MASTER JOHN HORSELEIGH, KNIGHT

In the earliest and mustiest volume of the Havenpool marriage registers (said the thin-faced gentleman) this entry may still be read by any one curious enough to decipher the crabbed handwriting of the date. I took a copy of it when I was last there; and it runs thus (he had opened his pocket-book, and now read aloud the extract; afterwards handing round the book to us, wherein we saw transcribed the following)--

> Mastr John Horseleigh, Knyght, of the p'ysshe of Clyffton was maryd to Edith the wyffe late off John Stocker, m'chawnte of Havenpool the xiiij daje of December be p'vylegge gevyn by our sup'me hedd of the chyrche of Ingelonde Kynge Henry the viii th 1539.

Now, if you turn to the long and elaborate pedigree of the ancient family of the Horseleighs of Clyfton Horseleigh, you will find no mention whatever of this alliance, notwithstanding the privilege given by the Sovereign and head of the Church; the said Sir John being therein chronicled as marrying, at a date apparently earlier than the above, the daughter and heiress of Richard Phelipson, of Montislope, in Nether Wessex, a lady who outlived him, of which marriage there were issue two daughters and a son, who succeeded him in his estates. How are we to account for these, as it would seem, contemporaneous wives? A strange local tradition only can help us, and this can be briefly told.

One evening in the autumn of the year 1540 or 1541, a young sailor, whose Christian name was Roger, but whose surname is not known, landed at his native place of Havenpool, on the South Wessex coast, after a voyage in the Newfoundland trade, then newly sprung into existence. He returned in the ship Primrose with a cargo of 'trayne oyle brought home from the New Founde Lande,' to quote from the town records of the date. During his absence of two summers and a winter, which made up the term of a Newfoundland 'spell,' many unlooked-for changes had occurred within the quiet little seaport, some of which closely affected Roger the sailor. At the time of his departure his only sister Edith had become the bride of one Stocker, a respectable townsman, and part owner of the brig in which Roger had sailed; and it was to the house of this couple, his only relatives, that the young man directed his steps. On trying the door in Quay Street he found it locked, and then observed that the windows were boarded up. Inquiring of a bystander, he learnt for the first time of the death of his brother-in-law, though that event had taken place nearly eighteen months before.

'And my sister Edith?' asked Roger.

'She's married again--as they do say, and hath been so these twelve months. I don't vouch for the truth o't, though if she isn't she ought to be.'

Roger's face grew dark. He was a man with a considerable reserve of strong passion, and he asked his informant what he meant by speaking

thus.

The man explained that shortly after the young woman's bereavement a stranger had come to the port. He had seen her moping on the quay, had been attracted by her youth and loneliness, and in an extraordinarily brief wooing had completely fascinated her--had carried her off, and, as was reported, had married her. Though he had come by water, he was supposed to live no very great distance off by land. They were last heard of at Oozewood, in Upper Wessex, at the house of one Wall, a timber-merchant, where, he believed, she still had a lodging, though her husband, if he were lawfully that much, was but an occasional visitor to the place.

'The stranger?' asked Roger. 'Did you see him? What manner of man was he?'

'I liked him not,' said the other. 'He seemed of that kind that hath something to conceal, and as he walked with her he ever and anon turned his head and gazed behind him, as if he much feared an unwelcome pursuer.
But, faith,' continued he, 'it may have been the man's anxiety only. Yet did I not like him.'

'Was he older than my sister?' Roger asked.

'Ay--much older; from a dozen to a score of years older. A man of some

position, maybe, playing an amorous game for the pleasure of the hour. Who knoweth but that he have a wife already? Many have done the thing hereabouts of late.'

Having paid a visit to the graves of his relatives, the sailor next day went along the straight road which, then a lane, now a highway, conducted to the curious little inland town named by the Havenpool man. It is unnecessary to describe Oozewood on the South-Avon. It has a railway at the present day; but thirty years of steam traffic past its precincts have hardly modified its original features. Surrounded by a sort of fresh-water lagoon, dividing it from meadows and coppice, its ancient thatch and timber houses have barely made way even in the front street for the ubiquitous modern brick and slate. It neither increases nor diminishes in size; it is difficult to say what the inhabitants find to do, for, though trades in woodware are still carried on, there cannot be enough of this class of work nowadays to maintain all the householders, the forests around having been so greatly thinned and curtailed. At the time of this tradition the forests were dense, artificers in wood abounded, and the timber trade was brisk. Every house in the town, without exception, was of oak framework, filled in with plaster, and covered with thatch, the chimney being the only brick portion of the structure. Inquiry soon brought Roger the sailor to the door of Wall, the timber-dealer referred to, but it was some time before he was able to gain admission to the lodging of his sister, the people having plainly received directions not to welcome strangers.

