

CHAPTER XI

“THE MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE”

Conscious of her influence over animals, Margaret clung on in the desperate hope of getting that stubborn mouth round: and in one final effort she pulled with hard backward strain: but now the old reins snapped.

Whereupon the wheezy nag, in free career, went scattering the muddy road homewards. No device could now check him: and in a great leap she alighted with elastic ease on the grass.

Backward she hurried to the Grandcourt road. The gipsy was still behind, and already late for the rendezvous at seven. Her feet grew light with the joy and rage of contest: if he beat, he would not beat by much, perhaps! She knew how to *run*, at any rate!

She was not, however, far gone, when the rotatory, clattery, spattery tramp of the donkey behind her was heard on the roadway. The gipsy drove straight to ride her down, and as he dashed past, leant back, shaking his fist and jargoning. A bend of hill hid him; but soon there rose before her the woods of Grandcourt.

The Duke had sent to ask Lise d'Arblay if she would join him (everyone dined early, about six), but she had declined on the ground of *migraine*. As the hour for Lovell's arrival drew on, her feverish solitude became intolerable; she descended into the grounds; when he was *late* she knew the anguish of the rack. It was twenty minutes to eight before, on the agreed west side, she saw him come galloping. At that moment Margaret was running up the avenue; but she had a longish *detour* round the lake.

Lovell handed to Lise Danda's note, and at the same time said:

“Is there anybody has any suspicion of this matter of yours, lady?”

She glanced quick surprise. “No, I hope not Why so?”

“A woman gave me chase on the road, you see. She isn't far off, either. She's coming here certain. She cut off my basket with the brat, and made me late, you see. 'Cod! you should be careful, lady.”

Lise turned upon him a blanched face. “There must be some mistake. . . . No one knows—”

“Well, I tell you what I saw, lady. Is everything right for to-night?”

“Everything: Lovell, be punctual, I charge you, Lovell. You are sure she is coming here?”

“Sure, lady.”

“Well, we shall see. At half after eight, remember,—and *nine*. How does she look, this woman?”

“A young woman she is, active on the legs, and a brune, lady.”

Lise turned one way, Lovell the other. She walked across the lawn, and spoke to a footman in the hall.

“If a young woman comes, wanting to see the Duke, or having any message, send her into that room yonder to me. He will be unwilling, I think, to see anyone to-night, being busy with Government affairs.”

“Very good, madam.”

Lise was the mistress of the house.

“Has the Duke returned to the library since dinner?” she asked.

“Yes, madam.”

Lise, in a little arrased music-room near, touched a harpsichord, an oboe, then a little piccolo, her own, brought from London, and played a bar. She then laid a book upon her placid lap, and

waited ten minutes: and now before her appeared the face of Margaret, its hot damask flush parching three half-dried streamlets of sweat, the golden eyes, and wild.

In contrast, her own creamy face lay in profiled repose on the red-cushioned chair.

“You have been exerting yourself,” said she, “one sees that. Sit down, will you? Something is the matter.”

“Are you Lady Grandcourt?”

“There is no such person. There was a Lady Elwell, who is dead. Tell me—”

“Are you the mistress of the house?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see—the Duke of Wellington?”

“I am *afraid* not”

“Oh, don’t say that, pray, pray. I do so *want* to see himself.”

“He is busy. But he might see you, if the matter is important. Tell me—”

“I am *foolish*, you see. I suspect everybody and everything, just as if— But that man is so *artful*! That is why I want to see himself—”

“To which man do you refer? Tell me.”

“Some Frenchmen, who have a plot to kidnap the Duke—”

A slim cry escaped Lise. Her lower lip trembled a little. But in a moment she was herself.

“But that is rather a wild story, is it not? Whereabouts are these Frenchmen?”

“I don’t know where they are *now*, but I know that they were on shore last night, because I’ve good cause to *remember* them! And I know that they mean to do what they are trying for.”

“You encountered them, then, last night?”

She told her whole story in outline, ending with the “Busy Bæ,” the name “Lise d’Arblay,” the gipsy.

“There certainly seems something in what you say,” mused Lise. “You shall see the Duke and recount him all this—if I can persuade him to see you, that is. He is so careless of himself, you know. But we shall see. What is your name?”

“Margaret Ferris.”

“Well, will you wait here? I shall go straight now, and see. Meantime, be sure to say nothing to the servants, till you see the Duke—he would not, I know, like the house to be thrown into a state of alarm. You may have to wait some time, you know—an hour—two. It is quite an undertaking—Margaret—to put the wheels of that great machine into action. Meanwhile, I am going to send you some cake and wine!”

With friendly condescending nods she stepped away, holding the travelling-skirt.

Margaret sat waiting. Something troubled her, something. With the first glance at Lise, a mistrust which had vanished, an instinctive enmity which had passed, had arisen in her. And now that she was alone, a feeling remained as if she were losing ground—and time. Something was awry, disturbing.

This something was the French accent of Lise, a thing so fugitive that one might hear it, and not know that one had heard it.

A footman entered with wine: and she, hardly knowing why, said:

“What is the name of the lady who was speaking to me just now?”

“Mrs. Opie,” said the man.

“Thank you. She is the mistress here?”

“No—well, yes; just for the time being, you know.”

“All right. I thank you.”

She waited at a window, looking out upon the lawn northwards. The evening grew from greys to browns: the day of summer storm was over; and the definite premonition of night was here.

CHAPTER XII

THE COFFIN

But away in the West the sky was still tawny with lights and paints; and there in outspread, changing spectacle, as in some world-theatre, was enacted a great drama of colours and tragedy of hues. It was the one place of tints in the drab, and dun, and utterly still evening, in which not the pipe of a bird, or the breath of a wind, was heard.

The Duke had spent the day in reading the despatches, and making notes, less one half-hour in the great groined dining-hall over Regent cutlets and port. Soon after eight the coloured light in the vast cedared duskiness of the library failed. He laid down the magnifying-glass through which he had been tracking the words. At the same time his strong lips curved into a smile of pleasure.

He was fond of music: and a piccolo had begun to warble the Spanish *Palama* just beneath the library-window nearest him.

“Well, that is rather handsomely done,” he said to himself; and he took the snuff-box; and he tapped it; and he inhaled through alternate large holes of satisfaction; and the spice mingled with the melody in a charm.

He went presently to one of the narrow gothic mullions, and opened a half, peeping out. The lake lay beneath, lapping the wall. Among the cushions of a skiff he saw Lise reclining, flute at lips. He took his oak stick, and his curving low beaver, and through a corridor outside passed on to a marble platform in the lake.

This was even better than the hope of Lise d’Arblay. Far yonder, in another wing, Margaret waited, watching the darkening day.

Lise ceased her music, and laughed. Her paddle touched the water, and the shallop came grazing the landing-place.

“I had no idea that I was overheard, your Grace,” she said; “I have been spying about, and found this elegant lake, and this adorable wherry, too tempting. So I brought my piccolo.”

“You have brought me as well, you see: and I have heard both Mrs. Billington and Catalani, too, in my time; but that is siren-music.”

“Ah, your Grace, Ulysses did not listen to the sirens. He stopped his ears.”

“Well, but I am not Ulysses. And, besides, the fellow only managed to escape because the sirens did not play with piccolos.”

She threw back her head:

“I owe your Grace, then, to my piccolo: I must overlay it with gold.”

“Well, shall I step in?”

He stepped in. Lise had the paddle. The wherry glided out, curved languidly about, then almost reached the other side, near the avenue. A lazy species of flirtation went on meanwhile within it.

“I have been adoring the avenue,” said Lise. “I do not think I ever saw one so sumptuous.”

“Yes, it is supposed to be rather fine,” said he.

“But so bare! On a French chateau, from every opening would peep white nymph and faun, Pan and Sylvanus, satyr and hamadryad. Here, except the file of tree-trunks, there is—nothing!”

“There you are wrong,” he answered. “My friend, Elwell, has in quality what he lacks in quantity, you will find. A little way down one comes upon a rather fine thing by Turnerelli; then, farther on, there are some Graces by Nollekens; and if you keep on, you get to a thing by Chantry—”

A little cry . .

“Chantry, your Grace?”

He nodded.

“He is my ideal!—my darling! I *should* like to see it”

“Well, the only way is to go to it, then. That is easily done, too.”

Is it far down?”

“Not too far. We will go.”

So they stepped out upon the south shore, and Lise furtively looked at her watch; and there was the leisurely walk down; and the halt before the Turnerelli; and the halt before the Nollekens; and the adoration of the Chantry. And out from the West faded the tragedy of hues, leaving only burnt-out emptiness and grey oblivion, as when a tragedy is past. The night was nearly come.

