

Over the Border

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

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CHAPTER VII.
Coincidence.

WILLIAM Armstrong rode his splendid black steed like one more accustomed to the polishing of saddle leather than to the wearing out of the same material in the form of boots. Horse and man were so subtly suited, each to each, that such another pair might well have given to some early artist the first idea of a centaur. Armstrong was evidently familiar with the district he traversed, for he evinced no surprise when, coming to the crown of a height, he saw in the valley below him a one-storied stone building, whose outhouses and general surroundings proclaimed it a solitary inn, but the horse, less self-contained, and doubtless more fatigued, thrust forward its ears and gave utterance to a faint whinny of pleasure at the near prospect of rest and refreshment. The hand of the rider affectionately stroked and patted the long, black mane, as if in silent corroboration of the animal's eager anticipation.

The young man was fair as his mount was dark. A mass of yellow hair flowed out from under his Scot's bonnet and over his broad shoulders. A heavy blond moustache gave him a semi-military air, a look of the cavalier, as if he were a remnant of that stricken band across the border which was fighting for King Charles against daily increasing odds, but something of jaunty self-confidence in Armstrong's manner betokened that the civil war raging in England was no concern to him.

Both prowess and gentility were on the instant of being put to the test as he approached the inn, where a wayfarer is usually certain of a welcome if he has but money in his pouch. A lanceman, his tall weapon held upright, stepped out into the road from the front of the closed door before which he had been standing, when he saw that the traveler was about to halt and dismount.

"Ye'll be fur dawnerin' on a bit faurer forret," hinted the sentinel in a cautious, insinuating manner, as if he were but giving expression to the other's unspoken intention.

"A wise man halts at the first public house he comes to, after the sun is down," replied Armstrong.

"Ah'm thinkin' a man's no verra wise that stops whaur he's least wanted, if them that's no wantin' him hiz good airn in their hauns."

"Aye, my lad, steel's a bonny argument, rightly used. What's a' th' steer here that a tired man, willing to pay his way, is sent doon th' road?"

Armstrong adopted for the moment a brogue as broad as that of his questioner. He flung his right leg across the horse, and now sat sideways in his saddle, an action which caused the sentinel to grip suddenly the shaft of his pike with both hands, but the equestrian making no further motion, conversing in an easy, nonchalant tone, as if he had little personal interest in the discussion, the vigilance of the man on guard partially relaxed, probably thinking it as well not to provoke so excellently equipped an opponent by any unnecessary show of hostility.

"Weel, ye see, there's muckle folk in ben yonner that hiz many a thing to chatter about, an' that's a' Ah ken o't, forby that Ah'm ta let nane insaide ta disturb them."

"Whose man are you?"

"Ah belong to th' erl o' Traquair."

"And a very good friend of mine the erl of Traquair is. Will you just go insaide and tell him William Armstrong is sitting here on his horse?"

"That wull Ah no, for if th' king himself were to ask, Ah munna let him by th' door. Sa jist taak a fule's advice fur yince, and gang awa' ta th' next botha afore it gets darker an' ye'r like to lose ye'r road among th' hills."

The descent of young Armstrong was so instantaneous that the man-at-arms had no opportunity of carrying out his threat, or even of leveling the unwieldy weapon in his own defense. The horseman dropped on him as if he had fallen from the clouds, and the pike rang useless on the rough cobblestones. The black horse showed no sign of fright, as might have been expected, but turned his intelligent head and calmly watched the fray as if accustomed to any eccentricity on the part of his master. And what the fine eyes of the quadruped saw was startling enough. The widespread limbs of the surprised soldier went whirling through the air like the arms of a windmill in a gale. Armstrong had grasped him by the waist and turned him end for end, revolving him, Catherine-wheel wise, until the bewildered wits of the victim threatened to leave him through the action of centrifugal force. By the time the unfortunate sentinel lost all reckoning of the direction in which solid earth lay with regard to his own swiftly changing position, he was sprawling on his assailant's shoulder, gaping like a newly landed trout, and thus hoisted aloft, he was carried to the closed door, which a kick from Armstrong's foot burst crashing inward. The intruder flung his burden into the nearest corner of the large room, as if he were a sack of corn, then facing the startled audience the young man cried:

"Strong orders should have a stronger

guard than you set, gentlemen. I hold to the right of every Scotsman to enter a public dramshop when he pleases."

A dozen amazed men had sprung to their feet, oversetting a chair or a stool here and there behind them, and here and there a flagon before them. Eleven swords flashed out, but the upraised right hand of the chairman and his commanding voice caused the weapons to hang suspended.

"The very man! By God, the very man we want! In the fiend's name, Will, where have you dropped from?"

