



# Vindictus

by

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# ***VINDICTUS***

*A Novel by H. A. Covington*

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# *England*

## *Autumn, 1652*

### I.

In the fifteenth century, a landless knight-adventurer named Sir John Redmond rendered such bold and sterling service to the Yorkist party during the Wars of the Roses that he was rewarded with the manorial holding of Whitewood, in the county of Hereford. Two hundred years later, two brothers who were the last of the Redmond line rode home to Whitewood in the gloom of an autumn dusk. They too had fought for a disputed throne, but unlike their ancestor, they came home to Whitewood in defeat.

The Redmonds rode down darkening country lanes in an unseasonably warm October twilight, to the weathered hulk of stone where they had each grown into a youth which was not yet manhood before they went to war. The younger brother, Thomas, had not been within the walls of the old manor house for more than four years. The elder brother, Denzil Redmond, had been gone for ten. By most reckoning they were in the prime of life, but the faces beneath the wide-brimmed felt hats seemed hewn from the same ageless granite as the walls of Whitewood. Their youth lay buried with the rest of the war's corpses and débris, strangled in the acrid gunpowder fumes of Edgehill and Marston Moor and Naseby and a hundred other places without names, places where they had fought and killed and suffered.

The bulk of the present manor hall was medieval, and had changed little since the days of the first Redmond. Squat, massive grey stone walls with narrow windows supported a sharply angled slate roof, and there were but two narrow, deep-set doorways front and rear. The first structure built on the site had been a crude stone tower heaped up just after the Norman Conquest by one of William the Conqueror's thuggish barons, who used it as a base from which to fight off Welsh marauders, keep down Saxon rebels, and on occasion to indulge in a little robbery and pillage himself. One wing was anchored by a stout barn and granary of newer, ruddy brick, the other by the original Norman tower, crumbling yet forbidding. The tower was reputedly haunted by ghost of the beautiful Lady Jeanetta Redmond, wife of the Yorkist lord, who had perished in the upper chamber under mysterious circumstances during the reign of Edward

the Fourth. Family records showed that shortly thereafter, Sir John had married the redheaded daughter of a tavern keeper.

They reined in at the gate of the park, staring through the deepening dusk at the dark mass which was the only home they had ever known outside the army. Behind them Tom Redmond led a single pack mule, lightly laden with two panniers containing everything they had in the world, mostly military equipment like their breastplates and their long steel gauntlets, smoke-blackened so as not to give away an ambush through a telltale gleam. No light showed from the house through the trees. "I wonder if anyone is there?" said Tom. "Surely Sammy and Meg have stayed on, if they still live. Surely Sir Edward wouldn't turn them out!"

"Parliament says it belongs to Pelham now," said Denzil, his voice quiet with muted rage. "He can do what he likes, put in who he likes, turn out whomever he likes. For now." His face was lean and waxen in the gloom, his long dark Cavalier curls and sharply pointed black beard melting into the shadow beneath his hat brim. Even in the twilight his eyes seemed to gleam and wink in pain. Tom secretly thought that sometimes he saw incipient madness in his brother's eyes as well. A whorl of white twisted upwards over one of the chimney pots. "Smoke," said Denzil, pointing. "Someone is there. Let's find out who." They trotted through the park and around the house to the stables in the rear. There was no one in the stables. The place was empty of beasts except for two spavined mules in the stalls, left behind to pull a rickety wagon that stood gauntly in one corner. No lowing of cattle came from the byres, no bleating of sheep from the folds, no snuffling of swine or cackling of fowl; not even a dog barked. The lofts and mangers were empty, the walls devoid of tools or harness. "Pelham and his parcel of Puritan rogues have stripped the place bare," observed Denzil bleakly. "We are here in our own home on the sufferance of a Parliament who murdered the king and a traitor who used the realm's cataclysm to enrich himself by robbing his neighbours."

"He probably took all our stock onto his own land to care for, because there were no tenants left and no labour to be had, with every man in the district dead or in the armies or running from the press gangs," Thomas replied. "You mustn't impute malice to Sir Edward. He was ever our family's friend."

"We have no friends among traitors," said Denzil. "I am going to see who is in our house, and if it is someone who has no right to be there I intend to tell them to leave. I will tell them only once." Denzil calmly checked the priming on a pair of pistols at his belt, holstered one and strode towards the door with the other in his hand.

"I wouldn't plan on using those guns, Den," called Tom warningly. "It's a habit you'd best get out of. We're not at war any more, and you can't go around shooting people!" Denzil ignored him and pushed open the kitchen door. An elderly couple sat by a low fire in the hearth, eating their meagre supper of frumenty meal and oatcakes. They were shabbily but cleanly dressed in russet homespun, and Denzil recognized them as the estate's former head groom and his wife, who had been nurse to both of the Redmond sons. They started up and stared at him, surprised, and the old man grasped a reaping hook as he arose from his stool.

"Who be ye, sir, and what do ye intend with that pistol?" the old man demanded uncertainly. Denzil grinned and sheathed the piece in his belt.

"I'm a King's Malignant, Sammy," he replied with a chuckle. "I've come a long way for a plate of Meg's honey oatcakes, and then tomorrow morning I'll be off to shoot a boil off Oliver Cromwell's arse!" The old woman stood up on tiptoe and peered at him short-sightedly, and then suddenly cried aloud and rushed to embrace him, weeping vehemently in joyous welcome. "For ten years I've often longed for one or two of those oatcakes of yours, Meg," he told her gently, hugging her.

"Dear God, it's Master Denzil!" shouted the old man incredulously. Tom stepped through the door. "Why, 'tis both of them! Praise be unto Heaven!" he quavered, his rheumy eyes filling with tears. "Oh, but this day has been a long time in coming! If only old Master William and Lady Jane could be here!" He dropped the hook and clasped their arms. "It's a terrible poor welcome for you, sirs, terrible, the old master dead and gone, the poor king murdered, Old Noll Cromwell plunking his hams down on the throne in Whitehall, England gone to the Devil and all of our goods gone to Pelham! They said it was the law that done it. Blethers, bloody blethers, I say! Traitor's law! Smockfaced Grindall lawyers, they came with their Parliament papers and bailiffs and they took it all!"

"We'll get it back, Sammy," Denzil assured him grimly. "Every hanging and every piece of plate, every cow and every shoat that our swine have birthed, every chick our hens have hatched, everything the Pelhams have taken. But for tonight, would there be any chance of a good hot meal?"

The old couple dug into their hoarded larder. In addition to the oatcakes they produced a pork pie, a cheese of respectable age and flavour, some eggs for a spicy tansey omelet, and a bottle of vintage claret they had managed to conceal from the Pelhams' steward when the cellar had gone to the new masters. Later

that night the two Redmond brothers sat at a trestle table next to a roaring fire in the long, high paneled hall of Whitewood, where the knights and barons of York had been wont to roister and where many a banquet of their youth had been laid. Tom pulled out his clay pipe and a rub of tobacco, which he lit with a brand from the fire. "At least they left us our ancestral portraits," he said philosophically, pointing to the paintings hanging on the walls. From one wall a slim, scholarly Elizabethan gentleman in a starched ruff looked down on them enigmatically; below his right hand on a small table were portrayed several ponderous books, a crystal ball, a quill pen and inkstand, and several beakers and odd looking vessels. "The hall wouldn't be the same without Grandfather. If he were still alive mayhap he could boil us up a cauldron of gold. We could certainly use it, eh, Den? Remember when we used to sneak up to the tower and peep at all his old equipment gathering dust up there? Until Father heard of it and had it all thrown out? I wonder if he ever came close to finding the Philosopher's Stone? He dabbled in alchemy all his life."

"Some say he dabbled in worse things," grunted Denzil. "I've heard the word sorcery mentioned. Pity he's not around to turn Cromwell into a toad." Denzil cleared a space on the table and began laying out his formidable personal armoury of handguns for cleaning and servicing, talking as he worked. "Grandfather Lucian was a character, so he was, but the one I wish I'd known was old Sir Nick over there." He pointed with a ramrod to another, smaller portrait on a far wall, discreetly tucked away in a recess.

"The one who was a mercenary commander on the Continent, of exceedingly unsavoury reputation?" remarked Tom.

"Aye, he had to go on the run in the time of Bluff King Hal," said Denzil. "Did you ever hear why, Tom?"

"Mother didn't encourage me to inquire," said Tom. "She found our family black sheep to be an embarrassment."

"Weren't you ever curious?" Denzil grinned widely. "A small matter of murder, it was. Nicholas Redmond killed a Pelham who insulted him. You never knew, but I don't think Sir Edward has forgotten."

Tom decided not to reply. He disliked the turn the conversation was taking. He watched Denzil uneasily as his brother picked up each pistol and unloaded it, shaking out the priming powder onto a dry cloth and then carefully pulling the ball and powder charge from each with a hooked drawing rod, thus saving himself the necessity of firing off his weapons to empty them, a practice Denzil

considered wasteful. It was a tricky operation, and yet Denzil performed it with practised speed and skill. "I suppose we must go and see Sir Edward tomorrow," said Tom after a while, puffing meditatively on his pipe. "It will be awkward, I grant you. We can't erase the past. But I think we can come to some kind of satisfactory accommodation regarding our presence here, and the return of most of our goods and livestock, getting some kind of lease or formal tenure here which will satisfy their county committee or whoever needs to be placated."

"You go and see him," said Denzil.

"Sir Edward is a good man, and a fair one," insisted Tom.

"I don't deny it," replied Denzil. "I just point out yet again that whatever his personal virtues, the man is a traitor to his king, and he has profited from his treason at our expense. I will not go begging to him with my hat in my hand for something that is mine by right. I'm not sitting in judgment on you, Tom. You are your own man. If you want to make an accommodation with him, obtain his permission to live here in the place where you were born and raised, then that is your affair. Not I. Pelham is a thief, and I don't parley with thieves."

Tom sighed and remained silent for a time. Denzil picked up his favourite pieces, a pair of wheel-lock pistols made by the famous gunsmith Carl Zelner of Salzburg. He generally preferred a flintlock for speed of loading and cocking, but the Zelnors were exquisite guns, perfectly balanced and tooled. The stocks and butts were hand carved from seasoned black walnut, polished to a glowing sheen, and inlaid with engraved silver reinforcing plates, while the Gothic-fluted barrels were cold-rolled from the finest Toledo steel, and the locks sturdily fitted with tight precision to keep misfires to a minimum. What made Denzil prize these guns more than any other, though, was the fact that they had been a gift from the commander of King Charles's cavalry, Prince Rupert of the Rhine.

The other weapons in Denzil's arsenal gave him a formidable firepower. In the field he carried three more brace of horse pistols in his saddle holsters, heavy flintlocks called petronels, weapons two feet in length which fired balls of one and a quarter ounce, propelled by as much powder as one cared to hazard. An excessive charge would blow the weapon to shards in the shooter's hand, and his hand with it. In addition to this lethal armament Denzil carried a pair of all-metal "Scots dags" with button triggers and flaring bell muzzles like small blunderbusses, which he loaded with shot and used against charging cavalry in skirmishes. As backups he also had a pair of tiny "French dags" no

bigger than the palm of his hand, for which he had special pockets sewn in his sleeves, his hat, and his boots. Now Denzil began to disassemble and oil one of the Zelners. "You don't have to do that tonight, Den," said Tom apprehensively. "Actually, you don't have to do it ever again."

"Every night, Tom," replied Denzil. "That's why I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of misfires I have had in ten years. I service my own pieces, I cast and size my own bullets, I blend my own powder whenever I can and re-sift any I get ready-mixed to keep it smooth and even grained. I cut my own wads and patches and I always load my own charges. Surely you recall how many of our foppish aristocratic comrades in arms left such mundane tasks to their orderlies, and then ended up with a Roundhead pike in their guts when their pans flashed?"

"That's all over with, Den," said Tom flatly. "You should put those pieces away now. The war is over."

"Of course the war isn't over yet," replied Denzil with a sigh, like someone speaking to a half-witted child. "It can't be over. We haven't won."

"In God's name, man, don't you realize how lucky we are even to be alive?" cried Tom passionately. "King Charles is dead, the Prince of Wales is a tennis instructor in Paris, Prince Rupert has sailed off to the West Indies to play pirate, Hopton and Montrose and General Lisle and Lucas and Astley are all dead! Everyone else we fought along side is either dead as well or fighting in foreign armies for a few shillings a week or else they've made their peace with Parliament and come home! Damnation, Den, I don't like Cromwell and his pestilential crew any more than you do, but as foul as they are they have won and we have lost, and they rule England now! If we are ever to recover anything at all from this ghastly débacle of the last ten years then we are going to have to come to terms with that reality. I'm just glad they let us come back under any conditions at all, else we'd most likely die with our guts blown allover some foreign battlefield or end our days as old men freezing in some Amsterdam garret with not the price of a loaf of bread or a bottle of rotgut wine between us! I'm sick of it, Den, weary unto death of it all, and I just want to go on with living."

"And what of the Pelhams?" asked Denzil, studiously swabbing out the pistol barrel with an oily rag at the end of a ramrod.

"What about them?" demanded Tom. "They have been friends of our family for generations, even if one of our ancestors did kill one of theirs over some



forgotten quarrel. Our line has this tendency to produce madcaps and quarrelsome types, in case you□ve not noticed..."

"Really? You amaze me!" interrupted Denzil with a chuckle. "I wouldn□t call you quarrelsome nor yet a madcap."

"Don□t play silly buggers, Den, I□m serious," continued Tom exasperation. "In our time the Pelhams have always been our friends, until this national trouble came upon us, and we are not the only friends and neighbours who have found ourselves on opposite sides in the war, God pity us all. The war is over and that friendship stands, and tomorrow morning I□m riding over to Pelham Hall and tell them so. When I was wounded after the battle of Monmouth and I came crawling back here half dead, the Pelhams all knew very well that I was here. They could have reported me to the local military committee, or they could have come over and taken me themselves and won some credit with the régime in Whitehall, but instead they turned a blind eye and even slipped food and bandages and medicine to Sammy and Meg. Sir Edward will deal with us fairly, in friendship. I know it. We□re lucky the Roundheads didn□t give Whitewood to some real tub-thumping Grindall fanatic who□d turn us off the place on sight!"

"Oh, aren□t we the lucky ones indeed?" sneered Denzil bitterly. "Lucky we did not die in the honourable service of our king fighting against this traitorous rabble! Lucky these rodents have allowed us to return to the land of our birth so long as we do it on our hands and knees, our tails tucked between our legs liked whipped dogs! Lucky our home and our lands were handed over to one of the less obnoxious specimens among them who will kindly allow us to stay! For ten years I sent these carrion running like squealing stuck pigs when Prince Rupert sounded a charge, I□ve seen their brains squirt and splatter through their helmets when I put a ball in their eye, I□ve watched their Godly toes do a jig on a hundred ropes, and now I□m supposed to ask Edward Pelham every time I want to go to the jakes? Our good fortune leaves me giddy!"

"Denzil, we can□t wipe out these past ten years as if they had never happened. I wouldn□t try. But now we have a chance to make up for some of that lost time, to pick up a few pieces. We can get Whitewood refurbished, producing, earning again so we can feed ourselves and need not rely on anyone□s good will or charity. We can get married..." Tom stopped abruptly. "I□m sorry, Den. That was a stupid thing for me to say."

"Save the mark, Tom," replied Denzil carelessly. "It□s partly true. Belike you can still wed Barbara. I know she□s been much on your mind."

"Aye, she has," admitted Tom. "I'm going to ask her tomorrow, and I hope she'll have me. I only thank God that none of her family died in the fighting, else she might not be speaking to me now. I'm sorry things didn't work out between you and Kate, but you were away for ten years, and from her point of view you were fighting in the wrong army. It was your own choice. You could have come home back in '46 when the first peace was made. Instead you went to Scotland and joined Montrose."

"Montrose was the only one still fighting."

"I know, but how did that look to Katherine?" said Tom. "You had a chance to come home to her and you didn't. Ten years, Den! Who could have expected her to wait that long? Did it never cross your mind that she would find another?"

"And didn't she that, eh?" whispered Denzil, his eyes glowing oddly in the firelight. Tom saw them and shuddered inwardly.

"Francis was a logical choice after Katherine embraced the Nonconforming church," argued Tom. "It's only natural that she would want to marry someone who shared her religious views. I can't very well see you turning Puritan, even for her. Francis was the obvious candidate. He's rich, he's one of the most prominent men among the county's sectaries, he has a good war record on their side with Bradford's Fifth Monarchy regiment, he's handsome and well-favoured."

"It boots not to me whether he sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty!" interrupted Denzil. "Francis Staton is a turd! He was a treacherous, smockfaced little wretch when we were boys and he hasn't changed. He would always be the one to tattle to our tutors or to the parson anytime an apple orchard got raided or someone's pony got taken for a jaunt or somebody's chickens got stoned. Always had his lessons down letter perfect and knew all his Scripture for Sunday school. Even then he was forever cozening Kate, trying to turn her against me, get her away from me with bribery, gifts of sweets and ribbons and mirrors. Do you remember a wee puppy I gave Kate once? She loved it. I always figured it was Francis who dropped it into the cistern at Pelham and drowned it. He was always slandering me behind my back, to our parents, to Kate. He ran fast whenever I came after him, and he got away more often than not, but I caught him a few times. I'll wager he remembers when."

"I remember, Denzil," said Tom. "That was half a lifetime and ten years of war ago. If you don't let this go now there will only be more pointless suffering. Please, Den, no more!"

"They're not wed yet, you know. There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip."

"And do Kate's wishes count for nothing?" asked Tom. "Denzil, she wrote to you. She said she loved Francis. She chose Francis. That's the end of it. We lost the war and you lost Kate. Those are facts of life which some day, somehow you are going to have to learn to accept."

"No."

"Then what will you do?" demanded Tom. "Kill Francis? No doubt you could. But to what end? Katherine would hate you forever, you would be outlawed almost as soon as you have been amnestied, and even if you escaped the gallows you would have to flee the realm forever. One would think you'd had enough of exile. I grant you the wines and the sunshine are pleasant in France, but Holland is dead dull and the beer is watery, and I have heard little good of anywhere else. Nowhere else is England, Denzil, and I'm never leaving again. Sooth, I'm never riding more than ten leagues from this door if I can help it! Make peace, Denzil! Make peace with Parliament, make peace with the Pelhams, make peace with yourself! There are other eligible ladies in the shire, including, I regret to say, a number of young widows whose husbands fell fighting for the king, and who surely would be proud to wed one of the last of the Cavaliers to surrender."

"I haven't surrendered."

"As you will. You're here, you're young enough to make a new start, and even though Whitewood technically isn't yours anymore you are still a baronet with our father's title."

"A landless knight," ruminated Denzil. "Not an unfamiliar situation in our line, to be sure. Old Lord John got this place by marrying a Talbot girl, whom some say still hangs about in our tower, but before that all he had was a sword. Wonder what he would have made of a flintlock? Sir Nicholas Redmond had his little contretemps with the Pelhams and he lost Whitewood for years, but he was able to come home before he died. A dramatic gesture is called for, I think. I'll not use my title while Old Noll rules, but retain my military style to spite the Roundheads. Until the second King Charles comes into his own, then, Sir

Denzil of Whitewood is no more. I am Captain Redmond, on extended leave from His Majesty's army of Restoration. Knights serve kings, not bumpkin dictators with Huntingdon cow dung between their toes."

"If you want to live in a world of phantasm, please yourself," said Tom with a shrug. "But for me, it's over."

"I've told you, it's not over at all," said Denzil patiently. "We haven't won yet. It will be over when King Charles returns to his throne and the top rail is on the top again while the bottom rail is on the bottom where it belongs."

"Play with the wording of it as you will, you must still live in the real world," responded Tom with irritation. "Just what do you intend to do on this extended leave of yours?"

"Do my duty, as I have always done," replied Denzil moodily, picking up another pistol and starting to break down the lock to clean it. "I'm not a total fool, Tom. I do recognize the fact that certain reverses have occurred."

"I would agree that total defeat does constitute something of a reverse, yes," said Tom bitterly.

"Certain reverses notwithstanding, I shall continue to do what I can in my present limited capacity," Denzil continued, ignoring the interruption. "It will be an interesting problem."

"You are mad, Denzil!" said Tom.

"Not mad," replied Denzil. "Just persistent, brother. Merely persistent."

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## II.

The next day dawned bright and crisp, glowing gold and orange in the wan sunlight of autumn. That morning Thomas Redmond rode alone to the home of his enemies and his friends, the Pelham family. He asked Denzil to accompany him, but his brother grunted and refused again, and Tom was secretly relieved. He felt that his chances of accomplishing something constructive were enhanced by Denzil's absence.

After a breakfast of bread and boiled Martinmas beef, Tom carefully shaved himself with a newly sharpened Italian razor from his field kit, with generous

latherings of goose grease. His face was more square and chunky than Denzil's, and his hair a much lighter brown; he wore it long in the accepted Cavalier style but preferred a clean shave to his brother's scraggly, Mephistophelean beard and moustache. Tom washed his face and hands and thoroughly combed and curled his hair, tooting around in the trunks and presses with Meg's help, he was able to assemble a few presentable items of apparel from his pre-war wardrobe. He chose dark satin knee breeches with blue garter ribbons, a velvet doublet of dark blue, a clean white scarf to serve as a cravat for his neck, and a hat with a plain fustian band of sober black rather than his Royalist crimson and gold. The riding boots of his cavalry days were replaced by linen hose and black shoes with shining silver buckles. He cut a respectable if not quite elegant figure. Tom felt naked without the sword and pistols he had carried for so many years, but even though he was entitled by custom to wear the gentlemanly rapier he decided to leave it behind. He thought it best to forego any display of weaponry, lest it recall to his hosts' minds the days when his blade had been wet with Parliamentary blood.

Pelham Hall lay on a rolling ridge to the east of the Whitewood estate; Tom's alchemist grandfather had in fact sold the land to a Pelham contemporary in order to finance his strange researches, to the irritation of his own family and the bemusement of the countryside. Approaching through the lanes and across the harvest-stubbed fields Tom soon came in view of the house. While the Redmonds were a line of soldiers and country squires, the roots of the Pelham prosperity had always lain in commerce. The founder of the family fortune was one of Queen Elizabeth's more quietly successful courtiers during the Armada years. A prescient merchant, he had amassed immense wealth through supplying his country in her hour of need with the naval stores, powder, equipment, and rations which the sailors of Drake and Frobisher had used to smash the proud galleons of Spain. Pelham Hall today was cheery and spacious, gabled in oak and superbly landscaped with surrounding gardens that were a wonder to behold in high summer, an open and airy mansion which sang of Gloriana in contrast to gloomy, medieval Whitewood. The Pelham family butler, an old retainer named Leander, suppressed whatever surprise he may have felt in seeing a former Cavalier on his master's doorstep. He called a boy to lead Tom's horse around to the stables in the rear, then courteously showed Tom into a receiving parlor on the ground floor. The steward departed and promptly reappeared with a pewter tankard of ale, and told Tom, "Sir Edward will be with you shortly, sir."

But it was not Sir Edward who entered the room first. Tom was standing by the fire sipping the drink when he heard the rustle of skirts. He turned and saw a

short, full-figured woman with auburn ringlets standing before him. She wore a high-necked gown of blue damask with a tight waist, her bodice accentuating her full breasts, trimmed with lace and ribbons and the neck and the elbows. She stared at him in shock and joy. "*Tom!*" she quavered. He set the tankard down onto the mantelpiece and wordlessly gathered her into his arms. "Let me look at you!" she said tremulously.

"Let me touch you," he said. "At this moment you are the most beautiful sight in all the world, Barbara. Tell me, my lady, do I still have kissing privileges?"

"Always!" she whispered. He softly ran over her forehead and her cheeks and her eyes with his lips, cradling her face in his hands and caressing her neck. When he reached her lips she responded passionately, gripping his shoulders and forcing her tongue against his ferociously. Then she sighed and leaned her head against his chest, and she began to cry unashamedly, in relief and joy. "Are you home now?" she sobbed. "Really home, for good and all? I couldn't bear it if you left me again. Dear God, it's been so horrible all these years. Please, Tom, please, don't leave me again."

"Never again, my love," he swore to her, hugging her and meaning every word in his soul. "Never gain. I want you for my wife now more than ever I did before. All my life I have wanted you, Barbara. I have carried your image in my mind's eye. Sleeping and waking, always you have been there with me. I wrote you letters, countless letters. I don't know how many of them got through to you."

"I'll show you," she sniffled. "I kept them all."

"I received only four letters from you, darling, four in as many years. That isn't surprising, the way we kept moving around and the way we were on the run half the time, chasing your lot and then being chased ourselves. But I saved your letters and read them over and over again until they almost fell apart, until I knew every word by heart and just took them out so that I could hold something which had been held in your sweet hands. I have read those letters in the rain and the snow, on board ships at sea and by a hundred campfires, in taverns and in ditches, even under bombardment at the battle of Worcester. They were all that kept me going, because they gave me the hope that someday I would come back here and we could all live together in peace, and we could be together always and never be parted again. Will you marry me now, Barbara?"

"Yes, yes, a thousand times yes, my love!" she said, weeping softly.

"And a fine hearing that makes!" exclaimed a voice behind them. A tall, grey-haired gentleman with calm and distinguished features entered the room. He was richly dressed in satin and velvet, his suit subdued but fine. "I didn't mean to overhear such a scene, Tom, which should have been private between the two of you, but having heard I heartily approve!" continued Sir Edward Pelham. He clasped Tom Redmond's hand warmly. "Welcome home, lad, welcome home! I had hoped that you above all of our late adversaries would take the Engagement and return to England. There are far too many of our best Englishmen living in exile these days."

"About time you two quit mucking about and tied the knot!" boomed a voice behind Sir Edward; the entire Pelham family were crowding into the parlor behind their father to welcome the returned neighbour. Robert Pelham was the oldest son, a tall and beefy widower with a florid face and close-cropped hair going grey at the temples. He gripped Tom's hand in a big fist. "Welcome home, Tom! Thank God all that bloody bother is over with and we can have all pleasant about us now. We've missed you Redmond lads at the Ludlow races and Shrewsbury fair. Maybe we can start bringing up some decent hunters now that the armies aren't taking all the best horseflesh!"

Then came Miles Pelham, a spare, neat man with a trimmed dark beard and moustache, attired in the uniform of a colonel in the New Model Army with the orange sash and blue trim denoting a staff officer. "You I suppose I should salute," laughed Tom

"Save the mark, no," returned Miles. "I'm no longer in the Horse Artillery. I am now military liason to the county committee. I fire my broadsides these days with foolscap and ink, and I command a gallant troop of clerks and accountants who are ever ready to draw quill and fight to the last ledger!" Then came Lewis Pelham, the youngest son, a wispy and slender young man with a polished air and a soft golden moustache, lace at his cuffs and high-heeled shoes and silk hosen below his satin knee breeches. Lewis had followed his father into law but had no practice, nor had he become involved in the late military conflict. Tom didn't know Lewis very well, but greeted him cordially. He had a diffused impression that Lewis was a bit out of sympathy with his family's politics and service to Parliament, but then Tom been gone four years. Perhaps he would now be able to get to know Lewis better.

Finally, Katherine Pelham entered the parlor. *Here she comes, the woman who apparently still has a hold on that heart of stone within Denzil. She's still a looker right enough,* Tom reflected as he took her in after years of absence. Tall, slender, and stately, she was a woman famed throughout the March

country for her beauty and her piety in the Independent church. The great mystery in her circle of acquaintance was why she remained unmarried at the advanced age of twenty-seven. Most of her neighbours were aware that buried deep in her past was an entanglement with a notorious Royalist marauder who had been her intended, but no one in her congregation would ever be so impolite as to mention such ancient history. On her arm was the man to whom she was now betrothed, as tall and as dignified in his carriage as was she herself. He was Sir Francis Staton, Member of Parliament for a Hereford pocket borough, wealthy landowner and merchant adventurer, staunch Puritan, and friend to John Okey and others among Cromwell's new Council of State that effectively ruled the realm now. Both he and Katherine wore the dark and sombre garb of their faith, but their apparel was finely tailored and cut from rich material. She wore a black boratto dress with spotless white floating collars of starched linen, with a white cap over the cornsilk tresses which flowed freely down her back. Staton was attired in black velvet and broadcloth with satin knee ribbons and white hose.

*Going a bit meaty, though,* thought Tom critically. *He was with Bradford, but I wonder how he spent his war and how much actual fighting he saw?* A paunch was beginning to form around Staton's waistline and his face, albeit still handsome, was beginning to grow fleshy, with the beginnings of a double chin. It was a self-indulgent and self-satisfied face, not strong, with watery blue eyes and soft white flesh and hair so blond as to be a most white. Tom was struck with qualms. He had never liked Francis Staton even as a boy, although he was more of Denzil's generation than his own. He recalled Francis as a bad loser and a worse winner. Denzil had been hardened, made lean and sharp by defeat, while Staton had become puffy and smug in victory. Would he be capable of dealing with the threat posed by Tom's lethal brother?

Katherine interrupted his thoughts when she embraced him warmly. "Welcome home, Tom!" she exclaimed.

"Kate, you and Francis are the only non-juring folk I have seen yet who can manage to look elegant in that grim garb you affect," Tom told them admiringly.

"My lady eschews worldly adornment, sir," replied Francis enthusiastically. "Nonetheless, her beauty hideth not its light under a bushel."

"Don't flatter me, Francis, you'll make me vain!" protested Katherine. She clasped his arm in affection. "Tom, your welfare and your safe return to us has always been close to our hearts and in our prayers."



"Even when your brothers and your intended here were shooting at me?" inquired Tom teasingly.

"Then more than ever!" she replied earnestly. "Each day, I thank the Lord in His infinite mercy that none of my family fell during these perilous past times. We have been very greatly blessed, for not many households have escaped these troubled times without scathe."

"Leander!" called out Sir Edward, "Mull wine, and let's have some wood to build up the fire in the library! No need to keep an old family friend up here in the parlor, that's for parsons and justice of the peace business!" The group moved on through to Sir Edward's well-appointed library with high ceilings and shelves laden with handsome leather-bound quartos. Among the books were the works of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Marlowe, and John Donne, as well as treatises on science, astronomy, and agriculture. Sir Edward Pelham had supported Parliament during the war, but he had done so purely as a business venture and not out of any Puritanical attitudes. Tom recalled that Sir Edward had been known even during the war itself as a patron of troupes of traveling players, while plays and masques had been staged at Pelham Hall in despite of censorious official disapproval. Edward Pelham was too valuable a supporter of Parliament's cause, though, and his cultural peccadilloes had been overlooked. "Sit, Tom, sit, boy! There on the settle so Barbara can sit beside you!"

"So you two are to wed, then?" prompted Katherine.

"Aye," said Tom, looking at Barbara who blushed with happiness. "It was always to be, wasn't it?"

"We all knew it, ever since you were both very young," agreed Sir Edward. "The signs were all there." For a fleeting moment a name hovered in the air between them all, for there had been another betrothal, another marriage that everyone here had thought would be. But Tom pushed the name from his mind. *Not Denzil, not now*, he thought. Soon enough the name would have to be spoken aloud and the threat he posed to this circle of friends would have to be discussed, but not yet. "So when is your day?" he asked of Francis.

"Christmas," Staton told him. "Of course, in our faith we no longer celebrate the Saviour's birth in the old idolatrous manner, but Sir Edward talked us into it, and well you know he is a persuasive man." The old patriarch beamed. "Parliament reconvenes in February, and then Katherine and I shall remove to London and make our home there so we can be near the center of government and commerce. It's going to be an exciting time, Tom! We will be making a

new world, creating God's kingdom on earth, at least insofar as it is possible for mere mortal men to accomplish such a thing. I am going into a wool venture with some other investors, shipping all the way to Muscovy. The war years understandably caused a serious drop in England's wool production, but there are markets all over Europe hungering for every bale we can export. Now that we've gotten rid of so many archaic laws and customs regarding land use we can implement extensive enclosure for grazing, so the English yield should increase to three or even four times the pre-war level."

"You mean now there is no Crown to enforce the ancient custom and usage of centuries and keep common lands open for all?" remarked Tom, slightly irritated. "Yes, I can see how you could increase wool production many times over if you raise sheep rather than people. The Divine Right of Kings seems to have been replaced by the divine right to make money hand over fist and devil take the hindmost."

Francis refused to have his feathers ruffled; contemplating his coming profits put him in an equable mood. "Wool is just part of it, Tom. The really coming thing is the American trade, timber and furs and naval stores from New England, tobacco from Virginia, sugar and rum from Barbados. We barter for these commodities directly with the planters, giving them English manufactures and negroes from the Africa trade, so we can outfit ventures with little actual cash required. There is serious planning afoot to mount an expedition to seize Jamaica from the Spanish, and that will give England a presence right in the heart of the Spanish Main from which we can force our way into commercial contact with Panama, Peru, Venezuela, and Cuba, maybe even gain access to the gold mines of Mexico itself! The days of Drake and Frobisher could come again, Tom! English merchant vessels sailing into Southampton loaded down with the treasures of the West Indies, English sea dogs looting the yearly plate fleet! I've already got shares in a ship on its way to Bermuda, and I'm with a group of underwriters who are backing the Jamaican venture as well as other projects. Why not come in with us, Tom? With your military experience you could recover your family fortunes in a single successful expedition, maybe end up with a huge plantation in Jamaica or a chest of gold from a Spanish galleon!"

"A war of conquest and plunder is an interesting way to inaugurate the rule of the righteous and the kingdom of Heaven on earth," observed Tom. Katherine felt it was time to step in to prevent a relapse into the kind of political wrangling which had dominated their lives for the past decade and more.

"Why don't you and Barbara get married on Christmas day with us, Tom?" she interposed. "A double wedding. You've waited long enough, why wait any longer?"

"Too long," agreed Tom, clasping his beloved's hand.

"Much too long," said Barbara softly.

"And afterwards, Tom?" asked Sir Edward. "Any plans?"

"I should like to take Barbara to Whitewood, sir, and for the time being concentrate on getting the estate on its feet. As tempting as Francis's vision of a Jamaican plantation and Spanish gold may be, I have promised myself that from this time forward I remain at my own hearthside, in the home of my people. Whitewood resembles a mausoleum now; the war hit us hard. Of course, that is largely up to yourself, Sir Edward."

