

but he remained motionless, panting like a trapped animal, for the giant form of Armstrong stood with his back against the door, the only exit.

"Very well. Come down," said Traquair, quietly.

When the sentinel returned Traquair bade him get rope and tie the innkeeper hand and foot, while the prisoner groveled for his life, his supplications meeting with no response.

"Now take him outside, Angus, and if there is any attempt on his part to move or if there is an alarm of rescue run him through with your pike and retreat on us. As for you, you false knave, your life will depend on your lying quiet for the moment and on what you tell us hereafter."

"Am I to be taken away, your merciful lordship?" sobbed the man, who, now that his life seemed in no immediate danger, turned his anxiety toward his property. "What 'ull become o' th' inn, fur there's nane here ta tak care o' it?"

"We'll take care o' it, never fear," replied Traquair, grimly.

The stalwart Angus dragged the man out and the door was once more closed.

"I think we may venture to seat ourselves again," said Traquair, suiting the action to the word. "There's nothing more to be done, and pursuit is hopeless."

All sat down with the exception of Armstrong, who remained standing with his back to the door, gazing somewhat scornfully on the conclave.

"You will pardon me, Traquair," began Armstrong, "for you know I would be glad to forward anything you had a hand in, short of slipping my neck into a noose, but at that point I draw back. I'll not set foot on English soil now, king or no king. Man, Traquair, I wonder at you! The lot of you remind me of a covey of partridges holding conference in a fox's den."

"I'm not going to defend the covey of partridges, Will, but after all's said and done the danger's not so much greater than it was before."

"Do you think I'm fool enough to set face south when there's a spy galloping ahead of me with full particulars of every item in my wallet? Not me! It was bad enough before, as you say; now it's impossible. That is, it is impossible for me, for the flying man knows all about me. No; the proper thing to do is to meet at your castle, or some other safe place, and choose a man whose name and description are not in the wind ahead of him."

"But I've known you to clench with quite as dangerous a task before."

"It's not the danger, Traquair, as much as the folly that holds me back. I've been in many a foolish scramble before now, as you have hinted, but I learn wisdom with age, and thus differ from our friend Solomon."

"Will nothing change your decision?"

"Nothing; nothing in the world; not anything even you can say, my lord."

Any trampling ass may break an egg, but once broken the wisest man in the kingdom cannot place it together again. Tonight's egg is smashed, Traquair.

"I canna blame you; I canna blame you," said the earl dejectedly, drawing a deep sigh. Then turning to the others he continued: "Gentlemen, there's no more to be said. We must convene again. Would to-morrow, or the day after, be convenient for you?"

It was agreed that the meeting should take place two days from that time.

"You are not angry with me, Traquair?" asked Armstrong.

"Not in the least, Will. I appreciate your point of view, and were I in your place I should have reached exactly the same conclusion."

"Then I must beg a bed from you tonight. I have no wish to stay in this place, and if you are bent for home, as I surmise, I'll just trot my nag alongside o' yours."

"I was this moment going to ask you, for I confess I'll ride the safer that your stout arm is near."

The company left the inn together and in the middle of the road, before the house, they found Angus, with a torch, standing guard over a shapeless bundle huddled at his feet. The bundle was making faint pleadings to the man-at-arms, to which that warrior was listening with stolid indifference. The murmurs ceased as the group of men drew near. Traquair extended a cordial invitation to all or any to spend the night at the castle, which was the nearest house, but the others did not accept. Each man got upon his horse, and some went one direction and some another.

"Fling your lighted torch into the loft," said Traquair to Angus.

"That will prevent this wolf worrying about his property. When you've done that, throw him across your horse and follow us. Has there been sign of anyone else about?"

"No, ma lord," replied Angus, promptly obeying the injunction about the torch. He then tossed the howling human mass in front of his saddle, sprang into his seat and went down the road after the two who preceded him, the flames from the burning bothy already throwing long shadows ahead.

