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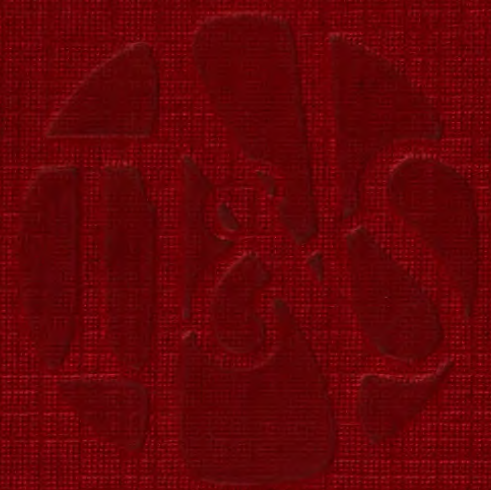
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THE HOUSE IN THE
DOWNS

THE HOUSE IN THE DOWNS

BY

H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON



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TO
J. BRADSHAW-ISHERWOOD
AFFECTIONATELY ALWAYS
FROM
H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON.

SHERE, *August* 1914.



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THE HOUSE IN THE DOWNS

CHAPTER I

THE ENTRANCE

RICHARD CHALLIS had not penetrated more than half a mile into the wood before he began to have misgivings. It had fallen very dark, and a sharp rain came over the Downs on a nipping wind from the north. He was certain now that he was not upon the direct road, and that this track was misleading him. It had seemed very easy down at Midhurst, but he realized the difficulty now of picking his way in an unknown country full of wild open ground and rude tracks. He wished he had remained at Midhurst in the comfortable inn, with the fire and the wine and his pipe ; and here he was threshed by the raw April weather, miles still from his destination, and lost in a wood which sank steadily into deeper darkness as he progressed. He reined in his horse and considered. Probably it would be wise for him to turn about and reach the main road again. At West Dene he could make inquiries, and be sure of arriving at his goal, even if it would be a rather longer route. And yet he was convinced from his study of the map that this track must trend in the direction he

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wanted, unless, perhaps, it was another track unmarked that he had taken. The maps of those days were not the careful products of modern surveying. He sat his horse, pondering ruefully, and then jogged forward.

"I hate turning back," he said to himself, "and, after all, this is the mere antechamber of it all. As an adventure it doesn't exist; as discomfort it makes no comparison in the face of what is before me." That thought led him into further reflections, and these engrossed him so that he was hardly aware of his progress through the wood. His horse moved slowly but sure of foot among the great leafless beeches, and nothing was visible now, nothing audible except the swish and lash of the April rain through the bare branches.

Presently there stole through the naked forest a little glimmer of light, which enlarged as he advanced and ultimately proved to be a fire in a clearing in the front of a charcoal-burner's hut. The hut, which was of the design of an Indian wigwam, was built of sods of earth, and was open to the fire. The charcoal-burner sat inside, smoking, secure from the wild weather, and on Challis's advent lifted his head and stared solemnly at him. He was a big, bearded man of sixty, slow of thought, slow of speech, and he had a strong Sussex burr.

"Is Hale anywhere near?" inquired Challis.

"That would be through Southover," remarked the charcoal-burner after what seemed to the interrogator an unnecessarily long pause.

"I don't know," said Challis. "It is Lord Plinlimmon's place. I was told to get to it through the Denes, but my map showed a short cut, and I've got mixed up in these woods."

The charcoal-burner dropped his gaze to the fire again meditatively and spat. "That would be Southover way," he said, and suddenly pointed with a long arm. "The track leads by Birch Bottom to the hanger, and across the top's Southover."

The Entrance

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"I don't know the names," said Challis, a little impatiently. "You mustn't look upon me as a native here. Tell me how to find it."

It took some time, for the peasant's brain was dull, and many questions were necessary ere Challis felt certain of his path. But at last he got what he wanted, and set out once more through the pelting rain. In half an hour's time he had surmounted a rise in the Downs and emerged from the forest, and below him gleamed the lights of a farm, like glow-worms in a misty darkness. He descended carefully until he reached a better track, and so, guided by the radiant windows, came to the entrance of the farmhouse. The wind, full of rain, came with a swirl at his face as he rang a peal on the bell, which sounded above the storm. He waited for some minutes, but no one answered his call, although he thought he heard footsteps within. The noisy wind might, however, have deceived him. He was on the point of ringing again when he heard the bolts go on the inside, and the big oak door in the portico in which he stood, with his bridle over his arm, creaked clumsily open. A man stood on the threshold with a lantern, which he swung in Challis's face without speaking.

"Pardon me," said Challis, "I am a traveller who has lost his way. Could you tell me if I am far from Hale?"

The man who held the lantern, and whom Challis could not see for the glare of light, seemed here to be joined by some one, as footsteps on a stone passage testified.

"It's a wild night," said a very deep voice from the darkness and haze beyond the lantern. "You'd better come in, sir. Have you travelled far?"

"From Guildford by way of Midhurst," said Challis, suddenly awaking to a realization of all that a warm room and a comfortable fire would mean.

"Come in and welcome," said a second voice. "I'll send a man to take the horse."

Challis surrendered without further parleying, and

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yielding the reins entered the hall. The man who held the lantern shouted an order down the passage, and Challis followed the second man into a large, comfortable room, with oak beams overhead and oak-lined walls. A huge fireplace occupied almost half one side of the room, and in it a wood fire roared. It was like entrance into Valhalla from the abysmal darkness of another place.

Challis offering some pleasant words of thanks, found himself being scrutinized by his companion. This was a man of thirty, he judged, with glossy dark hair in abundance, dark eyes, and good features, of a strong build, in which, however, his torso did not correspond with his nether limbs. He was built on a fine scale to his waist, but below the design had failed, and ended in rather short, thick-set legs. His face was handsome, and he had a look of capacity.

"You'll be the better of refreshment," he said, and turned as the other man entered.

This man was older by nearly twenty years, and round and rubicund of face. He was of good stature, burly, and had an agreeable air of friendly aloofness.

"Mr. Heywood, the gentleman is starved of cold and hunger, I reckon," said the younger man.

"That so?" said the farmer, as Challis now identified him. "The gentleman is welcome to our poor hospitality. A glass of wine——"

Challis deprecated giving any trouble, but the farmer insisted. He called out for a servant, and walked to the door. He was deliberate and formidable in his actions, as became a great mass of humanity in motion. The younger man, still scrutinizing the guest, said—

"The gentleman's wet, and he would probably like a glass of spirits better."

"You are very good," said Challis, with his pleasant smile.

The farmer at the door stood looking from one to the other. With quick understanding Challis realized that he was slow in initiative, and amenable to the suggestions

of his younger friend. Something passed between him and a servant in the flagged passage, and shortly afterwards a flagon of cognac and glasses were deposited on an eight-legged table in the centre of the room. The host proceeded to mix a glass of hot brandy, while the visitor and the other man talked.

"Hale is only a mile away. You are near your destination, sir."

"I was foolish enough to try a short cut," said Challis. "I was lost in a wood."

"Ah, that would be Charlton," said the other.

Challis sipped his grog, and sat in his chair feeling at ease. The room seemed full of light from the roaring fire, which drowned the spatter of the rain on the window panes.

"His lordship doesn't favour us much with his presence," said Heywood, who had joined his guests in a glass.

"No ; he lives mainly between Cheshire and London," said Challis.

"Here's confusion to Boney," said the farmer. "Duke, why don't you drink to that ?"

Duke, thus addressed, lifted his glass. He had sat down and seemed to be in a reverie.

"I'll drink to that," said he. "Damnation to Boney !"

"We live in troubled times, sir," pursued the farmer.

Challis nodded assent.

"They say Boney is collecting an army to invade England," suggested Heywood. "Do you think he has any chance, sir ?"

"Chance !" cried Duke, in his big, booming voice. "If Boney landed with his men on Kentish soil he would eat us up. But there's no such luck for him. He'll never cross the Channel."

"What do you think, sir ?" inquired the farmer.

Before Challis could reply the door opened, and a girl entered. She was a good deal above the average

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height of women, slenderly full, and of a fine clarity of colour, with quick, significant eyes. She brought in a flash into the room an effect of beauty, and Challis recognized this at once. In that chamber of leaping light she seemed in place, for the dominant impression she conveyed to the senses was one of vivid life and brightness. Duke turned his eyes at once upon her with a certain masterfulness of manner.

"Hallo, Dorothy!" said the farmer, with an affectionate note in his voice.

"Father, is Loseby to start with the third barn tomorrow?" she asked, in a clear, soft voice.

"Loseby! Why, I told 'un," said Heywood, showing a little surprise.

Duke showed none, and a smile flitted on his face. "We have company, Dorothy," he said.

The girl looked at Challis for the first time, and he bowed deeply. The three men were grouped together, but Challis alone was standing, having risen on the girl's entrance. To her eyes they should have been in striking contrast—her tall, burly, weathered father, the black-haired Duke, square of shoulder and thick-set, and the visitor, of unusual stature, and of spare but just proportions. He was the youngest of the three, and to Dorothy Heywood brought in the air of London and cultivated life.

"You have been out in this wild weather?" she said.

"The weather enhances the charm of this refuge, if it were possible to enhance it," he said gallantly.

"We are glad to prove a wayside inn for you," she replied, and Challis wondered at the superior level of her voice and address, in view of her paternity. Heywood was a characteristic farmer; this was a lady. Evidently there must be some value in select academies for young ladies.

"You know these Downs, sir?" inquired Duke.

"This is my first acquaintance with them," he said

lightly. "Lord Plinlimmon has been good enough to place his house at my disposal. I shall be greatly interested in the remains and antiquities, of which, I am told, there are many."

"Ay, Chanctonbury and the Old Road," said old Heywood, nodding.

"You see," said Challis smilingly, as he read the unspoken question in the girl's eyes, "I am a writer."

"A writer!" she cried, with sudden interest. "Do you mean such as Madame D'Arblay? And have you read *Camille*, sir?"

He shook his head, laughing. "I dare not aspire to those celestial heights," he said. "I am but a plodding writer—a ploughman of letters. I am engaged on an historical work. It is heavy, Miss Heywood, much too heavy for young ladies, and dull withal. But it exacts time and quiet. Which is just why you find me where I am, in this very hospitable house." He bowed again, and his courtesy was acknowledged.

"You want quiet. Well," said Duke, "you should find it at Hale."

Challis had now finished his cognac, and thought he should not burden his host any longer with his presence, as the night was advancing. He took a grateful farewell of the company, and mounted his horse, carrying with him directions for the remainder of his journey.

At the gates of Hale he reined in. It was still dimly raining, but the arrival at his destination cheered his spirits. Hale was as dark as the farm had been bright. He opened the iron gates and rode up the drive through wind-swept trees, and the house presented to him a blank face. It was so black that he had a difficulty in finding the door, and when he pulled at the bell the handle jerked out towards him emptily. It was obvious that there was no possibility of communication with the inhabitants that way. It seemed a huge, rambling building, and there was no light visible. He followed the face of it and turned a corner, only to fall

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into a shrubbery. His tired horse made no response, but waited meekly till he had recovered himself. Then he pursued his way towards the back parts of the house. Presently he espied a window dimly lit, and on investigating closer, made out a door, on which he rapped sharply. It opened at once, and he peered out of the night into a large chamber, obscurely illuminated. A voice spoke sharply, "Who is there?"

"It is Mr. Challis."

There was a moment's silence, and then the voice asked in another tone, "Is it the gentleman from his lordship?"

"Yes, my man," said Challis. "Can you take charge of my horse? We are both exhausted with the night and our journey." He entered. "You are the servitor of whom Lord Plinlimmon told me. You were butler to him."

"For twenty years, sir," said the man respectfully. "I'll see to your horse, sir, and meanwhile would you honour us by sitting for a few minutes in the kitchen? Your honour's room is ready, but we did not expect your honour to-day. The letter said to-morrow. So there are no lights, and you will, I hope, excuse us, sir."

"To-morrow," repeated Challis. "There must be a mistake. It was to-day my journey was arranged for."

"No doubt, sir, no doubt," said the man hurriedly. "It was a mistake. I will see to your horse, sir, if you will honour us by entering. This dark kitchen ill becomes you. I would we had known. The house should have been alight. Dear, dear! My wife will make you welcome, sir. Bess!" he called into the dim-lit room. "Mr. Challis must have supper at once prepared. Excuse me, sir. The horse—Dear, dear!" and he disappeared into the night.

A woman had risen from a chair near the dwindling fire, and stood as it were to order, awaiting Challis's commands. She looked a faded wisp of a woman with

careworn face, and a movement she made displayed a little stagger. "Pray sit down. You are Mrs. Graves," said Challis kindly. "I regret there has been this mistake. It will have incommoded you."

"It will have inconvenienced you, sir," said the woman. "His lordship mentioned to-morrow, we thought. Otherwise, everything would have been in readiness. I fear there will be only cold viands——"

"Please say no more," he interposed, lifting a hand and smiling. "You will vex me if you persist. As for me, I am a glutton for cold meats."

He took a seat near the fire, thereby encouraging Mrs. Graves to be seated, for it was evident that she was ill at ease afoot. "I must beg to be excused for so late an arrival," he went on. "I lost my way on the Downs, and the night is dark."

"It is very dark, sir. I wish we had known——" Her voice was tremulous and faint.

"Now," said Challis, "I warn you I shall be gravely offended by your obstinacy. Dismiss that blunder which was certainly not yours. I shall be content to eat such victuals as you have, and I'll pledge my word I sleep like the sleepers of Ephesus after my journey."

"You are very good, sir," she said, and on that her husband entered.

"Bess," he said briskly, "Mr. Challis's supper——" and then paused suddenly. "Felicity, help your mother," he said, more sharply, "and you, sir, will you please come this way to your rooms?"

As he rose Challis was aware of another figure which stepped out of the outlying shadows. It was that of a young girl, of whom he could see but little in the half light. He followed Graves from the kitchen, along a corridor and into a comfortable, low-ceilinged room, which was evidently a library. When it had been properly lit by Graves, he could see how hardly time had dealt with it, how faded were its glories, and could judge therefrom how the whole house must have fallen

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into disrepair and even decay. The shelves were neglected, the covers of the books cracked in many places, and the titles had disappeared from the backs of plenty through the encroaching and unresisted damp. It was probable, he reflected, that the walls gaped to the wild wet weather of these exposed Downs, and that the roofs of the old house leaked. But one pleasant feature of the room was the fire that glowed in it, and flickered on the oak overhead. Graves was now revealed by the better light as a man of sixty, of middle stature, thin, dark, and sallow, with a conspicuous long, narrow nose. He had the remains of a good servant's manners, being civil and attentive, yet a little too talkative for perfection in breeding as a domestic. Long disuse had deteriorated his quality, yet he braced himself valiantly up to old standards. He bustled about busily and noiselessly, which was one of the agreeable traits of service left him. In a short time he had the table prepared and laid in readiness for the guest's supper, and he talked the while of his late master, Lord Plinlimmon, of the rough night, and of the French war. He was anxious that Challis should not lay to his charge the unreadiness of the house, and fetched out a letter from "his lordship," in which notice was given of the arrival of his lordship's friend, Mr. Challis, on the 11th of the month. This figure, more closely scrutinized, looked like a possible 10, and was finally admitted to be capable of either interpretation. Graves thus triumphantly emerged from suspicions of negligence which might have enveloped him, and, recovering security, ventured on a reference to Mr. Challis's friendship with his lordship.

"You must know his lordship well, sir," he said. "And I trust he is sound in health. I had the honour of long service with his lordship, but I have not seen him for years."

"His lordship is in good health," said Challis. "I saw him a week since."

"Ah!" Graves looked as if he had desired a fuller answer, but said nothing. He lingered until his daughter entered with the supper, and then he retired silently. Challis had now the opportunity of examining the girl in good light. She was dark like her father, and of no considerable stature, a slight, dainty figure that he could have brushed away with a hand. But what struck him about her most, and remained as an impression, was a curious eldritch beauty that she possessed. She fluttered about the table like an elfin thing, hardly like anything of flesh and blood, and her raven hair added to the fancy picture of her. He spoke with her in the friendly way in which one might address a pretty child, hardly knowing how to key his language and ideas to her, but hoping that he was just hitting the proper mean. She told him that she found life rather lonely in the Downs, that they were ten miles from Chichester, where society was established and all gay social events took place, and that their few neighbours were scattered widely in the folds of the hills.

"I saw some," said he. "It was a mile or more back, where I called for directions at a farm."

She considered a moment. "That must be Southover," she said. "Was it a big man, sir?"

"Yes, he was one, and there was another, shorter and dark."

"It was Mr. Heywood, of Southover," suddenly interjected Graves, who had entered without being heard.

"And the other man?"

Graves had his back turned, and was cutting some bread at the moment.

"I think it must have been Mr. Draycott," he said. "Mr. Draycott, the boat-builder from Bosham. He is a frequent visitor there. The daughter——" He hesitated.

"Yes, I saw the daughter," said Challis slowly. There came back into his mind swiftly the picture—

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the room flooded with the light, the two men, and the tall girl with her wealth of hair, and it made an odd contrast with his reception at Hale, and with the people who were now about him. He recalled himself to find Felicity's dark eyes upon him almost searchingly. He stirred with a curious sense of uneasiness, and poured himself out a glass of wine. Graves returned to the subject of Lord Plinlimmon.

CHAPTER II

CHALLIS EXPLORES

CHALLIS found his bedroom was situated on the floor above, and was gained by a short staircase. As he passed to it under the guidance of Graves, he noticed that the entrance hall was broad and fine in proportions, and that at the back a shallow stairway ran up to wide-spreading corridors. The house had evidently been designed on a handsome and generous scale. The living rooms seemed to lie on the south side, and his staircase was in a passage hereabouts.

His chamber was comfortable, and a fire had been lighted in it since his arrival. He undressed slowly, reviewing the events of the day. Two doors gave access to the bedroom, one from the passage and one from a farther room. Before retiring he had the curiosity to explore this. It was a room of faded furniture, very still and deathlike; but he decided that it would suit him very well as an annexe to his sleeping apartment. He could write there and meditate in privacy. One set of windows faced southwards and the other west. As he was peering out of the latter he became aware of a swift leap of flame and light below, and now his eye could carry for some distance into the avenue which led to the gate. He perceived that Graves must have lighted the lamp above the hall door, and he set the act down to the scrupulous ceremoniousness of an old

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servant, suddenly awakened to the stirred memories of his service. He went back to his room, and sank presently into profound slumber.

When he woke the wind and the rain were gone, and the sun shone from a pleasant, speckled April sky; zephyrs played through the open windows, and the thrushes sang in the tangle of wood into which he looked. In the night, as it seemed, winter had made his last effort, and in the dawn gracious spring was on the Downs with her tender fingers.

The Downs were the insistent feature of the landscape, and drew his eyes. It was an agreeable day for rambling, and his work was not yet to hand, so he promised himself a pleasant holiday. He breakfasted in the library, with the birds calling in his ears, and Felicity—a silent figure—watching his needs. He talked to her, and asked questions as to the neighbourhood, but found her shy and furtive in her manner. She smiled once at a little jest of his, and it lighted up her dark beauty. But she sank soon into silence, with short, aloof replies, as if she shrank from communication.

The house Challis found to be a patchwork of several styles and generations. It had fallen into a state of neglect, and seemed settling down into ruins. He lamented the dilapidations, for both in character and in position there was something delightful about Hale. Lord Plinlimmon had told him that he had not seen it for years, and had joked him on the chance of its still being in existence. As he explored the Downs he recalled that interview—the only one he had ever had—with his lordship.

“Sir William tells me you have your instructions, Mr. Challis. I’ve nothing to do with those. I believe you’ll do good service. You’re welcome to that statement,” he added, in answer to Challis’s murmur of thanks. “I’ve made inquiries. But it’s nothing to do with me. My part’s to house you; and, egad, I’m half-ashamed of myself. Hale’s in ruins, I believe.

There's an old servant of mine there, where he's stayed for years like a barnacle. I get his bills, and know no more now. But I'll be damned if I know how much of the place is standing. Such as it is, it is at your disposal and Sir William's."

He wondered, as he looked down on Hale from a shoulder of the hill, how long this was destined to be his home. Hale lay in a fold of the Downs, sheltered from the winds on all sides, and its gardens and park were flung far up the valley in luxuriance, much in contrast with the smooth, empty slopes of the surrounding chalk hills. Beyond, where the sunlight gleamed on the summit, a barrow caught his eye, and he could see the sheep, dwindled to toy things, cropping the fine spring grass about it. He would have a little space in which to collect himself and be happy and idle after his arduous work in London, and he was glad of it. Sir William had urgently represented to him the weight of responsibility he was thus delegating to him. He was prepared for his task when the hour should strike. But that was not yet. It might not be until the close of April that he would hear anything definite; and then the great burthen of anxiety would descend upon him. He would not shrink from it; indeed, he looked forward to it, being young and fresh and ardent and patriotic. But he would not complain of this interlude in pleasant weather among unfamiliar and attractive surroundings.

He made various explorations on the Downs, and returned to Hale for the midday meal. Graves was absent in Chichester, his daughter said, who waited on "his lordship's friend" with assiduity and neatness. She was more communicative at this meeting, but still held herself in reserve. Challis had the impression that she was eyeing him with some suspicion, and he devoted himself to an endeavour to win her friendly confidence.

During the next few days Challis continued his exploration of the neighbourhood, with which he began to grow familiar. Also, he made some new acquaint-

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ances, and renewed some old. On the third afternoon after his arrival he found that his walk had brought him to Southover, and he decided to call on the farmer and pay his respects in person. He was drawn by an interest in the people he had met on the night of his arrival, and (he confessed to himself frankly) more particularly in the girl. He descended the fields into the yard where a huge hind was at work on a rick, and to him he addressed an inquiry.

The man answered in broad Sussex, and stared at him stolidly. He continued to stare after him, when Challis had gone on his way to the farmhouse. The master was not at home, but at market. Armed with this information Challis did not hesitate to ring on the bell, and was presently admitted to Miss Heywood's presence, not in the big room which he remembered, but in a smaller and more elegant drawing-room. Miss Heywood rose to her guest, and told him of her father's absence.

"Perhaps," said he, smiling, "you are the fitter recipient of my message, which is, I assure you, one of sincere thanks. I am installed in Hale, and had it not been for Southover I should be to-day a homeless wanderer."

She laughed at his extravagant speech, and protested very prettily. She was frank and natural in her acts and words, which was a delightful change for him after the vapours and pretensions and affectations of London.

"But, indeed, Mr. Challis, I trust you have found Hale suit your health," she said presently.

"I love your Downs," said he. "I am vastly taken with them, and that fine prospect of sea delights me. I am fed with perpetual delectation when I look southward."

"You do our scenery honour," she said, flushing with pleasure, for the spirit of the Downs was in her blood. "I am glad you like it. To some it seems cold and barren."

"Barren!" said he, and he waved a hand towards the

window which looked on an orchard breaking into leaf and blossom. "These hills and folds grow beauty, Miss Heywood, beauty in all things."

She took his compliment with simple sincerity, and her glowing colour showed her pleasure in it.

"The quietude perhaps suits your mood as a writer, Mr. Challis, after stormy London," she ventured next.

"I have barely begun," said he. "Indeed, I find it hard. There is too much of outward nature to engross me."

"I saw you walking on the Barrow crest," she said.

"Yes, it is a pleasant view from there. I like the air of solitude."

"Yet you must have seen much of society in town," she observed. "I wonder you are content with our rude wilderness."

"To me, Miss Heywood, it is a garden of Eden," he said, with a smiling inclination of his head.

Her lips were apart; a colour in her cheeks; she had an air of excitement.

"I should love to see life in London," she said.

"I should love to dip into its pages, and then turn them."

"Believe me, Miss Heywood, it is a trivial life," he said.

"I should like to see its triviality," she said.

"Some day, doubtless, you will," he declared.

She leaned forward, her elbows on the couch arm, her pretty face resting on the palms of her hands, and gazed with naïve interest at him.

"You have travelled much," she said. "I know you must have done. You have a travelled air."

He laughed. "I have seen some parts of Europe. But this little island's best."

"I believe it," she said. "Yet it would be nice to have proved it like yourself."

He laughed again at her impulsive and irrepressible spirit. "That, too, you will accomplish," he vowed.

She shook her head. "We are homekeeping folk."

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My father's interests lie here. Not unless the French Emperor casts us out shall we leave Southover. It is what the Bible calls a law of the Medes and Persians."

Once again Challis was surprised at the cultivation of her mind and the urbanity of her talk. She was not at all what he had conceived a rustic maiden would prove, blooming alone in this wild garden. He wondered whence she derived her delicacy of fancy and her wide outlook. She had a deep sympathy with nature, as she knew it, and yet had all a girl's innocent curiosity as to the great world she had not entered. Some question of a new flower arose, and they went out into the garden to settle it. The cherry-trees were in blossom, and the whole orchard was like a bower of faery. Challis noted with approbation how beautifully his companion harmonized with the setting. She wore a white, high-bosomed gown, which flowed gracefully the full length of her body, and her rich hair and fragrant face, with the clear grey eyes, touched him with a sense of almost enrapt appreciation. From his heart started a thrill which captured his whole being. He laughed and talked brightly and almost recklessly, and it was with reluctance that he parted from her, feeling that he must not outstay his welcome.

On the way to Hale he encountered a farmer's cart, in which sat Heywood, "market-merry," as they say, and by him the man he had seen on the first night at Southover, Duke Draycott. Heywood was driving, but Draycott put out a commanding hand and reined in.

"I have just been to pay my respects to you, Mr. Heywood," said Challis, "and, unfortunate in missing you, I was fortunate in finding Miss Heywood."

Duke Draycott stared, and Heywood's broad, red face was agrin.

"That's right," he said.

"You like Hale, sir," said Draycott.

"An engaging house, an engaging situation," responded Challis lightly.

"There is strength in the air of the Downs," said

Duke. "It's healthy for most folk, but uncommon unhealthy for others."

It was a Delphic utterance, and as he spoke his eyes moved towards the distant gables of the farm.

"My appetite is sharpset by it," said Challis. "I find your Southdown mutton admirable. I am content."

"You stay long?" inquired the other.

"If it continues to content me I will stay for some time. I am my own master."

"I would have no man for master myself," said Duke, almost in a growl. He threw his head back, and his big chest came forward. "I wish you good-day, sir."

Heywood obediently started the horse at this hint, and the cart rattled out of sight.

Those days of the interlude were pleasant enough, and lingered long in the memory. Challis cast back his memory to his campaign in Ireland, and was glad to be quit of it. That which was before him was in every way more alluring, and more adventurous. He was eager for the signal, but this as yet had not come. The rambling old house held an attraction for him. It had still a certain stateliness and beauty even in its decay. It was invaded by damp, and the walls in many rooms were encrusted with mouldy patches; its decorations and hangings were dingy and faded; rats scampered across the corridors and gambolled in the vacant rooms, where the doors creaked all day when the wind was high; and holes gaped in the boarding. Yet there was something fascinating in this ancient messuage, which had gone through so many centuries, had been exposed to so many tumults of fortune, and had been handed down from generation to generation, until at last its life was giving out, and it was passing into a crumbling ruin. Nothing could prevent that fate now, he thought, and the thought touched this young man to a certain tenderness of feeling. He was of sensitive nerves, as befitted what he claimed to be—a writer of ambitions. He had set out the room next his bedroom as an auxiliary

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sitting-room, and it was here he had arranged his papers. His most private effects were in his secure valises, but the table was covered with his notes on the history of the Revolution which he was writing. Felicity had come upon these mysteries many times as she dusted, and had turned them over, and set them straight with a certain awe. Challis wrote in the morning and walked abroad in the afternoon. He had encountered Mrs. Graves now and then in his explorations. She was a shrinking woman, affected with rheumatism, and he was sorry for so unfortunate a being who lived a life so subordinate to her family and so sequestered from all that mattered. He entered into conversation with her on each occasion, and spoke with kind cheerfulness. It pleased him to see that she brightened on his approach, and she confided to him a little of her history. She had been in his lordship's service with her husband, and had married from the house. They had taken an inn in Surrey, and had been there for some years. Then Graves had farmed a little, but had had no luck; and so it came about that he had drifted into his lordship's service again in this subsidiary and exiled post as guardian of the decaying property. They had been at Hale for seven years, and its master had not set foot there in all that time. "Seven years!" repeated Graves's voice, breaking in suddenly, as he came up. "It is a long time; but no doubt you know, sir, knowing his lordship as you do."

This was, as Challis recognized, only another attempt at prying on the ex-butler's part. He had referred several times to his guest's acquaintance with Lord Plinlimmon, and it was clear that he wanted to know on what terms they stood to each other.

"Well, you see, I have persuaded his lordship to open it after a fashion, Graves," he said, smiling.

"Indeed you have, sir; and we welcome it heartily. It is lonely in a big house like Hale on the Downs."

About a mile farther on the Chichester road was a

little wayside inn, under the style of the "Hen and Chickens," a square, weather-beaten house, built in the early part of the eighteenth century upon the foundations of a still older building. Scattered cottages in the vicinity gave the tavern its custom, and stray travellers called there. Challis had dropped in once or twice upon the landlord and conversed affably with him, a dull, dumb man, of middle age; but he had hitherto met none there but silent hinds. He had begun, indeed, to feel a little the lack of appropriate society, and had taken steps to relieve his solitude by visiting Chichester, where he had an introduction to a prominent gentleman in the town. He had called at Southover more than once, and felt drawn to call again, as on each occasion he had seen Dorothy Heywood, whose charm had so engaged him. But good manners forbade his constant intrusion, and so he went farther afield for company.

At Mr. Compton's house in Chichester he met one Captain Balmain, who was in charge of a company of troopers in the town, and was a very jovial, simple fellow, without any pretensions to intellectuality. The Captain was interested to find that his new acquaintance was a man of letters, but professed himself unlearned in such matters.

"I have read a book or two that are in fashion, but damme if I could read some of them," said he. "They are full of crackjaw words. I like simplicity for myself. Not that I don't think writing fellows clever. By George! they are—devilish clever!"

This compliment delivered, Captain Balmain considered he had discharged his duty to letters, and plunged into other matters. He was an amiable, empty-headed soldier, with a garrulous tongue and an absence of humour, which was apt to tickle the sense in others more fortunate. Of these Challis was one, and he was vastly entertained by the ramblings of the Captain, who informed him, among other things, how

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the war with Bonaparte should be conducted, and wound up with a pitiful complaint.

"But, gad, here am I in a stale little town, with nothing higher to fly at than the free traders. Conceive it, Mr. Challis!"

Challis condoled with him, and put an inquiry about the free traders.

"It is true they have engorged heads," said the gallant captain. "They have had immunity too long, and they are thick at sea and in every cove in south and east. Gad, I believe there are more contraband men on this coast than honest. But that is the Government's fault. They should have taken steps and stamped out the offence with strong measures with preventive men and their cutters. And, damme, they now fall back on His Majesty's army for that mean job. I resent it, sir. It is like setting me to sweep floors of garbage. I take it as an insult, Mr. Challis."

"It must be vexatious work for you, Captain," agreed Challis, "especially for one of your experience."

The Captain was at once gratified and incited by this appreciation. "Let me have a fly at Boney," he said. "That's what I should like. Give me real work, real fighting, and not this scullery work. We must assist the preventives, must we? Egad, I think shame to associate with the riding officers, Mr. Challis," and he drank his wine at a draught to drown his chagrin.

It had been a break for Challis after nearly two weeks in the lonely Downs, to mix in this urban company, and the change had amused and stimulated him. At Hale he pored over papers and maps half the day, and spent the rest of his time in wandering on the hills and in the hollows. He could have charted the Downs for miles away; so familiar had he become with them. On his way back he reined in at the "Hen and Chickens," for his ride had engendered a thirst, and there was excellent ale in Moreton's casks. He dismounted, and fastened his horse to a link in the wall, where another horse was

already stationed. Then he entered, and greeted the landlord, a quiet, dull fellow enough, but attentive and obliging to his customers. He was talking to a man whom Challis assumed to be the owner of the horse without. This man was strongly built, with a face, as he turned it on the new-comer, pock-marked and ugly, with a scar reaching nearly to his eye from the middle of his left cheek. He surveyed Challis out of rather hard, narrow eyes, and then saluted civilly.

"Growing spring weather," he remarked.

Challis agreed, ordered his ale, and took off his gloves. He recognized the costume of the stranger, which was that of a riding officer in the service of the Customs. Frankly he introduced the subject.

"Do they keep you busy about here, officer?"

The riding officer grinned. "There is more free trading on this Sussex coast than upon any other," he said, "and we are undermanned. Busy! We are like galley slaves."

"I understand that the Government intends to strengthen the preventive forces," said Challis.

The riding officer's eyes seemed to narrow even beyond their natural habit, and he paused for a moment before replying. "It is welcome news, sir. We here are but badly furnished. The supervisor has a long coast, and he is overworked. There should be a relief."

"Such is the talk in town," said Challis pleasantly.

"We have heard nothing of it. We hear nothing," said the other. "We do our duty, and that is all."

"I have no doubt you do," said Challis, raising his tankard. "I drink to the gallant preventive officers."

The riding officer's somewhat grim face relaxed, and he bowed. "Thank you, sir. And you drink in good ale that has paid His Majesty's charges, which is more than can be said of much liquor. Faith, the countryside is rank with it—every inn and tavern."

"Oh come, Mr. Foster," cried the innkeeper, "not every inn!"

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The riding officer laughed easily. "Oh, you are all right, Moreton. I'll warrant you are sound enough to King and Church."

"You may go over every foot of my cellars, Mr Foster," said Moreton earnestly. "You are at liberty to, sir. I beg you will."

"Not I, man," said Foster. "I know honest men when I see them."

Challis and he left the inn together, and parted outside.

"You are staying at Hale, sir," said the riding officer.

"Yes; how did you know?" asked Challis.

"It is my business to know things," said the preventive man, and pointed down to the flat lands where Chichester lay. "Look, we shall be astir soon. We shall be in the press of it."

"How so?" inquired Challis.

Foster threw him a quick look. "The dark of the moon," he said. "It is our critical time," and he saluted and mounted.

CHAPTER III

THE DARK OF THE MOON

CHALLIS came upon traces of the smugglers for the first time a few days later. It was a fine, clear day, and he was taking a favourite walk of his on the smooth crest of the Downs eastwards. From the barrow he could stand and look forth upon the broken coast, Chichester harbour, and the shelving shores towards Shoreham; and beyond all a bright, sparkling sea. Rain had fallen overnight, and there had been April showers in the morning, but all sky and sea were of a magnificent blueness now. From the tumulus he descended to the west of Hale, and here he met Dorothy Heywood. She had been gathering wild flowers, those precious rare things that flourish on the chalk, and her face was beautiful with the threshing of the wind. That rude and boisterous breeze on the high ground had yet only served to call out the infinite delicacy of her rose complexion. She was youth and happiness incarnate as she stood smiling at him, her hair and her gown blown in the wind.

Together they descended into a ravine, where trees grew and the wild juniper flourished. They were easy of speech together now, and they had not wondered at it; they seemed to have drifted quite naturally into their present freedom of intercourse. Considering how few subjects they really had in common, they were

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marvellously interested in each other's talk. Yet these subjects included Nature and books which both loved, if in different degrees, and with rather diverging standards in the latter case. Dorothy said she had come to meet her father, who was visiting a neighbour's farm, and would return by that road. They talked and lingered and waited, and almost forgot the father.

He came presently, riding slowly up the slope, and greeted Challis courteously. The three turned and mounted the down along a rude track. At the top, where the farmer was to strike off in a slanting direction across the slope to the back parts of Southover, the party halted. Challis's direct road to Hale would separate him from the others at this point.

"A good deal of traffic goes this way, Mr. Heywood," he observed.

"Traffic! Aye, I dare say so," said the farmer gruffly.

Challis was looking at the track, which, soft from the rains, was much cut about by the marks of wheels.

"Last night," he said, "there was a stream of carts on this road."

The farmer stared. "How do you make that out?" he asked slowly.

"There was rain last night," said Challis, "and these marks are deeply scored in the chalk. The carts came from the flats below, and their tracks interlace. See, there were many of them."

Dorothy was interested, but her father seemed perplexed. "They were no carts of mine," he said. "Mine do not come this back way."

"No," said Challis, "they were not yours; they were the carts of the free traders."

Heywood gasped. "How know you that?" he asked.

Challis laughed. "For the last three hundred yards the track has been scattered with tea. There is a leaking chest in the carts."

The farmer seemed to digest it leisurely.

"Free traders!" he repeated.

"Where does the track lead?" inquired Challis.

"It joins the Petworth road, on t'other side of the Downs," said Heywood.

"But there are places on the road," said Challis. Heywood eyed him. "Well, let us say the carts are gone to Petworth." He laughed, and took off his hat with a bow to Dorothy, as he turned away.

The following day he had an invitation from Captain Balmain to dine at Chichester, and accepted it with pleasant anticipations. He was not disappointed. The dinner was good, the wine better, and the company best of all—from Challis's particular point of view. He was blessed with a sense of humour, and was much diverted by the young men he met. There was a naval lieutenant, rich in stories, capable, animal, two young gentlemen, squires of the vicinity, my Lord Osterleigh of Hants, Sir John Fairford of Fairford, and a witty gentleman of the law. It was this last that amused Challis more than his companions. His air of knowledge was serene, and you might take it that he was intimate with all the great persons of politics. He told stories which the company recognized as funny from the hall-mark of the teller, and whispered knowledge which was not to be spread broadcast among the common, but was to be contained among select cronies. These concerned many fine people, such as Mr. Pitt, Mr. Canning, my Lord Castlereagh, and the Regent above all.

The Captain was in excellent mood as host, and the wine was passed about continuously. He referred to the smugglers in another vein from that which he had displayed when Challis had met him first.

"Gad, I shall have a bit of fun at last," he said, "and after a dull winter, damme, it is better than nothing. The preventive men want my assistance, and it's all the Government think I'm fit for."

Nevertheless, he was cheerful enough, drank too much

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wine, and assured Challis, in parting, that he was a great addition to the society of Chichester. As Challis came out of the house he espied a form across the road which seemed familiar, and instantly afterwards recognized it as Draycott's. Draycott nodded to him, and came over.

"Pleasant little town," he said in his deep voice. "You've been visiting friends, sir?"

"Yes," said Challis, in a friendly way, as he passed on. Draycott's gaze went after him until he had turned a corner.

He had lingered at the Captain's rooms, and he had also some business in the town; so that it was not until dusk that Challis reached Hale. The flare light in the hall of the house had not yet been lit, and the avenue from the gates was in obscurity. He did not summon Graves, but stabled his horse himself, and when he had finished the darkness was dropping. From the stables he had a view of the kitchen door, which at this moment opened, and the light from within flashed upon two men. One of these was, of course, Graves, and the other he recognized also. It was surely the riding officer whom he had encountered a few days previously at the "Hen and Chickens." The man, after some exchanges with Graves, made off round the house and disappeared; Graves closed the door, and there remained only the glow in the windows. By this Challis guided himself to the house and so round to the side door, of which he had the key. The door from the tangled and overgrown pleasaunce on the south was that which admitted to his rooms and that wing of the house. The great front door into the hall was never used.

On the following morning Challis devoted considerable time to his maps and his papers, and was interrupted in the middle of his work by Graves, who brought letters from the post. There was an important document from London, and Challis sat in deep reflection for a few minutes, until suddenly he was aware that

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Graves had not left the room, and, rousing himself from his reverie, glanced at the man. Graves was on the farther side of the table, and Challis thought his eyes lifted swiftly from the litter of maps on the table.

"Well?" Challis spoke sharply.

Mrs. Graves, it appeared, begged his lordship's guest to make choice between lamb and veal, and, the choice referred back rather impatiently to Mrs. Graves, his lordship's guest sank again into his meditations. The nearer the approach to the crisis of his work the more his nerves braced themselves; he felt strung to the occasion which Sir William promised him was imminent.

Challis walked on the Downs, as usual, with a vague, hopeless thought of Southover, for a visit to which farm he could find no possible justification. It had fallen dark when he reached the barrow on the hill over Hale, and he saw a dark small figure flitting about it. Once or twice before he had seen this, and he knew who it was. He went to her and spoke.

"You are fond of this place, Miss Graves."

"Yes," she answered.

"There is a splendid view from here," he went on.

"It was a beacon hill in the time of the Armada."

"It has been a long time like this," she said, in a curious, spasmodic voice. "Long before the Armada."

He saw she was looking at the tumulus. "That was here before our ancestors arrived in Britain," he said.

"How long?" she asked quickly, looking at him with her dark eyes.

"No one knows. People who lived on these hills—people who lived in caves, perhaps—many thousands of years ago."

"That's what I feel," she said. "They are here." She pointed, and spoke as simply as a child might. He talked to her a little in his pleasant friendly way, and then, noticing the failing light, asked if she were going home. "If so," he said, "will you let me accompany you?"

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She turned swiftly away. "Yes, sir, if you will," she said hurriedly.

They descended into the valley, but Challis did most of the talking, his companion tripping silently by his side, as lithe and sure-footed as a young kid. They parted at the house to enter by their separate doors, and soon afterwards Challis's supper was served. There was fine wine in the cellars of Hale, and Lord Plinlimmon had made him free of it. Graves served him with the respect due to rare vintages by a responsible butler. He seemed to take a pleasure in recommending this bottle or that, in varying and diversifying the supplies, and in remarking the guest's satisfaction. They talked over wines, as Challis ate, and he drank with the taste and restraint of a connoisseur. It had been an excellent bottle he had cracked, and he sat meditating in his chair for some time after Graves had retired and left him with a decanter of port. This was pleasant enough, but it was not work. He itched to be at work, and was compelled to kick his heels in idleness. Yet the situation was unquestionably comfortable, and had piquant possibilities. His thoughts drifted down the road and over the hill to Southover, and he saw, in a mental vision, Dorothy Heywood in her flowing high-girdled summer gown walking in the flowery orchard with her sweet grace.

