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DOROTHY FIREBRACE

OR

THE ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER OF BIRMINGHAM

BY

THE AUTHOR OF 'WHITEFRIARS'

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET

1865



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THE
ARMOURER'S DAUGHTER.



CHAPTER LXVII.

A LOVE-SONG.

EDWARD HOLTE was decidedly in a good humour with himself and all the world, on the morning he rode from Sutton Manor House to Aston Hall, on his promised visit. In spite of serious checks and drawbacks in other matters, he was now so perfectly happy and triumphant in his love, that everything moral and physical in nature and in humanity seemed to take the splendid rosy hues of his delightful reveries, which inundated, as it were, the universe in a sunshine coloured from the heart.

The sombre depths of the ancient forest he traversed—the dark stagnant pools—the expanses of dreary, herbless bog—the tracts of barren uncultivated waste—the mystical mounds and trenches which had so possibly once been a temple for the sanguinary rites of Druidism—all shone in his happy eyes with a light not their own, but bright as a dream of Paradise.

He hoped the best of everything, even of his father's

and sister's infatuation respecting Prince Rupert. It could not be but that in the end they would listen to reason and common sense. Especially his sister; for it must be, it should be—however misled she might be by ambitious fancies—that in her heart she preferred the generous Tubal.

As regarded the latter, there was no occasion to be uneasy. Dorothy was to explain to him the King's obstinacy, and point out that he had only to persevere on his own part to bring his Majesty to reason. Any way, military necessities would most likely soon compel the Prince to remove his quarters from Warwickshire.

For himself Edward considered he had ample excuses for delaying obedience to the orders he had received to attend the King in the west, in the unfurnished and undisciplined state of his newly-levied corps.

It was, besides, a really very fine day; the sky of a lovely warm blue, with an atmosphere of that brilliant transparency which produces all the colouring of nature in the most vivid contrasts and effects. The rich, brew-like scent from gorse and broom came wafted constantly to Edward's sense on a playful breeze. Deer frolicked in all the glades, bees hummed on the yellow and purple bloom; rabbits and hares showed their startled, globular eyes at every turn among the deep grass and fern. No, it was not a day—it was not a scene—for a youthful bridegroom to believe in misfortune.

These pleasant impressions continued on Edward's first arrival at the Hall. His approach up the great avenue startled two rustic lovers who were met in fond tryste at a stile leading into the Park, and who proved on inspection to be Robin Falconer and Phœbe Dew-snap, a favourite and vivacious waiting-maid of his sister.

From these two he learned that all was well at the Hall, and giving his horse to the former, continued his way thither on foot.

Yet was it all so well?

Passing along the garden-front of the house, under the open windows of his mother's drawing-room—an apartment still known as Lady Holte's—Edward heard the melodious murmurs of a musical instrument, which he immediately discerned to be his sister's "virginals," as the original of the subsequent spinet, harpsichord, and piano, was styled in its earliest invention;—the very instrument on which Tubal Bromycham, inspired by love, had exhausted his mechanical genius. And pausing for a moment to listen who the player might be, Edward heard a rough male voice—which yet he instinctively felt the owner made an effort to soften to an amorous wooingness—request that Mistress Holte would charm him with some 'lovesome ditty' to the notes. And immediate compliance followed, in accents full of a species of passionate cajolement and allurements, that, coupled with the earnest meaning of the words themselves, struck Edward with foreboding and dismay!

Of course the verses displayed the usual qualities of quaintness and stiffness in the style to be noted in nearly all the poetry of the time of Charles the First, of which, luckily, no great quantity remains. It is perhaps, however, necessary in the present instance, to ask attention to

ARABELLA HOLTE'S LOVE-SONG.

To my heart, I said, 'Faint Heart!

Why, like the wind-struck lute,

Dost thou sweet utterances begin

That die then, and remain for ever mute?

For ever mute.

The rest of the officers were absent on various duties and excursions to out-lying posts.

Still more annoyed and perplexed, Edward murmured to himself, 'A brother's presence cannot be deemed an intrusion,' and made his way to the apartment where he was aware he should find the songstress of the virginals and her auditor. For it plainly appeared the Prince and Arabella Holte were alone together.

Neither, it must be stated, did Edward take any precautions to have his arrival announced; but stepping abruptly into 'Lady Holte's Withdrawing Room,' he came upon a not altogether unexpected but extremely ill-pleasing spectacle to himself. Arabella Holte seated before her instrument, but turned from it with eager excitement visible all over her vivid countenance, and Prince Rupert kneeling at her feet, with both her hands clasped in his, and pouring forth some but partially intelligible but most vehement gibberish, in a mixed rhapsody of English, German, and French.

Of course Edward's arrival produced an instantaneous change of position. Both parties sprang on their feet, Miss Holte withdrawing her hands from the Royal Dragoon's strenuous grasp, and ejaculating, with a mixture of confusion and an attempt to pass off the affair, 'My brother Edward! I thought it had been Master Grim-sorwe, who remained to help me entertain his Highness.' And her complexion lighting with a fiery glow, made shift to add some words of welcoming, which died away when she remarked how coldly and severely Edward received them.

'Yes, sister,' was the brother's reply. 'I have made a special visitation to Aston to speak with you on some matters of family importance, which should be in private.

His Highness will, therefore, pardon your retirement awhile.'

Rupert laughed his hoarse trooper-laugh. 'It is time I were in the saddle myself on the business of my detachment, which is fast swelling into a little army, Master Holte!' he said; then, 'But your adorable sister sang so like an angel awhile ago, that I mistook her for one, and was rendering homage to her in the proper attitude of mankind to divinities!'

'Were you not the King's nephew, sir,' replied Edward, in by no means a similar tone of compliment, 'I should ask the meaning of so high-flown a speech. But your birth places you too far above questioning on such points, which it shall not be my fault if my sister and sire do not speedily better comprehend! Come, Arabella, I must have speech with you alone.'

'You need not drag your sister hence then, sir, for the purpose,' returned the Prince, disdainfully; 'I did not think to ride to-day, but my horse I deem better company at any time than a churlish host, and I shall seek mine at once.'

So saying he strode haughtily out of the apartment, beginning to hum some camp tune before he reached the door, and markedly saluted Arabella Holte alone thence as he retired.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

EDWARD looked after the discourteous Prince with a bent and lowering brow, and then he turned to his sister.

‘What is the meaning of all this, Arabella?’ he demanded. ‘What strange scene is this I have interrupted? I have the right to ask. I am your brother, and your honour and fair repute are no less mine than your own to guard.’

‘Is not my father, then, my father, and so a properer judge if either be in danger, good brother mine?’ rejoined Arabella, striving to adopt a light and somewhat defying tone in her rejoinder. ‘And that he thinks not so, plainly appears from his leaving us in the sole charge of such a bookworm as Richard Grimsorwe often shows himself of late! Alas, we poor women! It should suffice, methinks, if we follow the behests and fancies of one tyrant at a time—father, brother, husband, son, by turns—but not in pairs, or all together, sure!’

‘My father is besotted by his pride and vanity. Do not show yourself his daughter most in those qualities, Arabella!’ returned the brother, severely. ‘But you have yourself too much good sense and experience of the pretended godship of Royalty, in your Court days, ever to believe that this Royal German trooper can mean you

ought but disgrace and contumely in men's eyes by his attentions.'

'Oh, but, brother Edward, things fall not always out as by their original planners are devised! The stone does not always roll where it is cast; and none knows better—if all we hear be true—than Edward Holte—that love obeys no laws but his own, and studies no degrees; but levels even the gods to poor humanity when so it pleases him!'

Edward coloured. But he cleverly parried the meaning of the remark, and introduced a new element into the discussion.

'Not always *levels*, Arabella! At times *exalts*,' he said. 'For what but love and devotion to you has made the young man, Tubal Birmingham—lawful heir as he is of a noble race—to stand so bravely forward and reclaim the rights of his ancestry; content as he was to exercise his matchless genius and skill in an art to which the old Greeks, indeed, gave a god, and married to the fairest of the goddesses. But, doubtless, some one of Ben Jonson's Court Masques must have made you familiar with the pretty tale of Venus and Vulcan, since the other matters of mythology occur so patly to your memory!'

He spoke these latter words rapidly and yet waveringly—surprised and even alarmed at the powerful effect which the name of Tubal Bromycham, introduced into the discussion, produced upon his sister. She grew deadly pale, and looked at him with singularly strained and aghast eyes.

'Tubal *Bromycham*—Tubal *Birmingham*!' she murmured to herself principally; adding with a forced and quivering smile, 'My brother Edward, too, infected with that man's foolish rhapsodies!'

‘But is it all rhapsody, Arabella?’ repeated Edward Holte, gazing earnestly at his sister’s wan complexion, that yet changed rapidly in degrees of paleness. ‘No one would say so that hears him speak! Who believes his own falsehood? But Tubal speaks so that no man can doubt he believes himself, and, if what he says be true, you must—you must—have loved him once!’

There was a considerable pause, during which Arabella turned her superb head away: doubtfully whether in disdain and indignation, or to hide the overpowering emotion which certainly writhed along her brows.

‘He told you so? The Birmingham blacksmith fellow told my brother so?’ she then ejaculated, turning with hidden fierceness and vivacity on Edward.

‘The Blacksmith *Lord* of Birmingham has not told me so, Arabella!—Has but told me so, at worst, as his own belief—his own hope—the purpose and triumph of his brave and honest life—of all his thoughts and actions—to achieve! But if he said so, was it false? Arabella Holte! have you not loved Tubal Birmingham?’

Again a pause. A peculiarly long and significant pause.

‘No!’ Arabella Holte then faintly repeated. ‘No! I have *not* loved Tubal *Birmingham*. Never, never, never—have I loved—Tubal *Birmingham*!’

‘Sister! Do not take refuge—do not deceive yourself and me by a sound! Tubal *Bromycham*, then, if you will! Have you not loved that nobleman and prince of nature’s own making—even you who now debase the glorious and fit supremacy of true loving womanhood at the feet of a coarse, contemptuous man—butcher by trade and heart—because forsooth his sire and dam are blazoned “royal” in the tawdry daubings of the

madman in colouring and sprawling animals, called heralds?’

‘Is Edward Holte, then, turned Dutch republican, or something less attuned to aught that is honourable and glorious among the distinctions of humanity? What raises one above his fellows, or sets him off sunlike in the eye and observances of the world, but this same gaudy blazonry?’ returned the haughty former maid-of-honour of the haughty Queen of Charles the First. Yet, Edward, with true intuition of the natural action of the passions, noticed with satisfaction that it was only in the second place she resented the personal attack on her royal admirer. ‘But is this proper language to be used by a gentleman who purposes to be a soldier, of a Prince, and already famous Captain of the wars?’ she continued. ‘A man butcher! Prithee, Captain Holte, shall you sweat in armour to other purpose than to lay low as any slaughtered oxen in the world the foes and rebels of your king?—Men, at all events, in shape and the reckoning of those who will lead them to the edge of your sword?’

‘I call a mercenary soldier so. What business has this German horse-soldier killing Englishmen, in a quarrel that concerns but Englishmen?’ returned Edward, passionately.

‘Cry you mercy, Master Holte, but our enemies say the quarrel concerns all mankind, and all time, not merely England and the men of this generation! Moreover, Prince Rupert is at least half an Englishman by blood and birth—the grandson of an English king! Methinks his sword has some fair say in an English quarrel, so!’ Arabella replied with equally angry vivacity.

‘The grandson of a *Scotch* King, if you will. What

was James the First, in all truth else, though he sat on the English throne to disgrace it, and wasted English treasures on his hateful minions? The *great-grandson*, it may well be, of an Italian fiddler!' Edward Holte could not forbear retaliating.

Of course he alluded to the old scandals concerning Mary Queen of Scots, and the Italian musician, David Rizzio.

Arabella coloured indignantly, as if her own pride were hurt by the insinuation.

'What, Edward Holte! you pass in insult even the basest reviler Republican of the Parliament—for such, in their secret souls, are Vane, and Pym, and St. John, and all the rest of the talking traitors, whose heads I hope yet to see rotting on pike-staves on London Bridge and Temple Bar! Nay, I doubt if even the prodigious rascalion, whose plans on the most sacred person of the King you take so much credit to yourself and your Birmingham mistress for foiling—'

'My Birmingham mistress, Arabella Holte!' Edward vehemently interrupted; and was about to rebuke his sister's scornful expression with that one all-refuting, but most dangerous word, that rushed to his lips——. But he reflected in time. Was not Arabella become, and likelier to become yet more so, the friend and ally of his enemies?

'It is a word no honest and honourable woman—no lady—should apply, in the ill sense doubtless you mean, of another no less than her equal in all such respects,' he contented himself with replying. 'Nay,' he added, with passion, but in all sincerity, 'if things are suffered to proceed as now they seem to be set, it is rather Arabella Holte than Dorothy Firebrace—rather the proud

Baronet's than the stern Armourer's Daughter—that is likely to forfeit her title to the homage due to virtue, and virtuous repute, in her sex !'

Edward was perhaps a little alarmed, and yet not ill-pleased, at the vehemence of indignation aroused in his haughty sister at this remark.

'Great God !' she exclaimed, 'what have I done to justify such insult—such atrocious insult?—from a brother, too ! I will complain to my father—to Rupert himself!—to the Prince, whose illustrious birth hinders him not to be a gentleman of honour and spirit also, and who has already drawn his sword on an insolent knave in my behalf.'

'Good heavens ! how know you that ? in my turn, I exclaim.'

So Edward did indeed.

'My father ! can he have been foolish enough ?'

Edward knew full well that nothing could be likelier to interest a woman in favour of a man than an act of protection, mingled with homage and devotion, so marked as those certainly displayed by Prince Rupert towards his sister in his whole demeanour in the affair of the quarrel with Cornet Titus. He was in proportion vexed and alarmed accordingly. Nor were these feelings diminished when Arabella answered shortly, 'No ; it was your brother, Richard Grimsorwe, sir, imparted the wonderful secret to me.'

Edward was silent for a moment. 'Mischievous comploter !' he then muttered.

'Richard Grimsorwe is no brother of mine,' he resumed bitterly, 'and if he has become yours, Arabella, it is very recently indeed. On the contrary, I warn you, he is in his felon's heart the blackest of enemies,

and contrives evil against all the children of our mother, and would rejoice to witness our utter ruin and disgrace. But let that pass now—only let us not become his fools and instruments in the work. And what else, what else, dearest sister, my only sister, my dearest Arabella, can you expect to issue from this disastrous intimacy you have formed?’

‘You begin whimpering now, Edward; it was ever your wont. I should have been the man of the family, you its kind, soft-hearted maiden! And yet you can insult with tears, as it would seem, of love and pity in your eyes! For what issue, say you, can I expect from this—this intimacy, I have formed? What issue should my father’s daughter, think you, expect?’ Arabella rejoined, in tones of exasperated excitement at last, though at first she was evidently moved with her brother’s emotion of sorrow and tenderness.

‘And do you really dream that the proudest and stateliest of Monarchs—that a King of England—that King Charles the First—who has rushed upon a civil war rather than have his grandeur and supremacy in any manner curbed or disputed; do you possibly imagine, Arabella, he will ever consent to a lawful union between his nephew and the daughter of a country squire, whose genealogy traces back through a couple of centuries to a blacksmith’s anvil, scorn blacksmiths as you may?’ Edward vehemently inquired.

‘Ay, that is what our brother Grimsorwe—for he is our brother in some sort, repudiate him as we may—oft complains of you, Edward!—complained to the Prince himself but the other day; that since you have taken so strange an idolatry for a smith’s daughter of Birmingham, you will never let the clank of the anvil

cease to sound in your own genealogy!' Arabella replied, evidently endeavouring to elude the force of the previous interrogatory. But after a moment she seemed to be aware this would not do, and she added with a smile, 'But who thinks to ask our most puissant King and Lord's consent in any such matter, prithee?'

'Mean you, then, sister, to say that this proper Prince woos you openly and plainly, in so many words, to dishonour?' Edward fiercely rejoined, and his hand quivered as if involuntarily down to the hilt of his sword.

The gesture perhaps rather alarmed Miss Holte. 'Foolish, angry boy!' she said, but soothingly. 'What talk is this of wooing me at all? Your head runs of nothing else, methinks, but love-making and such simple vanities, of late! And yet you have but just thrust it in a soldier's helmet, and should think chiefly awhile, I should say, of how best to keep it there.'

'Did I not find the man at your feet, stuttering in his bad broken horse-gibberish, a declaration of some sort?' Edward demanded.

Arabella coloured again deeply, and evidently paused and hesitated in her reply. But it was too plainly of no use to deny the fact so unmistakably witnessed.

'Well, sir, you did then! Gallantry and homage to ladies have not yet altogether ceased to be of a soldierly and princely usage! What more?'

'He insulted you, then, by using the language only of *gallantry*? In a passion of utterance—an attitude—with a look—that indicated the very frenzy of the emotion, which, in men—Arabella Holte, your brother tells you—is either love or lust!' Edward almost shouted, now.

'You wish my father, doubtless, to overhear your re-

marks at Hagley!’ Arabella exclaimed, greatly alarmed and annoyed at this excitement. ‘Or will it content you merely to let our whole neighbourhood and menial service into the secret? You have startled the rats in the highest bacon-loft of Aston Hall, I am certain, brother! And yet, if you would hear me out— Ridiculous boy! how can I say or know what the Prince’s true meaning and inference from the passion he avowed would have been, since you so rudely and inopportunately stepped in to stop him in mid career?’

‘But had he confessed love, and not spoken of marriage to you, Arabella! What then?’

‘I would have spoken of marriage to him!’

‘But what then, if the condition was not found palatable?’

‘We would have disjoined society for ever, Edward Holte—the Prince Electoral and I—that’s all!’ the young lady replied; adding, with a smile of triumphant pride and self-confidence, that certainly lighted up her beauty into a kind of natural queenliness of power and supremacy, ‘But deem you, simple boy, that I should ever put the decision to the hazard until I have this high-born wooer so enthralled and subdued to my will, that *no* condition shall seem to him hard or impossible that wins the woman of his love to it?’

Edward could not but admit to himself a kind of irresistibility in beauty and arts of feminine cajolery so perfect as those possessed by this splendid pupil of courts, and born inheritrix of the highest fascinations of female loveliness. But though for a moment he rested from one venomous fang of suspicion, another twined a softer but still deadly fold on his breast.

‘If it be even so, my poor beauteous sister,’ he re-

sumed, in sorrowful tones, 'and granting you the most triumphant success to be hoped in the affair with this royal personage; still, do you no wrong to your own heart by straining at the achievement? Do you love the Man, or the Prince only? Nay, have you not loved—do you not still love—another? I return to the question, to which you have not yet given me any construable reply.'

Once more Arabella's deep pallor of profound but as strongly suppressed emotion revisited her cheek. She contrived, however, to rally in a very brief interval.

'Any construable reply!' she exclaimed,—'any construable reply! Have not my actions long ago, as well as now, replied sufficiently for me? On the discovery of the mad mechanic's presumption, whose cause you seem to advocate, did I not hasten at once with my complaints to my father, whose wrath, have we not all of us all our lives seen, knows scarcely any other limit than his power to follow out its dictates? Disgraceful maltreatment was the very least I had reason to believe my father would inflict on such a suitor. And did I hesitate?'

Edward was staggered in his secret opinions perhaps—certainly in his secret hopes and wishes, by this question. Nay, he was all but convinced of the fallacy of poor Tubal's clinging credulities as to the real sentiments of the proud and ambitious daughter of Sir Thomas Holte.

'It was a great cruelty then, surely, in you, Arabella, so to recompense the love and devotion of any man—of any human heart. Love and devotion are not such common merchandise that people can afford to throw them amid the garbage of the market-place, and trample them like cabbage-stalks and rotten gooseberries.'

‘Love and devotion,’ repeated Arabella scornfully. ‘How know we what excited all this same devotion and love in the blacksmith’s breast? Love and devotion to Arabella Holte, or to the wealthy and exalted co-heiress of Aston? For such my father thinks almost to make me if I content him by this glorious marriage; though I ask it not of him, but hope some day, rather, my husband will redeem his princely heritage with his own right hand.’

‘What, and disgraced with his only powerful patron and likely supporter, the King, for the very reason that shall most content your own family!’ said Edward; and to confess the truth, the notion, besides being so improbable in that respect, was not by any means pleasing to him. He was a husband now; and certainly, if children were granted him, he could not look forward with much satisfaction to the prospect of their being in part deprived of their inheritance, in a manner, to purchase a husband for his sister, too great and high in all probability to acknowledge the relationship.

Hitherto Arabella had only been assured of the moderate portion usually bestowed at that time even in wealthy English families on the female members, and this was probably one reason why, with her views of personal exaltation, she had felt obliged to cultivate arts of coquetry and cajolery so perfect as those she possessed.

Her brother’s remark, however, seemed to produce a different effect from what he intended.

‘I begin to be of Grimsorwe’s opinion,’ she observed, disdainfully smiling, ‘that apprehension of my father’s liberality in such a case would set you much against the match; though he chiefly spoke it laughingly as of him-

self; standing, as his fortunes do, in such mere dependence upon my father's will.'

'Well,' Edward replied, mournfully, 'I can no more against this ambitious insanity. Heaven only grant that your denial of a preference for another is truly founded! For the curse of God is upon all creatures that disobey the commandments He has more plainly chiselled on the human heart than those of old on the stone of Horeb. If you err so completely against all the best impulses of natural womanhood, as to seek to marry a man because he is a Prince, instead of the one you truly love, of lowlier destinies, evil must come of it, Arabella Holte. If not the unpardoned sin against the Holy Ghost, surely it stands next to it among sins against the light!'

Arabella certainly looked shaken and perturbed in her own consciousness at this denunciation. It was with an effort that she replied, though with a species of lured gaiety of defiance and denial—

'I take my own sins upon my head; I ask no woman else—nor man either—to bear for me the penalties of my misdeeds. Look! I say, let the angels make record of my words, and keep them against me for the day of account and balancing! Need you more, dear Edward, brother mine? Or has your abode among the Birmingham fanatics soured you into their belief, that all must be atheists and contemners of God's laws who do not make earth itself a beforehand place of outerdarkness and gnashing of teeth? Why, you are much worse of bodement and mischance to befall than the old Witch of Aston herself,' she concluded, almost playfully, observing that Edward could not refrain from a smile at the former allusion, which brought very unlike associations in full tide back upon his heart. 'You know Maud Grimsorwe is said

never to have wished well or kindly to our house. Yet, when she chanced upon the Prince and myself returning together on our wearied steeds from the hawking the day you left, she smiled all over her withered face and wrinkled eyes, and held up her skinny claws enclasped, and blessed us for the noblest youthful pair those weary eyes of hers had lighted on for thirty years.'

'For thirty years!—since her daughter's doom! Such blessings are curses. Long may I and mine remain unblest by the detestable hag!' Edward ejaculated; and indeed the circumstance seemed, strangely enough, to revive his apprehensions. Or else he wished to do what might yet be possible to satisfy Tubal of his own goodwill in the affair. 'But well, my dearest sister,' he resumed, 'I am grieved for it, but no longer disbelieve but that your heart may go the way our father's ambition marshals you. The Prince may seek you in all honour and honesty, as you resolve he shall. But yet ease a brother, who has always loved you better than any proud, self-absorbed Prince in the world ever can, of his worst fears. Come and be awhile your brother's companion and bright embellishment of home at Sutton Manor House, and all may yet be well. If the Prince loves you, he will assuredly follow you there, and I shall have the right to ask him plainly his objects and intentions in the fact.'

'Nay, nay, brother Edward! you are yourself too fire-quick and choleric to use a proper temperance in the matter. So far his Highness and you have never met but to dissent and spar. I shall remain at Aston, under a father's care, who falls in so agreeably in all things with the Prince's humours and tastes, that to cross them for once can scarcely chafe him much. Moreover,' she

concluded, with a smile that meant a good deal more than the words, 'there are not wanting those who inform me Sutton Manor House is decked for at all events a *fairer*, and, I somewhat misdoubt me, welcomer visitant, than ever the dearest sister was, or can, or ought to be.'

Edward was excessively annoyed at this intimation, which satisfied him his suspicions of the decorations at Sutton were well founded; and was probably on the point of giving expression to the feeling, when a tap was audible at the door, and with infinitely more of polite precaution in the way of announcement than Edward Holte had observed, Richard Grimsorwe made his *entrée*, book in hand, as if he had suddenly bethought himself that his presence was needful where he had now for so considerable an interval withdrawn it.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE DAY MOON.

GRIMSORWE was visibly surprised, and even startled, on perceiving Edward.

‘Now, is it you, brother Edward?’ he yet said, with affected carelessness. ‘His Highness was here just now and wanted to look in this book of the Holte pedigree, which my father has lately had carried back to I know not what kings and grandees in the old chronicle-books. His Highness takes a vast interest in pedigree matters, and Sir Thomas is absent, as most likely you know. So we were glad of anything to amuse the Prince’s leisure from horseback to-day. Of the two, methinks I would rather undertake the diversion of his steed; but my sister is a capital hostess, and supplies all defects.’

‘I have always forbidden you, Master Grimsorwe, to speak to me as your sister,’ said Arabella, with great coldness and hauteur. She, as well as her brother Edward, whom she greatly loved and admired in general, had always shared a mingled feeling of contempt and dislike towards the bastard intruder, which every circumstance had latterly tended to increase. His mean and creeping artifices in winning favour with Sir Thomas Holte were necessarily excitements to the former feeling with so lofty-spirited a woman, while the now frequent

developments of his dangerous and vicious character as naturally promoted the latter.

“ I will not henceforth presume against your wishes in this respect, either in word or deed, Miss Holte,” Grimsorwe replied, seemingly in no wise concerned at the snub. ‘ But where has the Prince’s Highness betaken him without seeing this pretty book? The old monks never illuminated a legend-book of their mass with brighter enamelling than all these shields and cross-quarterings of the worshipful arms of the Holtes. Only, I would have my father put King Arthur into the pedigree-root, to match the Emperor Charlemagne’s in his Highness’s. Or Charles Martel’s should it be, as an imperial set-off against our own old Hammerer?’

‘ My father will believe how ridiculous he makes himself by his pretensions, when I tell him how even you make him his mock behind the back, who cringe so lowly to his face, Master Grimsorwe,’ said Edward, who now scarcely took any pains to disguise his indignation against his insidious enemy. ‘ Come, sister, let us walk in the park, until my father and mother return.’

‘ But we have a good dinner found and ready to be served his Highness even now. I am a first-rate purveyor and major of the kitchen when the humour takes me. Will Miss Holte please to give her orders for the service?’ Grimsorwe replied; ‘ or must we wait until the master of the house returns, and gives orders to slay the fatted calf in addition to our roasted peacocks and swans?’

Arabella was obliged to state that the Prince had gone unexpectedly from the house, and to give directions that the dinner should be put off as long as possible, or until his return. Yet, considering the manner in which

he had left the Hall on his excursion, very reasonable doubts might be entertained if the Prince had not taken the huff altogether, and would not grace the meal at all with his presence.

In reality, the brother and sister had taken a long promenade in the grounds and park of Aston Hall—had reviewed and re-discussed at length the recent subject. Arabella had listened with impatience to a yet fuller exposition of all the brave and noble things Tubal Bromycham had of late performed, with a view to retrieve her favour; and yet the offended great personage had not returned.

In fact, the dinner provided was quite spoilt, in spite of Adam Blackjack's diligent cares, who was apprehensive that whoever deserved the blame he should get it, and was mostly in his senses in the exercise of his profession. And Sir Thomas and Lady Holte themselves arrived home from their solemn return visit to Hagley House without the Prince having deigned to re-appear.

It would be in vain to pretend that Edward himself was not rendered considerably uneasy by the circumstance, though, in spite of his sister's entreaties, he determined to await explanations with his father.

And he speedily found that such would be required of him, and by no means in the pleasantest and most conciliatory style. Partly due, no doubt, to the fact that Richard Grimsorwe had met Sir Thomas at the gates, and given his own impressions of what had occurred in the first place.

Sir Thomas Holte presented himself suddenly in the garden, where Edward and his sister were walking, as in a place remote from espial, and still exchanging their opposed ideas on the recent subject of discussion, with

the vehemently excited look he usually wore, even on much less occasions of irritation.

‘So, Master Holte!’ he exclaimed, with no other form of parental salute, ‘you have taken upon yourself, it seems, a good deal more than even the mastery of my house, and have behaved yourself with such disrespect to my royal guest, that he has left word with one of his officers he shall not enter Aston Hall again as long as he is not guaranteed against your rude intrusions and un-called-for reflections on his actions and orders in his Majesty’s service in these parts.’

‘Go in, Arabella, and offer my duty to my mother, while I speak with my father on this matter,’ said Edward, unwilling to enter upon the explanations which he yet considered needful, and was firmly determined not to be driven from by his father’s violent and overbearing demeanor.

Miss Holte, though unwillingly, complied, feeling how much more unpleasant and compromising her presence must render the scene certain to issue.

‘Is it not enough that you have Sutton Manor House entirely at your own disposal, to tenant it as you may think proper, but you must come to lord it also here at Aston Hall? Do you fancy I am dead and in my grave, and no one but your weak, foolish mother to counteract and check your domineering assumptions?’ Sir Thomas resumed, anxious to overbear his son’s opposition without entering into explanations on its motives.

But Edward was resolved it should not be so. He therefore answered in a respectful but unintimidated manner, ‘You are deceived, sir, if you fancy I have taken upon my hands any unbecoming sway in your house. But your daughter’s honour, sir, is also her

brother's; and if the Prince has gone off in dudgeon because I looked disapproval of his offering clandestine love, or at least the outward signs of it, in your absence, and that of all others who should and would protect a young maiden from such unlicensed importunity, I cannot even say that I am sorry for it.'

He then described to Sir Thomas Holte, as briefly and as little disparagingly for his sister as possible, the scene he had interrupted.

To his amazement and extreme vexation, however, far from seeming amazed or brought to a sense of the imprudence he had fostered, Sir Thomas Holte looked highly pleased and gratified by what he heard.

'Odd's bodikins, man!' he exclaimed, 'what manner of a pragmatistical knave are you turned, to find fault with a little love-making between a young soldier and the most beautiful girl in England, in an August month? I begin no longer to believe in the stories about your own sweet doings in Birmingham, though you have turned half Roundhead for the sake of a pair of bright eyes in a giglot's head. Prithee, is it not what we all expect and look for hourly, to hear that his Highness has declared him the enamoured swain which, in all men's observation as well as your wondrous wisdom's, he has become?'

'If so much has been observed, sir, it is full time you took upon you a father's duty, and inquired with what views all this love-making proceeds,' said Edward, with warmth.

'So! you will teach me my duty as a father, will you, Master Holte, after the long apprenticeship I have served to the mystery?' returned Sir Thomas fiercely, though mockingly. 'Or rather, as Richard said but this morn-

ing, you would have me rush in like a madman and prevent the bees settling down just as they are humming down, and play your senseless game to despite his Highness without any the like excuse?’

‘Well, sir, but hear me. Nay, sir, I will be heard, if I am forced to call out my words as I would to a man both deaf and blind making for the edge of a precipice!’ the son now resolutely rejoined. ‘I warn you most solemnly of the danger of all you do in this matter; and that in my own mind and heart I do not for one moment believe this arrogant foreign princeling has so much as formed the notion of the possibility of the alliance you look upon as assured.’

‘Good heavens! if this man should remain here, to put such a notion in the head of my royal guest, who, no doubt, will have enough misgiving and counter-suggestion to overcome of his own fancy and the prompting of those around him,’ exclaimed the baronet. Decidedly, Sir Thomas had not studied logic to great advantage in his college days. ‘Come,’ he continued, with rising exasperation, ‘if I am in reality master of Aston Hall, thus I prove it, by forbidding you to return to it under pretence, Master Holte, until I summon you either to your own or your sister’s still more exalted bridalty. And I have been to Hagley to-day and had speech on the business with my Lady Keeper Lyttelton, and we have all but settled the wedding shall take place before the further opening of the campaign, if it be delayed much after my Lord’s arrival, who is also daily expected at home.’

Edward was dismayed at once into silence and withdrawal at this intimation.

‘Well, sir,’ he said, ‘I shall not then infringe further

on your hospitality to-day, or stand in the way of your illustrious guest's return. I take my leave, therefore, with only this word,—unless the Prince declares at once to you that his intents are honourable, it behoves you to place in my hands the right and duty to rebuke the pretensions he has advanced, which will then be proven insults, and you will always find me ready and willing to the task.'

Sir Thomas folded his arms contemptuously, and looked up at the faint outline of the harvest moon, which appeared in the still glorious sky.

'You talk, son Edward,' he said, with a most thoroughly self-satisfied look, 'and so does yonder moon shine; but neither of you much to the purpose.'

'Heaven forefend the darkness should come which will show my meaning forth, like yonder pale orb's, with a brighter glare!' said Edward, with a deep sigh, for his heart strangely misgave him, as he turned to take the departure so unparentally enforced upon him; accepting the command however literally, quite well aware that nothing was to be hoped from his mother's interposition, and that his abrupt leaving would be more likely to fix her attention on the causes than the most earnest entreaties he could address to her.

CHAPTER LXX.

HOW TO KNOW WHAT HUSBAND YOU SHALL HAVE.

A FEW days after the ill-received visit of the heir of Aston Hall to that stately parental home, Maud Grim-sorwe sat in her miserable cottage on the Fish Stews Pool—alone.

At least, as much alone as the aged woman's haunted imagination ever suffered her to be. For in truth it might be said of this unfortunate old creature, as was said, in a far different sense, of the ancient philosopher, she was never less alone than when alone.

Then came back—at times, it is possible, with an hallucination of actual vision—the few but tragical figures of the past, which had stamped their images, by intensity of grief and horror, indelibly in her otherwise faded mind—images that revived amidst its general feebleness and confusion (excepting when electrified into strong vitality by the energy of her powerful passions), through every half-effaced shaping of subsequent change, like ciphers scratched into a slate, do what you may with sponge and new figuring to obliterate them.

The few who ever approached her darksome and secluded dwelling would at such times hear the old woman engaged, as it seemed, in a dialogue with several visitors. And if they ventured to peep in, would perceive old

Maud muttering and gibbering, and using many gestures to her unseen company; mostly seated on the edge of her miserable bed of crazy timber-work, black blankets, and patched quilt, or rocking herself backward and forward on a stool before a thriftily-fed wood-fire in her windy chimney, which was only formed by an opening in the low, moss-grown roof.

The latter was the position she occupied on the occasion we allude to—seated on an old, roughly-made milking, stool gazing fixedly into the dying glow on her hearth.

‘It is not very like her face, neither,’ she was also muttering; ‘and, whatever Adam Grimsorwe may say, I will never believe my child is in hell-fire now, for her offence in perishing by her own act and deed. How, was she not driven to it? No, no, no! we are her murderers. Sir Thomas Holte, I, her mother, and Adam Blackjack, the master cook; we three are my poor child’s murderers.’

‘How strange, too, that after treating her the way I did—after overwhelming her with scorn, and hatred, and reproaches, after driving her and her infant shame with yells of reproach and curses from my doors, how strange that I should hear that splash—that screech—and yet not take to my understanding what had really occurred. Or was it—no, it could not be; it shall not be! I was not so steeled with my own supposed wrongs and injuries, and the disgrace the poor girl thus had brought upon me and my father’s name, that knowing she was gurgling in the deep water for her life, I yet would not stretch forth my hand to save her—till too late!’

‘But could I have saved her?’ the unhappy creature went on musing. ‘Marry, I think not; although she

gave that cry, she was bent on dying! And you cannot prevent people from dying that are bent upon it; you cannot, I say! Adam Blackjack only pretends I could have saved her, because the undying worm is at his own heart, too, in that, and he would ease some blame off himself on me. It was he drove her mad by his pretensions to become her husband; by his revealing that Sir Thomas desired it. Cowardly slave! It is his only comfort to feign now that after he had driven her frantic, her mother could have saved her merely by stretching out her hand, and—and would not!

‘And they talk of the day of judgment as to be millions of ages hence, perchance, do they? No, no; judgment day is now—here! Judgment day is over for me now for nigh these thirty years. And hell! Is it not hell enough to remember that hour? And my poor child’s white drenched face as they drew her from the pool, and her last cry, “Mother, my child! my child!” They say she plunged with it in her arms; but how could that be, since I know very well she called out those very dying words, and he, Richard Grimsorwe, was found safe and sound among the osiers on the bank? And for Adam to torment me on, by saying that her ghost is only troubled because her child was not allowed to be drowned with her, as she intended, but is left to do so much mischief and wickedness on the earth. For had he less cause for bitterness of heart, my grandson truly is a devilish man in his revenges and hates. Hillo, talk of the devil, and doth he really sometimes appear? Who’s there? Grandson, is it you?’

At this moment Maud Grimsorwe’s latch was clicked up, but, as she had secured the low door with a broad wooden bolt, the visitor could not enter.

Some interval of no reply ensued, and the old woman's 'extravagant and erring spirit' thus pursued its cogitations—

'Or is it the Old One himself, then? The Old One whom, they say, I serve, and who, for that, should do me favours in return. But what hath he ever done that I have begged of him? Some of the children, it is true, perished; but two goodly heirs survive to Thomas Holte, flourishing like the young pine and lady-birch of the woods. Hath he not a noble, youthful son, who obeys his will in all respects, who is to be married to a noble and wealthy wife? A daughter, whose beauty has attracted the admiration of a Prince, and whom, they say, she is to marry? Myself, I blessed them when I met them in the Waste, they looked so stately and proud a pair; and yet a curse was in my heart.

'So happy and fortunate is the man to whom I owe the misery of so many years. What folly, then, to talk—as the strange old scholar who was father of Esther Feldon, and parish clerk of Sutton so many years, often would—of familiars and demons that might, by proper devil's prayers and incantations, be brought to do our will on others! Yet he was a wise man, and taught me nigh all I know of my witchcraft, forsooth, in herbs and unguents. What, the bolt moves again. Who's there without? What want ye? I am making bedward, and it is time an old woman should when the owls begin their hooting.'

'Open the door, good Dame Grimsorwe; I am a Birmingham lass, come of an errand it shall do you no harm to hear, but put a piece of fine large white money in the palm of your hand,' replied a voice from the exterior, which sounded indeed like that of a female, but

scarcely of the rank indicated by the expression and the lonely style of the visitation.

‘What voice is that?’ said the old woman to herself, considerably startled. ‘But, no; it is not at all like Maud’s; hers was always sweet, and sad, and low-toned as the warble of a water in the woods. What says it about money? Can some bold slut of the town have heard of what I am saving up, with so much toil and pains, to bury me, that in the very last I may owe no one on earth a kindness, and come to rob me? Go hence, I tell you; be you who you may be, Maud Grim-sorwe is too weary to listen to women’s long plaints to-night.’

‘I have come too tiresome a trudge, and my business is too pressed, to go back without speech with you, old dame,’ the voice replied, in impatient and even imperious accents. ‘I will take your cat away from you if you will not let me in; and hark, do you not hear him mewling at the door?’

The witch’s skeleton favourite in reality gave what probably sounded in her ears a very pathetic and moving appeal, in the form of a fearful waul, at this moment.

‘Hussy, to dare to harm my cat! I’ll let you know!’ the old woman exclaimed, and, forgetful of her personal apprehensions, she arose and hobbled in high exasperation to the door.

Opening in a mingled quiver of anxiety and rage, Dame Grim-sorwe found herself facing a female figure, in a long grey cloak and hood drawn nearly over her features, such as were worn in reality by women of inferior rank both in town and country, at the time, as a going-out dress. What was remarkable only was that

besides this concealment, the visitant wore a vizard—a species of black canvas mask, used by females of much higher pretensions than those assumed to preserve their complexions on journeys, or conceal their features in places of public assemblage where they did not choose to be known. Yet Maud Grimsworpe was not a little struck by the distinguished appearance of her visitor in other respects, and the tone of command and superiority that seemed natural to her.

‘Phœbe Dewsnap! You are not Phœbe Dewsnap, either!’ the old woman exclaimed, strangely puzzled by what she saw.

‘No, indeed. I am of Birmingham, I tell you. But, prithee, let an honest Christian woman in as well as your cat. See, good dame! I have not come to challenge a proof of your skill unprovided with a sufficient fee; and there are more where this comes from,’ the visitor rejoined, displaying a silver coin of about the size and value of a crown-piece, called a noble.

Avarice was not one of the infirmities of age from which the Witch of Aston was exempt. The sight of the money proved a most potent smoothener of obstacles.

‘Come in, my young madam, then,’ she said, ‘for so I am sure you are by your voice. But there are so many foolish wenches come to me from the town, who think I can and will cure them of all their troubles and ailments for nothing. Whereas I am a poor old woman myself, and want to save up all I can get to buy me a shroud and a coffin.’

‘You seem not very rich indeed, good dame; and I marvel the more at that, since they report you, far and near, so very skilful and knowing in things, that some people report you have dealings with the other world;—

say you are a witch, in short,' replied the visitor, but not by any means as if she meant to use the term reproachfully.

Maud Grimsorwe, however, seemed not greatly to relish it.

'They say so, who would fain make a bonfire of a poor old woman's dry bones, and they lie. I know the virtues of some common herbs and simples, which I learned in a lawful Christian way of an old mediciner that once abode in these parts, and had all Sutton Chase for his apothecary's shop,' she replied, snappishly enough.

'Hush, hush, Dame Grimsorwe; do not think to hide the truth from me. I have heard of you almost all my life as a woman who had real power and dealings with supernatural agencies; I ask not of what sort—but, hark, your cat mews as if he, too, liked not your denial.'

The stranger said this in a rather playful manner, but yet with evident earnestness and belief at bottom; and Maud, whose eye was strongly attracted by the coin, perhaps thought it unadvisable to discredit her own capabilities of deserving recompense any further. She therefore contented herself with a doubtful mutter, concluding with a request to the 'Birmingham lass' to enter, take a seat at the fire, and state her wishes, as briefly as might be.

The stranger seemed to comply very willingly, and meanwhile, the cat continuing to mew and circulate rapidly round the old woman's feet, her attention was attracted to it.

Suddenly she uttered a doleful cry, 'Smilikin, Smilikin, Smilikin! what has done this to my bonny Smilikin?' she exclaimed, lifting the frightful animal in her

arms. 'Some dog has bitten it, has torn its poor skin with its beastly fangs. My curse go with it, and its owners too, over the edge of the Beacon Barr!'

'Nay, do not say so; the creature cannot be much hurt; it ran before me nearly all the way,' said the stranger, evidently a good deal alarmed and perturbed by this manifestation.

'Its shoulder-blade is nigh bitten out by the sharp, narrow, cruel bite of a greyhound. There is but one runs at large hereabouts, and it belongs to the proud minx of Aston Hall,' the old woman now quite yelled.

'And do you curse her, old woman? You blessed her not many days ago,' the stranger-damsel replied, with angry vivacity.

'How know you that, *young* woman?' the Witch now fiercely rejoined, her grey eyes flashing fire on the speaker, and instinct with vengefully suspicious scrutiny.

'I am a great acquaintance of the young lady of Aston's maiden, Phœbe Dewsnap, and she told me so, good dame,' the visitor now rather sharply replied. 'But, boasting the skill you do, why not apply your sanative ointments to the mangled vermin's wound? And what better can either you or it expect, if it goes prowling like a wild ounce or tiger in the woods?'

'And would you have it stay at home with me always here, and famish? What food have I to give it, that have scarcely withal to satisfy my own toothless munchings? Oh, Smilikin, Smilikin, Smilikin! gnawed like a rat by the over-fed, pampered lady's hound, merely in sport and cruelty. When will the Holtes cease to do wrong on me and mine?'

'Even now, old woman, if you study to deserve it, and will swear secrecy to me on my business,' the

stranger-visitant abruptly replied. 'I do confess that my hound—for I am Arabella Holte—which I could not rate from accompanying me, startled and chased your cat. But I saved it from his jaws, and severely reprimanded Prince home; a hound I like of as well as you can of your animal, certainly, for it is the gift of a King's son and nephew to me. But, why such a pother about the matter, and a working on of old grudges, when I tell you I have come to you with the best of feelings and purposes, to inquire out my fortune of you, and repay to the fullest the exercise of your skill?' -

'You! You are Mistress Arabella Holte! Come to ask your fortune of—of Maud Grimsworth, of a poor, wretched old woman like me?' exclaimed the Witch of Aston; and truly, in her astonishment, relinquishing even the examining and piecing up of her grimalkin's torn side.

'Yes, Dame Maud, and methinks it is time that I should know it now,' replied Arabella Holte, resuming her naturally haughty and commanding tones, though with an effort to seem lively and jesting. 'But no doubt you have heard of me, as I have of you, and are aware that I have refused numerous not unsuitable offers of marriage, as people deem them, that have been made to me. Indeed, I cannot well fix my mind on any, and would find out what fate inevitably has in store for me, to put my tossed and vacillating mind to some rest. Moreover, I make some kind folks, who perchance deserve a better fate (this she said with a sigh), very unhappy by my undecidedness, and would end the trouble and contention in my own soul and theirs, by knowing what is written down in fate for me. And now, Phoebe Dewsnap, my handmaiden, tells me you predicted to

her most truly that she should be wooed and won in wedded love by Robin Falconer.'

'What else was to be expected between a peasant and a waiting-maid, Mistress Holte?' the Witch replied, after an interval of astonished silence; 'and I saw them at their love-making as the blithe falconer made for home over these plantations, or when your mother's maidens came down to a linen-wash in the pool. But for your father's daughter to seek to know herself in such a matter, of my daughter's mother, passes belief.'

'Not at all, Dame Grimsorwe; why should I inherit those senseless old grievances? And I am well assured of your skill, for even my father himself espied you but very lately engaged in some magical divination, at a cross-road, with a dozen other of your kind, that all dispersed in lightning and thunder when he spake. Nay, but for your grandson's entreaties, and Adam Blackjack's fearful refusing to stand to his witnessing, he would have given out his warrant that very night for your apprehension as a witch.'

'So my grandson told me. And for these kindnesses and courtesies, to say nothing on old scores—but what do you ask of me, Mistress Holte? I am old, young lady, very old, and scarcely took note what you have said.'

Miss Holte now repeated, in still clearer and more peremptory declaration, that she desired the Witch of Aston to show by some certain charm or spell what husband she was to wed.

Maud Grimsorwe was probably herself for some moments amazed at the credulity and craving desire to pry into the secrets of futurity that must have dictated this research. But the pride and sense of raised importance

natural to a poor, old, half-witted, grief-worn creature of the kind, took possession of her mind upon it, and dictated the reply she made.

‘I can show you who your future husband is to be, Mistress Holte, if husband your pride and vanity ever suffer you to take among mortal men. Who your husband ought to be I leave to your own heart.’

‘What mean you?’ exclaimed Miss Holte, with a sudden pettishness that did not conceal the fact that she was struck with a kind of dismay on the words.

‘I have eyes for blacksmiths as well as for game-keepers, high-born ladies as well as their handmaidens, and I have seen what I have seen,’ returned the Witch, as peevishly. ‘Nay, I have my thoughts that it was because you spied my withered head over the yew tree in Aston churchyard that day when Tubal Bromycham implored of you to give him some definite answer to an oft-urged suit before, that you hastened with your own version of the tale to Sir Thomas Holte. As if I would have betrayed a love-making so much to my mind and so little to his!’

‘You are not far wrong, perchance, in your conjecture, Maud; it was a madness, a frenzy, from which fear of my father’s displeasure could alone so wonderfully have saved me. But it is long over all, now,’ Miss Holte replied, and in tones of deeper emotion than she seemed willing to admit. ‘How is it, then, that you will enable me to ascertain my real destiny in a husband, if, as you say, I ever am to wed?’

It is probable Maud herself only projected a humiliation and blow to the pride and hopes of the haughty beauty, her enemy’s daughter. But she answered boldly, ‘Cross my hand with silver thrice, lend me your

best laced smock, and the first night the moon is at the full come hither to me, and I will have everything prepared for the experiment; which consists in this, that the fair garment is hung before a fire, magically prepared, over a shroud (which I have of mine own, convenient, for they would not let my girl wear the shroud I wrought her), and thereupon she that would know her fortune must watch till midnight. And when it strikes—be he far or near, east or west, at bed or banquet, or on battle-field—he that is destined for her husband must leave wherever else he is, and stalk, as it were in a dream, into the chamber, and turn the smock over the shroud, to show that he is hers for life and death, as married folks should be.’

Miss Holte listened with a singularly earnest anxiety, and yet belief, in this strange statement, which only the extreme superstition of the times and her own overwrought thirst for information on the point, influenced by recent occurrences, could at all have rendered reasonable. This was nevertheless one of the most established and favourite forms of marriage divination, in practice for many previous ages among the northern nations, especially in Scotland; and it still lingers, it is said, in divers outlying provinces of Germany and the Scandinavian peninsula.

‘I will begin, then, at once, with the silver-crossing of the palm,’ she said, eagerly taking out purse, and chinking coin after coin, to the number indicated, into the skinny, outstretched hand of the beldam. ‘It will not be so easy, indeed, for me to be out of the Hall so late at night; but Phœbe and I, and perchance Robin Falconer, who is a good, faithful fellow, and as brave as a lion, will contrive it among us. And now, good

even, good old dame, for it is growing very dark as we speak, and I may be missed. When will be the first full moon at midnight for our spell?’

‘I must draw the lines, and I will send you word, fair mistress! But did I bless you, say you then, the other day? I bless you again now,’ the Witch exclaimed, delightedly clutching the money. ‘What beautiful, beautiful broad pieces they are! But I must attend to poor Tomikin now; hear how he mews again!’

‘No doubt the imp is in pain with his rent skin,’ said Miss Holte, while the cat indeed renewed its excited wailings and movement around its mistress.

Unhappily, no one noticed the whining and snuffling of a dog at the door at the same moment, amid the cries and restlessness of the Witch’s favourite. And Miss Holte, bestowing a renewed condescending and friendly farewell on Maud Grimsorwe, stepped heedlessly to the door of the cottage, opened it, and before the young lady could even discern how necessary her interposition was, Prince had darted in, and reseized his escaped victim, whose lamed limb and the narrowness of the chamber prevented it from flight. And while the old woman rushed shrieking to the fireplace for a broom-handle which served her for a poker, to be used in defence of her favourite, a catastrophe took place, and Smilikin, or Tomikin—he had a variety of witch pet-names—lay with his head bitten almost from the neck on the floor.

