Ford Madox Ford

Ladies Whose Bright Eyes

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PART ONE

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Mr Sorrell, just landed from New York after an almost too pleasant voyage, was accustomed to regard himself as the typical Homo Sapiens Europaeus. He was rising forty; he was rather fair, with fresh, brown hair; he was by profession a publisher and at the top of the tree; he had a vigorous physique, a drooping moustache and a pink, clear skin. He owed no soul a penny; he had done his duty in the war; he rose usually at eight, voted Conservative and had been given to understand that he might be honoured with a knighthood at a near date. So his eyes which were clear and blue were slightly threatening—as if with an expression of being ready militantly to assert at once his right and his rectitude. He stood just six foot.

He stepped out into the swaying corridor from the compartment into which he had gallantly accompanied Mrs Lee-Egerton. He wanted to smoke a cigar and now that he was off the boat, to reflect whether he had not made a fool of himself. The carriage was swaying very much, the train travelling at an unusual speed. This pleased Mr Sorrell. If he was not responsible for it he was at least a friend of its author, Mr Makover of Pittsburgh. He himself had gone with the Pennsylvanian to interview the driver. Mr Makover had offered that amiable mechanic a fiver if he got them up to town in time to dress, dine and go to the Empire before the

ballet began. Thus Mr Sorrell took pride in the speed at which they travelled.

His left shoulder struck with violence the outer window; his right pained him when it hit a brass handrail of the inner one.

‘Oh, steady,’ he exclaimed.

He had been bending down in order to peer into the compartments to discover one in which he could smoke. He saw the spotless expanse of white of a nun’s headdress and at the same moment he was thrown violently against the outer window. For a moment he had a panic. He thought he had just missed breaking it and going through.

He exclaimed: ‘This won’t do!’

He set his feet hard against the outer wall of the corridor. He was not going any farther. He got out a cigar, pierced the end of it and began to smoke. Then he took another peep at the nun.

She excited in him an almost unholy curiosity. He could not remember ever to have been so near a nun before. It seemed odd that one should be seated in a train. It was still more odd that she should be coming back from the United States. You would have said that America with its salutary emigration laws would not permit one of them to enter its territories. He would have thought that Catholicism had died out.

But there was still a Pope. There had been one four years ago. When Mr Sorrell had still been proprietor of the *Four-penny Magazine* it had published an article with illustrations on a day’s work in the Vatican. He had then commissioned

the editor to try to get for him an article by the Pope even if it cost him a couple of hundred pounds.

That was modern life. Today a subject seemed of enormous importance; in a month you would not touch it as any sort of publishing matter.... Keen intelligences those of today!

And he was in the movement. He had agreed to pay the Theat Publishing Company of New York $15,000 for the English Claflin rights. Mr Claflin, the aviator, had flown completely round the earth, over both North and South Poles, non-stop, and never deviating by more than a mile from the 90th Parallel.... Or perhaps the lines that went from North to South were not parallels. The earth bulged and they met at the Poles. It was a good thing that they had encyclopedias to cold-store that sort of knowledge for them. The modern man had to know so much that he could not carry it all round in his head. Yet there was some medieval fellow who was said to know all knowledge. Shakespeare, no doubt. Trust Shakespeare! But perhaps Shakespeare was not medieval. Mr Sorrell wished that he had a better head for dates. And of course Shakespeare had not known that Bohemia was not on the sea.... At any rate Mr Sorrell could be proud that he had published so many encyclopedias. That was a public service. They were knighting him for it. A pestilential fellow called Bunter who wrote salacious memoirs had told him that his encyclopedias atrophied the brains of the public. The little wasp! That would teach him. They would never knight him. His books sold though. But did you ever hear such a thing? The public brain atrophied! What did that mean?...

At any rate the intrepid Mr Claflin had written a book about his intrepid exploit—or had had it written for him so that it had been awaiting him when he got back to New York. And now, well out of the contagious atmosphere of that city, Mr Sorrell was inclined to wonder if he had not promised to pay too much for that work. But he had put his back into it. All the way over from New York he had occupied himself after lunch, whilst Mrs Lee-Egerton took her siesta, in writing a sixteen-page pamphlet about the Claflin book. In it the words *intrepid aviator* occurred fourteen times and there were other repetitions. But McCrackan would see to that. Lean, dark, shining-haired McCrackan was invaluable. And cheap. He was running Sorrell, Son & Nephews all off his own bat at the moment. For not five hundred a year. And absolutely to be trusted. Like a feudal vassal!

