THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

CHAPTER I—NANCE AT THE 'GREEN DRAGON'

Nance Holdaway was on her knees before the fire blowing the green wood that voluminously smoked upon the dogs, and only now and then shot forth a smothered flame; her knees already ached and her eyes smarted, for she had been some while at this ungrateful task, but her mind was gone far away to meet the coming stranger. Now she met him in the wood, now at the castle gate, now in the kitchen by candle-light; each fresh presentment eclipsed the one before; a form so elegant, manners so sedate, a countenance so brave and comely, a voice so winning and resolute—sure such a man was never seen! The thick-coming fancies poured
and brightened in her head like the smoke and flames upon the hearth.

Presently the heavy foot of her uncle Jonathan was heard upon the stair, and as he entered the room she bent the closer to her work. He glanced at the green fagots with a sneer, and looked askance at the bed and the white sheets, at the strip of carpet laid, like an island, on the great expanse of the stone floor, and at the broken glazing of the casement clumsily repaired with paper.

'Leave that fire a-be,' he cried. 'What, have I toiled all my life to

turn innkeeper at the hind end? Leave it a-be, I say.'

'La, uncle, it doesn't burn a bit; it only smokes,' said Nance, looking up from her position.

'You are come of decent people on both sides,' returned the old man. 'Who are you to blow the coals for any Robin-run-agate? Get up, get on your hood, make yourself useful, and be off to the "Green Dragon."'

'I thought you was to go yourself,' Nance faltered.

'So did I,' quoth Jonathan; 'but it appears I was mistook.'

The very excess of her eagerness alarmed her, and she began to hang back. 'I think I would rather not, dear uncle,' she said. 'Night is at hand, and I think, dear, I would rather not.'

'Now you look here,' replied Jonathan, 'I have my lord's orders, have I not? Little he gives me, but it's all my livelihood. And do you fancy, if I disobey my lord, I'm likely to turn round for a lass like you? No, I've that hell-fire of pain in my old knee, I wouldn't walk a mile, not for King George upon his bended knees.' And he walked to the window and looked down the steep scarp to where the river foamed in the bottom of the dell.

Nance stayed for no more bidding. In her own room, by the glimmer of the twilight, she washed her hands and pulled on her Sunday mittens; adjusted

her black hood, and tied a dozen times its cherry ribbons; and in less than ten minutes, with a fluttering heart and excellently bright eyes, she passed forth under the arch and over the bridge, into the thickening shadows of the groves. A well-marked wheel-track conducted her. The wood, which upon both sides of the river dell was a mere scrambling thicket of hazel, hawthorn, and holly, boasted on the level of more considerable timber. Beeches came to a good growth, with here and there an oak; and the track now passed under a high arcade of branches, and now ran under the open sky in glades. As the girl proceeded these glades became more frequent, the trees began again to decline in size, and the wood to degenerate into furzy coverts. Last of all there was a fringe of elders; and beyond that the track came forth upon an open, rolling moorland, dotted with wind-bowed and scanty bushes, and all golden brown with the winter, like a grouse. Right over against the girl the last red embers of the sunset burned under horizontal clouds; the night fell clear and still and frosty, and the track in low and marshy passages began to crackle under foot with ice.

Some half a mile beyond the borders of the wood the lights of the 'Green Dragon' hove in sight, and running close beside them, very faint in the dying dusk, the pale ribbon of the Great North Road. It was the back of the post-house that was presented to Nance Holdaway; and as she continued to draw near and the night to fall more completely, she became aware of an unusual brightness and bustle. A post-chaise stood in the yard, its lamps already lighted: light shone hospitably in the windows and from the

open door; moving lights and shadows testified to the activity of servants bearing lanterns. The clank of pails, the stamping of hoofs on the firm causeway, the jingle of harness, and, last of all, the energetic hissing of a groom, began to fall upon her ear. By the stir you would have thought the mail was at the door, but it was still too early in the night. The down mail was not due at the 'Green Dragon' for hard upon an hour; the up mail from Scotland not before two in the black morning.

Nance entered the yard somewhat dazzled. Sam, the tall ostler, was polishing a curb-chain wit sand; the lantern at his feet letting up spouts of candle-light through the holes with which its conical roof was peppered.

'Hey, miss,' said he jocularly, 'you won't look at me any more, now you have gentry at the castle.'

Her cheeks burned with anger.

'That's my lord's chay,' the man continued, nodding at the chaise, 'Lord Windermoor's. Came all in a fluster—dinner, bowl of punch, and put the horses to. For all the world like a runaway match, my dear—bar the bride. He brought Mr. Archer in the chay with him.'

'Is that Holdaway?' cried the landlord from the lighted entry, where he stood shading his eyes.

'Only me, sir,' answered Nance.

'O, you, Miss Nance,' he said. 'Well, come in quick, my pretty. My lord is waiting for your uncle.'

And he ushered Nance into a room cased with yellow wainscot and lighted by tall candles, where two gentlemen sat at a table finishing a bowl of punch. One of these was stout, elderly, and irascible, with a face like a full moon, well dyed with liquor, thick tremulous lips, a short, purple hand, in which he brandished a long pipe, and an abrupt and gobbling utterance. This was my Lord Windermoor. In his companion Nance beheld a younger man, tall, quiet, grave, demurely dressed, and wearing his own hair. Her glance but lighted on him, and she flushed, for in that second she made sure that she had twice betrayed herself—betrayed by the involuntary flash of her black eyes her secret impatience to behold this new companion, and, what was far worse, betrayed her disappointment in the realisation of her dreams. He, meanwhile, as if unconscious, continued to regard her with unmoved decorum.

'O, a man of wood,' thought Nance.

'What—what?' said his lordship. 'Who is this?'

'If you please, my lord, I am Holdaway's niece,' replied Nance, with a curtsey.

'Should have been here himself,' observed his lordship. 'Well, you tell

Holdaway that I'm aground, not a stiver—not a stiver. I'm running from the beagles—going abroad, tell Holdaway. And he need look for no more wages: glad of 'em myself, if I could get 'em. He can live in the castle if he likes, or go to the devil. O, and here is Mr. Archer; and I recommend him to take him in—a friend of mine—and Mr. Archer will pay, as
I wrote. And I regard that in the light of a precious good thing for Holdaway, let me tell you, and a set-off against the wages.'

'But O, my lord!' cried Nance, 'we live upon the wages, and what are we to do without?'

'What am I to do?—what am I to do?' replied Lord Windermoor with some exasperation. 'I have no wages. And there is Mr. Archer. And if Holdaway doesn't like it, he can go to the devil, and you with him!—and you with him!'

'And yet, my lord,' said Mr. Archer, 'these good people will have as keen a sense of loss as you or I; keener, perhaps, since they have done nothing to deserve it.'

'Deserve it?' cried the peer. 'What? What? If a rascally highwayman comes up to me with a confounded pistol, do you say that I've deserved it? How often am I to tell you, sir, that I was cheated—that I was cheated?'

'You are happy in the belief,' returned Mr. Archer gravely.

'Archer, you would be the death of me!' exclaimed his lordship. 'You know you're drunk; you know it, sir; and yet you can't get up a spark of animation.'

'I have drunk fair, my lord,' replied the younger man; 'but I own I am conscious of no exhilaration.'

'If you had as black a look-out as me, sir,' cried the peer, 'you would be very glad of a little innocent exhilaration, let me tell you. I am glad of it—glad of it, and I only wish I was drunker. For let me tell you it's a cruel hard thing upon a man of my time of life and my position, to be brought down to beggary because the world is full of thieves and rascals—thieves and rascals. What? For all I know, you may be a thief and a rascal yourself; and I would fight you for a pinch of snuff—a pinch of snuff,' exclaimed his lordship.

Here Mr. Archer turned to Nance Holdaway with a pleasant smile, so full of sweetness, kindness, and composure that, at one bound, her dreams returned to her. 'My good Miss Holdaway,' said he, 'if you are willing to show me the road, I am even eager to be gone. As for his lordship and myself, compose yourself; there is no fear; this is his lordship's way.'

'What? what?' cried his lordship. 'My way? Ish no such a thing, my way.'

'Come, my lord,' cried Archer; 'you and I very thoroughly understand each

other; and let me suggest, it is time that both of us were gone. The mail will soon be due. Here, then, my lord, I take my leave of you, with the most earnest assurance of my gratitude for the past, and a sincere offer of any services I may be able to render in the future.'

'Archer,' exclaimed Lord Windermoor, 'I love you like a son. Le' 's have another bowl.'

