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THE GREAT ROXHYPHE

BY
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"The Black Moth: A Romance of the XVIIIth Century"

"Under which King, Bezonian?"
— King Henry IV. Part II



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**TO
MY MOTHER AND FATHER**



BOOK I

THE WAYS RUN PARALLEL

THE GREAT ROXHYTHE

CHAPTER I

THE KING AND HIS FAVOURITE

A LARGE gentleman was strolling from group to group in one of the great galleries of Whitehall. He was very exquisite, this gentleman, adorned with all the coloured silks, velvets and furbelows which that Year of Grace, 1668, demanded. A great peruke was on his head, with flowing, dark curls that reached over his breast and below his shoulders. He carried his plumed hat in his hand, and at times he made great play with it, as if to point some witty remark. At other times he opened his jewelled comfit-box with a delicate flick of his wrist, and selected, with some care, a tinted sweetmeat. Once or twice he swept a low bow to some lady of his acquaintance, but for the most part he was occupied with the courtiers who were present, always lazily smiling, and with his brown eyes bored and expressionless. His height, and the breadth of his shoulders made him easily distinguishable in the gay throng, so that those who wished to speak to him soon found where he was standing, and made their way towards him. He was the Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe, the King's favourite and the ladies' darling, and his name was on many lips.

No longer in his first youth, my lord had nothing to learn in the way of polish. He was the perfect courtier, combining grace and insolence even more successfully than his Grace of Buckingham. His brow was incomparable; his air French; his wit spicy; his tailoring beyond words, remarkable. Even in those days of splendour and unlimited extravagance he was said to be fabulously wealthy.

All this was enough to gain him popularity, but yet another asset was his. This was the ear of the King.

For no one did Charles cherish quite so warm a regard. He had never been heard to speak harshly to the favourite, and the favourite had never been heard to take a liberty with his good-natured master. He had been with Charles on his travels; had fought at his side at Worcester, had entered London in his train in 1660, and was now one of the most influential men in town.

He was something of an enigma. As indolent and as licentious as his royal master, possessing strong personal magnetism, many engaging qualities, and excellent abilities, he never interested himself in the affairs of the moment nor exercised his influence either for his own ends or for those of some "party." He belonged to none of the factions; he was no statesman; his lazy unconcern was widely known. He never plotted, and never worried himself over the affairs of the State. He had few friends, and some enemies. The King's brother, the Duke of York, openly disliked him for the influence he held over Charles; influence that his Grace did not possess; influence that might be turned against him. Many of the courtiers covertly hated him for this same reason, but no one, for some inexplicable reason, ever intentionally annoyed him.

This afternoon, as he walked through the gallery, he found that the conversation was more serious than was either seemly or usual. On all sides was talk of the Triple Alliance with Holland and Spain which the King had signed but a few weeks ago. No one could quite understand why Charles had done this, but nearly everyone was pleased. Uneasy patriots who feared the French King's yoke saw in this new bond a safeguard against France and a safeguard against the attacks of the Dutch; while the fervent religious party who had murmured at the King's marriage to a Papist and at his good-humoured toleration of the Catholic religion thought this Protestant alliance a proof of Charles' good faith.

The King occupied himself so little with affairs that

many of the men who surrounded him came to the conclusion that he had had no mind of his own in the matter, but had blindly followed his ministers' instructions. Others who had more insight into the King's nimble, competent brain confessed themselves at a loss to explain his concurrence with a bond which must surely be disadvantageous to himself. These were his intimates; men who had some conception of the King's friendship with his cousin Louis, and a knowledge of the condition of his private purse. They wondered, and surmised, and exchanged glances, but they were few in number, and the majority of men thought the King an indolent prince with no head for business and certainly no taste for intricate intrigue.

It seemed that the only man at Whitehall that afternoon who neither wondered nor surmised but who was content to receive the news placidly and without argument, was, as usual, Lord Roxhythe. He spent his time turning aside solemn questions as to his opinion of the bond by a series of flippant rejoinders. He grew weary at last of trying to turn men's thoughts into lighter and more congenial channels, and withdrew to the side of Mrs. Chester, one of the Queen's ladies. There he remained, and was exchanging languid badinage with her when a page broke in on the gathering about the lady's couch and bowed low.

His Majesty desired my lord to go to him at once.

It was no unusual thing for Charles to summon his favourite to him privately, and no one thought it a matter for suspicion; not even Sir Thomas Killigrew who was unreasonably jealous of his rival.

My Lord Roxhythe cast an appealing glance at Mrs. Chester, and rose.

"Oh well, sir!" shrugged the lady with a little *moue* of pretended anger. "I know you will never stay by my side when His Majesty calls!"

"Sweetheart," retorted Roxhythe, audaciously, "I would stay by your side an I could, but seeing that I may not, how can I?"

Mrs. Chester laughed immoderately at this, flirting her fan.

"You confound me with your woulds and coulds, sir! I know not the answer to your riddle, yet if I command your company . . .?"

"Then on two sides my company is demanded, and on the both by Royalty."

"How?" she dimpled.

"Why, Fairest, if His Majesty is King of England, you are the Queen of Beauty, and I know not whose claim be the stronger."

As Mrs. Chester was no more than ordinarily good looking, this fulsome compliment pleased her very much.

"And so what would you do?"

"I would compromise, sweet."

"Compromise! I do not think I like the word. But how?"

Roxhythe picked up his hat and gloves and bowed.

"I would take you with me to His Majesty so you might both have my company."

Her laughter followed him across the gallery as he walked in the wake of the page to the King's private closet.

Charles sat at his desk, his chin in his hand, but at Roxhythe's entry he rose and came forward, hands outstretched.

Roxhythe took them in his, carrying them to his lips.

"Ye are recovered from your indisposition, Davy?" asked the King affectionately. "Do you know that 'tis five days since I have seen you?"

"Do I not, Sir!" smiled Roxhythe.

"And even now I have to send for you because you do not come! What ill usage is this, David?"

"None, Sir," was the prompt reply. "I have been a suppliant at your door, and turned away because that Your Majesty was greatly occupied with State affairs."

"They had no orders to turn you away, David! Odds-life, but one would think the business of more account than you!"

"One might," conceded Roxhythe, and laughed. "They would have announced me, but hearing of Your Majesty's occupation, I forbad them."

"You think so much of business!" sighed the King. "Well, I have been with my nose to the grindstone all the morning and I am not finished with it yet. Sit down, Davy!" He returned to the desk.

Roxhythe chose a seat opposite him and laid down his hat.

Charles' heavy face was overcast. His melancholy eyes, resting on the favourite's face, were frowning. Roxhythe raised his brows, and leaned back in his chair.

"David," said the King, at last, "I am in something of a quandary."

Roxhythe said nothing.

"If I do not obtain money soon I am like to be in a worse one. This Dutch alliance is of no use to me."

"Well, we always knew that, Sir. You've commands for me?"

"A request."

"Name it, Sire."

"Gently, Roxhythe! There is much ye must understand first."

Roxhythe drew closer to the desk.

"This is a secret matter, Sir?"

"For the present, yes. David, the matter is this: very soon I must have means, or I fall. The Commons will grant me nothing, nor will I ask them. There is Louis . . ." He paused.

Roxhythe made a little gesture of distaste.

"You are adverse from dealing with the French King, ah? Well, so am I. I've no mind to bear his yoke on my shoulders, for I believe it would tax my ingenuity to its uttermost to out-wit him. That he would jump to the movement of my finger I know. Yet . . ." Again he paused.

"You do not wish to put England under his thumb, Sir?"

"I do not wish to put myself under his thumb, Roxhythe. His Christian Majesty is very grasping. So I am forced to think of another alternative."

"Well, Sir?"

"My nephew."

For an instant Roxhythe was puzzled. Then his eyes narrowed.

"William of Orange."

Charles nodded.

"You see the possibilities of the idea?"

"I see a great many impossibilities, Sir."

"You are not over encouraging, Roxhythe. You have not heard what is in my mind as yet."

Roxhythe bowed.

"I am waiting for Your Majesty to expound."

"It is this. De Witt rules Holland, and he holds my nephew prisoner. Yet I have good reason to believe that his position is none too safe. Already there are murmurings among the people. Nassau is always Nassau—in Holland. If William were to rise up 'gainst Their High Mightinesses the mob would flock to his standard. The mob's memory is never of the longest. In the face of his present unpopularity, it would forget the good De Witt wrought in Holland, and stand again for the Orange. With an English army to back him William might very easily overthrow De Witt and take his rightful place as Stadtholder. He might even be made King."

"And the price, Sir?"

"Tribute paid to me, yearly."

"So you will hold the Provinces as a subsidiary state to England?"

"Ostensibly. Enough to satisfy Ashley."

"Ashley. So he is in the plot?"

Charles shrugged.

"To some extent. He does not know my whole mind. He sees advancement for himself in it. And the Country's good. A patriot, this Ashley."

"And who else knows of the thing, Sir?"

The King moved a little uneasily.

"Buckingham," he answered shortly.

"Your Majesty trusts that man too much."

The King's eyes flashed.

"My Majesty does not brook correction, Roxhythe."

"Your pardon, Sir."

One of the dogs barked in its sleep and growled.

The King leant forward again.

"In Holland to-day there is a strong Orangist party. Influential men, some of them . . . " he mentioned names

. . . "And a few of the richer tradesmen. Not so many of that class. 'Tis the noblemen and the mob who are for the Orange, but the burghers stand by De Witt. If Louis presently invades the Low Countries, as I believe he will do, De Witt's position becomes the more insecure. The mob will blame him for the invasion, and turn to rend him. Then were the time to produce the Prince, with a small force at his back. England would approve it, and in such a way I might become independent of Louis."

"It is a pretty scheme, Sir," said Roxhythe slowly. "But one point Your Majesty overlooks."

"What is it?"

"The Prince himself, Sir."

Charles brushed the objection aside.

"A mere boy. My bait should be tempting enough."

"Have you considered that others may have dangled that same bait?"

"Louis. Assuredly. But on my side there is this: I am his uncle; England is Protestant, as he is. Louis is Catholic, and the blood-tie is not so close."

"You are sure, too, that the Prince is amenable to bribes, Sir?"

The sombre look faded from the King's face. He showed his teeth in a smile of pure mischief.

"Roxhythe, Roxhythe, have ye forgot he is a Stuart?"

The favourite laughed.

"No, Sir. Nor that he is also a Nassau."

"A proud race," nodded the King. "Still, his youth stands me in good stead."

"He may have older and wiser councillors, Sir, not easy to dazzle."

"I never yet met a statesman I could not bribe," replied the King cynically.

A smile flickered across Roxhythe's mouth.

"What will you bribe them with, Sir? I thought 'twas Your Majesty who required money."

"I am prepared to spend some money that I may obtain more," retorted the King. "I believe the Commons would assist me for such a cause."

"All things are possible, Sir," said Roxhythe pessimistically.

"So I think. But first I must know my nephew his mind. From all I can gather he is a youth of parts. I would lay my proposition before him, for without his consent nothing is possible."

Roxhythe twisted his rings.

"And so we come to the part I have to play."

Charles glanced at him affectionately.

"I would not press you, David. I but request."

My lord's lips twitched.

"Your Majesty knows I can refuse you nothing," he said.

The King put out his hand quickly.

"Ah, David! If I had more about me of your loyalty!"

"Then, Sir, were I not so favoured," smiled Roxhythe. "I am to go to the Hague?"

"Ay. You will bear a packet containing the—bribe—as writ by Ashley. But you know my mind as he does not, and you will plead my cause with the Prince yourself. Remember I am set on this thing if it may be brought about."

Roxhythe stood up.

"I will serve you to the best of my ability, Sir. My instructions, I suppose, I receive from *Messieurs Ashley and Villiers?*"

"They await you in the room opposite. Roxhythe, my displeasure will be very great if you anger these men! Already they do not like it that I have chosen you for messenger, and I will have no petty quarrelling! Remember you are my friend!" He rose also, and extended his hand. He was a very great Prince.

Roxhythe kissed his fingers.

"I will bear your words in mind, Sir. But I never quarrel."

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"No," admitted the King, laughing. "But you have a damned annoying air about you!"

"That is possible," agreed my lord placidly, and left the presence.

Outside he paused, and glanced down the corridor. There was no one in sight.

"Ashley and Villiers," he murmured. "What ails my little master?"

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CHAPTER II

THE KING HIS COUNCILLORS

By the fireplace, lolling in one of the carven oak chairs, and from time to time selecting comfits from a jewelled box, was a tall, fair man rather florid of countenance, with very arched eyebrows, and an enormous periwig. His dress and appointments were rich and heavily perfumed; his face was painted and powdered; his air was blasé. He wore salmon-pink with silver facings and silver ribands. His coat was marvellously embroidered; its sleeves turned back from the elbow to allow his fine cambric shirt to billow forth into foamy ruffles of Mechlin. His person was lavishly besprinkled with jewels, and the hilt of his sword was of wrought gold with rubies and diamonds scattered over it.

In all a handsome, foppish gentleman, with just enough of dare-devilry and charm in his manner to soften the slightly repellent insolence that characterized him. His Grace of Buckingham.

Standing by the window was Lord Ashley-Cooper. His lordship laid no claim to either personal beauty or charm. Even at that time his face was lined and pinched, and his manner lacked the courtier's polish. His dress was plain, judged by the standards of the day, and something careless in appearance. He neither toyed with comfits, nor hummed to pass the time, as did His Grace of Buckingham, but signs of impatience he showed in the way his foot tapped the ground, and in the twitching of his thin lips.

Villiers studied him amusedly.

Then Roxhythe came into the room.

Both men turned, and Buckingham dragged himself from his chair, yawning behind his scented handkerchief.

Ashley bowed stiffly. It struck Roxhythe that he was not at ease. He wondered what the man really knew of the

King's designs: whether he was playing into the King's hands deliberately. Roxhythe was slightly acquainted with him, but he saw that Ashley's bow was not cordial. He returned it, making great play with his plumed hat. Then he bowed to His Grace.

And there they stood, Buckingham obviously amused; Roxhythe quite impassive, sustaining his bow; and Ashley very uncomfortable. Yet it was he who spoke the first word.

"My Lord Roxhythe, we are greatly honoured. Pray will you not be seated?" His voice was harsh but not unsympathetic.

Roxhythe ended his bow with a flourish. He deposited his hat on a chair, laid his gloves on the brim, and sat down at the table, making a gesture with his hand to two other chairs. In that moment he became master of the situation.

Buckingham stretched himself in his original place and ate another comfit. Roxhythe caught the exasperated glance that Ashley flung at him and chuckled inwardly. Charles had chosen an ill-matched couple for the business.

"Gentlemen, I await your convenience," he said.

Buckingham passed his comfit-box to Ashley, who sat nearest him.

"May I not tempt you, my lord? I assure—"

"I thank your Grace, no!" said Ashley, curtly.

"Then my Lord Roxhythe?"

Roxhythe accepted a violet-tinted sweetmeat, and handed the box back to his Grace.

Villiers watched him anxiously.

"A delicate flavour, you'll agree, my lord? I have scoured London and not found another maker to rival this one."

Roxhythe lifted his hand.

"I seem to catch the name in the flavour, sir . . . Champlin—no . . . Ah! Tonier!"

"You're right," nodded Buckingham. "Tonier. I set great store by my comfits."

Ashley interrupted at this, seeing that Roxhythe seemed disposed to continue the subject.

"Gentlemen, we have met to discuss more important matters than your sweetmeats!" he said quickly.

Haughtily Buckingham raised his eyebrows. Then he let them fall again, and yawned.

"My Lord Roxhythe will forgive the abruptness," he drawled. "I shall hope to continue our little conversation another time, sir."

"Your Grace still gives me something to live for," replied Roxhythe sweetly.

Ashley brought his clenched fist down on the table.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he cried. "I must beseech your attention!" Instantly Roxhythe turned to him.

"Your pardon, my lord! I stand rebuked. Well, I have had speech with His Majesty." He sat back, waiting for Ashley to speak.

"Oh, have you so?" asked Buckingham sleepily. "How doth His Majesty? I have not seen him in these two days."

"Very well, sir—considering . . ."

Ashley flashed angrily.

"Well, sirs! And is this the time or the place to bandy questions concerning His Majesty's health? We are here on business of great importance——"

Buckingham was moved to sit up.

"My lord! His Majesty's health——"

"Is of great moment, your Grace, as I am perfectly well aware! But we have no time to waste now! We must come to our business at once! Already we waste time with all this talk of sweetmeats and——"

"Gentlemen, I beg you not to quarrel here, in His Majesty's apartments," interposed Roxhythe very coldly. "My lord, if you will give me your attention for one moment!"

Before Ashley, indignant at the implied reproof, had time to do more than open his mouth, Roxhythe had begun to speak, concisely, but with the air of one bored beyond measure.

"His Majesty did me the honour of requesting my presence this morning, when he did propound to me a scheme which he hath in mind. This I need not speak of

to you, gentlemen, for I know that you are party to the intrigue." Here he bowed. "His Majesty further honoured me by commanding my services in the matter, desiring me to be his messenger to his nephew, the Prince of Orange. This I did undertake, and His Majesty at once commanded me to seek you out for the further propounding of the matter. Allow me to say also, gentlemen, that I am entirely at your disposal."

"Very prettily said," commented his Grace, opening one eye. "I swear I could not reel it off so pat."

"I gather, my lord, that His Majesty apprised you of our intentions?"

"His Majesty told me that Prince William was to be cozened to our side, and the Provinces to pay yearly tribute to England."

"That is so."

Roxhythe felt Buckingham's eyes upon him. He knew then that Charles had made no secret of his intentions to the Duke. As yet he could not judge of Ashley's knowledge, but he thought it unlikely that this man should be privy to the King's aims.

"I see you know it all," continued Ashley. "It but remains to arrange that you depart in such a way that the French Ambassador's spies shall not suspect you; and to read you your instruction."

Roxhythe bowed.

"His Majesty desires you to travel by sea to Flushing, where it is believed your lordship has friends."

Again Roxhythe bowed.

"You are to journey to the Hague, but in such a way as to excite no suspicion. So the first day you will ride no further than Bergen-op-Zoom; the second to Gertruydenberg; the third to Rotterdam, and so to the Hague itself. We leave to your discretion the time you spend in each of these towns. It is possible you may have to allay suspicion by remaining in each some days. It is almost certain that you will be spied upon. If the Duke of York, or the French Ambassador, M. de Rouvigny, were to hear of the affair, they would do all in their power to stop you gaining

access to the Prince. When you are come at length to the Hague you will in some way——”

“Which we leave to your discretion, knowing none ourselves,” put in Buckingham.

“——in some way gain entrance to the palace. You must deliver the King his packet into the Prince his hands, and bring back an answer. That is the whole plan in rough, my lord.”

“Neat, eh, my lord?” said Buckingham lazily. “You must take care, however, to allay the spies’ suspicion. In all probability they will be with you on the boat, but no doubt you will contrive to shake them off during the journey, even an they do arrive at the Hague to meet you.”

Ashley broke in.

“The other matter, which is of great importance, my lord, is the manner of your departure.”

“Surely an escort as far as Harwich . . .?” asked Villiers, surprised. “He cannot then come to much harm this side of the water.”

“Your Grace is pleased to make a mock of me,” retorted Ashley with quiet dignity. “My Lord Roxhythe, you have no suggestion to put forward?”

Roxhythe left off playing with the tassel of his glove and looked up.

“Why no, sir. Unless it might be that I should fall under the displeasure of His Majesty and be forced to leave the country for a spell.”

Ashley brought the knuckles of his right hand into the palm of his left.

“You have hit on it, sir! Why, it is the very thing! A public rebuff; coldness from His Majesty! It lends verisimilitude to the affair at once!”

Villiers looked curiously across at my lord.

“So you’ll do that, eh?”

“Why not, sir?” Roxhythe opened his eyes rather wide.

“Damme if I would!” remarked his Grace. “Well, well! what next?”

Ashley started to fidget with some papers lying on the table. His face became more harassed than ever.

"There is one other matter which I hardly like to mention to your lordship. And that is—plainly speaking—the—ah—in spite of His Majesty's—I may say—very straitened circumstances—it is the—er——"

Buckingham burst into a great laugh.

"Odd's blood, but the man stumbles like a cat on hot bricks! 'Tis the payment that he tries to speak of, Roxhythe!"

"We—leave it to your lordship's discretion, of course."

"You'll need to have a vast amount of that discretion!" chuckled the Duke.

"Your Grace!—to your lordship's discretion—how much money you should require for the expenses of the journey." He stopped, and glanced with some anxiety into my lord's ironic eyes.

Buckingham drawled something about the King's purse that made my lord's hand clench suddenly on the glove he held. Ashley's discomfiture amused him. He prolonged it for some moments. Then he began to speak, very slowly.

"Set your minds at rest, gentlemen. His Majesty knows I shall not ask him for money." He paused, frowning. A little sneering laugh from Villiers affected him not a whit. Ashley watched him closely. "One thing, however, I must have."

"Oho!" Buckingham flashed a look at Ashley.

"May we know what that is, sir?" asked Ashley.

Roxhythe toyed again with his glove.

"I require a gentleman to go with me."

The relief on both men's faces was ludicrous.

"Well, sir!" said Ashley briskly. "That is no such great matter!"

Roxhythe was pained.

"Pardon me, sir. I mean a man who may be to some extent cognizant of the intrigue; who will be loyal to me; who will transact all the business of transport for me; who will take orders from no one but me; who will act in implicit obedience to me. In short, gentlemen, one who is trustworthy and discreet."

Buckingham stared at him gloomily.

"In these days!" he said, patiently exasperated. "Really, my lord!"

But Ashley had his finger to his teeth, biting the nail.

"You hear, sir?" asked Buckingham.

"Ay. I hear," murmured Ashley, abstractedly. "Wait!"

"He knows of such a man!" breathed Buckingham.

"Well, well!" He crossed his legs, and surveyed his gay rosettes.

"You have no one in mind, Lord Roxhythe?" asked Ashley, suddenly.

"I? No."

"How should he?" sneered the Duke.

"Then I believe I know the man you seek."

"That is very good hearing, sir. Who is he?"

"He is by name Dart. Christopher Dart. He is little more than a boy, it's true, but I knew his father well, and I know his brother. I could vouch for his character. They come of a very old Suffolk family, and they are intensely patriotic. Chris came to my house only last week, asking me if I had work for him. I did promise to keep him in mind. He is the very man you want, my lord, and more than ever so as his brother is in the Prince his service at the Hague."

Even Buckingham was roused.

"Roxhythe his difficulties fade before this youth," he remarked. Roxhythe laid down his glove.

"Proceed, sir, I beg of you!"

"The boy will serve you faithfully enough; of that I am sure. As to his brother, Roderick, he was placed with His Highness by De Witt himself, so he is not suspected by the Prince his governors. Young Christopher spoke of him when I saw him. He told me that Roderick has learnt to worship the Prince, and would die for him, and much more heroic talk beside. If you can use Christopher to gain his brother, half your difficulty is gone!"

"Why, so it seems!" bowed Roxhythe. "I am indebted to you, sir."

"I will send to Chris to come to see me to-morrow," continued Ashley. "Unless you yourself will see him, sir?"

"Where does the prodigal lodge?" inquired Roxhythe.

"In Milford Lane—Number seven."

"I'll visit him myself, then, sir, and learn his mind. I may use your name?"

"Surely, my lord!"

"Then he will run to you to hear your advice, and, acting on it, accept the post of secretary which I offer."

Ashley saw the wisdom of this.

"Very well, sir. And for the rest?"

"I'll wait on you," said Roxhythe. He turned to Buckingham and bowed. Then he bowed to Ashley. "There is nothing more you have to tell me?"

Ashley shook his head.

"At present, nothing, sir. If you will visit me later in the week I will have everything clear."

Roxhythe picked up his hat.

"Then, with your permission, gentlemen, I'll leave you."

"One moment, Roxhythe!" It was Buckingham who spoke. "We may leave to you the task of informing His Majesty of your decision?"

"My decision?" interrogated Roxhythe.

"That blind to the French spies you spoke of. The public rebuff." The sneer was thinly veiled.

Roxhythe looked over his shoulder.

"Yes. You may leave that to me. I will speak to His Majesty."

"I am relieved," smiled the Duke. He watched my lord go out, and the smile faded. He flung himself back in his chair with a short laugh. "The fool!" he exclaimed. "The fond fool!"

"No, I do not think him that," said Ashley. "But I wish it were any other than he. I do not trust him; he is too secret. I would he were more a fool; I should be more at ease."

"Of course he is a fool! What sane man undertakes the King's most expensive tasks and asks no payment? A fond fool, I tell you!"

"I think he loves the King very dearly," slowly remarked my lord. "Or else he feigns well. Yet I do not trust him,

for I think him selfish, and I do not think he cares overmuch for the country."

"Oh, ye set too great store on the man, sir! A public rebuff! He who has never endured a slight from the King! He is mad!"

"No, he loves the King. But I wish it were other than he." He sighed, and gathered together his papers. "I do not conceal from your Grace that I have grave misgivings concerning this business."

Buckingham chuckled.

CHAPTER III

CHRISTOPHER DART

ROXHYTHE made his way back to the gallery. He found it crowded, and across the room caught sight of the King sitting with la belle Stewart, and laughing boisterously at some witty shaft aimed by Killigrew, standing near. Lady Castlemaine was by the door as he entered, in one of her black moods. He addressed her lightly, bowing. She turned.

"Ah, Roxhythe!" The frown cleared somewhat. "You have not been at Court these last few days. What ailed you?"

"A trifling indisposition, madame. I am flattered that you marked my absence."

"We missed you at the ball," she answered. "It was a pretty evening. You heard?"

"I heard that your ladyship was much admired. Sedley spoke of a yellow gown, of blue ribands, of——"

"Yes. And what said Sir Charles of Miss Stewart?" She spat the words at him.

"He did not speak of her," said Roxhythe, calmly. "She was present?"

"Ay, the hussy!" Lady Castelmaine struck her fan into the palm of her hand. "The minx! Flaunting her airs and her graces before mine eyes! The bread-and-butter miss!"

Roxhythe shook with quiet laughter. Her ladyship flung him a wrathful glance.

"Oh, laugh, Roxhythe, by all means! I make no doubt you are stricken with the same madness! La belle Stewart! Tchah!" She moved angrily away.

Roxhythe felt the King's eyes upon him. As soon as he could conveniently do so, he made his way to where Charles was sitting, and went to talk to Digby who stood behind the King's chair with one or two others.

Presently Charles rose and walked with his fair companion to the door. He nodded carelessly to Roxhythe.

"Davy, be sure you visit me to-morrow." It was affectionately said; the Monarch conferring a favour on his courtier. Roxhythe bowed.

"I thank your Majesty."

Charles passed on.

The audience next morning was short. Charles was in a flippanant mood, and although he at first objected to publicly snubbing his favourite, he soon consented. He was more interested in Roxhythe's account of yesterday's interview, and he laughed heartily at the description of the ill-assorted pair. For a fleeting few moments he was inclined to cancel his commands, reproaching himself for thinking to send Roxhythe into danger. Then that inclination faded, and he fell to discussing various minor details with Roxhythe.

In the evening Roxhythe went to visit Christopher Dart.

Christopher lived in a house looking out on to the river; a jeweller's shop, over which he rented rooms. On this particular evening he was on the point of going to bed when the little serving-maid knocked on the door, and shrilled through the key-hole that a gentleman wanted to see Mr. Dart. Christopher had already snuffed two candles, and he paused now in the act of pinching the third. He went to the door and opened it.

The maid did not know who the gentleman was.

Christopher looked at her surprisedly. His friends in London were few, and they did not call on him at eleven at night.

The maid smoothed her dress with plump, red hands.

"I told the gentleman ye were like to be abed, sir," she said, with a pert toss of her head. She glanced at Christopher from beneath her lashes. He was a comely boy.

"Well, I'm not abed, Lucy. But I was on the point of retiring when you came."

"Be I to send him about his business, sir?" Her tone implied that she would find the task congenial.

"No," said Christopher, slowly. "'Tis not so often that I have a visitor that I can afford to deny myself." His

solemnity vanished in a smile. "Will you show him upstairs, Lucy?"

"A great mill-post of a creature all wrapped up in a coat!" she sniffed. "And not a mite of his face to be seen for his hat all down on his nose!"

"A dangerous fellow," agreed Christopher, twinkling. "But I have my sword over in the corner there! Don't keep him waiting, child."

He tried to think who would be likely to come disguised to see him. His friends were of a peaceable nature, nor had he one amongst them who could be considered taller than the average. While the maid was clattering down the stairs, he re-lit the two snuffed candles, and stirred the dying fire to a blaze. He was youthful enough to cast a glance into the mirror over the mantelpiece, and to straighten his hair. It was his own, and he wore it in natural curls about his shoulders.

The maid opened the door. She put her head into the room, announcing resentfully: "The gentleman!" and vanished.

Roxhythe came forward, removing his hat.

Christopher gazed at him in perplexity. It must be remembered that he was not long come from the country, and had seen very few notables of the town. His visitor's face was totally unfamiliar.

Roxhythe shed his heavy cloak. He was gorgeously dressed in rose velvet and purple trimmings, for he had come straight from Whitehall. As he dropped his cloak on to a chair he smiled at Christopher who stared the harder.

"I must really apologize," said Roxhythe, in his inimitable way. "It is quite disgraceful of me to wait on you at this hour, Mr. Dart. But I have been much occupied, believe me. I am relieved to find you not yet asleep; much relieved."

Christopher swallowed twice, and stammered something inane. The deep brown eyes cast a spell over him which was strengthened by his visitor's strange manner. Feeling that his murmured remark was inadequate, he bowed, and told Roxhythe that he was honoured. From my lord's

attitude he supposed that he had met him somewhere and forgotten him. He did not know the ways of Roxhythe.

My lord drew off his fringed gloves. Rings winked from his fingers.

"You are wondering what-a-plague I want with you," he remarked.

Christopher spoke rather coldly.

"I confess, sir, I am at a loss."

"Naturally. I shall have to explain, and I was ever a bad hand at that. May I sit down?"

Christopher blushed. Roxhythe had made him feel a raw schoolboy. He put forward a chair, not without resentment.

"Pray do, sir. I regret I have not better entertainment to offer you, but, as you know, I was not expecting this visit."

Roxhythe took the chair and leant back in it, looking up at the stiff young figure with some amusement.

"My dear Mr. Dart, I can never explain my errand if you stand above me so disapprovingly."

In spite of his slightly offended self, Christopher went over to another chair.

"I see, sir, that you know my name. May I not have the honour of yours?"

His lordship's brows rose.

"I am Roxhythe," he said, with faint surprise.

The naïve egotism passed over Christopher's head. He stood transfixed in an amazement that plainly showed itself on his face. He recovered, and bowed again.

"I am indeed honoured," he said.

Roxhythe's lip quivered.

"On the contrary," he replied. "The honour is mine. Yes, do sit down. I cannot bear you on your feet any longer. And before we proceed any further, permit me to say that that solemn fellow—Cooper—Ashley-Cooper will hold himself responsible for me."

Christopher conceived that he was being laughed at.

"Lord Ashley-Cooper is a great friend of mine, sir," he said coldly.

"A most praiseworthy, energetic gentleman," nodded Roxhythe. "He recommended me to wait on you."

Light began to dawn on Christopher.

"My lord has work for me?" he asked, forgetting his studied coldness.

"That is it, Mr. Dart. Work for—ah King and Country if you've a mind to it." He watched the young man's eyes grow eager. "Work of a very private nature."

"I can be—discreet, sir!"

"So Ashley assures me. I stand in need of a secretary."

For one moment Christopher looked blank. Then he flushed angrily.

"Sir—!"

"I am not making sport of you," pleaded Roxhythe. "It is very serious, urgent business."

"I—"

"I could not trust my present secretary for the work I have to do."

"Oh! Then it is not for you that I should have to work?"

"I am very sorry," said Roxhythe. "I am afraid I should require you to—"

"I meant—it is for some State business?"

"State business; yes, Mr. Dart, that is it. I work for my master, and you work for me. That is the position."

"Is your master the King, sir?"

Roxhythe was again surprised.

"Naturally."

Christopher leaned forward.

"Will you not—propound, sir?"

Roxhythe drew his gloves lazily through his fingers. He did not look at Christopher. Briefly he outlined as much of the plot as was meet for the other to hear, ending with the part Christopher was to play. He had apologized for being unversed in the art of speaking, but it was a very concise and unfaltering tale that he unfolded. He explained the whole affair in a rather bored manner, and as if it were the most usual thing in the world for a King and his minister to go behind the backs of other ministers to form secret

treaties with prisoner princes. But so well did he tell it that this aspect of the situation never struck young Dart at all. When Roxhythe had finished he drew a deep breath. His eyes shone.

Roxhythe ate a sweetmeat.

For a moment Christopher remained silent. Then he rose abruptly, and walked to the window, opening it and looking out over the river to the houses beyond. The night air blew in at the casement, stirring his fair curls as it passed him, and spread coldly over the room. Somewhere below a bargeman called to his fellow, but the sound of his voice came muffled to the quiet room. Christopher spoke with suppressed excitement.

"I—am very sensible—of the great honour—you do me in confiding in me, sir."

"Yes," agreed Roxhythe. "But will you take the post I offer?"

Youthful impetuosity cried yes! Native caution hesitated. Native caution won.

"If I might—think on it," ventured Christopher, half-ashamed at what he felt to be sheer timorousness.

"I will give you—" Roxhythe glanced at the clock. "—fourteen hours."

Christopher shut the window.

"Thank you, sir. I shall know my mind by then."

"You know it now," answered Roxhythe languidly. "But by all means ask his advice."

"Sir!" Christopher was taken aback. For a moment he looked foolish, then his boyish smile appeared. "Well, yes, sir; I could consult Lord Ashley. He was an old friend of my father's, and as my brother is away—"

"Don't apologize. Of course consult him. Your brother is in the Prince of Orange's service, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. He writes very warmly of the Prince. Mayhap he might be of use to you in the enterprise?"

"It seems quite likely," said Roxhythe. He rose. "You know my house?"

"No, sir."

"Really? Bevan House in the Strand."

"Oh, yes, sir! By Charing Cross."

"That is right. I may expect to hear from you no later than four o'clock to-morrow?"

"I will be there at that hour," promised Christopher. He watched Roxhythe pick up his hat, and became suddenly aware that he had offered no refreshment.

"My lord, you will stay to take a glass of wine with me? I have been sadly lacking in manners to forget. Pray forgive—"

The keen eyes rested kindly on his face.

"I am sure you will excuse me, Mr. Dart. Already it is late and I would not put you to any further inconvenience."

"It's no such thing, sir! If you will be seat—"

"Why, it is very kind of you, sir, but you must forgive me that I do not stay another minute. To-morrow we will attend to the matter!" He pulled his cloak about him. Then he smiled.

In that moment Christopher was first conscious of his fascination. He bowed.

"I will not press you, sir, but I have been most remiss."

"My dear boy," replied his lordship, "I have occupied all your thoughts for the past hour. No, don't come down with me; I shall find my way very well."

"Indeed, sir, I shall!"

Again Roxhythe smiled.

When Christopher re-entered the room, alone, he thought himself that Roxhythe had neither sworn him to secrecy, nor adjured him to be discreet. He puzzled over this curious omission for some time. If it was not carelessness, it must mean that Roxhythe deemed him above suspicion. He lifted his chin a little.

He lay awake long that night, recalling all that had passed. As he turned from side to side in the great four-poster, he tried to argue the matter reasonably. Roxhythe had been right when he remarked that Christopher had already made up his mind, but the boy was young, he felt himself to be inexperienced, and he wanted older and wiser counsel.

The romantic side of the affair appealed to him strongly. Roxhythe had spoken of spies and possible danger: Christopher asked nothing better. That was not what made him hesitate. He hardly admitted to himself what it was that caused him to draw back. It was Roxhythe.

Without knowing why, Christopher felt that he disliked him. He questioned whether such a nonchalant *flâneur* was the man for this task. Had it been some creature of Ashley's who had visited him, or a sober-minded individual, he would not have hesitated. But this foppish court-darling with his affectations and his languour treated the whole affair as if it were of very little importance. At the same time his personality held Christopher. The boy admitted that he had allowed himself to become a little dazzled towards the end of the interview, but now that he was alone he had thrown off the spell, and could take a sane, unbiassed view of the situation.

When he at length fell asleep the clocks were striking three, and the grey light of dawn was already stealing through the window. He did not wake until nine, and then only because Lucy was thumping on the door, and demanding to know if he were ready for his breakfast, which, she informed him, had been ready for him this hour and more.

At eleven o'clock that morning, Christopher waited on Lord Ashley-Cooper, and was lucky enough to find him at home. He was ushered into a severely furnished apartment where Ashley was dictating to his secretary, and motioned briefly to a chair.

Ashley finished his dictation, and sent the secretary into an adjoining room.

"Well, Chris? You want my help?"

Christopher took his outstretched hand.

"I think you know on what errand I am come, sir," he said. "Yesterday evening my Lord Roxhythe honoured me."

Ashley nodded. He sat down again at his desk, watching Christopher draw up a chair for himself.

"And you want my advice?"

"I do, my lord."

"The thing is genuine enough."

"Why, I had not doubted that, sir!"

"Oh? The venture is precarious, and the result most uncertain. Yet if the Prince might be won over, it would be a great thing for England. We do not stand to gain much by the Triple Alliance alone, and if King Louis also has it in mind to coax the Prince, our cause is but the more urgent. Well, well; what is your own opinion?"

"I think the same as you, sir. 'Tis not for that that I hesitate. It is—it is—I cannot think my Lord Roxhythe a very—fitting messenger." He looked up a little anxiously as he spoke, but Ashley straightened in his chair and his face was in many worried creases.

"If it were any other man!" he said. "But the King is blinded by his love for Roxhythe. To send that man on State business! Why, it is madness!" He broke off, remembering to whom he spoke. "This must go no further, Chris!" he said sharply. "After all, the King himself knows that I mistrust Roxhythe. But he was determined, and swore that there was no other man he would send."

Christopher, who had come into the room with just these sentiments in his mind, was now moved to expostulate on behalf of Roxhythe. He realized that he was showing great inconsistency, and wondered at his own perversity.

Ashley grunted.

"Oh, he has cast his net over you! I expected nothing better. Well, what shall you do?"

"I shall go with him, sir."

"I suppose so. Keep a clear head, Chris, and above all, do not allow yourself to fall under Roxhythe's influence. Damme, I'm not sure that I did right to mention your name to him! Mayhap your poor father would have—"

"My father, sir, would have been anxious for me to serve the Country as best I might."

"Maybe, maybe. Come and see me again before you go, Chris."

Christopher rose.

"Of course, sir. I owe you a debt of thanks for remembering me in this matter."

"We shall see," was all that Ashley vouchsafed.

On his way through the hall, Christopher met Mr. Hyde whom he had seen once or twice before at Ashley's house. He bowed and went on to the front door. Hyde's horse stood waiting in charge of his servant. Christopher glanced at the man idly. Then he walked on down the street.

That afternoon, punctual to the minute, he arrived at Bevan House, and was ushered into the library. A spacious room, this, with oriel windows to the south, and a wide fireplace with an oaken mantel-shelf, very cunningly carved. A writing-table stood at one end of the room near a door, other than the one at which he had entered. He sat down near this, and waited.

The minutes ticked by; he grew impatient. Roxhythe had bidden him to come not later than four o'clock; he had obeyed, and behold! there was no Roxhythe. His foot tapped the ground angrily. When Roxhythe at length came into the room, he rose and bowed stiffly.

"I came as you desired me, sir, at four o'clock," he said. He glanced at the timepiece a trifle pointedly.

"Yes?" said Roxhythe. "I remember now; I did ask you to come then. Pray be seated!"

"Thank you," answered Christopher. He remained standing. Roxhythe's manner was insufferable, he decided.

My lord walked to the table where lay a sheaf of papers. One of these he picked up, and folded into three.

"Well, Mr. Dart?"

"I have thought over the matter, sir, and I have spoken to Lord Ashley, it but remains to inform you of my decision." He spoke very coldly. In that moment he knew that he was going to refuse the post offered to him. Then Roxhythe looked up and across at him, smiling.

"But will you not sit down, Mr. Dart?"

Christopher sat down.

"I had—thought to—accept your offer, Lord Roxhythe." The quizzical brown eyes held his.

"But since you have seen me again you realize that it were impossible to work with one so utterly distasteful to you as myself."

For a moment Christopher stared.

"I confess, sir, that was in my mind. However, I trust I put my Country before my personal feelings. I will accompany you to Holland." He had not intended to say that. Even as the words left his mouth he regretted them.

"Why, that is very well," nodded his lordship. "But are you quite sure that you mean it?"

There was another silence.

"Yes, sir," said Christopher meekly.

CHAPTER IV

FLUSHING

THUS did Christopher enter the service of Roxhythe against his will, against his inner promptings. When once the step was taken, he resolutely choked the warning voice within him, and refused to re-consider his decision.

He took up his position as secretary within the week, and busied himself most conscientiously with his master's private affairs. For the most part they were trivial enough, leaving him plenty of time in which to amuse himself.

He observed Roxhythe closely during those days, but he always found that my lord baffled him. He was by turns charming and insufferable. There were moments when Christopher's dislike for him became acute; moments when his lordship was curt, or distrait to the point of rudeness; but just as Christopher's anger could not longer be controlled, Roxhythe would disperse it with some look, or remark that Christopher could not withstand. Gradually dislike gave place to amusement, and ripened then into liking.

Beyond outlining the steps of the journey, Roxhythe had not mentioned their mission to Holland since the evening when he first met Dart. He appeared to give no further thought to the matter, and his indifference added fuel to Christopher's enthusiasm.

In one short week the boy saw more of town and its ways than in all the time that he had previously spent in London. He met men who had been hitherto but names to him; he grew accustomed to receiving courtier, politician and poet, whom a month ago he would have been elated to set eyes on. His head was turned a little, but not unpleasantly so. There was never anything of the coxcomb about Christopher.

He learnt with amazement that Roxhythe was in disgrace at Court. He heard the tale through various sources

and hardly credited it at first. Fashionable London hummed with the news. It appeared that Roxhythe had taken some liberty with the King, for which he had received not only a public rebuff but afterwards a cold shoulder. Christopher laughed at the tale. Ignorant of Court life he might be, but he was not so ignorant that he did not know of Roxhythe's almost life-long devotion to Charles. Never had my lord received a snub. Then came the rumour that Roxhythe deemed it advisable to leave England for a spell. This set Christopher's brain to work. Perhaps the rebuff was a blind for spies. He determined to ask Roxhythe.

Outwardly my lord remained impassive; Christopher tried to imagine what must be his real feelings. He could conceive the galling degradation of it, and he felt slightly nervous of speaking to Roxhythe on the subject.

It was one morning as he sat writing in the library that he at last ventured to broach the question. My lord had entered the room with several papers which he laid on the desk beside Dart. He turned to go, and as he did so, Christopher rose.

"May I—ask you—something, sir?"

Roxhythe paused.

"Perhaps you will think me impertinent, sir," went on Christopher, stammering. "I hardly—like to—"

Roxhythe sat down.

"Of course ask me what you will."

Christopher took heart.

"It—concerns this—affair at Court, sir."

"My dear boy, I shall not be offended if you say exactly what you mean. 'Tis my disgrace, eh?"

"Ay, sir. At first I was perplexed; then I thought a little. It is a blind for spies?"

"For everyone. I wondered if you would have the wit to perceive it."

Christopher flushed, and laughed.

"'Tis not so very subtle after all!"

"But neat, I flatter myself," said Roxhythe.

Christopher's eyes widened.

"The plan was yours, sir?" His voice was incredulous.

"Whose else?"

"I thought—His Majesty—"

"Oh, lud, no! Now confess, Chris, you did not think I had it in me?"

"'Tis not the wit I marvel at," said Christopher. "I think it was a brave thing to do."

"But then you are not acquainted with His Majesty," said Roxhythe.

There the matter ended, but it left a great impression on Christopher's mind. It was from that moment that his everlasting love for Roxhythe had birth.

A week later they were aboard a sailing ship bound for Flushing. Nothing could have been more devoid of interest than their passage.

At Flushing they stayed at the Sceptre Inn, and Christopher, once recovered from his sea-sickness, resumed his effervescent *joie de vivre* and started to look about him. He had little or nothing to do, as Roxhythe hardly ever desired his company, so when he met Mr. Edward Milward he was pleased.

He stepped on his toe as he passed him in the coffee-room and apologized in excruciating Dutch. Whereupon Mr. Milward fell into his arms, metaphorically speaking, and called him friend. It appeared that Mr. Milward had not seen a fellow-countryman for months; naturally he was delighted to meet Christopher. They partook of sack together.

Mr. Milward was a great traveller. He was even now on his way to the Hague, where he intended to stay for an indefinite period. He had lately been in Italy. Altogether he had much to tell Christopher. In fact he was a remarkably pleasant companion and Christopher liked him.

Roxhythe returned next day from Middleburgh, where he had been visiting friends, to find his secretary full of his new-found acquaintance.

Christopher confided that Mr. Milward was a remarkably interesting man who had seen much, and who had much to say.

"Ask him to honour us at dinner," suggested Roxhythe good-naturedly.

So it came about that Mr. Milward supped in my Lord Roxhythe's private parlour and enjoyed himself exceedingly.

It seemed to Christopher that Roxhythe was not himself. He was, if possible, even more languid than usual, and once or twice he rested his head in his hand as though it ached intolerably. Taxed with it, he roused himself with an effort, denying that he was at all unwell.

"I do trust you have not caught some low fever, sir!" exclaimed Dart anxiously.

Roxhythe laughed the idea to scorn, but he excused himself at an early hour, leaving his secretary to entertain the guest.

"Lord Roxhythe hath the air of a sick man," remarked Milward, and nodded wisely.

Christopher strove to conceal his anxiety.

"We had intended to ride to Bergen to-morrow," he said. "But I fear my lord will not be well enough to sit the saddle."

"To Bergen? Why, I was to have ridden there to-day but that my horse cast a shoe! I had decided to remain here some few days, but if you go to-morrow, why—!" He left the sentence unfinished.

Christopher was polite, but not enthusiastic.

Later he visited Roxhythe, and found him in bed. He stood looking at him, full of concern, until my lord begged him to be seated. He could never bear an unrestful companion.

Christopher sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I doubt you'll not sit the saddle to-morrow, sir," he said gravely.

"Art a pessimist," was the lazy response. "What of your friend Milward?"

"'Tis of him that I wish to speak." Christopher wrinkled his brow in perplexity. "He—he wants to ride with us to-morrow."

The brown eyes opened.

"Does he so? Well . . . we shall not be lonely."

"I did not know—that is, I rather thought you would prefer to ride alone, sir."

The eyes closed again.

"By all means let the man come. What of it?"

"Naught, sir. I only thought—"

"Oh, ay, ay! God's Body, but my head's a-fire! Go you to bed, Christopher!"

Christopher rose reluctantly.

"There's nothing I can do for you, sir?"

His fine white hand was across Roxhythe's forehead, shading the upper part of his face, but Christopher saw his lips curve.

"Poor Chris! You shall not be called upon to play body-servant as well as secretary!"

"I would do aught I could for you, sir!"

The hand moved away. Christopher looked straight into my lord's eyes.

"Then go to bed," said that sleepy voice. "And Christopher!"

Christopher paused. He was drawing the curtains about the bed.

"Well?" he smiled.

"Don't worry your head over me!"

Outside the room Dart met Roxhythe's servant.

"I fear his lordship is a sick man, John," he said. "And he will not own it."

The man looked at him curiously for a moment. Then he grunted.

Rather to Christopher's surprise he found Roxhythe already dressed next morning when he went to his room. My lord was in the act of fastening a diamond pin in his cravat when the tap fell on the door, and his glance as he met Christopher's eyes in the mirror was one of pure amusement.

"You thought to find me abed, my friend," he remarked.

"Yes," admitted Christopher. "But I rejoice to find you up. You are better, sir?"

"I am well enough," shrugged his lordship. He gave

a final touch to his ribands, and turned. "Well, to breakfast—and the amiable Mr. Milward."

"You had rather he did not ride with us?" asked Christopher quickly.

"On the contrary," smiled Roxhythe.

Thus it came to pass that Mr. Milward joined the little cavalcade and did much to beguile the tedium of the journey with his sparkling conversation. He had a fair knowledge of the country and he spoke Dutch perfectly, so Roxhythe, whose Dutch was fluent enough but hopelessly marred by his English accent, allowed him to parley with the landlords of the inns at which they halted.

Christopher, whose first visit abroad this was, greatly enjoyed the ride. He drank in every fresh sight and sound with avidity; nothing escaped his notice; his eyes were on everything. Roxhythe regarded him thoughtfully.

Now and again Christopher glanced at his lordship with a worried eye. He saw how he flagged, how weary were his movements, but guessing that Roxhythe did not wish him to call attention to his indisposition, he held his peace.

For some time Roxhythe talked inanities to Mr. Milward. Christopher wished that he need not appear so foolish, and fretted. The lazy eyes never looked his way.

Presently Roxhythe spoke of his disgrace at Court. Mr. Milward's tact was most praiseworthy. Roxhythe explained that he must needs absent himself from Whitehall till the storm should have blown over. He told Mr. Milward that he was desirous of pressing on to the Hague where he intended to visit all his old friends. Mr. Milward was all interest. Friends made, no doubt, during the period of his exile with the King? Roxhythe nodded pensively, and proceeded to expatiate on the subject.

Christopher saw the half-veiled scorn on Milward's face and fumed inwardly. Roxhythe continued to talk.

And so at length they arrived at Bergen-op-Zoom. Roxhythe was worn out and he excused himself from appearing at the supper-table.

Milward and Christopher dined alone. Christopher

thought that he detected a patronizing note in Mr. Milward's voice when he spoke of Roxhythe. He decided that he no longer liked Mr. Milward. As soon as he could he left him and went upstairs to Roxhythe's room.

My lord was seated before the fire, wrapped in a gorgeous dressing-gown. The remains of supper stood at his elbow.

"Sir, you cannot ride to-morrow," said Christopher firmly.

The arched brows rose.

"So!" said Roxhythe politely.

"You may say what you will, sir, but I know you have the fever, and I will not let you ride until you are well."

"Why, that is very entertaining—Mr. Dart."

Christopher reddened.

"You think me impertinent, sir, but—"

"No. Over-zealous, and—importunate."

"Nevertheless, sir, you do not travel to-morrow."

My lord fingered his peruke, his eyes grown hard as steel.

"I see you will have it, Mr. Dart. You force me to remind you that you are here to obey without question."

Christopher had much ado to choke back his anger.

"But, sir, I cannot see that our hurry is so—"

"I think there is no need to pursue the subject," said Roxhythe.

Christopher drew himself up.

"You are right, Lord Roxhythe; there is no need. You will not find me over-solicitous again."

"It is outside your part," agreed Roxhythe. He leant back in his chair, closing his eyes.

Christopher seethed inwardly.

"Then, if you have no commands for me, sir, I'll retire." Nothing could have been colder than that hurt young voice. My lord said nothing.

Christopher was very youthful; it was all he could do to refrain from slamming the door as he went out. He was furious that Roxhythe should treat him thus. He told himself that he had been right when he dubbed his lord-

ship insufferable; not easily would he be won over again.

Relations were strained between them next morning. Christopher treated Roxhythe with punctilious politeness, and addressed all his conversation to Milward. Sur-reptitiously he watched my lord, and more than once he wondered whether he would last the journey. Roxhythe rode in silence, looking straight between his horse's ears. They halted very few times upon the way, and dismounted not at all, so Christopher was not surprised when, at Gertruydenberg, which was their destination, Roxhythe, having dismounted, reeled, and would have fallen but for his prompt assistance. He helped him into the inn and gave him into John's care. When he had arranged for the stabling of the horses, and changed his boots, he visited my lord in bed and spoke with ill-concealed triumph.

"Do you wish me to fetch an apothecary, sir, or shall you ride to-morrow?"

"Neither," said Roxhythe, his handkerchief to his mouth. "You'll—make my—apologies to the—amiable Mr. Milward—and say that I shall—hope to meet him—at the Poisson d'Or Inn at the Hague. Odd rot! my head is like to split!"

"I am grieved, sir," said Christopher primly.

Milward awaited him downstairs.

"My lord is worse?"

Christopher shook his head.

"He'll not ride to-morrow, nor yet the next day. He is a sick man."

"Oh!" said Milward uncertainly. His eyes searched Christopher's face.

"He bids me tell you that he is sorry to break up our party, but he hopes to see you at the Poisson d'Or at the Hague."

"Oh!" said Milward again. "I hope so too."

So Mr. Milward departed next day in solitary state, very loth to leave his travelling companions, but looking forward to seeing them at the Hague.

Watching him ride away, Christopher felt suddenly very

lonely. He wished that he had not fallen out with Roxhythe. He walked slowly back into the house.

As he passed through the crowded coffee-room, he paused to survey the occupants. For the most part they were dull-looking burghers, and did not interest him, but in one corner, by the window, sat two men who attracted his attention. They were playing dominoes, and at first, Christopher watched out of idle curiosity. Then he studied the men's faces. It struck him that the one nearest the window was vaguely familiar. He racked his brains in the effort to remember where he had seen him before, but with no success. He concluded that he must be mistaken when the man called an order to the landlord in excellent Dutch.

He went upstairs, feeling very depressed.

Instead of finding Roxhythe in bed as he had expected, he found him in his dressing-gown, writing. He stared in amazement, for Roxhythe had no longer the air of a sick man. His person had lost its languor, his eyes their sleepiness. Roxhythe raised them as he entered, and the boy was startled by their unaccustomed keenness.

"John!" Roxhythe addressed his servant curtly.

The man came forward, holding one of his master's perukes in his hand. Roxhythe's head was bent over his work.

"I wish to be private with Mr. Dart."

Christopher watched John go out, marvelling at this change in Roxhythe.

As the door closed, my lord glanced up quickly.

"Sit down, Christopher."

So he was restored to favour? Christopher drew up a chair, reflecting that if anyone had the right to be magnanimous over the late *contretemps* it was himself. However, he was growing accustomed to the ways of Roxhythe, and he was not so indignant as he would once have been.

For a few moments Roxhythe's hand continued to travel to and fro across the parchment, but he was only a short while finishing. He pushed the paper away, and leaned back in his seat.

"Poor Chris! I owe you an explanation, eh?" The tone

was so winning that the remaining shreds of Christopher's rancour fled.

"I do confess, sir—I am at a loss."

"Of course you are. Has Milward departed?"

"Ay, sir. I sped him on his way just before I came to you."

"And you gave him my message?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you showed him your concern for my health?"

"I thought it best to counterfeit unconcern, sir."

Roxhythe's eyelids drooped suddenly. His mouth twitched.

"Very good, Chris. What of the other guests?"

Christopher looked up, bewildered.

"What of them, sir?"

"Describe them."

Understanding dawned on the boy. He described the people he had seen in the coffee-room very readily. Then he remembered the man by the window, playing dominoes. He paused, cudgelling his brains anew. Roxhythe sat still watching him.

Suddenly Christopher started up.

"Odd's body! Of course I know!"

"Well?" Roxhythe had fallen back into his old drawl.

"At Ashley's that day! Outside with the horse!"

"My dear Chris!" expostulated Roxhythe.

Christopher sat down again, laughing a little.

"I had forgotten you did not know! It was the day I—you engaged me. I had been to see Lord Ashley, and as I came out I met Mr. Hyde in the hall. I thought nothing of it at the time but I remarked his servant, outside. He was holding Mr. Hyde's horse and 'tis he downstairs!"

"You infer—"

"Why, sir, Mr. Hyde is the Duke of York's brother-in-law! The man is a spy!"

Roxhythe nodded casually.

"Is he of medium height with a bulbous nose and light eyebrows?"

"Well, yes!" admitted Christopher, smiling.

"Ah! I wondered."

"When have you seen him, sir?"

"At Flushing the other day."

Christopher stared at him, open-mouthed.

"Yet I did not!"

"No? But you were not on the look-out."

"I—I hardly thought that you were!" Christopher blurted out.

"I am old in intrigue, my child," said Roxhythe. "So he is a creature of Hyde's? Well. Milward, then, is probably in French pay."

"Milward!" Up started Christopher again. "I—never—thought—of—that! Why—why what a dolt I am! Of course Milward is a spy! Why did you not tell me, sir? Warn me?"

"You would have been less useful," explained Roxhythe.

"But I might have let fall anything! Had you told me I had been on my guard."

"Precisely," nodded his lordship. "And you are young in intrigue."

"Oh!" said Christopher rather blankly. He thought for a moment. "Did you but feign sickness, sir?"

"To shake him off; ay."

"Then why did you not remain at Bergen yesterday? Why come here? He would not have suspected, for indeed you had the look of a sick man."

"Because I had laid my plans otherwise—which plans you, my young hothead, did your utmost to o'erset."

The ready colour rose to Christopher's cheeks.

"I am sorry, sir. But I did not know. Is it possible that you foresaw all this?"

"It was so obvious," sighed his lordship.

"Was it, sir?" asked Christopher admiringly. "And what now? Or—or am I to be kept in the dark?" He spoke deferentially.

"No, I am going to expound." My lord lifted up a quill, and surveyed it idly. "To-morrow I keep my room; on Wednesday we travel by coach to Rotterdam. I am afraid I shall be ill again, Chris. You will be suitably perturbed,

and you will fetch a certain Mynheer de Staal, an apothecary, and a friend of mine. He will give it out that I am suffering from a low fever and must not be disturbed. I shall make my escape by way of the window at night and proceed to de Staal's house where I shall wait till morning. Then I shall ride to the Hague, leaving you and John to trick the spy into thinking me abed. De Staal will come every day; I can trust him. At the Hague, I shall stay at the Three Fishers, and, with the aid of your brother, gain access to the Prince, when I shall lay His Majesty's proposition before him. That done, and the Prince his answer given, I return to Rotterdam, and recover from the fever. For the rest it is easy. We proceed to the Hague; we meet our friend Milward. Presently, behold! His Majesty has forgiven me! We return to London. I think the amiable Mr. Milward will be perplexed."

Christopher's eyes glowed.

"It is a marvellously well thought-out scheme, sir. But I am afraid."

"On what score?"

"You may be discovered. The French spies may have orders to prevent your gaining access to the Prince at any cost."

Roxhythe's lips curved haughtily.

"They dare not."

"Dare not?"

"I am Roxhythe."

"Then you think they would not murder you?"

"I know it. They dare not touch me. They are not certain on any point concerning this expedition. They suspect, but they cannot molest me on their suspicions. Had it been a lesser man, they might have dared. But I—I am Roxhythe."

"I see," said Christopher, abashed.

CHAPTER V

MYNHEER DE STAAL

DURING the coach journey to Rotterdam, Christopher suffered from suppressed excitement, much to Roxhythe's amusement.

As soon as they arrived at the inn Roxhythe retired to his room, leaving Christopher to explain to mine host that his lordship was most unwell and must be kept very quiet. At first the landlord was not desirous of having a sick man in his house, but when it was clearly borne in upon him that Roxhythe was an English milor' and would pay lavishly, his objections faded.

Christopher repaired to Roxhythe's room, and found him in the act of writing to de Staal.

My lord refused his proffered services, and finished the letter with a flourish.

"Tell the landlord to have it conveyed to 19, Prinsen Straat, Chris."

"I will take it, sir."

"My dear boy, do as I bid you."

"Yes, sir," said Christopher, chastened, and bore it off.

"Has M. the Spy arrived?" asked Roxhythe on his return.

"Not yet, sir." Christopher shook his head. "I can see him nowhere."

"I should be sorry if de Staal arrived before him," remarked my lord.

Presently Christopher went downstairs again, on some pretext or other, and took a casual survey of the coffee-room. The spy was not there, but as Christopher turned to go, horses' hoofs sounded on the cobble-stones without. Feeling that he was very deep in intrigue, Christopher affected to take no notice and strolled towards the stairs.

"Party o' three," rumbled the landlord, coming out of an

inner room. "Plague take them, we're nearly full already."

He waddled away to the door and set it wide. Through it Christopher caught a glimpse of the new arrivals. Two of them had their backs to him, the third came forward to speak with mine host. He was plainly dressed and eminently respectable. Christopher did not know him at all. Then one of the other men turned, and he saw that it was the spy. He went upstairs with forced calmness, but his heart was bounding within him, and his eyes, when he burst in upon Roxhythe, sparkled and glowed with excitement.

"Fiend seize you, Christopher! What now?" protested Roxhythe, opening one heavy eyelid.

"He hath arrived!"

The other eye opened with an effort.

"Hath he indeed?" mocked Roxhythe. "What shall we do?"

"Nay!" blushed Christopher. "But you must admit that 'tis monstrous exciting, sir!"

My lord yawned and prepared to go asleep again.

"'Tis all a damned plaguey nuisance," he murmured. "And I would I were at home."

"So do not I," retorted Christopher. "I swear I am enjoying myself as I have never done before. I marvel that you can go to sleep in this fashion!"

"I cannot with so much chatter in my ear," complained his lordship. He opened his eyes to watch Christopher laugh. He always averred that to see Chris laugh afforded him much pleasure.

"Well, may I go out, sir?" asked Dart impatiently.

"By all means. You'll find Rotterdam dull and unprofitable, but don't let that dissuade you."

"I'm not so blind that I cannot see from the window what a quaint place it is," answered Christopher. He walked to the door. "I wish you might come with me, sir."

"Go away!" begged Roxhythe.

Christopher found Rotterdam a prosperous town. He walked about its streets for some time, and in the course of his peregrinations, met a fat tradesman with whom he had

speech. He wanted to hear the tradesman's views on State Affairs, and what his feelings were towards the Prince of Orange. It seemed that the man was a butcher. He gave Christopher a long account of the price of meat. He deplored the fact that three of his bullocks, all very fine and in their prime, had lately sickened and died of a mysterious disease. He had dark suspicions that this was the work of a certain enemy of his who lived at the other end of the town and boasted that his custom was far greater than Mynheer Dagvelt's. Christopher, only half comprehending, tried in broken Dutch to bring the conversation round to the Prince. Mynheer Dagvelt told him that his neighbour had had a spite against him from the day that two of his customers left him to deal with the far superior Dagvelt. Disgruntled, Christopher passed on his way.

He returned to the Flaming Sun shortly after sundown. Roxhythe had shaken off some of his sleepiness and was studying a map of Holland. He had changed his clothes and his nails had been carefully polished. He looked up as Christopher entered, and smiled.

"Well, what of the town?"

Christopher did not tell him of his encounter with Mynheer Dagvelt.

John put his head in at the door with the news that Mynheer de Staal was below. Roxhythe nodded.

"At once, John."

Christopher rose to depart.

"Don't go, Chris," said my lord languidly. "You'll like de Staal."

The door opened again in a minute, and a small, white-haired gentleman came hesitatingly into the room, hat in hand.

Christopher was between him and Roxhythe, obscuring the latter. A pair of gentle blue eyes looked up into his face, and the finely cut lips smiled doubtfully.

"Milor'—Roxhyt'e?" said de Staal.

Roxhythe had pulled himself out of his chair, and now he came forward, hands outstretched.

"De Staal!"

"Milor'!" The sweet voice trembled. Before Roxhythe could prevent him, de Staal had carried both hands to his lips. "Milor'! Ah, milor' . . .! To see you again after all these years!" He spoke in Dutch.

"And you, de Staal! You are well?" Roxhythe's English accent had disappeared.

"I grow old," answered the other. "Yes, I am well. The sight of you would refresh a dying man, milor'."

Roxhythe led him to a chair.

"You missed us, de Staal? Well, we've missed you, and all the old friends. Sometimes we pine for the sight of the old haunts—my little master and I."

"Ah, the Prince! He is well? He is happy in his England?"

"Yes, he's happy, de Staal."

"And you?"

"Oh, I! But of course!"

De Staal regarded him wistfully.

"We heard how great you are in England, milor'; how powerful; what a courtier. Eh, eh! And it likes you, that life?"

"It likes me very well, de Staal. I am as my master—I've no mind to set out on my travels again."

De Staal nodded slowly. His eyes never left Roxhythe's face.

"You find me changed?" asked my lord.

"A little," admitted de Staal. "There are lines where there were not, and your eyes have grown not so bright."

"That is age," smiled Roxhythe.

"It is the soft living," replied de Staal. "I do not see the soldier, milor'."

My lord gave a strange little sigh.

"He hath gone long since, my friend." He sighed again.

"You almost make me wish I was a wanderer once more." His smile was rather crooked. "You were surprised to get my letter?"

"I could not believe mine eyes! The sight of 'Roxhyt'e' across the page stunned me. I came as soon as I could leave the house. You want my help?"

"You guessed that?"

"You would not else have sent for me, milor'."

Christopher cleared his throat. De Staal was a pathetic figure, and these calm words, spoken entirely without bitterness, made his eyelids smart suddenly.

Roxhythe did not expostulate.

"I am here on the King's business, de Staal; business of a very private nature, and I am spied upon."

"You have been spied upon before," smiled de Staal. They both laughed.

"Ay, but this is more serious."

"Your life is in danger?"

"Not a whit. But I must shake off the importunate gentleman. He is downstairs now, thinking me in bed with a low fever. I must ride to the Hague no later than tomorrow night and I do not desire the company of my friend."

"Ah! You kill him?"

Roxhythe bit his lip.

"There are three of them or I might be tempted. No, I leave him here. De Staal, I want you to give it out downstairs that I am indeed ill—remember you have never seen me before—and that I must not be disturbed. Only Chris here, and my servant are to be allowed into my room, and you will come every day until I return from the Hague. That I hope to do in three or four days' time. Will you do it?"

"Milor'!" De Staal looked his reproach. "You ask me *will* I do it?"

"You will. Another thing. I want you to procure me a horse, and to stall it for me until I come to fetch it. You'll do that too?"

"Assuredly. So you escape by night, *hein*?"

"By way of the window. With your permission I'll spend the rest of the night with you."

De Staal nodded.

"I wish I were coming!" said Christopher suddenly. Roxhythe shook his head.

"You would greatly complicate matters, my dear Chris."

De Staal looked enquiringly from one to the other. Roxhythe translated.

"Aha! De adventure appeal to you, *hein*?"

"I should like to be there, to help Lord Roxhythe."

De Staal smiled approvingly.

"You should take *heem*, *milor*'."

"*Sacré nom!* I think not."

"If only you would, sir!" Christopher looked appealingly across at him.

"De Staal, why must you put such ideas into the child's head? No, Chris, it's impossible."

"I am not a child."

"I crave your pardon. An I thought you one, I should not leave you to dupe Mynheer Spy during my absence."

Christopher was not appeased.

"It is so little to do, sir!"

"Chris, this is your first intrigue, and you expect to play the leading part! I have given you an all too difficult task as it is. Be assured that it is of great importance."

Christopher was silent. He escorted de Staal part of the way home, and again he broached the subject.

"I would I might prevail upon my lord to take me with him, *mynheer*."

"He tell me you are of grit use to *heem* here," replied the Dutchman.

"Did he? I was afraid—I mean I do so little—I did not think I was of any use."

"But yes. He t'ink a grit deal of you, *Mynheer Dart*."

"Oh, is that true?"

De Staal cast him a shrewd glance.

"I should not say it eef eef were not. He tell me you are a ver' prince of secretaries. Eet ees not often t'at *milor* t'ink a grit deal of a man . . . You like *heem*, yes?"

"Yes," said Christopher. "But I do not understand him."

"No one understands *heem*," answered de Staal placidly.

"He ees what you English call—enigma. He ees a ver' grit man. He throw a spell over you, *hein*? He make you do what he say?"

"He has great fascination," admitted Christopher.

"He make all men love heem eef he like. Only he not like ver' often."

"No. He is sometimes very—very—"

"He make you angry, *hein*?"

"Yes, very."

"I know. Eet ees hees way. You must always do wha he say, nevair—what you call eet?—dispute with heem."

"I am learning that!" grimaced Christopher.

"T'at ees well. You will love heem ver' mooch one day, only, I warn you, do not love heem too mooch, for he ees Roxhyt'e, and he not care for any one save heemself and hees Prince."

"Oh," protested Christopher.

"You not belief me. You t'ink heem onselfish, and ver' good. Well, I warn you, eet ees not so. You remember t'at always and you not get hurt."

"But, mynheer, why should I get hurt?"

"Eef you love a man ver' deeply, t'at man he have de power to hurt you ver' mooch. Me, I love heem ver' gritly, but I know t'at he ees—Roxhyt'e. One day perhaps he hurt you ver' mooch eef you not take care. So I warn you."

"Thank you very much, mynheer. But—oh, I feel sure that he is not like that!"

"You will see. You not belief me now, but one day you will remember what I say to-night, *hein*?"

"I hope not," said Christopher gravely.

On his way back to the Flaming Sun, he decided that de Staal was very charming, but very morbid. He gave not another thought to the evening's conversation.

De Staal visited my lord just before noon next day and Christopher saw him off the premises. For the benefit of all who might chance to be within earshot, de Staal gave him minute instructions concerning his "patient's" treatment. Christopher hoped that the spy was near at hand.

He could hardly possess his soul in patience during the rest of the day, and Roxhythe's placidity was a source of wonderment to him.

"One would think you were trying to get out of the way,"

my lord twitted him. "I only hope you will not run your head into a noose while I am gone, in your lust for adventure. Sit down and write to your brother."

"Why?" asked Christopher.

"How argumentative you are! Tell him that you are coming to the Hague, with a certain Mr. Curtis, and have rooms at the Three Fishers. Tell him to visit you at six in the evening to-morrow. And tell him to ask for Curtis. Say naught that spies might not read with impunity."

Christopher looked up.

"Oh, Roderick is not suspect, sir! He was engaged by De Witt himself."

"Yet he is the Prince, his man?"

"He is now."

"Ah!" said Roxhythe.

Christopher scratched away at the parchment.

"Seal and address it," ordered Roxhythe.

Christopher obeyed, and handed it over to him.

"There's naught else, sir?"

"I think not. You know all that you have to do. Keep Mynheer Spy content, and listen every night for the hoot of an owl, twice repeated."

"I do trust you will come to no harm, sir," said Christopher anxiously.

"You had best wish success to my mission," was the gloomy response. "God knows, it needs it," he added beneath his breath.

At half-past ten he was ready to start. A voluminous cloak concealed his rich riding dress, and heavy top boots were on his feet. He thrust his gloves into his belt and donned his beaver.

"So it is fare ye well, Chris! You took that package to de Staal?"

"For your journey? Yes, sir."

Roxhythe opened the window softly, and looked out. It was very dark.

"None too vigilant a spy," he remarked. "Did you say he was playing at picquet?"

"Five minutes ago he was. But you had best hasten."

"Oh, I am going, I am going! Lud, how anxious you are to be rid of me!" He held out his hand. "Goodbye, Chris; have a care to yourself, and remember that John may be trusted implicitly."

"Yes, sir. And, oh! pray, be careful."

"There's naught to fear on my account." He looked at Christopher for a moment. "I could not have accomplished this without you, child."

The two hands gripped. Then Roxhythe swung one leg over the sill.

"Quickly, Chris! The rope."

Two minutes later he was on the ground outside, and blackness had enveloped him.

Christopher shut the window. He felt strangely forlorn and alone.

Downstairs the spy continued to play picquet.

CHAPTER VI

RODERICK DART

ROXHYTHE clattered through the streets of Delft until he came to a likely inn. There he drew rein, and there he lunched. In spite of his air of leisure he was well on his way again within the hour. By three in the afternoon he was at the Hague.

The Three Fishers was an insignificant little inn on the outskirts of the town, not frequented by the quality, so Roxhythe's lack of baggage excited no suspicion. A slight sensation was caused by my lord's request for a private parlour, but when he explained that he was to have a friend to dine with him whom he had not seen for years, it died down. The landlord was impressed when he learnt that the friend was of the Prince's household and he readily undertook to have Christopher's note delivered to Mr. Dart.

Roxhythe was prepared to be very much on his guard with Roderick. Christopher had told him that he had been specially engaged by De Witt, but had since become a devoted adherent to William. Roxhythe was a cynic; he had lifted his eyebrows at that. Christopher had assured him that his brother might be trusted with Ashley's packet; Roxhythe preferred to take no risks. He fully expected to find Mr. Dart an informer, feigning love for the young Prince as a means whereby to worm himself into whatever Orangist plot might be afoot. Roxhythe knew that William was very closely guarded; he also knew that De Witt chose his attendants carefully, and paid them well. He mistrusted Mr. Dart.

Without Roderick's aid he could not hope to gain entrance to the palace, yet with his aid he might easily walk into some trap. He cast a loving glance at his pistols.

Punctually at seven Mr. Dart was announced. My lord

rose at his entry, scanning him closely from beneath drooping lids.

The door closed behind Roderick. He took a quick step into the room, looking all round. Then he stared at Roxhythe and his lips tightened.

He was not very like his brother, except for his eyes which were grey, and as honest as Christopher's. His mouth was thin and straight; his expression cold and watchful. He was dressed in a plain dark suit, wearing none of the furbelows that were in fashion. His whole appearance was severe.

"Have I the honour of addressing—Mr. Curtis?" His voice was crisp.

"The name will serve," answered his lordship. "You are Mr. Dart, I think?"

Roderick bowed.

"I am come at my brother's request, sir, but I do not see him."

