THE IMPRUDENCE OF PRUE

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The Imprudence of Prue

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"Permit your slave——" Page 220.

With Four Illustrations
By HERMAN PFEIFER

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THE IMPRUDENCE OF PRUE

CHAPTER I
THE PRICE OF A KISS

"Stand and deliver!"

The words rang out in the gathering darkness of the February evening. The jaded horses, exhausted with dragging a cumbrous chariot through the miry lanes and rugged by-roads of the rough moorland, obeyed the command with promptitude, disregarding the lash of the postboy and the valiant oaths of a couple of serving-men in the rumble.

"Keep still, unless you wish me to blow out what you are pleased to consider your brains," said the highwayman. "My pistols have an awkward habit of going off of their own accord when I am not instantly obeyed—so don't provoke them."

The postilion became as still as a statue and the footmen, under cover of the self-acting pistols, descended, grumbling but unresisting, yielded up their rusty blunderbusses with a transparent show of reluctance and withdrew to a respectful distance, while the highwayman dismounted, opened the carriage door and throwing the light of a lantern within, revealed the shrinking forms of two women muffled in cloaks and hoods.

One of them uttered a shriek of terror when the door was opened and incoherently besought the highwayman to spare two lone, defenseless women.

The highwayman thrust his head in and peered round eagerly, as though in search of other passengers. Then, pulling off his slouch-brimmed hat, he re-

vealed a pair of dark eyes that gleamed fiercely from behind a mask, and as much of a bronzed and weather-beaten face as it left uncovered. Black hair, loosely gathered in a ribbon and much disordered by wind and rain, added considerably to the wildness of his aspect, and the uncertain light of the lantern flickered upon several weapons besides the pistols he carried so carelessly.

"I shall not hurt you, Madam," he exclaimed impatiently. "Your money and jewels are all I seek. I expected to find a very different booty here and must hasten elsewhere lest I miss it altogether by this confounded mishap. So let me advise you to waste neither my time nor your own breath in useless lamentations, but hasten to hand out your purses and diamonds."

"We have neither, Mr. Highwayman," said the other lady in a clear, musical voice, quite free from tremor. "I am a poor widow without a penny in the world, flying from my creditors to take refuge with a relative almost as poor as myself. This is my companion—alack for her! The wage I owe her might make her passing rich if ever 'twere paid—but it never will be."

"Do poor widows travel in coach and four with serving-men and maids?" demanded the highwayman with an incredulous laugh. "Come, ladies, I am well used to these excuses. Do not put me to the disagreeable necessity of setting you down in the mud while I search your carriage and—mayhap—your fair selves."

The lady threw back her hooded cloak, revealing a face and form of rare beauty, and extended two white hands and arms, bare to the elbow and entirely devoid of ornament. In one hand she held a little purse through whose silken meshes glittered a few pieces of money.

"This is all the money I have in the wide world," she said, in a voice of pathetic sweetness. "Take it, if you will, and search for more if you think it worth while—and if you find anything, prithee, share it with me!"

But the highwayman scarcely heard her. Through his mask his eyes were fixed upon her beautiful face with a devouring admiration of which she was quite unconscious. Not that such an expression would have seemed at all extraordinary to her, or otherwise than the natural tribute of any masculine creature to the beauty she valued at its full worth.

"Keep your purse, Madam," he said, and his voice had lost its harshness; "I will take but one thing from you—something you will not miss, but that a monarch might prize—a kiss from those lovely lips."

"A kiss, rascal! Do you know what you ask?" she exclaimed, her sweetness vanishing in haughty anger. "Something I shall not miss, forsooth! What can—"

"Oh! kiss him, Prue; kiss him and let us be gone!" implored her companion. "We shall miss the mail-coach at the cross-roads, and then what will become of us?"

The highwayman leaned against the open carriage-door and watched the

struggling emotions flickering over the face of the widow. Anger and disgust were succeeded by scornful mirth, and at last, with a gesture of indescribably haughty grace, she extended her hand, palm downward.

"My hand, Sir Highwayman," she said loftily, "has been deemed not unworthy of royal kisses!"

"My plebeian lips would not venture where a king's have feasted," was the mocking retort. "But whoever in future may kiss your lips must come after Robin Freemantle, the Highwayman. So, sweet one, by your leave." He bent suddenly over her and kissed her boldly on the scarlet blossom of her mouth.

She drew back, gasping with anger and amazement. "How dare you?" she almost screamed.

He stood a moment as if half-dazed by his own audacity, then closed the carriage-door and replaced his beaver on his head.

"Good night, Ladies," he cried in a tone of reckless gaiety. "A pleasant journey to London and a merry time at court, and as 'tis ill junketing on an empty purse, accept mine in exchange for yours."

With which he flung a heavy wallet into the carriage and snatching the little silken trifle from Prue's hand, sprang on his horse and was quickly lost in the gloom of night.

"Insolent varlet!" cried Prue passionately. "Would I were a man to beat him to death!" And she burst into a flood of angry tears.

"Console yourself, sweet cousin," said her companion coaxingly. "You have saved our jewels for the second time to-day—first by outwitting a sheriff and now by cajoling a highwayman. After all, what is a kiss? You have just as many left for Sir Geoffrey as you had before you were robbed of that one."

"That is all very well," cried Prue, half laughing and half tearful, "but how would you have liked it if it had happened to you?"

"Faith, I'm not sure I should have made such a fuss! After thirty one may well be grateful for the kisses of a handsome young gallant—for I could see he was young, and I'll warrant me he was comely too—even if he is Robin Freemantle, the highwayman."

"For shame, Cousin Peggie, an' if you love me, never remind me of this," replied Prue, with a touch of irritation. "I would far rather have lost my few last jewels than have suffered such an insult."

"So would not I," laughed the incorrigible cousin. "What with play and the haberdasher all I have left in the world is contained in the little box under my feet, and I should count that cheaply saved at the price of a kiss."

"You were not asked to pay the price," said Prue coldly. Then, thrusting her head out of the window, she relieved her pent-up feelings by soundly berating the cowardly serving-men who had yielded without a blow to a force so inferior

and were now wasting precious time hunting for their useless weapons instead of hastening to the near-by crossroads to meet the mail-coach in which the two ladies proposed traveling from Yorkshire to London.

The two men clambered back into the rumble, somewhat shamefaced, and each striving by muttered disclaimers to reject the charge of cowardice in favor of the other. The postilion, suddenly galvanized into activity, roused the horses with strange oaths and cries and fierce cracklings of the whip. Prudence closed the window and retired into the voluminous shelter of her cloak, and the interrupted journey was resumed.

CHAPTER II
LADY DRUMLOCH

No further adventures overtook the two ladies. The mail-coach picked them up at the crossroads and carried them to London in course of time, where they were soon safely housed with their grandmother, Lady Drumloch.

My Lady Drumloch was, as all the world knows, a very great lady, and back in the days of King Charles the Second had been a beauty and a toast. The daughter of a duke and the wife of an earl, she had queened it in two courts, had gone into exile with King James, intrigued and plotted with the Jacobites, and finally, having lost husband and son and fortune in her devotion to a hopeless cause, had made her peace with Queen Anne and returned to England to eke out her last years in the soul-crushing poverty of the great.

But as with her she brought her two granddaughters, the Honorable Margaret Moffat and Lady Prudence Wynne, her meager little house on the outskirts of May fair soon became not only the Mecca of other Jacobites as aristocratic and as poor as herself, but of many who were neither Jacobites nor in reduced circumstances. Among both classes the Lady Prudence, though but fifteen, soon found courtiers to pick and choose from. The saucy child with her skin of milk and roses, her tangle of dark curling locks and her wonderful blue eyes, was already possessed of that mysterious charm of femininity by which the world has been swayed since the days of Eve.

To gratify her grandmother's ambition, and at the same time emancipate herself from the restrictions of the school-room, she married the Viscount Brooke, heir of the Earl of Overbridge. But the marriage resulted disastrously.

The viscount had long before exhausted his private means, and although his father, hoping that marriage would sober and settle him, made a sufficiently liberal allowance to the young couple, a few months of reckless extravagance and gaiety plunged them in an ocean of debt, from which the viscount, in a fit of delirium, extricated himself by means of a bullet in his brain, leaving Prue a widow at sixteen with no home but her grandmother's little house in Mayfair, and not a penny beyond the grudging bounty of her father-in-law.

Still, it was delightful to be a widow, and, consequently, free from all authority. Having curtailed her mourning within the scantiest limits, she returned to society with renewed ardor, where her youth and beauty, enhanced by her widowhood, secured her a flattering welcome. She played the hostess in Lady Drumloch's shabby drawing-rooms, filling them with laughter, scandal and love-making. She chaperoned Margaret Moffat, who was ten years her senior and who loved her with the infatuation one sometimes, if rarely, observes in a very plain woman for a very beautiful one.

Poor as she notoriously was, the oft-repeated rumors of Prue's engagement to one or another of her wealthy admirers enabled her to run into debt time and again for such necessaries of existence as fashionable dresses and costly jewels, for which she certainly never expected to pay out of her own pocket. Nay, even money-lenders, beguiled by her bright eyes and her unquestionably promising matrimonial prospects, had furnished the sinews of war (for which her future husband would have to pay right royally), and this despite the fact that the Lady Prudence Brooke, widowed at sixteen, was still a widow at two-and-twenty.

Lady Drumloch's granddaughters were not expected at her town-house, and when the hired cabriolet in which they arrived drew up at her door, the ancient butler was divided between joy at the sight of the two bright young faces, and trepidation as to the welcome they might expect from the higher powers. Mrs. Lowton, my lady's waiting-woman, was troubled by no such complex emotions. She made little attempt to conceal her own dissatisfaction or to disguise the fact that the old countess was in no humor for gay company.

"My lady has had an awful attack of gout," she averred, "and the doctors have ordered the strictest quiet. The least agitation might be fatal."

"We will be as quiet as mice, Lowton," said Lady Prudence, ostentatiously tiptoeing across the narrow hall and up the steep stairs. "James, pay the coachman and let me know how much I owe you."

The butler obeyed, though with no great alacrity. "Her ladyship ain't long getting back to her old tricks," he muttered with rather a wry smile, as he hunted through his pockets for the coach-hire. "I gave the man two shillings—and sixpence for himself," he said, coming back promptly. "I suppose your ladyship has not forgotten that before you went to Yorkshire—"

"Oh! never mind that, James," she interrupted hastily. "Let bygones be bygones, and when I come into my fortune you will see whether I forget anything. Come, Peggie, let us get to bed. I am fainting for want of sleep."

"I am fainting, too," retorted Miss Moffat, "but more with hunger than sleep. Lowton, for the love of Heaven, order some breakfast, and that speedily."

"I'll see what I can do, Miss Margaret," said Lowton, without enthusiasm, "but her ladyship keeps us closer than ever, and I doubt if there's anything for breakfast but milk and bread."

The cousins crept softly up to the little room on the top floor, where their dismantled beds and the bare floors gave so much evidence of disuse and so little promise of hospitality that the most courageous hearts might have sunk a little.

"We were better off at Bleakmoor, even with the bailiffs in attendance," said Prue piteously.

"Mayhap—but there we were out of help's way, and here, if we will—or rather if you will—there is succor at hand," said the undaunted Peggie—"and even while I speak of rescue, here comes my dear old Lowton with food for the starving and sheets and blankets for the weary. Come, coz, eat and sleep, and when you wake you will be ready for any emergency."

It was evening before the tired travelers rose, and, ransacking wardrobes and closets for the wherewithal to replace their soiled and dusty traveling attire, made themselves presentable for the inevitable visit of ceremony to their grandmother.

Quiet as they had been, the old lady had become aware of their arrival long before the faithful Lowton ventured, in lugubrious whispers, to communicate the news.

"There is no necessity, my good Lowton, for you to apologize for my granddaughters," Lady Drumloch had interrupted, almost before the first word was uttered. "No doubt I shall have to listen to half-a-dozen different stories before I get at the true cause of this visit, so you may as well spare yourself the trouble of inventing excuses for you know not what. Let me know when the travelers rise, and I will receive them and hear what they have to say for themselves."

The venerable countess lay in a huge four-poster bed, propped high with pillows scarcely whiter than her waxen face, upon which still lingered some of the beauty and all of the indomitable hauteur of the belle of half-a-century ago. Her scant and snowy locks were concealed under a cap of priceless lace and ruffles of the same fell over her small ivory-white hands. At the ceremonious announcement of the Viscountess Brooke and the Honorable Miss Moffat, she slightly moved her head on the pillow and turned her bright, dark eyes from one to the other.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit, my lady Viscountess?" she in-

quired dryly.

"Partly, dear Grandmother, to our anxiety about your ladyship's health," said Prudence, sweeping so deep a curtsey that she seemed to be falling on her knees, "and partly because a whole long year in the wilds of Yorkshire hath made us homesick."

"A whole long year in your brother-in-law's house, gaming, dancing and—unless I am misinformed—play-acting and fox-hunting, has still left you with an appetite for the follies of the court. I doubt not," said Lady Drumloch. "Does your ladyship return to Yorkshire to-day? or to-morrow? I understand that you traveled without escort or baggage and by the public conveyance!"

"Do not be angry with us, dear Grandmother," pleaded Prue, her bright eyes filling with tears (the minx always had a supply at her command). "You do not want us to go back to-morrow, do you? Are you not a little tired of the excellent Lowton's conversation, and do you not weary for your little Prue to read you Mr. Pope's latest poem and Mr. Steele's new play? and make you die of laughing over her adventures with the Yorkshire squires?"

"And not only the squires," put in Peggie, who had been standing rather in the background, eagerly awaiting a chance to bring herself into notice. "Prue has had adventures with gallants more romantic than Yorkshire squires!"

"Ah! is that Margaret Moffat?" cried the old lady. "'Tis sure where Prudence is, her shadow can not be far away! And, pray, what have your adventures been? Have not even bumpkin squires fallen to your charms? Surely Prudence has not carried off all the honors there as well as here?"

This was a hard thrust, for Peggie was as plain as her cousin was fair, and had entered her fourth decade without one serious assault upon her maiden heart. Devoted to Prue, she was too loyal to think that this was partly the fault of the youthful widow's all-devouring coquetry, but she was very human, and it wounded her to be forced into acknowledging the contrast.

"Alack, Peggie made short work of their hearts," cried Prue, coming to the rescue. "I only turned their heads. 'Tis strange how foolish men will always be about a widow."

"Foolish enough to marry one widow after being jilted by another," acquiesced the grandmother dryly. "I hear thy erstwhile lover, Lord Beachcombe, has married the Widow Curzon. The baker's daughter hath a second chance of wearing strawberry-leaves."

"She may have them for aught I care—along with the meanest, ugliest, most disagreeable man that ever decked his empty head withal," cried Prudence. "*I* am going to marry the finest gentleman in England—the bravest and handsomest—and the cleverest, too. When a man of parts is in Parliament, 'tis his own fault if he be not in the Cabinet—and once in the Cabinet there are garters and coronets

to be had for the trouble of reaching after them."

"A politician, too!" sneered the countess. "Pray, which of our worthy statesmen has had his head turned by the widow?"

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert," replied Prue, and having got so far she stopped, and the blood rushed in a torrent to her face, crimsoning even her forehead and neck.

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert!" the old lady repeated slowly, while her dark, brilliant eyes seemed to burn down into Prue's inmost soul. "The same that fought the duel with Colonel O'Keefe?"

"Surely," murmured Prue, "I could do no better than give myself to the man who killed my traducer. If Colonel O'Keefe misunderstood or misinterpreted a piece of girlish bravado—was I to blame? And if he dared to comment disparagingly upon what he did not understand, and make a public jest of a woman who had only played a harmless joke upon him—you, dear Grandmother, would be the last to reproach the gentleman who drew sword in her vindication."

"Thereby leading every one to suppose that there was something to vindicate," retorted Lady Drumloch. "If the marriage really takes place, it will put a complete quietus upon ill-natured tongues, but bethink you how they will wag if this should prove another of your *affaires manquées*!"

"I am glad that you approve, Madam," said Prue, with an air of the deepest respect, as she again sank gracefully down in a most profound curtsey.

"I said nothing about approval," replied her grandmother sternly. "I know your Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert—a Whig—a renegade, whose father was a good Catholic and a 'King's man.' The son would have made a fitting husband for your father's daughter if he had been loyal to his father's king—but you know well that I would rather see you the wife of the least of Jacobites than the greatest of Whigs. Go your own wilful way and do not pretend to ask my approval."

"I am not married to him yet," said Prue, who had not been unprepared for a vigorous protest from her ancestress, and for obvious reasons desired to placate her. "Nor would I contemplate such a step until my dear grandmother's recovery set me free from anxiety. And now, if your ladyship will permit us to kiss your hand, we will withdraw, as we grieve to hear that your physician has forbidden you all excitement."

During the whole interview the two girls had remained standing—not being invited to seat themselves, nor venturing to do so without permission. As they withdrew after saluting the tapering, ivory fingers of the invalid, she called after them, with more graciousness than she had yet shown, "You may return in the evening and read me Mr. Pope's poem. I have had it these three weeks and could not bring myself to let Lowton stumble through it. 'Twill give me something to

think of besides an old woman's gout and gruel."

CHAPTER III
SIR GEOFFREY'S ARRIVAL

Lady Drumloch was not really half so ill as she fancied herself, and no better medicine could have been prescribed to hasten her convalescence than the gaiety and cheerfulness that her two granddaughters infused into the atmosphere of the little house in Mayfair, as soon as they had recovered from the fatigues of their journey.

Instead of lying in bed grumbling at the length of the lonely days and pain-weary nights, her ladyship allowed herself to be cajoled into rising and reclining on a couch, which was then wheeled into the adjoining room by James and the faithful Lowton. At first this was only for an hour or two a day, and the invalid, refusing to admit that she could be, in any way, benefited by the lively gossip of her granddaughters, had insisted that the reading of sermons and other pious works suited better with her age and infirmities than plays and poetry. But by the end of the week she had abandoned Atterbury and Taylor for the *Tatler* and the latest works of Pope and Prior, and was thirsting for yet more exciting entertainment, which she knew to be tantalizingly near at hand.

As soon as the return of the cousins became known, their numerous friends, who had contented themselves with polite inquiries after the invalid, while Lowton was the sole dispenser of news, displayed a touching solicitude about her condition. Every afternoon Lady Prue held quite a little levee—at which the sickness of the old countess up-stairs did not interfere greatly with the gaiety below. Day by day these cheerful sounds grew more and more exasperating to Lady Drumloch, whose passion for scandal was only whetted by the comments of the two girls, and who chafed rebelliously under the restrictions of the doctor, and led the devoted Lowton the life of a dog.

"Did I hear voices and laughter this afternoon?" she demanded, one evening, when her granddaughters came to bid her a dutiful good night.

"'Twas but Mary Warburton and Lady Limerick, who came to inquire after the health of their beloved cousin," said Prue demurely.

"No one else? It seemed to me that a dozen times, at least, the door was thundered at as though a queen's messenger demanded entrance."

"In very truth, your ladyship's penetration is marvelous!" cried Prue eagerly. "Her Majesty most graciously bade Lady Limerick inquire the latest news of 'the dear countess' gout'—and also, if my duties at your bedside left me leisure to attend the court."

"And, pray, what answer did you make?" Lady Drumloch inquired suspiciously.

"In good faith, I was put to it for excuses, since I had admitted the favorable change in your symptoms, and received the congratulations of many anxious friends," returned Prue pathetically. "'Tis true I have no heart for frivolous pleasures while my dear grandmother is ill—but the court is another thing, and people begin to wonder at my absence."

"Well, what is the matter? Why make excuses at all? I am not aware that I have imposed any restrictions upon you," said the old lady crisply. "Lowton has taken very good care of me for a year, and you may still venture to trust me to her for a few hours. 'Tis news to me that you should be so averse to 'frivolous pleasures' that you need make *me* an excuse for giving them up."

"Indeed, dear Grandmother, it was no vain excuse—'twas the truth," Prue protested. "Yet not the whole truth, for my baggage is still at Bleakmoor, whence we fled in such a hurry that we brought naught away with us but what we traveled in!"

"Well? Are there no milliners and mantua-makers in London?" inquired the countess, with an air of surprise.

"Several hundred, I should think—and every one of them threatening me with the law's worst penalties for debt! The wretches! they were eager enough to fling their wares under my feet, when they believed me rich—or likely to be. But now—never a mercer or tailor will trust me for a gown!"

"What! not with the prospect of a husband in Parliament?" cried her grandmother, laughing maliciously.

"Indeed no, Grannie," sighed Prue piteously; "not unless I pay, at least, for what I order now."

"They have learned wisdom at last," retorted Lady Drumloch coldly, "and that is more than can be said of you, who during four or five years of widowhood have jilted half the peerage, made yourself the byword of the court, and now go in fear of the debtors' prison!"

"There was no talk of a debtors' prison for me when I was Queen Anne's favorite lady-in-waiting," said Prue, with a touch of arrogance, "but now they only remember that I was banished from court—"

"And that the rich lovers you jilted have married other women, while you are still 'the Widow Brooke,'" Lady Drumloch interrupted.

"But they will change their tone when they find that the queen has forgiven

me," said Prue, ignoring her grandmother's last thrust, "and now she has sent me such a gracious message by Lady Limerick—but, alack the day!—what am I saying? How can I present myself before Her Majesty without a decent gown to my back? Oh, Grandmother—" She fell on her knees, and would have clasped the pale, slender hand that lay on the coverlet. But Lady Drumloch drew back out of her reach and regarded her with resentful eyes.

"Well?" she queried in her driest voice. "What do you propose to do? You have a plan, no doubt, to accomplish what you have set your heart upon."

"No—I have no plan," cried Prudence despairingly, "but surely you, dear Grandmother, will not let your little Prue lose her last chance of winning back the queen's favor, for lack of a few guineas to buy a gown!" and once more she tried to get possession of the reluctant hand.

But Lady Drumloch pushed her away with such force, in her anger, that she almost overturned her on the floor. "I thought I should soon come at the cause of all your pretty speeches, you false jade!" she shrieked. "Is it not enough that I give you shelter in the home you have disgraced with your reckless follies, that I have to admit your wanton companions—only Mary Warburton and Lady Limerick, forsooth! Do you think I am so deaf as not to have heard the voices of half a dozen men, and your dear friend, Barbara Sweeting, sharer and inspirer of half the mad frolics that have made you notorious?—but I must pay your debts and give you money, when I'm so poor I can only afford one woman to wait on me, and can not go out for an airing because a carriage is too great a luxury for me—even a hired one! *C'est honteux—c'est infame*"—and the angry old woman, who seldom lapsed into French, except in moments of great agitation, burst into hysteric cries and weeping, at which Lowton hurried in, and the girls, with scared faces, fled.

"She is much worse than she used to be," whispered Peggie. "Formerly, when you asked for money, she used to tell you to go to the devil, and scold you roundly—but she gave it after all. And now—I do not think she will."

"If she waits until I ask her, she certainly never will," said Prudence proudly. "To-morrow I will go to old Aarons—though I vowed the last time should be the very last."

The girls were still lingering upon the staircase, listening to the soothing murmurs of Mrs. Lowton and the outcries of the invalid, gradually sinking into whimpers, when a loud knocking announced the arrival of a visitor of importance, and James presently came up with a petition from Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert for a few words with the Lady Prudence, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour.

"The lateness of the hour! Why, 'tis barely nine o'clock," cried Prue, blushing and sparkling with delight. "Go, James, and tell Sir Geoffrey I will be with

him immediately. Come, Peggie."

And away she flew to reassure herself, by a glance at her mirror, that her scene with Lady Drumloch had not dishevelled her luxuriant curls, and to disguise the shabbiness of her gown with a lace kerchief and a knot of ribbon.

"A plague on all milliners and tailors," she pouted; "to think that I should have to receive my betrothed after three weeks' separation, looking more like my lady's scullery-maid than her granddaughter."

"Sir Geoffrey will never know what you wear, if you sit away from the lamp, where he can just see your eyes by the firelight," counseled Margaret. "No man cares to look at your gown, who can see your face."

"Flatterer!" cried Prue; but she kissed her cousin on both cheeks, and certainly gave no sign of doubting her veracity.

Sir Geoffrey was impatiently waiting in the dim drawing-room, where James had reluctantly lighted a pair of candles in an ancient silver sconce that Benvenuto Cellini himself may have chiseled. The two ladies swept the most ceremonious of curtseys, but at the sight of Prue's radiant loveliness, her visitor dropped on one knee, and taking both her little hands in his, kissed first one and then the other with unaffected ardor.

"How have I lived all these centuries?" he cried—"they can not have been merely weeks—without my Goddess, my Star—" and so on, after the highflown fashion of the days of Pope and Dryden. To which Prue was well accustomed, and did not find any too fantastic for her highly cultivated vanity.

"Rise, Sir Geoffrey," she said very graciously, and when he obeyed, offered him her glowing cheek, upon which, one may be sure, he made haste to imprint more than one or two impassioned kisses. Then Margaret, who at first kept discreetly in the background, came forward and presented her hand, contenting herself with a salute of a more perfunctory nature.

"When did you return to town, Sir Geoffrey?" Prue inquired.

"Can you ask?" he said reproachfully. "You may be sure I have only waited to shake off the dust of travel, before hastening to throw myself at your feet."

"And how did you leave Bleakmoor?" she went on, "and have you seen our host and his friends since we left them?"

"Bleakmoor, deprived of the sunshine," said Sir Geoffrey, including the two girls in a low bow, "has by now been given over to the bats and owls. Brooke hath betaken himself to Malvern, and his friends are scattered to their own homes. The hunting is better since the thaw, but I have lost all taste for the field when Prue no longer leads the hunt."

"We scarcely expected that you would follow us so soon," remarked Peggie.

"Was I in too great haste?" he demanded. "Had I been warned of your sudden journey, I might, perhaps, have offended by offering my escort."

"You would have had a chance of playing the knight-errant," said Prue, "and coming to the rescue of two forlorn damsels set upon by footpads and forced to resort to all kinds of feminine wiles to protect their jewels."

The baronet rapped out an oath. "The fellows attacked you and I was not there to make mincemeat of them!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, these rascals become more and more audacious every day. A band of them attacked Will Battersea and myself on the North Road, where we had the good fortune to capture the ringleader and hand him over to the officers of justice."

"Bravo!" cried Margaret, clapping her hands. "Tell us all about it, Sir Geoffrey."

"Oh! 'twas the usual thing," he began. "We were on a lonely road, not far from Willesden—Will and I riding in front, with our fellows close behind—when several masked horsemen appeared from behind a clump of bushes, and covering us with their firearms, demanded our money or our lives—"

("Stand and deliver—" murmured Peggie, with a covert glance at her cousin.)—"We proceeded to argue the matter," Sir Geoffrey continued, "and either by accident or to intimidate us, one of the rascals let fly and hit my man Brown in the shoulder. Instantly, there was a mêlée, in the midst of which approaching shouts were heard and the highwaymen, at the word of command, dashed off, pursued by Will Battersea and myself. A parting shot, fired at random, brought down the horse of one of the highwaymen, who threw his rider into a ditch and rolled over him. There we found him with a broken collarbone, and handed him over to the mounted constabulary, who had arrived so opportunely."

"I shudder to think what might have happened," said Prue gravely, "had their arrival been less well-timed."

"Spare your tremors, my dearest," replied Sir Geoffrey, rather nettled by her tone. "You surely do not think that Will and I were in any peril from half-a-dozen highwaymen? To say nothing of our men, who were both sturdy rustics and had served in the West-Riding Yeomanry. I vow I was disappointed at the interruption, and would rather have taken Robin Freemantle with my pistol at his ear, than pulled him out of a ditch with the help of a constable."

"Robin Freemantle!" the two ladies exclaimed simultaneously. Then the blood rushed so tumultuously to Prue's face, that she was thankful for the dim light that hid her confusion.

"What! was it he that assailed you on Bleakmoor? The fellow is ubiquitous!" cried Sir Geoffrey. "I will not forget to add this to his other crimes, when I am witness on his trial. The man who has dared to attack the fairest lady in England—the protégée of her Grace of Marlborough—should be drawn and quartered; hanging is too good for him."

"Sir Geoffrey! I forbid you to mention my name!" she exclaimed, in a great

flutter. "It may not be the same man—besides, he took nothing from us, did he, Peggie? Nothing, that is to say of any—any—"

"My dear Prudence—the mere fact of his attacking you would rouse the country," cried her lover, rather pompously. "It would have more effect upon the jury than a dozen ordinary highway robberies—"

"I do not wish to rouse the country," interrupted Prue. "What! am I to be discussed by lawyers and jurymen, and lampooned, forsooth, in the Flying Post! My grandmother would never forgive it—"

"Dearest Prue, pardon me for suggesting anything that could for one moment distress you; it was but my eagerness to punish the scoundrel for his crimes. Let us relegate him to oblivion. Such subjects are not for the lips and ears of Beauty. Tell me, sweet Prue, when may I hope to see Lady Drumloch and implore her sanction to my suit?"

"I have already broken the matter to her," replied Prue, "but, as we anticipated, without any great success, at present. She is, as you know, an ardent Jacobite and can not be expected to approve your politics, which are considerably more important to her than my happiness. Mayhap, when she becomes acquainted with you she may blame me less. You must exercise your eloquence on her as you did on me," she added, with a coquettish smile, "and then I think I can safely leave our cause in your hands. My prayers shall accompany you, and if necessary we will kneel side by side and implore the ancestral benediction."

CHAPTER IV

THE MONEY-LENDER INTERVENES

Either her hysterics or her gout kept my Lady Drumloch in her chamber long enough to try the brief patience of Prudence Brooke. Sir Geoffrey, secure of his bride, was less impatient, for after all, the grandmother's consent was a mere matter of form, although he had reasons—upon which he did not care to dilate—for wishing to propitiate the old lady, and secure her good graces.

He came to Mayfair as frequently as his parliamentary duties permitted, and never without sending up to the sick-room the most sympathetic messages, accompanied by bouquets of rare flowers, baskets of hothouse fruit and dainty porcelain or enameled boxes of French bonbons, and his gifts to Lowton were as lavish, though of a different character.

Finding no abatement in her grandmother's austerity, about a week after Sir Geoffrey's arrival, Lady Prudence ordered a chair, and concealing as many of her charms as could be hidden by a cloak and hood, made a pilgrimage to the city.

Almost under the shadow of Aldgate Church, at the entrance of a narrow court, of quiet appearance but sinister reputation, lived a certain Mr. Moses Aarons, reputed fabulously wealthy. Few were the gay inheritors of paternal acres to whom the little office in Aldgate was unfamiliar, and in the safes and deed-boxes that encumbered the upper floors of the dingy house many a bond and mortgage told a history of vast estates held by a hair, and noble fortunes of which little remained but the name.

Mr. Aarons was a man of unpretending appearance, with very little about him to suggest the Jew money-lender. Immaculately dressed, in a suit of fine plum-colored cloth, with silk stockings of the same hue, and wearing his own iron-gray hair slightly powdered, and gathered in a black ribbon, he might have passed for a respectable lawyer or merchant, had not some suggestion of power in his smooth voice and heavy-lidded eye, belied the modesty of his appearance.

The chair of a fine lady was no unaccustomed object at his door—nor, indeed, was the Viscountess Brooke a stranger. When his clerk bowed the lady into Mr. Aarons' sanctum, he rose to greet her, and returned her sweeping curtsey with a bow as ceremonious.

"My Lady Brooke! This is, indeed, a condescension," he said. "My poor place is not adapted for the entertainment of such fashion and beauty."

"Most excellent Aarons," cried Prue, a little haughtily, "a truce to your compliments, which are only meant in ridicule, I fear." She threw back her hood, however, not disdaining to try the full effect of her charms upon this Jew, from whom she had come to cajole a few hundred pounds, if possible, without security.

"Your ladyship's long absence from London hath surely been to some magic spring," said the usurer, with an exaggerated deference that bordered on insolence. "We heard you were breaking squires' hearts in Yorkshire, but sure 'twas some southern sun that has been ripening the peaches on your cheeks."

Prue burst out laughing. "Are you turning poet, Mr. Aarons?" she inquired flippantly. "Take my advice, and keep to your own trade; no one will ever read the verse of Shakespeare or Milton with half as much interest as the magic prose that can turn a scrap of dirty paper into golden guineas."

"Your ladyship is tired of poetry, and wishes for a little prose by way of change, no doubt," suggested the money-lender.

"Change, forsooth! That is just what I am perishing for," cried Prue. "Fate has been dealing me the scurviest tricks, and now the chance of my life has come, and I tremble lest I lose it for want of a few pounds. The queen has bidden me to

court, and I hope the best from Her Majesty's condescension. But, alas! I can not make a fitting appearance at court, for I am—as usual—penniless. You must help me out of my troubles, good Mr. Aarons, and this time I shall pay you principal and interest, and recover the diamond necklace that has been so long in your care."

"If the security you offer is no better than last time, my lady Viscountess—" the money-lender began.

"Alack! this time I have nothing at all to offer as security," she interrupted. "You know where most of my jewels are, and on my way from Yorkshire, I was set upon by Robin Freemantle, the highwayman, and robbed of everything he could lay his hands on!"

"The outrageous villain! Did your ladyship lose much?" asked the Jew, with ill-concealed sarcasm.

"I scarce remember how much, but he left me with nothing but a few worthless trinkets I had concealed in my cousin's jewel-casket, which fortunately escaped. So I arrived in London destitute. My grandmother is too ill to think of aught but prayers and potions, and I am most anxious to return to the court, where, doubtless, her Grace of Marlborough will do something for me—she loves me like a daughter—but I can not wait on her grace without a gown and a carriage."

"The milliner will, no doubt, be enchanted to provide the one, and the liveryman the other," said Aarons suavely.

"True, but every one knows I was banished from court, and nothing will satisfy them that I am in favor again but to see my name in the *Court News'* account of the queen's levee. I can not get there without money, and for that I look to you, who have stood my friend before. Now listen," she went on quickly, laying her little dimpled hand on his arm, in her eagerness to interrupt the impending expostulation. "I am going to be married—oh, yes, I know what you would say—'tis not the first time by several, and I am still the Widow Brooke! This time, however, you may consider it final; within a month, I wed Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert."

The money-lender started. "Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert!" he exclaimed. "Your creditors, my lady Viscountess, will scarce be pleased at this hearing, and may find cause to remind you that there are lodgings for ladies in the Fleet and Queen's Bench. Sir Geoffrey is a member of Parliament, and can not be arrested for his own debts, let alone his wife's."

"Arrested! Do you mean to suggest that Sir Geoffrey can not, or will not, pay my debts?" she cried angrily.

"He may be willing; indeed, who could doubt that any man would esteem it an honor to pay the debts of Lady Prudence Brooke? But that he is able, is quite

another matter, and you may take my word for it, that Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert couldn't pay his own debts, if every acre he owned was free, instead of mortgaged, lock, stock and barrel."

"You are maligning a gentleman, sir!" she exclaimed, losing all control of her temper. "I will tell him how you have lied to me, and he will have his servants beat you within an inch of your life! Sir Geoffrey a bankrupt!—his estates mortgaged!—was ever such a slander? He is a man of substance, I tell you. I have visited him in his ancestral domain, where he entertained me royally. He is lord of the manor, and has the retinue of a duke—no man in Yorkshire is more highly respected—he is M.F.H. and might be Sheriff of his Riding an' he chose!" She began to subside a little, though still angry, and looking, it must be owned, transcendently lovely in her excitement, with cheeks like damask roses, and flashing sapphire eyes. "Good Mr. Aarons, why did you give me such a scare?" she went on, with a ring of almost entreaty in her tone. "Tell me you were joking. What can you know about Sir Geoffrey's estate? He hath borrowed of you, mayhap; who has not? But since he has come into his patrimony—"

"His patrimony, Lady Prudence? His father was one of King James' most devoted followers, and one of the most lavish while a guinea could be raised to prove his loyalty. Sir Geoffrey can not cut a tree in his 'ancestral domain,' and you may be sure there was a bailiff or two wearing his livery among the ducal retinue that dazzled your ladyship."

"Mr. Aarons, you must be mistaken," she persisted stubbornly. "If his fortunes are so low, why does he seek to join them to those of a portionless widow? Sure, there are heiresses a-plenty who would gladly buy his title with their dowries!"

"Oh! your ladyship has but to look in your mirror to answer that question," cried the usurer, with a low bow and a look of open admiration. "There are also men of wealth and substance who would gladly pay the debts of Lady Prudence Brooke, and settle such a fortune upon her as would keep her busy in the spending."

"No doubt, no doubt," said Lady Prudence hastily, "but I am betrothed to Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert, and these benevolent persons do not greatly interest me. Let us quit the subject of the fortunes Sir Geoffrey and I are throwing away, and return to business."

"Yet believe me, Lady Prudence," he insisted, "you will never wed Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert."

She rose with great haughtiness. "I decline to dispute the subject with you, Mr. Aarons—" she began.

"You will not marry Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert," he repeated. "If you do not refuse the match, he will find some way to release himself; 'tis his misfortune

more than his fault. Mark me, Lady Prudence, and do not let him place you in a false position. You want to be a rich woman as well as a great lady. You can marry a man who will give you the finest house in town, the most splendid establishment, the choice of a dozen country seats, and more money to spend than you have ever dreamed of, and who asks nothing in return but to see you queen it at his expense."

She smiled a little, and met his glance with a most deceptive air of innocent curiosity.

"And who is the *gentleman*, Mr. Aarons?" she inquired, in her sweetest tone, with but the hint of an emphasis.

"Can you not guess?" he replied more boldly.

"Faith, I came hither seeking a money-broker, and was not prepared to find a marriage-broker instead!" she said, shrugging her pretty shoulders. "Do not keep me in suspense, good Aarons; I am dying to know the name of the admirable creature who desires to rescue me from poverty—and Sir Geoffrey—and confer so many benefits upon my unworthiness."

He placed his hand upon his breast, and bowed deeply.

"You see him here, fair Lady Prudence," he said. "The humblest of slaves, the most ardent of admirers and, if you will, the most devoted and indulgent of husbands."

She burst into a peal of laughter, but the faint note of bitterness that permeated the charming music was not lost upon the money-lender's sharp ear.

"Truly, Mr. Aarons, your jest is subtle and well-conceived, and a fitting rebuke to my silly vanity," she began. But he interrupted her, "In truth, Madam, 'tis no jest, but a serious offer. I have always admired your ladyship, and a year ago, endeavored to give fitting expression—"

A knock on the door interrupted his flow of eloquence, and the clerk, from without, announced that Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert's chariot had just driven to the door, and that "his Ludship" was in the act of alighting.

"Great Heaven!" cried Prue, turning scarlet and then pale. "How shall I escape? I would not be found here by him for a thousand pounds! Do not admit him, good Mr. Aarons, I beseech you—"

"Take Sir Geoffrey up-stairs, Jacob, and tell him I am engaged, but will wait on him anon," said the Jew. Then turning to his fair client with an insinuating smile, he added, "Now, if your ladyship chooses, you may have an opportunity of judging between my statement of this gentleman's finances and his own—"

He indicated, by a gesture, a door in an obscure corner of the room.

"What! play the spy upon my betrothed husband? Never, never!" exclaimed Prue indignantly. Yet she did not go away, and her pliant form seemed to sway toward the little dark door, as though a stronger will than her own con-

trolled her muscles.

"'Tis no harm," said the Jew, in his silkiest tones, as he opened the door leading into a room scarcely bigger than a closet, but light, and furnished with a single chair, and a table littered with papers and thick with dust.

Half-involuntarily, Prue yielded, and the door closed upon her. "I need not listen," she said, half-apologizing to herself for an action she disdained. But the room was small, and that, perhaps, was why she did not think it worth while to move away from the door.

The blood rushed to her head when she heard Sir Geoffrey's voice, and for some moments she was conscious of nothing but a confused murmur, out of which, at last, her own name rang sharp and clear.

"The Lady Prudence Brooke has honored me by accepting my hand," she heard Sir Geoffrey say, in a tone that was evidently intended to discourage adverse comment.

"I congratulate your Honor," said Aarons politely. "The lady's charms do credit to your choice. But such luxuries are costly, and I am not surprised that you need money. It is unfortunate that times are so hard and money so scarce. I have just suffered a terrible loss. The death of Lord Boscommon, whose father survives him, has turned ten thousand pounds' worth of post-obits into waste paper, and the failure of Johnson and—but this does not interest your Honor. Beset as I am, I shall be able to accommodate an old and valued client like yourself, no doubt, if the security is satisfactory. You have good security to offer, of course?"

"Oh! it is no use beating about the bush with you, Aarons. I have no fresh security, but you can surely let me have a couple of thousand more on the Yorkshire estate."

"Not a stiver," said the money-lender firmly. "Even the entailed property is encumbered beyond its utmost value. Had you come to announce your marriage with Miss Cheeseman, the Alderman's daughter, or Mrs. Goldthwaite, the banker's widow, I do not say I would have refused the necessary funds for the courtship and wedding on your note-of-hand. But the Viscountess Brooke is dowerless—over head and ears in debt, and without a penny of expectations."

"Miserable little Jew," muttered the fair dame he so pitilessly anatomized; "Geoffrey will kill him."

"Dowerless, yes; over head and ears in debt, possibly; but not without expectations," said Sir Geoffrey, displaying none of the anticipated fury. "You overlook the fact that she is the favorite granddaughter of Lady Drumloch, who, for all her miserly ways, I am credibly informed, is enormously wealthy."

"Oho!" cried the Jew, maliciously enjoying this display of a motive not altogether flattering to the unsuspected listener. "Your Honor is not quite so simple as I began to fear."

"Did you really think I was fool enough to leap before looking?" retorted Sir Geoffrey, with a fatuous laugh that set Prue's ears tingling. "To be sure, the wealth of Golconda could not add to the Lady Prue's charms, but in this wicked world one can not live on love, and as I have little else to offer, I rejoice, for her sake as well as my own, that she has a rich grandmother, who can not, it is to be hoped—I should say, lamented—live long to enjoy her hoards. They will, I am convinced, be put to excellent use by Lady Prudence Beaudesert."

"But how, if I could prove to you, Sir Geoffrey, that Lady Drumloch, instead of being a rich miser, is a very poor old woman, whose kinsman loans her a house to live in, and whose sole income is an annuity, from which she has—perhaps—saved enough to bury her? I know not who may have told you of this fabled wealth, but I am pretty sure it is not either of her granddaughters."

"Indeed, no," said Sir Geoffrey reflectively. "No such sordid subject has ever been broached between us. Yet I had it from a reliable source."

"Well, I advise you to make very sure of it, Sir Geoffrey; it will be no kindness, either to yourself or the Lady Prudence, to marry her without either of you having anything you can call your own—except your debts."

"'Tis true," muttered the baronet. "If I can not raise a thousand pounds—are Lady Prudence's debts so very great?"

"I do not betray the secrets of one client to another," said Aarons, with a sinister smile. "Even now I have acted against my own interests in my desire to befriend two headstrong young people. Nay, I would gladly go further, and find a rich wife for your Honor and a rich husband for the viscountess, if you would both listen to reason."

"Thanks, good Aarons," said Sir Geoffrey, moving toward the door; "I appreciate your good will at its full value. A rich wife—of your providing—to pay my debts, and a rich husband, on the same terms, for Lady Prudence, would make four fools for the benefit of one wise man."

"Your Honor flatters me!" said Aarons obsequiously. They passed out of the room together, and as he closed the door behind him, the money-lender remarked, in the most casual manner, "I had a visit from the lady but an hour agone, praying me for a loan of a few hundred pounds, at any interest, on the strength of her approaching marriage with your Honor."

Sir Geoffrey started, and a curious light came into his cold, handsome eyes.

"'Sdeath!" he ejaculated, "the lady doth me too much honor!"

"I was most reluctantly compelled to refuse the loan, for the same reason that she gave for requesting it," said the usurer, as he respectfully bowed his visitor out. "But in the meantime, if I can serve you in any other direction, pray command me."

When he returned alone, he found Lady Prudence arranging her hood with

a weary air.

"Prithee, Mr. Aarons, is my chair at the door?" she demanded, cutting short his apologies for detaining her. "You and your client have well-nigh sent me to sleep with your long conference. Sure, you have kept me shut up in the cupboard, while you transacted the business of a dozen petitioners."

"Your ladyship was probably unable to overhear our conversation?" he retorted, with a shrewd smile. "'Tis a pity, for it would have interested you vastly."

"Did you, indeed, think I would condescend to listen at the keyhole?" cried Prue, with a superb air of disdain. "Believe me, I do not take quite so much interest in the clients of Mr. Aarons! Is my chair at the door? Then let me begone. My grandmother will marvel at my absence, and ask more questions than I shall be able to invent answers to."

The Jew accompanied her out to her chair, bare-headed, and as he handed her in, said, in his voice of curiously blended humility and power, "I shall hear from your ladyship again, when you and Sir Geoffrey have had time for reflection."

CHAPTER V
A WIDOW ON MONDAY

That day was destined to be one of accumulated trials to Prue's patience. Her ruffled temper had scarcely calmed down by the time she reached home, and found that, during her absence, communications had been received from the attorneys of various tradespeople, warning her that Mr. Aarons' view of her position was by no means exaggerated.

Although she had rigidly refrained from announcing her projected marriage, in deference to Lady Drumloch's opposition, the news had crept out in the mysterious way such things have of proclaiming themselves, and had led to a general investigation of Sir Geoffrey's solvency, by those whose only hope of payment depended upon her future husband's wealth. The immediate result of these researches displayed itself in the unanimous determination of her creditors to be paid before she could shelter herself under the coverture of a husband whose parliamentary privileges placed him out of their reach.

This blow was the more crushing because it came from those who had encouraged her extravagance and played upon her vanity while she was the favorite

of the all-powerful Duchess of Marlborough, and lady-in-waiting to the queen. Then, every temptation was thrown in her way, and the day of reckoning was never mentioned, unless in sly allusion to the dazzling, ever-changing panorama of her matrimonial prospects.

But, now, circumstances were different. To tell the truth, the fair viscountess had left London a year ago under the cloud of royal displeasure. Her extravagance at the card-table and elsewhere, her mad-cap frolics and countless flirtations—culminating in a fatal duel and a brilliant engagement broken off almost at the church-door—had brought upon her a sharp rebuke from the queen, coupled with a command to seek time for reflection and penitence in some retreat far enough removed from the court to relieve her of its temptations.

Under this ban, she had thrown herself upon the hospitality of her brother-in-law, himself somewhat out of favor, in consequence of his Jacobite tendencies, and living in comparative seclusion upon his heavily mortgaged estate in Yorkshire. There, Prue had held a little court of fox-hunting squires and provincial notables, until, wearying for a more congenial atmosphere, she gladly seized upon the illness of her grandmother as an excuse for a hasty and unheralded visit to London, where her bosom friend, Lady Barbara Sweeting, having paved the way for her, met her with the delightful news that her escapades were forgotten and her absence bewailed, and being on the spot, her unauthorized return would meet with no severe reprimand, but rather with a joyous welcome.

Prue knew the advantage of striking while the iron is hot. She was well aware of the fickleness of the great, and the importance of catching the smile of royalty before it has had time to cool off into a frown. So, being assured that the hand of welcome was graciously beckoning her, it did seem the irony of fate that she must needs hang back because her wardrobe was in Yorkshire, and her chance of redeeming or replacing it even more distant.

At this exasperating crisis, it was only natural that her mind should revert persistently to the one spot of light in the gloom. Was it a beacon of hope or an illusory will-o'-the-wisp? Had Sir Geoffrey been misled, or was he trying to mislead Mr. Aarons?

"Can grannie really be a miser?" she had asked both herself and Peggie a dozen times in the course of the day. She longed to question Sir Geoffrey as to the source of his information, yet dared not reveal the little she knew, for fear he might wonder how she had come by that little.

Peggie laughed heartily at the suggestion of Lady Drumloch's wealth, and vowed it must be a myth. "Could she have kept such a secret from us for all these years?" she asked. "Never once giving us a hint of it, and never once relaxing the austerity of her life, even now she is old and sick? Besides, how would it help us now, if she had a cellar full of gold, since she will not give us a guinea or a gown?

You have so many friends, Prue; will none of them help you out?"

"The women will not help me; they are only too glad to keep me out in the cold," said Prue pettishly, "and I am neither old enough nor ugly enough, to ask favors of a man, even a money-lender," she added, contemptuously reminiscent of Mr. Aarons' advances. "Pray, open the window, coz. These distracting cares make me so faint, I feel as though I should die for lack of air."

Peggie obeyed, and Prue, seating herself near the window, gradually ceased her lamentations and fell silent. The outside noises floated up confusedly—the roll of a passing carriage, the quarrelsome shouts of waiting chairmen, and clear above all, the voice of the newsman, calling the details of yesterday's cock-fight and the latest scandal.

"Rumor of a great battle in the Netherlands—Arrival of a queen's courier with sealed despatches from the seat of war—Exciting scene in the House of Commons—Threatened resignation of Lord Godolphin from the Cabinet—Trial and sentence of Robin Freemantle, the highwayman. Story of his Life and confessions—How he fell from virtue and respectability to end his days on Tyburn Tree next Monday."

"Dost thou hear that, Peggie?" cried Prue; "the bold highwayman who kissed me on Bleakmoor is condemned to die for other crimes, perchance less heinous!"

"'Tis a natural death for such as he," quoth Peggie philosophically.

"And yet, he was a gallant man; young, I'll be sworn, and handsome, belike. It seems strange to think that such hot blood will be cold in the veins of a corpse in less than a week—"

"Art going to wear weeds for him, coz, because he snatched a kiss from you?" teased Peggie.

"Not I! but mayhap some poor wretch is breaking her heart because she'll be a widow o' Monday," said Prue pensively.

"All her debts will be paid along with the debt of nature," said Peggie flippantly. "Don't you think you could easily console yourself in her case?"