'My lord, for both our sakes, you will excuse me,' replied Mr. Archer. 'We both require caution; we must both, for some while at least, avoid the chance of a pursuit.'

'Archer,' quoth his lordship, 'this is a rank ingratishood. What? I'm to go firing away in the dark in the cold po'chaise, and not so much as a game of écarté possible, unless I stop and play with the postillion, the postillion; and the whole country swarming with thieves and rascals and highwaymen.'

'I beg your lordship's pardon,' put in the landlord, who now appeared in the doorway to announce the chaise, 'but this part of the North Road is known for safety. There has not been a robbery, to call a robbery, this five years' time. Further south, of course, it's nearer London, and another story,' he added.

'Well, then, if that's so,' concluded my lord, 'le' 's have t'other bowl and a pack of cards.'

'My lord, you forget,' said Archer, 'I might still gain; but it is hardly possible for me to lose.'

'Think I'm a sharper?' inquired the peer. 'Gen'leman's parole's all I ask.'

But Mr. Archer was proof against these blandishments, and said farewell gravely enough to Lord Windermoor, shaking his hand and at the same time bowing very low. 'You will never know,' says he, 'the service you have done me.' And with that, and before my lord had finally taken up his meaning, he had slipped about the table, touched Nance lightly but imperiously on the arm, and left the room. In face of the outbreak of his lordship's lamentations she made haste to follow the truant.

CHAPTER II—IN WHICH MR. ARCHER IS INSTALLED

The chaise had been driven round to the front door; the courtyard lay all deserted, and only lit by a lantern set upon a window-sill. Through this Nance rapidly led the way, and began to ascend the swellings of the moor with a heart that somewhat fluttered in her bosom. She was not afraid, but in the course of these last passages with Lord Windermoor Mr. Archer had ascended to that pedestal on which her fancy waited to instal him. The reality, she felt, excelled her dreams, and this cold night walk was the first romantic incident in her experience.

It was the rule in these days to see gentlemen unsteady after dinner, yet Nance was both surprised and amused when her companion, who had spoken so soberly, began to stumble and waver by her side with the most airy divagations. Sometimes he would get so close to her that she must edge away; and at others lurch clear out of the track and plough among deep heather. His courtesy and gravity meanwhile remained unaltered. He asked her how far they had to go; whether the way lay all upon the moorland, and when he learned they had to pass a wood expressed his pleasure. 'For,' said he, 'I am passionately fond of trees. Trees and fair lawns, if you consider of it rightly, are the ornaments of nature, as palaces and fine approaches—' And here he stumbled into a patch of slough and nearly fell. The girl had hard work not to laugh, but at heart she was lost in admiration for one who talked so elegantly.

They had got to about a quarter of a mile from the 'Green Dragon,' and were near the summit of the rise, when a sudden rush of wheels arrested them. Turning and looking back, they saw the post-house, now much declined in brightness; and speeding away northward the two tremulous bright dots of my Lord Windermoor's chaise-lamps. Mr. Archer followed these yellow and unsteady stars until they dwindled into points and disappeared.

'There goes my only friend,' he said. 'Death has cut off those that loved me, and change of fortune estranged my flatterers; and but for you, poor bankrupt, my life is as lonely as this moor.'

The tone of his voice affected both of them. They stood there on the side of the moor, and became thrillingly conscious of the void waste of the night, without a feature for the eye, and except for the fainting whisper of the carriage-wheels without a murmur for the ear. And instantly, like a mockery, there broke out, very far away, but clear and jolly, the note of the mail-guard's horn. 'Over the hills' was his air. It rose to the two watchers on the moor with the most cheerful sentiment of human company and travel, and at the same time in and around the 'Green Dragon' it woke up a great bustle of lights running to and fro and clattering hoofs. Presently after, out of the darkness to southward, the mail grew near with a growing rumble. Its lamps were very large and bright, and threw their radiance forward in overlapping cones; the four cantering horses swarmed and steamed; the body of the coach followed like a great shadow; and this lit picture slid with a sort of ineffectual

swiftness over the black field of night, and was eclipsed by the buildings of the 'Green Dragon.'

Mr. Archer turned abruptly and resumed his former walk; only that he was now more steady, kept better alongside his young conductor, and had fallen into a silence broken by sighs. Nance waxed very pitiful over his fate, contrasting an imaginary past of courts and great society, and perhaps the King himself, with the tumbledown ruin in a wood to which she was now conducting him.

'You must try, sir, to keep your spirits up,' said she. 'To be sure this is a great change for one like you; but who knows the future?'

Mr. Archer turned towards her in the darkness, and she could clearly perceive that he smiled upon her very kindly. 'There spoke a sweet nature,' said he, 'and I must thank you for these words. But I would not have you fancy that I regret the past for any happiness found in it, or that I fear the simplicity and hardship of the country. I am a man that has been much tossed about in life; now up, now down; and do you think that I shall not be able to support what you support—you who are kind, and therefore know how to feel pain; who are beautiful, and therefore hope; who are young, and therefore (or am I the more mistaken?) discontented?'

'Nay, sir, not that, at least,' said Nance; 'not discontented. If I were to be discontented, how should I look those that have real sorrows in the face? I have faults enough, but not that fault; and I have my merits

too, for I have a good opinion of myself. But for beauty, I am not so simple but that I can tell a banter from a compliment.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr. Archer, 'I had half forgotten; grief is selfish, and I was thinking of myself and not of you, or I had never blurted out so bold a piece of praise. 'Tis the best proof of my sincerity. But come, now, I would lay a wager you are no coward?'

'Indeed, sir, I am not more afraid than another,' said Nance. 'None of my blood are given to fear.'

'And you are honest?' he returned.

'I will answer for that,' said she.

'Well, then, to be brave, to be honest, to be kind, and to be contented, since you say you are so—is not that to fill up a great part of virtue?'

'I fear you are but a flatterer,' said Nance, but she did not say it clearly, for what with bewilderment and satisfaction, her heart was quite oppressed.

There could be no harm, certainly, in these grave compliments; but yet they charmed and frightened her, and to find favour, for reasons however obscure, in the eyes of this elegant, serious, and most unfortunate young gentleman, was a giddy elevation, was almost an apotheosis, for a country maid.

But she was to be no more exercised; for Mr. Archer, disclaiming any thought of flattery, turned off to other subjects, and held her all through the wood in conversation, addressing her with an air of perfect sincerity, and listening to her answers with every mark of interest. Had open flattery continued, Nance would have soon found refuge in good sense; but the more subtle lure she could not suspect, much less avoid. It was the first time she had ever taken part in a conversation illuminated by any ideas. All was then true that she had heard and dreamed of gentlemen; they were a race apart, like deities knowing good and evil. And then there burst upon her soul a divine thought, hope's glorious sunrise: since she could understand, since it seemed that she too, even she, could interest this sorrowful Apollo, might she not learn? or was she not learning? Would not her soul awake and put forth wings? Was she not, in fact, an enchanted princess, waiting but a touch to become royal? She saw herself transformed, radiantly attired, but in the most exquisite taste: her face grown longer and more refined; her tint etherealised; and she heard herself with delighted wonder talking like a book.

Meanwhile they had arrived at where the track comes out above the river dell, and saw in front of them the castle, faintly shadowed on the night, covering with its broken battlements a bold projection of the bank, and showing at the extreme end, where were the habitable tower and wing, some crevices of candle-light. Hence she called loudly upon her uncle, and he was seen to issue, lantern in hand, from the tower door, and, where the ruins did not intervene, to pick his way over the swarded courtyard,

avoiding treacherous cellars and winding among blocks of fallen masonry. The arch of the great gate was still entire, flanked by two tottering bastions, and it was here that Jonathan met them, standing at the edge of the bridge, bent somewhat forward, and blinking at them through the glow of his own lantern. Mr. Archer greeted him with civility; but the old man was in no humour of compliance. He guided the newcomer across the court-yard, looking sharply and quickly in his face, and grumbling all the time about the cold, and the discomfort and dilapidation of the castle. He was sure he hoped that Mr. Archer would like it; but in truth he could not think what brought him there. Doubtless he had a good reason—this with a look of cunning scrutiny—but, indeed, the place was quite unfit for any person of repute; he himself was eaten up with the rheumatics. It was the most rheumaticky place in England, and some fine day the whole habitable part (to call it habitable) would fetch away bodily and go down the slope into the river. He had seen the cracks widening; there was a plaguy issue in the bank below; he thought a spring was mining it; it might be to-morrow, it might be next day; but they were all sure of a come-down sooner or later. 'And that is a poor death,' said he, 'for any one, let alone a gentleman, to have a whole old ruin dumped upon his belly. Have a care to your left there; these cellar vaults have all broke down, and the grass and hemlock hide 'em. Well, sir, here is welcome to you, such as it is, and wishing you well away.'

