

THE LANCASHIRE WITCHES
VOLUME IV
BY
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Hoghton Tower

CHAPTER I.—DOWNHAM MANOR-HOUSE.

On a lovely morning, about the middle of July, in the same year as the events previously narrated, Nicholas Assheton, always astir with the lark, issued from his own dwelling, and sauntered across the smooth lawn in front of it. The green eminence on which he stood was sheltered on the right by a grove of sycamores, forming the boundary of the park, and sloped down into a valley threaded by a small clear stream, whose murmuring, as it danced over its pebbly bed, distinctly reached his ear in the stillness of early day. On the left, partly in the valley, and partly on the side of the acclivity on which the hall was situated, nestled the little village whose inhabitants owned Nicholas as lord; and, to judge from their habitations, they had reason to rejoice in their master; for certainly there was a cheerful air about Downham which the neighbouring hamlets, especially those in Pendle Forest, sadly wanted.

On the left of the mansion, and only separated from it by the garden walls, stood the church, a venerable structure, dating back to a period more remote even than Whalley Abbey. From the churchyard a view, almost similar to that enjoyed by the squire, was obtained, though partially interrupted by the thick rounded foliage of a large tree growing beneath it; and many a traveller who came that way lingered within the hallowed precincts to contemplate the prospect. At the foot of the hill was a small stone bridge crossing the stream.

Across the road, and scarce thirty paces from the church-gate, stood a little alehouse, whose comfortable fireside nook and good liquors were not disdained by the squire. In fact, to his shame be it spoken, he was quite as often to be found there of an evening as at the hall. This had more particularly been the case since the house was tenanted by Richard Baldwyn, who having given up the mill at Rough Lee, and taken to wife Bess Whitaker of Goldshaw Booth, had removed with her to Downham, where he now flourished under the special protection of the squire. Bess had lost none of her old habits of command, and it must be confessed that poor Richard played a very secondary part in the establishment. Nicholas, as may be supposed, was permitted considerable licence by her, but even he had limits, which she took good care he should not exceed.

The Downham domains were well cultivated; the line of demarcation between them and the heathy wastes adjoining, being clearly traced out, and you had only to follow the course of the brook to see at a glance where the purlieu of the forest ended, and where

Nicholas Assheton's property commenced: the one being a dreary moor, with here and there a thicket upon it, but more frequently a dangerous morass, covered with sulphur-coloured moss; and the other consisting of green meadows, bordered in most instances by magnificent timber. The contrast, however, was not without its charm; and while the sterile wastes set off the fair and fertile fields around them, and enhanced their beauty, they offered a wide, uninterrupted expanse, over which the eye could range at will.

On the further side of the valley, and immediately opposite the lawn whereon Nicholas stood, the ground gradually arose, until it reached the foot of Pendle Hill, which here assuming its most majestic aspect, constituted the grand and peculiar feature of the scene. Nowhere could the lordly eminence be seen to the same advantage as from this point, and Nicholas contemplated it with feelings of rapture, which no familiarity could diminish. The sun shone brightly upon its rounded summit, and upon its seamy sides, revealing all its rifts and ridges; adding depth of tint to its dusky soil, laid bare in places by the winter torrents; lending new beauty to its purple heath, and making its grey sod glow as with fire. So exhilarating was the prospect, that Nicholas felt half tempted to cross the valley and scale the hill before breaking his fast; but other feelings checked him, and he turned towards the right. Here, beyond a paddock and some outbuildings, lay the park, small in extent, but beautifully diversified, well stocked with deer, and boasting much noble timber. In the midst was an exquisite knoll, which, besides commanding a fine view of Pendle Hill, Downham, and all the adjacent country, brought within its scope, on the one hand, the ancient castle of Clithero and the heights overlooking Whalley; and, on the other, the lovely and extensive vale through which the Ribble wandered. This, also, was a favourite point of view with the squire, and he had some idea of walking towards it, when he was arrested by a person who came from the house, and who shouted to him, hoarsely but blithely, to stay.

The new-comer was a man of middle age, with a skin almost as tawny as a gipsy's, a hooked nose, black beetling brows, and eyes so strangely set in his head, that they communicated a sinister expression to his countenance. He possessed a burly frame, square, and somewhat heavy, though not so much so as to impede his activity. In deportment and stature, though not in feature, he resembled the squire himself; and the likeness was heightened by his habiliments being part of Nicholas's old wardrobe, the doublet and hose, and even the green hat and boots, being those in which Nicholas made his first appearance in this history. The personage who thus condescended to be fed and clothed at the squire's expense, and who filled a situation something between guest and menial, without receiving the precise attention of the one or the wages of the other, but who made himself so useful to Nicholas that he could not dispense with him—neither, perhaps would he have been shaken off, even if it had been desired—was named Lawrence Fogg, an entire stranger to the country, whom Nicholas had picked up at

Colne, and whom he had invited to Downham for a few weeks' hunting, and had never been able to get rid of him since.

Lawrence Fogg liked his quarters immensely, and determined to remain in them; and as a means to so desirable an end, he studied all the squire's weak points and peculiarities, and these not being very difficult to be understood, he soon mastered them, and mastered the squire into the bargain, but without allowing his success to become manifest. Nicholas was delighted to find one with tastes so congenial to his own, who was so willing to hunt or fish with him—who could train a hawk as well as Phil Royle, the falconer—diet a fighting-cock as well as Tom Shaw, the cock-master—enter a hound better than Charlie Crouch, the old huntsman—shoot with the long-bow further than any one except himself, and was willing to toss off a pot with him, or sing a merry stave whenever he felt inclined. Such a companion was invaluable, and Nicholas congratulated himself upon the discovery, especially when he found Lawrence Fogg not unwilling to undertake some delicate commissions for him, which he could not well execute himself, and which he was unwilling should reach Mistress Assheton's ears. These were managed with equal adroitness and caution. About the same time, too, Nicholas finding money scarce, and, not liking to borrow it in person, delegated Fogg, and sent him round to his friends to ask for a loan; but, in this instance, the mission was attended with very indifferent success, for not one of them would lend him so small a sum as thirty pounds, all averring they stood in need of it quite as much as himself. Though somewhat inconvenienced by their refusal, Nicholas bore the disappointment with his customary equanimity, and made merry with his friend as if nothing had happened. Fogg showed an equal accommodating spirit in all religious observances, and, though much against his inclination, attended morning discourses and lectures with his patron, and even made an attempt at psalm-singing; but on one occasion, missing the tune and coming in with a bacchanalian chorus, he was severely rebuked by the minister, and enjoined to keep silence in future. Such was the friendly relation subsisting between the parties when they met together on the lawn on the morning in question.

"Well, Fogg," cried Nicholas, after exchanging salutations with his friend, "what say you to hunting the otter in the Ribble after breakfast? 'Tis a rare day for the sport, and the hounds are in excellent order. There is an old dam and her litter whom we must kill, for she has been playing the very devil with the fish for a space of more than two miles; and if we let her off for another week, we shall have neither salmon, trout, nor umber, as all will have passed down the maws of her voracious brood."

"And that would be a pity, in good sooth, squire," replied Fogg; "for there are no fish like those of the Ribble. Nothing I should prefer to the sport you promise; but I thought you had other business for me to-day? Another attempt to borrow money—eh?"

"Ay, from my cousin, Dick Assheton," rejoined Nicholas; "he will lend me the thirty pounds, I am quite sure. But you had better defer the visit till to-morrow, when his father, Sir Richard, will be at Whalley, and when you can have him to yourself. Dick will not say you nay, depend on't; he is too good a fellow for that. A murrain on those close-fisted curmudgeons, Roger Nowell, Nicholas Townley, and Tom Whitaker. They ought to be delighted to oblige me."

"But they declare they have no money," said Fogg.

"No money!—pshaw!" exclaimed Nicholas; "an idle excuse. They have chests full. Would I had all Roger Nowell's gold, I should not require another supply for years. But, 'sdeath! I will not trouble myself for a paltry thirty pounds."

"If I might venture to suggest, squire, while you are about it, I would ask for a hundred pounds, or even two or three hundred," said Fogg. "Your friends will think all the better of you, and feel more satisfied you intend to repay them."

"Do you think so!" cried Nicholas. "Then, by Plutus, it shall be three hundred pounds—three hundred at interest. Dick will have to borrow the amount to lend it to me; but, no matter, he will easily obtain it. Harkye, Fogg, while you are at Middleton, endeavour to ascertain whether any thing has been arranged about the marriage of a certain young lady to a certain young gentleman. I am curious to know the precise state of affairs in that quarter."

"I will arrive at the truth, if possible, squire," replied Fogg; "but I should scarcely think Sir Richard would assent to his son's union with the daughter of a notorious witch."

"Sir Richard's son is scarcely likely to ask Sir Richard's consent," said Nicholas; "and as to Mistress Nutter, though heavy charges have been brought against her, nothing has been proved, for you know she escaped, or rather was rescued, on her way to Lancaster Castle."

"I am fully aware of it, squire," replied Fogg; "and I more than suspect a worthy friend of mine had a hand in her deliverance and could tell where to find her if needful. But that is neither here nor there. The lady is quite innocent, I dare say. Indeed, I am quite sure of it, since you espouse her cause so warmly. But the world is malicious, and strange things are reported of her."

"Heed not the world, Fogg," rejoined Nicholas. "The world speaks well of no man, be his deserts what they may. The world says that I waste my estate in wine, women, and

horseflesh—that I spend time in pleasures which might be profitably employed—that I neglect my wife, forget my religious observances, am on horseback when I should be afoot, at the alehouse when I should be at home, at a marriage when I should be at a funeral, shooting when I should be keeping my books—in short, it has not a good word to say for me. And as for thee, Fogg, it says thou art an idle, good-for-nothing fellow; or, if thou art good for aught, it is only for something that leads to evil. It says thou drinkest prodigiously, liest confoundedly, and swearest most profanely; that thou art ever more ready to go to the alehouse than to church, and that none of the girls can 'scape thee. Nay, the slanderers even go so far as to assert thou wouldst not hesitate to say, 'Stand and deliver!' to a true man on the highway. That is what the world says of thee. But, hang it! never look chapfallen, man. Let us go to the stables, and then we will in to breakfast; after which we will proceed to the Ribble, and spear the old otter."

A fine old manorial residence was Downham, and beautifully situated, as has been shown, on a woody eminence to the north of Pendle Hill. It was of great antiquity, and first came into the possession of the Assheton family in 1558. Considerable additions had been made to it by its present owner, Nicholas, and the outlay necessarily required, combined with his lavish expenditure, had contributed to embarrass him. The stables were large, and full of horses; the kennels on the same scale, and equally well supplied with hounds; and there was a princely retinue of servants in the yard—grooms, keepers, falconers, huntsmen, and their assistants—to say nothing of their fellows within doors. In short, if it had been your fortune to accompany the squire and his friend round the premises—if you had walked through the stables and counted the horses—if you had viewed the kennels and examined the various hounds—the great Lancashire dogs, tall, shaggy, and heavy, a race now extinct; the Worcestershire hounds, then also in much repute; the greyhounds, the harriers, the beagles, the lurchers, and, lastly, the verminers, or, as we should call them, the terriers,—if you had seen all these, you would not have wondered that money was scarce with him. Still further would your surprise at such a consequence have diminished if you had gone on to the falconry, and seen on the perches the goshawk and her tercel, the sparrowhawk and her musket, under the care of the ostringer; and further on the falcon-gentle, the gerfalcon, the lanner, the merlin, and the hobby, all of which were attended to by the head falconer. It would have done you good to hear Nicholas inquiring from his men if they had "set out their birds that morning, and weathered them;" if they had mummy powder in readiness, then esteemed a sovereign remedy; if the lures, hoods, jesses, buets, and all other needful furniture, were in good order; and if the meat were sweet and wholesome. You might next have followed him to the pens where the fighting cocks were kept, and where you would have found another source of expense in the cock-master, Tom Shaw—a knave who not only got high wages from his master, but understood so well the dieting of his birds that he could make them win or lose a battle as he thought proper. Here, again, Nicholas had much to say, and was in raptures with one cock, which he told Fogg he would back to

any amount, utterly unconscious of a significant look that passed between his friend and the cock-master.

"Look at him," cried the squire; "how proud and erect he stands! His head is as small as that of a sparrowhawk, his eye large and quick, his body thick, his leg strong in the beam, and his spurs long, rough, and sharp. That is the bird for me. I will take him over to the cockpit at Prescot next week, and match him against any bird Sir John Talbot, or my cousin Braddyll, can bring."

"And yo'n win, squoire," replied the cock-master; "ey ha' been feedin' him these five weeks, so he'll be i' rare condition then, and winna fail yo. Yo may lay what yo loike upon him," he added, with a sly wink at Fogg.

"You may win the thirty pounds you want," observed the latter, in a low tone to the squire.

"Or, mayhap, lose it," replied Nicholas. "I shall not risk so much, unless I get the three hundred from Dick Assheton. I have been unlucky of late. You beat me constantly at tables now, Fogg, and when I first knew you this was not wont to be the case. Nay, never make any excuses, man; you cannot help it. Let us in to breakfast."

With this, he proceeded towards the house, followed by Fogg and a couple of large Lancashire hounds, and, entering at the back of the premises, made his way through the scullery into the kitchen. Here there were plentiful evidences of the hospitality, not to say profusion, reigning throughout the mansion. An open door showed a larder stocked with all kinds of provisions, and before the fire joints of meat and poultry were roasting. Pies were baking in the oven; and over the flames, in the chimney, was suspended a black pot large enough for a witch's caldron. The cook was busied in preparing for the gridiron some freshly-caught trout, intended for the squire's own breakfast; and a kitchen-maid was toasting oatcakes, of which there was a large supply in the bread-flake depending from the ceiling.

Casting a look around, and exchanging a few words with the cook, Nicholas moved on, still followed by Fogg and the hounds, and, tracking a long stone passage, entered the great hall. Here the same disorder and irregularity prevailed as in his own character and conduct. All was litter and confusion. Around the walls were hung breastplates and buff-coats, morions, shields, and two-handed swords; but they were half hidden by fishing-nets, fowling-nets, dogs' collars, saddles and bridles, housings, cross-bows, long-bows, quivers, baldricks, horns, spears, guns, and every other implement then used in the sports of the river or the field. The floor was in an equal state of disorder. The rushes were filled with half-gnawed bones, brought thither by the hounds; and in one corner,

on a mat, was a favourite spaniel and her whelps. The squire however was, happily, insensible to the condition of the chamber, and looked around it with an air of satisfaction, as if he thought it the perfection of comfort.

A table was spread for breakfast, near a window looking out upon the lawn, and two covers only were laid, for Mistress Nicholas Assheton did not make her appearance at this early hour. And now was exhibited one of those strange contradictions of which the squire's character was composed. Kneeling down by the side of the table, and without noticing the mocking expression of Fogg's countenance as he followed his example, Nicholas prayed loudly and fervently for upwards of ten minutes, after which he arose and gave a shout which proved that his lungs were unimpaired, and not only roused the whole house, but set all the dogs barking.

Presently a couple of serving-men answered this lusty summons, and the table was covered with good and substantial dishes, which he and his companion attacked with a vigour such as only the most valiant trencherman can display. Already has it been remarked that a breakfast at the period in question resembled a modern dinner; and better proof could not have been afforded of the correctness of the description than the meal under discussion, which comprised fish, flesh, and fowl, boiled, broiled, and roast, together with strong ale and sack. After an hour thus agreeably employed, and while they were still seated, though breakfast had pretty nearly come to an end, a serving-man entered, announcing Master Richard Sherborne of Dunnor. The squire instantly sprang to his feet, and hastened to welcome his brother-in-law.

"Ah! good-day to you, Dick," he cried, shaking him heartily by the hand; "what happy chance brings you here so early? But first sit down and eat—eat, and talk afterwards. Here, Roger, Harry, bring another platter and napkin, and let us have more broiled trout and a cold capon, a pasty, or whatever you can find in the larder. Try some of this gammon meanwhile, Dick. It will help down a can of ale. And now what brings thee hither, lad? Pressing business, no doubt. Thou mayest speak before Fogg. I have no secrets from him. He is my second self."

"I have no secrets to divulge, Nicholas," replied Sherborne, "and I will tell you at once what I am come about. Have you heard that the King is about to visit Hoghton Tower in August?"

"No; this is news to me," replied Nicholas; "does your business relate to his visit?"

"It does," replied Sherborne. "Last night a messenger came to me from Sir Richard Hoghton, entreating me to move you to do him the favour and courtesy to attend him at the King's coming, and wear his livery."

"I wear his livery!" exclaimed Nicholas, indignantly. "'Sdeath! what do you take me for, cousin Dick?"

"For a right good fellow, who I am sure will comply with his friend's request, especially when he finds there is no sort of degradation in it," replied Sherborne. "Why, I shall wear Sir Richard's cloth, and so will several others of our friends. There will be rare doings at Hoghton—masquings, mummings, and all sorts of revels, besides hunting, shooting, racing, wrestling, and the devil knows what. You may feast and carouse to your heart's content. The Dukes of Buckingham and Richmond will be there, and the Earls of Nottingham and Pembroke, and Sir Gilbert Hoghton, the King's great favourite, who married the Duchess of Buckingham's sister. Besides these, you will have all the beauty of Lancashire. I would not miss the sight for thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds!" echoed Nicholas, as if struck with a sudden thought. "Do you think Sir Thomas Hoghton would lend me that sum if I consent to wear his cloth, and attend him?"

"I have no doubt of it," replied Sherborne; "and if he won't, I will."

"Then I will put my pride in my pocket, and go," said Nicholas. "And now, Dick, dispatch your breakfast as quickly as you can, and then I will take you to the Ribble, and show you some sport with an otter."

Sherborne was not long in concluding his repast, and having received an otter spear from the squire, who had already provided himself and Fogg with like weapons, all three adjourned to the kennels, where they found the old huntsman, Charlie Crouch, awaiting them, attended by four stout varlets, armed with forked staves, meant for the double purpose of beating the river's banks, and striking the poor beast they were about to hunt, and each man having a couple of hounds, well entered for the chase, in leash. Old Crouch was a thin, grey-bearded fellow, but possessed of a tough, muscular frame, which served him quite as well in the long run as the younger, and apparently more vigorous, limbs of his assistants. His cheek was hale, and his eye still bright and quick, and a certain fierceness was imparted to his countenance by a large aquiline nose. He was attired in a greasy leathern jerkin, tight hose of the same material, and had a bugle suspended from his neck, and a sharp hunting-knife thrust into his girdle. In his hand he bore a spear like his master, and was followed by a grey old lurcher, who, though wanting an ear and an eye, and disfigured by sundry scars on throat and back, was hardy, untiring, and sagacious. This ancient dog was called Grip, from his tenacity in holding any thing he set his teeth upon, and he and Crouch were inseparable.

Great was the clamour occasioned by the squire's appearance in the yard. The coupled hounds gave tongue at once, and sang out most melodiously, and all the other dogs within the kennels, or roaming at will about the yard, joined the concert. After much swearing, cracking of whips, and yelping consequent upon the cracking, silence was in some degree restored, and a consultation was then held between Nicholas and Crouch as to where their steps should first be bent. The old huntsman was for drawing the river near a place called Bean Hill Wood, as the trees thereabouts, growing close to the water's edge, it was pretty certain the otter would have her couch amid the roots of some of them. This was objected to by one of the varlets, who declared that the beast lodged in a hollow tree, standing on a bank nearly a mile higher up the stream, and close by the point of junction between Swanside Beck and the Ribble. He was certain of the fact, he avouched, because he had noticed her marks on the moist grass near the tree.

"Hoo goes there to fish, mon?" cried Crouch, "for it is the natur o' the wary varmint to feed at a distance fro' her lodgin; boh ey'm sure we shan leet on her among the roots o' them big trees o'erhanging th' river near Bean Hill Wood, an if the squire 'll tay my advice, he'n go there first."

"I put myself entirely under your guidance, Crouch," said Nicholas.

"An yo'n be aw reet, sir," replied the huntsman; "we'n beat the bonks weel, an two o' these chaps shan go up the stream, an two down, one o' one side, and one o' t'other; an i' that manner hoo canna escape us, fo' Grip can swim an dive os weel as onny otter i' aw Englundshiar, an he'n be efter her an her litter the moment they tak to t' wotur. Some folk, os maybe yo ha' seen, squoire, tak howd on a cord by both eends, an droppin it into t' river, draw it slowly along, so that they can tell by th' jerk when th' otter touches it; boh this is an onsartin method, an is nowt like Grip's plan, for wherever yo see him swimmin, t'other beast yo may be sure is nah far ahead."

"A brave dog, but confoundedly ugly!" exclaimed the squire, regarding the old one-eared, one-eyed lurcher with mingled admiration and disgust; "and now, that all is arranged, let us be off."

Accordingly they quitted the court-yard, and, shaping their course in the direction indicated by the huntsman, entered the park, and proceeded along a glade, checkered by the early sunbeams. Here the noise they made in their progress speedily disturbed a herd of deer browsing beneath the trees, and, as the dappled foresters darted off to a thicker covert, great difficulty was experienced by the varlets in restraining the hounds, who struggled eagerly to follow them, and made the welkin resound with their baying.

"Yonder is a tall fellow," cried Nicholas, pointing out a noble buck to Crouch; "I must kill him next week, for I want to send a haunch of venison to Middleton, and another to Whalley Abbey for Sir Ralph."

"Better hunt him, squire," said Crouch; "he will gi' ye good sport."

Soon after this they attained an eminence, where a charming sweep of country opened upon them, including the finest part of Ribblesdale, with its richly-wooded plains, and the swift and beautiful river from which it derived its name. The view was enchanting, and the squire and his companions paused for a moment to contemplate it, and then, stepping gleefully forward, made their way over the elastic turf towards a small thicket skirting the park. All were in high spirits, for the freshness and beauty of the morning had not been without effect, and the squire's tongue kept pace with his legs as he strode briskly along; but as they entered the thicket in question, and caught sight of the river through the trees, the old huntsman enjoined silence, and he was obliged to put a check upon his loquacity.

When within a bowshot from the water, the party came to a halt, and two of the men were directed by Crouch to cross the stream at different points, and then commence beating the banks, while the other two were ordered to pursue a like course, but to keep on the near side of the river. The hounds were next uncoupled, and the men set off to execute the orders they had received, and soon afterwards the crashing of branches, and the splashing of water, accompanied by the deep baying of the hounds, told they were at work.

Meanwhile, Nicholas and the others had not remained idle. As the varlets struck off in different directions, they went straight on, and forcing their way through the brushwood, came to a high bank overlooking the Ribble, on the top of which grew three or four large trees, whose roots, laid bare on the further side by the swollen currents of winter, formed a convenient resting-place for the fish-loving creature they hoped to surprise. Receiving a hint from Crouch to make for the central tree, Nicholas grasped his spear, and sprang forward; but, quick as he was, he was too late, though he saw enough to convince him that the crafty old huntsman had been correct in his judgment; for a dark, slimy object dropped from out the roots of the tree beneath him, and glided into the water as swiftly and as noiselessly as if its skin had been oiled. A few bubbles rose to the surface of the water, but these were all the indications marking the course of the wondrous diver.

But other eyes, sharper than those of Nicholas, were on the watch, and the old huntsman shouted out, "There hoo goes, Grip—after her, lad, after her!" The words were scarcely uttered when the dog sprang from the top of the bank and sank under the

water. For some seconds no trace could be observed of either animal, and then the shaggy nose of the lurcher was seen nearly fifty yards higher up the river, and after sniffing around for a moment, and fixing his single eye on his master, who was standing on the bank, and encouraging him with his voice and gesture, he dived again.

"Station yourselves on the bank, fifty paces apart," cried Crouch; "run, run, or yo'n be too late, an' strike os quick os leet if yo've a chance. Stay wheere you are, squoire," he added, to Nicholas. "Yo canna be better placed."

All was now animation and excitement. Perceiving from the noise that the otter had been found, the four varlets hastened towards the scene of action, and, by their shouts and the clatter of their staves, contributed greatly to its spirit. Two were on one side of the stream, and two on the other, and up to this moment the hounds were similarly separated; but now most of them had taken to the water, some swimming about, others standing up to the middle in the shallower part of the current, watching with keen gaze for the appearance of their anticipated victim.

Having descended the bank, Nicholas had so placed himself among the huge twisted roots of the tree, that if the otter, alarmed by the presence of so many foes, and unable to escape either up or down the river, should return to her couch, he made certain of striking her. At first there seemed little chance of such an occurrence, for Fogg, who had gone a hundred yards higher up, suddenly dashed into the stream, and, plunging his spear into the mud, cried out that he had hit the beast; but the next moment, when he drew the weapon forth, and exhibited a large rat which he had transfixed, his mistake excited much merriment.

Old Crouch, meantime, did not suffer his attention to be drawn from his dog. Every now and then he saw him come to the surface to breathe, but as he kept within a short distance, though rising at different points, the old huntsman felt certain the otter had not got away, and, having the utmost reliance upon Grip's perseverance and sagacity, he felt confident he would bring the quarry to him if the thing were possible. The varlets kept up an incessant clatter, beating the water with their staves, and casting large stones into it, while the hounds bayed furiously, so that the poor fugitive was turned on whichever side she attempted a retreat.

While this was going on, Nicholas was cautioned by the huntsman to look out, and scarcely had the admonition reached him than the sleek shining body of the otter emerged from the water, and wreathed itself among the roots. The squire instantly dealt a blow which he expected to prove fatal, but his mortification was excessive when he found he had driven the spear-head so deeply into the tree that he could scarcely disengage it, while an almost noiseless plunge told that his prey had escaped. Almost at

the same moment that the poor hunted beast had sought its old lodging, the untiring lurcher had appeared at the edge of the bank, and, as the former again went down, he dived likewise.

Secretly laughing at the squire's failure, the old huntsman prepared to take advantage of a similar opportunity if it should present itself, and with this view ensconced himself behind a pollard willow, which stood close beside the stream, and whence he could watch closely all that passed, without being exposed to view. The prudence of the step was soon manifest. After the lapse of a few seconds, during which neither dog nor otter had risen to breathe, a slight, very slight, undulation was perceptible on the surface of the water. Crouch's grasp tightened upon his staff—he waited another moment—then dashed forward, struck down his spear, and raised it aloft, with the poor otter transfixed and writhing upon its point.

Loudly and exultingly did the old man shout at his triumph, and loudly were his vociferations answered by the others. All flew to the spot where he was standing, and the hounds, gathering round him, yelled furiously at the otter, and showed every disposition to tear her in pieces, if they could get at her. Kicking the noisiest and fiercest of them out of the way, Crouch approached the river's brink, and lowered the spear-head till it came within reach of his favourite Grip, who had not yet come out of the water, but stood within his depth, with his one red eye fixed on the enemy he had so hotly pursued, and fully expecting his reward. It now came; his sharp teeth instantly met in the otter's throat, and when Crouch swung them both in the air, he still maintained his hold, showing how well he deserved his name, nor could he be disengaged until long after the sufferings of the tortured animal had ceased.

To say that Nicholas was neither chagrined at his ill success, nor jealous of the old huntsman's superior skill, would be to affirm an untruth; but he put the best face he could upon the matter, and praised Grip very highly, alleging that the whole merit of the hunt rested with him. Old Crouch let him go on, and when he had done, quietly observed that the otter they had destroyed was not the one they came in search of, as they had seen nothing of her litter; and that, most likely, the beast that had done so much mischief had her lodging in the hollow tree near the Swanside Beck, as described by the varlet, and he wished to know whether the squire would like to go and hunt her. Nicholas replied that he was quite willing to do so, and hoped he should have better luck on the second occasion; and with this they set forward again, taking their way along the side of the stream, beating the banks as they went, but without rousing any thing beyond an occasional water-rat, which was killed almost as soon as found by Grip.

Somehow or other, without any one being aware what led to it the conversation fell upon the two old witches, Mothers Demdike and Chattox, and the strange manner in which

their career had terminated on the summit of Pendle Hill—if, indeed it could be said to have terminated, when their spirits were reported to haunt the spot, and might be seen, it was asserted, at midnight, flitting round the beacon, and shrieking dismally. The restless shades were pursued, it was added, by the figure of a monk in white mouldering robes, supposed to be the ghost of Paslew. It was difficult to understand how these apparitions could be witnessed, since no one, even for a reward, could be prevailed upon to ascend Pendle Hill after nightfall; but the shepherds affirmed they had seen them from below, and that was testimony sufficient to shake the most sceptical. One singular circumstance was mentioned, which must not be passed by without notice; and this was, that when the cinders of the extinct beacon-fire came to be examined, no remains whatever of the two hags could be discovered, though the ashes were carefully sifted, and it was quite certain that the flames had expired long before their bodies could be consumed. The explanation attempted for this marvel was, that Satan had carried them off while yet living, to finish their combustion in a still more fiery region.

Mention of Mother Demdike naturally led to her grandson, Jem Device, who, having escaped in a remarkable manner on the night in question, notwithstanding the hue and cry made after him, had not, as yet, been captured, though he had been occasionally seen at night, and under peculiar circumstances, by various individuals, and amongst others by old Crouch, who, however, declared he had been unable to lay hands upon him.

Allusion was then made to Mistress Nutter, whereupon it was observed that the squire changed the conversation quickly; while sundry sly winks and shrugs were exchanged among the varlets of the kennel, seeming to intimate that they knew more about the matter than they cared to admit. Nothing more, however, was elicited than that the escort conducting her to Lancaster Castle, together with the other witches, after their examination before the magistrates at Whalley, and committal, had been attacked, while it was passing through a woody defile in Bowland Forest, by a party of men in the garb of foresters, and the lady set free. Nor had she been heard of since. What made this rescue the more extraordinary was, that none of the other witches were liberated at the same time, but some of them who seemed disposed to take advantage of the favourable interposition, and endeavoured to get away, were brought back by the foresters to the officers of justice; thus clearly proving that the attempt was solely made on Mistress Nutter's account, and must have been undertaken by her friends. Nothing, it was asserted, could equal the rage and mortification of Roger Nowell and Potts, on learning that their chief prey had thus escaped them; and by their directions, for more than a week, the strictest search was made for the fugitive throughout the neighbourhood, but without effect—no clue could be discovered to her retreat. Suspicion naturally fell upon the two Asshetons, Nicholas and Richard, and Roger Nowell roundly taxed them with contriving and executing the enterprise in person; while Potts told them they were guilty

of misprision of felony, and threatened them with imprisonment for life, forfeiture of goods and of rents, for the offence; but as the charge could not be proved against them, notwithstanding all the efforts of the magistrate and attorney, it fell to the ground; and Master Potts, full of chagrin at this unexpected and vexatious termination of the affair, returned to London, and settled himself in his chambers in Chancery Lane. His duties, however, as clerk of the court, would necessarily call him to Lancaster in August, when the assizes commenced, and when he would assist at the trials of such of the witches as were still in durance.

From Mother Demdike it was natural that the conversation should turn to her weird retreat, Malkin Tower; and Richard Sherborne expressed his surprise that the unhallowed structure should be suffered to remain standing after her removal. Nicholas said he was equally anxious with his brother-in-law for its demolition, but it was not so easily to be accomplished as it might appear; for the deserted structure was in such ill repute with the common folk, as well as every one else, that no one dared approach it, even in the daytime. A boggart, it was said, had taken possession of its vaults, and scared away all who ventured near it; sometimes showing himself in one frightful shape, and sometimes in another; now as a monstrous goat, now as an equally monstrous cat, uttering fearful cries, glaring with fiery eyes from out of the windows, or appearing in all his terror on the summit of the tower. Moreover, the haunted structure was frequently lighted up at dead of night, strains of unearthly music were heard resounding from it, and wild figures were seen flitting past the windows, as if engaged in dancing and revelry; so that it appeared that no alteration for the better had taken place there, and that things were still quite as improperly conducted now, as they had been in the time of Mother Demdike, or in those of her predecessors, Isole de Heton and Blackburn, the robber. The common opinion was, that Satan and all his imps had taken up their abode in the tower, and, as they liked their quarters, led a jolly life there, dancing and drinking all night long, it would be useless at present to give them notice to quit, still less to attempt to pull down the house about their ears. Richard Sherborne heard this wondrous relation in silence, but with a look of incredulity; and when it was done he winked slyly at his brother-in-law. A strange expression, half comical, half suspicious, might also have been observed on Fogg's countenance; and he narrowly watched the squire as the latter spoke.

"But with the disappearance of the malignant old hags who had so long infested the neighbourhood, had all mischief and calamity ceased, or were people as much afflicted as heretofore? Were there, in short, so many cases of witchcraft, real or supposed?" This was the question next addressed by Sherborne to Nicholas. The squire answered decidedly there were not. Since the burning of the two old beldames, and the imprisonment of the others, the whole district of Pendle had improved. All those who had been smitten with strange illnesses had recovered; and the inhabitants of the little

village of Sabden, who had experienced the fullest effects of their malignity, were entirely free from sickness. And not only had they and their families suddenly regained health and strength, but all belonging to them had undergone a similar beneficial change. The kine that had lost their milk now yielded it abundantly; the lame horse halted no longer; the murrain ceased among the sheep; the pigs that had grown lean amidst abundance fattened rapidly; and though the farrows that had perished during the evil ascendancy of the witches could not be brought back again, their place promised speedily to be supplied by others. The corn blighted early in the year had sprung forth anew, and the trees nipped in the bud were laden with fruit. In short, all was as fair and as flourishing as it had recently been the reverse. Amongst others, John Law, the pedlar, who had been deprived of the use of his limbs by the damnable arts of Mother Demdike, had marvellously recovered on the very night of her destruction, and was now as strong and as active as ever. "Such happy results having followed the removal of the witches, it was to be hoped," Sherborne said, "that the riddance would be complete, and that none of the obnoxious brood would be left to inflict future miseries on their fellows. This could not be the case so long as James Device was allowed to go at large; nor while his mother, Elizabeth Device, a notorious witch, was suffered to escape with impunity. There was also Jennet, Elizabeth's daughter, a mischievous and ill-favoured little creature, who inherited all the ill qualities of her parents. These were the spawn of the old snake, and, until they were entirely exterminated, there could be no security against a recurrence of the evil. Again, there was Nance Redferne, old Chattox's grand-daughter, a comely woman enough, but a reputed witch, and an undoubted fabricator of clay images. She was still at liberty, though she ought to be with the rest in the dungeons of Lancaster Castle. It was useless to allege that with the destruction of the old hags all danger had ceased. Common prudence would keep the others quiet now; but the moment the storm passed over, they would resume their atrocious practices, and all would be as bad as ever. No, no! the tree must be utterly uprooted, or it would inevitably burst forth anew."

With these opinions Nicholas generally concurred; but he expressed some sympathy for Nance Redferne, whom he thought far too good-looking to be as wicked and malicious as represented. But however that might be, and however much he might desire to get rid of the family of the Devices, he feared such a step might be attended with danger to Alizon, and that she might in some way or other be implicated with them. This last remark he addressed in an under-tone to his brother-in-law. Sherborne did not at first feel any apprehension on that score, but, on reflection, he admitted that Nicholas was perhaps right; and though Alizon was now the recognised daughter of Mistress Nutter, yet her long and intimate connection with the Device family might operate to her prejudice, while her near relationship to an avowed witch would not tend to remove the unfavourable impression. Sherborne then went on to speak in the most rapturous terms of the beauty and goodness of the young girl who formed the subject of their

conversation, and declared he was not in the least surprised that Richard Assheton was so much in love with her. And yet, he added, a most extraordinary change had taken place in her since the dreadful night on Pendle Hill, when her mother's guilt had been proclaimed, and when her arrest had taken place as an offender of the darkest dye. Alizon, he said, had lost none of her beauty, but her light and joyous expression of countenance had been supplanted by a look of profound sadness, which nothing could remove. Gentle and meek in her deportment, she seemed to look upon herself as under a ban, and as if she were unfit to associate with the rest of the world. In vain Richard Assheton and his sister endeavoured to remove this impression by the tenderest assiduities; in vain they sought to induce her to enter into amusements consistent with her years; she declined all society but their own, and passed the greater part of her time in prayer. Sherborne had seen her so engaged, and the expression of her countenance, he declared, was seraphic.