He had now to get the pamphlet, the book, the illustrations, the preliminary puffs and the advertisements out as soon as possible. You ought to be able to do that in a fortnight. The American plates of the book were by now out of the hold of the Eurytonka. They would be in London that night and delivered to the printers next morning. That would give the reporters seven days in which to write their reviews and his travellers to get orders from the libraries. So Mr Sorrell could look forward to an exciting and pleasurable spell of work. By devoting himself with furious energy to the task of obtaining publicity from the halfpenny papers, and with that devotion to the team of his whole staff which is the cricket of publishing, Mr Sorrell imagined that he would score another immense success: and it would have been done in record time. It was only three weeks since the day

when, in London, he had received from Theat and Company of New York the cable announcing that they had secured the full rights in Mr Claflin's book. Mr Claflin had arrived the day before in New York with his memoirs in his hand-grip.

Bending down to peep again at the nun, Mr Sorrell felt satisfaction at the fact that he lived in the present day. It was the day of rushes. There was no saying how many deals you could not get through in all sorts of fragments of time. He was even proud that he felt exceedingly tired. Except for the few hours that he had spent in the society of Mrs Lee-Egerton, he did not think that he had really had any leisure whatever in the five days that the journey from New York to Southampton had cost him. He was, too, proud of his profession. In the old days a publisher had to consider what was Literature. It had been uncommercial. Publishers had worked in a kid-glove sort of way, trying to establish friendly relations with authors. Now it was just a business. You found out what the public had to have and gave it them. And Mr Sorrell held up his head with pride. It was he, more than anybody else, who supplied the sort of printed stuff that the suburban season-ticket holder must indispensably have. In his day Mr Sorrell had done to this end many curious things. Yet he had started out in life as a mining engineer.

He had not begun with the least idea of publishing. He had rather remarkable mechanical talents and a still more singular gift of tongues. He used to say that he could pick up any South American dialect in ten minutes and drop it completely twenty minutes after he had no more use for it. In his career as a mining engineer this had been to him of great use. He would be sent off at any minute to inspect any

mine, whether in South Africa, in Galicia, or on the Klondyke. And without having to rely on the representations of the Anglo-Saxons or Semites who might be trying to sell a mine, he had been able to pick up nearly always tidy little bits of information from native miners and the hangers-on at bars. So that he had not limited himself to his mechanical and mineralogical efforts. He had had a finger in a pie or two of his own.

Thus he had been already a warm business man when his cousin, William Sorrell, had died. His uncle William Sorrell, senior, of the firm of Sorrell and Sons, the publishers, established in 1814—his venerable uncle, William, had offered him a share in the business direction of the ancient and august house. The literary side Old William had intended to maintain in his own hands.

Mr Sorrell had gone into the matter carefully. His uncle, by methods as antiquated as those of the builder of the Ark of Noah, contrived to extract from the business an income of between six and seven thousand pounds a year. As his uncle’s sole heir, now that his cousin was dead, the business would ultimately fall to him. Mr Sorrell had accepted his uncle’s offer. It had, indeed, only taken him five minutes to consider it. He had remembered that the business was old and not much supervised. There must be innumerable screws that could be tightened; there must be innumerable economies that could be effected. Half the staff could probably be kicked out. The site of the snuffy old Georgian house that the firm owned could be converted into a veritable gold-mine by building modern offices upon it. And

‘William Sorrell, Son and Nephew’ could be floated as a public company.

Mr Sorrell had imagined that he would practically limit his energies to the floating of this company. Publishing had then struck him still as something connected with Literature—as something effeminate. But books, if you got hold of the right sort of book, were something that the city clerk must have. The right sort of book was as indispensable as a season ticket, a clean collar, or a radio set. At the same time Mr Sorrell had been not so obtuse as not to see that it would be difficult so to modify the old-fashioned publishing traditions of William Sorrell and Sons—they *were* worth between six and seven thousand pounds a year—as to make them square with publishing what the city clerk would want. The long-standing reputation of the house was an asset that Mr Sorrell did not at all want to depreciate. It had cost him a great deal of thought, but at last he had achieved the happy medium. He had begun with encyclopedias. He had gone on to cheap editions of the classics originally published by Sorrell and Sons. After all, had not they brought out works of explorers like Speke, Burton, Grant, and Livingstone in solid quarto volumes? So what was there against their publishing gentlemen like Mr Car K. Claflin. Exploring by aviation had replaced the old-fashioned and tiresome footslogging of the earlier travellers. It was all in the very tradition itself. It *was* the tradition. It was perfectly true that you had to print Mr Claflin upon heavy glazed paper so that his reproductions from photographs should come out well. You had to publish him in fortnightly parts, so as to appeal to the pockets of season-ticket holders and commuters. But the old flag flew

