

Tom Tufton's Travels eBook

Tom Tufton's Travels

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Page 1

CHAPTER I. AN ONLY SON.

Good Squire Tufton of Gablehurst lay dying. He had been ailing for many months, knowing his end to be near; and yet, as is so often the case in lingering declines, death was long in coming, so that those about him had grown used to the sight of the strong figure wasted to a shadow, and the face shadowed by the wings of the hovering messenger.

Some members of the household, indeed, had begun to cherish the hope that the master might yet recover, and be seen amongst them once more; but that hope was not shared by the patient himself, nor by the two devoted women who nursed him with tender love.

His wife and daughter were always with him, relieving each other in turn, and occasionally both yielding place to one of the many faithful servants, who were all eager to do what they could for the master they loved; but in his waking hours the squire seldom missed the best-loved faces about him. Rachel and her mother seemed to live their lives about his sick bed, soothing his weariness and pain, and striving with patient resignation to school themselves to submission to the will of God, who was about to take their loved one from them.

And yet they had kept him with them longer than once seemed possible. The bright days of summer were doubtless favourable to the patient. When he could lie with open windows, breathing the pure soft air from woodland and field, he seemed able to make a stand against the grim enemy of human nature. But the summer was now upon the wane; the golden sunshine was obscured by the first driving rains of the approaching equinox; and it seemed to those who watched at the sufferer's bedside that his life was ebbing away as slowly and as steadily as the hours of sunshine in the shortening day.

Today there was a look upon his face which caused Rachel many times to turn anxious and beseeching eyes upon her mother, and yet what she read in the expression of that worn and gentle countenance only confirmed her own impressions.

The Squire lay very still and quiet, dozing as it seemed, whilst the fire crackled cheerfully up the wide chimney, and the rain dashed ceaselessly against the windows. He had not spoken for many hours. There had come into Rachel's heart a terrible fear lest he should never speak again. The shadow on his face looked so gray; the features had taken so strange and pinched a look.

Rachel had seen death before in many humble homes, although it had, so far, not touched any of her own nearest and dearest. She had watched that creeping shadow before now, for her heart always went out to the sick and the suffering, and her feet led her to the homes of those who stood in need of tender sympathy and womanly aid. But

when the shadow gathered upon the face of her own loved father, the pressure upon her heart seemed almost more than she could bear. The tears stole down her cheeks, and her eyes sought those of her mother with a glance of almost pitiful appeal.

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The leech had stolen into the room, had stood beside the patient, had shaken his head, and stolen away. He knew that his skill, such as it was, could avail nothing now; it was but the question of a few hours.

All day that stupor had continued. Rachel had feared they would never hear his voice, or see the loving glance of his eyes again. She had passed the time between a study of that wasted face, and an eager and restless looking forth from the casement, as though in search of something or somebody who came not.

Often she saw servants and messengers hastening this way and that, exchanging words with each other, and starting off afresh; but the one stalwart figure, for which she gazed with aching eyes, appeared not, and often a sigh would break from her lips, whilst from time to time a tear forced its way to her eyes.

Dusk was falling now. She could no longer see across the expanse of park land which surrounded Gablehurst. She drew the curtains at last with gentle hands, and piled up the logs upon the hearth. There was a glint of something in her eyes not altogether accounted for by the tears in them. It was a sparkle which bespoke wounded sensibility—something approaching to anger.

“O brother, brother,” she whispered, with dry lips, “how can you treat him so? Have you a heart? How terrible a judgment you seem to be seeking to draw down upon yourself! What will the end be like, if this is the beginning?”

The flames leapt up with a sudden ruddy glow. The room had been dark before; now it was suddenly flooded with a brilliant palpitating light. As Rachel turned back to the bed, she saw that her father’s eyes had opened. The mists of weakness no longer seemed to cloud his sight. He was looking round him with comprehension and observation.

“Where is Tom?”

It was the question they had been expecting all day. It was in anticipation of this that messengers had been scouring the neighbourhood in search of that young ne’er-do-well, Tom Tufton, the good Squire’s unworthy son.

And yet, unworthy as he was—idle, reckless, dissipated, a source of pain and anxiety to father, mother, and sister—young Tom was beloved by the people in and about his home, albeit they all shook their heads over his follies and wildness, and wondered with bated breath what would befall Gablehurst when the young master should be lord of all.

“Where is Tom?” asked the Squire, in a firmer voice than they had thought to hear again.

“Dear father, we have sent for him,” answered Rachel soothingly; “he will be here anon.”



“I would speak with Tom,” said the Squire. “There are things I needs must say to him ere I close my eyes for ever. Perchance I have already delayed too long. Yet I have waited and waited, hoping for signs of seriousness in one so soon to lose a parent. But seriousness and Tom have no dealings together, it would seem. God forgive us if it be any lack on our part that has made our son the wild young blade that he seems like to be!”

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A little sob broke from the mother's lips. It was the bitterest thought of all to the parents; and yet they could not see wherein they had erred. They had striven to bring up the boy well. He had had the same training as his father before him. There had been no lack of firmness, and no lack of love, but the result, as at present seen, was terrible to the father and mother.

The squire heard the stifled sound of grief, and put out his hand to clasp that of his wife.

"Remember he is the child of many prayers," he said. "We must believe that those prayers will be answered. We must have faith in God."

"I will try—I will try," answered the poor mother; "but oh, my husband, how shall I hope to cope with that wild spirit when you are gone?"

It was a hard question to answer, for the Squire himself had found his son more than a match for him many a time. It was true that he had done all that man can do to protect wife and daughter from the reckless extravagance of an ungoverned nature; but he knew well that Tom was not one to see himself tamely set aside. There were difficulties ahead for these two women, and the future of his son lay like a load upon his spirit.

"I would speak with Tom," he said, after a brief pause, during which Rachel administered a draught of the cordial which did most to support the failing strength of the dying man. Just at this moment the lamp of life seemed to be glowing with fresh strength. It was but the last flicker before extinction, and the wife knew it, but Rachel experienced a glow of hope that perhaps it might mean a temporary improvement.

"I will go and see if he has come," she said. "Perchance they have found and brought him by now."

She glided from the room, just giving one backward glance in so doing, when the expression on her mother's face brought a quick spasm of pain to her heart. There was a strange conflict of feeling going on within her, as she trod the corridor with swift steps, and passed rapidly down into the hall beneath.

This hall was a great square place, with a glowing fire illuminating it, the dancing shadows falling grotesquely upon the pictured Tufcons that lined the walls, and upon the weapons which hung, together with trophies of game, between them. In the centre of the hall was an oak table, heavily carved about the legs, and at this table stood a tall, broad-shouldered young man, clad in the stout leathern breeches and full coat of the period, tossing off a steaming tankard of some spirituous liquor, although the flush on his face, and the slightly unsteady way in which he held the vessel, seemed to indicate that he stood in no further need of strong drink.



Rachel came swiftly down the staircase, her footfall making scarcely any sound upon the shallow polished steps.

“Tom!” she exclaimed, in a voice full of repressed feeling, “how can you delay drinking here, when your father upstairs is dying, and is asking for you?”



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“Dying, quotha!” returned the young man, with a foolish laugh; “methinks I have heard that tale somewhat too often to be scared by it now, sweet sister!” and he patted her shoulder with a gesture from which she instinctively recoiled.

“Tom, have you no heart? He will not last the night through. Got you not our messages, sent hours ago? How can you show yourself so careless—so cruel? But tarry no longer now you are here. He has asked for you twice. Take care lest you dally too long!”

Something in Rachel’s face and in her manner of speaking seemed to make an impression upon the young roisterer. Tom was not drunk, although he had been spending the day with comrades who seasoned every sentence with an oath, and flavoured every pastime with strong drink. A man with a weaker head might have been overcome by the libations in which he had indulged, but Tom was a seasoned vessel by that time, and he could stand a good deal.

He was in a noisy and reckless mood, but he had the command of his faculties. He saw that his sister was speaking with conviction, and he prepared to do her bidding.

At the same time, Tom was not seriously alarmed about his father. The Squire’s long illness had bred in him a sort of disbelief in any fatal termination. He had made up his mind that women and doctors were all fools together, and frightened themselves for nothing. He had resolved against letting himself be scared by their long faces and doleful prognostications, and had gone on in his wonted courses with reckless bravado. He was not altogether an undutiful son. He had some affection for both father and mother. But his affection was not strong enough to keep him from following out his own wishes. He had long been a sort of leader amongst the young men of the place and neighbourhood, and he enjoyed the reputation he held of being a daring young blade, not far inferior in prowess and recklessness to those young bloods about town, reports of whose doings sometimes reached the wilds of Essex, stirring up Tom Tufton’s ambition to follow in their wake.

He always declared that he meant no harm, and did no harm, to any. The natives of the place were certainly proud of him, even if they sometimes fell to rating and crying shame upon him. He knew his popularity; he knew that he had a fine figure and a handsome face; he knew that he had the sort of address which carried him through his scrapes and adventures with flying colours. He found the world a pleasant place, and saw no reason why he should not enjoy himself in his own way whilst he was young. Some day he would marry and sober down, and live as his fathers had done before him; but, meantime, he meant to have his fling.

There were other Tuftons who had done the like before him, as his father knew to his cost. Several times had the estate been sadly impoverished by the demands made upon it by some of the wild younger brothers, who had bequeathed (as it seemed) their

characteristics to this young scion, Tom. The Squire himself had been living with great economy, that he might pay off a mortgage which had been contracted by his own father, in order to save the honour of the family, which had been imperilled by the extravagance of his brother.

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Tom never troubled himself about these things. He cared little how his father scraped and saved, if he had but money in his pockets sufficient for the needs of the day. Extravagance in money was less Tom's foible than recklessness in his exploits, and a daring disregard of authority. No doubt he would have made away with money had he possessed it; but as everybody knew that he did not possess a long purse, and that the Squire would not be likely to pay his son's debts of honour, he was saved from the temptation of plunging deeply into debt. People did not care to trust him too far.

So, as he climbed the shallow stairs three at once, he told himself that his father had no need to speak severely to him. He had only been as other young men, and had not got into serious debt or trouble. Tom had almost persuaded himself, in fact, that he had been on the whole a very estimable sort of youth, and he entered the sick room with something of a swaggering air, as much as to say that he had no cause for shame.

But at the sight which greeted his eyes, as they met those of the sick man, a sobering change came over him. He had seen death sometimes, and the sight of it had always painfully affected him. He hated to be brought up short, as it were, and forced to see the serious, the solemn, the awe inspiring in life. He wanted to live in the present; he did not want to be forced to face the inevitable future.

"Tom," said his father's voice, in weak but distinct accents, "you have come, and it is well. I have things to say to you which may not longer be delayed. Take that chair beside me. I would see your face once again."

Tom would far rather have lingered in the shadows of the background; but his mother had risen and motioned him to take her place. He sat down rather awkwardly; and mother and daughter, without leaving the room, retired to the background, and sat together upon a distant settle, holding each other by the hand.

"Tom," said the dying man, "I have sent for you because there are things which I would rather you should hear from my lips than learn from others after my death."

"Oh, you will not die yet, father; you will be better soon," said Tom uneasily, letting his glance wander restlessly round the room to avoid the searching gaze of those luminous eyes.

"Life and death are in God's hands, boy; and I think my summons has come. Tom, have you been counting upon being master here when I am gone?"

"I don't know that I ever thought much about it," answered Tom, rather taken aback; "but I suppose I come after you."

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“Yes, Tom, you come after me; but not immediately. I have so settled my affairs that your mother remains here and administers the estate until you are five and twenty—that will be three years hence. By that time the burdens will be cleared away—and I fear you would never clear them off were you in power. By that time it will be possible for you to come and live here (I trust a wiser and a better man), whilst the estate can bear the charge upon it of a sufficient income to be paid to your mother and sister to live in comfort at Little Gables, which has been willed absolutely to your mother and to Rachel after her. At present the estate could not bear that drain—unless only to get into fresh difficulties; but three more years will put things right. During those three years, Tom, you will not be master of Gablehurst. You will have no more power than you have had in my lifetime. But I hope and trust you will be a dutiful son to your mother, and will cause her no heart-breaking anxieties, and oppose no vexatious obstacles to her management of the estate.”

It cannot be denied that Tom was taken aback at this. He had naturally supposed that he would succeed to his father’s position as squire of Gablehurst without let or hindrance; and it was a decided blow to him to feel that he was still to occupy a subordinate position, squire only in name. It was all very well when his father lived—that was right and natural enough—but to see his mother ruling, and himself submitting to her rule!—that was a thing he had not bargained for. He felt as though he would be the laughing-stock of all his friends.

The father saw the look upon his face, and it pained him.

“You do not like the arrangement, Tom; and yet I know it is the best which can be made.”

“Oh yes, in a way. I see what you mean. I don’t understand scraping and paring myself; yet, of course, it will be best to get the mortgage paid off once and for all. I can see that well enough. But I confess it will be poor fun living at Gablehurst as a little boy tied to his mother’s apron strings. I would rather go away altogether, and see the world for myself.”

“Well, Tom,” answered the father in the same low, even tones, “your mother and I have sometimes asked ourselves seriously whether you might not do better away from home; whether it might not be the best thing we could do for you to sever you from your present companions, and see if you could not find better ones elsewhere.”

“I have no fault to find with my friends,” said Tom quickly.

“No, my son, I fear not. But we have much to complain of.”

“I don’t see what!” cried young Tom rather hotly.



“That is the worst of it. Did you see greater harm, our anxieties would be less. But what are we to think of these cruel sports in which you indulge, these scenes of vice and drunkenness where you are constantly found? Even the Sabbath is not sacred to you. What is this story we hear of you—that no girl may even go to church without paying ‘Tom Tufton’s toll’ at the lych gate?”



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Tom broke into a sudden laugh.

“They like that toll well enough, father, I can tell you; else they could go round the other way. Why, you yourself salute the farmers’ little wenches on the cheek sometimes—I have seen you do it; and why not I the older ones?”

The Squire looked at his son with mournful intensity of gaze.

“Tom, Tom, I think sometimes that thou dost err more from thoughtlessness than from wickedness; but, my son, thoughtlessness, if carried to excess, may become wickedness, and may breed vice. I verily believe that in half thy pranks thou dost mean no great harm; but thou art growing to man’s estate, Tom. It is time that thou didst put away childish things. What is pardoned to youth, may not so easily be pardoned to manhood. Have a care, Tom, have a care! Oh, my son, remember that the day will come when thou too must lie face to face with death, even as I do tonight. Let not the record upon which thou wilt then look be one of vice and profligacy. It needs must be that in such a moment our lives seem deeply stained by sin; but strive so to live that thou mayest at least be able to say, ‘I have striven to do my duty—the Lord pardon all my imperfections!’ For, Tom, if thou dost persevere in careless and evil courses, it may be that the power to ask the Lord’s forgiveness may pass from thee; and if it comes to such a pass, may the Lord have mercy upon thy wretched soul!”

The dying man stopped short, a spasm of suffering passing over his face. The thought had been a terrible one to him. Yet he had been bred up in the somewhat stern Puritan tenets, and it was not in his creed to speak so much of the everlasting mercy as the everlasting judgment.

Tom put the cup of cordial to his father’s lips, himself somewhat sobered by the words heard and the visions called up. He was neither callous nor hard-hearted; and his father was dying. In that moment he really longed to turn over a new leaf, and cut adrift from former temptations.

“Then, father, let me go,” he said; “let me try afresh in a new place. I could not do it here perhaps; but I think I could elsewhere.”

“If that be so, my son, then thou hadst better go,” said the dying man. “I would that thou couldst have remained to be the stay and support of thy mother; but if not, then it may be thou wilt be better elsewhere. I have thought often of this. I and thy mother have talked it over many times. I have even made provision for it, as she will tell thee and show thee. But, Tom, if thou go hence, linger not in London, where, I fear me, thou wouldst soon be ruined body and soul. There be stirring things passing in the great world beyond the seas. Take ship, and go and see some of these things. Linger not in idleness in the haunts of vice. The world is a bigger place than thou canst know. Go forth and see it, and learn and find thy manhood’s strength.”

Tom's eyes glistened at the thought. It had never occurred to him as possible to leave his native place. Now it suddenly seemed as though a new life were opening out before him.

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“Where shall I go, father?” he asked.

The Squire was silent for a while. He had exhausted himself by the energy with which he had spoken hitherto. When next he opened his lips his words came more slowly and languidly.

“If I were in your place, boy, I should go forth and see what is doing at the seat of war. I love not war for its own sake. It is a cruel and terrible thing. Yet there be times when it becomes a righteous thing; and methinks England is doing right to ally herself with the foes of France to crush the tyranny of that proud nation, whose king would fain be monarch of all Europe if he could. I know not whether men untrained to arms may enlist themselves in the ranks of the great Duke of Marlborough, whose genius is winning renown for England’s sons. But were I young, methinks I would go forth and see some of the great things that are doing in the world; and it might well be that a fine grown young fellow, with stalwart limbs, a firm seat on a horse, and a knowledge of sword play and the use of firearms, might even find a place in the ranks of the great general. Whether or not, he would see life as he had never seen it before, and learn lessons which might make a man of him all his life.”

The prospect was attractive and exciting for Tom, who loved a fight as he loved nothing else, and who had a very exalted idea of his own prowess and skill in arms. He could wrestle and throw better than any antagonist he had ever met, and was no novice with pistol or sword. He had the good opinion of his powers which naturally came to one who had seldom or never found his match in his native place; and already in imagination he saw himself riding at the head of a troop of soldiers, and winning laurels on all sides by his bravery and address.

The Squire’s voice had sunk into the silence of exhaustion. He had closed his eyes, and only opened them again after a long interval. Their glance met that of young Tom, and the father seemed to read something of what was passing in his mind.

“Tom, lad,” he said feebly, reaching forth his hand and trying to grasp the great horny fist of his son, “strive to be humble. Think not too well of thyself. Seek counsel from God in all things. Be not wise in thine own eyes. If thou art self willed, vain, and headstrong, grief and pain will be thy lot. Seek first the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness—”

But here the voice failed; and Tom, his quick nature touched and sobered, rose hastily, and, with a muttered promise of quick return, threw himself out of the room, as though afraid to trust himself there longer. He was such a stranger to keen emotion, that he fled from before it with a sense of dread.

The wife came back to her husband’s bedside. He looked into her face and said, faintly:



“The lad hath yet a warm heart.”

“I have always felt that,” she answered quickly. “But oh, my husband, why send him forth to the perils of war?”



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“In the hope that the stern discipline of a soldier’s life may fit him for the duties which will be his at home. The lad needs above all things to learn to obey. Till he has mastered the lesson of submission, he can never be fit to hold the reins of government. That lesson he will learn most quickly in the life of the camp. There he will be no great man, but an overgrown boy to be taught and drilled. Young Tom needs to find his own level. That is what he never will do at home. He has lorded it over the neighbourhood too long already.”

“But if he leaves us and goes forth into the world, who will care for his immortal soul?” asked the mother, with tears in her eyes.

“Has he listened to our words of admonition and warning at home?” asked the Squire, with a strange look in his glazing eyes. “Nay, wife, I feel as I lie here dying, that the life of the soul is something we poor frail human creatures must not try too much to touch. The Spirit of God will work in His own time. We may pray and weep and plead before God for an erring son, and we believe our prayers will be answered; but it will be in His time, not in our own. And time and place are no barriers with Him. He will do for Tom, I will not doubt it, what we have failed to do with all our pains and care.”

The mother wept silently—for the husband whose life was ebbing away; for the son over whose heart she seemed to have so little control; for herself, soon to be left alone in the world, with only her daughter for her prop and stay. She was not a weak or helpless creature. She had been in her husband’s confidence, and had been his helpmeet throughout their married life. She was well able to carry on single-handed the course of action he had pursued through his long rule at Gablehurst; yet not the less for this did she feel the desolation of her approaching widowhood; and it seemed an additional sorrow (although she recognized its necessity) that Tom was also to be taken from her.

A mother’s love for her only son is a very sacred and compelling thing. Tom had not been a comfort or support to his parents; he was likely, if he remained, to be a source of endless trouble to his mother during her reign at the old house; yet none the less did it seem to her a heart-breaking thing to have to part from him.

The light about them grew more dim as the fire burned with a steady glow instead of with dancing flames. Rachel had lighted a lamp, yet it did little to illumine the great room. The sick man lay as though asleep.

Presently the mother spoke in a whisper to her daughter.

“Fetch Tom,” she said.

Rachel knew what that meant, and her heart beat to suffocation. She crept from the room, and returned with her brother, and they stood side by side at one side of the bed, whilst their mother knelt at the other.



Once the dying man opened his eyes, and looked from one to another of those about him, though whether he saw them they did not know. Then his eyes closed, he gave a sigh, and turned upon his pillows.



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The Squire of Gablehurst had passed to his last account.

CHAPTER II. OUT INTO THE WORLD.

“You had better let me go, mother. I shall do no good here.”

Tom stood before his mother with a flush upon his handsome face—a flush that was one partly of shame, partly of anger, with a dash of excitement and eagerness thrown in.

His mother was in tears. She had been uttering words of reproach and sorrow; for after a period of wonderful steadiness immediately succeeding his father’s death, young Tom had broken out into his wild ways again, and her fond hopes of seeing him grow into her comfort and stay were dashed ruthlessly to the ground again. The impression made upon him by the death of the Squire was growing dim now. His old companions were tempting him back to their ranks, and he had neither strength of purpose nor the resolute desire to resist their overtures.

“You had better let me go. You know my father said it. I have never done any good here, and I never shall. I want to see the world, and I see nothing here. Gablehurst and Gablethorpe are too narrow for me. I will go to foreign lands, and come back to you with a better record to show. I think I could make a fine soldier, but in this miserable little place a man has no scope.”

“A man has scope to become a good landlord, a kind master, a God-fearing head of his household,” said the mother, with a sigh in her voice.

But Tom interrupted impatiently:

“That is all very well when one is the master. Perhaps when I come back I can be all that myself; but now I am a dummy—a nobody, and they all make game of me for being a mock squire! My father himself knew that no man of spirit would stand such a humiliating arrangement. If he could not trust me to succeed him, he did well to arrange for me to go elsewhere. He said you would tell me what provision he had made for me to do so.”

The moment had come that the mother had so long dreaded. She had to face the separation from her son, and to send him forth into the world alone. But the experiences of the past weeks had taught her that perhaps this was the best thing that could happen to young Tom. In Gablethorpe he had no chance of getting away from evil associates. In a different place he might find friends of a different stamp.

She rose and silently unlocked a great oaken press, clamped with iron, a place where the Squire kept all his valuable papers, and some of the heirlooms which had come



down to him from his forefathers. Tom looked on with curious eyes. He had always experienced, from childhood upwards, a certain sense of awe when that press was unlocked and thrown open. He now observed his mother's actions with great curiosity.

"Come, Tom, and lift down that box, for it is heavy," she said; and Tom came forward and carefully lifted down a small iron-bound chest, which, for its size, was in truth remarkably heavy. This box was placed upon the table, whilst the mother locked up the safe once more.



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Then she selected a small key from a number in a bag at her girdle, and offered it to her son.

“There, Tom, the box and its contents are yours. You will find within five hundred golden pieces—guineas every one of them, bright and new from the mint. Your father saved them up for you for many long years, in case it should ever become needful that you should leave home to see the world. Always it was his hope that you would remain at home to be his comfort and stay; but if that could not be, then would he wish to send forth his only son in such a manner as beseemed his condition in life.”

Tom’s eyes sparkled. A flush mounted to his cheek, and his hand shook a little as he put the key into the lock.

It was all true. There lay, in neat rolls, more money than he had ever seen in all his life—a fortune for a prince, as it seemed to him in his youthful inexperience. The admonitions and counsel of his mother fell on deaf ears. Tom’s busy brain was planning a thousand ways in which his wealth might be expended. He would go forth. He would see the world. He would win fame and fortune. He would never return to Gablehurst until he brought with him a name which should cause the ears of those who knew him to tingle by reason of the fame he had won!

“Nay, but boast not of the future, my son,” pleaded the mother, with a note of anxiety in her voice; “and be not over confident. The times are perilous, and you are but an untried youth. Boasting is not well.”

But Tom could not listen. He laughingly repeated his boast, and was off to the stables forthwith, to pick for himself the best horses for his ride to London. For, of course, he must first go there, to fit himself out for his journey beyond seas, and find out where the army of the Duke was at present to be found.

Vague rumours of the great victory had penetrated to the wilds of Essex; but where Blenheim was, and what the victory was all about, the rustics knew as little as “Old Kaspar” of the immortal ballad of later days. The squires were little less vague in their ideas as to the scope and purpose of the war. It was to abase the power of France—so much they knew, and was unpopular with the Tories of Jacobite leanings, for the reason that the French king was sheltering the dethroned monarch of the Stuart line. But then the great Duke who was winning all these victories was said to be a staunch Tory himself; so that it was all rather confusing, and Tom was just as ignorant and ill-informed on all these topics as the hinds who tilled his fields. He had never cared to inform himself of what was passing in the world, and the newspapers had always seemed to him very dull reading.

Now, however, he wished he knew a little more; but he told himself that he should quickly pick up everything in London. His heart beat at the thought of seeing that

wonderful city; and although he carelessly promised his mother not to linger there long, he was by no means sure that he would not make a good stay, and learn the fashions of the gay world before he crossed the sea.



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He was quite of the opinion that, clad in a new suit of fashionable make, he could ruffle it with the best of the young bloods about town. He was now all in a fever to be off. He selected for his attendant a young groom, with whom he had long been more intimate than his father approved. His mother in vain besought him to take faithful old John, or at least Peter, whom they had known from boyhood; but Tom would have nobody but young Robin, and declared that he and Robin, mounted upon Wildfire and Wildgoose—two of the best and fleetest horses ever reared in the meadows round Gablehurst—could distance any highwaymen who might try to stop them, or shoot them down if they could not shake them off.

For these were days when travelling was none too safe, and the transit of the heavy bag of golden guineas made an additional source of danger. For there were highway robbers and footpads, who seemed to have a seventh sense for the scenting of gold. It was probable that they had spies and confederates in all sorts of places, and that they were warned beforehand when travellers rode with money and valuables upon their persons.

It was, therefore, small wonder that mother and sister looked with somewhat sinking hearts at the handsome young fellow, in his workman-like, if rustic, riding dress, as he sat upon his horse at the hall door, giving a last look round him at the little crowd gathered to see him ride away.

“You will write and tell us of your safe arrival in London; and be very careful how you cross Epping Forest,” said the mother.

And young Tom answered gaily,—“Oh, never fear for me. Wildfire and I can ride through and ride down anything! I will send a letter from London, but after that you must not look for anything but silence. When men cross the seas, and live amid battles and marches, letters can scarce be written, still less safely carried.”

He stooped from his saddle, and once more kissed both mother and sister. Then the servants and tenants crowded round, full of good wishes for a prosperous journey and a happy return; and Tom answered them with gay words of promise. He would come back again, covered with fame and glory. They would hear of his doings before they saw him again, and when he came back he would “take toll again of all his old playmates;” and so saying, he looked laughingly round upon the blushing girls, who had paid Tom Tufton’s toll many a time, between jest and earnest, by the lych gate.

They all admired and liked the handsome lad, even though his ways were more wild and reckless than the elders could approve. But all declared that it would do him all the good in the world to go out and see life in other places. It would cool his hot blood, and teach him wisdom; and, after all, lads always would be lads till manhood’s cares and lessons had tamed them.



So Tom rode away in high spirits, Robin following on Wildgoose, with the saddlebags strapped in front of him. They did not take much with them, as Tom meant to equip himself in town, and was wearing his finest home-made suit upon the journey. He had his precious guineas carefully secured about his person. They were heavy, it is true, but he liked to feel the weight of them, and to know that they were safe.



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For many miles he was constantly receiving hails from friends and comrades; sometimes a band of young men would ride with him for a few miles, and then, wishing him good luck, return home again. At some houses which he passed, bright eyes would look out from the windows, and kerchiefs would be waved in greeting and farewell.

Tom may perhaps be forgiven for regarding himself somewhat in the light of a young prince riding forth to see the world. Everything in his past life had combined to give him a good opinion of himself, and make him fancy himself irresistible alike with men and women. For he was undoubtedly the strongest and handsomest youth in his own small world.

He sang and whistled as he rode along in the crisp morning air. October had dashed the trees with vivid tints of red and gold. A crisp touch of frost was in the air, and though the noonday sun was bright and hot, there were indications of approaching winter plain to be seen.

They baited their horses for an hour at a little inn where Tom was slightly known; but when he spoke of pressing on, and asked where the next halting place was, mine host advised his remaining where he was till morning, as he was now close to the forest boundaries, and not only were the paths somewhat intricate, but there were always footpads, if not worse, lurking in the recesses of the wood, ready to pounce upon unwary travellers, especially after sundown.

“And the light goes quickly beneath the trees. For my part, I would rather travel by the waxing light of early morn than by the fading glow of an autumn evening.”

Tom had meant to arrive at this inn full two hours before he did; for he had allowed his friends to hinder him on his way, and had stopped all too often to exchange a word with some maiden watching from a window or by a gate. He had intended reaching a little village known to Robin, situated in the forest itself, before night fell; and even as it was, he was by no means prepared to abandon the hope of getting there.

Robin was not afraid of darkness or of footpads. He had a very good knowledge of the forest, and was eager to press on. It was still quite light, and Tom was in all the fervour of his first impetuosity. So, as soon as the horses were baited and themselves refreshed, they mounted once more, and pushed gaily along, feeling themselves quite equal to repel any wretched footpads who might try to assault them.

As for the regular highway robbers, well armed and well mounted, they favoured better-frequented routes than this. Open heaths were their favourite hunting grounds, though they liked well enough to lie in hiding in the forests when they had brought too much notoriety upon themselves. These unfrequented forest paths did not offer them sufficient hope of booty to attract them in large numbers, and Tom had no fear of meeting an enemy too strong for him.



But security is not always safety, as Tom was destined to find to his cost. In spite of their best efforts, and the gallant response made by their good horses, dusk fell whilst they were still threading the tortuous forest paths, and Robin was fain to admit that he would be puzzled to find the way in the dark; indeed, he was not certain that he was on the right track now.



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It was impossible to ride fast in the gathering darkness, and upon so rough a way; and Tom had more than once suggested that they should make their bed in some hollow tree, and wait for daylight before pursuing their journey.

They had halted in an open place, and were just discussing the matter, when—whiz!—a bullet grazed the flank of Wildgoose, and the mettlesome creature reared straight into the air, threatening to fall backwards over his rider.

“Mark ho!” cried a loud voice, and there was a crackling of the underwood all round.

“It is the footpads!” cried Robin. “I have beard that call before;” and in a moment the travellers had their pistols out, and were warily awaiting the first sign of attack.

It was not long in coming. Three men with blackened faces sprang out from different places, and the crackling of the underwood showed that more were lurking out of sight.

Tom took steady aim, and brought down the foremost villain at the first shot; but Robin was not so lucky. He winged his man, but did not drop him, and the next moment four stalwart figures had sprung out to the aid of their comrades, and the travellers were surrounded.

Tom set his teeth hard, a great fury in his heart. He took aim again, and another of his assailants dropped as he pulled the trigger; then, setting spurs to Wildfire, who was well-nigh distracted with terror at the noise and the flash in the darkness, he rode clean over the man who had sprung at his bridle rein, and calling to Robin to follow him, he sped away in the darkness at a pace which was risk to life and limb.

The footpads seemed taken aback by this move, for they had reckoned that a headlong flight into the recesses of the forest would be too great a peril to be risked; and indeed it was a headstrong course to take. But Tom was in a headstrong mood, and his horse was beside himself with fear. Both man and beast were well used to reckless riding, and Tom had eyes like a cat, whilst Wildfire had both the wonderful sight and wonderful instinct of his race. Tom lay along the horse’s back, now on this side, now on that, dodging, swaying, manoeuvring, in a fashion which showed marvellous horsemanship, and all the while listening eagerly for the sound of Wildgoose’s following steps.

But he heard nothing. The silence of the forest was unbroken save for the noise he made himself. It became plain at last that he was alone. Robin and Wildgoose had either lost his track, or had not followed him.

And a sudden doubt surged into Tom’s brain as to whether or not Robin had betrayed him to the footpads. Was it not Robin who had connived at all the halts upon the way in the morning, Robin who had advised pushing on, and had undertaken to find the way by day or night? Robin was a son of the forest himself. Might he not have friends amongst

these very outlaws? Had not his father warned him before this that he did not trust Robin, and did not like his son's intimacy with the young man?



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All these thoughts came surging into Tom's brain as he rode on through the dark forest. He was loath to harbour doubts of his servant and friend; but he could not lay them to rest, do what he would.

But for these doubts he would have ridden back in search of his comrade. As it was, he set his teeth somewhat grimly, and rode onwards. Robin had no money about him. He would escape with the loss of his horse, and could follow his master on foot to London if he chose. It was not worth while to risk life and fortune in attempting the rescue of a fellow who might be a villain and a traitor.

It seemed a heartless thing to do to leave Robin to his fate, but for all that Tom could not make up his mind to turn back and search for him; for he felt it was quite probable he would only fall into a cunningly-devised ambush. But he could not ride all night through the forest. He might fetch a circuit all unknowingly, and find himself in the midst of the footpads again. The moon had now risen, and was giving a faint light. By its aid Tom was able to examine the nature of the ground about him, and presently saw at a short distance a dark, arched cavity in the face of a mass of gravelly rock which rose up on his left hand. It had the appearance of a cave, and Tom got off and carefully examined the loose shale round the mouth of it for the trace of recent footsteps. He did not want to fall into the hands of a band of marauders.

But he could not see any trace of footmarks, either of man or beast; and the cave was tempting to one who had ridden since early morning. There was a pool of water close at hand, where his horse eagerly stooped to quench his thirst; and Tom loosed the girths, and left the creature to browse at will; for Wildfire was as tame as a dog, and knew his master's voice well. He could be trusted not to wander far away, and to come back at the sound of whistle or call. Indeed, it was probable that he would presently find his way into the cave, and lie by his master's side.

Tom found that he could make himself comfortable enough in the little cavern. It was not very deep, but it afforded protection from the cold night wind; and a great heap of leaves at the end bespoke the fact that other travellers had utilized the place before. Tom had a little food in his wallet, which he munched in silence, feeling his spirits somewhat damped by the events of the last hour, and yet he was as fully resolved as ever to see life and taste of adventure before he returned home again.

His adventures had begun rather before he had bargained; but, after all, that was the way of life. He would learn in future to trust nobody and to believe in nobody. All men were liars—did not the Scriptures say as much? It was as well to learn that lesson soon as late. He would not waste a regret upon Robin. His horse was the one friend in whom he would trust. He at least would never betray or desert him.



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Presently Wildfire, having eaten his fill of herbage, came and snuffed at the cave's mouth with a whinny of inquiry. On hearing Tom's voice, he stepped lightly in, and after standing for a while beside his master, lay down between him and the opening to the cave, so that Tom was well shielded from the keen night air, and could sleep as snugly as in his bed at home.

Sleep he did, and soundly too; for the day's ride had wearied him, and he was of the age and temperament when slumber is seldom wooed in vain. How long he slept he knew not; but he was aroused at length by a movement of Wildfire. The horse had lifted his head, and was snorting slightly as if in anxiety or fear.

Tom looked out. The gray of dawn was in the sky, and between him and the light stood a tall, motionless figure, outlined clearly in the cave's mouth by the coming glow in the east. It was the figure of a man. He held in his hand a great horse pistol, and was evidently studying with some curiosity the sleeping figures whose slumbers he had disturbed.

Tom would have sprung to his feet, but the man called out in a clear, sharp voice:

"Keep where you are, or I fire!"

The hot blood surged into Tom's cheeks; but for once prudence took the upper hand of valour, and he remained sitting upright behind the still recumbent figure of Wildfire. He had restrained the horse from rising by the pressure of his hand. He knew by hearsay that robbers seldom fired upon a good horse if there were a chance of making a capture of so valuable an acquisition. He might find shelter behind the body of the good steed yet.

"What do you want with me?" he asked, speaking as calmly as he could, but bitterly regretting the carelessness which had omitted to load again his pistol after the brush with the footpads of the previous night. He had meant to do it before falling asleep, but drowsiness had come quickly upon him, and he was now practically at the mercy of the man who stood in the cave's mouth, for there was no way of escape save past him.

"I only want your money, my young friend," answered the man, whose face was becoming more visible every moment in the growing light. "I doubt not you have a bag of gold pieces somewhere upon your person. Give them up to me, and you shall go your way in peace."

The veins on Tom's forehead swelled with rage and impotent fury. He set his teeth, and his voice sounded hoarse and choked.

"You will have to take my life first," he said.



“Nay, but that is folly,” remonstrated the elder man, who had a rather fine face, and much of the air and manner of a gentleman, as Tom was quick to perceive. “I desire no man’s death; I only ask for his gold, which is, after all, but the dross of the earth; and life for a fine young fellow like yourself is full of joyous promise, even though he carry no purse with him.”



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“I tell you,” answered Tom, in the same stubborn way, “that if you take my money, you will have first to take my life. Here have I been leading the life of a dog or of a boor all these years—squire’s son though men call me. I have seen nothing, I have learned nothing; I have consorted with low hinds; I have been no better than the swine in the fields. Now at last I have my liberty and a bag of gold given to me. I am sent out to see the world, and to enjoy life. Take my gold from me, and I must perforce go back to the old life. I would choose death sooner. Therefore, sir, let us fight like men for this same bag of gold; for I will defend it with every drop of my blood!”

And in spite of the peril of so doing, Tom sprang to his feet and stood facing his antagonist with the air of a man whose blood is up, and who will prove no mean adversary.

“Come now, I like that spirit,” said the other. “In these days of dandies and ruffled courtiers, stuffed with fine-sounding words but puling cowards at heart, it refreshes the spirit to meet a youngster of your sort. Tell me your name, young master, and let us talk this matter over together. I have ever sought to mingle mercy and discretion with the need for making a livelihood out of my fellowmen.”

Tom was surprised into a short laugh at this unexpected address.

“I am Tom Tufton of Gablehurst,” he began, but was quickly interrupted.

“What! the son of the good Squire of Gablehurst! Lad, is this the truth?”

“Ay, verily,” answered Tom, somewhat taken aback. “Did you know my father? Alas! he is dead.”

“Dead! What! Is that so? Then the world is the poorer by one good man. And you are his son, and called by his name! What are you doing away from home? Are you not master there?”

“No,” answered Tom, with a flush on his cheek. “I am to see the world first. My mother will rule for me till I be five and twenty. I have money given me, and I am to seek fame and fortune afar. That is what I said to you. Take my money from me, and I must needs return to the life I have left—and I would sooner die!”

“Tut, tut, boy. Speak not so wildly; nor think that I will touch a penny of your good father’s gold. I am not sunk so low as that. Did he ever speak to you of Captain Jack, whom he once saved from the gallows?”

Tom shook his head. His father had not been a talking man.

