
Fortune's Fool
Rafael Sabatini

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CHAPTER I

THE HOSTESS OF THE PAUL'S HEAD

The times were full of trouble; but Martha Quinn was unperturbed. Hers was a mind that confined itself to the essentials of life: its sustenance and reproduction. Not for her to plague herself with the complexities of existence, with considerations of the Hereafter or disputations upon the various creeds by which its happiness may be ensured—a matter upon which men have always been ready to send one another upon exploring voyages thither—or yet with the political opinions by which a nation is fiercely divided. Not even the preparations for war with Holland, which were agitating men so violently, or the plague-scare based upon reports of several cases in the outskirts of the City, could disturb the serenity of her direct existence. The vices of the Court, which afforded such delectable scandal for the Town, touched her more nearly, as did the circumstance that yellow bird's-eye hoods were now all the rage with ladies of fashion, and the fact that London was lost in worship of the beauty and talent of Sylvia Farquharson, who was appearing with Mr. Betterton at the Duke's House in the part of Katherine in Lord Orrery's "Henry the Fifth."

Even so, to Martha Quinn, who very competently kept the Paul's Head, in Paul's Yard, these things were but the unimportant trifles that garnish the dish of life. It was upon life's main concerns that she concentrated her attention. In all that regarded meat and drink her learning—as became the hostess of so prosperous a house—was probably unrivalled. It was not merely that she understood the mysteries of bringing to a proper succulence a goose, a turkey, or a pheasant; but a chine of beef roasted in her oven was like no chine of beef at any other ordinary; she could perform miracles with marrow-bones; and she could so dissemble the umbles of venison in a pasty as to render it a dish fit for a prince's table. Upon these talents was her solid prosperity erected. She possessed, further—as became the mother of six sturdy children of assorted paternity—a discerning eye for a fine figure of a man. I am prepared to believe that in this matter her judgment was no whit

inferior to that which enabled her, as she boasted, to determine at a glance the weight and age of a capon.

It was to this fact—although he was very far from suspecting it—that Colonel Holles owed the good fortune of having lodged in luxury for the past month without ever a reckoning asked or so much as a question on the subject of his means. The circumstance may have exercised him. I do not know. But I know that it should have done so. For his exterior—his fine figure apart—was not of the kind that commands credit.

Mrs. Quinn had assigned to his exclusive use a cosy little parlour behind the common room. On the window-seat of this little parlour he now lounged, whilst Mrs. Quinn herself—and the day was long past in which it had been her need or habit with her own plump hands to perform so menial an office—removed from the table the remains of his very solid breakfast.

The lattice, of round, leaded panes of greenish, wrinkled glass, stood open to the sunlit garden and the glory of cherry trees that were belatedly in blossom. From one of these a thrush was pouring forth a *Magnificat* to the spring. The thrush, like Mrs. Quinn, concentrated his attention upon life's essentials, and was glad to live. Not so Colonel Holles. He was a man caught and held fast in the web of life's complexities. It was to be seen in his listless attitude; in the upright deep line of care that graved itself between his brows, in the dreamy wistfulness of his grey eyes, as he lounged there, shabbily clad, one leg along the leather-cushioned window-seat, pulling vacantly at his long clay pipe.

Observing him furtively, with a furtiveness, indeed, that was almost habitual to her, Mrs. Quinn pursued her task, moving between table and sideboard, and hesitated to break in upon his abstraction. She was a woman on the short side of middle height, well hipped and deep of bosom, but not excessively. The phrase "plump as a partridge" might have been invented to describe her. In age she cannot have been much short of forty, and whilst not without a certain homely comeliness, in no judgment but her own could she have been accounted beautiful. Very blue of eye and very ruddy of cheek, she looked the embodiment of health; and this rendered her not unpleasing. But the discerning would have perceived greed in the full mouth with its long upper lip, and sly cunning—Nature's compensation to low intelligences—in her vivid eyes.

