

In the yard made him fear he had lain longer abed than was his custom. He was the more convinced of this in that he remembered hazily the clattering hoofs of a horse some time before and then later another being led out; now there appeared to be a third and the hum of talk came up to him. His window overlooked the stable yard and he recognized the rumber of the hostler who had assisted him yesterday. He lay still, half drowsed, the mattress most alluring to him, when suddenly he was startled wide awake by a voice he knew.

"Then, I turn to the left for Broughton?"

"Yes, sir," muttered the hostler.

Armstrong leaped from his bed, placed his eye at the chink in the shutters and peered down into the stable yard. The voice had not misled him. De Courcy, sitting on a horse, was just gathering up the reins and departing. The Scot lost no time in pulling on his boots, pushing aside the bed, unbolting the door and making his way down the stair. What did this gaily plumaged bird of ill-omen here want here in the country of the Parliament when his place was beside the king? Was there treachery afoot? It looked like it. Once outside he saw it was still early, with the sun scarcely risen. He accosted the yawning hostler.

"Who was that man you were directing to Broughton?"

"I don't know, sir."

"When did he arrive?"

"Last night, sir, after dark."

"Did he stop in this house?"

"Yes, sir. I thought he was a friend of yours, for he knew your horse when I was putting up his own. He asked if you were here, and I told him you were in the room over the yard."

"What is Broughton; a hamlet?"

"It is a castle, sir. Lord Say's castle, about three miles from here. General Cromwell is there now; it is his headquarters in this district."

"Cromwell?"

The young man stood stock still, eyes gazing into vacancy. What traffic had this king's chamberlain with Cromwell? How dared he come within the Parliamentary lines, undisguised, unless—unless—

Like inspiration the whole situation flashed upon him. De Courcy knew the burden he carried, and had seen where it was placed. He was on his way to sell his secret and set the troops on the track of the messenger. He must be off at once and outside the traitor. Before De Courcy had gone his three miles he would have traversed a dozen, and from then on it would be a race to the Scottish border.

"Is my horse fed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get him out at once. I will arouse the others."

He took three steps toward the inn, then stopped as if shot, his hand clutching his breast.

"By God, he's got the thing itself. Robbed, as I'm a sinner!"

Now the disturbance in the night stood out clear in his memory, but he wasted not a thought over it. In upon the astonished hostler he swept

"Never mind the saddle, fellow. Spring up behind me and show me the road to Broughton. Up, I say, the horse can carry a dozen like us. Here's two goldpieces for you; guidance and a stiff tongue in your head is what I want."

Armstrong grasped the two pistols from the hostler, flung the hesitating hostler upon the animal's back and leaped up in front of him.

"Which way, which way, which way?"

"Straight down the street, sir," gasped the terrified man, clasping the rider round the waist. "Now to the right, sir, and next to the left. That's it, sir. Up the hill. Ah, there's your man, jogging on ahead, leisurely enough, if it's him you seek."

"Right. Slip off; I can't stop. God be with you."

The hostler rolled in a heap along the ditch, staggered to his feet feeling his limbs for broken bones, thinking his gold pieces hardly earned in such usage, then, satisfying himself that the damage was not great, hobbled back to Banbury.

De Courcy, riding easily, as the man had said, wholly unsuspecting of pursuit, or any reason for it, had disappeared into a hollow, when Black Bruce, like a thunder cloud came over the crest and charged down upon him with the irresistible force of a troop of dragons. The Frenchman, hearing too late the rumble of the hoofs, partly turned his horse across the road, the worst movement he could have made, for Black Bruce, with a war neigh came breast on, maddened with the delight of battle, and whirled opposing horse and rider over and over like a cartwheel flung along the road from the hand of a smith. De Courcy lay partly stunned at the roadside, while his frightened steed staggered to its feet, leaped the hedge across the field to its furthest extremity. Armstrong swung himself to the ground with a quieting word to Bruce, who stood still panting and watching every movement of his master. A pistol in each hand, Armstrong stood over his victim.

"You ha'ter dog, traitor and scoundrel, give me the king's commission."

"Sir, you have killed me," moaned De Courcy, faintly.