where it used to fly. The Firm was still the Firm, though just every now and then Mr Sorrell chafed at his traditions and wished that he had been born an American citizen. His old uncle was actually alive at Reading. There he insisted on perusing all the manuscripts that were sent in to the firm. He discussed them with his two maiden cousins of incredible ages who kept house for him. Nevertheless today Mr Sorrell was able to think that he had accomplished the smartest bit of publishing that had ever been known since the makers of books began to move their offices from Paternoster Row.

He peeped again at the nun. She sat perfectly tranquil and self-possessed. She moved a little in her seat and he obtained through the small windows a good view of her face. She had very red cheeks, as if she had been much in the open air, blue rather hard eyes. Her large teeth imparted to her face an air of rustic and rather hoydenish good health. She looked to Mr Sorrell's eyes like a prosperous market woman. He had expected that she would appear pale and dark and ascetic. With all the traces of suffering! His cigar drew well, and, propped between wall and wall of the corridor, he felt, upon the whole, comfortable. He had come out to think whether he had not made a fool of himself with Mrs Lee-Egerton. But having the kind of brain which is able to cut off its thoughts into hermetically divided compartments, he was determined to leave the subject alone until he had come much more clearly to the end of his cigar.

What a bully time he might have had if with all his present faculties and knowledge he could be thrown right back into the Middle Ages—when the world had been full of

nuns. What would he not be able to do with all those ignorant and superstitious people! He would invent for them the railway train, the electric telegraph, the aeroplane, the radio and its developments, the machine gun and the gas bomb. Above all the gas bomb! He would be the mightiest man in the world: he would have power, absolute and enormous power. He could take anything. No king could withstand him. The walls of no castle and of no mint could keep him out. And he felt in his physical being a tingling, impatient sensation, an odd emotion of impatience. It was as if just at his right hand there must be suspended an invisible curtain. Could he but see it, he had only to draw it back to enter the region of impotent slaves over whom he could be lord of wealth as of life.

It was, of course, the sight of the nun that had aroused in him this train of thought. When he once more looked at her she was, with an expression of enjoyment, eating a sandwich out of a paper bag. And Mr Sorrell laughed. It seemed to him as absurd that a nun should eat sandwiches as that she should travel in a Southampton-to-London express. He did not know how he ought to consider that nuns should subsist any more than how he should consider that they ought to travel. He rather imagined them consuming myrrh and hyssop, drinking the tears of affliction, and gliding in their stiff black skirts, without ever touching it, over the ground; quite close to it. This Mr Sorrell was accustomed to do in a recurring dream that he had in common with most of the rest of humanity. The nun brushed the crumbs off the wide expanse of linen over her breast. Becoming aware of Mr Sorrell’s eyes she frowned slightly at

the thought that he must have seen her eating and moved over to the other corner of the vacant compartment. Mr Sorrell did not see her again. And as if it were a signal to him to resume thinking upon whether he had made a fool of himself, Mr Sorrell thrust his right hand into the deep pocket of his long grey ulster. He drew out a leather jewel-case that had ‘L.E.’ stamped upon its slightly domed top in gilt letters of a German-Gothic character.

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He was putting on weight. He wished now that on the voyage he had spent more time on the mechanical horse and at the punching-sacks in the gymnasium and less beside Mrs Lee-Egerton on the deck in the sunshine. He regretted to think that soon he might have to say farewell to his physical excellence. In his day he had been a strong man with a keen eye. It was not all gone but if he were not watchful it might go. As liaison officer to Allenby’s cavalry, riding anything from a camel to a thoroughbred Arab stallion beneath the torrid suns, he had run himself as fine as a man could. At the military tournament that had celebrated the surrender of Jerusalem he had been pretty high up in the Turk’s head and tentpegging gymkhana…. Pretty high up! He could do most things that could be done on a horse at full gallop…. He *had* been able to. And with his knack of picking up languages he had been pretty useful to that Army. He had loved his days in Palestine where he had got a nodding acquaintance with Hebrew along with the two local

Arabic dialects and at the end of the war he had been as lean as a rake. And as hard.

