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DOROTHY FIREBRACE

OR

THE ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER OF BIRMINGHAM

BY

THE AUTHOR OF 'WHITEFRIARS'

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET

1865

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THE
ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER.



CHAPTER I.

THE HOLTES OF ASTON HALL.

It was on the usual Thursday Market Day in Birmingham, in the year of grace 1642—if the term can be properly applied to the date of the commencement of the great Civil War of England. But, at all events, still at a time when market days were occasions of general gathering and movement in the towns and neighbourhoods where they were held—when Edward Holte, Esquire—eldest, and, indeed, only surviving legitimate son and heir presumptive of the worshipful Knight and Baronet, Sir Thomas Holte, of Aston Hall—rode into the town from the direction of that then not very long finished and magnificent specimen of English domestic architecture under the Stuarts.

This cavalier was apparently still a young man, though past the earliest flush of youth—the first blythe and bounding exultation, rather than mere enjoyment of existence, natural in the attainment of a healthy and

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high-blooded maturity of manhood. And such had, for ages, been as much a part of the inheritance of Edward Holte's race, as any of their numerous manors and other possessions scattered profusely in the neighbourhood of Birmingham. Or else peculiar circumstances had cast a shade of depression and melancholy over the features of this young man of five-and-twenty summers only, that would better have become the wintry side of life. Otherwise, his countenance was exceedingly handsome and engaging, from its expression of sentiment and intellect, mingled with an air of gentleness and refinement that spoke almost equally well for the qualities of mind and heart of their possessor.

It must be admitted that the lineage whence the heir of Aston sprang, needed some such variety in its exhibition of the kind of fruit from which the tree was to be known. For, from the time when a sturdy blacksmith of Birmingham founded the family by the strokes of the anvil—so the tradition ran—the Holtes of Erdington, Duddeston, and, finally, now of Aston Hall, had been renowned in their country for a peculiarly haughty and masterful bearing, which was far from acquiring them the good will, or even respect, of their neighbours of the town.

On the contrary, it served to keep alive the memory of their origin, in the indignation inspired by the contrast of the sway and tyranny they assumed in their new position; particularly with a people of such independent freedom of speech and action as the townsmen of Birmingham, who seemed to have acquired both from the ring and metal of their own forges. But the more ancient gentry and nobility of the country were long supposed, also, to regard with disfavour the forward pre-

tensions and bustling arrogance of what was still looked upon as a new race, during a considerable portion of the two centuries and a half, in which it had been rising in wealth and possessions.

It was not found easy, however, to withstand the influence of these latter claims to distinction, backed as they mostly were, in the Holte generations, by personal qualities of an imposing and formidable description.

In particular, the representative of the family at the period of the seventeenth century alluded to, was considered, with some reason, to 'out-Herod' all the previous Herods of his race.

He had built a mansion which, in grandeur and expense of decoration, rivalled a princely palace, in the notions of the age. He had surrounded it by the enclosures of a park, which hemmed in the town in the direction its natural extension would most conveniently have pursued, besides depriving it of a tract of common land that had long been of use and recreation to the inhabitants. And, no longer satisfied with the rank of a country squire, achieved with difficulty by his ancestry, nor even with the honour of knighthood from the hands of his sovereign, Sir Thomas Holte had bought for himself one of the new hereditary titles, which excited at once the ridicule and indignation of the possessors of the ancient degrees of nobility. He was a *baronet* by purchase—and at a cost which, in those days, was held to be of fabulous enormity. But, in addition to all these offences, the new baronet was personally a man who appeared to combine in his attributes all the least popular and commendable qualities of his progenitors. He was said to be of an extraordinarily violent and tyrannical character, and

report figured him as living in his stately seclusion at Aston Hall, more in the style of an Eastern despot than a modern English gentleman—with all his family and vassalage trembling around him.

To be sure, the place where these reports were most believed in, and possibly invented, was very unfavourably disposed to the Holtes in general. Aston Hall and Birmingham had been at feud almost from the laying of the first stone of the building, so close upon it, till now, when it towered in all its pride and novel splendour, and seemed to rebuke the mechanical genius of the town by its displays of consequential gentility.

Like a proper English country squire, besides, Sir Thomas Holte rigorously preserved the game on his lands, and on the Crown wastes of Sutton Coldfield, of which he was Ranger. On the other hand, the bold and hungry commonalty of the town were irresistibly tempted by the joy of forbidden sport, and the sight of the fat bucks, pheasants, and wild ducks that were in such plenty over the whole territory in question, to acts of depredation and spoil. These were resented in the most vigorous manner by the Aston baronet; and as he was in the commission of the peace, and enjoyed numerous far more arbitrary privileges and powers as a royal officer of the chase, he was often enabled to visit chastisements on the aggressors, the severity of which secured him an amount of bitter ill-will seldom attained by any private individual. And now, to crown all, the great division and quarrel of the English people, as a nation, found the baronet and his ingenious artificer neighbours at complete issue and variance on all the main points in the dispute.

Possibly it would have been enough for the lower

orders of the townspeople of Birmingham to have known which side Sir Thomas Holte had embraced, to range them on the opposite one. But, like nearly all the larger rising towns of England at the time, not dependent on the soil, but engaged in commerce or the mechanical arts, Birmingham had adopted with eagerness and enthusiasm the new ideas, both in policy and religion, that had long been spreading in secret among the masses of the people.

A sturdy love and maintenance of personal freedom had ever, indeed, been remarked as native-born and habitual in the feelings and habits of Birmingham men. And doctrines so congenial to their natural tastes and instincts, as were now universally diffused from the great centre of English public opinion, found a more than ready acceptance among them. Birmingham, in consequence, vehemently adhered to the cause of the Parliament, when the time for declaration arrived, against the vacillating and yet headstrong efforts of Charles the First to change the constitution of his kingdoms into a despotism—while equally, as a matter of course, Sir Thomas Holte took sides in the quarrel with a sovereign of so similar a character and views.

Not to mention that Sir Thomas was under personal obligations and service to his Prince, it was highly necessary for a *parvenu* baronet, who aspired to complete his grandeur and elevation by a loftier title of nobility, to show a marked zeal and forwardness in the support he lent to his sovereign's cause, now that it was cast on the last arbitrament of the sword. For the King, having retired—or, rather, having been driven—from London to York, had for some time been assembling an army, under whose protection he proposed to raise his

royal standard, and advance to the overthrow and chastisement of the rebellious Parliament; while the Parliament, on its part, marshalled the Londoners and the rest of its partisans into a host likely to render the enterprise of great doubt and difficulty in the execution.

A personage of such a character and demeanour in external relations, as those ascribed to Sir Thomas Holte, was not likely to prove a very kind or indulgent father and master of a family; and domestic discomfort of this sort might have had something to do with the pensive and sorrowful cast of expression observable in the looks of the young heir of Aston. But reports were also afloat that Master Holte—as he was called—and his father differed considerably in their notions on public affairs.

Both were, indeed, royalists, in the main stamp of opinion; but they were not so well agreed in the quality and degrees of their adherence to the cause thus embraced.

Despotic and overbearing in his personal tastes, Sir Thomas Holte was all for the high-handed exercise of power and authority, and talked of nothing but riding up to the saddle-bows in the blood of those plebeian traitors and contemners of lawful dominion who had exalted their horns in the London Parliament. His son—perhaps from practical experience of the effects of uncontrolled power—was an advocate for milder measures, and a reconciliation which should compose differences, without exalting or depressing either great balancing power in the State to the destruction of the other.

Edward Holte had been the bosom friend of the accomplished and generous Falkland at the University,

and, like him, had hoped on against hope to the last, that means might be found to reconcile the contending factions at a less price than a torrent of English blood, poured forth by English hands. But the hatred and exasperation of parties had now passed all such saving limits; or the rash elation and conceit of the Royalists, at having the person and still venerated majesty of the royal name engaged on their side, no longer permitted a hearing to moderate counsels.

The stern old man at Aston was not likely to be the last to share in the rising furor of determination on the part of his faction; and, as the Holtes very seldom went into Birmingham for their pleasure, it was a probable supposition, now that the baronet had imposed his own energetic will and resolves upon the milder and more submissive genius of his heir, that Master Holte was in the town on business connected with the arming of the Aston tenantry on the side of the King.

It was, at all events, very well known in Birmingham that King Charles's commission of array had arrived in Warwickshire, and was being put into execution by the zeal of the principal country gentlemen; though the Lord-Lieutenant, Lord Brooke, taking part with the Parliament, refused all assistance; and that, among the leading spirits on the King's behalf, Sir Thomas Holte was exhibiting extraordinary zeal. According to the report, he was forming the chief of the able-bodied yeomen on his estates into a body of horse, under the command of his son.

Only heir and lawful representative of the name, as young Edward Holte remained, his sire seemed not to grudge the exposure of his life in the bloody game about to be played. But, probably, like the greater part

of the Royalist faction, at the time—elate with the pride and presumption of birth and territorial possession—Sir Thomas thought the struggle with the ‘rascally mobs’ that backed the Parliament, would be brief, and dangerous only to the ‘citizen and rabble routs,’ which were believed to form its main dependence. Among these, pillage and massacre were speedily to do their worst, in the calculations of civil hatred and revenge, in which aristocratic contempt and notions of superiority, natural to the class that for so many ages alone wielded the sword, largely mingled.

The Holtes, it is certain, would have sought in vain for recruits among the townsfolk of Birmingham; but the agricultural population, as a rule, implicitly followed the will and pleasure of the landlords and other ancient masters and leaders of their class; and the large landed possessions of the family placed means of influence in this respect at his disposal, which it could not be doubted the Aston Baronet was very well inclined to exert.

CHAPTER II.

BIRMINGHAM 221 YEARS AGO.

It was evident Edward Holte's business lay in no degree with the principal cause of that day's assemblage in the town. He scarcely bestowed a glance on the trains of market goods, and merchandise of various descriptions, slowly lumbering past him in carts, or on the backs of weary, spavined horses, which, tottering under piles of loaded sacks, performed such portion of the labour of the railway and canal of our day, as was needed by the much inferior demands of traffic and manufacture in that.

Then, as now, the 'Black Country' forwarded, as to a central unloading place, the products of its darksome industry, chiefly in small tumbril carts, to suit the narrow, deeply-sunk roads, into Birmingham; in several of which, up to a much later period, a load of straw, piled till it nearly overbalanced the carriage, scarcely showed above the edges of the way. And the leather-clad, sooty-faced attendants on this needful supply to the forges of Birmingham—already famous, time out of historic memory, for the productions it now furnishes to the entire world—it was plain, examined with no very friendly attention the general figure and appearance of the young cavalier. And, if his broad plumed hat—his flowing bright brown curls—his fine features and grace-

ful bearing — his riding cloak of mulberry-coloured velvet—his richly embroidered collar, high boots, and gold rowelled spurs—excited their admiration, as a display of the polish of civilised life—these gnomes of the coal mine seemed rather disposed to express the feelings awakened, in coarse and gibing remarks, not unfrequently akin to open insult and ribaldry.

The latter form of salute was, it is true, chiefly directed against the two well-mounted and well-armed domestics of Aston. Their scarlet livery coats, as serving men, distinguished by the squirrel badge of the Holtes, seemed in particular to excite notice and ill-will, the more especially as they took every opportunity to return jeer for jeer, and rough practical joke for joke, as they dashed along in attendance on their master. Indeed, it required, more than once, a considerable display of patience and dexterity on the part of the young gentleman, to avoid some uncomfortable collision or dispute with these Black Country folk, whose vehicles had, in several places, almost complete possession of the road. And, though accustomed from his childhood to legends of the wild manners and hardy independence of these people, Edward acknowledged to himself, with a sigh, that the signs of an altered and democratic age appeared in the increased sturdiness and disdain of all former admitted pretensions to social superiority, he had now so ample occasion to remark.

Birmingham was a very different town in its external aspects, in 1642, to what it presents at the present day.

It was a manufacturing town, it is true, and had been so from the earliest ages of English history. It enjoyed almost a unique reputation in England for all the arts of Tubal Cain — all the products of the bellows

and the forge. But its size was not in any proportion to its renown; and, had not the whole mass of the inhabitants been engaged in the staple industry of the place, it would be difficult to imagine how it could have supplied the wants, even of scattered and unpopulous communities like those of England—and of Europe in general—at the time.

Instead of a population of 290,000 living souls, Birmingham reckoned scarcely 6,000.

Fifteen streets and nine hundred houses lodged this population, according to the lively, but, perhaps, too imaginative local historian, Hutton. Equal to the demand, certainly, even if Birmingham had already acquired its sensible liking for space and separation into families that now distinguishes it. But the lofty chimneys, towering like the burning genii of the place, in an Arabian tale, did not yet exhibit their sombre majesty over a sea of murky smoke and cloud. The smithies, scarcely raised above the general run of two-storied houses, and chiefly confined to the lower portion of the town, sent forth their temperate volumes of sooty vapour, each from its separate range of open timber-work, to the streets. Everywhere else, Birmingham presented the aspect of a quiet country town, reposing in the midst of fields and woodlands, not yet stripped of vegetation and verdure by the flaming breath of a thousand furnaces.

From Aston Park, a succession of fields and orchards occupied almost all the space now covered with a tangled maze of streets and habitations, to Gosta Green and Newhall Street. As yet, St. Philip's was not; and only a part of Bull Street. At the Welsh Cross, Edward Holte might be said first to find himself in the town.

Then, traversing the long, irregular High Street, he came upon that broad triangular space sloping downward to the Church of St. Martin, from time immemorial used as the market-place of Birmingham.

The rider's glance caught, almost unconsciously, the summit of the beautiful spire of this edifice, rising in airy elegance over the mingled and bustling scene below, and yet sinking so singularly from all the lines of approach. Edward was absorbed in thought, and this was too customary an object to break his reverie.

Neither might anything equally wonted in the market-day aspect of the enclosure he now traversed, have disturbed it. The lines of open booths all round the churchyard walls, displaying most of the hardware products of Birmingham—each attended as salesman by the brawny artist himself, who troubled no middleman with the task; the orderly ranges of carts, containing the vegetable produce of the surrounding districts, set back to back, like the chariots of a British encampment, down the centre of the space; the bellowing herds of kine and oxen, penned in movable hurdles before the shambles for which they were destined; but allotted, by our humaner ancestors, in that respect, plentiful food and troughs of water, during the intermediate stages of bargain and sale; the rows of ruddy farmers along the Corn Cheaping, as it was called, disdaining not to stand by their open sacks of barley, wheat, and rye; and presenting sample and bulk together to the purchaser—the steeds bestridden to market by these worthies, being tethered by the bridle before the doors of the numerous inns, which paraded the most curious ensigns—not merely names—without need of a licence, wherever the

eye glanced round the thick enclosure of low-roofed, carved, gable-end houses.

All this had nothing striking or unusual in it for Edward Holte.

Neither the Market Cross itself, which formed a conspicuous object in the scene to strangers, being an old Saxon sculpture of a crucifixion, elevated on a flight of granite steps, the whole worn almost to shapelessness by time and exposure—nor the well-accustomed apparition of the Bailiff of Birmingham (Birmingham being at the period only the appendage of a feudal lordship) sitting, as it were, enthroned in an old carved oak chair, just below the cross; garbed in a worm-eaten antique costume of coloured quarterings, resembling a herald's sleeveless coat or tabard.

This functionary—a fat, jolly-looking man, with a corporation that might have supplied the town's lack of one—was undignified enough to be fast asleep at the moment, *coram populo*, and even snoring aloud. But nobody heeded him. And yet he had a row of stocks behind him, and a banner waved over him from a gibbet, to denote the Lord's right (long disused) of inflicting *capital punishment* on offenders within the jurisdiction of the manor, the Justiciary besides being attended by four or five officials of inferior rank, with scales and measures, whose occupation was probably not so completely gone.

Antique feudal customs of all kinds were still in too general vogue to excite any special wonder, even in a philosophical student of his age like Edward Holte. Yet—proceeding in deep thought, as he was—he could not avoid being struck, a little further on in his advance,

by the aspect of a portion of the crowded resort he had now come upon.

This was a part of the enclosure of dwelling-houses, on the eminence directly facing the Church of St. Martin, which, at a time when the barbarous pastime of bull-baiting was a favourite amusement of the English populace everywhere, received a name from the practice—extended to the entire space, in the end.

The tortured animal was chained for the 'sport' to a massive iron ring, fixed by a staple in a block of stone in the rough pavement of cobble-stones. And this was universally known in Birmingham as the Bull Ring.

But now, around the spot dedicated to this cruel recreation, a remarkable group was collected, evidently for a very different object. Indeed, this group might be said, at the moment, to take in the entire motley assemblage.

It was chiefly composed of artisans, the country people in general standing aloof, though sharing in the general attention—skilful men in most of the manufactures practised at the time in Birmingham—workers in iron and in brass, and in the more precious metals; in leather and in steel—armourers of all kinds—defensive and offensive—makers of swords, daggers, pikes, pistols, and carbines, and fashioners of the plates of polished metal still used to cover the body from the assaults of these instruments, and adapted to its configuration with extraordinary skill—dyers, glassmen, bellows-makers, were here collected, together with representatives of all the innumerable varieties of ingenious craftsmen who at this day are said to work in the 'toy trade' of Birmingham.

The business of marketing which had collected this

throng was evidently, however, not the one at present commanding the general attention, directed in the quarter mentioned. The ordinary chaffering and clatter of a scene of activity of the kind was lulled, and on all sides notice seemed absorbed in a single speaker. Women and children were among the most eager and engaged listeners, where listening appeared to be the universal business. And, glancing forward with surprised attention, Edward Holte beheld a figure addressing this numerous audience, that certainly, and not lightly, aroused his own curiosity and interest.

It was that of a man of middle age; of low stature, and naturally of slender and delicate proportions in his limbs, whose fleshy covering had been so much further reduced, seemingly by privations, that he now presented little more than the skeleton framework of a human being. His features were particularly fine and chiselled in the outline; and the forehead, which was expansive, though a little too suddenly thrown back, would have possessed a character of great benevolence and intellect, but for the frenzied glare of the expression overspreading the whole countenance. This was besides ghastly pale in the complexion, and deformed with strange, letter-shaped gashes, that gave him something of the appearance of a Feejee savage, decorated with the emblems of cannibal chieftaincy. But the terrible expression that shone over it was chiefly due to the eyes, which glowed with such a lustre of passion and distempered fervour of meaning, as to a calm looker-on appeared nigh akin to, if not quite, insanity. The long shaggy grey hair seemed as if it had not been combed for years, and was tossed back like the mane of a horse, revealing also a pair of slit and mutilated ears.

As for the garb of this wild figure, it was scarcely equal to the requirements of decency, the chief part of it consisting of a loose kilt of sack-cloth, scarcely reaching to his knees from the shoulders. The feet were naked and bleeding, and the crouched and distorted knees and ankles still visibly bore the marks of fetters, and attested great need of the long staff he held, curiously branched at the end so as to resemble an outstretched gigantic hand.

From these signs, Edward Holte was not slow to form the conclusion that he beheld one of what had of late years become a very numerous wandering corps—a fanatic enthusiast, who had suffered from the persecutions of the established powers in Church and State. Traces of the pillory and of the pelting of a Royalist mob, were unmistakably visible in every line of the poor man's misused visage, but the letters stamped into it were the true handwriting of the merciless Archbishop Laud, and attested that the victim had been branded as a R. (ogue) and a S. (chismatic) by the hand of the executioner, all which decidedly graced the sufferer with the honours of martyrdom, and accounted for the half-maddened state of mind he exhibited both in looks and words.

Aware that these representatives of persecution were among the most formidable signs of the time, Edward reined up his horse behind a group of the auditory, to take some note of what might be the subject of a discourse that commanded so much attention. His own arrival remained, for awhile, quite unmarked in the superior absorption of men's minds—and it is certain that, after listening for a few moments, he was no longer surprised at this centralisation of notice.

‘Why marvel ye at my words, gazing at me as at one who hath no warrant or authority for the terrors of God’s judgment, which I have thus declared among ye, unless ye, too, take warning in time, and “flee from the wrath to come?”’ the enthusiast was shrieking forth, at the pitch of a shrill but piercing and powerful voice. ‘Is it because that, of a truth, I have declared unto ye that of myself I am nothing—even as dust in the balance of the scales of the world? For what am I by birth? A wretched foundling, discovered wallowing in Fleet Ditch, in London city, where it had been flung by a murderous mother, as a loathsome and abhorred offscum of guilt and shame! What by trade or occupation? Even a poor tailor, who had no skill at his work, and was discharged of all bread and employment for not having wit sufficient to thread the eye of a needle or follow a chalking on cloth with the shears! But HE respecteth not persons, and out of the mouth of babes and sucklings He perfecteth praise! Worthless worm of the earth as I am, He chose me forth as one that should turn on the heel of the oppressor, and witness to His truth before the scoffer and despiser of the Word, seated in the highest place! See ye not the seal of the testimony burned into the flesh of my face, because, having heard the call of the trumpet, even in my lowliest and most dismal estate, wandering afar in the desert—yea, standing shivering, in starvation and rags, on mighty London’s bridge, and meditating whether or no to seek some way through the houses to overleap into the river, and end mine earthly miseries—I forthwith girded up my loins, and answering, “Yea, Lord, I am here!” accepted the commission wherewith I was then and there charged!—which was, to preach everywhere, throughout the

length and breadth of England, the coming of the true kingdom of Christ upon the earth, before which all other powers and dominations thereof shall pass away, even as the glory of the sun devours the blaze of torch and taper! The reign of a thousand years of the Saints around the Lamb, where sin and pain and grief and death shall be unknown, and a joy of purity, even as a river of milk, shall encompass all the land!

‘This did I, through good report and ill report; whether the people received me with bread or with stones: until such times as the fame of my testimony coming to the ears of that minor Beelzebub, of some styled Laud, Pope of London, I was had before him at Lambeth; and, persisting in the truth, was given over to the tormentors! But quailed my heart in the furnace? Melted my soul within me at the gnashing of the teeth of the lions? Of a surety, no; though for awhile I shook the dust of London city off my feet, and wandered up and down the length and breadth of the land, declaring everywhere the breaking of the dawn! How came I else in Nottingham Castle Keep, where, for contumacy, as they called it, which was in truth obedience to God, rather than to man, I have groaned in captivity for eleven endless years of days and nights? For so long a season hath the man Charles—the most hateful and accursed of all his hateful and accursed race—given his sceptre as a rod into the hands of the persecutors, and bidden them smite and spare not.

‘But what saw I there—even there—through the rusty bars of my dungeon, in the high tower of that strong-hold of mercilessness and desolation?’ the haranguer continued with yet heightened passion and vehemence. ‘Lo, now! I saw the upraising of the standard

of the tyrant on the loftiest battlemented summit above me, amidst the blare of trumpets, the thunder of cannon, and the shouts of triumph of the armed men of Satan and Belial, thronging all the heights below. But, behold! hardly was it raised, when a blast of the fierce wind of God's indignation seized and rent into rags the ensign of blood, with all its pagan decorations of butchery, horned beasts, and usurped crowns! Yea, even tore up the pole it was planted upon—tall as the foremast of a mighty ship of war—and flung it headlong over the battlements from all its shrieking gear, even as a child of ten years tears up a hazel wand and tosses it laughing to the winds, stripped of all its flutter of leaf and twig!

‘Myself, I saw it!’ the excited speaker continued. ‘With these eyes I beheld the plain manifestation of the judgment of Heaven against the tyrant, who then and there set up his standard of war and destruction against the people of England. And I saw the dismay that pierced the hearts of the malignants when they beheld what had happened; and how even the stern proud man of blood and wrath himself grew pale—paler than the whiteness of his tossing plume! I saw, and I yelled forth, Joy! joy! until the angry, clouded skies rang again with the utterance; and the tyrant himself asked what shriek that was—not human, and yet that seemed so—which ran up and down the castle steeps of Nottingham to his ears? And they were fain to tell him, to comfort him, that I was a *lunatic*; confined for the cause of lunacy, and that alone, in Nottingham Castle jail!

‘But now that I am an angel, or messenger, well approved of Him that is at hand—listen, and believe!’ The enthusiast went on to announce himself; and, in

truth, drawing up his meagre and exhausted form into an attitude almost sublime in its energy of self-assertion. 'Lo! haughty Rehoboam's heart was molten within him with terror, and his knees slackened when he heard mine eagle-yelling of exultation night and day in the keep above his castled crags; and the Lord so wielded him as an instrument to his purpose that, although many about him—and chiefly the young man of blood whom they call Prince Palatine, and who thirsts as a hungry lion for the blood of the faithful people of God—would fain have had him put me to death without further trial or demand, as one guilty, of old, of unpardonable felony and relapse, the man Charles would not have it so, but ordered simply that I should be taken from my captivity and cast forth of the town, to wend my way whither and how I might.

'And now, of a truth, I declare unto ye I was sorely minded, and pressed to take my way to London to enquire after my wife and children, whether they were dead or no: which, for eleven years, I know not, being secluded from all sight of them—of every living face of man, saving my gaolers, and almost of the glorious sun of day, which is the life of the flesh and of the world. Though why speak I of them, or that, since in recompense I was blessed with many great and beauteous visions and revelations of marvellous mercies and deliverances in store for the God-fearing people of this land, and ever-memorable age of time? But it might not be. For, moreover, a Voice spoke unto me, as I tottered forth into Nottingham woods to feed my hunger, even as the birds and wildlings of the air, on haws and berries, but knelt first for direction, saying, Go not to London, go not to London. What are thy wife and children to

thee in comparison with the work in hand? And yet, tarry no longer in this country; but hasten on to the good and godly town of Birmingham, where be the most potent workers and welders in iron and steel and brass of all the living men in the world, and bid them prepare the armour and weapons of carnal trust for the men of the sword, whom the Lord shall raise in his appointed time, to do him right on his adversaries! 'This shall you bid them do, as they would shun the wrath at hand! Not the wrath of the kings of the earth, who usurp the throne of Jesus; nor of the blood-thirsty myrmidons of kings and prelates, who are assembling round the usurper at Nottingham! FLEE FROM THE WRATH OF THE KING OF KINGS, I say unto you, whom, unless ye aid to raise up and place in the supremacy of the world, the Angel of the Seals shall break the last against you, and the vials of destruction be poured forth as a consuming torrent of liquid fire among ye! Look at your furnaces, O ye men of Birmingham, and consider what that shall be!

'As for me, I have spoken; I have delivered my soul. They who found me wallowing in Fleet Ditch mire called me, in memory of my deliverance, Flotsam. When I preached the glory of the thousand years at hand, I was everywhere called Kingdom-Come Flotsam. But when I stood in the pillory before the palace of the tyrant, and was reviled and pelted of his soldiers, I determined to call myself, in perpetual memory thereof, until the horn of deliverance should sound, *Wrath-of-God Whitehall!* So call me henceforth among ye, for I will abide here awhile unto the perfectness of the work, when I will declare truly who and what I am. For I am not what I seem; nor know I myself well yet

WHO or WHAT I am. But the beginning must be before the end, and the abomination of desolation sit first in the place. Only this I say unto ye without parable: the day and the hour are at hand, and the text must go forth as the breath of the desert consuming a path—“Without shedding of blood there is no remission.””
Heb. ix. 22.

With this strangely perverted scriptural quotation the speaker paused, but evidently in exhaustion, rather of his physical powers, than of his wish to prolong the exhortation; for he continued wildly grasping in the air with his disengaged right hand, and muttering and foaming at the lips for some time longer; while the multitude, gazing at him, evidently in astonishment and awe, broke also into a confused murmur, that sounded to Edward Holte like an accompaniment of prayer.

CHAPTER III.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM.

EDWARD was aware, in common with other royalist gentlemen, whose immediate exertions had been called upon in the Midland Counties, that it was the King's intention to raise his royal standard at Nottingham, and assemble his army around him there. But he had not yet heard of the actual completion of the design, so slowly did news travel in those days, unless when winged by the zeal of such partisanship as was exhibited by the released fanatic, who had witnessed the accident that had thereupon befallen. It grieved him much to hear tell of so disastrous an omen, as he was well aware it would be considered by even his own party; the effect on the opposite one needed no further interpretation.

The heir of Aston had also long been aware that the inhabitants of Birmingham were suspected of some strong, though secret, adherence to the new doctrines in religion and civil policy which had become prevalent. But he was not prepared for so general and vehement a tendency of opinion as now became manifest in the excited throng. The country people attending the market, still, indeed, gaped aloof, with a mixture of ridicule and stolid wonder in their ruddy looks. But

the townspeople—and especially those workers in mighty metals who were so emphatically addressed—seemed to respond with answering frenzy, ‘He is inspired of God!’ Many muttered, withdrawing their brawny arms from under their seared leather aprons, ‘Let him tell us what to do, and we will do it!’

One young lad of the throng took Edward Holte’s attention rather particularly.

Perhaps he had no fair claim to be reckoned among the craftsmen of the town; for, by his gait and general appearance, he was neither more nor less than a wandering tinker. His lithe and flowing limbs, his sparkling, audacious eyes, his dissipated and vagabond aspect, seemed, in truth, to speak of gipsy blood and habits. But even this wild youth was taken with the prevailing contagion, and Edward remarked that he shook and trembled all over, as if taken with a convulsion fit, and finally burst into a passion of tears; and, in the language of his own immortal vision at a subsequent period (for it was the young John Bunyan of the future ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’), ‘Not being able longer to contain, he broke out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do? What shall I do to save myself from this wrath that is coming upon us all?”’

‘Ay, master, tell us that! What shall we do?’ enquired another spectator of the group just before Edward Holte, in a voice so strong and deep-toned that it resembled the bass notes of a church organ. But it was now hoarse and vibrating with emotion.

Struck with the utterance, Edward glanced at the speaker. What he saw removed his surprise at such a power and volume of sound. The voice came from the broad chest of a figure which might best be described

as that of a stunted giant, it was so massive and developed in everything but stature; in consequence, it seemed likely, of too early and severe labour in a compressed posture—possibly in a coal mine—though the brawny bare arms and grimy visage now betokened one who had changed the toils of the mine for those of the forge. Nevertheless, he was still a young man, about the age of Edward Holte. In other respects, the square, strong-moulded head, clustered all over with wiry chestnut curls, the well-cut features, the firm compressed lips, the ruddy complexion, indicated great energy of will and character, and marked unusual purity of Saxon descent. On the other hand, the emotion visible in the countenance, the tears quivering in the bright blue eyes, indicated a susceptibility to impressions and tenderness of nature hardly to be looked for in so virile and powerful an outward conformation.

‘What shall we do, I say?’ this artificer repeated, with a kind of musical roar in the vehemence of his accents. ‘I, for one, am ready—for anything!’

Wrath-of-God Whitehall rolled his eyes with a still wilder glare over the excited multitude, whose excitement added fearfully to his own, for actual fire seemed to flash from them.

‘What shall ye do?’ he yelled, as if himself puzzled by the question for a moment—but only for a moment. ‘Will ye obey me? and I will speak;’ he resumed. ‘Begin by pulling down the images of Baal and Dagon throughout the land! Down with this idolatrous Pagan figure of hewn stone, which Time has not been able to destroy! But the patience of God is exhausted now at last, and He is a-weary of the slow teeth of that dog of the centuries to destroy! Down with this popish

and idolatrous Crucifixion, I say, which usurps the living presence of the Lord! Aye, and with all that defend it!’

The maddened zealot pointed, as he spoke, to the almost shapeless Market Cross, around which the Bailiff and his officers had now arisen, with evident marks of consternation.

‘By cock and pix! I should like nothing better than a tussle with the Bailiff and his men, who sit for a lord of the manor who hath stolen from me mine inheritance!’ exclaimed the dwarfed young giant, with a joyful shout and clapping of his nervy hands.

But this zeal received a sudden rebuke.

‘Peace, Tubal Bromycham! peace! Hath not my father reprovèd you a thousand times for making yourself ever thus foremost in a fray? And are you not now here solely to aid and assist me, his daughter, in my marketing?’ interposed a female voice, whose bright and vivacious accents formed a singular contrast to the solemn murmuring around. Something also of the coquettish and imperious, announcing the spoilt beauty, naturally drew male attention in the direction. Edward Holte looked, and saw what riveted his attention for awhile.

There stood a young woman almost immediately before him, probably in her eighteenth year; all the formality, and one might say quakeress-like simplicity, of whose garb could not disguise the perfect grace and swelling modulations of her youthful form. Nor did the close-drawn brown cloth hood she wore do more than cast into a pleasing shade the bright rosiness and beauty of her countenance, framed, as it were, in a glossy profusion of raven-black, flowing hair. Brilliant

hazel eyes, and a lovely dimpling of the plump peachy cheeks, further fascinated the cavalier's observation; and the degree of bravery and challenge implied in this public speaking, so unusual among women at that time, had a peculiarly piquant effect, in association with so much feminine charm and fascination of outward appearance.

The curiosity and admiration expressed in the glance Edward Holte turned upon this rare young creature, was meanwhile not lost upon her. He perceived her colour rise; but there was also a degree of startled query and recognition in the glance she flashed upon him, and then away, which awakened his own reminiscences.

But he had no time to consider much. The young fellow who had been reprov'd, exclaimed, in a vexed and discomfited tone, 'Here I am, then, Mistress Firebrace, with my panniers! But, if I mistake not, it was yourself, good mistress, stopped first to witness how this wrestler with the devil would throw and trample the old blackamoor!'

Speaking thus, Tubal Bromycham, as he seemed to be called—who, from what passed, appeared to be an artificer employed in the forge of some master smith of the town, whose housekeeping daughter he had been appointed to attend, probably in the capacity of porter, for which his evident extraordinary strength well qualified him—flourished aloft two large baskets on his arms, and moved as if to hustle his way after his young mistress through the crowd. But, of a sudden, the lean, long hand of the fanatic apostle was laid upon his shoulder; and 'Halt, I command thee!' he shouted, and indeed in an accent that might have arrested the march of an army. 'Is this a woman of Moab in the garb of

one of the pure ones of Canaan? Hast thou put thy hand to the plough, young man of sinew and brawn! and wilt thou now draw back? No, of a truth, no, thou shalt not! I mark thee forth from this hour as a Goliath in the cause of Israel! Or if thy name be Tubal—which is of a godly and scriptural sense—keep and deserve it by devoting all the skill and power wherewith God has endowed thee, to work out the great deliverance! Lo! I, speaking with authority, command thee at once to throw down the burdens with which thou art laden, even as Issachar, an ass between two masterful oppressions, and fall to the work for which thy might was given thee. Rend down, root up, cast away, I say—and let all who hear, hear!—this pagan, popish image, set up for idolatry of old times among ye!’

Apparently enthralled by the power and solemnity of this address, the young blacksmith, as he seemed to be, tossed his baskets frantically up in the air, like hoops from a girl's wands, though they were partly filled with market goods; and, heedless where they fell, drew his leather girdle tight around his waist, and shouted to the people: ‘Lend hands, then, men of Birmingham; for, surely, it would shame ye to see one at the work alone; though, on such encouragement, meseems I could lift St. Martin's Church!’

An uproarious shout responded, and Tubal Bromycham, bursting his way with the strength and violence of an ox rushing from the goad, swept upwards towards the Market Cross, with a goodly retinue of the shouters in his train.

‘They are bent on mischief; but be not alarmed, Mistress Firebrace—as I learn is your name. I have business, precisely at this time, in the town with your

respected father, the armourer, Zachariah Firebrace, and I shall feel proud and most happy to be permitted to be your escort in safety home,' said Edward Holte, alighting from his horse to be of more efficient countenance and protection to the fair Puritan, who now looked evidently distressed, if not alarmed.

'I thank you, sir; even a thousand times I thank you. But that poor foolish youth, whom my father looks upon as his right hand at the forge, what is he about?' replied the maiden, gazing after her deserting attendant. 'Ah me! he will get himself and the whole town into trouble and outlawry with the Crown, whose officers the Bailiff and his men are! And all the world knows what evil comes of that mostly, unless the world is turned upside down shortly! And no one should understand that better than poor Tubal himself, who, but for the strong hand of unjust authority, instead of a working man for wage as he is in Birmingham, should be its lord paramount and chief!'

Edward Holte rapidly recalled to mind, as he listened to these words, a too well-known story of an act of perfidious tyranny which had disgraced the reign of Edward VI., with regard to a family of the name of Birmingham, belonging to that place, or rather to whom the place belonged; for it was doubtful whether they had given a name, or derived one, from *Bromycham*, as the town's was mostly pronounced at that time by the inhabitants. So ancient was the dominion, as lords of the manor, of the family of Birmingham, but who had been deprived of all their extensive estates and rights in it, by an act of mingled treachery and violence almost incredible, even in the most barbarous ages; by a

feigned process of law and justice certainly, but which only added the baseness of hypocrisy and betrayal to the most cruel tyranny and spoliation. Unhappily, Edward Holte also called to mind at the instant, that one of his own ancestors—found a fitting instrument of unjust power—had figured with no light share in the perfidy and wickedness of the transaction.

But it was not a time for much reflection on the subject.

‘There is no means of hindrance for their madness, that I can espy at hand, Mistress Firebrace,’ he observed, after following, with a brief gaze, the tumultuous onset of the crowd: ‘though, if you think it can be of any use for myself and servants to interfere in aid of the Bailiff and his officers, whose duty it is to preserve the peace of the town—’

‘No, good troth, no! I would not have you, of all madneses, step between these wild people and their will!’ the fair Puritan interrupted him to observe, her anxiety appearing suddenly to shift its object. ‘The Bailiff himself is not the man, believe me, to run needless risk. See, he makes no resistance—nor even show of it—but turns his face and flees, with his officers at his back. They will make, no doubt, for the moated manor-house of the lordship, where, if they have but courage left to raise the drawbridge, none can follow them. But yonder is Tubal, tearing and rending at the old statue with a mad giant’s strength and recklessness, as if he could tear up an oak by the roots. But ’tis too well fixed in its base. Hark! one calls for crowbars; the tinker supplies his poker. And now, do but listen to the strokes of Tubal at the base of the statue! Do

but look and see how the fire flashes from every blow he gives the solid stone, as if it were from the strokes of the anvil! Let us hence—let us hence, fair sir,' the young girl concluded, turning to the cavalier with an expression in which it was impossible to avoid discerning a lively interest, 'for if I am right in believing you are one of the honourable Holtes of Aston Hall, there is no knowing whither their frenzy may proceed under such guidance! Perchance you know it not, but your house is little loved or cherished in our town!'

'I am not afraid, gentle mistress, of a rascally mob like this, who are only valiant where they are not resisted. I and my servants are well armed; but I do not desire to enter rashly into collision with your angry townspeople at this time; I have quite another object in Birmingham. In good time these people will be punished, I nothing doubt, to the top of their deserts; but, meanwhile,' Edward Holte concluded, with a smile, 'I should be tempted rather to scramble a few coins among this rabble, as a reward for removing so unsightly an eyesore from the only goodly open space in the town.'

'But you do not know—no one of your faction—no one at Aston, I would say—Master Holte, knows what manner of humour the townspeople of Birmingham are now possessed of; and they are not a people to be made a jest of in their wrath. Let us hence, if your kindness really would protect me safely to my home!' the lovely Puritan replied, with increasing anxiety, amidst the groaning uproar of blows and shouts. But it was pleasingly evident to Edward himself that her solicitude was chiefly on his account.

It could scarcely be otherwise. Mistress Firebrace had little reason for apprehension on her own account, from a mob led on by one of her father's principal artisans, and who was besides more than suspected of a devoted personal attachment to herself; not to mention that her father was one of the most wealthy and respectable inhabitants of Birmingham, and of great influence in the place, on account of his known attachment to the popular and puritan opinions which had of latter times gained the complete ascendancy in it.

'Let us leave them to their work, then: they will find it as tough a job as Birmingham has often mastered, for this statue seems fixed by the men who set up the Red Horse in the Vale of Edgehill,' observed Edward, affecting a gaiety which perhaps he did not altogether feel. Then, turning from the noisy and uproarious scene around the mutilated image, which, in spite of all the efforts directed at it, now under the yelling exhortations of Wrath-of-God Whitehall himself, showed no signs of yielding, the cavalier offered his hand with graceful courtesy to Mistress Firebrace's acceptance.

'We shall run the less risk of separation,' he said, with a smile that grew in warmth of admiration the nearer he surveyed the fair Puritan's charming countenance. 'One of my knaves can lead my horse, and the other gather up your merchandise, and follow with the baskets. Ho! Joscelin and Humphrey, do you hear my words?'

The two mounted serving men emulously responded. Rapid and implicit obedience to orders was certainly among the virtues very practically inculcated in the household of Sir Thomas Holte. And Mistress Firebrace, colouring violently, but with a sun-burst of

pleasure in her bright eyes, accepted the offered conduct.

This suddenly-assorted company proceeded then to take their departure from the scene of uproar; and, exclusive attention being now devoted, as usual, by the people to the most violent and exciting portion of the spectacle, no kind of obstruction was offered to their retreat from the market-place.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIREBRACE SMITHS.

THOUGH not a frequent visitor in the town, Edward Holte knew very well in what direction to proceed to the abode of a man who was held, at the time, the best maker of weapons and defensive armour in Birmingham; a man, indeed, who was much more generally known as *The Smith of Deritend* than by his christian and proper name of Zachariah Firebrace. Our ancestors had a tendency to give a man his trade as a distinguishing appellation, so that it would have been no great wonder if, like so many others which we may suppose to have been lost in that all but universal patronymic, the Firebraces had merged into simple Smiths. But they were peculiarly proud of their name, and insisted on keeping it in all formal documents and signatures.

Firebrace itself might seem, however, not remotely to refer to the occupation of the race, which had now been hereditary in it for three centuries; and on the same spot. Such is the tenacity of family life and residence in Birmingham, where there are numerous cases still to be found of a like lengthened association between a race and its dwelling-place. But a constant and religiously-preserved tradition assured the Firebraces of Birmingham that their name had been origin-

ally Ferre-à-bras, or Iron Arm, and was of French and chivalric origin—a fact they were believed to cherish with great pride, in spite of their devotion for so long a period to a mechanical trade. In reality, there was a singular story connected with the origin of the Firebraces in Birmingham, not without support in visible actualities.

It was said that the founder of the family was one of those Knight Templars who, in the fourteenth century, fled from France and the persecution set on foot against the order by Philip the Fair. The enormous riches and power of this body of religious warriors, exciting the greed and dread of kings themselves, were probably the true causes of the severities of expulsion and punishment to which they were subjected in almost all the countries of Europe, where they had establishments. But they were accused of divers enormous crimes, including blasphemy, sorcery, and *freemasonry*; this last being represented by their enemies as a secret conspiracy for the spreading of the most horrible heretical, irreligious, and subversive doctrines in religion and the state.

Andomar Ferre-à-bras was, accordingly, among the fugitives from the tortures and stakes so liberally provided in his native country for the members of his order. But a similar persecution breaking out in England shortly after his arrival, he had found it necessary to hide his real quality and position in obscurity.

Birmingham, in all times well-renowned for kindness and hospitality to strangers, seemed to have offered this wanderer some peculiar attraction; possibly a similar love for, and skill in, the mechanical arts: for the knightly fugitive was said to have betaken himself to

the exercise of the craft of a smith very shortly after his settlement in Birmingham, and to have raised himself and his family to wealth and consequence in the town, by the application of his ingenuity to various arts, the deeper secrets of which were supposed to be possessed by adepts in freemasonry. But, as might be expected, the Templar was particularly skilful in the manufacture of warlike implements. Hence, the first renown of the Old Crown House Forge. So it was styled, even in the seventeenth century, from the sign of the house, and to distinguish it from a number of more modern 'Crowns,' stirred up by the success in business of the original starters of the designation, as applied to a manufacture of the kind.

The *Old Crown House* is, in fact, the most ancient dwelling-house now remaining in Birmingham, dating probably from about the middle of the fourteenth century. Its size and solidity are still in themselves worthy of wonder and admiration, considered in relation to the resources and general style of domestic architecture in the age that raised it; even by ours, which has built the leviathan of the deep, and carried a railway over an arm of the sea in an iron tube; marvels, no doubt, of mechanical contrivance, daring, and ingenuity, but which will not last five centuries so little impaired!

Unshaken in all its massive main timbers, chambers, and roofs, to this advanced period of the nineteenth century, the Old Crown House still testifies to the science and opulence of its original architect and proprietor, the alleged Templar fugitive. But, even in the seventeenth century, it was the case that the Firebrace family was to be considered as having greatly shrunk from its original high estate, not in the fact that

a portion of the extensive premises belonging to them in Deritend was devoted, as a smithery, to carry on the labours of vulcanic art—according to the family traditions alluded to, Ferre-à-bras had devoted his talents with great success in the department of mechanical art still pursued by his descendants—but a long course of intermarriage with the townfolk must strongly have anglicised, and, truth to say, *plebeianised*, the blood of the illustrious and high-born Templar, when, in the seventeenth century, his representative was found to be, both as a religionist and politician, all that was most opposed to orthodoxy and privilege in either.

To be sure, the traditions of the race pointed this way, from the ashes of the piles where the brethren of their ancestor had fallen victims to the cruelty and spoliation of kings and their abettors: but how completely Zachariah Firebrace had yielded to the republican and fanatic influences of the age, he himself, it is very possible, was scarcely aware as yet. Only he had long been known in Birmingham for a man of the sternest puritan principles and manners, embittered, as it was believed, by certain family misfortunes and disappointments; among these being especially the early death of his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached; and the circumstance that, after an uninterrupted descent from father to son of three centuries, the race of the famous Firebrace Smiths threatened to become extinct in the person of Zachariah's only child and heiress, Dorothy Firebrace.

Meanwhile, these singular family legends were believed to be supported by certain remarkable circumstances, unless they were in reality the foundation for an imaginative version of the whole.

Hung up in the Church of St. Martin, over the family tomb of the Firebraces, was a full and very beautiful suit of armour, appropriate to a Knight of the Temple in the fourteenth century, and which had certainly remained there ever since a certain Andomar Ferre-à-bras, armour-smith of the town of Birmingham, flourished, died, and was buried in the town thereof. The house this skilful fugitive had built, saluted every eye that entered from the south, and attested to posterity his knowledge in the great art whose apron Solomon himself was said to have received at the hands of Adoniram, the master-builder of the temple of Jerusalem. The sign by which the building was distinguished, according to a custom not yet confined to houses of public entertainment, was reported to be a masonic emblem, of unknown, mysterious, and very formidable import; to that degree, indeed, that it was confidently reported a carving of the same, on a great internal cross-beam of the house, was a kind of magic key-stone to support the structure, which had been raised by compact with the foul fiend, and would fall to pieces the moment the meaning was discovered!

In truth, the device in question was rather singular and suspicious; being the likeness of a crown, formed of two *fleur-de-lis* or *flower-de-luces*, turned back to back, on either side of a central club or mace. On the right of this emblem was a six-sided star, pierced with a small circular hole in the middle. On the left, a figure resembling a double triangle, or mason's levelling plane; no unlikely symbol of some republican hope and purpose of the Firebrace race!

Be the rest as it may, this device was the trade-mark of the productions of the 'Smiths of Deritend,' and was

stamped on their weapons and flagedreed into the breast-plates of their suits of armour, and was accepted generally as a sure stamp of excellence; though, again, it may only have been the fanciful emblem adopted by a Frenchman, from the usual ornaments of a royal crown in his country, to denote the superiority of his manufacture.

CHAPTER V.

THE ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER.

To reach this famous armourer's, in Deritend, Edward Holte's direct way would have been to guide his fair companion from the tumult of the market-place along the comparatively quiet Corn Cheaping; the agriculturists who frequented this continuing to take little other part in the disturbance than to stare at it in the distance, and exchange expressions of wonder and consternation. But he considered it better to avoid these crowded and gaping lines of rustic frequenters of the market-place; and, proceeding along a row of houses behind the churchyard, then called Mercers' Row, now Edgbaston Street, the retiring pair speedily passed along an unenclosed space around the ancient castellated mansion of the Lords of Birmingham. This residence was, at that time, and, indeed, until very late years, surrounded by a moat; and thither the affrighted Bailiff and his officials could be observed flying for shelter. Thence a narrow lane, by a windmill, led into the spacious street called Digbeth, and they had nothing to do but to wend their way peaceably down it to the quarter of the smiths, chiefly at that time in Deritend.

And now, if the age had been much given to such studies, young Edward Holte would not have failed to

remark the influence of race in Mistress Dorothy Firebrace's character and demeanour. In spite of her puritan antecedents and surroundings, and her demure name, the gaiety and coquetry of her French blood appeared in her expressions and manners, much more than in the pretty-well certified account of her descent, or even in the sparkling of her vivacious eyes, and the changeful richness of the hues of her complexion.

It was speedily plain that she was not ill-pleased to find herself under the escort of so handsome and courteous a gallant as the heir of Aston was in person, and knew well how to exhibit himself in act and word; and whose appearance and demeanour probably contrasted advantageously in the imagination of a young woman so placed, and endowed with the kind of wit that is most sensible of the ridiculous and incongruous in the outward aspect of things.

‘My faith! do but look how the worthy High Bailiff half waddles and half flies over hedge and ditch, like an affrighted gander back to the flock,’ she exclaimed; laughing heartily at what was, in fact, rather a ludicrous spectacle, considering that the Bailiff was a very fat and pursy man, who would have made no bad representative of Sir John Falstaff, and was evidently running for sweet life. ‘And this is he who swore so hugely the other day he would put in force the King’s proclamation in our town, and compellate every man who holds suit and service of the manor to stand forth in the commission of array on his Majesty’s behalf! Yet I am sorry for poor Johnny Cooper, too; ’tis a merry old lad, who laughs and grows fat, and means no harm to any one, if his wife—who is more royalist than the King himself—did not set him on all manner of rancorous dealings, on

that behalf, with the townspeople. And when one thinks how unfairly his own masters and setters on, or rather, Dame Cooper's, came by their authority, it makes the high-handed exercise of it harder to bear withal, you know, Master Holte.'

'It is very like, fair Mistress Firebrace,' replied the young cavalier; 'but, trust me, I am as much surprised as any one to find what a progress the new opinions have made in your town. It is true, I have not long been at home from my university, to make much stay, for information; yet it seems to me a most wonderful change to have come over the entire face of things so suddenly. It is surely undreamed of at Aston. My father must be quite unaware of what men are thinking and feeling in Birmingham, to send me here on mine errand. There is only one change, Mistress Firebrace,' the young cavalier continued, fixing his eyes, which kindled lustroously with admiration as he spoke, on the beautiful creature beside him, 'that seems to me to be for the better, and that is all in your fairself! I remember you a bloomy, rosy girl, of twelve or fourteen springs merely, whose blossoming promised a lovely flower; but, by my faith, the promise is a thousand times more than fulfilled in the expanded beauty of the bud.'

Dorothy coloured, but evidently with no unpleasant excitement in the flush that visited her complexion.

'Ah, that is what my father and our preachers are always saying, and warning us against the sweet blandishments of speech you courtiers and King's men ever have at your command,' she said, laughingly averting her glance from Master Holte's warm and eager gaze. 'But,' she added, in a more serious, almost a sad, tone; 'but you are right to consider that your father, and

those of his belief and consorting, are entirely ignorant—nigh neighbours as we are—of what is coming to pass among us. My father, I may say, has gone on in strides in his opinions of late, ever since a certain agent of the Parliament came to reside among us for a season, who is a man that speaks not well, or much to the purpose, one would say, yet hath a way of mastering and directing men's wills, in a rough, blunt fashion of his own, that is a marvel to me and all who witness his effects.'

'An agent of the Parliament in Birmingham? Who is he? For what purpose here?' said Edward; a good deal surprised and interested by what he heard.