"You bribed thief, the rope is your end.

You'll take no scathe through honorable warfare. Disgorge!"

De Courcy, vaguely wondering how the other knew he carried it, drew from within his torn doublet the second commission signed by the king and handed it up with a groan to the conqueror. As it was an exact duplicate of the one he had lost, even to the silken cord, the honest Scot had not the slightest doubt he had come by his own gain, and the prone man was equally convinced that someone had betrayed to Armstrong his secret mission, yet, for the life of him, could not guess how this were possible. The young man placed the document where its predecessor had been, then said to his victim:

"Had I a rope and a hangman with me you would end your life on yonder tree. When first I learned your character you were in some danger from my sword; a moment since you stood in jeopardy from my pistols; beware our third meeting. For if you cross my path again I will strangle you with my naked hands, if need be."

De Courcy made no reply. He realized that this was not a time for controversy. A standing man well armed has manifest advantages over an enemy bruised and on the ground, and some thought of this came to the mind of the generous victor, now that his anger was cooling. He felt that it was rather undignified to threaten a helpless adversary, and if he were a traitor to the king, let the king deal with him. So whistling to his horse, he sprang on his back and rode to Banbury at a slower pace than he had traversed the same road some minutes before.

The hostler made grievous pretense that he had been all but murdered by his fall, and Armstrong examined him minutely, as he would have done with a favorite horse, pronouncing him none the worse for his tumbling, but rather the better, as he was now more supple than he had been for years. He rewarded the man liberally, nevertheless, and gave him the receipt for a liniment good for man and beast, should after complications ensue.

"I hope, sir," whined the man, "that you did not treat the gentleman you were in such haste to meet as roughly as you did me."

"Very much the same," cried Armstrong, with a laugh, "but you are the better off, because I left him neither gold nor medicine, taking from him rather than bestowing."

"Ah, is that your game?" whispered the hostler, a glint of admiration fighting up his eyes. "Dang me if I did not take thee for a gentleman of the road when I first clapped eyes on thee. Be sure I'll say naught, for I've cut a purse myself in younger days. Those times were better than now. There's too many soldiers and too few gentlemen with fat purses traveling the roads nowadays, for our trade."

Again William laughed and shook hands with the old man, as one highwayman in a good way of business might condescend to another less prosperous, and the veteran hostler boasted of his intimacy with a noted freebooter for the rest of his days.

"Rub down my horse well while I am at breakfast," said Armstrong, and, receiving every assurance that the best of so excellent a man should receive every attention, he went to the inn and there found Frances awaiting him.

The girl was standing by the window, which was low and long, with a valance of crumpled spotted muslin running athwart the lower half of it. A bench was fixed beneath the window, and on this bench the girl had rested a knee, while her cheek was placed against the diamond panes. The light struck her face and illuminated it strongly and she stood so still that she seemed to form part of a tableau which might have been entitled, "Watching." On the table placed in the center of the room breakfast was spread.

It was a jubilant man who disturbed this quiet picture by his abrupt coming. The early morning gallop, the excitement of contest, the flush of victory, all had their effects on his bearing, and he came in with the mien of a Saxon prince, his yellow hair almost touching the beams of the low ceiling. The two formed a striking contrast, when the embodiment of dejection. There was a new furtiveness in the brief glance she cast upon him, and after her first startled cognizance, she looked beyond him, on either side of him, over his head or at his feet, but never turned her eyes full upon him as of yore.

"Ah, my girl," he cried, "you have not slept well. I can see that at once. This will never do; never do at all. But you are certainly looking better this morning than you did last night. Is that not so?"

"You are looking very well," she said, avoiding his question.

"Oh, I've had a morning gallop already."

"What! With the ride to Scotland still before you. Is not a merciful man merciful to his horse?"

"He should be; but I may say this for Bruce, he enjoyed the ride quite as much as I did. And now, I am ravenous for breakfast, and eager for the road again."

He tucked a little handkerchief that rested on the table. "We have another splendid day for it. The sunrise this morning was positively inspiring. Come, pass, and sit you down. We must set the roses back into those cheeks, and I think the ride today will do it. For we will be nearing the north, and you are just like me, you are

yearning for the northland, where all the men are brave and all the women fair."