Most extraordinary it was to witness the really delirious rage and despair of the poor old wretch at this tragical ending of her sole companion and friend. Maud flew at the greyhound with such fury that, age-worn and feeble as she had seemed the moment before, it did not

appear impossible but that she might take ample vengeance in the way of laming and braining it. But the dog flew, howling with pain and terror, from the cottage, and its mistress, little less dismayed, followed it out, uttering apologies entirely unheeded by the excited and raving beldam.

Probably Arabella would have returned to endeavour to soothe the injured mistress of the unfortunate Smilikin; but when she reached the door, she almost stumbled upon the entering figure of Richard Grimsorwe, who said smilingly, as he passed, as if he really mistook the personage, 'What, pretty Phœbe Dewsnap here so after dark!'

CHAPTER LXXI.

CONSPIRACY.

‘I THINK the moon will be at the full to-night, by the almanack, Cornet Titus,’ said Richard Grimsorwe to that officer, whom he found stalking sulkily up and down the terrace between the garden and the falconer’s lodge, with his arm still in a sling.

It was about a week after the visit of Miss Holte to the cottage of his grandmother.

‘Why do you make this remark to me, sir? Do you suppose that my intellects follow the ebb and flow of the moon, like some milkmaid’s crazy for love?’ Cornet Titus replied, with his characteristic sharpness and acrimony. ‘Or do you presume upon making me your jest, on account of my being still disabled with the wound so hardly inflicted upon me by my royal captain for a drunken jest?’

‘Not I, in good faith; I wear the garment of a man of peace, and not of war, and do not feel myself in the least encouraged to your provocation by the success of so perfect a master of his weapons as his Highness the Prince in your demolition. You would still, I think, prove too many for a poor lawyer with only your left arm,’ replied Grimsorwe, jocosely. ‘I made the remark with quite another intent, I do assure you, Cornet Titus, and

not merely, either, as a puzzle to pass the time while his Highness dines ; for it seems that neither you nor I are held good enough company at meals for such great personages as sit down daily now in Aston Hall.'

'Your birth disqualifies you for the placing of a gentleman, Master Grimsorwe, I am sorry to say. There is not a haughtier Prince in the world than his Highness, as regards the pedigree of persons admitted to his society. And you are aware Miss Holte took occasion openly to declare on what reasons she disclaimed your calling her sister before him, while speaking of a grandmother you have, some poor old rubbishing cottager, who might almost thence have been inferred to be hers also, in some sort. As for me, I am too completely out of favour with that haughty girl herself, to expect the Prince to take me easily back into his,' Cornet Titus said.

'Indeed, his Highness seems fairly besotted with Mistress Holte, who is not my sister. But I marvel the less at it, being a lady of beauty so extraordinary, certainly, that nothing matches it but her pride and her ambition,' Grimsorwe replied, with singular virulence of insinuation. 'Or perhaps I ought to add also, the unrelenting character of her resentments ; which I dare promise you, Cornet, will wear out your hopes of promotion in the service of this Prince of yours, if ever she becomes his wife.'

'His wife ! Miss Holte the wife of Prince Rupert ! —of the King's nephew !' exclaimed the Cornet, whose breath seemed almost taken at the bare idea.

'Why, what else deem you is aimed at here, among folks so proud and aspiring as the masters of Aston Hall are known to be?' replied Grimsorwe, affecting himself to look surprised.

‘Why, you are all mad together, then, but to dream such madness! Or if I thought there was any real fear in the matter, I would mount my horse at once, and ride with or without leave, and at any further risk of displeasure, to his Majesty with the intelligence,’ Cornet Titus now ejaculated, and in tones of the greatest indignation and alarm.

‘And so ruin yourself, indeed, irrevocably with the Prince, and perhaps bring about the very catastrophe you would avoid,’ exclaimed Grimsorwe.

‘No, sir, I cannot deem so; it is not possible! You do not know the towering pride and exalted self-opinion of the Prince, if you deem it possible that he should think of marriage with the daughter of a mere English commoner. I know that he aspires to the hand of the King’s daughter, the Princess Mary, when she shall be old enough to be espoused, and his services in this war shall seem to deserve the prize. And Count O’Taafe has told me that his mother, the ex-Queen of Bohemia, has a thousand engines at work to try and patch up a reconciliation between the empire and him, which may probably require of him, on the other hand, to marry the Duke of Bavaria’s daughter and turn Catholic, to secure a restoration of his Palatinate of the Rhine.’

‘All these fine projects may, however, speedily come to nothing, and the fortunes of all who depend upon the Prince’s rising, unless things are looked to in time,’ Grimsorwe replied. ‘Or, if not so, it becomes more than ever my duty to endeavour to save this rash and obstinate girl—sister though she will not let us style her—from a most dangerous entanglement. Moreover, I could be glad, methinks, to relieve his Highness from the exceedingly uncomfortable position in which he will

speedily find himself with so choleric a gentleman as my father, though he very properly refuses to relax his rules respecting persons of my unhappy birth. All this may be done without exciting any reasonable offence, and, by your assistance, Cornet, in a way which shall restore you to more than your forfeited favour, and by a very simple means.'

'Pray you, make me master of the talisman; I will let no grass grow under my heels in bringing about so notable a combination of desirable things,' said Cornet Titus, very eagerly.

'Communicate, then, to his Highness—and it was therefore I alluded just now to the quartering of the moon—that Miss Holte is going to consult a witch to-night as to who is to be her future husband, by a most peculiar process of divination, which I will describe to you anon, in hopes that it may prove his Highness, and so encourage her in her plans to his enthrallment. It is all, of course, a foolish country superstition, but may be used as the means of disabusing *my sister* (if for once again I may call her so) of her high-reaching infatuation. I would have you, therefore, mention the affair to his Highness, and suggest that he should go to the scene of enchantment, as if under some phantom spell of the old silly mumbling hag, who is to perform the incantation, and plainly indicate, by a refusal to execute what they desire of him, that he has no such intentions as folks are growing fast to ascribe to him at Aston Hall.'

'A witch! a spell! an enchantment! Marry, what manner of a good old song is this you are singing me?' exclaimed Cornet Titus, who belonged to a then rare but existent school of illuminati, which rejected the super-

natural altogether as either old wives' tales, or artfully-contrived stuff to deceive and terrify the masses of the people into subjection.

Grimsorwe explained that he had accidentally become acquainted with Miss Holte's arrangement with the old witch-woman of Aston, through the latter being exasperated into betraying the secret by a favourite cat of hers being worried by a dog of the young lady's, which she had taken with her on her visit. Moreover, the pretended sorceress was the doating old cottager, *his* relative, whom his owning of such had been so rudely and unreasonably taken up by Arabella Holte. And having a very proper dread of falling under the condemnation of the laws for anything savouring of actual witchcraft, this ancient kinswoman mostly consulted him upon what she might do to turn an honest penny in that way, without incurring the grievous penalties of witchcraft. But, alarmed at a transaction which might easily be construed to fall under that description of felony, Grimsorwe desired, he stated, to let the whole affair pass into the harmless domain of practical joking, in case any discovery should be made.

But that, he added, was not much to be feared, as the appointed scene was in a very lonely hut, at a long distance from the Hall: the hour midnight. And stipulations might easily be made to prevent Miss Holte being encumbered by any close attendance of servants, or others, to the place of meeting.

These latter statements seemed most particularly to strike Cornet Titus, especially as their significance lay a great deal more in the peculiar accent and glances of the betrayer than his words, which only we are enabled to convey to the reader. Titus's pert and malicious

physiognomy also lighted up with some reflection, if not of the fiendish malignancy, of the evil intuition, mingled with libertine gaiety, of the thought that occurred to him.

Revenge, and the prospect of retrieving the Prince's favour by procuring him a form of extrication from what his own excited passions were probably fast rendering a most dangerous complication—all to be suggested and achieved in the guise of a jest on a young girl's folly of credulity, which yet revealed the earnestness and eager advancement of her hopes, and an old witch beldam's knavery. These were rich materials for the audacious and unscrupulous Cornet's wit and contrivance to bring to the catastrophe contemplated, without remorse or a shadow of relenting on the part of the arch-conspirator Grimsorwe.

Before they parted, Grimsorwe was thoroughly convinced he could not have put the working of his plot against the honour and ambitious hopes of the woman who had refused to be called his sister, in better—that is, in worse—hands than those of this heartless and revengeful libertine youth, the future author of the atrocious incentive to Cromwell's assassination, styled 'Killing no Murder.'

CHAPTER LXXII.

TENDER AND TRUE.

DURING the interval thus spent at Aston Hall, things in Birmingham seemed, in most external aspects, relapsing into their former quiet state.

The disturbance caused by Cromwell's stormy passage appeared to pass away like the agitated movement of a deep water when a stone is cast into it, that speedily sinks to the bottom.

The artisan population of the town, as a general fact, moved only by the impulse of its chiefs, who appeared to be satisfied with the kind of peace patched up between Birmingham and the King. And this feeling continued, although it was known that the main condition of the arrangement made on the part of the town, had not been complied with.

Armourer Firebrace, it is true, made an earnest attempt at the Guildhall to induce his fellow-rulers to repudiate the whole agreement, in consequence. But he was unsuccessful, from various causes; among which must be reckoned the violent and domineering tone he adopted, that in itself strongly indisposed his hearers to acquiesce, and this was no longer backed by any visible force or flow of popular feeling. The really energetic and determined fanatic minority in the town held itself aloof

from all share in what was happening now. And meanwhile, the restoration of trade, and the cheerful blazing of their forges, restored both masters and workpeople to good humour. While if the gathering strength of the Cavaliers at Aston excited remark and alarm, these were rather reasons with most folks to shun a revival of provocation towards an enemy growing so capable of making his resentment felt.

Perhaps, however, the true reasons of this quieting down must be sought in the lack of agencies to sustain the impulse Birmingham had received from without.

Firebrace's authority, unbacked by personal qualities of the fierce activity required, exercised no great influence. Major Monk declined all interference; and though he still remained in the town, and sent up to the Parliament a full account of what had happened, requesting instructions, he had not the power, if even he had the will, to hinder anything that was done. The enthusiast newly-elected pastor of Birmingham was, indeed, engaged in certain mysterious preparations to celebrate his induction to his office, but nothing had as yet happened in consequence. But, above all, the great stirring spirit of the town, Tubal Bromycham, seemed to have sunk into a singular lull of apathy and indifference.

Tubal resided at the Moat House, but in a remarkable condition of isolation and gloom, only forcing himself from his seclusion at intervals to countenance Dorothy Firebrace's evasions from her father's suspicious supervision.

But this also, it began to appear, was becoming irksome and dissatisfactory to Tubal Bromycham. He did not, of course, comprehend the true position of his former betrothed and Edward Holte, all the parties to the trans-

action considering it due to one another, and the preservation of the secret, not to confide it even to him. His impulsive nature was known; and Edward, who had felt obliged to warn him of the little hope there was of removing in his favour the obstacles to his love which existed in the pride and ambition of its object, dared not venture on letting him perceive how completely even a Holte could yield to the influence of the passion.

There might well, therefore, have been much which, in all his absolute and heroic simplicity of brotherly trust in Edward's honour and integrity, troubled Tubal in the kind efforts he yet continued, to make other lovers happier than there seemed any possibility he should ever be himself. It came to his heart sometimes with a vivid pang, that unless Edward Holte possessed all the chivalry and generosity of sentiment he ascribed to him, he was aiding in a terrible deception, fraught with disgrace and ruin to the persons most dear to him, and honoured of man and womankind, saving only one dearer than all, more honoured than all, in the impassioned idolatry of his poet and artist nature.

Yet here, too, in all that concerned his own hopes and affections, Tubal was condemned by the combination of circumstances to the most unhappy condition the faculties of the human mind and heart can be subjected to; when we feel that a fate of intolerable calamity, as regards the most vital and suffering principles of both, is falling upon us, without our having the smallest imaginable power of prevention or cure.

From the very first the arrival of Prince Rupert at Aston Hall, and his abode there, had filled Tubal with the most poignant apprehensions, awakened the most

venomous gnawings of the cruel passion which darts its poison most into its victim's entrails, and too often coils there in a more thickly-rankling nest with every hour's sojourn.

Jealousy is perhaps only a master-passion in natures which are at the same time the most powerfully organized and the most modest and diffident of their own powers. Tubal's glorifying and yet profoundly venerating imagination, which had conferred the most splendid lustre of idealism on the object of his passion, deprived himself of any confidence in his merits and abilities to deserve so transcendent a prize.

It heightened to him all the supremacy of attraction Arabella Holte in reality possessed, to make him certain that the Prince, rude soldier as he was described to be, could not possibly escape the fascination. And then, what was to come of that?

Tubal, who would joyfully have laid the crown of an emperor at the feet of Arabella Holte, never in the least doubted that, however haughty by birth and prejudice, the exiled Palatine could have no hesitation to prostrate himself, with his sword of a soldier of fortune, at the feet of the glorious daughter of Sir Thomas Holte. And that she would accept so high a destiny, in some respects, Tubal's own melancholy experience of her vanity, and aspiring scorn of all beneath her, independently of Edward Holte's sorrowful admissions of the probability, now tormentingly suggested the certainty.

No wonder, then, that the Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham remained most miserable and hopelessly inactive in the midst of his vainly-recovered inheritance.

What is success, even if great and assured? what are power and wealth, and the homage of the world, always

paid to these, when the heart looks into itself, and finds all empty, voiceless, unsatisfied there? Ah! me—

‘What is the costliest banquet
To one sick at heart with death?’

But even the calm of utter hopelessness, of despair, which some will have it must needs be the death of love, was denied to Tubal Bromycham.

When he reflected on the past, he could not force himself to believe that he had been all along mistaken, all along an object of the utter indifference, even aversion, Arabella Holte now certainly exhibited towards him.

The tenderness and compassion which had so often shone through all the brilliant gaiety and coquetry of her glance, the admiration she had evinced for his talents, the brief but intoxicating intervals in which she had seemed to yield to some overmastering sentiment on her own part, however restrained by caution and pride,—every minute recollection of these moments of delight and hope, however scantily spread over a considerable lapse of time, forbad Tubal to take refuge in that death of complete hopelessness, which, after all, is a conscious one, and as little to be sought and desired as the advantage of being *buried alive*.

Even Dame Cooper took into compassion at last this unhappy tenant, as she considered him still, of the Moat House, though she took care not to trouble the bliss of *her* lovers by any dreary allusions to what was happening elsewhere, in their presence.

Perhaps she had a notion that, however curiously he lent himself to be deceived, Tubal Bromycham was not quite satisfied to resign his betrothed, on the suspicions of her affections being engaged to another. So Dorothy

thought it enough to assure her. And the good dame, who had several soft corners in her heart, as became a townswoman of gentle Willie, began at last to make the supposed discarded suitor an object of compassionate attention and looking after.

This, however, did not seem to improve the situation for Tubal, who speedily found Mistress Cooper's kindness irksome, and desired to escape from it. Or else the deadly stillness and silence became too insupportable to him, of the species of suspense to which he was condemned when Edward Holt admitted to him, that in consequence of an angry discussion on the subject of his sister and the Prince, he had been discharged from learning the news at Aston Hall.

He grew, accordingly, to addict himself to long absences from home. And yet he very rarely now appeared in the streets of Birmingham; never at the forges where he had spent so many laborious but happy days of his still young existence.

Neither was he ever reported to have been at Sutton, though Edward Holte frequently invited and pressed him to make a visit there. And to heighten the mystery, these absences were often prolonged deeply into the night; insomuch that Dame Cooper took it at last into her head Tubal Bromycham must have betaken himself for consolation to some remote sweethearting—perhaps in some part of his native collier wilds about Walsall or Wolverhampton.

Very few people, even in an age still so remote from the unromantic materialism of our own, would have conjectured the real objects and localities of Tubal's wanderings. Who would have dreamed that, instigated by the earnest desire that possessed him to behold again, how-

ever distantly, under whatever disastrous accompaniments, the object of his passion, the chief of the Birmingham sedition ventured by night and stealth into the very midst of his armed and exasperated enemies, whose outposts stretched all around Aston Hall.

There was little reason to expect that the species of unratified truce between the people of Birmingham and the King's troopers would have availed to protect Tubal, had he been discovered in these wild wanderings. The impetuous and savage determination of Prince Rupert's style of making war, imported from continental practice, was beginning to be well appreciated in England; and under the circumstances it would be perfectly easy to suppose a spy in Tubal, who ought to be made to suffer the penalties of one.

Nevertheless he defied this formidable danger, on the mere hope of being enabled to catch the most remote glimpse of the slighting and apparently alienated goddess-illusion of his own love and genius, but which to his eyes seemed a reality—a celestial of beauty and superiority; persuading himself perhaps, at the same time, that he only desired to discover some fact upon which his tormented mind might rest, however fatal to its peace.

Tubal's intimate acquaintance with the whole district around Aston certainly stood him in good stead on these occasions, and secured him against the worst part of the dangers to be apprehended.

He knew every line of approach to Aston Hall; what shelter and hiding-places in wood and dell, behind hedge or in ditch; on the summits of lofty trees, or in the sedgy skirts of hidden pools there were around. Former restless love-wanderings had made him familiar with these, and in great measure had obtained him his repu-

tation of a poacher on Sir Thomas's grounds, due mainly to the exploits of others.

From one of those higher observatories alluded to he watched where the lines of sentries were drawn, and avoided them by skilful windings.

The dogs in the villages and outlying farmhouses mostly recognised him as a friend, and seldom barked as he passed near their points of vigilance. The ferocious bull of Aston itself, had they met, bore in recollection a terrible cudgelling it had received at the strong blacksmith's hands, and would probably have shunned an encounter. Yet the reward of all this perilous adventuring was little indeed to any calm and rational consideration.

Tubal had grown familiar with the powerful figure of his rival, his stern rough manners in command, and had espied him once or twice, from the leafy summit of an oak, putting his squadrons through their evolutions in the midst of the Park, with a fair spectatress looking on, whose smiles and wreathing affabilities set every fibre in his hardy and yet sensitive frame palpitating with rage and agony. At nightfall, when the household at Aston Hall retired to rest, he was at liberty to watch one particular window at his leisure, and figure to himself the fair occupant, until the glowing lamp was extinguished, and he was left to the desolation of the silent woods and midnight stars.

But still the fever that preyed on Tubal's heart seemed somewhat allayed and comforted by the restlessness of these movements, and the occasional glimpses of better hopes, which would at times—he knew not why—seem to visit him on some air that blew from Aston Hall.

On a particular occasion, we are now to mention, this

vague but over-mastering spirit of wandering research came with unusual force upon Tubal Bromycham, in his home at the Moat House, in Birmingham.

There he occupied a chamber which resembled that of Don Quixote as much as anything else, since it was full of old books and pieces of armour, with the exception that the latter were very modern (then) and bright.

Here Tubal laboured, when he could bring himself to attend to anything, at what he considered the proper accomplishments of a gentleman of his lineage. He strove hard to master the contents of divers antique tomes he found in the worm-eaten library of the place, and practised the tricks and feints of broadsword exercise which Cromwell, who hardly knew them himself at the time, had taken considerable pains to instruct him in.

It is not said that the moon has much influence over the minds or physical powers of the male sex, though astrologers are pleased to ascribe the greatest to that planet over the moods and inclinations of women. Men have placed themselves, in their calculations of the kind, under the nobler and steadier solar sway. Nevertheless, it was the full moon this night when Tubal Bromycham was visited by a not unusual longing with him certainly, to quit the town and wander in the open lands round Aston Hall, undeterred by the fact that the rounded effulgence was all the likelier to betray his daring to eyes he could least desire to discern it.

It may be indeed, the case being so, more irresistibly worked on the desperation of the feelings that mostly urged him forth on these excursions. There was something tempting to the fate-defying mood of a hopeless lover in the very certainty of added danger and possibili-

ties of an ending for life and misery together. Something perhaps, even of a strange joy, such as a subtle but strong denizen of the wilds might feel at braving the dangers of a near approach to the habitations of man, in quest of forbidden luxuries of prey.

Or could it have been that some divine instinct of the heart summoned Tubal Bromycham forth into Aston plantations that full-moon night and hour?

CHAPTER LXXIII.

“ANY FORM BUT HIS OWN.”

CORNET TITUS had meanwhile executed, and more than executed, his appointed part in the work.

It was usual for Prince Rupert's officers to attend him the last thing at night in his chamber, when he retired from the plentiful joys of the table, and the homage that surrounded him at Aston Hall, to deliver their reports for the day and receive orders for the morning; and this was often, as on a former recorded occasion, made the pretence for a renewed conviviality, ending, in the rude fashion of the day, in a regular drinking bout.

There was no need of any addition to the bacchanal enjoyments of the evening in question. The Prince was a German campaigner in all his habits at this period, whatever future refining influences the progress of age and reflection, the sorrows and poverty of exile, might afterwards render him. He was the pupil, in more than military respects, of the ferociously jolly and licentious soldier of Tilly and Wallenstein, Count O'Taafe. He had, therefore, done his full duty to the rich wines Sir Thomas Holte's profuse hospitality had placed before him, and in the consumption of which the latter was as well qualified to play second to no man as any other robust English squire of his time.

Perhaps even the two men, scarcely consciously to themselves, made extremely uneasy by a similar cause, strove to dispel or drown an idea that annoyed both, by the profuse libations they urged upon each other.

Sir Thomas Holte began to be aware that he could scarcely pretend much longer to ignore the fervour and intention of the Prince's demeanour towards his daughter. The Prince himself, unused to the analysis of his feelings or motives, and followingly mostly with little consideration the impulses of his coarse and vehement passions, nevertheless began to be annoyed and startled into the perception of the realities of the position in which he was involving himself, from various enlightening circumstances.

Among these must be reckoned the Baronet's growing plainness of insinuation, though consisting chiefly in vaunting details of his own wealth and grandeur—the services he intended to render the Crown—the honours he expected in return—the splendid genealogy he could prove, if need were, and alliances, past and at hand, with the most distinguished families of the country; including, of course, his son Edward's fine approaching match with the heiress of the Lord-Keeper Lyttelton.

Rupert heard these statements for the most part with impatience, or a species of acquiescence which is said to be more dispiriting to our missionaries in India, and other idol-ridden nations, than any amount of counter-argument.

When the former deduce arguments in favour of the Christian religion from the miracles which attended its manifestation, the intended converts, calm in the possession of their own prodigious mythology, admit everything, but ask, Is that all? So with Rupert, who be-

lieved himself descended through we know not what all of dukes, and counts, and margraves, and kings, from Charlemagne? What could there be imposing or attractive in the fact to him that his host was connected by blood or marriage with some two or three English earls or squires of great possession in the county of Warwickshire?

If Sir Thomas Holte's drift could have eluded so blunt and pride-possessed a Prince Palatine's perception, still he might have read something in the silent melancholy of disapprobation with which my Lady Holte watched her daughter's manœuvres on the occasion. For, certainly, Arabella Holte seemed bent on displaying all her powers of fascination on her admirer now, and succeeded plainly but too well. However much his suspicions, and, probably, inner convictions of the danger he was rushing into, might work on the Prince's mind, he was of too early and genuine a type of rude warrior manhood not to yield easily to displays of female cajolery, which he was so little accustomed to understand or withstand.

In these various moods the company at Aston Hall at last broke up, and with such an extravagant mark of homage on the Prince's part, who knelt to kiss Arabella's hand, that Sir Thomas Holte calculated almost with certainty his Highness was about to make the desired declaration of his feelings and purposes.

The baronet usually conducted his royal guest from the table to his suite of chambers, and he did so on this occasion. Yet, still to his great disappointment, not a word of the kind he expected was uttered, and Rupert more than once yawned when his host detained him before an emblazoned window in the hall, to explain the quarterings by the aid of the strong moonlight stream-

ing on the panes. In truth, Richard Grimsorwe had already spoilt the effect of the exhibition, by smilingly declaring that they ought to have an anvil and hammer in every lozenge, if they did proper justice to the family motto, *Exaltavit humiles*. As for the squirrel cracking nuts, it did not, in his opinion, at all express the idea; ‘for though the creature climbed high, it was *only* to crack nuts.’

On the whole, the Palatine was in no very agreeable humour for an unwelcome suitor, when Cornet Titus stepped from the circle of his officers and asked leave to speak with his Highness for a few minutes in private, on an important observation he stated he had made on a recent round of his guard at the Hall, which ought to be at present reserved from general communication.

‘Military intelligence can matter little, sir,’ the Prince replied, testily, ‘as long as Count O’Taafe continues absent at Court, and the civilian wrongheads around his Majesty withhold him from following my advice respecting these mechanical rebels, and his own better judgment in the case. Besides, I am so weary to-night, methinks I could contentedly sleep in my boots; but whether with the good Sir Thomas’s wine or talk the most, I scarce can tell.’

Titus, however, very earnestly and significantly renewed his request, with a statement that the granting of it nearly concerned his Highness’s personal comfort and safety.

The Prince smiled scornfully.

‘My personal comfort is even too well attended to here, Cornet Titus,’ he remarked; ‘and for my safety, I hold that pretty amply provided for against a town rabble, even of gunsmiths and sword-makers, by night

or by day. Cry you mercy, and leave me to my night-cap.'

But Cornet Titus, who had decided on his course of action with characteristic contrivance and craft, rejoined in a manner that excited the Royal Dragoon's attention.

'Such foes as I purpose to warn your Highness against do indeed rather work by night than by day, but by no such tangible weapons of warfare as may be guarded against with the like. I do request your Highness's indulgence, as I have said.'

'Does Cornet Titus, then, begin to believe in supernatural warnings?' returned Rupert, who was as well aware of his officer's incredulity as his officer was of the tendency of his own mind to the mysticism and exaltation of fancy which in almost all ages have been characteristic of the German mind. Natural products, it may be, of the stormy and gloomy latitudes in which the German mind has chiefly displayed any marked activity.

Titus was quite well aware that it would never do for him to make his suggestions in the manner doubtless intended by Grimsorwe, who did not so well understand the personage dealt with. He had adopted a different route to the same object.

'I have begun to do so, sir, on your behalf,' said the Cornet, gravely; and his unusual tone, and a well-acted semblance of disquiet and alarm sent over his wontedly impudently jeering physiognomy, produced some effect on the Prince.

'We shall hear just now that Cornet Titus has seen this same Wehrwolf, or rather Wild Man of the Woods, which Provost-Marshal Storcks pretends to have spied when he went the other morning to St. Thomas's plantations for the materials of his new gallows. Or have

you also seen the grimly ghost of the Duke of Friedland, which, they say, sometimes haunts poor O'Taafe for the share he took in leaving Prague citadel gates open to the Emperor's assassins? But any way, you say the communication is to myself alone? Leave us so, gentlemen; I dare confide in the Cornet's broken arm as well as his good intents, that he means me no unhandsome retaliation, or Wallenstein maltreatment, in the affair!

The Prince expressing himself to this effect, the rest of his officers retired, and Titus was left to use his opportunity—not, certainly, unstimulated by resentment at this last unflattering hint.

Of course he dissembled his real emotion, and started with a preamble to a very different effect, and yet one that at first greatly roused Rupert's easily kindled indignation.

The Cornet boldly affirmed that the wound he had so deservedly received at his Highness's hands had only quickened his zeal in his service, since it was an unexampled honour to receive such in a fair man-to-man encounter with a Royal Prince,—an honour, for his own part, he should never have dreamed of accepting, had it not been thrust upon him at such hard alternatives as were offered him, and, moreover, being at the time scarcely restored to a true sense of things from the liquor which had been the occasion of the whole. But, whatever malice might be imputed to him in the affair, instead of the love and duty he professed, he could not stand by and see his Highness made the victim of *witchcraft*, and all manner of devilish spells and incantations, without endeavouring, at all events, to put him on his guard.

The general credulity of the age, scarcely conceivable in our own by persons of education and enlightenment, but still to be found among large classes of the people, must be taken into account in estimating the effect of this observation on Prince Rupert. It was but a score years removed from the time when his grandfather, James the First, penned his great book on Demonology, and passed his severe laws against the practice of magical arts and sorceries of unnumbered species; and at the very time Hopkins the witchfinder was beginning his career of extra-judicial murder, under the same imaginary convictions, and the authority of the Puritan Parliament and the most celebrated divines of the persuasion.

The Prince looked at Titus with startled surprise, and even—dauntless soldier as he always showed himself on the field—alarm at the words; then demanded explanation, in a style that truly left no room for hesitation. On the other hand, Cornet Titus, with a gravity that was very unusual with him, but served him similarly to Iago's settled habits of sober enunciation, stated to the Prince in reply, that in the course of his military rounds on the previous day, in Aston Park, a withered old beldam had presented herself before him, and offered to tell him his fortune for the smallest possible crossing of silver. And on his refusal of the offer, on the score of his disbelief in her power, had burst forth into an angry declaration that her skill gave her the means, not only to foretell, but to bring events to pass, in the fortunes of the greatest princes and lords, *as she had proved by bewitching the royal soldier staying then at Aston Hall, whom she had enthralled and subdued into such love for the fair daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, that he was in-*

clined to give up all his prospects of glorious elevation and retrieval of his ancestors' rank, as sovereign princes on the Rhine, for the sake of her love!

This was a desperate venture, a deep dive into the secrets of the haughty Palatine's soul, which nothing but the mingled impudence and audacious spirit of research of Cornet Titus could have dictated.

Yet it succeeded. Rupert himself—the man of blows and violence—shuddered like one stricken with a truly awful conviction of the reality of what he heard, as he ejaculated, ‘That is true enough, indeed! There have been moments when I have dreamed it possible; for it is *not* possible to think that on any other terms the daughter of Sir Thomas Holte, who seems to fancy himself fully the equal of princes, on the strength of some poor half-dozen quartering of arms, 'tis true. I have often of late been driven to the belief there *was* some spell upon me—some wicked witchcraft spell! Else, why should I desire to remain here when I know that either my own ruin or that of this most beautiful and stately girl and her proud father— But how dare they—why should they use *witchcraft* on me?’

‘Nay, I say not who uses it; I shall never again say half a word anything to the disparagement of Sir Thomas Holte,’ replied Cornet Titus, shrugging his wounded arm with a gesture of pain. ‘Still, were I your Highness, I would not be made the joke and practice of these people, if it be so as I learn. If the young lady had won you by magic of her charms, that would have been fair play even for a Prince's enslavement—quite another matter. But that they should make you the fool and delusion of a horrible piece of witchery, methought it did consist in no wise with my unchanging duty to your

Highness to suffer. And it is most certain; for when, as you will think likely of me, I showed the old Circe that I put no belief whatever in her words, she offered me the proof,—that on this very night, at the full of the moon, she would compel you—*compel* was her word—to leave your comfortable chamber and retirement, and make resort to her miserable hut, there to perform a ceremony quite as irreparable, quite as fatal to your return to your proper princely, even kingly rank—to your favour with your Royal uncle—to the good-will and blessing of your illustrious mother, who is trying so many devices to restore you to your exalted rights in the empire, as if you had in reality married yourself with this artful descendant of a fortunate smith of Birmingham?’

Rupert actually grew deadly pale, and his strong, brassy tones quivered as he inquired what devil's sacrament this could be, which he should thus be drawn against his will to take, of so binding an efficacy.

Titus thought it now the proper place and time to declare to the superstitious German the particulars of the magic rite proposed to be celebrated, as Richard Grim-sorwe had stated them to him. But, willing to keep all the merit of the disclosure to himself, and for other reasons, he suppressed that worthy's share in the matter throughout. And it was true that he had what the Americans call *prospected* the ground, and had an interview with the old woman in her cottage. But no such communication as he announced had passed between them. On the contrary, Maud had exhibited herself singularly sullenly and unwelcomely towards the impertinent military stranger, and had continued her occupation—which was the strange one of stuffing a dead cat—for the most part as if unconscious of his pre-

sence, or replying to his questions only with mutterings of dotage.

Nevertheless, in answer to the Prince's inquiry how he had acquired his information from a person who had so many motives to conceal it, Titus did not scruple to declare that he extorted the secret from the old woman by threats, on the one hand, of having her seized and put to the torture to confess, and promising, on the other, not to divulge the secret to her harm.

Rupert's panic alarm continued, but it was accompanied also by the most violent indignation.

‘If their spells really have the power upon me the Holtes opine, know they not the only remedy for those who are drawn into any such horrible Sabbath is to draw their swords in the name of God, and hack and hew at the devils and sorcerers without stint or mercy, till of themselves they gladly release the inveigled one?’ he exclaimed. ‘It was thus that the good knight Conrad of Stolzenfells, who was carried off by a witch who loved him to the Blockula, disguised as a coal-black mare, struck off its head midway, and the same moment and hour the wife of his chief huntsman was found in her bed with her head severed from the shoulders, as with the stroke of an executioner's axe.’

Titus ventured a sly smile at this legend, which he probably thought admitted of interpretation without crediting the supernatural part of the tale too much.

And such a tragical effect was by no means the one he wished the affair to result in. ‘Were I your Highness,’ he remarked, ‘I would take another guise revenge than so—a much pleasanter one than sabreing the skull from an old witch's backbone, where 'tis ten to one it would only drop down again as ugly as ever.’

‘How say you? What would you do, Cornet? I would O’Taafe were here to counsel me!’ said the Prince, in vexed perplexity, staring at his truly base and mocking Mephistophelan adviser with a mixture of anger and expectation.

It was now the crafty Titus’s turn to give a new turn to the whole wicked instilment.

He burst into a laugh. ‘My Prince,’ he said, ‘notwithstanding the gravity with which I have related the whole affair, your Highness is aware I attach no manner of belief to such old wives’ leasings and inventions. ’Tis but in truth a worthless old woman thinking to cheat a young one out of a few pieces of silver. But your Highness is none the less injured by the likelihood that the wrong purposed is out of human power and agency. And yet, methinks, the punishment were ample if you mortified the pride of Mistress Holte by stalking in, as in obedience to the spell, and solemnly shaking your head in refusal of the ceremonial by which she would think to bind you sacredly her own. Then, should she be very cross and pettish, your Highness might ask her pardon in the manner you lovers best know how. And which you well may, without dread of interruption or discovery, for the Witch’s cottage is in a very desolate place, remote from the Hall. A string of our sentries surround the spot; the hour will be midnight. And, of a surety, Mademoiselle has shown such forwardness and passion to win your notice, that it may well and fairly be permitted to your Highness to believe she loves you enough to pardon what loving offence you might be led by circumstances to offer.’

This last view of the affair seemed greatly to tranquilize as well as please the Prince.

‘Deem you this may be so, Titus?’ he said, with a sigh of great relief. ‘Why, in very truth, I should owe Mistress Holte some chastisement for dragging me by spells and evocations from my quiet sleep. And if, when she sees that I in nowise project destroying all my own hopes to gratify her pride, she does not yet drive me from her presence with scorn and indignation, the presumptions will be fairly as you raise them, nor can any honourable man then rate me for breach of the laws of hospitality, and the good faith due to the roof that shelters us. Yet I would O’Taafe were here to counsel me, so experienced as he is in all points of honour and observances among soldiers and men of degree!’

‘O’Taafe would counsel no otherwise in this instance, sir. I have espied him out already making love to Mistress Holt’s waiting wench; and when I laughed with him upon a box of the ear he received for his pains, he would have it he was only trying to win the girl over to serve your interests with her young lady,’ the Cornet replied.

‘Ay, and to deal in witchcraft against me! But I would fain discover whether there be magic in it, by making my resolve not to go to the place, if I can hinder me,’ said the Prince.

‘Why, then, you will be taken on the whirl of a wind through the air, instead of safely guided on the good solid earth by your poor servant, to the rendezvous; and those who go against their will to a witch-meeting, ’tis but reasonable to suppose they can exercise none there, and heaven knows what follies your Highness may be led to commit.’

Rupert reasoned within himself for some moments, not very clearly or logically, it is probable, after all the

wine he had drunk, and the confusion of mind into which he was purposely thrown. No doubt, also, the influence of the real enchantress's recent spells worked powerfully in conjunction with the other motives urged upon him.

The ill result of his meditations appeared in the words, 'I will go, then, of my own will, under your guidance, Cornet, well armed against either fiends or men. And do you take your trumpet to summon further assistance, if we should be in need.'

Titus, smilingly, assured his Prince of his devotion in this respect to his interests.

'I can waken the dead with my blast on the bugle, although unhappily my sword-arm still continues too painful and disabled for much use. But it will still be some time ere we need be afoot, for the moon lacks yet more than an hour of the full.'

CHAPTER LXXIV.

GOOD SPIRITS AND BAD.

IN reality, any one who could have looked into the interior of Maud Grimsorwe's cottage, during the very time of this conference, might well have believed that something diabolically mysterious and fateful was in progress.

An enormous fire, heaped almost as high as the chimney would bear, but burning without flame or smoke—in reality a charcoal fire—glowed on the hearth, and diffused a lurid glow over the entire chamber. You would have thought everything in it was red-hot; even the tattered furniture of the crazy bedstead seemed to flutter in flames, in the strong draught that entered at a half-open door. The rafters and thatched roof were so illuminated into relief, that you could espy the innumerable spiderwebs that overhung them, with their swollen hunch-backed tenants, magnified by the glaring relief into creatures of an enormous toad-like size and squat.

Before this fire there was placed a large iron triangle, on its apex, though it was not easy to discern by what means the instrument was kept upright and fixed. Probably by an iron rod, forming part of it, driven well into the earthen floor.

This triangle cast a shadow of nearly double its size,

large enough for a man on horseback to have stood in it.

On one side of the shadow, apparently basking with enjoyment in the intense heat, and crouching as near to it as possible, sat Maud Grimsorwe on her stool, with her lean, veiny hands raised a little to shade her withered visage from the glare.

On the other, as deeply as he could get into the shade of the low ingle-corner, stood a figure that might well have been taken for an infernal presence already,—the figure of Richard Grimsorwe in his black lawyer's robes, and with his evil countenance resembling a mask of red-hot bronze, in the distortion produced by the mingled effects of his own malignant passions and the reflection of the fiery heap before him.

He had apparently but just arrived.

'It is wearing into a very wild and windy night, granny,' he was observing. 'But all is going well with us in other respects. It is even better that the moon should be clouded over so frequently as she is. And you seem to have everything here in a good readiness.'

'Everything,' repeated the old woman mechanically, and as if she scarcely heard either her own answer or what was said to her.

'Nicely swept and littered,' he resumed, looking round with satisfaction; 'you have not spared the sweet essences I gave you, as I desired, and the fumigating-pot for the Devil's Mass you are to celebrate, grandam, is well stored with intoxicating and bewildering drugs of the East, which will not fail to produce their effect. But why have you placed yonder frightful object so much in sight? I would not have that! I would have the whole hovel glow in their enchanted sight like a bower

of roses—and that frightful, grinning, stuffed beast set there!’

‘How, Dickon, Dickon, what say you? Would you deprive me even of poor Smilikin’s stuffed skin!’ exclaimed the witch, glaring up now with both light and intelligence in her eyes, and clutching the lawyer back by his robe, from a reach he was making, with unexpected strength. ‘Fool! I placed it there to give me heart to go through with the vile wickedness you have thrust me upon; for if I forgive the Holtes all else, how could I my Tomikin’s cruel death?’

‘Oh, in that case!’ said Richard, turning with looks of disgust from the really horrible object he had observed set on the mantelpiece above.

It was the outward presentment of the lacerated cat, with its head steadied on the backbone by a skewer. In other respects the work was skilfully executed, stuffing dead animals having always been a favourite amusement of the aged solitary, who had acquired the art, with most of her other harmful science, from the strange naturalist, Esther Feldon’s father.

‘But he is to be better avenged, soon, poor fellow!’ the old woman resumed, grinning almost as frightfully as her favourite. ‘I have told her I cannot perform the spell, now my imp’s gone, unless she consents to make him friendly and helpful again by killing his killer. And I have the axe ready, and Prince, forsooth, though she loves him so well, is to come with her to me!’

‘What will she not consent to, then, in her frenzy? For she is very fond of the sprightly animal,’ exclaimed Grimsorwe, really now surprised; ‘and I no longer wonder that we find it recorded parents would offer up

their children to the demon-gods, in the ancient times, to make themselves rich and prosperous. And I am glad of it, too, on another score, for the creature hates me.'

'You will live to hate yourself, Richard,' replied the old woman, with extreme asperity.

'It may be. Perchance there are times when—no matter, I will still sting all round me ere, like the scorpion, I plunge my dart in my own vitals! No one loves himself more at present, however, than I do, grandam. Only I must not be espied out by others who love me less, and might so connect me by chance with what may be ill done to-night. Since all is well with you, and all prepared, therefore, I will take my departure. But if any accident should arise, I shall not be too remote, at all events, for *your* shrill-tongued summons to reach me.'

The old woman nodded wearily. 'Go, go,' she said; 'the sound of your voice grates somehow horribly on my ears. I could almost think you are the Evil One, and I in bondage of my own sin in raising you!'

'And for my own part, I do begin to believe something in *your* witchcraft, Mother Grimsorwe, since, after so many years of vain cursing, you are like to bring so much to pass in the way of vengeance on Sir Thomas Holte to-night. How were it possible more completely to avenge my unhappy and dishonoured mother? At the same time, see how you advance my prospects, which else would run the greatest risks of vanishing altogether, to supply the needy grandeur of such a son-in-law as the banished Palatine. But proud princes, still less than other men, rarely indeed marry their mistresses! There will be no more talk of royal sons-in-law henceforth in Aston Hall!'

The traitor gave a dark, undertoned chuckle of barbarous triumph, and retired towards the door.

He drew it open and looked out.

‘The moon wants but another quarter of an hour to be at the full,’ he then remarked with significance to the beldam. ‘Arabella will now be upon the way; and even her proud heart will quake when she finds she has to leave her two attendants at yonder vast old withered oak. A marked object, Granny Grimsorwe; and therefore I chose it. Or else, methinks it is in itself too dismal and portentous a guide-post.’

‘For a thousand years it has cast forth green leaves there, Esther Feldon’s father would say!’ the old woman muttered, aloud, and yet, as it seemed, chiefly to herself.

‘Hist! they are coming. I must begone; or—gracious heaven! what is yonder unearthly-looking creature stalking there? No, it has vanished—into the oak, almost, it meseemed!’

Grimsorwe exclaimed these latter observations rather than merely uttered them.

‘The oak! What see you there? The oak is known to be haunted by the fairies,’ returned the witch, whose own superstition was immediately aroused.

‘This was no fairy: it seemed more like a black bear pawing upright! I saw its eyes gleam as it looked up at the moon. I could almost think that the tale reported by the German provost-marshal is true, and that a wild man of the woods haunts hereabouts!’

The old woman laughed sardonically. ‘Well, I thought I saw something on the top of one of the tallest beech-trees in the lower wood myself last night; but when I got there, it was only a harmless squirrel pulling a crow’s nest to pieces.’

‘Howbeit, I am glad I have not to go that way of the old oak. Yet it may well be only an owl, or a cow feeding there,’ said Grimsorwe, aware that it would not do to excite his aged relative’s alarms. ‘Ah, grandam, to think that you should have the laugh at me for such silly beliefs, after all! I leave you, then; prosper, and show that, if you have a witch’s dangerous reputation, you will not have it for nothing.’

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE FAIRY OAK.

ARABELLA HOLTE had meanwhile certainly left Aston Hall upon her perilous and, truth to say, wicked and unmaidenly nocturnal enterprise.

The only excuse for this unhappy young woman must, in fact, be drawn from an aggravation of her worst fault. Had she not felt in the depths of her heart the lamenting appeal of a real passion for another, she would not have been so set on striving to discover some reason why she must hold herself irrevocably fastened to her father's will and purposes in the designs on Prince Rupert. She imagined that if she could only ascertain a fatality in this, her mind would be thoroughly reconciled to it, and she could devote all its power to the realization.

It may be stated to her credit, however, on the other hand, that she felt so deep a secret repugnance to the task of ambitious enthralling she had set herself upon, felt so strongly the unwomanly and undignified conduct it compelled, since her brother had forced the consideration upon her, that she hoped to discover some reason to abandon the whole comfortless enterprise. If it was found that the Prince was not to wed her, this powerful reason would exist, and the regrets that might else have tormented her, to lose so glorious a prize, would cease to have influence.

But it is often scarcely possible to distinguish what are the governing motives of the human mind in some conjunctures of destiny. The current which ripples over the surface may not truly show the deep impelling movement of the tide below. Often indeed where we ourselves least intended, in setting out, we arrive.

But whatever the strength or nature of her actuating motives, Arabella Holte could not but experience a deep sensation of dread on stealing out of her father's stately mansion at nigh the midnight hour, unknown to nearly all its inmates, on such an errand. Phœbe Dewsnap, however, some of whose waiting-woman's upper garments she wore, attended her from her chamber; and Robin Falconer was to meet them in the pleasure grounds, and be their convoy to an appointed spot in the park below; not to mention that Arabella Holte's greyhound was allowed by her—nay, coaxed with divers kind cajoleries, and yet with the most deadly reluctance on his mistress's part—to accompany them.

Robin Falconer was easily induced by his damsel to believe that a fellow-servant of her own desired to have her fortune in wedlock shown her by the Witch of Aston, and the good-natured fellow readily lent his countenance and protection on the excursion. Robin had, in fact, taken quite a good will towards the old woman and such inquiries, since his own loves had been so forwarded by Maud Grimsorwe's prediction that he was to be Phœbe's bridegroom. Moreover, the *tête-à-tête* he was promised with his betrothed at the Fairy Oak, as it was called, had had charms for him sufficient to blind him to every other consideration.

It may be Robin allowed himself to be deceived, without being actually so much so as he pretended. The

whole appearance of Phœbe's pretended fellow-servitrix, her voice, her stately manners, the accompaniment of the dog, must have left him in little doubt as to who the third party really was; but Robin easily accounted, in his own simple fancy, for Miss Holte's desire also to pry into the secrets of futurity. Every one about Aston formed their conjectures from seeing the Prince and the young lady there so much together; and Robin, who vastly admired Rupert's prowess, of which he had been an eyewitness and sharer, had no doubt that inquiries would result as fortunately for his young mistress as for himself and his betrothed.

The falconer was in punctual attendance at the draw-bridge, just over the moat beyond the terrace towards the pools, and after a fondly, friendly greeting of his betrothed, which resulted in divers half-angry, half-delighted, 'Prithee, Robin, forbear. Marry, good soul, too much of this!'—the party set forward on their as yet not unfavourably-omened enterprise.

Arabella Holte had made up her resolve, and she was at no time lacking in courage and determination. Whatever came of it, she was now bent on executing the extraordinary plan she had formed.

She easily closed her mind to the apprehension of observation of following from the Hall. Most of its inmates had been asleep for hours, and she had reason to know that her father had singularly exceeded that night in a solitary potation after the Prince retired, and would consequently be disposed for heavy slumber. As for the Prince himself, her notion was, that if compelled by magic art to attend where his presence was desired, it would be in a kind of supernatural trance and insensibility, such as somnambulists of modern times are sup-

posed to exhibit in submitting to mesmeric or magnetic influences.

And truly it might have been thought Arabella Holte herself was in some such state as this by the manner she proceeded to the appointed scene of divination. Her two companions went before by several steps, at her whispered desire to Phœbe, and she seemed rather to drag herself after them than to follow with the alert step of a person who obeys the impulse of his own mind. Some external but invisible agency appeared to impel her movements. More than once she hesitated, and looked fearfully back; but, as a general fact, kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and a silence which had in it something of spectral and darkly rapt, like the thought of a condemned criminal moving to the place of execution.

It had been arranged that as little was to be said as possible, to avoid the dangers of discovery of various kinds. But Phœbe Dewsnap herself felt singularly awkward and uncomfortable at her mistress's strange manner of movement, while Robert Falconer more than once intimated to her, with an effort at a lively tone, that 'her friend' already seemed under some witchcraft spell.

Still more remarkably, a similar feeling of reluctant submission to necessity appeared to have possession of Arabella's greyhound. The swift creature walked laggingly on at its mistress's heels, never once darting off on its usual excursions and circlings of delighted fleetness, in which it chased the very wind for a prey, wantoning in its own splendid powers of pace. Its usually curled tail drooped straight; its ears were flatted to its head; and any one aware of what was intended would have thought the creature conscious of its doom.

But perhaps, in reality, poor 'Prince' only remembered the sharp chidings on the way, and rough reception he had found, on his recent visit to the Witch of Aston's hut, and was dismayed to find his lady's steps tended thitherward again.

In this strange way the whole group arrived, after a considerable transit, at the Fairy Oak.

This tree was one of great antiquity. If the weird naturalist, Esther Feldon's father, exaggerated in rating its age at a thousand years, still authentic records of Aston Manor verified its existence for nearly half that period. In old times it had marked a boundary between the counties of Warwick and Stafford, and was thus a well-known object in the district. But its mysterious antiquity, and the natural tendency of the rustic mind, associated it with various superstitions, and especially with the belief that it was haunted by fairies. A singular circle formed completely round on the mossy turf below the bare, gnarled roots of the forest-monarch, was supposed to be formed by the dancing of these festive sprites, with whom such disport was believed to be a favourite midnight recreation. Nor was the fancy at all diminished by the decay into which the Fairy Oak had fallen, and which left of it little more standing than a prodigious hollow trunk, seamed and scarred and bossed over with enormous wens, and only decorated in one or two branches with foliage of its own. What else there might be was furnished by the friendly zeal of an ivy, which covered the stately ruin wherever it could reach with a green matting, and hung loose tattered tresses of the same, in various directions, almost to the ground,—the probable cause, by its shade, of the circle visible on the grass below.

The conspirators against Arabella's honour had purposely chosen this tree for her to part with such hindrance to their nefarious designs as was furnished by the company of her two attendants. Maud Grimsorwe, in obedience to her instructions, conditioned that no nearer approach should be made to her dwelling by persons who might betray her dealings in a forbidden art. And Arabella herself was extremely unwilling to place her full secret in the possession of her servants. And now the Fairy Oak, though within sight of the Witch's cottage, was too remote for prying, or overhearing any sound less piercing and powerful than such an outcry as it was not apprehended Miss Holte would venture or resolve to make under the circumstances.

The three midnight rangers arrived at the Oak within a very few minutes after Richard Grimsorwe had been alarmed by the glimpse of a shaggy apparition passing into the tree while he gazed, and which he had had some difficulty in explaining to his own mind.