It was before the Chantry that Lise remarked:

“Your Grace—I found this morning, on arriving at Wyemouth, that your Grace is quite the subject of gossip among the cronies.

“So? What is it about?”

“It appears that a wonderful rumour has got abroad that your Grace is to be kidnapped by a club of Frenchmen, who are connived at by their Government, and then kept as hostage for the release of Hero.”

“Ah, it would be rather a gallant thing for them to do,” answered he: “I wonder some of them have not their thought of that.”

She glanced at the angular face, admiring that perfection of *sang-froid*.

“But they seem so monstrous serious!” she said. “They even forked out details,—and *names!* I heard that the plot is already in full go—the Frenchmen being in a ship off the coast—and assisted on shore by two English people: one, a female, called Margaret Ferris—”

“Ah, I had a Commissary General in the Peninsular called Ferris. It is really an Italian name, which they have turned into Scotch.”

“Remember it, your Grace,” she said, and laughed—“Margaret—Ferris. If ever you meet her, you will know your sworn enemy.”

Lise all the time was full of secret trouble at the thought of the girl waiting, waiting yonder: for who could tell what Margaret might take it into her head to do?

Suddenly, as if springing from the ground, two gipsies, a man and a woman, appeared a little farther down the avenue. They were very ragged, the man’s clothes wet with blood. The woman, half-crouching to her knees, held out a supplicating palm.

“Oh, they are gipsies,” said Lise.

“Well, and how came you here?” asked the Duke. He took a listless step in their direction. The gipsies ran a little way, as if in fear.

“Don’t run away,” he called, seeing their distress: but as he approached, they kept backing diffidently, slowly, half-crouchingly.

“The rascal is afraid of my stick, that is clear,” said he, taking a groat from his purse.

“Do you want to tell our fortunes?” called Lise. The gipsy-woman nodded enthusiastically, but kept backing. They were not far now from the end of the sombre avenue.

“Do you know,” said he, “they say that Buonaparte has great faith in the sayings of these rascals?”

Crow’s-feet, just beginning to gather at his eye-corners, wrinkled up into amusement.

“Some people consider that one of the marks of his greatness,” said Lise.

“Ah yes, a great man,” he answered musingly: “but the charge I bring against him is that the fellow is not a gentleman. Here, you—what is it you want?”

The gipsy pointed to his belly, meaning hunger: to his blood-stained clothes.

“Well, then, here is a fuppenny.”

The gipsy, leaning far forward, gingerly took the coin: then backed away.

“And what is all the blood about?” asked the Duke.

The man began to pour out a voluble tale of wrong, keeping his leisurely-advancing from camp by the old woman; he had been beaten, robbed, and pursued by them nearly to the avenue.

And what was it all about?

It was because he would not consent to the burying alive of a poor weak-headed lady whom the tribe had stolen in London—a poor thing with the face of a rat—

The Duke glanced at Lise with concern. She was feeling, with tingling pleasures, the perfection of the gipsies’ acting.

A few steps more, and they would be at the avenue-end.

Suddenly a perfect hullabaloo of jabbering gibberish, tongues contending in volubility, burst upon the ear: and immediately there passed by the avenue-end, along the open road, a crowd of apparently excited gipsies, evidently carrying some burden like a coffin, for in their midst was a longish space.

“There are they!” cried the gipsy-man to the Duke—“those are them, guv’nor! They are carrying her now to bury!”

He, with stick grasped tight, trotted prone at once. He raised his voice, calling “Stop!” At the sound a silence fell; every gipsy glanced backward: and distance all the while before the couple. He had been driven gipsies of his tribe, he and his in a body, they took to their heels. The Duke was after them.

Lise and the two gipsies came running after, she holding up her habit-skirt

The band, either with design, or because of their burden, did not run fast. The Duke, hat pushed back on head, with uplifted stick, gained slowly upon them. But *his* run, too, was more leisurely than intense; and the road was winding. When the crowd was still twenty yards ahead, he was clean hidden from Grandcourt by a cliff-side. All the time he could hear a beating and kicking against boards, and divined the death-struggle in the coffin. When at last he was within striking distance, he had run a good way, and the noises in the coffin had ceased. As he was about to drop a blow, suddenly the whole band scattered like chaff, in swift flight over ditches, fields, hedges, dropping the melancholy burden at his feet.

He bent over a coffin of rough boards, at a loss what to do. The noises had ceased! And he had no means of opening the lid.

While he stood in doubt, Lise and the two gipsies came running. The male gipsy, marvellously well prepared for the exigency, held out a short poker.

The Duke with unexpected ease prised up the lid, threw it off, and saw death before him.

There lay a young woman, absolutely chinless. He realised at once that this could only be the stolen niece of Opie; and a strong emotion of pity and indignation stirred his heart. In the gathering darkness he bent over the dead face, silently.

The girl had been taught to make a noise at a sound of three taps above her head: but the taps were never given: for, before the signal, the frail creature had begun to pound the boards, stifling, and had quickly died.

Lise d'Arblay put her hand on the poor slanting forehead, smoothing back the hair. But not a film dimmed her eye.

"And they've all her jewels and things in camp, and a pile of money and papers which they stole with her," remarked the gipsy-man.

"Is that so?" said the Duke.

"Yes, guv'nor."

"How far is the camp?"

"About a two mile off—on the yon side of the martello-tower."

"Then we will go."

"They be many, guv'nor—we but two."

"Well, but you are a host in yourself, sir. We will go."

He bent once more over the body, replaced the lid, and pushed the coffin from the path,

"I must look into this matter," he said to Lise. "I think I should return to the house, if I were you, and get them to remove the body. You, sir, lead the way."

The gipsy-man and he went on together, followed by the gipsy-woman. Lise stood there, her hands clasped cold and tight before her.

The Duke and his guide advanced through country which was a complete solitude. He might have been bound or murdered anywhere hereabouts with perfect security: but it was too near the Abbey for the cautious plans of the French.

After a time the gipsy said: "Yonder is the martello-tower."

He pointed to a black truncated cone of masonry.

"Ah," said the Duke.

It was nine-thirty o'clock. And down came brooding a night dark as the raven's wing.

CHAPTER XIII

EN ROUTE

The Duke bent over his watch. Something disquieted him, a vague trouble: for it was nine-thirty, and precisely then it was his way to take a twenty-minutes' arm-chair snooze, a kind of *hors-d'oeuvre* to the night's sleep. He hated all departure from the routine of things.

"You say the gipsy-camp is on the *other* side of the tower?"

He spoke over his shoulder.

But he received no answer: he looked round: gipsy and gipsy-woman had vanished.

A foreboding of something strange came to him then. He under-tapped the snuff-box with the middle-finger nail, and held the pinch suspended, thinking.

"Ah, I might have guessed that the fellow meant to be off," he said. "Well, then, I must tackle the other rascals alone."

He walked forward. The martello-tower lay some yards from the roadway, a squat rough-hewn chimney, black and scabrous and old, with Norman slits for windows and door. It stood the very symbol of ancient solitude on a heath sparse-grown with stubble. Around it, in the long past, had been a palisade festooned by chains, and three of the posts still stood, black with rot, to one hanging four eaten red links; beyond the posts a fosse, shallowed up almost to the level ground,

and choked with bracken, bramble, furze. A shelving hill-brow met the heath thirty yards beyond. It was between hill and tower that the Duke supposed the camp to lie.

He left the path, and commenced to traverse the stone-encumbered stretch of stubble. On loneliest Pyrennees, among wilds of Assaye, he had not imagined himself in solitude more complete: yet eyes regarded his every step; and on his appearance at the turn of the path, twelve men had crept out of the tower, crawling on the belly, into the shrub-choked fosse.

In his passage across, he walked quite near the ambush: and, in a moment, was surrounded.

Up leapt the stick, and backward poised his body, and out cocked a leg; and, for a moment, the wild and gallant stare of the war-horse in action flashed round terrific upon the Frenchmen.

But only for a moment. The men had kept respectful distance. The stick dropped; his eyes resumed their calm. He said

“Well now, what is it you men are after?”

All in a circle uncovered. Verdier stepped forward, bowing, polished, fashionably-dressed, hat in neatly-bandaged hand.

“Your Grace,” he said, and stopped, and began again: “your Grace—we are Frenchmen, members of a Society which might be called national, originally formed some twelve months since in Paris, with the chief object of securing your Grace’s person as a hostage for the safety, and the release, of our Sovereign, Napoleon I. Your Grace’s presence among us here and now represents the initial success of that enterprise. We need hardly point out to your Grace that resistance would be useless, in face of the numbers around your Grace; nor do we think it necessary to assure your Grace that your Grace has nothing but homage and consideration to expect from us, if your Grace will deign to accompany us. We are all your Grace’s servants.”

