a low tone that it was a quarter to twelve. Then we heard the tramp of the musketeers relieving guard, every sound of the instructions given to the sentry at the barbican being distinctly audible.

"'Tis Captain Titus," whispered Firebrace, "and he is with us."

This seemed to be the case, for we heard him tell the musketeer to pay no attention to any sounds

he might hear without the castle, and to this the man readily complied, he also being a party to the enterprise.

"Now 'tis time," whispered the page; and walking swiftly along the bed of the dry moat, we at length came to a part of the castle where the walls were considerably lower than the rest. Here a stout rope was dangling from the battlements.

"Five minutes will decide whether we have set our heads in a rat trap or not," said Major Hosken. "Now, Dixon, you first—up you go."

Seizing the rope with both hands, the captain swung himself lightly up the sheer face of the wall, and instantly afterwards a shake of the hemp announced that he had reached the battlements in safety. Firebrace followed, and I ascended third, followed in turn by Hosken, while the remaining officer stayed without to facilitate our descent.

I found myself on a narrow stone ledge, protected on its outer side by a parapet breast-high, while the inner side was unfenced. A slip or a false step in the dark, and we should have fallen a depth of thirty feet on the ground of the base-court.

With the air of a man who knows his business, Firebrace led the way along the narrow pathway for about twenty paces. Here a flight of stone steps afforded a descent to the ground, while but three yards away rose the outlines of a detached building.

"'Tis the Great Hall—His Majesty's apartments," whispered the page, as we gained the level of the basecourt. "Watch yonder window."

We had not long to wait, for the hour of twelve was striking. Everything was perfectly still, and though a light gleamed through a window in the gatehouse, there were no signs of any of the guards.

Presently there came the sound of a casement being cautiously opened, and we could see a white face looking down between the bars of a window on the first floor.

Instantly we uncovered, then expectantly awaited His Majesty's appearance. The end of a stout rope fell at our feet, and then the head of our royal master emerged betwixt the bars of the window.

For a brief space we waited in suspense. Then——

"I am stuck fast!" exclaimed the King in a low voice.

"Nay, sire," said the page. "Where Your Majesty's head passes through, your body will surely follow."

"Nay, I repeat, I cannot move either forward or backward," said the King, with a long-drawn groan, wrung from him by the result of his exertions.

Whilst he stuck I heard him groan again and again; yet we could not come to help him, even though Dixon climbed the rope, and grasping the bars with his hands, tried in vain to wrench them asunder—at the risk of his neck had the iron given way suddenly.

In five minutes the attempt was at an end, for His Majesty, using the cord to force his way back into the room, succeeded in freeing himself from the embraces of the iron bars. Then, having suffered the devoted captain to kiss his hand, he retired; whereupon Dixon, muttering softly under his breath at our impotence, slid softly to earth.

For a few moments more we waited beneath the window. Why we tarried I know not, unless we thought that some miracle would bring our royal master to our side.

Then his room became illuminated, and bearing a candle in his hand (which he set in the window as a prearranged sign that he had abandoned the attempt, though we knew to our cost that such was the case already), the King stood before the window, the light shining on his classic features.

As if in final benediction, he raised his right hand in token of farewell, then, as we brought our swords to the salute, he disappeared from view.

'Twas fated to be the last glimpse I had of the face of the Royal Martyr.

I was recalled to the danger of my position by Dixon's hand being laid on my shoulder, and regaining the wall, we slid down the rope to the moat, where we communicated the dismal news of our failure to our comrade.

Then, descending the hill, we each selected a horse, and were soon galloping down the road to Newport.

* * * * *

Firebrace, the page, remained in the village, but I accompanied the officers as far as the ford across the creek at Wootton.

They wished me to retain the horse I was using, but, much against my will, I was obliged to refuse, for the presence of the animal at my cottage would give rise to well-founded suspicions. Then,

having set them on the right road to Brading Harbour, I bade them farewell, and sick in mind and tired in body, I walked back to my humble dwelling.