“It was years ago now,” said the man thoughtfully, “and I did try for long after that to lead a different life; but in the end I came back to the one I love the best—the free life of the



road. But believe me, Tom Tufton, your father's act of clemency has never been forgotten. I too have shown mercy many a time and oft. I have my own code of honour and chivalry. I want money badly enough; but I will touch none of yours. I want a good horse; but I will lay no finger on yours. Go your way in peace, and drink your fill of the world's pleasures; but remember that if the time should come when you want a friend and a place of refuge, ask at The Three Ravens tavern on the skirts of this forest for news of Captain Jack, and whensoever you may come to me, I will share my last penny and my last crust with you, for love of the good man your father, who saved my unworthy life."



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The man spoke with visible emotion and Tom was moved also, he scarce knew why. A sudden sense of liking—almost of love—sprang up in his heart towards this freebooter. He laid a hand upon his arm.

“Take me clear of this forest,” he said, “and I will leave Wildfire in your hands as a token of gratitude. I have bethought me often that in London town he would pine his heart away. He loves the green glades of the woodland, and the free air of the fields and forests. Methinks you would be a kind master; and he is a loving and faithful creature. I might even lose him in London, where, they tell me, rogues abound. I would sooner leave him in your hands; and if I want him back some day, I will ask him of Captain Jack.”

The bargain was struck. Captain Jack accompanied Tom to the farthest limits of the forest, giving him meantime much information about life in London, and astonishing him by the intimate knowledge he possessed of life in every grade of society.

Tom listened in wonder and amaze; but Captain Jack answered his questions in such a way as to leave him little the wiser. He managed, however, to make friends with Wildfire almost as quickly as with his master; for the two men rode by turns, and Captain Jack’s horsemanship was of that finished kind which every horse understands and responds to.

“You are right not to take such a creature into London,” said Captain Jack, after trying the paces of Wildfire over a stretch of springy turf. “Some sharper would soon make away with him; but it will be a clever man who filches him from me! I will guard him as my greatest treasure, and he will be worth more to me than the guineas you carry in your bag.”

“And his brother is somewhere in the forest,” said Tom; and he told the story of Robin and Wildgoose, to which Captain Jack listened with a look of amusement.

“Clever fellow! clever fellow!” he muttered, “he will make one of the brotherhood one of these days!”

Tom began to realize, with a grim sense of humour, that he was aiding and abetting the mischievous schemes of some notorious highwayman, and that his father’s two favourite young horses, by which he set such store, were destined to become the property of the gentlemen of the road!

At the limits of the forest Tom and his companion parted. He had been put upon the highroad, and given careful instructions as to the way he must take. Moreover, Captain Jack had given him a password, which, he said, would protect him from molestation; although a traveller on foot was not in the same danger as one who rode a fine horse.



It cost Tom a pang to turn his back on Wildfire; but he felt so certain that the horse would pine in London, or be stolen away, that he preferred to leave him in the hands of a kind master who would treat him well.

“Take your fill of life. Keep open eyes, and believe every man to be a rogue till he prove himself an honest fellow,” was the parting advice of his companion, for whom he had already taken rather a strong liking; “and if ever town becomes too hot, come and join Captain Jack; and if ever you should chance to knock up against Lord Claud, tell him that his old master sends him greeting and felicitations, and is watching his career with admiration and delight.”



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With that the captain turned and galloped away; and Tom was left looking after him, wondering what the meaning of this last charge could be.

CHAPTER III. IN GAY LONDON TOWN.

Tom Tufton walked through Bishopsgate, and along the crowded dirty thoroughfare towards the Poultry, with a jaunty air of unconcern that did credit to his powers of dissimulation.

It was Captain Jack's parting word to him to dissemble all outward signs of astonishment at what he might see when he entered the city; to walk on without stopping to stare or gape, to look as though such sights were of everyday occurrence in his life, and to bear himself with a bold and self-sufficient air, as much as to tell the world at large that he was very well able to take care of himself, and that roisterers and bullies had better let him alone.

Tom acted his part with considerable acumen; but within he was consumed by astonished bewilderment, which increased as he turned westward towards Cheapside, and approached the still fashionable regions of Holborn and its environments.

The streets appeared to the country-bred youth to teem with life. Everything he set eyes on was strange and wonderful. The shops with their wares displayed, and noisy apprentices crying out to buyers, or exchanging fisticuffs with each other by way of interlude; the coaches carrying fine ladies hither and thither, tightly laced, swelled out with hoops, their hair so towering in its lace and powder as to provoke the query as to how it had ever attained such gigantic proportions; the gay gallants in their enormous perukes of powdered hair, and their wonderful flowered vests and gold-laced coats—all these things provoked the keenest wonder and amazement in Tom's breast; albeit he walked on without pausing to examine one more than another, or to exchange a word with any save some honest-looking shopman, of whom he would ask the way to Master Cale's shop just off Holborn.

If Tom had lost on the way to London his servant and both his horses, he had at least gained some information which might be of more value to him than all the rest of his possessions; for Captain Jack had told him to go to Master Cale's and lodge with him, telling him who had sent him, and had added that he would put him in the way of becoming a proper gentleman of fashion, without fleecing him and rooking him, as would inevitably be the case if he fell into the clutches of those birds of prey always on the lookout for young squires from the country coming up to learn the ways of the world, with a plentiful supply of guineas and inexperience.



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Master Cale seemed to be well known, and he was directed to his house in almost the same words by each person he asked. Master Cale was a perruquier of no small popularity, who had risen through honesty and ingenuity to be one of the most fashionable tradesmen of the day. He also sold vests or waistcoats, lace-edged neck cloths, gloves, sword scarfs and girdles, generally of his own design; yet though his shop was regularly crowded with gallants and courtiers, the man himself managed to preserve much of the honesty and simplicity which had been his making in the days gone by. Everybody liked and trusted Master Cale, and he was said to be the best-informed man in London town on matters connected with the court and its fashionable throng of hangers on.

As Tom walked onwards he realized for the first time in his life what a rustic-looking fellow he must appear. He had felt himself smart enough at home in his leather breeches, brown frieze double-breasted coat, scarlet vest, and riding boots, his hair tied behind with a scarlet riband to match the vest. But as he beheld the fine gentlemen lounging arm in arm along the streets in their huge curled wigs, gorgeous waistcoats reaching sometimes to the knees, gold embroidered coats, with huge cuffs turned back almost to the elbows, and scarfs of every hue of the rainbow supporting their swords, he felt himself a mere boor and bumpkin, and wondered much whether Master Cale would ever be able to turn him out a fine gentleman, fit to associate with those he saw in the streets.

As he pursued his way westward, he met parties of young rakes and roisterers setting out for the theatres, the play being then an earlier function than it has become of late years.

These men were swaggering along arm in arm, exchanging ribald jests with each other, and insulting the inoffensive passers by with coarse remarks interlarded with oaths, and, whenever occasion offered, tripping them up with their swords or canes and landing them in the gutter.

Some of these worthies wore cockades or badges, and later on Tom learned to know them as Darby captains, Tash captains, or Cock-and-bottle captains, according to the special sort of marauding which they favoured. He met one party of the dreaded Mohocks, or Mohawks, reeling along half intoxicated already, and ripe for any offensive mischief, which later in the day they were certain to perpetrate. They eyed the young rustic askance as it was, and Tom heard a whisper go through their ranks:

“Pity ‘tis so early i’ the day, or we’d sweat him rarely.”

But he held his head high, and swaggered along as though he felt himself a match for all and any who might attack him. Yet inwardly he felt that he would never go abroad in town without a sword at his girdle. What the “sweating” might be, he knew not; but he was assured that it was some sort of assault upon his person.

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At length he reached his destination, which was a shop of fine appearance in Drury Lane, just off the main thoroughfare of Holborn. It was then a street of some pretensions, albeit a narrow one, and Tom's eyes soon espied the name he was in search of over the door of a shop round which a score or more of gallants were lounging. In the doorway itself stood a very fine youth, at least he was fine as to his raiment, although he wore no wig and was but an apprentice of better figure and deportment than most. He was displaying to the admiring crowd a mighty fine waistcoat of embroidered satin, worked in gold and colours very cunningly, and trimmed with a frosted-gold cord of new design and workmanship. It was this waistcoat, which the young man called the Blenheim vest, that had attracted the crowd, and Tom could not at first get near the door, so much chaffering and laughing and rough play was going on round it.

So he filled up the time by seeking to understand the extraordinary jargon which was spoken by the young dandies, in which he was not particularly successful (for in addition to a marvellous assortment of oaths, they talked a mixture of bad English, worse French, and vilest Latin), and in examining the signboard which hung out over the doorway of Master Cale's abode.

This sign had been painted to the perruquier's own design, at a time when there threatened to be a reaction in favour of natural hair in place of the monstrous perukes so long worn. The picture represented a young man clad in all the finery of a fop of Charles the Second's court, save only the peruke, hanging by his hair from the limb of a giant oak, with three javelins in his heart, whilst below sat weeping a man in royal crown and robes; and below this picture there ran the following legend:

“O Absalom! O Absalom!
O Absalom! my son,
If thou hadst worn a periwig
Thou hadst not been undone.”

In the window of the shop was set out an array of the most wonderfully curled wigs, perfect marvels of the perruquier's art; and, indeed, the size of the young dandies' heads was a study in extravagance quite as wonderful in its way as the towers upon the heads of the ladies.

When presently the group had moved away, and the apprentice in the fine vest had a moment's leisure, Tom came forward and asked if Master Cale were within.

The youth regarded him with some insolence of manner, but as he might be addressing a future customer from the country, he replied with a show of civility that Master Cale was in the room behind the shop, curling the perukes of some gentlemen, but that Tom could go inside and wait if he liked. This he accordingly did, and soon the apprentice

was surrounded by another crowd, and was taking orders thick and fast for the Blenheim vest.



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The talk bewildered Tom, who, however, needs must listen, and presently he was attracted towards the inner room, where half a dozen young men, with heads almost as bald as those of infants, were arguing and laughing about the curl and fashion and set of their wigs, which were all standing in a row upon the blocks, and being cleverly and carefully manipulated by the deft hands of a small and dapper man, in a neat but not inelegant suit of brown cloth, ornamented by rather large silver buttons, whom Tom saw at a glance must be Master Cale the perruquier, although all his customers called him "Curley."

Heads were turned upon Tom's entrance, but the gentlemen only vouchsafed him a haughty stare, whilst the perruquier bid him be seated till he had leisure to attend to him. He then adjusted upon each head its own wig, amid much jesting and gossiping that was all Greek to Tom; after which the gallants filed out with much noise and laughter, and the little man turned to his unknown customer.

"What can I do for you, young sir?" and his eyes instinctively sought the head of the rustic youth, which was crowned with his own fairly abundant locks of dark brown.

"I come to you, Master Cale, with a few words in writing from one calling himself Captain Jack, whom I met in Epping Forest, and who told me I should be fleeced and beggared in a week if I fell into the hands of the sharpers of London town; but that if I sought lodging and counsel from you, I might learn my lesson without being ruined thereby. Here is the note he sent to you."

The shrewd face of the little perruquier had taken an almost eager look as the name of Captain Jack passed Tom's lips. His eyes scanned the youth from head to foot, and when Tom took out and handed him the note which had been given him, he seized it and read it eagerly, after which he turned to his new client, and said:

"This billet, young sir, would be enough to secure you a welcome from me. Tell me of my good friend Captain Jack. Ah! if he could have but stuck to honest trade, he and I might have made our fortunes together ere now. Never was such a figure for showing off coat or vest or sash, or a head upon which a peruke sat with a daintier grace. But come, let us sit down together and quaff a cup of wine, and you shall tell me all your history."

Dusk was falling between the high walls of the houses, and business was over for the day. Cale led his guest into a room on the basement floor, where a simple but substantial refection had been laid out. He called out to his apprentice to get his supper in the kitchen; and when the door was shut upon the pair, he listened with interest whilst Tom gave a very fairly accurate history of his own life up till the present moment.

Then the little man shook his head with an air of wisdom.



“The best advice I could give you, my young friend, is that you should go home to your mother and your friends in Essex, and seek to learn no more of the wickedness of the world than you know already. But I suppose no words of mine would induce you to take that course.”



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“Certes no,” answered Tom with a short laugh. “I am sick of the country. I have come forth to see the world, and see it I will, or know the reason why.”

“Ah yes, so says every moth that flutters round the candle, till his wings be burnt away, and he left the shattered remnant of what he erstwhile was,” responded Cale, with a wise shake of the head. “But no man ever yet was found wise enough to take experience at second hand. So if you are bent on seeing the world—which, let me tell you, is an evil thing at best—I will try, for the love I bear to Captain Jack, and indeed to all honest youths, to put you in the way of seeing it with as little hurt to yourself as may be. And so you are thinking of foreign travel?”

“I was, till I saw what London was like,” answered Tom; “but, i’ faith, I am in no haste to quit it till I have seen its sights and tasted of its pleasures. Methinks I might go far, and spend much good gold, and not find the half of the diversion which the streets of London afford.”

“Oh, if it be diversion you seek—”

“It is,” answered Tom frankly; “diversion, and the game of life as it is played elsewhere than in the lanes of Essex. I have seen enough in one afternoon to excite a thirst which can only be allayed by drinking from the same fountain. So no more talk of Essex, or even of lands beyond the seas. I will e’en get you to write a letter to my mother, telling her that I am safely arrived in London town; and knowing that, she must make herself easy, for I was never one who could easily wield a pen. I was always readier with the sword or the quarterstaff.”

“There will be fine doings in London town, too,” remarked Cale, rubbing his nose reflectively, “when the Duke lands, and is welcomed by all the town as the great victor of Blenheim. Yes, certainly, you should stay to witness that sight. Afterwards we can talk of what you had better do. They are always wanting fine-grown young fellows for the army. Perhaps when your store of guineas is gone, London will not hold you so fast.”

“My store will last a long while,” answered Tom, confidently slapping his inner pocket where the bag of gold rested. “I have five hundred golden guineas, the legacy of my father; and to that my mother added another hundred, to fit me out with all things needful for my travels, which things could not well be purchased in Essex. Now Captain Jack bid me at once hand over to you my money, which, he said, would melt in my pocket like snow, if it were not filched away by thieves and rogues. He bid me place one hundred guineas with you for my board and outfit, and trust that you would do honestly by me; and the rest was to be put into your keeping, to be doled out to me as I should have need. It seems a strange thing to be taking the counsel of a highway robber in such matters. But I like you, Master Cale; and I am just wise enough to know that my guineas would not long remain mine were I to walk the streets with them. So here I give them into your keeping; I trust you with my all.”



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“I will give you a receipt for the amount, my friend. Many men have made me their banker before now, and have not regretted it. You shall have a comfortable room above stairs, and you can either be served with your meals there, or take them with me, or at some coffee house, as best pleases you; and as for the outfit—why, it will be a pleasure to clothe a pretty fellow of your inches in fitting raiment. But be advised by me; seek not to be too fine. Quiet elegance will better befit your figure. I would have you avoid equally the foppery of the court beaux and the swaggering self-importance of those they call the bully beaux, with whom you are certain to make acquaintance ere long.”

Tom was willing to listen to advice in these matters, and the little perruquier soon threw himself almost with enthusiasm into the subject of the young man’s outfit. They spent above two hours looking over cloths and satins and scarfs, trying effects, and fitting on perukes. Tom had never before imagined how important and engrossing a matter dress could be, nor how many articles of attire were necessary to a man who wished to cut a good figure.

But at last he grew weary of the subject, and said he would fain take a stroll in the streets, and breathe the outer air again. He felt the stifling presence of encircling walls, and longed to get out into the starlit night.

“The streets are none too safe at night for peaceful citizens,” remarked Master Cale, with a shake of the head. “But I have a peruke to take to a client who lives hard by Snowe Hill. If you needs must go, let us go together; and gird on yonder sword ere you start. For if men walk unarmed in the streets of a night, they are thought fair game for all the rogues and bullies who prowl from tavern to tavern seeking for diversion. They do not often attack an armed man; but a quiet citizen who has left his sword behind him seldom escapes without a sweating, if nothing worse befall him.”

“And what is this sweating?” asked Tom, as the pair sallied forth into the darkness of the streets.

Here and there an oil lamp shed a sickly glow for a short distance; but, for the most part, the streets were very dim and dark. Lights gleamed in a good many upper windows still; but below—where the shutters were all up—darkness and silence reigned.

“Sweating,” answered Cale, “is a favourite pastime with the bullies of London streets. A dozen or more with drawn swords surround a hapless and unarmed passer by. They will close upon him in a circle, the points of their swords towards him, and then one will prick him in the rear, causing him to turn quickly round, whereupon another will give him a dig in the same region, and again he will jump and face about; and so they will keep the poor fellow spinning round and round, like a cockchafer on a pin, until the sweat pours off him, and they themselves are weary of the sport. But, hist! I hear a band of them coming. Slip we into this archway, and let them pass by. I would not have my wig box snatched away; and there is no limit to the audacity of those bully beaux when they

have drunk enough to give them Dutch courage. Discretion is sometimes better than valour.”



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So saying, he pulled Tom into a dark recess, and in a few minutes more there swaggered past about six or eight young roisterers— singing, swearing, joking, threatening—more or less intoxicated every one of them, and boasting themselves loudly of the valiant deeds they could and would do.

They did not see the two figures in the archway. Indeed, the greatest safety of the belated citizen was that these bullies were generally too drunk to be very observant, and that a person in hiding could generally escape notice. After they had passed by, Cale continued his way quietly enough, following the noisy party at a safe distance, as they too seemed bound towards Snowe Hill.

They were approaching the top of the hill when a sudden sound of shrieking met their ears, mixed with the loud laughter and half-drunken shouts of the roisterers. Tom caught his companion's arm and pulled him along.

"That is a woman's voice!" he cried quickly. "She is crying for help. Come!"

"Beshrew me if I ever again walk abroad with a peruke at night!" grumbled Cale, as he let himself be hurried along by the eager Tom. "I am not a watchman. Why should I risk my goods for every silly wench who should know better than to be abroad of a night alone? Come, come, my young friend, my legs are not as long as yours; I shall have no wind for fighting if you drag me along at this pace!"

It was the urgency of the cries that spurred Tom to the top of his speed. The laughter was loud and ceaseless, but the shrieks were becoming faint and stifled. Tom's blood was boiling. He pictured to himself a foul murder done. A few seconds before they reached the spot a new sound greeted their ears—a sort of rattling, bounding noise—which provoked another peal of uncontrollable laughter.

Then a voice was heard shouting:

"The watch! the watch! or some fellows with swords!"

Immediately the whole band broke up and rushed helter-skelter in all directions. Not that the bullies feared the watch one whit. The watchmen were mostly poor, old, worn-out men, who could do little or nothing to impose order upon these young braggarts. Indeed, they were so often maltreated themselves, that they just as often as not kept carefully away when cries were raised for help. But, having had their fun, the roisterers were ready to disperse themselves; for some of the citizens would rise in a white heat of rage, and take law into their own hands, in which case it happened that the disturbers of the peace came off second best. One of them had seen Tom's tall figure and the sword in his hand as he ran beneath a lamp, and had fancied that some more determined rescue than that afforded by the watch was to be given. So the band dispersed



shouting and hooting; and Tom and Cale found them scattered ere they came up to them.

“But where is the woman?” asked Tom, looking round; “they have not surely carried her off?”



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“Oh no—only sent her rolling down the hill in a barrel!” panted Cale; “it is a favourite pastime with the youths of London town. One party will put a barrel ready in yon doorway on purpose, and if it be not removed, it will like enough be used ere morning. We had best go in search of the poor creature; for oftentimes they are sore put to it to get free from the cask—if they be stout in person at least.”

And, indeed, as they neared the foot of the hill, they heard a groaning and stifled crying for help; and, sure enough, they found a buxom woman, the wife of a respectable citizen, tightly wedged into the cask, and much shaken and bruised by her rapid transit down the hill, although, when released with some difficulty, she was able to walk home, escorted by her rescuers, and bitterly inveighing against the wickedness of the world in general and London’s young bullies in particular.

“The best thing, good dame, is not to be abroad at such an hour alone,” advised Cale.

“Yes, truly; and yet it was but the matter of a few streets; and it seems hard a woman may not sit beside a sick neighbour for a while without being served so on her way back. My husband was to have come for me; but must have been detained. Pray heaven he has not fallen in with a band of Mohocks, and had the nose of him split open—to say nothing of worse!”

“Are men really served so bad as that?” asked Tom, as the two turned back from the citizen’s house whither they had escorted their grateful protegee.

“Worse sometimes,” answered Cale, with a shake of the head. “Those Mohocks should be wiped out without mercy by the arm of the law; for mercy they show none. They have read of the horrid cruelties practised by the Indians whose name they bear, and they seek to do the like to the hapless victims whom ill-fortune casts in their way. There be men whose eyes they have gouged out, and whose noses have been cut off, whose brains have been turned by the terror and agony they have been through. And yet these men go free; and law-abiding citizens are allowed to quake in their beds at the sound of their voices in the street, or the sight of their badges even in broad daylight. I call it a sin and a shame that such things can be. Well, well, well, let us hope that, when the great Duke comes home, he may be able to put a stop to these things. Even in warfare, men say, he is merciful, and will permit no extortion and no cruelty. We citizens of London will give him a right royal welcome; perchance we may be able to crave a boon of him in return. He—or, rather, his wife—is all-powerful with our good Queen Anne; and she would not wish a hair of a man’s head hurt could she but have her way.”

“By the Duke you mean the great Duke of Marlborough, who has done such great things in the war? But what is the war about? Can you tell me that, for I have never rightly understood?”



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Cale was a great politician in his own eyes, and was well versed in the politics of the day. He strove hard to make Tom understand the intricacies of the Spanish succession, the danger of allowing Spain to be ruled by one of the Bourbons, and the fear of the all-powerful French king, who seemed like to rule Europe, if the allied powers could not make head against him. Tom did his best to understand, and got a rather clearer view of the situation than he had before; but what interested him most was the information that the Duke would come over to England shortly, and that a magnificent reception was to be given to him.

Whigs and Tories had alike grown proud of the victorious general, and the war had become popular from success, though the drain on the country was great. The Queen was personally liked, although she was but a small power in the kingdom; and for the time being Jacobite plots were in abeyance. So long as she lived, nobody was likely seriously to desire the return of the banished Stuarts; but, of course, there was the future to think for. Anne had no child to succeed her; and the thought of the Hanoverian succession was by no means universally approved. Still for the moment the Jacobite agitation was in abeyance, and all England rejoiced in the humiliation of so dangerous a foe as the great monarch of France.

Cale was full of stories of court gossip respecting the Queen and the Duchess of Marlborough, whose affection for one another was a byword throughout the realm. The Duke and Duchess were also most tenderly attached; and the private lives of Anne and her Prince George, and of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, presented a bright contrast to the general laxity of morals prevailing at the time. The rather austere rule of William and Mary had not really purged the court of vicious habits, though such had been steadily discouraged. Anne had not the force of character to impose her will upon her subjects; and extravagance, frivolity, and foppery flourished amazingly.

Tom felt his head in a perfect whirl as Cale chatted on of this thing and that, passing from politics to court life, and then to the doings of the wealthy classes, of which he had an intimate knowledge.

“By my faith, London must be a marvellous place to live in!” quoth Tom, when at last he had been shown to the chamber prepared for his reception. “I feel as though I had been a year away from Gablehurst. Prithce, bestir to get my clothes ready, good Master Cale; for I shall know no rest till I have been abroad myself, and have seen these gay doings with mine own eyes!”

CHAPTER IV. THE FOLLY.

A very fine fellow did Tom Tufton feel a few days later, when, arrayed in all his new finery, he surveyed himself from head to foot in Master Cale’s long mirror, kept in the

best light afforded by the back room, for the benefit of the fops and dandies who desired to see the effect of the finery purchased from the fashionable perruquier.



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Cale had used discretion, and urged the same upon Tom, in the selection and fashion of his garments, and had sternly discountenanced anything like undue extravagance and foppery. Tom had insisted upon the Blenheim vest, with its rich flowering on the white satin ground, and its trimming of golden cord; but for the rest he had permitted Cale to select what he would, and was perfectly satisfied with the long coat of claret-coloured cloth, with a modest trimming of gold cord, and turned-back cuffs (showing the white lawn full shirt sleeve beneath), which set off his tall and well-made figure to advantage. The breeches were of the same cloth, but showed little, as silk stockings were drawn high up over them, almost meeting the vest or waistcoat, which was always long. He had shoes with high though not extravagant heels, and gilt buckles; a gold cord with tassels adorned his jaunty three-cornered hat; and his girdle and sword belt were of gold silk and cord.

But perhaps Tom was most proud of his periwig—an addition to his outfit which he had insisted upon rather against the advice of Cale, who had offered to curl and powder his own hair in an imitation of the prevailing mode. But Tom would not be denied the fashionable peruke. He had spent the best part of each day seated behind a screen in Cale's inner shop, listening in a species of fascination and amaze to the talk of the young dandies who daily resorted thither. Cale told him that he would thus best learn something of the language and gossip of the day, and be better able to hold his own when he went abroad; and Tom already felt that he possessed command of a thousand new epithets and words, to say nothing of the meaningless oaths and blasphemies, which made a part of the stock in trade of every fashionable man's vocabulary.

And now he stood regarding himself with complaisant satisfaction, feeling that he could ruffle it with the best of them. He had heard too much talk of periwigs not to feel resolved to wear one himself. Unless he did so, he felt he should never take his place in the world of fashion. His natural hair had therefore been cut close to his head, the peruke was fitted on, and fell in bushy curls to his shoulders.

Tom could not forbear a smile as he turned his head this way and that to judge of the effect. He felt indeed a pretty fellow, prepared to take his share in the drama of life going on about him.

"Harry Gay shall be your companion," said Cale, who had assisted at the toilet with the interest of a connoisseur, and who did not attempt to disguise his satisfaction at the result. "Harry is as gay as his name, but he is a well-meaning youth, and will neither rob you himself, nor suffer others to do so without warning you. He knows London well, and the life has hurt him less than it hurts most. He is brave without being a bully; he can play, and knows when to stop. He is afraid of no man, and so he is left alone. He has a good heart, and is to be trusted; and here he comes in good time to take you under his care."



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The young man who now lounged in with a smiling face and a nod of recognition to Cale, was not unknown to Tom. He had seen him several times, and had taken a liking for him, which the other reciprocated. Harry Gay was the son of a leading merchant citizen, a man of some importance and mark, who was able to give his son every advantage that money could purchase, and the means to enter almost any circle short of that of the court itself.

But he had also transmitted to his son a certain hard-headed shrewdness, which stood him in good stead in the gay life he was now leading. Harry had the sense not to try to push himself amongst the high-born dames and gallants, where he would be regarded as an interloper, and only admitted to be fleeced of his gold; but contented himself with a more modest sphere, where he was a man of some little mark, and could lead as well as follow, if he had the mind.

Entering the back shop, Harry cast an approving glance at Tom, and nodded his head towards Cale, at the same time taking a pinch of snuff from his box, and handing it to the perruquier.

“Does you credit, Curley, does you great credit. A chaste and simple costume, but elegant withal—uncommon elegant, i’ faith. Shouldn’t mind a suit of the same myself, if I had our young friend’s inches.

“Well, friend Tom, and how do you feel? Learned to take snuff yet? No! Ah, well, ’twill come by degrees.

“Put some more scent upon his person, Curley; he must smell like a perfumer’s shop; and so—give him his gold-tasselled cane, and the gloves with the golden fringe. A muff? No! Well, perchance those great fists would look something strange in one, and the day is fine and mild.

“So, if you are ready, friend Tom, we will sally forth. To the coffee house first, and afterwards, an it please you, to the play.

“Farewell, Curley; I will bring you back your nursling safe and sound. He shall not be rooked or robbed today. But how long I shall be able to hold the cub in leading strings remains yet to be proved!”

Tom was in far too good spirits to take umbrage at this name. He felt anything but a cub as he walked down the street beside his scented and curled and daintily-arrayed companion, unconsciously striving to copy his jaunty step, and the little airs and graces of his manner.

“We will to the Folly,” said Harry, as they stepped out into Holborn and turned their faces westward. “You have not yet seen the river, and the Folly is a floating structure moored



in the water on the farther shore opposite to Somerset House, of which you may have heard. It is not the most fashionable resort; but, for my part, I like it well. There is always good company to be had there, and we are not interrupted every moment by the incursions of drunken roisterers, who spend their day in reeling from tavern to tavern, or coffee house to coffee house, in search of some new story to tell, or some fresh encounter to provoke.”



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Tom listened eagerly to all his friend told him as they went their way towards the river. So far he had not cared to show himself in the streets till after dusk, as he had become foolishly ashamed of his rustic garb. He was immensely interested in all that he beheld, and in the stories his companion told him about the places they passed, the persons they met, and the occupants of the coaches which were now rolling to and fro through the streets, taking ladies and their fine gentlemen friends either to the park, or some fashionable rendezvous.

Great indeed was his interest and amazement as they reached the steps beside the river, and Harry signalled to a waterman to bring up a wherry alongside to take them to the Folly. He had never imagined anything so wide and grand as this great flowing river, lined with its stately buildings, and bearing on its bosom more vessels than he imagined that the world held! Had it not been for his fear of betraying undue ignorance, he would have broken into a torrent of questions; as it was, he sat in wide-eyed silence, gazing about him like a savage suddenly transported into the world of civilization—not a little to the amusement of his cicerone.

The Folly was a floating structure not unlike a large houseboat of the present day. Its guests could walk to and fro upon the roof, or find warmth and entertainment within its walls, as did Harry and his friend; for although the sun shone, the wind blew cold upon the water, and it was pleasanter within the warmed interior, where already a sprinkling of guests had assembled.

The place was divided into two rooms for the public accommodation. The first of these was a bar and gaming room. A buxom and rosy-cheeked damsel was presiding at the bar, and several young dandies leaned their elbows upon it, and strove to engage her in conversation. Some others were already seated at a table, and were throwing the dice, laughing and swearing ceaselessly over their game. The second room was quieter at present, and upon the table there lay strewn about the various newspapers and pamphlets of the day. Two or three men were reading them, and discussing the news of the hour as they sipped their coffee or chocolate.

Harry led the way into this place, ordered coffee for himself and his friend, and, whilst nodding familiarly to the occupants of the room, possessed himself of a few papers, and pushed some of them across to Tom.

“A new pamphlet by Jonathan Swift, I see,” he remarked carelessly, with a wink at his pupil. “You know his Tale of a Tub, Tom? Monstrous clever thing that! It tickles one to death reading it. So do his pamphlets—sharpest things out. Some talk of Defoe as his rival; but, for my part, I never read anything that rivals Swift’s writings! Pity he has such a sharp edge to his temper. They say he will never get promotion.”

Tom took up the pamphlet, and tried to look as though he were reading it with appreciation; but he had never been much of a student, and the comings and goings of

a constant stream of visitors engrossed him far more than the printed words, the meaning of which he understood no whit.

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It was much more interesting to him to listen to what the frequenters of the coffee house were saying amongst themselves; and greatly did he admire the ease and readiness with which Harry took his share in the conversation.

“Has my Lord Godolphin found a worthy pen to sing the praise of the victor of Blenheim yet?” he asked of a man who appeared to be a referee on matters literary. “The last I heard was that he was scouring London, tearing his periwig in pieces in despair that the race of poets was extinct, and he could only find the most wretched doggerel mongers, whose productions were too vile to be tolerated. Has the noble lord found a better rhymster? Or will the victory of the great Duke have to go unsung by the Muse?”

“What! have you not heard the end of that matter? Why, my Lord Halifax declared that he knew the man worthy of the occasion; but he would not reveal the name unless it was promised that he should be excellently well treated. And this man is none other than Joseph Addison, a fellow of the University of Oxford, and a man well thought of and pensioned, too, by the late King William. But since the death of His Majesty, the poet has been living in poverty and obscurity in a humble lodging hard by the Haymarket. There it was that he received a visit one day from the two noble lords; and it hath since been whispered that a poem is a-preparing so fine in quality and so finished in style, that my Lord Godolphin is now fit to dance a hornpipe for joy, and has promised a bountiful reward to the genius whose brain has devised and whose hand has penned the lines. They say that the poem is to be called ‘The Campaign,’ and that it is one of the finest the world has ever seen.”

Whilst this sort of talk was going on in one corner, there were counter-conversations, more interesting to Tom, being carried on in other parts of the room. One band of bully beaux, somewhat the worse for drink already, were telling stories of scandal and duelling, to which Tom could not but listen with ill-concealed interest. Others were discussing the last new play, or the last new toast. A few fine dandies sat combing their periwigs as they talked of the latest fashions, taking snuff freely, and sprinkling themselves with perfume from a small pocket flask, if they were ever too nearly approached by some commoner person.

As time passed by the quieter men, who had come early to read and talk politics and literature, withdrew themselves and took their departure. Harry Gay was claimed by a party of dashing-looking young rakes, who insisted that he should come and play a game of tic-tac with them in the outer room; and as Tom made no move to accompany him, he left him in his seat in the corner to look on and learn all he could.



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Tom, indeed, was quite fascinated by the scene around him, and had no desire to tear himself away. Presently one of the men from the group of bully beaux (as Tom had dubbed them, not by any means incorrectly) moved nearer to him, and took the chair vacated by Harry; and gradually the group reformed, with Tom as one of its members. The others addressed him, asking his name and his history. Tom was reserved as to this last, but spoke in a frank and easy way which seemed to win upon his comrades. There were four of them, and whatever might be their real names, Tom found out that they were known amongst themselves, and by the world of the tavern, by the following cognomens: "Slippery Seal," "Bully Bullen," "Thirsty Thring," and "Dicing Dick."

Tom was not sure that he liked or approved these new comrades, but at least their conversation interested and excited him. They told of duels fought in the ring at Hyde Park, or at the back of Montague House; of the exploits of highwaymen, and the executions at Newgate, which were plainly favourite spectacles with them. They told of the doings of themselves and other marauders in the streets of London, and roared with laughter over their exploits. Tom, ashamed of his real disgust, strove to laugh too, for he dreaded above everything to be thought a man lacking in spirit; but perhaps his face betrayed more than he meant, for his comrades began to gibe him in a fashion which made his hot blood rise; and he might have got into trouble before Harry could come to the rescue, had it not been that a sudden hush fell upon the room, whilst the word went round, spoken in every intonation of curiosity, respect, and admiration:

"'Tis Lord Claud himself! Hither he comes! Certes, but he is a fine figure of a man! So he has not grown too fine for his old haunts, though men did say that he was the pet and the favourite of all the court ladies!"

At that name, heard once before from the lips of Captain Jack, Tom looked round in great curiosity and eagerness. Immediately he was gratified by the sight of the entrance into the inner room of the person who was the cause of all this subdued commotion.

The newcomer was a very handsome man, of slender and graceful proportions, tall and elegant, and dressed in the extreme of fashion, yet with a taste that robbed foppery itself of any appearance of absurdity in his case. He looked quite young at the first glance; but a keen and practised eye could detect lines in that gay and handsome face which only time could trace. Probably he was past thirty by some years, yet many men of five and twenty looked older. The only thing in which he differed materially from his brother dandies was that he wore his own hair in lieu of the wig; but so abundant and beautiful was it, lying upon his shoulders in large curls of tawny golden hue, and clustering with a grace about his temples that no wig ever yet attained, that not the most ardent upholder of the peruke could wish him to change the fashion of his coiffure, which, in fact, gave to his outer man a touch of distinction which was well borne out by the elegance of his deportment and costume.



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Tom stared his fill at the newcomer, who was attended by several of the habitués of the coffee house, and received their welcome with a languid grace and indifferent goodwill. He was speedily accommodated with the best seat in the room. Conversation was hushed to listen to his words; the most fragrant cup of coffee was brought to him by the beauty of the bar herself, and his orders were dispatched with a celerity which was lacking to any other customer.

Small wonder was it that Tom, gazing and marvelling, asked in a whisper of the man next him:

“Who is it?”

“Lord Claud, of course, you rustic cub,” was the scornful reply, for politeness did not distinguish Tom’s new friends. “Any fool about town could tell you that much.”

“I know it is Lord Claud,” answered Tom, somewhat nettled; “but who is Lord Claud? That is what I meant by my question.”

Another laugh, not a whit less scornful, was the reply to this second query.

“He’ll be a clever fellow who tells you that, young greengoose from the country!” was the answer, only that the words used were more offensive, and were followed by the usual garnishing of oaths and by blasphemous allusions to Melchisedec, from which Tom gathered that nothing was known to the world at large as to the parentage or descent of the man they called Lord Claud, and that this title had been bestowed upon him rather as a nickname than because it was his by right.

The babble of talk, hushed at the entrance of the newcomer, began to rise again when he took up one of the journals, and appeared disposed for reading rather than conversation. Tom, unable to take his eyes off the elegant figure, still continued to ask questions respecting him, but was more puzzled than enlightened by the nature of the replies.

“There had been other Clauds before him,” one of the men remarked.

Another added that it was easy to be rich when the king was made to pay toll.

Slippery Seal wished, with a laugh and an oath, that he were half as slippery as the great Lord Claud; and Bully Bullen remarked that if he could but get such a reputation for duelling, he would play the bully to better purpose than he did now.

This band of four were getting noisy and quarrelsome. They had been drinking steadily ever since they came in, and their cups of coffee had been tinctured by something much stronger. They were getting up their energies for their nightly prowls about the city, and thought it no bad start to bait young Tom first. Of course he had betrayed his ignorance



and rusticity in a hundred little ways. Although he began to understand a little of what passed around him in the interlarded speech of the day, he could not frame his tongue to any adequate imitation of it yet. He had learnt, alas, to swear in his old life; but there is a fashion even in oaths, and his were too rustic in form to pass muster here.

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As the bully beaux got deeper in their cups, so did their baiting of young Tom increase in offensiveness and coarseness. The hot flush of anger kept rising in the young man's face, and there were moments when a fight was imminent, which was perhaps what the aggressors desired. Harry was still in the outer room, or he would have interposed, for it was not a nice thing to be the butt of a set of braggarts and bullies, and this fashion of drawing a young man into their clutches was by no means unusual.

Suddenly, as matters seemed to be getting ripe for some outbreak of fury on Tom's part, which might well lead to disastrous results, a sudden clear, resonant voice rose above the hubbub, and dominated all other tones by a peculiar property impossible to describe.

"Let that lad alone, you cowards!" spoke the voice, in tones of unmistakable authority. "Get out of this place, you swaggering bullies! Are we to have no peace even in this inner room, for your filibustering ways? Go and bluster out yonder, if bluster you must. Speak a single word of insolence to me—" and here the blue eyes seemed to flash fire—"and I will have every one of you ducked in the Thames three times ere you take a step from hence! Now, will you go quietly?"

It was strange to see the change which came over these young rakes the moment that the clear, cold tones of Lord Claud's voice fell upon their ears. They stopped, they cringed, they looked one at the other, and then back at him, as a whipped dog looks at the master who rates him. Thirsty Thring, who had drunk the most deeply, and who was in consequence most filled with Dutch courage, ventured once to look as though he were about to resist, or to dispute the mandate of Lord Claud; but no sooner had he provoked that flash of the eyes, than he too was cringing more humbly than his fellows.