The earl of Traquair, chagrined at the temporary defeat of his plans, inwardly cursing the stupidity of those with whom he was compelled to act, rode moody and silent, and this reserve the young man at

his side made no attempt to interrupt, until they had reached a slight eminence, where the nobleman reined in his horse and looked back down the valley at the blazing steading which now filled the hollow with its radiance.

"We will wait here till Angus overtakes us," he said. "This bonfire may collect some of the moths and it's better traveling three than two."

"We've not far to go," said Armstrong, "and that's a blessing, for I'm on a long jaunt in the morning and would be glad of my bed as soon as may be."

"Where are you off to?" asked the earl indifferently, gazing anxiously down the road for a sight of his follower, who was not yet visible.

Armstrong replied with equal nonchalance:

"Oh, I'm just away for Oxford to carry a message from Lord Tarquair to the king of England."

"What!" cried his lordship, nearly starting from his saddle in amazement.

"Surely my talk before these cuddles did not mislead you? I'll take your message through and bring you back an answer, if the thing's possible, but I cannot have those fools pottering and whispering in the matter. They must know nothing of my going. You will meet them two days hence, except whomsoever they propose and let him blunder along to a rebel gallow. It will be one blockhead out of the way and then wise folk can do their bit travels unmolested."

"But how can I send papers with him when they'll be in your pouch?"

"Indeed, and that they will not be. This night's work compels me to a change of program. I shall carry no papers with me. If you let me read them I'll remember every word, though they be as long as the Psalms. I'll repeat them to the king with as few slips as any man in the realm. It would be folly for me, now that Cromwell's spy is on the gallop, to carry a line of writing that bears relation to politics. I'll be arrested before I'm a mile beyond the border, so my chance of getting through will depend on the search they make. If they find nothing it is likely they'll let me go, and I must manage to get back as best I can. There's no sense in being hanged for a spy the first day I set out."

CHAPTER IX.

Emprise.

The next morning early William Armstrong, on Bruce, his black horse, set out for the border with the good wishes of his host. His naturally gay demeanor was subdued and he muttered to himself with wrinkled brow as he rode along. This unwonted abstraction was not on account of the danger which he knew lay ahead of him, but because he was committing to memory the message to the king.

Arriving at a forking of the road, both branches tending south, he paused and pondered. Which should he take? He knew them equally well. The main road led to Carlisle, and in time of peace would have been preferable; the other, less direct, would probably carry him further in these uncertain times. That he could avoid contact with the Parliamentary forces was impossible, whichever road he took, and the question which now demanded solution was not so much his direction as whether it were well to bring on his inevitable encounter with the Cromwellites sooner or later.

But to an observer he bore the attitude of a stranger who had lost his way. This was evidently the conclusion arrived at by an object hidden in the hedge, which had proved his night's lodging. The object sprang out across the ditch, with a suddenness that made the horse start and snort in alarm, to be soothed by the gentle pat of its rider's hand, for the imperturbable Armstrong seemed surprised at nothing which took place. The object had the wild, unkempt appearance of one who habitually slept out of doors. His long and matted hair, emaciated face and clothing, or covering rather, made up of odds and ends of various costumes, formed a combination by no means attractive. He held in his hand, grasped by the middle, a long stick, somewhat taller than himself. "Which road are you going to take, my gay gentleman?" he cried.

"I was just switherin'."

"Ah, you're from Scotland. They tell me they grow a fine crop of fools there. The road on the right leads to Carlisle, and the fool's name in that direction is the king. The safest way is the one you came, and the fool's name there is like to be Cromwell, so they tell me. Am I to get the fool's price for advice?"

The horseman threw him a coin, which the object clutched in mid air with great expertness and examined eagerly.

"Thank you, gay gentleman. The advice is to turn your fine horse end for end and get back among the fools of your kidney. We are always safer among our own kind."

"Are there any cattle for sale hereabouts? I see none in the fields."

