

Warwick Deeping



# THE HOUSE OF SPIES

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# **The House of Spies**

**Historical Thriller**

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Jasper Benham tumbled out of bed, with the crack of a pistol-shot splitting the silence of the night. Before him ran the long casement window, each diamond pane a silver lozenge set in a frame of jet. Moonlight came through and lay patterned upon the floor.

"Master Jasper—Master Jasper——!"

It was a plaintive howl from under the window, the voice of a man who was afraid.

"Master Jasper—horse-thieves in t' yard!"

The lattice opened, and a pair of broad shoulders caught the moonlight.

"What's this—Jack——?"

John Bumpstead, the groom, was squeezing himself against the wall.

"Dear Lord—sir—they've bruk into t' stable. Me and Jim Burgess tumbled up to see what was wrong. We couldn't face pistols, sir. They be there still, sir——"

"What! The infernal rogues! Here, take the blunderbuss, Jack, and have a blaze——"

"Master Jasper—I dursn't——"

"You're not man enough to scare rooks!"

The figure disappeared from the window, and from the moonlit room came the sounds of an active young man plunging furiously for his clothes. Anything served; a frilled shirt, the red coat of a lieutenant of volunteers thrown over a chair, a pair of riding-breeches and rough boots. A hanger hung from the bed-post, and there was the blunderbuss in the corner. Jasper Benham went down the oak stairs with

the clattering impetuosity of a boy playing hide-and-seek. He drew back the bolts of the heavy porch door, and ran the oak bar out of its socket.

Jack Bumpstead waited in the porch, with little coquettish flirts of something white swaying in the draught. He had been valorously quick in dressing, but his teeth chattered behind his thin beard.

"Take the oak bar, Jack; it's a good cudgel. How many of them?"

"May be a dozen."

"Fudge! Where's Jim Jenner?"

"I shouldn't like t' say, sir."

"No doubt back in bed and under the sheets by this time! Shout—if you can't fight, Jack; make a noise—anything. Come along."

They skirted along the terrace, turned down by the yew hedge, and so by the stone-paved passage between the bake-house and the great brick barn. The passage was in deep shadow, and Jasper had no notion that a man was lurking there till the yellow spurt of the powder in the priming-pan of a pistol made him throw himself against the wall. The piece missed fire, and the clatter of heavy boots over the stones betrayed what had become of the man who had pulled the trigger. There was some shouting in the stable yard, and the stamping of horses. One deep voice sent oaths flying, the savage and impatient oaths of a man in a fluster.

Jack Bumpstead had thrown himself flat on his face. He caught young Benham by the ankle.

"You shan't go for to be shot, master; they be some of Dan Stunt's gang."

"Let go—you fool!"

"They don't mind God or devil, sir. Better for 'em to have the nags——"

"Let go, Jack, or by Jove——"

He twisted free and ran on into the yard in time to see a hustle of horses crowding through the gateway into the moonlight. One fellow was still lying across his horse's back with his legs dangling. Another sat gaunt and erect, pistol raised, ready, like a big forefinger.

Jasper's blunderbuss came up. He fired high, because of the horses, and the belching mouth of the blunderbuss stabbed the night with flame. Smoke hung for a moment, drifting away in wisps. The gateway had emptied as though by magic, and in the place of the black knot of men and horses, a strip of moonlit road was guarded by the two black, brick pillars with their two stone balls.

Jasper ran for the gate, shouting to Jack Bumpstead as he ran.

"Get a lantern—get a lantern."

Nothing lay in the roadway beyond the gate, no dark thing that squirmed with leaden slugs burning in its body. A dark blur that moved broke the white road across the paddock. Jasper watched it a moment with jaws set, and then turned back into the yard. He was in an ugly temper, and even the tail of Jack Bumpstead's shirt, flickering in doleful whiteness by the stable door, flapped no laughter from him. A tinder-box was kept on a window-ledge close to where the cord that held the great stable lantern sloped down to a hook in the wall. The groom had groped for the tinder-box and was trying to get a light, though his hands were shaking so that he struck the flint with his knuckles more often than he struck it with the steel.