To the great amazement of Tom, they took up their hats, and slunk from the room like so many whipped curs. He heard them the next minute chartering a wherry to take them to the shore once more.

Lord Claud had taken up his paper again, but meeting Tom's bashful glance of mingled gratitude and admiration, he remarked to him with a quiet smile:

"You are a stranger to London and its sons, lad; take this bit of advice from one who knows both well: Never let any man badger and insult you. Take no word from any; but return it with a blow or a sword thrust. Make your name feared—it is the surest road to success. Tavern and street brawls are taken little note of by the administrators of the law; but better a few weeks' discipline in Newgate, than to be the butt and victim of a set of vulgar street swaggers and swashbucklers such as those worthies we have just seen depart."



Tom had risen and had slowly approached Lord Claud. Now that the hour for the play had all but come, the room was thinning of its guests. He felt more courage to speak to this strange being, who seemed so great a personage.



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"I thank you, sir, for sending them away. I will seek to follow your good counsel in the future."

And then, after a moment's hesitation, he added, "Sir, are there more than one Lord Claud in this great city of London?"

"Not that I am aware of," answered the other, with a lighting of the eyes. "Some would tell you that one was enough even for so vast a city and realm as this!"

"Because," continued Tom, "I was charged with a message for one Lord Claud, and I marvel that it can be your worshipful self, for he that sent it was a strange man to speak of himself as your master."

A laugh shone in the dark blue eyes of the other.

"In sooth I call no man my master," he answered lightly; "but tell me the name of him who sent this message, and I shall know if it be for me or not."

"He called himself Captain Jack," answered Tom, "and I met with him betwixt my home in Essex and this city. He was dwelling in the heart of the great Forest of Epping."

Upon Lord Claud's face there had come a look of vivid interest and pleasure; yet he laid a finger upon his lips, as though to caution Tom, who, indeed, had spoken in a tone too low to be heard by any one else.

"Any news of or from Captain Jack is right welcome in mine ears," he said; "but this is not the time or place in which to speak of such things. Come tomorrow morning early to my lodgings in the Mall—any man will direct you to them—and there we will speak at ease. Forget not—tomorrow morning by ten o' the clock, ere my levee has begun. I shall expect you. Farewell, good youth, and keep your distance with those gentlemen you have just left. They would like to spit you as a goose is spitted, but I would see you again ere that consummation be achieved!"

He nodded to Tom, and took up his paper again; and Tom, turning round, encountered the amazed glance of Harry, who had come in to find him, and discovered him in friendly converse with the greatest man of all the company.

"How now, Tom! But you have a mettlesome spirit after all, if you can scrape acquaintance with Lord Claud. I have been in his company many a time, but never a word has he vouchsafed to me. And are you invited to his lodgings? Surely my ears must have deceived me!"

"In sooth he asked me, but it is only to hear a message I chance to bear from an old friend of his. Harry, tell me who is this Lord Claud? Men seem to worship the ground he treads upon, and yet to fear him, too, more than a little."



It was after they had reached the streets again that Tom put this question, and Harry answered it by a knowing shake of the head.

“I should have the makings of a fortune in me,” he answered, “if I could tell who Lord Claud was. There be many fine ladies, and curled darlings of fashion, who would give much to know that secret.”

“But if he be a lord—”

“Ah, indeed—a wise ‘if’! He is no more a lord than I am! That much I can tell you. But the name fits, and he wears it with a grace. There be ladies in high places, too, who would not be averse to share it with him, and be my Lady Claud, even though no other name might be hers.”



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“But he is very rich; and rich men—”

“Rich!—ay, verily; and so should I be rich, if every time my purse was empty I helped myself to Her Majesty’s gold, as it traversed the road from place to place!”

Tom stopped short as though he had been shot.

“A highwayman!” he gasped.

Harry bestowed upon him a sage glance and a mocking laugh.

“That is your word, not mine, my friend. Breathe it not before his lordship! But there be many who swear that he is none other than a grandson of the famous Claud Duval of olden days, and that he rolls in the wealth he has filched from royalty itself.”

“And yet he lives like a prince, and all the world pays him court!”

“Oh yes—it is the way of the world; a successful villain is as much an idol as a successful general. The tide may turn. All high positions have their dangers. Remember nothing has ever been proved against him; but men think and whisper, though not in his presence. Town talk may or may not be true; and the ladies like him none the less for the tales that circulate about him. But come now, no more questions, or we shall be late for the play!”

CHAPTER V. WITH LORD CLAUD.

Cale shook his head; but Tom was resolute. He had fallen under the spell of the so-called Lord Claud’s personality—like many another before him—and whatever the upshot of the matter might be, he was going to accept the invitation accorded him, and visit that personage in his lodgings.

“Have a care, lad, have a care,” advised the little perruquier. “All is not gold that glitters; and many a fine lad has been led to his ruin ere now by following some headlong fancy of his own.”

“I will be careful,” answered Tom, with the careless confidence of inexperience. “Did I not come back last night with nothing spent save the price of the theatre and my coffee and supper? You said yourself I had done well. So give me now ten guineas, and I will be gone; for I was told to be early.”

Tom had no difficulty, once he had reached the Mall, in finding Lord Claud’s rooms; for everybody knew where they were situated, and looked with some respect upon Tom for inquiring. He was received at the door by a very fine lackey, and taken up a wide staircase, so richly carpeted that the footfall could not be heard upon it. Everywhere his



eyes rested upon strange and costly products of foreign lands, such as he had never dreamed of heretofore. Later on he learned that Lord Claud had won this sumptuous suite of rooms from a rich young nobleman at the gaming table, and had stepped into its luxury and collected treasures with never an effort on his part. It was the fashion of the day to stake house and lands, wealth, and even honour, upon the cast of the dice or the fall of the cards; but that Tom did not yet know.



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He followed the servant into a large and lofty bedchamber, the like of which he had never seen before. He could have spent an hour in examining all the rich and curious things it contained; but a voice hailed him from the bed, and there lay Lord Claud, in a nest of snowy pillows, his golden head and fair complexion giving him an almost girlish aspect, albeit the square set of the jaw and the peculiarly penetrating glance of the dark-blue eyes robbed the face of any charge of effeminacy.

He was clad in a sort of dressing jacket of silk and lace, fine enough for any lady; and the bed was draped in silk from the Indies, worked in a fashion that set Tom agape. A few volumes of poetry, half a dozen letters, scented and delicately twisted, and a silver salver bearing an empty cup stood beside him. His servant removed this latter, and at a sign from his master withdrew; and Tom was motioned to take the lounging chair which stood beside the bed, and from the recesses of which he could watch Lord Claud, as he did, with a sense of fascination.

“Early afoot, in sooth, my young spark from the country! Ah, it is a fine habit, that of early rising. I practised it once myself, so I speak with authority. But what would you in this Babylon? And, i’ faith, what is there to do before the afternoon to tempt a man from his couch? I have scarce had four hours’ sleep as it is. There was no getting away from my Lady Betty’s reception last night. Egad, I believe that fair votary of the Graces ruins more young bloods than any sharper in the town! Have a care of your guineas, my young friend, if ever you find yourself sitting down to the card table with her!”

“That is not likely,” answered Tom modestly. “I am but the son of a country squire. I have come to London to see somewhat of the life there; but I look not to consort with the fashionable ones of the earth.”

“We shall see, we shall see. A golden key opens all doors—at least, nearly all. And you have not come empty-handed from home, I warrant. And that reminds me of your words of yesterday. You bring me a message from my quondam friend, Captain Jack. I would hear news of him; so tell me all the tale.”

Tom told the tale simply enough, and Lord Claud listened with unaffected interest, nodding his head once or twice at hearing the terms of the message delivered for himself.

“Ah, good Captain Jack! So he is still in the free forest! Well, well, well, perhaps he has chosen the better part. There be times when I look back at the old free life of peril and adventure, and my soul sickens at the weary round I see day by day. Who knows but the time may come when I will break these gossamer bonds! Ah, I might do worse—I might do worse—ere my youth and courage are fooled and squandered away.”



He seemed almost to have forgotten that he had a listener, and to be musing aloud; but, catching the wondering glance of Tom's eyes, he recollected himself with a smile, and stretching out a white yet muscular hand, he said, with an air of winning grace:



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“My young friend, I have taken a liking to you. I like you because you bring to my jaded senses a whiff of the free air of field and forest, as well as a message from one to whom I owe much. I am sick to death of the inanities of the dandies and fops of the town. Shall we be friends and comrades, good Tom? I trow you might do worse than make your Mentor of me—little though I look the part of the preceptor of Telemachus!”

Tom could scarce believe his ears at this proposition; he blushed and stammered almost as though it were some fair lady wooing him to friendship. Lord Claud laughed at his embarrassment, and presently, taking up one of the notes beside him, threw it across to Tom, saying:

“Read that, my young friend; I have a reason just at this moment why I would fain have a trusty friend beside me. What! thou canst not make sense of the jargon! Well, it is jargon; in that thou art right, honest Tom. Men talk in a fashion which fools might gibe at. But ‘tis the fashion, the fashion, and what would you? Be i’ the fashion—or perish! That is the choice before us.”

“But how can I serve you, my lord?” asked Tom eagerly.

“Hast ever taken part in a duel, good fellow?” asked Lord Claud, with a keen glance at the stalwart youth.

“I have fought many a battle in play and in earnest,” answered Tom, “with my fists, with the sword, and with the quarterstaff. I have no knowledge of the ways of town fights, such as I heard talk of in the Folly yesterday; but—”

“But you have a stout arm, an honest heart, and a tongue that will not wag when it is bidden to be silent? Is that so, honest friend Tom?”

“My lord, I would not speak a word to living soul if you bid me be silent; and I would stand by you to the death!”

“’Tis a sudden liking you have taken for my unworthy self.”

“Prove me, my lord, if it be not as sound as it be sudden.”

Lord Claud stretched out his hand, and Tom’s great fist met it.

“This liking on sight is a strange matter; yet I seldom mistake my man. Tom, I am going to trust you to act as my second in a little affair I have with another gentleman tomorrow morning, in a certain spot of which I have knowledge. Another man was to have acted for me—he has, indeed, made all the arrangements; but, as yon note informs me, he was mixed up in a brawl last evening at the gaming house, and lies abed with a broken arm. ’Tis not a matter I would have get wind, else there be a dozen men who would



serve my turn. I had rather one silent, steady comrade than a score of chattering jays. So you shall be my friend, Tom, and see what duelling is like.”

“You are not in danger of death, my lord, or grievous bodily hurt? Else I fear I should break the rules of the game and dash to your succour!”

“Tush, boy!” answered the other, with a gleam in his eyes, “I have yet to find my match with the rapier; I shall get off without a scratch, you will see. Whether or not I kill my man will depend upon his behaviour. I love not slaughter for its own sake, but there be those whose jaunty insolence rouses the devil within me; and then I strike and spare not.”



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“And for what cause do men fight duels?” asked Tom.

“The question is a wide one, and smacks of innocence on your part, Tom. Generally a woman is the cause; but there be other matters too—wounded self-esteem or vanity, revenge, envy, evil passions of all sorts. But, egad, in these days it takes little to provoke the combat! Why, it is but a few months ago that two young sparks met in mortal conflict because, forsooth, one of them had declared that Venus was the goddess of love and beauty, whilst the other affirmed that it was Aphrodite!” and Lord Claud leaned back upon his pillows and laughed aloud; laughing still more when he found that he had to explain to Tom the nature of the confusion which had prompted the duel.

Time was fast flying as the two oddly-assorted comrades talked, and soon the valet appeared at the door with the perruquier in his wake, informing his master that several gentlemen waited below, and that all was in readiness for the morning toilet.

“Heigh-ho!” sighed the young exquisite. “Why can we not rise from our couches like the beast of the field, give ourselves a shake, and be ready for the day’s work? These levees are the bane of my life. But fashion, fashion, fashion! She is the goddess of the hour. Tom, sit over yonder, and watch the follies of thy kind. Keep a quiet tongue, and I’ll see you are not baited.

“And now, let in the popinjays and chattering monkeys; for the sooner we begin, the sooner comes the end!”

The next two hours presented a marvellous spectacle to Tom. There were perhaps some eight to twelve young sparks about town coming and going during that time, some remaining the whole toilet through, others roving off to other similar scenes. Whilst the perruquier plied his skilful hands in the curling, powdering, and arranging of Lord Claud’s abundant golden hair, which some days was powdered and some days left as nature had ordered, they sat beside him in a row upon the bed and chattered of all the latest bits of scandal, the wittiest retorts of this or that sprightly dame, the on dit of the town, the quarrels of the gaming houses, and the doings of the court.

When Lord Claud left his bed and began arraying himself in the soft and costly array provided by his valet, his friends amused themselves by joining with him in the perfuming of his person; borrowing his essences to sprinkle upon their own fine clothes, washing their hands in milk and perfume to make them white and delicate; and calling to his valet to re-tie and arrange their lace-edged cravats in imitation of the style affected by Lord Claud.

Some of them removed their wigs, and asked the perruquier to give them an extra powdering; others got at the cosmetic boxes upon the toilet table, and gave a touch of carmine to cheeks which the night’s revel had left wan. Some gave infinite pains to the



arrangement of a patch to resemble a dimple; and all desired to dip their handkerchiefs in the silver bowl of rare scent which was offered almost the last thing to the master of all these luxuries.

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Tom sat in his corner and looked on in amaze. He had felt himself a very pretty dandy whilst being arrayed in his new clothes in Cale's shop, but he felt like a raven amongst peacocks in this company; and it would have taken nothing short of the testimony of his own eyes to convince him that these were men and not women engaged in all this pranking and personal adornment.

Many curious glances had been thrown in his direction at the first; and a few of the guests sauntered up from time to time, and entered into conversation with him. Tom observed, with some satisfaction, that there was respect, if not admiration, in their manner, and he wondered what had caused this; for yesterday he had received mockery and taunts as his portion from men of much less distinction than Lord Claud's friends.

He had not heard the words Lord Claud had spoken to his guests on their arrival—or, rather, he had not understood them, since they were spoken in the French tongue.

“A friend of mine—a fine young fellow—a son of the forest—best let alone, gentlemen, by those who value a sound skin,” Lord Claud had said, with a careless laugh.

His friends drew their own conclusions, and looked at Tom with respect. Lord Claud knew exactly what they were thinking, and laughed in his sleeve.

The valet was now perfuming the gloves, and giving just the jaunty cock to his master's hat which best suited its shape.

“Now, gentlemen, I will bid you farewell for the present,” said Lord Claud. “I and my friend have business of our own. We may meet again at the play ere long. Off with you each to his own favourite tavern. For my part, I have other fish to fry today.”

With that he swept them a fine bow, and the room cleared as if by magic. It was one of this man's arts that he could rid himself of the buzzing crowd by one look or gesture when he had the mind. Valet and perruquier followed the retreating guests, and Lord Claud drew a breath of relief.

“There, honest Tom; we are well rid of the chattering magpies—screaming peacocks were the better word, or painted popinjays. Now to business; for I must keep a steady head and quiet hours today. Are you anything of a swordsman, my friend?”

“I was accounted a good enough fighter in my own village,” answered Tom; “but everything here is so different. My methods may be useless against the skill of men trained in a different school.”

“We will put that to the test, and that quickly,” said Lord Claud; and forthwith he led his companion out of the house and through several unfamiliar streets, till he reached a



building rather larger than its surrounding neighbours, into which he walked with the air of one well used to the place.

First they passed through a large hall, the floor of which was thickly sprinkled with sawdust; but, without pausing, Lord Claud mounted a staircase in the corner, and led Tom into a large upper room, the walls of which were adorned by rapiers with buttons at the end, where a man was sitting polishing the foils and humming a tune to himself. He rose instantly upon seeing Lord Claud, and made a deep bow.



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"I have come to try a bout at sword play with a friend of mine," explained the latter, stripping off his coat, and signing to Tom to do the same. "Give us two well-matched weapons; for we have none too much time to spare measuring and comparing."

Tom's blood quickened at the feel of the rapier in his hand. He had always loved these encounters with the sword, whether in play or earnest. He had not lacked training of a certain rude sort, and his wrist was strong and supple, his eye wary and keen; moreover, he had length of reach and strength of muscle. After the first bout Lord Claud gave him an approving nod, and, looking at the man who stood by, remarked:

"There is the making of a fine swordsman in the lad, is there not, when he has learnt more finesse and quickness?"

"The gentleman does well," answered the man, with a shrewd glance at Tom's tall and well-knit frame. "He may be worsted in a sham fight, but, methinks, in sober earnest he would be an ugly customer to meet."

In the next bout Lord Claud showed his antagonist some of the dexterous feats of rapid sword play, with the result that Tom was rather hard pressed; but for all that he did not lose his head, and soon began to master the tricks of attack and defence, the quick lunge and the quick recovery which perplexed him at first; and in the next bout he showed so much skill and address that his opponent and the onlooker alike applauded.

"Very good, Tom, very good," said Lord Claud. "You will make a notable swordsman one of these days. Now I shall leave you here for an hour with worthy Captain Raikes, and he will give you a lesson in fencing which you will not fail to profit by. After that I will come back for you, and take you elsewhere."

"Captain Raikes, I have a little affair on hand tomorrow morning. I would fain try a pass with you, to see that my hand has lost nothing of its cunning."

"Not much fear of that, my lord," answered the master of the place, as he took the rapier from Tom; and the next minute the youth from the country stood in silent admiration and amaze, whilst the two blades crossed and flashed, and twined and clashed, with a precision and masterly deftness which aroused his keen delight and envy. To become a proficient like that would be something worth living for; and his quick eyes studied the movements and methods of the two adversaries, till he felt he had begun to have some little notion of the tricks by which such results were attained.

When Lord Claud came back to fetch him, at the end of the stipulated hour, it was to find young Tom without coat, vest, or peruke, and bathed in perspiration; but so keenly interested in the new science, that it was all his comrade could do to drag him away.



“Egad, Tom, but you will make a pretty swordsman one of these days! Captain Raikes says he has never had a more promising pupil. You have winded him as well as yourself. But all that exertion must have given you an appetite. We will to Pontac’s and refresh ourselves; and when you have cooled down, I will take you to see a man as great in his way as Captain Raikes with the foils. Oh yes, you can come again at your leisure for another lesson. But I have no fears for you, tomorrow, even now. Whatever may betide, you are no child with the sword.”



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The coffee house to which Lord Claud now conducted him was a much finer and more select place than the Folly, and Tom was much interested in the fine company there, all of whom welcomed Lord Claud heartily, and seemed to desire to draw him into talk.

Although dressed in the height of the fashion, and not without their fopperies and extravagances, the company here interested itself less with private scandal than with public affairs, and there was much talk of the war abroad, and of the return of the Duke of Marlborough, which it was now thought would take place before long.

“But he has first to go to Berlin, to cajole the King of Prussia to send help to Italy, to the Duke of Savoy,” cried one of the company, who seemed best informed on military matters. “It will take a good one to wring eight thousand soldiers out of His Majesty of Prussia, but if any man can do it, it will be Johnny Churchill! I remember him even when we were boys together. He had a tongue that would flatter the nose off your face, if you did but listen to him! A voice of silver, and a hand of iron—those are the gifts which have made the fortunes of my Lord of Marlborough.”

“Ay, an iron hand for keeping money when once the fingers have closed upon it!” laughed one.

“And a wife who rules the Queen, and is bent upon making her husband the greatest man in the kingdom—though she will always keep the upper hand of her lord, you will see. Marlborough, whom no combination of military prowess can daunt, trembles and turns pale before the frown of his wife!”

“Yet it is not fear but love which makes him tremble,” said another. “Although their children are grown to adolescence, he loves her yet as dotingly as ever youthful swain loves the Phyllis of his boyhood’s amours!”

“That is nothing to sneer at,” remarked Lord Claud, speaking for the first time. “Rather should we thank Heaven, in these days of profligacy and vice, that we have a Queen upon the throne who loves her husband faithfully and well, and a general, victorious in arms, who would gladly lay down his victor’s laurels for the joy of living in peaceful obscurity at the side of his wife!”

Nobody laughed at Lord Claud’s speech, though it would have provoked mirth if another had given utterance to the sentiment. The talk went on, however, in the same vein, and Tom listened in silence, trying to digest as much as he could of the news of the day.

Lord Claud did not remain long; and when they were in the street together, Tom asked him of the great Duke, and what had been said of him. Was he really treacherous and false, loving money above all else, and careless of the good of the realm, so long as he built up his own fortunes securely?



“The Duke’s career is not without its black spots,” answered Lord Claud. “It is known by all that he deserted the late King James the Second; but there were reasons solid and sound for that. The darkest passage in his life is his intrigues against His Majesty King William, for which he was disgraced for some time. But for all that his genius is marvellous, and I am very sure he is loyal to the core to good Queen Anne; albeit a man who will not openly ally himself with either Whig or Tory faction must expect to make enemies in many quarters.”



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“And does he indeed love money so well?”

“Second to his wife, or men do him great injustice. But though they laugh and sneer at him, I misdoubt me if he loves wealth better than his traducers; only he keeps a firmer grip upon it, having indeed no taste for vulgar dissipation. Why, even as a youth he was mighty prudent.”

Here Lord Claud began to laugh, as though tickled by some memory; and on being questioned further, he told Tom the tale.

“You must know that John Churchill was a marvellous pretty fellow, with just the same languid grace of bearing that he has kept all his life; and of which you may judge the effect yourself, good Tom, ere many weeks be passed. He was a youth about the court of Charles the Second, and the Duchess of Cleveland took notice of the handsome, witty lad, and sometimes had him in her rooms to amuse her. Once they so chanced to be there together, when the steps of the King were heard approaching; and as His Majesty was like to think evil of a matter where no evil was, the Duchess was sore put to it, and looked so affrighted, that young Churchill gallantly sprang from the window, at the risk of breaking his leg if not his neck. The Duchess sent him a present of five thousand pounds the next day; and what does the lad do? Most of his sort would have squandered it at play in a week; but Johnny Churchill was of a different kidney. He goes and purchases with it an annuity; so that come what may, he may never be left quite destitute in his old age!”

And Lord Claud again burst into a hearty laugh, in which Tom now joined.

They were now approaching a narrow street hard by the Haymarket, and his companion knocked at a lowly door, which was opened by a sombre-looking man in a shabby suit of clothes.

“Is your master within?” asked Lord Claud, who seemed known to all the world; and the next minute he was striding up the stairs, two steps at a time; Tom following, and marvelling much at the darkness of the humble abode, and at Lord Claud’s purpose in coming.

A door on the second floor was thrown open, and Lord Claud stepped gaily in.

“Ha, Master Addison,” he cried, “I have come to offer to you my tardy congratulations for that yet more tardy recognition of merit which has been your portion at last! And so the great ones of the land have been forced to come beseeching in person? Ha! ha! that is very good. And may my friend here—young Esquire Tufton, of Gablethorpe, in the county of Essex—have the privilege of hearing some of those wonderful lines which are to take the country by storm? Come, Master Addison, you know that I am a lover of good metre and fine sentiment. The words must needs be tingling in your ears, and

lying hot upon your tongue. Let us hear the roll of them, and I warrant that all London town shall soon be in a ferment to hear them, too!"



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The man of letters was attired in a neat but poor suit of clothes, and his surroundings were humble and even sordid; but his face was neither peevish nor careworn, but wore an expression of dignified contentment and scholarly repose. The walls of his lodging were lined with bookcases, upon which many a volume was stacked. Poor he had been for long, but he had not been in the straits that many men of letters were reduced to in those days. On his desk were strewn pages of manuscript verse which caught the eyes of the visitors at once.

“By my halidome! if that be not the poem itself!”

“The rough copy alone, the rough copy,” said Addison, who was walking up and down the narrow room, his eyes aglow, his face a little flushed. “The fair one is in the hands of the printers. My Lord Godolphin came himself to hear it read but a few short days ago, and took it off with him then and there.”

“Delighted with it, and vowing that you should be the first poet of the times, if report be true!” cried Lord Claud.

“He did express his satisfaction,” answered the poet quietly. “And I doubt not I shall receive some mark of favour at no distant date. But not all the favour of Queen or courtier can give me the title to poet. That lies in a sphere which not the most powerful potentate can aspire to touch. The voice of posterity alone can make or mar that title!”

“But let us hear something of this great poem,” cried Lord Claud. “As I say, it must be burning upon your tongue. Prithee do us the grace to recite us portions of it.”

It was a request palatable to the eager soul of the poet, all on fire with the work which had occupied his thoughts and pen for so many long weeks. He still kept up his pacing to and fro; but as he walked he gave utterance to the well-conned passages of his work, throwing into the words a fire and a spirit which kindled the spark in Lord Claud’s eyes, and even made young Tom’s heart glow with admiration and wonder, albeit he had never been the votary of letters.

If high-flown, the language of the day kept it in countenance. Nothing simple would have found favour at that date. And no one called the sentiments forced, even though there seemed to be slight confusion sometimes between Marlborough and the Deity. The well-known lines upon the battle of Blenheim itself were given with a wonderful fire and force:

“’Twas then great Marlbro’s mighty soul was proved,
That in the shock of charging hosts, unmoved
Amidst confusion, horror, and despair,
Examined all the dreadful scenes of war,
In peaceful thought the field of death surveyed,



To fainting squadrons sent the timely aid,
Inspired repulsed battalions to engage,
And taught the doubtful battle where to rage.
So, when an angel by divine command
With rising tempest shakes a guilty land—
Such as of late o'er pale Britannia passed—
Calm and serene he drives the furious blast,
And, pleased the Almighty's orders to perform,
Rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm."



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“Excellent! excellent!” cried Lord Claud, when the poet at last flung himself into his chair, exhausted by his own flow of eloquence. “That will take them! That will hit them! My good friend, your fortune is made.

“Capital, was it not, Tom? Why, it has raised a sparkle in your calm bucolic eyes!

“‘Tis a fine poem i’ sooth, Master Addison; as fine a piece of work as any man of this day ever produced. You might have seen it all yourself. You have had information, one can see, from high quarters. Now tell me, I pray, something in detail of this great battle;” and forthwith poet and gallant fell to discussing the campaign in such a fashion as filled Tom with wonder at his companion, such as he was always feeling.

Lord Claud seemed to have such a masterly knowledge of military detail, that it was hard to believe he had not at some time been a soldier himself; and his knowledge of public affairs, and of the intricacies of foreign and home politics, struck the country-bred youth as something little short of marvellous.

For hard upon two hours did the two men sit talking, with papers and diagrams before them; and when at last Lord Claud rose, Addison gripped him hard by the hand, and declared he was the best company he had seen for many a long day.

“We are too late for the play, Tom, my lad,” said Lord Claud, as they reached the street. “But, for my part, I have been better entertained; and if I have wearied you, I crave pardon.”

“I am no whit wearied,” answered Tom promptly; “but I marvel much at your knowledge of men and things.”

Lord Claud laughed slightly and lightly.

“Keep open eyes and ears as you go along in life, Tom, and you will learn many things in your turn. And now, methinks, we will take horse to Earns, and lie there tonight. It will be better for us than the long ride in the cold of the early morning.”

CHAPTER VI. BARNS ELMS.

“You can ride, Tom?” Lord Claud had said, as they sauntered homewards from the poet’s lodgings.

Tom replied that whatever else he was lacking in, he might certainly lay claim to horsemanship; and the pair walked on together, Lord Claud sunk in thoughtful silence, his companion always ready to give his attention to the sights of the streets, which had lost none of the attraction of novelty as yet.



“Ho! ho! ho!” laughed a voice behind them; “Master Tom the greengoose has found fine company!”

“A fine comrade, truly, will he find he has got! What becomes of all the strapping young fellows whom my Lord Claud takes pains to notice and befriend?”

“They are like the butterflies—flutter for a season and are no more seen after!”

“Or like the buzzing fly who is lured within the spider’s web! ’Tis easy fluttering in, but there is no getting out!”

“Ay, ay, the gallows noose must feel mightily like the strand of the spider’s web to the silly fly. And as the spider pounces upon his victim ere it be dead, and sucks away its life blood, so does the hangman cut down his victim alive and cut out his living heart! Oh, ’tis a fine sight! a fine sight! Young Tom must e’en go and see the next execution at Tyburn!”



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These words were spoken with caution, and yet every one of them fell full upon Tom's ears. These ears, be it noted, were very keen ones, as is often the case with those who have tracked game and hunted the fallow deer in the free forest. Moreover, Tom had not yet grown callous to the sounds of talk and laughter in the streets. He must needs listen to all he heard, and these phrases were plainly meant to meet his ear.

He glanced at Lord Claud to see if he had heard, but there was no change in the thoughtful face. His companion appeared lost in his own reflections, and Tom, dropping a pace behind, looked back to see who had spoken.

As he had surmised, it was the four bully beaux whom he had met at the Folly the previous day. So much had happened in the interim, that Tom could have believed it a week ago. At his look they all burst into jeering laughter, but it did not appear as though they desired speech of him, or any sort of encounter, for they plunged hastily down a side street, and Tom saw that Lord Claud had just turned his head to see what hindered his companion.

"Pay no heed to drunken roisterers i' the streets, Tom," advised his mentor; "a quarrel is quicker provoked than mended, except at the sword's point, and unseemly is brawling at street corners. Yon fellows bear you some ill will for my threat yesterday. They will do you a bad turn if the chance offers. They are an evil crew, and my Lord Mayor has been warned against them ere now; but it is difficult in these days to give every man his deserts. London would be depopulated if all who merited it were transported to the plantations of Virginia."

A little later they met Harry Gay sauntering from one playhouse to another. He looked with a sort of amused surprise at Tom, who paused to send a message to Master Cale, to tell him that he would not be at home that night, and was not to be troubled after in any wise.

"Do you lodge with Lord Claud?" asked Harry, with a curious glance towards the elegant figure sauntering on, and exchanging bows with the fine ladies in the coaches.

"I know not; but I ride forth with him ere long on some errand I wot not of. Have no fears for me, good Harry, I can take care of myself well enow."

"You have good confidence, my young friend. I trust it is not the pride which goes before a fall. It savours of peril to steer one's bark over unknown waters, or to follow a road which leads no man knows whither;" and Harry nodded his head in the direction of Lord Claud, with a gesture that was as eloquent as any words could be.

"Tush!" answered Tom, with something of the careless indifference he had caught from Lord Claud and his associates; "I have come to see the world, and see it I will. If there

be peril, why, so much the better. I am sick to death of sitting at ease in the safe shelter of home. A man can die but once, and he had better live first.”



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“Just so, just so,” answered Harry with some emphasis; “that is exactly the sentiment I would most impress upon your inexperience. A man should live to drink the cup of life, ere it be snatched from his grasp.”

Tom nodded and passed on, not pausing to ponder upon the meaning of the words he had heard. Indeed, he had small time to ponder, for his comrade was quickening his steps, and he had to hasten to reach his side.

“My stables lie this way. We will go and look at the hackneys, and make choice of one fit to carry those great limbs of yours, my worthy friend. As for me, a light-made barb will suffice; but it takes bone and muscle to carry all that bone,” and he clapped his hand upon Tom’s shoulder with a little laugh.

The stables were neither very bright nor savoury according to modern ideas, but for the times they were thought a marvel of perfection. Tom’s eyes soon got used to the dimness, and he was quickly in a high state of rapture at the evidences of breeding and pace in the horses stabled there.

That they knew their master well was plain, for all heads were turned at the sound of his voice, and each animal gave a low whinny of pleasure at the approach of Lord Claud. He took carrots from a basket and dispensed them with impartiality to his stud; and, meantime, he and his head groom talked together in low tones, and presently Tom was called to the conclave.

“Nell Gwynne will carry you best, Tom. But she may give you a little trouble. It is not every rider she will brook upon her back; yet if you can master her, she will bear you to the world’s end faithfully.”

Tom approached the mare indicated, who looked at him, laying back her ears and showing the whites of her eyes, sidling a little over in her stall with the evident intention of trying to get a kick at the stranger. But Tom coolly walked up to her head, and began caressing her with a perfect fearlessness which presently disarmed her suspicion. She was accustomed to see men flinch and quail before her, and despised the race accordingly. But the few who had no fear of her she recognized as her masters, and she gave them the love of her heart and the best of her powers.

“That will do, Tom,” said Lord Claud’s voice from behind; “you have won my lady’s capricious fancy.

“Bring up the mare and Lucifer in an hour’s time, saddled and bridled, and fed for the evening,” he added, speaking to the servant; “you will probably have them back some time tomorrow, but of that I cannot speak with certainty.”

He took Tom’s arm as he left the yard, saying in his nonchalant fashion:



“Sometimes after one of these affairs of honour it is well to take oneself off for a while. Her Majesty is as much against the settlement of private quarrels by the appeal to the sword as ever King William was. However, fashion is too strong even for good Queen Anne. But it is better not to do more than wing your man. If you kill him, you run a risk of getting into trouble. But I have no intention of doing so, unless he provokes me beyond endurance.”



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“Is he a man of note?” asked Tom, with pardonable curiosity.

“In his way he is; you probably would not know the name; but he has friends in high places: He and I have never loved each other. He has balked me more than once, and I have had my revenge at the gaming table and in other places, which he is not likely to forgive or forget. The other day he sought to provoke me by almost open insult. It was not a woman, Tom. I have enough on my hands without embroiling myself in affairs of gallantry. There are women, doubtless, who are worth the championship of honest men; but in our world of London town they are few and far between. Let them and their quarrels alone, Tom, if you would keep out of trouble.”

Lord Claud was speaking now with a sarcastic intonation rather unusual with him. He was more thoughtful and grave than Tom had ever seen him, but the youth did not dare to ask the cause. Indeed, it seemed to him that a man who had a duel to fight upon the morrow with a dangerous adversary had reason enough for gravity and thought.

“Tom,” said Lord Claud suddenly, breaking a rather long silence, “I feel sometimes that I have had enough for once of the trammels of town life. I am weary of the slavery of levee, and gaming table, and playhouse. There are better things in life than foppery and idle dissipation. What do you think of it all, my honest Tom?”

“I find it vastly entertaining,” answered Tom truthfully; “but I feel me something out of place amongst all the fine fops I meet everywhere.”

“You would like to travel and see the world? There is another world besides that of London town.”

“I would see more of London town ere I leave it,” answered Tom frankly; “but I would fain see other things and places, too.”

“Wilt come farther afield with me, if I go?” asked Lord Claud, with a quick sidelong glance at the tall figure of his companion. “A man of thews and sinews, who knows not fear, is the comrade in whom my heart delights; but there be so few of them amid yon crowd of painted popinjays.”

The compliment tickled Tom’s vanity, just as the preference shown him from the first by so great a man as Lord Claud touched his naturally quick affections.

“Let me but see this wonderful city first, my lord, and I will follow you to the world’s end!” he cried impulsively.

“You shall have your wish, trusty Tom,” answered Lord Claud, his face clearing and his brilliant smile shining forth. “In sooth, I have no desire to quit it just yet. I would fain be one of those to welcome back the great Duke, who will be here ere the year closes; and



you should not miss seeing the pageant which will greet the victor of Blenheim. It may even be that the Duke himself will find employment for his poor servants.

“Hast ever heard of the secret service, Tom? No? Well, there be openings enow for men of courage and resource. It may be that you and I may find work for us to do. When all Europe is at war, country with country, and kingdom with kingdom, there is work and to spare for trusty messengers, stout of heart and strong of arm. Who knows but that such luck as that may come in our way?”



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Tom listened agape, feeling as though his horizon were growing wider every hour. He had been scarce more than a week in town, and, behold, all life seemed changed about him. Already he had been plunged into an adventure which would probably end in the spilling of blood; and now the prospect was opening out before him of travel and adventure of a kind of which he had never dreamed. It seemed impossible that he could be the same raw rustic youth who, a few short months ago, was accounted the greatest roisterer of his own county. His doings in the past seemed just the outcome of boyish spirits. He had been nothing but a great boy in those days; now he felt that his manhood was coming upon him by leaps and bounds.

At Lord Claud's lodging a repast was awaiting them which was in itself a further revelation to Tom. He was mightily hungry, too, and fell upon the good cheer with an appetite that entertained his host. The food he found most excellent, though seasoned something too strongly for his palate. But the wines were less to his taste, and he presently made bold to ask for a tankard of homely ale, which was brought to him from the servants' quarters; Lord Claud leaning back with his glass in his hand, and smiling to see the relish with which Tom enjoyed the simple beverage.

"Ah, the time was when I could quaff a tankard of ale with any man, and it may well be that I will do the same again in the future. But now, Tom, we must come and don riding gear, for the horses will be round ere long. Oh, have no concern as to that. My man will have ready all that you will need. But those silken hose and that broidered vest are little suited to the saddle."

And, in very sooth, Tom found himself quickly fitted with a pair of stout leathern breeches, a cloth waistcoat, and a pair of riding boots adorned with silver spurs. A riding switch was put in his hand, and he stood flicking his boots at the top of the staircase till Lord Claud joined him, dressed in a quiet and most irreproachable riding suit, which became the elegance of his figure almost better than the frippery of the first toilet.

The horses stood at the door. Tom walked up to the great mare and renewed acquaintance with her before swinging himself lightly to the saddle. She made an instinctive dart with her head, as though to seek to bite his foot; but he patted her neck, touched her lightly with the spur, and sat like a Centaur as she made a quick curvet that had unseated riders before now.

The next minute the pair had started forth in the murky twilight of the autumn evening; but the moon was rising and the mists were dispersing. Before they had left the houses behind they could see the road clear before them, and were able to give their impatient steeds their heads, and travel at a steady hand gallop.

Tom had approached London from the north, so that all this country was new to him. He delighted in the feel of a horse betwixt his knees again; and the vagaries of the high-

bred mare, who shied and danced at every flickering shadow, kept his pulses tingling and his heart aglow during the whole of that moonlight ride.



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Lord Claud said little. He too had need of some horsemanship, for the black barb he rode was full of fire and spirit. Both riders kept a sharp lookout as they rode along, for there was never any security from footpads and highway robbers once they were clear of the houses. However, there was no indication that any such light-heeled gentry were abroad that night, and the travellers reached the little hostelry whither they were bound without any adventure.

Here they were evidently expected. The host came out with an air of great respect, and took their horses. Within, a plentiful supper was prepared for them, to which Tom was ready to do justice after his ride, though Lord Claud ate little and drank less. Upstairs a commodious chamber with two beds had been prepared. A fire of logs burnt cheerily on the hearth; and it was plain that some valet had been there earlier in the day, for night clothes and toilet accessories lay about in profusion, to say nothing of a pair of shining rapiers carefully laid upon the mantel shelf.

Lord Claud took these down and examined them with care. Then he handed one to Tom.

“Just a few passes, trusty Tom, as is my habit ere sleeping the night before a duel. I like to make test of the weapon with which I shall meet my antagonist in the morning.”

Tom was delighted to show off his newly-learned skill, and was complimented by Lord Claud on his progress.