“Well, and where is it you mean to take me to?”

“We have a frigate off the coast, and a boat near the shore. The only serious inconvenience to which we shall be compelled to subject your Grace will be a short ride through the surf on the back of one of our men.”

“Ah, and how far is it?”

Something over twelve miles, your Grace.”

“Well, then, let us be going.”

He stepped forward, pulling his hat a little over the eyes. The men formed in pre-arranged order about him, Verdier by his side, a head shorter than he. Before all marched little Danda with scorched beard, blistered face, stepping rhythmic, triumphal, as to sound of flute and tambour. Already the night was very black.

The road did not lead directly southwards, but east-and-south. And along it, in silence, with steady tramp, they went — with here a stumble, there a splash. One man behind carried a hamper of eatables, with which it had been thought that it might be proper to refresh the Duke, should opportunity offer on the road; another carried a half- veiled lanthorn, which hardly shed light.

In the Duke worked the resentful consciousness that the hour of his snooze was past. After a time, he said to Verdier:

“So, then, this is the gipsy-camp?”

“Your Grace will pardon the little ruse,” said Verdier, smiling in the dark.

“Ah, I was warned of you fellows, and should have looked out. But I do not say that it was not rather gallantly done. I must now set about and see how I am to get away from you.”

“No doubt your Grace will find that difficult.”

“Well, then, so much the better for your side.”

There was silence; and thinking that, in truth, he *had* been warned, he thought next of the warner, and frowned.

“Do you know a Mrs. Opie?” he said.

“No, your Grace.”

“On your honour, sir?”

“Mrs. Opie, your Grace? No, sir.”

And now he was a little self-angry for suspecting a lady: and concluded that her presence with him in the avenue must have been mere coincidence.

As for Lise d’Arblay, sure of his capture, she had hurried back to the Abbey; made for the line of stables northward; found the crib where she had seen her horse stalled, left saddled by her directions. The livery-men were at supper. All was still. Soon she went cantering the lawn, making the detour for the avenue. She had to embark with the party, having followed on horseback behind: for, till the shore was reached, it was not judged prudent that she should be known to the Duke in her true character, so that, in case of mischance on the twelve-mile journey, she might be useful.

But as she went cantering the lawn, Margaret watching in growing weariness, saw her pass dimly, like a shadow, athwart the deepening night. Two hours she had waited. Most solemnly still the vast house was I—soundless within, soundless without. The world seemed mere uninhabited gloom, the haunt of ghosts. She had peeped into the corridor, but now not even a footman was visible. She stood her sentry-guard at the window, looking out, waiting. All of a sudden, she saw the shadow canter—and started. She could discern that it was a woman—and she knew what woman—she had no doubt. All her vague suspicion leapt now into rage. That woman had kept her waiting these hours, was supposed to be arranging an interview for her, and was out riding, away from the Abbey, in haste. A train of doubt, of thought, flashed through her: and she had an impulse, and was away—along the corridor—to the hall, spying about, meantime, for a servant: but the mansion seemed desolate as some enchanted castle. She flew after the horse, bent upon following. Her legs were still good for a run, anyway. She tracked the hoof-tramp to the avenue; and quite half-way down it her excellent powers availed her to run at utmost speed.

Hence she could discern that the horse, now at the end, turned to the left: but when she too, reached the open road, Lise was lost to both eye and ear. Margaret, still running, panting, but without conscious aim now, followed to the left.

As Lise cantered near the coffin, she pulled short, stricken with surprise. There, bending over the body, stood a man, a lanthorn-shine on his face.

He was very old, but stalwart, large-boned, tall; a mist of white hair floated from his uncovered head; his beard reached his middle. He looked like a prophet, or a madman. He had on nothing but a blanket, fastened over the left shoulder, from which a lank arm hung out.

Wondering at what produced upon her the impression of a vision, Lise galloped past, while two pipes of blunderbuss-slug, shot at her head, whizzed over the horse’s haunches.

When Margaret, twenty minutes later, reached the spot, no aged man, and no dead body, were there.

CHAPTER XIV

CASTLE DEBONAIRE

There are two roads which, between them, clasp the domain of Grandcourt like two arms. By one, the southern, the Duke had gone to the martello; the other, the northern, runs round the north of Grand-court Park: and these two meet in a single road, half a mile beyond the tower. Along this single road the party walked a mile, and here the road again split into two, one of the branches being a mere footpath. This perhaps was why, on coming to that point, not noticing the footpath (their right way), they walked along the other some fifteen minutes.

Then the voice of Danda was heard: "Stop! we have come wrong somehow."

A mass of masonry had confronted him at a turning. No such building, he knew, should be met on the right way.

A halt was made. The man with the lanthorn ran forward, and came back crying:

"It is some old castle."

"What has happened is this," said Verdier, "at the meeting of two paths we have taken the wrong one."

"Back!" cried Danda.

"We might use the castle," said Verdier; "it is the 'Castle' in the Report sent us: it has been deserted for centuries. Your Grace, we have taken the precaution to bring for your Grace's refreshment, and our own, some victuals. Might I ask—?"

"Very Well, if that is so. I am rather hungry," said the Duke.

It was the day of impossible "suppers" after dinner, and heavy ones. The party moved forward.

"That is, if we can get in, your Grace," said Verdier.

But there was no difficulty, both bridges being down over bush-rank ditches. The building was baronial Norman, mostly ruins. One portcullis hung yet in the inner-curtain arch, but all trace of portals was gone. They traversed a courtyard of dislocated flags, then the donjon-gate into a corridor littered with *debris* of fallen walls, floorless rafters above, then a complexity of decay, seeking some table, or bench, or block, for the meal. The extent seemed specially vast for an ordinary castle: but after some minutes of ascents, descents, and wandering, they stood on some flat marble steps before the west-looking nave of an Abbey-chapel, a long-drawn lane of broken groins and compound-columns. It was now clear that they were in one of those religious establishments whose priors had been first barons, and ecclesiastics after: in which case the way to the frater was obvious. They therefore picked their way east to the chancel, then through the remains of the south transept, then by the east cloister across the standing walls of calefactory, slype, chapter-house and parlour, all well defined, and finally turned west into a large room which must have been the refectory: and here, certainly, in the centre, was a small table.

But the table was surprising: it did not seem old, and was made of rough logs; and as the lanthorn was deposited upon it, it was impossible to doubt—those were *crumbs* between the logs!

The French exchanged glances. One, with the lanthorn, examined the chamber. It bore unmistakable evidence of an occupant. Here and there hung carcasses—rat or rabbit, dog or cat. Along one wall, near the ceiling, ran a gallery of short stone balusters bellying almost into mutual contact: and over the balustrade hung—a blanket!

They saw, too, that the walls had been pierced by several holes, within which lay rusty muzzles of fowling-piece, musket, or blunderbuss, while from three larger orifices near the floor protruded a 24-pounder saker, a 17-pounder culverin, and a 33-pounder demi-cannon.

A clang—a click—a bolt pushed into its socket— and the blood went rushing to every heart. They had entered by a doorway still fitted with a door of old iron bars, facing which, in the opposite wall, was another similar door. It was this opposite door that now clanged.

And instantly, from the *other* door (of their entrance), a rich voice sang out:

“Hands up! And out with your purses, or you are dead men all!”

Prompt upon this cry, from the opposite door a very different voice, a deep bass, shouted:

“Up draw-bridge! Down portcullis! The castle is invested with tents! At them, my merry men! Harry—harry—the foe!”

“Well now, we are in for it,” said the Duke of Wellington.

Wild confusion ensued. One of the French fell dead; the Duke’s hat went flying, shot away; and the man at the grating who had cried, “Out with your purses!” dropped a corpse.

These three shots came all from behind the door opposite the party’s entrance, and were fired by an old man clad in a blanket, from which the lank arm stuck.

The man shot behind the other grating was a leader of highwaymen, who, passing over the desolate country-side towards Wyemouth, had happened upon the castle, and, some time before the French, had entered it to “spend the evening. Highwaymen” proper they were not, being without horses: they were called “foot-pads” or “wolf’s-heads,” and were common in the country.

There was a quarter of a minute’s silence, while everyone in the smoke and half-darkness wondered what was toward: when forth again from that bare arm flashed a pistol, of which some dozen lay loaded at his feet. And out again he cried:

“Harry, harry the foe!”

