Baroness Orczy

The Nest Of The Sparrowhawk

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Chapter 1
The House Of A Kentish Squire

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Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy folded his hands before him ere he spoke:

“Nay! but I tell thee, woman, that the Lord hath no love for such frivolities! and alack! but ’tis a sign of the times that an English Squire should favor such evil ways.”

“Evil ways? The Lord love you, Master Hymn-of-Praise, and pray do you call half an hour at the skittle alley ‘evil ways’?”

“Aye, evil it is to indulge our sinful bodies in such recreation as doth not tend to the glorification of the Lord and the sanctification of our immortal souls.”

He who sermonized thus unctuously and with eyes fixed with stern disapproval on the buxom wench before him, was a man who had passed the meridian of life not altogether—it may be surmised—without having indulged in some recreations which had not always the sanctification of his own immortal soul for their primary object. The bulk of his figure testified that he was not averse to good cheer, and there was a certain hidden twinkle underlying the severe expression of his eyes as they rested on the pretty face and round figure of Mistress Charity that did not necessarily tend to the glorification of the Lord.

Apparently, however, the admonitions of Master Hymn-of-Praise made but a scanty impression on the young girl’s mind, for she regarded him with a mixture of amusement

and contempt as she shrugged her plump shoulders and said with sudden irrelevance:

“Have you had your dinner yet, Master Busy?”

“’Tis sinful to address a single Christian person as if he or she were several,” retorted the man sharply. “But I’ll tell thee in confidence, mistress, that I have not partaken of a single drop more comforting than cold water the whole of to-day. Mistress de Chavasse mixed the sack-posset with her own hands this morning, and locked it in the cellar, of which she hath rigorously held the key. Ten minutes ago when she placed the bowl on this table, she called my attention to the fact that the delectable beverage came to within three inches of the brim. Meseems I shall have to seek for a less suspicious, more Christian-spirited household, whereon to bestow in the near future my faithful services.”

Hardly had Master Hymn-of-Praise finished speaking when he turned very sharply round and looked with renewed sternness—wholly untempered by a twinkle this time—in the direction whence he thought a suppressed giggle had just come to his ears. But what he saw must surely have completely reassured him; there was no suggestion of unseemly ribaldry about the young lad who had been busy laying out the table with spoons and mugs, and was at this moment vigorously—somewhat ostentatiously, perhaps—polishing a carved oak chair, bending to his task in a manner which fully accounted for the high color in his cheeks.

He had long, lanky hair of a pale straw-color, a thin face and high cheek-bones, and was dressed—as was also Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy—in a dark purple doublet and

knee breeches, all looking very much the worse for wear; the brown tags and buttons with which these garments had originally been roughly adorned were conspicuous in a great many places by their absence, whilst all those that remained were mere skeletons of their former selves.

The plain collars and cuffs which relieved the dull color of the men’s doublets were of singularly coarse linen not beyond reproach as to cleanliness, and altogether innocent of starch; whilst the thick brown worsted stockings displayed many a hole through which the flesh peeped, and the shoes of roughly tanned leather were down at heel and worn through at the toes.

Undoubtedly even in these days of more than primitive simplicity and of sober habiliments Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy, butler at Acol Court in the county of Kent, and his henchman, Master Courage Toogood, would have been conspicuous for the shabbiness and poverty of the livery which they wore.

The hour was three in the afternoon. Outside a glorious July sun spread radiance and glow over an old-fashioned garden, over tall yew hedges, and fantastic forms of green birds and heads of beasts carefully cut and trimmed, over clumps of late roses and rough tangles of marguerites and potentillas, of stiff zinnias and rich-hued snapdragons.

Through the open window came the sound of wood knocking against wood, of exclamations of annoyance or triumph as the game proceeded, and every now and then a ripple of prolonged laughter, girlish, fresh, pure as the fragrant air, clear as the last notes of the cuckoo before he speaks his final farewell to summer.