On the extreme verge of a high bank situated at the point of junction between Swanside Beck and the Ribble, stood an old, decayed oak. Little of the once mighty tree beyond the gnarled trunk was left, and this was completely hollow; while there was a great rift near the bottom through which a man might easily creep, and, when once in, stand erect without inconvenience. Beneath the bank the river was deep and still, forming a pool, where the largest and fattest fish were to be met with. In addition to this, the spot was extremely secluded, being rarely visited by the angler on account of the thick copse by which it was surrounded and which extended along the bank, from the point of confluence between the lesser and the larger stream, to Downham mill, nearly half a mile distant.

The sides of the Ribble were here, as elsewhere, beautifully wooded, and as the clear stream winded along through banks of every diversity of shape and character, and covered by forest trees of every description, and of the most luxuriant growth, the effect was enchanting; the more so, that the sun, having now risen high in the heavens, poured down a flood of summer heat and radiance, that rendered these cool shades inexpressibly delightful. Pleasant was it, as the huntsmen leaped from stone to stone, to listen to the sound of the waters rushing past them. Pleasant as they sprang upon some green holm or fairy islet, standing in the midst of the stream, and dividing its lucid waters, to suffer the eye to follow the course of the rapid current, and to see it here sparkling in the bright sunshine, there plunged in shade by the overhanging trees—now fringed with osiers and rushes, now embanked with smoothest sward of emerald green; anon defended by steep rocks, sometimes bold and bare, but more frequently clothed with timber; then sinking down by one of those sudden but exquisite transitions, which nature alone dares display, from this savage and sombre character into the softest and gentlest expression; every where varied, yet every where beautiful.

Through such scenes of silvan loveliness had the huntsmen passed on their way to the hollow oak, and they had ample leisure to enjoy them, because the squire and his brother-in-law being engaged in conversation, as before related, made frequent pauses, and, during these, the others halted likewise; and even the hounds, glad of a respite, stood still, or amused themselves by splashing about amid the shallows without any definite object unless of cooling themselves. Then, as the leaders once more moved forward, arose the cheering shout, the loud deep bay, the clattering of staves, the crashing of branches, and all the other inspiriting noises accompanying the progress of the hunt. But for some minutes these had again ceased, and as Nicholas and Sherborne lingered beneath the shade of a wide-spread beech-tree growing on a sandy hillock near the stream, and seemed deeply interested in their talk—as well they might, for it related to Alizon—the whole troop, including Fogg, held respectfully aloof, and awaited their pleasure to go on.

The signal to move was, at length, given by the squire, who saw they were now not more than a hundred yards from the bank on which stood the hollow tree they were anxious to reach. As the river here made a turn, and swept round the point in question, forming, owing to this detention, the deep pool previously mentioned, the bank almost faced them, and, as nothing intervened, they could almost look into the rift near the base of the tree, forming, they supposed, the entrance to the otter's couch. But, though this was easily distinguished, no traces of the predatory animal could be seen; and though many sharp eyes were fixed upon the spot during the prolonged discourse of the two gentlemen, nothing had occurred to attract their attention, and to prove that the object of their quest was really there.

After some little consultation between the squire and Crouch, it was agreed that the former should alone force his way to the tree, while the others were to station themselves with the hounds at various points of the stream, above and below the bank, so that, if the otter and her litter escaped their first assailant, they should infallibly perish by the hands of some of the others. This being agreed upon, the plan was instantly put into execution—two of the varlets remaining where they were—two going higher up; while Sherborne and Fogg stationed themselves on great stones in the middle of the stream, whence they could command all around them, and Crouch, wading on with Grip, planted himself at the entrance of Swanside Beck into the Ribble.

Meanwhile, the squire having scaled the bank, entered the thick covert encircling it, and, not without some damage to his face and hands from the numerous thorns and brambles growing amongst it, forced his way upwards until he reached the bare space surrounding the hollow tree; and this attained, his first business was to ascertain that all was in readiness below before commencing the attack. A glance showed him on one side old Crouch standing up to his middle in the beck, grasping his long otter spear, and with

Grip beating the water in front of him in anxious expectation of employment; and in front Fogg, Sherborne, and two of the varlets, with their hounds so disposed that they could immediately advance upon the otter if it plunged into the river, while its passage up or down would be stopped by their comrades. All this he discerned at a glance; and comprehending from a sign made him by the old huntsman that he should not delay, he advanced towards the tree, and was about to plunge his spear into the hole, hoping to transfix one at least of its occupants, when he was startled by hearing a deep voice apparently issue from the hollows of the timber, bidding him "Beware!"

Nicholas recoiled aghast, for he thought it might be Hobthurst, or the demon of the wood, who thus bespoke him.

"What accursed thing addresses me?" he said, standing on his guard. "What is it? Speak!"

"Get hence, Nicholas Assheton," replied the voice; "an' meddle not wi' them os meddles not wi' thee."

"Aha!" exclaimed the squire, recovering courage, for he thought this did not sound like the language of a demon. "I am known am I? Why should I go hence, and at whose bidding?"

"Ask neaw questions, mon, boh ge," replied the voice, "or it shan be warse fo' thee. Ey am the boggart o' th' clough, an' if theaw bringst me out, ey'n tear thee i' pieces wi' my claws, an' cast thee into t' Ribble, so that thine own hounts shan eat thee up."

"Ha! say'st thou so, master boggart," cried Nicholas. "For a spirit, thou usest the vernacular of the county fairly enough. But before trying whether thy hide be proof against mortal weapons I command thee to come forth and declare thyself, that I may judge what manner of thing thou art."

"Thoud'st best lem me be, ey tell thee," replied the boggart gruffly.

"Ah! methinks I should know those accents," exclaimed the squire; "they marvellously resemble the voice of an offender who has too long evaded justice, and whom I have now fairly entrapped. Jem Device, thou art known, lad, and if thou dost not surrender at discretion, I will strike my spear through this rotten tree, and spit thee as I would the beast I came in quest of."

"An' which yo wad more easily than me," retorted Jem. And suddenly springing from the hole at the foot of the tree, he passed between the squire's legs with great promptitude,

and flinging him face foremost upon the ground, crawled to the edge of the bank, and thence dropped into the deep pool below.

The plunge roused all the spectators, who, though they had heard what had passed, and had seen the squire upset in the manner described, had been so much astounded that they could render no assistance; but they now, one and all, bestirred themselves actively to seize the diver when he should rise to the surface. But though every eye was on the look-out, and every arm raised; though the hounds were as eager as their masters, and yelling fiercely, swam round the pool, ready to pounce upon the swimmer as upon a duck, all were disappointed; for, even after a longer interval than their patience could brook, he did not appear.

By this time, Nicholas had regained his legs, and, infuriated by his discomfiture, approached the edge of the bank, and peering down below, hoped to detect the fugitive immediately beneath him, resolved to show him no mercy when he caught him. But he was equally at fault with the others, and after more than five minutes spent in ineffectual search, he ordered Crouch to send Grip into the pool.

The old keeper replied that the dog was not used to this kind of chase, and might not display his usual skill in it; but as the squire would take no nay, he was obliged to consent, and the other hounds were called off lest they should puzzle him. Twice did the shrewd lurcher swim round the pool, sniffing the air, after which he approached the shore, and scented close to the bank; still it was evident he could detect nothing, and Nicholas began to despair, when the dog suddenly dived. Expectation was then raised to the utmost, and all were on the watch again, Nicholas leaning over the edge of the bank with his spear in hand, prepared to strike; but the dog was so long in reappearing, that all had given him up for lost, and his master was giving utterance to ejaculations of grief and rage, and vowing vengeance against the warlock, when Grip's grisly head was once more seen above the surface of the water, and this time he had a piece of blue serge in his jaws, proving that he had had hold of the raiments of the fugitive, and that therefore the latter could not be far off, but had most probably got into some hole beneath the bank.

No sooner was this notion suggested than it was acted on by the old huntsman and Fogg, and, wading forward, they pricked the bank with their spears at various points below the level of the water. All at once Fogg fell forward. His spear had entered a hole, and had penetrated so deeply that he had lost his balance. But though, soused over head and ears, he had made a successful hit, for the next moment Jem Device appeared above the water, and ere he could dive again his throat was seized by Grip, and while struggling to free himself from the fangs of the tenacious animal, he was laid hold of by

Crouch, and the varlets rushing forward to the latter's assistance, the ruffian was captured.

Some difficulty was experienced in rescuing the captive from the jaws of the hounds, who, infuriated by his struggles, and perhaps mistaking him for some strange beast of chase, made their sharp teeth meet in various parts of his person, rending his garments from his limbs, and would no doubt have rent the flesh also, if they had been permitted. At length, after much fighting and struggling, mingled with yells and vociferations, Jem was borne ashore, and flung on the ground, where he presented a wretched spectacle; bleeding, half-drowned, and covered with slime acquired during his occupation of the hole in the bank. But though unable to offer further resistance, his spirit was not quelled, and his eye glared terribly at his captors. Fearing they might have further trouble with him when he recovered from his present exhausted condition, Crouch had his hands bound tightly together with one of the dog leashes, and then would fain have questioned him as to how he managed to breathe in a hole below the level of the water; but Jem refused to satisfy his curiosity, and returned only a sullen rejoinder to any questions addressed to him, until the squire, who had crossed the river at some stepping-stones lower down, came up, and the ruffian then inquired, in a half-menacing tone, what he meant to do with him?

"What do I mean to do with you?" cried Nicholas. "I will tell you, lad. I shall send you at once to Whalley to be examined before the magistrates; and, as the proofs are pretty clear against you, you will be forwarded without any material delay to Lancaster Castle."

"An yo winna rescue me by the way, os yo ha dun a sartin notorious witch an murtheress!" replied Jem, fiercely. "Tak heed whot yo dun, squoire. If ey speak at aw, ey shan speak out, and to some purpose, ey'n warrant ye. If ey ge to Lonkester Castle, ey winna ge alone. Wan o' yer friends shan ge wi' me."

"Cursed villain! I guess thy meaning," replied Nicholas; "but thy vindictive purposes will be frustrated. No credence will be attached to thy false charges; while, as to the lady thou aimest at, she is luckily beyond reach of thy malice."

"Dunna be too sure o' that, squoire," replied Jem. "Ey con put t' officers o' jestis os surely on her track os owd Crouch could set these hounds on an otter. Lay yer account on it, ey winna dee unavenged."

"Heed him not," interposed Sherborne, seeing that the squire was shaken by his threat, and taking him apart; "it will not do to let such a villain escape. He can do you no injury, and as to Mistress Nutter, if you know where she is, it will be easy to give her a hint to get out of the way."

"I don't know that," replied Nicholas, thoughtfully.

"If ey might be so bowd os offer my advice, squoire," said old Crouch, advancing towards his master, "ey'd tee a heavy stoan round the felly's throttle, an chuck him into t' poo', an' he'n tell no teles fo' all his bragging."

"That would silence him effectually, no doubt, Crouch," replied Nicholas, laughing; "but a dog's death is too good for him, and besides I am pretty sure his destiny is not drowning. No, no—at all risks he shall go to Whalley. Harkee, Fogg," he added, beckoning that worthy to him, "I commit the conduct and custody of the prisoner to you. Clap him on a horse, get on another yourself, take these four varlets with you, and deliver him into the hands of Sir Ralph Assheton, who will relieve you of all further trouble and responsibility. But you may add this to the baronet from me," he continued, in an under-tone. "I recommend him to place under immediate arrest Elizabeth Devereux, the prisoner's mother, and her daughter Jennet. You understand, Fogg—eh?"

"Perfectly," returned the other, with a somewhat singular look; "and your instructions shall be fulfilled to the letter. Have you any thing more to commit to me?"

"Only this," said Nicholas; "you may tell Sir Ralph that I propose to sleep at the Abbey to-night. I shall ride over to Middleton in the course of the day, to confer with Dick Assheton upon what has just occurred, and get the money from him—the three hundred pounds, you understand—and when my errand is done, I will turn bridle towards Whalley. I shall return by Todmorden, and through the gorge of Cliviger. You may as well tarry for me at the Abbey, for Sir Ralph will be glad of thy company, and we can return together to Downham to-morrow."

As the squire thus spoke, he noticed a singular sparkle in Fogg's ill-set eyes; but he thought nothing of it at the time, though it subsequently occurred to his recollection.

Meanwhile, the prisoner, finding no grace likely to be shown him, shouted out to the squire, that if he were set free, he would make certain important disclosures to him respecting Fogg, who was not what he represented himself; but Nicholas treated the offer with disdain; and the individual mainly interested in the matter, who appeared highly incensed by Jem's malignity, cut a short peg by way of gag, and, thrusting it into the ruffian's mouth, effectually checked any more revelations on his part.

Fogg then ordered the varlets to bring on the prisoner; but as Jem obstinately refused to move, they were under the necessity of taking him on their shoulders, and transporting

him in this manner to the stables, where he was placed on a horse, as directed by the squire.

The Lancashire Witches Volume IV by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER II.—THE PENITENT'S RETREAT.

Nicholas and Sherborne returned by a different road from that taken by the others, and loitered so much by the way that they did not arrive at the manor-house until the prisoner and his escort had set out. Probably this was designed, as Nicholas seemed relieved when he learnt they were gone. Having entered the house with his brother-in-law, and conducted him to an apartment opening out of the hall, usually occupied by Mistress Assheton, and where, in fact, they found that amiable lady employed at her embroidery, he left Sherborne with her, and, making some excuse for his own hasty retreat, betook himself to another part of the house.

Mounting the principal staircase, which was of dark oak, with richly-carved railing, he turned into a gallery communicating with the sleeping apartments, and, after proceeding more than half-way down it, halted before a door, which he unlocked, and entered a spacious but evidently disused chamber, hung round with faded tapestry, and containing a large gloomy-looking bedstead. Securing the door carefully after him, Nicholas raised the hangings in one corner of the room, and pressing against a spring, a sliding panel flew open. A screen was placed within, so as to hide from view the inmate of the secret chamber, and Nicholas, having coughed slightly, to announce his presence, and received an answer in a low, melancholy female voice, stepped through the aperture, and stood within a small closet.

It was tenanted by a lady, whose features and figure bore the strongest marks of affliction. Her person was so attenuated that she looked little more than a skeleton—her fingers were long and thin—her cheeks hollow and deathly pale—her eyes lustreless and deep sunken in their sockets—and her hair, once jetty as the raven's wing, prematurely blanched. Such was the profound gloom stamped upon her countenance, that it was impossible to look upon her without compassion; while, in spite of her wo-begone looks, there was a noble character about her that elevated the feeling into deep interest, blended with respect. She was kneeling beside a small desk, with an open Bible laid upon it, which she was intently studying when the squire appeared.

"Here is a terrible text for you, Nicholas," she said, regarding him, mournfully. "Listen to it, and judge of its effect on me. Thus it is written in Deuteronomy:—'There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.' A witch, Nicholas—do you mark the word? And yet more particular is the next verse, wherein it is said;—'Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.'

And then cometh the denunciation of divine anger against such offenders in these awful words:—'For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations, the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.' Again, it is said in Leviticus, that 'the Lord setteth his face against such, to cut them off.' And in Exodus, the law is expressly laid down thus—"THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE." There is no escape for her, you see. By the divine command she must perish, and human justice must; carry out the decree. Nicholas, I am one of the offenders thus denounced, thus condemned. I have practised witchcraft, consulted with familiar spirits, and done other abominations in the sight of Heaven; and I ought to pay the full penalty of my offences."

"Do not, I beseech you, madam," replied the squire, "continue to take this view of your case. However you have sinned, you have made amends by the depth and sincerity of your repentance. Your days and nights—for you allow yourself only such rest as nature forces on you, and take even that most unwillingly—are passed in constant prayer. Your abstinence is severer than any anchoress ever practised, for I am sure for the last month you have not taken as much food altogether as I consume in a day; while, not content with this, you perform acts of penance that afflict me beyond measure to think upon, and which I have striven in vain to induce you to forego. There will be no occasion to deliver yourself up to justice, madam; for, if you go on thus, and do not deal with yourself a little more mildly, your accounts with this world will be speedily settled."

"And I should rejoice to think so, Nicholas," replied Mistress Nutter, "if I had any hope in the world to come. But, alas! I have none. I cannot, by any act of penitence and contrition, expiate my offences. My soul is darkened by despair. I know I ought to give myself up—that Heaven and man alike require my life, and I cannot reconcile myself to avoiding my just doom."

"It is the Evil One who puts these thoughts into your head," replied Nicholas, "and who fills your heart with promptings of despair, that he may again obtain the mastery over it. But take a calmer and more consolatory view of your condition. Human justice may require a public sacrifice as an example, but Heaven, will be satisfied with contrition in secret."

"I trust so," replied the lady, vainly striving to draw comfort from his words. "Oh, Nicholas! you do not know the temptations I am exposed to in this chamber—the difficulty I experience in keeping my thoughts fixed on one object—the distractions I undergo—the mental obscurations—the faintings of spirit—the bodily prostration—the terrors, the inconceivable terrors, that assail me. Sometimes I wish my spirit would flee away, and be at rest. Rest! there is none for me—none in the grave—none beyond the grave—and therefore I am afraid of death, and still more of the judgment after death!"

Man might inflict all the tortures he could devise upon this poor frame. I would bear them all with patience, with delight, if I thought they would purchase me immunity hereafter! But with the dread conviction, the almost certainty, that it will be otherwise, I can only look to the final consummation with despair!"

"Again I tell you these suggestions are evil," said Nicholas. "The Son of God, who sacrificed himself for man, and by whose atonement all mankind hope for salvation, has assured us that the greatest sinner who repents shall be forgiven, and, indeed, is more acceptable in the eyes of Heaven than him who has never erred. Far be it from me to attempt to exculpate you in your own eyes, or extenuate your former criminality. You have sinned deeply, so deeply that you may well shrink aghast from the contemplation of your past life—may well recoil in abhorrence from yourself—and may fitly devote yourself to constant prayer and acts of penitence. But having cast off your iniquity, and sincerely repented, I bid you hope—I bid you place a confident reliance in the clemency of an all-merciful power."

"You give me much comfort, Nicholas," said the lady, "and if tears of blood can wash away my sin they shall be shed; but much as you know of my wickedness, even you cannot conceive its extent. In my madness, for it was nothing else, I cast off all hopes of heaven, renounced my Redeemer, was baptised by the demon, and entered into a compact by which—I shudder to speak it—my soul was surrendered to him."

"You placed yourself in fearful jeopardy, no doubt," rejoined Nicholas; "but you have broken the contract in time, and an all righteous judge will not permit the penalty of the bond to be exacted. Seeing your penitence, Satan has relinquished all claim to your soul."

"I do not think it," replied the lady. "He will contest the point to the last, and it is only at the last that it will be decided."

As she spoke, a sound like mocking laughter reached the ears of Nicholas.

"Did you hear that?" demanded Mistress Nutter, in accents of wildest terror. "He is ever on the watch. I knew it—I knew it."

Clasping her hands together, and fixing her looks on high she then addressed the most fervent supplications to Heaven for deliverance from evil, and ere long her troubled countenance began to resume its former serenity, proving that the surest balm for a "mind diseased" is prayer. Her example had been followed by Nicholas, who, greatly alarmed, had dropped upon his knees likewise, and now arose with somewhat more composure in his demeanour and aspect.

"I am sorry I do not bring you good news, madam," he said; "but Jem Device has been arrested this morning, and as the fellow is greatly exasperated against me, he threatens to betray your retreat to the officers; and though he is, probably, unacquainted with it notwithstanding his boasting, still he may cause search to be made, and, therefore, I think you had better be removed to some other hiding-place."

"Deliver me up without more ado, I pray you, Nicholas," said the lady.

"You know my resolution on that point, madam," he replied, "and, therefore, it is idle to attempt to shake it. For your daughter's sake, if not for your own, I will save you, in spite of yourself. You would not fix a brand for ever on Alizon's name; you would not destroy her?"

"I would not," replied the wretched lady. "But have you heard from her—have you seen her? Tell me, is she well and happy?"

"She is well, and would be happy, were it not for her anxiety about you," replied Nicholas, evasively. "But for her sake—mine—your own—I must urge you to seek some other place of refuge to night, for if you are discovered here you will bring ruin on us all."

"I will no longer debate the point," replied Mistress Nutter. "Where shall I go?"

"There is one place of absolute security, but I do not like to mention it," replied Nicholas. "Yet still, as it will only be necessary to remain for a day or two, till the search is over, when you can return here, it cannot much matter."

"Where is it?" asked Mistress Nutter.

"Malkin Tower," answered the squire, with some hesitation.

"I will never go to that accursed place," cried the lady. "Send me hence when you will—now, or at midnight—and let me seek shelter on the bleak fells or on the desolate moors, but bid me not go there!"

"And yet it is the best and safest place for you," returned Nicholas, somewhat testily; "and for this reason, that, being reputed to be haunted, no one will venture to molest you. As to Mother Demdike, I suppose you are not afraid of her ghost; and if the evil beings you apprehend were able or inclined to do you mischief, they would not wait till you got there to execute their purpose."

"True," said Mistress Nutter, "I was wrong to hesitate. I will go."

"You will be as safe there as here—ay, and safer," rejoined Nicholas, "or I would not urge the retreat upon you. I am about to ride over to Middleton this morning to see your daughter and Richard Assheton, and shall sleep at Whalley, so that I shall not be able to accompany you to the tower to-night; but old Crouch the huntsman shall be in waiting for you, as soon as it grows dusk, in the summer-house, with which, as you know, the secret staircase connected with this room communicates, and he shall have a horse in readiness to take you, together with such matters as you may require, to the place of refuge. Heaven guard you, madam!"

"Amen!" responded the lady.

"And now farewell!" said Nicholas. "I shall hope to see you back again ere many days be gone, when your quietude will not again be disturbed."

So saying, he stepped back, and, passing through the panel, closed it after him.

The Lancashire Witches Volume IV by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER III.—MIDDLETON HALL.

Middleton Hall, the residence of Sir Richard Assheton, was a large quadrangular structure, built entirely of timber, and painted externally in black and white checker-work, fanciful and varied in design, in the style peculiar to the better class of Tudor houses in South Lancashire and Cheshire. Surrounded by a deep moat, supplied by a neighbouring stream, and crossed by four drawbridges, each faced by a gateway, this vast pile of building was divided into two spacious courts, one of which contained the stables, barns, and offices, while the other was reserved for the family and the guests by whom the hospitable mansion was almost constantly crowded. In the last-mentioned part of the house was a great gallery, with deeply embayed windows filled with painted glass, a floor of polished oak, walls of the same dark lustrous material, hung with portraits of stiff beauties, some in ruff and farthingale, and some in a costume of an earlier period among whom was Margaret Barton, who brought the manor of Middleton into the family; frowning warriors, beginning with Sir Ralph Assheton, knight-marshal of England in the reign of Edward IV., and surnamed "the black of Assheton-under-line," the founder of the house, and husband of Margaret Barton before mentioned, and ending with Sir Richard Assheton, grandfather of the present owner of the mansion, and one of the heroes of Flodden; grave lawyers, or graver divines—a likeness running through all, and showing they belonged to one line—a huge carved mantelpiece, massive tables of walnut or oak, and black and shining as ebony, set round with high-backed chairs. Here, also, above stairs, there were long corridors looking out through lattices upon the court, and communicating with the almost countless dormitories; while, on the floor beneath, corresponding passages led to all the principal chambers, and terminated in the grand entrance hall, the roof of which being open and intersected by enormous rafters, and crooks of oak, like the ribs of some "tall ammiral," was thought from this circumstance, as well as from its form, to resemble "a ship turned upside down." The lower beams were elaborately carved and ornamented with gilded bosses and sculptured images, sustaining shields emblazoned with the armorial bearings of the Asshetons. As many as three hundred matchlocks, in good and serviceable condition, were ranged round the entrance-hall, besides corselets, Almayne rivets, steel caps, and other accoutrements; this stand of arms having been collected by Sir Richard's predecessor, during the military muster made in the country in 1574, when he had raised and equipped a troop of horse for Queen Elizabeth. Outside the mansion was a garden, charmingly laid out in parterres and walks, and not only carried to the edge of the moat, but continued beyond it till it reached a high knoll crowned with beech-trees. A crest of tall twisted chimneys, a high roof with quaintly carved gables, surmounted by many gilt vanes, may serve to complete the picture of Middleton Hall.

On a lovely summer evening, two young persons of opposite sexes were seated on a bench placed at the foot of one of the largest and most umbrageous of the beech-trees crowning the pleasant eminence before mentioned; and though differing in aspect and character, the one being excessively fair, with tresses as light and fleecy as the clouds above them, and eyes as blue and tender as the skies—and the other distinguished by great manly beauty, though in a totally different style; still there was a sufficiently strong likeness between them, to proclaim them brother and sister. Profound melancholy pervaded the countenance of the young man, whose handsome brow was clouded by care—while the girl, though sad, seemed so only from sympathy.

They were conversing together in deep and earnest tones, showing how greatly they were interested; and, as they proceeded, many an involuntary sigh was heaved by Richard Assheton, while a tear, more than once, dimmed the brightness of his sister's eyes, and her hand sought by its gentle pressure to re-assure him.

They were talking of Alizon, of her peculiar and distressing situation, and of the young man's hopeless love for her. She was the general theme of their discourse, for Richard's sole comfort was in pouring forth his griefs into his sister's willing ear; but new causes of anxiety had been given them by Nicholas, who had arrived that afternoon, bringing intelligence of James Device's capture, and of his threats against Mistress Nutter. The squire had only just departed, having succeeded in the twofold object of his visit—which was, firstly, to borrow three hundred pounds from his cousin—and, secondly, to induce him to attend the meeting at Hoghton Tower. With the first request Richard willingly complied, and he assented, though with some reluctance, to the second, provided nothing of serious moment should occur in the interim. Nicholas tried to rally him on his despondency, endeavouring to convince him all would come right in time, and that his misgivings were causeless; but his arguments were ineffectual, and he was soon compelled to desist. The squire would fain also have seen Alizon, but, understanding she always remained secluded in her chamber till eventide, he did not press the point. Richard urged him to stay over the night, alleging the length of the ride, and the speedy approach of evening, as inducements to him to remain; but on this score the squire was resolute—and having carefully secured the large sum of money he had obtained beneath his doublet, he mounted his favourite steed, Robin, who seemed as fresh as if he had not achieved upwards of thirty miles that morning, and rode off.

Richard watched him cross the drawbridge, and take the road towards Rochdale, and, after exchanging a farewell wave of the hand with him, returned to the hall and sought out his sister.

Dorothy was easily persuaded to take a turn in the garden with her brother, and during their walk he confided to her all he had heard from Nicholas. Her alarm at Jem Device's threat was much greater than his own; and, though she entertained a strong and unconquerable aversion to Mistress Nutter, and could not be brought to believe in the sincerity of her penitence, still, for Alizon's sake, she dreaded lest any harm should befall her, and more particularly desired to avoid the disgrace which would be inflicted by a public execution. Alizon she was sure would not survive such a catastrophe, and therefore, at all risks, it must be averted.

Richard did not share, to the same extent, in her apprehensions, because he had been assured by Nicholas that Mistress Nutter would be removed to a place of perfect security, and because he was disposed, with the squire, to regard the prisoner's threats as mere ravings of impotent malice. Still he could not help feeling great uneasiness. Vague fears, too, beset him, which he found it in vain to shake off, but he did not communicate them to his sister, as he knew the terrifying effect they would have upon her timid nature; and he, therefore, kept the mental anguish he endured to himself, hoping ere long it would diminish in intensity. But in this he was deceived, for, instead of abating, his gloom and depression momentarily increased.

Almost unconsciously, Richard and his sister had quitted the garden, proceeding with slow and melancholy steps to the beech-crowned knoll. The seat they had chosen was a favourite one with Alizon, and she came thither on most evenings, either accompanied by Dorothy or alone. Here it was that Richard had more than once passionately besought her to become his bride, receiving on both occasions a same meek yet firm refusal. To Dorothy also, who pleaded her brother's cause with all the eloquence and fervour of which she was mistress, Alizon replied that her affections were fixed upon Richard; but that, while her mother lived, and needed her constant prayers, they must not be withheld; and that, looking upon any earthly passion as a criminal interference with this paramount duty, she did not dare to indulge it. Dorothy represented to her that the sacrifice was greater than she was called upon to make, that her health was visibly declining, and that she might fall a victim to her over-zeal; but Alizon was deaf to her remonstrances, as she had been to the entreaties of Richard.

With hearts less burthened, the contemplation of the scene before them could not have failed to give delight to Richard and his sister, and, even amid the adverse circumstances under which it was viewed, its beauty and tranquillity produced a soothing influence.

Evening was gradually stealing on, and all the exquisite tints marking that delightful hour, were spreading over the landscape. The sun was setting gorgeously, and a flood of radiance fell upon the old mansion beneath them, and upon the grey and venerable church, situated on a hill adjoining it. The sounds were all in unison with the hour, and

the lowing of cattle, the voices of the husbandmen returning from their work, mingled with the cawing of the rooks newly alighted on the high trees near the church, told them that bird, man, and beast were seeking their home for the night. But though Richard's eye dwelt upon the fair garden beneath him, embracing all its terraces, green slopes, and trim pastures; though it fell upon the moat belting the hall like a glittering zone; though it rested upon the church tower; and, roaming over the park beyond it, finally settled upon the range of hills bounding the horizon, which have not inaptly been termed the English Apennines; though he saw all these things, he thought not of them, neither was he conscious of the sounds that met his ear, and which all spoke of rest from labour, and peace. Darker and deeper grew his melancholy. He began to persuade himself he was not long for this world; and, while gazing upon the beautiful prospect before him, was perhaps looking upon it for the last time.

For some minutes Dorothy watched him anxiously, and at last receiving no answer to her questions, and alarmed by the expression of his countenance, she flung her arms round his neck, and burst into tears. It was now Richard's turn to console her, and he inquired with much anxiety as to the cause of this sudden outburst of grief.

"You yourself are the cause of it, dear Richard," replied Dorothy, regarding him with brimming eyes; "I cannot bear to see you so unhappy. If you suffer this melancholy to grow upon you, it will affect both mind and body. Just now your countenance wore an expression most distressing to look upon. Try to smile, dear Richard, if only to cheer me, or else I shall grow as sad as you. Ah, me! I have known the day, and not long since either, when on a pleasant summer evening like this you would propose a stroll into the park with me; and, when there, would trip along the glades as fleetly as a deer, and defy me to catch you. But you always took care I should, though—ha! ha! Come, there is a little attempt at a smile. That's something. You look more like yourself now. How happy we used to be in those days, to be sure!—and how merry! You would make the courts ring with your blithe laughter, and wellnigh kill me with your jests. If love is to make one mope like an owl, and sigh like the wind through a half-shut casement; if it is to cause one to lose one's rosy complexion and gay spirit, and forget how to dance and sing—take no pleasure in hawking and hunting, or any kind of sport—walk about with eyes fixed upon the ground, muttering, and with disordered attire—if it is to make one silent when one should be talkative, grave when one should be gay, heedless when one should listen—if it is to do all this, defend me from the tender passion! I hope I shall never fall in love."

"I hope you never will, dear Dorothy," replied Richard, pressing her hand affectionately, "if your love is to be attended with such unhappy results as mine. I know not how it is, but I feel unusually despondent this evening, and am haunted by a thousand dismal

fancies. But I will do my best to dismiss them, and with your help no doubt I shall succeed."

"There!—there was a smile in earnest!" cried Dorothy, brightening up. "Oh, Richard! I am quite happy now. And after all I do not see why you should take such a gloomy view of things. I have no doubt there is a great deal, a very great deal, of happiness in store for you and Alizon—I must couple her name with yours, or you will not allow it to be happiness—if you can only be brought to think so. I am quite sure of it; and you shall see how nicely I can make the matter out. As thus. Mistress Nutter is certain to die soon—such a wicked woman cannot live long. Don't be angry with me for calling her wicked, Richard; but you know I never can forget her unhallowed proceedings in the convent church at Whalley, where I was so nearly becoming a witch myself. Well, as I was saying, she cannot live long, and when she goes—and Heaven grant it may be soon!—Alizon, no doubt, will mourn for her though I shall not, and after a decent interval—then, Richard, then she will no longer say you nay, but will make you happy as your wife. Nay, do not look so sad again, dear brother. I thought I should make you quite cheerful by the picture I was drawing."

"It is because I fear it will never be realized that I am sad, Dorothy," replied Richard. "My own anticipations are the opposite of yours, and paint Alizon sinking into an early grave before her mother; while as to myself, if such be the case, I shall not long survive her."

"Nay, now you will make me weep again," cried Dorothy, her tears flowing afresh. "But I will not allow you to indulge such gloomy ideas, Richard. If I seriously thought Mistress Nutter likely to occasion all this fresh mischief, I would cause her to be delivered up to justice, and hanged out of the way. You may look cross at me, but I would. What is an old witch like her, compared with two young handsome persons, dying for love of each other, and yet not able to marry on her account?"

"Dorothy, Dorothy, you must put some restraint on your tongue," said Richard; "you give it sadly too much licence. You forget it is the wish of the unhappy lady you refer to, to expiate her offences at the stake, and that it is only out of consideration to her daughter that she has been induced to remain in concealment. What will be the issue of it all, I dare scarcely conjecture. Wo to her, I fear! Wo to Alizon! Wo to me!"

"Alas! Richard, that you should link yourself to her fate!" exclaimed Dorothy, half mournfully, half reproachfully.

"I cannot help it," he replied. "It is my destiny—a deplorable destiny, if you will—but not to be avoided. That Mistress Nutter will escape the consequences of her crimes, I can

scarcely believe. Her penitence is profound and sincere, and that is a great consolation; for I trust she will not perish, body and soul. I should wish her to have some spiritual assistance, but this Nicholas will not for the present permit, alleging that no churchman would consent to screen her from justice when he became aware, as he must by her confession, of the nature and magnitude of her offences. This may be true; but when the wretches who have been leagued with her in iniquity are disposed of, the reason will no longer exist, and I will see that she is cared for. But, apart from her mother, I have another source of anxiety respecting Alizon. It is this: orders have been this day given for the arrest of Elizabeth Device and her daughter, Jennet, and Alizon will be the chief witness against them. This will be a great trouble to her."

"Undoubtedly," rejoined Dorothy, with much concern. "But can it not be avoided?"

"I fear not," said Richard, "and I blamed Nicholas much for his precipitancy in giving the order; but he replied he had been held up latterly as a favourer of witches, and must endeavour to redeem his character by a display of severity. Were it not for Alizon, I should rejoice that the noxious brood should at last be utterly exterminated."

"And so should I, in good sooth," responded Dorothy. "As to Elizabeth Device, she is bad enough for any thing, and capable of almost any mischief: but she is nothing to Jennet, who, I am persuaded, would become a second Mother Demdike if her career were not cut short. You have seen the child, and know what an ill-favoured, deformed little creature she is, with round high shoulders, eyes set strangely in her face, and such a malicious expression—oh! I shudder to think of it."

And she covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some unpleasant object.

"Poor, predestined child of sin, branded by nature from her birth, and charged with wicked passions, as the snake with venom, I cannot but pity her!" exclaimed Richard. "Compassion is entirely thrown away," he added, with a sudden change of manner, and as if trying to shake off a weakness. "The poisonous fruit must, however, be nipped in the bud. Better she should perish now, even though comparatively guiltless, than hereafter with a soul stained with crime, like her mother."

As he concluded, he put his hand quickly to his side, for a sharp and sudden pang shot through his heart; and so acute was the pain, that, after struggling against it for a moment, he groaned deeply, and would have fallen, if his sister, greatly alarmed, and with difficulty repressing a scream, had not lent him support.

Neither of them were aware of the presence of a little girl, who had approached the place where they were sitting, with footsteps so light that the grass scarcely seemed to bend

beneath them, and who, ensconcing herself behind the tree, drank in their discourse with eager ears. She was attended by a large black cat, who, climbing the tree, placed himself on a bough above her.