“My adversary’s second may desire to cross swords with you, Tom,” remarked Lord Claud as he began to undress. “’Tis a foolish habit; but you must not seem to shrink. Show him that you care nothing for his sword, and I will then interpose to stop the second fight. It may not be offered; but, again, it may.”

And, as the pair prepared for bed, the elder man instructed his companion in all the details of duelling, that he might be prepared to play his part on the morrow with confidence and aplomb.

“I have a few excellent rules of my own, Tom, and I have never been worsted once, and only once wounded. I neither drink, nor dice, nor dance, nor weary myself the previous day. I go overnight to the place of meeting, and I retire to bed early and sleep sound. I take a modest breakfast, without wine or spirit, an hour before the meeting; and I come to the ground with a head as cool and a hand as steady as though no such thing as danger or death existed in the world. Some men pride themselves on sitting up and dicing and drinking away the night, to show their own courage and their contempt for their adversary. I prefer to show mine by leaving him prostrate on the field!”

It certainly seemed as though Lord Claud’s methods were good, for he slept like a child all night, better than Tom did, who had been greatly excited by the events of the day and



the prospect of the morrow; and when he was dressed upon the following morning, still in his sober riding suit that became him so well, Tom thought he had never seen anybody looking so thoroughly master of himself and his circumstances. The very glance of the eye seemed to bespeak victory, as did the quiet resolution of the grave mouth.



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Breakfast over—an early meal taken by the light of candles, yet excellent of its kind—and the pair went forth together, Tom carrying the two rapiers, as it was his duty to do.

The sun was just about to rise, and the mists lying over the river and fields were growing silver in the light, as they came in sight of the group of elms which had seen so many foolish and bloody contests between angry men, some of whom scarce knew why they fought at all, save that it was the fashion.

From the opposite direction three other figures were approaching—two tall men and one little one.

“They bring a surgeon,” quoth Lord Claud, with a smile on his face; “perchance they are wise. For myself, I never trouble to do so. I count a leech a needless encumbrance.”

Tom looked curiously at the two foremost men as they drew near. One of them struck him in particular. He was very tall and very strongly made, though clumsy in figure and swarthy in face. He had the look almost of a foreigner, Tom thought, with black eyes that twinkled with an evil and sinister expression, and never showed more than as a slit between half-shut lids. He was marked with smallpox, and had taken no pains, today at any rate, to disguise the ravages of that malady. He walked a little in advance of his companions, and when he got near to Lord Claud he stopped and made a sweeping bow, his eyes the while scanning Tom’s face and figure most closely.

“This is not the gentleman who waited on me,” he said in a rasping voice.

“No; that gentleman is laid up in his bed, and cannot keep his appointment; but this one will do the business equally well.

“Mr. Tufton of Gablehurst; let me present him to you, Sir James.”

The swarthy man looked Tom over from head to foot with an insolent stare.

“A fine young cub,” he said at length, “and well grown for his years. One of the gang, I suppose?” and there was an ugly sneer upon his thick lips.

Tom looked at Lord Claud, wondering what the meaning of those words could be; but the quiet face looked as if carved in marble, save only that the eyes glowed like fire in their sockets.

He signed to Tom to produce the rapiers; and the second man came forward and examined and tested them, selecting that which his principal should use. Then the ground was stepped, the most level place selected, and the two combatants stripped off coat and waistcoat, and prepared for the fray.



Tom drew his breath hard as he watched the commencement of the fight, and his face was full of anxiety, as he felt that the man addressed as Sir James had weight and length of reach beyond anything that Lord Claud could command. But for a while both the men fought warily and without attempting to get to close quarters, and Tom began to lose his first breathless excitement, and to watch the play of shining blades with more coolness and observation.

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Two rounds had been fought, and neither man was wounded. But whilst Lord Claud looked just as cool and steady as at the start, the dark adversary was flushed and inclined to pant, and the beads of sweat stood upon his forehead notwithstanding the briskness of the morning air.

Then Tom began to understand where Lord Claud's advantage lay. If he could tire out his adversary by keeping on the defensive, then at the last he might get his chance, and lunge at him when he would scarce be able to parry the thrust.

It was easy to see that his weak point was slowness of recovery. His thrusts were quick and well planted, he had an excellent guard and mastery of the weapon; but he was slow in recovering after making a lunge, and the longer the fight continued the more evident did this defect become. And it was plain that he was aware of it, for though he pressed upon his antagonist with great determination and with much dexterity of sword play, he was afraid to take advantage of his longer reach and lunge at him boldly; for he knew that if Lord Claud avoided the thrust, he would almost certainly have at him with a counter lunge before he had time to parry.

And, in fact, that was what did at the last happen, after the fight had lasted so long that Tom thought half an hour must surely have gone by. Both antagonists showed signs of weariness. It had even been suggested that enough had been done to satisfy the claims of honour; but to that suggestion neither principal would listen.

Sir James was much distressed. Sweat poured from his brow, his breath came in deep gasps, his face was growing purple. Lord Claud looked white, but otherwise had not changed in aspect, and the deadly battle light in his eyes was growing brighter and keener.

His heavy antagonist now saw that nothing could serve his purpose but an exercise of sheer weight and brute force, and he pressed on and on with such fury that Tom almost cried aloud in his fear. But Lord Claud was wary and watchful; he gave way for a while, only parrying the thrusts, and that with not so much force as before; then suddenly Sir James made a furious lunge, and calling out in a strangled voice, "Have at you now!" he all but buried his rapier in his adversary's body.

All but—yet not quite; for just at the moment when it seemed impossible to parry the furious stroke, Lord Claud made a curious upward twist of the wrist, caught his adversary's blade and turned it so that it glanced aside and passed him, whilst he sprang towards him at the same instant, and saying quite coolly, "Sir, methinks your physician would recommend blood letting in your heated condition," he thrust straight and true at his burly adversary, running the shining blade into his shoulder in such a fashion that the tip of the rapier reappeared red with blood behind him, and he fell forwards with a smothered bellow like that of a bull who is ringed, so that Lord Claud had need of all his quickness to withdraw his rapier in time.



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Second and surgeon sprang to the side of the wounded man; but Lord Claud said quite quietly:

“Tis no mortal wound. He has not got his deserts this time. Are you satisfied, gentlemen, or do you want more with us?”

The second looked up at Tom’s stalwart figure, hesitated a moment, and then professed that he desired to carry matters no further.

Lord Claud handed the rapiers to Tom, coolly resumed his discarded garments, took off his hat with a courtly bow, and walked off with his customary air of easy grace.

“Come, Tom,” he said, “we have managed that well. The brute will not die, but will only keep his bed a while, and doubtless rise to trouble us again in days to come. They say he has never felt a wound before, and boasts himself invulnerable. He will little relish the lesson he has had today. But he will never forget or forgive; so have a caution when he is your neighbour in any company. He will rail at his second for not pinking you; but ’twas his own words that daunted the man. He thought he saw in you a veritable son of the forest, terrible in wrath, invincible in skill—” and Lord Claud suddenly threw back his head and began to laugh unrestrainedly.

“I did not understand him,” quoth Tom.

“Marry, no—and no need you should! You had better not understand too much of the things you see and hear in the world, honest Tom. And now let us to a more hearty breakfast, and back again to town. I must show myself today with a lordly grace, and prove to all the world that I need shrink from no man’s gaze. As for yon black bull, be sure he will breathe no word of this thing. It would ill mate with his pride for the world to know that he had been spitted like a capon by one whom he has dared to gibe at as the white hind of the forest!”

Lord Claud’s mood had completely changed. He was gay and merry, and eager after pleasure. He took Tom hither and thither to half a dozen fine houses, where the ladies gazed with a certain awestruck admiration at this “untamed son of the woods,” as it pleased Lord Claud to call him, whilst they loaded with favours the brilliant young spark, who seemed, when in the mood, to have power to win all hearts.

He was a “dear tormenting devil,” or a “mad fellow, but withal a true Prince Charming;” and just as he talked sound sense and politics with the poet yesterday, so now he beat even the finest of the ladies and their beaux at high-flown nonsense about goddesses and heroes, and the Arcadian bowers where they made a pretence of living and moving.

At the play, to which they went later, he moved from box to box, from tier to tier, taking snuff with the men, saying charming nothings to the ladies; the centre always of a



laughing throng, whose proximity must surely have been distressful to any persons so unfashionable as to desire to listen to what the actors were saying. He even went behind and upon the stage, as spectators were still permitted to do, although there was less of this confusion than a few years before; and he was eagerly welcomed wherever he appeared.



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From the play they repaired to more gay houses, where Tom speedily lost his ten guineas at basset, but was too excited to care, and paid over his stakes with a lordly indifference that did credit to his powers of observation and imitation.

It was long past midnight ere they bent their steps homewards, and then, as it was far too late to seek the shelter of Master Cale's abode, Tom betook himself once more to Lord Claud's lodgings, and was speedily sound asleep in the most soft and sumptuous bed it had ever been his lot to lie upon.

CHAPTER VII. MASTER GALE'S DAUGHTER.

It was Sunday morning, and Tom was making his way, towards the hour of noon, to the house of the perruquier, which he had quitted some four days past, with no intention of so long an absence.

The streets were unwontedly quiet, and the cries of the apprentices at the doors of the shops were pleasantly missed. The shops were most of them shuttered up, and the apprentices, clad in their best, were all away to some sport of their own selection in byways and alleys, or lingering about the parks with a knot of footmen and lackeys, watching the fine folk walk in and out. For the common sort were not admitted as yet within the precincts of the parks, and even the gentlefolks had to leave their servants behind; so that it may well be guessed there was plenty of gossiping and hustling to be had at the gates, if any had a taste for it.

Tom was a far finer figure coming home than he had been in going out. He wore a coat of azure velvet, and his vest was a perfect cataract of fine point de Venise. His shoes were of white leather with red heels, and his stockings of the finest white silk. He had felt ashamed of his plain claret cloth, which had seemed so fine at first, when taken to the houses of the fine hooped and powdered ladies; and Lord Claud had had him fitted with this suit at his own costumiers, bidding Tom regard it as a small token of friendship and gratitude.

Tom had delighted in his fine appearance as he was taken the round of the fashionable houses; but now, as he neared his former lodgings, he found himself wishing he had put on the more sober suit. He felt that Master Cale's eyes would rest upon him with a grave disapproval, and he had not yet grown indifferent to the opinion of the man who had so befriended him.

The perruquier's shop was close shut up, the sign swinging idly overhead. But the door in the rear stood ajar, and Tom softly pushed it open and entered.

He paused on the threshold, surprised by an unfamiliar sound—the sound of a fresh young voice singing a gay little snatch of song in some upper chamber. He mounted



the stairs softly, the sound of the voice growing clearer, and at last he knew that the singer must be in the upper parlour, where, when the day's work was all finished, the perruquier and any lodger he might chance to have spent the evening hours if they did not go abroad.



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This parlour was free to Tom, who, however, had not so far troubled it much with his presence; but now he pushed open the door with pardonable curiosity, and beheld at once the singer of the quaint little refrain.

A slim young maiden was standing at the window, looking down into the street below. She wore the simple dress of the citizen class, a rather full skirt of cloth—of a finer texture perhaps than some, and of a dark crimson colour which well became her—and the laced bodice and full sleeves of the day. Round her throat she had a fine white muslin kerchief edged with lace, and her apron was of the same. She had plainly been wearing a hood of cloth like her dress, but this was now lying on the table; and her pretty dark brown hair, rather ruffled, was bound by nothing save a snood of crimson riband. Her profile was turned to Tom, and he saw a sweet, little, merry face, with a nose a trifle tip-tilted, and a cheek the colour of a damask rose.

It seemed as though the opening of the door had been heard, for the maid exclaimed in a merry voice:

“O father dear, I do love your picture of Absalom and David! I think the king’s great periwig is most beautifully depicted. But I would like a companion picture on the other side—the mule running away with Absalom, and the periwig left hanging on the tree!”

Then turning full round a laughing rosy face and a pair of roguish hazel eyes, the maid suddenly found herself face to face with this very fine young gentleman, and in a moment the smile died away, although there was no displeasure in the glance of curiosity and admiration which she bestowed upon him.

Tom made his best bow, and the maiden dropped him a pretty courtesy, saying with frank fearlessness:

“You are surely my father’s lodger, of whom he spoke to me. I crave your pardon for not sooner seeing you. But I knew not that you were in the house, and thought it must needs be my father at the door.”

Tom advanced and stood beside her in the window. The pair regarded each other with a frank and friendly curiosity.

“Are you Master Cale’s daughter, pretty maiden?” asked Tom.

She nodded her head archly, whilst Tom hastened to ask:

“But how comes it then that I have never seen you before? I thought he lived alone, with only his housekeeper, shopman, and apprentice in the house.”

“And so he does,” answered the maid. “He will not have me to dwell here. As soon as my mother died, when I was but eight years old, he sent me away to my aunt in



Highgate, with whom I have remained ever since. Fain would I come back and keep house for him, but he will none of it. He says that his house is no place for me, and he will never let me visit him even of a week day. But upon most Sundays he either comes forth to fetch me, or my aunt brings me hither to him. Last Sunday the rain poured down so lustily that we were e'en forced to bide at home; but whenever it is possible we spend the day together, and I love to come into the town and walk abroad with him there, and see such sights as may be seen upon the Sabbath day."



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“And is your aunt with you today?” asked Tom.

“She brought me hither after we had attended service at St. Paul’s, which I love to do. But now she has gone to visit some gossip of her own. Father and I will have the afternoon together and alone, and this we love best of all. He always gives holiday to apprentice and shopman, so that we can have the house to ourselves, and enjoy ourselves after our own fashion.”

“I trust I shall not mar your happiness if I ask to share your noontide meal,” said Tom humbly.

“Oh no, sir, we shall be proud of your company,” answered the girl; “if you are not too fine a gentleman to sit at board with humble citizens.

“Ah, there is my father’s step! Doubtless he comes to say that dinner is ready. He will not let me soil my fingers with cooking when I come; but I can cook right well for all that —” and there she stopped short, for Cale was already entering, and he gave quite a start as his glance fell upon the resplendent figure standing beside his daughter, though his face cleared and put on a slightly quizzical look as he recognized who the young spark was.

“Ho! ho! my young friend, so I see you back at last! It is plain that you have been with mighty fine company since you left my humble roof. I almost marvel that Curley Cale’s lodging is accounted fine enough to hold your worshipful self longer!”

Tom suddenly felt a qualm of shame and disgust at his finery. It was all very well for men like Lord Claud, but he felt that it made him ridiculous to be tricked out like a peacock, in lieu of wearing the more sober and becoming raiment chosen for him with such care by Master Cale himself. His cheek glowed as he made reply:

“It is but a suit that was given me to appear at the house of some fine lady last evening. I would gladly be rid of it now, and, with your leave, will don more sober raiment. I love not to be pranked out like this; but what would you, when all the world does the like?”

Cale smiled his shrewd little smile, the maiden’s eyes expressed open admiration for the costly frippery, but Tom hastened away and chose for himself one of the seemly but well-cut and fashionable suits that had been left for him since he quitted the house a few days before; and when he descended to join the party of two at the board, as he had been invited, he felt much more like himself, and looked much more suited to his surroundings, than he had done when he first appeared there.

Father and daughter received him kindly, and Rosamund’s eyes were full of eagerness as she turned them upon him. He had learned by this time that her name was Rosamund, though her father generally called her Rosy.



“I pray you, fair sir,” she said, with a pretty imperiousness of manner, “tell us some of the things that you have seen and heard these last days. My father says you have been keeping fine company, and I would learn what that is like; for I am but a humble citizen’s daughter, and I live my life away in the country, so all I know of the gay doings in the town I must needs hear from my father, who tells me as little as ever he can!”



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And she looked towards him with a charming pout upon her lips, though her eyes were full of love beneath their merry sparkle.

“I am but a country-bred youth myself, Mistress Rosamund,” answered Tom, who had laid aside all his fine gentleman airs, and felt a deal more comfortable in consequence, “and this town and its gay doings are as strange to me as they can be to you. I am all agape at what I see and hear; but a man must needs keep his astonishment to himself, else he becomes the butt and the gibe of all the company.”

And forthwith, by no means reluctantly, Master Tom began to give account of his doings of the past days, only keeping quite silent on the subject of the duel, for he had learned that that was a matter which Lord Claud wished to remain secret.

Rosamund listened as Desdemona might have done to Othello, and Cale himself was considerably interested, though he shook his head when he heard that already Tom had lost all the money he had about him, and was even in debt to Lord Claud for losses he had been unable to meet at the moment, and which his patron had settled for him.

“Keep away from the gaming tables, Tom; keep away from the gaming tables,” he said. “Did I not warn you that you would be fleeced and rooked if you tried that sort of thing on?”

Tom laughed a little, and said he knew beforehand he should lose, as though that were an excuse. But Cale only shook his head; and Rosamund asked eagerly:

“But who is this great Lord Claud, fair sir? He seems a wonderful person, and fain would I see him with mine own eyes. He seems a kind and generous man, and wondrous clever and beautiful. Pray tell me who he is?”

Tom looked across at Cale, and made answer:

“I’ sooth, Mistress Rosamund, I know not. Perchance your father may be better instructed.”

Cale shook his head. His face was very grave.

“That is a question which I doubt if any man in London town can answer. Every man knows Lord Claud by name and fame, but none can tell who he is, nor whence come his wealth and power. Mark me, Tom, it behoves you to have a care how you fall beneath the spell of his beauty and his kindliness. He has made friends before this of handsome, powerful lads, not long from the country, and amongst these many have disappeared and never been heard of more, whilst others have fallen into crime, and have languished in Newgate, or paid the forfeit of their lives upon the gallows.”

Rosamund shrank and grew pale; whilst Tom looked the perruquier full in the face, and said:

“Truly I can believe that many men who plunge into dissipation and vice may come in time to a bad end. But why charge that upon Lord Claud? He can only be held responsible for his own life, and he lives and thrives in favour with all.”

“Like a green bay tree,” answered the perruquier thoughtfully. “I have often seen the wicked in great prosperity; but their downfall comes at last.”



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“Do you call Lord Claud wicked?” asked Tom rather hotly.

“No,” was the quiet reply; “I judge no man; but I do say that worldly prosperity is no test of true merit. The wicked may be fat and flourishing for long; but the Lord will avenge at the last.”

“But, father,” cried pretty Rosamund eagerly, “for what crimes were the poor young men hanged of whom you spoke just now?”

“Most of them suffered for the crime of robbery on the king’s highway.”

Tom again flushed rather deeply. He had heard hints and innuendoes before this, and his wits were beginning now to piece things together. He was angry, yet he scarce knew why.

“Do you mean to say, Master Cale,” he asked, “that men accuse Lord Claud of being the accomplice of highwaymen and footpads?”

And then he himself remembered the words of the message with which Captain Jack had entrusted him, and a strange thrill seemed to run down his spine.

“Men say nought of him openly,” answered Cale, “but they whisper among themselves. For my part, I know nothing of Lord Claud and his doings. But I know that there have been marvellous clever and daring deeds done upon the road; that the king’s money chests have been rifled again and again of gold, transmitted by the Treasury for the pay of the soldiers in foreign lands, and that none of the gold has ever been recovered. Now and again an obscure person has been captured, and has suffered death for complicity in such a crime; and it has been told me that several of such have been stalwart and stanch youths, who had at one time been seen frequenting Lord Claud’s lodgings, much noticed and petted by him. What truth there be in such talk I know not. Nor have I any desire to know. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing; and the voice of rumour is but little to be trusted.”

“Very little, I should think,” answered Tom quickly; for he had already conceived a great attachment towards Lord Claud, and it irked him to think that men should speak of him as one who was a false friend, and the accomplice in crimes for which others suffered whilst he reaped the spoil.

A man, especially in his hot-headed youth, seldom believes what he has no mind to; and Tom certainly had no disposition to believe any harm of Lord Claud.

So the talk drifted to other channels, and when presently Rosamund declared with pretty insistence that she must not be cheated of her walk abroad in the streets. Tom asked if he might make one of the party without intruding; and the bright eyes of the girl gave eloquent answer.



So they sallied forth together, and Master Cale played cicerone, and showed Tom many strange and wonderful things, telling him absorbing stories the while. He showed him the limits of the ravages of the Great Fire, which he could remember well, as he was ten years old at the time. He took them into many of the churches afterwards built by Wren, and Tom stood lost in amaze at the magnificent proportions of the great St. Paul's, the inside of which he had not seen till today. He was shown also the site of one of the Great Plague pits; and Rosamund clung trembling, yet fascinated, to her father's arm whilst he spoke of the things that had happened in those gruesome days.



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He himself had been sent away into the country during the terrible visitation; but his father had remained and had survived, and from him he had learned all manner of strange tales, which Rosamund loved to hear him tell, though they always blanched her cheek, and brought a look of terror into her pretty eyes.

Tom thought this was a pleasanter way of spending the afternoon than listening to the braggings of the coffee house bullies, or watching the mummery of the play, when scarce a word could be heard from the actors, owing to the laughter and talk that buzzed all round the house. The clamour from the footmen's gallery alone almost sufficed to drown the sound from the stage; and, indeed, a short time later on, the disgraceful behaviour of the servants who attended their masters and mistresses to the play became so intolerable that the free gallery was closed to them, causing regular riots every night, till military aid had to be summoned.

But Rosamund thought it must be delightful to see a play, and wanted to hear all he could tell her about it; and so well pleased were the pair with their conversation, that Master Cale, bethinking him of an old friend hard by, with whom he liked to exchange a friendly word from time to time, bid them walk up and down the street together for a brief time, until he should pay his visit and join them again.

This suited the young people very well, and they exchanged a good many confidences together. Tom told her of his home at Gablehurst, and of his mother and sister, and the father who was gone; and she told him of her quiet life in her aunt's house, and how she would so greatly like to remain always with her father, and watch the life of this wonderful city.

But Tom could well understand how the perruquier would shrink from permitting his innocent and pretty daughter to dwell beneath his roof. His trade brought thither all manner of fine dandies and young bloods, and if it were known that there was a pretty maiden within doors, there would be no end to their attempts to get sight of or speech with her; and any girl's head might be turned by the flowery nonsense that would be spoken and written to her.

"Believe me, you are better where you are, Mistress Rosy," answered Tom. "I would not have my sister Rachel here, now that I have seen what London is like. It is a place for men to see at least once in their lives; but women are better away from it. I looked about at the painted faces, the towering heads, and the huge hoops the other night, and I said to myself, that if my mother or sister were to make of themselves such objects as that, I should be ready to sink into the ground for shame—to say nothing of the ogling, and fan tapping, and silly jargon of talk which would put a chattering monkey to shame!"

If Tom was quoting Lord Claud's moralizings, he quoted them in all good faith; for he had been honestly disgusted by the glimpses he had had of the goings on of fine ladies

in their houses, and could better appreciate the simplicity and true affection of his own womankind than he had ever done before.



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At this moment there smote upon his ears the unwelcome sound of mocking laughter that seemed familiar to him.

“Ho, ho, ho! So the country bumpkin has found a mistress already! So he has had to leave the fine ladies, and mate with one of his own sort after all! Ho, ho, ho! She has a neat foot and ankle, at any rate! Let us see what sort of a face there is under the crimson hood!”

Tom felt the girl’s hand clutch fast hold of his arm, and his blood began to tingle in his veins. He was mightily glad that he had buckled on his sword before coming out; although, as he had put on a heavy cloak, it was possible the bullies were not aware of that.

“Which house did your father enter, Mistress Rosamund?” he asked quickly.

“I did not note,” she answered, looking round with frightened eyes; “but methinks it was the one with the steps and the little recess.”

Tom, making a few rapid strides, whisked her quickly within the shelter of the doorway, saying, as coolly as might be:

“Knock, and ask to join your father, if he be within. I will soon settle these impudent fellows behind.”

Then he faced about quickly, just as the four bullies he had met before came swaggering up, ready for any mischief and fighting that might be afoot.

“Come, Master Greengoose, let’s see what sort of taste you have in faces! You are a fine hand at making friends! Let’s see how you fare with the ladies!

“Nay, mistress, do not turn so coyly away and draw your hood over those bright eyes—”

But the speaker got no further, for Tom’s sword had come flashing from its sheath, and with a quick turn of the wrist he hit the fellow full on the mouth with the hilt, so that he fell back spluttering and swearing, the blood starting from his lips.

“Is that enough,” said Tom sternly, “or will you have more?”

It was Thirsty Thring who had received the buffet, and he was the least disposed of all that worthy quartette to show fight to a resolute adversary; but Bully Bullen came swaggering up, drawing his sword with a great air of assurance. He had been the hero of many a tavern brawl before, and reckoned his skill as something to be feared.

“So, young rooster! Wouldst crow so lustily on your dung heap? D’ye think you’re to be cock o’ the walk in all London town? Are honest citizens to be set upon, and their teeth



knocked out, to please your lusty humours? Take that, you young cub, and learn manners to your betters!"

He made a fierce and sudden lunge at Tom as he spoke, expecting that he had an untrained and inexperienced adversary to deal with. But Tom had had three lessons already from Captain Raikes, as well as bouts with Lord Claud by way of amusement; and with hardly a perceptible effort he parried the thrust, and making his keen blade twine round the clumsier one of his opponent, he jerked the weapon clean out of his hand, and sent it flying half across the road.



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“A fig for your boasting!” he cried contemptuously. “You had best get out of my sight, lest I run you through for your impudence!”

Slippery Seal, seeing how matters were going, now raised a cry for help.

“Help! help! Watchmen, to the rescue! Here is a desperate young ruffian seeking to murder the Queen’s subjects in broad daylight! Help, I say, and take the young braggart before the magistrates! Cannot peaceable citizens walk the streets without being set upon by such bullies as that yonder?”

Two watchmen at that moment came hastening up, and looked at the combatants with questioning eyes. Tom was flushed, and his sword was still in his hand; but Rosamund had been admitted to the house, and was going hot-foot in search of her father, to come and put a stop to the fight; for she had perfect faith in his power to do anything he had a mind to.

“We four can testify,” said Slippery Seal, with a voice of great unction, “that as we were peaceably passing down the street, this young fellow, of whom we know no good, made a sudden and unprovoked attack upon honest Master Thring there, whose mouth is still bleeding from the blow. Thereupon Master Bullen drew his sword to protect him; but he was set upon so furiously, that had he not been a notable swordsman he must needs have been killed. As it was, his sword was dashed from his band, and there it lies in the roadway before your eyes. I say, how long are pious and peaceable citizens to be treated thus? Do your duty, my good fellows, and take this young man into custody. A taste of the stocks will do him a vast deal of good, and we will bear testimony against him with right good will. ‘In the mouth of two or three witnesses—’ you know what says the Scripture.”

“Ay, you blasphemer and liar, we know well what says the Scripture: ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness;’ and again, ‘The mouth that speaketh lies shall be stopped.’”

Looking round quickly, Tom saw Master Cale, with his daughter clinging to his arm, standing in the doorway of the house, and sternly regarding the scene.

“Watchmen,” he said, “if you make any prisoners today, take you those four bullies, who are but too well known in these streets already. It is they who delight to set upon strangers, and insult and frighten innocent maidens. Take you them, and I will bear witness against them; for I saw the scene with my own eyes. Would to heaven that honest citizens could rid their streets of such spawn!

“But I tell you, you mischievous scum, the day will come when we will no longer stand this swaggering and bullying. We are a patient people; but you can provoke us too far. I know you four right well. I would sit you in the stocks in a row, or have you whipped at the cart’s tail from Newgate to Tyburn; and perchance the day may come when—”



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But the miscreants did not wait to hear the end of this harangue. They well knew that no tale of theirs could stand for a moment before the witness of a man respected as Master Cale the perruquier. Fearful lest the watch, who had let go their hold of Tom, should in turn lay hands on them, they fled helter-skelter, but as they went they breathed out threats of being even with Tom another time, and he knew well that this encounter had changed them from the merely jeering enemies they had shown themselves at first into real antagonists full of bitter animosity and hatred.

The watch were never too eager to take up evildoers who were possessed of swords and were strong of body. They were glad enough that Master Cale had vouched for Tom's honesty, and that the other four had betaken themselves away. Hard knocks and sometimes fatal injury were often the portion of these old men, so incapable of keeping order in the streets; and thankful were they when any fray ended in the manner of this one.

But Cale's face was rather grave as he turned homewards, his daughter clinging to his arm, and Tom marching upon her other side with his head high in the air.

"I thank you, my good lad, for being so stout a champion to my little girl," he said; "and yet I would it had not happened; for it is ill work making enemies in these days of lawlessness and duelling."

But Tom gave a little laugh. He had no desire to make boast of his prowess; yet he felt that he could settle a score of quarrels with such besotted creatures as the four he had put to rout so lately, and be no manner the worse for it himself. He was not at all sorry for the adventure. He felt a flutter of pride and pleasure in the shy glances shot at him from the dark eyes beneath the crimson hood. He had made of himself a hero in the eyes of pretty Rosamund, and he liked that experience well enough.

"Fear not for me, my good friend," he answered, in a tone that had caught a little of the lofty ring of Lord Claud's.

"A man cannot go through life without making enemies as well as friends. But as for such creatures as we have just quitted, why, they are not worth a thought! I heed them no more than the wasp that buzzes round my head. They are the scum and off scouring of the earth—all brag and boast, but ready to run at the first hint of danger!"

Rosamund's eyes shot forth another look of admiration; but Cale said quietly:

"Yet it is this very scum and off scouring of the earth who have before now kidnapped and shipped off to the plantations of Virginia honest men of stout heart and stalwart frame; for there is great demand for able-bodied men there, and good prices are paid for bone and muscle. So again I say, have a care, Tom, have a care. I would not have



you entertain one coward fear, yet I would have you careful not to provoke needless animosity; for we live in perilous and evil days.”

The colour had faded from Rosamund’s cheeks at these words, and she timidly laid a hand upon Tom’s arm as he marched beside her.



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“Fair sir, you will be careful,” she said, in a soft and pleading voice. “If hurt were to come to you for having so gallantly befriended me, I should know no peace or happiness again!”

Tom looked with a smile into the face of the speaker; and Cale heard the words, and saw the look. He gave a little sigh, and walked on in deep thought.

It was Tom and Rosamund who did the greater part of the talking, even after they got home and partook of the dish of tea. This then costly beverage was reckoned by Rosamund as a Sunday treat, and sipped with great relish; and Tom took it for the first time, saying he would e’en make shift to like it, since Mistress Rose vouched that it was good, although he had hitherto refused it when offered at the houses of the fine folks he had visited.

So in talk and tea drinking an hour slipped away; and then the perruquier rose and bid Rosamund get her hood and come; for it was high time to fetch her aunt, and go back to Highgate.

Tom would have liked to accompany them once more, but some instinct restrained him from making the offer. He bade adieu to Rosamund at her own door, and went back to sit by the fire and muse of all the things that had happened to him during this momentous week.

CHAPTER VIII. THE GREAT DUKE.

“Now, Tom, keep your eyes well open. He is about to appear!”

Tom was standing, tall and silent, feeling singularly out of place in that gorgeous company, in a magnificent reception room, brilliantly lighted, and crowded from one end to the other with a throng of highly-born and fashionable persons.

He had been introduced by Lord Claud into this gay assembly, and was already half disposed to wish himself away.

Tom had been several weeks in town now; and after his first encounter with Lord Claud, which had led to such close intimacy for a few days, he had seen nothing of that remarkable personage for the space of two or three weeks.

Although perhaps a little piqued that his patron had not sent him so much as a line of invitation, or seemed to remember his existence, Tom was not sure that he regretted his lack of memory. Lord Claud had certainly fascinated his imagination, and won his affections; but he seemed to be a mysterious character, whose friendship might not prove too desirable a possession. It was not his place, he thought, with the simple pride of the countryman, to seek to thrust himself upon a man so much greater than himself.



So he had gone about seeing the sights of the town with Harry Gay, spending his money with some freedom, and indulging in a little play and dicing at various houses of entertainment. But he kept within moderate bounds in his pleasures, both because he desired to eke out his funds as far as possible, and because he did not wish to fall under the displeasure of his kind host, Master Cale, the father of pretty Rosamund.



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Tom thought a good deal about Rosamund during the week, and regarded Sunday as the red-letter day of his calendar. Master Cale did not forbid him to be of their company upon the afternoons when they walked abroad, and he and the maid were excellent friends by this time, and exchanged many gay quips and sallies together. Rosamund always made him tell the story of his past week in some detail; and Tom had therefore another motive for keeping free from scenes and company which would have made his story unfit hearing for her pretty ears.

Already he had begun to think that when he had travelled and seen the world, and was ready to go home and take up the duties which at five and twenty would devolve upon him, he would return with far greater contentment and pleasure if he could take back Rosamund as his wife. He could not fancy that any life would be dull and monotonous shared with her, nor any home dreary that was lightened by the sunshine of her presence.

The image of Rosamund had begun almost to obliterate that of Lord Claud in his imagination, when suddenly one day he found himself again in company of that gentleman at the coffee house he generally frequented.

Lord Claud laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder, saying, with a light laugh:

“O Tom, Tom, whom I called so trusty, I fear me you are as fickle as any maid! But what does the prophet when the mountain will not come to him? He even puts his pride in his pocket and goes to the mountain. You are a solid mountain in your way, good Tom; and here is the prophet come after you!”

Tom looked up, half ashamed, half flattered, the charm of Lord Claud’s presence beginning at once to make itself felt.

“My lord, I could not think you wanted such a humble person as myself! And you had but to send me a line to Master Cale’s if you did,” he stammered.

Lord Claud dropped into the seat next him, laughing a light, low-toned laugh.

“I like your simplicity, my honest Tom. Keep it as long as you can; for it is a quality rarely met with in these days, and smells as sweet as lavender in country gardens. I have not been wont to need to ask my friends to visit me. They swarm about my rooms like bees round honey, so long as there be honey to gather from my hive. How do you think you are going to live, my young friend, when your store of guineas is melted, if you have not learned that noble art of picking and stealing, which our young blades of fashion practise with such success and grace?”

So the acquaintance was renewed, Tom quickly falling again beneath the spell of the strong personality of Lord Claud. He had not entirely ceased his sword practice with



Captain Raikes during the past weeks, and now was to be found at his hall almost every day. Lord Claud himself would sometimes come and watch and applaud; and more than once, as the two had walked away together, linked arm in arm, his patron had said:



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“Good swordsmanship is an art to be greatly prized. It makes a man respected and feared. It gives him distinction with his fellows. Besides, one never knows when it may be useful for the saving of one’s skin. A man who can wield the rapier with skill, master his horse as you can, honest Tom, and shoot fair and true with pistol and musket, may go through life to a merry tune, and even die at last in his bed, if he has a mind for so respectable an end!”

The days were shortening to their darkest by now. Snow fell in the streets, and made walking disagreeable. Tom found it pleasant to ride along beside Lord Claud, mounted upon the mettlesome mare, Nell Gwynne, who appeared kept just now for his especial use and behoof. He still spent his Sundays at his lodgings; but pretty Rosamund was not always able to come across when the snow lay deep along the country roads. Tom began to think less of her again, and more of his patron and friend; being, as may have already been gleaned, a youth of impressionable nature, easily moulded by the character of his associates, although not without a latent firmness of will which might develop into sterling metal in time, though, perhaps, not until the admixture of dross had been purged away by the action of the furnace of trial.

All London was now agog over the return of the victor of Blenheim. The great Duke of Marlborough had been upon his way home for some time. In the middle of December he reached London, and took his seat in the House of Lords; and it was said that early in the next year there would be a monstrous fine procession from the Tower to Westminster, in which all the trophies of war would be solemnly paraded.

Tom was as excited as anybody over all this, and as eager to obtain sight of the great Duke. Lord Claud had promised that he should not only see him, but be one of the same company at some fine house where he would show himself. Tom had often been to grand enough houses already with his friend; but it seemed to him overmuch to suppose that he could be introduced into any company of which the Duke of Marlborough was to be a member.

Lord Claud, however, was not given to vain boasting. The open-house festivities of Christmas were approaching. He himself had won the entree to an extraordinary number of fashionable houses; and this evening here was Tom, come with his patron to a nobleman’s dwelling, standing in the crowd of fashionable grandees, all in a flutter of excitement to see the hero of the hour at close quarters.

“Keep your eyes open, Tom; you cannot fail to see him as he passes through the room. You are lucky in being able to look over the heads of all the crowd. No tiptoeing lady can intercept your view even with her towering headdress!”

This was hardly true; for there were ladies whose headdresses were of such monstrous proportions that the dame of five feet stood seven feet high, taking the heels of her shoes and the tower on her head into consideration! But luckily these extravagant

follies were confined only to the few, the majority of the ladies being content with a headdress of more moderate dimensions.



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There was a great buzz of talk going on as it became known that the Duke was approaching—some eager to know if the Duchess would be with him; others laughing at the name, and vowing that Mrs. Morley could never bear to part with her dear Mrs. Freeman even for an hour!

The doors at the end of the room were thrown suddenly open. The master of the house appeared, leading with great distinction of manner a little knot of guests, who passed through the crowded outer reception room at a slow pace, returning the many salutations of the company with great show of goodwill, disappearing presently behind the curtains which shut off the innermost room where the lady of the house was awaiting them, with some of the more select and high-born guests.

“That is the Duke,” said Lord Claud to Tom, indicating a tall and elegant man, who looked to him hardly old enough for the general of so many victorious battles. He was singularly handsome, with a languid grace of bearing that seemed strange in a soldier. He spoke in a peculiarly modulated and refined voice, and plainly possessed the art of saying the right thing to the right person, and that at the right moment. His silver tongue had done as much good service in keeping the Allies in harmony, as his military genius in forming combinations and defeating the ends of the enemy.

At his side was the Duchess, a fine-looking woman of commanding presence, not beautiful, but with a very elegant figure and remarkably abundant hair, which she wore in a more tasteful way than most of the company. A few paces behind came another notable figure, that of Marshal Tallard, the French general whom Marlborough had taken prisoner at Blenheim, and whom he had brought with him to England; but whom he treated with every courtesy, and with whom he had formed something very like a real friendship.

Lord Claud whispered to Tom that Marshal Tallard had been the one French general whose genius was in the least able to cope with that of Marlborough; and to have him in safe keeping in this country was a most excellent thing for the Grand Alliance.

As soon as the distinguished guests had disappeared, the buzz of talk rose louder than before. Tom asked, in puzzled tones, what all this chatter about Mrs. Morley and Mrs. Freeman meant; and Lord Claud laughed, as he replied:

“Have you never heard of the whim of the Queen to call herself Mrs. Morley in her letters to the Duchess, who in her turn is Mrs. Freeman? And very well is she so named, for never was subject more free with sovereign than is Duchess Sarah with good Queen Anne. Indeed, there be not those lacking who say that such freedom cannot go on for ever. However fondly the Queen may love the Duchess now, she cannot for ever submit to be the subject of her subject. Some day there will be a storm, and then it will behove Mrs. Freeman to sing to a different tune! For the Queen has a

will of her own when once it is roused, and can show a stubborn front when she chooses—as some of her ministers have already found to their discomfiture!”