Barbara's father coughed in embarrassment. "Tom, I want to explain a few things to you. I exercised a great deal of influence, through Miles and on my own account, in order to be granted the Redmond family estates on their sequestration by Parliament at your father's death. That confiscation was inevitable, with both your brother and yourself serving in the royal army. Your father understood this, and on several occasions he and I discussed what was to be done in order to ensure that the family patrimony remained in your hands. So far as I am concerned, Tom, Whitewood is still yours. I went to some lengths to acquire it, but always with the intention of holding it in trust and returning it to you when that becomes feasible. Everything I have here for safe keeping which came from Whitewood will be returned, and as soon as you can get some labour in over there the livestock will follow. A strict accounting has been kept of all your property and your animals. You won't find a thing missing. We shall have to come to some kind of lease arrangement, because for the time being, the political situation being what it is, your only possible status is that of a tenant. The fact that you will soon become my son-in-law helps immensely, of course. Let's give the world a few more years to settle down and allow painful memories to dim a bit, and then you can buy it back from me for a shilling or something of the kind."

"There is a difficulty, Sir Edward," said Tom quietly. The name which had been hovering in the air around them could be denied no longer. It had to be spoken. "You seem to have forgotten that I am not the oldest Redmond. My brother Denzil is now heir and baronet."

"Denzil? No, Tom, I hadn't forgotten, but then it doesn't really matter, does it? Despite the Engagement, I simply can't see Denzil coming back and living peacefully under Parliament's laws as a simple country squire. Do you happen to know where he is now? No doubt somewhere over the seas plotting with the Stuarts still?"

"He is at Whitewood," replied Tom.

"*What?*" exclaimed Sir Edward, sitting bolt upright in his high backed chair by the fire. He was interrupted by the arrival of Leander and a footman bearing a tray of large, steaming goblets of mulled wine, and there was a delay while each of them took a cup, more bottles of claret were decanted and placed on a sideboard, and mulling irons were thrust into the fire. "I don't think we need be in any doubt as to who our first health shall be addressed to," said Sir Edward, as they all rose. "Tom, welcome home, and may you and Barbara live long and joyously and in the peace of God."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Robert Pelham, tossing off his draught and reaching for a bottle.

"Denzil in England?" demanded Miles as soon as they were seated again. "Don't tell me that he has taken the Engagement as well?"

"No one was more surprised than myself when I saw him waiting for me on the dock at Greenwich," admitted Tom. "You know that we weren't required to sign anything under the Act of Oblivion, or to swear an oath to Parliament. I doubt he would have done that, but he has returned and thus far he has refrained from any acts of violence or insurrection against the government. As for myself, sir, all I desire from now on is to live in peace by my own fireside with your daughter, whom I love more than all the world, and to be at peace with my neighbours and have all pleasant about me. I care not who holds the deed to Whitewood if such is the price of peace. This war has taken seven years of my life, since first I rode with Prince Rupert at the age of sixteen. I will not yield this quarrel one more minute of that time which is left to me. For me, the war against Parliament and Oliver Cromwell is over, for good and all."

"Well said, lad!" cried Sir Edward in delight.

"And Denzil?" asked Katherine. "Is the war over for him as well?"

"No," said Tom sadly. "For Denzil, it will never be over. I really have no idea why he has accepted the Act of Oblivion and come back. If Parliament had

made the same offer in 1649, after the king's execution, then every true Cavalier would have spat in their faces, but after three more years of fighting and defeat and exile most of us have seen the handwriting on the wall and we are grateful for the chance to come home, pick up the pieces and start anew. But Denzil? I can't read his mind, I don't know what he's thinking, but I don't like it. He means no good, I can tell you that much."

"I must confess that I am surprised Denzil Redmond was not specifically excluded from the provisions of the Act," commented Miles. "He has an evil name, Tom. Surely you know that? Wasn't there some question of murder charges?"

"Most of the really vile things he did in Scotland," said Tom. "I doubt it would be safe for him to go north of the Border. Those Presbyterians have long memories. I want all of you to know that I was never an outrider like Denzil. I always served with a regular cavalry regiment, commanded by legitimate officers. During the war years I very seldom saw Denzil except when he was in camp for some kind of conference, or when he brought his troop in for some really big engagement like Naseby or Marston Moor. Most of my military service was spent in riding about the countryside looking for food or fodder, sitting in stinking quarters somewhere in a tent or a greasy tavern picking lice and waiting for something to happen, freezing or sweating buckets according to the weather, intermixed with a few short interludes of fear and madness and killing when we ran into some of your lot."

"Sounds familiar," said Robert with a grim chuckle.

"A very good description of our own life with the colours on Parliament's side," commented Miles. "I imagine Joshua's men felt the same way before the walls of Jericho."

"But you have to understand the way Denzil fought his war in order to understand him," Tom continued. "They were called prickers, because they pricked the Roundheads---excuse me, the Parliamentary forces, then fled and came back to prick them again. You'll recall that both sides had them, small bands of men on fast horses who moved light and lived off the land. They roamed the countryside beating up quarters, ambushing supply convoys, robbing pay trains, picking off isolated outposts and stragglers, trying to draw forces away from the main armies and interfere with troop movements."

"Also plundering, raping, looting, murdering defenceless bystanders who got in their way, and sometimes changing sides when it was convenient," added

Miles. "Yes, Tom, both sides used irregulars like that. I wish I could put my hand on my heart and swear to you that no atrocities were ever committed in the name of the Commonwealth, but I would lie if I did. These irregulars made themselves an evil name, but Tom, by every account I ever heard Denzil Redmond was the worst of the lot, king or Parliament."

"Aye," agreed Tom morosely. "From the very beginning Denzil seemed to have a natural bent for that kind of warfare. Prince Rupert recognized it early on, and started giving him independent commands and long-range missions. He put together a band of about a hundred men, all violent and profane killers and marauders like himself. They called themselves the Merry Malignants."

"Malignant, aye, but damned effective!" laughed Robert Pelham, his hearty voice booming. He at least bore no grudge against his late enemy. "Gave us some headaches, did Denzil, got to give him that! I recall that at one time we had three bloody regiments of dragoons chasing him! Oh, sorry for swearing, Kate," he added hastily, abashed at a glare from his sister. "Miles is right though. Got himself a nasty reputation as a hangman, did Denzil. Uncalled for, that sort of thing, you know. Hanging people and all that lark."

"Denzil is no hypocrite, at least," sighed Tom. "He neither denies what he did, nor does he attempt to justify any of it. Some of his killings were just mindless cruelty, like that time in Scotland when he wanted to test a new rifled musket, and so he stripped prisoners to their bare shirts, bound them pressed together in a line front to back, and then fired the weapon into them point blank to see how many men's bodies it would go through."

"Sweet Jesu pity them!" cried Katherine fervently. "Oh, Tom, how did he come to be so cruel and merciless? What happened to him?"

"The same thing that happened to all of us, Kate," Tom told her gently. "The war happened to him. Some men like me became so sickened by it that never again will we take up the sword, but others like Denzil can never lay it down. Denzil was in it right from the beginning. You of all people will remember the day Den rode away to join the king's army at Nottingham, as sorry as I am to cause you pain by reminding you of it."

"All of us in this room were there that day, Tom, including my present betrothed," said Katherine, taking Staton's arm and softly caressing his hand. "We all remember well

enough how I made a fool of myself, weeping in anguish and begging him not to go. It was a beautiful day in summer, the very day that I turned seventeen years of age."

"August of 1642," Tom reminded her. "Denzil himself was only a month past his seventeenth birthday. Two months later, he was in the vanguard of Prince Rupert's charge at the battle of Edgehill. From the day he rode away and left you until this very hour, my brother has lived with a gun in his hand. Ten years of it, Katherine as a true believer in the king's cause. For him it was always very simple. Charles was anointed by God to rule and to rebel against him was treason and blasphemy. To kill those who rebelled was righteous and just. So he believed at Edgehill, and from that day to this no doubt or second thought has ever crossed his mind. He equipped and paid his men out of his own pocket, and incidentally out of Father's pocket and my own as well, until all our pockets were empty, and then he fought on with whatever came to hand. Yet for all his striving, God never vindicated Denzil's cause with victory, and so he blamed himself and others for not struggling hard enough, and after every defeat he redoubled his efforts."

"How many?" interjected Robert.

"Eh?"

"How many men did that rifled musket ball go through?" asked Robert.

"Oh, forebear, Bob, that is ghoulish and grotesque!" admonished Katherine in an exasperated voice.

"Three, and it bruised the fourth on the chest," replied Tom.

"But see here, there were several instances of outright murder committed by Denzil here in England as well as in Scotland, spoke up Francis in a grave tone. "Men whom he hanged without trial."

"He said that they had given their parole not to bear arms against the king and then they had violated their oath, Francis, and frankly I am inclined to believe him. Denzil killed and tortured and looted, but I have never known him to lie in order to excuse any of his actions."

"What about his murder of Sir Giles Beachy?" demanded Francis. "Beachy and some drummer boy, I heard it was."

"There will never be any formal charges brought in that matter," said Tom flatly.

"I cannot agree," said Francis severely. "Charges certainly should be brought. I knew Beachy well. He was a hero at Newbury and Marston Moor, and a godly man withal."

"Then I am sorry to be the one who must inform you as to the truth about his character," sighed Tom. "I shall do so later, when the ladies are not present. There are certain repulsive details."

"Tom, this late war has hardened us to all manner of repulsive details, as you put it," said Katherine. "If Denzil has any excuse for what was by all accounts the wanton and heartless murder of a gallant Christian gentleman, then please tell us what he has to say for himself. We don't wish to believe all of the evil that is said against him."

"Sir Edward?"

"By all means, Tom," replied her father. "You've gotten our curiosity aroused now, lad."

"Very well, sir, but don't blame me if I scandalize your daughters," returned Tom, shaking his head dubiously. "You will recall that it befell at Henley, in Oxfordshire, in January of 1649, the month King Charles was beheaded. Denzil was mad to stop the king's execution, and he acted on a rumour that Oliver Cromwell himself was stopping at an inn called the Fox. As it happened, this wasn't true, but there was a detachment of Parliamentary troops billeted there. Denzil was going to capture Cromwell and hold him in exchange for the king. He and his riders surrounded the inn and caught the Parliament men by surprise, seizing the place with stealth and speed, not a shot fired. They also surprised Sir Giles Beachy and a handsome young drummer lad of about fourteen years, in a stable. They were in an exceedingly compromising position."

"What do you mean, Tom?" asked Barbara naively. "I mean, good heavens, what kind of compromising position could two *men* get into?"

"Er, take my word for it, my dear, it's possible!" Sir Edward hastened to assure her.



"*Beachy?*" exclaimed Sir Francis Staton, appalled. "Tom, are you sure about this? Beachy was always so, so *manly* in his carriage! Are you certain that bloody brother of yours isn't just making up this grotesque slander in order to smear one of his more prominent victims? I simply cannot believe that Beachy would, well, that he would do *that!*"

"Francis, I am sorry, but Denzil is not the only one I've heard it from," said Tom. "Denzil called in all the officers from both forces to witness what was found."

"*What* was found?" Barbara demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"He refers, my dear, to the sin which takes its name from one of the Cities of the Plain," said Katherine acidly.

"Kate!" gasped Francis, "How on earth would you know of such things?"

"It is all in the Holy Writ, my love, if one but knows where to look," she replied.

"What things?" asked Barbara, bursting with curiosity. "What sin? What city on a plain?"

"Read your Bible, sweetling," advised Kate. "The Old Testament, Genesis first, and then Leviticus might repay detailed study."

Tom chuckled. "Kate, are you quite certain you're a Puritan? I seem to detect the remnants of a sense of humour."

"I merely commend the Scriptures to my sister's attention, sir," she replied demurely. "Oh, do stop chortling, Bob! You sound like a colicky horse! It really isn't funny, you know."

"No," agreed Tom. "No one could deny the, ah, evidence. Later, Barbara, after we're married! Both the law of God and the law of man prescribe death for that particular abomination. The boy was taken into a harness room and hanged from a beam with a length of leather rein. Sir Giles Beachy blustered and swore and called for any man among them to fight him with sword and pistols, but he had clearly forfeited any such gentlemanly prerogatives. Denzil did at least allow Beachy to get dressed, then marched him into the courtyard of the inn where he was shot by a firing squad comprised of men from his own troop. There were plenty of volunteers, men of your faith, Francis, who were enraged

at how one of their own leaders had betrayed them. Parliament could ill afford subsequently to admit that one of their most prominent heroes was a practising sodomite, and so they gave out that the gallant Beachy had been basely slaughtered by the villainous Denzil Redmond in his rage at not capturing Oliver Cromwell. But too many witnesses were present, and the truth would be bound to come out in any kind of formal trial. That is why I said earlier that there will be no charges laid. That case is one sleeping dog Parliament will want to let lie."

"But what of the crimes Denzil committed in Scotland?" asked Miles

"In those last years he was no longer a soldier, he was a mad dog, rending and tearing and killing," said Tom sadly. "He shot his enemies when they fought and hanged or sabered them when they could fight no longer. When he found bakers who gave bread to Cromwell's men, he roasted them in their own ovens. When he caught farriers who shod Parliament's horses he nailed red-hot horse shoes to their feet. When he captured farmers who sold provisions to the New Model he buried them up to their necks in their own fields and harvested their heads with scythes. And whenever he caught anyone, soldier or not, man or woman, who refused to take the oath to King Charles, then they died. Denzil doesn't wage war anymore. He simply deals out death. The world is a collection of targets to be shot out of his way."

"May God have mercy on his soul!" sighed Katherine. There was a short silence, and then Francis Staton spoke up.

"Tom, forgive me, but I must ask a question and you must answer it full true and clear. You tell us that in spite of everything, Denzil has taken the Engagement and returned to England. I cannot believe that he means to change his way of life and live in peace from now on. Does Denzil intend to harm anyone here in this house? Katherine or myself in particular?"

"You deserve the truth," said Tom, looking all of them in the eye. "I am convinced that he does. Precisely what he is planning to do, I know not. No man can gauge his mind. But he is obsessed with you and Katherine, Francis. He has always held you in great personal contempt ever since childhood, and for you to wax strong and prosperous with Parliament while Denzil's cause has gone down into defeat is an unbearable situation for him. For you to take Katherine from him is utterly intolerable. He has been kept away from you two by the war and then by our subsequent exile after the battle of Worcester, but now I believe he has returned here to do something wicked and terrible. May

God forgive me for speaking so about my only living blood kin in the world, but it is true."

"Then it is clear what I must do," said Francis firmly. "I must deal with him in the only manner which he understands. Tom, I presume that when we meet Denzil will ask you to act as his second, nor would I expect you to do otherwise for your own brother, and I promise you I□ll not take it hard. Miles, would you do me the honour?"

"No!" Tom, Katherine, Miles, and Sir Edward Pelham all cried out the word at the same time. Robert Pelham shook his head dubiously.

"Bad idea, Francis," Bob told him. "Not a good idea at all, that."

"No, Francis, no!" cried Katherine desperately. "I won□t let you call him out!"

"He□d kill you," said Miles Pelham flatly.

"I thank you all for that resounding vote of confidence!" said Francis petulantly.

"He□d kill you," repeated Miles. "Can you not see that a duel would play right into his hands? If you challenge him you place yourself at a disadvantage from the beginning. As the challenged party he can choose the weapons, and he will choose pistols. With a rapier, very well, you might have a chance. You□re taller than Denzil so you□d have some reach on him, and if we had time to get a fencing master in to really sharpen you up, you might survive the encounter. With a handgun you haven□t got a hope in hell, if you□ll pardon my language, Kate. Denzil Redmond is the best pistol shot in England."

"I believe him to be the best pistol shot in all of Europe," asserted Tom.

"Stories!" spat Francis. "Campfire rumours and barracks gossip! I□ve heard it all before and I am not impressed."

"You□d better be very impressed, Francis," warned Tom. "I have never spoken of it to Denzil, because I don□t really know how to approach it with him, and I fear what I may find out. You know there are stories about how he sold his soul to Satan in exchange for his uncanny marksmanship? I don□t want to believe that, but I have to admit that sometimes his skill with those pieces of his is little short of diabolical. Oh, like all men of our class Den can hold his own with the rapier, and in battle he□s never disdained the use of the sword or the pike or

anything else he can kill with, but first and foremost, my brother is a kind of soldier never seen before. He's a *gunfighter*. During the war we all carried pistols into action, to be sure, but how many? A brace or two. We fired them at close range and then drew steel and tried conclusions hand to hand. The musketeers fired one or two volleys but by then the other side would be on them and they settled things with the push of the pike."

"That's how you win battles, lad," asserted Bob Pelham stoutly. "Give 'em a ball or two, then man to man with the blade. Naseby, Marston Moor, that's how we won 'em."

"Denzil carries at least a dozen loaded weapons on his person or in his saddle harness," said Tom. "He relies on powder and shot, not steel, and he can do that because more than any other soldier I have ever seen, king or Parliament, Denzil has an incredible ability actually to *hit what he aims at!* He knocks walnuts off a fence at twenty paces and apples at thirty. I have seen Denzil shoot a man out of the saddle of a moving horse, at a hundred yards if it was an inch!"

"A freak shot," protested Francis. "Nor would he be using a musket on a dueling field."

"With a *pistol*, Francis!" insisted Tom.

"Oh, bosh, that's impossible!" exclaimed Robert Pelham.

"I have seen him do it, Bob!" said Tom. "I don't know how he does it, *but no one has ever seen Denzil Redmond miss!* At least never that I heard tell of. If he can't make a shot he seems to realize it, and he doesn't fire. Maybe the tales about him selling his soul to the devil are true. God knows I'd never dare to ask him. One way you could tell those among King Charles's army who were secret Roman Catholics was to watch and observe who would discreetly cross themselves after Denzil walked by them in camp."

"If he has trafficked with the Adversary then it is my Christian duty as well as my family obligation to meet him and defeat him," asserted Francis. "I appreciate your concern for me, all of you, but like you I have fought a long and arduous war for law and liberty---your pardon, Tom, I mean no slur upon your own service, I know you lot thought you had the right of it, however much in error you were---and I shall not shirk this stern obligation before me now that my friends and my future family are endangered."

"Francis, this is not a matter for courage but for prudence," said Miles diplomatically. "We must all face this dilemma sensibly, together, not in the distorted grip of passion. There is simply too much risk involved in allowing you to fight a duel with Denzil Redmond, or any of us for that matter. I'll not deny that I myself would be reluctant to trade shots with him in the light of dawn. None of us can fight him on his own terms. He is just too damnably good with those guns of his."

"I'd take him on myself," said Bob. "Trouble is, I never was much good with a pistol, other than popping one or two off when we were riding head on against old Johnny Stuart. Don't like to use 'em, really. I swung a mean saber, though. Always liked a good charge, rather like a fox hunt in a way, except the fox was trying to cut your head off, eh what? Your Prince Rupert, Tom, now there was a fellow who'd give us a good scrap! Always wanted to meet His Highness. Saw him a couple of times across the field with your lot, but couldn't stop to chat. Obvious reasons. Heard some wild stories about Denzil and those pistols of his. Supposed to hunt partridge with 'em."

"I've heard he hits them on the wing with a pistol ball," said Francis.

"And hits the bird in the head at that, so as not to spoil the meat for the table," said Miles with a smile.

"Don't tell me you believe such absurdities as that, Tom?" demanded Francis.

"He does all of those things," said Tom quietly. "How do you think we ate as we rode on our way home these past few days? We had no money for wayside inns, and both of us were too proud to beg a meal."

This time even the women joined in merry peals of laughter. "Tom, lad, you are a fine young fellow and I would do much for you, indeed I would," chuckled Sir Edward Pelham. "God forbid I should ever accuse you of, how shall I put it? Drawing the long bow? But really, Tom, surely you can't expect us to believe..."

At that moment, as if in ironic mockery, there came from the grounds outside the house the flat crack of a pistol shot, dully splitting the crisp autumn air. Miles strode to the casement and flung open the windows of the parlor. "Speak of the devil and smell brimstone," he growled in distaste. "Denzil is here."

The flustered butler Leander appeared moments later in the doorway. "Sir Edward," he said breathlessly, "One Captain Denzil Redmond, as he styles

himself, late of His...I mean late of Charles Stuart's service, desires to have a word with Miss Katherine. It's Sir Denzil from Whitewood, sir, only he bade me say all that folderol and told me not to use his correct title. He also bade me give you this for your dinner." The butler held up in his hand the still fluttering dead body of a bird, a plump pigeon. "When I sent the stable boy around for the gentleman's horse, Sir Den---I mean Captain Redmond apparently decided to amuse the lad by shooting this bird off the roof from the carriage drive, sir, using one of a brace of pistols which he prominently displays."

They all stared numbly at the pigeon the servingman held up for their inspection. Its head had been neatly decapitated by a bullet, and blood dripped from the severed neck onto the fine parquet floor.

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### III.

"Do you see now why it would be madness to challenge him, Francis?" asked Katherine. "My dearest, there is surely no shame in avoiding a duel with a man who can do something like this!" She indicated the bird. "I will speak with him and discover his intentions."

"No!" This time it was Francis who was doing the shouting. "I'll deal with him, Kate! I don't want you to see him, I don't want you soiled by his slightest touch!"

"There may be no need for any of us to deal with him in the way that you mean," said Kate sensibly. "We have no proof as yet that Denzil intends any harm. Tom may have misread him. But we urgently need to know one way or other, and if he will tell anyone he will tell me. I have to see him alone, for he will never speak freely with anyone else present. Besides, I think after everything that has passed between us in the past this man does have a right to a private interview with me. I know that you are unhappy with the idea, Francis, but this affects all of us." She rose gracefully from the settle, and spoke to the hovering butler. "Leander, please dispose of that unfortunate bird, and then go tell Captain Redmond, if such he desires to be called, to go to the arbor behind the house. I will join him there presently, as soon as I have fetched my cloak, for it is chill this morning. Also ask him, from me, that he please refrain from discharging any more firearms on the grounds." The butler bowed and left to deliver the message.

"Suppose he does discharge a firearm, into you?" demanded Francis hotly.

"I do not believe he would do that," she said, "But God's will shall be done in all things."

Miles Pelham rose to his feet. "I trust, sister, that both you and the Lord will forgive us if we render you a modicum of earthly assistance. Robert, Francis and I will go to the gun room and get our own pistols. We shall discreetly observe you and our unwelcome visitor from the kitchen window, and should this man offer you any violence or appear to be on the point of doing so, we shall intervene. Tom, I think it best that you and Barbara remain here. You have much to talk about, and it is better that you are not involved in this."

"I understand," said Tom with a nod.

The family departed, leaving them alone. They gazed into the crackling fire in the parlor grate for a time, listening to the motion and sounds of the people in the house, both wondering if they would hear more gunshots soon. "Tom, what is Denzil going to do?" she asked, looking up at him. "Is he going to hurt Kate?"

"The ironic part of this little episode is that I suspect Katherine is the only person in the world Den *wouldn't* hurt," said Tom carefully. "He'd shoot anybody he found inconvenient. He'd probably kill me as well if he thought it would help bring back the king. But Katherine has always carried a special burden in his scheme of things, a place in his world that I don't pretend to understand. He doesn't love her, at least not in the sense that I love you. If he had truly loved her through all these years he wouldn't have done what he did to her. But he could never kill her or hurt her without tearing a fatal rift into the fabric of his own incomprehensible life."

"Will Denzil come between me and you?" she asked him directly, a serious expression on her face.

Tom thought for a moment. "Denzil means some kind of mischief," he told her slowly. "I still hope that somehow it can be averted. But Barbara, you need to understand that it may get very, very bad. We must decide, here and now, that whatever happens we are not going to let it pull us asunder. That's going to be a hard decision to keep to, I suspect. Can you do it?"

"Yes," she said immediately. "You are the only man whom I have ever loved or wanted. Life without you is unthinkable."

"I love you more than life itself," he said, kissing her hands gently. "I fear what is coming, Barbara, I fear it so terribly!"

"As do I," she said. "All I can promise you is that for all the years to come, I shall be as strong as I can find it within myself to be, and that never, ever will I cease to love you."

"No man ever had a better offer," replied Tom, smiling as he gathered her into his arms again.

Denzil leaned carelessly against one of the small Ionic columns that stood against one end of the arbor. He listened to the wind that whispered among the golden branches and the rustling of the fallen leaves as they drifted across the ground. The sky was bright blue and fleecy white clouds eased along through the sky. The earth was damp and aromatic, the colours of soil and foliage and the mellow red brick of the Pelham manor house somehow sharper and better defined in Denzil's eye than he had seen for a long time.

He needed no second sight to understand that this day would be one of the most important in his life. It would rank with the day he and Katherine had first made love on the soft grass. It would be like the day he had seen the Cross of St. George rippling over the Royalist army at Edgehill and learned of the power he held in his hand and his eye, and how easily men died. It would be like the bleak winter day when he had heard that the stubborn, courteous, luckless King Charles was dead, and he had written off his own soul to the quest for perpetual revenge. Now that revenge included the woman he had once loved. He wondered what she would be like after all these years. In his heart he knew that his brother was right. He knew that he had lost her, and yet this one loss somehow had to be recovered, not with a gun but with words, words he could not imagine. Despairingly, he knew deep within himself that it was too late, that it could no longer be done, yet still he had to try. Because with the final knowledge of Katherine's loss would come the moral imperative to act, and that he feared. The thought of simply walking away from the whole wretched situation never occurred to him.

Then she stood before him, and the sight of her blasted his soul. She stood on the cobbled walkway, calm and serious, her golden hair blowing in the wind beneath her cap. *Let Francis Staton have her?* he thought. *Let them take everything, so that of my first seventeen years of life in this place, no single thing shall remain to me? No. Never* "Why must you wear black?" he finally



choked out. "As much as perfection exists in any man or woman, it is in you, Kate. Why must you drape yourself in the cerements of death?"

"Because the tomb is my destination, sir, as it is the ultimate end of all mortal flesh," she replied primly. "The only perfection lies in God, and the only true life is the Life Everlasting."

"When did you swallow a sermon book?" demanded Denzil incredulously.

"Ten years ago when I left to join the king you screamed out for all to hear that you would not live without me. Today I see you for the first time since then and I get a Scriptural homily. Did Francis Staton do this to you? By God, I'll draw his living guts from his belly and feed them to the dogs!"

She flinched but replied calmly, "The love and the forgiving grace of God have done this to me, as you put it, and every day I pray in thanksgiving that I have been so favoured. Will you gut God? Den, please tell me how I can help you. I do want to help you, very much. I want you to know the peace which passeth all understanding, the balm that is in Gilead. I want you to know the joy that I have known since I accepted Christ as my Saviour. You have strayed far, Denzil, farther even than the other misguided men who served the Herod Stuart and resisted the coming of God's own Commonwealth. But even you are not beyond redemption! Tell me how I may bring you forth into the light?"

Denzil stared at her for a time, and then spoke in careful, measured tones.

"Katherine, I am going to say all of this only once. Over the years I have lost patience with many things, and repeating myself is one of them. For this one time only, I am going to try to explain myself to you, to get through to you, although seeing you dressed like that and hearing that detestable Puritan drivel falling from your lips, I own that I am not too sanguine about my chances."

"Tell me," she urged him. "I really do want to understand how all of this has made you...made you..." She ran down, unwilling to add anything.

"Made me a monster?" Denzil finished for her, with a bitter laugh. "You won't be the first, nor will you be the last to call me that, Kate. I believe even your high and mighty Lord Protector, as he now styles himself, has made some similar aspersions against my character." He took a deep breath, marshaling his thoughts. "I received two letters in France. The first one was from you, telling me you planned to marry that pusillanimous buffoon Francis Staton. Since then I have been planning what I would say to you when we met. It is because of you that I am here. No one else could have induced me to make even a temporary peace with these loathsome regicides who now rule England. I had

to get back here and see you without having to fight off regiments of Roundhead troops in the process. The amnesty was a providential chance, and I took it.

"Katherine, for ten years I have fought a civil war against my countrymen, the worst kind of war men can fight. During that time I have plumbed the depths. I have seen sights that would make a dog vomit. I have stained my soul with irredeemable sin. I have stripped men and women of all their worldly goods even down to the clothing off their backs, before turning them naked and destitute onto the roadside. I have killed people past counting, and many of them suffered horribly in their dying. I myself have never raped, but I have stood aside while others have done so and sneered at the tears of the victims, so I am equally guilty. I tell you this not to frighten you or shock you or to excite your pity, but to let you understand that I am by no means unaware of my own sin. I *am bad*, Kate! I *am* so bad I even frighten myself, for I can see the putrescence of my soul more clearly than anyone else. In addition to being a wholly wicked human being, I am also a totally useless one. I can do one thing in life, and one thing only. I can kill. I can't heal, I can't laugh, I can't cry, and I can't love. I won't tell you that I love you, Kate, because I don't. I am incapable of loving anyone any more. But if I could love anyone it would be you. Please believe that."

"I do," she whispered, stunned and fascinated.

"Kate, I need you. I need you because if I lose you then I lose everything. My life is divided into two portions, the first being seventeen years I spent at Whitewood, growing up playing in these fields and woodlands, reading the books in my father's library on long winter days until it was time to light the candles, riding and hunting and learning to run what lands we had left after my grandfather practically bankrupted us. Do you recall that there were people back then who used to say that we Redmond lads wanted you Pelham girls for your money? It used to anger me no end. I was always afraid you might come to believe it. God, how inconsequential petty gossip like that seems today, after ten years of destruction!

"That's the second half of my life, Katherine. The war. I was just turned seventeen when everything I had, everything that I was here, disappeared. That second half has been nothing but mud and fire and stink. The smell of rotting dead horses and rotting dead men. The sound of gunfire and screaming and cannon shaking the earth. Bread and meat crawling with maggots and foul sour drink that balled my stomach up like a fist and didn't even get me properly drunk so I could forget. Riding aimlessly through England trying to find

somebody to shoot. Crossing the seas to foreign cities to skulk and recriminate and plot until we could come back to do it all again. But always I thought that at the end of it all, you would be there, that something of the years I spent here in this place would be left for me to pick up again."

"Why didn't you come back?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Hereford was occupied by Parliament most of the time," he said.

"Not for ten whole years!" she cried. "There were many times when it would have been safe, when your people were in the area or when there were no soldiers of either side about. You could have found the time if you'd wanted to!"

"My duty to the king came first," said Denzil.

"And now my duty to God comes first," replied Kate.

"Then do it," Denzil rasped. "Save my soul."

"What?" gasped Kate. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, Kate, my soul. I think we both know quite well what is going to happen to me when I die. I'm damned, Kate, I'm going to hell and I should be terrified, but I'm not! That is how wicked I am, how lost I am. I'm destined for eternal damnation and I just don't care!" Kate was staring at him now, here eyes wide with shock and amazement. Then Denzil astounded her even more by dropping down onto his knees before her. "Kate, I am asking you to marry me. I am asking you to cast your goodness over me like a cloak and save me from the flames. Make me feel my sin, make real to me the horror and the remorse I should be feeling, so that I may save myself through repentance! I can't repent now because I feel no guilt, no shame at anything I have done. All I can see is enemies of the king who have come to their just end at my hand. I tremble at asking you to stain yourself with my foulness, and yet for my soul's sake I implore you to do it."

"You mean it, don't you?" she whispered in wonder. "Denzil, this is madness and blasphemy! I cannot grant you salvation. God alone can do that!"

"You can, if you will." He rose to his feet. "Marry me! Be there with me by day so that every time I see you I will know that however the war ended, at least something is left to me of what was before. Be there in the night when I

awaken from my dreams, and drive away the black things that cluster around my bed in the dark. Give me children, babies who will smile and laugh and play with me and love me because they know not the evil I have done in the world. I beg of you as I have never begged anything before of man or woman. Kate, save me! For the love of God, save me!" He leaned against the marble column of the arbor in black despair, exhausted.

"You know that I am to marry Francis" she told him.

"Why *him*?" cried Denzil.

"Because I love him, and he loves me, and we are one in our faith in the Lord, as you can never be," she said

"So now it all begins again," he muttered dismally. "Dear God, Kate, why have you done this to me? Can you not understand how utterly tired I am, exhausted to the roots of my soul from war? Now you make me start another one. The last one lasted ten years. How long will this one last?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Kate nervously.

"You know what kind of man I am now," Denzil told her levelly. "Do you seriously think I will simply shuffle my feet and hang my head and walk away?"

"Oh, part not from me in anger, Den!" she pleaded. "Can you not still be my friend? We were good friends, once."

"Kate, I can't force you to love me, and I'm not fool enough to believe I could. Nor, brother Tom to the contrary, was I so feckless that I never considered that you might find another during all those years apart. I hoped against hope, but I was half ready for your letter when it came. Had you chosen a true king's man who kept faith with his sovereign lord, then I would have accepted your decision and I would indeed have been your friend throughout the years, a strong right arm and a staunch support whenever you had need of me. But *Francis Staton*? Kate, you cannot be blind to his faults, but if every woman, or every man for that matter, who chooses wrongly in that line were struck down then the entire population of the world would be cut in half at a stroke. You never did answer my question properly. Why Francis?"

"I told you, I love him!"

"Ten years ago you loved me, and I recall several occasions when you bade young Master Staton to desist his unwelcome attentions and cast himself into the nearest body of water! Now you say that you love him and you're going to marry him and go trotting off on the pearly staircase to heaven together, and you want me to be your *friend*? We were a good deal more than friends once, Kate! You recall our afternoons together down at the old mill, before you became so bloody holy? Tell me, Katherine, does your sweetling Francis know that I've had you?"

She flushed, and retorted, "Yes, he knows all. I told him when we first spoke of marriage. He knows that it was a long time ago, that it was the foolish sin of a foolish and passionate girl who was not the Christian woman I have become. He knows that God has forgiven me, and so he has forgiven me himself. But my past fornication with you was one of the reasons we have waited until this coming Christmas to wed. We both felt that some years of virtue and chastity on my part would fortify my faith and purge me of my sin, preparing us both for the bliss of Christian wedlock."

"There will be no bliss for you, Kate, Christian or otherwise." The calm voice chilled her blood.

"I see," she quavered. "What do you mean to do? Kill me? We were discussing that possibility before I came out here. Does not the blood of pigeons satisfy you, sir? Have you drunk so deep of the blood of Christian folk that you must drink of mine as well?"

"God's bones!" he exploded with a laugh, his blasphemous oath making her wince. "You thought I'd put a ball in you? So that's what your brothers and that cream-faced loon Francis are doing with their silly gobs pressed up against the kitchen windows? At first I took them for pumpkins! Did you really think I came here to kill you, Kate?"

"The thought crossed my mind," she admitted. "You have made little enough of killing a good many others who believe as I do."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't do at all," said Denzil, shaking his head. "If I killed you then you'd be free of me. Before you judge me for my murders, though, should you not give a thought to your own? Even if it was only a single wee little one?"

She froze, her jaw working, but no sound would come out of her mouth. A cool wind arose, blowing the bright dead leaves rustling over the ground, and a

cloud hid the sun. "What are you saying?" she finally choked out, her voice trembling.

