

long journey he attended to their wants and flung down some bundles of straw for his own night's lodging. He began to think he must go supperless or run the risk of foraging in an unknown pantry, if he could find entrance, when he saw Frances approach from the house with a loaf of bread and a lump of cheese on a trencher, with a measure of ale. He met her half way and relieved her of the load. Under her arm she carried some comestible weapon, which she brought out when he assumed the burden of the provender.

"It is a pair of sheep shears, which the woman tells me is all she has, but I assured her they were most suitable for my purpose. Now sit on this stone here in the moonlight and be shorn, for we must set out at daylight without those long locks of yours. You look too much like the king, even with your cloak and steel cap."

The girl laughed softly as she said this, and snapped the big shears menacingly. He sat on the stone like the obedient young man he was, shook out his lion's mane, and in a few minutes was bereft of it. The girl stood back and surveyed her work, laughing, but nevertheless with a tinge of regret in her laughter.

"Oh, it's a pity," she cried. "All the king's horses and all the king's men are not worth the sacrifice. I hope it will grow again, for if not, the Philistines be upon thee Samson. Your dearest friend wouldn't know you now."

Armstrong smiled ruefully and passed his hand in anxious doubt over his cropped head.

"I suppose it will grow again, unless my dearest friend refuses to acknowledge me with this curtailment, when I shall become bald through grief at her defection."

"I make no promises, if you mean me. I shall very likely reconsider. You are never the man who cast a glance over me at Oxford and elsewhere. I fear I am no true Parliamentarian after all, but I shall not come to a decision until I see you in the daylight. Perhaps the rap will be an improvement, but I doubt it."

He squeezed on the cap, which was still too small.

"By the bones of my ancestors, it will need Peter, the blacksmith of Gilnockie, to get this off again!"

"That is worse and worse," urged his tormentor. "I cannot bear the sight any longer, or it will drive sleep away from me. Good night, my poor shorn Samson," and she was off before he could spring up and intercept her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Expérience.

Great is the recuperative power of youth, and shortly after sunrise the two were on the road again, refreshed and with high courage, to face the outcome of another long ride. They had traveled further than their estimate of the night before, and so found themselves but little more than twenty miles south of Manchester. In the night the weather had undergone another change, and the sun was hidden, while now and then a scurry of rain passed over them. To the north the outlook was black and lowering. They were approaching the land of storm.

"I have made up my mind," said Frances, "that we must part. No, it is not on account of that cropped head of yours, but rather to save it."

"I have been thinking myself that it is wrong you should share my danger, when there is nothing to hinder you from going across country to your own home."

"I shall not go across my country until I have seen you safely into your own. But, as you know, the swearing colonel and his men are not looking for me. Perhaps they think I took the opportunity left open to get away from the cathedral, but, on the other hand, if wise, they must have looked for our horse's tracks, and then they learned we left Lichfield together. I propose to act as your scout. I shall ride a mile or two ahead, and if I am stopped, you will strike to the right or to the left, and avoid the danger if you can. On every elevation I reach I will stand for a few moments. If my horse faces west, the way between us is safe; if he faces east, there is danger."

"Frances, I would rather run the risk and have your company."

"I am sure you would, but (laughing) now that you are clipped, you are the one who is beautiful and I the one who is wise. It is really to your advantage that I should see as little of my Roundhead lover as possible, and you would be foolish to detain me, for I cannot help glancing at you now and then, and whenever I do I sigh for the cavalier who wooed me yesterday. Women are not so changeable as they say, and I am constant to my first adorer."

To this William made no reply, gazing somewhat gloomily at the storm in the horizon.

"There, there," she cried, riding alongside and touching his hand. "I have offended his vanity and he doesn't like to be laughed at. Poor boy, you little know what is in store for you. Don't you understand you will have enough of my company in the days to come and may well spare some of it now? I shall not disown my promise, if you remind me of it when your love locks are over your shoulders again. But, seriously, my plan is a good one, unless you have a better to propose. We must quit

the main road now and avoid Manchester as we avoided Birmingham, but we should have a care that we do not ride into another ambush, and if I go first that may be prevented."