Yes, he regretted his Palestine days. That after all had been a life: in a country without a telephone where on a horse in the shadow of an olive-tree beside a great rock you could imagine yourself anything—a Mameluke: a horseman of Godfrey of Bouillon.... Anything with a horse and a spear.... And, yes, no damned telephone!

Good Palestine days.... A good war too, it had been, as far as he had been concerned. He had never been afraid of roughing it and a spice of danger—even quite a lot of danger—opened your lungs. It made you breathe deep, which was the best thing life had to offer you.

No doubt today was better than yesterday. The world was more full of the wonders of the machine age. Human intelligence had no doubt progressed.

All the same....

There had been the time when he had been prospecting in the Caucasus for the Tsar's Government.... Unheard of untouched mineral wealth in those old mountains. It was no doubt still there. He did not suppose those Soviet fellows would have done more than scratch the ground. There would be still every thinkable mineral. Undoubtedly in paying qualities. He had worked it out that it must be the Soviet Republic of Darghestan by now.... And Prince Diarmidov's little castle, on its grey spur on the range between Novorssusk and Iékhaterinodar. You did not forget *those* names. 1913! Good years!

The Prince had done him well. More caviare than you could eat, and silks, and cigars. But there were hardships

too. No white bread. No roads.... All the same he had got a crushing mill to work. It had been good at night to hear from up above the stamps pounding on. A good honest sound. Crushing hard ore. None of your purring dynamos that made telephones drill like hell.

And those Tcherkess raiders....

He squared his chest. He supposed he was one of the few men of today who could say that he had been wounded by a flint arrow head.... Every damned kind of metal those fellows had used. The prince had got a bit of pot-lid in his behind. From a blunderbuss.

No wonder the prince had cooled off to the whole project and had reported that the crushings had not panned out so well. Of course he had not been nursed by Elizaveta Dionovna ... Dionitchka! With the high head-dress that hid her hair. It was golden. Like a good washing from one of those rivers. As fatalistic as any Oriental. Absent even. And fair as the girls of Lewes or Salisbury. With Circassian blood no doubt.... And her apron of green and white chequers.... There were things that you did not forget.

It was of course sentimental, but he imagined that if the Soviet Republic of Darghestan would offer him the chance.... They needed gold those fellows....

But Dionitchka would be forty. Or murdered or married. And he was in deep enough already....

Still he would like before he died or got really fat to have one more stretch of roughing it. In a rough land with a horse and a gun. And possibly also with no woman ... that mattered!

He supposed he would some day learn to be more circumspect with respectable women. He had been nearly married twice and he had had one or two affairs of the heart that he did not care to think about much. In one case he had burned his fingers rather severely. His rival in the affections of a married lady—an erratic one—had persuaded her to give up to him Mr Sorrell's letters to her. Afterwards to save his own skin the rival had handed those letters over to a remarkably injured husband and it had seemed to Mr Sorrell that he had had to sweat blood and fire before he had come out of that scrape. It had been a warning and nothing but the laxness of shipboard would have made him have anything to do with Mrs Lee-Egerton.

It was not that anyone knew anything against her—but her husband was the sort of man who was always shooting in the Rockies. He was indeed shooting in the Rockies at that moment. That made it all the more remarkable that Mrs Lee-Egerton should have appeared anywhere as near him as New York. Lee-Egerton was the son of a peer of so many descents that Mr Sorrell would have been glad to know him. To know Mrs Egerton was not nearly so remarkable. It was extraordinarily easy to come across her, attended, as it seemed always, by a band of laughing cavaliers. On the other hand Lee-Egerton, whom few people ever saw, was said to be a happy, dangerous person. He might descend upon you at any time with a magazine rifle or worse. Nevertheless, with the idea of this rather thunderous personality at the back of his head, Mr Sorrell had felt himself quite remarkably soothed by her frequent companionship on board. He had not been soothed by