Graves broke in upon these reveries, and his face showed unwonted animation.

"I don't know if you are interested, sir," he said; "but there is a report of an attack on smugglers over the High Ridge."

Challis leapt to his feet. Here was action, and he yearned for action.

"That is stirring news, Graves," he said. "My kingdom for a horse!"

"If you thought of going, sir, I will saddle yours," said Graves. "If you will join me this side of the 'Hen and Chickens' I could guide you to the place."

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Challis accepted with alacrity, and Graves withdrew.

Upstairs in his room Challis made preparations rapidly for the exciting excursion. He had to change into riding-clothes. When he was nearing the completion of his toilet he heard the key of the door to the landing turn softly, and paused. Next moment he was across the room, and was trying the handle. The door was locked. He stood for a moment dumbfounded, and through his maze of wonder he heard slight, faint footsteps without. He opened the door to the adjoining room, which he had made an annexe, and tried the handle of the outer door there. That also was locked. A flurry of anger and perplexity shook him. Why was he thus imprisoned?

With the light in his hand he explored the windows. On this side of the house they were small lattice windows, and would not admit of the passage of so large a body as his. He made examination in both rooms, and soon saw that the only chance for him, if he wished to break his prison, was to break a window. As has been said, the whole house of Hale was in a state of dilapidation, and at last he found a window the hinges of which were held by insecure fastenings. It took him ten minutes, however, to remove them, and so clear a way for his escape. He dropped fifteen feet, to the soft earth, and then hastened round to the stables. His horse was not there!

He reflected that possibly Graves had taken it with him, and promptly rejected the idea. He knocked at the kitchen door, and found Mrs. Graves. Felicity was not there. She told him that her husband had gone a quarter of an hour previously, and she seemed disturbed. She knew nothing of the horse. Much vexed, Challis made an exploration of the yard with a lantern, and at last came upon his horse in the small park which adjoined the pleasure. It was saddled and bridled, and he could only suppose that the animal had wandered

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out of the stable ; yet that would imply an open door, and incompetence or carelessness on some one's part. Graves had shown signs of elation, so that might be the explanation. He mounted, dismissing his speculations, and rode down to the inn. Here, however, there was no sign of Graves, and after waiting impatiently for some minutes he determined to go forward himself. He knew the High Ridge, of course, but he had not gathered from Graves on which side of the hill the encounter was expected. At any rate he had only the two alternatives, to push on or to go back, for it was of no use to linger where he was on the road.

He passed the High Ridge on the north side, where a rough track led down a mile or more from Southover, but all was quiet there, and so he surmounted the brow of the hill and turned southwards. A little later the silence of the night was broken by a pistol-shot, and, guessing that he was nearing the scene of the drama, he hastened his horse forward.

The night had fully fallen, but was lit with faint stars, and he could make out figures as he approached, also black outlines representing something he could not determine. Voices reached him now, but no sound of fire-arms. He quickened to a trot, being on more level ground, and presently was challenged.

" Who's that ? "

He thought he recognized the voice, and hailed.

" Is it Captain Balmain ? "

" Yes ; that's Mr. Challis, isn't it ? " and the figure advanced.

There were some ten or twelve dragoons in the party, and Challis saw now that the black things against the sky were carts.

" Is it over ? " asked Challis, as the officer reached him.

Captain Balmain swore. " Damme, a pretty business. They scattered in ten minutes. If I had known I would ha' brought half my men, and had more fun. They've

left the booty behind ; but, damme, what is the use to me ? I shan't drink French brandy any the cheaper for that."

He grumbled, but he was nevertheless pleasantly excited, and called to one of his men.

" Is that fellow conscious ? "

" A wounded man ? " asked Challis.

" Yes, the only casualty, one of the smugglers. What is his state, Wellings ? "

" Bullet in the shoulder, I think, sir," said the dragoon.

" Is he known to you, officer ? " asked Balmain.

They had approached the group near one of the carts as these communications were exchanged, and now Challis recognized dimly the riding officer he had met at the " Hen and Chickens." It was he who had been addressed by the captain.

" Yes, sir ; he's a man from Pagham. I've had an eye on him for some time. Can you speak, Hamp ? "

The wounded man muttered something. " It's not a wound of any account," pursued the riding officer. " You will, I assume, take him into Chichester gaol, Captain ? "

" Yes," assented Balmain, and to Challis, " Gad, if it was for myself I'd let the poor devil off, on condition he fought for His Majesty in the Fleet. This is the stuff that Boney fears."

Ere the dragoons departed with their prisoner and convoy Challis had time to pick out Graves. There were two riding officers and three men in addition to the dragoons, and Challis and Graves completed the party. After civil good-byes Challis found himself riding home between Riding Officer Foster and Graves. It had not been an affair of much moment, said the former, whose voice expressed regret at an opportunity missed.

" But you made a fair haul," said Challis.

" Yes ; so far so good. But we had aimed higher. We wanted to lay the gang by the heels. It has troubled these parts long enough. I tell you, sir, that every house and every church is in the service of contraband."

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"Come, Mr. Foster!" protested Graves.

"I speak within reason. I can fit my tongue to the occasion," said Foster. "I speak with heat, but I do not speak of all. No; but one never knows where the free trade hides. It is cultivated and protected from nobleman to peasant. Pah!"

They entered the "Hen and Chickens," and Challis called for ale for the party. The riding officer bared his arm suddenly and showed a flesh wound, where a bullet had ploughed the surface.

"A near shave," said Challis, who knew something of anatomy and recognized the neighbourhood of the artery.

The riding officer looked at him oddly. "I am accustomed to close shaves," he said, "it tickles up life," and he tossed his liquor off at a gulp.

"You spoke of a gang," said Challis.

Foster swore an oath. "It is a gang such as sets Government at defiance," he said roughly. "We are hamstrung and powerless for want of men. What can we do against Captain Noll?"

"Captain Noll?" Challis repeated the name interrogatively.

"Yes, it wouldn't be long ere you heard of him on this Sussex coast. He is known as far as Alfriston, and even in Kent. He is a regular Bonaparte of the free trade, and we can't catch him. He has a fleet of luggers under him, and his operations are in a dozen harbours and roadsteads."

"Where is this formidable pirate to be seen?" asked Challis.

"Ah, there's the question," said the preventive man. "Where? No one knows, or no one will tell. He rules the contraband of this coast, and no one will betray his identity. Who is he? I'd give much to learn."

On the way home there emerged in Challis's memory the locked door, which had been dispossessed by the excitement of the interlude.

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"Where were you, Graves?" he inquired. "I missed you at the inn."

"I waited for some time, and thought you had changed your purpose," said the man.

"No; it was a curious thing that delayed me. I have no explanation of it. I was locked in my room, and had to break a window to get out."

Graves was manifestly amazed. "Locked!" he echoed. "Did the bolt catch?"

"It was deliberate. I heard footsteps—the key was turned. And, moreover, my horse was gone from the stable."

"I left him saddled," said Graves. "I do not understand this, sir."

"Nor I," said Challis dryly.

Graves seemed perturbed, and expressed his regret and his astonishment several times. Then he fell silent, as if he were turning over the puzzle in his mind. When they got to the house it was late, and Challis felt ready for bed. But he sat up for some time in his chamber reading and making notes. Presently there was a knock on the door, and Graves entered, very solemn of face, and wrapped in the obsequiousness of his ancient calling.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, in a formal voice. "I have inquired and determined the culprit. The key was turned by my daughter in ignorance of your presence within. I trust you will forgive her inadvertence."

Challis stared, and then laughed a little. "Oh yes, Graves," he said, "that suffices. I wanted no mystery; that is all. Give my respects to Miss Graves, and tell her not to bother her pretty head about the matter."

He nodded in dismissal, and Graves, having as formally expressed his gratitude as he had expressed his regret, retired. Challis, of course, realized the absurdity of this flimsy explanation. Two doors had been locked on him, and the horse had been found in the garden. Accidents did not fall out with such just coincidence. No; the mystery was there still, but it

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was something to have discovered the author. He sat late, despite his somnolence, and as he was starting to prepare for bed it struck him that he might as well examine his locks. They were all right, but he opened the doors and removed the keys to the inside, in view of future contingencies. As he stood in the corridor without, his ears caught a slight stifled sound in the distance. He listened, and it continued ; and with a certain apprehension and compassion he recognized that it was a sound of sobbing. He walked down the passage in the direction from which it came, and the sound became plainer. It was as though some one sobbed convulsively into a pillow. He was in complete ignorance where the members of the household slept, and it was news to him that some one was so near him. He could not endure the pain of the convulsive weeping, and he knocked on the door gently. Instantly he heard a quick movement, and then the door opened. A light on one side of her showed him Felicity, with misty, sullen eyes now flashing in defiance as she confronted him. She was fully dressed, and had evidently risen from the bed, where she had flung herself to weep.

"Are you crying on my account, child?" he asked kindly, as the explanation dawned on him. She had been scolded for her conduct. "Come, don't let your pretty face be spoiled with tears," he pleaded. "Come, Felicity! See, I smile. It was nothing to me, only a puzzle why it was done. It was a mischance. Dry your eyes, and go to sleep, child. No harm is done to any."

Her eyes had lost their sullen flash, and softened, though the dew lay still within them, blurring her vision. She passed her hand quickly across her face and swept the tears away. She gazed at him, and drew in a little long breath, as it were of relief—of gladness.

"No," she murmured. "No harm is done to any. I thank you, sir, from my heart."

He smiled, bade her good-night, and passed away to his room thoughtfully.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSENGER

THE messenger came two days later. He came in the person of Lieutenant Beswick, of His Majesty's revenue cutter *Magpie*, who walked up the avenue briskly, and rapped with authority on the unopened door. A little later Graves steered him through the side door and introduced him to Mr. Challis's dining-room. Challis was writing upstairs, and on learning of his visitor asked that he should be shown to this, his more private, apartment. Lieutenant Beswick saluted Mr. Challis gravely, and being a man of few words, announced his credentials. Challis went to the door, looked down the passage, and re-entering, turned the key.

"Now, Lieutenant," he said. "You have something for me."

The Lieutenant extracted from his pockets a bulky parcel, and placed it on the table. Challis broke the seal, and turned over the papers enclosed.

"You will excuse me, sir," he said civilly. "It is not necessary that I should go through all these dispatches in your presence. But I must needs read one—the one from——" he bent his brows on his visitor.

"Mr. Brown," said Lieutenant Beswick curtly.

"To be sure; Mr. Brown. Pray forgive me. You have ridden far, perhaps, and a glass of wine would not be amiss."

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"When you have finished, sir, and not before," said Beswick, and put up a deprecating hand.

Challis bowed in recognition of this courtesy, and began to read. He read for a few minutes, and then folded his paper slowly and thoughtfully.

"Mr. Brown," said he, "lies at West Itchenor."

The Lieutenant assented.

"Then, by your leave, I'll visit him there to-night. He says that you sail before dawn."

"When the tide serves, sir. I have to join my consort. We are acting together."

"You have special work?" inquired Challis, examining carefully this young man, who was about his own age.

"There is always work, sir, on these coasts, with Captain Noll."

"Ah!" Challis recalled the riding officer's words. "He gives you a pack of trouble."

"If it were not for him we should kill the contraband trade in these parts in twelve months, Mr. Challis."

Challis was ruminating.

"I will go through my papers and see Mr.—Brown so soon as it is dark," he said. "It will be safer then. I will avoid Chichester."

"By your leave, Mr. Challis, I have a better way to offer," said the Lieutenant. "I have my boat at Fishbourne, and I shall be returning to the *Magpie* about nine. It is an easy run down the channel, and if you can sail a boat you have a good southerly wind to bring you back. It is a quicker way, and a pleasanter in my view."

"You forget I am a landlubber," said Challis, smiling. "But I cordially accept. And now for this glass of wine."

He carefully bestowed the packet of papers in his pocket, and, rising, led the way down to the library, whither Graves presently brought an admirable bottle and some fragrant cakes of his wife's cooking. The two

men talked of current affairs, of Bonaparte, and of Mr. Pitt's genius, and his deplorable illness. Challis looked with admiration on his companion, who knew so well how to keep his own counsel, and talk of indifferent topics, and he rejoiced that one coadjutor at least in the adventure before him was so austere and tactful. He had had correspondence with Mr. Brown from London, but he had never met him, and had not made up his mind about him.

Challis accompanied his visitor to the gates, and as they were on the point of parting Duke Draycott rode up, and, seeing them, reined in. He came from the direction of Southover, and Challis received in his mind suddenly an impression that the boat-builder had been to see Dorothy Heywood. The thought remained unpleasantly with him. Draycott was frequently at the farm, and Challis now perceived a reason for it, and wondered why he had not recognized it before. Draycott saluted civilly, and addressed Lieutenant Beswick.

"You haven't been my way for some time, sir."

"No, Draycott," said the revenue officer. "I've been busy——"

Duke grinned. "The usual thing," he said. "Well, there's plenty of 'em about. I'm making good work with the cutter, and I expect to finish her in a few weeks."

"That is good news," said Beswick. "We need reinforcement badly. The Customs Commissioners are moving, and ask more than we can accomplish. With a recruit like the *Swift* we might manage to lay even Captain Noll by the heels."

"It will take more than one *Swift* to do that," said Duke dryly, and turned his challenging gaze on Challis.

"I should like you to see my yard, sir. Mr. Beswick will tell you its quality. I have built boats for His Majesty's Customs for near a score of years, and I'll wager my work against any man's. If there's any one that knows more of the points of a cutter on this coast I would greet him heartily, Mr. Challis. It would give

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me pleasure to see you at Bosham and show you the yards."

"I will come with agreeable anticipations, and willingly," said Challis, with his characteristic courtesy.

"That's right, sir. I like a frank gentleman, one that knows his mind, and is not tossed about by p's and q's, and what is the fashion, or what beaus and dandies do. I pride myself on my yard and on my skill, and Lieutenant Beswick will tell you that I have served my King and country well therein."

"That is so, Mr. Draycott," said Beswick, nodding affirmation. "There is good work done from your yards."

But it was plain to Challis that the silent Lieutenant was a little impatient of this boasting, and he made a move on his horse. Draycott noticed it, and said—

"If you be going Chichester way, Mr. Beswick, I'll be proud to offer my companionship, and hope not to be refused."

"Why, of course not, Mr. Draycott," said the revenue officer, unbending to a civil smile. And thus they rode off together, neither of them a very fit and proper figure for horseback, as Challis thought to himself, watching them down the road.

He went back to his room, with a last regretful gaze at the beautiful day. Why did his thoughts fly over the rises of the broken Downs to Southover, instead of centring on the work before him? He had looked eagerly forward to this work, and to the prospects of action, and now his mind drifted elsewhere. He set it down, on reflection, as he mounted the stairs to his room, to the provocative face and presence of Duke Draycott. Then, with an effort, he dismissed all else but the French dispatches from his mind.

He sat most of the day reading, referring to maps, making notes, and plunged in thought and in calculations also. There was a break when his meal came, to which he descended wrapped in conjectures and plans,

yet with one sense alert for the circumstances about him. He would not have made the success in Ireland that he had made were it not for that special openness to the receipt of impressions which made him an invaluable agent. He resumed the study of his dispatches in the afternoon, and wrote letters to London, which he designed to send off from Chichester that evening. And after he had finished he felt stuffy and tired mentally with the weight of an ever-present and ever-pressing responsibility, and he strolled out along the Downs, upon which a soft wind was blowing from the south-west. On one of the heights he paused, and looked down upon Southover. He could see the flowering orchard, he thought, and the trim beds. The place breathed up to the hills and heaven a beautiful serenity, and he smiled pleasantly as he regarded it. There was a flash of blue in the orchard. Had not Dorothy Heywood a blue gown? He liked to think it was she, and that perhaps his tall figure on the summit was discoverable and recognizable. Did she look and know him, and what was she thinking? It was all a conceit of his fervid imagination, come of too close attention to work. The mind, released from its labours, expanded in delightful fancies. That was all. It was as agreeable and palatable as a book of poems from Mr. Wordsworth.

He rode to Chichester later, and did his business with the post. He put up his horse, and met Beswick according to their appointment. The revenue Lieutenant supped with him at the "Dolphin," and under the influence of a sterling bottle of wine became more communicative. He was a zealous officer, and frankly confessed that the revenue service was in a bad way. "They stint us, they starve us," he declared; "and they expect us to keep the Channel clear of free trade. My dear sir, it would need twice the number of cutters to do that. And then we are contemned by the naval officers. There is no goodwill between us, as there should be. We are at loggerheads. I may admit, Mr.

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Challis, with humiliation, that some of the revenue officers have not been adequate to their work. They have been chosen badly. We have had some cowards, and more incapables. But if the Commissioners saw fit they could reorganize the service, spend some more money on it, and get fruitful results. There, I have said my say, and I close my mouth. But it is bitter to be so helpless. The whole coast is leagued against us, and there is this Captain Noll."

"Have you seen him?" asked Challis.

The Lieutenant shook his head. "He shows a clean pair of heels. Once I thought I had him, but he is an adept at dodging, and a mighty fine sailor. He escaped. If I had had a consort I should have taken him. We exchanged shots, and I lost a little blood."

He smiled, and persisted in a change of conversation. It was dusk when they started from Fishbourne down the channel. Challis had decided that his business with Mr. Brown might detain him overlong, and so had announced to Graves that he would be absent for the night, having determined to lodge at the inn. The wind dropped as they tacked down the harbour, for it was flood tide, and Beswick said—

"Perhaps it's as well you have resolved to stay, Mr. Challis; for you might be delayed in getting back, and have to row."

He proved himself an excellent seaman, and brought the boat deftly to the jetty, after a speedy run. In the faint light Challis could discover the cutter at anchor in the channel. At the inn door Beswick paused.

"I have done my duty now, sir," he said. "I must sail in two hours' time. I wish you well with your work."

Challis thanked him and entered the inn. The landlord informed him that Mr. Brown was in the parlour, and thither he was ushered. The man who rose at his entrance was a thin man of forty, rather anxious of face and somewhat heavily lined, but vivacious of air. He looked interrogative.

"Mr. Brown?" said Challis, and the other bowed.

"My name is Challis. I welcome you to our shores, sir."

"It is kind of you. We have had correspondence, and should know each other in person. I have been looking forward to this," said the other man, and there was a distinct French accent in his otherwise perfect use of the English tongue.

"I am delighted to have met you at last," said Challis. "Shall we talk in French or English? I assume this man is trustworthy."

"He knows nothing," said Mr. Brown, dropping easily into French, "and I think he troubles himself less than nothing. Shall we sit down and talk, monsieur?"

"You have, monsieur, a more difficult task than we can perhaps conceive from this side of the Channel," said Challis. "I quite understand the obstacles in your way. It requires patience to surmount them."

There was nothing in his tone to suggest to his companion that he had been disappointed by the dispatches delivered to him. He was merely explaining courteously his appreciation of the difficulties by which Mr. Brown was faced. Mr. Brown opened in almost a passionate outburst as to the hazards of his quest. "You must assure yourself, monsieur," he said, "that it chagrins me, being what I am, that this hangs so long. But the man is amazing. He is clever, he is diabolic. He guards all so scrupulously. I have my agents who report, and they are devoted to me and the cause; yet I cannot get at the core of his secret. Monsieur, I have an admiration for this man, and I confess to you, monsieur, that I have at times been tempted to be proud when I have read his victories—victories of our French. I, who am what I am, can afford to say so. But then I remember what he is, this blood-stained usurper, and I recall my master—I, monsieur, who saw his head fall into the basket, and who have witnessed the swelling of this gross ulcer which is the disease upon my country;

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and I return to my work, to what I have sworn, to what I design to accomplish."

"I understand, monsieur," said Challis, who was studying the face of the man before him. "Your work has been admirable, but you will admit yourself that there is still much to be done. The situation is balanced on a knife-edge, as you know. To-day there is nominal peace in Europe, and the various Powers sit watching each other, and more particularly France. The Emperor——"

"Monsieur, Bonaparte!" protested Mr. Brown.

Challis accepted the correction with a bow. "Bonaparte is in Italy, where he is reported to be received with open arms. But he must be aware that Europe cannot leave the present map untouched. There is, and has been always, one obstacle to his domination of this continent, and that is the country which I have the honour to represent at this moment."

Mr. Brown bowed in his turn, and looked very thoughtful.

"The force collected at Boulogne can be destined for no other purpose than to crush this country, which done, Bonaparte is master of the world."

"La France!" murmured Mr. Brown, without seeming conscious of his uttered adscript.

Again he was subject to those clear eyes, but Challis continued evenly: "You have through your agents succeeded, monsieur, in demonstrating the size of that force. There are 114,000 men in barracks there, and there are a number of gunboats and armed vessels, apart from the French fleet. It is a formidable armament, and it eats its head off in barracks and harbours. Why?"

"Till Bonaparte returns," said Mr. Brown quickly.

Challis drummed on the table with his fingers, and hardly seemed to hear him.

"Every day gives us more time to prepare," he said, after a pause. "We have the clear warning. It may

be that Bonaparte is merely offering a threat. It is hard to guess. We must have more information to guess upon. For example"—his clear eyes fixed the other's steadily—"if we had data as to the armament of this flotilla it would help us. It is understood from your information that there are transports in plenty. But there is the command of the Channel, and the English fleet."

"Bonaparte hopes, monsieur, to reinforce his fleet by this flotilla and so to be superior to you."

"I wonder if it would be possible. We know what Admiral Villeneuve has in his command. If we could secure details as to the flotilla, its number, the armament . . . monsieur, we should know."

Mr. Brown shrugged his shoulders. "I am very willing," he said, "but there are difficulties. I am suspect, and must operate slowly and through others. Monsieur, I profess to you that I have done what I can."

Challis smiled his engaging smile. "For that we are indebted to you, as is France, and you shall do more. I have put on paper just what I should like to know. It will take time. Get François to help, and Le Moine. I will take up my station at Jersey in a fortnight, and will send my address. I shall hope to hear from you there."

He rang the bell and ordered wine, and so seemed to close the conversation on that topic. Mr. Brown had started to say something, but this manœuvre had prevented him. He sat with a frown on his brows, while the innkeeper bustled in and out, and it was only after he had drunk a glass that his countenance relaxed.

"I will not fail, monsieur," he said, when they were alone.

"My dear friend, I have never had any doubt of that. Your country and your king will owe you life-long gratitude."

Mr. Brown leaned over and lifted his second glass with vivacity. "*Vive le Roi!*" he whispered, and smiled

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and nodded. Challis was content ; he had for the time fired the waning enthusiasm of an agent—and an agent whose value was considerable.

A pleasant, friendly talk ensued, which was interrupted by the entrance of Lieutenant Beswick.

"Time is up, Lieutenant ? " asked Challis.

"I am sorry to disturb you, gentlemen," said the revenue officer. "But the tide serves now, and the breeze is dropping."

"At Jersey in a fortnight," were Challis's final words ; and then he was alone.

CHAPTER V

THE SEA FOG

CHALLIS sat in the little room for some time in a silent meditation, and then came out of his thoughts and looked out on the night. The tide was on the ebb, but the jetty was still knee-deep in water, and of a sudden he saw no reason why he should remain in the inn all night. There was ample time to get back to Chichester, at any rate, and once there he had his horse. He told the landlord of his changed intention, and, securing from him the loan of a boat which dangled in the tide at the end of the jetty, slipped into the starred night, and began to move on the beginning of the ebb. The water was not drawing fast, and he could make fair progress, though the sudden failure of the wind prevented him from using the sail. But he had stout arms, and almost a craving at that moment for physical exercise after the comparative inaction of the past weeks. So he pulled with a will, with the stars twinkling in the water in his wake, until the coming of the sea fog.

It descended instantaneously, precipitately, as it seemed, out of nothing. One moment there were the stars and the water, and the dimly visible bank, and the next the curtain had descended and shut him in with himself. He could not see the rowlocks and not one yard into the channel. The air bit raw, and, though he was aware that probably fifty feet up the stars were still shining, the blanket of blinding mist smothered

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him there in the harbour. He put a hand in the water to test the current, but the tide was still asleep, and he could not ascertain in which way the water moved. He dipped his oars again, and pulled on again tentatively and cautiously for a few minutes, till he was brought up by the nose of the boat running into the mud. This must be one of the shoals left early by the retreating tide, but the trouble was that he did not know where it was. It might be part of the high-water level mudbank of the channel, or it might be Pilsey Island.

He pushed off and tried again to feel the tide, but that was not yet possible ; so he let the boat drift, imagining that he might succeed in getting some sense of direction in that way. Soon he was aground again, and this time, to his bewilderment, it was the stern that stranded. By this time he had recognized the hopelessness of his case, and the uselessness of further effort. There were only two alternatives ; the one to run his boat ashore, wade through the mud, and strike across country inland, and the other to wait till the ebb made, and so feel his way up the channel. The latter course pointed many difficulties, but he chose it in preference to a blind venture in the wider field that the land offered for errors and mischances. If he kept the channel he must in due course arrive at Fishbourne. So he hung in the water on his oars until he heard the bubble at the bows, and putting down his hand felt the strength of the ebb. Then he began steadily to pull against it. He had been chilled by the fog while in inaction, and he was glad to send the blood flying through his straining body. He fell into a mechanical stroke, and in his heart rather liked the gentle hazards of the night. He guessed he had gone some four miles when he perceived a light shining ahead. He judged from this that either the fog was lessening, or that it lay here with lighter veils. He was not at all sure that he might not have reached Fishbourne already, and that

this was not an outstanding house of the village. So he resolved to explore, and to determine his exact position. The water now had receded so far in the channel as to leave a wide gap of mud between it and the shore, as he could feel by probing the darkness with an oar. But presently he seemed to hit a cross branch of the channel, which must be one of the tributary creeks, and he poled his boat up this, the more willingly that it seemed to bring him closer to the light he had seen.

This pierced the fog in a great shaft, though faintly, and he decided that it must come from a large window, brightly illumined. He beached, crawled over the mud-flat, and got to firm earth at last. Then he stared in the direction of the glow, which he found proceeded from a blazing brazier in the open. It defied and attacked the darkness, scattering its influence into sundry parts of a yard. Dimly beyond, Challis could discern the outlines of a long building, which proved on his nearer approach to be a barn. The door into it was ajar, and from within streamed a fainter glow, and the sound of voices. Trusses of hay piled up stood between and shut off sight of the speakers. Challis paused and listened for a moment. Then he remembered his dilemma, and walked forward past the trusses into an empty space in the barn, and came to a halt.

Half of the barn was free from hay and sacks, and was occupied by seven or eight men, who sat and lolled at a table on which were several bottles and glasses. They were smoking and drinking and talking, and seemed in a jovial frame. Most of them were obviously seafaring men, but some had the appearance of landmen, and one was very richly dressed. It was he who spoke as Challis made these quick observations.

"Raggett will slip in. The mist will serve him. He does not give a damn for the *Magpie*."

"Aye!" said another with an oath. "I'll swear Raggett gets in, and Fry at Shoreham, too."

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"Captain Noll——" began the first speaker, and came suddenly to silence, as his eyes lighted on Challis in the fringe of the outer darkness.

"Who's that?" he cried, and all heads swung round. Challis saw pistols picked up and knives loosened.

"I'm sorry to say I have lost my way," he began in a rich, clear voice.

One of the men growled an oath and hoarsely muttered in the original speaker's ear.

"By ——," said the latter, moving. "You're right. Spy! Spy!"

He ran forward, and suddenly words rose on the air, some of which Challis caught the sense of. "Spy!" "Preventive!" "London," and "Hale!"

He was used to quick decision; his life in the Secret Service of his country had accustomed him to that. And he realized in an instant all that was involved in this oncoming gang of infuriated men. He did not stand upon the order of his going, but went without an appeal or an attempt at explanation. Outside, beyond the brazier, the fog swallowed him up.

Pistols cracked, but no bullet reached him. He sped on through the night quite at random, splashed through some water—a pond, he guessed—and ran into a hedge. The cries and sounds of the pursuit assailed his ears. He scrambled at last into a road, along which he ran until another light emerged suddenly out of the mist, as it were, with a start. He stopped.

"Who goes there?" a voice hailed. "Is that you, Jevons?"

A lantern flashed in his face, and a voice which he had now time to recognize from its depth and quality boomed out.

"Mr. Challis!"

"Is that you, Mr. Draycott?" he asked. "I have come by a misadventure which is rather absurd." He laughed panting, and panting explained his case.

"Was the barn by cross roads?" inquired Draycott,

and added himself, "Ah, you wouldn't know from the mist. It would be—ah well! we best hold our tongue about our neighbours. Anyway, you and I are not Government dogs. I'm sorry you had the scare."

"It was only part of the adventure," said Challis lightly. "But you can tell me, at least, where I am."

"Yes, and more than that, sir, I hope," said Duke Draycott heartily. "You are in Bosham. You took the wrong channel, and no wonder in a night such as this. But come this way, sir, and I'll give you a glass you will sorely need before we discuss your plans."

He led the way with his lantern along the road a little farther, and turned into a doorway, which gave entrance to a large workshop.

"This is my yard," said he, and held the lantern aloft, so that the light streamed on the upturned shell of a boat. "Here is the new revenue cutter, as will prove fast as any sloop on this side of the almighty seas, by heaven she will." With his hand he clapped the hull in almost an ecstasy of affection, and then passed on, mounted some steps, and opened a further door. This led into the living house beyond. Draycott lit a lamp, and going to a cupboard in the old-fashioned room, brought forth a bottle and glasses.

"I will not swear, Mr. Challis," he said, twinkling, "that this liquor made its bow to His Majesty, but it is none the worse for that."

"I have no prejudices in my host's house," said Challis, with easy courtesy, and taking the cognac found it exemplary.

"And now, sir, it seems that I must get you out of a small difficulty," pursued the boat-builder. "First I must discover if the coast is clear, and next I must find this boat of yours. I think I know the creek. If you can entertain yourself for a little time I will engage to be back with news presently."

Challis thanked him, and when Draycott had departed leaned back in his chair comfortably and fell into

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thought. He was roused by Duke's reappearance after half an hour's absence. He was cheery, and carried a bracing sea breeze with him.

"All's well," he said. "The chase must have been given up. Maybe they were full in liquor. There are rough characters on this coast, sir, from Hayling to Selsey. But I have not found your boat. It must keep till to-morrow. That's no odds. You shall have one of mine, and I think I can warrant you will get safely home with the aid of my compass and a lantern."

He explained the bearings and the lie of the Chichester reach, and Challis thanked him cordially. They parted in the misty light of the lanterns, and Challis went down on the tide very easily, and with a general satisfaction in the luck which had extricated him from an awkward situation.

He found the junction of the two channels, and turned up the Chichester arm. The ebb was now running fast, and the channel was shrinking every minute. He plied his oars vigorously, and succeeded in keeping in mid-stream. It was very still and quiet, all sounds subdued and dulled under the blanket of fog ; but he was soon aware of another boat behind him, for he could hear the turn of the oars in the rowlocks, and muffled voices. The boat, moreover, was gaining on him, and there passed through his mind the thought that he would be glad to voyage in company. But the next moment he had dismissed this idea quite imperiously, and was invaded by a flash of doubt. Why he doubted, why he was suddenly affected by suspicion, he was never able to say ; it arose from some subtle psychical influence as to which we know so little even now. Challis knew nothing beyond the feeling that caution was unexpectedly required of him. It moved him so much that with a swift and powerful and silent stroke he sent his craft spinning towards the shore. There he lay on his oars. He heard the boat draw up, and, to the accompaniment of voices, go by. He heard a voice raised rather louder than the others, "Not far ahead now."

And he lay on his oars wondering, with that strange psychical influence of suspicion. He paddled closer to the shore, and waited—again he could never have said why. After some ten minutes he heard a boat again, but this time coming on the tide down-stream. Its progress, however, seemed slower than he expected, and he judged that the course was erratic. He was still wondering about this when a voice reached him.

"He couldn't have got farther up. We must have overtaken him."

"We've been going to and fro across the channel for a mighty time," said a second voice sulkily.

"Damn him, when we get him——"

Challis started up alert. It seemed to him that with that last voice the boat had come very sensibly closer. It dawned on him what they were doing. They were searching the channel for him, and out of the fog he seemed to see the nose of the boat swinging towards him. His unknown enemies were upon him. He slipped out upon the mud, pushed the boat off softly, and waded knee-deep towards the shore. It was horrible slime, and gave and sucked at each step. Once he went through right up to one thigh, but, extricating himself with difficulty, wriggled on his stomach, and crawled painfully for the rest of the way. As he reached the firm land he heard a cry, and guessed that the boat had been discovered. Voices clamoured in excitement, and the noise of a disputation came to him muffled by the fog. He stood for a minute or two, quite collected, and endeavoured to free himself from the dreadful mud. The sound of oars was audible, and then a voice, "She's stuck."

They were coming ashore to hunt for him. He turned from the unseen water and the unseen foe and struck out across the land.

He did not know what hour it was when he reached Chichester, having had the luck to happen upon a road which led him fairly well. The mist still held every-

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thing in its grip, but the lights in the houses enabled him to get to the mews where his horse had been left. The sleepy ostler did not notice his condition, and yawned as he acknowledged the piece of silver. Up on the ascending Downs the mist faded out, and when he reached Hale it was quite clear, stars shining in a fine sky. Everything was in darkness save for this starlight. He stalled his horse and sought his door. He was suddenly conscious of being very tired, and the thought of bed was a delight. All other thoughts might wait till the morrow. No; everything was not in darkness. A tiny light was in a window on the first floor, but he hardly noticed it, and yawned as he entered, like the ostler. He ascended the stairs noiselessly, and soon got to bed. As he fell asleep he was vaguely conscious of a rumbling as of carts, and it passed into his dreams. Some time later he started awake, with the feeling that some one had been in the room. In his dreams he had seen a woman's form wrapped about, with invisible eyes, and she had bent over the bed, and seemed to watch and listen. As he sat up the vision fled, and there was only darkness. Somewhere a clock was striking two. He curled himself up in the bed-clothes again, and, as he settled into sleep, once more a noise drummed in his ears like the rumbling of carts.

CHAPTER VI

THE WILD MEN

Now that his immediate business was discharged, Challis was at liberty to return to the history, but the following morning he did no work ; he was exercised in his mind in regard to the events of the night. It was obvious to him that he had been the quarry the men in the boat were after, and he associated them with the earlier incident of the barn. There was no blinking the fact that these constituted a lawless gang—probably smugglers—and that he was supposed to have spied on them. Yet the ferocity and persistence with which he had been pursued astonished him. Graves, who waited on him at breakfast, had an odd, furtive, and hesitating air, more than usual, and showed special anxiety for the guest's comfort.

" I see you had an accident last night, sir," he said.

" Yes," said Challis shortly, for he never volunteered information without an object.

" I'm afraid the mud will take some getting off," went on the ex-butler. " Felicity is doing what she can."

" It is very good of her," said Challis suavely. " I am sorry to have been a nuisance to her."

" You mustn't think that, sir," said Graves. " We are at your disposal as his lordship's honoured guest. You have heard from his lordship lately, sir ? He is well, I hope ? "

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"He was well when I heard," said Challis, who had heard nothing since he left town.

He detected an inquisitiveness in the man's questions which he had noticed before, and which annoyed him. Later he resolved to ride over to Chichester and visit his new friend the captain of dragoons. Balmain welcomed him.

"You know my friend, Sir John?" he said affably.

Challis recognized the man thus introduced as one he had met on a previous occasion, Sir John Fairford, of a neighbouring estate. Fairford was a man of nearly forty, with a dissipated, handsome face and good intelligence. He displayed an easier knowledge of the world than was natural to those retired parts, and was evidently a Londoner by taste. Indeed, he lightly complained of his rustication, which was enforced upon him by the necessity of retrenchment. In his face and person generally Challis read the probable history of the man in town. However, it was a satisfaction to meet any one with such knowledge and intelligence. They dined together, and Challis told his story as an amusing adventure. "Smugglers!" said Sir John, and the Captain endorsed his explanation.

"I have a curiosity to investigate," said Challis. "I wonder if I could find that barn again."

"Perhaps you'd better not," said Sir John, sipping his wine.

"So persistent and obdurate a pursuit——" mused Challis.

Sir John drummed on the table thoughtfully. "You were returning from Hayling?" he said interrogatively.

"No," said Challis, "I had merely gone for an expedition down the harbour, and the fog caught me."

"With Lieutenant Beswick of the *Magpie*, with whom you supped earlier," said Sir John unexpectedly.

Challis flushed slightly. "You seem to be well aware of my movements, sir," he remarked rather caustically.

"Oh, you mustn't fall out with me over that," said

Fairford, laughing. "I see you are unaccustomed to our rural ways in the wilderness. Gossip is abroad, Mr. Challis. 'Enter rumour painted full of tongues'—you remember. What news we have is all over the neighbourhood in a trice."

"It is true," said Challis, who had quickly reflected. It was of no consequence that he had been seen in Beswick's company. "I went down to have a look at the cutter."

Sir John was examining him with interest.

"You can bring no prosecution," suggested Balmain.

"No," said Challis thoughtfully, "though I am sure I could identify one or more of the rogues. I have a mind to find that barn all the same."

"I should advise you against such a course," said Sir John. "They are wild men, these free traders. You had a lesson in their truculence."

"Yet I am interested," insisted Challis.

Balmain supported his new friend, and in the end they all agreed to ride over to Bosham.

"You see," said Challis, "I have to explain to my friend Draycott and to make good the loss of his boat."

"Draycott!" said Sir John, with a laugh. "Oh, Draycott couldn't lose a boat. He's amphibious."

There was some truth in this, as Challis discovered, for Draycott had recovered his boat.

"At first," he said, "I had misgivings as to you, sir, but I decided you had been forced to abandon it in the fog. It was, perhaps, wise. She was found on Pilsey. And more by token I've got yours also, sir. She had gone adrift with the tide, and came up nigh to the slips. Some one brought her as mine. All boats come to me."

"A famous boat-builder is Draycott," said Sir John. "There is nothing of the craft he is ignorant of."

Challis looked at the name over the yard, "Marmaduke Draycott, boat-builder," and then his gaze went across the road to the slips and the water, which once more had filled the channel with its flood.

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"I'm going to have a look for that barn, Mr. Draycott," he said.

Draycott stared at him heavily. "If I was sure you could find it I'd beg you not to venture, sir," he said.

Challis displayed the same quiet obstinacy that he had shown in talking with Sir John.

"It would interest me," said he.

"Damme, I should think so," said Captain Balmain.

"Well, sir, seeing how I stand to my neighbours, maybe you will excuse me from accompanying you," said Draycott.

"Of course. I understand very well, Mr. Draycott," said Challis pleasantly. "It is live and let live in places like these, is it not?"

He moved on with his companions, and struck out across the fields in a direction which he had conjectured while talking. Captain Balmain babbled of the contraband and Boney, and Sir John was silent. They reached a small creek, and Challis looked round. There was a barn not far away, and beyond a farmhouse snuggled away near a copse and very unpretentious. It seemed to him that he had reached his goal. As they stood there a man emerged from a yard near by and stared at them.

"This is the place," said Challis.

"If that's so, we'd better make inquiries of this man," suggested Sir John, and beckoned.

The farmer approached slowly, a dull-looking, quiet fellow with greying hair.

"Might we have a look into the barn?" asked Sir John in a friendly voice.

The farmer assented, but gazed from one to another stupidly, as if he failed to comprehend. They moved towards the barn, and found the door open. Challis thought he recollected it. But within the scene was wholly different from that which he had witnessed in the night. The barn was full of sacks, and it was hardly possible to find room to move in it. They retraced their steps, and Sir John thanked the voiceless farmer.

"In the case of a siege from Boney these sacks will hold money, eh?" he said jocularly.

A grin spread on the man's face. He had understood that, at least.

Challis was puzzled. There were several outhouses and barns within sight, but, having made a blunder in his first calculation, he hardly trusted himself to a second. However, a second visit was paid to a neighbouring barn and proved futile. Then he abandoned the search, with a light apology to his companions.

"It is of little consequence, after all," he said. "I hope you have not been greatly wearied."

"I have enjoyed the expedition," said Sir John, narrowing his eyes on Challis. "It has probably saved me from losing many guineas over faro."

"Gad, I wish we had run the badgers down," said Balmain.

They saw Draycott at work on the cutter as they passed, waved to him, and passed through Bosham to the main road. At Chichester Captain Balmain parted from the others, but Sir John's road lay for some part of the way with Challis. Indeed, by a little detour they arrived at his house, and when Challis would have passed on Sir John stayed him with an invitation. The house stood in good grounds, and was a handsome building, though of no great size. Challis gathered from his host that the estate was impoverished, and had been neglected. "Let me not pick holes in my forefathers," he said frankly. "I have been one of the worst sinners in the foolish line. But my grandfather, Sir Simon, was the most reckless. It is for his excesses we suffer to-day, and, damnation, I should not mind for myself, were it not for Lady Fairford."

This seemed generous and finely spoken, and Challis liked the man for his candour, which he appreciated the more when he saw Lady Fairford. She was a woman of five and thirty, with a considerable presence and personality. Her looks were not out of the ordinary,

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and what beauty she had, suffered from the anxiousness of her face. It seemed beleaguered by troubles, though these fled from her smile, which was charming; and it was with a smile that she greeted her guest.

"I forgot to ask," said Sir John, seated in his dining-room, "if you are any relative to some one I have met, a Captain Anthony Challis?"

"He is my brother," said Challis.

"Good faith! It is odd how close the world is," observed Sir John. "Then you are Sir Oliver Challis's son of Gloucestershire."