During the latter part of the conversation, and when it turned upon the arrest of Jennet and her mother, the expression of the child's countenance, malicious enough to begin with, became desperately malignant, and she was only restrained by certain signs from the cat, which appeared to be intelligible to her, from some act of mischief. At last even this failed, and before the animal could descend and check her, she crept round the bole of the tree, so as to bring herself close to Richard, and muttering a spell, made one or two passes behind his back, touched him with the point of her finger, but so lightly that he was unconscious of the pressure, and then hastily retreated with the cat, who glared furiously at her from his flaming orbs.

It was at the moment she touched him that Richard felt as if an arrow were quivering in his heart.

Poor Dorothy's alarm was so great that she could not even scream for assistance, and she feared, if she quitted her brother, he would expire before her return; but the agony, though great, was speedily over, and as the spasm ceased, he looked up, and, with a faint smile, strove to re-assure her.

"Do not be alarmed," he said; "it is nothing—a momentary faintness—that is all."

But the damp upon his brow, and the deathly hue of his cheek, contradicted the assertion, and showed how much he had endured. "It was more than momentary faintness, dear Richard," replied Dorothy. "It was a frightful seizure—so frightful that I almost feared; but no matter—you know I am easily alarmed. Thank God! here is some colour coming into your cheeks. You are better now, I see. Lean upon me, and let us return to the house."

"I can walk unassisted," said Richard, rising with an effort.

"Do not despise my feeble aid," replied Dorothy, taking his arm under her own. "You will be quite well soon."

"I am quite well now," said Richard, halting after he had advanced a few paces, "The attack is altogether passed. Do you not see Alizon coming towards us? Not a word of this sudden seizure to her. Do you mind, Dorothy?"

Alizon was soon close behind them, and though, in obedience to Richard's injunctions, no allusion was made to his recent illness, she at once perceived he was suffering greatly, and with much solicitude inquired into the cause. Richard avoided giving a direct answer, and, immediately entering upon Nicholas's visit, tried to divert her attention from himself.

So great a change had been wrought in Alizon's appearance and manner during the last few weeks, that she could scarcely be recognised. Still beautiful as ever, her beauty had lost its earthly character, and had become in the highest degree spiritualised and refined. Humility of deportment and resignation of look, blended with an expression of religious fervour, gave her the appearance of one of the early martyrs. Unremitting ardour in the pursuance of her devotional exercises by day, and long vigils at night, had worn down her frame, and robbed it of some of its grace and fulness of outline; but this attenuation had a charm of its own, and gave a touching interest to her figure, which was wanting before. If her cheek was thinner and paler, her eyes looked larger and brighter, and more akin to the stars in splendour; and if she appeared less childlike, less joyous, less free from care, the want of these qualities was more than counterbalanced by increased gentleness, resignation, and serenity.

Deeply interested in all Richard told her of her mother, she was greatly concerned to hear of the intended arrest of Elizabeth and Jennet Device, especially the latter. For this unhappy and misguided child she had once entertained the affection of a sister, and it could not but be a source of grief to her to reflect upon her probable fate.

Little more passed between them, for Richard, feeling his strength again fail him, was anxious to reach the house, and Dorothy was quite unequal to conversation. They parted at the door, and as Alizon, after taking leave of her friends, turned to continue her walk in the garden, Richard staggered into the entrance-hall, and sank upon a chair.

Alizon desired to be alone, for she did not wish to have a witness to the grief that overpowered her, and which, when she had gained a retired part of the garden, where she supposed herself free from all observation, found relief in a flood of tears.

For some minutes she was a prey to violent and irrepressible emotion, and had scarcely regained a show of composure, when she heard herself addressed, as she thought, in the voice of the very child whose unlucky fate she was deploring. Looking round in surprise, and seeing no one, she began to think fancy must have cheated her, when a low malicious laugh, arising from a shrubbery near her, convinced her that Jennet was hidden there. And the next moment the little girl stepped from out the trees.

Alizon's first impulse was to catch the child in her arms, and press her to her bosom; but there was something in Jennet's look that deterred her, and so embarrassed her, that she was unable to bestow upon her the ordinary greeting of affection, or even approach her.

Jennet seemed to enjoy her confusion, and laughed spitefully.

"Yo dunna seem ower glad to see me, sister Alizon," said Jennet, at length.

"Sister Alizon!" There was something in the term that now jarred upon the young girl's ears, but she strove to conquer the feeling, as unworthy of her.

"She was once my sister," she thought, "and shall be so still. I will save her, if it be possible." "Jennet," she added aloud, "I know not what chance brings you here, and though I may not give you the welcome you expect, I am rejoiced to see you, because I may be the means of serving you. Do not be alarmed at what I am going to tell you. The danger I hope is passed, or at all events may be avoided. Your liberty is threatened, and at the very moment I see you here I was lamenting your supposed condition as a prisoner."

Jennet laughed louder and more spitefully than before, and looked so like a little fury that Alizon's blood ran cold at the sight of it.

"Ey knoa it aw, sister Alizon," she cried, "an that is why ey ha cum'd here. Brother Jem is a pris'ner i' Whalley Abbey. Mother is a pris'ner theere, too. An ey should ha kept em company, if Tib hadna brought me off. Now, listen to me, Alizon, fo' this is my bus'ness wi' yo. Yo mun get mother an Jem out to-neet—eigh, to-neet. Yo con do it, if yo win. An onless yo do—boh ey winna threaten till ey get yer answer."

"How am I to set them free?" asked Alizon, greatly alarmed.

"Yo need only say the word to young Ruchot Assheton, an the job's done," replied Jennet.

"I refuse—positively refuse to do so!" rejoined Alizon, indignantly.

"Varry weel," cried Jennet, with a look of concentrated malice and fury; "then tak the consequences. They win be ta'en to Lonkester Castle, an lose their lives theere. Bo ye shan go, too—ay, an be brunt os a witch—a witch—d'ye mark, wench? eh!"

"I defy your malice!" cried Alizon.

"Defy me!" screamed Jennet. "What, ho! Tib!"

And at the call the huge black cat sprang from out the shrubbery.

"Tear her flesh from her bones!" cried the little girl, pointing to Alizon, and stamping furiously on the ground.

Tib erected his back, and glared like a tiger, but he seemed unwilling or unable to obey the order.

Alizon, who had completely recovered her courage, regarded him fixedly, and apparently without terror.

"Whoy dusna seize her, an tear her i' pieces?" cried the infuriated child.

"He dares not—he has no power over me," said Alizon. "Oh, Jennet! cast him off. Your wicked agent appears to befriend you now, but he will lead you to certain destruction. Come with me, and I will save you."

"Off!" cried Jennet, repelling her with furious gestures. "Off! ey winna ge wi' ye. Ey winna be saved, os yo term it. Ey hate yo more than ever, an wad strike yo dead at my feet, if ey could. Boh as ey connna do it, ey win find some other means o' injurin' ye. Soh look to yersel, proud ledy—look to yersel? Ey ha already smitten you in a place where ye win feel it sore, an ey win repeat the blow. Ey now leave yo, boh we shan meet again. Come along, Tib!"

So saying, she sprang into the shrubbery, followed by the cat, leaving Alizon appalled by her frightful malignity.

Alizon Defies Jennet.

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CHAPTER IV.—THE GORGE OF CLIVIGER.

The sun had already set as Nicholas Assheton reached Todmorden, then a very small village indeed, and alighting at a little inn near the church, found the ale so good, and so many boon companions assembled to discuss it, that he would fain have tarried with them for an hour or so; but prudence, for once, getting the better of inclination, and suggesting that he had fifteen or sixteen miles still to ride, over a rough and lonely road, part of which lay through the gorge of Cliviger, a long and solitary pass among the English Apennines, and, moreover, had a large sum of money about him, he tore himself away by a great effort.

On quitting the smiling valley of Todmorden, and drawing near the dangerous defile before mentioned, some misgivings crossed him, and he almost reproached himself with foolhardiness in venturing within it at such an hour, and wholly unattended. Several recent cases of robbery, some of them attended by murder, had occurred within the pass; and these now occurred so forcibly to the squire, that he was half inclined to ride back to Todmorden, and engage two or three of the toppers he had left at the inn to serve him as an escort as far as Burnley, but he dismissed the idea almost as soon as formed, and, casting one look at the green and woody slopes around him, struck spurs into Robin, and dashed into the gorge.

On the right towered a precipice, on the bare crest of which stood a heap of stones piled like a column—the remains, probably, of a cairn. On this commanding point Nicholas perceived a female figure, dilated to gigantic proportions against the sky, who, as far as he could distinguish, seemed watching him, and making signs to him, apparently to go back; but he paid little regard to them, and soon afterwards lost sight of her.

Precipitous and almost inaccessible rocks, of every variety of form and hue; some springing perpendicularly up like the spire of a church, others running along in broken ridges, or presenting the appearance of high embattled walls; here riven into deep gullies, there opening into wild savage glens, fit spots for robber ambuscade; now presenting a fair smooth surface, now jagged, shattered, shelving, roughened with brushwood; sometimes bleached and hoary, as in the case of the pinnacled crag called the White Kirk; sometimes green with moss or grey with lichen; sometimes, though but rarely, shaded with timber, as in the approach to the cavern named the Earl's Bower; but generally bold and naked, and sombre in tint as the colours employed by the savage Rosa. Such were the distinguishing features of the gorge of Cliviger when Nicholas traversed it. Now the high embankments and mighty arches of a railway fill up its

recesses and span its gullies; the roar of the engine is heard where the cry of the bird of prey alone resounded; and clouds of steam usurp the place of the mist-wreaths on its crags.

Formerly, the high cliffs abounded with hawks; the rocks echoed with their yells and screeches, and the spots adjoining their nests resembled, in the words of the historian of the district, Whitaker, "little charnel-houses for the bones of game." Formerly, also, on some inaccessible point built the rock-eagle, and reared its brood from year to year. The gaunt wolf had once ravaged the glens, and the sly fox and fierce cat-a-mountain still harboured within them. Nor were those the only objects of dread. The superstitious declared the gorge was haunted by a frightful, hirsute demon, yclept Hobthurst.

The general savage character of the ravine was relieved by some spots of exquisite beauty, where the traveller might have lingered with delight, if apprehension of assault from robber, or visit from Hobthurst, had not urged him on. Numberless waterfalls, gushing from fissures in the hills, coursed down their seamy sides, looking like threads of silver as they sprang from point to point. One of the most beautiful of these cascades, issuing from a gully in the rocks near the cavern called the Earl's Bower, fell, in rainy seasons, in one unbroken sheet of a hundred and fifty feet. Through the midst of the gorge ran a swift and brawling stream, known by the appellation of the Calder; but it must not be confounded with the river flowing past Whalley Abbey. The course of this impetuous current was not always restrained within its rocky channel, and when swollen by heavy rains, it would frequently invade the narrow causeway running beside it, and, spreading over the whole width of the gorge, render the road almost impassable.

Through this rocky and sombre defile, and by the side of the brawling Calder, which dashed swiftly past him, Nicholas took his way. The hawks were yelling overhead; the rooks were cawing on the topmost branches of some tall timber, on which they built; a raven was croaking lustily in the wood; and a pair of eagles were soaring in the still glowing sky.

By-and-by, the glen contracted, and a wall of steep rocks on either side hemmed the shuddering traveller in. Instinctively, he struck spurs into his horse, and accelerated his pace.

The narrow glen expands, the precipices fall further back, and the traveller breathes more freely. Still, he does not relax his speed, for his imagination has been at work in the gloom, peopling his path with lurking robbers or grinning boggarts. He begins to fear he shall lose his gold, and execrates his folly for incurring such heedless risk. But it is too late now to turn back.

It grows rapidly dusk, and objects became less and less distinct, assuming fantastical and fearful forms. A blasted tree, clinging to a rock, and thrusting a bare branch across the road, looks to the squire like a bandit; and a white owl bursting from a bush, scares him as if it had been Hobthurst himself. However, in spite of these and other alarms, for which he is indebted to excited fancy, he hurries on, and is proceeding at a thundering pace, when all at once his horse comes to a stop, arrested by a tall female figure, resembling that seen near the mountain cairn at the entrance of the gorge.

Nicholas's blood ran cold, for though in this case he could not apprehend plunder, he was fearful of personal injury, for he believed the woman to be a witch. Mustering up courage, however, he forced Robin to proceed.

If his progress was meant to be barred, a better spot for the purpose could not have been selected. A narrow road, scarcely two feet in width, ran round the ledge of a tremendous crag, jutting so far into the glen that it almost met the steep barrier of rocks opposite it. Between these precipitous crags dashed the river in a foaming cascade, nearly twelve feet in height, and the steep narrow causeway winding beside it, as above described, was rendered excessively slippery and dangerous from the constant cloud of spray arising from the fall.

At the highest and narrowest point of the ledge, and occupying nearly the whole of its space, with an overhanging rock on one side of her, and a roaring torrent on the other, stood the tall woman, determined apparently, from her attitude and deportment, to oppose the squire's further progress. As Nicholas advanced, he became convinced that it was the same person he had seen near the cairn; but, when her features grew distinguishable, he found to his surprise that it was Nance Redferne.

"Halloa! Nance," he cried. "What are you doing here, lass, eh?"

"Cum to warn ye, squoire," she replied; "yo once did me a sarvice, an ey hanna forgetten it. That's why I watched ye fro' the cairn cliffs, an motioned ye to ge back. Boh ye didna onderstand my signs, or wouldna heed 'em, so ey be cum'd here to stay ye. Yo're i' dawnger, ey tell ye."

"In danger of what, my good woman?" demanded the squire uneasily.

"O' bein' robbed, and plundered o' your gowd," replied Nance; "there are five men waitin' to set upon ye a mile further on, at the Bowder Stoans."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Nicholas; "they will get little for their pains. I have no money about me."

"Dunna think to deceive me, squoire," rejoined Nance; "ey knoa yo ha borrowed three hundert pundt i' gowd fro' yung Ruchot Assheton; an os surely os ye ha it aw under your jerkin, so surely win yo lose it, if yo dunna turn back, or ge on without me keepin' ye company."

"I have no objection on earth to your company, Nance," replied the squire; "quite the contrary. But how the devil should these rascals expect me? And, above all, how should they conjecture I should come so well provided? For, sooth to say, such is not ordinarily the case with me."

"Ey knoa it weel, squoire," replied Nance, with a laugh; boh they ha received sartin information o' your movements."

"There is only one person who could give them such information," cried Nicholas; "but I cannot, will not suspect him."

"If yor're thinkin' o' Lawrence Fogg, yo're na far wide o' th' mark, squoire," replied Nance.

"What! Fogg leagued with robbers—impossible!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Neaw, it's nah so unpossible os aw that," returned Nance; "yo 'n stare when ey tell yo he has robbed yo mony a time without your being aware on it. Yo were onwise enough to send him round to your friends to borrow money for yo."

"True, so I was. But, luckily, no one would lend me any," said Nicholas.

"There yo're wrong, squoire—fo' unluckily they aw did," replied Nance, with a scarcely-suppressed laugh. "Roger Nowell gied him one hundred; Tummus Whitaker of Holme, another; Ruchot Parker o' Browsholme, another. An more i' th' same way."

"And the rascal pocketed it all, and never brought me back one farthing," cried Nicholas, in a transport of rage. "I'll have him hanged—pshaw! hanging's too good for him. To deceive me, his friend, his benefactor, his patron, in such a manner; to dwell in my house, eat at my table, drink my wine, wear my habiliments, ride my horses, hunt with my hounds! Has the dog no conscience?"

"Varry little, ey'm afear'd," replied Nance.

"And the worst of it is," continued the squire—new lights breaking upon him, "I shall be liable for all the sums he has received. He was my confidential agent, and the lenders will come upon me. It must be six or seven hundred pounds that he has obtained in this nefarious way. Zounds! I shall go mad."

"Yo wur to blame fo' trustin him, squoire," rejoined Nance. "Yo ought to ha' made proper inquiries about him at first, an then yo'd ha' found out what sort o' chap he wur. Boh now ey'n tell ye. Lawrence Fogg is chief o' a band o' robbers, an aw the black an villanous deeds done of late i' this place, ha' been parpetrated by his men. A poor gentleman wur murderd by 'em i' this varry spot th' week efore last, an his body cast into t' river. Fogg, of course, had no hont in the fow deed, boh he would na ha interfered to prevent it if he had bin here, fo' he never scrupled shedding blood. An if he had bin content wi' robbin' yo, squoire, ey wadna ha betrayed him; boh when he proposed to cut your throttle, bekose, os he said, dead men tell neaw teles, ey could howd out nah longer, an resolved to gi' yo warnin."

"What a monstrous and unheard-of villain!" cried the squire. "But is he one of the ambuscade?"

Nance replied in the affirmative.

"Then, by heaven! I will confront him—I will hew him down," pursued Nicholas, griping the hilt of his sword.

"Neaw use, ey tell ye—yo'n be overpowerd an kilt," said Nance. "Tak me wi' yo, an ey'n carry yo safely through em aw; boh ge alone, or yo'n ne'er see Downham again. An now it's reet ey should tell ye who Lawrence Fogg really is."

"What new wonder is in store for me?" cried Nicholas. "Who is he?"

"Maybe yo ha heerd tell that Mother Demdike had a son and a dowter," replied Nance; "the dowter bein', of course, Elizabeth Device; and the son, Christopher Demdike, being supposed to be dead. Howsomever, this is not the case, for Lawrence Fogg is he."

"I guessed as much when you began," cried Nicholas. "He has a cursedly bad look about the eyes—a damned Demdike physiognomy. What an infernal villain the fellow must be! without a jot of natural feeling. Why, he has this very day assisted at his nephew's capture, and caused his own sister to be arrested. Oh, I have been properly duped! To lodge a son of that infernal hag in my house—feed him, clothe him, make him my friend—take him, the viper! to my bosom! I have been rightly served. But he shall

hang!—he shall hang! That is some consolation, though slight. But how do you know all this, Nance?"

"Dunna ax me," she replied. "Whatever ey ha' been to Christopher Demdike, ey bear him neaw love now; fo', as ey ha tow'd yo, he is a black-hearted murtherin' villain. Boh lemme get up behind yo, an ey'n bring yo through scatheless. An to-morrow yo may arrest the whole band at Malkin Tower."

"Malkin Tower!" exclaimed the squire, in fresh surprise. "What, have these robbers taken up their quarters there? This accounts for all the strange sights said to have been seen there of late, and which I treated as mere fables. But, ah! a terrible thought crosses me. What have I done? Mistress Nutter will be there to-night. And I have sent her. Death and destruction! she will fall into their hands. I must go there at once. I cannot take any assistance with me. That would betray the poor lady."

"If yo'n trust me, ey'n help yo through the difficulty," replied Nance.

"Get up then quickly, lass, since it must be so," rejoined Nicholas.

With this he moved forward, and giving her his hand, she was instantly seated behind him upon Robin, who seemed no way incommoded by his double burthen, but dashed down the further side of the causeway, in answer to a sharp application of the spur. Passing her arms round the squire's waist, Nance maintained her seat well; and in this way they rattled along, heedless of the increasing difficulties of the road, or the fast-gathering gloom.

The mile was quickly passed, and Nance whispered in the squire's ear that they were approaching the Boulder Stones. Presently they came to a narrow glen, half-filled with huge rocky fragments, detached from the toppling precipices on either side, and forming an admirable place of ambuscade. One rock, larger than the rest, completely commanded the pass, and, as the squire advanced, a thundering voice from it called to him to stay; and the injunction being disregarded, the barrel of a gun was protruded from the bushes covering its brow, and a shot fired at him. Though well aimed, the ball struck the ground beneath his horse's feet, and Nicholas continued his way unmoved, while the faulty marksman jumped down the crag. At the same time four other men started from their places of concealment behind the stones, and, levelling their calivers at the fugitives, fired. The sharp discharges echoed along the gorge, and the shots rattled against the rocks, but none of them took effect, and Nicholas might have gone on without further hindrance; but, despite Nance's remonstrances, who urged him to go on, he pulled up to await the coming of the person who had first challenged him. Scarcely an

instant elapsed before he was beside the squire, and presented a petronel at his head. Notwithstanding the gloom, Nicholas recognised him.

"Ah! is it thou, accursed traitor?" cried Nicholas. "I could scarcely believe in thy villainy, but now I am convinced."

"The jade you have got behind you has told you who I am, I see," replied Fogg. "I will settle with her anon. But this will save further explanations with you!"

And he discharged the petronel full at the squire. But the ball rebounded, as if his doublet had been quilted. It was in fact lined with gold. On seeing the squire unhurt, the robber captain uttered an exclamation of rage and astonishment.

"You are mistaken, you see, perfidious villain," cried Nicholas. "You have yet to render an account of all the wrongs you have done me, but meantime you shall not pass unpunished."

And as he spoke, he snatched the petronel from Fogg, and with the butt-end dealt him a tremendous blow on the head, felling him to the ground.

By this time the other robbers had descended from the rocks, and, seeing the fall of their leader, rushed forward to avenge him, but Nicholas did not tarry for any further encounter; but, fully satisfied with what he had done, struck spurs into Robin, and galloped off. For a few minutes he could hear the shouts of the men, but they soon afterwards died away.

Little more than half the ravine had been traversed when the rencounter above described took place; but, though the road was still difficult and dangerous, and rendered doubly so by the obscurity, no further hindrance occurred till just as Nicholas was quitting the gloomy intricacies of the gorge, and approaching the more open country beyond it. At this point Robin fell, throwing both him and Nance, and when the animal rose again he was found to be so much injured that it was impossible to mount him. There was no resource but to proceed to Burnley, which was still three or four miles distant, on foot.

In this dilemma, Nance volunteered to provide the squire with another steed, but he resolutely refused the offer.

"No, no—none of your broomsticks for me," he cried; "no devil's horses—I don't know where they may carry me. My own legs must serve me now. I'll just take poor Robin out of the road, and then trudge off for Burnley as fast as I can."

With this, he led the horse to a small green mead skirting the stream, and taking off his saddle and bridle, and depositing them carefully under a tree, he patted the animal on the neck, promising to return for him on the morrow, and then set off at a brisk pace, with Nance walking beside him. They had not gone far, however, when the clattering of hoofs was heard behind them, and it was evident that several horsemen were rapidly approaching. Nance stopped, listened for a moment, and then declaring that it was Demdike and his band in pursuit, seized the squire's arm and drew him out of the road, and under the shelter of some bushes of hazel. The robber captain could only have been stunned, it appeared; and, as soon as he had recovered from the effects of the blow, had mounted his horse, which was concealed, with those of his men, behind the rocks, and started after the fugitives. Such was the construction put upon the matter by Nance, and the event proved it correct. A loud shout from the horsemen, and a sudden halt, proclaimed that poor Robin had been discovered; and this circumstance seemed to give great satisfaction to Demdike, who loudly declared that they were now sure of overtaking the runaways.

"They cannot be far off," he cried; "but they will most likely attempt to hide themselves, so look well about you."

So saying, he rode on, and it was evident from the noise, that the men implicitly obeyed his injunctions. Nothing, however, was found, and ere many minutes Demdike came up, and glancing at the hazels, behind which the fugitives were hidden, he discharged a petronel into the largest tree, but as no movement followed the report, he said—

"I thought I saw something move here, but I suppose I was mistaken. No doubt they have got on further than we expected, or have retired into some of the cloughs, in which case it will be useless to search for them. However, we will make sure of them in this way. Two of you shall form an ambuscade near Holme and two further on within half a mile of Burnley, and shall remain on the watch till dawn, so that you will be sure to capture them, and when taken, make away with them without hesitation. Unless my skull had been of the strongest, that butcherly squire would have cracked it, so he shall have no grace from me; and as to that treacherous witch, Nance Redferne, she deserves death at our hands, and she shall have her deserts. I have long suspected her, and, indeed, was a fool to trust one of the vile Chattox brood, who are all my natural enemies—but no matter, I shall have my revenge."

The men having promised compliance with their captain's command, he went on—

"As to myself," he said, "I shall go forthwith, and as fast as my horse can carry me, to Malkin Tower, and I will tell you why. It is not that I dislike the game we are upon, but I

have better to play just now. Tom Shaw, the cock-master at Downham, who is in my pay, rode over to Whalley this afternoon, to bring me word that a certain lady, who has long been concealed in the Manor-house, will be taken to Malkin Tower to-night. The intelligence is certain, for he had obtained it from Old Crouch, the huntsman, who is to escort her. Thus, Mistress Nutter, for you all know whom I mean, will fall naturally into our hands, and we can wring any sums of money we like out of her; for though she has abandoned her property to her daughter, Alizon, she can no doubt have as much as she wants, and I will take care she asks for plenty, or I will try the effect of some of those instruments of torture which I was lucky enough to find in the dungeons of Malkin Tower, and which were used for a like purpose by my predecessor, Blackburn, the freebooter. Are you content, my lads?"

"Ay, ay, Captain Demdike," they replied.

Upon this the whole party set forward, and were speedily out of hearing. As soon as they thought it prudent to come forth, the squire and Nance emerged from their place of shelter.

"What is to be done?" exclaimed the former, who was almost in a state of distraction. "The villain has announced his intention of going to Malkin Tower, and Mistress Nutter will assuredly fall into his hands. Oh! that I could stop him, or get there before him!"

"Yo shan, if yo like to ride wi' me," said Nance.

"But how—in what way?" asked Nicholas.

"Leave that to me," replied Nance, breaking off a long branch of hazel. "Tak howld o' this," she cried.

The squire obeyed, and was instantly carried off his legs, and whisked through the air at a prodigious rate.

He felt giddy and confused, but did not dare to leave go, lest he should be dashed in pieces, while Nance's wild laughter rang in his ears.

Over the bleached and perpendicular crag—startling the eagle from his eyry—over the yawning gully with the torrent roaring beneath him—over the sharp ridges of the hill—over Townley park—over Burnley steeple—over the wide valley beyond, he went—until at last, bewildered, out of breath, and like one in a dream, he alighted on a brown, bare, heathy expanse, and within a hundred yards of a tall, circular stone structure, which he knew to be Malkin Tower.

The Lancashire Witches Volume IV by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER V.—THE END OF MALKIN TOWER.

The shades of night had fallen on Downham manor-house, and with an aching heart, and a strong presentiment of ill, Mistress Nutter prepared to quit the little chamber which had sheltered her for more than two months, and where she would willingly have breathed her latest sigh, if it had been so permitted her. Closing the Bible she had been reading, she placed the sacred volume under her arm, and taking up a small bundle, containing her slender preparations for travel, extinguished the taper, and then descending by a secret staircase, passed through a door, fashioned externally like a cupboard, and entered a summer-house, where she found old Crouch awaiting her.

A few whispered words only passed between her and the huntsman, and informing her that the horses were in waiting at the back of the garden, he took the bundle from her, and would fain have relieved her also of the Bible, but she would not part with it, and pressing it more closely to her bosom, said she was quite ready to attend him.

It was a beautiful, starlight night; the air soft and balmy, and laden with the perfume of the flowers. A nightingale was singing plaintively in an adjoining tree, and presently came a response equally tender from another part of the grove. Mistress Nutter could not choose but listen, and the melody so touched her that she was half suffocated by repressed emotion, for, alas! the relief of tears was denied her.

Motioning her somewhat impatiently to come on, Crouch struck into a sombre alley, edged by clipped yew-trees, and terminating in a plantation, through which a winding path led to the foot of the hill whereon the mansion was situated. By daylight this was a beautiful walk, affording exquisite glimpses through the trees of the surrounding scenery, and commanding a noble view of Pendle Hill, the dominant point in the prospect. But even now to the poor lady, so long immured in her cell-like chamber, and deprived of many of nature's choicest blessings, it appeared delightful. The fresh air, redolent of new-mown hay, fanned her pale cheek and feverish brow, and allayed her agitation and excitement. The perfect stillness, broken only by the lowing of the cattle in the adjoining pastures, by the drowsy hum of the dor-fly, or the rippling of the beck in the valley, further calmed her; and the soothing influence was completed by a contemplation of the serene heavens, wherein were seen the starry host, with the thin bright crescent of the new moon in the midst of them, diffusing a pearly light around her. One blot alone appeared in the otherwise smiling sky, and this was a great, ugly, black cloud lowering over the summit of Pendle Hill.

Mistress Nutter noticed the portentous cloud, and noticed also its shadow on the hill, which might have been cast by the Fiend himself, so like was it to a demoniacal shape with outstretched wings; but, though shuddering at the idea it suggested, she would not suffer it to obtain possession of her mind, but resolutely fixed her attention on other and more pleasing objects.

By this time they had reached the foot of the hill, and a gate admitted them to a road running by the side of Downham beck. Here they found the horses in charge of a man in the dark red livery of Nicholas Assheton, and who was no other than Tom Shaw, the rascally cock-master. Delivering the bridles to Crouch, the knave hastily strode away, but he lingered at a little distance to see the lady mount; and then leaping the hedge, struck through the plantation towards the hall, chinking the money in his pockets as he went, and thinking how cleverly he had earned it. But he did not go unpunished; for it is a satisfaction to record that, in walking through the woods, he was caught in a gin placed there by Crouch, which held him fast in its iron teeth till morning, when he was discovered by one of the under-keepers while going his rounds, in a deplorable condition, and lamed for life.

Meanwhile, unconscious either of the manner in which she had been betrayed, or of the punishment awaiting her betrayer, Mistress Nutter followed her conductor in silence. For a while the road continued by the side of the brook, and then quitting it, commenced a long and tedious ascent, running between high banks fringed with trees. The overhanging boughs rendered it so dark that Mistress Nutter could scarcely distinguish the old huntsman, though he was not many yards in advance of her, but she heard the tramp of his horse, and that was enough.

All at once, where the boughs were thickest, and the road darkest, she perceived a small fiery object on the bank, and in her alarm called out to the huntsman, who, looking back for a moment, laughed, and told her not to be uneasy, for it was only a glow-worm. Ashamed of her idle fears she rode on, but had not proceeded far, when, looking again at the bank, she saw it studded with the same lights. This time she did not call out or scream, but gazed steadily at the twinkling fires, hoping to get the better of her fears. Her alarm, however, rose to absolute terror, as she beheld the glow-worms—if glow-worms they were—twist together and form themselves into a flaming brand, such as she had seen in her vision, grasped by the angel who had driven her from the gates of Paradise.

Averting her gaze, she would have hastened on, but a hand suddenly laid upon her bridle, held back her horse; and she then perceived a tall dark man, mounted on a sable steed, riding beside her. The supernatural character of the horseman was manifest, inasmuch as no sound was caused by the tread of his steed, nor did he appear to be

visible to Crouch when the latter looked back. Mistress Nutter maintained her seat with difficulty. She well knew who was her companion.

"Soh, Alice Nutter," said the horseman at length, in a low deep tone, "you have chosen to shut yourself up in a narrow cell, like a recluse, for more than two months, denying yourself all sort of enjoyment, practising severest abstinence, and passing your whole time in useless prayer—ay, useless, for if you were to pray from now till doomsday—come when it will, a thousand years hence, or to-morrow—it will not save you. When you signed that bond to my master, sentence was recorded against you, and no power can recall it. Why, then, these unavailing lamentations? Why utter prayers which are rejected, and supplications which are scorned? Shake off this weakness, Alice, and be yourself again. Once you had pride enough, and a little of it would now be of service to you. You would then see the folly of this abject conduct—humbling yourself to the dust only to be spurned, and suing for mercy only to be derided. Pray as loud and as long as you will, the ears of Heaven will remain ever deaf to you."

"I hope otherwise," rejoined the lady, meekly.

"Do not deceive yourself," replied the horseman. "The term granted you by your compact will not be abridged, but it is your own fault if it be not extended. Your daughter is destroying herself in the vain hope of saving you. Her prayers are unavailing as your own, and recoil from the Judgment Throne unheard. The youth upon whom her affections are fixed is stricken with a deadly ailment. It is in your power to save them both."

Mistress Nutter groaned deeply.

"It is in your power, I say, to save them," continued the horseman, "by returning to your allegiance to your master. He will forgive your disobedience if you prove yourself zealous in his service; will restore you to your former worldly position; avenge you of your enemies; and accomplish all you may desire with respect to your daughter."

"He cannot do it," replied Mistress Nutter.

"Cannot!" echoed the horseman. "Try him! For many years I have served you as familiar; and you have never set me the task I have failed to execute. I am ready to become your servant again, and to offer you a yet larger range of control. Put no limits to your desires or ambition. If you are tired of this narrow sphere, take a wider. Look abroad. But do not shut yourself up in a narrow cell, and persuade yourself you are accomplishing your ultimate deliverance, when you are only wasting precious time, which might be more advantageously and far more agreeably employed. While laughing

at your folly, my master deplores it; and he has, therefore, sent me as to one for whom notwithstanding all derelictions from duty, he has still a regard, with an offer of full forgiveness, provided you return to him at once, and renew your covenant, proving your sincerity by casting from you the book you hold under your arm."

"Your snares are not laid subtle enough to catch me," replied Mistress Nutter. "I will never part with this holy volume, which is my present safeguard, and on which I build my hopes of salvation—hopes which your very proposals have revived in my breast; for I am well assured your master would not make them if he felt confident of his power over me. No; I defy him and you, and I command you in Heaven's name to get hence, and to tempt me no longer."

As the words were uttered, with a howl of rage and mortification, like the roar of a wild beast, the dark horseman and his steed vanished. Alarmed by the sound, Crouch stopped, and questioned the lady as to its cause; but receiving no satisfactory explanation from her, he bade her ride quickly on, affirming it must be the boggart of the clough.

Soon after this they again came upon Downham beck, and were about to cross it, when their purpose was arrested by a joyous barking, and the next moment Grip came up. The dog, it appeared, had been shut up in the stable, his company not being desired on the expedition; but contriving in some way or other to get out, he had scented his master's course, and in the end overtaken him. Crouch did not know whether to be angry or pleased, and at first gave utterance to an oath, and raised his whip to chastise him, but almost instantly the latter feeling predominated, and he welcomed the faithful animal with a few kind words.

"Ey suppose theaw thowt ey couldna do without thee, Grip," he said, "and mayhap theaw'rt reet."

They are now across the beck, and speeding over the wide brown waste. The huntsman warily shapes his course so as to avoid any limestone-quarries or turf-pits. He points out a jack-o'-lantern dancing merrily on the surface of a dangerous morass, and tells a dismal tale of a traveller lured into it by the delusive light, and swallowed up.

Mistress Nutter pays little heed to him, but ever and anon looks back, as if in dread of some one behind her. But no one is visible, and she only sees the great black cloud still hovering over Pendle Hill.

On—on—they go; their horses' hoofs now splashing through the wet sod, now beating upon the firm but elastic turf. A merry ride it would be if their errand were different, and

their hearts free from care. The air is fresh and reviving, and the rapid motion exhilarating. The stars shine out, and the crescent moon is still glittering in the heavens, but the black cloud hangs motionless on Pendle Hill.

Now and then some bird of night flies past them, and they hear the whooping of the owl, and see him skimming like a ghost over the waste. Then more fen fires arise, showing that other treacherous quagmires are at hand; but Crouch skirts them safely. Now the bull-frog croaks in the marsh, and a deep booming tells of a bittern passing by. They see the mighty bird above them, with his wide heavy wings and long neck. Grip howls at him, but is instantly checked by his master, and they gallop on.

They are now by the side of Pendle Water, and within sight of Rough Lee. What tumultuous thoughts agitate the lady's breast! The ground she tramples on was once her own; the woods by the river side were planted by her; the mansion before her once owned her as mistress, and now she dares not approach it. Nor does she desire to do so, for the sight of it brings back terrible recollections, and fills her again with despair.

They are now close upon it, and it appears dark, silent, and deserted. How different from what it was of yore in her husband's days—the husband she had foully slain! Speed on, old huntsman!—lash your panting horse, or the remorseful lady will far outstrip you, for she rides as if the avenging furies were at her heels.

She is rattling over the bridge, and Crouch, toiling after her, and with Grip toiling after him, shouts to her to moderate her pace. She looks back, and beholds the grim old house frowning full upon her, and hurries on. Huntsman and dog are left behind for awhile, but the steep ascent soon compels her to slacken speed, and they come up, Crouch swearing lustily, and Grip, with his tongue out of his mouth, limping as if foot-sore.