"I told you I received two letters in France. The other was from Whitewood, from my old nurse, Meg. Meg didn't appreciate it when your father came with his bailiffs and stole everything she and Sammy possessed for their old age. It took her letter almost a year to catch up with me, but by some miracle, it did. She can't write very well, but she wrote enough, and after Tom left this morning I had a talk with her. The midwife you brought here that night nine years ago, Mistress Brierly, is Meg's niece." Denzil saw Katherine's horrified expression." Did you not know? You should have planned ahead and sent to Shrewsbury or someplace farther afield. You grew up here, you ought to have recalled that all the country folk in this part of the shire are related in one way or another. The guinea you gave Goodwife Brierly was generous, but after a while it was spent, and nine years of good Hereford ale and cider can make for a few slips of the most discreet tongue. I suspect your squalid little secret is more widely known than you thought, but what with battles and raids and the sacking of towns and the fall of kings over this past decade folk have had other matters to wag their tongues over. May I ask who in your family knows?"

"They all do, except Barbara," said Katherine, slowly sitting down on a white marble bench, her voice dull. "We sent her away to our cousins in Worcester for a few months. Bob actually made a joke about it. He said I was in foal."

"Bob always did confuse women with horses," said Denzil. "Did my father know? Of course he did. Quiet and unassuming as he was, nothing that happened in this county escaped his notice. Tom doesn't know, obviously, for he's no good at keeping secrets and he would have let something slip before now. The next obvious question, Kate, is why you didn't tell me at the time? I did get a few letters from you before you stopped writing, you'll recall, so it wouldn't have been impossible. In the spring of '43 we were winning in the March country. I could have come home had I known. Surely you knew that even if I had to cut my way through a whole Roundhead brigade, I would have come back here and married you? When I left I thought that was what you wanted. What went wrong, Kate? Why didn't you send for me?"

"You were in the Royalist army," she said in a dull voice. "Miles and Bob were fighting for Parliament and Father was a member of the county committee. I couldn't embarrass them by being involved with you."

"I see," said Denzil. "Reputation is a bubble, and all that? Not your reputation, because you knew I'd marry you and you also knew that there is a time-

honoured tradition among the shire folk of England not to count back the months over closely when a baby is born to a newlywed couple. But the reputation of your father and your brothers was something for which our child could be sacrificed? Who suggested it? Did you resist at all?"

"Do not impute this sin to my father or my brothers, Den," said Katherine, tears forming in her eyes. "It was my idea and my doing."

"Why? Why, Kate, in God's name why?" demanded Denzil, shaking with rage.

*"You left me!"* she screamed, beginning to sob, clenching her fists in the air. "I begged and pleaded with you, I gave myself to you, I did everything I could to get you to stay and you rode away and left me anyway!"

"I left you because the monarch to whom every English man and woman, including yourself, owed their obedience had summoned me to defend his throne against vile treason and the armed overthrow of the state!" snapped Denzil. "I told you that at the time, I told you that I could do naught other than what I did! You are a woman and you should have accepted the way things were as women always have, with fortitude and with some of that Christian resignation you Puritan lot babble about in your sermons!"

"Yes, Denzil, I am a woman," she whispered bitterly. "You hurt me more than you can ever know. All you cared about was your precious king and the glorious adventure of it all, so you rode away and you left me here, and I took a woman's revenge."

Denzil looked out over the fine landscaped garden, the neat paths and bowers and trellises. "Where is he, Kate? Meg's niece said that he was somewhere here in this garden, but only you knew where because you buried him with your own hands. Oh, Christ, Kate, could you not have crept over the hedge and put him in some corner of Whitewood, so at least I could have had that much of him?" She was silent. "The midwife also told Meg he was born perfectly whole and hearty and that there was no reason for him to die. She left the room for a quarter of an hour and when she came back he was dead. You killed him, didn't you? Because I chose the king over you, you murdered our child."

"Who are you to call anyone a murderer?" she cried with some spirit. "Who are you to judge me?"

"I must judge you, and all who dwell in that house, because no one else will," said Denzil. "It's not something that I want to do, believe me, but if I don't take upon myself the administration of such justice as is possible after all this time, then there shall be none. Better done by me than not done at all."

"You're mad!" she gasped.

"Not mad, Kate, merely persistent in my undertakings. You haven't answered my question. You killed the baby, didn't you?"

"I won't answer!"

"Never mind. You just did," he sighed.

"So you are to be my judge?" she asked him. "Then kill me if you think you have the right. Francis and Bob and Miles will come after you from the kitchen and we'll have a final round of murder right here in our garden to cap off the last ten bloody years of war and destruction. Is that how it is to be?"

"And if I don't?" asked Denzil.

"You mean now that you know, will I change my mind and marry you instead of Francis, as some kind of penance? No, I will not. Denzil, if I could undo the last ten years I would, but I cannot, and life goes on. The fact is that Parliament won the war, and Francis is now a winner and you're a loser. I have become a Christian woman and I repent of my sins. I will answer for them to God, of Whose forgiveness I am assured because I and my husband to be are numbered among the elect, as I now know you can never be. I am truly sorry for what has happened in the past, but after all, it *is* in the past, and I will go forward now with Francis. There is simply no place for you here any more, Denzil. Tom has accepted defeat and our family's new pre-eminence here, and he is willing to embark on a new life, running Whitewood as a Pelham holding. It may well belong to a Redmond again someday, but if so it will be his branch of the family and not yours. You belong to a bygone time in our lives, Den, and if you have a shred of decency you will not haunt us. Francis was telling Tom earlier today that there is a whole new world out there across the western ocean, lying there for the taking. Why not emigrate to Virginia, or Barbados, or sail with the British expedition against Jamaica? You are still a young man and you can start afresh, so long as you can purge your spirit of royalism and vengefulness. Please, think about what I have said."



"I see," ruminated Denzil. "Our play is ended, gentles all, the characters have taken their final bows upon the stage, so fare thee safe home unto thy beds. Cromwell is in Whitehall, Kate and Francis are wedded in holy bliss. Tom, the good Redmond who fought a respectable fight and then gave up with gentlemanly good grace gets his consolation prize with the younger sister and the graciously conferred status of farm manager on his own ancestral land. While at some point in the future, conveniently off stage, the wicked elder brother who kept faith with his honour and his king will no doubt come to some edifyingly sticky end?"

"That's a cynical way of putting it," sighed Kate, "But to follow your analogy, yes. It's that or else you can choose to end the play like the last act of Hamlet, with dead bodies littering the stage, mine and yours and possibly those of Francis, Bob, and Miles. I hope you won't. I don't want to die, and I don't want any other deaths on my conscience."

"I told you before, that would be far too easy a fate for you, Kate." said Denzil. "You think you can re-write the script of this little play of our lives to suit yourself, but you are mistaken. The character of Denzil will not exit when he is commanded to do so. From this day on, the whole lot of you up in that house had best look over your shoulders, for no matter where you are or what you do, betimes you will see me there when you least expect it. I offer you only one promise, and that is that I will never kill you, Kate, or physically harm you in any way. Beyond that, I shall make your life a hell upon earth."

"I fear you not, sir, not you nor any minion of Satan!" she cried passionately, but it was an empty boast, for she was appalled and terrified beyond measure.

"Do you not, lady?" said Denzil. "Then the more fool you. Goodbye, Kate." Then he strode away and left her standing in the arbor path, stunned and gaping.

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#### IV.

In the stables Denzil was warmly greeted by the young groom he had met earlier, a boy called Jeremy. He handed Denzil the bridle of the great chestnut stallion. "A fine animal he is, sir," said the youth. "Combed him, watered him, and fed him a quartern of oats. What did you say his name was, sir? Inky what?"

"Incitatus," said Denzil. "The Emperor Caligula of ancient Rome had a race horse so named. Roughly translated it means Up-and-At-Em! Caligula made his horse a Senator, while in England today we have made a horse's arse Lord Protector."

Standing behind the boy was a slender, red-headed girl with freckles, dressed in the plain woolen gown of a servant. "Cap'n sir, this is Ruthie," said the boy. The gamine stepped forward with a shy impish curtsy. "She's a scull in the kitchen. Could ye make another shot for her, like the one wot kilt the pigeon?"

"Not now," declined Denzil with a chuckle. "Miss Katherine has asked that I not go shooting up the place, as much pleasure as it would give me. Tell me, lad, are you interested in guns?"

"Oh, aye, sir, but never shot one," said the groom eagerly. "Colonel Miles and Major Bob and Sir Francis, they got some really beautiful pieces, sir, but we was told if we touched any of em without leave we'd get ten of the best. Sometimes Sir Francis lets me carry his big long fowlin' piece when they goes out for pheasant and coneys."

"Would you like to learn to shoot?" asked Denzil. The boy's eyes bugged out. "Do you get a half day?"

"Aye, sir, Wednesday."

"Then come up to Whitewood on Thursday afternoons, and on Sundays as well if you like. I shall be happy to initiate you into the mysteries of what Master Shakespeare called villainous saltpetre." Denzil had not an idea, but he felt one coming, and over the years he had learned to trust his instincts. He wanted to start stirring the pot to see what came to the surface, and corrupting Sir Edward's servants seemed like a good place to begin.

That night five people gathered for a council of war in Sir Edward Pelham's library. In addition to the baronet himself there were his sons Miles and Lewis, his daughter Katherine, and Sir Francis Staton. Tom had returned to Whitewood, Barbara was in bed, and Robert was off somewhere. "Probably upstairs swiving that little red-headed dollymop, Ruth," remarked Miles.

"Miles, I have long since accepted that my son Robert belongs to a rather more lusty and less censorious age than the present," said Sir Edward.

"He is a drunkard and a libertine who thinks of nothing but horse-racing and other frivolous, not to mention lewd pastimes," said Katherine severely. "You really must speak to him, Father."

"Be that as it may, I have found it more expedient to rely in matters of moment upon the rest of you," replied the old knight. They sat around a cheerful fire sipping mulled scrumpy cider and nibbling on bread and cheese. Sir Edward and Miles lit up their long-stemmed pipes with artistically painted porcelain bores, accepted Katherine's usual admonition against the filthy habit, and puffed deeply before continuing. "He's quite mad, you know," reflected Sir Edward.

"Not mad, Father," said Kate with a shudder. "Wicked."

"It is possible to be both, daughter," he replied. "But surely something can be done. We have in this room representatives of every branch of government and law. I am a barrister and a magistrate, Lewis is admitted to the Inns of Court, Miles is a senior military officer and county committeeman for this shire, Francis is a Member of Parliament, and between us all we have sixty or seventy thousand pounds in the funds. It is inconceivable that we cannot find some method of dealing with a lone madman who is without friends, money, or influence."

"Until he breaks the law, the law cannot break him," said Lewis. "You know that, Father. Under the terms of the amnesty these Cavaliers may re-enter society unmolested. If we move against him first in any way, then it is we who shall be accused of persecuting him for his past service to the monarchy. I am sure that the Lord Protector would not view such an accusation with favour. He would think we were rocking the boat."

"But we must do something!" cried Francis angrily. "You heard what he told Kate! He wants us worried and nervous, always looking over our shoulders in fear of what he will do. That's the better part of his insane revenge right there, making us live in constant fear without a single moment's peace. I won't have it, I tell you, I won't have and no matter what you say I intend to call him out!"

"Whereupon he will drop you like a poled ox with a pistol ball in your brain-pan," said Miles acidly. "Our family's peace will be shattered, our sister will be widowed before she is a wife, and Denzil's object of keeping you apart forever will be fulfilled. Because you issued the challenge, in the subsequent legal proceedings he will probably escape with banishment, whereupon he will

rejoin the exiled Royalists and further their plots against the Commonwealth with all the malevolent cleverness at his command. Sweet, Francis, very sweet! I say again, my friend, that it is no cowardice but simple prudence to avoid baiting the devil in his own hopyard. We must wait and trust to his own madness, or his own wickedness if Kate prefers, to give us the opening through which we can move against him with the law on our side. At least, that would appear to be our only alternative. There is another."

"And that is?" asked Sir Edward.

"Let me lay this out for you completely," said Miles, looking at all of them keenly. "I believe that by waiting for him to make the first move we are underestimating this man's diabolical cleverness and putting too much at risk. Bear in mind that he was a successful commander of light horse for many years. He managed to evade the finest troops Parliament could send against him, and he wreaked untold carnage while he did so. If three regiments of dragoons couldn't stop him, how can we hope to do it with a statute book?"

"It's not the same thing!" protested Lewis.

"Is it not? I think it is. See here," Miles went on, "You heard what Tom said this morning about the war never ending for Denzil. He views this quarrel with our family as one more military campaign. He will approach it in that manner, carefully and cunningly, as if he were planning another lightning raid against the New Model. On the surface, it is true that we appear to have all the advantages Father enumerated. We outnumber him, we are well entrenched, we have authority and influence and wealth, and we can crush him if he makes a single miscalculation or slip-up. But don't you see, these are the very odds he is accustomed to? Our position, the law, these mean nothing to him. When he strikes it will be hard, fast, and deadly. Simply sitting on our hands and waiting for him to surprise us is an unjustifiable risk that could get one or all of us killed. There is also the morally sound objection that by allowing ourselves to be terrorized we are submitting to evil and giving in to despair, and as Christians we are forbidden to do that, a theological point I'm sure that Francis and Katherine will appreciate. I do not know if these persistent stories about Denzil selling his soul to Satan are true in the literal sense, but from an ethical viewpoint he serves the powers of darkness on this earth just as surely. I will not abide an evil man like Denzil Redmond putting this family in fear and making this household wretched with perpetual worry and apprehension."

"Precisely what is it that you are proposing we do, Miles?" asked Sir Edward.

"Denzil Redmond is a festering wound in our lives!" replied Miles forcefully. "Cauterize that wound! Burn out the infection! Destroy him!"

"You mean *murder* him?" exclaimed Lewis, shocked.

"Is it murder to cut out the heart of a vampire?" demanded Francis Staton excitedly. "Is it murder to burn a witch or an atheist at the stake?"

"It is to do so without due process of law," observed Edward Pelham in a dry voice. "Miles, something of the sort did occur to me as well. I didn't wish to be the first to voice it, because it is a bit unusual for a Justice of the Peace to advocate the assassination of an inconvenient neighbour."

"We are talking about a hanging matter!" said Lewis heatedly.

"No one will hang us for slaying a hangman," said Francis. "Denzil Redmond's reputation weighs about his neck like a corpse. Do you think anyone in Whitehall or the county committee will be overly exercised if this viper is removed from England's bosom? So long as it is done with discretion the law will go through the motions and nothing more."

"What we are discussing here goes beyond law, Lewis," said Miles. "We are concerned with the safety and the well being of our home and our family, especially our sister, for I place no credence at all in Denzil's afterthought promise that he won't physically injure her. Kate, what do you have to say to all of this?"

Katherine stared at the rich maroon carpet for a time. "Murder is a sin," she said finally. "There is a commandment."

Lewis opened his mouth and drew breath audibly in order to speak, but Sir Edward divined his intention and silenced him with a quick scowl and a shake of his head. Kate caught the gesture. "There is no need to be over tender of my feelings, Father. Because you so mercifully spared me public disgrace and punishment does not mean I have forgotten. I live with my shame and pray for God's forgiveness every day."

"Girl, girl, don't you think nine years of self-torture is enough?" asked Sir Edward kindly. "You have lost the best years of your life to guilt, Kate. How many women are still unmarried at twenty-seven? Of all the things Denzil Redmond has done, I believe it is that I can least forgive him. Not the sin itself, but the pain that it has inflicted on you. I know there are fathers who would

have driven their daughters from their door in like circumstances, although I have never understood how any Christian man could do such a thing to his own child. As for the other circumstances, since our entire family has benefited from the concealment of that unfortunate episode we are all accessory to it, and none of us have any right to judge."

"You realize, Kate, that old hag at Whitewood has let the cat out of the bag?" said Lewis gently. "Either she or Denzil will tell Tom Redmond, and Tom will tell Barbara."

"Perhaps not," said Sir Edward. "I'll have a word with our Tom, and I think he will agree that it is in no one's best interest to poke at sleeping dogs. He's not really in a position to refuse any request of mine, is he?"

"But what of Denzil?" persisted Francis. "Kate, we now have an opportunity to avenge ourselves on this man who so terribly wronged you, who rode off to fight for the Antichrist Charles Stuart and left you with his bastard brat!"

"Katherine, you spoke with him," said Miles. "Do you agree that Denzil Redmond poses a clear and present danger to this household and all who dwell within it?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I know better than any of you that he is a terrible threat to us all. I saw his eyes."

"Do you agree that if we wait for him to make the first move, someone among us may be hurt?" asked Miles.

"Yes, I know that to be true," she said.

Miles pressed her relentlessly. "Then can you see any possible action which we may take to forestall such a thing from happening, and still remain within the bounds of the law?"

"If my father and my brother who are lawyers can see no such course, then how can I?" she sighed.

"Which sin, then, shall we commit?" asked Miles. "Do we destroy this mad dog who threatens us, or do we wait and take the appalling risk that one of our loved ones, any of us here, may suffer for that hesitation? Do we wait until this very house is burned over our heads?"

"Surely there can be no love left in your heart for this Royalist butcher, Kate?" demanded Francis.

"None," whispered Kate. "My love for him died in that room upstairs, on that dark night nine years ago. No one of you can understand what happened. Only another woman can understand. But what you mean to do now is different."

"Denzil did it every day for ten years, as casually as he would bite off a hunk of bacon or quaff a gulp of ale," said Miles. "Denzil kills men like others swat flies. Either we kill him first, or someone here will join his roster of victims. Which is it to be, Kate?"

She bowed her head. "Let it be done, then, and may God have mercy on his soul, and ours."

"Amen!" chorused Francis fervently.

"Lewis?" inquired Miles.

"I am a man of peace and of law," said Lewis, shaking his head in disquiet. "I know there are some who accuse me of cowardice or sloth because I didn't go into the New Model like you and Bob and Francis, but I heeded them not. I did not go to war because I feared death, for what man doesn't? I stayed out of it because I didn't want to kill, I didn't want to be involved in all of that *unpleasantness*, as puerile as that sounds. All of my instincts are against this plan, and I have the horrible suspicion that we may be starting something here that we will not be able to inter with Denzil Redmond's bones. But I must agree that waiting for him to strike first will probably mean that at least one of us will keep him company in the grave. I don't want it to be any of you and I most certainly don't want it to be me. As risky as this murder plot is, the alternative is to sit around waiting to see which one of us is going to draw the short straw. Very well, I'll defend you at the assizes if you get caught, just leave me out of the commission stage. By the by, Miles, how are you planning to do the deed?"

"Father?" said Miles, turning to Sir Edward. "Odd that we should be asking a magistrate to give him blessing to a homicide, but you are head of the family. What say you?"

Pelham pursed his lips and knit his brow. "Denzil Redmond is a blood-soaked murderer who is totally beyond redemption and is destined to end on the gallows sooner or later. As a justice it is my duty to uphold the law, but I would

acquit any man who removed Denzil Redmond from society and account him a public benefactor. The law of the land is important, but there is such a thing as a higher law. I am not inclined to sit idly by and await some nameless atrocity against my family. Let it be done. But I'm curious. Just how *are* you planning on going about it, my son?"

"Who's going to bell the cat?" asked Lewis with a sour smile. "I repeat, brother, leave me out of the dirty work itself. I'd be no good at all as an assassin, and Father is too old. Besides, we'll need him as justice of the peace for the necessary legal clean-up afterwards. It will have to be you or Francis or Bob. You've all been to the wars and so presumably you won't faint at the sight of blood. I doubt you'll be able to catch him unarmed. Tom tells us he always has a loaded pistol within reach, on his saddle or at his belt. He even sleeps with them."

"I see no need to bring Robert in on this," said Miles. "Too many cooks spoil the broth, and besides, jolly country squire that he is Bob might have notions about fair play and honour which would ill accord with the task at hand. He is not temperamentally suited for this kind of removal. Francis and I will undertake it."

"You're saying that I *am* suited for murder?" demanded Staton.

"You seemed rather enthusiastic about the project a moment ago," Miles pointed out.

"Do you have the stomach for it? Can you do it?"

"For Katherine's sake? Of course I can!" insisted Staton.

"Hear me, Francis, if you're going to crumple on me when it gets down to the point, I don't want you with me."

"You needn't worry on that score," replied Staton huffily.

"So be it," said Miles. "Henceforth you and I shall spend a great deal of time hunting rabbits and wildfowl and stoats along our boundaries with Whitewood. Eventually, the opportunity will present itself to arrange a mishap. If possible I'd like to catch Denzil on our side of the property line, even if Whitewood is technically ours now. It would look better in a court record. But if necessary we'll go into Whitewood grounds after him. We are going to have a simple, tragic hunting accident of the kind that occurs often in the countryside. We must keep our eyes open, catch him by surprise, and make sure we don't miss



with the first shot, because if we do we will find ourselves facing those deadly guns of his. Do not delude yourself that this will be easy or without peril. Call it an informal duel, if that will make you happy. Tom and Barbara are to know nothing of what we have discussed and decided tonight. Tom may suspect afterwards, but as their happiness is at stake here as well, I don't think he will be overly querulous about his brother's death. Besides, as Father pointed out, in all events he's hardly in a position to object, so long as we hold the deed to his house and land."

"Soon it will all be over, Kate," said Francis, holding her hand reassuringly.

"I pray to God you are right, my love," she said, a shudder passing through her. "But I am afraid. I saw his eyes."

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## V.

"You're mad!" Tom told Denzil one morning in November. "How did you get that money? Have you turned highwayman now?" They stood together outside an empty cowshed in the rear pastures of the Whitewood estate, on a cold and blustery day of intermittent clouds and weak sunshine. Seventy yards away stood boxlike beehives in a row, along a hedge beyond which lay a sunken lane on Pelham land. Denzil drew a long horse pistol from the saddle holster on Incitatus, who stood nearby, rested it on his updrawn left knee, cradled the pistol barrel on his left elbow, and sighted. On one of the top beehives stood an earthenware jug. "Don't shoot at that jug!" warned Tom. "You'll miss and hit the hive, and we shall need the honey next summer." Denzil fired with a flash and a roar, and the heavy lead ball vaporised the jug.

"I never miss, Tom," he said complacently. "You know that." Behind him the Pelham stable boy Jem Harris and the red-headed scullery girl Ruth clapped their hands in joyous appreciation of Denzil's sharpshooting.

"Where did you get almost twenty guineas?" persisted Tom. "You disappear for three days and then you return with money and a cask of powder and four more bloody pistols, as if you needed any more. Where did you get it all?"

"I didn't steal it, if that's what worries you," said Denzil, swigging scrumpy from another earthenware jug at his feet. "I went up to Shrewsbury fair and did the rounds of the taverns, shooting at butts and birds on the wing and whatnot for wagers and prizes. Sometimes the local gentry were a bit short of coin, so

we wagered our pieces against one another, hence two more brace of weapons for me. Rather like the olden days when a victorious knight in a tournament got his opponent's horse and armour. Sporting, you know."

"My thanks for the money, it certainly won't come amiss," said Tom. "But you need to be helping me restore this place to some kind of order, not gallivanting around the countryside doing trick shooting like a mountebank or wasting time, powder and ball out here every day."

"I don't like the idea of relying on Edward Pelham's largesse to pay our bills over the winter," Denzil told him.

"Speaking of Sir Edward, how is it that two of his retainers are spending time in your company?" Tom indicated Jem and Ruth, who sat on a fence behind them. The girl was giggling, and the boy had his arm around her. "Are we running a trysting place for dallying servants now? They should be at their work."

"Today is their half day," said Denzil. "I'm teaching the boy how to shoot."

"Why?" demanded Tom. "What possible need would a stable groom have to know the use of firearms?"

"Perhaps Sir Edward might make him a gamekeeper," returned Denzil airily. "Since it's our Whitewood forests wherein he and his now hunt, it behooves us to see that they are well managed. Some of the poachers around about might not have the proper paper from Parliament giving them a mittimus to steal our game like the Pelhams have. Better still, young Jeremy might make a dragoon when the king returns, and once again we draw sword to bring these wretches down into the mud."

"With luck and the mercy of God, that will never happen," said Tom. "If it ever does, then the boy is welcome to my place in the ranks, because I tell you now, Den, I'm not going back. But that's not why you're doing this. You are planning some devilry. What is it?"

"Devilry?" asked Denzil with an injured look. "Who? Me?"

"Don't cozen me!" snapped Tom angrily. "You know very well that you have the entire Pelham household terrified!"

"Indeed, you astound me, sir," said Denzil. "How, pray tell, have I accomplished this intimidation? I haven't set foot over there in weeks."

"No, you just come out here and fire those pistols all day long, here in this field as close as you can get to Pelham Hall and still be on Whitewood land, where you know they can hear the shots. They understand what you are saying to them and so do I."

"Oh, they understand, right enough," chuckled Denzil. "Which is why they are going to try to ambush me."

Tom looked at him in surprise. "What? Who told you so? Those two back there? Have you got Sir Edward's menials spying on him? Damnation, Den, I won't have that!"

"I need no spies, Tom, it just makes sense. They would be foolish to sit and wait, not knowing what I intend to do or when I will strike. Oh, I'll concede that these little practice sessions of mine out here do have a dual purpose. This potting keeps me up in form, of course, but it also confuses and disheartens the enemy."

"The Pelhams are not the enemy!" shouted Tom angrily

"Oh? They fought against their lawful sovereign. They acquiesced in his murder and have benefited tangibly from his death, at our expense. They hold our land and property unlawfully. I repeat that they are almost certainly planning a murderous assault on me. I call such ill-disposed persons enemies."

"I am going to marry one of those enemies," Tom reminded him. "I'm not on your side, Denzil. I'm not on their side either, especially now that, well, now that I've spoken to Meg." Tom still could not bring himself to discuss the revelation about Katherine Pelham with his brother. It was a complication of an already tangled and dangerous situation that horrified and unnerved him, and he had no idea how to approach the subject. He went on, "I am only for myself and Barbara. But the minute you cause Barbara pain, the minute you engulf her in this, this roiling swamp of trouble you are stirring up, then from that moment I *am* on their side. I can't out-shoot you or out-plot you, and I am not foolish enough ever to believe that I could. But I can force you to treat me as you treat them, burn your last bridge, destroy the last friendship you have in the world. Before you go any further with whatever abomination you are planning, you had best be very sure that you are ready to take that final step." Tom mounted his grey and rode off towards the house.

Young Harris and the girl Ruth approached Denzil respectfully, Jem eager for his next lesson in the mysteries of gunpowder and ballistics. The boy wore a threadbare jacket of fustian and cracked, stained clumsy shoes beneath ragged stockings, without a hat, his brown hair done up into a pigtail which billowed in the chill breeze. The girl was attired in what was evidently her one garment, the patched woolen gown, and a ragged shawl. Denzil smiled at them. "Ruth, run down to the apple tree and hang up a new target," he told her. He handed her a battered tin basin with a small hole bored in the lip, through which had been passed a length of twine. She curtsied happily and ran to the gnarled tree with her shawl and red hair flying. She tied the basin onto a limb and it swung in the breeze, presenting a broadside target that swung in the breeze. Denzil laid a row of pistols out onto the bench. "Now, let's see what you remember from Sunday," he said, picking up a pair of the pistols. "What are these?"

"Petronels," replied Jem promptly. "Flintlock, round barrel, button front sight. You had them put on special."

"And how did I show you to aim?" He reversed one of the guns and handed the butt to Jem. "No, keep that muzzle pointed away!"

"It ain't loaded!" protested Jem. "See, it's on half-cock and the priming pan cover's up!"

"Jem, all guns are loaded, without exception!" Denzil admonished him sternly. "Even when they aren't, you treat them as if they were! Never, ever point a firearm anywhere you don't want the ball to go if it fires, and never point a weapon at anyone unless you mean to shoot him. Now you practice a two-handed stance while I load and prime these pieces. I know it's hard, but I want you to get into the practice of using that front sight, not just blazing away from the hip when you're in close. Keep the barrel steady, don't wave it about at arm's length like some high-nosed ninny of a gentleman flourishing a rapier. The slightest wobble of the muzzle and you'll throw the ball off target. Now, what am I loading here?"

"The Zelners," said Jem. "Can I shoot them today?"

"Yes. What's so special about them?" asked Denzil, ramming a patch down the barrel.

"Them's rifled," said Jem importantly, as if all this were old hat to him. "The gunsmith cut spiral grooves down the inside of the barrel to put a spin on the ball, so's you can shoot straighter and further."

"Correct. The Zelners are also wheel locks. What are the advantages and disadvantages of wheel versus flint?"

"Wheel's more reliable in wet weather," recited Jem. "Wiv a new pyrite in yer dog you don't needs to prime, because the spark can fire the main charge on its own, but priming powder helps. Not as much pan flash and almost never hangs fire, so it's best for your first shot in an ambush. But yer wheel lock is real costly and cranky. You has to have a winding key to cock 'em and they breaks real easy. Flintlock has got fewer moving parts, faster to load and prime, and the new ones has a halfcock safety so's you can carry 'em primed and ready to fire. Disadvantage to flint is that they hangs fire lot and your priming gets damp."

"Flint's the coming thing, though," Denzil told him. "I'm not getting any more wheel locks unless they're something really special like these Zelners, balanced and rifled, front and rear sights. The gunsmiths aren't making wheel locks any more, and in twenty years they'll be gone. I'd hazard a guess the matchlock musket will be gone in ten. The New Model Army is in the process of converting their longarms to flint or snaphaunce. I hear the French are even experimenting with a way of sticking long knives onto the end of the musket barrel, so every musketeer can be his own pikeman as well." He drew a shortened carbine from Incitatus's saddle scabbard. "What's this?"

"A French miquelet," said Jem. "Eight-square barrel wiv a rear peep sight and a snaphaunce lock, which is kinder like a flintlock."

"Right, I'll let you fire this one first. You need to master longarms before you get into handguns, because the musket is the basic weapon of the soldier. Cavalry maneuver, loading and firing from the saddle, the caracole are all entirely different from marching and firing in cadence from massed ranks. I'll have to teach you to ride properly before we get into that, but fortunately you've already got a good grounding in horses, and thanks to Bob Pelham you've worked with the finest. Now, your weapon is already charged, so you need to prime the pan. Hold it in your left hand and brace the butt on your hip. Good. Here's your priming powder." The boy took from Denzil a small boiled leather bottle, flipped the pan cover open, and clumsily poured the fine priming powder into the pan. "No, no, you're wasting time and primer!" Denzil admonished. "You've got a Roundhead hussar riding down on you and you can't afford to muck about or his saber will take your head off! See, the nipple of the flask fits right into the pan and contains just the right amount of powder. It takes two flicks of the wrist, like this. Shake the priming powder into the nipple, then upend the flask with the nipple into the pan, and flick it out. With

practice you'll get it down into a couple of swift motions. Make sure you always recap the priming flask securely with your thumb, like this, because priming powder is very thirsty. I always carry two priming bottles, in case one gets wet. Above all things, you must remember to always keep your powder dry! Right, now kneel down behind the bench here and let's see if you can hit that target."

The boy knelt down in a clumsy firing position. Denzil guided him and corrected his posture. "Brace your body with your right leg, your left elbow on the bench. Any time you're firing a longarm always try to brace on something; they're heavy and hard to keep steady. Cock the weapon with the first two fingers of your right hand, while bracing the butt firmly against your shoulder. Make sure you hear the sear click twice. Good. Now remember what I told you about aiming." Denzil went on. "Sight along the barrel, and rather than shoot *at* something, try to feel the bullet *flow* along your line of sight. The gun must become part of you, a part of your whole being. Your eye, your hands, your whole body must learn to seize in together with the gun, so that the round goes where your eye goes, just like you were reaching out a long finger and *touching* the target, except you're touching it with a bullet."

"Is that why you never miss, Cap'n?" asked Jem.

"Yes. I can do as I just described to you. Why so few others can do it, I don't know, but I believe it's something most men have the power to do if they stop thinking of the weapon as a lump of carved wood and steel and think of the shot as a wholeness, so to speak. I really can't explain it any better than that, but I'm very interested to see if this faculty can indeed be taught to someone else, someone young like you who hasn't picked up lazy habits. My comrades in King Charles's army simply figured I had done a deal with the devil and let it go at that. Now *squeeze* the trigger, don't pull it. Remember, the gun will throw upwards and to the right when you fire. Learn to expect the kick and you'll soon adjust yourself for it without thinking. Now take your time, and fire whenever you're ready, lad."

Jeremy paused, and sighted, waiting until the breeze brought the basin full face around towards him. The air was split by a thunderclap and a tongue of flame, and there was a resounding clang as the bullet struck the target, holing it and sending it whirling and spinning wildly. "Good shot!" cried Denzil. Ruth clapped while Jem choked on the stinging white fumes. "By heaven, sir, we could have used you in the Merry Malignants!" cried Denzil. "I know veterans who would have missed that one." He swept off his wide-brimmed hat with the

scarlet and gold Royalist headband and red plume, and placed it on Jem's head. "I hereby appoint you to the rank and honour of king's musketeer!"

"Lord, Cap'n sir, don't let the master hear that!" laughed Jem. "He don't know Ruthie and me is here. He'd have conniption fits if he did. Can I go and see?"

"Certainly, my boy. I'll wager you plugged her dead centre!" The youth ran towards the target, still wearing Denzil's Royalist headgear.

Behind a nearby hedge on Pelham land, Miles Pelham and Sir Francis Staton had dismounted a short time before, and they approached the sunken lane warily. They wore heavy cloaks and steeple-crown hats. Miles was armed with a fowling piece and Francis carried a wheel-lock arquebus. Both had a brace of pistols and a rapier slung in their saddles. "Every day he's out here firing," muttered Francis, hugging his cloak about himself and pulling his hat down against the cold. "Every time Kate hears a shot she falters and trembles for a moment. I'm going to put a stop to this, Miles. I am going to stop it today."

"If the opportunity offers," concurred Miles. "Do you not think I want this over and done with as well?" The two men were upwind of the cowshed, and could neither see nor hear their quarry. Suddenly a shot rang out and there was a metallic clang, and a bullet crackled through the hedge showering them with sticks and leaves. Both men recalled past battlefields and hit the dirt, prone against the damp cold ground.

"God's wounds!" hissed Francis, momentarily forgetting his piety. "The villain is shooting at us!"

"No," said Miles, peeping through the hedge and spotting the gyrating basin dangling from the limb on the bit of twine. "He's shooting at a chamber pot or something hanging by a string on a tree."

"I'd fain hang *him* on a tree!" snapped Francis. "Why the devil can't Sir Edward simply tell him to leave, throw him off the estate? Whitewood is ours now."