Every time that echo of youth and gayety penetrated into the oak-raftered dining-room, Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy pursed his thick lips in disapproval, whilst the younger man, had he dared, would no doubt have gone to the window, and leaning out as far as safety would permit, have tried to catch a glimpse of the skittle alley and of a light-colored kirtle gleaming among the trees. But as it was he caught the older man's stern eyes fixed reprovingly upon him, he desisted from his work of dusting and polishing, and, looking up to the heavy oak-beam above him, he said with becoming fervor:

"Lord! how beautifully thou dost speak, Master Busy!"

"Get on with thy work, Master Courage," retorted the other relentlessly, "and mix not thine unruly talk with the wise sayings of thy betters."

"My work is done, Master."

"Go fetch the pasties then, the quality will be in directly," rejoined the other peremptorily, throwing a scrutinizing look at the table, whereon a somewhat meager collation of cherries, raspberries and gooseberries and a more generous bowl of sack-posset had been arranged by Mistress Charity and Master Courage under his own supervision.

"Doubtless, doubtless," here interposed the young maid somewhat hurriedly, desirous perhaps of distracting the grave butler's attention from the mischievous oglings of the lad as he went out of the room, "as you remark—hem—as thou remarkest, this place of service is none to the liking of such as ... thee ..."

She threw him a coy glance from beneath well-grown lashes, which caused the saintly man to pass his tongue

over his lips, an action which of a surety had not the desire for spiritual glory for its mainspring. With dainty hands Mistress Charity busied herself with the delicacies upon the table. She adjusted a gooseberry which seemed inclined to tumble, heaped up the currants into more graceful pyramids. Womanlike, whilst her eyes apparently followed the motions of her hands they nevertheless took stock of Master Hymn-of-Praise's attitude with regard to herself.

She knew that in defiance of my Lord Protector and all his Puritans she was looking her best this afternoon: though her kirtle was as threadbare as Master Courage's breeches it was nevertheless just short enough to display to great advantage her neatly turned ankle and well-arched foot on which the thick stockings—well-darned—and shabby shoes sat not at all amiss.

Her kerchief was neatly folded, white and slightly starched, her cuffs immaculately and primly turned back just above her round elbow and shapely arm.

On the whole Mistress Charity was pleased with her own appearance. Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse and the mistress were seeing company this afternoon, and the neighboring Kentish squires who had come to play skittles and to drink sack-posset might easily find a less welcome sight than that of the serving maid at Acol Court.

"As for myself," now resumed Mistress Charity, after a slight pause, during which she had felt Master Busy's admiring gaze fixed persistently upon her, "as for myself, I'll seek service with a lady less like to find such constant fault with a hard-working maid."

Master Courage had just returned carrying a large dish heaped up with delicious looking pasties fresh from the oven, brown and crisp with butter, and ornamented with sprigs of burrage which made them appear exceedingly tempting.

Charity took the dish from the lad and heavy as it was, she carried it to the table and placed it right in the very center of it. She rearranged the sprigs of burrage, made a fresh disposition of the baskets of fruit, whilst both the men watched her open-mouthed, agape at so much loveliness and grace.

“And,” she added significantly, looking with ill-concealed covetousness at the succulent pasties, “where there’s at least one dog or cat about the place.”

“I know not, mistress,” said Hymn-of-Praise, “that thou wast over-fond of domestic pets ... ’Tis sinful to ...”

“La! Master Busy, you ... hem ... thou mistakest my meaning. I have no love for such creatures—but without so much as a kitten about the house, prithee how am I to account to my mistress for the pasties and ... and comfits ... not to speak of breakages.”

“There is always Master Courage,” suggested Hymn-of-Praise, with a movement of the left eyelid which in the case of any one less saintly might have been described as a sly wink.

“That there is not,” interrupted the lad decisively; “my stomach rebels against comfits, and sack-posset could never be laid to my door.”

“I give thee assurance, Master Busy,” concluded the young girl, “that the county of Kent no longer suits my

constitution. ’Tis London for me, and thither will I go next year.”