anything or anybody quite so much for a long time. It was not that she was in her first youth. She had a son, as Mr Sorrell had reason at that moment to know, actually at Cambridge. There he had got himself into scrapes, all the more damnably complicated in that he was the heir-presumptive to the title, though his uncle could not be got to speak to any of his relatives. But Mrs Egerton had a sort of haggard, pale, passionate repose. She was very dark and very tall and very aquiline; she was, moreover, exceedingly thin. Mr Sorrell imagined that he had found her restful because she was exactly the opposite of himself. For, whereas he was exceedingly optimistic, she was oppressed by a great grief. The great grief was her confounded son. And to him, feeling as he did, large, and protective, Mrs Egerton had confided her almost unbearable sorrow. She had started for the United States, intending a campaign of social pleasures and triumphs. That was to have begun in New York, to have ended in Washington, and culminated in a scandalous book of which, with immense success, she had already written two or three. But in New York itself, before she had had time to get her foot really planted, she had received a most lamentable letter from her son at Cambridge. This she had shown to Mr Sorrell on the second night out, whilst after dinner they had reclined side by side in arm-chairs in a pleasant nook on the upper deck. Mr Sorrell had taken it to a porthole to read. Young Egerton would be in the most damnable scrape in the world if he could not have two hundred and fifty pounds at the very moment that Mrs Egerton landed at Southampton. Mr Sorrell had returned to Mrs Egerton in a frame of mind as grave as

it was consolatory. He said that she might be quite sure that it would be all right, though it was quite certain that young Jack must be in as disgusting a hole as it was by any means possible for a young man to be in. And Mrs Egerton, the enormous tears in her enormous eyes plainly visible in the Atlantic moonlight, had declared to him that he could not by any possible means imagine what a mother's feelings were like, or what a good boy her Jack really was. And at the thought that he might have to go to prison she shuddered all over her long and snake-like body. Mr Sorrell said of course it could not possibly come to that.

Next evening, they had been sitting side by side at dinner in the *à la carte* restaurant of the upper deck. She had suddenly thrust over his plate of *hors-d'œuvres*, whilst the select band played, and the waiters appeared to skim through the air, a marconigram form bearing the words:

'*Bulmer pressing. All up if necessary not here by eight tomorrow. God's sake help. Jack.*'

'Oh well,' Mr Sorrell had said cheerfully, 'you must radio your husband's solicitors a message to wire the money to him.'

Mrs Egerton stared at him with huge eyes. She swallowed an enormous something in her throat. She ate nothing else during that meal and Mr Sorrell's dinner was completely spoilt. She disappeared before he had finished it, and Mr Sorrell went to pace in solitude upon the comparatively deserted deck. Although they were only two days out and were not yet past the Banks, he had acquired the habit of expecting to find this charming lady there. It was not, however, for at least an hour and a half, which in his

impatience seemed interminable, that, through the moonlight, she came to him and, exclaiming ‘I can’t do it!’ burst into tears.

‘You can’t do what?’ Mr Sorrell asked. And then there came out the whole lamentable story. Mr Sorrell imagined that he must be the only man in London, or in the space between London and New York, who really understood what Mrs Egerton was. So he was the only one who would be able from henceforth to champion her.... Her husband allowed her the merest pittance—not twenty pounds a week—for her private needs. His solicitors were instructed in the most peremptory manner never to advance her a penny of this pittance. She had come out expecting to exist upon the hospitality of the United States, so she had upon her hardly more than her return ticket. The real stones of her jewellery were all in pawn and replaced by imitations; she could not anyhow in the rest of the world, although she was surrounded by seeming friends, raise anything like the sum of a quarter of a thousand pounds. Her husband was fourteen days’ journey beyond the nearest telegraph station in the middle of a savage region.

‘And oh,’ she said, with a glance at the heaving bosom of the sea, ‘I couldn’t *live* if anything happened to Jack. Once he was an innocent boy saying his prayers at my knee.’ And after a good deal of hesitation and stammering Mr Sorrell got out the offer to lend the lady the required sum.

She said, of course, she could not think of it; as her son had made his bed so he must lie. Comparative strangers, however intimate their souls might feel, could not bring financial matters into their relationships; her husband would

murder her if he came to hear of it. Mr Sorrell could have no conception of that gentleman's ferocity. But the more she protested the more Mr Sorrell thrust his offer upon her, and at last, in the midst of a burst of tears, Mrs Lee-Egerton came to a pause. 'There's the Tamworth-Egerton crucifix,' she had said.