"Forsooth, yes!" cried Prue, quickly recovering her vivacity. "I would I were like to be the widow of somebody—somebody I don't care for, of course—within a week. Then I could laugh at that old villain Aarons, and the rest of the pettifoggers, with their threats of the debtors' prison! Sure, there must be a special hell for Jews and lawyers!"

Peggie gave her hearty acquiescence and returned to her book, and for some time no sound was heard except an occasional smothered laugh, when Mr. Pope's highly-spiced rhymes tickled her fancy more than usual. Prue fell into a somber reverie, and with the tip of her taper finger between her teeth, became so buried in thought, that a sharp little line began to trace itself distinctly between

her drawn brows. Outside, the newsman's voice, gradually fading in the distance, still repeated, "Buy the life and confessions of Robin Freemantle, the notorious highwayman—only sixpence."

Prue sprang to her feet, at last. "Margaret!" she exclaimed, and her voice had a curiously unfamiliar ring.

Her cousin started. Prue had not called her by her full name in many a day.

"Margaret, if this highwayman has no wife—people of that sort don't marry, usually—what is to prevent his marrying me, and leaving me a widow on Monday, with all my debts buried in his coffin?"

Peggie had been so often participator and prime minister of Prue's exploits, that she was not easily astonished by her. But this proposition was so entirely outside the bounds of reason, that she could only shake her head vigorously, without even a word of protest.

"'Tis not so reckless as it seems, Peggie," said Prue, sitting down beside her and passing a coaxing arm round her shoulders. "Listen, dear Peg. The man must die; God's pity on him! What can it matter to me to be his wife for a few hours; what can it matter to him to ease me of my debts? They will not trouble him in the next world; neither will I."

"You'll be none the richer for such a mad freak," Peggie remonstrated.

"I'll be out of danger of the Fleet, though!" cried Prue, renewing her caresses. "Fancy your poor little cousin in a debtors' prison, Peggie, with all sorts of wretches who can not pay their butchers and bakers—and miserable cheats and swindlers, so mean and low that they have not a soul to help them—and fancy me just as ill-off and forlorn as they!" Peggie began to melt. "You saw that letter from Madame Taffetine's lawyer, 'Unless we receive the payment, so frequently promised, within forty-eight hours, the law will be enforced without any further delay.' The other man is even more explicit; he threatens me with imprisonment in so many words! Oh! Peggie, I am the most miserable girl in the world!"

"Sir Geoffrey will marry you, and you will both be safe and happy," counseled Peggie.

"Sir Geoffrey! I'm not so sure I wouldn't rather marry the highwayman!" cried Prue. "At any rate, I can not offer myself to him, and I doubt if he be in the mood to hurry me. Besides, there's like to be a dissolution of Parliament, and then he'll be in a worse plight than I am now. 'Tis true," she laughed, but not quite merrily, "there is Mr. Aarons, who was kind enough to place his hand and his money-bags at my feet, but the doors that are open to the poor Viscountess Brooke, might be slammed in the face of the rich Lady Prudence Aarons!"

"Robin Freemantle would be better than Mr. Aarons," Peggie conceded.

"Robin Freemantle, at this moment, will do better than any one else," said Prue. "I tell you, Peggie, my mind is made up. You may as well help me, for if

you don't, I'll do it all alone—but you won't desert me, will you, Peggie, dearest?" So, with tears and kisses and wiles most varied, but all through with a stubborn self-will that had often before subdued Peggie's feeble scruples, Prue won her at last, not merely as a confidante, but as an accomplice.

As soon as the whimsical creature found that there was nothing to fear from her cousin's opposition, her spirits rose at the prospect of an adventure even more reckless and madcap than usual. She ran on with a thousand absurd suggestions, until Peggie, infected by her mood, offered to visit the prison at Newgate, and lay Prue's proposal before the highwayman.

"You know, you told him I was your maid," she said, "and 'tis one of a maid's chief duties to carry messages for her mistress; messages of doubtful discretion especially. I can remind him of the meeting on Bleakmoor, and introduce myself as having witnessed the kiss which ignited a flame in your heart, that can only be quenched by a marriage *in extremis*."

"Make use of what arguments you please, Peg, and for credential, take with you the purse he bestowed in charity on the poor widow, who now implores a still greater favor from him. Alack! the purse is well-nigh empty, but there's enough left in it to bribe the jailers to admit a lady of high degree, who comes to find out if the condemned man can put her in the way to recover the jewelry she was robbed of on the Queen's Highway."

"To-day is Thursday, Prue," said Peggie, proceeding to prepare for her errand without delay. "Thou'lt not wed o' Friday? 'Tis unlucky!"

"Unlucky! Dost think there's any luck, good or ill, about such a marriage?" cried Prue, dropping suddenly into a shuddering despondency. "Friday is as good a day as any for one's undoing, and Saturday's too long; 'twould give me time to change my mind."

"There's time enough for that now," quoth Peggie philosophically. "The banns are not yet asked, nor even the wooing sped. 'Twere wiser, perhaps, to repent to-day than regret to-morrow."

"Do you think so, Peggie? So do not I. If I do have to repent, it shall not be for an opportunity missed for a coward scruple. Here, let me tie this long, black veil over your hood, Peg; it will make you look like a mourner, and with your handkerchief to your face, you might defy even the sharp eyes of Lowton herself."

CHAPTER VI

A MATTER OF TITLE

As Peggie, veiled and muffled up, with the curtains of her sedan-chair drawn—but not closely enough to interfere with her outlook—was borne toward the city, she passed a handsome chariot, driven rapidly in the opposite direction.

The glimpse she caught of the occupants caused her great amusement. Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert was seated beside a young man, richly dressed and handsome, but sallow and hollow-cheeked. This was Lord Beachcombe, whose marriage with Lady Prudence Brooke had been abruptly broken off about a year ago, in consequence of a scandal raised by a certain Captain O'Keefe, who considered himself ill-used by the lady, and whose insulting strictures upon her conduct led to a fatal duel with Sir Geoffrey, and resulted in the promise of her hand to the champion of her honor. The sight of Prue's former and present lovers together, struck Peggie as particularly funny, in connection with her own queer errand. If she could have overheard their conversation, it would have given additional zest to the situation.

"Faith," Lord Beachcombe was saying, "if you are really bent on marrying the lovely widow, I wish you better luck than I had."

"I *am* bent on it, with my whole heart and soul," Sir Geoffrey replied, doggedly rather than enthusiastically. "*I* am not a man to be turned from my purpose by an idle word."

The other laughed carelessly. "No man in your condition takes warning by other men's misfortunes," he remarked. "But there's still hope for you; you are not her husband yet."

"No, but I swear I will be, and soon, too!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey. "I won her at the sword's point, and by the God above us, I'll wear her!"

"Will you bet?" demanded the other, with a sneer. Gambling was the most fashionable vice of that day, and few subjects were too great or too small to hang a wager upon.

"Aye, Lord Beachcombe, if you want to lose money, I'll not deny you the opportunity," laughed Sir Geoffrey, recovering his good humor. "What do you want to wager? Fifty guineas? a hundred?"

"Fifty or a hundred guineas is all too small a wager for so important a matter," said Lord Beachcombe slowly, as though considering the exact sum demanded by the occasion. "Let us say a thousand—or five thousand."

Sir Geoffrey was staggered by the amount, but he was as ardent a gambler as his companion, and reputed a much luckier one. "As your lordship pleases," he replied, with well-assumed indifference. "But I warn you that the higher the stake, the more certain I shall be to win it, even if I have to carry the lady off by

force."

"Oh! if you have to resort to force—"

"If I have to resort to force, the stake should be doubled!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey, "but I have no fear of that. Did your lordship say a thousand? or was it five?"

"Let it be five thousand," returned Beachcombe. "I'll wager five thousand guineas that you do not marry the Viscountess Brooke within—shall we say a month?"

Sir Geoffrey signified his satisfaction; each gentleman made a memorandum of the bet, and as the carriage had already been standing some minutes at Prue's door, her betrothed alighted, thanked his friend for his courtesy in giving him a lift, and hastened in to press his suit with renewed ardor.

As the carriage was driven off Lord Beachcombe pulled the check-string and ordered the coachman to drive with all speed to Newgate Prison.

Newgate Prison, in the reign of Queen Anne, was a festering sink of iniquity and horror. Almost every crime under the sun was punishable by death—from stealing a penny loaf to robbing a church, and from snaring a pheasant to slaughtering a family. In fact the laws in relation to property were far more strictly enforced than those for the protection of human life, unless the value of the life was enhanced by the rights of property. There, in noisome pens, criminals of every degree herded together—men, women and children—all brought to an equality under the shadow of the gallows. But money was just as powerful there as anywhere else, and the prisoner who could pay might have privacy, company, the best of food and wine—everything except cleanliness—that no power could bring into Newgate Prison, and it needed the cleansing fires of destruction to purge it off the face of the earth.

Robin Freemantle, the condemned highwayman, had money enough to secure him a cell to himself. One of the poorer prisoners, for a consideration, had swept it out, and he had hired a table and chair from the jailer at about twice the price for which they had been bought ten years ago.

At his table he sat writing, with a bottle of wine at his elbow, and the debris of a substantial meal on a tray. Through a barred window above his head enough light slunk reluctantly in to show the fine athletic form and bronzed, manly face, on which the pallor of imprisonment was already toning down the ruddy glow of health. On the page before him he had inscribed but four words, at which he sat gazing irresolutely while he nibbled the feather of his pen. The key turned in the lock and a hoarse voice outside announced, "A visitor for you, Robin Highwayman."

Lord Beachcombe walked in, and the door closed behind him.

Robin rose. "Welcome, my Lord," he said, with an unmistakable ring of relief in his tone. "Your promptitude will do us both a good turn."

"I received your letter, fellow," said the other haughtily, "and I confess I was curious to learn how a man of education had fallen to your condition." His eye glanced upon Robin's left arm, which he wore in a sling, as though he marveled why it had been thought worth while to mend a collar-bone upon which the neck was set so insecurely.

"Take this chair, my Lord. I have but one in my spacious apartment. I'll sit here." He moved to the cot and his visitor sat down, not without some show of reluctance.

"And now, be brief," said Lord Beachcombe, watching him narrowly, "and let me know the service *you* wish to render *me*"—with a sneer—"and the price you expect for it. I do not remember ever having been waylaid by you, so you can not have stolen jewels to restore."

"Yet your lordship has some idea of what I have to offer—not to restore, for you never possessed it—and if I die on Monday, will never know the full worth of it until too late. Your lordship has a lawsuit pending involving your title and estate—"

"Every one knows that," said Beachcombe irritably. "Some mysterious person has claimed to be my elder brother. The thing is manifestly impossible, but he appears to have interested a lawyer of sorts."

"The thing is not impossible, Lord Beachcombe. It is true. It is also true that this claimant can deprive you not only of your title and estates, but of your very name."

"You are mad! If such a thing were possible, what is it to you, and how can you know anything about it?"

"Because all the papers are in my possession. Oh! not here—in perfectly safe keeping; where they will remain until I die, or claim them back."

"How came they in your possession?" demanded Beachcombe. "In robbing a coach, I suppose you took them for something valuable."

"They came into my possession by the action of Providence, to afford your lordship the chance of giving me my life and keeping your own honorable name."

"Your life, my good fellow! You overrate my power and your own value. If your papers are worth anything, I'll give you all the money you ask for your own spending, and the provision of those you leave behind—"

"We'll come to that presently," said Robin. "First, I'll tell you what I have to offer. Some thirty years ago—while His Majesty King Charles was on the throne—a certain lieutenant of the Guards, younger son of a great earl's younger brother, fell in love with a poor schoolmaster's pretty daughter. Passing himself off as a

stage-player, under the name of Gregory Vincent, he won the young woman's affection, though not, apparently, her complete confidence; for she went to the pains of investigating the gentleman's private life, and discovered his real name. Then she consented to a secret marriage, at which she substituted a real priest and legal papers for the sham ones with which her honorable lover had intended to cozen her."

"This story has already been communicated to my attorneys," interrupted Lord Beachcombe impatiently. "How are you acquainted with it, and why do you expect it to interest me in you?"

"I know it because a vast number of letters, written by this gentleman, first to his sweetheart and afterward to his wife, have fallen into my hands. They tell the whole history, with many entertaining details, and would prove racy reading in the *News* sheet for your lordship's friends and foes, especially the latter."

The visitor winced. "No man likes his family affairs held up to ridicule," he said. "I would willingly buy the letters, if genuine."

"Oh! they are genuine; also the marriage certificate, whereof one of the witnesses is still living, and the certificates of the birth and baptism of the son, now twenty-eight years old. I believe your lordship is twenty-six?"

"And why has this matter been allowed to sleep for thirty years?"

"Because Mrs. Vincent—as she temporarily allowed herself to be called—although clever enough to find out that her stage-player lover was really a lieutenant of the King's Guards, masquerading under a false name, was unable to trace him when he disappeared, a year after their marriage, and never knew that in consequence of several deaths, he had become Lord Beachcombe, of whom she probably never heard, and certainly never connected with Lieutenant Gregory de Cliffe. The last of this series of documents is the certificate of the death of the deserted wife, when her son was about five years old, to whom she bequeathed only her wedding-ring and a casket, which was to be opened when he came to man's estate."

Lord Beachcombe's sallow face crimsoned with such a rush of blood, that his eyes were suffused, and he seemed in danger of suffocating.

"Five years," he gasped. "Scoundrel, do you know what you are saying?"

Robin bent his head, without speaking.

"Where are these forgeries? These—these—" Beachcombe stopped, apparently unable to utter another word.

"As I told you before, they are quite safe," said Robin quietly. "But an hour after my death, they will be in the hands of the person whom they most concern."

"And do you—does this impostor imagine that he can oust a peer of the realm with a few old letters and musty documents, forsooth?" cried the earl, recovering himself a little. "We nobles hang together, Sir Highwayman, and are

chary of disturbing one of our order for a trifle."

"I do not know whether he can oust you, Lord Beachcombe," said Robin, looking him steadily in the eye, "but he can prove you a bastard."

Beachcombe sprang to his feet, with hand on sword, as though he would have drawn it on the defenseless prisoner, and stood, breathing heavily, unable to utter a word.

"We are alone, my Lord, and not one word that passes between us need ever be repeated outside this cell," said Robin; "that is, if you agree to my terms. Otherwise, I may feel compelled to make terms with your cousin, who would be the inheritor if you were—illegitimate, and your *elder brother* were—could be induced to waive his claim."

Lord Beachcombe bent a furtive but piercing regard upon the prisoner. "And how can you answer for him?" he asked, slowly weighing his words. "If I buy you off, I may have to fight him in the law courts afterward. Oh! 'tis intolerable—it's a conspiracy—it must be a lie—my father a bigamist!—my mother—! Villain, you shall hang for calling me bastard, if for nothing else."

"I think not," said Robin. "Your unborn child may be a son, whose fate hangs upon your word. The rightful heir values my life so highly, that he himself has instigated this offer. He is willing to give all his documents in exchange for my life and liberty. Furthermore, for a sum of money sufficient to carry him abroad and start him in life, he will sign a deed, if you will have one drawn up, resigning all claims on the title or estates of Beachcombe. Is that explicit enough?"

During this speech, Lord Beachcombe had quieted down, and was now seated opposite the prisoner, whom he regarded with fixed attention.

"What does your claimant call himself? Under what name is he known?" he demanded abruptly.

"You can not know it without perusing the documents," said Robin, "and you can not do that until I am free to bring them to you myself."

"I tell you," exclaimed the earl pettishly, "that you overestimate my influence. How can I obtain the pardon of a highwayman who attacked the Lord Archbishop?"

"I took nothing from his grace but his wig!" cried Robin, with a boisterous laugh, "and so that he might not catch cold in his venerable head, I gave him in exchange a comfortable cotton nightcap, that had once been the property of the Mayor of York! 'Twas a fair exchange, and methinks the archbishop would scarcely wish me hanged for a joke, when I might have stripped him of a coachful of treasure."

Lord Beachcombe rose. "There are yet three days," he said grudgingly. "I'll see what can be done."

"Three days for *me*, my Lord, but not for you," said Robin significantly. "I

must know by this time to-morrow what my chances are with you, for the letter I was inditing to your cousin Francis can not be delayed longer than that."

"Francis!" sneered Lord Beachcombe. "What do you imagine he can do for you? A man whose name is hardly known at court! An indolent recluse; a mere bumpkin!"

"For me? Probably nothing," Robin replied, in a stern, threatening tone. "But what can he do for you, with those papers in his possession? I may be dead before they reach him, but my revenge will be sure, in his hands."

"Do you suppose he will put himself out for you—*your claimant*? You evidently don't know Francis."

"I do not know him, but I know human nature," retorted Robin. "What heir does not live in hopes of some day inheriting? I shall make no conditions with him, but place the proof of your father's first marriage in his hands. Can you doubt that he will use that weapon to put himself in your place? Oh! don't flatter yourself that my death will clear the worst danger out of your path. Alive, you have a dozen ways of silencing me; dead, I have one way to ruin you—utterly."

The two men regarded each other for a few seconds intently. Robin's face expressed cold, implacable determination, the other, deadly hostility. Lord Beachcombe turned suddenly and rapped sharply on the door. It was instantly opened by the jailer, and he strode out without another word or glance.

Robin flung himself into the chair, and gave way to a deep and gloomy reverie. From time to time, broken sentences escaped him. "What is the use, after all?"—"It makes little difference whether I die now, or live to be hanged some other time"—and other remarks of a pessimistic and dismal nature. Then he fell to writing, but after a while, tore the paper into shreds, and sat moodily watching the sallow reflection of daylight fading slowly behind the bars.

CHAPTER VII
A WEDDING-RING FOR A KISS

Robin had been alone half-an-hour or so, when the door was again opened, and another visitor announced.

"Here, Highwayman," cried the jailer, "a lady wants to see you now. You Knights of the Road are always in favor with the women."

"I know no women," said Robin roughly. "Certainly none that would come

here to see me."

"Well, shall this one come in?" demanded the jailer. "I'll warrant she's young and pretty, and a real lady, too! She came in a chair!"

"Oh! let her in, let her in. Pray don't keep a real lady waiting in the passage," said Robin, who foresaw some begging petition, or, perhaps, the request of some frolicsome damsel for a lock of his hair for her album, or a bequest of the rope that hanged him, for luck! "Be seated, Madam," he added, as a slender figure, wrapped in a heavy cloak and closely veiled, glided timidly into the cell. "What service can I render you?"

"Can I have a few words alone with you?" murmured the visitor. The jailer, who had been hanging round, curious to see and hear, withdrew, with a laugh and a coarse jest, and locked the door after him.

The lady threw off her veil, revealing the homely features and sparkling eyes of Margaret Moffat.

"You know me not," she said. "Yet we have met before, Robin Freemantle."

"I can not believe," replied Robin gallantly, "that, once seen, you could ever be forgotten by me."

"Well, possibly you did not see me; one far more attractive engrossed all your attention, and 'tis from her I come, to ask as favor from you, that which many of the highest in the land have offered in vain."

"You puzzle me greatly," said Robin. "What favor can any lady desire of a man as good as dead?"

"Why—that's just where it is—an' you were not condemned to die, you could do nothing for my lady."

"My lady! And who is your lady, may I ask?"

"I'll tell that presently; but first, before I reveal her name, tell me one thing truly. Are you married?"

"Married? No, the Saints be praised! but how can that concern your lady? Does she wish to marry me, perchance?" cried Robin ironically.

"That is just what she does wish," said Margaret, as demurely as though she had really been the waiting-maid she feigned to be. "And for a token, she sends you this." And she threw down before him the wallet he had flung into Prue's lap on Bleakmoor.

He took it up, recognizing it with a whirling brain. The whole scene sprang up before him as under a sudden illumination—the gathering darkness and the falling rain—the old chariot, with its steaming horses and frightened servants—and by the light of his lantern, the lovely face of a girl, with her hood thrown back and a tangle of dark curls against the milky whiteness of her neck. He saw the round, bare arms and tapering hands extended, to show that she had no jewels about her, the roguish smile disclosing the little even teeth and sparkling in the

depths of the starry eyes, and for a moment his lips once more brushed her scarlet mouth, and the perfume of her breath again clouded his brain.

Margaret watched him with amusement, as his face disclosed something of the varying emotions, over which amazement predominated.

"Does that surprise you?" she inquired mockingly. "Sure, 'tis no uncommon thing for a man to pay for a kiss with a wedding-ring!"

"There must be some other reason," he said, more to himself than in reply to her. "That kiss meant nothing to *her*."

"Did it mean anything to you?" asked Margaret, beginning to feel interested.

"To me?" His face was suddenly irradiated. "You, who bask in the light of that incomparable loveliness all the time, can never understand what it means to the man who sees it for the first time—and not only sees, but touches!—touches with his unworthy lips that cheek of down—those lips! Ah! how many times since have I felt the thrill of that kiss, and wondered if she could recall it without horror."

"Well, horror can scarcely be the sentiment you inspired, since she wishes to marry you," simpered Peggie.

The mist of passion suddenly cleared from his eyes, and he bent on her so steady and penetrating a glance, that her eyes fell, and she waited nervously for his next words to give the cue to his thoughts.

"Ha! she wishes to marry me?" he said slowly. "Is it an honest wish of her own, or is it a trap set by some one else?"

"Oh! indeed, it is entirely her own idea!" cried Margaret eagerly; "not a soul has any suspicion of it but herself and me, and if you refuse, you will not even know her name, and the secret will be buried in your grave."

"Then give me a reason," he said, apparently relieved by her unmistakable honesty. "Give me the real reason, for I see this is something more than a mere fine lady's caprice."

Margaret felt a little natural embarrassment—the man was so different from what she had expected, that the little plans she had devised on her way to the prison, did not fit into the circumstances.

"In truth Prue—I mean the Lady Prudence—is deeply in debt and much harassed by her creditors, who threaten her with the Fleet, and I know not what beside," she blurted out. "Now, if she were your wife, her debts would be your debts, and as you, alack, must die on Monday, no one can make your widow pay your debts!"

"So 'tis my *widow* the Lady Prudence desires to be; not my wife!" said Robin, with a bitter smile.

"What difference does that make?" cried Margaret, greatly relieved at hav-

"So 'tis my widow she desires to be!"

ing got over the worst of her mission. "An' if you think so much of a kiss, I'll warrant my lady will not refuse one to her *husband*."

"Aye, such a kiss as I snatched from her on Bleakmoor, with lips denied and cheek averted. Or such a kiss as she might leave on the face of a dead stranger; as cold as the corpse itself."

"'Twill be your own fault if you get nothing better than that," cried Peggie, with a glance that had something of challenge in it. "On Bleakmoor, Lady Prudence had not seen your face; how could she tell you were not some blackavised desperado? There is not a handsome young gallant behind every robber's mask."

Robin burst out laughing. "Thanks, sweetheart!" he cried. "I trust my bride-elect has as kind a disposition as her messenger. Yet what does it matter to me?

"'Be she meeker, kinder than
Turtle-dove or pelican;
If she be not so to me,
What care I how kind she be?'"

His rich voice filled the squalid cell with burst of rollicking melody. "If she be a very Xantippe, I shall not suffer from her temper," he went on. "And, by the way, I do not yet know the name of the lady who has honored me by the offer of her hand—in widowhood."

"That I can not tell you, until I know your intentions," said Margaret. "First, will you marry her?"

"Will I marry her? Surely, she is not accustomed to sue in vain for men's hearts and hands! They must fall under her feet—as I do—when she but glances at them. Aye, I will marry her, though death himself ties the nuptial knot."

"That is settled, then—" Peggie was beginning philosophically.

"Settled, perhaps, as far as I am concerned; but what about your lady? Will her caprice last out until you return, think you, or will she be likely to stay in the same mind until to-morrow? 'Tis nothing to her, mayhap, to set a poor prisoner's brain afire, and bid him welcome death because it brings him five minutes of her company. I may dream myself her husband for a few hours, and forget everything else in the delicious hope of seeing her again; but what of her? By the time you go back to her, she may have changed her mind, or found some less objectionable way of paying her debts!"

"'Tis like enough," she replied coolly. "You would not be the first she has served in that fashion. You must take your chance of that."

"I'll take my chance," the prisoner acquiesced.

"Very well. Now, will you swear not to reveal the marriage to any one?—unless it be your father-confessor, if you have one."

"That I will willingly swear. If she can keep the secret herself, it will be safe enough in my grave."

"Now, I have only one more thing to ask. You must not be offended, but—is Robin Freemantie your true name? I know you 'Knights of the Road' do, sometimes, masquerade in name as well as in person, so perhaps you may have another name—not quite so—celebrated?"

"Aha! my lady wants a respectable grave to bury her debts in!" cried Robin, laughing sarcastically. "I am fortunate in being able to satisfy her even in this. I *have* another name, and a friend who will claim my body after I am hanged, and bury me where my disconsolate widow may, if she wish, raise a monument to commemorate my virtues and her woes." He wrote the name on a sheet of paper and handed it to her.

"And have *you* no condition to make?" asked Peggie, rising.

"What condition should I make?" demanded Robin, somewhat sternly. "Will she try to save my life, who only seeks to profit by my death? No! it will be reward enough to hold her hand for five minutes, while the priest makes her my wife; for just so long as I can coax her to keep her carriage waiting! No conditions for me. Yet, stay; I'll make one that will not hurt her pride or wound her vanity. Tell her I demand that she comes to me, looking her prettiest, as becomes a bride. I'll feast my eyes upon her loveliness, and if she'll but kiss me once, I'd thank them if they would take me out and hang me before the kiss had time to grow cold on my lips. Fare-thee-well, sweetheart, since you must go, and thanks for your company. Take my lady back my wallet, and let me first fill it with gold pieces for yourself."

"No, no!" cried Peggie, not quite able to act up to the character of waiting-woman to the extent of accepting a fee for her mediation. "My lady would be vexed with me, if I took aught from you but your consent to marry her."

"And this," he cried, gaily kissing her. "I'll warrant you know the old saw, 'Kiss and never tell.'"

"For shame!" she remonstrated, without any great show of indignation, however. "Help me with my cloak and call the jailer, if you please. Alack, my reputation would suffer sadly, if ever this long visit should be heard of outside the walls of Newgate."

He adjusted her cloak, not forgetting to steal another kiss before she tied the thick veil over her hood. "To-morrow," she said, as she hurried out after the jailer, "some time in the forenoon."

As she took her seat in the chair, she laughed softly to herself. "I must be a good actress," she murmured, "or, maybe, there is not enough difference between an earl's granddaughter and a waiting-maid to be perceptible to a robber! Odd's

life! he doesn't know the bride's name, even now! 'Tis a queer marriage, indeed!"

CHAPTER VIII
AN ORDER FOR A PARSON

Scarcely had Margaret Moffat alighted from her chair, when Prue darted out into the little hall and greeted her with embraces.

"Oh! Peggie, Peggie, I have been counting the minutes for your return," she cried, literally dancing round her. "Since you went away, all sorts of delightful things have happened. Our boxes have come from Yorkshire; think of it, all our finery—packed anyhow, to be sure, but a hot iron will repair the damage—and we can go to court and to church and to the play, and to the Duchess of Marlborough's masquerade! Oh! Peggie, I am crazy with joy!" and she kissed her cousin again, with an ardor that must have been rather exasperating to Sir Geoffrey, who was looking on.

By this time, Peggie had thrown off her wraps, and forgetting all about Robin, had become as joyously excited as Prue.

"Oh! the masquerade—shall we be invited? I was breaking my heart to think of missing it!"

"We are invited! Scarcely had the trunks arrived, when there came a messenger from the duchess with the invitations for the masquerade, and a note bidding me to dinner with her grace, to-morrow, at noon. Think how overjoyed I was to be able to accept both invitations. I flew up to grandmother to give her the good news—never thinking, I vow, that she would do aught but scold—and found her in a most gracious mood. She gave me a lovely lace flounce. Oh! Peggie, you know her rose-point? there's some for you, too; and what do you think? She offered to lend me her pearls, and promised to give us fifty guineas to help make us presentable at the queen's next drawing-room. Isn't that good news? And now, Peggie, you must help me prepare for to-morrow; that is even more important than the mask, for if the duchess should be in great good-humor with her little Prue, she might take her to Kensington Palace to make her peace with the queen!"

"To-morrow morning you have already one very particular engagement," cried Peggie, laughing. "I see, however, that poor Robin was right in thinking you might change your mind before I got back!"

"Robin—!" Prue glanced at Sir Geoffrey, and turned scarlet. Then her eyes danced with mischief. "Tell us all about it, Peggie; Sir Geoffrey may as well enjoy the joke."

Margaret hesitated, and would have changed the subject, but Prue, wilful as usual, would not be denied.

"'Tis too good to keep," she laughed. "You must know, Sir Geoffrey, that I am desperately in debt; 'tis no secret, though no one but Peggie knows how I have been driven and harried by my creditors. Well, in utter despair, I hit upon a most original way of paying my debts. I decided to be the widow of Robin Freemantle, who is condemned to be hanged next Monday."

"The widow of Robin Freemantle!" he exclaimed, with evident mystification. "Pray, how can you be a widow without first being a wife?"

"That was the only difficulty," cried Prue, with a mock-serious air, "so I persuaded Peggie to go to Newgate and ask Robin to marry me. Did he consent, Peggie? Did he make terms and demand a bribe, or am I forestalled by some fair Molly of the Minories, and must I pine in the Fleet, or marry good Mr. Aarons?"

Sir Geoffrey, who was, perhaps, a little deficient in sense of humor, could not dissemble his perplexity. He had passed the afternoon at the feet of his capricious mistress, or rather under the high heels of her dainty slippers, for she had laughed at his vows and persisted in turning his poetic rhapsodies into coldest prose. Even her joy over the arrival of her trunks and the duchess' invitations, had not improved matters, for she took little pains to conceal that the prospect of returning to the field of her former triumphs had reawakened a thirst for further conquest, which might prove disastrous, both to his matrimonial views and his rash wager.

It was certainly disconcerting to hear his betrothed calmly discussing her possible marriage with this one and that one, while he was racking his brain to devise some means of marrying her without burdening himself with the debts she must needs bring in her little hand. And Sir Geoffrey had already discovered that Prudence was never so likely to be serious, as when she appeared most frivolous.

"Miss Moffat has been to Newgate?" he exclaimed, grasping that one fact out of a bewildering array of vague possibilities. "What an extraordinary adventure! And did you really see the miscreant?"

"I saw him," replied Peggie, "and for a miscreant, he was really quite inoffensive, and even agreeable;" she smiled furtively, as she thought of the two kisses he had stolen, "and if Prue will choose that way out of her troubles, she may; for he's ready to marry her to-morrow, if she will provide the priest and the ring."

Prue glanced at her suitor, and observing his downcast eyes and the thoughtful frown upon his brow, thought the joke had been carried far enough,

even for her perverse humor.

"Nay, dear Peggie, 'tis enough folly for once," she said. "Let the poor fellow die in peace. What good would it do me to be the widow of a malefactor publicly hanged? I could never claim the rights of such a widowhood!"

"It need not be known, coz," Peggie eagerly suggested. "He has another name—one quite familiar to you—and though he will die as Robin Freemantle, he will be married and buried under his own name—or what he claims as his own—Robert Gregory de Cliffe."

Both her hearers repeated the name in tones of astonishment, "De Cliffe!"

"Of course, it is an assumed name, but 'twill serve, none the less," said Sir Geoffrey, with a constrained smile.

"De Cliffe," repeated Prue; "'twould be strange, indeed, if that name became mine by such a means. Lord Beachcombe would be greatly edified, if he knew I had a second opportunity of bearing his family-name." She laughed merrily, "If such a thing could be taken seriously, this would almost tempt me."

"And why not?" cried Peggie. "I protest I see no reason for throwing away such a chance. You marry the man to-morrow, and on Monday you will be a widow. His body will be claimed by a friend and buried under the name of De Cliffe, and if your creditors harass you, all you have to do is to produce your marriage-lines and they may go hunt for their money in Robin's grave."

Prue looked irresolutely at Sir Geoffrey. Her caprice for this marriage was almost played out, but she wanted to be coaxed out of it, and to make a great favor of yielding up her own wilful way to the remonstrances and entreaties of her lover. Sir Geoffrey, on the other hand, had rapidly turned the matter over in his own mind, and arrived at the conclusion that however this escapade might affect Prue, it would have two points in his favor. First, the riddance of those debts which he was so unwilling to shoulder, and second, the advantage that the possession of such a secret would give him in pressing his suit to a speedy marriage, and in maintaining his marital authority later on. Sir Geoffrey adored Prue, but with the experience he had gained of her wiles and guiles, he had no objection to the handling of a weapon that would keep them in due subjection.

He remained silent, so after a pause that began to be ominous, Prue said softly, "And you, Sir Geoffrey; how does this project strike you? Peggie has given me a girl's advice; I should like a man's opinion."

He hemmed a little, and glanced from one expectant face to the other. "Woman's wit," he began at last, "is often more to the point than man's—"

"Wisdom," suggested Peggie, filling in a slight hesitancy.

He laughed deprecatingly. "Oh! my dear Miss Margaret, I was not thinking of laying claim to wisdom—merely to logic, with which we poor dull-brained men try to compensate for our lack of feminine intuition. You, who are wise as well

as witty, can well afford to be merciful—"

"Still," persisted Prue, "you are only complimenting Peggie's wit; you are not telling us what you think of her scheme."

"Peggie's scheme!—oh—" murmured Margaret, *sotto voce*.

"My dearest Prudence, surely I do not need to say that the idea of any man having even such a ghost of a claim upon the woman I adore, is abhorrent to me," Sir Geoffrey began, rather pompously. "'Tis absurd to think that a few words to a stranger could free you from so much anxiety, while I, the most faithful of your slaves, am forced by cruel Fate to stand aside, for fear of aggravating your woes." Having got thus far, however, it occurred to him that this was too serious a view of the matter, so he went on with a careless laugh, "To be sure you would only see him once—the fellow's audacity would be rightly punished by such a torment of Tantalus—and your creditors—the wretches have threatened you with the Fleet, did you say? By Saint George, 'tis no more than they deserve to be balked of their prey—it seems almost worth while—"

"I see," interrupted Prue, without the least appearance of annoyance, "that you agree with Peggie. We will consider it settled. I'm so glad we have told you about it," she went on, in her most vivacious manner. "I really don't see how Peggie and I could have managed without you; and to think that I was foolish enough to be afraid you would be shocked!—"

"Oh! I *am* shocked—distracted, at the idea of any man—" he began, but she interrupted him, playfully shaking her forefinger at him.

"Now, now! don't let us try to be sentimental about it. The plan is a very good plan; very sensible and ingenious. I am proud of having originated it. Peggie, I know, is proud of having successfully carried out the negotiations, and you will have a right, my dear Sir Geoffrey, to be proud of the part you are going to play in bringing it to a triumphant end."

"I am entirely at your disposal, my dear Prudence," said Sir Geoffrey, rather taken aback at thus finding himself assigned an acting part in the comedy, "but I hardly know what I can do—indeed, the fewer persons concerned the better, I think—the less likely to attract attention—comment might be caused by any—a—unusual action on the part of a member of Parliament—the newsmongers are always on the look-out for—"

"Ta-ta-ta! don't you suppose that I should make a spicier mouthful for the newsmongers than even a member of Parliament?" cried Prue impatiently. "Who is to procure the marriage license and the priest, Sir Geoffrey, unless you do it? Don't you think I should attract more attention in Doctors' Commons than Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert, M.P.? And surely, you can more easily find some accommodating parson who will keep the secret and be sure to tie the knot so securely, that when the time comes to reap the reward, there may be no slip 'twixt

cup and lip. Then, to-morrow morning, you can conduct me to Newgate, on my way to dine with the duchess, and take care that Peggie and I do not get clapped into a dungeon by mistake."

"If it can be done so soon," Sir Geoffrey began reluctantly, yet scarcely venturing to make any further excuse.

"If it can not be done then," cried Prue imperiously, "it will not be done at all. You may be sure, once I get back to court, I shall have no time for marrying malefactors, or members of Parliament either, mayhap."

Sir Geoffrey made no further protest, but considering that the benefit to himself was so undeniable, gave in gracefully, and pledged himself to his lady's service with many courtly vows. Indeed, the tempting prospect of Prue, divested of her debts, and free in three days to bestow herself upon him, rose before him in such glowing colors, that even Lord Beachcombe's wager was cast into the shade, and only served to add luster to the vision of his fickle and inconsequent mistress, reduced to sweet reasonableness and proper wifely submission by the judicious use of her discreditable secret.

He, therefore, took his leave, having to content himself for the nonce with the tips of Prue's fingers to kiss, and leaving the cousins to the delightful occupation of turning over their recovered wardrobes, and devising the means of making a resplendent appearance at court with their present possessions and the thrifty outlay of Lady Drumloch's fifty guineas.

CHAPTER IX
THE WEDDING

"My mind misgives me," said Margaret, when the two girls were at their toilet the next morning. "'Tis not too late, Prue, for reflection, and if ill betide thee, dear, I shall feel as if I had brought it on thee."

Prue turned from her mirror with a petulant gesture. "Tell me, Peggie, truly," she said, with an air of deep concern, "do you not think the hairdresser has trussed my hair too high on top? Would not a curl or two more on the neck be an improvement? Prithee, unpin this lock and let it fall negligently behind my ear. Ah! that's better." She turned back to the mirror, and regarded her reflection critically. "Am I too pale, Peggie? Do you think a touch of rouge—the least touch—would be becoming?"

"For the wedding, do you mean? Faith, I always thought a pale, pensive bride more interesting. Not that you are either. A shade more color would spoil you. I think you are even a little flushed."

"*You* are pale, Peggie," said Prue, looking fixedly at her. "What's the matter?"

"Oh! I dreamed all night of troubled water, Prue. You know that's ill-luck! 'Tis not too late to give up this foolish marriage—"

"Foolish marriage! Why, Peggie, 'tis the first wise one I have ever contemplated. And as for a dream, why I dreamed three times running of a black cat, and if anything bodes good luck that does."

"But suppose after all the object of the marriage should fail," urged Margaret.

"Fail! How can it fail?" cried Prue pettishly. "Besides, you know the motto of the Wynnes: '*Cowards fayle. I winne.*' Well, I have failed often enough, yet not from cowardice, God wot! And still I am always hoping to win, I scarce know what."

"Your new motto will suit you just as well," said Peggie, "'*Nil timeo.*'"

"Ha, ha! the motto of the De Cliffes. Was ever such audacity as this Robin's? I've a mind to ask him, when the deed is done, if he has any directions to give about his hatchment, or if I shall refer the matter to the head of the house."

"Oh! Prue, are you utterly heartless? I declare, since I have seen the poor young man I am sorry for him and I wish I had not helped to turn his execution into a jest."

"Would you have me weep?" said Prue, almost sternly. "There is always time enough for that when there is nothing else to be done. Ah! I hear Sir Geoffrey's voice. You are dressed, Peggie, prithee go down to him and bring me word whether he has done his part, and is ready—and willing—to give away the bride."

She turned for a last look in the mirror as Peggie hurried away, and the half-scornful smile with which she surveyed her own charming reflection had none of the levity with which she had so easily deceived her cousin. Yet it certainly was not a picture to provoke disdain. Never had the wilful beauty looked to greater advantage. The restless brilliancy of her sparkling eyes, the changeful color that flushed and paled her cheek with each quick-drawn breath, the nameless but irresistible charm that animated every feature, might have excused a more complacent glance. But Prue, though by no means prone to deal severely with herself, was a good deal more ashamed of her scheme than she would have cared to own, even to herself, and perhaps secretly longed for some insurmountable obstacle to stop her in spite of herself.

She was determined, however, that she would not be the one to raise a dif-

ficulty. She was so unspeakably mortified by the new light yesterday's events had thrown on Sir Geoffrey's wooing that the idea of placing a barrier between herself and him, gave her keen satisfaction. That the possibility of her inheriting a fortune from her grandmother should have influenced his pursuit of her ever so slightly, wounded her vanity, that nerve-center of her being; and that he should have lent his countenance and help to a scheme that would give her, even nominally, to another man, no matter how brief or indefinite the tenure, dealt it an almost mortal blow.

"He has yet a chance," she murmured. "He may have found on reflection that he can not bring himself to sacrifice me for the sake of a couple of thousand pounds' worth of debts, and he may implore me to refrain for his sake. I might not be persuaded—one can never answer for oneself—but he would come out of it without dishonor." She mechanically smoothed a ribbon here and adjusted a flounce there and, half turning, tried to obtain a full view of her back in a glass two feet square. "'Tis provoking to be obliged to dress by guess-work," she commented. "If I were to marry old Aarons I could have three or four tire-women, and a dressing-room with the walls all covered with mirrors, so that I could see every side of myself at once. Pah! what is coming over me that I could even think of such a creature? What with marrying criminals and receiving offers from usurers the Viscountess Brooke must be coming to a pretty pass."

With which she made a deep curtsey to as much as she could see of the Viscountess Brooke in the little looking-glass, and running out of the room met Miss Moffat coming up-stairs.

"Hasten, Prue," she whispered breathlessly. "All is arranged. Sir Geoffrey has the ring and license in his pocket and a parson in the carriage. If the bride is ready—" She had entirely recovered from her brief spasm of reluctance and was as merry as a child and as reckless of consequences.

"The bride is quite ready," cried Prue. "Nothing is lacking except—"

"Except what?" inquired Peggie, as she broke off abruptly.

"Oh! a trifle or two; nothing worth mentioning," laughed Prue, snatching up her cloak and hood and running lightly down-stairs, where Sir Geoffrey awaited them, not altogether at ease about his own part in the affair, and palpably relieved that Prue was in the best of spirits and inclined to treat the whole adventure as a frolic.

"'Tis all your own fault—and Peggie's," she laughed in her sauciest way. "If I were not the most good-natured person in the world I should scold you both soundly and refuse to make a fool of myself for your amusement."

"Will you change places with me and let me take your chance?" cried Peggie. "It can not make much difference to Robin."

"What, when I am all dressed up in ribbons and laces for the wedding? No

difference, forsooth! What do you say to that, Sir Geoffrey?"

"I was just going to suggest that you were altogether too fine a bride for the occasion," said Sir Geoffrey, rather glumly. "A less resplendent toilet would be less likely to attract attention."

"Eclipse me then under this big cloak," she replied, giving it to him. "Do you think, you foolish man, that I am dressed up like this to wed a footpad? I am on my way to Marlborough House to dine with the duchess, and must hasten or I shall be late and may chance to get a box o' the ear for my first course."

Robin Freemantle sat at the rough table in his cell, writing busily. Several closely written sheets were spread out before him, and when he finished the last and signed his name to it he threw the pen down and sat drumming on the table with his fingers. It was an idle action but by no means idly performed, for the frown on his forehead and the movements of his long, sinewy hands were full of purpose, and angry purpose, too.

Presently the frown died away and a look of wistful sadness replaced it. He took up the written sheets and turned them in his fingers as though half-disposed to tear them up, smiling bitterly as he glanced from page to page.

"What good will it do me," he muttered, "when my bones are rotting in an unmarked grave, to bequeath a feud to perhaps unborn generations? Shall I fling down my mother's reputation for the lawyers to fight over, like dogs over a bone, when I am not there to protect it, and when the outcome of the struggle will interest me as little as it will her?"

A dim vision, more imagination than memory, rose before him of the fair, young mother who had faded from his life twenty-three years ago, and beside it another face radiant with life and laughter, a pair of blue eyes sparkling through curled lashes, a pair of round, white arms gleaming in the darkness, a scarlet mouth—every nerve tingled at the thought that his own had touched it, and might again. But no! she had been merely playing with him. How could he have been fooled by the ruse of a spoiled beauty to feed her own vanity and punish his audacity? *She* want to marry *him*! It was fantastic, absurd, and what could be more improbable than the reason for such a folly? She had a wager on it, perhaps, or merely wished to amuse herself at the expense of the daring highwayman who had robbed her of a kiss. Well, she had had her way. He had shown that she had but to beckon and he was ready to follow, and that had doubtless ended her whim.

"She will not come!" he said, aloud, in a tone of poignant disappointment, that plainly showed how he clung to the promise he feigned to discredit.

The jailer opened the door noisily.

"Visitors for the highwayman," he announced. "More fine ladies and gen-

tlemen."

Robin sprang to his feet, looking eagerly from one to another. Whatever his expectations were, the first glance disappointed them. A pimply-faced, watery-eyed little man, in rusty black, entered first, conducting Margaret Moffat by the hand in a ceremonious fashion, that had something in it reminiscent of the time when he did not need filling up with gin to make him remember that he was a student and a Doctor of Divinity. And close behind him, followed Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert—tall, handsome, dressed with the sober elegance that became the budding statesman, supporting on his arm a lady, enveloped from head to foot in a hooded cloak, that completely concealed her.

"May I inquire—" Robin began. Then his glance fell upon Margaret, whose air of coquettish simplicity would not have misbecome my lady's confidential maid, and recognizing her, his hopes rose again, and he burst into a hearty laugh. "Ha, my fair friend; have you come to enliven my solitude once more? What! Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert? I can not say I anticipated the honor of a visit from you. I fancied you had already seen more of me than you approved."

Sir Geoffrey flushed. "My good fellow," he said haughtily, "I have no personal enmity toward you; I merely did my duty as a citizen in appearing as a witness against you."

"Oh! I had forgotten that," said Robin negligently. "I was thinking of the time when I and my friends were chasing you and yours, and the constables shot my horse—poor Firebrand, I wonder what became of him—and turned the tide of battle."

"'Sdeath, fellow!" Sir Geoffrey began furiously, but Prue checked him with a light touch on the arm.

"Pray, gentlemen, do not waste time quarreling; what does it matter now who fled and who pursued?"

At the sound of her voice, at once gentle and imperious, the two men dropped their warlike air, and Robin, who was astounded to recognize Prue in Sir Geoffrey's companion, seemed petrified into a statue of expectancy.

"If we can have a few minutes' privacy—?" she suggested.

Sir Geoffrey beckoned to the jailer, and after a murmured conference, enlivened by the clinking of coin, the latter consented to see that they were uninterrupted for as long as they wished.

While that was being arranged, Prue approached Robin with a timid air. "Master Robert de Cliffe—or Robin Freemantle"—she said, "I thank you for consenting to my wild scheme, and I pray you, forgive me if it seems heartless."

"Madam, I deem myself fortunate, if my death be of any use to you," he replied, with a ring of bitter sadness in his tone.

Prue, greatly surprised by the voice, which had none of the roughness of

the robber's greeting on Bleakmoor, looked more closely at Robin, and discovered that he was young, handsome, and by no means ferocious-looking.

"I would not have you feel harshly toward me," she said, in a low, thrilling voice. "It is not too late, even now, for me to withdraw, if you deem me overbold."

A spasm of apprehension shivered through him. Had she brought his dream so near realization only to snatch it from him? Could a woman be so cruel to a dying man? He met her questioning look with one of agonized supplication. "Withdraw—now?" he muttered, unable to voice the prayer of his eyes. "Then why come at all—to mock me?"

But Prue was quick to read men's hearts, and what she saw in Robin's, translated his few abrupt words into a language that stirred hers to pity. Therefore, to console him (the jailer having by this time retired), she now threw off her wraps, and revealed such a vision of loveliness as fairly illuminated the dingy prison cell. His look of delighted surprise satisfied her.

"I recognize you now, but you are far, far more beautiful than even my dreams of you! And have you really made yourself so fine to gladden a poor prisoner's eyes?" said Robin, gazing with rapture upon the graceful figure in its dainty garb of brocade and lace, the lovely face, from which eyes of the most dazzling brightness smiled alluringly upon him; the little hand, so tapering and dimpled, stretched out to him with a gesture, half-entreaty and half-command. As he took it in his, she blushed a little, remembering how he had behaved the other time she offered it. But this time, he bent his head and laid a courtly and reverential salute upon it.

"We have nothing to wait for now," said Sir Geoffrey, impatiently observing this little episode. "Parson Goodridge, have you shown the papers to this gentleman, to make sure they are correct?"

Robin mechanically took up the papers the parson had laid on the table, and read out the names from the marriage license. "Robert Gregory de Cliffe," he nodded approval and glanced further down. "Prue, widow of James Stuart Brooke and daughter of Reginald Wynne and Anne Drumloch, his wife." All the titles had been eliminated, and there was nothing to show that the bride was not of plebeian origin. Robin smiled slightly. Was it worth while to be mysterious with a man virtually dead? He recalled that Peggie had made him promise to keep his marriage with "my lady" a secret, but it was apparent that he was not to be trusted with more of the secret than was absolutely necessary.

"It is quite correct," he said, laying the paper down.

"Then let us proceed to business. Master Goodridge, pray do your office quickly. Let us have no homilies on the duties and pleasures of matrimony"—Sir Geoffrey laughed maliciously—"but make the ceremony brief and binding. We will not intrude on your privacy," he added, turning to Robin, "any longer than

is necessary."

"I am ready," said Robin curtly.

The ceremony was quickly performed. Robert Gregory and Prudence duly accepted each other as man and wife for all the vicissitudes of their mortal life, severally vowed love, honor and all the rest of it, pledged themselves by the giving and receiving of a ring, to share each other's worldly goods, and finally received the blessing of the church, borne on the gin-flavored breath of Parson Goodridge.

A short ten minutes having sufficed to make the Viscount Brooke's widow the highwayman, Robin Freemantle's, wife, the parson pocketed his dog-eared book, also a generous fee from the bridegroom, and took his departure.

"Do not forget to keep your own counsel," Sir Geoffrey warned him. "This has been a good morning's work for you, Master Goodridge, and there is better to come when your testimony is wanted, if the secret be well kept."

"I shall keep it, never fear; I shall keep it," mumbled the degraded creature, already drunk in anticipation of the glorious possibilities of a pocket so unusually well lined. "A secret is the only thing I have ever learned to keep."

And he disappeared, chuckling at his own wit.

"Now," said Sir Geoffrey, turning to Prudence with a smile, "all that remains is the pleasant ceremony of congratulating the bridegroom and saluting the bride, and then we had better be going."