Miles sighed. "As Father and I have explained to you already, several times in fact, there are reasons for not doing that. It would give the appearance that it is we who persecute him in violation of the spirit of the Engagement, and it would do no good. Denzil would simply find someplace else nearby to skulk. At least

while he is at Whitewood, we know where he is and what he is doing, literally within earshot of our door."

"Here, when he comes down to put up another target, I'll shoot him then," whispered Francis, carefully winding the lock with his spanner to cock the weapon. "I'll say I was potting at a rabbit. It's a likely enough accident. Sooth, that ball of his came through the hedge and damned near clipped us in like manner!"

"I agree," said Miles. "This is as good a chance as we're likely to get. The crowner's jury will all be good solid Parliament men, Sir Edward will see to that, but we mustn't make it too blatant and difficult for them to return a verdict of accidental death."

"I wish I had my goodly firelock I trailed at Marston Moor," fretted Francis.

"He'd spot the smoke from a match," replied Miles. "Get down! Here he comes!"

Both men hunkered down in a shallow ditch that ran beneath the hedge. A figure now stood at the swinging basin, his back to them, his hat trailing the crimson and gold ribands of King Charles. "That's him!" hissed Francis. "I'd know those colours of Herod on that hat anywhere! In an England made godly through the blood of the devout Redmond blazons his evil past for all to see. Well, now falls the last of Herod's henchmen! Die, you devil dog!" Francis thrust the barrel of the arquebus through the hedge to take clear aim. The range to his victim's back was not a dozen paces. He couldn't miss.

Both Ruth and Denzil saw the gun barrel slide through the greenery behind Jem. Ruth shrieked and Denzil bellowed a warning. Jem turned from examining his target, a quizzical expression on his face, unable to understand what was the matter. The muzzle of the gun vomited smoke and flame and thunder, and Jem screamed like a woman as an ounce of soft lead snapped his spinal cord, tore through his left lung, split his breastbone like it was paper, and buried itself in the trunk of the apple tree. Jeremy whirled about clawing at the air, and his scream became a gurgle as a river of blood poured from his mouth. Abruptly he sat down with his back against the tree, his breeches filling with urine and excrement, staring at his killers with startled eyes that died as they watched. Miles and Francis leaped up and sprinted for their horses, encumbered by the heavy long guns they carried. "*Sweet Jesu, we've killed the wrong man!*" shrieked Francis with a sob



"I know, I saw!" shouted Miles. "Can you load on horseback? Do it! He will be coming after *us* now!" They clambered into the saddle and spurred down the sunken lane that ran below the hedge, riding hellbent for Pelham Hall.

At the shot Ruth ran towards the butchered boy, screaming dismally, but Denzil wasted no time; he recognized death when he saw it, even at that distance. He snatched up every loaded horse pistol from off the bench, sheathed them in Incitatus's saddle holsters, stuck the two loaded Zelners into his belt, and then vaulted headlong up onto his horse, hatless, his long black hair whipping in the wind. The stallion was a veteran war horse and could smell the difference air now. Gunsmoke mixed with laughter and tobacco smells was harmless and good, but powder mixed with the smell of blood and the screams of wounded meant war and death, and the horse tensed, flared his nostrils, and reared with hooves flailing. Horse and rider hurtled across the pasture at full gallop towards a copse of trees on the Whitewood side of the hedge.

*They'll head for Pelham Hall, thought Denzil. Where else? I have to intercept them, get ahead of them to get a clear shot. Them, he thought. There must be at least two of them. There would have to be a corroborating witness to back up the trigger man's story to the crowner's jury that my death had been an accident or possibly self-defence, if they claim I drew down on them first. Miles would be one of them, for he wouldn't trust the others not to bungle it. That puling little catamite Lewis? No, hasn't got the bottle. Sir Edward? No, too old and too risky to have him involved in the actual killing; he needs to keep his hands clean so he can provide legal cover. That leaves Miles acting with Francis or Bob or both. Would Bob shoot a man in the back from ambush? No, the chuckle-pated oaf would want a sporting duel with a steeplechase meet and a banquet afterwards. I'm after Miles and Francis, then. Does Kate know? Did she send them to kill me as she killed our child? Later, not germane to the tactical situation. Will they take to the woods and swing through the fields? No, they've bungled it and they're too rattled to play cat and mouse. They'll make a beeline for home. The lane winds to the right for about four hundred yards on their side of the line, then swings back leftwards straight for Pelham Hall. I need to get ahead of them before they break out of the woods, because if I have to pursue them down a straightway they could wheel around and have a clear shot at me.* Denzil thought all of this through and planned his attack in a fraction over two seconds.

He leaped his war horse over the ditch where the hedge petered out and into the wood. He was now on Pelham property. Hugging the horse's neck low to avoid the overhanging branches he pelted through the forest at breakneck speed. Just beyond the bend in the lane where it widened out into an open

roadway, Denzil reined in and leaped to the ground into a stand of poplars, hoping that his quarry hadn't beaten him there and wasn't lying in wait to ambush him from the same cover. He whipped horse pistols out of his saddle and leaned against a tree trunk to brace his aim. A moment later Miles Pelham and Francis Staton appeared, pounding up the lane towards Pelham Hall in a panic, looking fearfully over their shoulders to catch a glimpse of any pursuit. The only sound in the wintry wood was their horses' hooves thudding in the crunchy, frosty mud of the lane, cushioned by the fallen leaves.

Denzil fired with a muffled boom which shook the dead leaves from the branches around him, and Sir Francis Staton's horse leaped high into the air with a scream and crashed to the earth dead, convulsing. Staton rolled clear, shouting incoherently. Miles wheeled his horse and drew a pistol from his saddle holster, which he leveled and fired at the smoke from Denzil's gun. The ball splattered into the earth a few feet from Denzil, who ignored it. Miles swung his horse back towards Francis, who clambered up behind him. Pelham pulled his fowling piece clear and fired at the dimly seen form of his enemy in the trees, but Denzil expertly rolled out of it and the shot rattled harmlessly through the wood, nipping brown leaves from branches and shredding bark from tree trunks. Denzil leveled his second weapon and passed the ball through the left eye of Miles Pelham's floundering, overburdened horse, splattering Miles' shirt with the animal's brains. The mare shuddered and collapsed noiselessly onto the roadway, sending both riders scrambling. Denzil whipped out a Zelner and cocked it with his winding spanner, in a fluid motion almost too fast for the eye to follow. Miles knelt behind his fallen horse and carefully braced his second pistol, then pulled the trigger. The pan flashed and hissed; Miles cursed and twisted the weapon up to look at the pan just as the hangfire went off and blew a squirrel's nest out of an overhead branch in a shower of twigs and debris. Denzil chortled. Both men scuttled for cover towards the woods opposite, Francis scooping up the fallen arquebus as he ran. Denzil fired the Zelner wheel-lock, and the bullet smashed into the stock of the arquebus and whirled it out of Staton's trembling grip, causing him to utter an oath which would have fetched him a month's penance had a churchwarden overheard it.

Denzil remounted quickly and galloped off the poplar knoll where he had sheltered, jumping a small creek and hurtling across another muddy field. He crossed over the roadway about two hundred yards down. Now he was on the same side of the road as the two killers. He halted again beneath an elm, and with practiced skill and speed he reloaded all his empty weapons, pouring measured powder charges into the barrels from the brass cartridges carried in

the bandolier across his chest, then ramming the balls down without bothering to use a patch, for he would be firing these again soon enough. Miles and Francis were reloading as well, Miles his pistol and Francis ramming powder and a handful of pellets down the barrel of the shotgun. "The man is a wizard!" gasped Staton, his teeth chattering from fear and from the cold.

"I hope not, else we'll not get home!" growled Miles. "We can wager our boots that he is somewhere between here and the hall. He's also mounted, for I saw that chestnut of his through the smoke as they moved out. We must move carefully and stick to the trees on the roadside for cover. If we try to cross open fields he'll pick us off like we were pigeons on the roof. I'll watch the fields to the right, you watch the lane to the left, and tell me if you see any movement at all. Damnation, man, why didn't you bring your pistols from your saddle holsters? He's got us outgunned now, as well as dismounted!"

"I forgot them," whined Francis. "Denzil was shooting at me!"

"Let's go," ordered Miles. They moved cautiously down the lane, guns ready and eyes straining for the slightest indication of their enemy's location.

In fact Denzil was ensconced behind a turnstile in a hedge which divided which divided two Pelham fields, watching them in amusement. Overhead a few ravens circled and cawed, their cries carrying in the weak sunny sky. *Shall I feed them?* wondered Denzil, looking up and watching them for a moment. *No, not today. What then? A bit of drollery at their expense? Why not? These Zelners are lighter and more accurate than the flintlocks. Let's see if I can pull this off.* Aiming carefully with both hands, Denzil fired and whipped Sir Francis Staton's broad-brimmed steeple-crowned hat off his head. Miles dropped down on one knee, cocked and aimed, and fired at the smoke. He shot splintered the wood of the turnstile, showering Denzil with dust. *Not a bad shot,* Denzil conceded judiciously. He fired the second Zelner and Pelham's hat flew from his head exposing the Colonel's balding pate. "That bloody bastard Cavalier!" choked Miles in fury. "He's playing with us!"

"Damn you, Denzil!" screamed Francis wildly. "You always were a bully, but you can't bully me now! Your tyrant king is dead and you shall follow!" He blazed away wildly with the shotgun, the charge plowing into the earth ten feet away from the turnstile.

The two men waited, sick with fear and hate. Miles handed Francis his empty pistol. "Don't muck about with that, reload this!" he ordered. "Take your time

and do it right, so I don't misfire! I've got one left and I'll shoot if he shows himself. Quickly, devil take you!"

"We have to run!" gabbled Francis.

"He'd put a ball in your leg if you tried," said Miles harshly. "Don't you understand? He's got us pegged down here and he can kill us any time he chooses. For some reason known only to himself and Lucifer, he hasn't done so yet. He's toying with us instead. *Redmond!*" Miles called out. "Speak up, damn you for a blackguard! What do you mean to do with us? Do you want to fight me? Then give over those cowardly pistols and let me fetch my sword from back there, and we'll fight like gentlemen! You can't do that, can you, Redmond? Afraid of a pink or two with good honest steel, are you?"

"What are you doing?" whispered Francis, appalled.

"Trying to bait him into a sword fight where I might have a chance to see the sun set," Miles told him. "It probably won't work, but it's better than being shot down like a dog! *Redmond!* Do you hear me, Redmond? Better shoot us now, because if we live I'll post you as a coward in every taproom and fair betwixt here and Shrewsbury, until you come out and face me with a blade!" While Miles raved and berated him in the chilly air Denzil was slipping down the roadway by the hedge. Reaching the lane he ran swiftly down it towards the place where Miles and Francis crouched behind a hummock. Miles saw him out of the corner of one eye and wheeled his pistol muzzle, trying to get a clear shot through the trees. At a sudden opening Miles fired at the speeding figure, the flash and the smoke blinding both men for an instant. When they recovered Denzil was gone.

"Did you hit him?" asked Francis.

"I wouldn't count on it," said Miles sourly. "Haven't you got that thing reloaded yet? Get on with it, man, while I do this one!" But before they could get either weapon charged they heard a voice of iron behind them. "*Turn, dogs!*"

Denzil Redmond stood behind them, his head bare, his long hair billowing in the breeze. The muzzles of two cocked pistols covered them. "You will notice, good sirs, that I am not wearing my hat, despite the cool weather. Sooth, neither are you gentleman. Very wise of you. It would seem that wearing the wrong hat is sometimes a fatal error in this goodly and godly shire of Hereford. Are you

two blithering idiots aware that you have just murdered one of your own servants?"

Francis fell to his knees, stammering, his pallid face quivering. Miles stared at Denzil coldly. "For you to accuse anyone else of murder is grotesque, Redmond. But if you shoot us now it will be murder right enough, and everyone in the county will know who did it. The hue and cry will go out all over the realm. Think you can make it to the coast? Think you can find a ship for Holland or France before the ports are sealed? You'll hang, Redmond, you'll turn in the wind on a gibbet at Ludlow crossroads just like a common footpad."

"You people have been trying to kill me for some years now, with a signal lack of success," Redmond reminded him. "So what else is new? As it happens, though, I'd rather not kill you now. I rather like the idea of you two sweating a murder charge yourselves."

"Murder?" gasped Francis in a strangled voice. "What are you talking about?"

"Just following my nose, so to speak," replied Denzil. "I really couldn't tell you why, but I get the instinctive feeling that killing you two now would be premature. I intend to play this out, over a long, long time. I've nothing better to do with my life now. You arrogant tub-thumping pigs started a war that has left this realm a reeking charnel house of death and misery. You murdered the king and stained your blasphemous hands in the blood of God's anointed. You stole Whitewood from our family after dumping the birth-strangled babe who should have one day owned these lands and our title into your garden as fertilizer, like a lump of horse shit from your stables. I want you all to have some time for reflection on your sins, especially sweet sister. For now, gentleman, I am inspired to perpetrate a jest of the kind we Merry Malignants were famous for, in which I shall require your cooperation. Play along with me, and you'll be alive tonight, to fume and splutter and tell one another of all the ways you're going to do me in next time you get a chance. Refuse and I'll shoot you both in the belly, then sit here and smoke a good long pipe while you wiggle and scream on the ground, and I shall spit in your faces as you die. Which shall it be?"

At the manor house, Sir Edward Pelham stood at the open casement in the library, ignoring the cold air that rushed in and made the hearth fire flicker and smoke. There had been no more shots for while. Katherine and Barbara sat on a

settle behind them, staring into the fire. Kate twisted her hand mechanically together, back and forth. "Father, do you want me to ride out and see?" asked Lewis.

"There is no need," said Sir Edward in a quiet, grim voice. "I was not a soldier, Lewis, but I was close enough to the front in the doing of Parliament's business so that I recognize the sound of a skirmish when I hear it. There should not have been that many shots so close together. Thank God Bob is at Shrewsbury fair for the races, else he'd grab his guns and go charging right into the middle of it."

"What can it mean?" asked Katherine in an agony of suspense.

"It means that Miles and Francis missed," replied Lewis bluntly. "It means they didn't get Denzil on the first shot and he returned fire. Both of them are probably dead."

"Dear God, no!" cried Katherine, beginning to weep.

"Father, tell me!" urged Barbara, "It sounds from what you are saying as if Francis and Miles actually went looking for a gunfight with Denzil! Dear God, we grew up with Denzil and Tom! I know he hates us now because of Whitewood and the war, but why murder, for the love of all that is holy? What will Tom say?"

"Almighty God," prayed Sir Edward softly, "Please don't make me pay for my overweening pride and my blind stupidity with the lives of these two young men, the one my son and the other who would have been a son to me. Barbara, I ask you to try to understand that we did what we thought we had to do for the sake of peace in our home and a quiet and serene future, not least for you and Tom. I have no other excuse to offer, feeble as that one is. Let us hope that we are yet mistaken in what we fear has come to pass. Lewis, if by chance they still live there will be no more such attempts. We will put a stop to Denzil Redmond through the law, and only through the law!"

"It would seem we will get that chance," said Lewis, leaning out of the window. "There is a very bizarre procession coming up our carriage drive."

"Eh?" exclaimed Sir Edward, peering short-sightedly. "I have not my spectacles. Tell me what you see, son!"

"I see that we are about to be the audience for one of Denzil Redmond's more memorable acts of lunatic exhibitionism," said Lewis. "They are all three coming up to the house. Father. You and I must go and meet them. Katherine, you and Barbara stay here. Denzil has his pistols and he may still mean to kill. God watch over us."

When Sir Edward and Lewis Pelham stepped out of the porticoed front entrance to Pelham Hall, before them stood Miles and Francis Staton, white-faced and tight-lipped. Both of them were naked except for linen shirts, and their bare legs were blue with cold. Behind them rode their conqueror on Incitatus, a long horse pistol balanced carelessly across his saddle pommel at full cock, his hand resting lightly on the butt. Katherine and Barbara gaped from the library window, and a knot of servants came from around the back, staring, clustered at the corner of the house. "What is the meaning of this, sir?" demanded Sir Edward stiffly.

"I fear that your son and your future son-in-law have met with a misfortune, Sir Edward," said Denzil with straight-faced courtesy. "Ill-disposed persons appear to have been abroad today. They have set upon these two fine neighbours of mine and slain their horses, afterwards robbing them of their purses and all of their garments." Then Denzil's voice hardened. "I also regret to inform you that one of your servants, Jeremy the stable boy, has been foully and treacherously murdered. I will send his body to you this evening for burial."

"Murdered?" quavered Sir Edward. "How? What happened?"

"A bullet meant for me, sir," replied Denzil coldly. "Fired from ambush by some contemptible coward who lacked the courage to call me out and face me man to man. No doubt it was the same person or persons unknown who set upon these two gentlemen here and relieved them of their raiment. As shocking as it may seem to you, Sir Edward, I do believe that I have an enemy. Perhaps several enemies."

"Indeed," muttered Pelham, his mouth dry. "So it would seem."

"I must be on my guard against these malefactors in the future," Denzil said with a faint smile. "Forewarned is forearmed. Your servant, sir." He saluted military style, with his pistol raised like a sword to his chin, and then looked directly over into Katherine's stunned eyes. "And yours, madam." Then he wheeled and thundered down the carriage drive at a gallop, as his bitter laughter chilled their blood as it wafted through the winter air.

That night a mule drawn wagon driven by old Sammy brought Jem's body back to Pelham Hall, and tearful servants laid him out in the small chapel. Miles noted with anger that the two mules both wore steeple-crowned hats of fine make perched upon their heads, slits cut through for their ears. Each hat sported a bullet hole.

Sir Francis Staton was beyond further humiliation. He was much affected by the murder, and spent all night in deep prayer over the shrouded corpse. His grief and his piety won him the respect and affection of all the servingfolk. How kind of the noble baronet to offer us his prayers for one of the common people! All of the staff of Pelham from the steward Leander on down spoke up in praise and admiration of this devout and gracious gentleman.

All except one.

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## VI.

Denzil waited in the stable for the wagon to return safely. Incitatus stood in a stall, fully saddled. Denzil did not expect any precipitate action on the part of the Pelhams, but ten years of irregular warfare had taught him to be prepared to counter any sudden move from the enemy. Tom stood beside him, watching as his brother packed a clay pipe and offered it to him. Hesitating briefly, Tom accepted. Denzil packed his own pipe and then lit a long broomstraw from the wick of a dark lantern hanging on a hook beside him. He lit Tom's pipe and then his own, and they smoked quietly, looking out into the moonlit yard which glowed in the crystal cold air, the earth hard with a rime of frost. The men's plumed breath mixed swirling with the tobacco smoke. Through old habit both of them kept their hands over the bores of their pipes to shield the glow from any observer. Finally Tom spoke. "Do you know which one of them killed the boy?" he asked.

"Francis," said Denzil, puffing quietly

"Are you sure? Did you see him actually fire the shot?"

"No, worse luck," said Denzil. "If I had I'd have him in the palm of my hand now."

"Then how do you know it was he?"



"Miles would have made sure he killed the right man." There was silence for a time. "Go to bed, Tom. I'll stand the watch a while longer. I don't think they'll attempt anything tonight. They'll probably try the law now, claiming it was me who did it. I may have to leave here soon. The less you get mixed up in all this, the better."

"I am going to marry Barbara Pelham, Den. I am mixed up in it whether I will or no. I don't suppose there is any way to stop this, even now at the eleventh hour?"

"That boy died for me. He took a bullet that was meant for my back. You know what that means among soldiers. You were one for long enough."

"Yes, I was," said Tom. "But his death was partly your fault. I don't know what the devil you thought you were doing out there, but you of all people ought to know that when you pick up a gun someone eventually gets a bullet. That's what the damned things are for. Den, in the name of God, I beg you to stop! Stop now! I can't make you stop. I'm not clever, and I wouldn't raise my hand against you if I could. All I can do is try to prevent you from hurting more people. Let that boy's blood be the last shed! Let me go to the Pelhams and tell them that. If you don't want to stay here, and I can well understand why you wouldn't, then let us help you to go where you want, to do what you want. I know money would be no object."

"Trying to buy me off, Tom?" laughed Denzil. "Pelham put you up to it?"

"No, just an idea I thought I'd try. I'll try anything. It wouldn't be a bribe, Denzil, it would be, oh, call it reparations if you like. Jamaica sounds promising, when they get this expedition together. Go kill Spaniards instead of Pelhams. But no more blood here, Den. God in Heaven, I am sick unto death of the smell of blood!"

"I'm not for sale, Tom." There was another silence.

"You know that if you hurt Barbara, you're going to have to kill me as well," said Tom.

"Barbara never fought against the king," said Denzil.

"You mean Barbara never was so foolish as to offend *you!*" snapped Tom.

"As you wish. But once she is married to you, so far as I am concerned she's out of it. You say that you cannot stop me, and nor can you. But neither can I stop you from getting in my way. What happens is up to you. Stay out of it and hopefully you won't catch anything not meant for you, like that poor benighted boy did. That's the best I can offer you, Tom. Your wife will suffer pain enough, for which I am sorry, believe that or not as you may. She didn't choose her relatives. It is unfortunately inevitable that you are going to get some backwash. If people like the Pelhams didn't want to be hurt they shouldn't have started this whole bloody mess ten years ago. As to you, I'm not going to start locking my door or making sure I am always facing you whenever we meet in the house or in the fields. You can probably shoot me in the back, if you don't mind becoming a man like Francis Staton."

"Better than becoming a man like you," said Tom.

"I won't argue. This thing has gone beyond argument or introspection. It's just something that has to be played out to the end. I've no idea how long it will last or how it will turn out. If I chose I could go riding over to Pelham and go berserk, shooting everything that moves. But that wouldn't balance the scales. Justice is not always served by the mere death of a culpable party."

"And just how do you define justice here, Den?"

Denzil thought for a while. "They have to suffer, of course, but they have to understand that the whole thing was avoidable, that they quite easily could have made other decisions than they did and that the nub of the whole thing lies not with me, but in their own behaviour. The main essence of justice, I suppose, is that they must never be able to forget, never be able to put it behind them even for a single day, an hour, a moment. Every day, in a thousand ways, they must be reminded of the sin they committed when they rebelled against the king, the crime they committed when they stole our property and set themselves above us. They say that's one vision of hell, you know, always having your sins before you. I know. I've been there for some time."

"Den, when I was a boy I worshipped you," said Tom. "I joined the king's army because of you, and in doing so I broke our mother's heart and probably our father's spirit, knowing as they did that both their sons might never come back. I have often wondered how great a part pure fear and worry for us played in the illnesses that killed them. That is my sin. I know that now, and if it gives you any satisfaction I will indeed live with that knowledge every day and every hour. But I did it for you, not for the king. Do you know something, Den? I'm glad our parents are dead, because they would have no more chance of

restraining you than I do, and at least they don't have to stand by and watch while you torture a family who have been our friends for over a century. They don't have to see you as I do, with nothing but hate and mindless murder in your soul. Denzil, what are you going to do? Just how do you propose to get this justice you speak of? I'd like to stop you, but I have to confess that I'm also just plain curious."

"I'm not really sure, Tom. I wouldn't tell you if I was, but I'm playing this by ear at the moment. I'll simply do like I did during the war, hang onto their flanks and ride behind their line of march, picking off any targets of opportunity which may present themselves. I learned after my first charge with Prince Rupert that gay abandoned frontal attacks may be exhilarating, but they are far too costly, and while they may win a battle they can lose a war. This is war, Tom, not fox-hunting with a saddle cup and a view-halloo. Attrition is the key to victory here."

"Denzil," said Tom, choosing his words with great care, "Do you have any idea what you have just said? Are you capable of comprehending that you are *insane*? The war is over, Den. We lost! Before God, can you really not see that? If not, then you are truly mad."

"It is quitting that makes us losers, Tom, not pieces of paper," said Denzil. "I am quite well aware of the disaster which has overtaken the king's cause. I'm not hearing voices telling me to avenge Charles on the Pelhams, if that's what worries you. I simply intend to keep on fighting for what is right, what's right for England, what's right for King Charles the Second, and yes, what is right for myself. If it reassures you about my sanity, I don't deny my own very strong personal motives in this matter."

"Nor should you." Tom was silent again, and he re-lit his pipe. "Den, about Katherine. Until I talked with Meg I didn't know what had happened. Hell, I was here at home during that period of time and all I remember is that Barbara was in Worcester and Katherine wasn't around much. I guess I'm rather a stump when it comes to noticing things like that. For what little it's worth, I'm sorry."

"It's worth more than you think, Tom. Thanks."

"But there's something I don't understand here. I can see why you'd be angry with Kate, why you'd hate her, why you'd want to punish her. Jesu, man, I'm angry with her myself! It was a wicked and shabby, vile thing to do and I've lost all respect or affection for her. But what appears to have set you

off is that after all she's done, after all that's happened over the past ten years, she won't marry you and become mistress of Whitewood. Is it because she's marrying Francis, whom I know you hate? Is it because she now supports Parliament? Why? Why this oath of vengeance? Gadzooks, some would say that all things considered, you'd had a lucky escape!"

Denzil was quiet for a time. "She has decided that I am like one of her dolls from childhood. I am something to be placed in a trunk in some box room or attic of her mind and her heart, possibly taken out and examined in a nostalgic way every five or ten years, then returned to the trunk to be locked away while she gets on with a life that has nothing to do with me, where I don't know the people or the things or the places or the reasons for things. When I spoke to her we compared it to a play. She thinks she is composing the script and she can write me in or out of it as she chooses. In this she is mistaken. I'm writing the script, not her. My pen is a pistol and my ink is blood, and because she tried to wrest the pen from my hand she will end up with a good many entrances and scenes and lines she would not otherwise have had to perform." He grinned at his brother. "How's that for melodramatic simile?"

"You are mad," moaned Tom, shaking his head.

"Not mad, just persistent."

"And where do Barbara and I fit into your script?" Tom asked.

"Oh, right where you are," said Denzil. "You said this morning you wouldn't go back if the king landed again, and actually I think that's for the best. Whitewood needs a Redmond master and it isn't likely to be me. You are cut out for it, I'm not. I've got nothing in my life now except these guns, and there is nothing ahead of me except a bullet or a rope or death from a gangrened wound that rots one of my limbs off. One day you'll hear that I'm gone, Tom, in some way like that. When you do, don't mourn. It was my choice. I'll try not to hurt Barbara any more than necessary. If you don't get in the way both of you can make it through. You'd best get to bed, lad. Whatever happens, try not to think too ill of me."

Denzil sat in the stable alone until the wagon returned. Sammy clambered down from the seat and they talked while he unhitched the mules and put them into their stalls. "Seems quiet enough over there at Pelham now, sir," the old man reported. "No saddled horses, no gatherings of strangers. I supped a pot of ale with Leander below stairs. Some reckons it was highwaymen, and there's some as point the finger at you, sir."

"I didn't kill the lad, Sammy."

"You don't have to tell me that, Master Den. I set that mugwort Leander straight right quick on that point, I did. There's a parcel of ill bein' spoke about Sir Denzil, says I, but one thing none have ever been able to say and that is that he shot man nor boy in the back."

"Thank you, old friend. Did the little girl get back to the hall?"

"Didn't see her, sir."

"No matter. She didn't get a good look at them anyway. Good night, Sammy. Leave the door to the buttery unlocked. I'm going to stay out here for a while."

Denzil sat and smoked for a long time in a shadowed corner, the door to the stable open so he could watch the rear yard in the wan moonlight. Then he jerked to attention as a slim form slipped across the yard from a lane in the rear, and entered the stable. He had a pistol out, when he saw that it was the girl Ruth. He grabbed her from behind and commanded her to be still, then he pulled the hood on his dark lantern aside. In the flickering yellow light she looked bedraggled and forlorn, her face streaked with tears, a small bundled cloth in her hands. "What are you doing here, Ruth?" Denzil demanded.

"I was going to sleep in your stable tonight and then come and see you tomorrow," said the girl. "I knows somethin'."

"What do you know, Ruth?"

"It was Sir Francis and Colonel Miles wot kilt Jem," she said miserably, sniffing. "I heard 'em talking about it."

Denzil was interested. "What did they say, and how did you come to overhear it? Were you spying on them?"

"I warn't spying!" she said indignantly. "There's this place, see, where I goes some

times when I wants to be alone. 'Tis a closet under the back stairs where they keeps linen and rags and things. The horse blankets for the grooms wot comes during the hunt meets is piled away up top in the back of the closet. I climbs up on top and lays there. It's warm, and Leander never looks for me there. The

back stairs run right up under Sir Edward's liberry. I heard 'em talking tonight." The heartbroken child began to cry. "Oh, Captain, sir, they was wicked to kill Jem, wicked, wicked, wicked! He was my lad, he was all I had, they have everything but they took him away from me anyway, they got no right....no right...." She sobbed uncontrollably for a time.

Denzil took her hand and held it gently. "He was a fine lad, Ruth. You know that it was me they really wanted to kill?"

"Aye," she snuffled brokenly. "Sir Francis said he shot Jem on account of he was wearing your king hat and he thought Jem was you and how was he to know, it wasn't his fault. Mr. Lewis called him a bloody fool and said he was against the whole thing from the beginning, and then the master says not to worry because he's magistrate in these parts and he will conduct the official iniquity."

"Official inquiry, Ruth, although sooth, you weren't far wrong. Go on. Tell me, what else did they say?"

"Colonel Miles says now they've got to kill you for sure because you knows too much, and now they can do it with the law. Then they started talking about how they was going to blame you for killing Jem. They don't know I was there when it happened. I knows you didn't do it, Captain sir, but they said that they shall swear they was out a-hunting and took Jem with to carry their guns and bag, and then you shot Jem and kilt their horses and made 'em take off their breeches because you're mad and you sold your soul to the Black Man. They said no Parliament jury would ever listen to anything you said because you're a Malignant and they is Christians."

"Evidently not Christian enough to recall the commandments against murder and bearing false witness," said Denzil with a bitter chuckle. "They've probably got the right of it, though. They won't believe you either, Ruth, even if you testify to what you heard, and you'd just end up getting yourself done for perjury or some trumped-up thing or other. But there may be a way. Ruth, will you help me punish them? I shouldn't think you bear them any love after what they've done."

"I hates 'em," said the girl dully. "I hated them all even before they murdered Jemmy. All 'cept Miss Barbara, anyway. Miss Barbara's nice. She give me a hair ribbon once. Miss Katherine looks down her bleeding high holy nose at me all the time because I'm a slut and a wanton. Leander and Mrs. Evans the cook, they works me half to death, washing the dishes and scrubbing the floors

and scouring the greasy pots, washing the linens and the woolings with fuller's earth that burns me hands, making me bathe outside in the wash house in the winter, never letting me have a fire or a bit of candle in me room upstairs. They only gives me three day bread and gruel and if I nicks me an apple or a mince pie Leander whops me wiv his strap. Then at night the gentlemen won't let me sleep. They all the time come up to me room and fuck me."

"Eh? Who in that godly Puritan household does that?" asked Denzil.

"Major Bob comes upstairs a lot, and sometimes Sir Francis, and sometimes Mister Lewis, once or twice even Sir Edward hisself."

"Not Miles?" asked Denzil curiously.

"No, never him. He just looks at me like I'm dirt when he sees me. He's as bad as Miss Katherine. She knows about it. She makes me come into her sewing room and sit on a stool while she reads the Bible to me and tells me how I'm full of sin, and the flesh waxeth hot but the fires of damnation are a thousand times hotter and I shall go and burn in hell forever when I die. I guess I will. I don't want to let 'em but I gots to, because they is gentry. Me mum useter do it, but now she's dead so they fuck me instead."

"Have you a father?" asked Denzil

"He ran off a long time ago. Someone told me mum once that he'd been killed in the war. I dunno where."

"How old are you, Ruth?"

"Fourteen, I think," she said

"Where were you planning on going now?" he asked her.

"I dunno," she replied with a shrug. "Somewheres. I won't stay in the same house with wicked people who kilt my Jem." Tears flowed down her face, glistening in the flickering lantern light. "Leander and all the other servingmen wanted to shag me too, but Jem was the only one below stairs I'd allow. We was going to run away to America. We had some money we'd saved from our wages." She unrolled the little bundle with her few possessions in it, a fragment of broken mirror, a ribbon which was presumably the one Barbara had given her, a comb, four or five buttons, some spare stockings and a worn, cracked

pair of ladies' shoes. "Miss Barbara gave them to me mum and now I got 'em," said Ruth. "They're too nice to wear, though, so I keeps 'em put away. See, here's me and Jem's money." She turned out a knotted handkerchief and plunked a handful of wretched coppers down on the bench, the two young people's pathetic hoard.

"Ruth, there can't be more than six or seven shillings there," said Denzil. "How were you going to get to America on that?"

"This spring we was going to run away to Bristol and indenture ourselves," she replied.

"Are you daft, girl?" said Denzil sharply. "Indenture is as good as slavery!"

"Oh, we figured to run away again when we got to America," the girl explained naively. "That's why Jem wanted you to learn him to shoot guns. We was going to build us a house in the forest where we would live all by ourselves, and Jem would shoot buffaloes and elephinks so that we could eat all we wanted whenever we was hungry."

"There are no elephants in America," Denzil told her gently. "Elephants live in Africa. Ruth, I'm afraid what would have happened to you and Jem in Bristol would have been different." *Brutally different*, he reflected. They might never have gotten past Bristol, he turning thief or working himself to death on the docks, she dying in childbirth in some greasy basement or else whoring for drunken sailors. They might have made their marks on indenture papers they could not read and ended up chained in a filthy bilge on some overcrowded hulk, to be sold on the block as slaves by some labour contractor if they survived the passage. They might have been promised Virginia and shipped instead to the living hell of the Barbados cane fields, or forcibly parted and shipped to different colonies. "The Pelhams have shattered your dream as well as mine," Denzil went on. "We can't bring back the dead, but we can try to give them justice, Ruth. Justice for Jem, justice for King Charles, justice for a tiny soul who knew but a few minutes of light and sound before his own mother...will you do what I ask, so that someday both you and Jem can be avenged on them?"

She regarded him warily. "I won't sell me soul to the Black Man!" she said firmly. "Nothing so melodramatic, lass!" Denzil chuckled. "Is that what they tell you about me?"

"Miss Katherine says so. She said so tonight."



"Did she indeed?" said Denzil with a thoughtful frown. "Do you believe her?"

The girl hesitated. "No, Captain sir, I reckon not. But I'm kind of scared of you. I'm scared you will shoot me."

"I won't shoot you, Ruth. There are traitors and regicides and tub-thumping preachers enough abounding in England who stand in need of shooting, without I start in on dollymops. Now, here is what I want of you. First off, tomorrow you will go with me to London."

The girl's eyes widened. "Lunnon town? I ain't never been anywheres except for Ludlow, and Shrewsbury once."