She was sitting in an upper room on one of the lath-backed, willow-bottomed 'shepherd's' chairs, made on the spot then as to this day, and as they were probably made there in the days of the Heptarchy. In her lap was an infant, which she had been suckling, though now it had fallen asleep; so had the young mother herself for a few minutes, under the drowsing effects of solitude. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, she awoke, started up with a glad cry, and ran to the door, opening which she met her brother on the threshold.

'O, this is merry; I didn't expect 'ee!' she said. 'Ah, Roger--I thought it was John.' Her tones fell to disappointment.

The sailor kissed her, looked at her sternly for a few moments, and pointing to the infant, said, 'You mean the father of this?'

'Yes, my husband,' said Edith.

'I hope so,' he answered.

'Why, Roger, I'm married--of a truth am I!' she cried.

'Shame upon 'ee, if true! If not true, worse. Master Stocker was an honest man, and ye should have respected his memory longer. Where is thy husband?'

'He comes often. I thought it was he now. Our marriage has to be kept

secret for a while--it was done privily for certain reasons; but we was married at church like honest folk--afore God we were, Roger, six months after poor Stocker's death.'

''Twas too soon,' said Roger.

'I was living in a house alone; I had nowhere to go to. You were far over sea in the New Found Land, and John took me and brought me here.'

'How often doth he come?' says Roger again.

'Once or twice weekly,' says she.

'I wish th' 'dst waited till I returned, dear Edy,' he said. 'It mid be you are a wife--I hope so. But, if so, why this mystery? Why this mean and cramped lodging in this lonely copse-circled town? Of what standing is your husband, and of where?'

'He is of gentle breeding--his name is John. I am not free to tell his family-name. He is said to be of London, for safety' sake; but he really lives in the county next adjoining this.'

'Where in the next county?'

'I do not know. He has preferred not to tell me, that I may not have the secret forced from me, to his and my hurt, by bringing the marriage to

the ears of his kinsfolk and friends.'

Her brother's face flushed. 'Our people have been honest townsmen, well-reputed for long; why should you readily take such humbling from a sojourner of whom th' 'st know nothing?'

They remained in constrained converse till her quick ear caught a sound, for which she might have been waiting--a horse's footfall. 'It is John!' said she. 'This is his night--Saturday.'

'Don't be frightened lest he should find me here!' said Roger. 'I am on the point of leaving. I wish not to be a third party. Say nothing at all about my visit, if it will incommode you so to do. I will see thee before I go afloat again.'

Speaking thus he left the room, and descending the staircase let himself out by the front door, thinking he might obtain a glimpse of the approaching horseman. But that traveller had in the meantime gone stealthily round to the back of the homestead, and peering along the pinion-end of the house Roger discerned him unbridling and haltering his horse with his own hands in the shed there.

Roger retired to the neighbouring inn called the Black Lamb, and meditated. This mysterious method of approach determined him, after all, not to leave the place till he had ascertained more definite facts of his sister's position--whether she were the deluded victim of the stranger or

the wife she obviously believed herself to be. Having eaten some supper, he left the inn, it being now about eleven o'clock. He first looked into the shed, and, finding the horse still standing there, waited irresolutely near the door of his sister's lodging. Half an hour elapsed, and, while thinking he would climb into a loft hard by for a night's rest, there seemed to be a movement within the shutters of the sitting-room that his sister occupied. Roger hid himself behind a faggot-stack near the back door, rightly divining that his sister's visitor would emerge by the way he had entered. The door opened, and the candle she held in her hand lighted for a moment the stranger's form, showing it to be that of a tall and handsome personage, about forty years of age, and apparently of a superior position in life. Edith was assisting him to cloak himself, which being done he took leave of her with a kiss and left the house. From the door she watched him bridle and saddle his horse, and having mounted and waved an adieu to her as she stood candle in hand, he turned out of the yard and rode away.