"When I see you interfered with I will just gallop to your assistance."

"You will do nothing so foolish. No one in England is going to injure me, but you are not safe until you are over the Scottish line. We shall be north of Manchester in three or four hours and then you have your own pass. You are really a most creditable Roundhead. After Manchester we can travel in company again, if you wish. Have you anything better to propose?"

"Yes, I propose we stay together and take our chances."

"Goodby," she cried, gayly, touching up her horse, then over her shoulder as she galloped off: "Remember. West, safety; east, danger."

Armstrong had not only to curb his own inclination, but his horse as well, who viewed with evident disapproval the capture of his mate. At the summit of the first hill the girl turned her horse across the road facing west, waved her hand to him and disappeared over the crest. And thus the journey went in, sometimes two miles between them, sometimes less. Manchester was seen and left in the rear. He now tried to catch up with her, but she kept valorously ahead, as if she were some fabied siren luring the poor man on. For a time he lost sight of her, then as he mounted a hill saw her standing on a crest a mile away, like an equestrian statue against an inky sky, but this time her horse faced the east, and he thought she was motioning with her handkerchief in that direction. She stood there until he sent his horse over the hedge, and made in the direction of a forest, then the darkness seemed to swallow her up. He skirted the edge of the wood. Rain was now coming down heavily, but before it blotted out the landscape he passed the head of a valley and saw dimly through the downpour a large encampment of white tents. A man in drab on a black charger stood little chance of being seen against the dark forest from the encampment, but he moved on as rapidly as he could, knowing that, if a lull came in the deluge he ran great risk of detection by the outposts. Some distance on he stood for a time under the trees, blessing the long cloak, which formerly he had maligned for its ugliness, for now it proved of good material and waterproof. The girl had evidently gone directly down into the camp and he was at a loss what to do. Duty called him to press forward to the north, but duty is often an ill-favored jade, whose strident voice is outdistanced by the soft whisper of a beautiful woman. Armstrong dared not shout and the deluge formed an impenetrable curtain whichever way he turned. He skirted the wood for some time, then crossed the fields to the west until he came to the road which trended north from the camp. Here he stood in the rain and wondered whether she was detained or whether she had already passed the spot he now occupied. They had made no arrangement for meeting again in case they should lose sight of each other and he blamed himself for his negligence on this important point. One thing was certain. It was useless to stand here until he was dissolved. Even his stout-hearted horse had assumed an attitude of the utmost dejection, with drooping head, the water pouring off every part of him. Should the weather clear, which he was compelled to confess there seemed little likelihood of it doing, he was in danger so near the camp. He resolved to turn north, go on until he reached some place of shelter and their wait. Progress was slow, for the lane had become a quagmire. The forest which he had skirted extended now to the west and the road became a woodland track, but just where it began to penetrate into the wilderness there shone upon him a ray of hope. From an overhanging branch of the first tree hung a limp and dripping white rag, tied by one on horseback in such a position that it might brush the face of a rider passing that way. He took it down and it proved to be a lady's handkerchief. If he had followed the edge of the wood he could hardly have missed it; if he came along the lane he was almost certain to see it. He thrust this token under his cloak and chirruped to his discouraged horse. When something like a mile had been cast behind him his horse neighed and was answered by another further ahead. Then he came to a forester's hut and in an open shed, sheltered from the storm, stood the companion of Bruce, who showed lively pleasure at the encounter.

Inside the hut a cheerful sight met his eyes. A fire of fagots blazed on the hearth and before it stood a radiant young woman, arranging the brands to their better burning with the tip of her boot. On a high stool was spread her steaming cloak. In a far corner sat the old forester and his old wife, lowering on their visitor and their newly arrived guest, for strangers were viewed with universal suspicion by high and low, little good ever coming of them in the minds of the peasantry, while the chance of danger was always present; danger whether hospitality was proffered

or withheld. There was more chance of entertaining devils unawares than angels, and well the afflicted poor knew it.