It remains, however, that she was endowed with charms enough of person and of fortune to attract Coleman, the bookseller from the

corner of Paul's Yard, and Appleby, the mercer from Paternoster Row. She might marry either of them when she pleased. But she did not please. Her regard for essentials rendered the knock-knees of Appleby as repulsive to her as the bow-legs of Coleman. Moreover, certain adventitious associations with the great world—to which her assorted offspring bore witness—had begotten in her a fastidiousness of taste that was not to be defiled by the touch of mercers and booksellers. Of late, it is true, the thought of marriage had been engaging her. She realized that the age of adventure touched its end for her, and that the time had come to take a life companion and settle soberly. Yet not on that account would Martha Quinn accept the first comer. She was in a position to choose. Fifteen years of good management, prosperity, and thrift at the Paul's Head had made her wealthy. When she pleased she could leave Paul's Yard, acquire a modest demesne in the country, and become one of the ladies of the land, a position for which she felt herself eminently qualified. That which her birth might lack, that in which her birth might have done poor justice to her nature, a husband could supply. Often of late had her cunning blue eyes been narrowed in mental review of this situation. What she required for her purposes was a gentleman born and bred whom fortune had reduced in circumstances and who would, therefore, be modest in the matter of matrimonial ambitions. He must also be a proper man.

Such a man she had found at last in Colonel Holles. From the moment when a month ago he strode into her inn followed by an urchin shouldering his valise and packages, and delivered himself upon his immediate needs, she had recognized him for the husband she sought, and marked him for her own. At a glance she had appraised him; the tall, soldierly figure, broad to the waist, thence spare to the ground; the handsome face, shaven like a Puritan's, yet set between clusters of gold-brown hair thick as a cavalier's periwig, the long pear-shaped ruby—a relic, no doubt, of more prosperous days—dangling from his right ear; the long sword upon whose pummel his left hand rested with the easy grace of long habit; the assured poise, the air of command, the pleasant yet authoritative voice. All this she observed with those vivid, narrowing eyes of hers. And she observed, too, the gentleman's

discreditable shabbiness: the frayed condition of his long boots, the drooping, faded feather in his Flemish beaver, the well-rubbed leather jerkin, worn, no doubt, to conceal the threadbare state of the doublet underneath. These very signs which might have prompted another hostess to give our gentleman a guarded welcome urged Mrs. Quinn at once to throw wide her arms to him, metaphorically at present that she might do so literally anon.

At a glance she knew him, then, for the man of her dreams, guided to her door by that Providence to whose beneficence she already owed so much.

He had business in town, he announced—at Court, he added. It might detain him there some little while. He required lodgings perhaps for a week, perhaps for longer. Could she provide them?

She could, indeed, for a week, and at need for longer. Mentally she registered the resolve that it should be for longer; that, if she knew her man and herself at all, it should be for life.

And so at this handsome, down-at-heel gentleman's disposal she had placed not only the best bedroom abovestairs, but also the little parlour hung in grey linsey-woolsey and gilded leather, which overlooked the garden and which normally she reserved for her own private use; and the Paul's Head had awakened to such activity at his coming as might have honoured the advent of a peer of the realm. Hostess and drawer and chambermaid had bestirred themselves to anticipate his every wish. The cook had been flung into the street for overgrilling the luscious marrow-bones that had provided his first breakfast, and the chambermaid's ears had been soundly boxed for omission to pass the warming-pan through the Colonel's bed to ensure of its being aired. And although it was now a full month since his arrival, and in all that time our gentleman had been lavishly entertained upon the best meat and drink the Paul's Head could offer, yet in all that time there had been—I repeat—neither mention of a reckoning, nor question of his means to satisfy it.

At first he had protested against the extravagance of the entertainment. But his protests had been laughed aside with good-humoured scorn. His hostess knew a gentleman when she saw one, he was assured, and knew how a gentleman should be entertained. Unsuspicious of the designs upon him, he never dreamed that the heavy debt he was incurring was one of the coils employed by this cunning huntress in which to bind him.

Her housewifely operations being ended at last—after a prolongation which could be carried to no further lengths—she overcame her hesitation to break in upon his thoughts, which must be gloomy, indeed, if his countenance were a proper index. Nothing could have been more tactful than her method, based upon experience of the Colonel's phenomenal thirst, which, at all times unquenchable, must this morning have been further sharpened by the grilled herrings which had formed a part of his breakfast.

As she addressed him now, she held in her hand the long pewter vessel from which he had taken his morning draught.

"Is there aught ye lack for your comfort, Colonel?"

He stirred, turned his head, to face her, and took the pipestem from between his lips.

"Nothing, I thank you," he answered, with a gravity that had been growing upon him in the last fortnight, to overcloud the earlier good-humour of his bearing.

"What—nothing?" The buxom siren's ruddy face was creased in an alluring smile. Aloft now she held the tankard, tilting her still golden head. "Not another draught of October before you go forth?" she coaxed him.

As he looked at her now, he smiled. And it has been left on record by one who knew him well that his smile was irresistible, a smile that could always win him the man or woman upon whom he bestowed it. It had a trick of breaking suddenly upon a face that in repose was wistful, like sunshine breaking suddenly from a grey sky.