The road now leads through a thicket. The horses stumble frequently, for the stones are loose, and the footing consequently uncertain. Crouch has a fall, and ere he can remount the lady is gone. It is useless to hurry after her, and he is proceeding slowly, when Grip, who is a little in advance, growls fiercely, and looks back at his master, as if to intimate that danger is at hand. The huntsman presses on, but he is too late, if, indeed, he could at any time have rendered effectual assistance. A clearing in the thicket shows him the lady dismounted, and surrounded by several wild-looking men armed with calivers. Part of the band bear her shrieking off, and the rest fire at him, but without effect, and then chase him as far as the steepest part of the hill, down which he dashes, followed by Grip. Arrived at the bottom, he pauses to listen if he is pursued, and hearing nothing further to alarm him, debates with himself what is best to be done; and, not liking to alarm the village, for that would be to betray Mistress Nutter, he gets off his horse, ties him to a

tree, and with Grip close at his heels, commences the ascent of the hill by a different road from that he had previously taken.

Meanwhile, Mistress Nutter's captors dragged her forcibly towards the tower. Their arms and appearance left her no doubt they were depredators, and she sought to convince them she had neither money nor valuables in her possession. They laughed at her assertions, but made no other reply. Her sole consolation was, that they did not seek to deprive her of her Bible.

On reaching the tower, a signal was given by one of the foremost of the band, and the steps being lowered from the high doorway, she was compelled to ascend them, and being pushed along a short passage, obscured by a piece of thick tapestry, but which was drawn aside as she advanced, she found herself in a circular chamber, in the midst of which was a massive table covered with flasks and drinking-cups, and stained with wine. From the roof, which was crossed by great black beams of oak, was suspended a lamp with three burners, whose light showed that the walls were garnished with petronels, rapiers, poniards, and other murderous weapons; besides these there were hung from pegs long riding-cloaks, sombreros, vizards, and other robber accoutrements, including a variety of disguises, from the clown's frieze jerkin to the gentleman's velvet doublet, ready to be assumed on an emergency. Here and there was an open valise, or a pair of saddle-bags with their contents strewn about the floor, and on a bench were a dice-box and shuffle-board, showing, with the flasks and goblets on the table, how the occupants of the tower passed their time.

A steep ladder-like flight of steps led to the upper chamber, and down these, at the very moment of Mistress Nutter's entrance, descended a stalwart personage, who eyed her fiercely as he leapt upon the floor. There was something in the man's truculent physiognomy, and strange and oblique vision, that reminded her of Mother Demdike.

"Welcome to Malkin Tower, madam," said the robber with a grin, and doffing his cap with affected courtesy. "We have met before, but it is many years ago, and I dare say you have forgotten me. You will guess who I am when I tell you my mother occupied this tower before me."

Finding Mistress Nutter made no remark, he went on.

"I am Christopher Demdike, madam—Captain Demdike, I should say. The brave fellows who have brought you hither are part of my band, and till lately Northumberland and the borders of Scotland used to be our scene of action; but chancing to hear of my worthy old mother's death, I thought we could not do better than take possession of her stronghold, which devolved upon me by right of inheritance. Since our arrival here we

have kept ourselves very quiet, and the country folk, taking us for spirits or demons, never approach our hiding-place; while, as all our depredations are confined to distant parts, our retreat has never been suspected."

"This concerns me little," observed Mistress Nutter, coldly.

"Pardon me, madam, it concerns you much, as you will learn anon. But be seated, I pray you," he said, with mock civility. "I am keeping you standing all this while."

But as the lady declined the attention, he went on.

"I was fortunate enough, on first coming back to this part of the country, to pick up an acquaintance with your relative, Nicholas Assheton, who invited me to stay with him at Downham, and was so well pleased with my society that he could not endure to part with me."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mistress Nutter, "are you the person he called Lawrence Fogg?"

"The same," replied Demdike; "and no doubt you would hear a good report of me, madam. Well, it suited my purpose to stay; for I was very hospitably entertained by the squire, who, except being rather too much addicted to lectures and psalm-singing, is as pleasant a host as one could desire; besides which, he was obliging enough to employ me to borrow money for him, and what I got, I kept, you may be sure."

"I would willingly be spared the details of your knavery," said Mistress Nutter, somewhat impatiently.

"I am coming to an end," rejoined Demdike, "and then, perhaps, you may wish I had prolonged them. All the squire's secrets were committed to me, and I was fully aware of your concealment in the hall, but I could never ascertain precisely where you were lodged. I meant to carry you off, and only awaited the opportunity which has presented itself to-night."

"If you think to obtain money from me, you will find yourself mistaken," said Mistress Nutter. "I have parted with all my possessions."

"But to whom, madam?" cried Demdike, with a sinister smile—"to your daughter. And I am sure she is too gentle, too tender-hearted, to allow you to suffer when she can relieve you. You must get us a good round sum from her or you will be detained here long. The dungeons are dark and unwholesome, and my band are apt to be harsh in their treatment of captives. They have found in the vaults some instruments of torture

belonging to old Blackburn, the freebooter, the efficacy of which in an obstinate case I fear they might be inclined to try. You now begin to see the drift of my discourse, madam, and understand the sort of men you have to deal with—barbarous fellows, madam—inhuman dogs!"

And he laughed coarsely at his own jocularly.

"It may put an end to this discussion," said Mistress Nutter firmly, "if I declare that no torture shall induce me to make any such demand from my daughter."

"You think, perhaps, I am jesting with you, madam," rejoined Demdike.

"Oh! no, I believe you capable of any atrocity," replied the lady. "You do not, either in feature or deeds, belie your parentage."

"Ah! say you so, madam?" cried Demdike. "You have a sharp tongue, I find. Courtesy is thrown away upon you. What, ho! lads—Kenyon and Lowton, take the lady down to the vaults, and there let her have an hour for solitary reflection. She may change her mind in that time."

"Do not think it," cried Mistress Nutter, resolutely.

"If you continue obstinate, we will find means to move you," rejoined Demdike, in a taunting tone. "But what has she got beneath her arm? Give me the book. What's this?—a Bible! A witch with a Bible! It should be a grimoire. Ha! ha!"

"Give it me back, I implore of you," shrieked the lady. "I shall be destroyed, soul and body, if I have it not with me."

"What! you are afraid the devil may carry you off without it—ho! ho!" roared Demdike. "Well, that would not suit my purpose at present. Here, take it—and now off with her, lads, without more ado!"

And as he spoke, a trapdoor was opened by one of the robbers, disclosing a flight of steps leading to the subterranean chambers, down which the miserable lady was dragged.

Presently the two men re-appeared with a grim smile on their ruffianly countenances, and, as they closed the trapdoor, one of them observed to the captain that they had chained her to a pillar, by removing the band from the great skeleton, and passing it round her body.

"You have done well, lads," replied Demdike, approvingly; "and now go all of you and scour the hill-top, and return in an hour, and we will decide upon what is to be done with this woman."

The two men then joined the rest of their comrades outside, and the whole troop descended the steps, which were afterwards drawn up by Demdike. This done, the robber captain returned to the circular chamber, and for some time paced to and fro, revolving his dark schemes. He then paused, and placing his ear near the trapdoor, listened, but as no sound reached him, he sat down at the table, and soon grew so much absorbed as to be unconscious that a dark figure was creeping stealthily down the narrow staircase behind him.

"I cannot get rid of Nicholas Assheton," he exclaimed at length. "I somehow fancy we shall meet again; and yet all should be over with him by this time."

"Look round!" thundered a voice behind him. "Nicholas Assheton is not to be got rid of so easily."

At this unexpected summons, Demdike started to his feet, and recoiled aghast, as he saw what he took to be the ghost of the murdered squire standing before him. A second look, however, convinced him that it was no phantom he beheld, but a living man, armed for vengeance, and determined upon it.

"Get a weapon, villain," cried Nicholas, in tones of concentrated fury. "I do not wish to take unfair advantage, even of thee."

Without a word of reply, Demdike snatched a sword from the wall, and the next moment was engaged in deadly strife with the squire. They were well matched, for both were powerful men, both expert in the use of their weapons, and the combat might have been protracted and of doubtful issue but for the irresistible fury of Nicholas, who assaulted his adversary with such vigour and determination that he speedily drove him against the wall, where the latter made an attempt to seize a petronel hanging beside him, but his purpose being divined, he received a thrust through the arm, and, dropping his blade, lay at the squire's mercy.

Nicholas shortened his sword, but forbore to strike. Seizing his enemy by the throat, he hurled him to the ground, and, planting his knee on his chest, called out, "What, ho, Nance!"

"Nance!" exclaimed Demdike,— "then it was that mischievous jade who brought you here."

"Ay," replied the squire, as the young woman came quickly down the steps,— "and I refused her aid in the conflict because I felt certain of mastering thee, and because I would not take odds even against such a treacherous villain as thou art."

"Better dispatch him, squire," said Nance; "he may do yo a mischief yet."

"No—no," replied Nicholas, "he is unworthy of a gentleman's sword. Besides, I have sworn to hang him, and I will keep my word. Go down into the vaults and liberate Mistress Nutter, while I bind him, for we must take him with us. To-morrow, he shall lie in Lancaster Castle with his kinsfolk."

"That remains to be seen," muttered Demdike.

"Be on your guard, squire," cried Nance, as she lifted a small lamp, and raised the trapdoor.

With this caution, she descended to the vaults, while Nicholas looked about for a thong, and perceiving a rope dangling down the wall near him, he seized it, drawing it with some force towards him.

A sudden sound reached his ears—clang! clang! He had rung the alarm-bell violently.

Clang! clang! clang! Would it never stop?

Taking advantage of his surprise and consternation, Demdike got from under him, sprang to his feet, and rushing to the doorway, instantly let fall the steps, roaring out,—

"Treason! to the rescue, my men! to the rescue!"

His cries were immediately answered from without, and it was evident from the tumult that the whole of the band were hurrying to his assistance.

Not a moment was to be lost by the squire. Plunging through the trapdoor, he closed it after him, and bolted it underneath at the very moment the robbers entered the chamber. Demdike's rage at finding him gone was increased, when all the combined efforts of his men failed in forcing open the trapdoor.

"Take hatchets and hew it open!" he cried; "we must have them. I have heard there is a secret outlet below, and though I have never been able to discover it, it may be known to Nance. I will go outside, and watch. If you hear me whistle, come forth instantly."

And, rushing forth, he was making the circuit, of the tower, and examining some bushes at its base, when his throat was suddenly seized by a dog, and before he could even utter an exclamation, much less sound his whistle, or use his arms, he was grappled by the old huntsman, and dragged off to a considerable distance, the dog still clinging to his throat.

Meanwhile, Nicholas had hurried down into the vaults, where he found Nance sustaining Mistress Nutter, who was half fainting, and hastily explaining what had occurred, she consigned the lady to him, and then led the way through the central range of pillars, and past the ebon image, until she approached the wall, when, holding up the lamp, she revealed a black marble slab between the statues of Blackburn and Isole. Pressing against it, the slab moved on one side, and disclosed a flight of steps.

"Go up there," cried Nance to the squire, "and when ye get to th' top, yo'n find another stoan, wi' a nob in it. Yo canna miss it. Go on."

"But you!" cried the squire. "Will you not come with us?"

"Ey'n come presently," replied Nance, with a strange smile. "Ey ha summat to do first. That cunning fox Demdike has set a trap fo' himsel an aw his followers,—and it's fo' me to ketch 'em. Wait fo' me about a hundert yorts fro' th' tower. Nah nearer—yo onderstand?"

Nicholas did not very clearly understand, but concluding Nance had some hidden meaning in what she said, he resolved unhesitatingly to obey her. Having got clear of the tower, as directed, with Mistress Nutter, he ran on with her to some distance, when what was his surprise to find Crouch and Grip keeping watch over the prostrate robber chief. A few words from the huntsman sufficed to explain how this had come about, but they were scarcely uttered when Nance rushed up in breathless haste, crying out—"Off! further off! as yo value your lives!"

Seeing from her manner that delay would be dangerous, Nicholas and Crouch laid hold of the prisoner and bore him away between them, while Nance assisted Mistress Nutter along.

They had not gone far when a rumbling sound like that preceding an earthquake was heard.

All looked back towards Malkin Tower. The structure was seen to rock—flames burst from the earth—and with a tremendous explosion heard for miles ground, and which shook the ground even where Nicholas and the others stood, the whole of the unhallowed fabric, from base to summit, was blown into the air, some of the stones being projected to an extraordinary distance.

A mine charged with gunpowder, it appeared, had been laid beneath its vaults by Demdike, with a view to its destruction at some future period, and this circumstance being known to Nance, she had fired the train.

Not one of the robbers within the tower escaped. The bodies of all were found next day, crushed, burned, or frightfully mutilated.

The Lancashire Witches Volume IV by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER VI.—HOGHTON TOWER

About a month after the occurrence last described, and early on a fine morning in August, Nicholas Assheton and Richard Sherborne rode forth together from the proud town of Preston. Both were gaily attired in doublets and hose of yellow velvet, slashed with white silk, with mantles to match, the latter being somewhat conspicuously embroidered on the shoulder with a wild bull worked in gold, and underneath it the motto, "Malgré le Tort." Followed at a respectful distance by four mounted attendants, the two gentlemen had crossed the bridge over the Ribble, and were wending their way along the banks of a tributary stream, the Darwen, within a short distance of the charming village of Walton-le-Dale, when they perceived a horseman advancing slowly towards them, whom they instantly hailed as Richard Assheton, and pushing forward, were soon beside him. Both were much shocked by the young man's haggard looks, and inquired anxiously as to his health, but Richard bade them, with a melancholy smile, not be uneasy, for all would be well with him ere long.

"All will be over with you, lad, if you don't mind; and that's, perhaps, what you mean," replied Nicholas; "but as soon as the royal festivities at Hoghton are over, I'll set about your cure; and, what's more, I'll accomplish it—for I know where the seat of the disease lies better than Dr. Morphew, your family physician at Middleton. 'Tis near the heart, Dick—near the heart. Ha! I see I have touched you, lad. But, beshrew me, you are very strangely attired—in a suit of sable velvet, with a black Spanish hat and feather, for a festival! You look as if going to a funeral I am fearful his Majesty may take it amiss. Why not wear the livery of our house?"

"Nay, if it comes to that," rejoined Richard, "why do not you and Sherborne wear it, instead of flaunting like daws in borrowed plumage? I scarce know you in your strange garb, and certainly should not take you for an Assheton, or aught pertaining to our family, from your gaudy colours and the strange badge on your shoulder."

"I don't wonder at it, Dick," said Nicholas; "I scarce know myself; and though the clothes I wear are well made enough, they seem to sit awkwardly on me, and trouble me as much as the shirt of Nessus did Hercules of old. For the nonce I am Sir Richard Hoghton's retainer. I must own I was angry with myself when I saw Sir Ralph Assheton with his long train of gentlemen, all in murrey-coloured cloaks and doublets, at Myerscough Lodge, while I, his cousin, was habited like one of another house. And when I would have excused my apparent defection to Sir Ralph, he answered coldly, 'It was better as it was, for he could scarcely have found room for me among his friends.'"

"Do not fret yourself, Nicholas," rejoined Sherborne; "Sir Ralph cannot reasonably take offence at a mere piece of good-nature on your part. But this does not explain why Richard affects a colour so sombre."

"I am the retainer of one whose livery is sombre," replied the young man, with a ghastly smile. "But enough of this," he added, endeavouring to assume a livelier air; "I suppose you are on the way to Hoghton Tower. I thought to reach Preston before you were up, but I might have recollected you are no lag-a-bed, Nicholas, not even after hard drinking overnight, as witness your feats at Whalley. To be frank with you, I feared being led into like excesses, and so preferred passing the night at the quiet little inn at Walton-le-Dale, to coming on to you at the Castle at Preston, which I knew would be full of noisy roysterers."

"Full it was, even to overflowing," replied the squire; "but you should have come, Dick, for, by my troth! we had a right merry night of it. Stephen Hamerton, of Hellyfield Peel, with his wife, and her sister, sweet Mistress Doll Lister, supped with us; and we had music, dancing, and singing, and abundance of good cheer. Nouns! Dick, Doll Lister is a delightful lass, and if you can only get Alizon out of your head, would be just the wife for you. She sings like an angel, has the most captivating sigh-and-die-away manner, and the prettiest rounded figure ever bodice kept in. Were I in your place I should know where to choose. But you will see her at Hoghton to-day, for she is to be at the banquet and masque."

"Your description does not tempt me," said Richard; "I have no taste for sigh-and-die-away damsels. Dorothy Lister, however, is accounted fair enough; but, were she fascinating as Venus herself, in my present mood I should not regard her."

"I' faith, lad, I pity you, if such be the case," shrugging his shoulders, more in contempt than compassion.

"Waste not your sympathy upon me," replied Richard; "but, tell me, how went the show at Preston yesterday?"

"Excellently well, and much to his Majesty's satisfaction," answered the squire. "Proud Preston never was so proud before, and never with such good reason; for if the people be poor, according to the proverb, they take good care to hide their poverty. Bombards were fired from the bridge, and the church bells rang loud enough to crack the steeple, and bring it down about the ears of the deafened lieges. The houses were hung with carpets and arras; the streets strewn ankle deep with sand and sawdust; the cross in the market-place was bedecked with garlands of flowers like a May-pole; and the conduit

near it ran wine. At noon there was more firing; and, amidst flourishes of trumpets, rolling of drums, squeaking of fifes, and prodigious shouting, bonnie King Jamie came to the cross, where a speech was made him by Master Breares, the Recorder; after which the corporation presented his Majesty with a huge silver bowl, in token of their love and loyalty. The King seemed highly pleased with the gift, and observed to the Duke of Buckingham, loud enough to be heard by the bystanders, who reported his speech to me, 'God's santie! it's a braw bicker, Steenie, and might serve for a christening-cup, if we had need of siccan a vessel, which, Heaven be praised, we ha'e na!' After this there was a grand banquet in the town-hall; and when the heat of the day was over the King left with his train for Hoghton Tower, visiting the alum mines on the way thither. We are bidden to breakfast by Sir Richard, so we must push on, Dick, for his Majesty is an early riser, like myself. We are to have rare sport to-day. Hunting in the morning, a banquet, and, as I have already intimated, a masque at night, in which Sir George Goring and Sir John Finett will play, and in which I have been solicited to take the drolling part of Jem Tosspot—nay, laugh not, Dick, Sherborne says I shall play it to the life—as well as to find some mirthful dame to enact the companion part of Doll Wango. I have spoken with two or three on the subject, and fancy one of them will oblige me. There is another matter on which I am engaged. I am to present a petition to his Majesty from a great number of the lower orders in this county, praying they may be allowed to take their diversions, as of old accustomed, after divine service on Sundays; and, though I am the last man to desire any violation of the Sabbath, being somewhat puritanically inclined as they now phrase it, yet I cannot think any harm can ensue from lawful recreation and honest exercise. Still, I would any one were chosen to present the petition rather than myself."

"Have no misgivings on the subject," said Richard, "but urge the matter strongly; and if you need support, I will give you all I can, for I feel we are best observing the divine mandate by making the Sabbath a day of rest, and observing it cheerfully. And this, I apprehend, is the substance of your petition?"

"The whole sum and substance," replied Nicholas; "and I have reason to believe his Majesty's wishes are in accordance with it."

"They are known to be so," said Sherborne.

"I am glad to hear it," cried Richard. "God save King James, the friend of the people!"

"Ay, God save King James!" echoed Nicholas; "and if he I grant this petition he will prove himself their friend, for he will I have all the clergy against him, and will be preached against from half the pulpits in the kingdom."

"Little harm will ensue if it should be so," replied Richard; "for he will be cheered and protected by the prayers of a grateful and happy people."

They then rode on for a few minutes in silence, after which; Richard inquired—

"You had brave doings at Myerscough Lodge, I suppose, Nicholas?"

"Ay, marry had we," answered the squire, "and the feasting must have cost Ned Tyldesley a pretty penny. Besides the King and his own particular attendants, there were some dozen noblemen and their followers, including the Duke of Buckingham, who moves about like a king himself, and I know not how many knights and gentlemen. Sherborne and I rode over from Dunnow, and reached the forest immediately after the King had entered it in his coach; so we took a short cut through the woods, and came up just in time to join Sir Richard Hoghton's train as he was riding up to his Majesty. Fancy a wide glade, down which a great gilded coach is slowly moving, drawn by eight horses, and followed by a host of noblemen and gentlemen in splendid apparel, their esquires and pages equally richly arrayed, and equally well mounted; and, after these, numerous falconers, huntsmen, prickers, foresters, and yeomen, with staghounds in leash, and hawk on fist, all ready for the sport. Fancy all this if you can, Dick, and then conceive what a brave sight it must have been. Well, as I said, we came up in the very nick of time, for presently the royal coach stopped, and Sir Richard Hoghton, calling all his gentlemen around him, and bidding us dismount, and we followed him, and drew up, bareheaded, before the King, while Sir Richard pointed out to his Majesty the boundaries of the royal forest, and told him he would find it as well stocked with deer as any in his kingdom. Before putting an end to the conference, the King complimented the worthy Knight on the gallant appearance of his train, and on learning we were all gentlemen, graciously signified his pleasure that some of us should be presented to him. Amongst others, I was brought forward by Sir Richard, and liking my looks, I suppose, the King was condescending enough to enter into conversation with me; and as his discourse chiefly turned on sporting matters, I was at home with him at once, and he presently grew so familiar with me, that I almost forgot the presence in which I stood. However, his Majesty seemed in no way offended by my freedom, but, on the contrary, clapped me on the shoulder, and said, 'Maister Assheton, for a country gentleman, you're weel-mannered and weel-informed, and I shall be glad to see more of you while I stay in these parts.' After this, the good-natured monarch mounted his horse, and the hunting began, and a famous day's work we made of it, his Majesty killing no fewer than five fine bucks with his own hand."

"You are clearly on the road to preferment, Nicholas," observed Richard, with a smile. "You will outstrip Buckingham himself, if you go on in this way."

"So I tell him," observed Sherborne, laughing; "and, by my faith! young Sir Gilbert Hoghton, who, owing to his connexion by marriage with Buckingham, is a greater man than his father, Sir Richard, looked quite jealous; for the King more than once called out to Nicholas in the chase, and took the wood-knife from him when he broke up the last deer, which is accounted a mark of especial favour."

"Well, gentlemen," said the squire, "I shall not stand in my own light, depend upon it; and, if I should bask in court-sunshine, you shall partake of the rays. If I do become master of the household, in lieu of the Duke of Richmond, or master of the horse and cupbearer to his Majesty, in place of his Grace of Buckingham, I will not forget you."

"We are greatly indebted to you, my Lord Marquess of Downham and Duke of Pendle Hill, that is to be," rejoined Sherborne, taking off his cap with mock reverence; "and perhaps, for the sake of your sweet sister and my spouse, Dorothy, you will make interest to have me appointed gentleman of the bedchamber?"

"Doubt it not—doubt it not," replied Nicholas, in a patronising tone.

"My ambition soars higher than yours, Sherborne," said Richard; "I must be lord-keeper of the privy seal, or nothing."

"Oh! what you will, gentlemen, what you will!" cried Nicholas; "you can ask me nothing I will not grant—always provided I have the means."

A turn in the road now showed them Hoghton Tower, crowning the summit of an isolated and conical hill, about two miles off. Rising proudly in the midst of a fair and fertile plain, watered by the Ribble and the Darwen, the stately edifice seemed to command the whole country. And so King James thought, as, from the window of his chamber, he looked down upon the magnificent prospect around him, comprehending on the one hand the vast forests of Myerscough and Bowland, stretching as far as the fells near Lancaster; and, on the other, an open but still undulating country, beautifully diversified with wood and water, well-peopled and well-cultivated, green with luxuriant pastures, yellow with golden grain, or embowered with orchards, boasting many villages and small towns, as well as two lovely rivers, which, combining their currents at Walton-le-Dale, gradually expanded till they neared the sea, which could be seen gleaming through openings in the distant hills. As the King surveyed this fair scene, and thought how strong was the position of the mansion, situated as it was upon high cliffs springing abruptly from the Darwen, and how favourably circumstanced, with its forests and park, for the enjoyment of the chase, of which he was passionately fond, how capable of defence, and how well adapted for a hunting-seat, he sighed to think it did not belong to the crown. Nor was he wrong in his estimate of its strength, for in after years, during the

civil wars, it held out stoutly against the parliamentary forces, and was only reduced at last by treachery, when part of its gate-tower was blown up, destroying an officer and two hundred men, "in that blast most wofully."

Though the hour was so early, the road was already thronged, not only with horsemen and pedestrians of every degree from Preston, but with rude lumbering vehicles from the neighbouring villages of Plessington, Brockholes and Cuerden, driven by farmers, who, with their buxom dames and cherry-cheeked daughters, decked out in holiday finery, hoped to gain admittance to Hoghton Tower, or, at all events, obtain a peep of the King as he rode out to hunt. Most of these were saluted by Nicholas, who scrupled not to promise them admission to the outer court of the Tower, and even went so far as to offer some of the comelier damsels a presentation to the King. Occasionally, the road was enlivened by strains of music from a band of minstrels, by a song or a chorus from others, or by the gamesome tricks of a party of mummers. At one place, a couple of tumblers and a clown were performing their feats on a cloth stretched on the grass beneath a tree. Here the crowd collected for a few minutes, but presently gave way to loud shouts, attended by the cracking of whips, proceeding from two grooms in the yellow and white livery of Sir Richard Hoghton, who headed some half-dozen carts filled with provisions, carcasses of sheep and oxen, turkeys and geese, pullets and capons, fish, bread, and vegetables, all bent for Hoghton Tower; for though Sir Richard had made vast preparations for his guests, he found his supplies, great as they were, wholly inadequate to their wants. Cracking their whips in answer to the shouts with which they were greeted, the purveyors galloped on, many a hungry wight looking wistfully after them.

Nicholas and his companions were now at the entrance to Hoghton Park, through which the Darwen coursed, after washing the base of the rocky heights on which the mansion was situated. Here four yeomen of the guard, armed with halberts, and an officer, were stationed, and no one was admitted without an order from Sir Richard Hoghton. Possessing a pass, the squire and his companions with their attendants were, of course, allowed to enter; but the throng accompanying them were sent over the bridge, and along a devious road skirting the park, which, though it went more than a mile round, eventually brought them to their destination.

Hoghton Park, though not very extensive, boasted a great deal of magnificent timber, and in some places was so thickly wooded, that, according to Dr. Kuerden, "a man passing through it could scarcely have seen the sun shine at middle of day." Into one of these tenebrous groves the horsemen now plunged, and for some moments were buried in the gloom produced by matted and overhanging boughs. Issuing once more into the warm sunshine, they traversed a long and beautiful silvan glade, skirted by ancient oaks, with mighty arms and gnarled limbs—the patriarchs of the forest. In the open ground on

the left were scattered a few ash-trees, and beneath them browsed a herd of fallow deer; while crossing the lower end of the glade was a large herd of red deer, for which the park was famous, the hinds tripping nimbly and timidly away, but the lordly stags, with their branching antlers, standing for a moment at gaze, and disdainfully regarding the intruders on their domain. Little did they think how soon and severely their courage would be tried, or how soon the mort would be sounded for their pryse by the huntsman. But if, happily for themselves, the poor leathern-coated fools could not foresee their doom, it was not equally hidden from Nicholas, who predicted what would ensue, and pointed out one noble hart which he thought worthy to die by the King's own hand. As if he understood him, the stately beast tossed his antlered head aloft, and plunged into the adjoining thicket; but the squire noted the spot where he had disappeared.

The glade led them into the chase, a glorious hunting-ground of about two miles in circumference, surrounded by an amphitheatre of wood, and studded by noble forest trees. Variety and beauty were lent to it by an occasional knoll crowned with timber, or by numerous ferny dells and dingles. As the horsemen entered upon the chase, they observed at a short distance from them a herd of the beautiful, but fierce wild cattle, originally from Bowland Forest, and still preserved in the park. White and spangled in colour, with short sharp horns, fine eyes, and small shapely limbs, these animals were of untameable fierceness, possessed of great cunning, and ever ready to assault any one who approached them. They would often attack a solitary individual, gore him, and trample him to death. Consequently, they were far more dreaded than the wild-boars, with which, as with every other sort of game, the neighbouring woods were plentifully stocked. Well aware of the danger they ran, the party watched the herd narrowly and distrustfully, and would have galloped on; but this would only have provoked pursuit, and the wild cattle were swifter than any horses. Suddenly, a milkwhite bull trotted out from the rest of the herd, bellowing fiercely, lashing his sides with his tail, and lowering his head to the ground, as if meditating an attack. His example was speedily followed by the others, and the whole herd began to beat ground and roar loudly. Much alarmed by these hostile manifestations, the party were debating whether to stand the onset, or trust to the fleetness of their steeds for safety; when just as the whole herd, with tails erect and dilated nostrils, were galloping towards them, assistance appeared in the persons of some ten or a dozen mounted prickers, who, armed with long poles pointed with iron, issued with loud shouts from an avenue opening upon the chase. At sight of them, the whole herd wheeled round and fled, but were pursued by the prickers till they were driven into the depths of the furthest thicket. Six of the prickers remained watching over them during the day, in order that the royal hunting-party might not be disturbed, and the woods echoed with the bellowing of the angry brutes.

While this was going forward, the squire and his companions, congratulating themselves on their narrow escape, galloped off, and entered the long avenue of sycamores, from which the prickers had emerged.

At the head of a steep ascent, partly hewn out of the rock, and partly skirted by venerable and majestic trees, forming a continuation of the avenue, rose the embattled gate-tower of the proud edifice they were approaching, and which now held the monarch of the land, and the highest and noblest of his court as guests within its halls. From the top of the central tower of the gateway floated the royal banner, while at the very moment the party reached the foot of the hill, they were saluted by a loud peal of ordnance discharged from the side-towers, proclaiming that the King had arisen; and, as the smoke from the culverins wreathed round the standard, a flourish of trumpets was blown from the walls, and martial music resounded from the court.

Roused by these stirring sounds, Nicholas spurred his horse up the rocky ascent; and followed closely by his companions, who were both nearly as much excited as himself, speedily gained the great gateway—a massive and majestic structure, occupying the centre of the western front of the mansion, and consisting of three towers of great strength and beauty, the mid-tower far overtopping the other two, as in the arms of Old Castile, and sustaining, as was its right, the royal standard. On the platform stood the trumpeters with their silk-fringed clarions, and the iron mouths of the culverins, which had been recently discharged, protruded through the battlements. The arms and motto of the Hoghtons, carved in stone, were placed upon the gateway, with the letters T.H., the initials of the founder of the tower. Immediately above the arched entrance was the sculptured figure of a knight slaying a dragon.

In front of the gateway a large crowd of persons were assembled, consisting of the inferior gentry of the neighbourhood, with their wives, daughters, and servants, clergymen, attorneys, chirurgeons, farmers, and tradesmen of all kind from the adjoining towns of Blackburn, Preston, Chorley, Haslingden, Garstang, and even Lancaster. Representatives in some sort or other of almost every town and village in the county might be found amongst the motley assemblage, which, early as it was, numbered several hundreds, many of those from the more distant places having quitted their homes soon after midnight. Admittance was naturally sought by all; but here the same rule was observed as at the park gate, and no one was allowed to enter, even the base court, without authority from the lord of the mansion. The great gates were closed, and two files of halberdiers were drawn up under the deep archway, to keep the passage clear, and quell disturbance in case any should occur; while a gigantic porter, stationed in front of the wicket, rigorously scrutinised the passes. These precautions naturally produced delay; and, though many of the better part of the crowd were entitled to

admission, it was not without much pushing and squeezing, and considerable detriment to their gay apparel, that they were enabled to effect their object.

The comfort of those outside the walls had not, however, been altogether neglected by Sir Richard Hoghton, for sheds were reared under the trees, where stout March beer, together with cheese and bread, or oaten cakes and butter, were freely distributed to all applicants; so that, if some were disappointed, few were discontented, especially when told that the gates would be thrown open at noon, when, during the time the King and the nobles feasted in the great banquet-hall, they might partake of a wild bull from the park, slaughtered expressly for the occasion, which was now being roasted whole within the base court. That the latter was no idle promise they had the assurance of thick smoke rising above the walls, laden with the scent of roast meat, and, moreover, they could see through the wicket a great fire blazing and crackling on the green, with a huge carcass on an immense spit before it, and a couple of turn-broaches basting it.

As Nicholas and his companions forced their way through this crowd, which was momentarily receiving additions as fresh arrivals took place, the squire recognised many old acquaintances, and was nodding familiarly right and left, when he encountered a woman's eye fixed keenly upon him, and to his surprise beheld Nance Redferne. Nance, who had lost none of her good looks, was very gaily attired, with her fine chestnut hair knotted with ribbons, her stomacher similarly adorned, and her red petticoat looped up, so as to display an exceedingly trim ankle and small foot; and, under other circumstances, Nicholas might not have minded staying to chat with her, but just now it was out of the question, and he hastily turned his head another way. As ill luck, however, would have it, a stoppage occurred at the moment, during which Nance forced her way up to him, and, taking hold of his arm, said in a low tone—

"Yo mun tae me in wi' ye, squoire."

"Take you in with me—impossible!" cried Nicholas.

"Nah! it's neaw impossible," rejoined Nance, pertinaciously; "yo con do it, an yo shan. Yo owe me a good turn, and mun repay it now."

"But why the devil do you want to go in?" cried Nicholas, impatiently. "You know the King is the sworn enemy of all witches, and, amongst this concourse, some one is sure to recognise you and betray you. I cannot answer for your safety if I do take you in. In my opinion, you were extremely unwise to venture here at all."

"Ne'er heed my wisdom or my folly, boh do as ey bid yo, or yo'n repent it," said Nance.

"Why, you can get in without my aid," observed the squire, trying to laugh it off. "You can easily fly over the walls."

"Ey ha' left my broomstick a-whoam," replied Nance—"boh no more jesting. Win yo do it?"

"Well, well, I suppose I must," replied Nicholas, "but I wash my hands of the consequences. If ill comes of it, I am not to blame. You must go in as Doll Wango—that is, as a character in the masque to be enacted to-night—d'ye mark?"

Nance signified that she perfectly understood him.

The whole of this hurried discourse, conducted in an under-tone, passed unheard and unnoticed by the bystanders. Just then, an opening took place amid the crowd, and the squire pushed through it, hoping to get rid of his companion, but he hoped in vain, for, clinging to his saddle, she went on along with him.

They were soon under the deep groined and ribbed arch of the gate, and Nance would have been here turned back by the foremost halberdier, if Nicholas had not signified somewhat hastily that she belonged to his party. The man smiled, and offered no further opposition; and the gigantic porter next advancing, Nicholas exhibited his pass to him, which appearing sufficiently comprehensive to procure admission for Richard and Sherborne, they instantly availed themselves of the licence, while the squire fumbled in his doublet for a further order for Nance. At last he produced it, and after reading it, the gigantic warder exclaimed, with a smile illumining his broad features—

"Ah! I see;—this is an order from his worship, Sir Richard, to admit a certain woman, who is to enact Doll Wango in the masque. This is she, I suppose?" he added, looking at Nance.

"Ay, ay!" replied the squire.

"A comely wench, by the mass!" exclaimed the porter. "Open the gate."

"No—not yet—not yet, good porter, till my claim be adjusted," cried another woman, pushing forward, quite as young and comely as Nance, and equally gaily dressed. "I am the real Doll Wango, though I be generally known as Dame Tetlow. The squire engaged me to play the part before the King, and now this saucy hussy has taken my place. But I'll have my rights, that I will."

"Odd's heart! two Doll Wangos!" exclaimed the porter, opening his eyes.

"Two!—Nay, beleedy! boh there be three!" exclaimed an immensely tall, stoutly proportioned woman, stepping up, to the increased confusion of the squire, and the infinite merriment of the bystanders, whose laughter had been already excited by the previous part of the scene. "Didna yo tell me at Myerscough to come here, squire, an ey, Bess Baldwyn, should play Doll Wango to your Jem Tosspot?"

"Play the devil! for that's what you all seem bent upon doing," exclaimed the squire, impatiently. "Away with you! I can have nothing to say to you!"