"The deuce, Jack! Here, give me the things!"

From the loose-box at the far end of the stable came the whimpering of a horse and the clatter of hoofs on the brick floor.

"Why, they've left Devil Dick!"

"Sure, Master Jasper, sure!"

"That's luck, indeed!"

John Bumpstead managed to get one of the sulphur-tipped matches alight. Benham had lowered the great lantern and it dangled close by. The groom put the match to the candle, and the yellow rays shooting between the black bars showed four empty stalls littered with trampled straw.

Benham pulled a wry face.

"Confound the blackguards! Two cart-horses, and Peggy, and Brown Bob gone. And they have left Devil Dick, the best of the whole bunch!"

He went to the loose-box, and a warm nose was thrust over the door. The horse's lips nibbled affectionately at his hand.

"Jack, light that other lantern there. Run into the house and get me a brace of pistols. You'll find them in the case on the oak chest in my room. Run, man, run. I'll saddle Dick."

"Sir——?"

"Don't stand and stare, you fool! Do you think I'm going to let these gentry go without a gallop! I may follow them up if I can't bring them to action."

In ten minutes Devil Dick was prancing sideways through the gateway, carrying a bare-headed, bare-legged man with a pistol in each pocket. A good square jaw, blue eyes, and a firm mouth are the points of a youngster who does not fawn upon fate. Jasper Benham had been an impudent young cub, a little laughing, keen-eyed imp who had been whacked and cuffed into a sturdy, determined, brown-faced man.



Jasper drew Devil Dick on to the grass and listened. The night was still, with a gibbous moon sailing away up yonder, and a vague, inconstant breeze murmuring occasionally in the trees and hedgerows. Rush Heath House stood black and huge at Jasper's back. He listened to a faint galloping rhythm coming like the noise of a stream running in the distance. The moonlight shone on the deep-set eyes under the square brows.

"Tsst—Dick—on—lad."

They started away through the paddock, and over the furze-covered slopes of Rush Heath, the big black horse swinging smoothly between Jasper's knees. Stones clinked in the road. The stunted thorns rushed by, stretching out warning hands. In the damp places the rush tufts splintered the moonlight like silver wires. The further woods were very black upon the hillsides, and the fresh smell of the spring night was tinged with the scent of the sea.

Jasper galloped through Polecat Wood, on over Stubb's Common, and past Flanders Farm into Lavender's Hole. At the top of the further hill he drew in to listen, and heard something that heartened him and set his blood a-spinning. There was good turf along the track over Stonehanger Heath, and by the light of the moon he could see the fresh marks left by the horses ahead. A lively imagination is needed for the making of a coward, and Jasper Benham's shoulders were too sturdy to form a squatting-place for fear. Devil Dick at a gallop was made for audacity, pistol-shots, and the clashing of swords.

"Scurvy thieves——!"

The land was very wild here, rough wood and heathland rising toward uplands that overlooked the sea. Stunted oaks and firs hung in black tangles against the moon. Desolate furze-covered knolls heaved this way and that, and the track

plunged, twisted, and burrowed through thickets. Even higher ground lay up yonder under the moon, a bluff ridge where the trees had been blown all one way by the wind, and the furze rolled like green breakers.

Jasper saw the roof and chimneys of a house rising black against the sky. He lost sight of it for a moment as the track curved under a rocky bank where dwarf trees and brushwood broke the moonlight. Then the house reappeared again upon the hilltop, a bleak house, parapeted, square-windowed, with massive chimneys built for the roar of the wind. Tattered thorns, oaks, and firs sheltered it on the north and the south-west, and held out their arms to it as though it had tormented them for years with some strange secret. The furze broke upon the very walls of its terrace and garden.

Jasper drew in, like a man challenged in the darkness.

"Stonehanger! I had forgotten the old place!"

He looked up at it, frowningly, as though it roused grim thoughts, ghostly drifts of gossip that made folk draw nearer to the fire.