And with that Jonathan ushered his guest through the tower door, and down

three steps on the left hand into the kitchen or common room of the castle. It was a huge, low room, as large as a meadow, occupying the

whole width of the habitable wing, with six barred windows looking on the court, and two into the river valley. A dresser, a table, and a few chairs stood dotted here and there upon the uneven flags. Under the great chimney a good fire burned in an iron fire-basket; a high old settee, rudely carved with figures and Gothic lettering, flanked it on either side; there was a hinge table and a stone bench in the chimney corner, and above the arch hung guns, axes, lanterns, and great sheaves of rusty keys.

Jonathan looked about him, holding up the lantern, and shrugged his shoulders, with a pitying grimace. 'Here it is,' he said. 'See the damp on the floor, look at the moss; where there's moss you may be sure that it's rheumaticky. Try and get near that fire for to warm yourself; it'll blow the coat off your back. And with a young gentleman with a face like yours, as pale as a tallow-candle, I'd be afeard of a churchyard cough and a galloping decline,' says Jonathan, naming the maladies with gloomy gusto, 'or the cold might strike and turn your blood,' he added.

Mr. Archer fairly laughed. 'My good Mr. Holdaway,' said he, 'I was born with that same tallow-candle face, and the only fear that you inspire me with is the fear that I intrude unwelcomely upon your private hours. But I think I can promise you that I am very little troublesome, and I am inclined to hope that the terms which I can offer may still pay you the derangement.'

'Yes, the terms,' said Jonathan, 'I was thinking of that. As you say, they are very small,' and he shook his head.

'Unhappily, I can afford no more,' said Mr. Archer. 'But this we have arranged already,' he added with a certain stiffness; 'and as I am aware that Miss Holdaway has matter to communicate, I will, if you permit, retire at once. To-night I must bivouac; to-morrow my trunk is to follow from the "Dragon." So if you will show me to my room I shall wish you a good slumber and a better awakening.'

Jonathan silently gave the lantern to Nance, and she, turning and curtseying in the doorway, proceeded to conduct their guest up the broad winding staircase of the tower. He followed with a very brooding face.

'Alas!' cried Nance, as she entered the room, 'your fire black out,' and, setting down the lantern, she clapped upon her knees before the chimney and began to rearrange the charred and still smouldering remains. Mr. Archer looked about the gaunt apartment with a sort of shudder. The great height, the bare stone, the shattered windows, the aspect of the uncurtained bed, with one of its four fluted columns broken short, all struck a chill upon his fancy. From this dismal survey his eyes returned to Nance crouching before the fire, the candle in one hand and artfully puffing at the embers; the flames as they broke forth played upon the soft outline of her cheek—she was alive and young, coloured with the bright hues of life, and a woman. He looked upon her, softening; and then sat down and continued to admire the picture.

'There, sir,' said she, getting upon her feet, 'your fire is doing bravely now. Good-night.'

He rose and held out his hand. 'Come,' said he, 'you are my only friend in these parts, and you must shake hands.'

She brushed her hand upon her skirt and offered it, blushing.

'God bless you, my dear,' said he.

And then, when he was alone, he opened one of the windows, and stared down into the dark valley. A gentle wimpling of the river among stones ascended to his ear; the trees upon the other bank stood very black against the sky; farther away an owl was hooting. It was dreary and cold, and as he turned back to the hearth and the fine glow of fire, 'Heavens!' said he to himself, 'what an unfortunate destiny is mine!'

He went to bed, but sleep only visited his pillow in uneasy snatches. Outbreaks of loud speech came up the staircase; he heard the old stones of the castle crack in the frosty night with sharp reverberations, and the bed complained under his tossings. Lastly, far on into the morning, he awakened from a doze to hear, very far off, in the extreme and breathless quiet, a wailing flourish on the horn. The down mail was drawing near to the 'Green Dragon.' He sat up in bed; the sound was tragical by distance, and the modulation appealed to his ear like human speech. It seemed to call upon him with a dreary insistence—to call him far away, to address him personally, and to have a meaning that he failed to seize. It was thus, at least, in this nodding castle, in a cold, miry woodland, and so far from men and society, that the traffic on the Great

North Road spoke to him in the intervals of slumber.

CHAPTER III—JONATHAN HOLDAWAY

Nance descended the tower stair, pausing at every step. She was in no hurry to confront her uncle with bad news, and she must dwell a little longer on the rich note of Mr. Archer's voice, the charm of his kind words, and the beauty of his manner and person. But, once at the stair-foot, she threw aside the spell and recovered her sensible and workaday self.

Jonathan was seated in the middle of the settle, a mug of ale beside him, in the attitude of one prepared for trouble; but he did not speak, and suffered her to fetch her supper and eat of it, with a very excellent appetite, in silence. When she had done, she, too, drew a tankard of home-brewed, and came and planted herself in front of him upon the settle.

'Well?' said Jonathan.

'My lord has run away,' said Nance.

'What?' cried the old man.

'Abroad,' she continued; 'run away from creditors. He said he had not a stiver, but he was drunk enough. He said you might live on in the castle, and Mr. Archer would pay you; but you was to look for no more

wages, since he would be glad of them himself.'

Jonathan's face contracted; the flush of a black, bilious anger mounted to the roots of his hair; he gave an inarticulate cry, leapt upon his feet, and began rapidly pacing the stone floor. At first he kept his hands behind his back in a tight knot; then he began to gesticulate as he turned.

'This man—this lord,' he shouted, 'who is he? He was born with a gold spoon in his mouth, and I with a dirty straw. He rolled in his coach when he was a baby. I have dug and toiled and laboured since I was that high—that high.' And he shouted again. 'I'm bent and broke, and full of pains. D' ye think I don't know the taste of sweat? Many's the gallon I've drunk of it—ay, in the midwinter, toiling like a slave. All through, what has my life been? Bend, bend, bend my old creaking back till it would ache like breaking; wade about in the foul mire, never a dry stitch; empty belly, sore hands, hat off to my Lord Redface; kicks and ha'pence; and now, here, at the hind end, when I'm worn to my poor bones, a kick and done with it.' He walked a little while in silence, and then, extending his hand, 'Now you, Nance Holdaway,' says he, 'you come of my blood, and you're a good girl. When that man was a boy, I used to carry his gun for him. I carried the gun all day on my two feet, and many a stitch I had, and chewed a bullet for. He rode upon a horse, with feathers in his hat; but it was him that had the shots and took the game home. Did I complain? Not I. I knew my station. What did I ask, but just the chance to live and die honest? Nance Holdaway, don't let them deny it to me—don't let them do it. I've been as poor as Job, and

as honest as the day, but now, my girl, you mark these words of mine, I'm getting tired of it.'

'I wouldn't say such words, at least,' said Nance.

'You wouldn't?' said the old man grimly. 'Well, and did I when I was your age? Wait till your back's broke and your hands tremble, and your eyes fail, and you're weary of the battle and ask no more but to lie down in your bed and give the ghost up like an honest man; and then let there up and come some insolent, ungodly fellow—ah! if I had him in these hands! "Where's my money that you gambled?" I should say. "Where's my money that you drank and diced?" "Thief!" is what I would say; "Thief!"' he roared, '"Thief"'

'Mr. Archer will hear you if you don't take care,' said Nance, 'and I would be ashamed, for one, that he should hear a brave, old, honest, hard-working man like Jonathan Holdaway talk nonsense like a boy.'

'D' ye think I mind for Mr. Archer?' he cried shrilly, with a clack of laughter; and then he came close up to her, stooped down with his two palms upon his knees, and looked her in the eyes, with a strange hard expression, something like a smile. 'Do I mind for God, my girl?' he said; 'that's what it's come to be now, do I mind for God?'

'Uncle Jonathan,' she said, getting up and taking him by the arm; 'you sit down again, where you were sitting. There, sit still; I'll have no more of this; you'll do yourself a mischief. Come, take a drink of this

good ale, and I'll warm a tankard for you. La, we'll pull through, you'll see. I'm young, as you say, and it's my turn to carry the bundle; and don't you worry your bile, or we'll have sickness, too, as well as sorrow.'

'D' ye think that I'd forgotten you?' said Jonathan, with something like a groan; and thereupon his teeth clicked to, and he sat silent with the tankard in his hand and staring straight before him.