"I vow you spoil me," said he.

She beamed upon him. "Isn't that the duty of a proper hostess?"

She set the tankard on the laden tray and bore it out with her. When she brought it back replenished, and placed it on a coffin-stool beside him, he had changed his attitude, but not his mood of thoughtfulness. He roused himself to thank her.

She hovered near until he had taken a pull of the brown October.

"Do you go forth this morning?"

"Aye," he answered, but wearily, as if reduced to hopelessness. "They told me I should find his grace returned to-day. But they have told me the same so often already, that...." He sighed, and broke off, leaving his doubts implied. "I sometimes wonder if they but make game of me."

"Make game of you!" Horror stressed her voice. "When the Duke is your friend!"

"Ah! But that was long ago. And men change ... amazingly sometimes." Then he cast off the oppression of his pessimism. "But if there's to be war, surely there will be commands in which to employ a practised soldier—especially one who has experience of the enemy, experience

gained in the enemy's own service." It was as if he uttered aloud his thoughts.
She frowned at this. Little by little in the past month she had drawn from him some essential part of his story, and although he had been far from full in his confidences, yet she had gleaned enough to persuade herself that a reason existed why he should never reach this duke upon whom he depended for military employment. And in that she had taken comfort; for, as you surmise, it was no part of her intention that he should go forth to the wars again, and so be lost to her.
"I marvel now," said she, "that you will be vexing yourself with such matters."
He looked at her. "A man must live," he explained.
"But that's no reason why he should go to the wars and likely die. Hasn't there been enough o' that in your life already? At your age a man's mind should be on other things."
"At my age?" He laughed a little. "I am but thirty-five."
She betrayed her surprise. "You look more."
"Perhaps I have lived more. I have been very busy."
"Trying to get yourself killed. Don't it occur to you that the time has come to be thinking o' something else?"
He gave her a mildly puzzled glance, frowning a little.
"You mean?"
"That it's time ye thought o' settling, taking a wife and making a home and a family."
The tone she adopted was one of commonplace, good-humoured kindliness. But her breathing had quickened a little, and her face had lost some of its high colour in the excitement of thus abruptly coming to grips with her subject.
He stared a moment blankly, then shrugged and laughed.
"Excellent advice," said he, still laughing on a note of derision that obviously was aimed at himself. "Find me a lady who is well endowed and yet so little fastidious in her tastes that she could make shift with such a husband as I should afford her, and the thing is done."
"Now there I vow you do yourself injustice."
"Faith, it's a trick I've learnt from others."
"You are, when all is said, a very proper man."
"Aye! But proper for what?"

She pursued her theme without pausing to answer his frivolous question. "And there's many a woman of substance who needs a man to care for her and guard her—such a man as yourself, Colonel; one who knows his world and commands a worthy place in it."
"I command that, do I? On my soul you give me news of myself."

“If ye don’t command it, it is that ye lack the means, perhaps. But the place is yours by right.”
“By what right, good hostess?”
“By the right of your birth and breeding and military rank, which is plain upon you. Sir, why will you be undervaluing yourself? The means that would enable you to take your proper place would be provided by the wife who would be glad to share it with you.”
He shook his head, and laughed again.
“Do you know of such a lady?”
She paused before replying, pursing her full lips, pretending to consider, that thus she might dissemble her hesitation.
There was more in that hesitation than either of them could have come near imagining. Indeed, his whole destiny was in it. Upon such light things do human fates depend that had she now taken the plunge, and offered herself as she intended—instead of some ten days later, as eventually happened—although his answer would have varied nothing from what it ultimately was, yet the whole stream of his life would have been diverted into other channels, and his story might never have been worth telling.
Because her courage failed her at this moment, Destiny pursued the forging of that curious chain of circumstance which it is my task to reveal to you link by link.
“I think,” she said slowly at last, “that I should not be sorely put to it to find her. I ... I should not have far to seek.”

“It is a flattering conviction. Alas, ma’am, I do not share it.” He was sardonic. He made it clear that he refused to take the matter seriously, that with him it never could be more than a peg for jests. He rose, smiling a little crookedly. “Therefore I’ll still pin my hopes to his grace of Albemarle. They may be desperate; but, faith, they’re none so desperate as hopes of wedlock.” He took up his sword as he spoke, passing the baldric over his head and settling it on his shoulder. Then he reached for his hat, Mrs. Quinn regarding him the while in mingling wistfulness and hesitation.
At last she roused herself, and sighed.
“We shall see; we shall see. Maybe we’ll talk of it again.”
“Not if you love me, delectable matchmaker,” he protested, turning to depart.
Solicitude for his immediate comfort conquered all other considerations in her.
“You’ll not go forth without another draught to ... to fortify you.”
She had possessed herself again of the empty tankard. He paused and smiled. “I may need fortifying,” he confessed, thinking of all the disappointment that had waited upon his every previous attempt to see the Duke. “You think of everything,” he praised her. “You are not Mrs.