"Who's there now? Bless me if I know! These horse-thieves——!"

He took a pistol from his pocket and let Devil Dick advance at a walk. The black house up yonder oppressed him. Such things had happened there. It was as though it threw a shadow across his heart.

What was that? Horses galloping! By George—what a fool he was to be shying at a dark house like a nervous horse, while the gentry yonder were going over the hill. Jasper urged Devil Dick to a trot. The track was steep here, and littered with loose stones.

But in chasing blackguards a man may forget to be on his guard against the blackguards' tricks. At the spot where the

grey stone wall of the Stonehanger garden began a great yew threw its shadow across the road. And a man leaning round the trunk of the tree, flashed a pistol at Jasper, and then jumped into the road.

"Take that—for being obstinate, and be darned to you!"

Jasper was down in the road as quickly as the man, simply because Devil Dick had swerved and thrown him, and left him lying on his back. The horse-thief bent over Jasper with the butt-end of his pistol ready. A superfluous precaution. Benham of Rush Heath lay as still as a stone, and his horse had bolted down the road.

The man spat, and nodded.

"You lie nice and quiet there, lad. I should have liked your nag, but the beast's bolted. Good-night to ye——"

And he went off with a wave of the hat.



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There was a light in Stonehanger House. It had flashed out suddenly in one of the side windows, as though the black house had raised an eyelid and looked out on the world with a sinister, yellow eye.

The light disappeared from the window, and left the eastern side of the house a mere dark surface. At the same moment a gust of wind came over the hill from the sea. The stunted trees shook their fists at the house, cursing it and bidding it beware.

Then a door opened, and the light came out into the paved yard at the back of Stonehanger. It flickered across toward the stable whose stone roof was brushed by the boughs of a clump of firs. There was the sound of some one hammering at a door, a hollow sound like blows struck with the hilt of a sword upon the panelling covering some secret hiding-place.

The light approached the road, shooting yellow rays among the overgrown laurels and hollies of the shrubbery inside the stone wall. There was a gate here, with an arched stone bridge leading over the ditch to the road. The gate was thrust open and the lantern held out at the end of a white forearm. Ten yards away Jasper Benham lay flat on his back, one arm flung out, the other twisted as though it were broken. The lantern swayed uncertainly at the gate and then came down into the road. It showed the white face and the slight figure of a girl, a red cloak flung over her shoulders, her dress open at the throat.

She stood and looked at the figure in the road as though she were shrewdly afraid, and ready to reason with herself for being so.

"Don't be a coward, Nance. You won't help any one by being afraid."

She spoke the words aloud, in a mood to be reassured by the sound of her own voice.

"Can't you see that the man has a soldier's coat? The French may have landed at last. You heard horses go by, and the sound of a pistol-shot."

She moved forward and, holding the lantern shoulder-high, bent over the man in the road. It was a pure coincidence that Benham opened his eyes at the same moment, and blinked at the light that was within two feet of his face.

"Hallo!—O—my head!"

He stirred, turned on one elbow, and fell back with a savage start of pain.

"Damnation, what's this? What have they done to my arm? Who—? I say—I beg your pardon—!"

Sudden sanity came into his eyes, and he lay and stared at the girl's face. It seemed that these two were fascinated momentarily by each other's eyes. Benham moistened his lips, and made an effort to explain himself.

"I must have had a crack on the head. Of course, what am I thinking of! The scoundrel shot at me from behind a tree. Where's Dick? Can you see anything of a horse?"

She looked up and down the lane, and her eyes returned slowly to his face. They were very solemn eyes, big and dark, like the eyes of a southern woman.

"I can't see any horse. Have the French landed—?"

"The French?"

"Yes."

"Nothing so respectable. I was chasing horse-thieves, and one of them shot me from behind that yew-tree. I'm Benham of Rush Heath."

Her solemnity took the colour of compassion.

"I'm sorry. And your poor arm there! No, don't move. I'm Nance Durrell, and this is Stonehanger Lane."