'Why,' says Nance, setting on the ale to mull, 'men are always children, they say, however old; and if ever I heard a thing like this, to set to and make yourself sick, just when the money's failing. Keep a good heart up; you haven't kept a good heart these seventy years, nigh hand, to break down about a pound or two. Here's this Mr. Archer come to lodge, that you disliked so much. Well, now you see it was a clear Providence. Come, let's think upon our mercies. And here is the ale mulling lovely; smell of it; I'll take a drop myself, it smells so sweet. And, Uncle Jonathan, you let me say one word. You've lost more than money before now; you lost my aunt, and bore it like a man. Bear this.'

His face once more contracted; his fist doubled, and shot forth into the air, and trembled. 'Let them look out!' he shouted. 'Here, I warn all men; I've done with this foul kennel of knaves. Let them look out!'

'Hush, hush! for pity's sake,' cried Nance.

And then all of a sudden he dropped his face into his hands, and broke

out with a great hiccoughing dry sob that was horrible to hear. 'O,' he cried, 'my God, if my son hadn't left me, if my Dick was here!' and the sobs shook him; Nance sitting still and watching him, with distress. 'O, if he were here to help his father!' he went on again. 'If I had a son like other fathers, he would save me now, when all is breaking down; O, he would save me! Ay, but where is he? Raking taverns, a thief perhaps. My curse be on him!' he added, rising again into wrath.

'Hush!' cried Nance, springing to her feet: 'your boy, your dead wife's boy—Aunt Susan's baby that she loved—would you curse him? O, God forbid!'

The energy of her address surprised him from his mood. He looked upon her, tearless and confused. 'Let me go to my bed,' he said at last, and he rose, and, shaking as with ague, but quite silent, lighted his candle, and left the kitchen.

Poor Nance! the pleasant current of her dreams was all diverted. She beheld a golden city, where she aspired to dwell; she had spoken with a deity, and had told herself that she might rise to be his equal; and now the earthly ligaments that bound her down had been tightened. She was like a tree looking skyward, her roots were in the ground. It seemed to her a thing so coarse, so rustic, to be thus concerned about a loss in money; when Mr. Archer, fallen from the sky-level of counts and nobles, faced his changed destiny with so immovable a courage. To weary of honesty; that, at least, no one could do, but even to name it was already a disgrace; and she beheld in fancy her uncle, and the young lad, all

laced and feathered, hand upon hip, bestriding his small horse. The opposition seemed to perpetuate itself from generation to generation; one side still doomed to the clumsy and the servile, the other born to beauty.

She thought of the golden zones in which gentlemen were bred, and figured with so excellent a grace; zones in which wisdom and smooth words, white linen and slim hands, were the mark of the desired inhabitants; where low temptations were unknown, and honesty no virtue, but a thing as natural as breathing.

CHAPTER IV—MINGLING THREADS

It was nearly seven before Mr. Archer left his apartment. On the landing he found another door beside his own opening on a roofless corridor, and presently he was walking on the top of the ruins. On one hand he could look down a good depth into the green court-yard; on the other his eye roved along the downward course of the river, the wet woods all smoking, the shadows long and blue, the mists golden and rosy in the sun, here and there the water flashing across an obstacle. His heart expanded and softened to a grateful melancholy, and with his eye fixed upon the distance, and no thought of present danger, he continued to stroll along the elevated and treacherous promenade.

A terror-stricken cry rose to him from the courtyard. He looked down, and saw in a glimpse Nance standing below with hands clasped in horror and his own foot trembling on the margin of a gulf. He recoiled and leant against a pillar, quaking from head to foot, and covering his face with his hands; and Nance had time to run round by the stair and rejoin him where he stood before he had changed a line of his position.

'Ah!' he cried, and clutched her wrist; 'don't leave me. The place rocks; I have no head for altitudes.'

'Sit down against that pillar,' said Nance. 'Don't you be afraid; I won't leave you, and don't look up or down: look straight at me. How

white you are!'

'The gulf,' he said, and closed his eyes again and shuddered.

'Why,' said Nance, 'what a poor climber you must be! That was where my cousin Dick used to get out of the castle after Uncle Jonathan had shut the gate. I've been down there myself with him helping me. I wouldn't try with you,' she said, and laughed merrily.

The sound of her laughter was sincere and musical, and perhaps its beauty barbed the offence to Mr. Archer. The blood came into his face with a quick jet, and then left it paler than before. 'It is a physical weakness,' he said harshly, 'and very droll, no doubt, but one that I can conquer on necessity. See, I am still shaking. Well, I advance to the battlements and look down. Show me your cousin's path.'

'He would go sure-foot along that little ledge,' said Nance, pointing as she spoke; 'then out through the breach and down by yonder buttress. It is easier coming back, of course, because you see where you are going. From the buttress foot a sheep-walk goes along the scarp—see, you can follow it from here in the dry grass. And now, sir,' she added, with a touch of womanly pity, 'I would come away from here if I were you, for indeed you are not fit.'

Sure enough Mr. Archer's pallor and agitation had continued to increase; his cheeks were deathly, his clenched fingers trembled pitifully. 'The weakness is physical,' he sighed, and had nearly fallen. Nance led him

from the spot, and he was no sooner back in the tower-stair, than he fell heavily against the wall and put his arm across his eyes. A cup of brandy had to be brought him before he could descend to breakfast; and the perfection of Nance's dream was for the first time troubled.

Jonathan was waiting for them at table, with yellow, blood-shot eyes and a peculiar dusky complexion. He hardly waited till they found their seats, before, raising one hand, and stooping with his mouth above his plate, he put up a prayer for a blessing on the food and a spirit of gratitude in the eaters, and thereupon, and without more civility, fell to. But it was notable that he was no less speedily satisfied than he had been greedy to begin. He pushed his plate away and drummed upon the
table.

'These are silly prayers,' said he, 'that they teach us. Eat and be thankful, that's no such wonder. Speak to me of starving—there's the touch. You're a man, they tell me, Mr. Archer, that has met with some reverses?'

'I have met with many,' replied Mr. Archer.

'Ha!' said Jonathan. 'None reckons but the last. Now, see; I tried to make this girl here understand me.'

'Uncle,' said Nance, 'what should Mr. Archer care for your concerns? He hath troubles of his own, and came to be at peace, I think.'

'I tried to make her understand me,' repeated Jonathan doggedly; 'and now I'll try you. Do you think this world is fair?'

'Fair and false!' quoth Mr. Archer.

The old man laughed immoderately. 'Good,' said he, 'very good, but what I mean is this: do you know what it is to get up early and go to bed late, and never take so much as a holiday but four: and one of these your own marriage day, and the other three the funerals of folk you loved, and all that, to have a quiet old age in shelter, and bread for your old belly, and a bed to lay your crazy bones upon, with a clear conscience?'

'Sir,' said Mr. Archer, with an inclination of his head, 'you portray a very brave existence.'

'Well,' continued Jonathan, 'and in the end thieves deceive you, thieves rob and rook you, thieves turn you out in your old age and send you begging. What have you got for all your honesty? A fine return! You that might have stole scores of pounds, there you are out in the rain with your rheumatics!'

Mr. Archer had forgotten to eat; with his hand upon his chin he was studying the old man's countenance. 'And you conclude?' he asked.

'Conclude!' cried Jonathan. 'I conclude I'll be upsides with them.'

‘Ay,’ said the other, ‘we are all tempted to revenge.’

‘You have lost money?’ asked Jonathan.

‘A great estate,’ said Archer quietly.

‘See now!’ says Jonathan, ‘and where is it?’

‘Nay, I sometimes think that every one has had his share of it but me,’ was the reply. ‘All England hath paid his taxes with my patrimony: I was a sheep that left my wool on every briar.’

‘And you sit down under that?’ cried the old man. ‘Come now, Mr. Archer, you and me belong to different stations; and I know mine—no man better—but since we have both been rooked, and are both sore with it, why, here’s my hand with a very good heart, and I ask for yours, and no offence, I hope.’

‘There is surely no offence, my friend,’ returned Mr. Archer, as they shook hands across the table; ‘for, believe me, my sympathies are quite acquired to you. This life is an arena where we fight with beasts; and, indeed,’ he added, sighing, ‘I sometimes marvel why we go down to it unarmed.’