'Nay, it is not for me to divulge what, perhaps, my father chooses rather to remain a secret—at all events, at Aston Hall; though the man himself makes no great concealment of his business and purposes in the town. But here, as I have given you to understand, honourable sir, we of the HONEST and WELL-AFFECTED party have it chiefly our own way, and are not afraid one another should know in which quarter the wind puffs our chimney smoke!' Mistress Firebrace replied, with a somewhat satirical smile and emphasis on these words, which had become a party shibboleth in the application. But she went on to say, finding that Edward Holte looked annoyed at her so using them, 'Though I know not that there is any need to deny you the good man's name who is so busy amongst us; and the less that he is a member of Parliament, who has taken up open and resolute testimony against the King's manner of rule so far, hitherto. And would to Heaven he had thought fitting to change it before matters came to the extremity they are driving at, and while it yet seemed

possible among us of the people to put faith in his royal grants and protestations towards the people's liberty !'

'I would say Amen to that prayer, Mistress Firebrace ; only the word, I presume, is held for popish and obsolete among the new audacious sectaries of the age !' said Edward. 'But if this agent's name be no great secret in Birmingham, and so well known in the world elsewhere, as are mostly those that figure the most ungraciously against the ancient laws and government of this realm—what is it ?'

'The person is called one Master Oliver Cromwell, a brewer of Huntingdon, and, I think I have heard say, of some considerable interest among the people thereabouts,' replied Mistress Firebrace, in an indifferent tone ; unconscious that in that name she had uttered the keystone of the immense revolution at hand for England ; and, through England, for the world.

'Ay, truly ; one Master Oliver Cromwell ?' replied Edward Holte, without appearing to attach much more importance to the name than the armourer's fair daughter herself. 'I have heard my Lord Falkland speak of him as of a harsh, confused, scatter-brained speaker in the House. Yet, as you say, Mistress Firebrace, of singular ability and power to persuade men to follow him in action. A man of action, I take it, therefore, rather than of words ; which the times certainly require the most. What can Master Oliver Cromwell, then, be a-wanting in Birmingham ? Oh, I have it now ! I have heard that several of the Parliament men are busying themselves in these neighbouring counties to execute the ordinance to raise the militia, on the behalf of that usurping assembly. This will be his business in the town.

Mistress Firebrace merely replied, 'Tis like enough,' and was silent, as if fearing to betray some degree of implied confidence in her discretion.

'Well; but at least I may hope, I trust, there are exceptions, even in Birmingham town, to the general lack of loyalty and true allegiance that is to be feared, Mistress Firebrace,' said the cavalier, speaking with peculiar earnestness, as if he attached some great importance to the wish he expressed; and at the same time he looked downward at his lovely companion with something almost of entreaty and prayer in his looks that perhaps surprised; certainly, a little fluttered her.

'It were hard else, honoured Master Holte,' she replied, with manifest confusion; 'very hard else, that the townspeople of Birmingham should all stand together—so closely knit together—against their King! So royal a king, too, as he is in most of his seemings! Not like his father, who was fitter, they say, for some poor Latin-accidenced schoolmaster, or a greedy vagabond pedlar, in his dealings. Why, if there be no man else loyal in the town, there is excellent Johnny Cooper, who is a ton of man in his flesh and merriment!' she concluded, with a light, showery laugh, that very possibly concealed a feeling by no means so mirthful.

'But hath the King's Majesty no faithful subject among so many fair ones that he hath in Birmingham?' pursued Master Holte, with increased earnestness of query.

Mistress Firebrace made an evident pause. Then, looking at the cavalier with a mixture of roguish gaiety and embarrassment, she answered, 'Truly, yes; the King has no more zealous and tinkle-tongued loyalist, in all the length and breadth of the land, than Mistress

Cooper, the High Bailiff's wife, who is also the greatest termagant and man-masterer among us. But she, and, perchance, one or two others that eat and drink daily at the Crown's expense, make about the sum total of the King's faction in Birmingham.'

Edward Holte looked very grave, in spite of the lively tone assumed in this reply. He seemed determined to ascertain clearly the point he was driving at.

'I concern myself little about such official and officious persons, Mistress Firebrace,' he remarked, 'but I should be very content to know whether the King's *fairest subject* in Birmingham cherishes not also some loyal feeling towards his sacred person and cause? There is no need to add, I ask you of yourself!'

'Great need, I do assure you, Master Holte; for I never should have known the bird by the description of the feathers,' the fair Puritan answered, with, however, something of the flash and pride of conscious beauty in her looks, as she disclaimed the compliment. 'But since I gather you speak of Dorothy Firebrace, though jestingly, I will answer you the very truth. I have not given my mind—which runs too much on idle thoughts and vanities—to great reflection in the matter. But, as is a child's and good townswoman's duty, I follow much as a gosling follows in the water-rings of the main flock. Only, if it be any satisfaction for you to know it, I do not of my own heart and impulse wish much success and exaltation to such sour and implacable minds as I have seen abounding among us of late, and trust my father will not be cajoled by them into taking some dangerous pre-eminence in the part adopted by the town, which I know hath been urged upon him of late. For he is a man of infinite resolve and stubborn-

ness when the mood takes him ; and, should the King's faction prove the stronger in the struggle, we have a good deal to lose besides our will and way in state and religious affairs.'

'Doubtless, Mistress Firebrace. Your father is the great armourer of Birmingham ; and, as such, it is to him my father, Sir Thomas Holte, has sent me on an errand that I trust may prove profitable to him, and of service to us of Aston. For I should say our money will be considered as good as any other bidder's, in an article of merchandise,' said Edward Holte.

'I cannot say, fair Master Holte,' replied the armourer's daughter, casting down her eyes with evident embarrassment. 'My father will answer you best for himself, no doubt ; and here we are on the threshold of his house and smithery.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE OLD CROWN HOUSE.

THE armourer's daughter and her cavalier protector had now, for some time, been wending their way through Digbeth—which abounded in tanners and dyers—into the quarter of the smiths, as Deritend might very properly have been styled, since nearly all those of Birmingham at this epoch resided in it; a quarter by no means then meriting its unhandsome modern nickname of Dirty End, the true etymology of the term being probably The-Rea-Gate-End, from a toll-gate established at the bridge over the river Rea, where certain entry-dues of the Lords of Birmingham were levied.

It was, in fact, one of the most substantial and wealthy districts of Birmingham at that time, the principal trade of the town being thus chiefly exercised in it—the Edgbaston of its day, in some respects, though not in the articles of external beauty and embellishment, in consequence of the nature of the business carried on in it. But here the masters of the Birmingham manufactures and principal men of the town resided, in the midst of their work and work-people. Our simple-mannered and congenial ancestors had not yet dreamed of the habits of seclusion and separation between the classes of society which modern luxury and super-refinement have intro-

duced. On all sides Deretend accordingly resounded with the music of hammer and anvil, although the general style of the buildings was that of the most substantial resident citizenship. On all sides—from deep caverns of soot-hung timber-work—blazed the fires of unnumbered forges; on all sides could be heard the laborious pantings of hundreds of pairs of bellows, like that of the lungs of giants engaged in some mountain-heaving taskwork.

And so the young pair, whom chance had thus mated, paused two hundred years ago—as any of the myriad toilers of Birmingham may at this day—under the eaves and before the wide porch of the mansion and workshop of the Firebrace Smiths, known as the Old Crown House. And the careful restorations recently effected as a labour of love by the judicious antiquarian proprietor, probably leave the structure much as it appeared to Edward Holte when he raised his eyes upon the announcement with which Dorothy Firebrace broke what was becoming an embarrassing and entangling conversation, in spite of the secret feeling of satisfaction and pleasure in each other's good looks and congenial society that certainly ran through their whole brief association hitherto.

The extensive ground floor, front and side, presented by the corner position of the Old Crown House to the street, pierced with handsome lattice windows; the broad projecting cornice of the upper story; the lofts above this, with their triangular gables; the tiled roof and high twisted chimneys; the ornamental striping in brown and white of the plastered walls that filled up the spaces of the massive timber-work—nothing is changed. To be sure, the showy gas lamp hung at the corner was then supplied by a dull-burning oil lantern;

and the most esteemed prophet of that age of enthusiasm and of interpreters of futurity, dreamed not of that arch of a railway viaduct where the locomotive, 'winged with red lightning and impetuous heat,' crosses the line of vision, high in mid air, in the gaze of living men, at the present background of the building.

Nothing, indeed, was to be seen behind the mansion but the outbuildings appropriated to the labours of the forge. After which a succession of gardens, orchard-ground, and fields extended to the banks of the river Rea on one hand, and on the other an open, heathy common led to the *village* of Bordesley.

A very different stream was the Rea of those days to the one now offered to the saddened eye of the spectator—dark with the pollutions of a great city; flowing sluggishly between haggard and half-tumbling piles of crowded tenements—answering perchance in yet gloomier respects to the poetical descriptions of 'Acheron and Styx—rivers of death and hell!' It was a clear, broad, shining stream in which trout and salmon sparkled and leaped; wandering through deep flowery banks and pastures and woodland into a far reach of fair and fruitful country.

Then, as now, the principal sitting-chamber of this extensive old house projected very considerably over the porch into the street. But it had a latticed window in front as well as over the two sides of the projection, whence only light is admitted now-a-days to a chamber narrowed in other respects the greater part of its original size, and thus consigned to gloom and twilight, instead of being, as of old, the most cheerful and illuminated apartment of the dwelling.

The entrance-passage of the building was also more

than twice as broad as it now remains, in consequence of two small chambers being parcelled off on each side. Wide enough, in fact, it was to admit carts laden with heavy materials into an extensive courtyard at the back of the house. This enclosure was formed on one side by the elevation of the dwelling-house; on the three remaining sides of a very irregular square by the covered forges and other necessary outbuildings attached to an extensive smithery.

Edward Holte, complying with his fair companion's evident wish, halted with her at the porch, and for the first time looked round for his attendants. 'They have walked the horses very leisurely,' he remarked with a smile, 'or else thought we did not desire to be too soon overtaken; and, in sooth, for my part I wish the way had been twice or thrice as long.'

'It could not have been the weight of the basket,' replied Mistress Firebrace, blushing under the ardent gaze she felt fixed upon her; 'for I had but half concluded my marketing.'

In reality the young cavalier was greatly taken with his unexpected fair acquaintance, and felt unwilling to part. There was something that singularly interested him, in the contrast between the gay and vivacious beauty and lively discourse, and the puritan plainness of garb and demure position of Mistress Dorothy Firebrace, as the daughter of one of the most noted and severe sectaries of the town. The lovely colour that now suffused her complexion, the golden glow and consciousness of the fine eyes she now raised, full of archness and expression, to meet his, though but for a moment, completed his fascination. The questioning meaning and bright doubt implied in the glance shot into the young

man's very heart, and he was about to make some incoherent reply to the mute language of that look, when, luckily for the heir of Aston, the two grooms rode their horses up to the door; one carrying Mistress Firebrace's market baskets, pannier-wise, across his steed's neck, the other leading his master's vacated mount.

'I must wish you a fair good morning here, kind Master Holte,' said Dorothy Firebrace, also assuming an air of distance and maidenly gravity on this approach. 'Your way lies across the court-yard, to my father's smithy—mine up the gallery stairs into the house.'

'Truly, gentle mistress; but I can carry your marketing to the stairs within—my servants can remain here,' replied Edward, anxious to prolong the satisfaction he enjoyed, even by a few moments. And as the armourer's daughter made no objection, he took the baskets from his surprised serving man, and again the pair wended their way through the open passage to the interior circuit of the enclosure beyond.

All of a sudden Edward heard his fair companion break into a light, silvery laugh, like the fall of the spray of a summer fountain in a bright sunshine. 'Forgive me, sir,' she said; 'but I was thinking what your proud father would say, if he saw you thus helpful to a Birmingham artificer's marketing daughter! Pray you have a care, as you set the baskets down—they are full of eggs.'

'All I regret is, not to be allowed to carry them further for you, sweet Mistress Firebrace!' said Edward, putting down his burdens, with a sigh that certainly seemed to regret something, at a place indicated by a

gesture of the fair Dorothy. It was the foot of a flight of steep steps, which ascended to a gallery that ran all round the upper story of the house, with several similar descents, at intervals, and formed the only means of entering the chambers on the second story of the dwelling.

‘No, no further,’ replied ‘sweet Mistress Firebrace,’ also with a sigh that seemed like a softer and fainter echo of the one that had heaved the breast of Edward Holte. ‘My father has the strictest notions on these points, and for a strange man—and tenfold more, a strange *gentleman*—of your name, to be seen in our house—would amaze him utterly! I must bid you farewell now, Master Holte; which, believe me, very truly and heartily I do.’

It was evident her mind dwelt on the literal meaning of the word—Farewell. And she uttered it with so musical and sweet lingering on the accent, that Edward Holte felt as if his heart melted away within him to some exquisite glow of feeling that sped like a warmer blood through all his veins. Yielding to the vivid impulse of the moment, though scarcely aware of what he did, he snatched the young beauty’s hand, and pressed it with strange fervour to his lips that evidently excited even her alarm.

‘For shame, Master Holte!’ she exclaimed, hastily withdrawing it. ‘What would my father say if he saw this? What would the neighbours say, who all know that I am a betrothed maiden to one—of my own condition and degree?’

‘Betrothed! said you *betrothed*, Mistress Firebrace?’ exclaimed Edward, and in a tone of surprise and dismay truly singular, considering the shortness of the

acquaintance, and the little reason he apparently had to interest himself in the announcement.

‘Betrothed, sir: I said *betrothed!*’ replied the armourer’s daughter, but, it must be allowed, with a very similar accent of sadness and discomfiture.

‘To whom, then? Who, in all this unbred, mechanic town, can have been deemed worthy of charms which would grace and add lustre to a royal court?’ Edward ejaculated.

‘Oh, sir, you do far overstate the matter; but ’tis the courtier style,’ replied Dorothy Firebrace, looking sufficiently pleased and proud at the eulogium, nevertheless. ‘I am but betrothed to my father’s foreman—the armourer you saw with me in the market-place—Tubal Bromycham by name. No such high and stately personage as you assert should pretend to me; but though now of poor estate, born of a most ancient and honoured lineage in this town: brave and good, and marvellously strong and skilful at his work, so that the proudest and wealthiest of the smiths’ daughters in Deritend all envy me my good hap, and wish it was their own!’

‘A coarse, horn-handed artisan to become the possessor of beauty like this!’ exclaimed Edward Holte, in a very spiteful and angry accent.

‘Not so. Tubal has a heart as gentle as the gentlest woman’s, and open as day to all manner of kindness and generosity—where he is fairly treated in return,’ replied Dorothy Firebrace, with a warmth that still further annoyed and disturbed her listener. ‘I say not that he has the silken insinuation and winning graces of you high-bred courtiers, sir. But in his trade he is without a match for skill and power. And therefore

do all men in Birmingham honour and esteem him to the full, and my father chiefest of all. Not to forget that he saved my father's life once, almost at the losing of his own—an act of bravery and nobleness never to be forgotten by any that hold that father dear !'

'I say not to the contrary, Mistress Firebrace,' Edward Holte now remarked, drawing himself up in an offended and pettish attitude, which there seemed no call for in what he heard. 'I say only that beauty like yours was never, to my thought, fashioned for the rude embraces of a mechanic artisan. But if you deem otherwise, 'tis not for me to cavil at your choice.'

'My choice ! my choice, Master Holte ! I said not it was my *choice*,' replied Mistress Firebrace, with evident hesitation, and yet with a strong touch of dissent and repugnance in her accent. 'But it is my father's will, as I have said, which it is not allowed to a dutiful child to dispute. It may be I have as good a relish as another for a prouder fortune and a brighter and gayer estate of life than is to be led in this dull and hard-working town. But what avails that ? My fate is set before me like a ploughman's supper, which he must eat or none. And it should be remembered, also, Master Holte,' she continued, in a haughtier and petted tone, 'that although unjustly deprived of his ancestral rights and honours, this poor Birmingham mechanic of yours is by fair claim and descent of an antiquity of greatness to which the Holtes of Aston Hall are but as the morning mushroom to the oak of a thousand years ! No record even professes to tell of the origin of the Birminghams, Lords of Birmingham ; no man knows whether they are named after the town, or the town after them ! Whereas, who knows not at

what time and by what means your family became so glorious hereabouts ?'

'You say truly, Mistress Firebrace!' replied Edward, now visibly displeased. 'The Birmingham anvil is tied round the neck of the Holtes, and will sink us through all time in the estimation of the smiths of Birmingham! But it is an old saying: Birmingham makes gentlemen for every county but Warwickshire. And besides,' he added, with an extremely scornful and bitter expression, 'it is very plain you love this stumpy young giant, your betrothed; and your happiness is therefore well assured in his society, whatever the rest of the world may think of a match as ill-assorted as ever was that of Venus and Vulcan, though your blacksmith be not lame!'

'Love him! You say I *love* him, Master Holte! Alack, the question was never asked me! My father ordained that I should marry him, when I reached fully my eighteenth year, which lacks but a three-month yet. And I think *he* loves me. That is all,' was Mistress Dorothy Firebrace's somewhat broken and confused response to the cavalier's indignant comments on her confessed matrimonial arrangements; ending, we are a little ashamed to declare, in a sudden and most uncalled-for gush of tears.

'I thought it could not be, beautiful Mistress Dorothy, that such a mis-match was to your own taste and contentment!' Edward Holte now rejoined, evidently softened and yet distressed by this display of emotion. 'Fathers are surely madmen, to undertake thus to govern and dispose of their children's chances of happiness and contented bearing of so heavy a yoke, if born unevenly? But 'tis the same with mine; who

without so much as once consulting me, or leaving anything to my option in so nice a disposal, has engaged me almost from my cradle to the daughter of his neighbour at Hagley, the Lord Keeper Lyttelton.'

It was now Dorothy Firebrace's turn to flash up with a singularly annoyed and passionate movement of the blood in all her youthful but electrically-charged veins. 'But you!—you are a *man*!' she exclaimed with vehemence. 'And do you mean to say that you suffer yourself to be marketed in this way, like a sheep or a sack of corn by their owner? But you are *like me*, perhaps,' she continued, with satirical vivacity. 'Your heart goes where a parent's command directs it; and possibly with so much the better reason that my Lord Keeper's daughter being, as one may say, born to good fortune in every respect, clears her suitors of any mercenary suspicion, by her exceeding charms of person and mind!'

This was most maliciously spoken, of a truth; for the Lord Keeper Lyttelton's daughter, alluded to by Edward Holte, though likely to derive a large endowment of fortune's goods, was notoriously deficient in the species of attraction which might have rendered them the less necessary in a woman of birth and high position. On the contrary, a rumour was general in the county that she was of a masculine and somewhat deformed figure, and of an irascible and sullen temper; while it was quite certain that she was considerably older than her intended bridegroom. But the fathers of that age were like the fathers of most other ages of the world—with a good deal more power to enforce their wise opinions and behests than modern notions encourage them to exert.

Edward Holte's face visibly clouded over. 'But well,' he resumed, with a brightening expression, after a slight pause, 'perhaps I resemble you in another respect, Mistress Firebrace. I may not see so clearly the wisdom of my parents' choice as to make it, altogether and without reservation, mine own. Nay, I think I could convince you of that if we had a little more time, and were not in a place so liable to observation.'

'Truly I had forgott'n,' replied the armourer's daughter with a start, and glancing anxiously at the resounding sheds on the other side of the yard; 'and you remind me well, Master Holte—but for this time I have indeed no further leisure to waste. Our old house-keeper will be asleep over her wheel, expecting me home with my marketings, and our housemaidens ready to gnaw their finger-ends for dinner. Let me go now, therefore, I pray you. Your way is straight on; mine is up these steps.'

'And am I never to see you again, fairest Mistress Firebrace?' exclaimed Edward, in a most lackadaisical and lovelorn voice, and far from budging out of the way, placing himself more in it.

'That depends on your eyes, whether their sight be good or not—though by no means required to follow the whole flight of an arrow, shot upwards. It is my custom almost always at morningtide, Master Holte, to sit at the gallery chamber window above the porch we lately passed under, at work with my needle at the household stuff and such like; for my father suffers no such vanities as embroideries or lacemaking in his sober sight,' Dorothy Firebrace replied, resuming now all her former coquetry and liveliness of manner.

'Ay, indeed; a thousand thanks, sweet Mistress Fire-

brace! One of my stature might almost kiss a fair hand at the lattice,' the cavalier remarked joyously, and blushing with pleasure at the warm colouring that sprung also in the lovely Puritan's complexion. 'But I must give you something to keep you in mind of your promise,' he went on to say; and taking a small nosegay stuck in the mouth of a beautifully chased silver whistle hanging at a button-hole in his cloak, he handed it, with a graceful, beseeching bend, to the armourer's daughter.

She hesitated, however, for a moment to accept the gift; but for a different reason than the suddenly-smitten young lover feared.

'There are marigolds in them—French marigolds—the Queen's favourite flower,' she said, smilingly, but withdrawing her hand. 'My father would never away with these, if he saw them in my possession—or rather, he would at once.'

Edward remembered on the words the extreme unpopularity of the French Queen of Charles the First among the Puritans, and felt considerably annoyed at his own forgetfulness. But he speedily rallied. 'I wear marigolds for that very reason, Mistress Firebrace,' he said. 'My sister Arabella, who hath a strong touch of my father's defiance and pride, gathered it on purpose for me, that I might flaunt the Birmingham folks with the display of Queen Henrietta's emblems. And my base-born brother Dick—who, on my soul, I think, wishes me no great good—did so taunt me on my remonstrances with her, that I was fain to prove to him I was not ashamed to show my true colours anywhere! Will you be of my mind again, and wear these marigolds for the giver's sake?'

He offered the nosegay once more, and looked so handsome and tender in the expression with which he bent toward the young damsel of the Old Crown House, that it was not in her woman's nature to refuse.

'I will keep it—but in secret. You shall see how well when I spy you beneath my window, making the enquiry,' she said, taking the flowers, and, yielding to a kind of impulse she could not resist, placing them in her own bosom. Edward Holt, as a matter of course, snatched her hand to his lips. But in a moment she had withdrawn it, and, gliding past, ascended the steps of the open gallery with a rapid, fawn-like trip. He looked after her, almost doubtful whether he should not venture to obtain a renewal of her pretty pledge and assurances. But, pausing at the landing place above, and probably guessing his intention, Mistress Firebrace waved her hand earnestly to warn him not. Then, with another relenting, and yet brilliantly gay and coquettish action, she kissed the marigolds on her bosom, and flew into an upper chamber of the house, carefully closing the door after her.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN CROMWELL.

EDWARD HOLTE proceeded on his way with much the feeling of a man who has passed some bright sunny opening in a wood, and entered again under the darksome woodland shade.

Only a shadowing of the mind, however, for a ruddy glow poured from every chink and recess of the enclosures he threaded. The whole range of works appeared to be in full operation. A jingling thunder of hammer and anvil, sounding like the clattering hoofs of a thousand steeds, echoed on all sides. Edward, in fact, had never heard the like before, though he had been repeatedly at Firebrace's smithy when a lad, in his father's company, who had long a good deal of business in it connected with the fittings of his new mansion at Aston.

A woman, who was out in the yard engaged in raising water at a draw-well close behind the dwelling-house, directed the stranger where 'the master' was to be found. Civilly enough, but with some marks of wonder and curiosity, which Edward was not aware there was anything in his appearance to warrant. But he remembered with a smile how, when a boy, he had often heard this well described as the cause of the superior

excellence of the steel manufactured by the Old Crown Smiths. The water was said to be of a singularly icy coldness—colder even than that famous river of Spain to whose tempering the excellence of the Toledo blades was believed to be due. It was supplied from unknown springs, perfectly independent of the neighbouring river Rea, which might be almost dry in summer without affecting the flow of water in it by a bubble. Nay, some wild legend asserted that this silvered the iron plunged into it, in consequence of a great chest of that metal lying at the bottom, where it had been cast for security by the fugitive ancestor of the Firebraces! It is true there was another, to the effect that the well was bottomless.

What was certain is, that a very peculiar and nice construction was visible in the stonework of the well, all the pieces being fitted into each other in hewn segments of a circle. Indeed, it was looked upon by the knowing in those pre-Artesian days as a perfect miracle of art, and went further than anything else to support belief in Andomar Ferre-à-Bras's freemason mastership.

But to continue. The image of the fair Dorothy faded not away from Edward Holte's consideration with her actual disappearance. It seemed to accompany him with every step of his onward progress, and the music of her brilliant and coquettish laugh continued audible amidst all the puff and pant and clamour of beaten metals around.

By no very unusual caprice of the human mind and heart, Edward Holte, wearied with the state and stiff decorum observed in high society at that time, and especially in his father's household, felt irresistibly delighted and attracted by the lively gaiety and freedom

of his late fair companion's manner and talk. It was the more surprising and rousing, too, in so unexpected a quarter. Nevertheless, he tried to check the alluring recollection. He bethought himself, with a sigh, that this bright maiden could never be anything to him but a passing vision of loveliness and joy. It was impossible she could ever honestly be more to him, and Edward Holte was endued with a high and chivalric feeling towards women that forbade even the idea of tempting the good opinion he saw very clearly he had achieved with the armourer's daughter to lengths honour and virtue could not sanction. Not to forget that Dorothy Firebrace was herself of a respectable and wealthy family, though engaged in a mechanical trade, and that her puritan education, and the severity of the principles inculcated by those sectaries, made it improbable that the usual allurements to women from virtue could have much influence with her. The heir of Aston had merely acted on an impulse he scarcely understood, but could not control, when he asked her to see him again. He almost repented he had done so more than once as he crossed the yard, whither he was directed, to the principal forge. And yet he felt not unlike a man who projects some injury to another, when he found himself at last in the presence of Zachariah Firebrace.

The armourer was at work in the deepest recess of a vast shed, formed of massive timber work, which crossed and recrossed in the roof and along the walls, like the web of some colossal spider of the pre-Adamite world. This shed was encumbered in all directions with massive productions of the forge of various kinds—furnaces, anvils, bellows, immense grindstones, vices, pincers, wooden horses—what not? All the means of modern vulcanic

art; with the exception that these were forced to be within the compass of human strength and power to wield, the gigantic energies of steam not being yet subjected to man's intelligence and direction. The prodigious pincers, whose massive jaws only steam power can lift and close—which snaps a bar of iron as unconcernedly as a crocodile might a cane stick—was of course unknown. Still more the tremendous and yet more docile force of the steam hammer, which beats into shape indifferently the armour of a ship of war and the ornaments of a teapot.

There were numerous forges in the shed, and workmen busy at them—all with the unwearying assiduity said to owe so much to the eye of the master. And considering the business he came about, Master Holte's ought to have gladdened, one would have thought, at the appearance of the results of this labour. The massive wooden dressers all round the shed shone with the light reflected from many dozens of pieces of armour of polished steel—breast-plates, back-plates, cuisses, or armour for the front part of the thighs, steel-caps, helmets, swords, and the barrels of the short thick carbine in use by the ponderous cavalry of the age.

But Edward was struck immediately with the notion that he was disastrously forestalled in the market for this invaluable warlike gear. He had hardly caught sight of Zachariah Firebrace standing at a forge, but evidently only pausing from personal exercise of his profession, when his glance was attracted from the familiar to a less known form—that of a man who was at a little distance opposite to the armourer, with the anvil, at which the latter was at work, between them; and whose unusual and, to Edward Holte, portentous

figure, was brought into strong relief, alike by the fiery glow of the open forge and a dazzling beam of sunshine that descended from the roof—fissured to allow of the passage of the smoke above—over a portion of his upper person.

A broad plain hat, with a steeple crown, such as was then adopted as a mark of distinction by the Puritans from the plumed head-gear of their showy cavalier antagonists, partly shaded the countenance of this stranger, even from the sun-glare thus cast on his head. But Edward, discerning at a glance the outlines of the rugged and massive visage below, close-shaven, and all a-glow with a species of dark and sombre power, which shone out as from an inner fire on the tarnished but sanguine and brassy-flushed complexion, was struck at once with the conviction that he beheld the formidable agent of the Parliament whom Dorothy Firebrace had described to him.

Little doubt on the subject remained to him on a second and slightly more deliberate survey. The rest of the stranger's costume was evidently quite in the puritan taste, in points of plainness of stuffs, absence of decoration, and general clumsiness of cut and fashion. It was, in fact, chiefly of leather, and that greased and worn, in the parts most used, in a sufficiently unseemly wise. But, in addition, it was very negligently put on; scarcely laced or tagged at the waist; the high, broad-topped boots were liberally travel-stained; the plain, flat linen collar quite dirty round the neck; the short brown cloak looked as if it had not been brushed for weeks. Nothing was in good order in the accoutrements of the man but his polished spurs, and the pair of heavy pistols that garnished his belt. He wore no sword;

at least, no scabbard was visible at the usual loop. But, at the moment Edward arrived, he was leaning on a naked weapon of the kind, the bright polish of which marked it as new, with the whole weight of his powerful, though not unusually tall, figure on it, insomuch that the blade, which was very thick and two-edged, curved slightly under the burden.

But although thus seemingly at pause, Edward, perceiving a whole sheaf of swords piled beside the stranger, and that one of his feet was set heavily on a much-hacked oak block before him, evidently used to essay the sound metal and edge of such weapons, felt satisfied that he had come upon the Parliamentary emissary engaged in the duty of proving the articles for which he had bargained. Yet, on the other hand, he could not think, when he looked across to the armourer, that the earnest attention and excitement visible in his long, deeply-carved, and habitually staid and severe—even morosely melancholy and austere—visage could be moved by anything relating to the mere matter of business in hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIRMINGHAMS, LORDS OF BIRMINGHAM.

NEITHER was it so. And if Edward Holte could have known what occasioned this suspense of action, and earnestness of thought and speech, between the armourer and his customer, he would not have deemed his own errand in a very thriving way.

The former was the result of a conversation involving subjects of momentous interest to both, and which seemed to require more privacy than the smithy could afford. But the uproar on every side was as good a cover for secret talking as stone walls, and perhaps the zealous and daring partisan of the Parliament, who committed himself the most in the dialogue, was careless of who might overhear of those 'well-affected' artisan townsmen of Birmingham.

Captain Cromwell had paid his usual early forenoon visit to the Old Crown Forge, to ascertain what progress had been made the previous day in the execution of the order he had entrusted to its diligence. And he took the opportunity, as was also usual with him, to urge upon the master-armourer (so Zachariah Firebrace was styled) the reasonableness and propriety of his openly joining the cause of the Parliament.

Oliver Cromwell—at the time altogether unknown

as a soldier, and working, much on his own account, to raise a troop of cavalry under his command—was also not much considered as a member of Parliament, excepting in regard of his boldness and bull-dog obstinacy against the Court and all its favourers. But, among the zealots of his own persuasion, he was held to possess considerable powers of expounding and holding forth on scriptural subjects, which he had influentially exerted in a more practical sense on his visit to Birmingham. In spite of the danger attached to such a proceeding, he had prevailed upon Zachariah Firebrace to agree to furnish him with arms for the troop of horse he had raised in his native county against the King; but, well-inclined as the master-armourer was to the cause, there he had stuck. Zachariah was wealthy, and a man of a gloomy, unhopeful temperament; had a daughter whom he fondly cherished, though with little external display of the feeling; and was well aware of the penalties of high treason.

‘No, no, Master Cromwell,’ he would say, ‘I see not light enough yet in the wood. How are we poor citizens and townsfolk to set ourselves in arms against the nobles and gentry who flock around the King, and who are trained to them and to the management of the fiery war-horse, that snuffs the battle from afar, and neigheth to the spearmen, aha! These weapons I furnish you withal, are in the way of my craft; no man can challenge me thereupon, nor am I bound to know, by any evident proof, to what service you intend them. And the King is drawing towards these parts, and we are an open, un-walled town; and such as have the lawful direction of us—to wit, the Bailiff and his constables—are firmly set the courtiers’ way. And though, as you say, I am chief

of the Guild superstitiously styled of the Holy Cross, of this town, *that* gives me but mastery and control in the overseeing of the trades and charities. What can I do?’

It was, nevertheless, a very great object apparently with Captain Cromwell—and with good reason, considering the warlike uses and central position of Birmingham—to win over some outward and visible tokens of adhesion on its part to the cause he served; and, even on this minor scale of action, he was destined to exhibit a good deal of that remarkable union of political foresight, fanaticism, cunning, and audacity which afterwards raised him to the supreme power in England.

On the occasion alluded to, he had been peculiarly pressing upon Firebrace to declare himself. He announced that, in consequence of the King's movement from York to Nottingham, he had that day received advices that the Parliament army, under the Earl of Essex, was to advance to Northampton—greatly superior, according to him, in numbers, discipline, and equipment to the Royalists. And while entreating the armourer to hasten in every way possible the garniture of his troop of cuirassiers, he took the opportunity to urge upon him the necessity of some decisive action on the part of the town of Birmingham.

‘I would say to you, Brother Zachariah,’ Captain Cromwell remarked, in the favourite scriptural style of his party, and his own rambling one, ‘even as John, by some called the Divine, writes in Revelations to the Angel of the Church of Laodicea: *I would that thou wert either hot or cold.* For the time is fully at hand when the servants of God must be sealed unto Him, if ever they are to be, that He may know His people in

the day of His wrath ! And how is that to be, unless you declare yourselves openly for one side or the other ; and 'tis very plain which way your affections turn ! And truly, Master Firebrace, I must needs tell you 'tis the common saying hereabouts that you hold the people in the hollow of your hand, and can tilt them either way—to a hearty zeal in the good cause, or to a lukewarm neutrality which will raise the gorge of both parties alike, to spue you forth as a derision and scorn unto the land ! You tell me yourself that the Crown Bailiff of the town, who sets up for its chief ruler and ordainer, is but the representative of an usurped authority ; concerning which I have heard from other quarters, too, a very sad and dolorous tale, which truly stirs mine own blood to such an exasperate resentment and intolerance, that were the wrong done to one of my own kith and kin I could not more angrily conceive of it.'

Captain Cromwell was likely to be well informed on the point alluded to. From the first, Tubal Bromycham's extraordinary skill and strength in his work as a smith had attracted his attention, and the young man's master, who was much attached to him, had taken care to deliver full particulars of his history to the influential member of a body which, in the eyes of the people of England, was specially organised for the redress of grievances inflicted by the tyranny and exactions of the Crown and aristocracy.

Briefly related, the story was that the last Birmingham, Lord of Birmingham, who enjoyed the title and its large appertaining estates and privileges, riding out one day from his manor-house, alone and unattended, was overtaken by three or four horsemen in a lonely part of the road to Aston—not yet converted into a magnificent

park, surrounding a palatial mansion. The tradition stated, that the reason why so distinguished a person ventured on the highways in a manner at that time so unusual with people of rank, was a love affair, which he was obliged to carry on privately, with the young heiress of the Grimsorwes, who were at that time owners of the property, in consequence of the young lady being a minor, in the custody of an uncle, who was anxious she should not marry at all.

These horsemen—whose company the Lord of Birmingham speedily discovered he could not rid himself of, in spite of many efforts he made for the purpose—were strangers in Birmingham. They had resided at an inn there for a few days, under pretence of purchasing certain of the goods manufactured in the town for London. But they were in reality robbers and villains by profession, the sweepings of that city, who had been hired to play a part in a most detestable conspiracy, by no less a personage than John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, Protector of England in the minority of Edward VI.

This grasping and tyrannous minister, whose ambition brought himself and almost his entire family, at a subsequent period, to the block, anxious in all ways to increase his wealth, had turned desiring eyes on the lands and hereditaments of the house of Birmingham; part of which it had the misfortune to possess in the neighbourhood of Dudley Castle, and had refused to yield up to the convenience of the haughty lord thereof.

Another villain, of some outward station and respectability, was yet to be found to complete the plot. One was discovered in the person of a member of the family

of Holte, then of Duddeston; a younger brother of it, qualified for any kind of baseness by long service with the unprincipled Northumberland. But, moreover, this unworthy gentleman was known to cherish a personal spite and animosity against the Lord of Birmingham, having been rejected for him in a suit of his own to the heiress of Aston.

It was arranged that the malignant rival should meet with the favoured lover—accompanied so much against his will, but striving to quit himself civilly of the unwelcome society, that he might keep his secret love-tryst unmolested—as if by accident; but upon that, the robbers in the Lord of Birmingham's reluctant association were to set upon Holte, colourably maltreat him, and strip him of some money and valuables, probably supplied by the Duke, their suborner, for the occasion. Holte was then to affect to make his escape with difficulty, after recognising the Lord of Birmingham among his assailants, and to proceed at once to accuse him of being the chief in the robbery and felonious assault upon his person.

It is still a wonder that, even in so lawless and tyrannous a time, when the high-handed exercise of power spared scarcely any rank or innocence, so transparent and monstrous a conspiracy could have achieved the end desired. But so it fell out; partly, doubtless, through a weakness of character on the part of the last Lord of Birmingham calculated upon all along by his enemies.

He was apprehended, and assured that he would be brought to trial on the charge of felony, and condemned on the clear evidence that could be brought against him by Hialmar Holte and his ruffianly accomplices, who

were alleged to be those of the unfortunate prisoner. He knew how universally the law was wrested at the pleasure of authority ; and that the whole power of the Crown was in the hands of his deadliest foe, whose influence also was supreme in the county where his trial must take place, as the Lords of Birmingham were only Peers by tenure, and not by summons to Parliament. And so, driven to despair by a long imprisonment—subdued by the violence and tortures of mind and body to which he was subjected—perhaps hoping for better times to come, when his enemy's unjust power might be stripped from him—the unhappy prisoner agreed to purchase his pardon for an offence he had not committed, and his liberty, by the surrender of all his property to the Crown as a criminal attainted and confessed guilty of felony, and thereby placed at its mercy.

The Duke of Northumberland, of course, speedily transferred this forfeiture to his own profit and advantage ; but, although the oppressor did not long enjoy those ill-gotten goods, other court favourites succeeded in their turn to the Dudley forfeitures, and no appeals to the justice or mercy of the Crown ever availed to obtain the restoration of the smallest portion of their ravished inheritance to the family of Birmingham.

The unfortunate head of it, whose want of fortitude was in some degree the cause of the ruin of his race, died of a broken heart, after years of vain appeal and litigation. And we know not whether it could be considered a consolation of his woes, that the maiden of his love—adhering, with the lovely magnanimity of her sex, to his fallen fortunes—persisted in uniting her fate to his, and shared in consequence in his ruin. For the

merciless tyrants in power pronounced her inheritance also forfeit as that of the wife of a felon; she having wedded her lover, with generous precipitancy, before his pardon passed the Great Seal.

Another of the creatures of Northumberland, who was strongly suspected of a share in the conspiracy—the unfortunate heiress's unnatural uncle and guardian—obtained a portion of this spoil as his reward; and it was from the last male representative of this base betrayer of his 'brother's blood'—who proved, by his extravagance and dissolute conduct, the destruction of his own family, and the truth of the proverb 'Ill got, ill gone'—that Sir Thomas Holte purchased the Aston estate.

And now the unhappy pretended felon Lord of Birmingham—according to master-armourer Firebrace's account, to the patient and attentive agent of the Parliament for the Redress of Grievances—was great-grandfather, in a direct line, to that Tubal Bromycham whom he had chosen as a future son-in-law, and proudly avowed in the capacity.

A disinterested selection, certainly, it would have appeared on the first blush; from the circumstance that, however ancient and honourable the family, it had long been so reduced that (still according to Firebrace's account) its lineal representative was at one time a worker in an iron mine.

The armourer took pains to give the exact particulars of how this had come to pass, and the manner of his own discovery of the fact, to Captain Cromwell, in the course of their many conversations on the disorders and tyrannies of the times. And the rather, perhaps, that the statement soothed his own pride, and accounted

for so singular a selection of a son-in-law by a wealthy citizen, in a way honourable enough to that same wealthy citizen's feelings and superiority to vulgar prejudice, and, at the same time, legitimate notions of good thrift and furtherance to his business affairs.

The armourer traced his intended son-in-law's genealogy very closely from the last wronged Lord of Birmingham, stating that in the next generation after him, the family, unable to endure its degradation on the scene of its prosperity, had migrated to Walsall, in Staffordshire. Sinking here deeper and deeper into the slough of despond and poverty, it came to pass that the latter descendants of the race were compelled to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. Then, as now, iron and coal mining was the staple industry of the district, and Tubal Bromycham—himself the son of an unlettered labourer of this class, and left an orphan at a very early age—was abandoned, altogether untaught and untrained, to the same occupation, until chance brought him acquainted with the Birmingham armourer. Not a very lucky chance at first, seemingly, for the latter.

Master Firebrace, it appeared, was one of a number of the smiths of Birmingham—indeed the chief of them—who at a certain period, about seven or eight years previous to the commencement of this narrative, conceived that they were charged too much for the ore and coals used in their forges and furnaces, chiefly brought from Walsall. They found some iron-masters who agreed to supply them at lower than the accustomed rates; and, by way of compelling other proprietors to come down to their prices, agreed to deal exclusively with these until the latter submitted also to their terms.

But the proprietors in question took care to stipulate that the Birmingham smiths should come to the pit's mouth to receive their purchases themselves, being doubtless very well aware of the excited and dangerous state of the population in consequence of the general closing of the undersold mines.

Master-armourer Firebrace was appointed to the responsible office of negotiating and bringing home the first deliveries under the new tariff; not only by the unanimous deference of his fellow-craftsmen, but by his own sense of his proper position as original promoter and organiser of the movement. He was himself a man of great pride and overbearing contempt for such half-savage and poverty-stricken people as the miners of Staffordshire were considered at the time. Very possibly, too, he was not well aware of the state of exasperation and defiance into which the Walsall district had passed, naturally enough, on finding itself, and its wives and children, cast foodless and without employment out of the murky depths where, at best, men earned so hard a loaf.

Accordingly, armourer Firebrace, arriving with a long train of carts and wagoners, and the very inadequate civil support of the two regular constables of Walsall, at Longswirl Mines, only awakened to a sense of his danger, and inability to resist it, in the midst of a swarming, furious mob, who, with their begrimed visages, half-naked, haggard forms, madly flourishing pick-axes and spades, resembled, in the armourer's long subsequent dreams, nothing other than the fiends of a pandemonium broken loose.

Constables and wagoners took to flight at once, and for the most part escaped in comparative safety, though

with a mauling which aching bones kept in remembrance with some of them to their dying day. But, though Firebrace himself, perceiving how completely overpowered he was, attempted no resistance, he was not permitted to follow the example of his company. The enraged miners seized upon him ; and, aware that he was the prime mover and agitator of the Birmingham smiths against them, determined to make him a memorable example of retribution. It was proposed, and unanimously agreed, to drag him to the mouth of an old disused pit, of unknown but believed unfathomable depth, destroyed ages previously by fire-damp, and cast him to the bottom.

This resolution was in course of execution. In spite of a now maddened effort to extricate himself on the part of the armourer, he was hurled headlong on his way to the intended destruction by the furious multitude. But, luckily, the mine in question was at some little distance beyond Walsall ; and on the way another party of miners, belonging to the underselling owners, happened to be returning from their work. Principal among these was a young man of about nineteen, but of extraordinary personal strength and resolution of character ; very unlike his near ancestor, he of the forfeiture—for the young man was Tubal Bromycham.

As he had been reared in as wild and primitive notions of justice and natural right as any other of the Black Country miners, it is very possible that it was rather a feeling of partisanship with his proper owner than a sense of the illegality and cruelty of the assault that determined Tubal to interfere in the rescue of his master's customer. But so he did ; and as his fellows of the Longswirl mines were very well wont to follow

his lead in most of their active diversions, and were irritated at the contumely they had been subject to on their owner's account, they readily joined him in a gallant onset to redeem the prisoner from his assailants.

It needed, however, all the prodigious strength possessed by Tubal, and its unsparing exercise in the way of knock-down blows and fisticuffs, to accomplish the result. Firebrace remembered very well that, for nearly twenty minutes, he became, as it were, the bone of contention, the foot-ball banded to and fro, the flying shuttlecock, of a battle, that seemed rather of maddened bulls and buffaloes than of men. Once he was even about to perish rather disgracefully—too bruised, beaten, and stunned to attempt anything at his own preservation—under the fire-shovel of a stalwart Amazon, of more than six feet high, with a baby at her breast, who hit mercilessly at his skull, with the apparent purpose of securing the honours of his braining to herself. Indeed, how he was saved, Firebrace himself entertained no species of distinct recollection. But, on returning from a state of insensibility, to which one of these vigorous strokes had consigned him, he found himself lying at some distance from the scene of action, partly concealed behind a little mountain of cinder and ashes, with Tubal Bromycham bending over him, bathing his bleeding skull with sulphurous water from one of the neighbouring pools, and endeavouring thus to restore him to life.

The humane young giant afterwards explained that he had carried the object of his solicitude off the field of battle on his back, *butting himself a way with his head*—a not uncommon Walsall fig ting feat—through

the thick of the opposing combatants. The fury and generalness of the *melée* afterwards gave some scope for the exercise of another of his physical accomplishments, in which he was quite a match for the swift-footed Achilles himself. But, at the juncture in question, Tubal lost no time to account for his rescue to the defeated rebater of the Walsall staples. He entreated him to resume his flight before a discovery could be made, as it was pretty well certain the much inferior Longswirl forces would be driven from the field by the insurgent crowd on the other side.

To the best of his ability, Firebrace attempted to comply with this advice. But he was so disabled and demoralised by fear and the violence to which he had been subjected, that he was unable to move more than a few paces. And thus, as he ever afterwards gratefully confessed, must again have fallen into the power of his exasperated foes, but that Tubal, observing his condition, hoisted him once more on his shoulders, and fairly carried him on them over many miles of rough and all but impassable country, out of further danger of pursuit.

Tubal himself, however, seemed not to think he had done any great matter in this. He was for returning at once, after setting down his burden near Birmingham, if need were, to take further part in the fray. But the grateful armourer would not suffer it. He perceived very plainly that the generous act the young man had performed would expose him to special animosity on the part of the main body of miners. He ascertained from himself that he had no relatives to be anxious for his safety; and he insisted, upon these considerations, on Tubal's accompanying him quite into the town, to

receive some substantial mark of his gratitude. Yet such was the heroic simplicity and disinterestedness of Tubal Bromycham's nature, that he seemed literally unable to understand that he had acquired any title to the armourer's benevolence. It is even probable he would have persisted in the purpose he announced, if Firebrace had not continued to declare his inability to proceed without assistance.

A few days' residence in Birmingham seemed, however, to effect a revolution in the youthful giant's notions of things. Strange as it may appear, he had never been in a town before; and the sight of the wonders of manufacture into which the rude material he had spent his life in casting on the surface of the earth was wrought, awakened in him what might else have remained a hidden, but extraordinary and truly artistic, genius in that class of workmanship. Tubal was seized with a passion to become a smith, and readily yielded to the armourer's friendly request to him to acquire skill in the art as his apprentice.

Perhaps if Edward Holte had heard the story, he would have fancied the beauty of the armourer's daughter had something to do with that acceptance, but Dorothy Firebrace was then a child of ten years old.

In relating the story, Master Firebrace always, however, asserted that it was quite by chance, and at a long subsequent period, that he discovered his marvellous apprentice's high descent and rightful pretensions. Tubal had suffered his very name to sink from its proper syllables into the common country pronunciation of Bromycham. In truth, he seemed rather ashamed than proud of his pedigree from the weak-

hearted, alleged robber, Lord of Birmingham. Firebrace only discovered the facts of the case by accident, when Sir Thomas Holte, having heard of the fame of Tubal as an artificer in all kinds of iron-work, wished him to attend at Aston Hall, to assist in the casting of the ornaments and fittings-up of his then externally-finished structure. Tubal confessed to his master the old feud, of which mention has been made, to excuse his compliance, but, with an artist's natural vanity, allowed himself to be soothed into submission by the admiration and praises his extant labours extorted from the good taste of Sir Thomas Holte and his family.

Tubal's good nature in this respect, the master smith of Deritend thankfully admitted, was a pretty penny's-worth in the way of the firm; Sir Thomas Holte delighting amazingly in the decoration of his mansion with ornamental iron work: and in that piping time of peace, there was no great employment in the proper business of an armourer-smith in Birmingham.

In particular, Sir Thomas had a fancy for chimney-piece and fire-place decoration, of a most costly and elaborate device. He even procured the assistance of a Dutch artist as a designer of these embellishments, which Tubal was at first employed to cast in furnaces set up for the purpose at Aston. But he speedily exhibited a natural genius in the task-work superior to the taught foreign artist's; and the greater part of the magnificent fire-place, garden gates, fantastic window framework, roofs of the minaret towers, and other curious ornaments in bronze and iron, at Aston Hall, were alike of Tubal Bromycham's design and execution.

One day, nevertheless, a difference arose between the

haughty Aston baronet and the no less proud and independent artist-artisan.

Firebrace always declared himself unacquainted with the occasion of this breach of the good understanding so far existing, and which Tubal obstinately refused to communicate. The young man was even violently exasperated, for a long time afterwards, whenever any questioning on the subject was raised; and, indeed, sometimes declared his intention, if further teased on the matter, to depart, and pursue his occupation in some distant place.

No doubt it was partly in dread of this possible abandonment, as well as the gratitude and admiration Firebrace felt towards his helpful pupil and foreman, that induced him at last to resolve to bestow upon him his daughter in marriage, and take him into direct partnership with himself. Yet, strange to say, for a considerable period, the reluctance and disinclination to this most advantageous arrangement for him, was on the side of Tubal Bromycham; but the charms of the daughter, just rising into the perfection of early womanhood and beauty, powerfully added to the generous entreaties of the father, it is to be presumed. At all events, at the time when Captain Cromwell arrived in Birmingham, a formal betrothing had taken place between the young pair, seemingly to their mutual contentment and satisfaction.

CHAPTER IX.

FORESHADOWS.

THE parliamentary commissioner had not failed to draw some inferences from the stories he heard on the subject of Tubal Bromycham, and to adapt them with singular dexterity, under his rough outward forms of speech, to the grand object he had himself in view. He represented both to the armourer and his intended son-in-law that the unjust forfeiture which had stripped the latter of his true place in society, was the very kind of wrong to the subject which the glorious parliament then in being would be the most certain, as soon as it secured the power, to set to rights. They had even, therefore, greatly more than the motives common to all true Englishmen, who were resolved not to become in themselves and their posterity a nation of crouching Asiatic slaves, and to maintain the purity of true religion against popish and prelatical invasions, to stand forth in the good cause.

The commissioner found a very willing hearer in the younger man, in whom he discovered a vein of bitterness and animosity against the powers that were, and the state of things in general, hardly to be accounted for, even from his ancestral wrongs, and his own personal privation of his rights.

At times, it crossed the subtle and penetrating mind of Cromwell that the quarrel between the iron artist and his patron at Aston Hall, must have been attended with peculiar and unknown circumstances of aggravation. Tubal never mentioned Sir Thomas Holte without some expression of scorn and indignation at the pride and tyranny of his character. Firebrace stated that he had frequently headed formidable poaching forays into the baronet's preserves, and those of the royal chase in his charge at Sutton Coldfield, purely, he believed, in annoyance and defiance, since he killed much but never brought away a single head of game of any sort. But still, the older and more prudent craftsman could not be won into any more open marks of adhesion to the Parliament than engaging to furnish their officer with the arms he needed. And Cromwell, as has been seen, was making a particularly earnest renewed appeal to the armourer at the very time of Edward Holte's arrival on the scene of action.

