

## DAME THE SEVENTH--ANNA, LADY BAXBY

By the Colonel

It was in the time of the great Civil War--if I should not rather, as a loyal subject, call it, with Clarendon, the Great Rebellion. It was, I say, at that unhappy period of our history, that towards the autumn of a particular year, the Parliament forces sat down before Sherton Castle with over seven thousand foot and four pieces of cannon. The Castle, as we all know, was in that century owned and occupied by one of the Earls of Severn, and garrisoned for his assistance by a certain noble Marquis who commanded the King's troops in these parts. The said Earl, as well as the young Lord Baxby, his eldest son, were away from home just now, raising forces for the King elsewhere. But there were present in the Castle, when the besiegers arrived before it, the son's fair wife Lady Baxby, and her servants, together with some friends and near relatives of her husband; and the defence was so good and well-considered that they anticipated no great danger.

The Parliamentary forces were also commanded by a noble lord--for the nobility were by no means, at this stage of the war, all on the King's side--and it had been observed during his approach in the night-time, and in the morning when the reconnoitring took place, that he appeared sad and much depressed. The truth was that, by a strange freak of destiny, it had come to pass that the stronghold he was set to reduce was the home of his own sister, whom he had tenderly loved during her maidenhood, and

whom he loved now, in spite of the estrangement which had resulted from hostilities with her husband's family. He believed, too, that, notwithstanding this cruel division, she still was sincerely attached to him.

His hesitation to point his ordnance at the walls was inexplicable to those who were strangers to his family history. He remained in the field on the north side of the Castle (called by his name to this day because of his encampment there) till it occurred to him to send a messenger to his sister Anna with a letter, in which he earnestly requested her, as she valued her life, to steal out of the place by the little gate to the south, and make away in that direction to the residence of some friends.

Shortly after he saw, to his great surprise, coming from the front of the Castle walls a lady on horseback, with a single attendant. She rode straight forward into the field, and up the slope to where his army and tents were spread. It was not till she got quite near that he discerned her to be his sister Anna; and much was he alarmed that she should have run such risk as to sally out in the face of his forces without knowledge of their proceedings, when at any moment their first discharge might have burst forth, to her own destruction in such exposure. She dismounted before she was quite close to him, and he saw that her familiar face, though pale, was not at all tearful, as it would have been in their younger days. Indeed, if the particulars as handed down are to be believed, he was in a more tearful state than she, in his anxiety about her. He called her into his tent, out of the gaze of those around; for

though many of the soldiers were honest and serious-minded men, he could not bear that she who had been his dear companion in childhood should be exposed to curious observation in this her great grief.

When they were alone in the tent he clasped her in his arms, for he had not seen her since those happier days when, at the commencement of the war, her husband and himself had been of the same mind about the arbitrary conduct of the King, and had little dreamt that they would not go to extremes together. She was the calmest of the two, it is said, and was the first to speak connectedly.

'William, I have come to you,' said she, 'but not to save myself as you suppose. Why, oh, why do you persist in supporting this disloyal cause, and grieving us so?'

'Say not that,' he replied hastily. 'If truth hides at the bottom of a well, why should you suppose justice to be in high places? I am for the right at any price. Anna, leave the Castle; you are my sister; come away, my dear, and save thy life!'

'Never!' says she. 'Do you plan to carry out this attack, and level the Castle indeed?'

'Most certainly I do,' says he. 'What meaneth this army around us if not so?'

'Then you will find the bones of your sister buried in the ruins you cause!' said she. And without another word she turned and left him.

'Anna--abide with me!' he entreated. 'Blood is thicker than water, and what is there in common between you and your husband now?'

But she shook her head and would not hear him and hastening out, mounted

her horse, and returned towards the Castle as she had come. Ay, many's the time when I have been riding to hounds across that field that I have thought of that scene!

When she had quite gone down the field, and over the intervening ground, and round the bastion, so that he could no longer even see the tip of her mare's white tail, he was much more deeply moved by emotions concerning her and her welfare than he had been while she was before him. He wildly reproached himself that he had not detained her by force for her own good, so that, come what might, she would be under his protection and not under that of her husband, whose impulsive nature rendered him too open to instantaneous impressions and sudden changes of plan; he was now acting in this cause and now in that, and lacked the cool judgment necessary for the protection of a woman in these troubled times. Her brother thought of her words again and again, and sighed, and even considered if a sister were not of more value than a principle, and if he would not have acted more naturally in throwing in his lot with hers.

The delay of the besiegers in attacking the Castle was said to be entirely owing to this distraction on the part of their leader, who remained on the spot attempting some indecisive operations, and parleying with the Marquis, then in command, with far inferior forces, within the Castle. It never occurred to him that in the meantime the young Lady Baxby, his sister, was in much the same mood as himself. Her brother's familiar voice and eyes, much worn and fatigued by keeping the field, and by family distractions on account of this unhappy feud, rose upon her vision all the afternoon, and as day waned she grew more and more Parliamentary in her principles, though the only arguments which had addressed themselves to her were those of family ties.

Her husband, General Lord Baxby, had been expected to return all the day from his excursion into the east of the county, a message having been sent to him informing him of what had happened at home; and in the evening he arrived with reinforcements in unexpected numbers. Her brother retreated before these to a hill near Ivell, four or five miles off, to afford the men and himself some repose. Lord Baxby duly placed his forces, and there was no longer any immediate danger. By this time Lady Baxby's feelings were more Parliamentary than ever, and in her fancy the fagged countenance of her brother, beaten back by her husband, seemed to reproach her for heartlessness. When her husband entered her apartment, ruddy and boisterous, and full of hope, she received him but sadly; and upon his casually uttering some slighting words about her brother's withdrawal, which seemed to convey an imputation upon his courage, she resented them, and retorted that he, Lord Baxby himself, had

been against the Court-party at first, where it would be much more to his credit if he were at present, and showing her brother's consistency of opinion, instead of supporting the lying policy of the King (as she called it) for the sake of a barren principle of loyalty, which was but an empty expression when a King was not at one with his people. The dissension grew bitter between them, reaching to little less than a hot quarrel, both being quick-tempered souls.