"Durrell! H'm. That fellow's bullet must have broken my right arm."

"I heard horses galloping, and the sound of a pistol-shot. You see, I was watching for father. And I couldn't wake David; he's stone deaf."

"You live here then?"

"Yes, at Stonehanger. Don't you know?"

Jasper looked discomfited by his ignorance.

"It's my head; this tumble has knocked my wits to pieces. I wonder if I can get up."

She put the lantern down, and they regarded each other with great seriousness.

"I don't know. There's your arm! And it has been bleeding."

"Has it?"

"Sssh—it must hurt!"

"Well, I can't lie here in the road, can I?"

"No."

"I must get up—and home—somehow."

She looked at him as though considering what was best to do.

"I know. You ought to have your arm fastened to your side. I had my arm broken once. I'll go in and get a scarf."

She picked up the lantern and disappeared through the gate with beams of light swinging about her in the darkness. As for Jasper Benham, his head had cleared sufficiently to admit some measure of astonished curiosity. Who were the

Durrells, and how had they come to Stonehanger House, and how was it he could not remember ever having heard the name?

"Nance Durrell—Nance Durrell."

He repeated it to himself as he lay under the shadow of the yew-tree, as though the uttering of the name might help him to realise that he was not dreaming in his bed at Rush Heath. No; the ground was solid, the yew bough above him was solid, the pain in his arm was very real. And the girl who called herself Nance Durrell? He found himself waiting impatiently for her return, and watching the foliage of the shrubs for the shine of her lantern.

She was back again in the road, carrying a red scarf in one hand.

"I had to hunt for it, or I should not have been so long."

She put the lantern down, and knelt beside him, her lips parted, her eyes full of her purpose. It struck Benham of a sudden that she must have led a free and rather lonely life. She seemed ready to rely upon herself, to meet responsibilities with the frank self-reliance of a girl who has had to trust to her own hands.

"Do you think you can sit up?"

"Of course I can."

"Wait; I'll help you. Hold your arm with your other hand."

She drew herself behind him, and put her hands under his shoulders.

"Now."

He was up, with her hands still holding him, and her breath touching his cheek.

"Can you bear it?"

"Yes."

"Draw the arm across—so."

"Phew—confound it! I'm sorry; it's nothing."

"I know how it must hurt."

The frank impulse toward sympathy in her voice sent a start of emotion through him. He set his teeth as she bound the broken arm to his side with the red scarf. There was a kind of pleasure in the pain.

"What gentle hands you have."

"Have I? There! How does that feel?"

"Splendid."

"Now I'll help you up."

Whatever a man's pluck may be it cannot raise him above nature, or make him independent of the ills of the flesh. Jasper Benham scrambled to his feet to be smothered by a sudden fog of faintness that blotted out the moonlight and set him groping with his hands.

"I can't help it—but—"

She understood what ailed him, and was practical in her compassion.

"You're faint."

Her hands steadied him.

"Put your head down—just for a moment."

He felt the grip of her strong young hands, and the thrill of it may have helped his heart.

"That's better."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She picked up the lantern and, holding it high, looked at him with frank concern.

"You can't get back to Rush Heath to-night."

"I am afraid that's the truth."

"You must come in here. I'll wake David somehow. He can go over to Rush Heath as soon as it is light, and tell them to send a cart."

"What a friend you are."



She stood there in sudden forceful contrast to all the things feminine that he had ever known. There was a sweet and brave directness about her that challenged his manhood. Simple, chivalrous homage; some women win such service with a word or a look. He bowed to her, and his heart bowed with his body.

"You are very good to me."

"Good! What else could one do!"

Everything about the grey, upland house seemed fashioned out of stone. The paths and yard were paved with rough stones from the quarry; the hall and passages floored with flagstones. Jasper Benham found himself lying on a long couch under the window in a room that might have been part of an old religious house. It was walled and vaulted with stone, and the fireplace was a great yawning recess with carved pillars on each side of it.