Mr Sorrell had never heard of the Tamworth-Egerton crucifix. It was a gold beaten cross of unknown antiquity. It had been in the hands of the family ever since the fourteenth century. It was considered to be of almost inestimable value. She had it actually upon the boat with her, for she had desired to impress certain choice members of American society by the sight of it now and then. If Mr Sorrell would lend her the money, or still better, would wire it to her son, she would at once give the cross into his keeping until she could repay him.

Mr Sorrell without more bargaining—for at the moment he did not want anything but this woman's gratitude—had routed out the Marconi operator from his supper, and had telegraphed by private code to his bankers instructing them to pay £250 to Mr Jack Lee-Egerton before noon on the morrow. Shortly afterwards in the public boudoir of the ship, Mrs Egerton had handed over to him the Egerton cross in its leather case, in return for an acknowledgement from him, that he held it against the sum of £250 that day advanced.

In the corridor of the train Mr Sorrell opened the leather case and looked at the battered, tarnished, light gold object. It was about the size of a dog biscuit and the thickness of a silver teaspoon. The cross was marked upon the flat surface with punched holes much like those on the surface of a dog

biscuit itself.... The feeling that had been lurking in the mind of Mr Sorrell ever since, quitting the glamour of the ship, he had stepped upon the gangway at Southampton, put itself into the paralysing words: ‘Supposing I have been done.’

After all, he did not really know anything about Mrs Lee-Egerton. The other things that she had told him might or might not be true. This object might just as well be a gilt fragment of a tin canister for all he knew.

He snapped the case to and determined to return it to the lady. If she were honest, she would pay him back the money in any case. If she was not the thing would not be worth keeping.... He swayed back into their compartment and sat down opposite her.

‘I don’t at all like this speed,’ she said. The train was shooting through round level stretches of heather. It seemed to sway now upon one set of wheels, now upon the other.

‘That’s all right,’ Mr Sorrell said. ‘Nothing ever happens in these days. I’ve travelled I don’t know how many thousand miles in my life without coming across the shadow of an accident.’ And he extended the jewel-case towards her. ‘Look here,’ he said, ‘this thing’s too valuable for me to have in my possession. You take it. After all, you’re the best person to keep it.’

In the unromantic atmosphere of the railway carriage Mrs Egerton appeared older. She was dressed all in black and her face was very white and seamed, with dark patches of shadow like finger-prints beneath her eyes.

‘No, you must keep it,’ she said earnestly. ‘After all, it’s a thing to have had in one’s possession. Why, it was brought back from Palestine by Sir Stanley Egerton of Tamworth.

Tamworth is quite close to here, and Sir Stanley, they say—that's the touching old legend—died on landing on English soil.' The cross had been carried to Tamworth by a converted Greek slave, who was dressed only in a linen shift and knew only two words of English—Egerton and Tamworth. Of course, Tamworth had been out of the family many centuries now, but the cross never had. Never till this moment.

Mrs Egerton appeared to have grown older but she appeared also to have grown more earnest. She leaned forward, and taking the cross out of the case she put it into Mr Sorrell's hands.

'Look at the funny, queer old thing,' she said. 'And think of all it means, of loyalty and truth.'

'Well, I suppose it does if you say so,' Mr Sorrell said. 'You mean the chap carried it about in his nightshirt? I wonder how he travelled? I suppose they had stage coaches then, didn't they?'

'Oh, good gracious, no!' Mrs Egerton answered. 'He walked bare-foot, and the country was beset with robbers all the way from Sandwich to here.'

'I don't know that I should like to do that,' Mr Sorrell said. 'Though I suppose it would take off some flesh! But you don't mean to say that they didn't have any kind of public conveyance?'

'Dear me, no!' the lady answered. 'It was in the year of the battle of Bannockburn. Sir Stanley had set out for the Holy Land with twenty knights and more than a hundred men-at-arms. When he came back they were all dead and his only companion was this slave.... That's why,' she went

on, ‘I should like you to keep the cross, if only for a little time. Since it was in the hands of that slave it hasn’t been out of the hands of an Egerton until now.’ But her son was the last of the family, and Mr Sorrell had saved him from a dishonour worse than death quite as certainly as that slave many times had saved his master.

Mrs Egerton went on:

‘He lived for some time at Tamworth and there he died. He’s said to have had weird gifts of prophecy and things. He prophesied steam-engines and people being able to speak to each other a hundred miles apart and their flying in the air like birds. That’s recorded in the chronicle.’