In the meanwhile a creaking of ungreased axles had been heard descending through the wood; and presently after, the door opened, and the tall ostler entered the kitchen carrying one end of Mr. Archer’s trunk. The

other was carried by an aged beggar man of that district, known and welcome for some twenty miles about under the name of 'Old Cumberland.' Each was soon perched upon a settle, with a cup of ale; and the ostler, who valued himself upon his affability, began to entertain the company, still with half an eye on Nance, to whom in gallant terms he expressly dedicated every sip of ale. First he told of the trouble they had to get his Lordship started in the chaise; and how he had dropped a rouleau of gold on the threshold, and the passage and doorstep had been strewn with guinea-pieces. At this old Jonathan looked at Mr. Archer. Next the visitor turned to news of a more thrilling character: how the down mail had been stopped again near Grantham by three men on horseback—a white
and two bays; how they had handkerchiefs on their faces; how Tom the guard's blunderbuss missed fire, but he swore he had winged one of them with a pistol; and how they had got clean away with seventy pounds in money, some valuable papers, and a watch or two.

'Brave! brave!' cried Jonathan in ecstasy. 'Seventy pounds! O, it's brave!'

'Well, I don't see the great bravery,' observed the ostler, misapprehending him. 'Three men, and you may call that three to one. I'll call it brave when some one stops the mail single-handed; that's a risk.'

'And why should they hesitate?' inquired Mr. Archer. 'The poor souls who are fallen to such a way of life, pray what have they to lose? If they

get the money, well; but if a ball should put them from their troubles, why, so better.'

'Well, sir,' said the ostler, 'I believe you'll find they won't agree with you. They count on a good fling, you see; or who would risk it?—And here's my best respects to you, Miss Nance.'

'And I forgot the part of cowardice,' resumed Mr. Archer. 'All men fear.'

'O, surely not!' cried Nance.

'All men,' reiterated Mr. Archer.

'Ay, that's a true word,' observed Old Cumberland, 'and a thief, anyway, for it's a coward's trade.'

'But these fellows, now,' said Jonathan, with a curious, appealing manner—'these fellows with their seventy pounds! Perhaps, Mr. Archer, they were no true thieves after all, but just people who had been robbed and tried to get their own again. What was that you said, about all England and the taxes? One takes, another gives; why, that's almost fair. If I've been rooked and robbed, and the coat taken off my back, I call it almost fair to take another's.'

'Ask Old Cumberland,' observed the ostler; 'you ask Old Cumberland, Miss Nance!' and he bestowed a wink upon his favoured fair one.

'Why that?' asked Jonathan.

'He had his coat taken—ay, and his shirt too,' returned the ostler.

'Is that so?' cried Jonathan eagerly. 'Was you robbed too?'

'That was I,' replied Cumberland, 'with a warrant! I was a well-to-do man when I was young.'

'Ay! See that!' says Jonathan. 'And you don't long for a revenge?'

'Eh! Not me!' answered the beggar. 'It's too long ago. But if you'll give me another mug of your good ale, my pretty lady, I won't say no to that.'

'And shalt have! And shalt have!' cried Jonathan. 'Or brandy even, if you like it better.'

And as Cumberland did like it better, and the ostler chimed in, the party pledged each other in a dram of brandy before separating.

As for Nance, she slipped forth into the ruins, partly to avoid the ostler's gallantries, partly to lament over the defects of Mr. Archer. Plainly, he was no hero. She pitied him; she began to feel a protecting interest mingle with and almost supersede her admiration, and was at the same time disappointed and yet drawn to him. She was, indeed, conscious

of such unshaken fortitude in her own heart, that she was almost tempted by an occasion to be bold for two. She saw herself, in a brave attitude, shielding her imperfect hero from the world; and she saw, like a piece of heaven, his gratitude for her protection.

CHAPTER V—LIFE IN THE CASTLE

From that day forth the life of these three persons in the ruin ran very smoothly. Mr. Archer now sat by the fire with a book, and now passed whole days abroad, returning late, dead weary. His manner was a mask; but it was half transparent; through the even tenor of his gravity and courtesy profound revolutions of feeling were betrayed, seasons of numb despair, of restlessness, of aching temper. For days he would say nothing beyond his usual courtesies and solemn compliments; and then, all of a sudden, some fine evening beside the kitchen fire, he would fall into a vein of elegant gossip, tell of strange and interesting events, the secrets of families, brave deeds of war, the miraculous discovery of crime, the visitations of the dead. Nance and her uncle would sit till the small hours with eyes wide open: Jonathan applauding the unexpected incidents with many a slap of his big hand; Nance, perhaps, more pleased with the narrator's eloquence and wise reflections; and then, again, days would follow of abstraction, of listless humming, of frequent apologies and long hours of silence. Once only, and then after a week of unrelieved melancholy, he went over to the 'Green Dragon,' spent the afternoon with the landlord and a bowl of punch, and returned as on the first night, devious in step but courteous and unperturbed of speech.

If he seemed more natural and more at his ease it was when he found Nance alone; and, laying by some of his reserve, talked before her rather than to her of his destiny, character and hopes. To Nance these interviews

were but a doubtful privilege. At times he would seem to take a pleasure in her presence, to consult her gravely, to hear and to discuss her counsels; at times even, but these were rare and brief, he would talk of herself, praise the qualities that she possessed, touch indulgently on her defects, and lend her books to read and even examine her upon her reading; but far more often he would fall into a half unconsciousness, put her a question and then answer it himself, drop into the veiled tone of voice of one soliloquising, and leave her at last as though he had forgotten her existence. It was odd, too, that in all this random converse, not a fact of his past life, and scarce a name, should ever cross his lips. A profound reserve kept watch upon his most unguarded moments. He spoke continually of himself, indeed, but still in enigmas; a veiled prophet of egoism.

The base of Nance's feelings for Mr. Archer was admiration as for a superior being; and with this, his treatment, consciously or not, accorded happily. When he forgot her, she took the blame upon herself. His formal politeness was so exquisite that this essential brutality stood excused. His compliments, besides, were always grave and rational; he would offer reason for his praise, convict her of merit, and thus disarm suspicion. Nay, and the very hours when he forgot and remembered her alternately could by the ardent fallacies of youth be read in the light of an attention. She might be far from his confidence; but still she was nearer it than any one. He might ignore her presence, but yet he sought it.

Moreover, she, upon her side, was conscious of one point of superiority.

Beside this rather dismal, rather effeminate man, who recoiled from a worm, who grew giddy on the castle wall, who bore so helplessly the weight of his misfortunes, she felt herself a head and shoulders taller in cheerful and sterling courage. She could walk head in air along the most precarious rafter; her hand feared neither the grossness nor the harshness of life's web, but was thrust cheerfully, if need were, into the briar bush, and could take hold of any crawling horror. Ruin was mining the walls of her cottage, as already it had mined and subverted Mr. Archer's palace. Well, she faced it with a bright countenance and a busy hand. She had got some washing, some rough seamstress work from the

'Green Dragon,' and from another neighbour ten miles away across the moor. At this she cheerfully laboured, and from that height she could afford to pity the useless talents and poor attitude of Mr. Archer. It did not change her admiration, but it made it bearable. He was above her in all ways; but she was above him in one. She kept it to herself, and hugged it. When, like all young creatures, she made long stories to justify, to nourish, and to forecast the course of her affection, it was this private superiority that made all rosy, that cut the knot, and that, at last, in some great situation, fetched to her knees the dazzling but imperfect hero. With this pretty exercise she beguiled the hours of labour, and consoled herself for Mr. Archer's bearing.

Pity was her weapon and her weakness. To accept the loved one's faults, although it has an air of freedom, is to kiss the chain, and this pity it was which, lying nearer to her heart, lent the one element of true emotion to a fanciful and merely brain-sick love.

Thus it fell out one day that she had gone to the 'Green Dragon' and brought back thence a letter to Mr. Archer. He, upon seeing it, winced like a man under the knife: pain, shame, sorrow, and the most trenchant edge of mortification cut into his heart and wrung the steady composure of his face.

'Dear heart! have you bad news?' she cried.

But he only replied by a gesture and fled to his room, and when, later on, she ventured to refer to it, he stopped her on the threshold, as if with words prepared beforehand. 'There are some pains,' said he, 'too acute for consolation, or I would bring them to my kind consoler. Let the memory of that letter, if you please, be buried.' And then as she continued to gaze at him, being, in spite of herself, pained by his elaborate phrase, doubtfully sincere in word and manner: 'Let it be enough,' he added haughtily, 'that if this matter wring my heart, it doth not touch my conscience. I am a man, I would have you to know, who suffers undeservedly.'

He had never spoken so directly: never with so convincing an emotion; and her heart thrilled for him. She could have taken his pains and died of them with joy.