Quinn of the Paul's Head, you are benign Fortune pouring gifts from an inexhaustible cornucopia."

"La, sir!" she laughed, as she bustled out. It would be wrong to say that she did not understand him; for she perfectly understood that he paid her some high and flowery compliment, which was what she most desired of him as an earnest of better things to follow.

CHAPTER II

ALBEMARLE'S ANTECHAMBER

Through the noisy bustle of Paul's Yard the Colonel took his way, his ears deafened by the "What d'ye lack?" of the bawling prentices standing before The Flower of Luce, The White Greyhound, The Green Dragon, The Crown, The Red Bull, and all the other signs that distinguished the shops in that long array, among which the booksellers were predominant. He moved with a certain arrogant, swaggering assurance, despite his shabby finery. His Flemish beaver worn at a damn-me cock, his long sword thrust up behind by the hand that rested upon the pummel, his useless spurs—which a pot-boy at the Paul's Head had scoured to a silvery brightness—providing martial music to his progress. A certain grimness that invested him made the wayfarers careful not to jostle him. In that throng of busy, peaceful citizens he was like a wolf loping across a field of sheep; and those whom he met made haste to give him the wall, though it should entail thrusting themselves or their fellows into the filth of the kennel.

Below Ludgate, in that evil valley watered by the Fleet Ditch, there were hackney-coaches in plenty, and, considering the distance which he must go and the desirability of coming to his destination cleanly shod, Colonel Holles was momentarily tempted. He resisted, however; and this was an achievement in one who had never sufficiently studied that most essential of the arts of living. He bethought him—and sighed wearily over the reflection—of the alarming lightness of his purse and the alarming heaviness of his score at the Paul's Head, where he had so culpably lacked the strength of mind to deny himself any of those luxuries with which in the past month he had been lavished, and for which, should Albemarle fail him in the end, he knew not how to pay. This reflection contained an exaggeration of his penury. There was that ruby in his ear, a jewel that being converted into gold should keep a man in ease for the best part of a twelvemonth. For fifteen years and through many a stress of fortune it had hung and glowed there amid his clustering gold-brown hair. Often had hunger itself urged him to sell the thing that he might fill his belly. Yet ever had reluctance conquered him. He attached to that bright gem a sentimental value that had become a superstition. There had grown up in his mind the absolute

conviction that this jewel, the gift of an unknown whose life he had arrested on the black threshold of eternity, was a talisman and something more—that, as it had played a part in the fortunes of another, so should it yet play a part in the fortunes of himself and of that other jointly. There abode with him the unconquerable feeling that this ruby was a bond between himself and that unknown, a lodestone that should draw each to the other ultimately across a whole world of obstacles and that the meeting should be mutually fateful.

There were times when, reviewing the thing more soberly, he laughed at his crazy belief. Yet, oddly enough, those were never the times in which dire necessity drove him to contemplate its sale. So surely as he came to consider that, so surely did the old superstition, begotten of and steadily nourished by his fancy, seize upon him to bid him hold his hand and suffer all but death before thus purchasing redemption.

Therefore was it that, as he took his way now up Fleet Hill, he left that jewel out of his calculations in his assessment of his utterly inadequate means.

Westward through the mire of the Strand he moved, with his swinging soldierly stride, and so, by Charing Cross, at last into Whitehall itself. Down this he passed towards the chequered embattled Cockpit Gate that linked one side of the palace with the other.

It was close upon noon, and that curial thoroughfare was more than ordinarily thronged, the war with Holland—now an accomplished fact—being responsible for the anxious, feverish bustle hereabouts. Adown its middle moved a succession of coaches to join the cluster gathered about the Palace Gate and almost blocking the street from one row of bourne posts to the other.

Opposite the Horse Guards the Colonel came to a momentary halt on the skirts of a knot of idlers, standing at gaze to observe the workmen on the palace roof who were engaged in erecting there a weather-vane. A gentleman whom he questioned informed him that this was for the convenience of the Lord High Admiral, the Duke of York, so that his grace might observe from his windows how the wind served the plaguey Dutch fleet which was expected now to leave the Texel at any hour. The Lord Admiral, it was clear, desired to waste no unnecessary time upon the quarter-deck.