"That is so," said Challis. He could picture the gay and easy Anthony mingling with such people as Sir John at White's or Boodle's. There was little in common between the brothers. They talked for some time on topics of interest in London, and presently Lady Fairford left the room. A little later, as Challis rose to go, his host said—

"You had an ugly experience last night. If I might warn you, Mr. Challis, it is ill meddling with these free traders. They are wild folk. You were seen with Beswick. There is danger in that association."

"May I not mix with His Majesty's lieges?" asked Challis lightly.

At this juncture Lady Fairford re-entered, and Sir John turned to her. He had a charming way with his wife.

"I was warning Mr. Challis of these wild coasts of ours, my dear Charlotte. Won't you join me in persuasion? He has already been mistook for a revenue officer and run the hazard of his life."

Lady Fairford turned pale, to Challis's surprise, and leaning forward said earnestly—

"Indeed, I beg of you to be careful, Mr. Challis. There are, indeed, people here in this trade who will stop at nothing. Those who oppose them run grave risks."

"That should be a poor argument against duty," said Challis lightly. "If it held, Lady Fairford, then should

all society come to a standstill." She turned slightly away, and said nothing.

"Nevertheless, it is true," said Sir John genially. "Well, I have done my best, Mr. Challis, and in any case let us enjoy the privilege of your society while we may. Lady Fairford will expect to see you here to supper. It is not so far from you. We are, indeed, neighbours."

At last the woman stirred and spoke. "It will delight me if you will come, Mr. Challis. Pray name your day, and we will accommodate ourselves to it."

Thus pressed, Challis accepted the proffered hospitality in his graceful way, and an evening was fixed in the following week. He felt a little puzzled, and with an instinctive feeling of sympathy for Lady Fairford which he had no means of explaining.

He returned to his history and his walks, and by this time had become familiar with every hill and hollow of the Downs about Hale. Two mornings later he learnt that Balmain had been invoked for another raid on the free traders. The riding officer had obtained information of a landing by Emsworth, and had, with the assistance of the dragoon, captured a quantity of brandy and tea; and almost simultaneously came the news of the seizure of a lugger by the *Magpie* off Shoreham. This was a pronounced run of ill-luck for the smugglers, and feeling rose high. There was an attempt made to rescue the captured free traders from Chichester gaol, but it failed owing to the presence of the military. Yet the attempt was audacious, and testified to the courage and arrogance of the lawless folk, as also, perhaps, to their reliance upon the sympathy of their adherents. "The whole country-side is honeycombed with their interests," said one of the local justices, indignantly, to Challis. "The Government will never succeed in rooting them out unless a determined concentration is made. It is necessary. The case cries out for it. We must make an end of Captain Noll. The loss to the revenue is monstrous."

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That same evening Challis supped over a book, as was his custom, and later decided on a stroll in the soft spring air. Everything was burgeoning and blossoming in the fold of the Downs about him, and his own heart was open to the impulses of the season. He walked almost unconsciously in the direction of Southover.

When he reached the gates into the yard he paused, and turned back to an entrance into the orchard, from a field. He had intended to go forward, but something in him checked him, and kept him lingering there in that flowering close. Among the trees of the orchard he could see the light on a window and a shadow on the blind. It was folly, he told himself, and was turning away, when a door opened, and Dorothy came into the twilight of the garden.

He watched her with fascinated eyes, and saw her coming straight towards him, slowly, as if she meditated. He dared not move, and under the apple blossom they met face to face. She started, and then recognized him.

“ Mr. Challis ! ”

“ I am trespassing,” he said softly ; “ but the light and the shadows made an engaging picture, and I could not resist it.”

She was silent momentarily, and then suddenly she said—

“ Mr. Challis, will you do me a great service ? ”

“ It would be my great wish to do even a little service for you,” he said.

“ Will you go back to Hale—now, at once—and copy for me those verses of Mr. Coleridge to which you referred when I saw you last ? ”

“ Certainly——” he began, and she cried—

“ Now, at once, and stay there until you have copied them ? ”

“ Yes.” He was astonished. “ I will copy them, and bring you them to-morrow.”

“ Thank you,” she said, and started, and put a detain-

ing hand on him, staring through the orchard towards the lighted house.

There was a sound of voices, and footsteps on the path. They faded away towards the gate, which clicked as it let some one out. Dorothy Heywood drew a breath deeply.

"Go now," she commanded.

Without comprehending, he went, and pondered over this odd request all the way to Hale. He scrupulously followed her instructions, found the passage, and wrote it out. Then he sat back in his chair, and reflected again. His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Graves, who asked him if he would require anything further for the night.

"I didn't know you had come in, sir," he said. "It is a beautiful evening."

"Yes," Challis considered. "I think I will go out again. It is a beautiful evening, as you say."

He rose and looked through the window, on which a half-moon was shining. Graves was busy arranging the glasses on the table. Challis frowned in the idle perplexity of thought.

"Yes, I'll have a look at the barrow in the moonlight," he said half-consciously aloud.

Graves withdrew. Challis went out by his own door, and, crossing the road, passed into a well-accustomed track. He often visited the tumulus on the Downs near by the Roman road.

A little later Felicity came into the kitchen to her mother. She had been occupied in the scullery. The supper was laid, and she sat down.

"Where is father?" she asked.

Her mother sighed. "He has gone out. He has gone to the 'Hen and Chickens.'"

Felicity sat rigid. "Why?" she inquired.

"I don't know. He has an appointment," said Mrs. Graves.

"He said nothing of that. He asked me that the

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supper should be punctual," said Felicity, staring at her mother.

Her mother said nothing, but began to cut the cold meat. Felicity rose and quickly left the room. She went upstairs and tapped at Challis's door; then she came down. The light in the library was low. She came back and seated herself at the table, but the plate before her was ignored; she did not seem to see it, nor did she answer her mother when she was addressed.

Challis mounted the familiar hill and looked seaward. Nothing there was visible. The tumulus stood out boldly in the moonlight, and he lingered by it, occupied by fugitive thoughts of prehistoric days. Then he turned and began to go down the slope. He had got some distance down when the report of a musket sounded in his ears. He stopped and looked into the valley. The moonlight was bright upon a stretch of furze at the bottom, and he caught sight of some figures moving. Then he went forward, and instantaneously was arrested by the snip of a bullet through his sleeve. The report followed sharply. He uttered an exclamation and dropped to the earth. He was being fired at, and he could not take a closer risk than that. There ensued a silence, and he could espy no movement among the furze. His unknown enemies were evidently waiting. If they imagined the shot had taken effect they were still showing caution. He had a good view down to the furze from where he lay, and if any one emerged it must be into his field of vision. After a time he began to see the impossibility of making this manœuvre permanent, and suddenly got to his feet and ran lightly away, not directly from the furze, so as to present a fairly constant mark, but sideways, so as to offer a shifting target. A musket cracked again, but he was not conscious of any bullet. He increased his pace, and suddenly dropped again to earth. This time the bullet whistled over him. His trick had undoubtedly saved him. He rose and made off once more, and then, to his amazement, he

saw a woman's figure flying in the moonlight down towards him. There was another report, and she rushed forward and threw up her arms.

"Come to me! Come to me!" she cried; and Challis recognized the voice and wondered.

They met, and she pushed him behind her. "Stay there; they dare not shoot me," she panted.

"Who is it? What is it, Miss Heywood?" he asked.

"They daren't shoot," she panted. "They are wild and wicked men. They dare not shoot me. Come, you must walk in front of me up the hill."

"No, no!" he protested. "A woman——"

She was almost passionate in the way she broke in on him. "Obey me!" she cried. "They dare not shoot me, I tell you. I asked you one thing to-night; you shall not play me false again."

"Give me your arm," he said with authority. "You are staggering. Give me your arm."

She looked back. There was no movement on the furze, and the moon illumined the down. "Yes," she said, "they dare not shoot," and she seized his arm so that they walked together almost inextricably one. Thus they reached the top of the down and the barrow, and passed into safety. Lower down in the copses that surrounded the park he came to a pause deliberately.

"You said I played you false," he said.

"Yes," her voice rang firmly. "I told you to stay indoors to-night."

He thought. "I see. You knew there was a plot against me."

"I guessed." She seemed troubled for the first time.

"And you came to save me?"

"I feared that you might not understand."

"I did not," he said, and held out his hand. "Miss Heywood, from my heart I thank you. I do not understand even now; but I thank you."

He felt the warm pulse in her soft hand as he grasped it.

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"Who are they?" he asked simply.

"They are wild and wicked men," she answered. He remembered the phrase. Was it not one that Lady Fairford had used in characterizing the smugglers of that coast? Illumination was breaking on him, but he said nothing except, "You saved me, you," and he held her hand as they walked under the delicate tracery of the coppice into which the golden moon was shining. Within a hundred yards of Hale gates she withdrew her hand almost sharply.

"You will not go out to-night?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Good-night, and thank you again. I shall set up a votive offering in your shrine."

She looked at him without comprehending, yet his face roused some sense of his meaning to her. She parted from him abruptly, and her gracious form was swallowed up by the shadows.

Challis let himself in, and as the door opened Felicity stood there with frightened eyes.

"Sir—sir," she stammered, and leaned one arm against the wall.

"Why, Felicity, you might have seen a ghost," he said cheerfully.

She recovered. "I wanted to know if I shall put some cognac in your room, sir," she said.

"Why, yes, I think a glass of brandy might help me to think," he said, smiling. "Cognac by all means, Felicity."

CHAPTER VII

TWO WOMEN

DOROTHY HEYWOOD reached Southover, and was admitted by a maid.

"Is there any one here?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Dorothy. It is Mr. Draycott."

She had expected that, and, taking off her hat, she put a touch to her hair in the big hall, and proceeded to the sitting-room, in which Challis had been received when he was blundering on his way to Hale. Draycott's voice, booming dully and persistently, met her ere she turned the handle. Then she entered, and both men, her father and Draycott, turned their eyes upon her. It was Draycott who spoke, and spoke forcefully, even angrily.

"She is here. Question her."

"She does not enter like a culprit," said Heywood slowly.

"Question her! Question her!" cried Draycott, and without waiting for the farmer to follow his advice he addressed Dorothy himself.

"It was you on the Downs by the barrow this night?"

"Yes." She spoke quietly.

"You walked with that spy, Challis. It was through you he escaped."

"I thank God," she said proudly.

Draycott turned to Heywood. "You hear?" he said.

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Heywood, the incarnation of the ponderous, looked at his daughter and frowned.

"Duke says you interfered with his plans."

"What were his plans—murder? If so, I am glad I interfered," said Dorothy scornfully.

"Tut, girl, there is no need to use ugly words. Challis is a danger, and if he comes by an accident there is no one to cry."

"Father," demanded the girl, almost fiercely, "how far do you go in this matter? I know nothing of it, except that you are in it. I hate it, I hate it. How far are you willing to go? I must know that."

"Silence, girl! You forget to whom you speak. You cannot order me as if you were an academy mistress. You know nothing, as you say, and best keep your nose out of it all. It is no business for girls."

"That it is not," said Draycott. "Let her know that. She meddles where she is ignorant and out of place. This is a man's work, and no woman's."

Dorothy swung her gaze on him and pointed to him. "There," she said, addressing her father, "there is the man who is leading you, and you don't know where. Father, think of that. You must surely think of that. Whither is he taking you, he and his fellows? I will tell you—to murder."

"I will not have that word here," said Heywood sternly.

"Look you, Heywood," said Draycott. "She's meddlesome. If you will leave her to me I will settle with her."

"You—you!" she cried, with ineffable scorn and passion.

"Heywood, you must leave her to me," said Draycott.

"Be damned!" said the farmer angrily. "My daughter's mine, and she's none of yours. What's to be done, I do."

Draycott's presumption had enraged him as a trespass

on his rights. Draycott had the sense to see as much, and he tempered his appeal at once.

"Look, Heywood," he said. "This affair is perilous. This man, Challis, stands in our way, and has wrecked us on several occasions. It is high time his game was stopped, and you know it. We are all agreed on that. This last business at Emsworth is the worst of all, for we lose heavily, and good men are taken. If we stand by without reprisal he will break us in pieces. We heard the Government was going to strike, and they have struck with this man."

Dorothy had listened with growing interest, conquering her disdain, at this statement, and now she intervened.

"You say Mr. Challis is a Government agent?"

"There is no shadow of doubt of it," said Draycott, turning to her. "Be reasonable, Dorothy. He holds all our liberties, your own father's liberty, in his hands, if we permit him to go on."

"I will not believe that of him," said the girl, with spirit.

"Graves has proof of it, even if we had none ourselves. He has seen the letters addressed to Government. Challis was sent down here to organize against the free trade. Foster has been heard to boast of secret measures which the Revenue Board would take. And, moreover, look you! Heywood, how our plans have been frustrated. Three separate seizures within six weeks, and those on a grand scale, and the runs were as carefully arranged as ever man could manage. It is the secret agent at work. It is Challis, damn him; and he must go."

"I will not believe that Mr. Challis is a preventive spy," said Dorothy bravely. "He is a gentleman of breeding and a man of taste."

Draycott frowned, and Heywood said heavily, "Come, come, Dorothy, Duke's right. He is a danger to us, and has caused us great losses. There has been a quickening

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of the service since he came hereabouts, and he is known to correspond with Government. How much he knows I cannot say, but he is dangerous."

Heywood spoke rather morosely, having in his mind a doubt as to his own standing in the matter.

"He is no spy," protested Dorothy. "Of that I am sure. You follow Duke Draycott, and commit yourself to his hands, father. Where is he leading you, I ask again? I am afraid for you. There was this attempt on Mr. Challis to-night."

"It was never meant to kill him, only to wing him," said Draycott sullenly. "We want him put out of action."

"There was death in those bullets," said Dorothy, flashing. "Death for him had it not been for me. You dared not fire while I was there."

Her tone was singularly triumphant, her attitude exalted, and the boat-builder regarded her with suspicious eyes, in which some other emotion was rapidly gathering.

"It was only meant to put him out of action," said Heywood. "We can trust Duke."

But Duke had not heard; he was carried away on a sudden impulsive suspicion, which had never risen before. He went forward to the girl rapidly, so that he was between her and her father.

"Why do you do this?" he asked roughly. "What have you to do with this man? What is this Challis to you?" and in his fury he seized her wrists.

She did not cry out, but strove to wrench herself free, and there was a momentary struggle, which ended as swiftly as it had begun. For the huge form of Heywood intervened, and, with his blue eyes blazing, he thrust the younger man away with an oath.

"Stand aside, damn you! What are you about? You forget——" and his passion choked further speech.

Draycott's fury subsided before the uprush of his prudence. He had his aims, and they certainly did not

include the hostility of Heywood. He dropped aside with a muttered warning.

"She will ruin us!"

Heywood towered over him, and then, recovering himself, pointed at the door. "Go, girl. I will have nothing done here of this sort."

Dorothy passed out of the room in a tempest of indignation, and when she was gone the farmer turned on Draycott.

"If that occurs again, or you interfere with my child, that's the end of our association," he said formidably. "Damn you, don't you know your place, Duke Draycott?"

"I tell you, Heywood, we stand on a precipice. We are in danger of ruin. That man must go. I forgot in my anger. She is your daughter, and you know what I want. I forgot she was not mine yet."

"There is some doubt if she will ever be yours if that is your ugly mind," said Heywood, still fuming.

But Draycott was resolved to conciliate him, and he began to persuade—to emphasize the risks, to underline the proofs of Challis's espionage, until he had succeeded in withdrawing the farmer's mind from his daughter and centring it on his own circumstances. Heywood was frankly alarmed by the activity of the Customs officers, and after a time he listened and assented and grumbled, and fell to his pipe and his glass, and Draycott knew that he had conquered.

Shortly afterwards he bade Heywood good-bye and went out. Within he was by no means as calm or as reasonable or as satisfied as he had appeared at the conclusion of the interview. The jealous suspicion sown in his mind remained and germinated. He opened the door of the parlour, under which he could see a light, and entered. Dorothy was reading in a chair, and looked up.

"Dorothy," he said, "I have come to ask your pardon for my roughness just now."

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She laughed rather hardly, and bared her wrists in answer.

"I know," he said, in a sympathetic voice. "I hurt them. Forgive me. Let me kiss the bruise."

She covered up her arms in her dress and stared defiance and hostility at him.

"No one asked you to come here, Duke Draycott," she said.

He was still humble. "Dorothy, you were promised to me long since. It was always understood."

"When I was fifteen, a child, I heard it talked of," she said coldly. "I am now at years of discretion."

"Your father wished it," he said. "Doesn't that weigh with you?"

"My father would wish me to do as I desire," she returned, and took up her book.

He lingered. "Why did you do that to-night?" he asked in a less conciliatory voice. "Why should you interfere?"

She would have answered sharply, but some thought came to her. She looked across her book at him.

"To save you from the sin of murder," she said gravely, "and my father from connection with it."

"We intended him no harm," he said after a pause. "He would have been in bed for a few weeks."

She smiled. "Good-night, Duke Draycott," she said.

Reluctantly he left her; he did not understand her.

She rose when he was gone and looked into the mirror over the fireplace, smoothing her hair. Then she peered into the moonlit garden under a corner of the blind, and smiled again.

"I saved him," she whispered to herself.

When Challis had gone upstairs Felicity went back to the kitchen and sat down at the table. Her mother was looking dreamily at the fire, and the tall clock ticked heavily in the corner.

"He has come in," said the girl, with some tenseness manifest in her voice. "He is safe now."

Mrs. Graves sighed. "I heard the sound of guns," she said. "They came from the hill."

Felicity shuddered. "So did I," she said in a low voice. "But he smiled as he came in. It must have been something else."

The ticking of the clock was audible plainly in the silence that ensued.

"Where will it end, mother?" the girl broke silence.

"I daren't think," said Mrs. Graves. "I won't think. All my life I'm afraid to think."

"It shall not end as they think—as they wish," said Felicity fiercely.

"You cannot fight against fate. You are only a girl," said her mother drearily.

Felicity lent her elbows on the table and her face in her hands, and stared at the fire.

"I had a dream last night, mother," she said in a slow, abstracted voice. "I can't shake it off. It was so strange. I was asleep and something woke me. I think it was a sound of a trumpet. I know that I opened my eyes with a blare in my ears, and I thought I was on the edge of my bed. But I wasn't. I was on the edge of the barrow, blinking my eyes as if I were hardly awake, and as I listened I heard the sound of horses, and I became aware of a procession that was going by. It was a stream of men, on foot and on horse, filing by continuously. They were big men, not like father or Draycott, tall, fair men, and they were armed. They carried swords and things like spears. And the road was so straight. It came up from the valley and across the Downs and I could see it go over the tops of the hills, and it seemed as if it went on into the Weald."

Mrs. Graves had shifted her gaze from the fire to her daughter.

"It was the Roman road," she said. "Stane-street."

"They passed along," went on Felicity dreamily, "men and horses and carriages—strange carriages, such as I have seen in pictures somewhere."

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"They were chariots," said Mrs. Graves.

"And one of the men on horseback was Mr. Challis. He wore a shining helmet. It was all light, and yet I thought it was night. They streamed over the hills, and I crouched there in the barrow and wondered. Who were they, mother?"

"I have heard tell that the Romans made that road," said Mrs. Graves. "You must have dreamt of the Romans."

"They were tall, fine men, and Mr. Challis was the tallest. He came to the edge of the barrow and looked down on me, and stared very gravely at me, and I thought he spoke and said, 'Why are you here? What are you doing in this barrow?' as he asked me once before, and I could not answer, and he turned away sighing, and said, 'You are little and dark. These are your people who were little and dark. You belong to the barrow.' And I felt ashamed and crept away back into the barrow, and the horses and the men and the chariots disappeared, and I thought I crept into the barrow, and I woke up and found I was in bed. Wasn't that a strange dream, mother? Mother, does it mean any harm to Mr. Challis?"

Mrs. Graves shook her head. "There is no sign there. There is a sign——" She stopped abruptly. "I have heard of those dark people. They were dead and buried long ago, long, long before the Romans came."

"When I got back into the barrow he was gone," said Felicity wistfully.

Her mother regarded her with an anxious look. "I wish he were indeed gone," she said.

"Why?" almost passionately demanded the girl. "You have yourself said how kind he is to you, and how courteous. It is infamous to wish him gone."

"Yes, he is kind," murmured the mother. "Yet that is why. It would be better for him if he were away."

"They shall do no harm to him," said Felicity fiercely.

"How can you say that? You are only a girl. You know nothing of the wickedness of men. They say he is sent by Government to investigate the free trade. They will not suffer that. He is better gone."

Felicity was silent for a moment; then she said slowly: "I can do more than you think. Who was it stopped him from risking his life in that fight with the dragoons? I locked him in. My father would have had him go forth to his fate. I saved him!" she ended triumphantly. Thus did two women exult in the saving of one man on the same night.

"I wish he were gone," said Mrs. Graves, in distress. "This life is killing me."

The door clicked, and Felicity silently flitted into the scullery which adjoined the kitchen, and began to busy herself with domestic duties. She could not and would not face her father at that moment. Graves entered, manifestly in an ugly mood, for his wife saw with fear that his dark face was sinister with passion. He scowled.

"There is no luck," he said. "The luck is damnably against us. But it can't last—it can't go on. Is Challis back?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes, he is abed," said his wife timidly.

There was no sound from the scullery, where Felicity, in her mouselike way, was at work.

Graves muttered an oath. "He will be the ruin of us," he said, and flung his hat furiously on the table. "He has been here—how long?—all these weeks, and our work has been stopped. Only with trouble and watching have we got anything through. What is to be done? I am losing my chances every day, and every day others are making money." He cursed and gesticulated fiercely, his face twisting diabolically in his rancorous outbreak.

Mrs. Graves sat trembling; she had no words in the face of this fury.

"Twice he has escaped," the man went on; "but the third time he will not be so lucky."

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"Twice!" repeated Mrs. Graves weakly.

"Yes, in the harbour, and to-night. Twice!" he said savagely.

In the scullery Felicity, listening intently, murmured to herself, "Three times, three times! He has escaped three times!" and her heart leapt in her bosom.

"To-night was the worst," pursued Graves darkly. "It was simple. All was arranged, and he would have troubled us no longer, and I could have gone with the shipments in safety. I am losing money daily," he cried, gnashing his teeth. "Don't you understand that, Judith?" he savagely demanded.

"Yes," she said tremulously. "Oh, I wish you would give it up!" she added with emotion. "You would be happier, we should all be happier, if you were free of this trade."

He looked at her contemptuously, as though she were an obscure insect in the line of his vision. "You're a fool, Judith. This trade will make me rich. I shall be no more dependent on my lord's bounty. Little he guesses to what use his tumbledown house is put, nor how it is enriching——" He broke off and scowled. "That man stands in the way," he cried angrily. "Until he came I was able to take all the proceeds of the runs between Selsey and Bognor that I wished, and Heywood and others only had second and other places. But now it is changed. The farm gets all the runs and I starve. Damn him," he cried, raising his voice. "If it hadn't been for that girl he would have troubled us no longer."

"What girl? What girl?" cried Mrs. Graves, in terror for her daughter.

"Why," said he, "that long-legged slut of Heywood's. There was a party ready for him, and she came along and spoiled it."

"Spoiled it?" repeated his wife.

"Yes. She protected him. Ran to him in the moonlight, was a cover for him against the bullets. I would have shot, but that bully, Duke Draycott, bade them

cease. He's a weakling, a fool. It saved his life. She saved his life ! ”

Within the scullery, from which no sound had issued since Graves's arrival, a cup dropped and clattered in the sink.

CHAPTER VIII

FAIRFORD HALL

THE more that Challis revolved the incidents of the night in his mind, the more it was evident to him that certain explanations were demanded. He was sure of two things—that an attempt had been made upon his life, and that he had been saved by the appearance of Dorothy Heywood. This was the second attack to which he had been subjected, and he thought of Sir John Fairford's friendly warning, in which his memory included that vivid appeal of Lady Fairford. He was too shrewd a man and too well versed in affairs not to draw certain conclusions. This was a wild and lawless coast, and the smugglers were very active there; it was plain that he had roused the suspicions and incurred the hostility of the free traders. Gangs of these lawbreakers infested the shores of Kent and Sussex. The Napoleonic wars had raised their pursuit into a well-paid, adventurous, and reckless calling. The Channel teemed with their luggers, and it was notorious that the Customs cutters were wholly inadequate to deal with the desperadoes. These latter were capable and daring sailors, and were, indeed, better seamen than most that manned His Majesty's ships. Discipline alone was lacking to make them the finest seafarers in the kingdom. But here they were content to spend their lives cheating the Customs and evading the laws

of their country. Rough and greedy and demoralized as they were, they did not stop at violence ; and Challis recognized that he was marked out for some reason as their victim. It behoved him to go warily, and, seeing on what urgent business he was engaged, to guard his life and limbs with what precautions he might. There was a moment when he had been disposed to look upon the intervention of Dorothy as other than accidental ; but he had soon dismissed the idea. She had flashed out of Heaven, so to speak, a casual and visiting goddess in time to shield her votary. He had begun in a smiling and half-playful manner to call himself this in his thoughts. But he was as clear on the other hand that some knowledge of this feud against him had reached the girl. He pondered this vexatious problem on his road to Southover the following day. He could not leave his thanks in that abrupt, dismembered way in which they had been given under the trees and the chequered moonlight. If he owed her anything he owed her all, and so when he found himself in her presence not one word of those questions which were presiding within him emerged. It was, of course, necessary to refer to the circumstances, and in the regathering of these in his memory, and with the very open rehearsal of them, he felt his pent-up tenderness gush forth. It overflowed his heart, if it did not reach his voice and manner in all its warmth and strength.

"What I owe you," he said, holding her slender hand, "is what I can never put in words. I can just feel it. You will be content with that ? " he asked softly, and her face flushed and softened on the same memory.

"I was glad. You do not know our country-folk. If you did you would not trust them. They are not cruel, but they are passionate, and it leads them to crime." She hesitated a moment. "The whole place is riddled with the free trade," she added.

"I have heard as much," he said. "And I suppose that is the explanation. I am suspected by the gentry."

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He laughed. "I was warned that this might be the case."

"Who warned you?" she asked quickly.

"Sir John Fairford," he said, and he had a curious feeling that there was relief in her eyes when she spoke.

"They suspect any stranger," she said.

He yearned to ask her why she had begged him to remain indoors, as he felt in his pocket for the verses he had copied. He was not blind to that interpretation of her conduct. She had heard something, and had desired to warn him. It was a chance that he had not taken her advice, a chance because he had had no thought of danger. And when he had gone to the hills he had met his peril, and had been saved. He did not understand, but he had strange glimpses of the truth, which flashed and eluded him, nimble as his brain was. There was something indefinable in the feeling with which he looked at her now, so sweet and fair and buoyant with young life. He drew the verses forth.

"I have sent for the volume," he said, "but meanwhile here is a scribbled copy. It gave me great pleasure to reflect that you liked these verses. It is an unusual poem, and one that has been savagely contested."

She took the paper from him. "I love it," she said. "I cannot tell why. Perhaps it is that the sea is so familiar to me. It is in my blood, though I do not think I like it." She had a little shudder of her shoulders. "But the poem seems to bring up pictures."

She read :

"The sun's rim dips ; the stars rush out ;
At one stride comes the dark."

"I have seen that so often. It comes on the sea and over the Downs to us. I have seen the barrow plunged into darkness in an instant, as if God's hand had swept it out." She turned a page :

“ ‘The harbour-bay was clear as glass,
So smoothly it was strewn !
And on the bay the moonlight lay,
And the shadow of the moon.’ ”

“ I have seen as much in Chichester harbour. I have seen the bay ‘white with silent light.’ I thank you heartily for copying these beautiful verses for me.”

Yet all the same, as he gazed at her he knew it was not for that that she had asked him to write them out. He said nothing, however, but referred to a stanza in the poem, and thus the conversation drifted to other things. A soft spring rain was falling like dew, and a mist blurred the horizon, yet the coast-line of the Isle of Wight beyond Spithead rose up to the Culver Cliffs. The vapour seemed to creep along the water towards the French shores lying in that ultimate obscurity. Sails dotted the immediate foreground of the sea, and their eyes dwelt on it. Challis had a secret and discreet tongue, yet his thoughts inclined him to a topic which seemed to make a confidence between them in his own private heart.

“ Should that water be the theatre of a great conflict,” he said, “ upon the issue would depend the fate of the world.”

“ You mean Bonaparte ? ” she said, with interest.

“ Yes,” he was musing. Was he not one of the springs in the machine ? He had a terrible sense of his own vital importance just then. “ If all these free traders were only of a patriotic heart they would help England to solve the problem of Bonaparte.”

“ They should join His Majesty’s Navy ? ” she cried, with a faint interrogation. “ I have thought so. I have always hoped so. I have——” She stopped short of the expression of something that was in her mind, and was slightly confused.

“ These men,” said he, pointing at the sea-coast, “ are admirable seamen. They are what the nation needs,

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and they must go a-sneaking into coves with Dutch tea and French brandy that has cheated the Exchequer. Bah ! ”

“ It is wrong,” she said tremulously. “ It is wholly wrong. There is no defence of it. I have found myself a score of times praying that these neighbours about us might change, and see aright. And it is the crisis of a nation,” she said, with a fine gesture of helpless anger.

She was beautiful in her anger, and Challis had to remind himself of his weighty duties ; incidentally, some thought of his father and his family intruded, almost as it were indecently, upon his feelings. He closed down the episode as he left, and turned his mind to his friend, Mr. Brown, and the news he had received that morning from France. He found it would necessitate his presence in Jersey at close quarters with the observations that were being made under his auspices.

The work in which Challis was engaged kept him busy during the next few days, and it was with misgivings and a little impatience that he recalled his invitation to take supper with Sir John and Lady Fairford. That very morning he had had a message from Lieutenant Beswick, and he had arranged to sail for Jersey on the next day at dawn. He at first thought of withdrawing from the engagement for supper, but reflected that he would have time enough to make his preparations for departure beforehand, and let it go.

At Fairford House, which was Sir John’s place, he found a warm welcome and genial companionship. It was not, however, what he would have considered congenial, consisting, as the party did, of his old friend Captain Balmain, a peer from Hampshire, and two gentlemen from the neighbourhood, of a fox-hunting type. It appeared that there was one bond that knit this company in an interest, and that was the love of gaming. From the first moment of his introduction Challis heard no word outside the saddle and cards, save when a casual and uninterested reference was made to

Pitt or Boney. Involved as he was in great and even vital issues, Challis could not avoid a feeling of amused contempt for these Englishmen, to whom the sole content of life was represented by a horse or a wager, and whose imagination or fervour was untouched by the fateful silence of Europe at that moment. Perhaps, he reflected, it was just because they lacked imagination that they felt nothing, and knew nothing, and cared nothing. They were like their own horses or their own hounds. The one exception was his host, who impressed him, as before, with a sense of character and capacity. Yet Sir John was in thrall to cards, and it was due to him that the company made so early a start after supper. Lady Fairford faded from the scene, as Challis fancied she must have been accustomed to fade long since, and her worn face affected him no longer. He was left to the bores of the card table, to port and brandy, and the hazards of play.

These rustics drank hard and played hard. If they had no intellects worth considering, they at least had hardihood and courage. They lost with phlegm and won with jocosity, and they drank unbridled by discretion or decorum. Sir John hardly fitted the picture, standing out of it almost as much as Challis himself. He was evidently of a gambling temperament, and hard-headed in his gambling, and his luck was good. He was an easy and an amiable host, hospitable with the bottle and courteous of speech. Challis's eyes wandered to the appointments of the handsome room, and could find no signs of poverty. Everything was well ordered, as well ordered as the supper had been. It did not seem as if the necessity of retrenchment had cost Sir John much, if this were his comfortable and even luxurious life in his country retreat. Challis withdrew from the party at the tables after a time, and studied the portraits on the walls. His host joined him.

"A spendthrift, useless crew!" he said, with a short laugh. "There's not one that did a stroke of honest

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work, save Nick Fairford, who was killed at Plassy. We are a family of no account."

Challis civilly deprecated this pessimistic view, and indicated a figure, bewigged and ruffled, with a grave and powerful face, dressed in the fashion of an Early Georgian reign.

"There is one," said he, "whose features promise. I should guess he served his country somehow—in the House of Commons, say."

Fairford laughed loud. "My good sir, he was in the Commons, it is true. But Sir James ruined himself and others in the South Sea Bubble."

Challis recognized the persistence of a trait which evidently characterized the family, and emerged in the speculations of an ancestor and the gaming of a descendant. The card-players were sinking deeper into potations, and their voices increased in raucous volume. The scene was distasteful to him, and he was glad when Balmain called on Sir John to join the faro party. He himself, with an exquisite courtesy, inquired if he might seek Lady Fairford, and left the room to the gamesters.

Lady Fairford was pensively fingering her harpsichord, and rose with a faint expression of pleasure momentarily on her face. She was a woman of evident personality, and had a cultured taste, which she delighted to indulge. Challis found they had predilections and prejudices in common, so that they progressed naturally to a condition of friendly sympathy. He was surprised to find that time had slipped away so quickly, when their conversation was interrupted by loud noises and laughter from the adjoining room.

When Challis, having apologized for the hour, left his hostess, he entered a room which had been transformed. Cards had been abandoned for some time, and the company had devoted itself whole-heartedly to wine. Lord Witham had already been carried to bed, as unfit for the homeward journey, and the squires and Captain Balmain were quarrelling over the hospi-

talities of two respective chaises. Balmain was claimed as guest by each, one arguing that as he had fetched the Captain he was entitled to carry him home, whereas the other maintained, so far as his thickened speech would allow others to make out, that as he had not enjoyed the privilege of bringing the dragoon, he was clearly justified in rectifying the balance by taking him back. It did not appear from Balmain's erratic and jumbled remarks to which side he inclined, but he certainly succeeded in adding to the confusion of the wrangle.

Challis was in no mood to share the company of any one of the three, and so he stood aside whilst the dispute was settled, and heard the chaises drive off with relief. Sir John sat in his chair and laughed consumedly, for his wine was at last taking effect on him. He said something contemptuous of the departed guests, and urged Challis to join him in another glass. Challis declined, and Sir John drank, not one, but two or three glasses in a few minutes, after which he resigned all pretensions to be other than drunk. He lolled in his big chair and snored stertorously, after drifting through incoherent mutterings into silence. Challis considered the fallen gentleman for a few minutes with philosophic indifference, and then rose. It was time that he was on his way. At that moment the door opened, and Lady Fairford entered swiftly.

"Sir John——" she began, and stopped abruptly, her eyes on the form in the chair. There was a flash of contempt in the eyes she turned on Challis. "Mr. Challis, I have just had news which concerns you. You know that you have incurred the enmity of the free traders."

"I have heard so, madam," he said, "and you were good enough to warn me."

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "It was true. I wish you had been advised."

"Madam, I have been discretion itself," he said, smiling.

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"Of course, it is impossible in your position," she said anxiously. "But I wish your duty had not called you here. I wish——"

"You do not suppose, madam, that I am a Customs officer," he said quietly.

"A Customs officer—no; but a Commissioner—oh, it is well known that the Government have been dissatisfied and have designed to reorganize the preventive force. It is common talk."

"Lady Fairford," said Challis earnestly, "pray disabuse your mind of such untoward suspicions. I am not connected with His Majesty's Customs or revenue in any way."

"I am glad," she cried, and then sighed. "But it will avail nothing now. Their suspicions are deep-set. But to-night"—her eyes strayed to her husband snoring in his chair, and scorn moved in them. "If it were not for that—that—" her pointing finger trembled, "this night would have mattered nothing."

"Madam, I do not understand," he said, in perplexity.

"Mr. Challis," she broke out, her excitement showing at last, "there are unscrupulous men lying in wait for you outside."

Challis frowned slightly. "These are free traders, madam?" he asked. She only stared at him emotionally. "This is the third time," he went on, in a deeper voice, "the third time. It must end. How do you know this, Lady Fairford?" he asked.

"One of my servants has just brought me news," she said. "He recognized some of the men, and I guessed the rest. I know the ugly temper of this countryside."

"You think they wait for me?" he asked, turning the matter in his mind with some curious marginal reflections.

"I am certain they do," she answered. "There is one way out. You must stay the night."

He shook his head, still considering. "That is impossible, Lady Fairford," he said. "But I am indebted to you for your proffer of hospitality so far. I am due elsewhere presently."

She gave an exclamation of impatience or agitation. "If Sir John——" she began, and frowned, and turned aside. "Mr. Challis," she went on abruptly, "no guest of ours shall suffer through accepting hospitality of us. I must find some way."

"Will you tell me two things?" he asked in his calm manner. "Can you say where these men are placed, and what roads of issue are there from the gardens?"

"I am a fool!" she said. "I have been too greatly disturbed to think. There is the wicket-gate in the walled orchard. There is no chance that that will be watched. But I will make sure."

She hastened from the room, and left Challis with his drunken host. Challis stood in a brown study, again exercised by curious thoughts, from which he was roused by the lady's re-entrance.

"You said well. The wicket-gate is safe," she began. "Willis says they are in the front and by the shrubbery entrance. They do not know there is a suspicion of their presence. Your horse——"

"Yes. If my horse could be brought—perhaps it were better not to bring it to the front," he said. "Somewhere in the back parts——"

"Below the maze. I will have it done," she said, and hastened away again. But this time he followed her. He heard her give the instructions and waited with her till the man returned. He held out his hand, which she grasped abstractedly, then dropped.

"No, I'm coming with you. Do you think I will leave any guest of this house in danger?" she asked.

In the shrubbery beyond the maze they found the horse in the hands of a groom, and the party proceeded to the orchard, from which a narrow gate in the walk opened upon a field and the upward slopes of the Downs.

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The gate was just wide and lofty enough to permit the passage of the animal, and, once outside, Challis turned to his hostess with feeling.

"There are things in these parts which puzzle me," he said, "and which seem to go beyond the line of sanity; but this I know, and can take oath on, that I hold your service, dear lady, in deep gratitude this night."

"Go!" she said, pressing his hand and flinging it from her. "They may be here even now. I fear them—I dread——"

He seemed to hear her tremulous wail of terror abiding in the air as he rode off—off up the slopes, across the fields, and into the open common land of the higher hills, by which way he came safely to the gates of Hale. It was a night with which darkness can hardly be associated, a night of tremulous, dim light, and objects were easily visible even at some distance. At the gates of Hale he saw a horseman trotting over the rise, and he pulled his own beast under the cover of the limes. The horseman drew rein, paused, and then turned through the open gate. In the house a hundred yards away through the avenue the light was flaring, as it was used to flare, and by it Challis recognized the man.

"Lieutenant Beswick!" he challenged.

"Sir! Is that Mr. Challis? I come in haste, sir. The *Magpie* must sail in two hours' time. We have an urgent mission reported to us. But, as your business is pressing, I came myself to warn you."

"Yes, Mr. Beswick, it is pressing. I thank you," said Challis seriously.

"We have the orders of the Board to give you every assistance, sir," said the Lieutenant a trifle stiffly. "I hope I do my duty."

"You are an example to your profession," said Challis courteously. "But if I take in what you say, I have no time to pass you compliments. If you will wait here, Lieutenant, I will join you in five minutes."

He jumped from his horse, secured him to a branch, and then went up the avenue briskly. As he did so he became sensible of a suddenly-fallen darkness, and there reached his mind a moment later a knowledge that the light in the door—the fanlight of the house—had gone out and left the place blank. It was a mere dull empty mass before him now. He entered by his private door, spent a few minutes in putting together some things, and scribbled a note, which he addressed to Graves, and threw carelessly on the table.

“He will find it there to-morrow,” he said, “and it will explain.”

Then he went forth, mounted, and rode with Beswick for Chichester harbour.

CHAPTER IX

THE DISAPPEARANCE

It was after one o'clock that Challis encountered Beswick, and even at that late hour the Graves household were not abed. Graves had been absent most of the evening, but he got back between eleven and twelve, and took his supper. He asked if Challis had returned, and said nothing when told that he was still away. After supper he drank some glasses of brandy and smoked a pipe, displaying a more amiable humour than either wife or daughter had observed in him for many weeks.

"When my fortune's made, Judy," said he, "you shall go in the finest silk to church and listen to parsons when ye will. You women love parsons, and, damme, you're welcome to them. Maybe I shall feel some of my fortune before any one can tell or prophesy, and we will go to Cheshire, and you shall revisit your Welsh hills, my faith, yes—your Welsh hills."

"I would like to see the hills," she said plaintively. "They are bigger hills than these, and there is something about them——" She did not finish, but looked vaguely about her.

"It is only Challis stands between me and fortune," the man went on, pursuing his thoughts, "and he will stand so no longer. They are all fools, and have no head like me. If I had a chance from Fate I should be

as rich as a king. It is my brains would do it. Look you, Judith, they think this man is a Customs man. Bah! I know better. I know what he is. He is bigger game than that, and those that see him should recognize it. He is of a finer cut. He stands for big people, not revenue cutters and riding officers." There was a note even of contempt in the man's voice. It was as though he had donned once more the old livery of butler, and was looking through butler's eyes at class distinctions. He puffed at his pipe, and resumed unexpectedly in another voice.

"Damn him! He has spelt nothing but ruin to me. The sooner he is gone the better. Not one barrel or chest have I lodged or delivered these weeks. He stands between me and my money. Damn him! Have you heard sound of him, Judith?" he asked abruptly. Mrs. Graves answered in the negative, and Graves turned to his daughter. "Go up, Felicity, and see if he be there."

When the girl with rebellious and tumultuous heart had gone, her father continued his angry harangue. "Look you, all these secret cellars lying idle, and no casks to enter or depart. All others are getting rich, and I am debarred. Damn him! But it shall not go on. Why should I not have the reward of my work and the risk I run? Who found the secret cellars that were used by the old monks for dungeons? It was I. His lordship knew nothing of them, and knows nothing. No one knew of them but me, and I shall be robbed of my advantage, of my proper gains, because this man dwells here." Felicity returned at this moment and he regarded her sharply.