Prue was standing a little apart, with down-cast eyes and a certain trouble in her pensive face, that almost foretokened tears. She drew back a step at Sir Geoffrey's words, and put up her hand, palm-outward.

"Let us have no more mockery," she said coldly. "We have made ourselves quite contemptible enough, without further buffoonery. So far from congratulating the bridegroom, we should do better to apologize to him." She stamped her foot slightly but positively, as he seemed disposed to persist. "As to the bride, sir, for once she is in no humor for folly. Be kind enough to take my cousin out and find a chair for her; then you can return and see me to my carriage."

"And leave you here?" he exclaimed.

"Where else would you leave me?" she retorted, in a jeering tone. "Are you afraid to leave me with my *husband*?"

Sir Geoffrey would still have lingered to remonstrate, but Peggie, whose ready sympathy divined her cousin's motive, placed her hand within his arm, and drawing her veil closely over her face, announced herself ready for departure.

"The gentleman is not *my* husband," she remarked demurely. "It would scarcely be proper to leave *me* alone with him, and you can not escort us both at once."

But when they were alone, the words of extenuation Prue intended to speak, seemed hard of utterance. There was a little lump in her throat, and she

could think of no commonplace form of excuse that seemed to fit the occasion. Robin gazed at her as though he wished to fill his whole soul with her image. Yet, although they were scarcely twenty inches apart, he made no attempt to touch her.

"*Morituri te salutant*," he said, with a curious mingling of irony and tenderness in his voice. "Accept the blessing of a dying man."

"Oh! poor soul—must thou really die?" sighed Prue, at last raising her eyes, filled with tears.

At the sight of those sweet, dewy eyes, the newly made husband thrilled in every nerve. "If those tears are for me, sweet Prudence," he said, "death is not so hard to bear."

"'Tis sad; indeed, I would I could do aught to comfort thee!" she murmured, half turned away, yet lingering.

A dark flush swept his cheek. "I could tell you, if I dared, how to make me forget everything but—yourself," he said.

"If you dared!" She flashed an arch glance at him. "On Bleakmoor, you were not so—so ceremonious, Sir Highwayman. Ask me for what you please. My powers are limited, but I will gladly do what I can to console you."

"An' thou wouldst really comfort me, kiss me once, as though I were thy real husband and thou lovedst me." He held out his arms to her, with such prayer and such insistence in his eyes, that Prue, startled, hung back an instant, and then, half involuntarily, drooped toward him, and permitted herself to be clasped in his passionate embrace.

When she drew herself away, her cheeks were rosy-red and her eyes cast down. But Robin, transferring his lips to her hand, fell on his knees before her.

"Oh!" he softly uttered, "I can bear to die now. Death itself can not rob me of your kiss."

"Then you forgive me for—marrying you?" she said.

"Forgive you! Oh! if you had killed me, I could have blessed you, but would not have presumed to think of pardon," he passionately breathed, "and now—" Words failed, and his lips finished the invocation on her hand.

She placed her other hand gently on his bowed head, and pressing it back, stooped and kissed him on the forehead. It was as pure and tender a caress as a mother could have bestowed on her sleeping babe, but it touched both hearts as the most passionate embrace of love could not have done. It was a farewell benediction.

Not another word was spoken, and when Sir Geoffrey returned, Prue allowed him to wrap her in her cloak and hood and lead her away, without even a backward glance at Robin, who, as soon as the door had closed behind them, threw himself on the floor where she had stood, and gave way to an ecstasy of

recollection, none the less delicious because there was no future to discount its bliss.

When at last he rose to his feet, he gathered up the manuscript at which he had worked since daylight, and tore it into fragments.

"Since my death will benefit her, I will not attempt to live," he exclaimed. "She has paid for my life in full and with interest, and I'll not cheat her of her bargain."

He sat down, and on his last remaining sheet of paper, wrote a short letter.

"FRIEND STEVE:

"As soon as I am dead and according to your promise (in which I have all confidence), buried, as we agreed together, you will take the iron box you wot of and convey it to Mistress Prudence Brooke, to whom I bequeath it, to do whatever she will with the contents. I do not know where this lady lives, but you can easily discover her, as she is of the court and a lady of title, being besides of a beauty so incomparable, that by it alone you can trace her.

"Do not grieve after me. We must all die, and I have ridden so often with Death on the pillion, that we are old comrades. Besides, I have reasons that you wot not of for welcoming him as a benefactor to others besides

"**Your friend**, "ROBIN FREEMANTLE."

He was sealing this missive, when the cell-door opened, and a man of grave and imposing appearance was ushered in.

"I am Lord Beachcombe's attorney," he announced himself, "and at his command, I come to confer with you about the strange statement you made to him yesterday. He has given me his full confidence, and empowered me to make terms with you, if I find it advisable."

CHAPTER X
THE FOLLY OF YESTERDAY

Prue came home late that afternoon, in the wildest of spirits. Her return to

society had been a genuine triumph, and even her enemies and detractors, who had been successful in ousting her from royal favor and keeping her in disgrace for a year or more, had been compelled to join in the chorus of welcome and feign, if they did not feel, a decent pleasure in her reinstatement.

Lady Drumloch, who was still unable to leave her room, as soon as she heard Prue's voice, despatched Lowton with a message, commanding her granddaughter to repair instantly to her and give a full account of the day's adventures.

"Can you picture the effect, if we obeyed her to the letter?" whispered Peggie. "I wonder how she would take the announcement of your—" Prue clapped her hand quickly over her mouth, at which Peggie indulged in a convulsion of silent laughter, indicating by signs and gestures the triumphant sense of power conferred on her, by the knowledge of her cousin's tremendous secret.

Checking her exuberance by an imperious glance, Prue followed Lowton into the sick-room, where the old lady reclined on a couch, near a bright fire. A look of real delight sparkled in the old lady's eyes when they fell upon Prue's graceful figure and animated face.

"Come hither, child," she cried; "kiss me and let me bless thee. Truly, Prudence, thou dost often vex my pride with thy follies, but thou dost always charm my eyes. What said the duchess to you? Did she chide?"

"No such thing, dear Grandmother. I have heard no word to-day but dear Prue this; sweet Lady Prue that. Her grace kissed me on the cheek and cried out how pleasant it was, for once, to be able to kiss a face fresh from nature, without having to pick out a spot where the paint and powder were not thick enough to poison one. And I'm not surprised, for half the women there were plastered so thick, 'twas like a frescoed wall, and one looked to see it crack when they smiled. The duchess was not much better herself; but she was all smiles and affability, and all my intimate enemies took the cue and overwhelmed me with flatteries, and Lord Ripworth lisped out, 'Gad, Viscountess, nothing happier than your return has occurred in three months. We have been so dull, that we have taken to religion as a diversion; now your ladyship has come back to court, we shall, at least, have something to talk about."

"The varlet! His mother was a chambermaid, and if people did not talk about her, it was because anything that could be said was too gross for utterance. I trust you set him down thoroughly."

"Oh! no; I was bent on showing how amiable I had grown in the country. I only remarked that whatever he might talk about, I had never heard him accused of saying anything of consequence. There was a large party to dinner, and I heard all the gossip. First, Lady Beachcombe has presented her spouse with a son and heir."

"'Tis your own fault, Prudence, that such an event is naught but gossip to

you," said Lady Drumloch severely.

"Oh! la, la! no one can accuse me of an envious disposition," laughed Prue. "Lady Beachcombe is welcome to all the honors of her position. I would not have changed places with her this afternoon for a dukedom, to say nothing of the privilege of nursing Lord Beachcombe's heir."

"Perhaps 'tis all for the best," the old lady conceded. "The present earl is a turn-coat, like his father, who came of a loyal stock, and was so devoted to the throne that he offered his allegiance to every successive usurper of it. I would rather see you married to an honorable Jacobite, who could use your influence at court for the cause of King James the Third."

"The De Cliffes are all *mauvais sujets*, are they not?" queried Margaret innocently.

"No, child, there have been De Cliffes as loyal as the Drumlochs and Wynnes; De Cliffes who were worthy to aspire to the hand of a woman whose forefathers laid down their lives for Charles the Martyr. Unfortunately, of late generations, the scum has risen to the top in more families than the Beachcombes."

"Well, dear Grannie, as you think so ill of Lord Beachcombe, 'tis as well, perhaps, that circumstances prevented my marrying him, and left me free for at least one more season to enjoy life," said Prue; "and truly, never had I better reason to value my freedom than to-day."

"You have not told us yet what you did this afternoon," cried Peggie, to whom her cousin's triumphs always gave intense and unselfish enjoyment.

"After dinner, the duchess dismissed her guests, and accompanied by Lady Limerick and myself, drove to Kensington Palace, where we had audience of the queen. Her Majesty was extremely gracious, and appeared to have forgotten all my peccadilloes. She inquired if I still played the guitar, and when I sang one or two ballads composed by Herr Haendel—whose music is now quite the rage—was pleased to observe that I must come to Windsor in the summer, and sing to her in the twilight. After that we played basset. 'Twas a dull finish to the day, for the queen fell asleep and nobody dared waken her, so the game was not very lively."

"If you go to Windsor, 'twill be as lady-in-waiting, surely," said Peggie.

"The duchess will do her utmost for me, but she is less powerful than formerly. Mrs. Masham, whom she placed about the queen's person to further her interests, has completely secured the queen's confidence, and means to use it to her own profit. I think the duchess would like to use me to check Mrs. Masham."

"Sarah Churchill would scarcely be so gracious to any one she did not expect to serve her in some fashion," said Lady Drumloch. "Well, my dear, I wish thee good fortune. Be wise this time, and do not let thy wild spirits wrong thee."

Prue became suddenly pale as death. "'Tis late in the day for me to become

wise," she said, in a low, wild voice. "Oh! Grannie, Grannie, I'm afraid I have given you a great deal of trouble, and the worst of me is yet to come!"

The old lady raised herself on her arm, and gazed with a look of terror into Prue's disturbed face. "What have you done, child? Let me hear the worst at once!"

"'Tis nothing," interposed Peggie, putting her arm round her cousin, and drawing her gently but forcibly away. "She is excited and overwrought, and methinks she has quarreled with Sir Geoffrey—"

"Is that all?" ejaculated Lady Drumloch, sinking back with a laugh that ended in a groan of pain. "I'll forgive that easily enough; he is no choice of mine, and now Prudence is back at court, 'tis odd if she can not do better than marry a bankrupt baronet."

"Better or worse," cried Prue passionately, "I'll never marry him; I'd rather marry a—a highwayman."

Peggie gave her arm a vicious pinch, but the comparison was so monstrously improbable, that Lady Drumloch did not deign to take any notice of it.

"You were very much in love with Sir Geoffrey a week ago," she remarked austerely, "but your fickleness appears to have no limit."

"Dear Grandmother!" exclaimed Prue, recovering her self-control, "'tis not fickleness, but simply the result of sound reasoning. I love certain qualities, and while I believed Sir Geoffrey possessed them, I loved him for their sake. I am still faithful to the thing I love; but, unfortunately, Sir Geoffrey has it not, at least, not enough of it for me. But let us not despair; the Duchess of Marlborough is determined to marry me off, and has been graciously pleased to select a husband for me."

"Indeed, and who may he be?"

"I know not; his name is still a secret. I have, indeed, a suspicion that it may be Lord Beachcombe's new-born heir, for she remarked that by the time her choice was ready for presentation to me, I might perhaps be settled down, and sobered sufficiently to make a tolerable wife-of-sorts!"

Peggie, watching her cousin closely, came to the conclusion that she was talking nonsense to keep herself from thinking, and at the first opportunity, coaxed her out of the room and away from the danger of betraying herself to Lady Drumloch, whose keen wits and close observation were the more to be dreaded, the less she displayed them.

As a result of the report of Prue's return to court, and her flattering welcome there, the shabby little drawing-rooms of her grandmother's house were crowded that evening and all next day, by those who hastened to offer congratulations and make excuses for neglect that she was too thorough a woman of the world

to resent. The throng of courtiers found her, indeed, most accessible. She had a jest and a compliment and a friendly word for every one. Arch glances and enchanting smiles fell alike on friend and foe; perhaps more especially on the latter, as Prue, for once, attempted to follow her grandmother's instructions, and be wise!

Long after midnight, the tired girls performed the last sweeping curtseys to their parting guests, and leaving the yawning James to extinguish the lights, crawled wearily up the long, narrow stairway to their attic bedrooms. Peggie, bursting with long-suppressed curiosity, offered her services to unlace her cousin from the stiff prison of whalebone and buckram in which her slender form had been encased for so many hours, and unpin the luxuriant curls and puffs from the cushion upon which the hair-dresser had disposed them early in the morning. Prue sighed with relief as Peggie, regardless of her own fatigue, removed the monstrously high-heeled shoes and filmy silken hose, and rubbed her cramped feet until they ceased to tingle and smart with the restored circulation, but vowed she was too tired to talk, and, moreover, had nothing to tell but what Peggie already knew.

"What said Robin, when we left you alone?" Peggie whispered. "Did I keep Sir Geoffrey long enough finding me a chair? I sent three away before I could be satisfied that the chair was clean and the chairman sober."

"Long enough for all we had to say," said Prue pettishly. "Do you suppose we were exchanging vows of eternal fidelity, or arranging for our next meeting?" Then, pathetically, "If you were as tired as I am, Peggie, you would rather be in bed than gossiping, and to-morrow we are going to Lady Limerick's drum, and the play afterward, and want to look our prettiest; so kiss me, dear coz, and get thee to bed."

Nor was she more communicative the next day. From early morning, the house was besieged by a procession of apologetic tradesfolk, eager to explain away their threatening letters and dunning messages, and placing themselves and their wares at the disposal of the reinstated favorite. No talk now of the Fleet and the sponging-house—no more writs and suits—nothing but dapper tailors and coquettish milliners' assistants, suave jewelers and mysterious, ill-shaven foreigners with dirty parcels from which they extracted, under vows of secrecy, laces from France or Flanders, or embroideries from the distant Indies, such as might have tempted the most austere of Eve's daughters to break at least one of the ten commandments.

And in the midst of all this excitement, Lady Prue flitted, bubbling over with mirth and triumph. Her bright presence lighted up the sick-room, and under its influence, Lady Drumloch declared she would be carried down-stairs on Sunday to receive callers, and that before a week was over, she would be strong enough

to drive to Kensington Palace and pay her respects at the queen's next drawing-room. She bade Peggie fetch her jewel-casket and try the effect of her antiquated diadems and brooches upon herself and Prue, and spent an hour or two deciding which of them the emeralds would best become, and which one ought to have the amethysts. Finally, however, the matter was left undecided, and except that she bestowed the promised pearls upon Prue and a filagree bracelet upon Margaret, the casket was relentlessly restored intact to its hiding-place.

All day long, Peggie watched her cousin, without being able to detect the faintest sign of compunction, or even recollection of the folly of yesterday and the tragedy that would crown it in a few hours. At Lady Limerick's drum, she led the scandal and laughter, as of old, and at the play, sat in her modest little box with Margaret beside her, and an ever-changing crowd of beaux behind her chair. Sir Geoffrey came late, and had scarcely time to greet her, when a message called her to the Duchess of Marlborough, in whose box she spent the rest of the evening.

He did not venture to follow there, uninvited, so it was not until the play was over that he found an opportunity to address her. He was waiting at the carriage door to hand her in, and without giving her time to object, followed and took his seat beside her.

"Do you not see my cousin sitting with her back to the horses?" inquired Prue, in the most freezing tone, as she drew herself as far as possible from him.

"Pardon my inadvertence, Miss Moffat!" he exclaimed, in a tone less gracious than his words, and bouncing over to the other seat in a great hurry.

"Never mind me," said Peggie, stifling a laugh. "I prefer the front seat."

"So much the better for me," remarked Prue, coolly spreading out her voluminous skirts. "Did you see the *Spectator* to-day, Sir Geoffrey? No? You must read it; the article about Lady Beachcombe and the new heir will make you die of laughing. You were too late, I think, to see the beginning of Mr. Congreve's new play; how do you like the end? Very sentimental, isn't it?"

"I can not say I noticed it," said Sir Geoffrey sulkily; "I was thinking of other things."

"Then why come to the play to think of other things?" she inquired innocently. "'Tis an ill compliment to Mr. Congreve."

"When Lady Prudence Brooke is present, Mr. Congreve can not expect to attract much attention," said Sir Geoffrey, with an effort to recover his customary gallant bearing. "Do not blame me too severely if I am unable to keep my thoughts from you, even at the play, dearest Prue."

As they arrived in Mayfair at this moment, Prue was spared the effort of a retort. Peggie, alighting first, ran into the house, leaving Sir Geoffrey to escort her cousin, but at the door of the drawing-room Prue stopped.

"I am very tired, Sir Geoffrey," she said, attempting to withdraw her hand from his clasp, "and must beg you to excuse me this evening. My cousin Margaret will entertain you."

"She will do nothing of the sort," said a laughing voice from above; "Cousin Margaret is on her way to bed!"

"Then I will ask you to excuse me, Sir Geoffrey, if I follow Peggie's example. I have lost the habits of gay London life, and two days of it have made me almost sick with fatigue."

"Give me but five minutes," he entreated, "and I swear I'll detain you no longer." He opened the door as he spoke and led her into the room, in which a single lamp, turned low, emphasized the darkness.

She stood facing him without a word. Suddenly he tried to take her in his arms, but she repulsed him with a gesture almost of horror. "You forget, Sir Geoffrey," she said, "that I am the wife of another man."

He laughed ironically. "Is it possible that you are taking this farce seriously? I feared I had had the misfortune to offend you, and am relieved to find that nothing worse has come between us than Robin Freemantle."

"That is enough for the present," she said. "While one man can call me wife, all other men must keep their distance."

"Even your betrothed lover, Prudence?" he pleaded reproachfully.

"You more than any one," she replied resolutely. "Without you, I could not have married this unfortunate man, and you should, at least, respect the wife you helped him to."

"Heaven give me patience!" he cried, exasperated. "Do you really look upon yourself as the wife of this gallows-bird? Pray, do you propose to don widow's weeds on Monday?"

A shudder quivered through her. "I don't know what I shall do on Monday," she said, in a low, strained voice, and ran out of the room and up-stairs without another thought of Sir Geoffrey.

He waited for a few minutes, in hopes of her return, and then went down and let himself out into the moonlit street.

CHAPTER XI

THE MORROW'S WAKENING

Before Sunday evening, Peggie really lost patience with Prue. She was so saucy and coquettish, so bubbling over with merry stories and foolish jests, that even in church she could not keep still, but fluttered her fan and whispered behind it to Peggie, until that lively damsel was quite ashamed of her levity. Not one word could she be induced to say about Robin. Astonished at her indifference, Peggie tried in a variety of ways to entrap her into some expression of feeling about him, but she became impatient under questions, and received any suggestions of sympathy with cold flippancy or even more provoking silence.

All the afternoon, a stream of visitors poured through the little house in Mayfair. Superb equipages and sumptuous sedan-chairs blocked the thoroughfare, while their occupants, in gorgeous array, offered their congratulations to the Lady Prudence, and sipped weak tea and chocolate out of her grandmother's egg-shell "chaney" cups. Lady Drumloch did not venture into such a crowd, but, decked in her priceless cashmeres and laces, received a favored few in her dressing-room, and listened with a flush of pride on her pale face to the praises of Prue's beauty and the prognostications of a future even more brilliant and eventful than her past.

"You must persuade her to marry well and settle down, dear cousin," Lady Limerick advised. "Twenty-two is quite old enough, even for a widow, to give up frivolous flirtations and choose a husband. The men are all wild about her, I know; but if she jilts a few more of them, the rest will get frightened and leave her in the lurch, and she will have to be satisfied with a crooked stick, like many another spoilt beauty."

"She must please herself," Lady Drumloch replied. "The harder she finds it to choose before marriage, the less likely she will be to repent afterward."

For all that the old lady took occasion to read her granddaughter a sharp lecture upon the necessity of mending her ways before too late. To which, Prue listened reverentially, and promised speedy amendment. Five minutes afterward, in the privacy of their own room, she was making Peggie die of laughter at her caricature of herself as a reformed character, with all her fascinating caprices exchanged for the cares of the nursery and still-room, obedience to a tyrannical spouse replacing her sway over a score of suitors, while she wielded Mrs. Grundy's birch instead of defying it. Not one solemn or repentant thought clouded the laughter of her blue eyes, and when her cousin kissed her good night and bade her sleep well, she cried out:

"Why, I'm two-thirds asleep already," and turned upon her pillow with a sigh of voluptuous drowsiness.

But in the night, Peggie, who always slept with the communicating door open between the two rooms, was awakened by a sound so strange and unaccustomed, that her heart stood still for a moment, with awe. From the little white

bed, wherein Prue usually slept as calmly as a child, came sounds of grievous weeping, sighs and sobs and broken words of self-reproach, and prayers for pardon for herself and pity for one in extremity.

Peggie started from her bed and crept stealthily to the door, where she was not long discovering the cause of this unexpected outbreak.

"Oh! if I could only once ask him to forgive me," Prue sobbed. "Oh! Robin, Robin, I did not want you to love me; I did not mean to be cruel. My God! he will die without knowing—oh! me, oh! me—"

"Poor little Prue, how unjust I have been," thought Peggy remorsefully. "I was past all patience with her heartless indifference, and here she is breaking her heart over a frolic marriage with a highwayman!"

She crept in quietly, and lying down beside Prue, put her arms round the little quivering form and drew the tear-damp face upon her kindly bosom.

"What is the matter, Prue? Don't cry so dreadfully," she said, soothing and petting her. "There, there, be comforted, darling. You are not to blame. We persuaded you, and after all Robin is none the worse for knowing he leaves some one behind to weep for him."

"But he doesn't know it. How can he?" sobbed Prue. "He thinks me a heartless, mercenary coquette—just as Sir Geoffrey does, and you, too. You know you thought so, Peggie—"

Margaret was conscience-stricken, but could not deny it. "I know you are a dear little thing, Prue, and though I thought yesterday you did not care, I know better now. I'm so sorry for you, dear. Your poor head is so hot and your hands are so cold. You'll be sick to-morrow, and after all, it isn't your fault."

Prudence threw her arms round her and buried her face on her shoulder in a fresh burst of tears.

"Oh! Peggie, I am a very wicked woman, I fear," she sobbed. "Can anything be worse than to make a solemn vow before God to love and honor a man I do not mean ever to see again—to swear to keep him in sickness and poverty, when all I wish for is that he may die a violent death to save me from my just debts? Oh! no, no. I do not wish it, Peggie. The man loves me! If ever I saw love in a man's eyes, it was when Robin held me in his arms and prayed me give him one kiss and then forget him! Alas, Peggie, I can never forget him! He will haunt me with those eyes that can look death in the face without blenching, and yet will be closed for ever in a few hours. Oh! Peggie, Peggie, he must not die for me."

"He does not die for you, dear Prue. He dies for his crimes. Faith, I'm sorry for it, though he isn't my husband. But think what a plight you would be in if he were to live!" Peggie remonstrated.

Prue looked at her like a child suddenly roused from sleep and finding its way back gradually from dreamland.

"'Tis true," she gasped. "What would become of me?"

"You are his wife," Peggie went on, "and as long as he lives you can not marry any one else. As to your debts—if he were not to die, he would have to pay them or go to prison."

"Oh, Peggie, stop! Every word you say makes me hate myself worse and worse. I must have been mad to marry a robber—a man who forced a kiss from me at the point of a pistol, as it were, and yet now he is my husband I can not, dare not, wish him dead."

"If you wished it ever so much, dear, you could neither help nor hinder it," Peggie began consolingly.

"I'm not so sure of that," cried Prue, raising herself on her elbow and speaking excitedly. "Do you know last night when I was in the duchess' box I had more than half a mind to fall on my knees before her and own everything and implore her to save Robin's life—"

"Great Heaven!" gasped Peggie. "What on earth do you suppose she would have done to you?"

"I do not know, and I am not sure that I care much," sighed Prue, sinking back on her pillow. "But I'm a wretched coward at heart, and a lump came up in my throat and stifled the words, and all I could say when she saw the tears running down my face was some foolishness about the play being so affecting, when every one round me was laughing and I didn't even know what the actors were talking about."

"What did the duchess say?" asked Peggie, eager for all the information she could obtain while her cousin was in the mood to tell it.

"That I was a little fool. And Lord Ripworth said, 'Not at all, that I wanted them to see how lovely I looked in tears.' And they all joked me until I would rather have been hanged myself than hinted at anything tragic in my life."

Peggie assured her that it was much better as it was and that nothing would have come of such a self-betrayal but scandal and disgrace that would have broken their grandmother's heart and banished them for ever from society. Then she kissed and petted her until she fell asleep, much as a grieved and frightened child might do, with long-drawn sighs and broken sobs gradually softening into the tranquil respiration of dreamless repose.

But there was the morrow's waking to come, and it came to Prue with a sudden sweep of consciousness and recollection that scorched her brain and stopped the beating of her heart. The clock on the mantel chimed the half-hour, and starting up in a panic she saw that the hands pointed to half-past seven.

And Robin Freemantle was to die at eight o'clock. Even now he was on the way to Tyburn, shackled to other malefactors in the dreadful cart which he would never leave alive. Even now the mob was jeering him and his wretched compan-

ions and gloating over the prospect of the "last dying speeches and confessions" which were expected to play so important a part in the morning's entertainment. Four of them were to be hanged that morning—two coiners, a house-breaker and—*Prue's Husband*! The hideousness of the thought struck her again with an agony of shame that tingled in every nerve and for the moment dried the tears upon her burning face.

She heard Peggie moving in the next room and sprang out of bed, dashing cold water over her face and head in feverish haste to wash off the tears and cool down the turgid blood that throbbed in her temples and crimsoned her cheeks.

Just then the clock struck eight. A neighboring church-clock took up the chime, and then another at a little distance. It was Robin's death-knell. Prue groped blindly a few steps and then, with a low, wailing cry, fell on the floor in a deathly swoon.

Peggie ran in and by main force lifted her up and laid her on the bed. The application of such simple remedies as cold water and hartshorn soon brought back consciousness, and with it floods of tears and such heart-broken lamentations that Peggie began to ask herself whether there could be any magic in the marriage service to make a widow mourn so bitterly for a husband she had only seen on two occasions, and masked on one of those! She wisely refrained from investigating the source of Prue's emotion however, rightly judging that the more completely she gave way to it the quicker it would wear itself out.

In fact, after an hour or so the violence of her grief subsided, leaving her pale and languid and much disposed to pity herself as in some mysterious way very cruelly used by fate and altogether a most interesting victim.

In this frame of mind she insisted upon rummaging out a black dress and arranging her curly locks in as subdued a fashion as their luxuriance and natural wilfulness would submit to. Then she permitted Peggie to lead her down-stairs.

Behind the dining-room there was a dingy, sunless little library looking out upon a few feet of neglected back-yard and the blank wall of a neighboring mansion. To this penitential apartment Prue retired, delegating to Peggie the task of receiving her callers and making what excuses she pleased for her absence.

"Say I am ill; say I am dead; say whatever you think will get rid of them quickest, Peggie, but don't let them imagine that I am unhappy, for that is the deadliest breach of good-manners and would make me an object of ridicule."

"Well, promise me you will not fret any more," besought Peggie, caressing her. "Your sweet eyes are all puffed up and you won't be fit for the masquerade ball if you cry any more."

Prue promised to control herself, and by way of keeping her word threw herself on the floor before the door closed upon her cousin, and flinging her arms out upon the seat of a chair, laid her face upon them and gave way to quieter and

more subdued, but not less bitter weeping.

She had not long been thus when the door opened and some one looked in. Thinking that she was being sought for and sure that where she lay she was safely hidden, she kept very still.

"Will you wait in here, sir, until I inquire if her ladyship can see you?" said James, the butler. "What name shall I say?"

"It would be useless to give my name," replied a deep voice; "or stay, you can say I bring tidings from Bleak-moor."

As the door closed, Prue rose to her feet with distended eyes and bristling hair, and faced Robin Freemantle.

He wore a long riding-coat of wine-colored cloth and carried a broad beaver caught up on one side with a plain silver buckle. A small quantity of fine linen ruffle protruded from his vest and the sleeves of his coat, and his left hand rested in a broad black ribbon sling. With his neat leather gaiters and spurred heels, and the plain sword in its black scabbard peeping from beneath the full skirt of his coat, he looked the traveling country-gentleman to the life.

For a minute or more the husband and wife stood gazing upon each other in silence. Gradually the look of terror faded from Prue's face and was replaced by an expression in which fear and anger contended with relief.

"It is really you?" she gasped—"alive—and free?" Then the recollection of her futile tears and her hours of anguish rushed over her and she stamped her little foot in unmistakable irritation.

"You are angry with me—because I am alive?" he said, recoiling as though she had struck him.

"I have no right to be angry," she said coldly. "On the contrary, I congratulate you."

"*You* congratulate *me*!" he repeated slowly. "But how about yourself? I am afraid my—resurrection—has put you in an awkward position."

She made no reply.

"Am I to blame for that—?" he began, but she turned upon him swiftly.

"You mean that it is my own fault that you are my husband?" she interrupted, her blue eyes flashing like steel. "If you choose to blame me for that, I have not a word to say in my own defense."

"If I dared, I would bless you for it," he said, in a low voice, "although you, perhaps, were waiting impatiently for news of my death, when I interrupted you?"

Remembering how she had been employed, Prue had no answer ready. She was silent a minute, and then abruptly blurted out, "How did you escape, and why did you come here? Good Heaven, if they should follow you and find you here! Oh, how could you betray me? Sure, I am the most unfortunate woman in the

world—!"

"Listen to me; there is nothing for you to be alarmed about," he cried, hurriedly coming to her and seizing her hand. "I am free—reprieved—pardoned. No one will follow me here; no one—" He stopped suddenly, and looked fixedly at her. "What has happened?" he asked, in a tone of deep concern. "You are so pale—your eyes are red and swollen—you have been weeping?"

"I thought you were dead!" she said half-resentfully.

"And you wept because you thought I was dead?" he said incredulously—"You were sorry for *me*?" He stood gazing at her, lost in an amazement so profound that it seemed like a reproach.

She drew away her hand.

"I should be sorry for any poor soul condemned to die," she said, with an effort at indifference.

"When last I saw her," he said doubtfully, as if reasoning out a strange problem against which his reason contended, "she was fresh and smiling, and prinked out like a princess for her marriage with a highwayman. To-day she is pale and sad," his eye ran over her somber figure, "and all in black—for my sake—"

"You run on too fast!" Prue interrupted petulantly. "Can I not wear a black dress without putting on mourning for your sake? Methinks I'll have to wear it for my own! Never, surely, was a woman so caught in her own trap!" She cast her eyes round, as though for visible means of escape. Suddenly a thought of horror glanced into her mind.

"Did you come here to claim me?" she gasped, sinking into a chair, pallid with fear.

"You need not fear me, I have no such design upon you," he said, regarding her with pitying tenderness. He was sorely wounded, though more for her sake than his own. "Can you not understand that I would rather perish by the most cruel tortures than give you one moment's pain? Oh! rather than see that look of fear and hatred upon your face, I would I were now hanging upon the gallows! At least, you would pity me there, and if not, I should be none the worse off for your scorn. I am free, it is true, but an exile, and unless I leave these shores within eight days, an outlaw. In a week, then, should I be still alive, I shall be dead in law and you will be free from me for ever."

She listened attentively while he was speaking, and her face lost its tense look of terror. Once or twice she glanced furtively at him, noting the power and grace of his tall form, his easy, self-confident bearing and the manly frankness of his strong, swarthy face—more attractive than mere beauty to a woman so essentially feminine as Prudence. She was not afraid of him now, but she was extremely angry with fate, and at the moment he represented fate in its most inexorable form, so she wanted to be very angry with him. Yet she could not

reproach him, for the harder she struck at him, the more she would wound her own pride.

"It is all so terrible," she said, sighing wearily. Then the door was flung open, and Peggie darted in with the *News* sheet in her hand.

"Prue, Prue," she cried, flinging her arms round her cousin without observing that she was not alone. "He is not dead—he has been pardoned and is out of prison. Oh! my poor, dear Prue, to think you were all night breaking your heart for nothing—"

"Hush, hush, Peggie!" Prue was scarlet to the roots of her hair, and with both her hands over Peggie's mouth, tried to stifle her voice.

"Mercy!" shrieked Peggie, suddenly discovering Robin. "How did you get here? What did you come for?"

"For no evil purpose, my good Mistress Peggie," he replied good-humoredly. "I came as any other visitor and requested a few words in private with Lady Prudence Brooke. By good fortune, I found her here alone, and will now proceed to disclose the object of my visit, which is simply to ask her to take charge of this small packet for me, until I send a messenger for it."

The packet was a compact one, about the size of an ordinary letter, and scarcely thicker, carefully stitched in a piece of white silk, and secured by a seal without any device.

Robin held it out to Prue, but she made no movement to take it.

"Oh! don't be afraid that I would ask you to do anything dangerous," he went on earnestly. "If it concerned myself, I would not dare to trouble you, but this is a sacred trust, which I hold far above my life, and if I were rearrested, which is quite possible, I might not be able to rid myself of it in time to prevent a great disaster. It was for this reason that I took the unwarrantable liberty of calling upon the Viscountess Brooke. This packet concerns the life and fortune of many friends of hers, but no one would think of looking for it in the keeping of the Duchess of Marlborough's favorite."

"Friends of mine?" she exclaimed incredulously. "Then who are you?"

"A poor soldier of fortune," he replied, bowing low as though introducing himself, "who has for a moment crossed your path, and in a few days will return to his natural obscurity and trouble you no more. All he asks is forgiveness for having so signally failed in keeping his part of the marriage contract."

"It is not that," she interrupted, thoroughly abashed, though not less angry than before. "*I* should, perhaps, be the one to ask pardon for forcing a marriage upon you which must be very irksome now; for, sure, you must be even more embarrassed to find yourself saddled with a wife than I with a husband. Yet, believe me, I am not so bad as I seem. Peggie knows I did not wish you harm, but oh! I wish I had never seen you. Why did you attack us on Bleakmoor, and

why, oh! why did you let yourself be caught and put in prison—by Sir Geoffrey, of all men! Even the devil could not have put such an idea in my head, about a highwayman I had never seen or heard of—"

Poor Robin turned so pale while Prue poured out these lamentations, that Peggie took compassion on him. "Out upon you, Cousin, for a railing shrew! If you must needs blame somebody, let it be me, for if I had not persuaded you to run away from Yorkshire, Captain Freemantle would not have kissed—I mean waylaid you—and if I had refused to carry your message to Newgate, he would have been spared a scolding wife, and God he knows, his state would have been the more gracious—if I had not meddled in things I had better have left alone."

"Well, Peggie, I forgive you; and you too, Sir Highwayman. The only person I can not pardon is Prudence Brooke, who never looks the length of her nose before she jumps over a precipice," said Prue. "Give me your packet," she held out her hand, without raising her eyes, "and tell me how I can serve you; but do not trust me too far; you can see for yourself what an empty-headed little fool I am."

"If you knew how you hurt me by blaming yourself, you would refrain," said Robin, in a low voice. "Believe me, death would be welcome, if it would make you as kind to me again as you were when I was condemned to die. But a higher law than man's law forbids us to take our own life or even throw it away recklessly; yet do not despair, the outlaw walks blindfold through a worldful of executioners."

"You wrong me in speaking as though—as though I were one of them," she replied, with a touch of disdain. "What do you wish me to do with your packet?"

"To keep it safely until my messenger calls for it, and to be alone when you give it to him. He will carry no credentials," Robin added, "and will merely inquire if you have anything for The Captain. You can surrender your charge to him without fear. Accept my profoundest thanks for this favor, and my humblest apologies for having intruded so long. Farewell, ladies."

Once more he bowed ceremoniously and was gone.

CHAPTER XII
THE PRICE OF A BIRTHRIGHT

Robin set out at a rapid pace in the direction of the city, but as he was passing

through a crowded street, a crippled beggar with a patch over one eye stopped him, and with a piteous whine, implored his charity.

Tossing him a coin, Robin went on his way, but the beggar, quite agile for so dilapidated a creature, kept close behind him, pouring out a stream of petitions and lamentations.

"What's sixpence to a noble lord like your honor? Make it a shilling, brave Captain, to help me out of the country. There's a warrant out for me, and divil take me if I know what's the charge, but its something political—hanging and quartering at the very least. Thank your honor kindly, and may your enemies always get the worst of it. Ah! but Lunnon's a bad town, and Linc'n's Inn's the very place to ambush a man and take him after the lawyers have got everything out of him. Divil take me if ever I'd give a thing to a lawyer that I might want myself; they'd take your life for six-and-eightpence, and make a bargain with Ould Scratch for your soul—-"

"That will do, my good fellow," said Robin, flashing a quick glance at him. "You need not follow me any farther, you are only wasting what is doubtless valuable time."

The beggar mumbled an excuse, and turned to beg from the nearest passer-by. And Robin pursued his way in a very thoughtful mood.

"Another warrant out," he murmured. "I ought to have thought of that when they appointed this morning to finish the business instead of settling it all yesterday. Steve was right. These hounds never meant to give me a chance."

By this time he was in the Strand, and turning up a paved court behind St. Martin's Church, knocked at a door, on which the name of Matthew Double, Attorney-at-Law, appeared on a brass plate.

The door was quickly opened and two men came out, who had been waiting for him. One of these, though scarcely older than Robin, had the strained look of hard work and high living that distinguished the professional man of that day. This was Mr. Matthew Double, and the other, in shabby black, carrying a mighty blue-bag, could never have been intended by nature for anything but a lawyer's clerk.

"Aha! here's our man, punctual to the minute," cried Double. "Few men would be so prompt to throw away a great inheritance, Captain."

"My word is passed," said Robin. "Did you doubt that I would keep it?"

"Not I; have I not just given you abundant proof of confidence? Still, I hate to see the chances of such a splendid law-suit thrown away; literally flung to the dogs. Dogs, too, who, if I am not mistaken, will turn and rend you when they have drawn your teeth and cut your claws."

"*When* they have," replied Robin. "By the way, can you lend me a cloak; a long and ample one?"

"This is somewhat the worse for wear," said Double, indicating one that hung in the hall, "but if you want it for a disguise it is rather conspicuous."

"All the better for both reasons," replied Robin, throwing over his shoulders a military-looking cloak of dark green cloth, a good deal frayed, and lined with stained and faded red. With it, he assumed a swaggering step, and with his beaver cocked at a defiant angle, made a striking contrast to the smugly clad lawyer and his weazened satellite.

"I'm ready now," he cried, and the trio started, keeping to the least frequented side of a street parallel with the Strand.

"My good Captain," Mr. Double remonstrated, after going a very short distance, "moderate your stride, I pray, to that of a man a foot shorter than yourself; or, better still, let me call a coach."

"I'd rather walk, if it is all the same to you," Robin replied. "A man who has taken all his exercise for two or three weeks in the courtyard of Newgate, feels the need of stretching his legs when he gets outside."

"True, but *I* haven't been in Newgate for three weeks, and am, besides, of too portly a figure to enjoy violent exercise. Samuel, stop the first empty coach we meet. Truly, Captain, thou'rt a queer fellow; there are not many of your profession I'd venture to let out of my sight for twelve hours when I was under bonds to surrender him at a certain time, and he had so many good reasons for leaving me in the lurch."

Robin laughed. "Why, it would ill suit me to leave London with my affairs but half-settled," he said; "after to-day your responsibility will be at an end, and whether I decide to stay here and challenge the hangman, or accept my fate and leave the country, depends on matters you wot not of, and will concern no one but myself."

"'Tis a thousand pities," observed Double regretfully, "that you did not unravel the mystery of your birth until there was a price upon your head. There's enough in your claim to have made a pretty case. A ve-ry pret-ty case. Even now—"

"Even now," interrupted Robin, "I have bought my life at the price of my birthright, and I'll pay the price if I get what I bargained for. But not unless. Oh! I'm no sheep to give my wool first, and then go quietly to the shambles."

"They will scarcely attempt to do anything while you are in England—but if you are going to—say America—I would advise you to give your address in—let us say Paris."

A peculiar smile curved Robin's mouth, but not mirthfully.

"Truly, I had thought of the colonies," he said reflectively. "Perchance, the government will give me a grant of land in some swamp or wilderness, where I can work off my superfluous energies fighting the Indians or the Spaniards."

"There is a coach, Master Double," interposed the meek voice of the clerk; "would you wish me to hire it?"

"What, within a stone's throw of Lincoln's Inn? Your conversation has beguiled me, Captain, but it has also made me thirsty. We have a few minutes to spare, and I would gladly crack a bottle to the successful ending of our business."

They turned into a quiet coffee-house, and Robin ordered a bottle of Burgundy. While it was being fetched from the cellar, he obtained a sheet of paper from Samuel's blue-bag and wrote a brief letter, in which he inclosed two small documents, sealed the packet with great care, and carefully addressed it

"To Mistress Larkyn, "In care of Mine Hostess of "The Fox and Grapes."

Mine Hostess, a plump but not uncomely dame, with a merry eye, sat in her cosy bar, surrounded by quaint flagons and other emblems of her hospitable calling. She returned a cheerful answer to Robin's greeting, and inquired his pleasure.

"You have a kindly face, and I'll be sworn a heart to match, fair Goddess of the Grape," said Robin. "Will you help two hapless lovers, separated by cruel fate?"

"That depends on what I am to help them to," she retorted. "Mine's a respectable house, and I'd rather have dealings with lawyers than lovers."

"I want but a trifling service from you, though 'tis a vast favor to me," said Robin. "Will you take charge of this letter, and by and by give it to the serving-man of Mistress Larkyn, whose name is writ upon it?"

"Oh! if that's all," she said, extending a hand that was plump and shapely, if not over-clean. Robin seized the hand and touched it gallantly with his lips, before surrendering the letter to its clasp. After that, although she called him an "impudent varlet," and made as though to box his ears, he might have asked a much greater favor without danger of rebuff.

When they went out again, Robin cast the green cloak about him, and strode along with an air that made more than one peaceable citizen give him the footway all to himself. As they entered Lincoln's Inn Square, this became still more marked, and in front of one of the finest houses, he stopped and looked round with an insolent swagger that greatly impressed a group of men loitering under a tree near by.

Double could not quite conceal his dissatisfaction, and pulling his client by the sleeve, whispered that the men looked like constables in plain clothes, and that they could hardly fail to recognize him when he came out, if, as seemed probable, they were waiting there for him.

"Let them stare their fill," said Robin. "I wish them to become thoroughly acquainted with Robin Freemantle's appearance." And he walked slowly up the steps into the house.

In an up-stairs room, Lord Beachcombe and his lawyer awaited them. Robin left his swashbuckling manners in the anteroom, where Samuel was relieved of his bag and left to the congenial society of two or three clerks.

Lord Beachcombe returned Robin's courteous greeting with a haughty movement that was scarcely a salute, the two lawyers met with friendly formality, tape-tied papers were produced, and the conference began.

"I understood," said the earl, addressing his attorney, "that the person who calls himself Robert Gregory de Cliffe would be present to-day."

"Have patience, my Lord, he will be here in good time," interposed Mr. Double. "Have you examined the attested copies, Mr. Perry?"

"I have, and to avoid waste of time, I am prepared to admit that they appear to contain interesting family matters, highly interesting. Not that they would be of much legal value if you brought the case before the courts, but enough to cause some annoyance to my client. We have shown that we consider it worth examining into the affair, by obtaining the pardon of this"—he glanced at Robin—"this gentleman."

"And also by taking the precaution of having a warrant ready for my arrest on another charge," said Robin, quietly but incisively.

Mr. Perry glanced at Lord Beachcombe, and their eyes met with the same inquiry, "How can he know?"

"Had you kept faith with me," said Robin, bending his stern gaze upon Beachcombe, "this matter could have been settled in a few minutes. As it is, I have decided not to put the two most important documents in your hands until I am in a place of safety."

"Traitor!" exclaimed Beachcombe, striking the table with his clenched fist. "I knew he would devise some means to balk me!"

"If you talk of traitors, did you not purpose to get everything you wanted from me, and then put my head back in the noose?" demanded Robin. "Such a cat-and-mouse game is not so easy to play with a man who has carried his life in his hand through every kind of danger—even to the gallows'-foot—even through treachery, though that is less common among gentlemen of the road than some other kinds of gentlemen. In exchange for my life, I will give you, as I promised, the original letters that passed between your father and his first wife, the original documents proving the identity of both parties, and the *copies* of the marriage certificate and the death certificate that prove *your* mother's marriage a fraud."

"Oh! this villain will drive me mad!" screamed Lord Beachcombe. "Let me go, Perry; must I kill you to get at him?"

"Be calm, my Lord, I beg you," urged the lawyer, very red in the face from his efforts to restrain his client; "this matter can be arranged without violence, if you will leave it to me. Mr.—a—Captain—a—Freebooter, pray address any remarks to me. You will only impede the negotiation by provoking Lord Beachcombe."

"Here are the original letters and documents," said Mr. Double, advancing to the table, "we will go over them together." The lawyers went to work together, comparing, arguing and quibbling, as though the whole matter had not been settled in advance.

Robin, meantime, strolled to the window, where he observed one of the loitering men in conversation with a furtive man in black, with a pen stuck in his rusty wig. He stealthily pointed Robin out when he appeared at the window, and then darted back to the house like a rat into its hole.

"These letters appear genuine," said Mr. Perry finally, "but they are valueless to us without the two certificates."

"They are worth as much to you as your pledge of safety is to me," returned Robin. "Why should you expect to feel safe from me, while I am still in danger from you? That was not the compact. The hour that I set my foot on a foreign shore in safety, I will cut the last thread that binds me to the past, but those two papers will never be yours, Lord Beachcombe, until it is out of your power to injure me. I have given my word, and I will keep it. My title in exchange for my life; your legitimacy in exchange for my safety."

"I knew it—I felt it!" cried Beachcombe. "This fellow himself is the arch-impostor."

"Impostor!" said Robin, with a contemptuous laugh, as he stood up and pointed to the earl. "Nature has cast us in the same mold; God be praised that her work is only skin-deep. Double, you have the late earl's picture in that bag; pull it out, and let us see on which of his sons he printed off the best likeness of himself."

Mr. Double drew forth a roll of canvas, that bore evidence of having been hastily cut from the frame.

"My father's picture!" cried Beachcombe, recognizing it with amazement. "How came it in your possession?"

"It fell into my hands," said Robin dryly, "when I was lately in the North Country. I thought it might be useful, so I brought it away with me."

"You mean, I suppose, that you stole it from Beachcombe Castle," snapped the earl.

"How could I steal my own? Beachcombe Castle is entailed upon the eldest son, and I inherited it from my father, as the son just born to you will doubtless inherit it from you if nothing untoward happens to me. You ought to pray heartily for my welfare, my Lord, until I am safely landed in—America. Still, I am

not dependent upon the picture of a dead man for proofs of identity. I can bring twenty living witnesses to prove that I am the son of Mrs. Vincent, whose marriage to Captain Gregory de Cliffe I can prove by documents and other valuable evidence."

"You will give up the two certificates if Lord Beachcombe pledges his word that you will be allowed to leave England unmolested, will you not?" inquired Mr. Perry insinuatingly.

"I will not," replied Robin firmly.

"Well, then—I urge this matter because my lord will have a long period of suspense to endure before he receives those documents, and without impugning your good faith, it is possible they might fall into the wrong hands after all—will you give them up if Lord Beachcombe gives you a written guarantee that you will be safe, so far as he can protect you?"

"I do not value his written guarantee one farthing," said Robin contemptuously. "Given an hour's start, I am ready to take my chance of escape from any lawyer or traitor of you all. But I've a reason for wishing to remain in London for the next few days, and I'll not give up the one thing that enables me to do it in safety."

Beachcombe sprang to his feet. "I have stood this insolence long enough!" he exclaimed. "You—an outlaw, a convicted robber, dare to spurn my word!—refuse to accept *my* written promise! Pray, what will satisfy you?"

"Oh! if you wish to offer me satisfaction, 'tis quickly settled," cried Robin. "To cross swords with your lordship will give me the utmost pleasure, and let him who draws the first blood dictate the terms of truce."

Beachcombe sneered, but he was not a coward, and his fingers almost involuntarily wandered to his sword-hilt.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" cried the lawyer. "This is no time or place for fighting; besides, if there is anything in your story, Captain—Freebooter—the curse of Cain would be on the one who shed the other's blood."

"Will the one who hires somebody else to shed the other's blood, escape the curse of Cain?" sternly inquired Robin. "If we can not settle this business like gentlemen, let us get it over as quickly as possible. It will not be difficult, I dare say, to find some better occasion for a meeting."

In a great hurry, Mr. Perry read over a legal document, renouncing on the part of "the person claiming to be Robert Gregory de Cliffe and his descendants for ever," all titles, estates entailed or otherwise, and other belongings appertaining to the Beachcombe family in all its ramifications, in consideration of one thousand pounds over and above all expenses of his transportation to a foreign land, or any place outside of the British Isles, that he might select for his future abode. The above to be paid to him on signing this deed, and to constitute a full

satisfaction for every claim, past, present and future.

Robin listened with scant patience to the monotonous repetition of legal terms by which every contingency was forestalled and provided for. Then he requested Mr. Double to peruse it, in case there might be snares or hidden meanings in it. Two clerks were called in to witness the bold signature of Robert Gregory de Cliffe, and finally, Mr. Perry counted out one thousand pounds in Bank of England notes, as compensation for Robin's claim to an inheritance worth twenty thousand a year, two hundred more for his expenses in leaving the country, and certain sums to Mr. Double for his services. Lord Beachcombe showed very little interest in this part of the transaction, but sat biting his nails and fingering his sword-hilt.

Mr. Perry drew Mr. Double aside, and made one last attempt to convince him that it would be greatly to the interest of all parties if he could persuade his client to surrender the two documents of whose value he held so exaggerated an estimate. Meantime, Robin strolled up to the window, arranging his beaver with great nonchalance, and throwing the end of the cloak over his shoulder, so as to display the red lining.