"You gave me the same promise at the Castle at Preston last night," said Dame Tetlow.

"I had been drinking, and knew not what I said," rejoined Nicholas, angrily.

"Boh yo promised me a few minutes ago, an yo're sober enough now," cried Nance.

"Ey dunna knoa that," rejoined Dame Baldwyn, looking reproachfully at him. "Boh what ey dun knoa is, that nother o' these squemous queans shan ge in efore me."

And she looked menacingly at them, as if determined to oppose their ingress, much to the alarm of the timorous Dame Tetlow, though Nance returned her angry glances unmoved.

"For Heaven's sake, my good fellow, let them all three in!" said Nicholas, in a low tone to the porter, at the same time slipping a gold piece into his hand, "or there's no saying what may be the consequence, for they're three infernal viragos. I'll take the responsibility of their admittance upon myself with Sir Richard."

"Well, as your worship says, I don't like to see quarrelling amongst women," returned the porter, in a bland tone, "so all three shall go in; and as to who is to play Doll Wango, the master of the ceremonies will settle that, so you need give yourself no more concern about it; but if I were called on to decide," he added, with an amorous leer at Dame Baldwyn, whose proportions so well matched his own, "I know where my choice would light. There, now!" he shouted, "Open wide the gate for Squire Nicholas Assheton of Downham, and the three Doll Wangos."

And, all obstacles being thus removed, Nicholas passed on with the three females amidst the renewed laughter of the bystanders. But he got rid of his plagues as soon as he could; for, dismounting and throwing his bridle to an attendant, he vouchsafed not a word to any of them, but stepped quickly after Richard and Sherborne, who had already reached the great fire with the bull roasting before it.

Appropriated chiefly to stables and other offices, the base court of Hoghton Tower consisted of buildings of various dates, the greater part belonging to Elizabeth's time, though some might be assigned to an earlier period, while many alterations and additions had been recently made, in anticipation of the king's visit. Dating back as far as Henry II., the family had originally fixed their residence at the foot of the hill, on the banks of the Darwen; but in process of time, swayed by prouder notions, they mounted the craggy heights above, and built a tower upon their crest. It is melancholy to think that so glorious a pile, teeming with so many historical recollections, and so magnificently situated, should be abandoned, and suffered to go to decay;—the family having, many years ago, quitted it for Walton Hall, near Walton-le-Dale, and consigned it to the occupation of a few gamekeepers. Bereft of its venerable timber, its courts grass-grown, its fine oak staircase rotting and dilapidated, its domestic chapel neglected, its marble chamber broken and ruinous, its wainscotings and ceilings cracked and mouldering, its paintings mildewed and half effaced, Hoghton Tower presents only the wreck of its former grandeur. Desolate indeed are its halls, and their glory for ever departed! However, this history has to do with it in the season of its greatest splendour; when it glistened with silks and velvets, and resounded with loud laughter and blithe music; when stately nobles and lovely dames were seen in the gallery, and a royal banquet was served in the great hall; when its countless chambers were filled to overflowing, and its passages echoed with hasty feet; when the base court was full of huntsmen and falconers, and enlivened by the neighing of steeds and the baying of hounds; when there was daily hunting in the park, and nightly dancing and diversion in the hall,—it is with Hoghton Tower at this season that the present tale has to do, and not with it as it is now—silent, solitary, squalid, saddening, but still whispering of the glories of the past, still telling of the kingly pageant that once graced it.

The base court was divided from the court of lodging by the great hall and domestic chapel. A narrow vaulted passage on either side led to the upper quadrangle, the facade of which was magnificent, and far superior in uniformity of design and style to the rest of the structure, the irregularity of which, however, was not unpleasing. The whole frontage of the upper court was richly moulded and filleted, with ranges of mullion and transom windows, capitals, and carved parapets crowned with stone balls. Marble pillars, in the Italian style, had been recently placed near the porch, with two rows of pilasters above them, supporting a heavy marble cornice, on which rested the carved escutcheon of the family. A flight of stone steps led up to the porch, and within was a wide oak staircase, so gentle of ascent that a man on horseback could easily mount it—a feat often practised in later days by one of the descendants of the house. In this part of the mansion all the principal apartments were situated, and here James was lodged. Here also was the green room, so called from its hangings, which he used for private conferences, and which was hung round with portraits of his unfortunate mother, Mary,

Queen of Scots; of her implacable enemy, Queen Elizabeth; of his consort, Anne of Bohemia: and of Sir Thomas Hoghton, the founder of the tower. Adjoining it was the Star-Chamber, occupied by the Duke of Buckingham, with its napkin panelling, and ceiling "fretted with golden fires;" and in the same angle were rooms occupied by the Duke of Richmond, the Earls of Pembroke and Nottingham, and Lord Howard of Effingham. Below was the library, whither Doctor Thomas Moreton, Bishop of Chester, and his Majesty's chaplain, with the three puisné judges of the King's Bench, Sir John Doddridge, Sir John Crooke, and Sir Robert Hoghton, all of whom were guests of Sir Richard, resorted; and in the adjoining wing was the great gallery, where the whole of the nobles and courtiers passed such of their time—and that was not much—as was not occupied in feasting or out-of-doors' amusements.

Long corridors ran round the upper stories in this part of the mansion, and communicated with an endless series of rooms, which, numerous as they were, were all occupied, and, accommodation being found impossible for the whole of the guests, many were sent to the new erections in the base court, which had been planned to meet the emergency by the magnificent and provident host. The nobles and gentlemen were, however, far outnumbered by their servants, and the confusion occasioned by the running to and fro of the various grooms of the chambers, was indescribable. Doublets had to be brushed, ruffs plaited, hair curled, beards trimmed, and all with the greatest possible expedition; so that, as soon as day dawned upon Hoghton Tower, there was a prodigious racket from one end of it to the other. Many favoured servants slept in truckle-beds in their masters' rooms; but others, not so fortunate, and unable to find accommodation even in the garrets—for the smallest rooms, and those nearest the roof, were put in requisition—slept upon the benches in the hall, while several sat up all night carousing in the great kitchen, keeping company with the cooks and their assistants, who were busied all the time in preparations for the feasting of the morrow.

Such was the state of things inside Hoghton Tower early on the eventful morning in question, and out of doors, especially in the base court which Nicholas was traversing, the noise, bustle, and confusion were equally great. Wide as was the area, it was filled with various personages, some newly arrived, and seeking information as to their quarters—not very easily obtained, for it seemed every body's business to ask questions, and no one's to answer them—some gathered in groups round the falconers and huntsmen, who had suddenly risen into great importance; others, and these were for the most part smart young pages, in brilliant liveries, chattering, and making love to every pretty damsel they encountered, putting them out of countenance by their licence and strange oaths, and rousing the anger of their parents, and the jealousy of their rustic admirers; others, of a graver sort, with dress of formal cut, and puritanical expression of countenance, shrugging their shoulders, and looking sourly on the whole proceedings—luckily they were in the minority, for the generality of the groups were composed of

lively and light-hearted people, bent apparently upon amusement, and tolerably certain of finding it. Through these various groups numerous lackeys were passing swiftly and continuously to and fro, bearing a cap, a mantle, or a sword, and pushing aside all who interfered with their progress, with a "by your leave, my masters—your pardon, fair mistress"—or, "out of my way, knave!" and, as the stables occupied one entire angle of the court, there were grooms without end dressing the horses at the doors, watering them at the troughs, or leading them about amid the admiring or criticising bystanders. The King's horses were, of course, objects of special attraction, and such as could obtain a glimpse of them and of the royal coach thought themselves especially favoured. Besides what was going forward below, the windows looking into the court were all full of curious observers, and much loud conversation took place between those placed at them and their friends underneath. From all this some idea will be formed of the tremendous din that prevailed; but though with much confusion there was no positive disorder, still less brawling, for yeomen of the guard being stationed at various points, perfect order was maintained. Several minstrels, mummers, and merry-makers, in various fantastic habits, swelled the throng, enlivening it with their strains or feats; and amongst other privileged characters admitted was a Tom o' Bedlam, a half-crazed licensed beggar, in a singular and picturesque garb, with a plate of tin engraved with his name attached to his left arm, and a great ox's horn, which he was continually blowing, suspended by a leathern baldric from his neck.

Scarcely had Nicholas joined his companions, than word was given that the king was about to attend morning prayers in the domestic chapel. Upon this, an immediate rush was made in that direction by the crowd; but the greater part were kept back by the guard, who crossed their halberts to prevent their ingress, and a few only were allowed to enter the antechamber leading to the chapel, amongst whom were the squire and his companions.

Here they were detained within it till service was over, and, as prayers were read by the Bishop of Chester, and the whole Court was present, this was a great disappointment to them. At the end of half an hour two very courtly personages came forth, each bearing a white wand, and, announcing that the King was coming forth, the assemblage immediately divided into two lines to allow a passage for the monarch. Nicholas Assheton informed Richard in a whisper that the foremost and stateliest of the two gentlemen was Lord Stanhope of Harrington, the vice-chamberlain, and the other, a handsome young man of slight figure and somewhat libertine expression of countenance, was the renowned Sir John Finett, master of the ceremonies. Notwithstanding his licentiousness, however, which was the vice of the age and the stain of the court, Sir John was a man of wit and address, and perfectly conversant with the duties of his office, of which he has left satisfactory evidence in an amusing tractate, "Finetti Philoxenis."

Some little time elapsed before the King made his appearance, during which the curiosity of such as had not seen him, as was the case with Richard, was greatly excited. The young man wondered whether the pedantic monarch, whose character perplexed the shrewdest, would answer his preconceived notions, and whether it would turn out that his portraits were like him. While these thoughts were passing through his mind, a shuffling noise was heard without, and King James appeared at the doorway. He paused there for a moment to place his plumed and jewelled cap upon his head, and to speak a word with Sir John Finett, and during this Richard had an opportunity of observing him. The portraits were like, but the artists had flattered him, though not much. There was great shrewdness of look, but there was also a vacant expression, which seemed to contradict the idea of profound wisdom generally ascribed to him. When in perfect repose, which they were not for more than a minute, the features were thoughtful, benevolent, and pleasing, and Richard began to think him quite handsome, when another change was wrought by some remark of Sir John Finett. As the Master of the Ceremonies told his tale, the King's fine dark eyes blazed with an unpleasant light, and he laughed so loudly and indecorously at the close of the narrative, with his great tongue hanging out of his mouth, and tears running down his cheeks, that the young man was quite sickened. The King's face was thin and long, the cheeks shaven, but the lips clothed with mustaches, and a scanty beard covered his chin. The hair was brushed away from the face, and the cap placed at the back of the head, so as to exhibit a high bald forehead, of which he was prodigiously vain. James was fully equipped for the chase, and wore a green silk doublet, quilted, as all his garments were, so as to be dagger-proof, enormous trunk-hose, likewise thickly stuffed, and buff boots, fitting closely to the leg, and turned slightly over at the knee, with the edges fringed with gold. This was almost the only appearance of finery about the dress, except a row of gold buttons down the jerkin. Attached to his girdle he wore a large pouch, with the mouth drawn together by silken cords, and a small silver bugle was suspended from his neck by a baldric of green silk. Stiffly-starched bands, edged with lace, and slightly turned down on either side of the face, completed his attire. There was nothing majestic, but the very reverse, in the King's deportment, and he seemed only kept upright by the exceeding stiffness of his cumbersome clothes. With the appearance of being corpulent, he was not so in reality, and his weak legs and bent knees were scarcely able to support his frame. He always used a stick, and generally sought the additional aid of a favourite's arm.

In this instance the person selected was Sir Gilbert Hoghton, the eldest son of Sir Richard, and subsequent owner of Hoghton Tower. Indebted for the high court favour he enjoyed partly to his graceful person and accomplishments, and partly to his marriage, having espoused a daughter of Sir John Aston of Cranford, who, as sister of the Duchess of Buckingham, and a descendant of the blood royal of the Stuarts, was a great help to his rapid rise, the handsome young knight was skilled in all manly

exercises, and cited as a model of grace in the dance. Constant in attendance upon the court, he frequently took part in the masques performed before it. Like the King, he was fully equipped for hunting; but greater contrast could not have been found than between his tall fine form and the King's ungainly figure. Sir Gilbert had remained behind with the rest of the courtiers in the chapel; but, calling him, James seized his arm, and set forward at his usual shambling pace. As he went on, nodding his head in return to the profound salutations of the assemblage, his eye rolled round them until it alighted on Richard Assheton, and, nudging Sir Gilbert, he asked—

"Wha's that?—a bonnie lad, but waesome pale."

Sir Gilbert, however, was unable to answer the inquiry; but Nicholas, who stood beside the young man, was determined not to lose the opportunity of introducing him, and accordingly moved a step forward, and made a profound obeisance.

"This youth, may it please your Majesty," he said, "is my cousin, Richard Assheton, son and heir of Sir Richard Assheton of Middleton, one of your Majesty's most loyal and devoted servants, and who, I trust, will have the honour of being presented to you in the course of the day."

"We trust so, too, Maister Nicholas Assheton—for that, if we dinna forget, is your ain name," replied James; "and if the sire resembles the son, whilk is not always the case, as our gude freend, Sir Gilbert, is evidence, being as unlike his worthy father as a man weel can be; if, as we say, Sir Richard resembles this callant, he must be a weel-faur'd gentleman. But, God's santie, lad! how cam you in sic sad and sombre abulyiements? Hae ye nae braw claes to put on to grace our coming? Black isna the fashion at our court, as Sir Gilbert will tell ye, and, though a suit o' sables may become you, it's no pleasing in our sight. Let us see you in gayer apparel at dinner."

Richard, who was considerably embarrassed by the royal address, merely bowed, and Nicholas again took upon himself to answer for him.

"Your Majesty will be pleased to pardon him," he said; "but he is unaccustomed to court fashions, having passed all his time in a wild and uncivilized district, where, except on rare and happy occasions like the present, the refined graces of life seldom reach us."

"Weel, we wouldna be hard upon him," said the King, good-naturedly; "and mayhap the family has sustained some recent loss, and he is in mourning."

"I cannot offer that excuse for him, sire," replied Nicholas, who began to flatter himself he was making considerable progress in the monarch's good graces. "It is simply an affair of the heart."

"Puir chiel! we pity him," cried the King. "And sae it is a hopeless suit, young sir?" he added to Richard. "Canna we throw in a good word for ye? Do we ken the lassie, and is she to be here to-day?"

"I am quite at a loss how to answer your Majesty's questions," replied Richard, "and my cousin Nicholas has very unfairly betrayed my secret."

"Hoot, toot! na, lad," exclaimed James; "it wasna he wha betrayed your secret, but our ain discernment that revealed it to us. We kenned your ailment at a glance. Few things are hidden from the King's eye, and we could tell ye mair aboot yoursel', and the lassie you're deeing for, if we cared to speak it; but just now we have other fish to fry, and must awa' and break our fast, of the which, if truth maun be spoken, we stand greatly in need; for creature comforts maun be aye looked to as weel as spiritual wants, though the latter should be ever cared for first, as is our ain rule; and in so doing we offer an example to our subjects, which they will do weel to follow. Later in the day, we will talk further to you on the subject; but, meanwhile, gie us the name of your lassie loo."

"Oh! spare me, your Majesty," cried Richard.

"Her name is Alizon Nutter," interposed Nicholas.

"What! a daughter of Alice Nutter of Rough Lee?" exclaimed James.

"The same, sire," replied Nicholas, much surprised at the extent of information manifested by the King.

"Why, saul o' my body! man, she's a witch—a witch! d'ye ken that?" cried the King, with a look of abhorrence; "a mischievous and malignant vermin, with which this pairt of our realm is sair plagued, but which, with God's help, we will thoroughly extirpate. Sae the lass is a daughter of Alice Nutter, ha! That accounts for your grewsome looks, lad. Odd's life! I see it all now. I understand what is the matter with you. Look at him, Sir Gilbert—look at him, I say! Does naething strike you as strange about him?"

"Nothing more than that he is naturally embarrassed by your Majesty's mode of speech," replied the knight.

"You lack the penetration of the King, Sir Gilbert," cried James. "I will tell you what ails him. He is bewitchit—forespoken."

Exclamations were uttered by all the bystanders, and every eye was fixed on Richard, who felt ready to sink to the ground.

"I affirm he is bewitchit," continued the King; "and wha sae likely to do it as the glamouring hizzie that has ensnared him? She has ill bluid in her veins, and can chant deevil's cantrips as weel as the mither, or ony gyre-carline o' them a'."

"You are mistaken, sire," cried Richard, earnestly. "Alizon will be here to-day with my father and sister, and, if you deign to receive her, I am sure you will judge her differently."

"We shall perpend the point of receiving her," replied the King, gravely. "But we are rarely mista'en, young man, and seldom change our opinion except upon gude grounds, and those you arena like to offer us. Belike ye hae been lang ill?"

"Oh! no, your Majesty, I was suddenly seized, about a month ago," replied Richard.

"Suddenly seized—eh!" exclaimed James, winking cunningly at those near him; "and ye swarfit awa' wi' the pain? I guessed it. And whaur was Alizon the while?"

"At that time she was a guest at Middleton," replied Richard; "but it is impossible my illness can in any way be attributed to her. I will answer with my life for her perfect innocence."

"You may have to answer wi' your life for your misplaced faith in her," said the King; "but I tell you naething—naething wicked, at all events—is impossible to witches, and the haill case, even by your own showin', is very suspicious. I have heard somewhat of the story of Alice Nutter, but not the haill truth—but there are folk here wha can enlighten us mair fully. Thus much I do ken—that she is a notorious witch, and a fugitive from justice; though siblins you, Maister Nicholas Assheton, could give an inkling of her hiding-place if you were so disposed. Nay, never look doited, man," he added, laughing, "I bring nae charges against you. Ye arena on your trial noo. But this is a serious matter, and maun be seriously considered before we dismiss it. You say Alizon will be here to-day. Sae far weel. Canna you contrive to produce the mother, too, Maister Nicholas?"

"Sire!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Nay, then, we maun gang our ain way to wark," continued James. "We are tauld ye hae a petition to offer us, and our will and pleasure is that you present it afore we go forth to the chase, and after we have partaken of our matutinal refection, whilk we will nae langer delay; for, sooth to say, we are weel nigh famished. Look ye, sirs. Neither of you is to quit Hoghton Tower without our permission had and obtained. We do not place you under arrest, neither do we inhibit you from the chase, or from any other sports; but you are to remain here at our sovereign pleasure. Have we your word that you will not attempt to disobey the injunction?"

"You have mine, undoubtedly, sire," replied Richard.

"And mine, too," added Nicholas. "And I hope to justify myself before your Majesty."

"We shall be weel pleased to hear ye do it, man," rejoined the King, laughing, and shuffling on. "But we hae our doubts—we hae our doubts!"

"His Majesty talks of going to breakfast, and says he is famished," observed Nicholas to Sherborne, as the King departed; "but he has completely taken away my appetite."

"No wonder," replied the other.

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CHAPTER VII.—THE ROYAL DECLARATION CONCERNING LAWFUL SPORTS ON THE SUNDAY.

Not many paces after the King marched the Duke of Buckingham, then in the zenith of his power, and in the full perfection of his unequalled beauty, eclipsing all the rest of the nobles in splendour of apparel, as he did in stateliness of deportment. Haughtily returning the salutations made him, which were scarcely less reverential than those addressed to the monarch himself, the prime favourite moved on, all eyes following his majestic figure to the door. Buckingham walked alone, as if he had been a prince of the blood; but after him came a throng of nobles, consisting of the Earl of Pembroke, high chamberlain; the Duke of Richmond, master of the household; the Earl of Nottingham, lord high admiral; Viscount Brackley, Lord Howard of Effingham, Lord Zouche, president of Wales; with the Lords Knollys, Mordaunt, Conipton, and Grey of Groby. One or two of the noblemen seemed inclined to question Richard as to what had passed between him and the King; but the young man's reserved and somewhat stern manner deterred them. Next came the three judges, Doddridge, Crooke, and Hoghton, whose countenances wore an enforced gravity; for if any faith could be placed in rubicund cheeks and portly persons, they were not indisposed to self-indulgence and conviviality. After the judges came the Bishop of Chester, the King's chaplain, who had officiated on the present occasion, and who was in his full pontifical robes. He was accompanied by the lord of the mansion, Sir Richard Hoghton, a hale handsome man between fifty and sixty, with silvery hair and beard, a robust but commanding person, a fresh complexion, and features, by no means warranting, from any marked dissimilarity to those of his son, the King's scandalous jest.

A crowd of baronets and knights succeeded, including Sir Arthur Capel, Sir Thomas Brudenell, Sir Edward Montague, Sir Edmund Trafford, sheriff of the county, Sir Edward Mosley, and Sir Ralph Assheton. The latter looked grave and anxious, and, as he passed his relatives, said in a low tone to Richard—

"I am told Alizon is to be here to-day. Is it so?"

"She is," replied the young man; "but why do you ask? Is she in danger? If so, let her be warned against coming."

"On no account," replied Sir Ralph; "that would only increase the suspicion already attaching to her. No; she must face the danger, and I hope will be able to avert it."

"But what is the danger?" asked Richard. "In Heaven's name, speak more plainly."

"I cannot do so now," replied Sir Ralph. "We will take counsel together anon. Her enemies are at work; and, if you tarry here a few minutes longer, you will understand whom I mean."

And he passed on.

A large crowd now poured indiscriminately out of the chapel and amongst it Nicholas perceived many of his friends and neighbours, Mr. Townley of Townley Park, Mr. Parker of Browsholme, Mr. Shuttleworth of Gawthorpe, Sir Thomas Metcalfe, and Roger Nowell. With the latter was Master Potts, and Richard was then at no loss to understand against whom Sir Ralph had warned him. A fierce light blazed in Roger Nowell's keen eyes as he first remarked the two Asshetons, and a smile of gratified vengeance played about his lips; but he quelled the fire in a moment, and, compressing his hard mouth more closely, bowed coldly and ceremoniously to them. Metcalfe did the same. Not so Master Potts. Halting for a moment, he said, with a spiteful look, "Look to yourself, Master Nicholas; and you too, Master Richard. A day of reckoning is coming for both of you."

And with this he sprang nimbly after his client.

"What means the fellow?" cried Nicholas. "But that we are here, as it were, in the precincts of a palace, I would after him and cudgel him soundly for his insolence."

"And wha's that ye'd be after dinging, man?" cried a sharp voice behind him. "No that puir feckless body that has jist skippit aff. If sae, ye'll tak the wrang soo by the lugg, and I counsel you to let him bide, for he's high i' favour wi' the King."

Turning at this address, Nicholas recognised the king's jester, Archie Armstrong, a merry little knave, with light blue eyes, long yellow hair hanging about his ears, and a sandy beard. There was a great deal of mother wit about Archie, and quite as much shrewdness as folly. He wore no distinctive dress as jester—the bauble and coxcomb having been long discontinued—but was simply clad in the royal livery.

"And so Master Potts is in favour with his Majesty, eh, Archie?" asked the squire, hoping to obtain some information from him.

"And sae war you the day efore yesterday, when you hunted at Myerscough," replied the jester.

"But how have I forfeited the King's good opinion?" asked Nicholas. "Come, you are a good fellow, Archie, and will tell me."

"Dinna think to fleech me, man," replied the jester, cunningly.—"I ken what I ken, and that's mair than you'll get frae me wi' a' your speering. The King's secrets are safe wi' Archie—and for a good reason, that he is never tauld them. You're a gude huntsman, and sae is his Majesty; but there's ae kind o' game he likes better than anither, and that's to be found maistly i' these pairts—I mean witches, and sic like fearfu' carlines. We maun hae the country rid o' them, and that's what his Majesty intends, and if you're a wise man you'll lend him a helping hand. But I maun in to disjune."

And with this the jester capered off, leaving Nicholas like one stupefied. He was roused, however, by a smart slap on the shoulder from Sir John Finett.

"What! pondering over the masque, Master Nicholas, or thinking of the petition you have to present to his Majesty?" cried the master of the ceremonies, "Let neither trouble you. The one will be well played, I doubt not, and the other well received, I am sure, for I know the king's sentiments on the subject. But touching the dame, Master Nicholas—have you found one willing and able to take part in the masque?"

"I have found several willing, Sir John," replied Nicholas; "but as to their ability that is another question. However, one of them may do as a make-shift. They are all in the base court, and shall wait on you when you please, and then you can make your election."

"So far well," replied Finett; "it may be that we shall have Ben Jonson here to-day—rare Ben, the prince of poets and masque-writers. Sir Richard Houghton expects him. Ben is preparing a masque for Christmas, to be called 'The Vision of Delight,' in which his highness the prince is to be a principal actor, and some verses which have been recited to me are amongst the daintiest ever indited by the bard."

"It will be a singular pleasure to me to see him," said Nicholas; "for I hold Ben Jonson in the highest esteem as a poet—ay, above them all, unless it be Will Shakspeare."

"Ay, you do well to except Shakspeare," rejoined Sir John Finett. "Great as Ben Jonson is, and for wit and learning no man surpasses him, he is not to be compared with Shakspeare, who for profound knowledge of nature, and of all the highest qualities of dramatic art, is unapproachable. But ours is a learned court, Master Nicholas, and therefore we have a learned poet; but a right good fellow is Ben Jonson, and a boon companion, though somewhat prone to sarcasm, as you will find if you drink with him. Over his cups he will rail at courts and courtiers in good set terms, I promise you, and I myself have come in for his gibes. However, I love him none the less for his quips, for I

know it is his humour to utter them, and so overlook what in another and less deserving person I should assuredly resent. But is not that young man, who is now going forth, your cousin, Richard Assheton? I thought so. The King has had a strange tale whispered in his ear, that the youth has been bewitched by a maiden—Alizon Nutter, I think she is named—of whom he is enamoured. I know not what truth may be in the charge, but the youth himself seems to warrant it, for he looks ghastly ill. A letter was sent to his Majesty at Myerscough, communicating this and certain other particulars with which I am not acquainted; but I know they relate to some professors of the black art in your country, the soil of which seems favourable to the growth of such noxious weeds, and at first he was much disturbed by it, but in the end decided that both parties should be brought hither without being made aware of his design, that he might see and judge for himself in the matter. Accordingly a messenger was sent over to Middleton Hall as from Sir Richard Hoghton, inviting the whole family to the Tower, and giving Sir Richard Assheton to understand it was the King's pleasure he should bring with him a certain young damsel, named Alizon Nutter, of whom mention had been made to him. Sir Richard had no choice but to obey, and promised compliance with his Majesty's injunctions. An officer, however, was left on the watch, and this very morning reported to his Majesty that young Richard Assheton had already set out with the intention of going to Preston, but had passed the night at Walton-le-Dale, and that Sir Richard, his daughter Dorothy, and Alizon Nutter, would be here before noon."

"His Majesty has laid his plans carefully," replied Nicholas, "and I can easily conjecture from whom he received the information, which is as false as it is malicious. But are you aware, Sir John, upon what evidence the charge is supported—for mere suspicion is not enough?"

"In cases of witchcraft suspicion is enough," replied the knight, gravely. "Slender proofs are required. The girl is the daughter of a notorious witch—that is against her. The young man is ailing—that is against her, too. But a witness, I believe, will be produced, though who I cannot say."

"Gracious Heaven! what wickedness there must be in the world when such a charge can be brought against one so good and so unoffending," cried Nicholas. "A maiden more devout than Alizon never existed, nor one holding the crime she is charged with in greater abhorrence. She injure Richard! she would lay down her life for him—and would have been his wife, but for scruples the most delicate and disinterested on her part. But we will establish her innocence before his Majesty, and confound her enemies."

"It is with that hope that I have given you this information, sir, of which I am sure you will make no improper use," replied Sir John. "I have heard a similar character to that you have given of Alizon, and am unwilling she should fall a victim to art or malice. Be

upon your guard, too, Master Nicholas; for other investigations will take place at the same time, and some matters may come forth in which you are concerned. The King's arms are long, and reach and strike far—and his eyes see clearly when not hoodwinked—or when other people see for him. And now, good sir, you must want breakfast. Here Faryngton," he added to an attendant, "show Master Nicholas Assheton to his lodging in the base court, and attend upon him as if he were your master. I will come for you, sir, when it is time to present the petition to the King."

So saying, he bowed and walked forth, turning into the upper quadrangle, while Nicholas followed Faryngton into the lower court, where he found his friends waiting for him.

Speedily ascertaining where their lodgings were situated, Faryngton led them to a building on the left, almost opposite to the great bonfire, and, ascending a flight of steps, ushered them into a commodious and well-furnished room, looking into the court. This done, he disappeared, but soon afterwards returned with two yeomen of the kitchen, one carrying a tray of provisions upon his head, and the other sustaining a basket of wine under his arm, and a snowy napkin being laid upon the table, trenchers viands, and flasks were soon arranged in very tempting order—so tempting, indeed, that the squire, notwithstanding his assertion, that his appetite had been taken away, fell to work with his customary vigour, and plied a flask of excellent Bordeaux so incessantly, that another had to be placed before him. Sherborne did equal justice to the good cheer, and Richard not only forced himself to eat, but to the squire's great surprise swallowed more than one deep draught of wine. Having thus administered to the wants of the guests, and seeing his presence was no longer either necessary or desired, Faryngton vanished, first promising to go and see that all was got ready for them in the sleeping apartments. Notwithstanding the man's civility, there was an over-officiousness about him that made Nicholas suspect he was placed over them by Sir John Finett to watch their movements, and he resolved to be upon his guard.

"I am glad to see you drink, lad," he observed to Richard, as soon as they were alone; "a cup of wine will do you good."

"Do you think so?" replied Richard, filling his goblet anew. "I want to get back my spirits and strength—to sustain myself no matter how—to look well—ha! ha! If I can only make this frail machine carry me stoutly through the King's visit, I care not how soon it falls to pieces afterwards."

"I see your motive, Dick," replied Nicholas. "You hope to turn away suspicion from Alizon by this device; but you must not go to excess, or you will defeat your scheme."

"I will do something to convince the King he is mistaken in me—that I am not bewitched," cried Richard, rising and striding across the room. "Bewitched! and by Alizon, too! I could laugh at the charge, but that it is too horrible. Had any other than the King breathed it, I would have slain him."

"His Majesty has been abused by the malice of that knavish attorney, Potts, who has always manifested the greatest hostility towards Alizon," said Nicholas; "but he will not prevail, for she has only to show herself to dispel all prejudice."

"You are right, Nicholas," cried Richard; "and yet the King seems already to have prejudged her, and his obstinacy may lead to her destruction."

"Speak not so loudly, Dick, in Heaven's name!" said the squire, in alarm; "these walls may have ears, and echoes may repeat every word you utter."

"Then let them tell the King that Alizon is innocent," cried Richard, stopping, and replenishing his goblet, "Here's to her health, and confusion to her enemies!"

"I'll drink that toast with pleasure, Dick," replied the squire; "but I must forbid you more wine. You are not used to it, and the fumes will mount to your brain."

"Come and sit down beside us, that we may talk," said Sherborne.

Richard obeyed, and, leaning over the table, asked in a low deep tone, "Where is Mistress Nutter, Nicholas?"

The squire looked towards the door before he answered, and then said—

"I will tell you. After the destruction of Malkin Tower and the band of robbers, she was taken to a solitary hut near Barley Booth, at the foot of Pendle Hill, and the next day was conveyed across Bowland Forest to Poulton in the Fyld, on the borders of Morecambe Bay, with the intention of getting her on board some vessel bound for the Isle of Man. Arrangements were made for this purpose; but when the time came, she refused to go, and was brought secretly back to the hut near Barley, where she has been ever since, though her place of concealment was hidden even from you and her daughter."

"The captain of the robbers, Fogg or Demdike, escaped—did he not?" said Richard.

"Ay, in the confusion occasioned by the blowing up of the Tower he managed to get away," replied Nicholas, "and we were unable to follow him, as our attentions had to be bestowed upon Mistress Nutter. This was the more unlucky, as through his

instrumentality Jem and his mother Elizabeth were liberated from the dungeon in which they were placed in Whalley Abbey, prior to their removal to Lancaster Castle, and none of them have been heard of since."

"And I hope will never be heard of again," cried Richard. "But is Mistress Nutter's retreat secure, think you?—May it not be discovered by some of Nowell's emissaries?"

"I trust not," replied Nicholas; "but her voluntary surrender is more to be apprehended, for when I last saw her, on the night before starting for Myerscough, she told me she was determined to give herself up for trial; and her motives could scarce be combated, for she declares that, unless she submits herself to the justice of man, and expiates her offences, she cannot be saved. She now seems as resolute in good as she was heretofore resolute in evil."

"If she perishes thus, her self-sacrifice, for thus it becomes, will be Alizon's death-blow," cried Richard.

"So I told her," replied Nicholas—"but she continued inflexible. 'I am born to be the cause of misery to others, and most to those I love most,' she said; 'but I cannot fly from justice. There is no escape for me.'"

"She is right," cried Richard; "there is no escape but the grave, whither we are all three hurrying. A terrible fatality attaches to us."

"Nay, say not so, Dick," rejoined Nicholas; "you are young, and, though this shock may be severe, yet when it is passed, you will be recompensed, I hope, by many years of happiness."

"I am not to be deceived," said Richard. "Look me in the face, and say honestly if you think me long-lived. You cannot do it. I have been smitten by a mortal illness, and am wasting gradually away. I am dying—I feel it—know it; but though it may abridge my brief term of life, I will purchase present health and spirits at any cost, and save Alizon. Ah!" he exclaimed, putting his hand to his heart, with a fearful expression of anguish. "What is the matter?" cried the two gentlemen, greatly alarmed, and springing towards him.

But the young man could not reply. Another and another agonising spasm shook his frame, and cold damps broke out upon his pallid brow, showing the intensity of his suffering. Nicholas and Sherborne regarded each other anxiously, as if doubtful how to act.

"Shall I summon assistance?" said the latter in a low tone. But, softly as the words were uttered, they reached the ears of Richard. Rousing himself by a great effort, he said—

"On no account—the fit is over. I am glad it has seized me now, for I shall not be liable to a recurrence of it throughout the day. Lead me to the window. The air will presently revive me."

His friends complied with the request, and placed him at the open casement.

Great bustle was observable below, and the cause was soon manifest, as the chief huntsman, clad in green, with buff boots drawn high up on the thigh, a horn about his neck, and mounted on a strong black curtal, rode forth from the stables. He was attended by a noble bloodhound, and on gaining the middle of the court, put his bugle to his lips, and blew a loud blithe call that made the walls ring again. The summons was immediately answered by a number of grooms and pages, leading a multitude of richly-caparisoned horses towards the upper end of the court, where a gallant troop of dames, nobles, and gentlemen, all attired for the chase, awaited them; and where, amidst much mirth, and bandying of lively jest and compliment, a general mounting took place, the ladies, of course, being placed first on their steeds. While this was going forward, the hounds were brought from the kennel in couples—relays having been sent down into the park more than an hour before—and the yard resounded with their joyous baying, and the neighing of the impatient steeds. By this time, also, the chief huntsman had collected his forces, consisting of a dozen prickers, six habited like himself in green, and six in russet, and all mounted on stout curtals. Those in green were intended to hunt the hart, and those in russet the wild-boar, the former being provided with hunting-poles, and the latter with spears. Their girdles were well lined with beef and pudding, and each of them, acting upon the advice of worthy Master George Turbervile, had a stone bottle of good wine at the pommel of his saddle. Besides these, there were a whole host of varlets of the chase on foot. The chief falconer, with a long-winged hawk in her hood and jesses upon his wrist, was stationed somewhat near the gateway, and close to him were his attendants, each having on his fist a falcon gentle, a Barbary falcon, a merlin, a goshawk, or a sparrowhawk. Thus all was in readiness, and hound, hawk, and man seemed equally impatient for the sport.

At this juncture, the door was thrown open by Faryngton, who announced Sir John Finett.

"It is time, Master Nicholas Assheton," said the master of the ceremonies.

"I am ready to attend you, Sir John," replied Nicholas, taking a parchment from his doublet, and unfolding it, "the petition is well signed."

"So I see, sir," replied the knight, glancing at it. "Will not your friends come with you?"