"Well then, you can come to London with me. I'll buy you a ticket on the post coach, and I'll ride along side you on Incitatus with all my pistols to make sure that the Pelhams don't try and make you come back, and to guard against robbers."

"Me ride in a coach like a lady?" she asked in incredulously.

"Aye. When we get to London we'll go and see a friend of mine, Master John Sharples. Master Sharples is a lawyer, an advocate like Master Lewis, but he has remained loyal to King Charles. He will call in some other people I know as witnesses, and you must tell them everything about Jem's shooting and what you heard the Pelhams say tonight when they talked about it. All of it will be written down, and then you must put your mark on it. And then I'll sign a similar statement about what I know of Jem's death, and all the witnesses will sign so it's all in proper legal form, and Master Sharples will put his notary seal on the statements. Then we will find you a new position in a household of true king's subjects."

The girl frowned. "Captain Denzil, I may be only a dollymop, but I knows the ways of this wicked world. Ain't no Parliament court going to bring down the law on the Pelhams over the shooting of a stable boy. They's gentry and was in New Model."

"No, they won't face trial, not now," agreed Denzil. He took her hands and looked into her eyes, speaking intensely. "But Ruth, you may have heard that our true king still lives, the Prince of Wales, son to the old king whom Parliament murdered. He is in France now, but someday the people of England will become sick and tired of Cromwell and his scurvy crew of rogues and jobbers and knobsticks, and they will bring back the prince and crown him as

King Charles the Second. When that day comes the top rail will return to the top and the bottom rail will go back on the bottom. The Pelhams and all their kind will be brought to justice, for killing Jem and for every other crime they have committed, against everyone. Come to London with me, and you can do your part to help bring that day closer. Even though you are only a serving girl, you can help England's anointed king. Will you do this for him, and for me?"

"Aye, sir," she whispered in awe, wide-eyed and solemn.

"Good." He kissed her on the forehead. "Now come with me into the kitchen. You will sleep by a nice warm fire tonight. I'll bring some of these horse blankets inside to make you a bed." Denzil got her settled in and then went back outside to unsaddle Incitatus. If they were planning a legal frame-up then there would be no trouble tonight, but he had best leave Whitewood early the next morning and get the girl out before the Pelhams missed her and put two and two together. This business of falsely accusing him of the stable boy's murder looked bad, but if they suspected there might be a second witness they might hold off, so long as the second witness were out of their reach. It was time to fall back out of range, circle, and come in to attack from another angle.

He went inside again, and made sure that all the doors were barred and the windows locked, moving silently through the empty rooms, pausing outside the door of Tom's bedroom to hear his brother's snores, poking into the shadows with his pistol barrel. It struck Denzil that tonight would be the last night he spent under the roof of his ancestral home for a long time, possibly the last night ever. It had proven to be a short homecoming.

Finally Denzil went to his own room, the master bedroom. Tom and Sammy and Meg had insisted that he use it, but Denzil knew he could never feel fully comfortable in this chamber which had always been occupied by his father during every day he had ever lived at Whitewood. He stepped to the narrow casement, a window knocked out of what had originally been a medieval arrow slit, and looked out over the bare trees and moonlit yard. *Do well by the old place, Tom*, he thought wearily. There was nothing for him here now. Katherine had probably been right about one thing, that it was Tom and Barbara's Redmond descendants who would preside here. The only land Denzil had coming was six feet of earth, probably in a place he didn't now even know existed. They had no right, the girl had said tonight. No. The Pelhams had no right.

Sammy had laid a fire in the hearth which still burned low, and Denzil stripped down and thoroughly scrubbed himself with lye soap and water from a basin, as

he had done hundreds of times in the field, not noticing the chill in the November night air, so accustomed he was to the procedure. The last time he had a full bath had been in France. Old soldiers' habits died hard. He turned down the bedclothes and placed his candle on the bedside table by the great four-poster, wriggling into the still unaccustomed luxury of a nightshirt.

Suddenly the door swung open, and Denzil had a cocked pistol in his hand. It was Ruth. She entered wordlessly and smiled up at him shyly, then pulled the woolen dress off over her head and slid down into the bed. Her whole body was lightly powdered with freckles, and her small round breasts were tipped with rosy nipples. In the dim candle and firelight she looked seductively older than she was. Denzil sat down on the bed beside her. "Ruth, you don't have to lie with me. You owe me nothing. On the contrary, it is I who owe you much for helping me in the fight against the king's enemies. My name isn't Pelham, and I won't use you as a tart."

"I want you to," she said. "It's cold and I'm lonesome and sad for Jem, and I want to be with somebody tonight. I ain't a whore, Captain. Major Bob used to offer me a shilling a time, but I never took it, even though Jem and me needed the money for America, because if I'd took the money then I would have been what Miss Katherine said I was. You're getting it because I want you to have it."

Denzil shrugged himself out of his nightshirt and eased down beside her. "What if you get with child? You're too young to have to go through all that."

"Oh, not to worry," she laughed. "I know how not to get stuffed up." She snuggled against him, and they kissed for a time, and then with an experienced abandon which astonished and delighted Denzil she slid her lips down over his chest and belly to his loins, taking him into her mouth and fellating him gently and skillfully, until his climax exploded in a surge of ecstasy which made him gasp. She drained in from him, leaving him limp and sated. Then she stretched out beside him with a contented sigh and pulled the covers close, luxuriating in the feather bed and clean sheets.

"Where on earth did a lass of your years learn to do that?" asked Denzil.

"Oh, I been doing that for a long time. It makes a man happy and you don't have to worry about babbies. Later on you can fuck me regular, but I has to count days. Me mum taught me how. Or you can fuck me in the bum if you like. Major Bob likes me to suck him orf all the time, but Master Lewis always fancies the old poop chute."

"He buggers you?" laughed Denzil.

"Aye," she giggled. "Sooth, I think it was Jem he would have done it to if he had dast. I think it's boys Master Lewis really fancies."

"Proper Puritans indeed!" murmured Denzil, drifting off to sleep.

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## VII.

Denzil had anticipated some difficulty in getting passage for a mere scullery maid on the post coach from the nearby market town of Ludlow. But the local merchants were so happy to have the coach escorted by the redoubtable former commander of the Merry Malignants that they loaded on extra parcels, shipments of gold and valuables destined for London. The roads were unsafe, plagued with highwaymen who were mostly discharged soldiers with no employment.

Their first stop was Shrewsbury, and when the word went out that Denzil's pistols protected this run, so many booked passage for their coin and their elderly and female relations that a second coach had to be added. An agreement was reached in the post house tavern between Denzil and several of the town's wealthy men to pay him five guineas, plus a free ride for Ruth. Denzil began to look forward to a regular income providing safe passage for travelers over the dangerous high roads of God's Commonwealth.

Nor was the precaution unnecessary. More than once during the three day journey the small convoy was approached by bands of ragged men and women and children, homeless and jobless, who milled about in the roadway and begged for coins in a sullen, aggressive way. Had it not been for Denzil's impressive mounted presence these bands of wandering vagrants could well have decided to attack, especially had it been the usual single post coach. Several times on lonely stretches of road, the coaches met armed men on fast and powerful horses whose demeanour was distinctly sinister. These men were veterans; they took in Denzil's presence with an expert glance, read the signs, and elected to swerve aside and let the convoy pass, before riding in search of easier prey.

In London the pair of them stayed at a comfortable inn in Southwark. A little extra silver creased the landlord's palm and forestalled awkward questions about the visiting gentleman from the shires and his "daughter". *Sniggering*

*obsequious bastard*, Denzil thought angrily to himself. *Jesu, I don't look that old, do I? But maybe I do. God knows, I sometimes feel as old as Methuselah.* For Ruth it was a holiday, a grand adventure. She made her statement willingly to Sharples in front of a room full of witnesses, all ex-Cavaliers, including a former sergeant-major in Denzil's troop of outriders named Arthur Hornby, who now owned a tavern in Eastcheap, but Denzil carefully avoided it for fear of surveillance by Cromwell's secret police. Hornby's establishment, which he defiantly called the Crowned Head, was well known as a hotbed of unreconstructed Royalists. Denzil wanted to remain inconspicuous, despite the fact that there was no legal charge against him.

After the witnesses had left for a drink and a chop at Hornby's hostelry, the attorney Sharples locked the girl's statement and Denzil's into his strongbox. "There is no hope of bringing any action against these Roundheads while they are in power, Captain," he told Denzil. "This is ammunition to be held in reserve against a future opportunity, which you realize may never arise at all."

"I understand that, John," Denzil replied, looking out through the diamond-paned window of Sharples' chilly and barren law chambers in the Temple. It was a clear and sharply cold day, the winter sun sparkling on the Thames below. "I'm just taking the opportunity to deal myself a few cards to keep hidden away under the table until such time as I can play them."

"What will you do now?" asked Sharples. "I have some friends over the seas who have ventures in cordage."

"Cordage?" returned Denzil. "You mean the Sealed Knot? Possibly I may wish to make their acquaintance at some stage, but not just yet. I still have business to settle in Hereford. I'll just hang about and kill some time between now and Christmas. I'll pick up some money doing trick shooting at fairs and riding escort for the post coaches. One of my ancestors, old Sir Nick, made his living that way, as hired muscle." Denzil looked out at Ruth down in the cobbled courtyard below, wrapped in a warm new cloak he had bought her. "Another ancestor of mine is said to have had a penchant for red-headed serving girls."

"Best keep a low profile, Captain," Sharples warned him. "Things are bad in London for loyal king's men, or anyone else for that matter who dares to raise a voice in criticism of Cromwell. Thurloe's informers and the Puritan morals proctors are everywhere. The city has become a kind of open-air lunatic asylum, part church, part military barracks, part counting-house where Puritan merchants stack piles of gold and silver. We've got wild-eyed fanatics of every stripe preaching hellfire and damnation on street corners. There seem to

be printing presses clattering night and day in every back room and cellar, turning out broadsheets and pamphlets on every subject from theocracy to free trade to the abolition of all private property, and every crank and vagabond in the realm has set up shop here prodding his own theories and projects for the coming Apocalypse. Every week government officers flog and brand and clip ears and clap scores of people in the pillory, but they seem barely able to keep the lid on. It's only a matter of time before Old Noll orders another crackdown on Parliament like Pride's Purge in '48, only this time he won't even leave a rump. He'll assume direct power, backed by the military, and at that point I wouldn't give a farthing for any of their guarantees, including their amnesty for king's soldiers like yourself. As it is the knobsticks will summons a man for wearing too bright a colour of clothing or drinking a pot or two overmuch of ale. If this is God's heavenly kingdom on earth, then God is certainly a grim sort of chap."

Denzil found that Sharples was right. The marching and drilling of the Roundhead regiments throughout the city galled him, the constant slanders of the street preachers and pamphleteers against King Charles enraged him, and life under the new world order seemed increasingly pointless and bleak. He found that Ruth could soothe his anger and his furious resentment at the consequences of defeat he confronted daily. She didn't chatter, and she gratefully accepted Denzil's little gifts. She gorged herself on freshly baked bread, good lamb and beef, ripe cheese and honey cakes and bowls of thick porridge with cream, eating like a bottomless pit to make up for the years of gruel and hard crusts at Pelham Hall. Her scrawny frame began to fill out and her figure began to swell and curve, while her hair began to thicken and grow lustrous, as she lost the pinched and half starved appearance she had when Denzil met her. At night she made love expertly and uninhibitedly, both orally and normally. She was grateful to Denzil for not sodomizing her. "It hurts and I always got to shit afterwards," she explained without a shred of self-consciousness. She insisted that the system of counting days taught to her by her mother precluded pregnancy. Denzil discovered with a certain shock that the Pelhams had been sexually abusing her since she was ten years old; he was surprised and rather worried to discover that he was affected by the child's wretched life story. He was a hard man, and he knew it was nothing unusual. Girls of Ruth's age and younger had followed the drum as laundresses, cooks and prostitutes during the war, and had often been killed and wounded when caught in the fighting as well as being routinely gang-raped, starved, and beaten by their military clientele. Here in London girls just out of their teens worked in conditions of service just as bad as Ruth's at Pelham. Others walked the streets and filled the brothels, were publicly hanged for petty crime, or died of

malnutrition and venereal disease to be dumped into unmarked pauper's graves. If Ruth had been more fortunate in her life she might well have been married by now to some man chosen for her by her parents or guardians, possibly a man old enough to be her father or grandfather, only to die in her first childbed. None of these things had ever bothered Denzil before, nor did they now. Life was inherently cruel and only a fool expected any different. But Denzil knew himself well enough to spot the danger signs of creeping human weakness. *I'd best guard against becoming too attached to her*, he told himself. He had a job to do, and Ruth was not part of the plan.

The days drifted by, cold and wet and short. Denzil rode several escort missions and on a run through Epping Forest he distinguished himself by shooting dead a locally famous highwayman called Captain Maggot, which earned him a handsome bonus from the aldermen of Walthamstow. One afternoon in December Denzil was approached in the taproom of the Southwark inn where he lodged by a beadle, a roly-poly fellow in greasy black broadcloth wearing a steeple-crowned hat and flourished the brass-headed staff of office which gave his kind their contemptuous nickname of knobsticks. "Pray you, good sir, a moment of your time," intoned the proctor sonorously. "It has come to my ears that you do abide here, sir, in the same chamber with a young lass of tender years. The landlord assures me that all propriety is maintained in his establishment, nor have I cause to doubt him, and yet..."

Denzil was in no mood for this, and he set aside his tankard. "Collecting for charity, are you?" he interrupted. "No doubt your scruples will be allayed by a piece of metal crossing your palm." He took a lead pistol ball from his bandolier and pressed it into the man's sweaty hand. The churchwarden stared at it, taken aback. Denzil stood up, and there was a scraping sound as the other toppers in the long, low-beamed taproom slid their stools and benches back from the tables, ready to get out of the way. This did not escape the Puritan's notice, and he glanced nervously about him. Denzil spoke to him in a calm and level voice. "I have another of those which I will gladly contribute to ensure that you never feel the need to question me again, about anything." His hand rested on the butt of a pistol at his side.

The beadle tried to bluster. "Are you mad? I am an officer of the Commonwealth, sir! How dare you threaten me? Tell me your name, if you dare!"

"My name is Denzil Redmond, a captain of light horse, late of His Majesty's..." There was a hole in the air where the beadle had been, and the sound of his screams grew fainter

outside as he fled down the street. Nor was he seen in the area again.

Three days before Christmas Denzil returned to the inn on a cold and blustery evening, when it was nearly dark. Ruth was stirring a pot of succulent stew hanging over the grate in their room. He handed her a pair of soft deerskin gloves, lined inside with fur. "This is your Christmas present," he told her. "I'm giving it to you now because I'm going away tonight."

"Thank you," she said, taking the gloves and kissing him. "When will you be back?"

"I won't be coming back, Ruth."

"Oh." She sat down on a bench and stared at the floor. "What about me?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"You may stay here until after Christmas," he said. "I have already paid the landlord for your room, and double wood for your fire, so you shall be warm. On Saint Stephen's day, go and see Mr. Sharples, the lawyer at the Temple. We have found a new place for you, at Arthur Hornby's Crowned Head inn in Cheapside. You met Arthur when you swore out your statement, that big heavy man with the large moustache. He was with me in Lord Hopton's Army of the West, and also in my own troop of irregulars. Arthur and his wife are good people. They will feed and clothe you well, pay you a fair day's wage for a full day's work, and you won't have to serve the customers anything other than food and drink."

"Why can't I go with you?" she begged him.

"It's impossible, Ruth," he told her gently. "You know that I never made any promises to you."

"I know that," she admitted, weeping. "I love you, Denzil."

"I'm glad, Ruth. I am very glad indeed that there is at least one person upon the face of the earth who can say that of me," he told her compassionately. "But for me to take you with me whither I am bound would be terribly wrong. It would be the most selfish and unfair wrong I could do to you. I want to thank you for your company and for the help that you have given me, and in order to repay you I am leaving you with a kindly man and his wife who have a good home where you can live and work. Someday you will meet a man your own age, who will wed you and give you everything that I cannot."



"I don't want anyone else, I want *you!*" she wailed desolately. He said nothing, simply holding her close while she cried herself out. Finally she said, "Must you go right away?"

"Yes, little one. I must. I have a long ride ahead of me."

"I didn't get you no present," she sniffled. "I was going to buy you something tomorrer, with me and Jem's money. Will you love me one more time before you go? It's all the gift I can give you tonight."

Later Denzil dressed quietly, packed his few possessions into a saddlebag, and loaded a pair of pistols for the journey. He had thought her asleep, but she spoke. "You're going back there, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Are you going to kill them wot kilt Jemmy?"

"It's not as simple as that, Ruth, but if it makes you feel any better, I am going to make them suffer, right enough. I'm going to set them all on the first step to the suffering of the damned. There are worse things than dying. Soon the Pelhams will understand that."

"Why don't you just kill them all?" asked the girl. "Shoot them down like dogs, like they shot Jem. Cept for Miss Barbara."

"Because in death she might forget me," muttered Denzil bleakly, staring at the floorboards. "I don't want her ever to forget about me. Not for a single instant."

"I don't understand," whispered Ruth.

"Good, because it would hurt you if you did, and you are not the one I want to hurt. One last thing, though since you are awake. Are you absolutely certain about that cellar door you told me about? I must get into the house."

"Aye. Every Christmas and feast day Leander unlocks the outside door to the cellar, so's he and the other serving folk can sneak outside to the wash house and eat and drink whatever they can pinch from the gentlefolk's table. They ain't supposed to."

"Good. Go to sleep now." He leaned over and kissed her cheek; it was cold above the blanket she had pulled up to her chin. "Goodbye, little one. Thank you." He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Goodbye, my beloved Captain," she whispered, and then she laid her head down on the pillow to cry herself to sleep, for the first of many long and anguished nights.

The snow didn't fall in Hereford until Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning it lay light and fluffy on the woods and fields of the Pelham estate, under a crystalline sky with wan sunlight twinkling off the drifts. In Pelham Hall the utmost cheer and goodwill prevailed, in consequence of the season and the impending marriage of both daughters of the house, an event long overdue in the opinion of the Pelham servingfolk and tenants. Everything was scrubbed down, victuals and drink hauled out of larders and cellars, children of various provenance screamed and giggled and played underfoot, and the entire manor house filled from top to bottom with delicious smells from the kitchens, roasting meat and freshly baked bread, pastry, and puddings. Sir Edward Pelham loved nothing better than a good old-fashioned Christmas of the kind he recalled from his own childhood in the last years of Elizabeth, and all of his eldest daughter's Puritan religious scruples he stoutly overrode. The weddings would be celebrated in the grand old style, with roast suckling pig and enough drink to intoxicate an army, as well as holly and a Yule log in the great hearth. Katherine inveighed against the first two as gluttonous and dissolute and the last two as verging on paganism, but the old knight was adamant. "Come, Kate," he chided, "Surely you won't tell me that you do not recall with fond memory the Christmases we had in days gone by, when your mother was still with us? May God rest her soul, surely she would have wanted it this way."

"They were good times before the war," Katherine admitted with a smile. "In a way this double wedding is a ceremony of reconciliation between old enemies. There are going to be faces at this board tonight we have not seen for ten years, some of our neighbours who fought for the king. If worldly display and levity is the price of that reconciliation then I think Francis and I can live with it." They were all standing in the great hall watching the tables and benches being set up, and holly and silver bells and greenery hung from the beams. "I just wonder what the Reverend Mister Fitch will say about all this adornment and frivolity. Marriage is a solemn Christian sacrament, a covenant made in the name of God before men, and it should be celebrated with dignity and sobriety.

"Glad I'm an irredentist King's Johnny and still High Church!" laughed Tom. "I agree it was a good idea to have the ceremony here, Sir Edward, so we don't have the company at swords drawn over the layout of the parish church!"

"The Reverend Mister Dowling has an altar rail hidden away somewhere," admitted Sir Edward. "He brings it out for some and keeps it concealed from others. I am a magistrate, and I hope no one in London hears of it, else I'll be forced to go through the motions of doing something about it. I hope we can keep Mr. Dowling and Mr. Fitch from one another's throats, at least long enough to get through with the weddings."

"If I recall Reverend Dowling he will be quite happy to settle down with a bottle of claret and a good slice of joint and Christmas pudding," said Tom

"I'm glad we're doing it this way as well," said Francis. "It does indeed seem to symbolize a new hope for peace and good will in a new England under the rule of God's law. Tom, might Miles and I have a word in private?"

"Barbara's upstairs with the maids laying out her gown," said Katherine. "I'll go and help her with it."

"No gown for your own wedding day, Kate?" asked Tom with a smile.

"Sober garb and a virtuous heart are the best to bring to such an occasion," said Kate. "But I must confess to a certain womanly envy of Barbara's satin and velvet. Francis, will you come and pray with me in the chapel in a bit? We must prepare ourselves spiritually."

"Surely," said Francis. "I shall be there when I have spoken with Tom." Sir Edward moved across the hall to greet the first of the arriving guests, and Miles led Francis and Tom into the library, where he poured out bearers of claret for all three of them. After toasting the health of both bridegrooms, Miles said, "Tom, we just wanted to inquire after that madcap brother of yours. I must confess to a certain unease in not knowing his whereabouts. Have you any word of him?"

"I had a letter from Denzil last week. He is in London," said Tom. "No address given, very noncommittal. No explanation of why he just took off like that without saying good-bye. Said he is taking his ease and wished me congratulations on my marriage. I have not the slightest idea what he is about, and there was nothing in the letter to give any indication that he is planning

anything. I agree, it's suspiciously calm. I would keep a weather eye about you, Francis. He's tricky, and I doubt he has given up plotting some nameless revenge. Have you any word of your missing dollymop?"

"None," replied Miles thoughtfully. "She was very thick with that miserable stable boy. They were bundling together, although just between the two of us there were some other men in this household who shall remain nameless, who were plowing that same furrow. The women below stairs say she was grief stricken by the boy's death."

"God rest his soul!" murmured Francis. Tom eyed him speculatively

"Apparently she and the boy had some idiotic notion of running off to America as indentured servants," Miles continued. "Perhaps that's where she went and she's halfway across the Atlantic by now, or more likely she just went to some relatives somewhere. Still, I don't like the coincidence of both her and Denzil disappearing at the same time. I suppose we're safe enough for the moment with Denzil in London, but I would dearly love to know just what he is up to."

"Perhaps we scared him off?" suggested Francis hopefully.

"Did he appear affrighted to you at our last encounter?" demanded Miles. "No. He's pulled away out of sight like a good outrider, preparing to hit us again from another direction, when we least expect it."

Tom chose his words carefully. "You will note, both of you, that I have never asked any questions about the death of the boy. I have decided that I neither need nor want to know. I blame no man for trying to defend his family and his home. I understand that Denzil is a threat to us all, and I know full well that whatever he does to Kate is going to hurt Barbara too. But I won't stand for him being falsely accused, as I have had rumour certain ill-disposed people may intend. Denzil didn't kill that boy. I know that because he told me so, and whatever else Denzil does he doesn't lie. I also know it wasn't an accident, because Denzil never had an accidental discharge in his life. If it makes things any easier I can tell you this, that Denzil was priming the boy for some secret purpose, no doubt nefarious and directed against this family."

"Did he tell you as much?" demanded Miles keenly.

"As good as, yes," said Tom. "One of the reasons he left may be that with the boy dead he is no longer able to accomplish whatever it was he was planning. I hope so."

"Then perhaps it is just as well that the lad is no longer with us," said Miles, with a pointed look at the troubled face of Francis Staton.

That evening at dusk, the double wedding took place in the main hall, lit by hundreds of candles and old fashioned flambeaux. The long room was packed with guests, the starched white linen and sombre Puritan black alternating in the throng with bright doublets, satin gowns of green and blue and gold, and ribbons and buckles and lace. It was a friendly and merry gathering. Sir Francis Staton and the Pelham family were widely known and respected throughout the shire by everyone regardless of political or religious persuasion, and like Katherine many felt that this event was a harbinger of reconciliation and a better time to come. Tom Redmond had the reputation of a brave and chivalrous soldier, and everyone felt that as *de facto* squire of Whitewood he would make a good neighbour and an honest friend. Miles told him so at the banquet board that night.

"It seems our fears of trouble from your brother may have been misplaced," commented Pelham over the table, striving to make himself heard over the hubbub. "I don't mind admitting I had my eye peeled and my hand on my sword this evening just before the wedding, and during the ceremony I was watching the crowd in the hall looking for Denzil, but perhaps I was overly worried. You and Barbara are now man and wife, and likewise Kate and Francis."

"No one is more relieved than I," admitted Tom, his mouth full of fresh juicy pasty, a goblet of claret in his hand. "Nor has there been any quarrelling among the guests, praise be to God, even though they are almost evenly half Royal and half Parliament. Oh, I've caught a couple of my former comrades off in a corner drinking surreptitious toasts to absent friends, if you get my drift, and there've been a few censorious scowls from some of Francis's blue-chinned fellow religionists, but thus far none of them have knifed one another."

"No one wants to reopen old wounds," said Miles. "After ten years we've all had enough, Tom. This has been a good day. And after all, it is Christmas." In the background a large and well appointed chamber orchestra struck up music. "The hall has been cleared for dancing. Come on, you and Barbara have stuffed yourselves sufficiently. You must come in and lead it off, lacking Kate and Francis."

"Surely Kate must now regret her religious scruples!" bubbled Barbara, "Imagine not being able to dance at your own wedding! I've never seen so many people here at Pelham, Miles!"

"Not since before the war," her brother agreed contentedly. "Every guest room is full and many of the single gentlemen will have to bed down the night on the floor of the hall like the knights of old did in days gone by."

"Got some fine horseflesh out back to do us proud," put in Bob from several seats down the board, flushed and pleasantly drunk. "Over seventy mounts and coach horses. They're tethered hock to hock in the stables, some real beauties." Bob had been especially impressed with a huge, powerful chestnut stallion that he had found in a stall fully saddled, calmly munching away on a Pelham oat bag. He had made up his mind to locate the owner and see if the animal were for sale when he had been summoned indoors as the wedding ceremony began. Unfortunately, he neglected to mention this at the table. Now the dancing and serious drinking had commenced, and Bob forgot about the horse.

The celebration was not confined to the guests in the hall, but there was feasting and wassail below stairs and in the barns and stables where the servants of the guests were lodged. In all the milling around and the caroling by the bonfires around the house, no one was surprised to see a gentleman wrapped in a cloak who staggered lightly through the yards, swilling on a black bottle, obviously somewhat tipsy from toasting the happy couples in Christmas wassail. The cloaked figure reeled around the corner and disappeared, but no one noticed him enter the house. After the ceremony and the merry wedding feast, the more devout of the guests withdrew from the hall where the secular revels held sway, and gathered in Sir Edward's spacious library. There Sir Francis Staton and his new made lady wife sat side by side greeting friends and dignitaries from the church and the government and accepting their good wishes for the future. The conversation was subdued and pious, and after the reading of several Psalms and a private homily delivered by the Reverend Mr. Fitch upon the blessedness of the matrimonial state they took their leave of the happy couple. Francis kissed his new wife tenderly. "I love you, madam," he said, holding her.

"And I you, sir," she replied contentedly.

"Soon now, Kate," Francis breathed excitedly. "Soon we can taste the fruits of our love, after all these years of waiting and wanting! He cannot stop us!"

"Denzil?" she asked. "Did you ever really believe that he could destroy this day for us, Francis? It cannot be, it could never be, for this day belongs to God and the Lord would not allow it. Our love is now sanctified in holy wedlock and

armoured in the power of Christ, and we are proof against the power of Satan and his minions."

In the hall the festivities were at their height. Musicians played upon drums, lutes, recorders, viols and spinets. Despite the frowns of the Puritans the dancing and the copious drafts from the bottle and the punchbowl continued unabated well into the night, and Tom and Barbara led every dance. Major Robert Pelham was sated with food and drink, enjoying himself immensely and mightily regretting the departure of that little red-headed dollymop Ruth. *A bit of dipping the old wick, that's what's called for*, thought Bob drunkenly. *Round off the evening nicely, that would. Ought to get married again myself, you know. Some likely widows of substance in the district, what with the war and all, but damme, money isn't everything, eh what? Got a hankering after a young 'un, hot little filly like that Ruth. Sir Lawrence Gatewood has a little lass of fifteen years or so coming up, does he not? A thought, definitely a thought!*

Bob tossed down the last of a tankard of ale and then his bladder told him it was time for another trip to the pots, so he staggered out of the hall. There were several stands of chamber pots placed discreetly behind screens in alcoves and cloakrooms about the premises, mostly for the benefit of the ladies. The men generally used the earth closets in the yard, but it was very cold out and Bob couldn't be bothered to put his cloak on. Every winter season a few people in country house parties staggered out into the dark to relieve themselves while drunk and either got lost or passed out and froze to death. There were pots in the basement meant for the servants, but Robert was no snob and he habitually availed himself of them. His egalitarian habits in this respect were known to all the servingfolk. Unfortunately for Robert, one of those servants had been a young girl named Ruth, and Robert's kin had murdered her lover.

Bob Pelham reeled down the hall and then down the stairs to where the ceramic pisspots stood in a corner. He fumbled with the lid of one of the pots, and did not see the shadows move behind him. What happened then was lightning swift and mercilessly savage. A slash from a dagger cut through his heavy breeches just behind his knees, and the astonished major fell headlong to the floor, knocking over the screen around the pots. A second and a third slash severed the Achilles tendons of his heels, right above his shoes. Bob rolled in confusion trying to get a glimpse of his assailant, but all he could see in the light of the single candle was a lithe, leaping figure, cloaked and masked, with a wide-brimmed hat pulled down low over the face. Before he could say anything or cry out, the attacker was on him, kneeling with one knee pressed into his victim's back. He snapped Bob's head upwards at an almost unbearable

angle, and two strong thumbs slid into Pelham's eye sockets. With skill and precision they flipped the eyeballs out of his head, grasped the slick and shining orbs, and twisted the nerve stems which connected them to the wretched man's brain. A sharp tug and the stringy red strands snapped and parted. Robert Pelham uttered a prolonged and indescribably hideous scream of unbearable pain and suffering beyond all imagining.

That scream rang throughout the rooms and the corridors and the kitchens up to the very rafters of Pelham Hall, silencing the music and the dancing upstairs, blasting that Christmas night of 1652 with unforgettable fear and horror for everyone within the walls of that house henceforth accursed. That night was born a diabolical legend which would be told again and again over tavern boards and hearthsides down the years, until became part of the mythical folklore of the March country. The guests and servants who came running found Robert Pelham rolling and scrabbling in a pool of his own blood and urine, a foul stench filling the cellar from the overturned chamber pots. He screamed and begged in a piteous wail for his lost eyes, pleading in a high cracked voice for someone to find them, as if he could simply screw them back into his head. Eventually the eyes were found, floating in a beaker of sack which the attacker must have supped while waiting for his victim to descend the stairs. In the confusion no one noticed the unlocked cellar door, and the rumour grew apace that Denzil Redmond had been seen pounding away from Pelham Hall that night on a daemon horse with eyes that glowed like hellfire, snorting flame. It was whispered that in the morning, instead of hoof prints the cloven marks of monstrous claws had been found in the snow. No one could doubt that Hell had come to the feast on Christmas night.

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## VIII.

"Does anyone question that it was he?" asked Miles several mornings later. A full council of war was gathered in Sir Edward Pelham's library, this time including Tom Redmond.

"I had a letter from him today," said Tom, drawing the paper from his pouch. "It was delivered to the post house at Ludlow and they sent a boy over to Whitewood with it."

"I suppose he gloats over this foul injury he has done to our family?" said Sir Edward in a dull voice.



"Not exactly. He says much, and yet says nothing. He writes, □Honoured brother: I am embarked upon a long and difficult journey which shall lead into many a strange place and deed, stranger perhaps than even I may know. The die is cast and was indeed cast long ago, when persons whom you know of decided that I could be set at naught. This is not a road that I travel of my own will, but the journey is now begun. My quarrel is not with you nor with your lady wife, nor shall it ever be me who shall make it so. Content ye with this. Your brother, Denzil Redmond, Capt. H.M. Forces of Restoration.□"

"Mad as a March hare!" muttered Lewis.

"Not mad, wicked!" cried Katherine. "Steeped in sin, sworn into Satan□s service, glorying in his evil!"

"Whence came that letter?" demanded Miles.

"It was left at the Ludlow post house on Stephen□s Day. Denzil could be anywhere in England by now. It might be possible to pick up his trail, but he is diabolically clever in laying down false scents and sending pursuers on wild goose chases. He did it often enough during the war. Damn and blast his black soul to the pits of Hell!" Tom cursed, clenching his fists. "No quarrel with me? He turns my wife□s brother into a mangled blind lump of....Sir Edward, all I can tell you is that from this moment on he is no brother of mine!"

"How is it possible for this man to enter my house and perpetrate such an atrocious act and depart without anyone seeing or hearing anything?" demanded Sir Edward heatedly, of no one in particular. "Every room and corridor in the place was thronged with people! The man must have used the Black Arts to make himself invisible! It must be true, Denzil has sold his soul to Satan!"

"Tom had the right of it when he once told us that Denzil is still fighting the war," said Miles. "He treated it as an attack on an enemy camp. Disguise, infiltration, a sudden sharp and ferocious strike, then he melted away into the gloom of the night. I have finally forced an admission from Leander that the cellar door may have been unlocked. The old rogue has been dismissed from our service and he□s now in Ludlow gaol; as soon as I can figure out some sort of charge on which to bring him up before a military tribunal, I□ll have him flogged and transported to Barbados."

"Leander has been with us for over twenty years!" cried Katherine, shocked. "Miles, how could you? It wasn□t his fault!"

"Don't interfere, Kate," said Miles coldly. "Denzil appears to have been corrupting our servants. An example has to be made so that our people keep their eyes open and remember where their loyalties lie. That doesn't do us or poor Bob any good, though. It appears we can't even set the law on him, devil take it!"

"If only he had said something when he attacked Bob!" exclaimed Lewis in frustration. "A word, a laugh, anything so that Bob could positively identify him! But we can't even place him in this county, never mind at the scene of the crime!"

"It wouldn't have helped," said Sir Edward. "You know the laws of evidence, son. On a capital charge there must be at least two witnesses to convict. One alone is not enough. Even if we got Redmond into a court, not only is Bob in no shape to testify, but we lack that vital second corroborating witness."

"There may be one," said Miles.

"Eh?" exclaimed Sir Edward. "Who?"