Yet I could not sleep, and after tossing restlessly on my bed till daylight streamed into the room, I dressed and went out. A strong easterly wind had sprung up with the rising of the sun, and looking in the direction of Spithead, I saw the drawing sails of a small vessel bowling along on her westward course.

It was the *Happy Adventure*.

CHAPTER XVII

EXILED

AGAIN, as far as I was concerned, time pursued its even course, and in my retreat I had little cause to complain of the manner of life I was leading, were it not for the galling fate of circumstances that had befallen my King and country. There were hundreds of brave Cavaliers, ruined by their devotion, who lurked in obscurity and sequestration, awaiting the time when their swords were once more to fly from their scabbards in the defence, and for the honour, of His Majesty, so that I comforted myself that in my present position I was by no means an exception.

One dark evening in the month of November I was returning from a long ramble through the woods of Quarr, and on gaining the little hard on the Fishbourne side of the creek, where I had left my boat, I saw the dark sails of a large craft of strange rig glide past up the channel. I say strange, but 'twas strange only as far as the locality was concerned, for I could have staked my all that those sails were cut in the West Country.

The vessel passed on, and disappeared in the darkness, but by the sound of the creaking tackle and shouts of the crew I knew she had dropped anchor just above the pool where the fishing craft are wont to lie.

Now it happened that just at the spot where this craft had brought up there is what the fishermen call a "hard bottom," rocks and large stones abounding, upon which a vessel would do herself an injury when she grounded at low tide; so, as I had to pass the craft on my passage over o the other side, I thought it but right that I shoul warn the crew, who were obviously strangers, of their danger.

The flood tide was making strongly, and it required but a few strokes to bring me alongside the new arrival as she fretted at her hempen cable in the swirl of the swift-running flood.

With the least perceptible jar my little boat rubbed sides with the larger craft, and standing up, I held on to the bulwarks of the latter and peered through the gloom to try and find some of her crew.

The deck was deserted, but from a half-open hatch came the gleam of a lamp that shot upwards through the thick night vapour, like a stray shaft of light that finds its way into the dusty atmosphere of a darkened room.

Judging by the sounds of the different voices, the boat carried a large crew, and for a moment I hesitated to hail them, fearing they might be a gang of smugglers, who, in these troublous times, often added piracy to the list of their numerous accomplishments. But, to my surprise, I heard a well-known voice exclaim: "Yet before we adventure ourselves in this matter, I would fain seek out Sir Humphrey Markham."

Caution was no longer necessary, and pounding on the deck with my fist, I called:

"Ralph! Ralph! 'Tis I—Humphrey."

The next instant Ralph Granville rushed up through the hatch, closely followed by Nick Firestone.

"Come aboard! Come aboard, Humphrey!" exclaimed Ralph. Then, as I came within range of the light, he continued: "And to think we should find you in the garb of a fisherman or woodman!"

"Which, I perceive, is a like garb to that which you yourselves are wearing," I replied, laughing, for there was little difference between our dress and that of the crew, amongst which I recognised Dick, the master of the *Emma Farleigh*.

Then I realised that I stood once more on the deck of the staunch little craft that effected my rescue from the sea, when my horse carried me willy-nilly over the cliffs of the Cornish coast.

"Come below and tell us how you have fared this long while," exclaimed Firestone. "And how came ye to find us?"

"Find you?" I repeated. "'Twas by pure chance that I saw you come in, not knowing who and what you were. But what brought you in hither?"

"To look for you, knowing that you were somewhere about in these parts. Our business is of a stern nature. Look behind you."

Ranged along the bulkhead of the cabin were several musketoons, pistols, boarding-pikes, and heavy swords known to seamen as cutlasses, while two swivel guns completed the armoury. In addition to Granville, Firestone, and myself, there were ten lusty seamen, all Cornishmen of the good old sea stock, crowded into the little cabin, their bronzed, bearded faces gleaming with zeal and intelligence.

"Turned pirate to build up the fortune of your home, Ralph?" I asked jocosely.