"Most assuredly," replied Richard, who had risen on the knight's appearance. And he followed the others down the staircase.

By direction of the master of the ceremonies, nearly a hundred of the more important gentlemen of the county had been got together, and this train was subsequently swelled to thrice the amount, from the accessions it received from persons of inferior rank when its object became known. At the head of this large assemblage Nicholas was now placed, and, accompanied by Sir John Finett, who gave the word to the procession to follow them, he moved slowly up the court. Passing through the brilliant crowd of equestrians, the procession halted at a short distance from the doorway of the great hall, and James, who had been waiting for its approach within, now came forth, amid the cheers and plaudits of the spectators.

Sir John Finett then led Nicholas forward, and the latter, dropping on one knee, said—

"May it please your Majesty, I hold in my hand a petition, signed as, if you will deign to cast your eyes over it, you will perceive, by many hundreds of the lower orders of your loving subjects in this your county of Lancaster, representing that they are debarred from lawful recreations upon Sunday after afternoon service, and upon holidays, and praying that the restrictions imposed in 1579, by the Earls of Derby and Huntingdon, and by William, Bishop of Chester, commissioners to her late Highness, Elizabeth, of glorious memory, your Majesty's predecessor, may be withdrawn."

And with this he placed in the King's hands the petition, which Was very graciously received.

"The complaint of our loving subjects in Lancashire shall not pass unnoticed, sir," said James. "Sorry are we to say it, but this county of ours is sair infested wi' folk inclining to Puritanism and Papistry, baith of which sects are adverse to the cause of true religion. Honest mirth is not only tolerable but praiseworthy, and the prohibition of it is likely to breed discontent, and this our enemies ken fu' weel; for when," he continued, loudly and emphatically—"when shall the common people have leave to exercise if not upon Sundays and holidays, seeing they must labour and win their living on all other days?"

"Your Majesty speaks like King Solomon himself," observed Nicholas, amid the loud cheering.

"Our will and pleasure then is," pursued James, "that our good people be not deprived of any lawful recreation that shall not tend to a breach of the laws, or a violation of the Kirk; but that, after the end of divine service, they shall not be disturbed, letted, or discouraged from, any lawful recreation—as dancing and sic like, either of men or women, archery, leaping, vaulting, or any ither harmless recreation; nor frae the having of May-games, Whitsun ales, or morris dancing; nor frae setting up of May-poles, and ither sports, therewith used, provided the same be had in due and convenient time, without impediment or neglect of divine service. And our will further is, that women shall have leave to carry rushes to the church, for the decoring of it, according to auld custom. But we prohibit all unlawful games on Sundays, as bear-baiting and bull-baiting, interludes, and, by the common folk—mark ye that, sir—playing at bowls." [3]

The royal declaration was received with loud and reiterated cheers, amidst which James mounted his steed, a large black docile-looking charger, and rode out of the court, followed by the whole cavalcade.

Trumpets were sounded from the battlements as he passed through the gateway, and shouting crowds attended him all the way down the hill, until he entered the avenue leading to the park.

At the conclusion of the royal address, the procession headed by Nicholas immediately dispersed, and such as meant to join the chase set off in quest of steeds. Foremost amongst these was the squire himself, and on approaching the stables, he was glad to find Richard and Sherborne already mounted, the former holding his horse by the bridle, so that he had nothing to do but vault upon his back. There was an impatience about Richard, very different from his ordinary manner, that surprised and startled him, and the expression of the young man's countenance long afterwards haunted him. The face was deathly pale, except that on either cheek burned a red feverish spot, and the eyes blazed with unnatural light. So much was the squire struck by his cousin's looks, that he would have dissuaded him from going forth; but he saw from his manner that the attempt would fail, while a significant gesture from his brother-in-law told him he was equally uneasy.

Scarcely had the principal nobles passed through the gateway, than, in spite of all efforts to detain him, Richard struck spurs into his horse, and dashed amidst the cavalcade, creating great disorder, and rousing the ire of the Earl of Pembroke, to whom the marshalling of the train was entrusted. But Richard paid little heed to his wrath, and perhaps did not hear the angry expressions addressed to him; for no sooner was he outside the gate, than instead of pursuing the road down which the King was proceeding, and which has been described as hewn out of the rock, he struck into a

thicket on the right, and, in defiance of all attempts to stop him, and at the imminent risk of breaking his neck, rode down the precipitous sides of the hill, and reaching the bottom in safety, long before the royal cavalcade had attained the same point, took the direction of the park.

His friends watched him commence this perilous descent in dismay; but, though much alarmed, they were unable to follow him.

"Poor lad! I am fearful he has lost his senses," said Sherborne.

"He is what the King would call 'fey,' and not long for this world," replied Nicholas, shaking his head.

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CHAPTER VIII—HOW KING JAMES HUNTED THE HART AND THE WILD-BOAR IN HOGHTON PARK.

Galloping on fast and furiously, Richard tracked a narrow path of greensward, lying between the tall trees composing the right line of the avenue and the adjoining wood. Within it grew many fine old thorns, diverting him now and then from his course, but he still held on until he came within a short distance of the chase, when his attention was caught by a very singular figure. It was an old man, clad in a robe of coarse brown serge, with a cowl drawn partly over his head, a rope girdle like that used by a cordelier, sandal shoon, and a venerable white beard descending to his waist. The features of the hermit, for such he seemed, were majestic and benevolent. Seated on a bank overgrown with wild thyme, beneath the shade of a broad-armed elm, he appeared so intently engaged in the perusal of a large open volume laid on his knee, that he did not notice Richard's approach. Deeply interested, however, by his appearance, the young man determined to address him, and, reining in his horse, said respectfully, "Save you, father!"

"Pass on, my son," replied the old man, without raising his eyes, "and hinder not my studies."

But Richard would not be thus dismissed.

"Perchance you are not aware, father," he said, "that the King is about to hunt within the park this morning. The royal cavalcade has already left Hoghton Tower, and will be here ere many minutes."

"The king and his retinue will pass along the broad avenue, as you should have done, and not through this retired road," replied the hermit. "They will not disturb me."

"I would fain know the subject of your studies, father?" inquired Richard.

"You are inquisitive, young man," returned the hermit, looking up and fixing a pair of keen grey eyes upon him. "But I will satisfy your curiosity, if by so doing I shall rid me of your presence. I am reading the Book of Fate."

Richard uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"And in it your destiny is written," pursued the old man; "and a sad one it is. Consumed by a strange and incurable disease, which may at any moment prove fatal, you are

scarcely likely to survive the next three days, in which case she you love better than existence will perish miserably, being adjudged to have destroyed you by witchcraft."

"It must indeed be the Book of Fate that tells you this," cried Richard, springing from his horse, and approaching close to the old man. "May I cast eyes upon it?"

"No, my son," replied the old man, closing the volume. "You would not comprehend the mystic characters—but no eye, except my own, must look upon them. What is written will be fulfilled. Again, I bid you pass on. I must speedily return to my hermit cell in the forest."

"May I attend you thither, father?" asked Richard.

"To what purpose?" rejoined the old man. "You have not many hours of life. Go, then, and pass them in the fierce excitement of the chase. Pull down the lordly stag—slaughter the savage boar; and, as you see the poor denizens of the forest perish, think that your own end is not far off. Hark! Do you hear that boding cry?"

"It is the croak of a raven newly alighted in the tree above us," replied Richard. "The sagacious bird will ever attend the huntsman in the chase, in the hope of obtaining a morsel when they break up deer."

"Such is the custom of the bird I wot well," said the old man; "but it is not in joyous expectation of the raven's-bone that he croaks now, but because his fell instinct informs him that the living-dead is beneath him."

And, as if in answer to the remark, the raven croaked exultingly; and, rising from the tree, wheeled in a circle above them.

"Is there no way of averting my terrible destiny, father?" cried Richard, despairingly.

"Ay, if you choose to adopt it," replied the old man. "When I said your ailment was incurable, I meant by ordinary remedies, but it will yield to such as I alone can employ. The malignant and fatal influence under which you labour may be removed, and then your instant restoration to health and vigour will follow."

"But how, father—how?" cried Richard, eagerly.

"You have simply to sign your name in this book," rejoined the hermit, "and what you desire shall be done. Here is a pen," he added, taking one from his girdle.

"But the ink?" cried Richard.

"Prick your arm with your dagger, and dip the pen in the blood," replied the old man.
"That will suffice."

"And what follows if I sign?" demanded Richard, staring at him.

"Your instant cure. I will give you to drink of a wondrous elixir."

"But to what do I bind myself?" asked Richard.

"To serve me," replied the hermit, smiling; "but it is a light service, and only involves your appearance in this wood once a-year. Are you agreed?"

"I know not," replied the young man distractedly.

"You must make up your mind speedily," said the hermit; "for I hear the approach of the royal cavalcade."

And as he spoke, the mellow notes of a bugle, followed by the baying of hounds, the jingling of bridles, and the trampling of a large troop of horse, were heard at a short distance down the avenue.

"Tell me who you are?" cried Richard.

"I am the hermit of the wood," replied the old man. "Some people call me Hobthrust, and some by other names, but you will have no difficulty in finding me out. Look yonder!" he added, pointing through the trees.

And, glancing in the direction indicated, Richard beheld a small party on horseback advancing across the plain, consisting of his father, his sister, and Alizon, with their attendants.

"'Tis she!—'tis she!" he cried.

"Can you hesitate, when it is to save her?" demanded the old man.

"Heaven help me, or I am lost!" fervently ejaculated Richard, gazing on high while making the appeal.

When he looked down again the old man was gone, and he saw only a large black snake gliding off among the bushes. Muttering a few words of thankfulness for his deliverance, he sprang upon his horse.

"It may be the arch-tempter is right," he cried, "and that but few hours of life remain to me; but if so, they shall be employed in endeavours to vindicate Alizon, and defeat the snares by which she is beset."

With this resolve, he struck spurs into his horse, and set off in the direction of the little troop. Before, however, he could come up to them, their progress was arrested by a pursuivant, who, riding in advance of the royal cavalcade, motioned them to stay till it had passed, and the same person also perceiving Richard's purpose, called to him, authoritatively, to keep back. The young man might have disregarded the injunction, but at the same moment the King himself appeared at the head of the avenue, and remarking Richard, who was not more than fifty yards off on the right, instantly recognised him, and shouted out, "Come hither, young man—come hither!"

Thus, baffled in his design, Richard was forced to comply, and, uncovering his head, rode slowly towards the monarch. As he approached, James fixed on him a glance of sharpest scrutiny.

"Odds life! ye hae been ganging a fine gait, young sir," he cried. "Ye maun be demented to ride down a hill i' that fashion, and as if your craig war of nae account. It's weel ye hae come aff scaithless. Are ye tired o' life—or was it the muckle deil himsel' that drove ye on? Canna ye find an excuse, man? Nay, then, I'll gi'e ye ane. The loadstane will draw nails out of a door, and there be lassies wi' een strang as loadstones, that drag men to their perdition. Stands the magnet yonder, eh?" he added, glancing towards the little group before them. "Gude faith! the lass maun be a potent witch to exercise sic influence, and we wad fain see the effect she has on you when near. Sir Richard Hoghton," he called out to the knight, who rode a few paces behind him, "we pray you present Sir Richard Assheton and his daughter to us."

Had he dared so to do, Richard would have thrown himself at the King's feet, but all he could venture upon was to say in a low earnest tone, "Do not prejudge Alizon, sire. On my soul she is innocent!"

"The King prejudices nae man," replied James, in a tone of rebuke; "and like the wise prince of Israel, whom it is his wish to resemble, he sees with his ain een, and hears with his ain ears, afore he forms conclusions."

"That is all I can desire, sire," replied Richard. "Far be it from me to doubt your majesty's discrimination or love of justice."

"Ye shall hae proofs of baith, man, afore we hae done," said James. "Ah! here comes our host, an the twa lassies wi' him. She wi' the lintwhite locks is your sister, we guess, and the ither is Alizon—and, by our troth, a weel-faur'd lass. But Satan is aye delusive. We maun resist his snares."

The party now came on, and were formally presented to the monarch by Sir Richard Hoghton. Sir Richard Assheton, a middle-aged gentleman, with handsome features, though somewhat haughty in expression, and stately deportment, was very graciously received, and James thought fit to pay a few compliments to Dorothy, covertly regarding Alizon the while, yet not neglecting Richard, being ready to intercept any signal that should pass between them. None, however, was attempted, for the young man felt he should only alarm and embarrass Alizon by any attempt to caution her, and he therefore endeavoured to assume an unconcerned aspect and demeanour.

"We hae heard the beauty of the Lancashire lassies highly commended," said the King; "but, faith! it passes expectation. Twa lovelier damsels than these we never beheld. Baith are rare specimens o' Nature's handiwork."

"Your Majesty is pleased to be complimentary," rejoined Sir Richard Assheton.

"Na, Sir Richard," returned James. "We arena gien to flichtering, though often beflummed oursel'. Baith are bonnie lassies, we repeat. An sae this is Alizon Nutter—it wad be Ailsie in our ain Scottish tongue, to which your Lancashire vernacular closely approximates, Sir Richard. Aweel, fair Alizon," he added, eyeing her narrowly, "ye hae lost your mither, we understand?"

The young girl was not discomposed by this question, but answered in a firm, melancholy tone—"Your Majesty, I fear, is too well acquainted with my unfortunate mother's history."

"Aweel, we winna deny having heard somewhat to her disadvantage," replied the King—"but your ain looks gang far to contradict the reports, fair maid."

"Place no faith in them then, sire," replied Alizon, sadly.

"Eh! what!—then you admit your mother's guilt?" cried the King, sharply.

"I neither admit it nor deny it, sire," she replied. "It must be for your Majesty to judge her."

"Weel answered," muttered James,— "but I mustna forget, that the deil himsel' can quote Scripture to serve his purpose. But you hold in abhorrence the crime laid to your mother's charge—eh?" he added aloud.

"In utter abhorrence," replied Alizon.

"Gude—vera gude," rejoined the King. "But, entertaining this feeling, how conies it you screen so heinous an offender frae justice? Nae natural feeling should be allowed to weigh in sic a case."

"Nor should it, sire, with me," replied Alizon—"because I believe my poor mother's eternal welfare would be best consulted if she underwent temporal punishment. Neither is she herself anxious to avoid it."

"Then why does she keep out of the way—why does she not surrender herself?" cried the King.

"Because—" and Alizon stopped.

"Because what?" demanded James.

"Pardon me, sire, I must decline answering further questions on the subject," replied Alizon. "Whatever concerns myself or my mother alone, I will state freely, but I cannot compromise others."

"Aha! then there are others concerned in it?" cried James. "We thought as much. We will interrogate you further hereafter—but a word mair. We trust ye are devout, and constant in your religious exercises, damsel."

"I will answer for that, sire," interposed Sir Richard Assheton. "Alizon's whole time is spent in prayer for her unfortunate mother. If there be a fault it is that she goes too far, and injures her health by her zeal."

"A gude fault that, Sir Richard," observed the King, approvingly.

"It beseems me not to speak of myself, sire," said Alizon, "and I am loth to do so—but I beseech your majesty to believe, that if my life might be offered as an atonement for my mother, I would freely yield it."

"I' gude faith she staggers me in my opinion," muttered James, "and I maun look into the matter mair closely. The lass is far different frae what I imagined her. But the wiles o' Satan arena to be comprehended, and he will put on the semblance of righteousness when seeking to beguile the righteous. Aweel, damsel," he added aloud, "ye speak feelingly and properly, and as a daughter should speak, and we respect your feelings—provided they be sic as ye represent them. And now dispose yourselves for the chase."

"I must pray your Majesty to dismiss me," said Alizon. "It is a sight in which at any time I take small pleasure, and now it is especially distasteful to me. With your permission, I will proceed to Hoghton Tower."

"I also crave your Majesty's leave to go with her," said Dorothy.

"I will attend them," interposed Richard.

"Na, you maun stay wi' us, young sir," cried the King. "Your gude father will gang wi' 'em. Sir John Finett," he added, calling to the master of the ceremonies, and speaking in his ear, "see that they be followed, and that a special watch be kept over Alizon, and also over this youth,—d'ye mark me?—in fact, ower a' the Assheton clan. And now," he cried in a loud voice, "let them blaw the strake."

The chief huntsman having placed the bugle to his lips, and blown a strike with two winds, a short consultation was held between him and James, who loved to display his knowledge as a woodsman; and while this was going forward, Nicholas and Sherborne having come up, the squire dismounted, and committing Robin to his brother-in-law, approached the monarch.

"If I may be so bold as to put in a word, my liege," he said, "I can show you where a hart of ten is assuredly harboured. I viewed him as I rode through the park this morning, and cannot, therefore, be mistaken. His head is high and well palmed, great beamed and in good proportion, well burred and well pearled. He is stately in height, long, and well fed."

"Did you mark the slot, sir?" inquired James.

"I did, my liege," replied Nicholas. "And a long slot it was; the toes great, with round short joint-bones, large shin-bones, and the dew-claws close together. I will uphold him for a great old hart as ever proffered, and one that shall shew your Majesty rare sport."

"And we'll tak your word for the matter, sir," said James; "for ye're as gude a woodman as any we hae in our dominions. Bring us to him, then."

"Will it please your Majesty to ride towards yon glade?" said Nicholas, "and, before you reach it, the hart shall be roused."

James, assenting to the arrangement, Nicholas sprang upon his steed, and, calling to the chief huntsman, they galloped off together, accompanied by the bloodhound, the royal cavalcade following somewhat more slowly in the same direction. A fair sight it was to see that splendid company careering over the plain, their feathered caps and gay mantles glittering in the sun, which shone brightly upon them. The morning was lovely, giving promise that the day, when further advanced, would be intensely hot, but at present it was fresh and delightful, and the whole company, exhilarated by the exercise, and by animated conversation, were in high spirits; and perhaps amongst the huge party, which numbered nearly three hundred persons, one alone was a prey to despair. But though Richard Assheton suffered thus internally, he bore his anguish with Spartan firmness, resolved, if possible, to let no trace of it be visible in his features or deportment; and he so far succeeded in conquering himself, that the King, who kept a watchful eye upon him, remarked to Sir John Finett as they rode along, that a singular improvement had taken place in the young man's appearance.

The cavalcade was rapidly approaching the glade at the lower end of the chase, when the lively notes of a horn were heard from the adjoining wood, followed by the deep baying of a bloodhound.

"Aha! they have roused him," cried the King, joyfully placing his own bugle to his lips, and sounding an answer. Upon this the whole company halted in anxious expectation, the hounds baying loudly. The next moment, a noble hart burst from the wood, whence he had been driven by the shouts of Nicholas and the chief huntsman, both of whom appeared immediately afterwards.

"By my faith! a great hart as ever was hunted," exclaimed the King. "There boys, there! to him! to him!"

Dashing after the flying hart, the hounds made the welkin ring with their cries. Many lovely damsels were there, but none thought of the cruelty of the sport—none sympathised with the noble animal they were running to death. The cries of the hounds—now loud and ringing—now deep and doling, accompanied by the whooping of the huntsmen, formed a stirring concert, which found a response in many a gentle bosom. The whole cavalcade was spread widely about, for none were allowed to ride near the King. Over the plain they scoured, fleet as the wind, and the hart seemed

making for a fell, forming part of the hill near the mansion. But ere he reached it, the relays stationed within a covert burst forth, and, turning him aside, he once more dashed fleetly across the broad expanse, as if about to return to his old lair. Now he was seen plunging into some bosky dell; and, after being lost to view for a moment, bounding up the opposite bank, and stretching across a tract thickly covered with fern. Here he gained upon the hounds, who were lost in the green wilderness, and their cries were hushed for a brief space—but anon they burst forth anew, and the pack were soon again in full cry, and speeding over the open ground.

At first the cavalcade had kept pretty well together, but on the return the case was very different; and many of the dames, being unable to keep up with the hounds, fell off, and, as a natural consequence, many of the gallants lingered behind, too. Thus only the keenest huntsmen held on. Amongst these, and about fifty yards behind the King, were Richard and Nicholas. The squire was right when he predicted that the hart would show them good sport. Plunging into the wood, the hard-pressed beast knocked up another stag, and took possession of his lair, but was speedily roused again by Nicholas and the chief huntsman. Once more he is crossing the wide plain, with hounds and huntsmen after him—once more he is turned by a new relay; but this time he shapes his course towards the woods skirting the Darwen. It is a piteous sight to see him now; his coat black and glistening with sweat, his mouth embossed with foam, his eyes dull, big tears coursing down his cheeks, and his noble head carried low. His end seems nigh—for the hounds, though weary too, redouble their energies, and the monarch cheers them on. Again the poor beast erects his head—if he can only reach yon coppice he is safe. Despair nerves him, and with gigantic bounds he clears the intervening space, and disappears beneath the branches. Quickly as the hounds come after him, they are at fault.

"He has taken to the soil, sire," cried Nicholas coming up. "To the river—to the river! You may see by the broken branches he has gone this way."

Forcing his way through the wood, James was soon on the banks of the Darwen, which here ran deep and slow. The hart was nowhere to be seen, nor was there any slot on the further side to denote that he had gone forth. It was evident, therefore, that he had swam down the stream. At this moment a shout was heard a hundred yards lower down, proceeding from Nicholas; and, riding in the direction of the sound, the King found the hart at bay on the further side of the stream, and nearly up to his haunches in the water. The King regarded him for a moment anxiously. The poor animal was now in his last extremity, but he seemed determined to sell his life dearly. He stood on a bank projecting into the stream, round which the water flowed deeply, and could not be approached without difficulty and danger. He had already gored several hounds, whose bleeding bodies were swept down the current; and, though the others bayed round him,

they did not dare to approach him, and could not get behind him, as a high bank arose in his rear.

"Have I your Majesty's permission to despatch him?" asked Nicholas.

"Ay, marry, if you can, sir," replied James. "But 'ware the tynes!—'ware the tynes!—'If thou be hurt with hart it brings thee to thy bier,' as the auld ballad hath it, and the adage is true, as we oursel's have seen."

Nicholas, however, heeded not the caution, but, drawing his wood-knife, and disencumbering himself of his cloak, he plunged into the stream, and with one or two strokes reached the bank. The hart watched his approach, as if divining his purpose, with a look half menacing, half reproachful, and when he came near, dashed his antlered head at him. Nimble eluding the blow, which, if it had taken effect, might have proved serious, Nicholas plunged his weapon into the poor brute's throat, who instantly fell with a heavy splash into the water.

"Weel stricken! weel stricken!" shouted James, who had witnessed the performance from the opposite bank. "But how shall we get the carcase here?"

"That is easily done, sire," replied Nicholas. And taking hold of the horns, he guided the body to a low bank, a little below where the King stood.

As soon as it was dragged ashore by the pricklers, James put his bugle to his lips and blew a mort. A pryse was thrice sounded by Nicholas, and soon afterwards the whole company came flocking round the spot, whooping the death-note.

Meanwhile, the hounds had gathered round the fallen hart, and were allowed to wreak their fury on him by tearing his throat, happily after sensibility was gone; while Nicholas, again baring his knife, cut off the right fore-foot, and presented it to the King. While this ceremony was performed, the varlets of the kennel having cut down a great heap of green branches, and strewn them on the ground, laid the hart upon them, on his back, and then bore him to an open space in the wood, where he was broken up by the King, who prided himself upon his skill in all matters of woodcraft. While this office was in course of execution a bowl of wine was poured out for the monarch, which he took, adverting, as he did so, to the common superstition, that if a huntsman should break up a deer without drinking, the venison would putrefy. Having drained the cup, he caused it to be filled again, and gave it to Nicholas, saying the liquor was needful to him after the drenching he had undergone. James then proceeded with his task, and just before he completed it, he was reminded, by a loud croak above him, that a raven was at hand, and accordingly taking a piece of gristle from the spoon of the brisket, he cast it on the

ground, and the bird immediately pounced down upon it and carried it off in his huge beak.

After a brief interval, the seek was again winded, another hart was roused, and after a short but swift chase, pulled down by the hounds, and dispatched with his own hand by James. Sir Richard Hoghton then besought the King to follow him, and led the way to a verdant hollow surrounded by trees, in which shady and delicious retreat preparations had been made for a slight silvan repast. Upon a mossy bank beneath a tree, a cushion was placed for the King, and before it on the sward was laid a cloth spread with many dainties, including

"Neats' tongues powder'd well, and jambons of the hog,
With sausages and savoury knacks to set men's minds agog"—
cold capons, and pigeon pies. Close at hand was a clear cold spring, in which numerous flasks of wine were immersed. A few embers, too, had been lighted, on which carbonadoes of venison were prepared.

No great form or ceremony was observed at the entertainment. Sir John Finett and Sir Thomas Hoghton were in close attendance upon the monarch, and ministered to his wants; but several of the nobles and gentlemen stretched themselves on the sward, and addressed themselves to the viands set before them by the pages. None of the dames dismounted, and few could be prevailed upon to take any refreshment. Besides the flasks of wine, there were two barrels of ale in a small cart, drawn by a mule, both of which were broached. The whole scene was picturesque and pleasing, and well calculated to gratify one so fond of silvan sports as the monarch for whom it was provided.

In the midst of all this tranquillity and enjoyment an incident occurred which interrupted it as completely as if a thunder-storm had suddenly come on. Just when the mirth was at the highest, and when the flowing cup was at many a lip, a tremendous bellowing, followed by the crashing of branches, was heard in the adjoining thicket. All started to their feet at the appalling sound, and the King himself turned pale.

"What in Heaven's name can it be, Sir Richard?" he inquired. "It must be a drove of wild cattle," replied the baronet, trembling.

"Wild cattle!" ejaculated James, in great alarm; "and sae near us. Zounds! we shall be trampled and gored to death by these bulls of Basan. Sir Richard, ye are a fause traitor thus to endanger the safety o' your sovereign, and ye shall answer for it, if harm come o' it."

"I am unable to account for it, sire," stammered the frightened baronet. "I gave special directions to the prickers to drive the beasts away."

"Ye shouldna keep sic deevils i' your park, man," cried the monarch. "Eh! what's that?"

Amidst all this consternation and confusion the bellowing was redoubled, and the crashing of branches drew nearer and nearer, and Nicholas Assheton rushed forward with the King's horse, saying, "Mount, sire; mount, and away!"

But James was so much alarmed that his limbs refused to perform their office, and he was unable to put foot in the stirrup. Seeing his condition, Nicholas cried out, "Pardon, my liege; but at a moment of peril like the present, one must not stand on ceremony."

So saying, he took the King round the waist, and placed him on his steed.

At this juncture, a loud cry was heard, and a man in extremity of terror issued from the wood, and dashed towards the hollow. Close on his heels came the drove of wild cattle, and, just as he gained the very verge of the descent, the foremost of the herd overtook him, and lowering his curled head, caught him on the points of his horns, and threw him forwards to such a distance that he alighted with a heavy crash almost at the King's feet. Satisfied, apparently, with their vengeance, or alarmed by the numerous assemblage, the drove instantly turned tail and were pursued into the depths of the forest by the prickers.

Having recovered his composure, James bade some of the attendants raise the poor wretch, who was lying groaning upon the ground, evidently so much injured as to be unable to move without assistance. His garb was that of a forester, and his bulk—for he was stoutly and squarely built—had contributed, no doubt, to the severity of the fall. When he was lifted from the ground, Nicholas instantly recognised in his blackened and distorted features those of Christopher Demdike.

"What?" he exclaimed, rushing towards him. "Is it thou, villain?"

The sufferer only replied by a look of intense malignity.

"Eh! what—d'ye ken wha it is?" demanded James. "By my saul! I fear the puir fellow has maist of his banes broken."

"No great matter if they be," replied Nicholas, "and it may save the application of torture in case your Majesty desires to put any question to him. Chance has most strangely thrown into your hands one of the most heinous offenders in the kingdom, who has long

escaped justice, but who will at length meet the punishment of his crimes. The villain is Christopher Demdike, son of the foul hag who perished in the flames on the summit of Pendle Hill, and captain of a band of robbers."

"What! is the knave a warlock and a riever?" demanded James, regarding Demdike with abhorrence, mingled with alarm.

"Both, sire," replied Nicholas, "and an assassin to boot. He is a diabolical villain."

"Let him be taken to Hoghton Tower, and kept in some strong and secure place till we have leisure to examine him," said James,— "and see that he be visited by some skilful chirurgeon, for we wadna hae him dee, and sae rob the woodie."

Demdike, who appeared to be in great agony, now forced himself to speak.

"I can make important disclosures to your Majesty," he said, in hoarse and broken tones, "if you will hear them. I am not the only offender who has escaped from justice," he added, glancing vindictively at Nicholas—"there is another, a notorious witch and murderess, who is still screened from justice. I can reveal her hiding-place."

"Your Majesty will not give heed to such a villain's fabrications?" said Nicholas.

"Are they fabrications, sir?" rejoined James, somewhat sharply. "We maun hear and judge. The snake, though scotched, will still bite, it seems. We hae hangit a Highland cateran without trial afore this, and we may be tempted to tak the law into our ain hands again. Bear the villain hence. See he be disposed of as already directed, and take good care he is strictly guarded. And now gie us a crossbow, Sir Richard Hoghton, and bid the prickers drive the deer afore us, for we wad try our skill as a marksman."

And while Demdike was placed on the litter of green boughs which had recently sustained a nobler burthen in the fallen hart, and in this sort was conveyed to Hoghton Tower, James rode with his retinue towards a long glade, where, receiving a crossbow from the huntsman, he took up a favourable position behind a large oak, and several herds of deer being driven before him, he selected his quarries, and deliberately took aim at them, contriving in the course of an hour to bring down four fat bucks, and to maim as many others, which were pulled down by the hounds. And with this slaughter he was content.

Sir Richard Hoghton then informed his Majesty that a huge boar, which, in sporting phrase, had left the sounder five years, had broken into the park the night before, and had been routing amongst the fern. The age and size of the animal were known by the

print of the feet, the toes being round and thick, the edge of the hoof worn and blunt, the heel large, and the guards, or dew-claws, great and open, from all which appearances it was adjudged by the baronet to be "a great old boar, not to be refused."

James at once agreed to hunt him, and the hounds being taken away, six couples of magnificent mastiffs, of the Lancashire breed, were brought forward, and the monarch, under the guidance of Sir Richard Hoghton and the chief huntsman, repaired to an adjoining thicket, in which the boar fed and couched.

On arriving near his den, a boar-spear was given to the King, and the prickers advancing into the wood, presently afterwards reared the enormous brute. Sallying forth, and freaming furiously, he was instantly assailed by the mastiffs; but, notwithstanding the number of his assailants, he made light of them, shaking them from his bristly hide, crushing them beneath his horny feet, thrusting at them with his sharpened tusks, and committing terrible devastation among them.

Repeated charges were made upon the savage animal by James, but it was next to impossible to get a blow at him for some time; and when at length the monarch made the attempt, he struck too low, and hit him on the snout, upon which the infuriated boar, finding himself wounded, sprang towards the horse, and ripped him open with his tusks.

The noble charger instantly rolled over on his side, exposing the royal huntsman to the fury of his merciless assailant, whose tusks must have ploughed his flesh, if at this moment a young man had not ridden forward, and at the greatest personal risk approached the boar, and, striking straight downwards, cleft the heart of the fierce brute with his spear.

Meanwhile, the King, having been disengaged by the prickers from his wounded steed, which was instantly put out of its agony by the sword of the chief huntsman, looked for his deliverer, and, discovering him to be Richard Assheton, was loud in his expressions of gratitude.

"Faith! ye maun claim a boon at our hands," said James. "It maun never be said the King is ungrateful. What can we do for you, lad?"

"For myself nothing, sire," replied Richard.

"But for another meikle—is that what ye wad hae us infer?" cried the King, with a smile. "Aweel, the lassie shall hae strict justice done her; but for your ain sake we maun inquire

into the matter. Meantime, wear this," he added, taking a magnificent sapphire ring from his finger, "and, if you should ever need our aid, send it to us as a token."

Richard took the gift, and knelt to kiss the hand so graciously extended to him.

By this time another horse had been provided for the monarch, and the enormous boar, with his feet upwards and tied together, was suspended upon a pole, and borne on the shoulders of four stout varlets as the grand trophy of the chase.

When the royal company issued from the wood a strike of nine was blown by the chief huntsman, and such of the cavalcade as still remained on the field being collected together, the party crossed the chase, and took the direction of Hoghton Tower.

The Lancashire Witches Volume IV by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER IX.—THE BANQUET.

On the King's return to Hoghton Tower, orders were given by Sir Richard for the immediate service of the banquet; it being the hospitable baronet's desire that festivities should succeed each other so rapidly as to allow of no tedium.

The coup-d'oeil of the banquet hall on the monarch's entrance was magnificent. Panelled with black lustrous oak, and lighted by mullion windows, filled with stained glass and emblazoned with the armorial bearings of the family, the vast and lofty hall was hung with banners, and decorated with panoplies and trophies of the chase. Three long tables ran down it, each containing a hundred covers. At the lower end were stationed the heralds, the pursuivants, and a band of yeomen of the guard, with the royal badge, a demi-rose crowned, impaled with a demi-thistle, woven in gold on their doublets, and having fringed pole-axes over their shoulders. Behind them was a richly carved oak screen, concealing the passages leading to the buttery and kitchens, in which the clerk of the kitchen, the pantlers, and the yeomen of the cellar and ewery, were hurrying to and fro. Above the screen was a gallery, occupied by the trumpeters and minstrels; and over all was a noble rafter roof. The tables were profusely spread, and glittered with silver dishes of extraordinary size and splendour, as well as with flagons and goblets of the same material, and rare design. The guests, all of whom were assembled, were outnumbered by the prodigious array of serving-men, pages, and yeomen waiters in the yellow and red liveries of the Stuart.

Flourishes of trumpets announced the coming of the monarch, who was preceded by Sir Richard Hoghton, bearing a white wand, and ushered with much ceremony to his place. At the upper end of the hall was a raised floor, and on either side of it an oriel window, glowing with painted glass. On this dais the King's table was placed, underneath a canopy of state, embroidered with the royal arms, and bearing James's kindly motto, "Beati Pacifici." Seats were reserved at it for the Dukes of Buckingham and Richmond, the Earls of Pembroke and Nottingham, the Lords Howard of Effingham and Grey of Groby, Sir Gilbert Hoghton, and the Bishop of Chester. These constituted the favoured guests. Grace having been said by the bishop, the whole company took their seats, and the general stillness hitherto prevailing throughout the vast hall was broken instantaneously by the clatter of trenchers.

A famous feast it was, and worthy of commemoration. Masters Morris and Miller, the two cooks who contrived it, as well as the labourers for the ranges, for the pastries, for the boiled meats, and for the pullets, performed their respective parts to admiration.

The result was all that could be desired. The fare was solid and substantial, consisting of dishes which could be cut and come to again. Amongst the roast meats were chinees of beef, haunches of venison, gigots of mutton, fatted geese, capons, turkeys, and sucking pigs; amongst the boiled, pullets, lamb, and veal; but baked meats chiefly abounded, and amongst them were to be found red-deer pasty, hare-pie, gammon-of-bacon pie, and baked wild-boar. With the salads, which were nothing more than what would, now-a-days be termed "vegetables," were mixed all kinds of soused fish, arranged according to the sewer's directions—"the salads spread about the tables, the fricassees mixed with them, the boiled meats among the fricassees, roast meats amongst the boiled, baked meats amongst the roast, and carbonadoes amongst the baked." This was the first course merely. In the second were all kinds of game and wild-fowl, roast herons three in a dish, bitterns, cranes, bustards, curlews, dotterels, and pewits. Besides these there were lumbar pies, marrow pies, quince pies, artichoke pies, florentines, and innumerable other good things. Some dishes were specially reserved for the King's table, as a baked swan, a roast peacock, and the jowl of a sturgeon soused. These and a piece of roast beef formed the principal dishes.

The attendants at the royal table comprised such gentlemen as wore Sir Richard Hoghton's liveries, and amongst these, of course, were Nicholas Assheton and Sherborne. On seeing the former, the King immediately inquired about his deliverer, and on hearing he was at the lower tables, desired he might be sent for, and, as Richard soon afterwards appeared, having on his return from the chase changed his sombre apparel for gayer attire, James smiled graciously upon him, and more than once, as a mark of especial favour, took the wine-cup from his hands.

