

Over the Border

A Tale of the Days of Charles I,
by Robert T. Barr

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CHAPTER V.
Ordeal.

FRANCES made her way to the north as her father had directed, and everywhere found the news of his arrest in advance of her, the country ablaze with excitement because of it. The world would go well once Strafford was laid low. He had deluded and misled the good king, as Buckingham did before him. Buckingham had fallen by the knife; Strafford should fall by the axe. Then the untrammelled king would rule well; quietness and industry should succeed this unhealthy period of fever and unrest.

The girl was appalled to meet everywhere this intense hatred of her father, and in her own home she was surrounded by it. Even her brother could not be aroused to sympathy, for he regarded his father not only as a traitor to his country, but as a domestic delinquent also, who had neglected and deserted his young wife, leaving her to die uncomfited, without even a message from the husband for whom she had almost sacrificed her good name, bearing uncomplainingly his absence and her father's wrath. During the winter Frances saw little of her brother, Herbert Wentworth was here and there riding the country, imagining with the confidence of extreme youth that he was mixing in great affairs, as indeed they were, although he was too young to have much influence in their direction. The land was in a ferment, and the wildest rumors were afloat. Strafford had escaped from the Tower and had taken flight abroad, like so many of his friends, who had now scattered in fear to France or to Holland. Again it was said the king's soldiers had attacked the Tower, liberated Strafford and the black man was at the head of the wild Irish, resolved on the subjugation of England.

Since the letter she had received on the night of his arrest the daughter had heard no more from her father. Had he again forgotten, or were his messages intercepted? They heard, even in the north, that the earl would have to stand trial. At last she could wait no longer. Her horse and the southern road were at her disposal, with none to hinder, and she set forth for London again. She avoided her father's mansion when she arrived there, knowing that Lady Strafford was then in residence there, and she went to the inn where she had formerly lodged. Then she appealed to her father's treasurer, Mr. Vollins, to get a seat for her at the earl's trial, where she could see him, but where he could by no possibility see her, lest the sudden sight of her might unnerve him in a crisis.

At the next day Frances found herself one of a bevy of gayly dressed ladies, all of whom were chattering merrily. But their chatter was silenced soon by the measured tramp of armed men. Behind them, with four secretaries, the earl of Strafford came slowly, a bowed and pallid figure dressed in black.

A broken man, sentence of death was already passed upon him by a higher tribunal. He took his seat and closed his eyes as if the short walk from the barge to the place of judgment had been too much for him.

The preliminaries of the day passed by Frances like a dream. But suddenly she saw her father on his feet, and he began to speak, the voice at first cold and calm, penetrating the remotest corner of that vast room, in argument that even she recognized as clear and logical, and as dispassionate as if he were setting forth the case of another.

He was listened to with the most profound respect by friends and enemies alike. He seemed to brush away the charges against him as if they were very cobwebs of accusation.

As he went on, warmed to his theme, all in the great hall leaning intently forward, realized that they were listening to oratory such as had never before greeted the ears of England, and probably never would again. A breathless tension held the audience spellbound, and it seemed impossible that his direst foe could remain unmoved. The belief in his acquittal became a certainty. Not a cloud on the harp of humanity was left untouched.

"And now, my Lords," he ended, "I thank God I have been by His blessing sufficiently instructed in the extreme vanity of all temporal enjoyments compared to the importance of our eternal duration. And so, my Lords, even so, with all humility and with all tranquility of mind, I submit clearly and freely to your judgments. And whether that righteous doom shall be to life or death, I will repose myself, full of gratitude and confidence in the arms of the great author of my existence. Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur."

The Latin phrase pealed forth like the solemn tone of a chant, and the speaker subsided into his chair almost in a swoon, for physical weakness had at last overcome the indomitable spirit.

On none of the vast visible throng had the effective oration exercised greater power than upon an unseen auditor. The awed stillness was suddenly broken by a splintering crash and the startled audience looking up, saw the frail lattice work that hid a gallery above shattered, and the king standing there like a ghost enframed

by jagged laths. Stern determination sat on that handsome countenance; a look which said as plainly as words, "This man shall not die!" His hands clutched the broken framework beneath him and he moistened his lips as if to give utterance to the words his expression foreshadowed. But before he could speak a tall, angular figure sprang out from among the Commons and held up a sinewy hand. His face was ablaze with anger; his stentorian voice dominated the hall, envenomed with hatred, striking the ear with terror as does the roar of a tiger.