Nance Durrell had gone to wake David Barfoot, the servant, who slept in a room by the stable. Benham lay back with his head on the round squab, and looked about him with the consenting curiosity of a man who dreams. Who were the Durrells, and how had they come to Stonehanger, this grey house, that for thirty years had been spoken of as a house of horror? Benham was not an imaginative man, but this grey room with the huge yawn of its fireplace filled him with a vague sense of eeriness and mystery.

He heard footsteps crossing the paved hall. Nance reappeared with an armful of wood. Her big, brown eyes ran over with laughter, the mischievous and sparkling laughter of perfect health.

"I have managed to wake David. We make him leave his window open, because there is only one way of waking him."

"Throwing stones——?"

"I could only find the stable bucket—and I'm afraid I dropped it on David's head."

She put her wood down and, kneeling, stirred the heap of grey ash in the fireplace. Her breath roused it to redness, and the twigs that she threw on crackled with flame. Benham watched her as though the kindling of that fire was one of the most wonderful things that he had ever seen. The burning wood threw a warmth upon her, and made her black hair gleam.

"Don't you love making a fire?"

"Yes, when it is not at six o'clock on a winter morning."

"Oh, I love that, too. It is so glorious to get warm."

To Benham the whole adventure had been incredibly delightful. Only by degrees did he become conscious of himself, of his bare legs, and the general precipitation of his dress. But somehow these things did not seem to matter. The girl had picked up the incidents of the night as naturally as she would have gathered wind-blown apples out of the grass.

"There's David."

Sounds came from some far-off corner of the house. Nance disappeared, to return with a skillet full of milk, a cup, and some bread and cheese on a plate.

"I am going to heat this milk for you."

"You are taking too much trouble."

"I should have to sit up—anyway. Father may return to-night. He was coming by the night coach, and meant to walk from Battle."

Jasper was seized with a desire to ask questions, but his finer instincts smothered the desire. And in another minute she was holding out the cup of milk to him with that solemn and intent look in her eyes.

"You must get some sleep now. I shall have to keep awake by the fire, and listen."

"For Mr. Durrell? He will have a long tramp from Battle."

"Yes. David never hears anything."

"A useful man on occasions."

"Does the arm hurt you much?"

"No, nothing to speak of."

She brought a rug from somewhere and threw it over him, and took the cup when he had finished the milk.

"I will put out the lantern. The firelight will do for me."

She drew an arm-chair before the hearth, took some logs from the oak log-box and piled them against the fire-back. Benham lay and watched her out of the corners of his eyes. She sat herself down with the firelight playing upon her black dress, and touching her throat and face. Perhaps she had outwatched her own wakefulness, for presently she fell asleep, her head resting against the chair back, her face turned toward the window.

Jasper Benham could not sleep. The aching of his broken arm, and a feeling of restlessness kept him awake. Moreover, he was very conscious of the nearness of the girl sleeping in the chair; and the alluring strangeness of her white face seemed sharpened by his own pain. He became feverish and nervously alert, unable to master the thoughts and conjectures that made a whirligig of his brain. He began to question the history of Stonehanger as a sick man busies himself with patterns on a wall. Was it true that Inchbold had killed his wife here fifty years ago? Was it true that two men had fought a duel to the death in this very room? What of the tales told of the haunting horror of the house, a horror that had emptied it and kept it empty for twenty years? Nance Durrell, sleeping before the fire, seemed to contradict

all this. The ebbing and flowing of her breath between the red lips of youth might exorcise such ghost tales.

But Benham was very restless. The flicker of the firelight through the vaulted room made a grim, fantastic shadow-play. There was a listening silence about the house that made wakeful ears tingle with imaginary sounds. Sometimes a log settled, and sent up a scattering of sparks. More than once a gust of wind rattled the windows.

Suddenly Benham turned his head. He had heard, or thought he had heard, the ring of a horse's hoofs upon the stones of the court-yard. He wondered for the moment whether he ought to wake Nance Durrell.