The horse which bore him was, or seemed to be, a little lame, and Roger fancied from this that the rider's journey was not likely to be a long one. Being light of foot he followed apace, having no great difficulty on such a still night in keeping within earshot some few miles, the horseman pausing more than once. In this pursuit Roger discovered the rider to choose bridle-tracks and open commons in preference to any high road. The distance soon began to prove a more trying one than he had bargained for; and when out of breath and in some despair of being able to ascertain the man's identity, he perceived an ass standing in the

starlight under a hayrick, from which the animal was helping itself to periodic mouthfuls.

The story goes that Roger caught the ass, mounted, and again resumed the trail of the unconscious horseman, which feat may have been possible to a nautical young fellow, though one can hardly understand how a sailor would ride such an animal without bridle or saddle, and strange to his hands, unless the creature were extraordinarily docile. This question, however, is immaterial. Suffice it to say that at dawn the following morning Roger beheld his sister's lover or husband entering the gates of a large and well-timbered park on the south-western verge of the White Hart Forest (as it was then called), now known to everybody as the Vale of Blackmoor. Thereupon the sailor discarded his steed, and finding for himself an obscurer entrance to the same park a little further on, he crossed the grass to reconnoitre.

He presently perceived amid the trees before him a mansion which, new to himself, was one of the best known in the county at that time. Of this fine manorial residence hardly a trace now remains; but a manuscript dated some years later than the events we are regarding describes it in terms from which the imagination may construct a singularly clear and vivid picture. This record presents it as consisting of 'a faire yellow freestone building, partly two and partly three storeys; a faire halle and parlour, both waynscotted; a faire dyning roome and withdrawing roome, and many good lodgings; a kitchen adjoyninge backwarde to one end of the dwelling-house, with a faire passage from it into the halle,

parlour, and dyninge roome, and sellars adjoyninge.

'In the front of the house a square greene court, and a curious gatehouse with lodgings in it, standing with the front of the house to the south; in a large outer court three stables, a coach-house, a large barne, and a stable for oxen and kyne, and all houses necessary.

'Without the gatehouse, paled in, a large square greene, in which standeth a faire chappell; of the south-east side of the greene court, towards the river, a large garden.

'Of the south-west side of the greene court is a large bowling greene, with fower mounted walks about it, all walled about with a batteled wall, and sett with all sorts of fruit; and out of it into the feildes there are large walks under many tall elmes orderly planted.'

Then follows a description of the orchards and gardens; the servants' offices, brewhouse, bakehouse, dairy, pigeon-houses, and corn-mill; the river and its abundance of fish; the warren, the coppices, the walks; ending thus--

'And all the country north of the house, open champaign, sandy feildes, very dry and pleasant for all kindes of recreation, huntinge, and hawkinge, and profitble for tillage . . . The house hath a large prospect east, south, and west, over a very large and pleasant vale . . . is seated from the good markett towns of Sherton Abbas three miles, and Ivel

a mile, that plentifully yield all manner of provision; and within twelve miles of the south sea.'

It was on the grass before this seductive and picturesque structure that the sailor stood at gaze under the elms in the dim dawn of Sunday morning, and saw to his surprise his sister's lover and horse vanish within the court of the building.

Perplexed and weary, Roger slowly retreated, more than ever convinced that something was wrong in his sister's position. He crossed the bowling green to the avenue of elms, and, bent on further research, was about to climb into one of these, when, looking below, he saw a heap of hay apparently for horses or deer. Into this he crept, and, having eaten a crust of bread which he had hastily thrust into his pocket at the inn, he curled up and fell asleep, the hay forming a comfortable bed, and quite covering him over.

He slept soundly and long, and was awakened by the sound of a bell. On peering from the hay he found the time had advanced to full day; the sun was shining brightly. The bell was that of the 'faire chappell' on the green outside the gatehouse, and it was calling to matins. Presently the priest crossed the green to a little side-door in the chancel, and then from the gateway of the mansion emerged the household, the tall man whom Roger had seen with his sister on the previous night, on his arm being a portly dame, and, running beside the pair, two little girls and a boy. These all entered the chapel, and the bell having ceased and the environs

become clear, the sailor crept out from his hiding.

He sauntered towards the chapel, the opening words of the service being audible within. While standing by the porch he saw a belated servitor approaching from the kitchen-court to attend the service also. Roger carelessly accosted him, and asked, as an idle wanderer, the name of the family he had just seen cross over from the mansion.

'Od zounds! if ye modden be a stranger here in very truth, goodman. That wer Sir John and his dame, and his children Elizabeth, Mary, and John.'

'I be from foreign parts. Sir John what d'ye call'n?'