“’Tis a den of wickedness,” commented Busy sententiously, “in spite of my Lord Protector, who of a truth doth turn his back on the Saints and hath even allowed the great George Fox and some of the Friends to languish in prison, whilst profligacy holds undisputed sway. Master Courage, meseems those mugs need washing a second time,” he added, with sudden irrelevance. “Take them to the kitchen, and do not let me set eyes on thee until they shine like pieces of new silver.”

Master Courage would have either resisted the order altogether, or at any rate argued the point of the cleanliness of the mugs, had he dared; but the saintly man possessed on occasions a heavy hand, and he also wore boots which had very hard toes, and the lad realized from the peremptory look in the butler’s eyes that this was an occasion when both hand and boot would serve to emphasize Master Busy’s orders with unpleasant force if he himself were at all slow to obey.

He tried to catch Charity’s eye, but was made aware once more of the eternal truth that women are perverse and fickle creatures, for she would not look at him, and seemed absorbed in the rearrangement of her kerchief.

With a deep sigh which should have spoken volumes to her adamantine heart, Courage gathered all the mugs together by their handles, and reluctantly marched out of the room once more.

Hymn-of-Praise Busy waited a moment or two until the clattering of the pewter died away in the distance, then he

edged a little closer to the table whereat Mistress Charity seemed still very busy with the fruit, and said haltingly:

“Didst thou really wish to go, mistress ... to leave thy fond, adoring Hymn-of-Praise ... to go, mistress? ... and to break my heart?”

Charity’s dainty head—with its tiny velvet cap edged with lawn which hardly concealed sufficiently the wealth of her unruly brown hair—sank meditatively upon her left shoulder.

“Lord, Master Busy,” she said demurely, “how was a poor maid to know that you meant it earnestly?”

“Meant it earnestly?”

“Yes ... a new kirtle ... a gold ring ... flowers ... and sack-posset and pasties to all the guests,” she explained. “Is that what you mean ... hem ... what *thou,* meanest, Master Busy?”

“Of a surety, mistress ... and if thou wouldst allow me to ... to ...”

“To what, Master Busy?”

“To salute thee,” said the saintly man, with a becoming blush, “as the Lord doth allow his creatures to salute one another ... with a chaste kiss, mistress.”

Then as she seemed to demur, he added by way of persuasion:

“I am not altogether a poor man, mistress; and there is that in my coffer upstairs put by, as would please thee in the future.”

“Nay! I was not thinking of the money, Master Busy,” said this daughter of Eve, coyly, as she held a rosy cheek out in the direction of the righteous man.

’Tis the duty even of a veracious chronicler to draw a discreet veil over certain scenes full of blissful moments for those whom he portrays.

There are no data extant as to what occurred during the next few seconds in the old oak-beamed dining-room of Acol Court in the Island of Thanet. Certain it is that when next we get a peep at Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy and Mistress Charity Haggett, they are standing side by side, he looking somewhat shame-faced in the midst of his obvious joy, and she supremely unconcerned, once more absorbed in the apparently never-ending adornment of the refreshment table.

“Thou’lt have no cause to regret this, mistress,” said Busy complacently, “we will be married this very autumn, and I have it in my mind—an it please the Lord—to go up to London and take secret service under my Lord Protector himself.”

“Secret service, Master Busy ... hem ... I mean Hymn-of-Praise, dear ... secret service? ... What may that be?”

“’Tis a noble business, Charity,” he replied, “and one highly commended by the Lord: the business of tracking the wicked to their lair, of discovering evil where ’tis hidden in dark places, conspiracies against my Lord Protector, adherence to the cause of the banished tyrants and ... and ... so forth.”

“Sounds like spying to me,” she remarked curtly.

“Spying? ... Spying, didst thou say?” he exclaimed indignantly. “Fie on thee, Charity, for the thought! Secret service under my Lord Protector ’tis called, and a highly

lucrative business too, and one for which I have remarkable aptitude."

"Indeed?"

"Aye! See the manner in which I find things out, mistress. This house now ... thou wouldst think 'tis but an ordinary house ... eh?"

His manner changed; the saintliness vanished from his attitude; the expression of his face became sly and knowing. He came nearer to Charity, took hold of her wrist, whilst he raised one finger to his lips.