Roxhythe ignored the hostility of his tone.

"Christopher is at Rotterdam, Mr. Dart. 'Tis I who requested your company."

Roderick's hand went to his belt.

"Oh, no!" drawled my lord. "It is no shooting matter. Pray, will you not be seated? Dinner will be served in a moment."

Roderick swung his cloak from his shoulders and laid down his hat.

"I thank you. I take it you have not desired my company for the mere pleasure of seeing me. You are come on business, my Lord Roxhythe?"

My lord opened his eyes admiringly.

"I felicitate you," he said.

Roderick's lip curled scornfully.

"On my perspicacity, sir?"

"On your power of recognition, Mr. Dart."

Roderick brushed that aside.

"I have seen you many times, my lord." The words bit.

. . . "One would almost have inferred that I did not

find favour in his august eyes," afterwards remarked Roxhythe.

"I am delighted," sighed his lordship. "It greatly facilitates matters. Did you know that Christopher is my secretary?"

"I did not. Since when is this, sir?"

"Nigh on a month ago, I suppose. He is not very like you."

"Christopher is easily led—easily influenced!" said Roderick.

Roxhythe conceived that the news of his brother's latest venture did not meet with Roderick's approval.

"Just so," he agreed. "A most useful boy."

At this moment the one maid that the inn boasted entered the room with a tray. When she had gone:

"I must apologise for such poor hospitality," said Roxhythe. "It is the best the inn can afford."

Roderick seated himself at the table. He unbent slightly.

Until the maid had finally withdrawn, leaving the men to their wine, they spoke of Christopher, the atrocious condition of the roads, or London gossip. It was then that Roxhythe inwardly dubbed Roderick a strait-laced Puritan. His disapproval of his host was very apparent, as was his disapproval of King Charles and his Court. Roxhythe was consumed with amusement.

"I suppose you have moderately good entertainment at the Palace, Mr. Dart? he asked indolently. "But no doubt you miss the London life."

"No," said Roderick. "Whitehall and its customs do not appeal to me. We of the Prince's household live very quietly. We observe Whitehall and the Louvre from afar, and we do not desire to emulate them."

"Dear me!" said Roxhythe. "The Prince, then, has no taste for Court life?"

"None whatsoever."

"Heaven forbid I find not a psalm-singing Quaker for Prince!" thought Roxhythe. Aloud he said: "Why, you surprise me, sir! I had thought so young a boy—and a Stuart—had had some taste for gaiety. Well, well!"

"His Highness, sir, looks with disgust on the ways of his uncle's Court," said Roderick deliberately.

"Good luck to my mission!" thought Roxhythe.

"He cannot see that King Charles has any man about him—with one or two exceptions—" he bowed, "—whom he can trust."

Roxhythe stared at him over the rim of his wine-glass.

"Is His Highness then surrounded by men whom he can trust?"

"The Prince his servants are faithful unto death," was the proud answer.

"His Highness is singularly fortunate," said Roxhythe drily.

Roderick pushed his chair back from the table.

"Have we dilly-dallied long enough, sir? You have business with my master?"

For a moment Roxhythe did not answer. Then he spoke slowly, his eyes on Dart's.

"Why, I do not know, sir. It depends."

"On what?"

"On who your master is," said my lord.

Roderick looked puzzled. He flushed angrily as Roxhythe's meaning dawned on him, and half rose in his chair.

"Do you insult me, my lord?"

"By no means," replied that imperturbable voice. "I was told that De Witt chose you to be one of the Prince his gentlemen. You speak of yourself as the Prince his faithful servant. What am I to understand?"

"I am the Prince his servant."

"Yet you are not suspect by De Witt?"

"No."

"You are lucky," smiled his lordship.

"There is no reason why I should give you an explanation, sir, but you may know that I was engaged not as an informer, but as one not likely to be won over by His Highness. So Mynheer De Witt said."

"I take it Mynheer De Witt was wrong?"

"Ay. You do not know His Highness or you might understand."

Roxhythe bowed.

"I am looking forward to making the acquaintance of this Prince."

"You are a messenger?" Roderick surveyed him critically. "An envoy from King Charles?"

"I have that honour."

"You want me to bear a packet to His Highness?"

"No," said Roxhythe. "I want you to help me to gain access to the Prince."

Roderick gasped at his audacity.

"Impossible!"

"A word I do not know," drawled his lordship.

"The Prince will not receive you!"

"I think he will."

"He will require proof of your identity!"

"He shall have it," Roxhythe drew a heavy signet ring from his finger, and laid it before his guest.

Roderick stared down at the magic initials: C.R. There was no mistaking the ring. For a minute he sat thinking. Roxhythe polished his thumb-nail.

"I may take this to His Highness?" asked Roderick, at last.

"You may."

"And there is no packet to be conveyed?"

"None that I cannot convey myself."

"I think His Highness will require you to send it!" flashed Roderick.

"Alas! My orders are to deliver it into his hands myself."

"In that case there is no more to be said. You seem to think it is an easy matter to gain access to the Prince. Pray have you thought how you will do it?"

"No," said Roxhythe. "I never worry myself unnecessarily."

"Unnecessarily!"

"You see, I leave it to you," said my lord sweetly.

"Indeed! Remember, I hold out no hope."

"I am dismayed," said Roxhythe placidly.

CHAPTER VII

WILLIAM OF ORANGE

ROXHYTE had scarcely finished his breakfast next morning when once again Mr. Dart was announced.

Roderick was colder than ever. He returned King Charles' ring to my lord.

"His Highness commands me to say that he will receive you this evening, sir."

"Yes?" said Roxhythe. He drew forward a chair. "Can I offer you breakfast?"

"Thank you, I breakfasted two hours since," said Roderick.

"Then you must be very hungry," sympathised my lord. "Allow me to cut you some of this quite excellent bacon!"

"Thank you, no."

Roxhythe sighed.

"You must know, sir, that His Highness has been suffering from a slight indisposition these last few days which has compelled him to keep his room."

"I did not know." Roxhythe was gravely concerned. "I am grieved to hear it."

"You misunderstand me, sir. The Prince had intended to leave his room to-day, but since you are to have audience with him he deems it more prudent to allow De Witt's spies to think him still unwell. If you will come to the Palace to-night at eight and ask for me, you will be taken to my rooms which are at some distance from the Prince's. You understand that I am not suspect, so my guests may come unchallenged. I have already spoken of you to the Governor, Mynheer Van Ghent, and he is satisfied. You may trust me to smuggle you to the Prince his apartments."

"Very neat," approved Roxhythe. "Be assured that I shall be punctual."

"If you please," bowed Roderick, and took his leave.

"If the Prince his manners are like those of his servants, I am like to enjoy myself," reflected Roxhythe. "Odd's blood, but the young cockerel might be equerry to His Most Christian Majesty from the airs that he affects . . . A damned Puritan lot," he added gloomily.

In spite of this nonchalance, Roxhythe was curious to see Prince William. He had always heard that he was a youth of parts, and he thought now that he must be a youth of very forceful parts if all he had gathered from Roderick's conversation were true.

At eight o'clock he presented himself at the Palace. He was conducted through the great hall, up the stairs, and along a corridor to a small, sparsely-furnished room.

Roderick rose and came forward, hands outstretched.

"Ah, Curtis! So you have come!" In Dutch he addressed the servant. "Bring glasses, Hans."

The man withdrew.

"I must ask you to await his return," said Roderick stiffly.

Roxhythe was shaken with silent laughter. Mr. Dart's cordiality had dropped from him so suddenly.

Roderick eyed him with cold hostility.

"I think, too, that you had best retain your hat, sir, or stand with your back to the door."

My lord bent over the fire, warming his hands.

"I trust your face has not been too closely observed," continued Roderick.

Roxhythe always complained that Mr. Dart thought him a fool.

The servant re-appeared. He set glasses on the table, drew corks, and retired.

"I do not wish to be disturbed, Hans," warned Roderick.

"No, Mynheer." The door closed softly.

Roxhythe picked up his hat and gloves. Roderick nodded.

"If you will follow me, please."

The mocking light had gone out of my lord's eyes. Roderick looked into the barrel of a small, gold-mounted pistol.

"I deplore the seeming churlishness of my behaviour," said Roxhythe, "but if there should be foul play, Mr. Dart, you will suffer for it."

Roderick was scornful.

"You may put that plaything away, my lord. There will be no treachery."

"You relieve me," said his lordship, still holding the pistol. "Lead on!"

Roderick shrugged. He went to a door at the opposite end of the room. "This way, sir."

They passed into a narrow corridor, faintly lighted by an oil-lamp at one end. Roderick led the way along it, and up the flight of winding stairs that branched off from it. They came out on to a broad landing which was dark except for the light streaming from an open door. Someone came out of that door, and turned to look at them.

Roderick seemed not to see. He spoke crossly to Roxhythe in Dutch.

"You should not have left it until this late hour, Franz. If His Highness is asleep I cannot get the gloves for you, and I think it probable that he is asleep. He will be most displeased when he finds them still unmended . . . Good-evening, Van Druyslet!"

A good-natured voice laughed:

"Those gloves again, Dart!"

"There has been enough bother about them already," said Dart, walking on.

"Ay. Good-night."

They went on down another passage, better-lighted, and not so narrow. A man was standing by a low couch outside one of the doors that flanked the corridor. Roxhythe took a firm hold on his pistol.

The man came forward, eyeing Roxhythe curiously. He addressed himself to Dart.

"In the Prince his study, Roderick." He spoke in English.

"Thank you, Heenvliet. The Governor has visited His Highness?"

"Half an hour ago. His Highness feigned the migraine. It is quite safe, but in case of accidents I will cough out-

side the door, and you, my lord," he turned to Roxhythe, "will secrete yourself in the cupboard by the fireplace."

Roxhythe bowed. Roderick opened the door, and they entered a large, well-lighted room. It was empty, and, like the rest of the Palace, richly, but severely furnished.

Roderick held out his hand.

"That pistol, if you please, my lord."

Roxhythe handed it over, smiling.

"Did you think I meant to assassinate the Prince?"

"I take no risks, sir," said Roderick quietly. He went to where a heavy curtain hung, and pulled it back. "His Highness will be with you almost at once." He disappeared.

My lord was again shaken with laughter.

"Oddsfish! 'tis as good as Etheridge his best!" he told himself. "The little princeling! . . . But he would appear to have good servants," he added, thinking of the man on the passage.

The Palace was very silent. A cinder falling on to the hearth caused his lordship to start as at an explosion. The candles were burning steadily; not even the wind moaned.

"A damned gloomy place," said Roxhythe. He drew a bulky package from his breast, and laid it on the carven table.

There was not a sound anywhere; no movement, no sign of life; everything was eerily silent. Roxhythe shivered.

"William of Orange has my sympathy," he murmured.

The heavy curtains swung noiselessly back. A slight youth, with great eyes burning in an unnaturally pale face, came quickly into the room. Dart followed him, and the curtain fell back into place.

The boy was dressed as plainly as Dart. Light curls fell to his shoulders and framed his hawk-face. His eyes were hazel, cold and keen, the nose aquiline; the mouth thin. He gave Roxhythe the impression of one much repressed, and old beyond his eighteen years.

My lord swept a low, court bow.

"Your Highness!"

William spoke haltingly. His voice, even then, had a harsh timbre.

"Mi—lor'—Roxhyt'e?"

My lord bowed again.

"I have to thank Your Highness for receiving me at this hour. I am very sensible of the honour you do me."

William inclined his head gravely. He spoke over his shoulder to Dart.

"Rodrigue, you may leave me."

Roderick frowned quickly.

"Will Your Highness not permit me to remain?"

"It is not necessary. Heenvliet will show Milor' Roxhyt'e back to your room. I wish you to go."

"Very well, Sir." Roderick went out.

William brought his eyes back to Roxhythe. He continued to speak Dutch.

"Well, milor'? You bring me a message from my uncle?"

"Yes, Highness. I have a proposition to lay before you on behalf of His Majesty," said Roxhythe, also in Dutch.

"It is here?" William stepped to the table where lay Ashley's packet. His hand closed over it.

"That contains the proposition, Sir, as writ by Lord Ashley."

The Prince looked up quickly.

"So? Ashley." He sat down at the table, and broke open the seals. "Be seated, milor'." He spread the close-written sheets out before him, and resting his head in his hand, started to read.

Nothing broke the stillness save the crackling of the parchment, and occasionally a cough from the Prince.

While he read, Roxhythe studied the boy's face, waiting for him to betray his feelings by some change of expression.

William read on steadily. Not an eyelid flickered.

Roxhythe marvelled more and more at this extraordinary youth. He realised that here was a personality as strong as, or even stronger than his own master's, and at the same time, totally dissimilar. William's manner was almost

repellent; he employed no wiles to attract; he rarely smiled. To Roxhythe he had been brusque to the point of rudeness, yet his lordship was conscious of an overwhelming magnetism. He could understand now how it was that William was so well served. Instinctively he felt that William had the strength of character that his uncle lacked. He felt, too, that William could inspire unlimited confidence, and he knew, without knowing why, that even he, cynic that he was, would trust him implicitly.

William put the sheets together, and rested his hand lightly on them. For some time he did not speak, but sat looking straight before him, eye-brows drawn close across his forehead. His tapering fingers drummed on the folded parchment; a ruby ring caught the light of the candles, and winked sagely. It was the only ornament he wore.

"So this is Ashley's proposition . . ." he said slowly. "What has my uncle to say?"

"His Majesty but endorses what you have read, Highness," answered Roxhythe.

William looked at him thoughtfully.

"I do not see what King Charles stands to gain by this," he flicked the parchment.

Roxhythe was taken aback. He was not prepared for such ruthless perspicacity.

"Your Highness has a knowledge of men," he said.

"Is it likely that King Charles would offer this——" again he flicked the parchment—"and demand naught in exchange?"

"No, Highness, it is not likely. Yet King Charles stands to get the worst of the bargain."

For the first time William smiled.

"I cannot credit it, milor'."

"Nevertheless, it is so, Sir. Have I your leave to speak?"

William nodded. His eyes never left my lord's face.

"The matter is this, Highness: King Charles is desirous of seeing his nephew in his rightful place, and not a State prisoner. He hath no love for De Witt, and he thinks that the people of Holland have none either. He will aid you to overthrow their High Mightinesses, and he will make

you Stadtholder—even King, if the thing were possible. It should not be difficult. You know, Sir, that the people grow tired of the Pensionary, and murmur your name again. At Rotterdam, at Middleburgh, at Amsterdam, and a score of other towns I could mention, feeling is very strong in your favour. King Louis is an all too powerful enemy and the Provinces require a leader. It is thought that you, Sir, inherit your great-grandfather's genius. Were you to break free from De Witt and raise your banner at the right moment, crowds would flock to it. The nobles are on your side and the middle-classes will follow when they realize that in you lies salvation. King Charles will help you to drive out the French, and the combination will surely prove too strong for Louis."

"Yes," interrupted the Prince. "And the price?"

"You have read it, Sir."

William moved impatiently.

"I have read many meaningless words and vague terms, milor'."

"Briefly, Highness, it is this: In return for setting you in your rightful place, His Majesty requires the State to pay him a certain sum yearly, to be afterwards decided on. There would be some compact, of course."

"I think that is not all," said William. "What of that compact of which you spoke?"

"An alliance between the two countries, similar to the existing bond." Roxhythe looked up. "That should benefit you, Sir."

"It should also benefit King Charles," said William drily. "And your English Parliament? They would like this?"

"Your Highness has read Lord Ashley's letter."

"Lord Ashley stands by the King . . . Strange! Or does Lord Ashley work in the dark? He says nothing of this tribute to be paid to King Charles."

Roxhythe's brain worked swiftly. It was very evident that William was no fool. He saw through the offer and he would see through all subterfuges, however glib. The only course was to be frank.

"Highness, King Charles is in need of money. You know enough of the relations between King and Commons in England to see that he must look abroad for it. Two ways he may look: to France, or to you. France will ask too much in return; she would want to hold England 'neath her thumb——"

"Much as King Charles wants to hold me," nodded the Prince.

"By no means, Sir. His Majesty wants to help you to the Stadtholdership. He will benefit by the compact; you will benefit still more, and the Commons will think they benefit."

"His Majesty's scruples are very nice," said William. "He will not make England a catspaw of France, but he would like to make the Provinces a catspaw of England. A subtle distinction, milor'."

"Your Highness hardly states the case," said Roxhythe gently. "There is no question of catspaw."

"No? Then I have greatly misunderstood you, sir!"

"Your Highness has said so."

William looked down at the paper beneath his tightly-clenched hand. All at once he grew rigid and his eyes flashed. He began to speak, quickly, and with suppressed feeling.

"King Charles his offer is no less than an insult! He seeks to bribe me to sell my country to him—to barter mine honour! He has made a great mistake, sir! He thinks to frighten me, Nassau! with his evasive talk of Louis. Oh, ay! I have seen very clearly what he means! He is very sure that I may be bribed, and bought, and tricked! He thinks to dupe me with these vague promises"—he struck the parchment—"But I know him! These armies he will put at my disposal—this King Louis whom he will drive from my country! Does he think me such a fool that I do not know he will never offend the French King? Bah! 'Tis I who am to fight! I who must provide the money wherewith to equip mine army! I who must lead them! I who must do all, while he stands by, encouraging me, and tricking me with his subtleties, and his empty

promises! The compact? I can imagine it very easily, milord! A string of evasions with but one clear clause amongst them! And that that I should pay him tribute yearly! He thinks me a child not to be reckoned with. He does not know Nassau! You spoke of my great-grandfather's spirit which my good uncle thinks I inherit. Tell him that he spoke sooth, and that William of Nassau treats his offer thus, and thus!" William tore the parchment sheets across and across.

"Highness, you misjudge His Majesty very grievously

"Do I so? Bah! He is afraid! He fears that Louis may be making me this same offer, and he cannot afford to have France and the Provinces united. His good intentions!" He laughed shortly, furiously. "He does not like to see me a prisoner! Yet he has seen me thus all these years, and raised but the feeblest finger in protest. He is slow to decide, your King! Well, there is mine answer!" He pointed to the scattered pieces of paper on the floor. "And further tell him that William of Orange will not stoop to intrigue behind the back of the State, nor will he sell his people for his own advancement!" He paused and pressed his handkerchief to his mouth. A violent fit of coughing tore and racked his slender body.

Roxhythe waited for him to cease. When the Prince leaned back in his chair, quiet now, and with exhaustion written about his eyes, he answered him.

"Your Highness would do well to consider. Have you bethought yourself that it is not wise to offend the King of England?"

The pale lips parted.

"While I remain a prisoner King Charles cannot harm me. When I am Stadtholder he will not dare. There is Louis."

"Your Highness is very sanguine. If you will not sell your country, as you call it, by whose help do you hope to overthrow the Oligarchy?"

"Have I said that I hoped to overthrow them? I desire to hold my rightful office, but I will raise no hand against

a Government that I fully acknowledge. It will be by the people's will alone that I become Stadtholder."

"And if the people will it not?"

William's eyes flashed again.

"Did you not assure me that they were ripe for my standard?"

"For your standard, Sir, yes. But if you raise it not they cannot stand by it. They will not rise for Prince William alone. Prince William with a force to back him, yes. It is a very different matter."

"I do not fear." The Prince spoke calmly now.

"Your Highness is young. You do not know the temper of a mob."

"Then I shall learn, milor'."

"By bitter experience."

"Perhaps even that."

There fell a long silence. It was useless to attempt further argument. The Prince meant what he said, and he knew what he was saying. Yet my lord tried to reason with him once more.

"Highness, I counsel you most sincerely not to reject my master's offer thus lightly. You must realize what an impossible task it is that you set yourself. You will have your country divided against itself, some standing for you, others for the Pensionary. Also you will have a French army marching upon you; perhaps, too, an English army. You would do well to consider."

"I have considered. What King Charles asks is impossible. I am not a Stuart—I cannot so unconcernedly sell my country. Milor' Roxhythe, I beg you will not waste your breath seeking to persuade me. Do you think I have not had just such an offer before? I have considered well, and there lies my answer."

Roxhythe rose.

"Then there is no more to be said, Highness. I trust you will not regret this day's work. Again I implore you to consider well. I shall return to the Hague in a few days' time, staying at the Poisson d'Or. A message will bring me very swiftly. Think it over carefully, High-

ness, and remember that together England and the Provinces would be very powerful." He picked up his hat. "I have to thank you for this audience, Sir. I fear it has tired you."

"No, milor'." William pressed his handkerchief to his lips again. "I am sorry that you should have been put to this unnecessary trouble. Your King has sent you on a fool's errand. My answer is final."

"Nevertheless, Highness, I shall be at the Poisson d'Or for ten days."

William shook his head. He struck the hand-bell at his side.

Heenvliet appeared.

"Conduct milor' to Mynheer Dart," ordered William. "Milor'"—he moved his head wearily—"I will not detain you longer. I thank you for your patience."

Roxhythe bowed as he would have bowed to the King, his master.

"I do not despair, Highness. Permit me to compliment you on your integrity."

So he left William, Prince of Orange, seated in the high-backed chair, with the scattered scraps of parchment at his feet, a solitary figure, bodily frail, but with the light of indomitable courage shining in his dark eyes, and a steadfast purpose before him.

He knew that he had failed; he knew that the little princeling whom he had pitied—whom he still pitied—was one of the world's great men; a prince who, one day, would have to be reckoned with; a prince who was not to be bought; a prince who was also an honest man.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMIABLE MR. MILWARD PERPLEXED

To Christopher, waiting by the window, came the hoot of an owl, twice repeated. In an instant he was on his feet, and had leant out of the casement. Roxhythe's voice reached him.

"That rope, Chris! 'Tis plaguily damp out here."

Christopher vanished. When he reappeared it was with the rope, one end of which he secured to the stout hook in the wall. The other end he cautiously let down.

Roxhythe swung gracefully up. He climbed over the sill into the room, and threw off his hat and cloak. Christopher drew in the rope, and watched my lord go to the fire. He saw how grim were the lines about his mouth.

"You'd no trouble, sir? No mishaps?"

"None," said Roxhythe curtly. "And you?"

"Everything has gone very well, though I fear the spies grow anxious. They removed to the inn across the road the day after you left me." He poured out a glass of wine and handed it to my lord.

"You saw the Prince, sir?"

Roxhythe sank into the nearest chair. He gave vent to a prodigious yawn.

"Yes, I saw him." He volunteered no further information, and Christopher did not like to question him. Instead he told him all that had passed during the last few days.

". . . So Mynheer de Staal gave it out to-day that you were better, and he thought it possible that you might be up to-morrow."

"Very good," said Roxhythe. "Your suggestion?"

"Yes," admitted Christopher. "I thought you could not well be later than to-morrow, and it seemed a pity to waste time."

"You are invaluable," sighed my lord.

Presently Christopher felt that he could no longer curb his curiosity.

"Was your mission successful, sir?" he ventured.

"It failed," answered Roxhythe. "A novel experience. I shall go to bed."

He appeared downstairs next morning for a short space and spent the rest of the day, sleeping in his chair. He complained that he was bored.

After three days he announced that he was tired of Rotterdam and should go to the Hague.

Christopher was surprised.

"I had imagined that we were to return to London," he said.

"Had you? But then you are so impetuous. You forget our amiable friend."

"Milward? Does he matter?"

"He would think so," said my lord, and would vouchsafe no more.

They said farewell to de Staal that afternoon. The old man was distressed. Christopher left him alone with Roxhythe.

En route for the Hague he spoke of him to my lord.

"Mynheer de Staal hath a great regard for you, sir."

"Yes," replied Roxhythe, unmoved.

They found Mr. Milward at the Poisson d'Or. He seemed relieved to see them. Roxhythe invited him to dinner and Christopher went forth to meet his brother.

He and Roderick dined at a little inn not far from the Palace. They had not met for two years, and there was much to be said on both sides. Not until dinner was over did Roderick speak of Roxhythe. Then he went straight to the point

"Christopher, what induced you to enter the service of that man?"

"That man?" interrogated Christopher with uplifted brows.

"Lord Roxhythe."

"He was in need of a secretary; I, of work."

"There are a score of better men in need of secretaries!"

"Indeed?"

"Don't speak like that, child! You should have consulted me. I might have known you would act foolishly when my father died."

"I am perfectly well able to care for myself! And I resent—your tone!"

Roderick ignored this.

"Were my father alive he would be more than displeased to see you in such company."

"Roderick, what do you mean? What have you against my lord?"

"What every sane man has against him. He is a libertine—a rake-helly fellow, with no morals, and less honour."

"How dare you say that? He is no more rake-hell than the others at Whitehall! And as to honour!—You speak of what you do not know!"

"Do I so? Even an what you say is true, which it is not—that he is no more rake-hell than the rest of that licentious circle, it is no excuse for entering his service. I would not have my brother in the company of one of them."

Christopher essayed a sneer.

"Why, are you turned Puritan?"

"I am no more Puritan than ever I was, as you very well know. Had I been in England a month ago I would have prevented you taking this disastrous step."

"And I tell you that you would not! My Lord Roxhythe is a very honourable, brave gentleman, and I am proud to be in his service!"

"A patriotic gentleman also, I suppose?"

"Yes!"

"You are infatuated."

"Then so are you! What induced you to enter the Prince of Orange his service? I would not work for a foreigner!"

Roderick gripped his wrist, shaking him.

"You young fool, be silent!"

"Why?" Christopher stared.

"Do you think no Dutchman understands English that you shout what might be mine undoing in an inn parlour?"

"Your pardon!" . . . Christopher rolled the words out caressingly. "I had forgot you playéd a double part. Oddslife, Roderick! I would not serve two men as you do. To my mind it is no gentlemanly thing to do."

Roderick coloured angrily.

"You do not understand. I serve the Prince and no other!"

"Who is imprudent now?" jeered Christopher. "I thought you served De Witt once? Your devotion to the Orange smacks somewhat of double-dealing."

"I am not going to quarrel with you, Christopher."

"Then do not seek to malign my master to me! I know him as you do not, and I tell you he is the soul of honour!"

"You fool," said Dart quietly. "Do you believe that? I warn you that one day you will be disillusioned. Roxhythe works for himself alone. He would dupe you did the need arise, or crush you beneath his heel. You think him a man of scruples, but I tell you—and I know—that he is without heart and without honour. Chris, you are very young, be advised by me and quit his service. He only wants you for a tool."

"'Tis you who are the fool! My Lord wants me for a secretary! There is no question of duping, or tools."

"Do you deny then that you are with him solely for the purpose of bringing King Charles his message to the Prince?"

Christopher was silent.

"Roxhythe hath it in mind to use you in his machinations for his master. And if you are over-nice in your scruples, he'll trick you. Be warned, Chris, I implore you!"

"You are undoubtedly mad," said Christopher with conviction. "If I were required to work for His Majesty there would be no need of trickery. I would die for His Majesty and the Country."

"You cannot die twice!" snapped Roderick.

"The King and his Country are one, as you should know."

"Are they?" said Roderick heavily. "Not your King and his Country."

"You are disloyal! My King? He is also yours!"

"Alas, yes!"

Christopher betrayed anxiety.

"Roderick, consorting with these stiff-necked Dutchmen has affected your brain. I do not pretend to understand this strange talk of yours. You had best quit Holland and come home!"

"My dear brother, living as I do, I have had opportunities of studying politics, and of viewing politicians and Princes that you have not. I have seen the intrigues within intrigues that are always afoot—the treachery, the lying! More I cannot say, but rest assured that I speak the truth. I have seen what manner of men live in England and in France, and I know that amongst them all there is not one who is honest. There is only one man to be trusted. Him, I serve."

"You have become bigoted, Dick, and hard. What you say is utterly false. Is it possible that you think your master the one honest man? Why, even I, whom you so freely call fool, am not so mad!"

Roderick sighed.

"I see you will go your own wilful way, Chris. You have fallen a victim to Roxhythe's notorious charm, and I suppose you will follow him headlong to destruction."

Christopher leaned his head in his hands and gave way to helpless laughter. When he had recovered, Roderick started to talk on some other topic. They spoke no more of Roxhythe that evening.

My lord was in his dressing-gown when Christopher came back to the inn. He gave his secretary one shrewd, calculating glance.

"You look heated, Chris. You have been quarrelling with your brother."

"Nearly," said Christopher. "I fear for his sanity. He speaks so wildly, and so foolishly."

"In fact he disapproves of my Lord Roxhythe most sincerely," nodded his lordship. "Does he seek to remove you from my evil influence?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I think he seeks to put me in a glass case, for he avows that there is but one honest man alive to-day, and he will not have me serve under any other!"

"Lud! Does he expect you to enroll yourself under the Prince's banner? Don't do it, Chris! 'Tis a gloomy youth."

"Not I, sir!" said Christopher flippantly. "I had sooner tread the path to destruction in your company."

"So ho!" said Roxhythe to his reflection in the mirror. He was seated before his dressing-table. "Is that the way the wind blows? Be warned, Chris! I am an unscrupulous fellow."

"I know," said Christopher, smiling. "He told me so."

"Well, it's true enough."

"Is it, sir?" Christopher's voice vibrated with indignation. "Do you seek to warn me 'gainst yourself?"

"It would appear so," said Roxhythe.

Three days later my lord entered their private parlour and sat down at the table. He dipped a quill in the ink, and drew a sheet of parchment towards him.

"Milward sticks like a leech. I feel it behoves me to write to my little master." He bent over the parchment.

Christopher assented vaguely.

The quill scratched tranquilly along. Presently Roxhythe sat back, and dusted the sheet. He folded, addressed, and sealed it.

"That will go by special courier. It should interest Mynheer Spy."

"If it goes by courier, how should Milward see it," asked Christopher.

"There are ways," placidly replied his lordship.

"But he would scarce dare to steal a letter from you to His Majesty, sir!"

"No," agreed Roxhythe. "He would very easily dare to borrow it for some few minutes, however."

"To read the contents? He hopes to learn the result

of your mission—or—or whether you have been on a mission at all—so that Louis might make an outcry?”

“Something like that, no doubt.”

“I see,” said Christopher profoundly. “Yet how dare he break the seal?”

“You do not realize that I have been so considerate as to place the seal on the wafer,” said Roxhythe, pained. “He will not break it.”

“Were you born in intrigue, sir?” asked Christopher.

“I believe I must have been,” said his lordship.

Thus it came to pass that when the not incorruptible courier slept off his doctored potations at Delft, his late host, accredited agent to his Most Christian Majesty, removed a certain document from his wallet, and in the deserted coffee-room, carefully slit open the wafer that sealed it. He was well versed in cyphers but he found a cypher unnecessary. The letter was short, and was written in English.

“YR. MAJESTY,—Has Yr. Majesty punished His Servant enough, or must Roxhythe Remain a Wanderer? If he might Crave Yr. Pardon againe, he Does so, Still more Humbly and Contritely than Before. Yet more earnestly Does he Implore Yr. Majesty to Allow him to Return, when he will Endeavoure To Showe Yr. Majesty How Great is his Remorse for that Unpardonable Offence which he Committed.

“He is Yr. Majesty’s most Devoted, Humble Servant,
ROXHYPHE.”

His Most Christian Majesty’s accredited agent was annoyed and perplexed. Deftly he re-stuck the wafer, and restored the packet to the courier’s wallet. Then he rode back to the Hague.

The amiable Mr. Milward when apprised of the contents of the letter wrinkled his brow uncertainly.

“It seems we are come on a fruitless errand, Dupont. Roxhythe has not the wit to write such a plausible blind. King Charles is not a fool, and only a fool sends a fool to work his intrigues.”

"You are assured that milor' is a fool, then?"

"He is a brainless court-darling. Yet . . . It was strange that he should fall into such sudden disgrace. I had thought him too perfect a courtier to offend as he did. I confess I am at a loss. He has not had word with the Prince, nor any of his servants, unless it be Mr. Dart who is De Witt's man. I have dogged his steps, and he suspects naught!" He laughed contemptuously. "I believe we are on a fool's errand!"

"Maybe, *m'sieu'*. But I do not think that milor' is quite the brainless nincompoop he pretends to be. I would I had been at Rotterdam in place of Grant. I am uneasy."

"He is either a fool or a marvellously astute man. In any case, what more can be done?"

"Naught," said Dupont sadly. "But I mistrust him."

In due time came a letter for Roxhythe. It was brought to him as he sat at dinner with Christopher and Mr. Milward.

"From my master," he said. "You will excuse me?" He tore open the seals and read. Then he gave a relieved laugh, and laid the sheet down in such a way that Mr. Milward might easily read what was written there.

"His Majesty is pleased to forgive me! So it's boot and saddle for us, Chris, as soon as may be."

King Charles' letter ran:

MY LITTLE DAVY,—My Majesty must needs Forgive you, for I cannot Live Without You. I am Surrounded by Dolts and Sycophants; I must have My Roxhythe. Return at once.—CHARLES R.

Mr. Milward tried to drown his fears.

Before they left the Hague, Roderick had speech with Roxhythe again.

"His Highness desires me to say, sir, that his answer is final."

"That is his last word?"

Roderick bowed.

"I am sorry," said Roxhythe.

The brothers parted on quite cordial terms. Roderick, seeing that it was useless, did not again press Christopher to leave my lord's service.

Mr. Milward bade the travellers a touching farewell. Roxhythe addressed him mournfully.

"I shall miss your pleasant companionship, Mr. Milward. We have seen much of each other of late."

Mr. Milward watched the little cavalcade depart. He became aware of Dupont at his elbow.

"He laughs at us," said the Frenchman gloomily. "He slips through our fingers like water. Me, I have had dealings with him before. I suspected, but evidence? Pouf!"

"Nonsense!" said Milward uneasily. "I have scarce left his side since he has been at the Hague!"

"It would not worry him. I tell you, he is a devil. You might be bound to him with chains, and he would give you the slip. He is not a man. He is a devil." He walked away, depressed.

Four days later, on board ship, Roxhythe broached a subject that had been weighing heavily on Christopher's mind. He laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, and spoke with some affection.

"Well, Chris, so the journey is at an end. In a few hours' time we shall be in London. What then?"

Christopher looked at him.

"You will be no longer in need of a secretary, sir?"

"I? Oh, I must have a secretary, of course."

Christopher became still more crestfallen.

"I—you—that is, you wish me to leave you now, sir?"

"No. But I think you would be wise to be counselled by that excellent brother of yours."

"Oh, sir, never give him a thought!" cried Christopher. "If I might stay with you, I will serve you—unquestioningly."

"Very well," said Roxhythe. "You shall stay."

CHAPTER IX

THE KING OF ENGLAND

GORGEOUS in a pale-blue velvet suit with crimson facings and ribands, and much rich lace, the Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe entered the doors of Whitehall. He carried his gloves and his cane in one hand and in the other he held his comfit box. The page at the door cast one glance at the handsome face beneath the wide brimmed hat with its drooping feather, and straightened in every line of his body.

Roxhythe's slumbrous eyes travelled over him.

"His Majesty?" he said.

The page bowed.

"I think His Majesty is in his closet, sir. Shall I send Master Hutchins to announce you?"

"Do," said Roxhythe.

An elegant gentleman crossed the hall towards him.

"I protest 'tis a joy to see you again, Roxhythe," he simpered. "You had a fair crossing?"

"I believe I did," assented my lord. "How doth her ladyship?"

"Very well, very well," said the elegant gentleman. "His Majesty is all a-fret to see you. He will be delighted. He had not expected you so soon."

On his way up the Grand Staircase, Roxhythe met some half a dozen gentlemen, who were all duly enthusiastic over his return. He reflected that his was something of a triumphal entry.

As he neared the King's closet he spoke to the page beside him.

"Is His Majesty disengaged?"

"I think Lord Lauderdale is with him, my lord."

"In that case you may announce me," said Roxhythe.

"Yes, my lord. His Majesty gave orders that you were to be taken to him at once." He knocked on the door of the closet.

Charles' voice bade him enter. It held a peevish note. The page opened wide the door.

"The Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe!"

Hat in hand Roxhythe walked into the room.

Charles was seated at the table, opposite Lord Lauderdale, but at the favourite's entrance, he pushed back his chair and rose quickly to his feet.

"David! Already!" He embraced Roxhythe before my lord had time to make his bow. He held him by the shoulders, scanning his face.

"Zoons, Davy! how I have waited for this moment!"

"Not so impatiently as have I, Sir." Roxhythe smiled back into his eyes.

My Lord Lauderdale rose, a red spot on either cheek.

"I take it Your Majesty has no further use for me," he grated.

"None whatsoever, my lord," answered Charles gaily. "Some other time . . ."

Lauderdale jerked a bow to him, and another to Roxhythe. He went angrily out of the room.

"A good riddance to his dourness," said Charles. "Davy, Davy, I have missed you so sorely I swear I'll never send you from me again!"

"I am glad you have missed me, Sir," said Roxhythe. "So you may have some conception of my poor feelings. These weeks have seemed months!"

Charles drew him to a couch.

"I vow you have had the best of it, David. I have been harassed and over-run with petitions, and what not, and empty-headed dolts beside. You would not believe the number that have tried to take your place! But there is only one Roxhythe. How have you fared?"

Roxhythe grew solemn.

"Very badly, Sir."

"What's that? You have been in trouble?—danger?"

"Not I, Sir. 'Twas my errand that I spoke of."

Charles showed surprise.

"Did you fail, David?"

"Ay, Sir. There was no hope for success."

The King laughed a little ruefully.

"Well, well! And so you failed! Has such a thing ever before come to pass?"

"Seldom," said his lordship. "But this time I was very grievously beaten."

The King settled himself against the cushions.

"If 'twere not so damned annoying, 'twould be most diverting," he said. "Tell me, David."

Roxhythe proceeded to relate his adventures up to the point of Roderick's appearance on the scene.

"I would Your Majesty could have seen that man!" he sighed. "He gave himself the airs of a duke, and he paraded his Puritan views for my edification. I do assure you, Sir; that I have never been so set at naught in my life. He spoke of the Prince as though he were Master of the Universe, and his whole manner was as formal as your father his courtiers never were. He came the second day with the news that the Prince would grant me an audience, as though 'twere some giant favour he were bestowing. I went to the Palace at eight in the evening—I should tell you, Sir, that I was requested to be punctual—and taken to Dart's room. He led me out by another door, along countless gloomy vaults, each darker than the last, until we came to a hall. Then we met one of the Prince's not so faithful gentlemen and I became a lackey, and was severely reprimanded. We shook off the man, and proceeded to the Prince's apartments. Outside one of the doors was yet another man. He, though, was one of the Prince's faithful ones. He sped us on our way. Dart ushered me into the room with all solemnity. Then he took my pistol from me. I suppose he thought I might assassinate His Highness in a fit of depression. At all events he took it, and left me to kick my heels, awaiting the Prince. And all as though I were in very sooth a lackey! I, Roxhythe, the King's envoy!"

"Then came William of Orange . . ." he paused.

Charles, who had been shaken with suppressed laughter, sat up.

"I' faith, Davy, I'd give much to have been with you! So you were pushed from pillar to post, my poor Marquis? Oh, lud!" Again he shook. "But what of my nephew?"

Roxhythe spoke gravely.

"Sir, he is a remarkable youth. In appearance he is slight, with a hook nose, and eyes that see everything at a glance. His manner is cold, brusque, repressed. His personality is overwhelming."

"So?" said Charles, interested. "As great as mine?"

"In its way, Sir, greater. He has none of Your Majesty's charm, but he forces himself into one's memory. He attracts, and he repels. In spite of his youth, and his lack of polish, he holds the stage."

"Why, Roxhythe, this is marvellous! Proceed!"

"He received me with as much ceremony as I had by that time learnt to expect. He had the air of an Emperor giving audience to one poor subject. He read Ashley's packet. Then he asked me what Your Majesty hoped to gain by the bargain."

Charles burst out laughing again.

"That I should have missed all this!"

"I do confess, Sir, I was taken aback. In a very short time he showed me that if he was young in years, he was old in wisdom. He perceived that Ashley was little more than a catspaw; he sneered at the idea of your helping him to his rightful place. In fact, Sir, he desires to know why you have not come to his aid before now."

"The impudent young cockerel!"

"You would not think so did you but see and hear him, Sir. He asked me what was to be the price of all you offered. I told him—glibly enough, and evasively. He caught me up, and told me all too rightly what I meant. He saw through and through that proposition, Sir, and at last I was frank with him. I explained Your Majesty's attitude—with reservations. Then the storm burst. Odds body, Sir, but when the Prince loses his temper, one shivers in one's shoes. He hailed words about me. He

cried that Your Majesty was asking him to barter his Country and his honour for his own advancement. He bade me tell you that he was not a Stuart. He said he saw very clearly how you were seeking to trick him into an alliance by which only you would profit. Finally he tore the packet into shreds and bade me tell you that that was his answer. Then he fell to coughing, and I tried to collect my wits. Sir, I argued with that boy until my throat was parched, and always he had a ready answer wherewith to dumbfound me. He gave away naught without meaning to, and I could not gather what were his intentions. But he has evidently received advances from King Louis, and I think he hopes to frighten you by holding that over your head. That he will ally himself with any foreign power to gain the Stadtholdership, I do not think for a moment. He is as honest as the day, and as astute as old Nick himself. He thinks to rise without foreign aid, but he told me he would not seek to overthrow a Government that he fully acknowledged. He is to be feared, Sir."

"My dear David, I must make his further acquaintance. Did he send any more insulting messages to me?"

"A score. He does not trust you or anyone else, Sir, and he told me so in good round terms. He bade me tell you you that Nassau does not stoop to intrigue behind the backs of his ministers. I think already he has quite a little Court."

Charles was deeply interested.

"And you think him one to be reckoned with?"

"More than that, Sir. I think him a great man; one to be propitiated at all costs. I foresee that he will rise suddenly, and at no very distant date."

"We must invite him to England," said the King. "I am agog to see him."

"I doubt he would not come. He holds England and the English in contempt. Also King Louis. All this he told me. I spent a pleasant evening, Sir."

Charles rocked with laughter.

"And I thought I could twist him round my finger! Zounds, why was I not there to see?"

"It is no laughing matter, Sir. I am too old to be ordered about by petty princelings and their servants."

Charles sobered suddenly.

"But, Roxhythe, it is a plaguey nuisance. This means I must turn to France." He bit his finger-nail, frowning. Then he smiled again. "So you came away with a flea in your ear, my poor Roxhythe? God's Body, how I have ill-used you! But tell me more of William. You say he has personality; he attracts. But does he inspire his followers with confidence?"

"Judging from Dart's airs, yes, Sir. He is very well served. It seems his servants would undergo any torture ever invented sooner than betray him."

Charles made a rueful grimace.

"And," continued Roxhythe, "he says himself that he will not have any man about him whom he could not trust implicitly."

"If I said that, I had only you left," remarked Charles.

"Precisely. And he seems to allow no familiarity—no license. He lives in an atmosphere of gloom and depression." Roxhythe looked round the luxurious room. "Thank God for Whitehall, and mine own Prince!" he said devoutly.

Charles smiled.

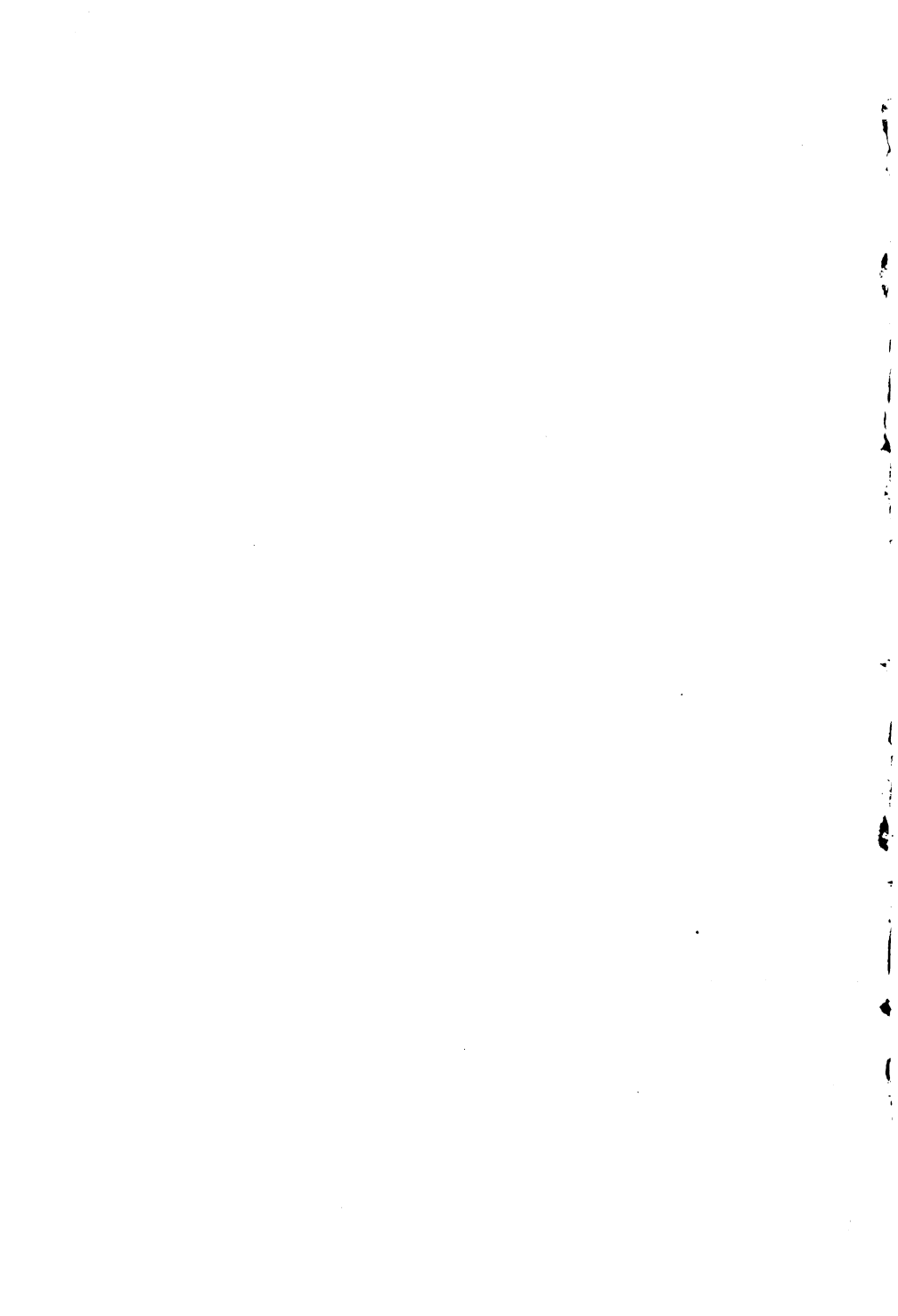
"He is more kingly than I am, eh?"

"No," said Roxhythe instantly. "He is too young to unbend. But in intrigue, Sir, you have met your match in William of Nassau."

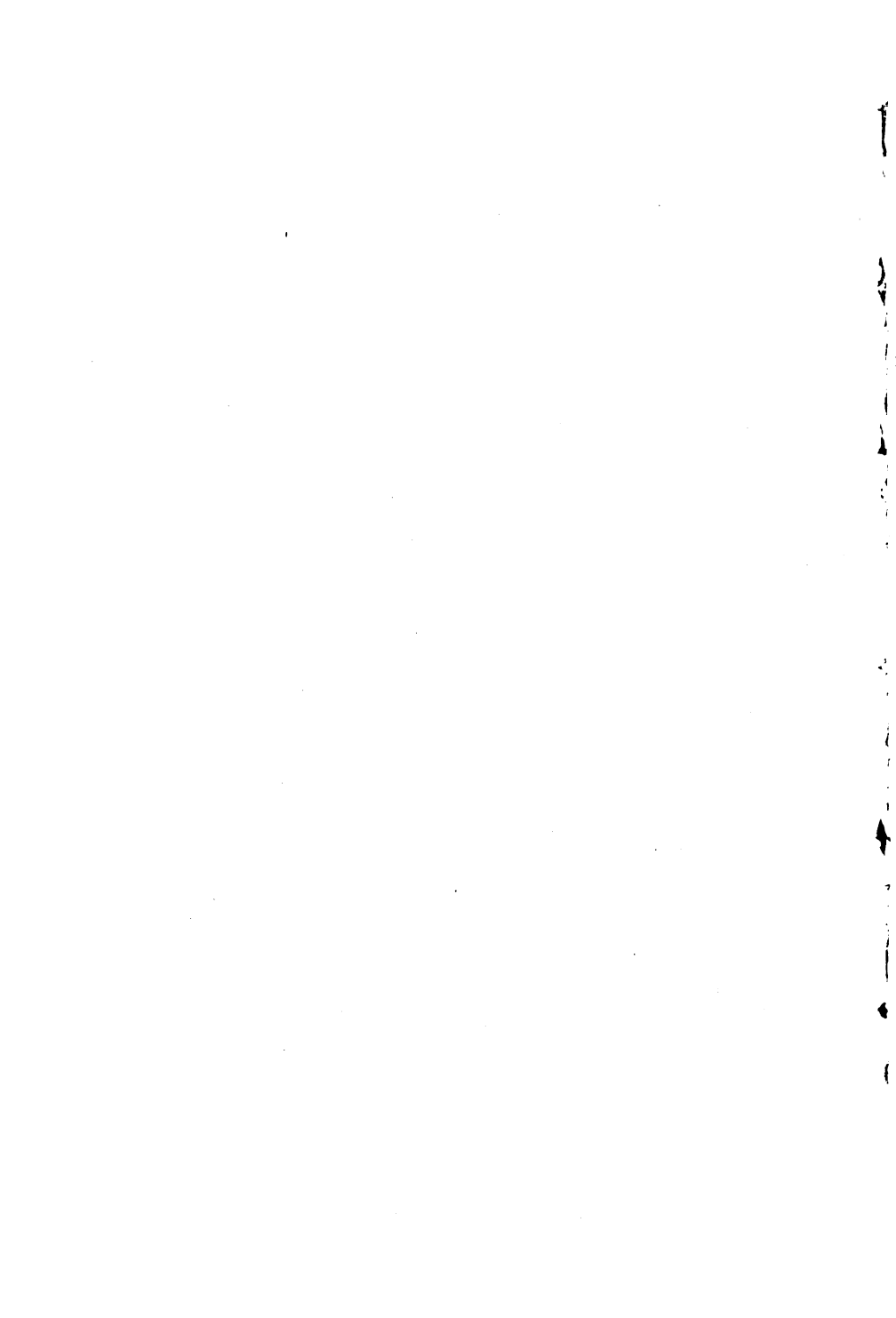
"I must have a care," laughed the King.

"Indeed yes, Sir. Remember, the Orange is a man, and one who must not be forgotten. I foresee trouble. Guard against him."

"I will," promised the King. "And now, David, we must look to France."



Book II
THE WAYS DIVERGE



CHAPTER I

JANUARY, 1669

CHRISTOPHER settled down very quickly on his return from Holland and took up his abode at Bevan House, Charing Cross. His duties as secretary were not arduous, and consisted for the most part of attending to the affairs of Roxhythe's country estate, and answering the many invitations that flocked in.

He was supremely happy. In spite of all Roderick's gloomy prognostications his love for Roxhythe grew steadily. True, he had to some extent re-adjusted his ideas. He no longer held my lord up as a model of good behaviour; he knew that Roxhythe was careless, frivolous, sometimes ruthless. A year ago these facts would have been enough to damn my lord in his eyes, but now he flattered himself that he was broader-minded. He no longer condemned the immoral lives that were led by Roxhythe and his associates. Their frivolity and their rakishness were at times to be deplored, but Christopher could not see that they were without honour. Roderick had insinuated that those who frequented Whitehall were entirely lacking in morals. He had said that each one would barter away his honour for position or money. He had even hinted that there were few who would scruple to betray their country.

As far as Christopher could see there was no question of such a contingency. It might be true of some, but of others it was manifestly untrue. With regard to Roxhythe it was ridiculous. He had no interest in politics; he laughed at intrigue. His whole life was spent in waiting on the King, and amusing himself either at Whitehall or at the Louvre. He was above the petty machinations of the day; he belonged to no party; he never schemed for his own ends.

Christopher did not pretend to understand him. It almost seemed as though his was a dual personality, yet the second side of him had appeared for so short a space that Christopher half doubted whether he had not been suffering from an illusion.

In Holland Roxhythe had shown himself to be cool-headed, energetic, astute. Above all he had proved an expert plotter. He had dropped much of his lazy cynicism; his languor had mysteriously vanished. But when the intrigue was at an end back had come the old Roxhythe, just as languid, just as indifferent. No word of politics ever passed his lips; no suspicion of plotting was evident.

Christopher was nonplussed. Eventually he came to the conclusion that Roxhythe was not an intriguer from choice. It was only when commanded by His Majesty that he roused himself.

Roderick had inferred that Roxhythe worked not for England but for his own ends. The idea was beneath contempt. Roxhythe had shown clearly that he worked for the King alone. The King, of course, worked for the Country. It was all one.

Christopher understood that Roxhythe did not wish his powers as an intriguer to be known. That was natural. Once discovered, he could not act with the same freedom. At first Christopher had thought his habitual indifference a mask, but as time went on he decided that it was as real as the other half of him. He realized that he could never hope to fathom the depths of my lord's nature; perhaps he did not wish to try. He was content to love an enigma. He knew that Roxhythe could be astute; he knew that he was mostly obtuse; he could be ruthless, or he could be kindness personified. To Christopher he had been kind. He seemed to take an amused pleasure in fathering him; he introduced him at Jeremy's, one of the great coffee-houses; he took him to routs and to balls. In all matters of dress and fashion he advised him; his house and servants were at Christopher's disposal.

It was a curious friendship. On the one side was boundless affection and unlimited confidence; on the other a

casual liking and absolute reticence. Partly it was accounted for by the difference in age. Roxhythe was more than twenty years Christopher's senior and it was not to be expected that he should confide in the younger man to any great extent. But Christopher knew nothing of Roxhythe's life. The surface was free for inspection. There were countless *amours*, countless trivialities, but of what lay beneath the boy had been allowed only a glimpse. Never again had he seen it; all that met his eyes was a cynical *roué*, fascinating and repellent by turns. He loved this *roué* as he had never loved before. There had been no woman in his short life, there still was not. Roxhythe possessed his whole heart. Whatever Roderick might say to the contrary, Christopher knew that Roxhythe would always possess it. It was to no avail to analyse the why and wherefore of his love; there was no reason for it but that subtle attraction which my lord held for him. He was content to love, secure in the belief that his love would never be betrayed. He wanted nothing in return; he asked no confidences and was not disappointed that he received none. He gave the very best that was in him, happy that this should be so.

Before he had entered Roxhythe's service his life had been singularly devoid of colour. His mother died when he was a child, and his father had had Roderick's cold nature. They came of old Puritan stock; they were very godly, and also very repressed. Madam Dart, who was not of her husband's persuasions, had bequeathed her sunny personality to Christopher. She had nothing else to give him. On account of this bequest there had been no understanding between Christopher and his father, and very little between Christopher and his brother. Both Mr. Dart and Roderick felt that he was not akin to them; they feared that he was weak and easily led astray. They deplored his early craving for excitement, and they did their uttermost to quench the craving. Then, shortly after Roderick's departure for Holland, Mr. Dart died. At first Christopher felt lost and vaguely frightened, but the feeling had faded and given place to a glorious sensation of

freedom. Then Roxhythe had blazed into his life, shocking him. Disapproval had, in its turn, given way to love. His mind had broadened; he lost the shreds of intolerance that had been instilled into him. One thing he retained: love for Country counted above all else. His father's creed as Christopher's also. Nothing mattered as much as England. Her honour and welfare must stand first.

Roderick had conceived that they did not stand first with either Roxhythe or the King. He was undoubtedly crazed. The King was naturally above reproach. Equally above reproach was Roxhythe. Christopher cast his brother's warnings to the four winds.

He was interested in politics and listened closely to all the arguments that took place at Jeremy's. There was usually some conversation concerning Home Affairs and the King's intentions. It was well known that Charles squandered away more money than he possessed, and men wondered how he would contrive to pay off his load of debts.

Foreign Affairs were also discussed, especially the menace of France to Holland. Everyone knew that Louis would never rest until he had annexed those Provinces which he claimed, and everyone hoped that England would throw herself seriously into the conflict. Such a contingency would surely turn the scale against Louis. King Louis was universally feared; he was growing too powerful, and too belligerent. It was known, too, that he coveted the throne of Spain for one of his own children. If the ailing young Spanish King died, matters would become serious. On no account must Louis be allowed to seize Spain.

Christopher was deeply interested. He had the hatred of the average Englishman of the time for France. He wished that Roxhythe would discuss these matters with him, but Roxhythe only laughed and protested that such conversation was too deep for him.

At the present moment my lord was in Paris. He had been away a week, and on Christopher's shoulders had fallen the strenuous task of making his excuses to the

various people whose invitations to routs and dinners he had ignored.

These visits to France were always unexpected. Suddenly my lord would remark that he could bear London no longer. He would depart with perhaps a day's warning. More suddenly would he return, with no warning at all. Christopher supposed that he went because of some Frenchwoman. Gossip said so, and he, knowing Roxhythe, believed Gossip.

He was seated in the library one morning, sorting out my lord's correspondence, when he heard a leisurely footfall without. He lifted his head, listening, for the step was familiar.

The curtains over the doorway parted. Roxhythe came into the room.

Accustomed as he was to my lord's ways, Christopher was still surprised. He sprang up.

"Sir! I had no idea you were in town!"

Roxhythe smiled at him.

"Nor was I until an hour ago." He went to the table and turned over his letters. "You are well, Chris?"

"Very well. And you? You had a pleasant visit?"

"Quite amusing," nodded Roxhythe. "Need I look at all these?" He flipped a pile of letters with his finger.

Christopher glanced through them.

"There are one or two letters from Lady Flora, sir," he said.

"They will keep. She is becoming wearisome." He sat down. "Have you any news, Chris?"

Christopher put the letters in the drawer.

"Nothing of great import, sir. Lord Buckhurst requests the pleasure of your company at a supper-party he is giving on Wednesday. I accepted for you. Sir Malcom Digby begs you will honour him on Friday at Shawn House. Mr. Carver gives a dance for Miss Rosiland next month. I have not answered that."

"Carver? I do not think I have the honour . . ."

"You have forgotten, sir. He is the man who gave us shelter the night we rode to Bevan in the storm."

"That wealthy tradesman?" asked his lordship. "What impudence!"

"I am to refuse?"

"Naturally. Stay—this Rosiland—have you seen her?"

"She's young and shy, sir."

"Oh, refuse, refuse!" said Roxhythe impatiently. "Oddslife, what is the world coming to that that upstart should invite me to his house? Naught else?"

"Naught else, sir, unless it be my Lord Arlington's invitation to supper and cards. I accepted."

"Well I need not go," remarked my lord.

"Then I think you will greatly offend Lord Arlington, sir."

One haughty eyebrow rose the fraction of an inch.

"Oh? What maggot has Bennett in his head now?"

"He seemed anxious that you should go. And—and he has influence. He was not pleased that you refused his last invitation."

"Oho! You think I should do well not to offend his lordship?"

"Well, sir, he would make a powerful enemy."

"But not, I think, so powerful an enemy as Roxhythe." My lord rose and stretched himself. "I suppose I must to Whitehall." He lounged out.

An hour later, his dress changed, his person powdered and perfumed, he walked into the King's presence.

Charles was in the midst of his Court, talking to Lady Castlemaine. Way was made for my lord to pass up to his couch. He went forward gracefully, bowing to right and left in answer to the many nods and smiles.

"Why, here is our good Roxhythe!" cried her ladyship, welcoming him. "See, Sir!"

"I see a base deserter," said Charles. He held out his hand. "I believe you love his French Majesty more than me, David."

Roxhythe bent over it.

"No," he said, inimitably. "His French Majesty was an interlude, no more."

Charles joined in the general laugh.

"How doth His Majesty?" he asked.

"Very well," said Roxhythe. "Very expensively."

"Surely that's Roxhythe?" came a voice from behind. "I thought so! Well, my lord? So you've returned to us?"

Roxhythe bowed to the slim, graceful youth who came up to the group about the King.

"As your Grace sees," he said.

Monmouth leant on the back of the couch, above Charles, smiling, debonair.

"I thought I could not be mistaken. I would swear to your presence in a room of a thousand people!"

"You are a flatterer," Roxhythe shook his head. "You had best visit Versailles."

Monmouth sighed. He put back his curls with one delicate, white hand.

"I have a mind to. I have a great desire to visit the French Court."

"Ah, no!" said Charles, quickly, raising his hand. He laid it affectionately on his son's arm. "I cannot spare you, James."

"You spared Roxhythe," shrugged Monmouth. There was a suspicion of triumph in the glance he shot at my lord.

"Needs must," quoth Charles, ruefully. "Roxhythe stays for no man."

"Not even for Your Majesty?" asked Lady Castlemaine. Charles smiled.

"I wonder?" he said. "Can one catch a star?"

"I take it 'tis a question of holding a star," remarked Killigrew, coming up to them. "'Twould be interesting to test Lord Roxhythe his devotion." He spoke lightly, jestingly, but there was too much of the sneer in his voice for Charles' liking. The look he gave him was cold.

"See the wretch now!" exclaimed Lady Castlemaine. She was in great good humour to-day. "I'll swear he is searching for his lady-love! Are you not, Roxhythe?"

Roxhythe turned his head.

"Which one, Lady Castlemaine?"

She spread out her hands in mock protest.

"The latest; the dearest!" smiled Monmouth.

"Alas! There is no dearest."

"What! Dead, my lord?"

"No." Roxhythe sat down. "Faded, sir."

"Already? I thought the little Crosby woman—"

"But I tire so easily," complained his lordship.

"You are a scoundrel, Roxhythe." It was the King who spoke. "I vow I do not know why I keep you near me!"

"Oh, I can give Your Majesty the answer to that!" replied Roxhythe, placidly.

"Give it then!" Charles turned, ready to be amused.

Roxhythe's eyes travelled slowly round the room.

"Amongst so much virtue . . ." he began, and got no further. Protesting, laughing voices chided him.

Charles rose.

"Ye all appear horrified at the idea of any virtue being found amongst you," he sighed, his eyes alight with laughter. "Well, I'll set your minds at rest. Without doubt ye are the most outrageous subjects in Christendom. David, I want you! I have it in mind to give a ball which shall excel all others ever held between these walls. I must have your sage counsel." He linked his arm through Roxhythe's, and shook a reproving finger at his small court. "I'll leave you to your various wickednesses," he said. "God wot, ye are not fit company for me!"

A slight stir by the door announced the entrance of the Queen. She came slowly across the room on her way to her apartments, a short, insignificant figure, primly garbed in riding-dress.

Charles withdrew his arm and went to meet her.

Her dark eyes with their vague unhappiness scanned him a thought anxiously as he bent over her hand.

"Well, madam? You have been riding?" The King spoke kindly, as one speaks to a child.

Katherine inclined her head.

"Yes, Sir." Some of the apathy went out of her voice. "The daffodils are already blooming in the Park."

"Are they so? It was a pleasant ride, sweet?"

"Not very, Sir. I wished you had been with me." She

looked up at him sadly. "The people would have cheered."

"Why, madam, they cheer for you!" said Charles, patting her hand.

"No," said the Queen. "No." She looked round the room. Lady Castlemaine curtsied as the lack-lustre eyes passed her. Katherine made no sign. Then she saw Roxhythe, and smiled. The smile changed her whole face. It held appeal, shy coquetry; it dispersed some of her stiffness.

"I did not know you were in London, my lord," she said.

Roxhythe came forward at once, and kissed her hand.

"I hope Your Majesty is better than when I left you?" His tone held something near warmth.

"I am very well," answered Katherine. "We have missed you, my lord."

"Your Majesty is too kind," he said gravely.

"You should have been with us to-day," she continued. "The spring has come so early this year! The flowers are all opening in the Park. It was very pretty." Her eyes went back to the King, wistfully. Charles had no interest in flowers; he was not attending. Roxhythe it was who answered.

"I shall beg you to let me come in your train again one day, madam," he said. "You have not asked me of late."

"Because I thought you would not care to," she replied. "I do wish, though, that you might accompany me."

"I should be very greatly honoured, madam," he bowed. "I shall await your commands."

"One would almost imagine that he wanted to ride with her!" murmured Killigrew in Buckingham's ear. "Is it possible that the fastidious Roxhythe is *épris* in that direction?"

Buckingham shook his head.

"No. He has always been the same with her. I suppose he seeks to curry favour!" He sneered.

Roxhythe followed Charles to his closet. There the King flung himself down on the luxuriously cushioned window-seat.

"I doubt the Queen is not happy," he remarked, frown-

ing. "She takes no interest in our pleasures and she hath always the air of one moped to death."

"The Queen hath a great regard for Your Majesty," said Roxhythe deliberately.

Charles jerked an impatient shoulder.

"Oh, ay! Ye think I do not notice her enough. She should be more cheerful. She wearies me—poor woman," he added. "Ye heard to-day; the people do not like her nor cheer when she passes. Well, 'tis not my fault."

"If Your Majesty went with the Queen, the people would cheer," answered my lord.

"Roxhythe, I will not be taken to task like this!" said Charles pettishly. "You had best accompany her! The people do always cheer when you ride out. Mayhap she will think 'tis for her."

"You make a mistake, Sir, when you dub Her Majesty a fool."

Charles stared at him.

"Are you an admirer?" he asked.

"I admire, and have always admired Her Majesty's brave spirit," said Roxhythe.

Charles was silent. Presently he changed the subject, speaking coldly.

"Well, did you ascertain Louis his attitude?"

Roxhythe shrugged.

"He realizes that he must come to the movement of your finger, Sir."

Charles' brow cleared as if by magic.

"I always thought he would! He may rest assured that I shall move that finger to some purpose. I tell you, Roxhythe, I must have money, or I fall. What is Louis his figure?"

"I do not know, Sir."

"Arundell said two million."

"I am sorry to have to disagree with my Lord Arundell, but it is too much."

"Are you sure, David?"

"As sure as I am over anything, Sir."

"A pity." Charles rested his chin in his hand. "Ye think Arundell a fool?"

"No. I do not think he understands the French mind."

"Nor I. 'Tis for that reason that I want you to help me. Colbert has proposals to put before me."

M. Colbert de Croissy was the French ambassador, brother to the great Colbert, Minister of Finance in France. Roxhythe was amused.

"It should be interesting to hear what he says," he remarked.

"So I think. Roxhythe, I have seen that Clifford may be won over."

"Our incorruptible Chancellor!" said Roxhythe. "Well, well!"

"Not at all. He hath great faith in mine integrity. From what he said I gather that Colbert means to put the matter very plausibly. Arlington is, of course, my man; Arundell also. I propose to summon Clifford to my chamber next week when I shall also receive M. Colbert. Then we shall see how the matter strikes Clifford."

Roxhythe nodded.

"And what of His Grace of York, Sir?"

"James is mad for the promotion of the Catholic faith in the country. All else will fade before that."

"It seems very well," said Roxhythe. He sighed.

Charles heard the sigh.

"You do not like it, Roxhythe?"

There was a pause.

"No, Sir, I do not."

"You do not like that I should make an alliance with France?"

"I would it might have been otherwise."

"But it cannot be otherwise," fretted the King.

"No, Sir?"

"You know it cannot! I tried to avoid it by an alliance with Nassau, but he'd have none of it. What else can I do? I must have means or I shall be entirely dependent on Parliament. I am sore beset! And now if you turn against me—"

"I shall never do that, Sir." The answer came quietly, but very emphatically. "If you want a compact with France you must have it. It matters nothing to me. Only one thing do I consider and that is your pleasure."

Charles put out his hand.

"Ah, David! And yet you dislike it?"

"I dislike it—yes."

"Because you think I am planning to sell England to Louis?"

His smile crept into Roxhythe's eyes.

"Now you are ridiculous, Sir."

Charles' hand gripped his.

"You believe in me?"

"I believe that you will contrive to out-wit Louis."

"That is evasive. You think I am not acting for England?"

"I know you are not."

Charles laughed.

"I suppose you are right. But I do not think I shall harm her."

"Nor I, Sir. And I do not think you will do her any good."

Charles looked at him curiously.

"Roxhythe—you care for England?"

"I used to, Sir."

"And now?"

"Nothing counts save your pleasure. I stand or fall with you."

Brown eyes met brown.

"And naught else counts . . . not even the Country?" said Charles slowly.

Roxhythe carried the hand that lay in his to his lips.

"Since your ways diverge, Sir, no."

CHAPTER II

THE OFFER

JAMES, Duke of York, sat at the table drumming on it with restless fingers. Charles, the King, lolled as usual on the window-seat, playing with one of his spaniels. Sir Thomas Clifford, Chancellor, sat stiffly by the fire and looked ill-at-ease, which indeed he was. There was silence save for the yapping of the spaniel.

Presently the Duke pushed back his chair.

"Will the man never come?" he said.

Charles did not raise his eyes. Sir Thomas glanced at the clock.

"It—it wants ten minutes to the hour, sir," he said propitiatingly.

James shrugged impatiently. He looked over at his brother. The spaniel's yapping jarred on him.

"Is Lord Roxhythe not expected until three, Sir?" he asked.

"No," answered the King.

"Would it not have been better to have seen him before M. Colbert?" James did not conceal his impatience well.

"Wherefore?"

Charles yawned.

Quick foot-steps came along the passage.

"Perhaps this is he?" hazarded Clifford.

"My Lord Roxhythe never hurries," sneered James.

"This is M. Colbert."

The French ambassador entered, and cast a swift glance round the room. He swept a bow to the King.

"Sire!" He turned. "Altesse!" He turned again. "Sir Thomas!"

Charles nodded easily.

"Pray sit down, monsieur. We are delighted to see you."

James rose jerkily and went forward.

"You are very punctual, M. Colbert. Will you take this chair? We still lack Lord Roxhythe."

"It still wants three minutes to the hour, sir," remarked Clifford.

"No doubt ye have heard from His French Majesty?" asked James, ignoring the interruption.

Colbert bowed.

"A plaguey damp day, eh, monsieur?" drawled the King. The Frenchman's dark eyes twinkled.

"As Your Majesty says," he agreed.

"You don't have such weather in your country," went on Charles. "'Tis a fortunate land."

The Duke shut his eyes, exasperated. Charles glanced at the clock.

"The hour," he said. "And—I think—Roxhythe."

The three other men turned to look at the door.

It opened. Mr. Chiffinch, the King's confidential page, announced my Lord Roxhythe and my lord came in unhurriedly.

His chestnut wig was nicely curled, and hung down over his shoulders; his dress was carefully chosen. In one hand he carried his hat; in the other, his comfit-box and cane. His calm, rather ironic eyes travelled slowly round the room, and came to rest on the King. He made a very low bow. Then he made another which included all the room.

The Duke of York's brows drew closer together.

"Davy," sighed the King. "You are punctuality personified! How a-God's name, do you manage it?"

"I really don't know, Sir," said Roxhythe. "I believe it must be a habit."

"A vice," answered Charles, mournfully. "One which I do not possess. I think you know M. Colbert?"

"I have that honour," bowed Roxhythe.

"Then I need present nobody," said the King. "How very fortunate! Oh, sit down, Davy! sit down!" He waved him to a chair.

Roxhythe sat down and crossed one leg over the other. He looked expectant.

Charles sighed.

"Proceed, gentlemen," he counselled them, stroking his dog's head.

"Do you wish me to—conduct the conversation, Sir?" asked James bluntly.

"Pray do!" begged the King.

James turned to the Frenchman.

"M. Colbert, you advised His Majesty some time since that you had certain propositions to lay before him, coming from King Louis. For the sake of these other gentlemen, will you be good enough to repeat them?" He sat back in his chair, his eyes keen and alert.

M. Colbert twisted one of his rings round.

"But certainly, m'sieu'. It comes to my master's ears that King Charles was not quite at one with his Cabinet over the Dutch Alliance. He is relieved, *naturellement*, for he has always been King Charles' very good friend and cousin. He feared once that the alliance might lead to war between England and France—oh, ridiculous, of course! but there was a chance of such a thing—and he would be loth to fight one whom he wishes so well. Of course. He knows that there are in England, many Catholic gentlemen . . ." he bowed to Clifford. ". . . of whom Sir Thomas is one. The interests of the Church are his, as they are of every good Catholic . . ." he bowed to James. ". . . he is desirous of seeing England return to the old Faith. He believes, too, that King Charles would give much to see this."

King Charles twisted the spaniel's ears above its head, and eyed the effect pensively.

"He realizes, however, that it is not an easy matter for King Charles to drive the true Faith into his country—without assistance. But for such a cause—a cause that is ever nearest his heart—His Majesty would readily lend assistance.

"There is also another side, messieurs. For many years England and France have been enemies. His Majesty desires that this shall be so no longer. He would make a compact with England that should seal forever the friendship of two countries that lie at each other's doors—two

countries that are the most powerful in the world. He thinks it more than a pity that such countries should be at enmity, as must be the case if England allies herself with the Provinces.

"His Majesty knows that, together, England and France are all-powerful. Together they might do aught they pleased. It might be thought, messieurs, that His Majesty would be desirous of annexing England for his own. Such could never be the case. His Majesty would never interfere with England save at England's wish. It might be thought that he would desire England to pay him tribute. He does not. If it should be that France makes war, he would want England to join her, should he call for help. He would share with King Charles, not the expenses, which he would pay himself, but the profits of war. He would hold himself bound to come to England's aid if ever she should call, exacting naught in payment, messieurs, save a share in the profits. More than that even would he be prepared to do: he would bear all the expenses of any war of his making, and a large share of the expenses of a war on England's side. You must agree, messieurs, that His Majesty is generous."