The minuter facts about any locality can only be acquired by residence in it: so that when Lise d’Arblay reported the situation of Castle Debonaire, she had stated that it had been long deserted: yet few residents in the country-side were ignorant of the hermit of the castle. He was said to be the last of the Debonaire race, and, from youth, had been deranged. For sixty years the castle had been his home, and for sixty years he had lived in the belief that it was in a state of siege, and his garrison suffering famine. The rock-boulders round represented to his frenzied eye the camp of a leaguering host. The old muzzles which pointed upon the refectory were parts of the battery which threatened invaders. Daily he sallied forth at the head of foraging party, or flying squadron, in search of provisions, and the carcass of rat or dog on the walls each represented the triumph of some *sortie* in the teeth of overwhelming odds. Woe to the peasant who encountered the hermit on these excursions: the shot which he had fired at Lise d’Arblay being his habit. He lived from a plot of potatoes and another of rye inside the outer curtain, and had laid up stores of unleavened cakes.

His shot at the foot-pads was supposed by them to be the Frenchmen’s answer to the demand for money, and when out cracked the hermit’s fourth shot, wounding another foot-pad, they, with rage in their shout, threw open the grated door, and rushed into the refectory, resolved upon war.

They were fifteen.

And at once the chamber was a hubbub of detonating pistols, smoky confusion, clashing swords, contending shouts: above all, the brazen-lunged bellow:

“White are the fields with tents! Harry, my merry men!—batter!—slay!”

Round the Duke had gathered a number of French, partly to protect, partly to guard him, Verdier among them. He, in their centre, stood, hatless, his gossamer hair lifting a little at the agitated air, eyes campaigning round, taking the measure of every detail, a certain light in them—like the light of battle.

“Well, we shall all soon be done for, if we do not look out,” he said.

Danda, in white-lipped intensity, was hacking furiously with others among the foot-pads.

Bang, bang, the fire-arms before, and bang, behind, rang the hermit-shot.

And it was well for the Frenchmen that at that moment the leader of armies definitely ranged himself on their side.

"I sha'n't run off you know," he said, "at least not just now. I will tell you what to do, if you like."

Out above the tumult sang Verdier's tenor: "Follow the Duke's orders!"

And out like an echo the cry of Danda: "Duke's orders!"

CHAPTER XV

THE IRON MAN

And at once, where dismay and random ecstasy had reigned in the heads of the French, orderly obedience to a dominant mind supervened. The Duke was in command, leading, for the first time, a French brigade into action.

He stooped, and speaking low to two, said in French:

"You see the table: just lay it against the wall yonder on its side, and get behind it with your pistols." And before they could move, he said to two others whose pistols his remarking eye had noted still undischarged: "Those two fellows at the end there—just cover them with your pistols, and pick them down the moment I give the word." And before these could stir, he said to a fifth: "Just toss your coat over the lantern."

At once the room was in darkness: for the foot-pads' light was in the dorter where they had been carousing, they having stolen down in the dark, on hearing sounds; nor had the hermit his lantern; for, arriving in his room, which opened on the gallery, he had spied the party over the balustrade, and descended in quivering haste to riddle them.

And quick, to the two commanded to level pistols, the Duke said:

"Now take me off those two rogues."

He had calculated that the effect of the sudden darkness would be a momentary motionlessness of shock: and, in fact, the two targets marked to die fell together.

Meantime, two were able to drag the table unharmed, and crouch behind it.

A knowing eye, measuring the chances, would have discerned that already the few words of the Duke had rendered the battle hopeless for the foot-pads.

"Now," he said, in confidential whisper to Verdier near, "just get quickly and quietly to the door there, and run your sword into that old man's belly."

The shots had again begun to detonate at random from hermit and foot-pad. But a fearful shriek quickly announced that Verdier had done his work, and the long war of the hermit's life was warred.

"Three of you," said the Duke, laying fingers on three shoulders in quick succession; but, as he touched the last, the man dropped shot. "You, then"—he touched another—"creep up yonder on the left ten paces toward the door, and get out your swords till I give the word. And you," he said to another, "stand near the lantern till I say 'uncover,' then uncover, and run away behind the table."

Three of the nine French were left. To these he cried, raising his voice:

"Well, now, you three, follow me up the right-hand steps to the gallery! And mind you don't break your necks."

There were two narrow stone stairs against opposite walls, but in such ruin, that it would hardly have occurred to another to attempt their scaling. But the sagacious eye had seen, not only

the possibility, but that the right flight, as one faced the gallery, was the better preserved. Up, then, they climbed, hands, knees, and feet, the brittle stone falling in powdery masses, shots whistling.

They had nearly reached the balcony, when he called:

“Now then, the lantern: uncover!”

A man snatched the coat and scurried behind the table; the room burst into light; and now the foot-pads, if they had eyes, must have seen the position untenable: for there, for frontal attack, were three in entrenched post behind the table, muzzles pointed; outflanking their right, a light-brigade with swords; above, behind the bellied balusters, three threatened their left flank.

“Well, now, I think we may begin,” said the Duke.

But the robbers, twelve to nine, were disposed to fight like Britons: and four dashed upon the three swordsmen, with knives, with butt-ends, urgently, meaning business.

“Pick me that fellow down,” said the Duke to Danda, indicating one: but the fellow had spattered a French brain before ever Danda had fired, and missed.

Meanwhile, the men behind the table were not idle, and the foot-pads fell fast. Three, observing the other ruined stairway near, climbed with such frantic agility, that they nearly reached the top unnoticed: till the Duke said to his own three:

“You see those three: send them to the devil.”

They ran to the gallery-end to obey; and in a fierce conflict the French, being uppermost, played havoc with the scalers. Meanwhile, below, a general *mélée* took place, the other foot-pads having made a rush for the table; but they were now outnumbered, five to three, and swordless. The contest was short. The bodies of the scalers dropped. Below, the last two foot-pads took to their heels, covered with wounds.

But the fact of the situation was this: that the Duke stood alone near that gallery-end at which he had climbed, behind him an open door—that through which the hermit had seen the party. It was partly with an eye to it that the Duke had climbed the gallery.

Stealthily, unnoticed in the heat of fight, he felt behind the door-post, up and down; then behind the door. There was staple, there was socket. He examined the door: it was fairly stout and new: the handiwork of the hermit.

He waited till the last foot-pad scuttled. Then he lifted his voice, and spoke.

“Well, now,” he said, “I have saved the lives of some of you fellows. I think it would be only fair if I get off.”

Before they could recover from that stupor of amazement, he was gone.

“Shoot—shoot his legs!” shrieked Danda, but he was a century late.

“*Sot!*” went Verdier, his lips curling. At the same time the men below, running in confusion, happened to overturn the lantern on the floor, and tread it into darkness. The Duke bolted the door.

“It ought to take them half an hour to get through that,” he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief. The door was of logs, round on one side, flat on the other.

His arms went up in a stretch; his mouth opened in a sleepy yawn.

Whither to go? Already the battery had commenced. A few steps over some very shaky flooring, and he came to a doorway on his right, opening into a kind of alcove in faint light, shed partly from a lanthorn’s wick, turned low, and partly from dying embers in a grate. He entered, and to his delight discovered the form of a mattress, heaped with blankets. The hour of his nap being long past, he was desperately drowsy.

In furious haste hacked the swords.

“The fellows cannot get in for half an hour, let them beat about as they like,” he said. “Well, then, I think I will turn in, and get some sleep.”

He took off his coat, and spread it before the fireplace, propping it with his stick and some fire-wood twigs there, his object being to hide the light, should his time-estimate prove inaccurate.

He came to the bed. To his chagrin, in the middle lay in stiff sleep a body, which, peering, he instantly recognised—the afflicted girl, which the hermit had brought as rich trophy-of-war and laid upon his bed.

In furious haste hacked the swords.

“Well, then,” said he, “we must be bed-fellows my poor girl. You have had worse, I think, and I also.”

So he lifted her to the farther edge, and he extinguished the lanthorn, and he lay by her side, covering himself. And in an instant, he murmuring:

“Twenty minutes,” they were asleep together, quick and dead.

But his estimate proved wrong. Before half an hour, in little, more than a quarter, the French had gained entrance. As they fell in, with shouts, with clamour and heat, a nasal sound of midnight slumber came long-drawn from the living sleeper.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TWO ROADS

In rushed the French in the rayless dark, past the alcove-door, without suspecting its existence. Their whole effort, indeed, was to get upon the road again, to put swiftness and the ecstasy of chase into their legs, not dreaming that he could be hardy enough to linger there an instant, supposing him already hastening to Grandcourt.

Hasting or sauntering: for they remembered his coolness, his contemptuous way, with hope: and the way was long: one impassioned chase, and again he might be theirs.