He observed that the loitering men had drawn together, and numbered about half-a-score, armed with stout bludgeons and still more deadly weapons. Near them, under the trees, a ragged urchin walked Lord Beachcombe's horse slowly up and down, hopeful of a bounteous douceur from the noble patron who had kept him so long waiting.

"Now, Captain," said Mr. Double, "I am at your service."

Robin walked to the door, and removing his beaver, swept so low a bow, that he dropped it on the floor.

"Farewell, Mr. Perry,—you will hear from me—from foreign parts. My Lord Beachcombe—adieu."

The lawyer, who had already assumed an air of preoccupation with other matters, returned the bow with ceremonious frostiness. Lord Beachcombe did not even turn his head. Consequently, neither of them saw Robin kick his own hat out of the way and help himself to one that lay on a chair near the door.

"Give me five minutes start," he whispered to Double, as he quickly disengaged himself from the green cloak and threw it into a dark corner of the stairway. When he emerged from the front door, a dignified gentleman in a plum-colored riding-coat and black velvet cavalier hat with a long, drooping ostrich feather, he looked as little as possible like the roystering blade who had been seen a few minutes before at the upper window. He signed to the boy with the horse, and mounting without haste, threw him a shilling and beckoned to the chief of the posse of constables.

"You had better bring your men on this side of the street," he said imperi-

ously; "don't give the fellow time to get away or you will never catch him again. And, mind—dead or alive!"

The man knuckled his hat obsequiously. "Yes, m' Lud," he said, with something the air of one bulldog being egged on to attack another. "Them's my orders."

Robin gave him a curt word, and rode out through the gateway leading into Chancery Lane. When he was out of sight, he gave rein to his horse, and taking to the network of narrow lanes that lay between the Strand and the river, made off with the utmost speed toward Westminster.

CHAPTER XIII
THE SEALED PACKET

Mr. Double did not hurry after his client, but gave him a good ten minutes' start, while he made Samuel search the blue-bag for some imaginary papers, and then, bidding him shoulder his hated burden, went forth, much reassured by the absence of commotion in the Square.

The posse had collected outside the house, and eyed the lawyer and his clerk suspiciously. There was a moment of expectation as they recognized the companions of their quarry, but Double and his satellite were not molested, and at a short distance they separated, and Samuel pursued his westward way alone. He did not go far, but leaving his bag in charge of a friendly law-stationer, scurried back to Lincoln's Inn, and slipping through the constables, ran up-stairs and knocked timidly at the door of Mr. Perry's private sanctum.

"What do you want here, fellow?" demanded Perry, opening the door and discovering the little, cringing, shabby figure shrinking into the shadow. "This is not the clerk's office."

"Could I—can I—speak a word with the—the lord?" stammered Samuel.

Mr. Perry looked very searchingly at him for a minute or so. Then he relaxed a little and made room for him to pass into the room, which he did, smoothing his flaxen wig over his forehead with his moist palm, and evidently in a desperately uneasy frame of mind.

"Do you want to speak to Me?" demanded Lord Beachcombe, in a haughty voice, that sounded so terrible to the clerk, that he could hardly stammer out, "Y—yes."

"And what have you to say?" inquired Mr. Perry, in a more encouraging tone. "Speak out, man, don't be frightened; nobody will hurt you."

"Ah! but he would, if he knew," quavered Samuel, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

"You mean Mr. Double? I suppose you want to tell us something he is concealing from us, eh? Well, we will protect you from him," said Mr. Perry magnanimously.

"'Tis not so much him I'm afraid of as the captain," whispered Samuel, glancing from side to side, as though he expected to see him lurking somewhere about. Then he approached Lord Beachcombe on tiptoe. "What will you give me if I get you those certificates?"

"Damnation!" cried Beachcombe, starting up, black with fury; "are my private affairs known to every quill-driver in the town?"

Samuel turned livid with terror. "I only know where they are," he whimpered; "I don't know anything about them."

"Well, where are they?" demanded Beachcombe threateningly.

A glint of cunning sparkled in Samuel's eye. "It wouldn't be any use for me to tell your lordship where they are. No one can get at them but me, and as I shall be suspected, it's worth a good deal for the risk I run—if the certificates are any use to your lordship."

"How do you know what certificates these are, if you say you don't know anything about them?" interposed Mr. Perry.

"Because I heard the captain tell Mr. Double that he could afford to let Lord Beachcombe have everything else, so long as he kept the two certificates back. So he put them where nobody knows but himself and Double and me. And he'll have them out if I don't hurry and get there first."

"You need not be uneasy about that," said Beachcombe, with a grin of malicious joy. "Captain Freemantle is on his way to Newgate Prison by now, and if those—papers—find their way into my possession, I think it is safe to say that he will never come out except to make the journey to Tyburn."

"On his way to Newgate?" cried the little clerk, rubbing his hands with glee. "Then, if we can agree on the price, your lordship can have them in an hour."

"If you bring them to me—without reading them—in an hour, I will give you ten guineas," said Lord Beachcombe magnificently.

"Ten guineas!" echoed Samuel, with a falling countenance. "They can not be so very important, after all, if that's all they're worth."

"How much did you expect?" demanded Beachcombe, who hated parting with his money, and was still writhing under the agony of having had to disburse so considerable a sum already over this affair.

"Considering the risk, I think I ought to have a hundred pounds," pleaded

Samuel, trembling at his own audacity.

"A hundred devils!" growled Beachcombe; "do you think I am made of money?"

"It's well worth it, my Lord," urged Samuel. "You don't know the risk I run, even if the captain is in jail. And why wouldn't he get out? He's been there before and cheated the hangman; he's as artful as a fox, and has more friends than you and I know of."

Beachcombe reflected a while. "Well, bring the documents to my house and you shall have the hundred pounds. But if you ever betray the slightest knowledge of them, it will be worse for you than if the captain, as you call him, escaped from prison and came after you with all his friends."

"They're in a sealed packet, my Lord, and if I break the seal you can keep your money," said Samuel, growing bolder, as a confederacy in dishonor brought the haughty peer nearer to his level. Beachcombe signified his acceptance of the compact and walked over to the window, while Mr. Perry gave Samuel instructions how to make sure of the packet falling into no other than the right hands.

"God's death!" Beachcombe suddenly exclaimed, in so strange a voice, that the others hurried to the window and looked anxiously out to see what had befallen. The street was perfectly quiet. A couple of barristers, with their gowns tucked up, stood talking and laughing, a street vendor shouted the praises of his wares, a slatternly woman, with a baby in her arms and another clinging to her skirt, lounged under the trees opposite, and the group of constables, still expectant, chewed straws and spat them out in the gutter, with the utter absence of hurry so frequently observed in men whose time is owned and paid for by the government. Nothing else was in sight.

"What are those men waiting for?" roared Beachcombe. "Is that scoundrel hiding in this house? Call them in, Perry, and make them search every corner. By Heaven! if you have let him slip through your fingers—"

"Do you mean the captain?" asked the trembling clerk. "He went out half an hour ago, just before me and Mr. Double."

"And no one stopped him? He passed through the constables unchallenged? It is collusion; they shall hang for it. Give me my hat, Perry—"

Samuel flew to obey, and after a brief search, emerged from beneath a table with a somewhat weather-beaten beaver, turned up with a silver buckle.

Beachcombe dashed it from his hand. "That is not mine!" he shouted; "that is the one that fellow wore when he came in. He has left it behind and taken mine; he has used it as a disguise, and those idiots have been taken in by it—" He flung out of the room, and the next minute was heard furiously cursing and berating the crestfallen constables, who, taking him for their long-awaited prey, sprang upon him as soon as he appeared, and but for the speedy interference of

Mr. Perry, would have handled him roughly.

The men fell back in confusion as the situation dawned upon them. This the real lord? Then who was the haughty and self-important personage who had ridden away from them so coolly after issuing orders with such an air of authority?

"You shall sweat for this!" cried Beachcombe. "Where is my horse?"

No one seemed able to answer this question. The men glanced from one to another, and the mysterious crowd that springs up from the roadside when there is any excitement, began to collect. Some one suggested that a gentleman in a black hat and feather had been seen riding out of the Square, on a fine chestnut horse, and a murmur from the crowd confirmed the statement.

By this time, Lord Beachcombe had become speechless with rage. He signed to a passing chair, and getting in bareheaded, pulled the curtains close, and departed without a valedictory greeting.

After a visit to Bow Street which gave promise of a warm quarter of an hour to the constables on their return, Beachcombe hurried to his house, overlooking St. James' Park, to await Samuel's visit, and concoct plans by which Robin should not only be arrested, but brought to an ignominious and lingering death. Torture was supposed to have been abolished in those days, but treason was still punishable by drawing and quartering, and while the country was still astir with Jacobite plots, the charge of treason might easily be fastened on any man who could not readily account for his comings and goings.

The day passed slowly, for Lord Beachcombe, shut up in his study, gave orders that no visitor should be admitted except the lawyer's clerk. Once possessor of the proofs—if proofs they were—of the shadow upon his birth, he could set his heel without fear upon the throat of this miscreant who claimed to be his brother. His brother—! his *elder* brother—! The shrill cry of the baby-heir smote upon his ear, and goaded him to such a madness of impotent fury that if Samuel could have seen him then and known the cause of the furrow on his brow and the blood upon his bitten lip, he might have made his own terms and become rich for life.

In the afternoon, a groom came to say that his lordship's horse had been brought to the stable by a ragged boy, who had made off before he could be questioned.

"What condition was he in? Had he been ridden fast or far?" Lord Beachcombe inquired eagerly.

"Hadn't turned a hair, my Lord," was the reply; "might 'a' been for a canter round the Park."

Beachcombe went to the stable himself to make inspection, but could discover no mark or sign to enlighten the most sharpsighted. "Oh! if you could

speak!" he muttered, as he caressed the glossy coat and deer-like head of his favorite. "If you could tell me where you have been these three hours!"

But there was nothing to be learned; not so much as could be shown by a muddy fetlock. If the horse had been out of town, he had been carefully groomed on his return and every trace of travel removed. His master returned to the house, more morose and vengeful than ever, to while away the hours that slowly passed until it was time to dress for the great entertainment at Marlborough House.

When he descended from his wife's apartments, where he had gone to display himself in his masquerade dress, he was certainly a magnificent and picturesque figure. His costume, of the period of Charles II., was of white satin, profusely trimmed with exquisite lace, and adorned with dazzling orders and jewels. A wig of long curls softened the harsh outline of his face, and a skilful touch of rouge relieved his swarthy pallor and lent a brilliancy to his dark eyes. His resemblance to Robin was remarkable enough then to have struck the most unobservant.

Over his arm he carried a voluminous domino of scarlet silk, and a mask to match dangled from his jeweled fingers.

He was stepping into his carriage, when a little black figure darted in front of him, and Samuel, bowing to the very ground before this gorgeous apparition, besought a word with him.

"Leave him alone," cried Beachcombe, as two or three serving-men stepped forward to sweep this insect from their master's path. "Have you anything important to say to me?" he eagerly inquired.

"Most important, your worship—I mean your Lordship," replied Samuel. "I've got it; only just now, though, and I've run every step of the way," and he showed a corner of the letter hidden in his breast.

"Give it to me," said Beachcombe, in a low, concentrated voice, and held out his hand for it. But Samuel hung back.

"My Lord—my Lord—" he stammered, clutching the packet like a drowning man grasping a straw, "will you give me my hundred pounds?"

"What, now; before I see the papers? Besides, I've not so much about me," exclaimed Beachcombe. "Why, you imp of the devil, are you afraid to trust me? Here, take my purse and give me that packet. I must have it *now*, do you hear? And come to me to-morrow for your hundred guineas."

And before Samuel could make up his mind what to do, he found himself standing alone with a silken purse, full of golden guineas, in his hand, and the precious packet being whirled away from him in the earl's chariot.

Lord Beachcombe, with the packet tightly clutched in his hand, gave way to a reverie so pleasant and absorbing that he did not notice a slight additional jar in the jolting of the carriage over the ill-paved street. The cause of the jar

was the sudden accession of two outside passengers; one on the box beside the coachman, and the other beside the lackey behind. Each of these functionaries, at the same instant, felt the cold contact of a pistol against his ear, and before they could make any outcry, the carriage was going in a different direction.

A touch of the whip sent the horses forward at breakneck speed. "Keep quiet and you are safe," said the stranger on the box, and in a moment he slipped over the coachman's head a bag that served both to gag and blindfold him. The same operation was performed simultaneously upon the footman. Very soon, they turned sharply under an archway, and a heavy gate was slammed behind them.

Leaving the coachman on the box, his captor got off and opened the carriage door.

"Descend here, Lord Beachcombe," he said, holding up a lantern, which revealed a tall man in a mask and behind him an open door.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" demanded Beachcombe, fumbling at his sword. The masked man, with very little ceremony, hauled him out of the carriage, and disregarding a strenuous resistance, conducted him into a small room, barely furnished and dimly lighted. He then saw that his assailant was almost as richly dressed as himself, and wore a jeweled star and other decorations of great splendor.

"What am I brought here for?" he asked, in a more subdued tone, for as his fear of robbery subsided in these surroundings, the fact that he had many and bitter enemies rose up before him.

"No harm unless you bring it upon yourself," replied the other. "At worst, an hour or two's detention and solitude and the loan of your invitation to the duchess' masquerade."

"Your voice sounds familiar to me," said Lord Beachcombe. "Will you not remove your mask, now that we are alone?" The other hesitated. "Is it worth while to keep up this mystery, Captain Freemantle? You see I recognize you."

"Since you know me, it is not worth while," replied Robin, unmasking. As he did so, Beachcombe whipped out his sword and rushed upon him. Robin had no time to arm himself, but dodging the onslaught with the agility of a cat, closed upon his assailant with a clever wrestling trick that threw him upon his back half-stunned, and before he could recover, had his hands securely tied behind his back with his gold-fringed sash.

"You *would* have it!" said Robin. "Now I can—" his eye fell upon a packet that had fallen from Beachcombe's hand, with the superscription upward:

"To Mistress Larkyn, **"In care of Mine Hostess of** "The Fox and Grapes."

He picked it up and turned it over, examining the unbroken seals, and glancing from time to time at his captive.

"So you found a traitor in the camp," he said, at last. "Let him beware—but, tush! I know who it is; it can be no other than Samuel. I need not interfere with him; he will find his own way to the gallows soon enough. I'm afraid I shall have to search you, my friend. You may as well take it quietly; you know I'm an expert at discovering hidden treasure."

Lord Beachcombe, however, would not submit quietly, so Robin bound him securely to a chair and instituted a rigorous search, which revealed nothing except the emblazoned note of invitation to the ball. So, warning his prisoner that any outcry would lead to rough treatment from those who were left in charge of him, Robin withdrew, taking with him the packet and the invitation, and also Beachcombe's sword and the lamp, and leaving him to darkness and reflection.

CHAPTER XIV
A PAIR OF GLOVES

When Robin Freemantle left Prue, she ran to the mirror and critically examined her reflection in it.

"What a fright I look!" she exclaimed, "with my hair plastered down and my nose red and swollen. Peggie, I should not be surprised if that man were as disappointed with his bargain as I am with mine."

"You don't look much like yourself," Peggie admitted frankly. "But even as you are, you must be a great deal prettier than the sort of women a highwayman would be used to."

"Why, Peggie, do you think—do you suppose Robin has women-thieves for friends? Pick-pockets, perhaps—or Gipsies! Yet he looks like a gentleman. Highwaymen are sometimes brave and chivalrous—one hears of their doing generous things—they are not like common malefactors—"

"They get hanged, all the same," said Peggie unthinkingly.

"Oh! Peggie, you wicked, cruel creature; how dare you say such things!" cried Prue indignantly. "Robin hanged! Never, never! I would rather go to the queen and implore a pardon for him on my knees. Peggie, you saw him yourself. He is handsome, is he not, and dignified? He made me feel very much ashamed of myself; yet I hate him! I would I had never set eyes on him! Do you suppose

he despises me, Peggie?"

"I shouldn't think he would have the impudence!" exclaimed Peggie. "A common adventurer, if no worse."

"Adventurer, 'tis true, but which of us is not? Am I not an adventuress, Peggie? Aye, and not so very honest a one either. Say he will rob my Lord Bishop of his wig and my Lord Tomnoddy of his purse; what better do I when I buy what I can not pay for, and marry a man condemned to be hanged in order to cheat my creditors. Oh! my dear Peggie, there are many fine folk with their noses in the air, who can not glance into a mirror without seeing the reflection of an adventurer."

"Not a doubt of it," said Peggie philosophically. "but most people, when they look in a mirror, see nothing there but what they want to see."

"Well, what I see is just the reverse of that," said Prue, casting a dissatisfied glance at her own reflection, as she hurried away to rid herself of her somber dress and release her curls from their unaccustomed bonds. This was hardly accomplished to her satisfaction, when Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert arrived, in a state of great excitement.

"Good morning, fair ladies," he cried, saluting them with less ceremony than usual. "No need to ask whether you have seen this morning's *Courant*."

"Why not?" inquired Prue innocently.

"Because you look too happy and unconcerned to have heard the disastrous news," he said, with a portentous air. "I grieve to be a harbinger of misfortune."

"You alarm us," cried Prue. "What has happened? Speak!"

"Calm yourself, dearest Prudence, and remember that *I* will not suffer any harm to come to you." Sir Geoffrey lowered his voice to a mysterious whisper, "The highwayman you wot of has escaped!"

"Is that all?" said Prue, with a shrug; "I thought you had news for us. We knew that an hour ago."

"You knew it? How? Has the villain dared—"

"How did we know it?" Peggie interrupted quickly, to prevent a retort from her cousin. "Why, the same way you did," and she displayed the printed sheet that, adorned with a rude cut of a gallows, gave a minute account of the morning's executions, adding that the queen's clemency had been extended to Robin Freemantle, through the influence of powerful friends in *certain quarters*, and that he had left Newgate with *great secrecy* late Sunday evening.

Sir Geoffrey was greatly vexed at having his surprise discounted. "I'm glad to find you taking it so unconcernedly," he observed, looking anything but glad. "I feared that you would be crushed by such a calamity."

"Did you, indeed, think us bloodthirsty enough to regret the saving of a fellow-creature's life?" said Prue, with grave reproof. "I hoped that you had a

better opinion of our humanity."

"Humanity," echoed the baronet, with ill-dissembled irritation. "Such angelic sentiments well become the cruel beauty whose path is strewn with bleeding hearts. But has my dear Prudence no pity to spare for the unhappy swain, condemned to worse than death by Robin, the highwayman's, unexpected good luck?"

"On the contrary," laughed Prue, "she congratulates you on your escape; believe me, a far greater piece of luck than Robin's."

"Do not jest, dear one, I implore you," said Sir Geoffrey seriously. "You certainly have not considered the position this miscarriage of justice has placed you in. Let me lay before you the consequences—"

"Pray, do not," interrupted Prue pettishly. "If I am resigned to the will of Heaven, why persecute me with reasons for rebellion?"

Sir Geoffrey, with his hand upon his heart, bowed to the ground.

"Before such piety, I am dumb," he said. "Is it permitted to ask if you are reconciled to your creditors as well as to the means you took to rid yourself of them?"

"It is not," replied Prue with overpowering dignity. "That is my private affair and I do not care to discuss it, even with Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert. By the by, Sir Geoffrey"—with an entire change of tone and manner—"you always know the latest news; do tell us why Mrs. Tewkesbury has gone home to her father, and whether her husband is going to fight a duel or will merely horsewhip her hair-dresser?"

The conversation drifted into safer channels, and Prue was soon her own bright, frivolous, enchanting self. Other guests dropped in; fashion, scandal, and the duchess' masquerade were discussed, and Prue had a saucy answer for every compliment and a ready laugh for every jest, and beneath her dainty bodice such a tumult of fear and shame and sharp sense of defeat, and withal such strange, swift stabs of something that was not pain, and yet hurt her more than all the other emotions that quickened her pulse and sent the blood surging through her brain.

It was late in the afternoon, and Prue's guests were making their adieux, when Robin's messenger came—a rustic-looking youth with a ruddy complexion and a shock of tow-colored hair. He was dressed like the footboy of a prosperous tradesman, and carried an oilskin covered basket—and of a surety bore no resemblance to the crippled beggar who had followed Robin so persistently on his way to the conference in Lincoln's Inn.

Yet it was the same man.

With an air of dense stupidity, he evaded such questions as James deigned to put to him, and reiterated his petition for a personal interview with Lady Pru-

dence Brooke, for whom he had a message that was to be delivered to her, and to her alone. James, scenting a discreet but persistent dun, bade him wait in the library, and conveyed his request to Prue with the same air of respectful condolence with which he would have announced any other calamity. Although he disapproved of her youth and frivolity, James would have yielded to none in admiration of his beautiful young mistress, whom he had carried in his arms as a baby and conspired with every other member of Lady Drumloch's household to indulge, spoil and flatter from the first hour that her blue eyes had opened on a world full of her adorers.

"A young man is waiting below, my Lady. He has a message for you which he will not send up. I told him you were engaged, but he said he would wait until you were at leisure."

"What sort of a young man, James? Does he look as if he came for money?" Prue asked. "You know most of my duns better than I do."

"He is a stranger to me, my Lady, but it is likely he may be a lawyer's clerk in disguise."

"I will see him, James; bring him up here," she interrupted.

"The hair-dresser is here; shall I tell him to wait?" inquired James.

"No; send him up-stairs. Peggie, go and have your hair dressed first, and by that time I will be ready."

She was alone when the young man was shown in. "You want to see me?" she said, as soon as the door was shut. "You come to fetch something, do you not?"

"The captain told me—" he began, then stopped and stared mutely at her.

"Well, what did the captain tell you?" she demanded impatiently.

"He told me I should see the most beautiful lady in the whole world, and that I should know her for the Lady Prudence Brooke, without asking her name," said the lad.

"Your captain is a fool!" cried Prue. But, try as hard as she might to look indignant, she blushed divinely and a furtive smile played hide-and-seek among her dimples. Of all Prue's many charms there was none to equal her smile. It was, perhaps, on that account that she smiled often and so maintained a reputation for good-nature that lured many an unsuspecting victim into disaster.

"That he is!" cried the messenger heartily. "For he said he'd done this beautiful lady a great injury, but for all that he would trust his life—and more than that—in her hands. Can any man be a worse fool than to trust a woman so far as that?"

"Said he that, in very truth?" asked Prue, turning very pale.

"Aye, and other things just as foolish," said the man, with the same stupid air of rusticity. "Will it please your ladyship to give me what the captain left with

you?"

She brought out the white silken packet from its hiding-place among the laces of her bodice, and held it out to him. "Tell your captain from me," she said disdainfully, "that I scarce know which is the greater fool—he or his messenger."

The man laughed very heartily, and having bestowed the packet safely, opened his basket and took out a parcel and a letter. "The captain bade me present these to your ladyship," he said, and was bowing himself out, when she stopped him hurriedly.

"I forget the captain's address," she said; "I might want to—to send a message to him."

"Any time your ladyship wants to send to him, a word to Steve Larkyn, at Pip's Coffee-house, Essex Street, Strand, will find your ladyship's humble servant, who will be most honored by any commands you lay upon him," said the man. And before she could speak again, had disappeared.

Prue opened the parcel, which contained a long, narrow box of perfumed wood, lined with pink sarsenet. The next moment, she was flying up-stairs, two at a time, in her haste to display the contents to her cousin.

"Look, Peggie, did you ever see anything half so lovely?" she cried, holding out for her inspection a pair of long silk gloves as filmy as a cobweb and exquisitely embroidered with seed-pearls.

Peggie dared not move her head, for the coiffeur was busy with his tongs, but she rolled her eyes round until she saw the gloves, and then rolled them up as far as they would go to emphasize her one word of admiration, "Incomparable!"

Prue drew on one of the gloves. It was so elastic, and yet so clinging, that it clasped her slender fingers like another skin, giving them even a more tapering and delicate appearance than usual. She did not open her letter until she was alone in her own room, and then, tearing off the cover with more eagerness than she would have cared to own, found nothing inside but ten crisp, new Bank of England notes for one hundred pounds each.

She dropped them as though they had been so many adders, and a flush of anger rose to her cheek. "I suppose he has been waylaying and robbing some one!" she said half-aloud, "and hugs himself to think he can buy me with stolen money! Oh! he is just as base as the rest—"

There was a movement in the other room, so Prue snatched up the bank-notes and crumpled them into her jewel-box. Not even to Peggie did she wish to

Prue opened the parcel.

confide this fresh instance of Robin's turpitude.

CHAPTER XV
THE RED DOMINO

Fashionable hours were early in the days of Queen Anne, and it was a well-known fact that the imperious Sarah Churchill did not easily pardon the slight of unpunctuality at her entertainments. So by nine o'clock the gorgeous drawing-rooms were well-filled and the steady stream of rank and beauty poured up the great staircase as fast as chariots and chairs could discharge their glittering loads.

The sight was a dazzling one; every nationality, every celebrity was represented. Cardinals paid court to Gipsies, Charlemagne and Henry the Eighth contended for the favor of Helen of Troy, and in front of the dais upon which the duchess stood unmasked, to receive her guests, an endless procession passed, of monks and devils, kings and clowns, swashbucklers, nuns, fairies, princesses, allegorical and mythological personages—a veritable phantasmagoria, in which the mask and domino afforded just as much concealment as the wearer desired, but no more.

A ripple of laughter or a murmur of admiration at frequent intervals announced the arrival of some specially brilliant or humorous masker, and when the crowd was at its densest, a couple approached the dais, followed by a stream of hilarious compliments.

Foremost came Prue, dressed as a shepherdess. Over a skirt of her grandmother's priceless lace, she wore a Watteau dress of white silk, brocaded with bunches of rosebuds and forget-me-nots, and coquettishly perched upon her luxuriant curls was a little straw hat, adorned with a wreath of roses and a flowing knot of blue ribbon. The pearl-embroidered gloves covered her hands, in one of which she carried a crook all laced with fluttering ribbons, and in the other a silken cord, by which she led Peggie, admirably disguised as a lamb; of gigantic growth, to be sure, but delightfully and gracefully grotesque as she ambled and pranced beside the little shepherdess, who at every other step, stopped to caress and encourage her.

The little procession was so irresistibly funny that the duchess, at first rather disturbed by the rising tide of laughter and applause, as soon as she set eyes upon the cause of it, joined in with the utmost heartiness, and even the queen,

who sat beside her in a chair of state, vouchsafed a smile of genuine amusement, rare enough upon the face of that woman of few emotions.

Dancing was going on in the great ball-room, but Prue refused to dance. "I dare not leave my lamb at the mercy of all these wolves," she declared, in a falsetto voice that deceived no one. "Is there no grassy nook where I can repose, while my pet frolics round me?"

"Certainly," said a voice, which she recognized as Sir Geoffrey's. "There are secluded retreats in the conservatories sacred to Chloris and her flock—"

"Including Strephon? No, thank you," and warning him off with her crook, she roamed about, launching the harmless arrows of her ready wit against such of the guests as she recognized, or pretended to.

Presently a voice began to murmur close behind her—

"Her hair,
In ringlets rather dark than fair,
Does down her ivory bosom roll,
And hiding half, adorn the whole.
In her high forehead's fair half-round
Love sits in open triumph crown'd.
Her lips, no living bard, I weet,
May say how red, how round, how sweet—"

"Oh! hush!" cried Prue, in a great flutter; "how could you be so rash? You will be recognized." She turned a quick, timid glance backward, and was promptly reassured. The tall, stately figure, picturesquely draped in a voluminous red domino, had nothing about it to attract attention, and a red mask with a deep fall of gold-lace concealed the entire face, except the firm mouth and strong, square chin.

"What made you come here, of all places in the world?" she asked.

"Chiefly to see you, but partly because I had business here," he answered.

Poor Prue thought of the bank-notes, and almost collapsed. What business could a highwayman have at a ball unless to rob the guests while pretending to be one of them? Just then Peggie drew her attention by pulling at the cord.

"For Heaven's sake," she whispered, "come out of this crowd. I am so hot, muffled in this sheepskin, I shall die if I don't get to the air."

Prue signed to Robin to follow, and led her lambkin away. Outside the ball-room, they were soon in comparative solitude. In the card-rooms a few elderly people had thrown off their masks and given themselves over to the full enjoyment of whist and écarté. Here and there a tête-à-tête was progressing behind the kindly shelter of albums or portfolios. In the library a sedate couple mused

side by side over the latest number of the *Spectator*, upside down, while two or three portly, be-starred and be-ribboned fogies discussed the threatened Jacobite uprising over an exclusive bottle of Burgundy.

Prue was at home in every corner of Marlborough House, and had no difficulty in piloting her companions into a cool, dim-lighted conservatory, where the sound of voices and music reached the ear agreeably softened by distance.

"Every one has seen me," said Peggie; "I'll get rid of this sheepskin, and then I can dance."

"Peggie would rather dance than eat, sleep or go to church," remarked Prue, seating herself and making a little, half-hesitating, half-inviting movement toward the seat beside her.

Robin was not slow in availing himself of the opportunity. There was something in Prue's manner that allured him, while it kept him at a distance. He longed to take her in his arms as he had done once; yet he dared not touch her hand.

"I am glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you," she said, removing her mask. "You sent me something to-day—"

"Yes—oh! you don't know how happy you have made me by wearing them," he said earnestly.

"Ah! yes," she started and looked down at the gloves; "they are beautiful—just the very thing for my dress, too. But that was not what I meant."

A deep flush burned his face under the mask. "I beg and implore you not to speak of anything else I sent," he said, in a low, tremulous voice. "Let me deceive myself into the belief that you acknowledge *that*, at least, as my rightful privilege."

She raised her lovely eyes to his with a puzzled expression, then dropped them, a little embarrassed. "We will not discuss that," she said, "but unfortunately I can not avoid speaking about the money, because—you see, I can not help knowing that you—that perhaps—that perhaps it honestly belongs to somebody else and you have no right to give it to me. There!" She looked apprehensively at him, fearing an outburst of rage, but he was quite calm, and the mask concealed any change of countenance.

"You are very scrupulous," he said coldly.

"Oh! I know you had no reason to expect honesty from me!" she exclaimed, with a touch of temper in her voice. "But when you threw your purse to me in the carriage, I had no opportunity of returning it and I never expected to see you again. Besides, you took mine and—and—" She glanced at him out of the tail of her eye, but he did not accept the challenge. "You think, perhaps," she went on, quite angrily now, "that I have done a much worse thing for money than ever you did; but if I have married a robber—"

"Stop, stop!" he said authoritatively. "If you must say these things about yourself, it shall not be to me. Insult *me* as much as you please, but do not accuse me of daring to blame you for anything you have done, or could do. Tell me, if I assure you that that money is my very own, will you take my word for it?"

She hesitated and softened. "Tell me truly—in what way your own? Do not fear to trust me."

"Trust you! Do you not know that you could charm any secrets of my own from me by a kind word? But this is no secret; it is the price of my birthright, received in honest sale and barter over a lawyer's table. You *will* believe me, won't you?"

She put out both her hands, with a gesture of enchanting frankness. "I will believe anything you tell me," she said; "I know you would not deceive me."

He took the two little fluttering hands in his, and raised them one after another to his lips.

"I see you are not wearing a sling," she remarked. "Is your arm healed?"

"It was nothing; a broken collar-bone is quickly cured," he said carelessly, though delighted by even so slight a token of interest from her. "Besides, the person whose domino I borrowed, does not wear his arm in a sling, and I do not wish any difference to be remarked when he resumes it."

"Then you are here in some one else's disguise?" she said quickly. "What will you do when we unmask?"

"At midnight the right face will be found under this mask," he replied.

"What fun it would be!" she cried, with reckless gaiety, "if you were to stay until midnight and unmask with the rest! I wonder if any one would recognize you."

"If the experiment will amuse you, I will stay and try it," said Robin tranquilly.

Her own voice dropped almost to a whisper. "To amuse me?" she murmured. "What do you suppose would happen?"

"Probably nothing at all; I am not so well known. At the worst, they would merely arrest me," he said.

"Merely arrest you! and send you back to—prison, I suppose?"

"Why, 'tis likely; and then, in a few days, you would be free—to marry some one you love."

"I have had enough of marrying," she said petulantly. "Besides, had I loved one man, I would not have married another, even in jest."

"Even in jest," he repeated. "Well, have a little patience and you may laugh as heartily as you please at this merry jest. When you are free, will you—" he hesitated—"I owe you a chance to make a better use of your freedom next time, yet it irks me to think that you will very likely throw it away again upon one

who is not worthy of you."

"Do you mean Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert?" she said. "Do not fear, I shall never marry him."

"You will not?" he exclaimed eagerly. "You do not love him? Oh! you give me new life; I care little what becomes of me, if I am sure you will not marry Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert."

"Hush-sh," she whispered, peering round in the dim twilight of their retreat; "I thought I heard a movement; suppose any one had overheard you!"

He clapped his hand on his sword, but everything was still except the distant music and the approaching voices of another pair in search of solitude.

"Let us go," said Prue, rising in a tremor and adjusting her mask. "I would not, for the world, have anything happen to you, and I fear you are not safe here; we have been incautious—prithee, begone from this house—"

"Do not be uneasy, dear Lady Prudence; I am safe here," said Robin, devouring her with his eyes. "I may never see you again; do not banish me—"

"Never see me again?" she interrupted. "Why not? I am sure you are in some danger you will not tell me of, else why should I never see you again?"

"Would you care if you did not see me again?"—he was beginning, in a passionate whisper, when Peggie, released from her sheepskin and clad in somewhat scanty drapery intended to represent springtime, pounced upon them, delighted with the semi-nudity that displayed her charming form, while the mask concealed her plain face.

"Have I been away long enough?" she cried saucily. "Have you had plenty of time to quarrel and make love? Come, Prue; eleven o'clock has struck, and we shall scarcely be in time for a country-dance before we unmask. Hasten!"

She was drawing Prue after her by one hand, but she hung back, extending the other to Robin, who stood irresolute, longing to follow, yet not venturing, unbidden.

"Farewell," she said, in a thrilling voice. "Prithee, do not linger."

He pressed a kiss on her finger-tips and was still looking after her with his heart in his eyes, when a hand brushed his arm with a peculiar touch, and turning with his wandering senses suddenly on the alert, he saw a figure in a monk's habit, strolling slowly toward the most crowded card-room. He followed, and soon caught up with him.

"Your dress is too conspicuous," said the monk, in a harsh whisper. "There is work to be done, instantly, and your dress unfits you for it."

"Show me the work," said Robin, apparently greatly interested in two players who were throwing dice for high stakes.

"I expected to find you at your post, and after a long search, where do I discover you? *You*, of all men—at the feet of the most heartless little Jezebel in

London," said the monk, with bitterness.

Robin laughed silently. "Have you also been under her feet?" he asked. "Well, if it were any one else, I would kill him for such a calumny upon the most virtuous and adorable lady in the world; but I can not spare you, so give me your news."

"The papers stolen from a certain general are here, in the possession of a man who does not know their importance, but only that Madame Sarah will pay handsomely for them. Not being able to obtain audience of her, he is now leaving the house."

"Why do you make such a long story of it?" said Robin impatiently. "Describe him to me, and I will see to the rest."

"There is no hurry; he has a sweetheart among the maids, and will be some time about his adieux. I will show him to you, but you must get rid of that scarlet affair; what have you underneath? Oh! that is still worse; satin and velvet and diamonds! Why couldn't you come quietly dressed, like the rest of us?"

Robin blushed under his mask, for he knew very well that if Prue had not been among the guests, the monk's frock or the student's cap and gown would have been fine enough for his purpose.

"Never mind my dress," he said shortly. "You can lend me your frock, and if you have no further business here, you can do me a service."

As they went out together, Robin explained to his friend the manner in which he had obtained a domino and an invitation, and, incidentally, the predicament of Lord Beachcombe. Together they sought and found his carriage, at a place previously arranged for, and within it the exchange of garments was effected.

"Now go to the house by the riverside, where you will find Lord Beachcombe tied hand and foot in the dark in the guard-room, and his lackeys under similar conditions in another room. Steve Larkyn is in charge of them. Restore the mask and domino to Lord Beachcombe, return him and his varlets to the carriage, blindfolded, and when you have taken them a safe distance from Essex Street, set them free to go their way to the ball or the devil, whichever pleases them."

The carriage drove away and Robin, completely concealed under the monk's gown, made his way back to the house. Not, however, through the brilliantly lighted main-entrance, but this time by a side-door that led to the servants'

quarters.

CHAPTER XVI
AT THE UNMASKING

When Prue and Robin had left the conservatory a sufficiently long time to insure their return to the ball-room, out from behind a clump of plants slipped Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert. Observing her exit from the ball-room with a tall and conspicuously habited masker, he had followed with the intention of interrupting a tête-à-tête and forestalling one of Prue's little flirtations that, however harmless in themselves, were dangerous, as he knew by experience, to anterior claims.

When he found that, avoiding the well-lighted rooms, Prue guided her companion to an out-of-the-way retreat, where it was unlikely that they would be disturbed by any one less familiar with the house than herself, his annoyance increased, and with it his anxiety to know who the favored swain might be, and when Peggie, with the good-natured intention of giving Robin an opportunity, left them to rid herself of her sheepskin, the green-eyed monster took complete possession of Sir Geoffrey and prompted a baseness of which, a moment before, he would have blushed to think himself capable.

The only available concealment was at such a distance that at first nothing reached him but the murmur of voices. He could see that Prue stretched out her hands to her companion, and that he kissed them with ardor, but until his own name was mentioned, he heard nothing but a disjointed word here and there. Then, with ears preternaturally sharpened by something even more poignant than jealousy, he overheard Prue's repudiation of himself and her companion's expression of relief and gratitude for the same.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that the colloquy was so soon brought to an end by Peggie's eagerness to carry her cousin off to the ball-room, whither Sir Geoffrey followed as quickly as he deemed wise, only to find Prue already standing up in a country-dance, and the tall masker in scarlet missing. He hunted everywhere for him, but in vain, and finally withdrew to one of the card-rooms, where he played with a marked absence of his usual skill, and also of the luck for which he was proverbial.

At midnight a flourish of trumpets announced that the moment for unmasking had arrived. The dancers formed a double line and marched past the

dais, each couple unmasking as they saluted the duchess and her royal guest. Following them came an almost interminable procession of the beauty, talent and rank of the country, and among the very last of these, Sir Geoffrey's search was rewarded. The tall figure in its scarlet drapery suddenly appeared, he knew not whence, and within a few feet of him, doffed domino and mask and revealed the familiar but unlooked-for person of Lord Beachcombe.

Instantly there flashed into Sir Geoffrey's mind an explanation of the words he had overheard, which roused him to an almost uncontrollable fury. This man, once his rival, was still in love with Prue, and after goading him into a monstrous wager about her, had exerted some infernal arts or arguments to induce her to play the jilt once more and thus rob him, at one stroke, of his bride and his money.

"Oh!" he muttered, with intense bitterness, "such a trick is worthy of a man who would not pay his own sister's dowry, until he was sued for it! He shall answer for this treachery with his heart's best blood, and as for her—" His look boded ill for the future of the capricious beauty toward whom his feeling just then was less like love than hate. He was forced into self-control, however, by the reflection that to provoke a meeting on this issue would place him in a more than equivocal position and that it would be necessary to find some other cause of quarrel.

Beachcombe, meanwhile, unconscious of what had happened under shelter of his disguise, saluted his hostess and his sovereign and passed on with a bland exterior and a temper in a highly inflammable state.

Sir Geoffrey lost no time in throwing himself in Beachcombe's way. They exchanged greetings and then, "How goes the courting?" asked my lord. "How is it you are not in attendance on the fair widow?"

Sir Geoffrey's fury choked him. Was ever such impudence as this scoundrel's?

"Do you require an explanation on the subject?" he said, between his clenched teeth.

"Far from it," retorted Beachcombe, with a jeering laugh. "It will be quite enough for me to know that she has jilted you; I care nothing for the details. Still, if I were you, I would not carry my willow quite so openly."

"No doubt your lordship regards it as quite permissible to prejudice the Viscountess Brooke against a suitor who has a wager with you, dependent on her favor," sneered Beaudesert.

"I hardly fancy it would be diplomatic," drawled the other, not having the clew to Sir Geoffrey's meaning, and relishing his peevishness as evidence of defeat. "As the lady has probably never pardoned my speedy consolation, I doubt not that anything I might say against you would only drive her into your arms. This is the first time I have seen the Lady Prudence since Her Majesty requested

her to retire from the court a year ago. She appears to me even more beautiful and vivacious than formerly. I must endeavor to make my peace with her; one can not afford to be at odds with so bewitching a creature, especially if she is to be attached to the queen's household again, where we shall be obliged to meet constantly."

Sir Geoffrey was so dumfounded by what he took to be the earl's audacity and dissimulation, that he fell back and allowed him to follow in the wake of the subject of their conversation. It was but a small consolation to him that Prue was in his power through her rash marriage; she had already shown him that she considered him *particeps criminis*, if she did not go so far as to lay the blame on his shoulders. It was plain to him that Beachcombe would give him no opening for a quarrel about her and that he would have to find some other cause for the duel he was determined to force upon him, but that gave him no uneasiness. At that period dueling, though nominally unlawful, was a highly popular means of settling any and every difference between gentlemen, and love, cards, etiquette, family jars, political opinions and a host of more or less trivial causes gave plausible excuse for the indulgence of personal hatred. Sir Geoffrey was a dead shot and a fairly skilled swordsman, and had come off scathless in encounters with far more formidable antagonists than this young lordling, whose prowess was still untried and whose reputation for courage or any other lofty quality was yet to make.

With a wager of five thousand guineas contingent upon Prue's fidelity to him, Sir Geoffrey was not prepared to be overnice about the pretext that would put such an antagonist *hors de combat* for a few weeks.

While he was turning over in his mind a variety of baits by which he might draw Beachcombe into a quarrel, the latter pursued his way through the crowd, exchanging greetings and receiving congratulations upon the advent of his son and heir, and at last reached Prudence. It was no very easy task to edge his way through the throng of her admirers, nor had he any special reason to felicitate himself upon his success when he had gained it. He came up, bowing low, with his hand upon his breast, pouring out the customary stream of high-flown compliments and asseverations that the sun, moon and stars had refused their light since her eyes, the brightest of all luminaries, had been withdrawn from the firmament!

Prue regarded him with one of her most beaming smiles.

"'And pray, sir, when came you from hell?
Our friends there—did you leave them well?'"

she inquired, with an air of flattering interest.

In the midst of the laughter that greeted this sally, Peggie was heard to exclaim, in a voice of mock-horror, "Prue! how shocking!"

"My dear, you must blame Mr. Prior, not me, if you object to the quotation," said Prue demurely.

"Maybe," retorted Peggie; "but in conversation one can not see the inverted commas, and you know Lord Beachcombe does not read poetry."

"True, I apologize," said Prue, and turning again to her former suitor, she dropped a deep curtsey. "How is it, Lord Beachcombe, that we have not seen you earlier?" she asked graciously. "When did you arrive from—home? and did you leave her ladyship and the baby well?"

The laugh that followed this was utterly incomprehensible to the proud father, who replied with urbanity, feeling that Prue showed great self-denial in making these inquiries so publicly and exposing herself to the hilarity of those who could not fail to remember how she had forfeited the proud position of wife to the present and mother of the future Earl of Beachcombe. He felt quite sorry for the regret and mortification she must be suffering and was inclined to concede that the punishment was overharsh for the frailty of a creature so winsome.

He offered his hand to lead her into the supper-room and the magnetic thrill of her touch sent the blood surging through his veins in the old accustomed way—he looked down into the sparkling depths of her lovely eyes and straightway forgot—everything that he ought to have remembered. It needed but the gloomy frown of Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert to incite him to offer the most effusive attentions and Prue to permit, if not actually encourage them, until wearying of a pastime that had nothing to recommend it but its folly, she turned the battery of her fascinations in another direction.

It must not be supposed that Lord Beachcombe was without curiosity as to the use Robin had made of the invitation and disguise he had borrowed so peremptorily. He questioned several people, but no one seemed to have observed the scarlet domino, and the one person who could have enlightened him, he did not dream of connecting with the exploits of a highwayman. He began to feel reassured, and a couple of bottles of wine helped to restore his damaged *amour propre*, though his temper was considerably ruffled. He followed Prue to the ball-room, but his invitation to dance was coldly declined and he retreated to the card-room where Sir Geoffrey was already seated and hailed his coming with fierce joy. It would be strange, indeed, he argued, if means could not be found to fasten a quarrel upon a man who came to the card-table with a naturally morose temper heated with wine and still further excited by the bitter-sweet arts of a coquette.

That Beachcombe was still infatuated with his old love, Sir Geoffrey had not the slightest doubt, and that he had persuaded her to jilt him he had, as he

firmly believed, the evidence of his own senses.

The play was high, and Sir Geoffrey's luck had taken another turn. The pile of guineas in front of him grew apace and gradually the others dropped out, except Beachcombe, who had also been winning, though not so largely. His luck soon gave way before Sir Geoffrey's, and in a short time he had lost all his winnings and a considerable sum besides. Seeing him hesitate and half rise from the table, his opponent laughingly exclaimed, "Don't leave me, Beachcombe; I'm in the vein to-night—"

"Unlucky in love, lucky at cards," sneered Beachcombe. "I see the widow *has* jilted you."

"That's a lie and you know it!" cried Sir Geoffrey. Both the men started to their feet and stood glaring at each other across the table. Most of the other games were suspended, and a breathless hush fell upon the whole assembly.

"Is that intended for an insult?" said Beachcombe thickly. A laugh or two expressed the opinion of the onlookers as to the propriety of such a question.

"You can take it any way you please," retorted Sir Geoffrey. "What I have said I am ready to repeat, if you require it, and uphold in any way you demand."

A gray-haired man in general's uniform came forward and laid a hand on the arm of each.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the duchess will be much offended, if this should go further under her roof, on such an occasion as this. If you wish to continue this discussion, my quarters, near by, are at your disposal after the ball. Until then, pray let us avoid any unpleasantness."

Beachcombe turned on his heel and walked off to the other end of the room. Sir Geoffrey accepted the old general's invitation, and pocketing his winnings, repaired to the ball-room, his temper and spirits vastly improved.

There he had the good fortune to find Prue in a gracious mood, and willing to make up for her previous neglect by dancing with him and allowing him to linger at her side until the ball came to an end. Then he had the felicity of shawling her and handing her into her carriage, where she bade him good morrow and permitted him to press a kiss upon Robin's pearl-embroidered gloves.

CHAPTER XVII

LADY BARBARA'S NEWS

The sun was flushing the horizon when Prue and Peggie left off comparing notes about the ball and laid their weary heads on their respective pillows. Peggie, light of heart and easy of conscience, was very soon asleep, but Prue was less fortunate. The more tightly she closed her eyes, the more distinctly she saw everything that had happened to her since yester morning's sun had looked coldly upon her grief and remorse. Could it be only yesterday that she had been awakened by the hideous thought that her *husband* was expiating his crimes upon the gallows? Only yesterday that she had bemoaned herself as the wickedest and crudest of women, while she believed him dead: yet was ready to reproach him with perfidy when she saw him alive? Oh! it was impossible that only yesterday morning she had scorned herself for the folly that bound her to a malefactor. Why, last night she had treated him as an equal, had taken his word as a gentleman, had felt and acknowledged anxiety for his safety, and had permitted him to kiss her hands; not out of pity as when she married him, but just as if he had been of the same social flesh-and-blood as herself. She vainly reminded herself that this Robin was the same who had waylaid her on Bleakmoor; the same who had lain in Newgate Prison, a felon condemned to the gallows; the same she had married because he was doomed to death, and for no other reason; oh! more the shame to her! As to him, his part in that ignoble contract was blameless and even generous. With which thought last in her mind, she fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes, Peggie stood at her bedside, smiling over an armful of roses.

"Guess what little bird sent these to you," she said.

Prue started up eagerly. "Is he here?" Peggie shook her head. "What, did he go away without seeing me?" cried Prue, her face falling and her lip drooping like a grieved child.

"No, he sent them by his lackey. You had better make haste to be up and dressed, in case he comes to be thanked."

Prue jumped out of bed and began dressing in a great hurry.

"How comes *he* with a lackey, forsooth!" she said presently, feigning to cavil so that Peggie would go on talking.

"Why, does not Sir Geoffrey always send his lackey with flowers for you—and grandmother?" laughed Peggie.

"Sir Geoffrey!" cried Prue, starting away from the roses as though she had suddenly encountered their thorns.

"Of course; who did you think had sent them?" inquired Peggie blandly.

"Why—I thought—you said—Oh! Peggie, what did you mean by a little bird?" pouted Prue.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Peggie screamed with laughter. "So the only bird you can think of now is a Robin! Why, Prue, you foolish coz, what is the use of setting

your heart on him? You know you can not have him."

"And suppose I can not; is not that enough to make any woman set her heart on a man?" cried Prue. "Take those nasty things out of the room, Peggy; the smell of them makes me quite sick."

Peggie started to go, sniffing them voluptuously. "Poor Robin!" she murmured; "'tis well he can not see how his roses are treated. Nasty things, indeed! I never knew the smell of roses to make you sick before."

Prue flew after her. "Margaret!" she exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "How dare you torment me like this? Tell me, this instant, who sent those flowers to me?"

"Why, didn't I tell you they came from Robin?" asked Peggie, regarding her with guileless surprise.

"Give them to me this instant! Oh, Peggie, Peggie, you know you tried to make me think Sir Geoffrey sent them—"

"I only said he always sent flowers by his lackey," Peggie interposed.

"Was there nothing with them? Not a letter, not a message?" Prue went on. "Oh, Peggie, just a word—?"