Clifford moved, turning his head.

"To what ends, monsieur?"

"To the end, Sir Thomas, that he may prove himself England's friend, and the Church's friend."

Clifford pursed his lips.

"If this be so, His Majesty is indeed generous," he said.

The Frenchman inclined his head.

"There is another private matter," he pursued, more slowly. "His Majesty apprehends that King Charles finds it difficult to live as should live a Monarch of his degree." He turned to Charles. "Your Majesty will forgive me if I speak too plainly."

Charles nodded casually.

"I thank Your Majesty. King Louis, I say, knows this. During the years of his exile, King Charles his purse was very surely drained, as was natural, in his efforts to come back to an ungrateful people. The many grievous losses

that he sustained could not be repaid to him in full. His Majesty, my master, hath a great regard for his cousin; it grieves him to see King Charles in any way pressed for money. He, King Louis, has not had to bear such drains on his private purse, and he is, as you, messieurs, no doubt know, moderately wealthy. Because of this love which he bears King Charles, he is anxious to supply him with means wherewith to live as he should. He knows that King Charles is too noble, too kindly a man to tax his people as did—forgive me, Sire—his father. He thinks it little less than shameful that by reason of this true nobility of mind King Charles should be in want. Quite privately he would desire to make King Charles an allowance. This he could not do, as you must realize, messieurs, if England were at enmity with France. But this private matter has naught to do with the other matter of which I have already spoken. It is a gift from one cousin to another, if King Charles will have it so, and not deem himself insulted by King Louis his offer.”

There was a long pause.

Roxhythe played idly with the tassels of his glove, his face inscrutable. James was looking at Clifford, who sat staring into the fire.

“It is for you, Sir Thomas, to speak,” said the Duke at last.

Clifford raised his head. He spoke bluntly.

“M. Colbert, King Louis his offer would appear to be generous to an extreme. Yet this offer of money to His Majesty savours too much of bribery for my liking.”

The Duke of York stiffened. Over M. Colbert’s face came a look of pained surprise. Roxhythe stopped playing with his gloves. Only Charles paid no heed.

“Sir Thomas, I am sure you cannot realize that such a suggestion is little less than an insult to His Majesty!” said James harshly.

“And to my master,” came haughtily from Colbert.

“I crave His Majesty’s pardon if I offended,” answered Clifford, red to the ears. “But I still say that the offer has that appearance.”

James was about to reply, but with a deprecating smile Colbert forestalled him.

"You are perfectly right, Sir Thomas. To an evil-thinking world that to no man accords the desire to do good for goodness' sake alone, King Louis' entirely disinterested offer smacks of bribery. It is for this reason that he would wish the matter kept secret. He expects to gain nothing by this offer. It is made out of his love for King Charles, not from any desire of gain for himself. He could not, of course, voice such a proposal were England and France at disagreement. I have given you his reasons for wishing their friendship; this private offer to King Charles is no part of it. It has naught to do with the State; it is between man and man. Yet His Majesty foresaw that the public, who, being low-minded, credit all others with their same motives, would cry shame to King Charles for accepting a bribe. The muck and run of men, Sir Thomas, will not believe that a man can be generous, hoping to gain nothing by his generosity. I had not judged you to be of this class; I still do not. I know that you spoke in the heat of the moment, not giving yourself time to reflect. Had you done so, you would have seen how wrong—pardon me—how base were your suspicions."

Clifford met his reproachful look, and stammered hopelessly.

"His Majesty knows—that I—that you—that I meant no offence—by what I said. Perhaps—that is, of course, I spoke heatedly. I would not accuse King Louis—of—of descending to—bribery. I could not think that His Majesty—" he cast a flurried glance at Charles, "—would countenance a—a bribe. I—I but said it savoured of that, as—as I think it does, sir!"

"It is for that reason that the matter should be kept secret, Sir Thomas. I confess, if I had thought you would take this tone I had not mentioned the matter to you. Knowing you to be an upright man, I had hardly expected you to impute dishonourable motives to others."

Sir Thomas collapsed.

"Sir, you misunderstand me! I—I meant no rudeness to

His Majesty! I—" he floundered hopelessly and stopped.

M. Colbert wiped his lips with a delicately laced handkerchief.

"I am much relieved to hear you say so, Sir Thomas. May I now go on to my next point?"

The Duke nodded shortly.

"It is this: His Majesty is fully alive to the fact that there are in your English Cabinet many honest gentlemen who are yet very stubborn and narrow. They, like many other ignorant people, are averse from dealing with France. They are Protestants, messieurs. They may be drawn to the right way of looking at a French alliance, but at present they will not listen to reason. Once it was proved to them that France desired nothing but friendship from England, their objections would fade. They would see that an alliance with France was for their country's good. In holding away from it they, all unwittingly, work great harm on England. They cannot be brought round at present, but is it to be permitted that they should do England this great wrong? They have proved stubborn; they have showed that they will not listen to argument. Shall they not then be ignored? They would raise an outcry; they would prevail upon the ignorance of the people; they would prevent an alliance. Then they must know naught until the thing is done, when they will soon see that it is not a great evil, but a great good."

"You mean a secret treaty?" asked Clifford blankly.

"Secret only for the moment," promptly replied Colbert.

"Think on what I have said, monsieur, and tell me if this great thing for England is to be quenched by a party of dogged Protestants."

"I do see the truth in what you say, sir, but there are many points against it."

"Will you not name them, Sir Thomas?"

"The first and foremost of them is this, sir: what you propose is no less than a violation of the Triple Alliance, whereby we bound ourselves to stand by Holland against France if need be. Your proposal is a treaty with an enemy

country made behind the backs of the rest of the Cabinet. It likes me not."

"It is true that we ignore these ignorant gentlemen. But have I not proved to you that it is for England's good? Do you value these gentlemen's feelings above your country?"

"Not I, sir. But I had sooner that they were made cognizant of the affair."

"So they might hold lengthy debates, raise an outcry, and howl it down? You must see that it is impossible. They will realize afterwards that it is for their country's good."

Clifford spoke sarcastically now.

"Not if you seek to force Catholicism down their throats, sir."

James frowned, biting his lip. Colbert waved his hand expressively.

"You do not credit my master with much perspicacity if you do not realize that he has foreseen that, Sir Thomas. He is not an impetuous man. He sees that the introduction—rather, I should say, the furtherance—of Catholicism in England must be brought about slowly, and with great care. He has no mind to raise a hubbub. He has no mind to 'force' the Faith into England. He even sees that it cannot be as yet. He is content to wait until King Charles calls to him. If King Charles finds it not necessary to call, he will be the more thankful. He wants not to interfere in another man's country. Very earnestly does he counsel King Charles not to hasten this great work to its undoing. The time is not yet."

James stirred restlessly, and seemed about to speak. Then he checked himself.

After a short pause Colbert continued.

"I would not ask you to give a hasty decision, Sir Thomas. I ask you to think over all I have said before you speak."

"I shall most certainly do so," said Clifford. "I cannot but see that there are great points in favour of this plan, but, as I have told you, there are points which like me

not. But I will think on it. Is there—anything further?"

"At present, nothing, sir."

"Then . . . ?" Sir Thomas looked hesitatingly at the King. "Have I Your Majesty's leave to withdraw?" He rose as he spoke. So did Colbert. So also did Charles and Roxhythe.

"I too," said the Frenchman.

Charles nodded. He spoke for the first time since the beginning of the interview.

"We have to thank you, M. Colbert, for your patience. We will speak on this more fully later on. We will not keep you."

Colbert bowed over his hand and went out.

Charles turned to Clifford. His wonderful smile dawned.

"You will think me seriously on this, Sir Thomas? And you'll not believe ill of your poor King?"

"Sire!" Clifford caught his hand, kissing it. "I crave Your Majesty's pardon again and again."

"Why, there is naught to forgive," said Charles gently. "I but ask that you'll not think evil of me."

"I could not, Sir! I—I—" Clifford kissed his hand again. "I spoke in heat."

"Then that is very well," smiled Charles. He watched him leave the room, smiling.

"M. Colbert—speaks you very fair, Sir," said James.

Charles regarded him thoughtfully, his eyes alight with laughter. He shifted the dog under his arm.

"Damned plausible, a'n't he?" he chuckled, and walked slowly back to his seat.

The Duke watched him uneasily. Roxhythe continued to play with his gloves.

"You don't believe in the French King's offer, Sir?" asked James abruptly.

"I want to know what lies behind."

"You heard M. Colbert."

"I heard a deal of smooth talk."

James sighed.

"You don't trust Louis, Sir?"

"Do you?" riposted the King.

James stared down at his hand lying clenched on the table.

"I trust very few people, Sir. I want no French yoke about our necks. But is this a yoke?"

"Louis would wish it to be without a doubt," replied the King. "The question is: can I circumvent him?"

"Yes." It was Roxhythe who spoke. "Louis cannot afford to offend you, Sir."

"If it comes to that, I cannot well afford to offend Louis," remarked the King.

"Better than can he, Sir. At all costs he must have England, if not at his side, at least not against him. England turns the scale."

"That is so," agreed James. "If Louis plans more wars on the Continent he must be assured of England's help. And there is the cause. For that the alliance is all-important."

Charles became exasperated.

"James, I am thinking of the Cause, as you call it. What matters it to us if England is Catholic or no? It is a secondary consideration. I am thinking how I may profit by the alliance and yet prevent Louis making of me a catspaw."

"Then, Sir, we are privy to this thing from different motives! I wonder that you weigh your own petty advantages before the great Cause! I am privy to the bond only for the good it may do the country! With France at our back we may successfully drive the Faith into the country. It seems that you are privy to the thing for the pecuniary good it may do you!"

Charles nodded amiably. His brother's outbursts never had the slightest effect on his good-humour.

"Quite right, Jamie. And if I am not like to profit overmuch I'll have naught to do with an alliance that bids fair to be a plaguey nuisance."

Roxhythe laid his hat on the table. Charles glanced affectionately in his direction.

"And that brings us to Roxhythe his share in the business. Davy, I have had but one word with you since you

returned from Paris. Tell us exactly what you ascertained."

The Duke leaned back in his chair, scowling. He never liked Roxhythe.

"There is not much to tell, Sir. As yet the scheme is in embryo. Madame d'Orléans is very secret."

"I wonder if I did right to negotiate through her?" said the King. "But I could trust Holles."

"You did quite right, Sir. Madame is to be trusted. At present she is vague—partly because Louis is vague. We must walk carefully. It has been made clear to me that Louis wants to hold England at his beck and call. The offer of aid to you is a bribe, of course. If he fails to snare you he will try to bribe the more corruptible members of the House. At all costs he must have England to back him in his wars on Holland. Roughly speaking what he wants is this: to have England aid him in these wars, and to have England uphold him in his right to any new titles that may fall to him."

"I had guessed the Spanish business to be in his mind," said Charles. "That will not harm me. War with the Dutch? H'm! Does he know my people's temper, I wonder?"

"I think he has great faith in Your Majesty's adroitness. He stipulates too that the Catholic Faith shall be propagated in England. But remember, Sir, war on Holland is his first thought!"

"Is it?" said Charles cheerfully. "I do not think it is mine, though."

James lifted his eyes.

"The Promotion of the Faith is the first matter to be attended to," he said.

Charles pursed his lips.

"I might stipulate for that, Davy. I should gain time."

"You might, Sir."

"You must!" corrected James sharply. "It serves a double purpose. If you successfully drive the Faith in you make your position the more secure, and you know that you have done your duty as a Catholic."

"Very comforting," said Charles. "The first purpose appeals to me more. There is another thing, Roxhythe."

"What is that, Sir?"

"If Louis subdues the Provinces I want provision made for my nephew."

James stared at him.

"Why?"

Charles did not look at him.

"You understand, Roxhythe?"

"Yes, Sir."

"But why?" persisted James.

"Another double purpose, Jamie. Because I pledged my word to his mother to protect his interests."

"You've not done much to protect them during all these years!"

Charles spoke with quiet majesty.

"I have done all that was in my power to do."

"Beyond protesting to De Witt—"

"I could do naught. Nor was it necessary. The Prince has been well cared for, and he was but a child. Now it is different.

"Evidently!" said James. "But where is your double purpose?"

The King's eyes met Roxhythe's.

"I believe it were politic to placate my nephew. I desire to stand well with him."

James pulled at his lip.

"A mere child. Why?"

"Because I think that he will one day become a power not lightly to be overlooked. Are you satisfied?"

James was silent.

"And now, Roxhythe, it is for you to determine the price. Louis refused the two million."

"Two million?" exclaimed James. "What folly!" He rose. "With your leave, Sir, I'll withdraw. You will best arrange this alone!"

"Very well," said Charles. He watched him go out. "Roxhythe, you must discover my sister's attitude in the matter."

"I believe that Madame is fair-minded, Sir."

"What mean you by that?"

"That she will favour neither side. If it were possible she would strive for you. As it is she holds herself neutral. She is a wise intermediary, Sir."

"So it seems," said Charles. "We shall see. In the meantime, Roxhythe, go you to Paris. I shall put this matter before Arlington. I fancy we shall have trouble with him."

"I thought he was your man, Sir?"

"So he is. But his wife is Dutch—and of the House of Orange."

"True. Yet he will stand, I think, by you."

"We shall see," repeated Charles.

CHAPTER III

HER LADYSHIP

THUS began the negotiations between the Kings of France and England. They were necessarily slow, and they entailed many journeys for the favourite to and from Paris. Christopher noticed that the French visits were becoming more and more frequent and decided that the lady must be unusually attractive. He did not worry his head over it at all.

Towards the end of the year came a lull in the proceedings. A deadlock had been reached, and it almost seemed as though the alliance would not take place. Lord Arlington hesitated and demurred, irritating King Louis; and Madame, the fair intermediary, would give Roxhythe no definite answer as to the price that Louis would pay. Both parties were dissatisfied with one another, both demanded what the other would not give. For a time Roxhythe ceased his visits to Paris and found amusement with a certain Lady Crewe, a bride, newly come to town. She was young, beautiful and rather unsophisticated. She was very much in love with her husband, but she was flattered by Roxhythe's attentions.

In October the deadlock had to some extent been passed. The journeys to Paris became more frequent again. During one of them a little stir was created in fashionable London by the arrival of the Lady Frances Montgomery, daughter of the late Duke of Rochefort, and wife of Sir Jasper Montgomery, of the Diplomatic. She had returned from Spain, where she had been for the last three years. She was cousin to my Lord Roxhythe, and before she had married Montgomery there had been much talk of an alliance between her and my lord. Her father had wished it, but evidently she and Roxhythe had not, for London had been denied the thrill of seeing my lord caught

at last. The Duke had not looked favourably on Montgomery. His daughter might have married the bluest blood in France or England had she liked. She had been bred in the French Court; she had beauty, wit and that mysterious something known as charm. She had had many suitors, but not one had she accepted. She preferred to remain single, and, as the Duke could refuse her nothing, single she did remain. When she came to the Restoration Court she made a huge success. Charles himself paid her extravagant compliments; the men fell at her feet. Rumour said that she was as astute as Madame, Duchesse d'Orléans, and had more than once had a finger in various intrigues. Then she met Sir Jasper and electrified Society by deciding to marry him. As usual she had her way. There was a magnificent wedding, and she went away with honest but dull Montgomery and was seen no more.

Now she had returned because her husband had been ordered home. As soon as the news became general every scrap of gossip concerning her was retailed. A great many people wondered whether she had wearied of Montgomery and whether she would amuse herself with her cousin.

It was said of her that she was the one woman with whom Roxhythe had not trifled. They had never been anything dearer than very good friends.

When she had been in London for about a week she gave a reception to which all London flocked. She had not asked Roxhythe to come because she believed him to be in Paris, so she was considerably surprised when, midway through the evening, two gentlemen were announced, one of whom was the Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe, and the other Mr. Dart.

Roxhythe was magnificent in purple and gold. Diamonds scintillated from his breast where his several orders hung, and from his long, thin fingers. He made his entry superbly and swept a glance round the room.

Lady Frances was standing with the young Duchess of Monmouth. He saw her at once, recognising her slim, graceful figure. She was talking animatedly, with many tiny gestures of the hand learnt at the French Court, and

many lightning smiles that showed pearly teeth behind her red lips.

Christopher watched her, conscious of her fascination. He could not take his eyes off her face. It was not so much her beauty which attracted him, but her great vivacity. Her brown eyes flashed as she talked; dimples quivered on her cheeks. Around her was gathered quite a little court, hanging on her lips, waiting for a look or a smile.

Roxhythe glanced at his secretary amusedly.

"She is quite charming, is she not?" he asked.

Christopher drew in his breath.

"Is—that Lady Frances?" he said.

"That is Lady Frances. A sad minx." He laughed softly at Christopher's indignant face.

Frances had seen them. She came across the room, hands outstretched.

"My very dear David! What an honour!"

Roxhythe kissed her hand.

"You did not invite me," he said. "But I came."

"Of course I am delighted! I thought you away, else I should assuredly have asked you to come."

"So I thought," nodded his lordship, pensively. "May I present Mr. Dart? Chris, Lady Frances Montgomery."

My lady flashed her bright eyes at Christopher. She seemed to search his face for the fraction of a second. Then she smiled. Her smile was wonderful. Christopher fell in love with her on the spot.

"I must introduce you to someone very nice," she decided. "Come with me! David, I want to talk to you, so you must not run to Lady Crewe's side yet." She bore Christopher off to the other end of the room. When she came back she found Roxhythe talking to Lord Buckhurst and one or two others.

"No," she said, emphatically. "You may none of you come with us. I've not seen Roxhythe for three years, and I've much to tell him. Charles, if you love me as much as you swear you do, you'll entertain Miss Douglas for me."

Buckhurst grimaced.

"That's a poor substitute for you, Fanny!"

"Dear Charles, Arabella disapproves of you very thoroughly! 'Twill amuse you."

Buckhurst looked gloomy.

"It may. Thy will be done, Fanny!" He walked off.

Lady Frances and Roxhythe withdrew to a small room, adjoining the ball-room. Once there, Roxhythe took his cousin in his arms, and kissed her. Lady Frances made no demur. On the contrary, she returned the kiss, and settled herself on a blue and gold couch.

"David, do you know that it is very refreshing to see you again?" Her humorous eyes challenged him.

Roxhythe sat down beside her.

"It must be." He looked at her quizzically. "The compliment withheld."

"You always were provoking," she retorted. "But are you not glad to see me?"

"Superlatively. You never expect me to make love to you."

"Of course I am flattered," she said.

His lordship was regarding her appraisingly.

"I was afraid the climate might spoil you," he pronounced at length. "Thank heaven, you are as beautiful as ever!"

She tilted her head on one side.

"I thought I was more beautiful than ever!" she said.

"My dear, Jasper is not the judge of beauty that I am. If he told you that, he lied. It were impossible for you to be more beautiful. Riper, perhaps."

"I do not like the word," she answered, gravely. "Next I shall be over-ripe."

"And after that, decay," nodded my lord.

"How ungallant of you!" cried Lady Frances, letting fall her fan. Then she laughed. "In truth, we are getting old, Roxhythe."

"We are," he agreed. "Foiled again, Fanny. Is it London for you now?"

"I think so. Unless Jasper is sent abroad again, which is unlikely. Who is the charming boy?"

"I don't know," replied Roxhythe. "Have you found one?"

"David, you must really not try to impress me with your affectations! I mean the boy you brought here to-night."

"Oh, Christopher! Yes, he is rather likeable, isn't he?"

"Who is he?" insisted Frances.

"He is my secretary. One of the Darts of Suffolk."

"Your secretary? How came he to be that?"

"I really don't remember. I seem to have had him some time."

"He was not with you when I left England."

"No. I think it must have been shortly after you left. My last was a fool. And so untrustworthy."

"Aha? You wanted a discreet man for some intrigue, I suppose?"

Roxhythe looked at her in hurt wonderment.

"My dear Fanny, have you ever known me require assistance in an *affaire*?"

"I meant a political intrigue."

"Oh, lud!" said Roxhythe, and was shaken with laughter.

"Yes, Fan, that is it. At my time of life I am turned plotter. It is very sad."

She looked at him steadily for a moment.

"I wish you would not think me a fool, Roxhythe. How is your beloved King?"

"The same as ever. He will be pleased to see you."

"I think he will. I am going to Whitehall with Jasper on Thursday. You will be there?"

"Since you are going, yes. The compliment granted."

"You know, I am very glad I did not marry you," she told him.

"So am I," said my lord. "We should have quarrelled. 'Tis ever the way when both have wit. I suppose you never quarrel with Jasper?"

"Insufferable man! I shall go." She rose, and held out her hand. "Come, David! You must make yourself very agreeable to everyone."

"Why, I rather thought of leaving!" he protested. "I only came to see you."

"Then you will offend me very grievously. Come!"

He suffered himself to be drawn to his feet.

"If you give way to idle passions you will have lost your chief attraction," he sighed. "If I succeed in offending you I shall lose all interest."

"What a terrible fate were mine, then!" she mocked. "Oh, here is Jasper come to seek me! Jasper, Roxhythe is worse than ever!"

Montgomery grasped my lord's hand.

"I am overwhelmed to see you," he smiled. "But I cannot have my wife monopolized."

"You have it wrong," retaliated Frances. "I monopolized him! He is the gr-reat Roxhythe! Oh fie!" she blew him a kiss and rustled away.

"She is remarkably fascinating," reflected my lord. "But no doubt I should have wearied of her."

On the way home Christopher informed Roxhythe that Lady Frances had asked him to wait on her. He also informed Roxhythe that she was the sweetest, loveliest lady he had ever met.

My lord settled himself more comfortably in his corner of the coach.

"Minx," he murmured. "So she has you in her toils? I had almost come to think you immune."

"I greatly admire and respect her ladyship," said Christopher with dignity.

My lord closed his eyes.

"Yes, that is always the way. Odso, I can scarce remember my calf-love! No doubt she was years older than I."

"You are most provoking to-night," said Christopher huffily.

"So she said," agreed his lordship.

CHAPTER IV

HER LADYSHIP'S PERPLEXITY

"THAT nice child has been here to-day," remarked Lady Frances, suddenly. "I am at a loss."

Her husband looked up, smiling.

"A novel experience for you, my dear. What child?"

"Christopher Dart. David's secretary."

"Oh? Why are you at a loss?"

Lady Frances frowned uncertainly.

"I cannot understand how he should be in Roxhythe's service."

Montgomery laid down his quill.

"Proceed!"

"Now, do not laugh!" begged her ladyship. "I am in earnest."

"Did I laugh?"

"You looked as though you might. That boy is honest."

"Yes?"

"I wish you were more intelligent," sighed her ladyship.

"Though Roxhythe assures me we should quarrel an you were."

"I did not know I had been the subject of your conversation that evening last month."

"Oh, you were not! Please don't sound so offended! We congratulated ourselves that we had not married one another. It was very quaint."

"Highly diverting," agreed Montgomery, drily.

"Indeed, it was! And we nearly did, you know. But never mind that; it's not what I wanted to tell you. It is about Christopher. He has been with Roxhythe for nearly two years, and he worships him!"

"Well?" asked her husband. "What of it?"

"That is not all. He—he respects him! And he is such an upright boy! So very honourable!"

"You seem to have observed him closely."

"Pho!" said Lady Frances. "He is as transparent as air! He knows naught of plots and plotters. He is a very babe in affairs, and is seemingly blind to what goes on around him. And he is with Roxhythe!"

"I cannot see why you marvel at it, Fanny. Roxhythe is no plotter."

Lady Frances leant both elbows on the table. She rested her chin in her hands, and looked steadily across at her husband.

"Do you really think that, Jasper?"

"Of course I think it!" he answered, surprised. "Roxhythe a plotter? My dear, you have some maggot in your head! The man has no mind for aught save clothes, and women, and witticisms!"

"You think he is a fool?"

"A typical courtier," he amended.

A curious smile curved her ladyship's mouth.

"Do you think the King a fool?"

Montgomery fingered his quill.

"No. Alas!"

"What use then do you suppose he has for fools?"

"None. Save when he uses them as dupes."

"Would he keep a fool ever at his side, think you?"

Montgomery perceived whither this led.

"Roxhythe amuses him."

"So have other men. Yet they have faded away. Roxhythe remains."

"He is a man of some parts, of course," admitted Montgomery.

"More than that. He is as clever as sin."

"Oh, my dear Fanny, you over-rate him!"

"I do not. I would wager my reputation that David's inanities are but a mask."

"Your woman's imagination runs away with you, my dear. If he were the clever man you say he is, why should he wish to hide his qualities?"

"So he might serve the King better."

Montgomery twisted one of the curls of his periwig round his finger.

"Oh. Then you infer . . .?"

Lady Frances dropped her eyelids.

"Nothing," she said smoothly. "I only know that I would not trust Roxhythe."

"Trust him! No, nor I. But not because I think him clever."

"Roxhythe acts a part," said Frances slowly. "Of that I am assured. In his position a man sees many things about Whitehall. Yet he is ever ignorant. He is always indifferent, cynical; he knows nothing. If one speaks of intrigue, he fences, and is flippant. He would have the world believe him the idle court-gallant you think him. The world does believe it. But not Lady Frances!"

"Lady Frances is very deep," said Montgomery, sarcastically.

"Lady Frances knows Whitehall and its ways!" she flashed back at him. "I have lived all my life in courts! I know what use have Kings for fools. Why, Jasper, Jasper, where are your wits? Do you forget that Roxhythe has never been away from Charles his side since they fled the country? Charles had no room for any but the most astute during those years. It was plot, plot, plot, all the time!"

"Through Roxhythe?"

"Roxhythe and others. But certainly Roxhythe."

Montgomery sat silent for a while.

"I have a great respect for your wisdom, my dear, as you know. Yet I think in this you are wrong. If Charles had need of plotters, he had also need of men to divert him. Such is Roxhythe."

Lady Frances shut her lips firmly. After a moment she spoke again.

"One day you'll know I was right, Jasper. And you will marvel, even as I do, that Christopher Dart was ever in his service."

"Mayhap," shrugged Montgomery. He went on writing.

Lady Frances left the room. She went up to her own boudoir, and, from her escritoire, took a letter from her

very dear friend, Aimée de St. Morny, Lady-in-waiting to Madame, Duchesse d'Orléans.

“ . . . I was Interested Yesterday, my dear Fanny, to Meet a Kinsman of Yrs. I mean le Marquis de Roxhythe, who is perhaps *épris de Madame*, who is *sans doute éprise de lui*. He is ever in Attendance on her, and Shows himself *trés beau cavalier* . . . ”

“Oh!” said my lady. “Oh! . . . Well, it may be so. It is even probable. And yet . . . I think I shall watch my good Roxhythe.” She nodded briskly and locked the letter away in her desk.

CHAPTER V

LADY CREWE

It was some weeks later that Christopher met an old friend, whom he had not seen for some years. He saw him in the Strand one morning, coming out of one of the houses. He caught his arm.

"Sydney Harcourt!"

Harcourt stared for a moment in perplexity. Then his face cleared, and he grasped Christopher's hand.

"Chris!"

Christopher linked his arm in his. Together they strolled down the Strand.

"I had not thought to meet you to-day, Sydney!"

"Nor I you. 'Oons, lad, but you've changed!" He laughed. "You are a man now!"

"I have need to be!"

"Yes? Roderick is still abroad?"

"With the Prince of Orange," nodded Christopher. "I have not seen him for two years. I was at the Hague in '68, and I found him greatly changed."

"Is that so? He was a very bright youth when I knew him!"

"He's like a psalm-singing Puritan now," said Christopher gloomily. "But tell me of yourself, Sydney! What do you do?"

"I am with Russell as his confidential secretary," replied Harcourt. "And you?"

"I have much the same post, I fancy," smiled Christopher. "I am Lord Roxhythe his secretary." He said it with pride, and was gratified by Harcourt's start of surprise.

"With Roxhythe? You, Chris?"

Christopher nodded.

"I have been with him for nearly two years. Roderick is very angry with me because of it."

Harcourt compressed his lips quickly.

"I confess, I, too, am—surprised. You are with a strange man, Chris."

"I am with a very great man," retaliated Christopher. "If you think to warn me 'gainst my lord, let me tell you that I take such warnings very ill."

The shrewd grey eyes looked into his.

"Oh?" said Harcourt. "I am to congratulate you, then?"

"If you like," answered Christopher.

"Then of course I do. Why should I seek to warn you?"

"Heaven knows! Most people have tried to."

"I shall not, I assure you. You should count yourself fortunate to be with perhaps one of the most influential men of the day."

Christopher was pleased. After that they spoke no more of Roxhythe. He refused an invitation to dine that night, pleading that he was going to Lady Crewe's masquerade, but he accepted for Friday. Then they parted.

When Christopher returned to Bevan House he found that Roxhythe had returned unexpectedly from Paris. Overjoyed he hurried into the library where my lord was seated.

"How very delightful, sir! I did not expect you for another week!" He kissed Roxhythe's hand.

My lord smiled at him.

"Are you really so pleased to see me, Chris?"

"Why, of course I am!" said Christopher, surprised. "How can you ask?"

"So few people are. The King, Fanny, and you. It is quite refreshing. Is everything well with you?"

"Yes, very well. Oh, I had well-nigh forgotten! Lady Crewe came here on Wednesday. She—was very annoyed."

"What an imprudent child she is!" said Roxhythe. "What ailed her?"

"It seems you did not go to her ball last week."

"Did I not? No, I remember now."

"She said you had promised to be present. I found it quite impossible to placate her. I explained that you were

in Paris, but she was the more angry. She left a letter for you."

Christopher chuckled a little, hunting through the desk for it. Roxhythe watched him, a twinkle in his eye. When the note was handed him he unfolded it leisurely and started to read.

"A woman's letter," he remarked at the end, "is at all times a thing to marvel at. An angry woman's letter is a thing to ignore. Remember that, Chris!" He tossed the note into the fire. "Have I an engagement for to-night?"

"Yes," said Christopher, still chuckling. "You have. It is the night of Lady Crewe's masquerade."

Roxhythe's lips twitched.

"It will be amusing," he said. "We will go to it."

It was not until they were seated in the coach that evening on the way to the Crewes' that Christopher remembered his morning's encounter with Harcourt. He told Roxhythe about it. He always told him everything.

My lord was mildly interested.

"Harcourt? Harcourt? Surely I have . . .? Whose secretary did you say he was?"

"Lord Russell's, sir."

"One of the leaders of our respected Country Party. I believe I must have met Harcourt at his house. Is he tall with aquiline features?"

"Yes; and grey eyes."

"I have met him, then. I fancy he is one of those who disapprove of my existence."

"Oh no, sir! He complimented me on being in the service of one of the most influential men of the day."

Roxhythe lost a little of his sleepiness.

"Did he so? And he one of the Country Party. Ah, well!" He closed his eyes.

Christopher roused him presently.

"We are nearly come to the Crewes', sir. Had you not better don your mask?"

"I think I left it behind," said Roxhythe placidly.

Christopher handed him the strip of velvet.

"I thought you would. So I brought an extra one."

"You are invaluable," sighed Roxhythe.

The ballroom at Stoke House was very crowded. As Roxhythe entered, Lady Crewe detached herself from a group of guests and came towards him, rustling silks.

Roxhythe stopped. Lady Crewe stood directly before him, swathed in a pearl grey domino, her red lips in a straight line.

"So, my Lord Roxhythe! You deign to visit me?"

Roxhythe looked down at the golden curls. One hand clutched my lady's domino to her breast. The delicate nostrils were quivering.

"I am indeed honoured," went on that trembling voice. The lady's control broke down. "Oh, how dared you slight me so? How dared you?"

"I?" said Roxhythe. "Sweetest Millicent!"

"You are free with my name, Lord Roxhythe!"

"It is such a pretty name," pleaded my lord.

"Don't try to coax me! Why came you not to my party? Why did you ignore my letter?"

"Dear child, I was in Paris at the time of your party? Believe me, I was desolated."

She gave a short, angry laugh.

"Oh yes, my lord! I make no doubt you were! We have heard of your escapades in Paris! Desolated, forsooth!"

"My dearest, most beautiful one, suppose we move away from this very public spot, and discuss the matter calmly? I will show you that I was indeed desolated." My lord offered his arm.

For an instant Lady Crewe hesitated. Then she looked up into Roxhythe's face and saw his smile.

"Very well, sir." She allowed him to conduct her to an alcove, slightly apart from the rest of the room.

"Now what is the matter?" softly asked my lord. "Is it possible that you are offended with me because I could not come to your party?"

"You made no effort to come! And then you ignored my letter!"

"My dear, it is never wise to address abusive opportunities to me."

The beautiful mouth drooped. My lady turned away, fumbling with her fan. A tiny sob reached Roxhythe.

"Tell me," he said. "Have I sinned beyond forgiveness?"

"You are cruel! cruel!"

"Am I so? I think 'tis you who are the tormentor. Millicent . . . ? Dear one . . . ?"

She did not reply. He drew her close to him, so that her head was almost resting on his shoulder.

"Most Beautiful?"

His nearness intoxicated her. She clung to his fingers.

"You don't care for . . . me! You . . . only pretend . . . because it amuses you! You are quite, quite cold!"

She could feel his arm about her waist, his breath on her hair. Above all, she was conscious of his strange, relentless fascination that not all his neglect could destroy.

"Should I have braved your anger to-night had I not cared?"

"To . . . tease me. Oh, you make me so unhappy!"

"I could make you happy, Millicent, if you would grant me your sweet forgiveness. Come! Am I too vile?"

She twisted one of the ribands of his domino about her finger. His strong, white hand took hers, and pressed it to his lips.

"I cannot help forgiving you," she whispered. "You—you—must not hold me so—here!"

"And I must not kiss you?" Roxhythe bent over her head.

"No—oh no!" She felt his lips on her hair and broke free. "If any should see us! You must let me go! If my husband were looking!" She slipped back into the ballroom.

Roxhythe followed slowly. For a while he stood talking to Lord Finchhelm, but presently he again sought out Lady Crewe.

"My sweet life, I want to talk to you."

Her depression had fled. She smiled naughtily.

"Do you, sir? Why?"

"Can you ask? I've not seen you for nigh on a month!"

She tilted her head.

"What do you want to say to me?"

Roxhythe took her hand.

"I want to tell you how lovely you are."

She was a child, playing with a forbidden toy.

"I do not think I want to hear it."

"Then I'll tell you how much I love you."

"And that I must not hear!"

"You shall feel it, sweetheart."

"You are very wicked, you know," she said, gravely.

"You would not like me else, dear."

"Should I not? Do you think women are like that?"

"Women, child, are the most incomprehensible, mad, divine creatures on this earth. Come with me, and I'll tell you how wonderful one woman is."

"I ought not to. And it is only a game."

"Nothing is so alluring as the 'ought not,' beloved."

"No. But should one give way to temptation?"

"Most certainly one should, for if one does not, it leaves the devil idle."

"Surely he were best idle?"

"Not at all. If he is idle, he rests for a while, devising fresh temptations which are more seductive than the last."

"You are dreadfully wicked!" nodded Millicent. She went out with him.

Two days later Roxhythe left for Paris, to carry on the negotiations between the King of England and an enemy country. Millicent, jealous of an unknown rival, shed bitter tears.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRICE

BEFORE Roxhythe went again to Paris he craved and was granted an interview with the King. The Duke of York was present, and from his uneasy bearing and his black looks, Roxhythe guessed that he was assailed by one of the qualmish fits to which he had of late become subject. He sat by the fireplace, staring moodily into the flames. He barely acknowledged my lord's bow.

The King welcomed his favourite cheerily.

"Well, my David? Ye have fresh news for me?"

Roxhythe kissed his hand.

"I have, Sir. I wished to acquaint you with it before I returned to France, so I begged this audience."

Charles nodded.

"Do matters progress at last?"

"Very fairly, Sir. Yet I think you must not hope for a conclusion this year."

"*Mort de ma vie!* How much longer am I to wait? It is December now and we have been negotiating for over a year!"

"If you would give way to Louis' demands you might conclude the affair at once."

"I'll not give way! Surely you do not advise that?"

"By no means, Sir. I counsel you to wait. I think that it will end in the spring if not before."

"I suppose I must be patient then. But have you discovered the price?"

Roxhythe watched the Duke move angrily and scowl.

"Madame is ever vague. Evidently Louis is wishful of seeing how much he need offer."

"Ay, he's close-fisted. What says my sister?"

"She's hinted at sixty thousand pounds yearly, Sir."

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"And you?"

"I? Oh, I waved it aside, Sir! I told her that if the King of England was to be bought his price was high."

James flushed and stirred again. The King laughed.

"Incomparable Roxhythe! What said she to that?"

"Why she affected finality, Sir. Louis hopes that you will give way."

Charles played with one of his thick curls. He was frowning slightly.

"Roxhythe, you walk round and round the point. How much can I with safety demand?"

My lord studied his polished finger-nails. For a moment he did not speak; the King's frown was reflected on his face.

"In all, Sir, two hundred thousand," he said at last. He spoke with deliberation.

The Duke straightened in his chair.

"It is ridiculous!" he rasped. "Two hundred thousand! You must be mad, my lord!"

Roxhythe said nothing. Charles who had been fondling one of his dogs put it down. He was all attention.

"You think that, Davy?"

"I know it, Sir."

"How?"

Roxhythe twisted one of his rings round.

"Madame hath a great regard for you, Sir. She does not wholly play into King Louis' hands. She remembers that if she is Louis his sister-in-law, she is also your sister."

"Oh. You said once, Roxhythe, that if it were possible she would play into my hands rather than Louis'."

"I said also, Sir, that she was a very wise intermediary. I still say so. It is impossible for her to take your part openly, but she can still help."

"She told you that Louis would go to that figure?"

"N-no. Madame would not be so incautious. She is a very Queen of intriguers. Rather—she gave me that impression."

"You are quick to take impressions, Lord Roxhythe!" sneered the Duke.

Charles ignored him.

"You are sure of this, David?"

My lord shrugged.

"I am never sure, Sir."

This seemed to satisfy the King. He sat with his chin in his hand, thinking.

"Louis would never pay me such a sum without a struggle," he mused. "If I stand too firm, I may lose all . . ."

"No," said Roxhythe.

"—Yet, as you so wisely remarked, if I am to be bought, my price is high."

"My Lord Roxhythe speaks airily!" snapped James. "He cannot be certain of such facts. Louis will never go to that figure. Is it likely?"

Roxhythe's calm eyes surveyed him.

"It is more than likely, sir."

"It means a struggle, eh?" asked Charles.

"The thing is not worth having if you have not to fight for it, Sir."

"A King does not haggle!" retorted James.

"I repeat, Sir, if you are to be bought it had best be for a fair price. If Louis wants an alliance with England, he must pay dearly for it."

"Roxhythe is right," agreed the King. "I believe in sucking the French King of all he can give."

James brought his fist down on the table with some force.

"The whole business is degrading and un-Kinglike! I dislike secret negotiations. We show ourselves afraid of the Government by trafficking with France behind its back. Why not do the thing openly and Royally?"

"Why not leave the country at once?" shrugged Charles.

"Sir, you are over-timorous! The army is behind you. You have naught to fear."

"No? Jamie, I had thought you wiser. Would you have more bloodshed in England? Would you put both our heads in danger?"

"I would have straight dealings, and the Faith at all costs."

"You would not get it by foolhardiness. You would only ruin my popularity; jeopardize my crown."

"Anything were better than this hole-and-corner treaty!" Charles grimaced.

"Even exile? No, no Jamie! This is an easier way."

"An underhand way! A timorous way!"

"Let us be honest, my dear. We are afraid of the Government, alack! It is too powerful. Therefore it must be tricked and turned against itself. So shall I gain power."

"You'll lose your popularity when the treaty is discovered," returned the Duke.

A little chuckle escaped the King.

"Shall I, Davy?"

"With some factions," answered Roxhythe, gravely.

"Only for the moment."

"That depends, Sir, on how far you play into Louis' hands."

The Duke rose and went over to the window. For some moments he stood staring out into the gardens. Then he turned, and came back to the table.

"Louis will require you to play very deeply into his hands, Sir," he said.

"He may require it, but I do not think I shall do it," smiled Charles.

"You will have to," said James, tersely. "Oh, there are many points against this alliance!" He paced up and down the floor, his hands linked behind his back. Suddenly he stopped, and faced the King. "Sir, I implore you, have the matter put before the Cabinet! Enforce your will upon them, but make an honourable and a safe treaty! No one wants the alliance more than do I, but I do not want to play the part of catspaw to Louis, as we must if we make these secret terms. We show Louis that we stand in fear of Parliament. Oh, 'tis madness, Sir! I have thought well on it, and I know 'tis madness."

Charles laid his hand on his brother's arm.

"James, you are wrong. Can you not see that it is not I who will play the part of catspaw?"

James stared.

"Who then?"

The most curious of smiles fitted across the King's face.

"Louis, my friend."

James shook off his hand.

"The suspense has turned your brain! You must indeed be mad if you think that!"

"I do not think, James. I know."

"Pah! If you sign this secret treaty they concoct, Louis holds you in the hollow of his hand! An you fail to fulfil your part, he will denounce you to the Government! And he'll fail to pay you your wage!"

"Expose me? Do you really think that?"

"Assuredly!"

"My good brother, he dare not. He would lose all hope of gaining England, if he did. The nation would be hot for war with France. I tell you, James, Louis is the one power I do not fear. Be reasonable! Leave this matter to me! You were not fashioned for the intriguer's part."

"I thank God, no!" cried James. "I see you will go your own wilful way, but I pray you will not drown us all in a sea of disaster!"

"You are so inconsistent," sighed Charles. "A moment back 'twas you who were the fernaught. Now you are as timorous as I never was. Do you so love the Government?"

"No, by heaven!"

"Then why hesitate to trick them as they would not hesitate to trick you? Has the Government treated us so well that we need consider it?" He snapped his fingers. "Bah! So much for the Government!"

"'Tis not that I cavil at . . ."

"You fear that I shall in my turn be duped by Louis. I shall not. You fear a French yoke. You shall not be called upon to bear one."

"I fear you will sell England to France!" said James, impetuously.

"I shall never do that, rest assured. Charles Stuart is no man's chattel. If I accept Louis his offer 'tis for the furtherance of mine own ends. I enter into this bond with open eyes."

"If I could believe that . . .!"

"You can believe it."

"And that is your last word? You'll not lay the matter before the Cabinet?"

For the first time Charles showed exasperation.

"James, in the face of the Triple Bond, how can I?"

James shook his head wearily.

"I know not. Ye seem able to do most things." He paused. "Well, there's naught to be gained by argument. I'll leave you."

"You stand by me in this matter, Jamie?"

"I must." James spoke over his shoulder. The next moment he was gone.

"I was never so at one with His Grace," remarked Roxhythe.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST SEED OF DOUBT

ON Friday, two days after Roxhythe's departure for France, Christopher set out to visit his friend Harcourt at his house in Great Queen Street.

He was pleased to renew the acquaintance, but he could not help feeling that he and Harcourt would now have very little in common. The Country Party was always steadily opposed to the Court Party, and most of its members held the Court and all its ways in abhorrence. Once Christopher had held their views himself but since he had been with Roxhythe he had changed his opinions. His father had always pulled a long face when King Charles was mentioned. He had solemnly warned his sons to have naught to do with the vicious Court and the dissolute King. Christopher had never taken him very seriously; he had abundant trust in Charles' integrity. He thought it impossible that a King should be worthy of suspicion; he laughed at his father's gloomy prognostications. Mr. Dart had prophesied that the King would make a sorry substitute for the Protector. He said over and over again that no Stuart could run straight: they must always choose the crooked path. He warned his sons to trust neither in the King nor in any of those around him. Christopher saw now how wrong he had been; life with Roxhythe had taught him that. He hoped that Harcourt would not inveigh against the Court, for he felt that he could not discuss the matter calmly. Since he had been at Bevan House he had become acquainted with so many courtiers and liked most of them so much, that he could not bear to hear ill spoken of them by the Country Party whose members he had come to consider very worthy but very dull. He hoped, too, that Harcourt would not advise him to quit Roxhythe. From his manner the other day he thought that he would not, but

since he had received so many sinister warnings he was ever on his guard.

So he arrived at Great Queen Street. He was introduced to Madam Harcourt. She came of an old Puritan stock, and she was very properly grieved at the company that Christopher kept. Several times he caught her eyeing him with a species of sad gravity that annoyed him beyond words. He was thankful when dinner came to an end, and the lady left her husband and his guest to their wine.

Harcourt pushed the decanter towards him.

"Fill up your glass, Chris, and tell me all that you have been doing since I saw you!"

Christopher obeyed the first behest.

"I don't think I have done anything," he said. "My life is quite uneventful. You will have more to tell me."

"Oh, I . . . ! No, I do my work, and for the rest there's naught. Come! Tell me about yourself!"

Christopher laughed.

"I do my work, and go out a little, and for the rest——"

"There's something! Were you in Roxhythe's service when you went to Holland? Or was that before you joined him?"

Christopher tilted his glass so that the red wine caught the light, and sparkled.

"I was in his service," he answered.

"Strange! I had thought my lord would not have been absent from Whitehall for so long."

"If you cast your mind back," said Christopher, slowly, "you will remember that there was a slight difference—between His Majesty and my master. Roxhythe found it expedient to go abroad for a while."

"I do remember something of the sort," frowned Harcourt. "I remember London was a-hum with the news."

"Yes?" said Christopher. "Well, that was why he went away."

"To Holland . . . Lord Roxhythe usually goes to Paris!" said Harcourt, smiling.

"He has many friends in Holland whom he wished to visit," replied Christopher.

Harcourt drew him on to the subject of the Prince of Orange. He wanted to know if Christopher had ever seen him. In fact, there was much that he wanted to know. He insisted that Christopher should tell him of his life with Roxhythe. At the end of the recital he regarded Christopher rather strangely for a moment. Then he smiled.

"It seems you are very fortunate," he said. "I'd give much to be in your shoes!"

Christopher felt that this was not true.

"You would find my master a change from Lord Russell!" he said. "I do not think you would like my life."

"Perhaps not. By the way, I saw Lord Roxhythe at the play the other night. What a comely man he is!"

Christopher warmed.

"He is very handsome," he agreed. "And he is more than that. He is very great."

"Indeed, yes. He has much power."

"I did not mean power. I mean he has a great nature."

Harcourt pushed his chair back from the table, so that his face was slightly in the shadow.

"Ah? I had not thought he had much depth of character, I confess . . ."

"You don't know him!" said Christopher quickly. "He is brave and upright, and clev——" He stopped.

"Clever?" ended Harcourt, smoothly. "He does not show it."

Christopher recovered himself.

"Well—no!" he laughed. "Perhaps he is not clever! I am carried away by my love for him. No, he is brave and honourable. I have never known him perform a mean act. But I do not think he is clever."

"He hath a very lively wit, if all I hear be true."

"A ready tongue," said Christopher. "He is very indolent."

"Yes." Harcourt peeled a nut abstractedly. "I suppose it is for that reason that he doth not meddle in intrigue."

"He has no taste for plotting," replied Christopher, in all good faith. "Indeed he laughs at intrigue."

"Very wise," said Harcourt, still busy with his nut. "And what does he to-night?"

"I do not know," answered Christopher. "He is away from home."

The shrewd eyes looked up for a moment and fell once more.

"Again?" asked Harcourt. "I fear your master is of a very gay disposition, Chris! Paris, I suppose?"

Christopher sipped his wine.

"Yes, Paris. I believe he has met a very fair lady whom he adores for the moment. It is his way."

"Oh! In the household of Madame, eh? We hear tales of it even in this quiet house. Some say it is Madame herself."

"Maybe." Christopher was not interested. He had had enough of the subject. Evidently Harcourt had not.

"She must be very fascinating, who'er she be," he remarked. "My lord has been to France so much during the past year. We thought it impossible that it should be for a woman and naught else. He must have business there, surely?"

Christopher's brows drew perceptively nearer.

"No, he has not. It is nothing for my lord to go often to Paris! You take a great interest in his affairs!"

Harcourt ate his nut.

"Forgive my impertinence! I am interested in all that concerns you, Chris. Let us talk of something else!"

Christopher went home, thinking hard. Unperceptive he might be, but he was wise enough to see that Harcourt had been more than casually curious about his affairs. He went over the evening in his mind. First the questions concerning the journey to Holland; then the questions concerning my lord's French journeys. Christopher remembered that Lady Frances had talked to him on that subject. She had wanted to know what it was that drew my lord to Paris. Well, he had not known. He still did not know. He guessed that it was some woman for it was always that. He had not puzzled over the matter at all. It was not unusual for Roxhythe to journey to Paris;

no one, save Lady Frances and Harcourt, had thought it unusual. Why should these two strive to draw explanations from him? What did they suspect? Why did they suspect? He resolved to speak to Roxhythe himself. If he had aught to confide, surely my lord would tell it to him?

Christopher went into the library and lighted candles. He found an invitation from Lady Frances to wait on her one day. She chided him for what she termed his neglect. She believed he had tired of her already!

It was a letter such as his mother might have written. Christopher folded it carefully and put it away.

Next day he went to her house, and was admitted into my lady's private parlour. It was a tastefully furnished room, hung in blue and gold to suit my lady's colouring. It looked south on to the gardens.

Frances came to him, wonderfully dressed and coiffed.

"You wicked boy! To think I had to send for you!" She allowed him to kiss her hand. "Confess! You've no excuse?"

"I did not like to plague you too often, Lady Frances!" stammered Christopher.

"What nonsense!" She sat down. "Did you not know that I like young things about me?"

"It is very kind of you," said Christopher. "I love to come."

"That is very well," nodded her ladyship. "But this time I want you for a purpose."

"If there is aught I may do——"

"Well, there is, but don't make a speech about it, dear boy. I am past the age of such vanities. Reserve them for your sweetheart."

"I have none!"

"Then it is time you had! No matter; you are young yet. Best keep away from such things . . ." She sighed.

"These are sad times, Chris, and I've led a wicked life! So I know all about it! Unless you find a very nice girl, I shall not allow you a sweetheart!"

"Indeed, I do not want one!"

"Ungrateful boy! But listen! I contemplate a masquerade down at Hatchley, when the warmer weather comes. Of course it must excel all others in brilliance."

"Of course it will if you are there!" answered Christopher.

"Naturally I shall be there. You are not to make me pretty speeches! Well, as I say, it must be a very great success. For I intend to ask His Majesty to grace it with his presence."

"Will he?" asked Christopher, wide-eyed.

"Why, yes! His Majesty has a fondness for me, even though I have mended my ways. He will come. Therefore, Chris, I must have Roxhythe. You see?"

"Is he so needful to your party's success?" smiled Christopher.

"You know he is! No one would dream of entertaining Royalty if they could not be assured of Roxhythe's presence. So I must be assured of it. There's the difficulty. One cannot rely on David. One thinks one is safe until the last minute, when lo, and behold! there is no Roxhythe!"

"He would never serve you so." Christopher shook his head. "You have only to ask him."

"Indeed he would! He has done it before! Oh, la—la! what a state I was in! I vowed I would never forgive the wretch—no, nor receive him neither. And then he appeared one day to dinner, and I had not the heart to chide him." She sighed. "'Tis always the same. You may be never so angry with him when he is absent, but the moment you see him—pouf! The anger is gone! But I deviate, I deviate. My husband tells me that I can never walk straight to my point. Is he not rude? Yes. Well, I must have Roxhythe. That is why I wanted to see you."

"How can I help you?" wondered Christopher.

"Dull boy! For one thing you can see that he accepts no other invitation for that night. Oh yes, that has been known to happen, Chris. Roxhythe accepts all invitations haphazard, and finds that he has as many as six for the same night. So he throws them all away and goes to the one house to which he was not invited. Now don't laugh!

It's very serious. Do you give me your word you will prevent this happening?"

"I promise it shall not happen!" chuckled Christopher. "But what am I to do if your invitation comes not first?"

"Oh, you must destroy the first in that case!" said her ladyship airily. "He will never remember. Not that he would care a fig for't an he did. The other thing that you must do, Chris, is to see that he does not go to Paris or what not on the day. You must make him come to me. *C'est entendu?*"

"I'll try," promised Christopher. "But one does not 'make' my lord do anything."

"He'll do what you ask, never fear! I really believe he hath some sort of an affection for you."

Christopher flushed.

"Some sort . . .?" he interrogated.

Lady Frances looked at him for a moment. Her bright eyes softened.

"Chris, dear, don't love Roxhythe too greatly," she said. The laughter had gone from her voice.

Christopher's thoughts leapt back two years. He saw himself walking with de Staal in Rotterdam, and heard de Staal's warning:

". . . You will love heem ver' mooch one day, only—I warn you—do not love heem too mooch for he is Roxhyt'e, and he not care for anyone but heemself, and hees Prince . . ."

"Lady Frances, why do you say that?" he asked quickly. "Why should I not love my lord?"

Lady Frances stared down at her rings.

"I like you, Chris. I—don't want you to—get hurt."

". . . One day, per'aps, he hurt you ver' mooch, eef you not take care. So I warn you . . ."

"Please tell me why you say that!" begged Christopher. "Why should he hurt me? What reason have you for misjudging him so?"

"I can't tell you, Chris. I do not know. But Roxhythe—is Roxhythe, and I think one day you will be disappointed.

You think him very great, very good; suppose it were not so? Suppose he were not so true?"

"It is impossible! When have you found him untrue? What right have you to warn me against him?"

She laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"None—none! Indeed it may be impossible! But—oh, he would never return your regard! He cares for no one save himself! I don't want you to think him perfect—to reverence him so greatly! I don't want you to be so much under his influence!"

Christopher's eyes were flashing.

"Perhaps you would advise me to quit his service, Lady Frances? It would not be the first time I have received such advice!"

"I fear it were useless," she said. "I only beg you not to trust in him too much. He is utterly, utterly selfish."

"He loves his King—his Country!"

"Don't let us speak of it any more! You are greatly offended with me, I know! But—remember, Chris!"

The angry look died out of his eyes.

"Forgive me if I have been rude, Lady Frances! I did not mean to be, but I cannot bear to hear ill of my lord! Because he is indolent, and does not interest himself in affairs, people dub him untrustworthy. It is unjust! Even you think it impossible that a man should be above suspicion! I—well let us talk of something else!" His boyish smile peeped out.

Lady Frances nodded.

"What we really want to discuss is how to bring him to my masquerade," she said. "Only I deviated again."

"I'll send him to you," promised Christopher. "I think he will be only too honoured."

"Pho!" My lady snapped her fingers. "So much for that! And you are to bring him. Of course I am inviting you."

"How—how very kind you are!" exclaimed Christopher. "Thank you very much, but do you think you want me?"

"I had not asked you otherwise. Now, listen, Chris! I have decided that masquerade had best be in June, so unless

I change my mind, June it will be. I shall not send out the invitations for some time yet, but you may tell Roxhythe. Tell him, too, that the success of my party depends on his being present. 'Twill flatter his vanity."

"I will. I'll tell him as soon as he comes home." The words were hardly out of his mouth before he had regretted them.

Lady Frances looked up sharply.

"Home? Where then is he?"

"I think—in Paris," said Christopher uncomfortably.

"Again! Then—" she stopped. "Yes. He is very much in love with Madame, is he not?"

"I—I believe so!" said Christopher, who was sick of the sound of the Duchess d'Orléans' sobriquet. He prepared to make good his escape.

CHAPTER VIII

MADAME

ROXHYTE proceeded to Paris in a blaze of magnificence, and on his arrival went at once to the Louvre, to the apartments of M. le Comte de Saint-Aignan. The doors flew open before him, and he was ushered into the private room of M. le Comte.

The room was furnished sumptuously and was much gilded. M. le Comte, swathed in a marvellous satin wrapper, was reposing on a silken-covered divan. In one hand he had a book of poems; the other was held by his valet, who knelt at his side, manicuring monsieur's delicate nails. The air was heavy with some sweet scent; a fire burned in the grate. On every embroidered seat were cushions; the rugs that covered the polished floor were very thick and soft.

When Roxhythe was announced the Comte dropped his book in surprise and swung his legs to the ground.

"*Mon Dieu!* Roxhyt'e!"

Roxhythe came forward gracefully.

"If I am very inopportune, say so, my dear Comte."

"Inopportune! *Mais non!* How could such a thing be?" cried Saint-Aignan. He rose, and clasped my lord's hand. Over his shoulder he addressed the valet.

"François, you may go. Tell them to see to monsieur's apartments and his baggage. *Vite!*"

"*Oui, monsieur.*" The man slipped out.

Saint-Aignan drew his guest to a chair.

"But sit down, *mon cher!* Why are you here?"

Roxhythe put his hat on the table. He cast the Comte a quizzical glance.

"My dear Henri, you know as well, perhaps better, than I do myself."

The Comte made a little gesture of protest.

"Roxhyt'e! So blunt! So brusque!"

"I cry your pardon! You want a pretty phrase, eh? Well, I have come on account of the *beaux yeux* of Madame."

"Oh, that!" The Comte threw out his hands. "It will suffice. They think that in England?"

"I really don't know. It is quite likely."

"They do not know you in England? Not even now?"

"Henri, you are a rogue. Do you think that you know me?"

"*Mais oui! Tu es un grand poseur, mon ami!*"

"Then they know me in England?"

"No. They do not think you an intriguer."

Roxhythe drew out his comfit-box.

"Let me offer you a sweetmeat!"

The Comte accepted one smiling.

"You find that a good way to turn the subject?"

"An excellent way. I have never known it fail."

"Except with me!"

"Oh, you! You are incorrigible, Henri! But do strive to remember that I am an idle *flâneur!*"

"I will try. You do not intend to confide in me?"

"But certainly! I bought these quite modish boots at Piccat's. My gloves I obtained with much difficulty at Dormont's. You'll observe the gold fringe with the blue entwined. I conceived the idea. So now we have gloves à la Roxhythe. I have my uses, you see."

The Comte could not resist inspecting the gloves. He did it surreptitiously and pretended that he was not interested.

"*Peste!* What do I want with your gloves? *Va donc!* You've naught to tell me of your business in Paris?"

"You'll hear it all from His Majesty. Why plague me?"

Saint-Aignan almost pouted.

"You are as secret as the dead. *Eh bien!* Tell me of your cold, dark city. What of Whitehall?"

"The same as ever. And the cold, dark city is very bright and spring-like."

"*C'est vrai?* Ah! Roxhyt'e!" He straightened in his chair.

"Well, what now?" My lord looked lazily across at him.

"How dared you stay with de Guiche last month? Why did you not come here as before?"

"Two reasons."

"Give them, *vaurien!* You will be abominably rude, I know!"

"I shall. Firstly, de Guiche showed a marked desire for my company; secondly, I had little or no desire for yours. Are you satisfied?"

"*Parfaitement!*" The Comte's mobile face was wreathed in smiles. "Inimitable one! And for how long do you intend to honour me?"

"I am not sure. Not more than ten days. Can you bear with me so long as that?"

"I could bear with you for much longer. You refresh me. You have made your bow to the King?"

"No, I came straight to you."

"Ah, you must go to His Majesty! He will be delighted to see you again. I tell you, Roxhyt'e, it is only in France that you are appreciated."

"Oh, no! They appreciate me in England, I assure you."

"A maker of gloves! Bah! I shall take you with me to-night."

Roxhythe turned an inquiring eye upon him.

"To the levée," nodded Saint-Aignan.

Roxhythe sighed.

"I believe I shall be indisposed. Your Grand Monarcque is so damned austere."

Saint-Aignan laughed at him.

"That will be good for you, *mon cher!* A change from your King, eh?"

"Yes," said Roxhythe. "King Charles, thank God, is not of a strenuous disposition."

"But you will come?"

Roxhythe rose. He smiled down at the brisk Comte.

"For the good of my soul," he bowed.

He went to the levée, gorgeously clad in silver and pale blue, with slashings of rose-pink. Even the critical Saint-Aignan was pleased to approve of his costume. He observed that Roxhythe "took the eye."

His Majesty was very gracious. He allowed Roxhythe to kiss his hand, and he stayed for some moments to talk to him. Then he pursued his regal way, an imposing little figure, bearing himself with all the haughtiness, the sublime magnificence that characterised him.

Roxhythe always protested that His Most Christian Majesty was a figure of fun, but in his heart he must have respected him, although he never acknowledged it. He remarked, when pressed, that Louis tickled his sense of humour.

When the King left him my lord paid some extravagant compliments to the La Vallière, under the eye of Madame de Montespan, for whom he possessed some strange fascination, until that eye was flaming with anger. Then he left La Vallière, and paid still more extravagant compliments to La Montespan, to the amusement of Mademoiselle. After that he disappeared in the wake of de Guiche, and was next seen in attendance on Mademoiselle de Foucheron, one of the Queen's ladies.

Monsieur, as was called the Duc d'Orléans, strolled across the room, saw Roxhythe, exclaimed at him, and claimed his attention. Roxhythe's boredom grew. He did not find the King's brother entertaining. He presently departed, taking with him one Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau. He appeared no more that evening.

Saint-Aignan found him in elegant déshabillé, in his room, some hours later.

"*Mais, mon ami!* Madame has been asking for you!"

"Alas!" Roxhythe sat down. "I met Monsieur instead."

"Madame did not arrive until an hour later. I told her you were fatigued from your journey and had retired early. And why did you drag de Courcillon with you? *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, tu es incorrigible!*"

"Oh? Was it not permitted? De Courcillon amuses me. We went into the gardens and exchanged reminiscences. I never believe in outstaying my welcome."

Saint-Aignan caught sight of himself in the glass.

"I am not satisfied with this wig," he mused. "It lacks that indescribable something—My dear Marquis, you

could not outstay your welcome, but certain it is that every one is ten thousand times more intrigued to see you now that you are gone. It is very curious."

"No, very natural. I never stay longer than an hour at a levée."

Saint-Aignan started to laugh.

"*Pardieu, Roxhyt'e! Que tu es amusant!* And they tolerate you at Whitehall? La-la! That is why they call you enigmatical! Because you do things that no one else dare dream of doing! And you have not offended to-night! No. '*Voilà,*' they say.—'*C'est Roxhyt'e!*' Oh, *grand poseur!*"

"Go to bed," smiled my lord. "You fatigue me!"

"I would you might stay here an hundred years," continued Saint-Aignan. "I should never weary of you!" He went out, still chuckling.

Roxhythe arrived at the Palais Royal next afternoon, and inquired for Madame.

The lackey shook his head.

"Madame does not receive this afternoon, monsieur."

Roxhythe tapped his comfit-box with an impatient finger.

"My friend, you are not acquainted with me. I am Roxhythe."

The man bowed at once.

"Pardon, milor'! If milor' will enter, I will inform Madame. Madame has said she will receive milor'."

Roxhythe was shown into a great room over-looking the courtyard.

After a few moments the lackey returned.

"If milor' will deign to follow me. . . ."

He led Roxhythe up the grand staircase, and across the hall, to a smaller room which was Madame's private salon.

The Duchesse rose at his entry, and extended her hand.

"I have been expecting you, my lord."

Roxhythe bowed, carrying her fingers to his lips. If he ever bent the knee to a woman, that woman was Henrietta Stuart, Duchesse d'Orléans.

"I am honoured, Madame."

She waved him to a chair, and made a sign to her lady-in-waiting to leave the room. The lady went out, gracefully.

"Sit down near me! *C'est cela!* Tell me, did you recognize my *demoiselle d'honneur?*"

Roxhythe frowned.

"Was she with you at Dunkirk, Madame?"

"And in London. You do not remember?"

"On the contrary. Mademoiselle de K roualle. His Majesty conceived a liking for her."

Madame's great eyes scanned his face.

"Mademoiselle desires to join the Court at Whitehall."

Roxhythe's lips twitched.

"I see. Well, you have chosen a fit envoy."

"So I think. Charles will permit it?"

"No doubt he will be delighted."

Madame had charming dimples. She showed them now.

"He is a sad man," she said. "Poor Charles!" The dimples vanished. "Well—M. Colbert de Croissy informs us that His Majesty—considers."

"What I admire about M. Colbert is his careful truth," remarked Roxhythe.

"Then His Majesty has not come to a decision?"

"By no means. Subject to certain conditions he will give the matter his serious consideration."

"Ah!" Madame pulled a cushion into place. "Go on, Roxhythe."

My lord chose and ate a comfit with great deliberation. Then he snapped the box and put it away.

"Madame, you must forgive me and I weary you, but I wish to come to an understanding. You'll permit me to go back a little. In February as you know, M. Colbert was granted an audience at Whitehall. There were present, His Majesty, His Grace of York, Sir Thomas Clifford, and myself. M. Colbert laid before us as prettily worded a scheme as it has ever been my lot to listen to. The second thing I admire in M. Colbert is his capacity for vague terms. The proposition that he unfolded was rosy in hue—for England. The only point where we were left in the

dark regarded France. His Majesty was, and still is, curious to know in what way France stands to profit by the alliance."

"Did M. Colbert not tell you?" evaded Madame.

"M. Colbert showed himself most astute except in one point. That was his estimation of King Charles. He did not give him credit for any brain, Madame."

"M. Colbert knows that His Majesty is—very wise."

"Then he did not intend to flatter him by showing that knowledge. He gave us fair words but he omitted to tell us exactly what it is that France requires of England."

"Perhaps he thought His Majesty astute enough to guess that."

"It may be so. But, Madame, it is not King Charles his custom to sign treaties on supposition."

"Roxhythe, did I not tell you myself? Why recall all this?"

"Madame," he answered, bowing. "I have always said that you were born to be a politician. You also gave me vague explanations and fair words. I want plain speaking; that is why I recall it. Till now you have refused to speak plainly."

She sat still, twisting the cushion tassel about her finger.

"You are very bold, my lord."

"Your pardon, Madame, no. Rather 'tis you and King Louis who are bold to seek to cozen my master."

Her irrepressible smile peeped out.

"I think perhaps you are right, Roxhythe. I will be more explicit."

Again he bowed.

"King Louis is at war with Holland. At any moment he may be called upon to war with Spain. France is very powerful; she can easily support the cost of these wars. But . . ." Madame looked up. ". . . She must be assured that England will not enter into the conflict on Holland's side. That might—I say might, Roxhythe—turn the scale. Louis is cautious. He does not want to run the risk of defeat. So he seeks to bring about this treaty. You know all this."

"Yes, Madame, but I wanted it from your own lips. This war with Spain—I gather it would only come in the event of the Spanish King's death?"

"That is so. The matter is very near to Louis' heart."

"So I apprehend. Now, M. Colbert spoke with his engaging airiness of wars. He told us that King Louis would require England to aid him in these wars. Does this apply to the possible war with Spain?"

"Of course it does."

"I wonder if King Louis ever gave the Triple Bond his attention?"

"Why?"

"Because if he had carefully read that bond he would have seen that England has promised to hold Spain inviolate."

"He knows that."

"Yet he proposes this?"

"Roxhythe, the whole of this treaty is a violation of the Triple Bond! Why cavil at that one point?"

"That one point, Madame, is direct. The rest is vague, and might be termed a violation. This is too positive."

"You want it kept out of the treaty?"

"I do. It is no matter to King Charles whether or no France usurps the throne of Spain. But it is possible that Clifford and Arlington might not see eye to eye with His Majesty there. Can you not employ one of those vague terms, Madame?"

"To leave a loop-hole for Charles? Roxhythe, Roxhythe!"

"All I ask is that you do not specify any particular war. You may make it as blind as you please, but pray have a thought for Messieurs Clifford and Arlington their scruples."

"They must know what it is that Louis hath in his mind?"

"They know, yes. But they can shut their eyes to the obvious so long as it is not made too obvious."

Her laughter bubbled over.

"How wise you are, Roxhythe! I will tell King Louis. Is that all you want with me?"

"I fear I am trespassing on your time, Madame. It is not all. There are two more points."

She sighed.

"Let us have the first."

"The first, Madame, is the point on which you have—pardon me—consistently evaded me. You say that King Louis wishes to see the Catholic religion furthered in England. He also wishes England to join him in subduing the Provinces."

"The two are not incompatible," said Madame.

Roxhythe smiled a little.

"Are they not, Madame? Yet I think you will agree that they cannot both be done at one and the same time."

Madame twitched her gown with fingers that trembled.

"Roxhythe, I am tired of this subject."

"And I, Madame. Therefore I wished to have the question settled. His Majesty stipulates that the furtherance of Catholicism in England shall precede war with the Dutch."

"Yes, Roxhythe. And King Louis stipulates that war with the Dutch shall come first."

"I am sorry. May I state my case?"

"Please do."

"It is this: by making England Catholic once more King Charles his position is strengthened. He may then safely enter into hostilities against Holland. If he does so now there will be uproar in the Houses, perhaps discovery of this compact; even failure."

Madame looked up. She scanned Roxhythe's face thoughtfully.

"My lord, you have known my brother for many years."

"I have had that honour, Madame."

"I also have known him for many years."

"Yes, Madame?"

"Yes, Roxhythe. I know that he is astute; I see that he wishes to avoid war with Holland; I know too that this desire for Catholicism is a blind to King Louis, and possibly a sop to my brother James his scruples. King Charles

can twist and dupe his Parliament with the utmost ease. Am I right?"

"Not entirely, Madame. My argument still stands."

"Because of James?"

"No. It is King Charles his wish."

Madame bit her lip. She seemed to consider.

"So I am to bear that message to King Louis?"

"I shall be greatly indebted to you if you will, Madame."

"I think I will do it, Roxhythe. And we shall see. Is that all?"

"I am very tiresome, Madame. There is still the second point."

Suddenly her gravity left her. She threw out her hands, laughing.

"I know what is coming now!" she despaired.

"*Mordieu*, I'll never act intermediary again! The price!"

Roxhythe did not smile.

"An all important question, Madame."

She folded her hands.

"Proceed."

"M. Colbert—I think I told you of my admiration for his vagueness?"

"Chut!" she reproved him.

"I thought so. M. Colbert spoke of the bribe—no, I beg your pardon—the allowance that King Louis wished to offer my master. We were both surprised and gratified to hear of this matter. But M. Colbert contrived and still contrives to leave us unsatisfied after all. He forgot to mention figures. I fear he is very absent-minded, Madame."

"Did I not mention figures when you last were here?" asked Madame.

"I have no recollection of it. I remember you gave vent to some pleasantry on the subject."

"Pleasantry, sir?"

"I believe so. You spoke of sixty thousand pounds, or some such trifle."

"That was no pleasantry, Roxhythe."

My lord's brows rose.

"I did you the honour to treat it as such, Madame."

Madame studied the cushion tassel.

"Well? What does Charles want?"

"He will sign your treaty, Madame, for the annual allowances of two hundred thousand pounds paid quarterly. No less."

Madame bit her lip.

"Impossible!"

Roxhythe took up his hat.

"In that case, Madame, we are wasting time. The negotiations need proceed no further." He rose as he spoke.

Madame raised her hands.

"Oh, la-la! So haughty? No, no, sit down, Roxhythe! We must talk of this."

Roxhythe relaxed again.

"What is there to talk of, Madame? Those are King Charles his terms. It but remains for you to put them before King Louis."

"Shall we be quite honest?" said Madame, sweetly.

"You name that figure—why?"

"It seems a fair price," answered Roxhythe. "Or do you want me to be really honest?"

"I said so."

"Very well. I am, as I was informed the other day, very quick to take impressions. I received one from you that led me to advise my master to ask that sum of Louis."

"Aho! I wondered if you were as stupidly obtuse as you appeared. It seems you are not. I felicitate you, my lord. But I do not think I gave you such a decided impression."

"You gave me to understand that Louis was prepared to go to a far greater sum than sixty thousand. The rest I gathered from mine own intuition, and various other sources."

"My Lord Roxhythe, you are either a very clever man or else a fool. I do not think that Louis will go to that figure. One hundred thousand perhaps. But two hundred thousand! It is a very different matter."

"You will see, Madame. It is King Charles his last word."

She looked at him admiringly.

"You have unbounded confidence in yourself, Roxhythe. Do you tell me that that is my brother his last word? I seem to see your hand alone in it. You must be very sure."

"I am very sure," he replied.

"So was Lord Arundell sure when he asked two million."

"But I, Madame, am not Lord Arundell."

"No," she sighed. "I would you were. You are quite certain?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Then we understand one another. I'll give—King Charles his last word—to Louis. You are satisfied?"

He rose.

"Since I am assured of your support in the matter, yes, Madame."

"You are audacity itself," she said. "Will you wait on me—no, I'll send you word what day. Are you staying with de Guiche as before?"

"No," said my lord, possessing himself of her hand. "This time I am honouring Saint-Aignan."

"How truly delightful for him!" she retaliated. "Well, you shall hear from me."

Roxhythe kissed her hand.

"I shall await your commands, Madame. I have to thank you for receiving me to-day."

"Did you see Madame?" asked Saint-Aignan of him, two hours later.

"I did," said Roxhythe.

"Well? What of the interview?"

"She is the most charming, beautiful lady that I have ever known," replied my lord.

"I consider that you have offered me your comfit-box!" laughed Saint-Aignan. "I am dumb, then?"

Roxhythe nodded approvingly.