'Master John Horseleigh, Knight, who had a'most as much lond by inheritance of his mother as 'a had by his father, and likewise some by his wife. Why, bain't his arms dree goolden horses' heads, and idden his lady the daughter of Master Richard Phelipson, of Montislope, in Nether Wessex, known to us all?'

'It mid be so, and yet it mid not. However, th' 'lt miss thy prayers for such an honest knight's welfare, and I have to traipse seaward many miles.'

He went onward, and as he walked continued saying to himself, 'Now to that poor wronged fool Edy. The fond thing! I thought it; 'twas too quick--she was ever amorous. What's to become of her! God wot! How be

I going to face her with the news, and how be I to hold it from her? To bring this disgrace on my father's honoured name, a double-tongued knave!' He turned and shook his fist at the chapel and all in it, and resumed his way.

Perhaps it was owing to the perplexity of his mind that, instead of returning by the direct road towards his sister's obscure lodging in the next county, he followed the highway to Casterbridge, some fifteen miles off, where he remained drinking hard all that afternoon and evening, and where he lay that and two or three succeeding nights, wandering thence along the Anglebury road to some village that way, and lying the Friday night after at his native place of Havenpool. The sight of the familiar objects there seems to have stirred him anew to action, and the next morning he was observed pursuing the way to Oozewood that he had followed
on the Saturday previous, reckoning, no doubt, that Saturday night would, as before, be a time for finding Sir John with his sister again.

He delayed to reach the place till just before sunset. His sister was walking in the meadows at the foot of the garden, with a nursemaid who carried the baby, and she looked up pensively when he approached. Anxiety as to her position had already told upon her once rosy cheeks and lucid eyes. But concern for herself and child was displaced for the moment by her regard of Roger's worn and haggard face.

'Why--you are sick, Roger--you are tired! Where have you been these many

days? Why not keep me company a bit--my husband is much away? And we
have hardly spoke at all of dear father and of your voyage to the New Land. Why did you go away so suddenly? There is a spare chamber at my lodging.'

'Come indoors,' he said. 'We'll talk now--talk a good deal. As for him [nodding to the child], better heave him into the river; better for him and you!'

She forced a laugh, as if she tried to see a good joke in the remark, and they went silently indoors.

'A miserable hole!' said Roger, looking round the room.

'Nay, but 'tis very pretty!'

'Not after what I've seen. Did he marry 'ee at church in orderly fashion?'

'He did sure--at our church at Havenpool.'

'But in a privy way?'

'Ay--because of his friends--it was at night-time.'

'Ede, ye fond one--for all that he's not thy husband! Th' 'rt not his wife; and the child is a bastard. He hath a wife and children of his own rank, and bearing his name; and that's Sir John Horseleigh, of Clyfton Horseleigh, and not plain Jack, as you think him, and your lawful husband. The sacrament of marriage is no safeguard nowadays. The King's new-made headship of the Church hath led men to practise these tricks lightly.'

She had turned white. 'That's not true, Roger!' she said. 'You are in liquor, my brother, and you know not what you say! Your seafaring years have taught 'ee bad things!'

'Edith--I've seen them; wife and family--all. How canst--'

They were sitting in the gathered darkness, and at that moment steps were heard without. 'Go out this way,' she said. 'It is my husband. He must not see thee in this mood. Get away till to-morrow, Roger, as you care for me.'

She pushed her brother through a door leading to the back stairs, and almost as soon as it was closed her visitor entered. Roger, however, did not retreat down the stairs; he stood and looked through the bobbin-hole. If the visitor turned out to be Sir John, he had determined to confront him.

It was the knight. She had struck a light on his entry, and he kissed

the child, and took Edith tenderly by the shoulders, looking into her face.

'Something's gone awry wi' my dear!' he said. 'What is it? What's the matter?'

'O, Jack!' she cried. 'I have heard such a fearsome rumour--what doth it mean? He who told me is my best friend. He must be deceived! But who deceived him, and why? Jack, I was just told that you had a wife living when you married me, and have her still!'

'A wife?--H'm.'

'Yes, and children. Say no, say no!'

'By God! I have no lawful wife but you; and as for children, many or few, they are all bastards, save this one alone!'

'And that you be Sir John Horseleigh of Clyfton?'

'I mid be. I have never said so to 'ee.'

'But Sir John is known to have a lady, and issue of her!'

The knight looked down. 'How did thy mind get filled with such as this?' he asked.

'One of my kindred came.'