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Lord Claud strolled away presently, leaving Tom to look about him and listen to the idle chatter of the shifting throng. He made out that though the Duke of Marlborough was in great popular esteem, his Duchess was little liked; and spiteful things were circulated to her disfavour all round the room. It was plain that she had a very overbearing temper, and made many enemies; but her affection for her husband and children was never disputed, nor his for her, though there were many who marvelled what a man of his parts could see in such a shrew to be so devoted to her as had always been the case.

“For she belabours him sorely with her tongue times and again, and oftentimes writes him fiery letters, which discompose him more than a reverse in arms. When she smiles, he is filled with an extraordinary joy; and when she frowns, he knows no peace till he has conciliated her. 'Tis the strangest thing in a man such as he; and the Queen is just as bad. In old days the woman would have been burned as a witch, for she has certainly bewitched that pair, though no one else can see wherein her wondrous charm lies.”

Later on in the evening, when the company had somewhat thinned, and when the card rooms had drawn off a number of those who yet remained, the Duke was seen strolling by himself through the suite of rooms, exchanging friendly nods and words with the many eager acquaintances he met there.

Marlborough had that recollection of faces which is so often the prerogative of royalty; and he had none of the pride which hinders a man from greeting an old friend, even though his station in life was humble. The Duke had been but the son of a country gentleman, when he came to court as plain John Churchill. He had climbed the ladder of fame and fortune fast; but he remembered his former friends, and never forgot to salute them in company. His charm of manner was felt by all who came in contact with him. However worried or hard pressed, he never let his irritation be seen, and he never appeared in haste. He was as suave and gentle in manner amongst the humbler sort of company as in the presence of royalty itself; and his clear glance passed quickly from face to face as he talked, as though he were secretly taking the measure of men, although his languor of manner never varied.

More than once, as he walked hither and thither through the rooms, had Tom's glance crossed his. Possibly it was the young man's great height which took the eye of the soldier in the midst of this crowd, where smirking fops and bending courtiers predominated. Tom could not be accused of bowing or smirking. He remained the whole time leaning back against the wall in the same place; his face grave; his eyes following the movements of this or that person; his lips silent, because he could not frame them to the jargon of tongues and the stilted phrases of the day, and besides he had no acquaintances in this gay throng, save only Lord Claud himself.



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Tom was looking in some curiosity to see if Lord Claud was acquainted with the Duke. He had never said so; but then Lord Claud was not given to boasting, and had already surprised Tom by the number of his notable acquaintances. The Duke was walking along, skirting the wall of the room. Everybody gave way for him to pass. He was now very near to Lord Claud, and not far from Tom himself, for his patron had been strolling idly in his direction.

Tom saw the eyes of the two men cross, and Lord Claud make his courtly bow, to which the Duke responded gracefully. Lord Claud took one step forward, and said in a low tone, every syllable of which, however, was audible to Tom:

“I have never before had the honour of speaking with your Grace; but there is one word that I crave to speak in your ear. If there be some secret mission of danger which the Duke of Marlborough desires to intrust to two men, stout of heart, cool of head, and skilled in the use of the sword, then I can promise that the services of myself and my trusty comrade here are at your Grace’s disposal; and I think I can promise that, whether we succeed or not, we can be true to the death.”

And Lord Claud, as he spoke, laid a hand upon the arm of the astonished Tom, who had certainly not understood his words of former days to mean anything quite so definite as this.

At the same time the heart of the youth leaped within him as he heard, and he felt a thrill run through his veins. As the soft yet searching gaze of the Duke fell upon him, he felt himself flush to the temples like a girl; and yet at that moment he felt that he could willingly lay down his life to serve so great a man as this.

“And who may have told you, sir, that I have need of trusty men for the secret service?” asked Marlborough, in his even tone.

“My knowledge of men and of warfare have told me,” answered Lord Claud, with his accustomed serenity of manner. “True men are not to be plucked from every tree, as I have found to mine own cost. A man may prove but a treacherous reed, upon whom if one leans it goes into his hand. Therefore, your Grace, have I made bold to tell you of two trusty servants, something wearied with the hollow life of this great city, who are willing and ready to travel farther afield, and to whom peril or danger adds but zest to any quest.”

Marlborough stood thoughtfully regarding the two men before him. Lord Claud returned his gaze by one full and calm; Tom’s eyes glowed and kindled by reason of the keenness of the surging thoughts within.

“You are he whom men call Lord Claud,” said the Duke thoughtfully. “You know that there are strange whispers afloat about you, my lord?”



“I know it well.”

“And you have never denied those whispers?”

Lord Claud smiled slightly.

“My sword has answered a few taunts. For the rest, I heed them not overmuch. If we began to take cognizance of the chatterings of this world of magpies, we might have a duel to fight every day of our lives.”



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Marlborough smiled slightly at the nonchalance of the reply.

“That is all you have to say to me, Lord Claud?”

“That is all, your Grace.”

For a moment there was silence, whilst the Duke bent his eyes upon the ground; then he looked straight at Tom.

“And who are you, young sir?”

Tom glanced at Lord Claud, but seeing that he was to answer for himself, he did so frankly and candidly. He was not ashamed of his humble birth, and made no secret of it; nor did he deny that he should never have found himself in such fine company save for the introduction and good offices of Lord Claud.

“And you desire to see foreign parts?”

“I was sent from home that I might do so. My father thought I might find room in your Grace’s army to fight for my country. I was smitten so with the wonders of London that I have lingered here long. But I begin to weary of the life. I would gladly go forth and see new lands, the more so if I could travel with a comrade who knew to frame his tongue to foreign speech;” and here he glanced at Lord Claud, who seemed to him a notable linguist.

“You know no tongue but your own, Mr. Tufton?”

“Never a word; and even that I cannot speak as men speak it in London town, so that I am fain to keep silence in a crowd like this, lest men laugh me to scorn, and anger me till I say or do something unseemly;” and the lad’s face flushed, for he had been sorely provoked before this, and had need of all his patience to quell the tempest of his soul.

The Duke smiled at this boyish frankness of speech; but then his face grew grave again, and he stood a while in thought. Then he looked at Lord Claud, and said with some significance:

“I will think more of this matter, sir. I have used strange tools before this, and oftentimes with success. The secret service has its secrets and its surprises; and I have my own methods of winning the fidelity of the messengers I employ.”

“So I have heard, your Grace.”

The two men looked full at each other, and the glance was neither unfriendly nor suspicious. It appeared to Tom as though there were mutual liking, and a disposition to confidence; but this was neither the time nor the place to indulge it.



“Till all this feasting and pageantry be over, I am not mine own master, and I can scarce find time for the needful business of the hour,” said Marlborough; “but later on I hope to be free to spend a short spell of well-earned rest in mine own house of Holywell, hard by St. Albans. If you should receive a summons to visit me there, come privately, and bring your friend with you. It may be I shall make use of your services ere long.”

With a slight bow, which was respectfully returned by Tom, and more gracefully by Lord Claud, the Duke moved away; and Tom’s eyes were alight with excitement as he asked eagerly:

“What does it mean? What have you offered? What will he use us for?”

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Lord Claud led his pupil away through the crowded rooms, out into the cold night air; but neither of them felt the cold. A keen excitement filled their veins as with molten fire.

“He rose to it!” quoth Lord Claud exultantly; “I saw it ever growing in favour as he turned it over. I have heard of his methods in the secret service. He spends more money, and gets greater results than any general has ever yet done. He says truth when he speaks of employing strange tools. Well, let him employ this strange tool—and it shall not play him false!

“My coffers are almost bare, Tom. And I am sick of crowds and foppery and the follies of the city. I would fain away on the back of my good steed, and feel what freedom is like once more. Gold I must have; and the King’s gold is my fancy. Let me win it this time by my services, which shall be true and faithful; but if not—well, let them not say the fault is mine!”

“The Queen’s, you mean,” said Tom. “We serve our Queen now.”

Lord Claud gave a short laugh.

“You speak sooth, honest Tom; we have a Queen now, and I would not do despite to our good Queen Anne! I was thinking of the last time I had won royal gold—then it was the King’s money that replenished my empty exchequer!”

He laughed again, and Tom looked at him half uneasily; which perceiving, he changed his tone, and in a short time the youth had forgotten everything save the glorious prospect of adventure and peril, and the handling thereafter of golden treasure; for if the Duke was accounted a lover of money, no man ever accused him of showing meanness in rewarding the services of others.

The next weeks flew by almost like a dream for Tom; and truly he felt he must surely be dreaming when he watched the gorgeous pageant of the third of January, and witnessed from a commanding situation the grand procession of the trophies of war as it wound its way from the Tower to Westminster Hall.

Companies of horse and foot made a brave and gallant show; row after row of pikemen with the captured standards; a goodly number of the nobles of the land; and the great Duke himself, at whose’ appearance the populace shouted till they were hoarse, ladies waved handkerchiefs, and the city seemed to go mad with joy and applause.

Almost grander still was the pageant three days later, when the victor of Blenheim went in state to the Goldsmiths’ Hall, to a banquet given in his honour by the Lord Mayor and Town Council. He was conveyed there in one of the royal carriages; the greatest men in the kingdom, and some princely guests, accompanied him; and again the whole city turned out to give him welcome. At Temple Bar the city marshals received him in state,



garlands were flung, and trumpets proclaimed the idol of the hour. The Commons were petitioning the Queen to suggest some fitting tribute for the services of so great a man; and the gift of the royal manor of Woodstock, and the erection by royal bounty of the palace of Blenheim (although after his fall and disgrace Marlborough had to finish the palace at his own cost) were the results of this appeal.



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Tom witnessed all these brave sights, and had his head well-nigh turned by all the rejoicings in which the city took part. Even Master Cale scarcely chid him for the way in which his guineas were flying; although he warned Tom that they would not last long at such a pace. But Tom laughed now, and said he had the prospect of earning more when these were gone; and Lord Claud laughed lightly when the subject came up, and told Tom that the pleasantest way with money was to spend it freely whilst it lasted, and then turn to and get more. There were a hundred ways of doing this, he assured him; and Tom half believed him, and found it mighty pleasant to throw about his gold as the young bloods of fashion did, and have a pretty costly trinket to offer to Rosamund whenever they chanced to meet.

Master Cale would rather the child had not had these gay gewgaws forced upon her; but he could not chide overmuch when he saw the brightness of her eyes and the eagerness upon her face. Besides, Tom had already spoken of his speedy departure for foreign lands; and although Rosamund pouted, and professed that it was very unkind of him to go just when they had grown to be friends, her father saw no indications of deeper feeling. And, indeed, the maid had as yet no real love for any but her father. Tom had taken her fancy, as being the finest and handsomest youth she had ever come across, but she regarded him as a being quite out of her sphere; and though her heart fluttered a little at first sight of him, she could look forward to the thought of his absence with great equanimity.

“You will come back and tell us all your adventures,” she said, as though that would make up for much; and Tom faithfully promised, although he fancied there might be many reservations in the tale he would tell.

One day before the month of January had fled Tom received a summons to Lord Claud’s lodging. There he found everything in confusion, servants hurrying hither and thither, and the valet packing up some sober clothing in a small valise that could be strapped across a saddle.

When Tom came face to face with Lord Claud he saw a new expression in the eyes of his patron. All the languor and indifference had fled. His whole aspect was of a man bound upon some stern errand.

“Tom,” he said briefly, “the time has come. Go home and don your stoutest riding dress. Take a second with you in saddlebag or valise; and hide such money as you have left somewhere upon your person. Then come back hither, and we will dine together. We are to start upon our journey this very day; and our first stage is Holywell House, near St. Albans.”



CHAPTER IX. FARE WELL TO HOME.

“My lord,” said Tom, “I am but a country squire’s son. I am no fit guest for the house of a duke. I pray you let me turn aside, and go visit mine own home, and say farewell to mine own people. If, as you say, we shall speedily be sent forth upon some errand of peril, I would fain kiss my mother once again before parting. I have not been to her as good a son as I should wish. Let me ask her pardon, and show her that I have not forgotten her, ere we fare forth on our mission.”



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Tom and his companion were drawing near to the Duke's property of Holywell, when Tom suddenly burst out with these words. He had begun to feel a sort of proud, shy shrinking from thrusting himself, even as invited guest, into the house of the great Marlborough. Moreover, the sight of the familiar country—for he had been wont to pay visits afore times to St. Albans—had awakened in him memories of the life which now seemed so very far distant, together with more tender thoughts of mother and sister than he had ever felt towards them in the days of old.

"I would meet you in three days' time wherever you would appoint me," he added, as Lord Claud remained silent and thoughtful; and there was a note of pleading in his voice which showed how much bent he was upon this visit of farewell. "You have said you do not look to be less than three days at Holywell. I pray you spare me for this last farewell."

Lord Claud's face softened, as though he felt sympathy for Tom's eager desire. He spoke kindly and thoughtfully.

"In sooth, I see no objection," he replied. "It is to me that the Duke must impart his wishes, as you know nought of foreign lands or tongues. A stout and trusty comrade I need to take with me; but it is not necessary, so far as I see, for us both to wait upon the Duke. Belike, too, he may be busy, and it may be I shall have to wait his leisure; or he may himself have to wait for despatches from abroad ere he can give me mine. So do you take your ease at your home of Gablehurst; and when I have received instruction, I will, by your leave, join you there. We shall certainly cross the sea to Holland; for we must not adventure ourselves in the hostile ports of France. So 'twill all be in my way for the coast; and perchance your good mother will afford me the shelter of her friendly roof for one night."

Tom's face lighted up as though a sunbeam had touched it.

"For a dozen, my lord, if you will thus far favour us! In sooth, I thank you heartily for this grace. The village of Gablethorpe is well known to some persons even in these parts; and Gablehurst is the largest house in the place. A hearty welcome will be yours, my lord, whenever you arrive there."

"Thanks, good Tom. I doubt it not if thy folks are of thine own trusting kidney. And hark ye, look well to the mare Nell Gwynne; let her be well fed and well tended, for it may well be that she has hard times before her. If we have to cross the sea on urgent business, I shall do my best to take our good steeds with us. Dutch nags may be strong, but I would sooner feel the English blood stirring beneath me. Besides, in matters where despatch and caution are needed, it is half the battle to have a horse who has been trained under one's own eye. They have ways with them that can be of vast use in moments of peril, and will brook no strange riders on their backs. See to the

mare, Tom, and do well by her; for it may be that thy very life may hang one day upon her speed and strength!"

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Tom felt the blood tingling in his veins.

“I will not forget your charge, my lord.”

“And now, what will you do, Tom? Will you sleep one night at Holywell? For I would not have you adventure yourself alone in the forest at dark; and you must needs pass through a part of it to reach your destination.”

“No, my lord, nor I either, after what I experienced there before. But hard by here is the house of a friend. I would gladly turn in thither; and tomorrow he will certainly ride with me through the forest and homewards. Doubtless, too, when you have to pass that way, the Duke will give you escort till you near our friendly village.”

So the matter was thus arranged to the satisfaction of Tom; and almost immediately the two companions parted company, the country here being safe and fairly populated. Before long Tom found himself knocking at the gate of an old friend of his, who gave him hearty and boisterous welcome.

It was with strange feelings next day that he found himself riding along the familiar track which led straight to the village of Gablethorpe! It was only three months since he had left the place, but he felt as though full as many years had passed over his head.

He was not very finely dressed; but there was a style about his London-made riding suit which his country clothes had lacked, and the peruke upon his head gave him the air of a fine gentleman. He noted with amusement that some of the rustics who gaped at him as he passed did not recognize him, although he knew them well. If he had been riding Wildfire they would have known the horse; but now both steed and rider seemed strange to them.

Then as he rode at a foot pace through the village, smiling at sight of the familiar places and faces (his friend had turned back when they had passed the limits of the forest, and had ridden home with his servant, not to be belated), one of the women at the cottage doors smote her hands together and cried:

“Bless us all! if it bean’t Master Tom hisself!”

“Golly! and so it be!” cried her husband, who was just coming in from the fields; and the next minute Tom was surrounded by a gaping, admiring crowd, all eager to give him welcome, and wonder at the fine figure he cut amongst them.

The restiveness of the mare shortened the greetings of the rustics; for Nell Gwynne was not accustomed to being so surrounded, and showed a disposition to lay about her with her heels, or to rear and strike out with her forefeet. These manoeuvres soon scattered the crowd, and Tom rode on, laughing and waving his hand; whilst the fleet-footed of the village urchins started in a beeline across the meadows for Gablehurst, knowing that the



lady there would certainly bestow a silver goad upon him who first brought the news that Master Tom was at hand!

So when Tom rode up the avenue towards the fine old gabled house, which had never looked so pleasant to him as in the evening glow of this January afternoon, mother and sister were out upon the steps waiting for him; and the servants were assembling from within and without to give him a hearty cheer, and receive his kindly smile and greeting in reply.



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His mother folded him in her arms, with the tears running down her cheeks. She had only heard once from him all these months; for the letter he had sent at Christmas time had never found its way through the snow drifts of the forest. Tom kissed mother and sister with real feeling, and then turned aside to give minute instructions and warnings with regard to the mare, who was put into the care of the old servant who had most experience in the matter of horse flesh, and felt no uneasiness at the vagaries and tantrums of her ladyship.

Then Tom turned to enter the familiar hall, his hand upon his mother's shoulder, Rachel clinging to his other arm.

"O Tom!" she cried, "have you come back to us for good? Have you had enough of gay London town?"

There was already a traveller's meal set out in the warm south parlour, and the servants were hurrying to and fro with eager zeal and excitement. Tom was pushed into a seat by his sister, and helped with no unsparing hand; whilst the mother hung over him, eager not to lose a single word.

"Yes, truly, for the time being I have had enough of London town," answered Tom; "although it is a monstrous fine city, and I should well like to see it again, as indeed I may. But for the moment I am on my way to foreign lands, as my father wished. I am like to have work to do there for my lord of Marlborough, whose coming to this country has set all the town in a commotion, as perchance you have heard."

They had heard something of it even at Gablehurst; and Rachel eagerly asked Tom if he had seen the great Duke.

"Oh, many times," answered Tom, with the complacency of one who feels himself a great man in his present surroundings. "I witnessed many pageants in which he took part; and I was of the same company at the house of my Lord Craven, and was presented to him, and had speech with him!"

Mother and sister were impressed and surprised; but yet Tom was so great a personage in their estimation that perhaps they took this piece of news more quietly than more enlightened dames would have done. They made him tell his story from end to end, sitting with his feet towards the hearth, the cheery glow of the fire warming his limbs and imparting a sense of well-being and homelike comfort.

"And who is this Lord Claud, who has shown you so much kindness?" asked the mother, when the outlines of the story at least had become known to them.

"That I cannot rightly tell you," answered Tom; "there is some mystery about his birth and name. He goes everywhere, and is received by the best and finest people of the



town, short of the court circle. And even my lord of Marlborough exchanged civilities with him, and let him present me as his friend. But more than that I cannot tell you, nor can any man in town. If it be a secret, it is mightily well kept. All have heard of Lord Claud; but none know more of him than his name.”



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“That seems a strange thing,” said Rachel.

“Not more strange than half the things one sees and hears in the world,” answered Tom, with the air of a man of vast experiences, as indeed he felt himself to be in this company.

Nor did the pleasant feeling wear off with the rapid flight of days. He was courted, and feted, and made much of by rich and poor alike. All the gentry of the neighbourhood came flocking to see him; and his old companions, hanging about the stable yard, not daring to present themselves at the house, would beg for a word with Master Tom, and feel themselves quite uplifted and glorified when he came out to them, and stood in their midst, smiling and jovial, but with a something now in his appearance and bearing which seemed to put a great gulf betwixt him and them.

All this was mighty pleasant for Master Tom, though perhaps not the most salutary experience for him. He had felt qualms of penitence and remorse as he rode homewards, thinking of his follies and weaknesses in the past, ashamed of the class of comrades he had affected then, ashamed of the fashion in which he had spent his days, and of the indifference he had shown to his parents.

But the reception accorded him had dimmed these healthy sentiments, and given him the idea that he was a mighty fine fellow and a great man in his way. He no longer craved the rule at Gablehurst; he had ambitions of another sort. He must see the world first, and drink the cup of pleasure to the dregs. Gablehurst was all very well as a resting place for him when he had had enough of travel, of adventure, of the gay and rollicking life of the town; but for the present let his mother reign there undisturbed. He had no wish to do so.

Therefore he found it easy to be loving and gentle and kindly towards her and Rachel. Indeed, Rachel seemed to him a more attractive maiden than she had ever been before. She had smiles for him, where once she had only grave looks of disapproval; and she delighted in his stories almost as much as Rosamund Cale had done. Altogether, this visit was a mighty pleasant one for Tom; and it lasted for ten whole days before the news was brought to him that a strange gentleman had ridden up and was asking for him, and he knew that Lord Claud had come to fetch him.

Tom had had the prudence to say very little about their purpose in going abroad. His mother and sister knew that it had some connection with the war, and that the Duke of Marlborough was going to send some despatches by them; but he told them not to name even this fact to the neighbours, and he had not mentioned to them the mysterious words “secret service.”

When he reached the hall door, there was Lord Claud mounted upon the black horse Lucifer, who looked in tip-top condition. Mrs. Tufton and Rachel had come out to

welcome Tom's friend, and the rider was sitting bare headed in the afternoon sunlight, looking mightily handsome and gallant.



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“Ah, good Tom, so you are e’en at hand when wanted. I have been detained somewhat longer than I thought; but all is in readiness now for a start for the port of Harwich. Have you got yourself and Nell into first-class condition? for we have work before us, my lad.”

“But, sir, you will not surely start today, with the shades of evening drawing on so fast?” pleaded Mrs. Tufton, who felt a sinking at heart in the thought of parting from her son again. “You will lie here for one night at least, and start forth with the day before instead of behind you?”

“If you will favour me with so much hospitality, gracious madam, I should be glad to do so,” answered Lord Claud with a courtly bow; and in another minute his horse was being led away to the stables, and he was following the ladies into the house, speaking so many words of well-chosen admiration for the quaint old manor and the fine meadowland and timber trees about it, that Tom was prouder of his home than he had ever been before, and even of the mother and sister who dwelt there. For Lord Claud paid them as much attention, and gave them as courtly treatment, as though they had been the highest ladies in the land; and it seemed as though their native refinement and tact enabled them to make fitting reply to him, and to show a certain simple dignity of mien which Tom had never troubled himself to observe in them before.

He observed now that Rachel was a very handsome girl, rather like himself in feature, but with more refinement of aspect and more thoughtfulness of disposition. This thoughtfulness gave a depth to her eyes and a piquancy to her talk which Tom noted with surprise and admiration; and he was well pleased that both his home and his womenfolk pleased his friend so well.

Mrs. Tufton would fain have learned something of the nature of the errand upon which her son was to start upon the morrow; but Lord Claud fenced cleverly with her questions, and, whilst seeming to reply to them, left her little the wiser. They were going to take ship for Holland, and thence make their way with despatches to one of the allies of the Duke; so much he let them freely know. And when she asked if there were peril to face, he laughed lightly as he replied:

“Madam, there is always peril to be faced whether we bide at home or travel beyond seas. Your son Tom met more peril in the forest only a few short miles from home, than he has encountered in that great Babylon of London. It is so with us all. Ofttimes those that stay snug and safe at home meet with some mishap, whilst the rovers come back safe and sound. No life can be without its perils; but I have come through so many unscathed, that I have learned not to fear them beforehand.”

“And Tom at least will be serving his country,” said Rachel; “and that is a thousand times better than receiving hurt when in search after idle pleasures.”

Lord Claud bowed to her across the table as he replied:



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“You speak a great truth, fair lady. We do indeed go forth upon the service of our country, and of the great Duke, who is a master to be trusted and obeyed. He is never reckless. He never throws away lives needlessly. Never was general in battle so tender for the wounded as he. His first thought after a fight is for his injured soldiers; and he looks personally after the arrangements for their comfort. This fact should be enough to show you that he is careful of human life, and would not intrust men with missions that are too perilous to be successfully carried out.”

Mother and sister took heart at this, and trusted to see Tom return safe and sound from his present journey.

This farewell was more easily gone through than the last, although Tom felt a keener sense of affection for his relatives than he had done on the first occasion, and a greater affection for his home. But he had made trial of a new life now, and was full of hopeful confidence; and both mother and sister had begun to believe in him, and had shown pride and satisfaction in his career.

So they rode forth in the first sunshine of a bright February morning, with three stout serving men from Gablehurst to attend them as far as Harwich. Lord Claude was willing to accept the escort, as the road was unfamiliar to him, and he wanted no needless delays along the route.

Rachel brought the stirrup cup, and the household assembled to cheer the travellers as they rode away. There were tears in the mother’s eyes, but she smiled and waved her hand bravely. The horses were in first-rate condition, and full of life and spirit. They were delighted to find themselves travelling side by side again; and the riders were pretty well occupied for the first few miles of the road in curbing their gay spirits.

They had plenty of time to get to Harwich before the light failed them, and the servants knew the road and the best inns to bait at. The journey was performed without misadventure; and Tom dismissed his retainers when he and his companion were safely installed in a good inn upon the quay, as the servants intended making one or two stages on the homeward road before stopping for the night.

Lord Claud had gone straight down to the harbour so soon as they arrived, leaving Tom to make arrangements for the night. So far he had said almost nothing as to the errand upon which they were bent, and Tom had asked no questions, knowing he should be told what was needful in due time. So when he had ordered a plentiful supper, he strolled out upon the quay, and presently saw his comrade returning with a satisfied look upon his face.

“Well, Tom, we are in luck’s way. There is a skipper in harbour who has unshipped his cargo, and is going back almost empty by the morning’s tide. He is glad enough to take us and our good horses safely across to Rotterdam; and, with the light, favouring



breeze that has been blowing steadily these last three days, he declares we ought to make the anchorage there before nightfall. With the sea as smooth as this, too, I am not afraid to adventure the horses; which I should be were a gale to blow.”



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“Do they suffer from seasickness?” asked Tom.

“Ay, from the nausea of it,” answered Lord Claud; “but the relief that we can gain by sickness is impossible to them, and therefore they must needs die if things be too bad with them. But if the weather change not—and there looks no fear of that—we shall have a swift and prosperous voyage; so now let us to supper, and I will tell you more of what lies before us.”

But as it turned out, there were too many other guests at the table for private talk to be possible; and only when on board the good sloop Marlborough did Tom hear anything of the details of the projected expedition.

It was a clear, promising morning, a light breeze blowing from the west, but the sea still and smooth, only dimpling with the puffs of wind. Tom stood on board beside the horses, soothing their fears at the strange sights and sounds about them, his own heart beating somewhat high with excitement at the thought of putting to sea for the first time.

The sailors were busy hauling in ropes, singing and shouting. The vessel gave a little start and shiver, there was a rattle of canvas overhead, and a gentle lurching movement. Then the shore seemed suddenly to be slipping away; and Tom knew, with a start of surprise and exhilaration, that they were off upon their voyage to unknown lands.

Presently the horses grew calm and quiet, used to their strange surroundings, and willing to nibble at the heap of fragrant hay put down at their feet. Tom was able to leave them with a clear conscience, and came over to where Lord Claud was standing in the fore part of the vessel, watching the sheets of green water that fell away from the prow as the sloop cut her way through the waves.

“Well, friend Tom, so we are off at last.”

“Yes, my lord; but I have not heard yet whither.”

“No; and, like a wise and prudent fellow, have not desired to know too much. You are a model of patience, Tom—an excellent companion to have. But the time has come when I can safely enlighten you as far as you need be enlightened. I shall not tell you all I know; for, in truth, you would not understand it.”

“That may very well be,” answered Tom humbly.

“But I will tell you this much, Tom; we are bound upon an errand of peril. We have some difficult journeyings to make, and there will be certain persons lying in wait for messengers from Marlborough; and we may be sore beset to avoid them. Tom, do you remember the tall dark man with whom my duel was fought?”



“Sir James?”

“That is the name by which he goes in England. He passes there as one Sir James Montacute, a man of bravery and wealth. But there is another side to the picture. That man, Tom, is a spy, and in the pay of the King of France. If I had known as much that day as I have since learned from his Grace the Duke, methinks I should not have left him alive upon the field. Tom, we shall probably have to measure our wits against his in a duel of another sort ere long.”

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Tom threw back his head with a defiant gesture.

“Well, my lord; and I am ready!” he said.

“Very good, Tom; I thought as much. You did not love our dark-skinned friend much better than I did. I think we shall find him lurking in wait for us somewhere amid the snows of the St. Bernard Pass. Hast ever heard of the St. Bernard, Tom, and the good monks there?”

“I think I have,” answered Tom, who had heard so many new things of late that he could not be expected to keep them all in mind together.

“Well, it may be we shall have to seek their hospitality yet; although our way lies across the Little St. Bernard, as it is called, that ancient pass which Hannibal and his host crossed when they marched through the snows of Switzerland to pour themselves upon the fertile plains of Italy. It is to this very day the only route by which those snowy Alps may be crossed; and we must find our way thither, Tom, and go down to the fair city of Turin.”

“Is that where we are going?”

“Ay; hast heard of Victor Amadeus, Duke of Savoy?”

“Is he not one of the Allies?”

“Yes; albeit for a while he sided with the French King, who did much to hold his fidelity. But now he is one of the Allies, and he is sore beset by the armies of Louis. The King of Prussia is about to send relief; but His Majesty is tardy, and the snows of winter lie thick in his land, hindering rapid action. It is our part to take the Duke news of the welcome aid, and of other matters I need not be particular to name; and we shall need all our wits about us to carry this matter to a successful issue.”

“You mean that the pass will be watched?”

“Yes; we shall be certain to fall in with spies of the French King, perhaps with Sir James himself. He has left England, so much is known; and though he may be at the court of France, yet it may be our hap to light upon him at any time. He is a man of cunning and resource and ferocity. We shall want our best wits and our best swordsmanship if we are to cope with him.”

Tom’s eyes sparkled with excitement and joy.

“And is the mountain pass the only way of getting into Italy, for I have heard that Savoy lies in that land?” said Tom.



“Ay; Italy has had its strange vicissitudes of fortune, and has been divided and redivided into duchies and kingdoms, till it needs a clever scholar to tell her history aright. But it is enough for our purpose that Savoy lies just beneath those grim mountains which we must scale; and that for the present no other entrance is possible.”

“But there are other ways then?”

“Why, yes, we could at other times go by sea; but now that the Spaniards are seeking to win back the rock of Gibraltar, which we have lately reft from them, and which Marlborough says must never be yielded up again, we cannot safely try that way; for we might well fall into the hands of some Spanish vessel, and languish, unknown and uncared for, in Spanish dungeons. We cannot travel through France, and reach it from the shores of Genoa; because it were too great peril for Englishmen to ride through the dominions of the French monarch. So we must needs land at some friendly Dutch port, and ride through their country, and so into Westphalia, and thence to these mountain regions which cut us off from our destination.



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“Have you ever seen snow mountains, Tom, towering to the very skies in virgin whiteness, with the rivers of ice, miles in width, flowing silently down their rocky sides? It is a strange and marvellous sight when viewed for the first time. I could find it in my heart to wish I stood in your shoes, that all these new things might be seen and heard for the first time!”

“And I would that I knew more of these strange lands, and the ways of the people there,” answered Tom; “for I fear lest mine ignorance may lead us into peril. But if such a thing as that were to befall, I would lay down my life to save yours, my lord.”

“I believe you, Tom,” answered the other very gravely. He was silent a while, and then he said slowly, “Tom, I am going to say a strange thing to you—at least it would sound strange to some; and, indeed, I should not dare to say it to every companion in peril. But I believe you to be staunch and true.”

“I trust you will ever find me so, my lord.”

“Well, Tom, this is the word that I would say to you. It may chance that things come to this pass with us, that one of us twain must needs fall into the hands of the enemy, and die; for there is little hope of any other end when that befalls. And if we know and can so arrange matters, it must be you and not I who will fall into that peril.”

Tom looked back without flinching.

“You speak well, my lord,” he said. “It must be my lot to die. You will not find me hold back when the moment comes.”

Lord Claud took his hand and held it in both of his.

“It must be you, Tom; and yet I would rather it were myself. But I have that intrusted to me which I must speak in the Duke’s ear. The despatches are as little compared with what I have had from Marlborough’s own lips—what may not be trusted upon paper. Moreover, I could find my way through the countries, where you would be lost for lack of words to ask your way. If one of us has to be delivered over to death, it must be you.”

“It must. I see it well.”

“Yet we may both succeed in getting through, or we may both leave our bones lying amid the eternal snows. Perhaps in years to come it will matter little enough. Just now it seems a matter of more importance. But I have told you this to show my trust in you, Tom. There are not many comrades to whom I could have thus unburdened myself. I should have had to use subtlety where now I use truth and openness.”

“You shall not find me fail you, my lord,” answered Tom.



CHAPTER X. IN PERIL.

“Halt! and declare yourselves!” cried a hoarse voice speaking in the French tongue.

“Now for it, Tom,” said Lord Claud quietly, speaking between his shut teeth. “Remember what I have told you. Be wary, be ready. We shall get through all right. There are but two or three score, and none of them mounted.”



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The travellers were passing now through the narrow territory of the Margrave of Baden, with the Rhine upon their right, the only protection from the frontier of France with all its hostile hosts.

The slow and inactive policy of the Margrave of Baden naturally encouraged the enemy to send small parties of soldiers across to harry his country; and already Tom and his master had had to dodge and hide, or go out of their way, to avoid meeting with these bands of inimical marauders. They were not the class of opponents whom Lord Claud most dreaded, still they might well fall upon and make prisoner the two English travellers; and if despatches were found upon the person of either, they would almost certainly be shot as spies. Indeed, so bitter was the feeling on the part of the French after their defeat at Blenheim, that any travellers belonging to the hated English nation went in danger of their lives.

For some time now Tom had been wearing the garb of a serving man. His peruke had disappeared, and he wore a little dark wig that looked like his natural hair. It excited less comment for master and servant to travel from town to town together than for two English gentlemen to be riding unattended through such a disturbed country; and as they pursued their way, Lord Claud would give minute and precise directions to Tom how to act in the event of their falling in with one of these scouting or marauding parties, showing such a wonderful knowledge of the tactics of forest warfare that Tom was often astonished at him, and would have liked to ask where he had obtained his experience.

And now, for the first time, Tom was face to face with a real foe—no mere antagonist of the hour, with whom he had exchanged some angry word, and was ready to follow it up with blows, but with armed foes of a hostile race, whose blood was stirred by the hatred bred of long-continued warfare, and who would think as little of taking the lives of two Englishmen as Tom would of shooting a fat buck in his native woodlands.

Again came the word of command in the hoarse voice.

“Halt! and declare yourselves, or—”

But the threat remained unspoken, for Lord Claud had drawn rein, and was looking at the speaker with eyes of mild inquiry.

“What is your will, monsieur?” he asked, in his easy and excellent French.

At this seeming show of submission the face of the officer relaxed, and the men in his company lowered their carbines and stood more at ease pending the result of the dialogue.

“Monsieur is not a Frenchman?” questioned the officer, with a look from one face to the other.



Tom sat gazing before him with a stolid expression of countenance, which greatly belied the tingling which he felt through every vein in his body. It seemed as though this tingling sensation was in some way communicated to the mare he rode, for she began fidgeting in a fashion which plainly told Tom that she was ready to do her part when the tussle should come.



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“How know you that, sir?” asked Lord Claud with a smile. “If you can tell me my nationality I shall be grateful, for I am ignorant upon the point myself.”

The man’s face clouded a little; he felt a certain suspicion of the handsome stranger, and yet he must not do despite to one of His Majesty’s subjects, and Lord Claud had the air of a man of no mean status.

“Your servant is English,” he said with a touch of sullenness, “and I take it your horses are, too. The army of His Majesty of France is badly in need of strong horses. If you are good subjects of his you will be willing to part with them. My horse was killed but a little way back; that one of yours would suit me right well,” and he made a step forward as though to lay a hand on Lucifer’s rein.

“Now, Tom, my boy!” said Lord Claud in a clear, low tone.

In a moment he had whipped out his pistols and fired straight at the officer, who fell face downwards almost without a groan. Tom had meanwhile marked his man—the foremost in the rank behind; and he rolled over like a log.

With a yell of rage and amaze the men were upon them; but Lucifer and Nell Gwynne had already reared almost upright, and now were fighting so wildly with their iron-shod hoofs that in fear and dismay the assailants fell back, whilst a second report from each pistol dropped another man dead upon the field.

“Forward! before they can take aim!” cried Lord Claud in a voice of thunder; and the horses obeyed the word without any touch of spur from their riders.

They bounded forward with an impetus which must have unseated any but an experienced horseman, and then laying themselves along the ground, they fled onwards at a gallop which astonished even Tom by its wild velocity.

A shower of bullets fell round them, but none touched either steeds or riders; the yells of the infuriated soldiers died away on their ears; the horses sped on and on as though they had wings to their feet, and only after some few miles had been traversed did the riders draw rein.

“That is always the best plan of action,” said Lord Claud, as though such an occurrence as this was a matter of everyday experience with him. “Always appear ready to pause and parley. It invariably disarms suspicion. At the first every pistol or musket is levelled at your head; but if you stop to talk, these are lowered. Then, when you have put the enemy a little off guard, make a dash for it; take them by surprise, drop a few, and confuse the rest, and you almost invariably escape with a sound skin.”

Then Lord Claud coolly proceeded to wipe and recharge his pistols, as though the escape of half an hour back had been a mere detail hardly worth discussion.



But Tom knew well that both his master and the horses they rode must have been through many such perils before this, or they could never (at any rate the horses) have shown such aptitude in playing their parts. He had felt that the mare he rode was prepared to fight furiously with hoofs and teeth; and, as it was, she had struck down two men who had been preparing to spring at her.



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“Ah, my lady had always a temper of her own,” replied Lord Claud with a smile, as Tom said something of this. “Yes; I have taken some pains with my horses to teach them to help in a fight. Travelling even in one’s own land is none too safe, as you found to your cost, honest Tom. Nell Gwynne comes of a fighting stock, and showed an early aptitude for the fray. Trust to her, Tom, if ever you are hard pressed; she will bring you safely through, if it can be achieved at any price.”

And, indeed, as the travellers pursued their long ride through a disturbed and often half-hostile country, they had frequently to depend as much upon the fleetness, fidelity, and strength of their horses as upon the strength of their own right arms.

Well did Tom now understand why Lord Claud had made such a point of having their own horses with them. Had they been jogging along upon some beast hired or purchased in the country, they would never have got through the divers perils of the way.

Once Tom was aroused from slumber in a little, ill-smelling inn by the sound of kicking and stamping proceeding from the stable; and when he had aroused his companion, and they had hastily dressed themselves and descended, it was to find that a desperate fight was going on between the two horses and a handful of French soldiers, who had followed after the fine animals, and were seeking to steal them whilst the travellers slept.