"You should never give way to idle curiosity," he said. He surveyed his friend critically. "And I do not think I like the mixture of salmon-pink and orange."

CHAPTER IX

THE GROWTH OF THE SEED

LORD Ashley-Cooper desired to see Mr. Dart. Lord Ashley-Cooper was conducted to the library. Christopher was not there, so my lord was requested to wait. My lord sat down. He surveyed his surroundings, which were very handsome. The room was hung in brown and gold; the chairs were leather-seated, with carved wooden backs; the table was of solid oak. Over by the window stood Christopher's desk. The room gave on to the gardens.

Presently Christopher came quickly into the room.

"My lord! This is indeed an honour!"

Ashley took his hands, looking at him gloomily. It was a different Christopher from the boy who had visited him two years ago. Christopher had now an ease of manner; a presence. He dressed well, and with none of his former sobriety. He still wore his own fair hair, but he had taken to dressing it very carefully, and it hung in ordered curls about his shoulders. Ashley had watched the gradual change from afar but he had rarely seen Christopher for any length of time alone. Hence Christopher's surprise.

He pulled forward a more comfortable chair.

"Pray sit down, sir! I am delighted to see you. Have you commands for me, I wonder?"

"No." Ashley watched one of my lord's liveried servants place wine and glasses on the table. "This is purely a friendly call."

Christopher nodded to the servant.

"You may go, Roger. I am out to all other visitors."

The man bowed and departed. Christopher busied himself with the glasses.

"Some canary, my lord? Yes?" He handed him the

glass and poured out another for himself. Then he sat down.

"Well, it is a very long while since I have had any private conversation with you, sir. This is very pleasant."

"Indeed, yes. I do not think I have really talked to you since you returned from Holland."

Christopher frowned a little. On that occasion, Ashley had been moved to adjure him to leave Roxhythe's service, now that his work was done. After that there had been a slight estrangement between them.

"No, I think not," said Christopher. "Do you hear from Roderick at all, sir?"

"Very seldom," replied Ashley. "Have you any news of him?"

For a while they talked of Roderick and trivialities. Then Ashley took advantage of a pause to change the subject.

"Lord Roxhythe is still away?"

Christopher sighed inwardly.

"Yes," he replied, on guard.

"Indeed? He is often abroad, is he not? I suppose you manage his affairs?"

"I have that honour," said Christopher. He filled up the glasses.

"Christopher, have you yet discovered that Lord Roxhythe is a—very complex character?"

"No," said Christopher. "Have you?"

"I suspect it," said Ashley. "I fear it. In fact, I fear Roxhythe."

Christopher was silent. He was tired of discussing Roxhythe with all and sundry.

"I fear he is not so indolent as he would have us believe." Ashley ground the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other. "I mistrust him. I always have mistrusted him. I may say I am a judge of character."

"Oh!" said Christopher.

Ashley slewed round in his chair so that he faced him.

"Why is he in Paris?" he asked abruptly.

Christopher set down his glass.

"He is in Paris because he is in love with Madame. What else would you like to know?"

Some of the worried lines were smoothed from Ashley's forehead.

"Is that true?"

The colour was mounting to Christopher's cheeks. His eyes sparkled dangerously.

"I am not in the habit of lying, my lord."

"No, no," soothed Ashley. "I know you at least are honest. And I know you are no plotter. Well, well! You then can vouch for what you tell me?"

"Yes, I can!" cried Christopher, carried away. "My lord is at Madame's feet! That is his reason for going so frequently to Paris! None other!"

"I may have been wrong."

"Do you suspect everyone of plotting, sir?"

"Everyone!" replied Ashley, quickly. "Everyone!"

"Even Roxhythe!" Christopher laughed derisively. "Why, I tell you no thought is farther from his head!" He spoke with unbounded confidence. Ashley read the transparent honesty in his eyes, and leant back in his chair.

"And you know him as well as anyone, I suppose. Oh, do not be angry, Chris! It is part of my office to guard against possible intrigue. You say Roxhythe is in love with Madame. I had not thought of that. Yes, it is very likely. He must ever be in love with some woman." He sneered.

"Suppose we talk of something else?" suggested Christopher, controlling the fury in his voice.

Ashley leant forward.

"Ah, Chris! Don't speak like that! I had no thought to offend you. I wish you so well."

Christopher was mollified.

"I am not offended, my lord. Indeed, I am sorry if I spoke rudely. But I do not relish adverse criticism of my Lord Roxhythe."

"Then we are friends, Chris?"

Christopher took his outstretched hand.

"Of course, my lord!"

The heavy curtain hanging across the open doorway parted noiselessly. A tall figure stood there, all in black and gold, with thick chestnut curls framing his face. One white hand rested on his sword-hilt; the other fingered the lace at his throat. Calm brown eyes surveyed the two by the fire.

The Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe swept a bow to Lord Ashley-Cooper.

Christopher was on his feet in a flash.

"My lord!" he cried joyfully, and hurried forward.

Roxhythe held out his hand. He spoke to Ashley.

"I intrude. I apologize. I thought Chris was alone."

Ashley watched Christopher kiss my lord's fingers and saw the quick pressure of Roxhythe's hand on his. He too rose.

"I think 'tis I who am the intruder," he said. "I have been visiting Christopher, whom I have not seen for some time. I will now withdraw."

Roxhythe disengaged his hand.

"I beg you will not!" He went to the door.

Ashley stayed him with a gesture.

"I was on the point of taking my leave," he assured him. "I have been here too long already. I am a busy man, Lord Roxhythe. Chris!"

Christopher accompanied him out.

When he came back, Roxhythe had shed his long gold-lined cloak, and was seated on the edge of the table, swinging one booted leg.

"Well, Chris? Everything is as it should be?"

"Yes, sir. There are one or two letters from the bailiff at Bevan. I do not think him honest. Will you see them?"

Roxhythe nodded.

"And for the rest?"

"Nothing untoward has happened, sir. You are returned sooner than I expected." He turned over a pile of papers, searching for the letters.

"Sooner than I expected myself. I found I was tired of Paris." He took two sheets of parchment from

Christopher, and started to read. "I did not know you were on speaking terms with Ashley," he remarked, not lifting his eyes from the paper. "A reconciliation?"

"Something of the sort," acknowledged Christopher. "I have barely spoken to him since he counselled me to leave your service. To-day he came to visit me. A kindly intention, but he contrived to ruffle me the more."

"Oh?" Roxhythe turned the sheet over, and went on reading.

"Yes." Christopher knitted his brows. "He wanted to know why you were in Paris; why you went so often, and a lot more beside. I am sick to death of being questioned concerning your movements!"

Roxhythe stopped swinging his leg. Still he did not raise his eyes.

"I hope you satisfied him?"

"Well—yes! I think now that I spoke hastily, and had no right to say what I did. But I was angered, and the words slipped out."

Roxhythe laid down the paper.

"What did you say?"

"I confirmed the popular tale, sir. Ashley had some fool's notion of intrigue. I told him you were at the feet of Madame." He spoke rather nervously.

Roxhythe picked the paper up again.

"Truthful boy," he said.

Christopher was silent for a moment, still frowning.

"My lord," he said, at last. "Ashley is not the first who has sought to suck me of news concerning you. I dined with Harcourt the other night, and he talked of you until I had perforce to snub him. Everyone wants to know what you do, and why you do it. Even Lady Frances has questioned me! And I do not know! I—I can only fall back on gossip, and I have been so harried and worried that I too am beginning to wonder: why did you go to Paris?"

Roxhythe went on reading.

"You told me yourself a moment ago."

"I only told you what gossip says. You have never

confided in me—indeed, I did not expect it. I thought nothing of these sudden comings and goings. But other people seem suspicious. Why are they suspicious? Why do they think you—are not what you seem to be?”

“Heaven knows!”

Christopher moved an agitated hand.

“My lord, you know I am not inquisitive. But—but—is there any truth in Ashley’s suspicions?”

At last my lord looked up.

“What precisely are his suspicions?”

“He told me he mistrusted you; he said you were a complex character. He hinted at intrigue. I know—I thought I knew—that such a thing would never enter your head. I said so; I laughed the idea to scorn. He was reassured, but between them all, I have been set thinking. Is there any truth in their suspicions?”

“None whatever,” said Roxhythe. He folded up the letters.

Christopher heaved a sigh of relief.

“I knew it!” he said. “But when next you go away I wish you would leave me some explanation to give these people!”

“You gave them the right one,” answered Roxhythe.

“Yes, but I did not know if it was right or wrong. I had to say something, and oh lud! the good advice I have received!” He laughed ruefully. “Everyone advises me to quit your service at once, and why God alone knows! I have been so infuriated, sir!”

“Poor Chris! You can quit my service if you will.”

“Sir! Have I shown myself so lacking in affection to you that you should think that possible? I do not want ever to do that. I—I am so relieved to know that you are not leading—well, a double life! Of course I did not really think it, but when several people all show suspicions one cannot help wondering. And then there was the Dutch affair. You plotted then, but it was for the King, and the King was plotting for the country, so it’s all one. You would never plot against the country, I know. I do not think, either, that you are in the habit of taking part in intrigue.”

"You know me rather well, don't you?" smiled Roxhythe.

"Better than do these—mischief-makers," replied Christopher. "I am wise enough to trust in you implicitly."

Roxhythe regarded him curiously.

"Are you? I am flattered." He glanced down at his letters. His face was quite impassive.

"It is strange that so many people should warn me 'gainst you," continued Christopher, airily. "First there was de Staal . . ."

The brown eyes lifted, and fell again.

". . . Then Roderick, then Ashley, then Lady Frances. Are they all crazed?"

"It seems so. Christopher, I think you must go to Bevan and attend to this matter." Roxhythe tapped the parchment with his finger. "I mislike the tone of the man's letter. I'll have you keep a watchful eye on his doings, and, if need be, dismiss him and engage another in his place."

Christopher's face fell a little.

"Very well, sir. I suppose I shall be there some weeks?"

"I am afraid so. I shall miss you sadly here, but it cannot be helped."

"When do you wish me to go, sir?"

"As soon as possible." Roxhythe stood up. "I'll look more closely into this presently." He tossed the letters on to the table. "What am I doing to-night?"

Christopher referred to a tablet.

"You are going to Lady Caroline Sowerby's rout, sir."

Roxhythe shook his head.

"What induced you to accept that? Sowerby, forsooth! No, that is too much to expect of me. I shall wait on Lady Crewe." He went out.

CHAPTER X

MAY, 1670

DURING the weeks that followed Roxhythe lived almost entirely in France. At first Louis refused to countenance Charles' demands, and it needed much skilful diplomacy and tender handling to persuade him. My Lord Arlington too proved troublesome, and cavilled at first one point and then another. At length Louis agreed that the furtherance of Catholicism in England should precede war with the Dutch, but on the subject of price he remained adamant. It almost seemed as though another deadlock had been reached, and Charles, urgently in need of money, was inclined to modify his demands. It was Roxhythe who counselled patience; Roxhythe who continued the negotiations, calmly, unhurriedly.

Christopher stayed at Bevan for nearly two months. Whenever he announced his intention of returning, as if by magic some new trouble would arise and he would be bidden to attend to it. It was not until the beginning of March of 1670 that he came back, and by that time the negotiations with France were practically at an end.

Towards the middle of the month Roxhythe had private audience with the King. Charles was in high spirits.

"My dear Davy, we have come to the end!"

Roxythe was placid.

"I always said that the spring would see the end," he remarked.

Charles drew him to a chair.

"You did, David. M. Colbert de Croissy has been with me. Louis gives me the sum I ask. Bealling is to draft the treaty. We win."

"Yes, Sire, we win. I was determined that there should not be another failure."

Charles pressed his shoulder.

"You are thinking of the Nassau intrigue? Does it rankle?"

"I believe it does," said Roxhythe.

It was not until May, however, that the treaty was signed. There was much argument as to the manner in which it should be done, but it was at length decided that Madame d'Orléans should come over to Dover ostensibly to see her brother, and that the representatives of both parties should sign it there.

Louis and his Court were making a tour of the country round Dunkirk, so that it would be no great matter for Madame to sail to England for a short space.

On the sixteenth of the month Charles travelled in state to Dover. He was accompanied by all his court with the exception of the Duke of York, who was prevented from coming until a few days later.

The festivities at Dover were riotously extravagant. Every minute of every day was planned out for Madame's entertainment, yet in the midst of all the gaiety Charles found time to have private speech with his sister.

The interview did not last long, but it was conclusive. That evening the King summoned his favourite.

"David, I have agreed to my sister's wishes."

"Ah!" said Roxhythe. "And they were?"

"That I should give the war with Holland my first attention." He looked closely at my lord as he spoke.

"You thus make yourself dependent on Parliament, Sir."

"Not wholly, Louis gives me three million livres yearly for as long as the war shall last."

Roxhythe walked to the window.

"In part I applaud you, Sir. It were best to defer the declaring of yourself a Catholic."

Charles laughed.

"I have always known that to be worse than imprudent."

"Of course. I think His Grace of York will not care for the amendment."

"Perhaps not. But I think I am wiser than is James."

"So do I," said Roxhythe.

There the matter ended.

A few days later came the Duke of York. When he heard that Charles had given way to Louis he was first furious and then despairing. He implored his brother to recall the promise; he uttered solemn warnings and urgent pleas. To all of which Charles smiled and smiled again.

Madame at once perceived James' discontent. As soon as she could conveniently do so she taxed him with it. He came into the room one evening when she was seated with Roxhythe at the window, watching the bonfires in the distance. When the Duke entered Madame shot a commanding glance at her companion. My lord bowed and sauntered out.

James sat down heavily. After a moment Madame went to him and laid a caressing hand on his arm.

"What is it, James? There is something you do not like?"

The Duke covered her hand with his.

"I am torn this way and that, Henriette. I scarce know myself what ails me."

She sat down beside him.

"Why are you so torn, *mon ami*? Is it this bond? You still have misgivings?"

"Deep misgivings. This secrecy likes me not at all. It is as though we were thieves—in the night."

She was silent. There was nothing to say.

"I want this alliance," he continued sombrely. "I have prayed for it. But not this way."

"How then would you have it?"

"Openly. With the consent of Parliament."

"They would never consent."

"They might be compelled. There is the army."

"It is not practicable," she answered. "You know it."

He brushed his hand to and fro across the table.

"Henriette, what we do is not right! It is not honourable! For Kings to traffic secretly with one another—it revolts me!"

Again she was silent.

"And now you have induced Charles to go to war with Holland before he declares himself Catholic!"

"James, believe me, it is impossible for Charles to do that now. He dare not. The time is not yet."

"You are all the same," said the Duke bitterly. "The time is not yet.' Wait, wait, wait, until it is too late! I tell you I am sick unto death of the whole affair."

"Then leave it to us, James! Charles is acting for the best, as am I. Is it only this question of Catholicism that troubles you?" Her eyes searched his face.

"No," said James. "I fear a trap."

"Who would be likely to lay traps for you?"

He returned her glance squarely.

"Louis."

Madame took his hands.

"I swear to you there is no such thing."

"You may not know."

"If there were a trap Charles had been the first to see it," she said.

James's lip curled scornfully, and a little sadly.

"Charles thinks of naught save money and women. He is careless—blind."

"You misjudge him," she answered. "Charles is no fool."

He shook his head wearily.

"I do not understand him. I never have understood him. Great issues weigh with him not at all; he spends his days idling—and making love."

"You do not know," she said quietly.

"It may be that." An angry light came into his eyes. "He does not give me his confidence! He laughs at me, and fences when I question him. All his confidence goes to that man!" He jerked his head towards the door.

"Roxhythe?" she asked, watching him.

His hand clenched slowly.

"Ay, Roxhythe. That impudent *poseur*! That court-darling! Roxhythe is never from his side. He employs him always—tells him his whole mind. Oh, they are fitly matched! Both are without honour! without decency!"

"Don't speak so loud. Remember, Charles is the King."

"A pretty King!" he replied bitterly. "He cares for naught save his own pleasures. Do you think he enters into this treaty from any sense of patriotism? He does not! He sees a means whereby to gain money! Money that he will squander on his women and his playthings! He and his favourite! Oh, they are a fit couple! Roxhythe abets him in his extravagance! He panders to his vanity! I tell you that man is not to be trusted! He works only for himself."

"No. He works for the King. Never forget that, James. To that one man I believe he will always be loyal. Why do you so dislike him?"

James rose jerkily to his feet, scraping his chair back across the wooden floor.

"Because I am jealous of him," he grated; "I admit it freely! He hath the place that should be mine! He hath the King his ear. There is nothing Charles does that Roxhythe does not know. There are many things that I know not of!"

"'Sh! What reason have you for saying that?"

He paced up and down the room.

"I have eyes. I am not the fool Charles thinks me. I know that he plots behind my back. Oh, I've no proofs! But I know for all that."

Madame led him back to his seat.

"James, you are speaking wildly. Your jealousy has carried you away. Charles has no secrets from you, I'll swear. You should not make an enemy of Roxhythe for so foolish a reason." So she chided him, her hand in his.

"Ay, that is it," he nodded. "I should not make an enemy of so powerful a man. I, the King's brother! *Cordieu*, things have come to a pretty pass!"

"Oh fie! You over-rate Roxhythe his influence. You know that you stand first with the King."

"I would it were so," he answered, leaning his head in his hand.

"It is so. Why, James, to what are you descended that you stoop to be jealous of a courtier?"

He sat up.

"I am overwrought. I am not jealous of him. I do but mistrust him. This affair is preying on my nerves till I do not know what I am saying. Forget it, Henriette!"

"It is forgotten," she assured him. "And James! Put all thoughts of traps and false dealings out of your head. I, Henrietta Stuart, swear that there is no such thing."

He smiled up at her, his whole face softened.

"I'd not accuse you of false dealing, child."

She patted his cheek.

"There! Now you are sensible! Another thing I'll tell you: Charles is not so soulless as you think. Trust in him to see that no harm comes to the alliance."

The smile faded. James turned his head away.

Someone knocked on the door. A page entered holding the door for Roxhythe.

James rose quickly.

My lord bowed first to Madame, and then to the Duke.

"I crave your pardon for this intrusion," he said. "His Majesty sent me to request your presence in his room, sir."

James straightened his cravat.

"I thank you, my Lord. Madame, you will excuse me?" He left the room.

Down in the streets below were many lights. A torch-light procession was passing. There was much noise of shouting and of cheering. My lord went over to the window, looking out.

"Roxhythe," said Madame abruptly. "Why does my brother dislike you?"

My lord glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Does he?" he asked.

"You know it. Do you annoy him?"

"You see," apologized Roxhythe. "I am of a flippant turn of mind."

That was all he would say. Dissatisfied, Madame broached the subject to the King next morning.

"Charles, do you know that James hates Roxhythe?"

The King was lolling on a couch.

"My dear, he would hate a fly if it teased him."

"Does Roxhythe tease him?"

"He has a certain air which distresses poor Jamie," smiled the King.

"It is a pity," she mused. "James thinks that you do not give him your whole confidence."

Charles' mournful eyes widened.

"Dear, dear!"

"He is afraid that you will walk into some trap of Louis' making. He thinks you are a fool."

"I know," said the King. "And I think him one. Yet we are really very fond of each other. An amusing situation."

"I wish that you understood one another better," she sighed. "Or rather that James understood you."

"So do not I," said Charles. "We are very well as we are." He surveyed her languidly. "To-morrow the bond is to be signed?"

"By your Commissioners, and by de Croissy. You've no misgivings?"

"None," he answered. The glance that passed between them was full of meaning.

"I have to thank you for your patience in the matter, Henriette."

She shook her head.

"No, no! I am so glad to have been of use!"

He put his arm about her.

"You are a very charming child," he said, and kissed her. "I would I might take you back with me to London." Something sparkled on the end of her lashes.

"Perhaps—I wish—so—too," she said.

He stroked her bright curls. For a while there was silence.

"So I am to have La K roualle?" said the King at length.

Madame smiled again.

"You asked for her long ago," she parried. She was finding a novel amusement in turning the hand she held this way and that so that the light caught the rings on his fingers.

"So I did. Louis must think well of her to send her to me."

"She is very beautiful," said Madame, still holding his hand.

"And very cunning?" The long fingers clasped hers.

"Charles, do you not want her at Whitehall?"

"I shall be delighted to have her," he retorted.

"She comes not as a spy, but as a—"

"Secret agent. A nice distinction. But no matter."

"I really do not wonder that James is annoyed with you," said Madame severely.

CHAPTER XI

UNREST

SUMMER. Christopher sat on the broad terrace at Bevan Court, looking out across the gardens into the blue haze. Before him the great house reared up its turrets, creeper-hung, against the cloudless sky. Clipped yew hedges dotted the lawns at his feet; flowers grew in stone pots around him. It was very still, very hot. Somewhere a bird was twittering sleepily to its mate; lying on the ground beside Christopher was a huge mastiff, his boon companion.

Christopher contemplated the scene restfully. He felt at peace with the world. So much so that presently he closed his eyes.

Lady Frances came out of the old Gothic door on to the terrace. For an instant she stood irresolute. Then she saw Christopher and smiled.

Christopher felt light hands across his eyes.

"Guess!" whispered my lady, behind him.

He jumped up.

"Lady Frances, of course!"

She came round the seat and sat down. The mastiff wagged his tail; then he went to sleep again.

"How hot it is!" said her ladyship drowsily. "How beautiful!"

Christopher agreed.

"I came out to give you this," continued Frances. She handed him a packet. "The courier has just arrived."

Christopher turned it over lazily.

"Roderick," he said. "Have you any news of my lord?"

"A short note. He is escorting the King here in two days time. He adjures you to have everything in readiness."

"I don't think there is anything more to be done," said

Christopher. "I have racked my brains to discover something."

"There is nothing. Do you read that letter! Perhaps your brother will have news of the Prince."

Christopher broke upon the seals.

It was late August of 1672. The past years had been fairly uneventful at home except that in October of 1670 the Prince of Orange had come home on a visit to England. Roderick had been in his train, and the brothers had seen a great deal of one another. Roderick had succeeded in annoying Christopher by regarding him in studied gloom, and Roxhythe with scarce veiled disapproval. Christopher was thereby made uncomfortable. He was grateful to my lord for asking Roderick to Bevan House but at the same time he wished that he had not done it. He felt that Roderick was not a credit to him. It afforded him some satisfaction to see that Roderick was impressed by his standing in society. It was very pleasant when Lord Buckhurst strolled into the library where they were seated, and hailed him by his Christian name, asking some questions concerning Roxhythe's whereabouts. Roderick was so disdainful and affected such superior airs that little incidents such as that filled him with unholy joy.

Abroad much had taken place. In France Madame had died suddenly, mysteriously, some said poisoned. In Holland, William Nassau had gradually broken away from De Witt. Lately he had been made, at twenty-one, Captain-General of the army, and was fighting Louis with all the energy and indomitable courage of his race.

The French generals, Turenne and Condé, had overrun three of the Dutch Provinces, spreading terror before them. Then had been the moment for Nassau to rise. Many of the great cities clamoured for him. At Middleburgh and Amsterdam the people grew unruly. De Witt had been forced to consent to William's rise. He exacted from him an oath that he would observe the abolition of the Stadtholdership, and sent him to the head of the army. Hope revived; Holland hailed the Prince their preserver.

De Witt suspecting negotiations between England and

France, had made a treaty with Spain that broke off the last threads that bound the Triple Alliance together. Charles seized the opportunity to induce his Cabinet to declare war on Holland.

Christopher had watched these proceedings with intense interest. He did not pretend to understand why Ashley headed the desire for war; it was unlike him to wish to ally England with France. Christopher decided that politics were very mysterious.

At home, Charles had introduced his Declaration of Indulgence, permitting religious freedom. It had passed the Houses, and was greeted with murmurous opposition. The Duke of York was publicly received into the Roman Catholic Church. London was uneasy. The sudden closing of the Exchequer caused a stir, and more unrest.

Now it was late summer, and Charles was coming to Bevan Court on a visit. Lady Frances was acting hostess, and Christopher had been sent on in advance to have all in readiness.

An exclamation from him made Lady Fanny start, and open her eyes.

"The De Witts have been murdered!"

Lady Frances sat up.

"Chris!"

Christopher referred to the letter.

"Roderick writes as though 'twere a natural happening! Oddsblood, the man has the heart of a fish! . . . 'Yesterday the news was brought to us thatt Jan and Cornelius De Witt have been done to Death by the Mob at the Hague. Soe Perish all His Highness' Enemies!' . . . Zounds!" Christopher crumpled the parchment in his hand. "Murder! Foul murder! I wonder . . ."

"What do you wonder? Not . . ."

"I wonder what part the Prince played in this dastardly deed."

"Oh, no, Chris! No, no!"

"Roderick says no more than that 'so perish all His Highness his enemies.' Great Heavens!"

Lady Frances took the letter from him.

"May I see?"

"Oh, you may read it! That I should have such a brother!"

She spread open the sheets on her knee.

". . . All over the Country the People call for a Stadholder. At Rotterdam and Amsterdam they Growe unruly. The Prince His Oathe to De Witt absolved by Deathe, taketh the Government into His Owne Hands. Nowe he at last hath His Rightfull Place, after soe Many Yeares Patient Waiting. Nowe he hath Command over All Things, and no Pensionary to Oppose Him. He Hath Grate Plannes for the Repulsion of the Impudent Frenchman, the which, Guided by His Supreme Courage and Steadfast Purpose, He Goes shortly to put into Action. God Aide and Bless His Endeavours! He is a very Upright, Grate Prince, Wise beyond His Yeares, Knoweing not Despair. We of His Household, seeing Him Day by Day Striving always for His Country, Knowe howe Iron is His Will, howe Grate His Truthe. I do Counsel You, my Brother, to Leave thatt Libertine His Service, and to Join me Here, under the Prince His Glorious Standard. This do I Implore You to do for the Love I Bare You, which Love Hateth to see You Working for the Truthless Servant of a King who Lacks Honoure, Loyalty, and all those Things thatt a King should have . . ."

"Bah!" snapped Christopher. "What more?"

"There's little else. The rest concerns you alone." She handed him the parchment which he thrust angrily into his pocket.

Lady Frances sat with her chin in her hand.

"So that is what Roderick says? Warnings, Chris, warnings!"

"Ay! You are all very anxious for me to quit my lord! And I will not! I know him as you do not! And I hold these warnings in contempt!"

She sighed.

"Don't eat me, Chris. 'Tis very seldom that I speak to you on this subject after all!"

He took her hand quickly, kissing it.

"Forgive me! I had no right to speak to you like that! You are so good to me! so very good!"

"Oh, nonsense!" She patted his shoulder. "I wonder what they think of this in London? The news will have reached them by now. I would give much to know the inner workings of it."

"Would you? I had rather not know. It must have been at the Prince's instigation."

"It may have been. De Witt was a block in his path. Therefore it was right that De Witt should go."

"Right? How can you say that?"

Lady Frances' eyes were narrowed.

"It seems to me that De Witt's day has been ended some time since. The one man who might save Holland is Nassau. We have seen how he was hampered by De Witt's cautious vetoes. Well, down with De Witt."

"I cannot agree!"

"Quite right, dear boy. I hope you never will agree."

He stared at her.

"You hope—but why?"

"Because it would mean that you had acquired a callous heart, even as all we who have—never mind! Let's take the news to Jasper."

They walked slowly back to the house.

The tidings reached my lord at Bevan House as he was in the act of penning an amorous note to Lady Crewe.

His servant came hurriedly into the room. He had been with Roxhythe since his boyhood, and he was permitted these licenses.

"My lord, the De Witts are dead! Murdered!"

John felt more than a casual interest in the news. He had several times seen the Grand Pensionary.

Roxhythe looked up.

"What of it?"

"But, my lord—!"

Roxhythe went back to his writing.

"You disturb me."

He went later to Whitehall and found it seething with the tale. He was very bored.

The visit to Bevan Court was in every way successful. The King was fêted and feasted most extravagantly. Mademoiselle de K roualle, now Duchess of Portsmouth, and mistress-in-chief, came in his train, and was pleased to be very fascinating; the Duke of Monmouth, in high spirits, could talk of nothing but the prospect of his journey to Holland next year at the head of the English troops.

Christopher lived the few days in a positive whirl of excitement. He was very busy, for Roxhythe paid no attention to any of the arrangements, but this did not trouble him. He was helping to entertain the most gracious King in the world; he had kissed this King's hand; the King had spoken to him several times; his cup was full.

All through the winter Roxhythe continued to make trifling and spasmodic love to Lady Crewe. Christopher watched, troubled. He saw that Millicent was taking his master very seriously, and he was sorry, for he knew that Roxhythe was beginning to weary of her. He dared not speak to him on the subject, but he was a tender-hearted boy, and he wished that my lord would amuse himself with someone older, and more accustomed to the game. He saw that Millicent was not treating it as a game any longer. He saw also that Sir Henry Crewe was less and less at his wife's side, and had begun to look at her coldly. He wondered how it would end.

Meanwhile, great changes were taking place in England. Ashley, now the Earl of Shaftesbury, was Chancellor, and led the Cabinet. The long recess of Parliament still went on. The Country party was more than ever opposed to the Court party and dissension was growing apace.

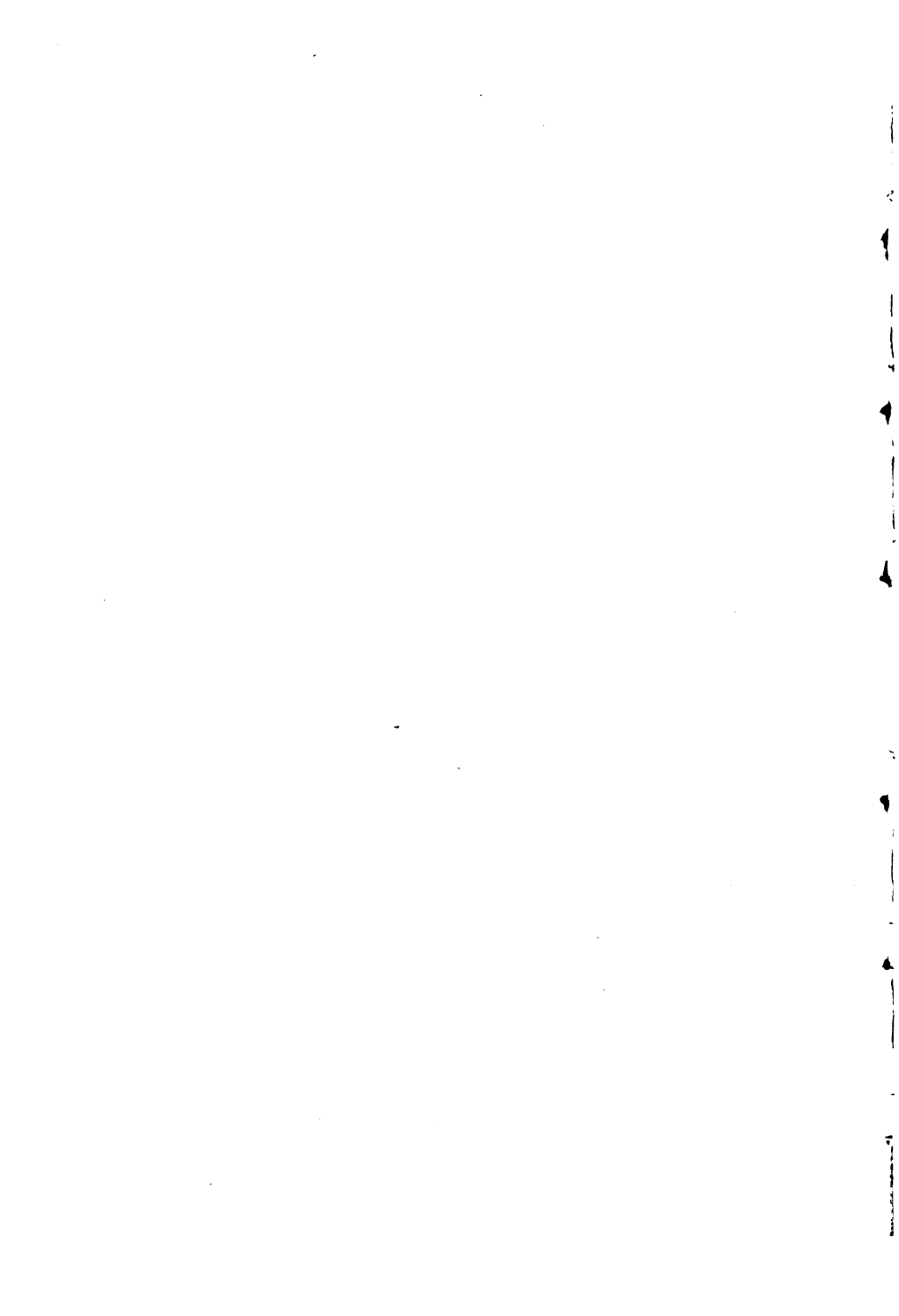
From Harcourt Christopher learned that the Declaration of Indulgence was becoming more and more unpopular. War with Holland was imminent; the King continued to amuse himself.

Roxhythe still ignored the universal unrest. Christopher was more than ever sure that he had no interest in politics, was of no party, and was above all the petty jealousies and intrigues that went on daily. Now and then he went to

Paris, but mostly he was at Whitehall, pursuing his brilliant course. Christopher no longer puzzled over these visits to France. Roxhythe had assured him that his vague fears were groundless; he trusted Roxhythe.

And so the year crept out, and the New Year was upon them.

Book III
QUO VADIS?



CHAPTER I

WHITEHALL

"NEVER was there a man so beset!"

Roxhythe looked amusedly across at his master.

"Was there not, Sir?"

"Never." Charles spoke gloomily. "I swear I do not know why ever I came back to such an importunate, ungrateful people."

They were in the King's private closet. It was late autumn and chilly. A fire burned in the wide grate and the room was stuffy. One was aware of the presence of dogs.

Charles crossed his legs and went on speaking.

"They would not have my Declaration of Indulgence; they insisted on an act which should prevent Catholics from holding office under the Crown. So I let them have their Test Act, thus enraging my brother. I thought to have some peace. But no. Clifford resigns his office because he cannot subscribe to the Test. And now they clamour and debate over James his second marriage. *Mordieu*, what a thing it is to be King!" He sighed.

"The Duke would do well to consider," said Roxhythe. "A marriage with the Catholic Mary of Este will only serve to gain him more unpopularity."

"So I think. Next the Commons will demand his exclusion from the succession. I see it coming very plainly. He is so unwise . . . And he was a damned good admiral," he added with another sigh. "Odso! It meant so little. He might have been as Catholic as he pleased to himself if only he would have conformed outwardly to the Test. However, he'd none of it, and gave up his post. And now he is so chafed and irritable that he plagues all and sundry and affects them against him. He won't listen to my sage counsel; he goes his own foolish way. I

know the Commons will demand his exclusion sooner or later. And then what's to do?"

Roxhythe knew that on this one point his master was likely to remain adamant. He had some affection for his brother.

"I really don't know, Sir. I doubt you'll manage to confound the Commons when that time comes—if it comes."

"Oh, it will come, sure enough, unless he mends his ways, which he will not."

"Then you will skilfully circumvent the Commons," smiled Roxhythe.

"But what unpleasantness! What fatigue!" said Charles. "I was not born for this strenuous life." He shut his eyes wearily. Then he opened them again. "David, I am satiated with Ashley."

Ashley now led the Cabinet.

Roxhythe laughed softly,

"You were like to be that, Sir. 'Tis a dull dog."

"My dear David, 'tis the wickedest dog in Christendom—all on a sudden. He must go." He said this quite calmly.

"Very well," said Roxhythe. "Though I dislike the idea of Ashley's hand against us."

"I cannot help it. He must go. He opposes me at every turn while pretending to aid me."

"And so?"

"And so I have another man in mind." Charles looked at him quizzically.

"I might guess his name, Sir," drawled the favourite.

"You might, Davy, but I think none other would."

"Perhaps not. Doth he hail from Yorkshire?"

Charles nodded.

"If you ever go over to the opposition, Davy, I shall be undone. You would foresee all my intentions. Do you like my choice?"

"Osborne," pondered Roxhythe. "A tool. Therefore untrustworthy."

"I had thought of that. He must be bribed."

"So others may think."

"Davy, why will you always play the pessimist? You try your best to dishearten me!"

My lord rose, and walked over to the window.

"My heart's not in it, Sir."

Charles stirred uneasily.

"In what, Roxhythe?"

"In all this bribing and duping and double-dealing."

"Why, David, do you then yearn to tread the straight and narrow path?"

Roxhythe stood silent, gazing out of the window. There was a hint of bitterness in the cool eyes; even a little sadness.

Charles studied his profile concernedly.

"What is it, Davy?" he asked gently.

Roxhythe smiled.

"I was just thinking, Sir. Perhaps we were happier in the old days, across the water."

"We plotted then and bribed," said Charles quickly.

"It was rather different. Then we were a few against the world. We had only ourselves to think of. Now we have the whole of Britain depending on us, and we plot and trick, and lower her honour."

"Davy, I do her no harm! Surely you have seen that? You did not like the Treaty of Dover, but what ill has come of it?"

Roxhythe shrugged.

"Naught save the lowering of the King his honour."

Charles bit his thick underlip.

Roxhythe continued, in that same level, passionless voice.

"I believe I have a desire to run straight once more, Sir. Sometimes I think I would give much to be with my regiment again—no intriguer, but just a soldier."

"David!" The King's eyes were full of pain. "You think that?"

The smile crossed Roxhythe's lips again.

"Until I remember you, Sir."

The King flung out his hand.

"Ah!—and then?"

"And then I know that had I to choose again I would follow you." He came back to the King's chair, and knelt. "Don't let this distress you, Sir. These are but idle regrets, that are not even regrets. I am your man until I die, or until I fall."

Charles' hand was on his shoulder.

"Roxhythe, what is this talk of falling?"

"I hardly know, Sir, save that no man trusts my word. They suspect my every movement. Because of the Dover treaty, which they guess at."

"Can you think that I would ever desert you?"

"Not I, Sir. I am turned pessimist to-day. I do crave your pardon."

Charles pressed his shoulder. He was troubled.

"Regrets—regrets. I did not think you had any, Roxhythe."

My lord rose, shaking back the heavy curls of his peruke.

"Nor have I, Sir. 'Tis the autumn dampness has entered my bones. Forget it! I chose long ago which path I should tread, and I've no regrets. I would not lose your friendship for all the world."

Charles was still troubled.

"Which path you would tread . . . What mean you, David?"

"Once I thought them one and the same path. Then they diverged, and I followed you. The choice lay between King and Country."

"It was a struggle then?"

Roxhythe hesitated.

"A little, Sir. But I decided to kiss my hands to Country, and here am I!"

"And you are happy, Roxhythe?"

"Despite these moments of gloom, Sir, yes. I have all a man wants; money, power, the King his favour."

"And friends?"

"Say rather popularity, Sir."

"No; friends."

Roxhythe was silent for a moment.

"Then, Sir, not counting yourself, one. Perhaps two."

"Who are they?"

"My fair cousin Frances, and my secretary."

"A strange couple. They are all you can name?"

"They are all."

Charles nodded slowly.

"You sacrificed much for me, eh, David?"

Roxhythe's egotism leapt to the fore.

"No. I gained all. I have everything. Friends? Bah! A name, no more. Not a doubt on it but those sycophants below," he waved a contemptuous hand, "would not hesitate to call me that."

"Yet you said you had but one?"

"Two. The rest hate me covertly. I am too powerful."

Again Charles nodded.

"You do not seek to make them like you. I think you are foolish, Roxhythe."

"Maybe. They do not understand me, and for that reason distrust me."

Charles smiled irrepressibly.

"Why, I do not think that many men trust me," he said. "But all men love me."

Roxhythe swept a bow.

"Sire, I am no Stuart."

"No, you are Roxhythe, which is perhaps even better. *Mordieu!* The great Roxhythe! *A propos*, David, what's this I hear took place at Jeremy's?"

Roxhythe sat down. He drew out his comfit-box.

"Yes, it was diverting," he admitted.

"Tell me your version. I heard it from Sedley yesterday, but I'd sooner have it from your own lips."

"What did Sedley say? I hardly know what happened at the beginning."

The King chuckled.

"Oh, Sedley was full of the tale! He tells me that that young secretary of yours was at Jeremy's on Thursday, and fell to gaming with Fortescue. Sedley draws a picture of them both in their cups. Then Fortescue speaks sneeringly of the great Roxhythe, and the next thing they knew was that his face was all dripping wine, and young Dart was

half across the table in a black fury. Sedley falls a-laughing at this point, but I gather that the two young cockerels were held apart by main force, and Dart was spluttering out challenges. It seems the rest of the party enjoyed the situation vastly, and there was great uproar. Fortescue—Sedley tells me he was most unsteady on his legs—hiccupped out *his* challenge, and called on Digby to second him. Then the pother was that no one liked to be embroiled in a quarrel against my Lord Roxhythe. So more uproar. Dart called on Fletcher to serve him. Fletcher thinks himself best out of that boys' quarrel. Others were of his opinion. So then we have young Dart offering to fight the whole room, and Fortescue drinking more Burgundy to steady himself. Sedley says by now the whole room was in a roar, and the most of them arguing what was to be done. Then—Sedley is very fine at this point—the door opened. In strolled the unwitting cause of all the turmoil: Lord Roxhythe. He was becomingly languid; he desired to know the reason of all the noise. Six people explain it to him. My lord looks round with interest. Fletcher tells him that no one will second the children. My lord is pained. He looks at Fortescue. 'You must apologize,' says he. 'No,'—hiccup—'Be—damned an I will!' 'Then you must apologize,' says my lord, turning to his secretary. Dart was not so far gone in his cups. 'Never!' says he. 'Then I will apologize,' says my lord. 'Your pardon, gentlemen, for being the cause of so much trouble.' Then Sedley grows incoherent. Tell me the rest, Roxhythe."

Roxhythe touched his lips with his handkerchief.

"My young Chris was mighty valiant. He sneered. 'If a glass of wine in the face is not enough,' says he, and left an elegant pause. Fortescue caught him up. 'No—damme—,' says he. 'I'll fight you!' Chris bowed. I have a fleeting suspicion that he emulates my style. 'I am relieved,' says he. 'Mr. Fletcher, again I ask: will you serve me?' Fletcher nodded. 'Who's to serve Fortescue?' asks that rogue Sedley. Then they all looked uncomfortable, and shuffled. I conceived that it was time to

introduce a light note. I made my best leg to Fortescue, who was hanging on to the table. 'Sir,' says I, 'I shall be honoured to second you.' He had arrived at the polite stage. He returned my bow, and managed not quite to fall over. 'Sir,' says he, 'I thank you. Y—You're a—g—gentleman!'

"My Chris was in such a rage that he was fit to slay me there and then. He turned on his heel and slammed out of the room. I went away.

"And there the matter really ended. I was hoping for an amusing duel, but evidently Fortescue was talked to very seriously. At all events he visited me next day, all the pot-valiance knocked out of him. Odso, but he was ashamed! He had come to offer me his apologies! He had not known what he was saying; he begged I would excuse him. Then he grew very red, and told me that he could not have me as a second in the circumstances. So I sent for Chris. Fortescue was all for fighting, but I made them shake hands. That is all. My name is now safe." He smiled a little.

"No wonder it is the talk of town!" cried Charles. "Oddsblood, I would I had been there!" Then he became grave. After a moment he said: "Roxhythe, this Dutch war is becoming vastly distasteful to my people."

Roxhythe was amused.

"Now what ails you?" demanded Charles. "Is it a laughing matter?"

"Certainly not. I laughed at the sudden change of topic. And have you but just discovered that the people do not like it?"

"No. They grow hot. What is more to the point is that the Commons also grow hot. I think I must have a respite."

"How?"

"I have had enough of Parliament," said Charles, looking at him. "For the present."

"Prorogation!" smiled Roxhythe. "I admire your consummate daring, Sir."

CHAPTER II

THE HUSBAND

LADY CREWE was disconsolate. Out of the corner of her eye she watched my Lord Roxhythe paying his respects to Mlle. Charlotte d'Almond. Charlotte was of the Duchess of Portsmouth's household, something of a virago, but undoubtedly fascinating. Lady Crewe hated her cordially. Lady Crewe sat alone, playing with her fan. Presently Mr. Dart appeared. His hostess, Fanny Montgomery, greeted him with affection. She told him to make himself useful. So he went across the room to Millicent's side and swept her a bow.

"All alone, Lady Crewe?"

She forced a smile.

"No, Mr. Dart; you are here."

Christopher was fond of Millicent. He sat down beside her.

"Shall we stay on this very pleasing couch, or shall we dance?" he asked.

"I—I don't think I will dance, thank you," she answered. She was young, and she did not conceal her emotions well.

Christopher glanced round the room.

"All the world is here to-night," he remarked. "What a gathering! I don't see Sir Henry?"

"He is here," she said listlessly. "Gaming belike."

A year ago Sir Henry Crewe was never from his wife's side. Christopher regarded Roxhythe across the room with tightened lips. He attempted another remark.

"It is quite an age since we last saw each other, Lady Crewe. I looked for you at the Coventry rout last week but someone said you were in the country. Was that so?"

"No," she answered. "I was not well. I do not think town air agrees with me. I tire so easily."

Time was, reflected Christopher, when this had not been so. Her ladyship's cheeks had been rosy then, and less thin.

"Why, I am sorry!" he said. "You must make your husband take you to the country for a while, though I vow we should miss you sadly."

Lady Crewe was not attending. A lazy, cynical voice reached Christopher's ears. He turned sharply. Lord Roxhythe stood beside them.

"My very dear Millicent! I had not seen you till this moment. Pray where have you been?" He kissed her hand. Christopher observed how the colour flooded her face.

"You have been otherwise engaged, my lord," she replied. "I have been here some while."

Christopher saw that he was not wanted. He faded away. Roxhythe took his seat.

"Child," he said, "where are all your roses?"

"Am I so pale?" she smiled. "Perhaps I have lost my rouge."

"Evidently," he said. "And what ails you?"

Her eyes were troubled.

"My lord my lord"

"But why so aloof?"

The coaxing tone brought the tears to her lashes.

"David—I am very unhappy."

He rose.

"My dear, we must examine this more closely. I know a room where we shall not be disturbed."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Indeed, I must not!"

"Must not?"

"You—you know it is not seemly for me to be seen so much—with you. My—my husband—"

"Fiend seize your husband. Come!"

"I ought not—I ought not—" Even as she said it she rose and laid her hand on his arm. Together they went out.

Roxhythe led her into a small, dimly lighted parlour. He shut the door, and took her in his arms.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

For a moment she tried to free herself; then her hands clung to his broad shoulders.

"David, it is wrong! I—I am not this kind of woman! God help me, I wish I had never met you!" The cry was broken.

Roxhythe bent his head till his lips met hers. It was Mrs. Diana Shelton who had called Roxhythe's kiss "divine intoxication."

"Confess! 'Tis a lie?"

"No, no! Indeed, I wish it!"

He kissed her again.

"You do not love me?"

"Oh, yes!—No! oh, what am I saying?" She broke away from him to a chair. "Before I—met you—before you—made love to me—I thought I cared so much for Henry. Now—now we hardly speak. You fill all my thoughts, and he looks at me—as though he hated me. I'm no court beauty. I cannot—play at love as they do. 'Tis—not in my nature."

My lord knelt at her side, holding both her hands.

"Do you then care so much for Henry? Am I nothing?"

"Have I not told you? Oh, my heart is nigh breaking! You do not really love me; you only—pretend—and it means so much to me. I'm a fool; a silly, hysterical miss! I—" She tried to laugh, but her voice broke, and she buried her face on his shoulder, sobbing.

Roxhythe stared over her head at the wall. His expression was rather curious. Suddenly he bent over the bowed figure, clinging so desperately to his hands.

"My child, you distress yourself unduly. How old are you?"

"T—twenty-one. Why—why do you ask?"

My lord smiled whimsically.

"Twenty-one. And I am—forty-two."

She lifted her head.

"What of it?"

"I seem to be rather too old for you, dear."

"David—my lord—I do not—understand."

"No? I think our little comedy has played itself out."

Slowly she drew herself away from him.

"You—call it comedy. I—have another name for it. Mayhap 'twas indeed a—comedy to you. To me—to me —" she stopped, twisting her fingers.

"Oh, no!" said my lord, calmly. "You delude yourself, my dear. It was a pretty farce, and perhaps you were a little dazzled. But that is all."

"You—make me—hate you."

"Why, that is as it should be."

"You—you made love to me; you—dazzled—me, and now you are tired of the—farce—you cast me off."

"Not a whit. I am not tired of it. I think you are."

She shook her head. Slow tears were creeping down her cheeks.

"I love you. I cannot let you go."

"Well, my dear, I do not see how you are to keep the both of us on a tether if you take the matter so seriously."

"I do not want both."

"Then choose your husband, my child."

"I can't, I can't! I want you!" It was the cry of a child. Roxhythe bit his lip.

"It will pass."

She raised her head.

"Are you saying—these things—for my sake, or is it—because of—Charlotte d'Almond?"

"Oh lud!" said my lord. He rose to his feet. "Preserve me!"

She also rose.

"It is not? You love me, as you've so often vowed?"

Roxhythe looked at her serenely.

"My dear, I do not think I love anyone."

Tragedy was in her blue eyes, and uncomprehending hurt.

"You thought me—just a—cheap woman!"

"No."

"Then—then—Oh heavens, how dare you humiliate me so? And I—and I—please take me back to the ball-room!"

She stepped forward into the full light of the candles, erect, outraged. Roxhythe eyed her critically.

"Child, you must dry the tears."

In spite of her forced calm something sparkled on the end of her long lashes.

"Oh, tut, tut, Millicent! You will forget all this madness. Come, let me wipe away the tears."

Millicent pushed him from her with hands that trembled.

"No! Please—don't try to—be kind to me! I cannot bear it. I have been in heaven and hell this past year, and now—and now—" She choked back a sob. "You were—very cruel, my lord. You made me play at love with you, and then—when I am no longer playing—you turn away, and—call it—a pretty comedy. And you talk to me—as if you were—my father!"

"Which I almost might be," remarked his lordship.

"My dear, you are too young for the game. I ought to have known it. I am sorry. Now won't you let me dry your tears?"

His voice was very gentle; all his fascination was to the fore. It swept over Millicent and would not be gainsaid. Pride was as nothing before it; at that moment she felt that only one thing mattered, and that was that he should not leave her. She allowed him to draw her closer, and to wipe her eyes with his scented handkerchief. A small pulse in her throat was throbbing madly; he was so inexpressibly dear, so strong, so wonderful. The tears welled up afresh; she heard him speak through a haze of misery.

"Dear child, I am not worth it. I am only an interlude."

"That is all—to you. Oh, you are utterly, utterly ruthless! I amused you for the time, so—you have—broken my heart—for your pleasure, and brought me—as low as this! I was so happy before you came! So happy."

"You will be happy again," said Roxhythe philosophically. "Hearts are easily mended. Tell that husband of yours to take you away for a time."

"My husband! We scarcely speak! He despises me!

He thinks me—what I am—a cheap, faithless woman!”

“It seems your husband is a fool. There! The tears are gone?”

“Take me back to the ballroom, please. I—I have been mad. What will—Henry think—if he finds me gone? Oh, please take me back.”

Roxhythe smiled faintly.

“Yes. I did not think the passion was real. Console yourself, my dear. ’Tis Henry you love.” He held out his arm.

The door opened.

“Just as I thought!” The words came furiously, hissed across the room. With his back to the door, hands clenched at his sides, stood Sir Henry Crewe.

Millicent sprang away from Roxhythe’s side, her cheeks flaming. Roxhythe himself regarded the intruder pensively.

“Blue and rose-pink . . .” he murmured. “Marvellous!”

Crewe walked forward, his dark velvet cloak hushing against the table as he brushed past.

“I have not sought you out to talk of my clothes, Lord Roxhythe!” he said. He did not glance in his wife’s direction.

“No?” answered Roxhythe. He met the angry young eyes amusedly. “What then?”

Crewe controlled his voice with difficulty. He was very pale, but his eyes burnt.

“I have come to tell you that my friends will wait on yours, Lord Roxhythe!”

“Thank you very much,” said Roxhythe. “But may I point out to you that this is a somewhat inopportune moment?”

“I think not! I could scarce have chosen a more fitting time!” He laughed bitterly. “I trust I make myself clear?”

“Not at all,” said Roxhythe. “I am at a loss.”

“You are singularly dense if you do not understand me! Things have come to a pretty pass that you so brazenly take my wife apart! Is that explanation enough?”

Roxythe stared at him in great hauteur. Then he turned to Millicent and bowed.

"Permit me to conduct you back to the ballroom, my dear."

Crewe flung himself between them.

"Lady Crewe can stay to hear what I have to say! She will not again require your escort!"

My lord's voice became a shade more languid.

"My good youth, you rave. You have my permission to stand back."

Few had ever dared to withstand that note. Sir Henry stood firm.

"'Tis you who shall stand back, sir! You shall not touch my wife!"

Millicent clasped and unclasped her hands. She was very near to breaking point.

"You make a very fine melodramatic hero," said Roxhythe. "But you forget with whom you have to deal."

"You might be the devil himself and I'd not let you pass!"

"Child's talk," said my lord. His hand descended on Crewe's shoulder and gripped hard. He gave a sudden twist, and Crewe fell back with a smothered exclamation. Roxhythe took Millicent's cold hand in his.

"I'll return to you," he informed the furious young man. "Open the door."

"Perhaps it is as well that Lady Crewe should withdraw," sneered Sir Henry. He flung the door wide.

Roxythe did not answer him. He led Millicent, tearless now, a creature of ice, to the deserted hall.

"Will you wait here, child? I'll send my cousin to you."

Her lips moved.

"Oh—no! I cannot! I——"

"My dear, you are in no fit state to go back to the ballroom. Sit down."

She sank down, unresisting. Roxhythe kissed her hand. "Let me re-assure you, sweetheart; there will be no scandal. You can trust my cousin." He strolled into the ballroom.

Lady Frances was not dancing. When she saw Roxhythe she came quickly towards him.

"Where is Lady Crewe?"

"I want to take you to her. That young fool of a husband came plunging in upon us, and she is nigh fainting with fright."

"Good God, Roxhythe! In my house! Could you not be decent for one evening? Where is the child?"

"In the hall. May I solicit your kindness for her? She should go home."

Lady Fanny swept out. Roxhythe, following more leisurely, saw her bend over the drooping figure in the chair. He half smiled, and went back to the little parlour.

Frances took the girl's hands.

"My dear! Will you come upstairs with me?"

The great shamed eyes looked up.

"I—think—I had best—go home," whispered Millicent.

Frances drew her to her feet.

"Presently, dear. Come with me now and tell me all about it."

"Lady Frances—I am indeed sorry—to be the cause of a—disturbance in your house. I——"

"Nonsense! Come, we shall be private in my room."

She bore the girl off to her boudoir, and put her into a chair.

"There! Poor little thing! Tell me what has happened."

Millicent bowed her head.

"I've been so wicked—I suppose you know. And to-day—I let—Lord Roxhythe—take me to another room—and—and—my husband found us—and—oh, heavens, what must you think of me?"

"Why, that you are a silly child! No, no, don't cry! There's no harm done. My cousin will see to it that there is no scandal. But mercy on us, what induced you to play with Roxhythe, of all men?"

"I love him," answered Millicent dully.

Lady Frances opened her eyes to their widest.

"Love—my dear, foolish girl, you cannot."

"I love him. And it's all over—all over."

"And a good thing too!" thought my lady. But she did not say that. She put her arms round Millicent.

"Won't you tell me everything, dear?"

The girl flushed.

"You are very, very kind, Lady Frances, but—oh, I expect you know all there is to know about me!"

"My child, I have seen Roxhythe often at your side, and I confess I have wondered what you were at—playing with fire."

"I was not playing! Oh, at first, three years ago, yes. No one minded; my husband thought nothing of it. But lately—I have been so—unhappy, and when he was with me—so very happy! And he meant nothing; he did not love me. It was a—game. I suppose any other woman would have known, but I—I—oh, I think my heart will break!"

"I am quite sure it will not," replied Lady Frances. "Tis all midsummer madness. How could you think Roxhythe was in earnest? Was there no one to warn you?"

"No. There is only Henry—and now he—hates me. What shall I do?"

"Start afresh," said Fanny briskly. "Roxhythe is not worth one tear-drop. You must forget him, and play no more with fire."

"Forget! Ah, my lady, it is easy to speak so. I love him! I love him so much that were he to lift one finger I would go with him—anywhere!"

Lady Frances nodded over the bowed head.

"Well, my dear, he'll lift no finger. He lives for himself alone. This is not his first *affaire*."

Millicent shuddered.

"I thought he really cared for me. I knew there were—other women—but——"

Lady Frances proceeded to be cruel for kindness' sake.

"I have known Roxhythe for—I won't say how many years—and I know how much heart he hath. That is none. He has fascinated you until you think that you love him. But you do not. Ah, no, my dear, you do not!"

Millicent was silent. After a moment Fanny patted her shoulder.

"Come! Cheer up! Oh, I know 'tis hard, but you must bear a brave front. Never let him see that he has hurt you."

"You do not know, Lady Frances."

Fanny laughed irrepressibly.

"Why, do you think I have not been in love scores of times with those whom I should not have loved? Child, I have experienced all your feelings, and I assure you that you will recover."

"I wish that I were dead!"

"Nonsense! You are over-wrought to-night; to-morrow you will think differently. I am going to send you home now, and—if I may—I will come and see you in a few days' time."

"You—you will not care to. There will be some dreadful scandal—oh, I wish that I had never come to town!"

"There'll be no vestige of scandal, my dear. Trust Roxhythe to see to that."

"Oh, yes, yes! They are going to fight, and one of them will be killed—all for me who am—worthless!"

"I'll wager my best necklet no one is killed," said Lady Frances.

"Henry is so angry! I have never seen him look so terrible! He—he will do my lord some injury."

"Alas! There's no likelihood of such a thing happening!" said Fanny, tartly.

CHAPTER III

THE CHALLENGE

ROXHYPHE shut the door.

"And now what is it?"

Crewe was standing by the fire. At my lord's words he swung round.

"It is this, sir! I'll not have my wife's name dishonoured by such as you! For nearly three years it has gone on! At first I thought nothing; she had her admirers, but she loved me. And then you gradually stole her from me, until she thinks of naught save when she shall next be with you! Oh, I'm not blind! I've watched and waited. But to-night I could no longer contain myself! One of us dies, my lord!"

"Very fine," applauded Roxhythe. "But you make a deal out of nothing. Let us say that I fascinated Lady Crewe. We played at love, *bien sûr*. Now we have agreed to end the game. As to her good name, no harm is like to come to that."

"No harm, you say? All the town will talk of this. How do I know that there is not more between you?"

The fine lips curled contemptuously.

"Faith, you have a good opinion of your wife!" said Roxhythe. Then he grew grave. "You foolish boy, what have you been about all this time? You say you have watched us? Then why a-God's name did you not act? By heaven, I would let no man steal my wife's heart!"

"If it can be stolen I do not want it! I'll make no effort to win her from you, my lord! She—she has earned my contempt! my hatred!"

"The tragic hero, egad! One would think there was more to this *affaire* than a series of very mild flirtations."

"I do think it!"

"Then you are a foolish child. Strive to be wiser. I

suggest you take your wife away, and woo her afresh. She will very soon forget me."

Crewe gripped a chair-back. His face was white with anger.

"How dare you mock me? One would think that I was to blame for all this!"

"Most undoubtedly you are. Instead of freezing the girl you should have shaken her soundly and taken her away. *Mordieu*, you drove her to my arms, with your coldness and your scowls!"

"I thought her above—this kind of intrigue! I—heaven, what did I not think her? I have found that she is no better than the commonest trull that walks the streets!"

"La-la! What a fury! I begin to pity your wife."

Two hectic spots of colour burned on Sir Henry's cheeks.

"We'll have done, if you please, sir——"

Roxhythe sighed with relief.

"Now God be thanked, here's sense at last!"

"Will you name your friends?"

Roxhythe looked him up and down.

"Oh. You want satisfaction? Bethink you, you'll damage your wife's reputation as I have not done all this time."

"I will take care of that, I thank you. Will you name your friends?"

"No," said Roxhythe. "I will not."

It seemed that Crewe was dumbfounded. He stared in amazement.

"You will not? You will not? Am I to call you coward then?"

"My dear boy, you may call me what you will if it eases you at all. Roxhythe does not fight with every fly that buzzes in his ear."

Crewe sent a chair spinning across the room.

"Yet you will fight me, sir!"

"If you continue in this vein it seems very likely. I counsel you to calm yourself. It is no light matter to fight Roxhythe."

"I am not afraid! Right is on my side!"

"But in this world it is more often might that triumphs. My tragic hero, do you not realize that I could pink you within—one minute?"

"I care not! And I believe that I can kill you!"

"The worse for you then. You were as effectually damned. You would have to reckon with King Charles. I'd not envy you that task. No, I will not fight you."

"Then you are a coward! a coward! a coward! All the world will call you one!"

"All the world will laugh at you for your pains, Crewe. The world knows what manner of man I am."

"You insult me! Am I unworthy of your sword?"

"By no means. But I do not murder babes."

Crewe looked up into the mocking eyes. His hand fumbled in the breast of his coat and came out. With one laced glove he struck my lord across the face.

"Is that enough?" he panted.

The straight brows contracted swiftly.

"Almost enough to earn you a thrashing at my hands, Crewe," said Roxhythe, a hint of grimness in his smooth voice.

Sir Henry fell back. A sob tore at his throat.

"My God, are you made of stone? You'll swallow that insult?"

My lord shrugged.

"I have already told you; I do not murder babes."

"Damn you, am I to strike you again?"

Roxhythe smiled.

Crewe's hand clenched on the glove, twisting it round and round.

"Can I say nothing to move you? What have I done that you should scorn to fight me? Do you not owe me at least that much?"

"My good child, no. I have not damaged Lady Crewe's reputation; I am even preventing you from so doing."

"I will cry this shame against you! All London shall know how you refused to fight! were afraid to fight!"

"You would be very ill-advised. You would ruin your wife, and make yourself a laughing-stock. Do you think

I cannot afford to refuse to fight without injuring mine honour?"

Crewe stood still, seething with rage and impotence.

"Why will you not fight me? What reason have you?"

"I thought that I told you that," said Roxhythe.

"Bah! 'Tis not from any desire to spare my life, I know!"

"Why then, we will say that it is not my will."

"Do you think to put me off with that excuse? You treat me as though I were of no account! as though you had not ruined my happiness, disgraced my wife!"

My lord re-arranged his cravat.

"I've no taste for heroics off the stage, my friend."

The young man's breath was coming short and quick. His hands trembled; his eyes burned dark in his pale face.

"Don't mock at me! You—you goad me to what I will not think of! I could kill you where you stand, you smiling devil!"

My lord was still busy with his cravat. He stood with his back to Crewe looking into the mirror.

"*Eh bien!* Kill me."

Crewe swung round on his heel. Up and down the room he paced, with white lips and trembling hands. He came at last to a standstill, facing my lord.

"Once more I ask: will you name your friends?"

Roxhythe studied his reflection pensively.

"I will not."

Crewe was almost hysterical with rage. He tore at his sword, wrenching it from the scabbard.

"You shall fight! If you will not have it in order, it shall be here and now! On guard, my lord!"

Roxhythe gave a finishing touch to his laces, and turned.

"What have we now? *Corbleu!* A sword! Am I to fling myself on its point?"

"Draw, curse you!"

Roxhythe snapped his fingers scornfully.

"So much for that pretty plaything! I do not fight you now or at any time. Body o' me, am I to fight every young cockerel who fancies himself injured by me? Put

up your sword and be thankful that I do not choose to take offence."

The sword clattered to the ground.

"Devil! Devil!" gasped Sir Henry, and sprang at him.

There was a short struggle, a strangled oath from Crewe. Roxhythe had both the boy's wrists in a vice-like grip. He did not appear to exert himself in the least, but Crewe could not break free. The pressure tightened relentlessly.

"Fool!" said my lord evenly. "I could ruin you ten times over for this. What madness has come over you that you dare to challenge me in such a fashion?"

Sir Henry was silent, clenching his underlip hard between his teeth. The grip on his wrists was agony. Roxhythe looked down at him contemptuously.

"If you like I will swear that at my hands Lady Crewe has received no ill, save, perhaps, a little heartache. Is that enough?"

"No, no! Damn you, let me go! I'll allow no man—to make love to—my wife—and go—unpunished!"

"I applaud you. But yours would be the punishment an I met you."

"I'll take my chance of that! Let go my wrists! Do you think I care whether I live or die? Oh, name your seconds! Name them!"

"No."

"For God's sake forget that you are Roxhythe for one moment!"

"It is as well that one of us should remember it."

"'Sdeath! Are you a creature of flesh and blood? I've struck you! I have offered you every insult! Is it possible that you can still refuse me satisfaction?"

"In truth, I am very forbearing," sighed Roxhythe.

Crewe struggled to be free of him.

"Then again I call you coward! I'll never rest until I have met you!"

Roxhythe released him.

"If you pester me it will be my painful duty to have you removed. I repeat: neither now or at any other time will I fight you. That is my last word."

Crewe fell back. The marks of Roxhythe's fingers were on his arms; dry sobs shook him. He collapsed into a chair, resting his head in his hands.

Roxhythe shook out his ruffles.

The door was opened; Sir Henry heard the snap as it was closed again. He was alone.

Ten minutes later Roxhythe was at Mrs. Carthew's side, drawing witticisms.

Lady Frances came up with Mr. Fletcher at her elbow. She smiled sweetly.

"Mrs. Carthew, may I present Mr. Fletcher?"

The lady bowed.

"Will you dance, Madam?" simpered Fletcher.

Madam was uncertain. Plainly she liked Roxhythe's company. But her hostess was already engaging his attention.

"Thank you, sir." She was led away.

Lady Frances sat down beside my lord.

"Roxhythe, why have you tampered with that poor child?" Her voice was very calm.

"My dear Fanny, need we pursue the subject? I do not care to dwell on my mistakes."

"You admit that it was a mistake? David, I implore you, let it end here!"

"It ended an hour since. I found myself growing paternal."

"I am thankful for't. The girl fancies herself in love with you. I pray heaven 'tis but a fancy. I have told her what manner of man you are."

"Really? What manner of man am I?"

She disregarded him.

"David, it was not right; it was not fair. I'd say naught if she were a Court miss, versed in these ways. She is not. She knew no harm until you came into her life. And now—God and you know what harm has been wrought."

"None."

"That is true, Roxhythe?"

"As I live. I believe I must always have felt paternal towards her. It was a very mild intrigue."

Lady Frances heaved a sigh of relief.

"I feared—she was so very over-wrought—If you say it is not so, I believe you. But, oh, David, why? Why try to break her poor, foolish little heart? Were there not enough women besides her? Women who knew you and your ways?"

"It was her sweet simplicity that attracted me," said Roxhythe.

"So you broke her for your pleasure. Sometimes I think that you are utterly without heart, David."

"Mayhap. However, you'll agree that I am not without forbearance when I tell you that for the past hour I have been closetted with the husband, refusing to fight him."

"Ah! You will not fight him?"

"Certainly not. Why should I?"

"I know why you should not! 'Twere Lady Crewe's ruin an you did."

"So I thought. Unhappily he did not. He did all in his power to provoke me to wrath."

"He failed?"

"Can you ask? I have told him that I will not meet him now or at any other time."

"David, promise me that you will not go back on that!"

"I promise."

She touched his hand, smiling a little tremulously.

"You're not all bad, David. I believe that you are sorry for this—mistake."

"I regret it with all my heart. The child took me more seriously than I knew."

Lady Frances dabbed surreptitiously at her eyes.

"My dear," said Roxhythe, "if you cry, I shall depart. I have had naught but tears and ravings all the evening."

"Poor David! Oh me! I should be angry with you, I suppose. Somehow I cannot. You had best make love to me next time. Then neither of us will be hurt."

Roxhythe kissed her hand.

"Two women there are, Fanny, whom I esteem above all others. One is now a memory."

Frances looked up.

"Who was she?"

"She was Madame."

"Madame! Roxhythe, you loved her?"

"I respected and admired her above all women. The other is your sweet self. If ever I love, or have loved a woman, you are she."

"How dear of you!" sighed my lady. "To how many women have you said that?"

CHAPTER IV

PROGRESSION

AT Drury Lane Christopher met Harcourt. They sat side by side in the Pit, and during the intervals, exchanged confidences. After the play they went together to partake of supper. When the dishes had been set before them Harcourt shook his head at Christopher.

"Oh, Chris, you are very wily!"

Christopher sampled a pasty.

"Am I? Why?"

"You led me to think that your master was no plotter."

It was a bold attack, but it failed.

"Nor is he." Christopher went on with the pasty.

Harcourt laughed long and low.

"Why, Chris, have you heard none of the rumours current in town?"

"I hear a good many lies. Which one is this?"

"That the King made a treaty with France some time back—secretly."

"Oh, that!" Christopher was scornful. "I wonder you give ear to these rumours, Harcourt."

"But my dear boy, men say that it was for that reason that we went to war with Holland!" He was watching Christopher closely.

"Men will say anything," replied Dart. It was a very fair imitation of Roxhythe's style.

Harcourt's eyes narrowed.

"Are you fencing with me, I wonder?"

Christopher looked up, smiling.

"Odso! I? No."

It was impossible to look into his clear, honest eyes and to disbelieve his word. Harcourt was puzzled.

"I have heard it said also that Roxhythe worked the intrigue. You remember how often he was in Paris?"

"Ay. And I know why. It was not intrigue."

"Oh! Then you do not think that the King allied himself with France behind our backs?"

"Of course I do not. Is that a wild duck?"

Harcourt pushed the dish towards him. Christopher had a fine, healthy appetite.

"I don't trust the King," said Harcourt profoundly.

"You must always be mistrusting someone, Sydney," said Christopher, amused. "What's to do now?"

"Why were we deprived of Shaftesbury? Why have we this Danby?"

"God knows. I don't meddle in politics. You had best ask Shaftesbury himself. I hear he is much with your master."

Harcourt frowned.

"Perhaps I shall. Is it possible that you can trust Danby?"

"I hardly know him," said Christopher. He attacked the wild duck with some vigour.

"But his policy! It is all cringing to the Court."

"Is it?"

"I mislike his distribution of money. It smacks of bribery."

"Sydney, I recommend this bird—oh, I beg your pardon! yes, bribery. Certainly."

"Associating with Roxhythe has made you very careless," reproved his friend.

"I have already told you that I do not meddle in what I do not understand. I have abundant faith in His Majesty's discretion—and that is all there is to it. How is Madame Harcourt?"

Harcourt gave it up, and Christopher promptly forgot the conversation.

Later in the week he called on Lady Frances to whom he was more than ever attached.

She greeted him gaily. With her was Lady Crewe, and Christopher saw that Millicent had been crying.

"Do I intrude?" he asked, smiling.

"By no means!" answered Frances. "We are delighted to see you, are we not, Millicent?"

Lady Crewe assented. Christopher kissed both their hands, and sat down. For a short space he entertained them with snatches of gossip. Lady Crewe was palpably ill-at-ease and anxious to be gone. Before very long she rose, murmuring excuses.

Lady Frances took her hand.

"Must you go? Well, I'll not press you to stay, as I know how busy you are. Chris, wait for me!" She went out with Millicent.

When she returned, Christopher looked at her, one eye-brow raised inquiringly.

"Well?"

"Well what?" asked her ladyship, swinging her brocades.

"I want to know."

"Inquisitive child! Again what?"

"Is it all at an end between Lady Crewe and Roxhythe?"

Fanny sat down beside him.

"Thank heaven, yes! You noticed, then?"

"Since March he has hardly ever been at her side."

"And she mopes and lies awake nights thinking of him. It's a sad coil, Chris."

"So I always thought. Lady Crewe looks very sick."

Frances tapped her fan against the table.

"Because she hath a fool for husband! 'Pon rep, Chris, I've no patience with the man! Oh, I'll tell you the whole story! You can be discreet, I know. In March I gave a ball; you remember? Well, they were both present. Roxhythe took Millicent into my little parlour and as far as I can gather there was something of a fracas. He discovered that he felt fatherly towards her and I suppose that he saw that she was too much in earnest for peace and quiet. To do him justice, I believe he meant to be kind then. They bade one another farewell, or some such nonsense, and the child wept very grievously. Roxhythe is too fascinating. At that moment in walked the husband! Conceive the tableau! Roxhythe brought Millicent to me,

and went back to Sir Henry. According to him, Sir Henry was all for a duel, but he'd have none of it, and left the poor man disconsolate. No doubt he was very rude. Since then he has eschewed Millicent's society. *Tant mieux*. All would then have been well had it not been for Crewe's heroics. So Roxhythe calls it. Instead of treating the matter tactfully, he first raved at the child, and then turned a cold shoulder to her. They scarcely speak; each goes his own road, and each is very properly unhappy.

"I told Sir Henry he was a fool—yes, was it not brave of me?—and I told him to take Millicent away and be kind to her. Oh, he could have won her back! Instead he took her down into the country where she fretted herself to death. Now she thinks that she hates Crewe. I've talked to the man till I am tired, and to no avail. In fact, he sent me about my business. And so they go their ways. Millicent yearns for Roxhythe, because she wants love and Henry seems to have none for her. She sees David at all the houses they visit, and in that way the wound is kept open."