"The might of England, in Parliament assembled, gives judgment, untrammelled and unafraid. The king is not here. The king cannot be here. The throne is vacant and must remain vacant until justice is done."

here, but a determined man, knowing what he wanted and bent on having it. To her excited imagination the resolute face took on the semblance of a death mask, and the clenched right hand seemed to grasp the shaft of an ax. It was as if the headsman had suddenly stood forth and claimed his own and a chill as of the grave swept over the audience with a shudder in its wake.

A low, wailing cry went sobbing across the silence; a cry that tugged at Strafford's heart when he heard it. What memory did it stir in his troubled mind? A reminiscence of something that had escaped him, crowded out by matters of more pressing moment.

"What is that?" he asked, anxiously.
"It is nothing, my lord," answered Vollins, stepping between his master and the

Wednesday saw no excitement on the streets. People were going soberly about their affairs and this was a hopeful sign to Frances, who had grown to fear the hue and cry of the mob even more than she feared the indecision of the king. If he were left untrifled, she reasoned all his tendency would be toward mercy and the keeping of his solemn promise at Hampton.

At the palace gates opening on Whitehall, the captain of the guard refused to grant admission without an order; but struck by her beauty and evident distress, he consented to admit her if she could name any about the court who would vouch for her. Frances pondered a moment and hesitated, but her need was great, and she named De Courcy, though



As the last words rang out the long index finger, shaken menacingly, pointed at the empty and draped throne in the hall. There was defiance of king or minister in words and tone and gesture; a challenge to the throne. The pale face of the king became a ghastly white, his hand trembled and fragments of the lattice work fell from beneath it. Irrresolution took the place of former determination and he glanced pitifully from right to left, as if seeking human support, of which, in the amazed stillness, there was no indication. Then the fine white hand of an unseen woman showed for a moment on his arm like a snowflake, and Charles, with one look of haunting compassion on the prisoner, disappeared from sight. The phantom picture had vanished from its ragged frame without a sound and blank darkness occupied its place. Truly the king was not present, conjured away by the strenuous hand of the fierce combatant on the stage, and the soft hand of the woman behind the scenes.

"Who is that man?" whispered Frances, gazing in frightened fascination on the rude interrupter.

"That is John Pym, the chief prosecutor and deadly personal enemy of Lord Strafford."

As the girl gazed at this dominating individuality all the truth of confidence in her father's acquittal, whipped up by the chatter of conversation at the beginning, evaporated. There stood the personified hatred of England against the earl of Strafford. No wavering in accent or action

commotion among the women. "A woman has fainted, that is all. They are taking her out."

CHAPTER VI. Betrayal.

There followed many days of suspense. Despite the fervor of Pym's speech, the Commons has not asked the lords for judgment, and Strafford's friends hailed it as good omen. But the Commons speedily disillusioned them. A bill of attainder was brought in. They would have the head of Strafford by act of Parliament if not by legal procedure.

To the amazement of all, the lords gave their consent to the bill, and nothing stood between Strafford's head and the block except a scrawl from the king's hand.

On Monday there were ever increasing rumors that Charles had signed the bill, which would send his chief minister to the block. But by nightfall news came that the bill had been signed, not by the king's own hand, but by four commissioners whom he had appointed for the purpose. Even the House of Commons was amazed and the friends of the earl were mute with dismay. But shrewd men pointed out that the case in reality was no worse. At any moment the king could free his minister or mitigate his sentence, and Charles was free to reprove the earl even at the last moment.

Frances determined to see the king herself and learn from his own lips the fate of her father.

with deep reluctance.

De Courcy appeared before many moments, lured by the information that a beautiful woman was waiting for him. When he saw Frances, he did not trouble to make an explanation to the captain of the guard, but bade her enter at once.

"I will take you by a private way where you will encounter no one," he said with a leer.

They threaded their way through devious passages until at last they reached a door, which he pushed open, saying: "If you will wait here for a moment, I will go to the king."

He bowed gracefully and ushered the girls into a square room, the walls of which were decorated by groups of swords and rapiers of various sorts; a veritable armory. A table occupied the center, and there were several chairs with a lounge against the wall. A door opened upon an inner room. De Courcy, instead of taking his departure, stepped in quickly after the girl, closed the door and turned the key in the lock. With the grating of the key came the first suspicion to the mind of Frances that her guide was treacherous. Much as she had always distrusted him, it seemed incredible that, knowing her to be the daughter of the earl of Strafford, anything disastrous might befall her here in the very palace of the king, the sworn protector of his people. The leer on De Courcy's face and his...
"If you will be seated, my dear, we may