They had paid dearly for their temerity, however, for Nell Gwynne was stamping the life out of one wretched fellow; whilst Lucifer had broken the leg of a second, and had pinned his companion by the arm, so that he was yelling aloud in his agony.

Lord Claud sprang in, and at the sound of his voice the horse loosened his grip, and the man reeled hack against the wall, white and bleeding, and cursing beneath his breath. Tom was too late to save the life of the victim of the mare’s anger, but he was in time to strike up the pistol which another of the soldiers had pointed at her, in the trembling hope of saving his comrade.

“If you fire you will drive her to madness, and she will kill every man of you,” said Lord Claud coolly. “She has a devil in her, and is bullet proof; you had better leave meddling with both the beasts.”

The men crossed themselves in pious horror, and were glad enough to back out of the place, carrying their dead and maimed companions with them. Tom and Lord Claud did not linger longer than the time needful for saddling the horses. They knew that the people of the inn must be in collusion with the soldiers, and the sooner they quitted the place the better.



They had long since left behind them the level plains, and were now in a country that became increasingly mountainous and difficult. After the long, flat plains of Holland, Tom had thought the Baden territory sufficiently mountainous; but now he was to make acquaintance with the snow-topped peaks and ranges of Switzerland, and his eyes dilated with awe and wonder when first he beheld the dazzling white peaks standing out clear against a sunny sky.



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He was not a youth of much imagination or poetry, but he did feel a strange thrilling of the pulses as he looked upon this wonderful sight.

But Lord Claud's face was cool and impassive as usual, and his remark was:

"Very fine to look at, good Tom, but ugly customers to tackle. A snowstorm up amongst those mountain peaks may well be the death of either or both of us, and the snow will be our winding sheet."

"Have we to cross those snows, my lord? to scale those lofty peaks?"

"We shall have plenty of snow, Tom, without scaling the peaks. At this season the passes will be deep in snow. We shall have to trust to a guide to take us safely over; and the very guide may be a spy and a traitor himself."

"But, my lord, I thought you knew the way? I thought you had crossed the pass once?"

"So I have, Tom; but these snow fields are treacherous places, and the track shifts and changes with every winter's snow. You will see, when you get amongst them, what a savage scene they present. In summer it is none so bad; but we are yet in the grip of winter, and though the foothold is harder and better on the ice slopes, the cold is keen and cruel, and the snowfalls frequent and dangerous."

"And the horses, my lord?"

"Those we must needs leave behind us for a while, Tom. I do not say that we could not get them over, for, methinks, Hannibal must needs have brought his horsemen across in days of yore, and where any other horse has been, there could Lucifer and Nell Gwynne travel. But I fear the poor beasts would suffer sorely; and I misdoubt me if they would not be more care than use to us. They have done their work gallantly, so far; and they will take us back as gallantly, I doubt not, when our task is done. Meantime, I know a pleasant and sheltered valley, where dwell some honest folk with whom I tarried in bygone days, to heal me of a fever I had caught in the hot Italian plains. There we will leave them; and there, Tom, if we lose sight of each other, will we meet when our appointed tasks be done.

"There are two places where we may find a safe asylum in this wild land. One is the valley to which we are now bending our steps, which nestles not far from the foot of the great mountain men call the St. Bernard; the other is at the hospice upon the Great St. Bernard itself, where is a colony of devout and kindly monks, who give their succour to travellers of every nationality and creed, and where a safe shelter may always be found. Moreover, the monks have a certain intercourse with the inhabitants of the valleys round and about, and we could thus have news of each other were one of us there and the other here below.



“But we will not part company save for urgent need; yet 'tis well always to be prepared.”

Travelling was becoming increasingly difficult and trying as they mounted into higher regions, and the roads became mere bridle paths, often encumbered with snow drifts, and difficult to traverse.

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Fortunately it was fine overhead, and the season was a favourable one. The sun had already attained some height in the sky, and could shine with power at midday, for February was well advanced by this time. But the cold at nights was intense, and the state of the roads often made travelling difficult for the horses. The mountain torrents were swelled to brawling rivers, and the ordinary bridges broken down, so that the travellers had much ado to get across them.

It seemed a savage country to Tom, although the excitement and peril made travelling a delight. Moreover, the people were kind and friendly, although they spoke such a barbarous patois that it was difficult to hold communication with them.

At last they reached the sheltered little valley of which Tom had heard, and here they found friends of a kind; for at the little inn Lord Claud was remembered and hailed with joy. He had plainly won the affections of the simple folks whilst lying there sick, and they were ready and willing to give the travellers of their best, and furnish them with guides for the passage of the mountain range, which seemed now to tower above their heads into the clouds.

Travellers and horses were alike pretty well worn out by this time, and the thought of spending a few days in this hospitable valley was grateful even to Tom's stalwart frame. As for the horses, they testified their satisfaction in many ways. They even made friends with the goatherd who was told off to attend to them, and attempted none of their tricks upon him; which was a source of considerable satisfaction to Tom, who had been afraid the people might decline to be left alone with such charges.

After seeing them safely stabled, bedded, and fed, Tom was glad enough of a good meal himself; after which he retired to bed, and slept for hard upon thirty-six hours, as he found to his amaze upon awakening. And, indeed, it was small wonder that he did so; for he had not been used to such strenuous exercise so constantly continued, nor to the clear, bracing air of the mountains.

He woke as hungry as a hunter; and it was only after he had satisfied the cravings of nature that he had time to observe the thoughtful shadow which had gathered upon the face of his comrade.

"Is aught amiss?" he asked presently, leaning his elbows on the table, and heaving a sigh of satisfaction.

"Well, Tom, that is as you like to think it; but what I feared might be the case has come to pass. We shall not reach the plains of Italy without being sore beset by danger."

Tom's eyes flashed keenly under their dark brows.

"What have you learned, my lord?"



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“That the pass is being closely watched, Tom, by spies, or whatever you choose to call them, from the French army. The Duke of Savoy is, as I have told you before, completely hemmed in by the armies of the great Vendome, one of the ablest generals France possesses. His capital is in danger, and it is of the first importance that he should receive the despatches and messages with which I am charged by Marlborough, and which will give him heart and courage to prolong the contest till the promised help, which is now on its way, shall reach him. Doubtless it is equally the policy of the enemy to keep him in ignorance of what they themselves now know or fear, so that he may surrender to the French arms before he hears what is being done for his succour.

“That, in brief, is the situation we have to grapple with. I suspect that Sir James is one of those who are watching for messengers from England, and that we shall have to measure our wits against his. Tom, I must get through the pass. I must carry my despatches into Turin. I am not one whit afraid of the French lines. I can disguise myself, and pass through them if needs be without a qualm of fear. I can speak French against any Frenchman living, for I was cradled in that land. But the first problem we have to face is this—how can we cross the pass unseen? How can we put the spies on a false scent?”

Tom drew his brows together and scratched his head in the effort to think matters out.

“Do they know that strangers are here in this valley? Are we watched?”

“I suspect so,” answered Lord Claud. “It is not easy to be certain, because the people here are friendly to us, and distrust the French, who have given them small cause to love them. But I am convinced that so astute a man as Sir James Montacute would cause a close watch to be kept upon this valley. Most likely our presence here is known, and we are being watched for.”

“And is there no other way of crossing the mountains into Italy?”

“Yes, there is one other route; for historians disagree as to the one taken by Hannibal, albeit most believe that it was this of the Little St. Bernard. There is another way, which doubtless could be found; but if we were to strike aside after it, the spies would be upon our heels at once.”

“I was thinking,” said Tom slowly, “that we might perchance part company, one take one route and the other the other, and so arrange matters that the spies should follow hot-foot upon the scent of the wrong man.”

A gleam came into Lord Claud’s eyes. He spoke very quietly.



“In truth, Tom, some such thought has come into mine own head; but it is not easy to make up one’s mind to act upon it, for I fear it means certain death to the wrong man who must be followed.”

Tom’s face set itself in grim lines. There was a vein of reckless bravery and hardihood about him which imparted to the situation a species of stern delight, and sent the blood tingling once more through his veins.



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“I will take the risk of that,” he said; “I shall take some killing, I think. And killing is a game that more than one can play at! If I have to sell my life, I will make it cost the French King dear.”

“Right, Tom; but that will not give back a gallant servant to Her Majesty of England!”

“I am not dead yet,” answered Tom, with a grim laugh. “Tell me the plan which you have worked out in your head, my lord; for your wits are seven-fold keener than mine.”

Then Lord Claud unfolded the plan which had been working in his busy brain during the day that Tom had been sleeping, after he had heard news which made him sure that his mission was suspected, and that he would be stopped and robbed if possible.

Higher up the mountain side, just where the snow line lay, above which there was everlasting ice and snow, was a little rough hostel, where travellers rested and slept before they tried the pass itself. An old half-witted man and his goitred wife kept the place, and provided rough food and bedding for travellers, though interesting themselves in no wise with their concerns. In that rude place several men were now stopping, and had been stopping for some days.

That fact in itself was almost sufficient for Lord Claud; but somebody had found a scrap of torn paper with some French words upon it, and this had made assurance doubly sure. Moreover, Lord Claud believed it to be the writing of the man he had duelled with beneath Barns Elms.

To this inn (if such it could be called) he and Tom must journey, with a peasant for a guide to take them across the pass. Upon reaching the place, his idea now was that he should appear sorely smitten by the cold, as some travellers were; so ill and unfit for further journeying, that he should have perforce to send Tom on alone with the guide, whilst he returned to the valley. All this they should discuss in their room at night, assured that they would be overlooked and overheard; and when quite certain that eyes were watching them, Lord Claud was to unrip his doublet and take thence a packet of papers, sealed with the signet of the Duke of Marlborough, and sew this same packet firmly into Tom's coat.

In reality this tempting-looking packet with the Duke's seal contained nothing but a sheet of blank parchment. The real missive for the Duke Victor Amadeus was written on a thin paper, and was concealed between the soles of Lord Claud's boots—though even Tom did not know that. The packet was arranged as a blind, if need should be; and now it seemed as though the need had come.

Then on the following morning Tom and the guide would start forth across the pass; whilst Lord Claud should creep feebly down to the valley, watched, perhaps, but

probably unmolested. The majority of the men, at any rate, would most certainly follow Tom.



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“There are but four,” said Lord Claud; “and if one be Montacute himself, I doubt if he will stir from the inn. He will try to keep an eye upon both, being a man full of cunning himself. I reckon that he will send two men after you, Tom, and one after me. I shall, after a while, pause, lie in wait, and kill that man. Then I shall flee to the valley, get a guide who can show me the other pass, and make such way from the seat of peril that I shall be well-nigh across the frontier before Sir James knows that one of his quarry has escaped him.”

“As for you, my boy, you may like enough escape with a sound skin, unless Montacute himself pursues, making three to one—for one cannot trust these peasants to show fight. But be the issue what it may, that is the plan I have thought out which gives the best chance of winning through. If you escape, flee either back here, or perhaps, better still, to the protection of the monks. For here these unwarlike peasants could perhaps give you little aid if hard pressed; but the Church will afford you sanctuary, and not even the wrath of Sir James himself will avail to wrest you from the hands of the monks, if you claim their protection.”

“It seems to me,” said Tom, throwing back his head, “that the peril is, after all, not so great—not so great, indeed, as what we have faced many times before. Let us carry out the plan, and whether good or evil follow, we shall have done our best—and no man can do more!”

The two men gripped hands upon it, and the compact was sealed. Tom rather exulted in the post of peril that was accorded to himself. Perhaps in days to come the Duke would hear of it, and might reward him by some words of praise or thanks.

That same afternoon Tom felt his veins tingling again as they neared the lone little hut amid the whiteness of the low-lying winter snow. He was about to launch forth upon the first solitary adventure of his life, and one which might be fraught with dire perils; but his heart quailed not.

Almost at once he was lost in admiration and amaze at the power displayed by Lord Claud in acting a part. He began to draw his breath with apparent difficulty; his face looked drawn and ghastly; he clung to Tom’s arm as if for support; and it was difficult indeed to believe that he was not feeling really terribly ill.

They reached the hut and knocked. The door was instantly opened, and Tom was certain he saw a gleam of malicious satisfaction upon the faces of the men, who welcomed them in with a show of rude cordiality.

There were but two rooms that could be called sleeping apartments, they said, and one was already occupied; but they would give up the other to the use of the sick traveller. Lord Claud was speedily assisted thither, and the fire in the stove replenished. He lay down upon the bed with a groan, and looked as if nigh to death. The peasant chattered

with the old couple, and it was plain that this sort of seizure was not very uncommon in those altitudes.

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The men tried to make Tom understand that his companion should go back to the valley; but that could not be done till the morrow, and presently the pair were left alone in their room.

This room was only separated from the next by some rude split pine trunks. Tom had seen upon entering that a light had been quickly extinguished, otherwise he would have seen clearly through the chinks who the occupant was. He knew perfectly that every word they spoke could be overheard, and every action they performed duly watched; and he entered into the game of play acting with a zeal that gave him greater aptitude than he had thought to possess.

He strove to get his master to take the broth that one of the men brought up; he entreated him not to give way; and finally he agreed that it would be impossible for the sick man to attempt further travel, and offered himself to bear the packet of letters into Italy.

Then came the projected piece of play acting—the ripping up of the doublet, the sewing of the sealed packet into Tom's clothes, promises, directions, warnings, all given with apparent feeble energy, and received with faithful eagerness.

And all the while Tom was aware that close to them, just behind the thin partition, other eyes were watching, other ears listening to all that passed. He could even hear the short breathings of repressed excitement, and almost feel the keen gaze which he knew was constantly bent upon him.

When all was done to the satisfaction of the sick man, Tom extinguished the light, and lay down beside him on the rude bed. After his long sleep of the previous day, he cared little whether he slumbered or not—indeed, it seemed better that he should keep awake. His head was full of the adventure which lay before him, and he was almost certain that he heard whispering voices either in the next room or below; by which he guessed that their enemies, having discovered all they wanted to know, were now laying their plans how best they might carry out their own designs.

CHAPTER XI. THE PIOUS MONKS OF ST. BERNARD.

Tom knew quite well that he was being followed. He had been aware of it almost from the first. He felt an exultant triumph in the thought that they had outwitted the astute Sir James, and that his emissaries were following the wrong man, falling into the trap which had been laid for them.

Tom's business was to lead them as long a dance as possible. He had no other object in view. He had no intention of pushing onwards into Italy. In a strange country, surrounded by people of a strange tongue, he would be perfectly helpless. He had



picked up just a few words of French, and of the patois of these mountain regions, enough to enable him to obtain the necessaries of life on this side the Alps. And on this side he meant to remain, doubling back, if possible, and eluding his pursuers; hoping to find shelter at the monastery of the Great St. Bernard, and await there the return of Lord Claud.



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He had watched, before starting himself, the start made by Lord Claud upon the arm of the landlord. He had again admired the marvellous powers of his master in simulating sickness. It was difficult even for him to believe that he was not the victim of some grave malady; and he had noted with satisfaction the covert eagerness with which the other travellers in the hut urged upon him the descent into the valley as the only chance of recovery.

Plainly they desired that the two should part company; nor could Tom trace that any of their number went after Lord Claud. But on that point he could not be certain, as he himself had to take his departure almost immediately.

The other travellers professed to be waiting for the recovery of one of their number from a strain to the ankle before proceeding in an opposite direction. This they explained to Lord Claud, regretting they could not accompany him to the valley, as they had to wait for their own master. They professed to have crossed recently from the Italian side, and gave Tom some hints and instructions as to his route; which he heeded no whit, being in fact only able to understand a word here and there.

He trusted to his guide to take him safely through the pass, though he reckoned upon having to give him the slip, too, if he could not explain to him that he was going to make his way to the monastery. For it was not safe for Lord Claud to explain this to the guide beforehand. Although to all appearances an honest and simple fellow, there was never any knowing how the enemy might seek to tamper with him; and a bribe might be sufficient to open the fellow's lips if he had anything to tell.

Now Tom was on his way upwards amid the snow, stepping out boldly, and rather urging on his guide than detaining him by lagging; and all the while he was conscious that he was being followed and watched, although it was only from time to time that he was successful in catching sight of the forms of his pursuers, who at present kept a good way behind.

Tom guessed for one thing that his own rapid pace gave him the advantage, and he also suspected that they would prefer to wait until his first energy had abated before trying conclusions with him. He was in splendid condition from his long journey, which had braced all his muscles, and had given him back all that vigour which his London life had slightly impaired.

So he stepped along gaily in the clear morning air, calculating as well as he could what Lord Claud's movements would be, and how far he would have progressed upon his way with the real despatches.

Lord Claud never let grass grow under his feet. If he once obtained a fair start, he would not easily lose it. The route by which he was going was a little longer and more

circuitous; but let him have a day's clear start, and it would be odd if any pursuer caught him after that.



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So Tom walked on in high spirits, feeling well equipped for the coming struggle, and fearing little the peril which might lie before him. In the pride of his manhood's strength, he laughed at the thought of danger. He had faced too many perils of late to begin to turn coward now. So long as he felt that he was leading these followers away from the other pass to be taken by his comrade, he cared for nothing else—not even for the discovery he once made that they were three in number, though Lord Claud had calculated that they would only be two.

Sometimes Tom noted that his guide would look back, and more than once he fancied that he detected him signalling to those below. This aroused in his mind a doubt of the fellow's fidelity; but there was nothing to be done now. They were in the midst of trackless snow plains, ice slopes, and precipices. He must perforce trust to the leading of the guide, albeit, if he had been tampered with by those in pursuit, things might look ugly when it came to the moment of attack.

As the hours wore away, Tom began to wish that the situation might declare itself. The drear wildness of the mountain height oppressed him with a sense of personal insignificance which was rather overwhelming. The great white mountains seemed to stare down upon him as though pitilessly indifferent to his fate. How could they care what became of one solitary son of earth? Did they not stand fast for ever more, from century to century? It was a thought that he found oppressive and rather terrible.

At one point the guide insisted upon leaving what looked like the better track, and led him round a sort of shoulder of piled up snow and rock, where walking was very laborious. Tom began to feel the need of food, and would have stopped and opened his wallet; but the man shook his head and gesticulated, and seemed to urge him onwards at some speed. Tom supposed he must obey, as the man pointed warningly to the rocks above, as though to hint that danger might be expected from them.

So on they trudged, Tom feeling a slight unaccustomed giddiness in the head, as many persons do who first try walking for some hours in the glare of sun and snow and at a high altitude. Then the path suddenly turned again under the frowning wall of rock, which rose black and stern through the covering of snow. The guide disappeared round the angle of the path; Tom followed with quick steps, and the next moment was almost felled to the earth by the terrific blow of a cudgel upon his head.

Almost, but not quite. He had been on his guard. He felt that the crisis was coming, and he was certain that the guide had betrayed him at this pre-arranged spot into the hands of his enemies. In one second Tom's rapier was out (he had carried that in spite of the hindrance it had sometimes been to him), and although he was half-blinded and half-stunned by the force of the blow received, he lunged fiercely forward, and heard a yell of pain which told him that his blade had found its billet.



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But the blade could not at once be disentangled. For two seconds, perhaps, was Tom struggling with it; and in those two seconds one of his adversaries sprang behind him, and seized him round the waist with the hug of a bear.

In a second Tom had whipped out his pistols, and fired full at a dark figure in front of him; but his eyes were full of blood, and a taunting laugh told him that his shot had missed its mark. With a quick movement of his strong arm backwards he dealt the man who was holding him a terrific blow with the butt of the pistol, and discharged the other full at another dark figure looming in front.

This time there was an answering yell; but the odds were still tremendous, and Tom felt himself growing faint and giddy, and though he hit out lustily on all sides, he had no confidence that his blows told.

Every moment he expected to hear the sound of a report, and to know that his quietus had come; but at last he was aware that it was his captors' wish to take him prisoner, and not to kill him. They had closed in upon him now that he was disarmed, and were using every artifice to overpower him without further injury.

Tom felt his own struggles becoming weaker each moment, and at last he was conscious that somebody had crawled towards his feet and was passing a cord about them. In vain he sought to kick out and release himself; the next minute the cord was pulled tight. His feet were jerked from beneath him, he fell backwards heavily, and for some time he knew no more.

When he opened his eyes once again, he found himself sitting propped up against the rocks, his arms tightly pinioned to his sides, and his feet still encumbered by cords; whilst at a little distance sat his assailants in a ring, eating and drinking, and making merry together.

One had a bandaged head, and another had his arm in a rude sling. But the guide had come in for the worst of Tom's blows, and lay all his length along the ground, stiff and dead.

Tom smiled a grim sort of smile. He suspected that the same fate would shortly be his, but nevertheless he did not pity the unfaithful peasant. If he had acted loyally by the man he professed to serve, this ill would scarcely have befallen him. He had met his punishment somewhat more swiftly than is usual.

The men talked in French, and too fast for Tom to catch a word of their meaning; but when they saw that his eyes were open, and that he was watching them, they laughed and nodded at him, and by-and-by one brought him food and a cup of wine, and Tom felt mightily refreshed thereby.



Then they looked up at the sky, and at the sun which had some time since passed its meridian, and began to make ready to depart. Tom was half afraid at first that they, having robbed him of his despatches, were going to leave him helplessly bound here amongst the snow, to perish of cold and starvation. But when they were all in readiness they unbound his feet, and bid him rise and come with them. Indeed, he had no option in this matter, for one of them held the end of the cord which bound his arms, and drove him on in front as men drive unruly cattle.



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Tom felt giddy and stiff, but he scorned to show weakness; and it was less trying to descend the pass than to ascend it, although the rough walking with tightly-bound arms was more difficult than he had fancied, and several times he tripped and fell heavily, unable to save himself.

He was, therefore, very bruised and sore and weary when at last he found that they were approaching the little hut he had left early that same morning. But amid all his weariness and pain, and the peril of his position, he felt, with a thrill of proud satisfaction, that he had at least played the part which had been allotted to him, and had drawn off the forces of the enemy whilst Lord Claud made good his escape with the real despatches. Whatever vials of fury might quickly be poured upon his head, he would always know that he had done his duty—and who can do more than that?

A light was twinkling in the hut. Tom was pushed and hustled within. A voice, that he remembered as having heard once before, called out from above:

“Bring the prisoner up here to me.”

The next minute Tom entered the very room where he and Lord Claud had slept the previous night; but it was now tenanted by a new occupant—a dark-skinned man of huge frame and malignant aspect—who regarded Tom from beneath the penthouse of his frowning brows, and plainly remembered him as well as he was himself remembered.

“So we meet again, my young buck of the forest! You seem to serve a master who takes pleasure in bringing you into peril and doubtful adventure! So you are the bearer of despatches to the Duke of Savoy? I fear, my good friend, Victor Amadeus will be disappointed of his news for once. And I say in good sooth, that if his grace of Marlborough chooses to intrust the matters of the secret service to unfledged lads, he deserves to find himself outwitted.”

Tom compressed his lips to hide the smile that might have told too much. He preserved a stolid appearance, and remained mute.

Sir James gave a quick order in French, and at once some of the cords about Tom's person were cut, and the packet sewed up in his coat was duly brought forth. As it was handed to Sir James and he saw the signet of the Duke, a sardonic smile played over his features, and Tom's eyes gleamed in their sockets.

The dark-browed man eagerly undid the packet, and drew forth the parchment sheet. He scanned it over and over; he turned it this way and that. His face betrayed nothing, but Tom saw that his fingers trembled slightly as with ill-veiled excitement or anger.



He gave one fierce, searching look at Tom, who preserved an air of indifference, and then he took the paper across to the stove, and held it in the heat of the glow which stole thence.

Back he came with it to the table; but there was nothing revealed by the application of heat. He called sharply for something to one of his men, and a small phial was brought to him. He applied a drop of the liquid it contained to the parchment; and eagerly awaited the result; but no lettering was revealed upon it, and his face grew dark and stern.



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How many tests he applied Tom scarcely knew; but he saw that this man was master of all the arts of secret penmanship, and that no matter would have been kept from him had it been intrusted to the paper.

At last Sir James became satisfied of this himself. The veins on his forehead swelled with anger. He saw that he had been tricked, and his fury was hotly aroused.

Smiting his great hand upon the table, he cried in a voice of thunder:

“This despatch is a trick and a fraud. There is nothing but a sheet of blank paper. Men do not risk their lives in carrying dummy packets.

“Where is the true despatch, knave? Out with it, or ’twill be the worse for you!”

“That is all I have,” answered Tom quietly; “I know nothing of any other. Search me if you will. You will find naught else.”

“Search him! search him well!” said Sir James to his servants, almost panting in his ire. “The knave was never sent to the Duke with nothing but this in his keeping. Find it instantly! I love not these delays!”

Instantly Tom was laid on his back upon the floor, and such a search was made of his dress and person as was a matter of curiosity and amaze to himself. Even his nose and ears and mouth were explored by rough fingers, in a fashion none too gentle; whilst his clothing was well-nigh ripped to pieces, and he wondered how he should ever make it fit for wear again. Certainly if he had had any message to carry it would not have escaped the scrutiny of his captors, and their oaths and kicks bespoke their baffled disappointment.

“Then he has messages intrusted to him,” said Montacute, first in French, and then in English. “Set the fellow upon his feet, and bind fast his hands to yon rafter. If he will not speak the truth, it shall be flogged out of him!”

The swarthy man was growing very angry at his failure. He may have begun to suspect that he had been duped by a wit keener than his own, and the thought raised within him the demon of cruelty and lust of blood. He hated Lord Claud with a deadly hatred, having been worsted by him in encounters of many kinds. If unable to wreak his vengeance upon the man himself, to do so upon his follower was the next best thing.

“Tell me with what messages to the Duke of Savoy you are charged!” he cried, standing before Tom with flaming eyes. “You are not sent upon this quest with neither letter nor word. Speak, or you shall be made to find your tongue!”

“I will speak as much as you like,” answered Tom, with haughty disdain in his tone, though his flesh crept at the sight of the men knotting the ends of rope in their hands;



“but I am charged with no message. I know nothing of what you would wish to know. You can flog till you are weary, but you can't get out of me what I do not know. That at least is one satisfaction.”

Montacute waved his hand. The next moment the ropes descended upon Tom's bare back. He set his teeth, and made no cry, though the blood came surging to his head, and the room seemed to swim in blood. Again and again they descended; but the keen pain awoke within Tom that ferocity of strength which comes to men in their extremity, so that, like Samson, they can turn the tables upon their foes.



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The hut was but a rude affair, somewhat loosely put together. The beam to which Tom's arms had been bound was not too strongly jointed to its fellow.

A sudden madness seemed to come upon this man of thews and sinews. He gave a sudden bound and wrench; he felt the beam give, and redoubled his efforts; the next moment the whole rafter came bodily down upon their heads. Tom ducked, and escaped its fall; but it pinned one of his foes to the ground, and his own hands were immediately free.

With a bound like that of a tiger, and a roar like that of a wounded lion, he sprang, or rather flew, at Montacute, flung him over backwards upon the floor, and pinned him by the throat, uttering all the while a savage sort of growling sound, like a wild beast in its fury.

The light was thrown over in this strange melee; the room was plunged in darkness. The two men upon the floor lay struggling together in a terrible silence, only broken by Tom's fierce snarlings, that seemed scarce human. So terrified were the remaining two men, that they could do nothing for the assistance of their master; indeed, they hardly knew what was happening to him. They set up a shouting for aid, half afraid to stir lest the whole house should come falling about their ears.

There were steps in the room below. Footsteps mounted the stairs. The door was thrown open, a shaft of light streamed in, and a calm, full voice demanded in the French tongue:

"What, in the name of all the saints, is this?"

"Holy father, he is murdering our master!" suddenly cried one of the men, recovering from his stupor of terror, and seeing now how Tom's great hands were gripping the throat of Sir James.

Montacute's face was purple. His eyes seemed to be starting from their sockets. It was hard to say which was the more terrible face, his or that of Tom, which was perfectly white, and set in lines of ferocity and hatred as though petrified into stone.

In the doorway stood the figure of a tall monk, clad in the long white robe and black cloak of his order. Behind him was another, similarly attired, holding the light above his head.

The first stepped quietly forward, and laid a hand upon Tom's shoulder; and something in the touch made the young man turn his head to meet the calm, authoritative glance bent upon him.

"Enough, my son, enough," he said, in quiet tones, that brooked, however, no contradiction. "Let the man go."



Had the followers of Montacute sought to loose his clasp by force, Tom would have crushed the life from his victim without a qualm; but at this gentle word of command he instantly loosed his hold, and stood upright before the monk.

“He drove me to it—his blood be upon his own head! He would have scourged me to death, I verily believe, had it not been that the rafter gave way.”

Tom spoke English, for he had been addressed in that language, and so knew that he should be understood. The monk bent his head, as though he grasped the entire situation.



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“I would we had come in time to spare you what you have already suffered, my son. But we did only enter the doors as the fall of the rafter announced that some catastrophe had happened. I feared to find you already a corpse.”

“You came after me, good father?” asked Tom in amaze.

“Yes, truly. Your companion, who is safe over the other pass by this time, caused the message to reach us that you were like to fall into the hands of Montacute, and be hanged or shot. He begged that if we could we would save you; and as our work lies in succouring those who are in peril upon these heights, be that peril what it may, we have been seeking you ever since. I would we had arrived a few minutes earlier.”

Tom’s eyes gleamed; it seemed to him as though the madness was not yet out of his blood.

“I can scarce echo that wish, reverend father,” he said; “for I have had my taste of joy! If my back be torn and scored, I have had my fingers on yon miscreant’s throat. I think he will carry the marks of them as long as I shall carry my scars. I have had my recompense!”

“Peace, my son,” said the monk, lifting his hand. “The heart of the natural man lusts after vengeance; but these passions are terrible, and contrary to the will of God. Especially in these savage solitudes, with the strange and awful handiwork of the Almighty Creator about us, should we bow in humblest adoration of His infinite power, and draw near and close, in bonds of brotherhood, to our fellow men. But I know that the sin was not yours. You were sinned against sorely first. Nevertheless, we must needs learn to forgive our enemies, and do good to those that persecute us. So alone can we follow in the steps of Him who is set as the light of the world.”

Tom hung his head. He was a little abashed at the fury he had shown, and yet the savage joy of it was still tingling in his veins. He looked at the other monk, who was kneeling upon the floor beside Montacute, and he perceived that the latter was slowly recovering, and was able to sit up, propped against the wall.

As soon as he was able to understand what was said to him, the elder monk addressed him in stern tones.

“Montacute—thou man of blood—be warned by the fate which thy cruelty well-nigh drew down upon thy head this day! If God in His mercy had not sent us, in the very nick of time, to save this youth out of thy murderous hands, thou wouldst have passed ere now to the scathing fires of purgatory, whence there be few to offer prayers for thy release. Be warned by this escape. Repent of thy bloodthirstiness and cruelty. Seek to make atonement. Go and sin no more, lest a worse thing happen unto thee.”

Then turning from him with a slight gesture of repulsion, he said to Tom:

“My son, we would take you to the safe shelter of our monastery home, till your comrade comes for you. The way is something hard and long, but the moon and frost will help us. Have you the strength to walk with us?—for we would not leave you here, and it would be safer for all to travel without delay; albeit there be few so vile as to seek to do hurt to those who wear the habit of the servants of the Lord.”



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The fire yet burned in Tom's veins. He felt no abatement of his powers. He declared himself well able for the march, and was soon helped into his torn garments, with wet rags to protect his bleeding back from rough contact. The monks gave him to drink from a flask that contained some cordial, which was marvellous in subduing his natural fatigue; and there was a mess of broth awaiting him below, of which both he and the monks partook, ere setting forth upon their moonlight march.

As for Montacute and his followers, they remained in the room above, and made no effort to delay the travellers. They had been worsted at every point, and seemed to be aware of it.

It was a strange experience for Tom, this trudge over the hard, frozen snow, with his two cowed and gowned companions. It seemed to him afterwards like a vision of the night, full of a strange oppression and pain. He started forth with undiminished strength, as he thought; but ere long he felt as though leaden weights were fastened to his feet, as though some strange, uncanny beast were seated upon his chest, impeding his breathing, and paralyzing his heart. The smart of his raw back became more and more intolerable with every mile, and the awful whiteness of the moon upon the limitless plains of snow seemed to make the whole expanse reel and dance before his giddy eyes.

How the last part of the journey was performed, and what befell him when he reached the monastery, he never afterwards remembered. As a matter of fact, he was already in the grip of a burning fever; and for weeks he lay sick upon his pallet bed, tended by the kindly monks. Indeed, the spring had penetrated even to those rugged heights ere he had recovered strength enough to think of travelling once more; and Lord Claud had come to seek him, and bring him word of his own successful journey with the despatches of the Duke.

When Lord Claud had gone stumbling down the hillside, in affected illness, he soon found, rather to his dismay, that Montacute himself was following him. He therefore abandoned his intention of seeking battle with his foe, knowing that in brute strength and weight and muscle his adversary was his superior; and he had gone to the inn and put himself to bed, letting all around him believe thoroughly in his illness. Montacute had remained on the watch for a time; but finding, as he supposed, that there was no feigning in the matter, he had gone back to his appointed meeting place with the men sent after Tom. He had paid a fellow to keep watch upon Lord Claud, and send immediate word if he recovered and left his bed; but this man was one of those whose hearts had been won by Lord Claud's pleasant manners, and he at once reported the matter to him, and asked what he should do.

Between them it was arranged that they should change clothing, and, with the connivance of the landlord, should exchange identities. The young peasant should lie in bed, and be tended as the sick stranger; and Claud, in peasant's dress, should flee over

the other pass, leave word with the monks as to the peril of his friend, and make his way to Savoy with all the speed he could.



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This had been done with wonderful ease and celerity. And now, having accomplished all with unlooked-for success, he had returned to find Tom not only alive, but in good condition; for the latter, having once got rid of the persistent fever which had brought him so low, was getting back his strength and vigour every day. The mountain air was now acting like a tonic upon him, and the kindly ministrations of the brothers of the monastery gave him every help his condition needed. Even the scars upon his back had ceased to smart, and he was all but fit for the road and the saddle ere Lord Claud joined him again.

His lordship had heard good tidings of the horses in the valley below. And when rested from his rapid journey in search of Tom, he went to visit them, and reported them abundantly fit for the road.

But the war had now been resumed, and the countries were all in commotion. Travelling was a risky thing, save in numbers; and the good monks warned them that they might easily lose their lives by falling in with some bands of hostile soldiers, who were sure to fall upon travellers in ferocious fashion, and rob them of arms and horses, if not of life itself.

Soon, however, some of the monks themselves were to take a journey into France, and if the travellers would habit themselves in the cowl and gown, and travel with them, they could do so in almost certain safety. Tom's shaven head lent itself excellently to the tonsure; and though Lord Claud objected to part with his golden tresses, he quickly manufactured himself a tonsured wig which almost defied detection. As the monks, too, were to travel on horseback for greater speed, they had but to teach their steeds to amble along at a gentle pace, and none would be likely to suspect them.

So the day came when the parting was made, the travellers leaving behind their earnest thanks for kindness received, and taking with them the blessings of their hosts, who had come to love the two gallant young men right well.

They turned their backs upon the monastery, and wound their way down into the green valley, where horses were awaiting all the party; and then they turned their backs upon the ice and snow, and set their faces towards sunny England and home.

CHAPTER XII. BACK IN LONDON.

"Why, Tom, my lad! Now this is a welcome sight in sooth! Verily it is you yourself, else should I think I must sure be dreaming! Come in, come in, lad, and a hearty welcome to you! Faith, we had almost begun to give you up for lost! There be so many who go to foreign parts, but return thence no more, and of whom nothing more is ever heard. The Lord be praised that that has not been your fate!"



Cale had taken Tom by both hands, and was drawing him eagerly into the house. The young man had entered the doorway just as the shutters were being put up at dusk. The light lasted long now that May had come, and Cale was about to step forth to take the air for a while himself, when he beheld the tall figure darkening the doorway, and saw that it was indeed Tom who was entering.



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“Why, methinks you are taller than ever! and have gotten the air of a man of travel! This will be news for my little Rosy tomorrow. Why, it was but last Sunday, as we sat and talked of you, that the tears came into her eyes, and she said she feared we should never see you more! How she will laugh and skip tomorrow when she sees you in your accustomed place!”

“It was kind of Mistress Rosamund to spare a thought for me,” said Tom, feeling that it was good to be welcomed home again so warmly.

Other home welcome had he not yet received, for they had not returned by Holland and the port of Harwich. The good monks had taken them the shorter way through France, and had seen them safe upon a vessel bound for Southampton, where they had safely disembarked a few days ago. They had spent their last money in getting themselves clothing other than a monkish habit, and had then ridden merrily to London in quick time. Tom had left his good mare in Lord Claud’s stable, and had marched off forthwith to Master Cale’s shop; whilst his companion had declared his intention of making speedy application for the payment due to them for their recent enterprise, which had now been successfully carried through.

“I would I could have seen the Duke himself,” said Lord Claud; “but he is gone back to the Hague, men say, and may be anywhere now. But I shall lay my case before some of the ministers of the realm, and claim our reward. The Duke of Savoy knows the value of the news I brought him, and the labourer is worthy of his hire. You shall have your share, Tom, when I get the gold; for you took your share of peril boldly, and were a staunch comrade in all moments of danger. You suffered more than I, and that shall not be forgotten.”

So Tom felt light and happy of heart. He was back again in the old country, hearing his native tongue once more around him, the satisfaction of success in his heart, the experiences of a man of travel giving him added dignity in his own eyes. If his purse was light, he would soon replenish it; and in the welcome accorded to him by the honest perruquier he felt the earnest of other welcomes in store for him.

As they sat at table together the traveller told his adventures to his host, Cale listening with eager attention, and rubbing his hands softly together as he heard how Montacute had been outwitted, and how he had been well-nigh throttled by Tom, as well as rebuked by the pious monks.

“I have seen the fellow,” he said thoughtfully—“he came here once for a peruke—and a more evil countenance I have seldom seen. They say he is half an Italian, though he passes here for an Englishman; and that he is in the pay of the King of France is a thing commonly reported. He has an evil face, and I hope we shall see it no more in this land. You must have a care, Tom, if ever he crosses your path again. He will not forget that grip on his throat in a hurry!”



“Nor I those lashes upon my back!” answered Tom between his shut teeth. “He will find me ready for him whenever he wants! I am sometimes fain to regret that I did not squeeze the life out of him as he lay in my grasp, even as—well, others I know have regretted that they did not run him through the heart in a duelling bout.”



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“It is not many who get that chance, if report speaks truth,” said Cale; “Sir James Montacute is reckoned a notable swordsman.”

“He is no mean antagonist, truly,” answered Tom, with a slight smile; “yet I have seen a better.”

The day following was Sunday, and eagerly did Tom await the arrival of Rosamund, whom her father had set out betimes to fetch. But he had promised to keep the secret of Tom’s return for a surprise to meet her on her arrival; and so, when she turned the corner of the street upon her father’s arm, laughing and chattering to him in her brightest fashion, there was Tom standing in the doorway, clad in one of his finest suits (left behind in the care of Cale), smiling bravely, hat in hand, and looking altogether so grand and finished a gentleman that at the first moment Rosamund could scarce make sure if it was he himself.