However, less risk lay in succoring a steel cap than a feathered hat, so the moment the dripping horseman shoved in the door the old woman rose and began to set out a meal of dark bread and swine's flesh, boiled and cold.

"Ah, here you are at last," cried the girl, "I was beginning to fear I should have to go back to the camp for you. Did you find my token?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

"Not so. Findings are keepings. You cannot prove your right to the property."

"Alas, honest travelers are few, as these poor people seem to think. Throw off your cloak. Here is a wooden book by the fire that I have kept for it. Draw up your stool and eat. I was so hungry that I didn't wait for you. You see what it is to possess a good conscience once more."

"I possess a good appetite, anyway."

"Then sit down and I shall be your waiting maid."

"What news have you?"

"Hush! Great news, for I was the very princess of scents. One thing at a time, however, and the one thing now is this black bread, which is like the old woman here, better than it looks. We can get nothing for our horses at this place, so must set out again as soon as possible, in spite of the rain."

When he had finished his meal and stood again with her before the fire she whispered to him:

"You must not pay these people too lavishly. They are somewhat near the camp, and although they do not seem over-talkative, it is better to run no risks. Bargain with them; be a very Jew in computation."

"I'll do better than that. I'll be a very Scot and so save money."

Once on the road again she gave him her budget of news.

"You are a hero, William Armstrong. England is ringing with your exploits and I never dreamed with what a valorous knight of old I traveled. It seems you stormed Warwick castle and took it. You passed unseen through cordons of troops and it is suspected you have dealings with the devil, who travels beside you in the guise of a female, as is right and proper, and who appears and disappears at her will. Single-handed you scattered two armies at Lichfield—"

"Oh, give the devil her due!"

"With her aid, of course; that is always understood. You attacked Lichfield cathedral and captured it and there is much disapproval among the peasantry that Cromwell had formerly dismantled it, for they think that if this had not been done the holy belongings of the place would have baffled you. The cathedral now reeks of sulphur and you escaped in a whirl of flame, amidst a storm of bullets."

"They know that nothing will prevail against you but a silver pellet, and even that must be well aimed. So I am not sure but I have been mistaken in disguising you, for if any cavalier shows himself in the north the inhabitants are like to take him for satan and fly from him."

"Then they are good Christians, for they are told to resist the devil and he will fly from them. You think, then, that my fiendish character will protect me?"

"Not so, but you have nothing to fear between here and Carlisle. I thought you said De Courcy had been killed?"

"He went down and I supposed him shot, but was in too much of a hurry to inquire."

"He and others rode to the north last night and they are now between us and Carlisle."

"He has as many lives as a cat. If that is the case, why do you say the road to Carlisle is clear?"

"Because from Carlisle to Newcastle, right across England, the cordons are to be stretched, and from Carlisle west to the coast. Before we can reach there a line of men, almost within touching distance of each other will extend from sea to sea and all traffic north will be stopped. A thousand pounds is on your head, and Cromwell thinks to stop you, not with silver, but with gold. The general himself is on his way north to see that you are trapped, or to be ready for any outbreak of the Scots, should you win through."

"I fear I have been unable to convince Oliver that I am the devil, since he takes such excellent human means of frustrating me. A thousand pounds! And yet you held that first day I was of slight value!"

"I have confessed my error since. The camp I visited is breaking up today and moving on to Carlisle. Twenty-three thousand men, I was told, but, being mostly foot, there is no chance of their overtaking us."

"Well, the north looks black with more than rain, though goodness knows there is enough of that. I wish I were in Glasgow."

"What do you propose to do?"

"You are the planner of this foray. What do you propose to do, or have you thought of that yet?"

"I have not only thought of it, but have received instructions on it. I have heard the officers discuss what should be done, but I want to hear your conclusions first."