"I see," said Christopher. "I had some notion of this, of course, but I did not know all. One does not question Roxhythe."

"No," agreed her ladyship. "One does not. I am very worried over this *affaire*. I must say that since the fracas Roxhythe hath not paid much heed to Millicent. But they meet everywhere—and Roxhythe is all too magnetic. The child fancies herself madly in love with him."

"I had not thought that. True, she does not look well, and she is less gay, but she scarce glances in Roxhythe's direction."

"Oh, she hath her pride!" said Frances. She sighed a little, and fell silent. After a few moments she smiled reminiscently.

"Chris, who do you think waited on me yesterday?"

Christopher shook his head.

"Who?"

"Our new Earl!"

"What, Danby?"

"No less. Was it not amusing? I barely know him, and now, suddenly, he comes to see me!"

"Perhaps he has long been an admirer," said Christopher, twinkling.

Her lightning smile flashed out.

"No such thing. He wanted to prove me concerning Jasper's political sentiments."

"Did he? What are his sentiments?"

"If I knew I do not suppose that I should tell you, my dear boy."

"As I am aware that you do know, I take that as a very decided snub!"

"Soit! I'll tell you: Jasper belongs to no party."

"Wise man."

"So I think. I dislike this Danby."

"That is curious," remarked Christopher. "I met Harcourt the other day and he said much the same thing."

"Harcourt is very often right. Why does he object to Danby?"

"I forget. Something concerning bribery, I think. He mistrusts everyone. Even the King is not above reproach."

"Oh?" Lady Frances studied her fan. "Of what does he suspect the King?"

"Some tittle-tattle about selling England to France. Harcourt swallows every wild rumour that is current and firmly believes in it. 'Tis the way of his party."

"I don't think that, Chris. Harcourt usually has grounds for his suspicions."

"Oh, he hath for this one, the war with Holland, and Shaftesbury's resignation."

"Ah! By the way, Chris, is not Shaftesbury your friend?"

"Hardly. He was a friend of my father's and he has been very kind to me. Lately I have eschewed his company as he cannot meet me without deploring my regard for Roxhythe."

"I see. That regard is as strong as ever?"

"An hundred times more strong!" said Christopher warmly.

Lady Frances said nothing.

Not ten minutes after Christopher had departed, Montgomery came quickly into the room. Lady Frances laid down her embroidery.

"Well, Jasper?"

Montgomery flung himself into a chair. His face was overcast.

"Has His Majesty been at the House to-day? Is the dispute ended?"

"He has ended it very summarily."

"Oh? What has happened?"

"We are prorogued."

Lady Frances started. Her eyes crinkled at the corners; she laughed beneath her breath.

"My dear Jasper, he is a marvellous man!"

Montgomery shrugged despairingly.

"It passes all bounds. We were all in a turmoil over this question of privilege—Shaftesbury's doing, of course. Had it to do with the Test, or had it not? The Houses were at one another's throats; the King could do naught to settle the dispute. So he prorogued us. I tell you, Fanny, he'll o'er-reach himself ere long. First we had Danby foisted upon us. By sheer force we made peace with Holland. That was February of last year. Did Charles recall the troops? No! He gives us shuffling answers. 'Tis my belief he is in French pay. There was dissension. Then Danby employs a little bribery, and all is quiet. The House turns against Lauderdale, as well it might. There was talk of impeachment. More bribery. No more talk of impeachment. Next we have the No-Popery cry, Danby heading it, the King—ostensibly—seconding.

"Then the bill offered to the Lords—no person to sit in either House, or to hold any office without declaring all resistance to the King's power criminal, or without swearing never to attempt to alter the government of Church or State. Pretty, was it not? Well, the opposition arose and debated. So we have next a standing order attached: no oath should ever be imposed the refusal of which should deprive a peer of his seat or vote. Shaftesbury evidently

thought it would pass, so what must he do but pick a quarrel with the Lords on Privilege. So were we all in a turmoil. Whereupon Charles prorogues Parliament. 'Tis a scandal, Fanny!"

She nodded.

"And the Bill?"

He pulled down the corners of his mouth.

"I'll swear we have heard the last of that."

"So it is ended. At least 'tis no triumph for Danby."

"No." He fell silent, watching her moodily.

"What of Scotland?" asked Frances at length.

"No decision; matters drift on. 'Pon honour, Fanny, the country is in a grievous state! A dissolute King, and a sycophant for minister! I had sooner have Shaftesbury for all his faults."

"Yes . . ." Lady Frances was frowning. "But Shaftesbury was not to be trusted."

"As we have seen. I think no one is to be trusted save it be my Lord Halifax."

"Oh, Halifax!" she laughed. "He'll do naught because he cares not enough one way or the other. He hath the wit, though."

"I have a great opinion of him...Who has been here to-day?"

"No one of any moment. Millicent, and later, Chris Dart."

"Dart. Fanny, have you ever learnt anything from that young man?"

"He knows nothing."

"He could throw no light on these suspicions concerning the King and France?"

"He spoke of it to-day. He is quite in the dark."

"So Roxhythe was not in any intrigue in that quarter?"

"I do not say that."

"My dear Fan! If his private secretary knows naught—?"

Lady Frances laid down her needle.

"Roxhythe works alone. I believe that when Madame came to England in '70, it was to negotiate with Charles for

Louis. I believe also that Roxhythe was the King's agent."

Montgomery was worried, but still unconvinced.

"I do admire your intelligence, my dear, and true it is that all men eye Roxhythe askance since those rumours began. And yet . . ."

"Wait," said Lady Frances. "My instinct never errs."

A servant came into the room, holding the door wide.

"My Lord Roxhythe, your ladyship."

"Speak of the devil . . .!" muttered Montgomery. He rose.

Roxhythe entered. He was dressed in shades of mauve and silver.

Lady Frances laughed at him.

"Roxhythe, you are like an autumn evening!" she told him.

"Then I am inappropriately clad," he replied, bowing over her hand. "Montgomery, ye seem mighty solemn."

"Ay." Jasper forced a smile. "You've heard the latest news?"

"I believe so. Fitzjoyce is engaged to fight Digby out at Islington. On account of Digby's fair spouse."

"I referred to State affairs," said Montgomery stiffly.

"The King has prorogued Parliament."

"So he has. I remember now."

"I fear he will go too far if he continues to behave in this wise."

"Oh? His move is not approved of?"

"Hardly."

Roxhythe handed Lady Fanny to a seat, and sat down beside her.

"Well, well. He will be distressed."

Montgomery spoke boldly.

"Roxhythe, you possess more influence than does anyone.

Why do you not exert it?"

Lady Frances looked quickly from one to the other.

"Why should I?" asked my lord blandly.

"'Twere in the interests of the country."

"Um," said Roxhythe profoundly. "But I never meddle in what concerns me not."

Fanny saw the colour rise to her husband's cheeks. She gave a little gurgle of laughter.

"There's for you, Jasper! And now we'll talk of something else, an it please you."

"I'll not stay then," answered Montgomery brusquely. "I am like to cast a blight on my Lord Roxhythe's conversation." He left the room with a slight bow to Roxhythe.

Lady Frances looked troubled. Roxhythe regarded her amusedly.

"I seem to have upset your worthy husband," he remarked.

CHAPTER V

THE MOST NOBLE THE MARQUIS

'76 dawned softly. In England there was no Parliament, for in November of '75 it had refused Charles a grant of money; had even dared to insinuate that he should be in possession of a surplus. It was importunate, and it was straightway prorogued.

On the continent Louis still waged war on Holland, but Turenne was dead at Saltzbach, and De Ruyter dead in Italy. A congress was held at Nimeguen, but the war continued, the Prince of Orange doggedly holding his enemy in check. Seldom was he successful in battle. At St. Omer he suffered great losses, but ever he managed just to hold back the French. So Louis approached his cousin Charles tentatively.

Negotiations were opened and carried on through M. Barillon, the French ambassador; the Duchess of Portsmouth; and my Lord Danby. Into the negotiations strolled my Lord Roxhythe.

Charles was dissatisfied. Louis showed a tendency to meanness. Charles held counsel with his favourite.

"David, it is like squeezing money from a stone."

"Is it, Sir?"

Charles was petulant. He repulsed one of the spaniels which was trying to leap on to his knee.

"It is unsatisfactory, trafficking through Barillon. I do not know King Louis his real mind. As before, we are fenced round with vague terms. I'll do the thing direct or not at all."

"Ah!" Roxhythe sighed, for he perceived whither this led.

Charles shook back his curls. In his eyes was a brooding melancholy look that the favourite knew well.

“Barillon speaks me fair and offers little. Louise——” he shrugged. “She leaves me in the dark. Before I enter into a second treaty with Louis I’ll know where I stand. He seeks to trap me.”

“Naturally. So the whole matter lies in one short sentence: —Roxhythe must go to France.”

The King half smiled.

“It seems so, David.”

“To discover King Louis his mind?”

“Ay. Roxhythe, I have no notion how much I may with safety demand. I would ask—the same as before. Louis would try to beat me down. If I know not what is the maximum sum he will pay I dare not stand adamant. I must know. And there is none like unto you for discovering these matters. I want the thing done quickly; I am tired of all this haggling and bargaining.”

Roxhythe nodded.

“And when I have discovered this: what then?”

“I will have you take a letter to King Louis setting forth my mind.”

“But, Sir, why not negotiate then through Barillon?”

“Because I dislike the oily-tongued rascal! I’ll lay the matter bare before Louis—he shall know my wants from me alone; not as translated and modified by his own servants.”

“Very well, Sir.”

“You must go to Monmouth. You have been a-many times, so it will not give rise to suspicion. And from thence to Paris.”

Roxhythe cast up his eyes.

“Have a little mercy, Sir! Employ one of the Duchess her creatures.”

“No. I trust no one save you.”

“I am flattered, Sir, of course.”

Charles stretched himself, laughing. Some of the shadows had gone from his eyes.

“David, ye grow ungallant!”

“I grow weary, Sir, and old,” retorted my lord.

“Nevertheless, ye will go?”

"I suppose I must, Sir."

Charles smiled, full of affectionate understanding.

So Roxhythe went again to Paris.

During his absence Lady Crewe came one evening to Bevan House, closely veiled. She was ushered into the library where Christopher received her. When he saw who it was who had come to see Roxhythe at such an informal hour, he was horrified.

My lady moved agitated hands.

"Mr. Dart, I must see my Lord Roxhythe." Her voice was carefully controlled, but Christopher could detect the flutter beneath her calm.

"I am very sorry, Lady Crewe, but—"

"Please—do not—make excuses! I must see him."

"Madame, it is impossible. He is not here."

She stared at him, blankly.

"Not—here! Oh—I—did not know! I—" She broke off twisting her hands.

Christopher watched her. He saw pride struggling with desire, and wondered. Suddenly she turned to him.

"Mr. Dart, I want so much to ask my lord not to—not to—go to Lady Claremont's rout next week!"

Christopher looked at her steadily. The reason sounded much like an excuse. He bowed.

Millicent read the doubt in his face; she drew herself up proudly.

"Will you please deliver that message to my lord as soon as he returns?"

Christopher decided that his suspicions were unjust. He came forward, taking her hand.

"Will you not be seated, Madame? Of course I will deliver your message, but—forgive me—is it not rather a strange one?"

"I—yes, I suppose you must think so. Perhaps he—will not understand—I—oh, promise me you will tell this to—"

"Whatever you impart to me I shall treat as a strict confidence."

"Thank you. It is just that—people are talking still about—my lord—and me. And last week—we—I was at

Lady Bletchley's and she presented—Roxhythe—to me, and we had to dance—and my husband was very angry. Now he watches my every movement. He heard my lord ask me if I was to be at the Claremont rout—next week. And then at a coffee-house there was some vile talk—and oh, I don't know how it is, but he hath it firmly fixed in his head—that we—that I have arranged to meet—my lord—there, because Henry is not going. He—he is mad with jealousy. He won't believe—that it is not so. I feel he means to arrive at the rout—later in the evening—and—if my lord is there—and I am there—he—he—is so wild I fear a scene—or that he will challenge my lord. You see, of late—Lord Roxhythe has been at all the balls—and—oh, I dare not stay at home, for then Henry suspects me more than ever! Please, please do not let Roxhythe go to the Claremont rout!”

“I will certainly try to prevent it,” soothed Christopher. “But are you sure that your husband is quite as mad—as you think?” He spoke apologetically.

“You do not know how wild he is! And—and because I go to Lady Frances' house who is Roxhythe's cousin, he thinks—he thinks—oh, it is all too horrible!”

“It must be,” said Christopher with feeling. “Will it comfort you if I promise that Roxhythe shall not go to this ball?”

“Oh, yes!” she sighed. “Thank you very much!”

He showed her out, anxious that she should leave as soon as might be. Hysterical women filled him with nervousness.

When he came back to the library his lips pursed.

“Thunder of God, what a household! And how indiscreet of her to come here!” He shook his head wisely.

When Roxhythe returned two days later, Christopher told him of my lady's visit.

“Little fool,” commented my lord.

“Sir, she is naught but a child, and—I believe I am sorry for her.”

Roxhythe poured himself out a glass of burgundy.

“She behaves so foolishly. I have but to enter the room

for her to go pale and then red. They are a melodramatic pair. I wish them joy of each other." He drained the glass and lounged out.

Shortly after noon on the following day Roxhythe was in his private room attending to some affairs. To him came a lackey who announced that Sir Henry Crewe was downstairs and desired to see him at once.

One haughty eyebrow rose.

"I do not receive," said my lord.

"I thought not," said a deadly calm voice. "So I followed your servant."

The scandalized footman threw a deprecatory glance at his master. Roxhythe nodded. Sir Henry came firmly into the room; the door closed behind the lackey.

Roxhythe looked his visitor up and down.

"May I know to what I owe this honour?" he drawled.

Crewe was very pale, with determination writ upon his face.

"A year ago, sir, you refused to fight me. Since then I have watched you closely. I have seen you at every ball, sometimes in attendance with my wife. I have remarked how many evenings she spends with your cousin. I am not a fool; neither am I blind."

My lord's mouth twitched.

"I am glad to know that," he said.

"Perhaps it surprises you!" sneered Crewe.

"I confess I had not given you credit for much brain. Of course if you assure me that I was wrong I have no choice but to believe you."

"You may mock as much as you please, my lord, but you will not evade the point any longer. It has come to my knowledge that my wife came to your house three nights since. I have borne much, but this goes beyond all bounds. One of us dies, my lord. Will you meet me?"

Roxhythe balanced his quill on one finger.

"I gave you the answer to that question a year ago, my friend."

"You still refuse?"

"Certainly."

"Perhaps—" Crewe laughed derisively. "—perhaps you'll deny that my wife came to your house?"

"I am not in a position to deny it. You see, I was not in London."

Crewe laughed again.

"A lie!"

Roxhythe bowed.

"I have called you coward; I now call you liar. Do you still refuse to meet me?"

"I do."

An unpleasant smile hovered about Crewe's mouth. He strode to the door, turned the key in the lock, and pocketed it. Roxhythe watched, mildly interested.

"Very well, my lord. You force my hand." Sir Henry produced a case of pistols. He laid them on the table. "You will find them ready primed, sir, and alike in every respect. You may take your choice. We will stand at opposite ends of the room. It is now two minutes to the hour. When the clock strikes for the third time we fire."

"It doesn't strike," said Roxhythe apologetically.

Crewe reddened.

"Then you may count."

"You are very kind," murmured my lord.

"Have you chosen your weapon, sir?"

Roxhythe pushed them away.

"My dear, impetuous fool, do you seriously think that I am going to fight you?"

"If you do not I'll shoot you like the dog you are!"

"Not in this coat," said Roxhythe. He stroked its velvet surface lovingly.

Crewe curbed his temper with difficulty.

"I think you will have no need of coats after to-day, sir."

"Oh, I trust so," answered Roxhythe placidly.

Crewe picked up one of the pistols.

"Do you fire from where you sit, sir?"

"No," said Roxhythe.

Light sprang to the angry eyes.

"At last! From where, my lord?"

"From nowhere," said Roxhythe.

The nervous hands clenched.

"I could strangle you in your chair, you mocking devil!"

"I doubt it," smiled Roxhythe, unruffled. He rose, and came towards the furious young man. "In a very few moments I shall have lost my patience," he said. "So I advise you to go."

The pistol was raised.

"If you call for help I fire!" threatened Crewe.

"What I dislike about you is your deplorable manner," complained Roxhythe. "Don't wave that thing in my face!"

"Pick up that pistol! By God, if you goad me much further I will shoot you out of hand!"

"I thought you proposed doing that in any case. I suppose you have not the courage."

Crewe's finger was on the trigger. His eyes blazed.

"'Tis not I who lack courage, my lord! 'Tis you!"

Roxhythe smiled.

"Do you doubt me?" cried Sir Henry.

"You are labouring under a delusion," replied Roxhythe. "I am not deaf."

"Damn you, pick up that pistol!"

The smile became insufferable.

"Damn you, pick it up yourself," said Roxhythe, very urbane.

Crewe looked in the handsome, laughing face, saw that my lord was playing with him, would continue to play with him, and went white. In that moment all semblance of sanity left him. He raised the pistol. His hand was trembling, but he controlled it; he had no thought for the consequences; he only knew that Roxhythe was laughing at him, jibing at him. He fired . . .

The report was deafening; smoke flooded the room. As soon as he had pulled the trigger Crewe realized the enormity of his act, and came violently to his senses. He dropped the pistol, shuddering.

The smoke cleared. Lord Roxhythe was lying inert upon the floor. Below his right shoulder a great red patch was growing, growing.

Crewe stared numbly. The patch was creeping over my lord's coat, soon it would trickle down on to the carpet. It seemed a pity. Crewe tried to imagine what it would look like when the steadily flowing blood should have reached the floor. It would spoil the carpet; he thought that blood-stains never came out, but he was not sure.

Along the passage came the sound of footsteps, running. The door was tried; voices called; someone was trying to burst open the lock.

The noise dispelled some of the mists that were gathering about Crewe's mind.

"Wait! wait!" He fumbled in his pocket for the key, and finding it, thrust it into the lock with cold, trembling fingers

The room seemed full of people. They were gathered about my lord's body, talking excitedly. No one noticed him. How foolish they were! Why try to staunch that blood? Roxhythe was dead. He, Crewe, had killed him... How still Roxhythe lay! He could not look at him. He leant against the wall, sick and cold.

Into the confusion came Christopher, swiftly.

"What is it? I thought I heard—" he stopped short seeing the agitated group at one end of the room. Like a flash he was across the floor and had thrust two of the men aside.

Crewe watched covertly. The red patch was growing and growing; it had reached the carpet. What fools they were! Why did they not stop it?

Christopher gave a strangled cry. He was down beside my lord, agonized, feeling for his heart.

"My God, no!" he whispered. "Not dead! Not dead!"

Those around grew suddenly quiet.

Christopher lifted his head from my lord's breast.

"He is alive. James, run for the nearest surgeon! Quickly!"

The man hurried out.

"John?" He was staunching the blood with deft, tender fingers, as he spoke.

Roxhythe's old servant stood before him, shaking.

Christopher looked up.

"Get me linen and water!"

John fled.

"The rest of you, go!" said Christopher. His eyes fell on Crewe, leaning against the wall, face averted.

"Crewe!"

A footman pushed forward.

"Ay, sir! He came an hour since, and forced himself into the room. I thought that he was queer-like then—"

"Fool! Why did you let him in?"

"But, sir! My lord said—"

"Oh ay, ay! See that he does not escape now. My God, if Roxhythe dies—!"

Two lackeys seized Sir Henry's arms and stood holding him. The rest, in obedience to Christopher's commands, drifted away.

John came running with linen and water. Between them, he and Christopher bound the wound tightly, and straightened my lord's limbs. Then, after what seemed an interminable time, Mr. Burnest, the surgeon, appeared, and attended to the wound.

Christopher watched breathlessly as his hands moved about my lord.

Burnest finished his examination.

"By God's mercy it has not touched the lung. He will live."

The colour came flooding back to Christopher's cheeks. John fell on his knees beside the writing-table, sobbing thankfully.

Crewe's voice, hoarse, unlike himself, cut across the room.

"He'll live, you say?"

Christopher swung round fiercely.

"No thanks to you, you damned scoundrel!"

Burnest looked up quickly.

"What's that?" he said sharply.

Before anyone had time to answer Roxhythe stirred. Christopher was beside him in a moment, and knelt down on the floor holding one of the beautifully shaped hands in his.

The deep brown eyes opened. They were puzzled; then the bewilderment faded, and amusement took its place. My lord regarded the surgeon silently. Then he looked at Christopher. Lastly he frowned.

"God's Body! My new coat!"

At the sound of the faint voice, Christopher gave vent to a shaky laugh of relief and pressed my lord's hand to his lips. Roxhythe saw the blood on his sleeve.

"Ruined!" he said. He showed a tendency to rise, and was suppressed.

"My lord, you must be still!" commanded Burnest.

"If you think I shall continue to lie on this devilish hard floor, you are mistaken," said Roxhythe faintly. "Chris!"

Christopher bent over him.

"I implore you to lie still, sir. If you move you will start the bleeding again."

"Send for James and another. I'll be lifted to the couch." He saw Christopher glance at the surgeon. "I mean it, Chris."

Burnest knew Roxhythe of old. He shrugged.

In five minutes my lord was reposing on the sofa, his wig straight, his side neatly bandaged. Burnest gave him a restorative and his voice grew stronger.

John was standing by his side, holding the empty glass. There was a look of dumb agony in his eyes.

Roxhythe stretched out his hand.

"My dear John, I am not like to die this time."

John kissed his hand. Tears were running down his cheeks.

"My lord—my lord—"

"Yes. Go and get some canary for Mr. Burnest. Take it into the library." He turned his head and saw Crewe, standing between the two footmen. He surveyed his servants coldly.

"What do you think you are doing?"

One of them fidgetted uncomfortably.

"My lord, Mr. Dart said—"

"You have my permission to go."

They glanced at Christopher, irresolute.

"I gave an order." Roxhythe's voice was icy.

Both men left the room hastily.

"Mr. Burnest, Chris will take you into the library. You must be thirsty after your run."

"No, I thank you, sir. I am waiting to bleed you."

"You are very kind," said Roxhythe. "You will have to wait quite half an hour."

"Indeed, no! It is imperative!"

"My good friend this is not the first time that I have been wounded. Chris, take him away."

"I cannot, sir. I beg you will be reasonable."

"You fatigue me," sighed his lordship. "I am in the middle of a discussion with Sir Henry. I cannot be interrupted in this fashion."

"There has already been an interruption! I want to know what it was!" cried Christopher.

"You always were inquisitive. Sir Henry has been showing me his pistols which are of a very exquisite workmanship. Unhappily they have a tricky way of exploding—as you see."

"That will not suffice, sir. You cannot put me off with such an explanation!"

The brown eyes were like stones.

"That is my explanation. Any who doubt my word may come and tell me."

"Sir, I know something of what lies behind! I—"

"Take Mr. Burnest to the library."

"My lord—"

"You hear me?"

Christopher flushed.

"Very well, sir." He rose sullenly. "Mr. Burnest, will you—"

"It is impossible! Lord Roxhythe, you cannot—"

"You waste time," said Roxhythe wearily.

"You had best come," advised Christopher. "It will do no good to argue."

"But—! Heavens, Mr. Dart, he should be put to bed at once! He cannot stay talking to his friends! 'Tis madness! I—"

"You heard him. He will ever go his own way."

Burnest knew this. He turned to my lord.

"Sir, if I leave you, will you promise not to move, nor to exert yourself in any way?"

"Aught you please."

"Then I will go. Against my wish!"

"I thank you."

Burnest followed Christopher out.

There was silence. Roxhythe pressed his handkerchief to his lips. His face was rather drawn.

"Come and sit down, Crewe."

Sir Henry spoke hoarsely.

"I'll not take my life at your hands!"

"You will do exactly what I say. Sit down."

Crewe obeyed limply. He had the look of one who is weary beyond words.

"Well, I compliment you," remarked his lordship. "I did not think you would do it."

Crewe flung out his hands.

"Before God, I swear I never meant to! It was a sudden madness! I fired before I had time to think! You must believe that! Oh—"

"As usual you spoil everything. Including my coat. I had hoped it was your intention. I had thought the better of you."

Crewe stared at him.

"You must be—crazed!"

"No. Luckily I am sane. So we may come to an understanding."

The wretched man groaned, his head in his hands.

"Now, what is this nonsense about your wife?"

"You know! Oh, heaven, must you add to your devilry?"

"You would greatly oblige me by dropping the heroic pose. You raved some nonsense about my meeting Millicent every day at my cousin her house. I have never met her there."

Crewe looked up.

"If I could believe that—!"

"You can. Our very harmless little *affaire* ended last March. I'll swear to that if my word is not enough."

"No—no. But she came here three nights ago! You cannot deny that!"

"I make no attempt to deny it. She had come to ask me not to appear at the rout next week."

"Not to— That seals her guilt!"

"Fool. She feared your mad jealousy would prompt you to make a scene. You have so worked on her with your passions that she is well-nigh crazed herself. There is naught between us."

Crewe sprang up.

"Swear it! Swear it!"

"Very well, I swear it. You can ask her. She will tell the same tale. Last year she was infatuated by me. *Soit*. It ended as you know. Had you then behaved sensibly towards her all would have been well. You preferred to enact the heroic husband. That too is ended. You'll go to her and ask her pardon on your knees." Few had heard that lazy voice so stern.

Crewe was silent, fighting himself.

"If you say naught concerning this afternoon's work there will be no scandal. I shall not allow any man to question my explanation. But . . ." he paused.

"But?" Crewe stepped forward.

"But you must withdraw yourself for—a year. I suggest you take Millicent away. I believe I suggested that before."

"I see." Crewe struggled for words. "You have treated me—better than I—deserve, sir."

"Yes," said Roxhythe. "Goodbye."

CHAPTER VI

THE KING HIS WILL

My lord lay in bed, propped up on pillows, rather weak from copious bleeding, but otherwise himself. The surgeon had been amazed at his nonchalance, well as he knew him, for the wound was deep, and the extraction of the bullet had been more than painful. My lord had neither flinched nor swooned.

Christopher was seated by the bedside, entertaining him, when John came into the room.

"My lord, the King is below." He said it with the utmost unconcern. In his eyes the King was as nothing beside Roxhythe.

Roxhythe picked up his mirror.

"Admit His Majesty," he said. "Give me that comb, Chris."

"Should I not go to escort His Majesty?" asked Christopher, flustered.

"No. Give me the comb."

Christopher watched him rearrange two curls. He looked at the door, wide-eyed.

John bowed His Majesty in. Roxhythe struggled up.

Charles went quickly to him, pressing him back on to the pillows.

"Don't move, Davy! Ah, what a crime!"

Christopher withdrew discreetly.

Roxhythe kissed his master's hand.

"Sire, you honour me very greatly. I scarce know how to thank you—"

Charles sat down.

"I came as soon as I heard the news. Some said you were dead; I have been in a ferment! No one knew the truth concerning the matter. Davy, how dared you scare me so?"

"I do crave your pardon, Sir. It was not my intention to be shot." He smiled faintly. His hand rested in the King's. "It was an accident."

"A curious accident!" said Charles. "I want the truth, David."

"For what purpose, Sir?"

"I'll not have your murderer go unpunished!"

"But I am not dead. I repeat—it was an accident."

Charles was incredulous.

"'Tis not like you to play the magnanimous part, Roxhythe. Are you shielding the man?"

"'Tis a new departure. A whim."

"You'll not be avenged?"

"By no means."

"David, I will have the truth!"

"Sire, I will have your promise."

"That I'll not pursue the miscreant?"

"Yes, Sir."

Charles frowned.

"Why, David?"

"Because it is my will."

The King tried to keep back a laugh and failed.

"Oddsblood, you're bold!"

Roxhythe smiled.

"Very well," said Charles. "I promise—since it is your will. I suppose you know that I can refuse you nothing?"

"You've said so, Sir. Crewe conceived himself injured by my attentions to his wife. So he challenged me to fight him. I refused."

"Challenged you! What presumption!"

"So I thought. The other day Lady Crewe came to my house—oh, quite innocently! Crewe discovered it, and came to challenge me again. Again I refused. Then the young coxcomb locked the door and laid two pistols before me. It was most exciting. We were to stand at opposite ends of the room and to fire. Oons, but he was furious!"

"David, do you tell me that you actually consented to such a proposal?"

Roxhythe was pained.

"Is it likely, Sir? I continued to refuse. The child was easy to bait. In the end his wrath got the better of him and he threatened to shoot me—er, like the dog I was."

"Insolent!"

"Very. I did not think he had the courage to do it. Evidently he had, for here am I."

The King's brow was very black.

"He should be strung up if I had my way!"

"Happily for him you have not, Sir. I did consider the matter, but I decided to let him go."

"But why? why?"

"There were several reasons. First, it was so damned amusing. And Roxhythe does not descend to vengeance on gnats. He was altogether too little. Lastly there is his wife."

"*Sangdiou!* Are you so infatuated by that chit?"

"No. On the contrary. I am so weary of meeting her and seeing her wan looks cast at me that I am determined to make an end. I have sent them away. Had I handed Crewe over to justice Millicent would have remained. In all probability she would have expected me to marry her."

The King's lips twitched.

"So in this weird fashion you are rid of both?"

"That is it, Sir."

"You are wonderful," said Charles. "And quite unique."

"I believe I am," said his lordship modestly.

"You've still to combat the gossip," warned Charles. "London is shrieking the news that you have been murdered by Crewe. No one will believe your tale of accidents."

"Will they not, Sir! I think they will not dare to disbelieve—openly."

"Perhaps you are right. But you cannot kill talk."

"I shall not try. There will be no talk addressed to me. And Crewe will be out of reach."

"And so it ends! I admit that it is a wise finish. But I would have liked to punish the wretch."

"Sir, I have had enough of heroics. You'll oblige me by treating the affair as an accident."

Charles laughed at him.

"You shall be obeyed, my lord. And now there is another matter."

"I know, Sir. I have been cursing my ill-luck all day."

"So have I. 'Tis not often that you fail me, David."

"I humbly beg your pardon, Sir."

"No, no, Davy! 'Twas not your fault. But devil take us all, what am I to do?"

"May I make a suggestion, Sir?"

"Provided it bear sense."

"I counsel you to continue your negotiations through Barillon."

"I tell you I'll not! You say fifty thousand is Louis' price. It is not enough. *Cordieu!* the thing is hard to do as it stands. I'll be well paid."

"Fifty thousand is a very fair price, Sir."

"Before he paid two hundred thousand."

"True. But since then you have played fast and loose with him, Sir. You'll not get that sum again."

Charles bit his lip moodily.

"Does Louis think that it is an easy matter for me to trick my Parliament?"

"He remembers that you did it before with great ease, Sir."

"Ay, but now they suspect me. Body o' God! I'll not accept a paltry fifty thousand for such a task!"

"What says Danby?" asked my lord.

"He is a fool."

"I take it that he does not like the Bond?"

"Oh he likes it well enough until he is assailed by a fit of virtue. And then he glooms and grumbles. I am sick to death of them all."

"And His Highness?"

"As usual he objects to what he terms 'the bribe.' He hath no head."

"And Lauderdale?"

"To hell with Lauderdale!"

"I'm with you there. Beware that man, Sir!"

"Pah! I have him in a vice. He fears impeachment."

"So! And now what?"

"I'll write to Louis."

A shadow crossed Roxhythe's face.

"Your Majesty is vague. If it is not an impertinent question, what will you write?"

"Asking him for better terms."

The firm lips curled.

"You'll beg of Louis, Sir?"

Charles was silent.

Roxhythe stared before him. His face was hard, inscrutable.

Charles moved his hand wearily.

"I've no choice. I must have money. Last year I essayed the Commons. You saw what came of it. What else can I do?"

Roxhythe turned his head.

"Well . . . so be it. After all, what matter?"

"What indeed? I knew you would stand by me, Davy!" The King's spirits had risen. Quickly they clouded over again.

"I wanted you to bear the letter to Paris—to plead my cause with Louis. And they tell me you'll not be out of your room for a week."

"They lie," said my lord calmly. "But I fear I cannot travel for a week."

"I'll not have you move from your bed until the surgeon permits. Understand that, Roxhythe!"

"Is this an order, Sir?"

"An order that I will have obeyed."

"Very well, Sir. And I do not think I should be an apt messenger."

"I am sure you would," smiled Charles.

"No. I am not versed in the art of—begging."

"Roxhythe!"

The favourite lay back. There were grim lines about his mouth.

"I do not take that tone from any man alive, Roxhythe."

My lord never said a word.

The King grew colder.

"I await your apology."

"If I have offended, I ask your Majesty's pardon. I but spoke my mind."

Charles was very angry. He rose and put back his chair.

"It seems you want to quarrel with me, Roxhythe. You are under my displeasure."

He stood looking down at the drawn face for a moment. Then he bent, laying his hand on Roxhythe's.

"I had forgot how nigh I was to losing you, Davy. I' faith, I cannot find it in my heart to punish your rudeness." His voice was very gentle.

Roxhythe's fingers closed on his.

"Sir, you know how great is my love for you! If I have been impertinent 'tis because I cannot bear to have you beg of Louis."

"I know, David, I know! Do you think it does not irk me? But needs must when the devil drives."

"If you say so, Sir, it is enough. Yet I am glad that I cannot bear this letter."

"Now that I know your mind, I'd not ask you. Dimcock must take it."

Dimcock was the King's private messenger.

"Or Church," said Roxhythe.

"No. Church is not faithful."

"When did you discover that, Sir?"

Charles smiled.

"I discern your triumph. A week ago. I remembered your warnings. Now there is only Dimcock left. I dare not risk an unfaithful messenger with this." He drew his hand away as he spoke. "I must go, Davy. I doubt I have tired you."

"You have given me new life, Sir."

"Have I? I will come again as soon as may be. And, Roxhythe!"

"Sire?"

"Promise me you will obey the surgeon! *Mordieu*, if I were to lose you—!"

"I promise, Sir." Roxhythe stretched out his hand to the bell at his side. Charles rang it for him.

As if by magic, Christopher appeared.

"Chris, you will escort His Majesty downstairs."

"Ah, Mr. Dart!" The King was pleased to be gracious. "I fear you have a difficult patient."

Christopher smiled, bowing.

"No, Sir. My lord is quite tractable."

"I have never found him so," said Charles. "I charge you very straitly to have a care for him." He flung a glance at Roxhythe, brimful of mischief. "'Twas a grievous accident!"

"Yes, Sir," said Christopher grimly.

The King bent over Roxhythe again.

"Fare ye well, Davy. I shall come again within a day or two."

Roxhythe kissed his hand.

"I can find no words wherewith to thank you, Sir. You are very good."

Christopher accompanied the King downstairs, nearly bursting with pride.

"Is the surgeon satisfied with him?" asked Charles, his hand on the baluster.

"Yes, Sir. But he urges complete rest. My lord must not move this week."

"See to it that he does not, Mr. Dart. He is very dear to me."

"He is very dear to me, Sir."

Charles looked at him kindly.

"That is very well. You have been with him some time, I think?"

"Yes, Sir. Close on eight years."

"He has been with me for thirty. There is not his equal on this earth."

Christopher blushed in anticipation of what he was going to say.

"Except Your Majesty, Sir."

Charles laughed.

"Very good, Mr. Dart!"

As they crossed the hall, he spoke again.

"I think you were his would-be champion some time ago?"

Christopher met his quizzical glance and flushed to the ears.

“Why, Sir, I—he would not have it so—but—”

“I was much entertained to hear of it. I commend your action, Mr. Dart.” His two equerries joined him. He extended his hand to Christopher, who went on one knee to kiss it. In that moment he would have laid down his life for the King.

CHAPTER VII

THE HAND OF FATE

THE wound was slow in healing, and Roxhythe grew impatient. Then, unexpectedly, came the King. As before, he was ushered into the sick room, but this time he barely waited for Roxhythe to speak before he broke out.

"David, the devil is in it this time, and no mistake!"

Roxhythe supported himself on his elbow, wincing at the pain the movement gave him.

"What's amiss, Sir?"

"Dimcock is down with the fever!" Charles could still laugh, albeit a trifle ruefully.

"The hand of fate," said Roxhythe.

"It would appear so. Yet am I determined that this letter shall go."

"Who will you send to take it?"

"Plague seize it, I do not know! I trust no one. So I came to you."

"Give me three days, Sir! I'll do it."

"No, that was not my meaning. You will stay where you are. I thought mayhap you know of a trustworthy man?"

"Not I, Sir, alack! Oh, devil take Crewe and his works! That I should fail you when you most need me!"

Charles forced him back on to his pillows.

"Gently, Roxhythe! Is there no one whom you can call upon?"

"No one."

Charles threw himself into a chair.

"The luck is against me. I had thought of Louise, but we are at variance for the moment on account of poor Nelly. Oddsfish, but Louise can be very spiteful when she likes! I'll not approach her."

"Sire, take it as an omen! The Fates are against it. Negotiate through Barillon."

Charles was superstitious by nature, but the appeal failed.

"Damme, no! I am determined. Think, David! Is there no one?"

"Justin?"

"I believe him to be in Shaftesbury's pay."

"Cherrywood?"

"I would send him but that he is in Flanders with Monmouth."

"Then there is no one. Buckingham would have done it, but you have cast him off."

"I'd not trust him. Think again, David!"

There was a long silence. Roxhythe lay staring before him, his brain working swiftly. Charles, watching him anxiously, saw his lips tighten suddenly, and his brows draw together. He seemed to be considering.

"Roxhythe, do not fail me in this!" besought the King.

Roxhythe looked at him wistfully. He sighed.

"I will not fail you, Sir. I know of a man."

"Ah! His name?"

"Dart."

"Your secretary? I'd not thought of that. But will he do it?"

"Yes," said Roxhythe. "He will do it for my sake."

"And he may be trusted?"

"Implicitly."

"Why, David, it could not be better!"

"There is a drawback."

"Always the pessimist!"

"Perhaps. Christopher will serve you very well provided that he does not know what it is that he does."

"Oho!" Charles pursed his lips. "Sits the wind in that quarter?"

"Christopher believes you to be impeccable. He has no notion of French intrigue. He trusts me wholly."

"He would not trust either of us did we send him to Paris," said Charles gloomily.

"We shall not send him to Paris."

"Roxhythe, let me have no riddles! What is it that you propose?"

"Send him with your letter to Flanders, with another writ by you to Cherrywood. You can rely on him?"

"Ay."

"He will deliver the packet to Cherrywood, who will journey with it to Paris. Chris need do no more. It's very simple."

"It is well thought out," admitted Charles. "But what will you tell Dart? There must be no shadow of suspicion."

"I will say that the packet contains private orders for Monmouth. You need have no fear."

"If they are orders for Monmouth he will wonder why he is to take them to Cherrywood," objected Charles.

"No. I shall tell him that they are to be delivered into his hands and not the Duke's on account of the French spies that do watch Monmouth very closely."

"'Tis very intricate, David. Are you sure that you can vouch for Dart?"

"I am sure."

"I would Dimcock were not ill," sighed the King. "I mislike this scheme."

"Can you think of another, Sir?"

"No. It must suffice. You'll pave the way with Dart?"

"Yes, Sir. When do you want him to start?"

"The letter is not yet writ. Can you spare Dart by Wednesday?"

"Sooner."

"Wednesday is soon enough. I'll bring both letters then."

For a long time after the King had departed, Roxhythe lay still.

When he had engaged Christopher eight years ago, it had been because he thought that the boy might prove useful in just such an affair as this. Gradually he had come to see that Christopher's standards of right and honour were rigid and uncompromising. More than once he had sounded him

on the subject, and always he had struck against that Puritanical streak that was at the bottom of his nature. He realised then that Christopher would never serve him as he had intended. Because the boy had become dear to him he had kept him at his side, taking great pains to trick him into oblivion of the intrigues that went on in his house. Looking back, he realised how much Christopher meant to him. He had grown accustomed to his quiet adoration, had come to expect the little attentions that the boy bestowed on him.

In some vague way Christopher's presence was necessary to his happiness.

Until to-day he had relinquished all ideas of using him in his machinations. But to-day Charles had called on him for help. It was something in the nature of a struggle. If he chose to respect Christopher's scruples he must fail the King; if he came to the King's rescue he would perhaps destroy Christopher's love for him. Secrets often leaked out. For the present he could keep the boy in ignorance of the real purpose of his mission, but one day it was possible that Christopher might discover the truth.

The King's cause had won. Roxhythe's fondness for Christopher was as nothing beside his love for Charles. Long, long ago he had made his choice; had thrown in his lot with the King; all else had faded before the one man. It was not likely that the tables would be reversed at this stage.

Charles had called on him: it was enough.

When Christopher presently entered the room Roxhythe pointed to a chair.

"Sit down Chris."

Christopher obeyed, somewhat mystified.

"His Majesty visited me again to-day while you were out," began Roxhythe.

"So soon? He was here a very short while since."

"This time he came for a purpose. I can trust to your discretion, Chris?"

"Of course, sir." Christopher was interested.

"Yes. You probably know that the King has always to beware of French spies; spies who would not scruple to interfere with his correspondence."

"I do suppose so, sir."

"For this reason he hath about his person several men whom he can trust implicitly. They are his private messengers. When he desires to send dispatches privately these men bear them. But lately two have been discovered to be untrustworthy, another is ill, and the fourth is with Monmouth."

Christopher assented vaguely. He did not perceive the drift of the conversation.

"And I," said Roxhythe, "am also ill."

"Are you a messenger, sir?"

"No, but I have played the part ere now. The King dare trust so few men."

"I see. Somehow I did not think you—Go on, sir!"

"It so happens that the King wishes to send very private orders to Monmouth, concerning various matters, warning him 'gainst certain men that the King knows to be in French pay. My Lord Danby has couriers, but he cannot vouch for them. You understand that 'twould be ruinous if these dispatches fell into the hands of the French, or into those of some of our number whom we believe to be also in French pay."

Christopher began to see daylight.

"Yes, sir. Do you mean——"

"I mean that the King has appealed to me to find him a messenger who is above suspicion, who will guard that packet with his life. There are very few men to-day whom we can trust, but I think that there is one."

"Sir—will you—speak plainly?" Christopher clasped his hands on his knee.

"I told His Majesty that I could find him a courier. I had you in mind."

"Oh—sir!"

"You will do it?"

"Oh—yes! I—I am all amazed! I—can scarcely believe that this honour is to be given—to me!"

"It is a very great honour," said Roxhythe gravely. "I assured His Majesty that you were worthy of it."

Christopher caught his hand to his lips.

"How kind you are! I owe it all to you! I—I cannot thank you enough! I do swear that I will prove faithful."

"I know that. You accept the task then?"

"Accept! I would do aught in the world for His Majesty—and you."

"So I thought. You served me very well eight years ago. You are older now, and wiser. I can trust to your discretion."

"I do not know why you should, sir! Indeed, I have done naught for you save the most trivial matters! I am overwhelmed."

"You've no alarms?"

"Sir! When have I shown myself a coward?"

"You will be alone this time."

"I do not fear."

"You will need all your wits. Remember, you go in my stead."

"I do remember it, sir. 'Tis because of that that I can scarce believe mine ears! That His Majesty should deign to send me in your place!"

"His Majesty acts on my advice. If you fail—if you deliver those letters wrongly—on me will fall the blame."

"I will not! Oh, I swear that I will never give them up save to the Duke himself!"

"You will not give them to the Duke. He also is surrounded by spies. It needs a more seasoned head to give them to him without creating suspicion. The King his fourth agent is in Monmouth's train, as I told you. You will give the packet to him, and he will do the rest."

"Very well, sir. Who is this man?"

"You have never seen him. He is named Cherrywood—Frederick Cherrywood. You will find him easily enough, for he is in Monmouth's household."

"Will he believe me to be the King's messenger?" asked Christopher.

"The King will give you his ring as token. And he will

recognize the cypher. This evening I'll outline your route and give you all minor instructions. You start in two days."

"Two days!" Christopher gasped. "But you, sir!"

"What of me?"

"You are ill! How can I leave you?"

"Strange as it may seem, I have been ill before, and there was no Christopher. The King his will must be obeyed even though I were dying, which I am not."

"Yes, sir, of course! But I wish you were not ill. I do not like to leave you."

"If I were well you would not be asked to bear these dispatches," Roxhythe reminded him. "However, you need have no qualms concerning me. I am under oath to His Majesty to obey the surgeon."

"If that is so it is very well," said Christopher.

"Yes. His Majesty will give the dispatches into your hands on Wednesday. And remember this, Chris! There must be no talking to Harcourt, or to Lady Fanny."

"Of course not, sir." Christopher spoke with dignity.

On Wednesday Burnest was so satisfied with my lord's condition that he allowed him, on pressure, to be dressed and carried down to the library. There he reposed on a wide couch, rather exhausted, but cheerful. Christopher arranged his cushions more comfortably.

"It has tired you, sir. You had best have kept your room."

"My dear boy, I dislike my room. The hangings are so crude. I shall have it seen to."

"You were never used to object to them," said Christopher, smiling.

"I was never in the room for so long at a stretch before. I believe that green has retarded my recovery." He ate a comfit. "You are very smart to-day, Chris."

Christopher blushed, conscious of his modish brown velvet with its gold embroidery.

"I see you know how to please His Majesty," said my lord. "And, I think, here is His Majesty."

Footsteps were coming across the hall; voices were heard,

and then the heavy curtain was swung back, and King Charles passed into the room.

The footmen straightened their beautifully curved backs and disappeared.

Christopher stood stiff. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Roxhythe was trying to rise. He cast an anxious glance in his direction and another at the King. Charles was studying him calmly. He saw the hurried glance at Roxhythe, and turned.

"David, I have never met a man so self-willed! Be still!" He clasped Roxhythe's hand affectionately. "You are better? The surgeon permitted you to come downstairs?"

"Should I have dared to disobey Your Majesty's commands?" smiled my lord.

"I do not know!" Charles laughed. "I dare swear you bullied Burnest into complying with your will." He looked at Christopher. "Eh, Mr. Dart?"

Christopher bowed.

"There was some slight coercion, Sir," he replied. "But Burnest consented very quickly."

"I knew it!" said Charles. "Roxhythe, I am of a mind to send you back to bed!"

"I beg you will not, Sir. The colour of the hangings has preyed cruelly upon my nerves."

Charles was amused.

"The hangings?"

"Green, Sir. They remind me of cabbage which I detest."

"The contemplation of cabbages!" chuckled the King. "Is it a fruitful topic?"

"Very, Sir. But wearisome. Will you not sit down?"

Charles sank into a chair. Again he addressed Christopher.

"It is his foible that no one must stand in his presence. It unnerves him."

Christopher was re-arranging my lord's pillows which had fallen in his struggle to rise. He laughed.

"I did discover that within a week, Sire." He stood

back, surveying his handiwork. "Is it to your liking, sir?"

"Thank you, yes. Since you are acquainted with my foible, sit down!"

Charles nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Dart. And so to my errand. Roxhythe has informed you of my will?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well?"

The King was grave now. Christopher had been conscious of his charm; he now felt the force of his personality. It was overwhelming.

"I can scarce thank Your Majesty enough for the great honour you do me. If I may I will serve Your Majesty faithfully."

The far-famed Stuart smile touched the King's lips.

"Very well spoken, Mr. Dart. You have considered everything?"

"Sire, I found nothing to consider save that Your Majesty had commands for me."

"A courtier, forsooth! We must see you at Whitehall. Then you will undertake this charge, and swear to carry it through with all care and discretion?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You understand that you must exercise the greatest care? You must never allow the packet to leave your person; you must never allow any man however harmless to suspect you of being my envoy; you must deliver the packet into Cherrywood his hands. Whatever happens, none other must see it or know of its existence. You understand?"

"I understand, Sir."

"That is well. When you have given it to Cherrywood you will return at once to London with his reply."

"Your Majesty may trust me."

"I do trust you, Mr. Dart. It will be in your power to betray me, yet I believe that no temptation would be strong enough to induce you to do so."

"I swear Your Majesty shall not be disappointed in me! I would serve Your Majesty till death itself!"

"I thank you. And I compliment you." The King drew two sealed packets from his bosom. "This one"—he held up the smaller of the two—"is for Cherrywood's perusal; the other you will give him to take to Monmouth."

Christopher was on one knee now. Roxhythe flicked a speck of dust from his sleeve.

Charles laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. His voice was almost stern. His fingers gripped.

"I give them into your hands. See to it that they do not leave them until you have found Cherrywood. It is my most strict command."

Christopher took the letters. He spoke huskily.

"Your Majesty has my word."

"Now swear to me by all that you hold most sacred that you will never by word or sign divulge the secret of this mission."

"I swear it."

The hand left his shoulder. Charles smiled again.

"I can offer you no reward, Mr. Dart. But we shall be very pleased to see you at Whitehall."

"Your Majesty—is very good," stammered Christopher. Charles drew off his signet ring.

"You must show this to Cherrywood," he said.

Christopher took it and carried it to his lips.

"On my head be it, Sir!"

The King's eyes twinkled.

"Put it in a safer place, Mr. Dart," he advised.

And so the interview ended.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMIABLE MR. MILWARD AGAIN

CONTRARY to his expectations Christopher met with no opposition on his journey to Flanders. He encountered but a single inquisitive gentleman, and he was inquisitive only on one point. The point was whether he was likely to be sea-sick on board ship. Christopher could not enlighten him. He left him apprehensive and disconsolate.

He landed at Dunkirk and went by horse inland. The country interested him greatly, and he was still more interested in the people that he met. He travelled northward, over Dutch ground, and wherever he went he heard nothing but praise of the Stadtholder. Every host of every inn had something to say on the subject. Some were pessimistic, and doubted that, in spite of his great courage and determination, the Prince was too young for the task of expelling the French from the States. Others were confident of his ultimate success. On all sides was hatred for the French.

Christopher arrived at length at the little town near which Monmouth had stationed his army. The Duke himself was not in camp, but stayed with his household in one of the largest houses in the town. It had been entirely given over to him, and he contrived, so the landlord of the Setting Sun told Christopher, to while away his time very creditably.

On the morning after his arrival Christopher caught sight of the Duke riding out in the midst of a gay cavalcade to the chase. He saw very little change in him. He was burnt by the sun and more developed, but otherwise just the same joyous, carefree Prince who had left England a few years before.

After watching the Duke out of sight, Christopher went through the town on a voyage of exploration.

He heard a good deal of English spoken around him,

and much French. Rather to his surprise he found that the town was seething with Frenchmen, and a few French officers. He was puzzled, but he remembered that England was now a neutral country and might receive whom she pleased in her camps.

Presently he arrived at the big market-place in the middle of the town, and there to his dismay, he came across Mr. Milward, face to face.

Escape was impossible. Christopher felt as though his coat were transparent and his precious packet in full view.

Milward stared at him. Then he gave a great laugh, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Oddsbody! My young friend of Flushing!"

Sick at heart, Christopher assented. He grasped Milward's hand with an assumption of cordiality. Arm in arm they walked across the square.

"What a surprise! I had not thought to see you here, Mr. Dart!"

"Nor I you," said Christopher truthfully. "I am sight-seeing. On my holiday, you understand."

"So? You are still with Lord Roxhythe?"

"Yes. I have long been desirous of visiting the troops, so he hath given me leave to come."

"I am delighted! Another intrigue?"

Christopher stared at him.

"Intrigue? Not that I know of!"

Milward laughed again.

"Oh, you diddled me finely between you! 'Twas but lately that I found out. Gad, but I was puzzled! I knew not what to think, and when I reported to M. de Rouvigny he pulled the longest face I have ever seen! However, naught came of it. The secret leaked out a little while since."

"What secret?" demanded Christopher blankly.

"Tut-tut! There's no need to feign innocence now. I fancy we work together, eh?"

Christopher shook his head hopelessly.

"You speak of what I know nothing. We went to Holland because of my lord's disgrace."

"Bah! You know 'twas not so."

"Indeed, indeed, I know nothing! Pray tell me what you mean?"

"Oh, if you knew naught, well and good! What is it this time?"

Christopher saw that he was not believed. He sighed. "You speak in riddles. I am on my holiday."

"Oho? You know, you need not be afraid to speak. We are all one over this."

By now Christopher was genuinely perplexed.

"All one over what?"

"Why, your errand, to be sure!"

"But I am not come on an errand!"

"Soho! You know naught of—M. Barillon?"

"I have seen him several times, but——"

"But you do not come from him?"

"Of course I do not!"

Milward wagged his finger expressively.

"You are very cautious with me. It is the King, eh?"

"What is the King?"

"Your errand!"

"Milward, pray do not be ridiculous! I have not an idea in my head what it is that you mean!"

"Have you not? Oh, I'm not squeezing you! We are one now. Barillon warned us of something of this kind."

"I do not pretend to understand," said Christopher. "You talk like a madman."

"That's good, 'pon my soul! Don't be offended! I won't question you any further. Had you a fair crossing?"

"Very fair," said Christopher. They went into a little inn.

When he at length shook off Mr. Milward he was hopelessly bewildered. From that gentleman's manner he would seem to be friendly disposed, but Christopher mistrusted his manner. It almost seemed as though Milward believed him to be in French pay. Well, let him think so!

Just before sundown he went to Monmouth's house. He had no difficulty in entering, and on asking for Mr. Cherrywood, was shown into a small room over-looking the garden.

Several gentlemen were strolling across the lawns. They all seemed in excellent spirits; the sound of their laughter floated in at the open window.

Mr. Cherrywood came briskly into the room. He was a short, dapper, little man, with bright eyes and a quick speech.

"Mr.—Dart? You want me? Have I the honour of your acquaintance?" He spoke courteously, but with a touch of surprise.

Christopher bowed.

"As yet, sir, you have not. I have something of a private nature to impart."

"Oh? Will you not be seated? We are quite private here. No, they will not hear you from the lawn. What is it that you wish to tell me?" A little of his cordiality had disappeared.

Christopher drew off his gloves unhurriedly. In all things he imitated Roxhythe. From his finger he slipped the King's ring and pushed it across the table to Mr. Cherrywood.

Cherrywood picked it up, glanced at it, and rose. His manner underwent a change.

"One moment, sir!" He went to the window, and shut it. "You come from His Majesty?"

"I have that honour."

"I did not know you were one of us?" The tone was searching.

"I am not," said Christopher. "His Majesty's envoy is ill. I am bidden to tell you that Church and Justin are not to be trusted."

"Well, well! Perhaps I knew that. You've a message? Or a dispatch?"

Christopher extricated the two dispatches from his coat. He handed the smaller to Cherrywood, who broke the seal and spread the sheets before him. When he had finished reading he looked rather strangely at Christopher.

"Oh! May I have the dispatch—for Monmouth?"

Christopher gave it to him. He felt relieved that it was out of his hands at last.

"I am to bear an answer to His Majesty, sir, as proof that I have delivered the packet."

"You shall have it. Excuse me for one moment!" He pocketed both documents and hurried out.

Christopher picked up the King's ring and put it on his finger. He felt an odd thrill at wearing it.

An elegant, much-beribboned gentleman passed the window and looked in curiously. With him was another still more elegant gentleman. He too stared in. Then he shrugged, and they passed on. Christopher heard him say something in French.

Presently Cherrywood returned. He gave Christopher a sealed packet.

"There is mine answer. You have the ring?"

Christopher held up his hand.

"That is well. Now, is there aught else you want of me?"

"No," said Christopher. "But there is something that I would like to tell you."

Cherrywood sat down.

"Ah! Well?"

"I met a certain Milward to-day in the town. I know him to be in Barillon's pay. For reasons which we need not discuss he mistrusts me, thinking me an intriguer. I wish to warn you that he may suspect."

"Milward? Milward? Oh, ay, ay! Thank you Mr. Dart, that will be very well."

"He is a spy," warned Christopher.

"I shall be careful, I assure you. Is that all?"

Christopher rose.

"That is all. What a quantity of Frenchmen you have in the town!"

Cherrywood followed him to the door.

"Yes. Well, we are not at war. We suffer all parties to visit us."

"I have seen hardly any Dutchmen."

"Oh, we have a few! Most Dutchmen are fighting, you understand."

"I see," said Christopher. "I am glad that we ceased war on Holland."

"Certainly. Yes." Mr. Cherrywood bowed him out. On the steps they clasped hands for a moment.

"I compliment you, Mr. Dart; I compliment you. You would make a good envoy. Perhaps we shall see you amongst us ere long."

"I serve Roxhythe," said Christopher. "I am no intriguer."

Cherrywood favoured him with another hard stare.

"Oh! You serve Roxhythe. Well, well!"

Christopher was not desirous of meeting Milward again, and he arranged to leave the town early next morning. He was both annoyed and disgusted when his enemy walked into the Setting Sun inn while he was at dinner.

Milward espied him and came to sit at his table.

"A piece of luck!" he commented. "I thought you were staying at the 'William'?"

"No," said Christopher. "Are you?"

"Oh dear no! I am at"—he paused. "The Flag of Orange."

Christopher disbelieved him on the spot.

"We were finely diddled over your master," continued Milward, presently. "I thought him naught but a court-darling. Dupont knew."

"Really?" Christopher was studiously polite.

"Oh, indeed yes! Now, of course we know. Since '70."

"Why since then?"

"Why? Blister me, you're a pretty young innocent!"

"I am glad I find favour in your eyes," bowed Christopher.

"Is it possible that you don't know? Didn't you hear?"

"I never listen to gossip," said Christopher.

Milward shook his head. He took a long drink.

"You puzzle me, you know," he said.

"I am sorry," said Christopher, and straightway changed the subject.

He arrived in London six days later. He drove at once to Bevan House where he found the royal coach drawn up in the courtyard. The footman who admitted him said that His Majesty was with my lord. Christopher

decided that nothing could have been more opportune. He gave the lackey instructions to pay the coachman, and raced upstairs to his room. He changed his travel-stained garments for his smartest suit, washed his face, and combed out his fair hair. Then he assured himself that Cherrywood's letter was in his pocket, and walked downstairs as calmly as he could. His cheeks were flushed; his eyes were very bright. He felt himself a man of some account; his patriotism flared high.

Two lackeys stood before the thick curtain that shut off the library. Christopher waved to them to draw it back.

"Sir," expostulated one. "His Majesty is within, visiting my lord."

"I am aware of it," said Christopher.

Reluctantly the man held back the curtain. Christopher walked in.

The King was seated with Roxhythe by the window. My lord's lazy voice was the first thing that Christopher heard. Then Charles burst into a great laugh.

"David, you rogue!" His eyes, wandering round the room, alighted on Christopher, who bowed. The laugh died on his lips, and a look of surprise came into his face.

"*Cordieu!* 'Tis our young friend!"

Roxhythe turned his head. It was characteristic of him that he showed no surprise.

"You arrive at a good moment, Chris."

Charles laughed again.

"Thunder of God, but you are like your master! Do you imitate him, Mr. Dart? I did not expect you yet, and here you are as spruce as though you were off to a ball! I wonder, have you been to Flanders at all?"

Christopher came forward and dropped on his knee before the King. It was one of the greatest moments of his life.

"I have the honour to inform Your Majesty that my mission has been successful." He offered Charles the packet.

The King took it. Roxhythe was contemplating Christopher with amusement.

Without a word Charles broke the seal and scanned what was written on the parchment. He tossed it to Roxhythe and bent over the still kneeling figure.

"Mr. Dart, I thank you. You have more than fulfilled my expectations." He said no more than that, yet Christopher, listening to the grave voice, felt himself re-paid in full. He could not trust himself to speak. Dumbly he held out the signet ring.

Charles slipped it on to his finger. Then he extended his hand.

Christopher held it to his lips as long as he dared.

"Sire—sire——" he stopped.

"Tell me," said Charles, "is there aught I can do for you?"

Christopher looked up into the melancholy brown eyes that yet held such a twinkle in their depths.

"Your Majesty—overwhelms me. It is enough to know—that I have pleased Your Majesty—and that I have been—of some use to my country."

Roxhythe regarded the trees outside.

"You are sure?" persisted Charles. "I would do aught that was within my power to do."

"There is nothing, Sir. I cannot thank you enough. I am very content."

"Then we shall hope to welcome you at Whitehall. Roxhythe must bring you."

"Your Majesty does me great honour." Christopher rose, and looked across at my lord.

"You are better, sir?"

"I am very well, Chris. Were it not for His Majesty I had not remained in this room for so long."

"He thinks me a tyrant, Mr. Dart," said the King. His solemnity had vanished.

"I do," sighed Roxhythe. "If you had not visited me so often, Sir, I were in my grave to-day from sheer depression."

"Poor Davy!" The King smiled at him. "I deliver him into your hands, Mr. Dart."

"Your Majesty may rest assured that I shall have a great care for him," said Christopher.

It was not until after dinner that he was alone with Roxhythe. When the wine was before them and the servants had left the room, my lord leaned back in his chair.

"Well, Chris, how fared you?"

"Very well, sir. My journey was quite uneventful until I arrived at the camp."

"Oh? What then?"

"You'll never guess whom I met there!"

"Then I shall not try. Whom did you meet?"

"Milward."

"The amiable one! But how charming!"

"It was not, sir. He—he bewildered me."

"How?" Roxhythe re-filled his glass.

"He was very boisterous—by the way, sir, he knows now why we went to Holland in '68."

"I suppose so. Go on."

"He asked me what fresh intrigue I was busy with. I dissembled, and then he said that he was not trying to squeeze me as he fancied we were at one now. What could he have meant?"

"God knows. What else?"

"It was all to that tune. He asked me if I were the King his messenger, and he said he was expecting 'something of the kind.' He seemed to think that I was in French pay. And he said that I puzzled him."

"The sun must have affected his brain."

"It almost seemed so. He was very strange. He told me that he knew now what manner of man you were. He spoke of 1670 and laughed heartily. He was surprised that I 'did not know.' I can only suppose that he is afflicted by Harcourt's complaint. You remember how they suspected you at the time?"

"Ay. Fools."

"I think Milward is a bigger fool than any of them. I was glad to be rid of him."

Roxhythe sipped his wine.

"Take my advice, Chris; do not heed these gossip-mongers."

"I do not. I never have heeded them. They suspect every one of disloyalty to the country. But I know!"

"Yes. You know. And you too love the country."

"Above everything," said Christopher simply.

"So you would never join certain of our respected friends in their machinations behind the country's back?"

"I, sir? How can you ask? I would sooner die!"

"Yet many people have warned you 'gainst my supposed nefarious dealings. You remain with me in spite of all?"

"Why, sir, I laugh at them! Your nefarious dealings! Oh, ay, my lord!"

"And if their suspicions were true: what then?" He looked full into Christopher's clear eyes.

"I—think—it would break my heart, sir," answered Christopher unsteadily. "But then, it is not so, is it?"

Roxhythe touched his lips with his napkin.

"No. It is not so."

"Of course it is not!" smiled Christopher. "Oh, sir, I am very, very proud to-night!"

"Are you?" said Roxhythe.

CHAPTER IX

DISILLUSIONMENT

CHRISTOPHER settled down to his old life very quickly. England was in a state of unrest. In February of the next year Parliament met again. There was universal excitement, and some cries were directed against the King. Harcourt told Christopher that Charles was trying to dispense with a Parliament altogether. Christopher was amused.

Roxhythe had lately fallen foul of His Grace of Buckingham, ever his foe, and Buckingham proceeded to wage war on him, writing catchy doggerels which circulated the coffee-houses, and sneering at the favourite on every opportunity. Roxhythe complained that he was becoming a nuisance. Then his Grace over-reached himself. He was very vehement on the subject of prorogation. He joined Shaftesbury in the popular cry that by the length of the prorogation the Parliament had ceased to exist. He employed all his caustic wit in this cause, and he grew excited. His section was out-voted, and he, Shaftesbury and Wharton were consigned to the Tower. Gossip whispered and gradually shouted that his imprisonment as one of the ring-leaders of the movement was due to my Lord Roxhythe's influence. Christopher listened, observed my lord, and believed Gossip. My lord smiled and said nothing.

In March Christopher received one of Roderick's rare letters. He found it a bulky package and was surprised. Roderick was not wont to write at length. He settled himself more comfortably in his chair and spread the sheets before him.

There was very little preliminary. Roderick inquired after his health, and after that wasted no time in giving vent to his feelings.

“ . . . Ye knowe, my dear Chris, how I Do long to See You out of Roxhythe His Service. Once more I Implore You to quit him. With him Ye Breathe the Air of Intrigue, of all thatt is Vile. It is in no Peevish Spirit thatt I Warn You, but in my Zeal for Yr. Welfare, which I have ever to Heart. Ye are Young: it may be thatt Ye are Ignorant of the Machinations of This Man for his Infamous Master. We in Holland have learnt by Bitter Experience never to Trust to Charles His Word. Ye in England must Surely knowe By Now the Truth concerning thatt most Disgraceful Affair in 1670. We knew, very soone after, thatt Charles had sold himself to France in a Shameful Treaty made Secretly with Louis. We sawe how he contrived to Trick his Parliament into wishing for War on Us. We knowe, for the Prince has Zealous Agents, what Partt my Lord Roxhythe played in thatt Treaty. He did haggle with Louis on Charles his Behalf, and did arrange a Secret Meeting for Both Parties. Were Ye not so Blinded by Yr. Love for him, Ye would have seen the Truth from the first. A Doubt Assails me thatt Ye did knowe, and did Connive at the Deed. I tell my self thatt ye are too good a Patriot, but the Doubt remains.

“Yr. King plays Fast and Loose with us. He did make Peace, Three Years Since, in '74. But we knew then thatt his Hand had been Forced, and thatt he was not Desirous of Breaking from Louis. Else why did he Leave his Troops under his Profligate Bastard on this Soil? He did Finely Trick his Parliament, but he did not Deceive His Highness.

“Last Year we did Realise thatt he was in Need of Money to squander on his Women, and his Pleasures, for he did send my Lord Roxhythe to Traffic againe with His Highness, giving him Fair Words, and demanding Tribute for his Master. His Highness would have None of it, for he doth knowe how Perfidious is King Charles. We did Expect then to see the English Troops Once More against us, and have not been Disappointed. We do apprehend thatt Charles has Sold Him Self to Louis yet againe. England, without the Knowledge of Her Government, stands against us. The Prince His Agents have Grave suspicions thatt there

have been Secret Dispatches passing from Charles to Louis. They do knowe thatt M. Barillon was closetted very Often with the King Last Yeare.

“And so I come to the Crux of the Matter. These same Agents who act for His Highness in England do knowe thatt a man went to the English Camp Last Yeare. This Man was You, Christopher.

“I do Pray Heaven thatt Yr. Mission was Innocent, and Indeed, we have No Proof thatt it was not. We do but Knowe thatt Ye visitted the Camp when My Lord Roxhythe was a-bed, Wounded. It is Possible thatt Ye did but go as Many have Gone before You, but we Fear otherwise, knowing You to be in Roxhythe his Service. Hardly a Month from thatt date, the English Army had moved Secretly, to Join the French.

“Oh, my deare Brother, I do Implore You to have no Dealings with King Charles! If Ye tell me Yr. Journey to Holland was Innocent I do Believe you, but a Grate Fear hath me in its Grip thatt Ye have been won to Roxhythe his Machinations by Yr. Infatuation for him. Christopher, pray consider what it is thatt Ye do! Think of Our Father his Grief were he Alive and knew thatt Ye were Working against the Country her Good, behind her Back, for a King who hath Neither Honour nor Decency; who does not Scruple to Betray his Country her Honour for a few Pounds!

“Ye have Refused to Believe thatt my Lord Roxhythe is not to be Trusted; Ye have shut Yr. Eyes to his Perfidy, seeing only his Fascination. Ye must knowe, however, thatt he Counts no Cost, and hath no Moral Sense. He will gaine his owne, or his Master his Ends by Fair Means or by Foul. Ye knowe his Vaunted Love for King Charles; the Country Counts for naught with him. He setteth Love for Man Above Love for Country.

“Christopher, I do fear thatt You too set Grater Store on Man than on Country, and on Right. Be advised by me who have seen so much of the Evils of the Day, do not let this be so. Remember Ye are Yr. Father his Son! Have no Secret Dealings Either for Roxhythe or the King!

Deal openly Always, and do not Work against Yr. Country, for I do Earnestly tell You thatt the Country in these Troublous Times Counts for more than All Else. The Country needs True Patriots More than ever it did; do not You join the ranks of those Unworthy Englishmen of whom the King is one, and Roxhythe another! I pray You, do not lightly cast my Warning aside, nor Sneer at it as Ye have sneered at all others. I have no Spite against Roxhythe; I warn you because I knowe what manner of man he is; because I will not have My Brother under his Influence. Naught but Harm can come of it; I implore You, be warned by me!

“The Prince his Courage is undaunted by the Many Disasters thatt have befallen him. He doth hold the French King in Check, Daily growing Wiser in War, More Strong in Body. I would ye too might be Induced to Join him who is the One Honest Man...”

Christopher read the letter through deliberately. When he came to the end he laid it down with fingers that trembled slightly. Every word rang true. At first his mind refused to grasp all that was set down before him; then, when the first numbness had passed he argued hotly with himself. Roderick had evidently believed the rumours of 1670. How often had he, Christopher, laughed at these rumours? But Roderick seemed to have proofs . . . Bah! Were the Dutch spies wiser than all others? They too had listened to rumour, and, because Roxhythe had travelled frequently to the Louvre, had jumped to conclusions. It was not possible that the gracious King who had allowed him to kiss his hand, whom he believed in so implicitly, had descended to trafficking secretly with France! And Roxhythe, the lazy courtier, in very sooth an intriguer? Impossible! Yet . . . How many times had he been warned? How many people had questioned him concerning my lord's movements?

He referred again to the letter.

“. . . for he did send my Lord Roxhythe to Traffic againe with His Highness . . .”

Last year . . . That must have been when Roxhythe

went, ostensibly, to Paris. Christopher had not known that he had gone to Holland. He had been left in the dark. . . . Well! Why not? Was my lord bound to confide in his secretary? . . . But how many more times had he been left in the dark? If my lord could play the emissary to Holland, why not to France? Why had he never thought of that before? Supposing the '70 rumours were true? Had my lord indeed haggled with Louis for the King's private ends? Had he been instrumental in selling England?

Again he took up the letter.

" . . . And so I come to the Crux of the matter . . . "

He read it through carefully. *Peste!* Roderick was morbidly suspicious!

" . . . Hardly a month from thatt Date the English Army had Moved, Secretly, to Join the French . . . "

Something seemed to seize his throat; he felt as though he were choking. These words of Roderick's were based not on suspicion but on hard facts. Roderick was not the man to prevaricate that he might gain his own ends . . . But it could not be! Roxhythe would never use him so! Nor would the King stoop to sell his Country to Louis. It was unthinkable, ridiculous! Charles was all that was most regal, most upright! Christopher remembered how he had extended his hand; he remembered the thrill that had run through him as he had kissed that hand. Surely, surely Charles was honest? And Roxhythe! It was impossible that he should have consented to use him deliberately, against his convictions! He did not believe it! He would not believe it! *Sangdieu!* He laughed at such senseless tittle-tattle! . . .

" . . . You not believ' me. You t'ink heem onselfish and ver' good. Well, I warn you, eet ees not so. You remember t'at always and you not get hurt." . . .

De Staal . . . And de Staal had loved Roxhythe . . . The grave words were ringing in his ears—he could see the whole scene. It was nine years ago. How quiet the street had been! How peaceful was de Staal; how pathetic his love for Roxhythe! . . .

"I—like you, Chris. I—don't want you to get hurt."
Lady Frances . . . She had warned him repeatedly.
What was it she had said?

". . . You think him very great, very good. Suppose
—it were not so? Suppose he were not so true? . . ."

Had he been blinded by his love for Roxhythe? Was
my lord the ruthless schemer they had all thought him?
Even Ashley had warned him.

". . . I fear he is not so indolent as he would have us
believe . . . I mistrust him. I have always mistrusted
him . . ."

Realisation was dawning on Christopher; doubts pulled
him this way and that. He would not believe—he did not
believe . . . but—oh, God, if it were so! . . .

Roxhythe came into the room in his usual leisurely
fashion. Christopher ever afterwards remembered his
appearance on that day. He was dressed in pearl grey
velvet, with soft pink facings and sword-knot. The rosettes
on his shoes were of pink satin; rubies sparkled in his
cravat and on his fingers. He was carrying a ruby-studded
comfit-box, given him by the King.

"Russell waxeth very wroth over Buckingham's
imprisonment," remarked my lord. He gave a twitch to
his billowing shirt sleeve. "He and Coventry inveigh
against me." He glanced up and saw Christopher's face.
"Oh. Well, what now?"

Christopher handed him Roderick's letter.

"Please—read that, sir—and deny—what is writ there!
I—it has disquieted my mind."

Roxhythe sat down on the table-edge. He read the
letter through in silence. Then he handed it back to
Christopher.

"May I ask why such nonsense should disquiet you?"

Christopher rose quickly.

"It is nonsense, sir? There's no truth in it?" His
voice trembled relievedly. "And yet, sir——"

Roxhythe shrugged.

"There is a certain amount of truth interwoven, I grant
you. The rest—bah!"

"Sir, this secret treaty with France that he writes of—it is a lie?"

"My dear Chris, best ask His Majesty."