Benham's eyes were turned toward the fire. He did not see something white glide up toward the window. A face seemed to flatten itself against the panes, and to be distorted by the crinkles in the glass. It remained there for a few seconds, and then melted back into the night.



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Two men were waiting in the stone porch that sheltered the yard-door at Stonehanger. A third man crossed the yard with long, silent strides, and joined the two who were waiting. He took one of them by the arm.

"Over here—among the shrubs."

They moved away into the moonlight, and along under the shadow of a stone wall toward the wild tangle of the neglected garden. The man who had spoken carried himself with a grand air that was spoilt by a suggestion of swagger. He had restless eyes that threw rapid glances from side to side. The man whom he held by the elbow had white hair and a thin, sharp, eager face. The third fellow was a little tub of a Frenchman, frog-faced, blue-chinned, and very fat.

"Here, this path will do. Anthony Durrell, what shall you say if we are trapped?"

"What do you mean?"

"For God's sake, sir, keep that squeaky voice of yours down in your shoes! Pardon me, I am somewhat excited. There is a red-coat officer lying at his ease upon your couch. He had covered himself with a rug, but I got a glimpse of his red jacket. And Mademoiselle Nance is asleep before the fire."

The three men stood close together under the laurels and hollies, whispering with their heads close, and speaking sometimes in French and sometimes in English. The tall man seemed to take the lead.

"Pest on it, Durrell; I have a mind to go back and shoot the man through the window."

"No—no—I will not countenance——"

"There, there, am I a fool! The house may be full of red-coats. We have got to find that out. Your daughter expects you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you must go and knock as boldly as any corporal. Jerome and I can stay in the shadow by the porch. If the red-coat is alone, and means mischief, we can deal with him. If he has men with him, they will catch nothing but a respectable scholar returning after a journey to London. It is lucky I left the horses in the quarry."

Anthony Durrell fingered a prominent and bony chin.

"I think you are right, Chevalier."

"Tut, tut, it is plain as the moon. Jerome and I know where to bolt to in case of trouble. Go and embrace your most charming daughter."

Nance Durrell woke with a start, and her eyes met the eyes of Jasper Benham.

"I've been asleep!"

"There is some one knocking."

She was up instantly, and kindling a piece of stick at the fire she lit the lantern.

"It must be father."

Nance went out, and Benham heard her shooting back the bolts of the door. A man's cheery and exclamatory voice told of a home-coming.

"Why, child, here we are—at last."

"I am so glad you have come."

"All well, all well?"

"Yes. But we have had an adventure."

"What—what!"

"Let me take your cloak. Yes; a gentleman was shot at and wounded by horse-thieves—in the lane. I had to help

him in here. He is in the parlour."

"Bless my soul!"

"Come in and see him."

Benham sat up, the rug falling from him, as Nance Durrell and her father entered the room. He saw a thin, narrow-shouldered man in black regarding him with weak and red-lidded eyes. Anthony Durrell had one of those narrow, hungry, aspiring faces, the face of a man whose desires would never be satisfied. He might have been a bookman, a fanatic, or a dreamer of dreams.

He came in smiling, and the smile spoilt the dignity of his face. It lifted the angles of the mouth too markedly, showed the gaps between the teeth, and was too reminiscent of a snarl.

"Good evening to you, sir."

Benham had risen. He had the watchful look one sees in the eyes of a young man who is brought into sudden contact with a personality that is new and strange.

"Miss Durrell has told you? Yes. I must say, sir, that I am vastly grateful——"

"Common courtesy, common kindness, Mr.——"

"Benham of Rush Heath."

"Mr. Benham. I hope you are not badly hurt."

He rubbed his hands, and smiled with a sympathy that seemed ill at ease.

"A broken arm, sir."

"Indeed! That's bad."

He looked fixedly at Benham, and then turned to Nance.

"I commend you, my dear child. I am glad that we have been able to be of service to Mr. Benham. What does the clock say? What, gone two! It seems to me that it will be kinder to leave Mr. Benham undisturbed. You can get me

some supper in the kitchen, Nance. And then I think bed will be very welcome."