But they were now fearfully handicapped, since their lanthorn lay shapeless in the refectory. With occasional flashes they made to some broken stairs, down which they stumbled. In the complexity of the ruins, they had lost the direction of the drawbridge, and now wandered at random in a wilderness of stone, just managing to keep together. At last Verdier, in advance, emerged upon a lane between guessten-hall and donjon leading to the courtyard. It was then seen that the abbey-garth must run at right angles to the court, whereas they had imagined the two in the same straight line.

Verdier sang out: and over the draw-bridge, and away along the road they dashed. The night outside was about as dark as within the ruins.

To the point where road and footpath met they ran, and thence along the single road, before it splits into the two roads embracing Grandcourt

At that time, coming along this single road was Margaret Ferris, breathless, hastening she knew not whither, sure only that this way Lise had galloped. She running, and they running, in a minute she must have butted amongst them, but her light ears detected a multiple sound of feet on wet road, and immediately heard some words—in French!

They were these:

“What if the Duke is in the castle all the time— behind us!”

That tenor—she knew it. She had only time to swerve, and stand still, when the men rushed by; but one, near the hedge, brushed her, and before she could start into flight, pulled up, and caught her arm.

“Here is someone,” he called—“halt!”

They came, surrounding her. The man said: “It is a woman.”

“Let me *go!* Let me *go*, will you?” cried she, struggling.

Something in the voice caused Verdier to start.

But the bones of Margaret, he was certain, were among the lighthouse ashes.

“Be quiet, you! no one is going to hurt you,” panted her custodian.

Someone struck steel-and-flint, and she stood lit: but at the first sound of preparation, she had half-turned, and with swift wit, thrown skirt over head with her free hand. Her dress now was different to the gauze and spangles worn on the frigate, nor, in the momentary glint, was she recognised.

“Where are you from?” asked Verdier, in English.

“The way you are going,” she answered, sullenly.

“Did you meet anyone?”

She had not. The glad possibility of misleading them occurred to her.

“Someone passed me,” she said; “I think it was a man. He had a man’s voice.”

“He spoke, then?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked if he was on the right road to Grandcourt.”

“How far back was that?”

“Not far. About five minutes before I met you.”

“*Come on!*”

Off they darted, leaving her there.

So, then, they had had him, and *he had escaped!* this she gathered from the words overheard: “What if he is in the castle all the time—behind!” That, then, was where he really was! for if on that road, she must have met him. But where was “the castle”? She knew not: she had been only three days in the country-side. She had to find out, however, meet him, guide him from them: else they would lurk on the road, and retake him. At all events, she was going right, the castle being “behind” the French. She must trust to her luck, her wit. She had gathered herself to set off, when — a galloping tramp. She thought of Lise—“that Mrs. Opie”—as the invisible sounds galloped past. She started in the opposite direction.

As for Lise, she had made no mistake, like her friends, where the road divided into footpath and castle-road, but galloped along the footpath with keen outlook for the lanthorn, till surprise grew in her at their incredible rate of travel; finally she reached a point impossible to them on foot. By some unspeakable chance, she reasoned, she must have passed them, or they gone wrong, or—something. She had then turned back in headlong urgency, eyes wide in apprehension.

The French had nearly come to where the road splits into two to embrace Grandcourt, when her hoof-sounds overtook them.

“Lise, Lise, don’t ride us down,” called Verdier.

“In the good God’s name, what *are* you doing here?” she gasped, drawing up among them.

“My dear, raving will not help,” said Verdier. “Still, the news is not cheering. The prisoner has escaped, that is all.”

“Then, O my good God, I pity you! Nothing will ever wipe out your shame! You have betrayed France!”

“So I say, too!” cried Danda, “so I say, too!”

“But *I* say,” retorted Verdier, “that it is not a question of raving, but of recapturing the man.”

“That you will never do!” said Lise.

“A feminine view,” he answered. “We may. He is certainly not far ahead now, if he is ahead at all. The only question is—”

Without pause they had been trotting on, and came now to the point when the two Grandcourt roads meet.

“Halt!” said Verdier.

“Well, what is the question?” said Lise.

“This: supposing him to be on ahead, which of these two roads has he taken?”

“Divide your men, and send one party along each road.”

“A brilliant idea, Lise, but impossible. Six of our best fellows are gone. There has been a row—a fight. There are only six of us left.”

“If three go the north road, and three the south—” said Lise.

“Three are no good. The Duke of Wellington is not going to allow himself to be ordered about for ten miles by three men. And we have no lantern: it was smashed in the fight. One party would never find the other, if we separate. We must stake all on one chance.”

“But you are losing time! Try the north road, then! As you came by the south, he is more likely to take the north now—I, meanwhile, will go by the south—”

“Good! I agree with you. The north, then! Come on—this way!”

Off, then, they rushed, Lise taking the southern road, past the martello, on to the avenue, then up it, all ears, head held low on her mane: no sound but the hoof-falls: back then she turned, galloping hot, scouring the road, past the martello, past the meeting of the ways, on by the single road.

Margaret now was not far from the meeting of footpath and castle-road, when again she heard the sounds of the on-coming horse behind.

“What does the woman *mean*?” she said to herself. And this time she felt absolutely that she must speak, must know more.

“Is that you, Mrs. Opie?” she shrilly called. Lise’s horse reared, so sharply she reined—with alarm more than surprise: for she recognised the voice.

“Yes, it is Mrs. Opie,” she said—“and you, Margaret?”

“I waited for you, but you did not *come*.”

“My dear girl, a dreadful thing has happened—”

“Oh, I dare say!”

That tone of scornful rancour was convincing. “So, then, Margaret suspects, suspects me,” Lise thought: “let me remember that.”

“I suppose you know that your story of the Frenchmen has come true, Margaret, and that the Duke has been got away by them?”

“Yes, I know. I met the Frenchmen, you see. Haven’t you sent any of the *servants* of the Abbey out looking for him?”

“I? No—I haven’t had time.”

“I see.”

“But I, too, met the Frenchmen, Margaret, and overheard some of their talk. It appears that the Duke has escaped.”

“Everything you tell me I know already.”

“Then do you tell me something which *I* do not know. Where is the Duke now?”

“I can’t say, I’m sure.”

“Are you out looking for him?”

“Are you?”

“But yes, Margaret. Why else? other of us may find him.”

“I hope *one* of us may, yes.”

“Well, if *you* do, let me give you a hint. You know where the two roads meet near the martello-tower?”

“Well?”

“Well, the Frenchmen have gone by the *north* one, and there are lying in wait for him. So if you meet him, be certain to take him the south way, in order to cheat them.”

Lise, with absolute cunning, argued that Margaret, suspecting her now, would do the opposite, and, if she discovered the Duke, would not fail to lead him by the north road into the arms of the French.

And, in truth, Margaret only needed this counsel to be convinced that the north was, in fact, the road of safety: and said at once to herself:

“I would make him go the north road, all the same.”

“And where are you going now, Margaret?” said Lise.

“I don’t know, I’m sure.”

Where she was going to was—“the castle.” She had this knowledge which Lise had not: that the Duke had been to some “castle”; for in the galloping dialogue between Lise and Verdier had been no mention of the castle, whereas Margaret had overheard those words: “the castle behind.”

“I am going to turn back, Margaret,” said Lise. “Further on this way seems useless.”

She started back in the direction of the martello; Margaret the other way, at a run.

When she came to footpath and castle-road, not seeing the footpath, she kept still the wide road, and rapidly approached the castle.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE COURT-YARD

Punctually at the end of the twenty minutes assigned himself the Duke opened his eyes, expecting to hear the French still hacking: but all was silence.

He lay for a time, then rose, and put on his coat. A draft in the coat-covered grate had blown the embers into a babbling whip of flame. With this he lit the hermit’s lanthorn, covered the dead girl, went warily, and descended some stairs.

The French were still in the ruins, fumbling for an exit. Sounds reached him. He found a space between two walls, piled with *debris* at either end; over one pile he climbed, and crouched waiting, the lanthorn under his coat.

He knew exactly where lay court-yard and drawbridge, for he had noted all the changes of direction in the passage through castle and abbey, and summing up these, concluded that the chapel and frater would lie at about right angles to the castle.

He did not know that the French had been less observant, and having waited and heard nothing, he climbed from his hiding-place, and set out, steering his feet toward the court-yard. A little

sooner, and he must have been caught: for, when he emerged, they had hardly run down the outer escarpment, and from the roadway some ordering voice came up faintly.

“Ah, they think I am off before them,” he said. “They have more zeal than discretion, I see: good soldiers, but bad generals. Well, then, I must only wait here till they get away.”