"There is no one there," she said in a low voice.

"Ah!" There seemed satisfaction in his tone. "What's o'clock? No one there!" He nodded and smiled, and once more recurred to his more amiable mood. "These fools think they know Challis, but they don't. I doubt you do yourself, Judith. What think you he is?"

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He grinned quizzically, and his wife started, showed some confusion, and stammered.

"Is he not a Customs officer?" she asked.

"Bah! Did I not tell you? He is too high for that. They know nothing outside, but I know, I who have watched him day and night, and have inspected his letters. One I opened." He laughed. "I suspected him at first like the rest of them; but this letter—it was from high quarters—it dealt with great affairs. What think you he is?" He lowered his voice almost involuntarily. "He is in the Secret Service of the Government. He is employed to watch Boney."

Felicity's dark eyes were upon the speaker, fascinated, and a glow spread through her frail body. She shuddered with emotion. He was that! Her father was talking on, but she was not following farther than that, as she absorbed this romantic revelation into all the tissues of her being. Then she was aware that he had broken off.

"There was a noise!" he said sharply. "Did you hear a noise? Felicity, see if he be come back."

Felicity sped quickly, with fluttered heart strangely crying in her bosom, and went lightly up the stairs. The rooms were silent and empty. She rested a hand upon the chair where Challis was wont to sit and smoothed it caressingly, then she reported to her father. He laughed aloud.

"It was the wind or a mouse," he said. "I am getting fidgety. 'Tis time you were abed, girl."

"But Mr. Challis may want supper when he comes," she protested.

The face of Graves was contorted in a stricture. "Mr. Challis is sleeping to-night at Fairford," he said. "There is no need to wait up for him;" and then, as a thought struck him, "you may lay supper in his room on the chance he comes."

He rose, yawned, and went out of the room whistling. Felicity laid the supper and went to bed. She noticed

then that the light was out over the hall-door. She knew what that signal meant, and wondered.

Graves did not sleep as he had thought he would. Certain doubts occurred to him, and he rose and paid a visit to his guest's rooms. They were empty, and he was content ; but as he was turning away his eye was caught by a letter on the table addressed to him. He opened it, frowning, and the frown deepened as he read ; then slowly his brow cleared.

" It is well so far," he said to himself. " Four or five days ! The bunglers ! Well, any way, I will get to work. This means freedom for that time."

He went to bed cheerfully, and plunged into a profound sleep.

When Felicity rose in the morning she paid her usual visit to the library, and cleaned and dusted it. Her mother was already up, and told her that her father had breakfasted and gone out. " He will not be back to-day," she said. " He has gone on business."

Felicity said nothing ; she did not even show her relief, but a little later referred to Challis. " Will he have breakfasted, mother, when he returns ? " she inquired. " Shall I cook the eggs in readiness ? "

" We will wait and see," said her mother. " Gentlemen lie long abed when they have been late at night. He will probably be here before midday."

But Challis did not arrive before midday, nor did he come in time for his dinner, nor was there any sign of him all day. Late in the afternoon Felicity was troubled ; sudden fear leapt upon her. She recalled the odd behaviour of her father overnight, how he had sent her to see if Mr. Challis had returned, and how curiously he had been affected when there was no news of the guest. He had laughed and jested, which was something quite unusual with him. Alarm grew in her remembering these things, and she flew to her mother with her fears. Mrs. Graves could only dully counsel patience, and, sighing, leave the solution to time. Had



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Graves been at hand his daughter would have bearded him and demanded the truth of him ; but he was away, and neither mother nor daughter knew whither he was gone or when he would return. All this increased Felicity's terrible suspicions. In an agony of mind she thought all ways about the position. If it were true that those desperate villains of the free trade had harmed Challis, there should be some knowledge of it in the neighbourhood. Her thoughts rushed to Fairford Hall. Would anything be known there ? Was it not possible, after all, that Challis had stayed there, and was even still lingering in the company of his compeers ? No ; she had a presentiment against that. She hastened down to Fairford, and made inquiries there, as became her station, of the servants. She heard that Mr. Challis had left the house at one o'clock, and had ridden over the hills. The man who informed her was actually the servant, Willis, who had aided in Challis's escape, and he saw no reason to conceal or minimize his part in the affair. In his own capable hands he assumed large proportions, much larger than either Lady Fairford or her guest. It was to him, apparently, that Challis owed his life.

" But he has not returned," she wailed, and Willis considered the news from his own standpoint of hero.

" Well, missy, I did my best. I'll swear to God he was safe when I left him. He went up the hill yonder. It may be they followed and caught him. I am not answerable. I did my duty by him, I'll vow and wager."

And thus the iron of despair entered Felicity's heart. Back she sped to Hale, and found no news. Then she caught up her skirts, girded herself, and ran breathlessly to Southover on a new idea. Had he by any chance taken refuge at the farm ? Would Heywood know anything ? She grasped at the barest chances.

Arrived at Southover, she was admitted to Dorothy's presence. Dorothy Heywood was in her pretty drawing-

room, which her father rarely visited, and which she was wont to frequent for privacy and for thought when her duties were done in the house. She had managed her father's house ever since her mother's death five years earlier, and she was a capable mistress. But her real interests were in other fields, and she pursued these in her room, where she kept a harpsichord, books, and her drawing-board. The room was ample, well furnished, faced south, and looked through the tangle of the orchard. It was beautifully bright when Felicity entered, and the windows were open to the balmy airs of spring. Dorothy was drinking tea, and she rose and held out her hand in her open-hearted fashion. There was a social difference between the farmer's daughter and Felicity Graves, but Dorothy's generous nature ignored it. She welcomed the girl as an equal, and begged her to join in the tea. This invitation Felicity barely heard; her dark eyes searched the fair face in front of her as if they would pierce to the heart of a secret.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Challis, Miss Heywood?" she asked, almost violently.

Dorothy started and stared. What did this girl with the swart face and raven hair mean? Was it impertinence, a trespass—but Felicity broke in upon these thoughts.

"He has not returned to Hale. You know he has enemies. You know that well enough," she cried.

Dorothy rose. "Do you mean that Mr. Challis is in danger?" she asked, after a tense silence.

Felicity buried her face in her hands. "God knows. It may be worse than that," she whispered.

"What do you know?" asked Dorothy, in the same strained voice.

"Nothing, nothing!" She threw up her hands helplessly. "They have attempted his life before. You know that—you know that." She fixed her large, dark eyes almost with passion on the other, eyes which seemed

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so out of keeping with her small face. "There was the other night."

"Yes, yes," said Dorothy. "They want him away. I know that."

"I saved his life, too," said Felicity slowly. "I saved his life one night."

"Tell me all you know," said Dorothy impatiently.

"He was at Fairford Hall last night, and they followed him there. They surrounded the place. But at the Hall they say he escaped. Oh, I don't know, I don't know!" She shivered.

Dorothy left the room quickly, and reappeared very shortly in her walking dress.

"Do you know," she asked unexpectedly, "where Mr. Draycott is?"

Felicity shook her head. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I am going to Fairford," answered Dorothy. "I want you to find some news of the free traders. Your father——"

"My father is away," said Felicity, casting down her eyes; and then she remembered. "Yours——"

"My father is at Guildford market, and is gone two days," said Dorothy coldly, as if the association vexed her. "It is possible they know something at the 'Hen and Chickens.' Have you the courage to ask there?"

Felicity's eyes flashed. "You shall not say that, miss," she cried.

"Come, then," said Dorothy imperiously. "I will report to you what I may learn."

There was little conversation between the two girls ere they parted, for each was occupied with her thoughts, and strangely enough each was pushing her way forcibly into the other's thoughts. Yet Felicity was dismissed from mind as Dorothy hastened down to the Hall, and, once arrived, she had no room in her whole mental area save for the one active fear. She demanded to see Lady Fairford, not modestly content, like Felicity, with in-

quiries of the servants. Lady Fairford, who was acquainted with her in a distant way, was surprised at the visit, and not a little curious as to the cause of it. Dorothy did not beat about the bush.

"My lady, there is no news of Mr. Challis," she began, "and it is said he was here last night, with enemies in waiting."

Lady Fairford's interest increased. "Sit down, Miss Heywood," she said, in a friendly way. "It is true that Mr. Challis was here, but he rode home."

"There were enemies in waiting," said Dorothy. "Unscrupulous men who stick at nothing."

"Who sent you here, child?" asked Lady Fairford abruptly.

"No one," she replied. "It was Miss Felicity Graves that brought me the news, and I have come to inquire."

"Is Mr. Challis a great friend of yours, then, that you are so anxious?" asked the lady.

There was a hot flush on Dorothy's face. "He is a neighbour, and I may say a friend also," she said, with some dignity; "and if he were neither, I should be justified in the name of humanity in coming here."

"Tush! I mean no harm," said Lady Fairford, and her eyes passed enviously over the girl's face with its beautifying colour, and along the lines of her figure in the high-waisted gown. "But Mr. Challis, I doubt not, will—your anxiety is misplaced. He left here safely last night."

"Did he arrive safely, madam?" she said quickly.

Lady Fairford was disconcerted. "That I cannot say," she replied; "but it is impossible that he could have been overtaken by the men you speak of."

"You know not the free traders, my lady," said Dorothy.

Lady Fairford looked past her into space, and when she spoke it was in a gentle and more sympathetic manner.

"I believe your fears will prove groundless, and that

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Mr. Challis is safe. I saw him ride from the wicket-gate myself. There are not many that would avail against him in combat."

Pride leapt in Dorothy's heart. "No," said she. "There is none, I believe. Yet it is strange that he has not returned."

It was with mingled feelings that she left Fairford Hall, leaning now this way and now that in her mind. She reached Hale, and there conferred with Felicity, who had been able to get no information at the "Hen and Chickens." The innkeeper was involved with the smugglers, as were so many in those parts, but he could keep a close mouth, and at all events he professed that he knew nothing of Challis, and nothing of any movement against him. There was a conspiracy of silence in the countryside, and, what was ugliest, was the absence of the chief agents. As she pondered this Dorothy felt her hopes vanish and her heart sink. It had the appearance of a desperate act planned and executed. The more she considered it the less she liked it. She was Heywood's daughter, but she stood outside the smuggling interest, and held it in disdain. There was no ethical point involved in the condemnation or condonation of the trade in those days. It was merely a question of convenience, of policy, of upbringing, that divided the nation into two classes. Dorothy, who disapproved, knew nothing of the working of the illicit business, though she was aware of Draycott's association with it, of Graves's, and of some other principals'. But no one would have confided in her merely because she was her father's daughter. And Heywood, who might have helped her in this juncture, was absent and not expected back for another day.

She made Felicity promise to go over to Southover if she received news, and then went home. There was nothing to be done. She had begged Lady Fairford to inform Sir John, that he might take steps in hunting for his friend. Without any emotion on her passive face

Lady Fairford had promised to do so. Of Captain Balmain's friendly relations with Challis, Dorothy did not know. She had made all the appeal she could, and could but await the result with growing fears.

Her evening was restless ; she could not play nor read, and sat looking into the orchard till dark fell. In the morning word was brought by Felicity that Mr. Challis was still absent, and a sense of desolate heart-hunger filled her. The two girls looked at each other wildly. There was nothing now in their hearts save the elemental passion that was single of soul and would break into dirge on the slightest incitement.

" He may come to-night," said Dorothy, moving slow lips.

" He will not come to-night ! " cried Felicity through her storm of tears.

Dorothy looked at her wonderingly, and even with her wonder was a new pain.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW CUTTER

THE *Magpie* made a good passage to Jersey, and Challis was at once plunged into affairs of the deepest importance. He had dispatches from France to read, and instructions to make out, and during the three days he was in the island he had to interview various agents and intermediaries, principally from "Mr. Brown." As to "Mr. Brown" himself, the misgivings he had felt at their interview were growing with his improving experience of the man's character. He was an excellent judge of men, or he would not have had the success he had enjoyed in his delicate work ; and he was beginning to read "Mr. Brown" like a book. He had evidences of the man's vanity, of his enthusiastic fervour, of his revulsions of pessimism, and of his almost feminine emotionalism. What work he had done had been done out of loyalty to the cause of the Bourbons ; and it was with a bitter hatred that he hated Bonaparte. Yet he seemed to be despairing, and fealty to a house seemed to be merging at times in love of country. Challis could read in some letters the undercurrent pride which moved him at the conquests of France ; and even now he was recording the triumphant progress of Napoleon in Italy with obvious complaisance in the homage thereby offered in the Peninsula to French arms. Challis had food for thought in this and other directions.

On one occasion he left his inn and went down to the sea. The afternoon was warm and still, and the unruffled waters moved in a quiet sheet at his feet. He looked northwards where the open spaces of the Channel lay, serene and sunlit, and some sense of what an active war would really bring to those waters came to him. Napoleon was absent, yet his fleet might move at any moment, and there was a seasoned army waiting to be poured on Kentish shores. He had so far failed to discover what he wanted to know about the strength and numbers of the fleet in Boulogne. He was not satisfied with his information. The whole position seemed to him a puzzle, and troubled him with a vague sense of mystery. If his agents could not secure for him what he wished, he must act personally. That was his decision that sunny afternoon.

And turning, as he made it, he saw Duke Draycott.

Draycott saluted him with civil respect.

"Why, sir, they do say the world is small," he said.

"It can seem very large sometimes, Draycott," said Challis, "and we seem to move very slowly over its largeness."

"Ah, sir, you would not say that," said Draycott, "if you were on my new cutter. 'Tis the one I have built for the revenue. Gad, she flies, sir, she has wings. I'll wager her legs against any in His Majesty's service," he cried exultingly.

"I have heard of your skill in boat-building," said Challis.

"Well, sir, you shall judge of it, if you will," said Draycott. "I have run her on trial, and she galloped here in a light wind. She'd run to glory in a stiff wind, and jump the bars of the world in a gale. I can haul her right up to a breeze. She is a beauty."

"You crossed in her?" asked Challis.

"Aye. I have given her a trial run. I have her here. You shall go back in her if you are sailing in my time, sir."

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Challis had made no arrangements for his return, and expected to use the packet. After a moment's reflection he said—

"I should much like to test her powers, and you are kind to offer me the chance. I shall be returning to-morrow."

"That hits it, sir. I had fixed to-morrow for my journey. 'Tis an engagement, sir."

Draycott also had important business in Jersey, which was connected with his illicit trade, and not with his honourable craft. It was true that he had been trying his new boat which had been built for the Customs Board, and his professional pride in her outweighed even his contraband interests. She was built for use in Northern waters, but Draycott would have built a boat to be used against himself, so sincere was his delight in his work. Indeed, the *Magpie* had come from his yard and had interfered with his smuggling ventures on more than one occasion. But he had laughed. "Let her win, if she can," he said. "They won't drive her like me. I could show them a knock." The *Magpie*, however, was outclassed now by the new model, and he was a little contemptuous about her.

It was early the following morning that the *Swift* sailed for Chichester harbour, and Challis confessed that certainly she justified her name and the builder's confidence. She leapt the waves like a creature of life, and with a favouring west wind soon ate up the sea miles. By the fall of dark they were some thirty odd miles from Portsmouth, and were going free. Challis had seen at a glance that the cutter was not manned by revenue men. It was a trial trip in the builder's hands, as he understood. When dark fell, the lights of a lugger were visible to larboard.

"If I were chasing her, damn me, I would overhaul and cut her down in a brace of shakes," boasted Draycott; and suggested then that Mr. Challis might like refreshment in the cabin.

The New Cutter

III

Challis was by no means averse, as the sea-winds had threshed up his appetite, and he had dined meagrely. Cold viands attractively were spread upon the small table, and there was a bottle of good Burgundy also. Draycott joined him in the meal, and talked a great deal of the navy, of sea-service, of his craft, and of politics. His voice boomed on in the confined space of the cabin, and mingled with the noise of water and the creaking of the cordage above. Yet Draycott ate and drank with deliberation and displayed no more of the enthusiasm which he had shown for his boat. He seemed to be waiting, to be talking out time, and presently he rose at the sound of a shot and a whistle and excused himself.

"My men want me," he said as he left.

Challis sat on and finished his wine. His thoughts recurred to the problems which had been besetting him in Jersey, and he started and looked up suddenly on Draycott's return.

"I've made a mess of it, Mr. Challis," said the boat-builder. "And what to make of it I don't know. I've over-reached myself. By — I should never have dreamt——"

"Is anything the matter?" asked Challis.

"Do you hear that noise—those shots?" demanded Draycott, eyeing him. "That's the damned lugger bumping into us—those are the damned Frenchies calling out."

"What does it mean?" inquired Challis, rising abruptly.

"It means something ugly—ugly for me, and ugly for my boat, but ugliest for you, Mr. Challis."

"Come, man, speak up. Don't beat about," said Challis sharply.

"Look you, Mr. Challis," said Draycott impressively. "That lugger—it seems the Frenchman thought I was a revenue cutter after him, and he showed his teeth, by Heaven, turned and showed his teeth. My men

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never thought any harm until the lugger came crashing into us. She's armed like a man-o'-war, damn me. And the Frenchy's on deck cursing like any moss-trooper."

"He understands you are not after him?" inquired Challis. He was surprised to see how deliberate and unmoved Draycott was.

"I have told him so," said he. "But he is a Breton, and only partly understands. He has no English, and I only a little of his lingo. He swears there is a spy aboard."

"Spy!" echoed Challis wonderingly. Was it possible that his operations had been scented by the French authorities? But Draycott's next words dispelled that fear.

"Yes. There is some one, says he, that has been tampering with his trade for long now—some one that he wants to find—some one the whole free trade is pledged against."

Challis frowned. Where was this leading? He did not understand, and he was perplexed by Draycott himself. The whole episode was a puzzle.

"What is there behind this?" he asked shortly.

"That man is you, sir," said Draycott, laying a hand on Challis's shoulder. "He will search this cutter for you—swears by all that is sacred in his faith that he will lay you by the heels."

"But this is absurd," said Challis sternly. "This is a yarn, a fairy tale, a piece of fanatical folly. What know I of him or any of them?"

"He has his men on the deck—an evil crew," went on Draycott slowly, paying no heed at all. "There is no chance of resistance."

Challis made a gesture of impatience. "Let us end the farce," he said. "It seems I am no safer at sea than ashore."

He went up on deck, where a knot of men were gathered. A light swung in the shrouds, and he could

see the lugger alongside dimly—a huge, lumbering vessel. Some one flashed a light on him.

“It’s the man,” said a voice in French.

Challis seemed to stand alone, and he could only make out the figures of his enemies.

“What is it you want?” he asked in French. There was no reply to this; he advanced a step in the glare of the light, and it seemed as if the circle drew away. The swinging light in the shrouds, tossed by the fresh wind, flashed upon the faces on one side. They were strange to him, and foreign, and silent, as if waiting—but one he recognized. It was Draycott’s, who stood looking on curiously, as it were at a drama in which he was concerned only as a spectator. The next instant Challis was conscious of a heavy pain, and then of nothing.

The man who had felled him with a marling-spike from behind stooped over the body, and was joined by another, who helped him to lift it. The captain of the smugglers issued an order, and, carrying the body, they staggered to the side of the cutter and threw it over into the tumbling sea.

“That settles it,” said the captain of the lugger, and Draycott shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m damned glad it’s off my shoulders,” he said. “I couldn’t have slept comfortably if it had been there. Pouf!”

The Frenchman grinned, showing a monkey’s visage. “And now, monsieur, let us get to work,” he said.

Dreams . . . ugly visions . . . and a sense of something bright flashing past and impossible of capture . . . pains, and a grinding weight, coldness and passing through a gate—these things took form in the returning consciousness of Challis, who opened his eyes on darkness and pain and cold. He could not understand where he was, and could not remember where he had been. Slowly realization came to him, and he found first that he was icy cold, owing to the fact that the

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lower part of his body was immersed in water. Then he became aware that his head was resting on chains, and, moving a benumbed hand weakly, he found it in contact with a wooden wall. Into his confused brain filtered memory, and he had a mental vision of the group on deck, of the lights, of the faces. He had been struck down! That was the explanation. And now he was in the sea! As his mind recovered itself he realized that he was hanging in a loop of chains which depended from the deck of the cutter, and by which he had been caught when he had been thrown overboard. He assumed that that was what had happened. But he was not concerned with what had happened just then so much as what was happening. He was half in the water and half out, and it was as if he had been truncated. There was no feeling in his legs; they were paralysed with cold. He must succeed at any cost in altering his position.

He struggled feebly to raise himself, but could make no impression. His hands he could move, but nothing else. His legs were stark dead under him. He twisted his shoulders, and then something happened; his balance on the chain was upset, and he slipped wholly into the water. The plunge under roused in him mechanical and frenzied resistance. He struck out wildly with his arms, and blindly also. It seemed a long time before his hands encountered something. It felt like a rope, and he clutched it greedily, and pulled himself up partly out of the water. After he had gained breath he saw by the starlight that it was a rope hanging over the stern of the cutter. He explored it farther, and came upon a hard substance that seemed to be a barrel. Then it flashed upon his awakened wits what it meant—this was the smugglers' device of trailing contraband in the wake of the boat. He clambered as well as he could upon the barrel, and sat there, easing his hold on the rope, and awaiting strength for the next move.

Now he perceived that upon the farther, or larboard, side of the cutter the dark bulk of the lugger was pushing off. The two had finished their transhipment, and were parting company. Doubtless the barrels strung on his rope had come from the Frenchman. Draycott had conceived the impudent idea of smuggling with the Customs Board's own cutter!

These reflections did not come to Challis till afterwards. It can be imagined that he was in no condition to pursue a consistent course of thought. He was reduced to the status of a human animal bent on self-preservation at all costs. In this he displayed much cunning. He made a disposition of the barrel to suit him, and sat cramped on it, with his coat buttoned over the rope. He had a vague, formless, but impressive fear of falling off, of becoming unconscious again, and losing his perch. So he took precautions against it that would have done credit to primitive man. He was aware that the cutter was moving, and behind him he heard the swish of the water about the shifting rudder. Much of the ensuing time he must, as he reflected afterwards, have passed in a dazed condition without consciousness of the passage. He was continuously and terribly cold, and the physical pangs at last almost became an unconscious part of him. He woke up to a more vivid knowledge of his position only when he perceived the dim outlines of land, and thus knew that they must have reached Chichester harbour. A little later, as thoughts were bred in him they bred action, and he took the chance of the cutter's near approach to the shore to drop off the barrel. He floundered in the water, which was now come to be a monster, a horrible enemy to him; and he fought it desperately, until more by chance and good luck than by his own intelligent direction he found himself creeping on all fours on the edge of the high tide, and so he crawled safely to earth.

Once beyond the claws of the ravening sea Challis

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sank down, and, exhausted with his efforts, with the long exposure to the cold water, and his injuries, he fell into a profound slumber.

When he woke the sun was well up, and he was stiff and cold. He struggled to his feet, and painfully made his way across fields until he reached a cottage. He knocked at the door, and brought out a labouring man, who had the look of a farm hand. "I have had an accident," he explained, "a boating accident, and I am exhausted. Can I stay here? I want food and rest. Here are two guineas."

His hand that held the money trembled. The hind's gaze passed from the shipwrecked traveller to the gold, and fastened there.

"You're welcome, sir," he said. "I am off to work, but my woman will look after you."

His wife was a buxom, kindly creature, who was moved to pity at his appearance, and soon bustled about, preparing him a breakfast, which he ate sparingly. Then he undressed in the room to which he was directed, and slept through the whole day, the long, profound sleep of exhaustion. When he opened his eyes at last he found his clothes dried and ready for him, and when he had dressed he ate of a simple meal, and considered his next movements. The farm hand had got home from his work, and he struck another bargain with him, by which he was to be conveyed in a cart to Hale. This journey was accomplished at dusk, and it had fallen dark again when Challis entered the gates before the old manor-house and walked up the drive to his own door. His key was still in his pocket, and he had also kept all his papers on his person. He let himself in, and passed to the staircase which led to his rooms above. He stumbled in the darkness, and the giddiness which had possessed him all through the terrible time made it additionally difficult for him to get upstairs. In his bedroom he was surprised to see a light, and when he entered through the open door a cry, a frightened cry, assailed his ears.

Felicity stood for a moment white and fearful, and he heard himself speak her name.

"Felicity!"

The next moment she had rushed to his side like an elf, and was on her knees, with his hand in both hers, uttering low exclamations, which in his dizzy state he could not make out.

"Felicity, I must rest," he said. "Good little girl! Good little girl!" and he patted her head. "I have gone through a good deal, Felicity, and now I must rest."

"What have they done to you?" she cried, getting to her feet.

"They attempted my life. They would have drowned me," he answered wearily. "I will tell you all, but not now."

She cried out again, seeing above his ear the ugly wound matted with hair which the iron had made, and she rushed to the basin, and insisted on bathing it and washing it, crooning over it with indistinguishable sounds.

"Good little girl!" he said, patting her head. "Felicity, no one must know I am here. Do you understand? No one must know to-night. I shall be well to-morrow. I want to rest again. Good-night, Felicity."

She stood a moment in uncertainty, and then as he went towards the bed she withdrew. She went swiftly downstairs, past the kitchen, where she heard her father's voice in laughter. He had had good luck during these days of his unwelcome guest's absence, and he was celebrating it. Felicity stole to the larder and fetched from it food; then she secured a bottle of wine and a glass, and with her load returned noiselessly upstairs. She peeped into the bedroom, and saw Challis was asleep. She placed by the bedside a table with the food and wine, and then went out into the adjoining room, which he had used as an office. She fumbled in a drawer, found one of his pistols, and sank into a chair

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Sometime later she heard a sound, and looked into the bedroom. Challis had woke, and was eating a little. She saw him drink of the wine, and then he went back to bed. And there she sat with the pistol in her hand, unsleeping, ready to fight tooth and claw, ready to resist to the death any attempt upon the man for whom her wild, passionate heart overflowed with love. It was not until daylight struck into the rooms, showing the faint lamplight in the bedroom, that she rose and flitted silently away to her own chamber.

CHAPTER XI

FACE TO FACE

CHALLIS slept well, and woke early in the morning much refreshed. He had regained his normal condition, although the effects of his experiences still lingered in his body and his mind. It was the latter which now actively troubled him. He could stare facts in the face, and in so doing he saw, or thought he saw, more than he wanted to see.

One thing stuck out prominently, and that was the connection of Draycott with the smuggling trade of the coast. He saw clearly now how deep was the suspicion in which he himself was involved, and to what a pitch the desperadoes would go to secure freedom for their nefarious business. He had had three escapes, and the last had been the narrowest. This drew his attention, for the discoveries issuing from it staggered him. It was obvious now that the proportions of the free trade interests were so formidable as to terrorize the countryside, and set the law at defiance. Success and immunity had emboldened these lawless men so far as to commit them to the cruellest of crimes. How wide the net was spread he could only guess, but he began to view all people with suspicion. For one thing, it appeared that Heywood, of Southover Farm, was embroiled in the conspiracy, and at that he had winced and refrained. Yet it must be followed to its proper conclusion. He had been unwilling to put questions to Dorothy as to the

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knowledge she had obtained of the attempt to shoot him. Here it was all laid bare. She knew because her father was one of the gang. He grew bitter at the reflection, and something other than bitterness rose in him, till his anger swelled and broke in a tempest of indignation and scorn and shame. He dressed the wound on his head, and rang the bell for Felicity.

"What is that?" cried her mother, falling against the dresser in the kitchen. She put her hand to her heart. Was it a ghost? "My God!" she whispered.

"Hush, mother, it is all right," said Felicity, under her breath, though her father was still sleeping off the fumes of the brandy he had drunk overnight. "It is Mr. Challis. He has returned. He is safe."

Mrs. Graves sank into a chair. "Thank God!" she said weakly, and Felicity hastened upstairs to the call of the bell.

"Felicity," said Challis, smiling. Here was her god-like hero back again, in all his divine strength and beauty. "Felicity, all the world may know now. I am recovered. Did you bathe my wound? Child, child, you are goodness to me. And now I am hungry as a wolf. Away, and bring me victuals fit for gargantuan feasters or farm hands!"

She tripped away, glad at heart, and Challis breakfasted with an appetite. But he fell silent, consumed with his own dark thoughts, and she wondered to see him so changed in a short hour. He sighed, stretched himself, and rose.

"Felicity, I am going on an expedition. Wish me luck," he said.

She started in alarm. "You will not go——"

"Oh, there is no danger in it, none in the world, and yet I like it not, child. I think I would sooner face those who wanted my life." He mused. "I will tell you a story soon—a good-night story, a go-to-bed story, over which you can dream, Felicity."

He nodded, turned carelessly away, and went forth.

The scene was very beautiful that June morning; the spring choir was still in full tune, and the sun was adrift in blue spaces between fleecy clouds. He took the road to Southover, and, arrived there, was admitted by a maid-servant, who eyed him wonderingly.

A little later Dorothy came to him in the drawing-room that looked on the orchard. She came tremblingly, her face blanched, her footsteps uncertain; and then, on the sight of him, underwent a sudden change. It was as if life had in a flash re-entered her dying body, and re-animated it.

"You! You!" she cried. "Then it was no lie! no ghost!"

"It might have been a ghost, Miss Heywood," he said quietly.

"The maid came," she said. "She said you wanted to see my father. I——"

"It is perhaps as well that I should see you also," he said, still quietly. He looked at her beautiful face, now flushed, and saw her whole form palpitant before him, as if she were moved by some tremendous emotion, and were fighting it. He glanced toward the window and the sunshine, himself stirred beyond his understanding. He sought refuge in speech.

"I have had strange experiences these last days."

"We feared you were—that something had happened to you," she broke out.

He laughed rather bitterly. "Yes, something did happen," he said. "That is why I am here."

"Why you are here?" she repeated, in a lower voice. "What have you come here for, Mr. Challis, save as a friend?"

"Let me tell you a story," he said abruptly, "and ask you a question. And I will put the question first. How did you know that danger threatened me that night on the hillside?"

She paled visibly, and put out a hand as if to steady herself by a chair, for she was standing.

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"I don't know—there were rumours—things were overheard—the place is full of wicked men." She ended as if she appealed to him, as her eyes appealed. But he had no answer to that appeal in his hard state.

"I can understand," he said as slowly as ever, "this place is, as you say, crowded with evil-doers. And now I will tell you a story. I have had strange experiences." He paused.

"Were you in London?" she asked tremulously. "They said you were in London."

"Your father said that?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," she assented quickly.

He laughed. "You have read Mr. Coleridge's tale of the *Ancient Mariner*. I met an ancient mariner, who was young, and who held one that was no wedding guest. I was in Jersey, Miss Heywood."

"Jersey!" came from her in a whisper.

"I sailed from Jersey two days since, and when near the English coast I was struck down on the boat, and my body thrown into the sea—struck down by a gang of cut-throat smugglers, who——"

She did not hear, but he did. The door had opened, and he paused and glanced towards it. There entered Draycott and Heywood.

The maid who had given Dorothy the news had gone into the yard and found her master in talk with Draycott. To the former she had communicated the fact that Challis was asking for him. Draycott started, and swore a deep oath.

"By God, it's not possible!" he said.

"Why not? He has come from London," said Heywood.

His companion looked at him, forgetful for the moment of the suggestion to account for Challis's absence which he had himself made.

"I'll find out. Let me face it!" said Draycott.

No one could accuse this man of cowardice. He marched into the house and along the stone corridor

with slow, heavy, but undoubtful tread, and flung open the door. Heywood entered behind him.

"I'm heartily glad to see you safe and sound, sir," said Draycott, in his big voice. "I thought you were gone for sure." He was a man of practical action, and to him the solution of the mystery of this escape had faded into the background. He was engaged only by the difficulties of the situation. Anxiety might have been traced on his features.

"Well, I thought I was gone myself, Duke Draycott," said Challis, eyeing him calmly, as if in wondering estimate of his adversary. He felt his admiration challenged; this was a bold and courageous man.

"I was telling Miss Heywood a story," he went on easily. "Perhaps you would like to hear it—you also, Mr. Heywood," he added to the big form looming behind. "I was in Jersey on private business and I was met by a man with whom I was acquainted, and who offered me a passage in his boat to Chichester harbour. I welcomed a friendly offer, and closed with it in the friendly way which is in our natural English blood. You, Duke Draycott, know that we English are at bay now, and must present a united front to the world in arms. If I have any misgivings or tremors, I assure you they are not directed against my countrymen. At least they were not. Now I have reason to think otherwise."

He paused. Draycott's eyes were upon him, but the man made no movement or response. As yet he only suspected what the other knew, and his was not the nature to go out to meet trouble. He growled in his lair until he was provoked forth.

"This was a fine clipping boat," went on Challis, "and we made a good passage. But near the coast we fell in with a smuggler who overhauled us, and for some reason came to the conclusion that I was a revenue spy, and I was trepanned and dropped overboard."

"My God!" said Draycott heavily. "How did you escape?"

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"I came ashore on a float of casks—the smugglers' own trail," said Challis with a faint smile.

"The smugglers!" Duke started.

"Oh, they were both smugglers," said Challis. "French and English—both smugglers. They were in league. It was a concerted design upon my life—and by whom, think you?"

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Dorothy, hitherto tremulous in the background, came forward, her eyes blazing as she pointed her finger at Draycott.

"I will tell you," she cried. "There he stands—he is there, the murderer! It is you, Duke Draycott. They are all in league together to kill you, sir—the whole countryside. And that man is the leader of them—the worst of them!"

"Steady, girl, steady!" said Heywood. "I don't understand this. You told me Mr. Challis was in London, Duke," he said, his slow mind ponderously churning.

Draycott was staring full in Challis's face, and making up his bold mind. He did not heed.

"What you have said, sir, will exact explanation," he said. "I am no fool. I know you have directed this talk at me. But you may search my doings. You were thrown overboard by the Frenchies."

"Exactly," said Challis, smiling, "and with the help of their very good friend, Mr. Duke Draycott, builder of cutters to His Majesty."

"It is false," said Draycott, thundering. "Heywood, I was running the cutter on trial, and a French lugger came up with us, skipper drunk and crew vain-glorious. They claimed a French victory, and vowed we carried a spy. That was Mr. Challis. I was helpless against them. They boarded us, and threw him into the sea. Faith, I am glad to see him safe, none so glad. I thought of his corpse washing in the Channel, and it made me retch. There is the gospel!"

"Do not believe one word of it," cried Dorothy.

"He is false—false as Satan. He would assassinate you if he could. He has tried before, tried, and I baffled him!"

Draycott turned viciously upon her, but spoke to Heywood. "Get this girl away," he said peremptorily. "We are talking of what she knows nothing. What does she mean by this wild talk?"

"Hold, girl," said Heywood; "let Duke speak. This gentleman is mistook. Let us have justice."

"Justice shall be done," said Challis. "I will see justice is done."

He had moved as he spoke, and he felt a clutch on his coat.

"It is your life or his," said Dorothy. "Take his—take his."

Old Heywood stood frowning, perplexed, swallowed up in his mystifications. Draycott's dark eyes had an ugly glare in them.

"There is plenty of talk," he said, "but talk is nothing. What have you against me but your base suspicions? My career is known. I am favoured at the Customs Board, and I build for the Admiralty. Do you think these wild charges of yours could weigh against that and my repute?"

"I must think over your case, Duke Draycott," said Challis shortly. "You have interested me as a type, but I fancy you are too dangerous to spare."

"You have been injured. I can witness to that," said the smuggler boldly. "You had a blow on the head. I believe it has turned your brain. You don't know what you saw or what you did."

Challis's gaze passed to Heywood, and then to Dorothy. "I have found out what I wanted to know," he said. "I leave you to your consciences."

Challis went out of the door as he spoke, and after a momentary hesitation Dorothy followed him. She was aware of Draycott's voice like growling, angry thunder, "What does this mean, girl?" as she went. She paid

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no heed, but ran lightly, and caught up Challis at the gate.

"Mr. Challis, you must not—you must act," she panted. "It is his life or yours. I know him. Oh, you must acquaint the authorities. He is capable of any crime."

He had turned and faced her, looking at her gently and with admiring eyes.

"Miss Heywood," he said, "I owe you a profound apology. I have inflicted this detestable scene on you. I shall never forgive myself."

"Oh, what is all that?" she cried. "That is nothing. It is everything that you run a risk. You have had some experience of that—God knows how you must have suffered and what escaped! Well, you must run risk no longer. It is needful that you take action."

"You want me to lay an information against Draycott?" he inquired. "On what ground could I do so?"

"He has attempted your life," she cried fiercely.

He considered. "I have no proof," he said, "and that was why I spoke just now. What I could not satisfy publicly I satisfied privately. I was wrong. It should not have been done in your presence."

"Oh, these are all words, polite compliments," she said, almost impatiently. "You know he is a free trader. He leads them. Have him arrested, and so you will save yourself."

He looked at her gravely. "You tell me—all tell me that this free trade is widely spread about the coast, that most people are involved in it."

"What does that matter?" she asked impetuously.

He turned away. "I don't think I shall take action," he said slowly.

"You are mad—you don't know these people," she cried.

"Who are these people?" he asked, and then added quickly, "No, don't answer that. I have no wish to know. Miss Heywood, I am deeply grateful to you

for your kind interest. I am sorry to have brought trouble on you. May I see you soon ? ”

“ You will not see me again,” she gasped out of her full heart, “ unless you do as I tell you. See, the way is clear now. You have a horse. Ride into Chichester and lay the information. Abide there, Mr. Challis, until it is executed. There is your only safety.”

He took her hand and pressed it, lifted it to his lips.

“ Your words are precious to me,” he said, and turned and went.

She gazed after him, bewildered, wondering, hardly convinced. Did he mean to act on her advice ? What had he said ? What had she said ? In that moment of tumultuous feeling she did not realize that he had decided not to act in order to spare her father. He believed Heywood guilty ; he regarded him as accessory, at any rate, to the sordid crimes of Draycott and the others. She had no room in her mind for her father. She thought only of him, and when she went back to the house he was still the only tenant of her thoughts.

Meanwhile Heywood had wheeled slowly and ponderously on Draycott.

“ There is something here that I do not understand,” he said. “ There is mischief here.”

Draycott frowned. He hated a fool, and he found Heywood dull of understanding. Yet he was glad of that dullness now. His mind was engaged with other and blacker thoughts, but he was forced to abandon them in order to conciliate and humbug his companion. The cellars at Southover Farm were an invaluable storing-place.

“ It was Sarguet,” he said suddenly. “ I met him at the place we had agreed on, and there was no chance to prevent him. He was murderous. Word has gone abroad of this Challis. I was helpless.”

“ Why did you take him in the cutter ? ” asked Heywood, whose intelligence was at least sharp enough to see this point.

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"I wanted to give him a lesson," said Draycott. "I knew Sarguet would take him to France. He could have been landed there and confined until we had done all we wanted. Sarguet could have arranged to class him as a military prisoner."

Heywood digested this, and stirred when he had done so. Something was moving in his mind, and could not as yet obtain exit. Draycott, who had made these ingenious explanations almost contemptuously, now moodily returned to his earlier thoughts. He had Dorothy in his mind—and, beyond Dorothy, Challis. He burned like a furnace. And it was then that Dorothy returned. She, too, was afire, and she confronted him before her father.

"If you will not go," she said, "my father shall throw you out."

"What is that man to you?" he said, ignoring this.

She turned to Heywood. "Father, will you let this assassin defile your house any longer?"

Heywood moved a little, but his mind and his purpose had not yet vent; he said nothing.

"I want my answer," said Draycott, scowling. "There's more depends on it than you know. Heywood, ask her—she must tell us what this means."

"Father!" said Dorothy passionately.

Heywood's brain cleared at last. He looked from his daughter to Draycott.

"Is there anything, lass?" he asked.

"There is nothing save this man's arrogance and insolence," she answered scornfully.

"Duke Draycott," said the farmer, "you have mis-called my girl before, and you do it again. By heaven, no one shall interfere with her or disturb her. I am quit of it all. You lied to me when you said Challis was in London. You lied in other ways. You are lying now. You would drag me down dishonourably. I have a care for my name, and you shall not. I tell you, Duke Draycott, I am quit of it."

"You withdraw from us?" asked Draycott.

"I have done with you," said the farmer. "Get you gone."

Draycott rose. The red of the farmer's face had turned purple, and he knew the sign and respected it even in his fury. Cold calculation went on quickly under his tumultuous emotions.

"Very well," he said slowly. "I will come to-morrow to go into the reckoning. You have to account to Captain Noll."

"Bah!" said Dorothy. "You are he. Why make this mystery? You are the man of blood and greed."

He made no answer, but took his leave almost quietly, and the father and daughter were together. Dorothy rushed forward to the farmer's chair and seized his hand, throwing herself on her knees.

"Father! Father!" she exclaimed. "I am glad, oh so glad! Now you are free."

He passed his hand over her head abstractedly. "He shall learn not to browbeat you, child," he said. "Yet there is more to come. He would drag me down, would he? Let there be more to come!"

Draycott went down the road. His horse was at the "Hen and Chickens," and he strode towards it in a state of white passion. Arrived there he sent a messenger to Hale, bidding Graves to join him, and the ex-butler was soon in attendance, sleek, sly, and cautious.

"Your man is arrived home," was how Draycott greeted him, and grinned to see the fellow stagger.

He had heard nothing, for he had been away all day, and his daughter had kept silence on his return. Thus the news reached him for the first time.

"You said he was gone—safe!" he whispered hoarsely.

Draycott glanced at the door. They were alone in the tap-room.

"He was as safe as the Devil might make him," he said. "God knows how he escaped. Yet he is here."

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I have seen him. And by — he knows too much now. What he knew before is naught to what he knows now."

"He has nine lives," said Graves.