"Everythings for sale in England, crown, cattle, opinions, swords; O, it's a great market for cutlery. But the price is uncertain and various."

"Well, it's cattle, not cutlery. I want to buy."

"I sometimes sell cattle myself" said the object with a cunning look.

"It does not seem a very prosperous business, then? Where do you get your stock?"

"O, I pick it up on the roads. You'll find no cattle on the way to Carlisle. The country is swept bare in that direction. But I can lead you to a fine herd if you make it worth my while."

"In which direction?"

"Down this way. Come along. Are you after any particular breed?"

"No. Anything there's money in."

"You're just like me," said the vagrant with a laugh, as he strode off down the unfrequented road. The object walked with incredible speed, laughing to himself now and then, and Armstrong was forced to trot his horse to keep up with him. On arriving at a slight eminence the guide waved his long arm toward a steading in the valley, which looked like a deserted group of farm buildings, and said:

"There's a fine lot of cattle down yonder."

"I can see no signs of them."

"No, no. They're well stabled. Nothing lasts in the fields nowadays. They're not such fools as that. This herdsman knows when to keep his beasts in shelter." And with this the vagabond raised a shrill shout that echoed from the opposite hills.

"What are you crying like that for?" asked Armstrong, without showing any alarm.

"Oh, just to let the farmers know we're coming. Always give friendly warning in these parts and then you may not get something in your inside that's hard to digest. That's a fool's advice, and costs you nothing."

"Your cry meets with no response," said Armstrong, laughing at the shallow cunning of his treacherous guide, for his keen eyes noted crouching figures making way along the other side of a hedge, and he knew that if he went down the lane, at whose junction with the road the beggar stood with repressed eagerness, he would find himself surrounded. Nevertheless, he followed without betraying any knowledge of the trap he was entering.

As they neared the farmhouse, a voice cried sharply, "Halt!" and an armed man sprang from behind the hedge, cutting off retreat, if such had been attempted. While the others made through the hedge to the lane, the tattered man as nimbly put the hedge between himself and his victim, as if fearing a reprisal, laughing boisterously but rather nervously.

"Brave Captain, I've brought you a fine horse and a gay gentleman, and the two are for sale."

The man who had cried "Halt!" stepped forth from the shelter of the nearest outbuilding, a drawn sword in his hand, followed by two others with primed matchlocks, stolidly ready for any emergency. Four others closed up the rear, coming down the lane. There was no mistaking the fact that the man with the drawn sword was an officer, even if the object had not addressed him as captain, a salutation to which he paid no attention, for although his uniform showed little difference from that of his men, he had in his stern face the look of one accustomed to obedience. The horseman had drawn up at the word and sat quite nonchalantly on his steed, as if this were an affair of no particular concern to himself.

"Who are you?" asked the captain.

"My name is William Armstrong," replied the rider simply. In spite of himself, the stolid face of the leader showed some surprise at this announcement, as if it were unexpected, and as if he knew the name.

"Where are you from?"

"I came across the border this morning. I am a Scotsman."

"Why are you here?"

"I am a cattle dealer, and as there is little doing in my own country I thought I would just see if business was better on this side of the line. This amusing lunatic said there was cattle for sale in the valley and led me hither, for which service I paid him a trifle."

"And so there is, and so there is," cried the lunatic, "but the price was for my advice, not for the leading hither. I must get my pay for that yet. Aye, there's cattle for sale here, and I'm the market man."

"Peace to your folly," said the captain, scowling. Then curtly to the horseman, "Dismount." Armstrong sprang to the ground.

"Your sword," demanded the officer. The weapon was handed to him.

"Do cattle dealers in your country carry arms?"

"To tell you the truth," said the young man with a laugh, "if they did not they would carry little money home with them. I not only carry arms, but know how to use them on occasions."

"I ask to see your papers giving you permission to travel in England."

"I have none. Scotland is at peace with England and a citizen of my country should not require papers in visiting England, any more than an Englishman would need the same to go from one end of Scotland to the other."

