

Over the Border

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

(Copyright, 1903, by Robert Barr.)
CHAPTER XIX.

Acquaintance.

HITHER the moon had set or lay behind a cloud, for the night was very dark, with no trace of morning yet visible in the east. Frances buckled on her shoes and stood up. The innkeeper led forward his horse, and would doubtless have proffered his assistance, but when she spoke he learned she was already in the saddle.

"Set me on the road to Broughton, if you please."

"The word for tonight is 'Broughton'—he whispered, then took the horse by the bridle and led him down the street. The girl became aware that the town was alive with unseen men, for at every corner the innkeeper breathed the word 'Broughton' to someone who had challenged his progress. She realized then that Cromwell had surrounded Armstrong with a ring of steel, a living chasm, as her own wrist had been circled earlier in the night. At last they came suddenly from the shadow of the houses into the open country, and the night seemed lighter.

"Straight on for about a league," said the innkeeper. "You will be challenged by a sentinel before you reach the castle, and he will lead you there. Remember that the word going and returning is 'Broughton.' Do not forget. I beg of you, to tell the general that all preparation was made to your liking," and with that the honest man let go the reins, smote the horse on the flank, and bade her goodnight.

In spite of herself, the girl experienced that exhilaration which comes of the morning air, the freshness of the country and the movement of a spirited horse. She breathed deeply and felt as one brought newly to life again. If it were not for her upbraiding conscience and her distress of mind, she could have sung for the joy of living. But the biblical phrase, a thief in the night, haunted her and brought a choking sensation to her throat. Once or twice she wavered and almost turned back, for there was still time to undo; but reflection showed her the uselessness of retreat, as the town she had left was man-environed, and until Cromwell gave the word of release, Armstrong could no more reach its outer boundary than she could have escaped when his fingers closed upon her wrist. Her sacrifice must be complete, or all she loved were involved in common ruin. So with the phrase ringing in her ears, "Thief in the night," "Thief in the night," through the night she galloped, until her horse suddenly placed his fore feet right, and came to a stop so abrupt that the shock nearly unseated her.

"Who goes?" came the sharp challenge from under the trees that overshadowed the highway.

"Broughton," she answered automatically.

"Are you the woman from Banbury?"

"Yes."

"This is Broughton castle. I will lead your horse."

They descended a slight depression and came to a drawbridge, passed under an arch in the wall, then across a level lawn, on the further edge of which stood the broad eastern front of the castle, with its numerous mullioned windows, a mysterious half light in the horizon playing on the blank panes, which recalled the staring open eyes of a blind man. The house seemed high and somber, with no sign of light within. The sentinel bent against the door, and it was opened at once. Muffled as had been the knocking on the oak, it awoke the alert general, for when Frances had dismounted and followed her guide into the ample hall, Cromwell stood at the head of the stair, a candle in his hand. Less mindful of his comfort than Armstrong, he had evidently slept in his boots, and as Frances looked up at him, his strong face seemed older than when she last saw him, although but a few days had passed. The swaying flame of the candle, held on a level with his head, made the shadows come and go on his rugged features and emphasized the deep furrows in his face. His hair was tousled and he had the unkempt appearance of a man who had slept in his clothes. But his eyes burned down upon her as if their fire had never been extinguished even for a moment.

"Come up," he commanded, and as she ascended the stair impatiently, "Well!"

"There is the king's commission," she said quietly, presenting the document to him. He took it without a word, turned and entered the room; she followed him. He placed the candle on a table, did not take the time to untie the silken cord that bound the royal communication, but ripped it asunder, and spread open the crinkling parchment, holding it up to the light. He read it through to the end, then cast it contemptuously on the table, muttering:

"Charles Rex! A wreck you have made of life and opportunity and country." Then to the girl: "Wench, you have done well. Would you were a man."

"The pardon for my brother, sir, if it please you."

"It is ready, and the commission as captain also. You see I trusted you."

"So did another, and through his faith he now lies undone in Banbury."

"You have not killed him?" cried Cromwell sharply, looking with something al-

most like alarm at the uncanny apparition. All beauty had deserted her and her face seemed pinched and small, white as the parchment on the table, and rendered unearthly in its hue by the mass of cavern-black hair that surrounded it.

"Killed him? Not! But I have killed his faith in woman—cuzened him, led to him, robbed him, to buy from you, with the name of your Maker on your lips, a life that you know was not forfeited, but which you had the power to destroy."

"Ah, yes, yes, yes. I remember your tongue of old, but it may wag harmless now for all of me. His life was forfeited; aye, and this Scot's as well. But no matter now."