Colonel Holles moved on, glancing across at the windows of the banqueting-house, whence, as a lad of twenty, a cornet of horse, some

sixteen years ago, he had seen the late King step forth into the sunlight of a crisp January morning to suffer the loss of his head. And perhaps he remembered that his own father, long since dead—and so beyond the reach of any Stuart vengeance—had been one of the signatories of the warrant under which that deed was done.

He passed on, from the sunlight into the shadow of Holbein's noble gateway, and then, emerging beyond, he turned to his right, past the Duke of Monmouth's lodging into the courtyard of the Cockpit, where the Duke of Albemarle had his residence. Here his lingering doubt on the score of whether his grace were yet returned to Town was set at rest by the bustle in which he found himself. But there remained another doubt; which was whether his grace, being now returned, would condescend to receive him. Six times in the course of the past four weeks had he vainly sought admission. On three of those occasions he had been shortly answered that his grace was out of Town; on one of them—the last—more circumstantially that his grace was at Portsmouth about the business of the fleet. Twice it was admitted—and he had abundant evidences, as now—that the Duke was at home and receiving; but the Colonel's shabbiness had aroused the mistrust of the ushers, and they had barred his way to ask him superciliously was he commanded by the Duke. Upon his confession that he was not, they informed him that the Duke was over-busy to receive any but those whom he had commanded, and they bade him come again some other day. He had not imagined that George Monk would be so difficult of access, remembering his homely republican disregard of forms in other days. But being twice repulsed from his threshold in this fashion, he had taken the precaution of writing before presenting himself now, begging his grace to give orders that he should be admitted, unless he no longer held a place in his grace's memory.

The present visit, therefore, was fateful. A refusal now he must regard as final, in which case he would be left to curse the impulse that had brought him back to England, where it was very likely he would starve.

A doorkeeper with a halbert barred his progress on the threshold. “Your business, sir?”
“Is with His Grace of Albemarle.” The Colonel’s tone was sharp and confident. Thanks to this the next question was less challengingly delivered.

“You are commanded, sir?”
“I have reason to believe I am awaited. His grace is apprised of my coming.”
The doorkeeper looked him over again, and then made way.
He was past the outer guard, and his hopes rose. But at the end of a long gallery a wooden-faced usher confronted him, and the questions recommenced. When Holles announced that he had written to beg an audience—
“Your name, sir?” the usher asked.
“Randal Holles.” He spoke it softly with a certain inward dread, suddenly aware that such a name could be no password in Whitehall, for it had been his father’s name before him—the name of a regicide, and something more.
There was an abundance of foolish, sensational, and mythical stories which the popular imagination had woven about the execution of King Charles I. The execution of a king was a portent, and there never yet was a portent that did not gather other portents to be its satellites. Of these was the groundless story that the official headsman was missing on the day of the execution because he dared not strike off the head of God’s anointed, and that the headsman’s mask had covered the face of one who at the last moment had offered himself to act as his deputy. The identity of this deputy had been fastened upon many more or less well-known men, but most persistently upon Randal Holles, for no better reason than because his stern and outspoken republicanism had been loosely interpreted by the populace as personal rancour towards King Charles. Therefore, and upon no better ground than that of this idle story, the name of Randal Holles bore, in those days of monarchy restored, the brand of a certain infamous notoriety.
It produced, however, no fearful effect upon the usher. Calmly, mechanically repeating it, the fellow consulted a sheet of paper. Then, at last, his manner changed. It became invested by a certain obsequiousness. Clearly he had found the name upon his list. He opened the studded door of which he was the guardian.
“If you will be pleased to enter, sir....” he murmured.
Colonel Holles swaggered in, the usher following.
“If you will be pleased to wait, sir....” The usher left him, and crossed the room, presumably to communicate his name to yet another usher, a