"No, four!" said Draycott, staring his companion in the eyes. "And this is the last. He will have spent all on this one."

Graves shifted uneasily. "Which?" he asked.

"That which falls to you," he said. "Look you, Graves, I have managed all so far. I have handled the work, and it seems that I am no more than a bungler. It is your turn."

"I have no power. I am not able——"

"Bah! I'll tell you a way," interrupted Draycott.

"How many kegs are stored in the cellars?"

"About five hundred," said Graves, after a pause.

"Why, man, you got off that number on the carts into the Weald!" said Draycott. "You grow too rich."

"You forget that I have had no chance or luck since he has been at Hale," said Graves hurriedly. "He has daunted me and will ruin me, that man," he added, with the weak virulence of a miser.

"Then you have a chance of settling him," said Draycott bluntly. "Look you, the cellars——"

He paused as the door opened, and Foster, the riding officer, entered. He nodded curtly to both men, and summoned the innkeeper with a bang on the wall.

"It would have done your heart good to see her," said Draycott. "She made nine knots under zephyrs. There is no cutter in the service to meet her."

Foster turned. The landlord had not appeared. "You are supplied, gentlemen," he said with a smile. "I am thirsty still. I'll rout him out."

He left the room. Graves had only met his eyes for a moment, and was fidgeting uneasily. Draycott had stared. Did the riding officer come from Challis? Did he know anything? The thought stirred him to instant action. He seized his companion's arm and began to

talk in a low, subdued voice, his bass note rattling now like the open sea on pebbles. "If you fail us——" he said menacingly, and looked up again.

The sinister figure of the riding officer was in the doorway. Draycott got up.

"If you have no supply yet," he said, "I'll take the liberty of serving you myself. Moreton!" he roared, "a quart of ale for Mr. Foster!"

Foster grinned. "I drink your health, Mr. Draycott," he said.

CHAPTER XII

THE BOTTLE OF CONSTANTIA

WHEN Graves left the " Hen and Chickens " he borrowed the innkeeper's nag and rode down into the flat land of the coast. Here he had work to do, for a landing had been arranged with a lugger from Havre, and it was necessary to settle details. He had, of course, acted in ignorance of Challis's return, and alterations in the plan were required. His lodger's presence had slowly kindled in the man's avaricious nature an absorbing hatred. For years now he had abused his position as custodian of Hale to enrich himself by illicit traffic with the seafaring smugglers. He was no sailor, but he had an astute brain, and he bargained shrewdly. The cellars at Hale, which had once been the underground chambers of a priory, were most useful for storage, and Graves had made money by the lease of these at first ; but later he had taken an active part in the free trade himself, had purchased cargoes, stored in his own interests, and sold at a profit. There were three stages in the commerce, of which the sea-passage was only the initial. When the luggers had landed their goods, these were carted by night to some depository, such as the cellars at Hale or those at Southover. Here they rested until they were disposed of farther afield, dispatched in innocent-seeming farm wains into the Weald, and distributed in various directions from the central depots. It will be seen that

unchallenged and unsupervised possession of Hale was extremely valuable to Graves. And the presence of Challis in the house interfered with his operations. It was for this reason that he had welcomed his removal, and it was by using this argument that Draycott was enabled to obtain his object—a subservient instrument. Incidentally, as has appeared, it was owing to Challis's return that the rearrangements on the coast were necessary.

Challis had returned to Hale in a very thoughtful mood. He had been moved by the attitude of Dorothy, which in its absolute abandonment of reserve, and its candid concern for him, had been altogether unexpected. He had sounded depths here which had never been suspected by him. Yet he was bound to protect her father, and though his eyes were open to the unscrupulous nature of Draycott and his associates, he did not hesitate in refusing in his own mind to take any step which would involve Heywood in ruin, or at least suspicion. He had not, he reflected, spent years in the Secret Service and gone unscathed, only now to fear and doubt, and take cover, at the expense of others. No; he would be wary, but he would not act—not at the moment, at any rate. He ate a hearty dinner, and spent the afternoon on sorting his papers and in copying such of his documents as had suffered from his prolonged immersion in the sea. Already the physical effects of that experience were fading away. He felt in renewed strength, and mentally equipped to checkmate even the Terror of Europe. In his engrossing work mere smugglers could have no room, and only now and then, as he looked up at the westering sunlight, did some thought, some wonder, some trouble in which a girl's face was certainly engaged, flit across his mind and chequer it with passing doubt and pleasure.

When Graves returned it was evening, but a beautiful, light, summer evening, in which the whole world was dimly lucent. He entered the huge kitchen, and greeted

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his wife cheerfully ; asked after his daughter, who was in the adjoining room, and listened ; and then he said, with a great show of friendly interest, " They tell me Challis has returned. I had begun to think something must have happened. It is a relief to know he is safe."

Mrs. Graves said nothing ; only stared at him in astonishment at his attitude.

" But at the same time, Judith, I am glad he was away, and gave me time to get rid of the barrels. I owe him no grudge now. Let him come back, and welcome !"

" But there are more kegs, you said," his wife interjected.

" Bah ! They are a fleabite. I have carted the most, and made good prices too. Captain Noll may take his toll, and does ; but, damn me, he sees we get our profit too. No, Challis is welcome now. Where is he ?"

Felicity emerged from the scullery at this moment, and it was she who replied.

" He has been writing almost all day," she said.

" Ah !" said Graves, nodding. " He has concerns with the Government, as I said. But never a word of that, mind you," he added, turning like some ferocious rodent on his wife and daughter ; " they suppose him a Customs spy. Bah ! There is none here knows the truth about him but me. These Sussex louts are all dolts as well."

He seemed complacent in his scorn, and it was obvious to his wife and daughter that he had been drinking heavily. He called now for brandy, and then suddenly countermanded his order. " No, wait ; I'll carry what I have," he said. " What's o'clock ?" He examined his watch, and sat down and looked out of the windows at the falling night. " I have done a good week's business," he remarked, " and a man is warranted a bottle on that. Mr. Challis shall drink with me, if he will honour me." He laughed foolishly, and, getting to his feet, went out.

Felicity looked at her mother questioningly. " What has happened ?" she asked in a low voice. " He is so

different. Is it true that he does not mind Mr. Challis now? Has he changed?"

Mrs. Graves shook her head; she had learned in her life to give up many problems, and her husband was one of them.

"I will prepare the supper," she said. "It is near time."

Felicity found Challis with a smile on his face, as he stretched himself; he had earned his supper, and inquired quizzically, and with an absurd assumption of greed, about its constituent elements. She was delighted to see him so recovered, and in a little pause ventured to address him.

"You were going to tell me, sir, of your adventures."

He looked up. "Yes, Felicity," he said; "but I think I will wait just a little. It is an odd world, and there are odd things to tell. Yes, you shall have the story—but to-morrow. At present I am anhungered like an ogre who must eat if it be only pretty children."

He supped in silent reverie, his mind reverting to problems which had pressed upon him lately, and which were at present insoluble. It was after his supper that Graves presented himself. He was very respectful, and expressed his satisfaction at Challis's safe return.

"You had my letter?" asked Challis.

"Yes, sir; but we are glad to see you back. The house has seemed lonely without you. I hope your journey was successful, sir."

If this were designed to evoke from Challis his story, it failed of its end. Graves presented the face of one who knew nothing of the disastrous adventure, and had heard nothing. How could he be assumed to know? What he had learned from Draycott was locked up in his shrivelled heart, and any information as to his guest's trip must come from the guest himself. But Challis said nothing.

"I hope the supper was to your liking, sir, and the wine?" went on Graves.

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"Thank you, yes," said Challis.

"My lord has some good wines you have not tasted, sir. His lordship does not even know his own cellar, if I may say so."

"Indeed!" said Challis listlessly.

"You have seen the barrow, sir?" continued Graves.

Challis looked up. "The barrow?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir. They are building a bonfire there."

"Ah!" Challis was interested. This had been the matter of his own representations to the Government. He had urged that beacons should be established along the coast in order that intelligence of the French fleet might be flashed from point to point in the event of its sailing. This was to revive the precedent of the Spanish Armada, and he was glad to learn that the Government had adopted his advice. It was a beautiful evening, and he rose.

"I will have a look at it," he said.

He armed himself with a pistol and went forth. Graves watched him go, and then descended to the kitchen. He reported the guest's departure to his wife and daughter.

"Mr. Challis has gone out," he said.

Felicity started, and seemed as if she would have questioned him, but she sank back in her chair. Graves sat musing for some time, and then yawned and looked at the clock.

"It's high time we were all abed," he said, and, as his daughter made no movement in response, said peremptorily, "Come, did you hear? I'm tired, and we are all best abed. Mr. Challis has his own key."

His wife and daughter obeyed his orders, as they were accustomed to obey them. It was ten o'clock, and the sky was still light. Graves himself retired to his room, which was not that of his wife, but a chamber where he kept his money and made up his books, and which remained sacrosanct to his personal privacy. He rested in full dress on the bed, and waited and listened.

Challis returned about eleven, and let himself in by his door. He entered the library before retiring, and to him Graves entered, soft of foot.

"I was wondering if you were in, sir," he said respectfully. "I came to see to the lamp."

"I have just returned. I will put it out myself," said Challis curtly.

"Is there anything I can get for you, sir?" inquired Graves, with the butler's obsequiousness.

"I think not, thank you."

Graves stirred slightly, as if he recognized the liberty he was taking, and were afraid of it. "Begging your pardon, sir, I took the liberty of getting you a bottle of wine," he said, "some of his lordship's best."

"It is good of you, Graves," said Challis pleasantly. "I believe I should enjoy a glass before bed. What say you?" he asked, smiling, "shall we crack the bottle together?"

"I shall be honoured, sir," said Graves, and deftly produced glasses and opened the bottle.

It was a rare port wine which they drank, and Challis paid his testimony to it. They filled the glasses again, and the liquor pleasantly sent its glow through the body, and stimulated to friendly talk.

"His lordship," said Graves, "don't know what he's got here, if I may say so with respect."

"It is certainly a fine wine," said Challis.

"In the cellars, sir, there are as good and may be better. There is a bin to which I called his lordship's attention. 'Well, Graves,' says his lordship, 'try it on the dog,' and he said something in Latin, sir. That dog was me, sir; and I have never dared try it. It seemed throwing gold away. But I would give much to be able to sample it, sir."

"Well, as his lordship is willing, why not?" asked Challis, smiling.

"Does that signify you would honour me, sir?" inquired Graves with respectful eagerness.

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Challis hesitated and mused, but the wine had had its effect. "I dare venture," he said.

Graves, who had seated himself at his companion's request, rose with alacrity, and went as far as the door. There he turned as on a sudden thought.

"Would you care to look at the cellars, sir?" he asked.

Again Challis hesitated and mused. "Certainly!" he said, thinking to humour the man's pride in his discoveries.

They passed noiselessly into the corridor, where a candle burned on a table. This Graves snatched up, and with it led the way through the silent house to the stairway which descended to the basement. The greater part of this was filled with empty casks, vacant bins, and boxes. But there were small parcels of wine here and there, to which Graves drew attention with appropriate remarks.

"This isn't the choicest cellar," he explained. "There is an inner sanctum, sir, where the wine of which I spoke is kept. It is an old Constantia." He paused before a huge stone door, which had once evidently been bricked up, and on which his light played coldly, found a key in his bunch, and opened it. A smell as of darkness and decay saluted Challis's nostrils. So far as the meagre light carried he made out an extensive vault with arched supports. It was, in fact, the underground storehouse of the ancient priory, and, having been discovered by Graves, was now in use as the cellars of the free trade. The array of kegs struck Challis at once, but his mind was not alert enough to make a definite inference.

"If you go to the right, sir," he heard Graves say, and stepping out he stumbled over a cask which lay hidden in the darkness before him. The impact caused him to fall forward, and he put out his hands to save himself. As he recovered his upright position the cellars were suddenly plunged into darkness. He supposed

that the candle had blown out, for it was a gusty night, and he remembered that the candle had guttered on their way through the passages, so he called to Graves. There was no answer. He felt his way towards the door, and called again. Still there was silence, save for the reverberations of his voice from the arches. His sense of direction had been accurate, and he found the door. It was shut and evidently locked. With a convulsion of his whole being he realized what had happened. He had been shut in.

Instantaneously his mind picked up the clues. Graves had lured him there ; Graves, whom he had never suspected, was one of the gang who had determined to get rid of him !

The full significance of his situation was only pressed home slowly. He remembered the stone door, and he had a picture in his mind of the groined cellar, strewn with many barrels. This was a smugglers' warehouse, and he had been walled up in it, as it were, that they might be rid of him. He sat down on an upturned barrel and considered the position in all its circumstances.

The cellars were in pitch-black night, and almost audible silence. If he was to explore his prison he must explore in darkness, feeling his way at every step. And if he once left the neighbourhood of the door, should he ever find his way back ? The door, as has been stated, was of stone, and massive, and there seemed no chance of breaking through it. He felt in his pockets, but all he had for implements was his knife, an ineffectual thing, and his pistol. This latter he fingered wonderingly. But there was no use for it. What was he to do ? He was to be left in the cellars to die of starvation, unless he could find a way of escape. It looked as though his enemies at last had succeeded, and that his destruction had been cruelly and treacherously compassed. Challis was accustomed to strait places and tight corners, and he had learned to make quick decisions. He saw that further consideration would be required of him, but

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realized that he could do no good at the moment by following up his train of thoughts. It was late at night, and even if it were practicable to draw attention to his case by persistent noise, it was necessary that some one should be about to overhear. Moreover, the return of day might disclose some shaft of light penetrating into his prison, and thus offer him some relief from the utter darkness, and possibly even some assistance in his search for an outlet. So Challis, with resolution that was almost unnatural, settled himself on the stone-flagged floor, propped by a keg of brandy, and passed gradually to sleep. "This is real night," he told himself. "Let me sleep while I can, and think I shall rise to the song of birds."

He did not, in fact, know at what hour he rose, but no voices of birds reached his subterranean chamber. Nor was any ray of light visible. He was still wrapped about with profound darkness. If he had only been able to see his watch and note the time it would sensibly have helped him. He could see and hear nothing, though he supposed that the work of the house was in progress. He had only his thoughts to occupy him, and those were not pleasant thoughts. He did not want to abandon any advantage he might have through being near the door, and yet he was anxious to investigate the cellar in case it might offer some way of escape. A further exploration of his pockets resulted in the discovery of nothing to help him. Then he suddenly sat down on his barrel, removed a boot, pulled off a stocking, and began to unravel the wool. This took him an hour or more.

When he had completed his task he fastened the threads together and tied one end about his barrel. After which he set out gingerly on a tour about his prison, paying out the wool very carefully. He had several mishaps, bumping into casks and falling over kegs, and coming up against arches, but he reached the outer wall at last, and feeling along it traversed one

side of the underground cell. He was constantly in fear lest his delicate thread should snap, and he took extraordinary precautions that it should not. The net result of his exploration brought him no satisfaction. The outer wall was of stone, and showed no signs of any opening. He had heard from Felicity that Hale had once been a priory, and he guessed that these subterranean rooms dated back to the earliest foundation of the house. It was not probable that there was any outlet from them save through the doorway. It was likely that this cellar had been used in old time for punitive purposes, when such institutions as this religious establishment had need for secret vaults into which neither law nor custom could penetrate. Challis never knew how long it had taken him to make his circuit, but when he had successfully regained his barrel near the door he was disheartened. There seemed no chance for him now but to try to reveal his predicament to the people in the house. He could depend upon Felicity, he felt sure, and also on her mother ; it was only Graves he had to fear. For a space of time, which he did not attempt to estimate, he banged on the door, shouted, and clattered with any implement he could find. There were staves of broken casks, some truncated pieces of iron, and other detritus of the vault. These he used until his strength and hope failed him, and no answer came to him. He was barred in beyond the reach of sound, save that, it might be, of the archangel's trump.

When he had made this discovery he sat down to his desperate thoughts. Short of a miracle there was no help for him ; there was nothing between him and a terrible death, in which the first thing to yield might be his brain. The darkness was the worst feature in his trial. It obsessed him ; it was permanent, impenetrable, all-pervading, and paramount. He could endure night with its kindly sleep, and even the long winter darkness seemed friendly ; but this enforced blackness maddened

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him. It was to be interminable. It would go on, not for a winter's night, but to-day, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, for ever—no, in a week at most, surely, he would obtain release through the inevitable failure of his bodily powers. At least there was that refuge in store. But was there no other? Once more he beat, and shouted, and stormed in his gaol, and once more he had no answer. He essayed a second circuit of the cellar, and found no issue. He sank, exhausted, before the stone door. Sleep came to him gently, as if she were anxious to mitigate this awful iron dispensation of Providence. He slept and dreamt nightmares.

When he awoke, he knew not whether it were day or night, nor how long he had slept. An intolerable thirst assailed him. He was not conscious of hunger, but only of an overpowering thirst. Why had not the idea occurred to him before? He was thirsty in the midst of abundance. Guiding himself to a cask, he began to bore with his knife, and after a long time he heard the trickle of something. What was it? He put his fingers to the hole, and tasted. Brandy! Greedily he sucked at the vent until the fire in his throat drove him away. He felt new life in his veins, but just with that feeling came a realization that madness lay that way. Yet madness lay all ways! He sat down, and for the hundredth time bent his mind to the problem of his release. He heard the trickle of the escaping brandy, and paid no heed. His mind was alert, brilliant. He had no doubt now as to the end. He could escape. He could make a dozen plans, and any one of them would suffice him. He rose, humming a tune. These cellars must be filled from above. There was an opening there. He would go round again, clamber on the barrels and explore the roof. By some aperture there the cellar had been filled by the smugglers. He could find that aperture by probing. It would be wood, a cellar-door; and he could bore through it with his knife—in time. Give him one day, two days—more; he could last out

that time. He did not feel sensibly weaker for his confinement. He felt, on the contrary, that he could do the work of a lion.

He began the round of his prison again, with his wool-thread in his hand, almost cheerfully, and carried out his programme along one wall. There was no sign of anything above but the unyielding stone. Undismayed, he began on another side. Then it seemed to him that there was less darkness a little way on his left. Eagerly he felt his way to the place, moved an empty cask below it for foothold, and explored. There was no difference here ; all was still impermeable concrete and stone. He cursed at the failure of his hope, and then was aware that the thread he held in his hand was but a wisp, had parted from the safeguarding line, and that he was helpless in the middle of an unknown darkness !

He was very still for a few minutes after this discovery, and then began to grope patiently for the broken end of the wool. He had no notion when it had broken, but he crawled on the floor, seeking it. He crawled. . . .

Challis stood up. He had blundered into casks and arches. He could not now even find a wall. It was evident that he had been going about in a circle. He stood up, with that constant veil over his eyes, and groped for a cask. There was brandy on all sides of him, but it was not brandy he wanted. He wanted water. He considered with his hand upon the keg and then withdrew.

"No," he murmured, "not yet. It is too dangerous," and something in his pocket drew his mind. He felt it. "No ; not yet, not yet—only in the last resort," he murmured. It was his pistol.

CHAPTER XIII

BLACK NIGHT

WHEN Felicity had gone to her room, which was in the corridor in which Challis had his bedroom and its annexe, she only partially disrobed, and lay upon the bed listening. She had established herself as watch-dog for this handsome stranger from London, and now she was uneasy at his absence. She had reason to fear, more reason than she knew, although she had not heard the details of the last attempt upon his life. She listened and waited, and then, on a sound from below, softly opened her door, and went to the head of the staircase. Her heart bounded joyously in relief, as she recognized Challis's voice, and knew he had returned in safety. Then she heard her father's, suave and low, and she stole back to her room satisfied. A little later she was asleep.

In the morning she was astounded that Challis did not appear. She knocked on his bedroom, and, finally, on receiving no reply to repeated rappings, ventured within, and found that the bed had not been slept in. Alarmed, she explored the other rooms without success, and then hastened down to her mother with the news. Graves entered at the same moment, sallow, furtive of eye, and uneasy of expression.

"Mr. Challis not up!" he said. "He must have overslept."

"He has never been in bed. There is no trace of him," exclaimed Felicity.

Graves looked away. "Well, he has business, and he knows it best," he said. "I doubt he has not gone for long."

"But he would have left some word," protested Mrs. Graves.

"What happened the other day, Judith?" said Graves. "Mr. Challis went without warning on a voyage to Jersey. He has probably done so again. It is true he said no word when he went out for his walk, but he is a silent man. He has secrets to conceal. I told you what he was, and none knows but me."

Felicity leaned forward drinking in greedily, yet with deep misgiving, what was being said. Mrs. Graves, who was manifestly upset by Challis's absence, pursued the conversation.

"What was it you said?"

"Why, Challis is in the Secret Service of the Government. He is called upon at any time. His movements are mysterious. He is practically a spy!"

Felicity heard this, but she did not heed it. She was occupied by the fact that her father was concealing from them the return of Challis. What was his object? She experienced a dread sense of fear. She said nothing, but her fears haunted every cranny of the house and every hollow of the Downs. Graves ate his breakfast with zest, and she scanned the face of this unscrupulous man who was her father with repulsion and terror.

But she kept her own counsel, resolved to watch and observe, and in her heart she prayed steadfastly for the safety of the man she loved so desperately. All that day she hoped. It was, of course, possible that her father had spoken the truth as to the reason of Challis's absence, though his concealment of his return made her distrust him. Yet in the evening her hopes revived. She thought to catch her father out, and to confound him by a display of her knowledge, and when he met her

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challenge she had a surge of confidence in her heart. She had found in the library, in a cupboard, the bottle of port wine, and she brought it into the kitchen when her father was there, and set it before him on the table with the stained glasses.

The ex-butler looked swiftly from them to his daughter.

"They were in the cupboard," she said.

"Yes," said Graves. "It was Challis's last night. I did not tell you that. It is none of my business after all. Challis got back from his walk and brought a visitor. He must have met him. He had the air of a foreigner, but I did not hear him speak. Challis ordered wine, and I fetched him the bottle and opened it. I left them together in low talk, and went to bed. That was the last I saw of Challis. It is my notion that the stranger brought him news of urgency, and that he went off with him."

He looked suspiciously at Felicity, but her face had lightened, and she was not thinking of him.

"A stranger!" she said, and added, "I heard him come in. I thought he was talking with you."

"Yes," admitted Graves. "He called me in. I was not in bed, and I took him the bottle. He is used to sudden goings. Look you, my girl, how he went before."

It was true. He had gone before mysteriously, and, remembering this, Felicity was conscious that a load of care slipped from her shoulders. Mr. Challis had gone abroad on one of his mysterious journeys. He was in the employment of Government, an agent in regard to the French war.

She slept cheerfully and without misgivings that night, nor did any return to her till later in the day. It was in the early evening that she was returning from the library, where she had been preparing things against the guest's return; and as she passed the entrance to the cellars she heard a strange, short, stifled creak which drew her attention. Next moment she saw her father on the cellar stairs. He had a jug of brandy in one

hand, and in the other a lighted candle. His attitude arrested her. He was leaning against the wall, as if unable to proceed, and the liquor was streaming from the spout of the jug unnoticed by him. His face, half turned to the darkness of the cellar, was ghastly in candle-light. She called to him, asking what had happened, and he recovered himself and slowly finished his ascent.

"Take the jug," he said. "I had a little touch of faintness."

Fear dwelt in his face and ravaged its expression. Felicity wondered. She took the jug, and he followed her with difficulty to the kitchen. At the supper he ate little, and drank heavily, and was intoxicated presently. In this state his cheerfulness returned, and he talked a great deal with confidence, boasted of what a future he would build up, and made extravagant statements as to his future position. Once he paused suddenly, his jaw fallen, and seemed to listen, his head turned to the door which led from the kitchen to the serving rooms beyond. Then he laughed and drank more. He staggered to his bed quite early.

Felicity, watchful as ever, had observed all these signs of a troubled conscience, and was vaguely perturbed without definite cause. There entered her mind in a flood all the old suspicions, doubts, and fears. Had there been foul play to which her father was a party? She slept ill that night, and spent the next morning in wretchedness. Her father, morose and moody, left Hale early, and she saw him no more that day. Early in the afternoon a visitor arrived, the revenue Lieutenant whom she had seen before. Beswick it was, and he inquired for Mr. Challis, and heard of his absence with surprise.

"But he was expecting me," he said. "I had important business with him," and asked for further news.

Felicity informed him that Mr. Challis had been gone two days, and that she did not know his present address.

The Lieutenant showed himself put out, frowned,

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pondered, and finally asked if he might write a message to be delivered to Challis immediately on his return. Felicity brought him pen and ink, with a heart that sank in her, and resurgent forebodings.

When the visitor had gone she went upstairs to Challis's rooms, and began to pry about in every corner. She was resolved to probe the mystery, even though her heart trembled at the thought of what she might discover. She found his clothes set aside on the wardrobe drawers, and to see them idle thus thrilled her with a terrible pang. She glanced at his hats, went over all his displayed effects, and at last came face to face with his locked valise. Would that provide her with any clue? Dare she force that open in his own interests, as it might prove?

She turned away with a sigh, doubting. What in that valise could shed a light upon its owner's disappearance? Shrinking from the responsibility of this trespass she turned, and her eyes again fell on the pegs on which his coats and hats were hung. Suddenly an idea struck her, and she went closer; she counted the hats. She had often seen the guest's wardrobe, and admired its elegance and suitability to the mode. And now, like a woman, she recognized the hats. They were all there. If Challis went forth that night he must have gone bare-headed!

This discovery terrified her, and she hurried down into the library. It was there that she last had had knowledge of Challis; it was there that she had heard him talking to her father. Her investigation must begin there. Round and round the room she went, but received no inspiration, no guidance. All was silent, all was still. The inanimate furniture seemed to stare at her mutely, coldly. Then by chance her gaze fell on the carpet, and her careful eyes took in a big grease-spot. It affronted her housewife's spirit. She stooped to examine it. It was evidently the issue from a guttering candle. It was no chance that made her suddenly

start and move forward in eager scrutiny of the floor ; her brain had seized on the possibilities latent in this discovery. She moved to the door, and there was another grease-mark. Outside in the passage she paused. Would it lead her upstairs ? No ; a further spot was marked down the corridor. . . . She followed, and came to a stop at the head of the stairs which descended to the cellars.

There she leaned for faintness against the door, for of a sudden a picture flashed before her, a recollection emerging from the past. It was the memory of a man—her father—standing on the stairs, scared and shaken, with a jug in his hand, from which the brandy splashed unheeded. She went to the kitchen, obtained a candle, lighted it, and returned. Then she went down into the first cellar. She had been there often before. But what was there now in the atmosphere that frightened her ? The candle shook in her hand. And beyond was the inner cellar. What terrified her in the thought of that ? The stone door was locked ; she had never been in that private storehouse, but she was aware that the smugglers stored their kegs there. Her father had the key. She stole away with fears and thoughts and resolves gnawing and fighting in her heart.

Graves returned with a friend later in the day in rollicking spirits. This friend had a seafaring air, and Felicity guessed him to be one of the lugger captains that infested the coast, and with whom her father had relations. They discussed business matters in private, ate and drank, and continued to drink ; so that in the end the free trader stayed perforce in the host's house, and Graves himself was tucked up in bed by his wife. Mrs. Graves sent Felicity to bed, and herself retired. Half an hour later the door of the daughter's chamber opened, and she crept downstairs to her father's room. There was light in the sky, and the blind had only been partially drawn by Mrs. Graves. The room was dimly visible, and all that it held. Felicity halted on the threshold,

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and then went boldly forward. Her object was to find her father's keys. She knew that he kept them in his room, but she did not know where. A heavy, irregular sound of snoring filled the room, and, encouraged by this, she advanced. She searched the mantelpiece, the toilet-table, and other places which she thought likely to yield a result, and at last was forced to go through the pockets of his clothes. Here her persistence was rewarded by the discovery of a bunch of keys, in which she hoped to find that which opened the inner cellar door. Armed with these she stealthily made her way out into the passage, and into the kitchen. She lighted a candle, and then silently descended into the subterranean chambers.

Challis awoke from his sleep, which was a sleep of exhaustion, troubled by evil dreams, and the sense of his position pressed home on him with an ever-increasing force—the eternal silence, the eternal darkness, would be his till the end. It was, perhaps, a little consolation to reflect that the end could not be far away—a few days at the most. He was overpowered once more with thirst, and his thoughts flew to the brandy kegs. No; there was no hope of relieving his parched tongue that way. That way lay only madness. He turned his mind resolutely away from the fascination of revived courage and renewed strength through that treacherous draught.

Nowhere could he see any chance of escape from his inflexible and unscrupulous enemies. Should he wait so long as the natural term which would be given him—for death? Once more he fingered the pistol in his pocket, and once more dropped it to await emergencies. He struggled up, and moved blindly, vainly about his prison. He blundered into barrels and bumped against arches, tried to direct his progress, and subsided once more into stillness. Could he sleep again? Even with horrid dreams it was something to pass out of the hopeless present into a false world, may be of hopes, of visions—well, even if it were of ugly things, so long as

they were different from this. He shut his eyes, and he seemed to get more light that way. His mind offered him less darkness than the unrelieved physical blankness of the eyes. He dozed from weakness, and woke up in pain and distress from growing thirst. Should he tap a barrel and drink himself insensible?

He stared into blackness, and his eyes were caught by a cloudiness, a fleecy formlessness in the dark. He stared. Was it some ingress of light, so unexpected, so blessed?

It seemed to him that a globe of light was moving in the space above him. It illumined nothing in the cellar, but was itself luminous. Curious nervous thrills passed through him; his arm was full of pins and needles, and his fingers trembled and moved. He felt that they could work independently of his will. All the time he saw globular lights, passing, shifting, growing, and lessening. What could be the meaning of it?

Suddenly into his heart sprang the thought and image of his mother, dead these five years, his mother who had loved him with a great devotion. And what was this strange portent?

A grey and cloudy column was before him, and he seemed to read into it a simulacrum of his mother's face as he had known it, smiling, reassuring, with infinite tenderness in the gaze with which she held him. He raised himself on his elbow and looked intently, and slowly the image faded, and he was with his familiar darkness once again. Yet somehow that darkness did not now seem so dark or so forbidding. His surroundings had lost their terrors, and he was rapt up into other thoughts and other memories. Slowly sleep crept upon him, yet ere it wholly took possession of him he had withdrawn from his pocket his pistol, and discharged it into empty space. That temptation at least should go. The report, echoing from the walls, reached Graves in the outer cellar, and sent him reeling against the staircase. What was it to him? It was a sign of

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life within the prison, and yet he caught at it fearfully and eagerly as the sign of death. The prisoner could endure his torture no longer.

Challis slept and woke and slept again. His mind was sometimes as vacant as the surrounding darkness, and then again leapt to life. He made several attempts to reach the door, but he had lost all sense of direction. If he had succeeded in finding it, he wondered idly if his penknife could ever have pierced the hard substance of the stone. He calculated how many hours' work it might take him to bore a small hole through, and then how many hours to enlarge this into a cavity big enough to admit his body. It would, he thought grimly, be just about one week after his death !

He drove his knife through a keg with difficulty, and found that it contained wine. This was less destructive than the brandy, and helped to assuage his fierce thirst. He drank sparingly, however, for he was on guard against himself.

He opened his eyes on darkness once more, and minded it not. Once more he saw floating globes of light, and wondered, and then suddenly a change, a radiance so tremendous and so bright that his eyes could scarcely endure it. He blinked and sat up, and the whole cavern was awake and alive with light. He could see the arches, the walls, the strewn kegs and barrels, and just before him the open doorway, and in it Felicity, standing with the candle in her hand.

His voice sounded weak as he called her name, and she advanced ; her eyes steadfast on him, shining bright and happy ; but her hands were trembling.

" Is it you, Felicity ? " he said, in a low voice. " It is the visit of an angel," and he rose, kissed her brow, and staggered. She caught him, that slight creature, in an arm that seemed of iron, and he smiled and thanked her. He looked about him.

" Let us get away," he said, with a shudder, and leaned on her.

She supported him to the door, and through the farther cellar, speechless, with a great delight animating her heart, and together they got to the library.

"Water! give me water!" he said, sinking into a chair.

She got the water, and he drank greedily, and while he was drinking she was preparing food for him.

"How long is it?" he asked. "What is the hour? Is it day or night?"

"It is night," she answered. "It is three days. You must eat, sir."

He looked at the food, ate a little, and then sipped a glass of brandy she had brought him. It flushed the blood in his arteries, and he was able to think and talk more like his normal self. He inquired how she had found him.

"I traced the way to the cellars, sir," she said. "I got the keys and opened the door. You are not safe here."

He was puzzled and did not understand. She had found him, but how? It could not be that Graves had sent her to release him. How could he guess that she kept watch and ward over him as a lioness over her cub? Yet his mind had so far resumed its reign as to show him the delicate ground on which they stood together. Her father had endeavoured to murder him in that horrible manner. Did she know it?

In any case he could not deal with Graves as he would have desired. He could not give up to the justice he deserved the father of the girl who had rescued him. That would be to repay her ill. As he turned over these considerations she spoke again.

"You must eat. You have been starved."

He ate a little more, smiling at her. "I feel much better now," he said.

She poured him out more brandy. She asked no questions. He felt in his heart she knew.

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"You are very good to me, Felicity," he said. "What makes you?" and he put a hand on hers which was upon the table.

She let hers remain a little while, and then withdrew it.

"You must go away. You must leave here," she said. "You are in danger."

"I am in safety with you," he answered.

Suddenly she remembered Lieutenant Beswick, and went to a drawer and produced the letter he had left. Challis opened it and read it.

"When did this come?" he asked quickly, and when Felicity had answered he rose.

"There is Providence in this. You have saved my life, child, but you may have saved more. You are right. I must go. I am called elsewhere, where I may run a risk, but it will at least be an honourable risk. If I take my life in my hands it is mine to take. I enter warfare with my eyes open, not blinded and bound. But why do I say this to you, child? I am babbling. I must go. Let me think a little. The hour stands at eleven, does it not? I will take a little more to eat, but must be careful. The physical instrument must be nursed back to condition. Yes, and brandy, child! I will have just one more glass. Felicity, I drink to your health and fortune; yes, and your happiness."

He drank, smiled, and rested his head in his hands.

"Let me think. Felicity, there shall be no sign of me here. You will keep silence. I must have my horse."

He rose again, and she touched him with fear in her eyes.

"Where are you going? Oh, where?" she cried.

"You are as secret as the grave, I think," he said, contemplating her. "You shall know. I go to France. I have work to do. Good-bye, Felicity!"

"But you are not strong enough. You are weak! You are ill!" she protested.

"I am like a lion," he said with a laugh. "Good-bye, Felicity! We shall meet anon. And God bless you!"

He held her hand in both his, kissed her, and then turned and went swiftly from the room.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE ORCHARD

FELICITY stood for a moment listening and wondering ; then she recalled that she had things to attend to, and spent some minutes clearing away. He had told her that he trusted her, and his presence there must not be known. She had locked the cellar door behind them, and she would later replace the keys in her father's room.

When she had finished her work she heard a sound outside, and recognized it as the noise of a horse's hoofs. She ran to the side door, opened it, and looked out. The night was lit by a little moonlight, and she saw Challis mounted, and riding down the avenue. She followed him quickly to the gate, and when she reached it was amazed to see that his horse's head was turned, not towards Chichester, but across the Downs. She stood wondering, and then, struck with a fear that he was light-headed, she started after him at a run. She was as light and as seeming-frail as a feather, but though she sped fast the horseman naturally soon out-distanced her. She heard the sound of the horse's hoofs as it cantered into the night, and for some time she saw the horse and its rider in the soft moonlight ; and long after they had faded into shade she still could hear the padding hoofs. Then at last the noise also ceased, and she was alone with the sound of her own small feet.

She was breathless by now, and wondered if it was of any use to go forward on this uncertain expedition. Yet her troubled heart kept her going, though now at a lesser pace, dwindling ever, so that when she came by Southover she was walking, and that walk became a pause—a long and tremulous halt as she was brought up by the sight of a horse by the staple in the gates. It was Challis's horse !

Challis was not light-headed. On the contrary, his brain was alive and active. It was true he was weak, but even that weakness had been temporarily remedied by the brandy he had taken. His whole mind, from the time of opening Beswick's letter, had been fixed on the duty before him. The hour had struck when he himself could no longer rely on agents ; his agency for what he wanted most of all had broken down under his hands. If anything were to be accomplished for the sake of king and country it must be done by him personally. He thought no more of the smugglers, no more of Graves, his would-be murderer, and, after the parting in haste, no more even of poor Felicity. But at the gates of Hale he thought of some one else, hesitated just a moment, and then swung his horse about upon the road to Southover. He foresaw the hazards which must inevitably surround his enterprise, and as in a vision he glanced along the possibilities of that plunge into the body of France which was before him. He was used to risks, and had taken them lightly in Ireland and elsewhere, but somehow now they appeared more formidable, though he did not shrink from them. Why ? It was as he wondered vaguely that there flashed into his thoughts the face of a beautiful woman, and even as the flash came he had wheeled his horse about. On his way to France he would have tender memories of Dorothy Heywood. Sentiment mingled in this man's blood with virile purposes and activities. He had decided on his course, and he would have time enough to think out the details. For the moment he could afford

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to indulge the romantic feeling which drew him towards Southover. It was still a formless feeling, but invested with a delicious glamour. He would pass by the house, see its lights perchance, and linger a few minutes in its purlieus, and then southward for the sea and the great venture !

When he had tied his horse at the gate he entered the garden and struck into the orchard of which some exquisite memories remained to him. He stood for a few minutes in the grove of apple-trees, looking towards the window of the drawing-room, in which he knew that Dorothy was wont to sit. The blind was drawn down the long French window, but through it the light shone dimly. Was Dorothy reading there still, late as it was ? The window which he had imagined to be her bedroom window above was dark. Either she was in bed and asleep and her father occupied the sitting-room, or she had not yet retired. He was moved to feeling by this latter thought. His sentiment began to play delicately with him, and he experienced a strong desire to see her once again before he turned his back on this home-life. Even as this wish formed in his mind the blind was thrust aside, and the door opened. Dorothy herself stood in the doorway and looked into the moonlit orchard. In the pause that ensued he thought he could hear her sigh. The gentle breeze of night fluttered her garments ; she stood with one long arm upon the window, looking dreamily at the scene without.

A surge of wild emotion took the man suddenly off his balance ; he moved forward quickly.

" Dorothy ! " he called. " Dorothy ! " and there was a caress in his voice.

He saw her take a step forward, as if she were uncertain, and wondered.

" Dorothy ! " he said, with the same lingering caress, and he was now standing in the full moonlight between the apple-trees.

She came swiftly forward in her white gown, like a

ghost, and rushed straight into his arms, which closed about her.

"Darling!" he whispered in her ears, and raised her face to his, and there tasted the full sweetness of his love.

Where the orchard passed into the garden lawn, where pinks and roses bloomed, was a watcher; away on the farther side, towards the garden walk, and by the yew hedge, was another. Wreaths of cloud went over the moon, translucent and fairylike. The chequers lay about the lovers, as they whispered together.

"Why did you come?" she asked, in his arms.

"I came because I love you," he answered.

"You have said nothing," she said.

"I say all now," he replied, and kissed her again.

"Why do you love me?" she asked. "You know who I am. My father——"

"Hush!" he interrupted. "You are yourself, and you are now myself, as I am you."

"Is it true?" she murmured. "It is unbelievable. I did not dare think——" She did not complete her sentence.

"Think no more, dearest; only love," he answered her.

"You went away?" she asked. "You took my advice?"

"I have been absent," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "And I must go still farther. I am on the eve of a long journey, my beloved."

She pressed close again to him.

"You go away?" she said. "Yes, it is wise, but I shall miss you, lose you."

"Never lose me!" he exclaimed. "Miss me, yes! Miss me with all your heart, but I shall never be absent from it. I am there deep-planted, as you are here." He set her hand to the beating of his heart.

"I shall lie in bed and weep at nights," she whispered. "I shall weep until you return."

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It flashed through Challis's mind—Shall I ever return? But he said nothing of the danger he was to encounter. She supposed he was going to London on some private business which called him. Felicity knew better, Felicity who crouched by the briars on the other side of the orchard.

"When I return——" he spoke softly in her ear, which she held against his moving lips, and a smile of happy delight trembled on hers.

"Did you come to see me because you must go?" she asked.

"I dared not go away without you," he answered, for now he knew that. What had deflected him from his course to the sea, save this woman only?

"You hold me fast," she said; "but yet you are going from me."

Suddenly there was a little sound from the house, and she turned with ears alert, and startled eyes. A shadow crossed the blind beyond the opened door.

"My father!" she murmured. "He is closing the house, and has come to find me. I must go back."

"Beloved!"

"I must go back," she repeated, and withdrew a little from his arms. The big figure of Heywood was at the window, and the blind stirred.

"Good-bye!" she breathed. "Beloved, good-bye!" and slipped from him, crossed the grass sward of the orchard swiftly, and entered the door.

"Dorothy! Is that you? You should have been in bed, child," said Heywood.

"I have been in the orchard," she said. "It is a lovely night."

He examined her. "You are flushed hot, Dorothy," he said. "The moon has caught you, child. You are pretty like that, aye, you're like your mother now—so like, so like!"

He seemed to fall into a reverie, and then roused himself.

"But it is late. You should be abed, child. And I, too. Thank God, I shall sleep the better to be no longer concerned with Draycott."

"Draycott!" she repeated, coming out of her warm thoughts.

"Aye; I have settled with him this night."

"He was here this night?" she asked.

"He has gone but a short time," he answered.

Her heart, which had beaten so fast all this time, now seemed to cease suddenly.

"Draycott!" she repeated, and somehow a chill struck into the glow of her ardent spirit.