"Thou wouldst think 'tis an ordinary house ... wouldst thou not?" he repeated, sinking his voice to a whisper, murmuring right into her ear so that his breath blew her hair about, causing it to tickle her cheek.

She shuddered with apprehension. His manner was so mysterious.

"Yes ... yes ..." she murmured, terrified.

"But I tell thee that there's something going on," he added significantly.

"La, Master Busy ... you ... you terrify me!" she said, on the verge of tears. "What could there be going on?"

Master Busy raised both his hands and with the right began counting off the fingers of the left.

"Firstly," he began solemnly, "there's an heiress! secondly our master—poor as a church mouse—thirdly a young scholar—secretary, they call him, though he writes no letters, and is all day absorbed in his studies ... Well, mistress," he concluded, turning a triumphant gaze on her, "tell me, prithee, what happens?"

“What happens, Master Hymn-of-Praise? ... I do not understand. What does happen?”

“I’ll tell thee,” he replied sententiously, “when I have found out; but mark my words, mistress, there’s something going on in this house ... Hush! not a word to that young jackanapes,” he added as a distant clatter of pewter mugs announced the approach of Master Courage. “Watch with me, mistress, thou’lt perceive something. And when I have found out, ’twill be the beginning of our fortunes.”

Once more he placed a warning finger on his lips; once more he gave Mistress Charity a knowing wink, and her wrist an admonitory pressure, then he resumed his staid and severe manner, his saintly mien and somewhat nasal tones, as from the gay outside world beyond the window-embrasure the sound of many voices, the ripple of young laughter, the clink of heeled boots on the stone-flagged path, proclaimed the arrival of the quality.

Chapter 2
On A July Afternoon

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In the meanwhile in a remote corner of the park the quality was assembled round the skittle-alley.

Imagine Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse standing there, as stiff a Roundhead as ever upheld my Lord Protector and his Puritanic government in this remote corner of the county of Kent: dour in manner, harsh-featured and hollow-eyed, dressed in dark doublet and breeches wholly void of tags, ribands or buttons. His closely shorn head is flat at the back, square in front, his clean-shaven lips though somewhat thick are always held tightly pressed together. Not far from him sits on a rough wooden seat, Mistress Amelia Editha de Chavasse, widow of Sir Marmaduke's elder brother, a good-looking woman still, save for the look of discontent, almost of suppressed rebellion, apparent in the perpetual dark frown between the straight brows, in the downward curve of the well-chiseled mouth, and in the lowering look which seems to dwell for ever in the handsome dark eyes.

Dame Harrison, too, was there: the large and portly dowager, florid of face, dictatorial in manner, dressed in the supremely unbecoming style prevalent at the moment, when everything that was beautiful in art as well as in nature was condemned as sinful and ungodly; she wore the dark kirtle and plain, ungainly bodice with its hard white kerchief folded over her ample bosom; her hair was parted down the middle and brushed smoothly and flatly to her ears, where but a few curls were allowed to escape with

well-regulated primness from beneath the horn-comb, and the whole appearance of her looked almost grotesque, surmounted as it was by the modish high-peaked beaver hat, a marvel of hideousness and discomfort, since the small brim afforded no protection against the sun, and the tall crown was a ready prey to the buffetings of the wind.

Mistress Fairsoul Pyncheon too, was there, the wife of the Squire of Ashe; thin and small, a contrast to Dame Harrison in her mild and somewhat fussy manner; her plain petticoat, too, was embellished with paniers, and in spite of the heat of the day she wore a tippet edged with fur: both of which frivolous adornments had obviously stirred up the wrath of her more Puritanical neighbor.

Then there were the men: busy at this moment with hurling wooden balls along the alley, at the further end of which a hollow-eyed scraggy youth, in shirt and rough linen trousers, was employed in propping up again the fallen nine-pins. Squire John Boatfield had ridden over from Eastry, Sir Timothy Harrison had come in his aunt’s coach, and young Squire Pyncheon with his doting mother.