clerkly fellow with a wand, who kept another farther door.
The Colonel disposed himself to wait, sufficiently uplifted to practise great lengths of patience. He found himself in a lofty, sparsely furnished antechamber, one of a dozen or more clients, all of them men of consequence if their dress and carriage were to be taken at surface value.
Some turned to look askance at this down-at-heel intruder; but not for long. There was that in the grey eyes of Colonel Holles when returning such looks as these which could put down the haughtiest stare. He knew his world and its inhabitants too well to be moved by them either to respect or fear. Those were the only two emotions none had the power to arouse in him.
Having met their insolence by looking at them as they might look at pot-boys, he strode across to an empty bench that was ranged against the carved wainscoting, and sat himself down with a clatter.
The noise he made drew the attention of two gentlemen who stood near the bench in conversation. One of these, whose back was towards Holles, glanced round upon him. He was tall, and elderly, with a genial, ruddy countenance. The other, a man of about Holles's own age, was short and sturdily built with a swarthy face set in a heavy black periwig, dressed with a certain foppish care, and of a manner that blended amiability with a degree of self sufficiency. He flashed upon Holles a pair of bright blue eyes that were, however, without hostility or disdain, and, although unknown to the Colonel, he slightly inclined his head to him in formal, dignified salutation, almost as if asking leave to resume his voluble conversation within this newcomer's hearing.
Scraps of that conversation floated presently to the Colonel's ears.
" ... and I tell you, Sir George, that his grace is mightily off the hooks at all this delay. That is why he hurried away to Portsmouth, that by his own presence he might order things...." The pleasant voice grew inaudible to rise again presently. "The need is all for officers, men trained in war...."
The Colonel pricked up his ears at that. But the voice had dropped again, and he could not listen without making it obvious that he did so, until the speaker's tones soared once more.
"These ardent young gentlemen are well enough, and do themselves great credit by their eagerness, but in war...."
Discreetly, to the Colonel's vexation, the gentleman again lowered his voice. He was inaudibly answered by his companion, and it was some time before Holles heard another word of what passed between them. By then the conversation had veered a point.

“ ...and there the talk was all of the Dutch ... that the fleet is out.” The sturdy, swarthy gentleman was speaking. “That and these rumours of the plague growing upon us in the Town—from which may God preserve us!—are now almost the only topics.”
“Almost. But not quite,” the elder man broke in, laughing. “There’s something else I’d not have expected you to forget; this Farquharson girl at the Duke’s House.”
“Sir George, I confess the need for your correction. I should not have forgotten. That she shares the public tongue with such topics as the war and the plague best shows the deep impression she has made.”
“Deservedly?” Sir George asked the question as of one who was an authority in such matters.
“Oh, most deservedly, be assured. I was at the Duke’s House two days since, and saw her play Katherine. And mightily pleased I was. I cannot call to mind having seen her equal in the part, or indeed upon the stage at all. And so thinks the Town. For though I came there by two o’clock, yet there was no room in the pit, and I was forced to pay four shillings to go into one of the upper boxes. The whole house was mightily pleased with her, too, and in particular His Grace of Buckingham. He spoke his praises from his box so that all might hear him, and vowed he would not rest until he had writ a play for her, himself.”
“If to write a play for her be the only earnest his grace will afford her of his admiration, then is Miss Farquharson fortunate.”
“Or else unfortunate,” said the sturdy gentleman with a roguish look. “’Tis all a question of how the lady views these matters. But let us hope she is virtuous.”
“I never knew you unfriendly to his grace before,” replied Sir George, whereupon both laughed. And then the other, sinking his voice once more to an inaudible pitch, added matter at which Sir George’s laughter grew until it shook him.
They were still laughing, when the door of Albemarle’s room opened to give exit to a slight gentleman with flushed cheeks. Folding a parchment as he went, the gentleman crossed the antechamber, stepping quickly and bestowing nods in his passage, and was gone. As he vanished at one door, the usher with the wand made his appearance at the other.
“His grace will be pleased to receive Mr. Pepys.”

The swarthy, sturdy gentleman cast off the remains of his laughter, and put on a countenance of gravity.
“I come,” he said. “Sir George, you’ll bear me company.” His tone blended invitation and assertion. His tall companion bowed, and together they went off, and passed into the Duke’s room.
Colonel Holles leaned back against the wainscoting, marvelling that with war upon them—to say nothing of the menace of the plague—the Town

should be concerned with the affairs of a playhouse wanton; and that here, in the very temple of Bellona, Mr. Pepys of the Navy Office should submerge in such bawdy matters the grave question of the lack of officers and the general unpreparedness to combat either the Dutch or the pestilence.

He was still pondering that curious manifestation of the phenomenon of the human mind, and the odd methods of government which the restored Stuarts had brought back to England, when Mr. Pepys and his companion came forth again, and he heard the voice of the usher calling his own name.

"Mr. Holles!"

Partly because of his abstraction, partly because of the omission of his military title, it was not until the call had been repeated that the Colonel realized that it was addressed to himself and started up.