'See you not that it lies chiefly with yourselves, Master Firebrace, to deserve the earliest handful of justice from the Parliament?' he was saying just previously. 'Why should you hesitate? I tell you, of a truth, I myself am placing in these weapons and armour of proof all that remains to me of two fair patrimonies, expended in promoting this good and great cause, and supporting the persecuted brethren for religion's sake. The tyrant would not let me betake myself thereupon even to our poor and desolate plantations in the New World, surrounded by cannibal Indians, in a godly company of us that were at the time so minded; but I grudge not the sole inheritance of my children to this holy service; and I pray you take counsel by my

example, and hazard some little matter in the behalf of Christ, crucified again in these days by these enormous persecutors !’

‘Were the need so pressing? Yet I cannot think the King would be so obstinate as not to take wiser counsels in time, and shun his own or his people’s destruction!’ said the armourer, faithfully representing the well-to-do middle classes of his own and of every age, in reluctance to extremes.

‘You know not, then, his obstinacy and full-blown madness of pride and prerogative, if you deem so,’ the captain replied, vehemently; but adding, with a sort of half melancholy, half satirical smile of recollection, ‘I had cause to know it all of him right well, when he and I were boys together! You look surprised, Master Firebrace; but I must tell you I had a jolly old uncle once, who kept such state and wassail at a place called Hinchinbrook, in Huntingdonshire, that to this day there is fame of it in that country, and little else left to the name. And what must this worshipful knight, for such he was, but take upon him to entertain the man’s father who is now upon the throne—King James that was—upon one of his progresses. And, behold, there being none other of higher degree convenient, I must be sent for to be whip-boy and plaything to my young Prince Charles, of whom there was no thought at that time that he should inherit the crown, but was on the journey with his father and brother, the Prince of Wales, for a treat, to Scotland; though, God wot, by all we hear of that country, ’tis not the pleasantest direction for a native thereof to turn. But I interrupt your anvilling, master armourer.’

‘So be so; my arms are not so limber as they once

were; rest is good for them,' replied Firebrace, who listened to this courtly anecdote with the unusual mark of attention, on his part, indicated in a cessation from his toil at the forge.

'I would not stop the work, howbeit; especially as I see our famous foreman is absent, who doth the business of three when he is so minded,' Cromwell replied; yet he proceeded, as if the story amused himself also. 'Well, as I have said, they sent for me to my uncle, jolly Sir Oliver's, at Hinchinbrook, to be a playmate to the young prince, who now is King. And I, being a rude, hardy, country lad, of my ten years of age, disdained greatly at being forced to put myself in some finestiff suit of brocade buckram, with the cruel *chevaux de frise* frills they wore at times bristling like a wild boar's chine round my neck, and so was in a very uncourtly ill humour when they brought me to the prince's presence, and left me with his Highness to entertain him to my best. And he, being the very perfection of high-bred gentility, and disdainful pride of his royal estate, though but a slender, pale, red-haired boy—he takes upon him at once to make sport of my awkward and ungainly appearance in my fine clothes—calls me ill-dressed ploughboy—hog in armour, as I think—or what should mean the same. So thereupon I answered his Highness—rudely enough, no doubt—that I was not then offending his sight by any pleasure of my own, and if I was a ploughboy, would indeed greatly prefer to be out in the good green fields, under the free sky, than in his Highness's railing presence. Upon which, his Scotch blood waxing suddenly choleric, the princeling rebuked me as wanting reverence to his high little person, forsooth; and, upon further rejoinder, thrashed me rather

smartly over the cheek with a riding switch he carried. There was still less reverence then, you may bethink you, shown on my part to the blood of my masters, for in an instant his Highness lay flat on the floor, with his delicately carved royal nose spurting the blood of kings about him! Yet, though he had felt so manifestly the force of my arm, and must have guessed thereby that he was no manner of match for me—a big, robust, surly boy, such as I was, some two years his elder—when he rose up, nothing would content Prince Charles Stuart but he must fight me. And so, believe me, Master Firebrace, he will fight his people now.'

'You are a fit champion for him then, of a surety, Master Cromwell,' said the armourer, looking with astonishment at the man of such a boy.

'I do so purpose to show myself, master armourer,' replied the captain, with a sedate and thoughtful expression. 'But I had ill dreams on it, too—a very comfortless nightmare to my couch that night—whither I was sent most famously rated and supperless.'

'Tell me this also; there is sometimes a foreseeing in dreams more than carnal men think for,' said Firebrace, who, in spite of his advanced opinions in Church and State, partook as largely as any one in the superstitions of his time.

'Nay, but this was downright midsummer madness, though it was not midsummer at the time,' replied Cromwell, smiling; and yet he, too, seemed strangely impressed with his own words, as he continued, 'Well then, sir, I had fallen asleep sobbing over my uncle's most angry rebukes, and perchance some smarting of his displeasure elsewhere than in my mind—I think I must, I say, have fallen into a slumber of some sort, when

suddenly my room and counterpanes became all of a flutter like a flock of pigeons mounting. And, instead of my uncle's housekeeper, charitably bringing me some caudle for my hungry stomach, which I confess I expected, and my nightcap, which I remember I lacked by her negligence, a giantess strode into the room, and up to my bed, and bade me be of good cheer, for all that had passed that day; for that I should live yet to be *the greatest man in England!* A likely story is not that, neighbour Firebrace, while there's a King in England? But, to make an end to my story, and to complete the joke, this giantess seemed to me to flourish a royal crown in her hand—instead of a nightcap—such as was on all the King's liveries I had seen that day; with which I know not what long space she tantalised me, trying to clutch it, to put upon my bare pate and keep it warm, until I woke with a yell of anger and rage—yet could never persuade myself, then nor since, that I had been asleep at all! But, hist! what manner of a fine court gallant is this stepped out of one of Sir Peter Paul's showiest canvasses in the presence-chamber at Whitehall, when we carried up the Grand Remonstrance to his Majesty?'

It was in reality at this unpropitious moment that Edward Holte made his appearance on the scene.

CHAPTER X.

A MOVE IN THE GAME.

‘It is even our ill neighbour at Aston, Sir Thomas Holte’s only lawful son and heir. He hath but a devil’s cub of a bastard, who is a lawyer in London, for another,’ replied the armourer, in a vexed and surprised undertone to Captain Cromwell.

‘Ay, ay; say you so?’ remarked the latter, evidently with excited interest. ‘In truth, he looks like a very King’s man, with all those fine flowing womanish curls on the shoulders, nicely disparted on the smooth forehead; which I do never espy on a man than I hunger to twist my fingers among them to much such a like purpose as the oak branches tangled Absalom’s on his restive mule. But, so, master armourer, are your men about us to be depended upon in case we should need help against this fine sworder?’

‘Help, Master Cromwell! help, against one man!’ exclaimed Firebrace.

‘What know we how he may be tailed outside? May they not have heard at Aston of my presence and business in the town?’ returned the captain, with a glare full of scrutiny and suspicion at the approaching cavalier. ‘And did you not tell me that the pride-mad baronet there was raising horse on the King’s side?’

‘But they are not armed, that I wot of, Master Cromwell; and most likely it is on a matter relative to that, the young gentleman comes here,’ said Firebrace.

‘Ho, ho! unfanged adders, we will not fear!’ was the reply.

By this time Edward was almost close at hand, and Cromwell was aware that his own dark searching glance was amply returned by the young cavalier, though with less of menace and scowl in the expression. Both felt, however, that they were hostile planets, traversing each other's orbits. On the other hand, the heir of Aston saluted the Deritend smith with more than customary politeness and deference, even raising his hat for a moment; a very great condescension at that time on the part of a person of Edward Holte's rank to a person of Master Firebrace's.

Firebrace himself certainly felt gratified by this mark of respect, but did not like to exhibit the feeling under the stern gaze of his parliamentary customer. He drew up his tall and grisly person to its height, and folding his bare arms, with the hammer he had been using still in hand, looked at the stranger without any response of civility, merely remarking, ‘Master Holte, of Aston,—what may be your pleasure, sir?’

‘Why, Master Firebrace, you used not to look so like a stranger on my namesake once upon a time; and have the few years since my schoolboy days so altered me that you seem scarcely to know me again, now that I am come to live among my father's friends and neighbours?’ said Edward Holte, auguring no good from this manner of reception.

‘We of Birmingham are so, in a sense, Master Holte; but times are changed, sir, times are much changed!’

replied the armourer, very sulkily, and now upon some reminiscence of his own.

‘Truly; but not so ill for men of your craft, Master Firebrace,’ said the young gentleman, desirous evidently to conciliate; ‘and the proof is, that I have come to you to order furnishing for a troop of horse, mustering some seven score good stalwart yeomen, fellows of my father’s tenantry, which he is raising in compliance with the King’s commission of array; who has been pleased to name me their commander.’

Captain Cromwell gave an uneasy shuffle in his position, but made no observation, looking intently at the armourer for his reply.

Firebrace was evidently embarrassed, and there was a slight pause. But he met Cromwell’s fixed regard, and seemed to feel the necessity of speech.

‘Truly, then, Master Holte,’ he said, still with some hesitation, ‘I am sorry to have to disoblige you; but all my forge hands are engaged in other work, and I cannot do your bidding in anywise.’

‘Why, how so, Master Firebrace?’ said Edward, looking around him. ‘Here seems armour-gear ready to hand for as many and more than I have reckoned to you. Ah, and of a new and excellent shaping, to my eye! What are these plates of steel else?’

He pointed to the symmetrical row of polished cuirasses, skilfully arched to the chest, which covered all one murky side of the apartment with a silvery glare.

‘These are coverings for some poor honest fellows’ breasts, who will freely adventure them in a good cause in other respects, sir, but are bespoke,’ said Captain Cromwell now, and not by any means in so civil a tone as the words he used were in themselves.

'Tis true, sir; this armour is made to a London order,' said Firebrace, striving to speak as if he thought he was making an ordinary announcement of a business transaction.

'Not so, master armourer,' the captain resumed, in a stern and uncompromising tone; 'it is made to my order—to the order of Oliver Cromwell, burgess of parliament for the good town of Cambridge. I am not afraid to own Christ before man!'

'And do you call it owning Christ, sir,' said Edward, turning angrily on the stranger who thus audaciously put himself in the front of the discussion, 'arming the King's subjects against his lawful authority?'

'Quite the contrary, sir; I and my fellows are in arms to *maintain* the King's lawful authority, as signified by his Majesty's faithful houses of Parliament, to this people and nation.'

This was the style adopted by the Parliament in declaring their resolution to resist Charles by open force, in order to do as little violence as possible to the deeply-rooted veneration and awe of the English people, in that age, toward the person and prerogatives of the royal power.

'It is none the less—but rather all the more—*high treason*, not only in you who publish and project the same as your purposes, but in all who aid and abet you therein,' returned Edward Holte, passionately. 'And so his Majesty has had it proclaimed at the market-cross of Nottingham, where—by a reporter even you would not dispute, Master Cromwell—he has now openly set up his royal standard of deliverance from the misleading and tyrannies of you and your fellows in the London Parliament.'

‘Is it even so? The Lord be praised that has hardened Pharaoh’s heart to a greater redemption, against all the signs of the times and of His judgments!’ exclaimed Captain Cromwell; and probably with no feigned satisfaction in what he heard. ‘Said I not truly, Master Firebrace,’ he continued, addressing the armourer with a vehemence that quite undid the effect of Edward Holte’s denouncing on the other side, ‘that the time for the winnowing of the corn from the chaff has come, and for all men to ponder the text, “*Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draws back, my soul shall take no pleasure in him.*”’ Heb. x. 38.

‘Who is for *drawing back*, good Master Cromwell?’ said the armourer, pettishly, yet evidently thrown on his mettle. ‘Do not pick me up ere I fall.’

‘Oh, you, sir, and your party are well known for cappers of texts and gospel evidence; but this is a matter of statute law and customs of this realm,’ retorted Edward. ‘And I warn you, Master Firebrace, you are placing yourself in the deadliest shot and aim of the law thus to supply the King’s rebels and proclaimed enemies with weapons and munitions of war against him.’

‘It cannot be, sir; I do but the wonted business of my craft in the matter,’ returned Firebrace; yet an evident paleness came over his bronzed and heated complexion.

‘Then, at the least, you should make no distinction of parties, master armourer,’ replied Edward, eagerly; ‘and this plea may perchance avail you at another day. Divide your present manufacture between us of Aston and this stranger. We will pay you as well, if not better, than any Parliament-mongers in the world.

You cannot, sure, doubt my father's ability in that way; and 'tis not the King, but Sir Thomas Holte, whom I offer you as paymaster.'

'The more sufficient bondsman of the two, of a truth, unless the Oxford gownsmen have better luck in sending him their plate to melt than those of Cambridge, whom I stopped in the fact,' Cromwell replied, with a smile of some gloomy humour. 'However, young gentleman, I must let you know that what you wish cannot be, unless you would have your father's yeomen ride to the King's battles with O. C. on all their swords and armour buckles: for I purpose, I promise you, that Oliver Cromwell's troopers shall be known for whose they are, wherever they go.'

'On their gibbets, I trust, chiefly, sir, if they show themselves as causelessly rude and offensive to others as their captain hath to me, from no reason that I know of,' returned Edward, sharply, much provoked at this intimation. 'Still, Master Firebrace, if you really purpose to observe a fair neutrality, you will give us the next spell of your handiwork, and equip me and my men in time to attend his Majesty on his certainly announced journey southward!'

Firebrace looked puzzled. This assurance of the King's intention to come to direct collision with his mutinous Parliament, on a route which would bring him very near Birmingham, if not into it, evidently startled him. 'Why, for that matter, Master Holte,' he began, in a wavering manner, 'in respect of the esteem I bear your honourable self, rather than your house or father, worshipful Sir Thomas——' But Cromwell interrupted him at this point.

'Neutrality!' he exclaimed in a voice of thunder.

‘Neutrality! who speaks of *neutrality* between God and the devil? No, Master Firebrace, he who is not with us is against us, in this great contest between Satan and the Lord! And the real traitors and enemies to the country are those whom the Parliament has declared so, any and all, the aiders and abettors of yon rash, misguided tyrant, in setting up this war against the people of England! And now, as this fair-spoken young man hath yet plainly declared such is also his intention, I call upon you, Master Firebrace, and all other true and honest citizens of this town who hear me, to assist in the execution of the Parliament ordinance, made especially to fit such cases, whereby imprisonment during the pleasure of the two houses is the least penalty denounced on such malignant incendiaries and upraisers of rebellion. Do you hear me, master armourer, and will you and your men be helpful to me in the enforcement of this wise and just decree?’

Firebrace stared in great astonishment at the sudden outbreak; while Edward Holte burst into a derisive laugh. ‘Make me your prisoner, will you?’ he exclaimed; ‘why, the town has never a jail in it but such as is at the lord’s manor house, which is held by a good friend of our family; and I think I could spit all the force in constables likely to be brought against me on a skewer for roast larks. What do you mean, sir? Are you mad?’

‘Good men and true!’ said Cromwell, turning to the smiths around, who, startled by the noise of the altercation, were now mostly resting from their labours and listening to what passed, ‘you hear how this pervert and malignant from Aston scoffs at you and your town. Will you stand by me while I make him captive for his

traitorous designs and speeches, and send him to London as an assurance and earnest of your hearty zeal in the good cause for which all faithful Englishmen will soon be in arms? Moreover, he will be the best of hostages for the security of your town from the blood-thirsty assaults and insolencies you will else be sure to receive from the tyrannous King's bashaw at Aston.'

The brawny auditory gave a kind of murmur of assent, but looked evidently for more precise directions to their master.

Firebrace, on his part, was visibly both amazed and agitated at these sudden proceedings. Yet Captain Cromwell had established an influence over his mind which he did not find it easy to withstand, and he tried to betake himself to the usual resource in such cases—a kind of middle way.

'Nay, sir,' he said to Cromwell, 'you are surely too hasty. Yet I would not, Master Holte, that you wasted more time here on your entreaty, which I can by no means comply with, having other employment, as I have said, for all my forges, for months to come. I advise and pray you rather to lose no time in leaving the town, for the people are not well disposed to those of your name at present, and ——.'

'But I say he shall not leave the town, saving as a prisoner, to answer for his delinquencies, so openly avowed and enforced, before the committee of Parliament in London,' said Captain Cromwell—who seemed determined to urge matters to extremity—and, moreover, actually stepping between young Holte and his proper line of exit in case he had adopted the friendly suggestion of the armourer.

Edward was more provoked at this action, possibly,

than the words accompanying it. 'By the King's life,' he exclaimed, stepping back, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, 'and who art thou to threaten me thus? Stand out of the way, ruffian, or ——'

'Nay, if that be your game, we will try one of your weapons, Master Firebrace, on a cavalier costard (head-piece) instead of an oak block!' was the ready retort; and as Captain Cromwell raised the weapon on which he had hitherto been leaning, with a threatening flourish, Edward Holte was compelled, in self-defence, immediately to draw his blade, and place himself on guard. This he did with the practised grace and dexterity of an accomplished fencer, to which the bold but rough and apparently untutored attitude of Cromwell formed a singular contrast, and did not seem to augur altogether well for the parliamentary champion. And doubtless Edward Holte himself looked forward to a contest of skill and agility, to which his highly-trained experience promised him the victory in the quarrel thrust so unexpectedly and seemingly unreasonably upon him. And Firebrace in vain raised his voice in expostulation; and the smiths crowded towards the scene of action, in expectation of witnessing that most amusing of all spectacles to the popular eye, a hand-to-hand combat, when the whole affair came to as sudden a termination as the commencement.

Far from meeting his antagonist in the manner he evidently calculated, with *all* the finer tricks of assault and fence, Captain Cromwell brought his massive broadsword with so tremendous a force and clash upon the cavalier's bright but much slenderer blade, that, to the infinite astonishment and chagrin of Edward Holte, it was in a manner dashed to pieces in his hand; and

he found himself with little more than the bilt of his weapon left in his grasp, defenceless and unarmed, before his very slightly provoked but apparently strongly exasperated foe!

‘Ho, so, even as I thought; yonder foreign kickshaw is no match for a blade of Tubal Bromycham’s tempering, when he is in earnest at his work,’ said Cromwell, apparently in no wise elated at his success, but adding, in a very calm and business-like manner, ‘Do you yield you now, Master Holte, as my prisoner, or must I grapple with you for the mastery?’

‘How mean you, rude man! speaking thus to an antagonist so foully and dishonestly taken at an advantage?’ exclaimed young Holte, exasperated to a degree that removed him far beyond the restraint of prudence.

‘Nay, then, it shall be man to man; a fair up-and-down wrestle, until I bind you as fast as Samson in your own love-locks!’ returned Cromwell, suddenly casting away his own sword, and, yet more to the cavalier’s astonishment, throwing himself with his whole weight upon him, and grappling him as if for a wrestling match.

The elegant but slender and youthful figure of the heir of Aston was certainly not fitted for such an encounter with the powerfully muscular, heavy, and matured frame of the Parliament officer. Yet he met a strong resistance, as if he too were not altogether unaccustomed to the species of contest; and, although Cromwell several times lifted him with the force of a giant from his feet into the air, Edward contrived, with singular dexterity, always to alight again upon them; and even at last, by an active manœuvre, which the

captain seemed not to expect or understand, leaped fairly over his massive shoulder behind him. Reasonably then, considering that he had had enough of this kind of sport in so unfair a field, Edward Holte determined to make use of the opportunity to effect his escape. He therefore brushed through the group of staring Cyclopes—who, admiring his courage and dexterity, offered no hindrance—and rushed towards the exit of the smithy, where he expected to find his horses and armed servants.

And so, indeed, they were there, but gazing with a consternation of their own in quite a different direction to the one their master arrived in. And Edward also discerned, with no light increase of alarm and surprise, the approach of a great mob from the Bull Ring, which came pouring down Deritend in a strangely confused and tumultuous way; neither had he time to reach up to the holsters of his saddle for the pair of pistols in it, ere again the powerful clutch of Cromwell pinioned both his arms down to his sides.

‘Whither away, my master?’ he exclaimed. ‘Let us have it out fairly. But here come readier and rasher allies for me than our worthy master armourer and his beef-brained hammerers. There’s a jolly, shouting mob, such as we frightened the King away from Whitehall withal! On their lives, bid your serving-men keep the peace, or I will set the rabble on you in a fashion that—Ho, my master! What ho, Tubal Bromycham! in God and the Parliament’s names, aid me to make captives of these delinquent enemies to both.’

It was indeed the very rabble raised in commotion by the eloquent ravings of the Nottingham refugee, still headed by him and Tubal Bromycham, which now

came pouring down Deritend in a shouting, laughing, yelling, limb-straining mass. For, having succeeded in effecting the overthrow of the supposed emblem of superstition, the rioters—so they might be called—had been further moved by some capricious impulse of the popular mind, to resolve upon consigning the massive image—which they had found it impossible to destroy—to the waters of the Rea.

CHAPTER XI.

A PRISONER OF LOVE AND WAR.

TRUE to their proper mechanical genius, or instructed by their leaders, the Birmingham mobsters came drawing the ponderous image—which, otherwise, might possibly have offered a passive resistance of weight not easily to be overcome—on a set of iron rollers, placed and replaced in the way with emulous zeal, with ropes round its neck and the rest of the prostrate main mass. Men dragged at these over their shoulders, furiously urged on in the good work by Wrath-of-God Whitehall, whose flimsy skeleton could give no other assistance, while Tubal Bromycham did the work of three strong men—or, rather, of the strongest cart-horse—in his actual person. In this manner engaged, the whole rabble, unluckily for Edward Holte, came rolling towards the Crown Forge at the very moment when his former foe had again seized him in his unkind embrace.

Tubal, hearing his name called in a voice which he very well knew, ceased his exertions, and as he was the main strength of the movement, the whole rabble came to a halt before Firebrace's house. And as the people followed their leader, again, in hurrying up to ascertain the meaning of the strange grouping at the gateway, Edward Holte found his line of retreat still more

effectively cut off by their advance than his own seizure from behind.

Meanwhile, but perhaps rather to the increase of the cavalier's annoyance, the uproar had summoned a fairer auditor to the window projecting over the porch of the Old Crown. The lattice on one side of the window flew open, and Mistress Dorothy Firebrace looked out of it, with an expression of very great alarm and surprise, passing through many deepening shades in a single moment, as the aspect of things below more clearly struck her.

‘Hillo, Master Cromwell! what is the matter here?’ exclaimed Tubal, approaching; but, strangely enough, as his eye fell upon Edward Holte, his whole flushed and excited physiognomy lost its hues, and faded off into almost a deadly pallor!

Captain Cromwell lost no time in giving the required explanations, which he seasoned in a singularly artful manner, to win the adhesion and stir the exasperation of the already heated populace. But he addressed himself more particularly to Tubal. ‘Now is the time, or never, Master Bromycham,’ he said, with great eagerness, and with more significance to the person he spoke to than was exactly to be discerned in the sense of his words; ‘if you would deserve well of the Parliament in that great matter whereof we have had conference, to stand forth in its behalf, and enlist your famous and most serviceable town openly in the good cause!’

‘Aye, aye, openly, openly!’ yelled Whitehall. ‘Whoso denieth me before men, I will deny him before my Father! What is the work in hand—the work in hand, I say, to glorify the Lord?’

To Edward Holte's very considerable surprise, Tubal

made no response at first to the emissary of the Parliament's appeal. He looked at him, indeed, with a singular kind of stedfastness, and a shudder passed over his powerful frame as their eyes met. All this was, however, succeeded by a dark and angry flush of blood to his brow, and he exclaimed, 'Will he not go prisoner quietly? By Heaven, then, he shall feel my grip!'

'Shame on you, Tubal!—a thousand, thousand shames! So many on one defenceless and disarmed man!' exclaimed a voice at this moment from the window above—a female voice, but one full of the most eloquent fervour of emotion and appeal. It was the voice of Dorothy Firebrace; and Edward, glancing up at the beautiful, but now passionately excited and indignant countenance, gave a mournful and yet involuntarily pleased and tender smile.

Tubal himself apparently shrunk from the rebuke. 'Nay, 'tis none of my doing, Mistress Firebrace,' he said, in rather grumbling and surly tones.

'Whose doing is it, then? Not my father's! Is it this intrusive stranger's? And what has *he* to do to meddle among us, to the breach of all manners and decency towards a visitor and worthy neighbour of the town?' continued Dorothy, still highly excited. 'Where's my father? I see him not, or he would never suffer such insolencies to the son of his best and friendliest customer!'

'Heard man ever such a peal as this young girl's tongue rings out? Of a truth, ye of Birmingham must be the most henpecked husbands of all England, if the wives and matrons here keep the tune in their places!' exclaimed Cromwell. 'But, howbeit, these are not matters for women's meddling we are upon at

present. Tubal, take the prisoner to the town limbo under the Welsh Cross, where I have myself ere now seen pickpockets and other malefactors bestowed. We will see to his proper looking after there. Come, sir, will you go like a man on two legs, or must you be dragged and hounded thither like a timorous calf into the slaughter-house ?'

Edward glanced around him with eyes full of a very different expression—fierce with indignation and disdain. But the great array of rough force against him, convinced him that further resistance on his own or his servants' part, would only provoke an overwhelming demonstration of the superior strength of his adversaries.

'Do no base harm to us, since you have us so unfairly at your mercy; and look for certain to receive such chastisement of your unlawful assault and detention of the King's subjects, as his Majesty will be at hand shortly, with an army at his back, to inflict,' said he, shaking himself loose from Cromwell's hold. 'I yield myself your prisoner, since I cannot help myself; but not to you, sir, not to you!' he concluded, casting off Tubal Bromycham's grasp on his shoulder in turn, though it was gentle enough, with a violent gesture of anger and disdain. 'I will walk quietly, under my protest, to your prison.'

It was very plain in Tubal's countenance that this action roused a corresponding feeling of anger, resentment, and retaliation in his bosom, he even clutched back his sinewy arm, with the fist doubled, as if prompted to return it, where it had been dashed from, with emphasis. But either some restraining impulse of his own better nature, or the arrival of Firebrace and his

daughter, who made their appearance at this moment, together, from the porchway, arrested the first passionate movement—and a blow from Tubal Bromycham seldom required seconding.

On this arrival, it was at once obvious that his daughter's expostulations, which she had hurried from the window above to bestow on her sire, had produced a notable effect upon the armourer.

‘Nay, Tubal, lad, be quiet, ’tis an unarmed man. Master Cromwell, what you do is without due warrant. The young gentleman has in no way infringed upon our rights, or the customs of the trades of Birmingham. I am the master of the guild, and you cannot take him to the town lock-up without my orders or sanction.’

‘Will you hold him yourself, then, prisoner in your house, Master Firebrace, and go with me to the town-hall, to ask your fellow-citizens their judgment in the matter? I do not wish you to take a single step but such as the whole town shall be ready and willing to stride a pace beyond with you in,’ replied Cromwell, anxious above all things to implicate the master armourer in the transaction; and perceiving, in this suggestion, how to do so without startling the fears natural to all but the boldest and most determined spirits, in a solitary advance to danger.

‘Oh, yes, yes; let Master Holte remain here, under my father's assurance and protection. He would not be safe in the hands of these savage rioters, and then shall my father have to stand forth and answer for all!’ exclaimed Dorothy Firebrace, who appeared to dread nothing so much as to see the person of the heir of Aston placed in the custody of the exasperated multitude, whose unmanliness and violence were already so

formidably exhibited, and among whom, as she well knew, the entire Holte name was extremely in distaste and opprobrium.

‘I’m no jailer, Captain Cromwell. How can I take upon me this jailer’s charge?’ returned Firebrace, still not greatly relishing the part thrust upon him.

‘Let the young man give his parole he will not attempt to leave your precincts, or the town, until we determine what is fittest to be done with him, and he will need no locks and keys. Being of so honourable a degree of gentility, his word may doubtless be taken for a commoner’s bond!’ said Cromwell with a slight sneer. But Dorothy, turning to the cavalier, entreated him with so much passion and earnestness to accept the proposition, that he himself—not seeing how otherwise he could better his unfortunate position, and perhaps secretly tempted by the prospect of remaining within so pleasing a neighbourhood—lent some acquiescence to the arrangement.

‘I will give you my word to remain in Armourer Firebrace’s enclosures, on release or rescue, until you shall inform me of the good town’s resolution, whether it purposes to break all the natural laws of kind neighbourhoodship and hospitality, as well as the King’s, against me, or not; but nothing further. Do you take me into your charge on this footing, Master Firebrace? Aye or no?’

‘Truly, Master Holte, since it is of your own proffering, and you will bear me witness ’tis none of my doing or ordaining, but chiefly to save you from worse hands and treatment,’ the armourer replied, still anxious to secure his retreat from his dangerous predicament between the opposing parties. ‘Tubal, you also are as a

testimony to me that I do nought in this as of my own free choice. Look not so wrathfully at the young man, but keep yourself clear in all respects of an outrageousness, which, perchance, Master Cromwell may sometime find it a hard matter to answer.'

'I will take care Master Holte escapes not from whatever resolves the town may come to on his score, Father Zachariah! that is all,' returned Tubal; adding in a hoarse tone, within his teeth, 'And I wot well I owe none of his name a better turn!'

'Why, man, what harm has my name done to thee? Oh, I remember now; and has such black blood come down in your veins through the four generations of mortal men that have elapsed since then?' said Edward, looking scornfully at the famous blacksmith, whose animosity, he had no doubt, dated from the feud of a century old, the origin of which has been explained.

Tubal turned pale at the first part of this question, and Edward himself could not but feel that, although his eyes continued fixed fiercely upon him, the latter portion of his observation seemed scarcely to produce any effect upon him.

'What has your name done to me? What has it done to me?' Tubal muttered indistinctly to himself, while sparks of fire flashed from his blue eyes, as they might under his own vigorous strokes from the forge. 'Well, no matter, no matter! The day of vengeance must and shall come! But not now, nor on an unarmed and defenceless man!'

'Come into the house, sir, from this rude and angry rabble. I will be your willing, and yet most unwilling hostess, in my father's name,' said Dorothy; and it was not very clear whether her passionate glance did not

single out her betrothed as the representative of the body of individuals to whom those unpolite epithets were applied. And she seconded her invitation even by so decisive a measure as to place her arm in Edward Holte's, and draw him gently from the throng towards the court-yard steps, ascending into the private residence of Armourer Firebrace.

'Good troth! a lass who will take her own way like a spoilt only one as she is!' remarked Cromwell, looking discontentedly after the pair. 'Yet a lass of spirit, too, if she but showed it on the right side! Good faith, Master Bromycham—which is no evil-minded, devil-obtesting cavalier oath, but a sober and godly calling to witness of the truth—Good faith, your betrothed needs some careful looking after in such good company! And so we leave the young man, as you have said, in your earnest guardianship, while myself and Master Firebrace make known to the townsmen what is done in the affair, and ask their further counsel and support. Ho, there, which among ye here is the town-crier; for, sure, he will make one in such an onset of marrowbones and cleavers as is here?'

'Yea, verily; I, though unworthy, am the man—*Accepted Clavers* by name!' [said a voice from the throng, which sounded like the notes of a cracked trumpet, it was at once so shrill, dissonant, and devoid of control; and a long, lean figure on crutches, with two wooden legs from about the middle of the lower division of the human frame, hopped and thrust itself forward.

'They did not choose thee, then, 'tis plain, when the town needed rapid intelligence, *Accepted Clavers*! However, if the office be thine, do it with all diligence, and go round Birmingham town, and summon a full

meeting of the worthy people thereof at the Guildhall, in the name of the Master Armourer Firebrace,' said Cromwell, in accents of command which no one seemed now to dispute. *Accepted* himself—who had probably been promoted to his office as a charitable provision after the loss of his limbs, in some of the dangerous manufactures of the town—instantly raised a large bell, and rang out a most formidable jangling peal, which he followed up by uttering the proclamation in proper official form, and hobbled off to spread it through the town. After this, Captain Cromwell paused merely to disarm the two astonished and panic-stricken domestics of Aston, whom he ordered to dismount, and directed Tubal to consign to the lock-up at the Welsh Cross. The horses themselves of these men, as well as that of Edward Holte, he seemed to seize upon as spoil of the Egyptians, for he ordered one of Firebrace's smiths to lead them to the inn where he lodged, behind St. Martin's, called the Black Boy and Woolpack. And the active agent of the Parliament completed his arrangements by walking off with the master armourer—almost evidently against his will—to the town hall.

The mob, meanwhile, with characteristic inconstancy, hearing of what was up in that direction, abandoned the fallen statue in the roadway, and principally scudded off after the crier, leaving Wrath-of-God Whitehall vainly clamouring for assistance to complete the work of casting the profane image into the Rea. However, one of the faithful few who remained, and who seemed, by his rainbow-hued arms and apron, a dyer, offered the poor apostle shelter and food in his dwelling in Digbeth; which, in the relapse from his over-wrought feelings and disappointment, luckless Flotsam was glad to accept.

CHAPTER XII.

A PURITAN HOUSEHOLD.

WHILE the astute and daring parliamentarian thus alarmed the town, and summoned its principal citizens to a conference which he intended should produce momentous results, Dorothy Firebrace eagerly completed the rescue of the object of his first violent demonstration. Yet she was scarcely satisfied that Edward Holte was safe from the insults of the mob, until some time after she had escorted him into the interior of the house, and all noise of the tumultuous gathering had died away from the immediate neighbourhood of the Crown Forge. Until then, she seemed determined to keep him company—doubtless with a view to watch over his safety—very unusually reversing the relation of the sexes. And Edward Holte, who perceived her motive, was at once piqued and gratified with its effects. The latter feeling, to say the truth, much predominating, and leaving him very little disposed to find fault with whatsoever might be the consequence of so agreeable a result.

Armourer Firebrace's residence proved to be on as substantial and roomy a scale inside as out. The apartment Dorothy showed him into was very irregular in shape, and low in the ceiling, but it was of an extent

that would be thought ample for half-a-dozen chambers in our day. It was the common sitting-room of the family, on the second story; and the primitive state of manners was evinced by a considerable recess in it being used as a kitchen, while other divisions were evidently set apart as convenient store-rooms to supply the needfuls of the culinary art. About a third of the whole was as clearly assigned as a sort of parlour for the heads of the household, being paved with beautifully-flowered Dutch tiles, and very solidly furnished with table, settle, and chairs, of black oak, so heavy with material as almost to be immovable, and curiously carved with knots of oak leaves, oak apples, and acorns: the work, no doubt, of a remote period, from the look of the pieces, which were actually worn into sitting-places, like our modern Windsor chairs, by the simple pressure of the weighty generations that had successively occupied them.

The original appearance of the whole, to a modern eye, would have been completed by the sight of three or four distaffs set about the apartment, two of which were in actual use at the moment, under the nimble and dexterous managing of as many handmaidens of the armourer's establishment.

An old woman, who probably united the offices of cook and housekeeper—the same that had spoken to Edward Holte at the draw-well—was busied in some department of her art at the kitchen fire. Three massive doors seemed to open into contiguous chambers, and there were windows on each side, high and narrow, and cross-barred with iron, to form the lattice panes—so narrow, that when the fire-light glowed upon them, they looked little bigger, and quite as handsome, as

good-sized rubies. Nor could they be opened from either inside or outside, sufficient air being supposed—and with reason—to be provided from the door communicating with the courtyard gallery, and the several wide open chimney-places of the chamber.

The women, young and old, looked with surprise at the visitor, while Edward, with the natural uneasy feeling of a prisoner, walked to the windows to see what they gave out upon.

One range, he found, overlooked the smithy yard; the other a garden and orchard; of no great extent, and speedily bounded by the waters of the Rea.

Dorothy's interest in her handsome *protégé* had, meanwhile, not diminished with the cessation of any immediate danger to him. Perhaps, indeed, in the absorption of her mind, she thought so little of herself as not to reflect that she followed on Edward's steps with singular closeness, as if she had a right to be with him, and to guard him from any remaining possibility of harm.

'No,' she said, answering the cavalier's look, though he said nothing, after inspecting the windows, 'they will not open; but, in recompense, if you close the door by which we entered, I doubt if all my father's smiths together, armed with their best crow-bars, could force a way in for hours; and even then there is further retreat. The door yonder opens into our guest chamber, and is nearly as strong, with bolt and bar, as that to the open way.'

'You apprehend, then, still for me, Mistress Fire-brace?' said Edward; adding, with a mingled expression of shame and indignation, 'But, in truth, I am deprived of all defence by yonder powerful swash-buckler taking

me so unfairly with his heavy metal against a common rapier.'

'Good troth, do I, Master Holte!' the fair damsel replied, speaking in a low tone, as if she did not wish to be overheard by the other women present. 'The desperate man of whom you speak, and who has placed his head on the traitor's block by half that he hath already done, has evidently taken my father under his sway and urging; and my father is as a ship with full-spread sails for the blustering breeze that is abroad to catch and send headlong through the tempest. He has great influence also with Tubal Bromycham, my *betrothed husband* (these latter words she pronounced with a degree of falter and hesitation that pleased Edward), and there are, I think, secret counsels and devices hatching between them. Then again, my father himself always suspects—I can gather, though he has never openly declared his thoughts to me—that Tubal has suffered some special wrong or indignity at the hands of Sir Thomas Holte, likely to render him bitter and exasperate against his son. Nay, I think something more than that old grudge between your names, for he scarcely ever alluded to that of old times; but since his dismissal from the works of Aston, I myself have heard Tubal give vent, as it were, in blurts of fire from a closed furnace, to a deep smouldering of hatred and revenge in his heart against that haughty gentleman, which it may well be he will not be sorry to find occasion to blaze forth upon the son.'

'Let him give me fair play—let any man—and I fear not the worst that mortal hate can devise against me!' returned Edward, with an angry flush. 'But what you say, as regards the worthy blacksmith, may be true.

My father is a man of choleric temper and reckless impulses, and withal can hold to his feelings of revenge and bitterness as long as others of a calmer and slower implacability. But I should not speak this of a father, who, I know, will be driven to extremity by this outrage and insult in my person to his house.'

'And that is what I most fear,' said Dorothy, with sudden eagerness. 'Oh, master Holte! it would put everlasting ill blood between our names too—I mean, between the good town and Aston Hall, for ever—if Sir Thomas should attempt your rescue with a violent hand.'

'So it would, dear Mistress Firebrace, since you so kindly interest yourself in my favour. It is the very course Sir Thomas is likely to throw himself upon. It is not likely he will suffer me to remain in the hands of a brutish and violent mob, or to be dragged a prisoner to London at the behest of a member of the traitorous Parliament, to be detained as a hostage, and submit to what other ill usage their unlawful tyranny may determine upon.'

'What a dreadful equality of mischief, and on all hands!' said Dorothy, the tears springing in her glowing eyes. 'But the worst of it is, Master Holte, that unless your father has a much greater and readier force at home than any we have heard of in Birmingham, he will but rush upon his own destruction if he comes among us, as you think probable. At least, if that happens, which I am well assured will happen, and Captain Cromwell induces our townsmen to take to the arms, which you have yourself seen are in readiness for deadly wielding, even in unpractised hands.'

'It is very true,' said Edward, much struck by this

view of things. 'The yeoman riders whom I am to form into a troop are still scattered far and near in the farms and homesteads of our manors. No arms are as yet provided for them, and only plough horses and unbroken colts collected at Sutton; yet my father is full likely to place himself at the head of his household servants, with a few rusty pikes and pitchforks in their hands, and rush unknowingly upon some great shame and disaster in the town!'

'But if Sir Thomas were warned of the danger, of the true state of things—think you he would persevere?' said Dorothy, with peculiar earnestness.

'He were mad to do so—especially as he knows well the King will speedily march this way with a competent force to the rescue of his faithful subjects in jeopardy—if only he could be made to see I am in no pressing immediateness of danger to life or limb; for my liberty, fairest mistress,' Edward concluded, with a resumption of all the warmth and gallantry of his manner in their first interview, naturally rekindled by the beauty and devotion to his service evinced by the lovely young creature before him, 'I shall not regret it in a captivity embellished by so fair a presence.'

Dorothy blushed deeply, and replied, in an embarrassed undertone, 'Oh, I am certain no ill of that kind will befall you while you are under the safeguard of my father's roof. And if any of his family should do you the good service to warn your father against the rash extremities that are to be feared on his part, you will surely be a pleader with the King—should he show himself the master soon—to forgive what my father may be set upon to do by craftier and desperate men!'

'I should need no other reason for interference of the

sort, than the remembrance that the master armourer is your father, gentle Dorothy!' said the cavalier, in so sweet and languishing a tone that the fair Puritan lowered her eyes, while some sweetness seemed to flow, with a glide of honey, to her very heart.

'But I will deserve the kindness, Master Holte,' she replied, in tones that were indeed an unconscious echo of those addressed to her, 'for I will myself undertake the business of warning Sir Thomas Holte against any rash onset on our prepared and armed town.'

'You, Mistress Firebrace?'

'Hush! speak low. Old Mahala has long been staring at us; and though she be in a measure deaf, our handmaidens around have ears as nimble as mice in a pantry,' said Dorothy, resuming. 'Yes, I, sir! I alone. There is no one else in the town whom I could ask or trust to go upon such an enterprise. I can easily devise an excuse for a two-hour's absence, and no more will be needed. I know the way well to Aston Hall, for I used often to ride there when a child, in my father's carts, from the forge with Tubal. Nay, you yourself erewhile seemed to remember me on one of those visits—as, in good troth, I do well remember to have espied your honourable self, busy at your horsemanship in the chestnut paddock. On so wild a steed, methought, you flew, rather than rode, around the course.'

'Was it there? I thought it was in Birmingham I first thought you the loveliest child, as I now deem you the completest woman—I mean, I thought I remembered you first when I came to Birmingham with my father concerning the suit of armour he sent us as a present and proof of the town's skill, and of his own gratitude for his baronetcy to my Lord of Buckingham.

But he was slain by bloody Felton or ever he put it on, poor Duke!’

‘It was at Aston, howbeit, I remember *you* first—to say *remember!*’ replied Mistress Firebrace, with an emphasis on the word that certainly meant a great deal more than the word itself. ‘Neither is it far thither for a light-footed maiden, unaccustomed to any other conveyance than her own. All that is necessary is that you should give me some credential to your father—a letter, perchance, since you best know how to influence his mind, which I will most faithfully and assuredly deliver.’

‘But if you should be found doing me this service, what will your townsmen judge of it?’

‘It matters little; they cannot harm me while my father is chief man in it. Nay, what can they wish for more themselves than to avoid a passionate onset from Aston? Then, who could suspect Zachariah Firebrace’s daughter of such an errand? Neither do I run much risk—an insignificant girl—of being missed, in the present giddiness and turmoil of the town.’

Edward Holte was strongly moved and softened by this warmth of disinterested zeal on the part of a youthful woman towards one who, after all, was little other than a stranger to her a few hours previously. And this emotion quivered in all his utterance, as he said; ‘But I know not how I can have merited so kind an interest in my welfare, or what I can do to show my gratitude. Only, indeed, my father’s resentment of the outrage put upon me may well be mollified by so much goodness, and a happy reconciliation be brought about. It is very plain that this presumptuous stranger, who has undertaken to rule the roost in Birmingham, desires

nothing so much as to drive us all to open feud and hostilities. We will not play his game. I will write the letter, dear mistress, if you will furnish me with the means.'

'But it must be done out of observation,' said Mistress Firebrace, all her beauty brightening into strong relief in the lustre of satisfaction with which she felt that she had inspired. 'And now, in the great chamber yonder, you will find all that is needful to refresh a wayfarer, and moreover pen, paper, and sealing-wax, as they were left by Master Cromwell, when of late Tubal and he were buried there in drawing up some statement of rights and wrongs—I know not well which, on his part—to the parliament.'

Better pleased than ever with the careless, almost the scornful tone, in which this last allusion was made to her betrothed and his pretensions, Edward Holte gratefully accepted the proffer; and, advancing as he was directed, speedily found himself in the best bedchamber of the house; which, in those rude and barbarous times, was always dedicated to the use of the guest and stranger.

Dorothy remained for some minutes plunged in reverie at the farthest window where this colloquy had taken place, chiefly in too low a tone to be overheard even by the evidently curious female listeners. Then, almost starting back to consciousness, she desired old Mahala to hasten and serve the dinner; and, murmuring something about intending herself to go to the Cherry Orchards (a noted place of sportive resort in the fruit season for the young people of both sexes, at that time, in Birmingham), she seemed to think she had given reason enough for retiring to dress herself in a suit of bettermost out-of-doors apparel.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOROTHY'S MISSION.

To the astonishment, and almost, indeed, alarm of the old housekeeper, Mistress Firebrace made no secret, on her return, of her intention to dine at once with the stranger guest, without awaiting her father's arrival home.

‘He will most likely be detained long by the town's riotous doings to-day at the Guildhall, Mother Mahala,’ the armourer's daughter observed, in her usual familiarly affectionate style to the old woman, who had been a servant in the family long before she was born, ‘and I am sure he would not be pleased his guest should be kept so long waiting, for a sorry meal at best, since my marketing was so spoiled. And so, Mahala, I want to be away to the Cherry Orchard in time to have the sun about me when I come home. Tamar Mortlock and Thanks-be Middlemore are both to be there, and tell me 'tis the rarest junketing in nature to pluck the fresh fruit with one's own hands from the trees there.’

Even this was not wonderful enough, in the way of departure from precedents. When Mahala was ready to serve dinner, the young cavalier, having re-entered, refreshed from his day of dust and unexpected contest, the housekeeper desired one of her handmaidens to

summon Master Bromycham — evidently an unusual proceeding; but Dorothy Firebrace again interfered, and with the firmness and mastery of one who meant to be obeyed. 'No, Ringan,' she said, 'go not. Tubal is of those who have violently and, belike, unlawfully, imprisoned this gentleman. He will scarcely care to break bread with him.'

By this time, of course, the meaning of the cavalier stranger's appearance and entertainment in the house had spread in the Firebrace establishment, and the observation ought not to have excited so much surprise. But things were very methodically conducted there, and so marked a departure from the set-down rule could not but make the folks wonder.

Dorothy, however—who, as has been seen—was a girl of independent and resolute character—concerned herself little about opinions which could not be enforced. She seated herself at table with Master Holte, at his earnest solicitation, though she at first seemed as if she did not purpose to join him at the meal, but to see that he was well attended to. And the handsome pair were soon engaged over their viands in an earnest and close conversation.

Edward informed his fair hostess that, agreeably to her desire, he had written a letter to his father, containing the most favourable account he could deliver of his arrest and present condition, and pointing out the danger of any interference in his behalf, without an adequate force, in the mutinous and revolted state of Birmingham—accompanied with a full recital of the exceeding kindness he had received at the hands of the young damsel, Master Armourer Firebrace's daughter, who had generously consented to carry the warning he

proposed to give to his dear parent, at Aston Hall. He had then stated the reasons, including the presence of an active agent of the Parliament, which rendered it dangerous and hopeless to attempt a forcible rescue, and his earnest request that none such might be attempted, until the King's arrival, with his army in full force, might render resistance useless, and therefore not likely to be attempted. In conclusion, Edward Holte stated—and no doubt with perfect truth—that he recommended his fair, and most kindly and well-intentioned messenger to his father's highest respect and hospitable entertainment.

All this greatly delighted the object of the recommendation; and she listened, without any weariness, to Edward Holte's further reiterated counsels in the matter. He speedily, however, ascertained that she was thoroughly conversant with the way to Aston Hall. All that he found it advisable to say to her on that score being reducible, at last, to two points—one being not to approach any herd of grazing deer, which at that season were dangerous, and to keep the lower pathway of the park. There was also a very savage bull, he said, kept company with the kine over a portion of the upper ground, but he had seen it safely enclosed in a paddock in the morning. She could easily perceive it at a distance, and avoid the spot. Dorothy smiled, and said that every one had heard of the Bull of Aston, from its having gored several trespassers who had come upon it unawares; without, however, alluding to the strong belief in the town that Sir Thomas, at times, permitted the savage creature the range of his park, to diffuse a salutary, indistinct awe of its presence, against the not unfrequent night-maraudings after his game.

But the second branch of Edward Holte's counsel concerned a different class of harmful creature ; so, at least—in spite of the guarded expressions he employed—it was pretty plain he considered his illegitimate brother, Richard, who, it appeared, was not graced with the family name, in addition, but bore his mother's disgraced one of Grimsorwe.

'My father's youth was full of wild distempered heats, which scarcely, even now, the snow that hangs upon his beard has something cooled,' Edward Holte said, apologetically ; 'and Richard is his son, by a poor country wench, who came by an untimely end through her own impatience and melancholy, when my father married my mother, a lady of his own degree. Richard is my elder, so, and perchance owes me some grudge for the fitting legal preferences I enjoy, and it may be his mother's evil haps also ; for though Sir Thomas, in a sort, acknowledges him as his issue, and, taking compassion on his orphaned estate, reared him partly with me at the Hall, almost as a gentleman of equal degree (scarcely to my lady-mother's satisfaction), still Richard never was much more to me than a sullen and unwilling schoolfellow with our masters ; never a pleasant playfellow in our younger years, or companion in more advanced maturity. So that we were both well pleased when my father's appointment of our different conditions in life—he to be a lawyer, I a soldier—finally separated us in our jutting-ribbed and unwilling yoking together. But, trust me, I do not think Richard's abode in London among the scriveners, and his courses there, have tended to make him a better man or a truer brother, though by a left-handed kinsmanship, as 'tis. I am sure he envies bitterly still at my undeniable heirship

and rights, as my father's eldest lawfully-born son. It was but this very morning I had a snarling with him at my setting forth, which induced my fair haughty sister to take up a sneering challenge on his part, and equip me with those Queen's marigolds, which have found so much worthier a possessor now. But, for these reasons, I advise you not to make so subtle and ill-disposed a gownsman, any party in this controversy with your angry town. And for another better, or rather worse, cause,' the young heir of Aston continued, with a vague but singularly strongly excited sentiment of jealousy kindling amid that first bright flame that had invaded his bosom, 'I rede you, if possible, keep your fair self out of Dick Grimsorwe's bold and greedy eye-shot; for I have heard tales of his doings in London—and not reported either by ill-wishers, Sir Thomas taking too much delight in such discourse—that show he is my father's true son in all that regards women, as I trust I am myself my own pure and high-born mother's. But Richard takes a bastard's view, I misdoubt, in every and all things! Of this no more at present, dear Mistress Firebrace, since I see it troubles you; but, beholding how fair you are, and knowing what dis-esteem my brother merits, rather than Sir Thomas's boisterous applause, for his unbridled gamesomeness of the kind—which is not gamesomeness, either, for he even sins like a gownsman, with a certain gravity and solemnity of wickedness—I could not but utter some words of warning also in that respect.'

'I thank you, sir,' said Dorothy, who had coloured violently during these latter observations, 'but can but think your favour discerns in me allures which will remain invisible to all other eyes; and hope that in

anywise you speak less brotherly in this than even so disgraced a half-blood may fairly claim. But have you the letter ready?' she concluded, in a lower tone, though the younger handmaidens kept at a respectful distance, whirring at their wheels, during the repast, and Mahala had fallen asleep to the click-clack music of her unstopped smoke-jack. 'I would be afoot and away before my father's return.'

Edward perceived the necessity of the case, and though very loth to part with his fair companion, produced the rescript in question, on the demand, from beneath his cloak. It was duly folded, and sealed with the family coat of arms and crest, which he carried in a signet ring—the squirrel munching a nut, surrounded by the Holte motto—certainly of a significance seldom more inappropriately bestowed—'*Exaltavit humiles*' ('The humble shall be exalted.')