And in the midst of all these sober folk, of young men in severe garments, of portly dames and frowning squires, a girlish figure, young, alert, vigorous, wearing with the charm of her own youth and freshness the unbecoming attire, which disfigured her elders yet seemed to set off her own graceful form, her dainty bosom and pretty arms. Her kirtle, too, was plain, and dull in color, of a soft dovelike gray, without adornment of any kind, but round her shoulders her kerchief was daintily turned, edged with delicate lace, and

showing through its filmy folds peeps of her own creamy skin.

’Twas years later that Sir Peter Lely painted Lady Sue when she was a great lady and the friend of the Queen: she was beautiful then, in the full splendor of her maturer charms, but never so beautiful as she was on that hot July afternoon in the year of our Lord 1657, when, heated with the ardor of the game, pleased undoubtedly with the adulation which surrounded her on every side, she laughed and chatted with the men, teased the women, her cheeks aglow, her eyes bright, her brown hair—persistently unruly—flying in thick curls over her neck and shoulders.

“A remarkable talent, good Sir Marmaduke,” Dame Harrison was saying to her host, as she cast a complacent eye on her nephew, who had just succeeded in overthrowing three nine-pins at one stroke: “Sir Timothy hath every aptitude for outdoor pursuits, and though my Lord Protector deems all such recreations sinful, yet do I think they tend to the development of muscular energy, which later on may be placed at the service of the Commonwealth.”

Sir Timothy Harrison at this juncture had the misfortune of expending his muscular energy in hitting Squire Boatfield violently on the shin with an ill-aimed ball.

“Damn!” ejaculated the latter, heedless of the strict fines imposed by my Lord Protector on unseemly language. “I ... verily beg the ladies’ pardon ... but ... this young jackanapes nearly broke my shin-bone.”

There certainly had been an exclamation of horror on the part of the ladies at Squire Boatfield’s forcible expression of

annoyance, Dame Harrison taking no pains to conceal her disapproval.

“Horrid, coarse creature, this neighbor of yours, good Sir Marmaduke,” she said with her usual air of decision. “Meseems he is not fit company for your ward.”

“Dear Squire Boatfield,” sighed Mistress Pyncheon, who was evidently disposed to be more lenient, “how good-humoredly he bears it! Clumsy people should not be trusted in a skittle alley,” she added in a mild way, which seemed to be peculiarly exasperating to Dame Harrison’s irascible temper.

“I pray you, Sir Timothy,” here interposed Lady Sue, trying to repress the laughter which would rise to her lips, “forgive poor Squire John. You scarce can expect him to moderate his language under such provocation.”

“Oh! his insults leave me completely indifferent,” said the young man with easy unconcern, “his calling me a jackanapes doth not of necessity make me one.”

“No!” retorted Squire Boatfield, who was still nursing his shin-bone, “maybe not, Sir Timothy, but it shows how observant I am.”

“Oliver, pick up Lady Sue’s handkerchief,” came in mild accents from Mistress Pyncheon.

“Quite unnecessary, good mistress,” rejoined Dame Harrison decisively, “Sir Timothy has already seen it.”

And while the two young men made a quick and not altogether successful dive for her ladyship’s handkerchief, colliding vigorously with one another in their endeavor to perform this act of gallantry single-handed, Lady Sue gazed down on them, with good-humored contempt, laughter and

mischief dancing in her eyes. She knew that she was good to look at, that she was rich, and that she had the pick of the county, aye, of the South of England, did she desire to wed. Perhaps she thought of this, even whilst she laughed at the antics of her bevy of courtiers, all anxious to win her good graces.

Yet even as she laughed, her face suddenly clouded over, a strange, wistful look came into her eyes, and her laughter was lost in a quick, short sigh.

A young man had just crossed the tiny rustic bridge which spanned the ha-ha dividing the flower-garden from the uncultivated park. He walked rapidly through the trees, towards the skittle alley, and as he came nearer, the merry lightheartedness seemed suddenly to vanish from Lady Sue's manner: the ridiculousness of the two young men at her feet, glaring furiously at one another whilst fighting for her handkerchief, seemed now to irritate her; she snatched the bit of delicate linen from their hands, and turned somewhat petulantly away.