He stood a moment staring at the fire. The smile had died from his face and left it cold and preoccupied. When he turned once more toward Benham, the smile spread again over his face, unspontaneously, forced up from within.

"Mr. Benham, sir, I will not disturb you further. Make what use you please of this room. Shall we decide to meet again in the morning?"

He gave Jasper a stiff and constrained bow, and walked slowly from the room. Nance followed him, but turned at the door.

"Good night. Is there anything else you would like?"

"No; only to thank you again."

Her brown eyes smiled kindly at him as she closed the door.

"Nance, dear."

"Yes, father. David is in the kitchen."

"Ah, send him to bed, and get me some supper. I have left my bag in the porch. I had almost forgotten it."

"I'll fetch it for you."

"No, no; get me some milk heated. I feel rather chilled."

And he left her with irritable precipitation. Durrell had no more than a few hurried words with the two men who waited in the yard. He had closed the door behind him, and spoke in a half-whisper.

"No danger—I hope. It's a young man who was shot in the arm while chasing horse-thieves. I will send the girl to bed, and then come back for you."

"Who is the man?"

"A young Benham of Rush Heath."

"Psst—damnably awkward——!"

"I mustn't stay now."



"Yes, get back."

Half an hour passed before Nance took one of the brass candlesticks from the mantelpiece and went up to bed, yawning behind her hand. David Barfoot had been sent back to his room, and Anthony Durrell had Stonehanger House to himself.

The first thing he did was to take off his shoes, and go very cautiously along the passage leading from the kitchen to the hall. A faint line of light showed under the door of the room where Jasper Benham of Rush Heath sat on the couch, swinging his heels. Durrell went softly to the door and listened. The key was on the outside. He felt for it, and turned it with the utmost caution. Yet the lock gave a faint click as the catch shot home, and Durrell stood for three minutes, listening for any sound in the room within.

Durrell's ears satisfied him that all was quiet, though he would have felt far from satisfied had he been able to see through the panels of the door. Jasper had heard the click of the lock. He was sitting on the couch, and staring intently at the door. Presently he crossed the room, sliding his feet silently over the stones, and tried the door, only to find it locked.

"That's funny!" he said to himself; "it seems that the old fellow doesn't trust me. What has he to be anxious about?"

He turned and sat down in the chair in which Nance had fallen asleep.

Anthony Durrell had opened the porch door, and was whispering to the men in the porch.

"Go round to the kitchen entry. Don't make a noise. Nance has only just gone to her room."

They disappeared into the darkness, and Durrell felt his way back toward the kitchen, shutting the door that closed the passage from the hall. Entering the kitchen, he drew the

heavy stuff curtains across the windows, and then let the two men in.

"Don't talk too loud. The old house is solid—but I don't want Nance to hear."

Jerome the Frenchman glanced greedily at the bread and cheese on the table, and drawing up a chair he pulled out a bottle of schnapps, and began to eat and drink. The taller man smiled, and laid his cloak and hat on a dresser. He stood six feet, held himself arrogantly, and looked down at Durrell out of a pair of hard, brown, closely set eyes. He was clean-shaven, and the skin of his face was harsh and red. His long, straight nose had a curiously drooping tip, and two deep, vertical furrows where it joined his forehead. The man had the air of an aristocrat, and the easy and contemptuous manner of one who has seen too much of life.

"Durrell, I don't like this interlude. What's the fellow's tale?"

"He says that he was chasing horse-thieves, and that one of them shot him down yonder in the lane. Nance found him and brought him in."

"A plague on the women! Pity is the devil! Where was he hit?"

"In the arm."

"Sure?"

"It was bound up with a scarf, De Rothan."

The Chevalier straightened himself, and gave a toss of the head.

"I tell you what I think, Durrell—the man's a spy. I know young Benham. He is just the man they would choose to play a bluff, downright part. They may have suspicions. Who tied up the arm?"

"Nance."