Lord Baxby was weary with his long day's march and other excitements, and soon retired to bed. His lady followed some time after. Her husband slept profoundly, but not so she; she sat brooding by the window-slit, and lifting the curtain looked forth upon the hills without.

In the silence between the footfalls of the sentinels she could hear faint sounds of her brother's camp on the distant hills, where the soldiery had hardly settled as yet into their bivouac since their evening's retreat. The first frosts of autumn had touched the grass, and shrivelled the more delicate leaves of the creepers; and she thought of William sleeping on the chilly ground, under the strain of these hardships. Tears flooded her eyes as she returned to her husband's imputations upon his courage, as if there could be any doubt of Lord William's courage after what he had done in the past days.

Lord Baxby's long and reposeful breathings in his comfortable bed vexed her now, and she came to a determination on an impulse. Hastily lighting a taper, she wrote on a scrap of paper:

'Blood is thicker than water, dear William--I will come;' and with this in her hand, she went to the door of the room, and out upon the stairs; on second thoughts turning back for a moment, to put on her husband's hat and cloak--not the one he was daily wearing--that if seen in the twilight she might at a casual glance appear as some lad or hanger-on of one of the household women; thus accoutred she descended a flight of circular stairs, at the bottom of which was a door opening upon the terrace towards the west, in the direction of her brother's position. Her object was to slip out without the sentry seeing her, get to the stables, arouse one of the varlets, and send him ahead of her along the highway with the note to warn her brother of her approach, to throw in her lot with his.

She was still in the shadow of the wall on the west terrace, waiting for the sentinel to be quite out of the way, when her ears were greeted by a voice, saying, from the adjoining shade--

'Here I be!'

The tones were the tones of a woman. Lady Baxby made no reply, and stood close to the wall.

'My Lord Baxby,' the voice continued; and she could recognize in it the local accent of some girl from the little town of Sherton, close at hand.

'I be tired of waiting, my dear Lord Baxby! I was afeard you would never

come!

Lady Baxby flushed hot to her toes.

'How the wench loves him!' she said to herself, reasoning from the tones of the voice, which were plaintive and sweet and tender as a bird's. She changed from the home-hating truant to the strategic wife in one moment.

'Hist!' she said.

'My lord, you told me ten o'clock, and 'tis near twelve now,' continues the other. 'How could ye keep me waiting so if you love me as you said? I should have stuck to my lover in the Parliament troops if it had not been for thee, my dear lord!'

There was not the least doubt that Lady Baxby had been mistaken for her husband by this intriguing damsel. Here was a pretty underhand business! Here were sly manoeuvrings! Here was faithlessness! Here was a precious assignation surprised in the midst! Her wicked husband, whom till this very moment she had ever deemed the soul of good faith--how could he!

Lady Baxby precipitately retreated to the door in the turret, closed it, locked it, and ascended one round of the staircase, where there was a loophole. 'I am not coming! I, Lord Baxby, despise ye and all your wanton tribe!' she hissed through the opening; and then crept upstairs, as firmly rooted in Royalist principles as any man in the Castle.



Her husband still slept the sleep of the weary, well-fed, and well-drunken, if not of the just; and Lady Baxby quickly disrobed herself without assistance--being, indeed, supposed by her woman to have retired to rest long ago. Before lying down, she noiselessly locked the door and placed the key under her pillow. More than that, she got a staylace, and, creeping up to her lord, in great stealth tied the lace in a tight knot to one of his long locks of hair, attaching the other end of the lace to the bedpost; for, being tired herself now, she feared she might sleep heavily; and, if her husband should wake, this would be a delicate hint that she had discovered all.

It is added that, to make assurance trebly sure, her gentle ladyship, when she had lain down to rest, held her lord's hand in her own during the whole of the night. But this is old-wives' gossip, and not corroborated. What Lord Baxby thought and said when he awoke the next morning, and found himself so strangely tethered, is likewise only matter of conjecture; though there is no reason to suppose that his rage was great. The extent of his culpability as regards the intrigue was this much; that, while halting at a cross-road near Sherton that day, he had flirted with a pretty young woman, who seemed nothing loth, and had invited her to the Castle terrace after dark--an invitation which he quite forgot on his arrival home.

The subsequent relations of Lord and Lady Baxby were not again greatly embittered by quarrels, so far as is known; though the husband's conduct

in later life was occasionally eccentric, and the vicissitudes of his public career culminated in long exile. The siege of the Castle was not regularly undertaken till two or three years later than the time I have been describing, when Lady Baxby and all the women therein, except the wife of the then Governor, had been removed to safe distance. That memorable siege of fifteen days by Fairfax, and the surrender of the old place on an August evening, is matter of history, and need not be told by me.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Man of Family spoke approvingly across to the Colonel when the Club had done smiling, declaring that the story was an absolutely faithful page of history, as he had good reason to know, his own people having been engaged in that well-known scrimmage. He asked if the Colonel had ever heard the equally well-authenticated, though less martial tale of a certain Lady Penelope, who lived in the same century, and not a score of miles from the same place?

The Colonel had not heard it, nor had anybody except the local historian; and the inquirer was induced to proceed forthwith.