"Shall we continue the game?" she said curtly.

The young man, all the while that he approached, had not taken his eyes off Lady Sue. Twice he had stumbled against rough bits of root or branch which he had not perceived in the grass through which he walked. He had seen her laughing gaily, whilst Squire Boatfield used profane language, and smile with contemptuous merriment at the two young men at her feet; he had also seen the change in her manner, the sudden wistful look, the quick sigh, the irritability and the petulance.

But his own grave face expressed neither disapproval at the one mood nor astonishment at the other. He walked somewhat like a somnambulist, with eyes fixed—almost expressionless in the intensity of their gaze.

He was very plainly, even poorly clad, and looked a dark figure even amongst these soberly appareled gentry. The grass beneath his feet had deadened the sound of his footsteps but Sir Marmaduke had apparently perceived him, for he beckoned to him to approach.

“What is it, Lambert?” he asked kindly.

“Your letter to Master Skyffington, Sir Marmaduke,” replied the young man, “will you be pleased to sign it?”

“Will it not keep?” said Sir Marmaduke.

“Yes, an you wish it, Sir. I fear I have intruded. I did not know you were busy.”

The young man had a harsh voice, and a strange brusqueness of manner which somehow suggested rebellion against the existing conditions of life. He no longer looked at Lady Sue now, but straight at Sir Marmaduke, speaking the brief apology between his teeth, without opening his mouth, as if the words hurt him when they passed his lips.

“You had best speak to Master Skyffington himself about the business,” rejoined Sir Marmaduke, not heeding the mumbled apology, “he will be here anon.”

He turned abruptly away, and the young man once more left to himself, silently and mechanically moved again in the direction of the house.

“You will join us in a bowl of sack-posset, Master Lambert,” said Mistress de Chavasse, striving to be amiable.

“You are very kind,” he said none too genially, “in about half-an-hour if you will allow me. There is another letter yet to write.”

No one had taken much notice of him. Even in these days when kingship and House of Lords were abolished, the sense of social inequality remained keen. To this coterie of avowed Republicans, young Richard Lambert—secretary or what-not to Sir Marmaduke, a paid dependent at any rate—was not worth more than a curt nod of the head, a condescending acknowledgment of his existence at best.

But Lady Sue had not even bestowed the nod. She had not actually taken notice of his presence when he came; the wistful look had vanished as soon as the young man’s harsh voice had broken on her ear: she did not look on him now that he went.

She was busy with her game. Nathless her guardian’s secretary was of no more importance in the rich heiress’s sight than that mute row of nine-pins at the end of the alley, nor was there, mayhap, in her mind much social distinction between the hollow-eyed lad who set them up stolidly from time to time, and the silent young student who wrote those letters which Sir Marmaduke had not known how to spell.

Chapter 3
The Exile

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But despite outward indifference, with the brief appearance of the soberly-garbed young student upon the scene and his abrupt and silent departure, all the zest seemed to have gone out of Lady Sue's mood.

The ingenuous flatteries of her little court irritated her now: she no longer felt either amused or pleased by the extravagant compliments lavished upon her beauty and skill by portly Squire John, by Sir Timothy Harrison or the more diffident young Squire Pyncheon.

"Of a truth, I sometimes wish, Lady Sue, that I could find out if you have any faults," remarked Squire Boatfield unctuously.

"Nay, Squire," she retorted sharply, "pray try to praise me to my female friends."

In vain did Mistress Pyncheon admonish her son to be more bold in his wooing.

"You behave like a fool, Oliver," she said meekly.

"But, Mother ..."

"Go, make yourself pleasing to her ladyship."

"But, Mother ..."

"I pray you, my son," she retorted with unusual acerbity, "do you want a million or do you not?"

"But, Mother ..."

"Then go at once and get it, ere that fool Sir Timothy or the odious Boatfield capture it under your very nose."

"But, Mother ..."

“Go! say something smart to her at once ... talk about your gray mare ... she is over fond of horses ...”