Dorothy then disappeared for a few moments into another of those principal doors which it was right to suppose admitted into her own private apartment; and shortly after reappeared in a long mantle and hood, the usual going-out costume of the class she belonged to. Only, as the Puritans had set their faces against all lively colours and gaiety in apparel, the armourer's daughter had been obliged to content herself with a soft gray woollen stuff; which, however, she had so judiciously fitted and folded to her frame, that it became her like the changeable plumage of a wood-pigeon. Edward Holte, indeed, made some such gentle remark, in tones as soft and cooing as a loving mate of the kind might in a leafy covert, lending the maiden his hand the while to escort her to the gallery exit. Beyond that, she would not suffer his attendance; not, certainly, for

lack of a goodwill to hear more such sweet words, warbled so tenderly!

But Dorothy need not have been so apprehensive of observation. On descending in the stithy-yard she was surprised at the silence that reigned in a place usually so noisy, and which in the absorption of her own attention upstairs she had not hitherto noticed. Most of the forge-fires were also at a very low fuelling, and some of them were burned out. A little hump-backed urchin, who usually officiated as a bellows-blower, remained the sole representative of perhaps a score of strong-boned smiths; and he it was who informed the young mistress of the Old Crown that the master armourer had sent for Tubal and all the rest of his men to the market-place.

These tidings confirmed Dorothy in her conviction that Captain Cromwell would retain and use his ascendancy in the councils of the town, and hastened her own resolves. But, aware now of the movement in it, Dorothy only proceeded a short distance in her pretended direction to the Cherry Orchard to deceive any observation that might follow her, and then turned aside into the fields along the winding course of the Rea, which she knew would conduct her, though not so easily as by the highway through Birmingham, to Aston Hall.

Dorothy Firebrace was not a girl of modern nerves, but a healthy, blooming, vigorous, generous-hearted young woman of her own times, who had no species of dread of anything but real and tangible danger, and not much of that. A girl of perhaps too sudden and passionate impulses, but of unquailing constancy and resolve in carrying out whatever her warmer feelings and energetic imagination suggested either as a duty of heart or honour. As an indulged only child, she was

also accustomed to follow the bent of her own will, and pursue more solitary and unsupported courses of action than the members of numerous families are wont. Consequently the knowledge that she was pursuing a purpose of her own, which she considered just and kind, was a sufficient incentive and encouragement to her, and the silence and solitude of the then unfrequented pathways from Deritend to Aston Park, had no alarms for her.

The inclosure alluded to extended, at this period, almost to the present goods' station of the London and North-Western Railway, instead of forming a boundary a mile and a half, or more, beyond it. Consequently Dorothy Firebrace was not long before she reached an opening in the park palings, which was entered by a stile from Birmingham, and was the usual adit to a footpath conducting, for ordinary purposes of communication, to the Hall. The way then became certainly exceedingly lonesome. Anon, even the companionship of the river deserted her; and as Aston Park had not been inclosed from common-land during many years, this part of the journey assumed then a very dreary aspect. A hillocky waste, still covered chiefly with furze and stunted underwood, was before her, which was some time before it changed gradually into a flow of richer meadows and woodland, liberally planted, but with still young and scantily-grown wood.

By-and-bye, however, the character of the scenery underwent a new mutation, as Dorothy's light and rapid step conducted her nearer to the ancient settlement of Aston, a manor and lordship that has been the seat and residence of several families of distinction so far back as the Anglo-Saxon era. Sir Thomas Holte had, in fact,

cleared away an ancient ruinous mansion, erected by one Godmund, before the conquest, to make room for his span-new edifice. But, with better taste than has been evinced by its modern many-headed proprietary, left most of the towering ancient wood and scattered trees of his predecessors standing—a loss nothing can now repair, the axe having levelled, in a few day's strokes, the slow product of centuries.

Dorothy had now to pass through a wood of such extent, before reaching the Hall, that it was almost entitled to the more dignified appellation of forest. And this stretched along a great reach of country, in a direction below the species of elevated platform on which the mansion stood, considerably into the neighbouring county of Stafford; besides thickly screening it on the side towards Birmingham. This lighter and more scattered part of the wood was to be traversed by Dorothy Firebrace, and then she considered more than three lengths of her journey would be happily over. It was closely in view; but before arriving there, the armourer's daughter was destined to come upon an adventure not a little trying, even for mettle dauntless as was hers.

She had left a mill some distance behind, turned by water-power, at a place where there is now an extensive manufactory known as the Aston Brook Works, when the girl's attention was suddenly caught by hearing an extraordinary trampling sound approaching her; and she had hardly time to spring up a sandy hedging of the pathway, which at this point was broad and deeply plunged into the ground, ere she perceived a great number of deer rush clattering past, as if from the pursuit of some fiercer animal—either dog or man,

Dorothy thought; but had scarcely time to congratulate herself on her escape from so undistinguishing a flight and encounter, ere she was herself seized with a much keener kind of alarm than she would have felt from either class of pursuit, by the more portentous apparition of the ferocious Bull of Aston! It came careering madly along the road, with its monstrous head and horns lowered for goring whatever it might encounter worth the trouble—the saliva flinging in great flakes of foam from its large tongue whenever it tossed its head up, which it did as often as it thought it advisable to keep up the terrors of the pursuit with a dreadful bellowing.

The creature's rage had probably been excited by too presumptuous an approach, on the part of the deer, to its private inclosures; and it had broken bounds to repel the invasion of its rights, as probably it considered the exclusive use of that pasture; or perhaps the scent of the deer at this season offended the pure nostrils of a member of the ox tribe. Dorothy Firebrace paused not to reason on the why and the wherefore, but betook herself at once to flight. Whither, she scarcely heeded, and probably hardly knew, merely adopting the only turn on the rugged road she was aware of, and which she remembered to have passed about midway between this unlucky spot and the water-mill.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WITCH OF ASTON.

DOROTHY'S almost flying footsteps luckily gained the by-path considerably ahead of the dreadful animal, and it thundered past the turning, like a cannon ball on its errand of destruction. But such was the dismay the sight of the headlong mass of brown and horns excited even in her courageous nature, that when at last she ventured to pause for breath, the armourer's daughter could not make up her resolution to return and resume the beaten way across the park to Aston Hall. She dreaded—and it was likely enough—that wearied of its chase, or stopped by the roaring waters of the mill brook, the beast would return, and retrace the road to its pastures or the herd of cows, which Dorothy had observed dotting the country before her to the skirts of Aston Wood. Imagining, therefore, that her safest progress would be to continue on the by-path, which evidently led to some outlet, until she could ascertain the position of the mansion, and make for it by some roundabout, she did so. But advancing over some very rough and deep-rutted ground, she observed that it began to descend rapidly, and by degrees to grow shaded and closed in with very lofty and ancient trees. Dorothy concluded, therefore, that she had actually

entered Aston Wood by an indirect route, and that if she could only fall upon a path turning off in the direction of the one she had been driven from, she should be able to reach the hall along the bottom of the valley, as easily almost as if she had continued on the upland.

With this idea, she again hastened her pace, and though the road began to get swampy and grass-overgrown under the shadow of the trees, the light-footed maiden thought very little of these difficulties. But trimly picking her way, proceeded at a pace that ought speedily to have conducted her to her destination, had she not been deceived in her notion of the probabilities of the ground, for, instead of arriving at a cross path to ascend safely from the wood, she came at last, to her surprise and vexation, upon the margin of an extensive pool of water.

The great circumference of this pool almost entitled it to be considered as a lake. Of artificial creation, it is true, as pretty plainly appeared from its accurate ovaling, and the smooth belt of verdure that ringed it in, and the regularly planted rows of chestnut and lime trees bordering its circuit. There were also elaborately twisted rustic seats placed under some of the leafier foresters, and a handsome boat-house was built on the edge—a sort of miniature in wood, in the style of the Aston Hall mansion house, with its minareted roof. Dorothy easily recognised this, and perceived at once that she was in a portion of the Pleasaunce (as it was called) known as the Fish Stews; but on the wrong side of the water from the Hall, the variegated summits of which she now perceived, crowning an eminence above the tops of a thick intervening woodland on the other side.

As has been remarked, the pond was of an extent that greatly perplexed Dorothy Firebrace at the notion of having to make its round to reach Aston Hall; but there seemed no better to be done at first, until proceeding some distance she perceived something not quite at the further end, on her right, that resembled a bridge, over a narrowing neck of the water; and she directed her steps, without further loss of time, thither.

This whole scene was entirely new, in its present ornamental arrangement, to Dorothy Firebrace, being part of the improvements carried out by Sir Thomas Holte, after he had finished his mansion inside and out. There had been a swampy lake there always, but now the margin of the pool was level, well-drained into the water-bed, and as green as emerald. The August sun was still lustrous in the sky, though tending downward, and piercing the trunks of the trees with splendid transverse gleams of light. It was a pleasant, though a solitary scene; and so continued for a good stretch of the broad silvery expanse, where the numerous finny inhabitants leaped and disported themselves in pursuit of their humming and gilded prey.

But on a sudden, Dorothy Firebrace was aware she was coming on a very strongly opposed change of appearance in the scene. The bridge, as she had supposed what she saw at a distance, proved, on a nearer approach, to be a series of wooden piles, set in a descent of water from a higher and far gloomier upper pool. Of limited extent, indeed, bearing to the larger about the relation of the head to the body, but so hemmed in and blackly overshadowed by ancient wood and under-wood, that it seemed as if the confined water was in reality a huge blotch of ink! Dorothy considered to

herself they must be very dismal fish indeed that abode in this receptacle; but, perceiving that the timber heads of the weir were crossed by planks at convenient intervals for stepping, she had no doubt these were used as a bridge, and took heart to proceed.

Approaching the weir, the path suddenly took a plunge into a very thick and tangled piece of brushwood; emerging from which, Dorothy found herself, not without some satisfaction, at the back of a cottage, close on the water, that she had not hitherto observed. To say truth, it was little better than a hut of the very poorest description, such as might, at some period, have furnished a game or fish watcher a wretched shelter against wind and rain of a night. It was formed of branches of trees, wattled together and plastered with mud, with a thatched roof that sloped almost to the ground, and was covered with a beautiful, but damp and unwholesome, coating of the brightest green moss.

The sight of any species of human habitation was not, however, without attraction for Dorothy at this moment, though she doubted very much whether this could be inhabited. Conceiving that if, nevertheless, it was, she might make inquiries that would enable to avoid further risk of mistaking her way, the astray armourer's daughter was about to cross round to what appeared to be the front of the hovel, when her attention was even startled by the sudden emergence of two figures before it.

They were, in fact, a duality of very remarkable appositions, and one of them a sufficiently unlikely personage for the scene.

This latter was still a young, but thoroughly matured man, as appeared from his firm and energetic stand and

general gait; tall and well-made, but with a remarkable slouchant and skulking carriage of the head, that perhaps attracted more attention to it than a bold and upright bearing might. Then, when you looked at the face, you were struck with a yet stronger sense of puzzle and doubt, at perceiving a countenance, handsomely featured in the main, but disfigured by the livid pallor of the complexion, and a dark, lurking, insidious glance.

This person was garbed—as was then the constant custom among members of that learned profession—in a lawyer's robe, such as is now worn only in court. But underneath it, it was plain, he wore a sword and high boots, like a cavalier of the time. Yet the weapon stuck out awkwardly behind him; and with the general sombre cast of his figures, suggested the idea of an evil intelligence disguised at all points, saving the 'irrepressible' tail.

This notion flashed hurriedly on Dorothy Firebrace's mind, and arrested her advance by a kind of instinctive forbidding, luckily before she had come out from the shadow of the trees and underwood massed at the turning to the weir-dam; and it was greatly heightened in her fancy by a recognition she made of the lawyer's companion, almost in the same glance. And, no wonder, since it was an old woman who enjoyed, far and near Aston, the then very dangerous reputation of a *witch*!

And, in truth, Maud Grimsorwe, such was her name, had all the outward appearance men's minds were wont, in those days, to associate with the kind of evil human-supernatural. She would have been tall, had she stood upright, but she was bent nearly to a bow with age and infirmity, and her strangely haggard, lean, and yet

infinitely wrinkled and puckered face, seemed to turn upward, almost from her waist, like a snake's from a darting curve. The old woman's singularly gleaming and lucid eyes greatly heightened this effect, coupled with the malicious and hateful expression of her countenance, which seemed formed for that of envious and revengeful passions. Her costume was in keeping with these personal characteristics, consisting chiefly of a gown that appeared as if fashioned out of some worn-out old patchquilt, it hung in such motley tatters about her haggish frame. The cone-shaped hat, over a discoloured, loose linen cap, that revealed her matted white locks, and the stick on which she leaned her tottering weight, were precisely such as we see ascribed to Mother Hubbard in the child's book. And, if not provided with a dog, like the heroine of that easy-rhymed legend, the Witch of Aston—so she was universally styled—cherished the society of a large black tom-cat, that mewed frightfully after her, and seemed, like its mistress, of some unknown age, and withered and starved to a frightful bony and hide-bound feline anatomy.

On her former visit to Aston, Dorothy Firebrace had more than once had this Warwickshire Sycorax pointed out to her as a dealer in forbidden and wicked arts and spells. She lived a solitary and shunned existence, saving, it was supposed, by such as needed her vicious aid in their exigencies. And the report may even be believed in our enlightened days (as they are stated to be), that, from her study and familiarity with herbs, the old woman was in possession of certain secrets, which she exercised to her own profit, and the dreadful depravation, morally and physically, of divers unhappy young creatures who resorted to her, for the means to obviate

and conceal the consequences of indulgence in unlicensed passion.

So, at least, vague but horrible rumours ran all over the country-side concerning old Maud Grimsorwe. It was a sneer well understood in Birmingham, when a girl, or unmarried woman, was told she ought to pay a visit to the Witch of Aston! But nothing, of course, was ever clearly known or proved against the supposed abettor or contriver of the imputed enormities, or else the power and influence of Sir Thomas Holte himself might not have availed to shelter Maud from the due punishment of her offences; and it might be supposed likely to be exerted in this terrible old lady's behalf, in consequence of her being the mother of the mother of his illegitimate son.

And yet, on the other hand, there was a well-supported belief that Sir Thomas Holte, during one portion of his career, was at bitter feud and hostility with the Witch of Aston.

She was said to be the last lineal descendant of those Grimsorwes who had usurped the inheritance of Aston from the wife of that deprived Lord of Birmingham who was ancestor of Tubal Bromycham. Her husband, who was also her cousin—it was he who had signed away the poor last vestiges of the family rights to Sir Thomas Holte; all but a scanty piece of ground of which his extravagance and villany could not deprive his wife and co-heiress. Precisely, indeed, the upper one of the Aston fish pools—that dark secluded lakelet Dorothy had remarked—where the finny tribe were spawned and waxed large, to supply the lower preserve. Sir Thomas had tried to secure this also; but a protracted lawsuit, resulting in the triumph and ruin of the weaker party,

had established old Maud Grimsorwe firmly in a possession which nothing, it appeared, could induce her to relinquish.

In reality, the old woman, with the recollection of the rights of her name, and the wrongs she had suffered in the person of her only child, her own bitter plainings of them, was much such an eyesore on Sir Thomas Holte's handsomely-rounded properties, as Mordecai presented at the exalted Haman's gates. Because *he* was there—poor, shivering, miserable representative of a down-crushed people—Haman had no joy of his life. Neither had Sir Thomas Holte, seemingly, for a long time, while this unhappy and injured hag persisted in retaining her position in the very midst and heart of his grand acquirements.

But the result of two trials, the invincible obstinacy of his antagonist, and, possibly, the friendly interceding of her relative, Richard Grimsorwe, as he advanced in life, with his father, had finally procured the Witch of Aston such peace as her own bitter memory-gnawed heart, her own implacable spirit, and the general suspicion and hatred of her neighbourhood allowed.

These were the persons whom Dorothy Firebrace spied in colloquy together near that congenially dark and melancholy upper pool; for after a single glance the conviction struck her, without the slightest pause of doubt, that the male party in it was the one described to her by Edward Holte as his unkindly-natured, base-born brother, Richard Grimsorwe, grandson of the Witch of Aston, by the mother's side.

CHAPTER XV.

A CALIBAN OF THE MIND.

THIS fact soon became apparent. While Dorothy remained motionless, partly in surprise and partly under the influence of an unaccountable impulse of curiosity, behind the hut, the two persons in front of it appeared to resume a conversation interrupted for the moment by the action necessary, on one part at least, in passing from under its low roof.

‘Leave me now, grandmother. Your ceremony of attendance thus far is ample for the state and magnificence of your abode, and I would not that any stray eyes should mark us in such friendly commune and kinsmanship together. You know my father’s jealous nature, and how he preserves his rancour against you still. He never forgives the crossing or thwarting of his will in any matter, and your obstinate holding of this upper water almost balances his happiness in the possession of all the other inheritance of our name at Aston.’

‘I trust it doth—truly, I trust it doth,’ returned the old woman, with inexpressible bitterness of accentuation, but not in the tone of a person of her apparent class, who had been born in it. ‘For what else deem you, Richard, have I preserved it, tooth and nail, so

long from his avaricious clutch? Think you it is made precious to me by being the darksome grave of my only child, your mother, driven to cast herself into its black depths by falsehood and desertion of the treacherous tyrant himself, who would now so fain wrest that last vestige from me, to turn, no doubt, like all the rest, into a gay pleasaunce for his haughty dame and her handmaidens to disport in, with their companies of gamesome lovers and servitors?’

‘You do well, grandmother; yet it is but a poor revenge for so great an injury,’ returned Richard Grim-sorwe, with rather a sneer in his tone.

‘But ’tis not all—I have done what else lies in me! How else have six goodly sons and daughters, born unto Sir Thomas Holte in his fine new palace, perished of no other known cause save the curse in my heart, or ere they left the cradle or the crib?’ the old woman replied, and her eye lighted up with a glare that strangely combined the luridness of insanity with a malice and hatred that revealed a full rational consciousness of the meaning of her words. And Richard Grim-sorwe’s reply, in its deadly sneeringness and calm, betokened even a deeper and more malignant phase of the same feelings.

‘Tut, Mother Maud!’ he said, ‘cheat and affright the country loobies around you with stuff like this!—If your curses had power to kill, why have you left the main hindrance and prevention of my prospects of so vast and wealthy an inheritance—yon fine legitimate heir of ours—alive and well, and in flourishing years of manhood, to flaunt it over me, and shame me the more significantly by his excellences before all the world, with my bastardy!’

‘Ay, Edward Holte lives! But not in spite of curses. I have never cursed him yet!’ returned the old woman.

‘And wherefore not, I pray you?’ rejoined the base-born brother, but still baser-hearted man; and in spite of his recent contemptuous repudiation of the popular feeling on the subject, one could hardly help thinking, from the earnestness of his query, that Richard Grimsorwe placed some superstitious faith of his own in the Witch of Aston’s imputed powers to ban and destroy. ‘And wherefore not? One single lawful madam’s issue is as much a total barring to my inheritance—of the restoration of the honour of my mother’s name—as a thousand whelps of the brood! Yea, all the manor and even allodial lands would fall to that haught princess and duchess in her own conceits, scornful Arabella Holte—mere woman as she is—were Edward gone, rather than to me. Nay, I have no part nor share in my father’s inheritance but such as his good will may assign me as to a perfect stranger and alien in blood. And how far that may extend, what hopes may I form when—to humour his proud lady’s jealous disdains—he denies me even so poor a privilege as to bear his name.’

‘His name! his name!’ repeated the old woman, with scornful emphasis catching at the word. ‘What is Thomas Holte’s name to bear? A Birmingham blacksmith’s of some hundred years’ gentility! You should be prouder to retain your mother’s, Richard Grimsorwe! For we were lords of all these lands five centuries ago, and the Crusader who lies with his crossed knees in the church yonder (which I will never pray in while God lets men like *that man* give Him thanks in it for their triumphant wickedness!), is our direct ancestor—a

Grimsorwe, of Aston, who was with Richard the Lion Heart in the Holy Land.'

'Had I come honestly by my name, good grandmother! But so foul a blotch of bastardy on it something mars the splendour,' returned Richard Grimsorwe, who seemed, from some undefined motive of his own, to dwell on this exasperating expression. So it evidently was to old Maud.

'Ay, ay,' she muttered, with the indistinctness of age and intensely roused emotion. 'A bastard, a bastard! The blacksmith's descendant has brought disgrace and infamy also on the name whose inheritance he has devoured! You are right, Richard, my curses are powerless! Or where would Thomas Holte be now, could curses kill men's bodies, and sink their souls to the abyss!'

'It would profit me much, indeed, to have a father removed and a brother to lord and rule it over me instead, who I know hates and despises me,' said Richard, with his customary sneer, in reply to the old woman's raging outburst.

'Doth Edward Holte so by you, Dickon, Dickon, my poor boy?' she replied, with a rather doubtful quaver in her aged voice. 'Methought he was kind and well-wishing to all. It was his childish interference on my behalf, when Cuthbert Bangster was stoning me for having bewitched his cattle, that moved me to spare *him* alone of all his race from the curses which I found could slay! Or else, was it that I was even myself weary of curses, when the sixth fair babe was put into the cold black earth, and I heard the mother's broken-hearted sobbings over the grave? I remembered, then, mayhap, how I felt when they brought me home my

only child—my pretty Maud—dead, drowned—her yellow hair streaming with weeds and darnel from the pool! But not as was my wont, with a renewal of hatred and vengeance in my poor old withered heart! And so it was I did not utter the spell when my imps brought me word, for the seventh time, that a man child was born lawful heir to Aston Hall.'

'You wronged your own blood there then—most bitterly wronged it, grandmother!' said Richard Grim-sorwe. 'But talk not of your imps, foolish old woman, which are but the dreams and fancies of your dotage; for if these religious times, which I foresee at hand, should come to pass, they may bring your grey hairs to the stake. Or have you never heard the text, "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live?*"'

'But thou wilt not suffer them to harm thy grandam, now, Richard, Richard, my own cunning and law-bred lad, now, wilt thou?' the old woman answered wheedlingly, as if confiding greatly in the powers evoked, but with manifest alarm. And, indeed, it was an age fraught with dangers of the most terrible kind to pretenders to supernatural influences, when, as mostly happened, they were poor and defenceless creatures in every external respect.

'What refuge is there in me, mother? What power have I either to save or harm any one as I am now?'

'Nay, come, nay, now, you are as great with your father as I am mean and hateful in his sight. And no man dares harm one in this country whom Sir Thomas Holte in any sort abides by!'

'And, say you so, Granny Grim-sorwe?' returned Richard with a singular mixture of mockery and solemnity in his accents. 'But you wot not how the

times are changing! I have watched them well, and think not, as my father does, that one bloody overthrow in an open field, and mayhap some knocking at the gates of London with lance and culverin, will set the King there again, in prouder sway and supremacy than ever. Nay, from the seething of men's blood, and the infinite hoarding of fire in their breasts unto some great mindquake, I gather, rather, that quite new times are coming to pass in England, and that the old system of things will be clean swept away. Sir Thomas Holt will abide by the old and worn-out landmarks, doubtless, and full likely will be swept away with them in the great rising tide.'

'Let that destruction come, and I care not what else follows!—the great deluge again, or the universal swallowing up into hellfire of this wicked and woful earth!' returned the beldame, with a truly ferocious, tigress-clattering of her still white and singularly sound teeth, testifying to the original goodness of a constitution that had survived so much that grief and poverty and age have of most grievous and hard to be borne.

'Tush! you talk like an old fool! But there is a way, indeed, if your thoughts were not altogether taken up with the prospect of so savourless a feast of revenge, by which not only might I become as a tower of strength and refuge to my friends, but redeem your name and my own, grandmother, from its ignominy, and inherit, without soiling my hands with kindred blood, the broad lands that should be mine!'

'How so, son? You speak to me now greater marvels than any witchcraft can work!' said Maud Grim-sorwe. But the eagerness with which she listened for the reply was not unmatched closely in her neighbour-

hood, though, witch as she pretended to be, or was supposed by superstition, little she dreamed how Dorothy Firebrace, almost imagining herself to have been brought by Providence to the spot, for the detection of an atrocious conspiracy, held her breath and listened too. Indeed, with the additional stealthiness of fear, for Dorothy felt she had already heard enough to excite the dread and rancour of the plotting pair to perhaps mortal extremities.

‘Marvels, granny! What marvels are there which a resolute mind and will cannot bring to pass? Specially in troubled times like these, when all things are turning topsy-turvy?’ Grimsorwe resumed, and with a slowness and deliberation in his manner that seemed to indicate he was not uttering a mere impulsive thought of the moment, but one long planted and matured in his mind. ‘Listen, grandmother; am I not my father’s eldest-born? and, were I lawfully so, his heir? And have I not heard you say many times that Sir Thomas Holte promised my mother marriage ere he led her astray; aye, and in the presence of witnesses?’

‘Even so,’ replied the old woman, in a surprised and anxious tone; ‘it is a common trick of the seducer. In the presence of one witness, at all events, for Adam Blackjack, the master-cook that now is at Aston, was called up into Sir Thomas’s presence to bear witness to his oaths and promises when my poor girl was abiding with her worthless father at Sutton, where he was at the time under-keeper of the chase; and yet the rankest poacher on it, to supply himself with means of ceaseless drunkenness whereby to drown his conscience, when I would not live with him there, after he had sold the last shred of our inheritance but the few perches he

could not wrench from me, to part withal—this hut and pool.'

'Listen again, grandam! The new order of sectaries who are now arising in the body politic, where they have been fermenting for a hundred years, and who, in my opinion, will achieve the mastery in this coming struggle, hold it for a law of religion and morality, which they propose shall supersede all others, that a promise of marriage interchanged between a man and a woman in the presence of witnesses, with such sequences as followed in my hapless mother's case, do constitute a marriage! And see you not—if in the meantime I can render myself of service and advantage to the cause of the Parliament and Presbytery—the moment they shall establish their discipline, and I produce my proofs, an adherent of the King's, like my brother Edward, will find but little favour in their sight to bar the consequences!'

'Great God, if it might be! If I might not close these aged eyes until I had seen this great retribution on the name of Holte; had seen my daughter's and my father's name redeemed from shame and infamy!' exclaimed the old woman, with really frantic fervour, and clasping her hands, and looking upward in a species of ecstasy of revengeful passion and hope.

'Peace, peace, old fool!—What's that rustling in the thicket? You will bring some note upon us that will mar the whole plot,' said Richard, very angrily, not without more cause than he imagined; for Dorothy Firebrace had given an involuntary movement of horror and surprise at what she overheard, that made the unusual stirring in the bushes where she was concealed behind the hut.

‘Leave me then awhile to think over this blessed imagination of yours, dear grandson, and devise how I may best aid in its fulfilment,’ returned Maud, still evidently almost delirious with excitement. ‘What a brain for contrivance hast thou, my Richard! But even as a mere lad thou didst counsel me how to withstand all Sir Thomas’s chicanery of advocates and the law, to dispossess me of my little freehold. Go now, go now; let us not hazard anything in so wonderful a plotting, if we can but bring it to pass. When I am alone I will counsel with my imps, Suck-cow and Weasel. You shall see they will give me rare inkling into the matter.’

‘Tut! I had best begone—she is at her dotage again!’ muttered Richard Grimsorwe, aloud and yet to himself. ‘Farewell, then, grandam, for awhile; I shall need your advice and assistance, be sure, but not for some while again, until I see how matters are likely to turn in this coming time of strife and struggle. Here are a few pence for your needments; for indeed my father keeps me very bare, to supply his fine heir in playing the soldier in the King’s service, whose triumph will be my ruin.’

Richard seemed then to dole out some scanty assistance, in the way of a few silver coins, to his aged relative, who eagerly extended her withered and palsy-shaking palm to receive them, and with a sigh as if he begrudged the dole, scanty as it was. Then replacing a purse well stocked with much weightier metal in the breast of his lawyer’s robe, he wished his grandmother sullenly ‘Good even,’ and, infinitely to Dorothy’s relief, took his departure.

CHAPTER XVI.

A ROUGH WOOER.

THE armourer's daughter remained for some moments couched in her hiding-place, without daring to breathe, until the termination of the interview took place.

Brave and fearless as she was by nature—as brave and fearless, perhaps, as a woman can be—the insidious treachery of the projects she had overheard appalled her even more than their audacity. She felt as the most courageous of men might, if conscious that, not himself, but another very dear to him, was in danger of being involved in the windings of a snake. Nor was the notion of personal peril altogether absent. Dorothy felt that, if detected in her involuntary espying, a man of so resolute a character as Richard Grimsorwe might probably hesitate little at the means of ridding himself of apprehension on the score of a solitary and unprotected girl.

She continued carefully perdue in the bushes that sheltered her until some time after she imagined the ground clear. She saw Grimsorwe, in fact, stepping over the weir dam, and apparently taking a path into the wood on the opposite side of the pool; and, after a somewhat longer interval, she heard the old woman moving off, muttering and ejaculating to herself, in a

direction fronting from her hut. Dorothy, however, judiciously waited still a considerable further interval, to give time for both of these ominous gossips to be fairly out of the way ere she emerged from her covert.

She had no doubt, from Grimsorwe's taking it, that her proper route to Aston Hall lay in the direction he had pursued. Thinking now that he must be out of risk of her overtaking him, she determined to follow in his traces; and accordingly proceeded to the weir dam, keeping herself as nigh the trees and as much out of eye-shot in any other line of observation as possible.

Arriving at the weir, Dorothy was, however, greatly annoyed at finding that the old woman was again within view. She had, indeed, proceeded some distance along the margin of the high black upper pool, and was engaged apparently in selecting and gathering herbs or cresses from amidst its rank close vegetation into an osier basket on her arm, muttering all the while to herself what might well have seemed to a superstitious ear spells and fiendish sanctifications to her work. And all Dorothy Firebrace's brightness of wit, and vivacious sense of the unreasonable and ridiculous, could not protect her from the influences of her age, and of the notions in which she had been reared, in this respect. Besides, had she not heard the wretched old woman herself confess that she had imps, whose counsels she placed great reliance on, and who doubtless aided her in her worst malefactions? Dorothy believed old Maud to be a witch in reality, and of the most cruel and malignant description, since her curses, Herod-like, slaughtered innocent babes in the cradles, and menaced possibly the life of a young man who, in so strangely

brief a time, had become the great interest of the impassioned girl's existence.

Luckily the witch's back was turned in her operations; and, hoping to get over the water ere she looked round from her unhallowed work, Dorothy Firebrace shrinkingly ventured on.

There was more difficulty in effecting the passage of the weir dam, nevertheless, than she had anticipated from observing Richard Grimsorwe's rapid transit. He was probably accustomed to make it. But the planks were set widely apart, loose, rotten, and in places altogether swept away, Dorothy found, when she attempted the crossing. The bridge was, in truth, part of the property disputed of old between Maud Grimsorwe and Sir Thomas Holte, and might be considered in a species of local chancery. And, of course, as the hag took pleasure in injuring the effect of his improvements by the desolation and neglect in which she retained her own remnant of property, the bridge was left in disrepair. Fortunately there was no current, and though the descent of the water from the upper pool was heavy and unintermitting, it was seldom of violence or sweep to dizzy the passenger. Dorothy, therefore, after a brief hesitation, believed she should manage the passage well enough; and, in fact, she had reached about the middle of the weir in safety, attending chiefly to her footsteps, when the sound of a dreadful cat-screeching, rather than mewing, came to her ears, and apparently startled the attention of the old woman also. Dorothy then—to her surprise no less than her consternation—heard a shrill scream in the direction of the herb-gathering witch.

All this greatly startled her, and steadying herself, with an awkward quiver, on a plank she had now

reached, Dorothy paused, and glanced with no feigned alarm into the gloomy recesses of the upper pool. And there on the margin stood Maud Grimsorwe, gazing towards her, and frantically tossing her arms, while the grotesque and fiendish-looking skeleton cat wailed and mewed around her. This was enough for Dorothy, who hastened her pace at a reckless rate across the weir, panic-stricken with the notion that the hag was about to put some spell of hideous witchcraft upon her too.

It was not until she had fled at a really headlong pace a considerable distance along the lane she found on the other side, that Dorothy remembered having heard the old woman call to her such harmless words as, 'Daughter, daughter! what do you there?' But the misery and imploring in the tones suggested to her that perhaps, after all, Maud Grimsorwe was partially lunatic, and had mistaken her for an apparition of her deceased daughter. That unhappy victim of lust and betrayal, it appeared, had committed suicide near the spot—very likely from the weir dam. It was true the witch had alluded to her child as being fair-haired; but the shine of the evening sun on Dorothy's dark locks, and the feebleness of aged eyes, might have diminished that means of disillusion.

This accident produced another untoward result. Dorothy's more immediate alarm made her forget another danger, and her rapid pace brought her at a sudden turn in the wood upon a wayfarer whom she had the least desire imaginable to overtake. She came almost close upon Richard Grimsorwe, who, with his long robe tucked up, and held uneasily behind him on the pommel of his sword, presented a portentous and moodily thoughtful marching figure to her approach.

Dorothy's progress was startlingly checked by this apparition. But she felt at once that retreat was out of the question—would only have roused suspicion, and probably pursuit. With very good nerve, therefore, she endeavoured to treat the junction as an accident of the road, that required no particular notice on either part. At first, indeed, she had some hope that, by dropping her own pace, she could let the lawyer resume his start in advance, and follow unobserved. But she had arrived too abruptly, and with too much echo of footfalls, for this manœuvre. Richard glared round at once at the sound, and perceiving the new arrival, came to a sudden pause, and halted too.

‘Save you, my fair maiden! but what is the wonderful hurry with you on this road—and why do you stare at me so dismayed?’ enquired Grimsorwe, taking a surprised but clearly pleased and interested view of the lovely and panting young fugitive, whose rich complexion was heightened to an extraordinary glow of colour and beauty by excitement and rapid movement. ‘’Tis not the road to Paradise that I wot of,’ he continued, finding she was too much out of breath to reply at once, ‘and though you look a very suitable wayfarer in that direction, I warn you, you will not come upon the angels with the fiery swords within a mile or two, to my certain knowledge.’

‘I only want to go to Aston Hall, sir; I have lost my way—the bull drove me from it,’ said Dorothy, shrinking with visible alarm and secret horror from the bold and licentious gaze now fixed upon her.

‘You are right enough, then, for Aston Hall, fair maid, and as I am going that way too, we can bear each other company,’ was Richard Grimsorwe’s reply.

‘Nay, sir, I am spent, and cannot keep your pace,’ said Dorothy, endeavouring to drop without further parley into the rear, by slackening her rate of advance.

But Richard Grimsorwe immediately shortened his own step. ‘Faith, then, sweet one, I will keep yours,’ he said, ‘for such companionship is not to be lighted on in every lonesome lane in this dismal Feldon country-side.’

Dorothy felt indignant, and also alarmed. But her own natural high spirit and policy alike suggested not to seem afraid, and, hoping they should soon arrive at some less deserted spot, she silently acquiesced in the arrangement, so far as neither to increase nor diminish her rate of progress. But she made no reply likely at all to encourage the free and easy style of accost Grimsorwe seemed to think it right to assume to an unprotected female on a solitary country pathway.

The lawyer himself was probably more struck by this silence than he would have been by any form of speech. Possibly it not only surprised, but embarrassed him. Dorothy felt that he kept glancing at her earnestly and scrutinisingly, as they proceeded almost abreast along the narrow road. At last he spoke again.

‘You are going to Aston, you say, my blooming pearl of damsels errant. Can it be by some marvel of good fortune, which my Lady Holte has not deigned to allow a town visitor as yet to be aware of, you are of her ladyship’s attendance there?’

‘No, sir,’ replied Dorothy; ‘I am a Birmingham girl, and I have only an errand to Aston, which will not, I trust, take me many minutes to despatch.’

‘I might have known that by your precisian garb, in truth,’ said Grimsorwe, looking still more perplexed.

‘I will guess again, then. You are some relative and visitor of Adam Blackjack, our master-cook, who I know has kinsmen among the pure ones in yonder town, and is suspected of being himself more than half a convert from the good jolly notions of his trade and place?’

‘I am no cook’s or other menial’s kinswoman or visitor,’ returned Dorothy, offendedly; adding haughtily, without considering all the effects of her declaration, ‘I am Dorothy Firebrace, Armourer Firebrace’s daughter, of Birmingham, who is known for a man of repute and substance in our town.’

‘Ay, troth, is he; I nothing gainsay the affirmation thereof,’ replied Grimsorwe, with evidently increased curiosity. ‘I have heard of the precious man, and for my own part hold him and his craft in high honour and esteem. But he and his are in no very sweet savour at Aston at present; which something makes me curious to know what may be your purport at the Hall.’

‘My business is not with you, sir, whatever it may be, or whoever you may be: it is with Sir Thomas Holte himself alone!’ returned Dorothy, not only greatly annoyed by the insulting tone of familiarity adopted by the stranger base-brother of Edward Holte, but aware that it was not to so bitter though secret a foe she ought to give any inkling of her object in visiting Aston.

‘Ah, indeed, that’s sharply said; there is a keen edge to the bright metal, then?’ resumed Richard Grimsorwe, staring with still more audacity of query and admiration of an unpleasing kind at the wondering beauty. ‘But you must know, fair damsel, I am one that, if you have any suit worth the obtaining to Sir Thomas Holte,

am the likeliest, within any distance you can name of his hall steps, to make or mar your petition.'

'I need no help, nor ask any; my suit with Sir Thomas Holte concerns his own weal and service, not mine own,' said Dorothy, pettishly.

'Then it is like to speed the better. What! is it concerning this arming of the Aston tenantry, to ride behind my pretty brother Edward to the King's wars?' Richard Grimsorwe replied, apparently greatly struck by the latter statement. And he added in a tone purposely provocative and sneering, 'By St. Michael's breast-plate and helm, then, which, being fashioned at Birmingham, the devil himself could not crack into with his mace—I did not think the smiths of that town were of so forgiving a temper!'

'What say you, sir? There is no quarrel between my father and the worshipful baronet of Aston Hall,' replied Dorothy, whose curiosity was now in turn somewhat aroused.

'Is there none? Is there no clanship then, or fellow-feeling among tradesmen there, as among gentlefolks elsewhere?' said Grimsorwe, in whose mind a variety of reflections and conjectures had at last settled down into the true one.

Dorothy remembered the circumstance of Tubal Bromycham's abrupt dismissal from Aston, and his labours as an artisan in embellishing that stately residence. She had never heard the cause, or concerned herself much about it, concluding it was some difference of opinion in the works carried on there for Sir Thomas, under Tubal's superintendence; particularly as her father himself had ordered her to ask no questions on the subject, when once a vague impulse of curiosity had

induced her to make some enquiry. She now therefore merely said: 'The smiths of Birmingham hold one another in very fair brotherhood and esteem, but they make no mortal quarrel of mayhap some slight misliking as to how work undertaken should be executed; and I never heard of any deeper grudge between Deritend and Aston than so.'

'Ha, well; what happened was not likely to be boasted of either by the master armourer or the skilful iron-worker, who we hear is now to become his son-in-law,' said Grimsorwe, with a derisive laugh, and eyeing Dorothy with a still more penetrating and piercing gaze. 'But are you aware, damsel, what manner of work it was Tubal Bromycham thrust himself upon at Aston, and was so bitterly rebuked therein? I'll be sworn you would not guess it once in a thousand years; but, according to a true report I think I have heard, Master Vulcan set himself up for my Lady Venus—who but he!—and was in requital first solemnly tossed in a blanket by angry Jupiter for the presumption, and then squatted on his nether man a good long summer's day in Aston stocks, the gaze and laughter and pelting of a throng of miserable villagers, who thought to please their lord by out-aping his contumelious tyranny!'

Dorothy did not quite understand what was said, wrapped in the mist of such fine playgoing, town expressions. But she understood enough to awaken her surprise and curiosity, and, perhaps, some other more vehement feeling than either, to a very lively impulse. 'What mean you, sir?' she exclaimed. 'Speak plainly, for you speak now of my betrothed husband; and in truth I never heard or suspected such a tale as this of him before?'

‘Tis not the kind of story men tell to their betrothed. Whose chimney is the good-man the last to suspect on fire?’ returned Richard Grimsorwe, with his insidious and exasperating sneer, and seeming as if what he heard only confirmed a previous conclusion of his own. ‘But it is all even as I say. An old granny, hereabouts, who reports to me all the news in my absences, told me that she herself saw Tubal Bromycham dragged out of the hall like a struggling ox, by well nigh all my father’s men-servants setting their strength in a knot, ere they could have him to the place of disgraced punishment, where he sat gnashing his teeth between well nigh two sunsets ere he fell into a fit, and was released; not so much for pity as for dread that he might die on their hands. And the common report from there about Aston for months after was, that this absurd king-blacksmith of yours in Birmingham had shown himself so besotted in the conceit of his artisan skill and supremacy as to think to woo and win the haughtiest lady of Warwickshire, in the person of my fair half-sister (I must needs confess her so), Mistress Arabella Holte.’

Dorothy heard this astounding statement at first with a feeling of utter incredulity. But a short pause of astonished reflection suggested to her so many confirmations of this explanation of what had always been a vague though unconsidered puzzle and enigma to her, that she was struck with the belief finally that all was as she heard it reported.

Tubal Bromycham, she knew, had a right to consider himself by birth on more than an equality even with the ‘haughtiest lady in Warwickshire.’ And if Arabella Holte was so fair, what likelier than that a feeling deeper than admiration, and that overlooked all other

inequalities, might have stirred the young blacksmith's robust and sturdy spirit even to so daring an assertion as a declaration of his passion? Sir Thomas Holte's towering pride and tyranny accounted amply for the alleged consequences in all other respects.

It cannot be denied that this conviction was bitterly mortifying to Dorothy Firebrace, who had so much reason to consider herself—famous beauty of her town as she was held—treated as a kind of fall-back, or *pis-aller*, in the affair. And yet, perhaps, she was not altogether displeased with the notion; for within those last few hours a feeling had arisen in Dorothy's heart, half whose pleasantest impulse was deadened by the notion of wrong to another. A generous, faith-overflowing, noble betrothed! But did Tubal Bromycham seem so now?

The result of a brief but decisive reflection on this strange intelligence—which passed through windings in her mind altogether without a clue for Richard Grimsorwe—clearly surprised him. Dorothy answered in an almost unconcerned tone, 'It was a strange madness, if so, in Tubal Bromycham; yet not so strange, since Mistress Arabella is, as you say, so fair! But Sir Thomas has made an enemy who, I doubt me, will look some day for his revenge.'

'Do you precise, professing Christians of Birmingham hold revenge so sweet? And, if so, should it be altogether the portion of a too ambitious blacksmith?' Richard Grimsorwe said, after a pause of consideration, and in a cajoling, insinuating voice, from whose oily glide Dorothy instinctively shrunk, as from the soft undulations of a serpent in the grass. 'Do you owe your

false betrothed no retaliation—deem you, I say, fairest Mistress Firebrace?’

‘Retaliation! How mean you by the word, Master Grimsorwe?’ she replied, for the first time calling him by the name, and with something of scorn and reproach in the sound. And she was startled, too, by the query; though for a very different reason than her questioner imagined.

‘Tubal, your betrothed, made love to a lady of high estate—and if a gentleman of my degree made love to you, you should admit him a fair hearing. That is what I mean, fair townswoman,’ he now replied.

There was a pause. Dorothy shrunk still more from the now gleaming gaze of her unwished companion. But with a scorn and disdain she could not repress she answered, after a moment’s weighing of the expression, ‘A gentleman of your degree!—I pray you, Master Grimsorwe, explain to me further, what is that? I have heard say your grandmother one way is a witch. Do you claim your gentility on the mother’s side?’

A black frown and scowl passed over Richard Grimsorwe’s brows. ‘Ha, doth this Brummagem lane-haunter taunt me, too?’ he muttered to himself. Then on a sudden, greatly to Dorothy’s alarm, he stepped from his position walking beside her, right in the front, so as to stop her further way.

‘How know you *that*? Where were you erewhile? The Aston bull was never in these woods—and methought I heard that same old grandam of whom you speak yelling with affright after me, soon after I had left her! Had you affair with her, my bonny wench, on your own account, and stopped to listen while she and I discoursed?’

The sudden questioning—the lonely situation in which she found herself with the menacing questioner—the truly terrible, the more than fiendish expression of Richard Grimsorwe's eyes, so many and contrary passions glowed in them—so dismayed even the courageous armourer's daughter that she made no reply, but stood aghast and fear-stricken, looking at her fierce interrogator without venturing the least reply. The brutal Grimsorwe, on his part, seemed to accept this terror as a confirmation of his worst suspicions.

'So, my fine wench!' he exclaimed, 'you shall give me hostages of your goodwill towards me and mine ere you advance another step to Aston. Hear you! And I will accept none but——,' and before Dorothy could even anticipate, much less shun the cowardly assault, Grimsorwe had clutched the girl in his arms, and torn her to him with all his strength. Then stifling the screams she attempted to utter with his odious kisses, Dorothy found herself struggling frantically against much superior strength in the felon's arms.

Heaven knows what Grimsorwe's purposes might have been—whether merely to frighten a person whom he suspected of knowing too much from pursuing her journey to his father's presence, or some deadlier irreparable mischief. Whatever his first intent, however, his brutish excited passions might easily have urged him beyond it; irritated by the resistance and struggles, and yet more, the exceeding beauty of the victim, which his unhallowed violence more and more discovered to himself in the course of their close-clasped contest; when, on a sudden, by Heaven's mercy, a voice, whose thundering accents seemed to strike even Richard Grim-

some motionless as by an actual bolt of fire, burst from some high though unseen post of observation. 'God's life, son Richard! what manner of law is this you administer in my domains?'

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR THOMAS HOLTE.

RICHARD GRIMSORWE, changing only his form of brutality, no sooner heard the voice than he flung his purposed victim from his unmanly embrace with such force and violence that Dorothy Firebrace was precipitated into a deep ditch on a side of the pathway. An action in the way of escaping detection, on the impulse of the moment, that showed of what the dastardly ravisher was capable, had he completed a crime that rendered necessary more elaborate contrivances for impunity. As it was, the armourer's daughter had great difficulty in saving herself from a severe fall, and consequent injury, by clutching at the bullrushes and nettles with which the ditch was choked, while the softness of the mud at the bottom broke the shock of her rudely propelled descent.

Exclamations from more than one voice, but with the first speaker's startlingly predominant, accompanied the whole movement; and if Dorothy had been in a condition to observe, she would have seen the figures of two men on horseback, who were enabled by that elevation to overlook the scene from above a line of park paling that skirted the ditch. One of these, exclaiming 'Fie! Master Richard, fie!' jumped from his

horse, and with a singularly active scramble and bound, cleared the inclosure into the ditch, evidently to render assistance to the ill-treated girl.

This kindly stranger was a young man, of the bright florid complexion generally communicated by an open-air life, and who, wearing a green livery, with a hunting-knife and horn at his girdle, seemed probably some official attached to the considerable sporting establishment at Aston Hall. He was, in fact, the chief falconer there, and took his name from his occupation. At least, he was known by no other than Robin Falconer; and exceedingly well liked throughout the country-side, as a cheery, honest, hearty lad of his calling under it.

There was little reason to doubt who was the other spectator. The exceeding pride and imperiousness of command of his attitude—the rich brocades of the doublet and cloak he wore—his clean-cut, swarthy, almost Spanish features, instinct with haughtiness and towering sense of supremacy—the beauty and fire of the steed he bestrode—the two muffled hawks on his wrist—all betokened the presence of the despotic and showy master of and builder of Aston Hall.

In other respects, Sir Thomas Holte's figure was clearly one of great strength of muscular development, particularly about the shoulders and arms, though the enormous stuffing and padding of all the parts of the male dress at that period, from the trunk hose upwards, seldom allowed the true proportions of the frame to be noted. His stature was certainly lofty, unless the upper portion of his person—all that could be discerned over the palings—was unusually long in comparison with the limbs. And this was in reality somewhat the case, as was visible when he was on foot. Sir Thomas

Holte bore also a resemblance to both his sons, that would have recognised him to any one who knew either; but more particularly to the elder unlawfully-begotten one. The dark complexion and sharp-cut features were, however, the chief points. There was much that was domineering, fierce, and irascible in the worshipful knight and baronet's looks, but nothing of the stealthy and sinister ferocity that branded Richard Grimsorwe dangerous with nature's own searing-irons. *Cave quem Deus ipse notavit.*

A couple of instants sufficed for Robin Falconer to assist Dorothy out of the ditch, weeping bitterly; when the honest fellow, reiterating all kinds of assurances that no further damage should accrue to her, knelt on both knees, and set to work assiduously on the spot to clean her mudded shoes with some dock leaves, gathered for the purpose. Meanwhile Grimsorwe, perceiving clearly he was known, and that he had no chance of establishing an *alibi*, adopted the next best plan, and burst into a loud laugh. 'Faith, sir,' he said to Sir Thomas, in this way, 'the wench had sharper eyes than I, and must have espied you coming, for she had promised me a kiss for guiding her safely out of the way of jolly St. George, your great bull, which it seems hath broken bounds again. But observing you over the hedge, the minx grows shy, and claws at me as fine a resistance as ever Potiphar's wife in the Scripture tale.'

'Oh, thou false ruffian! But for your arrival, good gentlemen, the villain meant me the basest wrong, and I had scarcely 'scaped at a less forfeit than death; which yet I would a myriad times have preferred to his brutish embrace!' half sobbed and half shrieked the armourer's daughter. 'In God's name, do not desert

me now! He thrust his company on me all along, against my most earnest and expressed desire; and I fled from nothing so harmless in comparison as your savage bull, but from his detestable grandmother, the witch, with whom I espied him in a conspiracy of death and ruin against his noble brother, at the hut below. And this I will go and witness at once to Sir Thomas Holte, good yeoman, if you will protect me to your master's house and presence.'

'Sir Thomas Holte is here, overlooking, and hears all, fair maiden,' said the falconer, looking rather embarrassed, but indicating his master by a gesture towards the palings.

'Is here? Is where? I will let him know what a true bastard his base-born whelp is!' said Dorothy, righteously exasperated beyond studying her words, and who, besides, was reared in a plain-speaking age and among a plain-spoken community.

'Ay, there is nothing a woman will not say and do that would shift the blame of such a discovery partly from herself, wholly to another,' said Grimsorwe, dexterously awakening a reminiscence in his father's mind which he knew would be of influence.

In truth, Sir Thomas frowned darkly. 'A woman's tongue is no scandal, certes, that openeth a baying against a man in some matters,' he said. 'Still, this is something of a rough wooing, Richard, even for you town gallants, who, we poor country folk are given to understand by your plays and discourses, carry fortresses by a brisk assault, which we should besiege by slow approach, and sap for a whole campaign, and then, belike, fail in. But who is this fair wench? Methinks I should recall something in her favour; though I

cannot well remember at this onward of time whether I am mistaken or not in my supposal.'

'You are not, sir, if you take me to be the daughter of Zachariah Firebrace, master armourer of Birmingham, who of a former time often frequented your noble dwelling and appurtenances,' said Dorothy, eagerly, though she had now her fears whether the statement presented any very strong claim on Sir Thomas Holte's consideration.

'It is even so,' replied the baronet. 'And of a surety, Dickon, you have started the greyhound for the hare this time! But what do you here, my good girl, so lonesomely in the fields with that tempting peachy face? Doth the worthy craftsman, your sire, doubt that my son hath my commission and assurance of payment for the artillery we need?'

'Nay, sir; but yet I have business worth the hearing with you, though I will not say it before a scowling night-bat, who hates his brother worse than Cain, for being, in the like manner as Abel, more acceptable to God and man, beyond reckoning!' returned Dorothy, somewhat recovering now, but continuing to survey Richard Grimsorwe with unspeakable indignation and loathing.