"Nay, lad, nay. 'Tis an affair of duty and honour. In short, we hope to have His Majesty aboard the *Emma Farleigh* or her consort, the *Three Brothers*, within a couple of days. Dost remember his futile attempt to escape during the spring?"

"Ay," I replied. "Seeing that I had a hand in it."

"Then fie on you for a bungler, Humphrey. But to continue the story of our plans. The *Three Brothers* lies in Newtown River, within an hour's ride of Carisbrooke. Thither we will repair, and joining hands, there will be sufficient men to surprise the castle and effect a rescue. Then hey for France! Wilt join with us?"

"There is no need to ask me," I replied. "But will it be an' easy task, think you? Colonel Hammond, I hear, has been removed. He was ordered to Windsor but yesterday week, and Colonel William Sydenham has been given the charge of His Majesty's person."

"Sydenham? I know him to be a red-hot fanatic," remarked Firestone; "and, moreover, a thorough soldier, though he be a rebel. Our task is rendered doubly difficult."

"Nevertheless, we must see the thing through," added Ralph resolutely. "Now, Humphrey, if you have any preparations to make, hurry on with them, for we must needs be at the rendezvous without undue delay."

Accordingly I hurried ashore, took a change of clothing, my sword, and a few small articles of value, since I knew not whether I should ever return; then, locking the door, I left the key in the hands of an old fisherman, one Robert Young, who had oftentimes before looked after my dwelling when I had occasion to be away for long.

When I returned on board, a steady south-easterly breeze was blowing down the creek, and in a very little time the sails were hoisted, and the *Emma Farleigh* glided over the tide towards the Solent.

The night was bitterly cold, but, with Dick in charge on deck, there was no necessity for us to remain without; so we retired to the cabin, there to talk over our respective adventures after we had separated at Chalton.

By and by there was a scurrying of feet on deck, and we heard Dick's powerful voice shout, "Mind your helm, there."

Rushing on deck, we saw the dim outlines of a vessel disappearing astern of us, and even as we looked a light flashed thrice in quick succession above her sides.

"Quick, there, show a flare!" ordered the master and in obedience one of the crew replied with a similar signal, which was replied to with another succession of six flashes.

"'Tis the *Brothers*, sure enough," said Dick; "I wonder what they are doing out here?"

With the dark water churning up under her forefoot our consort drew up under our lee, and a hasty conversation took place between the two masters, to the effect that the crew of the *Three Brothers* had heard that the King was to be taken from Carisbrooke over to Hurst Castle that morning, and they feared he would be conducted thence to London.

"Are you sure of it?" shouted Firestone.

"Ay. Walter heard it direct from one of the sofdiers at an inn near Yarmouth, and a coach has already lef t for the castle."

"Then we are too late," exclaimed the colonel, turning to Ralph. "Unless we can intercept the vessel that bears him across the Solent."

"Can we manage that?" asked Granville of the master.

"If us keeps out o' range o' the guns at Hurst Castle, 'twill be safe enow," replied Dick. "An' I'll warrant never a ship on these waters'll show 'er 'eels to the likes o' we."

"Then speak with the Brothers, and desire them to bear us company. Sink or swim, I'll have this craft laid alongside the vessel that bears His Majesty across the Solent."

For the rest of the night the crew were busily engaged in setting up the swivel guns, bending the larger and lighter sails in the place of the heavier winter canvas, and leaving nothing untouched that would increase our speed; and as the grey dawn stole across the eastern sky, we found ourselves

standing close in shore within a short distance of Worseley Tower, hard by the little town of Yarmouth.

We observed a small sloop lying at anchor just off the tower, while several soldiers on shore were intently watching us. Presently a boat pushed off from the land, and an officer ordered us roughly to stand farther off.

"Can us not fish here?" asked Dick, who with two others alone remained on deck.

"No, sirrah," replied the officer. "For all I know, you and your other boat may be looking for fish that does not swim in the sea. Get you gone, I say."