It is scarcely needful to inform the reader that this phantom was none other than Tubal Bromycham, out on one of his love-lorn wanderings in Aston Park.

Alarmed on his own part by the sudden appearance of a man at the door of Maud's hut, revealed by the furnace-like glow behind him, Tubal had retired into the concealment nearest at hand in the hollow of the Oak. And considering it was very liable to suspicion as such, to any one acquainted with the internal decay of the tree, and apprehending he had come upon some unexpected outpost of soldiery, he availed himself of his great muscular power to thrust upward some height, and keep himself there by mere force of pressure between the nape of his neck and his feet, for there was hardly any internal remains in the tree for a support.

Tubal had but just accomplished this manœuvre when footsteps, halting below the withered but still gigantic branches, convinced him of its necessity, however uneasy the position proved. And yet he nearly relaxed all tension of his frame, and dropped to the roots of the Fairy Oak, when, instead of a coarse trooper challenge, a commanding but sweet-toned voice, whose accents he had never forgotten, sounded in his astonished ears.

‘You are to await here my return, my good Phœbe, and friendly Robert Falconer. You need not be alarmed to do so, however; the fairies love faithful lovers, and often do them a good turn; but the old fortune-telling woman has made it a condition with me that I should go alone to her hut. Yonder it stands: if I should need you, I can easily summon you thence.’

So those still all-powerful accents declared. Such were the words whose echoes remained ringing in the sense of the unseen auditor.

Robin Falconer, however, very respectfully demurred, ‘Nay, fair mistress,’ he said, ‘the Witch’s hovel is a much longer flight from the Fairy Oak than you think. I could scarcely make my bird-whistle sound so far, though I can bring a falcon down from nigh the sky with it. It were well we went with you much nearer than this.’

‘It must be here that you remain. I must keep the condition enjoined me exactly, and if you would have the wise woman (why do you call her *witch*? she likes not the word!) as exactly observe hers. You are not afraid to remain alone with your sweetheart, my friend Robin, are you, who played so stout a part at Worcester Fight?’ the young lady replied, with an effort at playful unconcern, but it was obvious that something also of

urprise and irresolution quavered in her tones. She was doubtless surveying the length of intervening country to the Fish Stews Pool, which a bright burst of the now nearly full moon made plainly manifest.

‘Nay, madam, in all love and honesty, I durst abide by Mistress Phœbe a whole year at the bottom of a coal-mine!’ Robin Falconer replied, doubtless rather nettled at a faint saucy giggle which came from the damsel, at her lady’s observation.

‘You shall need to abide but the half-hour which, after the full of the moon, will likely be required for the old woman to mumble her sorceries in, if, in reality, she possesses any such powers as she pretends to, which I own it something misdoubts me she does not; especially as she will have it she uses only an innocent white magic, and by pure fire agencies, to show people what of their coming fates they may well wish to know. And yet, if it be fate, what avails it to know!’ Miss Holte said, but rather as if she were reasoning with herself than her companions.

‘Pray you, dear mistress, leave us no longer trembling here than you can help it; for although Robin and I be as firmly plighted to each other almost as if the parson had spoken it, I would not that any one should spy us out, and have cause to report that I met my sweetheart of a midnight so far from home!’ said Phœbe, forgetting in her anxiety that her mistress did not desire to be recognised as such on the occasion.

‘Who can spy you out, Phœbe, if you keep well in the shadow of the oak? We are certainly unobserved at the Hall, there are no near watchrounds in this part, I am well assured, and nobody will be at the cottage excepting the poor old purblind fortune-teller herself, or

such flimsy shadowy creatures as are all she pretends even likely to answer to her spell, if her evocations have indeed any power. But perhaps I have not your luck, Phœbe, and the man is unborn who is destined for a husband for me!’ said Miss Holte.

‘You, my lady! No husband for you, so beautiful, young, and rich as you are!’ exclaimed Phœbe, contemptuously. ‘I only wish, however, it may prove the right one when the apparition comes, if it is the smock and the shroud spell the old woman is at. And then I am sure it will be none other than a Royal Prince; and none other could deserve you, Miss. I wish you joy of it beforehand, or the witch is no witch. A good deliverance from the danger of it too, for I have always heard say that little good ever comes of such a tempting of Providence; and that’s why I never dared to try it myself. Truly, my dear young lady, my granny often told me a story how a fellow-maiden of hers, in her youth, would try the trick, and saw a skeleton come in and turn the white linen to the red blaze, and sickened that hour, and lay in her shroud in the churchyard, in good truth, by a skeleton that turned up as they were digging her grave, within another full of the moon.’

‘Well, and if it were so, she understood the worst, Phœbe, at once, and that is better than to be the prey of doubts and suspense!’ returned Arabella; adding, with a rather dismal pleasantry, ‘My worst, I fear, will be no skeleton, but some stalwart brute of flesh and sinew whom I can never love. Tush! what are we prating now and time wasting so fast? I must be gone. Prince, Prince! Alas, poor fellow, you must needs go with me!’

‘Why, say you so, so sadly, Mistress Arabella?’

Whom should he be better pleased to go withal than the kind mistress who has collared his neck with silver?" said Robin, caressing the elegant animal, which, however, stood still, and snuffed the air in the direction of the witch's cottage with a trembling all over its limbs, and a faint, terrified whine.

"He seems to dread going. Let him stay with Robin, good mistress, who will take care he turns not tail for the Hall till you return," interceded Phœbe, who perhaps had her vague suspicions on the subject, for the sacrifice of living animals was a known portion of certain magic rites; nay, there were unpleasant rumours current that in some cases the infernal agencies were not satisfied without an oblation of human blood, and children were supposed to be inveigled and murdered by the terrible old wretches whose exploits formed so large a portion of the popular faith.

"Prince must go with me; he must, he shall; the old woman will not proceed else!" returned Miss Holte, in a sharp, angry accent; and nevertheless she audibly burst into tears as she seized the hound by its silver collar, and dragging it reluctantly on with her, set off at a rapid pace for the Witch's hut.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

IN AND OUT OF THE OAK.

OF all this Tubal Bromycham had been perforce an auditor; and was so stricken and absorbed by what he heard that he lost all recollection, even of the painful and constrained position in which he remained during the whole time.

Arabella Holte out of her father's house at midnight, in the midst of the solitary fields, with two of her father's servants for companions! Arabella Holte seeking to learn her destiny in marriage from a horrible old hag, and by means forbidden alike by the laws of God and man!

Tubal was petrified with amazement as he listened. It is scarcely a metaphor to say so. And for some moments amazement was his master-feeling, and kept him fixed in breathless attention in his comfortless elevation. A fissure in the trunk of the oak close behind his head gave facilities for overhearing, in other respects.

This emotion predominated for several moments after Arabella's departure. It was then succeeded by something that closely resembled fear, if it was not quite fear, in that strong-nerved man.

The Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham was endued with all the superstitions of his age, and the rank of

society in which he had been reared. Scarcely any rank was indeed at that time exempt from those relating to witchcraft and sorcery. Moreover, a childhood spent among mines and colliers, whose gloomy underground work disposes them for dark and melancholy fancies, could not fail to prepare his mind for the apprehensions that now invaded it.

But more than apprehensions. He was thoroughly convinced of the reality of all he heard, and that the Witch of Aston truly possessed the powers she was stated to intend to use on Arabella Holte's behalf.

And now for a brief while a sentiment of the most violent indignation, mingled with ravening jealousy, assailed his heart, and quickened its beating into cruel throbs.

If Arabella Holte were not utterly faithless to the memory of that old clandestine, unavowed but passionate attachment of theirs, what needed she to inquire of a sorceress who was to be her husband? Her fate was at her own disposal, if she dared make it so! And with a rage of despair that fairly made him grind his teeth, in spite of the closeness of the clench compelled by his position in the oak, Tubal rushed to the conclusion that she desired and hoped to assure herself that her allurements would not be spent in vain upon the nephew of the King.

With this idea lighting up like fire in his brain, Tubal's first thought was of prevention, of darting out of his concealment, and preventing the completion of the unhallowed rite, which he did not doubt would offer Arabella every encouragement to proceed in her plans. And he allowed himself to drop, with scarcely any precaution, to his feet.

Engaged as were Phœbe and Robin, who had seated themselves at the foot of the oak, in their own interesting conversation, so portentous a circumstance as that the tree gave a hollow rumble and shook behind them, naturally startled them. But the falconer explained the matter after a pause, to soothe the apprehensions of his fair companion. 'It is the fairies, Phœbe dear, getting on their little horses for a revel; for it is known they all live in the oak by day, and come out by night to take their pleasure and exercise. We shall see such a pretty sight just now in the moonlight, when the Fairy King comes out with all his knights and yeomen in green and gold. But nothing can be so pretty as my Phœbe's own self, when she smiles her Robin leave, as she does now, to take a kiss.'

And so saying the good yeoman snatched himself the favour he partly announced conceded; but apparently by the difficulty he experienced before he obtained it, with only one yes to the bargain. And the honest-hearted English yeoman was quite content with this indulgence, when at length it was accorded, and never dreamed of abusing the opportunities of the midnight scene with the object of his manly and uncorrupt affection.

Meanwhile a singular variation had come over Tubal's distracted thoughts, and which wonderfully soothed them.

While steadying himself in the consciousness that it would be harmful to any purpose he might form, to be discovered by the pair who were so near, an idea suddenly occurred to him that the strange, the irresistible longing he had felt that night to venture where he was, was caused by the spell of the witch. That he, Tubal Bromy-

cham, once the secretly-loved lover, was destined to become the husband of Arabella Holte also, and was compelled thither by the spell to show that the fact should be so. Was it an hallucination of love and superstition, or a suggestion of passion and desperation, in themselves so ingenious and so courageous?

Tubal's historian can scarcely say, since Tubal himself would have been at an utter loss to declare how the case really stood. But be the truth how it might be, whatever the impelling motives, Tubal determined to brave every obstacle, every danger, to answer the witch's spell, and present himself in her hut as the DESTINED FUTURE HUSBAND OF ARABELLA HOLTE!

This resolution sobered him on other points. He perceived how advisable it was not to let Robin or Phœbe understand his unseen presence, which a moment before he had determined to proclaim in the most openly audacious and defying manner.

Luckily the rifted portion of the oak, by which it could be entered almost as conveniently as by a doorway, was on the further side of the tree from the billing lovers. But the open slope of meadows and scattered young plantation down to the witch's abode lay open and bright before them in the moonlight. It was therefore necessary for Tubal to take a rather extensive winding from the Fairy Oak to the skirts of the water, so that he might approach and enter on the scene of operations unobserved by persons who would not fail to interfere in his design.

His project was favoured by Robin's beginning to warble, in a very low tone, like a bird to its mate, a rustic love-song of the time, very different from Arabella Holte's stiff court invention in that description of minstrelsy—

“ Sweet ! can you love me,
Sweet, sweet, sweet ?
Say if you love me,
Sweet, answer sweet !
To a true love like mine,
Like true love is meet ;
Say, that you truly love me,
As I truly love you, sweet !
Sweet, sweet, sweet !”

Taking advantage of the undertoned but earnest murmuring of this rustic melody, Tubal glided out of the oak, and betaking himself to a distant line of trees, remote from the margin of the pools, only doubled under their shadow to retrace the way to the Witch of Aston's hut.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

RESCUE OR NO RESCUE.

ARABELLA HOLTE had meanwhile arrived at the appointed place, delayed by the efforts made by the greyhound not to be led on the track its mistress seemed determined to force it to pursue. No doubt the poor animal had a very distinct recollection of the withered tenant's displays of fury and violence towards it, though probably unable to conceive that the destruction of the vermin it had pursued to death was the occasion of the demonstration.

The lady and her hound arrived, however, at last, and Miss Holte pushing open the ajar-door of the hovel, felt almost as well inclined as her shrinking animal to effect a retreat from the spectacle that presented itself.

It is only necessary to say that it was scarcely at all changed from the description of the scene during Richard Grimsorwe's consultation with his grandmother. He was gone, but the other portents of the spectacle remained; perhaps a little heightened by the circumstance that the old woman had begun to exhibit an ill-omened species of wakefulness and activity.

She was squatting on the floor, writing a name in singular characters within the shadow of the triangle, in charcoal.

The letters composing this were of large size, and in

reality of Hebrew conformation, an accomplishment which it is difficult to know how Maud Grimsorwe had acquired, unless one takes into account her former association with the learned parish clerk of Sutton. Though it is still hard to say why she should have devoted any time to the acquisition of the Biblical language, unless it may be true what is reported by adepts of the demon world, that they best understand and obey the original language of man; which the Hebrew is supposed to be.

‘You are busy, dame!’ said Arabella, entering the cottage.

‘Have you brought the dog?’ returned the malignant old wretch, startling up with haggard eagerness at once from her occupation.

‘It is here!’ replied Arabella, dejectedly. ‘But again, I implore of you, Mother Grimsorwe! if it be possible to proceed without so cruel a sacrifice, spare the poor animal. Prince but followed his natural instincts when he chased and killed your prowling cat. Why should you be so rancorous against him?’

‘So do but the cut-purse and the cut-throat? What more natural than to thirst for another’s gold, and to quiet resistance by the thrust of a knife? Yet the thief and the assassin mount the scaffold to the hangman’s clutch!’ returned the old woman, vindictively eyeing the trembling and crouching hound, as she added, ‘And here is Tomikin’s murderer now!’

‘Peace awhile, you will make him break from me and his chain, and tell me what name is written here!’ said Miss Holte, gazing at the inscription on the floor; perhaps chiefly to gain a little time for the victim.

‘The word is Astorath, who is a Grand Duke of Hell!’ the hag answered, with a vivid smile, in which the as-

sumption of power and a conviction of her own imposture were singularly mingled. 'He is one of the ugliest of the fiends, but very powerful. Satan himself goes in dread of him sometimes when they quarrel for a prey. But he has a wonderful dominion and influence with great Lords and Princes, and, I take it, our affair is with such to-night. Those who invoke him properly, and go so far as to adore him as a god, them he makes very powerful and mighty conquerors! He knows the past, the present, and the future, and when he is in a good humour with the sacrifices offered him, will answer almost any question you can put to him relating to any of these. He alone of all the fallen angels still maintains that he was condemned unjustly, and is therefore the more rancorous and inexorable never to cease from troubling the creatures of God, and wages rebellion against His decrees throughout the world. All this is very well, is it not?'

'Do you mean to raise this fiend to-night,' said Arabella, looking and feeling, reasonably enough, considerably alarmed at this description of so horribly powerful an infernal.

'Nay, I hope we shall have no need. His stench is as the stench of a ploughed churchyard, or of a slaughtered army festering in the sun!' the hag replied. 'I do but place Astorath's name there because it is so potent; no chance fiend will dare to take what he will suppose to be his place in the triangle. The power we are to invoke is that of the pure Demon of Fire, Baal; a king in hell. But even Baal I shall do my best not to require you to see, for he is very frightful. He has three heads; one of a man, another of a toad, the third a cat's. And that reminds me—Hold your dog firmly by the collar while I get the axe.'

The vengeful hag strode to a corner of her hut, and produced a long-handled, but very blunt-looking and rusty weapon, of the kind indicated, worn, in fact, to a mere stump of hack-edged iron. But she seemed to think it sufficient for her purpose, and returning with her sunken eyes shining in their wrinkled cavities like corpse-lights, aimed a blow at the unlucky animal. But whether age and passion had disabled her, or whether Arabella's feelings deprived her of the requisite energy to perform her part in the tragedy, the hound eluded the stroke, and, with a truly wonderful spring, broke from its mistress's hold, and fled with a dreadful howl from the hut.

Maud flung her disappointed axe after it, and then burst into a horrible screechowl lamentation over the failure, mingled with sharp reproaches to the young lady.

'You have done it on purpose, and spoilt the whole spell!' she grumbled viciously. 'But when were the Holtes other than false and treacherous? Go, go, you may as well return to your warm bed at once, unless you can bring the vile beast back! Call him, whistle him, bring him back!'

'I cannot, I will not, but neither shall you deceive me with your poor excuses! Fulfil your promise, hag, or I will make such representations to my father, who already believes you very fit for the tar-barrel.'

'Quiet, quiet, my fine young woman, then! You shall have your own way, you shall have your own way. Yet I did half repent me; and might, perhaps, but for the treacherous abetment of the hound in his escape. But we will find a time for him too; when the name of Prince will no longer sound perhaps so sweet in your ears! Tut,

tut ; I am only joking ; you must excuse a poor, simple, doating, daft old woman, *hag* you call me ! no matter ! I was once held as good-looking a body as yourself, my fine mistress, or any other in Aston parish. But that was before I was a grandmother, no doubt, no doubt. For I had a daughter once, and she a son ! daughter, daughter. My cat, my cat. Be not afraid, Mistress Holte ; I have regained my mind now, and will proceed in the business we are upon presently, as you would have me.'

Arabella was so much alarmed at the old woman's incoherent paroxysm that she was on the point of following her hound in its judicious exit. But these latter words allayed her panic, and she paused in her departure. 'Proceed, then, Mother Grimsorwe,' she said, 'and earn your promised reward. Nay, I shall be better than my word in that, if you will be but as good as yours.'

'I will be better, I will be better, too,' muttered the hag, 'though I do not well know how we shall proceed without a heart taken alive and palpitating from some creature's breast ! Tomikin was a rare helpful one at that ; I had only to look at him, and he would make for the woods, and bring me a pigeon or a dove back, with its wings beating all alive, and taking such pains not to kill it till it was wanted. Where is the garment I bade you ?'

'It is here,' replied Miss Holte, producing one of the finest white linen, beautifully trimmed with lace. 'The Queen herself gave me this when I had last charge of her wardrobe, in my rotation among her maids-of-honour, as a reward for my diligence in the office, and bade me keep it for my wedding-day.'

'And it was a present for a queen to make, indeed !'

Maud answered, taking the fine woof in her withered brown paws, and surveying it, witch as she was, with much of the curious interest women of no such supernatural pretensions mostly take in examining each other's finery. 'And the Queen herself must have thought it likely enough you should marry a Prince, to make you such a present for wedding wear. We must hang it on the triangle, but it shall not scorch, for I will place my shroud over it, which is of good thick white woollen stuff.'

So saying, Maud hobbled to a corner of the glaring apartment, and opened a cupboard, whence she produced a long flat box. Opening that, a strong smell of camphor diffused itself all over the chamber, and the old woman drew forth a long garment resembling a night-gown, but the uses of which could not be doubted from the peculiar folds and crimping at the breast and wrists.

She returned with this to Miss Holte, and, in courteous interchange of the recent inspection, handed over the shroud to the young lady.

'Tis a pretty work, all of my own spinning and yarn; and smell how sweet it savours of the camphor drug. Yet, 'tis not so much for the pleasant savour either, as to keep the moths out, that I embalm it thus. They eat everything, moths do; moths and rust eat everything.'

Arabella took the ominous robe with evident reluctance, and spent but little time in the examination.

Maud, receiving it back, flung it over the richly-laced 'smock,' observing, with a chuckle, 'I am as proud of it as ever you can be of yours; and I may well doubt which will need her dress the sooner. We must be quick, however, now, for the moon is nigh the full, as I look at her. Mark, then, what I say to you, Mistress Holte!

Get into the bed and draw the clothes and curtains so close to you that you can only see what is happening on the hearth, and no one thence see you. Keep your gaze fixed then on the triangle; and when I have uttered the spell, I will open the further casement yonder, and take myself off into the open air; for not even the Witch must remain when the phantom comes. And if you would escape all danger of breaking the charm, and the magic sleep of the summoned one (in which case they often wax madly furious and wrathful, and afterwards remember things to your prejudice), you must not utter a word, nor breathe a sigh, through the whole course of the Appearance's arrival and departure.'

'Do not fear me for that; I can keep my silence as if death had sealed it, when need is,' replied Arabella. 'But,' and she surveyed the mouldering old couch and its decorations with visible disdain and repugnance, 'must I get into this unsavoury heap?'

'Or run the risk of being perceived by the Apparition; and I have known that on a sudden recollection, at a future time, of what had happened him thus, a man would take an utter loathing and abhorrence of his bride, that nothing could ever afterwards remove,' replied the Witch; and, indeed, popular legends related cases of the possessed person being seized with such a violent resentment at the remembrance of the magnetic tortures inflicted upon him by the magic rite, as to kill the unhappy bride in the very nuptial chamber.

Arabella no longer made objections upon receiving this warning; but no one could have mistaken the disgust and repugnance with which she betook herself to the old woman's wretched crazy pallet, which looked as if it was fitter for a colony of rats to find covert in.

Having agreed, however, to what was required, Arabella made no half measures of it, and soon only her beautiful, excited face appeared out of the coarse blankets, while the curtains were so drawn as even to shade that nearly out of sight from any removed observation. Only the anxious gleam of her fine eyes could have drawn attention thitherward, for the clothes were heaped about her in such a manner as nearly to conceal her figure completely.

Maud gave a balefully sardonic glance at these preparations, and then turned to pursue her own unholy share in the rite.

It is needless, and might be wearisome, to detail the numerous ceremonials enacted by the nefarious old woman in carrying out her grandson's base and barbarous project.

Something like a profane and horrible imitation of a Roman Catholic mass was enacted by this priestess of the Devil of Revenge, if no other.

Kneeling before the now lessening pile of glowing charcoal in the triangle, the hag muttered a series of strange and fiendish-sounding names, in the form of a devilish litany, but chiefly in languages Arabella Holte could not understand; perhaps she did not understand them herself, and they were mere fragments of the teachings of the wizard clerk of Sutton, who had so misapplied his extraordinary learning and ingenuity as to devote himself by their aid to the study of the imaginary, but not less detestably wicked and profane art now pretended to be practised by his former disciple.

No doubt this formula was to be taken as an evocation of the spirits whose names were called upon to assist in the unholy work, which might not in reality have

been unworthy of demon assistance, if the villanous men who were engaged in it were not of themselves alone sufficient for any wickedness. And to complete the whole hideous mockery, Maud kept up a constant censuring of the fire-glow from a silver pot, held by a triangular chain, which diffused clouds of aromatic and singularly languid and enervating perfumes all over the chamber.

In this fumigation Arabella Holte began to feel herself becoming strangely and yet voluptuously entranced into a kind of pleasant lethargy and repose.

Her head swam, but with no uncomfortable giddiness; rather with the first symptoms of intoxication from fine wines, when ideas full of brilliancy and gaiety rush in a splendid sort of kaleidoscope delirium through the brain.

It almost seemed as if she no longer feared what might happen on account of its supernatural character, but rather felt the awe of the approach and enhancement of its delight and satisfaction.

In the midst of all this, the witch's utterance gradually grew fainter, and seemingly exhausting into pauses and breaks. At last it ceased altogether; and dimly through the clouds of incense Arabella watched her retire to the solitary casement, which she opened with some difficulty, as if the shutters were little in the habit of being moved.

There was no glass in the panes, and the moon shone in from its full rounded effulgence in the sky. And then it certainly appeared to Arabella as if the Witch raised herself and sloped out of the chamber, on a strong breeze that blew in at the door, by the casement.

Thus she was left alone, to await the results of all this extraordinary preparation. And certainly everything

concurrent to heighten into credulity and tremendous expectation the emotion with which the proud beauty awaited the solution of the great perplexity produced by the struggles of a purer and nobler passion, with its ambitious aspirations, and her father's senseless urgency, in her heart.

There was a deep silence of several moments.

Then a step was audible on the exterior of the cottage; and we do not pretend that even the haughty and resolute young woman's heart did not throb wildly and quickly at the sound. And yet it somehow indefinitely struck her as a very unspiritual and substantial sign of approach on the part of an apparition.

But there was little time for consideration on this point; a shadow darkened the low threshold of the hut, and a figure bent its head and entered the chamber.

Great heaven! it was no Rupert—no Prince Palatine! His towering, but shambling and ill-knit stature little resembled this, which seemed rather of a giant shortened in the lower limbs, but moving with all the power and active unity of proportion in muscular development.

Arabella looked with eyes nearly starting from their orbits with intensity of expectation, and a heart that literally stood still with dread. And she beheld—was it himself, indeed, or his apparition?—the form and lineaments of Tubal Bromycham, as he staggered in with a singular dizziness and uncertainty of movement that seemed to affect him the moment he entered the witch's hut. And yet he made towards that fateful triangle. And it was the scorned and shamefully repulsed and maltreated Blacksmith Lord of Birmingham who turned the shroud below the laced wedding garment it nearly concealed there!

Tubal appeared then to pause, to examine the robe; he seemed to perceive the cyphers of the beloved name wrought upon the bosom, and knelt and kissed them, with a tenderness—with a respect—with an adoring lingering of the lips, that vibrated even to that haughty lady's inmost heart, and almost constrained her to some reciprocating sigh.

In truth, Arabella Holte's emotions, on witnessing what she now did, were singularly at variance with what might have been expected. The phantom's homage certainly did not excite her irritation; on the contrary, she seemed relieved of a great burden and anxiety, and if she had ventured on any utterance at all, it would probably have been an ejaculation of happiness and release.

The apparition arose from its knees, turned one searching glance around the apartment, and, doubtless attracted by the magnetism of the human eye, started to recognize those star-like orbs a-gaze from the witch's bed. The figure, in fact, stood as if struck by sudden immovability on the glaring hearth, striving to fathom the meaning of the mysterious and tremendous dream which it may be supposed to conceive it was passing through.

A thought seemed then to strike it. The eyes shone up with a much fiercer and wilder light than the glow in the charcoal fire; and with an audible groan of the deepest anguish, the supposed phantom pursued its way towards the open window.

Then it stepped out and drew the shutters to—not wholly, as Arabella believed she could clearly discern.

An instant's pause followed, during which she felt herself reviving from the species of stupor of amazement and expectation in which she had doubtless been held. Then

believing the whole phantasmagoria to be expected had been exhibited, Arabella was about to rise and leave her musty couch, when again a tramp of footsteps came to her ear. And, with a sensation of wonder and terror, to which no language could do justice, she beheld Prince Rupert enter the hut, stooping from the low roof, but with (for a phantom) a strangely abrupt, angry, and defying gesture of advance, as his glance fell upon the whole extraordinary scene in the Witch of Aston's abode.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE RIVAL PRINCE AND BLACKSMITH.

RUPERT had thoroughly learned his evil lesson. After effecting this inauspicious entrance, he moved deliberately to the fire, deliberately raised and looked at the garments suspended before it, and then, with a gesture full of disdain and repulse, rumbled them up together—laced smock and crimped shroud—and threw them into the furnace pile of glowing charcoal in the chimney-place.

Arabella Holte's first emotions of alarm and wonder now changed their character, and the haughty young lady could not forbear uttering an exclamation of indignant amazement at so flagrant and obvious a sign of contempt and rejection; though, as she imagined, on the part only of a spectral representative of the real doer of the deed. But this slight utterance, Rupert well knew from his own country's beliefs, entitled him to consider the spell broken, and justified him in awakening from his supposed magic slumber.

'Ha!' he exclaimed, suddenly starting round, and staring wildly about; 'where am I? What voice speaks there? Beautiful sorceress! is it you have summoned me, with so strange and deadly a swooning torture, from my quiet sleep to this witchcraft hut? But you shall pay the penalty—in your adoring lover's arms!'

And pretending for the first time to catch Miss Holte's fear-rapt gaze from the Witch's couch, the Prince rushed towards it.

Ere he reached it, however, she had sprung from it with a shriek of terror, and made a dart towards the door of the hut.

This only, however, placed her the sooner in his powerful grasp.

'Arabella! Miss Holte!' he then exclaimed, forgetful of his mystic part, 'whither are you going? There is nothing to alarm you. I am no spectre, no delusion. I am your faithful Rupert—your Prince—who adores you, though he cannot wed you, and whose affection you have seemed to repay!'

'Release me, sir; unhand me, if you be a Prince, as you say—if you be a gentleman of whatsoever degree! But you are some dreadful phantom, raised by the foul Witch of this hut, or you would never have had the base insolence and cruelty—'

'This, then, to convince my dearest Arabella I am no phantom but her own adoring Rupert,' exclaimed the coarse-minded royal trooper, detaining the young lady with no little violence, and endeavouring to stifle her exclamations of rage and indignation with his winey kisses. But on a sudden he felt himself seized behind by his long, mane-like hair, and torn away back with such force and fury, that when the powerful grasp which had seized him left its hold, the impulse yet sent him reeling headlong into a corner of the hut.

The rescuer's figure then emerged in the glow of the fire, distinct in its unusual proportions, before the gaze of Arabella Holte, who cowered at the sight, overwhelmed with shame and dread, with her hands over her face, to its very feet.

‘Tubal, Tubal!’ she exclaimed, ‘spare me—spare me! I have been betrayed into this miserable place. Spare me, and save me!’

‘Betrayed, Arabella Holte!’ a sad and quivering, though deep-toned voice replied, ‘betrayed by your own pride—by your own ambition—by your own faithlessness. I have heard all in the gossip of your servants at the Fairy Tree, and you can deceive me no more now. I have but saved you, perchance, from the least harmful consequences of your treason to nature and your own heart; the worst are in your soul.’

‘They are—they are! But I repent, Tubal. I feel within that inmost soul how falsely—how foolishly—how madly—I have followed the ambitious dictates of vanity and the aspiring fancies of my father. But be merciful now in your hour of triumph. Remember how you loved me once, and do not expose, do not ruin me now. Protect me from this heartless man—this Prince. Merciful heaven, protect yourself!’

This latter exclamation was occasioned by her observing Rupert’s approach, returning savagely on his strangely hastened steps, after a moment’s stupefaction of surprise and rallying in the corner where he was flung.

Tubal’s back being that way, of course he did not so immediately discern the probable assault. But he whirled round at once to face his antagonist, and, strange to say, when Rupert’s glance fell upon him, bold and impetuous and furiously excited as he was, he seemed struck with dismay, and stepped back involuntarily, quite yelling out the words—‘The Provost-Marshall’s Wild Man of the Woods!’

‘No, Prince—as you call yourself; no, unmanly and false wooer of Arabella Holte! I am Tubal Bromycham,

Lord of Birmingham, and leader of the good town against you and all your tyrannous masters. And I have loved this lady with all my heart and soul, and therefore with both do abhor and detest so false and treacherously designing a rival as you must be, after what I have seen and heard. And I challenge and defy you to dare even to cast upon Arabella Holte a profane glance while Tubal Bromycham is here to defend her honour with his life.'

'Madman! what is this you rave?' said Rupert, glaring with eyes in which a new and ferocious passion, in blood so untamed and hot as his, shot up its fire. 'You! some base mechanic slave as you seem, to set yourself up as the champion of Arabella Holte—against me!'

'Try else,' was Tubal's unshaken response.

'Miss Holte, do you sanction this extraordinary insolence!' exclaimed the Prince, wild with indignation at a species of opposition of all others the most surprising and exasperating in a person bred in the German superstitions of the rights and supremacies conferred by birth and rank.

'I place myself under the protection of this *man*, against your insulting treatment, *Prince!*' was Arabella Holte's reply.

'Indeed! is it so? Ha! and what *man* is this, madam? *Tubal Bromycham!* Tubal Bromycham! Insolent rebel! truly, I have been informed of you by the name. And you are here, here in the midst of the quarters of the King's soldiers, by night, by stealth, avowing yourself, with this audacity, head and leader of the atrocious and unprovoked sedition of Birmingham. Spy, traitor, dearly shall you abide the discovery! I arrest you as such. Surrender, or I cleave you to the chine,' cried the ferocious

royal soldier of fortune, drawing his sword, and flourishing it in menace over the head of the leader of the revolt of Birmingham, who thus audaciously announced himself his rival.

Arabella shrieked aloud, in the expectation of witnessing her unarmed rescuer's immediate immolation. But Tubal, by a sudden movement, stretching his long arms, rushing in and grappling with his foe, effectually frustrated his action, no scope remaining for the stroke of the weapon. Indeed, Rupert was even forced to abandon his sword to avoid being absolutely stifled in the powerful seizure to which he found himself subjected, which resembled that of the boa constrictor round the rhinoceros, and apply all his efforts to free himself from the pressure.

A violent struggle ensued, though only of brief duration, the antagonists being locked in so close an embrace of contention that it could hardly have been possible to tell, as it progressed, whose muscular powers were yielding to the other's. But Tubal Bromycham's extraordinary strength availed him against all the superior stature and dexterous efforts of the trained soldier, in whose education, at that time, wrestling formed an important branch of qualification. And the contest ended by his raising the whole stalwart and strenuously resisting figure of the Prince high in the air in his mighty arms, and dashing him backward down, with such violence to the earthen floor of the hut that he lay there stunned, bleeding, and insensible.

'Saints of mercy! What have you done, Tubal Bromycham?' gasped Arabella, ceasing at the spectacle from the shrieks she had not ceased to utter during the encounter. 'You have slain the nephew of the King!'

‘I have avenged an insult offered to Arabella Holte. I care not on whom. Moreover, the man threatened my life unfairly, I being weaponless,’ Tubal replied, with gloomy composure. ‘But I trust he is not dead, if you desire his life, Arabella. I have inflicted no mortal wound upon him, and have cast others as heavily ere now who were none the worse of it in life or limb a week after—unless he bleeds at the mouth; let me see.’

And Tubal knelt beside his fallen rival, and raising his head in his hand, remarked, ‘No, he is only stunned for awhile. But is he not totally at my mercy, were Tubal Bromycham the man to take the unfair advantage he fain would have taken of me?’

‘He is, he is, Tubal! But at least use the advantage of the time that may remain ere he revives to vengeance, or to the renewal of a conflict which at all events must end in my exposure and disgrace. Save yourself now, most generous man! I am safe, nothing requires your further delay here,’ exclaimed Arabella.

‘And leave you to revive him, to watch over him, to soothe, to comfort, to console with your caresses his defeat?’ Tubal replied, with fierceness; ‘rather will I perish here.’

‘No, no; such is not my intention. I will leave him here to his fate—to the care of his friend the Witch—the detestable hag will be sure to return anon; and will make my own way home to the Hall, and will protest henceforth so total an ignorance of all that has occurred here that he shall himself believe he has been fooled by some magic delusion of my presence. Only place yourself at once in safety, for were you discovered now, here—powers divine! you are already discovered, are lost! Look there, there—at the window, look!’

The unglazed opening by which Tubal had entered on the scene, after observing what happened on the exterior through the half-closed shutters, now let in a full glare of moonlight, and exhibited the figure of a dark man in a lawyer's robe. Tubal turned at the exclamation.

'It is either the devil or Richard Grimsorwe!' he exclaimed, after a moment's attentive survey.

'Tubal Bromycham here!—the Prince stretched on the floor!—Help, murder, help!—the Prince is murdered!'

Such outcry the figure made at the highest pitch of its ill-omened voice, and disappeared from the opening.

'Fly, Tubal, I tell you, fly. This wretch—ah! he has doubtless been in the treason of it all—will speedily summon assistance. There is an outpost of soldiers at no great distance, and—oh, if Grimsorwe gives the alarm, and I am discovered here, my honour too is gone! Otherwise, I can outface the world I never was here!' Arabella wildly implored.

'If you bid me, dearest Arabella; if you concern yourself for me so far as to wish me to place myself out of danger—'

'I do! I do!'

'And you will depart also?'

'I will, I will! Come this way—this way! I will go at the same moment. For my sake, *dear, dear* Tubal! if ever you have loved me, save your own life now, at once.'

'Oh, Arabella! dearest of women—most honoured of ladies, these words would raise me from the dead to do your will. I would die a thousand deaths for you, and you bid me live. Only leave at the same time; permit me only to see you in some place of safety nigh your father's house through the park—'

‘No, Tubal, no! there is no need; I have ample protection at the Fairy Oak; you know, two of my servants await me there; but every moment may be of consequence to secure your flight, which must surely not be that way. All is lost else; but what do I say? All is lost already! Hark, yonder, that bugle blast!’

A bugle, sounding the alarm note for cavalry, now indeed came to the hearing of the agitated interlocutors, and apparently from no great distance.

Tubal listened for a moment. ‘What can be the meaning of this?’ he exclaimed, stepping to the door of the hut, whither also Arabella affrightedly accompanied him.

The meaning of it was that Cornet Titus, who had guided Prince Rupert to the witchcraft scene, and was sauntering away at some considerable remoteness on the margin of the Fish Pools, but near enough to hear Miss Holte’s outcry, without making any manner of response, or even affecting to hear it, no sooner distinguished Grimsorwe’s yelled appeal than he returned in the greatest hurry and consternation towards the hut. And on the way, finding the terrifying exclamations repeated, raised the bugle with which he came furnished to his lips, and blew a blast, which was instantly answered by the appearance of a number of soldiers from an outpost on the skirts of a neighbouring wood. The alarm continuing, several of these men discharged their muskets, and were seen running breathlessly over the moonlit meadows towards the noise.

Seen by Arabella Holt and Tubal Bromycham the moment they reached the door of the hut.

The former seemed to abandon all hope at once, on discerning this approach. ‘Oh, I am lost, I am lost!’

she exclaimed. 'These men will find me here, and the whole dreadful scene will have to be explained to my destruction. This man—this prince—lying wounded, perhaps dead, out in such a spot, in my company! Shame and unutterable disgrace await me; and my father will kill me in his rage!'

'Be not afraid, dearest lady. Remember me sometimes with kindness, whatever befalls. Hie home at once at every speed you can make from this place, and I will hazard all to save you. Perhaps I shall myself escape also; but if not—if not—remember always that I died for you!'

So Tubal said; and snatching Miss Holte's hand to his lips for a single moment of delirious tenderness, he darted forward ere she could do anything to prevent him, or even inquire his meaning, and presented himself plainly to the approaching force. Then raising both his clenched fists, he shook them aloft in defiance, and with a shout of contemptuous challenge, like an Indian war-whoop, to his coming foes; moved off as if to betake himself for shelter among the scattered plantations in the rear of Maud Grimsorwe's wretched abode.

Arabella discovered at once the meaning of the manœuvre, that he purposed to be observed, and to direct the pursuit on his traces, at whatever personal hazard, so as to allow her time to effect her own escape from the disastrous and inexplicable scene.

For a moment a sensation of gratitude, love, pity—scarcely could it be said how many overpowering feelings of the kind—rushed in full tide through Arabella's heart, and almost she resolved to rush forth side by side with her heroic lover and share his fate, whatever it might be.

A moment's reflection assured her how useless the effort would prove; how much more likely to act harmfully for Tubal, and perhaps fatally hamper and delay his flight. She knew how famous he was for his feats of activity and speed; how thoroughly acquainted he was with the ground to be traversed; the short distance that would suffice to place him in safety in Birmingham; and hope for him revived in her heart. And with this hope the instinct of self-preservation—above all, of the preservation of that honour and repute which were so dear to the proud daughter of Sir Thomas Holte—reanimated her to the efforts necessary on her own part to render the generous sacrifice made to her of avail.

To lose fair fame and placing in the world for a man who despised, who contemned her in the only light in which he should have sought her, in which ambition only prompted herself to desire success, the very thought stimulated Arabella to any effort to avoid so deplorable an exposure and disgrace. Moreover, she had now no slight perception that she was the subject of an organized conspiracy of her enemies; to foil whose base plans were alone sufficient motive to exertion.

With this latter conviction in her mind, Arabella concluded hastily that her retreat would be anticipated in the direction she had come, by the Fairy Oak, probably watched for there by the villanous Grimsorwe. Very unluckily therefore she determined to take flight in another direction, without attempting to apprise Phœbe and Robin Falconer of the facts of the case, hoping that they, too, would take the alarm and retire unharmed. Indeed, it had been arranged, if any discovery was made, all parties were to betake them home to the Hall the best and speediest way they could.

Arabella gave a single glance back to the hut, now thoroughly lighted by the moonlight, and perceived with a new quickening of terror that Rupert was moving and stirring himself up from his stupefaction. What might not be his feelings of revenge and exasperation against herself also, after the injury and indignity he had suffered!

Arabella paused not to calculate, but with the affrighted speed of a hind that sees the jungle stirring for the unseen tiger's spring, rushed out of the hut and fled.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE CROSSBOW-SHOT.

UNLUCKILY, meanwhile, for all parties, Robin Falconer's attention had been at once attracted by the summons of the bugle.

His young mistress's terrified exclamations, as had been anticipated by the atrocious planners of the affair, had not reached his ears. But he started at once upon his feet from his loving chitchat with his betrothed, upon that dismal blast.

Phœbe Dewsnap jumped up beside him, greatly alarmed. 'What can it be?' she exclaimed.

'Do you see yonder creature, Phœbe?' the falconer replied, with his hair bristling upright.

Tubal Bromycham at the moment emerged, on his act of devotion, in the open before the Witch's hut.

It should be remembered that some allusion had already been made in the conversation of the pair to the dreadful phantom Provost-Marshal Storcks reported he had recently come upon in Aston Woods, and which was now a common story among the servants and other implicit trusters of the marvellous at Aston Hall.

'Oh, me, yes!' responded Phœbe; 'it is the Wild Man of the Woods the German hangman gentleman has been telling us all of late he has seen about ours at Aston.'

And the Witch has brought it here on purpose, and it has torn my poor young lady to pieces.'

'Deem you so, Phœbe? It was our young lady, then. Oh, it is like enough then my lass! The horrible old woman has always hated my master's house and name. But I will avenge her. Provost Storcks, who knew I was often out in the woods by night, taught me how to cope with a wehr-wolf. I have a bolt here for my crossbow which would bring down the fiend's self; for it is twisted with a silver sixpence, with the Grace of God outside. Of course, I have my bow slung on my shoulders, and here is moonlight clear enough to hit a sparrow on a top bough, much more a bulky thing like this.'

While the falconer spoke he was bringing round his weapon into his hold,—a weapon which was still considered appropriate for all rural field-sports, though already long superseded by the gun in man's destruction of his own species.

Those who have only seen the child's plaything of modern times have no notion of the power of this weapon, in skilful hands, in its ancient form of construction. With this, rather than the longbow, the English of Crecy and Poitiers thinned the overwhelming legions of their enemies ere they charged with axe and bill and pike, and cleared the field. The greater distance the musket would carry, and its easier management, were, in fact, the chief advantages of that instrument of destruction over the crossbow, until modern improvements gave it so deadly a precision and power.

Robin was famed for his skill with this arm, and Tubal Bromycham's rash generosity exposed him so completely to an aim, that it was no wonder when the

skilful falconer, acting upon the impulse of his own and of Phœbe's excited imagination, snatched his cross-bow and launched the charmed bolt, that it reached the mark.

The unfortunate 'Wild Man' was evidently struck just as he betook himself to a more rapid flight, having, as he considered, accomplished the object of drawing attention to his movements.

It was clear, for after staggering for a moment he fell.

'It is hit in the leg, I think, and falls just like a man,' said Robin, suddenly coming to a pause of consideration. 'I wonder whether it is a human creature, after all, and if I have shot it by mistake.'

'Let us go to the hut, and see after my poor mistress. There are plenty of people running the way of the horrid thing now,' said Phœbe; and in reality numerous figures of men and soldiers were seen scudding across the moon-lit meadows in the direction of the fallen Wild Man. And to complete the certainty of detection, a greyhound emerged from some stealthy covert and joined with its unerring organs in the general chase and halloo.

In some degree fortunately, however, Robin declared to the trembling Phœbe that she had better stay where she was, while he proceeded to ascertain the real nature of the fugitive he had brought to a stop. If her lady was torn to pieces, she could do no good, and might be uncomfortably involved in the transaction. And Phœbe was prevailed upon to hide herself in the oak until her sweetheart's return from what had now become the main point of attraction in the pursuit.

On arriving, Robin found a number of soldiers and Cornet Titus engaged in tracking, with the aid of the

hound, the course which the unfortunate fugitive had taken after being severely wounded, for it appeared as if he had dragged himself along the ground to a considerable distance, as no immediate traces could be found of him.

CHAPTER LXXX.

LOVE FOR LOVE.

ARABELLA accomplished her flight in safety to the Hall, though obliged to lose some time in the *détour* she made, to avoid the danger she apprehended on her proper line of retreat.

All was still and silent there. Even the alarm of the distant musketry appeared not to have reached the drowsy inhabitants of Aston, and the young lady unobservedly re-entered by a postern door belonging to the servants' hall, and by which, under Phœbe Dewsnap's guidance, she had left the mansion.

To what an agony of doubt and misery was she not however consigned, when, sinking breathlessly exhausted on her couch, Arabella Holte felt herself once more in personal safety, but abandoned to every species of horror in reflection.

Would Tubal Bromycham escape? Was there not likelihood the Prince was so seriously injured that what had happened to him must necessarily call for the severest and most betraying scrutiny.

On this latter point Arabella recalled with some hopefulness that she had left Rupert exhibiting signs of revival from the stunning effect of the violence to which his own violence had subjected him from his stronger

antagonist. But even so, would not revenge and a spirit of retaliation, very likely even of a jealous character, prompt him to deliver her over to ridicule and disgrace?

And if Tubal had found it impossible to evade the danger by which he was circled in, what would be the result?

Arabella knew she could depend to the death on the fidelity and silence of her heroic smith-lover, were he even captured and at the disposal of his enemies. But what would that disposal be under circumstances so strangely mixed and aggravating?

Moreover, who could say to what extent other parties were engaged in and cognisant of the true meaning of the strange discoveries probably inevitable?

Had she so nigh fallen a victim to a concocted plot; or was Richard Grimsorwe's presence at his grandmother's cottage an accident?

Had the witch in reality exercised a potency of art in bringing her two lovers—the true and honourable, the disdainful and wrongfully-purposing one—on the scene where they had figured? Or was the whole a cunning contrivance of Richard Grimsorwe's to bring her to disgrace and ruin?

How came Tubal to appear so strangely on the scene?

Nothing but Arabella's confidence in the sincere love and generous feeling of Tubal Bromycham towards her prevented her from entertaining this latter supposition. But well she knew nothing could have induced or cajoled him into any design that might by possibility be harmful to her. But, unless by magic compelled, how came he on such a scene at such a time?

These ideas added all the horrors of remorse and regret to her dread for the safety of the brave blacksmith.

And there were times, during the interval of suspense that ensued, when Arabella Holte felt as if she could scarcely restrain herself from rushing forth once more, and at every hazard ascertaining the fate of the noble-hearted man who had devoted himself with such generosity to her preservation.

What a contrast was he to the insulting royal lover, who had so plainly exhibited his notions of his superiority, and the unfair and dishonourable designs he entertained in all his pretended homage and courtship.

If Arabella Holte had not already experienced in the depths of her heart the strongest emotions of tenderness towards the chivalric and high-souled rival of that selfish and overbearing Prince, doubtless they would now have awakened in it. But it is certain which way the real affections and promptings of unbiassed female nature in her soul flowed, had not the strange perversities of opinion and of her father's will turned the true current aside.

Tubal Bromycham was surely in the ascendant now, since Arabella's principal support and consolation during the trying interval that ensued lay in recalling the fact that the Witch's experiments assigned him to her as a husband. If he was now to perish, that could not be, and the decrees of fate would come to nought.

Meanwhile, if only she could be assured Tubal was safe, an evasion from her other main difficulty suggested itself to her mind.

She had already established an *alibi* by her unobserved flight and return. But, in addition, she now undressed and transferred herself to her couch, lay down on it, and put on as much semblance of slumber, in preparation for the alarm she expected, as might perhaps have deceived an ordinary observation.

Accordingly, when about an hour after her return a loud knocking came at her chamber door, and the affrighted tones of her mother demanded admission, she feigned all the process of awaking from a sound sleep with singular address, and opened it at length with only the degree of panic fairly attributable to a night-rousing of the kind.

Lady Holte appeared in a dressing-robe, hastily thrown on, and exhibited every mark of consternation natural in a person of her weak nerves and present disorder of mind.

'Arabella, my child! my dear daughter!' she exclaimed, 'prepare yourself for bad news. Ah me, ah me! the Prince, the Prince! All is lost, all is lost!'

'I am prepared, dear mother, for the *very worst!*' Miss Holte replied, and truly in accents as if she meant what she said. And she did believe that all was discovered.

'Cornet Titus has just arrived at the Hall for the Prince's surgeon, and as many of his officers besides as can be at once assembled for a court-martial. You may well start, child. His Highness was taking his rounds by night, as his custom often is, alone, or with a single attendant officer, to make certain his men are at their posts, and watchful to perform their duties; and Cornet Titus had but left him a few minutes, on orders to visit a party lying out towards Oscott Woods, when a spy of the Birmingham people came upon his Highness, quite by surprise. But yet, with his natural courage and determination, the Prince resolved upon his arrest, and in a struggle that ensued is nearly killed. The fellow almost strangled, and then dashed him with such force to the ground, that he was stunned for several minutes,

and his Highness is now lying at the cottage of old Maud Grimsworth, the wicked old witch who hates us all so, only just sufficiently recovered in his faculties to be aware of what has happened, and give immediate orders for the trial and execution of the offender. So Cornet Titus reports, who, by great good fortune, happened to overhear the noise of the struggle, and summoned help to save the Prince from actual murder; for the villain is dreadfully strong, and had quite overpowered him.

Lady Holte said all this, but not by any means in so regular and connected a form of narration.

‘The trial and execution of the offender! Immediate! Tubal Bromycham a prisoner! Tubal Bromycham to be executed!’ exclaimed Arabella, now fairly aghast.

Every spark of hope, almost of vitality, seemed extinguished in her heart by these words.

‘Tubal Bromycham! How know you it is he, daughter? Yet Tubal Bromycham it is, according to the report of Robin Falconer, who was a main instrument in his capture. Good heavens, my dear child!’ Lady Holte continued, observing, though but in the moonlight, the deepening pallor and wild stare with which Arabella listened, ‘you are not concerned for this villanous rebel whom your father hates so much, and who has already done so much, by his presumption and mad attachment, to cause us all uneasiness. Nothing could be better than the opportunity that occurs to be rid for ever of such a troublesome knave, were it at a less price than this injury done the Prince, whom yet I could be well content we had never seen at Aston.’

‘To be rid for ever of such a troublesome knave!—for ever! What mean you, mother? Surely if the man is a prisoner, it is not intended to assassinate him!’ gasped Arabella.