'This is another of those who are only straining their wits to find matter of invective against me to you, sir,' said Grimsorwe, with crafty bitterness. 'Belike some leman of my brother's; who, in truth, envies me the fatherly countenance you show me, for my mother's sake, in spite of all.'

'It may be so, Richard; but thou art not exactly the saint to call my son Edward a sinner—even so,' returned Sir Thomas, sharply. 'But fie on this unbrotherly

captiousness and carping ; and do not presume too much against thy better-born, though not elder, to make me rue the equal favour and indulgence I have ever shown thee. Know thy place, such as it hath been appointed thee, or I must teach it thee in another manner, and perhaps recall to my mind more than will please thee, that thou art also the grandson of the most hateful hag that ever—'sdeath ! she is here !'

This latter exclamation was occasioned by the sudden and totally, by all parties, unexpected appearance at this moment of the Witch of Aston ; who, hobbling as if for life and death, and still attended, dog-like, by her frightful cat, suddenly turned into sight at an angle in the road, close on the scene of action. So eager was her speed, indeed, and so fixed her attention on some unseen ulterior object, that she pelted almost close upon Dorothy and Robin Falconer before she seemed to discern any obstacle on the road, while her cat appeared as if it skimmed along in her wake on the wind, with all its four legs rigidly set.

Apart from any superstitious feeling, Robin had reason to apprehend a personal concussion. But he was most alarmed probably from reasons of the former description, for he uttered an exclamation that expressed fear more than anything else, as he jumped out of the old woman's way. And, so rooted were old customs in the country parts of England still, he actually crossed himself, as he exclaimed, 'Forfend thee, witch ! what mean ye now ?'

'Ho, ho ! are you there ? Are you there ? It is not my daughter ! It is not my daughter !' groaned the old woman, bringing herself as suddenly as she had arrived to a halt, but clearly without taking any notice of

Robin Falconer's interposition, glaring fixedly with her frightfully luminous eyes at Dorothy Firebrace.

The latter shrunk from her look. 'Keep the witch off me!' she exclaimed. 'She hath done me much harm already to-day by her wicked eyes, and will do me more.'

'She bodes harm to whoever and whatever comes within her purview. I had rather three magpies had crossed me in a field; and there will never be good times at Aston until she has crackled with her old, dry, marrowless bones in a bonfire!' muttered Sir Thomas, adding, in raised and exasperated accents, 'Hag! what do you here? Was it not stipulated between us that you should never again cross my path?'

'I was your bondsman, grandam. Why break you my faith for me?' said Richard Grimsorwe, in his turn, angrily enough. 'But what ails the old idiot? She seems to stare with open eyes, and yet asleep, at the girl! Do you know her, grandam? Is she of your *herb acquaintance*?'

Dorothy's glance flashed flakes of fire on the vile asperser, while the old woman, recovering herself, as it seemed, with a shock of consciousness, turned from her with a wild and horrible stare at her grandson. 'What, gallows bird, you too belie a poor, wretched, miserable old woman, your mother's mother?' she yelled. 'Say you too that Maud Grimsorwe brews hell-broth, and hath dealings with the foul one? Tell Sir Thomas that; he needs but a half-pretext to bring me to the faggot and tar-barrel! But I thought it was her ghost—my daughter's ghost—and would have craved her pardon for all my mercilessness to her, that she was glad to seek refuge from my curses in the black pool,

yonder down! But it is not Maud—my pretty, golden haired Maud, whom it made the very grave-digger weep to deny christian burial to, and drive the stake into her fair breast! Who is it then? Be not afraid, fair girl; for my daughter's sake, I will not curse any young thing that resembles her ever again!’

‘Bid the hag aroint, Richard, or I shall lose all patience with her yet again!’ said Sir Thomas, in passionate and yet strangely stifled and suppressed accents, as if he also felt some superstitious awe of the poor old wretch's imaginary powers.

‘Grandmother, go; I am in trouble already with my father, and you will lead me into worse: I will come by and by, and learn your meaning in what you now say,’ half ejaculated and half muttered Grimsorwe, drawing his sinister relative away from the scene of action, and setting her withered visage homeward to her hut. He added some yet more emphatic whispered words, which she seemed to understand; for her head began to shake with a kind of palsy, and ejaculating, ‘Ay, ay; it was a bargain, it was a bargain! Mopkin, Mopkin! my cat, my cat! we are wanted at home! A good day to all the fair company, and a long night when it comes, for there are few of us who will rise very sweet and fresh-smelling from the grave! Make the most of your time, then, on earth, Sir Thomas Holte, for it is short with the best of us; and He that is the Judge of judges is no respecter of persons, and asks not whether a sinner wore purple and fine linen, or home-spun, on the earth. And so I leave my benison on the good company.’

The witch then—perhaps a little rudely accelerated by a push from her grandson—hobbled off the scene, attended by her imp, as it might well be considered,

with as strange and unwonted rapidity as she had entered upon it. But, for a considerable distance, those who remained could hear her muttering and laughing in a low self-satisfied chuckle to herself, as if well-pleased with having left an impression of vague menace and disaster behind her.

And so she had; particularly with Sir Thomas Holte. 'I'll warrant me,' he said to Dorothy Firebrace, 'what thou hast to say to me is of some evil betiding and misfortune, since that detested beldam has made me an encounter! What is it? Be speedy, for I shall be interrupted shortly into night-fall, and I wished to air me, after my hawk's flight, before sunset, and they grow restless in the jesses enough to break their fine sharp claws.'

'Heed again how you listen to the spiteful she-creature, Sir Thomas; for I have gathered from her, now it reminds me, that she is the betrothed of yonder audacious blacksmith of Birmingham, Tubal Bromycham, who sets himself up as a wooer of your daughter, Arabella, and was fitly brought to his senses in your filthiest horsepond, which made me stand the less upon my manners with so free-spoken a coaster as madam,' said Grimsorwe. The villain's suspicions were reasonably enough confirmed from what he had now heard—that Dorothy Firebrace had overheard something of his recent conversation with his grandmother, and, perhaps, proposed to avenge her own mal-treatment by revealing the wicked suggestions and plots they had exchanged.

The trick failed not of its effects. Sir Thomas's frown deepened in his already crumpled brows. 'What! hath the wealthy armourer chosen a mere brawny slave like

that for a son-in-law?' he exclaimed. 'But 'tis no great marvel that a blacksmith's foreman, who dared raise his eyes to the daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, should set himself to win his master's to wife.'

Dorothy had scarcely known what degree of credit to attach to Richard Grimsorwe's malicious statements and insinuations on this point. But now that they were so amply confirmed, she could no longer refuse belief to the tale. And although it did not pain her at all in comparison with what she might have felt if she had herself been greatly attached to her plighted husband; nay, perhaps, under the altered feelings of the last few hours, it rather pleased her to find she owed him so much less earnest fidelity than she had credited to him; still her pride as a woman, and an admired beauty, sustained a severe shock in the revelation. 'But I am not yet Tubal Bromycham's wife, mark you, sir,' she said, 'and, mayhap, with this new knowledge I have gained, never shall be! But, as I have said, my business with your worship is concerning no blacksmith or Tubal Bromycham in the world, but your honourable son and heir, Master Edward Holte, who has given me a letter of credence and information to you of the last importance, which I will deliver and explain as soon as I achieve your near and private ear.'

'A letter!—from my son—from Edward Holte!' exclaimed the baronet, now evidently greatly struck and surprised. 'Give it me over the palings then, and bear me company some furlong higher up the road, when we shall both come to an easy entrance across the moat, upon the garden terrace. Go before, Richard, and tell my Lady Holte and Arabella, whom you will find taking the air there, that I am on a speedier return

to supper than I thought. Ho, Robin Falconer! hand me the paper, and take your birds on your own jesses.'

So saying, the impatient Lord of Aston spurred his horse close to the palings on his side of the demarcation, snatched rather than took the letter his servant forwarded, and tossed the hawks so suddenly from his wrist, that the poor sky-harriers, being blinded in their mufflers, fluttered wildly about until the falconer's well-known lure guided them to him by hearing. Still further surprised by the formal appearance and thickness of the letter, Sir Thomas hurriedly broke open the seal, and putting his horse in movement, began to read.

As for Richard Grimsorwe, it did not seem that even he dared to remain against his sire's injunction; but he moved off clearly with great slowness and reluctance. But at the first exclamation he overheard, and which Sir Thomas Holte could not suppress, he halted and looked eagerly back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ASTON HALL.

BEFORE this utterance was made, however, Dorothy, keeping pace with the active but gallant falconer (whose horse, by-the-by, kept him equally implicit company on the park side of the palings), found herself in full view of the stately and beautiful edifice which was destined to testify so plainly to posterity the grandeur and wealth and princely tastes of its founder.

Such, to the present day, it remains, in spite of some cavilling of taste that may exist as to the effect of the singular Saracenic minareted roofs of the three towers, central and flanking, that form the principal reliefs of the otherwise purely English and domestic architecture of the picturesque and imposing mass. In spite, too, of the disproportionate smallness and lack of decorative carrying out in the design of the entrance door of the mansion on its principal front, over which Sir Thomas Holte had placed a proudly humble memorial of his achievement in the erection of the building, surmounted by a richly emblazoned coat of arms, of many quarterings, and concluding with an emphatic LAUS DEO (Praise be to God!)—an expression doubtless to be taken as a pious ascribing of all the glory and success in the great work to the supreme Planner and Executant of the

universe, but might be read almost like an ejaculation of weariness and impatience at the slow conclusion of a labour that had occupied seventeen years of the life of a mortal man—for the inscription recorded that Aston Hall was commenced building in the year 1618, and concluded Anno Domini 1635.

The result, however, did not disgrace even so protracted a task-work; especially at this period, when it was only in the second decade of its completed existence, and in all the glory and splendour of novel decoration.

The rich red brickwork was as yet untarnished by the beating storms of two hundred winters, and exhibited the white stone copings and figured reliefs of the façade and its still nobler wings, and the aërial balustrades on the summits of all the chief masses of the pile, with the brightness and lightness of a fringing of lace. The innumerable diamond-paned lattices seemed to make the walls as pervious to light as if they had merely been thrown up to support them, and the architect had most skilfully disguised the moderate height of his building by the loftiness, and elegance, and variety of the terminations in pointed gable, and twisted chimney, and arabesque pinnacle, into which he had carried his general roofs, independently of the elevated crowning effect of his three ogive-shaped minarets, of which the centre nobly balanced the whole pile to the eye. It is now a little out of the perpendicular, and so produces rather a contrary effect. Still, the whole suggests and increases the regret of the spectator, that so fine a monument of the palatial architecture of our ancestors—almost the only old remains Birmingham can boast—should run the risk of sinking into decay, or of being abandoned to worse destroying influences than those of

time—for want, not of means, but of the taste and will to preserve it to so wealthy and unadorned a town.

But it is not for a stranger, however much it may be permitted to a romancer, to interfere in this strictly domestic affair of municipal Birmingham. And it is perhaps an uncalled-for episode in another respect, since Dorothy Firebrace did not approach the mansion on the side principally alluded to, but on the Garden Front—worthy then of the name, and not altogether unworthy now—with its noble terrace walk, bordered by a marble balustrade, overlooking extensive grounds laid out in a rich variety of flower-beds, orchards, clipped yew hedges, flights of steps, statues, fountains, and other ornamental appendages of the style introduced in the reigns of Elizabeth and James by certain of our ‘travelled thanes’ from Italy.

It was easy to see that a man of ambitious and haughty aspirations must have contrived, or assented to, the creation of such a residence for himself and his descendants. The great wealth of Sir Thomas Holte itself would scarcely have justified his building so proud a residence for a family that meant to remain contented in the highest rank of the gentry merely—unless a baronet is to be counted as in the lowest degree of nobility. But, in truth, Sir Thomas Holte was well known to cherish the ambition of founding a race that should take degree with the highest in the land, and it was even said had for years nourished the design to give his grand mansion a suitable tenant in the person of a peer of the realm. It was this purpose that had peculiarly embittered to him the numerous deaths of the male children, born of his wedlock with a lady of noble descent. And this, besides the natural affection of a

father, made Edward Holte's existence and welfare a subject of perhaps scarcely less anxiety and importance to him than those of the sole heir to some imperial dynasty.

It may be imagined, therefore, with what emotions of alarm and exasperation a personage of passions so violent and unrestrained ascertained from the writing in his hand that this precious pledge was in the power of a seditious and excited mob. In the very clutches of two enemies, one of whom he knew he had mortally offended, and the other of whom he had every reason of alliance and friendship to perceive, now, was assured to share the sentiment.

His exclamation, as has been said, stopped Grim-sorwe's remoter advance, but also Dorothy's, with Robin Falconer, just as they reached the narrow winding of water, rather than moat, between the precincts of the garden and Aston Park and Chace. In reality, such an explosion of fury as that into which the choleric King of Aston, as he was sometimes called, now burst, had never before been conceived, much less witnessed, by the young girl, accustomed to the decorous and muffled tone of a society, deeply imbued at that period with religious gravity and control of the inner emotions. It was a volley of terrific oaths at first, poured forth without stint or measure; and only after a protracted relief in the outburst, becoming at last a little articulate and intelligible. 'Gad's my life! Thunder and lightning and death! My son—my only son—Edward Holte, my son, in the hands of the scoundrel rabble of Birmingham!—in the hands of Tubal Bromycham and his canting father-in-law! He is lost, he is dead, he is slain, he is murdered; and I have built my glorious

house, and thrown twenty manors into a scale of battle and civil war, to become an heirless, miserable, despised old man !’

‘How say you, sir !’ exclaimed Richard Grimsorwe, eagerly returning upon the word.

‘No, Sir Thomas Holte, you are much mistaken,’ said Dorothy Firebrace, who, with her conductor, now also stopped close beside the excited baronet. ‘The life of your son is as safe under the frank pledge of my father as I trust mine—a woman’s—is in yours. Much safer than were it in this man’s hand who calls himself Edward Holte’s brother. Your son is in no danger of aught but a brief detention, if, as this letter remonstrates, you do not provoke the townsmen by any violent attempt at rescue.’

‘God’s light ! how else shall I redeem my son ? Not a man that eats my bread, whether he be of the ablest body or blind and halt as an old beggar of the wars, but shall to arms, and follow me to Birmingham to the rescue !’

‘Then is your son indeed lost, and only then,’ said Dorothy. ‘I left him safely housed and honourably entreated in all respects ; but the townsmen thronging to their arms, under conduct of an esteemed and chosen captain of the Parliament ; and, when Birmingham so wills it, we can turn out twelve hundred fighting men, who will not readily turn back in a fray.’

‘What is the matter, sir ? I heard your voice, but, as my duty is of late so misinterpreted, I knew not whether I might make bold to ask or no,’ said Grimsorwe.

‘Richard ! your brother, whom I sent for arms for my tenantry into Birmingham, is seized and made the

prisoner of a bloodthirsty, riotous mob!' exclaimed Sir Thomas Holte.

'You say not so, sir!' said Richard Grimsorwe; and, alas! with what a fratricidal brightening and sparkling up of the eyes!

'She says so—this letter says so, Richard; what shall be done?' And the fierce, overbearing, self-willed old man seemed for awhile to have lost all these qualities, and to gaze dependently and submissively on his craftier son for an oracle.

'Let me see the letter, sir,' said Grimsorwe, perceiving his advantage. Dorothy, dismayed and astonished, no longer entered her protest. There was, indeed, a general and, so to speak, subservient silence, as the lawyer read his brother's calm, noble, and quietly-couraged epistle.

'Who is this agent of the Parliament of whom my brother speaks as directing you of Birmingham?' said Grimsorwe, as soon as he had deliberately, though with knitted brows, perused the whole missive. He spoke to Dorothy, who, without looking at him, answered, with knitting nostrils, 'His name is Oliver Cromwell.'

'Oliver Cromwell?' Grimsorwe appeared for a moment plunged in his reminiscences of town experience. 'Oliver Cromwell! Be assured then, sir, that you have to deal with the worst on that side, with the sole exception of him who jerks all their wires down below! I have heard of the man when I was in London. Of few and ill-set words, but of the most determined and resolute action among them all, and is of some suspected to have the most of a soldier in him of those who understand the part that must be played by the leaders of men in these times. Sir, you speak of

rescuing my brother; but against such a man it is impossible, if he is seriously in earnest to stir the commons of Birmingham to a resistance. What force have we? A few rusty old pikes and foolish serving-men, who will run the first push of point they feel against their jerkins.'

Dorothy was surprised—certainly not well content—to find the kindless brother of Edward Holte of the opinion he desired to enforce upon his sire.

'What would you have me do, then?' almost yelled Sir Thomas Holte. 'Sit down under this maltreatment, and stomach my wrongs as if they were my meat?'

'Nay, sir, but speak the rogues of the town fair, for my brother's sake, awhile you despatch messengers to the King at Nottingham for succour. Such a town as Birmingham—so central on all his Majesty's ways against his rebels—the very garner and wheatfield of Mars—will instantly claim rescue at his hands.'

'But the King himself is lying at Nottingham, with hardly men enough about him to ensure the safety of his own sacred person! Know you not how he hath been compelled to send nigh all his horse into Worcestershire, under his royal nephew, to cover our movements there, and check the Parliament's advance on the west?—Out on me, and shame on my rash tongue!' Sir Thomas Holte interrupted himself to exclaim: 'I was to keep this a secret, almost from my own bosom, until the Prince burst upon them, when they sent me the rendezvous of my son—and now here is even a woman in it!'

'But one whose secrecy there are means to secure, sir,' replied Grimsorwe, significantly, 'and his High-

ness Prince Rupert is but the nearer for aid to us in Worcestershire. Take my counsel, sir—which I could give at more freedom were we alone—and let us prophesy smooth things unto these angry blacksmiths of Birmingham, while we send at all the speed of man and horse into Worcestershire. Let me have the charge into Birmingham. You know I have a lawyer's tongue now in my head, or you have been at charges to little purpose for my education in London.'

Dorothy Firebrace, who heard all that was said, was struck with consternation at this overture. She remembered all that Edward Holte had observed on his brother's double-mindedness and villainy, so amply confirmed by her own experience. She spoke up, therefore, with vehement warmth to Sir Thomas. 'Trust him not in his brother's case, worshipful sir!' she exclaimed; 'he hates his lawful brother, and would place himself in his seat. I overheard him muttering as much with the foul witch, his grandmother, and debating the means how, if you will give me leave to declare them!'

'I trust I shall show differently in the proof; 'tis a most malicious lie, invented by a wench who possibly is my brother's leman, to sow divisions between us—which was ever such creatures' common trick in families. But your worship knows what stress to put upon a woman's raving tongue, when she hath malice in her heart, to set the clappers a-run.'

Sir Thomas frowned, as at some unpleasant recollection. 'You shall go to Birmingham in your brother's behalf, Richard,' he said; 'I could never abide three words ere I should tell them all my mind on their brutish breach of manners and hospitality

And I must say it shows most brotherly in you to propose it; for shall not your own person be also in manifest jeopardy?’

‘Not, sir, if you keep the master armourer’s daughter here as a hostage for my safe return!’ returned Grimsorwe.

Sir Thomas burst into a hoarse laugh. ‘Why so, in sooth, it shall be!’ he exclaimed. ‘Nay, I thought not of it before, but can we not bargain Edward’s release against her’s? A fair swap!’

‘Sir! your son’s safe-conduct for me is in your hands. I am here unknown to my father and the whole town, who would be angry with me nigh unto stoning if they knew I took part against their purposes. Therefore, in Heaven’s name, keep true touch with me, and since my errand is done, let me depart in peace.’

‘It seems reasonable what she says—Edward’s safe-conduct and assurance should be respected,’ said Sir Thomas, hesitatingly eyeing Grimsorwe. ‘And it were an ill-return for so generous a preference—’

‘Sir, if you allow of her departure, not only is my brother Edward’s danger from your retaliatory and offended enemies most manifest and inevitable, but the King’s counsels and nakedness at Nottingham are all betrayed—to what advantages we know not, when there are men like Master Cromwell of Huntingdon to seize them!’ replied the crafty lawyer.

‘Nay, that will never do; she must remain our prisoner,’ said Sir Thomas, ‘but in an easy and well-purveyed captivity. Robin, take her to the great kitchen, and be her guard over her while Adam Black-jack places the best in his pantry before her.’

A captive, and in the kitchen, with menials for

guardsmen and companions! The degradation, almost as much as the peril of her detention, nigh maddened Dorothy Firebrace.

It happened, too, that during a considerable portion of the dialogue Dorothy's glance had repeatedly fallen upon a group of persons parading up and down the terrace before the house, as if for evening exercise. Two of these were ladies; both apparently of rank by the rich gleaming of their dresses in the sunset splendours that now flooded the mansion and grounds in this direction. One of them, by the stiffer magnificence of her apparel—her train being carried by a page, and herself leaning on the arm of a pale elderly man, in the garb of a chaplain—was clearly the elder of the two. The other was of more playful and youthful manners, amusing herself with flinging biscuits to four or five peacocks, that trailed after her with their long, gorgeous tails along the balustrade of the terrace, and in chit-chat with a motley-garbed lackadaisical looking fellow, who was doubtless the still common retainer in great houses, styled, without roundabout, a Fool.

And now, seeing these persons, Dorothy had for some time concluded in her own mind that they must be the mother and sister of Edward Holte. And conceiving the possibility of women entertaining some compassion for a woman, she took a sudden resolution, and darting past Robin Falconer, over a narrow rustic bridge, she crossed the moat, and sped like an antelope up several flights of steps to the terrace where she observed the ladies. Arriving breathlessly before my Lady Holte, just as she was about to turn again on her parade walk—followed, at almost as desperate speed, but retarded by his lawyer's robe, by Richard Grimsorwe.

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY AND MISS HOLTE.

THE wife of Sir Thomas Holte was daughter and co-heiress of one of the most distinguished county families of Warwickshire, and in her youth had been a lady of remarkable beauty, and, it was said, of great spirit and haughtiness. But all these advantages had not enabled her to bear up against the tyrannous supremacy of her husband's character; and at the time we are now upon she had sunk for many years into a meek and utterly dependent vassalage on his will and pleasure, in whatever sort declared.

Part of this will and pleasure certainly was that my Lady Holte should figure in magnificent array at the head of his household, and be served with all the state and ceremony of a princess. But of the truest and real privileges of a wife and mother Lady Holte was as effectually deprived as if she had no claim to either distinction. She was allowed no voice or opinion in the education and disposal of her children in life. But, indeed, only two had ever so long preserved the gift of life bestowed upon them as to allow much scope for maternal anxieties or supervision. And the frequent calamities of her children's loss, due, probably, to the exhaustion of her own strength, consequent on unusual

fecundity, had, doubtless, greatly contributed to the weakening and subduing of the poor lady's character. Particularly as superstition lent its dispiriting aid to sorrow; and the discovery of her husband's immoralities and cruelty to another woman, though before their marriage, which had provoked, she deemed, the vengeance of a sorceress on her progeny, darkened existence for her in the midst of all the state and splendour accumulated by that husband's pride around her.

Her son Edward was, in fact, Lady Holte's chief, if not her only, consolation. He alone inherited her fair complexion—her resigned and feeling temperament—her tenderness of heart—her high sense of honour and propriety. Arabella Holte greatly more resembled her father both in look and character. It is true that she claimed so much of her mother's almost perfect, angelic beauty as was compatible with a deep brunette complexion, raven-black hair, and eyes of the most extraordinary darkness and vivacity. But in the passion and power of her spirit, her pride, her ambition, her love of rule and despotism, she was her father's child every inch. To be sure all these characteristics had taken feminine forms in a woman, and Arabella Holte's strivings after dominion took not unfrequently the shapes of the most bewitching coquetry and allurements, or languor of submission, rather than of sway. But these were only spells of the sorceress, destined to be wrought into cruel fixed enchantments, that left the victims the more powerless and yet scorned in her hands. For, young as she was, Arabella Holte had hitherto seemed impervious herself to the passions she took a wicked delight in kindling and deriding in others. The whole country rang with tales of her pride and disdainful insolence to

her wooers—the number of suits she had seemed to encourage for awhile, but had concluded by scornfully rejecting—even on the part of persons confessedly her equals, or even superiors, in rank and fortune. And in these caprices she was so thoroughly backed and encouraged by her father that it was derisively reported Sir Thomas Holte meant to marry his children to Infants and Infantas of Spain—an opinion of the towering pride and arrogance of that nation, especially in family concerns, being a rooted portion of the public belief in England at that period. But of all his family, not even excepting his crafty and intriguing bastard son—Arabella Holte enjoyed the greatest influence with her despotic and headstrong sire. He had a respect for her abilities, which were certainly great; and her ambitious and haughty character too closely resembled his own not to merit his approbation. And what father could fail to be proud of beauty so rare as to be almost matchless in its singular union of brilliancy and attractions of the softest and most voluptuous order?—when it so pleased her that at times betrayed depth of real fire in her unopened soul, whence all that flimsy flame and evanescent glow must needs proceed? It was not a philosophical age, and Sir Thomas Holte was not the kind of reasoner to understand the dangers as well as the charm and power of such a temperament.

These were the goddesses to whom Dorothy Firebrace had now recourse in the untoward conjunction of her affairs. But little to her advantage, for although she succeeded in arresting the attention of both ladies, she had hardly commenced her incoherent demand on Lady Holte for protection, in her son Edward's name, ere Richard Grimsorwe arriving, terrified the unfortunate

mother almost to death with the tidings of the young heir's seizure in Birmingham, coupled with the assurance that to retain the armourer's daughter was the only possible guarantee for his safety. Lady Holte nearly fainted away on the intelligence, and though her first exclamation of 'The witch, the witch!—the witch's curse has overtaken him too, now!' could not have been very agreeable to Grimsorwe, he reiterated his statement in a manner to overpower all poor Dorothy Firebrace's remonstrances.

It was true that Miss Holte, who had as little liking or trust in Richard as her brother, was at first inclined to take part against what he laid down as proper to be done in the case. But when Richard malignantly observed to her, 'Deem you that any lesser pledge than Tubal Bromycham's betrothed will save your brother, Mistress Arabella, from Tubal Bromycham's vengeance?' she bit her proud pouting lip, and was silent. And yet she was, doubtless, as incredulous as Dorothy or Edward Holte of good meaning towards him on his unlawful brother's part.

Dorothy even thought that the young lady, hearing her named as Tubal's betrothed, looked at her with something of disdainful and angry scrutiny. As if with all her own contempt for her blacksmith pretendant, her pride suffered not even the shadow of rivalry in another there. Perhaps the high-bred, passion-pale beauty was struck for a moment with some yet more annoying diffidence when she remarked the exaltation produced by excitement in what she would otherwise have despised as plebeian and vulgar loveliness, in the glow and flush of the Birmingham girl's appearance. But Sir Thomas Holte's arrival, who now came up on foot in a state of high exasperation, furiously rating

poor Robin Falconer at every step for allowing the evasion of his captive, was decisive on the whole question.

In vain did Dorothy renew her entreaties, and declare the ruin that awaited her for the mere performance of a kind action, in case she was detained, and her absence discovered in the town.

In vain did even the meek and melancholy looking chaplain, who continued to support Lady Holte's trembling frame, entreat Sir Thomas to more mildness and forbearance. The old man was inexorable. 'I will take charge of her myself henceforth,' he said, 'and lock her for safety as nigh the sky as we can get in this house—in the Dome-Chamber up there, yonder! Have thou no fear, Richard, but go at once on thy honey-talk in Birmingham, while I send the fleetest horse in my stable on a bloody spur to Prince Rupert, in the west, for aid. Come with me, girl! or must I have some lackey's fingers clawing about you to enforce my will?'

'Go with my father quietly, maiden, since it must be; my brother's life were else in grievous peril,' said Arabella, whitening perhaps at some secret recollection of her own.

'My son, my only son! Sir Thomas, save my Edward, cost what it will!' ejaculated Lady Holte.

'I am my father's only child, madam; but if you really think that young Master Holte's life can by my captivity be assured from some certain danger—I mean, sir, since I cannot resist, I yield myself implicitly your captive,' said Dorothy, upon these words.

'It is well, girl; you shall not fare the worse for it; and I will myself be your interceder with Master

Firebrace, at a fitting time. What! the old man and I have always been good friends before that foolish feud began. Come on; perhaps your's may but prove some few short hours' detention, for I will return you with every respect in exchange for my son, the moment Richard brings me word he has negotiated the bargain.'

The baronet then, with unwonted courtesy to an inferior, as doubtless he deemed Dorothy, offered her his arm, which she was forced to accept, and to keep pace with his sturdy tramp, that made the watch-dogs tremble and creep into their kennels as he passed, until they entered Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DOME-CHAMBER.

SIR THOMAS and his grieving captive were now literally in the Great Hall of the mansion—a remarkably handsome and stately apartment, brilliantly lighted, ornamented with a ceiling in geometrical compartments, and an extraordinarily fine cornice, with mouldings of various curious and even fabulous animals, such as the elephant, unicorn, lion, griffin, stag, &c. The wainscot was at this period of finely polished oak, and ornamented over the panellings with numerous antlered heads of deer, preserved as trophies for their surprising size and extension in the branching. Beneath these were suspended several suits of richly wrought, but ancient armour; and over the immense fireplace, which was filled with holly, still ruby-specked with the previous winter's berries, was arranged a great circular ornament of pikes, around an heraldic shield, blazing with all the quarterings of the Holte family.

Sir Thomas glanced towards this decoration at once, and even drew Dorothy herself towards it. 'We have arms now had we men to wield them,' he said, 'and whatever Dick says, I will summon my tenants, and the knave-yeoman who holds back need never show on again at a Manor Court of mine!' The young girl

herself, meanwhile, half unconsciously perused some lines conspicuously flourished and scrolled over the chimney-piece, intended, doubtless, for the edification of the menials whose place it was to dance attendance in this chamber.

If service be thy means to thrive,
 Thou must therein remain
 Both silent, faithful, just, and true,
 Content to take some pain.

If love of virtue may allure,
 Or hope of worldly gain,
 If fear of God may thee procure,
 To serve do not disdain.

Sir Thomas seemed then struck by some other thought, and turned proudly and eagerly to ascertain what effect all this state and grandeur produced upon the daughter of the master armourer of Birmingham. Greatly to the increase of his displeasure, however, he discerned that she was hardly taking any notice of what she saw. He could not himself but remark, though, how wan and colourless she had become on the relapse from her previous excitement, and he was, perhaps, a little touched at it. 'Cheer up, maiden,' he said; 'your detention, I trust, will not be for long; and meanwhile, it is not my purpose to put you, at all events, on prisoner's diet. I mean but to lodge you for safe custody in a high chamber above here, whence it will be impossible for you to evade; but come first to Adam Black-jack's offices, where methinks I shall have interest to procure you a crust and a sop to stay hunger, which is one of the worst calamities to a young stomach.'

Dorothy in vain protested she needed no refreshment—could partake of none. Despotically and obstinate in all his opinions and resolutions, the baronet inexorably led

the way to a door in a corner of the hall, admitting into a long and well-lighted corridor, speedily terminating in a flight of broad low steps. These descended rapidly into a high vaulted chamber, paved with red tiles, and set round with dressers bright with a prodigious array of polished pewter plates, with two long oak tables furnished with benches, evidently for the use of the Aston domestics at meals. Passing through this, a handsome brick archway admitted into a most extensive kitchen, fitted up with all the machinery for cooking on a grand scale, coppers, chopping-blocks, baking-kilns and ovens, and, above all, a fireplace of so extensive a range that it occupied one entire end of the chamber, and, indeed, rather resembled a black cavern separated from it by rows of iron bars.

At present only a small portion of this great culinary facility was in actual use. This was separated off by an iron plate, with sufficient fuel to heat an oven, which, to judge from a savoury scent diffused all over the kitchen, contained some relishing viand in process of baking.

Before the fire there sat a man whose appearance rather struck Dorothy Firebrace with a vaguely and yet strongly impressed feeling of mistrust and apprehension. He had a long, high, narrow head, set with closely cropped, nearly bolt upright, bristly black hair. His countenance was marked with an expression of profound gloom, and was by no means of a prepossessing character in other respects. But it was chiefly in the eyes, which had a peculiarly oblique and sinister glare in them when raised, that the unpleasant effect was to be remarked.

When the master of Aston Hall and his captive entered the apartment, this person was seated, appa-

rently lost in a sombre reverie, staring fixedly into the steady glow of the baking fire before him, and with his arms crossed moodily on his breast. Beside him there was a small, round, perfectly white deal table, on which was a squat, black, silver-hinged book, much dog-leaved and time-stained, he had seemingly been engaged in perusing. His garb was the usual one of a cook in a great family—of snow-white flannel, with a chamois-leather apron, a girdle hung with a knife and steel, like a modern butcher's, and a scarlet cap, and stockings up to his wide, baggy knee-breeches. He was not by any means a young man—probably about the age of his master ; but Sir Thomas's finer dark locks were threaded with a silvering of gray, while Adam Blackjack's beard and hair boasted all their primitive coarse dye.

Strange to say, the cook continued so lost in contemplation, that even the unusual apparition of his lord, and so accompanied, seemed not to excite his attention. To be sure, the invaders approached from behind, and the smooth-tiled floor gave little echo to footsteps. Nor was a personage to whom so much deference was due likely in the place at such an hour, if at all. Nevertheless, Sir Thomas both felt annoyed and exhibited himself so, to find his presence produce so slight an effect. 'The fellow hath grown into a trick of late to fall asleep thus awake,' he muttered. 'He had best not neglect the duties of his service, albeit, or all his anti-quity in my house shall not hinder me from snatching his ladle-spoon from his hand! What reads he here that hath such an efficacy for slumber?'

So saying, he raised the squat black book and examined it. '*The Bible!*' he then said, with a slightly surprised and scornful accent. 'What doth a master-

cook setting his brains a-simmer with divinity matters? 'S'life, I trust the knave is not bitten with the madness of the times, and turning text-monger at Aston Hall! "Many are called, but few are chosen," quotha! Is he caught by his long ears in the thorny maze of Jack Calvin's doctrines of reprobation and grace, which, as I hear, are all the prate of late times in the sectarian pulpits? If so, I would hope Master Blackjack's name was writ beyond rubbing out originally in the book of life; for, to my knowledge, he hath made many a backslide and stumbling on his way to Paradise. Yet is he a namesake of the first lord thereof. Wake, Adam, man, wake!—what doltish owl-staring is this?'

The cook started awake at these words, if he might be considered asleep, particularly as they were seconded by a vigorous slap on the shoulder. But his first utterance, as he glared round, betokened some continued disorder of the perceptive faculties. 'What, Sir Thomas, my master, and Mistress Maud come back again!'

'Idiot! what babble you? Are a score and ten years so easily jumped out of mind?' said Sir Thomas, angrily.

'I was thinking, sir—thinking of the old time over again; and the devil with his forked tail was a-whispering in my ear that—crave pardon, worshipful sir; but having nothing else to do but heed the bubbling of the game-pastry in the oven for your honourable supper——'

'It matters not; only keep awake now while you are so. Is my meat nigh in readiness?' Sir Thomas said, crossly interrupting the moody meditationist's exposition. Adam Blackjack had by this time completely recovered his faculties, and flung open the oven door,

revealing a noble standing pie in full steam and browning in its recesses. 'It lacks scarcely another bubble,' he responded.

'Then serve it at once to this young girl, with some observance of white diaper and the like; and let one of the sewers produce us both a foaming tankard of the best October. I will be accompanier to her in that,' said Sir Thomas, while the cook surveyed the armourer's daughter with marked wonderment and curiosity in the erection of his black straight eyebrows. 'So soon, so soon!' Dorothy then heard him mutter to himself, though Sir Thomas did not. 'Am I called upon now, and thus, to take up my testimony in Israel, and go forth of the house of Ahab, and prophesy with the pure ones of Birmingham, even as Balaam's ass had its mouth opened with the spirit of wisdom and knowledge? Of a verity, if the old man takes up again with the sins of his youth, and would plunge me deeper yet with him in the furnace of damnation, whereto of a former time he opened me the door.' He muttered these latter words in a fierce though indistinct undertone; and then, with a glare of the eyes that made Dorothy start, he enquired of her, 'Who and what art thou, woman so fair and young, and what do you here with my worshipful master alone—to be surfeited and feasted with his meats and strong drinks?'

Sir Thomas burst into a huge, hoarse laugh. 'What, Adam, art thou, too, turned saint in thy elder time, and yet creditest me with so much of the remains of my youthful spirits and jollity? No, man; this is no lovely leman tumbled from heaven into Aston Hall to tempt threescore years to folly; but a young maiden of Birmingham, who brings me such ill news thence that I

am compelled, greatly against my will, to keep her in pawn, even for my son Edward's life !'

Dorothy Firebrace had meanwhile been considering that she had frequently seen this moody and mad-eyed servitor in Birmingham, in attendance at the religious exercises of a certain new body of sectaries, who had been for some time growing there in number, and who were called Anabaptists. She knew little or nothing of their tenets, the upper classes of the town taking no part in them, having chiefly seceded to the Presbyterian and Independent forms of worship and doctrines. But it vaguely occurred to her that every kind of dissent implied some degree of friendly feeling among those who adopted a line of opposition to the established authorities, and she proceeded at once to lay her case, in a much clearer form than Sir Thomas Holte's statement, before the master-cook—greatly, as it seemed, to the discontent and anger of the former, whose pride, reasonably enough, revolted at the appeal from himself to his menial ; more especially as the latter, apparently regardless of his master's visible indignation, continued to lend a dark and frowning attention to all she said. The choleric baronet speedily lost patience, and, angrily seizing Dorothy by her arm, he exclaimed, ' Jade ! would you set my very menial up in revolt against me ? Come where I may see thee and thy witching tongue safely caged in stone walls ;' and he literally drew her after him by force up another flight of steps to the one they had descended by, and that emerged by a door contrived to communicate with the grand feasting-chambers of the house, by way of the principal staircase.

This, not yet disfigured by the atrocious coating of coloured pigments which the tastelessness of a subse-

quent century was to daub over the glorious massively-carved oak balustrades, was now before the unwilling captive and her captor. And up this the baronet dragged rather than led her, with real cruelty and violence in his irritated spirit of domination, alternately muttering threats of vengeance on his insolent servant, and ordering Dorothy, in startlingly fierce and Blue-beard-like accents, to follow on. 'What is it Richard means by forcing me still to entertain these mutinous slaves about me?' he said also, repeatedly. 'Though this be a good man of his craft, but for his entreaty I had dismissed the rascal the moment I heard he had taken to frequenting the Birmingham conventicles! He a spy, indeed, to tell us the counsels of the enemy! He is one to carry ours to them.'

Luckily the stairs, though arranged in numerous flights, were by a low step, and frequently reached good square landing-places in the ascent, so that the armourer's daughter suffered less than might have been expected from her rude handling.

In this manner they reached the top landing-place of the whole structure, where there was a strong high wicket gate, securely padlocked. Sir Thomas had the key and unlocked it, ordering Dorothy Firebrace, more like a lamb driven into the slaughter-house than anything else, within. She then perceived another short, narrow, and very steep flight of steps to the right, before her, terminating apparently in darkness, like the ladder of a belfry. But up this also Sir Thomas Holte sternly commanded her to follow. Dorothy felt it was in vain to exhibit the extreme reluctance and misgiving she felt; and was rejoiced to find that they stopped short of a peculiarly black and dungeon-like looking

chamber on the very top of the stairs. And it certainly was a much preferable one into which Sir Thomas stepped, and, in somewhat less savage accents, invited Dorothy Firebrace to follow.

This chamber was of a singular round configuration, dome-shaped in the roof, and of a wider diameter than would have been concluded by surveying its exterior from the ground-plan of Aston Hall. For it was in reality the hollow of the minaret-shaped principal tower of the mansion. It was quite unfurnished, with the exception of some old broken fragments, seemingly deposited there as rubbish out of the way; and there was nothing but an interweaving of massive timber supports between the eye and the lead of the roofing. And like the reverse of tapestry, though very fine with gilding and arabesque tracings—the skilful work of Tubal Bromycham—on the exterior, this looked very black and dull within. There was no deficiency of light, however, from several good-sized bull's-eye windows set at the points of the compass in the dome, and Dorothy had every opportunity to appreciate the cruel security of the imprisonment to which she was to be consigned.

‘And now,’ said Sir Thomas, with a derisive and angry smile, ‘if you can fly like a bird from above the tallest chimneys of Aston Hall, or force a lock whose key is of the purest steel, and of a pound weight, you are free to leave this place, and return to your father, the armourer, ere he sends me back my son, Edward Holte, whom he hath so unlawfully, and unjustly, and masterfully made his prisoner. *What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!*’ And with this homely

expression of his sentiments the haughty jailer left the Dome-Chamber, locking it after him with three successive movements of a prodigious iron bolt, and leaving Dorothy Firebrace to meditations, the extremely unpleasant nature of which it is unnecessary to declare.

CHAPTER XXI.

BIRMINGHAM IN ARMS.

RICHARD GRIMSORWE took good care not to start on his mission to Birmingham until he was satisfied that the hostage of his personal safety was securely lodged—not to mention the strong motives he had to disrelish the prospect of Dorothy's being at liberty and complaining of his misconduct towards her in a town where she had so many and so powerful friends.

With respect to his brother's relations with the armourer's daughter, Grimsorwe knew not what conclusion to form, but the suspicions immediately raised in his own debauched and dishonest fancy, that they must be of a close and dishonourable nature, added to the other numerous motives of his animosity against the better-born though younger heir of Aston, a feeling of intensely jealous envy and rivalry at this new instance of his more fortunate hap. And as he had also little doubt that Dorothy had overheard his plottings with his grandmother, incentives in the conviction that his unbrotherly projects were likely to be revealed, were joined to stimulate him on his present course of action.

Little did Sir Thomas Holte dream of his chosen agent's real intents and purposes, when he proceeded to give him his instructions.

These were to proceed to Birmingham, seek an interview with the master armourer and his allies and abettors, and, in the King's name, make a demand for his brother's immediate and safe return to Aston, as the only condition of the restoration of Dorothy Firebrace to her friends, and avoiding a speedy application of armed force to the rescue of a prisoner so unlawfully seized upon and detained. But, meanwhile, the baronet declared that he would send an express, at the utmost speed of horse and man, into Worcestershire, to Prince Rupert, to ask for military aid against the sudden outbreak of sedition in Birmingham. Robin Falconer knew every inch of the country, he remarked, and was so familiar with all its details, that he would easily be enabled to give the go-by to any flying parties of the enemy's cavalry, which might have been thrown out by the Parliament army in the west, under Sir William Waller.

Grimsorwe ascertained thus, to his great comfort, that Dorothy had not been enabled to secure any more trustful hearing to what she could reveal of his designs against his brother than when he was at hand to contradict her. But in truth he had established a very powerful influence over his father's mind; no less by Sir Thomas's conviction of his possessing the qualities of coolness and persuasion he was himself most deficient in, than by mean adulation and subserviency to the impetuous old man's humours and violence.

He had little occasion, certainly, to urge upon the baronet the extreme necessity of keeping the armourer's daughter in custody until both his sons were restored to him in safety. But he obtained a promise from his father, on learning where she was consigned, that he

would not part with the key of the Dome-Chamber on any pretence, or for a single instant, to any person, unless under his own close supervision. This important stipulation made, Richard Grimsorwe got into one of his father's coaches, which he preferred to horseback, as a more peaceful and yet imposing announcement of his authorised position and business, and set off for Birmingham.

The events that had taken place had consumed the time until it was close upon darkness and the end of the long August day, that had commenced so ominously in Birmingham with the arrival of the fanatic fugitive from Nottingham, when Grimsorwe reached the town.

No scientific magician had as yet dreamed of gas, and the frugal manners of the time, and early habits of our ancestors, made even a few oil-lamps be looked upon as a wasteful superfluity in all but capital cities. Usually, therefore, Birmingham shared the light and darkness of the heavens above it only. Neither was any regular system of police introduced even in capital towns, and not a solitary watchman guarded the peace and security of Birmingham by nights. So that Grimsorwe perceived at once that a remarkable change had come over the spirit of the town when at the entrance from Aston, where the highway traversed a field called 'The Butts,' from its being the place where the townsmen of old kept up their *cross-bow practice*, he found a great fire kindled in the very midst of the road, and heard his advance challenged in loud and sentinel-like accents by two men, furnished with musketoons (short hand-guns of a wide bore) to enforce their orders to halt.

'Under protest, as not knowing what right these, or any men, can have to hinder a subject of the King, on

the King's highway, on his lawful business—draw rein, coachman!' said the Aston ambassador, looking from his roomy and grandly-bedizened vehicle with much satisfaction at the signs of resistance evident in the determined aspect of the two stout fellows who now advanced to parley.

'The King hath no longer a highway into Birmingham, while he continues in breach of the laws and customs of the realm of England. We of the town have declared for the Parliament: leastwise, our masters and seniors have, whom we are bound in all true service to obey,' one of the men—seemingly, by his appearance, a smith—made haste to reply.

'Be it so; but they are your own necks you are putting into nooses, my good fellows. And what is all this pother about the young gentleman, worshipful Sir Thomas Holte's worshipful heir, and my honourable brother, whom you have made your prisoner, we learn at Aston?' said Richard Grimsorwe.

'You call your mother an ill name every time you so claim Master Holte, master lawyer,' replied the other sentinel, jeeringly, who doubtless recognised the speaker, and had no particular respect for him. 'But it is as true as if a lawyer had *not* said it, that the town abides by what the master armourer has done, and is sworn in on the great Guildhall Bible to stand by him unto every consequence.'

Richard Grimsorwe's dark visage flushed at the gibe, and the rancour in his heart deepened against its original innocent object. To the present interlocutor he answered in smooth and unstirred accents: 'I wish, then, to speak with whoever among you usurps the principal sway and authority in Birmingham, for I have

a most important message from Sir Thomas Holte to deliver, on his son's behalf, to the good and, methinks, needlessly angered town.'

'Who should that be, William Moorcroft?' said the first challenger to his comrade. 'Our master, Armourer Firebrace, is appointed commissioner for the Parliament in Birmingham: leastwise, as soon as the committee in London shall know that he is willing to take on him the business and office. But Tubal Bromycham is named captain of the town, for all warlike concernment. And as for the prophet who hath escaped from the tyrant's dungeons at Nottingham, and brings us such comfortable tidings and assurances, he himself doth but announce him as a spiritual light and pillar of fire though the wilderness before us.'

'With whether of these three would you have speech, master lawyer? Methinks the matter of your business will inform yourself the best,' replied William Moorcroft.

'But is there not one of greater power, for the nonce, among you than all these, seeing he is reported the prime mover and stirrer of the whole?' said Grimsorwe, rather hesitatingly.

'Captain Cromwell, he means—the stranger officer of the Parliament—who sluttered so to the people with his tongue from the Guildhall window, but hath ordered all things so soldierly among us against an onset from the old Nebuchadnezzar at Aston,' observed the former speaker.

'Yes, *Captain Cromwell*—that is the man's name I am more specially directed to reason withal, as representing London Parliament in this sorrowful outbreak and sedition, which I fear will bring upon the town a

sudden and sharp reprisal from the cavaliers,' said Grimsorwe, affecting to pronounce the name as if it was strange in his ears. 'Lead me to him.'

'But was it so put to us as our duty? Were we not to take the newsmen and prisoners to Tubal, as relating to the proper watch and ward of the town against its enemies?' deliberated William Moorcroft to his companion.

'I am a civilian, come on civil business and ambassage merely; and I do not desire to speak with Captain Cromwell in any military sense, but as the prime agent and answerer for the Parliament in these parts,' said Grimsorwe.

'Come then, but out of your coach; there be chains and barriers erected farther on,' said Moorcroft, after a little aside with his mate. 'We shall find Master Cromwell at the Black Boy, for after he had appointed us all our posts, and left Tubal in command at the Old Cross, I did hear him sweetly entreat the gifted man, Wrath-of-God Whitehall, to accompany him thither home, and exchange some comforting soul-experiences, as well as discourse more fully of the strange miracle of the blowing down of the King's flag on Nottingham Castle towers, which, with his own prison-wearied eyes, the good man saw.'

While this statement was being made, Richard Grimsorwe had alighted from his equipage. But, with discreet attention to his own personal safety, before placing himself in the hands of the irritated townsmen of Birmingham, he remarked, 'I nothing doubt your safeguard, gentlemen; but my father, Sir Thomas, has for hostage of it, in his hands at Aston, the fair soft

person of your master armourer's daughter, Mistress Dorothy Firebrace.'

'Good God! what say you? There have been seekers all over the town for her these two hours! Did you of Aston kidnap the maiden at the Cherry Orchard? for there old Mahala reported she had gone, and none could give further tidings of her after,' exclaimed William Moorcroft.

'Nay; she placed herself willingly in our hands,' returned the malicious messenger, 'for the sake of my brother's handsome face, and some pretty promises. I do not doubt he has whistled the fair wench from the hedge.'

'This will be strange news for my master, the armourer. I will take in the messenger, and then hurry to him with it,' said William Moorcroft, evidently greatly dismayed and astonished with the intelligence. 'He can scarce be in worse fears for her now; but there will be no thanks for the messenger, I am thinking. Where is the tinker boy, that promised to keep up the fire for us? I will send him on that business.'

The prudent sentinel called 'Jack! Jack Bunyan!' once or twice before he could awaken the lad in question, who was stretched on the grass, with his begrimmed visage turned up to the warm glow of the watchfire. Who knows? perchance even then collecting experiences for the inspired vision of his future times, and feeling the remote glory of the Celestial City in the coarse but comforting glare of a coal fire, in an open field, under the canopy of heaven! Moorcroft gave him his untoward errand, and then announced to Grimsorwe that he was ready to attend him to Captain Cromwell's quarters.

As the Black Boy and Woolpack stood in those days exactly where it stands now, there is no occasion to say that these were behind the Church of St. Martin, in the centre of the town; chosen by Cromwell chiefly on that account: for the landlady, who was a widow, a handsome and jolly woman, and a great gossip of Dame Cooper, the loyal High Bailiff's wife—was not at all well affected to the Parliament captain's party. On the contrary, she took every opportunity she could to rail at and deride it, and had even exhibited herself so little complaisant and obliging to her guest that, but for the excellent reasons he had of his own to prefer her house, it is most probable Captain Cromwell would soon have ceased to bed and board at the Black Boy and Woolpack.

In truth, Grimsorwe, on his arrival under guard, found Mistress Mellons in close and apparently amazed and panic-stricken confabulation, before the doors, with the bailiff's wife, who had doubtless made her way to her gossip's from the Moat House, to ascertain the meaning and progress of the alarming events of which the town of Birmingham was now the scene.

Simon Fairservice, the Black Boy ostler, was rubbing down a bespattered and exhausted steed, at a little distance, which the Aston envoy instantly recognised as his brother's favourite and pampered riding-horse, which he had chosen from all his father's valuable stud. It was plain the poor beast had fallen now upon a harder service.

‘Heard mortal now ever the like?’ Dame Cooper was saying, as Grimsorwe approached, in a high tone, as if indignation had got the better of prudence on the sudden. ‘I did not marvel so much to see my fat fool come pelting home to the Moat House, like an ox with

a gadfly to water, on the first stir in the Market Place this morning. But I thought at first it was only some discontent on the people's part as to the lord's butter-dues; which, indeed, are an old-standing grudge. Whereas now it is, say you, that the town is in arms against his most sacred Majesty's own dues and authority! But there will be a reckoning for all, and that before we see the snow again, or I am as daft a babbler as mine old knave himself. But it troubles me, gossip, it troubles me mightily, you should give such a villain and traitor harbourage in your house. It may twist yourself, my woman, in some turn of his rope!