Challis lingered a little longer in the orchard, but the blind had fallen behind the closed door, and soon the room was plunged into darkness. He turned away, and walked towards the gate where his horse was waiting, and was aware only of the moonlight flooding his life and soul with rapture. One watcher by the hedge moved slowly, and drew a pistol from his pocket. Challis crossed from the orchard into the open garden, and the watcher on the other side was taken by a sudden and overmastering fear that she would be seen. His course was carrying him to her. She slipped into the shadow of a lilac bush, and then sped swiftly. Some one racing like the wind across the garden struck upon the watcher with the pistol, and sent him off his balance. He recovered fiercely, and seized her; then he recognized her.

"Felicity!" he said. "What do you here? Out of my way!"

She clung to his arm. "What would you do?" she cried, sobbing, and clutching at the pistol in his hand.

"Oh, what would you do?"

He cursed her. "That was Challis, don't you know, fool?"

"He is no Customs man," she said eagerly. "He has nothing to do with you and your trade."

He cursed again as the sound of horse's hoofs was

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audible ; Challis was gone. Then he dropped his arm, put the pistol in his pocket, and looked at the girl.

"What are you doing here ?" he asked, and lowered his voice. "And what is Challis doing here ?" he asked in awed tones. "I thought——"

"He is alive !" she cried almost exultantly, "and I saved him," and she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"You have saved him to bring ruin on us all—on your father too," he said savagely.

"No, no." Her sobs ceased. "You do not understand, Duke Draycott," she pleaded with him. "Mr. Challis has nothing against the free trader. He has never pursued you, has never betrayed you. He is on Secret Service, and goes to France for the Government. I know that, as does my father. He is no spy upon you. You need not fear him. Leave him alone !"

"He is no spy upon us, you say," said the man, whose whole soul was moving in white-hot fury. "But he is a spy upon France. That is well. I am glad to hear that. We are free of him, then, this Challis." He laughed. "But not he of me. I do not need to fear him, you say. I fear no man. Leave him alone, you say." He laughed again, and listened, as if for the beating of the hoofs on the road.

Felicity stared blankly and wildly at him. She could not see his face, but she feared it. What was on it ?

"You will spare him ?" she asked beseechingly.

"What is he to you ?" he demanded, and shook her roughly.

She covered her face with her hands. "He is nothing," she cried, and sobs shook her more fiercely than his rude hands.

"Come, Felicity," he said suddenly. "You shall ride pillion. I will take you back to Hale."

She shrank from him. "No," she said. "I will not go with you. You are evil. Leave me."

"Well, remember that I offered," he said, as he turned away.

He was in a different mood now. All the white heat of his anger had settled into solid determination since he had learned from Felicity that which had inspired new plans. Challis was not what he had thought ; was no spy upon the free trade, but was another sort of spy. As he rode down to the " Hen and Chickens " he was occupied with the march of his plans, and it was only when he reached the inn that he came back to the outer world. His quick brain had decided that Challis was bound for Beswick's cutter. It was his business to be well acquainted with the movements of His Majesty's revenue cutters, and he knew of the arrival of the *Magpie* in the harbour.

" The cutter will start on the tide," he reflected. " That gives me three hours yet. It is time enough."

He entered the inn, and glancing round the room, in which one or two men were still lingering, passed into the parlour beyond. Here were two men, one conspicuously a sailor, of a swaggering, reckless air, but the other sleek and neat and eager, with some witness to foreign blood in his features and complexion.

" Desormes, you must cut short your stay," said Draycott, addressing this latter.

" If it is necessary, yes," said he, looking the speaker in the face interrogatively.

The other man put out a hand and reached for his glass. He paid no attention. Draycott turned on him.

" Graves has bungled the job, Edwardes," he said. " The man's at large."

" Challis ! " exclaimed the burly sailor man.

" Aye, Challis. We've marked him down many times, and he has slipped through our fingers. He must not again."

" Where is he ? " inquired Edwardes.

" He's in the harbour by now. He sails in the *Magpie*," said Draycott, and he sat heavily down.

The Frenchman observed him with intent eyes.

" Challis ! " he repeated in his odd English.

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"You have heard speak of him," said Draycott.

Desormes nodded. "He is a trouble to us—he is in our way."

Draycott stared at him. "There's more than that," he said bluntly. "He's a spy of the Government."

"On what you call the free trade, yes," said Desormes.

"He has two hands, two eyes, and a double tongue," said Draycott. "He is employed by Government in France."

Desormes' eyes glittered. "A spy!" he said. "An English spy!"

"That is his profession. He sails on the tide in the *Magpie*—it may be for Jersey or Havre. But he is bound for France. If he never came out it would suit us, and you too. You're a patriot, Desormes."

The Frenchman nodded, his dark face moving with emotion.

"I love my country," he said. "I am of the free trade; but I love my country. A spy!"

Draycott had been examining him in his downright way, and now said bluffly—

"We have each of us a right to his own country, and I'm for mine. I want no Boney here, and if he came he should meet with a warm reception."

"The Emperor has all Europe under his feet," said the Frenchman, flashing.

Draycott shrugged his shoulders. "He shall never have England," he said. "By thunder, no; we are a match for him."

Desormes seemed to wish to combat this statement with increasing spirit, but Draycott put him aside.

"Well, you shall go back, and I will acknowledge you victor when you deal with Challis. He bars our way, and he bars yours; and he is a spy upon France. Good! Desormes, I leave him in your hands."

"Who is this man, and where is he?" asked Desormes.

"Come, drink your cognac, friend, and come with me. Here is Jack Edwardes must sail on the tide, and in less than three hours."

Edwardes stirred, finished his glass, and set it down. The innkeeper came on a summons to replenish the empty vessels, and leaned across his bar.

"Mr. Draycott, sir, the riding officer!" he said, under his breath.

Draycott stared at the closed door.

"What does it matter?" he growled. "Let Foster come and go as he likes; there is no suspicion on me, and shall be none. Don't be a fluttered fool. Bring me cognac for all, and see the horses are ready."

He frowned heavily, emptied his glass almost at a gulp, and called to his companions. Within ten minutes the three were rattling down the road towards Chichester.

CHAPTER XV

THE ROAD TO BOULOGNE

BESWICK'S headquarters when ashore were at Chichester, but he was wont, in emergencies, to lie at Itchenor, in easy reach of his cutter. It was here that Challis found him about midnight. It was at the little inn where he had interviewed "Mr. Brown," and his second visit to it recalled to him, unhappily, the circumstances of his first, and the unfavourable impressions he had carried away from his interview. These doubts had now gathered into certainty. Beswick's letter, which Felicity had given him, had enclosed one from Mr. "Brown," which realized his misgivings. "Mr. Brown" had surrendered to the inevitable destiny of his country. One of the most striking facts of those days, with the memory of the Terror still so vivid, was the complete and rapid conquest Bonaparte made not only of Europe, but of France. Royalists there still were, but they were impotent, innocuous, silent, clinging desperately to foreign Powers; within France itself royalism died swiftly, overwhelmed by the amazing career of victory on which Napoleon led France. "Mr. Brown" had been shaken in his convictions, and Challis was threatened with the loss of a valuable ally.

"I picked up the message at the usual place in St. Heliers," said Beswick. "It was urgent, and I hurried across. I believe," he added thoughtfully, "that by my haste I lost one fat lugger. But I have the Board's instructions to give you precedence. You were away on affairs?"

There was a gentle inquiry in this statement, and Challis answered it. "On rather grave affairs," he said, adding with a grim, interior smile, "it was quite impossible for me to be in attendance then. But now I am at your service."

"No, sir," said Lieutenant Beswick, "it is I who am at yours."

"Well, Mr. Beswick, we will have it both ways. What time do you sail?"

The Lieutenant glanced at his watch. "Within an hour and a half," he said.

"Then there is time for a bottle, and I think I need it, as well as some refection, which I doubt not the inn-keeper can provide."

It was discovered that he could, and Challis sat to a supper of larger style than the small meal he had already eaten at Hale. He was quite himself, had turned his back on the cells of Hale, and was looking towards the cliffs and shores of France.

"Do we make Jersey?" asked Beswick presently.

"No. You say you are at my service, Mr. Beswick. I am at the service of His Majesty's Government. Well, we are both instruments for use. I must make a nearer point. I must make Havre."

"I cannot get into Havre," said the Lieutenant.

Challis waved a hand. "No, but I can. You shall drop me, Lieutenant, drop me within leave of the shore. I have it all fixed in my mind; and now, if the time is come, let us go."

Challis held the door open, when their preparations were made, and Beswick went first. The night was light enough for them to descry, with the aid of the moon,

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the trees and the fields in front of the inn. The lamps of the house shone on them as they issued forth, and M. Desormes in his hiding-place eyed both men with eager interest. When they had gone he walked swiftly to the water's edge, where a boat was in waiting.

"Desormes?" came in Draycott's deep voice. "Have you seen him? You are sure of him?"

"It was the tall man, yes. I know the Lieutenant by sight. I am sure of him."

"That is well," said Draycott. "The lugger will start within ten minutes. There is no time to lose. I will give you 500 francs for expenses, and remember that 100 guineas is yours if he does not return. It is worth it to me, and to all of us. Come aboard! Edwardes is waiting."

It was a fine night, still and cloudless, when the *Magpie* weighed her anchor, and in the dawn she was on a larboard course, with a lugger half a mile away. Beswick noted the latter, and recognized her. Every lugger was an object of suspicion, but the *Sally* had a clean slate. By eight o'clock the light wind had fallen almost to a calm, and cutter and lugger were quite close, idle in the Channel. Challis had slept and was now on deck, and watching the monotonous sea scene. He spoke of the lugger.

"She trades to and from the coasts, but there is nothing against her. I know her skipper, Jack Edwardes," said Beswick.

It was slow work, and the day dragged out, as Challis was anxious to get to his destination. His mind went back constantly in this enforced idleness to the orchard, and to Dorothy. He was quite happy, and again and again he recalled all that had happened, even to the veriest turn of her head and the lift of her chin.

By the fall of evening the *Magpie* had made landfall, for the coast of France loomed obscurely before them. The lugger that had been their attendant on the voyage now stood on another tack.

"She's making Havre," said Beswick.

Challis made no reply to that.

"You may give me the three-mile limit," he said.

"The breeze is making."

On the *Sally* a conversation was taking place between Edwardes and Desormes.

"She won't go nearer," said the former. "She daren't go into French waters."

"They will drop him, and you must drop me," said the Frenchman.

It was dusk when the cutter came about, and stood on a long board up Channel. Simultaneously a boat shot out from the lugger under a strengthening wind, and the *Sally* stepped out briskly for Havre. Challis, in his boat, was nearing the shore before he was aware of a companion in the twilight. It gave him no concern, and he drew closer, scanning the land for a suitable place to beach his boat. The coast was low here, and he was running into a small cove with a lively sea behind him. Within ten minutes he had chosen his point of debarkation, grounded his craft, and secured it out of reach of the high tide. Then he took his valise in his hand and moved inland.

A little hamlet looked down towards the foreshore from a short distance, and Challis made his way to the inn. It was a homely, pleasant house, the landlord of which cheerfully consented to get his visitor supper. He also recommended a wine, which Challis found agreeable to his palate. He felt hungry from the sea air, and he made a good meal, and had an entertaining chat with his host.

"I have been all day upon the water," he explained in his perfect French, "and that excuses my appetite. I have sailed from Havre in my small boat."

The innkeeper was interested. He lived by the sea, but had no feeling for it. He expressed his wonder at Monsieur's daring. Challis smiled.

"I like both elements," he said, "but now I have

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done with one. It is for a wager—by land and sea within so many days. That is where I shall want your help. Can I hire a good horse of you ? ”

The innkeeper was sympathetic, but looked troubled. Challis saw doubt in his eye, and awoke to the situation.

“ On the whole,” he said, “ I had rather buy one, if you know of one for sale.”

Oh yes, the innkeeper knew of one, and brightened visibly. And it was cheap, a mere nothing !

Challis recognized a shrewd bargainer, and knew, moreover, that he had delivered himself into greedy hands by his fiction of a wager. As he was engaged in what he made an indifferent altercation with his host over the price, there entered a second guest, with the obvious gait of a sailor. Challis scrutinized him sharply, and returned to his conflict. But Monsieur had only to see the animal ! He was worth double, yet in such a remote village, how was it possible to obtain so much ? Challis, comfortable and optimistic after his meal, declared his intention of inspecting the horse forthwith ; and the innkeeper turned to his other customer, who ordered a modest supper, and drank cider.

Challis had the map of the coast and the inlying boundaries by heart, and he had already determined on his first halting-place. He would stay the night at the inn, and go forward with the dawn. He reckoned the distance to Boulogne as, roughly, 100 miles, and he calculated that he could cover this in three days.

He was awakened by the sun streaming on his pillow, and after a brief breakfast got into the saddle, with his valise in front of him. By midday he had made good progress, and he dined at a wayside inn. Behind him, at a distance of half a mile or so, a second horseman followed. Desormes looked forward with greedy, eager eyes. He had two passions, the one for money, and the other for La France. He had before him a man whose discomfiture would mean one hundred good English guineas for himself, and service also to the “ little

Corporal." He had not made up his mind as to his exact course. If he merely denounced Challis to the authorities as a spy he had no evidence, and doubtless the Englishman, if he knew his business, would have taken precautions against such a chance. Desormes considered that it would be wisest to wait and act as circumstances should dictate. Meanwhile he was upon Challis's trail like a hungry wolf.

By evening Challis had reached a village on the outskirts of a park and château, and he passed from his pursuer's view through iron gates. Desormes waited in the roadway, dubious as to his action, and then he went over to the auberge, which stood a little way off in a cluster of houses.

"Whose château is that?" he inquired of the innkeeper, after greetings.

The innkeeper was surprised at his guest's ignorance.

"That, Monsieur! It is the château of M. le Vicomte de Levail."

Desormes was staggered. But he was of obstinate blood, and he had set before him a course which he was determined to pursue doggedly. He sat in the open before the auberge, and sipped a glass of wine, keeping his watchful eyes on the great gates. The murk of evening fell, and he became uneasy, fearful lest his quarry should escape. He posted himself in the darkness before the château, and peered incessantly about him. About eleven he was rewarded by the appearance of Challis through the door of the house, simultaneously with the arrival of his horse.

Desormes withdrew, watched the Englishman ride out into the roadway and canter lightly off. Hastily he recovered his own beast from the stables of the inn, and, discharging his score, set off on the road to Amiens, which Challis had taken. This spy was in a great hurry, but Desormes would keep in touch with him, though he rode all night.

Challis did not ride all night; he rested about two

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in the morning at an inn, and slept for a few hours. He had had his interview with "Mr. Brown," and now regretted the loss of time. The Vicomte de Levail was one of the old Royalists, and had hitherto worked ardently in the interests of the Bourbons. But his faith in the fortunes of that house had been gradually sapped by the long years of fruitless labour and hope, and the all-conquering Corsican seemed to have usurped the fortunes of France and to embody her glory. This mental revolution had been gradual, but his recognition of it had been sudden, involuntary, and almost in despite of himself. He would take no part in any proceedings which might be detrimental to his country, even though a usurper and an upstart was at the head of it. That was the decision he had arrived at, and so much he stated, clearly but reluctantly, and with some uneasiness, to Challis. In his secret heart he had almost ceased to regard the Corsican as an upstart. The man's feats and the glory of France were being inextricably mingled in his emotional soul. He entertained his English guest, pressed him to stay the night unavailingly, but adhered to his decision.

"I ought to have known better—I ought to have been a better judge of character," thought Challis more than once on his journey.

His chief agent had failed him, and he had resolved to undertake the work himself. What was the mystery of Boulogne harbour? What was the precise condition of naval affairs there? To determine those questions was his task, a task the difficulty and danger of which he did not underestimate. On the evening of the second day he found himself within call of his destination. His progress had been swifter than he had anticipated, and he had not had any mishap or even adventure on the way. He was quite unaware of the secret enemy who travelled tenaciously in his wake, seeking his opportunity to strike. This enemy was growing anxious to strike, for he had a fear lest the Englishman should escape him

in his rapid flight, and pass out of the range of his knowledge and weapons. Thus the two men that night lay in the same town, and the same inn. Challis was supping in a room by himself when he was aware of some one entering, and looked up. The new-comer was a small man in an official dress, and with an air of importance.

"Monsieur," he said, "I am instructed that your name is Challis." He used a very French pronunciation.

"Indeed!" said Challis casually. "By whom?"

"There is an informant who has placed his knowledge at the disposal of our authorities," said the small man, "and it is my duty to arrest you on suspicion of espionage."

Challis finished the wine in his glass, set the glass down, and lay back in his chair.

"You are, then, Monsieur le Préfet?" he said pleasantly. "There is some absurd mistake here, Monsieur. I am a gentleman from Grenoble, by profession a juris-consultat. Who in the name of the Emperor is your informant?"

"You can produce evidence of this, Monsieur?" asked the little functionary politely.

"Why, certainly. We shall be smiling at this mistake in half an hour, and you will be gracefully proffering apologies. Pray you, sit down, and join me in a glass. Your men are without?"

He wanted this information, but it was a question so indifferently put that the little Préfet never imagined that there was any ulterior motive.

"Yes, Monsieur," he assented. "I am obliged to back up the majesty of the law with force."

"It is the final appeal, Monsieur le Préfet," said Challis amiably. "Landlord, a glass for Monsieur," and talking pleasantly he filled the Préfet's glass to the brim, lifted his own, and pledged his visitor.

Taken aback by the ease of the stranger's address, the little official did not see his way out of the genial

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invitation. Moreover, he was drawn to the suspect by that inexplicable atmosphere of well-bred bonhomie. He sat down and accepted the wine, taking care to acknowledge and return the toast with all ceremony.

Challis was too old a hand not to give the whole of his attention to the man before him. Speculations as to the source of his discovery could wait. He had to produce such an impression of *bona fides* on this little official as would give him twenty minutes to himself in his bedroom. He set himself deliberately to the task of accomplishing this. He referred to the Emperor's triumphant progress in Italy, to the returning prosperity of France, to the state of international politics—to art and letters exclusively French, until he had succeeded in persuading the Préfet not only that he was a very cultivated person, but that both of them had many opinions in common and were vastly removed from the vulgar crowd. M. le Préfet, after his second glass of wine, indulged in reminiscences and also in predictions. He was a fellow of great ambitions that beat within the boundaries of his heart. Challis sympathized and encouraged, and then almost abruptly brought the conversation back to whence it had started.

“And now, Monsieur, for this preposterous charge!”

The Préfet saw that it was preposterous now, but, of course, he had his duty to perform, absurd though it was, as he anxiously explained to Challis.

The latter waved apologies aside. It was a trifle. He would have pleasure at once in removing the absurd misunderstanding by documents in his possession. They were in his room. If M. le Préfet would wait—or perhaps M. le Préfet would prefer to come with him, or even—he laughed—to send the gendarmes!

M. le Préfet hastened to dissociate himself from the insulting suspiciousness which such precautions would imply. Yet when the well-bred stranger had been gone twenty minutes he began to be uneasy, and was escorted

by the innkeeper to the guest's bedroom. No one was there. In a state of anger and agitation he descended and dispatched his gendarmes in all directions. The affable stranger had fled !

Outside the inn, with a glass of coffee on the table before him, sat Desormes, whose patience had broken down in the long and weary pursuit. He had sworn an information, and now waited on results. They seemed long in coming. Several people passed him, entering and leaving the hostelry, including a workman in his blouse, as he sat there, guarding its portals, so to speak ; and he followed each momentarily with his eyes. Presently he was startled by the precipitate exit of a flurried official, whose bodyguard began to rush about the precincts of the inn. He exclaimed in alarm, and learned the news. The spy had escaped !

" Name of a dog ! " said Desormes, smacking his leg. " It was the ouvrier. Fool ! fool ! Fool ! fool ! " he cried. " I should have known ! I should have guessed ! This man is the devil himself."

" What is it ? " inquired the little Préfet excitedly.

Desormes turned to the innkeeper who had accompanied his distinguished visitor. " Had you, perhaps, a workman on repairs in your house ? " he asked.

" But no," replied the innkeeper, puzzled.

" I said so." Desormes was savagely satisfied. " Here is a man comes by, passes out of the door, and stares at me, Messieurs—actually stares at me, and I do not recognize. Wretch ! He was in the garb of an ouvrier, and had a bag of tools, or so I thought. But it was his face that was most disguised. He was tall, I grant you ; but how could I recognize him merely by that ? His cap slouched over his face, and he had patches of a miserable beard."

" An ouvrier with a miserable beard," repeated the Préfet, with admirable decision. " We will catch him. The description shall be spread abroad."

" I will catch him myself," cried Desormes, " and

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when I have caught him—name of a name, there is his horse. It is mine. I will hunt him down.”

“With a patch of miserable beard,” repeated the little Préfet to himself.

That was, then, the description on which the trackers would go, and it was certainly in that guise that Challis passed the portals. He dared not expose himself to examination and to the land of the search, for he had precious documents about him. He had no time to think of anything but flight, and, his precautions having been arranged in view of an emergency such as this, he was not long before taking action. No one suspected a workman with what looked like a bag of tools, and even Desormes let him pass with a glance. Until Challis's eyes took in the watch-dog before the doors he had not given a thought to the cause of this abrupt discovery. But there was something familiar in Desormes' face, and ere he had passed into the gloom of the evening a dozen paces he had remembered the man who had entered the little inn two evenings before. This could not be a coincidence, particularly taken with the information laid against him. He wondered how suspicion had fallen on him, whence this stranger had got his knowledge.

He had abandoned his horse of necessity, but that was of small consequence, for his destination was not far away. He would walk and rest, sleep out of doors in the short summer night, and arrive at Boulogne in the early morning. Once outside the town, he removed the vestiges of beard which had made his face grotesque, but his workman's dress he was obliged to continue. He made good progress, and was thankful that the official interruption had come after his excellent meal. He hummed a chanson and went on his way, called at an auberge when thirst overtook him, chatted in Norman French, and dismissed himself of the company with smiling courtesy; and so drifted steadily on to the harbour.

At six of the clock, with a beautiful sunlight upon the town and the sea, Challis presented himself at the dock-gates, where a small company was assembled. They were applicants for work in the harbour, where the Emperor was making (it was well known) important preparations. A stalwart carpenter was Jules Fevrissens, of Etaples, who obtained his ticket and passed in, laughingly in converse with two of his companions, from Rouen and Amiens respectively. They were at the disposal of the Emperor and La France.

An hour later an agitated Préfet and others knocked on the dock gates, and inquired after a spy.

"Spy!" said the official at the gates, who was a man of consideration. "You deceive yourself, Monsieur le Préfet. There is no one admitted here save good Frenchmen."

The Préfet wailed and panted, "A very tall man with broad shoulders, and a damnable delusive voice," he protested. "A carpenter by pretence!"

"We have hundreds of carpenters," said the official impatiently. There were other things to do than to bandy words with a foolish, fat, breathless Préfet from God knows where.

"This man is a spy—a dangerous spy. This man will testify," said the Préfet.

"If you will produce the spy he shall be tried," said the official. "But Monsieur le Préfet will excuse me. There is work in plenty——"

The pursuers were left behind the huge dock gates, indignant and helpless.

CHAPTER XVI

THE KING'S SHIP

It was just a week later that a tall man in the dress of an ordinary citizen issued from the dock gates, and paused for a moment to congratulate himself on his liberty. Challis had spent a busy week exploring, examining, speculating, putting two and two together, drawing inferences, and theorizing, often on inadequate grounds. All this time he had lived in constant fear lest some flaw in his actions, some chance from without, should draw attention to his activities, and involve his plans and himself in common ruin. But he had succeeded in evading detection, and was now free—and with knowledge.

He had wandered over the whole harbour, had inspected the warships, had made a count of them, had estimated the number of men, the number of guns, their quality, and come to a conclusion generally as to the strength of Napoleon's flotilla which he was preparing in Boulogne for the invasion of England. And the conclusion he had come to was amazing. As he stood before the gates which had shut on him he reflected that his knowledge was worth ten thousand times the risk he had run, and was worth many weeks' confinement in that harbour. He stirred at that latter thought. No, the point was just there—that the week was all he dared spend, that unless he hastened forward now all his discoveries would be worthless to his country. He

must make for England at all hazards. His arrangements had been that Beswick should pick him up five days hence, at St. Heliers. He had calculated the days to a nicety, as he was pleased to reflect. It would be just possible for him to reach Jersey within that time, and he must not waste an hour in unnecessary delay.

As he emerged from the shelter of the gateway a man at the window of the inn across the road got up and peered out. He hesitated for a moment, took a step towards the door, then returned and peered again. At last he seemed to have made up his mind, and left the room with considerable agitation.

Challis took the road, hired a carriage a little way out of the town, and drove till nightfall on the western road. He put up at a pleasant little hostelry, where he passed for a worthy burgess of Orleans, travelling on commercial business. It was here that Desormes, the faithful watcher, located him, but found himself powerless. He had no authority to act, and he had sent post-haste for it to the little Préfet. Armed with certain documents he could destroy this evasive Englishman, and be 100 guineas the richer. Would they come in time? He rested feverishly, and at dawn with chagrin he saw his prey bowling along the road without power to stop him. The papers had not yet arrived. Thenceforth it was a race between them for two days. It was only on the second day that Challis discovered that he was followed. He made the discovery by a recognition of Desormes, stared him in the face passively, and passed by. But, as a matter of fact, he did not take the discovery as calmly as he seemed to do. The necessity of his getting through with his news, and the danger he ran at the hands of his unknown enemies, jumped simultaneously and vividly into his mind. He had been keeping to the main road, and now he slipped away from it, away towards the coast. Any risk was better than the hazard of capture and the loss of his knowledge.

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He struck the coast at Etretat, a small village with a fishing population, and, congratulating himself on his manoeuvre, he ordered supper at the inn. He had made careful observations on the way, and could not find that his follower was still at his heels. There were some craft off the shore, and he was speculating on the chances of being able to hire one of these when he perceived, galloping along the inland road, three horsemen in a cloud of dust. It was nearing dusk, but he could make them out plainly. He had cleverer enemies than he had realized. He turned down towards the sea, and in the shelter of a shrubbery meditated. The inn naturally would be the foe's objective, and he would easily be identified. He could hear the water lapping against a boat somewhere near. Stars were coming out in heaven, as he lay staring into it. The evening seemed very peaceful.

Suddenly he was conscious of the proximity of people, but could see nothing from where he was. His senses were all alert. So far the bushes were a screen for him in the dusk, and he made no movement. He heard voices . . .

In the foreground, where the sea rolled on the shore, the outline of a lugger was visible crawling out into the Channel under light airs. Challis rose to his feet and peered over the bushes. He could discern the three men twenty yards away. He walked sharply from his shelter down to the water's edge. Simultaneously the men saw him and hastened towards him. He was challenged, and called on to halt. He waded into the water until it reached his waist, slipped the moorings of the boat which bobbed to the waves, and, scrambling in, began to pull out to sea. Shouts were raised on shore, but he paid no heed ; his eyes were turned from time to time into the growing gloom of the water. The lugger was still faintly visible. He bent to his oars, drew into the night which settled on him, and then, lying on his oars, hailed the lugger. He was answered, guided himself to the voice, and received a rope's-end.

"What do you want?" asked a voice, in bad French. Challis replied, in English, "A passage to England."

"What are you?" came from the voice.

"Let me aboard, and I'll explain," said Challis, in a tone of authority.

A moment's pause was followed by an order growled to a sailor, and the voice said—

"Make fast your boat, then. Quickly, man, we are making leeway!"

Challis put out his hands, grasped the bulwarks, and cleared them. He was on deck, and face to face with a rough-looking captain, who was examining him with a lantern.

A voice came out of the darkness—a deep voice—

"Oh, never mind that, Edwardes. I'll answer for the gentleman. He and I are old acquaintances; and he's bound to go on this voyage."

Challis started ever so slightly. "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" he said, and then looked down at his dress. "I am wet," he said, "and I am tired."

"Follow me, sir," said Draycott, and led the way to the cabin, leaving the skipper staring in wonder after them.

"The fact is," explained Challis, as he sat down, "I have had no supper, and have come a long way, and have been considerably hurried."

Draycott opened a cupboard and took out a bottle, from which he poured a glass of brandy.

"I will see that they fetch you something to eat at once," he said.

Challis thanked him, and sipped his brandy.

"This, then, is the *Sally*!" he remarked, looking round.

Draycott grinned. "Aye, and the *Sally* in luck."

"On the usual business, since I find you here?" suggested Challis.

"Yes, Beswick don't know everything. Edwardes is the smartest skipper we have in the free trade."

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"You tell me this because you are now resolved that I have no connection with the Customs?" pursued Challis tentatively.

"I tell you it because you can do no harm any longer," said Draycott bluntly.

Challis sipped his brandy, and a short silence fell.

"Shall I tell you something?" said he at last; "something which I had not desired to tell any one. But it seems necessary in the circumstances. I have assured you that I have nothing to do with the Customs. I can prove to you who and what I am."

"I want no proof. I know," said Draycott. "You are in the Secret Service of the Government."

Challis was taken aback. "How did you know that?" he asked.

"The girl blabbed—Felicity," said the other bluffly.

"She blabbed!" repeated Challis, with a sense of disappointment, even of sadness. "It is true, then, that women cannot keep a secret. Well, now you know, and have no fears of me, Draycott?"

"I never had any fear of you, Mr. Challis. I reckoned myself a match for you, and still do."

Challis smiled. "We won't quarrel on that point," he said. "You have been a very determined enemy. I suppose we call a halt now. I have other work."

"It can end on conditions," said Draycott.

Challis looked his surprise. "Come," he said, "you know I have nothing to do with your affairs."

"You say that? You think there is nothing between us?"

"Not," said Challis, "if I choose to forget your attempts on me. They are a serious matter, as you are aware. But I have important work, and I can afford to forget them. I forget them."

"You are mistaken," said Draycott. "There is something else between us. There is Dorothy Heywood."

"Miss Heywood!" Challis stared at the man.

"I have said it. I don't know your purpose, but you

have pressed your attention there. There is that between us."

Challis suddenly realized, and he experienced a sense of shame that this man considered himself his rival. The pride of his long and honourable race rose in him and sent a flush of blood to his face.

"What do you mean by that, man?" he asked sharply.

"It is understood between Heywood and myself that the girl is to marry me," said Draycott, flaming.

Again the spasm of pride touched Challis. Was he, the heir of his family, to condescend to chaffer with this low and lawless fellow?

"I refuse to discuss Miss Heywood with you," he said shortly.

"Look you, there is no escape," said Draycott. "You are in my power, and you must face facts. I know the ways of your folk, and how you regard us. We are dirt to you."

"You are a damnable scoundrel," said Challis, quietly but distinctly.

Draycott made a movement, and then restrained his rising passion. "Very well. He talks best who talks last," he said. "You must come to a haggie with me. What is your business with Dorothy?"

Again Challis winced, and again he controlled himself as he answered—

"I have told you I refuse to discuss this lady with you."

Draycott gave an ugly laugh. "Come, my fine gentleman," he said, "these are lordly airs, but there is no place for them aboard this craft. You have trespassed on my grounds. You are a poacher. I know of what I am speaking. I will see you dead and damned ere you have her."

Challis sat rippling his slender fingers idly on the table. He said nothing; he seemed to pay no heed.

"I will give you this chance. I will give you the

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choice," pursued Draycott, in his angry growl. "I will spare you if you sign conditions of peace. They are these, and I will take you on oath, as a man of honour, that you say nothing of what has gone between us previously, and swear to leave Hale and the Downs, and have no correspondence with Miss Heywood."

"The alternative?" rapped out Challis.

"You guess it—death."

"You have promised me that before, Mr. Draycott, on more than one occasion, if I remember aright."

Draycott suddenly withdrew a hand from his pocket and levelled a pistol at Challis's head. "By God, there shall be no doubt this time," he said. "I will be my own executioner. I give you the choice. Make it."

Challis sat unmoved, but inwardly his mind was very busy. Presently he spoke.

"You dictate terms, then, like Bonaparte; a pretty Bonaparte, Draycott!"

"You may say what you will. I have you under my nail, and I will not hesitate to crack you," said Draycott truculently. "If you give me your honour to do as I say, you can go for me. Now is the time for your choice. Otherwise you see no Old England again."

"This is in the best style of the ranter," observed Challis, still thinking.

"Come, you have important work, according to you," went on Draycott. "Which will you give up—your work or the girl?"

Challis looked across at him squarely.

"You have been plain," he said, "and you put me to a puzzle, a riddle. Let me get into fresh air and think. Duke Draycott, this place has foul air. It stifles me."

Draycott watched him leave the cabin, and a little later followed him on deck, and gave some orders to the skipper. It was a light night, and light airs played about the deck. Challis walked to the bows and stood with his hand on a stay. Indeed, it was true that Draycott had placed a terrible problem before him.

Only himself knew the importance of the news he brought. He dared not let that miscarry. The alternative was to forswear his love, that love which, sprung so newly and so strangely in him, had seized on every fibre of his being. He stood motionless, communing with himself and his awful perplexity. He was aware that Draycott would carry out his threat, for he had judged the temper of the man: vain, braggart, resolute, and unscrupulous. What should he do?

Almost unconsciously his eye was taken by a ship in the distance, and he recognized by various signs that it was a frigate of the Royal Navy.

Suddenly Challis turned and swiftly retraced his steps. Draycott was in the cabin awaiting him. Challis sat down. He must save his honour as an Englishman, and he must save also his honour as a lover.

"There is something, Draycott, that I wish to set before you ere you have my answer," he began slowly, and with great deliberation.

"It is either yea or nay," growled the smuggler.

"No; it's not so simple as that. See you, Draycott, you have not inquired yet how I came aboard like this—in this state, a chance fugitive."

"It is sufficient to me that you came," said Draycott grimly.

"You asked me just now a question. You gave me a choice, and made an appeal to my sense of duty as an Englishman. I will make the same appeal in my turn."

"If you expect to alter my purpose you are wasting time," declared Draycott.

"You shall answer when you hear. I have spent a week in one of Bonaparte's principal centres of work, and I have information which is of the vitalest importance for the Admiralty."

"You would get off on that plea?" said Draycott derisively. "Yes, you can if you will say 'yea' to me."

"I will give you your answer here and now," said Challis in a loud, firm voice. "Never will I sell my

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honour—never will I withdraw from my pledged word—never will I at your dictation cease to follow the rule of my heart.”

“Then there is one end, and one only. You are done and under.” Draycott pointed his thumb sneeringly towards the bottom of the boat.

“That is as may be. My proposal has nothing to do with that. I surrender nothing of my will and character. As I am and have been I go to death, if necessary, and my life and my love are my own and inextinguishable. They are one and indivisible. Hear this, Draycott. There is a king’s ship out on the water. Allow me to give my information to the captain, and I pledge you my word of honour to return after I have done so.”

Draycott stared at him as if he had not understood, and then repeated slowly—

“Pledge me your word of honour to return?”

“Yes,” said Challis.

Draycott was silent, and at last lifted his head.

“No,” he said. “I have you safe now, and I will take no risks.”

“Yet you are willing to have me pledge my word to abandon what my heart is set on,” urged Challis.

“Judge you, man, whether by my very refusal I do not justify you in accepting my parole.”

“You are clever; you are cunning; I think you are sly. I am a plain man, and I hold you,” said Draycott stubbornly.

“Duke Draycott, you are a man of parts, and a man, God knows, of such abilities as might have carried you a long way, had you chosen other parts. Now you are an outlaw, and yet I do not believe you are other than a good Englishman and lover of your country.”

“I wish Boney in hell,” said the smuggler. “But I will not be played upon by this flimsy pretext.”

“Then, Duke Draycott, I must tell you what I had never thought to tell to any save my lords of the Ad-

miralty," said Challis gravely. "But you give me no choice, if I may save myself from dishonour in two guises. You are aware of the flotilla which Bonaparte has in Boulogne harbour for the invasion of England? Well, I have spent a week in the harbour as a workman, and I know the secret of the Emperor."

"Is his fleet a match for ours? I'll wager not," burst forth from Draycott eagerly.

"The flotilla is a pretence; it is a thing of straw; it does not exist. I, who have seen and worked there, tell you. It is a phantasmagoria created of this arch trickster. He keeps us about the harbours; our anxiety centres there. He has over a hundred thousand men in barracks there, and he has some four thousand transports. But he has no fleet. It is a sham; it is a deception."

"Then there is no fear of invasion?" said Draycott, who had listened attentively and with growing interest.

"Wait. You shall hear. You compel me to put all before you. Time presses. You know where Lord Nelson is?"

"He is chasing the French fleet in the West Indies."

"Yes; but the French fleet is no longer there. It is on the way back. Villeneuve has orders to return. His voyage to the Indies was a feint, a pretence like the other. It is all of a piece, man. Villeneuve is returning, and the French fleet, with its reinforcements from Ferrol and elsewhere, will be in command of the Channel. Under that security Bonaparte's transports will cross the Channel, and one hundred and fifty thousand men will descend on the Kentish coasts. England is lost unless—unless the Admiralty learns my news."

Challis had spoken quietly, with restraint, but with manifest earnestness, which grew as he proceeded, and his last words were almost dramatic in their intensity. They had their effect.

"What would you do?" asked Draycott, after a moment's silence.

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"I would hand my information to the captain of the frigate yonder," said Challis.

"You would come back?" asked Draycott.

"Draycott, I am here to save my honour. I keep my honour as an Englishman if I pass on any news. I keep my honour as a man when I come back to face you. And I keep my faith with my heart when I deny and refuse your compact."

Draycott sat brooding for the space of two minutes, and then rose heavily.

"So be it," he said. "You shall go aboard and come back. I have your word."

He went up on deck and shouted to Edwardes—

"Luff her! Luff her!"

The skipper, astonished, drew near, and seemed to remonstrate; but Draycott shook him off in his masterful way.

"What ship's that? Can you make out? Hail her!" And he himself raised his huge voice in a bellow.

"Ahoy! Admiralty messenger with dispatches. Ahoy!"

The man-of-war, going by in the light darkness like a wraith, backed and came up in the wind. She staggered.

"What ship is that?" roared the smuggler.

"His Majesty's ship *Siren*," came faintly in answer.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Admiralty dispatch," cried Draycott, and the *Sally*, on her new course, ran slowly toward the big frigate. In five minutes Challis was climbing the ladder to the man-of-war's deck, where a group of interested officers was gathered.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRESS GANG

FORTY minutes later Draycott stood on the lugger's deck watching the descending form of his enemy. Challis exchanged farewell civilities with the captain of the *Siren*, and the lugger slipped off on the larboard tack. Challis paid no heed to Draycott, but looked back at the man-o'-war until she was lost in the night.

"You have completed your job?" asked the smuggler.

Challis looked at him for the first time.

"Yes," he said. "The *Siren* will carry information to Sir Sidney Smith, in command of the Channel squadron. In a few days the Admirals off Ferrol and Rochefort will have received their instructions, and Villeneuve will find his road blocked by a united fleet."

"I am glad," said Draycott, and suddenly took up a lantern that stood on the deck and swung the light in Challis's face. "You are a man of courage, and you keep your word. Is it necessary to go on with this?"

"You understood the conditions," said Challis gravely. "You have mine. If you alter yours I will gladly accept."

"No," said Draycott with an oath. "But you are a fool. You throw away your life."

"I cannot purchase it on dishonourable terms," said Challis.

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Draycott indicated the cabin, and his prisoner obeyed the gesture. Possibly this was his last glimpse of the upper air. He drew the salt air in with a gusto, and descended.

"I have no wish for your life," said Draycott, "but I must have you gone. There is the case in a nutshell. I have admiration for your action just now, and I'm glad I helped you. Damn it, Mr. Challis, be reasonable, and give yourself a chance."

"Do you suppose, Draycott, that I have taken all this risk only to crawl out of it at the end a beaten, humiliated skunk? You're man enough yourself, I think. What would you do?"

"By God," said Draycott fiercely, "I would not give her up for any one."

Challis turned away. "Is it assassination?" he asked. "You have no convenient French skipper here."

"No," said Draycott roughly. "You shall have your chance."

"Then it is you who give me the chance. Mr. Draycott, you are a *preux chevalier*," said Challis, with light mockery.

Draycott guessed that he was being treated satirically, and he became ferocious; all his chivalrous graces and assumptions dropped from him in a moment.

"Downstairs!" he said. "And then we settle it once and for all. There is no room for me and you."

Challis descended lightly, and took a seat. The cabin was no more than fifteen feet long, and very narrow. There were two doors into cupboards, which held berths on each side. Draycott wore a scowl, which indicated a troubled and angered spirit. His adversary faced him with impassive face, as if indifferent to anything that might be proposed or effected. The long journey by day, and these later proceedings, had tired him, and he yawned, not ostentatiously, but because nature demanded this small relief. Draycott's frown deepened.

"No one shall say you had no chance," he said.

"Pardon me, no one will have the chance to say it, if I understand you aright. This affair is to be finished out of hand. I take it, if you are successful, you will not publish the incident."

Sarcasm moved this vain man more than any other weapon. He winced.

"I propose a fair duel," he said, "and as you are evidently weary, you shall rest first."

Challis straightened himself.

"Duke Draycott, you have the makings of a gallant gentleman," he said.

Draycott pointed to one of the doors.

"Rest in that bunk," he said. "When you are ready I will call you." He consulted his watch. "We make for Eastbourne," he said, "and this job must be over before mooring."

"You mean my demise and funeral? Very well, my friend, I accept your offer with pleasure. I shall at least have two hours' rest."

"A long rest afterwards," said Draycott fiercely.

"I bow to your prediction," said Challis; and he opened the door.

He was dog-tired, and though he endeavoured to centre his thoughts on certain facts in his position, nature presently had her way, and he fell off to sleep. He was awakened by Draycott, and with difficulty regained a sense of his plight. It was still dark, but the cabin was lighted by a swinging lamp. Challis, who had risen from his berth, sat down at the table, alert and attentive. Every nerve of his body now seemed invested with the conscious activity of life. He awaited his enemy's move.