"Ah, don't evade me! Roderick says that you were implicated in it! Harcourt feared it; Ashley too."

"Your memory is not of the longest, Chris. Did we not discuss this question at the time?"

"Ay, sir. You told me then that it was a lie."

"Am I likely to tell you that it was the truth now?"

"Tell me again, sir! You are not intriguing?"

"I was not."

"I knew it! I knew it! But——"

"Well?"

"Roderick says that you acted envoy to the Prince of Orange last year. Roderick would not lie to me!"

Roxhythe seemed to consider.

"Why not?" he said at last. "I have done it before, and you too."

"It was different then! We acted for the country; Ashley was privy to it. Roderick says that this time you acted for King Charles' private ends—to gain money for him!"

"I admire your brother's imagination, Chris."

"I would I could think it only that! But he writes so earnestly."

"Yes. I had noticed that he seemed concerned," nodded my lord.

"He is concerned. And, sir, if you can intrigue with the Stadtholder for the King, I suppose you can intrigue for him with Louis. You told me naught of your journey to Holland; I cannot help wondering how many times you have plotted without my knowledge."

"I wish you would sit down," murmured my lord.

Christopher ignored him. He was controlling himself with difficulty.

"And now I wonder if it was indeed to Monmouth that I took that letter. At the time I thought—it strange—that I should give it to Cherrywood. I—oh, my lord, my lord! Tell me that my suspicions are without foundation! It is

not possible that you should have used me as a tool! You could not have done it! You would not!"

"My dear Chris, why all this excitement? I could not have done it. I would not! *Voilà!*"

"I wish—oh, how I wish that I could believe you!" cried Christopher.

"Oh? Why can you not?"

"Sir, forgive me if I malign you, but you have so often journeyed to France—I—and then when you were ill, I had to go—and—oh, I have been warned so many, many times!" He spoke very bitterly. "De Staal told me not to trust you; Harcourt, Ashley, Lady Frances, Roderick! And I—thought—them—fools."

"Belike they were."

"You mean?" There was suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"Why, I mean that I have done you no harm nor am not like to."

"It was in truth a letter to Monmouth?"

Roxhythe looked at him haughtily.

"Is His Majesty's word not enough?"

"I wish I might be convinced! But you see what Roderick says! The army stands against Holland now. Everything comes back to me! Milward's strange words which I did not understand; the presence of so many Frenchmen in the camp. Oh, my lord, don't evade me! Or—" he stopped. "Is it possible that you too work in the dark? Do you know naught?"

Roxhythe stiffened. His eyes expressed blank amazement.

"I? *Cordieu*, Christopher, do you take me for a catspaw?"

Christopher took an uneasy pace across the room.

"I suppose not. You were then privy to the whole affair. The King sold himself to France in very truth! You can deny it if you will, but something tells me that it is so."

Roxhythe twisted his rings.

"It seems that I must explain. Sit down."

Christopher sank into the nearest chair.

"First," my lord spoke sternly, "I'd have you remember the oath you swore to His Majesty."

"Never to divulge by word or sign—oh, ay! I see it all now!"

"Endeavour to be less insane, Christopher. I did go to the Prince of Orange last year. King Charles is in need of money as your brother so sagely remarks. But the Prince is stubborn. He is imbued with the same false views that Roderick holds. Again I failed with him. So perforce, His Majesty turned to France. As to selling himself—pooh! He holds King Louis in the palm of his hand. He does not intend to make serious war on the Dutch, nor to further Louis' interests abroad. He seeks only to squeeze Louis of money. It is true that we had some sort of a treaty, but you need not fear that Louis will profit by it." He paused, looking at his secretary.

"And this," said Christopher, "is honour!"

"It is a game, Christopher, called Politics. You cannot hope to understand the workings of the game; one must be bred up in it. You may not condemn that which you do not understand."

"I had sooner not understand," replied Christopher. "It is too black, too dishonourable!" He laughed strangely. "Politics! To keep faith with no one! To try to trick your fellows!"

"It is the law of life, my child."

"No, sir. I will never believe that. And it is not politic to work behind the Country's back."

"The Country has not treated us exiles so well that we need consider it," answered my lord.

"The Country should stand first with every Englishman!"

"So you say who have had naught but good from the Country."

"Nothing would make me alter my opinions!"

"Why, that is very noble! We look on this from different standpoints. I owe allegiance to none save the King."

"And I—thought the King—Oh, I cannot bear it!"

"You thought the King more than human. He is as other men, save that he has more brain than all your patriotic dunderheads clubbed together. What you call love for Country is in reality love for blundering, senseless policy which is not worthy of the name. Your honest statesmen would bring the Country lower than ever King Charles would. Do you think I have not experienced all your feelings? I thought the same as you when I was young. But I was wiser than you are. I saw that King Charles was the man to follow, not 'the Country.' I too had to choose which path I would tread. I chose to serve the King. I have seen a great deal in my time, Christopher, but never that the King worked harm on the Country. I have learnt to place my trust in him. You would do well to learn that lesson too. If you are to take an active part in politics of to-day, you must follow the King, or those of our number whom you believe to be 'the Country.'"

"I would follow them! At least they are honest!"

"To what avail? What good is honesty in a world of vice? Is Louis honest? You know that he is not. What weapons shall we fight him with but his own?"

"You do not fight him! You play into his hands!"

"There speaks your ignorance. The King plays into no man's hands."

"Save his own!"

Roxhythe was silent.

Christopher clasped and unclasped his hands.

"I can understand that having chosen to follow the King you should speak in this vein. I can understand that you would do aught for him. But to trick me! to make me instrumental in selling England to France!—ay, my lord, you may say what you will, but that is what has been done! —I—it—oh, my lord, I trusted you so!"

The pent-up cry left Roxhythe unmoved.

"It was you or the King, Christopher. You should have followed your brother's advice and left me long ago."

"I would I had! I would I had listened to Roderick in the first place! But I thought you so good! so honourable! And all the time you were deceiving me, lying to me as you

lied to me in '70 when I asked what you did in Paris! My lord, it would have been kinder to have told me!"

A little hardness crept into my lord's voice.

"Mayhap. But you were useful to me. You shielded me from suspicion by your very ignorance."

"I—thought you cared—for me—a little! I loved you—so greatly! I would have done—anything in the world for you! And you—tricked me."

"I do care for you, Chris."

"Ah, no! You would never have treated me thus! I was—useful—to you."

Roxhythe shrugged and opened his comfit-box.

"You make too much out of too little," he said. "And you speak of matters above your head."

"It may seem a little to you, sir. You care naught for Country or patriotism. But I, I have been bred to think only of that! You knew it! You knew how I would have revolted from the task had I known the truth."

The brown eyes narrowed. Still colder became that passionless voice.

"Exactly," bowed his lordship.

"I see," said Christopher wearily. "You are as ruthless as they said. It did not matter what would be my feelings when I discovered the truth. The only thing that mattered was that King Charles should have his way."

"Your sagacity is quite astounding," said Roxhythe.

"And the King—I was so proud to be chosen for the task; so proud to kiss his hand; I believed in him so implicitly. And he joined with you in tricking me!"

Roxhythe ate another comfit.

Slowly Christopher picked up his brother's letter. His mouth was very set, his eyes bewildered, terribly hurt.

"I cannot as yet—quite realize—everything," he said unsteadily. "It—it takes time, my lord, to undo—the belief—of years. And it has come so—suddenly."

"When you have considered the matter you will think differently," replied Roxhythe, snapping his comfit-box. "There's no harm done; only a jar to a rather fanatic love for Country."

"I shall not think differently. I—I must think what I shall do. My—brain feels numbed. I—I can't realize that you whom I loved and respected so have done this thing."

"'This thing' is so delightfully tragic," remarked my lord.

Christopher walked to the door. His hand trembled as he pulled back the curtain.

"You'll—give me leave, sir."

"Yes," said Roxhythe.

Christopher went out.

For a long time after he had gone Roxhythe sat twisting his rings, and staring out of the window. At last he gave the faintest of sighs, and shrugged. The smile that came to his lips was not mirthful.

CHAPTER X

THE BITTER HOUR

ALL that day and the next Christopher avoided Roxhythe. He was battling with himself, fighting against what he believed to be wrong.

The blow to his patriotism had been severe, the blow to his love for Roxhythe severer, but what had been the severest of all was the blow to his pride. He would not admit it, but it was true. At twenty-eight pride is tender. It was not pleasant to think that he had been duped so easily and used as a catspaw. It galled him unbearably.

Nothing could kill his love for Roxhythe. It had grown and deepened during nine years; a single blow was not enough to quench it. But the trust was gone. Never again could he believe in my lord. He might pretend, but he knew that in his heart would always be suspicion. He knew now that Roxhythe was the King's chief adviser and negotiator. When my lord disappeared again, mysteriously, he would know that he was gone on secret business, nefarious business. Men would continue to question him; how could he quiet their fears, knowing the truth? If he assured these questioners of Roxhythe's innocence he would be acting for my lord, against all that was upright and good. Yet if he left my lord, what else did life hold for him? All these years he had been wrapped up in this one man, managing his affairs, accompanying him almost everywhere, living for him alone. Everyone else had ceased to count with him; Roxhythe was the beginning and the end.

Bitterly he reflected that he had learnt never to question my lord's actions, to trust in him always, to take up the cudgels on his behalf. In return for this he had been tricked in cold blood. Roxhythe was ruthless; Christopher

saw that in his turn he was engrossed in one man. All must give way before the King, even he who had served my lord so faithfully for so long. Then came the still more bitter thought: Roxhythe did not care how he had hurt him. He could not, even in the moment of discovery, abandon his flippancy. He treated the whole affair as an amusing episode; he laughed at Christopher's discomfiture.

Christopher tried to imagine what life would be if he continued in Roxhythe's service. It seemed impossible. His spirit rebelled against working for one who plotted and schemed behind the Country's back. In time he might perhaps be drawn under by Roxhythe's influence; he might become as cynical as Roxhythe; he might lose all his patriotism, even as Roxhythe had done.

Of the King he could scarcely bear to think. Charles had cast his spell over him, had inspired him with enthusiastic loyalty. He had refused to listen to ill of him; he had thought him all that was best and most noble. Now that ideal was shattered and lay in the dust at his feet.

Seated by the open window, looking out into the dusk, a great loneliness crept over Christopher. There was no one to whom he could speak; no one who would listen to the unburdening of his heart. He had sworn an oath to Charles that he would never disclose the secret of his mission to Flanders. That secret must remain with him to the very end, an everlasting shame to haunt him all his life.

He had wanted to serve his country. Instead, he had worked against her, helped to lower her honour . . .

The wind blew in at the window, coldly, and moaned a little through the trees without. Only a few embers burned in the grate; the candles were unlit. Christopher did not care. He was cold through and through, but he did not shut the window. He was facing the first big crisis in his life, and he was terribly afraid lest he should play the coward's part.

He knew that his mind was made up and that he must leave Roxhythe. No argument was strong enough to convince him that it would be right to remain. Perhaps Roxhythe would trick him again did the need arise. There

would never be trust in him now, and suspicion would surely kill his love. And Roxhythe cared nothing for him. He was merely a useful acquisition. He must leave Roxhythe. But it was hard. Love for man was greater at this moment than love for Country. Right must in the end triumph over wrong, but not without a struggle . . .

Christopher looked round the familiar room. It had been his for eight years. A lump rose in his throat . . .

Another aspect presented itself. Roxhythe had been good to him before this disaster. He had treated him more as a son than as a secretary. Did he not owe something to him? Why had Roxhythe been so good to him? Was it only that he might be of use to him? Christopher had set many uneasy minds at rest in '70, because he himself had believed in Roxhythe. Nothing is so convincing as innocence. Now that he knew the truth he could not set minds at rest. He could not pose and counterfeit, even if he wished. It seemed likely that Roxhythe would no longer have any use for him.

Then Christopher's head went down on the hard sill, despairingly . . .

Roxhythe had a card-party that night. Christopher should have dined with him, and seen that all was in order. He could not face the inane gaiety, the senseless laughter, the foolish witticisms. He rose jerkily and took up his hat and cloak. In a little while the visitors would arrive; he would hear their voices floating up to his room; to-night he could not bear it. He went quickly out of the room and down the stairs. An amazed footman opened the door for him and watched him descend the steps. Christopher did not care what he thought; only one thing mattered, and that was that he should be out of the house before dinner.

He did not return until after eleven. The same footman admitted him and afterwards remarked to his brethren that Mr. Dart looked for all the world as though he had seen a ghost.

Christopher went slowly upstairs. A burst of laughter from the library made him wince. He was very tired . . .

My Lord Roxhythe did not appear next morning until twelve o'clock. He came downstairs then, hat in hand, and his gloves already on.

Christopher met him at the foot of the stairs, barring his passage.

"My lord, may I speak to you—privately?"

Roxhythe paused, his hand on the baluster. He stood just above his secretary, looking down into the pale face with eyes that were quite expressionless.

"My dear Chris, I am pressed for time. His Majesty expects me."

"I can wait no longer, sir. His Majesty would not grudge me ten minutes."

The straight brows rose perceptibly.

"My lord," said Christopher earnestly. "I think you owe me this."

Roxhythe resumed his passage downstairs.

"It is never wise to take that tone with me," he remarked.

Christopher laid a hand on his arm.

"Sir, I do beg you will speak to me now! I—I cannot wait!"

The hand was removed.

"Neither can I," said his lordship. He went on calmly across the hall.

"You will not?" cried Christopher. His eyes flashed.

"I shall be in at three," replied Roxhythe. The next moment he was gone.

It was the one thing needed to clinch the matter for ever. If Roxhythe had acted differently, if he had exerted himself never so slightly to placate Christopher, love for man might have triumphed. But that was not Roxhythe's way.

Christopher fretted and chafed under the added wrong. By three o'clock there was no doubt left in his mind which way he should decide.

He went to the library to wait for my lord.

Punctual to the minute came Roxhythe. He surveyed his secretary coolly and laid his hat on the table.

Christopher came forward. He was holding fast to his decision. At the sight of Roxhythe it threatened to slip

away. No slight that my lord could inflict would ever destroy the magic of his presence.

"I—suppose you—you have guessed why I want to speak to you, sir," said Christopher unsteadily.

Roxhythe drew off his gloves.

"No. May I ask why you were not present last night?"

The old flush rose to Christopher's cheeks.

"I—could not. I was in no mood for it."

"I am sorry," said Roxhythe. "Perhaps you will inform me next time you feel like that."

"There will be no next time," answered Christopher very quietly.

"I am relieved to hear you say so."

"You do not take my meaning, sir. I desire to—to offer you my resignation." His voice trembled in spite of all his efforts to control it.

There was a long silence.

"Oh!" said Roxhythe. "Very well."

So this was the end. Christopher walked slowly to the door. There was a buzzing in his ears, his feet were like lead. He put out his hand to draw back the curtain. He must hold his head high; he must not let Roxhythe see his misery.

"Chris?"

The drawling voice reached him, full of caress. He wheeled about, saw my lord's outstretched hand, and stumbled back to where he stood, falling on his knees beside him, the hand pressed to his lips. There was a choking lump in his throat; desperately he clung to that strong, white hand. The fingers closed on his.

"So you'll leave me, Chris?"

"I must, I must! My lord, how can I stay after—after—" he broke off hopelessly.

"I see no reason why you should not."

"It—is impossible. I could—never—trust you again. If you went on King Charles his business—I should know, and—feel that I was helping to plot against my country."

"You rate yourself high," said that even voice. "And I

thought I told you that it is France, not England that we trick?"

"It is almost as bad. Oh, my lord, I have been taught to act honestly always—heaven knows I am wavering—but it is no honourable thing to trick any man by fair words! I cannot, cannot remain with you! There would always be suspicion; I should be of no further use to you, and—I should be wretched!"

"Where is your vaunted love for me?" asked my lord sadly.

Christopher kissed his hand.

"It will always be there sir! Nothing could kill it—I—I would give my life for you."

"Yet when I ask you to stay with me you refuse."

"Do not—oh, do not! It means—sacrificing my honour—my pride—I—oh, cannot you see that it is impossible?"

"Honour and pride count for more than Roxhythe?"

"Sir, it is right against wrong! You might persuade me to remain with you, but always I should know that I was doing wrong. I—it is—oh, do you think it is not breaking my heart to leave you?"

"Chris, try to look at the matter in a more sensible light. You assume that I am the greatest villain unchanged. In fact, you are melodramatic."

"I cannot look at it in what you call a sensible light. I can only see that you intrigue for His Majesty's private ends, breaking treaties, selling England—and—I—I cannot be privy to it!"

"Have I asked you to be privy to it?"

"I have eyes, sir. I should know when you went to France what was your mission. I—could not—shield you from suspicion. People have always tried to squeeze me concerning you. How could I reassure them, knowing the truth?" He did not look up; he dared not.

"Perhaps you are right," said Roxhythe. He sighed. "I am sorry."

"I—I cannot make evasive replies; I cannot counterfeit. It might even be that I should—all unwittingly—betray you."

"You could not do that. I am not a clumsy intriguer. But I suppose you must have your own way." Again he sighed. "We tread different paths."

"Yes—sir. You choose to follow King; I—I cleave to—Country."

"But mine, Chris, is the better part."

"No, sir, no. Yours is the—tempting part—but I believe that mine is the right."

"We shall not agree on that score," answered Roxhythe. He looked round the room. "Oddsblood, I shall miss you, Chris. You have been with me for so long."

"Nine—years," said Christopher, little above a whisper. "I, oh, my dear lord, why did you do it? Why did you trick me? I had never found out else! Why, why did you do it?"

Roxhythe smiled.

"Is that the way the wind blows? I believe I could persuade you very easily if I tried."

Christopher shook his head.

"No—do not try!"

"I shall not. I'll not have you here against your will. Nine years! You must have become a habit, Christopher."

"Yes—that is all. You will not—miss me for long. You will have another—secretary—you will forget that there ever was—a Christopher. 'Tis I who—shall not forget."

"Another secretary . . . It seems strange."

Christopher's hold on his hand tightened.

"Don't speak of it, sir! I—can't—bear it!"

Roxhythe bent over him.

"Look at me, Chris!"

The grey, almost blue eyes met his.

"You mean it, Chris? You'll leave me?"

Christopher tried to wrench his gaze away but the steady brown eyes held his. He drew a deep breath.

"Yes, sir. I—must."

Roxhythe straightened. He drew his hand away.

"I thought I could bend you to my will, Chris," he said. "It seems I was wrong. Well, what now?"

Christopher rose.

"I shall stay until you have—found a—secretary, sir—of course."

"Thank you. And then?"

"Then—I do not know. I cannot think of the future—as yet."

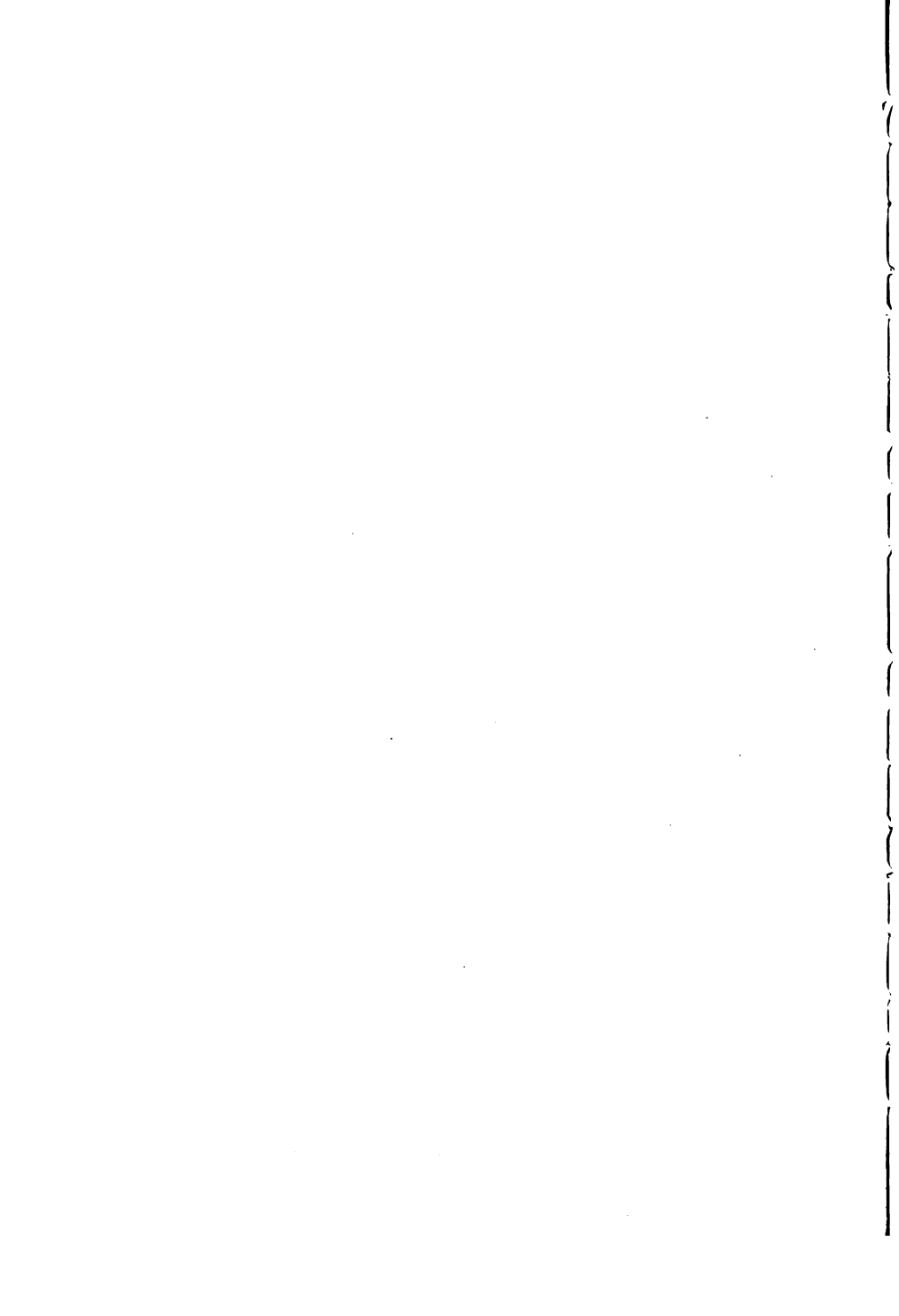
Roxhythe looked at him thoughtfully.

"One thing, Chris, I want you to remember always. Whatever happens, whenever you will, you may return to me. Don't forget it, child. I shall welcome you back no matter when you come. And if you ever want help, call upon me."

"You—are very good, sir. I—will—remember."

Roxhythe nodded. He watched Christopher go out of the room. Then he picked up his hat and gloves.

"So ends the one friendship," he said aloud. "I wonder—is it worth it?"



Book IV
THE ONE PART

CHAPTER I

THE NEW MASTER

IN April of 1677 Christopher left Roxhythe after nine long years and took rooms in Cheapside. After the first struggle he seemed to sink into a state of apathy. He hardly stirred from his rooms and he received no one. At present he was living in some horrible nightmare; he could not even now realise all that had happened.

In May of the same year Lady Frances returned from Scotland where she had been staying. She made her curtesy to the King at Whitehall and stayed by his side for some time, laughing and talking with him in a reminiscent vein. After that she exchanged frivolities with Lord Buckhurst. It was at that moment that Roxhythe appeared on the scene.

He stood for some while by the King, but presently he perceived his cousin and came across the room towards her.

Lady Frances gave him her hand.

"Well, David!" She eyed Lord Buckhurst with her head on one side. "Dear me, Charles, I believe Lady Finchley wants you!"

He laughed in answer to her twinkling glance.

"Which means that you do not? Very well! I'll go!" He strolled off to join Killigrew.

Lady Frances smiled up at Roxhythe.

"Charles is very charming, is he not?" she said. "Sit down, David. How are you?"

"The same as ever," he answered. "And you?"

"How do I look?" she parried.

"Marvellous!" he said lazily.

"Then that is how I feel. How is Chris?"

My lord regarded the rosettes on his shoes.

"I really don't know. He has left me."

Lady Frances gasped.

"Left you? Christopher? Good gracious, Roxhythe, what has happened?"

"We had a difference of opinion and he decided that our ways lay apart."

Lady Frances to some extent recovered her composure. She laid a compelling hand on his arm.

"Roxhythe, you must have shown yourself very vile! I insist on knowing everything!"

"I am sorry to have to disappoint you, my dear. Suffice it that we agreed to part."

"It does not suffice! Something terrible must have happened to induce Chris to leave you."

"No, not at all."

"Roxhythe, do not play with me! He is—disillusioned?"

"Thoroughly."

"He knows that you are not—so idle?"

My lord raised his brows.

"Oh, pho! You know very well that I see through your pose! Others may be blind, but I am not. You are the King his man."

"Is not this a rather public spot wherein to discuss such matters?"

"Has Chris found out?"

"Why not ask him?"

"I shall! Have no fear of that! But I want it from your lips. Oh, come, David! I too have lived in intrigue; I am not blameless myself. Chris discovered that you were plotting?"

"Something of the sort!"

"And so he left you? No, that is not enough. You used him?"

"You should have been born a man, my dear."

"My mother knew better. Did you use Christopher?"

"You weary me," said Roxhythe. "You were never wont to do that. I did use him."

"Then you are utterly without a heart, without shame! You are loathsome!" said my lady vehemently.

"You always knew that I had no heart. Shame is an

unknown quantity. But as to loathsome . . . h'm!"

"It is true. Oh, David, why did you do it?"

"I forget. There was a reason."

"For heaven's sake don't be flippant!" she snapped. "Where is Christopher?"

"In rooms. 94, Cheapside."

"I shall tell him to visit me. Perhaps he will be more explicit!"

"I doubt it." My lord smiled insufferably.

"We shall see. I suppose you have killed his love for you?"

"On the contrary."

"Do you mean to say that Christopher still adores you?"

"I believe so."

"And you sit there and tell me that in that calm, disinterested way! Roxhythe, I have never found you less to my taste!"

He looked into her flashing eyes. She was sitting very straight.

"Well, my dear, there is a remedy." He rose. "Pray give me leave!"

She nodded angrily. My lord strolled back to the King.

Next day a note was brought to Christopher. The serving-maid bore it up to his room.

Christopher was trying to write to his brother. The task was a difficult one. It was hard to acknowledge himself to have been in the wrong throughout.

The serving-maid gave a sniff and proffered the note. When he saw Lady Frances' handwriting a little colour came to Christopher's pale cheeks and he tore the letter open. It was very short.

"Deare Chris.—Come and See me this After Noon.—F.M."

"Do they await an answer?" asked Christopher.

"No, sir." The girl twisted her apron between her fingers and giggled a little for no better reason than that she admired him. "The footman went away at once."

"Thank you."

The maid departed, clattering across the floor in shoes

two sizes too large for her. She was something of a contrast to the well-trained lackeys at Bevan House.

That afternoon Christopher surveyed his many suits deliberately. If he was to wait on Lady Fanny he must be carefully dressed. At the back of the cupboard hung a brown velvet suit, heavily laced with gold. Christopher fingered it dreamily. He had worn this coat last when he had returned from Flanders . . . Then there was the blue cloth with its cream facings. That had been bought for a garden-party at Lady Pommeroy's house. Roxhythe had worn apricot velvet . . . He put it back slowly. The lilac velvet? No . . . That had been his summer suit down at Bevan last year . . . The grey cloth with the pale blue ribands? . . . Not that. Roxhythe had approved of that dress. What was it he had said? . . . Almost roughly Christopher thrust it back into the cupboard. From its depths he drew a green coat laced with silver. He had seldom worn this, thinking it ugly. Well, it should be worn now. He shut the cupboard.

An hour later he was ushered into Lady Fanny's boudoir.

Frances looked up quickly, scanning his face as he made his leg. She was shocked at the change that had taken place. There was no sparkle in his eyes, no colour in his face. He had aged extraordinarily since last she had seen him.

"My very dear Chris!" She came forward, hands outstretched.

He took them in his.

"How kind of you to invite me, Lady Frances! I did not know you were in town." His voice was graver than of old.

"Dear boy, it was more of a summons!" she smiled. "Now come and sit down beside me and tell me everything." She drew him to a couch.

"I don't think that there is much to tell," said Christopher, trying hard to sound unconcerned. "You heard that I have left Roxhythe?"

"Yes, Chris. Tell me all about it." She patted his hand as she spoke. "You know that I can be discreet."

"It's nothing, Lady Fanny. I found that I wanted to leave—so I—left." He spoke with would-be lightness.

"Chris, that is not enough. I have seen Roxhythe, and I know that something has happened."

"Oh, no! I was tired of playing secretary. I am a man of leisure now!"

"And do you like it, Chris?"

He looked away.

"Tell me, dear boy . . ."

"I can't!"

"You can. Roxhythe has treated you shamefully I know."

A wry smile twisted his lips.

"Don't say you warned me!"

"Of course I shall not! He used you in some way? tricked you?"

"That I cannot tell you. But you will be glad to know—that my eyes are open—at last."

"I am not glad, dear. I am very, very sorry. You thought he was——"

"I thought he was the soul of honour and truth. Well, I was mistaken."

"He has hurt you badly, then. It was bound to happen. He lives only for the King. It is his one good point."

"Not at all. He has many good points. Don't think that I have ceased to care for him! I love him as much as before—but I—cannot live with him. Shall we talk of something else?" His eyes pleaded.

"Yes, Chris. We will talk of what you contemplate doing."

"I hardly know. I thought I would continue to be a man of leisure. I find I must have some occupation."

"Quite right. What have you thought of?"

"A secretaryship, I suppose."

Lady Frances nodded briskly.

"You've someone in mind?"

"Not yet."

"Then I know the very thing for you!"

Christopher looked apprehensive.

"What is it, Lady Frances?"

"Do you know Sir Richard Worth?"

"One of the Country Party?"

"Yes; under Cavendish."

"I believe I have seen him. I do not know him."

"It so happens that he is in need of a secretary. Jasper knows him. You must apply for the post."

"Oh—oh—I do not think so!"

"Indeed yes! It is the very thing for you. You want occupation, and it had best be with a man very different from Roxhythe."

"But I doubt—I am not fitted for—public work."

"You will learn. Your name stands in your favour——"

"And my nine years' service to Roxhythe stands well against me."

"That is true, of course. However, I shall see what can be done. I have bidden Sir Richard to dinner to-night. I shall talk gently to him."

"Please do not, Lady Frances! Indeed, I do not think that I want to be his secretary!"

"Whose then?"

"I don't know—I——"

"Very well then! No, you must not argue! You do not want to do anything but mope at home. And I say you are not to. Have you any objection to Worth?"

"No. I know nothing about him."

"Then apply for the post. Ah, Chris, please!"

"It's very kind of you, Lady Fanny. I'll apply for it. After all, what odds does it make whom I serve?"

"There! I knew you would be sensible. And you'll wait on him to-morrow?"

"If you like."

"I do like. And Chris—don't wear that dress! Indeed, green becomes you not."

He smiled.

"I'll go clad in sober black."

"No, nor that either. Wear that nice blue coat worked with cream."

There was a slight pause.

"Yes," said Christopher.

He did go, although against his inclination. When he arrived at Worth's house he was ushered into the study, which was severely furnished and dark, and which looked out on to the backs of houses. Christopher shivered. A single ray of sunlight contrived to squeeze in at the window and showed a million specks of dust.

The door opened. A short, middle-aged man came into the room, Christopher's card in his hand.

"Mr. Dart?" The voice was fussy, slightly peevish.

Christopher bowed.

Sir Richard clasped his hand.

"Yours is an old name. I knew your father. A most noble gentleman."

Again Christopher bowed.

"Yes. Well, will you be seated? Oh, there are papers on the chair! Allow me!" He cleared the documents on to the table. Christopher thanked him.

Worth sat down at the writing-table and rested his arms on it.

"Lady Frances Montgomery advised me of your coming to-day. A charming lady! Charming!"

Christopher suppressed a smile. Evidently Fanny had exerted herself to captivate Sir Richard.

Worth came back to earth.

"Charming, yes. I understand you have been secretary to my Lord Roxhythe?"

"I have had that honour, Sir Richard, for nine years."

"Well, well! May I ask why you left him? Do not think me impertinent! But it is just as well to know everything, is it not?"

This was almost amusing. Worth was indeed a contrast to Roxhythe. Christopher found himself thinking of another interview that had taken place at eleven at night in rooms overlooking the river. How typical of my lord that was!

"Er—certainly, sir. I left because I wanted a change. He will speak for me, I know."

"Ah, yes, yes, of course! That is excellent. You under-

stand that this is rather different work from what you have been accustomed to?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't think that I mean to infer that you are not capable of undertaking it! But I think it would be a great change. Is that not so?"

"Yes, sir. I have done little save manage the affairs of my lord's estate."

"Just as I thought. Exactly. No matter. Of course I need hardly say this to James Dart his son, but great discretion would be required of you an you worked for me. Here we handle State affairs which must not be talked of."

"I understand that, sir."

"Ah, yes, yes, naturally. I am sure that you would prove discreet. You said, I think, that Lord Roxhythe would speak for you?"

"I did."

"Yes. You'll forgive me, Mr. Dart, but I marvel that you stayed so long in his service."

Christopher stiffened.

"Indeed, sir?"

"I had thought that James Dart his son would not have been in the company of such as Roxhythe."

"Sir, I think it as well to tell you that Lord Roxhythe commands my highest regards."

"Dear, dear! Of course he has great fascination. I have heard of it. A powerful man."

"Very," said Christopher.

"Forgive me again, but do you realize that the atmosphere of my house is very different from Lord Roxhythe's?"

Christopher glanced round the untidy room.

"Yes," he said. The faintest of smiles flickered across his mouth.

"I live very quietly. I fear I am no brilliant courtier. I am but a patriot. I do trust you are not imbued with Lord Roxhythe his views."

"I regret, sir, I cannot tell you what are his views."

"That is very well, very well. And so you desire to fill the post of secretary to me?"

Christopher sighed.

"That is my desire, sir."

"Yes. Well, Mr. Dart, I will not disguise the fact that good—above all discreet—secretaries are not easily come by these days. Your name stands greatly in your favour. And of course Sir Jasper Montgomery's recommendation is sufficient. With your permission I will write to Lord Roxhythe. And then, if you are agreeable, I should suggest a week's trial."

"Very well, Sir Richard. I shall try to satisfy you."

"Of course, of course! Let me see—have you not an elder brother?"

"Roderick, sir. He is with the Prince of Orange."

"Is that so? Very interesting to be sure. Though we cannot afford to lose good patriots in these times."

Christopher rose.

"Roderick has been with the Prince for many years, sir. He is very devoted."

"Ah yes, naturally. A remarkable young man, is he not? Remarkable." He ushered his visitor out.

Christopher walked slowly down Bishopsgate Street. Suddenly he laughed mirthlessly, and his hand clenched on his glove. What a fool he was not to return to Roxhythe! Why should he enter the service of this uncongenial man? Why should he not go to his master and beg to be allowed to come back? But he knew that he would never do that. A fool he might be, but he knew that he was acting rightly. He thought how Roxhythe would have enjoyed the interview with Worth, and laughed again. There swept over him an overwhelming longing to see that tall, graceful figure again, to hear the lazy voice, to feel the pressure of those tapering fingers. He walked on, biting his lip.

Two days later came a letter from Roxhythe. Christopher's hands trembled as he broke the seal.

"MY DEARE CHRIS.—Who in God's Name is Worth? Some Psalm-singing Puritan, I'll be bound. Eschew his Company. I spoke of you Very Highly, though I

was minded to Malign you when I saw who your Future Master was to be.

"My secretary is a Fool! I implore you to take Pity on me. Or if Ye will not, at least Visitt me Some Day.—ROXHYTHE."

Christopher folded the missive tenderly and slipped it into his pocket. Every nerve urged him to go to Roxhythe who wanted him, but his will held him back. Once in my lord's presence the spell would be cast over him again, and all the old agony would return.

He answered the letter at length, and told my lord that as yet he could not face an interview. He assured Roxhythe of his undying affection. It was a pathetic, wistful letter that tried hard to be cheerful.

My lord read it and laid it aside.

"A pity," he reflected. "He was so much more restful than this dolt."

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF WILLIAM

"My dear David, it is a marvellous scheme."

Roxhythe turned his hand so that the rings on it flashed in the sunlight.

"It seems very well. But what says the Prince?"

He was walking with the King in the Privy Gardens at Whitehall.

Charles shrugged.

"He has refused hitherto, but this time I think he will consent."

"Oh. And what says the Lady Mary?"

"She's a child. Therefore foolish."

My lord smiled.

"I thought so. And the Duke?"

"David, there are moments when ye would try the patience of a saint! Do you expect me to listen to James his complaints?"

"After all, she is his daughter," murmured Roxhythe.

"He should not count her above the nation," returned Charles piously.

Roxhythe's shoulders shook.

"Oh, lud!"

Charles bit his lip. Then he too burst out laughing.

"Fie on you, David! This time I have the nation's good at heart."

"Very well, Sir. So the Lady Mary must be sacrificed."

"Sacrificed!"

"Sire, you have had but a fleeting glance of your nephew. And that was seven years ago. You have not seen your nephew's court."

"No. Is it still so dreary?"

"Ineffably. I do pity the Lady Mary."

"She will grow accustomed to it," said Charles comfortably. "At all events the thing must be done."

"It is wise, I grant you. But you were never so set on it until now. Do I see the hand of Danby?"

"Partly. He is mad for it. I think he is suffering from an attack of patriotism. He is subject to them."

"Sir, Danby is a waverer. He is greatly disliked."

"He will last a little longer. He has his uses."

Roxhythe frowned.

"True. But not much longer. When does the Prince land?"

Charles plucked a rose and twirled it between his fingers.

"Next week. Odds, I am anxious to see him again."

"Does he know for what he is invited?"

"I suppose so. You say he is no fool."

"No. Therefore I expect him to comply very readily with your desires. I never understood why he refused before. He is very secret."

Charles nodded. They pursued their way along the ordered walks. Presently the King waved his hand towards the south side of the gardens where were the Duchess of Cleveland's apartments.

"Bab swears she is for Paris," he remarked.

Roxhythe smiled.

"I gather her Grace of Portsmouth has annoyed her?"

"Bab was ever a termagant. I hope she will return, though I have been worn to a shred by her passions. Mine is a hard lot."

Roxhythe looked inquiringly.

"Why? Because two women quarrel?"

"Oons, no! I was thinking of this marriage."

"I thought you were so eager for it?"

"On the one side I am; Louis is coming too close. But on the other side I do not wish to offend him. He'll take this very ill. However, I hope for peace."

Roxhythe was amused.

"What! Do you think that the dreary argufyers at Nimeguen will have done at last?"

"I do trust so. I count on it."

"You are grown sanguine, Sir," said Roxhythe drily.

Across the lawn came Danby, hurrying. He bowed to the King.

"Sire, the latest news is that Buckingham, Salisbury, and Wharton humbly submit, and plead your mercy."

The King looked at his favourite.

"Very proper," said my lord. "And Ashley?"

"Oh, Shaftesbury is obdurate, sir! He appeals to the law."

"Does he so?" said Charles, amused. "What good does he think will come of it?"

"Heaven knows, Sir! I think he hopes to raise an outcry."

"Very likely. Well, let him appeal. He is out of harm's way. What of the others, Davy?"

"I should release them, Sir, an they are properly repentant."

"You hear, Danby?"

"Yes, Sir. Will you sign the orders?"

"Not now. Some other time."

"Very well, Sir." Danby bowed and walked away.

"Vengeance is satisfied, Roxhythe?"

"Amply, Sir. He'll not annoy me again."

"If he knows whom he has to thank for his imprisonment."

"Oh, he knows!" replied my lord. "He probably realizes the futility of fighting against it."

"I am glad that you are not my enemy," grimaced Charles.

* * * * *

Next week, on the day of the Prince's arrival, the great hall at the Palace was crowded. The King stood by Lord Danby, talking gaily; a little to his left sat the Queen, Roxhythe at her elbow, the Ladies Mary and Anne behind her. Lord Dorset was near the door, in a knot of courtiers; Killigrew stood by the window, one of another group. Near the King was the Duke of York; his wife, Mary, sat beside the Queen.

The room was a riot of colour, and over all was a buzz

of conversation. Then, suddenly, fell a hush. The great curtain at one end was swung back; into the hall came a slight, plainly dressed young man with auburn curls falling about his hawk face. In his wake were some half a dozen gentlemen.

The King stepped forward. As he moved his silks and velvets rustled.

"My dear nephew! We do give you welcome!"

Everyone was craning to see the Prince. Many remembered him, but there were many who had never till this moment set eyes on him.

Roxhythe noticed very little difference in William. He had aged somewhat; his face was keener and more lined. He dressed as soberly as ever, and his manner lacked the courtier's polish. He seemed strangely out of place in the midst of this gay throng.

William bent the knee, kissing the King's hand.

"I am honoured to be invited once more to Whitehall, Sir," he said. He spoke English well, but with a Dutch accent.

Charles patted his shoulder.

"'Tis we who are honoured," he said. "Come, let me present you to Her Majesty!" He led William forward. "You remember Prince William, madame?"

Catherine smiled lifelessly, extending her plump white hand.

The King's eye roved round the room.

"I think you know most of us, William. I'll not weary you with introductions!" He bowed to the Duchess of York. "Permit me to present to you Prince William, madame."

Mary bent her head.

The King smiled at the fair, mischievous girl behind her.

"Come child!"

The younger Mary came to him, swaying her brocades. The King took her hand.

"You have already met our niece, William."

William looked at her searchingly as he bowed. The full lips pouted a little, the big eyes were downcast. Mary curtseyed.

"Then we have your uncle, William. James, where are you?"

The Duke came forward and took the Prince's hand.

"We give you welcome, William."

Again the King looked round.

"I'll not fatigue you, my poor nephew, with needless presentations. Suffice it is that there stands Lord Dorset, whom you know; over there, Lord Danby, whom you do not know; beside him, Killigrew; a little to the right, our good Sedley. A worthless set, I assure you."

A shout of laughter went up.

"They set me at naught," complained the King, twinkling.

William smiled mechanically. He never approved of his uncle's lack of formality.

Charles beckoned to Roxhythe.

"David! . . . There is one here, William, whom you know better than us all. Our very dear Roxhythe."

William turned sharply. Roxhythe made his profoundest leg.

"I am delighted to see Your Highness in England again," he said.

"Thank you, milor'. I too am delighted to be here. Sire" . . . he made a sign to his suite. "May I present my friend Bentinck?"

The King was graciously pleased to extend his hand. One by one William presented his little court. Charles had some good-humoured word for each. When Roderick made his bow, he detained him.

"Mr. Dart? We are very pleased to meet you. We do know your brother."

Roderick bowed again, flushing. He disapproved of Charles most strongly, but there did not live the man who could resist his fascination.

Charles addressed himself to William.

"We grudge you our countrymen," he smiled. "We can ill spare our patriots." His glance took in Mynheer Heenvliet. He drew William to a couch and waved his hand to the rest of the room.

"You may all continue your conversations!"

He kept the Prince beside him for some moments, and then he suggested that William might like to retire. William assented thankfully. He went out, escorted by his suite.

Roxhythe strolled up to the King. Arm in arm they walked to one of the windows.

"He has not changed much," said my lord.

The King shivered.

"Still the iceberg, only that now he is more icy. I had forgotten his eyes."

"They are rather wonderful, are they not, Sir? And you have not seen them flash."

* * * * *

William surveyed his bedchamber silently. Everything was very gorgeous, very rich. He turned to the three men who were with him.

"I am tired," he said. "The journey was very tedious. What have we to-night?"

Heenvliet answered him.

"A State dinner, Sir. You would do well to rest."

William nodded.

"Yes. How close it is in here! Dart, will you open me that window? And then I will be alone for a while. Bentinck, stay with me."

The two other men went out. William sank into a chair.

"What an atmosphere! What splendour!"

Bentinck sat down.

"It is a marvellously well appointed palace, Sir. His Majesty was very gracious."

"Yes. I had forgotten that this was your first visit. You see that my uncle commands great respect for all his lack of etiquette."

"A curious people these English," commented Bentinck. "But King Charles is very royal for all his joviality."

"I have always observed it. You saw my bride to be?"

"Yes, Sir. She is comely enough."

"And pert." William sighed. "I suppose it must be."

"She is very young, Sir."

"But she has been bred in this atmosphere of luxury and vice. And her father is a Catholic. God knows how it will end."

Bentinck spoke soothingly.

"Your Highness is despondent to-day. So young a girl should not be difficult to influence."

"Mayhap. Did you remark Lord Roxhyt'e?"

"I did, Sir. It was my first sight of him. He is very high with the King, I am told."

William looked up.

"Oh? You have had speech with one of them?"

"With one Digby, Sir, while you were with the King. It seems that this Roxhyt'e is very powerful."

"I know. I mislike him, and yet—" he broke off, closing his eyes. Presently he opened them again. "A State dinner, you said?"

"Yes, Sir. In your honour. Shall I tell Jan to put out your dress?"

"Thank you."

Bentinck left the room. When he returned the Prince was frowning slightly.

"William, did you tell him the orange satin?"

"No, Sir. Do you wish to wear it?"

"I think so. We'll not appear shabby before these English."

"Very well, Sir." Again Bentinck went out.

* * * * *

It was not until next evening that Roderick visited his brother. He found him in, and was taken at once to his room.

Christopher came forward.

"Well, Dick!"

They clasped hands.

"I expected you," said Christopher. He drew a chair away from the window. "Sit down. I have ordered dinner."

"You were very sure of me," smiled Dart. "As it happened it was hard to leave His Highness. They feast him again to-night."

"Yes? I thought you would come, though." He moved to the door. "Excuse me one moment."

Roderick heard him call to the serving-maid. This new Christopher was almost a stranger to him.

"Well, Chris! After seven long years!"

"So it is! I'faith, it does not seem as much. Did you arrive without mishap?"

"A fairly smooth passage. It is good to be in England again."

"It must be. How have you fared since I saw you?"

"Very well. I have been at the Prince his side throughout."

"Then you have seen much. How is the Prince?"

"Tired after the gaities of last night. We are ill-used to such late hours. We live very quietly when we are not in camp."

"Yes? I suppose there were many people present yesterday?"

"The room was crowded. I saw some familiar faces, but there were many whom I did not know at all. Lord Danby for one."

Christopher smiled.

"Oh, we have suffered Danby for some time now. An elegant gentleman, is he not? Quite amusing when he likes."

"You know him?"

"I have met him several times at Bevan House. Was Roxhythe there last night?"

Roderick looked at him narrowly.

"Yes. My Lord was in high good spirits. He had us all a-laughing many times."

"I expect so. And Sedley?"

"Yes. Chris, I was very pleased to hear that you had left Roxhythe." So he blundered tactlessly on to the raw.

"Were you?"

"You saw the truth of what I said?"

A little of my lord's famous manner entered into Christopher. Quite unconsciously he adopted that soft drawl.

"I really forget what you did say. I left Roxhythe for private reasons."

Roderick stared at him. Then he smiled.

"Very well, we'll leave it at that."

Christopher opened his eyes rather wide.

"Certainly we shall leave it at that. Oh, I have an invitation for you!"

"For me?"

"A very dear friend of mine wants to meet you. Lady Frances Montgomery."

"Not the Duke of Rochefort's daughter?"

"That is right. Wife of Sir Jasper Montgomery. She is my lord's cousin and the sweetest, kindest lady I have ever met."

"So! Well I shall be delighted to see her. When are we invited?"

"When we like. She is always at home in the afternoon. I'll take you whenever you are at liberty."

"That will be best. I cannot say as yet, as I do not know what commands His Highness may have for me."

Dinner arrived noisily. The serving-maid, conscious of responsibility, breathed hard through her nostrils as she laid the places.

Christopher had ordered a very *recherché* dinner. Life with Roxhythe had taught him much in this respect. Roderick prepared to enjoy himself.

Christopher started to carve a fat partridge.

"You have heard my latest news?"

"No. What is it?"

"Why, I am secretary to the dullest dog in town! Richard Worth."

"I do not think I know him. Who is he?"

"He belongs to what Roxhythe calls 'our respected Country Party.' He seems to have known my father. In fact he never refers to me other than as 'the son of James Dart.' He lives in an atmosphere of fuss and dust."

Roderick laughed, accepting the partridge.

"Really? Why the fuss?"

"Heaven knows! He is perpetually worried, and conceives that the cares of the nation rest on his shoulders alone. He gives every order twice, imagining that by so doing he shows himself a very sharp man. He is most wearisome."

"He must be. A contrast to Roxhythe."

Christopher ground his teeth.

"Quite. My lord implores me to eschew his company."

"Oh—! You still visit Roxhythe?"

"I have not done so as yet. He wrote to me."

"Indeed! Chris, why are you so secret? I want to know how matters stand between you and Roxhythe."

Christopher laid down his fork.

"My lord commands my love and loyalty," he said deliberately.

Roderick was puzzled.

"Still?"

"Always. I told you many years ago that I should continue to love him in spite of all your prognostications. Well, I have. He is the kindest master ever a man had."

"Ah? And you trusted in him as you swore you would?"

Christopher passed him the wine.

"Of course."

"And your trust was betrayed?"

"No. Why should it have been?"

"Do you forget that I know that you were in Flanders last year?"

Christopher flung back his head. As he laughed he showed all his white teeth.

"Oh, lud! Roderick you were on the wrong track then! I went to Flanders for my own pleasure! Odds, but I was amused when I read your letter!"

"May I ask why you went to Cherrywood?"

"Of course you may ask. I went to gain a permit to visit the camp."

"Oh . . . But why Cherrywood?"

"He happened to be one of the few in town that day. The Duke and his suite were out chasing."

"Chris, is that the truth?"

"The truth? What in God's name do you suppose? Is it likely that I should bear secret dispatches to Monmouth?"

"I confess I hardly thought so. And yet—"

"You are of a suspicious turn of mind, Dick. I am not the man to go on a secret errand."

"Perhaps you were tricked into it?"

"Perhaps I was. So tricked that I have no memory of delivering any documents at all. Perhaps I went to Flanders in a trance; perhaps I was drugged and the papers foisted upon me!"

"There is no need to mock me," said Roderick stiffly.

"Of course I believe your word."

"Thank you." Christopher pushed his chair back. He was very pale.

"No Dart ever acted treacherously towards his Country," went on Roderick. He eyed a pasty favourably. "No Dart ever lied. Naturally I believe you."

Christopher got up and flung the window open.

"How close it is in here! Let me—recommend that—pasty, Dick. A little more wine?"

"Thank you. Dear me, you fare well, Chris."

"Yes," said Christopher. He shut the window and glanced round the room. "I fare well, as you say." He smiled, but it was not a happy smile.

CHAPTER III

LA KEROUALLE

My Lord Roxhythe escorted His Highness round the Privy Gardens. William surveyed the scene interestedly.

"It is almost—Holland!" he said.

Roxhythe smiled.

"His Majesty is very proud of the garden. He copies the Dutch style as you see."

"It is very beautiful," said William. "I am glad that you brought me here."

"I thought Your Highness would appreciate the place. Will you walk a little? There are some very fine trees round the corner."

"I should like to." For the first time William looked at Roxhythe with something of friendliness in his eyes.

"You gauged my tastes correctly, sir!"

"Why, I am satisfied then!" My lord led the Prince along the neat walk.

William touched his lips with his handkerchief.

"You have brought me here for a purpose, of course. I wonder . . . can I divine it?"

Roxhythe knew his man.

"I am quite sure you can, Sir. I pave the way for Danby."

A smile flickered across William's thin lips.

"The way needs paving?"

"They seem to think so. And Danby is so tactless."

"Tact . . . I am to be approached cautiously?"

They had come to an arbour. A stone seat presented itself to William's notice. He sat down.

"Highness, we have dealt with one another before. I have too high an opinion of you to oil my tongue. Once I did so, and you routed me, horse and foot."

"This time you have a different message I take it. Well."

"As Your Highness knows, I am to request you to marry the Lady Mary."

William nodded. His eyes were fixed on a distant peacock.

"I need hardly say that the alliance will prove greatly to your advantage, Sir."

The hazel eyes rested on his face.

"Will prove . . . ?"

"Why not, Sir?"

"You take too much for granted, milor'."

"No. Your Highness admitted that you knew my errand before I spoke. I take it you knew before you came to England. And you are here."

"I see. There is really nothing to be said, is there?"

"Nothing, Highness."

William continued to watch the peacock.

"Tell me one thing, milor'. Of what Faith is the Princess?"

"Of your own, Sir."

"Ah? That is the truth?"

"Why should I seek to deceive you? 'Twere to no purpose."

William said nothing. The peacock strutted behind the tree.

"What does King Charles want of me?" asked William at length.

"Naught but this alliance, Sir."

"No compact? no treaty?"

"None that Your Highness does not desire."

"Always the smooth answer. There are no conditions attached to the marriage?"

"None, Sir."

"Then he hopes that I shall consider myself beholden unto him. Yet I do not greatly desire the marriage."

"King Charles considers it politic, Sir. Louis grows too arrogant."

"And the English too uneasy. Am I to understand that my uncle seeks to throw off the French yoke? Does he stand by me?"

"His Majesty has always wished to stand by you, Sir."

The thin lips sneered.

"He blows hot and cold," said William. "I have learnt how far he may be trusted."

Roxhythe snapped off a dried twig.

"Permit me to say, Highness, that you do not as yet understand my master."

William raised his eyes. There was a disconcerting gleam in their depths.

"Milor', if you think that you do not know me."

Roxhythe bowed.

"Then I have still something to learn, Sir."

"I think that you have many things to learn, milor'. Among them that it is not wise never to act honestly by any man."

"Highness, when have I acted dishonestly by you?"

William smiled sadly.

"Long ago, milor', you came to me with an infamous proposal. I rejected it. So you trafficked in the name of your master with the French King. Later you came to me again, giving me lies and fair words. Again I rejected your proposals. So once more you went to Louis. What faith shall men have in you?"

My lord opened his comfit-box.

"Sir, it seems that you do not know me. Roxhythe cares for no man's opinion."

"It's very bravely spoken, milor', but there comes a time in every man's life when the good opinion of others counts for much."

My lord hesitated between a pink and a mauve sweet-meat. Finally he chose the pink.

"I am conceited enough to think that I can stand alone, Sir."

"You do not stand alone," said William unexpectedly. "You have the King behind you. But there will come a time when you will wish that you had not destroyed all men's faith in you."

Roxhythe put away the comfit-box.

"Your Highness appears to have great knowledge of my affairs," he said. He was faintly amused.

"I do but know what everyone knows, milor'. You count no cost. You ruined Falmouth for your pleasure; you thwarted Cavendish the same. You tricked the Country Party some years ago. You have sacrificed all for one man."

"All?"

"Honour, friendship, loyalty. What will come of it, milor'?"

"It remains to be seen, Sir. I am surprised that you take such an interest in one so debased."

"Perhaps it is because I admire brain in any man. Perhaps because I realize what you might be, milor'. In a good cause you were invaluable. But you are inconsistent. Like the wind, you veer first one way in your policy, and then the other. I know that you possess great influence over my uncle. Yet you do not exert it in any way for the good. It is a thousand pities. And they tell me you were a soldier."

Roxhythe seemed to sigh.

"That is long, long ago, Highness."

William did not answer. Down the gravel walk was coming the King with the Duchess of Portsmouth on his arm. He was listening to something she had to say, his dark head bent slightly over hers. Then he laughed and patted her cheek. So they came to where the Prince was seated, Madame's fine eyes glowing with merriment.

William rose.

"I have admired your gardens, Sir. Milor' Roxhyt'e showed them to me."

The King cast a contented glance round.

"I am pleased that you like them, William. I was at pains to design them after the Dutch fashion. You in Holland understand the art."

"But no tulips!" said William, smiling.

"The season for them is over. We had a gay show in the spring. Has Roxhythe shown you the little lake?"

"No, Sir. Not yet."

"Oh, you must see that!" He bore his nephew off.

Roxhythe was left with the Duchess. She sat down in William's lately vacated seat. She was very beautiful to look on, framed by the roses in the arbour.

"Milor, sit down!" Always she spoke French with Roxhythe. "Yes. So here is our little Prince."

"Is it the first time you have seen him since he arrived, Madame?"

"No. But it is the first time that I have seen you since then. I have had speech with Barillon."

"Have you? I find that Barillon palls on one."

"Assuredly!" The slow, fascinating smile dawned. "He is so worthy. And he does not like to see the Prince in England."

"If only he had told us sooner . . ." deplored Roxhythe.

"He is uneasy in his mind, *le pauvre!*"

"He usually is uneasy," sighed my lord.

"Without cause, *hein?* But this time he has cause. He listens with both ears to rumour."

"How unwise!"

"Perhaps. He thinks the Prince has come to wed the Lady Mary."

"And you?"

"Me, I think so too. I know more than *ce cher* Barillon. It is true, I am assured. The King has said as much. But what of King Louis?"

Roxhythe fixed a rose in her hair. Its soft gold tint harmonized with her gown.

"You should always wear flowers, madame. So few women can."

"Aha! *C'est joli?*"

"*C'est merveilleux.*"

"Another here you think?" She touched her breast. Roxhythe considered it.

"Yes. That is perfect."

"Oh, for a mirror!" she sighed.

"You will never make me believe you have not one, madame."

"Yes. You know us, *n'est ce pas?*" She regarded him gravely.

"I have had experience, you see," said my lord.

"You know how to lead us away from the point; how to turn our minds from main issues. *La-la!* How weak is woman! But me, I am *la K eroualle.*"

"And I am—Roxhythe."

"In fact we are well-matched. What of Louis?"

"It is a question you best can answer, madame."

"I can answer, yes. When you have answered."

"What is it you would have me say?"

"I would have you tell me what it is that Charles means to do."

"Do you admit ignorance, madame?"

"Part ignorance, Roxhyt'e."

"Then who am I to know more than you?"

"You have said—Roxhyt'e. You have the King's whole confidence; I have but half."

"I had thought that what you lacked in plain speaking your wit would have supplied."

"Sometimes. And sometimes my surmises need confirmation. Will Charles break faith with Louis?"

"Because of this marriage?"

She nodded, watching him.

"It seems a slender excuse," said Roxhythe imper-
turbably.

"Does he require an excuse?"

"If Louis grew too arrogant he might be glad of one."

"And if he does not?"

"Then the marriage is too slender an excuse."

"So I thought. A warning."

"A concession to uneasy Puritan spirits."

"That also. I may take it that Charles wishes Louis no ill?"

"Madame, His Majesty is far too good-natured to wish any man ill."

"Evasive. Well, milor', one thing I will tell you: King Louis will be furious at the marriage."

"It is to be deplored."

"I think he will not readily unite with Charles again."

Roxhythe smiled.

"No?"

"No. And you, milor': Louis thought you at one with him. He trusts still to your influence. You said once that it would be exerted in his favour. On which side do you stand?"

"On neither, madame."

"That is bold, Roxhyt'e. You seek to offend King Louis?"

"By no means. I work for Charles. If another French alliance is possible it has my support."

"Safe words, Roxhyt'e. You are not privy to this marriage?"

"I am privy to nothing save my master's interests."

"Which do lie in France. Is that what you would have me understand?"

"You have said it, madame."

"And I may say it to Louis? You work for him still?"

"Have I ever worked for him?" parried my lord.

"You have furthered France's cause with your King. We have great faith in your influence."

"So it seems. You may tell King Louis that I am of the same mind as ever."

Madame bent her head to smell the rose at her breast.

"Which means that Charles is too. Well."

"David, you have been charming Louise away from me!" cried a gay voice. The King was coming towards them, the Prince at his side. "And who arranged the rose in your hair, sweet?"

The Duchess lifted her face to his.

"You like it, Sir?"

"'Tis admirable. Roxhythe his work?"

"In truth he is a flatterer," said madame. A smile trembled at the corners of her mouth.

"A rogue," amended Charles. "William, here be two rogues!"

"But one is too lovely for such a title," said the Prince.

Madame's eyelids fluttered in momentary surprise. She threw out her hands.

"Now which of us does he mean?"

"Can there be doubt?" smiled William. But his eyes were hard.

"La-la! Your Highness will offend one of us! Now, which is it to be?"

"I'll say that you are both beyond comparison. You make a well-matched pair." There was a glitter in the hazel eyes now. The thin lips still smiled.

"Soho!" said madame, and nodded at Roxhythe. "What did I say?"

CHAPTER IV

THE MEETING

LADY FRANCES received the Darts very cordially. She succeeded in captivating Roderick, no easy task, and he afterwards told his brother that she was the most charming woman he had ever met.

Fanny was anxious to know how Christopher liked his new master. She was much entertained by his description of Worth's vagaries, and she thought that Christopher must be recovering from his awful depression. She realised, however, that his engagement with Worth would not last long. She had never thought that it would, but it served to distract his mind for the time.

Montgomery appeared for a few minutes, especially to see Christopher. He, too, wanted to hear the boy's opinion of Worth. They retired to a couch together.

Lady Frances drew Roderick to the window-seat, a little apart.

"So you have not seen Chris for seven years, Mr. Dart? It is a long time."

"Too long," said Roderick. "I wish I could induce him to come back to Holland with me in the Prince his suite."

"Oh!" Lady Frances nibbled her finger-tip. "I don't think so. We cannot spare him."

Roderick hesitated. Then he leaned forward.

"Lady Frances, I know you have been very good to Chris. May I speak plainly?"

"Please do!"

"Then, I can see that the boy is unhappy."

"At present, yes. I think he will recover."

"Not here. Forgive me if I am impertinent, but Roxhythe is too close. He preys on Christopher's mind. He should go away."

Lady Frances was silent for a moment.

"Perhaps you are right. But I do not think that he will."

"I am afraid not. In spite of himself he is clinging to Roxhythe. Lady Frances, what has happened I do not know, but I can guess. It has been a terrible blow to Chris. He must have cared for Roxhythe quite absurdly."

"He still cares for him. Roxhythe has the power to endear everyone to him—when he chooses. Believe me, up till a short time ago, he has been more than good to Christopher. It even surprised me who have known him from the cradle. In his way he is very fond of Chris. But only in his way."

"Madame, he evidently treated him very badly at the end. Chris would not have left him for a whim."

"Oh, I agree! Roxhythe can be a devil. I warned your brother years ago."

"And I. He was obstinate. And it has broken him."

"Nonsense! He is young. He will recover."

"It has broken his faith in mankind. No, do not shake your head, Lady Frances, I speak of what I know. Christopher, before he entered that man's service, was the most innocent-minded youngster possible. He believed in the goodness of man. Now he does not. He is bitter."

"Oh no!" she protested. "Chris could not be."

"Very faintly, I admit. But the bitterness is there. He has had a rude awakening, and it has quite changed him. He will never again be the same joyous Chris."

"He is quieter, of course, and more repressed—"

"And less frank."

"Oh—do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. He fences when I question him; he has become almost impenetrable. Once I could read him like an open book."

"You don't make enough allowance for his increasing years, Mr. Dart. Remember, when you last saw him he was growing up. Now he has grown. The boy is a man."

"It is not only that." Roderick stared moodily across the room. "How I wish that he had never met Roxhythe!"

"No. Roxhythe has matured him."

"Matured him wrongly. He has given him the courtier's manner, the intriguer's speech, the cynic's heart."

"Fiddle!" said Lady Frances emphatically. "Fiddle!"

Sir Jasper came towards them.

"I am very churlish," he smiled. "But I must go. These are busy times, Mr. Dart. Fanny, will you excuse me?"

"How tiresome of you!" sighed my lady. "I suppose I must." She watched him leave the room. "He is very hard-worked," she said.

Private conversation with Roderick was at an end, so Lady Frances induced him to recount some of his life abroad.

Christopher found that his brother could be quite interesting when drawn out of his shell. In the middle of the recital the door was flung open.

"The Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe!" announced the footman portentously.

Roderick broke off. Lady Frances cast an agitated glance around.

"I do not receive," she said.

The footman became flustered. It was evident that Roxhythe was close.

Christopher had risen. He was rather white, but quite composed. A small pulse was throbbing in his throat.

A leisurely footfall sounded. My lord had followed the lackey. He came into the room, typically languid.

The footman cast his mistress an apologetic glance, and vanished.

My lord bent over his cousin's hand.

"My fair Frances, I felicitate you."

"Why?" she asked, a trifle peevishly.

Roxhythe waved his hand to the blue hangings of the room.

"The admirable setting," he answered. He bowed to Roderick. "Well met, Mr. Dart." Then he looked at Christopher, and smiled, holding out his hand. "My dear Chris!"

Christopher went to him quickly. He carried my lord's hand to his lips and held it there for a moment.

"What a charming reunion!" remarked Roxhythe blandly. "I am come at a lucky moment."

Lady Frances fanned herself slowly.

"Pray sit down, David! You are so large."

Roxhythe chose a high-backed chair with arms. He turned to Christopher.

"Tell me, Chris, how is your Worth?"

Christopher smiled. His heart was leaping within him, but an apathetic calm seemed to have settled above it.

"He is a sore trial, sir. He asks me the same question three times within the hour, and he is most unrestful."

My lord was pained.

"Are you gibing at me, Chris?"

"I wonder!" said Christopher, and laughed.

Roxhythe turned to Roderick.

"Christopher long since discovered that it was my foible that I could not have an unrestful companion. He has never ceased to poke fun at me on that score."

Roderick answered perfunctorily.

Lady Frances stopped fanning herself and entered into the conversation.

Presently Roderick looked across at his brother. He stood up.

"Oh—already?" asked her ladyship.

"We have trespassed too long," said Christopher. "Why, we have been here an hour!"

"You were not wont to be so polite," pouted Fanny. "But I'll not press you to stay. Mr. Dart, I hope you will visit me again. You may bring Chris!"

"You are very kind," bowed Roderick. "I shall avail myself of that permission."

As Christopher bent over her hand Frances whispered hurriedly.

"I am sorry, Chris! Indeed, I had no idea—"

"Why it's nothing," he answered. "Sooner or later it had to be." He kissed her fingers again. Then he went to Roxhythe, who was talking inanely to Roderick. "My lord—"

Roxhythe turned.

"Are you going, Chris? When do you intend to honour me?" The brown eyes were almost pleading.

"Some day," said Christopher. "Not—quite—yet."

My lord's fingers held his firmly.

"Don't let it be too long, child. I miss you."

The young mouth set tightly. Christopher did not look at him.

When they were gone, her ladyship looked straight into Roxhythe's eyes.

"Are you a devil?" she asked, deadly quiet.

"I had not thought so, but what an amusing notion! Perhaps I am."

"You knew that Chris was to be here to-day!"

"Did I?"

"I'll vow you did! Or you found out of my footman. Why did you come?"

"I wanted to see him."

"Why? To keep the wound open?"

"Perhaps."

"I suppose you wish now that you had not destroyed his faith in you. You want him back. I can tell you that he will never return to you."

"Can you? We shall see."

"I shall try to induce him to go away!"

"Certainly. I shall not worry myself unduly. I only wanted to see him."

"Then it was hateful of you! You might have known that it would be worse for him after seeing you! You are vile!"

"No. Only human."

"Inhuman!"

Roxhythe laughed.

Lady Frances sank back against the cushions. She gave a tiny sigh.

"No. I suppose you are just Roxhythe."

"A new species, my dear."

"Sometimes so dear; mostly so cruel."

"Fanny, you are morbid! Confess, you have a great kindness for me?"

"Alas, yes."

"This is most harrowing," said my lord. "Why alas? We have always been very good friends."

"I know. I have nothing personal against you. But, oh, David! leave Christopher in peace! You have broken him; don't try to make it worse."

"It was not my intention."

"It is what you are doing. You are trying to get him beneath your sway again! You will not do it, but it is cruel!"

"Then if I shall not do it, why worry?" said my lord.

CHAPTER V

DISCORD

WHEN William of Orange was wedded to the Lady Mary, in November, England rejoiced. On the eve of the wedding-day the streets of London were packed with jubilant citizens who made bonfires, and cheered lustily the King, the Lady Mary, and the Prince of Orange. They even cheered, though faintly, the Duke of York, who having at last consented to the marriage, was now putting a good face upon it. Enthusiasm, therefore, waxed great. Protestant successors were ensured to the throne, and the alliance undoubtedly pointed to a lasting split between Charles and the hated Louis.

Amid the festivities there was one who rejoiced not at all. This one was the French Ambassador, M. Barillon, who had received disquieting tidings from his royal master concerning the marriage, and knew that he was like to receive more. Nor was he mistaken in his conviction, for when my Lord Danby set before Louis tentative proposals for peace with the United Provinces, his Most Christian Majesty rejected them in no mean terms. He was very angry, and he recalled the harassed M. Barillon so soon as my Lord Danby showed signs of taking a firm stand against France.

In his position as secretary to Worth, Christopher was closely in touch with all these proceedings. His interest in them grew steadily. Through bitter experience had he learnt to mistrust the King, and at first he viewed Charles' patriotic spasm with a sneer. But when supplies were voted for an army to go into Holland against France, some of his mistrust died. When troops were indeed sent to Holland, it faded almost entirely. He threw himself into his work with renewed fervour, feeling that at last he was working for the one incorruptible party.

Then came dissension, and he was puzzled. He was present at many turbulent discussions, and he listened in growing amazement to my Lords Russell and Roberts, who were of a sudden seized by a fear that the troops were being raised, not for war on France, but for the King's private ends. Hot arguments ensued, some men denying the implication, others defending it, and a few holding themselves neutral. Chaos followed, and the nation, catching the panic which had spread from the Country Party to the Commons, cried aloud to have the army disbanded. It was then that Christopher discovered something that increased tenfold the load on his mind. These men whom he deemed so upright were, unwittingly or not, playing directly into the French King's hands. Even Lord Russell, patriot that he was, was communicating through Barillon against the throne.

From his position as onlooker, Christopher saw clearly how Louis was fanning the flame of mistrust for Charles in the Country Party. When he realized that Louis and the Country Party were virtually in league against England, he was at first staggered by the shock. That the Country Party did not themselves realize this he fully acknowledged, but the fact that they should descend to communication with an openly enemy country against their own King filled him with sick disgust. Another ideal was shattered and lay in the dust at his feet; once again he had followed a path which he believed to be right, and which had proved to be wrong.

He handed his resignation to Worth; he could not be implicated in such negotiations.

Again he stood by himself, filled with a great loneliness, and an overwhelming sense of his own puniness. Back came the old longings, the old struggle. If only he could return to Roxhythe! Roxhythe, who did not vacillate, who saw clearly, who worked calmly for one end. After all, was not his the better part? The Country Party were no more honest than was he, and they were dishonest not that they might the more successfully serve a definite object. They wavered and played false in their search for

what Christopher was gradually coming to think a vague ideal. They were divided against themselves; they knew no set purpose; they were swayed this way and that. But Roxhythe knew no wavering; he was unflurried; he stood firm.

In the face of his present difficulties and uncertainties Christopher's need of him was greater than ever it had been before. His whole soul was yearning for Roxhythe; only his sense of right prevented him from going back. Then came days and nights of unceasing struggle, of hopeless unhappiness. Until now Christopher's life had been placid and well ordered, filled with a great love. All this had been torn suddenly from him. Roxhythe had been his anchor; he had leant on him more than he knew. Now the support was gone, and he stood alone. He had thought to find peace with Worth, working for his country. That too was swept away. Life seemed to him a giant discord; a mass of complexities and unhappiness. There was no truth in mankind, only lust for power and money.

Two words thrummed in his brain: my lord. How many times had he repeated them, an ache in his throat, a mist before his eyes! To no purpose. It was all at an end: the happiness, the trust, the blissful years of companionship. Only the love remained, the love that nothing could kill; and the memories, bitter-sweet. Nothing else was left . . .

At Court Charles was busy. Since Louis was angry, Louis must be placated. He sent Roxhythe to Paris with assurances of good faith. Roxhythe had a stormy interview with Louis. Louis plainly intimated that he would have no dealings with my lord. He had learnt that Roxhythe was without scruples; he had been informed that my lord had furthered the royal marriage, even taken part in the negotiations; he had trusted that my lord would exert all his influence to prevent it, and to promote France's interests; he had understood that my lord was working for him in England; he now saw how empty were my lord's fair words.

His Majesty was most incensed. He strutted in his

wrath. Roxhythe remained as imperturbable as ever. He answered Louis smoothly. The marriage was necessary; England's fears had to be set at rest. To which Louis replied that England's fears might have been quelled in some other way, less insulting to his Majestic Person. Roxhythe grew more and more bored. His Majesty hardly understood the temper of the English people. Majesty replied that one thing he understood passing well, and that was the fickle temper of his cousin. Roxhythe became patient. He assured Louis of King Charles' unswerving loyalty to his secret ally. Louis thereupon snapped his august fingers. He, Roxhythe, still worked for a binding treaty with France; it had been beyond his poor might to hinder the marriage negotiations. His Majesty had over-rated his influence. But Majesty retorted that he had over-rated the weight of his word. Roxhythe had done nothing in England to further the French cause. He had spoken, years ago, of raising dissension in the Commons over a possible marriage between William and Mary. Where had been the dissension? Everything had run as smoothly as it could! Roxhythe alluded gently to many dissensions raised in the past for Louis. Louis flung back at him that he had sought to trick his Most Christian Person into trusting him. He knew now that my lord played into King Charles' perfidious hands alone. Roxhythe was pained. His Majesty grossly misunderstood his attitude—and his master's. Louis was a little mollified. He consented to listen to King Charles' message. But he would give no answer.