"Not a word. But the day is not over yet, and mayhap Captain Scatterbrain will bring his own message. He is mad enough for anything. Now don't keep smelling those 'nasty things'—you know the smell of roses makes you sick to-day—and make haste down-stairs. Grandmother is feeling almost well to-day and will take her chocolate in the drawing-room. She wishes you to join her anon, so that she can hear from your own lips all about your triumphs last night."

When Prue came down presently, she wore a great cluster of red roses at her breast, and one or two nestled in the rich braids of her hair. It was a pity Robin could not see how well they became her, but they were not altogether wasted, as Sir Geoffrey, coming in a short time later, made them the occasion of some charming compliments.

Old Lady Drumloch, with no sign of weakness about her but her delicate waxen pallor, reclined on a couch enveloped in her cashmeres, sipping chocolate, and listening with great complacency to her granddaughter's account of the masquerade. She greeted Sir Geoffrey without enthusiasm, accepted his congratulations upon her recovery with resignation, and remorselessly turned him over to Peggie for entertainment, while she kept Prue in close attendance upon herself.

Other guests dropping in, Prue was kept so busy dispensing chocolate and sweetmeats that she hardly noticed the portentous gravity with which Sir Geoffrey drew Peggie apart and engaged her in a low-voiced conversation, which at first amused, then surprised, and finally caused her to exhibit unmistakable signs of uneasiness. Her efforts to catch Prue's eye being abortive, she was on her way across the room, when the door was thrown open, and with a great rustling of

silks and clattering of fans, three ladies were announced. "Lady Limerick, Miss Warburton and Lady Barbara Sweeting."

Of the new-comers, the latter deserves a word of introduction, for Lady Barbara had been the sharer, and many thought, the instigator of half the frolics of Prue's lively widowhood. They were fast friends, and if the fading charms of Lady Barbara suffered by contrast with Prue's fresh loveliness, those who desired the friendship of either were usually wise enough to treat both with impartial gallantry.

A great favorite of Queen Anne and also a dangerous rival of Sarah Churchill, Lady Barbara owed her popularity chiefly to her skill in collecting and disseminating scandal. She knew everything long before any one else suspected it. Projected marriages, family jars, political intrigues supplied her with an ever-fresh stock of amusing anecdote. Mischievous but rarely malicious, she often pricked but seldom stabbed, and was as ready to turn the laugh against herself as to make fun out of her most cherished enemy.

"Dear Lady Drumloch, what a delightful surprise, and how charming you look!" she cried, taking the old lady's delicate hand in hers and pressing upon it as reverential a kiss as though it had been Queen Anne's own chubby fingers. "You don't know how enchanted we are to have you among us again! We have missed you so. Prue, you wicked witch, how dare you look so lovely? After last night you ought to be pale and languishing, instead of looking so shamelessly unconcerned and lighthearted." Prue, without knowing why, changed countenance a little, at which her tormentor ran on still more volubly. "We were getting on very nicely without you—a little dull, perhaps, but one can live without duels, and while you stayed in the North, wives could let their husbands run alone, even if they had been your bond-slaves. Prithee, was ever General Sweeting the victim of your enchantments? If so, alack, what is to become of me?"

A laugh rippled round the room, for Lady Barbara's husband was notoriously henpecked, and although he had once been a redoubtable warrior and a still more formidable rake, it was in the days when Prue's mother had not emerged from the nursery and Prue's self was an unpropounded problem of the distant future.

Not at all disturbed by the amusement of her audience, Lady Barbara raised her quizzing-glass and ran her bright, sharp glance round the room.

"What! Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert! how come you here? Why are you not flying for safety to your Yorkshire Castle? Or perhaps your parliamentary immunities extend to the slaughter of the innocents as well as the spoiling of the Egyptians!"

Sir Geoffrey, very red in the face, came forward, bowing low. "Dear Lady Barbara, as you are strong, be merciful," he murmured imploringly.

She gave him a look very unlike her ordinary merry defiance. "Merciful to *you*, who have no mercy even for the nursing mother and the suckling babe? Never! Lady Beachcombe is one of my ninety-and-nine dearest friends. I have just come from her. There was a sight to wring the heart of a monster! the weeping mother in one room and the wounded husband and father—"

"Oh, tush!" interrupted Sir Geoffrey, recovering his aplomb. "'Twas the merest scratch. A strip torn from my lady's kerchief would have bound it up and left something to spare—"

"Don't quarrel, you two," interposed Prue's sweet, cooing voice. "Bab, come and sit beside granny and I'll give you a cup of chocolate, while you tell her the latest news."

"The latest news! There is so much, that the difficulty is to know where to begin. I went, this morning, to visit my interesting friend, Lady Beachcombe, and according to promise, to give her full description of the ball, including"—here she shook her finger at Prue—"all the doings and misdoings of her lord. I was prepared to be cautious with the dear creature, but instead of finding myself welcomed as a bearer of news, I heard so much that my poor head fairly swims with trying to remember it all."

"Begin with the least exciting and work up by easy stages to a climax," suggested Peggie, edging toward her cousin and trying to attract her attention.

"No, begin with the most thrilling while our nerves are strong enough to bear it," Prue proposed eagerly.

"First, then," Lady Barbara began, highly enjoying her anticipated triumph, "there was a robbery at Marlborough House last night; and sure no common thief would venture to steal Her Majesty's diamond necklace from the royal tiring-room."

The general chorus of incredulity and indignation realized her expectations and she looked around with a mysterious smile. "No common thief, indeed; but Robin Freemantle, the highwayman, is out of jail, and 'tis said—indeed my authority can not be questioned—that he was among the maskers."

Prue felt cold shivers trickling down her spine, but the consciousness that Sir Geoffrey was watching her, gave her strength to fix a smile upon her face and pour out the cup of chocolate with a steady hand.

"Why do they think he had anything to do with this?" some one inquired. "Tell us everything quickly, Barbara, before we die of curiosity."

"Why, now we come to the best story of all," cried the fair newsmonger. "On his way to the ball, Lord Beachcombe was waylaid by Robin Freemantle and a band of ruffians, who carried him off—carriage, servants and all complete—to a secret cavern and left him there for several hours, having robbed him of his mask and domino and borrowed his invitation and his carriage!"

"The devil!" ejaculated Sir Geoffrey, suddenly very much enlightened.

"Fie, Sir Geoffrey; you should leave such remarks to our poor friend Beachcombe, when he discovered, this morning, the purpose for which his disguise had been taken."

"But he was there; I spoke with him," said Prue, feeling the color ebb from her cheeks and surreptitiously trying to pinch some of it back.

"Did I not see you supping with him?" retorted Lady Barbara archly. "I refrained from dwelling upon that subject to my poor friend, Lady Beachcombe, but I saw what I saw! Before midnight his property was restored and he was set free. He hastened to the ball, and doubtless he would have done much better to go straight home, eh, Sir Geoffrey?"

"He seemed in a bad humor," said Prue reflectively, "but not more so than usual."

"He might well be in a bad humor. It appears that he was instrumental in getting Robin Freemantle pardoned when he was in Newgate, condemned to be hanged."

"That is strange!" Peggie exclaimed. "'Tis the first time I ever heard tell of a charitable act of his!"

"'Twill be the last, no doubt; the man is an ingrate. His first use of his liberty was to steal his benefactor's mask and domino, and under cover of them to rob the queen's Majesty. Oh! 'tis outrageous!" Lady Barbara ran on volubly. "But he will be punished; and speedily." She became mysterious. "His retreat is known. When Beachcombe questioned his servants and added his own suspicions to theirs, he came upon important clues, and when I left he was going to place them in the hands of the authorities, from whom this miscreant will certainly not be rescued a second time—by him!"

"Or by any one else, it is devoutly to be hoped," remarked Sir Geoffrey; "don't you agree with me, Lady Prudence?"

"You played thief-taker before, Sir Geoffrey," she retorted, with unaccustomed acrimony. "You should offer your services again; his escape would then be impossible."

"Quite impossible!" cried Lady Barbara, who only caught the last words. "His home will be surrounded by soldiers, and he will be lodged in the Tower, when they catch him."

"Do they send soldiers to catch a highwayman?" inquired Peggie.

"And why the Tower?" objected Lady Drumloch. "Methought that was reserved for gentlemen; 'tis too much honor for robbers and footpads. Will they also behead this person; like a gentleman?"

"'Tis likely," cried Barbara. "I had so much to tell you, that I forgot that this Robin is not a mere ordinary highwayman; he is a Jacobite plotter, no less, and

is known to carry letters and messages from rebels in the South to those in the North and back again—doing, I presume, a little highway robbery on the way, for the good of the cause. Mayhap he appropriated the queen's necklace as a contribution to the treasury of the 'King in Exile.'"

"Barbara!" exclaimed Prue and Peggie together, in a panic.

"My dear Lady Barbara," put in the thin, incisive voice of Lady Drumloch, "the 'King in Exile' is the queen's brother and probably—may the day be distant—will succeed her. I can not permit such insinuations to be made in my presence, against the cause for which my husband and my son laid down their lives."

"Pray pardon me, dearest Lady Drumloch," cried Lady Barbara, really shocked at her own want of tact. "I meant no harm—my tongue runs away with me—and to be sure, I have no greater fancy for a Dutchman on the throne than any other loyal Englishwoman. Yet 'tis true that Robin Freemantle is only the *nom de guerre* of one of the most turbulent rebels against the queen's government—"

"If by that you mean the Whigs, you should rather say against the Duchess of Marlborough's government," retorted Lady Drumloch crisply.

"And what is the real name of this—rebel?" inquired Prue.

"Why, he calls himself De Cliffe, and if he really is an offshoot of the family, that would explain why Beachcombe obtained a pardon for him," said Lady Barbara.

"Indeed, it requires explaining," remarked Prue, who had quite regained her self-command. "It is much easier to understand why he is sending him to the Tower, if he be a poor relation."

During the laughter that followed this sally, other guests arrived and the loss of the queen's diamond necklace having, by this time, become pretty generally known, poor Prue had to listen to every variation of the story and every kind of theory concerning it, all leading to the same conclusion, that Robin the highwayman had been at the masquerade ball and profiting by opportunity—the Ruling Planet of adventurers—had carried off a prize of incalculable value.

With difficulty she eluded Sir Geoffrey's ironical condolences, and took her accustomed part in the heedless chatter, watching the clock as minute by minute slipped away and still her visitors lingered.

"Oh! if they would only go," she whispered to Peggie. "Do you think if I were to fall in a fit, or make James give an alarm of fire, that it would speed the parting guest?"

But the longest afternoon comes to an end some time, and Lady Drumloch's weary looks presently reminded her guests that she was but recently off her sickbed. So with a great rustling of silks and sweeping of voluminous curtseys, they withdrew, with as many farewell speeches as though they did not expect to meet

again in a few hours at dinner, rout or playhouse, and left the old countess to be carried up-stairs, and the two girls to their own devices.

When they were alone, Peggie threw her arms round her cousin. "Oh! my poor Prue," she cried; "what I have suffered for you the last hour—"

"Tell me of your sufferings by and by, Peggie," said Prue, rather ungratefully. "If you would help me, bid James fetch a chair, while I get me a cloak; I must hasten to the duchess."

"The duchess! Oh, Prue, dearest, don't do anything rash; for Heaven's sake, try to be discreet. If you can not help Robin, do not ruin yourself for the sake of a thief!"

"You are quite mistaken, Margaret; every one is determined that Robin has taken the necklace, and if I did not know him better than you do, I might think the same. But trust me; for once I will be the personification of prudence, and you will see that everything will come right. If any one should ask you where I am, say I have gone to offer my services and sympathies to the duchess. Sure, 'tis a terrible blow for her, and there are those about the queen who would rejoice if it were mortal. No one will wonder that I should wish at such a time to prove my friendship for one who has so often stood by me."

CHAPTER XVIII
THE DEN OF THE HIGHWAYMAN

Prue allowed James to direct the chairmen to Marlborough House, but, a short distance away, she stopped them, and giving them a crown, desired them to carry her with the utmost speed to Essex Street, where she would reward them amply for their diligence. Scenting an intrigue, with the usual accompaniment of a generous douceur for their share in it, they trotted off at a pace that gave their light burden hard work to keep her seat.

With all their haste, it was dark before they reached Essex Street, where Prue desired them to seek out "Pip's Coffee-House," a small hostelry of retiring, not to say furtive aspect. A flickering oil-lamp hung over the entrance, and through the red-baize window-curtain a dull glimmer penetrated.

Excited as she was, Prue was not without alarms at the sinister possibilities of this adventure, so vastly different from the sparkling follies of her giddy career. But "Cowards fayle," and Prue was no coward, nor was she capable of drawing

back when curiosity and inclination combined to thrust her on. She descended, and bidding the chairmen wait, boldly entered the house and knocked at the first door she came to.

A voice called out, "Come in," and she obeyed. The room was of moderate size, divided into small compartments, each containing a rough wooden table and a couple of benches to match. The floor was sanded, the ceiling low and smoke-blackened, but there was no appearance of squalor, and the few occupants, who were reading the *News* sheet or playing dominoes, looked respectable and orderly enough.

Reassured, Prue approached the man in charge of the little curtained bar, and in a timid voice inquired for "Mr. Steve Larkyn."

He stared at her, but her veil effectually hid her face, though the sweetness of her voice and the distinction of her bearing could not be disguised.

"Steve Larkyn? I'll call him, my lady," said the man.

"I'm no lady," retorted Prue sharply. "If I were I should not be asking for Steve Larkyn!"

She was sorry for her quickness the next moment, for the man laughed rather rudely, and opening a door behind him, called out, "Hullo, Steve, here's a lady asking for thee, that says she ain't no lady."

The Steve Larkyn who came hurrying out was so unlike the one she had seen in disguise, that she was about to repudiate him, when with a sudden grimace he changed himself back into the rustic foot-boy, all but the shock of tow-colored hair, which no longer covered his sleek brown head. The change passed like a ripple of wind over a smooth pool, but it reassured Prue.

"Can you come outside a minute?" she said, in a very low voice; "I must speak with you."

He followed her into the street, and once out of range of observant eyes and ears, she grasped him by the arm, and demanded to be taken instantly to the captain.

"I can take a message," said Steve, hesitating. "It will attract less notice than a visit from a lady."

"Waste no time in idle objections," she cried, almost fiercely. "I *must* see him; what I have to say is for his ear alone, and even if otherwise, 'twould be a waste of precious time to tell my tale twice over. Lead me to him instantly or take the responsibility of his certain death upon your own head!"

"Come, then," he replied; "but you must come afoot. 'Tis ill enough to take a woman into a secret, without a pair of spying lackeys to boot. Can you walk a short distance? The road is dark and rough."

"No matter, I can walk it." She paid the chairmen liberally, and dismissing them, followed Steve down a steep and narrow lane leading to the riverside. It

was unlighted, and she slipped and stumbled on the miry, uneven causeway until Steve, in pity, begged her to lean upon his arm. "'Tis not far now," he said, less gruffly, and a few yards farther they came to a huge and gloomy gateway, within which a little door admitted them into a dark hall. Steve struck a light and led the way across the echoing emptiness and up a broad staircase. He scratched with his nail upon a door, which was promptly opened by Robin himself, fully equipped for a journey.

"Steve!" he exclaimed. "What has happened, and who is this with you?"

Before he could answer. Prue stepped forward and throwing off her veil replied, "Your wife!"

"Lady Prudence!" he cried, scarcely believing the evidence of his senses. "In the name of Heaven, what brings you here? Why are you so pale and excited? Something terrible has happened?"

"No; but will happen unless you instantly escape." She came into the room and closed the door, leaving Steve outside. "Oh! Robin, Robin," she cried, clasping her hands and looking at him with reproachful eyes, "I know all that happened last night. How could you be so mad? You can not hope to escape again if you are arrested for this."

"Indeed," said Robin grimly, "if I am taken this time, 'twill be worse than hanging! But I'll never be taken alive—"

"There is time to escape," she urged. "Your retreat is known and you will be arrested to-night. Lord Beachcombe has discovered where he was brought yester night—"

"Ah!" said Robin, with a bitter smile. "I should have taken extra precautions against the bloodhound instinct of hatred! And so, Dear Heart," he went on, in a very different tone, "you came to warn me of danger? 'Twas very noble of you, for if you had left me to my fate, in a few hours you might have been a free woman."

Prue burst into tears. "Oh! you are cruel, cruel," she sobbed. "I do not want freedom—that way."

"I believe it," he said, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. "Do not grieve, my hunted life is not worth one of those tears—"

"But hasten," she interrupted, listening attentively and holding up her hand to silence him. "I know who you are and that you are concerned in Jacobite plots. Soldiers will surround the house and you will be arrested and taken to the Tower as a traitor. You have very little time to escape—"

He glanced at some papers on the table and began to gather them up and conceal them about him. In doing this, he uncovered a jewel-case of purple velvet embroidered in gold with the royal arms.

Prue uttered a faint shriek and covered her eyes, as if to shut out the sight

that confirmed her worst fears.

"Oh! Robin!" she gasped. "The queen's necklace—!"

"Was it the queen's?" he replied carelessly. "Well, now it is yours, if you care to have it." He opened the case and displayed the diamonds flashing like a string of fire. "'My faith! the gems are gorgeous; they will look well on the peerless neck of my beautiful Prue."

"*I* wear the queen's diamonds! You must be mad! What possessed you to take them? Oh, I hoped so that it was a mistake and that you were innocent of this."

"Innocent of what? Do you really think I stole the necklace? My dear Lady Prudence, I am a highwayman when occasion serves, but I am not a thief. Last night, on the king's business, I waylaid the wrong man, and all I got for my pains was this fine casket, which I never opened until now. Evidently I robbed the thief, confound him! and the papers I was commanded to secure are God knows where!"

"Oh! Robin, I am so glad!" she cried. "They said Robin the highwayman was at his tricks again, and had stolen the queen's necklace from Marlborough House, and oh, I was so ashamed to think such a thing could be said of—*my husband*!"

She half turned away, murmuring the last words so softly that only the ears of love could have caught them.

"Oh! Prue—angel—is it really possible that you think of me as your husband? Oh! I know there has been an empty ceremony which meant nothing to you, and to me only vain longing and a mad dream of unattainable happiness; but what a fool I am! Of course I ought to have understood that you fear to be brought to shame if it should be suspected that the thief of the queen's necklace is your—"

Prue's eyes flashed and her little high-heeled shoe tapped angrily on the floor.

"You are indeed a fool!" she exclaimed. "I do not know why I have any patience at all with you. Will you begone from here at once, sir, and not offend me by tarrying when I have risked so much to save your life?"

He started and flushed guiltily. "Selfish brute that I am! I forgot the danger to you. A thousand thanks, dear Lady Prudence, for your warning. I will profit by it when I have conducted you to safety."

"You will do nothing of the sort," she retorted imperiously. "When I arrived you were preparing to depart; do so at once, for if you wait for the house to be surrounded by the soldiers it will be too late. Even now, if you leave it alive, you may fall into an ambush. Is there no exit except into the street?"

"Yes; this room opens on a terrace overlooking the river, and although I

believed myself safe in London for a few days, I have a boat in readiness in case I should be forced to leave in a hurry," said Robin. "There are hiding-places in Southwark and Lambeth where the queen's whole army might hunt a week for me in vain."

"Be cautious then, for that may be known to your enemies; and, above all, be speedy—"

While she was speaking, the door was flung open abruptly and Steve Larkyn—his face blazing with fury—darted in.

"You are betrayed, Captain!" he ejaculated. "This woman has brought the soldiers with her. For the love of God, do not stop to listen to her, but escape while there is time—"

"You hear?" cried Prue, in a frenzy. "Go—go instantly! I command you!"

"What, go away and leave you here to meet the soldiers alone? Never!" said Robin, with a calmness that contrasted strongly with the excitement of the others.

"Then I will remain with you, and when the soldiers come I will declare that I helped you enter Marlborough House, and show the diamonds to prove that I was your accomplice; nay, I will say that my familiarity with the duchess' apartments gave me access where you could not have entered and that *I* stole the diamonds and gave them to you!"

"You will do this?" he gasped, utterly stupefied.

"I will; and if necessary I will proclaim myself your wife and let them think I have had my share in whatever you are accused of."

"But why? In the name of God, what is the meaning of this madness?"

She stretched out her arms to him with a gesture of utter self-abandonment. "It means that I love you, Robin. I love you, and would rather die with you than live without you!"

He caught her in his arms and strained her to his breast with all the pent-up passion of his being in that fervid embrace.

"Leave you—now, my darling, my heart's heart—"

She tore herself from his arms. "More than ever now," she pleaded. "If you hope ever to possess me, fly, and I swear that I will come to you—if not on earth, in Heaven. Stay, I have an idea." She snatched up a sheet of paper and thrust a pen into his hand. "Write," she commanded, and he wrote at her dictation.

"MISTRESS BROOKE:

"Follow the bearer and you will find the queen's diamond necklace."

"There," she exclaimed, laughing and crying together, "leave the rest to me, and go—if you do not wish to destroy us both. Hark! the soldiers are already at the gate," she flung the window open—"trust to my woman's wit," she cried, "I shall not only be safe but covered with glory and honor."

He pressed a burning kiss upon her willing lips and sprang through the window. "Follow your master," she said to Larkyn, who stood by, an effigy of astonishment. He obeyed without demur, and she shut the window, closing and fastening the shutter and half-drawing the faded curtain.

Then she resumed her mantle and veil and looked around for any sign of Robin's late occupancy. He had secured all his papers and on the table nothing was left except the purple velvet case and some writing materials, which she thrust into a drawer. In doing so she came upon a packet addressed:

"To Mistress Larkyn, "In care of Mine Hostess of "The Fox and Grapes."

She took it up and recognized Robin's writing. The angry blood glowed in her veins. "The insolent varlet!" she muttered. "He has been writing to a woman—'Mistress Larkyn,' indeed!—Mine Hostess of the 'Fox and Grapes,' forsooth! 'Tis some low intrigue, and I thought him my true lover and loyal husband. I will see how he addresses this creature." She was about to tear open the packet, when a crash below stairs and the sound of hurried footsteps warned her that the soldiers had broken into the house. She hurriedly thrust it into her bosom and waited.

A voice shouted harshly, "In the queen's name!" and the door was opened without ceremony. Half-a-dozen soldiers with drawn swords rushed in, and at sight of the little cloaked figure, came to a halt in some confusion.

But Prue, without waiting to be interrogated, threw back her veil, exclaiming, "Soldiers!" in accents of well-feigned joy and relief. "Oh! I am so glad! I was afraid, when I heard the noise, that I had fallen into a den of robbers, who would, perhaps, kill me for the sake of the queen's necklace."

"The queen's necklace!" exclaimed the officer in command. "Who are you, and what do you know about the queen's necklace?"

"I am the Viscountess Brooke," she replied, in her loftiest tone, "and this message will explain why I am here, and what I know about the queen's necklace."

She landed the paper to him and watched anxiously to see its effect. He read it dubiously and turned it over and over, evidently at a loss how to deal with a matter outside of his instructions.

"You see the necklace," she went on after a pause, taking up the emblazoned casket and opening it. "The person who brought me here disappeared when the

noise began at the gate." She looked round in every direction but the window. "I think there must be a secret panel somewhere in the room, for while my attention was distracted by the noise, she disappeared."

"*She!*" cried the officer. "Did a woman bring you here? What kind of person was it? Could it not have been a man, disguised?"

"A man!" she exclaimed; "oh, no"—then the advantage of prolonging this cross-examination struck her and she continued slowly, as if pondering over the suggestion—"at least, that never occurred to me. Her voice was loud and rough 'tis true—"

"Was she—or he—tall and broad?" demanded the officer, glancing at a document in his hand and reading from it—"swarthy complexion, black eyes, black hair, without powder, worn—"

She interrupted him with a laugh. "Surely not, the woman was old, bent, no taller than myself; a toothless, blear-eyed beldame—"

"And she disappeared, you say? Sergeant, examine the room thoroughly and break in anything that seems like a secret panel. I fear, Madam," the officer said, again addressing Prue, "that I shall be compelled to arrest you if we can not find the person we are seeking."

"Arrest *me*!" cried Prue. "Why, you will make yourself the laughing-stock of London if you arrest Lady Prudence Brooke. As to myself, I should enjoy it amazingly; I have never been arrested, and it would be something quite new for me in the way of an adventure, but I have found the queen's necklace"—she clasped it in her arms with an air of defiance—"and you must first take me either to Marlborough House, where it was lost, or to Kensington Palace, where you will easily find out whether or no to arrest one of Her Majesty's ladies-in-waiting."

She threw off her veil and smiled up at him with all the alluring archness at her command. It was not thrown away, although the young soldier made a brave effort to resist her captivating arts, by ordering his men to leave no loophole of escape for the object of their search or any one who might be his accomplice. They roughly tested the walls with blows and kicks, and finding at last a hollow-sounding panel, knocked it in without delay and found, not a secret passage, but a closet containing some weapons, a saddle and a couple of cloaks. These they made into a bundle and were about to search farther, when the sounds of shouts and shots from the river drew their attention that way.

"By Heaven, they have caught him on the river!" cried the officer, hurrying to the window. He unclasped the shutter and dashing the window open, sprang out on the terrace, followed by Prue. The night was intensely dark and a drizzling rain falling, but at a short distance the blaze of torches stained the fog a dull crimson, that looked to her excited imagination like a haze of blood. She stood shivering on the terrace beside the officer, as he shouted himself hoarse in his

efforts to get into communication with the crew of the boat which had intercepted Robin's flight, but the lights drifted farther away and the shouting ceased, and, at last, she ventured to lay her hand lightly on the officer's arm.

"Who is being pursued?" she asked, "and what is all the disturbance about?"

"Don't you know that this is the hiding-place of the notorious highwayman, Robin Freemantle, who is also suspected of being an active agent of the Jacobite plotters in Scotland? It is strange that you should be alone here, Madam, and yet know nothing of this man's escape! My orders are to arrest him and all persons found in his company; therefore you must consider yourself under arrest."

"Arrest me if you will," she replied, "but if you refuse to take me to the Duchess of Marlborough or the queen, the consequences be on your own head. Rest assured that there will be honors and promotion for the gallant soldier who protects one of the ladies of the court and brings her and the treasure she has recovered to safety. But to thrust one of my condition"—her eyes flashed and she raised her head with indignant pride—"into prison, will certainly bring disgrace or worse upon you. I have influence with the duchess and through her, with the duke."

The officer was young and not altogether insensible either to the sweet, imperious voice, or the arguments it propounded. He hesitated, and meeting the earnest eyes raised to his, began to waver. This was evidently a great lady. Her elegant dress and haughty manner abashed him, and he began to think that if he took her to the Tower in place of Robin Freemantle, she might prove a dangerous substitute.

"Come, come, Sir Officer," Prue went on, reading the changes of his expression with an experienced eye, "do not be so hard to convince." She smiled up at him now with a bewitching petulance and laid her slender hand on his arm. "'Tis but a step to Marlborough House and I am in a fever to see the duchess. I was, perhaps, indiscreet in coming to this strange place alone, but the hope of finding the jewels turned my foolish head and put all other considerations out of it. I fear I ran a desperate risk; I might have been attacked by robbers, instead of rescued by soldiers! I shall never forget that I owe my safety, perhaps my life, to you!"

By this time the lieutenant was in complete subjection. "I am most fortunate, Madam, in being of some service to you!" he said gallantly. "When I came here to take a prisoner, I little expected to become a captive myself."

Prue finished him off with a glance of irresistible archness. "Oh! I am quite reconciled to my arrest now," she protested. "Indeed, I should claim your escort, if I did not feel sure that you would wish to see the queen's necklace safely through its adventures. Fortunate man! there is not an officer in the duke's army, who would not envy your good luck."

"I can well believe it!" he cried, with an ardent glance. "I would not change

places with a general!"

"The duchess appreciates devotion as much as her husband does courage," said Prue, with tantalizing demureness.

"And the Lady Prudence Brooke—does she also appreciate devotion?" the young officer murmured hurriedly. "Oh! if I could believe so—"

"You would take me to Marlborough House instead of the Tower?" she interrupted quickly. "Prove your devotion by doing so, and afterward"—she lingered softly on the word—"we will talk about appreciation."

The soldiers, by this time, having ransacked the house without finding anything suspicious, one of them was despatched to fetch a chair for Lady Prudence, and leaving a guard at the house in case of Robin's return, the lieutenant and the rest of his soldiers escorted the prisoner—and the necklace—to Marlborough House.

CHAPTER XIX
IN THE DUCHESS' APARTMENTS

Any doubts that Prue's escort might have secretly entertained as to the credibility of her strange story, were set at rest the moment she entered the doors of Marlborough House. Her reception was that of the elect; a privileged guest whom all delighted to honor. The obsequious flunkeys bowed before her, and the stately Groom of the Chambers, by whose command the lieutenant was shown into a waiting-room, himself carried the Lady Prue's request for an audience of the duchess on most pressing business.

The anterooms were thronged with visitors whose curiosity had been whetted by a rumor that the long-expected had happened, and that the queen had gladly availed herself of the loss of her jewels as an excuse for humiliating the tyrannical favorite whose exactions had lately increased in proportion to the waning of her influence. It was whispered that the queen had been most reluctant to attend the masquerade, and that the duchess, fearing that she might repeat the slight of a recent public occasion (when Her Majesty had declined to appear in regal state in compliment to her), had exercised her privilege as Mistress of the Robes, and caused certain jewels to be conveyed to the royal tiring-room in Marlborough House. But the queen, on her arrival, had signalized her disapproval of this audacious proceeding, by refusing to make any alteration in the conspicu-

ously simple costume she wore, and the jewels—among which the necklace was the most important—were left in the tiring-room in care of the attendants.

All this, however, was mere gossip. Those more friendly to the duchess discredited the whole story and claimed to know that no royal jewels had come into the house, except on the queen's person, and that if any were mislaid, they would certainly be found either at Kensington Palace, where Her Majesty had been residing for some weeks, or St. James', where she had passed the previous day, in order to incur as little fatigue as possible in attending the masquerade.

Ladies Rialton and Monthemer, with other members of the ducal family and household, flitted from group to group, making light of the rumored estrangement between "*poor, unfortunate, faithful Mrs. Morley*" and her erstwhile inseparable and all-powerful friend, and vowing that nothing kept them apart but the violent illness of the duchess, over whom the physicians were in consultation as to the propriety of bleeding her to avert an attack of fever. But all hints and allusions to the lost necklace were ignored, and those who were hardy enough to put their inquiries into plain words, were met with diplomatic replies that neither affirmed nor denied anything.

With a greeting here and a hand-pressure there, Prue threaded her way through the crowd and hurried up-stairs to the duchess' private apartments. The way led past the little conservatory where she had sat with Robin last night. It was dark now and the entrance was blocked with tubs containing the orange-trees and shrubs which had adorned the grand stair-case and entrance-hall. Prue's heart beat a shade faster and a pang of remorse assailed her at the thought that by introducing Robin to this sequestered part of the house she had exceeded her privilege as a guest, and exposed both Robin and herself to a suspicion that only her utmost ingenuity could dissipate.

In the duchess' dressing-room a little throng of ladies-in-waiting and intimate friends welcomed her warmly. Deep concern sat upon every face as they listened to the hysterical cries and moans, in which the patient in the adjoining bedroom gave expression to her sufferings, and the broken exclamations and fierce invectives by which she called upon her doctors and attendants to bear witness to the ingratitude and perfidy of the queen, and the baseness of her minions.

While Prue hesitated about intruding, the doctor and the apothecary came out. The former hurried away with a red face and air of offended dignity, and his satellite only lingered long enough to assure the ladies that her grace, having refused to be blooded and having ordered the two medicos from her presence under pain of a drenching with their own potions, nothing could be done for her until she could be brought into a more reasonable mood.

"I must see her at once," said Prue, with decision. "I have a cure for her

malady far more efficacious than all the court physicians' nostrums."

"Why, do you come from the queen? Has she found her diamond necklace?" A dozen eager questioners crowded about her, but with a smile of mysterious but encouraging significance, Prue reiterated her demand and at last escaped from further interrogation, by making her way unannounced into the presence of the duchess.

The great lady lay upon her bed, her disordered dress and disheveled hair revealing the ravages of time, which she usually disguised with so much skill. Her tire-women vainly attempted to soothe her by chafing her feet and hands and fanning her flushed and swollen face.

"Who is that?" she screamed, catching sight of Prue. "Go away—I can not see any one—I am very ill—I am dying! Make haste to pay your court to Masham—Masham! the creature I raised out of the mire—the kitchen-wench, who will queen it to-morrow when I am dead! Oh! oh! oh!" And the hysterics were resumed with wilder frenzy than ever.

"Leave her to me," said Prue to the women. "I can cure her, but I must have her to myself for a few minutes." They looked from one to the other with bewildered eyes, wondering at Prue's audacity, yet unable to resist her calm tone of authority.

When they had withdrawn to the farther end of the room, she bent over the shrieking, raving duchess, and said, in a quiet, penetrating voice, "The necklace is not lost, it is quite safe."

The cries ceased with almost ludicrous suddenness. "What do you say?" gasped the patient.

"I will tell you all about it as soon as you are able to lie still and listen," said Prue, who had laid her plans on her way from Essex Street, and had her story all ready. The duchess quieted down and turned her face partly toward her.

"Is that Prudence Brooke?" she asked. "If you know anything about that accursed necklace, tell me quickly, before it is the death of me."

"I have news of it," said Prue, passing a cool, soothing hand over the hot brow and brushing away the heavy, straggling masses of hair, once the pride of Sarah Churchill and the envy of rival beauties. "If the necklace is returned what reward will you give the finder?"

"Reward? Oh! he shall be well rewarded; the finder need not be afraid to ask his own price," cried the duchess. "And yet the thing is worthless to any one, child—worse than worthless—it is deadly! No one would steal it except to injure me! But they shall swing for it, no matter who is at the bottom of it. It is a conspiracy of those who hate me—"

"It is a mistake," interrupted Prue; "the necklace was not stolen, it was taken by—by accident."

"Accident! Oh, I know what kind of accident it was; it was a conspiracy, I tell you!" the duchess reiterated.

"It was a mistake," Prue urged. "I am sure I can prove it."

"Prove it a conspiracy, Prudence Brooke—prove it so that I can get my revenge upon these wretches and you may ask what reward you will. Honors and emoluments shall be heaped upon you—"

"I want neither!" cried Prue vehemently. "That is, the finder would not accept money or anything of that kind." She began to feel uneasy at the threatening tone the duchess took, and her nimble wit jumped for shelter. "For myself," she said, in her most cajoling way, "I would ask a favor—not now, but later—and I want you to promise that you will grant it, no matter how strange and unreasonable it may seem."

The duchess, who was now quite collected, sat up and looked searchingly into the guileless blue eyes, bent so eagerly upon her. "*You* would not ask anything that would injure *me*?" she said slowly. "My enemies are so many and so wily, I fear to trust—even you. Is it something you want for yourself? If so, I promise."

"A thousand thanks," cried Prue. "I may never ask for anything; certainly never for anything that would hurt my dear benefactress to grant. 'Twas but a fancy. And such strange things happen—one never knows what one may be led into. I have had the strangest adventure to-night—"

"Another time, dear Prue," the duchess interrupted; "I can think of nothing now but the necklace."

"Yet you will own," persisted Prue, "when you have heard it to the end, that it is worth listening to. 'Twas thus—as soon as I heard of your grace's troubles, I set out to offer my heartfelt condolences. Scarce a hundred yards from home, the chair was stopped and a rough hand thrust a paper through the curtains. Here it is; shall I fetch a lamp for you to read it by?"

"No, read it to me. I have wept myself purblind," replied the duchess, without attempting to disguise her impatience and lack of interest.

Prue unfolded the paper, now soiled and crumpled from frequent handling, and read:

"MISTRESS BROOKE:

"Follow the bearer and you will find the queen's diamond necklace."

The duchess started up and seized her arms convulsively. "Is this true, Prue?" she demanded tragically. "Then why did you not go at once without coming to

make terms with me first?"

Prue was too well acquainted with the suspicious and selfish nature of the woman to take any offense. "I thought you would be interested," she replied sweetly. "Have a moment's patience and I will tell you how, reckless of consequences, I ordered the chairmen to follow this unknown leader, who took us through narrow by-streets, where I momentarily expected to be waylaid and perhaps murdered. But my desire to serve your grace was stronger than my fears; besides, as you are well aware, I am not very timid, especially when there is an adventure to the fore—"

"Yes, yes, I know how reckless you are, but where did you find the necklace?" the duchess broke in.

"I am coming to that. The chair stopped at last and I descended in a dark and muddy street, where I followed my conductor afoot to a lonely house, apparently uninhabited."

"Prudence—you reckless girl—you ventured into such a place alone and unprotected!" exclaimed the duchess, excited to such a pitch by the story that she absolutely forgot its reference to herself. "What madness!"

"Oh! that is nothing to what I would have done, if necessary, for—for your grace's sake," cried Prue. "But I confess that all my devotion was needed to keep up my courage. Inside the house my situation was even more terrifying. All was dark and empty—it seemed the very place for secret deeds of horror—yet no attempt was made to harm me; not a living creature appeared except the person who wrote this message and who, without any ado, placed this in my hand and begged me to take it away."

Having now arrived at the climax of her story, Prue drew forth the emblazoned casket and displayed the diamond necklace.

The duchess snatched it from her and gazed at it with entranced eyes. She flung her arms about Prue, calling her a heroine and a marvel, and the truest friend woman ever had.

"Any one but you would have gone straight to the queen and left me to my fate. There are those about that ungrateful woman who would have paid mighty high for such a chance of humiliating me. What reward did the robber demand, and how did you satisfy him?"

"There was no robber; only an old woman," said Prue, whipping out her carefully planned lie without a tremor. "I know not how she came by it, but she asked for no reward and only seemed to wish to be rid of it. Indeed, there was no time for me to ask an explanation, if she had one to give, for at the very moment when the casket was in my hands, there arose a hubbub in the street outside and the house was surrounded by soldiers. The old woman disappeared as if by magic, and when the soldiers broke into the room I was alone; nor could they

find any trace of her, though they battered the place to pieces."

"She shall be found and compelled to give up her accomplice," cried the duchess furiously. "Soldiers surrounded the house, and yet the miscreant escaped! Pretty soldiers, forsooth!"

"Yes, truly," cried Prue; "and more than that—they arrested poor little me—because I was all alone there with the queen's diamonds; think of that! I had a narrow escape of spending the night in jail! However, my tears and entreaties prevailed upon them to bring me here, and all that remains to be done is to dismiss my captors, and permit me to take my leave of your grace."

"Not so fast, Prue; you have still something to do for me," said the duchess. "I must hasten to the queen and you must go with me, and repeat what you have just told me. Marie!—Alice!—leave off chattering and tire me with all despatch. I must see the queen without a moment's loss of time."

"Surely, 'tis too late to-night," remonstrated Prue, who was sinking with fatigue. "Her Majesty will have retired."

"That's no matter," retorted the duchess arrogantly; "I am still Mistress of the Robes, and by virtue of my office entitled to enter the queen's bed-chamber at all hours of day or night. You must accompany me, and repeat your story, else I might be discredited by the reptiles who are for ever at the royal ear, poisoning *poor, faithful Mrs. Morley's* mind against her once beloved *Mrs. Freeman.* Come, I am ready."

As they descended by a private staircase to take the carriage, the Groom of the Chambers approached, and deferentially inquired what was to be done with the Viscountess Brooke's military escort.

"Faith, 'tis the honest soldier who wanted to hale me off to jail," cried Prue in reply to the duchess' look of surprised inquiry. "He came prepared to arrest a houseful of robbers or conspirators—he seemed uncertain just which—and finding me alone, with the queen's necklace in my hand, would have taken me to prison if I had not coaxed him to bring me to you first. If I might venture to suggest that your grace bid him attend us, he can corroborate my story, if needful."

"Let him come," the duchess commanded. "I would I had a hundred witnesses that it was not found in Marlborough House."

CHAPTER XX

A THREAT AND A PROMISE

When Prue reached home, about midnight, Peggie, who had been watching at the window during several anxious hours, met her at the door and almost carried her up-stairs in a strenuous embrace.

"Was that the Marlborough carriage?" she demanded eagerly.

"Yes; the duchess insisted on bringing me home."

"Then all is well; you have no idea how uneasy I have been. About ten o'clock, Sir Geoffrey came to see you; on a matter of the utmost importance, he declared, and the mysterious hints he threw out about the danger your rashness and love of adventure had led you into, positively drove me distracted."

"I am deeply indebted to him for his solicitude," said Prue disdainfully, "but the worst danger my rashness ever brought me near—that of marrying Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert—is happily averted. 'Tis true I have committed other follies—one of which has snatched me from the jaws of that peril, only to plunge me into a host of others, from which I know not how I shall extricate myself. Alack! my dearest Peg, methinks poor Prue is but a sorry fool after all's said."

Peggie's countenance fell into an expression of deep concern. For Prue to express a doubt of her own ready wit, was to utter heresy against the first article of Peggie's faith in her.

"Why, what has happened?" Peggie asked, almost tearfully.

"Oh! nothing but good: indeed, the Fates have showered me with good luck until I am afraid I shall be buried alive under it."

"Come, there are worse ways of being buried than that," cried Peggie, brightening up. "A fig for Sir Geoffrey's croaking, if there be nothing else to fear. Now tell me where you have been all the evening; with the duchess, of course, as she brought you home?"

"Not all the time. First I found the necklace. Then I took it to the duchess and together we returned it to the queen. And now, Peggie, bring down your eyebrows out of your hair and don't open your mouth wide enough to engulf me, and I'll tell you everything that has happened to me, if you will undress me, for I am too tired to move a finger."

Peggie most gladly set to work and had her cousin unlaced and unpinned and comfortably tucked in bed, long before the history of the evening's events had been expounded. From her, Prue hid nothing; in fact she was craving to pour her confidence into that kindly ear and receive such ungrudging sympathy and shrewd advice as the circumstances prompted.

When Peggie had exhausted the vocabulary of astonishment, admiration, congratulation and anticipation—had shuddered at Prue's danger, laughed at her wily devices, marveled incredulously at her passionate avowal of love, and rejected all possibility of fear for Robin's safety, she withdrew reluctantly, declaring that she should not close an eye that night—and was fast asleep almost before

her head reached the pillow.

Prue was less fortunate, and for an hour or two tossed and turned, vainly trying every soothing device to calm her racked nerves and woo repose.

While Peggie the optimistic was beside her, Robin's escape appeared more than probable; she could almost persuade herself that it was an accomplished fact. But it looked less certain, now her blood ran cool, and her high spirit flagged in the darkness and silence of night. Her faith in his courage and resource could not entirely resist the paralyzing touch of fear, and even her confidence in the value of the pledge she had extracted from the duchess was shaken by the unmistakable coolness of the queen, who had listened in silence to the explanations of her former favorite and reserved all her praises and expressions of satisfaction for Prue, to whom she had been cordiality itself.

Toward morning she slept so long and heavily, that Peggie came and went a dozen times before the long lashes lifted and the sweet blue eyes smiled drowsily up at her. And even when she woke she was loath to rise, and fain to rest more than once during the tedious process of her toilet, interrupted as it was by an obsequious procession of mercers and modistes, eager to make their peace with the restored favorite by the most pressing and disinterested services.

But a curious change had come over the wilful beauty, and instead of throwing herself heart and soul into the entrancing discussions of hoops and pouffes, sarsenet and tabbinet, plumes and perfumes, she declined the counsel of this one and the coaxing of that one, and sent the sycophant crowd away wondering what had happened to turn the most extravagant of court butterflies niggardly. The most bewitching "head," the richest farthingale, won but a passing glance and a word of careless criticism, and when Peggie, almost as dissatisfied as the rejected tradesfolk, remonstrated against such a blind neglect of opportunity, Prue lay back wearily in her chair and dropping her arms loosely at her side, said impatiently:

"Cousin, Cousin—I am sick to death of it all!"

"All of what?" cried Peggie briskly. "All you have lost for a whole year and won back in less than a week?"

"Aye, all that and more; sick of court and courtiers, sick of idle men and vapid women, sick of myself most of all—"

Then she sprang to her feet and burst out laughing. "What a fool I am, Peg, and what a fool you look standing there, open-mouthed, drinking in my vaporings as though you never had heard me grumble before! Did you think I was in earnest? Why, I was never so happy in my life. Did not the queen kiss me on the cheek, and the duchess swear to give me whatever I might ask of her; even the first choice of the places she has no longer to dispose of and the royal favors that she can no longer influence? Am I not invited to Windsor as lady-in-waiting

on probation and lauded to the skies as a heroine by—"

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert wishes to know if your ladyship will receive him."

The voice of James at the door produced a silence so profound that after a short pause he repeated his message in a louder tone. "Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert is below, my Lady, and wishes to see your ladyship most particularly."

"You had better see him," said Peggie, in response to Prue's startled and questioning glance.

"I will see Sir Geoffrey," said Prue. "Tell him I will be down immediately."

"Shall I come with you?" asked Peggie.

"Oh, no, no. I can play my little comedy better to an audience of one; besides, *you* know the truth!" she cried, and ran to the mirror to see if the battery of her charms was in order for the fray.

Sir Geoffrey, his face set in a mechanical smile, met her with a deep bow and pressed a ceremonious kiss upon her extended hand.

"Permit your slave to offer his humble congratulations, my dear Prudence," he said; "I hear that you have distinguished yourself with even more than your usual brilliancy."

"You allude to the fortunate accident that enabled me to return the lost necklace to Her Majesty, I presume?" Prue replied, seating herself and negligently pointing with her fan to a sufficiently distant chair. "I assure you I deem myself most happy in rendering a service, which has been only too highly appreciated, but I can not lay claim to brilliancy, for I was but a passive instrument."

"The brilliancy I refer to, dear Viscountess, was not so much the 'fortunate accident' as the ready wit by which you turned so compromising an adventure to such good account," said Sir Geoffrey significantly.

The challenge of his tone and words was unmistakable and Prue responded with more spirit than wisdom.

"You must speak more plainly if you wish to be understood," she answered. "Compromising adventures, you know very well, are not rare in my experience—or yours"—she laughed rather maliciously—"but I seldom turn them to good account. Now, the accident that gave the queen's necklace into my hands—"

"Was the happy result of a little visit to Newgate," interposed Sir Geoffrey, with veiled insolence. "Why beat about the bush with me, dearest girl? I know who gave you the necklace—when he was warned, by you, of the danger of keeping it! and how it came about that he was lucky enough to escape before the soldiers arrived to arrest him."

"What in the world are you talking about, Sir Geoffrey?" she cried, with rather over-acted bewilderment.

"What is every one talking about to-day, but the madcap viscountess, who coaxed the highwayman out of the stolen necklace, and being caught in the trap

that was limed for Robin Freemantle, circumvented the soldiers, cozened the Duchess of Marlborough and beguiled the Queen's Majesty. Am I not right in congratulating you on such a brilliant series of achievements?"

"My dear Sir Geoffrey, you have mistaken your vocation," she laughed. "With such an imagination you ought to have been, not a member of Parliament, but a poet! I am quite interested in this romance; surely there is more of it?"

"Considerably more," he went on, lowering his voice and drawing his chair closer to her. "There are those who saw the beautiful shepherdess in close conversation with a masker in red, at the ball; and who now know that he was no other than Robin Freemantle in the borrowed plumes of Beachcombe. You have enemies, fair Prudence—men you have jilted and women you have excelled in wit and beauty—and by some of these you were seen, in company with the Red Domino, very near the queen's tiring-room, from which the necklace was stolen. Can you wonder that when a story is bruited about that Lady Prudence Brooke, in dead of night, was discovered with the necklace in her possession, in the place where Robin Freemantle was looked for, these good people should compare notes about her ladyship's latest exploit, and place their own construction upon it?"

"And you, Sir Geoffrey?" she asked, her thoughtful eyes upon his, "what construction do you place upon this curious rodomontade?"

"Oh!" he laughed softly; "I hold all the clews, so it seems less of a rodomontade to me than, perhaps, to others. I alone know of the little ceremony in Newgate, which explains all."

"Oh! it explains all, does it?" she repeated reflectively. "I should be glad to hear the explanation, now you have propounded the conundrum."

"'Tis simple enough. When Barbara Sweeting told the story of the necklace, you instantly jumped at the same conclusion as the rest of us—namely, that Robin Freemantle, secure in his disguise, had made the use of his opportunity that a robber naturally would, and had stolen the most valuable thing he could lay his hands on—"

"Oh! then you don't give me the credit of the robbery?" she exclaimed with a pout. "It would have added so much to the interest of the romance if I—"

"You? Oh! Lady Prudence, can you ask me such a question?" he interrupted, in a tone of vehement reproach. "I only give you credit for hastening to warn your—*husband* of his danger and carrying away the incriminating proof of his guilt; and I admire your courage and generosity though I deplore its object."

"Have you quite finished this romantic story, Sir Geoffrey?" queried Prue, dismissing his personal opinion with a disdainful toss of her fan.

"The preface only, but the rest will wait," he replied, with a sinister smile.

"Then perhaps you would like to hear what really happened? It would be useless for me to deny—even if I wished—that I spoke with Captain Freemantle,

at the ball—"

"Quite so," Sir Geoffrey agreed blandly.

"Not that I wish to deny it," she went on petulantly; "at a masquerade everything is permitted, and you, my dear Sir Geoffrey, know better than any one else, this gentleman's claim upon my attention. Still, I fail to see any connection between Captain Freemantle's presence at the ball and the disappearance of the necklace—about which, you must acknowledge, that I know more than any one else, since I found—and restored it."

Sir Geoffrey bowed his acquiescence, but his smile was not reassuring.

"We all know what an admirable *raconteuse* Barbara is, and I was naturally much worked up by her story of the lost necklace; in fact I could scarcely restrain my impatience to hear a more authentic account," Prue proceeded, recovering her self-confidence, which for a moment had wavered under Sir Geoffrey's attack. "So the moment my visitors left me, I sent for a chair and started for Marlborough House, to get my information at first hand. At a short distance, however, I was interrupted by a person who thrust this paper into my hand."