‘ It is plain that he has come among us a spy, so Cornet Titus says; and accordingly the Prince has determined to make an immediate example of him as such; but in all due form, to show that he presumes on no infraction of his Majesty’s alleged truce with the town of Birmingham, which, nevertheless, not having been fairly accepted on their side, is of no force to protect an espial who ventures into his enemy’s quarters without leave and safeguard. So, at least, I heard the Cornet declare to Sir Thomas and some of the officers, who hastily assembled to accompany him back to Maud’s hut.’

It was now little or no consolation to Arabella Holte that she plainly discerned the Prince himself, and the other parties to the transaction, had determined to give it the best public gloss they could, and altogether to omit the witchcraft occurrences.

In truth, all parties had nearly equal interest to avoid exposing their shares in the wicked intrigue. And it was plain, if Richard Grimsorwe and Titus were involved in it—which Arabella had grown strongly to suspect—they had found it advisable to assist in putting the varnish indicated on the catastrophe. Of course, they expected that Miss Holte would readily take her cue, and be glad to extricate herself from the unpleasant position at so trifling a cost—as no doubt it seemed to most of those concerned—as the life of Tubal Bromycham.

Very probably indeed the revengeful nature of Richard Grimsorwe exulted in bringing a person who had inflicted on himself a disgraceful chastisement to so ignominious and sudden a doom. And perhaps, if he imagined Arabella had a species of secret liking towards her outwardly scorned woer, the pain she must suffer in consequence only added a zest to the gratification of his other rancorous animosity.

It is certain that it was he who urged upon Prince Rupert, the moment he was sufficiently recovered to attend to his suggestions, the propriety of losing not a moment in the chastisement of so insolent and outrageous an offender. And the more immediate the better, he urged, to prevent danger of a general collision with the Birmingham people, which the King might not approve, but which the prospect of saving their chief might provoke.

On the other hand, he easily convinced Cornet Titus how expedient, how necessary for all parties it was to conceal the disgraceful facts attending the scene of witchcraft. And the Cornet readily led the Prince over to his opinion, who felt that his own behaviour in the transaction was very little to his credit, and who saw his vengeance assured in another manner.

To conceal the deadly emotion she experienced on her mother's statement, and gain time for a few moments' internal reflection, Arabella inquired of Lady Holte, after a short pause, how the person accused as a spy had been taken.

What did it matter, in reality, if taken he was ?

Nevertheless, Lady Holte's reply deepened what had previously seemed the complete desperation of the tidings she communicated.

'By the greatest good luck in the world,' she said, 'Robin Falconer happened to be out in the woods with his crossbow, seeking by the moonlight for an escaped heron-hawk of our mews. And hearing the wonderful alarm, and seeing a creature scud past, which, from its strange appearance, he concluded to be the Wild Man of the Woods that has of late been seen so much about here, he sent a bolt after him that hit him in the kneecap,

and lamed him so that he could no longer run. But even then he crawled himself into the sedges on the bank of the great Swan Pool, and might perhaps have escaped, but that a greyhound—your greyhound, Arabella—how strange, is it not?—which you called after the Prince, darted out of some covert, joined in the chase, and discovered him bleeding and helpless there.'

New causes for bitter self-reproach and anguish on the part of Arabella Holte. Had she returned to the Fairy Tree, instead of preferring her own safety to everything else, Robin Falconer would not have remained on the theatre of events to perpetrate this crowning mischief. But for her cruel submission to the witch's decrees, the greyhound-detective would not have been there either.

'What have they done with the prisoner?' Arabella inquired, in a faint tone.

'Robin Falconer, who brings this part of the news, says that Provost Storcks, who happened to be at the outpost, has bound him so that it is impossible he should break loose, strong as he is as Samson, and he is cast into the hollow of the Fairy Oak, with a guard of musketeers, with their pieces loaded and levelled, all round it. And Robin was ordered by Richard Grimsorwe himself, who made at once to the spot on the first alarm of firing, which no one else at the Hall heard, to bring this portion of the intelligence here.'

'Richard Grimsorwe is in the whole treason, then,' thought Arabella, 'since he takes such pains to assist in giving a plausible varnish to the affairs.'

She was silent for some moments, lost in miserable and anxious reflections.

'Where is my father?' she then said to Lady Holte, with a sudden brightening and eagerness in her tones.

‘Gone at once to Maud’s cottage with a number of the Prince’s officers, and every assistance that could be thought of at the moment,’ her mother replied.

‘Well, then, dear mother, we must not seem behind-hand in our attentions,’ said Arabella; ‘let us hasten there also, with some of your damsels, to render any female help in our power. The unhappy prisoner may need some also; and surely common humanity—’

‘My dearest child, you do not surely propose to drive your father furious by any display of interest in the fate of this unfortunate young man!’ exclaimed Lady Holte, in great consternation. ‘He will visit it upon us all, if you do.’

Arabella shuddered; but she replied, with a singular kind of dignity and fixity of resolve that in a manner awed Lady Holte into silence and submission, ‘Whatever comes of it, mother, I must—and I will do—what God and the truth, and my own heart, alike point out to me to do; and if you will not accompany me yourself to the scene of this pretended court-martial on a spy—who is none—I go alone.’

‘Then you needs must, Arabella,’ said the nerveless mother, sinking into a chair in a flood of tears. ‘I dare not go with you, if you go in any manner to contravene your father’s will.’

‘Be that as it may, mother; I will never lie down with the blood of the noblest of men, and one who is altogether innocent of the offence imputed to him, on my head!’

And while yet speaking, Arabella proceeded hastily to dress herself for an out-door excursion, while the day-break suddenly illumining the chamber, lit up her toilette for the operation, but seemed chiefly to warn her of the necessity of losing no time.

‘Tubal Bromycham wounded—bleeding—bound! condemned to the gallows for my sake! It ought not—it shall not—it must not be!’ she exclaimed; and said no more until she was ready to start on her expedition, attended by Phœbe Dewsnap—who now re-appeared—and several elder female servants.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

TUBAL, A PRISONER.

PHŒBE DEWSNAP'S eyes looked very red on rejoining her young mistress ; but she did not venture to declare why, in the presence of Lady Holte.

On the way, however, to the scene of disastrous action she crept up to Miss Holte, and whispered that she had a few words to say in private. It was a message from Tubal Bromycham, who had been brought by his captors, grievously wounded, to the Fairy Oak, while Phœbe was still in hiding there, and flung in before they were aware it had another tenant. Miserably hurt and suffering as he was, no attention being paid to his injuries other than to carry him, as he was unable to walk, the gallant blacksmith had hastily availed himself of the opportunity to bid her assure her lady that no extremity could move his fidelity, and that he died happy since he died for her.

It may be thought if this affecting additional proof of her lover's heroic attachment slackened Arabella's movement to what she intended should be to his relief from the terrible position in which he stood.

With what a different step she now advanced to that she had forced upon herself a few hours previously, in going to the witch's assignation !

Nothing could show more clearly how powerfully the

moral nature of man works upon his physical one, than the now rapid and resolved gait of Arabella Holte, when her mind was conscious of a good and loving and exalted purpose.

Still, her strength of will and power alike almost yielded to the anguish of the spectacle that awaited her at the Fairy Oak, by which she purposely directed her way to Maud Grimsorwe's hut.

As the lady and her attendants approached, they distinguished a complete circle of dismounted troopers standing at marked intervals around the tree, with their loaded carbines levelled at it, and their horses feeding, bridled and bitted, beside them.

Cornet Titus was in command of these men; and as the visitors approached, they plainly distinguished he was laughing and bandying jokes with a sinister-looking man, in a black leather uniform, who was at the same time engaged in watching the operations of another, up among the few remaining branches of the tree. On his part, this latter was engaged in strongly securing a rope to a projection, which dangling down, showed that it finished in a hangman's slip-noose.

These two latter persons were Provost-Marshal Storcks and Robin Falconer, who was assisting in the preparations to finish off a victim whom he doubtless looked upon from his own point of view—of a loyalist vassal of the house of Holte, and gamekeeper—as a most pernicious criminal.

Yet all these dreadful and significant adjuncts of the scene were, perhaps, of less horror than what was discerned on a nearer approach. A stream of bright red blood was flowing from the oak, as from a slaughter-house; and though no sound of complaint or suffering

came from the interior, it could be little doubted but that the emptying veins of the captive supplied the source.

Arabella perceived this the moment she arrived at the cordon placed round the tree, and although Titus, observing the approach, advanced to intercept it, a few steps beyond his carbineers.

‘What do you want, madam?’ he said, puzzled and even alarmed at her extraordinary expression; ‘it is only a Birmingham villain, who assailed the Prince’s Highness, that is confined within there.’

Arabella pointed, with a ghastly and really terrible glare, from the Cornet to the crimson soaking of the grass before the opening into the hollow old oak.

‘I wish to bandage the poor man’s wounds,’ she replied. ‘Surely, ye are not quite wolves to desire his blood to lap!’

‘What is the use, madam? The court-martial must nigh have finished its proceedings, and there can be no doubt what will be the result to so notorious a seditioner and spy. The fellow’s gallows is already slung,’ returned the officer, indicating the halter and its noose with a malicious smile.

‘The court-martial! Tubal Bromycham a spy! No, no; but at least he is not condemned to bleed to death now and at once. Give me way, sir!’

‘Take it, madam. But I warn you, Miss Holte,’ Titus continued, in a low tone, accompanying the lady to the tree; ‘Richard Grimsorwe has informed the Prince of your old affair with this Birmingham smith, and what is suspected in the matter. Do not by your conduct support his malignant insinuations.’

‘Nest of serpent betrayers and perjurers. I care nothing for anything you can all do now. O Tubal,

Tubal! dear, faithful lover of mine! speak, if you yet live!

The exclamation was very naturally occasioned when, entering the species of narrow-circular chamber formed by the hollow trunk of the ancient tree, Arabella perceived the unfortunate object of her search. Tubal lay crouched in a most uncomfortable position, his arms being pinioned behind him to his heels by strong ropes, pallid as death itself, with the gore oozing from his wounded knee, both his eyes closed, and a cold sweat of agony bathing his excruciated features. Silent, nevertheless, as an Indian at the stake.

The sound of Arabella's voice acted like a charm. Tubal's clenched brows relaxed, he opened his faint and swimming eyes, and a bright effulgence broke over all his visage as he slowly recognised the beloved form.

Yet still he remembered what was confided, he deemed, to his faithful secrecy.

'Gentle Mistress Holte here!' he said, in a tone of respectful gratitude; 'this indeed sweetens death! And if you come to announce it, lady, my sentence itself will still sound like music in my ears.'

'Dearest Tubal! you are wounded grievously. I hope yet to save you, but if you bleed to death meanwhile—let me bandage your wound,' said Arabella, brokenly; and flinging herself in a passion of grief and remorse beside the wounded man, she tremulously but resolutely produced a pair of scissors, with which she commenced cutting away the covering of the injured limb.

But Tubal endeavoured, as well as his fettered condition allowed him, to decline this service.

'Nay, dear lady,' he said, while his whole countenance grew in its lustrous intensity of love and strange expres-

sion of delight, 'trouble not yourself, and me, for the little space that remains. My destruction is certain, at the hands of my enraged enemies; and if I can die of this welling of my life-blood forth, it were best for me, and will spare the last Lord of Birmingham's perishing by a felon's doom. Best for me in other ways, dearest Arabella,' he continued, in deeply moved and tenderly-consoling tones, doubtless observing the young lady's look of anguished dissent; 'for since you can never be mine, my suffering in that knowledge and belief have reconciled me very heartily to die!'

'But I *will* be yours, Tubal, if you will only live to make me so! I swear it! At least, I will never be another's. No temptation, no force, shall ever alter my resolve; and so I will proclaim to all the world at once, if only you will live to recompense my devotion by your love! And now will you let your plighted wife, Tubal, tent your wound?' Arabella exclaimed.

'Heavenly powers! but this is a cruel happiness!' Tubal replied. 'Yes, I could live for ever on such a promise, but my foes will not suffer it. And, besides, beloved Arabella! only a surgeon's, or a blacksmith's, pincers could relieve me of my main hurt. The cross-bow-bolt is sticking in the joint of my knee, which disabled me in my flight, and even by its overmastering agony subdued me into a swoon, from the purpose I entertained, of rather drowning in the pool near which I fell, than falling alive into the hands of my enemies.'

'I will draw it out, if need be, with my teeth alone! But perchance some grasp may remain to the bolt,' Arabella eagerly replied, proceeding in her humane task.

Phœbe Dewsnap was by this time by her mistress's

side, with a sponge and various other articles, hastily provided with a view to the use they were now turned to, though ostensibly to be of service in the Prince's injuries. And she now lent her handy assistance, clamouring at the same time to Robin Falconer to leave off playing hangman's 'prentice, and bring some water.

The falconer, who began confusedly to comprehend he was somehow in the wrong in the zealous assistance he was rendering, slid down from the oak at once, and hastily obeyed the orders he received.

It was a piece of singular good hap, in the midst of so much disaster, that on Tubal's wound being washed the head of the crossbow-bolt plainly appeared. It was, however, so deeply and strongly embedded in the knee-bone, that all Arabella Holte's efforts to remove it must have been futile but for Robin Falconer's aid, in the absence of the usual surgical instruments for an extraction of the kind. After trying his own strength for some minutes in vain, in consequence of the slight hold remaining above the bone to the bolt, he disappeared from the hut for a moment. Then, reappearing with a pair of forceps, he quaintly remarked, 'I saw where the Prince's surgeon put his tools, when he found they were not wanting for *him*;' and applying the instrument with considerable dexterity—under Arabella's directions—he proceeded to wrench out the cause of suffering, by the exertion of all his strength, in unison with the mechanical power.

We will not speak of the superhuman agony undergone by Tubal Bromycham during this rough operation. Some groans were wrung even from his strong breast, while his countenance writhed all over with the severity of the sufferings inflicted. But he fixed his straining

eyes on Arabella, and seemed to derive power to endure every extremity of pain from the intense and absorpt expression of love and agonized sympathy in hers. But when the bolt yielded at last, and was in a manner torn out of the bone it was fixed in, even Tubal's mighty power of endurance gave way, and with a shriek of agony he swooned away. He revived to find Arabella tenderly bathing his visage with fresh cold water, and that his wounded limb was carefully bandaged in linen and twisted tow. But it seemed to him that the hot tears which rained from her eyes over him did more to revive him than the cooler fluid, or the sense of relief from the excessive pain that had previously tormented him. He could only, however, look his gratitude; speech was denied him.

Precisely at this moment also the figure of Cornet Titus appeared at the entrance of the hollow tree, indicating the scene within to a person whom Arabella recognised, with a vague and indifferent sense of surprise, as Count O'Taafe; probably returned, by a remarkable coincidence at so strange a conjuncture of events, from his mission to the King.

'Is it not all as I tell you, Count? And will the Prince need any other remedy for his silly passion but a true report of this scene?' Titus said, without any effort to conceal his malignant satisfaction.

'I should say not! The whole thing puzzles me amazingly!—I would not stand between his Highness and his just vengeance. And yet the King's orders are strangely peremptory, and I come upon a hot spur, I can tell you! But let me see the Prince at once; the circumstances may justify rigour, since the ruffian is also a notorious traitor and spy!' Count O'Taafe replied,

raising his hat to Miss Holte ; who, however, took no manner of notice of the politeness, continuing absorbed in her loving task.

The Count and the Cornet exchanged some further whispered observations ; and then the former, murmuring, ' Let her do what she likes. By all means let her expose herself as much as possible ; only keep the prisoner safe,' moved onward from the tree in the direction pointed out to him as Prince Rupert's quarters, for the time, at Maud's hut.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

ON arrival, and entering at the open door, Count O'Taafe found a very unusual company assembled under that lowly roof. Nearly all the officers of the royal cavalry stationed at Aston Hall were present, engaged in a noisy and excited confabulation round their chief.

Prince Rupert himself sat on the witch's unsavory couch, looking very pale, for he had not long been bled by his surgeon, who was engaged in binding his arm ; while Sir Thomas Holte, officiously assisting, held the bright steel basin which had much more reverently received that royal fluid than the earth had drunk the heroic blood of Tubal Bromycham.

Perhaps the remedy was proper enough in this case, in the state of ferocious excitement to which Rupert revived from his overthrow by the Birmingham smith. But it was at that period almost the invariable first move of the mediciner's art to bleed a patient. No matter what his malady, exhaustion or otherwise—bleed, bleed, bleed !

In this instance the remedy had certainly produced but little effect to moderate the exasperation and violence of the impatient patient's passions. The moment his glance fell upon O'Taafe, though he had not seen him

for now several weeks, and his return was unexpected, the Prince exclaimed, 'Ha, Count! do you bring me the King's permission to let myself loose on this whole perfidious and audacious people in their town?'

O'Taafe was about to commence his reply by some expressions of condolence at the sad condition in which he found his Prince, when the latter fiercely interrupted him.

'I do not ask for pity, man! I hate it—I abhor it! I want vengeance! Not on one alone, but on all these traitors! Does the King consent?'

'We are all friends here, I think?' said O'Taafe, glancing round the assembly, and only pausing with a moment's hesitation as his eye fell on the countenance of Richard Grimsorwe, lit with a fiendish expression of triumph even in the darkness of the recess where he had stationed himself.

'*All*, Count! Speak with every imaginable freedom,' returned Rupert, impetuously.

'I will then, sir; and I grieve to say that his Majesty has most strictly forbidden any violation of his protection granted Birmingham until—until he has re-established his royal authority by the overthrow of his open rebels in the field,' replied O'Taafe, evidently to his own distaste; but adding, in a cheerfuller tone, 'and to this intent, his Majesty being now most wonderfully thronged to by his loyal subjects of all degrees, and set up in an army amply sufficient for the purpose, proposes to march at once by way of these cities and provinces upon London. It is no wonder, therefore, that his civilian prompters and counsellors have persuaded him how needful it is not to add to the obstacles on his march, or to the vexations on his rear, by provoking the people of

these parts into open hostility and rebellion. But I bring you, Prince, his Majesty's appointment to the supreme command of his cavalry, and instructions to advance with all the force you have, or can gather in, to cover his projected movement from the west. And by way of further consolation, his royal plight and word that, as soon as ever his authority is re-established in London, you shall have an altogether free and unfettered commission to reduce these counties to the utterest submission, and visit upon all concerned in the recent seditions in Birmingham the utmost punishment of their offences.'

Rupert seemed but little mollified by the statement, though an object of ambition was thus assured him he had been for some time passionately striving after, but which the King, his uncle, had not at first dared to confer upon so young a leader.

'What! the Birmingham knaves go scot-free until their London aiders and abettors meet their deserts,' he exclaimed. 'Well! for the mass of them, if it must be so, let it be so. But this traitorous spy—this audacious *boute-feu* (incendiary), who is in our hands, he shall die the death, if the King stood here in person to say no. The law-martial over-rides every other. Gentlemen, what say you? I have explained to you how I found the rascal prowling about in my camp as a spy; Master Grimsorwe has told you how he is the very heart and hand of the whole revolt of the town of Birmingham: needs there any more witnesses to send the rogue to the gallows?'

'And lose not a moment about it, gentlemen, I do advise you, or you will have a swarm of those madmen out to the rescue, and a general pell-mell and massacre,

which will be of great injury to his Majesty's affairs,' chimed in the malicious Grimsorwe.

'So say I, gentlemen. You will rid the whole neighbourhood here of a most pestilent disturber and ill-conditioned fellow, as well as deprive the Birminghams of their only leader that is truly to be dreaded in that capacity. A mechanic rogue, too, forsooth, who sets himself up for Lord of Birmingham,' subjoined Sir Thomas Holte, with perhaps a still more inhuman and rancorous eagerness, considering how heavily the balance of wrong inclined against himself to Tubal Bromycham. But his pride and self-will, and probably no slight consciousness of danger to be apprehended in that direction, urged him to assist in the destruction.

And yet, as plainly appeared, Sir Thomas was unaware of the abundant increase of reasons for his fears which had arisen within so brief a time. He looked completely startled and bewildered when Count O'Taafe exclaimed, 'I am glad to hear you say so, Sir Thomas, for not a minute ago I left your daughter, Miss Holte, attending and succouring this rebel, with much more devotion and zeal than methinks it is likely she would bestow on any of us, the King's most faithful soldiers, or even on his royal nephew himself, whom she seems to have postponed to visit until the occasions of the wounded renegade in question are fully served.'

'You are raving, of a surety, Count O'Taafe,' replied Sir Thomas vehemently; 'and I have already shown to you all, I will permit no idle tampering in anything that concerns my daughter's name.'

'You have only told me *half* the truth, then, Master Grimsorwe,' Rupert said, with similar passion. 'And this insolent blacksmith's pretensions to your father's

daughter have met with her approval and acceptance too.'

'Impossible, Prince! Your Highness knows not what you say. It was my daughter herself revealed the knave's presumption to me, and thereby justified the disgraceful punishment to which I subjected him in the village stocks,' exclaimed Sir Thomas.

'Here she comes—here my *poor sister* comes—to answer for herself. She will soon disprove this absurd notion your Highness has taken, so far as regards her,' said Grimsorwe, much agitated, catching a view from where he stood of the approach of the young lady, now quite alone. He knew not what to think of the singular revolution the affair had undergone; but aware of his own villanous proceedings, trembled at any possibility of exposure.

'Let us get rid of the seditious scoundrel then, in the first instance,' Rupert upon this exclaimed, with his usual impetuosity. 'What say you, gentlemen? You are a regularly enow constituted court-martial for the trial of so notorious an offender, whom I myself detected in these enclosures, and who resisted me to the hazard of my life, which he attempted with a brutish peasant violence. Do you not find this Tubal Bromycham came as a spy into our quarters, and as such is worthy of the gibbet?'

'There can be no doubt in such a case, your Highness; but the King's commands are so positive. Let us put it formally to the vote,' said Count O'Taafe, anxious to relieve himself from a responsibility he felt rather likely to be cast upon him. 'Do you condemn this Tubal Bromycham, then, for a spy in the quarters of his Highness the Prince?'

‘Say no, sirs! for ye cannot so condemn Tubal Bromycham with any right or justice,’ said the bright, fierce, resolved accents of Arabella Holte, who at this moment stepped into the hut, with the majesty of a goddess descending to the rescue of some favourite champion of pagan romance, and with much of some such celestial’s absence of mortal dreads and considerations. So fixed, indeed, in her resolves and utterances, that Destiny herself could scarcely have seemed more so. Pale, it is true, as marble, but as impenetrable and settled in her expression of determination.

. A general silence was struck into all present by this arrival, and the words that accompanied it.

Her father appeared to be the first who recovered from the surprise. ‘What say you, foolish girl?’ he exclaimed, and yet very confusedly. ‘How concerns it you what happens to this man? He is justly condemned as a spy, wandering, as he did, within these forbidden precincts.’

‘No, sir; Tubal Bromycham is not in Aston as a spy. He came here last midnight, as I myself came here last midnight, as the Prince came here last midnight—by the enforcement of a magic spell set in action by the witch-grandmother of your traitorous bastard yonder, Richard Grimsorwe. The Prince cannot deny what I say, on his faith and honour as a true man and gentleman; but I have other witnesses. And I say that at my request, and to win the reward I promised her, Maud Grimsorwe undertook to show me, by her sorcerer’s craft, who must be my husband by the decrees of fate. And it proved *not* to be this Royal Prince, but the brave blacksmith, leader of the people of Birmingham, whom, for my own part, and with all my heart and soul, I do accept as such!’

There was another still more astonished pause of utter silence ; and again it was Sir Thomas Holte who broke it. ‘ Good Lord ! ’ he exclaimed ; ‘ one thing at least is plain, is certain—my child is, and must be bewitched, to utter such madness as this. Where is the hellish sorceress, that I may fling her myself into the flames.’

‘ I am not mad, father. No ; nor *now* bewitched ! I was bewitched when I subjected myself to the meanness and disgrace of endeavouring to win a man who considers me fit enough to be his mistress, but not his wife ; who has openly shown so. Prince, can you deny it ? ’

Rupert looked at the lady with a most extraordinary change and brightening up of expression. His proud and fierce nature was stirred by the whole surprising act of courage and self-assertion, in a very different manner than might have been expected. It is true, besides, that Arabella Holte never appeared more supremely beautiful, more royal by nature, fitter to mate with the loftiest and most leonine, than on this momentous occasion. No doubt, also, Rupert had conceived a stronger passion for the lovely and brilliant companion of so many pleasures and leisure hours as he had shared during his visit at Aston, than he himself was aware, and which burst into an extraordinary flame in his impetuous temperament, thus contraried by events. Love, pride, jealousy, revenge—shame at the prospect of a fuller exposure of the violence he had attempted against the honour of his host and of an unprotected woman, in the presence of such an audience, all conspired to drive the Prince upon the singular resolution he adopted at once. Moreover, the royal trooper’s passions, violent as they were, were extremely devoid of delicacy and sentiment.

To the astonishment of all who listened, he replied,

'No, Miss Holte ; I do not, I cannot deny your accusation ; but I trust I shall make ample amends for whatever has hitherto been amiss in my conduct towards you and your family, and falsify the pretension of witchcraft which, I suppose, this spy fellow also relies upon, by declaring that I am willing at this very moment to give you my hand in marriage, under your father's sanction, provided you will prove to me it is not true you have a preference for yonder vile rebel, by withdrawing your plea for him, and consigning him freely to the gallows.'

There was indeed now a more awful pause of astonishment and suspense than had yet taken place. Sir Thomas himself could not speak for eagerness, and turned to his daughter with his mouth wide open for utterance, but unable to articulate a single word of entreaty.

No words, however, could have been more eloquent ; and it is probable that the strongest emotion that struggled in Arabella's breast after the avowal, was prompted by her sorrow at the disappointment she was obliged to give her father in reply. Possibly, she even hesitated for a brief instant on her own account, on so unexpected an opportunity of gratifying what had hitherto been the master-impulses of her nature. But, to the credit of all womanhood, and of her own noble, though so long perverted heart, Arabella Holte vanquished the temptation. The image of the generous Tubal, sacrificing all for her—bound, wounded, bleeding, suffering—to be consigned upon her word to a death of ignominy, that she might wed with a cruel and relentless rival, arose almost actually before her gaze, and she shrunk back from the Prince's extended hand.

'You are generous, Prince,' she yet strove to say. 'You have achieved a noble triumph over yourself. But

it is too late ; my affections and my most sacred pledge are Tubal Bromycham's. Exhibit yourself, then, still more princely and heroic in another form. Acknowledge the justice of my appeal ; release your cruelly maltreated and all but dying antagonist ; who, in his turn, spared you when you were still more completely at his mercy, and win my everlasting applause and gratitude. Or let me share whatever doom you inflict on Tubal, on my lover ; the only husband ever I shall wed, happen what will !'

'Madwoman ! I tell you all, sirs ; I assure your Highness, all this that she is saying is because she is bewitched. The hag of this hovel's devils are speaking in her. Where is she ? I will make her confess as much, if there be any skill in thumbikins and fire,' roared Sir Thomas Holte.

'Faith, I think you are all bewitched together!' shouted O'Taafe, quite bewildered by his royal patron's last strange outburst. 'And so I will inform the King, if a stop is not put to all this nonsense at once.'

Rupert had been silent since his impetuous movement, swallowing to the dregs the bitter cup of mortification forced on his unaccustomed lips.

He now spoke up, in as unusual a tone, for him, of satirical and suppressed rage.

'A stop shall be put, Count O'Taafe, on so much as regards myself, the nephew of the King !' he said. 'Gentlemen, our court-martial is dissolved, and the prisoner dismissed unharmed upon this reasonable plea raised for him by Mistress Holte. For there can be no doubt we are all labouring under some witchcraft, delusion, and temptation—the man of Birmingham as well as we at Aston. Moreover, I cannot but feel it would be most

ungenerous of me to deprive Miss Holte of so distinguished a husband, and Sir Thomas Holte of so distinguished a son-in-law, whose descent, I am told, is of little less antiquity, and scarcely more impoverishment than mine own, and who, if not a soldier, is of the next honourable craft in some nations' reckoning! And so I advise you to join your daughter's hand with this brawny blacksmith's forthwith, Sir Thomas, and send the bride and bridegroom home at once to housekeeping in Birmingham. For me, I will to horse as instantly, and be halfway on my road to Shrewsbury ere sunset of this foolish day!'

'Miserable girl! madwoman! And as a madwoman I will keep you henceforth a captive on bread and water, in chains, and straw, and a dark room, until you acknowledge yourself as such—from this husband of yours, forsooth!' yelled Sir Thomas Holte, now in reality himself fairly frantic with rage; and seizing his daughter by the arm, he tore her furiously away. 'Come, if you would avoid my curse in addition, I say!' he continued, dragging her with a cruelly violent precipitation after him, perceiving that she turned as if again to address the Prince. But still Arabella, with a truly admirable sustaining of resolution, called out to Rupert, 'Keep good faith with me, Prince; or the hand of a madwoman, indeed, shall avenge Tubal Bromycham!' resigned herself to her father's violent will.

It may be thought that Sir Thomas did not suffer his unhappy child to return to Aston Hall by the way of the Fairy Oak!

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

A REAL SPY.

As a first consequence of the events described, Aston Hall and its neighbourhood were almost immediately afterwards relieved of the presence of Prince Rupert and his Cavaliers.

Very seasonably, it was thought in Birmingham, when the principal leader and champion of the town was brought back to it in so maimed and disconsolate a condition as Tubal Bromycham appeared in, when a flag of truce announced the approach, and half-a-dozen troopers carried him on a hurdle to the barriers of the town, and there left him.

He was found to be grievously wounded in the knee, though carefully bandaged, and insensible with loss of blood. Nor was he able for a considerable period after to give any account how he came in his deplorable condition, a fever and delirium ensuing. But it could pretty well be guessed, since he was returned from Aston by the enemy.

Tubal was conveyed home to the Moat House, where he was immediately attended by a crowd of sympathising friends.

Firebrace and his daughter were earnestly conspicuous among these; but even Dame Cooper, who had quite

taken a liking for her former dispossessor, devoted herself now with almost as kindly zeal to nurse and restore him, as if she had been his mother. As for the townspeople of Birmingham, to whom Tubal's popular and heroic qualities had so long endeared him, nothing could exceed their grief and indignation when they heard what had befallen him.

Sisyphus and his dark alliance made some efforts to take advantage of this feeling to stir up a renewal of tumult and violence. But the departure of Rupert and his troops removed the principal objects of dislike and vengeance. Moreover, the other chiefs and elders of the town grew more than ever disinclined to hazard further exhibitions of hostility to the royal cause; and for the very good reason, that reports were now rife of a great army collecting round the King, which it was natural to suppose would speedily be on the march, and in a condition to execute any kind of vengeance he might ordain.

Pretexts were also wanting; for if Tubal Bromycham's injuries enabled one side to call for vengeance, on the other the King's favourers could declare that his being restored to his friends alive was a most convincing proof of his Majesty's and his officers' goodwill to preserve the truce, or peace, agreed upon. It was plain he had ventured into the enemy's quarters, for whatever reason, and might fairly have been treated as a spy. And when Tubal himself revived to a sense of things, he gave a most favourable version of his treatment, and forbade any attempt whatever at reprisal on the inhabitants of Aston, who were left now comparatively without defence.

Even Edward Holte and his troopers were destined shortly after to be withdrawn from Sutton.

He received orders, couched in a friendly style, but no longer to be evaded without open disobedience, from Prince Rupert, as General of the King's Horse, to join him at Shrewsbury. And the sadness of this parting for the husband-lover, so he continued, was at once heightened and soothed in an extraordinary degree by the revelation which Dorothy then felt it necessary to make, that there was every probability of his becoming in some few months a father.

The circumstance, both felt, must soon render it inevitable, for the preservation of the fair fame of the wife of Edward Holte, to avow their marriage. But the dangers and perplexities of such a revelation were sufficiently clear, and seemed even increased by the state of affairs at Aston Hall. Sir Thomas Holte appeared to his family and servants, accustomed as they were to his tyrannies, to have become a real madman, in the extraordinary way he was going on.

When, at Tubal's entreaties, the moment he could explain his motives, Edward made a visit to Aston Hall to inquire after his sister, Sir Thomas refused to allow him to see her. He bitterly reproached his son with being capable of strengthening her obstinacy against the splendid alliance which, he haughtily declared, he had brought about for her, and which he was determined she should consent to. But Edward learned from his mother's terrified hints that Arabella was consigned to a captivity of strange severity in some of the upper apartments of the house, to hinder her, according to Sir Thomas, from running away from an offer of marriage with a Prince, to the arms of a beggarly mechanic. The poor lady herself was denied to see her child, who was subjected to much other surprising harshness in the way of diet and deprivation of society.

Edward Holte was not only sincerely grieved on his sister's account at this state of things, but his own difficulties and perils were evidently increased by all he learned concerning the reason of her maltreatment.

Tubal, of course, knew only what happened between himself and her, and was ignorant of the means by which his release had been brought about. But Sir Thomas's gorgeous boasts, and his furious demeanour on finding his will thwarted in the exaltation of his family, showed Edward plainly what he had himself to expect in a discovery of his secret marriage. And, moreover, he was at liberty to apprehend Arabella's resistance to the royal offer made her, if made it was, would not last long under such pressure. And he could scarcely doubt it was the case; for the haughty old man answered the remonstrances he ventured with a fierce declaration that the Prince had actually made it, and in the hearing of Richard Grimsorwe and the chief part of his officers. The exact circumstances, however, he would not detail, and Edward disdained to question his sullen bastard brother. But now, if the event should really come to pass, the baronet's pride would swell beyond all limits, and he would look upon Edward's misalliance with a thousand times more exasperated eyes.

Tubal's emotions on receiving so much intelligence as could thus be gathered were curiously mixed.

Joy and triumph, unbounded love, contended in his heart with grief and indignation at the maltreatment of Arabella Holte on his account. Amazement that she should in reality have so far vanquished her ruling passions; that her love of him should have achieved so magnificent a triumph over her ambition, struggled continually in his reflections, with dread that it could not

really be, or that she could not resist continued temptation. All this kept up the fever in his veins, caused at first by loss of blood and the anguish of his wound. And this last was of such a nature as condemned him to physical powerlessness, keeping him confined to a couch, with a mind thus cruelly preyed upon by hope and fear.

And now, to crown all, Tubal's sole chances of intelligence from Aston were taken from him by the departure of Edward Holte. This could certainly no longer be delayed, unless the lovers were prepared to lose their last hope of aid in the favour of the King. But before he departed Dorothy requested and obtained of her young husband a full written acknowledgment of her as his wife, and his unborn offspring as legitimately so.

Dorothy wished for this, besides her marriage certificate, to satisfy her father and friends in case her situation should become apparent before an open declaration became prudent. It was impossible to say how long Edward might be forced to remain absent, or whether the war would in reality be directed into those parts so immediately as was believed, and hoped, by some. And strange to say, though Dorothy concealed the fact, to avoid as much as possible annoying her husband, there were already some whisperings on the subject of their intimate communion in the town.

How arisen it is difficult to say. Dame Cooper certainly kept the secret very well of the meetings of the wedded lovers, at the Moat House, by her friendly connivance.

Perhaps her babbling husband might have hinted in his cups at certain wonders he could reveal, 'as if he would.' And there have always been plenty of ears to hear, and tongues to report and glose upon anything of scandalous import, in towns.

Then again the housekeeper at Sutton, being of the following of Sisyphus the bellows-blower, might have allowed herself to be pumped by him of statements concerning Edward Holte's frequent nocturnal absences from his home. And truly the Anabaptist had not ceased to take an interest in the affairs of the Firebrace family, although he had been dismissed entirely from their service, and, since his defeat in the attempt to excite an insurrection, had been rejected from all the workshops, and compelled to eke out a starving livelihood how he best might.

Richard Grimsorwe's scanty and begrudging purse very possibly supplied some portion of these means. And yet this worthy himself purchased chiefly his own discomfort and exasperation.

From all he heard, and the collected reports of his spies, Grimsorwe could not doubt the success of his brother's love with the Armourer's fair daughter.

This pained him on divers scores. Not that he had any real passion for her himself. But he was a debauchee of the worst order, almost indiscriminate in his animal attachments, and his own brutal insolence had made him aware of the surpassing physical beauty of Dorothy Firebrace. He regretted thus, severely, that Edward should have carried off so fine a prize. He had always hated and envied his handsome brother for all the advantages he possessed over himself, and now this was added to all. Then Dorothy's great contempt and hatred of him stimulated Grimsorwe to revenge. But, so far as we have now spoken, his objects in keeping up an espial on his brother, in this respect, were chiefly prompted by a hope and expectation to expose Dorothy to shame and chastisement in her Puritan town, confirm

his calumnies of her to his father, and give his brother a kind of mortification, to which he thought him very susceptible. It had not entered Grimsorwe's selfish and base heart to conceive that even Edward Holte, chivalric fool as he deemed him, would hazard so great an injury to himself as to effect an honourable union with the object of his love.

But a revelation on this score awaited the traitor also. Not alone the fruit of bribery. Sisyphus's own malignant nature and insane passion for Dorothy Firebrace made the work of betrayal pleasant to him, and prompted a subtlety and daring no other causes could.

On the day assigned for Edward Holte's departure with his troop to join the King's array in the West, the youthful wedded pair ventured for almost the first time to prolong their parting interview till daybreak. This, however, seemed of the less consequence, as Firebrace had given permission to his daughter to remain at the Moat House with Dame Cooper, in attendance on Tubal during the worst of his illness, and the window of her apartment was purposely low to the ground, and opened on a drawbridge over the Moat; which passed, the open country was before a person leaving by it.

After exchanging every imaginable vow of constancy, after weeping in each other's arms for hours, and parting half-a-dozen times ere they could resolve upon the final one, the fond young husband and wife did, however, at length tear themselves asunder. But unhappily Edward, on reaching the drawbridge, could not forbear from a yearning backward gaze, and Dorothy, persuading herself that he had something of importance yet to say, stepped out of her apartment and hastened to him there.

A renewed, protracted, and tender adieu ensued, until

the appearance of people on the public road beyond compelled Dorothy to withdraw. Then, returning to her chamber, she was so oppressed with grief and sad forebodings that for a long time after she did not notice the important circumstance that the paper of acknowledgment Edward had written no longer remained on the table, where he had duly signed and sealed it.

Dorothy was convinced she had last seen it there; yet the most diligent search failed to recover the document. She then concluded Edward must accidentally, or in forgetfulness, have taken it with him, and she despatched Dame Cooper, her diligent ally, to Sutton, to ascertain. But the young captain of horse had already set out on his march several hours. All that could be done was to await till she could know where to write to Edward, to inquire the safety of the papers.

Of this, however, Dorothy had little doubt. It was true she had left the window by which she quitted her chamber open to facilitate her return. But it seemed impossible that any one could have the means or the inclination to enter the apartment, and carry off a piece of paper as sole trophy of his audacity. From the exterior, the house was effectually guarded by its circle of water, excepting at the drawbridge, on which she had stood. As regarded the interior, her door was strongly secured by bolts and a lock within.

And so Dorothy comforted herself; never for a moment entertaining any possible suspicion that her Edward could have purposely withdrawn the document, on consideration of the embarrassments to himself its production might entail.

And in this trust she was well justified; not in her hopeful explanations to herself.

Somewhere about this very hour when Dame Cooper returned from her fruitless errand to Sutton, Sisyphus the bellows-blower met Richard Grimsorwe, as was often their custom, in a secluded by-path between Birmingham and Aston Hall.

It was agreed that if they were observed the latter should pretend to beg. On this occasion he rather seemed to offer something very acceptable, to judge from the sudden voracity with which Richard Grimsorwe snatched at a parcel handed to him by the bellows-blower.

‘You watched him into the Moat House, into her chambers?’ said Grimsorwe. ‘You waded the water and saw him writing this paper at her dictation? You watched him out again at daybreak, concealed in the muddy ditch; saw her hasten yet again in amorous lingering after him, and, at the hazard of your life hooked me it from the open window forth? If it is a *promise of marriage*, as you suspect, good friend, though you cannot read, you have, indeed, earned better than a silver tester by your night’s work, this time! All the fiends of hell! What is here? Edward *married!* Edward the probable father of a legitimate heir to Aston Hall!’

The paper fell from the almost paralysed hand of the bastard pretender to the Holte inheritance, and he stood for some minutes even, gazing in a blank astonishment of dismay and horror at his accomplice.

On his part, Sisyphus’s ill-omened visage blackened as if he was strangling with the violence of his internal emotion.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE REIGN OF THE SAINTS.

CERTAINLY the feelings of neither of these wicked men were to be envied at the moment of their interchange of tidings.

‘Married! Edward Holt married to the girl whom I intended to—whom I—whom, if ever I attained the mastery in Birmingham—she a wife! Dorothy Firebrace likely to become the mother of the children of my hated enemy; poor, powerless, maimed wretch that I am!’ ejaculated Sisyphus; not so incoherently, however, but that Richard Grimsorwe’s active intellect pieced to him a new and extraordinary meaning in what he heard.

‘You too, then, you love—you love my brother’s wife, bellows-blower! *My brother’s wife*, I tell you! It is most plainly written down here. The when, the where, the how, the very priest’s name! And sleek-and-sly Master Lane, you must meddle and make in it, must you? I never thought my brother such an idiot before, or this wench so wondrous artful. Yet here it stands on record, in his own handwriting, with his own signature, his own seal, that he is the lawful husband of Dorothy Firebrace, and father of her unborn child!’

‘Vengeance, vengeance on the wretch, with his flow-

ing curls!’ said Sisyphus, grinding his teeth with fury. ‘Hasten at once with this paper to Sir Thomas, Master Grimsorwe, and let him disinherit our fine bridegroom, and separate them for ever.’

‘But would that so surely follow? And even so, were it vengeance worth the name? But it would not. I know my brother’s good faith and loving constancy of nature; he would never prove false to his wife, or desert her for any favour or fear. And who can say that my father may not relent when he finds the matter cannot be helped, and that the only lawful heirs of his name must be born of this daughter of a Birmingham smith?’ said Grimsorwe. ‘No!’ he resumed with fury, as his rapid invention in mischief suggested a plan to him, ‘No; Edward’s wife must first be disgraced and dishonoured before my father is informed of the event; and to such extent that he, and even Edward himself, perchance, shall deem the alliance infamy, and her children be scandalised too doubtfully in their parentage ever to lay claims to the inheritance of Aston Hall. Yes, Sisyphus, if there be any remains of sense and contrivance in my brain, this insolent beauty—this wife—this mother—shall be reduced to a vileness and scorn that will make her the loathing of the basest populace of Birmingham; worthy even of the destiny you have projected for her in your arms. Your arms! you have only one.’

‘It is true,’ Sisyphus replied; ‘but I have a hook by which I could drag a Spanish treasure-ship from the depths of the sea. But cunning, however, will serve us better than strength in such a turn as you advise, and which would be revenge indeed. Nor am I a stiff fool, of pampered diet, to reject my food for a little swinish handling. How purpose you to effect so notable a retaliation?’

It was wonderful how rapidly Grimsorwe had devised his villanous scheme of counteraction. He poured forth a statement at once of his plans, in which everything seemed contrived and arranged down to the most trifling minutiae, and the parts assigned to all the intended players in the tragic interlude. But the reader will find it best explained in the action.

Sisyphus readily promised his concurrence, though the share assigned him was not altogether to his taste. Yet there were reconciling portions in it; not the least being that Tubal Bromycham, his recent overthrower, was to come in for a portion of the harmful results, and that it was not improbable these would include the placing of Dorothy Firebrace's person in his power.

The state of affairs in Birmingham at this time rendered the extraordinary plans of those two devilish men possible, which under almost any other circumstances could scarce have been so. Grimsorwe was kept very well informed by his Anabaptist spies of all that occurred there, and on this information based his plot.

Tubal Bromycham's wound and confinement to a fevered couch rendered it unnecessary to take resistance on his part into consideration. Already, since his active interference was over, and the dangers vanished that compelled men to place their reliance in his courage and qualities as a leader, his power in Birmingham was singularly shrunk; moreover, the fanaticism of the times had taken a curious form of development there, opposed to any other supremacy, under the guidance of the three-parts insane enthusiast, Wrath-of-God Whitehall.

Resuming his old name of Kingdom-Come, Whitehall had set himself up as what he styled a Judge and Ruler

in Israel; and professing to restore a Scriptural purity and simplicity of discipline in all things, civil as well as religious, actually administered justice and oracles of faith alike, directly out of the Bible, in open and daily assemblages of the people, in the Market Place of Birmingham.

All other rules of law and government were contemptuously set aside, and declared null and of no authority.

The King's name was no longer used, nor any reference made to Acts of Parliament, in the decisions pronounced. The only sovereign was announced to be the heavenly one, whose personal advent on earth was hourly expected, and passionately prayed for. And, meanwhile, the people were to be governed in the name of King Jesus, by his Vicegerent, Whitehall, and a body of twenty-four Elders, whom he associated with himself in the office.

Such was the humour of the times that the extraordinary severities of discipline introduced by this madman and his coadjutors, from the laws of the Mosaic dispensation, found a ready allowance among by far the majority of the people of Birmingham.

Men's minds were on the strain for novelties and surprises equally in religion and politics, and found exercise and relief in a form of development which was besides promised to end in an amazing revelation of heaven to earth. Whitehall confidently announced that as soon as Birmingham was sufficiently purified, by his processes, and brought back to such holiness, and sobriety, and chastity of life, as to deserve glory so great, the Lamb of God would grant an open manifestation of his presence, and commence his reign of a thousand years, as King of the World, in that honoured town!

Hitherto Sisyphus, though devoured by chagrin and envy, and working darkly at organising the resistance of his partisans to what he looked upon as an usurpation, had not ventured to assail the new order of things, except with gibes, and sneers, and vague mutterings of menace and discontent. But now, on a certain given day, shortly after the interview described with Grim-sorwe, the bellows-blower presented himself in the usual assemblage of the people around their judge and spiritual instructor in the market-place, apparently in a much changed mood.

It may be thought that these daily religious meetings—for, after all, there was not much to be decided upon in material interests—spread an extraordinary spirit of enthusiasm and controversy among all orders of the townfolk of Birmingham. From being a mere place of bargaining and chaffering, the whole area before the Church of St. Martin's had of latter times changed into a species of open-air debating club, where the strangest and wildest opinions, both in religion and politics, were expounded and ventilated, and all manner of visionary notions and delusions canvassed and argued with a zeal that occasionally bordered upon frenzy.

When, however, it is considered that the president and great oracle of these debates was himself *in secret a madman*, though one endowed with extraordinary powers of language and eloquence, it is not wonderful that the state of the public mind in Birmingham was becoming strangely disordered and heated, and the elements of a volcanic outbreak fast collecting.

It was not, therefore, deemed surprising or suspicious when Sisyphus, the Anabaptist, made his way through numbers of people, frothing at the mouth, with vehe-

ment argument on the question of the day—namely, what were the signs that must precede the *Visible Manifestation*—presented himself before the judgment-seat of Whitehall, his former rival candidate, and announced that he had received a revelation, directing him to submit himself and his brethren of the Black Chapel as a militia, or soldiery, to the absolute orders of the holy and inspired minister of Birmingham.

This judgment-seat was established at the Bull-Ring, and consisted of an elevated chair for the Angel, as Whitehall was now styled, and a row of benches for his subordinate elders.

Agreeably to certain passages in Revelations, prescribing that the Company of the Elect, who are to herald the Great Approach, should be ‘clothed in white, with crowns of gold upon their heads,’ Whitehall and his elders were all arrayed in long linen robes, though they were obliged to supply the precious metal for the decoration of their heads by coronals of brass lacquer; but the splendid polish communicated by Birmingham skill left little to be desired, except in the actual value of the ornament. In addition, Kingdom-Come rejoiced in a species of sceptre, though it was simply a long rod of iron, in accordance with the text, ‘And he shall rule them with a rod of iron.’

Strange to say, among these singularly travestied personages sat Zachariah Firebrace, the Armourer!

The influence of the fanatic age had always been strong upon the Armourer’s brooding and melancholy temperament. But of late his exasperation against the Holte family—feelings of disappointment in his most cherished plans, and dread of worse—had thrown Firebrace altogether into the party most opposed to any revival of

cavalier influence in Birmingham. The frenzied zeal and eloquence of the new enthusiastic ruler found in his, moreover, a mind well prepared for those seeds of fire that sparkled from the mad but eloquent lips. Accordingly, he sat nearest the right hand of the Angel, and was graced with the title of Chief Apostle.

It was before this august array that Sisyphus presented himself.

The Anabaptist's followers, though not numerous, were believed to be of great determination and ferocity in their principles. Their flight from Tubal's cannon and menaces had, perhaps, a little shaken this opinion. But still their maimed leader could point as he spoke to the sturdy apparition of Faithful Moggs, gaping at him for commands, at the head of a chosen cohort of gloomy-looking men, armed with cudgels and pikes.

His own submission was dramatically sudden and surprising, and doubtless flattering to the vanity and secret fancies of the exalted visionary to whom it was made. Firebrace himself, the Angel's principal adviser in the actual business of ruling the town, desired by all means to strengthen the parties opposed to a Royalist reconciliation, and the unblushing bellows-blower applied his blasphemous invention most dexterously to impress the reality of the 'call' he pretended to have received to his present act of submission, on his hearers.

For three nights and three days, he stated, he had been tormented by a Voice incessantly repeating to him the words 'They who are not with me are against me!' which he interpreted to mean that Minister Whitehall was truly chosen by the Lord, as well as the people, to do His will in Birmingham, and that it was the duty of all men, but specially all religious men, laying aside

envy and pride, to devote themselves to aid him humbly in the work.

The result of a consultation between the Angel and his council, accordingly, was an acceptance of the services offered by the bellows-blower, whenever they should be needed against the enemies of salvation and of the town of Birmingham; a decision which Whitehall propounded with the addition that the young man, Tubal, who had been raised, even as Saul, the son of Kish, to the service of the Lord, having visibly faltered in it, and received a severe disabling judgment on the same, he was truly of opinion that this new succour and support of armed men was granted by heaven to supply the temporary loss. And on Sisyphus's further zealous demand, he conferred upon him and his Anabaptists the title of the **GUARD OF THE AMEN!**—an expression that seemed to possess some mystic and extraordinary meaning, both with him who asked and him who granted the designation.