‘What can I do, my good lady? As I hope to be saved, I have done what in me lay to make the Black Boy no home for a Parliament rogue, save and except refusing the necessary offices of my trade, which the town would not suffer,’ replied the landlady, sorrowfully. ‘Deem you it is much of a pleasure to me to see my best and jolliest customers discountenanced by a psalm-singing, canting Puritan of a knave like this pretended captain, forsooth, in his greasy old leather doublet and hose? His nose itself is a lying hypocrite, or else he got it so well steeped of yore that it hath not yet had time to sober itself, for it shows at whiles as coppery as a new brass pan; yet the man scarce stomachs a gallon of ale a week in my house. Even now, he is upstairs in his chamber, snivelling and weeping and praising God, in a snuffle and whine, like a pair of wheezy bellows, for his mercies, in bringing him to the acquaintance and companionship of a stray lunatic preacher, Tom-a-Bedlam, who hath escaped his chains and strayed hither, I know not how. Yea, but awhile ago, as I passed where they are liquouring each other with their

overflowing eyes—but never a drop of anything cherishing to man, for the good of the house—I did overhear Master Cromwell entreat the precious soul, forsooth, to be even as a new Samuel to the Saul he hath set up among us; who, if he is not by a head taller than all other Birmingham men (its his name, too), is as giant as Goliath in his strength and goodwill to the cause.'

'What is that, I wonder?'

'God 'a mercy! what times we are come upon! My poor husband will never have the heart to provide for all the hanging that will soon be to do in the town, when his Majesty marches this way,' lamented the bailiff's loyal spouse.

'He!—he is good for nothing but love-days, and merry-makings, and fair-junketings! Not but what that is much, Dame Cooper, and a real favour of Providence to us poor tapster folk, to have set at the head of a well-guided town. Howbeit, God fits the back to the burden, else a poor widow like me had long since given way under mine, and rather than that some of these hypocritical rogues should miss their dues——But whom have we here? A fair even to you, sirs; what do you lack?'

The buxom mistress of the Black Boy seemed now, for the first time, to notice the arrival of Grimsworth and his guard, who had been civilly waiting for some cessation in the gossip; but, finding none likely to take place in any given time, now pushed somewhat rudely past.

'We lack nothing but a sight of the worthy captain you have lodged above, mistress,' replied William Moorcroft; 'unless you will measure me a draught of

ale, with a stroke of chalk for a tape-wand, for it is not wages night, you wot.'

'Let him drink what he will at my expense,' said Grimsorwe, graciously, and thinking it not unlikely that a talk over a flagon would spread his news and calumnies.

The smith-sentinel—whose trade was as thirsty in the seventeenth as in the nineteenth century—seemed well enough pleased with the announcement, and ushered up the envoy with more marks of deference than he had hitherto deemed necessary or advisable. 'It is well seen in you, sir, that you have gentleman's blood in your veins, however you came by it,' he courteously remarked as they ascended a very narrow dark staircase. 'But what manner of caterwauling is this? Nay, by the rood, 'tis Master Cromwell and the persecuted man from Nottingham joining together in a thanksgiving song!'

CHAPTER XXII.

CROMWELL AND GRIMSORWE.

IT was even so. Two voices, one of them deep and strong, but hoarse and broken as the sound of the sea on a rocky shore; the other a wild, shrill piping, like the upper notes of an organ played out of tune, united in anything but harmony, came to Grimsorwe's hearing as his conductor spoke. But in spite of the strange discordancy in pitch, it was plain the 'thanksgiving song' must have been one familiarly known among the enthusiastic religionists of the age, since they kept the words very well together in point of time, and when the door was opened appeared at their work without a book.

God is our strength : in Him we trust ;
 Not in the arm of flesh and dust ;
 Not in the steel of shield or spear,
 Horseman or chariot's hot career.

He only hath the power to save
 The creature of His breath,
 Who rose from out the wormy grave,
 And drew the sting of death !

Wash me, oh, wash me with the Lamb !—
 Though I be earth's most rancid ram,
 Jordan's sweet stream can make me nice
 For holy Abel's sacrifice.

With herbs of grace then deck my horns,
 And lead me to the altar's foot,
 Where thankfully, amid men's scorns,
 My blood shall change to snow my soot !

So absorbed were the two praise-givers in their devout business, that, although both their countenances were towards the door, neither appeared to take any notice of the stranger's arrival. Grimsorwe, whose cold and sceptical nature made the exhibition a subject of secret contempt and mockery to him, nevertheless immediately took off his hat, as if he had felt himself in some hallowed presence, and reverently waited the conclusion, while he furtively scrutinised the tear-blotched and yet enthusiasm-lighted visages before him. Nor, keen, penetrating, and incredulous as was his own intellect, could he determine to his satisfaction—any more than the acutest of subsequent historians—whether the wonderful man on whom he gazed, somewhat guessing of his future eminence, was in reality the impassioned fanatic he appeared, or one of those greatest of actors who make the world their stage, and the times in which they live their own, by their power to receive and give vitality to the master impulses and emotions of their epocha.

Even when the jarring harmony came to its ludicrously protracted nasal close, on the word 'soot,' neither of the singers seemed inclined to bestow any attention out of their own immediate range of ideas.

'Of a verity and indeed, good, sweet soul, Master Whitehall, these are times when all poor, worthy, harmless Christian people may and do, in a sort, as I say, consider themselves bound to the altar, and ready to have their throats cut, if it so pleases the Lord, unto His glory,' Captain Cromwell said, in a most sorrowful, whining tone, as if he were actually bleating in some such dilemma. 'I do hear from out the county of Stafford, how the silly, poor, well-affected, godly people there in the town, dare not so much as go to church on

the Sabbath-day but armed, for fear of the Popishers, and yet have had the good resolution and owning of the cause as to cast out the prelatical wolves, sent among them as shepherds by little Laud, even from his stopped earth-hole in the Tower of London—little in size, but mickle in mischief! And for my own part, though I am of small account in so great a matter—less than a sand of the shore, to keep out the whelm of waters—yet truly I may say I am as ready as another, and will show myself so, to seal my testimony with my blood. And truly, from what you say, there can be no manner of doubt the Philistines do now gather their arms together for warfare to fight Israel! And of a further surety I must say I never heard anything more comforting than your account of the blowing down of the standard—though there be some, I nothing doubt, who boast themselves of a more worldly wisdom and policy, would tell you its erection is the greater sign and portent to the world. And so it is, in a sort; for now will be known the true temper of men's minds, and who are with us and who are against us. And in good faith, though I did purpose it all along, considering the infinite advantages of this place and town to all soldiering purposes, I am better pleased now than ever that Birmingham hath owned herself so heartily and honestly at one with us of the Parliament. And truly much is owing to you, sweet-savoured Master Whitehall, for so towardly a disposing of men's minds. And I do trust in you, I may say, speaking not so much of my own particular as in the general, as representing in some sort the Committee of Parliament in these parts—to keep the plough in the furrow, and the good town fixed and firm in the way it should go. And, truly, I must say the

work has gone on at a pace, and I do myself marvel unto myself how some weak instruments, otherwise in themselves incapable, are raised up to mighty works, even as with as slender a means as a little trowel the mason buildeth up great temples unto the Lord, and palaces unto kings. Though this be rather, 'tis to be thought, to a contrariwise effect in some matters; for who knoweth, indeed, whether it be not as you declare, and that the reign of the saints of God is at hand?'

'It is, it is! Have I not declared unto you how after my conflict with the great Red Dragon in my dungeon, just as I was sinking and choking in the blood thereof that mounted even unto the black bare granite ceiling, a voice as of one speaking through a silver trumpet proclaimed to all the nations of the earth that the fulness of time was at hand, and that I must needs be saved from the destruction and captivity around me, that I might go forth and build up the throne for Him who is to be seated upon it? And immediately the gore of blood o'erflooding me and choking up to my mouth and ears, fell like water from a bather's limbs from encompassing me, and I found myself dry and clean and unscathed amidst my dungeon straw!'

Such was the fugitive of Nottingham's rejoinder to his military friend's rather long-winded address.

Cromwell evidently mused for a few moments on the query; during which pause his eye wandered, but with perfect absence of observation, on Richard Grimsorwe's motionless form.

'And you would begin the preparation in this ding-dong town of smiths and anvils, mean you?' the captain continued thoughtfully. 'Well, for my part, I see

not that there is much to hinder you at this present; and the more thoroughly the good town commits itself to the great cause, the less should any that favour it be disposed to thwart you in any suchlike tendency. As for the High Bailiff—or rather his wife—and their some half-score favourers in the town, I think there is no great fear of them, though they do threat a meeting in the church, since even a window of the Guildhall, which is well-furnished of such, is denied them. And for the mad, choleric knight at Aston—Tubal Bromycham, whom I have named, in the Committee's name, Captain-at-Arms among you—and ten of his sturdy anvilmens with their hammers, and the advantage of the closed causeways, can keep out all danger in that direction. And Tubal hath great wrongs to avenge, and such hopes to entice, that he is assured to us body and soul. The only danger is the King's approach; but ere he is like to be much nigher, I do hope, by my humble representations of the conveniences of this place for smiting the adversary on all hands, to move my cousin Hampden, and other Parliament gentlemen of more consideration than my poor ploughman-tongued self, to direct the godly army hitherwards. What! ye shall perchance owe to me, ye of Birmingham, the goodliest sight that may be—a battle of freemen for their liberty and religion! Howsoever the issue may be, which is also in God's hands, who chasteneth whom He loveth—and whether we have deserved as yet well of Him I know not, for there is much backsliding and a holding back of the hand from the plough visible now on all sides, which makes it the more necessary that some should step boldly forward, and urge on the team, that there should be no return until the edge of the field is reached!

And who can deny that a few hours' willing labour is better worth than as many days of statute contribution?'

'And are not labourers hired with you, too, sir, at all hours of the day?' Grimsorwe now ventured to break in with, for he began to be tired of his part of listener to what sounded to him little better than the usual run of fanatic ravings, though perhaps a little wilder.

'And who art thou, friend, that ask the question? I see not that you stand with a straw in your mouth to be hired.' Captain Cromwell replied, in a tone that seemed to indicate, however little he had shown signs that he had been considering the personal attributes of the speaker before he thus obtruded on attention.

'My name is Richard Grimsorwe; and the outside of my business, honourable sir, with you, is to negotiate the release of my father's well-born son, Edward Holte. The kernel and inside requires a more private cracking and mastication,' returned Richard, adopting, as well as he could, the metaphorical style in vogue among the Puritan party from admiration and imitation of the Biblical one.

'Your name is *Richard Grimsorwe*? and your brother's Holte? I smell a fault there!' said Cromwell, with a quaint saturnine smile. 'Howbeit I have heard of the man at Aston, and of his lustful outrageous doings, which make him one of the crying sins of this country-side. And you wish to speak with me alone?'

'On matter, sir, of concernment as high as it should be secret.'

'Are you weaponed?'

'I searched and took his sword from him at the barriers, captain, as you bade should be done with all incomers,' spoke up William Moorcroft.

‘Soldierly executed. Leave the man then with me, good friends; I will hear what he hath to say.’

‘I also, for am I not also clothed with authority, albeit not yet even as a garment white and shining as the sun?’ said Whitehall, making no gesture to imitate Moorcroft’s ready retirement, who knew that a comfortable ale-pot awaited him below.

‘In all *spiritual* matters, yea, brother; and I would that you should note your limitations therein, or there will soon be discord and confusion among ye, to the laughter and hooting of the adversary. Go home, now, to the worthy elder of the town, whose skin is of as many colours as ever Jacob’s coat, but who hath given you a welcome to bed and board, and refresh your inward man, for you have need of rest and food, methinks.’ And taking the still reluctant fugitive of Nottingham by the shoulders, Captain Cromwell escorted him to the door with a degree of gentle violence which was yet felt as resistless by his worn and attenuated frame.

When he turned from this action, after carefully closing the door, Grimsorwe was really startled by the sudden change in Cromwell’s manner. He stood before him bolt upright, and with a masterful though suspicious expression of countenance, and discarding apparently at will both the language and peculiar nasal whine of the Puritanism of the day, which has been transmitted to our own, said, with stern, uncompromising directness, ‘So, sir! you are the bastard son of Sir Thomas Holte, of Aston Hall; what want you with me?’

Grimsorwe was for the moment startled by so informal an address. But only for a moment. ‘You guess me

in some sort rightly, sir; but not altogether. I am the *reputed* bastard son of Sir Thomas Holte; but were I not most bitterly wronged and deprived by an unjust ascendancy, I am in truth his eldest, or rather only, lawfully-begotten son and heir,' he said.

'Why, how is that?' returned Cromwell, with a deep-furrowed frown. 'You must not think to cozen me. I have shaken the very dust out of the meal of intelligence in these parts, and I know that Richard Grimsorwe is Sir Thomas Holte's bastard elder son, a lawyer of Gray's Inn, London; and that Edward Holte is his lawful heir, by a nobly-born lady.'

''Tis so given out, I deny not,' returned Grimsorwe, his lividly dark complexion deepening in hue. 'Nevertheless, the true state of the case is this—that Sir Thomas Holte was secretly married to my mother, who, though poor and powerlessly friended, was of more honourable birth and descent than himself. And only when his passion cooled in possession, and his eye was caught elsewhere, bethought him to deny what was but witnessed by a serving man of his own, and a poor, since crazy, woman, my grandmother, and a milk-livered, dependent chaplain of his house. And my poor mother, having been driven to despair and suicide—or else more basely cheated of her life—and myself but rescued by the merest chance from sharing her watery doom—thus, and thus only, it hath ensued that I am bastardised, and the young man in your custody struts the world as heir of Aston Hall!'

Cromwell listened with great attention to this revelation, crimpling his brows together, and with the tips of his right-hand fingers drawing down his under lip,

until all the large, firm set, white teeth were visible from fang-tooth to fang-tooth.

‘Why, St. John sometimes sings to those who will listen some such a song as this,’ he remarked. ‘I marvel whether all bastards deem themselves the lawful inheritors? Howbeit, this one tells his story, lawyer-like, skilfully, and means surely something by it more than a grandame’s ingleside gossip! Well, sir,’ he concluded, with a resumption of the practical directness previously observed upon, ‘why do you tell me this tale? In what concerns it me?’

‘I wish you to understand that you see before you a wronged and dispossessed man; that you may the readier trust in my assurances that I desire to be of service to the Parliament, in the belief that only from its power and success can I, and such as I, look for redress of grievances.’

‘I do understand this much, truly, that you conceive your own interests to lie that way. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, sir; I know not how this can induce me to serve you in the matter of this brother, whom you deny to be your father’s heir. And I must fairly tell you, I have heard nothing so much to the advantage of the man whose name you give yourself, that I should trust my ears in any absolute manner to what you may say.’

‘I ask you only to believe me on my proofs, Master Cromwell,’ said Grimsorwe; adding boldly, ‘But whatever may have been the errors of my youth also, men in Lincoln’s Inn still preserve some memory of the wild roystering doings of a certain Oliver Cromwell, some time student there, and now a forward leader and expounder among the precisian and godly party—who

do purpose, I foregather, to make as great changes in all England as hath been wrought by Providence in themselves.'

Grimsorwe had calculated correctly. The Puritan leader looked neither scandalised nor annoyed at the sharp rejoinder.

'You are right, young man,' he said, 'you are right. In my youth I have been as little to be commended as any other sinner that can be named, but who hath persevered in his villainies and harlotries unto grey hairs, which, God be praised, is not my case. I have been a sinner—the chief of sinners!—and therefore I judge not, neither do I pronounce but that you also may now, or at some other time, prove a true convert from yourself. Methinks you spoke of *proof*; and you must allow it needs some of your good meaning to the cause, coming out of Nazareth, as you do.'

'I do confess it; but, first, you must pledge me your word and faith that never—so may God help you—you will betray my counsel and working in this matter, which would be to my manifest ruin and overthrow with my father and all his alliance,' said Richard Grimsorwe.

The earnestness of the demand evidently surprised Cromwell, and excited his attention. But it was with as evident reluctance, and on a strongly reiterated demand, that he complied; murmuring to himself repeatedly, 'Swear not at all; swear not at all.' Still, it may be imagined that it was in nowise with disappointed interest that he listened to the important communication with which Grimsorwe followed up his preliminary stipulations.

He revealed to Cromwell the unguarded and almost

defenceless position of the King at Nottingham. He informed him he was certainly aware that Charles's person was only protected in his quarters by about three hundred infantry, and the trained bands of the county. That his main force of foot, and all his artillery, remained behind in the neighbourhood of York, for want of the means of transport for the latter, and the former awaiting the protracted arrival of the purchases of arms and ammunition making by the Queen in Holland, before it could be of any service in the field; while his entire cavalry—all but a few score gentlemen who mounted loyal guard on his person—had been sent into the west, under Prince Rupert, to assist in and cover the great royalist rising there under the Marquis of Hertford. But the audacious inference Grimsorwe drew from all these circumstances, the suggestion he started, were in good truth addressed to a spirit whose executive daring and readiness of acceptance more than matched. He proposed to Cromwell to collect all the Parliament forces at his disposal, as Commissioner for the three associated counties of Cambridge, Huntingdon, and Bedfordshire; his own troop of well-armed and well-mounted cavalry above all, at Birmingham; and, by a sudden inroad into the King's quarters, seize on his Majesty's person, and conclude the war at a blow!

Cromwell's usually dull and inanimate eyes shone up with extraordinary lustre and vivacity as he listened.

'In truth, in truth,' he exclaimed, 'there is but one man in England to whom you could have wisely counselled this; and it is he who told his recruits to stand on no nice ceremony, for that he would as soon fire his pistol in the King's face, in battle, as any other man's!

And indeed, if things should fall out so, as you reason they may, you will have a good right to any man's birthdom—let alone an usurping brother's—for such a mess of indigestible porridge as you shall have mixed for our enemies. But how may a man believe such folly even of rash despisers as we have in the Cavaliers, to leave the main prize of the war thus as it were under a swoop? I have heard some whisperings of this before, 'tis true. The witty madman who was here ere-while, and who fights with Red Dragons in his dungeons, could not multiply the armed men he espied at the standard-raising into anything like a host fit to guard a king; but I never believed it until now. Nay, do I believe it now? Why should I?'

'Here is evidence not to be denied, sir,' replied Grimsorwe, producing a letter from his breast pocket. 'But you must faithfully return it to me, since I have purloined it from my father's secret desk, as he deems it. A letter from Sir Jacob Astley, Major-General of the King's forces, expounding to Sir Thomas Holte the full destitute condition of affairs at Nottingham, and earnestly putting it to him thereupon to equip and send his promised troop of horse under my brother at once to the town of Nottingham.'

Cromwell eagerly took and perused the document. It was clear that it amply confirmed all the statements made.

'I did know—I did surmise—it hath been revealed to me in many and divers forms,' he exclaimed, with an extraordinary brightness lighting up his wontedly sombre and staid visage, 'that I am chosen forth as a great instrument in the mighty and marvellous works of the Lord that shall be in these days. But, to imagine that

it should be thrust upon me all at once, to save and redeem these unhappy kingdoms from a deluge of blood and misery; that I should be the David in the cave of Saul, to cut off his garment, yet not to injure him—something takes my breath, I do confess, by the suddenness of it. I did not think it should have been thus, either; but that, after the tyrant had dyed his purple so horribly in our blood that men's eyes in England would no more endure the hue. What am I saying? I know not! It is the Lord's will. I must seek the Lord in prayer; I must; I must. It was not given even unto him whose songs most delighted the Lord of Hosts, always to lead right forward to the battle; sometimes he was to fetch a compass behind the mulberry trees at the enemy's back, and then there was to be as it were a rustling in the upper branches before he made the onset: a wind of God's just revenge and judgment on the Philistine. But what is this man? Is he a rod of the Lord? The breath of Cain is in his nostrils; yet he speaks understandingly, and as one sent, whether he knoweth or not the Sender! I must seek the Lord; I must seek the Lord!

And Cromwell was apparently about to quit the room on this religious business, though it was difficult to say whither he meant to resort for an oracle, when Richard Grimsorwe arrested his step.

'You are going, Master Cromwell,' he said, 'and I know it, to despatch some swift horsemen for your command to assemble at once on my advised enterprise. But ere you go, I do desire you to begin to show some sense that I have deserved well at your hands by——'

'Yea, yea, you are free to depart, to return at once to Aston; but I cannot suffer you to do any harm to the

prisoner in my charge,' said Cromwell, pausing, and evidently surprised at the skilful divination of his real secret intentions on the part of the other, and thinking he had himself as accurately inferred Grimsorwe's.

'On the contrary, I ask you, captain, to order me to be kept a prisoner also in Birmingham—but under your own solemn safeguard, and out of my brother's sight and way,' replied Grimsorwe.

Cromwell did now look rather puzzled. 'Do you want to drive the old man at Aston fairly mad?' he said; 'or what is it? Moreover, we have no cause of detention against you. You have not applied for arms for the King's faction, or otherwise flown in the teeth of any ordinance of the Parliament.'

'I purpose now to do so,' grinned Grimsorwe; 'I am going to the Manor House to call upon the High Bailiff to proceed at once to an open and forcible rescue of my brother.'

'Cromwell burst into a huge, hearty cacchination. 'Deserve my severity, then,' he remarked, 'and you shall experience it. But, in good truth, yours must needs be a spirit of some deepest sounding, since I can only see the fins of your sharks—not what their jaws are agape after. I could have divined now a reason if you had turned earnest conditioner with me for you brother's *release*.'

'His release!' Grimsorwe exclaimed, and looked astonished in his turn.

'Ay, for being of so forward and courageous a temper, you might have relished seeing him in the front lines of these coming warlike times of ours,' replied Cromwell; adding with a dark and troubled glance, 'My God!

where shall we end, since we begin with fratricidal longings in our hearts?'

Grimsorwe was about to make, probably, some attempt to repudiate the feelings ascribed to him—for even the worst of villains do not like to hear their wickedness called by its true name. But precisely at the instant the door was thrown unceremoniously open, and Master Armourer Firebrace made his unexpected appearance, closely followed by Bunyan, the tinker-boy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HUMAN FEELING *V.* POLITICAL.

THE circumstance was, however, speedily explained. ‘I come, Master Cromwell,’ Firebrace exclaimed, with a wild and haggard look, ‘to have your immediate order for a release of the prisoner, Edward Holte—without which the men you have placed in guard of him will not suffer it—in exchange for my daughter, Dorothy, whom the cavaliers have seized at play in the town, and carried off to Aston Hall.’

‘Ay, ay, indeed; they were trustworthy poor souls whom I have found in this town, whom I set in the business: poor, wearied Sisyphus Turnour, the bellows-blower, and one Come-What-Will-Faithful Moggs, a creature of a sweet savour in his soul, though but a stinking tanner of his trade—I did not think but what they would desire to have my freewill and judgment in anything to be done regarding the prisoner. What is it you would have then, say you, Master Firebrace?’

‘Sir Thomas Holte hath imprisoned my daughter—so this young man reports from one who knoweth it with his eyes—until he hath his son in exchange. That is what I would have: let the young man go, and let

me redeem my child out of the furnace,' said Firebrace, with tears gushing, in spite of every effort to restrain them, from his hard and staringly fixed eyes.

'Tut, tut, man! call you this a persevering even unto the end? We cannot surrender the prisoner but to our great loss and detriment. What is to keep the town well set on its desperation but this personal quarrel? Were Edward Holte released, we should be all at sixes and sevens again. What risk does your daughter run in her captivity? What! we are not Barbary men, nor is Sir Thomas altogether the keeper of a sultan's retinue and seraglio. 'Tis an old man; what fear you? All is well, if but you have courage to abide by my declaration to you, without further questioning, that all *is*—well.'

'I can truly aver, sir,' said Grimsorwe, 'that the maiden placed herself freely in my father's hands, as hostage for his son. What may be between my brother and your daughter to make her so kind to him, I know not; but so it is.'

'It is all a lie; she hath been inveigled and treacherously seized,' returned Firebrace, passionately. 'My daughter is betrothed to a most worthy man of this town—to Tubal Bromycham; and would you drive me on going to him with a tale like this at my heels, to win him to release Edward Holte by force from your bellows-blower and tanner, two as hateful Anabaptist villains as are in the town? And is this what all your fine counsels, and our rash acceding unto the same, are to do for us of Birmingham?'

'I will pray God to bless my counsels to you: man is no further master of the event than he who lets out the waters can give them their bounds and demarcations

too. What if thy vineyard be overflowed, friend? Shall the whole country perish of drought, rather?’

‘I will go to Tubal, I will go to Tubal at once; he will not believe these lies. My fair child shall not remain another hour at Aston Hall!’ And the armourer rushed frantically out.

‘Silly man, silly man. But these things must be, I fear, while we use human instruments,’ said Cromwell, perhaps rather in his heart compassionating the father’s emotion, for he also was one. ‘Howbeit, were it my own—my pretty little Frances, even—what must be, must be. I must keep friends with the good man, too, for he hath a great sway in Birmingham, and I shall need some hastening now in my preparations for the field, though they be towardly enough. He will find Tubal meanwhile, I trust, very green wood to his crackling of harmless fire. But the Lord will guide me, I am sure. Who are you, young man, and why do you stare at me so wonderingly?’

These latter words were addressed to the tinker-boy, who was in reality gazing with simple but rapt intensity of contemplation at the personage whose own attention had been thus suddenly caught by it.

Bunyan was startled; even, as it seemed, for the moment alarmed. ‘Nay, sir,’ he said, ‘it is but with a due reverence; but the prophet hath been a-telling us all down below, while we waited your leisure, that you are the mighty strong angel, of whom it is written in a book called Revelations, that you should come down from heaven clothed with a cloud, and a rainbow on your head, and set your right foot upon the sea and your left foot upon the earth, and cry with a loud voice,

as when a lion roareth, "By Him that liveth for ever and ever, time shall be no more!"

'Said he so?' returned Cromwell, with an excited expression, which almost immediately faded into one of more common-place and worldly, perhaps almost ridiculing import, 'Why, then, friend, the prophet hath greatly overstated me.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE WATCH OF BIRMINGHAM.

MEANWHILE, Armourer Firebrace, driven by the impatience and anguish of his spirit to disregard all but the main consequence he dreaded, proceeded to the appointed head-quarters of the Captain of the Watch of Birmingham. This, it appeared, was Tubal Bromycham's title as military commandant of the town, and his quarters had been established for him by Cromwell at a small building on Gosta Green, called the Welsh Cross, as the most likely point of attack from Aston Hall. Several roads, indeed, debouched into the town at this point, which it commanded.

The structure itself was a low isolated elevation of one story, on open archways, surmounted by a lantern tower, pinnaced by a cross of fretted freestone, pierced to represent nail-holes.

Under the archways, accommodated with benches and tables, and bread and cheese in abundance, were assembled about a score of stout young fellows, well armed, and chiefly in smiths' leather aprons. These were to be relieved at intervals by other parties of the townsmen, who had responded with readiness to the energetic impulse of Cromwell, acting in the first place on the master armourer and his fellow-chiefs of the

trades. And a laughing, merry, excited company they were, evidently enjoying a novel sense of the dignity of danger, and proud of their position in the vanguard of defence.

In the room above this open guardhouse, reached by a very narrow flight of steps, Firebrace knew he should find the Captain of the Watch, in company with seven or eight young men who had been hastily constituted his under-officers. Of course he had free access thither; and, mounting, the unhappy father distinguished as he approached the upper chamber frequent bursts of laughter mingled with shouts of the most uproarious applause.

'Alack, alack-a-day! he is treating his new mates to a love-cup. Little wots he of the sorrow in store!' thought the armourer. And a strange sickness of heart induced him to pause as he reached the open entrance of the chamber. He then perceived with some surprise the occasion of the demonstration. In fact he could scarcely at first believe that he really beheld what he saw.

Standing at a table plentifully supplied with flagons of foaming ale, and surrounded by the jolly noisy company whose uproar Firebrace had noticed below, was Tubal Bromycham. But he could scarcely have been recognised under his new aspect. He was clad from head to foot in a suit of most beautifully-wrought and flagreed armour, excepting at the head, which was bare; and so great a change had this warlike panoply made in his appearance, that it was no wonder Firebrace himself was puzzled at the identity in other respects. His massive head and strenuous limbs, could scarcely, however, be said to show to advantage under

the polished plates of metal that encased them, and the disproportion of his bulk to his height was greatly exaggerated, though the effect was in favour of the young man's power to wield the heavy weapons with which he was also furnished, in the shape of a sword and a ponderous double-headed axe.

Tubal had evidently been addressing some harangue, very favourably received, though perhaps somewhat confusedly delivered, to his comrades. Firebrace distinguished the latter words: 'And thus, my mates—gentlemen, I would say—I trust I have shown unto you that I, and I alone, Tubal Bromycham, am the true Lord of the Manor and inheritor thereof, as soon as I shall have wrung from the tyrant representative of tyrants the rights of my birthdom; until when my proofs to you shall lie chiefly in the swing and power of my own right arm, in defence of this town of mine and of my ancestry!'

A thunder of applause followed this conclusion, and, as if with one accord, the young fellows all started up, replenished their flagons, and drank to the health of 'Tubal the Smith, Lord of Birmingham.'

By this time Firebrace was in the midst of the company; and, interrupting the clamour of joyful excitement, suddenly recalled Tubal to the matter-of-fact world by informing him that his betrothed had been captured by some base stratagem, and was then a prisoner at Aston Hall; and that Sir Thomas Holte would by no means consent to her surrender, saving in exchange for his son, whom Master Cromwell, on the other hand, did most masterfully and cruelly refuse to yield up.

Tubal came hastily down from his high flight upon this statement.

‘Dorothy!—a prisoner!—at Aston Hall!’ he exclaimed.

‘Let us go there at once, and tear her from the old devil’s claws!’ yelled several of the excited young fellows.

‘You will not find that so easy, gentlemen,’ said an unknown voice at this moment, and Firebrace perceived with astonishment that he had been closely followed into the apartment by a stranger.

The stranger was Richard Grimsorwe. ‘Aston Hall,’ Richard resumed boldly, ‘is barricaded at all points, and defended by my brother’s troop of stout yeomen, albeit but rustily armed. The girl, Dorothy, is placed by her own free will and action in my father’s hands, for the love, doubtless, she bears Edward Holte, whom you have unlawfully imprisoned among you! She is under lock and key, and bolt and bar, in the top chamber there in the Great Dome. You can do no more than provoke Sir Thomas to worse violences towards her by any effort on your part, unless you had great guns, and men who know how to manage them. And I am come to propose to the chiefs of the town, whom I understand to be you, Smith Bromycham, and you, Master Armourer Firebrace, a fair exchange between our prisoners. And if the stranger, who has taken upon himself such mastery, will not suffer it, possess yourselves of Edward Holte by force from his satellites. He may be a London Parliament man, but hath he, for that reason, a right to rule in Birmingham?’

‘So say I, so say I,’ exclaimed Firebrace. ‘Take Master Holte from the hold of the Anabaptist villains placed on his guard, and yield him to Aston forthwith

in exchange for my child, of whom it is—it shall be—most false to say, she hath wilfully deserted her own alliance and friending for Aston Hall.’

Tubal looked at the armourer at this moment with a singular expression. ‘I know not that—I know not that, good father!’ he muttered. ‘There are spells of strange magic belonging to the family there. They are cursed by a witch; but perchance, with their evil fascination, Dorothy also may have become the victim of the Holte sorcery! And let us not stir too rashly in this matter,’ he continued, gazing almost wildly around among his companions. ‘Ye all know the two Anabaptist men, Sisyphus the bellows-blower, and Faithful Moggs; and I did hear them swear to Captain Cromwell they would rather slay their prisoner than suffer him to escape their guard!’

‘So will they do, if they die on it!’ exclaimed one of the company. ‘Sisyphus is a man wearied of life, yet of a mad fanatic zeal to win what he deems the crown of martyrdom; and Faithful Moggs doth so abhor the very name of gentleman, that for its sake alone——’

‘We cannot rescue Edward Holte by force; ’tis not to be thought of; it would ruin all to quarrel now with the Parliament man. Nor Dorothy either, if it be true she is so imprisoned, as this bringer of bad tidings sayeth,’ lamented Tubal Bromycham, in a desponding tone.

‘And have you so easily forgotten the base ignominy to which Sir Thomas Holte put you at Aston Hall, for some slight failure in your craft, Tubal? Have you donned the armour of a knight and lord—of your own fashioning too, for more than a year—only to show yourself a craven and a submissive, beaten, huckster

hound in it?' shouted old Firebrace, in the most exasperated accents. It was plain to Grimsorwe that he was not in the secret of the real affair at Aston, respecting Tubal Bromycham's quarrel with the haughty proprietor there.

'But, father,' returned Tubal, with a deep flush, 'Sir Thomas deemed me then but a poor, presumptuous mechanic of this town, whereof I am the lawful lord! He will think differently of me soon, and repent him belike; and so will others too, perchance!'

'Arabella Holte, to wit,' thought Grimsorwe, but he did not venture to make the observation aloud.

Firebrace gave a bitter laugh. 'Will you leave your betrothed bride—the fairest maiden in Birmingham—in the hands of such men as Sir Thomas Holte and his bastard Richard are reported to be?' he exclaimed.

'Is it not said, Zachariah Firebrace, that the maiden is so placed in a sort by her own consent?' replied Tubal, inwardly ruminating, it was pretty evident, some deeper thought.

'At worst, then, it was because my daughter was indignant, as all honest folk and fair neighbours should be, at the unhandsome detention of the young man Holte,' groaned Firebrace. 'And I think we were all bewitched indeed when we yielded to a stranger's rash ordering as we have!'

'So deem not I, father,' returned Tubal. 'How else might I reclaim mine inheritance from the tyrannous usurpation of the Crown? And say you, sir, whoever you are, that Dorothy Firebrace is imprisoned in the Dome-Chamber of Aston Hall?'

'Even so; and before noonday to-morrow, Rupert, the King's nephew, in Worcestershire, will despatch of

his cavalry to my father's assistance there, and the overthrow of your sedition here,' said Richard Grimsorwe, fiercely, evidently resolved to hasten action against his brother, at whatever risk to himself.

It must be admitted that several of the noisiest of the recent revellers looked rather aghast at this announcement. More than one even shrunk away from the central group around Tubal, and gathered in separate knots to discuss the intelligence. Loud complaints were then audible as to the conduct of the Parliament officers. 'We were promised immediate help from London, before any could reach the Cavaliers at Aston. It were madness further to engage in the brawl till we know more!' many muttered, in reply to Firebrace's eager exhortations that they should march at once to Aston Hall to rescue his daughter. And for a wench who is in danger from her own wilfulness, seemed the general impression.

Tubal, in the meanwhile, remained for a few moments in deep meditation.

'Quit me of this cumbrous steel, friends,' he then observed, in a low voice, to some of his nearer comrades, 'I can nothing in it; methinks it seems to enchain my very mind with my muscles. Go, father Firebrace,' he continued, while one or two of the young men began to unstrap the numerous buckles that fastened the pieces of armour together on his powerful frame, 'Go home, and expect good tidings from me shortly, if even Captain Cromwell will not be moved by my entreaties also. And you, sir, rid us of the presence of a traitorous spy!' he concluded, to Richard Grimsorwe, who, startled by the flash in those clear still-blue eyes, made an ironical bow, and took his

departure somewhat hastily; but not before Zachariah Firebrace, who, highly indignant at the seeming *sang froid* and indifference with which his intelligence had been received, flung hastily out of the apartment.

Tubal was not satisfied until all his recent warlike panoply was removed from his stalwart limbs. He seemed then to breathe more freely; and his spirits also probably revived with the sense of freedom from physical restraint, for his companions noted a return of his accustomed energy of ideas and action almost as the last heavy plate fell from his limbs. 'I have been too long a smith in easy leathers to fit well into the lobster-coating of a knight and gentleman,' he remarked, with a singular kind of fierce playfulness in his smile and general expression. 'But the smith's craft shall perhaps serve me in better stead than the man-at-arms at this moment. I will resume my tools, even; they are in the chamber above. What I have done in donning armour and the like is of Master Cromwell's prompting, and but ill done, I fear me; but I will manage the next matter of my own head more to the purpose, I trust.'

He disappeared for a few moments in the lantern tower over head, and when he returned had a basket of tools, from which protruded the end of a crow-bar, on his brawny shoulders. He then desired one of his comrades to keep his place as Captain of the Watch until he returned, and took his departure from the Welsh Cross with little further ceremony of leave-taking.

All who remained held it for certain that their captain was going to remonstrate with the Parliament officers on the detention of his betrothed, and propose means for her rescue. And so they might have thought

for some short distance after he had crossed what was then the open verdant space, now covered with hobblely pavements, misnamed Gosta Green. But once fairly out of eyeshot of the Welsh Cross Keepers, Tubal Bromycham suddenly changed the direction of his steps from the town, and took that of Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ARTIST SMITH.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM was familiar with every step of the way to Aston Hall. A year, however, had elapsed, and more, since he had gone upon it, quitting it after his disgraceful maltreatment by Sir Thomas Holte with a vow of vengeance in his heart; which, nevertheless, he had either not found opportunity or resolution to put in any telling form of execution.

A passion more powerful than revenge, in the loving and generous heart of the disinherited Artisan-Lord of Birmingham, had hitherto, it is possible, restrained the promptings of the latter justly-excited feeling in his breast. Richard Grimsorwe had betrayed a family secret of his house also, in informing Dorothy of the true motives of the severities that had been exercised by his foster-brother towards Tubal. Sir Thomas's pride was so great that he scorned even to have it thought possible that a man whom he looked upon as a mere low-born mechanic, should have dared to dream of love towards his beautiful daughter; and, therefore, the Aston villagers and people at Birmingham had been left to believe that the quarrel between the baronet and the smith was on a question of work and wage, or carrying out the conditions of a contract. A scene of

great violence had passed between them, it was nevertheless known, provoked by Sir Thomas's insolent fury in attempting to chastise Tubal with his horse-whip. But as the Birmingham smith's prodigious strength in the arms made him unable to measure his reprisals, and he was reported to have nearly strangled Sir Thomas in his pressure ere he flung him to an extraordinary distance, breathless and bleeding, on the ground, in sight of numerous menials and workpeople—the punishment he was subjected to (in the stocks), and from the brutal violence used in overpowering him, seemed yet sufficiently provoked. Armourer Firebrace himself knew no otherwise, and had only concealed the facts from his daughter so carefully because he considered that—told as they might be—a girl of her spirit would be prone to regard a suitor who had suffered such an indignity with depreciating eyes; and it had grown in time to be Firebrace's most earnest hope and purpose to marry his famous foreman to his daughter.

Indeed it was a strange story altogether, and one whose passionate depths of romance and tenderness, on one part at least, were not likely to be fathomed by ordinary observation.

It was not even surmised by his townfolk in general that Tubal Bromycham was an artist of great genius, and possessed, in his powerful frame, all the acute sensibility, fervour of imagination, and vivid openness to external impressions that constitute the true artist whom Nature herself creates and fashions.

The chances of life which enabled Tubal's famous fellow-countryman to become the world's arch-poet, had put him on venting the beauty and poetical flowering of his soul in the hardest material agencies. He was,

therefore, merely looked upon as a most skilful worker in iron—nothing more. But, endowed with all the fine susceptibilities and faculties alluded to, what marvel was there in the fate that befel Tubal in his young affections? that the exalted and haughty beauty which blazed upon him in the person of Arabella Holte should first excite the iron artist's ecstatic admiration, and then his most passionate and soul-absorbing love?

According to prevalent custom at that time, Arabella Holte had been placed, for the completion of her education and polish in courtly manners, in the household of a great lady who was a relation of her mother's, and resided a good deal in London. This was the consort of the Lord Keeper Lyttelton, whose daughter was affianced from infancy, and without the least thought of asking the consent of either party, to Edward Holte. Arabella had thus enjoyed the requisite opportunities to acquire every external embellishment to her extraordinary beauty. The court of Charles I., presided over by a French Queen, full of gaiety and delighting in festivity and magnificence, and chastened by his own refined and cultivated tastes, offered a perfect school for all that could add lustre to the possession of those choicer gifts of nature with which Arabella was endowed. And even Tubal's rapt and artistic imaginings had never shaped a brighter realisation of all that was charming and seductive in woman, than in this youthful lady, when, at the outbreak of the troubles between Charles and his Parliament, she returned to reside with her parents at Aston Hall, and he saw her first.

This species of admiration might, however, never have passed the limits of a silent homage of appreciation

in the soul and heart of the inspired artisan, but for some peculiar circumstances of the case.

Arabella was by nature, and the habits of the brilliant Frenchified atmosphere she had just quitted, a coquette of the first water. She had been accustomed to flattery and splendid courtly appreciation of her varied claims on the admiration of the opposite sex. She had acquired considerable taste and judgment in artistic talent and effect, which were held in high esteem by Charles and his principal nobles. She was so proud of her own and of her father's position in society, that she perhaps thought it impossible any person in Tubal Bromycham's could ever dare to form hopes of a personal nature from any condescension she might exercise towards him. Anxious, then, to assure herself of the continued omnipotence of her charms—weary of lacking the accustomed ambergris fumes of compliment and devotion to their supremacy—discerning something of the extraordinary abilities of Tubal in his art—there can be little doubt that Mistress Holte had amused herself with exciting feelings in the young smith which she never dreamed for a moment of encouraging to any untoward exhibition, much less favourable result.

But, on his part, the warmth and vehemence of Tubal Bromycham's organisation—the simplicity and tenderness of his heart—his ignorance of the deception and unmeaning allurements of coquettish and courtly manners, conspired with his knowledge of his true birth and rights, to persuade him that an honourable attachment on his part, even to the daughter of the haughty Baronet of Aston, was not to be considered altogether a piece of frenzy.

In the lowliest debasement of their fortunes his family

had cherished the tradition of their origin, and hopes of the restoration of their ravished inheritance. And now, when on all sides resounded indignant demands for the restitution of invaded rights and privileges, and every species of grievance was clamorous for redress, Tubal was surely justified in believing that a time was also coming when justice might be extorted for his deprived and shamefully cozened race. A Lord of Birmingham might well, then, consider himself no unmeet suitor for a daughter of the parvenu house of Holte of Aston.

The brave smith, conscious of all manly qualities proper to win a woman's love—of devotion, skill, courage, and strength far surpassing other men's—did not form to himself any full notion of the distance placed, by education and manners, between him and a court-bred lady of his times. We fear, indeed, that Arabella must have diverted herself, and the tedious idleness now forced upon her, with kindling and playing with the fire in his breast to a much greater extent than she ever admitted. How else could the extraordinary delusion have arisen in his mind that the youthful beauty returned his affection, and would not disdain to listen to its avowal? Was it sheer madness alone that possessed and drew Tubal Bromycham at last upon the irrevocable utterance?

Whether it was that Arabella Holte perceived now, for the first time, the mischief she had done, and the danger she had incurred, or whether her pride and insolence of supposed superior birth and rank were alone provoked to measures of retaliation, cannot be precisely known; but she made a formal complaint to her father of the presumptuous overtures of the master mechanic he employed in the decoration of his

palace, and the scenes to which allusion has been made, followed as a matter of course. Tubal, standing up fiercely for the rights of his manhood, and retaliating on Sir Thomas's insults at his condition, by telling him that a gentleman who had become a blacksmith was at least the equal of a blacksmith who had become a gentleman, was assailed by him, and repulsed the attack in the manner described; Sir Thomas remaining the victor only by force of the superior numbers that thronged to his aid.

Tubal was, however, greatly to blame, and he had always felt so, in the acquiescence he afterwards lent to the armourer's scheme of marrying him to his daughter.

He had ever, indeed, dearly cherished Dorothy Firebrace, but it was rather as a lovely and lively child, as a younger sister, that he had so far caressed and consorted with her under his friendly master's roof. But the deep soreness of heart left by his cruel and mortifying failure with the proud daughter of Aston Hall; the natural yearnings of the disappointed affections for some new hold and clinging-to-gratitude to his generous patron; the growing and rapidly-developing beauties of his youthful companion; perhaps some vague hope to inflict, in his turn, mortification and a sense of despised dominion—of a yoke cast off—on his beautiful oppressor—had all conspired to induce Tubal to fall into the plan.

And now, even as he took his lonely way through the night toward Aston Hall, he tried to persuade himself that his objects in going there, and attempting the rescue of his betrothed, were to demonstrate his great and all-venturing affection for *her* to Sir Thomas Holte's

scornful daughter; and to Sir Thomas Holte himself, that it was not from any dread of him or of his power he had not hitherto taken effectual steps to revenge the insults and wrongs inflicted on him.

To retain Edward Holte unconditionally in his power, and yet to spare him, seemed also a noble luxury of vengeance Tubal was willing, at every hazard, to preserve to himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CLIMBING OF ASTON HALL.

TUBAL BROMYCHAM was disquieted with none of the apprehensions which had visited Dorothy in her lonely walk through Aston Park. He feared no man, and scarcely any number of men. He would scarcely have turned aside to avoid the full onset of the ferocious animal, the mere sight of which had so much excited her dread. Nevertheless, aware that his enterprise required secrecy as a condition of success, he avoided all the open lines of approach to the Hall, moving chiefly along hedge sides, under the shadows of the chestnut and elm trees of the great avenue, and finally, the outside of the lofty garden walls on the south by which Aston is reached from Birmingham.

Tubal, who knew every inch of the mansion and its grounds, knew that in this direction there were conveniences for the operation he meditated possessed by no other. He apprehended observation least on this side, which would be supposed safe from the circumstance that a terrace swept round the entire circuit of the house, excepting on the east front, divided from the park and the fields beyond by a sunken wall and a moat, which, though not very broad, was not easy to be passed without the help of the draw-bridges. These would now,

of course, be raised; and if watch and ward were kept at all, Tubal concluded it would be in the great hall of the entrance on the east front.

Nor was he out in his calculation. Darkness and silence seemed to reign absolutely on the whole extent of the mansion he could discern on his approach, and it was fortunately a very cloudy night, though there was occasionally a burst of moonlight that brought out the broad landscape into sudden relief, and, in particular, into visions of ghostly loveliness the statuary with which Sir Thomas had surrounded his grounds. The funereal-looking yew trees, cut into all sorts of grotesque representations of animals, and a line of lofty sycamores bordering the moat, further screened the advance. And thus it happened that Tubal, clearing the watery boundary at a leap, easily made his way along the walk to a wall that divided the west from the south front. He scrambled over this, though it was of considerable height, apparently without exciting any attention; and proceeding along the entire length of the west front, suddenly turned into a deep angle which it there forms with the northern division of the elevation.

This west front—as any Birminghamer can ascertain on inspection—consists, and consisted then, of three storeys: the ground-floor, comprising a series of apartments surmounted by the one grand chamber called the Long Gallery, over which were a projecting cornice and a parapet, and a flat roof covered with lead, whence a most extensive view of the whole surrounding country was afforded. Behind this lofty promenade arose the third story, furnished with several gable windows, backed by the tiled and sharp-sloping roofs of the main

mass of the central pile. And over these again were several stacks of octagonal chimneys; the whole being surmounted by the tower of the Dome-Chamber, rising conspicuously from the midst.

Marvellous as it may appear, it was Tubal Bromycham's purpose and resolve to reach that Dome-Chamber from the exterior of the mansion, without, of course, any of the usual assistance in the shape of ladders and scaffolding.

In truth, a most daring and, on the face of it, impossible enterprise. But Tubal, whose opportunities had familiarised him with every detail both external and internal of the building, had formed his own conclusions on the point. At all events, he was determined to hazard much—life itself perhaps—not improbably liberty—any malicious interpretation that might be put on it—on the audacious project to set his betrothed bride free, without paying the ransom so imperiously demanded.

He remembered that in a corner of the junction between the west and north fronts he had himself placed, and securely riveted, a thick ornamental waterspout from the flat roof to the basement: an iron waterspout, decorated at certain intervals by projecting gargols or *spues* of grotesque ironwork, whence the water was to be discharged from the roof, and the broad projection of the middle cornice or stringcourse, and its carved stonework designs, which ran all along the line of the building, about half-way in the elevation of the lofty walls.

Tubal remembered this; and confiding in the matchless strength of his arms and general muscular power, in his dauntless nerve and coolness, and knowledge of

localities, had resolved upon the extraordinary plan of dragging himself up a wall sixty or seventy feet high by means only of this waterspout!

Once arrived on the flat roof of the Great Gallery, he knew there was a way, if he could avoid making any betraying noise, by which he could get into the top chambers of the house and reach the dome. Such further difficulties as he might then encounter in the way of bolt and bar, the skilful smith, who had fashioned them nearly all, came prepared to obviate with the basket of tools strapped on his shoulder. Something, no doubt, must then be confided to luck; and Tubal was willing to abide the hazard of the die. In truth, he placed no great store on the life to be hazarded, in comparison with the objects he had in view.

Having reached the corner of the building he had in view, Tubal paused and listened to ascertain if there was any fear of detective pursuit. As he did so the distant clock of St. Martin, in Birmingham, struck ten. There was no other sound audible save a faint rustling of the night wind among the neighbouring trees, and the splash and murmur of the moat as it descended by a pretty cascade into a pool at no great distance, contrived to receive the surplus waters.

Satisfied with the silence, Tubal turned to survey the work he had before him. It gave him encouragement to notice how, nearly to the height of the first coping, the walls were covered with a thick ivy, even then of many years' growth. This coping would offer him a resting-place, and was broad enough to furnish a secure stand. The most difficult portion of the task would certainly remain to be performed; but, remembering how often in his early youth he had slung himself up

the steep shafts and inclines of mines with only the aid of a loose rope, Tubal felt as if even a perpendicular ascent, with a firm grasp at iron piping, was not so much more difficult. But additional facilities were afforded by the regular jutting of the quoins of the edifice—great stones which formed the strength and ornament of the structure in all its angles and projections and recesses. These he considered, though affording only space for about the points of the feet, almost as good as the steps of a ladder.

Come what would, Tubal Bromycham determined to try the experiment. It might be that he muttered a short prayer, and slightly shuddered when he bethought him how the least awkwardness, the least faltering of resolution, the least failure in his strength, might precipitate him in a few minutes a mangled and bleeding corpse on the gravelled walk on which he stood. But he gave himself little time for reflection on the subject, drew the buckles of his baggy knee-breeches tight, put his cap into his pocket, made sure of the fastening of his basket of tools, set a foot on the first coping-stone, grasped the waterspout in both hands, and with a facility that surprised himself, putting his feet at hazard among the ivy, in a very few minutes accomplished the first part of his perilous adventure. He landed on the coping-stone over the ground-floor chamber of the north-western front of Aston Hall.

It should have been stated that, in consequence of the inequalities of the wall, the waterspout was only closely riveted to it in parts, and therefore afforded openings as holding-places for the climber's strenuous grasp. Tubal, who had himself done the work, knew he could confide in the strength of these rivets. The pipe being also

ringed and embossed with ornamental ironwork, offered numerous stays both to hand and foot. Yet the spectacle of a man, and of a large frame, crawling up the side of a house like a fly, must have been one exceedingly strange and almost incredible even to a beholder. And Tubal himself, looking at what he had done, was amazed; looking at what he had to do, almost felt his bold heart sink in his breast.

He was standing in a niche close beside a projecting carving which resembled a mermaid, being a figure with a woman's head and flowing curls, terminating in a fish-like lower figure, saving that it had griffin's feet at the end. He was at a height of about twenty feet: above him, still to be ascended, was a sheer wall of about twice as many before he could get to the projecting cornice which he must raise himself over to reach the balustrade of the leaden roof. Of course the hazards of a fall increased with the elevation gained; and for a moment Tubal himself desponded as he gazed at the formidable perpendicular still to be surmounted.