She drew from her bosom the crumpled document which had already played an important part in her version of the affair, and handed it to him.

Sir Geoffrey read it carefully, refolded it, and meeting her eye, bowed gravely, as though to intimate that he was too much interested to break the thread of the narrative, even by a word.

"You know my love of adventure too well to doubt that I instantly decided to risk everything and follow this clue. It took me to a dismal old house—empty, I believe, except for an old hag, who, keeping her face concealed, thrust the casket into my hands and at the first sound of the soldiers' approach, disappeared."

Sir Geoffrey softly clapped his hands, as though in applause.

"Capital! excellent!" he cried. "My dear Prue, with shame I confess that I never before have done justice to the vast resources of your wit. I actually dared to wonder how you had managed to forestall suspicion and snatch safety out of the jaws of peril. You have surpassed yourself! To plan so subtly; to execute so promptly! To omit nothing—even the written proof—and to crown it all with a guileless frankness that might disarm the most captious, and certainly would have deceived me, if I had not been close beside you from the moment you emerged from your own door until that of Robin Freemantle hid you from my jealous eyes!"

Then suddenly, without giving her time to disguise the startled dismay that sprang to her eyes, he bent forward and seized her two hands in his.

"Why treat your faithful lover so harshly, sweet Prue?" he went on passionately. "Have I not proven my love again and again in the defense of your reputation and in unquestioning submission to your caprices? Have I not en-

dured your coldness and yielded my just claims before the scruple that prompted you to deny your future husband the smallest favor, while the phantom of a vow linked you to a felon? And am I to have no reward, not even enough of your confidence to enable me to give the lie to your traducers?"

"My traducers!" she cried impatiently. "Who are they? At present the only person who has dared to cast a doubt on my veracity is—Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert!"

"And how long do you expect to escape the pack of 'damned good-natured friends' who have been accustomed to feed upon the choice morsels of scandal you have liberally provided for them?" he demanded. "Before to-night every gossip in town will be in possession of the story of your adventures, and each one who recounts it will put his own construction upon it."

"'Tis true," she murmured. "I have often assisted at such feasts of reason. They are highly entertaining, and every one is eager to add a dash of spice or vinegar to the witches' broth. And there is nothing I can do to stop those busybodies." She glanced resentfully at Sir Geoffrey, yet there was inquiry in her eye.

"Certainly there is something," he replied, answering the unspoken question. "You can give them something else to talk about that will throw the escapade of the necklace into the shade. The shade, do I say? Rather into utter oblivion." An ironical smile began to dawn upon her face, but he did not leave her time to speak. "You can give them a wedding to talk about, a subject that eclipses every other; if you prefer it, an elopement; indeed, I think that would be more dramatic. Say but the word, dearest, and in an hour, a post-chaise—"

"Oh! Sir Geoffrey," she exclaimed, bursting into a hearty laugh. "Can you really seriously propose such an absurdity to *me*? An elopement? a post-chaise? Methinks I should be like a man who jumps into a river to avoid being wetted by a passing shower! We should indeed give the town something to talk about; and not only talk, but laugh at."

"Let them laugh," said Sir Geoffrey doggedly. "So can I; and he laughs longest who laughs last."

"With me for the butt of your hilarity? Thanks, I am always pleased to have my friends—and my enemies—laugh *with* me, but to have them all laughing *at* me is scarcely to my taste. Besides, for you, Sir Geoffrey, to suggest such a thing to me—you who know that I am already another man's wife and can not therefore legally become yours—for you to make such an offer is an insult—no less."

"My dearest Prue, spare me these reproaches. I grant that yesterday, while this man lived, you were—in a sort of way—his wife. But why should you, who were on the spot, pretend to be ignorant of what the whole town knows this morning, that Robin Freemantle was killed last night, and that consequently you are, as you naturally wish to be—his widow? I congratulate you—and myself."

All Prue's forebodings revived at these words, uttered with an air of triumphant security that struck a chill to her heart. "I—I do not understand you—" she stammered, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Oh! I think you do," he replied, "only you love to torment me by playing the inexorable prude. You were at Robin's house and witnessed—nay, possibly connived at his escape. You were still there when the soldiers overtook the boat in which he and his band were attempting escape, and shot the fugitives and sank their boat. The news in to-day's *Courant* can not but confirm your own hopes of regaining the joys of freedom, with all the advantages for which you married Captain—*de Cliffe*."

As she remained silent, he drew the *News* sheet from his pocket and, with a great show of searching out the item, handed it to her. She waved it away with a careless gesture and when he offered to read it to her, she merely bent her head slightly, never moving her eyes from his face.

"'At a time when the whole country is terrorized by highwaymen and footpads, singly and in bands, news of the extermination of the notorious gang of robbers under the leadership of Robin Freemantle (recently condemned to be hanged at Tyburn for his crimes and later mysteriously released) will be highly gratifying to the traveling public who go in constant fear of their lives because of the boldness of these marauders, who infest the very streets of the metropolis. No longer ago than last Monday L—d B—ch—e was attacked by these very miscreants, robbed and held in captivity (doubtless for ransom) while Robin Freemantle, disguised in his captive's domino, attended the masquerade at Marlborough House and robbed the duchess' guests—not even sparing, if rumor may be credited, the queen's most sacred Majesty!!

"'But for this piece of shameless audacity, the ruffians might still be at large and the hangman still looking forward hopefully to his fees. We have it on unimpeachable authority that a certain beautiful v-sc-t-ss, renowned equally for her lively adventures and her incomparable charms, determined to avenge this outrage upon her sovereign mistress, and with undaunted courage and marvelous shrewdness, tracked the robber to his lair and actually recovered the stolen jewels!!! Then, at a preconcerted signal, soldiers surrounded the house, and when the robber-band attempted to escape by the river, sank the boat with all the fugitives on board. The exact number is not known, but must assuredly have been large—probably a dozen or a score. One thing only is certain—none remained in the house and none can possibly have escaped—'

"There is more about the affair, but nothing that will interest you as much as that last paragraph," said Sir Geoffrey, folding the sheet.

"It is certainly most interesting to hear that there were twenty miscreants in the house," cried Prue, who had had time during the reading (which was impressively deliberate and pompous) to recover her self-command. "My exploit is vastly enhanced by the large number of human lions and tigers I bearded in their den. I begin to feel myself a heroine indeed!"

"There could be but one opinion as to that," said Sir Geoffrey, with a profound bow that scarcely accorded with the cold irony of his smile.

"Pray keep my counsel, and do not tell any one that I never saw any of the twenty robbers, and in fact had no idea that there were any in the place," said Prue. "You don't know how much I am indebted to you, Sir Geoffrey, for all the information you have given me about my little adventure!"

"I am indeed happy in being the first to assure you of its fortunate ending," said Sir Geoffrey, rising. "Surely you will now permit me, dearest, to urge my suit"—he dropped upon one knee before her, and had pressed several passionate kisses upon her hand before she made any attempt to repel him.

"That will do for the present, Sir Geoffrey," she said at last. "Please get up and be rational. You do not expect me, I presume, to send for a parson and marry you offhand? I *may* be a widow again; but I must have surer proof of it than a mere rumor, such as this, before I wed again. I have yet to be convinced that Captain de Cliffe left that house—that he ever was in it! 'Tis strange you should insist upon that—methinks that for a suitor so eager to press his own claims, you are over-ready to accuse me of keeping tryst with another—husband!"

"Accuse, sweet Prudence! You mistake me altogether. Too well, alas! do I know the coldness of your heart and the inaccessible distance from which your adorers are expected to admire you. Surely, you do not think me capable of a doubt?"

"You were capable of spying on me and following me, by your own showing," she retorted sharply.

"For your own sake, dearest; merely to be ready in case you needed a strong arm and a skilled sword to defend you. And all I ask now is that you will accept that protection for life and give me the right to silence every malicious tongue with the public announcement of our approaching marriage. Who will dare," Sir Geoffrey went on, in his most grandiloquent manner, "to defame the lady of whom I am ready to say, 'This is my promised wife; her honor is mine?'"

"A truce to your braggadocio, my good friend," laughed Prue; "your tragic tones and frowning looks almost persuade me that I need protection! Believe me, you are in a far worse case than I; you stand greatly in need of a disinterested adviser, who would counsel you to leave me before too late, or at least take time—

a year or two, we will say—to think it over."

"Was there ever a lover that listened to such counsel? Not if he loved as I do, dear one. So far from waiting a year, I swear that a week is too long, and that if you do not marry me to-morrow—"

He hesitated and Prue took him up sharply. "What if I do not marry you to-morrow? Pray finish your threat, so that I may know what fate awaits me, since I shall certainly not marry to-morrow, neither next week, nor, perchance, next year!"

"And does your ladyship imagine that I, Geoffrey Beaudesert, will swell the ranks of those whom the beautiful Viscountess Brooke has left lamenting at the church-door?" demanded the suitor, giving way at last to his long-suppressed fury. "No, no, you can not play with me as you did with Beachcombe, O'Keefe, Sutherland and a dozen others. To-day I love you to distraction; you may bend me to your lightest caprice with a kind word. But scorn me, and to-morrow you will have an enemy with the will, as well as the power, to cover you with shame. Aye, shame, Lady Prudence Brooke!" as she sprang to her feet with blazing eyes. "Where will you hide your head when all the world knows how and why you became the wife of an outlaw and a felon—the thief who stole the queen's necklace, for a nuptial gift to his bride! Ha, ha! that will be a feast indeed for the scandal-mongers of London Town!"

"And Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert—how will he appear in the affair?" she retorted. "This is not the first time to-day that you have threatened me, Sir Geoffrey, but I advise you to let it be the last, for I warn you that if you drive me to do so, I may tell the story myself; and my version of it will not leave you entirely unscathed. How could I have done this thing—this *shameful, scandalous* thing, as you truly call it—if you had not helped; nay, pushed me into it? Who bought the ring and license, and hired the parson? He was an ordained Church-of-England clergyman, was he not? If I am not mistaken, it was you who ordered him to make the marriage-service 'brief and binding,' and bade him keep his own counsel until his evidence was needed to prove me Captain de Cliffe's widow? If the scandal-mongers of London Town feast at my expense, they will certainly banquet at yours! And if you talk of enemies—but no, we are not silly children to wrangle over trifles, and scratch and slap each other's face because we can not have our own way all the time. Let us forget this folly and talk of pleasanter things."

"No subject is pleasant to me but one—yourself," said Sir Geoffrey, with an effort to resume his ordinary manner. "Believe me, however impatient I may appear as a lover, as a husband you will find me a pattern of indulgence. But do not, I entreat you, try my patience much longer."

"No doubt, Sir Geoffrey, I ought to be flattered by your persistence," replied

Prue petulantly, "but if you have so little delicacy as to press one husband upon me before the other is in his grave, you surely are not anxious to inflict upon me the possible fate of a bigamist? If, perchance, one of these twenty highwaymen escaped, and that one proved to be the one you helped me to marry, your hasty wooing might cause poor Prudence Brooke to blossom on Tyburn Tree or, worse still, to end her days on a cotton plantation. 'Tis strange how much more anxious you are to wed me since I became a wife, than you were when I was *really* a widow! Then I heard nothing about post-chaises and elopements—"

"Because then, dear Prue, I had not known the torture of Tantalus, the anguish of seeing you within reach of my arms, yet held at an inaccessible distance by the accursed phantom of a husband, who was no husband and never could be one. Pardon me if I am unable to restrain my jealous ardor, and believe me, if you will but set a time for rewarding my devotion, I will endeavor, however difficult the task, not to offend again."

Prue reflected a few moments. Then she rose, with an air that left Sir Geoffrey no choice but to follow her example.

"Sir Geoffrey," she said, "I am invited to accompany the queen to Windsor, whither she intends to go this week for a few days' rest, and perchance to be out of hearing of the wrangling of Whigs and Tories for a season. When I return, if you are still in the same mind, I promise to be ready with an answer, with which I shall hope to satisfy you. In the meantime, I shall not take it amiss if you reflect seriously upon the many defects of my character and the great disadvantages you will bring on yourself by marrying penniless me, instead of seeking out some charming heiress—of whom I could point out several, both maids and widows—to whom your many noble qualities—and your title—would be irresistible."

She made him the deepest of curtseys, preserving all the time a countenance so grave and dignified that he was completely silenced, and was withdrawing without further remonstrance, when the door was flung open, and James, in his most impressive; manner, announced:

"Lord Beachcombe."

CHAPTER XXI
AN AFFAIR OF FAMILY

There was a momentary pause of embarrassment. Lord Beachcombe's last visit

to Lady Drumloch's house had been under circumstances that made the present one quite unforeseen. Also he had not met Sir Geoffrey since their hostile encounter in Hyde Park, therefore a meeting in the presence of the woman who had been so disturbing an element in both their lives, was mutually disconcerting.

Sir Geoffrey was the first to recover himself, greeting the new arrival with exaggerated politeness and inquiring after his health with a solicitude that Lord Beachcombe did not attempt to reciprocate. The wound he had received from Sir Geoffrey's sword was slight enough to be patched up with a few strips of court-plaster; the wound to his vanity still gaped. He looked on with a sardonic smile while Sir Geoffrey, pressing several impassioned kisses upon Prue's reluctant hand, bade her "a brief adieu," and slowly backed himself to the door.

"I trust I am not driving Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert away," said Beachcombe stiffly.

"By no means," cried Prue with alacrity. "Sir Geoffrey was taking his leave when you entered. Sir Geoffrey, farewell. No doubt we shall meet at Lady Rialton's, or elsewhere, later in the day; our world is so small, we can not get away from one another even for an hour; don't you find it sometimes grows monotonous, Lord Beachcombe?"

As the door closed upon the parting guest, Beachcombe approached her with an air of distant respect, bowing profoundly, with his hand upon his breast.

"Pardon this intrusion, Lady Prudence, and permit me to lay my homage at your feet," he said.

Prue curtsied again. "Pray, my Lord, do not wound me by apologizing for a friendly visit," she returned, with a sweet smile. "Be seated, and let me offer you a cup of chocolate."

The little torment had jumped quickly to the conclusion that some motive of strong personal interest had brought her old lover to the house he had never entered since, scarcely a year ago, their troth had been broken with bitter words and thinly veiled insults on both sides. Her quick intuition warned her that his visit might, very possibly, add another snarl to the tangle in which she felt herself becoming hopelessly enmeshed. So she exerted all her tact and skill to keep him on tenter-hooks, and give herself time to gather her forces, while she discussed frothy scandals and airy nothings, pretending not to notice his lack of response and ill-repressed impatience, until suddenly she turned full upon him her clear and dazzling glance and changed her tactics without a moment's warning.

"But I had forgotten," she said, "how little you care about scandal and poetry, and I can scarcely flatter myself that my frivolous conversation can be very entertaining to you. My tongue runs away with me sadly, doesn't it? I dare say you remember of old what a chatterbox I am. Well," with a sudden change of tone, "now tell me what really brought you to see me?"

Her abrupt question had the intended effect of confusing her visitor and throwing him off his guard, while her ingenuous smile disarmed him.

"Your conversation is delightful at all times, Lady Prudence," he began hurriedly; "so much information—such—ah—intimate knowledge of society—and literature is as rare as it is agreeable. Nothing should I enjoy so much, if I did not have my head so full of a subject which—a—private family affair—which—which—"

He trailed off helplessly, and she let him flounder until his embarrassment ceased to amuse her. Then she said quietly:

"How can *I* be of any assistance to you, Lord Beachcombe, in a private family affair? That seems quite out of my province."

"Alas! I am but too well aware that I have forfeited all right to ask favors of you, Viscountess," he pleaded, "but I know your generous nature so well that I am emboldened to cast myself upon your mercy."

"You flatter me!" she cried, with her dazzling smile. "What can my generosity and mercy do for Lord Beachcombe?"

"I scarcely know. 'Tis but an idea; a mere catching at a straw. Still, I have been credibly informed that you were decoyed last night to the den of Robin Freemantle, the highway-robber, whence, with unparalleled courage, you rescued the queen's necklace—"

"Surely," she interrupted, with some impatience, "Her Majesty's necklace can not be your private family affair?"

He laughed explosively. "Is nothing sacred to you, Lady Prudence? I only wished to felicitate you upon your most remarkable adventure, and its brilliant result, and to implore you to tell me if you found any papers or documents in the—the place where the necklace was hidden."

"Was the necklace hidden anywhere?" she inquired, in a tone of surprise. "I did not find it; it was given to me—"

"By Robin Freemantle—is it not so?" he eagerly interrupted.

"Robin Freemantle! What could make you imagine that he gave it to me?" she cried, in an accent of intense astonishment.

"My dear Viscountess, surely you are aware that this rascal, disguised in my mask and domino, followed you the whole evening of the masquerade-ball—"

"Is it possible?" cried Prue, with the prettiest imaginable air of incredulity. "La! what strange things happen at a masquerade!"

"Possible? 'Tis a fact," replied Beachcombe; "and 'tis easy to understand that having fallen madly in love with you—"

"The outrageous monster!" shrieked Prue.

"Even monsters are human, dear Viscountess, and who can wonder that the beauty that has wrought such havoc in my—in our—-in all beholders, should

have smitten this fellow, who is reported to have shadowed your footsteps all Monday night, disguised in a red domino and mask. That mask and domino were mine, and he robbed me of them in the same house by the river-side where you were taken last night. A den of thieves, Viscountess, from which your escape unharmed was hardly less than a miracle."

"My escape? Nobody attempted to detain me. In fact I saw no one, and the only danger I escaped was of being taken prisoner by the soldiers who came to search for—rebels, I understood them to say."

"Rebels! Ha! ha! 'tis true, this jailbird has the audacity to mix himself up with Jacobite plots and claim that he only steals purses on the chance of their containing papers of value to the Pretender's cause! Speaking of papers brings me back to my own affairs. When this villain stole my domino, he also robbed me of a packet of papers. He returned the domino—after putting it to the use you wot of—but the papers, of great value, he refused to give up. Is it possible, dear Lady Prudence, that while you were in this robber's den, you saw such a packet?"

Prue shook her head. "The soldiers took everything they could find in the place," she said reflectively. "If I were you, I would make inquiries of them."

"I have done so," he said; "but they brought away no such packet."

"Perhaps it was opened and they have the contents."

"I have reason to think that unlikely," replied Beachcombe, biting his lips and scowling.

"Or destroyed?" she suggested.

"No, indeed; if I could hope for that—!"

"What, hope for the destruction of valuable private papers? It is not to you, then, that they are valuable?" she cried shrewdly.

He started and eyed her suspiciously for a moment. "To no one else," he replied emphatically; "but you can surely understand, Lady Prudence, that some family documents would be better destroyed than in the hands of—an enemy."

"Was Rob—Captain Freemantle—your enemy?" she asked ingenuously. "It seems to me that some one—who can it have been?—said he was your relative. He calls himself De Cliffe, doesn't he?"

Lord Beachcombe looked at her again with growing mistrust. "Did he have the impudence to call himself De Cliffe, when he addressed you at the ball, Viscountess?" he demanded.

"La! no; and if he had—people can say anything behind a mask, without fear of being believed," she retorted, laughing. "I recollect now that 'twas Barbara Sweeting, when she told us of the loss of the queen's necklace. She told us how you had obtained his pardon when condemned to be hanged, and afterward set the soldiers upon him—"

Beachcombe bent his sullen glance upon the carpet, tracing out its faded

pattern with his Malacca cane. "Every family has its painful secrets, Lady Prudence," he began, "and this packet contains one of the De Cliffe family secrets—a painful one, but not important—oh—not at all important. Had the soldiers found it, it would have been an easy matter to recover it—a few guineas at most—but if it is still in his possession—"

"What like was it?" Prue inquired listlessly, for she was growing weary of a subject that had so little of personal interest for her.

"The packet? Oh! a small thing, about the size and appearance of a letter—a *billet-doux*"—he forced a laugh—"sealed and addressed to Mistress—Mistress—the name has escaped me for the moment, but 'twas in care of the Hostess of the *Fox and Grapes*."

A sudden glow of color swept across Prue's face. In her joy at finding that the source of many a jealous pang was not Robin's after all, it is to be feared that she quite overlooked the gravity of Lord Beachcombe's accusation. What did it matter to her, whose letter it was—if it were not Robin's—written to another woman? She had an impulse to return it, and her hand involuntarily rose to the laces about her neck, where she had kept it concealed except when she thrust it under her pillow, where it lay all night pervading her dreams.

She checked herself quickly, though not quite unobserved. Beachcombe, of course, did not suspect anything so preposterous as that Prue could be interested in the highwayman, beyond the fact that he had made her the heroine of a successful escapade, but her change of countenance, slight as it was, and her gesture, though instantly diverted to a readjustment of the rose at her breast, did not escape his keen eye.

"You recognize the superscription?" he suggested insinuatingly. "You saw the packet in his hands, perhaps? If—so—"

"If so," she interrupted quickly, "you have little chance of recovering it, since 'tis said he was drowned last night."

"If I could only believe that true!" he exclaimed fiercely. "But no! he escaped; there can be no doubt of that; in fact I have reason to know—"

"To know that he is safe!" she cried, in a thrilling accent of unmistakable joy. "Oh! Heaven—" then suddenly she remembered that this man was his enemy and desired his death. She stopped short and then went on hurriedly, conscious that she had betrayed herself—"Is it possible that this—this miscreant is still alive and at liberty?"

He looked at her dubiously, but although a growing suspicion that she was acting a part disturbed him, it did not yet enlighten him with any ray of the truth.

"I am as sure of it, as I am that he pursued you at the ball, under cover of my domino—and, for his punishment, fell in love with you," he said boldly.

"Fell in love with me!" cried Prue disdainfully. "Again, sir? How dare you

suggest such presumption!"

"The fellow certainly does not lack presumption," replied Beachcombe, "and as to his having fallen in love with you, did he not prove his infatuation by surrendering his priceless booty for the sake of seeing you once more, even at the peril of his life? Believe me, dear Viscountess, the man who will risk so much, will risk still more; you have not seen the last of Captain Freemantle."

"You think not?" cried Prue. "What do you suppose he will do next?"

"Probably he will repeat the tactics that he has already pursued with such enviable success," said the earl, with a scarcely perceptible sneer, "and send one of his followers to your ladyship to beseech another interview; or perhaps he will come to you himself."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Prue. "I trust he will not attempt anything so—so audacious."

"On the contrary, my dear lady," replied Beachcombe blandly, "if you will be guided by me, I think we can turn this fellow's impudence to our mutual advantage. *I* most sincerely trust that he will come or send to you, because now he has been routed out of his house by the river-side, we no longer know where he is in hiding. He is not like to return there, but gentlemen of his profession have many haunts, and having induced your ladyship to visit one of them, he will, no doubt, try another."

"You seem to forget that there is only one queen's necklace," she cried incautiously. Then, conscious of her indiscretion, she added with too eager precipitation, "Besides, Robin Freemantle had nothing to do with my visit to that house; I was guided there—"

"By a messenger sent by him, as I understand," interrupted Beachcombe. "'Tis no secret that your ladyship was induced by means of a letter—"

"Secret! I should think not!" she cried petulantly, tossing the letter upon the table beside him. "All the town seems talking about it, and all the world may read it, for aught I care! I defy the most ingenious scandal-monger to make anything out of it."

Lord Beachcombe took it up, and slowly unfolding it, read it carefully, and then looked up with a smile of triumph, that struck a sudden chill to Prue's heart. From his breast he drew a letter addressed to "The Right Honorable Lord Beachcombe. At Rodney House, Saint James' Park, London," and placing the two papers side by side, contemplated them with vindictive satisfaction.

"There can be no further doubt," he said. "See for yourself, Viscountess, the writing is identical."

She looked, and had some difficulty in maintaining her indifference. Furious at herself for having given Beachcombe an opportunity to confirm his suspicions, she had just enough self-command left to see that it was a case of *qui*

s'excuse s'accuse, and that any attempt at explanation would only plunge her into an inextricable tangle of falsehood. So she merely remarked, in as casual a tone as she could assume, "La me! how curious!" and stretched out her hand for her own document.

Beachcombe withheld it. "Pray permit me to retain this, Lady Prudence," he entreated. "It is an important piece of evidence."

"More important to me than to your lordship!" she retorted sharply. "Be good enough to return it to me!" and as he still hesitated, she snatched it from his grasp, exclaiming with an angry laugh, "Evidently the liking for other people's 'private papers' runs in the blood of the De Cliffes."

With a savage scowl, Lord Beachcombe half-rose from his seat. But Prue had already recovered from her spurt of passion, and with the prettiest deprecating gesture and the most alluring smile she could call up at a moment's notice, she stemmed the tide of his wrath.

"Oh! forgive me, Lord Beachcombe," she said sweetly. "I am not used to be so cross-questioned and my temper, as you know well, is none of the most patient. Do not let us quarrel over such a trifle as a fancied resemblance between two scraps of writing."

"'Tis no fancied resemblance, Lady Prudence, said Beachcombe doggedly.

"Then if it is a real one, would it not be better for us to see how we can turn it to our mutual advantage, than to wrangle over it?" she suggested. Beachcombe's brow cleared at her conciliatory tone, and his half-awakened suspicions melted under the influence of a sweet and beaming smile.

"There is nothing easier than to turn it to our advantage and his destruction, dear Viscountess, if you will be guided by me," he said eagerly. "If Captain Freemantle should make another attempt to see you—as I feel convinced he will—surely woman's wit can manage to bring us face to face, or at least to let me know where he is to be found. I am convinced that I could show him excellent reasons for giving up those papers, which would prove dangerously compromising—to him—if discovered in his possession. You could secure yourself from further molestation and promote the ends of justice in this way, and place me under a lifelong obligation."

"And how about Captain Freemantle?" suggested Prue. "Would his obligation to me also be lifelong?"

"Why—no doubt," he replied, with a sinister smile.

"Well, Lord Beachcombe," said Prue, with a charming smile, "I will give your message to this Knight of the Road—*when* I see him—and I doubt not he will wait upon your lordship to receive the benefits you are so anxious to bestow upon him. Oh! you need not thank me" (he had no intention of doing so); "I am always glad to oblige an old friend. And pray do not hurry away; I hear the

voice of my gossip, Barbara Sweeting, and presently the rest of London will flock round me to repeat what every one is saying about me, and find out something new to tell in their turn. You, who have given me so much information, can help me to entertain them."

CHAPTER XXII
IN A CHAIRMAN'S LIVERY

Lady Barbara rustled into the room in the most expansive of hoops and the loftiest of heads of lace and feathers, the height, literally, of the mode.

"Prue, you sly minx, I have come to give you the scolding you deserve," she began, and half-mirthful, half-reproachful, was about to embrace her when her glance fell upon Lord Beachcombe. She started back and turned her eyes from one to the other with exaggerated disapproval, behind which lurked the excitement of the keen hunter on a promising trail.

Beachcombe's dark face flushed with an embarrassment that he vainly attempted to conceal under the elaborate politeness of his greeting, but Prue, all innocent smiles, and thoroughly enjoying a situation which put her inquisitor to confusion, flew into her dear friend's arms.

"How are you, dearest Bab?" she cried. "I am simply perishing for a long, long talk with you. Oh! I have *so* much to tell you—"

"Not so much as you think, perhaps, wicked one," retorted Barbara, still reproachfully, "but I own I am dying for the key to your mysterious adventures."

"Have you, too, come to cross-question me about last night?" cried Prue petulantly. "Before I was out of my bed, the house was besieged. Ah! here is Peggie, who can tell you more about my visitors than I can, for half of them came while I was yet asleep."

"'Tis not your visitors I want to hear about, Prue, but yourself. To think, that with such a frolic to the fore, my Prue should have left me without a hint of what was happening! How can I ever forgive it?"

"Lady Brooke should be pardoned all things for the sake of her heroism," said Beachcombe, with cold irony. "Yet it seems a pity that she should have braved alone the dangers so many of her friends would willingly have shared."

"You too?" cried Barbara, raising hands and eyes appealingly to the offended heavens. "Can neither matrimony nor paternity cure the Prue-fever?—

nor even phlebotomy at the hands of so skilful a chirurgeon as Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert? Pray, if one may venture to inquire, what may be your interest in the recovery of the queen's necklace, since surely it can not be either friendship or love?"

The look he gave her certainly suggested neither of these emotions, but his voice was under better control.

"My interest, dear Lady Barbara, is so far selfish that as the robbery was perpetrated under cover of my domino, I should certainly have wished to take part in the finding of the jewel—and the thief."

"La!" cried Barbara, smiling enigmatically. "How unfortunate that the necklace has been returned and the thief arrested without your assistance!"

"Arrested!" her auditors exclaimed together, but in very different tones. Lord Beachcombe's vibrated with gratified hatred, Prue's trembled with dismay. The color dropped from her cheek, and but for Peggie's promptitude, her agitation would have betrayed her beyond concealment. She, however, had been hovering on the threshold trying to attract her cousin's attention, and now ran forward with great vivacity, and by a torrent of eager questions, drew attention to herself and gave Prue time to recover from her perturbation, though not before it had been observed with malicious inference by Lord Beachcombe.

"Why, truly, I scarcely expected to bring news to the fountain-head," Barbara ran on. "Yet 'tis a fact, my poor Prue, that your romance has a very commonplace finale. 'Tis no dashing exploit of a bold highwayman, after all, no hairbreadth escape from a robber's den, but merely the outcome of an intrigue between a chambermaid and a scrivener's clerk; and a fit of vulgar jealousy has pricked the bubble of your romance, my love!"

Greatly to the astonishment of both her visitors, Prue's face, instead of falling in dismay, became irradiated with the loveliest expression of joy. Her eyes, softly luminous, swam in a rapturous mist and dimples played in the damask that suddenly drove the pallor from her cheek. Such a transformation could hardly fail to astonish even those most accustomed to the swift variations of this creature of caprice.

"Tell us quickly, dear Barbara," she cried, with a little tremolo of excitement in her voice. "You know 'twas near midnight when the duchess brought me home, and I was so tired I slept until noon—all my visitors this morning have come to seek information—not to impart it. Do, pray, tell me what has happened."

"La! Prue, I thought you would be mortified to death at such a tame ending to your romantic adventure, and you seem delighted," replied Barbara, with pique. "One of the serving-wenches at Marlborough House, finding the royal tiring-room for a moment unguarded, took her sweetheart in, and not content with gazing, they must needs carry their audacity to the point of fingering Her

Majesty's toilet-articles, and so came upon the necklace in its case, which so dazzled them, I presume, that they turned crazy, and hearing voices at one door, ran out of another and found themselves back in the servants' quarters with the necklace in their possession. The girl swears they did not mean to steal it, but did not know how to get it back unobserved, and finally the lover, in a panic, fled from the house, carrying the perilous pelf with him."

"A probable story, indeed!" cried Beachcombe scoffingly. "It might account for the disappearance of the jewel, but scarcely for its restoration."

"Oh! that was a case of conscience, a thing quite incomprehensible of course to an '*esprit fort*,' such as your lordship," retorted Barbara. "The girl suffered tortures, it appears, during which she was a dozen times on the point of confessing, but hesitated for fear of incriminating her lover. Then came the story of the return of the necklace, which, by the time it reached the still-room, had grown to the wildest of marvels. After that, no one seems to know exactly what happened, but possibly, between fear of her own part in the affair and rage at the treachery of her lover, the wretched creature lost what few senses she had and actually forced her way into the presence of the duchess, where she groveled on the floor, confessing and accusing and Lord knows what besides, and was carried out raving and foaming at the mouth."

"And so she confessed that she and her lover had stolen, or at any rate carried off the necklace," commented Prue thoughtfully.

"Then how do you account for its restoration by Robin Freemantle?" Beachcombe inquired, with his stealthy eyes upon her.

"Do you persist, even now, in connecting him with this affair?" she retorted, facing him defiantly. "For my part, I am now thoroughly convinced that it was a very vulgar matter and that I have been made a fool and a tool of by a pack of low wretches. Do not let any one who does not wish to offend me, ever mention my part in it again."

"On the contrary—" Barbara was beginning, when Peggie, from the window, uttered a cry of admiration.

"Is that your new chair at the door, Barbara?" she cried. "Sure, 'tis the finest in town!"

"Ah! I had for the moment forgotten—'twas but to display it I came here this afternoon—to show that and to scold Prue for a faithless friend."

They all followed her to the window, and in the street below stood a most superb sedan-chair, all carving and gilding, lined and curtained with crimson, and borne by four strapping footmen in liveries to match.

"'Tis truly magnificent," cried Lord Beachcombe. "All the world admires the taste of Lady Barbara Sweeting, but this time she has given us something to marvel at."

While he was speaking, Peggie plucked at Prue's sleeve and murmured in her ear, "In the library," with a glance and gesture that needed no interpretation. With an immense effort of self-control, Prue stopped long enough to compliment her friend on her new and gorgeous equipage, and then slipped away, with her heart throbbing in her throat, and ran down-stairs, to find Robin awaiting her, rather inefficiently disguised in a gold-laced velvet coat and a voluminous periwig, in which his marked resemblance to Lord Beachcombe struck Prue with absolute consternation.

"Robin, Robin!" she cried, when the door was closed, "how could you dream of coming here, of all places?"

"I have dreamed of nothing else," he replied. His eyes were glowing and his whole countenance transformed by a sublime transport of adoration. Few men are capable of this ecstasy and few women privileged to behold it; none, it may be conjectured, can resist its enchantment. Prue, trembling with a strange joy, yielded to the arms of her lover-husband, and there forgot everything else for a few blissful moments.

"Dearest, you must not stay here," she murmured, when he released her lips, "your worst enemy is in this house." And in a few rapid words she told him of Lord Beachcombe's search after the papers, his prediction of Robin's visit and his suggestion of using her as a bait to the trap he proposed setting for him.

"Go, now—at once, Robin, my husband, and send me word where to come to you; it is safer so. Oh! I will come! you need not fear—you see, I do not even ask if you want me to! Send for me, and be not too tardy about it—"

"Tardy, Heart of my heart," he murmured, with his lips to hers. "Every moment I spend away from you is an eternity in purgatory. If I must go, tell me that you love me, that I may have something to live upon until we meet again."

"Oh! I love you, Robin—indeed I love you—yet I take blame to myself for telling you so often, who have never yet said it to me. Some day you will, mayhap, remind me that I did all the wooing, and all the marrying, too! Nay, swear to me, Robin, that thou'lt forget that ever I asked thee to many me—" and she hid her face, all blushing with love and shame, upon his shoulder.

"Forget!" he exclaimed. "If ever I forget, it will be because my body is dust and my soul in torment! Yet I can not believe it. I fear to close my eyes in sleep, lest when I wake I shall find I have been dreaming—dreaming that these arms have held the dearest and sweetest woman in all the world and these most unworthy lips have been permitted to offer her worship. Oh! I scarcely dare to say, 'I love you.' I would I knew some other word that could express the adoration that fills my heart to bursting! I loved you the moment my eyes fell on your angel face—from the moment I kissed you. Oh! how dared I kiss you? Yet I was punished! You can not imagine the fire that kiss left in my veins—the unappeasable

longing in my heart!" His lips were seeking hers again, but she thrust him away with tender vehemence.

"No, no," she cried, "don't stop to kiss me now, but go, while yet the way is open."

She had her hand upon the lock when it turned gently and the door opened a few inches. The eyes of Lord Beachcombe and Robin met over Prue's head and the flash of mutual animosity struck through her like an electric current. She glanced quickly from one to the other, and the secret of their kinship revealed itself so convincingly in the two faces that she did not even feel surprised. It seemed as if she must always have known that they were brothers.

The door closed again so swiftly that the whole incident was over before any one could have drawn a breath.

"It is too late!" whispered Prue, then threw herself into Robin's arms in a kind of desperation that was half rapture. "He will betray you, but they must take me too; I will not be separated from you."

"He will not come here for me," said Robin, cool and practical in the presence of danger. "It will be best for me to go at once, before he has time to call assistance. I can surely beat off half-a-dozen of his lackeys single-handed. If I give him time to set a posse of constables in wait for me, I may have more trouble with them. Farewell, Heart of gold; I will send a safe messenger to you soon. Oh! I must see you again very soon; I have so much to say to you—"

"Yet, wait," said Prue, detaining him. "Let me think; I would not risk your life unnecessarily. Stay here and I will return instantly."

She was back in a few minutes accompanied by a gorgeous vision of rich brocade and costly lace. These embellishments fitly set off a stately figure that had once been slenderer and a charming face that showed few of the ravages of time and, indeed, had more than replaced the graces of youth by the archness and gaiety time had but enhanced.

"Barbara, this is my friend Captain de Cliffe," said Prue. "We met in the North Country. Permit me to present him to you."

Lady Barbara's evident astonishment did not affect the ceremoniousness of her deep curtsey, to which Robin, not less surprised by Prue's manoeuver, responded with a gravely respectful salute.

"Methinks I have heard of your meeting with this gentleman—on Bleakmoor," said Barbara, with twinkling eyes. "I, myself, claim a distant kinship with the De Cliffes; what branch do you belong to, Captain?"

"I am an unworthy twig of the senior branch," replied Robin.

"Ah! that accounts for your strong resemblance to the late earl," said Barbara, seating herself near the window, and so compelling him to face the light, while she coolly scrutinized him. "And if the present earl were a handsome fel-

low, you would be like enough for brothers. As it is—"

"As it is, he hates me like a brother," said Robin negligently, "and in that the resemblance between us is not to be denied."

"Dear Barbara," cried Prue, "let me make a confession to you. Captain de Cliffe is also known as Robin Freemantle, the highwayman."

"And when I told you so t'other day, you pretended to be surprised," cried Barbara reproachfully. "Little did I ever expect that my Prue would so deceive me."

"'Twas not to deceive you, dear Barbara, but a roomful of curious gossips, all ready to fall upon poor little me and tear my secret to shreds. Scold me as much as you will, some other time, dearest Bab, but help us now!"

"Us?" cried Barbara, turning her shrewd eyes from one to the other with sudden enlightenment. "Aha!" she smiled knowingly, and Prue, blushing and faltering, found no word to explain away her unvoiced suspicion. "I am glad, at any rate," she went on rather dryly, "to find Sir Geoffrey's nose out of joint! But if you want help, why did you not ask Beachcombe, who seems all too willing to return to your feet, and who has already, if I am not mistaken, once rescued this gentleman from Newgate?"

"Barbara, he wishes nothing so much as to get him back there. Scarce an hour ago he proposed to me to decoy him here that he might seize him and rob him of valuable papers. No doubt he would kill him if he resisted, or throw him into prison. So now, dear Barbara, help me to devise some way of getting him away from here unobserved."

"That is not difficult," Barbara assured her. "My new chair is amply large for two. If Captain de Cliffe will give me his arm, we will walk out of this house together and he can escort me home."

"But, Bab, if that wretch is on the watch, he may attack you. Remember, he has seen Rob—Captain de Cliffe here, and if you had seen his face as I did, when he looked in at the door! Oh, you may be sure that even you would not be safe at his hands, if you stood between him and the object of his hatred!"

"I have a better plan," said Barbara, laughing mischievously, "and one that promises more diversion. You are tall, Captain," she looked him over with an approving eye, "a proper man, i' faith! Do you think you could be trusted to take the place of one of my chairmen? They are all six-foot men, chosen to match in size; I am very fastidious in such matters. Three are new to my service, but the fourth is a faithful lad, who can be trusted to hold his tongue. In his livery you can defy my Lord Beachcombe and his myrmidons and walk away under their noses."

This proposition was quite to Prue's taste and Robin, who was too anxious to get away without causing her any serious trouble, to care much in what guise

he fared forth, gratefully consented. So James was despatched to call Lady Barbara's man Thomas, to whom she conveyed her commands in the fewest possible words, and the two ladies withdrew while the exchange of costume was effected, and the stolid Thomas, too well accustomed to his mistress' whims to raise the least question, resigned his crimson coat and gold-laced hat, his silk stockings and buckled shoes, and even his powdered bob-wig, to the new chairman.

By this time Prue's usual afternoon court was assembling in far greater numbers than the little house could easily accommodate, and the rustle of brocades and the ripple of gay voices filled the air. Outside the library Barbara hesitated. "I think I will not go back to your visitors, Prue, my tongue is apt to slip out of my control and I might say something compromising," she said. Then, seeing the door open into the empty dining-room, she went in, drawing Prue after her.

"Is it serious, child?" she demanded, with a hand on each shoulder and Prue's eyes vainly attempting to meet her searching gaze unflinchingly. "Is it possible that the heart that has resisted a hundred and one skilled assaults can have surrendered to the 'Stand and deliver' of a brigand? Come, tell me everything!—if you are in love with him—"

"Oh! no, no!" cried Prue, shrinking in horror from the extent of the revelation she might be drawn into if she began with such an admission. "Love! what nonsense—for a highwayman?" and she laughed, though with less than her usual abandon.

"Yet he is a charming fellow," said Barbara insinuatingly. "He might have caught your fancy—but, in fact," in a gay tone, "I'm glad he has not, for to own the truth, I am more than half disposed to carry off your highwayman and hold him prisoner for a day or two. 'Twill be safer for him and his adventures will surely keep me entertained for a while—and, who knows? I might amuse myself by making a conquest of this gentle savage!"

"Oh! Barbara, fie!" cried Prue, to whom the picture of Robin under the influence of another woman's fascinations was far from agreeable.

"It is condescension enough for you to save his life—"

"Condescension i' faith," laughed Barbara. "At least I can promise that *my* condescension shall end—where charity begins—at home! Eh, Prue? Well, I hear my new retainer in the hall, so fare thee well, dear Gossip," and with a kiss on either cheek, she rustled out and was respectfully assisted into her chair by Robin, who then took Thomas' vacant place at the rear pole.

The street was thronged with the equipages of Prue's visitors and, mingling with the crowd, Lord Beachcombe, closely followed by half-a-dozen lusty fellows, exchanged greetings here and there, without relaxing his vigilant watch upon the entrance. He scarcely vouchsafed a glance toward Lady Barbara, and as she swung past him in her gorgeous sedan-chair, with her four tall chairmen at full

trot, she was so elated that she had half a mind to stop and speak to him. But wisdom prevailed with her, for once, and she contented herself with waving her jeweled fan in saucy greeting. He responded with a careless wave of the hand, and the next minute she was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIII
THE PARSON SELLS A SECRET

As the afternoon progressed, Lady Drumloch's little house filled to overflowing. Reports of the adventures of the diamond necklace had brought a crowd of flattering, envious and above all, curious acquaintances round the dainty table where the cousins dispensed chocolate and coquetry.

Some vague rumors had reached Lady Drumloch, through Lowton, of a nocturnal exploit by which Prue had distinguished herself in some mysterious way, but she was in absolute ignorance of the actual facts, and had great difficulty in controlling her own curiosity, while maintaining an appearance of urbane indifference under the cross-fire of questions, congratulations, thinly veiled censure and half-incredulous comment by which the guests displayed their varied interest. It was in vain that Peggie used her ready wit to turn the conversation into safer channels; in vain that Prue vowed the whole thing a ridiculous exaggeration, and refused to be made a heroine or to be coaxed or goaded into compromising admissions. The necklace, she declared, had been accidentally carried away by some person employed at Marlborough House, who, becoming terrified by the possession of the dangerous treasure and wishing to be rid of it, had conveyed it to her as a sure means of getting it back to the rightful owner; that she had brought it to the duchess and together they had returned it to the queen; and there, so far as she was concerned, Prue regarded the incident as closed, and was quite tired of answering silly questions and explaining things that really needed no explanation. Would they please not worry her about it any more, but talk of something else?

Still, it was not easy to change the current of conversation, for each newcomer had some fresh rumor to be contradicted, some new extravagance to be laughed at or some malicious inference to be drawn from Prue's unwonted reserve, and her grandmother's ill-concealed annoyance.

But if the afternoon wore away slowly to Peggie and Prue, it was a long-

drawn torture to Lord Beachcombe, whose watch upon the house was never relaxed, notwithstanding the gibes of the gay throng as it passed in and out, marveling what kept Prue's quondam lover hanging round Lady Drumloch's door, and the rising murmurs of his followers, whose numbers had been reinforced by numerous loungers on the lookout for mischief or profit.

A constant stream of guests, arriving and departing, passed before him; still no one at all resembling Robin Freemantle appeared. Dainty ladies in brocade and jewels passed in and out of the door, their servants being obliged to force a way for them through the gathering crowd of idlers. Beaux as dainty and as gaily costumed, handed them into their equipages, lisping quaint oaths and shaking their jeweled canes in the faces of the overbold; still no Robin Freemantle. One after another the carriages rolled away, the chairmen trotted off with their fair burdens, the casual onlookers dispersed, and left the street to Lord Beachcombe and his noisy retinue.

At last he could control his impatience no longer. Hurriedly directing his men to keep vigilant watch for their quarry, he once more knocked for admittance and demanded a word with Lady Brooke. James, the imperturbable, would have conducted him up to the drawing-room, but he stalked haughtily to the library and abruptly opened the door—to find the room deserted.

Prue soon appeared, all smiles and artless witcheries, quite determined to see nothing strange in this untimely visit, and as ready to gossip as though she had nothing more serious on her mind than the latest epigram and the newest scandal. Lord Beachcombe, however, was in too deadly earnest to encourage her frivolity, and with very little circumlocution inquired for Captain Freemantle.

"Captain—Freemantle—?" she questioned, with a puzzled air. "Do you mean the highwayman? La! how should I know anything about him? You must be dreaming, Lord Beachcombe!"

"I am not dreaming, Viscountess," he said resentfully. "Nor was I dreaming a couple of hours ago, when, quite by accident, I saw him here," he indicated the spot by a motion of his hand, "in close—ahem—*conversation* with your ladyship."

"With me?" she cried. "Oh! you are in error. The gentleman you spied upon—pardon, I mean accidentally interrupted—is your relative, Captain de Cliffe—"

"The difference is merely nominal," he interposed, with a sour smile. "It is of great importance that I should have a few words with that—*gentleman*."

"Oh! how unfortunate," she cried, with profound regret; "he went away hours ago—oh! ages ago!"

"Went away? Impossible! he could not have left this house without my knowledge," exclaimed Beachcombe, too thoroughly roused for dissimulation.

"Indeed!" said Prue, ominously gentle. "May I inquire since when you took

upon yourself the right to observe the movements of my guests?"

He pulled himself together a little. "My dear Lady Brooke," he said, as suavely as he could, "can you not understand my anxiety about you? You surely are not surprised that I was reluctant to leave you unprotected in the power of a ruffian—an escaped convict—"

"Whose escape you procured, I am told," she replied, "for family reasons."

"The same reasons for which I am now anxious to meet him," retorted the earl. "I know not by what arts he has induced you to help him—or to conceal him, perhaps—under a mistaken compassion for a fugitive—"

"Would you wish to search the house, Lord Beachcombe?" said Prue, majestically rising. "If so, do not hesitate to make the minutest investigation. You will be quite as successful to-day as your emissaries were yesterday. Captain de Cliffe came into my grandmother's house openly and without precaution and walked out of it two hours ago, just as you, Lord Beachcombe, will do when you have satisfied yourself of my veracity—and with as little prospect of ever returning!"

Lord Beachcombe stood dumfounded. Could this pale, proud woman, her azure eyes suddenly black with anger and her clear voice vibrant with passion, be the gay, frivolous creature, who had played with his heart for a few weeks and tossed it back to him with a gibe and a laugh; whom no one could anger, because nothing ever seemed worth being angry about, and whose deepest emotion had always been more volatile than the bubbles of champagne? What had happened to work such a transformation?

"I fear that you have misunderstood me, Lady Prudence," he said at last. "If I have unwittingly offended you, I beg to apologize most humbly."

Prue preserved a disdainful silence.

"Pray pardon my inadvertence," Beachcombe went on, still more abjectly. "I can not leave you again under sentence of banishment—at least permit me to withdraw—"

"What! without searching the house?" interrupted Prue trenchantly; "I should advise you not to miss an opportunity that may not recur."

Lord Beachcombe drew himself up with a grieved air. "I merely wished to withdraw any remark that might be displeasing to you, Viscountess. It would grieve me beyond expression to offend you. If, in my excitement, I appeared incredulous, it was not that I presumed to doubt your word, but that I found it hard to believe that Fate could have played me so scurvy a trick."

Prue accepted his apologies with a dignified coolness that left him no excuse for prolonging his visit, so he departed, much crestfallen, but far from being convinced. While he was dismissing his followers with a none too liberal douceur, an elderly man, attired with rich simplicity, saluted him unobtrusively. Beachcombe stared after him as he disappeared into the house, at first not rec-

ognizing the somewhat plebeian figure, then muttering, "What is that old Jew doing here?" drove away, pondering on the strangeness of Prue's visitors and the atmosphere of mystery with which she had surrounded herself.

Could he have penetrated the actual motive of Mr. Aarons' visit, his surprise would have grown into amazement, for surely no greater tribute to the versatility of Prue's charms could be offered than the fact that they had brought Mr. Aarons to her feet. At least thirty of his fifty years had been spent in the exclusive pursuit of wealth. Pleasure he only knew by name. Love was to him merely a curious spell under which men became utterly reckless of consequences and unhesitatingly bartered their present possessions and future prospects for the means of dazzling a silly woman or purchasing a worthless one. That it brought easy prey into his net was the only thing he knew in its favor, and it must be acknowledged that his late proposal of marriage to the Viscountess Brooke was not prompted by any sentiments loftier than those he so contemptuously disparaged.

He knew her to be thoughtless and extravagant, for her visits to him had been the invariable result of losses at the card-table, or debts equally pressing and unprofitable. Such gossip about her as reached his ears, roused his derision, which her frequent matrimonial entanglements certainly did not abate. Yet he was no more capable of resisting her fascination than any butterfly of the court, and although his declaration had been to some extent unpremeditated, he was resolved, now he had offered his hand to the "Widow Brooke," to lose no time and spare no effort to win her acceptance.