Those who had stared askance at him on his first coming, stared again now in resentment to see themselves passed over for this out-at-elbow ruffler. There were some sneering laughs and nudges, and one or two angry exclamations. But Holles paid no heed. Fortune at last had opened a door to him. Of this the hope that he had nourished was swollen to a certainty by one of the things he had overheard from the voluble Mr. Pepys. Officers were needed; men of experience in the trade of arms were scarce. Men of his own experience were rare, and Albemarle, who had the dispensing of these gifts, was well acquainted with his worth. That was the reason why he was being given precedence of all these fine gentlemen left in the antechamber to cool their heels a while longer.

Eagerly he went forward.

CHAPTER III

HIS GRACE OF ALBEMARLE

At a vast writing-table placed in the middle of a lofty, sunny room, whose windows overlooked St. James's Park, sat George Monk, K.G., Baron Monk of Potheridge, Beauchamp, and Tees, Earl of Torrington and Duke of Albemarle, Master of the Horse, Commander-in-Chief, a member of His Majesty's Privy Council, and a Gentleman of the Bedchamber.

It was a great deal for a man to be, and yet George Monk—called a trimmer by his enemies and "honest George" by the majority of Englishmen—might conceivably have been more. Had he so willed it, he might have been King of England, whereby it is impossible that he could have served his country worse than by the restoration of the Stuart dynasty, which he preferred to effect.

He was a man of middle height, powerfully built, but inclining now, in his fifty-seventh year, to portliness. He was of a dark complexion, not unhandsome, the strength of his mouth tempered by the gentleness of his short-sighted eyes. His great head, covered by a heavy black periwig, reared itself upon too short a neck from his massive shoulders.

As Holles entered, he looked up, threw down his pen, and rose, but slowly, as if weighted by hesitation or surprise. Surprise was certainly the expression on his face as he stood there observing the other's swift, eager advance. No word was uttered until no more than the table stood between them, and then it was to the usher that Albemarle addressed himself, shortly, in dismissal.

He followed the man's withdrawal with his eyes, nor shifted them again to his visitor until the door had closed. Then abruptly concern came to blend with the surprise still abiding in his face, and he held out a hand to the Colonel whom this reception had a little bewildered. Holles bethought him that circumspection had ever been George Monk's dominant characteristic.

"God save us, Randal! Is it really you?"

"Have ten years wrought such changes that you need to ask?"

"Ten years!" said the Duke slowly, a man bemused. "Ten years!" he said again, and his gentle almost sorrowing eyes scanned his visitor from foot to crown. His grip of the Colonel's hand tightened a moment. Then abruptly, as if at a loss, or perhaps to dissemble the extent to which he was affected by this meeting, "But sit, man, sit," he urged, waving him to the armchair set at the table so as to face the Duke's own.

Holles sat down, hitching his sword-hilt forward, and placing his hat upon the floor. The Duke resumed his seat with the same slowness with which he had lately risen from it, his eyes the while upon his visitor.
"How like your father you are grown!" he said at last.
"That will be something gained, where all else is but a tale of loss."
"Aye! You bear it writ plain upon you," the Duke sadly agreed, and again there broke from him that plaintive, "God save us!"
Randal Holles the elder had been Monk's dearest friend. Both natives of Potheridge in Devon, they had grown to manhood together. And though political opinions then divided them—for Monk was a King's man in those far-off days, whilst the older Holles had gone to Parliament a republican—yet their friendship had remained undiminished. When Monk at last in '46 accepted a command from Cromwell in the Irish service, it was the influence of Holles which had procured both the offer and its acceptance. Later, when Holles the younger decided for the trade of arms, it was under the ægis of Monk that he had taken service, and it was due as much to Monk's friendship as to his own abilities that he had found himself a Captain after Dunbar and a Colonel after Worcester. Had he but chosen to continue under the guidance of his father's friend, he might to-day have found himself in very different case.
The thought was so uppermost now in the Duke's mind that he could not repress its utterance.
Holles sighed. "Do I not know it? But...." He broke off. "The answer makes a weary story and a long one. By your leave, let us neglect it. Your grace has had my letter. That is plain, since I am here. Therefore you are acquainted with my situation."
"It grieved me, Randal, more deeply, I think, than anything I can remember. But why did you not write sooner? Why did you come vainly knocking at my door to be turned away by lackeys?"
"I had not realized how inaccessible you are grown."
The Duke's glance sharpened. "Do you say that bitterly?"
Holles almost bounded from his seat. "Nay—on my soul! I vow I am incapable of that, however low I may have come. What you have, you have earned. I rejoice in your greatness as must every man who loves you." With mock cynicism as if to cover up any excessive emotion he might have used, he added: "I must, since it is now my only hope. Shorn of it I might as well cast myself from London Bridge."
The Duke considered him in silence for a moment.
"We must talk," he said presently. "There is much to say." And, in his abrupt fashion, he added the question: "You'll stay to dine?"