"Very well. The line runs from the west

coast to Newcastle. At Newcastle I am more than forty miles from Scotland at the narrowest point, while at Carlisle I am less than ten. Every step east I go I am placing myself more and more at a disadvantage, yet I might go east simply because of this, and because they know that I know that they know I am on the road to Carlisle. Having fallen into one ambush, they will imagine me on the constant outlook for another. Going free for so long, they might even count on my increasing carelessness, but shrewd men would not listen to that. Knowing I am single handed and can make no stand, they will expect me to creep through at night, either east or west of Carlisle, and as near as may be to that place, trusting to the short distance and the fleetness of my horse in a race for the Scottish border. I am a hillman, accustomed to threading my way through a wild country, with a keen eye for an enemy. I have avoided all the big towns—Birmingham, Manchester and the like—so they will not expect me to risk either Newcastle or Carlisle. Night will be the time when they are greatly on the alert, especially if this storm continues. Very well again. Who am I, if questioned? I am a trooper of Cromwell's own horse sent north from Warwick, having seen this escaped devil of a Scot, and therefore the more likely to identify him. I have become detached from my company in the storm. I will ride into Carlisle in broad daylight and ask where the Warwick horses are to be found. They were ordered to Carlisle, I shall say. I shall not avoid the commander, but will seek him. Then if I can saunter over the bridge, it is 'Hoorah for Scotland,' and may the best hoofs win."

"Good," cried the girl, "and well reasoned. They all agreed that Carlisle was the weakest link in the chain."

"Did they so? Then that makes me hesitate. If those in Carlisle think it the weakest link, they will strengthen it."

"The officer's plan was not so bad as yours. Of course, they did not know you were traversing in the likeness of one of themselves. They thought you would abandon your horse before you would come to Carlisle, creep into that town after dark, avoid the bridge, which is sure to be well guarded, swim the Eden and be across the Scottish border by daylight. There are two defects in your own proposal; your accent is not that of Warwickshire, and De Courcy is sure to be in Carlisle and may recognize you. Besides this, you may meet someone who knows the Warwick regiments, and you are not even acquainted with the name of the captain of your supposed company. I think the night attempt more like to prosper."

"In the night everyone is on the alert, and a Roundhead cannot be distinguished from a cavalier, so there is closer scrutiny. I can enact the stupid trooper to perfection, having natural gifts toward stupidity. There is a risk, of course, but this is a risky journey at best. If I once get over the bridge at Carlisle, I'll beat all England in a race for the border."

"I hope you will. I said I would see you across into Scotland, but I am convinced that purpose is futile, and I shall prove but a danger to you. A Warwick trooper on duty does not wander over the country a-squirring of dames. I have given you good advice, and a Roundhead's equipment, and have acted as your scout, so I must not imperil your mission by hanging to the skirt of that sopping cloak. Tonight we shall likely reach Yorkshire, and tomorrow I bid you God speed, and make across the country to my own home."

"Indeed, lass, I have come to so depend on you I shall be but a lost sheep, shorn at that, if you leave me."

"The wind is tempered to all such, and if you depend on your own wit you are likely to prosper. But you should have some care for me. It is my own safety I am thinking of."

Although the day was far from being one that invited toward hilarity, Armstrong laughed and turned his dripping face up to the storm. The girl joined him, but with less of merriment in her tones.

"You will never persuade me," he said, "that there is a tinge of selfishness about you, or that you even think of yourself when there is a friend to think of."

"There is worse to come," she went on, "I must beg of you to sacrifice that moustache. You will never get through Carlisle with that on your lip. Any one who has ever seen you before would recognize you now in spite of cloak and cap."

"Madam, you ask too much. The kingdom of England may fall, but this moustache, never."

"Really," laughed the girl, "if you saw it at this moment you would not be so proud of it. It has drooped and wilted in the rain like a faded flower. 'Twere better done away with, for it will mark you out from the smooth-faced troopers who throng Carlisle."

William somewhat wistfully wrung the water from it and attempted to draw it out across his cheeks.

"Madam, I suspect your design. One by one you have depleted me of what goes to make up a Borderer, and gradually you have reduced me to the commonplace level of those crop-eared vile lains who are fighting against their king."

(Continued from Page Eleven.)