"The devil! There you are! What do you mean by having a pretty daughter! Even if this is no spying trick, the booby may give us trouble. David should have had the job. You never know what a pair of soft eyes and hands will do."

Durrell looked troubled.

"But, Chevalier——"

"Yes, yes; it is accursedly awkward whichever way we look."

Jerome, his mouth full of bread, threw a suggestion into the air.

"Shoot the dog."

De Rothan laughed, sat on the edge of the table, and reached for Jerome's bottle of schnapps.

"You are a wise fellow, Jerome, always loading up against emergencies. But you are a little too rough in your methods. Strategy does it. I shall have my eyes on Mr. Benham."

"A snap of the fingers for him, then," said the Frenchman with a grin.

Durrell brooded, staring at the fire.

"The boat will not come ashore till to-morrow after dark, and then only if we give the signal."

"Yes; you will have to pack us in the attics, and get that fellow out of the house."

"Early."

"And take a ramble to the quarry."

"Yes, yes; no doubt."

Durrell answered irritably, like a man oppressed by a crowd of cares.

"The girl must be asleep by now."

"Very well. Away to the rookery. Bring that bread and cheese along with you, Jerome. I have only talked as yet."

Durrell took the lantern and went out into the passage. He was away for about five minutes. Then they saw him

standing in the doorway, beckoning.

The two men drew off their boots and gathered their belongings. They followed Anthony Durrell up the oak stairs to the attic story of Stonehanger House.

# IV

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Jasper Benham lay on the couch under the window and watched the dawn come up over the sea.

It was a stealthy creeping of tawny light into the sky, a rising of blue hills and headlands, dim, huge, and distant against the broadening East. The vague grey sea became a sheet of amethyst crossed by a band of gold. Birds were piping in the ragged thorn-trees upon Stonehanger Hill. A sense of wonder seemed to sweep across the land, touching the hills with splendour, and leaving the valleys full of a shadowy awe.

The breaking of the day was a relief to Jasper after a restless and pain-haunted night. He had come by odd snatches of sleep, but the starting of the broken arm had always awakened him, and left him at the mercy of his thoughts. The great, grey room, lit by the faint glow of the dying fire, had filled him with restless and unreasoning distrust.

He raised himself slowly on the couch, and his head swam with the fall of the previous night when Devil Dick had thrown him in the lane. Yet faint and dizzy as he was, the view from the window astonished him. From the Stonehanger uplands, wild, furze-clad slopes melted into the green-tinged browns of the April woods. Nearly the whole coast from Hastings to Beachy Head was visible. Pevensey Bay was a great half-moon of silver cutting into the green flats of the Level. The dim blue sky met the dim blue sea. Along the rim of Pevensey Bay were dotted little round pillars, the distant martello towers with the black mouths of

their twenty-four-pounders waiting for Napoleon and the French.

Benham knelt on the couch and gazed. He had heard vague movements about the house. A door had opened somewhere, and footsteps descended the stairs.

Then a girl's voice sounded out yonder amid the furze.

"Coop—coop—come along."

Jasper saw her drifting against the dawn, her black hair doubly black, her forearms bare to the elbow, her short skirt showing her feet and ankles. A kind of rough terrace garden, half grass, half paved path, ran along the front of the house. There were rose-beds in the grass, and the two old yews rose blackly above the parapet of the terrace wall. Nance was on the furze-land beyond, where the ground fell away toward the south.

A brown cow came into view. It passed Nance, and, like a creature of habit, followed a path that led to the yard. The girl had turned, and was looking at the windows of Stonehanger. A flight of rough steps went up to the terrace. She mounted them, and crossed the grass toward the windows of the parlour.

Benham, kneeling there, unfastened the lattice and thrust it open. Nance Durrell was quite close, and a kind of warmth went over her face. Her eyes had the dewiness of the dawn.

"You are awake."

"The morning is worth it."

She rested her hands on the window-ledge, and looked in at him with frank intentness.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry!"

"You have had a bad night of it. I can see that. The arm has been hurting you."