"Humph," growled the captain, "you are well versed in the law. I hope you are engaged in no enterprise that is contrary to it."

"I hope not, captain. If you are king's

men you maintain that you are upholding the law. If you are parliamentary you swear the same thing."

"We swear not at all."

"Then I surmise you are no king's men. But, in any case, until one or other of you have declared war against Scotland, or until Scotland has declared war against either of you, or both, you meddle with a free citizen of Scotland at your peril."

"It is perhaps wisest to indulge in no threats."

"I am not indulging in any. I am stating a plain, uncontrovertible fact, that would be held by none so stoutly as by General Cromwell himself."

"Then keep your dissertations on law until you see the general, which is likely to happen before we are done with you."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have a discourse with that distinguished man. He is a fighter after my own heart, and I understand he is equally powerful in controversy."

"Search him."

To this order Armstrong not only made no objection, but assisted in its fulfillment. He took off his doublet and threw it to one of the men who approached him, then held his arms outstretched that another might, with greater ease, conduct his examination. A third paid minute attention to the saddlebags, and a fourth took the saddle itself off the horse. The search brought to light some papers that conveyed excellent information regarding steers and cows, but nothing about politics.

The officer had utilized the interval in writing a brief dispatch, which he now handed to a young horseman. "Ride hard and give that to General Cromwell as soon as you can. In case you should lose it, tell him we have got our man, who crossed the border this morning. Say we are bringing him to Corbion Manor, as directed, and expect to reach there before dusk."

The youth, without reply or salute, pocketed the paper, shook out the reins and was off like the wind, Armstrong watching the pair with a glow of admiration in his eyes. Although unused to the life of a camp, he was much struck by the absence of any attempt at secrecy in the proceedings. There was no effort to bewilder the prisoner or make a mystery of the affair. That his advent had been expected was perfectly clear and that a written description of his person had been distributed along the border was equally evident. They had been watching for him and now they had him. There was no military fuss about the matter and apparently very little discipline, yet instant and unquestioned obedience, without accompaniment of formal deference to authority or the genuflections of salute to superiors. But underneath it all was a hint of power and efficiency. Armstrong realized that he was in the clutch of an admirably constructed human machine that knew what it wanted and went straight for it. No one had spoken except the captain, yet every man was on the alert to do what was required of him instantly, capably and in silence.

At a word from the captain a bugle call rang out and its effect was soon apparent. An accoutred horse was led to the captain, who sprang into his place with the ease of one accustomed to the feat, and from the buildings appeared something like a score of mounted troopers.

"Get into your saddle," commanded the captain, addressing Armstrong. The latter tested the buckling, which a soldier had just finished, drew up the strap a point, then, with his foot in the stirrup, turned and asked:

"Am I to consider myself a prisoner, sir?"

"Whatever questions you wish to put will be answered presently by one higher in authority than I."

"I must protest against this detention, sir."

"Your protest will doubtless be considered by the officer I referred to."

"General Cromwell, I surmise?"

"Or one delegated by him. Mount, we have far to go."

Armstrong leaped into the saddle and the troop set off, with the captain at the head and himself in the midst of it. There was no chance of escape, even if he meditated such an attempt, which apparently he did not. The direction tended south and east, and as the sun was setting they came to Corbion Manor, a large country house, which was seemingly the headquarters of a considerable section of the army encamped in the neighborhood. In to a room of this mansion Armstrong was conducted and left under guard, and he was pleased to see by the spread table that there was at least no design on the part of his captors to starve him.

(To be Continued.)

Relief

Carrie—Oh, how do you do, Kate? I'm so glad to see you! Constance's gown is the dowdiest thing I ever saw.

Kate—Isn't that a queer way of opening a conversation?

Carrie—Yes, I suppose it is; but I just told Constance her frock was the most beautiful and most becoming thing she ever wore, and I was just dying to say what I thought about the dress.—Boston Transcript.