'A traitor! Why should he mar our life? Ah! you said you had a brother at sea--where is he now?'

'Here!' came from close behind him. And flinging open the door, Roger faced the intruder. 'Liar!' he said, 'to call thyself her husband!'

Sir John fired up, and made a rush at the sailor, who seized him by the collar, and in the wrestle they both fell, Roger under. But in a few seconds he contrived to extricate his right arm, and drawing from his belt a knife which he wore attached to a cord round his neck he opened it with his teeth, and struck it into the breast of Sir John stretched above him. Edith had during these moments run into the next room to place the child in safety, and when she came back the knight was relaxing his hold on Roger's throat. He rolled over upon his back and groaned.

The only witness of the scene save the three concerned was the nursemaid, who had brought in the child on its father's arrival. She stated afterwards that nobody suspected Sir John had received his death wound; yet it was so, though he did not die for a long while, meaning thereby an hour or two; that Mistress Edith continually endeavoured to staunch the blood, calling her brother Roger a wretch, and ordering him to get himself gone; on which order he acted, after a gloomy pause, by opening the window, and letting himself down by the sill to the ground.

It was then that Sir John, in difficult accents, made his dying declaration to the nurse and Edith, and, later, the apothecary; which was to this purport, that the Dame Horseleigh who passed as his wife at Clyfton, and who had borne him three children, was in truth and deed, though unconsciously, the wife of another man. Sir John had married her several years before, in the face of the whole county, as the widow of one Decimus Strong, who had disappeared shortly after her union with him, having adventured to the North to join the revolt of the Nobles, and on that revolt being quelled retreated across the sea. Two years ago, having discovered this man to be still living in France, and not wishing to disturb the mind and happiness of her who believed herself his wife, yet wishing for legitimate issue, Sir John had informed the King of the facts, who had encouraged him to wed honestly, though secretly, the young merchant's widow at Havenpool; she being, therefore, his lawful wife, and she only. That to avoid all scandal and hubbub he had purposed to let things remain as they were till fair opportunity should arise of making the true case known with least pain to all parties concerned, but that, having been thus suspected and attacked by his own brother-in-law, his zest for such schemes and for all things had died out in him, and he only wished to commend his soul to God.

That night, while the owls were hooting from the forest that encircled the sleeping townlet, and the South-Avon was gurgling through the wooden piles of the bridge, Sir John died there in the arms of his wife. She concealed nothing of the cause of her husband's death save the subject of

the quarrel, which she felt it would be premature to announce just then, and until proof of her status should be forthcoming. But before a month had passed, it happened, to her inexpressible sorrow, that the child of this clandestine union fell sick and died. From that hour all interest in the name and fame of the Horseleighs forsook the younger of the twain who called themselves wives of Sir John, and, being careless about her own fame, she took no steps to assert her claims, her legal position having, indeed, grown hateful to her in her horror at the tragedy. And Sir William Byrt, the curate who had married her to her husband, being an old man and feeble, was not disinclined to leave the embers unstirred of such a fiery matter as this, and to assist her in letting established things stand. Therefore, Edith retired with the nurse, her only companion and friend, to her native town, where she lived in absolute obscurity till her death in middle age. Her brother was never seen again in England.

A strangely corroborative sequel to the story remains to be told. Shortly after the death of Sir John Horseleigh, a soldier of fortune returned from the Continent, called on Dame Horseleigh the fictitious, living in widowed state at Clyfton Horseleigh, and, after a singularly brief courtship, married her. The tradition at Havenpool and elsewhere has ever been that this man was already her husband, Decimus Strong, who remarried her for appearance' sake only.

The illegitimate son of this lady by Sir John succeeded to the estates and honours, and his son after him, there being nobody on the alert to

investigate their pretensions. Little difference would it have made to the present generation, however, had there been such a one, for the family in all its branches, lawful and unlawful, has been extinct these many score years, the last representative but one being killed at the siege of Sherton Castle, while attacking in the service of the Parliament, and the other being outlawed later in the same century for a debt of ten pounds, and dying in the county jail. The mansion house and its appurtenances were, as I have previously stated, destroyed, excepting one small wing, which now forms part of a farmhouse, and is visible as you pass along the railway from Casterbridge to Ivel. The outline of the old bowling-green is also distinctly to be seen.

This, then, is the reason why the only lawful marriage of Sir John, as recorded in the obscure register at Havenpool, does not appear in the pedigree of the house of Horseleigh.

Spring 1893.