On a block of masonry near the donjon-portal he sat with bare head, hiding for a time the lantern between his legs.

He could wait as greatly as act. He sat elbow on knee, thumb and forefinger holding his chin, smiling a little, while thirty minutes passed. The lantern stood now before him, its light on his face.

“They will not come back,” he reasoned: “when they do not find me on the road, the natural thing for them to think will be that I have got home; then they will run off to their ship in a sweat, lest I have them taken up.”

Another fifteen minutes, and in, with feet of pelting swiftness, came Margaret.

With infinite surprise she saw him, open to any eye, the light on his lean visage.

“My lord—” she panted—“are you the Duke?”

He dropped hand from chin, sat up leisurely, looked at her. He never forgot a face: and, as he did not know her, had never seen her. But he knew her name! This was that Margaret Ferris, the English auxiliary of the French, against whom he had been warned by Mrs. Opie.

“Well, now, Margaret,” he said, “what is it you are after?”

She started.

“I am glad you know my *name*, my lord,” she answered—“you have got to come with me at *once!*”

“Is that so? And where is it you want to take me to?”

“The Frenchmen—the Frenchmen—are on the south road—there is a north and a south road—and they are on the south road, going after you! You have got to come—quick—to the north road, and get home, before they come back.”

“Well, but suppose I like to remain here instead?”

“You *mus’n’t!* They will come back and take you!”

His face, his heart, hardened against her. He had just reasoned that the French would not return.

“You know all about them, then?” he said.

“I know, yes, my lord! They passed me on the *road!* I heard one of them—the most artful one, too—doubt whether you were ahead of them at all! He said that perhaps, all the while, you were hiding in the *castle!* It was that made me come here. They will be back and take you *sure*, if you do not *hurry!*”

“Ah, and who is that ‘most artful one’ you tell me about?”

“He is a man they call Verdier. They do everything he *tells* them.”

“Is that so? You know them all personally, then?”

“Haven’t I *cause*, my lord? Didn’t they chase me all over Seacombe Moor last night, and take me on board their ship with a man named Mr. Golde, and drive us up in the *lighthouse*, and burn the lighthouse down?”

“Is that so? Which lighthouse?”

“Raddon Lighthouse, my lord.”

This was categorical statement, chapter and verse. He disliked to have to doubt a woman’s word.

“So Raddon Lighthouse is burnt down, then. I have not heard that.”

“You have not had *time*. And we are losing time now, sir.”

He looked at her, almost with admiration. “Well, now,” he said, “you are a very bold young woman.”

“I don’t understand what you *mean*, sir.”

“Why not desert the enemy and come over to my side, Margaret?”

“I don’t understand what you *mean*, my lord.”

“I knew your name, you see.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what does that imply to your mind?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Well, it implies this, you know: that I have been told all about you.”

Still she had no notion what he was driving at. She said: “Won’t you come now, my lord?” “No, Margaret, certainly, I won’t come *now*. It looks as if you were rather wasting powder and shot. And what is more, I won’t let *you* go, either.”

What *did* he mean? Her hands met wringing.

“Well, now, you see, you are distressed,” he said: “but it is your own doing. You have over-run into the enemy’s lines. Sit down here.”

This he said with some sternness. She sat down at once by him, mouse-quiet

“I do not call you a good actress, you know,” he went on after a minute. “You are very bold, but you show too much distress and eagerness.”

“I can’t *help* it!”

“Well, that is an open confession. I like you; but then, when I had once told you that I had been warned against you—”

Now she understood

“Oh, my lord! my lord!” she cried.

Surely in that cry was sincerity! It had the true ring of pang, of reproach, of wounded loyalty.

“Have I pained you?” he asked, with sudden gentleness.

“My lord, my lord, *who* has been doing this?”

“Well, but I cannot tell you that.”

“But I *know*! It is that Mrs. Opie!”

“You know her, then?”

“Didn’t I go to the Abbey, my lord, and tell her of *the plot* this evening? And didn’t she leave rue waiting while she went to get you to see me? And while I was waiting, didn’t I see *her* out *riding* on the lawn? And didn’t *I* just meet her on the *road*, riding about?”

“You don’t mean to say that she is against me, and on the side of the Frenchmen?”

“Yes, my lord, that is just what I do mean!”

“Ah, I thought there was something,” said the Duke.

He had to choose between the two women, and his mind was swinging round to faith in Margaret, and something like distrust in Lise.

“Well, now, Margaret, I am in a fix, you see,” said he. “That lady, a guest in the house where I am staying, tells me that you are a naughty girl, and you tell me that she is naughty. I am afraid I shall have to disbelieve one or other of you. And it is rather difficult to choose. There are points that look black against you both.”

“But, my lord—look at me!”—her eyes filled with innocent tears—“do I *look* like one—”

She could not go on. The words perished in her throat. She turned aside her head. He patted her on the shoulder.

“Never mind. We shall see. Suppose I cast in my lot with you, and say I will trust you?”

She jumped up. “Oh, thank you, sir!”

“You won’t betray me, then?”

“Oh, my lord—!”

“Well, then, let us go.”

He rose. Margaret brushed a sleeve across her eyes, and in a moment was all activity. She caught up the lanthorn. They moved towards the drawbridge.

“Well, now,” he said, “I am in your hands. You shall do with me whatever you like.”

“You are good, my lord. I always *heard* that you were good.”

“You are very likely good, too. I am sorry now that we quarrelled. You know why I did it, and you will forgive me.”

“Oh yes, sir!”

“And you are a mighty pretty girl, Margaret. Will you give the Duke a kiss?”

“I don’t *like* to,” said she, pouting, with a reluctant movement of one shoulder.

“Well, then, I must go without. But we will hold hands, if you like. The road is rough and wet.”

And very lovingly they went, hand in hand, she slightly in advance, dragging him a little in her greed, swinging the lanthorn over the receding path.

“You remind of a very pretty French girl I once met near Toulouse. There was rather a flirtation between us, I can tell you, Margaret. You are not French, are you?”

“Oh, my lord—!”

“No—don’t be angry. I never do things by halves: I trust you entirely, having trusted you. The question was only accidental.”

On, over receding puddle and rough road, they went, to where castle-road met footpath, and on by the single road to where the two Grandcourt roads meet

“And about these two roads?” said he. “You say the Frenchmen are on the south one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are quite sure?”

“Oh yes, sir.”

“How do you know?”

She knew that they were on the south, because Lise had told her that they were on the north: she had perfect moral certainty. But she felt that the reason that convinced her might not convince him: and it was urgently necessary that he should be convinced. The French by this time must be hasting back. She feared delay—and told a lie.

“I know, sir,” she said. “I *saw* them on the south road.”

“Very well, then. We will take the north.”

And along the north they proceeded.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARGARET’S GUIDANCE

The French had gone in eager hunt right to the north park-gates, four miles. They halted fatigued. Since four that afternoon, they had travelled over twenty miles.

“He is behind us, then,” said Verdier.

“But what of the man, who, according to the woman on the road, was ahead of us?” said Danda: “we should have met him.”

“He must have gone the south road: in which case, Lise will be able to tell us something of him.”

“Ah, but where is she? Back! we search the country till we find him! We burn and sack the Abbey—!”

As they set off again, there sounded approaching hoofs—Lise, who, after parting from Margaret, had taken, this time, the north road.

They warned her, and she drew up among them.

“O my good God, he is nowhere on the south road,” she said.

“Did you meet a man?”

“That is strange. A woman on the road told us there was a man.”

“Oh, that was Margaret Ferris. She lied.”

“Margaret Ferris. You ought to have *killed* that girl. She will ruin everything yet—if everything is not already ruined.”

“But we have no idea what girl you are talking about.”

“Oh, nonsense! the girl you took on board the frigate last night.”

“But—are you in earnest? It is impossible that she is not dead!”

“She *would* be dead if *I* had had a pistol a short while ago.”

The men were stricken silent. Verdier bit his lip. “Come on! let us be on the move!” said Danda. The others went on. Verdier stood with hand on the horse’s wet neck.

Lise,” he said, “ I cannot think that he has reached home. He had only some fifteen minutes’ start, and unless he ran hard, we must have overtaken him. He is on the road now—or in the castle—”

“What castle?”

“The old castle—we were there—”

“My good God, you did not tell me that! I might have gone there! What a mess a set of men, if left alone—”

“Do not rave, my dear girl. I think it is you who have now gone wrong in leaving the south road. He may go that way.”

“I am going back. I was so sure that you had him—”

“Better stay about here, and keep guard; we are now going into the south to wait. And don’t go galloping about in that way: the hoofs make a row.”

He went running to join the others.