"Our former scullery maid," said Miles. "Ruth and Denzil both disappeared within twenty-four hours after that wretched stable boy Jeremy was killed. We now know that Redmond lit out for London. Tom tells us that Denzil was using both of those false servants in some deep plot against this family, teaching the boy to fire pistols and allowing the pair of them to tryst at Whitewood. I'm willing to wager that Denzil took Ruth to London with him. I don't think she could ride; he would have had to hire a conveyance or bought her passage on a post coach out of Ludlow or Shrewsbury or somewhere near. London is a big city, a good place to hide one unknown wench. Denzil is a light horseman, and after he'd used her for his purposes she'd be so much excess baggage. I'm willing to wager that even if he hasn't returned to London, Ruth is still there. Find Ruth and we may be able to pick up Denzil's trail!"

"What do we do now?" asked Francis.

"I will go to London and begin the search," said Miles. "I shall obtain leave from the army and I will devote my full time to the apprehension of Denzil Redmond. But we must always bear in mind that Kate is his primary target. You must stick close to her, Francis, and protect her at all costs. Parliament will simply have to do without your inestimable services for a session or two, as will the mercantile world. It's too dangerous for you to go to London now; the city is full of nooks and crannies, where Denzil can lurk around any corner to

do harm, and indeed he may be waiting for you to move there in February. This house is more defensible."

"It wasn't defensible on Christmas night," said Lewis bitterly.

"That was due to our own inexcusable carelessness, our underestimation of this man's insane hatred for our family and the lengths to which he is willing to go in order to injure us," said Miles. "I blame myself for that hideous night. I should have realized that the double wedding would have been an irresistible lure to Denzil. Instead I relaxed my guard once the ceremonies were complete. We have now learned wisdom at a terrible cost. I am posting a reward of fifty guineas in the district hereabouts to anyone who reports Denzil's presence if he does return, but until this matter is resolved, or at least until we have some confirmation as to his whereabouts, Kate, you must stay here in the house and never venture out unless you are accompanied by armed men."

"I should remain here at Pelham Hall in any case, Miles," said Kate miserably, "I should remain here to help care for my poor mutilated brother, who has suffered so terribly because of me."

"Stop that!" said Francis, taking her arm. "Katherine, my dearest, you must not say such a thing, ever! Do you not see? That's what he wants? That's why he has done this! He wants you blaming yourself instead of him! He wants you to regret your marriage to me and to wish that you had submitted to his threats instead. If you allow yourself to think that way then he shall have his triumph!"

"He has already triumphed in a way," said Miles. "He has cast a permanent shadow over the lives of this family. It is now more imperative than ever that we act to remove that shadow. The son of perdition! I shall hound him to the grave!"

"Miles, whatever you do, don't let another accident happen!" implored Sir Edward, his voice ragged and desperate. "Don't let me lose two sons to this monster!"

"I won't underestimate him again, Father," promised Miles. "I shall stay within the law. That was another error on our part."

"How is Bob?" asked Tom.

"He is now aware that he will never see or walk again," Miles told him bleakly.

"He keeps calling for a pistol to blow his brains out with," said Katherine with a shudder. "It's hideous, it's cruelty beyond all understanding! In the name of God, why would Denzil do such a thing? I can understand him trying to murder me, or Francis, or even Father out of the hatred he bears us, but why Bob? And why mangle his body like that? Why not just kill him and be done with it? What has he done to deserve such a living death as that? Bob always rather *liked* Denzil, even though he fought on the other side."

"I think I can explain," said Tom carefully. "First off, Kate, you have to understand that Denzil no longer has any friends in this world. I told you, to him people are just obstacles to be removed, targets to be shot out of the way. To him Robert was a tactic, from his twisted viewpoint a very effective way of getting at you. If he simply shot Bob down and escaped, eventually you would get over what happened, as all people must wrestle with the death of loved ones and overcome their grief and get on with their lives. But Denzil doesn't want you to put Christmas night behind you. Your wedding night, Kate. The day you stood beside a man who should have been Denzil Redmond but was not, the night you lay beside a man who should have been Denzil Redmond, but was not. Killing Bob would have marred that occasion in your minds forever; you would have remembered his murder every Christmas, which would have been a vile enough vengeance of itself, but that wasn't sufficient for Denzil. He wanted you to remember him every day of your life, remember how you have offended him and how he hates you all. And so you shall. When you carry Bob to and from the pots and the bath and take him his food, you will remember that you should have married Denzil Redmond. When you remember your childhood and Bob appears in those memories, the loathsome recollection of Christmas in the year of '52 will supervene. Bob is his wedding gift to you both."

"A similar wedding gift to Barbara and you, Tom," Miles reminded him.

"Yes, Miles. I have thought of that. I will help you in every way I can, with one exception. I will not shed his blood directly, except in Barbara's defence. It may come to that. He may return to Whitewood in some bout of madness and try to harm Barbara, in which case I shall die trying to stop him. But Miles, Kate, Sir Edward, please try to understand that the mother and the father whom we shared loved him as well as me. Even though I thank God that both of them have not lived to see how Denzil has turned into a monster, I cannot dishonour their memory by becoming my brother's killer."

"I agree, Tom," said Katherine. "I have enough on my conscience without adding fratricide."

"You have been right and Denzil has turned out to be wrong," said Tom wearily. "You have everything and Denzil has ended up with nothing. Nine hundred and ninety nine men out of a thousand would find some way of coming to terms with such a massive blow of fate as these past ten years of civil war have been. Disaster painted by the hand of God on such a huge canvas would awe them into acceptance of their own small corner of His handiwork. Denzil is that one man in a thousand, in ten thousand, who simply *will not accept defeat*, will not allow his will to be thwarted."

"I shall thwart him," growled Miles.

"Stay out of it, Tom," said Sir Edward. "It would appear from that demented letter that you and Barbara have been granted a dispensation from his lunatic feud with us, with history, and with life. Take that dispensation and make good use of it. Go to Whitewood, my son. I shall transfer ownership of the estate back to you as soon as I can get official approval. Go to Whitewood and stay away from this accursed place and the wretched targets of inhuman malice who abide here. You are right. Even if Denzil dies tomorrow, we are all now forever blighted. Tom, if you can give happiness and peace to at least one of my children, then by God, lad, you will have repaid any debt you feel you owe over Denzil's crimes. You are not responsible for him. Only Satan is responsible for Denzil Redmond."

It took Miles three weeks to find Ruth in London. He assumed that she would be in service, but beyond that he was working blind, and the city was huge. Rather than waste time trying to backtrack the fugitive pair himself, Miles called in a few favours from old wartime friends and acquaintances. Some of these men were now high officials in the Commonwealth government, and Miles was given access to the extensive internal spy network created by the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell and his intelligencer, Secretary of State John Thurloe. Cromwell was finding it increasingly necessary to monitor the opinions and activities of his sullen and resentful subjects.

Ruth was in the kitchen of the Crowned Head tavern scouring out pots and pans when Miles found her, up to her elbows in greasy water. She looked up and was astonished to see him standing there, flicking a riding crop against his boot top. She jumped back, startled. "Colonel Miles, sir!"

"I want to know where Denzil Redmond is, Ruth," Pelham told her in a calm, steady voice heavy with menace. "I know you came to London with him. I

know where you lodged with him in Southwark. I presume you serviced him in every sense of the word, which interests me not one whit. I also know that you serviced my brother Robert in like manner in your little bed up under the eaves at Pelham Hall, for which I assume you were duly recompensed. Do you know what Redmond did, Ruth? On Christmas night, as my sisters were being married, he entered Pelham Hall by stealth and in a revolting coward's trick he attacked my brother Robert from behind, cut his hamstrings, gouged out his eyes, and left him a blind cripple. Do you care at all? No matter. You are going to tell me where Denzil Redmond is hiding. Right here and now. Then you are coming with me to the magistrate at Westminster and tell him everything you know about Denzil Redmond, everything Redmond said to you, and everything you told him about our family, our home, and our affairs. Speak, slut!"

Ruth did not know where Denzil was, but she did not think simply to deny the knowledge. She understood it would do no good. Denzil had treated with kindness and consideration, the only man who had ever done so. He had not loved her, but then she had never expected love from a gentleman. He had used her in his vendetta against the Pelhams, but she was accustomed to being used and considered it to be the natural order of things, and Denzil had used her with courtesy and gentleness. This man was a former master from a time of grief and hunger and abuse. He had never before deigned to notice her or even to pay her the rudimentary compliment of availing himself of her body. She had not entirely followed everything Miles said, but she understood that Denzil had gone to Pelham Hall and struck a blow against the people who had hurt her so terribly. Now he stood there making it plain that he considered her to be a common whore, arrogantly commanding her to betray her Captain in the confident expectation that she would obey at once like a whipped dog.

"I ain't telling you nothin'!" she snarled at him. "Go away!" From the grate she picked up a kettle of water heating over the fire and hurled it at him. It was an ineffectual little gesture of defiance; the water was lukewarm and the only scalding was to Miles's dignity. But her defiance enraged him, and he grabbed her by the hair and thrust her screaming and struggling to her knees in front of the fire. The girl shrieked in agony as Miles remorselessly shoved her face down into the heat, searing her right cheek on the hot iron grate like a branding iron. She howled, and in a frantic burst of strength she tore herself loose from him grip. Miles shoved her against the wall and swung his riding crop, lashing her through the woolen gown. She fell to her hands and knees wailing in pain, while Miles flogged her mercilessly, his arm rising and falling. Then a hairy, brawny arm caught the whip from his hand and hurled it into the fire. Miles whirled and found himself facing a tall, heavy man with an enormous grey

moustache and a belly that hung over his thick leather belt like a ham. He wore a greasy apron, and in his massive hairy hands he held a wide-mouthed blunderbuss, cocked and pointed at Miles's midriff. "I think you'd best leave now, sir," said the innkeeper with deceptive courtesy.

"Put that gun down, you jackass!" growled Miles angrily. "My name is Colonel Miles Pelham, and I am here on state business. I'm also a personal friend of the Lord Protector, the last man on earth you want to shoot. You harm me and Thurloe's people will have this place down around your ears and everyone here in the Marshalsea before sundown with a one-way Tyburn ticket. I am looking for a renegade Cavalier, a traitor who has broken his Act of Engagement, a man named Denzil Redmond. This woman knows where he is. So might you know, come to that. You don't dare use that piece."

"I shouldn't be so sure of that if I were you, sir," rumbled Arthur Hornby. Ruth huddled in a corner, sobbing and holding her branded cheek. "I just might have an accident with this here bombard. We seem to be rather short of witnesses who might take a view of the matter favourable to you, sir. I don't fancy Roundheads, I don't fancy friends of Oliver Cromwell, I don't fancy men who beats young girls with whips, and I bloody sure don't fancy being threatened in my own kitchen!"

"Don't, Arfur!" Ruth begged him, her voice still shaking and tears still running down running down her face. "It's Colonel Miles from Hereford, from my old house I worked in. Let him take me. He can beat me all he wants, I ain't telling him nothin' about *him*. I can't. I don't know nothin' to tell. I don't know where *he* is, really, Colonel Miles, I don't! Arfur and Goody Hornby don't know either. They ain't done nothin' to you, leave them alone!"

"You're goin' nowhere, little love," said Arthur. "It's not your fault you've run afoul of a bad man. Good folks quite often do."

"How touching," said Miles with a disgusted sigh. "My good man, you will either tell me where Denzil Redmond is, or after I do find him and deal with him, I shall come back here with enough men and enough legal paper to make you wish you had never been born."

The big man chuckled, deep and low. "Colonel Roundhead, if you finds Captain Denzil, then you ain't coming back."

But it was not Miles who found Denzil. At that moment Denzil was sitting in a tavern in York gnawing a pig's knuckle and sipping sour ale from a leathern jack, when five soldiers of the New Model Army wearing buffcoats, cuirass, and lobster-tailed helmets crashed through the door of the taproom and surrounded him before he could make a move, their carbines and horse pistols leveled. "Don't reach for them guns, Johnny!" cautioned their officer, a lean middle-aged man with a smooth-shaven, weatherbeaten veteran's face. "Although I can't say as I'd be unhappy if you did."

"What do you want?" demanded Denzil, although he was perfectly certain why they were after him with a warrant. *Damn!* he thought to himself bitterly, *I thought I could play it out a lot longer than this.* "War's over, lads, or hadn't you heard?" he said mildly. "I'm amnestied, courtesy of the fine gentry who sit in Parliament, may their proud buttocks never know boils." He was playing for time. He would hurl the table over at them and go for his pistols. He knew it wouldn't work, and he would die there on the cold floor of hard earth. *It's right this way, though. I ought to die by the bullet I've served so many others with, rather than wait for the rope.*

"Pack in that insolent badinage and keep those hands on the table where I can see them, Johnny!" rapped the officer. "We're not here to arrest you, worse luck. We're here to convey an invitation, a nice sociable invite. There's a gentleman of very elevated station who would like to have a private word with you. Now. In a house across town. I suggest you accept the invitation, Johnny. Next time we might be around with different orders."

"My name is not John. The name is Captain Redmond to you, and just who might this high-toned gentleman be that I should accept his hospitality?" asked Denzil suspiciously. "And why the powder and ball, if his intentions are purely sociable?"

"I'll not blurt his name out in a public place like this, and the iron is a precaution in case you mistook our intentions, as it were. You've got a reputation for potting at orange cloth first and asking questions later." The lieutenant made a sign to his men and they slowly lowered their guns, while he sheathed his pistol. "Now are you coming or not?"

They let him mount Incitatus and rode with him to a large and well appointed town house in the shadow of York Minster. The street in front of the house was full of horses and Roundhead troops, and from the windows hung the pennants of at least three Colonelcies and a Parliamentary Commissioner. "Who the devil is in there?" asked Denzil. "Bloody Cromwell himself?"



"You're not far wrong, Johnny," growled the lieutenant. "We'll go in the back way. This gentleman of high station don't want to be seen consorting with eye gougers. Can't say as I blame him." They went in through the kitchens, the New Model lieutenant leaving his squad there and escorting Denzil up the stairs through a parlor, where men in black broadcloth pored over stacks and parchments and eyed them curiously, then to a drawing room on the third floor. He knocked on the door, and a voice bade them enter. The man who rose from behind the ornate desk was tall, with long black hair streaked with grey and long, luxuriant black moustaches beneath an aquiline nose on an aristocratic face. He wore a light russet jacket and linen shirt now, but Denzil had seen him at a distance on the other side of more than one bloody battlefield, mounted on a black horse and wearing polished black lacquered cuirass and arm gauntlets.

"Well, I'll be a mummer's monkey!" exclaimed Denzil, with a flabbergasted grin. "Black Tom!"

"General Lord Fairfax to you, knave!" bawled the Roundhead officer, glaring at him.

"I should hardly expect obeisance from so hardened a king's man," laughed Fairfax genially. "The sobriquets of one's enemies are often greater badges of honour than orders and titles from monarchs."

"Or dictators?" said Denzil.

"If you say so. That will be all, lieutenant. I shan't be so rude as to ask Captain Redmond to disarm. I feel entirely safe in his company."

"Think you should?" asked Denzil.

"*Do* you think it's wise, sir?" asked the lieutenant anxiously. "They say he's mad, you know."

"No, no, not mad I shouldn't think, merely single-minded," said Fairfax with a smile. "Wait downstairs until I ring for you." The man left, and Fairfax motioned Denzil to a chair. "Sit down, sir, please. There is wine on the sideboard, or if you prefer I am brewing some of a new beverage here over this spirit lamp. It is called coffee. It's a kind of soup made from pods which grow on trees."

"I've heard of it," said Denzil. "The Turks drink it, don't they?" He decided to be courteous, He hadn't much choice, and listening cost nothing, so he took off his sword belt and bandolier and laid them on a table.

"Yes. The Viennese acquired the taste when the Sultan's retreating troops left some behind during the great invasion of the last century," said Fairfax, carefully pouring out two steaming ceramic mugs of gooey black liquid from a tall silver pot. "As I said, it grows on trees in a bright red pod or berry, and until recently it was virtually unobtainable. However, since trade has improved we now get it via the Indies. A number of taverns and public houses in London are beginning to specialize in it. Careful, it's very hot and must be sipped. Also, try some of that bird on the platter there. It's another new arrival from our American colonies. They are called turkeys, and they are larger than even a capon or the fattest goose. The flesh is somewhat tough but of excellent flavor when roasted up with a little pepper and a light white wine sauce."

"I know, I've seen them on sale in the London markets," said Denzil. He twisted a leg off the roasted fowl and sat down with his coffee. Whatever Fairfax wanted, at least he would get a feed off the enemy general. Fairfax took a humidor from the sideboard and opened the lid, extracting from within a long brown object that looked like a stick of wood. "When you are through with that lot, try one of these. The Spanish called them *cigarro*. It's dried and seasoned leaf tobacco, cured or smoked or something, I'm not sure of the exact process. You cut off the ends with a knife, like this, and then you light one end and smoke them." Fairfax demonstrated, and a fragrant smoke filled the air as he lit the strange brown tube from a candle. It was growing dark outside as the chilly winter evening set in, but in the upper storey office the fire was cheerful and the enemy leader seemed quite friendly. "They are easier to keep lit than a pipe and less bother to carry about, so long as they stay dry. They are a Cuban invention. Cuban tobacco is every bit as good as our own Virginia and Barbados leaf."

"Are we trading with the Dons now?" asked Denzil. "I thought you lot fought the war and murdered the king to save England from the Popish plot, among other excuses."

"No, the King of Spain still declines to engage in commerce with heretics," said Fairfax genially. "The Spanish aren't at war with the French nowadays and so they do business. Normally we could obtain Spanish goods from France via the Netherlands, but at the moment we're at war with the Dutch ourselves, so we get these *cigarros* from France via Germany and Denmark. It puts a devil of markup on them, of course, hence our well publicized plans eventually to annex

Jamaica, as well as our increased privateering action in the West Indies to avoid all these middle men."

"It's called piracy," said Denzil.

"You Royalists always did have such a preoccupation with niggling semantics and petty legalisms!" chided Fairfax with a chuckle.

"It's called principle. My lord, excellent as your unusual viands are, surely you did not invite me hither merely to sup with you and discuss the economy?" asked Denzil, gnawing on the leg bone, which he finished and threw into the fire.

"No, Captain, nor did I send for you to discuss Christmas night in Herefordshire, although I must warn you that certain parties are searching for you in order to discuss that little matter." Fairfax waited expectantly for Denzil to make some comment, but he stayed silent and sipped his coffee. It tasted like hot boiled mud. Fairfax shrugged and produced a rolled parchment bound with scarlet thread. "In point of fact, Captain, I wished to offer you this. It is a Parliamentary commission in your name to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the New Model Army, and your assignment to the Tenth Regiment of Dragoons, who are now at Bristol awaiting transport to duty in Ireland. The Colonel of the regiment is Abraham Hocksley, a fine soldier and a skillful combat officer, but he is in ill health and you will actually be *de facto* commanding officer of the regiment."

Denzil put the coffee aside, took a *cigarro* from the humidor, methodically cut the tips and lit the long brown tube off a candle flame. The smoke was pungent and aromatic, the tobacco strong and yet smooth. "Ah, now these I could acquire a taste for!" he said, settling back in his chair. "My lord, I've heard much about you both good and ill, but you don't have a reputation as a humourist, so you obviously are not joking. I feel constrained to point out that I am a loyal subject of King Charles the Second, nor have I the remotest intention of altering my allegiance after having spent the last ten years killing men who carried the kind of commission you hold there. I regard the lot of you as scoundrels and traitors. What on God's green earth makes you believe for one moment that I would accept such a commission? I'm a hard man to flabbergast, my lord, but you've done it."

"Others have accepted such commissions," said Fairfax. "Sir Edward Grantham, Colonel Stephen Hancock, Sir Hugo Baskerville, Lord Molyneaux, Captain James Cradock, Major Philip Leffington. I could go on."

Denzil started at some of the names, but retained his composure. "I am very sorry to hear it, Cradock especially. I should not have thought anything could break his loyalty to the king. But I am not those men."

"No, you are not. You are Denzil Redmond, the most feared of the Royalist irregulars, leader of the Merry Malignants, a veritable daemon figure in Puritan eyes who is rumoured never to have missed a pistol shot and reputedly has sold his soul to the devil. We need you."

"Who is we?" asked Denzil.

Fairfax did not answer him directly, but went on, "We need you first of all because you can render England valuable service in Ireland. Officially, the rebellion there is over and has been since 1649, but the pacification is taking far longer than we had anticipated and we have lost more men and material through attrition than we did in the main campaign against Owen Roe O'Neill. In addition to the men lost and the troops tied down, Ireland is draining the Commonwealth treasury like a mammoth leech, and the plantation of Protestant settlers is way behind schedule. Ireland must be placed on a paying basis soon, and we vitally require soldiers with your particular type of expertise, for the Irish are masters of raid and ambush and diversion."

"So I have heard. The Irish never did anything to me, and most of them fought for King Charles during the war after their own haphazard fashion. Why do you feel I should be willing to help you fight them?"

"There is a second reason behind this offer," Fairfax told him, "It's very complicated and will take a good deal of explanation. You will understand that all of this is highly confidential, and that if you ever repeat one word of what I am about to say, I shall call you a liar to your face and have you clapped into the Marshalsea for slander and sedition."

"You intrigue me, my lord," said Denzil. "Please continue."

"As you aware, Captain, that in these times, despite my military rank and my prestige and my past services to Parliament, I do not hold one single office or post of any real authority within the Commonwealth government?"

"Yes, my lord, as it happens I am aware of that. You recall Sir Jacob Astley's comment about you lot? He said that you had done your work well but you had best learn to play nicely with one another and not fall out, as thieves are wont

to do. Your lordship appears to have gotten the short end of the stick from your old friend Noll."

"These are far more complex matters than mere division of the spoils of victory, Captain," said Fairfax. "It all boils down to the question as to how Britain is to be governed."

"No such question exists," said Denzil flatly. "England and Scotland and Wales and Ireland have a lawful sovereign, His Majesty King Charles the Second. They will be governed by that sovereign and his duly appointed ministers, so soon as some way can be found to drive from their high places of iniquity this pestiferous gang of traitors who now disport themselves in Whitehall."

"I agree," said Fairfax.

"*What?*" shouted Denzil. "I don't believe you! Sooner would the devil turn Puritan and sing psalms at the gates of hell than Black Tom Fairfax turn Royalist!"

"Oh believe me, sir, I haven't turned Royalist in the same sense as yourself and all of the others who fought for the Stuarts," said Fairfax. "I have discovered no belated affection for the Divine Right. But hearken: ten years ago, we of the nation's lawful Parliament took up arms against an establishment of arbitrary power in the hands of a single individual. In those days we were led by men of vision and statesmanship like Pym, and Holles, and John Hampden, men of letters and commerce and breeding. Regard them as traitors or howsoever you will, they had the best interests of the realm at heart as they saw it. Above all, they were the legitimate elected representatives of the people. The men who hold power now hold it by the sword alone. I will freely admit that Oliver Cromwell is a military genius with an immense talent for organization. That is how he will run the country, with a certain outward efficiency attainable only by turning these islands into one great barracks square. Beyond those attributes he is a ham-handed bumpkin with absolutely no grasp of long term policy, or indeed any conception that he ought to have one."

"I thought you and he were close friends?" said Denzil.

"We still are, but that does not blind me to his faults or to his vaulting ambition, nor does our friendship blind Oliver to my own reluctance to assist him in that ambition. That is why he keeps me far from the reins of real power. The men he has around him now are for the most part only second or third rate. Lambert and Monck are competent soldiers and Blake is a good sailor, but that's all.

The rest of them are rubbish. Okey, the jumped-up ship-chandler! Pride, the former draysman who purged Parliament at the point of a musket barrel! That peeping, prying little spy Thurloe! Harrison, the butcher's boy!"

"Who butchered the king," put in Denzil. "If I ever meet General Harrison his brains will leave his skull in short order."

"Narrow minded clerks and cheese-paring quartermasters," Fairfax went on with a sneer. "Half-mad preachers and mystics, blind bigots who would destroy all art and science and property on foot of some obscure apocalyptic vision, poisoning all free thought and nailing it up into a coffin lined with tracts! Captain, when we drew the sword ten years ago it was in the name of liberty, not merely to replace one tyrant with another!"

"And what in the name of God did you think would happen?" demanded Denzil bitterly. "I have oftentimes wondered, my lord, whether any of you people ever sit back and reflect on just what you have wrought in this glorious revolution of yours? Can any of you see, can any of you admit to yourselves, that life is far, far worse for everyone today than it was before you took it upon yourselves to decide that you knew better how things should be done than did the accumulated law and tradition and experience of centuries? Puritan merchants moaned and groaned and whined like spoilt crybabies over King Charles commercial monopolies and ship money and things like that..."

"The king was raising customs and levying taxes without the consent of Parliament in clear violation of all precedent and common law!" interrupted Fairfax.

"So now you have Cromwell imposing excises and quartering troops who should have been disbanded years ago, and you have outright confiscation of whole estates like your scum in Hereford took Whitewood!" snapped Denzil. "In the olden times there was no hunger in England, the only nation in Europe which could make that claim. I've just spent some weeks riding armed guard on public transport over the roads of England and fending off starving Englishmen half a day's ride from our nation's capital! Under the king there were laws protecting the poor and providing for the maintenance of widows and orphans. There was common land whereon even the poorest could graze their stock and grow food, much of which has now been stolen from them by greedy entrepreneurs who have Parliament's seal of approval to rob this land and her people blind! For all your blather about prerogatives and ship-money, England was the lowest-taxed nation on earth. Yet today we are crushed under an unheard-of tax burden to pay for a huge standing army which no one wants

or needs, save that the army refuses to disband because it would mean handing back power to those legitimate elected representatives you mentioned earlier. Representatives who would make it their first order of business to bring back King Charles! Scotland and Ireland are great open-air slaughterhouses, desolated and depopulated by war. Cromwell rules the country by naked force, by an infernal network of spies and informers who make men afraid to say what they really feel. The Puritans have turned religious devotion into a mania for conformity worse than anything Archbishop Laud and the Established Church ever imposed on them. The knobsticks fine people for swearing---how's that for an un-Parliamentary tax for you, eh, my lord?---they clap people in the stocks without trial for not going to church or for going to the wrong church, they flog Christian ministers at the cart's tail for putting up an altar rail during services, and worse than any of that, they *bore* normal people to the point of raving madness! My lord Fairfax, no one who fought on either side during the war can question your courage or your honour, but I will tell your lordship quite frankly that you are worthy of a better master and a juster cause."

"Perhaps I have found one," said Fairfax. "I do not dispute that much of what you say is true, Redmond. I am not blind, and I have observed many of these things. So have others in the realm. There are many who are riddled with doubt and who fear Oliver Cromwell's growing power. I will tell you this much, that there is a movement afoot to restore Charles Stuart the younger to his throne, and I am a part of that movement."

"The Sealed Knot?" said Denzil curiously. "I can imagine a few a few things more bizarre than Black Tom Fairfax becoming a member of the Sealed Knot, but not many. I'm surprised they would have anything to do with you."

"They wouldn't, even if I were to approach them. The Sealed Knot is a conspiratorial order whose membership is secret, or so they believe, and who are dedicated not just to Restoration but to revenge, the total destruction of all of those who served Parliament."

"Especially those who murdered King Charles the First," said Denzil.

"I would point out to you, Captain, that I refused to sign that warrant."

"I know it well, my lord, and I have always respected you for it. I believe the Sealed Knot have already taken vengeance on some of the regicides."

"Yes. They recently assassinated Dr. Dorislaus, the quondam ambassador to the Netherlands. No, the movement of which I speak is one of consensus only."

There is no formal organization to it, no oaths or secret passwords or any such mummary, nor do we use violence. Mr. Thurloe's spies cannot infiltrate something that does not exist. Our movement is more ecumenical than the Sealed Knot or other Royalist secret societies. There are those among us who fought for the king, others who fought for Parliament, and a good many who took no active part on either side but who desire a return to peace and stability and good government, with prosperity and reconciliation for all. These conditions may only pertain under the rule of a constitutionally guided monarch."

"That monarch being King Charles the Second?" asked Denzil keenly. "No nonsense about crowning some captive princess or Palatine Count as a figurehead? You mean to restore the bona fide true king?"

"Charles the Second and none other," agreed Fairfax.

"Very well, my lord, you may consider me a part of this movement of yours which doesn't exist," said Denzil. "I will do whatever is necessary to bring about Restoration and I have to admit that right now you people are in a much better position to do so than we former Cavaliers. But I still fail to see how my joining the New Model Army and wandering around the bogs and raths of Ireland will assist in that purpose."

"Sir Denzil, or pardon me, Captain Redmond as you now style yourself, I will tell you truthfully that right now there is no specific plan or timetable to bring about a return of the monarchy. After all," said Fairfax with a thin smile, "That would be treason. What we can do, what we are doing, is boring from within. We are ensuring that as many people as possible who are favourably disposed towards Restoration are inserted into key positions in the army, in the government, and other places where they will be able to advance the cause. We select men of proven ability and worth from all walks of life and all shades of opinion, anyone who for whatever reason wishes to bring back the king, and we further their careers, making sure they understand where their obligations lie."

"When will some concrete move be made to restore King Charles?" asked Denzil.

"Not while Oliver Cromwell is alive," said Fairfax. "We must accept as an unpalatable fact of life that he is simply too strong, too popular with the army, and too able a leader for us to confront directly. The rank and file worship him to the point of idolatry. But he is not a young man, and he will not live forever."



"If you are looking for an assassin, you've found one," offered Denzil in a quiet but deadly serious voice.

"No, no, no!" admonished Fairfax. "That isn't what I meant at all, perish the thought! I've no doubt in the world you would kill him if you could, Captain Redmond, but that is precisely what must not happen! If Cromwell is assassinated now, before we are ready, before this movement of consensus can spread throughout the entire nation, then Oliver becomes a martyr to English liberty, or at least a minority viewpoint of English liberty. We are not ready for Restoration yet and we won't be for some time. If Oliver dies prematurely we may well end up with something even worse than what we've got now, a Fifth Monarchy theocracy or some such horror as that. Cromwell must be allowed to lose his lustre, to live out his remaining years in increasing disillusion and obloquy. It's not the short term solution you might desire, Captain, but it is the only one which is practical. The alternative is a renewal of the civil wars. I've had enough of fighting, sir. We all have, with the possible exception of a few men such as yourself who have come to thrive on it. No offence intended."

"None taken, my lord, for you've more or less got the right of it," said Denzil with a shrug. "So in the meantime I am expected to bury myself in Ireland?"

"An apt assessment," agreed Fairfax with a grim smile. "England has always found Ireland a convenient place to bury things and people we don't want knocking about here. But there is more to it than that. The Irish situation is crucial and if it isn't settled it may seriously affect the Restoration question. If the Irish Catholics can succeed in re-establishing an effective resistance, it is possible that they might be able to seize and co-opt the entire Royalist movement. Charles is already in my view far too willing to flirt with Catholicism, and if he should ever embrace Rome that means the permanent death of any chance he will ever return to the throne. Royalists would have to make do with some of his German Protestant cousins, a very poor substitute. However oppressive Cromwell and the Puritans are, the English people simply will not tolerate the Pope in England. The fires of Smithfield under Bloody Mary, the attack of the Armada, Guido Fawkes and his plot to blow up king and Parliament, these are memories less than a century old, and they have become part of our national consciousness."

"I know," agreed Denzil. "Being a minion of Satan myself it makes no difference to me, of course, but I do have enough political sense to recognize that a Catholic king of England is out of the question."

"I presume you were joking about the Satan's minion remark, but were I you I should refrain from indulging in such japes." Lord Fairfax warned him. "Your reputation is none too savoury as it is."

"Since I am in such ill odour, are you quite sure you want me in your sanctified host slaughtering Irishmen in the name of the Lord?" inquired Denzil.

"Quite certain, Captain. In addition to your undoubted military prowess, which we need on the Irish campaign, it also solves the problem of keeping you out of harm's way. To be candid, Redmond, I want you with us not only because you would be a valuable ally but because in the past we have found to our cost that you can be a dangerous enemy. If you are not incorporated into some responsible Restoration effort, then a man of your passionate attachment to the king's cause would eventually become involved with the Sealed Knot or other such extremists, and engage in some half-baked intrigue which would get yourself and a lot of other people killed, and which would thoroughly gum up the works. The devil makes work for idle hands. I want to round up all the dangerous wild-eyes such as yourself who might upset the very delicate balance of forces that we are setting in motion for an orderly and peaceful return of the monarchy. Do you understand all I have been telling you?"

Denzil understood, clearly. Fairfax did not have to draw him a map or point out the drawbacks of refusal. Denzil wasn't stupid, and he realized that in order to carry his war against the Pelhams much further he would first have to ensure his long-term survival. Providence had dropped right into his lap this unique opportunity to acquire protection, powerful patronage from one of the few men in the realm capable of shielding him from the wrath of Katherine's outraged clan. He was under fire from the enemy, and he would be foolish indeed not to take cover behind the most renowned Parliamentary general next to Cromwell himself. Nor was a temporary departure from England a bad idea. *I can shake the hounds from my trail for a time and plan my next move*, he thought. "There is one potential problem area, my lord," he said aloud. "I'm sure you are aware that my personal affairs have made me enemies in certain influential quarters. Can you guarantee that I will be proof against their intrigues and machinations against me?"

"So long as you limit your eye-gouging and other exuberances to the Irish, yes, I can," replied Fairfax. "One more reason why I am offering you a command in Ireland rather than here in England is to put you out of the way of the pressures which will be brought against your appointment. Ireland is a violent and unsettled frontier, in some respects worse than America, and out there in those bogs no one is going to give a damn about a man's past or how

many weddings he's made a shambles of, so long as he can ride and shoot straight. I will be sending you a number of new men and officers over the coming months, former Royalists like yourself. When the time comes for Restoration, I shall expect to find Ireland quiet and your regiment amenable, and reluctant to follow anyone who might aspire to succeed Oliver Cromwell as dictator. That shall be your task, Captain. Or may I say, Lieutenant Colonel? You understand the offer. You play fair with me and I'll play fair with you."

Denzil picked up the commission from the desk. "Fancy me a bloody Roundhead!" he laughed. "Only in name, you understand. My hair stays on my head!"

On a grey afternoon in February, full of snow flurries and bitter winds, Miles Pelham stood staring out of the library window at Pelham Hall, a crumpled letter in his hand and rage in his heart. His father stood beside him. Edward Pelham had aged perceptibly in the past few months and showed his years, his face seamed and his shoulders stooped, his hair now white and limp. The door opened and Katherine. "You've had news," she said. "What is it?"

"Yes, there is news," said Sir Edward.

"You and Francis may go on to London now. You'll be as safe there as anywhere else. We know where Denzil is," said Miles.

"The girl Ruth? You found her and she has told us?" asked Katherine.