Immediately this decree was uttered, Sisyphus burst as it were into an irresistible torrent of thanksgiving, and ordered his men to take up a position at once around the judgment-seat—a proceeding that rather startled and annoyed Firebrace, but gave apparently the highest satisfaction to Kingdom-Come. The frenzied eyes of the latter glared up with the peculiar light of madness, and the smile and nod of assent he gave to Sisyphus testified how the terrific delusion under which he laboured persuaded him that all was well, and the whole proceeding the result of an inspired recognition on the part of the bellows-blower of his own true nature and predestined exaltation.

Hardly was this arrangement effected when an aged woman hobbled through the crowd to the judgment-seat,

a crowd which nevertheless yielded and gave way in all directions to her approach, as soon as she was discerned to be the ill-famed Maud Grimsorwe, more generally known as the Witch of Aston.

Much curiosity had been excited by the Anabaptist's unexpected demonstration. But a great deal more was stirred by the apparition of this lonesome and disaster-boding old woman, who was so seldom known to leave her solitudes for the haunts of men.

The strangely antiquated fashion of Maud Grimsorwe's garb—her wild and haggard looks—the fear-driven and bewildered aspect she at first presented—might have justified any amount of wonder. And, in fact, the hag approached the tribunal with as noisy a skirling and tumult around her as an owl startled from her hollow tree and scudding before the clamour and pursuit of the birds of day, blinded herself with the light.

Sisyphus exercised his new duties for the first time by interfering to prevent the flooding of the mob quite up to the seats of the Angel and his elders, and also to protect Maud in her efforts to reach them without further interference.

The witch of Aston accomplished this, and then breathless with age, fear, and a consciousness of the atrocious wickedness thrust upon her execution, shrieked and sobbed for some time in a frantically hysterical manner before she could at last be induced to state her business there in some intelligible form.

The miserable old wretch had, however, been thoroughly persuaded by her still more detestable grandson that what she was about to do was the only means to preserve from an unborn intruder the so long-coveted Holte inheritance; to give him a final chance to oust

his hated brother, and, above all, to preserve herself from the tremendous penalties of witchcraft. Sir Thomas, Grimsorwe informed her, was resolved upon subjecting her to them; and if she refused compliance with his own wishes he himself must remain powerless to aid her, and would withdraw at once from the spectacle of the triumph and happiness of his and her enemies.

Only the cruelty and subtlety of a man and a lawyer could, however, have suggested the dreadful calumnies and falsehoods the unhappy old woman now proceeded to utter.

She declared, in the first place, that she was currently but most causelessly reported to be a witch, and to deal in charms and incantations, to bring about various unlawful and forbidden results in the way of making people in love with each other; avenging them on their enemies; and effecting divers mischief to life and limb cattle and corn; raising tempests, and pining folks with sickness in the bones.

All this was of false report, and she was entirely guiltless of the same. And still more of the vile practices imputed to her, in relieving women likely to become mothers, and who had the wickedness to desire it, unnaturally, of their burdens, and at the cost of the destruction of the unborn, but not the less murdered, innocents, offspring of lust and shame!

How she had acquired so evil a reputation, Maud avouched, she knew not, except from the scandal of prating tongues, and some small skill she possessed and had exhibited in herbs and medicines.

Nevertheless, as they of Birmingham must be aware, she had fallen under the imputation, which, to her great sorrow, had forced upon her many revelations of the

wickedness of the times, and of certain women of the town of Birmingham, who in the desperation of their shame, scrupled not to offer her great recompenses to destroy its evidences.

Nay, the cases were not few, or confined to young creatures, whose poverty and dread of exposure was sharpened by inability to maintain the hapless fruit of guilt! And the horrible hag proceeded to declare, that after forbearing long to reveal the wickedness prevalent in that town of Birmingham, and dismissing her applicants with rebukes and threats that prevented their return, she had at last lost all patience at the suspicious and dangers accumulating against her on account of the numerous visits she received of the kind. And hearing that there was an angel of wisdom and holiness recently raised to authority in the town, she had come before him to declare her own guiltlessness, and denounce the villanous purposes against the laws of God and nature entertained even by women of a principal rank and station among them! Specially, and by name, a certain Mistress Dorothy Firebrace, daughter of a chief armourer of the town; who being with child by Tubal Bromycham, her betrothed, and he having refused to perform his promise of marriage, in consequence of detecting her in an intrigue with Master Edward Holte, of Aston Hall, thereupon had applied to her for the means to remove the proof of her infamy, that so she might persuade one or other of her lovers to believe her innocent, and marry her still!

This vile accusation was expressed in far plainer language than the decency—not by any means the innocence—of our times, permits to be repeated. But to declare the wonder, the fear, the horror, the indignation

of Firebrace at the amazing statement would exceed the powers of language, however freely given in its full force and swing.

Of course the father's first emotions were of utter incredulity, mingled with overboiling fury and rage at so shameful and public an accusation of his child.

He arose and yelled forth a denial of the charge, with passionate demands for immediate justice on the felonious witch-hag who had dared to defame an honest man's daughter, and chief armourer of Birmingham.

But the aged perjurers persisted in her statement, stimulated to greater virulence doubtless by the terms of opprobrium, and demands for vengeance, lavished on her by the unhappy sire. She challenged the proof. Let them only place the woman accused in proper custody, and under watch for a short time, and they would be furnished with every reasonable ground for conviction of the truth of her accusation, prevent the commission of a great crime, and the triumph of a wicked project on either of two men, honest and honourable, but for their unhappy connexion with so worthless a creature, an infanticide in purpose, if not in deed!

The confusion and uproar that ensued upon all this made the very stones of the market-place of Birmingham vibrate. But, to crown the whole calamitous occurrence, the noise and discussion were at their very height when Dorothy Firebrace herself appeared in the midst of the surging populace, quietly making her way to the Angel's seat of judgment.

Quite unconscious that she herself could be concerned in the terrific demonstration, but alarmed for her father, whom she perceived speaking, with the foam tossing

from his mouth with excitement, and furiously gesticulating, Dorothy pressed through the excited throng with some difficulty, until she reached him.

‘What is the matter, father? Why have you sent for me?’ she said, with her characteristic self-possession and dignity. Indeed the new relations of life into which she had entered, if they had rather sobered the sparkle and petulance of Dorothy Firebrace’s vivacity, had added something of matronly majesty to her naturally proud and courageous demeanour.

But even her courage failed—even her heroic heart lost power and almost life,—when the exasperated and affrighted hag turned fiercely upon her, and exclaiming ‘This is the woman that tempted me to abet in child-murder!’ shrieked forth a repetition of her accusations.

Dorothy Firebrace stood paralysed with horror and surprise.

She perceived at once how difficult, how impossible, it would be to refute the degrading and terrible suspicions raised against her unless by the violation of her promises to Edward Holte, by a revelation which would expose him to all his father’s wrath and malediction, before he had acquired any means of shelter for himself or her in the storm certain to arise.

She had the means in her power, it is true; of which she satisfied herself at the very moment, by a convulsive clutch at her bosom, where her marriage certificate was deposited, sewn into the silk of her corset.

But at what destruction to her beloved husband, who had sacrificed so much to her! And evidently on the instigation of his fratricidal enemy; for was not the Witch of Aston Richard Grimsorwe’s grandmother and fellow-conspirator to deprive him of his birthright?

Poor old Mr. Lane, too, the Coopers, all her faithful friends, at the same time to be given over to persecution and ruin !

Moreover, Dorothy considered to herself that she had defence enough in the infamous character of her accuser, and was not aware of the certainty Maud possessed of confirmation existing to her atrocious version of the reality.

As soon, therefore, as she could find speech to answer, Dorothy limited herself to indignantly denying the whole horrible calumny, and retorting upon her denouncer as a notorious witch, an agent and ally of the devil.

Unhappily Dorothy in her passion of self-defence, by this denunciation, disclosed that she had herself seen the witch in conference with her imp, in the shape of a cat in her hut. And it was in vain for her afterwards to mention that this was several months previously, and that she had never had any kind of private speech with her of any sort. The grandmother of Richard Grim-sorwe, worthy of the relationship, dexterously seized upon the statement at once as an admission of Dorothy's alleged visit and criminal request ; and the clamours of the auditory on all sides showed they considered it a strong support to the hag's accusations.

It has been seen that Dorothy Firebrace was in no great favour with her townfolk ; partly from her somewhat haughty manners, her sharp, sarcastic wit, and, with the female portion of the community, her supremacy of beauty. Moreover, the Birminghamers believed her to have taken hearty part against them with their Cavalier enemies. All these circumstances united to render her humiliation and disgrace satisfactory to a considerable number in the assemblage, while it disposed

a majority to lend, at all events, attention and credulity to what was said with those tendencies.

Still more unfortunately, the pride and disdain of the high-hearted girl's temperament suddenly returned upon her, in her conviction of the injustice and senselessness of the popular emotion. She turned on the noisy rabble, thronging around and yelling and hooting at her, and with indignant scorn declared she would not attempt any refutation of calumnies so odious, before such a tribunal of howling wolves, and made a movement as if to leave the market-place. But on a sudden the hideous hook of Sisyphus grappled her shoulder.

'Master!' he said, turning to Whitehall, who was staring bewilderedly on, 'must it not be, in mere justice, as the ancient woman hath demanded? Must not this accused girl be retained in captivity, even as the accuser has demanded, until the truth or falsehood of her charge can be essayed?'

'Let her remain in my custody, then!' shouted Firebrace, evidently almost frantic with excitement, 'I sent not for her here, though she says so; but, as my soul lives, I, her father, will surrender her to be stoned to death by the people, if it shall appear she is guilty in the sort denounced against her by this lying paramour-hag of the fiend.'

'A likely case!' the bellows-blower retorted insolently on his former master, 'You want only the opportunity, Master Firebrace, to set her free for her Cavalier lover's entertainment, on his return with the King's ravagers, or to secure her time and opportunity still to perform the devilry we have all heard affirmed, murders already in her intent. No, Rabbi, or rather King Kingdom-come Whitehall! Let her be safely

lodged at the Black Chapel, and guarded by us, your faithful and sworn servants of the right, until such time as a discreet and wise company of the matrons of the town may declare her guilt or innocence, to all men's knowledge and satisfaction.'

'The Black Chapel! Oh, thou villain! But, sirs, ye will not trust the fair woman in the power of my traitor husband, whose multiplied sins of adultery ought to make the earth open to swallow him. I know he seeks but to have her in his clutches to work some ruffian villany to her harm,' yelled Cut-throat Meg at this moment, battling her way through the mob as if with the purpose of setting her long nails in her crafty consort's visage.

Hitherto she had yelled against Dorothy.

There was a singular murmur, nevertheless, upon the words. The bellows-blower's real character was not unknown among the dregs of the populace associating with him in his recreations. But he himself turned with fury upon her, and shouting, 'Thou liest, torment of my existence,' would have struck her with his iron claw if Faithful Moggs had not interposed. 'Nay, good Sissy, 'tis a woman still,' he said, 'and look ye now, what is it the Teacher is about to say?'

Whitehall had continued, during this latter discussion, gazing with a strange fixity at Dorothy Firebrace. Those who were nearest him heard him mutter repeatedly, 'AND I WILL GIVE TO HIM THE MORNING STAR!—the Morning Star! the Morning Star!—what is your name, maiden, if wrongfully accused, as you avouch?'

'Dorothy'—she dared not add—Holte; she would not—Firebrace!

'Dorothy!—it is even so, then; the very name so pro-

phies it!' exclaimed the Angel, rising with an air of insane inspiration; 'Dorothy!—*Dorothea*—in its original Greek—signifieth truly, Divine Gift! It is even so, it is even so, unless the devil, by some artful gloss, commends a cup of impurity to our lips! It shall be known and declared as soon as may be! *Dorothea*. I will myself take the charge and custody of you in my own house, until such time as a true judgment can be formed and declared on your estate, when either you shall shine forth as the Morning Star, on the right hand of—but the time has not yet come!—or be exposed for what you truly are, on the pillory, to all men's horror and detestation, from noonday unto the setting of the sun; when, for your sin of fornication, you shall be stoned to death, by the people, even as your own sire has pronounced!'

Anything seemed better to the defenceless wife of the absent Edward Holte than to be consigned to the keeping of such a vile and revengeful wretch as Sisyphus, the bellows-blower, whose licentiousness his own wife had openly denounced. She had great belief and confidence in the benevolence and goodwill of the new Minister of Birmingham, wherever his fanaticism was not engaged, and by no means suspected the dangerous phase to herself into which his internal delirium had passed. It was better even for her, she thought, as regarded the preservation of her secret, to be placed in his than in the custody of her father. She could not well conceal the truth from him, and he would be sure to insist on its open declaration. Meanwhile time would certainly be gained to make Edward acquainted with her uncomfortable situation, and obtain his sanction for the necessary means of extrication.

The result of a brief meditation, therefore, induced Dorothy to stretch her hand cordially to Whitehall, and say, 'I place myself thankfully under your protection, father, from this unjust rabblement's abuse.'

'No, not father, not father! I am Omega—not Alpha—the completion, not the beginning! Can she be the true Morning Star, yet not know this?' murmured the dread lunatic to himself, rather than to those who yet overheard.

Nevertheless, he took the proffered hand, surveyed its blue-veined whiteness for some moments with profound attention, and said to Sisyphus with a commanding air, 'Take her to the Parsonage before me, and let certain wife-women be summoned to pronounce on the accusation of the Witch.'

The bellows-blower looked extremely disappointed. But his consort's fierce scowl was upon him, and there was that also in Kingdom-come's manner that indicated he meant to be obeyed.

Firebrace alone attempted any further remonstrance. 'If the man, Tubal, confesses the seduction of this wretched girl, and consents to marry her, will not that suffice, Master?' he groaned.

'On the contrary,' returned the insane Puritan, with relentless energy, 'if he confesseth so, he shall share her punishment, were he ten times Tubal Saul, and son of mine own blood!'

Dorothy essayed a few words of consolation to her father; but what could she say to the purpose without compromising her adored husband?

She could only entreat him to patience for a little while, and assure him emphatically that all would be well, whatever ill he feared. And then turning from the spectacle

of the old man's visibly overwhelming anguish and shame, with an intensity of almost mortal sorrow in her own heart, she disdainfully bade Sisyphus obey his orders, and escort her with his club-men to the minister's house.

There was a universal and singular silence as this manœuvre was effected. But as Dorothy disappeared under her villanous convoy, the people broke again into busy mutterings and discourse, and the assemblage prepared in general to disperse.

'Merciful Lord!' Firebrace internally ejaculated, 'is this the explanation of Tubal's sudden change of feeling towards her, and avoidance of the question of their marriage? I will go and learn, whether the truth slays me as with a sharp sword cleaving the heart, or no!'

He receded from the company in which he sat, on this resolve.

Maud Grimsorwe, who had remained awhile leaning on her stick, and watching him, groaned to herself, 'He feels the serpent's tooth, too, now, in his heart, of a child's disgrace. Yet, why should I rejoice? He never injured me!' And she was about also to hobble off on her return, when a voice hissed in her ear, 'Witch! hast thou any spell to bring back a truant husband to a fond wife's love? If so, I can pay thee well; I have still some hidden gold, of a kind to suit a witch's touch, for it is steeped in the blood of a murdered man!'

It was Sisyphus's wife who thus spoke.

Maud Grimsorwe paused, looked around, and recognising the whisperer, observed, in an extremely malicious and exasperated tone, 'I have already told thee, thrice, no, unless thou resolvest to obey thy husband's will, and humbly to serve his vileness in all things evil. When, if so, follow him now, and aid him in his wicked designs upon this hapless girl!'

‘I aid him!’ exclaimed the virago. “I’ll follow and tear his eyes out if he but dares but to look upon her so!”

Whitehall, on his part, had risen from his judgment-seat. ‘I will follow at once,’ he muttered, ‘and show her the name written on the white stone, to see if there is still no understanding of the great mystery in her!’

He was about to follow up his idea in action, when a new application detained him.

‘Master,’ said a tall lean man, wrapped in a cloak, with a hat slouched almost down to the end of his nose, ‘I come to consult you for an oracle of the Lord. Lo, I serve in a pagan house, in the midst of all manner of sorceries and iniquities, as master-cook; and now Belshazzar is coming to a feast therein, and I am bidden to exhaust my skill in banqueting him! But my soul is sick with reprobation, and I now ask of you, who are exalted even above my Teacher, whom I came to consult, is it lawful for me to remain in the pagan house, and do as I am bidden, or no?’

‘Good friend,’ replied Whitehall, not in the least surprised by so singular a demand, ‘the book of the law is as open to thee as to me; but since thou wilt have it so, I will search in it for thee.’

As he spoke, the ‘Angel’ opened a massive Bible, which lay beside him for his judgments on the species of throne he usually occupied; and the text he lighted upon proved, indeed, of singular aptness to the occasion.

‘Thus sayeth the law,’ he declared, in lofty accents, ‘How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.’ (1 Kings, chap. xviii.)

CHAPTER LXXXV.

HISTORICAL.

SHORTLY after these events in Birmingham, all Warwickshire resounded with intelligence of the approach of King Charles the First with a large and royally appointed army, on his way through the county, and march towards London; whereby he thought to compel the Parliament army to throw itself in his way, from Northampton, and put the decision of the great contention to the arbitrament of battle.

The emotion caused by these tidings was speedily greatly heightened by certain intelligence that it was the King's intention to pass through Birmingham on his route southward.

Whether this latter movement would be executed with the assent of the townspeople continued for an interval doubtful. They kept up their chains and barriers some time after it was known that the king had accepted Sir Thomas Holte's earnest loyal invitation, and would halt and lodge at Aston Hall until he was joined by a portion of his adherents from Yorkshire, who were on the march thence to join his standard, under the leadership of the Marquis of Newcastle. But it then appeared so manifestly impossible on the part of the town, to offer any effectual resistance to such overwhelming forces as were

now concentrated upon it, in the absence of all assistance from the Parliament, that the loyalist or timorous portion of the people prevailed to have it declared they continued at peace with their Sovereign, and, confiding in his protection, would open their barriers for the passage of his army.

John-the-Rogue and his son were particularly active in submission, and they were now in the supremacy in the town and its councils, owing chiefly to the fact that on the receipt of some additional ill news which reached him, Tubal Bromycham's fever and delirium had returned, and his life was long considered in danger. Of course, in so disabled a condition, mentally and bodily, he could have no influence on the course of events. Armourer Firebrace, also, overwhelmed with private griefs, of a kind truly to absorb all the faculties of an average man, took no notice of anything that occurred out of the pale of his domestic miseries.

Oliver Cromwell's labours and intrigues in Birmingham, therefore, came to nought. It was resolved to remove his hastily raised defences, and that a deputation, headed by John-the-Rogue, should wait upon the King immediately on his arrival at Aston Hall, and assure his Majesty of the loyal obedience of the town.

The Right Worshipful Knight-Baronet, Sir Thomas Holte, on his part, determined to show his sense of the high honour vouchsafed him, in a manner that should far outdo all his former displays of grandeur and profusion in the entertainment of a royal guest,—should, in fact, justify his pretensions to a high rank of nobility, and possibly forward the notions to which he still clung—of an alliance with royalty itself.

On very slender grounds apparently, excepting that

he heard from his son, who continued with the cavalry under Prince Rupert's command, that he was treated with marked kindness and friendship by his Highness. A conduct much in contrast to his former demonstrations, and for which Sir Thomas could only account to himself on the supposition that the Prince still cherished an attachment for his daughter.

But with regard to Arabella herself—in spite of all the extreme but judicious severity he imagined he exercised—it could scarcely be thought Sir Thomas was proving a very successful manager. For although the prime Royalist nobility and gentry of the entire county were expected to assemble at Aston Hall, to receive the King, including the ladies of Hagley, it did not appear that Sir Thomas intended to release his daughter from the extraordinary species of close and solitary imprisonment to which he had consigned her.

So Richard Grimsorwe ascertained on the very morning of the day when the King was expected, with the vanguard of his army—chiefly of cavalry. Sir Thomas and the distinguished gathering alluded to were to proceed on horseback to the borders of the county of Warwickshire, at Sutton Coldfield, to escort his Majesty, with due honours, to Aston Hall.

The entire extensive residence was thronged with guests and their attendants. The entire household of Aston Hall, powerfully reinforced, was in one universal bustle of preparation. But the superb beauty, whose presence would have been one of the greatest embellishments of the intended displays, nowhere appeared.

Grimsorwe ventured to make the observation, in some such palavering form, to Sir Thomas, watching his opportunity to encounter him as he returned from a last visit

to his terrified and nerve-shaken consort, upon whom he had been heaping commands for her enforcement during his absence in the cavalcade to Sutton.

The question was evidently not agreeable, from the fierce and irritated tone of the reply.

‘Would you have me let a *madwoman* loose among the guests, and to the very presence of the King? And the girl persists, the only notice she will take of the Prince who has honoured her with so much undeserved favour, will be to reiterate all she said at your witch-grandmother’s hovel, Richard! And all she asks of me, in the midst of her own straw and chains, and narrow, grave-like lodgment in the Dark Chamber, is to know whether Tubal Bromycham was spared and lives! I shall be obliged, I fear, to conceal her obstinate infatuation, by pretending that I have sent her away in dread of our ill neighbouring at Aston, awhile.’

‘But my dear father,’ began Grimsorwe, when Sir Thomas pettishly interrupted him.

‘Look that you call me none such, in the presence of the King, Dickon!’ he exclaimed. ‘We all know how strait-laced his Majesty is in matters of morality; and neither must you, nor can you, take upon yourself my sonship without betrayal of the facts, being Edward’s elder, yet he the inheritor. Nor see I why I should be made to blush before my prudish King, to own you as the bastard-born you are, of such a mother’s race!’

This was hard to swallow, but Grimsorwe made no retch at it. He had a revenge in store that sweetened all the intermediate gulps of bitterness.

‘I shall claim neither father nor brotherhood, sir, without both your good allowances,’ he replied. ‘If you present me at all to his Majesty’s benevolent notice,

it needs only be as one of your servants that aided in warning him of his danger at Nottingham to the best of a poor ability. But I know not, Sir Thomas, why you should deem it so desperate to bring my sister—Miss Holte, I would say—to some reasonableness: especially after what I have this day heard.'

'What have you heard this day?' said Sir Thomas. He had a great respect for his crafty son's intelligence, in all mischievous respects.

'I have heard that on this very day,—being Sunday—but the better day the better deed—as you yourself seem to think, sir, since you have ordered a bull-baiting in Birmingham, to celebrate his Majesty's arrival, and the hearty submission of the good people there,—the Angel of Birmingham, as he calls himself, and his favourite followers, have decreed to set a woman creature on the pillory, who is convicted of incontinence with this same blacksmith lover of your daughter—for whose sake she refused the addresses of a royal prince, and endures such grievous extremities, for one so delicately bred, at your unwilling hands!'

'How! What say you? Of all good pleasingness, say it again! What woman is this?' exclaimed Sir Thomas, with the most delighted interest.

'Even that very wench in contention for whose good graces I had the worst part of my recent wrangle with your son, sir—whom I must not call my brother any more, to get out of the wont of it when the King's Majesty may hear!—even Dorothy Firebrace, the Armourer's daughter; an altogether worthless and most discreditable slut, who, although plighted in marriage, and anticipating its lawful satisfactions with Tubal, her betrothed, has been detected by him in her intrigue with

Edward (I blame him not, the chance was as wellnigh mine), and cast off by him to the rigour of the Birmingham Puritans. Nor is that all the worst of it !’

And the infamous calumniator proceeded to repeat his grandmother’s perjuries, instigated by himself, respecting Dorothy’s pretended criminal projects to preserve herself from the consequence of her misdemeanour.

From Grimsorwe’s now more precise statements to Sir Thomas, it appeared that, faithful to her word through every extremity, the wife of Edward Holte was in reality in danger of being exposed to the scorn and resentment of the populace of Birmingham, in the most disgraceful form of punishment, on the infamous charges of which she was entirely innocent. Nay, there was even reason to expect that, according to the extraordinary rules of discipline put in force by the fanatic party in the town, her life might probably be sacrificed.

Minister Whitehall had solemnly adjudged her guilty, and condemned her to death. Her father himself, Grimsorwe stated, had abandoned all hope or intention of succouring her, on its being ascertained that she was in reality likely at no distant period to become a mother ; while, equally disgusted with her infamy and infidelity, Tubal Bromycham *feigned* to continue too ill to leave his couch or make any effort on her behalf.

Sir Thomas Holte was most extraordinarily delighted with these tidings of what was represented to him as the full exposure of the vileness of a woman whom he himself had long regarded, in vague but formidable lights, as a hindrance to a portion of his own most favourite projects, though he had no suspicion as yet how completely so. Full information on this point was reserved for a most decisive and overwhelming revelation.

On the contrary, Grimsorwe affected to speak of the whole disastrous affair with regret, in consequence of his aged grandmother having been compelled, in her own vindication, to figure in so unpleasant an affair, and which was certain to bring so much needlessly additional illwill upon her.

The only satisfaction he admitted himself to derive from it all was that his brother (he called him so again) would now be convinced of the truly infamous character and conduct of the woman, for whose sake chiefly he had quarrelled with Grimsorwe himself; not knowing how justified the boldness of his attempts had been by the bad repute of the girl, and the impudent encouragement she had extended to him on their very first encounter in Aston Park, until she learned whose relation he was, and the likelihood of exposure in consequence.

The deceived old man, wickedly and cruelly rejoicing in the whole grievous revelation, hastened, as Grimsorwe had expected he would, at once with it to the truly barbarous and unjustifiable confinement in which he had placed his unfortunate daughter—under the unfounded and tyrannous pretence that she required restraining as madwoman.

To this day the Dark Chamber at Aston Hall, situated high in its roof, near the central dome, and worthy of its name from its being absolutely lightless and windowless, retains the sad tradition of Arabella Holte's inhuman seclusion there.

It may be seen by any explorer who ventures up a final steep, ladder-like flight of stairs, and stoops to enter a black and noisome cell, formed by a slope of a portion of the roofing of Aston Hall. Such a cell, indeed, as even the most unfortunate real victims of in-

sanity in that age were but rarely consigned to, and alone of itself capable of injuring the mental faculties of a human being given over to its gloom and solitude,—not to mention the physical miseries and inconvenience of an abode in a chamber scarcely high enough to allow a child of twelve years to stand upright in any part.

In spite, however, of all the astounding information to Tubal Bromycham's disadvantage, Sir Thomas had it now in his power to divulge, and his commands to the captive to leave her dungeon and shine forth once more to recall a royal lover to her feet, he descended in a still more exasperated mood than he had mounted. And he informed the expectant Grimsorwe, that "the mad-woman" only persisted more obstinately than ever in her trust in the blacksmith's fidelity, and declared she would only believe her own senses to the contrary. 'As if, said Sir Thomas, 'I would trust her in Birmingham, in the midst of its rabblement, to see the wench in her pillory.'

'There is consolation, however,' said Grimsorwe, 'in the certainty that on receipt of the intelligence we can communicate concerning his paramour, my brother Edward will be no longer unwilling to complete his marriage with the Lord Keeper's heiress; and as she will be opportunely at the Hall here, I would advise no further delay to be made in it. 'Tis scarcely possible to conceive how far his infatuation for the Birmingham wench may else carry him.'

'It shall be so,' said Sir Thomas, grimly; 'my Lord Keeper will be with the King, and will propose it to him at once, for the sake of the heirship of my lands and name, as well as his, before these wars fairly begin. I shall not be disappointed there at least. But now for

some brief final conference with the master-cook, on his dainties to be prepared for the royal table, and then to horse with my noble company, and to Sutton away.'

Grimsorwe willingly summoned the master-cook to attend his father, and so expedite his departure.

Adam Blackjack came. Sir Thomas, who was great in such matters, reiterated to him a variety of injunctions and commands on the preparation of the magnificent banquet he had determined to give the King and his chief retinue on his arrival. Above all, he recommended the utmost punctuality to the hour at which he had ascertained it would please his Majesty to dine, and at which it would be practicable to have everything in readiness. But on this latter point Sir Thomas somewhat good-humouredly remarked he was satisfied his master-cook would not fail. He had never known him to do so, he said, and it was not likely he would do so in this instance; without concern he would wager his very life on Adam Blackjack's fidelity to arrangement.

During this harangue, Grimsorwe noted with curiosity the inexplicable smile that kept quivering over the countenance of the chief cook of Aston Hall, and the expression of stubborn will and resolve, rather than of obedience, with which he listened to his master's orders.

It was a purpose of his own, however, that induced Grimsorwe to detain Adam Blackjack after Sir Thomas had at last taken his departure.

A purpose which it seemed required extraordinary secrecy and privacy from the precautions he took, but which need not yet be elucidated. But it should be stated, Adam Blackjack listened with the same mysterious smile and gloomy inattention he had bestowed on Sir Thomas Holte's directions. And having heard all

that it was wished he should hear, replied that he would rather Master Grimsorwe should bring the papers he wished him to sign after the banquet was served, as his fingers trembled so with anxiety at the time that he thought he could hardly write legibly.

‘At best, I am a poor scholar, Master Grimsorwe,’ he said, with a strange laugh; ‘and in signing one’s soul over to the devil, one should be particular to be plainly legible! Howbeit, you offer me a fair price for the merchandise! And though your grandmother, the witch, cursed me this very morn for exhorting her to turn from her damnable ways, and take example from what she should see and hear of me henceforth, I freely forgive her, and own that five hundred pounds, secured on your inheritance of Aston Hall, is an ample recompense for scrawling my name to an old yellow marriage certificate—where you are right to say it ought to have been placed thirty years ago!’

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

KING CHARLES THE FIRST AT ASTON HALL.

NEVER since Aston Hall was a structure had so bustling a day fallen to the lot of its inmates as this of the expected arrival of King Charles the First within its walls.

All was hurry, and bustle, and confusion. Servants rushed about, overthrowing one another and what they carried, in their extreme diligence. Important guests arrived from all quarters, scarcely noticed. The deputation of the townfolk of Birmingham, headed by John-the-Rogue and the Chief Bailiff Cooper, were literally not asked into the house, but quietly submitted to the indignity of awaiting his Majesty's arrival in the open space before it. True, it was not numerous, everybody excusing himself that by any means could. Perhaps even Cooper would not have cared to present himself, had not his wife insisted he should ; and to enforce her decrees, and prompt his utterances, accompanied him in person—the only lady of the town who was of the party. But Dame Cooper had another motive for this, besides the necessity of showing her duty to the Sovereign, and that she and her husband were no participators in the disloyal doings of Birmingham.

Richard Grimsorwe was perhaps the only inhabitant of Aston Hall, with the exception of the unhappy im-

prisoned young lady of it, who took no concern in the general movement. He remained secluded in his own chamber the whole morning, engaged in a somewhat lawyer-like occupation, which, however, suspiciously resembled that of *a forger*!—imitating from certain old documents before him another handwriting, on scraps of tobacco-steeped parchment, that seemed prepared for the purpose of also looking old.

It was long before Grimsorwe succeeded in this object completely to his satisfaction. He then most dexterously transferred a seal from one of the old documents to the new imitation—and proceeded to make a deliberate and careful toilette.

Time had, however, passed unconsciously during the absorbing task he had been engaged in, and Grimsorwe was startled into haste by hearing the bells of Aston Church ring out a merry peal of welcome for the expected great arrival. He managed, nevertheless, to get down to the hall front in time to witness it; which it was an object of some importance for him to effect, that he might draw conclusions as to the position of persons and events. He took good care to carry the documents, so laboriously prepared, secreted in the breast of his doublet.

He found Lady Holte in the hall, with a number of other ladies, visitors of the chief families of the county, whose husbands and sons formed part of the cavalcade gone to meet the King. Two facts struck Grimsorwe then at once. Neither the Lord Keeper Lyttelton's wife nor his daughter, Edward Holte's betrothed, was present; and that the eyes of the unhappy lady were red as if with weeping—magnificently arrayed in her quality of hostess of Aston Hall though she was,—doubtless, for her daughter's sake, whose prison-door she had pro-

bably visited during the tyrannical father's absence. She could not enter it, Sir Thomas having conveyed away with him the key of the strong lock.

Meanwhile the esplanade before the mansion presented a sufficiently gay and crowded appearance, Sir Thomas's tenantry and the villagers of Aston being all assembled there in their Sunday smarts; not to mention the deputation from Birmingham, which stood huddled together, with humbled and even alarmed looks, along the garden-wall enclosure.

A discharge of musketry announced the entrance of the royal cavalcade into Aston Park; and very shortly afterwards the glittering cuirasses and waving banners of Prince Rupert's cuirassiers appeared in sight.

In the midst of these Richard Grimsorwe speedily discerned his father and the royal commander named, riding side by side, in company with Count O'Taafe, and seemingly on the best possible terms with each other. Grimsorwe augured from this that his Highness persisted in his liking for Miss Holte, and had probably been renewing his proposals for an alliance to the ambitious sire of Arabella.

Arrived at the esplanade, Rupert's cuirassiers faced about, as did Sir Thomas and the Prince,—the former, however, alighting to receive his Sovereign with a suitable mark of homage.

King Charles and his immediate retinue followed on this advance.

The King himself was in a plain dress of black velvet, with the broad blue ribbon of the Garter over his breast, and a wide-brimmed hat, with a plume of feathers waving from a brooch, or agraffe, of sparkling diamonds. He was mounted on a magnificent white charger, of the

towering size and strength still familiar to modern eyes in the portraits of the monarch by Rubens.

His Majesty was surrounded by a brilliant retinue of noblemen and gentlemen, among whom figured his newly-appointed general-in-chief, a Scotchman, and veteran leader of the wars of Gustavus Adolphus, recently created Earl of Lindesay. Lord Falkland was among this retinue, wearing his characteristic expression of melancholy thoughtfulness greatly deepened, while, on the contrary, the King's gravity appeared much diminished, and he was talking cheerfully, and even laughing, with the flighty young Earl of Denbigh, who rode, as Master of the Horse, close by his side. But Grimsorwe's devouring envy and hatred left him only eyes for the fact that Edward Holte rode at the other bridle, seemingly in great favour and notice with Charles, who had honoured his entertainers at Aston Hall, so far as to command that the guard on his visit there should be the troop commanded by its loyal young heir.

Yet Grimsorwe could easily discern that, in spite of these marks of distinction Edward looked singularly absent and brooding in mind; not sufficiently so, however, the unnatural brother thought, to have learned the disastrous news of Birmingham. Probably he was only surprised and disquieted at receiving no intelligence from his wife from the town of late, ample precautions having been taken to prevent all communication between Dorothy and her friends, of every kind and degree, since she had been immured a captive at the Parsonage, and guarded by the myrmidons of Sisyphus, the bellows-blower. Edward's appointment to attend the King personally would equally likely have prevented explanations between the father and son, not to mention that Grim-

sorwe had strongly recommended Sir Thomas not to let fall any intelligence on the subject till the day was over, and the 'vile wench's' disgrace and punishment (so the villain called her) assured.

In this manner escorted, King Charles the First arrived at Aston Hall, amidst the joyful shouts of the loyalist rustics, timidly echoed by the Birmingham deputation, who seemed afraid even to give offence by proffering homage; the beating of drums, the blasts of trumpets, the clamour of the village joy-bells, and a renewed discharge of musketry.

The King seemed to take little notice of the demonstration until he reached Sir Thomas's standing-place. He then slightly raised his plumed hat, and bowed once or twice to the shouting throngs, but with a coldness and severity of manner that rather resembled repulse than acceptance, and strangely quelled the effusion.

Sir Thomas bade his Sovereign welcome to his 'poor house of Aston' in a somewhat too long and elaborate speech; but to which Charles, a great stickler for form, listened with unruffled patience, if not attention, and Sir Thomas was further delighted at the conclusion of his harangue by the monarch's emphatic observation—'Good wine needs no bush, Sir Thomas Holte, and, despite your humble phrasing of its merits, your fine new house praises itself to any judging eye. I am right glad to see such a taste for noble architecture, and handsome appointments of all sorts to life, arising among my nobility and gentry, now that the old castle day is so wellnigh over. But, indeed, those served to little other purpose than as hiding-holes and fortresses of rebellion, to which palaces like these, open on all sides to the honest sunshine, cannot easily be turned. I see my nephew is in the right in his

reports of the beauty and stateliness of Aston Hall, and that it would make a fair mansion to lodge an *Earl*—the which your own and your son's services will, I trust, enforce upon us to present to this neighbourhood. For certain, the air is very bright and fresh hereabout, and it was a wise carpenter who said to you, Build here. It has given me a joyful and eager appetite for my dinner, and I hope your cook is one who studies his hours punctually, and that we may depend on exactness to the noon-day for our meal. There is a Spanish proverb, "A good stomach should be fed when 'tis a dog, not when 'tis a wolf!"

'I'll wager on my cook to a half-minute quartered, sire, if he hath no other merit! Will it please you now to alight, and enter the house, which is more my King's than mine henceforth?' Sir Thomas replied, reverently placing himself on one knee, and taking the royal stirrup to assist in the process indicated. Nor was this humility considered in those days an unfitting degradation on the part of a well-born host to his Prince.

Edward Holte had meanwhile taken the King's bridle, with a deep bend, almost to his own stirrup, as he did so, and Charles alighted rather heavily as if tired of his long ride. All the noblemen and gentlemen in the retinue immediately did the same, baring their heads to the royal glance.

Slightly acknowledging the homage, Charles courteously requested his host to rise and be his escort into the house; where, after some refreshments in a private chamber, he said he should be very willing to receive the dutious homage and respects of Sir Thomas Holte's friends and neighbours of the county of Warwick, agreeable to his request, who had assembled to assure his Majesty of their devotion to his person and cause.

‘But we will be brief as may be in the ceremony, Sir Thomas; for as I have told you, I have a hunter’s appetite for my dinner, so that they who can remember my father’s onsets at Theobald’s after a day’s stag-hunt, will think his jovial time come back again!’ said Charles, good-humouredly; and placing his hand, in its embroidered gauntlet glove, affably on the baronet’s tall shoulder, he added, ‘Let us lose no further time here, at all events. Lead on, Sir Thomas, and let me make the acquaintance of my Lady Countess of Birmingham, that is to be; and of your fair daughter, of whom such fine reports have reached us that we have a curiosity as to contemplate one of nature’s masterpieces, in her beauty and grace.’

Charles nevertheless pronounced the latter complimentary words with a slight frown and rather disturbed and inquiring glance at Prince Rupert, who coloured deeply, and, to careful observation, glanced with angry suspicion at Count O’Taafe. The last pretended to look quite unconscious of the meaning flashed at him.

Sir Thomas himself was considerably embarrassed in his reply, though probably arranged before in his mind. ‘I trust and fully believe my daughter will be able to present herself to your Majesty’s most gracious notice during some portion of your sojourn here. But I left her in the morning sick in her chamber of some womanish ailment, which the mere mention of your royal wish to see her will cure.’

‘Perchance not so. Women’s complaints are sometimes obstinate, and we must let no grass grow under White Buckingham’s hoofs between here and London, Sir-Thomas,’ the King replied, seemingly not dissatisfied with the excuse. ‘But who are these fellows craning

their necks so eagerly towards us, as if they meant to pickaxe up the ground with their noses on our way?’

‘They are fellows, sir,’ replied the vindictive baronet, ‘who should have ropes at full stretch round those same stiff necks of theirs—being a députation from seditious Birmingham, sent to tell you that finding they cannot help themselves otherwise, they have opened the town to the passage of your troops, after doing all that treason and traitors could to your Majesty’s disparagement and harm.’

Charles knit his brows.

‘I have heard much of the misdoings of the Birminghamers in these respects, Sir Thomas,’ he answered drily. ‘But how is it your son speaks up rather for them, and with so much earnestness that he has won from me a promise of pardon and remission of all offence offered by the rebellious town? And *at present*,’ he added, with marked significance on the words, ‘it behoves us to show ourselves a king of our word. A time may come for these as well as all other traitors and traitor-abettors in our realms. But I must speak them fair awhile; hearken, Falkland, if I have not caught some touch of those silvery notes of yours of peace.’

So saying, the King, in a most gracious and seemingly free and willing manner, stepped forward towards the quivering and shrinking Birminghamers, who immediately cast themselves most reverently on their knees before him. And John-the-Rogue, as chief of the députation, was about to make some striking commencement of a speech, when Charles courteously interrupted him.

‘There is no need to profess your duties, sirs,’ he said, very affably; ‘your presence and humility sufficiently

guarantee them, and we can well believe what your town has done amiss was at the instigation and by the madness of a few. But we have no leisure now to make inquiries, and separate the black sheep from the white, or even the piebald. This in general only. You may confirm to your town all our assurances of favour and protection, while it continues to show itself so worthy of both; insomuch that we declare, and bid all who hear us note the fact, we will punish with death any soldier, or even any officer of our army, who shall dare to offer the slightest injury or insult in Birmingham, while we abide hereabouts, or pass onward through it.'

The deputation burst into a complete cackle of thanksgiving ejaculations; during which Charles bowed, and with a smile full of gracious insincerity, withdrew, and resumed his walk beside Sir Thomas Holte to the entrance of the mansion.

Edward was following in the crowding attendance that then also resumed its march, when, on a sudden, he felt his sleeve plucked. He looked round, and there stood Dame Cooper, looking as red as a peony with excitement and agitation. 'Oh, Master Edward! Master Holte! mercy on us all!' she exclaimed. 'My last hope in you and your soldiers and the King's goodness is gone! Oh, that poor unhappy girl! Oh, poor Dorothy Firebrace, all is lost for her and you and the unborn innocent, your child!'

Turning deadly pale, Edward demanded an explanation of these extraordinary ejaculations; and the good dame, drawing the luckless husband of Dorothy Firebrace aside, overwhelmed him with the shocking revelations of her pressing and dreadful danger, and the apparent hopelessness of all redemption from it since the

King had guaranteed so completely the town from any interference in its cruel and unlawful doings.

Meanwhile Charles proceeded to the entrance of Aston Hall, where a new and still more imposing ceremonial of reception awaited him on the part of the lady of the mansion and her female company. Nothing could be seen for some time on all sides but descending and puffing sacques of the richest stuffs, curtsying to the ground with their fair owners' homage; fluttering fans, and waving plumes.

Bestowing the great honour of a salute from the royal lips of Lady Holte, whom he greeted as his most kind and courteous hostess, Charles brought the tears in a full gush to the poor woman's eyes by declaring how grieved he was to hear of her daughter's indisposition. But luckily or unluckily, we scarce can say which, for the Holtes, Grimsorwe now thrust himself so prominently forward that the King's attention was removed from a somewhat suspicious consideration of his hostess's display of emotion towards the intruder.

'Who is this gentleman, Sir Thomas?' he inquired, with visible surprise and distaste. 'Or perhaps we ought rather to ask of my Lord Keeper, as he seems a graduate of the long robe.'

'May it please your Majesty, I am that *Elder brother of Edward Holte* who had the happiness and honour to share his risks in the hint conveyed to you at Nottingham, which so nigh concerned the safety of your royal person,' Grimsorwe replied, with wonderful forwardness and audacity, and in obvious defiance of Sir Thomas's commands on the subject of their untoward relationship.

But he scarcely reaped the fruit he designed. Sir

Thomas blushed scarlet, and looked fiercely and menacingly at him, while the King sternly and shortly remarked, 'I have heard a different account of that matter, Master Grimsorwe,' and passed him with a visible expression of disdain and resentment.

'Ha! my sweet brother has been poisoning me with the King, also, in the honey-droppings of his lips, no doubt; but he will find business of his own as well worth attention, by-and-by,' Grimsorwe internally ejaculated; and after a moment's pause of reflection, boldly followed in the general movement accompanying the King.

Charles offered his arm to Lady Holte, who, trembling all over with nervous excitement, and hardly knowing what she answered to the monarch's gracious compliments on the well-ordering and stateliness of her husband's residence, guided him to the suite of chambers intended for his abode in Aston Hall, and which still bears his ill-starred royal name.

The fine proportions and gorgeous decorations of the apartments assigned to the King were indeed deserving of all commendation; but Sir Thomas was too much exasperated with the recent occurrence to take that pleasure he otherwise might in his Sovereign's praises and thanks for the magnificent accommodation provided him. And he, too, was glad when, the duty of escorting the King thither in state being performed, he was at liberty to withdraw his attendance, and seek an opportunity to vent some portion of his angry feeling on the presumptuous and disobedient bastard.

'Come with me, Dick Grimsorwe,' he said, as he passed him, in no conciliatory tones; 'I have a crow to pick with you, my lad. And you must not think I will suffer an unlawful brat like you to plague and beard me like my lady's heir.'

‘Whither are we going, then, sir, for these explanations?’ Grimsorwe replied, in gloomy but resolute accents.

‘To the kitchens. The King is hungry, and I must see if Adam Blackjack has all in good readiness; and I promise you, Master Grimsorwe, I mean to waste no more time than I need, on so busy a day, to rebuke your insolence,’ Sir Thomas briefly replied; and in truth he opened the side door which conducts from the hall of Aston Hall to the underground offices of the mansion.

Grimsorwe followed his vexed sire in, who closed the door instantly after them.

‘And now, sir,’ continued the baronet, pale with anger, ‘tell me who you think you are, so audaciously to violate my orders to my teeth?’

‘What I said I am—Edward Holte’s *elder brother*; and if I had my true claims recognized, Sir Thomas Holte’s only lawful son and heir.’

‘Are you a madman?’ returned Sir Thomas, gazing at this novel pretendant with some actual suspicion that the case was even so.

‘I am no madman,’ Grimsorwe sternly replied; ‘I have discovered within these few hours the proofs of my lawful birth, and of your marriage with my mother, Sir Thomas Holte,—consequently, the bastardy of all others who bear your name by your pretended marriage with the lady you now call your wife. Your wicked agent and accomplice, Adam Blackjack, stung by remorse, has confessed all, and placed the marriage certificate of Maud Grimsorwe and Sir Thomas Holte, Knight-baronet, duly witnessed, but surreptitiously removed from the parish books of Sutton Church, in my hands. And before the King leaves Aston Hall I will demand justice, and the

restoration of my rights, and submit the proofs to his royal judgment and decision.'

'Mad, then, thou art, bastard-liar!' almost shouted Sir Thomas Holte. 'Or, rather, thou art even as black a villain as Prince Rupert declares you in the witchcraft affair, and my only objection is removed to the process necessary, he himself tells me, to remove the spell from Arabella. The witch herself must be compelled by torments and flames to undo her work, and your beldam granny shall lie in close custody within an hour!'

'I care not; I can easily show you have but done it to invalidate, as much as in you lies, her signature to the long-lost marriage lines, found in my murdered mother's bosom, and secreted by your villainous accomplice, Sir Thomas Holte. Come to him—hear if he will deny it! And let me tell you, Sir Thomas, you will find it more to your honour and renown to admit my claims than to cling to Edward Holte as your heir, of whom I have certain proof that he is *positively married* to the infamous mechanic woman of Birmingham, Armourer Firebrace's daughter—who is this day set in the pillory for incontinence with many others, and crimes projected more abhorrent still!'

'Married! My son Edward *married* to a mechanic of Birmingham's daughter!' exclaimed Sir Thomas, aghast at the words.

'Know you Edward's handwriting? And what says he here?' returned Grimsorwe, producing the stolen document, of which Sisyphus, the bellows-blower, had possessed himself.

Sir Thomas Holte could not prevent himself from taking the papers, and running his dismayed glance over its contents.

‘It is false! It is another piece of witchcraft! It is a forgery!’ he yelled; maddening, nevertheless, with the conviction that what he saw and read was real.

‘Ask Edward himself; he will not deny the fact, in hopes to induce you to take his seduceress into compassion and relief from the dangers that encompass her!’ sneered the fiendish grandson of Maud Grimsorwe.

‘I! May she perish in them, as she has so fully deserved! But, good heavens! all this is impossible; or it has been penned simply to quiet a clamorous woman’s entreaties—meaning nothing, meaning nothing! It must—it shall be impossible! Great heaven! just when the Prince has made a formal demand for my daughter’s hand, and hopes to win his royal uncle’s consent to their union, if only she can be recovered from the delusion of a sorceress! But I will put the matter to the proof at once. My Lord Keeper and I have indeed already agreed upon it, who was so offended with Edward’s backwardness that he avows it is by his order his lady and daughter are not at Aston Hall, and shall not come until Edward brings Mistress Penelope himself from Hagley as his bride. He shall go thither at once on the errand, or—or—what shall I do if all my children turn out such cancers in my flesh?’

‘You will find I have spoken the truth, and less than the truth,’ Grimsorwe replied with fierce composure. ‘Meanwhile, Sir Thomas Holte, I would advise you to compose your angry spirit, and consider wiselier to do myself, your true and eldest son, and my mother’s memory, the scant justice in your power now.’

‘Ha! is it the madman, Adam Blackjack, say you, has put this frenzy in your head?’ returned Sir Thomas,

ragingly. 'By the King's life! I will know the why and wherefore, and beat it out of his own narrow skull, if need be!—only that we have so much need of his skill to-day, and the King desires his dinner to be punctually served. But I will speak with the Anabaptist lunatic (so I know he has become) quietly, until I make him own his frenzy. Come with me, crazed witch's grandson, and you shall see if Adam Blackjack dares maintain this false invention to my face.'

Grimsorwe was extremely undesirous this interview should take place before he had assured himself of Adam Blackjack's signature to his forged certificate. But still more apprehensive of what might be revealed in a private interview between his father and the changeably-excited master-cook, he followed on Sir Thomas's exasperated advance.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

MURDER.

RATHER to the surprise of both parties in this altercation, no steaming odours of the intended magnificent banquet came to their olfactories as they descended to the kitchen offices. Perhaps they did not notice the circumstance much in the absorption of their minds at first, but it could not be avoided when, opening the massive doors upon the immense cooking ranges of Aston Hall, everything appeared silent, cold, and desolate.

No great fires, no smoking roasts, no bubbling boils, no busy kitchen-men and kitchen-maids. All silent, cold, and desolate! The only person, in fact, that appeared was Adam Blackjack himself, seated on one of the dressers, with crossed arms and closed eyes, muttering unintelligibly to himself, and with a Bible open widely on his knee.

Sir Thomas imagined himself under the influence of some delirious dream, and it was rather in the hope to rouse himself than the cook that he strode up to him, and shook him violently until he opened his eyes.

‘God o’ mercy, what is the meaning of all this,

villain? Where are the preparations for the King's banquet,—the game, the stews, the comfitures? The stag roasted whole, the — the — where are all the kitchen-menials gone? Why are you glaring thus at me?'