‘You don’t say!’ Mr Sorrell said. And he took the cross out of the case by the heavy gold ring at its top. ‘I like those faithful characters of the Dark Ages. They didn’t produce much else that was worth speaking of, but they did invent the trusty servant. Did you ever see the picture at Winchester? It is called “The Trusty Servant,” and it has a head like a deer and a half a dozen other assorted kinds of limbs. I’d forgotten about it until now.’

Mrs Egerton said:

‘I don’t think people have very much changed even nowadays.’ And leaning forward she spoke with a deep and rather sonorous earnestness. ‘They say that in all the ages the blessing of a mother upon the preserver of her child—’

‘Oh come!’ Mr Sorrell said. And he felt himself grow pink even down into his socks.

‘It hasn’t,’ Mrs Egerton continued, ‘ever lost its power to console the unhappy. So that if ever you find yourself in a tight place....’

Mr Sorrell considered that that was scarcely likely to happen. They would have to bring down the country before they could bring down the house of Sorrell, Son & Nephew. Why, they....

Mrs Egerton suddenly clutched at her heart. Her eyes became full of panic, her mouth opened to scream. The smooth running of the train had changed into a fantastic, hard jabbing. The glass of the inner windows cracked with a sound like a shriek and fell, splintering over their knees. He was thrown forward onto Mrs Lee-Egerton and she back upon him. Then with a frightful jerk motion ceased. The glazed photographs of beauty-spots served by the line were descending towards his upturned forehead. The two opposite seats of the carriage were crushed one upon the other so that he screamed with the pain it caused his legs. The carriage turned right over; he was hanging head-downwards in a rush of steam.

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The Lady Blanche d’Enguerrand de Coucy of Stapleford stood yawning on the watch-tower of Stapleford Castle. There was no reason why she should have watched there—on the highest of the three stone steps in the north-east corner the ancient watchman, his horn slung from his neck, leant in an attitude of boredom upon his rusty pike. It was his business to signal to those in the keep below the approach of any traveller. He would blow four bass grunts for a knight-at-arms with his company but five if any person in armour came with an armed band whose cognizances

were unknown to him. For a merchant with pack-mules he would make one gruff sound. His horn was of wood. If, apparently, the approaching traveller was a knightly minstrel he would do his best to produce three high notes and a flourish.

For the last month he had been seeking to perfect himself in the blowing of one very high, long and sustained note to announce the approach of the Lady Dionissia de Egerton de Tamworth. She had lately been in the habit of riding over from the castle of Tamworth to supper every other evening. This last call had of late been almost the only one that his aged lips had occasion to make. When it sounded it would cause some little commotion in the castle, the due states and ceremonies having to be observed. Thus in the quadrangle below he would see offal and egg-shells and hot water being thrown on to the heap of garbage that formed the centre of the courtyard. Women and pages and old men would hurry from side to side far down below. The Lady Dionissia would ride up with her attendant train of women, little boys, old men, a chaplain or so. Shortly afterwards the washing trumpet would blow and the commoner sort of people would be observed cleansing themselves in the courtyard. But at that time it was only two hours after noon and it wanted two hours more for supper-time.

The old watchman leant upon his pike; the Lady Blanche yawned. In another corner of the small, square enclosure formed by the breast-high battlements, and of sheet lead warmed by the sun underfoot, the Lady Blanche’s ladies, Blanchemain and Amoureuse, whispered and tittered

continually with the little golden-haired boy Jehan, her page and the cousin of her husband. The Lady Blanche could not imagine what they could find to talk about. As a Lady of the Queen-Mother she had never found the time hang heavy on her hands. If they had not anything else to do at the Court they could at least play cat's-cradle, and there had always been gossip. Except for the outlaws, the clubmen and robbers, who made riding out a dangerous pursuit, there was not probably an able-bodied layman within twenty miles of the neighbouring castles of Stapleford and Tamworth. Her husband, Sir Guy, was tiresome and foolish when he was present. In espousing the cause of the late King—he was said by now to have been murdered in Berkeley Castle by means of a red-hot horn—in espousing the cause of the late King and his favourites as against the new Queen-Mother, the always foolish Sir Guy, who always did the wrong thing, had done it once again. The thought of it added to her nervous exasperation. This entirely foolish husband of hers had undoubtedly ruined her life. With the Queen Isabella she had always been a favourite. But her husband's insolence to Roger Mortimer, the Queen's leman, had cost him various fines and amercements amounting to more than two hundred pounds. This they could ill afford. By his silly joviality and easy manners the peasants had been encouraged to neglect their work upon the demesne lands. In his father's time they would have had at the end of the year seventy pounds from the sale of hay alone; even in bad years. Nowadays, it was much if they got forty in the best of seasons. And not only had his folly cost them two hundred pounds' worth of fines, but they were totally estranged from

the Queen-Mother. She had returned from France with a small company of knights of Hainault and had utterly discomfited and put to death, not only the late King, but all his favourites.