Then as the young Squire, awkward and clumsy in his manner, more accustomed to the company of his own servants than to that of highborn ladies, made sundry unfortunate attempts to enchain the attention of the heiress, his worthy mother turned with meek benignity to Sir Marmaduke.

“A veritable infatuation, good Sir Marmaduke,” she said with a sigh, “quite against my interests, you know. I had no thought to see the dear lad married so soon, nor to give up my home at the Dene yet, in favor of a new mistress. Not but that Oliver is not a good son to his mother—such a good lad!—and such a good husband he would be to any girl who ...”

“A strange youth that secretary of yours, Sir Marmaduke,” here interposed Dame Harrison in her loud, dictatorial voice, breaking in on Mistress Pyncheon’s dithyrambs, “modest he appears to be, and silent too: a paragon meseems!”

She spoke with obvious sarcasm, casting covert glances at Lady Sue to see if she heard.

Sir Marmaduke shrugged his shoulders.

“Lambert is very industrious,” he said curtly.

“I thought secretaries never did anything but suck the ends of their pens,” suggested Mistress Pyncheon mildly.

“Sometimes they make love to their employer’s daughter,” retorted Dame Harrison spitefully, for Lady Sue was undoubtedly lending an ear to the conversation now that it had the young secretary for object. She was not

watching Squire Boatfield who was wielding the balls just then with remarkable prowess, and at this last remark from the portly old dame, she turned sharply round and said with a strange little air of haughtiness which somehow became her very well:

“But then you see, mistress, Master Lambert’s employer doth not possess a daughter of his own—only a ward ... mayhap that is the reason why his secretary performs his duties so well in other ways.”

Her cheeks were glowing as she said this, and she looked quite defiant, as if challenging these disagreeable mothers and aunts of fortune-hunting youths to cast unpleasant aspersions on a friend whom she had taken under her special protection.

Sir Marmaduke looked at her keenly; a deep frown settled between his eyes at sight of her enthusiasm. His face suddenly looked older, and seemed more dour, more repellent than before.

“Sue hath such a romantic temperament,” he said dryly, speaking between his teeth and as if with an effort. “Lambert’s humble origin has fired her imagination. He has no parents and his elder brother is the blacksmith down at Acol; his aunt, who seems to have had charge of the boys ever since they were children, is just a common old woman who lives in the village—a strict adherent, so I am told, of this new sect, whom Justice Bennet of Derby hath so justly nicknamed ‘Quakers.’ They talk strangely, these people, and believe in a mighty queer fashion. I know not if Lambert be of their creed, for he does not use the ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ when speaking as do all Quakers, so I am told; but his

empty pockets, a smattering of learning which he has picked up the Lord knows where, and a plethora of unspoken grievances, have all proved a sure passport to Lady Sue's sympathy."

"Nay, but your village of Acol seems full of queer folk, good Sir Marmaduke," said Mistress Pyncheon. "I have heard talk among my servants of a mysterious prince hailed from France, who has lately made one of your cottages his home."

"Oh! ah! yes!" quoth Sir Marmaduke lightly, "the interesting exile from the Court of King Louis. I did not know that his fame had reached you, mistress."

"A French prince?—in this village?" exclaimed Dame Harrison sharply, "and pray, good Sir Marmaduke, where did you go a-fishing to get such a bite?"

"Nay!" replied Sir Marmaduke with a short laugh, "I had naught to do with his coming; he wandered to Acol from Dover about six months ago it seems, and found refuge in the Lamberts' cottage, where he has remained ever since. A queer fellow I believe. I have only seen him once or twice in my fields ... in the evening, usually ..."

Perhaps there was just a curious note of irritability in Sir Marmaduke's voice as he spoke of this mysterious inhabitant of the quiet village of Acol; certain it is that the two matchmaking old dames seemed smitten at one and the same time with a sense of grave danger to their schemes.