He had waited a week, trusting that her necessities would drive her back to him, but hearing of her triumphant return to court, and her startling adventures later, decided to wait no longer. Therefore it was that, armed with what he believed to be an irresistible argument in his favor, he presented himself at Lady Drumloch's door at the very moment of Lord Beachcombe's hasty exit.

Prue and Peggie were in earnest consultation on no less important a subject than the imminent explanation with Lady Drumloch, who, after the revelations of the afternoon, would certainly require a prompt and thorough enlightenment. That she would be deeply scandalized by the truth, yet was too shrewd to be put off with any evasion, the cousins were quite aware, and their consultation was as to the form their confession should take, rather than any plan of concealment or prevarication.

When James announced that "Mr. Aarons" was below and besought an audience of the Viscountess Brooke, Prue was not quite sure whether this interruption was a welcome respite or a tiresome delay.

"Aarons!" exclaimed Peggie. "What brings him here?" Then, lowering her voice, "Can he be coming to pay his court to you, Prue?"

"I know not," returned Prue, shrugging her shoulders. "I should scarce have

imagined that he would presume to present himself here. Well, bid Mr. Aarons come up, James; we will receive him here."

"We!" laughed Peggie, making for the door. "*I* have no wish to see him, and I am sure he does not come here on my account." And she decamped without giving her cousin time to remonstrate.

Prue greeted the money-lender in her stateliest manner, and entrenching herself behind the little tea-table, requested him to be seated.

"This is indeed a surprise," she said. "I should never have supposed that the busy Mr. Aarons had time to spare for visiting."

"You are right, Viscountess. I never, in my life, made a visit without an object," he replied, "but the busiest of men may discover that there are other things in life besides business. I, for example, have discovered that youth, beauty and accomplishments—such as yours—may outvalue wealth and power—such as mine."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Aarons," said Prue, in a moralizing tone. "Youth is fleeting, beauty is but skin-deep and accomplishments—such as mine—are apt to lead their possessor into mischief of more kinds than you wot of."

"Most mischief can be repaired by money," said Aarons insinuatingly, "and what can not be achieved by youth, beauty and accomplishments with unlimited wealth to boot? You, dear Viscountess, have gone far without money. Think what you could aspire to with more than you could spend if you tried your hardest!"

"Why tantalize me with such visions?" cried Prue. Then suddenly recalling the motive of her last visit to the money-lender, she added maliciously, "Sir Geoffrey, according to you, will not be likely to test my extravagance so severely!"

"Sir Geoffrey!" he exclaimed, with a frown. "He is no match for your ladyship. You have but to wait a few weeks for the dissolution of Parliament to see him luxuriously lodged in his town mansion of the Queen's Bench. Be warned by me, Viscountess, unless you wish to share his lodging."

"You mean that I, also, may be arrested for debt?" she retorted with disdain. "If I remember aright, you threatened me with the debtors' prison t'other day."

"I threatened you, Lady Prudence!" cried Aarons, in a horrified tone. "Never, never! Besides, your debts to me are amply secured, and my confidence in your prospects is so great that I came to-day expressly," he drew a morocco case from his breast-pocket, "to restore the necklace you left in my care. Your court toilets must need diamonds to set them off, though *you* do not, and it is a pity to keep this hidden any longer in my strong-box, where there are many—and still finer ones, waiting to adorn the loveliest of her sex."

As he spoke, he opened the case and displayed a necklace of fine diamonds, Prue's wedding-gift from her father-in-law, the Earl of Overbridge. At this sight, her eyes sparkled more brightly than the gems, and her hand involun-

tarily stretched out toward the glittering thing.

Aarons watched her with a sardonic smile, in which triumph and admiration contended with his innate contempt for feminine weakness, and thrusting the casket into her hands, said, in a voice far less harsh than usual, "It is yours. Only let me have the pleasure of seeing you wear it."

The softening of his tone roused Prue with a sort of shock. The scorn and repulsion with which she had listened to Aarons' first declaration revived, made sharper by an unfamiliar touch of shame, and she withdrew her hand as though the gift had stung her. Then, swift as thought, a bright glow and sparkle sprang into her face, and she darted from the room, leaving Aarons transfixed with amazement.

He was still in the same position—leaning forward with the open jewel-case in his outstretched hand—when she fluttered back, radiant and breathless, and dropped into her seat behind the table with a laugh of glee.

"Pardon my discourtesy, my good Mr. Aarons," she cried. "You took me somewhat by surprise; I was not prepared for so much forethought. Tell me, was it not two hundred guineas you lent me upon that necklace?"

"Yes—but—" began the usurer.

"One moment," Prue quickly interposed: "I am hopelessly stupid about such matters, but even I know that there is interest to pay for that loan. Please tell me how much? Another hundred pounds, perhaps, or—"

"I don't know how much," Aarons interrupted bruskly. "This is not a matter of loan and interest."

"Oh! pardon me, I think it is," said Prue, drawing up her slender neck with a vast access of dignity. "I am charmed to have my diamonds once more—God he knows for how long!" and she took the jewel-case from Aarons' unresisting hand. "And here, my good sir, are three hundred pounds; if I am still in your debt, let me know and I will pay you some other day."

She placed three of Robin's bank-notes before him, and lifting the necklace from its velvet bed clasped it about her throat.

"There!" she cried, facing Aarons with a bewitching smile. "Now you can have your wish: I have put it on so that you can see me wear it!"

"It is a sight I shall always remember with admiration," said Aarons, recovering his self-command with the ease of long practice, "and I will leave it to your mirror's reflection to remind you that I only await a word from you to place my fortune at your feet."

"Ah!" sighed Prue, "if it were only a question of your fortune! Must you go, Mr. Aarons?" for he had risen, and hat in hand, was already bowing himself out.

"Unfortunately, I am much pressed for time, Viscountess, so I am reluctantly compelled to take my leave; but I trust not for long. Fare you well." And

"——Was it not two hundred guineas?"

he was gone, leaving the bank-notes where she had placed them on the table.

In the hall he found James engaged in an altercation with a red-faced person in shabby black of a quasi-clerical cut. This individual was not precisely drunk, but most evidently not very sober, and the voice in which he expressed his intention of seeing and speaking with the Viscountess Brooke—if he had to wait until midnight—was very husky and rather bellicose.

"If I can not see the Lady Brooke, I'll wait and see Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert," he insisted, as James reiterated the utter impossibility of such a visitor to any member of the family.

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert does not live here," replied James loftily. "You had better call at his house."

The tipsy gentleman leered in a most impertinent fashion. "I'm a good deal more likely to find him at Lady Brooke's house than his own," he observed confidentially.

A hand was placed on his arm, and turning with a nervous start, he found the harsh gaze of Mr. Aarons bent sternly upon him.

"Parson Goodridge! you here and in this condition?" exclaimed the moneylender.

"Me here? Well, so are you!" hiccoughed the reverend gentleman. "Who the devil would expect to find old 'shent-per-shent' in a lady's boudoir?"

"I am frequently in places where you would least expect to meet me," said Aarons, with a scowl at the other's tipsy familiarity. "But this meeting is opportune; I want a few words with you, and as you will gain nothing by waiting here, you may as well come with me."

Goodridge hesitated and made an abortive attempt to wriggle out of the usurer's firm grasp.

"You can't do anything to me," he said at last, in a resigned tone. "I'm safe in the 'Rules,' and all the creditors in London Town can not touch me."

However, he made no further resistance, and when they reached the street, Aarons' manner changed completely. His hand slipped through the parson's arm with a friendly pressure and his voice lost its grinding harshness.

"Is there no quiet place of entertainment near by, where we can have a little talk—on business?" he inquired. "Pleasant business, Parson; business that may fill your pockets with gold, mayhap; or, if not that, at least will give us a chance to crack a bottle of good wine together."

"You have come to the right man if you are thirsty," replied Goodridge solemnly. "I never drink between meals myself, but there are few places within the pale of civilization, where I can not help a fellow-creature to quench his thirst."

With which exordium, he turned into a narrow lane or mews, at the farther

end of which a mean little inn advertised its attractions by a sign from which the device had long since disappeared.

"'Tis better inside than out," the reverend gentleman declared, and he was so far right that the unoccupied coffee-room was cleanly sanded and a bottle of not absolutely poisonous port was soon on the rough wooden table between the oddly assorted couple.

Aarons plied his guest discreetly, while he led up to the subject he wished to discuss. He praised the beauty and charms of Lady Prudence, and congratulated Goodridge on the friendship of a lady so high in the queen's favor. No doubt her influence would obtain some fat preferment for his reverence? Goodridge winked with great unction, but was not to be drawn by any mere conversational bait.

"My interest in the viscountess is, of course, money," said Aarons, with an air of great frankness; "that is the only interest I have in any of these fine dames. They *will* gamble at cards, and run into debt; until they get desperate and fly to me with their jewels, to stave off their creditors until luck turns or some wealthy relative leaves them a fortune. Many of them owe me money, and it is my business to see that they do not cheat me out of it. Sometimes it is worth my while to pay well for a little information."

"Sometimes it may pay better to keep a secret than sell it," said Goodridge, with latent boastfulness.

"Unless you are clever enough to make one pay you for keeping it and another for selling it," suggested Aarons. "Not that I want you to sell me any secret of the Viscountess Brooke's. 'Tis easy for me to know all I want about her affairs. My interest is in her lover, Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert."

Goodridge laughed and held out his glass for replenishment.

"Sir Geoffrey, I fear, is not worthy of this lady," said Aarons, passing the bottle over to his guest. "She might make a much better match if she could be prevented from marrying him. It would suit me better to have her marry a rich man who could pay her debts, you understand, than one such as Sir Geoffrey, who is himself only kept out of prison by being in Parliament. Now, it is more than likely that such a gay gallant has many a little entanglement or intrigue or what not, that it would be useful for me to know about, and any one who could serve me by discovering some such irregularity would do a true kindness to the lady and help himself at the same time."

Goodridge laughed again, and emptying his glass, refilled it and held it with an unsteady hand between his bleary eye and the dim window. Aarons watched him with a wry smile, patient and sardonic, looking for the psychological moment when his lips would unclose under the influence of the repeated bumpers.

"Boy," he called to the attendant, "another bottle; shall it be the same, Par-

son?"

"This is fair, but they've a better one," replied Goodridge, smacking his lips.

"Bring us a bottle of the best you have," Aarons ordered, and when it came, he filled both glasses and proposed the health of the beautiful viscountess, and a rich husband for her.

Again Goodridge laughed, and this time with such rapturous glee that Aarons was quite confounded.

"What a merry fellow you are, Parson," he grunted; "I'd give a guinea to know what you are laughing at."

"A guinea!" cried Goodridge. "You would give more than that, I'll warrant. Why, I was thinking that there's no more chance for Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert than there is—for—*you*, for example—or me!"

"You think not?" queried Aarons, passing over the personal application of the remark with a mental reservation.

"I *know* it," said Goodridge, with tipsy solemnity. "I'll take my oath on it."

"Your oath may be priceless," said Aarons, "but I can only *pay* for proof."

"And what," said Goodridge, setting down his empty glass, "may you be willing to pay for proof that Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert can not marry the Lady Prudence?"

Aarons eyed him warily. "I have a judgment against you, Parson, for forty-three pounds and costs. I will vacate the judgment and give you—five guineas. 'Tis a liberal offer for—I know not what."

For answer, the reverend gentleman leaned across the table, and extending his right hand within a few inches of Aarons' nose, snapped his fingers half-a-dozen times.

"That for your judgment!" he shouted truculently. "I'm in the Rules for life and you can neither keep me in nor let me out. Why, man, I've a score of judgments against me, and if you vacated yours, I should be no better off; nay, worse, for it might remind the creditors who have long since forgotten me. No, no, most excellent money-lender, my secret may be worth nothing or it may be worth much, but only cash can buy it—ready cash!"

Aarons, with a scowling brow, reflected. Was it worth a large sum to break off the match between those two headstrong young people? If Goodridge was to be believed the marriage was impossible, and no expenditure of his beloved gold was needed to prevent it. On the other hand, the triumph of proving to Prue some hidden treason of Sir Geoffrey's allured him, and the possibility that she might avenge herself by taking another and wealthier husband, included the probability of that other husband being the one to enlighten her and offer himself as the ready instrument of retaliation.

"I will give you ten guineas, cash," he said, after a pause.

"When you know my secret, you will think it cheap at ten times ten guineas," said Goodridge.

Aarons rose and began to button his surtout. "I see," he said, "that we are not like to agree, and as my time is valuable you will excuse me if I leave you to finish the bottle alone." As he spoke, he allowed some loose coins to rattle in his pocket, and in paying the reckoning, pulled out a handful of golden guineas and tossed one to the waiter.

The sight of the money produced the effect he had expected. Goodridge's moist eyes glistened and his lips pursed themselves greedily. "Sit down, Aarons," he said thickly, "and have a parting glass."

With an air of reserve and ill-humor, the usurer poured a small quantity of wine into his glass and without resuming his seat nodded to his guest, and muttering something that might have been either a toast or a malediction, sipped it with a deprecatory expression.

"Come now," said Goodridge, after waiting vainly for him to renew the negotiations; "what is it really worth to you to stop this marriage?"

"It may not be worth a great deal to me," said Aarons carelessly, but he sat down; "you never can account for women's vagaries. If I get her out of this affair, she may do worse instead of better."

"She can't do worse," chuckled Goodridge. But Aarons had not the key to his merriment and all his suspicions were centered on some unpardonable misdeed of the bridegroom elect.

"Were you going to tell her so when I met you at her house?" he inquired, smiling grimly. "What do you expect to get from her?"

"That's my business," he retorted. "But I wasn't going to offer *her* any secrets for sale. Oh! no, the Lady Prudence is my good friend, and if I need a few guineas, she's too kind-hearted to refuse me."

Suddenly it dawned upon Aarons that there was something sinister in the situation; a woman like the Viscountess Brooke was not the friend of such a miserable wretch for mere kindliness. He felt that whatever the price, he must know the whole truth, if this man could be induced to tell it.

"Will you take twenty guineas for your fine secret?" he asked with a sneer.

"No, but I'll take fifty and give you full value," said Goodridge. "I haven't the proofs here, but I'll tell you the secret for half the money and you shall give me the rest, when I give you the proofs. It's a loss to me," he half-whimpered, "for if I kept the secret and used it right, I might live well on it as long as it remained a secret."

Aarons counted out twenty-five gold coins upon the table, and covered them with his hand. "Now," he said, "there is half your price, and if you can give me a satisfactory reason why Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert can not, by any possibility,

marry Lady Prudence Brooke, that money is yours, and as much more when I have your proofs. But if you are deceiving me, beware! I am not a man to be trifled with."

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert can not marry Lady Prudence Brooke for the very good reason that she is already married," Goodridge whispered, leaning across the table with his mouth at Aarons' ear.

The usurer started back and his face became black with fury. "Lady Prudence married!" he exclaimed.

"Sh-sh-sh!" Goodridge glanced round apprehensively; "don't blurt it out for the whole town to hear. Yes, she is married. I myself performed the ceremony."

"You performed the ceremony!" muttered Aarons, with increasing anger and amazement. "Tell me the whole story; whom did she marry, and when?"

"Is it worth the money?" asked Goodridge, leering at his scowling face. Aarons pushed the twenty-five guineas across the table with quick impatience, and the other picked them up, counted them and stowed them in his pocket, before continuing.

"I married her less than a week ago," he then went on. "The wedding took place in Newgate Prison, and the bridegroom was Robin Freemantle, the highwayman. Now you know as much as I do."

"You lie, you damned scoundrel!" roared Aarons, beside himself with rage. "This is an invention to rob me. You think to get my money for a tissue of lies and then laugh at me for a credulous fool! A woman who could pick and choose among a dozen titles and fortunes many a felon in jail! If this is a joke, it is a dangerous one, Mister Parson, as you will find unless you return my money and make me a humble apology."

Goodridge had risen to his feet and, considerably sobered by this unexpected outburst, faced the infuriated man, pale beneath his vinous flush.

"Did you think to get such a secret as that from me and then rob me of the price?" he stuttered. "I swear by the Cross you accursed Jews despise, that I have told you the truth. Last Friday I married Prudence, widow of James Stuart Brooke," he sank his voice to a whisper, "to the highwayman, then under sentence to be hanged last Monday."

A gleam shot across Aarons' face. "Hanged last Monday!" he exclaimed. "Why, then, she's a widow again."

"That's what she expected to be, I'll be sworn," said Goodridge, with great significance. "But I said *under sentence*. That sentence was not carried out. He was reprieved and set at liberty, and my lady is still his wife."

A dark frown furrowed the usurer's brow. Before his eyes rose the vision of the beautiful object of his desire, with the diamonds he had thought to buy her with around her milky throat and the banknotes he had refused in payment

lying unregarded on the table. He ground his teeth in impotent fury to think how he had been the dupe of his own fatuity, and a savage longing rose in him for revenge upon the disdainful beauty, whose astounding caprice had placed her out of his reach.

Tipsy as Goodridge was, he had been crafty enough to hold his tongue about Sir Geoffrey's part in the transaction, therefore it was not unnatural that Aarons' thoughts should turn to his erstwhile rival as a fit instrument of Prue's humiliation. To expose her, degrade her and, if possible, ruin her socially, he would spare neither money nor skill, but he felt himself unfit for the task; the blow from his hand might recoil upon himself and leave her unscathed. Besides, his ideas were, for the moment, too chaotic, and he was not the man to weaken his purpose by undue haste.

With a tremendous effort of his iron will, he subdued all outward expression of anger, and even called up a smile of grim amusement. Once more rising from the table, he bade his companion adieu without any further allusion to the twenty-five guineas, much to the reverend scamp's relief.

"Take my advice, Parson, and keep a silent tongue in your head," he remarked. "*I* will keep your secret, because it will not serve me to betray it, but if you take many more into your confidence, you may get into trouble."

With which he strode away, leaving Goodridge to the congenial society of the half-empty bottle.

CHAPTER XXIV
A SUPPER FOR THREE

Prue's delight at the restoration of her necklace was so great that she forgot her fatigue, and Peggie found her dancing before a mirror and trying a variety of coquettish poses to show off the sparkling jewel and the fair throat it adorned. At first she could not resist the temptation of teasing Peggie by feigning to take Mr. Aarons' proposal seriously.

"Fancy, dear coz," she cried; "this Croesus tells me his strong-box literally bursts with diamonds only awaiting my acceptance. He promises me the finest of town-houses, with equipages and retinue to turn the grandest of our duchesses green with envy—the purse of Fortunatus, which will only be the fuller the more I spend! How pleased grannie will be to own Lady Prudence Aarons for a grand-

daughter!"

Peggie broke into smiles. "Lady Prudence Aarons! Picture grannie's face when you present the new grandson-elect to her ladyship."

"But seriously, Peg," Prue went on more soberly, "this man aspires to marry me, and would have bestowed my own necklace upon me as a gift, had I not insisted upon paying him."

"*Paying him!*" cried Peggie, in accents of the most profound astonishment. At the same moment her eye fell upon the little table and she pounced upon the neglected bank-notes with amazement too intense for words.

"He left the money!" exclaimed Prue, gazing at the notes as Peggie wildly fluttered them before her. "I have done Aarons injustice. He must be really in love with me."

"Prue! where on earth did this come from?" demanded Peggie, utterly mystified.

"Not from Aarons," replied Prue, a tender smile creeping over her lips as she took the notes with an almost caressing touch. "Don't be afraid; I am not yet sold to the devil. But come, Peggie, we have no time to waste. We must dress for Lady Rialton's dinner and I must show myself at half-a-dozen routs and balls before I can even spare time to think. Oh! I wonder where Barbara is going to-night!"

"You are bound to meet her somewhere," said Peggie consolingly, "and if not, you may be sure she'll take good care of your Robin, so don't be uneasy."

Prue gave her a half-comical, half-reproachful glance. "I never saw Barbara look as charming as she did to-day," she pouted. "Those tall lace heads are certainly very becoming to her kind of figure—they make her look quite slender—and the touch of hair-powder gave an extra sparkle to her eyes."

"'Twas not the powder on her hair, but the rouge on her cheeks that made her eyes sparkle," quoth Peggie, who was a trifle jealous of Barbara's influence.

"Do you think so? Would a little rouge improve me, do you think? I am sure I look faded." Prue peered anxiously into a mirror, but the sight that greeted her eye was reassuring. "I wish I had kept him here; we could have hidden him somewhere," she said, with a regretful sigh.

"Where?" cried Peggie trenchantly. "Under grannie's bed, belike! Any other place might have been searched if Lord Beachcombe had brought a constable with a warrant!"

"He is capable of that, even now," Prue agreed. "Barbara's coquetry is more dangerous to me, perhaps, but safer for Robin."

Poor Prue was doomed to a good many heart-pangs that evening, and without even the accustomed support of Peggie's sympathy. After Lady Rialton's dinner the cousins separated. Peggie returned home, and Prue, with less heartiness than usual, pursued the round of social functions. Her first inquiry at every

house was for Barbara Sweeting. No one was surprised at that, because the two were known to be the closest allies; but she had not been seen anywhere, a circumstance that caused some remark in so pious a pilgrim of pleasure. Various reasons were suggested, such as an attack of vapors, the return of General Sweeting's gout, or chagrin at not having been invited to take part in the amateur theatricals at Marlborough House, none of which satisfied Prue, who, perhaps for the first time in her life, felt the serpent-tooth of jealousy.

But if Barbara's absence disturbed her, she was goaded almost beyond endurance by the persistence of Lord Beachcombe, who followed her like a shadow, ignoring alike her snubs and the gibes of those who fancied themselves on the trail of a renovated infatuation. In self-defense she kept Sir Geoffrey in close attendance, reckless of significant glances from curious eyes that were swift to mark his air of triumphant proprietorship, until at last, worn out with disappointment and fatigue, she begged him to call her chair, as she was dying to go home and get to bed.

"And do, I implore you, leave me to go away alone, Sir Geoffrey," she entreated, in most pathetic tones. "I am too weary to entertain any one; you must see for yourself that I am almost too tired to speak."

It was impossible to contradict her, for her pale face and clouded eyes betrayed intense nervous strain. Sir Geoffrey contented himself with obtaining permission to inquire after her health at an early hour next day, and repaired to his club, where he speedily found distraction at the card-table.

But Prue, tired as she was, had no intention of going home without one more attempt to see Barbara, to whose mansion in Park Lane she was forthwith conveyed. Her friend was at home and the servants, aware of the intimate relations between the two ladies, did not hesitate to admit Prue, and inform her that supper was then being served in the Painted Room, a charming apartment, where Barbara was in the habit of holding high revelry with her closest intimates, and giving gay supper-parties at which gambling for high stakes, charades imitated from the entertainments of the French court, and similar amusements kept gossip on the *qui vive*.

There was no gathering of wits and beauties to-night, however. The room (which took its name from the mythological paintings with which the ceiling and walls were decorated) was brightly lighted, but unoccupied, and in the small conservatory opening out of it, at a little table set for two among the banks of blossoming plants and cages of bright-hued birds, sat Barbara coquetting with Robin Freemantle—highwayman and outlaw!—who was in the very act of raising her hand to his lips when the door opened to admit Prue.

"My dearest Prue—here you are at last—I had almost given up expecting you!" cried Barbara, greeting her with effusion.

"Did you really expect me?" asked Prue, with irrepressible irony. "Meeting you nowhere, I feared you might be indisposed, but I am vastly relieved to find that you reached home without mishap."

"Nothing could be more triumphantly successful than our escape," cried Barbara, gaily ignoring Prue's loftiness; "and as you see, I am taking excellent care of my captive."

"Dearest Barbara, I know well what an incomparable hostess you are," she replied dryly, "and now that I have seen for myself that you are safe, and not too greatly incommoded by your exploit, I will take my leave, as I am positively sinking with fatigue."

And she made as though to withdraw without deigning a second glance toward Robin, who had risen, and stood there a veritable statue of amazement and mortification.

But Barbara caught her by both hands and drew her to the table. "Nonsense, Prue!" she laughed, "Do you think I am going to let you run off like that? Sinking with fatigue indeed! I'll warrant you will flutter from ball-room to ball-room for the next two hours if I do not keep you here. Captain de Cliffe and I were about to bore each other to death over a tête-à-tête supper and you have come like a good fairy to preserve us from yawning in each other's face—(Prue smiled satirically)—at least sup with me, dear Gossip; 'twill rest you more than going home to bed."

"My chair waits—" Prue began, though not without signs of hesitation.

"What matters that? It shall be dismissed and I will send you home in mine."

"The temptation of returning in such state as that is well-nigh irresistible," Prue conceded, feeling that she had been sufficiently coaxed to do what she particularly wanted to do without sacrificing her dignity. She began to unfasten the mantle in which she was enveloped, but when Robin sprang forward to assist her, she allowed it to drop to the floor and walked away, leaving him to pick it up if he pleased.

"You will stay, then," cried Barbara; "that is delightful. I will order another cover and a bottle of your favorite Chambertin, and we will have a little festival to wish your friend *bon voyage*."

And she rustled away; more out of compassion for Robin's disconcerted aspect than the mere impulse of hospitality.

Prue seated herself behind a bank of flowering shrubs, as far away as the little conservatory would allow, and after a momentary hesitation, Robin followed.

"Have I been so unfortunate as to incur your displeasure, dearest?" he inquired anxiously.

"My displeasure, sir? Certainly not," she replied. "What can it matter to *me* how many ladies' hands you kiss?"

At this Robin (who, although a novice in love, was no fool,) was completely

relieved. He was even quite elated over the little display of jealousy which proved that Prue was far from indifferent to him. "When I am not with you, dear Prue," he said in a tone of gentle reproach, "my heart is so full of you that it flows over with gratitude to any one who will but utter your name. If you had heard what Lady Barbara was saying about you, you would not have been surprised to see me embrace her feet instead of her hand."

"What did she say?" asked Prue, her curiosity overcoming her petulance.

"She said many things in praise of the dearest of women," said Robin, taking courage to seat himself beside her, "but, best of all, she assured me that not one of all your scores of suitors could boast of half the interest you had shown to-day in the poor outlaw. Do you wonder that I kissed her hand?"

"Barbara is very indiscreet," said Prue, smiling a little. "Besides, she has the most beautiful hands in the world!"

"Are they beautiful? I was thinking too much of her kind words to notice aught else. Yet she warned me that my love for you is hopeless, and indeed she is right. I must leave England in a few hours, perhaps for ever—"

"And what right has Barbara to think our love other than hopeless? She knows nothing about it! I have a good mind," cried Prue, "to tell her all and see what she says then! But no! she would think me a fool for throwing myself away upon a man who loves me so little that he can bear to talk of leaving me for a day, let alone for ever—"

"I love you more than my own life and soul," said Robin, "more than anything except honor and duty; but their call I dare not disobey. My life does not belong to myself, but to the cause of my king, and a felon's death may end it at any moment. It would be infamous for me to hold you bound by such a marriage as ours—"

"Do you know me so little as to suppose that I would hold myself bound by it if I wished for freedom?" she retorted. "I did think you loved me, but I see it is not so; a man who loved me would fling discretion to the winds and busy himself with plans for keeping me whether I would or no. Out on such scruples! I will not be set free. If there is anything infamous about our marriage, the infamy is mine, and I take the consequences and glory in them. Leave me now, if honor and duty call you. We are young and who knows what may happen? The king who calls you away now, will bring you back in triumph some day, then, perhaps, it may be Beachcombe's turn to be hunted and driven from his country." Then suddenly remembering the cause of Lord Beachcombe's fierce pursuit, she brought out the little packet, somewhat crumpled, but otherwise intact. "I had almost forgotten to return this," she said; "I found it after you had escaped by the river on Tuesday and methinks 'tis for this he seeks you."

Robin took the packet and glanced at the superscription. "'Tis indeed this,"

he exclaimed. "By a miracle it fell into your hands instead of his. Prithee keep it, dear one; there is that in this envelope in exchange for which Beachcombe would give all his earthly possessions, and mayhap, some day when I am not here to protect you, it may be worth much to you to hold the secret that compelled him to take me out of Newgate, and has kept him thirsting for my life ever since."

"I am but a weak woman," said Prue, smiling archly, as she replaced the precious packet in her bosom. "Can you trust me with such a secret?"

"'Tis the secret of my birth," said Robin gravely, "and belongs as much to my wife as to me."

"I discovered that secret for myself this afternoon," Prue began, but Barbara, thinking she had given the lovers ample time to make up their quarrel, now came back on hospitable thoughts intent, and the trio, in a very pleasant mood, sat down to supper.

It was long past midnight, when Prue, after several fainthearted suggestions, at last rose resolutely and announced that she really must go home, and refusing Barbara's urgent offer of her new sedan-chair, declared she would have Robin's escort and walk the short distance to Lady Drumloch's house.

"It will be safer for him to come away now, than to wait until daylight," she said.

"It would be safest, *I* think, for him to stay here for a few days," Barbara proposed seriously. But the mutinous pout, and glance of arch defiance with which Prue received her suggestion, provoked her to hearty laughter, and she received Robin's thanks for her protection and the farewells of both her guests with an air of such thorough comprehension, that Prue felt constrained to whisper in her ear, "I will come to confession to-morrow, dear Gossip," and blushingly hurried away on Robin's arm.

Late as it was, they lingered on the way and managed to eke ten minutes' walk into forty. Robin had so much to say—so many vows of eternal fidelity to pledge, and such repeated assurances to give of his swift return—that it was not until a near-by church-clock struck two, that Prue quickened her steps a little, and declared with a sigh that the parting moment had really come.

"You will be careful, dear Robin," she pleaded. "Do not run any risks, and if we can not meet again safely before you leave for France, write me by some sure hand, and I will do the same. Remember—I forbid you to attempt to visit me—but oh! I shall count the hours until I see you again."

With the prospect of a long and perhaps fatal parting, their farewells were not soon over; each last kiss was but an excuse for one more, until the tramp of the approaching night-watch warned them of the danger of delay, and Prue tore herself from his arms and without trusting herself to a backward glance, hurried

into the house.

CHAPTER XXV
A CONFESSION

It was Peggie who, after some hours' anxious watching, opened the door without waiting for Prue's knock. She had long ago persuaded the sleepy and unreluctant James to retire to bed, and settling herself beside the dim lamp with a book, uncomplainingly resigned herself to a tedious and solitary vigil.

She had passed an evening not without excitement, for her grandmother's searching and persistent inquiries into Prue's mysterious behavior were not to be evaded, and some kind of explanation was inevitable. So, ingeniously substituting Captain de Cliffe, the emissary of King James, for Captain Freemantle, the highwayman, Peggie admitted that Prue and he had met "in the North," that after his arrest she had visited him in Newgate Prison, and that although now an outlaw and fugitive, steeped in Jacobite plots and charged with state secrets and compromising documents, he had played an important part in her recovery of the queen's necklace. In fact, she had contrived, without desperately straining the truth, to surround Robin with an aura of heroism and loyalty that had enlisted the old countess' sympathy for him, almost to the extent of preparing her to sanction Prue's marriage.

Having skilfully wrought her up to this point. Peggie had retired, leaving her revelations to work upon Lady Drumloch's long-dormant but far from extinct passion for the cause which had robbed her of husband, sons and worldly possessions, and left her nothing for the consolation of her declining years but unrecognized devotion to the most ungrateful of dynasties.

Too excited to think of bed, the cousins were still eagerly exchanging confidences, when Prue stopped abruptly and listened. Peggie was hurrying on with her story, but Prue checked her with a warning hand.

"Hark, Peggie, did you hear that? Was it not some one knocking at our door?"

Peggie listened, and the knocking was repeated. She threw open the window, and thrusting her head out, withdrew it after a brief investigation, with the announcement that there was a man in the street, looking up at their lighted window.

"Only one man?" queried Prue. "Can it be Robin?"

"I think not," said Peggie; "it does not seem tall enough—this man is—there is the knocking again—what shall we do?"

"Something has happened to Robin!" cried Prue, hastily throwing a cloak about her. "I must go down and see what is the matter."

"I'll come with you," cried Peggie, impelled partly by curiosity, and partly by the impulse to protect her cousin. They ran down together, and at the door paused to take counsel. It was no uncommon thing in those days for the "Mohawks" to batter thus at quiet citizens' doors and mistreat the person who answered their summons, or even, if a woman, to carry her off, shrieking and struggling.

"Who is there?" Prue demanded through the closed door.

"It is I, Steve Larkyn," a voice replied. "Oh! Mistress Brooke, I beseech you open the door; they have taken my master!"

Prue flung the door open, and there stood Steve, ghastly pale in the broad moonlight.

"They have taken your master? Then what are you doing here, alive and unhurt?" she cried passionately.

"Madam, what could one arm, and without a sword, avail against a dozen men, fully armed? The captain had but time to say to me, 'Fly—to Prudence!'—your pardon, but those were his words—when they surrounded him and made him prisoner without a chance to defend himself."

"Oh! dear God!" murmured Prue, covering her face with her trembling hands. "It is my fault; if I had left him with Barbara, he would now be safe. I brought him away to his death for a jealous whim! Where have they taken him?" she demanded, looking at Steve with widely distended eyes. "To Newgate? to the Tower? Tell me and I will go to him and share his prison."

"I don't know what they mean to do with him," said Steve, "but they were taking him to Lord Beachcombe's house—"

"Lord Beachcombe! Oh! I see it all! This is no arrest; it is a plot to rob and mayhap to murder him. Lord Beachcombe fancies that he has to deal with a defenseless outlaw and a weak woman. I will show him that there are stronger weapons than swords and bludgeons. I will go instantly to Rodney House."

"Oh! Prue, wait until morning!" implored Peggie.

"And give Lord Beachcombe time to spirit Robin away to some secret dungeon, where I may, perhaps, never find him alive? No! I will go to him at once, without a moment's delay."

"Then I will go with you," cried Peggie. "You can not go to Lord Beachcombe's house alone."

"Can not I? Besides, I shall not be alone; Steve Larkyn will escort me." She

turned to Robin's faithful henchman with a wan smile. "One woman is enough for you to take care of; and you, Peggie, dear, will watch for me, so that when I return, I can get in without rousing the house. Believe me, dear," she went on firmly, as Peggie was about to remonstrate, "what I have to do can be better done by myself alone; and I am not timid, as you know."

"But, Prue—what on earth can you do for Robin, by going to Lord Beachcombe in the middle of the night?" Peggie urged, in desperation.

"That remains to be seen," said Prue, with a smile of mystery. "I think I can make Lord Beachcombe set him free, and be grateful for the chance. Come, Steve," and wrapping her mantle closely round her, she drew the hood well over her face, and went out with a resolute step into the street, already growing gray in the early dawn of the May morning.

The courtyard of Rodney House was all astir when Prudence, clinging to Steve Larkyn's arm, stole through the great gateway, and under the deep shadow of the arcade that flanked the main entrance. That was closed, but from a low door a few feet away, a flood of light poured upon a traveling carriage with four horses and a group of mounted men. Without a moment's hesitation, Prue darted past them, ran down a few stone steps and found herself in a large, bare basement hall, where Robin, his dress in some disorder and his hands tied behind him, stolidly confronted Lord Beachcombe in a white heat of fury.

At Prue's sudden apparition a couple of servitors interposed to stop her and Lord Beachcombe, in a voice hoarse with rage, shouted, "Who are these people? What the devil do they want? Turn them out—"

Prue's silvery laugh rang out. "Not so fast!" she cried, flinging back her hood. "I have business of the utmost importance with Lord Beachcombe," and she swept him a mockingly ceremonious curtsey. No lady of the court, not even the great Duchess Sarah herself, was better known than the beautiful "Widow Brooke." The sight of her familiar face seemed to paralyze every one present. The lackeys fell back abashed, Robin gazed at her speechless, and Beachcombe's sallow face flushed with a purple that suffused even his eyeballs.

"Viscountess Brooke!" he stammered. "What in the name—"

"You are surprised?" she interrupted. "To be sure, my visit is somewhat untimely." She came close to him and lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "Did you find what you expected when you searched Captain de Cliffe?" she inquired insinuatingly.

"How do you know I searched him?" demanded Beachcombe.

"Why, when one sees a man with his hands tied behind him and his pockets inside out, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he has been searched. Yet I'll venture to say, Lord Beachcombe, that whatever you found, it was not what you were looking for!"

"How can you know anything about that?" he replied, with dawning suspicion. "Perhaps you know what it was and where it may be found? If so, you must be aware that it has no value except to me—"

"And Captain de Cliffe," she interposed.

"*Captain de Cliffe!*" he repeated, with a bitter and disdainful emphasis.

"What would you have me call him?" she bent forward and in a whisper suggested, "Robert—Earl Beachcombe?—is that better?"

The blood ebbed from his face, leaving it ghastly with fear and fury. He cast a hasty glance toward the group of men surrounding Robin, and although they were quite out of earshot, he fiercely motioned them to a greater distance. Then he pulled himself together sufficiently to force a sardonic laugh.

"Was it to play comedy that your ladyship honored me with this nocturnal visit?" he sneered.

"Not altogether," she replied. "I came to prevent your harming Captain de Cliffe, and, incidentally, yourself. Now tell me—in confidence—not having found the documents you sought, what do you propose to do with your prisoner?"

"I propose," said Beachcombe slowly, "to hand him over to justice. I believe the—documents—to be lost. At any rate, I am willing to hazard the risk of their recovery in order that this man may receive his deserts as a traitor and a malefactor. After he has been hanged, there will be plenty of time for me to deal with a claim that has no longer a claimant."

"And you really hate him enough to prefer his death to your own safety?" Prue could not repress a shudder at the cold ferocity of his tone.

"What if I secure both?" he retorted, gratified by the effect he had produced. "This man is a traitor and has earned a traitor's death. Although I may not have found what I sought, I *have* found papers that will send him to the gallows, and give me a claim to the gratitude of the government. Do not trouble further about him, his fate is sealed."

"And how if another claimant, perhaps far stronger, should spring up in his place? How if he leaves a widow?" suggested Prue. "One, for example, able and willing to pursue his claim?"

"I am not uneasy about that," he replied, but his tone was less confident than his words. "I have the best of reasons for knowing that he is not married."

"And you think that having no wife and leaving no—heir—to his claim (you acknowledge that he has a claim) it will cease with his death, because there is no one to pursue it?"

"My dear Lady Prudence, a lawyer could not have put it more clearly! That is exactly his position; I think mine is pretty safe, even if those redoubtable documents should still be in existence. It will then be merely a matter of money—some one will bleed me more or less copiously—but that will be the end of the

trumped-up claim of Captain—Freemantle."

"Well, Lord Beachcombe," said Prue, smiling up into his face, "now I ask you, as a favor to me, to liberate Captain Freemantle, and to molest him no further. I will answer for it that he will leave the country immediately and abandon his claim. Surely, you will not refuse a favor that is so hard to ask and so easy to grant!"

Beachcombe laughed unpleasantly. "Come, dear Viscountess," he said, and his tone, though bland, was tinged with insolence, "I know of old your thirst for adventure, but surely it has been slaked by the romantic episode of the queen's necklace and the mysterious spiriting-away of your cavalier—your Knight of the Road—by Barbara Sweeting! The excitement of the affair has evaporated; its novelty has staled. Waste no more of your enchanting wiles on so sorry a subject. I have made up my mind, and even for the sake of the most charming of women, I will not change it."

"Yet I think I may induce you," said Prue undauntedly, "because to my certain knowledge Captain de Cliffe has a wife and those precious papers are in her possession. She knows their value, too, and will only give them up on her own terms. If you will not grant *me* this gentleman's life as a favor—will you make a bargain with *her*?"

Astonishment and doubt struggled with Lord Beachcombe's self-command, but he kept an unmoved face, although an inkling of the truth began to force itself upon him. Not the whole incredible truth, of course, but enough to make him suspect that Lady Prudence Brooke was more than commonly interested in the subject of their discussion.

"And what might be the terms of the bargain?" he demanded, after a brief hesitation.

"You had better settle them with Captain de Cliffe," she said, "and I pledge my word that his wife will agree to whatever will satisfy him."

"I will make no terms with him," said Beachcombe sullenly. "If I listen to any proposition it is entirely for your sake, Lady Prudence, and must come from you and be carried out by you alone."

She reflected a few moments, while he watched her intently.

"This is my proposal," she said, at last. "That you will liberate your captive, giving him such time to reach a place of safety as he considers necessary. And that when you have received the packet you will engage not to take any steps to prevent his leaving the country. In return I promise that his wife will consider the whole matter at an end, and regard the claim as though it had never existed."

"And when I have liberated him and given him every opportunity to elude justice, what security have I that those papers will be delivered to me?" he demanded.

"I myself will be hostage for him. Send Steve with him and when he returns, having left his master in safety, I will hand you the packet. Does that satisfy you?"

Robin, sitting on the corner of a table, a little apart, could only guess from a word here and there that rose above the low-voiced colloquy, that Prue was making terms for him, the conditions of which it was not difficult to divine. Cruelly as it irked him to see her pleading with his bitter enemy for his life, he resisted the strong temptation to interfere, as he certainly would have done, could he have known that she was offering to remain a hostage to this unscrupulous man, until his safety had been purchased by her acknowledgment of their marriage. She was too well aware of that to admit him to the conference.

Lord Beachcombe, sullenly balancing pros and cons, found it no easy matter to decide between the gratification of his revenge upon Robin and the fear of losing what might be his last chance of securing the coveted documents.

It is impossible to say how long he might have fluctuated between two desires equally importunate, but it was at last borne in upon the sluggish current of his intelligence that the certificates were possibly that moment in the possession of Lady Prudence Brooke, who certainly would not hesitate to use them for his humiliation if he exasperated her.

"What will you do if I refuse?" he said at last.

"Then," said Prue, with spirit, "I shall go straight from here to the Duchess of Marlborough and lay the whole story—including the *documents*—before her. She has pledged herself to grant me any request I make of her, and will not consider the life of a highwayman too high a price to cancel her debt to me."

"The duchess is no longer the power behind the throne," said Beachcombe, with a scowl. "If you rely upon her influence—"

"I do not rely upon that *alone*," said Prue, retaining her patience with the greatest difficulty; "I will go to the queen herself and plead with her—oh! when I show her my heart, she can not resist the appeal of my prayers and tears—" She forgot for the moment where she was and who was her listener, and in imagination was already at the feet of her royal mistress. Beachcombe regarded the sapphire eyes sparkling through unshed tears and the piteous tumult of the lovely bosom beneath the laces of her ball-dress, and his pulse quickened dizzily.

"If her Gracious Majesty were a king, I think he would give you whatever you were pleased to ask," he breathed. "Ah! Prue—"

"And can *you* refuse me, when with a word you can secure my gratitude—my friendship—for life?" She stretched out her hands with a gesture so alluring, and turned upon him a look of such compelling appeal, as might have melted even a colder heart than his. He could not altogether resist her, but he still sought to temporize.

"You have those—that packet?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Have you examined the contents? Surely woman's curiosity—" The lightness of his words could not veil the anxiety in his voice.

"The seals are still unbroken," she assured him, "and, if you agree to my terms, will remain so until you break them yourself."

"But you know somewhat of the contents? No doubt," with intense bitterness, "Captain Freemantle has given you his version of their importance?"

"Whatever I know about them, Lord Beachcombe, will be forgotten—absolutely—from the moment that Captain—Freemantle—is out of danger."

Beachcombe still hesitated. His curiosity was strongly roused. He had had more than one experience of Prue's unbridled caprice, but this one bewildered him. He could not grasp the only explanation; its improbability baffled him. She had led so many eligible suitors—himself one of them—a lively dance to the very altar-rails; was it believable that this man—outlaw, fugitive, proscribed, penniless—could have won the wayward beauty, and won her so completely that having actually married him, she was ready to sacrifice the future she expected to share, for his present safety?

"How am I to know that his wife, if there be such a person, will keep the promises you make for her?" he said, with his crafty eyes upon her.

"I will answer for his wife—as for myself," said Prue. "Question me no further, Lord Beachcombe, but accept my terms—or refuse them if you deem it more to your advantage."

It is doubtful whether even then he would have taken the decisive step, but for a sudden recollection that flooded his mind with rapture. If Prue were married, Sir Geoffrey had lost his bet, and five thousand pounds, plus a glorious revenge, would fall into the hands of his bitter foe! Unable to conceal his excitement, he seized Prue's hand and drew her reluctantly farther away.

"Tell me," he whispered, "are you his wife? If so, I will make no further demur. For your sake," he added as an afterthought, "I am willing not only to free this—gentleman—but to aid his escape, although, by doing so, I play the traitor to my sovereign."

Prue gazed steadily into his eyes, as though she would read the depths of his mean soul. Then she replied firmly, "I am his wife."

"He is free! I pledge you my word I will not pursue him. Let him go where he pleases; your husband is sacred in my eyes." The sinister light in them was not in accordance with the bland, congratulatory smile that played over his lips, as he turned to Robin.

"The Lady Prudence has proved irresistible, as usual, Captain Freemantle. You are free. Take my advice and use your freedom to put as many leagues as possible between yourself and London. *I* shall not pursue you, but there are

others who seek your life, on whom the charms of Lady Prue might be exercised in vain. Untie his hands and set him free."

When he was obeyed and Robin had returned his pockets to their proper place, Beachcombe restored their ravished contents, reserving only one object. With his eyes fastened upon that, Robin pocketed his well-furnished purse, his handkerchief and other belongings, and then held out his hand once more.

"Your pardon, Lord Beachcombe, you have forgotten my wallet."

"The contents of that wallet, Sir Highwayman, concern matters of too great importance for either of us to deal with. It shall be placed in the hands of those most interested—when you are out of their reach," was the reply, pompously delivered.

"I can not leave this place without that wallet," said Robin resolutely. "It is worth more than life to me, and rather than purchase my freedom at the price of its surrender, I will remain here, and risk the worst."

"Robin!" cried Prue, in a voice of anguish. "Have pity on me if not on yourself!"

"Would you have me sacrifice a hundred lives to save my own?" said Robin unflinchingly, though pale to the lips. With drooping head she sank upon a bench, her courage for the first time failing. Lord Beachcombe looked from one to the other with a scowl as black as thunder, then with a sudden impulse snatched up the wallet and almost flung it into Robin's hand.

"Go!" he shouted; "go quickly, before I have time to repent my folly, and remember that other swords will soon be thirsting for your life," and he laughed harshly, as he turned abruptly away and walked to the farther end of the hall.

Then Robin approached Prue and taking her hand, said gently, "A thousand pardons, dear Heart of my heart. I must seem an ungrateful churl; but oh! if you could know—I will write—"

"Yes, yes!" she interrupted feverishly; "but now go quickly—every moment's delay is fatal to you—and to me—" the last words were murmured inaudibly. "How soon can you reach some safe concealment?"

"Very soon; in less than an hour," he said. "I leave you in Steve's care; he will conduct you home and protect you with his life."

"First you must take him with you and send him back when you are on the road to safety. I have pledged your precious packet," she said, smiling bravely up at him, "and when Steve returns to say you are safe, I shall give it to Lord Beachcombe. It is the price of your ransom."

"But you—"

"Don't you yet understand," she cried impatiently, "that I am like a cat? No matter where I am thrown, I always fall on my feet. Do not fear for me, but begone, and if you love me, do not attempt to see me again. Farewell."

It was no place for the tender adieux of parting lovers. He pressed her hand passionately to his lips, threw his cloak round him, and with a brief salute to Beachcombe—who took no notice of it—strode away, followed by Steve.

When their footsteps ceased to reverberate under the colonnade, Beachcombe approached Prue with a friendly smile.

"Permit me, dear Viscountess, to offer my congratulations," he said. "You have indeed prepared a charming surprise for your friends—and enemies, if one so adorable could by any possibility have any such."

Her answering laugh had the old ring of sweet, contagious mirth. "Circumstances have forced me to reveal my secret rather prematurely," she said, "but I can trust your lordship's discretion not to share it—with my dear friends—and enemies."

"Oh! we will give your husband time to escape before we impart the joyful news to—Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert, for example!"

Prue experienced an unpleasant shock as he pronounced this name, in a tone of malevolent triumph. This man, who had no cause to love either herself or Robin, evidently purposed using the secret he had torn from her in some hateful scheme of retaliation, of which Sir Geoffrey was to be the victim and executioner.

"Why Sir Geoffrey?" she murmured, half to herself.

"Because I hate Sir Geoffrey," said Beachcombe, with cold bitterness. "He has insulted me and triumphed over me—who can know how so well as you? He has worsted me in a duel and boasts that he will tame the lovely sorceress who has bewitched so many—myself among them—to their undoing. I hate him, and I shall never be satisfied until I see him reft of what I also have lost—impoverished—in a debtors' prison—" he checked himself at the sight of the indignant horror his words had roused. "I can wait, however," he went on, less vehemently. "It will satisfy me, for the present, to feel my power over him, without using it. How can I accommodate your ladyship while you wait for the captain's messenger? You can not wait here; will you honor me by accepting the poor hospitality of my house?"

"I can perfectly well wait here," she replied, reseating herself on the bench. "Your countess would be somewhat amazed to receive a visit from me at five o'clock in the morning—in my ball-dress! Even the Widow Brooke must draw the line somewhere!"

CHAPTER XXVI

PREPARATIONS FOR A JOURNEY

Mr. Moses Aarons sat in his private office. His pen hung idle between thumb and finger, and for perhaps the first time within his memory, his thoughts were very far from post-obit and mortgage. For once something more engrossing than money occupied his busy brain, and calculations more abstruse than compound interest furrowed his brow and contracted his eyes into a glittering line.

A night's reflection, so far from softening the bitterness of his anger against Prue, had intensified it to a pitch that positively shocked him. While he despised himself for the unaccustomed tumult of emotion into which he had been plunged, he was amazed to discover that the desire of possession was vastly augmented by the obstacle which he did not for one moment dream of surmounting. He was too shrewd to indulge in futile hopes, but he was weak enough to crave after revenge.