He threw before her the pardon for her

kindly, "do not distress yourself. You are a brave wench, and the wise will do you good, though you take it as it were a chemist's draught. I meant no harshness toward you; indeed, you remind me of my own daughter, who thinks her father criminal, and will shout for this foolish king in my very ears. Aye, and is as ready with the tears as any one of you, to the bewilderment of straight-going folk. I have a younger daughter who is your namesake, and I love her well. You will rest here in Broughton."

"No, no," sobbed the girl. "I must at once to Banbury. Give me, I beg of you, a pass for my servant to the County of Durham. I would send him on to my brother without delay, so that your release

cord that had wrapped the parchment of the king. Giving her the package, he accompanied her to the head of the stair, and stood there while she descended. He did not offer her his hand, nor say any word of farewell. They needed now no candle, for the early daylight was coming through the broad eastern window. Half way down the stair she turned, and looked up at him.

"The innkeeper at Banbury did everything that was possible for a man to do in aiding me."

Cromwell made no comment on this piece of information, standing there as if he were a carved wooden statue, part of the decoration of the hall. She completed her descent, passed outside without looking



Black Bruce with a war neigh came breast on, maddened with the delight of battle.

brother and his commission as captain, then strode out of the room to the head of the stair again, and she heard his strenuous voice:

"Hobson!"

"Here, excellency."

"Ride at once to the commandant at Banbury. Tell him the Scot goes free. Tell him to send word north and see that he is not molested, but should he turn in his tracks and attempt to reach Oxford again hold him and send word to me."

"Yes, excellency."

"Send up a stoup of wine."

He waited at the stairhead until the wine was brought, then took it into the room and placed it on the table before her.

"Drink," he said.

"I cannot," she cried.

"Drink, drink," he shouted in a voice so harsh that it made her tremble. She lifted the flagon to her lips and barely sipped the liquid.

"Drink!" he roared, bringing his clenched fist down on the oaken table with a force that made the very room quiver. The word had all the brutal coarseness of an oath and it beat down her weak resolution as the storm levels the sapling. She drank deep, then let the flagon drop, raised hands to face and burst into a helpless wall of weeping. Cromwell's face softened, now that he was obeyed, and he looked at this passion-swayed human flower with the air of a punished man. Then his large hand patted her heaving shoulders with some attempt at gentleness.

"There, there," he said in tones not un-

may reach him as soon as may be."

"But you? You do not purpose traveling further with this Scot?"

"I have done the crime; I must not shrink the punishment."

"Tut, tut, that is woman's talk. There is no punishment. He dare not place a hand on you. You may have an escort of twenty men, who will see you safe for all the Scots that ever despoiled their neighbors."

The girl dolefully shook her head.

"My punishment will take the shape of no harshness from him. It will come to me when I see his face, knowing me a thief in the night. This punishment is with me now and will be with me always."

"Woman, I do not like your bearing, touching what you have done. You did your duty by your country. God avenge you. Neither do I like your attitude toward this scullion in affairs of state. What is your relationship to him?"

"Merely that of a highwayman toward his victim."

"Sharp words again; hollow sounding brass, and the tinkling of cymbals. I ask you if there has been any foolish talk between you?"

"If 'twere so, 'tis not an affair of state, and I shall follow the example of General Cromwell and allow no meddlers in it."

A wry smile came to the lips of her questioner, and he remarked dryly: "I told you the wine would do you good."

He sat down by the table and wrote the pass for John, the servant, tying three papers together with the discarded silk

back, and mounting the horse which a soldier was holding for her. The birds were twittering in the trees, and the still water of the moat lay like molten silver in the new light. She rode up the acclivity, then galloped for Banbury, reaching the town before anyone was astir. The streets were entirely deserted. Cromwell's command having cleared them, and the invisible guards of a few hours before, whom the magic password stilled, seemed as nonexistent as if they had been phantoms of a vision.

The sleepy innkeeper received the horse, and she crept up the stair of old John's room and knocked upon it until he responded. She gave him his pass, and the two documents for her brothers, and told him to set off for Durham as soon as he got his breakfast, making what haste he could to Warburton Park. He was to tell her brother that she was well and would follow shortly. Then she went to her own room, threw herself on the bed, dressed as she was, and, certain she would never enjoy innocent sleep again, slept instantly.

CHAPTER XX. Enlightenment.

When William Armstrong awoke, he thought he had overslept himself for the tramping of horses sounded in the paved courtyard below. The one window of his room over which he had drawn and fastened heavy wooden shutters the night before let in a thread of light which showed him a new day had come and the activity