“That is an invitation I’d not refuse even from an enemy.”
His grace tinkled a little silver bell. The usher appeared.
“Who waits in the anteroom?”
Came from the usher a string of names and titles, all of them distinguished, some imposing.
“Say to them with my regrets that I can receive none before I dine. Bid those whose business presses to seek me again this afternoon.”
As the usher removed himself, Holles lay back in his chair and laughed. The Duke frowned inquiry, almost anxiously.
“I am thinking of how they stared upon me, and how they’ll stare next time we meet. Forgive me that I laugh at trifles. It is almost the only luxury I am still able to afford.”
Albemarle nodded gloomily. If he possessed a sense of humour, he very rarely betrayed the fact, which is possibly why Mr. Pepys, who loved a laugh, has written him down a heavy man.
“Tell me now,” he invited, “what is the reason of your coming home?”
“The war. Could I continue in Dutch service, even if the Dutch had made it possible, which they did not? For the last three months it has been impossible for an Englishman to show his face in the streets of The Hague without being subjected to insult. If he were so rash as to resent and punish it, he placed himself at the mercy of the authorities, which were never reluctant to make an example of him. That is one reason. The other is that England is in danger, that she needs the sword of her every son, and in such a pass should be ready to afford me employment. You need officers, I learn—experienced officers....”
“That’s true enough, God knows!” Albemarle interrupted him, on a note of bitterness. “My anteroom is thronged with young men of birth who come to me commended by the Duke of This and the Earl of That, and sometimes by His Majesty himself, for whom I am desired to provide commissions that will enable these graceful bawcocks to command their betters....” He broke off, perceiving, perhaps, that his feelings were sweeping him beyond the bounds of his usual circumspection. “But, as you say,” he ended presently, “of experienced officers there is a sorry lack. Yet that is not a circumstance upon which you are warranted to build, my friend.”
Holles stared blankly. “How ...?” he was beginning, when Albemarle resumed, at once explaining his own words and answering the unspoken question.

“If you think that even in this hour of need there is no employment for such men as you in England’s service,” he said gravely, in his slow, deep voice, “you can have no knowledge of what has been happening here whilst you have been abroad. In these past ten years, Randal, I have often thought you might be dead. And I ask myself, all things being as they are, whether as your friend I have cause, real cause, to rejoice at seeing you alive. For life to be worth living must be lived worthily, by which I mean it must signify the performance of the best that is in a man. And how shall you perform your best here in this England?”

“How?” Holles was aghast. “Afford me but the occasion, and I will show you. I have it in me still. I swear it. Test me, and you shall not be disappointed. I’ll do you no discredit.” He had risen in his excitement. He had even paled a little, and he stood now before the Duke, tense, challenging, a faint quiver in the sensitive nostrils of his fine nose.

Albemarle’s phlegm was undisturbed by the vehemence. With a sallow fleshly hand, he waved the Colonel back to his chair.

“I nothing doubt it. I ask no questions of how you have spent the years. I can see for myself that they have been ill-spent, even without the hints of your letter. That does not weigh with me. I know your nature, and it is a nature I would trust. I know your talents, partly from the early promise that you showed, partly from the opinion held of you at one time in Holland. That surprises you, eh? Oh, but I keep myself informed of what is happening in the world. It was Opdam, I think, who reported you ‘*vir magna belli peritia.*’” He paused, and sighed. “God knows I need such men as you, need them urgently; and I would use you thankfully. But....”

“But what, sir? In God’s name!”

The heavy, pursed lips parted again, the raised black eyebrows resumed their level. “I cannot do so without exposing you to the very worst of dangers.”

“Dangers?” Holles laughed.

“I see that you do not understand. You do not realize that you bear a name inscribed on a certain roll of vengeance.”

“You mean my father’s?” The Colonel was incredulous.

“Your father’s—aye. It is misfortunate he should have named you after him. But there it is,” the deliberate, ponderous voice continued. “The name of Randal Holles is on the warrant for the execution of the late King. It would have provided a warrant for your father’s own death had he lived long enough. Yourself you have borne arms for the Parliament against our present sovereign. In England it is only by living in the