An exile from France, a prince who hides his identity and his person in a remote Kentish village, and a girl with a highly imaginative temperament like Lady Sue! here was

surely a more definite, a more important rival to the pretensions of homely country youths like Sir Timothy Harrison or Squire Pyncheon, than even the student of humble origin whose brother was a blacksmith, whose aunt was a Quakeress, and who wandered about the park of Acol with hollow eyes fixed longingly on the much-courted heiress.

Dame Harrison and Mistress Pyncheon both instinctively turned a scrutinizing gaze on her ladyship. Neither of them was perhaps ordinarily very observant, but self-interest had made them keen, and it would have been impossible not to note the strange atmosphere which seemed suddenly to pervade the entire personality of the young girl.

There was nothing in her face now expressive of whole-hearted partisanship for an absent friend, such as she had displayed when she felt that young Lambert was being unjustly sneered at; rather was it a kind of entranced and arrested thought, as if her mind, having come in contact with one all-absorbing idea, had ceased to function in any other direction save that one.

Her cheeks no longer glowed, they seemed pale and transparent like those of an ascetic; her lips were slightly parted, her eyes appeared unconscious of everything round her, and gazing at something enchanting beyond that bank of clouds which glimmered, snow-white, through the trees.

“But what in the name of common sense is a French prince doing in Acol village?” ejaculated Dame Harrison in her most strident voice, which had the effect of drawing every one’s attention to herself and to Sir Marmaduke, whom she was thus addressing.

The men ceased playing and gathered nearer. The spell was broken. That strange and mysterious look vanished from Lady Sue’s face; she turned away from the speakers and idly plucked a few bunches of acorn from an overhanging oak.

“Of a truth,” replied Sir Marmaduke, whose eyes were still steadily fixed on his ward, “I know as little about the fellow, ma’am, as you do yourself. He was exiled from France by King Louis for political reasons, so he explained to the old woman Lambert, with whom he is still lodging. I understand that he hardly ever sleeps at the cottage, that his appearances there are short and fitful and that his ways are passing mysterious.... And that is all I know,” he added in conclusion, with a careless shrug of the shoulders.

“Quite a romance!” remarked Mistress Pyncheon dryly.

“You should speak to him, good Sir Marmaduke,” said Dame Harrison decisively, “you are a magistrate. ’Tis your duty to know more of this fellow and his antecedents.”

“Scarcely that, ma’am,” rejoined Sir Marmaduke, “you understand ... I have a young ward living for the nonce in my house ... she is very rich, and, I fear me, of a very romantic disposition ... I shall try to get the man removed from hence, but until that is accomplished, I prefer to know nothing about him ...”

“How wise of you, good Sir Marmaduke!” quoth Mistress Pyncheon with a sigh of content.

A sentiment obviously echoed in the hearts of a good many people there present.

“One knows these foreign adventurers,” concluded Sir Marmaduke with pleasant irony, “with their princely crowns

and forlorn causes ... half a million of English money would no doubt regild the former and bolster up the latter."

He rose from his seat as he spoke, boldly encountering even as he did so, a pair of wrathful and contemptuous girlish eyes fixed steadily upon him.

"Shall we go within?" he said, addressing his guests, and returning his young ward's gaze haughtily, even commandingly; "a cup of sack-posset will be welcome after the fatigue of the game. Will you honor my poor house, mistress? and you, too, ma'am? Gentlemen, you must fight among yourselves for the privilege of escorting Lady Sue to the house, and if she prove somewhat disdainful this beautiful summer's afternoon, I pray you remember that faint heart never won fair lady, and that the citadel is not worth storming an it is not obdurate."

The suggestion of sack-posset proved vastly to the liking of the merry company. Mistress de Chavasse who had been singularly silent all the afternoon, walked quickly in advance of her brother-in-law's guests, no doubt in order to cast a scrutinizing eye over the arrangements of the table, which she had entrusted to the servants.

Sir Marmaduke followed at a short distance, escorting the older women, making somewhat obvious efforts to control his own irritability, and to impart some sort of geniality to the proceedings.

Then in a noisy group in the rear came the three men still fighting for the good graces of Lady Sue, whilst she, silent, absorbed, walked leisurely along, paying no heed to the wrangling of her courtiers, her fingers tearing up with