Meanwhile she was left without support. Jonathan now swore by his lodger, and lived for him. He was a fine talker. He knew the finest sight of stories; he was a man and a gentleman, take him for all in all,

and a perfect credit to Old England. Such were the old man's declared sentiments, and sure enough he clung to Mr. Archer's side, hung upon his utterance when he spoke, and watched him with unwearing interest when he

was silent. And yet his feeling was not clear; in the partial wreck of his mind, which was leaning to decay, some after-thought was strongly present. As he gazed in Mr. Archer's face a sudden brightness would kindle in his rheumy eyes, his eye-brows would lift as with a sudden thought, his mouth would open as though to speak, and close again on silence. Once or twice he even called Mr. Archer mysteriously forth into the dark courtyard, took him by the button, and laid a demonstrative finger on his chest; but there his ideas or his courage failed him; he would shufflingly excuse himself and return to his position by the fire without a word of explanation. 'The good man was growing old,' said Mr. Archer with a suspicion of a shrug. But the good man had his idea, and even when he was alone the name of Mr. Archer fell from his lips continually in the course of mumbled and gesticulative conversation.

CHAPTER VI—THE BAD HALF-CROWN

However early Nance arose, and she was no sluggard, the old man, who had begun to outlive the earthly habit of slumber, would usually have been up long before, the fire would be burning brightly, and she would see him wandering among the ruins, lantern in hand, and talking assiduously to himself. One day, however, after he had returned late from the market town, she found that she had stolen a march upon that indefatigable early riser. The kitchen was all blackness. She crossed the castle-yard to the wood-cellar, her steps printing the thick hoarfrost. A scathing breeze blew out of the north-east and slowly carried a regiment of black and tattered clouds over the face of heaven, which was already kindled with the wild light of morning, but where she walked, in shelter of the ruins, the flame of her candle burned steady. The extreme cold smote upon her conscience. She could not bear to think this bitter business fell usually to the lot of one so old as Jonathan, and made desperate resolutions to be earlier in the future.

The fire was a good blaze before he entered, limping dismally into the kitchen. 'Nance,' said he, 'I be all knotted up with the rheumatics; will you rub me a bit?' She came and rubbed him where and how he bade her. 'This is a cruel thing that old age should be rheumaticky,' said he. 'When I was young I stood my turn of the teethache like a man! for why? because it couldn't last for ever; but these rheumatics come to live and die with you. Your aunt was took before the time came; never had an

ache to mention. Now I lie all night in my single bed and the blood never warms in me; this knee of mine it seems like lighted up with rheumatics; it seems as though you could see to sew by it; and all the strings of my old body ache, as if devils was pulling 'em. Thank you kindly; that's someways easier now, but an old man, my dear, has little to look for; it's pain, pain, pain to the end of the business, and I'll never be rightly warm again till I get under the sod,' he said, and looked down at her with a face so aged and weary that she had nearly wept.

'I lay awake all night,' he continued; 'I do so mostly, and a long walk kills me. Eh, deary me, to think that life should run to such a puddle! And I remember long syne when I was strong, and the blood all hot and good about me, and I loved to run, too—deary me, to run! Well, that's all by. You'd better pray to be took early, Nance, and not live on till you get to be like me, and are robbed in your grey old age, your cold, shivering, dark old age, that's like a winter's morning'; and he bitterly shuddered, spreading his hands before the fire.

'Come now,' said Nance, 'the more you say the less you'll like it, Uncle Jonathan; but if I were you I would be proud for to have lived all your days honest and beloved, and come near the end with your good name: isn't that a fine thing to be proud of? Mr. Archer was telling me in some strange land they used to run races each with a lighted candle, and the art was to keep the candle burning. Well, now, I thought that was like life: a man's good conscience is the flame he gets to carry, and if he comes to the winning-post with that still burning, why, take it how you

will, the man's a hero—even if he was low-born like you and me.'

'Did Mr. Archer tell you that?' asked Jonathan.

'No, dear,' said she, 'that's my own thought about it. He told me of the race. But see, now,' she continued, putting on the porridge, 'you say old age is a hard season, but so is youth. You're half out of the battle, I would say; you loved my aunt and got her, and buried her, and some of these days soon you'll go to meet her; and take her my love and tell her I tried to take good care of you; for so I do, Uncle Jonathan.'

Jonathan struck with his fist upon the settle. 'D' ye think I want to die, ye vixen?' he shouted. 'I want to live ten hundred years.'

This was a mystery beyond Nance's penetration, and she stared in wonder as she made the porridge.

'I want to live,' he continued, 'I want to live and to grow rich. I want to drive my carriage and to dice in hells and see the ring, I do. Is this a life that I lived? I want to be a rake, d' ye understand? I want to know what things are like. I don't want to die like a blind kitten, and me seventy-six.'

'O fie!' said Nance.

The old man thrust out his jaw at her, with the grimace of an irreverent schoolboy. Upon that aged face it seemed a blasphemy. Then he took out

of his bosom a long leather purse, and emptying its contents on the settle, began to count and recount the pieces, ringing and examining each, and suddenly he leapt like a young man. 'What!' he screamed. 'Bad? O Lord! I'm robbed again!' And falling on his knees before the settle he began to pour forth the most dreadful curses on the head of his deceiver. His eyes were shut, for to him this vile solemnity was prayer. He held up the bad half-crown in his right hand, as though he were displaying it to Heaven, and what increased the horror of the scene, the curses he invoked were those whose efficacy he had tasted—old age and poverty, rheumatism and an ungrateful son. Nance listened appalled; then she sprang forward and dragged down his arm and laid her hand upon his mouth.

'Whist!' she cried. 'Whist ye, for God's sake! O my man, whist ye! If Heaven were to hear; if poor Aunt Susan were to hear! Think, she may be listening.' And with the histrionism of strong emotion she pointed to a corner of the kitchen.

His eyes followed her finger. He looked there for a little, thinking, blinking; then he got stiffly to his feet and resumed his place upon the settle, the bad piece still in his hand. So he sat for some time, looking upon the half-crown, and now wondering to himself on the injustice and partiality of the law, now computing again and again the nature of his loss. So he was still sitting when Mr. Archer entered the kitchen. At this a light came into his face, and after some seconds of rumination he dispatched Nance upon an errand.

'Mr. Archer,' said he, as soon as they were alone together, 'would you give me a guinea-piece for silver?'

'Why, sir, I believe I can,' said Mr. Archer.

And the exchange was just effected when Nance re-entered the apartment. The blood shot into her face.

'What's to do here?' she asked rudely.

'Nothing, my dearie,' said old Jonathan, with a touch of whine.

'What's to do?' she said again.

'Your uncle was but changing me a piece of gold,' returned Mr. Archer.

'Let me see what he hath given you, Mr. Archer,' replied the girl. 'I had a bad piece, and I fear it is mixed up among the good.'

'Well, well,' replied Mr. Archer, smiling, 'I must take the merchant's risk of it. The money is now mixed.'

'I know my piece,' quoth Nance. 'Come, let me see your silver, Mr. Archer. If I have to get it by a theft I'll see that money,' she cried.

'Nay, child, if you put as much passion to be honest as the world to steal, I must give way, though I betray myself,' said Mr. Archer. 'There

it is as I received it.'

Nance quickly found the bad half-crown.

'Give him another,' she said, looking Jonathan in the face; and when that had been done, she walked over to the chimney and flung the guilty piece into the reddest of the fire. Its base constituents began immediately to run; even as she watched it the disc crumbled, and the lineaments of the King became confused. Jonathan, who had followed close behind, beheld these changes from over her shoulder, and his face darkened sorely.

'Now,' said she, 'come back to table, and to-day it is I that shall say grace, as I used to do in the old times, day about with Dick'; and covering her eyes with one hand, 'O Lord,' said she with deep emotion, 'make us thankful; and, O Lord, deliver us from evil! For the love of the poor souls that watch for us in heaven, O deliver us from evil.'

CHAPTER VII—THE BLEACHING-GREEN

The year moved on to March; and March, though it blew bitter keen from the North Sea, yet blinked kindly between whiles on the river dell. The mire dried up in the closest covert; life ran in the bare branches, and the air of the afternoon would be suddenly sweet with the fragrance of new grass.

Above and below the castle the river crooked like the letter 'S.' The lower loop was to the left, and embraced the high and steep projection which was crowned by the ruins; the upper loop enclosed a lawny promontory, fringed by thorn and willow. It was easy to reach it from the castle side, for the river ran in this part very quietly among innumerable boulders and over dam-like walls of rock. The place was all enclosed, the wind a stranger, the turf smooth and solid; so it was chosen by Nance to be her bleaching-green.