But when convinced of this, her pleasure was pretty to see. She made him stand by the window where she could see him; she looked him all over, clapping her hands, and declaring that he had grown so grand and handsome that she was quite afraid of him. But her dancing eyes and laughing lips belied her words, and soon she was chattering away in the old free style; and Tom sat looking at her, thinking how pretty she was, and what a pleasant thing it was to be home again after such a period of peril and adventure.

Of course he had to tell his story over again, whilst Rosamund’s face turned red and pale by turns, and her breath came fitfully between her lips. She clung to her father’s hand in a tremor of sympathetic fear as she heard of the doings of that memorable night in the rude hut amid the snows of the Little St. Bernard; but that Tom was a greater hero than ever in her eyes, after she had heard all, could not for a moment be doubted, and perhaps that was why she felt that in him she could safely confide a secret fear which was troubling her own mind.

She waited till her father had gone down to set the dinner upon the table; but when once she and Tom were alone together she was not long in opening her trouble.

“Do you remember those four ill men who set upon you in the street that day when first you walked abroad with us?”

“Yes, I know them well—a set of cowardly braggarts and bullies! Sure, Mistress Rose, they are not troubling you yet?”

“I fear me they are,” she answered, with a shadow of fear in her eyes. “I saw nought of them through the dark winter months. Indeed, I had well-nigh forgotten that any such creatures lived. Then when the spring days began to come, and the streets of the city

became gayer, I thought once or twice that I saw them in the throngs as we walked hither and thither; but they never accosted us, and I gave the matter little heed.”

“Until when?”



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“Until one evening in March, towards the end of the month, when the daylight lasts till seven of the clock, and my father let me remain later than usual with him, and then took me back as was his custom. The roads were quiet, and there were few abroad as we neared Highgate; yet I could not help thinking that I always heard steps behind us, and ever and anon I looked over my shoulder. I did not always see men following, but sometimes I did, and it seemed always as though there were four of them together. Once I heard a laugh that I seemed to remember, and I felt a qualm of fear, I scarce knew why.”

“You spoke no word to your father?”

“No; I thought myself the victim of some foolish fear, and I wanted not to trouble him. He bade me goodbye at the gate, and saw me run up to the house and let myself in. I went up straight to my window to wave my hand to him as was my wont, and just at that moment four men lounged by arm-in-arm with swaggering mien.”

“And you think it was those same men?”

“I was almost sure of it, and hastily withdrew, glad that they did not follow my father down the hill, but walked slowly on in the opposite direction, and then turned and paced slowly back two or three times. For though I did not show myself, I peeped out and watched to see what they did.”

Tom’s face was very black. He had a keen personal hatred for the four bullies, and a very strong interest and affection for Rosamund herself. He saw she had still something more to say, and she drew a little nearer as she added:

“And since then I have caught sight of them several times in our lanes, walking up and down rather near the house, or hanging about round the tavern at the crossroads where our lane branches from the wider road. Once I am sure I heard their steps coming after me; but I fled so fast they could not overtake me, and I dared not look behind lest I should trip over a stone. I am almost afraid now to leave the house alone, save in the early morning hours; and until this happened I came and went freely, and my aunt is used to sending me visiting to the neighbours. I like not to alarm her by talking of these men, nor do I wish to cause anxiety to my father. I have often wished I could tell you the tale, that I might ask you what I should do.”

The childlike appeal in the maiden’s face stirred Tom to a chivalrous desire to help her at all costs.

“Zounds!” he exclaimed, “but we will teach those curs a lesson they richly need. As it is, they are becoming a byword even in London streets. Hark you, pretty Rosamund, have no fears. I will get Harry Gay to join with me, and together we will come to Highgate, and hang about your house in concealment until these bold swaggerers show



themselves; and then we will set upon them, and give them such a trouncing as they shall not quickly forget. And we will make them understand that if ever they are seen there again they will receive a like chastisement. After that I think you need feel no fear. They are as cowardly as they are blustering, and love not the feel of hard blows upon their backs, as we have good reason to know. Two of us would be equal to vanquishing the four.”



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“And there is a strapping young farmer, William Long by name, who would gladly lend you the strength of his right arm,” cried Rosamund, kindling into excitement. “He was lately wedded to my best friend, Mary Baker, and they live not far from our cottage. I had thought to speak to him if things went on so; but four to one is long odds, and moreover he is something stolid in the head, and might mistake his men, and so get himself into trouble.”

The thought of a battle on behalf of his good friend’s daughter was congenial enough to Tom, who had always felt a strong personal antagonism to these bullies; an antagonism warmly shared by Harry Gay, who eagerly entered into the plan for freeing Rose of their unwelcome presence in her neighbourhood. He was also an admirer of pretty Rosamund, whom he had known from childhood, although they did not meet very regularly, as Harry did not often intrude upon Cale on the Sunday, when he knew he liked to have Rosamund to himself. However, he knew very well the haunts most frequented by the four bullies who had taken it into their heads to persecute the perruquier’s daughter. They probably bore Cale a grudge for his action towards them upon the Sunday when there had been the fight in the street; and certainly if he had had any idea that they were seeking to touch him through his child, he would have been exceedingly uneasy, and his business must have suffered.

“I will keep a watch upon them,” said Harry Gay, who was quite pleased to join with so great a man as Tom Tufton had become in some affair of this sort; “I will have an eye to them, and if I think they are starting off for the north of the town, I will run at once and fetch you; and we will follow and outstrip them, for they must needs stop at every tavern as they go, and we can slip by and be ready for them at Highgate.”

So Tom remained for the most part in and about his lodging for the next day or two, pleased enough to watch the busy life of the streets, and hear the gossip of the young dandies in Cale’s shop. No word of any kind came to him from Lord Claud during this time of waiting; but Tom had no anxieties as to the money he was to receive for his services, and Master Cale had still a few guineas in hand from the sum left to pay for his lodging chamber in his absence, which Tom had desired to continue to rent, that he might leave there his worldly possessions.

It was on the forenoon of Wednesday that Harry came to seek him, all eagerness and speed.

“They have started forth towards the north,” he said, “and I heard a few scraps of talk, and am certain that they are bound for Highgate. We shall quickly overtake and pass them; and, with the help of honest William, we will give them such a lesson as shall make them avoid the locality for the rest of their lives, I hope. So, if you are ready, let us be off.”



Tom was ready in a trice, and very soon they found themselves following in the track of the four young rakes, who were swaggering along the sunny streets in their usual rolling way, accosting and insulting the passers by, knocking citizens' hats into the gutter, singing scraps of ribald songs, and ready to come to blows with any other bullies who might run up against them.



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But it was not long before they swaggered into an alehouse; and then Tom and Harry went swiftly by, and, taking the straight route up to Highgate, arrived there long before the others could be expected.

Rosamund was tending her flowers in the garden when they came up to the gate, and looked up with a smile and a blush. She was alone in the house that day, she said, save for the servant woman, who was very deaf. This suited very well for the present purpose, as they did not desire that the aunt should be alarmed.

They bade Rose remain in the garden for the next few hours, and they would hide in a clump of bushes at the corner and watch what betided. Harry strode off to fetch William Long, who had promised the help of his sturdy staff right willingly. In a short time the three men were in their hiding place, whilst Rose went on with her tasks amid the flowers, her heart beating a little with excitement, although she felt no fear.

Presently the sound of lurching steps and foolish laughter approached along the lane. Rose never looked round, but the colour in her cheeks went and came. The steps presently stopped at the gate, and those in hiding could see the four bullies, who were already somewhat the worse for drink, leaning upon it and eyeing the maiden at work with silly leers and nudgings.

“Pretty Mistress Rosamund,” said Slippery Seal, in his most wheedling voice, “will you favour a thirsty traveller with a cup of water from your well?”

Rose faced round at that, her face flushed, but her manner quite calm.

“If you are thirsty, sir, there is water to be had in the brook yonder. My father would not have me speak with strangers on the road.”

“But, fair maid,” said another, “we cannot sure be called strangers. We have seen your rosy cheeks and bright eyes many times before, we—”

But before he had finished speaking, Rose had turned her back and was walking up the path towards the house.

“No, no, no!” cried Dicing Dick; “you do not run away like that, pretty Rosamund!”

The next moment he had flung the gate wide, and the whole four were making a dash up the path in pursuit of the girl. They had probably learned from the servant at the inn that her aunt was out, and had thought they could terrify her into doing their pleasure, and setting food and drink before them.

But they did not get far. With a sound like a growl and a yell—such as he had given when he sprang at Montacute’s throat—Tom dashed out from the thicket, and seized Bully Bullen in a bear-like clasp. The other two were not many yards behind, and



immediately there was a wholesale scrimmage in the little garden; the sound of blows and oaths resounded, and many a yell of pain and rage told that one or another of the bullies had got a well-merited chastisement.



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It was not Tom's wish to use his sword, but he applied his good cudgel freely to the back of the bully, who was more his own height and make than any of the others. Bully Bullen swore, and raved, and threatened, and made ineffectual efforts to draw his rapier and run his antagonist through the body. But he had been drinking, and neither hand nor eye were steady; whilst Tom's clutch upon his coat collar, as he kept swinging him half off his feet, and laying his stout staff to his back, almost throttled him, and rendered his efforts abortive.

Once Slippery Seal showed himself worthy of his name, by slipping through the clutches of Harry, and dashing to get a good blow at Tom, for whom these four worthies had conceived a powerful hatred; but Tom saw the advance, and cleverly swerved round, so that the blow descended upon the luckless Bullen, who roared anew with rage and pain.

"Let them go now! let them go!" cried Rosamund at last, half frightened at the scrimmage, and almost ready to pity the ruffians, who were getting so much the worst of it.

Lusty William had quickly laid Dicing Dick prostrate on mother earth, and was giving a drubbing to Thirsty Thring, who was helpless in his stout grasp. This attack, so unexpected and so resolute, had quite taken the wind out of the sails of the blustering four; and when, at Rosamund's cry, their antagonists paused and gave to each a parting kick, they had no desire to do anything but slink away with bruised shoulders—black rage in their hearts.

"If ever you come prowling here again, I'll have my men and my dogs out at you!" bawled William, whose blood was well up. "I live handily, just behind yon clump of trees. Rosamund has but to lift up her voice in a good screech, and I'll loose every dog in the place upon you! You'll not forget the feel of their fangs so soon as you'll forget the feel of my cudgel!"

That threat was quite enough for the bullies, they almost began to run; but so soon as they had put the fence between themselves and their antagonists, they paused and looked back, shaking their fists in vindictive fury.

They seemed to divine that Tom was in some sort the originator of this plan, and towards him was their chief malevolence directed.

"We will have our revenge for this, Tom Tufton!" they cried. "It's your turn today, but it will be ours another. You shall rue the day you made enemies of us!"

"Do your worst!" cried Tom scornfully. "Do you think I fear any such ruffians as you?"



“Strike me purple!” raged Bully Bullen, using an oath which had come into vogue since the terrible days of the Plague, “if I do not make you bitterly repent this day’s work, you insolent young coxcomb!”

“Get off with you, or I call my dogs!” cried William, who saw that Rosamund’s cheeks were growing pale; and at this hint the bullies made the best of their way out of sight, never to be seen again in the neighbourhood where so many perils awaited them.



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Rose was rid of her tormentors, but she cast apprehensive glances in the direction of Tom.

“Can they hurt him?” she asked of Harry.

And he replied, with a light laugh:

“He looks a child that can stand up for himself!”

Nevertheless, after William had taken Rose to his house to pass the rest of the time of her aunt’s absence, and Tom and Harry were walking southwards again, the latter said to his friend:

“All the same, Tom, I would have you take care of yon braggarts. They are as evil a set of fellows as walk the streets of this city, and if they could chance to do you an ill turn, be sure they would not let it pass.”

But Tom only laughed. He had passed through many perils of late, and he felt that in the heart of this great city he could take care of himself. A sort of careless self confidence had been his chief peril through life, and his association with Lord Claud had not tended to diminish it. In the presence of his patron, indeed, he often felt of little account; but elsewhere he fancied himself something of a hero, and was by no means disposed to tremble before the malevolence of a set of swaggering bullies.

The town was very gay this bright springtide, and Tom was more than ready to plunge into the vortex of such amusements as were open to him. His lack of funds did not embarrass him, as Harry was ready to lend him money, and he had some success at the dicing tables in those coffee houses which he frequented. Gambling had not any great attractions for him, but a little excitement did not come amiss, and the fascination of winning was powerful.

Sometimes he was persuaded to try his luck at basset or ombre, and here his lack of knowledge of the games often caused him to lose. But he cared little, telling himself that he should soon have his share of the reward offered by the Duke to his secret messengers; and he plunged more and more deeply into debt, rather by way of passing the time than for any particular delight in play. He had not yet acquired strength enough to decline to share the amusements of those about him. He kept up his sword practice in the mornings, and took long walks with Harry Gay to visit different places of interest in and about the city; but the afternoon and evening were usually spent in some place of amusement, and little by little Tom became impatient for his money. He had borrowed several times from Harry; but he thought he ought to be hearing something from Lord Claud.



At last he called at his rooms, and asked for him. He was asked to wait, as Lord Claud was expected home shortly, and Tom's face was well known to the valet. He went up to the familiar room, but noted with surprise how many pictures and curios were missing from their places. The rooms were comfortable, even luxurious, but they lacked the costly elegance which had characterized them before. It seemed to Tom as though Lord Claud must have been in need of money, too, and have been selling his valuables to keep himself in funds. That seemed a strange shift for one to whom the state owed so heavy a debt.



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Tom had perhaps sat still waiting for half an hour before the door opened to admit Lord Claud, who came in with a dark look upon his face, and threw down his hat and gloves upon the table with a smothered oath.

Then he saw Tom, and the cloud lightened, although it did not disappear. He shook the young man warmly by the hand.

“Tom, you are come in a good hour, and an evil one! I was just wishing I had you to stand by me. What think you is the reply of those to whom I have proffered my claim on our behalf? They will have nothing of it. They will scarce give me a hearing. I may go to the Duke of Marlborough with my tale, they tell me in some scorn, as though incredulous of my words, but they will have nought to do with it. And will not even make an advance, whilst they know that to reach the Duke one must run many a peril and risk much money. It is a shameful trick! I know they would not have dared treat all men so, but they think they may put their despite upon me!”

He ground his teeth, and then broke out into strange wild talk which Tom did not understand, though it inspired him with a sense of great anger against those in high places.

Moreover, he was not a little disturbed on his own account by the failure of Lord Claud. How should he pay his debts? How should he live himself? Had he not risked his life for the sake of his country? Had he not suffered scourging and sickness on her behalf? It took very little of Lord Claud’s fire to kindle an answering flame in his own heart. His anger was always readily stirred, and his appreciation of his own merit caused him to feel the more hot and aggrieved.

“Tom,” said Lord Claud suddenly, “there is one other way. If you have a clear head, a strong arm, and a stout heart, there is yet a hope that we may gain our ends.”

Tom looked up eagerly. He saw something in Lord Claud’s face which seemed to him strange, and which inspired him with a sense of keen, quick curiosity and excitement. He felt as though he were on the verge of some new discovery. His breath came thick and fast, but it was with eagerness, not fear. He had been so worked upon and played upon by a master hand, that the thought of fear found no place within his breast. What was this other way of which his master spoke?

“The gold is ours, Tom. We have won it with the best that is in us—with our heart’s blood, as men say. It is ours. We have the right to it. If they withhold it in injustice, have we not the right to lay hands on it ourselves?”

“Ay, verily!” answered Tom in a whisper, his eyes fixed upon the burning eyes of Lord Claud, which seemed to fascinate and hold him as the snake does the bird.



Then Lord Claud approached and laid a hand upon Tom's shoulder, and standing over him, talked long and earnestly in a low, quiet voice, which nevertheless sounded trumpet-like in his ears.

Tom sat perfectly still, gazing at him and uttering no word, but within his heart the fire seemed to glow and kindle; and when Lord Claud paused and searched his face with his keen glance, he saw no faltering there.



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"Then we are brothers once again, Tom! Brothers now and always!"

"Now and always!" echoed Tom, in a voice almost the echo of Lord Claud's. "Now and always!"

CHAPTER XIII. ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY.

A handsome and remarkably elegant vehicle stood at the door of Lord Claud's lodgings, with two fine horses harnessed to it.

Tom had never seen any conveyance at once so light and handsome, the cumbrous coaches of the times being little to his liking. He had always travelled afoot or on horseback hitherto, and he had expected to do the same now, when he received his summons from Lord Claud.

That gentleman stood at the door, leisurely drawing on a pair of strong gloves. He nodded to Tom as he came up.

"It begins to get hot for saddle work," he remarked in his negligent tones; "besides, I want to make trial of this new-fashioned carriage. I won it from my lord of Gratton three days since; and he boasts that it has been copied from one in the possession of the King of France, who is said to be a monarch of a very excellent taste. At least it will carry us to St. Albans, and bring us safely back three days hence;" and turning to the valet who was holding his snuff box and cane, he added:

"If any call and ask for me, tell them I have driven into the country, but look to be home in three days' time.

"Now, Tom, get up, and we will see if we can reach St. Albans ere the dusk fall upon us."

Lord Claud was dressed in one of his finest suits; all white and silver, with here and there a dash of azure blue. His hat was set jauntily upon his golden curls, innocent today of any touch of powder. His blue eyes were dreamy and soft in expression. He looked like one who goes forth a-wooing, in all the gay frippery supposed to be pleasing in a maiden's eyes. He had even discarded his sword, and only wore a short jewelled rapier, such as he sometimes put on rather for ornament than use.

He saluted passers by with an air of negligent grace, replying with a smile to those friends who paused and bandied jests with him, asking him where the fair lady was with whom he was going to visit.

Tom was also dressed in his best, and looked a fitting comrade for the young exquisite now leisurely mounting to the seat beside him. There was no place for a servant upon the carriage, and Tom had learned by this time that Lord Claud was no more really



dependent than he was himself upon the attentions of a valet. He was rather in a fog as to what all this was about, whither they were bound, and what they were to accomplish; but he was willing to be led by the strong will of his companion, and to follow him wherever he went.

Tom's irritation and perplexity had not decreased during the past days. He was at his wits' end for money; and it seemed to him that if he could not obtain the payment due, he must either trust to his luck at gambling for funds, or else go home and settle down at Gablehurst once again.



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For the latter course he was not yet ready. His soul revolted from the thought of the life of the country squire. He had tasted of the cup of excitement and pleasure, and was not in the least prepared to relinquish it. He would rather face almost any alternative than go back to the life of the Essex village, and sink down into the old routine.

So he had been gaming somewhat recklessly these past days, and with varying success. There had been moments when he was plunged into despair; and then again the luck would shift, and he would feel that fortune was almost at his feet.

Yet at the end of the time matters were with him very much as they had been at the beginning; save that Tom himself had grown more reckless and defiant, most lustful of gold, and less scrupulous how he obtained it, as is always the way with the true gambler, whether he is aware of it at the outset or not.

Now they were rolling along together through the gay streets of London, the hot summer sunshine making everything bright and joyous, filling Tom with a great longing after the good things of this life, and a sense of bitter indignation at being defrauded of his due.

Lord Claud handled the reins and drove his pair of fine horses with a skill which awoke the youth's admiration, and which attracted the notice also of the passers by. Lord Claud appeared rather to court observation than to shun it, and often paused to exchange a word with friends upon the footpath; always telling the same story of being on his way to St. Albans; always smiling and evading a reply when asked to what particular house he was bound.

Nobody who saw the light and remarkable-looking carriage speeding on its way would be likely to forget it, and Tom could not help rather wondering at the public fashion in which they took their journey forth.

He had one encounter which he thought little of at the time, and certainly made no effort to evade. Lord Claud had pulled up the carriage to exchange a few words with a knot of dandies who had hailed him from the footway, and Tom was sitting and looking about him at the passing throng. Presently he was aware of the fixed stare of several pairs of eyes at an adjacent tavern window; and looking fixedly through the rather dull glass, he made out for certain that his friends, the four swaggering bullies, were the owners of these eyes. A minute or two later Bully Bullen stepped forth from the door, and accosted him with swaggering insolence of demeanour.

"So, Master Tom, you make fine friends! And whither away so fast in that fine carriage? Egad, there be truth in the old adage, 'Set a beggar on horseback, and he will ride to the devil.' Fine company, fine company for a country bumpkin to keep! But you'll find it finer than you think for one of these days! Ho! ho! ho!"



Lord Claud did not appear to hear or heed this newcomer's talk; but he showed that he had taken all in by just quietly shifting the long whip into Tom's hands, whilst himself drawing tighter the reins.



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Tom understood him in a moment. He took the whip, and the next moment it had whistled through the air, and caught the bully a stinging lash right across the face. At the sound of the crack of the lash the horses started forward, and in a moment the carriage was spinning away over the dusty road, followed by roars of laughter from Lord Claud's friends, and by roars of a different character from the indignant and outraged bully.

"You will have to shoot those fellows one of these days," remarked Lord Claud coolly. "They are becoming a nuisance. Men who are a nuisance ought to be put out of the way. London would be well rid of them."

"They have been mine enemies from the very outset," said Tom, "from the day when first we met, and you came to my rescue when they were baiting me. They have owed me a grudge ever since; but hitherto I have had the best of our encounters."

"Drunken sots have no chance against sober fellows with thews and sinews like yours, good Tom; yet they can give trouble in other ways, and are better under ground than above it. I marvel they have all escaped so long; for they are well known for a set of ruffianly vagabonds, and well deserve the hangman's noose."

The carriage spun fast over the ground, and the westering sun threw long shadows over their path as they rolled farther and farther through the country lanes, leaving the racket of the streets far behind. The country was familiar to Tom, who had ridden over the same ground early in the year; but how different it all looked in the vivid green of early summer, instead of draped in a mantle of frost and snow!

He felt a little elation of spirit as they drove through the old town, the observed of all observers. Some friends of his own hailed him with eager nods of recognition, looking with a great admiration and respect at himself and his companion. Tom felt his heart swell with pride, knowing that in time it would reach Gablethorpe how he had been seen sitting in such state. He returned the salutations of old friends with easy good nature, but felt as though he belonged now to a quite different world; and his heart swelled with that sort of pride which is apt to be the forerunner of a disastrous fall.

They did not stop at St. Albans itself, but at a hostelry a little to the north of it, standing by itself in a pleasant leafy lane. Lord Claud appeared known to mine host, who made them welcome to the best his house had at disposal; and promised all care for the horses, which, as Lord Claud explained, had to make the return journey upon the third day.

It was now somewhat late, so the travellers took their supper, and then went to bed; Tom still in a state of subdued excitement and expectation, scenting coming adventure, but as yet only very imperfectly acquainted with the nature of it. He had suspicions of

his own, which caused him alternations of dread and excitement; but he knew he should be told all in Lord Claud's time, and in the meanwhile silence was the best policy.



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The following day they spent in amusement in the town of St. Albans. Never were two men more active in the pursuit of pleasure than they. Lord Claud presented himself at the door of many a fine house, never failing to obtain an eager welcome both for himself and his friend. They spent the whole day in a round of amusement, making themselves mightily popular with their companions. They remained until hard upon ten o'clock in one house, and from thence returned straight to their inn, which was already shut up and dark, although the door had been left open for their return.

Up to their room they went, and there Lord Claud's manner suddenly changed. He seemed to throw off his careless gaiety as if it had been a garment, and at once the lines of his face began to change and harden. His eyes gleamed with a steady fire, and his voice lost all its soft indolence of tone.

He went to a cupboard, which he unlocked, and there Tom saw two bundles which appeared to contain clothes, and two saddles and bridles, which he knew had come from Lord Claud's stables.

He looked from them to Lord Claud in questioning wonder.

"How got they there?"

"We brought them with us—secreted in the carriage. Now, Tom, we must no longer delay. We have stern and quick work to do this night; and then back to London with the reward that is ours by right, though they force us to take it by violence. The people here will swear that we slept this night within doors. You saw the landlord look out of his window as we entered to make sure who we were. He will be in bed now, sleeping the sleep of the just. You may be sure he will wake no more till five of the clock; and long ere that we shall be back—our work accomplished.

"Off with those fine trappings, and put on these clothes. Then to saddle the nags, and so steal forth. I know all the tricks of the locks; we shall have nought to stay us."

Whilst he was speaking Lord Claud was unrolling one of the bundles, and quickly transforming himself into such a creature as Tom had never seen before, though he had heard such described many times. His fine clothes were exchanged for a strong shabby riding suit of common cut and texture, that presented no distinct features, and would be most difficult either to describe or identify. He had a great pair of horse pistols stuck in his belt, and also wore a dangerous-looking weapon—something between a sword and a cutlass. His golden hair was tucked away beneath the collar of his coat, and his head was covered by a frowzy dark wig, that looked like untrimmed natural hair. He quickly blackened his face with soot from the chimney, and put on a black crape mask.



A more villainous-looking creature, and one more utterly unlike Lord Claud, the exquisite, it would be hard to imagine. It appeared to Tom as though even his figure had shrunk and become smaller. If he had not seen the metamorphosis with his own eyes, he would not have believed that it was his comrade who now stood before him.



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But the voice was the same, as Lord Claud quickly assisted him to change his garments, to assume wig and mask, and soot his forehead over.

Tom had not been unprepared for this denouement, and yet when he saw himself in the habiliments of a highway robber, his heart throbbed with a painful sense of wonderment at how it had all come about. Yet the fascination exercised over him by his companion, and his own love of adventure and excitement, were so strong, that he did not know whether he dreaded or desired the coming struggle.

“What are we going to do?” he asked in a low voice.

“To take our due that they will not give us,” was the stern reply. “They had their choice, and must abide by their blindness and obstinacy. I am not going to be treated with contempt; no one who has ever tried to do so has done it with impunity. Every man has a right to his own—is it not so, honest Tom?”

“Yes, truly,” answered Tom, with a note of indignation in his voice. “Those who withhold our due must suffer for it.”

“They shall suffer in pocket; and if what we shall obtain this night be more than our due, the fault is theirs, not ours. Tom, you are to taste a new experience this night—one which is full of joy to those who have drunk often of the cup. There be times when I say that I am happiest dressed as tonight, a good horse beneath me, a bright moon above, and a booty worth having well in view. It is so full of rare surprises and delight; and, if a man but have his wits about him, it is so monstrous easy, too!”

Tom seemed to catch the spirit of his comrade. Those were days when crime was lightly thought of, though so heavily punished. A strain of recklessness in Tom’s blood made the notion of even robbery on the king’s highway fascinating rather than terrible—at least when he could say to himself that he was but “taking his own.”

It was plain enough now that this was the secret of Lord Claud’s life—hinted at more or less plainly by many before, but never altogether understood by Tom. Yet Lord Claud was received, feted, made much of in the society of the gay city, even by those who more than suspected where his influx of wealth came from. He had even received instructions, and been intrusted with an important commission, by one so high in office as the great Duke of Marlborough. Surely there could be no great stigma resting upon one who was thus employed in the service of his country. It seemed to Tom (as it has seemed to others before and since) that if only success crowned these efforts, there was no disgrace attached to them.

But it was a significant if—and he knew it!

“And suppose we are taken?” he said tentatively.



“We should be hanged,” answered Lord Claud coolly. “But we shall not be taken. Make your mind quite clear on that point. Do just as I tell you, and have no fears. The rest will follow of itself.”

Tom had come to have that sort of implicit trust in his companion which some men have the power to inspire. It makes them dangerous to foes, because they appear to bear charmed lives; and their companions trust implicitly in their luck, and know no fear. Tom felt that if Lord Claud told him to ride through fire or water, he would do it without hesitation, knowing that the thing was possible, and believing he would accomplish it.



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“Come,” said Lord Claud, “take your saddle and bridle and walk softly. It is time we were off now.”

They stole through the silent house, and round to the stable, where the horses were lying on beds of clean straw. They got up at the sound of their master’s voice, but were so quiet in all their movements that it seemed as though they knew what was in the air. In five minutes they were free from the buildings, and the travellers mounted. The road lay before them in dappled lights and shadows from the brilliant moon overhead. It was as easy to see the way as though the sun had been up.

Once clear of the inn, and Lord Claud sprang forward at a steady, swinging hand gallop, a pace to which the horses settled down as though well habituated to it.

Then he began to speak to Tom of the project on which they were bent.

“There is gold on its way from the bank to the coast. It is guarded by four soldiers. They have been instructed to travel fast to catch a certain sloop. Today they will have met with many hindrances upon the way. All that has been arranged for. So they will profit by this clear moonlight night to prosecute their journey, which will not lie through what is thought to be dangerous country. Forest land and wild heath make men very careful, but quiet country roads where villages are frequent give them confidence. And yet it is just as easy to fall upon the prey in the latter as in the former locality. In sooth, I think it is easier. The men in charge rush back for help, thinking the more easily to track and follow us;” and then Lord Claud broke into a soft laugh, and began to whistle cheerily as they galloped forward.

These horses were wonderfully strong and fleet. Tom could not but remark it as they galloped mile after mile with unwearied energy. Lord Claud smiled in the moonlight as he replied:

“Oh yes, that is necessary. It is well to prove an alibi, if you know what that is, good Tom. The honest folks where we come from will swear that we and our steeds were abed all night over yonder; but even if that should not be enough, there will be many who will declare that if we did not leave St. Albans till past ten, we could never be at the spot I am aiming for and back again before break of day; and I shall take care to call mine host up betimes, so that there will be plenty of evidence that I have not been abroad this night.”

Tom had heard often enough of the good understanding existing between innkeepers and the highway robbers who infested the roads, and now he began to see the workings of it, and to understand how easy it made some of these excursions, and how difficult it must afterwards be to obtain evidence against the freebooters. Lord Claud’s handsome person, his freedom of speech, and his lavishly-spent gold, made him a favourite

everywhere; and now he seemed about to employ his fascinations of mind and body for other purposes. Tom was to see how they served him in a different sort of life.



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The rapid pace at which they were travelling hindered conversation. Tom would not easily have believed it possible to travel so fast by night, but he trusted himself implicitly to the guidance of his comrade; and the strong, mettlesome, sure-footed horse he rode seemed to make nothing either of his solid weight, or of the distance they had to go.

Presently Lord Claud drew rein. They were passing through a little copse, where the light was but misty and indistinct, and where the road made a sudden sharp turn almost at right angles, affording complete shelter to any person or persons lying in ambush.

“Now, Tom,” said Lord Claud, “this is the spot I have chosen. There is a village not half a mile distant. The road is not a dangerous or lonely one—this is the only little bit of wood for some distance, and it is very small. No special precautions will probably be observed. There are two horses laden with gold, under the escort of two soldiers each. They had a larger guard to pass through the wilder forest country, but some of the men were to turn back when the perilous transit was made. Most likely one horse and the two troopers will be a little in advance of the other. The moment the leading horse rounds this corner we shoot down the men. You need not kill your trooper, Tom—indeed, I never kill unless there is need—it is enough to disable him. In a moment I shall have possession of the horse and shall gallop off. But I shall only possess myself of the treasure, and let the beast go. I have no wish to be tracked by him. Now, if I am right in what I expect, the second troopers, hearing the shots and their comrades’ cries, will believe themselves in peril of attack from a much larger gang, and will instantly fly to save their skins. This is what happens in five cases out of seven. It is seldom that a couple of men will stay to face what they believe to be a desperate gang of highwaymen. If this is so, dash you out upon the second horse. Seize him, and follow me. I know every inch of the country, and those fellows know nothing but the roads. They will never catch us, even if they pursue. If, however, the second pair should prove fellows of a stouter kidney, and instead of fleeing should show fight, then leave the second prize and follow hard after me. We will not risk too much, and one load will suffice for present necessities, albeit I should like well enough to obtain the two. I would make our ministers smart for their scurvy treatment of me!”

Tom grasped the situation in a moment, and set his teeth hard, whilst the light of battle leaped into his eyes. The adventure suited the reckless self-confidence which his recent life had quickened. Why should he not in time become a second Lord Claud, a man half feared, half admired by all London town, petted, made much of, observed and copied wherever he went? That his calling was suspected, if not actually known, Tom had abundant reason to know. But it seemed rather to give a lustre to his reputation than to cover him with shame. Why should he not attain in time to a like pinnacle of fame and fortune?



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Thus he mused, standing there in the softened moonlight, the fierce and lawless strain in his nature for the moment in the ascendant, the influence of his strange comrade dominant in his heart.

There was a sound at last. The horses heard it first and pricked their ears. Next minute the riders heard it, too. It was the tramp, tramp of horses' feet upon the road, coming on at a leisurely pace, together with the jingling of arms and the sound of voices.

Tom's heart beat thick and fast, but his hand did not tremble as he followed Lord Claud's example and got ready his pistol. Like two figures carved in stone sat the two liers-in-wait, their well-trained horses as motionless as themselves.

Crack! crack!

The silence of the night was broken by the ominous sound. A yell of pain and fury arose. Two horses turned back rearing, and dashed away, but the third was gripped by a strong hand; and before the party behind could see a vestige of what was happening, two riderless horses had galloped past them, throwing them into a panic of confusion and terror.

Lord Claud had judged right in part. Thrown into confusion, the men turned as if to flee, thinking themselves fallen amongst a large band of robbers. Tom made a quick rush round the corner, seized the second pack horse by the bridle, and dashed off in pursuit of Lord Claud; but even as he did so he became aware that there were more than the two troopers in the party, and in a moment the sound of yells and cries behind him told him that he was pursued.

But he had proved the pace of the horse beneath him, and if he could but possess himself of the bags upon the pack horse, and let the slower-paced beast go free, he knew he could distance pursuit. With a mighty effort he lifted the heavy bags and swung them over his shoulders; but even at that moment he heard the crack of firearms in the rear, and his good horse reared up perfectly erect, and Tom had but time to slip off his back before the creature fell over backwards, and lay still and dead.

Tom had another pistol, and even as he reached the ground he turned round and fired full at the foremost pursuer. A cry of pain told him his shot had found a billet in horse or man. But he could stay for no more. Already his mask and wig had fallen off. The moonlight struck full upon his face and the fine proportions of his figure. He saw that there were half a dozen men spurring onwards in pursuit; but he was full of that fury which gives to men an almost superhuman strength.

Leaping upon the back of the pack horse, he spurred the maddened and terrified animal to the wildest gallop, a gallop which he could never keep up, but which for the time being distanced all pursuit. Then when he had winded his own beast, and knew that the



pursuing horses must themselves be pretty well blown, he slipped from its back and began running like a hare across country in the direction taken by Lord Claud, knowing that however cleverly he might conceal himself, he would not be far away, and that he would keep an eye upon Tom's line of flight, and come up with him as soon as it was safe to do so.



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The sounds of pursuit died away. Tom looked back, and found himself alone in the fields and copses. His quick turnings and doublings, and the choice of ground difficult for horses, had served his purpose well. He was safe, and he had his prize with him. His heart swelled with pride at the success of his achievement.

In a short while up rode Lord Claud, cool and smiling.

“Well done, Tom; that was gallantly done. But we have lost one of our good steeds, and you have lost your mask. I trust that none saw your face?”

“It came off when the horse plunged and reared, and I was cumbered with the moneybags,” answered Tom. “Yet I doubt if any who saw me would know my face again; the soot upon my forehead at least would make it hard to be sure of the face. And none were very nigh at hand.”

“Give me the bags, and take you my stirrup, and we will wend our way back as fast as may be. You can run like a hare, Tom, as I have seen well. Can you run step for step with a trotting horse for some few miles?”

“Try me and see,” answered Tom, who was not a little proud of his powers in this respect; and side by side through the misty summer’s night stepped man and horse, both unwearied and full of courage. Once Lord Claud insisted upon dismounting and letting Tom ride for a few miles; but for the most part it was Tom who trotted along step for step with the horse, thinking over the events of the night, and exulting in the triumph they had achieved.

They reached the inn outside St. Albans just as the dawn was breaking in the east. Not a creature was stirring as they stabled the horse and made their way into the house. Nor did they do this until saddle and bridle and moneybags had been safely locked away in the body of the carriage, which contained a cavity with a secret door, the trick of which seemed known only to Lord Claud. Then they went to their room, removed all traces of travel from their faces—as Tom had removed them from the horse in the stable just before—tied up their clothes in small compass, and got into bed just as the first sound of life began to be heard in the house.

Almost immediately then Lord Claud called loudly for the host, and bade him bring him instantly a hot posset, as he had had a touch of ague in the night. There was a good deal of bustling to and fro then, and servants passed in and out of the room, seeing both travellers lying peacefully in their beds, as though they had slept there all night.

Lord Claud wrote a short note at once, and handed it to the host with a few whispered directions, to which the man replied with a nod and a wink; and then he took his posset, turned round and slept a while, and rose at the usual hour as though he had no reason for desiring longer rest.



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This day was spent as the previous one had been, in paying visits and joining in fashionable amusements. The news that there had been a robbery on the highway of some gold about to be shipped to Holland for the troops excited a little commotion in the place, and once or twice Tom fancied that he saw curious glances levelled at himself and his companion. Lord Claud talked upon the subject with his usual airy negligence, but without the faintest hint of personal interest in the matter. Nor did he even “turn a hair” when rumour reported that there was a very decided clue as to the identity of one of the band, who had been recognized by some travellers on the road, who were going in the same direction as the troopers, and had assisted them in pursuing one of the robbers. The man had escaped; but it was asserted that he was known and could be sworn to at any time.

This was not pleasant hearing for Tom, but he showed a cool enough front at the time. It was only when alone with Lord Claud that he asked rather anxiously if he thought it could be true.

“I doubt it,” was the reply; “it is a common thing for men to make the boast, but it seldom proves correct. Was it true that there were others besides the troopers on the road? I thought I saw more figures than I looked for, but knew not whether all were soldiers or not.”

“There were others,” answered Tom; “but I had no time to see what manner of men they were. There was much shouting and cursing, and I heard one man give an exultant laugh when I turned and fired; but more than that I know not.”

Lord Claud looked thoughtful.

“Well, Tom, it boots little to meet danger half way. 'Tis always best to put on a bold front and set it at defiance. But this remember, that Nell Gwynne shall be kept in readiness for you by night and day. And if ever you have reason to seek to save yourself by flight, the horse is yours; there will be money and a few necessaries strapped to the saddle. Make your way incontinently to Captain Jack, who may always be heard of at The Three Ravens; and I will visit you there, and we will talk over the state of affairs.”

Tom nodded, and looked a little relieved in mind; but he felt as though a cloud hung over his spirit despite his attempts at defying fate.

Next morning they started off in the carriage once more, and, to Tom's astonishment, with (apparently) the same two horses. He looked at his comrade for a moment in mingled surprise and admiration. Lord Claud gave an odd little smile as he replied:

“It is always well to be provided against accident, good Tom. Half the clever deeds of this world are rendered null and void because men forget to look ahead. We shall see the same persons driving back as we saw driving out. We must have the same steeds



too, else would that dead horse lying in the fields tell a tale we would rather keep to ourselves.”