"No, worse luck," growled Miles. "The little slut seems to have vanished completely from that tavern of traitorous King's Johnnies in Cheapside. That fat jackanapes who jammed the blunderbuss into my middle was all bowing and scraping when I went back there with Thurloe's men, but he was right about one thing, there weren't any witnesses when he threatened me. We searched the place from top to bottom. No Ruth, no gun, a lot of suspicious characters in the taproom, all ex-Royals with particularly shady pasts, but no evidence of any actual conspiracy or treason going on. Thurloe is still watching the place, for what it's worth, but it's no longer necessary. Redmond has broken cover."

"Where is he?" asked Katherine.

"You won't believe it," said Miles, his voice dull with deep suppressed rage. "I didn't believe it. He thinks he is out of my reach, but he is very badly mistaken. By Heaven above, he shall not escape me!"

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# *Ireland*

*1653-1654*

## IX.

The fortress before them was a crude mound of heaped up earth and stones, like the rude mounds built by men in this ancient land from the very dawn of time, when weapons were of flint and bone. This one was so new it didn't even have a name among the British. What the Irish called it didn't matter. What did matter was that the month was October, and the British army wanted the unnamed fort in the middle of a Donegal peat bog for winter quarters. It commanded a good view of the surrounding countryside and offered shelter from the wind and rain, which was about all that could be said for it. Denzil and his men rode on horseback almost up to within musket-shot of the sod ramparts and dismounted. There was no attempt at surprise, since the windswept moors and bogs were totally open and they could be seen coming for miles off. On the works Denzil could see dozens of ragged Irishmen running about and waving weapons, and he could hear their Gaelic curses borne on the stiff wet breeze.

Denzil still felt odd in his lobster-tailed helmet, but he had to admit that observed from within, the New Model Army was a far more efficient and better organized fighting force than any Royalist command he had ever served with. The men were a better sort of Roundhead as well, with fewer Fifth Monarchy religious fanatics and communistic Levelers in the ranks than were to be found stirring up trouble in the mainland units. The common soldiers who drew the short straw and ended up in Ireland were mostly countrymen and out of work craftsmen who had enlisted to escape the growing unemployment in England, as well as a good many who had served on both sides during the civil wars and had been unable to adjust to civilian life. After the first few months in the bogs the regimental commander, Abraham Hocksley, had developed a wracking

cough and had been carried back to Dublin on a litter, hacking his life out in great gobs of bloody sputum; he was quite likely dead by now. Denzil Redmond had been in *de facto* command of Tenth Dragoons since then. There had been an Independent chaplain attached to the unit as a kind of combination spiritual advisor, moral censor, political officer, and government spy. Several days after Hocksley departed the preacher had been found lying in a pit latrine with his throat cut, no doubt the work of some villainous recusant. The men had not been overly grieved at his loss, nor did they inquire over deeply into his death, for he had been an irritating ass who fined them for swearing and drinking too much ale. Since then, Denzil had won the awed respect of the entire regiment for his courage, his matchless marksmanship, and his hard-riding ruthlessness in pursuit of the enemy.

"It's the best winter camp we'll be able to find," Denzil told his officers as they studied the earthen fort. "You see that creek? Good fresh water, running fast and deep, and we'll be able to graze the horses in the open by day, so long as we detail strong picquets. Bring up the guns, Archie."

"Aye, sir," replied Major Archibald Robertson, a tall, lean and weatherbeaten Scotsman who commanded a small light battery of field artillery, a seven-pounder and two brass four-pounders. Denzil looked over the fort through a spyglass. The only entrance was a rickety wooden gate, countersunk into the earth so that the top of the embrasure was flush with the ground, accessible only by a narrow scraped-out ramp. It was a classic method of protecting the fort's entrance against direct cannonade; the Irish had learned a lot since Oliver Cromwell had descended on them in 1649.

"How many rapparee you figure to be inside, Colonel?" asked George Rutland, one of his mounted troop captains, a heavy and powerful former Royalist who wore his greying hair cropped in Roundhead style under his helmet

"Two hundred or so, perhaps half of them men," estimated Denzil. "Most of the women will fight as well. There won't be too many children after the year we've given them. I will lead the first troop through the gate. Archie, I'm going to need a petard to blow it with. Make sure it's got a dry fuse. While we advance keep us covered with grapeshot and canister. Try and make them keep their heads down on that section of the works just over the gate. I doubt they have any boiling oil or other exotica, but I'd rather not find out different the hard way."

"Aye, sir," replied the Scot.

"The whole first troop going in on foot, Colonel?" asked Captain Andrew Smeaton, the youngest of the officers. Smeaton had been too young for the armies of the 140s and had missed the combat of the civil wars, but was proving himself fearless and hardy in this nasty, forgotten little war on the edge of the world. His blond hair was long in Cavalier style and Denzil had already ascertained the youth was attracted to the pageantry and authoritarian ideal of monarchy.

"Aye, Andy. The Irish will have only a few muskets and they'll be short on powder and ball, so until we actually breach the gate and close in hand to hand we shouldn't have too much trouble. Once we get inside and come to grips with the blades it will be hot work for a bit. George, you take number two troop and advance dismounted as well, with muskets, and give us some covering fire to keep them off the walls. Then up with the scaling ladders at wherever looks to be the most likely point, and over the top. I don't see any fosses or other obstacles. Maybe they haven't had time to entrench properly, or maybe they're too weak, or just careless. You'll have rough going over those rocks as you climb, but the works aren't steep. Make sure the horse lines are well back and you post picquets. We can't risk losing any more horses. They've killed too many already, and we won't get any remounts from England until the spring." It was a measure of the devastation wrought in Ireland that the invaders had to import their own mounts into the best horse-breeding country in the world. "If your men can't get down into the yard from where you go over, give us all the supporting fire you can."

"Understood, sir."

"What about my lads?" asked Captain Peter Carey, the commander number three troop, which was comprised exclusively of Ulster Protestants.

"You stay mounted and circle around to the rear, and cut down any who escape," Denzil told him. "Like the others, I want you to take care you don't lose any horses killed or hamstrung. Each troop will detail one squad for the waggon guard." A long procession snaked into the mist behind them, a train of waggons and carts, animals, drovers, sutlers and camp followers, easily as many people again as the regiment mustered combat soldiers. "Get the waggons circled before we attack," Denzil went on. "Remember, if the rapparee should break out they'll go for the train, even if it only means choking down a mouthful of bread or a chunk of flesh slashed out of a horse before they're spitted on a pike in the next instant. Remember what happened at Ballymote. I don't want a repetition. Also, make sure your men remember the rule against rape. Personally, I don't give a damn if the lads want to shag Sheenas, but

these women carry knives and if the troops don't watch out they might find themselves de-bollocked like yearling rams. Or else they'll go chasing some woman while there are still enemy effectives on their feet and fighting, and they'll get caught with their trousers down. Any questions? Good. We lay on."

The three troops of Lobsters moved out after the number two troop had armed themselves from the supply train with heavy matchlock muskets, forked swinefeather rests for the long barrels, and scaling ladders which broke down into sections and could be quickly assembled and taken apart again, an innovation Denzil found interesting and useful. The muskets were generally carried in the baggage train for use in defensive positions and whenever mass infantry tactics were called for; their range was longer, and fired *en bloc* by trained musketeers they could break the force of a cavalry charge, although the musketeers then needed to retire behind a hedge of pikes while they went through the slow and cumbersome process of reloading. The Tenth were a dragoon regiment who primarily fought mounted, wielding pistol and saber and shortened carbines or blunderbusses loaded with heavy buckshot. A few scattered shots cracked from the ramparts as the Roundheads approached within range, and one man down the line was hit and fell with a cry. The three guns of Robertson's little battery roared dully with a salvo of round of roundshot that churned and blasted away the stones and earth from the crude parapet above the gate. Dirt and rock erupted into huge fountains in the air, flinging several of the Irish skyward. Above the din the Scotsman could be heard ranting encouragement to his gunners. "Guid shot, Mr. Lowery! Gie the proud Pope's hellhounds a bonnie hot breakfast o' powder and ball!" Robertson's men were dour Presbyterians who regarded the English Puritans with almost as much distaste as the Papist Irish.

At the base of the earthworks the men of the second troop stolidly chunked their swinefeather rests into the ground and braced their muskets, shaking priming powder into open pans, and then presented the muzzles upward. On Rutland's command the pans flashed and a ragged volley thudded into the scarecrows lining the rampart, bringing a few of them down. Then the musketeers coolly withdrew their iron ramrods and began to reload. A skilled musketeer could load and fire one shot per minute. Some of their comrades placed scaling ladders against the heaped-up mound of earth in preparation for the escalade. A wildly gesticulating Irish rebel with a matted beard and skeletal arms leaped over the parapet and slid down the outer earthwork, attacking Rutland dementedly with a scythe. The captain's burly sword arm rose and fell, and he kicked the dead rebel aside.

Denzil and his orderly, a muscular corporal named Syme, walked calmly into the slit-trench entrance to the fort through a fusillade of musket and pistol balls, hurled polearms, and rocks. A huge Irishman with a crossbow stood up to get a clear shot from the parapet above the gate, and Denzil whipped out a long elegant Zelner wheel-lock and shot the man through the head before he could loose his crossbolt. Syme was trailing a musket with a smoking length of burning match in the lock, and Denzil lit the fuse of the sectioned iron bomb he carried. While his first troop men covered him with carbine and pistol fire Denzil casually strolled down the embrasure and placed the spluttering petard against the gate, then just as casually strolled back out the entryway, pausing to blast a gibbering red-bearded face on the parapet into oblivion with the second Zelner. He slapped both pistols back into his belt and pulled a flintlock out of the bandolier across his chest, where he had thrust more pistols. Just then the earth shook simultaneously to a salvo from Robertson's fieldpieces behind them, and the detonation of the explosive charge under the gate, the planks of which were splintered like kindling. A huge cloud of smoke and dust obscured the entrance. "*Now, lads, in!*" shouted Denzil. "Hit them while they're befuddled with the shock!" The dismounted Roundheads shoved down through the breach and over the wreckage where the gate hung in fragments. They were met with a with at with a bristling hedge of Irish pikes and halberds, but the bills were no match for bullets, and at close quarters the dragoons' pistols and carbines did butchery. The wall of iron and steel fell away, and the Lobsters drew sword and charged. By now the second troop were clambering down into the yard from the ramparts they had scaled, while some fired into the melee from above with their muskets, and the issue was decided.

The Irish now knew for certain that they were all going to die. They fought back with the fury of terror and despair and died where they stood, or else ran for the opposite earthworks in an attempt to escape. They were gaunt, starved people, the men wearing long linen shirts that fell to their knees and scraps of rusty armour, the women dressed in gowns and cloaks of rough home-spun wool. Men and women fought back with swords, axes, pikes and clubs. From the roof of a turf hut that might have been his primitive church, a shaggy priest in a ragged cassock shrieked imprecations in Gaelic and anathemas against the English in fractured Latin. Denzil snapped down into a two-handed firing position and shot the priest in the belly; his body jack-knifed and flipped off the roof. A brawny Irishman with an axe had hewn down several Roundheads, his back against a wall, until Denzil blew out his right eye and his brains with a heavy lead ball, collapsing him in a bloody heap. Another Irishman leaped at him from a doorway with a wild yell, slashing at him with a dagger that scored his hardened leather buffcoat. Denzil was knocked to the ground and he rolled,



coming up with one of small "French dags" which he pulled from his boot to shoot the attacker. From the parapet came the dull boom of the matchlocks, as the musketeers fired at will into the fleeing Irish running for the earthworks, some of the women clutching babies to their breast. Two wiry women turned and rolled a large rock down an embankment and crushed an English soldier, howling with delight as they watched him thrash his pulped legs, until two more dragoons leaped onto the breastworks and clubbed them both to death with carbine butts. Several score of the Gael had gotten out of the fort alive, and from the rampart Denzil watched Carey's Ulstermen savagely riding them down, sabering and shooting them, trampling infants into the mud beneath their horses hooves. This was work to Carey's liking, for the Ulster captain's entire family had been massacred by the Gaelic Catholics at Portadown in the great Irish revolt of 1641. He and his men rode for revenge. Not a single man or woman or child escaped.

In the yard Dr. Bray, the regimental surgeon, was already attending to the wounded, his apprentice laying out poultices and the sharp bone saws and cleavers used for amputating arms and legs. The Tenth had a higher rate of survival than most New Model regiments in Ireland, because Dr. Bray was a drunkard. The bungling that his tippling caused was compensated for by his devout faith in the use of *aqua vitae* for every ailment from bullet wounds to dropsy. He especially praised the healing qualities of the raw Irish *uisquebaugh*, or whiskey as the English pronounced the throat-stopping name of the drink. Bray carried pipes of it in his medical stores, and he administered copious quantities of both internally and externally, applied to wounds. Everyone knew that the good doctor merely used the liquor's alleged beneficent properties as an excuse to ensure that he would never run out of toddy, but oddly enough the bizarre treatment seemed to help. It was noticed that wounds doused in whiskey seldom went septic and gangrened, significantly reducing the need for amputation and the resulting mortality rate. Even when a man seemed doomed to die a long and hideous death from a belly wound, he sometimes recovered if his abdominal cavity were flushed with whiskey and vinegar, although the agony of it made the victim scream to God for the mercy of death. If the wounded died, at least they died drunk enough to dull the pain.

Several of the men set to work assembling the regiment's portable gallows, a standard item of equipment issued to every Cromwellian unit operating in Ireland. Originally the Lord Protector's policy had been "To Hell or Connaught". Captured Irish were cleared off the fertile lands of Leinster, Munster, and Ulster to make room for Protestant settlers, rounded up and force-

marched to the barren moors and rocky coastline west of the River Shannon, or else to the nearest port where they were loaded into slave ships and deported to the inferno of the Barbados cane fields. But by 1653 this policy was a dead letter. The Irish sent to the West Indies either arrived dead in the filthy bilges of the slaving hulks, or sat down in the fields and refused to work no matter how the overseers beat them. Some revolted and killed their masters, escaping in dugout canoes or rafts to other islands where they joined the sea-going gangs of marauders the French called *boucaniers*. The Irish forcibly moved west to Connaught simply came back, creeping back to their old lands by night, hiding in caves and woodlands, building turf squatter's huts wherever they could. It was like trying to sweep back the sea with a broom. So these days, Denzil and the other English commanders simply killed them all. The gallows was handy for saving powder and ball, and preventing wear and tear on pike and sword blades that grew dull and chipped through constant hacking at flesh and bone. Sometimes there were variations on the theme. Some Puritan commanders herded all the locals into their church and burned it down, thus eradicating not only a temple of idolatrous Papist worship but numbers of idolaters as well. One creative Roundhead commander herded an entire village into a cave and buried them alive with a powder charge. If there was open water handy children were tied up in sacks and drowned like kittens, and women's skirts tied over their heads before they were executed in like manner, but Denzil decided against drowning his prisoners in the stream. The men and horses needed the water and he didn't want to foul it with corpses.

It was a testament to the Roundheads' practiced efficiency as killers that only seven of the Irish in this mound fortress remained alive, four wounded men, a young boy, an old woman, and a fairly pretty young girl. They watched in varying degrees of terror and dumb apathy as the Lobsters erected the triple-poster gallows, three crossbeams connecting with three uprights ten feet off the ground.

"Who's our gibbet jockey this week?" called out Rutland. "Heppenstall, isn't it?" A tall sergeant stepped forward.

"Aye, sir, my detail today," he said cheerily. "Willikin, you and Cathcart give me a hand and we'll give these jackeens a ride on the Three-Legged Mare." The designated executioners started pulling ready-noosed ropes from a large wicker basket. The four wounded men were strung up in quick succession, writhing in the air like hooked fish pulled out of the water. Few of the soldiers bothered to stop what they were doing to watch. The boy was too light to strangle properly, but a humane Roundhead ran him through with a pike as he swung back and forth. The women chattered wildly in Gaelic, cupping their

hands around their stomachs in a vain attempt to "plead their belies." The old crone trying to claim pregnancy raised a laugh from the onlookers, and she was hanged shrieking prayers and maledictions. The girl fell to her knees, white-faced and weeping in fear, pleading incomprehensibly for mercy and making obscene gestures as she offered them her body in exchange for her life.

Sergeant Heppenstall and Willikin stolidly ignored her, quickly lashed her wrists behind her back, dragged her to the crossbeam and dropped a noose over her head. She was young and healthy, and she struggled for a while before her bare toes relaxed and turned slowly back and forth, a few feet above the ground.

"A shame about that lass," sighed Andrew Smeaton

"Can't be helped, Andy," said Denzil. "You know the orders. It's cruel but from General Fleetwood's viewpoint it makes hard sense. Rape leads to concubinage and concubinage leads to complications that interfere with efficient slaughter. We're here to kill these people, and if I'd let that girl live some of the men might have noticed in the process of fucking her that she was warm and soft and a human woman just like their mothers and sisters and wives back in England. We are going to be spending a long winter here and we'll have to keep them busy, but even so they are going to end up with a lot of time to brood on the things they've been doing since they came here. That's dangerous."

"This is foul work," said Smeaton bitterly. "I became a soldier because I love valour and glory. Instead I'm just a butcher for Cromwell."

"Cromwell won't last forever," said Denzil. "I'll sit down sometime soon and have a long talk with you about some things. But in the meantime, here's some female company for you." A procession of drab-looking women were trudging in through the gate, the regiment's assigned quota of Protestant prostitutes especially imported by the army from the stews of London and Bristol to save the souls of the soldiery from the Romish Jezebels of the peat bogs. The strumpets also did double duty as laundresses, cooks, nurses, and porters, but their primary purpose in following the drum was to prevent fraternization with Irish women, especially in winter quarters where prolonged cohabitation could undermine the morale of the men for their bloody mission.

In the following days the English set to work, preparing the mound fort for their winter quarters. "One troop on patrol every day," Denzil commanded. "I don't think any of the Gael in Donegal are in any shape to mount a counterattack, but if any large bodies of them approach I want to know it well

in advance." The Roundheads buried the bodies in a mass grave, cleared out all the debris, and erected tents and more turf huts inside the fort. The supply waggons were unloaded and sent to Londonderry in a heavily guarded convoy for more food, materiel and ammunition. The train returned in two weeks' time. It had been ambushed several times along the way, and two men had been killed. "One of the waggons became stuck in a bog," Rutland reported to Denzil. "We stripped it and burned it, so the jackeens won't even get a fire off it. We've brought powder, ball, food and drink, sacks of oats and forage for the horses, timber, blankets, saddlery and harness, hides, raw tallow for making candles, and of course more pipes of whiskey for the good health of our lads and their medical officer."

"The good doctor was staring sobriety in the face, a daunting prospect," chuckled Denzil. "I see you also brought some more whores."

"New shipment just landed at Londonderry quay," affirmed Rutland. "Fresh from the cells at Newgate and the Compter, this lot. Five of 'em, Colonel, all of an acceptable religious standard and a remarkably low standard of ugliness. These are the real dregs, sir. I'd wager every one of them is poxed." Work parties erected shelters and barracks, pens for the livestock and mounts for the cannon on the walls. Dugouts and latrines were excavated, and one wall of the fort breached and extended to make room for the horses and baggage train. The walls were built up higher and banked more steeply, and a fosse was dug around the perimeter. The waggons were arranged around the entryway as a sort of secondary fortification should anyone try to force the gate as the Roundheads had done in order to take the place. The fort even acquired an informal name; the men christened it "The Pope's Privy". Forays repeatedly scrounged the countryside for provender, but there was precious little to be had. Patrols brought in a few wretched, scrawny sheep and goats, a few wild cattle, and some sacks of a strange brown tuber.

"What on earth are those?" asked Smeaton when he saw them dumped out on a table in the officers' mess tent.

"Potatoes," explained Carey, the Protestant Irishman. "Sir Walter Raleigh brought them into the country seventy years gone to feed his tenants in Cork and Tipperary. The jackeens eat nothing else in bad years."

Food was stored in freshly dug root cellars and turf was laid in to burn in the soldiers' fires. By December the wet, nasty Irish winter had set in. Communication with Londonderry was constricted by the weather and by the increased danger of attack in the short days and long gloomy nights, but

occasional supplies and even mail did get through. As winter wore on the Irish became increasingly desperate, and any English who set foot outside the fort other than in overwhelming force were sure to be overrun by hordes of starving kerns who appeared to rise up from the earth with axes, pikes, and rusty swords. But inside the Pope's Privy it was roomy and reasonably warm, with adequate if not ample food for man and beast alike. The officer's mess tent was transformed into a turf hut Denzil designated as the Crowned Head tavern, after Arthur Hornby's establishment in Eastcheap, with a blanket-covered doorway and a crude bar serving whatever drink got through in the occasional supply runs from Londonderry, lit by a smouldering turf fire and a single candle. In the mess the conversation revolved around the year's campaigning, horse racing, pointed commentary on the multifarious shortcomings of quartermasters and pay clerks and military bureaucrats in Dublin, and the constant speculation of every army ever to serve in any foreign land, i.e. when they would be allowed to return home.

Denzil made sure they all kept busy every day, polishing and mending weapons and gear, drilling when the weather permitted, caring for their mounts, standing guard and doing long patrols in order to exercise the horses and to keep the men from going jumpy and queer in the head from the confined garrison. Denzil knew that boredom was the biggest threat, and he kept discipline tight, holding drumhead courts-martial, meting out fines or extra duty for minor breaches. He tried to avoid using the customary whip on defaulters; he had never felt it was a good idea to flog a man one's life might depend on in a future battle. For all their drawbacks and the quarrels they instigated, the women were a welcome addition to the post once they had settled in. Over and above their recreational duties they did laundry, cooked meals for the messes, and nursed the wounded and the increasing number of sick who piled up in the hospital tents as the Irish winter got to the men's lungs and pneumonia and dysentery started to take their wonted toll. Six babies were born in the fort over the winter, and since they were nursed by comparatively well fed mothers, four of them lived.

On a dark day in January Denzil was summoned to the wall over the gate. "We've got visitors, Colonel," said Rutland grimly. Denzil mounted the parapet in a freezing, whistling wind and saw a group of about thirty ragged Irish women huddled in the snow outside, begging for food. They thrust forward skeletal children and held up wasted infants to the view of the soldiers and the English women they could see on the works, baring their breasts to display flaccid dugs with no milk. On the hills beyond the tattered cluster of women, low dark grey shapes paced back and forth, barely visible in the low

cloud and blowing snow. "Wolves," said Rutland, pointing to them in the distance.

One of Robertson's Scots gunners was a Highlander who could understand something of the Erse dialect, and he relayed their plea for pity to Denzil. Some of the English whores called over to him, entreating him to allow the Irish women inside, horrified at the cruelty of their existence wandering over the moors and mountains. They too had seen the dark moving shadows. "Papist bitch dogs who'll gie up and bite us once they've had a meal and a lie doon by the fire," growled Robertson, scowling. "Dinna yield tae pity, Colonel Redmond. Ye'll recall the story of the Trojan Horse? Ye can wager a year's pay their men are oot there waiting, and the moment our backs are turned they'd open the gate some mickle dark nicht."

"He's right, Colonel," said Rutland. "Aside from the fact it's against regulations, we could never trust them if we took them in. We'd have to watch them all the time and they'd end up in the lines with the men."

"If we're going to condemn them to death then let's just shoot them down now!" said Smeaton angrily. "Christ, Colonel, if we won't help them at least let's put them out of their misery! Is your heart made of stone?"

"It is not my heart but the men's hearts which matter," said Denzil quietly. "We came here to kill these people. Up until now we've been doing it efficaciously, but there is a limit to the amount of outright murder you can make soldiers do, beyond which they cease to be soldiers and become mad dogs, or else simply mad. The ground is too hard to bury these women, and I don't want the lads looking out at a pile of weebegone corpses all winter and brooding. The nights are too long this time of year and there's too much drink in camp. We can't let them in, Andy surely you see that? Nor can we spare them any food. If we did we'd have a hundred here next week and a thousand the week after that. We've got to get them to leave of their own accord."

"How?" asked Smeaton. "They can hardly walk another step by the looks of them."

"I have an idea. Archie, have McDougal tell them that they may come into the fort and be fed and clothed, but only on the condition that they abjure their Papist error, leave the Church of Rome, and accept Protestant baptism for themselves and for their children."

Denzil had gauged the Irish mind well. The Highland gunner shouted down to the women that they must renounce the Whore of Babylon and the Antichrist in Rome as the price of a fire and a crust of English bread. Two young mothers ran forward with their screaming, skeletal infants; the English whores lowered a basket on a rope, and with one final dumb look of unspeakable agony the Irish girls placed their babies in the basket and watched them drawn up to the parapet. Then the fugitives wandered off into the wasteland. The wolves circled in the distance, but a snow flurry began and mercifully hid them all from view. Problem solved.

In the spring came word from Dublin that Colonel Abraham Hocksley had at last descended into the grave, and the regiment was ordered to break camp as soon as possible and return to the capital city. During the second week in April, Denzil judged that the weather was clement enough and the ground dry enough for the passage of the wagon train, and so the Tenth Dragoons bid farewell to the Pope's Privy. As they pulled out, they blasted down the walls of the fort with powder charges and torched what was left, leaving behind them a column of smoke ascending into the sky, to make sure that the Irish didn't reoccupy the site after they were gone. They had lost ten men in taking the place last October. Twenty-four more had died over the winter from fever, smallpox, Irish ambush out in the trackless waste of moor and bog, and accidental causes. One whore had died in childbirth, and there were two dead English babies as well as one of the Irish infants who hadn't made it. The final casualty was Dr. Bray, the regimental surgeon, who passed out while drunk, fell into a pit latrine, and lay there all night before he was found the next morning, frozen to death. Denzil led them southwards in easy stages, keeping the regiment together tightly on the march, mounting strong guards at night, circling his wagons and throwing up crude ditched stockades at every halting place, or building barricades of brush wood. It took them twelve days to reach Dublin, during which time they were attacked repeatedly by mobs of poorly armed Irish who crawled from the forests and moorlands and caves on their hands and knees, weak with hunger, falling upon the English column with sticks, reaping hooks, whatever came to hand. Two soldiers, a horse, and a pack mule were cut off from the main body of troops and lost. A patrol found the remains of all four, dismembered, the bits and pieces being fought over by a pack of creatures no longer entirely human who frantically shoved the gobbets of warm, bleeding meat into their mouths, licking the fresh blood off the grass. The patrol killed them all.

They reached the outskirts of Dublin on a sunny spring day. The sight of the busy and prosperous city was stunning to men who had been away from

civilization for months. It was like going from a desert into a garden, stone houses and the smell of freshly baked bread, the heady hop smell from the alehouses, streets and brightly dressed people instead of mud-walled cabins and hills full of wild men. Ships crowded the Liffey quays, the docks were heavy with bales of provisions and goods, and at least half the people on the cobbled streets were speaking English. The regiment was billeted in tent and hutment lines in the fields of Rathmines, just outside Dublin. After the narrow sod dugouts of the Pope's Privy, these accommodations seemed palatial. Denzil summoned the regimental paymaster who drew up the payroll, and they then both went in search of a headquarters finance officer. The Tenth was in luck; they had caught the military administration at a good time and the coffers were full. The barest of hints from Denzil immediately convinced the pinch-faced bursar in charge that paying a year's worth of back wages to the Tenth Dragoons was a high priority for God's Commonwealth. Even in musty Parliamentary counting houses the clerks had heard of Denzil Redmond; by now his reputation among the Puritans rivaled that of the legendary Doctor Faust.

Once the pay had been disbursed to the paymaster and an armed guard placed on the chest, Denzil spent an entire day seeing every single weapon in his regiment serviced, cleaned, and stacked in the company guardrooms. Every item of kit was patched and cleaned. Then every man in the command was marched in and paid out, and despatched into Dublin with silver burning white-hot in his purse. "In about three days check with the city provosts and start bailing them out of gaol, George," Denzil told Rutland contentedly. "They've had a long, hard tour and they deserve a good rambuncion."

"What about you, Colonel?" asked Rutland. "Surely you mean to uncork the odd bottle?"

"Probably," agreed Denzil, "I always drink alone, George. It's better for everyone that way. Fortunately these Roundhead jackanapes think me a minion of the devil, and so I will be spared the usual round of levees and drawing room socializing normally expected of high-nosed officer gentry. Besides, I have had a message to report to General Fleetwood tomorrow morning. Some kind of briefing, I think."

"You're going to be made our proper Colonel now, is what that is," Rutland assured him. "And not before time. Hocksley was a good soldier and I'll say nought against him. But you fought us like tigers over this last year, we bloodied the jackeens good and proper, yet withal you got us through it with the lowest butcher's bill of any regiment in Ireland. The lads would ride



through hellfire for you, sir. Fleetwood would be stark mad not to give you the command!"

"Fleetwood is Old Noll's own son-in-law, and as crabbed a Puritan as ever sang a Psalm," said Denzil. "But he's no fool, I'll give him that, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he and some of his cohorts are on to the private agenda that you and I and some of the other lads were given by our unlikely black-haired friend across the water. I'll be interested in hearing what he has to say. Is there a bathhouse around camp anywhere? I suppose I'd better meet the commanding general of the Commonwealth forces in Ireland smelling sweet in body, even if I am in ill odour politically."

General Charles Fleetwood was a lean, hawk-faced man in somber black leather and broadcloth, with a sharp eye and a sharper tongue. He carried a heavy, unadorned cavalry saber in a burnished black scabbard at his side, counterbalanced on the opposite side of his belt by a single holstered wheel lock pistol with a polished mahogany butt that Denzil admired covetously. The General had never disdained to use either weapon personally in the thick of battle, despite his rank. He had made it clear from the moment the Tenth Dragoons had arrived in Ireland that he did not like Denzil Redmond, did not trust him, and considered that Lord Thomas Fairfax had taken leave of his senses in appointing such an irredentist king's man to a commission in the New Model Army. Now as he received Denzil in his Dublin Castle office, Fleetwood's greeting was somewhat warmer. Denzil's exemplary Irish body count during the past year of campaigning was the surest way to the general's flinty heart. Anyone who killed that many Papists couldn't be all bad.

Fleetwood closed the door to his office, invited Redmond to seat himself, and complimented him on the regiment's performance. "I wish every command in the country were doing as well as the Tenth," he admitted. "Have a glass of claret, Lieutenant Colonel, or perhaps you'll take a china cup and some of that brew in the pot over there. You will find it an interesting new taste. It comes from the East Indies, made from a leaf that grows there on trees, so I am told. It is called cha. I dislike this new-fangled fashion in foodstuffs, especially this new hard yellow corn from America which threatens British grain prices, but I must confess I am partial to this cha." Recalling Fairfax and his atrocious coffee, Denzil declined the cha and took claret instead. He was better pleased when Fleetwood offered him some of the Cuban *cigarros*. They were indeed less trouble than a pipe, and Denzil determined to buy some if he could find any in the Dublin shops. "I am impressed by the Tenth's campaign," Fleetwood went on after they had lit up. "I admit that I was highly dubious about you, sir, considering your long held allegiance to the House of Stuart. I

believe that there are in fact quite a number of former Cavaliers in the Tenth, are there not? Especially among the officers?"

"They are soldiers, General," said Denzil with a shrug, puffing on his *cigarro*. "Many of them have little enough to go back to in England, or else they became bred to war and couldn't adjust to the peace of the Commonwealth. Some, such as myself, have some personal problems back home which make it politic for us to make our career abroad for a time."

"I am familiar with your personal situation, sir," said Fleetwood drily.

"But we are not just soldiers, general. We are *English* soldiers, and right now this is where England's battle front lies. Even those of us who fought for the king have no love for Popery and no desire to have any hostile elements gain a foothold here on England's back doorstep. King or Parliament, we can all read and understand a map."

"Your active pursuit of this pacification effort would appear to bear that out," Fleetwood told him. "King's Johnnies or not, I wish every regiment in the army of Ireland were as effectual as yours."

"They are not?" asked Denzil.

"We're having heavy going in the southwest, down in Munster," Fleetwood said. "You will have studied the countryside on a map. There are a whole series of little piss-ant mountain ranges down there, the Galtees and Ballyhouras and the Knockmealdowns and Knock-Me-Sillies and so on. There's a rebel leader in Munster named Liam Bann O'Neill, one of the innumerable bastard sons of that whoremongering priest Owen Roe O'Neill. He's managed to put together a force of about two thousand light horse and gallowglass, and he's moving in and out of the mountains from Tipperary on over to Limerick and down through Cork, all the way to the coast of Kerry, cutting the roads, attacking small garrisons, disappearing into the hills before we can get to grips with him. It's time Liam O'Neill was nipped in the bud. We had trouble enough with his blasted father, and if Liam isn't suppressed this entire island could go up in flames again as badly as it did back in '41. God's truth, there seems to be no end to this ghastly débacle! I am brigading your regiment with the Sussex Horse under Colonel Roderick Bradford, and reinforcing your artillery with another battery of field guns. I want you to get down there and root out O'Neill."

"Is Colonel Bradford to be in overall command of the brigade, sir?" asked Denzil worriedly. Roderick Bradford was known as a Fifth Monarchy adherent, the most wild-eyed extreme sect of the Puritans. He had also been Sir Francis Staton's commanding officer during the Civil Wars.

"No," said Fleetwood. "The Colonel of the Tenth Dragoons will be in overall command."

"The Colonel...?" Like Rutland, Denzil had assumed that he would be promoted to fill the vacancy created by Hocksley's death. Few senior officers would willingly serve in Ireland, where so many British soldiers, British military careers, and British military reputations had been buried over the centuries. Denzil did not crave promotion for its own sake, in an army serving a government which he despised, but he wanted a free hand with his men and no outsider stepping on his toes.

"I will be frank with you, Lieutenant Colonel," said Fleetwood. "I wanted to promote you to full Colonel and give you command of this expedition. You are unquestionably the best man for the job. I still cannot entirely fathom your motives for being here, but however that stands there is no doubt as to your valour and your ability. Every consideration would seem to dictate that you should be placed in charge of this campaign, and I so suggested to Whitehall. I was countermanded, on an elevated level." The General's embarrassment was now evident. He was Oliver Cromwell's son-in-law; it must have been a very elevated level indeed. "The man who has been sent out from England to take over command of the Tenth is a competent and battle-tested officer, well known to me," continued Fleetwood. "He served under me at Marston Moor and Naseby, during the sieges of Newark and Colchester, during the Scottish campaign of '48, and also here in Ireland in '49 under the command of the Lord Protector himself, so he is not unfamiliar with Irish conditions. He is a skilled gunner and field artilleryman, as well as a brilliant staff officer and tactician. For reasons I will not speculate upon, he and his family have exerted a great deal of influence to get this posting in Ireland, and he has been adamant in insisting on the Tenth Dragoons and no other regiment, despite the fact that he is a cannoneer by training and not a light cavalryman such as yourself. I dislike political interference in military business, I dislike being overruled in the appointment of my field commanders, and I dislike officers who allow their personal affairs to intrude into their military duties. I don't want this kind of thing in my command, especially not now when the strategic situation is this ticklish. Lieutenant Colonel Redmond, if after meeting your new commanding officer, you should desire a transfer to another unit, then I would be favourably disposed to grant your request." There was a knock on the outer door. "That

will be him now, no doubt. Come!" The door opened, and Miles Pelham entered the room, impeccably uniformed in buffcoat, black breeches and felt hat, orange sash and sabretache. Miles stood smoothly to attention and saluted Fleetwood smartly. Denzil swirled the claret in his goblet and then stood up and faced Miles, the burning *cigarro* smoking in his smiling lips.