'Hands off, uncircumcised of heart and soul! Hands off, Sir Thomas Holte! Unbelieving Ahab! touch me not, but receive the testimony unto the Lord, which, behold! I have this day taken up against thee, and thy wicked house, and Belshazzar the King, who comes to defile and shatter the sacred vessels and utensils of Israel, for his ungodly appetites,' the madman replied, springing down from his seat and violently shaking off his master's astonished grasp. 'Yea!' he continued, in a tone of frenzied excitement and exultation, 'I have this day cast off for ever the yoke of Babylon from about my neck, and I have received the oracle of the Lord, and done even as He hath bidden me by the mouth of His inspired servant and angel in Birmingham, Wrath-of-God Whitehall that was, but is now openly proclaimed Kingdom-Come! And I have sent all the men and maidens of my service, with all the viands gathered for the banquet—yea, all the fat oxen, the luscious venisons, the sleek muttous, the hares, the fowls, the golden carp, the glittering trout, the rich pies, and confectioneries, and jellies—in carts into Birmingham town, pretending unto the witnesses that it was by your orders, and that the King's Majesty would dine with the townfolk in their Guild. I have done my worst, humanly speaking, and now, Sir Thomas Holte, do yours!'

'Abominable madman!' roared out Sir Thomas, frantic with rage, and collaring the cook as if he meant to

strangle him. 'And it is you also who pretend to witness that I was married to the daughter of a vile witch, and that Richard Grimsorwe is my first-born true and lawful inheritor!'

'No, unbeliever; no!' yelled the cook, in return. 'I take up my testimony also against the witch and her devil offspring, and all their works, and I tell you the man Richard has been long conspiring the death of your son Edward; is in league with the Anabaptists of Birmingham; conspired the destruction of your King Belshazzar himself! At this very moment I witness, he has in his pocket a forged certificate of his mother's marriage, to which he wants me perjuringly to affix my signature, having also forged that of the parish clerk of Sutton—dead Feldon's—to the lying document! Search him for it! But, as to me, I go this instant to the full presence of Belshazzar, and all his wicked nobles and servants, openly to denounce Richard Grimsorwe's treasons and malefactions, and witch bastardy, and so complete the confusion of the whole Babylonian whoredom assembled under these roofs, and then—take whatever martyrdom the Lord God of Israel may please to assign me in his cause!'

'That shall you never! Or, by heaven, take your martyrdom at once, then—and thus!' Richard Grimsorwe yelled; and either yielding to an uncontrollable impulse of the furious passions he inherited, though usually under the control of hypocrisy and artifice, or driven to frenzy by dread of the exposure threatened, he snatched up a cleaver from the dresser, where it had remained by chance after the general clearance made by the insane cook, and struck with such remorseless butcher rage at Adam Blackjack's skull, that he ac-

tually clove the unfortunate man's head in halves on his shoulders.

Sir Thomas Holte's horror must be imagined, not described. No pen could do the slightest justice to such a concussion of mind.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE GREAT GALLERY AT ASTON HALL.

MEANWHILE the member of this disastrous race, against whom the now murderer's artifices had been so specially directed, drank full of the bitter chalice forced on his lips. Dame Cooper held it up; and, truth to say, the good woman—little occasion as she had to exaggerate—at all events spared nothing in the way of woeful revealing to him.

Edward Holte thus acquired the full knowledge of the overwhelming calamity threatening him. His beauteous Dorothy—his loving bride, his adored wife, the mother of his unborn child—was condemned to be exposed during the whole day on the pillory, upon charges the most infamous and groundless, and had accepted her doom of disgrace and suffering rather than betray her plighted promises and faith to him. But, indeed, as Dame Cooper represented it, Dorothy dared not produce the evidence of her marriage, which must render impossible the detestable accusation of the Witch of Aston, while in the custody of Grimsorwe's atrocious agents, who would infallibly seize upon and destroy it before it could reach the public cognizance.

And this danger was so imminent, so pressing—at hand, in point of fact—for at noonday, to which it

wanted scarcely a quarter of an hour, Dorothy Firebrace was to be led forth to her degrading and unjust punishment.

Yet, what hope of salvation or rescue could there be?

Not only was Tubal Bromycham disabled, according to Dame Cooper's report, by his wound and weakness from rendering any active assistance; he was so exasperated and grief-struck by the intelligence of Dorothy's supposed disgrace and betrayal by the friend in whom he had trusted, that he refused to make any attempt to rescue his supposed paramour from the penalties of her folly and wickedness. And besides, he had been almost frenzied by indignation at the vile part imputed to himself in the affair, and fancied that to labour at Dorothy's rescue would be to confess the villany he was accused of, and ruin him for ever in the opinion of the lady who was now enduring so much in his behalf. But even to him, Dame Cooper declared, she had not dared to confide the truth, knowing that the fanatic party were now completely in the ascendancy in the town, and that any attempt at rescue with such means as Tubal possessed, would but send him to his own destruction.

As for Firebrace, the old man thoroughly believed in his daughter's guilt, and was so infuriated by the conviction that he declared he himself would be the executioner to lead her up to the pillory. And when Dame Cooper had left Birmingham, availing herself of the opportunity of accompanying the loyalist deputation, the hateful instrument was in course of erection in the market-place, at the same time with the preparations for a bull-baiting, proclaimed in honour of the King's arrival.

No help could therefore be looked for in Birmingham. But out of it, what? When the King had so openly, on his royal faith, taken the town under his protection, and had prohibited his troops, under penalties so severe, to offer the people there the least obstruction or assault.

But for this Edward Holte would have assembled his troop at once, and have galloped into Birmingham to the rescue, since the barriers were now thrown down. But, under the circumstances, the only hope was to induce the King to take another view of the present unlawful proceedings of the Birmingham fanatics, and give such orders as would restrain their malice against the brave woman who had so materially aided in his own preservation.

Dame Cooper herself could suggest no other resource, voluble as her sorrow and sympathies exhibited themselves. Edward accordingly proceeded at once to seek an audience of the King.

Unluckily Charles, who was really in very royal appetite, and desired to get over the ceremonials of the day necessary before dinner, had made but a brief toilette, and was already in the Great Gallery of Aston Hall, engaged in the reception of the concourse of loyal nobility and gentry assembled to do him honour in its walls.

Entering by a side door known only to the inmates of the house, Edward found this extensive and noble apartment, still held to be one of the finest in England, crowded almost stemfull by the throngs eager to catch a glimpse of their sovereign, in whose cause they were prepared to hazard so much; those who deemed themselves of rank and eminence to justify their desiring the honour, pressing on to kiss his hand, where he sat throned in a recess at the end of the gallery.

Throned it might well be called. The part in question was raised by several steps above the floor of the long and lofty chamber, and being richly carpeted with crimson velvet, it was furnished with an arm-chair and canopy of perforated brass-work, on columns—a miracle of Tubal Bromycham's skill in the metal—and which shone like burnished gold. Sir Thomas Holte had always projected himself a visit from his sovereign, or perhaps thought the elevation would not be too grand and gorgeous for an *Earl of Birmingham* to occupy on solemn festivities; and while he was friendly with the town and its mechanic representative, thought he did but right to encourage its peculiar arts, and exhibit the perfection of its workmanship.

The King, artistically inclined himself, had at once taken the most admiring notice of the beautiful and splendid work, and declared, to the equally tasteful Marquis of Newcastle, who led him to it, and explained the fact that it was native art, that he had not thought he had subjects who could rival Italians in working the hard metals into patterns as light and elegant as lace.

Sir Thomas Holte, rather singularly, had not reappeared at the proper moment to do the honours of his mansion. Edward was, however, glad at the time to miss his presence in the gallery.

It might have been thought that the heir of Aston was anxious to supply the deficiency, from the eagerness with which he elbowed his way through the gorgeously arrayed Cavalier crowd to the sovereign's closer presence. Indeed, he seemed to some even rudely and violently progressive. The savage Goring, who was gazing up at the curiously arabesque ceiling, with folded arms, and yawning, found himself brusquely pushed aside, but had

hardly time to shape a scowl and utter an oath, ere Edward Holte had hustled past him in his haste.

Lord Falkland's office always placed him near the King's person; and he also noticed, to his Majesty himself, the hurried approach.

'What is the matter with Captain Holte?' he said in a low tone to the King. 'He looks as if he comes to tell us that the Man of Nottingham is coming at speed to renew his attempt upon your Majesty's person.'

'He would find us better provided than then, Lucius,' replied Charles, with a proud smile and glance at the crowding multitude before him. 'And yet I should not like to hear 'twas so. That man's very name sounds always of an ill omen to my ear.'

By this time Edward had reached the dais, and had flung himself—deadly pale, indeed, and almost breathless—on his knees before the King.

Charles's attention, already startled, was fixed by this appearance of agitation, and he made a slight movement as if to rise, in some alarm. But considerations of dignity retained him in his chair. Only he looked with great surprise and inquiry at the young officer, and then said, with forced composure, 'Is it your pretended good folks of Birmingham, Master Holte, turned out *en masse* to assault us?'

'No, sire. Would to God it were so, that their fanatic cruelty and insolences might meet with just chastisement!' exclaimed Edward Holte. 'I come to complain to your Majesty now of their barbarous and masterful proceedings, not to defend them; nay, to implore of you leave to put a stop by force of arms to their unlawful violences against the youthful woman who figured so heroically—as your Majesty has occasion to

remember—in enabling me to give you notice of the designs of your enemies on your royal person, in time to baffle them, at Nottingham.'

'How so, sir?' replied Charles, coldly. 'Are we never to hear the last of this great adventure? In which, besides, another forward gentleman of this house claims the greatest part.'

'But falsely, sire! Richard Grimsorwe is a traitor, and in league with your fanatic rebels everywhere! There is no time, however, at present to expound all his villanies to your Majesty. It is enough to say that the man is doubtless at the bottom of all the atrocious plot which has consigned Dorothy Firebrace to public exposure, and probably to death itself, from the cruelty of a misguided mob, on the pillory in Birmingham. But your Majesty will not suffer your loyal and courageous deliveress to meet with such treatment from a vile fanatic rabble, instigated by all manner of lies and wicked scandals, and her devotion to your royal service, to her ruin!'

'As how is all this, sir?' Charles inquired, sedately crossing one leg over the other, glittering with the diamonded badge of the Garter. He preserved the ornaments of this order through all his extremities, even to the foot of the scaffold.

Thus required, Edward was compelled to declare, though in rapid and disordered strain, the nature of the infamous accusations brought against Dorothy Firebrace, and the unlawful trial and condemnation she had undergone at the hands of the self-constituted tribunal of the fanatics of Birmingham; defending her, however, as yet, simply by asserting her innocence and the unfairness and illegality of the proceedings against her.

To his utter amazement and indignation, nevertheless, this was the King's reply!

'Well, sir, if this girl be as you say she is, and affirm on your own honour, pure and innocent of all the charges against her as an angel of light, it only the more completely appears how totally justice and right are concerned in the due maintenance of our power and authority in the State. As it is, you yourself are the main cause why we cannot in any way interfere in the affair. You have assured us, against every information to the contrary, of the well-meaning and sobriety of action in all things of the people of our good town of Birmingham; and thereupon we have solemnly guaranteed them full liberty and exemption from all control and interference of our present superior power. And that thence all men may know how well and fully we are resolved to observe every plight and promise we make, however completely in our power or not, I tell you the Birmingham folks must have their way, without let or hindrance on our part, on the penalties already by us denounced against all who presume to molest them.'

Edward was thunderstruck by the decision, which was pronounced in those inflexible tones he had learned to know could not be altered by reason or entreaty.

'But an innocent woman! A woman who saved your Majesty's life at the risk of her own!' was all he could utter.

'How know we she is so innocent?' returned Charles sharply. 'Her townfolk have, certes, better means to appreciate her character than a rash, enamoured boy, her lover.'

'Her lover, sir! I am HER HUSBAND!' shouted Edward, in tones that echoed over the whole vast apart-

ment, and made all start that heard the word. All but one; and, amazingly, that one was Sir Thomas Holte!

He entered the gallery precisely as the word was pronounced; and, it is true, with a strangely aghast and spectral look and action, but still most clearly in no connection with anything he heard.

He advanced, in a singularly dizzy and staggering manner, to the dais occupied by Charles, and, to everybody's surprise, ejaculated merely, 'Your pardon, sire; I made a vain boast, and have lost my wager, if I made one! My villanous master-cook turns out to be—to be one of the Birmingham fanatic madmen in secret; and rather than cook a dinner for your royal Majesty, he has—has *disappeared*—and left all the preparations in such disorder, that although my son Richard—who has some skill in culinary art—he—he says—has set to work to repair the disaster, I—I fear dinner cannot be ready—for more than an hour from this!'

Certainly the King, though no special trencherman, looked more discomposed and annoyed by this announcement than at Edward's really tragical and exciting statements. But the rest of the audience, struck with the singular concussion of ideas produced within their minds by a knowledge of previous circumstances, burst into an outrageous peal of laughter.

Irascible as he was by nature, nevertheless Sir Thomas's only notice of this demonstration was the extraordinary and unexpected one of bursting into an hysterical passion of tears and sobs.

Charles himself was greatly surprised and, somewhat touched with pity at so strange an outburst of feeling. But the consolation he offered was a singular one. 'The fanatics of Birmingham are not, however, so altogether

harmful to you, Sir Thomas. Your son, Edward, confesses that he has made a blacksmith's daughter there his wife, and they are engaged probably at this moment in ridding you of the relationship by stoning her to death for offences of which he declares her altogether innocent!

Inexpressibly to Edward's astonishment, his father replied, in broken accents still, 'I do believe her so! Let Edward rescue her from their clutches, and bring back your Majesty's dinner, which the traitor cook has sent to Birmingham, under pretence you were to dine in the Guildhall with the townfolk, in token of a true reconciliation, and, if possible—if possible—the man.'

'Say you so!' replied Charles, flushing angrily. 'Truly such a trick as this was not set down in the bill of indemnity for these Birminghamers. Take your own troop of horse, Captain Holte, and bring me back my dinner and the master-cook; and the last shall hang before I eat the first. Whatever else you do, young sir, is on your own responsibility.'

'Then, sire, I shall bring home MY WIFE to Aston Hall, who truly, by descent, is worthy to mate with the noblest here!' and without waiting further comment on his extraordinary speech, Edward hastened still more rapidly out of the Presence Chamber than he had entered it, with a glance at his friend Lord Falkland, that seemed to beg of him to undertake all advisable further explanation.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

FOR DEATH OR LIFE.

SELDOM since Birmingham was a town had so strange a scene been witnessed in it as was presented at noonday on that memorable Sunday, October 16th, 1642, in the enclosed space before St. Martin's Church.

Directly in front of the building, but outside the graveyard, a wooden building of two stages had been erected, somewhat resembling a gallows. But its real dedication as a pillory was apparent in the balanced plank with holes for the head, on the top of a central tourniquet wheel. On this plank was usually painted in very large letters the particular offences for which the criminal was to undergo his degrading punishment, the mob in general proportioning their insults and pelting pretty fairly to the occasion, when it could read, which was not always the case. Poor Dorothy's pretended crimes were by no means softened in the expressions devoted to their setting forth on the engine of punishment, in this instance, and were certainly well calculated to rouse the indignation of a populace among which there would be many women and mothers.

The executioner, who had already taken his station on the engine, was a very suitable one to have shared the punishment, if his wife's account of his doings might be

credited. It was Sisyphus, the bellows-blower; attended, however, by Faithful Moggs, doubtless to perform such part of the duty as might require the use of hands. And never had the wretch exhibited the fiendish passions and cruelty of his nature more conspicuously in his evil countenance than on this occasion. If one could conceive the expression of a wolf athirst for blood transferred to human features, such would have been that of this man. And yet he looked agitated; very pallid, with constant bursts of a dark sweat on his forehead, like a criminal listening to the pleadings against him before his judge.

The instrument of disgrace and suffering was surrounded by a guard of the Anabaptists, whose gloomy craving visages were turned towards Sisyphus as a leader with a peculiar degree of significance. And it was remarked that they were specially well armed and prepared as if for active violence, though only supposed to attend to prevent any efforts at a rescue on the part of the friends of the person condemned. Though that need scarcely have been feared, since Dorothy's father himself was to give her up to what he considered her just chastisement.

Around these bitter factionists clustered the rest of the most zealous and fanatic portion of the populace of Birmingham, while, separated only by some twenty or thirty yards, was an extremely different assemblage, and central object. The royalists of the town, not numerous in themselves, but mightily strengthened now by the neighbourhood of their King and his powerful army, were gathered there, with a host of yelping dogs of various degrees of fierceness and size, held in by the collar, awaiting the signal to be let slip at a vast and por-

tentous-looking animal of the bovine species, which was raging, roaring, champing, within the limits of a massive chain that fastened it round the neck to the Bull Ring in the midst of the market-place. The vast bulk and strength of this creature, its eyes rolling fire its sidelashing tail, its foam-slavering mouth, its mixture of terror with ferocity, under the usual circumstances in which it was placed, rendered it a spectacle of dread even to those who expected to derive sport from its fury and agonies of resistance. In reality this was the terrible and far-famed Bull of Aston, of whose ravages Sir Thomas Holte had at last himself grown weary, or else desired more signally to testify his satisfaction at the King's arrival, and affront the aversion entertained by the Puritans for all kinds of diversions, by offering it as a sacrifice on the occasion. Moreover, a proclamation had been made that, on the conclusion of the "baiting" the bull was to be slaughtered, and his carcass handed over to all who chose to go in for a share, while there was anything to divide. Socialism in beef!

If to these two main, and in strong respects opposed, groups, we add that all the rest of the enclosure before St. Martin's was crowded with a nearly complete assemblage of the townsfolk,—the amusements provided being adapted to every taste and shade of religious and political opinion,—we have a notion of the kind of spectacle to which Dorothy Firebrace was led from the Parsonage by "Angel" Whitehall and his Elders, on the day, and at the hour named, for punishment.

To complete the degradation, as it was intended, of the unfortunate daughter of Armourer Firebrace, she was compelled to make her appearance in the streets wrapped in a long white linnen sheet, and with a lighted torch in

her hand,—emblems of purity, which were to be taken from her on being fixed in the pillory ; before which the victim was usually stripped of all upper clothing, to be more freely exposed to the derision and missiles of the lookers on. But there are some figures and countenances which it is impossible to bring down to the level, even of the most degrading situations. Death himself is at times powerless to destroy the ensigns of natural nobility, or efface the stamp of heroic spirits from their deserted material tenements. And it was thus with Dorothy Firebrace. Extremely pale as she was, all her fine features expressed as noble a haughtiness and resolution as ever, and her step and carriage were stately and erect as a queen's, as if with the consciousness rather of an approaching triumph and glorious exaltation than of punishment and shame.

In truth, Dorothy felt that the moment she could safely produce the evidence of her innocence, she should have endured as much as she ought, in love and duty to her husband, and that his honour, as well as her own and her unborn child's, required that everything should be risked in declaring the truth. Accordingly, extrication appeared easy enough, when once she should find herself under a public presence, which in her case she believed would immediately prove a public protection.

It is true that the wife of Sisyphus, whose constant attendance she had not only accepted, but earnestly requested in her captivity,—half savage as she was, she was still a woman !—had not failed to infuse her own jealous suspicions of the bellows-blower and his designs. But the contempt and loathing of Dorothy for the villanous fellow were such that she could not bring herself to consider the statements as aught but the effusions of the very

madness of the passion that possessed Cut-throat Meg. Far less could she bring herself to fear so vile an enemy. The terrible woman herself was meanwhile a great protection against the traitorous Anabaptist's designs. Nothing could exceed her watchfulness and determination in guarding the prisoner, but chiefly against what she conceived to be the insidiously amorous designs of her husband,—not without reason. Nevertheless, she had strangely abandoned her post on the morning of the execution of the sentence of pillorying the victim, as if, her jealousy being satisfied, she thought vengeance might be better gratified from amidst the spectators.

Whitehall and his Elders entered the market-place in their strange costume, with the intended victim in the midst of them, chanting doleful hymns, as if at a funeral; and among these, to the wonder of every one and approbation only of the most violent fanatics, came Armourer Firebrace. But no one who contemplated the grief-worn and shame-struck visage of the old man could avoid perceiving what agonies he endured under his forced outward stoicism and stubbornly resolved manner.

With all his determination, however, it was observed that the unhappy parent's resolution nearly gave way when, arriving at the foot of the hateful erection, it became his self-imposed task, to lead or compel his child to mount it. He turned and clutched her hand convulsively, as if for one of these purposes, pointing with his unengaged finger to the inscription on the pillory, but suddenly paused, staggered, and might perhaps have fallen, had not Dorothy herself sprung forward and caught him in her arms.

'Courage, dear father!' she then exclaimed, for the first time melting into a passion of tears and sobs. 'Lead

on. All will be well presently ! I can explain all. Only let me know that the people hear and see what shall occur.'

Firebrace, dizzily rallying, gave a vacant, uncomprehending stare, and renewed his effort ; but, in good truth, it was rather Dorothy that led and supported her unhappy sire up the ladder-like ascent of the pillory, than he who urged her on to her appointed scene of punishment.

A loud yell, mingled with murmurs from the royalists, greeted the appearance of the heroic girl on the platform of the pillory. But it was rather from the detestable glare in Sisyphus's lustful eyes that the wife of Edward Holte shrank, for a moment, back, than this uproar.

On the contrary, rejecting with scorn his offered hook-hand in mounting the last step, which was higher than the rest, she seemed to regard with satisfaction the great assemblage, clamour against her how it might.

Meanwhile, as the bull roared more lustily than ever, startled by the rival noise, making the most violent efforts to break from his rope, and as the Elders had not ceased their funeral chanting, the frightful mixture of sounds may be conceived.

There was a general lull, however, when Whitehall, the Angel of Birmingham, as he styled himself, followed up the victim on the pillory, and plainly, by his gestures, announced an intention to harangue the auditory. His speeches—composed, as for the most part they were, of lunatic ravings and prophecies—were yet of a kind that fell aptly in with the religious humour of the times and of the excited populace of Birmingham.

Contrary to expectation, however, instead of commencing with what seemed the immediate subject of

Dorothy Firebrace's offences, Whitehall, screaming out as a text, '*They have encompassed me as with bulls of Bashan,*' burst into a vehement denunciation of the intended bull-baiting.

The Cavaliers, he said, had purposely contrived the exhibition with a view to involve the town in the sin and desecration of the Sabbath-day, and also to introduce the systematic violation set forth, and ordered on penalties to be observed, in what was called 'the Book of Sports' of the late tyrant, James Stuart, which the devil himself must have edited. But the Angel announced his resolve, on the other hand, to permit no such blasphemy and affront to the Lord, in the town placed under his charge and government in Christ; and that, therefore, he had ordered the 'Guard of the Amen' to disperse its ungodly accompaniers and rabble, and keep the creature quietly for slaughter on the following day, for the benefit of the poor of the town.

But upon this statement, Robin Falconer, who, with some other retainers of Aston, and the aid of two large mastiffs, had driven the animal to the Bull Ring, roared out, at the top of his voice, that if the least attempt of the kind was made, he would cut the rope, and let it loose among the Roundhead rascals that should dare such an insolency against his master and the King's Majesty!

Whitehall turned with some perplexity to the captain of his guardsmen upon this, but was rather surprised at the singular change of tone exhibited by Sisyphus.

'What the foul fiend are you prating here, minister,' he said, 'about bulls and baiting and such like matters,—nothing concerning the real business in hand? But the town has been too long already in a government of raving lunatics; and you cannot now call upon your pretended

Tubal Saul for assistance, who is himself all but dead, and as bereft of understanding as the rest of you! Moreover, the Lord has sent me a vision to inform me that He is not content with your way of doing things, and allowing Antichrist and his legions a free passage through it, and has therefore ordered me to take upon myself the absolute rule and governance of this place of Birmingham! Take your celestial paradise where else you will! But as proof that the Lord is with me, and is willing that the people here shall inherit the Kingdom on Earth; lo, I expect every moment the arrival from Aston Hall, of a great banquet, prepared for the King and his nobles' own gluttony, but which by prayer I have enforced should leave Sir Thomas Holte's kitchen, and be brought by his own scullions and servitors for us of Birmingham to feast upon! And it shall be as a coronation feast for a *King!* For by that name and title, but not of an earthly grant or confirmation, do I take upon me henceforth the rule of the town! And yonder, yonder the glorious banquet comes.'

In reality several waggons and carts, which seemed laden with hampers of provisions, now lumbered slowly into the market place, under convoy of certain of the servitors of the kitchen at Aston Hall, whom the master-cook had deceived into escorting the materials of the royal banquet to the Guildhall of Birmingham. Adam Blackjack's confidential intercourse with the Anabaptist leader sufficiently explained his knowledge and profane use of the fact.

Whitehall was singularly taken aback by this bold self-assertion of the rival prophet, but after a moment's staring at him with great bewilderment, exclaimed, 'No, no, no! you are a villanous liar and impostor! Where

is it anywhere written that the King of the Word should be maimed of his limbs, and with an iron hook for a hand? Moreover, it cannot be, FOR I AM HE! Good people all, hear me. The time for the manifestation must needs have arrived when a traitorous impostor like this—and, moreover, have I not seen and overcome that other monstrous delusion and temptation of the fiend, under the likeness of the Morning Star? Therefore do I now openly avow and proclaim—'

But at this moment the unfortunate 'Angel' felt a hook passed round his neck, which drew him back with nearly strangling violence. Then Sisyphus thrust himself in front, full in the view of his adherents, yelling out, 'Stone him! stone him! He has spoken blasphemy. Yet this woman is in reality the predicted Star of the Morning, who is to beam at the right-hand of the throne of glory on earth! Wherefore I claim her as my wife and empress, and as such she shall reign with me among ye. Speak, Dorothy Firebrace!' he concluded, turning to the amazed daughter of Armourer Firebrace, with his diabolical expressions of all kinds fearfully heightened, yet speaking in an undertone which she only could overhear. 'Speak to the people, acknowledge me as your husband and king, or I will give you up to every shame and contumely the worst mob can inflict upon you; and if you survive their injuries, will rend you to pieces with this iron claw myself! Nay, never glare among them for the hag to assist you who pretended you so much kindness! Neither dread her any more, for she is where even her savagery must be out-devilled and quelled!'

'You have murdered your wife, then, monster!' replied Dorothy, in a loud voice; but although every particle

of hope deserted her, her brave nature was not yet subdued, or the resources of her courage and resolution at an end. 'Well, as you say, I will speak to the people,' she continued. 'Hear me, ye men of Birmingham!'

Universal attention and curiosity were now fixed upon the pillory platform; and bewildered by all they heard, but evidently expecting, from Sisyphus's own statement, some clearer explanation, a unanimous shout of 'Hear her! hear the Armourer's Daughter!' and a hustling up to the scene of action, testified the general interest.

'In the first place, then,' pursued Dorothy, in bright, ringing accents, that reached the furthest in the crowd, 'I do avouch myself most innocent of the infamous crimes imputed to me by the malignant calumnies of a witch and other my enemies, and engraven on yonder hideous cross-beam; in the proof of which I now declare to you, women and men of Birmingham, that I am the *lawfully wedded wife* of Edward Holte, wedded here, in your church of St. Martin's, and the mother of an unborn but most lawful heir to Aston Hall! The proof of which I will speedily place before you. And who will then deem it possible I could be guilty, as I have been accused? Sirs! I stood solemnly pledged to my husband, and certain of my friends, true witnesses of the truth I announce to you, not to reveal our marriage without his consent. But in this extremity I know he would approve the public declaration I now make—nay, would himself be here to make it, did not some unknown but forcible circumstances, I am certain, hinder his presence by my side! Moreover, I have had no possibility of communicating with him until this morning, when Dame Cooper undertook the task, but perchance has not sped upon it. Nay, villain! you shall not hinder

me!' concluded the heroic woman, eluding the fling of the bellows-blower's hook by rushing to the very verge of the platform, and suddenly flinging down the torch she still bore, she rent open the bodice of her gown, and produced a paper, which she flourished aloft, calling aloud, 'Behold! here is the certificate of the marriage of Dorothy Firebrace, of Birmingham, with Edward Holte, Esq., of Aston Hall, in the Church of St. Martin, by the Rev. Mr. Lane, witnessed by the High Bailiff Cooper and his wife.'

'My daughter! my dearest, wronged child, is this so?' exclaimed the Armourer, who had pushed fiercely between his child and Sisyphus, on observing the bellows-blower's brutal attempt.

'It is, my father! Here are the lines; I place in your hands henceforth the assurance of your daughter's purity and honour as the wife of the Heir of Aston!' returned Dorothy, placing the important document in her father's quivering grasp.

'God be praised! It is all as she has said. My daughter is a most true and pure and honourable *wife*! And true it is, and I witness it, the young man himself asked her of me, her father, in lawful though secret marriage, which I refused to allow!' the Armourer now ejaculated, in a transport of joy. 'My child, my child! I thought to lead you to a doom of shame and anguish for your guilt! But you are innocent, God be praised! God be praised! Good people, after what you have heard, are you not well content I should lead my daughter in peace and honour home?'

And the people of Birmingham indeed—all but the ferocious Anabaptist minority—moved, as the masses almost always are, by generous and enthusiastic im-

pulses; surprised and elevated by the extraordinary exhibition of courage, and skilful refutation of her enemies on the part of the youthful woman before them, burst into a perfect uproar of applause and assent.

An uproar which seemed rather to grow than diminish for several minutes, while Sisyphus continued to gesticulate frantically to the crowd, unheard amidst the noise. But on a sudden, losing all patience, he pointed to the torch which still remained burning on the platform, and yelled to Faithful Moggs, 'Set her on fire in her sheet, and burn the paper, too, if you are any follower of mine.'

Moggs raised the torch, though with evident slowness and reluctance, and muttered in reply, 'Nay, master; let us rather do as you said before, and carry her off to the Black Chapel, to be made your queen and wife for a thousand years. Only, to be sure, Cut-throat Meg is there.'

'No, she is not! All will be well enough for her. She drowned herself while I was attempting to immerse her for baptism in the Pool of Life, in order that I might restore her to be my wife, after divorcing her,' Sisyphus stammered forth.

'Then I denounce this wretch as a murderer! The poor woman herself told me, gnashing her teeth with causeless hatred, that her husband had grown to detest me for my scorn, and that if she would consent to be brought into his pale of belief, he would receive her again as his wife. He has doubtless drowned her under this pretence!' cried Dorothy.

'How long must I endure the slandering lies of this accursed harlot?' stormed Sisyphus, appealing with his

frightful claw to his satellites closely surrounding the pillory. 'Good men! Guards of the throne, who shall share in all my perquisites and exaltations, come up to me here, and do as I shall tell you to the flagitious slut!'

A movement and clambering on all sides of a variety of grim and haggard figures, up the poles and timbers of the scaffolding, followed upon this appeal; and for the first time Dorothy's courage failed her in the extremity of the horror and disaster of the fate that seemed inevitably to await her.

Not completely, however; for perceiving that her father was seized by two of the ruffianly followers of the bellows-blower, she snatched the marriage certificate from his hand as he was extending it from their clutches, and flung it into the air over the scrambling wretches' heads below.

'If there be any human creature here, let him preserve this paper!' Dorothy shrieked. 'As for me, I will rather leap from this scaffolding and perish than—Great heaven! what is here? It is Edward—Edward Holte—it is my husband—comes!'

By a most fortunate turn and conjunction of good hap, at this moment the precious document fluttered away in the wind to the very ring of the chain in the market-place that confined the bull; and the clatter of the hoofs of a body of cavalry, approaching at a gallop, was distinctly and closely audible.

The practised ear of the maimed soldier readily divined the meaning of the sound.

'The Cavaliers are upon us; the King, as usual, breaks his word. But vengeance at least is mine!' and he broke from the feeble restraint Whitehall attempted to

put upon him, doubtless with a view to effect some murderous seizure of Dorothy Firebrace.

In reality, the poor girl had only one resource to avoid the blow aimed at her neck, and which would probably have broken it, by the wretch with his barbarous hook. And yet redemption and happiness seemed close at hand, for her words, as she flung herself over the platform of the pillory, were, 'Edward, Edward—my husband ! save me !'

Ay, and in truth, by some miracle of good fortune, Edward, distancing all who followed him, at the sight of the scaffold and its victim, surrounded by enemies, arrived just in time to save her!—to catch his young wife in his arms as she fell from the considerable height she had leaped, in his faithful arms. And being on horseback, at no great descent ; so that although Dorothy swooned and lay in them for several minutes afterwards insensible, she received no really dangerous hurt.

Sisyphus perceived that his victim had escaped his vengeance. But the mischievous activity of his mind suggested still some means of harm to her, and slinging himself down the poles of the scaffolding, on the opposite side from the approaching cavalry, he made his way through the crowd towards the Bull Ring : doubtless with a view to possess himself of the document flown thither, and forgetful, in the absorption of his hatred and cupidity, of the terrific guard upon it.

'Master Grimsorwe will yet make this scrap worth the trouble of picking up,' he muttered to himself, giving a dive at the paper, which lay below the chained bull's hind-quarters. But almost at the same instant it turned, and with an astounding roar set its monstrous

head almost close to the ground, and goring at Sisyphus with its horns, his very attempt at saving himself proved his destruction, for his hook got entangled in the weapons of the awful brute, and he was caught and tossed aloft into the air !

A spectacle of indescribable horror, though a brief one, followed ;—so horrible, that Edward Holte himself, the moment his attention was attracted to it by the screams and confusion of the immediate spectators, directed his troopers to discharge their carbines at the ferocious animal, as the only chance of a rescue. And it was a bullet from his own pistol that finally entered the bull of Aston's spine and laid it a mass of slaver and blood beside the breathless figure of a maimed man, so mangled, gored, and trampled, that it seemed as if scarcely a limb or a lineament remained whole.

Singularly enough, the document which occasioned the tragedy remained entirely uninjured and untrampled, and Robin Falconer picked it up from nigh the palpitating carcase of the bull, and carried it to his young master. And as soon as Dorothy was sufficiently recovered to be left in the arms of her father, Edward himself mounted the erection which had been prepared for her disgrace and ignominy, and read the certificate aloud to all the people, and called upon them all to witness that he acknowledged the Armourer's Daughter for his true and lawful wife, and the mother of his legitimate heirs.

The Anabaptists in general, after the death of their leader, ventured on no further measures of resistance ; and some of them, perhaps, thought he was not unworthy of his fate, when about a week after a frightfully mutilated corpse, with a heavy stone tied round its neck,

floated up in the pond where he had instituted a horribly profane imitation of a baptism into his new religion, and which was recognised by most people as the body of his wretched wife, Cut-throat Meg,—murdered herself, undoubtedly, in turn !

CHAPTER XC.

THE PARDON.

AFTER these surprising events Edward Holte determined on his course of action with a promptness of decision and resolution which formed part, in reality, of his apparently gentle and modest character.

He intruded no further on the proceedings of the Birminghamers than to order back to Aston Hall the entire provisions for the royal banquet, and then resolved to return thither at once with his wife, and acknowledge her as such to his father and all the assembled magnates there. This great recompense he believed himself to owe to her wonderful love and fidelity.

Firebrace himself, in his anxiety to retrieve the good name of his daughter, made no objection to the proposal. But Dorothy, as soon as she revived sufficiently to understand its purport, at first evinced reluctance to the idea of thrusting herself upon a family which refused to entertain her willingly in the capacity of the wife of its representative.

Edward, nevertheless, overruled the legitimately proud feeling of his wife by the necessity of re-establishing her reputation clearly to all the world, and the right of his future offspring.

Accordingly, after a scene of the most affecting re-

conciliation and parting with her father, Dorothy *Holte* accompanied her husband on his return to Aston Hall at the head of his troop of horse.

The events that had passed, and the interval required for Dorothy's complete restoration, had occupied much time. Nevertheless the royal banquet ordered for noon-day had only just been served, at sunset, when the youthful pair arrived at the mansion.

Having ascertained that the King had just sat down to dinner, in the grand dining-room of the Hall, Edward took his post at once, and, with his young wife leaning on his arm, entered the apartment. And in this manner he advanced with the Armourer's Daughter to the head of the table, where Charles sat under a canopy, with the principal guests on either hand, and craved leave to present her, under that designation, to the monarch, both falling on their knees as he did so.

Charles seemed now in a singularly changed mood of good spirit and urbanity. Not, however, caused by so unkingly a reason as the restoration of his dinner, but by the news that had now been for some time circulated, that his beloved Queen had landed in safety, with arms and ammunition from Holland, in Burlington Bay. He was well disposed therefore to a favourable entertainment of the young pair, whose well-matched beauty and grace probably also struck his artistic eye.

'You and your fair bride are very welcome, Master *Holte*. Let room be made for them at our table, and we will hear the story of the rescue. Why, Falkland, does not this read like a chapter of old romance? Or, methinks I am myself the banished Duke in gentle Willie's play, sanctifying the espousals of Orlando and the madcap, merry Rosalind! At least, if our

host's good sanction runs before, as in all reason it should.'

The King glanced over on these words to Sir Thomas Holte, who sat at the opposite end of the board, but with a singularly excited, and, as it seemed to Edward, inebriated look. And this unhappy supposition was rendered still more certain by the extraordinary nature of Sir Thomas's reply.

'Ay, my good liege, and if you will let your royal nephew marry as far beneath himself as my son, and will not look too *nicely in the Hiding Hole of my hall!*'

'Your father has drunk my health too loyally to-day, Master Holte,' said Charles, with a look of grave displeasure.

'No, by the Three Kings, my liege! I adore Miss Holte, and will never marry any other woman while I live!' exclaimed Prince Rupert, who, to say the truth, looked as if he had joined in his intended father-in-law's potations almost as liberally.

'Ay, ay, Prince; but first we must remove the spell—the witch's spell, you know. I have had old Maud seized and lodged in the church steeple to-night, and have sent for a man called the Witch-Finder, somewhere out of Bedford, to put her to tortures, and confess, and take off the spell,' Sir Thomas replied, wagging his head curiously at Rupert. 'But meanwhile we must have pardon for any little offence which we, or our friends, may have exceeded in the rigid performance of our duty, from the King's majesty, and then all will be well. But I cannot forget, the fellow's mother was an injured fool to die as she did!'

Edward felt now convinced of his father's condition; but fearful to direct further attention to it, he quietly

procured a seat at the banquet for Dorothy. Nevertheless, on the King's inquiry, 'Well, Master Holte, and heard you aught in Birmingham of this traitor cook?' Sir Thomas suddenly uttered an exclamation, and started up, gasping and clutching at the air.

Edward was immediately by his side, and earnestly entreated him to withdraw to his private chamber.

'Why yes, son Edward, I believe it will be best; I am not my own perfect man just now,' said Sir Thomas, allowing himself to be led staggering out of the apartment.

But on reaching the vestibule he turned to Edward with a most singularly aghast and horrified look, and exclaiming, 'Ask Richard Grimsorwe the reason!' fell down, apparently in a state of insensibility, which his son began to suspect was caused by something more than excess in liquor.

Horrified by the supposition that entered his mind, he sent for his mother to attend the baronet on his couch, whither he had him conveyed, and then determined to seek an explanation with his detestable enemy-brother. He conceived it even advisable to let him know how fully all his villainy was understood, and the punishments justly in store, as the best means to convince him that all future operations of his malice would be strictly watched and guarded against. Still, as being now the only representative of the family left to entertain the King, he found it necessary to return to the banquet until its conclusion.

To his surprise, however, on making for the dining-room, he found Richard Grimsorwe apparently in waiting for him in the hall.

No other person was there. The servants of the house

and of the royal guests were engaged in the inner chamber, in attendance at the banquet. And as it was now growing dark, Edward, aware of the diabolical acts of which his bastard brother was capable, almost imagined he had posted himself in this deserted spot to assassinate him. Grimsorwe, besides, carried a dark lantern, no ray of which he suffered to escape so as to throw any inconvenient light on his own person as he presented himself full in Edward's way. But still it was clear that he desired to be seen and recognized at once, and that therefore it was not likely (other probabilities apart) that he meant anything personally harmful.

His voice was also strangely agitated, and yet undertoned and quiet. 'Edward,' he said, 'I sought you.'

'For what purpose, ruthless villain?'

'Hush, foolish gentleman! Let our senseless rivalry be over! A suspicion, a look, a word, may deprive both of us of the object of contention, which alone has rendered us enemies. The Aston inheritance depends on a word, a breath, a suspicion, to be dispersed to the winds!'

'What mean you, madman? Madman, I call you, as the best excuse for your atrocities, and for my not at once throwing myself upon you, for death or life.'

'My enmity with you, Edward Holte, finished this morning, when my father's mad fury placed in scarcely redeemable peril the inheritance for which we contend.'

'Unnatural ruffian! what mean you?'

'Look there! Take this lantern, and throw its light on the object you will behold within yonder contrived secret place, which only my father, the mason who fashioned it, and yourself, as heir, should be aware of.'

So Richard Grimsorwe replied, leading the way to-

wards what seemed a large porter's chair, of some ruddy wood, set in a recess on the left hand of the great hall staircase.

Edward, aware of the secret concealed by this external appearance, and in a manner fascinated and enthralled, followed.

Grimsorwe took the large wooden armchair, seemingly contrived only for a porter's sitting, by the arm, and giving it a peculiar touch and swing, it turned, and revealed a dark inner chamber, of no great size, and only high enough to allow of a man of ordinary stature to enter it stoopingly.

'Take the lantern, and tell me what you see in there,' said Grimsorwe, handing his lamp to Edward.

Strongly controlled by his manner, the latter took it, and paced into the chamber, keeping his eye at first glancing backward; which Grimsorwe observing, retired to some distance.

What then did Edward's horrified glance light upon?

The bleeding corpse of a man. Of a man whose skull appeared to be cloven in halves; and, nevertheless, the two sides of whose face, if rejoined, it appeared to his horror-stricken conviction, must be that of Adam Blackjack, the master-cook of Aston Hall.

Edward gazed for several minutes, without being able to realise this terrible vision to himself. But Grimsorwe's voice recalled him to sense.

'For heaven's sake, Edward, make no further delay. You see what my father has done? In his fury at the discovery of what I confess I did not conceal from him, your disastrous marriage, and Adam Blackjack's insane taking up with the fanatics of Birmingham, and sending the King's dinner off there, he snatched at the nearest

weapon, and killed the wretched man with his own cleaver.'

'Merciful Jesus!—but this accounts for my father's terrible state of excitement and gloom.'

'It does; I, who alone witnessed the deed, only by the help of wine and strong drinks, have succeeded in bringing Sir Thomas to sufficient calm not to betray his own rashness to all our destruction. You remember what befell the family of Birmingham. We should have been betrayed to the same; we are in no great favour with the King, do what we will, though you can plead great services, Edward. We should have been exposed, you chiefly, and the wife and unborn child you falsely suppose I have meant mischief against, to all the penalties of felons. Forfeiture of goods is the least among these, and there are hundreds of courtiers ready to grasp at our destruction. Of course, scanty as are the hopes I may yet cherish of our father's treating me as his son, may be, I yet know that for the family to lose all could be no advantage to any member of it; and I have therefore aided him so far to the best of my ability in concealing the dreadful crime.'

Edward, who knew the violence and fury of his father's temper, and of the provocations to its display, listened in aghast horror, but full belief, to what he heard.

'Great God! what is to be done?' he gasped.

'This,' replied Richard Grimsorwe. 'We must obtain the King's pardon in general for my father for every imaginable offence, under pretence of shielding him from the consequences of his energetic exertions on behalf of the King, before any begging courtier is aware how rich a prize is thus placed within grasp. This very night you must ask of the King his signature to a pardon, which

I will draw up in the fullest imaginable, and yet vaguest terms of the law, as if our father might by possibility have incurred such inferences in the exercise of his endeavours to keep this country for his Majesty; and you must obtain the signature to greet Sir Thomas's waking, or it is my belief he will commit suicide in his despair. Nor do I pretend, Edward Holte,' the bastard brother concluded, 'that here our enmity and rivalry will cease; but we must care to keep something to struggle for, which otherwise cannot be.'

'Oh, my unhappy father! and I was probably the cause why his passions so completely mastered his judgment! Richard Grimsorwe, do what thou hast said, and, although from thy felonious hand, I will present the pardon to the King for signature, and obtain it in full satisfaction for all myself and my wife have ventured in his behalf, as the only favour I will ever ask of him during my miserable existence.'

Edward Holte returned to the banquet, and assumed his father's place at the foot of the table.

He found that his wife had already established herself in the royal and general favour by her manners, at once full of dignity and vivacity, and her simple yet eloquent description of the recent events in Birmingham. The King found himself sufficiently interested to question her further, and with great minuteness, concerning the attempt upon his person at Nottingham, which she had assisted in foiling, and expressed himself highly satisfied at the conclusion.

'This woman is one of Shakespeare's women,' he remarked, with unusual warmth for him, to the listening courtiers; 'and I doubt if even the women of Sparta or Rome equalled those noble creatures he has drawn from

the pure and high-hearted women of England, though he has placed them in so many different countries and scenes. I am glad, I say, to have seen a woman who realises to me the noblest ideas of that greatest of poets. Mistress Holte, your King thankfully drinks to your health and happiness.'

Edward played as well as he could the part of courteous host and representative of his family throughout the evening, yet he thought the King would never retire; and indeed he sat unusually late, listening with constantly revived interest to Dorothy's account of the circumstances of her rescue, and of the state of things and parties in Birmingham.

Very shortly before his Majesty did at last retire to rest, a paper was put in Edward's hands by a person in a lawyer's costume, who glided in, and then immediately glided out.

Charles, however, in the end, professed himself tired, and anxious for a night's repose. Edward was at once in readiness to escort his Majesty to his chamber, with an immense candelabrum in hand, which had been prepared for the occasion.

The great majority of the banqueters accompanied the King to his bed-chamber door; but only Edward Holte, Lord Falkland, and his Majesty's immediate body-servants, entered it with him.

King Charles, pleased with the evident efforts made to treat him royally, in the magnificent furniture of the apartment and the velvet hangings of the alcove in which his bed was placed, assured Edward that, although grieved at his father's indisposition, he ascribed it altogether to its true causes, fatigue and over-loyalty in his potations. When the young man tremulously informed

his Majesty that Sir Thomas was in reality tormented by fears that he had exceeded the law in various ways, in vindication of his royal legitimate authority against the Birminghamers, and other rebels and fanatics, like the late Earl Strafford, and could only be restored from his apprehensions by a general pardon for any of the offences he might have committed, signed by the Sign-manual,—a document, Edward concluded by stating, with great agitation, he had regularly drawn up, and which required only his royal hand to it.

So saying, he produced the form of pardon engrossed by Grimsorwe, which he himself had scarcely had any time to glance at.

Charles laughingly remarked, 'Give it me. I presume this pardon is required for such offences chiefly as you have committed yourself to-day, Master Holte, in suppressing the violence and insolence of your townsmen of Birmingham.' And scarcely looking, either, at the document, he took up a pen that was placed in a silver inkstand for his use, and affixed his royal signature. 'Put yours also, Falkland,' he said. 'It is the new form, the Parliament requires so much, and you will be glad to do anything to oblige your friend.'

Lord Falkland took the pen in turn, but with characteristic consideration glanced down the paper.

'Sweet Lord! what is all here?' he then exclaimed. 'Sir Thomas's pardon for *murder* and *bigamy*! Murder and bigamy—and fire-raising, and masterful oppression, and I wot not well all beside! What can be the meaning of this?'

'Sign it, Falkland, sign it, dear friend; 'tis but a form of the lawyers, to include every imaginable offence in a general pardon, that no cavil may ever after be raised upon the instrument.'

Grimsorwe had, in fact, informed Edward that he should put in several offences besides the real one, that no special attention might be drawn to it until circumstances should compel the explanation of the mystery. The body, he declared, could be very well kept hidden until the King's departure, when Sir Thomas Holte's rash but not unjustifiable act must be explained, and to any objections the King's full pardon pleaded.

Charles was to proceed on his warlike advance to London on the following day.

On his friend's remonstrance, Falkland countersigned the document, and once in possession of it, Edward took reverential leave and good-night, and resolved to hasten to his father's apartment, and relieve him from the horrible anxiety under which he believed him to labour.

On the way, however, Grimsorwe met him.

'Sir Thomas is in a deep sleep—I have just come from him—do not awaken him to a wretchedness that may perhaps madden him!' he observed in an agitated tone. 'Moreover, Edward, he begged that throughout this miserable affair, he might not be exposed to stand degraded before you—before his most virtuous son—in your actual presence, I mean! He begged me to do all that was necessary between you, him, and the King. Give me the pardon, if you have obtained it; and though I will not attempt to hide your merits in the affair, our father needs not stand utterly degraded beneath your observation, whom he most respects!'

Deceived by this moving appeal, Edward was about to hand the paper over to his false-hearted brother, when Dorothy suddenly appeared on the scene, escorted by some of the females of the household.

'Do nothing this traitorous wretch, your pretended

brother, bids you, Edward!' she exclaimed. 'Nothing—nothing whatever! I have just made my way to the prison door of your unhappy sister, which no one can open, and who accuses the wretch of all that has happened most unhappily for herself, as we may for ourselves. Do nothing he asks, bids, prays, implores of you!'

This vehement expostulation was the cause why Edward Holte refused to deliver the signed pardon into the hands of Richard Grimsorwe, who had his uses to make of it; who even at last, in his rage, partly avowed them. 'Keep it, then!' he exclaimed. 'It is but the clearer proof of Sir Thomas Holte's offences, whose lawful heir I am, and will prove myself—before the PARLIAMENT OF ENGLAND!'

And in reality, on the following day, when Edward entered into explanations with his father, and heard from the enraged and exasperated old man who was the real murderer of Adam Blackjack, the real murderer was nowhere to be found at Aston Hall.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE WITCH OF ASTON'S END.

It appeared that Sir Thomas Holte had been induced by Grimsorwe's entreaties and appeals to the memory of his unhappy mother, and the natural shrinking of a parent from consigning his offspring to destruction, to assist in hiding the body of the murdered cook, and consenting to conceal the dreadful fact until a pardon could be obtained for the perpetrator of the deed. He was to use his own influence, and gain Edward's assistance for his bastard-brother's redemption, if possible. And certainly the King could scarcely refuse condonation for an offence which could be represented so completely in his service, and almost authorised by his own threats of vengeance. But the wicked wretch, working on his own secret plans, proffered also to avert all risk from himself by throwing the guilt on his father. With this intention he had doubtless stimulated Sir Thomas to drown his horror and apprehensions in too copious libations; or—as was still more probable—had infused some powerful narcotic in his drink, that had deprived him of his reasonable senses long enough to enable him to complete his manœuvres in the atrocious manner described.