"From the back of my horse a moment since, as your henchman here will bear witness, Traquair."

"Armstrong, your arrival at this juncture

is providential; that's what it is, providential."

"It must be, my lord, for you did your best to prevent it. Your stout pikeman would not even let you know I was within call, so I just brought him in to give the message properly."

"Losh, if he knew you as well as I do, he would have thought twice ere he stood in your way. Come to the table, man, and fill a flagon."

The young man drank long and well. The sentinel had by this time got on his feet and was staring at the company like one dazed.

"Where's your pike?" demanded Traquair.

"On the stones outside, ma lord."

"Very well, go out and lift it, and see that you keep a better grip of it when the next man comes along. Attend to Armstrong's horse, and keep an eye up and down the road."

"I'll look after my own beast, Traquair."

"No need for that, Will. We have matters of importance to discuss, and Angus here will feed the horse as well as you can do it."

"I'll eat and drink whatever's set before me, and never ask who is the cook, but I trust no man to wait on my horse. You bid by your sentry march, Angus, and I'll see to the beast."

With this Armstrong strode out of the house, the ill-used sentinel following him. As the door closed the interrupted hum of conversation rose again. Who the interloper might be was the burden of the inquiry.

"Armstrong, the very man for our pur-

pose," said Traquair. "If anyone can get through Old Noll's armies by craft or by force, it is Will. I had no idea he was near by or I would never have wasted thought on any other. I have known him for years and there is none to match him, hi'lan' or lowlan'. We need seek nae farrer if Christie's Wull is wullin'."

He ceased, for the door opened and Will entered.

"We have some employment for you," cried Traquair, "if you are ready for it. There are papers that we must get through to King Charles at Oxford. Then, what is much more important, we must get his signed warrant back to us before we can act to any real purpose in this play. The

way to the very gates of Oxford if time is not too great an object with you."

"Time is an object, Armstrong, but you will have to do the best you can, and we shall await your return with what patience we may. You will tackle the job, then?"

"It's just the kind of splore I like. Can you allow me three weeks or a month?"

"If you're back insaide a month, Will, you'll have done what I believe no other man in all Scotland could do. Well, that's settled, then."

CHAPTER VIII. Espied.

The earl was interrupted by a roar from the sentinel outside, which caused every



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victorious rebels pretend that they are fighting for certain so-called liberties, but we have reason to know that their designs run much deeper, and that they aim at nothing less than the dethronement and possible murder of the king. It is necessary to get proof of this to the king and to obtain his sanction to certain action on our parts, for if we move without his written commission and our plans fail, we are likely to get short shrift from Cromwell, who will deny us the right of belligerents.

"Whether the king believes this or not, the documents we wish to send him are less to the purpose than that you should bring back to us his commission, so you will know that your homecoming is much more vital to us than your outgoing."

"I see. Still, if they kill me on my way there, it is not likely I will win my way back, so both journeys are equally vital to me."

"The pick of my stables is at your choice. Had you better not take a spare animal with you?"

"No. That would be advertising the importance of my journey. If I can get through at all it must be by dawdling along as a cannie drover body, anxious to buy up cattle and turn an honest penny by selling them to those who want them worse than I do; a perfectly legitimate trade, even during these exciting times. They all know the desire of a humble Scotsman to make a little money, though the heavens and kings be falling."

"That's an admirable idea—and you know the country well?"

"No one better. Indeed, I'll trade my

man in the room to start to his feet, but before they could move Angus came bursting in.

"Somebody dropped from the hole on the loft above the stables, an' wuz aff ta th' wood afore I could stop him."

"To horse!" cried Traquair. "Mount instantly and let's after him."

"It's useless, my lord," said Armstrong, quietly, the only unexcited man in the group. "Ye might as well look for some particular flea in all the hi'lan's. He'll have a horse tied to a tree, and a thousand cavalry couldn't catch him, if he knows the wilds hereabout."

Traquair stood frowning and indecisive, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Where's the landlord?" he asked at last.

"Angus, bring him in here."

The sentinel left the room, and speedily reappeared with a cowering man, evidently as panic-stricken as any of his guests.

"Have there been some stragglers about today?" demanded Traquair.

"Not a soul, my lord, on my oath, not a soul."

"Is there connection between the room above and the loft over the stable?"

As he spoke they heard the tread of the sentry in the loft.

"Is that you, Angus?" asked Traquair in an ordinary tone of voice.

"Can you hear what I say?"

"Perfectly, ma lord. There's a very cunning trap 'tween th' stable loft an' this, that one wouldna hev foun' in a hurry, but the thief left it open in his sudden flight."

The lips of the landlord turned white,