There was no help for it. We could have seized the officer, but that deed would not have helped us, for the rebels would have delayed putting His Majesty across till a sufficient number of ships had assembled to guard his passage, or else they might have sent him from Cowes to Titchfield Haven.

So the two vessels stood out from shore, the *Emma Farleigh* leading, with the *Three Brothers* close astern. The wind had fallen very light, and we barely moved through the water. A slight haze hung around, entirely blotting out Hurst Castle from our view.

"If this fog becomes no thicker, 'twill serve our purpose well," commented the colonel, as we came on deck once more. But, happening to look shorewards, we observed with great uneasiness that we were being simply borne through the narrow channel by the irresistible force of the tide.

In vain we tried to hold our own, but the wind was not sufficient to enable us to do so, and we observed with dismay that the breeze blew strongly off Yarmouth, while we were practically becalmed.

Then, to our mortification, we saw a party of soldiers hurry on board the sloop, a cloaked, bent figure in their midst, and in utter helplessness we saw the vessel shake out her sails, and heeling over to the breeze, stand on her way towards the frowning walls of Hurst Castle.

Our efforts to rescue His Majesty had failed.

A feeling of depression had seized upon everyone on board both our vessels, and for a long time we breasted the tide at twenty yards apart, without any fixed plan or purpose.

At length Firestone suggested that, to avoid needless risk, and the consequences of an already existing suspicion, the *Three Brothers* should return to the west, while the *Emma Farleigh* should land me at Wootton, and follow at her leisure. This was agreed to, and an hour later our former consort was a mere speck against the western sky.

By this time the sun had completely dispersed the mist, and Hurst Castle stood out clearly against the dark, tree-clad outlines of the New Forest. With the now favouring tide we made for the eastward once more, Firestone and Granville having promised to be my guests at my humble dwelling for a few days, until we had gathered definite news of the fate of our royal master.

But our plans were doomed to receive a rude shock, for, as we rounded Old Castle Point, and were just opening out the entrance to the creek, we saw a small boat rowing hurriedly towards us.

As it drew nearer I recognised the rower as the old fisherman, Robert Young, and calling to us to shake the vessel up in the wind, he came alongside.

"Don't 'e go back home, as you value your life, Master White," he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Why?" I inquired, a sudden suspicion flashing through my mind.

"'Cause a pack of rascally soldiers have taken charge of your cottage. They say that you are a Royalist, and that a price is set on your head. They've ransacked everything in your house, and I had great trouble to steal away and warn you. I'd flee, if I were you, while there is yet time."

"The man has given you good advice, and 'tis certain you ought to profit by it," remarked the colonel. "And we, too, are like to put our heads in a noose should we venture ashore. Clearly England is no place for us."

"So it seems," I replied despondently.

"Then there remains but one course open to the three of us," he continued. "Abroad we may seek refuge until such time that we can adventure our persons in a more successful enterprise. What say you?"

To this we all agreed, and after a consultation with Dick, the latter agreed to land us at Havre, in consideration of a certain sum of money; and before night the white cliffs of the Isle of Wight had vanished beneath the horizon.

* * * * *

Very little remains to be told. Directly we landed on French soil we hastened to offer our services to the Prince of Wales.

And here, in a strange land, we await, in common with a devoted and ever-growing band of loyal

English refugees, the time when His Gracious Majesty King Charles II will, with the blessing of God, wrest his inheritance from the rebels, at whose lawless hands we have so grievously suffered for King and country.

THE END

Transcribers notes:

- Near the end of chapter III: [One of our men uttered "come" coarse jest] is probably [One of our men uttered "some" coarse jest]

- Halfway chapter VIII: [and waited, in dead silence, for the "threatened" catastrophe.] is probably [and waited, in dead silence, for the "threatening" catastrophe.]

- Halfway chapter VIII: [for the rebells are leaving "Listithiel" this day.] is probably [for the rebells are leaving "Lostwithiel" this day.]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG CAVALIER: A STORY OF THE CIVIL WARS ***

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