And now Sir Guy, utterly without cause, had got together all his fighting men and kinsmen and retainers, and had gone at his own cost to aid the new young King in his campaign against the King of Scots. This, indeed, was a crowning folly, for in this war Sir Guy had not been summoned to do any service at all. The war was in Scotland, and no knight had been called for by the King or by the Queen-Mother from farther south than Lincolnshire. It was an utterly foolish piece of braggadoccio. What Sir Guy had wanted to do had been to impress the Queen-Mother with the sense of his power and importance. But Isabella would see how Sir Guy was weakening himself and his cousin, Sir Egerton de Tamworth. Even on their own showing, these two foolish men had confessed that the expedition would cost them at least two thousand pounds apiece, and she had made her own inquiries of the Jew Goldenhand of Salisbury. Jews were forbidden to live or to lend money in these parts at that time; but the town council of the city had paid no attention to the writs that came down from London for the expulsion of Goldenhand. They had baptised him by force instead.

She had learned that the two knights had borrowed of him at least eight thousand pounds, impignorating all their joint and several rights over land in the lordships of Old Sarum and Wiley. And where in the world should they find eight thousand pounds, even if they made fat plundering,

going to and from the war and in the war itself? Why, each man of the four hundred that they must take must bring back, as the Cantor Nicholas had informed her, the value of at least twenty pounds in booty before they could make it good. And her husband and his cousin were not the type of men to bring back money by way of booty. They were inspired by the modern crazy notions of forbearance towards their foes if their foes had fought well. These silly ideas had come from France. Why, after the siege of Hardeville, when Sir Guy had taken with his own hand the Sire Jehan D'Estocqueville, whose ransom might have been a thousand crowns, Sir Guy set the Frenchman free. He had done it with great pomp and ceremony, approaching the French knight whom he had served during dinner in the midst of two hundred people, and not only bidding him go free but setting on his head the chaplet of pearls that he had worn in his own hair. It was perfectly true that Sir Guy had gained much praise for this absurd action and many amorous glances from the ladies, which had been what he desired. But what lordships, demesnes or estates could stand this riotous drain, this foolish and sentimental ostentation, and what did it mean to her?

There she groaned and twisted her hands in aching solitude during how many months! Had they but husbanded their resources she might have ridden north with Sir Guy, and lain with the Queen, who was in the New Castle, just short of the Scottish border. And with twenty minutes of the Queen's ear, she would have done more good to Sir Guy than all he would ever get by the cracking of rusty iron on the heads of penniless Scottish knights. And, for all she

knew, her husband had got himself into a new folly. Might it not be he who had roused the archers against the men of Sir John of Hainault, who were aiding the King in the Scotch war? These outrages were said by the juggler, who brought them the news, to have been committed by archers from Lincolnshire, who had fallen on Sir John of Hainault and his fellows as they went back at night from the King's lodgings to their own. But how could she tell that it was not their own Wiltshire archers, of whom Sir Guy and his cousin had taken many bands with them, in addition to the men-at-arms and the gentlemen armed cap-à-pie, and upon the greedy destriers that ate so much hay and fodder? It was part of the folly of Sir Guy and his cousin that they could not, like other knights, ride to the seat of war upon light hackneys, with their armour in carts behind them. They must go prancing England from north to south upon great wasteful chargers that they might very well have waited to buy until they came to the northerly parts. Of this folly and vainglory of men there was nowadays no end, and the Lady Blanche dug her fingernails into her palms and breathed a tense sound of exasperation and rage.

The old man with the horn blew a single high-stopped note.

'Oh yes, a woman upon the road from the Plain,' she said impatiently. And she did not trouble to look over the battlements. 'When will there come again knights riding or men with bears and jugglers with their little flutes and golden balls?'

She called petulantly to the old man who stood three steps high. 'What woman is it upon the road?'