Nevertheless, Sir Thomas perceived that he was entangled beyond hope of extrication in the artful mesh thus looped together.

He felt it would be impossible for him to prove his innocence. His wager on his cook's punctuality, his own well-known violent temper, his agitation and other singular behaviour after the tragical occurrence, his concealment of it, his lack of all witnesses, save one that would certainly be against him, his legitimate son's obtaining him a pardon,—every tittle of proof and evidence seemed turned irreversibly against him.

Even Grimsorwe's flight afforded the victim no support to any declaration of the truth. The artful villain left a letter directed to the King himself, containing a long recital of his alleged wrongs, in being deprived of his birthright, and complaints that his father's and brother's favour with his Majesty, and violent demeanour towards the persons who offered to give evidence in favour of his mother's lawful marriage, obliged him to retire from Aston, and demand redress of his grievances from the Parliament.

Under these certainly most annoying circumstances, Sir Thomas behaved with more than even his accustomed irrational fury and violence. He turned the whole tempest of his wrath on Edward for having dared to believe him guilty of the crime imputed to him, and proceeding without obtaining his consent, or seeming to hesitate for a moment in his conclusions. He refused to hear any apology, or find any in the manner he had incapacitated himself from giving or receiving explanations. And not knowing how to vent his exasperation more to his son's annoyance, declared he had no doubt what he had done was at the instigation of his low-born Puritan wife, who wanted to have himself attainted of a deed of murder and violence, in order that if her Parliament friends got the upper hand, she might manage to have

his property transferred to the foolish husband she had secured.

Sir Thomas went on ragingly to declare that he was very well informed she had also had the impertinence to go prying upstairs to the apartment where he had confined his 'bewitched daughter,' who could not else have discovered—as he found she had—that her 'blacksmith' was still alive, and was guiltless of the imputations fastened on his character. But the Baronet vowed, with strangely terrible oaths, that Arabella should marry Prince Rupert, or finish her days in a madwoman's cell, which a continued refusal of so great an offer, when the witch-spell was removed, would certainly prove her to be. He concluded by ordering Edward to remove his pretended wife instantly from Aston Hall, and to bring him the pardon, that he might proceed at once to the presence of the King, and tear it to pieces then and there.

On all this bad news being announced to Dorothy, she, however, was not willing the instrument should be thus destroyed.

It is probable she suspected, from the violence of Sir Thomas's temper, that in reality he had committed the deed, which was a good deal more in his style of action than the serpentine Richard Grimsorwe's. Any way, the latter would be certain to make it appear so. She remembered the fate of the Birmingham family, and dreaded the possibility of a similar exercise of tyrannical power in the case of her husband's family. She therefore strongly advised that they should retain the pardon, although never to be produced unless the necessity should arise. And she recommended Edward to seek an audience of the King at once, explain the circumstances, and ask leave to join the vanguard of the army, which was already

setting forward, to escape from the old man's unjust anger and violence, and remove her, as he ordered, from beneath his roof.

Dorothy also begged her husband to remonstrate to his Majesty the extraordinary ill-treatment suffered by his sister, under the pretence of her being mad or bewitched. And Dorothy, avowing that she had in reality made her way to Miss Holte's dismal confinement without being able to get in to see her, declared she thought it extremely probable, from her wild tone of reply, that her intellects were giving way, unless speedy rescue should arrive. Arabella, it seemed, would have it that her comforter was an angel, sent from heaven for the purpose.

Edward, justly indignant at his own and his wife's and his sister's maltreatment, complied in full with Dorothy's requests; seeking his father again, in the first instance, to urge upon him the propriety and prudence of retaining the pardon. But Sir Thomas became in a manner frantic with fury, vowed that Edward and his wife were in conspiracy with his unnatural bastard to bring his name into utter disgrace and ruin, in order to disgust the Prince Palatine with the alliance he now so generously and nobly proposed to conclude,—but that he would foil the whole plot! And he rushed off to the presence of the King at once, with Grimsorwe's letter in his hand,—Edward concluded, to give his version of the entire transaction.

Edward, sadly perplexed and vexed at the certain exposure and concussion that must follow, proceeded also to the King's apartment, who was engaged in giving orders to the principal officers of his army regarding the renewal of his march on London.

Nothing could, therefore, be more public than the

revelations to be expected would certainly have been. But greatly to Edward's surprise, and at first to his relief, Sir Thomas made his appearance in a much calmer and tranquil manner, in company with Count O'Taafe.

But a harmful reason speedily appeared. Sir Thomas handed over the paper left by Grimsorwe open, though directed to the King, and informing his Majesty that the allegations contained were all utterly false, but that the writer having really gone over to the Parliament, in the hope to obtain his objects by its interposition, he discarded him for ever from any alliance and consanguinity with himself, *equally* with the lawful son, who should have been his heir, but for his unexampled disobedience, and degradation of the family name by marrying the daughter of a mechanic of Birmingham. Sir Thomas concluding this astounding declaration by stating that he had, in consequence, resolved to make his daughter the sole heiress of all he possessed—every rood of his land, his house of Aston Hall, and the entire revenues attached of seven goodly manors—on condition only that she accepted the glorious alliance which his Highness the Prince Palatine Rupert had been pleased to offer to conclude with her.

Charles looked extremely surprised at this address; but it was amply, and impetuously confirmed by Rupert, who, throwing himself on his knees, asked his royal uncle's consent to a marriage which he declared was essential to the happiness of his life!

Edward interposed, as soon as he could speak for amazement, by a passionate appeal to the King against the projected injustice and irrational severity of his father's proceedings towards himself and his good and

loyal wife, who, he further irritated Sir Thomas by declaring, was of nobler descent than the Holtes themselves could pretend to be.

Charles could not but perceive how much the right of the case was with Edward Holte; but all his maxims of public and domestic government supported the exercise of authority, however tyrannically directed. It may even be that he was not insensible to the advantages of such an establishment for his landless and exiled nephew, Sir Thomas Holte's wealth, great as it was really considered in that age, having been even greatly exaggerated to the King by those who desired to forward their master's present eager wishes and determination. Still, the ingratitude and unfairness of such a procedure struck even the Stuart Prince, and he himself remonstrated with Sir Thomas on the resolution announced, with apparent warmth and concern. Only, however, obtaining passionate reiterations of the fixity of his purpose from the Baronet, until Edward put the climax on his misdemeanors by assuring the King that he was certain his sister herself would never consent to become the usurper of her brother's rights, or the wife of Prince Rupert—whom she had rejected with scorn—unless she was driven to madness by the barbarous imprisonment and ill-usage she was subjected to, from which unlawful durance he implored the King to order her immediate release, and hear the truth from the young lady's own lips, with his own ears.

In making this appeal, Edward, however, unconsciously jarred on a powerful feeling with the King.

'Refuses a Prince!—refuses my nephew! Miss Holte refuses the Prince Palatine for a husband! She must be mad indeed; and I do not take upon me to interfere in the treatment of lunatics, saving by regular course of

law in my Courts of Chancery !' Charles said, with evident irritation.

'My daughter is not lunatic, sir; but she is possessed by a witch with an extraordinary hallucination, which we shall speedily dissipate. There are means—there are means!' vociferated Sir Thomas.

'Use them, then; we shall not interfere,' the King reiterated. 'Master Holte, if what you say be true, you cannot leave your redemption from disinheritance in better charge than a woman's obstinacy on such points. I myself am content to leave the preservation of my nephew from an alliance, which is too much beneath him in some respects, to the same. But you would not, sure, attaint your father of an unnatural cruelty and tyranny towards a woman, his own child?'

'There is little of which my son would not accuse me, had he any chance to be believed, sire! My mad cook of yesterday, for example, hath been discovered to have committed suicide in a privy chamber of my house, last night; and it wants little, perchance, that Edward Holte should accuse me of the rogue's murder to your Majesty.'

Sir Thomas Holte said this—and with extraordinary composure and credibility of manner—doubtless at the instigation of cooler and craftier heads than his own. But although Edward never dreamed for a moment of contradiction, he was horrified to think how completely the appearance of the body must refute to all beholders the possibility of *suicide*.

The King himself seemed uneasily struck by the circumstance, though he only remarked, smilingly, 'Well, Sir Thomas, you hold our pardon for that and for much more, if your loyal zeal had in reality ridded us of such

a felon fanatic.' And he appeared finally to sum up his whole decision in favour of Sir Thomas's despotism by turning to Edward, and remarking, 'But we will care, in any case, Captain Holte, to see that your own services, past and future, are so amply rewarded as to indemnify you for any lost inheritance. There will be traitors' spoils enow to divide anon; for numbers of good estate have openly joined our enemies now in the field;' and calling to the Earl of Lindesay to resume his observations, his Majesty plainly intimated that further discussion on the subject of his host's private affairs was not to be allowed.

Utterly discomfited, and reduced to silence and despair, the only favour Edward requested was leave to set forward at once in the vanguard of the army. This permission was graciously accorded; and, in a mood of the deepest sadness and dejection of spirits, Edward Holte rejoined his wife; and, somewhat comforted by her unshaken courage and hopefulness, rode forth with her from his paternal mansion, on the march which the royal army resumed about mid-day on Monday, the 17th of October.

There was nothing else for it. Dorothy could not possibly remain at Aston Hall, under the circumstances. Birmingham, where she had suffered so much, and which was again in the hands of the frenzied Whitehall, could be no suitable residence for her. Whatever the dangers and discomforts of the campaigning life before her, there remained no resource. And, moreover, after the perils they had undergone apart, neither Edward nor his young wife could bear the notion of being again separated.

King Charles left Aston Hall very far from pleased

with the main incidents that had befallen him in it, but renewing his expressions of approbation of the beauty of the situation and the magnificence of the building itself.

'Tis a regretful inheritance, truly, to lose, Falkland, as you say,' he remarked to that nobleman; 'but disobedience in children to a father's will is almost as heinous an offence as treason in a subject, and exposes to the like penalties and forfeiture! And it were indeed no ill endowment for a landless Prince like our obstinate nephew, who, if he set his head on anything, could not be rebutted from his career by a mountain tilting at him. However, all may end better than we think, and I will make your friend's advancement, in other ways, most specially the object of my care. They have yet to unbewitch this girl; and say you not some preference is alleged by her brother for another?'

This observation was made as the King rode out of Aston Hall, duteously preceded by Sir Thomas Holte, on foot, to the limits of his domains.

Lord Falkland, who always spoke up for his friend when he could, was about to reply, when a catastrophe took place which attracted attention, and marked the era of the commencement of the Civil War still more tragically at Aston Hall. And whatever expectations were formed of the Witch of Aston being persuaded or compelled to undo her supposed sorceries against Arabella Holte, it appeared, in consequence, were destined to be disappointed.

After her capture—accomplished with circumstances of great brutality by a number of the Aston rustics, who had long believed her a diabolical mischief-maker in various ways—Maud Grimsorwe was placed for security

in the steeple of Aston church. This was a favourite prison-cage for persons accused of sorcery, it being thought the devil had no power to enter a church, even to the rescue of his most devoted votaries. But driven finally to despair by the consciousness of total desertion, since her grandson himself did not interfere in her favour—by remorse, and the dread of the terrible doom of persons convicted of the offences imputed to her—the wretched old woman crawled out at an opening in the belfry, believed to be too narrow for the possibility of escape. And at the very moment when the royal procession commenced its stately progress through the grand court-yard gate, and Sir Thomas Holte appeared heading it, Maud Grimsorwe threw herself headlong from the summit of the roof of Aston church to the ground.

The idiotic old sexton, who was intended to be one of the main witnesses against her, and who was standing in the churchyard, declared afterwards that he saw the devil, in the likeness of a great black serpent, with wings, allow her to mount on his back, and then suddenly make himself as straight in the air as a stick, and let her down to the ground. Whence it was concluded that he kept some form of compact with the witch, to the letter, but broke it to the sense, as is well known to be the faithless custom of the Father of Lies. And certainly there was nothing of religious hope or trust in two strange lines which the unfortunate old woman had written with a piece of coal on the whitewashed wall of her place of captivity :—

‘ I am going to my rest through the air,
In a way that will make the folks stare ;
When the bones of myriads fly up in a riot,
May those of Maud Grimsorwe’s mother lie quiet.’

This delirious doggrel, nevertheless, supplied a piece of evidence—that the Witch of Aston, when out of the influence of her wicked grandson, did not claim for her daughter the name and status of wife to Sir Thomas Holte.

CHAPTER XCII.

CHARLES THE FIRST IN BIRMINGHAM.

A FURTHER remarkable circumstance diversified the King's progress through Birmingham, and which was attended with results of no little importance to the town.

Following on the advance of the principal masses of his army, Charles the First rode in a kind of triumphal state through the streets of Birmingham, surrounded by a brilliant escort of his principal officers. He was now arrayed, as became a king going to battle, in a complete suit of armour, with the exception that he wore a hat and feathers, the Earl of Denbigh carrying a helmet before him, decorated with the spikes of a crown. And as the entire population had swarmed out to witness the spectacle, the Birminghamers had ample opportunity to remark the displeased severity of their Sovereign's aspect, in finding himself, for the first time, amidst subjects so little disposed to render him the kind of obedience and submission he desired from all.

In fact, Charles doubtless nourished in his heart purposes of retaliation and vengeance by no means unsuspected; and, moreover, the sturdy independence of the people's character indisposed them to feign what they did not feel on the occasion. Accordingly, the King

was received in almost total silence in answer to his own surly looks, or if a scanty cheer was anywhere raised, it only served the more depressingly to mark the fewness in numbers of the loyalists who thus expressed their sense.

Before the Guildhall it had, however, been arranged the King was to receive a congratulation from the authorities of the town, there being no keys, nor any other emblems of submission, to be offered, belonging to it.

John-the-Rogue had proposed this, and that he himself should be the haranguer, in the expectation of receiving some special token of royal approbation for his forward zeal. But just before the arrival of Charles, he found himself unexpectedly displaced by Tubal Bromycham, who, with the now eagerly-proffered assistance of Armourer Firebrace, caused himself to be carried on a litter before the Guildhall, and informed the company assembled there that, as Lord of the Town of Birmingham, it was his duty and intention to offer the King all the proper ceremonial of reception on its part.

Tubal was still disabled from active movement by the injury to his limb, though it was now regaining power, and he continued frightfully pale with the exhaustion of the pain and fever he had suffered. But, as he was again surrounded by a strong body of the smiths, and backed by the Master Armourer, and the energy of his resolves was appreciated, John-the-Rogue and his adherents prudently waited events, and made no opposition. Whitehall nowhere appeared.

And thus it befell that, on reining up his powerful charger, King Charles found himself faced by a spectrally pale sick man, on a couch, who, raising himself with difficulty, supported by Firebrace, bade his Majesty wel-

come, in low, enfeebled tones, but with an eagerly excited aspect, in the name of the town of Birmingham, as Lord thereof; and requested him to receive from his hands, as such, the customary acquittance for the manor, by touching the handle of the sword with which his ancestor, Sir William of Birmingham, had rescued Edward I. at Crecy.

And saying this, Tubal extended, with the Armourer's aid, a long, rusty, two-handled weapon, by the point, with the hilt to the monarch.

It is probable that Charles would have complied at once with what he at first took to be some mere formula of feudalism, had not Prince Rupert suddenly exclaimed, 'What! the seditious smith of Birmingham, the impudent pretender to your Majesty's dues and rights in this town, and my own assassin assailant! Dares he to ask of your Majesty a confirming of his usurpation, and approval of his rebellion and mutiny-stirring among his townsfolk here? 'Tis he, chiefly, sire, who did deny your Majesty arms for your soldiers in Birmingham, and supplied the Parliament officers with the best its forges can produce.'

'Is this so?' inquired Charles, with a deadly frown.

'Nay, but it cannot be denied!' squeaked Wynkynthe-Weasel from far behind in the shade of the Guildhall portico.

Indignation seemed suddenly to restore all his energies to Tubal.

'No, sire!' he exclaimed, in a voice that rang now very loudly and clearly forth. 'I am no usurper, but lawful heir and descendant of my ancestors, Lords of Birmingham, who were unjustly deprived of their inheritance by your predecessor, Edward VI.; which injury

it is now in your royal power to repair, by acknowledging me for who I am. And traitor and assassin am I none, as I will prove body to body, and man to man, against this proud Prince, on any fair field your Majesty and all England can grant us for the trial in arms !'

'Your Majesty has heard some particulars of this case, by my transmission from Master Holte,' interposed Lord Falkland, with his usual moderation and generous feeling; 'and truly it is one which calls for some righting at your hands, to undo the wrong of your predecessor; nor could there be a fitter opportunity for exertion of your royal prerogative on the side of justice and mercy.

'My liege, the man pretends to half the lands of Sir Thomas Holte among his forfeitures; and to my certain knowledge has treasonably appealed from your courts of justice to the Parliament; besides showing himself on all occasions an aider and abettor of Oliver Cromwell in his criminal late designs, and stirring up of insurrection in the town!' exclaimed Count O'Taafe.

Nothing more was requisite than that name to exasperate Charles the First.

'Look to the Parliament then only, traitor! for redress of your pretended grievances. From me you shall only receive, at the earliest convenience of my laws and judges, a well-deserved halter. Forward, gentlemen.' And without deigning to listen to a word of further remonstrance, or even of the congratulatory speech which John-the-Rogue now conceived himself at liberty to deliver, King Charles the First proceeded on his way.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE BATTLE OF EDGHILL.

It was speedily known in Birmingham, that on retiring from Aston Hall the King had left no inconsiderable garrison of some forty or fifty soldiers behind him, under the command of Cornet Titus, who was promoted by Prince Rupert's interest to a captaincy on the occasion.

To the townsfolk in general this precaution was a standing menace, knowing on what terms of ill-neighbourhood they stood with the Hall. But to Tubal Bromycham it seemed as if specially arranged to the completion of his disaster in this unhappy love affair, and contrived to render hopeless any projects of relief he might form for the captive object of his affection.

Dorothy had not failed to report to him the barbarous maltreatment to which she had discovered Arabella Holte was subjected, from the perverse tyranny of her father, to coerce her into abandoning the man she loved for the man she disliked, and who had treated her in several respects so ill. Of course, it was no object with the wife of Edward Holte to promote Sir Thomas's object in securing himself his royal son-in-law. And now, it plainly appeared, the unhappy young lady was to remain encompassed by the myrmidons of her rough royal suitor; and it seemed doubtful whether even her high

and firm nature must not yield finally to persecutions and temptations so great, or her reason itself give way.

All that could be learnt in sequence from Aston Hall justified the worst apprehensions.

Every one in Birmingham concluded, from the accounts of the state of the body, that Sir Thomas was really the murderer of his cook; and further details of his insane violence and fury came constantly to knowledge, and kept alive both indignation and dread of further ill-consequences to every one concerned.

On the other hand, Tubal's interview with the King had satisfied him that there was no hope of justice or restoration at his hands. Under all these circumstances it was not wonderful that, as he regained his wonted powers of body and mind, Tubal should form and cherish the projects which at last he plainly avowed to the sympathising Master-Armourer Firebrace.

Firebrace, it may be imagined, was as little pleased as any one with the tidings he received of his daughter's reception into her new family.

'We will restore the town to the Parliament, and clear the country of this den of military jailors and assassins, while the main body of them are elsewhere engaged,' Tubal at last openly declared; and upon that both he and his once-intended father-in-law set earnestly to work to re-organise the Parliamentary party in the town, and form the people into a militia capable of defending it, and even of proceeding to external action. The death of Sisyphus removed one great source of faction and turbulence in Birmingham, and the mass of the townsfolks being already well inclined the way their leaders wished, began now to find themselves vexed and harassed by the royal garrison in their neighbourhood

in a manner to irritate the most patient. Captain Titus, under pretence that the forges of Birmingham were devoted to the Parliamentary supplies, set his dragoons on cutting off the necessary materials of iron and coal from the Black Country.

The news which arrived shortly after of the results of the first great battle of the Civil War, contributed rather to feed the flame than slacken it.

It was on a Sunday, exactly one week after King Charles the First's visit to Aston Hall—October 23, 1642—that the armies of the King and Parliament for the first time came into conflict, in the famous valley of the Red Horse, near Keynton, in Warwickshire, and under the sharp ridges of the heights which have given their names of Edghill to the battle.

The tidings which reached Birmingham faithfully followed the variations of the conflict itself.

It was reported, in the first place, that the King's right wing, composed of cavalry under the command of Prince Rupert, had charged the Parliament horse with such fury and impetuosity that it was utterly driven from the field, and pursued in complete disorder and rout to a distance from it. Much too far, indeed, since both victors and vanquished were thus equally removed from influencing the general decision of the field, and the Earl of Essex was enabled to advance his infantry and attack the King's, which was much inferior in number and resolution. Indeed, the principal nobility and gentry disdained to serve, except on horseback, and consequently the Royalist infantry was formed of the riff-raff of the army. The King's foot was in its turn broken, and a terrible slaughter made among it. His own royal person, and those of the two boy-Princes, his

sons, were for a time even in great danger, almost surrounded, as they were, by the enemy. And the Birminghamers might have been proud, had not their feelings been enlisted with the opposite party, to learn that a townswoman of their own—the wife of Edward Holte, who had fearlessly ventured to the very front of the battle to watch over its issue to her husband—was instrumental in withdrawing the two young Princes safely from the disastrous scene, intrepidly undertaking the charge, and moving off with one in each hand to the neighbouring heights, where comparative safety was ensured.

At one time, in fact, the battle was supposed to be entirely lost by the Royalists, and earnest endeavours were made to induce the King to quit the field. But his obstinacy stood him in good stead on this occasion; and Prince Rupert returning with a portion of his vainly victorious Cavaliers, restored the balance of strength. But darkness coming on, both sides desisted by a kind of consent from the conflict, and passed a dreary night under arms, scattered and intermingled along the entire valley, in expectation of its renewal in the morning.

In the account of this latter portion of the action, again the people of Birmingham had cause to be proud of their Armourer's Daughter.

The story ran that Captain Edward Holte's horsemen returned from this successful charge under Rupert without their leader, reporting that he had fallen mortally wounded in a single combat in which he had engaged with one of the fugitive officers, almost close upon Keynton. But Dorothy, distracted with grief as she was, attended by only one or two of her husband's soldiers, and furnished with a dark lantern, made her way over

the entire scene of sanguinary conflict, and found Edward at length bleeding and insensible on the ground, with several fearful swordcuts, but not dead; and contrived to bind up his wounds, and bring him back to the royal quarters in time to preserve his life.

Edward Holte continued for many months after entirely disabled for action, at Oxford, where the King ultimately fixed his head-quarters; an object of particular solicitude and attention on the part of Charles, as also was his heroic wife, though the special reasons for the royal consideration that existed as regarded Edward were not divulged until long after.

Dorothy herself was ignorant of what took place when, on the morning of the battle, the King had directed Edward Holte to be summoned to his presence.

The young captain found Charles halted on horseback, with a group of his principal superior officers, on the verge of a range of steep crags, just above the colossal sculpture in the red sandstone rocks which gives its name to the valley. But when he perceived Edward approach, he moved his horse along the cliffs, making a sign to him only to follow, until they were out of hearing of the group of officers.

These were all much surprised; but Edward himself was still more so, at the eager and excited expression of countenance with which the usually sedate and reserved King turned to him.

‘Captain Holte,’ Charles then said, in tones of like emotion, ‘would you know that man again, deem you—that Captain Oliver Cromwell—who attempted upon my person at Nottingham.’

‘Most certainly, sire; if by nothing else, by his Birmingham-made armour.’

‘Look out for him, then, when you charge in the Prince’s squadrons. Make him mine, alive or dead—but dead rather than alive—and there is no recompense you can ask of me, I will refuse. And your father shall sooner disinherit our Crown!’

Edward, who had such heavy grievances of his own to requite on Cromwell, answered as a loyal cavalier should—‘In truth, sire, I have no cause to love the man, and will do what in me lies to pleasure you on him.’

‘Swear it!’ said the King, who seemed most peculiarly bent on his wishes in this respect, ‘and I will give Rupert orders to leave you and your men entirely at your own discretion in the choice of antagonists!’

Edward did so; and it was in consequence of this oath that he became involved in the disaster previously mentioned, in the following manner.

The two hosts began moving towards each other about noonday, with a great rumble and rattle of artillery and musketry on both sides, which did little execution, but frequently halting to steady their lines, and keep well together. It was thus nearly a couple of hours before they came sufficiently near to engage in the hand-to-hand conflict whereby battles were in that age chiefly decided.

Prince Rupert, observing that the Parliament cavalry was principally massed on the right wing of Essex’s army, had taken the left of the King’s advance with his own—intensely eager for the fray. Edward Holte was among these, earnestly searching for the enemy against whom he was specifically to direct his energies; and as he rode in the front with the Prince, he had every opportunity.

Nowhere, however, could he discern any sign of the

bright armour of the Ironsides; and in reality, Cromwell, whose qualities were early disrelished by his superiors, and who was already on bad terms with the Parliament general, had been stationed by him remote from the probable conspicuous scenes of action,—a circumstance afterwards absurdly misrepresented by the royalists as really occasioned by a cowardly remissness and hanging back by Cromwell, at the commencement of the campaigns he made so fatal for them.

On a sudden, Rupert gave the signal for the onset, shouting, the words, 'The King's right, and charge, gentlemen!' and Edward's troop being mixed in the van, of course he no longer deliberated on what share to take in the movement, but dashed on with the rest.

Such was the violence and fury of Rupert's attack, that the entire left wing of the Parliament army was in a manner swept from the field in a moment, and the Prince's dragoons had the unresisted pursuit of the whole flying and scattered squadrons far and near.

It is well known how Rupert's impetuosity and insatiable ardour for slaughter and destruction transported him always, on the field of battle, into losing the advantages he gained, by following them up too far. But, of course, it was not for any subordinate officer to attempt to check the fury of the pursuit, even if Edward Holte had not shared as wildly and enthusiastically as any one in the company in the vehement sense of victory and mastery achieved.

'Kill, kill!' was Rupert's only word of command. But Edward himself was well pleased with the notion that every flourish of his sword increased the distance between his beloved wife and danger. And he was following on as recklessly as the rest in pursuit of the

flying foe, when passing a farmhouse on the roadside, he suddenly caught tones which he recognized, from a yard within a gate, exclaiming, 'Keep still, I say, son Oliver, yet awhile, till these mad Rupert's men are fairly ridden past; when, by the Lord! in spite of Essex's grizzled beard, I will try if we have not a good Lord still, and one who will keep his promise to us, by pushing between them and their King, and rending him from the midst of their sorry foot.'

It was the voice of Captain Cromwell.

Edward remembered its peculiar tones instantly, and reined up his horse at once, shouting a halt to his men; but, on looking over the palings enclosing the farmyard, he perceived only barns and out-buildings crowded with stacks of corn and hay from the recent harvest. Nothing living appeared at the moment but a number of ducks paddling in a dirty pond.

Edward was, however, convinced, from what he had heard, that troops were lurking concealed within, under cover, and he shouted the discovery as loudly as he could to the galloping throngs engaged in the pursuit, forgetting in his eagerness that he was now himself left almost alone; but this seemed too much for the patience of the young soldier, who had probably been addressed in those remembered accents, for a horseman in the Firebrace steel suddenly spurred from behind a stack, and dashed with uplifted sword at Edward Holte.

'Nay, father! 'tis but one man, and of my own inches. Let me flesh my maiden sword!' exclaimed the strange rider, and joined in a hand-to-hand conflict with Edward Holte.

It was, however, but of brief duration. Edward, perfect master of his weapon, and alarmed with the convic-

tion that he had fallen into an ambush, struck a blow which inflicted a mortal wound on his antagonist.

He would then have retired for support, but was almost instantly overtaken by a taller and stouter man, in similar array to the one he had overthrown, and in whose raging features he recognized—Oliver Cromwell!

‘Villanous cavalier, my boy is killed by you, and I will have your life in turn—Edward Holte!’

Cromwell recognized his antagonist as their swords came together. But John-the-Rogue proved of inferior temper to the Firebrace steel, and once more Edward was at the mercy of his adversary; but this time found none. Edward’s troop, however, had now made back to his assistance, and a sharp conflict ensued, in the course of which the farmstead and all its stacks were set on fire, and Edward received the wound under which he so long after languished. Doubtless, as he himself believed, from the hand of Cromwell, though he could never distinctly remember what followed in the furious *mêlée*, till he found himself stretched on a heap of bloody straw, in the King’s quarters, with his wife and one of the royal surgeons busily engaged in recalling him to life from a deadly swoon.

But although Cromwell himself escaped from the vengeance aimed at him, his eldest son Oliver, a youth of the most promising martial qualities, was slain in the conflict. And who knows what great effects were not thus produced by the chance stroke of Edward Holte’s sword that day? This youth might not have proved, like his younger brother Richard, unequal to the weight of empire that fell upon him from his father’s shoulders, and a Cromwell dynasty might even now be seated on the throne of England, or presiding, like the Princes of Orange, over its commonwealth.

On the other hand, the bitterness of a bereft father's feelings might not have mingled in the politician's calculations, and the comely head of Charles the First might never have rolled upon the block by the behest of Oliver Cromwell.

CHAPTER XCIV.

ATTACK ON ASTON HALL.

THE general result of the battle of Edghill was undecisive. Both parties withdrew from the field on the following day, severely mauled, without attempting to renew the conflict. But the universal exasperation and violence of men's feelings and partisanship were necessarily roused into fiercer and wilder outbreaks; and Birmingham, above all, already profoundly agitated and stirring beneath the surface, found itself drawn into sudden action by the determination of its chiefs.

Tubal Bromycham was himself urged to more decisive and rapid movement than he had at first designed, by tidings which now for the first time reached him direct from Aston Hall. Phœbe Maythorn presented herself one morning at the Moat House, in Birmingham, weeping, and laden with disastrous tidings of the state of things at the Hall; as may be guessed, since Lady Holte herself, vanquishing the excessive timidity of her nature, and her dread of her tyrannous husband, had sent her to declare—even to Tubal Bromycham—that unless some rescue arrived speedily for her daughter, her reason, or her life, would be sacrificed to her father's obstinate cruelty.

Regardless of the realities of the case, and more

excited than ever against both his sons, Sir Thomas chose to declare that the Witch of Aston's death must have broken all her spells, and consequently, that his daughter must be, and should be, willing to marry Prince Rupert at once. And he had actually expedited a message to that effect to the Prince, and had ordered his wife to make every preparation for the nuptials, as if they were certain to take place. And yet Arabella Holte continued a solitary captive in a dismal hole in the roof of the Hall, her father assuring her constantly that she should never quit it except to marry the Prince. And to complete the strange barbarity and certainty of what was intended, the Reverend Mr. Lane had been induced by threats, and as the only means to avoid Sir Thomas's indignation for the part he had taken in his son's secret union, to promise to perform the marriage ceremony whenever called upon, and whatever reluctance might be exhibited on the bride's part. Such was the infirmity of the old clergyman's character, and his subjection to the will of his violent patron.

Matters were evidently drawing to a formidable crisis.

With regard to his sons—on the one hand, there was long reason to suppose that Edward Holte's wounds at Edghill would prove mortal, and the baronet was so fiendishly set against his daughter-in-law that he was resolved her child, if she had one, should never inherit Aston Hall; while, on the other, he had conceived a still bitterer hatred against Richard Grimsorwe, and with still more reason; for the villain had actually presented the Parliament with a petition for the redress of his pretended injuries in being deprived of what he alleged to be his rights, as legitimate eldest son of Sir Thomas Holte, and had produced as a proof the forged certifi-

cate of his mother's marriage, to which he had now daringly appended a forged signature for Adam Blackjack. And he so plausibly supported his case by declarations that Sir Thomas had caused the destruction of the two living witnesses of the document, for no other reason but that they were so. He contrived so artfully to enlist the sympathies of the chief leaders of the Parliament against their declared and violent foe, that an ordinance of the House actually assented to the prayer of the petition, and a select committee was appointed to examine and report upon the proofs that might be laid before it by the petitioner.

Among these figured the murder of the cook by Sir Thomas Holte, though Grimsorwe affected only to urge it as a manslaughter on sudden provocation, caused by Blackjack's declaring the truth, and revealing where the certificate had been so long concealed. And he prayed that the pardon granted by the King might be produced as a confession of his father's main delinquencies, and a completion of the validity of the document he urged on consideration. And as this latter act of grace, accorded almost as a matter of course, could be quoted as a new sign of the King's indifference to public justice and monstrous system of favouritism, the Parliament readily endorsed the demand; and, although the pardon had never certainly passed the Great Seal, made the grant a portion of the charges presented against the fugitive Lord Keeper Lyttelton.

Putting all these circumstances together, Tubal had no doubt but that Sir Thomas was in a state of mind that rendered him capable of any violence to carry out the sole favourite plan that remained to him, and from which he could best hope support in his difficulties. And

as after the battle of Edghill, and the King's retirement to Oxford, it seemed not unlikely that Prince Rupert would have leisure upon his hands shortly, to figure in his part in the vindictive and tyrannous transaction, Tubal, and his ally the Armourer, perceived that no time was to be lost.

Accordingly, they resolved upon an immediate attack on Aston Hall, to dislodge the royalist garrison there, and set Arabella Holte at liberty.

This garrison, under the malicious Titus's command, and by Sir Thomas's wishes and abetment, had for some time been exhibiting still worse tendencies to mischief and violence towards the inhabitants of Birmingham, besides the injury done to the staple industry of the town. And probably it would not have been found very difficult to persuade the townfolk of the propriety of endeavouring to rid themselves of the nuisance as speedily as possible. But Tubal Bromycham now exhibited very unexpected qualities of popular oratory, and assembling the people in the market-place, he set before them so moving and impassioned a statement of the cruelties and tyranny exercised by Sir Thomas Holte, and of the perpetual misery and danger awaiting them in the presence of a Cavalier garrison at Aston Hall, that the crowded assemblage unanimously demanded to be led at once to rout out their insolent oppressors from the place.

Moreover, Whitehall, who ever since Sisyphus so audaciously contended with him, had seemed confused and strangely moping in his conduct, and had refrained from all his old vagaries, now emerged again in his old character of prophet and denouncer of woes to the royalists and their favourers. He declared that Aston Hall was doomed to be laid level with the dust, and that the toad and

serpent should ere long spawn their venomous brood in its stateliest chambers.

A better assurance, however, of this perhaps lay in the fact that Firebrace produced Tubal Bromycham's famous cannon, confessing that he had found himself loath to destroy a noble work of art of the kind, and so had merely concealed the instrument of destruction in a dis-used forge-house.

Without this formidable aid, the efforts even of a greatly out-numbering multitude against the disciplined force at Aston Hall, might have proved of doubtful result. And indeed, when the Birmingham men mustered to the number of about twelve hundred, advanced in good order to the entrance of the Park, and thence dispatched a messenger to require the immediate evacuation of the mansion, and its surrender to the people of Birmingham, the frivolous and time-serving Titus seemed rather amused than otherwise by the demand.

Sir Thomas Holte and he were now very special friends, he having persuaded the baronet that he earnestly desired to promote his royal patron's union with his daughter. And he supported the old man in his irrational plans of subduing his daughter's obstinacy, as he phrased it, with the zeal of malice and revenge.

In spite of the strange and horrifying symptoms which had begun to be exhibited by the unfortunate captive, he persisted in assuring Sir Thomas that the delirious cries and raving entreaties which were now frequently audible from the pretended madwoman's cell, were artful attempts on her part to enlist the sympathies of servants, and stupid people of that kind, and persuade a release, which would destroy all the good hitherto done.

Titus was also a great bottle companion, and he kept Sir Thomas from much interval of lone reflection by daily and nightly computations.

They were in the midst of a revel of this kind when the person sent to summon Aston Hall—Bailiff Cooper, much against his will, but it was thought a royalist would be safe on the errand—arrived.

It was a gloomy, overhanging autumn, or winter day rather, perhaps it should be called, being pretty far advanced in November, not very cold, though a faint powdering of snow had occasionally fallen that morning, and Sir Thomas and his military convivialist were seated together, at a rousing fire, in the chamber the King had occupied as the sitting-room of his suite; now in part filled by noble beginnings of a grand museum, if carried out with the spirit and goodwill evinced by the original projectors.

Sir Thomas and his friend were engaged in a strangely senseless amusement, endeavouring to out-grimace the extraordinary masks in ironwork that decorate the vast fireplace of this chamber, and occasionally toasting one another in brimming flagons of mulled sack, with bobbing crab-apples, to make the flavour pungent, in the midst.

It so happened that Titus, perhaps purposely, had peculiarly jarred on Sir Thomas's recollections by inquiring—'What wondrously skilful, comic fellow had fancied those rare laughing visages, that looked like the figures you see in dreams, with their very souls bursting with laughter?' And Sir Thomas, gloomily pausing, had just said, 'The lamed rascal who, they tell me, is again lording it in Birmingham; and who, why the Prince hanged him not that witchcraft-night, I never

could well understand!' and had fallen into a sombre rumination, when a domestic ran in, with a scared look, and announced—'A mob coming from Birmingham, your honour. And one before them to say what they mean.'

CHAPTER XCV.

THE SIEGE OF ASTON HALL.

‘THE good folks of Birmingham have bidden adieu to what little possession of their senses they have shown these latter times,’ said Captain Titus, after listening pleasantly enough to the High Bailiff’s confused and apologetic account of his errand. ‘Are they madmen, to think that a garrison of the King’s soldiers will surrender a place of any strength, and this fine palace may be made of much, on the demand of a higglepiggledy mob?’

‘I am only a mouthpiece, and one unwilling as the tortured twist of brass on the lips of a trumpeter, that, if left to its own utterances, would but bray or bleat; not discourse all manner of valiance and assault,’ replied the Bailiff. ‘My wife bade me do none of it; but how can you refuse when they have you by the throat? But never was creature more choked, as it were with dust, by his own words. I would I had as much water as I could hold in a sieve to take away the thirst.’

The Bailiff desiringly eyed the drink between the two captains of Aston Hall, but neither offered him any.

‘Who leads the rogues?’ said Sir Thomas, after an interval of gloomy reflection. ‘But there is no need to ask,—Tubal Bromycham, of course.’

‘The same, worshipful sir; and more bent than ever to be lord of Birmingham,’ replied the Bailiff.

‘What he shall never be, however,’ Sir Thomas replied, with a fierce smile, ‘is—husband of my daughter. I know how to remedy that.’

‘Tut, we are good as long as our provisions hold out against all Birmingham can do against us,’ said Captain Titus, scornfully. ‘It is scarcely worth while to close the doors or the stout oak shutters, Sir Thomas; but do so, while I ride out to look at these audacious fellows, and give them a taste of what is further in store for them.’

Sir Thomas nodded, but rather absently. He roused himself, however, by a seeming effort, to execute the portion of the taskwork put upon him.

In a few moments Aston Hall resounded with a clatter of warlike movement and preparation. The lower windows were hastily secured with their iron bolts and massive shutters, the doors locked, and the house servants, collecting by pre-arranged order in the hall, armed themselves as best they might from the store of weapons over the grand mantelpiece. An alarum bell was at the same time rung from the steeple of Aston church, to summon the neighbouring farmers and villagers to render what assistance they might. But seemingly with very little effect. A deep prejudice had been excited against Sir Thomas by reports of the strangely cruel manner in which he was behaving to his children, as well as the verified facts of his career, and the belief that Adam Blackjack had fallen a victim to his violence and passion.

The greater portion of Titus’s garrison was of musketeers, of a regiment commanded by Count O’Taafe. But he had also about a score of Prince Rupert’s dra-

goons, whom he directed to mount, and placing himself at their head, while Sir Thomas busied himself with the internal arrangements, he rode forth, apparently to reconnoitre the enemy. But the owner of Aston Hall would have been little pleased if he could have seen the expression of countenance, and heard the muttered words, with which his late boon companion looked back at the stately abode as he did so.

‘ We will defend it long enough to get it destroyed, my good old flinger of pewter pots !’ he said, stroking the scar on his forehead with the back of his hand ; ‘ and not long enough to hinder you from becoming the grandfather of a race of Birmingham smiths, ambitious old tyrant ! I have no cause to wish it otherwise.’

On arriving at the palings of Aston Park, within which the Birminghamers had not entered until an answer to their summons came, Titus was, however, rather surprised at the number of enemies he espied outside. Chiefly armed, it is true, with pikes and bars of iron, but drawn up in very steady and solid lines on each side of the road to the town, with a fine piece of artillery on wheels conspicuous in the rear. Tubal rode upon this, which was drawn by about a dozen of his comrades, to rest his still weak limb ; and the entire array seemed governed in its movements by his directions. For though Armourer Firebrace was present, he contented himself with carrying Tubal’s standard of a smith’s leather apron, gaudily painted with the arms of the Birmingham family.

It is probable, nevertheless, that Titus was rather pleased than otherwise at the strength his assailant presented, as affording him a better excuse for the conduct he meditated in the affair, in the gratification of the bitterly revengeful feelings that possessed him.

‘Hillo, rascally rabblement!’ he shouted over the palings; ‘where’s the impudent captain of housebreakers and mechanic slaves among you who has dared to summon an officer of the King to a surrender?’

‘I am the leader of the MEN OF BIRMINGHAM, and I am here!’ Tubal replied, recognising with strong distaste one of his worst assailants in his recent capture. ‘But you give us the names you deserve for yourselves alone.’

‘I answer your summons, then, thus, men of Birmingham, if so you call yourselves,’ Titus replied. ‘While two stones of its walls stand upon each other, Aston Hall shall never be yours, so begin destroying when you will!’

And with a curiously significant gesture of invitation towards the piece of artillery, Titus retired; remarking to his horsemen as he did it, ‘They are too many for an attack—it were a madness the Prince himself would not venture on. Let us return to the Hall.’

And return they did, losing thereby all the advantage of their position in the park, in the probably disorderly and interrupted advance of so undisciplined an assailing force.

But Tubal himself seemed not inclined to take the hint thrown out for his adoption. Firebrace proposed that they should unmuzzle the gun, and try its capabilities at once on Aston Hall, but he dissented.

‘Aston Hall is the work chiefly of our own hands, Armourer; and a goodly one, that should become the inheritance of your descendants. We want to rid us of its ill tenantry, not to destroy the place itself,’ he remarked; ‘moreover, who knows when the ball is launched where it may light? And there is a head under yonder roofs which to preserve from injury methinks I could

prop the skies with my shoulders! And shall I loosen stones and timbers on it?'

He gave directions instead that the park palings should be levelled, and the advance continued of the entire assailing force.

No resistance being offered, the townsfolk swarmed up the stately avenue leading from Birmingham to Aston Hall. But on approaching, they were received with a considerable change in the tune.

Sir Thomas Holte witnessed the rapid return of the dragoons with very great surprise, which he took no pains whatever to conceal.

'Never a sword—nothing but spurs—red!' he exclaimed. 'What means this, Captain Titus?'

'You will see in a moment, Sir Thomas. There is an army marching against us,' said Titus, with an appearance of consternation not altogether feigned.

'Whatever may be their number, my own servants and myself will at least make some effort to diminish them!' Sir Thomas Holte scornfully replied; and Titus—apprehensive that he was working his game too openly, or anxious to give himself an appearance of earnestness, or, in fine, willing to do what injury he could without spoiling his main views—very efficiently arranged his force for resistance.

It is on record that the first assault on Aston Hall was repulsed with considerable slaughter, though made with great courage and obstinacy.

The moment the Birminghamers, scrambling headlong over hedges and ditches, and making for the doors and windows to break them in, appeared within musket range, a murderous fire was opened upon them, and in a few moments many were severely wounded, and several killed.

A cry of alarm arose, and all Tubal's efforts could not prevent the greater portion of the crowd from taking to flight. But such was his excitement and exasperation, that he leaped from his gun, and, forgetful altogether of his lamed condition, rushed about in all directions, attempting to stop the fugitives, and hindering the abandonment of the cannon, which he forced a number of the men to assist in dragging off.

He managed at last, by the most strenuous exertions, to rally the main body at the point whence they had started, on the boundaries of Aston Park. And when the first panic was over, he had nearly succeeded in inducing a portion of the fugitives to return to the assault, when on a sudden Whitehall—who had been foremost in the advance, and equally so in the retreat—yelled out, 'Stay, stay! the Lord is not willing for an attack to-day! I have wrestled with Him in prayer, and can obtain no answer, your sins are so heavy and numerous! But until I do so, the victory cannot be to us, and your blood might deluge the whole earth in vain! So let us spend the rest of the day in fasting, and humiliation, and prayer, until a sign is granted us!'

The singular influence acquired by this frenzied enthusiast appeared most strikingly in the immediate irresolution and final desisting of the people from their more courageous resolution. Tubal himself had no sway against the 'Angel's' inspired wishes; and, greatly to his indignation and concern, the Birminghamers, gathering around the prophet, assented at once to his instructions to encamp whereon they stood, and fast and pray until the Lord was induced to turn His face their way once more, and to manifest the same by some plain sign, which those who ran might read.

This circumstance afforded time for divers unlucky incidents.

After barricading his house, and witnessing the return of Titus with his dragoons, Sir Thomas had proposed that an immediate messenger should be sent to the royal head-quarters, in Oxford, for assistance, since the town-folk of Birmingham were attacking them in such force. But after the repulse, his vanity and confidence rose so high that Titus easily persuaded him there was no occasion for such an appeal. Still, he declared, it was certainly advisable to send his Highness the Prince word to come at once and remove his bride from the midst of such a hurlyburly. And if Sir Thomas exerted his paternal authority at last in a decisive manner, and compelled Mistress Holte to yield obedience, bride she must be, for there could be no doubt that the Prince would be alarmed at the approach of his rival, and willing to overlook any trifling outward signs of reluctance that might remain on the lady's part.

Titus thus secured a renewed outbreak of the stern old man's tyranny against his unfortunate daughter, while he guaranteed himself, as he imagined, safe from his patron's displeasure, by seeming thus entirely unapprehensive of danger from his assailants, and desirous to promote his wishes. While he was aware that the Prince being at Lichfield, ample time was afforded him to continue a proper show of resistance, and yet bring about the other ill-consequences to the Holte family his mean malice induced him to plan.

Several other untoward results followed on the delay occasioned by the repulse of the assailants of Aston Hall.

Among the rest, the very next morning, when the Bir-

minghamers, still unable to obtain any answer to their prayers by the medium of their crazy intercessor, were still hesitating and unwilling to proceed to the attack, two most unexpected assistants arrived in their camp. These were no other than Captain Cromwell and Richard Grimsorwe, who presented themselves with an order of the Parliament appointing them conjointly Commissioners for the town and district of Birmingham, with the amplest military and civil authority.

Cromwell's merits had forced themselves into conspicuous notice at the battle of Edghill, in which his troop of dragoons was the only one that remained unbroken, and distinguished itself in covering the rout of the rest; and his opinions had acquired much weight. Consequently he was considered fittest to manage for the Parliament in Warwickshire, and his troop was quartered for the purpose at Coventry. Grimsorwe, on the other hand, from his pretended wrongs and legal education, was deemed very suitable for the duties confided to him at Birmingham. And, moreover, in compassion for them, or in revenge against so devoted a royalist as Sir Thomas Holte had exhibited himself, powers were given to him to sequestrate the whole Aston Hall property, and take charge of it in the name of the Parliament, until such further redress could be granted him as he could show due, to the satisfaction of that assembly.

Neither the soldier nor the civilian, it is, however, probable, had calculated on finding the people of Birmingham already engaged in a task which was likely to render the assistance of Cromwell's dragoons necessary. He had not brought them with him then, but had merely arrived with his fellow-commissioner, to instal themselves,

and consider the best means of accomplishing their other objects.

Cromwell seemed, and really was, greatly surprised at the numbers and efficient appearance of the improvised little army. But he found its general in a different mood from what he expected, when he proceeded to offer him his congratulations.

'Not much of soldiers yet, say what you will, Captain Cromwell,' said Tubal, gloomily. 'Every moment's delay is perilous to us in various ways, yet my men will not stir a foot again against Aston until I know not what miraculous encouragement is afforded us, in answer to our minister's prayers. And he has been praying as uselessly as hammering cold iron, all yesterday, and part to-day, for a sign!'

'Hath he so?' replied Cromwell thoughtfully. 'But is it quite certain a sign ought to be granted us? Know you what force is assembled at Aston Hall?'

Tubal replied, 'About forty soldiers, under Captain Titus, and some score servingmen, gamekeepers and the like, with Sir Thomas Holte.'

'Is this well assured?' Cromwell rejoined.

'Most certain. There is a man here from the place—one Gaspar Feldon—who had either been enforced against his will to serve, or has some secret grudge of his own, and came over to us last night, and reckons them at so many, and no more,' Tubal replied.

'Why, then, of a surety we are in numbers enough for the work, and to spare, if we could depend better to-day than yesterday upon such unseasoned soldiery!' replied Cromwell; but on a sudden his eye fell upon the piece of artillery, and brightened up like a flash of steel in the sun. 'What is yonder?' he exclaimed. 'A cul-

verin? Will it discharge? Good Lord! what further sign can men require than such a first-rate piece of deadly workmanship as this?’

And he examined the instrument with great delight, while Tubal, with a maker's natural pride, exhibited the power and finish of his manufacture.

Grimsorwe, whose reception in his new and influential quality had not been very brilliant on the part of Tubal or Firebrace, nevertheless followed his coadjutor closely about, and now made the saturnine observation, ‘Expound so much at once to the good folks, and let us proceed to work, Master Cromwell,’ when on a sudden he started and turned pale.

‘What ails you, Master Grimsorwe? Does the mere yawn of the empty mouth of destruction affright you?’ said Cromwell, who was pretty well aware of his coadjutor's lack of physical courage.

‘Not so! But how came my brother Edward's Sutton gamekeeper among you here? What, honest Gaspar! have you also turned to the other side?’ Richard said, looking at a sturdily-built man, who stood, gun in hand, apparently on guard over the artillery.

‘I knew not that it was yours, sir, or likely to be,’ the man replied, with gloomy discomfiture, and averting his eyes.