"Fair and false, perhaps you would add. That was your phrase, I think."

William laughed heartily, drawing in his chair.

"Yes, about our Sturtes, not about our ladies. They are ever lead and true. And indeed many of them are dark as well as fair, and they are the best. Dark hair, fair face and a loyal heart; there is a combination to cherish, when God is good to a man and allows him to meet it."

The servant had now answered the tinkling bell, and Frances was too busy acting the housewife to make any comment on his enthusiastic description of what was to be found in the north. Her pale cheeks reddened as he spoke, and he took this for a promising sign. She was convinced that he had as yet no knowledge of his loss, and wondered when and where such knowledge would come to him. She hoped the enlightenment would be delayed until they were near the Scottish line, or across it. Then she must tell him the truth at whatever cost to herself, and persuade him, if she could, not to return. When she made her confession she would be in a position to relate all Cromwell had said to her; show him that the general had given orders which would block any backward move and reveal his determination to hang the Scot, should he entangle himself further with English politics. Yet she had the gravest doubts that these dangers would influence him. She knew him well enough to be aware that his own personal safety weighed but lightly with him, and the very opposition would determine him to try conclusions with it, unabashed by the overwhelming odds against him.

These reflections troubled her until the time they were on their horses once more, when Armstrong interrupted them by crying out:

"Where's Old John?"

"I sent him on ahead long since," replied Frances.

"Good. We shall soon overtake him. Good-bye, pirate," he cried to the grinning hostler. "May I meet you on the road next time with a thousand pounds on you, and if you whisper 'Banbury' to me I will not lift a penny of it."

"Good luck to you and your fair lady, sir," replied the enriched old man raising his cap in salute. He wished more travelers like the brawny Scot came that way.

"Why do you call the poor man a pirate?" asked Frances.

"Oh, we're comrades," laughed Armstrong. "He thinks me a capable, prompt and energetic highwayman, and admitted on the quiet that he had cut a purse himself upon occasion in the days of his youth."

"And why does he think you are a highwayman?"

"Ah, that would be telling. Suppose it is because I escort the fairest lady in the land? The sex has ever favored the biggest rascals. No, I shall not incriminate myself, but shall maintain my pose of the amiable hypocrite. Here rides Will Armstrong, the honest man, if you will take his own word for it. But the hostler knows better. He sees secret comings and goings and draws his sage conclusions. Banbury! Oh, Lord, I shall never forget Banbury! It is a place of mystery, the keeper of dark secrets and sudden rides, of midnight theft and of treachery. Ask the Broughton road, where Cromwell lies, to reveal what it knows. Things happen along that track which the king knows nothing of, and his royal signature takes journeys that he never counted upon."

"Heaven's pity! What do you mean?" moaned the girl, whitening to the lips. He laughed joyously, but checked himself when he saw the terrifying effect of his words on his companion. They were now clear of Banbury and trotting along the Coventry road. Their departure had met with no opposition and they had seen not even a single soldier. The open country lay before them, the turrets of the town sinking in the rear.

"My foolish words have frightened you. Forget them. I am accumulating experiences that will interest you to hear when the time comes for the telling of them, but of one thing I am assured, the good Lord stands by his own, and he has shielded me since yesterday morning broke. Come, Frances, let us gallop. That and a trust in the Lord will remedy all the ills of man or woman."

She was glad of the respite and they set off at full speed; nevertheless her mind was sorely troubled. "What did he know? What did he know?" beat through her brain in unison with the clatter of the horse's hoofs. It was not possible that chance had brought him thus to the very center of her guilty secret. Cromwell, treachery, midnight stealth, the Broughton road, these words and phrases tortured her. Was this then the line of his revenge? Did he know all and did he purpose to keep her thus in suspense, hinting, soothing her fears, then reviving them, making her black crime the subject of jest and laughter? She cast a glance over her shoulder. Banbury had disappeared; they were alone, flying over the land. The doubt was unbearable; she would endure it no longer. Impetuously she reined her horse to a stand. "Stop," she cried, and at the word her own horse and Bruce halted and stood. The young

man turned with alarm to her agitated face.