At that time Margaret, her right hand in the Duke’s left, her left swinging the lanthorn, said

“Stop! I thought I heard something, my lord!”

He glanced at her.

Your ears are light, in that case.”

“They have *got* to be. Didn’t you hear anything, sir?”

“No. What was it like?”

“I don’t know. It was something.”

“Well, we must not allow ourselves to be frightened by ‘something.’ There is nothing to fear, if your story is correct.”

But the whole of her story, she knew, was not correct. She was a little doubtful, frightened.

“They may have split up their men into two lots,” she said, “and posted one lot on each road.”

“No, they won’t do that. There are only six of the fellows left. And they very likely guess that I won’t go with three without some fisticuffs. They are all, therefore, on the south road where you saw them.”

She was guiltily silent; then said:

“Suppose they have come over to this road, sir?” Again he glanced at her. She was pallid. Her hand trembled in his.

“You must not be afraid,” he said. “They would not do that, you know, without some reason. And if they were far gone on the south road when you saw them there, I think they would not have time to be here by now. *Were* they far gone?”

“Pretty far,” she said, and threw up her eye-whites in demure appeal, thinking: “Lord help me with this man this night!”

“Well now,” remarked he, “I think we are getting on very well for the Abbey.”

“I don’t like this *lantern* alight,” said Margaret irrelevantly.

“There again you are not yourself, Margaret. This now is the third time you have said that. If there is nobody to see us, by all means let us see ourselves.”

“You are very obstinate, sir,” she said with a sigh.

And through his mind, for one instant, passed the shadow of a questioning whether all these timidities were not mere cloaks to cover some hidden intent. Yet they had the look of genuineness. The half-thought passed. His pressure tightened in friendship on her hand a moment.

And on they went, approaching the approaching French: till Verdier, with intense hiss of exultation, whispered:

“*There he comes!*”

In the lantern-shine they saw him plod with calm deliberate step.

The five flocked round Verdier, hanging breathlessly upon his whispers.

“Quick! Dupin, Carhaix, and Huguenin, on that side, under the hedge, well apart—twenty paces. When I whistle, run out and close. Come, Danda and Carnot—you and I on this side.”

They went crouching. And the lantern swung nearer; and nearer grew the wet squelch of feet.

The Duke walked silent. He had trusted all to her, confident only in her tones, her frank glance. Yet he was a born aristocrat, with faith first in his own class; and in trusting the work-girl he had given a lady the lie, one against whom he could allege nothing, who had actually warned him against the guide he was blindly following.

Yet, in spite of inbred instincts, the simply human was strong in him, too, the frank good-fellowship of the hour, and broad trust in the heartiness of man. He struck a compromise within himself: and without distinctly charging Lise, contrived to rest confidently in Margaret.

Suddenly, the whole slow-built fabric of his trust collapsed. She had snatched her hand from his: a fatal movement. He could not but think it predestined. Yet was perfectly involuntary—a gesture of panic, of frenzied terror.

Verdier’s whistle had sounded—a quick succession of shrills.

They ran out, closing round the Duke. Up went the stick some inches, but dropped. He stood still in their midst, faint night airs musing among his uncovered hair.

She, in her fright, by an impulse of self-preservation, had stepped backward beyond the circle, and stood peering, the lifted lantern-shine luridly illustrating a face of distorted pallor.

For a minute intense silence. Then the Duke: “Well, I was behind you all the time, you see. You were after the deer before he broke cover: and gave yourself, and me, a walk.”

But now a low sobbing and lamentation was heard in the night, as Babylonish maidens, with dole and plaint, lamented upon the dead. Margaret's hands were over her face, the lanthorn hanging by a finger. And bitterly she sobbed:

"Oh, my dear lord, forgive me, sir! Oh, what shall I do, my lord, my lord? Forgive a poor girl, sir—Oh, I wish I had never laid eyes on you this night, my lord, my lord!"

But the face of the Duke was like white iron, and the granite rock.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOOT-FALL

The first movement was by Verdier. After a minute's tense suspension of silence, broken by Margaret's lament, he spurted at the girl, she not four yards from him. But prompt, with the alacrity of startled roes, she was off, having sighted him between her fingers. In an instant the source of her tears was dry, the streams paused on her cheek, and her soul was in her racing legs. Away they flew, on tip-toe, in impassioned run, a whirlwind of straining effort, Verdier intensely resolved, she desperate. Long it could not last: he felt himself fail, and her getting away from him, in spite of her quarrelling and flapping skirts and wildly-swinging lanthorn: he put hand to belt: a shot in the leg, low, in the calf. He steadied himself, ready to fire; but to her, too, thought by this time had come: away over the hedge, tossed awkwardly askew from the left hand, went the lanthorn into darkness. And she was ten yards ahead, lost to him now. He did not even fire.

The Duke was puzzled. Was it *genuine*, the race: and Margaret, after all, true? Crudely practical, he judged by results, and the results of her guidance were enough for him: he would never have given her the privilege of a second thought in his brain for ever, would have blotted her from his book of life, but for the race. It *looked* genuine: and there were the hearty sobs of the girl, her vivid grief . . . yet it seemed incredible that Verdier, if in earnest, should not shoot. The girl, if against them, would be a constant peril on the long tramp. Verdier's lovesick hesitation to shoot he could not divine: and when Margaret flung away the lanthorn, he decided that the object might be to keep the march dark, without insult to him, by a natural-looking ruse; when Verdier returned alone, without having once fired, the Duke smiled. Before the judgment-seat of his severity the girl stood damned. He banished her quickly from his thoughts.

It was dark, the Frenchmen few. Verdier therefore whispered two men to hold the prisoner's sleeves. The Duke felt the grips, and for a minute walked on so. Then he said:

"Well, you will have to behave like gentlemen, you know; or I shall knock some of you on the head."

"Can we do anything for your Grace?" asked Verdier.

"These fellows will have to let me go."

"But, your Grace—"

"Let me go. I won't run off."

"We have your Grace's promise?"

"No, I won't run off."

"Let go his Grace's arms," said Verdier.

But Danda grumbled in his throat, doubtful and ill-content.

On they went, the Duke in the middle, three on each side, with respectful interval. Nothing could be seen. They only knew his presence by the steady sound of his tread, and the ear grew to recognise its accustomed beat among the other sounds. No one spoke.

In this way they tramped to the meeting of north and south roads, and on, eastward, by the single road.

Margaret had stopped her flight, and stood uncertain, wild-eyed, listening. She heard the on-coming march, and drew back breathlessly against the hedge. When they passed her, she followed timorously, keeping the sounds of the march within her ears.

Lise, too, from behind had seen the lanthorn-light, the capture, the short chase. She followed a good way behind Margaret, lest her hoof-sounds might reach the party.

Near castle-road and foot-path, the French began to strike flashes to avoid a second mistake. The foot-path went winding south a considerable distance between alternations of meadow-grass, cliff, hill-slope, and swamp. And along it, with steady tramp, went the party.

It was too narrow for triple file: so now three went first, then the Duke, then three, in single file, Danda leading, his short legs stepping in the dark their rhythmic, triumphal step. Behind Margaret came Lise, with lax bridle.

The brain of the walking girl grew busy. What was she to *do*? what *could* she? To walk tamely, with tears and weakness, to the shore, and see them accomplish their work, would help nothing. When she remembered that this was *her* doing, up she flung her hands, and let them drop, in an agony.

She wondered if Golde still stupidly slept: if not, he would have read her note, and be at his mill, awaiting her. She could very well guess the direction of Newton, but not how far it might be. The wonder was that the Abbey servants had not missed the Duke—but even so, they could guess nothing: they might even suppose him sitting up, writing, maybe. Her hope was, that parties of men, without knowing of the seizure, had taken gratuitous interest in the matter, spurred on by Golde, perhaps, or deaf Mother Higgins, and were out doing something.

But, meantime, her necessity was to act, she herself, Margaret. If she could retard their progress, that might be something: some delay, somehow— her thoughts began to centre upon this: it was well past midnight: if she could keep them on the move some hours. A morning which found them far from the shore would dawn full of hope.

But to keep them? That could only be done by making them wander, by turning them somehow from their path.

It looked impossible: but, in contradiction to this conclusion, just then the party actually did miscarry, and go tramping over marsh.

“We are off the path!” called Danda; “it is just there to the left. Follow the sound of my steps.”

In a minute they were back.

But this opened her mind to the means by which the troop was guiding itself. She tingled with discovery. Here was no question of sight: the night was too confirmed. Each, except the foremost, walked by the sounds of the man before; the foremost by a species of instinct, the indefinite sensations of the ground, of bordering cliff or hillside. And he, too, was unconsciously influenced by the sounds behind.