One day she brought a bucketful of linen, and had but begun to wring and lay them out when Mr. Archer stepped from the thicket on the far side, drew very deliberately near, and sat down in silence on the grass. Nance looked up to greet him with a smile, but finding her smile was not returned, she fell into embarrassment and stuck the more busily to her employment. Man or woman, the whole world looks well at any work to which they are accustomed; but the girl was ashamed of what she did. She was ashamed, besides, of the sun-bonnet that so well became her, and

ashamed of her bare arms, which were her greatest beauty.

'Nausicaa,' said Mr. Archer at last, 'I find you like Nausicaa.'

'And who was she?' asked Nance, and laughed in spite of herself, an empty and embarrassed laugh, that sounded in Mr. Archer's ears, indeed, like music, but to her own like the last grossness of rusticity.

'She was a princess of the Grecian islands,' he replied. 'A king, being shipwrecked, found her washing by the shore. Certainly I, too, was shipwrecked,' he continued, plucking at the grass. 'There was never a more desperate castaway—to fall from polite life, fortune, a shrine of honour, a grateful conscience, duties willingly taken up and faithfully discharged; and to fall to this—idleness, poverty, inutility, remorse.'
He seemed to have forgotten her presence, but here he remembered her again. 'Nance,' said he, 'would you have a man sit down and suffer or rise up and strive?'

'Nay,' she said. 'I would always rather see him doing.'

'Ha!' said Mr. Archer, 'but yet you speak from an imperfect knowledge. Conceive a man damned to a choice of only evil—misconduct upon either side, not a fault behind him, and yet naught before him but this choice of sins. How would you say then?'

'I would say that he was much deceived, Mr. Archer,' returned Nance. 'I would say there was a third choice, and that the right one.'

'I tell you,' said Mr. Archer, 'the man I have in view hath two ways open, and no more. One to wait, like a poor mewling baby, till Fate save or ruin him; the other to take his troubles in his hand, and to perish or be saved at once. It is no point of morals; both are wrong. Either way this step-child of Providence must fall; which shall he choose, by doing or not doing?'

'Fall, then, is what I would say,' replied Nance. 'Fall where you will, but do it! For O, Mr. Archer,' she continued, stooping to her work, 'you that are good and kind, and so wise, it doth sometimes go against my heart to see you live on here like a sheep in a turnip-field! If you were braver—' and here she paused, conscience-smitten.

'Do I, indeed, lack courage?' inquired Mr. Archer of himself. 'Courage, the footstool of the virtues, upon which they stand? Courage, that a poor private carrying a musket has to spare of; that does not fail a weasel or a rat; that is a brutish faculty? I to fail there, I wonder? But what is courage, then? The constancy to endure oneself or to see others suffer? The itch of ill-advised activity: mere shuttle-wittedness, or to be still and patient? To inquire of the significance of words is to rob ourselves of what we seem to know, and yet, of all things, certainly to stand still is the least heroic.
Nance,' he said, 'did you ever hear of Hamlet?'

'Never,' said Nance.

'Tis an old play,' returned Mr. Archer, 'and frequently enacted. This while I have been talking Hamlet. You must know this Hamlet was a Prince among the Danes,' and he told her the play in a very good style, here and there quoting a verse or two with solemn emphasis.

'It is strange,' said Nance; 'he was then a very poor creature?'

'That was what he could not tell,' said Mr. Archer. 'Look at me, am I as poor a creature?'

She looked, and what she saw was the familiar thought of all her hours; the tall figure very plainly habited in black, the spotless ruffles, the slim hands; the long, well-shapen, serious, shaven face, the wide and somewhat thin-lipped mouth, the dark eyes that were so full of depth and change and colour. He was gazing at her with his brows a little knit, his chin upon one hand and that elbow resting on his knee.

'Ye look a man!' she cried, 'ay, and should be a great one! The more shame to you to lie here idle like a dog before the fire.'

'My fair Holdaway,' quoth Mr. Archer, 'you are much set on action. I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed.' He continued, looking at her with a half-absent fixity, 'Tis a strange thing, certainly, that in my years of fortune I should never taste happiness, and now when I am broke, enjoy so much of it, for was I ever happier than to-day? Was the grass softer, the stream pleasanter in sound, the air milder, the heart more at peace? Why should I not sink? To dig—why, after all, it should be easy. To

take a mate, too? Love is of all grades since Jupiter; love fails to none; and children'—but here he passed his hand suddenly over his eyes. 'O fool and coward, fool and coward!' he said bitterly; 'can you forget your fetters? You did not know that I was fettered, Nance?' he asked, again addressing her.

But Nance was somewhat sore. 'I know you keep talking,' she said, and, turning half away from him, began to wring out a sheet across her shoulder. 'I wonder you are not wearied of your voice. When the hands lie abed the tongue takes a walk.'

Mr. Archer laughed unpleasantly, rose and moved to the water's edge. In this part the body of the river poured across a little narrow fell, ran some ten feet very smoothly over a bed of pebbles, then getting wind, as it were, of another shelf of rock which barred the channel, began, by imperceptible degrees, to separate towards either shore in dancing currents, and to leave the middle clear and stagnant. The set towards either side was nearly equal; about one half of the whole water plunged on the side of the castle, through a narrow gullet; about one half ran ripping past the margin of the green and slipped across a babbling rapid.

'Here,' said Mr. Archer, after he had looked for some time at the fine and shifting demarcation of these currents, 'come here and see me try my fortune.'

'I am not like a man,' said Nance; 'I have no time to waste.'

'Come here,' he said again. 'I ask you seriously, Nance. We are not always childish when we seem so.'

She drew a little nearer.

'Now,' said he, 'you see these two channels—choose one.'

'I'll choose the nearest, to save time,' said Nance.

'Well, that shall be for action,' returned Mr. Archer. 'And since I wish to have the odds against me, not only the other channel but yon stagnant water in the midst shall be for lying still. You see this?' he continued, pulling up a withered rush. 'I break it in three. I shall put each separately at the top of the upper fall, and according as they go by your way or by the other I shall guide my life.'

'This is very silly,' said Nance, with a movement of her shoulders.

'I do not think it so,' said Mr. Archer.

'And then,' she resumed, 'if you are to try your fortune, why not evenly?'

'Nay,' returned Mr. Archer with a smile, 'no man can put complete reliance in blind fate; he must still cog the dice.'

By this time he had got upon the rock beside the upper fall, and, bidding

her look out, dropped a piece of rush into the middle of the intake. The rusty fragment was sucked at once over the fall, came up again far on the right hand, leaned ever more and more in the same direction, and disappeared under the hanging grasses on the castle side.

'One,' said Mr. Archer, 'one for standing still.'

But the next launch had a different fate, and after hanging for a while about the edge of the stagnant water, steadily approached the bleaching-green and danced down the rapid under Nance's eyes.

'One for me,' she cried with some exultation; and then she observed that Mr. Archer had grown pale, and was kneeling on the rock, with his hand raised like a person petrified. 'Why,' said she, 'you do not mind it, do you?'

'Does a man not mind a throw of dice by which a fortune hangs?' said Mr. Archer, rather hoarsely. 'And this is more than fortune. Nance, if you have any kindness for my fate, put up a prayer before I launch the next one.'

'A prayer,' she cried, 'about a game like this? I would not be so heathen.'

'Well,' said he, 'then without,' and he closed his eyes and dropped the piece of rush. This time there was no doubt. It went for the rapid as straight as any arrow.

‘Action then!’ said Mr. Archer, getting to his feet; ‘and then God forgive us,’ he added, almost to himself.

‘God forgive us, indeed,’ cried Nance, ‘for wasting the good daylight! But come, Mr. Archer, if I see you look so serious I shall begin to think you was in earnest.’

‘Nay,’ he said, turning upon her suddenly, with a full smile; ‘but is not this good advice? I have consulted God and demigod; the nymph of the river, and what I far more admire and trust, my blue-eyed Minerva. Both have said the same. My own heart was telling it already. Action, then, be mine; and into the deep sea with all this paralysing casuistry. I am happy to-day for the first time.’

CHAPTER VIII—THE MAIL GUARD

Somewhere about two in the morning a squall had burst upon the castle, a clap of screaming wind that made the towers rock, and a copious drift of rain that streamed from the windows. The wind soon blew itself out, but the day broke cloudy and dripping, and when the little party assembled at breakfast their humours appeared to have changed with the change of weather. Nance had been brooding on the scene at the river-side, applying it in various ways to her particular aspirations, and the result, which was hardly to her mind, had taken the colour out of her cheeks. Mr. Archer, too, was somewhat absent, his thoughts were of a mingled strain; and even upon his usually impassive countenance there were betrayed successive depths of depression and starts of exultation, which the girl translated in terms of her own hopes and fears. But Jonathan was the most altered: he was strangely silent, hardly passing a word, and watched Mr. Archer with an eager and furtive eye. It seemed as if the idea that had so long hovered before him had now taken a more solid shape, and, while it still attracted, somewhat alarmed his imagination.