Roxhythe went back to England knowing that in France his day was done.

Charles was momentarily cast down by the news that his favourite had not succeeded in his mission, but his cheery optimism soon came to the fore, and once again he set his brains to work. Through Danby he wrote to Louis, demanding a fresh pension in return for his good offices. Yet another secret bargain was sealed. Charles withdrew his troops from Holland on the understanding that Louis would make peace with that country. But no sooner had

the English army left the Dutch shores than Louis culled a leaf from his faithless cousin's book by taking back his peace-offers. Whereat the irrepressible Charles was much amused, and retired into the background to allow the foreign powers to fight out their quarrel alone. He was not at all perturbed by the turn affairs had taken, but rather pleased, as he was left with a large force at his disposal, never having declared war at all.

And so at length the Peace was signed, without English intervention. Mostly it was to Louis' advantage, but on one point it thwarted him: Holland remained inviolate. William had triumphed, if not wholly, at least partially.

"So the little Orange wins!" said Charles. "That boy!"

"I told you he was a youth of parts, Sir," answered Roxhythe placidly.

It was at this time that Christopher found a new master. My Lord Shaftesbury came to him, offering him a post as secretary to himself. He was but lately released from the Tower, and was burning with indignation and a fierce hatred for the King.

Christopher entered his service willingly, almost joyfully. Ashley had been his father's friend; Ashley at least was honest. He settled down to work for him with a quieter mind, feeling that in this patriot he would find a friend as well as a master. His old resentment against Ashley was nearly dead, for all that Ashley had said against Roxhythe was true. Now they never spoke of my lord, for on the one occasion when Ashley had mentioned his name slightly Christopher was up in arms at once. Not wishing again to alienate the young man from himself, Ashley thereafter eschewed the subject.

For a time all went smoothly. Christopher had much work to do, but in constant occupation he found mental relief, and he never grumbled at the ever-increasing load thrust on to his weary shoulders. Then, like a thunderbolt on the land, came the Titus Oates plot, and England was once more plunged into a ferment. The tale of the coming insurrection of the Catholics was swallowed avidly, although the King treated the whole plot with contumely,

and its exposers with stern disapproval. At the best, the evidence brought forward by Oates and his confederates was absurd, and provedly inaccurate. When the interest and incredulity in the plot showed signs of waning, it was fanned to fresh flame by new depositions, made by Oates, more gruesome and improbable than ever.

To Christopher's surprise, Shaftesbury credited the tale, and went into it thoroughly. Once Christopher expostulated with him, asking if it could be possible that Ashley believed Oates' lies. Ashley shot him a side-long glance and answered that it was indeed possible. Then he broke into an impassioned harangue against the Duke of York, who, he was convinced, was at the head of the plot. Christopher, knowing that his constant ill-health made Shaftesbury nervous and uncontrolled, thought little of this outburst. He was sorry that his master should be so led astray, but he trusted that in time he would return to his senses. But soon it was forcibly brought home to him that Shaftesbury was behind all the atrocities wreaked on the Catholics, and that it was Shaftesbury who encouraged the mob's lust for blood. His last doubts were dispelled when he was set to work on a bill of Shaftesbury's own making, excluding all Catholics from a seat in either House. Dimly he felt that this was but a stepping-stone to the exclusion of the Duke of York from the throne, and although he himself dreaded a Papist King he could not but feel aghast at Shaftesbury's action in using such a means to procure the exclusion. He began, slowly, to realize that Shaftesbury believed in the truth of the plot no more than he did himself, but was merely feigning belief the better to attain his own ends. Day after day Catholic priests were infamously tried, and executed; every gaol was full of so-called suspects. And the King moved neither one way nor the other.

Shaftesbury's bill passed both Houses, but in its chief object it failed, as it exempted the Duke of York. Interest in the plot died down again, and again Shaftesbury aroused it, this time by bringing forward a fresh accomplice of Oates, who embellished the original tale with new details,

and even accused the Queen of being privy to the whole affair.

Charles was disdainful, but the Commons seized on the evidence eagerly. Every Catholic in the realm was ordered to be arrested, and Father Coleman, agent to the Duke of York, was executed.

Once more Christopher handed in his resignation. He gave my Lord Shaftesbury very definite reasons. He realised that my lord was using the plot as a furtherance for his own ends. He could not and would not remain in the service of one who allowed, nay, encouraged the murder of innocent men. He left Shaftesbury in heat.

There followed a series of executions that drove the blood cold in Christopher's veins.

In vain did the Jesuit Fathers plead innocence and total ignorance of the plot. Their protestations were over-ruled, jibed at.

One Hill, employed at Somerset House, was tried, and in spite of all evidence in his favour, condemned to death. Christopher had much to do with this man when he had been in Roxhythe's service. He had transacted various small businesses for Christopher, and when he had been ill one winter, Christopher had helped him pecuniarily. When the news of his sentence reached Christopher he went at once to Bevan House.

Roxhythe chanced to be in, and Christopher was shown into the library.

My lord rose and held out his hands.

"Dear Chris!"

Christopher clasped them tightly.

"My lord, I have come on very urgent business!"

"So?" Roxhythe pressed him into a chair. "What is it?"

"Sir, do you remember Hill?"

"No," said Roxhythe. "You'll take some wine, Chris?"

"No, thank you, sir. Please listen to me! I mean the Hill who was yesterday condemned to death."

"Oh? Was there a Hill tried yesterday?"

"You must know, sir!"

"My dear boy, I do not interest myself in every little bourgeois who is indiscreet."

"Yet I beg you will interest yourself in this! Perhaps you remember that silver filigree box that we procured with some difficulty?"

"Yes, I remember that. It was a remarkably fine box. I desired it for His Majesty."

"I thought you would remember. It was I who found it through the agency of this Hill. Harcourt told me of him, and he got me the box from the wretched Prance who has been questioned lately. Sir, it is this same Hill who is to die. I would swear to his innocence! He was a poor meek creature, not one who would murder a magistrate! This miserable Prance has accused him of that. Will you not intervene on his behalf?"

"My dear Chris!" expostulated Roxhythe. "Do you expect me to meddle in these low matters?"

"It is in the cause of justice, sir! of right! If you would speak to His Majesty you could save him."

"Maybe. But I certainly shall not worry the King."

"My lord, my lord! Is it possible that you can see all these innocent men foully done to death and not raise one finger to help?"

"Chris, Chris, you are mad! Why this sudden interest in Hill?"

"It is not so much the individual as the cause! Enough innocent men have been murdered already! Why does the King allow it?"

"The King is not omnipotent, Chris. The public will not be content unless some blood is shed. If he interferes they will turn on him. His position is precarious."

"So he allows these poor creatures to die without question!"

"What matter a few bourgeois?"

"My lord, don't speak so! It—it is dreadful! That the King should act thus!"

"My dear boy, the King dare not interfere. You must not think that he does not look on all this bloodshed with horror. But he can do naught."

"Then can you not exert your influence? It is so dastardly!"

"No doubt I could, but I certainly shall not. It is unwise to tamper with the people's will at this point."

Christopher sprang up.

"You believe in these men's innocence?"

"I have hardly noticed them. I daresay."

"Then you are acting as I never thought it possible for you to act. Timorously! Cruelly!"

"Did you come here to quarrel with me?" asked Roxhythe. "Sit down, and talk of something else."

"I came to implore you to help in the cause of right! I see I might as well talk to a stone!"

"My good child, you excite yourself over nothing."

"Was it nothing that Father Coleman was murdered? That good man!"

"It was necessary. The King deplored it, but the people would have it."

"I suppose you advocated it?" said Christopher bitterly.

"Certainly. I thought you knew that nothing counts with me save His Majesty's safety and peace?"

"I—I cannot answer you, sir. Oh—oh, heaven, how I wish that I had never set eyes on you!"

Roxhythe stretched out his hand.

"Chris, dear boy, you are demented. Calm yourself."

Christopher ignored his hand.

"Then 'tis you have driven me so! You did your best to break my heart—and now you reveal yourself to me—callous, ruthless! It—hurts damnably, my lord."

Roxhythe turned away. He said nothing.

"I—I can't rest! I—oh, there's no truth anywhere! no honour! I thought Russell and Worth were irreproachable; I thought Shaftesbury above suspicion! I was wrong, wrong, wrong! I've done with Englishmen! Each works for his own ends and cares not what means he employs to obtain them. Even you, my lord!"

"I suppose I should be grateful for the 'even,'" said Roxhythe wearily.

Christopher went quickly to his side.

"Ah, no, sir! I—didn't mean it! I am distraught—I—never meant to say those things—to you. Forgive me!"

Roxhythe laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Chris, you are distraught because you are rudderless. Come back to me!"

"No—no! I cannot! Less than ever now. I—I think I shall go out of my mind soon!"

"Chris, you were happy with me. Come back!"

"Ah, so happy! It could never be the same again. I must go—right away, where I shall not see you."

"Even though I beg you to stay?"

"Yes—even then, my lord. Don't try to persuade me! It is hard enough as it is."

"So you'll go away? Where?"

"Holland, sir. To join my brother, I think."

"Orange," said Roxhythe quietly. "That will be the end, Chris."

"Yes, sir—the—end."

"And all in search of—what?"

"In search of honesty and truth. I will not sacrifice my honour for love of man."

"So instead you'll sacrifice your happiness for that vague thing called patriotism?"

"I'll find happiness in my patriotism!"

"You are like to be disappointed," said Roxhythe.

CHAPTER VI

THE DECISION

CHRISTOPHER wrote to Roderick, advising him of his coming to the Hague, and quickly made all his arrangements. Now that he had made his decision he was almost glad to be going. He longed to leave England behind him, and with it, all his uncertainties. Two days before his departure he visited Lady Frances.

She received him in her drawing-room. She thought she had never seen him look so old.

"Well, dear Chris?"

He sat down beside her, trying to smile.

"I have come to—say farewell, Lady Fanny."

She sat very still.

"Ah . . . Holland."

"Yes, Holland. You understand that I cannot remain in London?"

"I suppose so," she sighed. "Poor Chris!"

"Don't—pity me! I can't bear it. There's no peace for me in England, and no work. Always I think of Roxhythe, longing only to see him—to hear his voice—feel his hand in mine—." He stopped, biting his lip. "I am sorry. I have no right to weary you with such—foolishness."

She took both his hands.

"Chris, are we not friends? How could I be wearied? Won't you—tell me everything?"

"You are so kind," said Christopher. "You've always been so kind—I—oh, to be able to talk to someone!"

"I know. You won't go back to Roxhythe?"

"I cannot. You know what happened. You have heard all the tales concerning my lord. I should be acting falsely to all that I hold most sacred if I gave way to my longing to be with him."

Again she sighed.

"And he does not—care as I care. It is not to be expected. Lady Fanny—I am not—complaining, but—I loved him so greatly! I trusted him so! And he tricked me. It's—all over. I've to forget it all. I've to forget Roxhythe, and all that he meant to me. I must go right away, where I shall not be so constantly reminded of him."

She stroked his hand gently.

"So you are for Holland? Perhaps it is best after all. But I shall miss you sadly, Chris."

"Please—don't speak of it! I've so loved your friendship! But I must go."

"I know you must, Chris. And I know how hard it is."

"Hard!" he whispered. "It is—tearing my heart out of my body. I—" he smiled crookedly. "I leave it—with him. I suppose I shall be at peace again—one day. But I shall always remember these wonderful years—when I was—so happy. I should—be grateful for them—for the memory of them. Sometime I shall look back on it all calmly—but just now—I daren't let myself think!"

"Dear boy, I am sorry from the depths of my heart! But you are right; this great, great ache will fade—you'll only remember the happiness and be glad that you were happy. And you'll be happy again. You have your brother."

"Yes. He—doesn't count, you know. I—never cared for him greatly, and since I have been with—Roxhythe—he has had all my love. He has it still. There will never be another in his place. I'm a weak fool—but—oh, Lady Frances, I want him so much!"

She tugged at his bowed shoulders.

"Don't, Chris! Ah, don't! He's not worth it! Oh, why, why did he catch you in his net?"

"God knows. I don't really regret it. He has been responsible for so much that was wonderful in my life. And now—I hate all other masters. I compare them, you see—and they don't bear comparison. Roxhythe was—I hardly know—incomparable."

"He is just Roxhythe," said Fanny sadly.

Christopher caught his breath in a half-sob, half laugh.

“‘I am Roxhythe’ . . . I can hear him say it—in that soft voice! So haughtily! Yes, he is just Roxhythe.” He stood up, biting his lip. “I leave the day after to-morrow, Lady Frances. You’ll not—quite forget me?”

“Forget my Chris? Is it likely? One day you will come back. I am going to wait till then. You won’t forget me, I hope?”

He kissed her hands.

“It were impossible. I shall never forget—all your kindness. You’ll let me write to you?”

“You must write,” she said. “I should be so sad if you did not.”

“I can’t thank you enough—Good-bye, Lady Fanny!”

My lady put her hands on his shoulders and lifted her face.

“You may kiss me, Chris. My poor, poor, Chris!”

CHAPTER VII

THE REVENGE

It was very cold. Outside a drizzling rain fell on the bleak gardens. The gaunt tree branches were wet and shining. Charles sat by the fire in his room, nursing a spaniel. His dark eyes were brooding, his fingers restless.

"You heard what Danby had to say, David?"

Roxhythe was gazing out into the rain.

"Ay. Montague has been elected member for Northamptonshire."

"Danby tells me they quarrelled some time ago. God's life, why must he quarrel with my French Ambassador of all people?"

"Does Danby think he means harm?"

"Ay. He spoke of incriminating documents. You know what that means, Roxhythe."

"Letters to Louis. I always said it was unwise."

The King was peevish.

"If you had not fallen out of favour with Louis those letters need never have gone through Montague. Now we shall have Danby impeached."

"I think I see the hand of Shaftesbury. Montague is a tool."

"Shaftesbury or others. He hates Danby most."

"And Danby, being your tool, will turn on you."

"Another tax on my ingenuity! Danby intends to strike at Montague before Montague has time to strike at him."

"Better still to dispose of Montague."

"No, David! I have had enough blood."

Roxhythe shrugged.

"How does Danby think to strike at Montague?"

"Some talk of Montague's conferring with the Papists without my knowledge. Danby plans to seize his papers."

"Why, that is very well! He is to act in your name?"

"He says so. He is to inform the House of it to-morrow."
 There was a long silence. Presently the King turned his head.

"By the way, Davy, the Crewes are in town again."

"Crewes?"

The King smiled faintly.

"Forgotten already? The man you fell afoul of two years ago."

"That man! Yes, I remember. I told him to absent himself for a year."

"Well, he has been gone for two. He dared to appear at Whitehall."

"Oh? What did you say?"

"Remembering your request I said nothing. But it was gross presumption on his part."

"What of the wife?"

"She was there. I believe she has become most devoted."

"I thought she would." Roxhythe came to the fireplace. "King Louis hath his revenge on me, Sir."

Charles raised his heavy brows.

"Louis? Why?"

"He conceived that I had promised to act in his interests. He was furious with me when you married the Lady Mary to the Prince."

"A pity. What is his revenge?"

"I take it he has warned the Country Party against me." Roxhythe smiled rather wearily. "No longer can I intrigue privately."

"It's a plaguey nuisance. Faith, Louis is no gentleman to turn informer in that fashion!"

"'Tis unkind of him, I admit. I am the less useful to you, Sir, in consequence."

Charles stretched out his hand quickly.

"Don't speak like that, Davy! Always you are my dearest friend!"

Roxhythe went on his knee.

"Always," he said, and kissed the King's hand. "Always."

* * * * *

Danby's attack on Montague failed, for Montague carefully secreted the two most important documents in his possession. One of them was the letter written by Charles' order before the Peace of Nimeguen. Backed by the Treasurer's bitterest enemies he brought charges against Danby. Impeachment followed. There was fresh uproar in the House.

Danby narrowly escaped imprisonment, but the majority was small. Public feeling was against him.

Then Charles prorogued his unruly Parliament, and in January, scarcely a month after, dissolved it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HAVEN

AFTER ten years Christopher returned to Holland. Much of it he had forgotten, much brought back old memories, poignant in their nearness to him. He had travelled from Harwich to Rotterdam, spending only a night in that town. He visited 19, Prinsen Straat, hoping to see de Staal again. It had been a shock to find the house in other hands and to hear that de Staal had gone to his rest four years ago. He had hardly realized how much he wanted to see the old man. He went away with lagging steps, guided along that very road which they had walked that evening, now so long ago. He visited the inn at which he had stayed, and looked up at the window of his room. It was just the same. Nothing seemed to have changed: not even the fat landlord.

Christopher wandered into the coffee-room. Here he had seen the spy who had dogged their steps. He remembered, smiling a little, how excited he had been, and how placid he had found Roxhythe. My lord had been dozing in his chair; he had refused to be roused.

He tore himself away from the inn, knowing that it was foolishness to have come. It was with relief that he left Rotterdam behind.

The Hague seemed yet more packed with memories. The Poisson d'Or had changed no more than the inn at Rotterdam. Christopher looked up at the window, almost expecting to see Roxhythe standing there with the inevitable Milward at his elbow.

It was with an effort that he turned away. He had always remembered the Hague as a cheerful, happy town. Now it seemed dark, forlorn, a place of ghosts.

Roderick had grown kinder, and less harsh. He made no reference to Roxhythe. He was unfeignedly glad to see Christopher again; he wanted to present him to the

Prince, but Christopher refused. Later he would go to the Huis ten Bosch, but for the present he wanted to be quiet.

He bought a horse shortly after his arrival and one day rode out to Scheveningen. The peaceful fishing-village took his fancy. Nearly every day he rode there, sometimes talking to the fishermen, mostly sitting by the sea alone, undisturbed by any uncouth sound, watching the silver-backed gulls swirling and diving against the intense blue sky.

Slowly the ache within him died, already it was less acute. Sitting on the shore, listening to the cry of the gulls and the continuous break of the waves on the sand, all that had passed during the last year seemed to fade away to a memory. It was no longer the never-ceasing pain; it was still there; it was still a great sadness, but it had softened and was not ever-present.

Bit by bit he began to take an interest in what went on around him. He watched the fishermen draw in their hauls, interested in the slippery, gleaming fish that floundered in the bottom of the net. Once he went out in a boat, helping the fishermen. He grew stronger, more virile, less morbid.

Roderick seldom accompanied him to Scheveningen. Christopher did not wish it. His brother's presence disturbed him, disturbed the great peace of the village. He would spend all the day there, rejoicing in the vast loneliness, feeling the rough spray on his face, and the wind blowing strongly about him. At sundown he would ride back to the Hague, tired and hungry. Sometimes he dined with Roderick, sometimes by himself.

After a while he went less often to Scheveningen. Desire for company was coming to life again. Roderick saw it, and introduced him to Mynheer Heenvliet and various other members of the Prince's household. Other friends Christopher made for himself, all Dutchmen. One of these, Jan Van den Busch, showed him some of the countryside. Christopher visited Rijswijk and Loosduinen. It gave him a taste for sight-seeing, and he went away for a time, travelling north. When he returned, Roderick was surprised at the change in him. His eyes were brighter, his

bearing more brisk, his spirits lighter. His laugh still lacked its old spontaneity, his smile was not so joyous, but it came more often and less forcedly.

Roderick realized that Christopher had aged more in one year than in all the others of his life. He had no youthful illusions, no youthful impetuosity. He was calmer, more shrewd. He had a knowledge of men and of the world. Roderick realized that in some ways Christopher was older than he.

Once again he broached the question of an introduction to the Prince. This time Christopher consented.

So one day the brothers rode out of the Hague through the wood that led to the Huis ten Bosch. Christopher was rather silent for the most part but when they reached the gardens of the palace he expressed his admiration.

"His Highness will be pleased to hear that you like his flowers," said Roderick. "He takes great pride in them."

"What does the Princess here?" asked Christopher suddenly. "I had not thought that the solitude was congenial to her."

"At first Her Highness conceived herself very homesick. She is different now."

"Poor Lady Mary! She was such a gay princess! She took such delight in the life at Whitehall."

Roderick spoke stiffly.

"There is no need to pity her. She is the Prince his wife."

"Poor lady!" said Christopher again. "I do pity her."

"Her Highness should be happy enough," replied his brother. "She has changed."

The Prince was not in the house. One of the lackeys had seen him walking in the gardens not long since. They found him at length on a terrace, basking in the sunlight.

Roderick swept him a low bow.

"Highness, I have brought my brother. May I present him?" It was a triumphant moment for him. At last Christopher had been brought face to face with this Prince whom he had affected to despise. At last he could show Christopher how wonderful was his master.

William turned. Christopher thought he had never met such a piercing scrutiny. Then the Prince smiled and rose.

"I have long desired to make your acquaintance, Mr. Dart. Rodrigue has often spoken to me of you." He extended his hand.

Christopher went on one knee to kiss it.

"Your Highness is very kind," he said.

"Christopher greatly admires the gardens, Sir," said Roderick.

William looked pleased.

"They are beautiful!" said Christopher warmly. "I do indeed admire them, Sir."

"I love them," answered the Prince. "I could not live without my flowers." He waved his hand towards a bed of tulips. "Those are my flowers."

Christopher smiled.

"Even we in England know which are your favourites, Sir!"

"So? They are my favourites because they are part of Holland. You do not grow such flowers in England."

"No," said Christopher. "But we have our roses."

"Yes, you have your roses. Rodrigue, he must be shown the west side!"

So the Prince of Orange showed Mr. Dart the west side of his gardens.

The visit to the Huis ten Bosch was the first of many. Christopher made more friends in the Prince's household, and the Princess desired his acquaintance.

He hardly recognized the Lady Mary in the quiet, soberly dressed woman to whom he was presented. The Mary he knew had sparkling eyes and a roguish smile. The eyes were calm now, almost sad; the smile was full of dignity. He thought that she seemed unhappy, and later he found that there was a coldness between the Prince and his wife.

Mary was anxious to hear all the London news. More than once Christopher saw her eyes fill, but the tears did not well over. He could not tell her much, but she was grateful for very little. She asked after various people, lingering over their names as over a pleasant memory.

Christopher pitied her from the bottom of his heart.

Desire for work was growing apace. The indolent life he was leading had become irksome. Christopher realized that he must find some occupation.

The more he saw of William, the more convinced he was that he had found one who was honest and a patriot. He watched the Stadtholder's adroit management of affairs with growing admiration.

Roderick was surprised that his brother did not fall at the Prince's feet, worshipping. He was still more surprised that Christopher should feel no desire to become one of the Prince's household. He could not understand that all Christopher's love remained with Roxhythe.

"You do not desire to be near the Prince his person?"

"I would rather join his army," answered Christopher.

"Join the army! You had better enter his household."

"I do not wish to serve any man—personally."

"Odds life! Not even His Highness?"

"No one."

Roderick stared.

"You are no soldier, Chris!"

"I can learn."

"You were better advised to turn your hand to politics."

"Never! I want not to hear the word again!"

"But that is ridiculous! Because you found Shaftesbury acting questionably is no reason to think that——"

"I will not hear of politics. They mean intrigue and covert dealing; bribing and tricking. I'll none of it."

Roderick shook his head in amazement. But he broached the subject to his master.

Thus it came about that Christopher had audience with the Prince one sunny morning at the Huis ten Bosch.

William sat at his desk, chin in hand. He regarded Christopher thoughtfully for some moments.

"Rodrigue has been speaking to me of you, Mr. Dart. You desire to serve under my standard?" He spoke in Dutch.

"If your Highness permits, I ask nothing better."

Christopher saw the hazel eyes twinkle suddenly.

"Yet if I offer you a post about my person you will refuse it?"

There was something disconcerting about the Prince. Christopher stammered a little.

"I hope—Your Highness—will not—offer that."

"Sit down," said William. "Why do you hope that?"

"Sir, I desire to serve no man personally. I want to serve as a soldier."

William smiled.

"You want to serve an ideal, *hein?*"

"Perhaps that is true, Sir. I do not want to serve—a man."

"Are you afraid that I should betray your trust?"

The swiftness of the attack got behind Christopher's guard.

"I—don't understand, Sir."

"I think you do. Am I the man to betray a trust?"

"No, Sir. Why do you ask?"

"Because I will not be served by any man who does not place in me his whole confidence."

Christopher hesitated.

"I believe that you at least are honest, Sir," he said at last.

"But you will not accept a post about my person."

Christopher grew hot under the steady scrutiny.

"No, Sir."

"Why not?"

For a moment Christopher did not answer.

"Highness, if you must know, it is this:—For nine years I have served my Lord Roxhythe. He has all my love, all my devotion. I cannot serve another man in the same way. I have tried and failed. Twice failed."

"Mr. Dart, you say that Roxhyt'e has your love and your devotion. What then have you to offer me?"

"Faithful service, Sir, and loyalty."

"So!" William tapped his fingers lightly on a sheet of parchment. His face grew harsh. "We will have plain speaking, if you please, Mr. Dart. I have some knowledge of milor' Roxhyt'e's life, and of his dealings. How am I

to know that you are not imbued with his morals—or lack of morals?”

Christopher straightened.

“Highness, may we leave Roxhythe out of the discussion? I trust my morals are above reproach.”

“I trust so, Mr. Dart. Yet in ’77 there was some question of that.”

“Will your Highness explain?”

“It is necessary? In ’77 you bore letters to Cherrywood; letters that we believe to have been addressed to the French King from King Charles. You will admit that gives food for thought, Mr. Dart.”

Christopher met his eyes bravely.

“I give Your Highness my word that if that was so I knew nothing of it when I did take the letters. I thought them innocent dispatches to His Grace of Monmouth.”

“So your brother assures me. He tells me you were tricked. It is because you fear that I might trick you that you will not enter my—personal—service?”

“N—no, Sir. I think not. It is because I could not serve you with whole-hearted affection. It is true that I have grown suspicious of late, but I believe that I do trust Your Highness.”

“Thank you. That is your only reason?”

Again Christopher hesitated.

“No, Sir, there is another. However honest you be there must always be intrigue. I desire to know nothing of intrigue. I want to—be outside all the inner workings of politics. I want to—forget everything.”

William coughed a little.

“Then I think you would be better advised to seek employment with someone who lives not a public life.”

“I have thought of that, Sir, but it does not appeal to me.”

“In truth, Mr. Dart, you do not know what you want.”

“Indeed, Sir, I do! I want to fight France—our common enemy.”

“I do not fight France. There is peace.”

Christopher looked at him strangely.

"Your Highness will not always be content with this peace."

William's brows rose perceptibly.

"Oh! So you will join the army—and wait? Dull work, Mr. Dart."

"I have yet to learn a soldier's duties, Sir."

The Prince tapped the parchment again.

"Well . . . Perhaps I can find employment for you. We shall see."

He took up a quill. For some moments he wrote swiftly. Then he dusted the parchment and folded it.

"You are quite sure that you wish to serve the Orange? Remember that you are an Englishman; remember that once you have entered the army you cannot leave it at will."

"I have considered all that, Sir. It is no hasty decision that I have made. I have thought long, and—pardon me—I have observed Your Highness closely. I believe that at last I have found a master who is above bribes; who does not work for himself but for his country."

William bowed.

"I admire plain speaking, sir. In my turn I believe that you too are honest. I doubted it at one time, but when I was told that you had quitted Lord Roxhyt'e I concluded that I was wrong."

"Thank you, Sir. I may enter your service?"

William handed him the parchment.

"You will convey that to Bentinck. Rodrigue will direct you. Bentinck will give you a commission, and it will remain for you to prove yourself."

Christopher went down on one knee.

"I will serve Your Highness faithfully," he said. "I have to thank you for your kindness."

William held out his hand.

"That is very well," he said.

Christopher went quietly out of the room. Roderick was awaiting him, all eagerness.

"Well, Chris?"

"I am to go to General Bentinck."

Roderick was disappointed.

"I had thought—that when you had spoken with His Highness—you would have desired to be always at his side."

Christopher smiled faintly.

"I am no longer twenty-one, Dick. The age of illusions is past."

"Have you no enthusiasms?"

Christopher sighed.

"I hardly know. Perhaps. But not for man."

"I don't understand you, Chris. I had thought that the Prince would have captured your devotion."

"You have yet to realize, Dick, that my devotion lies elsewhere."

"Still?" Roderick was incredulous.

"Always."

"But after all that has happened! after his treatment of you——"

"If you think that any harm done to me could kill my love for Roxhythe, you do not understand love."

"You are infatuated! Pray heaven it will pass!"

"For my peace of mind I hope it will. You'll dine with me to-night? I shall leave the Hague early tomorrow."

"As soon as that? Yes, I'll dine with you. I wish you were to be of the Household, though. I wanted you near me after all these years."

Christopher spoke rather cynically.

"No, Roderick. You had been jealous of me and I had joined the Prince his Household."

"Really, Christopher!" Roderick was inclined to be offended. Then he smiled. "Perhaps you are right. But I shall miss you."

"It will pass," replied Christopher easily.

Roderick went back to his master.

"Well, Rodrigue? You have seen your brother?"

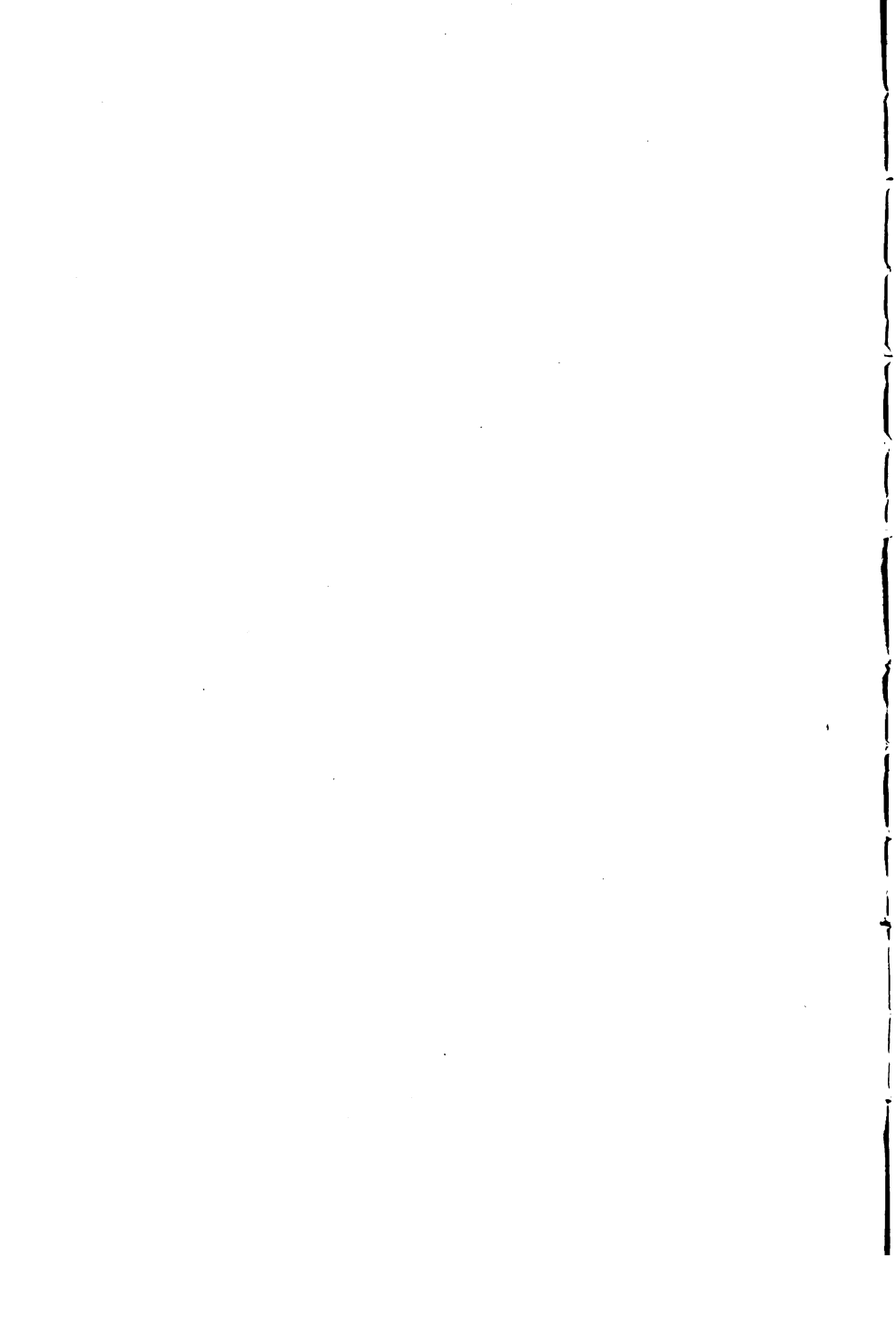
"Yes, Sir. I cannot understand his attitude."

"No?"

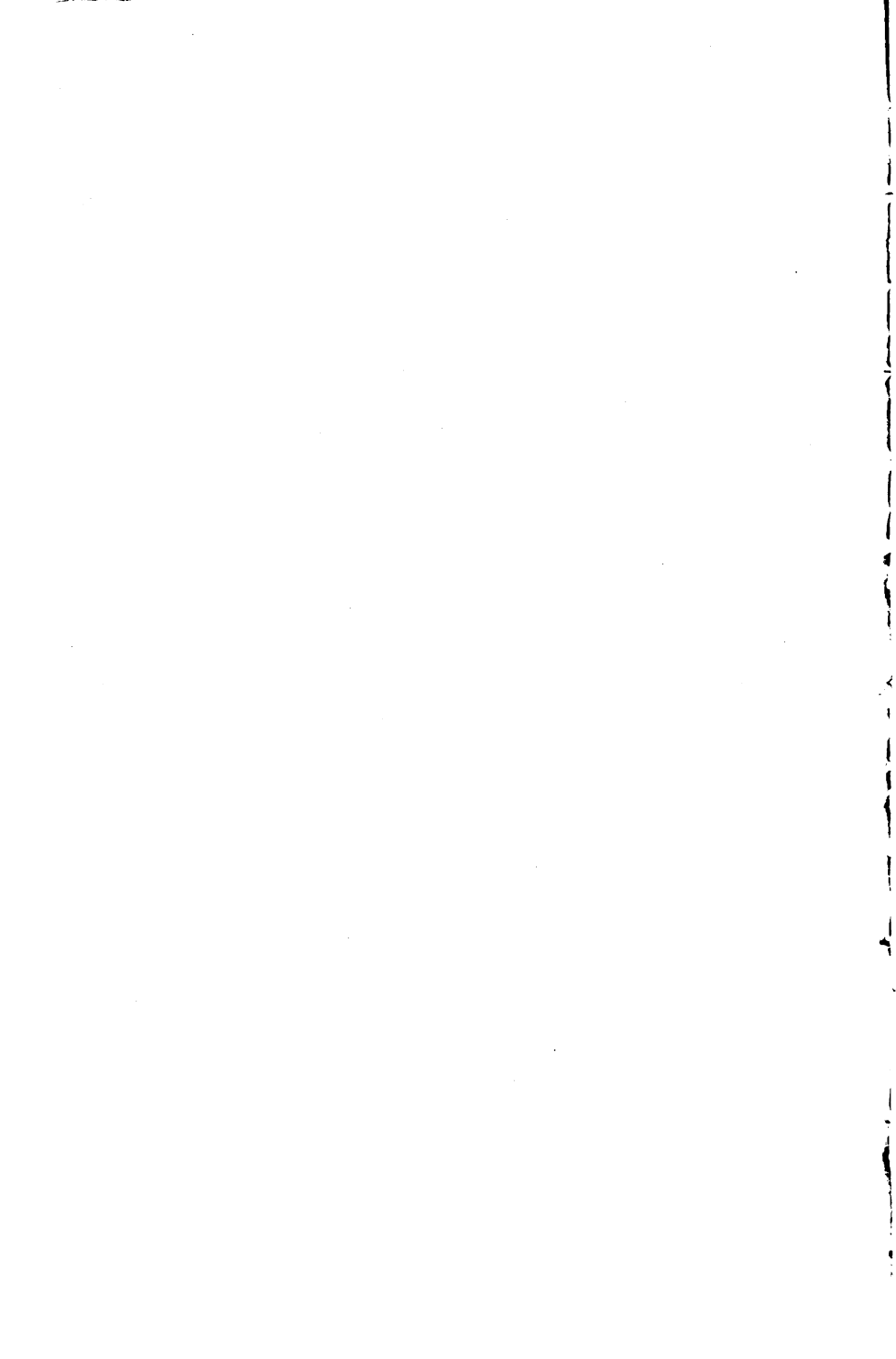
"He is so cold! so unlike his old self."

"My dear Rodrigue, your brother has suffered. I understand him."

"But then, Highness, you understand all men," said Roderick softly.



Book V
THE OTHER PART



CHAPTER I

THE TRIPLE GAME

"TROUBLE, trouble, naught but trouble!" Charles flung out his hands hopelessly. "Shaftesbury, Russell, Cavendish! What is to be done?"

Roxhythe smiled.

"Do you despair, Sir?"

"Do I ever despair? But this combination means endless toil, endless dissension. Shaftesbury is mine enemy."

"To counteract Shaftesbury you have Sunderland."

"Whom I would not trust."

"Nevertheless he may prove useful. And there is Halifax."

"He blows hot and cold."

"But mostly cold."

"What do you mean, David?"

"I wonder that you have not observed Halifax more closely, Sir. When the greater party blows hot, he blows cold. You'll find him opposed to Shaftesbury."

"It may be so. You think he'll support me?"

"If you are the losing side, Sir, yes. If you are the stronger he will not matter."

"True. But that will not help us now. I see trouble stirring for James. The people wax unruly."

"His Grace acts very imprudently. You would be wise to remove him, Sir. While he remains in England the Protestant cause will keep fresh in England's mind."

"Remove him . . . ay, but where?"

"Does it signify? Send him where he cannot stir up agitation by his foolish behaviour."

Charles sat up.

"I believe you are right, David. I'll send him to Brussels."

"It will suffice. At least he will be out of harm's way."

"Yes. But I do not think he will thank me."

"Perhaps not."

"He'll be greatly incensed. It may be that he will suspect your hand in the matter."

"Probably. It does not worry me."

Charles stroked one of his dogs reflectively.

"Do you think that by doing this I shall avert the storm against his succession? I do not."

"No, Sir. You will modify it."

"It will still mean a fight. Shaftesbury is determined to exclude him."

"Sire, most men are determined. Nearly all your new ministers are at one on the question. But I think that there will be dissension."

"Why?"

"They will not all want the same successor."

"You think some will stand for Monmouth?"

"I do expect it, Sir. Prince William is not every man's choice."

"No. And Monmouth is popular. He would be the people's choice, but I cannot believe that the Cabinet would consent to it."

"We shall see. In the meantime, Sir, I propose to act."

Charles leaned back in his chair.

"I were not King without you, Davy. You'll help me to overthrow the coming cry for exclusion?"

"I will."

The King looked at him curiously for a moment.

"Roxhythe, what are your own sentiments?"

"I've none. I care not what happens after you are gone. England may have James, or Mary, or Monmouth. It is all one to me. All that matters is your pleasure."

"I would I had more of your mind about me! What do you think of doing?"

Roxhythe sat down on the nearest chair.

"I shall throw myself into the cause against His Grace of York. Secretly."

The King's brow contracted in bewilderment.

"Go on."

"His Grace of York's dislike for me is well known. That adds colour to my attitude. I approach Shaftesbury when the time comes, with great caution. I am a thought fearful of discovery, you understand. I think that it were best for me to act secretly for fear of incurring Your Majesty's displeasure."

"I do not think that they will trust you."

"They will undoubtedly have misgivings. But my support in the matter would be invaluable. They would count on my exerting my influence to sway you 'gainst the Duke."

"Ay, but what then?"

"When I have convinced the worthy Shaftesbury of my whole-hearted sincerity I shall enter deep into the inner workings of the affair."

"Which you will impart to me?"

"Which I shall impart to you. I think I may be instrumental in bringing about the fall of our friend Ashley."

"You are clever enough for anything," admitted Charles. "But this is a big risk."

"No. They can but disbelieve in me, and I do not think they will do that. They will see that if the Duke succeeds you I must fall. It is the popular belief that I work primarily for my own ends."

Charles nodded.

"If all this should come to James his ears you are ruined—when I die, my David."

"That matters not at all, Sir."

"I might confide in James . . ."

"I beg you will not, Sir! He is so incautious. And he mistrusts me. He would not believe that I was working in his interests."

"I do not suppose he would. Especially if he guesses by whose advice he is sent to Brussels."

"He'll guess that, of course. He suspects my hand in everything. His mistrust will but further my machinations."

"Very well, Roxhythe, I consent."

The favourite laughed.

"Did you mean to withhold your consent, Sir?"

"I've no wish to ruin you, David."

"Why, I am ruined already. What happens after your death is no matter at all."

"Well, I do not think I shall die yet," said Charles placidly.

* * * * *

After welcoming the new Parliament with wild enthusiasm, England settled down to enjoy a panic concerning Papists and Papist heirs. This panic my Lord Shaftesbury fostered lovingly. He was a brave man, but the rest of the Council were not. They hesitated at bringing in an Exclusion Bill. But they agitated with the rest.

For a short space Shaftesbury supported the King's suggested Bill of Securities, but he decided at last that it was not strong enough, and laid it aside. He prevailed upon the Council to bring in a Bill excluding James from the throne and devolving it upon the next Protestant heir. The Commons liked the Bill, and passed it. My Lord Shaftesbury anticipated trouble in the other House, and he instructed the Commons to prepare a Remonstrance.

Charles deemed it prudent to prorogue his Parliament.

The trouble fermented. My Lord Shaftesbury held meetings and discussions. So did my Lords Halifax, Essex, and Sir William Temple, the Secretary of State. Into these meetings was introduced the magic name of Roxhythe.

Lord Holles mentioned my lord first. He was dining with Shaftesbury.

"I believe I have set my finger on a weak spot in the King's arm-our," he remarked. He peeled a nut, and ate it.

The Earl was all attention.

"What have you discovered, Holles?"

Holles ate another nut.

"I have reason to think that his favourite stands against him."

"Roxhythe? Impossible!"

"On the contrary. If you think for a moment you will see that it is more than probable."

"You think that Roxhythe realizes that the accession of James would be his downfall?"

"Well, he is no fool."

Shaftesbury pushed back his chair, frowning.

"I would never trust Roxhythe."

"Except when he works for himself."

"Less than ever then."

"I disagree. I discern signs of uneasiness in my lord."

"I can't believe that Roxhythe would ever betray his feelings."

"They were very slight signs, I admit. I fancy he is working for the exclusion."

Shaftesbury sat biting his nail, his face in worried lines.

"If it were so it would help the cause more than anything else."

"So I think. I know that he dined with Savile twice last week."

"With Halifax! That means he favours the accession of Mary!"

"It is more likely that he has not thought of Monmouth. Monmouth should be more to his taste."

"Holles, I wish that I might be sure of this! If one could trust him he would be invaluable. He has so much influence."

"Why not sound him?"

"How?"

"Invite him to dinner."

"Quite impossible. I do not visit him."

"Then let me. I'll also invite you."

Ashley bit his nail again, irresolute.

"If he would come——"

"Oh, he will come! He often dines with me."

"I do not think that he would ever work for a party."

"It remains to be seen. It is just possible that our great Roxhythe is a little apprehensive."

* * * * *

Two days later Roxhythe exhibited a letter to his master.

"I am bidden to Holles to-morrow, Sir."

"Really?" Charles took the letter. "How amiable he is! They mean to probe you, David."

My lord smiled serenely. He accepted the invitation.

During dinner at Lord Holles' house he excelled himself. He talked on every subject but one, and that one politics; witticisms flowed from his tongue, and if they annoyed Shaftesbury, they delighted his host.

When the servants had at last left the room, Lord Holles filled up the glasses, and, not without regret, brought the conversation round to home affairs. He began cautiously, for Ashley had implored him to be very circumspect in what he said before Roxhythe. He leaned back in his chair, tilting it slightly.

"We are all idle since our prorogation, Roxhythe—and somewhat disgruntled!" He grimaced ruefully. "I should not say that to you, I suppose."

Roxhythe stared into his glass.

"Yes, the Bill seems to have failed."

"The poor Bill! But we must not weary you with it. You understand it is something of an obsession! However, I know you are not interested. Shaftesbury, a little Burgundy?"

"Why should I not be interested?" asked Roxhythe. "Of course—it really does not affect me . . ." He left a pause.

Holles shot a look at the Earl.

"Why I rather thought ye were above our discussions! But—well, you are not always at one with his Grace of York, are you?"

He achieved a roguish smile.

Roxhythe touched his lips with his napkin.

"Not always," he said.

Holles thought it as well to change the subject. He was an artist, he flattered himself. Presently he would let the conversation glide back to politics. He was annoyed when Shaftesbury, always impatient, came abruptly back to the all-important topic.

"Of course, if we have James we are assured of Papist successors."

Roxhythe looked up quickly.

"Oh, 'tis not the successors——" he stopped. "Do you think so?"

Holles replenished his glass. Since Shaftesbury had so tactlessly re-introduced the subject it had best be continued.

"With both parents Catholic, what would you?" he asked. "We ought to have a Protestant heir." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Shaftesbury's apprehensive gaze, full of warning.

Roxhythe was gloomy.

"Yes, but Mary means the Prince of Orange."

"True." Holles returned Shaftesbury's look steadily. "You do not like the thought?"

Roxhythe sipped his wine, of a sudden languid.

"In truth it concerns me not."

There was no more political talk that evening.

When Roxhythe had gone, Holles returned to Shaftesbury, triumphant.

"What did I say?"

"Yes," agreed the Earl. "But he is not desirous of joining us. I think he still ponders."

"Evidently. And you see that he does not relish the idea of the Orange. We must secure him, my lord."

"If we can—if 'tis safe. He does not give much away."

"Except that he wants the exclusion."

"I wonder . . ." Shaftesbury frowned uncertainly. "It may have been that he wished us to infer that."

Holles was derisive.

"My dear Ashley! One could see that he was perturbed by his manner. Did you not think so?"

"Yes—and no."

"It was palpable! He must be cajoled to our side."

"I do not like it!" Shaftesbury spoke curtly. "I do not trust Roxhythe. He might ruin us."

"But will he? Do you not see that he must at all costs exclude James? He knows that the Duke hates him."

"I do not expect him to work against the King."

"Rest assured that he would never do so openly. So much the better."

"If we invite him to be one of us we take too great a risk."

"I do not agree. If we do not snare him he may go over to Temple's party. He has too much influence in the Upper House to be counted lightly. You do not want the Orange."

"No, damme! But could he influence the House to that extent?"

"I think it more than likely. And if we set Monmouth up as the heir Roxhythe could very easily influence the King to ruin him."

"If he became one of Temple's party that is what he would do, of course. Well . . . But I do not like it!"

"Leave it to me!" said Holles.

* * * * *

My Lord Roxhythe repaired to Whitehall. The King went apart with him.

"We progress," said my lord tranquilly. "I am advocate for Mary, I am advocate for Monmouth."

"'Sblood, David, does Shaftesbury really think to set Monmouth on the throne when I am gone?"

"So I gather. Temple wishes to bring Prince William to England to accustom the mind of England to the idea of his succession. But Shaftesbury will have none of it."

"And you?"

"Very secretly I am with Temple—say Halifax. Not wholly. They are still in doubt about me. Shortly I shall be one of Shaftesbury's band. Then we shall see."

"It must be damned entertaining!" exclaimed the King.

"It is damned hard work!" retorted Roxhythe.

CHAPTER II

THE SCHEMERS

CAUTIOUSLY did my Lord Holles set about the business of snaring Roxhythe. It took some little time to win this trump card to his side, but he did it at length, marveling at his own sagacity and cunning. At last Roxhythe allowed himself to be persuaded, and then he entered into the cause, as he put it, heart and soul. Shaftesbury still had misgivings; in Roxhythe's presence his conversation was always guarded, yet he could not but see the truth in what Holles said: Roxhythe must at all costs work for the Duke of York's exclusion. Reluctantly he invited Roxhythe to a discussion at his house.

The only other schemers there that day were Holles and one Lord Roberts. Roberts was entirely of Holles' mind concerning Roxhythe. He clasped my lord warmly by the hand.

"I am glad to know that you are one of us, my lord!"

"I am honoured to be one of you," smiled Roxhythe.

"This is a serious matter."

"It is indeed, my lord! It is indeed!"

Shaftesbury drew forward a chair.

"I need hardly say, Lord Roxhythe, that we trust to your discretion."

"Certainly," bowed my lord.

He listened to the discussion with interest. It appeared that the worthy gentlemen did not know how to win my Lords Halifax and Essex to their side. It also appeared that not many of the Council desired Monmouth for King.

In the middle of the argument my lord upraised his smooth voice.

"It seems, gentlemen, that the opposing side think his Grace would be an unpopular King."

"That is true!" cried Roberts. "They do not think

that he would ever be received. I believe it is for that reason alone that they will not join us. Many of them do not really want William."

"Then they should be shown how popular is the Duke," said my lord.

"You mean that we should thrust him to the fore?"

"Present him to the people . . . H'm!" Shaftesbury was dubious.

"He has been in the background of late," remarked Holles. "It might be well to parade him."

"Where is his Grace?" blandly asked my lord.

"He could not be present to-day," answered Roberts, before Shaftesbury could intercept him.

"A pity," said Roxhythe. He shrugged, and brought out his comfit-box.

"Why?" Shaftesbury it was who shot the question.

"He might have had some suggestion to put forward," replied my lord.

"Oh, no!" Roberts shook his head. "He will be advised by us."

"Why, that is better still," said my lord, very urbane.

"Lord Roxhythe's suggestion has merit," observed Holles slowly. "It might be well to bring the Duke before the people's eyes once more. You remember how popular he was during the war?"

"The people admired his courage—why not send him to Scotland?" Lord Roberts started forward. "If the King might be induced to put him at the head of the troops!"

"To quell the rising? I do not know that His Majesty would do that." Roxhythe spoke disparagingly. "He desires to keep the Duke at his side."

"Could you not prevail with the King?" asked Holles. Roxhythe seemed to consider.

"It is difficult. I do not want to become a suspect."

"Surely you could do it in such a way that the King should suspect naught?"

"I might. I do not know."

"It should not be so difficult. The King trusts in you."

"Yes. Well, I will think on it. If I may safely do so I will use my influence. But the suggestion should come from Shaftesbury."

"I agree with that," said Roberts decidedly. "You could well suggest it to His Majesty, Ashley."

"I am not sure that I approve of the scheme. Better that we should wait for a time."

"No, no! If we wait we lose ground," replied Holles. "If Monmouth quells the rising in Scotland the people will laud him once more. Then he can be paraded as much as you please. My Lords Halifax and Essex will see that he would be very easily the people's choice."

Still Shaftesbury hesitated.

"It is a bold step."

"A sure step."

"I think Holles is right," said Roxhythe gently. "Halifax and Essex are uncertain. If they were clearly shown which way the people look they would be more likely to join us."

"That is so, of course. On the other hand they may take fright at so bold a move."

"If you think that I should keep Monmouth in the background," said Roxhythe.

"No. The step is worth taking," said Roberts. "Do you, Roxhythe, think that Halifax and Essex will take fright?"

"It is hard to say," fenced his lordship. "I had not thought so, I confess, but I may have been wrong."

"There!" Roberts turned to Shaftesbury. "You hear?"

"And I still hesitate."

Roxhythe smoothed his ruffles.

"I do advise you to be guided by Shaftesbury. I know very little of these matters."

"You under-rate yourself, my lord!" cried Roberts. "I advocate the scheme."

"And I," said Holles.

Shaftesbury sighed.

"Very well, gentlemen. Since you are determined."

* * * * *

Roxhythe visited the King in his closet that evening. Charles laughed at him.

"Well, my plotter?"

"I am deep in intrigue," said Roxhythe. He sat down. "I have attended a meeting of our dear friends Ashley, Holles and Roberts."

"I would give much to see you in their company," chuckled the King. "What have you gleaned?"

"Several things. One that will grieve you, Sir."

"Monmouth?"

"Monmouth."

"He is privy to it?" Charles' voice was anxious.

"I am afraid so, Sir."

For a moment the King did not speak. He fingered his curls, his face overcast.

"I had not thought it of him," he said at last. "This is ill hearing, David."

"Not so ill as it might be, Sir. Monmouth would appear to be little more than a puppet in Shaftesbury's hands."

Charles pulled down the corners of his mouth.

"I wish he were not so weak!"

"Well, Sire, you always knew that he was—easily led."

"You said so from the first. What more?"

"I played with these worthy gentlemen. It was most amusing. They debated as to how they were to further Monmouth's cause. I suggested that he should be brought to the people's notice again. They liked my suggestion. All but Shaftesbury. He has sense but not sufficient faith in himself. The next suggestion came from Roberts. Why not send Monmouth to quell the Scottish rising? Eventually they decided that this was a brilliant step. I am to prevail upon Your Majesty to consent. Shaftesbury is to suggest it to you."

"Shaftesbury is very daring!"

"Very. Now, Sir, the point is this: by exhibiting Monmouth and by circulating the cry that he is the rightful heir, Shaftesbury will undoubtedly excite the people. I have insinuated that Halifax and Essex will also be won over."

"They will not."

"Most certainly they will not. They are hot for the Orange. And they would never stand for Monmouth on account of his birth. Your Majesty will pardon me if I speak too plainly."

Charles smiled.

"Ay, I pardon you. Go on."

"When they see Monmouth blazoning in Scotland, and, later, blazoning through England, they will be the more alienated from Shaftesbury. And I rather think that the more timorous members of the Council, still wavering, will be shocked at Shaftesbury's sudden move, and will either join the Orange party, or withdraw from the combat. Especially if Your Majesty shows signs of annoyance."

"Very wise, Roxhythe. But are you sure of Halifax and Essex?"

"Perfectly. And I am moderately sure of our dear Sunderland."

"Sunderland! Is he an Orangist?"

"Tentatively. If the Orange cause seems likely to prosper, he will become an ardent member. If not—he will be properly indignant at the Exclusion Bill."

"He does not cast his eyes in Monmouth's direction?"

"He is too astute. Monmouth could never be King."

"H'm! Well, I always thought him a man of brain."

"He is very wily. I advise you, Sir, to consent to Monmouth's generalship of the troops. Let him quell the rising; he has shown himself to be an able soldier. When the talk circulates that he is to be King after you, I shall be shaken with doubt. It may be that I shall affect others of Shaftesbury's persuasion. It may even be that these eminently temperate gentlemen will draw back a little. Thus you have Shaftesbury standing alone. Then you may strike, and be sure of Essex and Halifax and Temple their approval."

Charles stopped fingering his curls. His eyes brightened.

"*Cordieu*, David, I believe you are right! Essex and the rest of them are afraid of Shaftesbury since they supported the prorogation in May. If Shaftesbury wins they fall.

Why, I shall have Shaftesbury in the hollow of my hand!"

"It will mean a struggle," warned Roxhythe. "He is a dangerous man."

"Whatever I do means a struggle. When I dismiss him Shaftesbury will move heaven and earth to defeat me, but it is the first step. And then—an end to our brave Earl!"

"So I think, Sir."

Charles relaxed again. Presently he frowned.

"Heigh-ho! I am disappointed in Monmouth. I did not think he would work behind me."

"You would not like him to step into your shoes, Sir?" Roxhythe glanced at him curiously.

Charles was genuinely surprised.

"I know that I have accorded him many rights and favours, but surely you cannot think that I would set him above James? Why, he is illegitimate!"

Roxhythe nodded.

"I wondered."

"My moral sense is not so perverted, David!"

"No. I am glad of it."

Charles opened his eyes lazily.

"Do you care, then? I thought it was all one to you?"

"It is really. But I would sooner have James than the son of Lucy Walters."

"Of course. God's Body, but I should be a pretty Stuart if I connived at that!"

Roxhythe took up his hat.

"But you would not connive at it... Well, Sir, I must be gone. I am due at Lord Essex his house in an hour."

"Poor David! Have you ever led so strenuous a life before?"

"Seldom," answered Roxhythe. He smiled a little.

"I believe you like the game!" cried Charles, much amused.

"It is not without interest," admitted his lordship. Then he sighed. "They are all so easy to trick," he deplored. He went out languidly.

CHAPTER III

AGITATIONS

So the Duke of Monmouth went to Scotland.

A mysterious tale arose. It was rumoured that the King had married Lucy Walters. There was much talk of a marriage certificate sealed in a certain box. Roxhythe attributed the tale to Shaftesbury, and affected dismay. He told the Earl that he had gone too far. He implored him to do nothing rash. Shaftesbury almost believed in his honesty.

As soon as he had put down the rising, the Duke of Monmouth returned triumphant to London.

Then the King fell ill. Monmouth showed himself everywhere on the strength of it, and my Lords Sunderland, Halifax and Essex implored Charles to recall the Duke of York. They were very much afraid that if Charles grew worse and died, Monmouth would succeed at once.

Back came the Duke of York, sore at what he termed his banishment. From Sunderland he learned that Roxhythe was all for his exclusion. He thanked the pious Lord Sunderland for this information, and confessed that it in no way surprised him. He raved at Charles. Charles, convalescent, told him that he was a fool, and sent him to Scotland. Acting partly on Roxhythe's advice, and partly from his own disgust at his son, he deprived Monmouth of his generalship, and ordered him to leave the country.

Doggedly Shaftesbury clung to his cause, deserted by all but a few. Supported by Lords Russell and Roxhythe, he pushed on the persecution of the Catholics in the country. Several entirely innocent men were put to death, including eight priests. The terror of the Popish plot was fanned into fresh flame. Roxhythe watched carefully, and, at length, solemnly warned Shaftesbury that he was

going beyond all bounds. He counselled prudence, but by now my Lord was violent.

The King entered into the conflict and dismissed him from his post of Lord President of the Council. As Roxhythe had predicted, he had the Council's full support.

Then he summoned Roxhythe.

"There is danger, David."

"Great danger, Sir. Shaftesbury is determined to win."

"And so am I. We shall see. I have appealed to France." He frowned.

"France has answered?"

"Ay. Offering me degrading terms! This means I must call a Parliament. Heigh-ho!"

"You would be wise to wait before you allow it to meet, Sir."

"I must gain time. I shall prorogue its assembly until November."

"November of '80. If you can."

"I know that I can."

In spite of all petitions he stood firm. Parliament was not allowed to meet.

Shaftesbury grew still more daring. Again Roxhythe was closeted with the King.

Charles was worried.

"Shaftesbury exceeds all bounds, David. I am fearful for the result."

"Give him rope, Sir," advised my lord. "He'll hang himself yet."

"I don't doubt it. But in the meantime he is working much harm. What is this tale of pamphlets?"

"Our gentle Earl has a brain, Sir. He has formed a body. I am one of the body. We promote agitation. In time Essex will join us."

"Roxhythe, this is serious!"

"Not as serious as it would seem, Sir. The public is tired of the Popish plot. Instead of executions, we now have acquittals."

"But if Essex joins Shaftesbury it will mean great trouble!"

"It will bring matters to a head. There will indeed be trouble, but if you stand firm you will win. Monmouth is to return."

Charles started up.

"What's that? Monmouth defy me?"

"Shaftesbury sways him to his will. He induces him to come back to London."

"It exceeds all bounds! It is direct insolence to me!"

"Therefore let be. It gives you yet another handle against our good Earl. You may trust me to further the dissension in the Council. Halifax is still for the Orange. Sunderland . . ." He paused.

"What of Sunderland?"

"He has my admiration. He is very secret. As yet I can hardly say which party he supports: Orange or James. He waits to see which will win."

"God's Body! I am prettily served!"

"You are, Sir."

"That Monmouth should treat me thus! My own son!"

"Monmouth is a tool. You have very little to fear from that quarter. I have ascertained that every right-minded person in the country is opposed to him. They want Mary. Provided we can keep up the dissension, and use your influence in the Lords, the Exclusion Bill will be thrown out."

"And in the meantime every town is garrisoned and I dare not move one way or the other for fear that popular feeling may turn against me! All this arming smacks of civil war."

"Therefore I help to push it on. No one wants another war, and daily more men are coming round to your side."

"You think that, David?"

"I am sure of it, Sir. But use your influence in the Upper House. The Bill will come again very soon and I think it will easily pass the Commons. The Peers are your one hope."

Charles rested his head in his hand.

"*Mordieu!* I am beset! I must look again to France."

"Not yet. Let Shaftesbury run his course."

"Oh, ay, ay! But what of the Orangists?"

"I told you some time ago, Sir, that Halifax blows cold when the rest blow hot. I believe he will oppose the Bill. Ostensibly it will be for the Duke of York, but William is at the back of his mind. He talks of another Bill of Securities that will vest all power in the Parliament. The Commons will never consent to that, I am sure. So if the Lords throw out the Exclusion, the Commons will throw out the Securities. Thus you gain time."

Charles sighed.

"You are wonderful, David. So you advise me to take no steps?"

The favourite dangled his gloves by their tassels. He was cool and very collected.

"Not yet. Exert your influence in the Upper House and leave the factions to quarrel. The Country itself is divided in half."

Charles sat silent. Suddenly he rose.

"It might be as well to recall James," he said.

"If you like, Sir. It will bring him before the people again. It may bind his supporters more closely to him; on the other hand it will raise fresh opposition."

"In fact," said Charles, "it will raise more dissension, which you say we want."

"Then send for him, Sir."

A fortnight later Monmouth was travelling round England, having arrived in London secretly, by night, and Essex had joined with Shaftesbury. Russell and Cavendish handed in their resignations, and back came the Duke of York to London, furious at Monmouth's return. The Exclusion Bill came and went; the tide was turning in the King's favour.

Almost despairing, Shaftesbury brought in a Bill of Divorce, enabling the King to put away his Queen and re-marry. Charles was very angry; the Duke of York was more so.

Then Roxhythe brought new and disturbing news to Court.

"Sire, Shaftesbury is desperate, but he contemplates a last blow."

"What is it?" asked Charles.

The Duke, who was present, eyed Roxhythe malevolently.

"He seeks to impeach Lord Stafford."

Charles sank back in his chair.

"Impossible!"

"It is infamous!" snapped the Duke. "It can come to naught."

Roxhythe turned.

"Your pardon, Sir, it can come to a great deal."

"Lord Stafford's age protects him!"

"Not from the fury of the mob."

"You are right," said Charles wearily. "His trial would inflame them again. Shaftesbury knows that."

"I have done all in my power to dissuade him, but he had a strong support. It has also come to his ears, through Essex, that I have not played his game alone. He looks on me with an eye of suspicion once more."

"As well he might!"

Roxhythe smiled blandly upon his Grace.

"As well he might," he agreed.

Charles frowned.

"I'll have no bickering! Roxhythe works in my interests and yours, James."

The Duke sneered. He did not relish being rebuked in front of the favourite.

"David, if the jury finds Stafford guilty I am undone. Already Louis stands against me, and if Shaftesbury succeeds in this, Sunderland will take fright again. What would you have me do?"

"Stafford must not die!" said James harshly. "It were iniquitous!"

Roxhythe walked to the window. He spoke with his back to the room.

"It may mean Stafford or you, Sir."

James gnawed his lip. The King's eyes were brooding.

"I might intervene."

Silence.

"What say you, David?"

"You must intervene!" cried James.

"David!"

Roxhythe shrugged.

"You'll lose all that we have been fighting for, Sir. Perhaps your throne."

"You think that?"

"Your Majesty knows the temper of a mob. If it is balked of its victim it may turn on you."

"But, *cordieu!* Surely Stafford is innocent?"

"Undoubtedly. That will avail him naught."

"No jury will find him guilty!" rasped James.

"I think no jury will dare acquit him."

"*Sangdieu*, am I King, or am I not?" cried Charles.

"At present, Sir, you are King."

"Is it possible, Lord Roxhythe, that you advise Stafford's death?" asked James scathingly.

"I advise naught, sir. It is for His Majesty to decide."

"It seems I am impotent," said Charles. His voice held much of bitterness. "Why did I return to this ungrateful people?"

"God knows, Sir."

"And what if I allow them to murder Stafford? Is it the end? Can I make it the end?"

"You will be nearing the end. Shaftesbury thinks to hold you at his mercy on account of the poverty of the Treasury. He relies on your enforced consent to the Exclusion. If you can wring money from France the end is in sight."

"Faugh!" James flung himself back in his chair. "My God, to what are we coming?"

Charles was thinking quickly.

"I am still negotiating with Louis . . . it might be possible."

"*Mille diables*, Sir, consider!"

"Pray calm yourself, James. Do you want the Crown?"

"Ay! But not this way!"

"How then?"

James was silent.

"In Stafford's place I would readily die, Sir."

James burst out again.

"Very noble, Lord Roxhythe, and easily said! You are not in his place!"

"At seventy, and lying in prison, death should be welcome," said Roxhythe imperturbably.

"A traitor's death? You sicken me! You revolt me!"

"Have done!" commanded the King. "It is Stafford or ourselves. And he has not yet been tried. Wait."

"Call out the army!" snapped James. "Arrest Monmouth and Shaftesbury."

Roxhythe smiled. The smile infuriated His Grace.

"Ay, sneer my lord, sneer! How do I know that you are not deliberately advising my brother to his undoing? You are very sanguine as to the result of this execution! What do you know? You would do well to have a care!"

The brown eyes grew haughty.

"Your Grace is insulting."

"*Sangdiou!* Has it come to that? I am insulting? I tell you, my lord—"

Charles rose. He was no longer one of them. He was the King.

"You are both lacking in respect to me. I will have no quarrelling here. James, you speak wildly. Roxhythe, you may go."

My lord picked up his hat and bowed.

"I crave Your Majesty's pardon." He left the room.

The King turned to his brother.

"James, I request that you will not speak thus to Roxhythe. You should know by now that he acts only in my interests."

"The man is double-faced! He hates me!"

"You have not given him over-much cause to love you. I warn you, do not anger him."

Two red spots burnt on the Duke's cheekbones.

"Your Majesty asks too much of me! I also have a warning! Do not trust Roxhythe!"

Charles looked at him, half smiling. He seemed to slip back into his easy placidity.

"You are a fool, James," he said, quite pleasantly.

CHAPTER IV

THE KING HIS TRIUMPH

SIR Jasper came slowly into his wife's room. Lady Frances knew from his face that he was troubled. She could guess the cause. She was reading a letter from Christopher, but it fell to the ground as she sprang up.

"Oh, Jasper—no!"

Montgomery took her hands.

"My dear . . ."

Unaccustomed tears came to her eyes.

"They won't let him die! Oh, they cannot!"

"The sentence was read to-day."

Lady Frances pulled her hands away.

"It's too awful! too cruel! He never had a thought of—plotting! He was so sweet—so—" She broke down.

Montgomery watched her pitifully.

"Dear . . ."

"They cannot believe—him guilty of—these monstrous charges!"

"They do not. But public feeling is too strong. My lord made an excellent defence, but to no avail. The judges affected to believe Tuberville's lies. Tuberville swore that Stafford had engaged him to murder the King, five years ago."

Lady Frances tried to check her tears.

"The King—will not—intervene?"

"My dear, I have long since given up expecting aught but selfishness from the King."

She twisted her hands.

"It is death?"

"Yes. I'll not revolt you with the details."

She shuddered.

"He is—so old! They surely—cannot hang him—and—oh, it is too awful!"

"It is believed that the King will refuse his consent to that. We can only hope for decapitation."

Lady Frances turned away, biting her lip.

"I knew him so well! Papa—was one of his—dearest friends. I—oh, there's naught but cruelty and—lowness in England!"

"We are indeed come to a pretty pass," sighed Montgomery. "I never heard palpable lies so easily swallowed. The whole affair was disgraceful. The King was present, and the Duchess of Portsmouth. Her Grace might have comported herself more decently, I thought."

"I daresay." Lady Frances picked up Christopher's letter. Her voice still trembled.

"Chris—seems more at ease. He—writes cheerfully. He is very busy."

"I am glad he went away before all this trouble came to a head," said Montgomery. "I wonder what part Roxhythe plays?"

"I had rather—not know," said his wife.

Bit by bit Shaftesbury's adherents fell away from him. Roxhythe still ostensibly helped on his cause, but the Earl neither trusted nor mistrusted him. He believed that Roxhythe wanted the Exclusion but he knew that he had intrigued with the Orangist faction. The Cause was practically hopeless now, for the execution of Stafford had somewhat appalled the mob. Monmouth still blazed through England, and James clamoured for his arrest. It was Roxhythe who counselled the King to hold his hand.

Divining the calming temper of the mob, Shaftesbury tried to revive the terror of the Popish Plot. Roxhythe urged him to take action, knowing that, as a result, more members would join the Crown.

Then came the Exclusion Bill again, and the King moved at last.

"David," he said, "I shall now prorogue Parliament."

"You could not do better, Sir," agreed Roxhythe. "Your popularity with the people is growing. They have begun to consider."

"What do they consider?"

"Your attitude. They laud you for refusing to listen to Monmouth's claim. They see in it a just regard for your brother."

"How do you know, David? 'Pon my soul, you are sublime!"

"I am indeed. I have done more work in these past months than I ever thought to do in a lifetime. And I am a frequenter of taverns and public meetings. It is most amusing."

"No one suspects you?"

"On the contrary, everyone suspects me. Sunderland guesses that I informed you of his duplicity; Halifax will no longer traffic with me; Essex warns Shaftesbury to have no dealings with me. My day is nearly done, but I know enough. Shaftesbury's ruin is in sight, and it but remains to snare the rest. One man alone trusts me."

"Who is he?"

"Monmouth."

The King recoiled a little.

"I don't want him ruined, David! I love him."

"Certainly, Sir. But through him I can catch at the rest."

"I—cannot—believe that he is willingly against me!"

Roxhythe looked down at his hands for a moment.

"Why, Sir," he said slowly, "do not distress yourself. Monmouth is weak; he has been led away."

"You say that to console me," answered Charles. "I will not conceal from you, David, that it has hurt me more than all else."

"I repeat, Sir: he is weak. And very young."

"Yes," assented Charles. "He is young, of course . . ." He sighed. "Well, David, repinings will not help me. I am minded to appeal to the nation."

"A declaration . . . Well, I think the nation will support you."

"So do I," nodded the King, more cheerfully.

He was right. The Declaration was the one thing needed to seal the change in the people's temper. The country

was plunged into a sea of loyalty, and Shaftesbury, almost despairing, withdrew to his house in Aldersgate Street, where he proceeded to gather round him certain citizens of London who, he boasted, would rise at a moment's notice.

Then came a diversion in the shape of William Nassau, who visited London again with Charles' consent, although the Duke of York, already wary of him, besought the King to forbid his coming.

William was as secret as ever, but his uncle could guess his intentions. He wanted to bring England into league with him against France. He wanted Charles to summon a new Parliament. During his stay in London he very frequently visited the Duke of Monmouth and his followers. Charles lifted his brows at that, confessing to Roxhythe that he would give much for a peep into his nephew's mind.

When William at length left England he had extracted a promise from the King that he would call a new Parliament if Louis again invaded the Low Countries.

"Sir," said Bentinck. "Does Your Highness trust His Majesty at last?"

"I trust no Englishman," answered William shortly. "But I think to see upheavals in England." More he would not vouchsafe.

"Sir," said Roxhythe. "What of Louis?"

"Dear David," replied Charles. "Am I a fool? I have placated M. Barillon. Louis plans to attack Luxembourg."

"Ah! And you?"

"I believe I shall be blind to it," answered Charles placidly.

"I see," said Roxhythe. "To what figure does he go?"

"He is very mean. Only a million livres," sighed Charles. "I must recall James once more. He grows a thought too violent in Scotland."

Meanwhile Roxhythe was sowing hesitancy in Monmouth's mind. The Young Duke was planning a rising all over the country, but Roxhythe, by some miraculous

means or other, kept him uncertain, not daring to move boldly in any one direction, ever procrastinating, and ploughing through what seemed to him a bog of insurmountable difficulties.

Shaftesbury, already desperate, and fearing to be betrayed by the Duke's wavering spirit, found that his brave London citizens were not to be relied on, and gave up the struggle, broken. He had reason to think that he would be arrested again, and, this time, not released. He feared Roxhythe, although he had no proof of my lord's duplicity. Ill bodily, and more ill in spirit, he left London hurriedly and arrived in Holland in the middle of November, 1682.

He was suffering from an internal disease, and that, coupled with the many worries gathered about his head, hastened on his end. Some few weeks after his arrival in Amsterdam he died, broken-hearted, conscious of utter failure.

"So I win," remarked the King.

"I told you, Sir, that you should give him rope," replied Roxhythe.

"I had not dared without you, Davy."

"Oh, I think you would!" smiled my lord. "We can now almost touch the end."

"It is ended," said Charles.

"Not while Russell and Essex are at large, Sir," replied the favourite. "Wait!"

CHAPTER V

PLOTS

"DAVID, ye are a rogue! We see you less and less at Whitehall!" said Charles.

Roxhythe smiled.

"I crave your pardon, Sir. In truth, I am busied with Your Majesty's affairs."

"Let be! They are very well."

"Sir, they may be well for the moment, but as long as Russell and Essex and Sydney are at large trouble will continue to brew."