"I have two pistols," said Draycott, "and you shall have one. We stand at opposite ends of the cabin, and fire."

"On what signal?" asked Challis.

"I will count three, and on the third we fire."

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"Let me point out, my dear man," said Challis, "that you give yourself the advantage, inasmuch as you will know when you are going to say 'three,' and your mind and muscles will act on the knowledge."

"I trust you not to fire beforehand; you must trust me," said Draycott sharply.

"I fear you are not acquainted with human psychology," said Challis with a smile. "Well, let me pass over that point, and come to another. I am a very passable shot, and despite the advantage which you allocate to yourself, it is quite probable that I shall make my mark. Have you considered what purpose shall be served if we both are killed?"

Draycott pondered a little, and then said sullenly—

"We must take the risk."

"It seems a needless waste," said Challis coolly. "Why not turn over things in your mind, with a view to another and more satisfactory solution?"

"Damn you, you shall not mock me!" cried Draycott. "It shall be as I have said. Here is your pistol. See to it!" He tossed one of the two he held across the table, and Challis took it up and examined it. His heart was not going one whit faster, but his mind was; he was gathering up the conditions and circumstances of his position into a bunch; he was looking along from them to the immediate future—he saw down the avenue, not very far, but what he saw was salient, important, invested with emotion. When he had finished examining the pistol he let his mind go at will. He was fingering the weapon unconsciously, playing with it, his sub-conscious self acting automatically, and out of all relation to his real feeling. He saw many pictures flashed before him—the old home in the West, his father, his wild brother, Lord Plinlimmon, and at the last the face of Dorothy Heywood. It was for her he was exposing himself to this certain risk of death. Was it for her? Or was it for his own pride? He asked himself this question in that moment of vivid introspec-

tion, and he did not see the way to an answer. All human emotions and motives were so complex. Ah no, not all! There welled up in him in a flood the tide of that passionate love.

Then for an instant he saw his mother's face as he had seen it in the darkness of the cellar, but now in the vivid brightness of his mind.

"Are you ready?" He heard Draycott's voice, heavy, defiant, ominous.

"Why, certainly," he said, and, with an abrupt realization of the cold facts, drew the pistol into his hands and stood up.

It seemed senseless murder, but as he looked into Draycott's grim face he saw the uselessness of further protest. One or even both must die.

"I will start counting almost immediately," said Draycott; and the silence that ensued was almost audible.

Suddenly it was interrupted, not from within, but from without. There were noises on deck, shouts of excitement, hailings, and a trampling. Draycott turned his head and lowered his weapon. The hatchway door was burst open and a man rushed in.

"The press gang!" he shouted. "The press gang!"

Draycott turned on Challis fiercely. "This is your doing," he said. "You have played me false!"

"Should I have waited till now to do it?" asked Challis scornfully. "I have played you fair throughout."

Draycott uttered an oath, and dashed up the ladder. He found Edwardes engaged in altercation with a naval lieutenant. Alongside the lugger was a long pinnace, and the lugger's deck was in possession of sturdy blue-jackets. Draycott's big voice boomed in its intervention.

"What does this mean?"

The lieutenant wheeled round.

"It means action, my man," he said, after a mo-

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mentary examination. "We've waited long enough for that, and now are going to have it, thank heaven! and you have the privilege of assisting, my lad."

"I am an independent gentleman, travelling," said Draycott sharply.

The lieutenant put back his head and laughed heartily.

"I congratulate you on your company and choice of boat," he said. "Why, man, your trail's scores of feet long. If I had the time—but it's no business of mine. I leave that to the Customs boats," he said, with an evident sneer. "I'll leave three men, skipper included, to make shore. Come away there!"

As he finished with this sharp injunction to his men, his eye fell on Challis, who had followed Draycott from the cabin, and he stared.

"Is this a travelling mummer's show?" he asked, for Challis had an odd appearance in his French clothes, stained with salt water and disordered, and his distinguished bearing was strangely incongruous with his dress.

The naval men were carrying out their orders, and the free traders were one by one yielding to superior force and the King's authority when Draycott made a further protest.

"You have no authority to do this," he said. "We are entitled to protection."

"If there were a dozen good reasons in law against, I have one stronger," said the lieutenant, "and that is might. There are doings forward. The Channel Fleet has orders. Come, man, you should rejoice at this chance. We shall be at grips with Boney at last."

Draycott turned, and saw Challis.

"Well," said he, "the skipper and this man and I will carry her to shore."

"Lord love you, no," said the lieutenant again. "I choose the likeliest men. The skipper shall save his bacon. But I like your looks, my man, and this fellow's also. You shall both fight for King George."

Duke Draycott was alive to the impossibility of resistance. The lugger lay at the mercy of the armed pinnace, and he was called upon to make up his mind forthright. Again his eyes glanced to Challis.

"Well, if you take me, take him," he said, and reserved in his heart his individual and inalienable rights. He had seen much of press gangs, and knew he must bow to the inevitable. His chance might come later, if he should watch warily.

The officer delivered his orders, and the naval men, with their reluctant captives, trooped over the side of the lugger. A detaining hand had been laid on Challis's shoulder, which he made no attempt to shake off.

"You are Lieutenant ——?" The words were an interrogation, and though the officer was surprised at the cultured voice he answered sharply—

"What odds is that to you? You are impressed."

"Pardon me; it is of considerable importance to me," said Challis, with as great an air of authority as the other. "I am an enforced passenger by this free-trade boat. I beg you will examine this letter."

It was the grey of dawn, and the lieutenant, though he could see the figure and face of his interlocutor, was obliged to use the lantern to peruse the letter. When he had finished he folded it slowly and gave it back to Challis.

"It is curious you should be here," he said wonderingly, "in this company."

"Sir, I have been in stranger company in the execution of my duty," said Challis, with formal dignity.

"Of course, you are exempt," said the lieutenant. "But for me, egad, I like a fight in the open."

Challis flushed, and, leaning forward, tapped the other on the arm. "Look you, sir, if it had not been for me, one you would despise, there would have been no fight in the open."

The lieutenant stared. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

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"You are beating down Channel to join Sir Robert Calder?"

"How do you know that?" asked the lieutenant, amazed.

"My friend, you are acting on information supplied by me. Go, and go in God's name and England's, and if you live and will honour me with your company at dinner when you return to London, Richard Challis will be at your disposal at White's."

There was a moment's pause, and then the sailor put out his hand. "You will forgive me, Mr. Challis. We live in rough times, and gather rough ways," he said. "I shall be honoured, if I live. God save England!"

He stepped over the lugger's side into the pinnace, and a sharp order issued from him. In the grey of the dawn Challis stood watching the receding boat and the struggling figure of Draycott in the stern. Then he turned to Edwardes.

"You are a capable seaman," he said sternly, "and you have one hand. I know something of ships. You will take this lugger into Portsmouth harbour."

"But," protested Edwardes, "she is bound for the Cuckmere."

"I care nothing for that. Remember that I am in control now," and he displayed the pistol which he had retained. "You will make for Portsmouth with all speed. Those are my orders."

There was no choice. The free-trade captain had to do as he was bid; and some hours later the remarkable sight of a smuggling lugger entering Portsmouth in full daylight with her trail streaming behind might have been witnessed. By the irony of circumstances, this audacious entry passed without remark. Challis cynically dismissed the lugger and her trepidant captain, and went off on his business. Catching smugglers was no affair of his.

He hastened to the semaphore in the town, and was soon busily engaged in dispatching his news, which

would be transmitted from station to station with such speed as to arrive in London at the Admiralty in an hour's time. When he had finished he had time to think of his circumstances, and, having found a friend, dined comfortably at two of the clock, after ten arduous days of anxiety.

In the afternoon he smartened himself up with a fresh suit, borrowed a horse, and set out for London, with a deviation through Chichester. He was resolved to commit himself to no risks, and was to give Hale, at present at any rate, a wide berth. He had, of course, another object in his deviation.



CHAPTER XVIII

FELICITY

SINCE Challis's departure for France Felicity had lived in a terrible purgatory. She had burst out with her news to Draycott all unconscious of the handle she was thus giving him, nor did her mistake come home to her until she learnt the truth from her father. Graves had heard with terror of Challis's escape from the death to which he had been doomed. Draycott it was who gave him the dread information, and who communicated also the identity of the deliverer. He watched the wretched man trembling at the disclosure, and his contempt rose against the pitiful instrument. He had few scruples, but he was himself no coward, and would always stand up to his actions. With cynical amusement he saw Graves whiten and shudder, and gulp down his brandy. Then he relieved the wretch's mind.

"But we have secured him at last. He has gone to France, and will stay there. Dead or alive, he does not come back."

"He will come back!" gasped Graves, still shaking.

"No; he is settled this time. He will be shot for a spy."

Draycott's manner was so confident that this display, together with the brandy he had drunk, brought reassurance to Graves. His courage returned, and, instead of fear, he began to experience anger. By the time he

had reached Hale, late in the evening, he had worked himself into a fury against his daughter. On his entrance he demanded of his wife where Felicity was, and when confronted with her loosed his tongue.

"You take part against your father," he stormed. "You go helping his enemies. I'll learn you, miss, what your duty is. Who let this Challis out?"

"I did," said Felicity, with steady defiance in her large, black eyes.

"You have the impudence to admit it?" screamed Graves, and ejaculated oaths. "You plot against your father, would you!" and added an insulting name.

Felicity was pallid, but drew her slight form firmly up. "I released him because it was murder to put him there," she said tensely.

"What is it? What is this talk?" demanded Mrs. Graves, suddenly alarmed and puzzled. She knew nothing of Challis's escape, for Felicity had kept silence.

"This daughter of yours," said her husband viciously, "is betraying me. She will hand me over to the law, will she?" The effect of his potations was to confuse and inflame him. "She would see me kicking my heels in a rope, would she? She shall have her deserts. I'm done with her. Damn her!"

He had seized her by the arm, and was gripping it with terrible force; but Felicity did not shrink or cry out.

"I am glad that I released him. I would do it again," she said. "Yes, again and again. You would have committed murder."

"You dare say that!" cried Graves, infuriate now, and he wrenched and twisted the delicate arm. A spasm of pain passed over the girl's face, but no cry escaped her. Graves backed to the door, dragging her after him, and putting out his free hand, seized a heavy whip from the rack.

"By ——, I'll learn you!" he said, and raised the big thong above his head. Under the menace of that horrible thing Felicity winced. It seemed to threaten

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instant dissolution, so gross was the contrast the ugly weapon made with her flimsy body. She winced as the lash descended . . . but it did not fall on her. The madman's arm was suddenly swept aside, and his own pistol was thrust into his face.

"Touch her, and I will shoot you dead. I will shoot you dead! Do you hear? What I have endured I will stand no longer. A wicked husband you have been, and a wicked father! Let my daughter go, or I will shoot you!"

It was the rising of the mother animal, suddenly alive with all the frenzy of her love, and all the passion of her long-repressed feelings. Her eyes stared into her husband's like the wild eyes of an enraged cow, and her fingers trembled convulsively on the trigger. Before this terrifying outbreak Graves fell back in vivid alarm and bewilderment. Death was imminent in the pistol which a tremulous hand wielded. He shrank away and cried out in fear.

"Put it down!" he called. "For the love of God, put it down! I didn't mean anything. I was only scaring her." He was afraid that the pistol would go off under her touch, even without her volition, and he backed away into the corner.

Mrs. Graves's hand fell to her side, but she did not relinquish the pistol. Her bosom was heaving with the storm of her emotion, and her eyes were still wild.

Graves sank into a chair and began to mumble. The experience was sobering him. Never before in his life had his wife behaved like this; never had she been anything but a meek and voiceless and obedient drudge. He was staggered and shaken.

Felicity turned away without a word, even to her mother, but ere she had left the room her father had sufficiently recovered to show his teeth. He was still unable to get over the amazing revolt, but he spluttered out—

"It's of no consequence, any way. Challis is done

for. He is known in France now as a spy, and will never return."

Felicity paused, arrested.

"Draycott has seen to that. He will be shot as a spy in France, whither he is gone. And who managed that? Why, this dutiful girl, who saved him from the cellar."

"It is a lie!" cried Felicity, with leaping heart.

Graves sneered. "A lie? Who told Duke Draycott what this fine gentleman is? Take that away with you, and laugh if you can, you—you——" There was an ugly word on his lips, but the light had not yet died down in his wife's eyes, and, seeing it, he stopped. Felicity stood still for a moment, as if in agonized contemplation of an idea, and then turned and swiftly went from the room.

That night she passed as in one of the circles of hell, sleepless, tormented, and dry of eye. Visions passed before her, visions so strange, so terribly beyond her control, and so conflicting. She saw Challis arrive, smiling courteously, into the darkling kitchen; she heard his voice; she saw him at his desk at work, his hand passing in thought over his smooth hair; she saw him confronting visitors, a master of men; she saw him turn to her; she saw him in prison, dishevelled, worn, and like a lost spirit—ah, she felt his kiss!

She saw him again at bay. She was in the garden, and saw Duke Draycott lurking in the shadows. And under the slender moon she witnessed that meeting which had benumbed her heart and confounded life for her. She had seen the lovers in each other's arms! Was it a dream? And then there were horses galloping, the sounds of carts rumbling, a white-faced, starved, and battered man, a man moaning on his pillow, while one stood to guard him with a loaded pistol. And then—a man hanging from a tree, or against a wall, with his blindfold face. She shuddered; she could not weep. Who had done this? She herself!

Duke Draycott had made his bargain with the French-

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man, and never doubted as to the result. This man had taken so many risks that he must at last and now succumb to one of them. Draycott was busy for a few days in the disposition of his free-trade boats, for he was acting in a large organization, and then at last he found his way to Southover. He had to make the final arrangements with Heywood by which the farmer would be quit of the whole business, and he also wanted an interview with Dorothy. He was completely his own man when he arrived, both during the interview with Heywood, which was merely formal, and in the beginning at least of his interview with Dorothy. He had demanded this interview from her father, not truculently, as he was used to do, but with a great appearance of humility.

"It was understood between us once, Heywood," he said, "that Dorothy should be my wife if all was well, and she assented. She was indulgent to the idea. But now, if she refuses, I will not be the man to hold her to the bargain."

So Heywood, simple, easy man, sent him into the drawing-room overlooking the orchard, that Dorothy might speak her mind. Draycott was shrewd, and knew when to be silent, though his native genius bade him talk. He approached Dorothy, as it were, cap in hand. No news of his plot in France had reached her, for it was kept private between a few of the gang, and Heywood was no longer one of the smuggler's allies. He might, however, have augured ill for himself from the manner in which she received him. She had been reading, and she rose and stood waiting, as a duchess might wait for the message of an underling.

"I would to God, Dorothy," he said, "that nothing had come between us ; and, maybe, nothing that matters has. I have known you since you were a child, a pretty child at knee, and you have grown into a beautiful woman. What is there between us now, Dorothy ? Is it really less than there once was ? "

In the slight pause he made she spoke.

"There is nothing between us now. Once I was a child, and I admired you, as a child will. But I do so no longer. That is all. It is very simple."

"It may be simple," he said, "but it is not simple for me. It confuses my life. I have always let you know how I stand to you, Dorothy, and I stand now more passionately yours than ever. What answer have you to that?"

"I have no answer, Mr. Draycott, save that I am sorry," she said coldly. "Please do not prolong this visit. If you have business with my father——"

"There is no business more," he said. "I am tired of business. Don't think I always want business. I have done all I need to do in that way. I want to think of something else. Life is not made of business. It is you I want and love. Can I not have both?"

"You can have the one, if you look for it, I don't doubt," she said. "But not the other—not me, no, in God's name, not me."

At that he broke out. "But I have wealth which is not known. I am no poor man. I have not let others know, but I tell you. Dorothy, come to me, and you shall live happily, and with love, and in fine clothes and——"

"Oh, sir, do you rank me as abandoned women are ranked!" she cried. "I abhor your offer. I would live sooner on lentils and dress in homespun rags than have your riches and your ill-gotten prosperity."

It was at this point that Draycott's studied and earnest suavity left him. His untoward spirit could not brook this breach of his vanity.

"You have that man Challis in your mind," he said, raising his voice. "You need have him no longer. He is gone out of your life. He never meant to stay in it."

Dorothy never answered. "You do not believe me," he went on, his anger rising. "But it is true. He will not come back. You shall wait and see."

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Dorothy smiled, and in her smile was contempt which galled him.

"It is not possible that you should judge of natures so much above you," she said.

Incensed, he burst into flame, discretion thrown to the winds. "He will not come back," he said harshly, "because he has been shot as a spy in France."

Through Dorothy's heart went a sharp and horrible knife; and in a moment she collected herself.

"You always spoke false, Duke Draycott," she said steadily. "Your words now are as false as ever. Nothing that you could say would persuade me—nothing."

She turned and sat down and took up her book, though she trembled, and she put her elbows on the table and her hands over her ears, so that she should no longer hear him. When she looked up he was gone. He had recognized that he had made a mistake, and, his burst of temper over, had wisely retired, in the hope of better results another day.

But though Dorothy had treated his statement with scorn and incredulity, there came back upon her later an uneasy feeling. Duke Draycott was unscrupulous, as she had reason to know. But had he perchance spoken the truth on this occasion? Terrified at the mere thought she ejected it, but it returned persistently and with growing force. It made itself at home in her horrified mind, and dwelt there as an evil familiar which she had no means to evict. She could brook the torture no longer, and one day made haste along the road that led to Hale. Here she could inquire for news of Challis. That he had gone to France she was aware, and evidently that fact was known to his enemies. Here was danger enough to speed her feet.

She was admitted by Felicity at Hale, and the two girls confronted each other. There was the world of differences between them; they stood for two divergent and contrary types, and were united only in one thing, the love of this man. To Felicity the appearance of

Dorothy was tormenting ; to gaze upon her beauty hurt like knives. She had seen Challis in the orchard, and the memory of it pierced her heart. She fixed unfathomable eyes on her visitor and waited.

" I have come, Miss Graves, to ask if there is news of Mr. Challis," began Dorothy.

" Why do you want news of him ? " asked Felicity hoarsely.

Dorothy had an accession of colour. " What is that to you ? " she said. " Surely I am entitled to inquire after a friend."

" He is your friend ? " said Felicity in a whisper.

" Only a friend ? "

" You have no right or title to put me questions like that," went on Dorothy haughtily. " Mr. Challis is lodged here, and I come to ask when he will return."

" Suppose," said Felicity, moving a step nearer—" suppose he never does return."

Dorothy put out a hand and steadied herself by means of the door. " What ? " she said. " Is there news ? Is there bad——"

Felicity's large eyes were intense and apparently passionless. " What would it matter to you if he never came back ? " she asked slowly.

There seemed something ominous in the tone, and the eldritch look of this un-English girl brought an atmosphere of mystic happenings about Dorothy. She felt something throb and rise in her throat, and her other hand went up in instinctive protection.

" He is dead ? " she asked with an effort, conscious that she was swaying on shuddering limbs.

Felicity's eyes were lowered, and into her voice crept something new which had not been present in the dull, metallic tones which she had used till now.

" He may be dead," she said, with a break in her voice. " He may be in a foreign prison. God knows. God knows ! "

Dorothy's attention was drawn by this change, and

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she looked into the other's face ; the two women read each other in silence. In Dorothy's heart leapt something exultant even in her distress and anxiety, as she realized the truth anew. There was no wonder why this strange girl loved. All must love, but his love was for her alone. Her secret joy filled her heart. So should she go through life, and every beautiful woman she met would look with hopeless longing on the man who had chosen *her*. . . . Her swift chain of reflection was broken. But where was he ? Felicity was speaking out of her anguish.

"It was I, it was I that did it !" she cried.

"What did you do ?" said Dorothy, wondering.

"I told them what he was. I told them he was going to France."

"*You !*" Dorothy's voice and face hardened.

"It was I, it was I ! I did it to save him. They thought he was their enemy, sent to put down the free trade. They made attempts on his life. He would have been killed. But I told them what he was, and I hoped to save him, and I have destroyed him."

Her words were a wail, but Dorothy heard nothing save the words, gathering from them the terrible import.

"*You* betrayed him !" she exclaimed, almost like a beautiful tigress.

"Yes, I thought to save him, but Draycott wanted his life. He would have his life at all costs. He saw you in the orchard. He wanted his life because of you. And I—I didn't know. I told him, hoping to save him. It was my doing."

In Dorothy's mind thoughts were flashing fast. She had an overwhelming impulse to strike—to injure this traitor ; then into her angry and bewildered brain entered a gleam of mercy, of justice. This girl had hoped to save ! And last of all there rose up before her a vivid vision of all the issues, and she stood speechless, amazed. This girl who loved him had thought to save him even for *her*, and it was Duke Draycott's passion

for her to which this crime must be attributed. Draycott had seen her that night. Then if he had seen her he knew, and his words the other day had been cunningly devised. He had approached with soft speech, and told her that her lover had deserted her. Was it not all a lie? Her heart lifted itself clear of the dismal forebodings, and her breath came more naturally.

"You are not to blame," she said in another voice to Felicity. "Do not blame yourself. He is not dead," and on that gentler farewell she turned and went. He was not dead!

Challis rode over the Downs in the highest spirits. His messages had gone to London; the admiral of the Channel Squadron had probably received his information already; and he was on his way to his love on a beautiful summer day. When he reached Southover he tied his horse at the gate and entered the garden. Among the hollyhocks Dorothy came to him, with a smile on her face, and held out two hands.

"I knew you would come back," she said.

He put her arms about his neck, and his own arms about her waist.

"Why, I would come back from the dead to you," he said vehemently.

"Ah, but I knew you were not dead," she said. "They told me, but I knew otherwise."

"Who told you?" he asked.

"Draycott," she said, "and Felicity."

"Draycott!" he echoed, and added, "Yes, Draycott would have had me dead; and all for you, my dearest and beloved."

"I know," she said, her eyes clouding. "Felicity told me."

"Felicity!" he said, and remembered. "She is an odd child, dearest. Why, she has helped me, she has saved my life; and then she betrayed me, delivered me over to my enemies. I ran great risks through her. I wonder why she did that."

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Dorothy was tempted to silence. Why should she speak? But the arms about her, which thrilled her through and through, opened in her all unconsciously a generous sympathy. Could she not afford to put this poor, hopeless rival in proper light? Nothing could come between them now.

"She did it because she hoped to save you," said Dorothy softly. "She saved your life once. I am glad. Yet I saved it, too."

He stooped to kiss her, and whispered. What place had poor Felicity then? Alas! she was as the idle wind that passed unheeding ears, as the unheard murmur of the pines. The lovers were all in all to each other, and wrapt in their mutual and all-dominating love.

A little later he said—

"I have still important duties before me, but I shall be free presently. I must go to London, and I shall be there a little time. Then I will return and claim you from your father."

"You will not—you do not go into fresh danger?" she asked, clinging to him.

"No; that is past. My work there is done, and this place will know me no more, and it will also know you no more," he added tenderly. "Yet I confess I love it. I love every rise and hollow, every bush and tussock of it. For here I met you, and the whole face of the blown Downs, with its sea winds, breathes memories of you."

They parted at the gate in the fresh, bright morning, and Challis's horse was turned northward; he was headed for town. Dorothy watched him until he vanished round a dip in the road, and as he passed out of her sight he passed within the range of other eyes.

Felicity had been on an errand to a neighbouring farm, and she was issuing from a side track by which the farmer's wains reached the homestead when Challis rode into view. He had his eyes fixed forward, as if he saw nothing, but was in deep contemplation, and a

pleasant smile illumined his face, as of one whose thoughts are delightful. Felicity's heart stopped, and then began to beat tumultuously. The blood rushed through all her body in her gladness. She started forward at a run, and called to him.

" Mr. Challis ! Mr. Challis ! "

He paid no heed. The voice reached him on the soft air, but did not penetrate to his consciousness. She cried out again to him in her rapture. He was safe ! He was safe ! But again he heard nothing ; and saw nothing of the flying, fragile figure only a score of paces from him in the field. And suddenly Felicity stopped running ; suddenly she came to a halt, and looked after the cantering horseman. Then she remembered. All her case came home to her, and she fell on the meadow-sward and broke into sobs.

CHAPTER XIX

AT SOUTHOVER

CHALLIS remained in town for a fortnight, and found himself unexpectedly busy. He had received gracious compliments from great people, who were good enough to acknowledge his services to his country. News had come from Lord Nelson, whose fleet was straining every sheet and yard to cross the Atlantic in time to intercept Villeneuve ; and the arrival of the swift brig *Curieux*, which he had dispatched in advance from the West Indies, had given a fresh warning to the Admiralty. Even now Sir Robert Calder's squadron might be meeting the French reinforced fleet off Finisterre, and the fate of England trembled in the balance.

Challis had drawn the true inference from his observations in Boulogne. The naval preparations there were a pretence ; they merely masked Bonaparte's real design, which was to lure the English fleet away, thus secure command of the Channel, and pour his hundred thousand men upon Kentish shores. Now that his cunning scheme was laid bare, everything hung upon the result of the naval conflict. The official world at Whitehall waited for news with tense anxiety, and Challis shared the tension with his superiors and associates. The semaphores to Portsmouth and to Deal were in constant use, and England listened eagerly for the first news from the Atlantic.

It was in these days of tension that Challis met Lord Plinlimmon. His lordship was a fellow-guest at Sir William's, and was pleased to congratulate him.

"I formed an opinion of your character which was entirely favourable, Mr. Challis," he said, "and, gad, I'm delighted it has been justified."

Challis civilly expressed his thanks. Lord Plinlimmon was an important personage, not by reason of any superiority of intellect over his fellows. He was bluff and grandiose, and owned great possessions. Also, he was a man of discretion and confidence. He was of solid English character, without an atom of imagination, but with hard practicality, and a certain sense of humour at the expense of others.

"I hope," he added, "that that man of mine treated you handsomely."

Challis smiled, recalling, from what seemed another century, how exactly that man of his lordship's had treated him.

"He is a very clever rogue," he said.

"Rogue!" His lordship sipped his port, and looked mildly astonished.

"You have not visited Hale for years, my lord?"

"No, egad! I have no interest there, and there's too much wind on the Downs, and my wife wouldn't abide it. What is the rogue's roguery? Has he poached on the cellars?"

Challis in turn drank off his glass before he replied.

"There is as pretty a nest of smuggling thieves there as a Customs officer would care to see in a month's work," he said.

Lord Plinlimmon grinned. "So that is his game."

"And your cellars, my lord, come in useful," said Challis.

"My cellars! Damme, the rogue has the impudence of Satan."

"If I were in His Majesty's Customs, which I am thankful to say I am not," went on Challis, "I would

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make a clean sweep of the nest, and rid the coast of a dangerous gang—how dangerous I know, who have adventitiously been under their hands.”

His lordship displayed much interest, and announced his intention of dealing with Graves at once.

“Damn his impudence!” said his lordship, who appeared much affected by the facts in their relation to him, and their reflection upon his dignity.

“If I might advise,” suggested Challis, “it would be best to make a clean sweep, as I have said. If you single out one, the rest evade you. The Customs Board might tidy up the whole coast, and my information is at their service if they want it.”

Thus it came about, by the irony of fate, that the free traders by their persecutions created the instrument for their own undoing. Challis had not thought of Felicity.

A few days later the Admiralty received through the semaphores the news of the action off Finisterre, between Sir Robert Calder and Admiral Villeneuve. But that drawn battle, at least a battle with no definite and decided result, did not avail to relieve the tension, or dissipate the fears and anxieties of Whitehall. Two battleships of the allied fleet had surrendered, and one English battleship was put out of action. Sir Robert Calder had been prevented from following up his success by the fall of night, and on the next day Villeneuve declined to renew the fight. There was not at the first blush much in the affair. Why had Calder not forced an engagement on the French? Why had he stood away for the Channel? A dozen questions passed from lip to lip, and Sir Robert Calder came in for severe criticism. The first news had been welcomed as indicating an eventual victory; but the news of the English admiral's retirement called down upon him a storm of indignation. Friendly critics who kept their heads pointed out that Sir Robert might well have deemed it prudent not to pursue Villeneuve, who was retreating

towards a junction with the Rochefort and Ferrol squadrons, and that his already inferior force would in that event have been greatly outnumbered. No one would listen to that plea. England expected all her sailors to act with the dash and daring of a Nelson, and to obtain his decisive victories. It was not until later, when it was known that Villeneuve had taken refuge in Ferrol harbour, that the Admiralty realized the complete defeat of Napoleon's plans. For Calder had checked the French admiral at the one critical moment, and when that chance of action passed it never returned. Nelson had arrived in European waters, and there was no possibility after that of securing the command of the Channel. Napoleon abandoned all thought of invading England, and turned his attention to a new campaign against the Continental allies, which ended in Austerlitz and the hegemony of France in Europe.

But our tale does not look so far forward. No Austerlitz and no Trafalgar had been fought when in the end of July Challis set out for Portsmouth with dispatches from the Admiralty. Not yet was it understood how completely Napoleon's plans had collapsed. Only he himself was aware of it. Anxiety reigned throughout the country. Boney was still on every one's nerves; and it was necessary for swift communication with Admiral Nelson.

As Challis walked along the waterside he was vividly reminded of his entrance into the harbour just over two weeks before, and he smiled at the quandary into which he had forced the smuggler Edwardes. He did not know of the fate that had befallen Edwardes. That excellent seaman and redoubtable rascal had, to his amazement, found himself in Portsmouth in broad daylight with a contraband cargo unquestioned by any one. But he was shrewd enough to see that he would not long escape detection. No port authority would conceive that a smuggling lugger had audaciously entered the harbour; but if he remained there he must inevit-

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ably be challenged and discovered some time or other. Moreover, he was helpless to dispose of his cargo in Portsmouth, which lay outside the scene of the free traders' operations. He soon made up his mind that he must get away with as much speed as possible. Not to arouse suspicion, he lay at anchor for a couple of hours, and then with his single hand put out into Spithead. Here he ran into his fate unexpectedly. The commander of a revenue cutter, with never a thought of meeting illicit business in those waters, was struck by the trail of the *Sally*. Edwardes had had no opportunity to take aboard his floating kegs, acting as he had been obliged to do under the pistol of his determined passenger. And he had been unwilling to cut them adrift, seeing with what success he had so far been attended. Unhappily for him, Lieutenant Buchanan's sharp eyes were arrested, and that diligent officer had boarded the lugger within twenty minutes for inquiry. Edwardes had no hope of showing his heels, and to resist had been madness. He was lodged by the evening in Portsmouth gaol, and the *Sally* and her cargo were confiscate. Yet he managed to get a message to the gang, which was in effect a brief history of what had happened to Draycott and himself, and included some interesting and speculative statements about Challis. Edwardes was moved in his communication to bad language, and attributed without hesitation both the press gang and his own predicament to Challis. It did not matter that the cutter that seized him could not have been under orders from Challis. His bitter indignation overwhelmed his judgment, and he wound up by declaring, in ill-spelt language, that it was time this troublesome spy was disposed of.

It may be imagined with what feelings news of Challis's presence in the country came to the members of the gang, who were still convinced that he was a Customs agent interfering with their nefarious traffic. Duke Draycott knew better, but Duke Draycott was

away, and, moreover, had held his tongue for reasons of his own. So, too, Graves had been silent, and for reasons of his own also had even encouraged the idea that his lodger was a Government spy sent to root out the free trade in those parts.

Graves received the news with an uneasiness which he made no attempt to conceal. Felicity had said no word of what she had seen, and Dorothy, even if she had been disposed to communicate her great news, had no friend in the neighbourhood upon the social level to which her culture and tastes had elevated her. She was, on her father's side, of yeoman stock, physically the best in the country, and from the refined gentlewoman who was her mother she had inherited traits and feelings and possibilities quite beyond the reach of her father's class. She, indeed, was one of those outstanding personalities which are to be found in all classes, and which reach up and help to interlace rank with rank, and so keep our English race a homogeneous and healthy organism.

Graves spent days in terror, not on account of the free trade, but because he feared Challis would hand over to the law the man who had endeavoured to murder him. But presently he grew more confident, as nothing happened and Challis had vanished from the scene without taking action; and he entered into new smuggling plans with much of his old zest. He had acquired the cruelty, as well as the avarice, of the miser, whose ignoble passion grows with what it feeds on.

In other directions also the alarm was dying down, and the lawless free traders were settling back into security, when intelligence reached them suddenly that Challis had been seen in Portsmouth. He had been recognized by two of the gang, and their statements as to his identity were justified by the appearance of the man personally in Chichester. He had encountered Captain Balmain in Portsmouth, and that excellent and amiable fellow had pressed him to pay a visit to

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Chichester. Challis, who would not have accepted the invitation for the sake of the dull soldier, was induced to assent for a reason which is easily understood ; he would be able to pay a flying visit to Southover a little earlier than he had anticipated. This was how he came to be dining with his host and a select company on a blazing August afternoon. One of the company was his old acquaintance Sir John Fairford, as cool, as cynical, and as entertaining as ever. Some part of his story must be related to these friends, but just so much as would leave them ignorant of his work and post.

"It was rumoured you were in France, Mr. Challis," said Sir John. "I have told you what gossips we countryside folk are."

"It is true. I have been in France and the Channel Islands," said Challis, "and they were of an intolerable heat. Our island shore is best."

"It is odd what a state there has been between us and France," observed a guest. "There has been war and no war. English people knew not whether they were suspect or not if they travelled there. In a way of saying there has been free passage ; and now we have this fight."

That swung the conversation round to a topic on which every one was used to talk in those days. It was rumoured that the Lords of the Admiralty would try Sir Robert Calder by court-martial. He had some partisans, nevertheless, who defended him with some skill. And the eager question passed, unanswered, from lip to lip, "Where is Lord Nelson ?" "What has become of Villeneuve ?" The whole nation hung on these questions.

Challis excused himself early and passed on to Southover. His departure had been contested hotly by Balmain, but he had insisted ; yet one concession he had to make—a consent to return. Sir John claimed his company for supper in the near future. He pointed out how easy was the road to Portsmouth, and submitted

with what pleasure Lady Fairford would meet Mr. Challis again. Challis yielded to this importunity in his anxiety to be gone on the road to the Downs.

It was early evening when he reached the farm, and, to his huge satisfaction, found Dorothy alone again. Her father was busy in some remote field, and Challis thanked his good fortune.

"I have come back for a moment," he said, "and all eternity can be in a moment. It is when I hold you thus. Yet when I go it will have shrunk only to a moment."

"Let us keep that moment sacred," she answered, smiling into his face.

"Dorothy, there is work afoot for me. King and country call me."

"Not to danger?" she quavered.

"I think I have no such hazardous task as I have discharged," he said soberly. "But it is impossible to say. The peace of the world, the honour and security of England, hang on the events of these weeks. I am in Portsmouth to do what I can."

"If you go you will come back. I know it," she said earnestly.

"I would come back from the dead to you," he said again, under his breath.

"Hush!" she whispered. "There are no dead—they are all living. My mother has come to me at nights."

He stared. "My mother came to me," he said, remembering. "Yes, there are no dead. They are alive for evermore."

She rested in his arms, and he murmured in her ear.

"My father shall come and see you and admire your beauty. My sister shall love you. You are mine and cannot be separated from me."

"I fear," she said, pressing close.

"Fear not," he answered, for he was fearless himself, all his doubts and diffidence as to his family swept away in the vast flood of his love.

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In riding back he did not take the road, but went by a farm track across the Downs, and here he encountered Heywood. He reined in and gave him a friendly greeting.

"You were in France, Mr. Challis, I heard some time since," said the farmer heavily, "and then you were in London."

He paused, as if considering, a tall, commanding figure, a huge staff in his hand. "You have come from Southover?" he asked, fastening his clear blue eyes on the horseman.

"Yes," said Challis. "I was fortunate enough to find Miss Heywood."

"Aye," assented the farmer. "And you were fortunate enough, in your fine lingo, to find her before, when you rode to London."

"That is so," said Challis, wondering.

Heywood moved heavily, shifting his position. "What does a fine gentleman like you in these parts?" he asked bluntly. "You have been here long enough, it seems to me."

"Why, no one seems to want me," said Challis lightly. "Not even you;" and then he added soberly and with significance, "but yes, there is one, if one only."

"Ah!" The farmer looked him full in the face, and something like anger was rising in his own countenance. "You speak with impudence and shamelessness, if I take your meaning."

"I speak with all joy and happiness, and a profound sense of gratitude," said Challis. "It is Miss Heywood who wants me, as I want her."

Heywood said nothing in answer for two minutes, and then he spoke in a different voice.

"You mean all that you say?"

"Every word and fraction of word," said Challis fervently.

Heywood looked away at the Downland, on which the evening shadows were falling.

"I must guard my own," he said. "They tell me you are of a proud family."

"Never prouder than now, when it can take Dorothy into its blood and fortunes," said Challis.

Heywood was silent once again, and then put out a big hand.

"I believe God will bless her—she will be happy," he said almost roughly.

"I know it," said Challis softly.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE "HEN AND CHICKENS"

CHALLIS's days were much occupied, and he experienced a difficulty in getting over to Southover. It was in those days quite a formidable journey, which could not be undertaken at odd times. But a time was approaching when he would have greater freedom, and that was the day that marked the arrival in English waters of Lord Nelson. His advent was hailed with acclamations of delight. Surely the country was now at last safe.

On August 17 the great Admiral arrived in Portsmouth, with the *Victory* and the *Superb*, and proceeded to recruit at his house in Merton. He sailed from Portsmouth for Cadiz on September 14 to achieve a deathless fame, and lay down his life for his beloved country at Trafalgar.

With these great events this modest history has no concern. It is with the fortunes of Richard Challis that we deal, and it was the arrival of Nelson that released him temporarily from his work. Ere that had occurred he had managed two visits to Southover, but they were brief and tantalizing in their brevity. On August 18 he had settled to sup with Sir John Fairford, and thereafter promised himself a holiday from care and anxiety, and the happiness of the constant presence of his Dorothy. He was in high spirits when he arrived at Fairford Hall.

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Meanwhile, it is obvious that his continued presence at Portsmouth could not escape the notice of the free traders. They had many eager agents, and the league was united by bonds of common interests and common greed. It became known that Challis was to sup at Fairford Hall, and a watch was kept for him. Things had gone badly for the smugglers. During the past weeks they had met with severe losses all along the coasts, and the hand of the Government had struck them even so far as the Cuckmere Valley by Alfriston. There had been conferences between the various leaders of the band, and the feeling of anger and resentment was growing fiercely among them. The culmination to their fury at the frustration and overthrow of their schemes came in the seizure of the *Pretty Maid's* cargo. This lugger nicely and skilfully eluded the cutters, landed her load, and put off under ballast. But one hour later Riding Officer Foster and a party of dragoons descended on the smugglers and captured not only the booty, which was unusually valuable, but also half a dozen free traders.

This had occurred on the evening previous to the assembling of a number of the smugglers in an upper room of the " Hen and Chickens." The meeting had been called at the inn for a sufficient purpose, and " Bull " Maggis, from Hayling Island, a dark-browed, squat, and ill-looking personage, presided. The free traders met in a seething spirit of mischief, which boded evil. They had plenty to talk over, and they were long in doing it. About a score of them were present, rough, unscrupulous men, all their lives at odds with the law, who had thrived on an evil trade, and had come to look upon it as their right and privilege. Faced with what they conceived to be the menace of ruin, they were equal to any desperate adventure which might promise them relief from what they regarded as persecution.

" Bull " Maggis was a man with some sense of

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organization, and he had succeeded in imposing his authority on the gathering. He insisted on a certain order and method in the proceedings; and he made a speech which was none the less effective because it was crudely and vividly conversational.

"If this is to go on," said he, "we may burn our luggers and take to ploughs, or for them that are sailors let 'em fish mackerel, and cry meek to the Customs cutters. You know what has took place within a week—the *Day Star* seized off Shoreham; the *Lizzie* by Bognor; Ben Hutchison's cargo what he was landing nabbed and gone; the *Pretty Maid* was another; and then, worst of all, was the raid on Hayling. That's what goes to my gizzard and vexes it." "Bull" Maggis swore profusely and in extravagant colours. "The raid on the storehouse——"

One jumped to his feet in wild fury. "I was one of them, Bull, that was at Covensey when this damned Challis came up in the fog. He crept into the barn and heard us. He spied on us. That was how we come to change the storehouse up the creek. It's he done it, by ——!"

There were manifest signs of growing wrath in the room, and "Bull" Maggis, with difficulty, secured order and a hearing.

"That's got to be thought out," he said officially. "We must look into it. It's what we're here for. Who is it that knows so much about the free trade and gives the officers the nod to pounce on us? When we find him, by thunder, he won't have a head to nod with long."

Cheers greeted this rotund sentiment, but all those present had come with their minds made up, and they would brook no procrastination. They would endure to have their fury fed with proper fuel, and so rise to the pitch of action; but they were in no mood for rational consideration or cool counsel. It had been bruited now for months past on those coasts that the

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visitor at Hale was a Customs agent, sent to reorganize and strengthen the preventive service. It had been very noticeable how often there had been captures since his installation. He had been in Jersey and in France, and Duke Draycott had openly declared him to be their most dangerous enemy. That was enough. Their losses enraged and inflamed this ugly pack of ill-living creatures to whom violence was as natural as breathing and eating and sleeping. They clamoured to be rid of Challis, and soon " Bull " Maggis was forced to yield, and go frankly with the tide. He also had no doubts on the subject, but he would have liked to proceed formally with all the ceremony of an illicit court of justice. Yet when he joined his fellows he did it as a leader.