The King did ample justice to the good things before him, and especially to the beef, which he found so excellent, that the carver had to help him for the second time. Sir Richard Hoghton ventured to express his gratification that his Majesty found the meat good—"Indeed, it is generally admitted," he said, "that our Lancashire beef is well fed, and well flavoured."

"Weel flavoured!" exclaimed James, as he swallowed the last juicy morsel; "it is delicious! Finer beef nae man ever put teeth into, an I only wish a' my loving subjects had as gude a dinner as I hae this day eaten. What joint do ye ca' it, Sir Richard?" he asked, with eyes evidently twinkling with a premeditated jest. "This dish," replied the host, somewhat surprised "this, sire, is a loin of beef."

"A loin!" exclaimed James, taking the carving-knife from the sewer, who stood by, "by my faith that is not title honourable enough for joint sae worthy. It wants a dignity, and it shall hae it. Henceforth," he added, touching the meat with the flat of the long blade,

as if placing the sword on the back of a knight expectant, "henceforth, it shall be SIR-LOIN, an see ye ca' it sae. Give me a cup of wine, Master Richard Assheton."

All the nobles at the table laughed loudly at the monarch's jest, and as it was soon past down to those at the lower table, the hall resounded with laughter, in which page and attendant of every degree joined, to the great satisfaction of the good-natured originator of the merriment.[4]

"My dear dad and gossip appears in unwonted good spirits to-day," observed the Duke of Buckingham.

"An wi' gude reason, Steenie," replied the King, "for we dinna mind when we hae had better sport—always excepting the boar-hunt, when we should hae been rippit up by the cursed creature's tusks but for this braw laddie," he added, pointing to Richard. "Ye maun see what can be done for him, Steenie. We maun hae him at court."

"Your Majesty's wishes have only to be expressed to be fulfilled," replied Buckingham, somewhat drily.

"Were I the lad I wadna place ower meikle dependence on the Duke's promises," remarked Archie Armstrong, in a low tone, to Nicholas.

"Has your Majesty made any further inquiries about the girl suspected of witchcraft?" inquired Buckingham, renewing the conversation.

"Whist, Steenie, whist!" cried James. "Didna ye see her yoursel' this morning?" he added, in a low tone. "Ah! I recollect ye werena at the chase. Aweel, I hae conferred wi' her, an am sair perplexed i' the matter. She is a well-faur'd lassie as ony i' the realm, and answers decorously and doucely. Sooth to say, her looks and manners are mightily in her favour."

"Then you mean to dismiss the matter without further investigation?" observed Buckingham. "I always thought your Majesty delighted to exercise your sagacity in detecting the illusions practised by Satan and his worshippers."

"An sae we do," replied James. "But bend your bonnie head this way till we whisper in your ear. We hae a device for finding it a' out, which canna fail; and when you ken it you will applaud your dear dad's wisdom, and perfit maistry o' the hail science o' kingcraft."

"I would your Majesty would make me acquainted with this notable scheme," replied Buckingham, with ill-concealed contempt. "I might make it more certain of success."

"Na—na—we shanna let the cat out of the bag just yet," returned the King. "We mean it as a surprise to ye a'."

"Then, whatever be the result, it is certain to answer the effect intended," observed the Duke.

"Gae wa'! ye are ever sceptical, Steenie—ever misdoubting your ain dear dad and gossip," rejoined James; "but ye shall find we haena earned the title o' the British Solomon for naething."

Soon after this the King arose, and was ushered to his apartments by Sir Richard Hoghton with the same ceremony as had been observed on his entrance. He was followed by all the nobles; and Nicholas and the others, being released from their duties, repaired to the lower end of the hall to dine. The revel was now sufficiently boisterous; for, as the dames had departed at the same time as the monarch, all restraint was cast aside. The wine-cup flowed freely, and the rafters rang with laughter. Under ordinary circumstances Richard would have shrunk from such a scene; but he had now a part to play, and therefore essayed to laugh at each jest, and to appear as reckless as his neighbours. He was glad, however, when the signal for general dispersion was given; for though Sir Richard Hoghton was unwilling to stint his guests, he was fearful, if they sat too long over their wine, some disturbances might ensue; and indeed, when the revellers came forth and dispersed within the base court, their flushed cheeks, loud voices, and unsteady gait, showed that their potations had already been deep enough.

Meanwhile, quite as much mirth was taking place out of doors as had occurred within the banqueting-hall. As soon as the King sat down to dinner, according to promise the gates were thrown open, and the crowd outside admitted. The huge roast was then taken down, carved, and distributed among them; the only difficulty experienced being in regard to trenchers, and various and extraordinary were the contrivances resorted to to supply the deficiency. This circumstance, however, served to heighten the fun, and, as several casks of stout ale were broached at the same time, universal hilarity prevailed. Still, in the midst of so vast a concourse, many component parts of which had now began to experience the effects of the potent liquor, some little manifestation of disorder might naturally be expected; but all such was speedily quelled by the yeomen of the guard, and other officials appointed for the purpose, and, amidst the uproar and confusion, harmony generally prevailed.

While elbowing his way through the crowd, Nicholas felt his sleeve plucked, and turning, perceived Nance Redferne, who signed him to follow her, and there was something in her manner that left him no alternative but compliance. Nance passed on rapidly, and entered the doorway of a building, where it might be supposed they would be free from interruption.

"What do you want with me, Nance?" asked the squire, somewhat impatiently. "I must beg to observe that I cannot be troubled further on your account, and am greatly afraid aspersions may be thrown on my character, if I am seen talking with you."

"A few words wi' me winna injure your character, squire," rejoined Nance, "an it's on your account an naw on my own that ey ha' brought you here. Ey ha' important information to gie ye. What win yo say when ey tell yo that Jem Device, Elizabeth Device, an' her dowter Jennet are here—aw breedin mischief agen yo, Ruchot Assheton, and Alizon?"

"The devil!" ejaculated Nicholas.

"Eigh, yo'n find it the devil, ey con promise ye, onless their plans be frustrated," said Nance.

"That can be easily done," replied Nicholas. "I'll cause them to be arrested at once."

"Nah, nah—that canna be," rejoined Nance—"Yo mun bide your time."

"What! and allow such miscreants to go at large, and work any malice they please against me and my friends!" replied Nicholas. "Show me where they are, Nance, or I must make you a prisoner."

"Nah! yo winna do that, squire," she replied in a tone of good-humoured defiance. "Ye winna do it for two good reasons: first, becose yo'd be harming a freend who wants to sarve yo, and win do so, if yo'n let her; and secondly, becose if yo wur to raise a finger agen me, ey'd deprive yo of speech an motion. When the reet moment comes yo shan strike—boh it's nah come yet. The fruit is nah ripe eneugh to gather. Ey am os anxious os you can be, that the whole o' the Demdike brood should be swept away—an it shan be, if yo'n leave it to me."

"Well, I commit the matter entirely to you," said Nicholas. "Apparently, it cannot be in better hands. But are you aware that Christopher Demdike is a prisoner here in Hoghton Tower? He was taken this morning in the park."

"Ey knoa it," replied Nance; "an ey knoa also why he went there, an it wur my intention to ha' revealed his black design to yo. However, it has bin ordert differently. Boh in respect to t'others, wait till I gie yo the signal. They are disguised; boh even if ye see 'em, an recognise 'em, dunna let it appear till ey gie the word, or yo'n spoil aw."

"Your injunctions shall be obeyed implicitly, Nance," rejoined, Nicholas. "I have now perfect reliance upon you. But when shall I see you again?"

"That depends upon circumstances," she replied. "To-neet, may be—may be to-morrow neet. My plans maun be guided by those of others. Boh when next yo see me you win ha' to act."

And, without waiting an answer, she rushed out of the doorway, and, mingling with the crowd, was instantly lost to view; while Nicholas, full of the intelligence he had received, betook himself slowly to his lodgings.

Scarcely were they gone when a door, which had been standing ajar, near them, was opened wide, and disclosed the keen visage of Master Potts.

"Here's a pretty plot hatching—here's a nice discovery I have made!" soliloquised the attorney. "The whole Demdike family, with the exception of the old witch herself, whom I saw burnt on Pendle Hill, are at Hoghton Tower. This shall be made known to the King. I'll have Nicholas Assheton arrested at once, and the woman with him, whom I recognise as Nance Redferne. It will be a wonderful stroke, and will raise me highly in his Majesty's estimation. Yet stay! Will not this interfere with my other plans with Jennet? Let me reflect. I must go cautiously to work. Besides, if I cause Nicholas to be arrested, Nance will escape, and then I shall have no clue to the others. No—no; I must watch Nicholas closely, and take upon myself all the credit of the discovery. Perhaps through Jennet I may be able to detect their disguises. At all events, I will keep a sharp look-out. Affairs are now drawing to a close, and I have only, like a wary and experienced fowler, to lay my nets cleverly to catch the whole covey."

And with these ruminations, he likewise went forth into the base court.

The rest of the day was one round of festivity and enjoyment, in which all classes participated. There were trials of skill and strength, running, wrestling, and cudgeling-matches, with an infinite variety of country games and shows.

Towards five o'clock a rush-cart, decked with flowers and ribbons, and bestridden by men bearing garlands, was drawn up in front of the central building of the tower, in an open window of which sat James—a well-pleased spectator of the different pastimes

going forward; and several lively dances were executed by a troop of male and female morris-dancers, accompanied by a tabor and pipe. But though this show was sufficiently attractive, it lacked the spirit of that performed at Whalley; while the character of Maid Marian, which then found so charming a representative in Alizon, was now personated by a man—and if Nicholas Assheton, who was amongst the bystanders, was not deceived, that man was Jem Device. Enraged by this discovery, the squire was about to seize the ruffian; but, calling to mind Nance's counsel, he refrained, and Jem (if it indeed were he) retired with a largess, bestowed by the royal hand as a reward for his uncouth gambols.

The rush-cart and morris-dancers having disappeared, another drollery was exhibited, called the "Fool and his Five Sons," the names of the hopeful offspring of the sapient sire being Pickle Herring, Blue Hose, Pepper Hose, Ginger Hose, and Jack Allspice. The humour of this piece, though not particularly refined, seemed to be appreciated by the audience generally, as well as by the monarch, who laughed heartily at its coarse buffoonery.

Next followed "The Plough and Sword Dance;" the principal actors being a number of grotesque figures armed with swords, some of whom were yoked to a plough, on which sat a piper, playing lustily while dragged along. The plough was guided by a man clothed in a bear-skin, with a fur cap on his head, and a long tail, like that of a lion, dangling behind him. In this hirsute personage, who was intended to represent the wood-demon, Hobthrust, Nicholas again detected Jem Device, and again was strongly tempted to disobey Nance's injunctions, and denounce him—the rather that he recognised in an attendant female, in a fantastic dress, the ruffian's mother, Elizabeth; but he once more desisted.

As soon as the mummers arrived in front of the King, the dance began. With their swords held upright, the party took hands and wheeled rapidly round the plough, keeping time to a merry measure played by the piper, who still maintained his seat. Suddenly the ring was enlarged to double its former size, each man extending his sword to his neighbour, who took hold of the point; after which an hexagonal figure was formed, all the blades being brought together. The swords were then quickly withdrawn, flashing like sunbeams, and a four square figure was presented, the dancers vaulting actively over each other's heads. Other variations succeeded, not necessary to be specified—and the sport concluded by a general clashing of swords, intended to represent a melee.

Meanwhile, Nicholas had been joined by Richard Assheton, and the latter was not long in detecting the two Devices through their disguises. On making this discovery he mentioned it to the squire, and was surprised to find him already aware of the

circumstance, and not less astonished when he was advised to let them alone; the squire adding he was unable at that time to give his reasons for such counsel, but, being good and conclusive, Richard would be satisfied of their propriety hereafter. The young man, however, thought otherwise, and, notwithstanding his relative's attempts to dissuade him, announced his intention of causing the parties to be arrested at once; and with this design he went in search of an officer of the guard, that the capture might be effected without disturbance. But the throng was so close round the dancers that he could not pierce it, and being compelled to return and take another course, he got nearer to the mazy ring, and was unceremoniously pushed aside by the mummers. At this moment both his arms were forcibly grasped, and a deep voice on the right whispered in his ear—"Meddle not with us, and we will not meddle with you," while similar counsel was given him in other equally menacing tones, though in a different key, on the left. Richard would have shaken off his assailants, and seized them in his turn, but power to do so was wanting to him. For the moment he was deprived of speech and motion; but while thus situated he felt that the sapphire ring given him by the King was snatched from his finger by the first speaker, whom he knew to be Jem Device, while a fearful spell was muttered over him by Elizabeth.

As this occurred at the time when the rattling of the swords engaged the whole attention of the spectators, no one noticed what was going forward except Nicholas, and, before he could get up to the young man, the two miscreants were gone, nor could any one tell what had become of them.

"Have the wretches done you a mischief?" asked the squire, in a low tone, of Richard.

"They have stolen the King's ring, which I meant to use in Alizon's behalf," replied the young man, who by this time had recovered his speech.

"That is unlucky, indeed," said Nicholas. "But we can defeat any ill design they may intend, by acquainting Sir John Finett with the circumstance."

"Let them be," said a voice in his ear. "The time is not yet come." The squire did not look round, for he well knew that the caution proceeded from Nance Redferne.

And, accordingly, he observed to Richard—"Tarry awhile, and you will be amply avenged."

And with this assurance the young man was fain to be content.

Just then a trumpet was sounded, and a herald stationed on the summit of the broad flight of steps leading to the great hall, proclaimed in a loud voice that a tilting-match

was about to take place between Archie Armstrong, jester to his most gracious Majesty, and Davy Droman, who filled the same honourable office to his Grace the Duke of Buckingham, and that a pair of gilt-heel'd chopines would be the reward of the successful combatant. This announcement was received with cheers, and preparations were instantly made for the mock tourney. A large circle being formed by the yeomen of the guard, with an alley leading to it on either side, the two combatants, mounted on gaudy-caparisoned hobby-horses, rode into the ring. Both were armed to the teeth, each having a dish-cover braced around him in lieu of a breastplate, a newly-scoured brass porringer on his head, a large pewter platter instead of a buckler, and a spit with a bung at the point, to prevent mischief, in place of a lance. The Duke's jester was an obese little fellow, and his appearance in this warlike gear was so eminently ridiculous, that it provoked roars of laughter, while Archie was scarcely less ridiculous. After curveting round the arena in imitation of knights of chivalry, and performing "their careers, their prankers, their false trots, their smooth ambles, and Canterbury paces," the two champions took up a position opposite each other, with difficulty, as it seemed, reining in their pawing chargers, and awaiting the signal of attack to be given by Sir John Finett, the judge of the tournament. This was not long delayed, and the "laissez aller" being pronounced, the preux chevaliers started forward with so much fury, and so little discretion, that meeting half-way with a tremendous shock, and butting against each other like two rams, both were thrown violently backwards, exhibiting, amid the shouts of the spectators, their heels, no longer hidden by the trappings of their steeds, kicking in the air. Encumbered as they were, some little time elapsed before they could regain their feet, and their lances having been removed in the mean time, by order of Sir John Finett, as being weapons of too dangerous a description for such truculent combatants, they attacked each other with their broad lathen daggers, dealing sounding blows upon helm, habergeon, and shield, but doing little personal mischief. The strife raged furiously for some time, and, as the champions appeared pretty well matched, it was not easy to say how it would terminate, when chance seemed to decide in favour of Davy Droman; for, in dealing a heavier blow than usual, Archie's dagger snapped in twain, leaving him at the mercy of his opponent. On this the doughty Davy, crowing lustily like chanticleer, called upon him to yield; but Archie was so wroth at his misadventure, that, instead of complying, he sprang forward, and with the hilt of his broken weapon dealt his elated opponent a severe blow on the side of the head, not only knocking off the porringer, but stretching him on the ground beside it. The punishment he had received was enough for poor Davy. He made no attempt to rise, and Archie, crowing in his turn, trampling upon the body of his prostrate foe, and then capering joyously round it, was declared the victor, and received the gilt chopines from the judge, amidst the laughter and acclamations of the beholders.

With this the public sports concluded; and, as evening was drawing on apace, such of the guests as were not invited to pass the night within the Tower, took their departure;

while shortly afterwards, supper being served in the banqueting-hall on a scale of profusion and magnificence quite equal to the earlier repast, the King and the whole of his train sat down to it.

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CHAPTER X.—EVENING ENTERTAINMENTS.

Other amusements were reserved for the evening. While revelry was again held in the great hall; while the tables groaned, for the third time since morning, with good cheer, and the ruby wine, which seemed to gush from inexhaustible fountains, mantled in the silver flagons; while seneschal, sewer, and pantler, with the yeomen of the buttery and kitchen, were again actively engaged in their vocations; while of the three hundred guests more than half, as if insatiate, again vied with each other in prowess with the trencher and the goblet; while in the words of old Taylor, the water poet, but who was no water-drinker—and who thus sang of the hospitality of the men of Manchester, in the early part of the seventeenth century—they had

"Roast, boil'd, bak'd, too, too much, white, claret, sack.

Nothing they thought too heavy or too hot,

Can follow'd can, and pot succeeded pot."

—during this time preparations were making for fresh entertainments out of doors.

The gardens at Hoghton Tower, though necessarily confined in space, owing to their situation on the brow of a hill, were beautifully laid out, and commanded from their balustrad terraces magnificent views of the surrounding country. Below them lay the well-wooded park, skirted by the silvery Darwen, with the fair village of Walton-le-Dale immediately beyond it, the proud town of Preston further on, and the single-coned Nese Point rising majestically in the distance. The principal garden constituted a square, and was divided with mathematical precision, according to the formal taste of the time, into smaller squares, with a broad well-kept gravel walk at each angle. These plots were arranged in various figures and devices—such as the cinq-foil, the flower-de-luce, the trefoil, the lozenge, the fret, the diamond, the crossbow, and the oval—all very elaborate and intricate in design. Besides these knots, as they were termed, there were labyrinths, and clipped yew-tree walks, and that indispensable requisite to a garden at the period, a maze. In the centre was a grassy eminence, surmounted by a pavilion, in front of which spread a grass-plot of smoothest turf, ordinarily used as a bowling-green. At the lower end of this a temporary stage was erected, for the masque about to be represented before the King. Torches were kindled, and numerous lamps burned in the branches of the adjoining trees; but they were scarcely needed, for the moon being at the full, the glorious effulgence shed by her upon the scene rendered all other light pale and ineffectual.

After supper, at which the drinking was deeper than at dinner, the whole of the revellers repaired to the garden, full of frolic and merriment, and well-disposed for any diversion in store for them. The King was conducted to the bowling-green by his host, preceded by a crowd of attendants bearing odoriferous torches; but the royal gait being somewhat unsteady, the aid of Sir Gilbert Hoghton's arm was required to keep the monarch from stumbling. The rest of the bacchanalians followed, and, elated as they were, it will not be wondered that they put very little restraint upon themselves, but shouted, sang, danced, and indulged in all kinds of licence.

Opposite the stage prepared for the masquers a platform had been reared, in front of which was a chair for the King, with seats for the nobles and principal guests behind it. The sides were hung with curtains of crimson velvet fringed with gold; the roof decorated like a canopy; so that it had a very magnificent effect. James lolled back in his chair, and jested loudly and rather indecorously with the various personages as they took their places around him. In less than five minutes the whole of the green was filled with revellers, and great was the pushing and jostling, the laughing and screaming, that ensued among them. Silence was then enjoined by Sir John Finett, who had stationed himself on the steps of the stage, and at this command the assemblage became comparatively quiet, though now and then a half-suppressed titter or a smothered scream would break out. Amid this silence the King's voice could be distinctly heard, and his coarse jests reached the ears of all the astonished audience, provoking many a severe comment from the elders, and much secret laughter from the juniors.

The masque began. Two tutelar deities appeared on the stage. They were followed by a band of foresters clad in Lincoln green, with bows at their backs. The first deity wore a white linen tunic, with flesh-coloured hose and red buskins, and had a purple taffeta mantle over his shoulders. In his hand he held a palm branch, and a garland of the same leaves was woven round his brow. The second household god was a big brawny varlet, wild and shaggy in appearance, being clothed in the skins of beasts, with sandals of untanned cowhide. On his head was a garland of oak leaves; and from his neck hung a horn. He was armed with a hunting-spear and wood-knife, and attended by a large Lancashire mastiff. Advancing to the front of the stage, the foremost personage thus addressed the Monarch—

"This day—great King for government admired!
Which these thy subjects have so much desired—
Shall be kept holy in their heart's best treasure,
And vow'd to JAMES as is this month to Cæsar.
And now the landlord of this ancient Tower,
Thrice fortunate to see this happy hour,
Whose trembling heart thy presence sets on fire,

Unto this house—the heart of all our shire—
Does bid thee cordial welcome, and would speak it
In higher notes, but extreme joy doth break it.
He makes his guests most welcome, in his eyes
Love tears do sit, not he that shouts and cries.
And we the antique guardians of this place,—
I of this house—he of the fruitful chase,—
Since the bold Hoghtons from this hill took name,
Who with the stiff, unbridled Saxons came,
And so have flourish'd in this fairer clime
Successively from that to this our time,
Still offering up to our immortal powers
Sweet incense, wine, and odoriferous flowers;
While sacred Vesta, in her virgin tire,
With vows and wishes tends the hallow'd fire.
Now seeing that thy Majesty is thus
Greater than household deities like us,
We render up to thy more powerful guard,
This Tower. This knight is thine—he is thy ward,
For by thy helping and auspicious hand,
He and his home shall ever, ever stand
And flourish, in despite of envious fate;
And then live, like Augustus, fortunate.
And long, long mayst thou live!—To which both men
And guardian angels cry—"Amen! amen!"

James, who had demeaned himself critically during the delivery of the address, observed at its close to Sir Richard Hoghton, who was standing immediately behind his chair, "We cannot say meikle for the rhymes, which are but indifferently strung together, but the sentiments are leal and gude, and that is a' we care for."

On this the second tutelar divinity advanced, and throwing himself into an attitude, as if bewildered by the august presence in which he stood, exclaimed—

"Thou greatest of mortals!"—
And then stopped, as if utterly confounded.

The King looked at him for a moment, and then roared out—"Weel, gudeman, your commencement is pertinent and true enough; and though we be 'the greatest of mortals,' as ye style us, dinna fash yoursel' about our grandeur, but go on, as if we were nae better nor wiser than your ain simple sel'."

But, instead of encouraging the dumbfounded deity, this speech completely upset him. He hastily retreated; and, in trying to screen himself behind the huntsman, fell back from the stage, and his hound leapt after him. The incident, whether premeditated or not, amused the spectators much more than any speech he could have delivered, and the King joined heartily in the merriment.

Silence being again restored, the first divinity came forward once more, and spoke thus:—

'Dread lord! thy Majesty hath stricken dumb
His weaker god-head; if to himself he come,
Unto thy service straight he will commend
These foresters, and charge them to attend
Thy pleasure in this park, and show such sport;
To the chief huntsman and thy princely court,
As the small circle of this round affords,
And be more ready than he was in words.'[5]

"Weel spoken, and to the purpose, gude fallow," cried James. "And we take this opportunity of assuring our worthy host, in the presence of his other guests, that we have never had better sport in park or forest than we have this day enjoyed—have never eaten better cheer, nor quaffed better wine than at his board—and, altogether, have never been more hospitably welcomed."

Sir Richard was overwhelmed by his Majesty's commendation.

"I have done nothing, my gracious liege," he said, "to merit such acknowledgment on your part, and the delight I experience is only tempered by my utter unworthiness."

"Hoot-toot! man," replied James, jocularly, "ye merit a vast deal mair than we hae said to you. But gude folk dinna always get their deserts. Ye ken that, Sir Richard. And now, hae ye not some ither drolleries in store for us?"

The baronet replied in the affirmative, and soon afterwards the stage was occupied by a new class of performers, and a drollery commenced which kept the audience in one continual roar of laughter so long as it lasted. And yet none of the parts had been studied, the actors entirely trusting to their own powers of comedy to carry it out. The principal character was the Cap Justice, enacted by Sir John Finett, who took occasion in the course of the performance to lampoon and satirise most of the eminent legal characters of the day, mimicking the voices and manner of the three justices—Crooke, Hoghton, and Doddridge—so admirably, that his hearers were wellnigh convulsed; and the three learned gentlemen, who sat near the King, though fully conscious of the

ridicule applied to them, were obliged to laugh with the rest. But the unsparing satirist was not content with this, but went on, with most of the other attendants upon the King, and being intimately versed in court scandal, he directed his lash with telling effect. As a contrast to the malicious pleasantry of the Cap Justice, were the gambols and jests of Robin Goodfellow—a merry imp, who, if he led people into mischief, was always ready to get them out of it. Then there was a dance by Bill Huckler, old Crambo, and Tom o' Bedlam, the half-crazed individual already mentioned as being among the crowd in the base court. This was applauded to the echo, and consequently repeated. But the most diverting scene of all was that in which Jem Tosspot and the three Doll Wangos appeared. Though given in the broadest vernacular of the county, and scarcely intelligible to the whole of the company, the dialogue of this part of the piece was so lifelike and natural, that every one recognised its truth; while the situations, arranged with the slightest effort, and on the spur of the moment, were extremely ludicrous. The scene was supposed to take place in a small Lancashire alehouse, where a jovial pedlar was carousing, and where, being visited by his three sweethearts—each of whom he privately declared to be the favourite—he had to reconcile their differences, and keep them all in good-humour. Familiar with the character in all its aspects, Nicholas played it to the life; and, to do them justice, Dames Baldwyn, Tetlow, and Nance Redferne, were but little if at all inferior to him. There was a reality in their jealous quarrelling that gave infinite zest to the performance.

"Saul o' my body!" exclaimed James, admiringly, "those are three braw women. Ane of them maun be sax feet if she is an inch, and weel made and weel favourt too. Zounds! Sir Richard, there's nae standing the spells o' your Lancashire Witches. High-born and low-born, they are a' alike. I wad their only witchcraft lay in their een. I should then hae the less fear of 'em. But have you aught mair? for it is growing late, and ye ken we hae something to do in that pavilion."

"Only a merry dance, my liege, in which a man will appear in a dendrological foliage of fronds," replied the baronet.

James laughed at the description, and soon afterwards a party of mummers, male and female, clad in various grotesque garbs, appeared on the stage. In the midst of them was the "dendrological man," enclosed in a framework of green boughs, like that borne by a modern Jack-in-the-green. A ring was formed by the mummers, and the round commenced to lively music.

While the mazy measure was proceeding, Nance Redferne, who had quitted the stage with Nicholas, and now stood close to him among the spectators, said in a low tone, "Look there!"

The squire glanced in the direction indicated, and to his surprise and terror, distinguished, among the crowd at a little distance, the figure of a Cistercian monk.

"He is invisible to every eye except our own," whispered Nance, "and is come to tell me it is time."

"Time for what?" demanded Nicholas.

"Time for you to seize those two accursed Devices, Jem and his mother," replied Nance. "They are both on yon boards. Jem is the man in the tree, and Elizabeth is the owd crone in the red kirtle and high-crowned hat. Yo win knoa her feaw feace when yo pluck off her mask."

"The monk is gone," cried Nicholas; "I have kept my eyes steadily fixed on him, and he has melted into air. What has he to do with the Devices?"

"He is their fate," returned Nance, "an ey ha' acted under his orders. Boh mount, an seize them. Ey win ge wi' ye."

Forcing his way through the crowd, Nicholas ran up the steps, and, followed by Nance, sprang upon the stage. His appearance occasioned considerable surprise; but as he was recognised by the spectators as the jolly Jem Tosspot, who had so recently diverted them, and his companion as one of the three Doll Wangos, in anticipation of some more fun they received him with a round of applause. But without stopping to acknowledge it, or being for a moment diverted from his purpose, Nicholas seized the old crone, and, consigning her to Nance, caught hold of the leafy frame in which the man was encased, and pulled him from under it. But he began to think he had unkennelled the wrong fox, for the man, though a tall fellow, bore no resemblance to Jem Device; while, when the crone's mask was plucked off, she was found to be a comely young woman. Meanwhile, all around was in an uproar, and amidst a hurricane of hisses, yells, and other indications of displeasure from the spectators, several of the mummers demanded the meaning of such a strange and unwarrantable proceeding.

"They are a couple of witches," cried Nicholas; "this is Jem Device and his mother Elizabeth."

"My name is nother Jem nor Device," cried the man.

"Nor mine Elizabeth," screamed the woman.

"We know the Devices," cried two or three voices, "and these are none of 'em."

Nicholas was perplexed. The storm increased; threats accompanied the hisses; when luckily he espied a ring on the man's finger. He instantly seized his hand, and held it up to the general gaze.

"A proof!—a proof!" he cried. "This sapphire ring was given by the King to my cousin, Richard Assheton, this morning, and stolen from him by Jem Device."

"Examine their features again," said Nance Redferne, waving her hands over them. "Yo win aw knoa them now."

The woman's face instantly altered. Many years being added to it in a breath. The man changed equally. The utmost astonishment was evinced by all at the transformation, and the bystanders who had spoken before, now cried out loudly—"We know them perfectly now. They are the two Devices."

By this time an officer, attended by a party of halberdiers, had mounted the boards, and the two prisoners were delivered to their custody by Nicholas.

"Howd!" cried the man; "Ey win no longer deny my name. Ey am Jem Device, an this is my mother, Elizabeth. Boh a warse offender than either on us stonds afore yo. This woman is Nance Redferne, grandowter of the owd hag, Mother Chattox. Ey charge her wi' makin' wax images, an' stickin' pins in 'em, wi' intent to kill folk. Hoo wad ha' kilt me mysel', wi' her devilry, if ey hadna bin too strong for her—an' that's why hoo bears me malice, an' has betrayed me to Squoire Nicholas Assheton. Seize her, an' ca' me as a witness agen her."

And as Nance was secured, he laughed malignantly.

"Ey care not," replied Nance. "Ey am now revenged on you both."

While this impromptu performance took place, as much to the surprise of James as of any one else, and while he was desiring Sir Richard Hoghton to ascertain what it all meant—at the very moment that the two Devices and Nance removed from the stage, an usher approached the monarch, and said that Master Potts entreated a moment's audience of his majesty.

"Potts!" exclaimed James, somewhat confused. "Wha is he?—ah, yes! I recollect—a witch-finder. Weel, let him approach."

Accordingly, the next moment the little attorney, whose face was evidently charged with some tremendous intelligence, was ushered into the king's presence.

After a profound reverence, he said, "May it please your Majesty, I have something for your private ear."

"Aweel, then," replied James, "approach us mair closely. What hae ye got to say, sir? Aught mair anent these witches?"

"A great deal, sire," said Potts, in an impressive tone. "Something dreadful has happened—something terrible."

"Eh! what?" exclaimed James, looking alarmed. "What is it, man? Speak!"

"Murder? sire,—murder has been done," said Potts, in low thrilling accents.

"Murder!" exclaimed James, horror-stricken. "Tell us a' about it, and without more ado."

But Potts was still circumspect. With an air of deepest mystery, he approached his head as near as he dared to that of the monarch, and whispered in his ear.

"Can this be true?" cried James. "If sae—it's very shocking—very sad."

"It is too true, as your Majesty will find on investigation," replied Potts. "The little girl I told you of, Jennet Device, saw it done."

"Weel, weel, there is nae accounting for human frailty and wickedness," said James. "Let a' necessary steps be taken at once. We will consider what to do. But—d'ye hear, sir?—dinna let the bairn Jennet go. Haud her fast. D'ye mind that? Now go, and cause the guilty party to be put under arrest."

And on receiving this command Master Potts departed.

Scarcely was he gone than Nicholas Assheton came up to the railing of the platform, and, imploring his Majesty's forgiveness for the disturbance he had occasioned, explained that it had been owing to the seizure of the two Devices, who, for some wicked but unexplained purpose, had contrived to introduce themselves, under various disguises, into the Tower.

"Ye did right to arrest the miscreants, sir," said James. "But hae ye heard what has happened?"

"No, my liege," replied Nicholas, alarmed by the King's manner; "what is it?"

"Come nearer, and ye shall learn," replied James; "for we wadna hae it bruited abroad, though if true, as we canna doubt, it will be known soon enough."

And as the squire bent forward, he imparted some intelligence to him, which instantly changed the expression of the latter to one of mingled horror and rage.

"It is false, sire!" he cried. "I will answer for her innocence with my life. She could not do it. Your Majesty's patience is abused. It is Jennet who has done it—not she. But I will unravel the terrible mystery. You have the other two wretches prisoners, and can enforce the truth from them."

"We will essay to do so," replied James; "but we have also another prisoner."

"Christopher Demdike?" said Nicholas.

"Ay, Christopher Demdike," rejoined James. "But another besides him—Mistress Nutter. You stare, sir; but it is true. She is in yonder pavilion. We ken fu' weel wha assisted her flight, and wha concealed her. Maister Potts has told us a'. It is weel for you that your puir kinsman, Richard Assheton, did us sic gude service at the boar-hunt to-day. We shall not now be unmindful of it, even though he cannot send us the ring we gave him."

"It is here, sire," replied Nicholas. "It was stolen from him by the villain, Jem Device. The poor youth meant to use it for Alizon. I now deliver it to your Majesty as coming from him in her behalf."

"And we sae receive it," replied the monarch, brushing away the moisture that gathered thickly in his eyes.

At this moment a tall personage, wrapped in a cloak, who appeared to be an officer of the guard, approached the railing.

"I am come to inform your Majesty that Christopher Demdike has just died of his wounds," said this personage.

"And sae he has had a strae death, after a'!" rejoined James. "Weel, we are sorry for it."

"His portion will be eternal bale," observed the officer.

"How know you that, sir?" demanded the King, sharply. "You are not his judge."

"I witnessed his end, sire," replied the officer; "and no man who died as he died can be saved. The Fiend was beside him at the death-throes."

"Save us!" exclaimed James. "Ye dinna say so? God's santie! man, but this is grewsome, and gars the flesh creep on one's banes. Let his foul carcase be taen awa', and hangit on a gibbet on the hill where Malkin Tower aince stood, as a warning to a' sic heinous offenders."

As the King ceased speaking, Master Potts appeared out of breath, and greatly excited.

"She has escaped, sire!" he cried.

"Wha! Jennet!" exclaimed James. "If sae, we will tang you in her stead."

"No, sire—Alizon," replied Potts. "I can nowhere find her; nor—" and he hesitated.

"Weel—weel—it is nae great matter," replied James, as if relieved, and with a glance of satisfaction at Nicholas.

"I know where Alizon is, sire," said the officer.

"Indeed!" exclaimed James. "This fellow is strangely officious," he muttered to himself. "And where may she be, sir?" he added, aloud.

"I will produce her within a quarter of an hour in yonder pavilion," replied the officer, "and all that Master Potts has been unable to find."

"Your Majesty may trust him," observed Nicholas, who had attentively regarded the officer. "Depend upon it he will make good his words."

"You think so?" cried the King. "Then we will put him to the test. You will engage to confront Alizon with her mother?" he added, to the officer.

"I will, sire," replied the other. "But I shall require the assistance of a dozen men."

"Tak twenty, if you will," replied the King,— "I am impatient to see what you can do."

"In a quarter of a minute all shall be ready within the pavilion, sire," replied the officer. "You have seen one masque to-night;—but you shall now behold a different one—the masque of death."

And he disappeared.

Nicholas felt sure he would accomplish his task, for he had recognised in him the Cistercian monk.

"Where is Sir Richard Assheton of Middleton?" inquired the King.

"He left the Tower with his daughter Dorothy, immediately after the banquet," replied Nicholas.

"I am glad of it—right glad," replied the monarch; "the terrible intelligence can be the better broken to them. If it had come upon them suddenly, it might have been fatal—especially to the poor lassie. Let Sir Ralph Assheton of Whalley come to me—and Master Roger Nowell of Read."

"Your Majesty shall be obeyed," replied Sir Richard Hoghton.

The King then gave some instructions respecting the prisoners, and bade Master Potts have Jennet in readiness.