A thought which had suggested itself to him previously now recurred. He remembered that the lofty windows that gleamed behind the cornice on which he stood opened into the Great Gallery of Aston Hall. Should he attempt to remove a portion of the mullioned framework, and enter the house that way?

But Tubal also recollected, first, the great strength and intricacy of the iron framework he had himself wrought for these lattices. It would take hours to file a wide enough entrance for a man of his size. The Great Gallery also opened on a landing of the Grand Staircase, which there was reason to suppose would be carefully watched, being the main communication of the

mansion from the entrance hall. It was not improbable but that the massive oak doors might be locked on the exterior; and though Tubal came prepared to contend with similar difficulties, he felt that a series of them would exhaust his time, and, very probably, be overheard removing.

Nevertheless, to continue his present enterprise seemed fraught with the greatest danger. To increase his perplexity, Tubal could not, with every effort he made, call to mind whether the top of the waterspout coincided with the platform of the roof, or whether he should have a more perilous interval than all he might have surmounted to clamber without its assistance.

His resolution faltered, certainly, at this idea. But on a sudden it was fully restored by what seemed a very unlikely circumstance. Tubal heard a sound of footsteps and voices below, and glancing downwards perceived a group of persons turning from the west front with torches blazing in their hands. They were mostly, he perceived, serving-men of the house from their livery, pretty well armed with pistols and pikes. But in their haughty and imperiously-striding leader he recognised the man who had treated him with so great indignity, Sir Thomas Holte himself. He was partly in armour, and had a sheathed sword in his hand. And Tubal heard him say as he passed—‘Make the rounds thus every hour, while I take me such poor slumber as I may. Richard Grimsorwe returns not; and as I do not doubt these Brummagem rebels have detained him also, let but the Prince send me a force to rescue my sons, and I will return Armourer Firebrace his truant daughter whipped like a Bridewell wench at a cart-tail!’

Tubal was, however, in part relieved by this speech from an apprehension he entertained that his movements had excited suspicion ; and the indignant feelings which had all along prompted him revived with inspiring sparkles in his heart at the sight and words of the oppressor. He thought it likely enough aid would be despatched by the King's party that might enable Sir Thomas to gratify his insolent cruelty of disposition without peril to those who were dear to himself. And the idea of the degradation and insult proposed to the young girl whom at least he cherished as a most dear sister, warmed Tubal's generous nature to a furnace-glow of wrath and contrary resolve.

The watch had scarcely, therefore, continued its round out of sight, ere Tubal recommenced his enterprise with renewed determination and energy.

In reality it was not accomplishing much more, up to a certain point, in the open, than what the unhappy little sweep of modern times was once condemned to do in a stifling inclosure. But even the wonderful strength and length of Tubal's arms, the prodigious muscular development of his frame, its shortness in comparison with its width, would not altogether have sufficed, unbacked by the utter insensibility to physical danger that marked his character, and his youthful experience in the coalpits, altogether destitute in those times of the ingenious facilities for entering and leaving invented by modern science and humanity. Yet so cool was his head, so firm his nerve and step, that in point of fact he only stumbled once in accomplishing what remained of that prodigious ascent, which it would terrify most persons but to dream they had attempted. To be sure that was very near the summit ; and even

the powerful hands and wrists of the Birmingham smith sustained a fearful wrench as he hung for a moment with the whole weight of his body over a fearful abyss of sixty perpendicular feet. But he speedily regained his footing on the jut of the wall, and shutting his eyes and resolutely proceeding, on a sudden felt his head strike against the projecting eaves of the topmost coping.

To Tubal's horror, however, he perceived, immediately on opening his eyes, that one of his worst anticipations was well founded. The waterspout projected in a curious, buffalo-head shaped gargol just over his head, but only mounted to a level with the leads of the aerial terrace above. After that there was a stone balustrade, ornamented at intervals with urn-like vases. Consequently there was a necessity of clambering to the top of the waterspout without any species of hold or support; and it must be allowed that even the strong brain of Tubal Bromycham whirled for a moment, and his stout heart quivered like an affrighted woman's in his massive breast, as the conviction forced itself upon his mind. The sweat burst in large globules on his heated brows, his eyes dilated to double their proper size, as he glared down the frightful depth he had ascended. But he felt in the glance that, spent as his strength now was, there would even be more danger to attempt retrieving a footing on the ground below than to persevere in his present desperate effort. In Tubal's veins there flowed the purest streams of that energetic, unwearied, unconquerable Anglo-Saxon blood which, building, as it were, sand by sand, has raised a mightier empire than the world ever before beheld, with an insignificant island of the Atlantic for the keystone of the

fabric. Tubal recommended his soul in one brief ejaculation to his God, and seizing the top of the waterspout in the strenuous clutch, one might almost say, of despair, set his feet resolutely nearly close to his hands, and slung himself by a single powerful movement upright on the open top. A sudden giddiness then assailed him, and but for an instinctive effort whereby he threw himself over the balustrade on the leads, he must have fallen the other way, and been dashed to pieces below.

A faintness and momentary forgetfulness doubtless then came over even the strong smith. But he revived after that brief unconsciousness, and springing on his feet, found himself safe and sound under a bright beam of moonlight that, piercing a mass of driving clouds, covered the wide expanse now beneath his gaze with a shadowy imitation of the glories of the day.

The artist soul of Tubal, it may well be, was visited by a sense of soothing and satisfaction in the tranquil beauty of the spectacle thus illumined into view, as when a mother lifts the coverlets from the rosy limbs of the sleeping child. But he was aware he had no time to lose from the practical business of his enterprise, thus far almost miraculously accomplished. And finding himself, as he expected, with his back to the window of one of the three gable summits of the main central building on the west, he brought his tool-basket round (which, by the by, had hung rather heavily more than once on his neck in the ascent), and selecting a file and pincers from the contents, proceeded at once to remove the framework of a large square of lozenge panes.

Familiar with every portion of the building, Tubal was aware that these windows admitted light into an

immense and otherwise totally dark garret chamber or loft, intended by the builder as a store and lumber room for the use of the great household that was to be accommodated under the roofs. This has since been partially divided off into small dormitories for servants; but at that time there were only the obstacles of two strong doors at either hand to hinder the success of a manœuvre necessary to the completion of Tubal's plans.

Of course he was aware that it was out of the question, even for himself alone, to think of returning by the way he came; worn and fatigued almost to powerlessness as he felt in his general frame, as well as in his strained hands and arms. But he knew that at one end of this vast store-room there was a door, locked on the exterior it is true, but communicating by a narrow servants' staircase with the kitchen and other house offices on the basement of the north-west tower, and whence another door at the foot, usually only bolted on the interior, allowed exit to the Terrace Walk. And that at the opposite end of the store-room there was a door-secured within, that opened on the top landing of the Grand Staircase, and consequently close upon the Dome-Chamber.

Tubal's present business was therefore to obtain an entry into the store-room; and under his skilful labour the fastening of the windows speedily gave way, and allowed him the requisite facility. He thrust himself feet foremost then into the dismal loft; and the moon being now again thickly obscured, had to grope his passage amidst firkins and sacks, and lines of bacon-hooks, and hams, and hogsheads of various stores, to the door by which he purposed to proceed on his enterprise.

Arriving at the point after several stumbles and severe

raspings of the shins against obstacles, Tubal was nevertheless destined to be surprised by finding one removed. The store-room door was unbolted and ajar.

Rather alarmed than pleased with this facility, Tubal still did not hesitate on his way, but opening the door widely, stepped on.

He was now on the top landing-place of the Grand Staircase; and though uncomfortably struck by the circumstance mentioned above, after listening for a moment and hearing no sound below, he turned to ascend the narrow flight of steps leading to the Dome-Chamber. But there on a sudden he was struck by a most unwelcome spectacle.

Seated, reclining with his back against the door of that strong and lofty prison chamber was a man, apparently on guard. But very remissly so, for his eyes were closed, and he was snoring with a noise as if he was rather drawing in water than air, and suffocating accordingly, with his mouth gaping wide open. He had, however, a long bare knife strongly clenched in his hand, and by the glare emitted from an opening in a dark lantern beside him, Tubal Bromycham recognised, after a moment's attention, Adam Blackjack, the principal cook at Aston Hall.

The sight amazed him. Could this man be placed there on the guard to prevent the escape of a young girl from a strong-barred chamber at such an elevation? Was Adam Blackjack a likely man for the office?

Tubal, as well as Dorothy Firebrace, was aware that the Aston cook had of latter times made a somewhat noticeable adhesion to an obscure but dreaded and defamed sect in Birmingham, and might therefore be supposed to stand in some disfavour with his orthodox

master. He was not, at all events, a probable person to be chosen for the office of jailer or watchman on such an occasion. But otherwise, how to account for his presence there?

Tubal considered that it would be a considerable saving of labour if Adam was possessed of the key of the Dome-Chamber, and he could take it from him. Of this latter he had no doubt; his only apprehension lay in the chance of resistance provoking a struggle, which might be overheard. Still it was plain the hazard must be run; and forming his plan at a glance, Tubal mounted the intervening steps on tiptoe, seized the hand that held the knife in one vice-like clench, and with his other grasped and compressed the cook's yawning mouth. The yell he would have given in his first alarm was thus prevented, and Adam Blackjack glared wide awake, to find himself completely in the power of his adversary.

'Peace! Do you know me? On your life, utter no sound; you are in my hands for life or death! What do you here, man?' said Tubal, in a low-breathed but stern and commanding utterance.

'Tubal Bromycham!' ejaculated the cook, relinquishing his knife, and thrusting the hand from his mouth. 'Or is it a trick of the foul one? Aroint you, fiend, if ye be Sir Thomas Holte under this form!'

'I am even what I seem, man; but again, what do you here? Are you appointed the fair prisoner's keeper?' said Tubal, more astonished at the wild and terrified look the master-cook cast at him than he could have been by any violence of defence.

'Yea; but not in the sort you deem. Yea, I am appointed Dorothy Firebrace's keeper! Young Maud's

ghost, that has often haunted me on other occasions, appeared to me by my kitchen fire, all wet and streaming as they raised her from the Swan Pools down in the Pleasaunce, and bade me ascend even where you find me, and resist unto the death in case her betrayer and lustful master in the flesh meditated any wrong to her in the matters of her honour and chastity. But are you of Birmingham, then, in possession of the house?'

'You have not the key, then, Adam?' said Tubal, eluding the question, and much perplexed by what he heard, but forming some not unlikely notion that the man's senses were disordered.

'No, smith; Sir Thomas hath; he alone!' replied Adam; adding eagerly, 'But if you come to redeem the poor stray lamb from the butchers, some slight of your mystery, Master Bromycham, will as easily do the turn.'

'So it may, if I can calculate on your helpfulness, Adam. Will you hold me your lamp?—resting assured that, on your least movement to thwart me, I plunge this knife with all the strength of my arm under your fifth rib!' said Tubal.

'Ay will he, joyfully,' returned Adam; 'for the young woman's presence and peril among us has so stirred up all the mire of old deeds in my soul, that I know not well what I think, or say, or do. Let us be quit of her at any price. I did think even to go to the witch who curses this proud house of sin hereabouts, at fitting intervals, to beg her aid in the work.'

'If it be so, I shall need none but yours, good Adam,' responded Tubal, frankly restoring the Anabaptist his light; and, swinging his basket round from his shoulders, he took from it a ring of short hooked irons—skeleton

keys, in point of fact—to fit the wards he had designed and modelled in the numerous ingenious locks of Aston Hall; for Tubal Bromycham was a smith at all modern divisions of the work.

‘The devil’s claws, the devil’s claws,’ muttered Adam Blackjack, ruminating and stroking these instruments. ‘How they do stretch out and hook men down to flames and brimstone! But you need light, Master Tubal. So do we all. What a plain text it is—“I am the light that shineth in darkness.” Men’s souls, like mine, are a darkness, verily! What light, though? From whose lantern shall we take it? I would there were a light like the sun’s for men’s minds as well as our bodies, for I am so exercised with torments groping for it, that whiles it seems to me much preferable to be all darkness, as I was in my days of unquickenings. And, indeed, it appears to me often as if I should burst mine eye-balls yet, looking vainly through the mirk.’

‘Be silent,’ said Tubal, at this juncture, relinquishing his first intention of proceeding at once to pick the lock. ‘We shall frighten her. I must speak to her first, to give notice we are friends that are at hand.’

‘Nay, for she is already in some sweet rest, under the assurance of my vigilance in her behalf. So I told her through the key-hole; and she hath left off weeping and sobbing for a good time, since I myself have plainly been asleep,’ said Adam, not appearing to find anything contrary in his assertion.

Tubal nodded, once more applied his potent instrument, and with a mixture of dexterity and strength which probably surpassed in effect the handling of the proper key in other hands, almost immediately forced back the massive wards of the Dome-Chamber lock.

It was plain the effort was not even overheard within; and, drawing the door of the prison room softly back, Tubal perceived, by Adam Blackjack's lantern, which he carefully shaded in the glare, Dorothy Firebrace lying tranquilly asleep on a truss of straw.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FLIGHT.

SUCH was the provision Sir Thomas had caused to be made, under his own eye, for his captive's sleeping accommodation. Creature comforts were a little better attended to; not by the prisoner herself, however. A platter of game pasty remained apparently untasted; a flagon of beer the same; only a can of water appeared to Adam Blackjack's scrutiny diminished.

'Poor soul! yet I took care she had a whole partridge to her slice,' said Adam, compassionately surveying the beautiful slumberer. 'But, oh, when I think of the cruelties and threats I did exercise by my master's orders against the unhappy girl Maud, to compel her to marry *me*, and so shelter *him* from the evil report due to his villainies, what can I ever do to lighten my soul of the burden? And to think when the poor girl fled with her child in her arms from her confinement under my cruel charge at Sutton Manor House, and was so flung away by Sir Thomas, and accursed by her hagg-mother, that she must needs take refuge from us all in the deep, black, slimy pool among the eels! Where is the redemption that can cleanse so black a murderer's breast as mine? Baptism unto a new life, they say; a baptism of blood, Come-What-Will Faithful Moggs

will have it! But, if so, whose blood? What blood? Where?’

‘Help me to save this dear child; it shall count more than beads in your behalf, Adam,’ said Tubal, now convinced that he might place trust in his unexpected ally.

‘Beads! I scorn the Popish mummery!’ exclaimed Adam, and in so loud a tone that he startled the sleeper awake, ere Tubal could interpose.

‘Good heavens! where am I? What is this? Be ye murderers?’ exclaimed Dorothy, rising with an affrighted stare from her coarse couch, on which she lay in her clothes.

‘Do you not know me, Dorothy?’ said Tubal, in a soothing tone, but which yet seemed to strike the armourer’s daughter with some vague sense of dismay.

‘Tubal!’ she exclaimed; ‘Tubal Bromycham! But you must not reproach me, Tubal. It was to my father’s and the whole town’s disgrace to so maltreat a guest and merchandiser. And I have heard things of you, Tubal, since I have been at Aston, that should make you as much—a good deal more—ashamed!’ she concluded, evidently not having had time to retrieve her disordered faculties, or seeking, naturally enough, apologies for her own in the conduct of her betrothed.

Tubal’s excited countenance grew pale. But his was not a nature good at feigning in any guise. ‘Let us not reproach each other, Dorothy,’ he said, sadly. ‘You also have passed, and at once, under the Holte sorcery; but be content. The ill you know of me, as you think, sets you for ever free from a betrothal which I have often deemed was the first pressure of a yoke you would never have borne to put your neck wholly into. I come now to redeem you from your captivity only as

a friend, as a brother ! But there is no moment of time to be lost.'

'It is true, then, you love the haughty daughter of this house, whose very glance seems as it would spurn princes?' returned Dorothy, with almost an expression of scorn, and it is very possible her feeling as a woman and rival beauty were somewhat painfully aroused, for she added the irretrievable words, 'A high-born lady, for whose sake you have uncomplainingly endured vile shames and indignities, such as they do report to me about Aston?'

'Merciless words, but true,' groaned Tubal. 'Yet it is not for my sake—it is for your father's—for this Edward Holte's sake even, if it so please you. I pray you to follow me at once, and escape from this den of proud and masterful vengeance and oppression.'

'For *Edward Holte's* sake!' repeated Dorothy, perhaps rather shocked herself at this plain apprehension of her inward feeling. 'How do I know but that you desire merely to redeem the only hostage of his safety, from his father's hands, in my person? Why are you here? How? Is there an exchange of prisoners between the town and Aston?'

'No, nor will be,' returned Tubal, passionately. 'Sir Thomas has sent for aid from the King's nephew; which when he receives—if he retains you as the pledge for his son's safety—he will immediately attack and destroy your native town, and bring your father to some harmful doom!'

Dorothy briefly considered how probable all this was, and of the everlasting feud that would thence arise between her father's town and Aston Hall. Tubal followed up the argument by a rapid statement of the

threats he had heard fall from Sir Thomas Holte against her personally, reminded her of his hard and implacable nature, and declared to her the agonising grief of her father, until she was nigh overcome. But the condition she nevertheless affixed to her compliance powerfully struck Tubal, and dwelt ever after on his memory. 'Swear to me,' she said, 'that you take Edward Holte under your safeguard, if I leave his sire's custody thus! I can trust you, Tubal, but no other of those who are sedition-stirrers now in Birmingham!'

Strange, too, and momentous in its revelation, was Tubal Bromycham's reply:

'I swear to you so, Dorothy, by my *love for Arabella Holte*—by my hope to retrieve, as a knight and noble, that place in her affection which she has disdained to allot to the mechanic artisan! Come, come away!'

Aided by Adam Blackjack, who had the keys of the great store-loft, escape thenceforth was easy enough. The fugitives had but to cross that, to descend a long spiral staircase, to draw the inner bolts of a massive arched door, when they emerged on the circling terrace of Aston Hall, and, after exchanging a few words of parting good-will with the master-cook, betook themselves to a rapid and unmolested return over the Park to Birmingham.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORNING DEVOTIONS AT ASTON HALL.

It was early morning at Aston Hall. A bright sun shone over wood and glade, green-swelling upland and broad-sloping vale; the purple-heathered wastes of Sutton Chase, thickly scattered with trees that became a forest on the skirts, sent a bright sweet-breathed breeze to the stately mansion gates; the deer sprung from their dewy coverts, and bounded in frolicsome troops to the open wilds, as if inviting the hunter's eager pursuit—when the numerous household of Sir Thomas Holte, aroused at the customary daybreak hour, and having completed the first tasks of the day, assembled, according to wont, in the Hall Chapel. And there the haughty master of the mansion himself, escorting his lady and daughter, and treated on all sides with a ceremonial deference that would scarcely now be paid to a prince, deigned to present himself, cloaked, hat in hand, with trimmed beard and locks, to share the religious exercise considered in those times the due commencement of a Christian gentleman's day.

But it is doubtful whether Sir Thomas would have preserved the proper patience and humility for the task had he known from the first what tidings were in store for him.

Indeed, the fact of the case, as regarded this, appeared but too plainly when, in the midst of the meek chaplain's (Mr. Lane's) brief exhortation after the morning prayer, a poor-looking fellow made his way into the loftily-lighted and stately apartment dedicated as a chapel at Aston Hall, and timorously crouching and cringing at every step, asked for his worship Sir Thomas Holte. Adam Blackjack, who was sitting with the other domestics on one of a range of wooden benches, in the rear of the chapel, but with closed eyes, and with a soured, disgusted expression, almost as if he was partaking, against his will, of some bitter medicine, glared, startled at once, at the enquirer, and recognised him instantly as Simon Fairservice, ostler at the Black Boy, in Birmingham. He then shook his head, as if to reprehend the intrusion, and rigidly closed his eyes again; but Sir Thomas Holte, observing what took place from a high damask-curtained pew, where he usually sat apart from the vulgar throng of worshippers, arose and beckoned to the stranger to approach.

'You come from Birmingham, fellow, doubtless?' he exclaimed, indecorously interrupting the chaplain's gently-murmured utterance. 'Bring you me tidings from the sedition-mongers there, or from Master Grim-sorwe, whom I sent last night with a message to them, from which he has not returned?—only my coach and horses, that for some cause they did not think fit to steal, after a tedious tarrance at the unlawful barriers raised to bar entrance into the town.'

Sir Thomas, be it remarked, never mentioned Richard Grim-sorwe in any personal relationship to himself in the presence of Lady Holte. But the pale lady herself grew paler yet upon the words. 'Come you from

my son, Master Edward Holte, good fellow?' she also eagerly exclaimed.

Simon, who stuttered exceedingly in his speech, and was, besides, alarmed at the stately presence in which he found himself, said something quite unintelligible in reply, bowing to his shoe leathers. But he presented a piece of paper, folded in the form of a letter, which was probably much more intelligible. Snatching it, breaking the seal, and perusing the contents, the Master of Aston Hall broke into a torrent of exclamations of wonder and rage.

There was reasons, certainly, for both emotions.

The letter was from Richard Grimsorwe, indeed, and commenced by upbraiding his sire, in guarded but sufficiently wounding terms, for his forgetfulness of his promises to keep the armourer's daughter securely as a hostage at Aston, for the safety of his brother and himself from the exasperation of the townsfolk. The damsel, he stated, it was universally known in Birmingham, had returned to her father's house, under escort of her betrothed, the insolent smith, Tubal Bromycham, who boasted that he had set her free without an attempt of let or hindrance at Aston Hall!

Sir Thomas read only thus far, when, yelling out that the thing could not be so, that it was an utter impossibility, he snatched up a ponderous key, which he had laid on the velvet cushion before him at his prayers, and strode out of the chapel, followed by several of his domestics; perhaps more curious to ascertain the truth of the strange intelligence than in the expectation of being of assistance.

Among these was Adam Blackjack, with a smile of sinister and occult significance gleaming over his

sardonic visage. The messenger also conceived he had some right to attend, though with evident dismay and distance, as if he feared some likelihood of sharing the punishment of the announced want of vigilance at the Hall.

On arriving at the Dome-Chamber, Sir Thomas, however, found some reason to hope still that all was well. The door was as securely fastened as he had left it. Adam Blackjack had, indeed, made it his particular and rather singular request to Tubal that he would return the bolt to its proper place when Dorothy's escape was effected. But the moment Sir Thomas put in his key and had opened the door, the true state of things appeared in the complete emptiness of the lofty dungeon!

It may be imagined how this discovery affected the choleric lord of Aston Hall. No one dared to speak to him for some time while his fury vented itself. Yet even in him this passion was somewhat modified by the astonishment that took possession of him as he contemplated the void. 'But, my good heavens! how has all this come to pass? There must be connivance—treason among ye, rogues!' he yelled to the affrighted and shrinking servants.

Adam Blackjack, the only guilty one, alone remained firm and unmoved.

''Tis much like *witchcraft*, worshipful sir,' he said, with a smile whose bitter causticity he could not quite suppress. 'There *is* a witch, you wot well, who is the sworn enemy of you and of all of us under your roof; and it is full time your worship saw better into it, for none other but a witch could have opened these doors and closed them again, unheard and unseen, or had the

malice to work you and your honourable sons so great damage as setting the fair wench loose must needs be at this time.'

'The witch, Maud Grimsorwe? Villain, I see thou dost flout at me! Would she so have imperilled her own grandson as to do this mischief to me, however much she might desire *that*? 'Tis far likelier thy gloomy black-blooded self has conspired against thy master and feeder; which, if I should but once discover——'

'Ay, what then, what then, Sir Thomas, my *master and feeder*?' returned Adam, with a sudden fierceness and challenge in his manner that arrested Sir Thomas's angry speech, partly with astonishment. And it was strange the effect produced by the bold, almost the defying, tone of the master-cook to his angry lord.

'Why, then,' the baronet only answered, in a much softened and retracting accent, 'why, then, man, I would but strip my apron from thy forelegs, and send thee to cant and snuffle psalms with thy friends, the Anabaptists, in Birmingham, on much shorter commons than ever you fared in my house.'

'I shall find listeners there, then, Sir Thomas, to many a curious tale!' the cook replied, still in very gloomy and menacing accents. 'But the hour of my deliverance,' he continued in muttering undertones, as to himself, 'has not yet sounded! Or can it be that the fleshpots of Egypt detain me from heavenly manna in the wilderness? Oh! if I could but shake off at once, and at this moment, the spell of the witch, and of the apparition, and of her blue-skinned son, who some say was born while his mother was a-drowning! If she was burned, now, perhaps the apparition would cease; and then, what power would the man Grimsorwe have to

rule my will to so much worse wickedness, I say? You ask why the witch should do you the harm we see, Sir Thomas?' the mind-unhinged fanatic continued, with a sudden start of recollection. 'Out upon it! can she not save her grandson by some impery, and leave your heir only in the hands of your enemies?'

Sir Thomas eagerly returned to his letter upon this, and exhibited so much complaisance to the strange fancies of his cook as to read aloud to him what followed.

Richard Grimsorwe went on to complain that he himself had fallen into still worse and more implacable hands than his beloved brother—into those of a direct agent and officer of the usurping Parliament; charged with treason against the State, for no other reason than that he had made application to the lawful authorities of the town to effect that brother's release. That he was in momentary apprehension of being sent a prisoner to London—debarred all sight and speech with the object of their affectionate interest, and under close surveillance at the agent in question's head-quarters. That a forcible rescue was meanwhile more than ever out of the question, unless by a powerful force, the whole town being under arms, and in a state of open rebellion, under the leadership of Armourer Firebrace and Tubal Bromycham; nay, of men much wilder and more ungovernable in their notions, who appeared to project the overthrow of every form of lawful authority. Already the propriety was openly discussed of seizing upon the Moat House, and expelling the Crown-Bailiff. A noted fanatic preacher had full possession of the ear of the populace, and urged upon them the necessity of turning the regular clergyman of Birmingham out of his bene-

fice, and having himself exalted in the place. And to complete the wild and ruinous disorder of men's minds and events, Richard Grimsorwe concluded with the two most exasperating revelations he could contrive: on the one hand, the audacious smith, Tubal Bromycham, declared himself the *lawful heir and representative* of the ancient lords of Birmingham; while on the other, a portion of the lowest populace openly avowed their wish and resolution to level all ranks and degrees to their own.

Grimsorwe well knew nothing could be more annoying to his father than the bare notion of a pretendant to the stately territorial title he projected for himself, with a grant of the Crown rights in Birmingham, as a reward for the services he purposed rendering. It was Sir Thomas Holte's frequently avowed purpose to die Earl of his neighbouring town. But that the rival to his high titular hopes should be the hated Tubal would, Grimsorwe believed and purposed, inflame his indignation beyond all the restraints of prudence.

The necessity of the traitor's deeper plans, however, required that he should mention that certain of the Parliament forces were immediately assembling for the defence of Birmingham. And this partially enforced upon Sir Thomas Holte a degree of patience and forbearance he might not otherwise have exhibited.

'It were madness—nothing but certain defeat and disgrace even,' he muttered, 'to march upon the prepared town with my unarmed rapsallions! What must be done? what must be done? I must abide the Prince's answer. Meanwhile, honest fellow,' he said to the Black Boy ostler, who was looking on with knees crooked with

meanness and fear, 'my son recommends you, on safe delivery of this letter, to a silver crown from my pocket. Here it is. Return as quietly as you came, and let them not know in Gath of our grief and desolation until we can better show our resentment of the same.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRINCE RUPERT.

THE haughty Lord of Aston was thus compelled to await, in a state of the most fretful and exasperated anxiety and alarm, the result of his entreaty for aid to the King's commanders in the neighbouring county of Worcester.

And not only had he now the greatest reason to be apprehensive for the safety of his two sons in the hands of excited enemies, reports of whose strange and wild proceedings in their outbreak grew hourly in those qualities, until the inhabitants of Aston Hall almost passed into the belief that the townsmen of Birmingham were literally, and in all the forms, *gone mad*. Conscious of his imprudence in betraying before Dorothy Firebrace the King's dangerous condition in his quarters, Sir Thomas was, besides, tormented with the reflection that perhaps some harmful use might be made of the divulging. And yet he could not bring himself to disclose how unfit he was for trust, by sending Charles warning of what he had done.

All his hope remained in the influence in the King's favour he could not but conceive his son, Edward Holte, must have with the armourer's daughter. Yet, on the other hand, might not his own unhandsome

conduct towards her have destroyed that? The possibility of speedy aid from Worcestershire remained the only consolation.

Sir Thomas counted the hours and the moments necessary to elapse before he could receive a reply to his demands for aid. He could confide, he well knew, in the speed and goodwill of his messenger, Robin Falconer. But difficulties might well intervene. The Marquis of Hertford, and other great western lords, had, indeed, under cover and support of the Royalist cavalry detached to their aid, raised very considerable forces in the counties where their interest chiefly lay. But, like most of the King's levies at the time, these were ill-provided with arms, and scarcely under any kind of martial discipline. The Parliament had, moreover, opposed a small but well-appointed army to these volunteers, under the Earl of Bedford, on whose advance there were very general reports; the marquis and his principal gathering were retiring rapidly upon the borders of Wales. The only chance was, therefore, that the King's horse might still remain in some position, covering the retreat, to allow of a portion being despatched to suppress the new and menacing outbreak in the midland.

Sir Thomas counted the hours; and not a few were necessary, even in the quietest times, to traverse the distance between Birmingham and Worcester. The extreme badness, hilly, and devious character of the roads to be traversed, rather than the actual distance, made its five-and-thirty miles a many hours' journey, at the best speed of man and horse. But there was also to be taken into calculation the possibility of enemies being encountered, or avoided by long detours,

and Sir Thomas could only hope to see his servant sent on the business again, about the end of the second day of his mission.

It was the third, however, before Robin Falconer returned, and then on a lamed and all but exhausted steed. At another time, a severe rating would have awaited the domestic who had brought home a horse in such a condition; but Sir Thomas was too eager to learn results to concern himself about means. 'What news, what news, Robin Falconer?' he exclaimed, as the man threw himself from his bespattered and sweating beast. 'Good or bad? Speak it in a word, for my heart is sick with expectation.'

'Here is a letter, your worship, from the Prince's Highness own hand!' panted Robin, producing a large folded parchment like a piece of paper from his doublet. 'It will speak better than—I—can. My breath is gone with mere haste!'

Sir Thomas eagerly snatched the document.

It was directed, in a large coarse scrawl, 'To the worthy Knight Baronet, Sir Thomas Halte; at his house at *Achtan*, nigh *Bromacham*!' And the curious misspelling of the words, in the first place, attracted some frowning attention on his part. Robin Falconer hastened to explain. 'Twas writ on a drum-head, sir, with a gauntleted hand that had been laying about it, but some half hour before, on rebels' costards (head-pieces) till the sword it held was like a bloody flail; and his Highness speaks English but foreignly, much more writes it; and I had no horn-book skill to help him at the work.'

'Truly,' said Sir Thomas, brightening up wonderfully, 'if this be from the Prince's own hand, I marvel

not, for though his Highness's mother was an English princess, his father, the Palatine King of Bohemia, was a German; and 'tis a great honour he doth me to indite to me with his own hand. Truly, a royal seal!' the aristocratic baronet concluded, turning the letter over, and surveying, with great satisfaction, the enormous piece of wax, deeply impressed with a magnificent coat of arms, the supporters being the lion and unicorn of England. These were surmounted by two crowns, which attested Prince Rupert's descent on both sides from kings; though one was but that luckless pretender to the rank, the Palatine Frederic, who lost his own comfortable principedom in the attempt to achieve the exaltation.

Sir Thomas's anxious features changed in expression to one of swelling importance and pompous self-appreciation, as, after a deliberate survey of this royal attestation, he desired a page, who happened at the moment to be crossing the space before the porch, to bring him his lady's silver scissors. 'We must not break and mar so picture-like a piece of die-work,' he said; and in spite of the momentous nature of the contents he had cause to expect, the builder of Aston Hall forbore to tamper with the stately 'closure until he had received the instrument by which the letter could be opened without spoiling the seal. Nor was he much surprised, in the anxious state of mind among the relatives of Edward Holte, to find that his daughter Arabella brought the scissors. But even Arabella did not venture to hand them to him without a deep curtesy; and then stood silently by, expecting what explanation might be deigned.

Sir Thomas read the document at first to himself;

but the bright eyes fixed upon him easily discerned that the emotions roused by the perusal were of a proudly excited order. 'And God be praised!' exclaimed Sir Thomas, at the conclusion, with a burst of triumphant satisfaction. 'The Prince's Highness advertises me that he will be at Aston Hall himself—even he HIMSELF—at the head of a strong party of horse, as fast on the heels of my messenger as any commodity of his business near Worcester will permit!' This very night, perchance! But read our royal captain's words yourself, Arabella, and report to your mother the certain nigh deliverance of her son. Aloud, aloud!

Miss Holte as eagerly complied with the impatient old man's order, and read as follows:—

'Good Sir Thomas Holte,—Your message has reached me, and sets my blood a-churning at the account of the singular injuries and insults offered to his Majesty's greatness and authority in the town you mention. The dangers and commodities of the place, for all martial uses and the service of his Majesty, I do also plainly perceive; as well by your averrings, as the witnessing of the noblemen and officers of these western parts who are with me here. I have drawn the first blood in these wars, and given the enemy's cavalry a check and overthrow, which sets me free for operations wherever it may most concern his Majesty's service I should be. Meseems there is nothing more germane to that matter than to punish the rebellious artisans of your town, and restore them, with a bloody and swift punishment, to true obedience. And so important do I deem the office, that I will lead the score or two troopers I deem sufficient, on your report, for the purpose. Looke to see me at as early as I can be assured my Lord Hertford is in

some safe shelter with the King's new levies, which I expect every hour. Resting your friend—RUPERT.'

A species of postscript was added: '*Nota*—the *good villein* you sent me did special service in the affray, and should receive some recompense at so loyal a master's hands. He will tell you what things chanced, and how.'

'A gallant—a true soldier's letter!' exclaimed Arabella, with vivid admiration and delight in her looks. 'Such a Prince as this will stand upon no parleying and shilley-shalleying with those insolent smiths! I reckon my brother already restored to us. But his Highness speaks of some action lately ensued, Robin Falconer. Were you in view of it? What fell out, good fellow? Tell my father, prithee, if he gives you leave.'

'Speak, Robin,' conjoined Sir Thomas.

Robin Falconer, who was looking rather puzzled to hear himself styled 'a good villein,' blushed up to the eyes upon the question, and hesitated a good deal at first in his reply.

'It was but my chance, an't please you, young madam,' he said. 'Any other would have taken it, and done better on't, no doubt; though the Prince's Highness is pleased to make some special mention of my part; and his Highness hath seen the wars abroad, which we in England have not, I have heard my grandfather say, since the grand Armada and the Spanish Inquisitors, with their thumb-screws and racks, were wrecked and riven from our shores. And so, faith, then, lady-mistress, I scarce knew it was a battle I was in until it was all over and done! But this was how it happened to me, if your honours please to hear it told.'

‘Going on your worship’s errand,’ Robin continued, on the impatient gesture of assent he received, ‘you may believe Rouge-Dragon and I let no grass grow beneath our feet; neither had we much other let or hindrance on the way, save the steepness of the hills and rottenness of the roads, where choice could not be made by reason of its being night, until about day-break, when we topped the Lickey; and so on, at a mended pace, down upon Upton Warren, where the rabbits be in such plenty, you trample as much fur as grass and furze over the waste. By Droitwich Salt Pits, however, the mettle in us had a little wearied, and I was forced, much against my mind, to give poor Rouge-Dragon a taste or two of whip and spur; but when we came upon Handlip Hill he was about dead-beaten, and had slipped a shoe, so I was fain to stop for a bait at Astwood village and look for a farrier, which lost me a couple of the hours I had gained. But “The more haste the less speed” is an old proverb, your honour; and it turned out lucky after all, for Rouge-Dragon and I could never have done what we did but for the rest and inner comforting we took there. And Rouge-Dragon, my lady-mistress, drinks all manner of drinks as pleasantly as any Christian that ever bestrode him, and I must say we made little of a couple of gallons of perry between us at Astwood. But he had his oats, and I had my bread and cheese—which are both dry meats—to wash down.’

‘Prithee, less of thy horse and thyself, and more of the Prince and the battle,’ interrupted Miss Holte; but her sire overruled. ‘Let him tell his story his own way, Arabella; there are none shorter with this manner of men,’ Sir Thomas replied. ‘Go on, Robin, or let it

be supposed thy horse has munched his bread and cheese and thou thy oats.'

'Nay, sir, 'twas the other way,' Robin resumed, but evidently considerably thrown out of his track. 'Still its all one, as your honour says, in respect of the Prince and the battle. I am coming to them as fast as I can; but it was needful to show why it was past high noon-day when Rouge-Dragon and I came in sight of Rainbon Hill, just over Worcester town, with the London Road from Evesham full in sight over Warndon Waste, when what should we come upon, all of a sudden, but the prettiest sight, sure, that eyes can see—had it been put on our side of the question, your worship. A whole little army of horse and foot, with banners displayed, marching as close and compact, with all its pikes bristling and sparkling in the sun, as the back of the *procupine* they had at Brummagem Fair, last that ever was, from the *Injees*. And a great company of horse hanging on it as neat as fringe on a hammer-cloth, with others thrown out far in front and rear, on watch and ward over the main body.

'By all which signs I misdoubted in my own mind at once what crop-eared knaves they were; for all who have seen the London rebels say they move as slow and steady as a tortoise, while our jolly fellows go a-fighting as loose and gaily at their ease as to a football match. And sorry enough was I to see that, at the rate they and I were going at, they would speedily be in possession of all the ways and entrances into the town before me. And to make matters worse—though I had heard everywhere that the King's horse was for certain in Worcester—no manner of suspicion or look-out seemed to be entertained on their part. And I made sure that nothing

was likelier than that the Parliament men had stolen a march or two upon ours, and would be pell-mell among them at unawares, with the river behind to hamper escape. Whereupon I made up my mind at once what I would do.'

'My good fellow, what didst thou?' Sir Thomas eagerly interrupted: 'I'll warrant, study rather our friends' safety than thy own!'

'I told Rouge-Dragon how the case stood, and that we must gain Rainbow Hill before those villainous rebels, upon which he gave a snort and a shrill-out; but as I live by bread, and your honour's too, never needed touch of spur or switch our whole gallop over the waste! And he was not much to blame if the noise he so made attracted our enemies' attention on the further side; he meant well, poor lad, and as much as to say, "Trust me for a winner!" But so it befel, and I could espy that the Londoners' cavalry took the alarm at once, and were thrown instantly forward with a score or so of troopers on the swiftest horses to cut off my advance. For your honour sees I was going down a line from the north-west and they coming at a cross upon it from due sou'-west to Rainbow Hill, and I had the longer stretch to get over. And didn't we do it a gallant pace, neither, since we won the race by a good five minutes, and dashed into the town time enough for trumpets to sound, and the Prince to gather a small number of his troopers together! At whose head he did nevertheless, without a moment's pause or delay, suddenly rush out of the town and fall upon the Roundheads just as they were coming to a halt, and steadying themselves for the arrival of their infantry, on the slope of the hill. Marry, I rode in their company; but not so much for bravery as lack

of good sense and guidance, for I had no weapon till I possessed myself of one of the enemy's carbines, and fell a' braining with that! But it was the noble Prince himself killed their commander—one Colonel Sandys—with his own hand and sword, fairly beating him from his horse by fine force! Then the rest turned tail and galloped in full rout back upon their main body, and we had the hewing and hacking of them at pleasure for upwards of a mile, and put the rogues on foot into such-like consternation and dismay that they drew away back again to such a distance that his Highness himself, wearied of the pursuit, bade us all return. But Rouge-Dragon and I found ourselves then so spent that we were forced to rest a night upon it, or die.'

'Aha! aha! but this is good news indeed, and puts to rights the silly story out of Birmingham concerning the standard at Nottingham,' exclaimed Sir Thomas gleefully. 'Marry, this is the sort of leader and man for the times! A few turns of Prince Rupert, and the villains will be all on their knees, with ropes round their necks. And to think that it should be his Majesty's royal nephew who is the first to tap the bad blood of the state! But who hath a fairer right, being English by the mother's side? Look for good preferment in my son's troop of horse, Robin! Faith, thou shalt carry the flag!—the enemy will not easily take it from thee. But no, that may not be; his Majesty's commands are strict that all officers must be of gentleman's degree. I'll find out some good to do thee, nevertheless: meanwhile, unstiffen yourselves, ye twain, in stable and pantry, and look that Rouge-Dragon lacks not his hoop of ale any more than thyself, good fellow! Hie in now, daughter, and tell your mother these great news. I must make

all in readiness to receive the royal Prince and his company.'

'And so should my mother and myself, methinks, sir,' said Arabella, whose brilliant eyes sparkled like diamonds, as she spoke, with some internal excitement. 'Should I not, think you, put on my court suit of the gold *paduasoy* (a rich brocaded Italian silk), which you presented me when the queen-mother came from France, and her Majesty herself wondered at the art of the green lustre amid the threads?'

'Ay, my girl—ay, my girl; we cannot show too much honour to so brave and noble a Prince,' replied the fond though pride-consumed father; and as his glance fell on the bright beauty of the youthful woman who spoke, a vague but haughtily-ambitious notion crossed his mind, which, if put in words, might have run thus:—'*She* is royal in her beauty as he can be in his birth. *She* is the daughter of the man who raised this sumptuous pile, and who will soon achieve a peerage. *He*, though a prince, is a landless exile and fugitive. What if it is fated I should crown all my glories by mingling the blood of the *Holt*es with the blood-royal of England!'

Arabella herself had her visions at the moment that might thus have kept pace with her father's. 'The King's nephew can be but young,' she mused. 'So brave a soldier must be well inclined to love and courtesy. What a crown to all my conquests it would be—what a wonder and amaze to all my traducers and enviers—if I reckoned a Prince also among the hopeless servants and adorers of my charms! I shall then have had the two extremes of men's conditions at my feet—a Prince and a town-mechanic—and I shall know that nothing can resist me where I will to conquer!'

The beautiful coquette was about to return into the Hall with this ambitious fancy glimmering in her mind, when precisely at the moment a clattering of horse-feet was audible in the lane on the Aston village side of the lofty wall inclosing the domain in that direction. Cheerful blasts of trumpets followed; and while Sir Thomas and his fair daughter stood rooted to the spot with expectation and surprise, a moving mass of plumed hats, glittering breast-plates, horses' heads, banners, lances, appeared above the level of the ornamental zigzag coping of the wall.

'It is the Prince, or his vanguard. We are discovered: we must not now trick ourselves out more showily than we stand. Come with me, Arabella, to receive his Highness; you are more wont to courtly presences than I,' said Sir Thomas, looking, in fact, considerably flustered and alarmed, and drawing his daughter's arm into his own, somewhat against her will, for she rather hung back while the baronet strode forward, endeavouring to put a stout face on his inner failing of nerve. But he certainly did not expect to be greeted by a prince in such a trooper-like style as he was, when now a stern, commanding voice shouted from over the wall, 'Ho, good people here; open your gates, in the King's name, to his soldiers; or must I set a petard (a kind of explosive shell) to the work?'

'What King's officer can this rude man be?' said Sir Thomas, not a little indignantly, to Robin Falconer—who, he found, had his answer in readiness.

'An't please your worship, 'tis the glorious Prince!'

'Prince Rupert!' repeated Sir Thomas, in astonishment.

Glancing upward on the word, he perceived a dark

grim countenance glaring at him from over the wall. Of noble features certainly, and strongly carved, with a considerable resemblance to the Stuart family in the long, saturnine lines, but with a fierceness and haughtiness mingled with all the fire and energy of the expression which the baronet was quite unwont to associate with the idea of royalty—the mildly melancholy and gracious visage of Charles I., presenting the *beau ideal* of a noble gentleman, born to an august but sorrowful doom—was the type of comparison in his mind, with which this savage, powder-blackened trooper's little harmonised.

But there could no longer be a doubt on the subject; and his own natural pride and disdain of mastery rallying to his aid, Sir Thomas Holte stepped forward with answering imperiousness of tone and gesture.

‘Any man is welcome to Aston Hall, in the King’s name; but by much more the King’s nephew, sir, if you be such. The gates shall be freely opened; and let me trust you keep your warlike munitions for the King’s enemies, not his friends, whereof Sir Thomas Holte—which is myself—have proved me one, to my much loss and suffering.’

‘Pardon, worthy knight!’ replied the commander, obviously struck by this style of reception, and showing a first sign of civility by raising his steel-lined hat. ‘But for aught I knew, your house might have passed over, with your heir, to rebel keeping. Henceforth, I trust, all will be well with both.’

Satisfied with this apology, Sir Thomas directed the great gate to be opened by his domestics, and the Prince rode in first and alone.

It was afterwards recalled, as an unlucky omen, that

the Prince's powerful snow-white charger stumbled as it passed the threshold. Indeed, it nearly brought its shoulder to the ground, startled by the sudden and ferocious baying of the chained mastiffs on either side of the entrance. But the tall and powerful rider sat as if he had been an integral portion of the animal he bestrode, and almost instantly regaining the mastery by a fierce, strong check of the reins, horse and man became fixed and rigid as if suddenly changed into a statuary group in bronze.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ANABAPTISTS.

MEANWHILE the progress of events in Birmingham, up to the arrival of Prince Rupert at Aston Hall, requires to be detailed.

On leaving his intended son-in-law at the Welsh Cross on the night of his daughter's imprisonment, highly indignant at Tubal's supposed want of proper feeling in the misfortune, Armourer Firebrace returned to his house in Deritend with a view to make sure of what he deemed the now sole remaining pledge of her safety and restoration. This was, of course, the person of Edward Holte, who was there detained a captive; already certainly, one would have thought, under sufficiently close care and guardianship. The two men whom Cromwell, with intuitive sagacity, had chosen for the purpose were admirably well adapted to it, though by different qualities.

Physical power could not be considered the attribute of the elder watchman—Sisyphus the bellows-blower, as he was generally styled in Birmingham.

He was an old soldier of the wars in Germany, in which James I. had timidly and underhandedly aided in the attempts to retrieve the unfortunate Palatine

Frederic's dominions, and support the cause of Protestantism against the tyranny of the House of Austria. The English people, almost in spite of their Government, had joined with the enthusiasm of crusaders in these vain and ill-managed efforts; and among other fanatic zealots of a warlike turn, Sisyphus had volunteered in his youth in the regiment raised by Sir Horace Vere, and at the battle of Prague—where that valiant corps, maintaining the field to the last almost alone, was nearly cut to pieces—had the honour to lose his right arm by the shoulder, and his left hand by the wrist, under the hacking sabre of a pandour, who did not understand a cry for quarter in English. It is true that Sisyphus always persisted he had never asked for any, but was left for dead under a heap of other bleeding and mutilated carcasses.

How he returned to his native land and town was an unknown mystery.

Many years had elapsed from the date of the decisive field in which he had so disastrously figured, when a maimed and miserable old beggar returned to Birmingham in place of the brave young zealot warrior who had quitted it. Very few remembered even the real name of the man, which was Gibeon Knippers. One that was conferred upon him accidentally stuck to him.

Tubal Bromycham, taking compassion on his helpless condition, set his ingenuity to work, and fashioned him an iron hook, which served him in some sort instead of a hand. Particularly, it enabled him to grasp the handle of the great smith's bellows, in use at that at that time, and heave it so as to keep the furnaces aglow. The charity of the townspeople backed Tubal's,

and the maimed soldier was redeemed from absolute beggary by the wages of this occupation.

Scanty enough, indeed, for his physical wants were, as reported, many and craving. And, doubtless, these unsatisfied corporeal desires reacted on his mind. It was the contrast of the devouring restlessness and fever of spirit visible in his countenance, with the patient monotony of his attitude and office, seated on a tree-trunk—for ever heaving at that for ever falling-back machine of wind, in Firebrace's factory, that had suggested to Edward Holte (then a mere schoolboy, fresh from his first dip into the classic poets) the name of Sisyphus for him—that, it is well known, of the unfortunate, in Grecian mythology, who was condemned eternally to roll a stone up a hill in Tartarus, that as constantly rolled back.

The singularity of the term, and its appropriateness when explained, fixed it in men's memories, and speedily effaced that of 'German Gibby-Hook,' by which the maimed relic of the wars had at first been known in Birmingham.

But this disfigured carcass speedily became noted in the town for even more remarkable characteristics of mind than body.

In the general ferment of religious opinion and movement of ideas among the English people, it did not, indeed, at first seem strange that a person of the poorest, and apparently least qualified order of the populace, should set up for a theological teacher and guide. But amid all the extravagance and defiance of orthodox rules and restraint that prevailed, the doctrines and outward observances taught and enforced among the sect Sisyphus gradually formed around him in his

native town, excited wonder and even dread and horror among its superior and well-to-do classes.

The regular parson of Birmingham, Dr. Dugdale, who had been appointed for his high Arminian and, as they were deemed, papistical principles, by Archbishop Laud himself, declared that these were the pernicious and levelling doctrines of the furious German fanatics who, under the name of Anabaptists, had infected that country with a blasphemous and devastating rebellion for many years after the dawn of the Reformation.

Bloodily suppressed by the princes and nobles of Germany, the trampled embers were still believed to smoulder and glow in secret places, ready again to burst forth into destructive flames. And during his long sojourn in the country of Jack of Leyden, 'German Gibby-Hook,' more known as 'Sisyphus the bellows-blower,' was believed to have picked up divers direful sparks, and to have set them now among the popular tow to blaze.

The universal obliteration of all superiority in degrees and rank—community of goods and wives—were reported to be among the least formidable, society-undermining principles advocated by this new and dreadful order of sectaries. The means by which they were to accomplish these results of combined Mormonism and Socialism were alleged to be of the most sanguinary and ferocious instilment.

Not alone the destruction of the power and place of kings and nobles and priests, but of their persons, and by any means of assassination and violence, were intentions attributed in men's suspicions to the Anabaptist form of fanatic zeal.

Moreover, their religious teachings were surmised to

be some strange and appalling mixture of atheism and demon worship, and the rites and ceremonies observed in their secret meetings and initiations were declared of a hideously indecent and blasphemous description. In particular a form of baptism by adults in a state of nudity, in the presence of the congregation, had been denounced even to the Magistracy, and visited with rigorous inquisition and punishment by a commission of the Star Chamber, in which Sir Thomas Holte had figured as a prosecutor, with all the vehemence and violence of his character. With the usual ineffectualness of religious persecution, it was currently believed; now, in latter times, becoming startling manifest.

The propagator of this dangerous sect was, indeed, the very species of enthusiast to make it flourish among a populace like that which formed the lowest in Birmingham at the period.

Ignorant and brutal to the last degree in their minds and manners—suffering under every species of physical discomfort and misery—toil-worn, crushed, and trampled on by all the superior classes of society,—and yet visited by the breath and impulse of the great master influences of the age, in the desire for better things, spiritual and corporeal—no wonder the discontent and turbid superstition of the times, stirred to their depths, gave a ready acceptance to the democratic and visually imaginative theories of the Anabaptists. The doctrines of Mahomet, clothed in pretendedly Christian forms—his paradise realised on earth—what could be more seductive to the popular fancy? Mormonism in our days, which has built a city, and peopled a province, is nothing else, and has exhibited the influence of these

ideas on the ignorant and unhappy dregs of the European communities, on a grand scale.

And Sisyphus the bellows-blower was peculiarly well-adapted by nature and circumstances for the office he took upon himself.

He had suffered in his proper person all the sufferings of his class—poverty, toil, mutilation—in their worst degrees. The latter calamity had almost disabled him from supplying the physical desires and longings that tormented his strong and ardent nature; to say nothing of the fanatic enthusiasm and ambition always remarkable in his character, and threw him as by a kind of necessity on the means of obtaining influence for the purpose by swaying the minds of his fellows.