Charles waved his hand impatiently.

"How can you prevent their being at large? Let be!"

"Sire, one word I seem to have repeated a number of times: wait! I am deep in plots."

"I am tired of plots and plotters."

"Why, so am I. So I seek to make an end."

"Ye are very mysterious, Davy! Are you playing some deep game, I wonder?"

"I am amusing myself, Sir."

"That means that you will say no more. Well, well!"

My Lord Roxhythe accompanied His Majesty to Newmarket Races, as was his wont. Five days before the appointed day of departure he had speech with Charles.

"Sire, will you be advised by me?"

Charles, lolling on a couch, stretched out his long legs, yawning.

"Roxhythe, you have become as secret as the grave! What now?"

"I ask you to return to London in two days' time."

The sleepy eyes opened.

"Oho! More plots?"

"The strings of which I am gathering into my hands."

"And you'll tell me naught?"

"Not yet, Sir. I must first enmesh my victims."

Charles yawned again.

"I am sick of plots."

"So I shall not worry you with this. But return to London the day after to-morrow, taking the Duke of York with you."

"Very well, David. As you please."

Thus it came about that the King and his brother drove quietly past Mr. Rumbald's house at Hoddesdon two days before the appointed time. And Mr. Rumbald, who had arranged with one Goodenough and various others, to lie in ambush till the coach passed and then to stop it, and to murder the occupants, was justly incensed. He saw the coach go by, but he was alone in the house, awaiting his fellow-conspirators who were to arrive on the morrow, and he dared not attempt the deed.

Meanwhile, my Lord Roxhythe visited His Grace of Monmouth who was living in seclusion.

Monmouth greeted him effusively.

"Dear Roxhythe! I have been expecting you."

My lord disengaged himself.

"I have been at Newmarket, Sir, and could not come before."

Monmouth drew him to a chair.

"Sit down, my lord! sit down! I think you know Mr. Ferguson?"

Roxhythe turned to look at the grim Scotsman.

"I have that honour," he bowed.

"Yes, I have met his lordship," said the pamphleteer harshly.

Roxhythe glanced round the room.

"I do not see Lord Russell?"

"He is away from town," answered Grey, one of Monmouth's staunchest adherents. "He works to raise the West Country."

"He is too finicking," said Mr. Sydney suddenly. "Too cautious."

Sydney was a very thorough Whig. In the past he had fought under Cromwell.

"Oh!" protested Monmouth. "We have surely need of caution!"

Mr. Trenchard, rough and ready, uplifted his voice.

"He makes no progress. Taunton will rise at my call."

Monmouth smiled.

"We are indeed pleased with you, Mr. Trenchard."

Roxhythe bit back a smile.

"It seems we make very little progress in any way," grumbled Sydney. "We cannot rely on any part of the country to rise."

"We must have patience," said Monmouth vaguely.

"Patience will avail us naught! The longer we wait the more we lose!"

Someone argued this hotly. Others joined in.

"Peace, peace!" cried Armstrong. "Do ye quarrel in his Highness' presence?"

"Ay," nodded Monmouth. "I cannot have this babel."

"Highness, all this dilly-dallying is a weakness!"

"Lord Grey is right!" Ferguson sat up. "We have to strike at the head!"

"That is right," struck in Mr. Sydney. "The Duke should die."

"How?" interposed Roxhythe. His soft voice easily made itself heard above the bickering at one end of the room.

Ferguson glowered at him.

"There are many ways."

"Yet one should be decided on."

"He might be intercepted as he returns from the play-house."

Monmouth expostulated.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! I'll have no murder."

"You cannot make war in gloves, sir," retorted Lord Grey. "There must be killing. If we strike at the root we shall avoid undue slaughter."

"I cannot have murder," reiterated Monmouth. To show his displeasure he went aside with one Colonel Rumsey.

Ferguson drew his chair closer to Mr. Sydney's.

"We want more than the Duke."

Sydney shot him a warning glance. But Roxhythe was not attending; he was holding a languid argument with Lord Grey.

"I'm with you there. While the King lives we shall have trouble."

"Our rights he destroys, our religion he curbs!" Ferguson's eyes were fanatic.

"Monmouth would never consent."

Ferguson lowered his eyes.

"If Monmouth is tiresome . . ." he left a pause. "What think you of him?" By a faint movement of the head he indicated Roxhythe.

Sydney frowned.

"Untrustworthy. Too secret. But His Grace is blind to it."

"I'd have no dealings with him."

"Nor I. Except that he may prove useful."

"How?"

"He could help to overthrow the guards at Whitehall. It is always well to have one on the inside."

"Ay, but he would not do it. He'll stop short of killing Charles."

"He need not know. He is agog for the Duke to be disposed of."

"He is double-faced. I fear that he'll betray us."

"Not a whit. For his own safety he dare not. If the Duke succeeds his day is o'er. And Rumsey vouches for him."

Monmouth came back into the middle of the room.

"Gentlemen, it has come to my ears that there was lately a plot on foot to murder His Majesty and the Duke of York on their way from Newmarket!"

Grey shrugged and said nothing. Armstrong glanced at Roxhythe.

"My lord, did this come within your ken?"

"I heard rumours," admitted Roxhythe. "Whence comes Your Grace's knowledge?"

"From Wildman. He seemed to know much of the plot, and spoke of one Rumbald. Understand me, gentlemen, I will not have it!"

Mr. Sydney was hurt.

"Does Your Highness insinuate that any of us were privy to it?"

Monmouth shrugged peevishly.

"I know that Wildman was, so why not more of you? I will not countenance it!"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Should we not come to business, sir?" asked Grey.

"We cannot decide aught until we hear from Russell," answered Monmouth.

"Then we are likely to remain inactive for some time!"

Mr. Trenchard snarled. "All this indecision is ruinous to the cause."

"I would I had not lost Shaftesbury," mourned the Duke.

"He acted the coward's part! We were well rid of him!" snapped Trenchard.

"Shaftesbury was a wise man," murmured Sydney. "So, I think, is Lord Essex."

"By the way," drawled Roxhythe. "Where is Essex?"

"He is not here," sighed Monmouth.

"I had perceived it, sir," said Roxhythe drily. "Is he ever here?"

"Seldom." Monmouth was cast down for a moment.

"But I doubt he is very much in our interests," he continued, more brightly.

Trenchard snorted.

"I cannot see that Russell and Essex their absence need hinder us from deciding on a course of action!" cried Ferguson. "We remain inert from week's end to week's end! Strike! Strike!"

"You speak like a fool!" Lord Grey was angry. "How can we move until we are sure of the West Country's support?"

"I disagree!" Sydney took up the cudgels. "This talk of rising is impracticable! If we had the army with us it would be different, but what are we?—A mere handful, with possibilities of some counties behind us. Only fools count on possibilities!"

Armstrong joined in.

"Ye are insulting, Sydney! We must wait, and the possibilities will turn to certainties."

"Ay!" Mr. Sydney sneered. "Next century!"

"Sydney is right!" Up started Ferguson. "We must strike a decisive blow at the root of the trouble! Kill the Papist James! I have three hundred Scotsmen in London to-day, and they will rise at my call! Storm Whitehall, and possess ourselves of the city! The other counties will never rise for us until they see that we mean business."

"Wild and impracticable," declared Armstrong. "We must wait."

Sydney thumped the table.

"Wait till we ruin all by our waiting! Oh, ay, Sir Thomas! Good advice!"

"Do you provoke me, Sir?" Armstrong's hand went to his sword-hilt.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" implored Monmouth. "I must beg you to be silent."

"Highness, I'll brook no insult from Mr. Sydney! He has sneered at my advice. Then let him suggest better, or withdraw his words!"

"I have already voiced my suggestion! I'll voice it no more! It is meant for men who do not give way to squeamish, timorous doubts!"

Lord Grey arose.

"Mr. Sydney, you pass all bounds! Am I a timorous man? Your suggestions are foolish, and thoughtless!"

"Meant for men!" cried Ferguson.

"Ay, meant for men!" said Sydney. "All you and Sir Thomas do, Grey, is to counsel inaction! What good is there in that?"

"You had best have a care, sir! I do not stand criticism from you!"

"What's that?" Mr. Sydney came to his feet. "You'll answer for that, Lord Grey!"

"Will no one stop me this babel?" cried Monmouth. "It is disgraceful! I will not have it! Lord Grey, I beg you will not speak hastily! Mr. Sydney—"

"Mr. Sydney has insulted me, sir!"

"Sydney speaks very truly! You waver and hesitate, and have not the courage to strike a blow!"

"You had best guard your tongue, Mr. Ferguson!"

"Ay!" Armstrong was flushed. "An you dare—"

Roxhythe stood up. He seemed to tower above them. His lazy eyes travelled slowly round the room from the angry, distracted Monmouth, to the squabbling men by the table.

"An I dare?" cried Ferguson. "Dare? Dare? I'd have you know, sir, that I dare all! and—"

"Thank you. That will do." The calm, haughty voice penetrated the din. There fell a sudden hush. All eyes were turned to the tall, graceful figure standing by Monmouth, with one hand upraised.

Roxhythe indicated a chair.

"Mr. Sydney, resume your seat."

Sydney's eyes flashed.

"Sir!"

The cold voice grew yet more gentle.

"Mr. Sydney?"

"I'll—I'll not have this—tone—to me . . ." Mr. Sydney sat down, fuming.

Roxhythe turned to Grey.

"You too, my lord. Mr. Ferguson, you will please remember his Grace's presence. This childish quarrelling is both futile and unseemly."

"I'll have ye know, sir, that Ferguson takes orders from no man!"

The faintest suspicion of a smile crossed my lord's eyes.

"Do ye seek to rouse mine ire, sir?"

The smile crept down to Roxhythe's lips.

"You would do well to sit down, Mr. Ferguson," said my lord softly.

Ferguson flung over to the window.

"Thank you. Allow me to say that while you are all at variance, action is impossible." He picked up his hat.

"Roxhythe hits the very root of the matter," said Monmouth. "You are all under my displeasure."

"How are we to be assured of Lord Roxhythe his loyalty?" sneered Sydney.

"Any insult to Roxhythe I take to myself!" flashed Monmouth. "*Mort de ma vie!* To what are we coming? You may be silent, Mr. Sydney!"

"What advice has Roxhythe ever given?" answered Sydney, waxing hotter. "What has he done to help us?"

"Lord Roxhythe has given me sager counsel than any of you!"

"I will give you one piece of advice, Sydney," said my lord. "It is that you have a care to that unruly tongue of yours. It is like to lead you to disaster."

"Do you threaten me, my lord?"

"I have never been known to do such a thing," smiled my lord.

Mr. Sydney said nothing further. Roxhythe turned to Monmouth.

"Your Grace, I do counsel you to await Lord Russell his return. Be sure of your supporters; do nothing rashly. When the time comes, strike firm and true; above all, strike home. But do not endanger success by precipitous action. Permit me to take my leave."

Monmouth smiled graciously.

"You speak with great sense, my lord. I am entirely of your mind."

Roxhythe bowed and walked out.

"I applaud Roxhythe," said Grey. "He at least has a brain."

* * * * *

Late that evening, Colonel Rumsey presented himself at Bevan House. He was taken to Roxhythe's private room.

My lord waved him to a chair.

"Sit down, sir. Did they continue to quarrel this morning?"

Rumsey chose the most uncomfortable chair in the room, and sat gingerly on the edge.

"They did, my lord. They fell to arguing over your loyalty. Grey upheld you; Armstrong of course deems you true. But Sydney and Ferguson mistrust you."

"It matters not in the least. I have learnt enough to hang every man amongst them."

Rumsey looked at him uneasily.

"My lord, I do not like the part I have to play."

"No?" said Roxhythe. "I am sorry."

Rumsey twisted his fingers.

"My lord, expose the plot yourself! Do not ask me to do so!"

"I do not ask," said his lordship sweetly.

"You have me in a vice!" Rumsey flung out his hands.

"Yes," agreed Roxhythe.

"If I refuse to betray these men, you will do it and betray me with them. My lord, have a little pity!"

The scorn in Roxhythe's eyes made Rumsey wince. The fine lips curled.

"I have no mercy for those who plot against His Majesty's person," said my lord. His voice was like ice; but it was ice that concealed a fire. "If I followed mine inclination I would have you strung up—ay, and quartered. But as a price for your obedience I give you your life, such as it is."

Rumsey was white to the lips. Roxhythe fascinated him as a cat fascinates a mouse. He could not look away from that disdainful face.

"My lord," he stammered. "Have pity! To turn informer! I—" He broke off hopelessly. Roxhythe was smiling. "I am afraid!" he cried desperately.

"So I perceive. If you refuse to do my bidding you will have good cause to be afraid."

"My lord, my lord, why do you want me to do it? Why do you not do it yourself?"

"It is not my will. If you disclose my hand in the matter you will know what to expect."

Rumsey passed his tongue between his dry lips.

"And if I do not? If I obey?"

"Have I not said? I give you your life."

"How do I know that you will not hurl me to destruction when my work is done?"

"It were not worth my while," answered Roxhythe pleasantly.

"And Keyling? Is he in your power too?" asked Rumsey.

"Certainly."

"You—you—devil!" said Rumsey, almost hysterically.

"I should advise you to be more civil," said Roxhythe.

"I am not the man to be rude to."

Rumsey bit his lip. Suddenly he looked up.

"My lord, have you not thought that I might implicate you? You have been in this plot—" He stopped, stricken by the sight of that slow, pitying smile.

"Do you think His Majesty is not aware of the part I play?" asked Roxhythe.

CHAPTER VI

MONMOUTH

"ALL is meet for the sacrifice," remarked Roxhythe.

Charles looked up, interested.

"Am I to know at last?"

Roxhythe smiled.

"In truth you have been very much in the dark, Sir. You are to know."

"Then come and tell me! Are you about to deliver me from Russell and Essex?"

"Also Grey, and Sydney, and Hampden. And Ferguson."

"Good God, Roxhythe, you have done your work well! Are all these people in league against me?"

"There are many more," said Roxhythe calmly. "Those are the principals."

Charles looked at him anxiously.

"What of Monmouth, David?"

"He plans a rising all over the country, but he resolutely refused to listen to the idea of your assassination."

The King started.

"I should be grateful, I suppose! Is there in very truth a plot to murder me?"

"There are several, Sir. All equally wild, but equally dastardly."

"God's death! I had no notion 'twas so serious!"

"Nor is it, Sir. But by making it seem so we can ensnare your enemies."

"Speak plainly, Roxhythe! Let me know all that there is to know."

"Very well, Sir." Roxhythe moved to a chair. "Some time ago I came across one Keyling, a salter, and one who was embroiled in a certain quarrel with the Lord Mayor some while back. He goes in fear of his skin on account of it. He was also so unwise as to enter a plot

'gainst your life. He is a very thorough Whig, you see."

"Wait, David! How in heaven's name did you come to know him?"

"I have frequented a certain tavern in Aldgate where these gentlemen meet from time to time. I observed them all very closely. The rest I got from Rumsey."

"Who is Rumsey?"

"We shall come to him, Sir. Well, this Keyling is not too scrupulous, and not too loyal. A little bribery, and *voilà!* he was my man. He was more than ever my man when I hinted at the affair with the Lord Mayor. He turned informer to save himself. From him I gathered that there was a party of men engaged to dispose of Your Majesty and the Duke of York. A certain fellow, Rumbald, headed them. They planned to shoot you on your way from Newmarket. The appointed spot was Rye House, near Hoddesdon, which is where Rumbald lives. I counselled you to leave Newmarket two days before the appointed time, and the plot came to naught. But they continue to scheme, and this time they seek to kill you in London. They hold lengthy meetings at a certain Devil Tavern. They are joined by Rumsey and Ferguson, possibly Sydney."

"You're very cool!" said Charles, half-laughing.

"It is so interesting. For this is where the two plots meet."

"Sblood! What is the other plot?"

"The Monmouth rising that I spoke of. Monmouth hath a large following: Russell, Essex, Armstrong, Grey, Sydney, Trenchard and a score of others. Monmouth, Russell and Essex seek only to rise and to force you to declare Monmouth the heir, but Sydney and Ferguson wish to kill you. Ferguson would murder Monmouth too if necessary. He is by no means a pleasant character. They hold meetings at the house of one Shepherd. Lord Russell has been there many times, and there has been much treasonable talk. All this I have from Rumsey, whom I hold, as he puts it, in a vice."

Charles uncrossed his legs and sat upright.

"Who—is—Rumsey?"

Roxhythe opened his eyes rather wide.

"A creature of no account," he said. "One of Monmouth's followers."

The King leaned back again with a sigh of relief.

"At last! Why have you him in a vice?"

"I know a waverer when I see one, Sir. I easily discovered him. I told him that I had ample proofs of his meetings with Rumbald at the Devil Tavern. I frightened him, and, perforce, he became my man. I have promised him his life, as a price of which he will turn informer when I tell him."

"He will incriminate Russell?"

"He will incriminate anyone that I wish."

Charles was openly admiring.

"You are wonderful, David!"

"It was really very easy," disclaimed my lord. "But it will prove useful. The plot can be used as Shaftesbury used the Popish plot. You will gain power by it."

"And be rid of those who seek to bring about the Exclusion. When do these men lodge their information?"

"There are still one or two minor details that we must discover if we are to trap Essex. In about a week."

"Meanwhile I shall be murdered," said Charles cheerfully.

"Not a whit, Sir. If you could but see these schemers you would laugh at the thought of their ever moving either one way or another. They fight amongst themselves; they waver, they hesitate. Monmouth is swayed this way and that. They meet to decide on some sort of action, and when they are assembled they bewail the fact that they cannot, after all, come to a decision as one of their number is not present. If one puts forward a scheme, the rest pounce on it and tear it to bits. Then they come to blows—or would, if Monmouth did not intervene. It is the wildest, silliest band of malcontents I ever was in."

"It is because Monmouth is no leader of men. In battle, yes. But he has no fixity of purpose. A pity."

"In this case, Sir, a good thing."

Charles rested his head in his hand.

"I wish he were not acting thus against me. It—hurts, David—though I suppose I encourage him. I should never have accorded him the rights I did. It put higher ideas into his pate . . . Does he trust you?"

"Implicitly. I have given him a little obvious advice and he imagines that I am wholly with him. Sydney mistrusts me, but Grey stands for me because I studiously agree with what he says. Rumsey assures the rest of my loyalty. They think to hold me in their hands on account of the Duke of York his hatred for me. It never enters their heads that I work for you alone."

"I see. Does it irk you, I wonder?"

"Does what irk me, Sir?"

"The double part you play: delivering these men into my hands."

Roxhythe's eyes flashed suddenly.

"Sire, where you are concerned I have no pity."

* * * * *

And so, at last Roxhythe having all the threads at his finger-tips, started to pull them, so that the Great Whig Plot fell in ruins about its makers. Roxhythe worked still in the shadows, and so deftly did he play his part that his name was never mentioned. One by one he set his hapless tools to do his bidding, secure in the knowledge that they dared not refuse. Keyling and Rumsey disclosed all that they knew, but they were carefully coached by Roxhythe, and on every occasion they denied that Monmouth had ever countenanced the idea of assassinating the King or the Duke. Very skilfully was the betrayal done, bit by bit, till at last the network of information was complete, woven together by a master-hand.

Proclamation was issued, ordering the arrest of Monmouth and his chief followers: Grey, Russell, Ferguson and others. My lord's work was well done, and so thoroughly that no loop-hole was left through which the incriminated men, save Monmouth, might creep. All that Roxhythe had striven for since first he joined Shaftesbury

and Holles was accomplished. It had entailed endless toil, constant alertness of brain and unflinching perseverance. And now it was finished, the task that had been so colossal, and which, to any other man, would have seemed impossible. Step by step my lord had entered into almost every plot for over a year, and had gradually drawn those implicated into a cunning net whose strings were held by a relentless, merciless hand. My lord's quick brain was moving all the time, linking each tiny plot into one whole, leading on the men he was tricking, until, by their actions, they gave him damning evidence against themselves. Not until the evidence was complete did he draw the strings tight. To act too early would have meant failure, to act too late might have meant disaster. Coolly Roxhythe awaited the right moment, never losing patience, never relaxing his vigilance. The moment had come, and at last his task was over. The King's enemies were smashed, and the King sat firm upon his throne. Only one thing remained to be done. Because Charles wished it, Monmouth must be saved.

Thus it was that my Lord Roxhythe went to wait upon His Grace of Monmouth.

The young man was in a state of terror. He almost clung to Roxhythe.

"My lord, ye see how we have been betrayed!"

Roxhythe looked at him thoughtfully.

"What am I to do?" went on Monmouth. "Does the King suspect you?"

"No," said Roxhythe, smiling. "He does not."

Lord Grey had entered the room. He spoke now with suppressed fury.

"He has good reason not to suspect Lord Roxhythe!" he said.

Monmouth recoiled.

"What's that? No, no! Roxhythe, you have not betrayed me?"

My lord ate a comfit.

"I could kill you where you stand, you lying devil!" said Grey.

"No, you could not," replied his lordship tranquilly.

"Roxhythe, Roxhythe, it is not true! Good God, you could not have betrayed me!"

"Could he not, sir? Do you forget Sydney's warnings? Alas, that I ignored them! Rumsey has turned informer, but who was behind Rumsey? Who prompted him to tell such a careful mixture of truth and lies? He had not the brain, I know!"

Monmouth clung to the table.

"Roxhythe, speak!" He was very near tears.

Roxhythe shut his comfit-box.

"Gently, sir. Do not agitate yourself. Lord Grey, either leave the room or behave sanely."

Grey had drawn his sword. Murder was in his eyes.

"Will you draw, sir?"

"Certainly not."

Monmouth caught at Grey's arm.

"Fool, fool! We are surely ruined if you kill Roxhythe! Put up your sword! I command it!"

Reluctantly Grey obeyed. Monmouth sat down limply.

"Roxhythe—explain! Deny that you betrayed me!"

"I wonder that Your Grace ever believed I should do otherwise. I am the King his man. You were all very guileless."

"We were honest!" cried Grey. "We—foolishly—judged you by ourselves!"

"Then you were indeed foolish. You counted on my dislike for the Duke of York. You forgot my love for the King."

"Oh, my God!" choked Monmouth. "How could you do it? You have ruined me!"

Roxhythe's smile was sarcastic.

"I have prevented your ruin, Sir."

"How can you say so? Don't seek to excuse yourself!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, don't seek to excuse yourself!"

Grey watched the smile come again, sick at heart.

"I most certainly shall not excuse myself," said my lord haughtily. "Had it been necessary I would have ruined

Your Grace. As it is I have saved you. It was not my deliberate intention."

"You confound me with your riddles! What have you done to save me?"

"I have very effectually prevented your rising against King Charles. Is it possible that you do not realize how futile such a rising would have been? You would have caused a little trouble, your army would have been disposed of, and you would have died a traitor's death on Tower Hill."

"I am like to do that now!" groaned the wretched young man.

"Not at all. That is why I have sought you out to-day. Because His Majesty hath a great affection for you in spite of your conduct, I must help you to evade justice."

"Do not trust him, sir!" said Grey sharply.

"I shall not. I'll listen to no more of his advice!"

Roxhythe bowed.

"In that case I'll take my leave, sir."

Up started Monmouth.

"No, no! Come back, Roxhythe! Come back! What is it I must do?"

"Highness, pray do not—"

"Silence, Grey! Roxhythe, help me!"

"A warrant is out for your arrest, sir—"

"Curse you! Do I not know it?"

"—for your arrest. So I counsel you to go into hiding, not in London. When this storm has abated, surrender yourself to His Majesty, and implore his mercy."

"I shall surrender myself now! at once!"

"You will be very ill-advised, sir. Evidence is too strong against you. Much of it will be withdrawn in a while and you can with safety surrender. For the present, go."

Monmouth stood irresolute.

"How do I know that you are not trying to ruin me entirely? I—"

"You do not know. But Lord Grey will tell you that I am speaking with my accustomed good-sense."

Monmouth looked helplessly at Grey who shrugged.

"Is it a message from the King?" asked the Duke, of a sudden eager.

Roxhythe looked at his hands.

"I must say no," he replied.

"That is a curious way of saying it! Are you—bidden to—say no?"

"Is it likely that I shall tell you, sir? You have my advice. Act on it or not, as you will. It makes no odds to me. What should I gain by your ruin?" He went out.

"I shall go, Grey."

"Shall you, sir?" Grey smiled wanly. "I suppose you will. And we—shall stay."

CHAPTER VII

FEBRUARY, 1685

LADY Frances regarded her cousin thoughtfully.

"I often wonder, David, how you triumphed."

Roxhythe showed signs of interest.

"When? And how?"

"When Russell died, and Essex killed himself."

Roxhythe relapsed into boredom.

"Old history, my dear."

"But none the less puzzling. At the time you would say naught. Now it should be different. All those enemies to the King are gone; there is no danger of Exclusion. How did you do it?"

"It was the King his triumph."

"Undoubtedly. But also yours."

"I am gratified, of course. But why was it my triumph?"

"Roxhythe, am I a fool?"

"You are wiser than the most of your sex, my dear."

She made a little grimace.

"You are more than kind! Well, I am not a fool. Never have you succeeded in deceiving me, less than ever now. Why does Halifax become as stone when one speaks your name? Why does Sunderland grind his teeth? Why do Howard's cheeks grow red?"

"Do they?" asked Roxhythe. "How amusing!"

"No. Why do all these things happen?"

"In truth, I am too powerful."

"Why are you too powerful? What have you done to cause their enmity? You put a spoke in their wheels."

"Several spokes."

"You helped to overthrow Shaftesbury, you overthrew the Exclusion, you ruined Monmouth."

"It seems I am omnipotent. But I did not ruin Monmouth."

"Oh, I know he was forgiven, but he had to leave the country for all that."

"It was the King his will."

"Roxhythe, tell me plainly: were you one of Monmouth's band?"

"Is it likely?"

"It is more than likely that you counterfeited the better to undo him."

"Dear, dear!" said Roxhythe.

"David, I know that it must have been so. Every man mistrusts you, yet dare not cross you. You have tricked and betrayed; I am sure of it."

"In that case there is no more to be said."

"You admit it?"

"I admit nothing."

"Neither do you deny. That tells me all I want to know. I am fearful for you, David."

"Odds life! Why?"

"There is no one will uphold you save the King."

"Am I like to require upholding?"

Lady Fanny did not smile.

"I think so. Roxhythe, you have sacrificed all for Charles. It was weak."

My lord was genuinely astonished.

"Weak? What next?"

"I know 'tis a surprising thought. Christopher was stronger than are you."

"*Cordieu*, why am I weak?"

"David, when you were young, and I was a child, you were a soldier. You fought at Worcester. You were honest then, and you played one game alone. Gradually you dabbled in intrigue; at last you quitted the army. From that moment you changed. You forgot the soldier in yourself, overcome by your love for Charles. You put honour and good faith behind you. You sank yourself for Charles."

"This is enthralling! Proceed!"

"In '60 you came with him to England. Since that day you have never once played an honest game."

"One moment! I have played a consistent game."

"Consistent in that it was always for one man. Never a straightforward game. You intrigued with Louis—led him to think that you worked in his interest. You are no longer received at the Louvre because Louis discovered that your fair promises were empty, that you were not to be trusted. You betrayed Shaftesbury; you betrayed Monmouth, Russell and all those others. All for one man. I do admit that you have ever worked for Charles, and for that much will doubtless be forgiven hereafter. But, David! You have sacrificed truth, honour, patriotism for man. You may look at it in what light you will, but always it will be a weakness—a shame!"

"Will it?" said Roxhythe, unperturbed. "It is very sad."

"You will regret it, David."

"If you think that, Fanny, you do not know me."

She shrugged.

"Perhaps I do not. Will it not prey on your mind that you brought about the deaths of men who were innocent—just to gratify the whim of your master?"

"Not in the least. Who are these innocent men?"

"Russell and Essex. Do you think I did not know them? I knew them well. In Monmouth's cause they may have been, but in a plot to murder Charles, never! All that lying, worthless evidence . . . who helped to concoct it? Methinks I descry your hand. And Stafford; could you not have induced Charles to save him?"

"No."

She shrugged again.

"It may be so. But could you not have saved Russell?"

"Perhaps."

"And yet you did not. I can find it in my heart to pity you, David."

"Then I beg you will not. I regret nothing. My whole life has been at the disposal of the King. Am I to regret that?"

"It is for you to say. I had thought so, certainly. I tell you, David, Christopher chose the better part."

"And what is he now?"

"He is an honest man. He fought against losing his honour, his manhood, even as you must have fought, long, long ago. You gave way to inclination; Chris won his battle. He would not sacrifice all that was right and true for one man. Don't think that it was easy for him to leave you! I watched that struggle, and I know. Now he has found happiness. He is with his regiment; he works openly, honestly. I don't say that he has ever regained the same bliss that he once knew, but he is at peace, because he knows that he chose rightly. He may not have won power, but he has friends—and trust. You have power, but for how long will it last? No man trusts you."

Roxhythe turned his head to look at her. He was faintly amused.

"Quite a homily. Yet if I had to choose again I would choose the same path."

"Would you, David? Are you not lonely?"

"I am not."

"Then I can say nothing more. I suppose you think me very officious."

"My dear, you are at liberty to say what you will to me, but don't seek to reform my ways. Do you expect me to repent my evil life and weep?"

At last she smiled.

"You would not be Roxhythe as you did," she said.

"And you would thoroughly despise me."

"I suppose I should. I cannot help liking you—perhaps because I too have lived in intrigue. In truth, David, we are old and wicked."

"My sweet Fanny, I am not yet fifty, and you—"

"Don't! I cannot bear to think how old I am!"

"—are not yet forty-five. We are in our prime."

"Are we? Roxhythe, do you ever hear from Chris?"

"At rare intervals. Our interests lie apart."

"Do—you ever—miss him?"

"I really have not given the matter a thought," said Roxhythe, suddenly languid. He rose. "I must go. I have to visit Lord Wildmay. Have you observed his wife?"

"No," she said. "But I can see that you have."

The door flew open. An agitated gentleman came in. He did not heed Lady Frances who stared at him in great hauteur. He went straight to Roxhythe, breathless.

"My lord—I have searched for you everywhere!" He paused, and spoke lower. "You must come to the palace at once!"

Roxhythe's hand tightened slowly on his comfit-box.

"What is it, Chiffinch?"

Lady Frances drew nearer.

"What is the matter? Why is my lord so instantly required?"

Chiffinch hesitated.

"Madam—I trust to your discretion—the King—is ill."

Roxhythe picked up his hat.

"You'll excuse me, Frances. I will come, Chiffinch."

"Make haste, sir! They—they fear—he cannot—live!"

He turned away, hiding his grief.

Lady Frances went very white.

"Oh—! Mr. Chiffinch! Roxhythe, go quickly!" She turned towards him and found that she was addressing space. Roxhythe had gone.

* * * * *

The room was full of people. The physicians were consulting together by the window; James stood by the fireplace with the Earl of Feversham. When Roxhythe entered he turned, frowning. My lord did not glance in his direction. He went quietly to the great bed where lay his master. Charles' eyes were closed; his face was ghastly; one hand lay on the sheet. Roxhythe lifted that hand tenderly and kissed it.

The King's eyes opened. With an effort he smiled.

"This is the end, Davy." He spoke feebly, little above a whisper.

"Have courage, Sir. This is not the end."

The smile lingered.

"I shall not be sorry, Davy. In—truth, my spirit has—

not been at rest—this many a day. Stay by me.” His eyes closed.

The day wore on. One after another the surgeons attended him. He was unconscious, but towards evening he came to himself and seemed better.

Several divines sat with him during the night; the Duke of York scarcely left the bed-chamber. Roxhythe sat beside the bed, watchful, immovable.

Charles hardly opened his eyes. He was suffering great pain, but no complaint passed his lips.

On the second day news came of the nation's grief. During these last years Charles had regained all his old popularity. The people were filled with dismay at his illness; prayers were read for him in every church.

On the fourth day of his illness it was thought that the King would recover, and London rejoiced. Suddenly there was a relapse and the physicians knew that they could not save him.

At sight of her husband's sufferings, the Queen had fainted and had been forced to retire.

When the news came that the King was dying, the Duchess of Portsmouth had an interview with M. Barillon, as a result of which M. Barillon spoke long and earnestly to the Duke of York.

The Archbishop of Canterbury had urged the King to receive the Sacrament. Charles seemed sunk in apathy.

Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, fared no better.

Then came James to the bedside, and ordered everyone to stand back. He spoke quietly to his brother.

“Yes—yes! with all my heart!” gasped Charles.

The Duke whispered again. The King's answer could not be heard.

My Lord Roxhythe was speaking to M. Barillon when James approached. He turned to the Duke.

“Your Grace should seek out the Count of Castel Melhor.”

James frowned.

“There should be some Englishman.”

"There is not!" interposed Barillon eagerly. "The Count will find a confessor."

"One who cannot speak English. To what avail?"

"It is almost the only chance," said Roxhythe. "Where will you find a priest these days?"

James hurried out. Roxhythe went out also.

The Count promised to find a confessor, but not one was forthcoming who could speak enough English or French. James was distracted. Then came Roxhythe.

"Do you remember Huddleston, sir?"

"No!" snapped James. "I want no riddles now!"

Roxhythe looked his scorn.

"I offer you none. I speak of the man who saved the King's life after Worcester."

"That man!" James started. "Is he a priest?"

"Something approaching it. I have taken him to Castel Melhor who will see that he is well instructed. He is willing to shrive the King." He went back to the bedside.

"He is very cold," remarked M. Barillon. "*Ma foi!* I do not understand you Englishmen."

"I thank God we are not all like Roxhythe," answered James curtly. He left the room.

Later the room was cleared, only Feversham and Granville remaining, and Chiffinch brought Huddleston, disguised, by a back way.

For nearly an hour the door to the King's chamber remained inexorably closed. Glances were exchanged in the outer room, full of significance. Then again the door was opened and everyone was allowed to enter.

The King's children were brought to receive his blessing, but the absent Monmouth's name never once passed his lips.

During the night Charles regained some of his old urbanity. He sent messages to the Queen, and recommended several people to his brother's care. He even contrived to crack a joke.

The dawn came. Roxhythe was kneeling by the bed, the King's hand in his. His face was a mask; he seemed not to notice anyone in the room save his master. During the

night Charles had spoken with him in broken, laboured whispering. No one knew what he had said. His feeble voice reached the favourite's ears alone, and not even James, watching jealously, could catch a syllable. He had only seen Roxhythe kiss the King's hand again and again.

The light crept in at the windows. Charles ordered that the curtains should be drawn apart that he might see the day once more. Very shortly after, speech left him.

The slow hours crept on. Once the King's eyelids flickered, and Roxhythe felt the faint pressure of his hand. He bent over it, his face hidden.

Charles became unconscious. It was now only a matter of hours.

The Duke of York came and went; from time to time the physicians took the King's pulse. Nothing further could be done for him.

Drearly the moments ticked away. Except for the whispering of the men by the fireplace there was no sound.

M. Barillon jerked his head towards the still, kneeling figure by the bed.

"I think he feels it."

Feversham sneered.

"As much as he feels anything. It means his downfall."

"Perhaps," said Barillon. "Perhaps."

It was nearly noon. Dr. Shortt drew near the bed, bending over the King. He straightened himself and looked across at the other surgeons. They came to his side . . .

Dr. Shortt came away from the bed.

"Gentlemen!"

Everyone turned anxiously. The Duke was with the other physicians.

"Gentlemen, the King is dead." Shortt walked away to the window, blowing his nose.

There was a long silence. The Duke came away from the great four-poster, his face set. He went out quickly.

Roxhythe held the cold hand still. He had made no movement all through; it was doubtful if he had heard the sentence. Barillon looked at him curiously for a moment.

Then he went to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Milor' . . ." He spoke gently.

Roxhythe looked up. His face was drawn and grey.

"Milor' . . . you heard?"

Roxhythe stared before him.

"Ay. I heard." The level voice did not tremble.

"*Eh bien!*" Before this coldness M. Barillon's gentleness fled. He withdrew.

Once more my lord bent over the lifeless hand, raising it to his lips. There was no answering pressure now. For a long while he held it there, taking his last farewell. Then he rose and looked into the beloved composed features.

He turned, and faced the room. No one spoke. Even Feversham could not sneer.

The hard eyes travelled slowly round the room. Without a word my lord went to the door.

So he left Whitehall, which had been almost his home for so many years. Never again would he willingly cross its threshold. The King was dead.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LOSING GAME

"MADAM, my lord sees no one."

Lady Frances stamped.

"I tell you I am his cousin! I will enter!"

The footman held his ground.

"I crave your ladyship's pardon, but I dare not admit you."

Lady Frances compressed her lips.

"I will enter."

"My lady—"

"Stand aside. I must see John."

The footman's face cleared. He conducted Lady Frances to a great empty room at the back of the house. Presently Roxhythe's old servant came to her. Lady Frances sprang up.

"John, how is he?"

"Well, your ladyship, but sick at heart."

"He—he does not—seek to—take his life?"

John read her fear.

"That is not my lord's way, madam."

"I have been so afraid . . . May I see him?"

"I think he will not receive you, madam."

"Ah, but ask him! Tell him 'tis I, Lady Fanny, who begs he will let me speak with him."

John was irresolute.

"I hardly dare, madam—"

"Yes, yes!"

John bowed.

"I will ask him, madam."

When he had gone Lady Frances paced up and down the room, gripping her fingers nervously.

Roxhythe entered quietly. He was dressed all in black;

his face was very pale, but his eyes were the same as ever, soft and hard by turns, always inscrutable.

"I am indeed honoured, Fanny." He bowed. "Do you need my services?"

Frances went to him and took his hands.

"David—my poor David—"

"No," said Roxhythe, passionless. "Not that." He withdrew his hands.

"David, may not I—even I, who have ever been your friend—may not I—try to comfort you?"

"I want no pity. You cannot comfort me."

"Dear, won't you trust me? Can't you let me see your real self?"

Roxhythe kissed her finger-tips.

"You are very kind, my dear. No."

Lady Frances was silent. She realized that that impenetrable mask would not be dropped for her.

"I am sorry, David. What are you going to do?"

"In what way?" asked Roxhythe.

"Come and sit down!" she commanded. "I know that you will not be received at Whitehall. James hates you."

Roxhythe smiled.

"My dear, if I chose I could hold James 'neath my thumb."

"How?" she asked, incredulous.

"James is weak," said Roxhythe. "In time I could be as great under him as I was under—His Majesty."

"It would mean truckling to him."

"No."

"You know best. So you'll do that?"

"Oh, no!" he replied. "I shall not do that."

"It were a losing game," she said.

"Any game I choose to play now is that. I desire to have naught to do with Whitehall."

Lady Frances hesitated. Then she turned to him.

"David, you must know that your day is over. I have come partly to warn you. I believe James will strike you."

"Probably," said Roxhythe. "On what score?"

"Your share in the Monmouth plot."

"I am expecting that."

"You are armed?"

"I am still Roxhythe," said my lord.

* * * * *

Hardly a fortnight after the King's death, my Lord Sunderland waited on Lord Roxhythe at Bevan House. He was conducted to the library, and there Roxhythe joined him, a sombre figure in black and silver.

He swept Sunderland a deep bow.

"I am honoured," he drawled.

Sunderland returned the bow stiffly.

"My lord, I am come on an unpleasant errand."

"I thought it could not be solely for the pleasure of seeing me. Pray be seated!"

Sunderland remained on his feet.

"I am come at the command of His Majesty who bids me—advise you—to leave the country."

Roxhythe laughed gently.

Sunderland's sharp face crimsoned.

"It is no laughing matter, my lord! King James knows how deeply you were implicated in the Monmouth plot."

"Then why does he not arrest me?" asked Roxhythe.

"He wishes to be lenient. So he advises you to leave the country."

"Very kind. Pray thank him for me."

"And you will go?"

"Not at all."

Sunderland stared.

"You are very cool, sir!"

"I see nothing to be hot about."

"Do you realize that you stand in danger of imprisonment?"

"No," said Roxhythe.

Sunderland sat down.

"I assure you that you do." He met his lordship's enigmatical smile challengingly. But his eyes betrayed uneasiness.

"It's very interesting," said Roxhythe. "You may be sure that I shall not seek to evade arrest."

Sunderland fidgeted.

"You would do well to leave the country," he repeated.

The smile grew more amused.

"My Lord Sunderland, you have ever commanded mine admiration. Your astuteness is quite astonishing. I would advise you to employ it now."

Sunderland rose.

"I fail to understand you, sir."

"Yes?" said Roxhythe, always polite. "A pity."

"I can only repeat my message:—you would do well to leave the country." He walked to the door.

"Your solicitude is charming, but it so happens that I should do better to await arrest."

My Lord Sunderland departed in high dudgeon. He held a consultation with my lady.

"That man is dangerous."

My lady studied herself in a silver-backed hand mirror.

"Roxhythe. Have you but just discovered it?"

"He knows too much. He laughs at my warnings."

The Countess laughed long and low.

"My good Sunderland, he holds you in the hollow of his hand!"

"Because of my share in the Orange business. Curse the man, I never trusted him!"

"It was a pity that you ever took such an interest in the Orange cause. The time was not then. You had best have a care. My lord knows that your position is precarious since you voted for the Exclusion."

Sunderland was plunged in thought.

"If James had him arrested for the part he played in the Monmouth affair, he will accuse me of trafficking with the Orange. There are many who would support him."

"Therefore he must not be arrested," said my lady. She re-arranged the laces at her bosom.

"He must be very sure of his position to refuse to quit the country," mused the Earl. "I wonder, has he written authority from Charles for his dealings in the plot? We know that it was by Charles his wish that he joined Monmouth."

"Did Roxhythe hint at that?"

"It may have been. He was very secret."

"Then I do not think he has authority," said the Countess.

"But it might be well to tell the King that he has."

"So I think. And yet—we do not want him in England."

"My dear Sunderland, the man could ruin you. It would never do to arrest him."

"He may ruin me in any case. He was deep in Halifax his confidence at first."

"If he discloses that he ruins himself. He would only do it if he were accused of the Monmouth plot."

"In fact, it is a threat."

"A powerful one," smiled my lady. "He is a great man still. Placate him."

"God's life, I want no dealings with him!"

"You are sometimes a fool, Robert. He would be useful."

"Tchah! In what way?"

"In many ways." Her ladyship yawned delicately. "If he chose, he could ingratiate himself with James, who is swayed this way and that. With his help you could gain the power you lack."

"I can gain it myself in time. James will forget the Exclusion. When has Roxhythe ever worked with any man?"

"But the King is dead now," said her ladyship gently.

An invitation came from the Countess of Sunderland to the Marquis of Roxhythe. Would he wait on her at his convenience?

Roxhythe laid the note down.

"Is it worth while?" he pondered.

Power was within his grasp. And yet . . . What did he want with it? He had no wish to serve James. All these years he had plotted and worked for Charles. Now Charles was dead, and life held nothing more for him. In fact, he was tired of life. Why not go into exile? Why remain in this accursed land of memories? He was

Roxhythe . . . All these men wanted to see him fall. Well . . . they should not have that pleasure. He had never played the coward's part . . . Yet what did he want with Sunderland? He had no desire to meddle in politics. James could go to destruction in his own way. There was Monmouth By God, what could he not make of Monmouth if he chose! Monmouth was weak; he could be influenced. My lord fully believed that he could bring Monmouth to the throne. To what avail? He had no interest in the Duke—no interest anywhere. Why trouble to intrigue for that puny youth? It would mean work, hard work. And his master had not wished Monmouth to come to the throne.

There was the Orange. . . . No, by heaven! William mistrusted him. And William wanted no help. William was a man, even as he was. A man who stood alone. Alone! Well—why not? Why not use Sunderland to raise himself to his former level? Return to Whitehall Why not? Was he to turn sentimental now, after all these years?

Whitehall packed with bitter-sweet memories. Whitehall The King's closet No.

Suddenly he rose. God, why not submit to arrest? Why defend himself? It were an easy way out, after all . . . Too easy. And they would not arrest him. They dared not.

He picked up Lady Sunderland's letter. Little less than a summons. *Mordieu*, who were the Sunderlands to condescend to him? He flung the letter into the fire. He would ignore it.

'Twere amusing to hold Sunderland in fear. And if they chose to make away with him, so much the better. For the present he would continue as he had always done. They should not see his misery.

What was there to-morrow? A supper-party at Buckhurst's. He would go. Buckhurst was not his enemy. And Sedley. And Digby. And Fortescue. There were a score of men who liked him for his easy wit; a score of men whom he had not harmed.

He looked round the quiet room. Memories, naught but memories. Where was Christopher? If only Christopher were there to-day, seated in his old place He bit his lip. Christopher had chosen the better part. The better part The better part ?

His eyes grew less hard. Had Christopher chosen the better part?

"No! *Mordieu*, no!"

CHAPTER IX

THE SUNDERLANDS

MY Lord Sunderland spoke humbly.

"Sire, I think it were best to leave Roxhythe."

James' eyes flashed.

"What now? Does he refuse to leave the country?"

"He hinted, Sir, that it would serve him better to remain in London."

James pulled at his lip.

"What means he?"

"I think, Sir, that he counts himself safe."

"How? What do you know of him? I can convict him of his guilt in dealing with Monmouth!"

"Sire, he dealt with Monmouth that he might the better serve King Charles."

"Who will believe that?" James was scowling.

Sunderland looked at him significantly.

"It may be, Sir, that he hath that which will prove it."

James' brow grew yet more black.

"Explain yourself!"

"Sir, almost he told me that he had written authority from King Charles."

There was a pause.

"So I am to allow him to plot and work against me?"

A peevish note sounded in the King's voice.

Sunderland was deprecating.

"I hardly like to advise Your Majesty . . ."

"What is your advice?"

"Your Majesty has doubtless considered that Roxhythe makes a powerful ally."

"Do you dare to insinuate that I should placate the man?" cried James, wrathfully.

My lord was shocked.

"Sir! Such a course were unworthy of you. Roxhythe may seek to placate you."

"I want no dealings with him!"

"Then of course Your Majesty must have none. Roxhythe is a clever man."

"An untrustworthy man!"

"Your Majesty says very truly. Nevertheless Your Majesty might make use of him."

"I dislike him!"

"In that case . . ." Sunderland spread out his hands. "Why trouble to notice his existence?" He watched the King's face covertly, and noted with satisfaction that this seed promised to take root. James said no more.

The weeks passed slowly by. It was one day in March that Lady Sunderland met Roxhythe.

She went to Lady Duncannon's *soirée*. Lady Duncannon welcomed Whigs and Tories alike, so Wharton met Halifax, and the Sunderlands, true Tories, rubbed shoulders with every Whig who came. To wit, Lady Sunderland, who sat in close conversation with Lord Macclesfield, lately concerned in the Monmouth plot.

A little stir was caused by the entrance of Lord Roxhythe. Lady Sunderland gripped Macclesfield's arm.

"La! Roxhythe!"

Macclesfield nodded.

"He goes everywhere."

"What effrontery!" Her ladyship eyed Macclesfield over the top of her fan.

"He is brave," admitted my lord grudgingly. "Hostesses still welcome him."

"Well, well!" sighed the Countess. "Gracious! Do I see Trenchard?"

"He is newly arrived in town. It is unwise, of course."

"Dogged man! I admire such courage. Trenchard!" Trenchard came up to her.

"Do I see your ladyship, or do mine eyes deceive me?"

"You see me. What do you in town?"

"Perhaps I wanted to meet you."

"Perhaps you did. Yet it was foolhardy to come."

"The risk was worth the issue."

Lady Sunderland toyed with her fan.

"What is the issue?"

"How can I say, madam? It is for you to prompt me."

She laid a finger on her lips.

"You're over-bold, sir. I can give no promises."

"If I am over-bold, madam, you are over-cautious."

"Maybe. I am but the mouthpiece of my lord."

"Then your lord is over-cautious. Will he come to no decision?"

She looked down at her white hands.

"He waits. Who shall say which way the wind will blow?"

"You mean?"

"No more than I say. You ask us to risk all for—it may be nothing. We wish to know what we are like to gain."

"He whom we will not name comes soon."

"Why, we will wait till then!"

"And after?"

"Who knows?" she smiled. "Must I promise?"

"You will not. But do you hold out—hope?"

"There is always hope," she parried. "Have you seen who is here to-night?"

He frowned.

"Ay. Once bit, twice shy."

"But the King is dead," said my lady.

"I'd have no dealings in that quarter. Unhappily I am otherwise commanded."

She leaned towards him.

"Mark my words, Trenchard. In Roxhythe you gain a powerful ally."

"I know it. But who shall trust him after what he did?"

"Have I not said?—The King is dead."

He shrugged.

Later in the evening Roxhythe passed Lady Sunderland's couch. She beckoned to him, and he had, perforce, to go to her.

"Come and talk to me," she invited. "I am very forgiving, am I not?"

"Are you?" said Roxhythe. He sat down. "Why?"

"You did not answer my note."

"Did I not?"

"You'll say you had forgot that I had written! I was minded to be honest with you. Alack, the time has passed!"

He regarded her languidly.

"Honesty is a virtue which becomes not your sex, my dear."

"True!" She cast up her eyes. "'Tis our sweet deception that attracts. Heigh-ho! Have you been to Whitehall, my lord?"

Up went his brows.

"Lady Sunderland feigns ignorance. Why?"

She bit her lip.

"You have not. Have you seen Mr. Trenchard?"

"He obtrudes himself on one's notice. A plain man."

"I had perceived it. But he has conversation. You should speak with him; he would surprise you."

"Very little surprises me, madam."

"Except me?" She ogled him.

He looked at her gravely.

"In truth, madam, I am accustomed to woman's vagaries."

"Aha! Yet in some ways I differ from the rest of my sex."

"In many. So few women have the brain for affairs."

She cast down her eyes.

"Is it a compliment, my lord?"

"I wonder," said my lord.

At that she raised her eyes, deep wells of innocence.

"Let us be honest!"

"I thought we had decided that it was not becoming, madam?"

"But let us essay it. Do you dislike my poor Sunderland?"

Roxhythe bowed.

"I have a great admiration for Lord Sunderland's cunning."

"Perhaps that feeling is reciprocated," she answered. "You should have speech with my lord."

"Why, then, there are two whose acquaintance you bid me cultivate. Your lord, and Trenchard. A strange couple."

She laughed.

"Are they not? But I do not think I bade you speak with both at once."

"To speak with them separately were too tedious, madam."

"Tedious?"

"I weary of the same subject."

"Would both say the same things, think you?"

"Since you advise me to speak with both it seems likely, madam."

"So you will eschew their company?"

"I shall not seek them out."

"Ah! And if they seek you out?"

"I shall count myself singularly honoured, no doubt."

"I wonder what you mean by that?" she said.

"So do I," smiled Roxhythe, and left her.

My lady was thoughtful. She went home early to meet her lord.

Sunderland entered her boudoir.

"You are very opportune," said my lady. "I want you."

"Good luck!" exclaimed Sunderland. "What ails you?"

She curled her lip at him.

"I am not grown maudlin of a sudden, Spencer, rest assured. I have worked to-night."

He sat down.

"Let's hear it, my dear."

"I have had speech with Roxhythe. Also with Trenchard."

"Oddsbody! Is Trenchard in town?"

"Ay, and wants an answer."

"What said you?"

"I told him that we should wait until we might clearly see the result. He asked for hope. I gave him that."

She smiled slowly. "Monmouth desires to treat with Roxhythe."

"It was to be expected. What is Roxhythe's attitude?"

"I cannot tell. He is to be feared, Sunderland."

"Ay. I'd think seriously of Monmouth if Roxhythe were to take charge of his affairs."

"So would a-many others. Roxhythe has the cool sagacity that Monmouth lacks. He would change the whole complexion of the matter."

Sunderland tapped his teeth with one finger-nail.

"H'm. I do not think he will join Monmouth."

"No, but have you thought what else he might do?"

"Warn James? Ay."

My lady rose, drawing her wrapper about her.

"I've given you something to rack your brains over," she said, and laughed. "You would not be the man you are if you had not me to wife."

"I don't deny your intelligence," he retorted.

* * * * *

When Mr. Trenchard waited on Lord Roxhythe he went straight to the point.

"My lord, once you betrayed us."

Roxhythe paused. He was in the act of pouring out a glass of wine.

"I did not know you had come to indulge in reminiscences," he remarked.

"Nor have I. You betrayed us to your master. Perhaps I do not blame you."

"How magnanimous!" Roxhythe handed him the glass.

"Thank you. Well, now you have no master. Things have changed. Papist James was never to your taste." He paused. Roxhythe was sipping his wine, and did not speak. "Things have changed. His Highness remembers that you aided him to escape when our plot was exploded. Have you still a fondness for him?"

"Had I ever?" asked Roxhythe, mildly surprised.

"It is for you to say. Have you ever considered that His Highness might—plot again?"

"I never consider the obvious," said my lord.

"Then have you considered that it might be to your advantage to—plot with him?"

"I have not," said Roxhythe rather drily.

"But then you do not consider the obvious, do you?"

"No more than I consider the impossible."

"Is this impossible?"

"Say, rather, ludicrous."

Trenchard flushed.

"His Highness offers you—a place of command if you will join him."

"Delightfully vague," commented my lord.

"Prove yourself, sir, and I may safely promise a high place."

"It seems that His Grace is afraid of me," murmured Roxhythe.

"What is there to be afraid of?" sneered Trenchard.

"Why does he want me so urgently?"

"He wants all men."

"Oh? You take quite the wrong tone with me, you know. I do not like the offer."

"You like the offer but not the way in which I make it?"

"Perhaps even that."

"I thought so. Let me tell you that His Highness begs you will join him in Holland."

"I think the climate would not agree with me."

"Does the English climate suit you so well?"

"I think it will." Roxhythe played with his rings.

Trenchard curbed his impatience.

"What is your objection to my offer?"

"It is altogether too vague. What prospects has His Grace?"

"Do you expect me to tell you that?"

"Do you expect me to join you in the dark? If Sunderland would not, how should I?"

The chance shot found its mark. Trenchard sprang up.

"What do you know of Sunderland?"

My lord smiled.

"What more do you know?" cried Trenchard.

Again my lord smiled. If the weight within him were less he could enjoy this game. He essayed another shot.

"I might mention the name of a Scotsman," he said.

"If you know that Argyle is with us, what more do you want?"

"Nothing," yawned my lord. "So I'll give you good-day."

"You will not join us?"

"It is too much trouble," apologized his lordship. "Convey my respects to His Grace of Monmouth."

He bowed his guest out and returned to the library.

He had flung away that last chance; his master had not wished Monmouth to come to the throne. As to Sunderland—pah! He wanted no power under any man; his day was done. He was only waiting now until he could join his King.

His glance fell on his gold comfit-box, given him by Charles. In diamonds was written on the lid:—

"Roxhythe: C.R."

He picked it up, a smile that was more terrible than tears upon his lips. Slowly his hand clenched on it; his face had grown very grey. He sat down, resting his arms on the table, gazing dry-eyed at the jewelled box in his hand. He was still smiling, looking back across the years.

". . . So we are linked together, Davy, you and I."

"Always, Sir. I stand or fall with you."

"And always you had my love, David . . ."

There was a long, long silence. The proud head sank over my lord's hands; the comfit-box was pressed to his lips.

"Ah, Sire . . . Sire . . .!" whispered Roxhythe.

CHAPTER X

THE SHOT

LADY Fanny turned the page.

“ . . . My Heart bleeds for my deare Master. Give him Love, and Tell him howe Grately I do feel for him. The Newes of King Charles His Deathe shocked me beyond Measure. I dare not think what must be my Lord His Feelings. Howe I wish thatt I might be with Him nowe! Alas, it cannot be, but I am looking forward eagerly to the Day when I may once againe press His Hand. I do hope to come to England soone for a shortt Time. I cannot tell you howe I am longing to see You once more. I thank Heaven I came to Holland, for I have found Peace, and, in a Measure, Happiness. But after these Many Yeares my whole being is crying out to see You againe, and my deare Lord. I live for the Moment when I shall once more hear His Beloved Voice . . . ”

“I wish he might come now,” sighed Frances. “Indeed, indeed, Roxhythe needs him.”

* * * * *

Mr. Trenchard held counsel with Mr. Wildmay.

“Roxhythe knows too much. He will not join us.”

“And Sunderland?”

“Wavers. I think he will always play for safety. He will hazard naught. But Roxhythe” He paused, pursing his lips. “He knows too much.”

“What does he know?”

“That Argyle is coming, and that Sunderland is irresolute.”

“Gad, Trenchard! If he splits——!”

“He will. Somehow he must worm himself back into favour at Court. What surer way than to warn James 'gainst us? Since he refuses to join us that must be his intention.”

"Unless he is with Sunderland, and waits."

"He is not with Sunderland; I know that. And I mis-liked his bearing: 'twas a thought too sinister."

Wildmay was dismayed.

"What then is to be done?"

Trenchard drew his chair a little closer.

* * * * *

Across the ball-room Lady Frances espied her cousin. She beckoned him.

"You, David?"

"Why not?" he asked.

"No reason. I am very glad to see you. I have a message for you."

"From Chris . . . What does he say?"

"Yes, from Chris. How did you know?"

"I suppose I was thinking of him. How is he?"

"Very well. He sends his dear love to you and wishes he might be at your side during this—unhappy time."

Roxhythe shook his head.

"Too late," he said.

"Yes. He hopes to come to England soon, though, and bids me tell you that—well, I'll give you his own words—that he is living for the moment when he may once more hear your beloved voice."

Roxhythe's eyes softened.

"Does he say that? And is he coming soon?"

"So he says. You—you will like to see him, David?"

"Can you ask? After seven years . . . And he still loves me. He is very faithful."

"Dear Chris! Yes, he's faithful. He left his whole heart with you."

"I had thought he would have recalled it long since—for little Hook-nose."

"He writes admiringly of William, but I think he does not love him."

"Foolish. William would make a fine heroic figure."

Fanny drew him closer.

"Do you think William—will strike at the King?"

"You are growing treasonable, Fanny. It seems possible. But he will only strike at the right moment. There is nothing foolhardy about the Orange."

"No. I don't like James. I think that there will be trouble."

"You are really most unwise, my dear. You will find yourself clapped up in the Tower if you speak these shocking sentiments aloud," said Roxhythe.

"Jasper is most annoyed. I think he hopes for William."

Roxhythe was amused.

"I shall enjoy seeing Jasper turned intriguer. But tell him to leave Monmouth alone."

Frances started.

"Heavens! Is Monmouth to rise?"

"I should not be surprised. He planned once—why not again?"

"He could never be King!"

"Of course he could not. He has not the head."

"And Jasper would never support him."

"Then all is well." Roxhythe glanced round the room.

"I counsel you, Fanny, to remark Mrs. Challis. The fair woman with the roguish smile. Yes, with Birchwood."

Lady Frances looked, obediently.

"What of her?"

"She is rather *piquante*, is she not?"

"Am I to believe that you are once again in love?"

"Oh, no! She serves to distract me for the time."

Frances tapped his arm with her fan.

"David, I am sure you have some dark scheme in mind! What do you purpose doing?" She found it quite impossible to read his face.

"You are so inquisitive," sighed Roxhythe.

"Belike I am. Do you intend to win James his favour?"

"If you were a man, my dear, I should offer you my comfit-box."

She stared.

"What am I to understand by that?"

"I forgot. You do not know. It was an old joke of

Saint-Aignan's. He used to aver that when I wished to turn the subject I offered him a sweetmeat." He smiled a little, remembering. She pouted.

"Then I am snubbed. How hateful of you! I don't want you to go over to James."

"Tut-tut! I suppose you would like me to join the Orange?"

"Well! . . . Why not?"

"*Cordieu*, I could name an hundred reasons! Have you ever spoken with him?"

"No. What is he like?"

"He resembles nothing so much as an iceberg. And his Court is composed of Puritanical gentlemen who give themselves the airs of small sultans. I wish you had met him; it would have amused you."

↳ Fanny laughed.

"I think it would have depressed me! I was never Puritanical, David!"

"No," he said. "Certainly not that. Do you remember the little Vicomte, I wonder?"

Fanny was not yet too old to blush.

"David, how dare you? I'll not be reminded of my youthful indiscretions! How frightened I was to be sure! Papa was so strict for all his wickedness."

"You were perturbed. So was the Vicomte."

She chuckled behind her fan.

"Luckily you were in Paris at the time. I was so thankful!"

"So was not the Vicomte."

"No. Dear me, how long ago it is! I cried when I heard that you had wounded him."

"Did you? But then, you were young and foolish."

"So I was. And now I am old and foolish. Very virtuous, however."

Roxhythe nodded.

"Strange . . ." he pondered. "I never thought Jasper would have held any fascination for you."

"Like to unlike," she retorted. "We are prosaically blissful."

"You are. Quite depressing, in fact. Had you married me—pouf!" he snapped his fingers.

"Oh, I was never as foolish as that!" she said.

"Say rather that we were neither of us as foolish as that."

"You are most objectionable," she dimpled, and beckoned to Sedley who was passing.

* * * * *

My lord descended the steps of Lady Mitcham's house, drawing on his gloves. As was always his custom, he was leaving the ball early. His coach awaited him.

It was a fine moonlight night, very still and beautiful. My lord stood for a moment on the steps, looking round. The door closed behind him. He walked to where his coach stood, and there he paused again, looking into the shadows by the wall. A little smile that was almost triumphant curved his lips. He turned his head.

"Shoot, my friend."

The footman stared at him in amazement. My lord stood still.

Something moved in the shadows. There was a flash, a roar, and then smoke.

The Most Noble the Marquis of Roxhythe fell back into the footman's arms.

"*Touché!*" he gasped. "No! Let him—go!"

The other footman stopped in his pursuit.

"Let—him go, my lord?" he asked, stupidly.

"What else, fool?" My lord's hand was pressed to his side. "Take me home!"

"Sir, you are hurt! I'll carry you into the house!" said William distractedly.

"No." Roxhythe held fast to his consciousness. "I command—you—take—me—home!"

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT ROXHYPHE

"My lady, there is a lackey from Bevan House who desires speech with you."

Lady Frances was surprised.

"So? I'll come." She went downstairs. When she saw John she smiled. "Well John? You've a mess—" She stopped short, staring at him. "John! What is it?"

The man's face worked.

"My lady—my master—" he choked.

Lady Frances drew nearer.

"Quickly, John! What—what is it?"

"He is—dying!" John's voice trembled. "He—desires to see you."

All the colour ebbed slowly from her face.

"Good—God! No, no!"

"He was—shot—last night." John's head was bowed. "I cannot tell you, madam. He wishes you to come."

"Shot! Oh, heaven, 'twas that we heard, then! Yes, yes, I'll come at once! Only wait one moment!" She turned, and flew upstairs.

In three minutes she was back again, seated in the coach. She had commanded John to sit with her. Her eyes were wide.

"It was last night? When he left the ball?"

"Yes, my lady. They—brought him home—unconscious."

"Dolts! Fools! Why did they not take him back to the house?"

John brushed his hand across his eyes.

"It—was not—my lord's will, madam," he said simply.

Lady Frances burst into tears.

"Can't they—save him? Surely, surely, it is not mortal?"

"Dr. Burnest was with him through the night, madam. Nothing—can be done."

Lady Frances wept.

Outside the door of my lord's room she met the surgeon. Eagerly she caught at his arm.

"Tell me he will live! Oh, he cannot die! He cannot!"

Burnest took her hand.

"I beg you will be calm, Lady Frances. The bullet entered a vital part. Don't grieve my lord!"

She wiped her eyes.

"I will be calm. Is he—is he conscious?"

"Yes, madam, but very weak. He commanded that you should be sent for. You'll not excite him?"

She drew herself up.

"Of course I shall not."

Burnest opened the door for her.

My lord lay in bed, raised slightly on pillows. He was wrapped in an elegant bed-gown, and he wore his wig. His eyes were closed, but he opened them as Frances entered.

He smiled.

"My dear Fanny—all my difficulties are solved."

She bent over him.

"Dear, wicked Roxhythe!" In spite of herself, tears stole down her cheeks.

Up went his brows.

"I thought you knew that I could not bear a weeping woman?" His voice was full of mockery.

"Since you cannot weep for yourself, David . . ." she whispered, and flicked away the tear-drops.

"Weep? I?" The faint voice was disdainful. "I am only too well satisfied."

John put a chair for her ladyship. Frances sat down.

Roxhythe allowed her to take his hand. He was staring before him.

"The . . . welcome end. Gad, but I was glad to see the fellow . . . lurking in the shadows! . . . He little knew . . . little knew . . ."

"Who was it, David?" Lady Frances was surprised at her own calm.

"Trenchard. He thought . . . I should betray him . . . Sapiient man." Suddenly Roxhythe chuckled. "I told him . . . to shoot. He was . . . so surprised . . . he—" He broke off, coughing.

Burnest was at his side in a moment. The handkerchief that came away from my lord's lips was stained red.

"Sir, I beg you will keep quiet."

"No doubt. You want . . . to prolong . . . life. Unfortunately . . . I want . . . to end it."

"Sir—"

"My . . . dear Burnest . . . we have dealt with . . . one another . . . before. Don't . . . you realize . . . the futility of . . . argument?"

"You were always very stubborn, sir." Burnest put a spoon to his lips, smiling.

Roxhythe took the restorative. His eyes closed.

For a long time there was absolute silence. My lord lay in a kind of stupor. Presently a deep furrow appeared between his brows. He began to speak, muttering.

". . . vain . . . regrets! . . . Not I, sir. There was . . . never a question . . . of it. If you . . . think that . . . Fanny . . . you do not . . . know me. Always I am Roxhythe. Roxhythe . . . C.R. . . . linked together . . . Sire, all my . . . life . . ." His voice died away. He moved uneasily; his hand was very hot.

"My dear . . . Saint-Aignan! . . . a maker of . . . gloves. Blue . . . entwined. Did . . . Colbert tell you, Madame?" His eyes opened. They were shining with a strange, feverish light. "When . . . you . . . are gone . . . nothing matters. The . . . better . . . part. Fools! . . . fools! . . . Someone said . . . that. The better . . . part! . . . Always your . . . faithful . . . servant, Sir." He struggled up on his elbow. "It is . . . Cromwell's lucky day! How . . . could we . . . hope to win? Courage, Sir! This is . . . not the end!"

Burnest put him back on his pillows.

"Hush, sir! Be still."

He was shaken off.

"Gentlemen . . . the King . . . is dead! . . . Who was it . . . uttered the accursed . . . words? His hand . . . is cold . . . Sire . . . Sire!"

"Give me that bottle!"

John put it into his hands, weeping. Burnest measured out a spoonful. The mixture trickled between my lord's parted lips. Frances watched in silent agony.

The brown eyes opened.

"Fanny . . . why weep? Do you . . . think I . . . mind?"

"My lord, I beg you will not talk!"

"You . . . intrude . . . Burnest." The eyes were haughty.

"I am sorry, sir. I am responsible for you, you see."

The fine lips curled.

"No one is responsible . . . for Roxhythe . . . save himself. You would . . . oblige me . . . by retiring."

Lady Frances laid her hand on the surgeon's.

"Mr. Burnest, let him have his way. You cannot help now."

"Madam, I cannot allow him to——"

"*Mordieu!* Am . . . I to be set . . . at naught?"

"You only excite him. Please, please stand back!"

Burnest shrugged and walked away.

"Another . . . of those . . . who dislike me. I have . . . inspired . . . great love, or great . . . hatred . . . never a . . . luke-warm . . . liking, I thank God!"

Frances stroked his hand.

"In truth, you are Roxhythe," she smiled.

"Always. They . . . would have liked . . . to see me . . . fall. Had I lived . . . I would have shown them that Roxhythe . . . can stand . . . alone! But it is . . . better so. I am . . . going . . . to my master." Again his eyes closed. After perhaps ten minutes they opened. They did not see Lady Frances.

"It is . . . no laughing matter, Sir! . . . I am . . . too old to be . . . ordered . . . by petty princelings

. . . Thank God . . . for Whitehall . . . and my . . . own master. Curse . . . the dolt! Why . . . must he sit . . . in your place? . . . So you will leave . . . me, Chris? After all these . . . years. Did you bring my mask? . . . You know me . . . very well . . . don't you? You will . . . not stay with me? You make too much . . . out of . . . too little. I regret . . . nothing . . . The better . . . part . . . the better . . . part . . . *Cor . . . dieu!* I would choose the same . . . the same . . ." The brown eyes were frowning. "Why . . . must you sit . . . in his place? Memories . . . only . . . memories . . . What if I did . . . lose all? The . . . one friend . . . the one friend. . . Nothing matters . . . save your pleasure, Sir. I am . . . busied with . . . your affairs." Suddenly he laughed. "They . . . remind me of . . . cabbages! . . . a fruitful topic!" He drew his hand away, passing it across his eyes. "You remember . . . the green hangings . . . don't you, Chris?" His hand fell away. He looked at Lady Frances' bowed head. "I . . . have been . . . dreaming. I thought Chris was . . . here. Fanny?"

"Dear David?" Lady Frances tried to choke the sobs that rose to her lips.

Roxythe was smiling now.

"You . . . remember how Chris . . . laughed? It always . . . pleased me. He laughed . . . because I objected . . . to the green . . . hangings. They are gone . . . now. I had them . . . changed. It is . . . eight years. A . . . long time, my . . . dear."

"Yes, David. You still have—me."

"Of course. You . . . could never . . . quite . . . disown me . . . could you?"

"I am always—your friend, David. We understand one another."

The smile grew.

"But then you . . . are not . . . impenetrable, you know!"

"Am I not? How—you love to—tease me, David!"

"*Vraiment* . . . I am a trial. Don't let Jasper meddle . . . in Monmouth's cause!"

"I will not."

"I . . . ought to send . . . some farewell . . . messages. I always . . . disliked . . . the heroic pose . . . off the stage. Do you . . . remember Crewe?"

"And the silly wife! That was unlucky, David."

"A . . . mistake . . . I admit. Give . . . my love . . . to Chris. I would I . . . had seen him . . . just once . . . again. You . . . won't believe me . . . but I cared . . . for him."

"I know that you did, dear. I always knew it. If I said hard things I am very sorry!"

"My dear . . . according . . . to your lights . . . you spoke . . . rightly. You . . . could not . . . understand."

She shook her head.

"We won't speak of it, David."

"We might . . . quarrel . . . an we did. I regret . . . I cannot . . . repent, weeping. It . . . is not in . . . the part." He paused, and his hand tightened on hers. "I could have . . . regained . . . all my lost . . . power. It was . . . within my grasp. But it . . . was not . . . worth it. You . . . understand?"

"Perfectly, David."

"Your chief . . . attraction. What . . . is the . . . time?"

She glanced at the clock.

"Just after three, dear."

"Ah! . . . *He* died . . . at noon. I shall not wait . . . much longer. I am . . . very content." The weary lids drooped. "I have to . . . thank you . . . for your . . . kindness. I knew . . . that you would . . . come."

"I would have come from the ends of the earth, David."

"Happily . . . you were . . . nearer. I should have been . . . loth to put you . . . to such . . . inconvenience. It is . . . very dark. Draw the curtains . . . further apart! No . . . matter . . ." The whisper ceased.

Burnest tiptoed to the bed.

"It is nearly the end," he murmured in Lady Fanny's ear. "Just sit where you are."

She nodded. Her face was drawn.

John crept up to the bed and knelt beside it, his head buried in the coverlet. Lady Frances laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Do not grieve, John," she said pitifully. "You know he would not wish it."

Only a strangled sob answered her. Roxhythe moved his hand.

"Devil . . . take you . . . John! What now?"

John carried the hand to his lips, smothering it with kisses.

"My lord! My dear lord!"

"Chut!" Roxhythe pressed his fingers feebly. "Have . . . a care to him . . . Fanny."

"I promise."

There was a long, long silence. Nothing broke it save the laboured breathing. John was quiet now, clasping my lord's hand. Lady Fanny sat very still.

Over by the fire was the surgeon, staring into the red embers. He did not move.

Half an hour crept by; yet another. Somewhere outside a clock chimed mournfully.

My lord's eyes opened. There was a far-away look in them not of this world.

"I must . . . to Whitehall. To . . . my little . . . master." Faintly, very faintly came the whisper. His beautiful smile curved my lord's lips. "Sire . . . Sire . . ."

The eyelids fluttered, closed. My lord's hand quivered. He gave a deep sigh, full of peace.

"Only . . . your . . . pleasure . . . Sir . . ."

His head fell sideways a little on the pillow. The smile was still on his lips, but the light had gone out.

THE END

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to the study of the asymptotic behavior of the solutions of the system (1) as $t \rightarrow \infty$. It is shown that the solutions of the system (1) tend to zero as $t \rightarrow \infty$ if and only if the matrix A is stable.

2. In the second part of the paper, the problem of the asymptotic stability of the solutions of the system (1) is considered. It is shown that the system (1) is asymptotically stable if and only if the matrix A is stable and the matrix B is nonsingular.

3. In the third part of the paper, the problem of the asymptotic stability of the solutions of the system (1) is considered. It is shown that the system (1) is asymptotically stable if and only if the matrix A is stable and the matrix B is nonsingular.

4. In the fourth part of the paper, the problem of the asymptotic stability of the solutions of the system (1) is considered. It is shown that the system (1) is asymptotically stable if and only if the matrix A is stable and the matrix B is nonsingular.



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