" Where is Edwardes ? " he cried. " In Portsmouth gaol, among stinking rats and garbage ! " and the murmur passed into a roar. " Well, what are we going to do ? "

He glanced about the faces, and read there one determination. It was a momentous determination, but it hung there for a moment in imminent menace, and one man jumped up to give it voice. As he did so, there was a stir about the door, which opened, and all eyes went to it—pistols were drawn.

" It's me ! " said a deep voice ; and, to their utter amazement, entered Duke Draycott.

His appearance was hailed with delight, after the first momentary hush of surprise. He stood to the greeting with a grin, which showed his strong teeth, and then demanded a glass. " I have footed it from Portsmouth," he said, and then turned roughly round. " Are there any spies here ? " he demanded.

" No," said Maggis. " No, Duke, but we are dealing with a spy."

" Who is that ? " he asked.

" Challis," called several voices.

Draycott's face underwent a change. " Is he here, then ? " he asked.

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"Yes, he has been at Portsmouth, and is over-busy with his sneaking work. The *Daystar* and the *Lizzie* have been seized, and the stores at Hayling Island."

Draycott had seated himself, and was coolly considering the situation. He had come back for a settlement in regard to Dorothy, in which Challis must necessarily be involved. He had deserted, having swum ashore near Weymouth from the frigate on which he was serving, and had succeeded in making his way home by hook and by crook. He had almost fortuitously stumbled upon this gathering, and he saw at once how it might be used for his purposes. His imprisonment had embittered and soured his naturally intractable temper, and he had had time to brood over his wrongs. He had by now acquired a misgiving as to the chances of his private warfare from Challis. The man had a charmed life, and had escaped from his toils so often. He doubted that he might yet make another escape, and he was resolved that this should not happen. In his distrust of himself, which was almost a superstitious feeling, he was resolved to make sure of his object by now using the free traders. He knew full well enough that Challis was in no way responsible for the recent seizures. But he did not open his mouth to say so. On the contrary, he asked for a full statement of the losses, and, when he had heard it, pondered a little.

"Come, Duke," called a smuggler. "We look to you for a lead."

"Challis must go," he said suddenly; and there was a growl of satisfaction. He was rising to say more when the door was opened again, and a man hurried in.

"Farebrother!" shouted one or two.

Draycott turned to the new-comer. "What is it?" he asked.

The door which had admitted Farebrother had admitted also a slim, fragile girl. The man at the door had tried to shut her out, but his neighbour recognized her.

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" All right, man ; it's Graves's daughter," he said.
" What is it, lass ? "

Felicity, it seemed, had brought a letter from her father, to which an answer was urgent, and the letter was passed up to " Bull " Maggis. The evident excitement of Farebrother had drawn all eyes on him, and no one paid any heed to the girl, who was, in fact, invisible to all save two or three near the door. She remained unnoticed, unconsidered.

" I've come from Portsmouth, where I bin watching Challis," panted the man. " He's in the neighbourhood now."

" Here ? " asked Maggis.

" Aye. He's supping at Fairford Hall."

There was a moment's silence, and then a savage cry spread like contagion through the company.

" Challis is delivered into our hands," said a tall smuggler, with a superior appearance to the others.

" That is good hearing," said Draycott. " What are you going to do ? Here is the seizure of two of our best luggers, and the capture of their cargoes, not to speak of the storehouse on the island. Are you going to let the man that did it go free ? "

" No ! " shouted the crowd.

" Good ! " said Draycott, and, saying it, was aware of a girl struggling towards him through the press of smugglers.

" It is not true ! " cried Felicity, wild with fear and excitement. These men were going forth to kill Challis. She must stop them. " It is not true," she cried again. " Mr. Challis is no spy upon you, and Duke Draycott knows it."

" What is all this ? " said " Bull " Maggis roughly.
" What does the girl do here ? "

" Graves's daughter," went round the room, and the free traders waited in astonishment, an interlude in their anger, as they stared at her.

" Felicity, silence ! What do you know about it ? "

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said Draycott sharply. "Let us be gone, men, and lose no time."

But Felicity struggled forward. When one of the smugglers would have jocosely held her back she fought him, and cried out—

"It is false. He is no spy. I know it, and my father knows it, and Duke Draycott knows. He went on the King's business to France."

"There is no sense in this," said the tall smuggler. "The man is convicted by his record. There are all these cases. Foster and all the others never made the hauls before. He is sent down here to extirpate, and he will do it mighty soon if we take no action."

"That is so!" came from the body of the men in a growl of wrath. "He has given the preventive information."

"He did not give information," panted Felicity, now alive with emotion, and carried on the flood of passion; "it was another."

"Who? Who? If you know, speak. Bah, we will hang this Challis and be rid of him."

"It was another; it was another," wailed the girl. "Oh, my God!"

"We are losing time," said Draycott harshly. "Why listen to this silly girl?"

There was a chorus of approving voices, and a movement was made towards the door. But Felicity seized Maggis by the arm. "Listen! listen!" she cried. "I can tell you who did it, who betrayed you. It wasn't Mr. Challis," she gasped. "It was my father!"

Her voice rose on a comparative hush in the room, and for a moment after she had spoken the hush deepened. Then Maggis spoke.

"It can't be true. Why do you say that, girl?"

"She's beside herself," said Draycott. "Best get her away."

"It is true," said Felicity frantically, straining to save the man she loved, sacrificing all on that terrible

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altar of worship. " He is in league with Foster. They work together."

Again there fell an amazed silence, which was broken by Maggis.

" Here is a letter from him. I know his fist." He opened it, and read aloud: " Comrades, help wanted in running cargo from Trough Farm to-night, 11.30."

" He's running a cargo. That will be Bob Willis, of Pagham," said a free trader.

" He ran a cargo three nights since," observed another.

" I reckon Graves has piled up money," said a third.

A thoughtful mood possessed the room, as each man's memories were stirred. Each seemed to look back upon a long career of success which constituted Graves's history in the free trade.

" What does it matter? We know Challis is a spy," said Draycott, who did not like the turn things had taken. " Let us settle him first."

But " Bull " Maggis had a mind of his own.

" Steady!" he said. " This needs going into. The girl must know. I have seen Foster with Graves, and he told me he was trying to broach him. Now I think of it, there was cases in which we wondered as to the information before. Graves has run cargoes without an accident."

" By —, he has! I can witness," said an under-sized ruffian, with a blackened clay pipe. " By —, I believe I lodged in Portsmouth jug for him."

That set the powder train alight. In a few moments all were shouting for vengeance on their treacherous comrade, just as they had shouted for Challis's destruction a few minutes before. Draycott was swept away in the storm, and knew that his voice was lost.

" Down by Trough Farm," said Maggis meaningly. " Well, you know what you've got to do."

Yes, they knew full well, and every man's heart was a well of living indignation as they scrambled out of the room. Draycott was left with Maggis.

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"If it be he, he must go the one way." The deep voice came to Felicity's ears outside. "But I have other work. I have an account to settle. When it is done I will join you."

And on that hearing she knew, poor creature, that her sacrifice had been all in vain, and that what actuated Duke Draycott was not desire for vengeance of a smuggler, but the spirit of jealousy of a lover. Aghast, shaken, and with the furies of her own awakened conscience pursuing her, she turned and fled from the inn—fled down the road to Fairford Hall.

CHAPTER XXI

AT FAIRFORD HALL

CHALLIS had left Portsmouth in the late afternoon, and since he was not due at Fairford Hall till seven o'clock, had stayed for an hour at Southover. His work was nearly at a close in this part of England, and he was asking for exemption for a week or two, during which he hoped that Dorothy would visit his father's house in the West. The news of his engagement had been received with astonishment in his family. His father and an unmarried sister were at home, and he had two married sisters, one no less a personage than the Marchioness of Saltmere. To these the news came as a surprise, because it is always the inevitable that surprises.

"She must be a fine lady," said Anne, the unmarried, "for Dick was always so fastidious and of an exact taste."

"You cannot tell," said her elder sister Betty, the Marchioness, then on a visit, and speaking from her superior knowledge of the world. "These men's passions bolt and you cannot rein them in. She may be a trollop."

All the same she did not believe this, for she had an admiration for her brother, and was, moreover, indebted to him for kindly services in positions into which her indiscreet and romantic impulses had led her. Sir

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Oliver, a proud gentleman and a scholar, had winced over the letter which conveyed the news from his son. But presently he had taken comfort of Horace, having a sense of wit and humour, and having lived long enough also to see life in proper perspective.

"Of yeoman stock," he said, meditating, and then, "Well, there's no better stock in the kingdom, provided she be convenable and presentable; and I'll trust Dick for that."

"When they see you they will take you to their arms," Challis said, "and my father will find Latin and Greek tags for you, dear man."

"I am anxious," she said, "but I will endure anything for you."

"You shall have nothing to endure for me save a surfeit of happiness, my dearest," he answered.

It is not possible to forestall Fate, but it is well to meet her with brave hearts and ardent faith. Love and faith may never die.

Old Heywood, rubicund and smiling, watched his daughter with delighted eyes. He had some questions to ask about Sir Oliver's attitude, for he understood worldly differences very well; and it endeared the young man to him to find that all the formalities had been observed.

"My sister Beatrice will come from London in two days and will take Dorothy to Somerset," said Challis.

"Miss Challis——" began Heywood, but Challis interposed.

"She is married. She is Lady Bosanquet," he said. "My other sisters are at home, and there will be a family party."

"Lady Bosanquet!" repeated Heywood, who was ignorant of his guest's titled connections, and was impressed by them. And presently there must emerge of necessity the name of the Marchioness, at which his eyes opened wider. He was amazed to find himself with such a son-in-law in prospect. Yet the good soul would have

given his daughter to a farmer of his own standing with as much cordiality and delight, if she had loved him and he were worthy.

So after this hour—this pleasant interlude informed with beautiful romance and lovely feelings—Challis passed away with reluctance to Fairford Hall. Sir John was at his best. He shone like a bright star in a lonely heaven, scintillating wit and knowledge. Challis began to see how much this man must miss his town life, and a certain sympathy gathered in him for one who was obviously not wholly worthy of sympathy. Lady Fairford seemed to brighten at the presence of the guest, and spoke occasionally of old days. These were not days in London at Courts and under the sway of fashions and great ladies; they were days in a quiet vicarage, with green gardens and flowers and dogs, and the verdure of distant hills. Challis had never liked her better, and even caught some glimpses of a beauty, or of an attraction at any rate, which must once have been implicit in that face to capture the roving eye of the debonaire gambler.

It was an agreeable supper, to which no one else had been invited, and for that Challis was profoundly grateful. The thought of cards revolted him, but the placid atmosphere of the vicarage his hostess recalled was as grateful to him as the urbanity of Sir John's reminiscences was amusing. Life went very well those three hours, even despite the obvious fact that his host was falling fast into liquor. Yet he retained his head.

"Is your literary work accomplished?" he asked, and received a dubitating answer.

"Not quite altogether. Yet I think I have taken sufficient out of the Downs. I must be content, and seek inspiration in other scenes." As he spoke Challis laughed.

"You go away?" asked Sir John.

"I do not anticipate being much longer in the neighbourhood."

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"I believe we shall follow your example," said the other, with a smiling glance at his wife. "You have been too long excluded from town, my dear. Faith, I forget the ways of a beau myself. We are rustics, Mr. Challis, free from knowledge of modes and fashions. I would give a good deal for the smell of the London streets in my nostrils."

"I hope I shall have the privilege of seeing you if you come to London," said Challis, politely bowing towards Lady Fairford.

"Is there any more happiness to be squeezed out of town than out of the country?" she asked with some bitterness.

"It can, at least, be a change of misery," said Sir John whimsically, and inquired how long Challis would be in Portsmouth.

"I leave almost at once," explained the guest. "My work is all but done."

"As an historian?" said Sir John, with a quizzing look.

Challis laughed. "Oh, that is a formidable affair. But I have had some business also."

Sir John glanced down at the table. "You have had no more adventures with the smugglers?" he asked.

"They have paid me some attention," said Challis. "They honour me with the hypothesis that I am employed by Government to extirpate them. From what I have seen they are in great need of that operation, but it is no job of mine. The coast seems infested with the scum."

"An unpleasant feature of our countryside," remarked Sir John. "Picturesque it may be, but it is a barbaric survival."

"It is not likely that the Government will suffer it much longer," said Challis reflectively.

He was used to keep his own counsel, and to none had he divulged the secret of his service, save in compulsion to the free trader Draycott. And Draycott, he

reflected, was far away at sea. He looked up to find his host's shrewd eyes examining him. He almost felt that he was being weighed in the balance, as he himself was accustomed to weigh others. What was there behind Sir John? The man puzzled him.

But after supper there was an entertaining evening. Lady Fairford played upon the harpsichord and was persuaded to sing old songs of her childhood. Sir John exerted himself to be an attentive host, which showed such urbane qualities in him that once more Challis wondered why he should choose this exile in a wild land instead of the warm hospitalities and fellowship of London.

The drawing-room in which they sat was not the room in which faro had been played on the occasion of Challis's former visit; it was evidently consecrated to Lady Fairford, and was opened to the night and the flowing airs. It was sultry weather. On Sir John's suggestion no lights were fetched, and when Lady Fairford had played and sung they sat in the twilight and talked. A sense of peace and benediction was enveloping Challis. He recalled also that he would soon be going homewards, and Dorothy had arranged to steal forth to the gates of Southover and greet him as he went by.

Suddenly a servant entered with the information that a young woman was asking for Sir John, or for Mr. Challis. She asked for either, and clamoured to see them. The servant exhibited signs of wonder and interest through the mask of official reserve.

"Who may it be?" said Sir John, and the name was demanded as a passport. The servant returned with the name.

"Her name is Graves, and her business is very urgent. She says, sir, it is life or death."

"Hoity toity! These be big words," said Sir John genially. "It is Graves's daughter. Light the candles and show her in, Marshall."

There was a startled look on Lady Fairford's face

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when the room was illuminated by the candles. She was gazing at her husband, who smiled amusedly at her, and patted the dog which lay at his feet. Then Felicity entered, breathless, but a little overawed by the majesty of her surroundings.

"Well, child," said Sir John pleasantly, "what is this terrible news?"

At that she seemed to recover. She came forward and addressed Challis.

"Sir, there is an enemy upon your track. You must beware! Oh, you must beware! Draycott is loose and on his way here. He comes to take your life."

"Come, my dear, these are violent words," remonstrated Sir John. "Why is Draycott breathing fire and brimstone?"

Felicity looked at him. "He has reasons of his own," she said, in a rather hard voice. She would not name them. She stood committed to this heroic course of tragedy; but she shrank from Dorothy's name, and the very thought of her. She turned glowing eyes again on Challis, which seemed to plead for his life.

"You will go?" she urged.

"My dear Felicity," he said lightly, "is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

"But you must, you must," she urged. "I tell you that he is bent on your undoing."

"Come, my dear, here is the tragic muse in earnest," said Sir John. "Duke Draycott is known to us all. He is not such an ogre. Why should he harbour a grudge against Mr. Challis and want to eat him?"

Felicity made no answer, but was still looking at Challis, and their eyes met. In a flash the girl knew that he understood, and that she need not lay bare his secret. A blade was in her heart, but its pain was almost exultant. She was conscious of Challis alone, and of no other, certainly not of Dorothy. The other woman had been swept, as it were, out of existence for her.

"You will go?" she pleaded.

Challis took her hand. "I will promise you that nothing shall happen," he said softly. "But I will not go."

She pulled her hand away from him, slowly, reluctantly, and sighed.

"Nothing can happen," said Sir John cheerfully. "You are a little distraught, child. You shall drink a glass of wine."

Felicity paid no heed to him, and Lady Fairford, who had been considering the strange scene with wondering eyes, now came silently forward to the girl.

"Come with me, dear," she said; and to herself, "There is something in this deeper than I know."

Felicity obeyed, but kept her head turned to Challis till she reached the door. He smiled reassuringly.

"What is all this pother?" asked Sir John when he and his guest were alone.

"There is this truth," said Challis, "that Draycott wishes me no good. But I understood he was impressed and at sea with the fleet."

Sir John meditatively walked to the table, on which the servant had placed tray and glasses, and poured out two glasses of port wine.

"Well, let us acquire Dutch courage against this danger," he said easily, and handed to Challis a brimming glass. As the latter raised it to his lips a heavy form stepped out of the dark wall of the night through the open door into the light of the room. It was Draycott. Challis saw him, and, carrying the glass to his lips without interrupting his action, drank of it, and set it down on the console table by which he stood.

"So it is you, Duke Draycott," he said quietly.

Sir John paused in the act of drinking, and stared. A frown contracted his brow.

"I apologize for intruding, sir," said Draycott, almost as quietly as Challis; "but I have business with this gentleman that won't abide delay."

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"What is it you want with me, Draycott?" inquired Challis sternly.

"There was a matter between us, and there still is, Mr. Challis. Let me remind you of a scene aboard a boat in which there were pistols."

"I remember it—an ugly scene," said Challis impatiently.

"Do you fear it?" asked Draycott with a sneer. "That was why you took such steps for the intervention of the press gang; by —, it has come to me in thinking it over a score of times that you deserve death over and over again for treachery and cowardice."

Challis's face altered and darkened. "You talk foully, my man," he said. "You are infected with some evil spirit. You are aware that I played no trick on you. I accepted your terms and stood up to them. But why should I waste time and explanation upon you, Draycott?"

"Because you must go back to that bargain of ours," said Draycott heavily.

Sir John, who understood nothing of all this, intervened at this point.

"Come, Draycott, we have had enough of this," he said sharply. "You are intruding on my guest and me. You must go."

"I will have my say first," said Draycott obstinately. "This man betrayed me to the press gang, and there is another ground of quarrel between us."

"Good Lord, man, there can be no ground of quarrel between me and one in your position," said Challis, with rising anger and contempt. "I ought to do my duty and denounce you as an inveterate, rascally smuggler."

"You dare say that!" cried Draycott.

Challis looked him steadily in the face, his disdain marking all his features. "Yes," he said, "and also as a deserter, for that is plainly what you are."

Draycott made an ugly rush forward. Challis stood

unmoved, but Sir John stepped in the way, and pushed the infuriated smuggler back.

"Have I not told you to be gone?" he said angrily.

"Stand aside, Captain Noll!" roared the madman.

At the name Fairford's hands dropped, and he seemed to quiver. Challis, on his part, was staggered, and only slowly did the significance of this name reach his full reason. Then he looked at his host.

"The name——"

Sir John had recovered himself by an effort, and now shrugged his shoulders; then he smiled with a lapse into his characteristic cynical manner.

"It is out now," he said. "Well, you have it, Challis, and look upon a monstrous bad fellow. That, I will confess, was one reason why you are here to-night. You were said to be a dangerous enemy, and I wanted to know the truth. You may as well know the worst." He turned straightway to Draycott, whose impetuous fury had been curbed by this interlude, and said: "You are mistaken, Draycott; Mr. Challis is not in the employment of His Majesty's Customs. There is therefore no quarrel with him, though after this he may choose to make one," he added with his little touch of humour.

"I know that well enough," said Draycott. "I have known he has nothing to do with these raids on us for a long time. My quarrel goes deeper, and he knows it. We were at grips once on the boat, and must be so again."

"This goes beyond me," said Sir John with a gesture of impatience. "At least you must quit my house and the molestation of my guest."

"This gentleman knows the thing between us," said Draycott. "He is not a Customs spy, but is in the Secret Service of the Government." Sir John started. "And what there is between us is a woman—Dorothy Heywood," said the free trader sullenly.

Challis had put up a hand in warning ere that name came out, but his protest was unavailing. He turned

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now quickly to Fairford. "I must tell you," he said, "that Miss Heywood has honoured me by consenting to be my wife."

Sir John was taken aback. These surprises came in such rapid succession. Draycott's face blackened, and then Fairford spoke.

"I see no reason of dispute between men of honour in such a matter, Draycott. You have an unruly temper. Play the man, and take your defeat cheerfully."

If he had hoped that Challis would feel this little barb in the juxtaposition of the smuggler and himself as rivals, he was disappointed. Challis never winced.

"I expect my sister, Lady Bosanquet, to come from London to-morrow," he said, "and Miss Heywood will go to Challis Court in a few days."

"I know nothing of what you mean by honour," said Draycott savagely. "But I know my own mind, and I keep to it."

"Well," said Sir John, in despair, "you will see how impossible it is for me to allow my guest to be insulted. Let me advise you to sleep on it. Draycott, there is a good glass of port wine here. Be advised and drink it." He paused. "It paid all the King's duties." There was something in his manner, a mixture of authority and suavity, which affected the angry man, who was also reinforced by a sudden thought. What he had to do could not certainly be done there, if this fine gentleman refused to fight him. But he could wait a little. He accepted the port wine with a sullen air of resignation, as if he had been worsted.

Challis, a certain sense of disgust mingling with his anger, turned away, and Sir John accompanied him from the room. Draycott sat brooding and revolving plans. He made no effort to interfere with Challis's movements. Challis, outside the door, said suddenly—

"I may give you this warning, Sir John—that I believe very active proceedings will be taken against the free trade shortly. I am not in the secrets of the Cus-

toms Board, but I believe it is determined to uproot this traffic as a public danger." He spoke coldly, even stiffly, and Fairford flushed. Then he smiled.

"Thank you. I am, as a matter of fact, retiring from a profitable but risky business. Do you judge me?" he asked unexpectedly.

Challis made a movement with his hand as if he deprecated any intrusion of this subject.

"All I know is that your friends have been an accursed nuisance to me. My life has been endangered several times. I have had them to contend against as well as the enemies of my country—I should perhaps say our country."

His sting had been as deep as Sir John himself was wont to make his, and the latter flushed again.

"Oh, well," he replied, with his imperturbable humour, "I apologize for my share, and at least my influence has kept one of my raw friends in leash to-night."

"Do you think I care for that *canaille*?" burst out Challis impatiently; and then, with a sudden recovery, put out his hand. "I judge no man, but some things seem to me ugly. Pray make my compliments to Lady Fairford. A change of air would serve her well."

Sir John bowed. In his heart also were mingled feelings, and so the two parted—Challis for his horse.

Felicity had been taken into a pleasant little boudoir by Lady Fairford, and seated comfortably. The older woman was kind, but was too much aloof in class and feeling to touch the girl as another more sympathetic might have touched her. Felicity was still exercised about Challis's safety, and here, perhaps, the aloofness of Lady Fairford was of assistance. "You need fear no more, child," she said reassuringly. "Sir John can control the situation against a dozen Draycotts. Who is this Draycott that he should inspire you with terror?"

"He is wicked," said Felicity. "He has attempted Mr. Challis's life before."

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Lady Fairford examined her attentively, and read in the face what she sought. She was not gifted with sympathy, but she was kindly and she was sorry.

"Don't fret yourself, child," she said. "He is safe here. If I were you I should go home and to bed, and sleep off my fears."

But the word "home" brought memory back with a terrible shock. Till now there had been no room in Felicity's heart for anything but anxiety for Challis's safety. Now she remembered her father and his danger. She rose hastily.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I must go. I thank you, my lady. I must go now."

And, conducted to the door by the lady of the house, she sped into the night, leaving Lady Fairford touched and saddened. She went back through the room where the men were. She was glad. Perhaps Draycott had not come, and even so, she trusted her husband's capacity to handle the situation. Whatever his faults, and she knew them only too well, incapability was not one of them.

Felicity went as fast as she could along the road to Hale. Her father was not there, she knew, but she must pass the house on the way to the flat seashore, where his operations were in progress that night. She intended to take horse and outstrip the free traders, who would be on foot, and she thought that even now she would be in time to anticipate them. As she came by Southover she paused momentarily, and almost involuntarily. In the dim light she could make out a form at the gate into the garden, and she ran impulsively to it.

"Miss Heywood?" she asked, and knew it was she.

"You are late, Felicity," said Dorothy. "What keeps you abroad at this hour?"

Felicity suddenly seized her by the arm, and turned her with an impetuous movement, so that the stars shone upon her face. She looked fiercely into that face, while Dorothy wondered.

"What is it?" she asked.

Felicity sighed. She saddened in the beauty that she saw. Her eyes were clear and honest, and she knew and recognized her knowledge.

"Why," she asked, "does God give all to one and starve another?"

"I do not understand. There are difficult riddles," answered Dorothy uneasily, but in her heart she did understand.

Felicity let go her arm and stood silent; then there flooded into her soul a great tide of triumphant glory. Her love could not be forbidden, her love could not be denied. It was her right and property, and no one could rob her of it. She forgot Dorothy and Dorothy's beauty, and stood for a full minute transfigured with ecstasy. Then she turned and passed into the night. The sound of a horse coming up by the road arrested her, and she hesitated. She could not mistake; no, her heart acquainted her at once who it was that cantered lightly, and swung himself to earth in front of Southover. Challis had come to keep his tryst at the gate, and Felicity listened, her heart almost at a standstill. Her feeling of exaltation had left her, and she had fallen as far below normal life as a little before she had been above it. The thought of that meeting tortured her. She hated it; she dreaded it; she shrank from it. And yet she was drawn to witness it, as by some strange fascination. She returned under the shelter of the darkness and saw the lovers meet. Her heart wept within her; yet she gazed. She was like the little mermaid that walked on knives, but the knives were in her very soul. She put her hands over her eyes to deepen the dark of night, and ran blindly away.

Whither she went she knew not, nor cared, but it was borne in on her presently that she was going back on the road to Fairford Hall. She halted, and as she did so was aware of another horseman riding up from the valley. He passed without seeing her, and then quickly

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she turned again and sped noiselessly along the grass footway, for she had recognized this horseman also.

Duke Draycott had borrowed a horse from the "Hen and Chickens" to take him to Fairford Hall, and he had left the Hall on it shortly after Challis. He had no thought of following him, for he had fully made up his mind to wait. He was aware now that his enemy would be in the neighbourhood at least for a day or two, and he could, by means of his gang, keep a watch on his movements, and he would strike when he was ready. He had means of hiding in a score of unknown places if he should be sought as a deserter. On his way back he was partly exercised by the revelations as to Graves's treachery, which he had never doubted after he had heard Felicity's statement. His wild men had taken charge, and there would be bloodshed this night. He never doubted that, and, cool and resolute and audacious as he was, he could not but fear the hue-and-cry which a murder of this sort would raise in the countryside. If he had only not had his own game to play under the spur of passion he would have been able to arrange this rough justice in a way which would have attracted no attention. Graves could have disappeared, and his body might have been washed ashore some days later. But he was afraid of the savage recklessness of his men, the men over whom he had ruled, with the shadow of the unknown and mysterious Captain Noll, as organizer, behind him. Sir John was a born organizer, and his brains had been the making of the free trade on this coast. But he was unknown and unseen, an entity of power and authority to be feared, and to be respected and admired also, as the source of their prosperity.

Draycott, in the midst of these thoughts, arrived before Southover. He reined in contemplatively, and then, in the light of a glow which had been growing on the hill, he made out the group before him distinctly, a man and a horse, and near the man a woman. Who could the last be but the one? And the horseman——?

The light on the hill intensified. . . . From the dying embers of his passion the flames leaped anew and roared in his ears. He dismounted and advanced, blind and deaf to all else save the lovers in their embrace and the murmur of their voices. His hand held the pistol he had withdrawn from his pocket, and he moved still nearer. He was not heard in their deep absorption.

The glow behind was now mounting fast, but no one heeded it. It showed up the whole party, Dorothy, Challis, and Draycott still advancing. His hand with the pistol was raised. . . .

Challis was startled by a loud report, and Dorothy cried out in alarm and fear. The light was now so bright that they could see a man lying on the earth scarcely a dozen paces away, and Challis hastened to him. The flare of the light was on the upturned face.

"Draycott!" he said, and stooping examined the body. Then he stood up again, having noted the pistol still undischarged. "He is dead," he said. "He has been shot."

He looked down at the dead man, puzzled and uneasy, but Dorothy's instinct was fleet and vivid.

"Look!" she said. "He would have killed you. Some one has saved you."

The leaping light drew his eyes, and in the distance he caught sight of a woman running.

"Who is that?" he said, and Dorothy also saw.

"She has saved your life. I wish it had been I," she burst forth.

"Felicity!" exclaimed Challis. "What does she do here?"

"Oh! she has killed him," cried Dorothy, trembling, and torn with strange feelings. "She has killed him to save you!"

"But why——?" Challis's question remained unfinished. "She is distraught," he said abruptly. "But I must save her, if she has done this."

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The figure was climbing the hills, running and stumbling, and the great light showed her clearly.

"They have fired the beacon," said Challis, at last conscious of the phenomenon. "I must overtake her and help her."

"Yes," said Dorothy brokenly. "Yes, yes; save her!" and they both began to advance quickly towards the hillside.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BEACON

GRAVES was at Trough Farm, about two miles inland, where a cargo had been successfully stored. But he had need of help to get it to Hale, having neither carts nor hands enough, which was the reason for his appeal to his fellows in the trade. The smugglers were used to assist each other in this way. It was a curious and rather elaborate, but satisfactory, system which "Captain Noll" had imposed on the previously unorganized traffic. Though he had money himself in the business, his main part was that of receiver. He bought for markets which he knew would take the brandy and the tobacco and the tea; and each smuggler was interested to the extent of his personal service, or proportionally to the money he provided for the scheme. Graves himself had waxed fat on his speculations, and owned a lugger, ran his own cargoes under a competent skipper, stored in his own cellars, and sold profitably to the markets provided by "Captain Noll." There was thus rivalry between the smugglers. It was not a common fund or a common enterprise, because individual effort and individual capital were offered their individual reward. Yet the system had worked well enough until the special ravaging greed of Graves developed. Felicity had spoken the truth in her moment of wild terror. Her father had long been guilty of treachery to his comrades.

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He was in league with the riding officer, a thing which occasionally happened in those days, and in return for his information Foster allowed him immunity. Indeed, the compact had gone deeper than that, and had become more profitable to both. Foster shared in Graves's smuggling ventures, and there was a profit also in the seizure of other free traders' cargoes, and in the capture of smugglers themselves.

It will be conceived, then, with what fury these maddened ruffians heard the news, and learned to whom they owed the long string of mischances which had befallen them. Graves had been able to get higher value for his stocks since the supply of illicit wares had fallen by reason of the seizures. Graves himself was marching to wealth over the fallen fortunes of his colleagues. It was for this they had resolved to take vengeance.

The cargo had been cunningly run with the connivance of the riding officer, who had succeeded in diverting the attention and the services of the revenue cutter in those waters; and the carts and packhorses had carried the contraband out of reach of immediate danger to Trough Farm. During the night all must be stowed safely away in the dark and silent cellars of Hale, thence to be dispatched in due course to various centres arranged by Captain Noll. Graves rubbed his hands and chuckled. It would be a most fortunate venture; he gloated over the thought of his overflowing cellars, and no flying fear of Challis ever touched his ignoble spirit in its ignoble dreams of avarice. But he must have help to convey and convoy the kegs, and he awaited anxiously the answer to his letter. The men at work with him were drawn from the neighbourhood, and were insufficient in number.

"If we get no others, we must leave half the barrels," said one of the smugglers.

Graves cursed, and then there was a flare in the sky. "What's that?" he asked in alarm.

The man looked up. "It's the beacon," he said. "There was talk by some of firing it in honour of Lord Nelson's return."

Graves hated the light. He cursed again, and hurried on the men with imprecations. But the light which he abused now revealed to him the approach of a body of men at a distance of half a mile, and he became cheerful again.

"That's them," he told the farmer, whose men were at work on the loading. "Bill Jackson, you go forth and hasten 'em on. This accursed light——!"

Jackson did as he was bidden, crossed two fields, and came out on a track by which the smugglers were advancing, but he was unable to give his message.

"Is Graves there?" was asked of him; and when he replied in the affirmative, he was told to stand back.

Graves watched the approaching gang, and it struck him, somehow uneasily, that the numbers were larger than he had expected. He had looked for eight or ten, the number he had asked for; and here he estimated at least twenty. Graves's conscience, seared though it was with a dozen years' wickedness, was aware of his ill-doing, and ready to give alarm. He had no definite fear or suspicion, but he moved as restlessly as an animal that smells some enemy vaguely, and has only the terror in the blood.

He went into the farmhouse and asked the farmer's wife for a glass of brandy, looked out of the window on which the flare from the barrow shone strongly, and saw and heard the arrival of the party. They streamed over the farmlands recklessly, and some came through the hedge of quick, right up to the house and past the windows. One of these was open, and the inflamed smugglers were in no mood for craft or tactics.

"If we catch him, by ——, Graves'll drown or swing to-night for his treachery."

The words reached his ears and his craven heart, as they swung past the open window, and the vague

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rumours in his blood congealed into actual fears. They knew, then! In panic he gazed wildly about him, drank a noggin of brandy neat, and stealthily crawled through the window.

He was terrified now lest the light would reveal him, and he crept under the shelter of a hedge out of the garden. Beyond were fields, now lit up with the light of the beacon, and Graves burst into a run across them. By this time the smugglers had investigated the premises and made inquiries of the farmer and the other men. Graves's absence was discovered, and his escape was suspected. Then some one saw the figure running in the fields. Instantly a pursuit started, and with cries of rage and triumph the gang straggled out in a line of chase. Graves ran with extraordinary speed, spurred on by his terrible fears, and he outstripped the hunters. If it had been dark his confidence would have been greater, but the merciless heaven was alive with light, almost as though it had been midday. The shadows were deep and black, it is true, and they leaped and changed with the movements of the soaring flames; but outside the shadows all was bright and visible. Graves crossed two fields, and got upon a rough road, where he made better progress. He had as yet no plan in his mind, which had only room so far for panic and blind instinct. He was flying for his life, a life he knew had been justly forfeit by all the rules of his confraternity, but whither he fled he knew not. It was not to Hale that he was escaping; it was vaguely to the hills, vaguely across the Downs, away from the sea, away from those terrible avengers.

He was out of breath and exhausted after the first two miles, and hid in a ditch to recover. While lying there in muddy water, covered with brushwood, he heard horsemen go by, and thanked his luck that he had concealed himself in time. Some of the free traders had made use of the farmer's horses, and he would inevitably have been overtaken had he continued his course. He

waited a little longer, found his wind, and after a cautious inspection of the road, set out again. This time he swerved, and directed himself towards the burning beacon. It had dawned upon him that his safety—at any rate, his immediate safety—lay in reaching light and the protection of numbers. Thus, he whose evil deeds were always done in the dark now fled in terror for salvation towards the light he had cursed.

He had not gone more than half a mile before he heard the sound of wheels, and paused in alarm. Then he recognized one of his own carts, which he had overtaken, conveying smuggled goods to Hale. He caught it up, and, with a hurried explanation of haste to the driver, cut loose the horse from the shafts and, mounting it, urged the beast into a trot. In this way he covered two more miles, and then fell into a fresh panic at the sight of distant horsemen, riding in the twilight shadow of a hill. He determined to abandon the horse; on a horse he was a prominent object in the illumined plain. He struck off again refreshed, and, invigorated by his rest, walking, jogging, running, always towards the burning beacon.

Felicity, after she had discharged her pistol at close quarters and seen Draycott fall, had turned and run, with her whole heart a wondering, seething cauldron of diverse and conflicting emotions. Uppermost was fright—fright that she had killed a man and violated the laws of God, which her mother had taught her to revere and keep. She had killed Draycott, as he would have killed Challis. She rejoiced in it, and she trembled. What would God say to her when she passed before His eternal throne? Did Draycott's blood cry out for vengeance on her even now? Her mother's creed had been primitive and crude, including a terrible God who would exact His dues to the uttermost farthing, but who would hold His hand if His decrees were respected. She had shed blood, and God was a God of wrath. Her heart melted within her as she ran, stumbled, and

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scrambled—whither she knew not. Just so was her father running wildly on the southern slope of the Downs. And as she ran, without any sense of direction, the thought of her father once more intruded on her disturbed mind. She had betrayed him, and he was doomed. Was she to have yet another death on her conscience? Life was hopeless; life had no meaning or interest for her now; life was a mere welter of misery, sorrow, remorse, and pain.

She had diverged from the road to the barrow, and was on a lower slope when she encountered Graves. He had won so far in safety, and was nearing his goal. Away back in the plains the pursuing free traders had come upon the cart, and had received certain information from the carter. The hounds were still on the scent of their quarry.

Felicity sprang forward, and cried out, stretching a hand towards her father, and in his dreadful panic he struck at her and thrust her away.

"They are pursuing you," she cried. "You must escape."

"Let me alone," he said savagely. "Have you seen them? Where are they?" and, without waiting for an answer, he continued his flight towards the beacon.

Now for the first time it seemed to her that she was aware of the bonfire. She had hitherto hardly been conscious of the light, and had certainly not recognized the explanation of it. She followed her father towards it, and presently they had mounted the last slope, and were in the circle of the conflagration. The huge pile of brushwood and pine-tops had been fired by irresponsible young men from Chichester and the neighbourhood. Lord Nelson was now in Portsmouth harbour, and the country was safe! This was their method of proclaiming their patriotic joy.

Built upon the barrow, the great pyre raised tongues of flame and spires of smoke to the nocturnal sky, spreading dawn over miles of country; and round about

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it ran and capered two score of people, who constantly received augmentation of numbers from the villages and homesteads in the valleys below. Graves came to rest at last, spent and exhausted. He was safe now, he considered, safe, at any rate, for the time, and he would be able to recover breath and form his plans. Felicity followed him as he moved about restlessly, always associating himself with a knot of young men. There was laughter and talk and cheers for Nelson, booning for Boney, and general merriment. The haunted craven who saw in every bush and the scared, And thence in truth it was that his fears were reinforced. The barrow was fringed with circumferent furze bushes, and Graves began to eye these with anxiety. He dared not tell this light-hearted company of the strait in which he stood, for that would be to bring his own damnation on him. He was forced to skip about with them feverishly, even in fear and trembling, even in white cowardice, with a challenged eye on the shadows in every bush. And out of the shadows emerged the Terror at last.

His instinct had not been at fault; and in the leaping of a sudden surge of flame he saw a face behind the furze. He cowered and ran nearer to the beacon, as if it could offer him a friendly cover, till the fire scorched and burnt him. Now he began to descry other faces and other forms in the circle of bushes, and his dread became an anguish. He mixed more closely with the spectators, and talked to them recklessly, laughed and shouted with them. He would try and forget, and believe that he was one of them with his home at Hale waiting to receive him. He saw another face, and it seemed to grin at him horribly. It was fantastic. Was it Maggis? There were bottles of beer and brandy in that company, which passed freely from hand to hand, from mouth to mouth. The votaries of Bacchus and patriotism danced and sang. One proffered a bottle to

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Graves, and he drank greedily of raw spirit. Then his courage returned. Who was afraid? He stood and looked contemptuously towards the furze, which made no sign.

"Father, there are men in the bushes," said Felicity, through the roar of the flames.

"Did you see them too?" he asked savagely.

"You cannot stay here," she pleaded. "You must escape. Look, there is a gap there in the bushes. You can make way to Hale and hide."

He looked, and even moved a little forward as though to act on her suggestion. But faces seemed to peer at him, and he shrank back. Not even the brandy was proof against those abysmal terrors. Every bush again was an eye upon him. In this pause he was turning to join the throng of young men, when Felicity, who was watching the furze, detected a red flash, a flash that jumped out of the shadows, which the flames of the pyre had deepened.

She cried out, and ran to her father. He was safe and sound.

"You are not struck?" she said. "I saw——"

She looked towards the bushes in the formidable, leaping blackness, and she felt him tremble. She put herself before him, as if to shield him from the unknown and unseen avengers, and, coward to the end, he put tremulous arms about her, and held her as in a vice. . . .

The last thing Felicity was conscious of in this life was a second spurt of red flame. The bullet pierced her heart.

Graves uttered a terrible scream, and, dropping her, scampered away. The body fell to the earth on the outskirts of the barrow, and, as if it had been waiting for that signal, an overhanging part of the pile, which had been burnt out below, toppled over and spread over the foreground, scattering the spectators in all directions. It covered the spot where Felicity lay, dead now to all things of earth and mortal men, and the live

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flames jumped and exulted in their fresh lease of activity. So into the barrow which held the relics of her ancient people were the mortal remains of Felicity rapt and consumed and secluded for evermore.

The maddened man ran round the beacon, and among a company which was now mainly drunk hilariously. He was distraught, and his obsession was completed by the appearance of a man he knew. Was it not Harrison, Ned Harrison, who was approaching him from the outward bushes—Ned Harrison, whose brother lay wounded in Chichester gaol through information supplied by him and Harrison's officer? In Harrison's hand was a pistol, Graves, arrested at the sight, now turned and ran.

Anything was better than to perish there under the pyre, without any chance of escape. He ran, and ran outwards towards a gap in the bushes, now reckless of all things; and the drunken revellers laughed to see this reveller cutting capers like themselves. He reached the furze, threaded the bushes at a rush, and fell just beyond them. No one saw the spurt of flame, and no one heard the report of the pistol in the noise of the flaring beacon.

Half a mile away, on a shoulder of the Downs, Challis and Dorothy had come to a halt, and were looking up at the fire.

"She cannot have gone there," said Challis. "That would be the last place. She must have gone home to Hale."

"I wonder!" Dorothy shuddered. "Yes; she would go home, if not just now, later. She was frightened at what she did. We must reassure her. No one shall know how Draycott met his death. It will remain a mystery. Dorothy shuddered again. "She will suffer to-night," she said; and added almost to herself, "Yet she will be glad. I would to God—"

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She broke off, and found Challis looking down into her eyes. The great fire played upon her face and sweetly-robed body.

"Dearest!" he said. "I would that all people could find such a solution of life as you and I."

"Yes, I would to God——" she said, and again was silent.

"Dearest!" he said. "Give me your arms. See, I put them about me, and mine are clasped about you. Nothing can part us or sever us. We are one. Dearest!" He kissed her with deep devotion, but very gently and reverently. She sighed her happiness. Then they began the descent to Southover.



THE END

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