"What do you mean by your talk of Broughton and Cromwell?"

"Oh, that is a secret. I did not intend to tell you until our journey was ended, when we could laugh over it together."

"It is no laughing matter. I must know what you mean."

"All dangers are laughable once they are past. An unknown, unsuspected danger threatened me at Banbury. It is now past and done with and the person who plotted against me can harm me no more. There are reasons why I do not wish to mention this person's name. Fearing that I may tell you now as well as another time, if you care to listen."

"Do I know the person?"

"O, yes. You knew the person long before I did. It was a person I trusted, but now know to be a traitor and a thief."

It was some moments before Frances could speak, but at last she said very quietly, looking down at her horse's mane:

"Tell me the story, and I will tell you the name of the thief."

"You slept badly last night. Did you hear anything?"

"I—heard the clock strike the hours."

"I heard it strike 2, but lay so locked in drowsiness that I knew not the sound was calling to me. If the seven Sleepers were melted into one, I would outsleep that one. Well, to get on, I was robbed in the night. It must have been at that hour, for I remember dimly some sort of disturbance. But Providence stood my friend. By the merest chance, it might seem, but not by chance as I believe, I saw the creature make for Broughton. 'So, here's for Broughton,' cried I, 'on the bare back of Black Bruce, and see if my good pistols would win back what had been stolen from me.' The Broughton road it was, and the pistols did the business," saying this, he whisked from his pocket the king's commission, waving it triumphantly aloft. Her wide eyes drank in the amazing sight of it, slowly brimming with superstitious fear, and then she asked a duplicate of the question that had been asked of her a few hours before.

"Did you kill Cromwell?"

"Cromwell! I never saw him."

"From whom then did you wrench that parchment?"

"From the thief, of course. He never reached Cromwell."

"O, I am going mad! Who is the thief, who is the thief?"

"De Courcy, if you must know. Why does this trivial matter so disturb you? De Courcy followed us from Oxford last night, and was lodged at our inn. By some means he penetrated into my room, stole this from me, and I never missed it until I saw him ride for Broughton, and not even then, to tell the exact truth. But I remembered that he had seen me place this paper in the inside pocket of my vest, in the king's own presence, and then the whole plot came to me. Before he saw Broughton, Bruce and I were down upon him like a Highland storm on the lowlands. My sword! You should have seen us! For a minute there was one whirling of horses legs and Frenchman, like a rare show of acrobats struck by a whirlwind. If I had not been so angry I would have had the best laugh of my life," and the genial William threw back his head and made the wood echo with his merriment at the recollection. But the girl was sober enough.

"This is not the king's commission," she said, quickly.

"O, but it is."

"It is not. Have you read it?"

"No, but that's soon done."

He untied the cord and unfolded the sheepskin. She leaned eagerly forward and scanned the writing, while Armstrong read it aloud.

"You see," he cried, gleefully. "Of course it is the commission. There are the names of Traquair, and all the rest, just as I gave them to the secretary, and there is 'Charles Rex' in the king's own hand."

"It is a duplicate. Cromwell has the original. You never left De Courcy alive within a mile of Broughton castle?"

"I did that very thing. Not as lively as I have seen him, yet alive, nevertheless."

"Then ride, ride for the north. We have stood too long chattering here."

"All in good time, Frances. There is no more hurry than ever there was; less, indeed, for it seems to me that Cromwell, for some reason, wants to come at this by fraud and not by force. But now that De Courcy's name is mentioned between us, I ask you what you know against him more than I have told you?"

"Against him? I know everything against him. Would that you had killed him. He would sell his soul, if he has one. He robbed my dying father, and on the day of his death, when I was the only one in London who did not know he was executed, De Courcy lured me to his apartments at Whitehall, under pretence of leading me to the king that I might plead for my father's life. There he attempted to entrap me, snapped in my hand the sword which I had clutched from the wall to defend myself, and I struck him twice in the face, and blinded him with his own false blood, and so escaped. Judge, then, my fear when I saw him there at Oxford."