Only a week ago she had visited him, attempting to obtain a loan on the announcement of her speedy marriage with Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert. Was it possible that only a week had passed since she stood in that very room, indignantly championing one lover and that when she was already married to another? What were women made of, and who could anticipate the caprices of creatures so irresponsible? And yet, who could look into her eyes—those limpid sapphires—and not long to look again? Who could hear the thrilling voice and gushing laughter and not listen ever after for the echo of that divine music? The vision of that lovely face, smiling archly at him over the diamonds he had deemed irresistible, floated before him—sleeping and waking—yet it never occurred to him to claim them back or demand the payment he had refused. More, far more than that was necessary to assuage the fury that raged in his breast.

She had made him suffer, had humbled his pride, befooled him and made him ridiculous in his own eyes. For that *she* must suffer; *her* pride must be dragged in the dust, and she who had made sport of hearts and reputations must find her own in the pillory of public derision.

The wife of a highwayman—a malefactor who had been sentenced to die for his crimes, and had narrowly escaped the gallows! Married in Newgate Prison by a drunken Fleet-parson—"Lady Prudence Freemantle!" It was incredible! He laughed at the mere idea, a harsh, croaking laugh more evil than a curse. It would certainly be enough to publish such a mad freak, to cover the perpetrator with undying shame. But many considerations restrained him from taking a prominent part in her exposure. Some one else must be employed, some one whom his money could buy, and yet who would not be suspected of too base a motive.

Goodridge was too mean a tool. The indomitable Lady Prudence Brooke would surely find weapons to defend herself triumphantly from so paltry a foe, even could he be brought to attack her, which was far from certain. Aarons' thoughts reverted time and again to Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert. A spendthrift at his last gasp for a guinea, no doubt he had a price, though it might be a high one. The money-lender was no miser. Money he worshipped less for itself than for its influence, and one factor in his successful accumulation of vast wealth, was his intuitive knowledge of when to spend and how. But this was probably the first occasion in his life on which he contemplated an outlay, without counting the cost or discounting the return.

How could he buy Sir Geoffrey, and how could he use him? And in the first place, how could he reach him without arousing suspicion as to his own motive?

Aarons threw down his pen, and leaving word that he would be back in about an hour, went on 'Change, in hopes of diverting his mind by the exciting scenes of "Bubble" speculation, then at its frenzied height. But his mind was out of tune to its ordinary interests, and within the appointed time he returned. At his office door stood a handsome chariot, and with boundless satisfaction, he recognized Sir Geoffrey's liveries.

Within, impatiently pacing the narrow office, he found the man he was so anxious to see.

During the few minutes he consumed in slowly mounting the stairs, Aarons had resumed complete mastery over himself. He was again the smooth, wily, impenetrable man of affairs, equally prepared to baffle the craft of his clients or profit by their lack of it.

"Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert! This is an unexpected honor," he said. "I trust I have not kept you waiting long?"

"Time is always long when one is waiting for so dear a friend, Mr. Aarons," replied Sir Geoffrey, in his jauntiest manner.

"Pray be seated," said Aarons, indicating the only easy chair, and taking his usual place at the desk. "You are well, I can see for myself. How goes the wooing of the fair viscountess?"

"The *wooing* speeds gloriously," said Sir Geoffrey, "but the wheels of Hymen's chariot do not run fast enough to satisfy an impatient lover. Truth to tell, they need greasing, and that quickly. Women are proverbially fickle and I would fain secure my lady while she is in a yielding mood."

Aarons with difficulty repressed a sneer. This fatuity at the same time gratified him and excited his contemptuous amusement.

"The Lady Prudence has great temptations," he said suavely. "I understand that there are several rivals in your honor's way. With high titles and vast fortunes at her feet, I do not wonder at your eagerness to secure the prize before it

is snatched from you. Yet without ready money—" he shook his head regretfully as he met Sir Geoffrey's clouded eyes.

"You will not believe in the wealth of old Lady Drumloch without positive proof, I suppose?" the baronet hinted, "yet I give you my word of honor that my information is from a source impossible to discredit. And furthermore, I shall receive five thousand guineas on the day I marry Lady Prudence—entirely independent of the fortune she will inherit from her grandmother."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Aarons. "Five thousand guineas on her wedding-day! I was not aware of this change in her fortunes, and yet," an idea struck him suddenly, "to tell you the truth—this is in sacred confidence between us, Sir Geoffrey—yesterday I returned her ladyship's necklace which I have held as security for moneys advanced a long time ago, and I have reason to know that, although she tried to borrow from me last week, she now has money to redeem her diamonds, and tossed hundred-pound notes about like curl-papers!"

Sir Geoffrey's eyes sparkled. "What did I tell you?" he exclaimed. "Who but Lady Drumloch can have redeemed her diamonds (I saw them on her fair neck last night) and paid her debts? The old lady has done it before, and can do it again. Come, Aarons, open your heart and your purse-strings, and let me have a few hundreds on my note-of-hand, if you will not increase the mortgage. I'll pay you out of the five thousand guineas—that's a positive certainty—the day I marry Lady Prue."

"And suppose—I am bound to be cautious—suppose, by any chance, you should not, after all, marry the viscountess?"

"I will marry her, if I have to carry her off by force!" cried Sir Geoffrey, suddenly savage. "She shall not jilt me, by Heaven! or if she does, no other man shall care to take her afterward!"

Secretly delighted at this outburst of ferocity, Aarons assumed a deprecatory air, and with uplifted hands, entreated his visitor to be calm.

"We all know," he said insinuatingly, "how dearly the ladies love to think that they have been won in spite of themselves. The most tricksey of coquettes may turn out the meekest and most devoted of wives to the man who has the courage to prove himself master. At least, so I have heard, but of course I should not presume to advise so experienced a lady-killer as Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert."

"Well, Aarons, if you will furnish the sinews of war, I will undertake to carry the citadel by storm. A few hundreds for a week or less, and if I fail you may clap me in the Fleet, an' you will, and put everything I possess under the hammer."

Aarons still, for the sake of form, protested, but allowed himself to be coaxed and reasoned into a compliant mood, and finally accepted Sir Geoffrey's note for a substantial sum, on the tacit understanding that, by fair means or foul,

the Lady Prudence Brooke was to be made Lady Beaudesert without loss of time.

Leaving the money-lender to gloat over the unexpectedly efficient tool he had found for his vengeance, and to wonder whether Prue would confess her reckless marriage and take the consequences, or defy Sir Geoffrey and drive him to extremities, the latter made his way westward with all speed. Although the hour was still early for social calls, he presented himself at Lady Drumloch's and learning that Prue was somewhat indisposed and had not yet risen, left a message that he would return later, and having still some hours to spare before his parliamentary duties claimed his brief and perfunctory attendance, repaired to the Cocoa-Tree.

With a pocketful of crisp bank-notes, the card-table irresistibly attracted him, and finding, as he expected, a little coterie of congenial spirits, he passed a pleasant and profitable hour or two with the luck steadily on his side. Then, flushed with victory and in something of a boastful humor, he ran almost into the arms of Lord Beachcombe, on his way out.

"Your pardon, my Lord!" he cried, retreating a step, and bowing low; "'tis a pity you were not here sooner. Nat Bedloe and Lord Eustace have been throwing dice, and the ace came up sixteen times running! 'Gad I never saw such a thing before."

"I never throw dice—can't see any sport in it," drawled Beachcombe; "but that must have been worth seeing. Have you been playing? With your usual good luck, no doubt?"

Sir Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders. "I must make the most of my few remaining days of bachelor freedom," he said. "I intend to settle down when I am married, and become a model man of family. But I am still a gay bachelor, and very much at your service at the club or elsewhere."

"You forget that *I* am already married—and a father, no less!" Beachcombe replied, in his friendliest manner. "Still, I have not entirely given up worldly pleasures. I still book a little wager from time to time, and as my lady has a passion for Ombre, she can not grumble if I still take a hand at écarté or whist. Is your wedding-day fixed? No doubt the marriage of so charming and popular a lady as the Viscountess Brooke will be a brilliant function. All the court will wish to do her honor; perhaps even her Gracious Majesty intends to be present?"

"I fear that the state of her grandmother's health will prevent Lady Prue's indulging her natural desire to shine on this occasion. As the old lady's heiress, of course she can not risk offending her; even at the last minute wills may be changed and fortunes lost for a trifle."

"Ha! is the venerable countess so wealthy as to make her will a matter of importance? Yet she passes for poor, and when I was—when I had the privilege of standing in your present enviable relations to Lady Prue, she assured me—yet

these old women are often miserly—no doubt she will give the world a surprise when her hoards are unearthed. I congratulate you upon your prospects! A bride so incomparable and a great fortune to boot! You are indeed the favored of the gods! With such a prize in your grasp, you will scarcely think it worth while to remember our little wager."

"Five thousand guineas will come in very handy to start housekeeping!" cried Sir Geoffrey gaily. His laugh was echoed with a boisterous merriment that startled him like an explosion. Lord Beachcombe was so little given to mirth, his laughter was so noiseless and so rarely responsive to another man's hilarity, that the jovial shouts and gleeful contortions with which he received Sir Geoffrey's retort would have disturbed less susceptible nerves than his.

The sinister sounds rang in his ears all the afternoon as he sat through a dreary debate which did not interest the few members present sufficiently to interrupt the general conversation. What was Lord Beachcombe laughing at? he asked himself a hundred times, with ever-increasing irritation. He was not a man to take the loss of a large sum of money cheerfully. Yet it was impossible for him to have any suspicion of a serious impediment to the marriage. Still, Sir Geoffrey decided that delay was perilous and a secret known to five persons has fifty loopholes to escape through, so for a vast number of reasons Prue must be induced, by fair means, if possible—but somehow, anyhow—to marry him immediately.

To reassure himself, Sir Geoffrey carefully read the record of the wager and satisfied himself that it merely required him to marry Lady Prudence Brooke within one month of a certain date. There was no stipulation of what kind of marriage it should be, and even should it be contested later. Lord Beachcombe could not repudiate a wager that had been settled, even if the method of winning it were open to criticism. He heartily cursed Robin for failing to be hanged according to reliable calculations, and was even inclined to blame Prue for lack of foresight, but he pooh-poohed the possibility of danger in ignoring the Newgate wedding and the idea of Robin as a serious rival brought a contemptuous sneer to his lips.

At the first opportunity he slipped away and hurried back to Mayfair, where he found Prue and Peggie in a state of pleasurable excitement, and the anteroom thronged with milliners and mercers as in the early times of Lady Prue's lively widowhood.

Surrounded by obsequious tradesmen, anxious to atone for their late importunities by reckless offers of unlimited credit to the reinstated favorite, Prue was in her element. Over her graceful shoulders a chattering, little Frenchwoman draped a filmy scarf, while gloves and ribbons, sacks and "heads," silken hose and rainbow stuffs were spread before her on every side and half-a-dozen voices, raised in laudation of these and other wares too numerous to mention, filled the

air with confusion.

Barbara Sweeting, as high-priestess of fashion, criticized, selected, condemned and approved, while Lady Drumloch, installed on her favorite sofa, half-buried in her choicest cashmeres, voiced an occasional opinion in her crisp, decisive way, to which Prue gave more than usual heed.

"A fair day to you, ladies!" cried Sir Geoffrey. "'I faith, I feel like a stag-beetle among the butterflies." He bent over Prue as though examining a trinket in her hand. "Are you choosing the nuptial garments, dearest?" he whispered. "May I have a voice in the selection?"

"What do you think of this?" she replied, indicating a skirt ruffled to the waist and surmounted by full paniers of brocade stiff with silver embroidery. "'Tis the latest from France and vastly becoming to a slender shape. I shall be glad of advice as I have but little time for selection. The queen's physicians have hurried her off to Tunbridge and she is even now on the road. The royal command to attend her there without loss of time reached me but an hour ago, and to-morrow I must follow post-haste, so I am just gathering a few necessaries. Barbara, would you decide on that blue train or do you think the pink stripe will go better with the silver-gray?"

"What are you going to do with that lace flounce?" interposed Peggie. "You ought to trim the silver brocade with it; it is too lovely for a petticoat."

"Lady Drumloch's lace!" cried Barbara, pouncing on it with cries of ecstasy. "I protest 'tis the finest I ever beheld! You should keep it for your wedding-dress, Prue."

Prue glanced at her grandmother, and the slight smile that passed between them caused Sir Geoffrey an uneasy thrill, though he could not have explained why.

"I wish Prue to look her best," said the old lady. "It is a great opportunity for her to be in waiting upon the queen at this particular time. Her Majesty is to be kept very quiet on account of her gout and few people will have access to her; Prue may be fortunate enough to become indispensable, and the queen can be very indulgent to those who win her favor."

"And after Tunbridge there will be a summer at Windsor, I hope," said Prue, "and mayhap a few weeks at Bath—and who can tell what may happen before next winter?"

Barbara, nothing loath, chimed in with various suggestions, by no means calculated to soothe Sir Geoffrey's temper, which by this time was almost out of control. This was what a man might expect who built his hopes on a shallow coquette without a thought above frills and furbelows, and entirely devoid of a proper sense of duty to her future lord! He felt that to subdue her tricksy spirit was a sacred duty, and that any means would be justified with such a laudable

aim in view.

"Do you actually leave for the Wells to-morrow?" he inquired. "Is it possible for such elaborate preparations to be so quickly achieved?"

"Why, I must do the best I can," she replied regretfully. "This silver brocade can be fitted to me in a couple of hours. Mrs. Buckram has all her women at work upon a couple of morning frocks and a traveling dress, and with those I must be content. There will be no court at any rate for a few days and I am not journeying into a desert. London is not inaccessible, nor is there a better milliner here than little Madame Prim on Tunbridge High Street. Yes, my post-chaise is ordered for to-morrow morning, and I shall start at nine o'clock if I have to go barefoot and bareheaded."

"Might I be permitted to offer you the use of my chariot? Posting is far from agreeable or safe in a hired rattletrap."

She gave him an arch glance. "A thousand thanks!" she laughed, "but I am growing wise in my old age, and I fear that there would be a rare wagging of tongues should I be known to travel in Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert's coach."

"I regret deeply that no service I can offer is acceptable to you, my dear Lady Prudence," said Sir Geoffrey, with grave dignity. "Yet I pray you to remember that should you find yourself in any unpleasant predicament, there is a sword at your service and a hand not unaccustomed to use it—*for that purpose*."

Her eyes fell and he was gratified to observe a passing embarrassment in her manner. Taking the propitious moment for his departure, he rose, and while bending over her hand, murmured, "Have you forgotten that you promised me a favorable answer in a week?"

"If I mistake not I said that 'on my return,' I would hope to be ready with my answer. You see for yourself that my return is uncertain; but when it takes place I promise not to keep you in suspense. Do not forget that in the meantime you are free to—"

"Free to blow my brains out, if you drive me to despair," he interrupted, in a low, tense tone. "But not until I have exhausted every other means of bringing you to reason, dear Lady Prue. Tunbridge is not at the other end of the world, and as you may see me sooner than you expect, I will not say farewell, but—Until our next happy meeting!"

Something in his manner restrained the petulant rejoinder that rose to her lips, and she allowed him to kiss her hand in silence. He lingered a few minutes beside Lady Drumloch, inquiring after her health and condoling with her approaching loss of Prue's delightful company, and then, with a few passing compliments to Peggie and a brief skirmish with Barbara, he bowed himself out with consummate aplomb.

"Dear Gossip," said Barbara, when he was out of hearing, "be on your guard;

there goes one who will not wear his willow submissively."

"He must wear it as he pleases," she replied, "or not at all if he prefer. I protest I'll not contradict him, if it suits him to say he jilted me."

"Is his successor chosen?" queried Barbara archly. "Do I know him?—is he—"

"There is no successor," Prue interrupted hastily; "no more lovers for me. I am sick of courting and compliments, sick to death of 'hearts at my feet' and 'swords at my service,' and tongues more false than the one and sharper than the other ready and waiting to stab me in the back; or, worse still, in the reputation!"

CHAPTER XXVII
A DIFFERENT HIGHWAYMAN

After all, Prue's departure was by no means as early as she had intended. Quite a number of little hindrances contributed to the delay. An indispensable garment was not forthcoming at the promised time, another must absolutely be altered at the last minute. Messengers were despatched in hot haste for trifles unaccountably forgotten, and lingered upon their errands in the most provoking way. And when, at last, the packing was finished, Prue disappeared into her grandmother's chamber and remained so long in conference there, that Peggie, on guard to ward off interruptions, at last ventured to knock at the door and suggest that noon was swiftly approaching.

Receiving no reply, she gently opened the door, and there was Prue, at Lady Drumloch's feet, weeping bitterly, while the old lady comforted her with caresses and tender words.

"I do not blame you, child," Peggie overheard her say; "a brave man and a loyal soldier—what better could any woman hope for? Let him serve his king first, and meanwhile your influence may, perhaps, open the way for his return. And mayhap I may find a way to help you, though I am very old and useless now. Come in, Peggie; don't stand there letting in the draft. Is it time for Prue to depart? Is the post-chaise ready packed?"

Peggie exclaimed and ran out to find that the post-chaise had not yet arrived. Then there was scurrying and scampering, and James, bareheaded and bereft of his stately deliberation, hurried to the livery-stable, and presently returned in the belated vehicle. The postboy, with many oaths and strange-

sounding asseverations, protested that his master had mistaken the order for noon, and that he had been loitering about the yard all morning, waiting for the appointed time. Another explanation might have been afforded by Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert, who could also have cleared up the mysterious presence of two golden guineas in the postboy's pocket.

Thus it was within an hour or so of noon, when Prue, having received Lady Drumloch's blessing and exchanged many kisses and last words with Peggie (from whom she had rarely been parted even for a week at a time), took her seat in the post-chaise with her two substantial leather valises strapped on the roof and her valuables in the dressing-case under her feet.

She had often traveled the Tunbridge Road before in attendance upon Queen Anne, whose physicians were in the habit of recommending the Tunbridge waters as a corrective to the royal indulgence in the pleasures of the table. So when she had amused herself by observing the queer little stalls on London Bridge, where the closely packed throng compelled the chaise to proceed at a foot-pace, and wondered why everybody and everything looked so strange and different in Southwark, from those on the more fashionable side of the river, she soon grew tired of the squalid streets and dreary country beyond and still more bored by having no one to talk to, and composing herself in a corner of the carriage, courted such uneasy slumber as the rough road permitted.

During the earlier stages of the journey there was no lack of company. In those days travelers, unless well armed or otherwise protected, were greatly averse to solitude even in broad daylight, and Prue, though far from timid, was not displeased to find that the queen's visit to Tunbridge, in the balmy springtime, was drawing thither quite a rush of visitors.

Gallants on horseback, lumbering family-coaches and dashing chariots followed one another in quick succession, some forging ahead, only to be overtaken, perhaps, in a ditch with a wheel off, or at the post-house waiting for relays—a mishap that kept Prue waiting a couple of hours at Seven Oaks, to her great chagrin. However, the inn was hospitable and a good dinner compensated in some measure for the delay, though the afternoon shadows were perceptibly lengthening when the journey was resumed.

The road was more lonely now, those lucky folk who had secured the earliest relays having hurried forward to make the most of the daylight, and others, whose turn was yet to come, lingering impatiently behind or resigning themselves to the dire alternative of spending a night at the inn.

When Prue, after the first mile or so, put her head out of the window and surveyed the long stretch of road, with dense woods on one hand and a desolate vastness of uncultivated common on the other, she rather wished that she too had taken the better part of valor and broken her journey at Seven Oaks, instead

of risking the worst part in the declining day. However, looking back, she saw another carriage at no great distance, and the sense of companionship relieved her fears so thoroughly that she once more settled herself in her corner and fell into a pleasant train of thought.

Planning how to exercise her most winning arts upon the queen, who for a whole week of semi-invalidism would be chiefly dependent upon her for amusement, Prue mentally acted half-a-dozen charming little scenes in which she would relate Robin's adventures in so moving and pathetic a fashion that the queen would be only too ready to applaud the climax and bestow her sanction and blessing upon the romantic pair. Robin would be recalled and pardoned, and perhaps his devotion, combined with her own eloquence, would bring about a reconciliation between the queen and her half-brother, who, in gratitude, would shower honors upon his loyal follower in the happy days when King James the Third was come into his own.

Prue was roused out of these pleasant fancies by the rough jolting of the chaise. She looked out on the desolate landscape, rendered still more dreary by the rising mist that veiled the sinking sun. On one hand was a vast common, stretching away into the vague distance, on the other rose a steep incline, thickly wooded and already gloomy with twilight shadows, though all else was still bright. No habitation was in sight, nor any sign of life except the carriage she had previously observed and which, she remarked with some surprise, kept almost within hailing distance without any apparent haste to overtake her. She reflected that perhaps the occupant was timid and even more anxious for company than herself.

The jolting and rocking of the chaise increased so much that at last Prue let down the front window and remonstrated with the postboys.

"Pray drive a little less recklessly," she cried; "I can not keep my seat and I fear you will land me in a ditch."

"'Tis a bad piece of road, my Lady," replied the senior, bringing his horses to a standstill. "'Ere, Jimmie," he added to his assistant; "'old the 'orses while I looks to that near hind wheel; 'tain't none too staunch and this cursed cross-road is enough to shake the Lord Mayor's coach to splinters."

"Cross-road!" cried Prue. "Have you left the highway—? in the dusk—?" she was about to descend, scarcely knowing what she did in her sudden alarm.

"Keep your seat, Lady," the man replied; "'tis but a bit of a short-cut I took, to save 'alf-an-hour 'cos it's growin' late." He fumbled a little with the hind wheel and then remounted his horse.

Meanwhile the carriage which had followed passed and went ahead in leisurely fashion.

Prue's post-chaise resumed the journey, more shaky and jerky than before,

although scarcely moving at a walking pace. Very wide-awake now, and extremely uneasy with vivid recollections of postboys in league with robbers, and other perils to unprotected females, Prue sat as quiet as the rough jolting would allow and tried to comfort herself with the assurance that the next post-house could not be far distant, and that she could certainly find means there to have the wheels looked to or get another chaise if this one were unsafe.

But scarcely a hundred yards farther on there was a crash and a shock and Prue was lying in a heap in the overturned chaise. The shouts of the postboys, the trampling of the startled horses mingled with her screams of pain and terror—then other voices added to the tumult and in the midst of it all the door was forced open and Prue lifted out and gently deposited on the roadside.

"The lady has fainted," said a voice that sounded familiar. "Search for water, one of you boys; is there no brook or stream near by?"

"Nothing nearer than the river that *I* knows of, your Honor," said the man, "'less there's some in yon ditch—"

"You need seek no ditch-water for me," said Prue, sitting up and struggling with the wraps in which her head was entangled. "Since you are there, Sir Geoffrey, you may as well lend me some assistance."

"Good Gad! Lady Prue!" cried the baronet, with a vast show of astonishment. "By what happy chance am I fortunate enough to be of use to you? Methought you were safe in Tunbridge hours ago."

"No doubt that is why you have been following my carriage ever since I left Seven Oaks," she retorted. "'Tis strange you should also have taken a short cut which seems to lead to nowhere in particular!"

"It has led you into an awkward predicament, my dearest Prudence," he replied gravely. "I shudder to think of the straits to which you would have been reduced, had I not been—quite providentially—passing at the critical moment."

"Well, as Providence has been kind enough to send me a knight-errant, perhaps he will tell me where I am and how far it is to the next post-house," said Prue, not very graciously, for Sir Geoffrey's presence was too opportune to appear quite unpremeditated.

"The next post-house?" he reflected. "Post-boy, how far is the next post-house?"

"Four mile or thereabout, your Honor," the man returned, beginning to unstrap the valises.

"Is there any inn or cottage near, where I can wait while you take horse to the post-house and fetch me another chaise?" inquired Prue. The man scratched his head doubtfully and looked at Sir Geoffrey as if for instructions.

"Well, fellow, can not you answer the lady? You surely know what houses of entertainment there are on the road to Tunbridge," said Sir Geoffrey.

"There's a pike a mile or so ahead," said the man, "but 'tis no place for a lady to sit down in—a bit of a wooden cabin, and the pike-keeper's a rough blade."

Prue's dismay was unutterable. A mile to walk along a rugged country road in the dusk, and an indefinite period of waiting in the hut of a turnpike-keeper! She was silent for sheer lack of words to do justice to the situation.

"There is an alternative that will relieve you of all embarrassment," said Sir Geoffrey, after a sufficiently long pause to allow her to realize the horror of her dilemma. "My coach is not many yards away, and if you will not honor me by accepting my escort to Tunbridge, permit me, at least, to carry you to the nearest post-house, where no doubt you can obtain a conveyance for the rest of the journey."

Prue looked down at her little feet in their dainty, high-heeled slippers, and wondered how far they would support her along that rough, uneven road. She rose from the grassy bank where Sir Geoffrey had deposited her and a little cry escaped her. Though uninjured in the breakdown, she was shaken and bruised, and would have fallen had not Sir Geoffrey caught her in his arms, from which she extricated herself with great promptness. Drawing back a pace or two, she raised her lovely eyes searchingly to his, and though, in their clear depths he could read a hundred swift suspicions, he met their scrutiny without flinching.

"Sir Geoffrey," she said, after a brief pause, "I thank you for your offer, and accept your escort as far as the post-house, on condition that if we should pass any decent cottage, you will permit me to seek its shelter until a chaise can be sent to me."

"Your lack of confidence wounds and astonishes me, Lady Prudence," he replied, with bitterness. "After my long devotion and the vows that have been exchanged between us, it is strange that you should impose restrictions upon me that would sound injurious to a stranger. But I submit—as I have always done—to your lightest caprice."

"This is no caprice," she returned, with cold reserve; "my circumstances are peculiar and I am bound to beware of appearances."

He bowed low and taking her hand without further resistance, led her to his chariot, upon which the men were already loading her valises. Her jewel-box and the other contents of the chaise having been safely bestowed, Sir Geoffrey took his seat beside her, his valet returned to the rumble and they drove off, leaving the postboys to patch up the damaged vehicle and convey it, as best they might, to the nearest inn.

Glancing back at them, Prue observed with satisfaction that another carriage had come into view, following the same road. Greatly relieved at this proof that the "short-cut" was not, as she had feared, an unfrequented by-road, she relaxed her austerity, and was soon chattering with her natural vivacity. Sir Ge-

offrey was not slow to respond to her friendly mood, which he mistook for a sign that her fears were allayed and that her inveterate coquetry, momentarily under severe restraint, was ready for fresh development. His tones soon became tender, and his eyes glowed with a passion that he no longer attempted to moderate. He seized her hands, and, regardless of her struggles, pressed them over and over again to his lips. Then growing bolder still, he attempted to draw her closer and clasp her in his arms.

"Let me go, Sir Geoffrey, you are taking a dastardly advantage of me!" she cried, repulsing him with all her strength. "Release me! I insist upon your setting me down instantly! If I can not walk, I can wait on the roadside for some honest passer-by—"

"Never, dearest angel; never shall you leave my arms until you promise to put an end to my tortures. I have endured more from you than mortal man can be expected to brook with patience! You are in my power, sweetest Prue! A lucky chance has given you to my arms, and if I were to let you go now, I should deserve to lose you for ever."

"You lost me," cried Prue, "the day you gave me to Robin Freemantle. Now I belong to him; before God and man I am his wife."

"Tush! a felon—a gallows-bird!" cried Sir Geoffrey angrily. "Let me hear no more of that farce. I believe the man is dead; but if not so in fact, he is dead to the law, and you are free—free, dearest, to make me happy and to be as happy yourself as the truest, fondest lover woman ever had can make you when he is your devoted husband. Come, my dear Prue, throw aside these coy humors and be your own sweet self once more—the adorable creature—"

"Oh! spare me these raptures!" protested Prue. "Even one's own praises become wearisome by repetition. In very truth I am too tired to enjoy your conversation this evening, Sir Geoffrey. To-morrow, if you are in Tunbridge, and I am rested after this wearisome journey, we will discuss this matter and settle it finally. For the present, I beg of you not to disturb me until we reach the post-house; my head is dizzy and I ache from head to foot, and I fain would rest me."

"I grieve to discompose you, dearest, but to-morrow will be too late to discuss our marriage—though not, I hope, the happiness it will have brought us. I have a special license in my pocket and there is no reason that I know of, why it should not be used to-night."

Prue sat up so suddenly that Sir Geoffrey thought she was going to jump out of the carriage and laid a detaining hand upon her arm. She attempted, but unsuccessfully, to release herself.

"As to whether *we* go to Tunbridge to-morrow—that will depend on you," he went on. "At present we are going, as fast as horses can take us, in the opposite

direction. We shall arrive, presently, at a little church, where we can be quietly and quickly married, and can then, if you wish, resume our journey; or, if you are of my way of thinking, we can break it for a day or two, at a charming rustic retreat which has been placed at my disposal for the honeymoon. What say you, dearest?"

"I say that you must be mad to talk to me in this way," said Prue haughtily. "I insist that you take me at once to a post-house where I can get a chaise and proceed to Tunbridge. We can not be so very far out of the way."

"You are mistaken, love," he replied tranquilly. "At Seven Oaks your post-boy, instructed by me, turned off the Tunbridge Road in the direction of the secluded country house which our good friend Aarons offered me the use of, for as long as you wish to occupy it. That is where we are going now: it depends on you how long we remain there."

"In that case," she retorted promptly, "we will not remain an hour—a minute—in fact, we will not go there at all. I protest that rather than go another yard with you, I would walk back, barefoot, to Seven Oaks, or even to Tunbridge."

"The choice is not yours, Prudence," said Sir Geoffrey, his smooth voice in strong contrast to the black frown, that shadowed his face at her imperious tone and the indignant energy with which she repulsed his advances. "This time I will not be balked; I am resolved to give you no further opportunity of fooling me."

Prue laughed contemptuously. "Do you think you can marry me by force?" she cried. "What priest would marry us when I tell him the truth?"

"By the time you have been my guest for two or three days you will, no doubt, prefer returning to court as Lady Beaudesert, the heroine of a romantic marriage, to braving the scandal of a mysterious elopement as the frisky Widow Brooke."

"Villain!" she ejaculated. "I would brave any scandal rather than marry a wretch capable of such treachery!"

"We shall see," returned her captor, at the same time thrusting his head out of the window and calling to the postilion, "Stop, fool, is not this the ferry? See the inn yonder and the boats." The coach came to a standstill and Sir Geoffrey's man jumped down from the rumble. "Go rouse the landlord and call up the ferryman," said his master; "bid him hasten if he would earn a guinea for his services."

The moment the carriage stopped Prue began to scream, "Help—oh! help—is there no one here to help a poor woman in sore distress?"

"No one, dearest," replied Sir Geoffrey, opening the door and alighting in the dusty highway, "except your devoted lover and slave. Will it please you to descend? We have but little farther to go, and that by water."

Prue crouched back in the farthest corner of the coach. "I'll not leave this

carriage until my cries bring help. Help—oh! help!"

"Call your loudest, pretty one; 'twill give me a good excuse for smothering your cries with kisses. An' if you force me to carry you, so much the better for me: I shall enjoy the bliss of holding you in my arms all the sooner."

"You think you can insult me because I am a woman and unarmed," she cried, too indignant to be alarmed, "but I have ten daggers at my finger-tips to defend my honor."

"Your honor, dearest Prue, is in no jeopardy from me. I seek, on the contrary, to shield you from the disgrace of being pointed at as a felon's widow by making you the wife of an honorable gentleman."

"How dare you call my husband a felon?" she cried, "and his wife a widow? He is not dead, and if he were, I would not marry you."

"I swear to you that Robin Freemantle is dead," Sir Geoffrey asseverated. A voice from the shadow of the trees responded in sonorous and tragic tones, "You lie!"

CHAPTER XXVIII
THE DEAREST TREASURE

Somewhere about the time that Prue was leaving Seven Oaks, Robin Freemantle, accompanied by two friends and followed by the faithful Steve, rode out of the stately gates of a country mansion a few miles beyond St. Mary's Cray.

At a short distance they left the highroad and plunged into a deep and narrow lane, showing few signs of use and leading into others as neglected and man-forsaken. When the lanes were wide enough the three rode abreast, with heads bent together in earnest conference. Papers were handed to Robin which he concealed about his person, and last instructions reiterated, to which he listened attentively, but without enthusiasm.

"You think I am sure of finding a boat at Hailing, Percival?" he inquired, when the others became silent.

"We shall avoid Hailing and seek the ferry a mile or so above," replied the younger of his companions. "The ferry is little used; indeed I do not know how there comes to be one at all, for the road is unfrequented and I know of no habitation but the little inn where, however, there are always boats for hire—built possibly by the ferryman himself. The tide serves about nine o'clock and with a

favorable wind we should be below Rochester by moonrise. No one will be looking for you on the Medway, Captain, and before morning you will be safely past Sheerness and, I hope, on board the *Petite Vierge*, while the spies of the government are keeping strict watch for you between London Bridge and Gravesend."

"I would give ten years of my life," said Robin moodily, "for one more day in England."

"Your life is not your own to give, Captain de Cliffe," said the third man, who, even in this solitude, kept his wide-brimmed beaver slouched so as completely to conceal his face. "It belongs to King James, and should you be arrested with these documents upon you, hundreds of lives, besides your own, may pay for the mischance."

"I do not need to be reminded of my duty, even by your grace," said Robin proudly.

"I know it well," returned the other pacifically, "and when you return with the king, in triumph—may it be soon—His Majesty will know how to reward you."

"Aye, that he will," muttered Steve, who was close enough to catch some of the conversation, in which he was greatly interested. "'Virtue is its own reward' is the motto of the Stuarts!"

"The highest reward King James can offer is to send me back as fast as horse and ship can carry me," cried Robin. "Even now—"

"Even now, Captain," Steve broke in, "you are lucky in getting away alive. Don't forget there is a price upon your head and the law's protection—save the mark!—will be withdrawn in a few hours. After that your life is forfeit wherever the flag of England flies."

"*My* life! When has it not been forfeit?" returned Robin carelessly. "But your grace can be at ease; I have given my word to carry these letters safely to Paris and I will do so, God sparing me."

"Enough! I should never have thought of doubting you, had not mine own eyes seen you at the masquerade with a certain fair sorceress whose spells are far more dangerous than sword or bullet. Right glad am I that Fate drives you from her before we lose one of our most valued captains in the same snare that has entangled the feet of all heroes, ancient and modern. Let us lose no time, for the love of Heaven; your only safety lies in swift flight!"

And with malicious laughter, in which the other man heartily joined, he put spurs to his horse and urged the cavalcade to such speed as the heavy ground would permit.

In spite of their haste, the sun was sinking behind the mists that rose from the river, before they saw its shimmer through the trees. The road upon which they emerged from the bridle-path took a sharp turn at this spot and passed close to a little inn—a mere peasant's cottage, for all the announcement on the creaking

signboard of entertainment for man and beast, and further information as to the hire and sale of boats at the adjacent ferry.

"Go forward, Steve, and see what folks are about, and if there be a seaworthy boat to be had, while we keep within this thicket out of sight of passers-by," said the duke, backing his horse into the wood, while Steve and Percival dismounted to reconnoiter the premises.

Steve quickly returned alone. "The ferry is close at hand," he said, "but I can find neither ferryman nor landlord. However, there are boats a-plenty at the landing, and if we press one for the king's service, 'tis no more than a loyal subject should rejoice to contribute to the cause! The wind is fair, the tide is on the turn, I can hoist a sail and handle an oar, and 'twill be strange if we leave not Sheerness in our wake at sunrise."

"You are sure there is no one spying about?" the duke inquired nervously. "How if they are merely hiding? Stay you here, Captain—I will examine the inn for myself—it will not do for you to fall into an ambush. And it would be well for Steve to stand sentinel at the bend of the road; he can warn us in time of any approaching wayfarer, for if I mistake not, the road over the waste lands can be plainly seen for several miles."

Left alone, Robin dropped the mask of careless gaiety under which he had hidden his dejection from his companions. About to leave the land that contained Prue, on a mission whose risks he had often braved without a thought except of audacious delight in danger and reckless defiance of the law from which he was an outcast, he was now beset by a thousand apprehensions for which he could have given no reason, but which chilled his loyal ardor and hung like an incubus upon his soul. How could he wish for his once-beloved Paris while Prue was in England? What cared he for the safe asylum of the French court while Prue in the English court was wooed by a score of suitors and pressed by dangers and temptations from which he was powerless to protect her? The setting sun seemed like an emblem of his own fate—except that it would surely rise again on the morrow, while he might sink for ever into forgetfulness. "Oh! my heart's joy, my only love, shall we never meet again?" he murmured. "Oh! for one more look into those sweet eyes; one last kiss from those beloved lips! Must I go without a farewell word; without sure hope that she will ever bestow another thought on me? Before God she is my wife—yet the outlaw has no God—no country—no wife—and how dare I hope that she who took me for an hour's frolic, would not some day gladly be rid of me for ever?"

Robin's reflections, painful and absorbing as they were, did not prevent his keeping a close watch on Steve, who now turned, and, with many signs of caution, retraced his steps. At the same time the distant sound of wheels became audible.

"Conceal yourself, Captain, there are travelers coming this way; we must withdraw until they have passed," said Steve, pushing his way through the bushes and preparing to lead his horse farther into the wood.

"We are four," said Robin. "It would ill become us to turn tail without knowing what we fly from."

"Four! Would you attempt to draw his grace into a broil?"

"A broil! Pshaw!" cried Robin impatiently. "Some pursy citizen in a post-chaise, belike, or passengers for the ferry."

"There's another carriage following the one you hear," said Steve. "Shall I warn the duke and Mr. Percival?"

"No, no! let us play highwaymen once more and frighten them away," laughed Robin, quickly adjusting a black mask and handing one to Steve. As he did so a hand was laid somewhat roughly on his arm and the duke, in low but emphatic tones, interrupted him:

"A truce to this headstrong folly; your rashness will ruin everything."

"I'm in the right temper for a tussle," returned Robin resignedly. "Yet if these travelers do not molest us they may pass on their way unchallenged for me," and, reluctantly, he withdrew a few paces farther into the thicket, just as a coach and four rounded the bend in the road and drew up not many paces away.

A man jumped out of the rumble, and hurrying to the inn-door, battered and kicked at it, loudly shouting, "Ferry—ho, Ferry—where is the Ferryman? Ho, Landlord, open your door quickly and do not waste our time."

An upper window opened cautiously, just wide enough to show a night-capped head within.

"Who calls for the ferry at this hour?" demanded a quavering voice.

"Why, 'tis early yet," replied the man; "we are travelers who would cross in hot haste."

"Your haste will have time to cool—the ferryman beds t'other side the river and comes not over unless he brings a fare," said the landlord.

"Is there no way of calling him? He will be well paid for his trouble; and you, too, Goodman, may find it worth while to come down and serve my noble master," cried the man.

"There's a horn chained to yon post; blow it, if you will, an' if he hears you, mayhap he'll bring his boat across. If you want food and drink, you'll find none fit for the quality nearer than Hailing. My wife is sick a-bed and I'm lame with the rheumatics, but I'll come down and open if you'll have patience." And the head was withdrawn and the casement shut.

In the meantime the carriage door was opened and a man descended. His figure, which a ray of the setting sun brought into strong relief, was immediately recognized by Robin, who muttered, "Sir Geoffrey Beaudesert! What brings him

across my path again?" and pushing forward a little, caught the sound of his own name.

"I swear to you that Robin Freemantle is dead!"

"You lie!" shouted Robin.

Sir Geoffrey started and looked round. "What was that?" he exclaimed uneasily.

Prue instantly renewed her cries, "Help! help! If ye be true men, come to my rescue!"

Two masked and cloaked horsemen promptly advanced, leveling their pistols at Sir Geoffrey's head.

"Stand and deliver!" commanded the taller of them, in deep, vibrant tones.

At the sound of that beloved voice, Prue, with a cry of joy, sprang out of the carriage, and rushing to Robin, who was already afoot, threw herself into his arms.

"Oh! joy—oh! Robin, dear, dear Robin, Heaven has sent you to deliver me from this villain!"

At the sight of their meeting and the maddening certainty of his own utter discomfiture, Sir Geoffrey could not contain his fury, but drawing his sword, would have hurled himself upon Robin had not Prue stood between them with outstretched arms.

"Stand aside, woman!" he vociferated, beside himself with rage. "Must I kill you to get at him? Coward! are you going to shelter yourself behind a woman?"

"Stand aside, Prue," said Robin, in a tone she dared not disobey, and drawing his sword he placed himself on the defensive.

Sir Geoffrey was an adroit swordsman and a practised duellist, but he soon found he had no mean antagonist in Robin. It was a match between the clever master of fence and the soldier accustomed to fight with his life in his hand, regardless of carte and tierce. At pose and trick Sir Geoffrey was the superior, but he was under the disadvantage of a tempestuous fury that prevented his making the best use of the dexterity that had brought him out victor from numerous encounters, while Robin's coolness more than compensated for lack of finesse, and his skill as a swordsman soon proved itself. Sir Geoffrey, in spite of his passionate onslaught, was gradually beaten off the roadside and driven step by step to the door of the inn, where Robin, calm as though they had been merely fencing for amusement, goaded him into rashness with an exaggerated display of caution, and taking quick advantage of a wild lunge, disarmed him and sent his sword flying a dozen paces away.

At the clash of weapons and sound of warfare, the inn-door opened a few inches and a bald old head peered cautiously out.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" piped a trembling voice, "mine is a respectable

house; pray you do not get me into trouble. I implore you, if there is murder to be done, for Heaven's sake go a little farther up the road; there is a quiet spot, not five minutes' walk away, where no one will disturb you while you kill each other."

"It is all over, good mine host; 'twas but a friendly bout; no one is the worse for it by so much as a cut finger," laughed Robin. "Steve, pick up Sir Geoffrey's sword and restore it to him. Escort him into the inn and treat him courteously until I call for you." As they disappeared, he turned to Prue, who had watched the duel with mingled fear and joy, and now hurried to his outstretched arms.

"Oh! Robin; why didn't you kill him?" she cried.

"Why, 'twas a duel, dearest Prue, not an assassination—" he began.

"He would have killed you if he could, I'll be sworn," she protested. "I saw murder in his eye when he rushed upon us, and surely you would avenge the treachery that brought me to this lonely place with a man I detest, who desired to force or shame me into marrying him?"

"I am almost grateful to him," murmured Robin, with his lips to hers, "that he brought you here and procured me the inestimable happiness of seeing you once more and bidding you farewell."

"Is it indeed happiness for you to bid me farewell?" pouted Prue reproachfully.

"Almost—compared to the unutterable anguish of leaving you, perhaps for ever, without."

Prue drew herself away just far enough to look into his eyes with bewitching tenderness. "Does it grieve you so much to leave me, Robin?" she said softly.

"Can you ask, Heart of my heart?" he replied. "You little know how sorely I am torn in twain by the duty that separates me from you."

"Then why should we separate?" she cajoled, nestling against him.

"Oh! tempt me not, Beloved!" he implored, feeling himself melting like wax under her touch. "Honor and loyalty call me to France—

"Then take me with you!" she cried, in ringing tones.

A hand was laid on Robin's shoulder with no gentle emphasis. "What folly is this?" demanded a harsh voice. "De Cliffe, I have overheard the wiles of this enchantress, and although I believe your loyalty is beyond reproach, I can not allow her to test your powers of resistance too far. Can you really believe that she wishes to accompany you? Bah! 'tis but another coil to bind you more securely and make your escape more difficult. But it shall not avail, I swear on the bones of St. Anthony! Viscountess Brooke, do you wish to have this man's death on your conscience? If so, use your arts on him and you will soon be gratified; for I myself will run my sword through his heart, rather than see him a traitor to his king."

"Your grace misjudges me," said Prue proudly. "I come, as you should know, of right loyal stock, and nothing is further from my wishes than to hinder his departure. I but claim the right to go wherever he goes."

"The right! What right?" sneered the duke.

"The right, in the sight of God and man, of a wife to follow her husband," said Prue unflinchingly.

As she stood there so beautiful and undaunted, the love-light in her glorious eyes seemed to irradiate her whole face with indescribable tenderness and dignity. Even the angry duke dropped his eyes, abashed, and his tone was sensibly lowered when he exclaimed, "Wife? Husband? De Cliffe, what is the meaning of this midsummer madness?"

"Oh! Prue," cried Robin, "you know not what you say; how could you dream of sharing the fortunes of an exile—an outlaw?"

She raised her eyes to his, brimming with tears. "Because I love you, Robin," she sighed pathetically but bravely, "and life without you is worthless to me." Then, with a sudden change to petulance, "Oh! why do you leave me to do all the love-making? Is it not shame enough that I was a petitioner for your hand, but that now I must come as a beggar for your heart? Sure, I did think you loved me—a little," and she buried her face in her hands.

"Sweetheart, it is because I love you so dearly that I am loath to let you throw away your beauty and sweetness on a poor soldier of fortune," said Robin, scarcely less agitated than she.

"Who is apparently ready to ruin himself for the idle caprice of a frivolous coquette!" interposed the duke, with asperity.

The carriage which had followed Sir Geoffrey's had arrived while the duel was in progress, and drawn up unnoticed at the bend of the road. Its sole occupant alighted, and lingering in the shadow of the trees, became an interested spectator, himself unobserved.

"De Cliffe," continued the duke, "time presses and you must not linger. Think only of your duty and be firm."

There was a brief silence, which Prue broke, addressing her husband, "I will not force myself upon you, Robin. Tell me what you wish and I will obey, even if it breaks my heart. But if you do not take me away, what will you do with me? You can not escort me yourself—you can hardly return me on Sir Geoffrey's hands!—Am I to return to Tunbridge on foot and alone?"

"I will charge myself with your ladyship's safe conduct," interposed the duke impatiently.

"A thousand thanks," returned Prue, sweeping a profound curtsey. "Your grace's courage has not been overrated, yet methinks, if you reflect upon what might happen when some one told your charming duchess that you rode into

Tunbridge at break of day with the Widow Brooke on the pillion, you will be grateful for my rejection of your offer." She turned to Robin with a submissive air that made at least one onlooker smile, "I will plead no more with you, Robin, but if I must leave you, swear to return to me and I will be true to you if I have to wait fifty years."

She threw her arms round his neck and drawing his face down to her, kissed him with passionate abandon, then bursting into tears, sobbed out, "If you can leave me now, Robin, farewell!"

There is a limit to the powers of endurance of the most resolute, and Robin could stand no more. He clasped her in his arms and soothed her with the tenderest caresses. "I will never leave you, my wife," he declared; "no one shall take you from me. You are mine and only Death shall rob me of the dearest treasure on earth. Say no more, my lord Duke; it is settled. My wife will go to France with me. The king will welcome the daughter of his father's friend as the bride of his own faithful servant."

"If your mind is made up I have no more to say," returned the other, with a look of deep annoyance, "except that if the Viscountess Brooke—"

"Pardon me—the Lady Prudence de Cliffe," interposed a bland voice, and Lord Beachcombe stepped out of the shadow, and taking Prue's hand, pressed a respectful salute upon it. "Permit me, Captain, to congratulate you on your marriage and to welcome your fair bride into the family of which I am the head. I had reason, dear Lady Prue, to fear that you might be molested on your journey, so took the liberty of following Sir Geoffrey's carriage, to be at hand in case the road to Tunbridge might lead to—just such a breakdown as you suffered a while ago, and just such a romantic rescue as our gallant friend had prepared for you. I rejoice that I arrived in time to witness the reunion of husband and wife—such a delightful surprise for all of us!—and to wish them a happy future—beyond the sea!"

At the approach of Lord Beachcombe, the duke had pulled his hat lower over his face and drawn his mantle more closely about him. With a sign to Robin, he glided away among the trees, and only the sound of hoof-beats on the road marked his retreat. Percival, who had been too much engrossed in hunting out a water-tight boat to take notice of what was passing within a few yards of him, now approached, but stopped short at the sight of so many unexpected figures.

"This is my wife, Percival, who has decided at the last moment, to accompany me to France," said Robin. "Is there room for her in that boat or shall we need a bigger one?"

"Plenty of room," cried Percival, taking in the scene with eyes bulging with bewilderment. "But, Lady Prudence! 'tis impossible for you to brave the night in an open boat and the perils of crossing the Channel in a fishing smack!"

"Why, there 'tis!" she laughed, with saucy confidence; "if 'twere possible, 'twould scarcely be worth the doing! Steve, will you help Sir Geoffrey's varlets carry my valises on board? Within the carriage you will find my jewel-box and other trifles! 'Tis not much in the way of wedding-equipage for a court-lady, but 'tis more than I had when I was waylaid on Bleakmoor and the highwayman could find nothing—at least, nothing portable—to rob me of," and she threw Robin a glance of irresistible drollery.

"This will indeed be a racy dish of scandal for your friends, madam," said Sir Geoffrey, from the inn-door.

"It will lose none of its spice in passing through your hands, Sir Geoffrey," she retorted, with asperity. "Pray do not forget to give yourself full credit for your share in the escapade."

"I will take good care of your reputation, Lady Prudence, and also of Sir Geoffrey's," interposed Beachcombe. At his voice, Sir Geoffrey started and turned livid.

"'Od's Death!'" he exclaimed. "What brings you here of all men?"

"Why, just a trifling wager; I think you'll own I've won it fairly!" returned the earl, as Sir Geoffrey strode away, and calling to his men with curses, flung himself into his carriage and drove off at a gallop. Lord Beachcombe, scarcely waiting to press a hurried kiss on Prue's hand and wish her long life and happiness, followed him with no less speed.

"The sail is hoisted and the baggage aboard," Steve announced. "Will it please your ladyship to hasten; we should be halfway to Rochester by now."

Robin carried his bride over the rough causeway and made her as comfortable as circumstances would permit, in the stern of the boat. With his ample cloak he covered her from the chill night air, and taking his place beside her, gave the word to push off.

Steve guided the boat into mid-stream, then set himself to steer by the sail that pulled and strained from the mast under a favoring wind. Percival, in the bow, kept a keen watch for any sign of danger to his precious freight, and behind, in the darkness, Prue lay in the arms of her lover-husband.

THE END

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