Another sound, therefore, introduced among the tramp, continually tempting false, would surely prove a distracting factor, a misleading lure, in the *ensemble* of the foot-falls.

This thought struck her pallid. To introduce herself and mingle as one of them among them! and a stretched-out hand, a flutter of the skirt, would spoil her! And there was Verdier—

She once caught, she doubted if any hope would remain. But she felt out on either hand, though her will still hung in suspension: two hill-sides shelved to the path; as yet she could do nothing. But she quickened her pace.

At this point Verdier called out:

“It would be better, I think, if each took hold of the man in front for guidance. If your Grace does not object—”

Verdier was behind Danda, separated by a man from the Duke. Margaret, now near enough to hear, was stepping with strained ears, throbbing heart, and at Verdier’s proposal her face had a look of scare: it was just like a counter-answer to her thoughts.

“If your Grace does not object—” he repeated.

“Let us get on,” said the Duke, piercing the thought, without troubling to accuse it, “I told you that I would not run off.”

Verdier had the whim that this would be an inoffensive excuse for making doubly-sure of the prisoner, though, in fact, he had no doubt of the Duke’s word; and at the penetration of his motive, and the refusal, his face screwed into a laughing grimace of self-conscious defeat, as who should say:

“He’s done me!”

The march continued as before. And suddenly, Margaret, without knowing that she had resolved, found herself, with a pang of terror, in the thick of the act which she had only conceived.

Here, on one side, ran hill; on the other, a spread of wet land, half-moor, but sparsely tree-grown, lay dark. Over this she was now hasting, with cat-like care, stalking on intense tip-toe, yet quickly. And now she was abreast of the hindermost; and now of the Duke; and now of Danda, skirt picked high to thighs, her eyes wide with bigness of purpose.

Nearer!—her difficulty being the exact position of the foremost, and the slipping between him and the next. Had she known that the next was Verdier, her daring will might have failed. But by the concentrating of her whole soul, by ears ardent for accuracy, by nerves high-strung, trained to exact achievement, steadily sure, on the acme of alacrity, she did successfully slide between Danda and Verdier. And now, boldly, with strong manly step, outstriding like a soldier, she went marching between.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRUNK

Little by little worked the sorcery of that seducing foot-fall, like the “beginning of sin.” There was a mere deviation from the path; then, could it have been seen, a most gradual curve and trend to the right; then, always to the right, a definite excursive drift from the original direction of march; then blank delusion, and complex vagrancy, and mazy error.

Twenty minutes, and beyond redemption they were lost — no real idea of direction left in them, like a stray flock, the pied-piper’s rats flute-led to their drowning, believing in a lie.

She stepped from the curving file which they still formed; and, falling to the rear, no longer cautious, made a dark sound in a puddle. The result was marvellous. The man near heard, and followed it. And *his* sounds were followed by others, and theirs by others. And in an instant, the very spirit of delusion had them, playing with them, leading them by the nose, they no longer walking in file, but in a disorganised confusion, separated by varying intervals, each misled by the nearest sound, and misleading in turn through all the permutations of error; yet believing themselves all the while walking in file along the foot-path, southward.

The Duke was still in their midst, himself deluded. But it presently happened that none of the French were very near him; and it was then that he suddenly came, with a shock, to a standstill, striking an obstruction.

His hand felt up and down, meeting a substance damp, and smooth, and somewhat slimy; too smooth for bark, too soft for a hut-door. He moved a step aside, thinking to get clear, but there it still was; tried again, but it was there. With hand sliding along the substance, he began to step tentatively. Whatever the thing was, it was pretty extensive; and from the manner in which he was compelled to step, he concluded something circular. At last his sliding hand fell upon emptiness, and immediately struck something which yielded to the touch.

His hand, again put out, met nothing; but the arm, moved from side to side, was stopped by two edges. He now concluded that he had walked into a circular building, was at the door-way, and that what had yielded to the weight of his out-falling hand was the door.

A forward step, and he had this door, which came readily to his pull. Feeling along its surfaces, he found that the inner was soft, and damp, like the surface which had obstructed him, but the outer rough and gnarled.

And now he knew: he had walked into the interior of some colossal and hollow tree.

It was an elm, the fame of the county, old as the Druids, and large as a small room, with a door made of its own bark, narrower a-top. It was a recognised resort of pic-nic parties in the neighbourhood.

“Well, now,” said he, “this comes in rather well. Here, I think, we shall be pretty safe.”

He pulled the door upon himself. The closure was complete.

Lise had seen the giant trunk, but sent no report of it, it lay so remotely beyond the route; nor did she even know that it was hollow. For the French, without lanthorn, to refind the prisoner in this perfect retreat was impossible, even should they return striking flashes.

But they were now far away, having butted in a body against a stone hedge, before suspecting that anything was wrong. Then, like men awaking out of a dream, they felt that all was lost. A succession of flashes convinced them that the Duke was no longer among them.

“Where *are* we?” cried Danda, stamping furiously.

“We are where you have led us,” answered Verdier. I congratulate you, m’sieur.”

He struck a flash, looking at a pocket compass.

“We have been travelling due west instead of due south, that is all,” he said.

“But the prisoner! the prisoner!”

“The prisoner is probably sleepy, m’sieur, and going home to his bed.”

Danda’s white lip set.

“Then it is your fault! it is *you* who believed an Englishman’s word! it is *you* who said he was not to be held! Does he call himself a man of honour?”

“You are an idiot,” said Verdier coolly, “Something or other has happened. Gentlemen, whether they are Englishmen or not, do not break faith. He has not run away. He has missed us somehow in the dark. While we have been doubling about, he has perhaps gone straight. Something must have happened. He can hardly be such a *cur—!*”

He stopped: his brows knit: it was hard to conceive what *could* have happened.

“But what are we to do now?” said Danda.

“We are to go back, at a swift run, till we find the foot-path again, then run northward. it is there, if anywhere, that we will meet him.”

And at a run they started back, but obliquely, passing some distance from the elm: the Duke, within it, did not hear their foot-steps.

Margaret at the first flash of steel-and-flint, had fled beyond ear-shot of their talk, and believed the Duke still in their midst. When they started back, she followed, thinking that her *ruse* had not kept them long astray, after all.

In fifteen minutes, stopped by a hill-side, they recognised the foot-path: and away northward they sped, silent and swift. Lise d'Arblay, meanwhile, was stepping contentedly southward on her nag, not suspecting the deviation.

The Duke fastened the door with a hook-and-eye, more secure here than in his Grandcourt bedroom. He leant, his legs crossed, tired, listening, smiling.

So he reclined a longish time. The French had already run back past the tree, before he started violently upright. Suddenly he remembered. . . . He had promised. . . .

"Well, this will never do," he said.

He made at once two steps towards the door. But stopped. *What* had he promised? He remembered the very words

"Let me go. I won't run off."

The question which confounded him a moment was whether his accidental entrance into the tree, and the mere act of remaining there, could be called "running off." "Running" it certainly was not, nor was it even "off": if he stayed, therefore, he would be well within the letter of his promise

And the character of the persons to whom the promise was made did not escape his reflection. While half-recognising their gallantry, he judged them with all the severity of his austere mind. They were outrageous, they were criminal, they deserved to be hanged. In reality, they were a mere low rabble, vulgar brigands.

But his hesitation, his reflection, were only momentary. Soon he was at the door, and out, and away. . . .

He was rather scared, rather frightened. Suppose he could not find them? He called aloud. His memory, surely, had played him an odd trick: he must, in truth, be getting an old fellow. His perfect calm forsook him. Perhaps for the first time in his life—he was agitated.

There was a spirit as well as a letter: a man should be honest. . .

He ran calling, with bare head, in the same direction as his approach to the tree, thinking the French must be there, in advance. Finally, he, too, butted upon the stone hedge which had stopped them.

"This will never do," he said again, severely.

He was wholly lost. How he had come to enter the tree at all, they travelling in single file along a foot-path, was more than he could comprehend. And where now was the foot-path was all a mystery. He had no compass, no flint-and-steel. He stood shut in, in the close prison of the darkness, his great heart anxious, wrinkles of trouble across his brow.

"The only way, then," he said, "will be to run about and make a noise. These fellows will think . . ."

Again he started into a trot, calling, backward towards tree and foot-path. When he reached this, he was stopped by the hill on its further side, and understood: this then, was it. By a wise guess he determined which was north, which south, and southward he turned, not dreaming that they were making rapid paces northward on his imagined track.

Now he quickened his trot, stick out-held obliquely in hand; and ever as he went, he called: "Hi, there! Hi! Hi! Hi!"