‘You should make much of this man, Captain Cromwell,’ said Grimsorwe, in a patronising tone, and evidently trying to conciliate the speaker; ‘he is the best marksman in the Midland, and was always esteemed so on Sutton Chase. Has Edward Holte turned you from his service, my good Gaspar? And will you now believe that he scandalled me to you in warning you concerning your good housewife and me?’

'I believe now, as always, Master Grimsorwe,' replied the Sutton keeper, in tones of even deepened gloom, and still keeping his eyes off the impudent seducer, 'in my own eyes.'

'Believe what you will, then; but were I Master Bromycham, or the captain here, I would have no such traitors and renegades in my camp!' returned Grimsorwe, with spiteful vehemence.

'What are you yourself, Master Grimsorwe, if it be true you are of Sir Thomas Holte's begetting?' the same stern, unaltered tones rejoined.

Grimsorwe turned scornfully away, while Cromwell burst into a hoarse laugh. 'Fairly answered, Master Grimsorwe!' he said. 'But now let us to our main business. We will assault Aston, and at once, with this well-made tube. But first, to satisfy these honest, prayerful creatures how fitting it is we should. Where is Master Whitehall? I have some say with him, I know.'

He moved on with the other parties to this dialogue towards a group of people collected round the 'Angel,' who, from the top of a barrel, was vehemently uttering the words, followed in chorus by the crowd, 'O Lord! good Lord! best Lord! heavenly Lord! give us a sign, a sign, a sign, whereby to know if we shall proceed in this business or not! A sign, a sign, a sign, good Lord!'

'Here is one,' said Cromwell, stepping forward, and bringing Grimsorwe with him. 'Lo, the end is at hand, when the son is armed against the father; and it is Master Grimsorwe who proposes we should all march at once to take Aston Hall from the Cavaliers!'

'I have full authority, sirs—positive instructions—to

receive Aston Hall and its belongings into my own keeping, in the Parliament's name,' said Grimsorwe, unabashed at the wondering, and by no means approving, gaze people directed on him.

Whitehall would not, however, accept this sign.

'It is nothing,' he said. 'Lo, I myself have refused to acknowledge my wife and children, who have trudged painfully hither, on foot, to see me, from London, after being denied their presence and comforting for eleven mortal years of captivity! But this is much—this is all! I know and believe thou, Oliver, art the man appointed by God to do this work, and under your leadership I bid the people march to victory!'

The shouts of the assembly ratified the declaration of their minister; and Cromwell took upon himself the position at once which his rank and new commission in the Parliament's service entitled him to assume. And, indeed, the singular ascendancy he exercised indisposed Tubal himself to any opposition to his rule.

Preparations were accordingly at once resumed for action, and the Birminghamers once more invaded Aston Park, stimulated by a hope of vengeance also, now.

Meanwhile Gaspar Feldon had deserted his place by the cannon, after a short but profoundly sombre interval of reflection.

'He witnesses that I am a good marksman!' he then muttered to himself; 'and *traitor* and *renegade* will I no longer continue where he also is one! It is not murder to slay an enemy in open warfare; and cowardly as he is, I may have some chance at his heart while he watches how his errand speeds in the assault on Aston Hall! No one knows yet there where I have been. I will return!'

And shouldering his gun, with a dark smile, the injured husband of Esther Feldon stole from his guard, and creeping unobservedly along the park palings, soon re-entered the enclosure, and made the best of his way back to whence he had come.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE SURRENDER OF ASTON HALL.

SIR THOMAS, we know, had not concealed his surprise at the easy manner in which the commanding officer of his garrison abandoned the outer limits of his charge. But as nothing unfavourable seemed to happen in consequence, greatly to the surprise of both himself and Titus, he made no further commentary.

Next day, however, the case was altered, when Gaspar Feldon returned, and declaring that he had accidentally been made prisoner, and had afterwards effected his escape from the slight guard kept upon him, astounded Sir Thomas by the information of the presence of Richard Grimsorwe, and his pretensions, in the assailing force, which he declared was on the way to resume the attack on the Hall.

In his exasperation, Sir Thomas actually cursed his wicked son. 'God requite him,' he said, 'and fulfil the curse I utter on him! God visit on him the anguish he has planted in my heart, and all his wickedness! The murderous villain! for he, and he only, killed Adam Blackjack the cook!'

'Was it really so, Sir Thomas Holte?' inquired Gaspar Feldon, with a strange earnestness.

There was something in the man's manner that powerfully arrested Sir Thomas's attention.

'As my soul lives, it was so!' he exclaimed. 'You may believe as much, good fellow, of a man who has boasted in open companies a thousand times, how welcome your demure wife ever made him at Sutton Manor House!'

'I do believe that Richard Grimsorwe is the murderer of Adam Blackjack, Sir Thomas Holte! And, *blood for blood!*—it is written in the law!'

And Feldon, who was an Anabaptist of the school of Sisyphus the bellows-blower, ground his teeth audibly together, and retired.

The renewal of an attack, previously repulsed with so little difficulty, did not alarm Sir Thomas, who was ignorant of the Birminghamers' possession of a piece of heavy artillery, and that the assailing force was now under the direction of the great military genius of the times. But he began to be impatient for the arrival of Prince Rupert, having at last, as he considered, overcome his unfortunate daughter's reluctance to the glorious match he was bent on forcing upon her.

Titus's truly diabolical ingenuity had suggested a means which, after every other excess of coercion and cruelty had failed, seemed to succeed.

Under his inspirations Sir Thomas explained the noise of musketry, and of the assault on Aston Hall, which necessarily reached up even to the solitary chamber in its roof where Arabella Holte was a captive, as an attempt on the part of her lover, Tubal, and his townfolk to effect her rescue. The subsequent silence, he declared, probably enough, confessed their defeat and dispersion. But he coupled this with a false statement—that the pretended Lord of Birmingham was made prisoner in the assault, and that the next discharge of musketry she

heard would announce he had met a nobler death than any traitor rebel could deserve!

Arabella's terrible anguish—her wild outcries for mercy on her unfortunate hero-lover—would have moved the compassion of the most ruthless hearts, not dominated by the relentlessly exasperated feelings that possessed Sir Thomas. His own calamities had made him utterly insensible, instead of softening him, to the miseries of others! The barbarous old man having lent ear to Titus's suggestions that he had only to remove the object of preference to dispose his daughter to obedience to his will in favour of the Prince—in the midst of Arabella's entreaties, a rattle of musketry from the courtyard below reached her ears, purposely discharged by the captain, and which Sir Thomas exultingly declared to announce the slaughter of the insolent mechanic pretender to her hand!

Sir Thomas himself descended from the Dark Chamber shortly afterwards, with a scared and troubled look.

Nevertheless the news he signified, as the result of their manœuvre, to Titus, seemed all well enough.

After a brief explosion, to be naturally expected, of the wildest agony and despair, his daughter lent attention to his renewed arguments to induce her to accept the royal husband he was resolved she should, since his rival was now for ever removed.

'And you were right, Titus,' Sir Thomas concluded with but a dismal smile, nevertheless, 'no woman pushes her folly so far as to persist in her constancy to a *dead man!* And Arabella has consented at last to receive the Prince as her husband, as soon as he arrives for the purpose, in order to secure her own withdrawal from a situation of so much gloom and terror.'

Titus gave a long whistle, vulgarly enough—but also stared astoundedly at Sir Thomas.

Recovering himself, however, with some effort, he took unbounded credit for the cleverness of the move which had effected this desirable result, demanded of Sir Thomas if he did not now believe and confess that he understood women; yet concluded by advising that no relaxation of the young lady's captivity should take place until the arrival of the Prince, and the effecting of the marriage should prevent the possibility of any retreat or evasion from the extorted consent.

The former event might speedily be expected, Sir Thomas having despatched a confidential message to Prince Rupert, at Lichfield, with an invitation to that effect. He allowed himself again to be governed by his artful counsellor, who, on his own part, was not less annoyed than surprised at the result of his vengeful advice, Sir Thomas admitting that his daughter had implored him in the most pathetic manner to be suffered to leave her darksome and narrow chamber, now that she could not by possibility be retained there on any motive for her good.

Titus conceived himself again most thoroughly foiled by his own contrivances; but luckily, as he deemed it, the Birmingham people renewed the siege of Aston Hall; and he still imagined he saw a way to the execution of his secret plans.

This idea was strengthened when it was found that heavy artillery was brought against the house; to the amazement of the garrison, and more especially of Sir Thomas Holte.

The destruction of the baronet's noble palace seemed menaced, and went more heavily to his heart than any

other calamity had power. But Captain Titus, on his part, was not prepared for the form which his passionate affection for the work of so long a period of his life took in Sir Thomas Holte. The old Cavalier declared that he would no longer remain shut up in the walls of Aston Hall by a dastardly mob, that kept at a distance from all reprisals, but whether the Captain lent his assistance or not, would sally forth, at the head of his own domestics, and take the destructive weapon they had in some unknown manner obtained, from them.

Nevertheless, on reflection Titus probably considered that he could make use of this violent resolution to effect his own objects, under colourable pretexts. He therefore seemed to agree to the demand; and a muster for a sally was held, of the entire strength of the garrison, in the courtyard of the mansion.

Fighting under cover, the numbers of the garrison of Aston Hall had as yet only been diminished by a few wounded men. But it must be confessed that when they assembled in the open air, the seventy or eighty soldiers and servants, comprising the garrison, presented but a very disproportionate figure to attack the little army of upwards of twelve hundred, which Cromwell and Tubal Bromycham had drawn up, in a most advantageous position, along the edge of a range of uplands, towards the town.

Titus calculated on the effect of this visible disproportion in numbers, and he also purposely divided off Sir Thomas's domestics for a flank attack while he charged the Birminghamers in front.

His soldiers from the first showed evident symptoms of feeling themselves overmatched; and when the attack was made Titus speedily took occasion to withdraw from

it, leaving Sir Thomas Holte exposed to a general assault.

In fact, observing the soldiers retire, Cromwell ordered an advance from his own lines, under the leadership of Tubal Bromycham. The hot-blooded baronet, rushing to the attack with his usual fury and impetuosity, suddenly found himself and his men surrounded by a swarm of assailants.

In a few moments Sir Thomas was completely enveloped, nearly a dozen of his people knocked down or killed, and he himself was speedily overpowered and crushed to the ground by a flooding in of his enemies, resembling the downpour of a cataract.

No sooner was Sir Thomas's much-disliked person recognized than half a score of pikes seemed set all at once at his breast. But a powerful figure suddenly interposed, and in a manner gathering the weapons into shining sheaves, pushed them back.

'Let no man harm Sir Thomas Holte. He is my prisoner, and as such is safe. On your lives, none touch him.'

It was Tubal Bromycham, who, speaking thus, bestrode the fallen body of his oppressor, and protected him thus, at no little hazard to himself personally, in the fury and whirl of the onset. But Tubal's authority, in action, was always paramount, and no one dared to offer it any disobedience.

Sir Thomas himself was too stunned and injured to offer any further resistance. He was raised and carried, rather than led, into the rear of the Birmingham position, where Cromwell sat on the stump of an old tree, watching the progress of the skirmish, attended, much against his mind, by Richard Grimsorwe.

Firebrace was also at hand, standing leaning on Tubal's standard, which he insisted always on bearing, though he consented not to expose his age and exhausted strength in any personal effort.

'Who is this white-bearded prisoner?' said Cromwell to Grimsorwe. 'And why does he glare so fiercely at you?'

'He is my father, though he has seldom behaved to me as one; the choleric old man who killed his cook because dinner was not ready at one o'clock,' Grimsorwe replied.

'You lie, bastard! It was your own treacherous hand only!' Sir Thomas mustered spirit enough to reply, exhausted as he was. 'And I have this day received a mercy from my belligerent foe, which the man who professes to be my son would never have shown me.'

'Why did you not as I advised, Captain Cromwell, and order *no quarter* should be given?' Grimsorwe exclaimed, livid with fury at his father's words.

'Because, my good fellow, I wished to spare you the guilt of a parricide. A fratricide you are already in your heart,' Cromwell replied, unable to conceal his disgust.

'Whatever else I am, I trust in a few moments more to sit master and lord in Aston Hall, if the Parliament decrees have any force,' Grimsorwe rejoined, with a fiendish laugh.

'Of a truth, you have writings with you to that effect, Master Grimsorwe; yet there's many a slip 'tween the cup and the lip, you wot well,' Cromwell replied, though probably without affixing any very specific meaning to his own words.

'Nay, Captain Cromwell,' Grimsorwe sharply answered him, 'for I should say you have had enough of contra-

vening the orders of your superiors. And for my own part I am a civilian, and shall not put myself in the way of the calamities to which your swordsmen are liable.'

'My curse will yet, however, I hope, overtake you, unnatural calumniator and betrayer,' Sir Thomas said; and precisely indeed as he uttered the words a bullet, sped from some distant but unerring aim, struck Grimsorwe in the very middle of the forehead, and scattered his brains in all directions around him as he fell.

Sir Thomas Holte's own ruthless pride and ambition were destined to receive also a fitting chastisement.

Continuing to head his victorious townfolk, Tubal Bromycham arrived almost as soon as Titus and his flying soldiers, at Aston Hall. The Captain had time, however, to retreat into the house, and bar the doors. A few minutes after, a drum beat for a surrender, and a white flag was displayed at one of the windows of the Great Gallery over the hall.

Tubal desired nothing better than a pretence to spare the work, chiefly of his own genius and toil, and he entered into terms for a surrender at once.

These were of the easiest description, Titus stipulating only that he and his men should be allowed to retire in peace and safety from their stronghold.

By this time Cromwell had come up, holding a great key in his hand.

He gave it to Tubal.

'Sir Thomas has implored me to interfere to save his daughter, whom he has left locked in an upper chamber of the mansion. But I cannot, methinks, appoint a milder deputy!' he exclaimed, with a significant smile. 'It is true he will have it Miss Holte has consented to marry her savage Prince; in which case, master Bromycham,

have nothing more to say to so worthless a coquette, but let her take the chance of Sir Thomas's other goods, which I have given up to plunder to Faithful Mobbs and the whole rabblement of the town.'

Tubal glanced at the key, recognised it, uttered not another word, but rushed into the house; sped up flight after flight of the grand staircase, until at last he reached the darksome summit of the principal domè tower. Another instant and his key was in the door of the Dark Chamber. He called a name—he shouted it—'Arabella! dearest, dearest Arabella!'

No voice responded.

He burst rather than opened the door.

For a moment the thick gloom prevented any object from being visible. Then he groped forward, widely extending his arms. Only a moment. Suddenly Tubal then espied a gleam of terrible eyes, resembling those of a tigress. A spring resembling that of a tigress, also, from a couchant position, was made at him; and it was Arabella's clutch, resembling the clawing of a tigress, that circled his neck, while Arabella's accents yelled forth the mad but fearful words, 'You have killed my Tubal, devilish Prince; but I have only consented to be yours to kill you—and—and—thus!'

CHAPTER XCVII.

THE MARRIAGE OF TUBAL AND ARABELLA.

IT cannot be said that Tubal Bromycham was altogether grieved, horrified as he was by his maniacal reception, to find how completely his royal rival was now detested by Arabella Holte; since it was clear, from the dreadful clutch she fixed upon him, that she purposed Rupert's destruction to avenge his own supposed doom.

Had her strength been equal to her will, she would probably have accomplished it. As it was, it was only with great difficulty Tubal could remove the strangling grasp from his throat, and recover breath to repeat his exclamation, in accents which at last Arabella seemed to recognise. Then, uttering a fearful shriek, she sank lifeless in his arms, in a deadly swoon.

Tubal immediately bore her down a flight of stairs into the light, encountering Cromwell and Captain Titus on the way, who, engaged below on the terms of surrender, were alarmed by the outcry and rushed up.

But, alas! when the unfortunate young lady was restored to her physical senses her intellectual faculties seemed for ever to have deserted her.

It is true she recognised Tubal, but only as the ghost of himself. Nothing could disabuse her fancy from the certainty that he had been killed by her father's orders;

and she continued to address to him the most moving and passionate supplications for pardon for the injuries she had done to him, and for being the cause of his woful fate.

In vain Tubal almost raved in his assurance that he was living and well; it seemed impossible to restore her to any species of sane perception on this point.

What to do with her under these deplorable circumstances became the difficulty.

Her mother, Lady Holte, had disappeared. It was ascertained that Sir Thomas, having discovered his wife's attempts to bring some rescue for her unhappy child, had sent her away to Hagley, on a pretended purpose of apologising for the misconduct of his son, Edward. Phœbe Maythorn, who had been obliged to conceal herself from Sir Thomas's wrath—Heaven and Robin the Falconer only knew where—emerged from her hiding-place with the intelligence. The faithful girl hazarded the dangers of the rifled mansion to hasten to the assistance of her young mistress.

Neither the unhappy young lady herself nor Tubal Bromycham could bear the notion of her being restored to her tyrant father's care. Cromwell proposed this, after announcing his intention of sending Sir Thomas immediately a prisoner to London. 'Her mind is in all probability for ever crushed,' he exclaimed, with more emotion than was usual with him; 'and it is fitting that the grim destroyer thereof should be condemned to the contemplation of his own work. But for you, Tubal, I should have given no quarter to the father of the slayer of my own best issue. But he must not altogether escape punishment.'

'There is little fear of that,' said Titus, with malicious

exultation quivering on his features. 'Yet Heaven forbid,' he continued in a way that in reality suggested what he seemed to deprecate, 'that Master Bromycham should revenge himself so signally on the Prince—my kind master—who once purposed to hang him like a common felon on a tree—as to use the rights of war and possess himself, at all events, of the person of this beauteous madwoman, for good and aye.

'Wretched scoundrel!' Tubal replied, eyeing the treacherous captain with scorching scorn in his glance, 'these words prove of what you are yourself capable, and but that terms of surrender have been granted, you should, more certainly than I escaped it, have disgraced a gibbet with your worthless weight. The only alternative that remains, Master Cromwell,' he concluded, addressing that commander with marks of the strongest emotion, 'the only favourable means that remain to me of dedicating my existence to the restoration of my unhappy lady to love and reason—if it exists in possibility—will be to make her *my wife*, and remove her at once from this scene of disaster and confusion to a more quiet abode in Birmingham, and the careful attendance of good Dame Cooper, who is always willing to aid faithful love. Where is Chaplain Lane, who did the like sanctifying office between Dorothy Firebrace and Edward Holte? Let him be sought, and make, at least, this beauteous ruin mine, if ruin it must remain.'

'There could not be a more substantial way of proving yourself no apparition, certainly,' sneered Titus, 'though I do not suppose Mistress Holte will hesitate to accept so beloved a spirit as a husband. But I warn you, the Prince's indignation will be kindled to a fury that will involve all concerned in peril, and the severest chastisements in his power to inflict.'

This *warning* was accepted as it was doubtless intended it should be, as a new inducement to proceed in what it was pretended to deprecate. And Chaplain Lane having at this moment opportunely turned up from a place of concealment in which he had been discovered, and dragged in a prisoner by Faithful Moggs, was glad to purchase protection and an assurance of release, by consenting to what was required of him.

As for Arabella herself, she assented with delirious joy to a ceremonial which was to unite her inseparably and for evermore to the society of her beloved and wronged Angel of Redemption—so she now styled and evidently considered Tubal Bromycham.

This second surprising and unlooked-for marriage was therefore solemnized without further delay—or at least with as much solemnity as the circumstances of the times allowed. And while the noise and uproar of the triumphant invasion filled every chamber and cellar of Aston Hall, the unfortunate and yet not altogether unhappy lovers were made man and wife.

Tubal immediately after removed his bride from the scene of tumult and agitation to quieter quarters in his own residence at the Moat House in Birmingham.

Here she was received with the greatest kindness by Dame Cooper; and medical assistance having been procured, a powerful sedative was administered, under whose action Arabella sank into a deep slumber, which seemed to promise good results for her over-wrought and anguish-stricken brain.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE STORMING OF BIRMINGHAM.

FROM that time Tubal appeared to take no further interest or concern in aught that occurred away from the couch of the beautiful invalid, whose slumber deepened into a stupor that lasted for several days.

The apothecary (there were hardly any mediciners of higher standing, in provincial towns, in those days) assured him that a crisis was maturing under this outward insensibility, which would either be entirely destructive, or as completely restorative, to the health and reason of the patient. And Tubal watched in indescribable anxiety and dread for the awakening—for the decisive moment which would either seal him for ever the melancholy keeper of a lunatic, or the happy husband of an adored and beautiful bride.

Meanwhile there was a sorrowful satisfaction in the conviction that, whether for good or evil, that peerless idol of his young love—that wonder of beauty and excelling symmetry, which had fascinated his artist imagination from earliest years—was now his, and his alone.

No insolent rival, no overbearing Prince, would exult in the possession of that divine loveliness, and revel not less in the misery and deprivation of her cheated true love than in his own success. Arabella Holte was hence-

forth and for ever his. His wife! No calamity seemed altogether unendurable with this sweetness of consolation in the draught.

And thus absorbed in his self-imposed taskwork of love and devotion, Tubal took no heed of external events, until the consideration was forced upon him. And while Cromwell, untrammelled either by colleagues or opposition, displayed his singular administrative qualities, with extraordinary vigour and success, in reducing Birmingham to the government of the Parliament, he who was its proper lord and ruler interfered in no way in the matter. But Tubal was aroused suddenly and fearfully from his lethargy of expectant love.

Aston Hall had been sacked of nearly all its furniture and valuables; little more than the outside structure remained after it had been plundered by the victorious mob of Birmingham. Totally unpitied, and with not an effort made in any quarter on his behalf, Sir Thomas Holte had been forwarded as a prisoner of state to London! Cromwell's troop of Ironsides had arrived and established themselves as a garrison in the town; when, on the third day after the surrender of the hall, that leader presented himself at the Moat House, evidently somewhat shaken in his own perpendicular.

Threatening intelligence had arrived.

The tidings of the outbreak of the Birminghamers, uniting with his private mortification, seemed to have provoked Prince Rupert to an extraordinary effort at vengeance; and if the reports could be credited, he was now marching on the town with a regular little army of two thousand men and artillery, vowing to lay it level with the ground if any resistance was offered to the fulfilment of his Majesty's orders. And these orders

were to take possession of Birmingham, and put all the leaders of the revolt to an ignominious death on the gallows!

So at least a lad, who had escaped from their ranks, touched with horror at the profane and licentious courses he witnessed among the Royal troops—one Jack Bunyan—had brought word to Birmingham. And it was believed this reporter had only got the start by a very few hours of the assailing force.

Under these circumstances, the Parliament Captain and Commissioner came to consult with Tubal on what could be done to encounter or avoid the perils menacing the whole town and themselves.

‘I have not yet taken counsel with the Lord in prayer, for I love first to know what human means may be in the hands of men, as touching whatever can be effected by human agencies; which is no great matter, unless the Lord shows his hand in the work,’ said Cromwell, with his usual cloudiness and ambiguity of expression. ‘But, as regarding the good people of this town, I am myself of opinion the onset threatened is more than we can withstand; being altogether of seasoned and accustomed soldiers, well provided of military means. And for my own part, I would have all such as have any reason to apprehend the violence threatened to retire with me and my troop on Coventry, which is a town of defence, and which I have taken some poor pains, under the Lord, to make, as it were, a stronghold and rock for his people in all these parts to flee unto and find shelter. But the good man, Whitehall, who hath been received as a prophet and messenger of good tidings in this town (and indeed the poor soul preaches very comforting and savoury doctrine, whiles, when we have time to attend to

him), *he* will have it that we shall not give back but one step from our enemies, but rather that a tremendous manifestation is at hand which shall utterly confound and abash them. So that, although by mere human reckoning, we are not in any potency to meet and baffle the designs of our enemies, yet, truly, if we show a becoming confidence in the Lord, He will show himself as good a God as ever he did to his people Israel, even on that day when he commanded the sun to stand still over the valley of Jehoshaphat !’

‘Whitehall is right !’ replied Tubal, passionately. ‘It were death and final overthrow of her once so bright and lovely wit, to awaken my hapless wife and drag her in a wild hurryscurry from her quiet couch to Coventry. God will stand by us, if we stand by ourselves ! Moreover, did I not say to the proud Prince that I would prove myself no traitor, no assassin, my body against his, wherever we could meet ? I will not budge a step from amid my people ; but if they will rally around my apron and defend the town, so will I to the last drainings of my blood !’

‘’Tis manfully spoken, but I know your acts will outdo your words, Tubal Bromycham !’ said Cromwell ; with evidently kindled enthusiasm on his own part. ‘Neither know I of a surety but that the man, Whitehall, speaks of some superior ordination. At times he appears to me as a madman ; at others, as if the will of God spake in his utterances. He it was the first who knew and believed in me ; yea, and declared it to the people—what I have long known and felt in myself—that I am a man marked out for the accomplishment of great matters of the Lord, by the way, as one may say, of the strong arm of the flesh. Also, so noble a standing

forth and defiance of the superior force and fury of the enemy will greatly hearten men everywhere to brave resistances, and the tidings thereof will resound through the land, and put the people in a good way to show themselves men for the cities of their God, and the chief resting-places of the ark at this present time. He who defends Birmingham well may earn himself a call to do the like for London ; where whoever shows himself the most skilled in any trade or mystery may command the markets of the realm. And I shall see to it, moreover, that in the case of the worst, my men and I have a good retreat assured to us to Coventry or Warwick town ; which therefore knowing, it is for you of Birmingham, who cannot readily escape if once you bide the fray, to determine whether you will enter upon it or no.'

Tubal reflected for some minutes profoundly.

'This is the end of it!' he then exclaimed. 'Let those who are afraid of the issue avoid the town forthwith ; we who are determined on a brave defence of the same will offer them no obstruction. Let us assemble an open meeting of the townfolk in the market-place for this declaration ; and meanwhile do you, Master Cromwell, lay out the plans of our defence as masterly as you did erewhile when first the bloodthirsty German came to our assault.'

It was done as Tubal had said.

The alarm-bells of St. Martin and the summons of the Town Crier speedily assembled a crowd of nearly all the inhabitants of Birmingham at the Bull Ring, including every shade and variety of political and religious opinion and feeling prevalent among them. Firebrace, Whitehall, John-the-Rogue, Faithful Moggs, Bailiff

Cooper, Mistress Mellons of the Black Boy and Wool-pack, workmen at all the trades, Anabaptists, what not? swarmed out into the streets, and made for this common rendezvous.

Tubal was in readiness, and in a few brief but powerful sentences expounded to the people of Birmingham their position, the near approach of a Cavalier army, bent on slaughter and destruction, the means of defence at their disposal, and the probability that God himself would interfere on behalf of an injured and oppressed community of men who feared and honoured his name; and he concluded by stating, as he had stated to Cromwell, that, for his own part, he was determined to remain in the town, and live or die in a brave attempt to deliver it from the furious malice of its enemies.

The greater portion of the assemblage received this announcement with uproarious signs of adhesion and acceptance. The idea of retiring *en masse* from their homes and homesteads, comfortless as many of them might be, was exceedingly distasteful to the populace in general, and that was the only means of safety which seemed assured them from the overwhelming advance of their enemies. But the Royalist opposition had also gathered courage from the rumoured approach of their allies, and John-the-Rogue, for almost the first time, ventured to present himself openly in opposition to the wishes of the democratic leaders of the town.

‘Hear me, good people!’ he called out, at the pitch of his shrill treble voice. ‘It is very fine indeed for those who have ropes around their necks, to require of us to put ourselves into a similar ill condition. But I would have you know that the most part of us may be quit of any danger from this pretended raging Cavalier

army, by merely giving up our own tyrants and oppressors as the traitors and perturbers of the public peace they are. I promise you, on the faith of my body, which is in your hands, that you have only to yield up some half-a-score turbulent fellows of this community, to purchase exemption and pardon for all the rest. Anywise, it is madness to talk of resisting the powerful army marching against us, under the fierce Prince Rupert; and I, for one, if my counsel is not taken, will leave the town with all my goods, to shun the destruction which, most certain it is, otherwise awaits it.'

It is not unlikely that these observations might have produced some considerable effect, but that Whitehall now presented himself to the public attention, in one of his most inspired moods of frenzied excitement.

"Hearken, men of Birmingham!" he shouted. "No man whatsoever shall be suffered to leave this town until he has witnessed the full manifestation of the mercy of the Lord, and chosen his part with Him or against Him. For the Hour of the Kingdom is closely at hand, and within a brief time all who look upon me here shall witness the stupendous miracles by which it shall be revealed truly WHO AND WHAT I am, to the belief of the most worldly-blinded and incredulous!"

'O Flotsam, Flotsam! Jacob Flotsam! will you still refuse to own yourself your poor wife's husband and your poor children's father?' cried a female voice, in sobbing accents, from the crowd—the original of the sorrowful Pilgrimess Christiana, of the future immortal writer, who at the moment stood at her side, a fugitive deserter, known to a few, and unhonoured by all.

For a moment the prophet looked in some degree affected by the appeal. But his terrific lunacy speedily

regained its empire in his mind, and he burst into an harangue, in which he strenuously disavowed all human connections and copartnery, and all but announced himself to be the predicted Divine Ruler of the world for a thousand years.

But whether Whitehall's own insane imagination was affrighted by the tremendous nature of the pretension, and needed support; or that, with the instinct of his disease, he strove to conceal the very core and essence of its internal workings, he contented himself by declaring that if their enemies outnumbered the sands on the seashore, they should be scattered before them like chaff before the wind; and the visible doer and performer of this mightiness could no longer be doubted, or mistaken, to be the announced Restorer and Reigner over the faithful of Christ until the end of time and the Millennium.

The curiosity, the fanaticism, the hopes of the people were universally and vehemently excited by this appeal and these promises; and not only was it now determined to defend the town against its enemies, but that no one should be suffered to retire from it, or shirk his share in the common efforts necessary for its preservation.

Such was the resolution of an overwhelming majority, and preparations were immediately set on foot. Once more Cromwell appeared as the intrepid and sagacious leader, who was ultimately destined to attain the military supremacy of the entire nation, and a very brief period sufficed to place Birmingham in no despicable condition of fortified defence. The majority of the people worked with a will; but the entire body of the townsfolk were compelled to engage in the task, whether with or against their inclinations.

Accordingly, when Prince Rupert, burning for revenge of the various accumulated wrongs of which he conceived himself to be the victim, arrived, at his most rapid and reckless rate of marching, early on the following day, he found the old barricades and ditches ready for his reception in the circuit of the town, and Cromwell with his Ironsides, and the principal part of the inhabitants capable of bearing arms, assembled on a spot still called Camp Hill, at the foot of Deritend,—ready, as it appeared, to give him open battle.

Surprising as it may seem, the greatest and most general faith was placed in the assurances of miraculous aid constantly proffered by the insane Kingdom-Come Apostle. And though it was impossible for the defenders of the position not to perceive that they were frightfully out-numbered, and by a military array of a most formidable and imposing aspect, no signs of dismay or diffidence appeared in their ranks.

Count O'Taafe presented himself with a white flag, and found the Birminghamers engaged in chanting the favourite hymn of the puritan religionists, formerly placed on record in these chapters:—

‘God is our strength,’ etc. etc.

The message the Count brought amounted in the sum to what has been previously declared. He bore a summons to command the town of Birmingham immediately to surrender to the forces of the King, upon promise of his Majesty's pardon and protection to all but the leaders in the revolt and infamous attack on, and dispersion of, the royal garrison at Aston Hall, under penalties of being given up to fire and pillage, and general slaughter, from end to end.

It was Tubal Bromycham who, by universal assent

and approbation, answered himself as the representative of the town, and in its name refused all submission or treaty.

‘For yourself, audacious mechanic, I marvel little, for your fate is well assured, if we can find a gibbet strong enough!’ Count O’Taafe replied; and spitefully raising his voice to the highest pitch he called out, ‘But on the other hand, good people, if you will give up this one traitor alone, and the unhappy young lady he has basely ravished from her home and friends, I do believe the Prince may be induced to show mercy to all the rest.’

An uproar of refusal responded to the demand; and O’Taafe, willing enough to take an answer which entitled the town to the severities such commanders as himself most desired to inflict, bowed scornfully, and retired to his own array.

But now, unhappily, there commenced no slight difference of opinion among the leaders of the defenders of Birmingham.

Whitehall insisted that the whole body of them should rush forth from their defences, and overwhelm the Egyptians, even as the Lord overwhelmed Pharaoh and his host, of old times, with the waters of the Red Sea. But Cromwell, on a wiser calculation of probabilities, declared that they should await an assault from their enemies where they were, posted on the side of a hill, which, sloping off sharply in all directions, and enclosed by a strong stockade he had caused to be erected, offered great resources for defence.

‘Tis a hot-headed fellow this Rupert, who calls himself Prince Palatine, and is wild with anger, too. He will make one of his mad-bull rushes at us anon, and we shall be sure to spy some vantage. Moreover, simple

man! see you not that being chiefly horsemen, they will break in upon us in spite of my few troopers, if once we leave the shelter of our palings and ditches? Let them attack us, and we may baffle the onset. I will not be a sharer in any other design.'

'Is the Lord a mighty Lord only when the spearmen and the chariots outnumber on his side!' returned Whitehall. 'Generation of unbelievers still! Come with me, and ye shall see that I will wither them off the face of the land with the very breath of my nostrils!'

'You can do it as well, then, from this place of vantage, Master Whitehall,' replied the more matter-of-fact commander. 'A miracle is one equally at hand or at a distance; yea, and we should have the more leisure for observation and certainty if we never stir our stumps. Destroy the enemy from before our faces, then, but ask not me and my five-score riders to run amuck against these thousands advancing on us—for advance they do.'

In fact, during this conversation, the attack had commenced, and it was necessary to reply to the heavy firing now opened upon the defenders of Camp Hill.

Tubal's cannon took an important part in the transaction, and for a long time nothing was audible but the deep boom of its discharges, and the constant rattle of the smaller pieces, in every direction surrounding the enclosure of the hill where Cromwell had so judiciously stationed his main defence.

In truth, the people of Birmingham, now pretty well seasoned in arms, might possibly have sustained the attack with success had they continued to observe the judicious plans of their leader; but the treachery of John-the-Rogue, and the madness of Whitehall, combined to defeat his efforts.

Sudden but rapidly diffused intelligence arrived that the former personage had thrown open one of the main entrances of the town, in the direction of Long Bridge, and that the Prince's cavalry was pouring into it from that quarter. Upon this, Whitehall declared that the hour of salvation and complete redemption had arrived for all who would follow him, and that the Lord had only deserted them because they showed no confidence in his promises. The fanaticism of a considerable portion of the defenders then became ungovernable, and they rushed like a Bedlam let loose from their entrenchments, in a headlong charge on the baffled portion of the enemy still facing them.

Tubal himself, recognising Prince Rupert before him, could not resist the impetus of his own feelings, and headed the disorderly onset; Cromwell, however, would not be hurried or seduced from his calmer and matured resolves. 'If a miracle is to be wrought, they are now, for a thistledown blown by the breath of the Lord would suffice!' he remarked, with sarcastic anger. 'But no, I must do what in me lies to cover the retreat, and save the faithful handful confided to my charge, and such others as will answer to check and spur still.'

The result was what might reasonably have been expected. In a few minutes the entire mass of the assailing townfolk of Birmingham, at least those who survived the reception that awaited them, came scudding back in the wildest confusion and disorder, pursued by the Cavaliers, who were flourishing their swords, yelling and shouting all manner of derisive defiances and summonses to the fugitives to make their bold words good and stand to the fight.

Cromwell, perceiving he should be entangled in the

general rout, directed a retreat of his own troopers into the town. But as this retreat was severely pressed on by the multitude as well as their pursuers, it speedily partook not a little also of the character of a flight.

Cromwell himself was personally in great danger; having put his horse to the gallop in the rear of his Ironsides, ordering them to pass through the town, and leave it to its now decided fate, he was nearly overtaken by a dashing cavalier, who headed the Royalist charge, at a spot in Shirland Lane. But Cromwell, with characteristic audacity and suddenness of resolve, turned upon him, pistol in hand, fired it, and rid himself of his pursurer. None other than William Fielding, Earl of Denbigh, whom we have seen so gay and high-spirited in attendance on the King, at Nottingham and Aston Hall.

The fates of the other leaders of the onset were various.

Tubal Bromycham was for some time reported to be a prisoner. He was last seen in the conflict penetrating the thickest ranks of the Cavaliers, laying about him with a massive pole-axe. But on the general rout and confusion of his party, he also seemed to share the panic, though in reality actuated by a motive altogether apart from anything personal, and fled into the town along the still open passage preserved until the Ironsides also took flight.

As for Whitehall, an authentic account declared that, sharing the general downbreak, he fled as far as the Old Crown House, and took refuge with a crowd of other fugitives in the forge-yard. Here Firebrace, however, vehemently reproaching him with cowardice and imposture, the unhappy lunatic ravingly announced that he had only made the experiment of men's faith so far, by suffering the disaster incurred, but that he was in reality

himself the MESSIAS RETURNED, and would now at once proceed to exhibit his divine powers.

And by this outburst of frenzy he prevailed upon a number of the people to stand by him, and close the gates of the yard, which he declared should be even stronger than adamant against all assault, until he was throned, crowned, and robed as King, when he would issue forth and destroy all unbelievers, whether friends or foes, by actual lightning from his eyes. In the midst of which mad discourse Count O'Taafe arrived at the head of a body of pursuers, and having speedily caused the gates to be burst open, ordered all within to be put indiscriminately to the sword. The lunatic prophet dashing forward, with doubtless a terrific glare in his eyes, but not the destructive flames that were to issue thence, in defence of his people, was immediately cut down and killed, after a frightful mangling; while his companions partly shared his fate, and partly escaped by the most desperate efforts, a good number being drowned in the Rea behind the Old Crown buildings.

Among the rest, it was afterwards known, Armourer Firebrace was preserved, though special search was made for him, by letting himself down his own well in the bucket, which descended with his weight at a frightful speed, but where he was not suspected to have taken refuge, and so escaped the general slaughter.

But our concern is chiefly now with Tubal Bromycham, who, separating himself with difficulty from the stream of yelling fugitives, hastened at his utmost speed to the Moat House.

'There may yet be time to save her!' he muttered frequently to himself. 'And the barbarian who would have forced himself into her arms will shortly have every

atrocious in his power. In vain I laboured to reach him. Even her total destruction would be better than to suffer her to fall into his hands.'

To Tubal's surprise and great increase of alarm, he found the old building entirely deserted by those he had left in charge of the beloved invalid. The Coopers, with a very natural regard for their own safety, had hurried away, to endeavour, by an exhibition of their loyal principles, to avoid being involved in the general calamities of their townsfolk.

Consequently, Arabella had been left alone, apparently in the last stage of her stupor, on her sick couch.

Mounting to her apartment, however, Tubal found her sitting upright, and listening with an expression of wonder, which was yet of a rational terror and questioning, on her still beautiful, though now most singularly pallid and wasted countenance.

'Tubal!' she exclaimed, as the heroic lover rushed to her side, 'Tubal, is it indeed you? What uproar is all this? Have I not dreamed the amazing fancy that returns now so vividly upon me—that I am married to you—my only true and faithful love! and even by my father's chaplain, worthy Master Lane?'

'It is all true, my beloved wife, though without your cruel father's consent, who kept you captive as a mad woman, because he was himself mad. You are mine and I am yours, henceforth and for ever! You have suffered greatly, but, thank God, your reason seems restored! You are in Birmingham, in my house! But it is no longer possible we can remain here. Rupert has attacked us with an overwhelming force; but we may yet have time to fly from his vengeance and lust, if you will make an effort to rise, and let me carry you forth.'

‘Nay, I am exhausted, I am too weak, dearest Tubal. Death is assured to me, in any case. But save yourself, and leave me to my fate, whatever it must needs be. I have deserved the worst by my inconstancy and ingratitude to the bravest and best of men.’

‘Leave you in the midst of a town taken by assault, by the savage Rupert all whose worst passions are leagued to inflict the most unimaginable injuries and cruelty on the wife of Tubal Bromycham? No, dearest Arabella! rather will I die a thousand deaths. But Bull Street is yet unoccupied by the enemy. I feel a giant’s strength in such a cause, and I can bear you in my arms through the midst of every danger to some exit from the town.’

‘What! with that maimed and wounded limb!—maimed through my wickedness and folly,’ Arabella exclaimed. ‘And look, besides, dearest Tubal, look! Bull Street is in flames.’

It was even so. Rupert, exasperated with the resistance he had encountered, and willing to allow himself every licence in the pursuit of vengeance, abandoned the town entirely to the violence and brutality of his soldiery, with restraint or remorse.

A horrid slaughter was made among the unresisting inhabitants, most part of those saved only escaping by flight from the town, and covering the highways in all directions with lamenting throngs.

Quite an indiscriminate destruction of persons and things followed, John-the-Rogue’s house and work-premises being amongst the first given to the flames; while he and his son Wynkyn, and Bailiff Cooper and his wife, and other royalists found their claims as such completely ignored, and themselves exposed as much as any one else to the maltreatment experienced by the rest of the townsfolk of Birmingham.

It was through the flaming ruins of a considerable part of the town that Count O'Taafe, especially commissioned for the purpose, rode with a select body of dragoons to the Moat House of Birmingham, and formed a complete investment of its watery rampart. Terrified for his own safety, Bailiff Cooper had betrayed all the circumstances of Arabella's position there, and instructed O'Taafe in the means to secure her capture.

And now to return. Startled by his unhappy bride's exclamation, and the ruddy glow of flames which glared over the chamber, Tubal sprang forward, drew open the lattice casement, and looked forth. He was instantly welcomed with a rattle of musketry, and perceived that the house and its moat were completely surrounded.

At the same time a voice, whose infuriated accents he recognized to be those of Prince Rupert, yelled from a body of calvalry massed near one of the raised draw-bridges, 'Vile mechanic! surrender your treacherous siren, and submit yourself to the rope, before I lay this house level about both your ears with your own cannon.'

In reality, Tubal's masterpiece in arms had been captured, and now figured in array with the rest of his overwhelming of enemies, on the further side of the draw-bridge in front of the house.

He turned. Supernatural love struggled with supernatural anguish and despair in his expression.

'You hear, my loved, my lost one!' he exclaimed. 'All is over for me; it is impossible I can escape the vengeance of my merciless rival. But my destruction frees you for ever from all bonds, all engagements, all suspicion of preference for another—and you may yet become the bride of a Prince. One farewell embrace—one last embrace, sole hope and happiness of an existence that

but for you had been all blank! and I will offer myself without further struggle as the target of these thousand levelled carbines that circle me in.'

'And can you believe—even after all I have done to betray the ambition and vanity of my Holte blood—that I can prove so mean and worthless a creature still?' Arabella replied. 'No, dearest Tubal! my lover and my husband! dearer to me than ever were either before to woman! it is impossible I could outlive the doom to which I have brought you, and therefore I will die with you! Yes, my husband!' she concluded with a glorious smile, lustrous at once with the passion and power of her exalted though awhile erring spirit, 'we will cheat death of all his bitterness by perishing together, and in each other's arms. No other means remains for the wife of the last Lord of Birmingham to pass undishonoured to her grave by his side. Let us die together! Support my steps, or I will crawl after you, to the moat-side, and hand-in-hand we will plunge into its depths, and thenceforth defy the malice and power of our enemies to separate us any more.'

Every argument and entreaty were vainly exhausted by Tubal, in his love and sorrow, to prevail upon Arabella to venture on her chances of preservation after his own destruction had glutted the rage of their enemies. To meaner minds and hearts, incapable of great emotions, it may appear that the delirium induced by her long solitary confinement and sufferings still worked in the heroic woman's brain, and prompted her resolve. Spirits more akin will better comprehend that it was the only decision that remained for such a one to take compatible with its heroic impulses and purposes. And they will even understand how at last, unable to refuse himself so

supreme a triumph and release from the most terrible of his sorrows and fears in yielding to the fate that compassed him, Tubal Bromycham consented to his beloved bride's decree.

Yet no power of language could do justice to the unutterable anguish mingled with the unutterable joy—with which finally Tubal clasped the idol of his brave and loving heart in a last embrace, and with his own arm still wreathed around her, supported her forth with himself to their doom.

Strangely enough, however, Arabella seemed to have regained all the strength and stately grace of her accustomed manner as she stepped forth with her husband from the Moat House, right in front of the cannon, which was now in full preparation to be discharged,—doubtless with the determination on the part of the barbarous assailants, either to compel a surrender on the part of Tubal to a more ignominious fate, or batter down the old mansion of his ancestors over his head.

Rupert and his slaughtering host, now concentrated thickly round the edge of the moat, and attentively watching for the result, beheld two figures emerge from the ancient manor-house of the lords of Birmingham, closely linked arm-in-arm.

Immediately recognising in the glare of the burning town around, that one of these was the lame hero-smith, whom he so much detested, the Prince would have given orders to destroy him at once by a discharge of musketry, had he not also discerned that his closely linked companion was Arabella Holte.

'The dastard !' he yelled ; ' does he think to save himself from my just vengeance thus ? He but spares himself for the gallows !'

To the life-long horror and saddening of this ferocious soldier, however, the pair, reaching the verge of the moat, waved him a species of scornful greeting and farewell, and then turning, clasped each other in their arms, and flung themselves together into the deep, dark water of the moat!

So willingly did both these unfortunate lovers consent to death, that neither rose for several minutes, and when they did it was as corpses, still closely clasped in each other's arms.

And thus perished the last Lord of Birmingham and his bride of Aston Hall; emblems, let us hope, of a happier future indissoluble union between the town of Tubal Bromycham and the noble palace which his genius chiefly had adorned.

CHAPTER XCIX.

CONCLUSION.

THERE is not much to be said of a more cheering character concerning the subsequent fortunes of the Holte family, for a long interval of time.

SIR Thomas continued a prisoner, and his estate in sequestration, by order of the Parliament, for a very considerable period: until, in fact, the complete triumph of the Parliament cause being assured by the destruction of the monarchy, and beheading of Charles the First, he was admitted to what was called a composition for his property, by the influence of his son's wife and family with Oliver Cromwell. But such was the relentless stubbornness of his animosities, that he still constantly refused to be reconciled to her or Edward Holte during the remainder of his life. He would, indeed, have disinherited his son, but that he found himself childless and heirless of all issue besides; and Charles the First most positively prohibited this act of vengeance, and refused to sanction any transfer of his faithful adherent's birthright. While, on her part, Dorothy Firebrace blessed her husband with a numerous and flourishing progeny, which promised a long continuance to the race.

Twice afterwards did the influence of the Firebrace

family preserve the Holte property from total confiscation, in consequence of the reckless obstinacy with which Sir Thomas joined in various royalist plots and insurrections. Heavy fines and forfeitures were, however, imposed, that greatly limited his powers of mischief against the new Government, and which he made the pretence of refusing all but the scantiest means of subsistence to his son and his family.

Luckily Firebrace's resources, ungrudgingly dedicated to the purpose, preserved his daughter and son-in-law from the severer straits to which they might otherwise have been reduced.

There is an obscure tradition that Sir Thomas Holte survived his son, dying himself a very aged man towards the close of the Protectorate. But we have ascertained that this report is unfounded, and merely based on the facts that Edward Holte retired abroad with his family, on the destruction of royalty in England, rather than expose himself to the resentment of the father of the young soldier he had slain at Edghill, when he became supreme in the State. And abroad he resided for several years, amusing his exile with various literary and scientific pursuits, and also devoting much time and research to tracing and verifying the proofs of his wife's descent from an ancient and noble French family; the results afterwards figuring memorably in the statement of the Holte perdigree.

But though we do not allege that Edward Holte attained anything like the years of his violent but stronger-constituted progenitor, there can be no doubt that he lived to be restored to the Aston Hall estates, and to reside there for a long period in peace and prosperity, and to see his children properly acknowledged as his heirs.

A manuscript journal, undeniably in the small, timid handwriting of Chaplain Lane, still more tremulous with age, attests the fact.

An entry in it declares that on the 25th of June, in the year of his blessed Majesty King Charles the Second's restoration, Sir Edward Holte and my Lady Dorothy, his fair wife, and their three sons, specially naming 'Master Charles,' the eldest, did return to their house of Aston Hall, from a long and painful exile abroad, and were received with unbounded joy and wassail by all the tenantry thereof. And, moreover, a great number of the townfolk of Birmingham, being most willing, after the long troubles and disturbances, to live in good peace and neighbourhood with the Holte family, did accompany the Master Armourer, Firebrace, of Deritend, (verily, then, a most aged and wrinkled, but very happy man,) on the occasion, to welcome Sir Edward home. And there was a great feast and revel made and kept on the occasion, with all the old merry sports and junketings disused of a long time, under the direction of the Master Falconer, Robin, and his jolly wife, Phœbe. And that the only sadness he, Master Chaplain Lane, heard or remarked on any one's part, was when my Lady Dorothy inquired of her father whether he was careful to keep the tomb he had erected to the memories of her dear unhappy foster-brother, Tubal Bromycham, and his noble wife, her husband's sister, in the Church of St. Martin, always in good refreshment and repair. Whereupon there was scarcely a dry eye among all who overheard the question, it was put so lovingly and sorrowfully.

There are a few subsequent entries, referring to minor vexations endured by Sir Edward Holte and his brave

wife in their subsequent career. Prominent among which was the harassment they sustained from the rapacious designs of one of the mistresses of the restored King, who wanted to have it shown that Sir Thomas Holte had incurred forfeiture of his goods by felony, as the murderer of his cook, which at that distance of time it might have been very difficult to disprove; the woman herself having a greedy eye to a fine on a release from the 'extreme penalties' of the same. And then was seen the benefit of my Lady Dorothy's former wise resolve to retain the pardon granted by King Charles the First; for it was produced, and put an effectual stop to the whole nefarious proceeding. Not to mention that, for almost the only time in his life, Charles the Second recalled an obligation with gratitude, in the fact that in his boyhood he had been indebted to Lady Holte's courage and presence of mind for withdrawing himself and his younger brother from the dangers of the field at Edghill, and forbade that any further scrutiny should be made into the circumstances.

It is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to dwell on such trifles at the close of the recital of so many serious misfortunes and calamities. For, on the whole, indeed, many cloudless years of love and happiness were in store for the union of Sir Edward Holte of Aston Hall, with the Armourer's Daughter of Birmingham.

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