CHAPTER XIV. THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.



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Back in London, his pockets full of money, fine clothes upon his back, and fine houses open to him when he went there in company with Lord Claud, it was small wonder if Tom forgot his fears after a few days of such a life, and was only rendered uneasy when whispers reached him from time to time to the effect that the authorities were hot upon the track of the daring highway robber who had succeeded in making away with the Queen's gold.

A reward had been offered for the discovery and apprehension of the miscreants concerned in the affair, and at first Tom had felt half afraid to show his face in the streets by daylight. But after a few days had passed by, and nothing had happened to arouse his anxieties, he had taken heart of grace. Lord Claud's example of nonchalance gave him coolness and courage; whilst the language and behaviour of the fine folks with whom he came in contact helped to dull and deaden any pangs of conscience which the wickedness of the midnight raid might otherwise have occasioned him.

He saw perfectly well, from the glances of admiration and arch reproof levelled at Lord Claud by the ladies in the gay company which he kept, that his patron was suspected in many quarters of being concerned in this recent robbery. Fine dames would tap him with their fans, and ask him what he had been doing at St. Albans on such and such days; and when he replied as to his whereabouts with that easy grace of bearing which always characterized his dealings with men and women alike, they would shake their heads, flirt their fans, and call him by whimsical names incomprehensible to Tom, but which he knew implied that he was suspected of being concerned in very wild and lawless deeds.

Yet these suspicions on the part of the ladies raised this handsome golden-haired Adonis to a higher pinnacle of favour than ever. It seemed to Tom that so long as a crime was carried out with dash, and verve, and success, it only brought a man fame and honour. He shivered sometimes when he thought of his mother and sister, and what they would think if they suspected that he had been led into an open act of law breaking and robbery. But he felt a little flattered in the society of these fine dames, when he saw that they looked at him with interest and curiosity, and wondered if he had played the part of lieutenant to their hero in the recent exploit.

He had been growing used to the strange ways of that portion of the London world in which Lord Claud had his sphere, but even yet it did seem strange, when he began to think about it, that a man believed to be a notorious but exceedingly clever criminal, should be received, courted, flattered, and made much of, as was Lord Claud, just because of his handsome presence and dashing grace of bearing, and because he had never been caught.

Tom wondered sometimes how these same faces would look at them, were they to be carried in irons to Newgate; and he fancied that under such circumstances they would wear a totally different aspect.



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But for the most part he sought to drown thought and reflection by plunging into a vortex of gaiety. He was no longer laughed at as a country bumpkin. He had been quick to pick up the airs of a man about town. He dressed excellently, having toned down his first fopperies; and finding that a rich and sober style best suited his fine proportions, he adopted that, made his mark, and was treated with respect and courtesy.

He had not learned the jargon of the day, and was a silent man in company; but that was considered rather a distinguishing trait in one who could handle the sword and lose his money at the gaming tables with the aplomb that Tom had acquired. And a fine sum did he lose, too, during the days that followed upon the escapade; for he felt a sort of recklessness upon him, and as he had a sense of being hunted down and tracked, he thought he might make the most of freedom and wealth so long as they were his.

He was Lord Claud's guest for those days, feeling safer in his company than elsewhere; and that worthy appeared not to know fear. Indeed, he had succeeded in covering his tracks so well, that Tom did not see how anything could be brought home to his door. It made him think of words he had heard dropped before, to the effect that to be Lord Claud's confederate was to be also his victim. He wondered if there had been any truth in these insinuations, and whether he was trusting in a man who was ready to save himself at the risk of his friend.

It was difficult to believe this when in the company of his patron. It was when alone that the doubts would at times assail him, and therefore he was happier in the company of Lord Claud than in any other.

He had not been to his old lodgings since his escapade. He felt an odd sort of reluctance to facing honest Master Cale, and parrying the questions which might be addressed to him. But he resolved not to let a second Sunday pass without a visit; and upon the Saturday he returned thither, dressed in his sober riding suit, and striving to meet the welcome of his host with an air of unconcerned and natural gaiety.

"Good Tom, you are welcome indeed!" exclaimed the perruquier eagerly, taking him by the hand and drawing him within. "I have been suffering no small anxiety upon your account, my lad. I trust and hope without any cause."

Tom forced a smile, and hoped it was a natural one, as he asked gaily:

"And wherefore this fear for me, good mine host?"

"There have been ugly whispers in the air ever since the robbery of the gold on its way to Holland. Men will talk and wonder, and it was known to all that Lord Claud had driven forth the day previous northward from London, and that you were his companion. Men's tongues have wagged for less than that, Tom, and for less weighty matters."



The little man was scanning his guest's face somewhat earnestly. Tom felt a most unwelcome qualm of shame and pain, such as he had only experienced before when thinking of his mother and sister.



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“Why, Master Cale, Lord Claud was but visiting his friends at St. Albans, far enough away from where they say the robbery took place. He will have no trouble in proving that he was never two miles from St. Albans upon that night; and I was with him the whole time, sharing his room and his company.”

“Well, well, well,” answered Cale, with a look of some relief, “I would never willingly believe harm of any man. But there are more strange tales flying about with regard to yon Lord Claud than about almost any other man in town; and folks say that many a likely lad, dashing and brave, has become confederate for a time with him, and has then vanished no man knows whither. I would not that such a fate should befall you, Tom.”

A slight shiver ran through Tom’s frame. He felt that there was an ugly suggestion in these words. How easily might some disastrous turn of fortune’s wheel that other night have left him a victim upon those fields instead of the gallant horse who carried him! How skilfully and easily had Lord Claud played upon him, prompting him to an act which a few months ago he would have shrunk from in the greatest horror! There was something almost diabolic in the beauty, the fascination, the cleverness, of the man. Tom made a resolution, as these things flashed through his mind, that he would have no more dealings with him, if this was what they led to. He even began to doubt now whether it was true that he had applied in vain for the reward promised them for their secret service expedition. It might all be a part of a preconcerted plan, in order to cajole Tom into thinking he had some sort of right to act as they had done with regard to this money.

He began to feel doubts of everything now, and above all of himself. Had he been made a tool of and a dupe? And was he walking blindfold into a net ready for his feet?

He slept but restlessly upon his bed that night, revolving many things in his mind, and almost resolving to see Lord Claud no more, but to adopt a new method of life in this wonderful city, albeit he scarcely knew what that life should be.

Tom’s hot blood had been fired by the adventures of the past months; his vanity had been flattered by the success which he had met with; his self confidence (always rather too strong) had grown and increased with great rapidity. He felt that without adventure and peril of some sort life would be tame and flat. To live as Master Cale lived, a quiet uneventful life of honest toil, seemed repugnant to him. Even to do as Harry Gay did, and pass the time in wandering between coffee houses and the play, or taking a wherry and rowing hither and thither on the great river, or walking or riding into the country—all this now seemed to him tame and tiresome.

He turned and tossed upon his bed, wondering what had come to him, and what life held in store for him. He thirsted for adventure, for the excitements and perils which he had experienced of late. His blood tingled at the memories he conjured up of those

things he had passed through—the strife of arms, the fierce joy of battle, the breathless gallops from pursuing foes, and the hairbreadth perils they had come through.



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That was life! That was what he longed after! He cared little for the gay resorts of town, save as an interlude. The life of the streets soon palled upon him. But there was no attraction in the thought of home and the peaceful existence there. He must see more of the world, he must enjoy more of life, before he could ever dream of going back to Gablehurst to live.

But what could he do? He fell asleep pondering upon this problem, and when he awoke it was the first thought in his head.

But, as is so often the case when one has gone to sleep pondering upon a problem, the solution had come to him during the hours of unconsciousness, and he awoke with a new inspiration.

“Why not offer for the secret service?”

Tom pondered this question all the while that he was dressing. There were difficulties in the way, of course. The Duke of Marlborough—the only man to whom he could apply with any hope of success—was out of the country; Tom knew not where he would be found just now, though that could easily be ascertained. He himself was ignorant of foreign tongues, although he had picked up a little understanding of French, and could speak a few simple phrases. But he had plenty of confidence in his strength and courage. He felt that his energies demanded now a wider field of exercise; and if he could but get his chance, he had full assurance that he would make a brilliant name for himself in some way or another.

This idea brought back all his high spirits. He saw that it would be necessary once more to consult Lord Claud, who would probably be able to give him excellent advice. But after that, Tom told himself, he would have no more dealings with that mysterious personage, but would throw himself into the service of the great Duke with such zealous goodwill as should lead him to fame and fortune at last.

He had a feeling, also, that he should be happier out of London and out of the country just at this juncture. Lord Claud’s careless indifference to consequences had had its effect upon him; but he was not quite comfortable yet, and the feeling of being watched and hunted for was an exceedingly unpleasant one.

He felt a distinct qualm of uneasiness that very morning as he and his host sat at breakfast together.

“I am going to fetch Rosamund,” said the perruquier, as the meal drew to its close; “but if you will take my advice, good Tom, you will not sally forth into the streets today.”

“And wherefore not?” asked Tom.



“I misdoubt me that you are watched for here, Tom. It may be my fancy, but several times during these past days I have seen ill-looking fellows prowling nigh at hand—one or another of those four bullies, of whose discomfiture Rosy has told me, and young Harry also. Once the fellow they call Slippery Seal came boldly to the shop asking news of you from the apprentice; but the lad had the wit to reply that he thought you had ceased to lodge here. Nevertheless I have seen one or another of them skulking about since then, and it may be they will suspect that you may choose today for a visit to us.”



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“And what do they watch me for?” asked Tom, with heightened colour, but looking at Cale with an air of something almost like defiance, though his heart misgave him the while.

“Nay, Tom, that is a question you should be able to answer better than I. If there be no cause of offence against you, why, then, do as you will, and go where you will. Yet men have ere now been haled to prison and to the gallows for sins that have been less theirs than those who set them on.”

Tom’s face was very grave. He was not afraid of adventure and peril; but the thought of prison and disgrace—to say nothing of a felon’s death—seemed to paralyze the beating of his heart with a numb sense of horror. Truly, if this sort of danger dogged his steps, the sooner he was out of the country the better for himself!

But he would see Rosamund once more, and spend one happy day in her company. If he went out into the streets, it had better be after the summer dusk had fallen, when Cale took his daughter home. He agreed, therefore, to remain within doors all that day; and he was not sorry he had done so when presently he observed two of his enemies slowly prowling past the house, scanning the windows furtively, and talking together in very earnest tones.

Could it be possible that these men had been of the company travelling with the troopers that night? Could they have got wind in some mysterious way of what was afoot, and have followed to seek his ruin? Tom had reason to know that these men bore him a grudge, and had threatened revenge, and that they hated Lord Claud equally with himself. Harry Gay had warned him that they were dangerous fellows; and Tom had not lived all this while in London without being well aware that there were ways and means of obtaining information, and that every man had his price. If they suspected him to be concerned in the robbery, they would take every possible means to hunt him down.

Tom set his teeth as this thought came to him. To be the victim of the spite of a party of low villains, who were only fit themselves for the hangman’s halter! The thought was not to be borne. Better, far better, the life of the forest with Captain Jack! There at least he would be free of this persecution; and perhaps the day would come when he should find his foes at his mercy, and take his revenge upon them!

A very little brooding of this sort sufficed to set Tom’s hot blood boiling. He had no wish to join himself with freebooters and law breakers; but if they hunted him beyond a certain point, he would not hesitate to fly to those who would give him safety and a welcome. He had heard plenty of tales by this time of impoverished gentlemen, disbanded soldiers, falsely-accused persons of all sorts, who had been forced to fly to the freedom of the forest, and live as they could. Since the days of bold Robin Hood there had always been outlaws of the better, as well as the worse, sort. Tom had no

wish to throw aside his code of morality and honour; but if men would not let him live as a peaceable citizen, they should suffer for it!



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To be cooped up in dusty streets amid hot brick walls during these long beautiful summer days, was a thing not to be endured. Go he would and must; and if he could not find work for himself in the secret service, why not enter a secret service of another kind, and teach the authorities not to hound a man too far?

This was Tom's method of reasoning—evading the question of his own guilt by the excuse that he only took what was his by right. It is easy to believe what one wishes to believe, and Tom had never found it hard to persuade himself that what he desired was the best course of action to pursue.

How cool and fresh the green glades of the forest would look in the glancing June sunbeams! A good horse beneath him, the free skies above, a trusty comrade at his side—what could be more pleasant? Tom drew a deep breath and fell into musing thought. One thing was very certain: he was in danger from those enemies of his. He would take care not to be caught like a rat in a trap. He knew a better way than that!

In musings such as these time swiftly fled away, and soon he heard the voices of Rosamund and her father in the house below.

Rosamund greeted him with shining eyes, and a glance of keen curiosity and soft admiration, which he found mighty pleasant. She at least had not harboured unkind thoughts of him, and it was very plain that he had become the hero of her girlish dreams. She wanted him to tell her all that had befallen him since their last meeting. She listened with eager, breathless attention to what he had to say; and although he spoke nothing of the one event which was always in his thoughts, it seemed as though she half suspected that he had been the witness of, or the partaker in, some strange and fearsome adventure, for the colour went and came in her cheeks, and she seemed always waiting for more each time that he paused.

She asked in a low voice if he had heard anything of the bold act of robbery; and Tom answered that he had heard a good deal. Coming a pace or two nearer him, she looked wistfully into his face and asked:

“Have they told you that there was one man of very goodly height, strong of arm and stout of heart, who dropped his mask in the heat of the fray, so that the moonbeams smote full upon his face, which was only blacked above and below? Did you hear that news spoken by any?”

“I think I heard that something of that sort had befallen,” answered Tom as carelessly as his beating heart would allow.

“But oh, sir,” she asked yet more earnestly, “did any tell you that the tall bold robber was said to favour yourself? Indeed, some say that it must surely be you—even though you were so far away!”



Tom looked as he felt, a little startled at that.

“How heard you that, Mistress Rose?”

“Harry Gay heard it in the taverns. It is the talk in some of them. And he heard these four bad men, who were sworn to vengeance, as that they have a halter about your neck already, and they only wait till they have you safe to pull it tight.



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“O Tom, Tom, do not let them do you this despite! Have a care, oh, have a care how you fall into their hands, for they are without mercy, and full of evil passions, and greedy for the promised gold. They would swear any man’s life away to obtain the reward; and how much sooner yours, whom they hate!”

Tom felt a strange tremor run through him, half rage, with a dash of fear, and some emotion sweeter than he had ever experienced before, and therefore more strange. He suddenly found himself clasping Rosamund’s hands in his, and saying:

“Sweet Rose, would you care if hurt were to befall me?”

Her brimming eyes and quivering lips gave eloquent answer. He stood very still, holding her hands clasped between his; and when he released them, he answered with a new note in his voice:

“Have no fears, sweetheart. They shall not have me. I have plans that will foil them yet. But think not too well of me, Rosamund. I am not the hero you would make me out. I am a mad fellow, and have played the fool once too often; but for all that they shall not get me.”

“Keep out of their clutches, and I care for nothing else!” cried Rosamund, her eyes alight with excitement.

But they could exchange no more confidences, for Cale’s voice was heard summoning them to dinner; and after that meal they sat together in the cool parlour, and passed the time in talk, having no fear of being disturbed, for none knew of their being within. Generally in summer weather Cale took his daughter for a long ramble, and sometimes did not return to the house till after he had left her at her aunt’s house in Highgate.

The light slowly waned and faded. In the open country the day would be bright for some while longer, but in narrow streets it went faster. Down in the basement, where they had taken their supper, it was growing quite dark, although no lamp had yet been lit. Cale was just saying that he must take Rosamund home, and was debating within himself whether it would be wise for Tom to accompany them, when there was a sharp, determined knocking at the door, which made Rosamund jump quickly up with blanching cheeks, whilst Cale threw a startled look at Tom, whose face had grown suddenly set and pale.

“Open in the Queen’s name!” cried a loud and authoritative voice from without.

And Cale rose at that summons, for it was not one he might dare to disobey.

The moment he was gone Rosamund sprang to her feet.



“Quick, quick! This way! There is a window at the back. I will let you out, and bar it after you, and throw the key away. Come, I will show you where!”

Tom sprang after her into a little back kitchen, the door of which the girl promptly locked and barred behind them. The only other outlet was a narrow window, fastened by a bar that could be locked across it with a padlock. This she flung open, and disclosed to view a narrow court beneath.



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“Jump out,” she cried; “run across, and you can easily scramble upon the roof of yon low outbuilding. From thence you can creep along into the lane at the back; and, if no one be watching, drop down there and fly for your life. But if there be a spy set, then climb up by the gutterings upon the roof—Harry Gay has done it many a time—and you will find a hundred ways of outwitting them and escaping down some back alley.

“O Tom, make haste! I hear angry voices in parley with my father. He will detain them as long as may be. But be thou gone quickly. Oh, do not delay!”

“I will not,” answered Tom, with his hands upon the windowsill; “and I thank you from my heart for your goodwill to me this night. Give me one kiss, sweetheart, and bid me good speed. Pray Heaven you have a welcome for me when you see me next!”

She kissed him with the tears standing in her eyes.

“I shall always have a welcome for you, Tom,” she answered; “I shall think of you always till I see you again. But oh, go! go now! And Heaven prosper and be with you! Oh, they are coming! Delay no longer!”

Tom was already outside the window, and now sped forth to do her bidding. She saw him scramble up the rough wall of the building opposite, and make his rapid way along, as she had said. She craned out to see what he would do when he reached the corner, and watched as he made a careful survey, and then dropped into the lane at the back. She listened with all her ears, but there was no sound of pursuit or struggle.

It had been as she hoped. No one had thought of that possible way of escape. No doubt the back door of the yard was watched; but she would never have sent him out by that.

Instantly she closed and barred the window, throwing the little key away into the court below. Then she softly unlocked the door and set it ajar, and began washing her dishes in the dim twilight of the scullery, singing a little song to herself the while.

In the house above there was the sound of tramping feet and loud voices. She heard her father say quietly:

“Her Majesty’s warrant must be obeyed. Seek what you will, and take what you will. I know nothing of any criminal. I have none such in hiding here. I am an honest citizen, and have nothing to fear. Do your will. I hinder you not.”

The next minute Cale had come softly into the back kitchen, and was exchanging a silent but meaning glance with his daughter.



He saw in a moment by her face that all was well. Tom had made good his escape. The longer the search continued in the upper rooms, so much the longer would the fugitive have to put distance between him and his pursuers.

At last the feet came downstairs, and a lantern was flashed all round the basement rooms.

“Here is a window!” cried one. “If the bar were down a man could squeeze himself out. When was this window last opened?”



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Rosamund looked up and said quietly:

“The key is lost. We cannot open it. What are you wanting in this house, gentlemen?”

She spoke in a soft voice, and the rough fellows answered with more gentleness.

“We are looking for one Thomas Tufton, your father’s lodger, for whose apprehension we hold a warrant. He was seen to enter this house last night, and has not left it since.”

“He left it a short time ago, in the dusk,” answered Rosamund indifferently. “But wherefore is he arrested?”

“We have sworn information that he was seen to be one of the men concerned in the recent robbery of the Queen’s gold. We have testimony enough to hang him, if we can but lay hold upon him. Did he say where he was going, mistress?”

“I think he spoke of Rotherhithe,” answered Rosamund, after a moment’s reflection; “but I paid no special heed.”

At this moment an impatient voice from the open door above cried out:

“Why do you not bring him forth? He must be there still! What means the delay? He can be an ugly customer, truly, but sure you have mastered him by this!”

In a few minutes more Rosamund saw the ugly, shifty face of Slippery Seal drawing near to them, and he was followed by another of the same crew, peering eagerly this way and that, as though they looked to see Tom pinioned in the midst of the group.

“Where is he?” they cried.

“Flown!” answered the others, with a touch of sullenness in their voices. “You have led us a fine chase, truly; first to be made fools of by that dashing young spark, whom it is not good to meddle with, and then disturbing this honest citizen and his daughter! Zounds! you drunken fellows, if you lead us this sort of dance we shall believe no word you say again. I trow well that you were all of you more than half drunk upon the night you professed to see this thing done. How are we to know you are to be trusted in swearing it was this young man at all? Master Cale speaks well of him, and his word is worth twenty oaths from the likes of you.

“Goodnight, master; goodnight, mistress. I am sorry we disturbed you on the testimony of these ill-living fellows.”

Rosamund’s heart beat high with joy and triumph. She felt she could have kissed the burly officer of the law. But her bright colour paled again as she heard the exclamation of Slippery Seal, prefaced by a string of horrid oaths.



“He has escaped! These Cales are hiding him! But he shall not escape us! We will not lose the reward. After him, I say, after him, all of us! I know the tracks the fellow will make. It will go hard if we get not up with him ere he has shaken the dust of London from his feet!”

CHAPTER XV. AWAY TO THE FOREST.

Tom found no trouble in escaping from the house of the perruquier by the way suggested by Rosamund; and once in the dusky streets, he made good use of his long legs to carry him out of the vicinity of danger.



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He knew now that there must be a warrant out against him, and that London was no place for him—that he must fly somewhere beyond the reach of pursuit. He remembered Lord Claud's promise about the trusty mare, Nell Gwynne. Well, he would go once more to this strange friend of his, and see how he would stand by him in danger's hour.

Tom's blood was up. He felt like a man goaded into recklessness and crime by the action of others. If they would not let him live as a peaceable citizen—well, he would give them something to remember him by!

Quickly he made his way along, running like a hare when the street was empty, but always observing caution, and only striding along like a man in haste when there were passers by to note him. He felt sure that Rosamund's quick wits would do much to gain time and give him a start; and, sure enough, he reached the stable yard where Lord Claud's horses were kept without a sign or sound of pursuit.

As luck would have it, there was the master himself standing in the yard talking to his headman.

Tom strode straight up to him with a strange gleam in his eyes, for he knew not even now whether this man were friend or foe.

"I am come for the mare," he said briefly; "you remember your promise?"

Lord Claud gave him a swift, keen glance, as though he heard a new note in Tom's voice.

"I do. I will not fail you," he said very quietly.

Then to the man standing by, "Bring out Nell Gwynne. You have your instructions. See that nothing is forgotten."

The man vanished into the dark stable. Lord Claud turned to Tom.

"What has befallen?"

"There is a warrant out against me. They would have taken me in Master Cale's house half an hour back, but for the shrewdness and quick wit of his daughter. This is no place for me. My head is in danger. I must forth with all speed; but whither?"

"I should take to the forest, Tom. Captain Jack will welcome you gladly," said Lord Claud, as calmly as though discussing some indifferent project. "It is just the life for you. You will make a great name there. And that you will never do, my friend, in the gay world of London."



“I have thought of that,” said Tom between his shut teeth; “but it means the life of an outlaw—and a death on the gallows, perchance, to end it!”

“Pooh, nonsense! not for a fine strapping young fellow of your thews and your wits! It means a few gay years of excitement and peril, a little influence in high places, which can always be bought with gold, and a free pardon and a return home. Leave that part of the business to me. I have played the game often enough to understand the moves. Meantime, you will be free and safe there. Elsewhere, the gates of a prison may yawn for you at any moment.”

Tom shivered in spite of the warm night air.

“Death rather than that! But is it the only way? I had thought the secret service might find me some task.”



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Lord Claud shook his head slightly.

“In time, perhaps, in time; but you are too sorely beset at this moment for that. We will talk of that later. Now you must away with all speed. My house will be watched next. Indeed, I have had some ill-looking fellows asking questions and hanging round already. To the forest with you, good Tom, to the forest. That is the only safe place for you now. If you fled to Gablehurst, you would only bring sorrow and shame on all who love you. Lucky for you your mother still reigns there. Leave it to me to set her mind, and that of your sister, at rest concerning you. But you must to the forest, my good comrade, and to the free and merry life there. Egad! I could wish that I were going with you myself! Indeed, I may perchance join you there ere long. But we must not vanish together, Tom. We must use caution and circumspection.”

Tom set his teeth, and a fierce wave swept over him, half of rage, yet half of joy. The longing for freedom, struggle, adventure, was strong upon him. The restraint of the city, the bare thought of captivity, put wild thoughts into heart and brain; but the sense of having been betrayed—made a fool of—befeared by this handsome, imperious man beside him, set his blood boiling in his veins.

At that moment Nell Gwynne was led out, making sparks fly from her feet as she plunged in passing beneath the doorway. She looked in perfect condition—sleek, mettlesome, strong, and beautiful. Tom’s heart leaped at the sight of the splendid creature, who turned a responsive head at the sound of his voice, and dropped her velvet nose into his hand.

“She is yours, Tom, from this moment,” said Lord Claud, signing away the servant, and himself holding her head; “take her as the gift of one who is neither so indifferent nor so callous as you may think. Here is a purse of gold, too, Tom—all your own, my lad, so shrink not from taking it. Tom, whatever be the end of this friendship betwixt us, believe that I have loved you. It is my luckless lot to bring misfortune at times to those who consort with me; yet methinks they have their fierce tastes of joy, too. Tom, I shall not forget you. I shall hear of you. I shall sometimes see you; and I shall be your friend, whether or not you believe it now. You shall not always need to dwell in the forest. You shall return thence with fame and fortune secure.

“But, for the present, farewell. Captain Jack will give you welcome. He will be looking to see you. He will welcome you gladly. You will find it no such bad life, believe me. But delay not longer. Be off!”

Tom was in the saddle, and the mare reared beneath him with a snort of glad anticipation. She had done no work this many a day, being kept in readiness for Tom’s use, with only the needful modicum of exercise up and down within hail of her stable.



Lord Claud stretched out his hand, and Tom put his within it. After all, he loved this man in spite of all his faults and follies, and the strange reputation which clave to him. He might be false, but Tom had trusted him, and he desired to trust him to the end.



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Then he rode forth in the soft summer darkness, turning the mare's head westward at first, to get clear of the streets and houses, and only heading her north and then east as he made a wide circuit of the city.

To ride through it would have been to court capture; and even as it was, as he sprang forward upon the better road which lay straight for the forest to the northeast, he had a suspicion of being followed, although he could see nothing as he looked back.

The mare bounded beneath him with great, elastic strides. He could afford to laugh pursuit to scorn. Perhaps this confidence made him careless, for he noted not two motionless figures, lying as it were in ambush, one on either side of the road in front, just where a clump of great trees threw a deep shadow across the road. He had thought of foes following behind; but he had not thought of their forestalling his movements and waiting for him in advance.

The mare saw them first, and swerved violently. That swerve most likely saved her life, if not Tom's, for at that identical moment two shots rang out, and Bully Bullen with a shout of triumph sprang forward, certain that his bullet had found its billet, and that Tom was in his power at last.

The fire long smouldering in Tom's breast burst out now into a fierce flame. His eyes blazed. A smothered imprecation broke from his lips. He drew the pistol from his belt, and fired full at the fellow who had sought to seize the mare's rein.

He might almost have spared his fire, for Nell Gwynne would have dashed out his brains with her forefeet had he not fallen with a groan, a lifeless corpse. The other man, who had seemed about to rush forward, too, now started back in terror and dismay. Sheltering himself behind a tree, he yelled out in a voice of trembling fury:

"You shall swing for this, Tom Tufton! you shall feel the halter about your neck right soon! The highway robber who is a murderer to boot will never escape the arm of the law! I will bring you to the gallows ere I have done with you!"

Tom knew the voice, and turned the mare's head towards the fellow, who, however, decamped so quickly amongst the trees that it was hopeless to try and follow on horseback. Moreover, Tom did not know that he was not also pursued from behind; and if so, he must gain the friendly shelter of the forest ere his enemies came up.

True, he had but slain this fellow in self-defence. He had been well-nigh the victim himself. But the crime thus forced upon him seemed to cut the last cable which bound him to the life of the past. They might not be able to prove upon him the robbery of the gold, but at least one witness had seen him shoot down Bully Bullen, and would doubtless swear that there had been no provocation beyond that of seeking to take into custody a man upon whose head a reward had been set.



He touched the mare with the spurs, and set her head straight for the forest. The late moon was beginning to silver the world about him; Tom saw the ground gliding ghostlike beneath him as the noble creature sprang forward.



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“Away to the forest! away to the forest!” seemed the tune beaten out by the rhythm of her flying feet. No fear from pursuit now! Tom sang and shouted in the strange tumult of his feelings, as he galloped through the soft, scented night.

Lord Claud had been right. The forest was the place for him. He had tried the life of the rustic, the life of the town exquisite; and both had palled upon him. The clash of arms, the peril of the road, adventure, battle, pursuit, victory—these things held him in thrall. These things meant life to him.

Better that he should not see mother or sister again at present. Better that Lord Claud should tell them some smooth tale, which would set their minds at rest for a while. Later, perhaps, when the hue and cry for him was over, he would seek the shore, would find his way to other lands, and by the power of his good right arm would win himself a name amidst the din of battle.

The future seemed to unfold itself before him in glowing colours. Life held so many golden possibilities even yet. What might not a man accomplish who had a purse of gold in his belt, a noble horse beneath him, a trusty sword at his side?

Visions rose before his eyes of the things he would accomplish, the fame he would acquire, the return home he would finally make with laurels round his brow! Even here in the forest he would be no common freebooter. He would show himself merciful to the poor and oppressed; he would only take toll of the sleek and the fat, whose wealth was doubtless as ill-gotten as that of those whose lives he had watched of late.

“Men shall pay toll to Tom Tufon!” he cried, waving his sword above his head in a fierce gesture of triumph; “but the poor and the needy shall bless his name, and the oppressed shall find a haven of refuge with him!”

By which it may be seen that Master Tom’s self confidence was in no way diminished by the vicissitudes through which he had passed, and that he was looking forward once again to playing a leading part in some new drama of life.

The border of the great forest loomed up before him. It looked dark and solemn beneath the shade of the trees. Tom drew rein, and looked keenly to right and left, for he knew that The Three Ravens inn could not be far away.

“Who goes there?” asked a voice which Tom’s quick ear recognized instantly; and he cried out in tones of eager welcome:

“It is I, Tom Tufon—and you are Captain Jack!”

There was a movement of the brushwood, and a horseman stepped out, the horse having given an eager whinny at the sound of Tom’s voice.



“It is Wildfire!” cried Tom, bending over to pat the sleek neck of his old favourite. “Well, good fellow, have you had a luckier career than your old master? And yet I scarce can say I wish it undone. I have tasted life; I have had my glorious days.

“Captain Jack, I am come to you for shelter. There is a price on my head. I am outlawed in effect if not in reality.”



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"I have heard it. I expected you," answered Captain Jack in the friendly fashion in which he had spoken before to Tom. "I have had news from Lord Claud. It is not the first time he has sent his pupils to me."

"Have I been his pupil?" asked Tom with a half laugh; "in sooth, methinks I have been rather his dupe!"

"A little of both," was the answer. "But we must all pay the penalty of friendship with great men. Yet I think the price is worth the paying. And now, Tom, if that grand horse of yours is as little weary as she looks, let us forth together to some place where none may follow us. And let me tell you that it is not to every one Lord Claud would present his favourite mare, trained like a human creature for her trade."

"You know her?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Nell Gwynne and I have been acquainted this many a day. There be some of her fierce tricks that have been learned from my hand. I have been teaching the same to Wildfire and Wildgoose. We shall not be taken or overcome through lack of good beasts to bear us, Tom."

"You have Wildgoose, too?"

"Yes, I sent after him shortly. He was too grand a beast to be wasted upon a varlet of a serving man. If you have more of the same stock at home, Tom, we might make shift to get at them anon; but for the present we are well enough mounted."

They rode side by side through the forest tracks, Nell Gwynne and Wildfire making acquaintance with apparent mutual satisfaction as they stepped pace for pace together, their riders talking in quiet fashion over their heads.

Tom told the whole story of his adventures since arriving in London in October; and hard indeed was it to believe that months and not years had rolled over his head during that time.

"Not bad, not bad! Well done for a young cockerel! Ah, we shall make a man of you, Tom! It is in your blood, I can see well!"

Such were the comments of Captain Jack as he heard the tale; and Tom spoke with an unconscious pride in his own daring, which plainly betokened an undaunted spirit and a thirst after more adventure and distinction.

Angry and hot against those who had "driven him forth," as he called it, reckless of consequences, with boundless self confidence, he was just the tool fit for the hand of Captain Jack, who patted him upon the back in a friendly fashion, and said:



“Yes, yes, Tom, you shall learn how to take toll. We will have another story of Tom Tufton’s Toll ere we part company. There are good men enough amid the bands that infest these forest glades—men suffering unjustly, men falsely accused, men who have broken from those noisome prisons, which breed disease and death, and who would sooner put a bullet through their head than return to the filth and degradation of such a life. Ah, it is the hardness of the laws which drives men to be freebooters on the road! The rich may fatten and batten, rob, cheat, bleed



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their fellows to death; but let one of us lesser men dare to lay hands upon their fat purses, full of other men's gold, and we are branded as felons, and pay the ransom with our lives! That is not justice. That is not to be borne patiently. I tell you, Tom, that I have seen enough of the injustice of the law to turn my heart to molten metal and my blood to gall. We want fellows of your mould to wage the war and win the victory. The day may come when you will win for yourself a great name, and shine forth upon the world admired, courted, feared—even like Lord Claud!"

A thrill of gratified vanity ran through Tom's frame. He threw to the winds the last scruple of conscience. He flung back his head and set his teeth.

"Ride on—I follow!" he cried, in a strange, hoarse voice; "I follow unto the world's end!"

So side by side the two men vanished into the deep gloom of the forest; and Captain Jack led his companion to one of those secret haunts of his own, where no pursuing foot had ever yet penetrated. Tom drew a long breath as of relief, feeling that here at least he was safe.

And yet, when he sought to compose himself to rest after all the excitements of the past four-and-twenty hours, he found himself unable to sleep. The face of his mother, loving, wistful, reproachful, seemed ever rising before him. Was it not due to her that he should see her once again, even though he might be afterwards obliged to fly back to the forest? Was there not a chance—just a chance—that his enemies might not follow him to his own home?—might not even know where that home lay? At least, might he not see whether he was followed before he abandoned the idea of seeing once more the mother and sister who loved him so well?

With the first light of dawn he woke up Captain Jack, and put the case to him; and the elder man sat cogitating deeply, as Tom moved about making ready the morning meal.

"Tom, lad," he said, "you are safer here; but I understand your feelings. A man's first duty is to his mother if he have no wife. And your mother is a good woman. Squire Tufton would never have married her else.

"Listen to me, my lad. I like you. I would fain have you for a comrade and friend; and I fear that you will not long be left in peace at home. But you shall do this thing. You shall go to your mother—"

"Ah, that is a good word!" cried Tom, now all eagerness. "I shall at least see her once again!"

"Yes, you shall see her again; you shall make glad her heart. But, Tom, tell her nothing of all this that has befallen you, nor of the peril in which you stand. Let her never know,



come what will, that you may be driven to take to the forest, for fear of the unjust rigour of the law and the machinations of unscrupulous foes.”

“I would gladly be spared paining her by such a tale,” said Tom quickly; “but how—”

He paused, and Captain Jack took up the word.



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“I know what you would say. How if you have suddenly to fly again? How if aught should come to her ears? Now listen, Tom, and I will tell you what I will do. I loved your father. I vowed in my heart that if ever the day should come that I could serve him, I would do so; and therefore I will do what I can for his son. Hear me, Tom. I have means of knowing many things. I can set my scouts to work. Therefore, go you home to your mother. I will meantime set my men to the task. I will communicate with Lord Claud. If peril threaten, you shall have warning. Tell your mother that the Duke of Marlborough may have need of you again for the secret service, and that at any moment you may be forced to quit the house suddenly and secretly. Having made her understand that, enjoy your stay at home with a free heart. I will undertake that you have four hours' start of any pursuing foe. If you receive message or token from me—or from Lord Claud—you will know what to do. Take your horse, set spurs in her flanks, and draw not rein till you find yourself here once more. Note the road as you fare forth, and return by it again. You will find safety here—and a friend. This do, and you shall meantime be safe.”

Captain Jack had some of Lord Claud's power of commanding confidence; and, indeed, in this case Tom felt a greater sense of security in the promise of this highway robber than in that of his mysterious friend and leader in London.

“I will go,” he said. “I believe you. I take you at your word. I will return home to my mother and sister, and rejoice their hearts. And there will I abide till I receive your message; after which I will fly back to the forest. Captain Jack, I have that within me which tells me that I shall come back—that my adventures are not ended yet. But let me once more go home to those I love, and I ask nothing more.”

“You shall go, Tom Tufton, you shall go. A mother's happiness and her blessing are not things to be lightly thrown away. Go, and I will keep watch. Till you hear from me, you are safe.”

So Tom rode away in the gray light of dawn, and quickly finding himself in familiar haunts, put spurs to his good steed, and before noon found himself close beside the village which had been his home all his life till this past adventurous year of travel.

As he went clattering up the long avenue to the house, it seemed to him as though the birds of the air must have been at work; for there was his mother standing upon the steps to receive him, whilst Rachel was running towards him with flying feet.

“O Tom, Tom, Tom! we knew it could be no one but you! O dearest Tom, so you have come home at last!”

He swung himself from the saddle, and put his arm about his sister.



“Yes, I have come home,” he said a little huskily, “come home to see you all once more. The old place never changes—nor you and my mother!”

“Why should we?” asked Rachel softly.



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And he kissed her again, with a strange feeling of the unreality of everything human.

The servants were flocking out by this time. His mother's arms were outstretched in welcome. There was something like a sob in Tom's throat as he felt them clasped about his neck.

"My dear, dear boy—my only son! Thank God that you have come safely through all threatened perils, and have come home to us again!"

Tom held her close in his arms. He would not speak a word to dash from her those fond hopes which she so plainly cherished. He would not speak of the peril overshadowing him, which might at any moment become imminent.

"It is good to be home, mother!" he said, and kissed her many times.

The servants raised a cheer for the young Squire. Tom turned and smiled at them, and spoke a few words of thanks. How familiar it all was! How had he ever despised the love of the people round him, and of those two faithful women who loved him so truly and so well?

"Dear mother," he said tenderly, "you are so much better to me than ever I deserve; I will try to live to be a comfort to you some day. I have given you little but sorrow and pain as yet."

"Nay, Tom, you have served your country, and that should satisfy a mother's pride. Come in, my son, and tell us your adventures. You have seen foreign lands and fine folks since last we met. Come and tell us all about it, as you rest and refresh yourself from your journey."

So Tom gave one last look round at the eager faces grouped about the door, and turned into the great hall with a smile and a sigh. It was very like a dream, this eager welcome, and these familiar sights and sounds. The sense of insecurity which hung over him made everything seem unreal, and yet in one way dearer to him than ever before.

"Yes, this is home!" he said to himself, as he turned to follow his mother; "my travels are ended. I have come home. Whatever may betide in the future, I am safe at home now!"

If any reader desire to know the sequel to Tom Tufton's story, and how he took toll on the king's highway, that story shall be told another day. For the present his travels had terminated, and he was beneath his own roof tree—a sadder and a wiser man than he had sallied forth.

The end.