At this rate, conversation languished into a silence which was only broken by the gentle and ghostly noises of the rain on the stone roof and about all that field of ruins; and they were all relieved when the note of a man whistling and the sound of approaching footsteps in the grassy court announced a visitor. It was the ostler from the 'Green Dragon'

bringing a letter for Mr. Archer. Nance saw her hero's face contract and then relax again at sight of it; and she thought that she knew why, for the sprawling, gross black characters of the address were easily distinguishable from the fine writing on the former letter that had so much disturbed him. He opened it and began to read; while the ostler sat down to table with a pot of ale, and proceeded to make himself agreeable after his fashion.

'Fine doings down our way, Miss Nance,' said he. 'I haven't been abed this blessed night.'

Nance expressed a polite interest, but her eye was on Mr. Archer, who was reading his letter with a face of such extreme indifference that she was tempted to suspect him of assumption.

'Yes,' continued the ostler, 'not been the like of it this fifteen years: the North Mail stopped at the three stones.'

Jonathan's cup was at his lip, but at this moment he choked with a great splutter; and Mr. Archer, as if startled by the noise, made so sudden a movement that one corner of the sheet tore off and stayed between his finger and thumb. It was some little time before the old man was sufficiently recovered to beg the ostler to go on, and he still kept coughing and crying and rubbing his eyes. Mr. Archer, on his side, laid the letter down, and, putting his hands in his pocket, listened gravely to the tale.

'Yes,' resumed Sam, 'the North Mail was stopped by a single horseman; dash my wig, but I admire him! There were four insides and two out, and poor Tom Oglethorpe, the guard. Tom showed himself a man; let fly his blunderbuss at him; had him covered, too, and could swear to that; but the Captain never let on, up with a pistol and fetched poor Tom a bullet through the body. Tom, he squelched upon the seat, all over blood. Up comes the Captain to the window. "Oblige me," says he, "with what you have." Would you believe it? Not a man says cheep!—not them. "Thy hands over thy head." Four watches, rings, snuff-boxes, seven-and-forty pounds overhead in gold. One Dicksee, a grazier, tries it on: gives him a guinea. "Beg your pardon," says the Captain, "I think too highly of you to take it at your hand. I will not take less than ten from such a gentleman." This Dicksee had his money in his stocking, but there was the pistol at his eye. Down he goes, offs with his stocking, and there was thirty golden guineas. "Now," says the Captain, "you've tried it on with me, but I scorns the advantage. Ten I said," he says, "and ten I take." So, dash my buttons, I call that man a man!' cried Sam in cordial admiration.

'Well, and then?' says Mr. Archer.

'Then,' resumed Sam, 'that old fat fagot Engleton, him as held the ribbons and drew up like a lamb when he was told to, picks up his cattle, and drives off again. Down they came to the "Dragon," all singing like as if they was scalded, and poor Tom saying nothing. You would 'a' thought they had all lost the King's crown to hear them. Down gets this Dicksee. "Postmaster," he says, taking him by the arm, "this is a most

abominable thing," he says. Down gets a Major Clayton, and gets the old man by the other arm. "We've been robbed," he cries, "robbed!" Down gets the others, and all around the old man telling their story, and what they had lost, and how they was all as good as ruined; till at last Old Engleton says, says he, "How about Oglethorpe?" says he. "Ay," says the others, "how about the guard?" Well, with that we bousted him down, as white as a rag and all blooded like a sop. I thought he was dead. Well, he ain't dead; but he's dying, I fancy.'

'Did you say four watches?' said Jonathan.

'Four, I think. I wish it had been forty,' cried Sam. 'Such a party of soused herrings I never did see—not a man among them bar poor Tom. But us that are the servants on the road have all the risk and none of the profit.'

'And this brave fellow,' asked Mr. Archer, very quietly, 'this Oglethorpe—how is he now?'

'Well, sir, with my respects, I take it he has a hole bang through him,' said Sam. 'The doctor hasn't been yet. He'd 'a' been bright and early if it had been a passenger. But, doctor or no, I'll make a good guess that Tom won't see to-morrow. He'll die on a Sunday, will poor Tom; and they do say that's fortunate.'

'Did Tom see him that did it?' asked Jonathan.

'Well, he saw him,' replied Sam, 'but not to swear by. Said he was a very tall man, and very big, and had a 'ankerchief about his face, and a very quick shot, and sat his horse like a thorough gentleman, as he is.'

'A gentleman!' cried Nance. 'The dirty knave!'

'Well, I calls a man like that a gentleman,' returned the ostler; 'that's what I mean by a gentleman.'

'You don't know much of them, then,' said Nance.

'A gentleman would scorn to stoop to such a thing. I call my uncle a better gentleman than any thief.'

'And you would be right,' said Mr. Archer.

'How many snuff-boxes did he get?' asked Jonathan.

'O, dang me if I know,' said Sam; 'I didn't take an inventory.'

'I will go back with you, if you please,' said Mr. Archer. 'I should like to see poor Oglethorpe. He has behaved well.'

'At your service, sir,' said Sam, jumping to his feet. 'I dare to say a gentleman like you would not forget a poor fellow like Tom—no, nor a plain man like me, sir, that went without his sleep to nurse him. And excuse me, sir,' added Sam, 'you won't forget about the letter neither?'

'Surely not,' said Mr. Archer.

Oglethorpe lay in a low bed, one of several in a long garret of the inn. The rain soaked in places through the roof and fell in minute drops; there was but one small window; the beds were occupied by servants, the air of the garret was both close and chilly. Mr. Archer's heart sank at the threshold to see a man lying perhaps mortally hurt in so poor a sick-room, and as he drew near the low bed he took his hat off. The guard was a big, blowsy, innocent-looking soul with a thick lip and a broad nose, comically turned up; his cheeks were crimson, and when Mr. Archer laid a finger on his brow he found him burning with fever.

'I fear you suffer much,' he said, with a catch in his voice, as he sat down on the bedside.

'I suppose I do, sir,' returned Oglethorpe; 'it is main sore.'

'I am used to wounds and wounded men,' returned the visitor. 'I have been in the wars and nursed brave fellows before now; and, if you will suffer me, I propose to stay beside you till the doctor comes.'

'It is very good of you, sir, I am sure,' said Oglethorpe. 'The trouble is they won't none of them let me drink.'

'If you will not tell the doctor,' said Mr. Archer, 'I will give you some water. They say it is bad for a green wound, but in the Low Countries we

all drank water when we found the chance, and I could never perceive we were the worse for it.'

'Been wounded yourself, sir, perhaps?' called Oglethorpe.

'Twice,' said Mr. Archer, 'and was as proud of these hurts as any lady of her bracelets. 'Tis a fine thing to smart for one's duty; even in the pangs of it there is contentment.'

'Ah, well!' replied the guard, 'if you've been shot yourself, that explains. But as for contentment, why, sir, you see, it smarts, as you say. And then, I have a good wife, you see, and a bit of a brat—a little thing, so high.'

'Don't move,' said Mr. Archer.

'No, sir, I will not, and thank you kindly,' said Oglethorpe. 'At York they are. A very good lass is my wife—far too good for me. And the little rascal—well, I don't know how to say it, but he sort of comes round you. If I were to go, sir, it would be hard on my poor girl—main hard on her!'

'Ay, you must feel bitter hardly to the rogue that laid you here,' said Archer.

'Why, no, sir, more against Engleton and the passengers,' replied the guard. 'He played his hand, if you come to look at it; and I wish he had

shot worse, or me better. And yet I'll go to my grave but what I covered him,' he cried. 'It looks like witchcraft. I'll go to my grave but what he was drove full of slugs like a pepper-box.'

'Quietly,' said Mr. Archer, 'you must not excite yourself. These deceptions are very usual in war; the eye, in the moment of alert, is hardly to be trusted, and when the smoke blows away you see the man you fired at, taking aim, it may be, at yourself. You should observe, too, that you were in the dark night, and somewhat dazzled by the lamps, and that the sudden stopping of the mail had jolted you. In such circumstances a man may miss, ay, even with a blunder-buss, and no blame attach to his marksmanship.' . . .

THE YOUNG CHEVALIER

PROLOGUE—THE WINE-SELLER'S WIFE

There was a wine-seller's shop, as you went down to the river in the city of the Anti-popes. There a man was served with good wine of the country and plain country fare; and the place being clean and quiet, with a prospect on the river, certain gentlemen who dwelt in that city in