And now to see what terrible thing had happened.

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CHAPTER XI.—FATALITY.

Along the eastern terrace a youth and maiden were pacing slowly. They had stolen forth unperceived from the revel, and, passing through a door standing invitingly open, had entered the garden. Though overjoyed in each other's presence, the solemn beauty of the night, so powerful in its contrast to the riotous scene they had just quitted, profoundly impressed them. Above, were the deep serene heavens, lighted up by the starry host and their radiant queen—below, the immemorial woods, steeped in silvery mists arising from the stream flowing past them. All nature was hushed in holy rest. In opposition to the flood of soft light emanating from the lovely planet overhead, and which turned all it fell on, whether tree, or tower, or stream, to beauty, was the artificial glare caused by the torches near the pavilion; while the discordant sounds occasioned by the minstrels tuning their instruments, disturbed the repose. As they went on, however, these sounds were lost in the distance, and the glare of the torches was excluded by intervening trees. Then the moon looked down lovingly upon them, and the only music that reached their ears arose from the nightingales. After a pause, they walked on again, hand-in-hand, gazing at each other, at the glorious heavens, and drinking in the thrilling melody of the songsters of the grove.

At the angle of the terrace was a small arbour placed in the midst of a bosquet, and they sat down within it. Then, and not till then, did their thoughts find vent in words. Forgetting the sorrows they had endured, and the perils by which they were environed, they found in their deep mutual love a shield against the sharpest arrows of fate. In low gentle accents they breathed their passion, solemnly plighting their faith before all-seeing Heaven.

Poor souls! they were happy then—intensely happy. Alas! that their happiness should be so short; for those few moments of bliss, stolen from a waste of tears, were all that were allowed them. Inexorable fate still dogged their footsteps.

Amidst the bosquet stood a listener to their converse—a little girl with high shoulders and sharp features, on which diabolical malice was stamped. Two yellow eyes glistened through the leaves beside her, marking the presence of a cat. As the lovers breathed their vows, and indulged in hopes never to be realised, the wicked child grinned, clenched her hands, and, grudging them their short-lived happiness, seemed inclined to interrupt it. Some stronger motive, however, kept her quiet.

What are the pair talking of now?—She hears her own name mentioned by the maiden, who speaks of her with pity, almost with affection—pardons her for the mischief she has done her, and hopes Heaven will pardon her likewise. But she knows not the full extent of the girl's malignity, or even her gentle heart must have been roused to resentment.

The little girl, however, feels no compunction. Infernal malice has taken possession of her heart, and crushed every kindly feeling within it. She hates all those that compassionate her, and returns evil for good.

What are the lovers talking of now? Of their first meeting at Whalley Abbey, when one was May Queen, and by her beauty and simplicity won the other's heart, losing her own at the same time. A bright unclouded career seemed to lie before them then. Wofully had it darkened since. Alas! Alas!

The little girl smiles. She hopes they will go on. She likes to hear them talk thus. Past happiness is ever remembered with a pang by the wretched, and they were happy then. Go on—go on!

But they are silent for awhile, for they wish to dwell on that hopeful, that blissful season. And a nightingale, alighting on a bough above them, pours forth its sweet plaint, as if in response to their tender emotions. They praise the bird's song, and it suddenly ceases.

For the little girl, full of malevolence, stretches forth her hand, and it drops to the ground, as if stricken by a dart.

"Is thy heart broken, poor bird?" exclaimed the young man, taking up the hapless songster, yet warm and palpitating. "To die in the midst of thy song—'tis hard."

"Very hard!" replied the maiden, tearfully. "Its fate seems a type of our own."

The little girl laughed, but in a low tone, and to herself.

The pair then grew sad. This slight incident had touched them deeply, and their conversation took a melancholy turn. They spoke of the blights that had nipped their love in the bud—of the canker that had eaten into its heart—of the destiny that so relentlessly pursued them, threatening to separate them for ever.

The little girl laughed merrily.

Then they spoke of the grave—and of hope beyond the grave; and they spoke cheerfully.

The little girl could laugh no longer, for with her all beyond the grave was despair.

After that they spoke of the terrible power that Satan had lately obtained in that unhappy district, of the arts he had employed, and of the votaries he had won. Both prayed fervently that his snares might be circumvented, and his rule destroyed.

During this part of the discourse the cat swelled to the size of a tiger, and his eyes glowed like fiery coals. He made a motion as if he would spring forward, but the voice of prayer arrested him, and he shrank back to his former size.

"Poor Jennet is ensnared by the Fiend," murmured the maiden, "and will perish eternally. Would I could save her!"

"It cannot be," replied the young man. "She is beyond redemption."

The little girl gnashed her teeth with rage.

"But my mother—I do not now despair of her," said Alizon. "She has broken the bondage by which she was enchained, and, if she resists temptation to the last, I am assured will be saved."

"Heaven aid her!" exclaimed Richard.

Scarcely were the words uttered, than the cat disappeared.

"Why, Tib!—where are yo, Tib? Ey want yo!" cried the little girl in a low tone.

But the familiar did not respond to the call.

"Where con he ha' gone?" cried Jennet; "Tib! Tib!"

Still the cat came not.

"Then ey mun do the wark without him," pursued the little girl; "an ey win no longer delay it."

And with this she crept stealthily round the harbour, and, approaching the side where Richard sat, watched an opportunity of touching him unperceived.

As her finger came in contact with his frame, a pang like death shot through his heart, and he fell upon Alizon's shoulder.

"Are you ill?" she exclaimed, gazing at his pallid features, rendered ghastly white by the moonlight.

Richard could make no reply, and Alizon, becoming dreadfully alarmed, was about to fly for assistance, but the young man, by a great effort, detained her.

"Ey mun now run an tell Mester Potts, so that hoo may be found wi' him," muttered Jennet, creeping away.

Just then Richard recovered his speech, but his words were faintly uttered, and with difficulty.

"Alizon," he said, "I will not attempt to disguise my condition from you. I am dying. And my death will be attributed to you—for evil-minded persons have persuaded the King that you have bewitched me, and he will believe the charge now. Oh! if you would ease the pangs of death for me—if you would console my latest moments—leave me, and quit this place, before it be too late."

"Oh! Richard," she cried distractedly; "you ask more than I can perform. If you are indeed in such imminent danger, I will stay with you—will die with you."

"No! live for me—live—save yourself, Alizon," implored the young man. "Your danger is greater than mine. A dreadful death awaits you at the stake! Oh! mercy, mercy, heaven! Spare her—in pity spare her!—Have we not suffered enough? I can no more. Farewell for ever, Alizon—one kiss—the last."

And as their lips met, his strength utterly forsook him, and he fell backwards.

"One grave!" he murmured; "one grave, Alizon!"—And so, without a groan, he expired.

Alizon neither screamed nor swooned, but remained in a state of stupefaction, gazing at the body. As the moon fell upon the placid features, they looked as if locked in slumber.

There he lay—the young, the brave, the beautiful, the loving, the beloved. Fate had triumphed. Death had done his work; but he had only performed half his task.

"One grave—one grave—it was his last wish—it shall be so!" she cried, in frenzied tones, "I shall thus escape my enemies, and avoid the horrible and shameful death to which they would doom me."

And she snatched the dagger from the ill-fated youth's side.

"Now, fate, I defy thee!" she cried, with a fearful laugh.

One last look at that calm beautiful face—one kiss of the cold lips, which can no more return the endearment—and the dagger is pointed at her breast.

But she is withheld by an arm of iron, and the weapon falls from her grasp. She looks up. A tall figure, clothed in the mouldering habiliments of a Cistercian monk, stands beside her. She knows the vestments at once, for she has seen them before, hanging up in the closet adjoining her mother's chamber at Whalley Abbey—and the features of the ghostly monk seem familiar to her.

"Raise not thy hand against thyself," said the phantom, in a tone of awful reproof. "It is the Fiend prompts thee to do it. He would take advantage of thy misery to destroy thee."

"I took thee for the Fiend," replied Alizon, gazing at him with wonder rather than with terror. "Who art thou?"

"The enemy of thy enemies, and therefore thy friend," replied the monk. "I would have saved thy lover if I could, but his destiny was not to be averted. But, rest content, I will avenge him."

"I do not want vengeance—I want to be with him," she replied, frantically embracing the body.

"Thou wilt soon be with him," said the phantom, in tones of deep significance. "Arise, and come with me. Thy mother needs thy assistance."

"My mother!" exclaimed Alizon, clearing the blinding tresses from her brow. "Where is she?"

"Follow me, and I will bring thee to her," said the monk.

"And leave him? I cannot!" cried Alizon, gazing wildly at the body.

"You must. A soul is at stake, and will perish if you come not," said the monk. "He is at rest, and you will speedily rejoin him."

"With that assurance I will go," replied Alizon, with a last look at the object of her love. "One grave—lay us in one grave!"

"It shall be done according to your wish," said the monk.

And he glided on with noiseless footsteps.

Alizon followed him along the terrace.

Presently they came to a dark yew-tree walk, leading to a labyrinth, and tracking it swiftly, as well as the overarched and intricate path to which it conducted, they entered a grotto, whence a flight of steps descended to a subterranean passage, hewn out of the rock. Along this passage, which was of some extent, the monk proceeded, and Alizon followed him.

At last they came to another flight of steps, and here the monk stopped.

"We are now beneath the pavilion, where you will find your mother," he said. "Mount! the way is clear before you. I have other work to do."

Alizon obeyed; and, as she advanced, was surprised to find the monk gone. He had neither passed her nor ascended the steps, and must, therefore, have sunk into the earth.

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CHAPTER XII.—THE LAST HOUR.

Within the pavilion sat Alice Nutter. She was clad in deep mourning, but her dress seemed disordered as if by hasty travel. Her looks were full of anguish and terror; her blanched tresses, once so dark and beautiful, hung dishevelled over her shoulders; and her thin hands were clasped in supplication. Her cheeks were ashy pale, but on her brow was a bright red mark, as if traced by a finger dipped in blood.

A lamp was burning on the table beside her. Near it was a skull, and near this emblem of mortality an hourglass, running fast.

The windows and doors of the building were closed, and it would seem the unhappy lady was a prisoner.

She had been brought there secretly that night, with what intent she knew not; but she felt sure it was with no friendly design towards herself. Early in the day three horsemen had arrived at her retreat in Pendle Forest, and without making any charge against her, or explaining whither they meant to take her, or indeed answering any inquiry, had brought her off with them, and, proceeding across the country, had arrived at a forester's hut on the outskirts of Hoghton Park. Here they tarried till evening, placing her in a room by herself, and keeping strict watch over her; and when the shadows of night fell, they conveyed her through the woods, and by a private entrance to the gardens of the Tower, and with equal secrecy to the pavilion, where, setting a lamp before her, they left her to her meditations. All refused to answer her inquiries, but one of them, with a sinister smile, placed the hourglass and skull beside her.

Left alone, the wretched lady vainly sought some solution of the enigma—why she had been brought thither. She could not solve it; but she determined, if her capture had been made by any lawful authorities, to confess her guilt and submit to condign punishment.

Though the windows and doors were closed as before mentioned, sounds from without reached her, and she heard confused and tumultuous noises as if from a large assemblage. For what purpose were they met? Could it be for her execution? No—there were strains of music, and bursts of laughter. And yet she had heard that the burning of a witch was a spectacle in which the populace delighted—that they looked upon it as a show, like any other; and why should they not laugh, and have music at it? But could she be executed without trial, without judgment? She knew not. All she knew was she was guilty, and deserved to die. But when this idea took possession of her, the laughter

sounded in her ears like the yells of demons, and the strains like the fearful harmonies she had heard at weird sabbaths.

All at once she recollected with indescribable terror, that on this very night the compact she had entered into with the Fiend expired. That at midnight, unless by her penitence and prayers she had worked out her salvation, he could claim her. She recollected also, and with increased uneasiness, that the man who had set the hourglass on the table, and who had regarded her with a sinister smile as he did so, had said it was eleven o'clock! Her last hour then had arrived—nay, was partly spent, and the moments were passing swiftly by.

The agony she endured at this thought was intense. She felt as if reason were forsaking her, and, but for her determined efforts to resist it, such a crisis might have occurred. But she knew that her eternal welfare depended upon the preservation of her mental balance, and she strove to maintain it, and in the end succeeded.

Her gaze was fixed intently on the hourglass. She saw the sand trickling silently but swiftly down, like a current of life-blood, which, when it ceased, life would cease with it. She saw the shining grains above insensibly diminishing in quantity, and, as if she could arrest her destiny by the act, she seized the glass, and would have turned it, but the folly of the proceeding arrested her, and she set it down again.

Then horrible thoughts came upon her, crushing her and overwhelming her, and she felt by anticipation all the torments she would speedily have to endure. Oceans of fire, in which miserable souls were for ever tossing, rolled before her. Yells, such as no human anguish can produce, smote her ears. Monsters of frightful form yawned to devour her. Fiends, armed with terrible implements of torture, such as the wildest imagination cannot paint, menaced her. All hell, and its horrors, was there, its dreadful gulf, its roaring furnaces, its rivers of molten metal, ever burning, yet never consuming its victims. A hot sulphureous atmosphere oppressed her, and a film of blood dimmed her sight.

She endeavoured to pray, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She looked about for her Bible, but it had been left behind when she was taken from her retreat. She had no safeguard—none.

Still the sand ran on.

New agonies assailed her. Hell was before her again, but in a new form, and with new torments. She closed her eyes. She shut her ears. But she saw it still, and heard its terrific yells.

Again she consults the hourglass. The sand is running on—ever diminishing.

New torments assail her. She thinks of all she loves most on earth—of her daughter! Oh! if Alizon were near her, she might pray for her—might scare away these frightful visions—might save her. She calls to her—but she answers not. No, she is utterly abandoned of God and man, and must perish eternally.

Again she consults the hourglass. One quarter of an hour is all that remains to her. Oh! that she could employ it in prayer! Oh! that she could kneel—or even weep!

A large mirror hangs against the wall, and she is drawn towards it by an irresistible impulse. She sees a figure within it—but she does not know herself. Can that cadaverous object, with the white hair, that seems newly-arisen from the grave, be she? It must be a phantom. No—she touches her cheek, and finds it is real. But, ah! what is this red brand upon her brow? It must be the seal of the demon. She tries to efface it—but it will not come out. On the contrary, it becomes redder and deeper.

Again she consults the glass. The sand is still running on. How many minutes remain to her?

"Ten!" cried a voice, replying to her mental inquiry.—"Ten!"

And, turning, she perceived her familiar standing beside her.

"Thy time is wellnigh out, Alice Nutter," he said. "In ten minutes my lord will claim thee."

"My compact with thy master is broken," she replied, summoning up all her resolution. "I have long ceased to use the power bestowed upon me; but, even if I had wished it, thou hast refused to serve me."

"I have refused to serve you, madam, because you have disobeyed the express injunctions of my master," replied the familiar; "but your apostasy does not free you from bondage. You have merely lost advantages which you might have enjoyed. If you chose to dismiss me I could not help it. Neither I nor my lord have been to blame. We have performed our part of the contract."

"Why am I brought hither?" demanded Mistress Nutter.

"I will tell you," replied the familiar. "You were brought here by order of the King. Your retreat was revealed to him by Master Potts, who learnt it from Jennet Device. The sapient sovereign intended to confront you with your daughter Alizon, who, like yourself, is accused of witchcraft; but he will be disappointed—for when he comes for you, you will be out of his reach—ha! ha!"

And he rubbed his hands at the jest.

"Alizon accused of witchcraft—say'st thou?" cried Mistress Nutter.

"Ay," replied the familiar. "She is suspected of bewitching Richard Assheton, who has been done to death by Jennet Device. For one so young, the little girl has certainly a rare turn for mischief. But no one will know the real author of the crime, and Alizon will suffer for it."

"Heaven will not suffer such iniquity," said the lady.

"As you have nothing to do with heaven, madam, it is needless to refer to it," said the familiar. "But it certainly is rather hard that one so young as Alizon should perish."

"Can you save her?" asked Mistress Nutter.

"Oh! yes, I could save her, but she will not let me," replied the familiar, with a grin.

"No—no—it is impossible," cried the wretched woman. "And I cannot help her."

"Perhaps you might," observed the tempter. "My master, whom you accuse of harshness, is ever willing to oblige you. You have a few minutes left—do you wish him to aid her? Command me, and I will obey you."

"This is some snare," thought Mistress Nutter; "I will resist it."

"You cannot be worse off than you are," remarked the familiar.

"I know not that," replied the lady. "What would'st thou do?"

"Whatever you command me, madam. I can, do nothing of my own accord. Shall I bring your daughter here? Say so, and it shall be done."

"No—thou would'st ensnare me," she replied. "I well know thou hast no power over her. Thou would'st place some phantasm before me. I would see her, but not through thy agency."

"She is here," cried Alizon, opening the door of a closet, and rushing towards her mother, who instantly locked her in her arms.

"Pray for me, my child," cried Mistress Nutter, mastering her emotion, "or I shall be snatched from you for ever. My moments are numbered. Pray—pray!"

Alizon fell on her knees, and prayed fervently.

"You waste your breath," cried the familiar, in a mocking tone. "Never till the brand shall disappear from her brow, and the writing, traced in her blood, shall vanish from this parchment, can she be saved. She is mine."

"Pray, Alizon, pray!" shrieked Mistress Nutter.

"I will tear her in pieces if she does not cease," cried the familiar, assuming a terrible shape, and menacing her with claws like those of a wild beast.

"Pray thou, mother!" cried Alizon.

"I cannot," replied the lady.

"I will kill her if she but makes the attempt," howled the demon.

"But try, mother, try!" cried Alizon.

The poor lady dropped on her knees, and raised her hands in humble supplication—"Heaven forgive me!" she exclaimed.

The demon seized the hourglass.

"The sand is out—her term has expired—she is mine!" he cried.

"Clasp thy arms tightly round me, my child. He cannot take me from thee," shrieked the agonised woman.

"Release her, Alizon, or I will slay thee likewise," roared the demon.

"Never," she replied; "thou canst not overcome me. Ha!" she added joyfully, "the brand has disappeared from her brow."

"And the writing from the parchment," howled the demon; "but I will have her notwithstanding."

And he plunged his claws into Alice Nutter's flesh. But her daughter held her fast.

"Oh! hold me, my child—hold me, or I am lost!" shrieked the lady.

"Be warned, and let her go, or thy life shall pay for her's," cried the demon.

"My life for her's, willingly," replied Alizon.

"Then take thy fate," rejoined the evil spirit.

And placing his hand upon her heart, it instantly ceased to beat.

"Mother, thou art saved—saved!" exclaimed Alizon, throwing out her arms.

And gazing at her for an instant with a seraphic look, she fell backwards, and expired.

"Thou art mine," roared the demon, seizing Mistress Nutter by the hair, and dragging her from her daughter's body, to which she clung desperately.

"Help!—help!" she cried.

"Thou mayst call, but thy cries will be unheeded," rejoined the familiar with mocking laughter.

"Thou liest, false fiend!" said Mistress Nutter. "Heaven will help me now."

And, as she spoke, the Cistercian monk stood before them.

"Hence!" he cried with an imperious gesture to the demon. "She is no longer in thy power. Hence!"

And with a howl of rage and disappointment the familiar vanished.

"Alice Nutter," continued the monk, "thy safety has been purchased at the price of thy daughter's life. But it is of little moment, for she could not live long. Her gentle heart

was broken, and, when the demon stopped it for ever, he performed unintentionally a merciful act. She must rest in the same grave with him she loved so well during life. This tell to those who will come to thee anon. Thou art delivered from the yoke of Satan. Full expiation has been made. But earthly justice must be satisfied. Thou must pay the penalty for crimes committed in the flesh, but what thou sufferest here shall avail thee hereafter."

"I am content," she replied.

"Pass the rest of thy life in penitence and prayer," pursued the monk, "and let nothing divert thee from it; for, though free now, thou wilt be subject to evil influence and temptations to the last. Remember this."

"I will—I will," she rejoined.

"And now," he said, "kneel beside thy daughter's body and pray. I will return to thee ere many minutes be passed. One task more, and then my mission is ended."

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CHAPTER XIII.—THE MASQUE OF DEATH.

Short time as he had to await, James was unable to control his impatience. At last he arose, and, completely sobered by the recent strange events, descended the steps of the platform, and walked on without assistance.

"Let the yeomen of the guard keep back the crowd," he said to an officer, "and let none follow me but Sir Ralph Assheton, Master Nicholas Assheton, and Master Roger Nowell. When I call, let the prisoners be brought forward."

"Your Majesty shall be obeyed," replied the baronet, giving the necessary directions.

James then moved slowly forward in the direction of the pavilion; and, as he went, called Nicholas Assheton to him.

"Wha was that officer?" he asked.

"Your pardon, my liege, but I cannot answer the question," replied Nicholas.

"And why not, sir?" demanded the monarch, sharply.

"For reasons I will hereafter render to your Majesty, and which I am persuaded you will find satisfactory," rejoined the squire.

"Weel, weel, I dare say you are right," said the King. "But do you think he will keep his word?"

"I am sure of it," returned Nicholas.

"The time is come, then!" exclaimed James impatiently, and looking up at the pavilion.

"The time is come!" echoed a sepulchral voice.

"Did you speak?" inquired the monarch.

"No, sire," replied Nicholas; "but some one seemed to give you intimation that all is ready. Will it please you to go on?"

"Enter!" cried the voice.

"Wha speaks?" demanded the King. And, as no answer was returned, he continued—"I will not set foot in the structure. It may be a snare of Satan."

At this moment, the shutters of the windows flew open, showing that the pavilion was lighted up by many tapers within, while solemn strains of music issued from it.

"Enter!" repeated the voice.

"Have no fear, sire," said Nicholas.

"That canna be the wark o' the deil," cried James. "He does not delight in holy hymns and sweet music."

"That is a solemn dirge for the dead," observed Nicholas, as melodious voices mingled with the music.

"Weel, weel, I will go on at a' hazards," said James.

The doors flew open as the King and his attendants approached, and, as soon as they had passed through them, the valves swung back to their places.

A strange sad spectacle met their gaze. In the midst of the chamber stood a bier, covered with a velvet pall, and on it the bodies of a youth and maiden were deposited. Pale and beautiful were they as sculptured marble, and a smile sat upon their features. Side by side they were lying, with their arms enfolded, as if they had died in each other's embrace. A wreath of yew and cypress was placed above their heads, and flowers were scattered round them.

They were Richard and Alizon.

It was a deeply touching sight, and for some time none spake. The solemn dirge continued, interrupted only by the stifled sobs of the listeners.

"Both gone!" exclaimed Nicholas, in accents broken by emotion; "and so young—so good—so beautiful! Alas! alas!"

"She could not have bewitched him," said the King.

"Alizon was all purity and goodness," cried Nicholas, "and is now numbered with the angels."

"The guilty one is in thy hands, O King!" said the voice. "It is for thee to punish."

"And I will not hold my hand," said James. "The Devices shall assuredly perish. When I go from this chamber, I will have them conveyed under a strong escort to Lancaster Castle. They shall die by the hands of the common executioner."

"My mission, then, is complete," replied the voice. "I can rest in peace."

"Who art thou?" demanded the King.

"One who sinned deeply, but is now pardoned," replied the voice.

The King was for a moment lost in reflection, and then turned to depart. At this moment a kneeling figure, whom no one had hitherto noticed, arose from behind the bier. It was a lady, robed in mourning. So ghastly pale were her features, and so skeleton-like her attenuated frame, that James thought he beheld a spectre, and recoiled in terror. The figure advanced slowly towards him.

"Who, and what art thou, in Heaven's name?" he exclaimed.

"I am Alice Nutter, sire," replied the lady, prostrating herself before him.

"Alice Nutter, the witch!" cried the King. "Why—ay, I recollect thou wert here. I sent for thee, but recent terrible events had put thee clean out of my head. But expect no grace from me, evil woman. I will show thee none."

"I ask none, sire," replied the penitent. "I came to place myself in your hands, that justice may be done upon me."

"Ah!" exclaimed James. "Dost thou, indeed, repent thee of thy iniquities? Dost thou abjure the devil and all his works?"

"I do," replied the lady, fervently. "My compact with the Evil One has been broken by the prayers of my devoted daughter, who sacrificed herself for me, and thereby saved my soul alive. But human justice requires an expiation, and I am anxious to make it."

"Arise, ill-fated woman," said the king, much moved. "You must go to Lancaster, but, in consideration of your penitence, no indignity shall be shown you. You must be strictly guarded, but you shall not be taken with the other prisoners."

"I humbly thank your Majesty," replied the lady. "May I take a last farewell of my child?"

"Do so," replied James.

Alice Nutter then approached the bier, and, after gazing for a moment with deepest fondness upon the features of her daughter, imprinted a kiss upon her marble brow. In doing this her tears fell fast.

"You can weep, I see," observed the King. "You are a witch no longer."

"Ay, Heaven be praised! I can weep," she replied; "and so ease my over-burthened heart. Oh! sire, none but those who have experienced it can tell the agony of being denied this relief of nature. Farewell for ever, my blessed child!" she exclaimed, kissing her brow again; "and you, too, her beloved. Nicholas Assheton—it was her wish to be buried in the same grave with Richard. You will see it done, Nicholas?"

"I will—I will!" replied the squire, in a voice of deepest emotion.

"And I likewise promise it," said Sir Ralph Assheton. "They shall rest together in Whalley churchyard. It is well that Sir Richard and Dorothy are gone," he observed to Nicholas.

"It is indeed," said the squire, "or we should have had another funeral to perform. Pray Heaven it be not so now!"

"Have you any other request to prefer?" demanded the King.

"None whatever, sire," replied the lady, "except that I wish to make full restitution of all the land I have robbed him of, to Master Roger Nowell; and, as some compensation, I would fain add certain lands adjoining, which have been conveyed over to Sir Ralph and Nicholas Assheton, only annexing the condition that a small sum annually be given in dole to the poor of the parish, that I may be remembered in their prayers."

"We will see it done," said Sir Ralph and Nicholas.

"And I will see my part fulfilled," said Nowell. "For any wrong you have done me I now freely and fully forgive you, and may Heaven in its infinite mercy forgive you likewise!"

"Amen!" ejaculated the monarch. And all the others joined in the ejaculation.

The King then moved to the door, which was opened for him by the two Asshetons. At the foot of the steps stood Master Potts, attended by an officer of the guard and a party of halberdiers. In the midst of them, with their hands tied behind their backs, were Jem Device, his mother, Jennet, and poor Nance Redferne. Jem looked dogged and sullen, Elizabeth downcast, but Jennet retained her accustomed malignant expression. Poor Nance was the only one who excited any sympathy. Jennet's malice seemed now directed against Master Potts, whom she charged with having betrayed and deceived her.

"If Tib had na deserted me he should tear thee i' pieces, thou ill-favourt little monster," she cried.

"Monster in your own face, you hideous little wretch," exclaimed the indignant attorney. "If you use such opprobrious epithets I will have you gagged. You will be taken to Lancaster Castle, and hanged."

"Yo are os bad as ey am, and warse," replied Jennet, "and deserve hanging os weel, and the King shan knoa of your tricks," she vociferated, as James appeared at the door of the pavilion. "Yo wished to ensnare Alizon. Yo wished me to kill her. Ey was only your instrument."

"Stop her mouth—gag her!" cried Potts.

"Nah, nah!—they shanna stap my mouth—they shanna gag me," cried Jennet. "Ey win speak out. The King shan hear me. You are as bad os me."

"All malice, your Majesty—all malice," cried the attorney.

"Malice, nae doubt, in great pairt," replied James; "but some truth as weel, I fear, sir. And in any case it will prevent my doing any thing for you."

"There, you have ruined my hopes, you little wretch!" cried Potts, furiously.

"Ey'm reet glad on't," said Jennet. "Yo may tay me to Lonkester Castle, boh yo connahong me. Ey knoa that fu' weel. Ey shan get out, and then look to yersel, lad; for, os sure os ey'm Mother Demdike's grandowter, ey'n plague the life out o' ye."

"Take the prisoners away, and let them be conveyed under a strict escort to Lancaster Castle," said James.

"And, as the assizes commence next week, quick work will be made with them, your Majesty," observed Potts. "Their guilt can be incontestably proved, so they are sure to be found guilty, sure to be hanged, sire."

As the prisoners were removed, Nance Redferne looked round her, and, catching the eye of Nicholas, made a slight motion with her head, as if bidding him farewell.

The squire returned the mute valediction.

"Poor Nance!" he exclaimed, compassionately, "I sincerely pity her. Would there was any means of saving her!"

"There is none," observed Sir Ralph Assheton. "And you may be thankful you are not brought in as her accomplice."

As Jennet was taken away, she continued to hurl threats and imprecations against Potts.

Another officer of the guard was then summoned, and when he came, James said, "One other prisoner remains within the pavilion. She likewise must be conveyed to Lancaster Castle but in a litter, and not with the other prisoners."

Attended by Sir Richard Hoghton, the monarch then proceeded to his lodgings in the Tower.

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CHAPTER XIV.—"ONE GRAVE."

Notwithstanding the sad occurrences above detailed, James remained for two more days the guest of Sir Richard Hoghton, enjoying his princely hospitality, hunting in the park, carousing in the great hall, and witnessing all kinds of sports.

Nothing, indeed, was left to remind him of the sad events that had occurred. The prisoners were taken that night to Lancaster Castle, and Master Potts accompanied the escort, to be ready for the assizes. The three judges proceeded thither at the end of the week. The attendance of Roger Nowell, Nicholas, and Sir Ralph Assheton, was also required as witnesses at the trial of the witches.

Sir Richard Assheton and Dorothy had returned, as already stated, to Middleton; and, though the intelligence of the death of Richard and Alizon was communicated to them with infinite caution, the shock to both was very great, especially to Dorothy, who was long—very long—in recovering from it.

Nicholas's vivacity of temperament made him feel the loss of his cousin at first very keenly, but it soon wore off. He vowed amendment and reformation on the model of John Bruen, whose life offered so striking a contrast to his own, that it has very properly been placed in opposition by a reverend moralist; but I regret to say that he did not carry out his praiseworthy intentions. He was apt to make a joke of John Bruen, instead of imitating his example. He professed to devote himself to his excellent wife—but his old habits would break out; and, I am sorry to say, he was often to be found in the alehouse, and was just as fond of horse-racing, cock-fighting, hunting, fishing, and all other sports, as ever. Occasionally he occupied a leisure or a rainy day with a Journal,[6] parts of which have been preserved; but he set down in it few of the terrible events here related, probably because they were of too painful a nature to be recorded. He died in 1625—at the early age of thirty-five.

But to go back. A few days after the tragical events at Hoghton Tower, the whole village of Whalley was astir. But it was no festive occasion—no merry-making—that called forth the inhabitants, for grief sat upon every countenance. The day, too, was gloomy. The feathered summits of Whalley Nab were wreathed in mist, and a fine rain descended in the valley. The Calder looked dull and discoloured as it flowed past the walls of the ancient Abbey. The church bell tolled mournfully, and a large concourse was gathered in the churchyard. Not far from one of the three crosses of Paulinus, which stood nearest the church porch, a grave had been digged, and almost every one looked into it. The

grave, it was said, was intended to hold two coffins. Soon after this, a train of mourners issued from the ancient Abbey gateway, and sure enough there were two coffins on the shoulders of the bearers; They were met at the gate by Doctor Ormerod, who was so deeply affected as scarcely to be able to perform the needful offices for the dead. The principal mourners were Sir Richard Assheton of Middleton, Sir Ralph Assheton, and Nicholas. Amid the tears and sobs of all the bystanders, the bodies of Richard and Alizon were committed to the earth—laid together in one grave.

Thus was their latest wish fulfilled. Flowers grew upon the turf that covered them, and there was the earliest primrose seen, and the latest violet. Many a fond youth and trusting maiden have visited their lowly tomb, and many a tear, fresh from the heart, has dropped upon the sod covering the ill-fated lovers.

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CHAPTER XV.—LANCASTER CASTLE.

Behold the grim and giant fabric, rebuilt and strengthened by

"Old John of Gaunt, time-honour'd Lancaster!"

Within one of its turrets called John of Gaunt's Chair, and at eventide, stands a lady under the care of a jailer. It is the last sunset she will ever see—the last time she will look upon the beauties of earth; for she is a prisoner, condemned to die an ignominious and terrible death, and her execution will take place on the morrow. Leaving her alone within the turret, the jailer locks the door and stands outside it. The lady casts a long, lingering look around. All nature seems so beautiful—so attractive. The sunset upon the broad watery sands of Morecambe Bay is exquisite in varied tints. The fells of Furness look black and bold, and the windings of the Lune are clearly traced out. But she casts a wistful glance towards the mountainous ridges of Lancashire, and fancies she can detect amongst the heights the rounded summit of Pendle Hill. Then her gaze settles upon the grey old town beneath her, and, as her glance wanders over it, certain terrible objects arrest it. In the area before the Castle she sees a ring of tall stakes. She knows well their purpose, and counts them. They are thirteen in number. Thirteen wretched beings are to be burned on the morrow. Not far from the stakes are an enormous pile of fagots. All is prepared. Fascinated by the sight, she remains gazing at the place of execution for some time, and when she turns, she beholds a tall dark man standing beside her. At first she thinks it is the jailer, and is about to tell the man she is ready to descend to her cell, when she recognises him, and recoils in terror.

"Thou here—again!" she cried.

"I can save thee from the stake, if thou wilt, Alice Nutter," he said.

"Hence!" she exclaimed. "Thou temptest me in vain. Hence!"

And with a howl of rage the demon disappeared.

Conveyed back to her cell, situated within the dread Dungeon Tower, Alice Nutter passed the whole of that night in prayer. Towards four o'clock, wearied out, she dropped into a slumber; and when the clergyman, from whom she had received spiritual consolation, came to her cell, he found her still sleeping, but with a sweet smile upon her lips—the first he had ever beheld there.

Unwilling to disturb her, he knelt down and prayed by her side. At length the jailer came, and the executioner's aids. The divine then laid his hand upon her shoulder, and she instantly arose.

"I am ready," she said, cheerfully.

"You have had a happy dream, daughter," he observed.

"A blessed dream, reverend sir," she replied. "I thought I saw my children, Richard and Alizon, in a fair garden—oh! how angelic they looked—and they told me I should be with them soon."

"And I doubt not the vision will be realised," replied the clergyman. "Your redemption is fully worked out, and your salvation, I trust, secured. And now you must prepare for your last trial."

"I am fully prepared," she replied; "but will you not go to the others?"

"Alas! my dear daughter," he replied, "they all, excepting Nance Redferne, refuse my services, and will perish in their iniquities."

"Then go to her, sir, I entreat of you," she said; "she may yet be saved. But what of Jennet? Is she, too, to die?"

"No," replied the divine; "being evidence against her relatives, her life is spared."

"Heaven grant she do no more mischief!" exclaimed Alice Nutter.

She then submitted herself to the executioner's assistants, and was led forth. On issuing into the open air a change came over her, and such an exceeding faintness that she had to be supported. She was led towards the stake in this state; but she grew fainter and fainter, and at last fell back in the arms of the men that supported her. Still they carried her on. When the executioner put out his hand to receive her from his aids, she was found to be quite dead. Nevertheless, he tied her to the stake, and her body was consumed. Hundreds of spectators beheld those terrible fires, and exulted in the torments of the miserable sufferers. Their shrieks and blasphemies were terrific, and the place resembled a hell upon earth.

Jennet escaped, to the dismay of Master Potts, who feared she would wreak her threatened vengeance upon him. And, indeed, he did suffer from aches and cramps, which he attributed to her; but which were more reasonably supposed to be owing to

rheum caught in the marshes of Pendle Forest. He had, however, the pleasure of assisting at her execution, when some years afterwards retributive justice overtook her.

Jennet was the last of the Lancashire Witches. Ever since then witchcraft has taken a new form with the ladies of the county—though their fascination and spells are as potent as ever. Few can now escape them,—few desire to do so. But to all who are afraid of a bright eye and a blooming cheek, and who desire to adhere to a bachelor's condition—to such I should say, "BEWARE OF THE LANCASHIRE WITCHES!"

THE END

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