His own was deeply impregnated with German mysticism and visionariness; and in the camps of the luckless chief of the Protestant struggle in the provinces of the Austrian empire, doubtless it had become imbued with the darkest and wildest theories of German fanaticism. He possessed a species of eloquence always acceptable to the populace—disdainful of logic and sequence, but full of fire and passion, and a rude species of poetical inspiration in the language and tone. But, above all, Sisyphus was a man of doubtless courage, or rather of the most frantic audacity, when he chose; savage and relentless in his moods, and accustomed to scenes of violence and bloodshed. Little more was needed to make a dangerous sectarian leader in any age; but in that,^f when a civil war, inspired chiefly by religious fanaticism, had just burst forth, German Gibby-Hook was the very man to cut a great figure on the stormy stage of events, had his lot cast

him where they were prominent and decisive in the gaze of the world.

We need say but little of his coadjutor in the guard of Edward Holte, and ardent disciple, Faithful Moggs; although corporeally the main executive strength of the charge.

Faithful Moggs was a young man, a butcher by trade—as was pretty apparent from his ferocious visage, his blood-stained arms, naked to the elbows, his no less horribly-hued garb of coarse blue baize, and the cleaver and steel at his girdle.

He had the implicit reverence and devotion of a dog to its master towards his maimed teacher, and would as readily and recklessly have obeyed the impulse of his will. He it was who wielded the most reliable weapons of the party, in the shape of a pair of large pistols, ready loaded, and placed on a small table between them at the door; inside the prisoner's apartment. But their relative positions were yet more marked in the fact that the tired slaughterman had been allowed to go to sleep on his arms, while Sisyphus, with his look of restless, wolfish vigilance, kept watch upon the prisoner's restlessness, ready to rouse his myrmidon to sudden action on the least appearance of occasion.

Edward Holte had refused to retire to the bed provided for him in the inner chamber of the Crown House, until the occasion of Mistress Dorothy Firebrace's protracted absence was explained.

The consternation diffused by this circumstance in the Firebrace family had not, in the first instance, it was likely, been shared by the captive Holte under its roof. Edward doubtless believed himself, at first, solely in possession of a sufficient and personally satisfactory

explanation of what had now been for some time a subject of the highest alarm and apprehension with him also. The interval necessary for the accomplishment of Dorothy's mission had long elapsed, and as the night had grown in lateness and darkness, so had his fears and perplexity.

The beauty, the sprightliness, the generous self-devotion and kindly feeling evinced towards himself by the armourer's daughter, had excited, as we have seen, the warmest corresponding sentiments in the breast of the young cavalier. And the notion that he had, perhaps, exposed her to some great disaster on his account—certainly to misconstruction and anger on the part of her friends and relatives—annoyed Edward a great deal more than his own evidently increasing peril, and the discomforts of his position.

The grief and consternation of old Mahala herself had for some time yielded to the weariness and exhaustion of her years, and she sat asleep on a stool in a corner of the fire, in the great sitting-room of Firebrace's abode, with her apron over her withered and tear-blotched face, muttering yet uneasily in her repose. But Edward Holte was pacing the ample limits of his confinement with the restless movement of a native of the wilds caged for the first time; absorbed in anxious rumination, in which the sinister and ill-omened aspects of his new custodians scarcely entered at all. If his eye encountered at times the implacable glitter of watchfulness in the elder Anabaptist's steady glare, it was with scarcely a perception of its harmful meaning as regarded himself personally. He only felt that this fierce and armed vigilance stood between him and the possibility of proceeding in any manner to the aid of the

lovely and generous girl who had hazarded so much to serve him.

What evil had befallen her? There was a wide choice of causes for distrustful apprehension to harass the luckless prisoner. The dark and little-traversed way—the wild deer—the furious bull—his easily irritated and recklessly passionate sire—the insidious counsels of his unlawful brother; though Edward was far from divining all the Cain-like malignancy and villany of which Richard Grimsorwe had shown himself capable. Amid this fertility of possible calamities, which had really occurred?

What rendered his state of mind still more distressing was that Edward dared not, in any manner, communicate his private grounds for apprehension. That would be to betray to her friends and townfolk the assistance Dorothy was rendering to their supposed adversary.

And yet his conscience stung him ever and anon most piercingly with the notion that he might thus be withholding some needful aid and rescue to the fair girl. Several times he was on the point of stepping up to Sisyphus, for the last half-hour that had now elapsed, and begging him to inform some one who could follow in Mistress Firebrace's footsteps to Aston Hall, and ascertain her safety. But the fiercely fixed and menacing expression of the fanatic always checked and restrained him. It seemed to Edward Holte that by putting Dorothy's secret in the possession of this man, he should be rather placing a weapon to her harm in a cruel grasp, than securing the assistance she might but too disastrously need.

It may be imagined, therefore, that Edward distin-

guished with a sudden throbbing of hopeful expectation the voice of Dorothy Firebrace's father demanding admission from the exterior of the chamber. But his heart sank almost as immediately in his breast, as the dismally excited tone of the request smote upon it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

YOUNG LOVE.

SISYPHUS grumbled sadly at having to rouse his executive and comply with the summons, even of the assigned head of the great movement in the town and master of the house. And Edward Holte was made rather startlingly aware of the imminent danger of his position when Faithful Moggs, suddenly roused, sprung on his feet with both his pistols snatched and levelled at the captive! Had not Edward halted on his perturbed march, and sternly enquired what the fellow meant, it was even possible a discharge might have put all his perplexities at rest for ever.

Sisyphus, however, stretched his iron hook before the muzzle of the weapons.

‘Quiet, Moggs! do not hurt my young *godfather*,’ he said with a grim smile. ‘It is only Old Firebrace returning to his hearth; order arms, and I will admit him.’

Moggs, understanding that he was to withdraw his menacing demonstration, crossed his arms, with the pistols in his hands, on his breast, turning his unshaven, blue-bristly, hog-like visage towards the door. The bellows-blower then opened it and admitted the master

armourer, whose first words most unpleasantly explained the mystery of Dorothy's absence, and satisfied Edward Holte too certainly that there was no further occasion of any reserve on his own part.

'So, Master Holte, Master Holte! you have used some witchcraft on my daughter, to win her to do your errand to Aston Hall, against her duty to her town and kinsfolk; and yet there your inhuman father has made the poor child a miserable, frightened captive in his high Dome-Chamber, and threatened her with all manner of worser cruelties, unless we surrender you!' Firebrace exclaimed, almost sobbing as he spoke with mingled grief and rage.

Edward was greatly grieved and shocked by the intelligence. Yet it was in some sort a relief from still more disastrous apprehensions. Neither was it consonant with his proud and manly feelings to attempt any denial of the discovered facts of the case. His reply admitted the charge in some way.

'Do not impute to me the *merit* of your daughter's resolution to endeavour to remove the disgrace of your inhospitable and unlawful conduct from her house; and to prevent any rash movement of my father's justly provoked indignation against your town, master armourer,' he said; adding apologetically, 'But I am sure my father, of his own prompting, is incapable of such oppression and slighting of my earnest commendations as regards the virtuous maiden's safety. Grim-sorwe, my bastard brother, has put his mischievous counsel in the matter, we may be sure.'

'He is in the town, putting himself to all manner of jeopardy on your behalf, ungrateful young man!' returned Firebrace, vehemently. 'But when were not

the Holtes bitter and rancorous against each other, as well as masterful oppressors to all the world beside?’

Edward, however, continued to appear by no means pleasingly excited by the intelligence he received of the interference in his behalf. His brow darkened. ‘You know not the man; and I myself, perchance, suspect him but in part,’ he went on to say. ‘Yet, howsoe’er, Richard is as dear to my father, in some sense—perhaps dearer as regards his likings personal—as myself. Keep him as a hostage in my room, and I swear to you I will return within an hour with your daughter safe and redeemed; or alone, to suffer anything your anger can inflict for the failure.’

‘Why, so let it be; Master Grimsorwe himself proposes a fair exchange,’ said Firebrace, eagerly. ‘My good men, I relieve you of your charge, and take upon me all the responsibility of the young gentleman’s release. Here’s money for your pains hitherto, and now go your ways in peace.’

‘Money!’ replied Sisyphus, glancing contemptuously at the proffered coins, ‘to whom do you offer so mean a bribe, Master Firebrace? Fill this chamber with gold, and you cannot purchase my fidelity! I am a soldier, placed at a post by the captain to whom I have promised obedience; have you an order from the hand of the London man of war, Oliver Cromwell, for the prisoner’s release? For if not——’

‘Am I not declared ruler of the town for the Parliament? Am I not your master and employer, man?’ returned Firebrace, angrily, but eluding the main question.

‘I am a soldier of the wars. I own no master, no ruler, but my military officer, while a town is, as ours is

now, under martial restraint and ordering,' replied Sisyphus; adding, with every appearance of inflexible resolve, 'and sooner than suffer my prisoner to pass out of my hands without the said permit, I will hook him up to the bacon-beams of the chamber here with this wretched mockery of a hand of mine!'

'It shall not need, Sisyphus,' said the butcher lad, savagely; 'I can fell an ox at a blow; and if even the captain's pistols fail us, I have my chopper at my side.'

'How have I injured you, brutish fellow, that you threaten me thus?' said Edward, indignant at such uncalled-for ferocity of antipathy.

'Shall I do anything, master? Do you not say we are to begin with the gentlemen's throats, and so on upwards?' said Faithful Muggs.

'You seem more like murderers than watchers!' the armourer exclaimed, in disgust. 'But be assured, Master Holte, harm shall only reach you through my body first. At present we must abide these rude men's pleasures; only, Sisyphus, be you well assured you shall never more blow the bellows at any forge of mine!'

'Amen to that, master armourer; for never was flesh wearier of such service than mine! I shall blow blasts henceforth to mightier flames!' returned the fanatic; flames that shall wrap loftier heads than any I espy here, tower haughtily as ye both may to hear me speak; heads loftier than the tallest steeples in the land!'

'Shall there be giants now again in these days in the land, Sisyphus?' said Moggs, gazing with stupid curiosity at his teacher. 'And shall I live to see them?'

'Let us leave these madmen. Already our town is

given over to such,' groaned Firebrace, turning from his allies to his prisoner with visible preference.

'It is but a natural sequence that all authority should be contemned when the highest is assailed the first, and toppled over,' said the young cavalier; but he followed Firebrace with some satisfaction to a distance from the ferocious twain, who were so well provided with the means to execute any suddenly vengeful caprice that might enter their wild fantasy.

The guardsmen returned to their former position, whence both continued now to watch in grim silence the demeanour of their captive and of their master, whose authority they had so decisively refused.

It can hardly be thought that Edward Holte, aware of this observation, and how completely he was within the range of a bullet, felt very much at his ease in the confabulation that ensued. Nevertheless he speedily forgot all that concerned himself personally in his efforts to console the bereaved father, and to comfort him as much as in him lay on the score of his daughter's imprisonment. And it was clear that Firebrace was somewhat consoled by the favourable view of circumstances presented to him by Edward Holte, and his earnest assurances that, however provoked, his father was incapable of any personal insult or violence towards a woman.

'Mistress Firebrace will be detained until he knows of my safety, no longer. What can you fear for your daughter while Sir Thomas's son is in your hands?' he remarked on one occasion, loudly; and it was an unlucky observation.

'Hear you that, bellows-blower, what my fine gentleman says?' muttered the disciple Anabaptist to his

leader. 'Were it not good to rid the town of all danger of making it up with the tyrant at Aston, who had me prisoned and whipped three several times at the Market Cross for cutting up a deer carcass which I found rotting from Tubal Bromyham's cross-bow bolt, nigh Oscott Wood?'

Sisyphus mused upon this. 'Troth,' he said, with a dark smile, 'look at them even now—the masters of the poor sweating commonalty *here*, and the masters of the poor sweating commonalty *there*! We must put a river of blood between us and returning on our steps. Our blessed Jordan must flow redder than the sea that swallowed Pharaoh and all his host for that! Who knoweth by what lips God may speak in these latter days? He hath spoken of old by the braying of the insensate ass! This son of my bowels looks like a wild hog. But what then? Was Knipperdolling of Munster an angel of light to look upon? No, I trow me! What did'st thou say, friend, concerning the young man Holte?'

'I said that you have often told me we are to be baptized unto the new life, but not as by water; by blood!' returned the fanatic young butcher, with such a glance at Edward Holte as perchance he gave the doomed ox when the luckless beast turned its mildly terrified eyes on the destroyer, entering, mace in hand, into the dreadful byre at early dawn.

'What if I should say unto thee—*Smite and spare not!* is the power given unto thee? Hast thou the heart to strike to the earth this unarmed man, our prisoner?' said Sisyphus.

The younger fanatic was still an Englishman. This view of the case somewhat staggered him. 'An unarmed

man and a prisoner! I thought not of that!' he muttered. 'If you would have it done, why do you put such thoughts in my head?'

'Well, for myself, I have been a soldier! I have been a soldier in the camps of a brave though unfortunate prince and chief, and in the heat of battle who spareth? Where are my arm and my hand? And is not this the heat of battle? Is not this the heat of the worst battle, calm as we sit here; the battle between man and his own soul? Arise, I say, and spare not! Who talks of sparing? Rivers begin with rivulets. Let us have the blood of the young man Holte to begin with! What say you, Faithful Moggs?'

'I am ready,' replied the latter, rising impetuously; 'Shall it be with the ball of lead or the edge of steel?'

'What mean these fellows, speaking and looking at me thus?' said Edward, surprised at the movement. 'Certainly they mean murder! But I shall defend my life.'

So saying, he snatched one of the heavy andirons from the grate, and Armourer Firebrace, casting old Mahala from her stool, clutched it up simultaneously, and exclaiming, 'And I will defend your life, too, with mine, while under my roof, Master Holte,' evidently ranged himself on the weaker side.

Some overruling fate seemed always to conduct Dorothy Firebrace to the preservation of Edward Holte. It was precisely at this instant that a loud rapping was heard at the door, and Tubal Bromycham's thundering accents were heard, 'Open at once, you within! or I batter down the door! It is Mistress Dorothy returned.'

Sisyphus hesitated for a moment. He then gave a

hoarse laugh. 'Be quiet, Moggs,' he said; 'Tubal is a man of his word. Calm thy good thirst, man, for this time; a fitter will arrive.'

He then, for the second time, unbarred and opened the door, and Dorothy Firebrace sprang into the chamber, closely followed by Tubal Bromycham.

'My father! my father!'

'My child! my child!'

The father and daughter folded each other at once in a delighted embrace, while Edward Holte himself, unable to restrain the impulse of his feelings, seized one hand of the fair girl over Firebrace's shoulder, and covered it with kisses.

We are far from sure, however, that he was exactly pleased when Dorothy's first exclamation informed her father and himself that she owed her deliverance to the heroic courage and goodness of Tubal Bromycham, her betrothed husband. She did not, indeed, call him so, but Edward Holte uncomfortably remembered such was the relation in which she stood to the valiant smith.

Nor could he be spared a rapid and broken but full detail of the circumstances of Dorothy's escape from Aston Hall, which she breathlessly told—omitting, in fair consideration for the master-cook, his share in the evasion. But the story was intelligible enough without that circumstance, and redounded in every respect to the credit and exaltation of the daring and fortitude of Tubal Bromycham.

The young smith himself, however, listened to the detail with a downcast and saddened look. It seemed almost as if he would have preferred to suppress all the particulars of his achievements, and that results alone he wished should be attended to. More than once he

interrupted Dorothy Firebrace's lavish eulogium of his courage, kindness, and unfailing perseverance in effecting the entire departure and flight. And as soon as ever he could, with any propriety, he begged the armourer to excuse him for the night, as he felt it now his duty to return to the guard of the town.

'Go then; but take these insolent fellows with you, whose looks are full of murder and menace to my guest and prisoner,' said Firebrace, who himself uneasily felt the propriety of ending the scene. 'I and my servants are sufficient to retain him so; what do these strangers in my house against my will?'

'Come, sirs, you hear,' said Tubal, surveying the Anabaptists with undisguised repugnance and command.

'That shall we not!' returned Sisyphus, insolently; 'we are placed on duty here by Captain Cromwell, and shall not stir without his own release.'

'Tubal Bromycham sets up for a new lord in the land, bellows-blower; and hast thou not said we will have none such, even of the old sort?' chimed in Faithful Moggs.

'Ha, say you, butcher!' exclaimed Tubal, suddenly clutching the fellow by the nape of the neck, in a strangling grasp, that showed he had regained the power of his strenuous sinews. 'Shall I make thy tongue lollop like one of thine overdriven beasts, or wilt thou yield without further insolency to do the bidding of the Lord and Captain of the Watch of Birmingham? There is no greater sway than mine, I will have all men know, in the town. So wilt thou take thy executioner's knave hence quietly, Sisyphus, or must I throw him down the gallery stairs, for thee to follow?'

‘I have only mine hook—you have the poor honest man at mercy : we will go and complain to the Parliament gentleman,’ replied Sisyphus, spitefully but submissively surveying the superior array of force against him and his. ‘Release my brother ; he grows black in the face.’

‘Hence with you then both, and I will myself return these pistols, with explanations, to the Captain,’ said Tubal, disarming the butcher Anabaptist by a sudden and most dexterous movement ; and opening the door, he compelled the worthy twain to complete the evacuation of the premises ere, with a gentle and kindly good night to the entire group, he followed forth.

And a good night there was at the Old Crown Forge House. Firebrace forgot every other consideration in joy at the safe restoration of his daughter by the heroic efforts of her betrothed, which satisfied him that a notion, which had given himself some uneasiness, had taken no hold in that generous lover’s mind. Edward Holte’s jealous perturbation was lost in joy at the same event, and a faint consciousness that, however well another had deserved, he himself retained the first place in the fair fugitive’s good liking and esteem. All were rejoiced to be rid of the uncomfortable and dangerous company of the Anabaptist.

Firebrace vented his satisfaction in an approved English form. He ordered the awakened and rejoicing Mahala to prepare a good supper, and produced some choice Canary wine to exhilarate the repast. And the prisoner and his friendly gaolers partook with great relish and satisfaction of this meal in each other’s society, diversified by a renewed account of Dorothy’s adventures at Aston Hall. At least so far as related

to her imprisonment by Sir Thomas Holte. She let Edward know how much his father's proceedings were stirred on and excited by Richard Grimsorwe in that matter; but for reasons of her own, and not to excite her father's indignation too warmly, she suppressed all further elucidation of his villainy until she could find opportunity to confide it alone to the person most interested in hearing the whole truth.

This did not occur until the following day; but then ample occasion was afforded. Firebrace, lulled by Tubal's example against all suspicion, and summoned to the Guildhall to confer on further measures of defence, left his daughter in the company of his captive for many subsequent hours. And as Dorothy had the rest of the household completely at her command, she speedily found means to be left with him without eaves-droppers, and then proceeded to divulge the amplest particulars of the events with which the reader is already acquainted.

The sensible and spirited young girl judged it but a simple matter of right and duty to warn Edward Holte, as much as was in her power, of the traitorous designs and plans of his wicked brother; so much at least of them as had come at all under her observation, believing herself in a manner led by Providence to the discovery.

Of course, this revelation included the plot she had overheard in concoction between Richard Grimsorwe and his witch-grandmother, to oust Edward Holte from his birthright and lawful position as heir of Aston; matter enough to excite the cavalier's vehement indignation, though it was probable it was not for the first time that Edward had conjectured some such

crafty atrocity of purpose, at least, on Grimsorwe's part. But Dorothy was obliged also, by her own justly excited feelings of resentment, to declare to him how well-founded his opinion of the lawyer's coarse licentiousness and brutal violence of disposition towards women had proved. And then, indeed, did Edward's emotions become almost too powerful to be restrained; and he vowed to inflict signal personal chastisement on the unmanly wretch, the very first opportunity that presented itself.

'Brother, no! I have never looked upon the livid-faced scoundrel as such, and now less than ever will I, while I breathe God's vital air!' he exclaimed. 'Brother! that name shall scarce stand between my sword's point and his traitorous heart.' And when Dorothy Firebrace, with the vivacious good sense and generosity which formed so large a portion of her character, entreated him to promise her that he would only use the information she afforded him to keep on his guard against his unnatural enemy, Edward Holte could no longer resist the impetuous feeling that took possession of him.

'I consent—I consent, if only you—you, beautiful Dorothy! will promise to continue my guardian angel. On that condition only! fairest, dearest of women!—on condition only that you allow me to repair, by my honest love and devotion, the injury and insult of that licentious villain's address. Do you, will you consent, loveliest Dorothy? And do not deem this declaration sudden and unadvised. I felt the first moment I saw you again in the market square, on that eventful yesterday, that I have loved you all my life—from my earliest youth to manhood! It was that feeling, doubt-

less, that made me resolve—although my father, from some secret reason of his own, would have had me seek another chapman—to purchase my weapons only at your father's stithy! Dearest Dorothy, I cannot live and fancy you in danger to become another's, and who, yourself have confessed, is all but indifferent to you, whatever the value of his services may have been on the recent occasion! I would have hazarded my life as cheerfully—a thousand times more cheerfully, for the reward of your least regarded smile!

In short, the romantic circumstances and exigency of the position—the unparalleled devotion exhibited towards him by the beautiful and impassioned girl—his conviction that she regarded him with peculiar affection, and yet ran danger of a sacrifice to family arrangements like himself—the inborn warmth and enthusiasm of his character—transported Edward Holte into forgetfulness of all but the great objects of his overpowering emotion; while, on her part, Dorothy Firebrace, attracted by the noble and chivalrous realisation of her brightest and longest cherished visions of the high-born, courtly suitor at her feet, yielded in her turn to the delicious intoxication of a first and passionate love. And when the youthful pair awoke again to realities, they stood plighted and pledged each other's against all the malice of fortune and of fate.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RUPERT'S RAID.

LOVE-MAKING, though the most delightful of all occupations to those engaged in it, is seldom found to be so charming and fascinating in the description. Though who, indeed, can hope properly to describe that fairest flowering of the heart and soul in early youth, styled by mortals Love? What poet's pen has ever yet done justice even to so inferior a form of nature's development as the beauty and sweetness of a hedge of may-thorn, lured into full flush of scented snow by the warm freshness of spring?

We are not about to add, therefore, to the numerous failures in this department, by attempting much detail of the few days—hours they appeared to them—of exquisite happiness granted to Dorothy Firebrace and her lover in the first dawn of their disaster-heralded and accompanied passion. Suffice it in general now to say, that nearly the entire interval so uncomfortably filled up by Sir Thomas Holte at Aston Hall, expecting the arrival of military aid against Birmingham, was devoted by the youthful pair to the fullest avowal and confirmation of their mutual attachment; and that in those three days the destinies of the two loving and generous hearts were irrevocably sealed to each other by

all the most passionate plights and tokens of affection compatible with maiden delicacy and purity on one part, supported by the noble self-restraint and forbearance of a true gentleman and man of honour towards the woman whom he intends to make his wife.

Such was the purpose which Edward Holte, in face of all the difficulties too visibly awaiting such a project on every hand, was not only obliged by Dorothy's spirited demand, but by his own manly and honourable nature, to avow towards her with his first words of passionatè overflow. And never were oaths and promises made and renewed with more fervid sincerity than those which rose to the young lover's lips on that and many subsequent occasions.

A rapturous delirium, in all sober consideration, doubtless, but attended, as usual, in the case of the armourer's daughter and her now plighted worshipper, with answerable bright lunacies of hope and expectation.

Edward indeed knew, and fairly avowed, that it was out of the question ever to dream of obtaining his father's consent to the union thus agreed upon.

Sir Thomas Holte's towering pride and lofty views for his entire family, and most especially his heir and representative; the engagements he had entered into on his son's behalf with another—alike forbade the merest gleam of hope in that direction. But, besides those obstacles of position and station, there were now arisen still more formidable bars of political and even religious separation between the children of a high-church Royalist and an adherent to the sectarian Parliament of London—obstacles which every hour and every movement of the adverse factions

threatened to increase rather than diminish, and which blood seemed likely soon to set into flow and collision.

The strongest and most exasperating prejudices and enmities of the human mind were already enlisted, it was but too plain, against the hopes of our new Romeo and Juliet of Birmingham. It was even certain that the Puritan Capulet himself, Armourer Firebrace, would be as opposed as his co-parent against their plans, and was as likely to cherish his own in the disposal of his child as the haughty and despotic lord of Aston himself.

A brightness nevertheless shone through all this gloom, and arched the blackest clouds with rainbows, from founts in the human heart as little liable, apparently, to exhaustion as the light of the eternal sun itself; and Edward Holte drew his from so unlikely a source even as the progress of the dreadful species of war which was evidently commenced.

He trusted to be able to distinguish himself in its course in such a manner as to establish an independent position in the favour and protection of his sovereign, that would enable him to assert the natural privileges of manhood, to choose the woman as his wife with whom he could best prefer to spend his days; and, in the lover's sanguine views, Dorothy's position, as the daughter of a man of influence and high respectability, in so important a place as Birmingham, though his power was exerted at present unfavourably to the king, gave her adhesion to the royal cause peculiar claims on Charles's attention.

Firebrace, on his part, was evidently not one of the desperate antagonists of regal sway and orthodoxy which the times subsequently produced.

The word republic was still of unknown sound and meaning to the great body of the English middle classes, who opposed themselves, in the first place, to what they deemed the unconstitutional exactions and assumptions of sole mastery on the part of the King and his favourite advisers. And Dorothy took good care to impress upon her aristocratic lover the fact that her father prided himself on a descent from a noble French race, by a genealogy easily traced and proved; meanwhile it was undoubted that her sire was wealthy, according to the estimate of wealth in those days, and that she was his only child and inheritrix? Was not all this full of hopefulness?

To complete these grounds for confidence in futurity, Dorothy no longer made a secret to Edward Holte of the reasons that existed to free him from all anxiety on the score of Tubal Bromycham's rivalry. She frankly stated to the young cavalier what she had learned of her betrothed's luckless and devoted passion for Arabella, his sister, and the explanation that had passed between herself and him in the Dome-Chamber at Aston Hall.

Edward had never heard anything of this circumstance before. It had all taken place during his absence at the University. And Sir Thomas Holte's pride was, in reality, too acutely stung by the whole event—there were such peculiar and not easily explicable incidents in connection with the subject—that he had suppressed the wounding details as much as possible to every one. But in particular he disliked confiding to his lawful son, whose high-toned sense of justice and clear understanding, he instinctively felt, could not have been misled by any disguise or artifice of allegation.

Even Richard Grimsorwe, whose congenial worldliness and indifference to any fine sense of right Sir Thomas appreciated, had only come into possession of the story by indirect means of his own. And it must be confessed that the family haughtiness of feeling in the Holtes revolted in Edward also, in the first instance, from the notion of a person in a mechanical occupation aspiring to the hand of a daughter of his house. But when Dorothy explained to him the well-founded pretension of Tubal the smith to the honours and possessions of the ancient lords of Birmingham, this petulant emotion greatly abated.

Edward was familiar with the sad particulars of the fall of that ancient race, in which an ancestor of his own had disgracefully figured. He had often reflected on the injustice and barbarous tyranny of the transaction, and to put so great a wrong right appeared to him in the highest degree agreeable to justice, and to the ideas of a legal and settled order of things, which he and other enlightened Royalists hoped to re-establish in England.

Nor was he without some secret consolation in the notion that such an occurrence must partially have awakened Sir Thomas Holte to the fact that his children were looked upon as ordinary mortals, and by no means as set apart for destinies so lofty and peculiar as his towering pride suggested. And though he could scarcely yield any of his own to Dorothy's warm-hearted credulity of belief that at some period his sister must have encouraged, probably have shared, the feelings of her low-placed suitor, the notion flattered Edward with a hope that he should find a support and ally in her to his own projects, in what he knew would

be looked upon at Aston Hall as a miserably plebeian descent in alliance. He knew well that his sister was as attached to him as her volatile and usually selfishly engaged affections could permit.

It must be added, also, that Dorothy had not the courage to reveal the whole disastrous tale, or the disgraceful circumstances of the personal encounter between Tubal and Sir Thomas, and the maltreatment of the former in consequence. She thought it might be allowed her to be supposed ignorant of these adjuncts, and that some happy change of fortune would dispose the main parties in the dispute to mutual pardon and oblivion.

In short, Love is known to be a logician on his own side only, and these two young people, thrown almost completely into each other's society for so considerable an interval, were plunged in all the first most unreasoning conceits and illusions of inexperienced acquirement.

The lovers retained so much sense, however, as to be quite aware that any open declaration of their attachment and engagement was for the moment entirely out of the question. That would be merely to secure their immediate separation, and would place the strongest imaginable engine in the hands of the sordid and rancorous brother whose designs Dorothy Firebrace had been so providentially enabled to discover and disclose.

Meanwhile the most unlikely circumstances seemed all to work to throw them together, without danger of exciting suspicion by too anxious a seeking of opportunities. Firebrace himself urged upon his daughter to remain constantly in the house, having ascertained

that the townspeople were greatly offended at her taking part so evidently with their enemies.

The active babbling of Richard Grimsorwe diffused the information everywhere. The populace, with whom Tubal Bromycham had become a sudden object of enthusiasm, were perplexed, but irritated at the danger to which his betrothed's rashness had exposed their idol, while, nevertheless, his exploit in her rescue excited their triumphant admiration. And now, as the armourer himself was obliged to be constantly abroad, on the business of the office he had accepted in the insurgent town, all very restraining supervision was withdrawn from Dorothy's doings.

Old Mahala, charged specially with the duty, was subject to divers infirmities of age, or was not perhaps still so old a woman as to set herself resolutely against what she most likely considered the passing fanciful caprice of an indulged girl for a very handsome young man.

As for Tubal, the betrothed husband himself, never was less opposition offered from rivalry than his. Indeed, he scarcely approached the Firebrace mansion at all during Edward's whole stay, excepting on forge business, connected with the defensive preparations of the town.

Tubal had, in fact, made a new home for himself at some considerable distance from the Crown House. Dorothy was glad to be enabled to relate to her lover, as confirmation of her previous story, that Tubal had taken possession of the old castellated residence of his ancestors, known as the Moat House, in the centre of Birmingham, in spite of some degree of resistance on the part of the high bailiff, or rather of the high

bailiff's wife, who raised the drawbridges and stood a little siege, until hunger and fear made that functionary determine rather to brave his lady's wrath, and yield up his stronghold on the sly. And there Tubal had hoisted the long-disused banner of his family, and had openly taken upon himself all the privileges and rule of a lord of Birmingham—Cromwell, Firebrace, and a strong majority of the upper classes of the town, backing him in what he did, and only a small portion of the lowest fanatics and populace murmuring against the restoration.

Yet all this was only part of the turmoil and tumult now raging in Birmingham. Defensive preparations were in constant activity, and almost the whole population engaged vigorously in them.

Trenches were dug, earth-mounds and barricades erected at all the principal entrances of the town, chains stretched across the river and smaller inlets; every military precaution taken, which the rude, unfamiliar acquaintance, both of leaders and general combatants, with the resources of the military art allowed.

Cromwell himself was obliged to give his directions from an old book of Roman *Castrametation*, or camp-making, which formed part of his travelling library, by the gift—as was written in the title-page—of his loving cousin and fellow-truster in Christ, John Hampden. But his sagacious eye and apt military instinct supplied every deficiency. Moreover, with the faculty always observed in great men of discerning and directing the abilities and knowledge of others to the furtherance of their own ends, Cromwell selected Sisyphus the bellows-blower as a species of foreman in his operations, for which his experience in the scientific and yet

ferocious religious wars of Germany well qualified him. And the Parliament Captain's condescension to this maimed relic of old battles, meanwhile, greatly recommended him to the populace, with whom the bellows-blower was in high esteem; and his faculty of lending himself to the ideas and speaking the impassioned jargon of the obscurest and wildest fanaticism, secured him the respectful deference of the Anabaptists.

Tubal Bromycham's example and strenuous personal activity carried forward the executive part of this work at an answerable rate. So, from all this it came to pass that, make what haste his impetuous spirit and quick resolve could urge upon him, Prince Rupert arrived considerably too late for the species of assault he doubtless projected on Birmingham—a *coup de main*, as a sudden onslaught without artillery or other regular means of reduction was styled, being in his contemplation; as plainly appeared from the condition in which he presented himself, with a single overridden and exhausted troop of horse, at the fortified inclosures of the town.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TOCSIN.

THE lovers, absorbingly occupied in their own fears and hopes, delights and sufferings, took little notice of what was happening in the outward world.

Dorothy perhaps, trembling always for the safety of her beloved prisoner, kept up some degree of observation and vigilance. But her father's reports described a state of things which rather flattered the pair with the prospects of a speedily approaching deliverance than added to their apprehensions, now that the fair girl also had become so fervidly royalist. Yet still her dread of evil towards Edward Holte was fed by her knowledge that his traitorous brother continued in the town; apparently, it is true, in the position of a captive, under the observation of Cromwell. But she well remembered how Grimsorwe had avowed to his witch-grandmother his purpose to seek furtherance in his malicious project from the new powers in the state.

And here it should be noticed that this circumstance, in conjunction with another he ascertained in the same series of revelations, had almost more than anything else stirred Edward Holte's unceasing apprehensions.

Dorothy had mentioned, without herself attaching

much stress to the fact, that one of the reasons alleged for her detention at Aston was the power put in her hands by Sir Thomas's imprudent revelations, of revealing the king's dangerous position in his quarters at Nottingham. She had alluded to it, only still more plainly to evince her loyal sentiments to her loyal lover, by declaring her own utter incapability of such mean betrayal. Edward was painfully impressed with the circumstance in quite another point of view.

‘My father's rashness has then placed so momentous a secret on the tongue of my villainous brother, who tables and almost beds, from all that I hear, with this determined London officer!’ he remarked.

He strove, however, to take as assuring a view of the unlucky fact as the cheerful-natured Dorothy urged upon him.

‘What matters it if even Grimsorwe reveals the state of things to Captain Cromwell? What harm can happen of it?’ she said, smilingly. ‘Our townspeople evidently think only of their own defence. I heard that the captain should say he would not suffer a man out of the barricades till those within had got accustomed to the show and tramp of cavalry (nothing else is to be feared), and skilled in the set of the pike to keep them off. And such lubberly rogues as Mistress Mellons, of the Black Boy, tells our Mahala they look at work in the market-place, under Tubal's captaincy, who hardly himself knows the mere words of command! They show as if rather begging their lives on their knees than bent on so warlike an endeavour, and rise in such confusion that a butting ram could scatter them! Be Richard Grimsorwe's motive what it will, dearest Edward, he could find no means in Birmingham to

execute any such distant harm against his Majesty as your changed complexion hints.'

Edward was soothed, if not altogether reassured, by this view of things.

He, no more than the rest of their contemporaries, was aware of the matchless audacity and energy of Cromwell's character. So great an outrage as a direct assault of the royal person had as yet crossed no man's mind, the zealous Royalist succeeded in persuading himself; or, if the notion could be formed, what means of execution were there there in the power of an undisciplined rabble? And the nearest of the Parliamentary forces were at such distances from Nottingham, as to render it unlikely any project requiring an extensive military movement could be put in execution without exciting such alarm as to render it abortive.

On the occasion now to be mentioned, Dorothy's apprehensions were, in consequence of this reasoning, by no means turned upon the safety of the King; but a general alarm was excited in the town by the ringing backward of the great bell of St. Martin's. A lookout was stationed night and day in the steeple there, and the jangle of bells, rung out of tune, was a previously agreed upon signal of any suspicious external approach.

It was about noonday, and things were proceeding quietly enough in a busy way in the town, when this dissonant signal of danger became audible. In a moment all Birmingham was in a ferment and uproar.

The townspeople, emerging armed as well as might be with hastily snatched weapons from their different abodes, thronged into the streets, and hurried, also by previous arrangement, to the market-place. In parti-

cular, a considerable mob of smiths and hammermen of various kinds swarmed up Deritend, chiefly wielding the great weapon of their craft, and took their way with zealous rapidity to the Moat House, there to place themselves under the immediate command of Tubal Bromycham.

Armourer Firebrace was disturbed in a nap he was taking after dinner in his chair ; and with some trepidation, though not of a personal kind, declared that he must proceed at once to the Guildhall to meet the other elders and councillors of the town, and devise the best means to aid in the defence and preserve internal order. The poor old man's emotion was altogether on account of his daughter ; and Edward Holte was affected and surprised to find that he recommended her to the care of his prisoner, in case things went ill for the defence. 'For we mean only our lawful *defence*, fair sir,' he said, 'and by no means any assault and battery of our own driving against his Majesty's peace and soldiery, if such they be that have come against our town. I must not leave my fellows in any jeopardy I can share ; but if your friends make themselves a passage into the town, I trust you will remember towards my child that I have kindly, honourably, and safely entertained you under my roof.'

Edward declared with peculiar warmth that he would lose his own life rather than that any ill should befall his generous young hostess. And Dorothy thereupon earnestly demanded of her father whether he left protection sufficient for his prisoner's safety during his absence ; upon which the armourer announced his intention to lock up and bar up the entire house and forge until he could return, the massive bolts and doors of

which would alone resist any violence but that of artillery.

Satisfied with this provision for the safety of her lover, and anxious to obtain the earliest intelligence of what might happen affecting his condition, Dorothy, however, now begged her father's leave to accompany him into the town. 'At least to the market-place,' she said; adding, truly enough, that her anxiety would be much greater at a distance from whatever might occur to decide results than if she was an eye-witness of them. If there were any appearances of danger, she promised at once to return to Deritend, a quarter of the town which, as any assault to be made was apprehended in the direction of Aston only at this time, was the farthest removed from actual peril.

Edward Holte objected earnestly to this arrangement. But Dorothy persevered, perhaps with some slight mixture of coquetry in her expressions of unwillingness to remain. And the armourer himself, apparently for the first time noticing the smiles of mutual intelligence between the youthful pair, rather hurriedly and grimly declared to his daughter that she was in the right, and should accompany him wherever he went. 'They do not ask of us greybeards to take any share in the actual battling,' he said, 'and you will be as safe with me at the Guildhall—or safer—than here. Don your cloak and hood, and let us foot it at once.'

So it was determined, and so acted upon. Dorothy took a laughingly kind adieu of her forlorn lover, whom she left in the care of old Mahala and the other female domestics, while his saddened eyes reproached her for depriving him of the hours of happiness that might else have followed in each other's company. But Dorothy

herself superintended the labour of the workman who closed and locked all the entrances of the Crown Forge—a precaution scarcely necessary as regarded the prisoner's secure keeping, for even if he could have made his way out of the house, the exits of the town were all too well guarded to allow of any further evasion.

Firebrace gave his arm to his daughter on quitting their premises into Deritend; and with a grave and solemnly-bearded aspect, with the handle of an altogether unused sword ostentatiously figuring above a lift in his long cloak, the master armourer proceeded up the causeway, amidst the continued discordant summons of the tocsin, which resembled more the palpitation of an affrighted human heart than the jangle of a bell.

He took the direction of the church, in which the principal number of people were also speeding; speedily joined as he advanced by other chief citizens of the district. Only such presumed to join the slow and poised advance of the master armourer. But everyone whom they passed, or mixed with in the progress, treated this head townsman with great marks of respect and deference. Dorothy for herself could not but perceive that, though her father's presence protected her from much open signs of the popular disapproval, she obtained a novel and displeasing species of notice when she came into public view. 'Takes part with those of Aston! What doth she abroad now in our midst? To play the spy for them there?' harsh, though undertoned, voices more than once muttered in her wake.

The pride and defiance of Dorothy Firebrace's nature were, however, awakened, rather than her fears, under this rebuking reception. She held up her beautiful, fiery head, with the action of a high-mettled charger, in

disdain, and was only sorry when she felt her father's arm quiver in her hold, in a manner that denoted his keen sense of the species of public distaste exhibited towards his child.

Until they quitted Deritend these symptoms continued mild enough. But having once passed out of the quarter where the master armourer was all powerful, the aspect of things by no means improved.

Dorothy, nevertheless, ceased to take much personal interest in what regarded herself in her anxiety to ascertain the position of affairs. No one they had hitherto met or joined in with knew what was the occasion of the alarm. But on reaching the market-place, with a view to cross it to the Guildhall, the throng of people became very greatly increased, and evident marks of consternation appeared in the faces of the majority. 'The King's cavalry are upon us from Worcester!' was the general mutter and murmur. 'They are about Edg-baston Row; William Moorcroft has espied them as well nigh into the town as the Parsonage House; and 'tis well known which way old Dugdale's snout snuffs the wind! He will admit them thereby.'

Others replied that the doctor could not; that the London Captain had cleared out his Papistical den, and put it in the keeping of Gibby-Hook the bellows-blower, with men on whom he could depend. Then a score voices demanded, Where was the Captain? Where was Tubal Bromycham? And a number of women began screaming that all was lost; that they and their children would all be destroyed and massacred by the bloodthirsty cavaliers, and a general lamentation arose over the folly of their townsmen for placing them all in so dangerous a position.

Dorothy's appearance was consequently at no very propitious moment; and she herself began to grow a little alarmed at the accumulating signs of her unpopularity.

'I'll warrant me,' said a haggard, frightened-looking woman glaring at her from the mob, 'she knows better than any of us what downpour is coming upon us! To call herself so worthy a master tradesman's daughter, yet go a-gadding and eaves-dropping against us to the old tyrant of Aston! Hiss her, I say; and an it were not for her worthy father's sake, I would put my tentacles in her peach face, forsooth, to some purpose!'

And vigorously setting an example which was extensively followed among the members of the fair sex, the air became all of a whizz-fizz with the demonstration.

Dorothy herself quailed a little, and the armourer turned very pale as he addressed the crowd in deprecation.

'Peace, good folks; my daughter meant it all for the best,' he said. 'You yourselves talk now of how better a thing it were to have kept peace with Aston, if the assault comes thence.'

'It is not so, armourer,' said a loud commanding voice at this moment. 'It is the King's nephew, with some score of wearied horse, sniffing like a cat at a well-wired birdcage round the town. Let us keep steady on our perches, and Grimalkin cannot harm us. But, fie! have we a flock of geese turned out among us, by this noise?'

'They are angry at my daughter, Captain Cromwell,' said Firebrace, 'though I wot not well what harm she can have done in the case. I will take her to Tubal at the Moat House.'

‘You will not find him there; the over-eager youngster has sent me word that he has led his men to the chains at the end of Worcester Street, where the King’s men and they are angrily staring at each other, and would have my leave to make an onset out of the barriers, which I shall by no means yield to. Let the girl go to my quarters at the Black Boy. She will find her friend Dame Cooper there, and others of the like thinking, or prating at least, and who do so rail at me betimes as almost to put me past my patience.’

‘I will take her there.’

‘No; you are needed at the Guildhall to hearten some of the white-livered cravens of your town-governors, who stammer already the traitor’s word Surrender! Whereto I answer, NEVER while I have breath to shout No! All good people, shout with me No surrender! no surrender! Do you hear? They are talking of surrender in the Town Hall ere we are even so much as asked to yield. No surrender, boys! If the boys yelp, the men will soon bark.’

The courageous bearing and the determined accents of Cromwell produced their effect on the easily excited and directed emotions of the populace. ‘No surrender! no surrender!’ passed immediately from a murmur of repetition to a real uproar of vehement resolve.

‘Go and tell the Town Council what the people say, armourer, *and mean!*’ said Cromwell, evidently well pleased with this exhibition. ‘I will bring them beneath the windows of the Guildhall, if it needs confirmation; and meanwhile trust your maiden to my care, and I will see her safely bestowed.’

The armourer, agitated with the noise and confusion, assented to the order rather than request he received;

and passing also with a strange implicitness under the dominion of this master-spirit of the stormy times, moved as if under the influence of a spell at once towards the Guildhall, in New Street, leaving his darling daughter under the stranger's protection without a word of unwillingness or dissatisfaction.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EDGBASTON BARRIER.

‘THIS way with me, my bonny lass. Why do you pause a-tiptoe? Methinks you are safer in than out of custody. Hear you not what the people murmur?’ said Captain Cromwell, thus left in charge.

‘I heed them not,’ returned Dorothy, disdainfully. ‘I did never set much store by the utterances of such rank breaths. But I would rather go with you on and see the fight than be shut up with some old woman in a tobacco-smoking inn. Moreover, I like not a companion who lodges there—the Aston bastard fellow. Let me go with you, sir.’

‘I do not purpose there shall be any close encounter with the enemy, girl, where I go. But what misliking have you against worthy Master Grimsworth, which, the Lord defend you, truly he so amply returns?’ enquired Cromwell with some interest and more surprise in his accents.

Dorothy reflected, and suppressed the answer that rose readily enough to her tongue. It would not do, she thought, to let the Parliament Captain know how thoroughly she was in the secret of his private understanding with his pretended prisoner.

‘Let a woman’s reason suffice you, sir captain, that I

like not the man because *I like him not,*' she answered, rather petulantly, 'But if my betrothed is where you are going, I have the better right to follow; more especially if you purpose to keep him from a fray.'

'True enough,' said Cromwell; and after a moment's further reflection, he motioned leave to Dorothy to accompany him, and took the direct route to the now wide and commodious road to Edgbaston. In those days, though still one of the widest streets of the town, it was comparatively narrow, and only broadened to a space where it joined the Parsonage and Dudley Street, on the outer skirts of the Birmingham of 1642. Here particular skill had accordingly been required and applied in the fortification of the town. A deep and broad ditch had been dug, and a complete network of chains fixed across the street on strong staples, to the height of ten or eleven feet, so as effectually to bar the entrance. The position was further secured by the Parsonage House, which, like the Moat House, had a wide ditch around it, and was occupied by some of the most determined of the town rabble, under Sisyphus the bellows-blower.

Within these chains Tubal and a select band of young fellows, nearly all well armed, were drawn up in a kind of battle array; and beyond them appeared the gleaming cuirasses and snorting steeds of Prince Rupert's checked and amazed dragoons, the latter exchanging the most insulting ribaldry and defiances with the townspeople, goading and urging upon them not to sneak like rats behind a wainscot, but come out fairly into the open field and pit manhood against manhood in a fray!

Tubal in particular appeared to be exasperated by these remarks, and the scornful urging and impre-

cations of the leader of the enemy—a tall and powerful young man in bright armour, with a yellow plume in his hat.

‘I thought you English had been men of better mettle than to skulk thus behind mounds of earth! There is a better report of you in the Rhineland, where I was born and bred. Are ye deer parked in an inclosure, and dare not wager your horns against such lean, wearied hounds as we?’ this officer was saying, doubtless hoping to provoke what he considered a senseless rabble to the usual rash displays of such bodies of men. Tubal had indeed clearly some difficulty to restrain his men, and no sooner caught sight of Cromwell than he eagerly demanded leave to cast down the chains, and sally forth to punish the insulting foe.

‘But for what cause, think you, then, have we been at the pains to place them where they are?’ returned the Parliament officer, drily. ‘No; your undisciplined fellows cannot fairly face this picked horse of the King’s. Let them weary themselves with bawling, and so depart. Had I my own troopers in hand, now, whom I do so hourly expect, I should take a pleasure too in dusting yonder braggart young gentleman’s lion’s hide! But as it is, I command you all, on the obedience you have promised me, in nowise to stir out of the defences.’

And Cromwell remained fixed in this resolve, in spite of every entreaty on Tubal’s part to the contrary; laughing heartily at the numerous abortive attempts now made by the Prince and his cavaliers to leap the ditch to the barriers. Horse and rider rolled over repeatedly in those efforts; until at last, after a consultation among the officers, the Prince drew off his dragoons in futile wrath, and resumed his eager rounds

of the well-secured town, like a dog at a rolled-up hedgehog.

A report shortly after arrived that the cavaliers had drawn off altogether in the direction of Aston Hall; and then, for the first time, Cromwell, whose mind had been entirely absorbed in the military proceedings, noticed that Dorothy Firebrace no longer appeared at the place in the rear where he had left her on his advance to the point of attack. But Richard Grimsorwe was at his side, with a dark and scowling face.

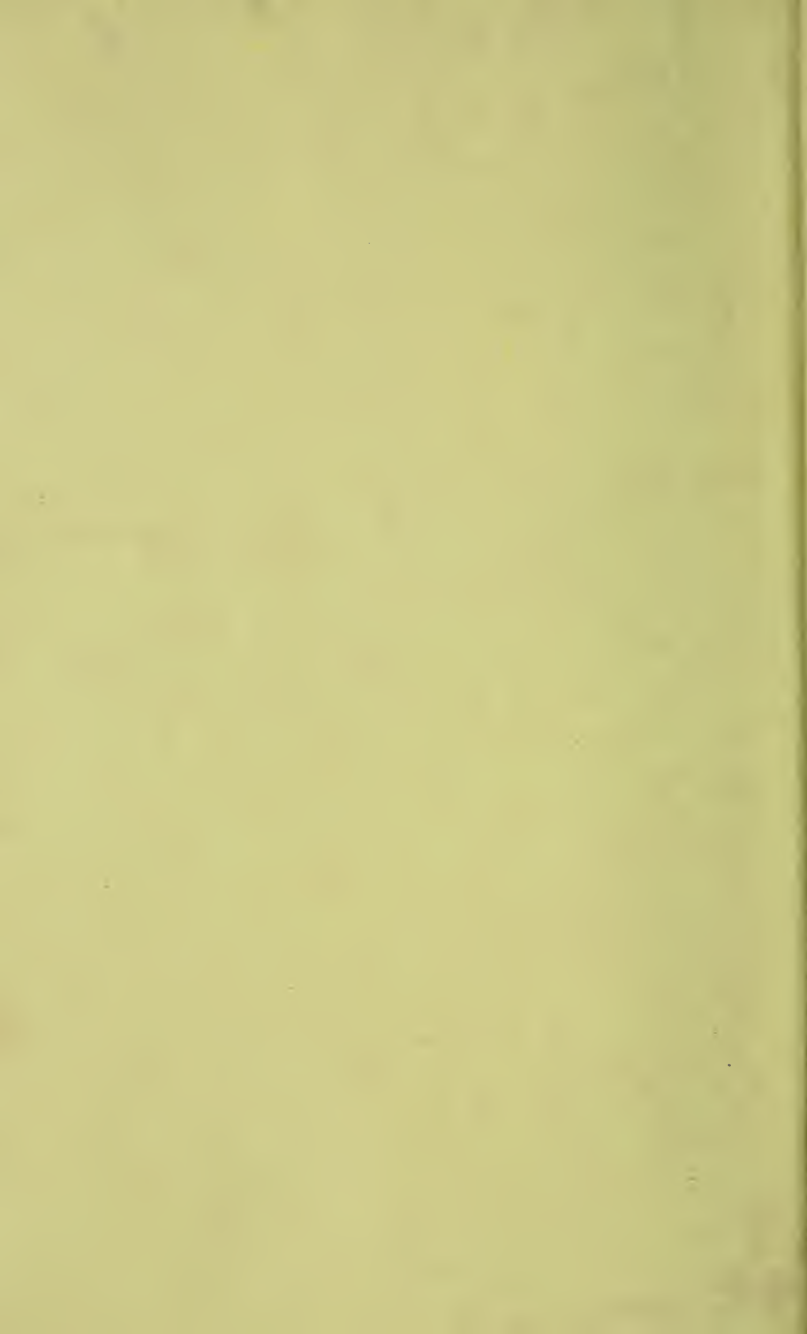
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LONDON

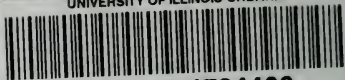
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