"No transfer will be necessary, general," he said. "I wouldn't trade this posting now for any consideration."

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X.

"It's a good plan," chuckled Denzil as they rode back to the regimental lines together. "Has it occurred to you that it cuts both ways?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Miles

"Your plot to destroy me. You'll have an abundance of opportunities, aye, but then so shall I. What is to stop me from putting a ball in you some night on guard duty, or during a skirmish with the rapparee?"

"Shoot me in the back?" sneered Miles. "The thought never crossed my mind. Aren't you the honourable one who refrains from such baseness? I'll have to guard my eyeballs, though. It was you who crept into our house that night, was it not, and struck down my brother Robert, leaving him a lump of blind and crippled flesh?"

"It was you and Francis who shot down a young boy from behind that day at Whitewood, was it not?" mocked Denzil. "Shot him on land which your family stole from mine, I might mention *en passant*. We both know that knowledge is one thing and proof is another, Miles. If you and your kind wanted law and order, you shouldn't have overthrown it and murdered the king. But as fascinating as we both find our own private little war, might I remind you that we are also fighting one against the Irish? In the same unit. How do you propose to destroy both the Gael and me?"

"What kind of shape is the regiment in?" demanded Miles.

"Good shape," said Denzil with a shrug. "At least in as good a shape as may be expected, given the kind of task they have been set. I would suggest that you don't come barging in and start switching things about and stirring things up purely for the satisfaction you would take in undoing what I have done. I have good troop captains and lieutenants who command good sergeants and good men, a sharp quartermaster and commissary which hasn't let us starve yet, and a damned good light battery of Scotties. The Tenth is a fine fighting force with

high morale, again considering the conditions under which we must operate and the nature of the mission we have been assigned."

"Mass murder? I must confess that the high command could have found no more suitable instrument for that purpose than yourself."

"Ah, but 'tis all in the service of God's own Commonwealth, good sir!" cried Denzil in a jolly voice. "A profitable business, for those with the proper connections. Haply you are unaware of the economic aspects of pacification and plantation? In the wake of the sword and the torch come the merchant, the military supply contractor, the banker, the land-jobber speculating in confiscated estates, clerks and notaries with quivers of pens and reams of parchment, and above all a damnable horde of lawyers like unto the Biblical plague of locusts! Camp followers all, ambling along in the wake of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse! Ireland is being parceled out, and glorious commerce is plunking golden guineas into sober Puritan purses. Next come the Protestant settlers, goodly artisans and tradesfolk and yeomen who will weave and forge and hammer out all manner of wealth. On Sundays they will read their Scriptures aright and lend an attentive ear to the minister, who will of course have nought but their best interests at heart. Not a damme! shall escape their lips without thruppence clinking into the church swear box, and never more than a pint of ale before retiring to their beds where they will roger their plump and jolly wives and then rise at dawn for another day of profitable toil for the benefit of their betters. Why, man, we are creating a veritable paradise on earth here! An Ireland neat and clean, properly hedged and ditched, genteel and well-advised. Of course, we do have a wee problem at the moment, what with all these pesky savages who continue to infest the place as brazenly as if they belonged here, the contumacious rogues, but in the true spirit of godly thrift we are even putting them to use, letting their wretched carcasses fertilize the soil to the encouragement of agriculture!"

"That is a grossly cynical and debauched view of a cause which is indeed worthy and godly!" snapped Miles heatedly.

"Not a moment ago, you yourself called it mass murder," Denzil reminded him.

"It is murder when 'tis done by a murderer like you!" Miles returned icily. "For a professional soldier, a believing Christian to undertake this grave duty for the sake of a permanent removal of a Papist peril on our country's back doorstep, to establish the rule of God's law is one thing. For a godless renegade such as yourself to be handed Parliament's sword and given a

licence for his every depravity is another matter entirely, one I find beyond comprehension!"

"I think you will find that it matters very little to the Irish who is killing them, or to us in the end, so long as they die," said Denzil. "We are here to manufacture Irish corpses, and one looks very much the same as another regardless of whether the heart of his slayer was as black as pitch or as pure as the driven snow. Death is death, Miles. By the by, I am not the only former king's man in Tenth Regiment of Dragoons."

"Indeed you are not," said Miles. "That causes me no little curiosity, nor am I alone in my interest. Others have taken note of the large number of former Cavaliers who have been turning up in this and in certain other units of the army. Indeed, a degree of official concern in this matter had a good deal to do with my posting here. There is a feeling in certain elevated quarters that you need to be watched, Redmond. Tell me, just how did it come about that a former Malignant was commissioned into the New Model Army and given a prime command by no less a person than Lord Fairfax himself?"

"It was my conspicuous virtue," said Denzil airily.  
"Don't play the fool with me, Redmond!" snarled Miles. "I am your commanding officer now, and I shall expect all due military courtesy and obedience to my orders. Should you disbelieve in my determination to accept nothing less, I shall soon disabuse you of your skepticism, sir."

"Very well, then, off we shall ride together into the peat bogs, on crusade for Commonwealth and crown."

"Crown?" asked Miles suspiciously.

"Assuredly. And the half-crown, the shilling, the penny and the lowly farthing as well!"

"I will not stand for insolence from you!" shouted Miles.

"Very well, Colonel sir, since you desire a sober and proper assessment of our military situation, here it is," said Denzil, his voice suddenly grim and his face scowling. "The Irish are poorly armed, poorly led, and waste time killing one another in their own obscure feuds instead of uniting to stop us while we lay waste to their land, but they are withal brave and resourceful opponents. They never surrender until they are beaten to a pulp and physically unable to fight any longer. Despite the incredible losses we have inflicted on them over the

past ten years, there are still a hell of a lot more of them than there are of us over here and we are outnumbered at every encounter. Besides all of that," Denzil went on, "Whatever you may think of them, you must in honesty admit that this government's policy towards them provides them with every motivation to resist. What we have achieved here is a stalemate that is likely to last beyond the lifetime of either of us. The Irish are too weak to throw us out by force and probably always will be, but neither are we strong enough to suppress them completely by force, nor shall we ever be. In any case, the total destruction of the Irish is not feasible for the simple reason that the shaky pro-British Protestant establishment here cannot exist without their labour. There will never be enough willing settlers of the proper political and religious complexion to displace the Irish, because the most prosperous and settled folk in England and Scotland will stay where they are, and the kind of chancer who is willing to take the risk necessary to settle a wild country full of danger and hardship is going to go all the way to America. Protestant landowners here have already read the handwriting on the wall as far as Hell or Connaught goes, and here on the east coast they are employing Irish labour and renting to Irish tenants. You will also find that Dublin Castle has quietly confirmed the titles and enlisted the services of some of the remaining Roman Catholic nobility here, on the condition that they keep their lands free from turmoil and insurrection. If you want to write to Old Noll himself and tell him I'm talking treason then do so, but General Fleetwood is telling him the same thing in his own confidential reports."

"Go on," said Miles.

"We are now brigaded with a Puritan regiment whom I presume are detailed to keep watch over us King's Johnnies in the Tenth as well as to reinforce us. We are heading into Munster where we will suppress what is probably the last gasp of organized Irish resistance in this generation. Let's go ahead and get it done, and refrain from knifing one another in the back until it is done. I can't keep watch for the Irish in front of me and you behind me, nor do I intend to try. I think a lot of these lads of mine, and I am not going to let them die unnecessarily because you decide it's time to avenge sweet sister and you pull some kind of a stunt. Whatever your differences with me, Pelham, you had damned well better not pursue them at the expense of the regiment, or by God, sir, I *will* put a ball into you some dark night!"

"One question," said Miles, "And I want a straight answer with no evasion. In all those irredentists you have managed to pack your regiment with, or I should say my regiment now, are there any clandestine Romans?"

"No," said Denzil. "And that is the truth. I couldn't have Xenophon and the Ten Thousand under my command if they were Papists, because eventually even the most loyal Englishman could not continue to slaughter his fellow Catholics."

"Dear me," said Miles in mock distress. "I had so hoped to catch you harbouring!"

"Start worrying about catching Liam O'Neill", said Denzil. "Else he may catch us."

Miles was not a brilliant commander, but neither was he a bad one. He made no significant changes in the regimental structure, inspected his troops daily, inflicted severe but fair punishment at the drum head, turned a blind eye to the whores in the train, and kept the men up to snuff in their gear and their daily turnout. Generally he left the day to day running of the unit to Denzil. The one area where Miles made his presence felt was in the artillery. The second battery assigned to the newly formed brigade was also manned by Scots, their commander a Presbyterian captain named Sutherland. Major Robertson remained in overall command of the guns, but Miles drilled them personally, ordered frequent practice firing, and laid in the pieces himself when he saw fit. The new battery was smaller, consisting of three four-pounders with shorter barrels and consequently less long-range accuracy, but they were good for grapeshot and canister, and their lighter carriages were better adapted for hauling over the wild tracks of the Munster hills.

On the tenth day of May, 1654, the brigade left Dublin and began marching westward. For the first few days they passed through a calm and peaceful countryside, in the settled area which used to be known as the Pale, down through Kildare and upper Carlow to Kilkenny town. But after Kilkenny they threaded deeper into the forests and hills, moving southwest. There the fields grew sparse and the stone boundary walls had been tumbled down, cottages stood abandoned and burned out, and snipers potted at the Roundheads from concealment with arquebus bullets and crossbolts. The baggage train was the target of both frontal attack and creeping, infiltrating theft by starving Irishmen. Their destination was Kilmallock, the old citadel of the Earls of Desmond in the Ballyhoura hills. In these days Kilmallock was the only garrisoned town between Cork and Limerick, a vital link in the chain which kept Munster leashed. All winter they had been harried by Liam Bann O'Neill, and their food and supplies were running short. The brigaded Tenth Dragoons and



Sussex Horse marched slowly to their relief, encumbered by the guns and the supply train, both of which were constantly getting stuck in the mud caused by the mild yet steady spring rains.

Progress was further delayed by the insistence of the Colonel of the Sussex, Roderick Bradford, in stopping repeatedly along the way to pull down roadside crosses, level shrines and grottoes containing statues of the Virgin Mary, and destroy any other symbol of Popish idolatry. Bradford was a devout Puritan, a relation of the famous Massachusetts Bradfords, and he had spent some years in the godly shores of the Bay Colony himself where he had fought the Red Indians, excellent training for combat against the wild Irish. Bradford and the bulk of his men were of the Fifth Monarchy persuasion, the most extreme and fanatical of the Puritan sects, who claimed that they fought to establish the rule of King Jesus on earth. They considered Oliver Cromwell to be a wishy-washy moderate. The combination of the bigoted Sussex and the resentful ex-Cavaliers of the Tenth was not a promising one. Bradford was sullen and openly hostile to Denzil Redmond and the Tenth, making no secret of the fact that he viewed the whole regiment as a Royalist plot. Denzil and even Miles considered it wise to keep a certain distance between the two regiments at night bivouac, although during the day they had to march together for mutual security against attack. The tension between the commanders communicated itself to the men, and the two units ate and stood watch separately, glowering at one another. The antagonism between the two regiments might have come to a violent head before they reached Kilmallock, but before that happened Denzil Redmond managed to make a hero of himself in the eyes of the entire brigade.

It was a Sunday, and they were encamped near the boundary of county Cork, on an open rise about half a mile from the edge of a dense forest. Because it was the Sabbath day, Bradford had refused to march; the garrison at Kilmallock would just have to wait another day. As regimental commanders both Bradford and Miles attended divine service, and so Denzil was made officer of the day along with some muttered remarks from Bradford to the effect that a servant of Satan had no place at worship in any case. Denzil accordingly kept Incitatus saddled, and patrolled the encampment. The sole exception to the mandatory church parade were a party of foragers from the Sussex who had been sent out that morning to gather firewood, fifteen mounted men and several mules to draw sledges of wood. Bradford hadn't been pleased about even such necessary labour being assigned on the Sabbath, but it was either that or do without fires for the night.

In the middle of the sermon there was a commotion from a sentry and a musket shot, and the godly discourse of the chaplain was interrupted as the troops ran

to determine the cause of the alarm. Six of the foraging party staggered out of the wood in the distance. Two appeared to be wounded, and were helped along by their comrades. Their horses and mules were gone. Obviously there had been an ambush. The Sussex men had gotten the worst of it, and now one sergeant and five men headed towards the camp on foot, hobbling while they tried to reload pistols and carbines. Then a whole Gaelic war party erupted from the forest, their howls of triumph audible in the camp. Ragged, hairy men riding bareback on sure-footed hobs, the horsemen held lances high over their heads, ready to stab downwards with deadly accuracy. These were *bonaghts*, Irish light horsemen who were wont to furbish their skill with the lance by spearing fish in streams from the saddle.

In an instant, every man in the camp took in the situation. They couldn't get saddled in time to intervene, they could only load their muskets and light their matches. On foot the straggling Roundheads were doomed, unless the four unhurt men abandoned their comrades, stripped off their armour, and sprinted for the circled wagons of the camp. They just might make the covering fire of the massed matchlocks before they were chopped down by the pursuing riders, but the two wounded troopers would fall into the hands of the enemy and be dragged away into the forest, where they would die in unspeakable agony. Every man in camp had seen the remains of English soldiers after the Irish rebels got through with them; surrender or capture had become unthinkable. Would the sergeant abandon his two wounded men to the fire and the flaying knife in order to save his own life and the other three? He would not. They turned and stood, and raised their weapons. The Roundheads shouted prayers and screamed curses at the oncoming Celts.

But suddenly a shadow sailed over the waggon tongues as Lieutenant Colonel Redmond leaped the vehicles and hurtled towards the stragglers and their howling assailants. He carried his full complement of pistols and carbine, and his sabre as well. A chorus of dismayed shouts arose from the dragoons, for they saw the man whom they considered to be their true leader riding pellmell for certain death. George Rutland and Andrew Smeaton ran to Miles and urged a sortie. "None of our horses are saddled," Miles pointed out.

"I mean a sortie on foot, sir!" said Rutland urgently. "Let me take the first troop out in open order at the double with muskets, so we can get close to give them at least some kind of covering fire!"

"Absolutely not!" snapped Miles. "Can't you see that this is a classic ambush situation? They are deliberately using those men as bait to lure us out of our position. Once we got down there in those meadows all of a sudden there

would be a thousand of them swarming out of the woods all over us! Redmond was a fool to fall for it, but on his own head be it!"

"I agree," rumbled Bradford. "God pity those poor fellows yonder, but haply the hand of the Lord is manifest in this, ridding us of a viper in our bosom. I will send none of mine to rescue the hell-hound of Herod!" Smeaton was about to make a furious retort which would have gotten him court-martialed without fail, but then Rutland grabbed him and they all turned to watch the drama unfolding in the distance.

Denzil had reached the six Sussex troopers out on the heath, breaking through the ring of encircling Irish with sheer momentum and avoiding their lance thrusts. Now he wheeled Incitatus and whipped out a pistol. The *bonaghts* had been circling the stranded squad like sharks, hoping to draw their fire in wild shots at moving targets they could not hit with their smoothbore weapons, but now they charged in to the attack. Pistol after pistol cracked, and each time Denzil fired an Irish rider went spinning off his pony. The sergeant emptied another Irish saddle with a ball from his carbine. The attackers whirled away in confusion, leaving dead bodies in the grass. Quickly Denzil dismounted, while the sergeant and another brawny trooper hoisted both wounded men up onto Incitatus. Then the little group began a steady walk towards the camp, while Denzil swiftly reloaded two of his pistols.

The Irish horsemen had been stunned by the deadly marksmanship of Redmond, but now they saw that their quarry was escaping and they again charged with lance and swinging broadsword, determined to finish off the English detachment. Denzil stepped forward, handed the reins of his horse to the sergeant, and then calmly drew and fired four pistols one after the other, standing with his feet spread apart in his famous two-handed shooting stance. Four of the Irishmen, mounted on their swift ponies and moving in a fast blur, nonetheless whirled off their mounts and rolled in the grass, quivering and dead. The attackers had had enough. They turned and fled, while Denzil drew his carbine from the saddle scabbard and brought down a final rider as they galloped off.

A thunderous ovation from the men of both regiments greeted Denzil as he escorted the six surviving Sussex troopers back into camp. By that night, the entire brigade knew that Miles Pelham and Roderick Bradford had refused to send Denzil aid and thus condemned six English soldiers to a barbarous death in order that they might be rid of the Lieutenant Colonel of the Tenth. It was said that Colonel Pelham had some kind of private feud with Colonel

Redmond. Angry if inaccurate parallels were drawn with the Biblical story of Uriah the Hittite.

The next day the column turned southwest and crossed the River Suir between Clonmel and Cahir, after driving off a war band of Gael who contested the ford and inflicted more casualties. The day after that a squadron of horsemen galloped in from the Kilmallock garrison. They brought disturbing news. The rebels had suddenly appeared before the small fortress in force, swarming out of the Wood of Kilmire and laying down a disorganized but threatening siege. Liam O'Neill had no artillery at all, not one man among three of his kerns had a firearm and there was little powder and shot for those who did, but there were thousands of the insurgents and they were keeping the garrison bottled up in Kilmallock Castle. When the rebels had first appeared the supposedly "civil" Irish in the village had turned on the Roundheads, and five men were captured. They had been flayed alive within sight and sound of the castle; their bloody carcasses now hung head downwards on a tree near the walls. The squadron now reporting had escaped by charging at a gallop from the gate, losing two more men in the process. They urged Miles to hurry.

"It is now essential that we make haste," said Miles at a conference of his officers held in his tent that night. "Kilmallock was the seat of the great rebel Earl of Desmond, who revolted against England over seventy years ago and for a time overran all of Munster before order and lawful authority could be restored. If O'Neill succeeds in capturing Kilmallock and establishing himself there, it will become a rallying point for every disaffected person in Ireland. Kilmallock must be relieved at all costs!"

"I agree that the castle must not be lost, for the reasons you have stated," said Denzil. "But O'Neill is counting on this brigade losing its head and charging into these hills and trackless glens in a rush to get there. Even with care, you are going to have the devil's own time getting the guns and the waggons through. The train carries supplies needed to hold the place, and we can't risk losing it. If you try and rush the column, you will have men and beasts strung out over the hills for miles, and that's what O'Neill wants. Kilmallock is a strong post, there are over two hundred seasoned troops inside, and they've got food and powder for a few more weeks. The fort won't fall, unless O'Neill can conjure up some artillery from somewhere. I shouldn't be surprised, in fact, if he hasn't got his eye on our own guns. You'll recall you expected an ambush Sunday, Colonel Pelham?" Miles scowled and flushed at the embarrassing memory. "You were entirely correct to do so," Denzil continued. "For all you knew, it could have been bait to lure us out of our position, and I think that's what this sudden onslaught against Kilmallock is.

O'Neill wants us to rush, get loose and confused in our haste, and make ourselves vulnerable. He wants to cut us up piecemeal, probably by night, so he can bring down Kilmallock at his leisure before a second relief force can be cobbled together. Don't give him an opening. Let's take our time and get the brigade there in one piece."

"Then O'Neill will have ample warning of our approach, and simply pull back into the hills out of reach," growled Bradford.

"I think we can set a spur to his hide, sir," said Denzil. "Give me two mounted troops, my pick of the men, with rations and remounts for three days. You take the column to Kilmallock by the safest and most open route, the way they'll be expecting you to come." Denzil indicated this route on the parchment map on the portable trestle table before them. "O'Neill will harass and ambush you along the way, of course. Expect it. Prepare for it. Keep the men together. In night camp, keep them stood to arms with primed pieces, sleeping by watch rota, and don't let yourselves be goaded into any wild headlong pursuits. Take your losses, inflict what you can, and keep pushing on."

"And where do you plan on gallivanting off to during this push?" asked Bradford.

"I will take my mounted force directly northwards along the Galtee foothills, here, and cut westward into the hills here, about fifteen miles east of Kilmallock. My guess is that's the direction O'Neill has left open for his withdrawal when things get too hot. His main camp and the families of his men are probably somewhere in this area, his main lines of supply and communication. When he tries to draw back from the heat, he will find us waiting for him in the rear and we'll give it to him hot."

"I must admit, however reluctantly, that it's a good plan," said Pelham. "I assume the men you select will all have prior experience in this type of irregular warfare? Mostly your old long riders and cohorts from the Royalist army?"

"Of course," said Denzil.

"Then with any luck we'll be shed of the lot of you!" said Bradford.

"We're a hard crew to kill, Colonel," said Denzil with a wintry smile. "Too hard for you lot, at any rate."

"Draw what you need from the stores and get it organized," said Miles. "The brigade will move out at dawn."

"We'll be gone before then," said Denzil. "We will lay a lash across O'Neill's back which scourged more than a few Parliament hides in years gone by."

The plan worked. It took four days for Bradford and Miles Pelham to manhandle the guns and the baggage train across the bogs and low mountains to Kilmallock. They kept men and animals and vehicles close together, moving slowly, repulsing countless attacks from the cover of the woods and the misty glens. They used massed musket fire to repel the Irish and refused all temptation to pursue the kerns into the heath. The Irish felled trees across their path, sniped relentlessly, and tried every ruse they could think of to delay and disperse the Roundheads, and the English left graves at every campsite and stream crossing. But on a morning of bright sunshine the brigade began its descent from a hilltop bivouac through the Ballyhoura pass down to the grey walls of Kilmallock Castle. As the column began to debouch into the cleared fields and meadows a mile from the castle they heard confused shouting and gunfire ahead.

Presently a mob of armed men issued from the trees, yelling and waving weapons. There were hundreds of them, wild hairy kerns and even a few gallowglass, the traditional heavy infantry of Ireland, wearing shirts of medieval chain mail which hung to their knees, swinging huge double-edged broadswords handed down from father to son, the blades bearing chips and scratches taken in combat against Saracen and Viking. There were axes, pikes, short sword and targe, and mounted lancers hurtling pellmell towards the brigade, but it was an ill-advised assault. The English had muskets loaded and plenty of room to deploy, and the Irish charge was met with rolling volleys of gunfire and a cavalry sweep that rode them down by the score. The cannon were unlimbered and swung around in double-quick time to throw grapeshot and canister into the ranks of the Gael. It had taken longer in Ireland than elsewhere in Europe, but gunpowder was now king of the battlefield here as well, as the last charge of the fierce and ancient Gaelic society was mown down by the bullet and the cannon ball. When the conical helmets were pulled from the heads of the dead gallowglass afterwards, every one revealed manes of hoary white hair or the bald pates of old men. The last heirs of Cuchulain and Finn Mac Cool, the last descendants of the heroes who had raced their bronze-wheeled chariots across the Curragh plain before a hundred High Kings of Tara, now lay in the bosom of their green land, cut down not by iron or steel

but by soft balls of lead fired in a world no bard ever sang of nor Druid ever foretold in prophecy.

The reason for the wild and disorganized attack became apparent when the advancing brigade saw a column of New Model troopers in buffcoats and cuirass thundering out of the woods in neatly dressed lines as if they were on a parade field, their leader a man on a gigantic chestnut stallion who casually dropped fleeing rapparee left and right with his pistols, shooting from the saddle and never missing a shot. Caught between the twin hammers, the serried line of the brigade before them and the flying column of pistol and sabre behind them, O'Neill's men threw down their weapons and ran, many of them to be swept up beneath the grey walls of Kilmallock Castle, which spluttered with muzzle flashes and puffs of white smoke as the garrison opened fire from the ramparts. Very few of the rebels on foot escaped; over seven hundred corpses were heaved into the mass grave next day. The English lost twenty-one men. It was the greatest British victory in Ireland since Cromwell himself had campaigned there.

Miles and Denzil met beneath the castle walls. "I congratulate you on a successful maneuver, Lieutenant Colonel," said Miles formally.

"O'Neill and most of his mounted men escaped," Denzil said, spitting from powder-blackened lips as he reloaded his pistols. "Give us fresh horses and a week's saddle rations, and we'll chase him from Kilmallock to the Pope's Privy in Donegal."

"That is what we came for," said Miles.

Miles made Kilmallock his base, began the erection of permanent barracks, and scoured the hills for Irish rebels. The corpses of the mutilated Roundheads were cut down from the tree upon which they dangled and given Christian burial. Most of the Irish villagers fled the scene, but about fifty were rounded up in the vicinity. It was impossible to identify which of them had actually participated in the killing of the soldiers, so an old woman's feet were placed in a fire until she shrieked out about a dozen names of both sexes. These were flogged bloody with the cat o'nine tails, and then hanged on the same tree. The old woman cut her own throat in her hovel later that day.

The rest of the peasants were suffered to return to their wretched wattle-and-daub huts below the castle walls, where they subsisted by doing menial labour for the English. Miles Pelham had sense enough to understand that "Hell or Connaught" was a dead letter, and he overruled Bradford, who wanted to

continue killing them all unless they renounced the Roman Catholic religion. Denzil reciprocated by diplomatically getting a grip on Peter Carey and the Ulster Protestants in Three Troop, who shared Bradford's views on the matter. He sent Carey and his men on long sweeps through the countryside, burning out and killing any "wild Irish" they found, thus keeping them away from the throats of the growing number of "civil Irish" who came slinking into the village to submit to the invader's rule and enjoy the precarious safety submission brought. Miles compiled a register of the "civil Irish", with the name and description of every man, woman and child in the village. He strictly forbade any Catholic priests or worship and sent to Cork for a complement of Protestant whores to provide politically correct fornication for the men. The "civil Irish" were allowed to plant potatoes, grow vegetables and keep chickens and pigs, and also to practice any trades they might have such as carpentry or cobbling. The village started to grow in the shadow of the rotting corpses that swung from the gallows tree.

Of all the units in Ireland, Denzil Redmond's riders of the Tenth Dragoons gained the widest renown during that summer. Volunteers who were tired of sedentary garrison duty eagerly sought transfers to the Tenth, and more recruits came from England. For some odd reason most of these new hands seemed to have prior service with the king's armies during the Civil Wars. Carey's Ulstermen quickly forgave Denzil over the vexatious issue of the "civil Irish", for outside Kilmallock he not only gave them free rein to kill Catholics galore, he led them in person with skill and courage all over Munster, slashing and burning and hanging until every Protestant victim of the '41 uprising was avenged ten times over.

Even some of the men from the Sussex asked for reassignment to Denzil's command. The Tenth Dragoons came to regard itself, and to be regarded by others, as an elite corps where a king's man could speak his mind without fear of Puritan spies and down a tankard or two without getting charged for intemperance. By juggling his own malcontents and Levelers and other religious fanatics into the Sussex, and sliding irredentists from other units into the Tenth, eventually Denzil achieved a dangerous kind of equipoise. The Tenth were all Royalist, with the Ulster Protestants of Three Troop as kindred spirits if not exactly politically reliable. The Sussex were Puritan, grimly loyal to Cromwell and deeply suspicious of the Tenth, although they could not withhold grudging admiration for their soldierly skill and Denzil's leadership. The surly Scots gunners were an unknown quantity. They kept to themselves and seldom fraternized even with their Ulster cousins. The Scots held non-conformist religious views which some of the English regarded as just as bad as



Popery. Miles offered no opposition to Denzil's increasingly blatant finagling of the manpower, despite the obvious fact that his ostensible regiment was now completely loyal to its Lieutenant Colonel and not to him. One day Miles even mentioned it as he inspected one of Denzil's long-range patrols before setting out. "Don't think I am unaware of what you are doing," he said. "I know quite well why you take this man from Limerick, send that man home on furlough, trading this trooper for that one in the Sussex."

"I have no idea what you mean, sir," said Denzil with a laugh. "But if you think I'm doing something improper, why don't you put a stop to it?"

"Because I want you to continue," Miles replied. "I want you to keep on until you overstep the bounds and commit some overt act of treason or rebellion which will strip you of the shield of law and patronage with which you have managed to surround yourself. Then I can take the necessary steps to ensure that my sister and my family can live their lives in tranquility."

"Your remedy is close at hand and always has been," said Denzil, pointing to the sword and pistols at Miles's belt. "Why do you not avail yourself of them?"

"Officers are forbidden to duel on duty, as you know," said Miles. "That solution is also precluded by the virtual certainty that you would kill me in a fair fight, and past experience leads me to believe that any attempt at an ambushade on my part would be too risky."

"It certainly went awry before," said Denzil. "You really shouldn't have left so important a matter as murder to an incompetent buffoon like Francis Staton, Miles. Sweet sister has married a right fool, you know. A craven as well. Bradford is the man's former commanding officer from the war, yet even he can't seem to find much good to say about Francis."

"Colonel Bradford is not given to over-voluble praise of anyone," commented Miles.

"True enough, but I can't help but note Sir Smockface Staton's conspicuous absence from this expedition to bring the glories of Christian civilization to far Hibernia. Whatever it is you're planning, either Francis didn't have the guts to come with you and help you do it, or else you left him behind so he wouldn't cock it up like he did the last time at Whitewood."

"My personal opinion of my brother-in-law is no concern of yours, and your opinion of anyone is a matter of utter disinterest to me."

"Ah, so you did leave him behind on purpose," said Denzil as he swung onto the back of his horse. "Probably the smartest move you've made yet, Pelham. We're riding up north to the Shannon country and the northeast, up to the headwaters as far as Athlone where I'll resupply. We should be back in a week or ten days. I've heard rumours to the effect that they've seized and fortified an old castle up there. If we find it I may need to call for the guns. You know, Miles, mayhap you'll get lucky and some rapparee will get close enough to cut my throat, you being so reluctant to have a go yourself."

"I very much doubt it," said Miles calmly. "You both serve the same infernal master. Good hunting, Redmond."

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## XI.

One warm day in August, Denzil's troop was encamped on a rise overlooking the broad, shining river Shannon. That morning Denzil loaded all his pistols and rode out alone, despite the vociferous protests of Captain Rutland, who told him quite correctly that it was foolhardy to the point of madness. Normally Denzil would have agreed, but there were times when he had to be by himself. The balmy days of August were especially dangerous, because Denzil could never entirely shake off the memory of an August years before, when he was still a youth, when his hands were still innocent of blood.

It had been the last summer of precarious peace, in 1642. The war had been building like a mass of thunderclouds mounting slowly in mighty pillars across the sky, and it was now apparent that an armed resolution of the long conflict between King Charles and his Parliament was in the offing. The two young lovers Denzil and Katherine also knew by then that when the conflict came, their families would be upon opposite sides of the chasm. In those days Kate had cared nothing for religion or politics, only her love for her handsome young neighbour, her friend and childhood playmate who had become so much more. They had ridden often to the old mill that stood in a glade equidistant from their homes, whenever Katherine could escape stern chaperoning eyes at Pelham, and they had made love on the soft grass by the mill trace. Denzil understood that it had been Katherine's idea. If she got herself with child, then her father would be forced to let them marry in order to avoid the disgrace, and Denzil would be compelled to stay at home with his new wife and baby.

Then time ran out on them. The king raised his standard at Nottingham that August, and Denzil rode away to join the Royalist army with Katherine's tears upon his face and her anguished screams in his ears. As he now knew, Katherine had achieved her desire, and although she didn't know it yet, she

was pregnant. *Why didn't she tell me?* he asked himself dismally for the thousandth time, riding slowly through a hostile foreign land with guns at his side. *We chased them all the way back to London after the fight at Edgehill. The roads were open. She could have gotten a letter to me. Why didn't she tell me?*

There had been letters. The first one caught up with him two days after he left, a Pelham groom she sent after him. There were letters of loving reproach, tearful pleas for him to return, and then later on letters of despair, increasingly larded with Bible verses. But not one whisper on the most important thing of all. *How could she?* he asked himself, again and again. *Why? I would have come back. I would have come back.* But would he have returned had he known of the child? Every time he could no longer keep himself from thinking, Denzil would torture himself trying to remember what things were like in his mind back in '42, trying to find the answer. He never could. Then after a gap of years, the final letter from Katherine had come, reaching him in France months after it was written. Denzil read it over and over again, hour after hour until it was too dark to read her script by the fire of the cheap inn full of Royalist exiles where he and Tom were billeted. Then he had thrown it in the fire and watched it burn. For a time he felt nothing. His soul was simply dead. But one more letter was yet to come, a paper bearing the laboured, nearly illiterate scrawl of his old nurse Meg, telling him of a tale a country midwife had babbled in her cups. Telling him that he was not done with Pelham, could never be done with them.

Now there was nothing left but to punish her. Not for the first time, Denzil wondered whether or not he was insane. Then he wondered why he didn't care.

In a sun-dappled glade by the sweet-smelling, flowered banks of the river, Denzil came upon some soldiers who were killing some Irish. There were six of the Lobsters, all wearing the blue and white sashes of the Norfolk Ironsides, the elite corps of Cromwell's régime, one of the crack Eastern Association regiments who had broken the royal armies at Marston Moor and Naseby and put the Lord Protector in power. Denzil recalled that there was a battalion of Norfolks stationed at Athlone.

What had obviously occurred was that a wretched family of Gael had been attempting to cross the river into Galway. A cart drawn by a gaunt mule stood by, the contents scattered across the ground as the Roundheads searched for loot. A young man in a woolen tunic lay dead at the foot of a tree, a bullet hole oozing red in his chest, and an old man rolled on the ground screaming, holding

his slashed belly and trying to stuff his intestines back into his abdomen. Apparently the Ironsides considered themselves sufficiently far from their base and their censorious chaplains to disregard the rule against rape. One of them held a writhing Irishwoman, completely naked, while the others dropped their breeches and repeatedly violated and sodomized her. The final member of the hapless family, a young girl, was being beaten to death by one of the Roundheads. She still had her dress on, but she was tied up by her wrists with her back against the hub of the cart wheel, while the soldier clubbed her head and torso brutally with a heavy leather belt and its brass buckle. The girl was unconscious, her head of long black hair lolling on her breast and rolling back and forth with each blow. Denzil watched them for some time, unobserved. The thought of interfering did not occur to him. This was why the English had come to Ireland.

The soldiers finished with the sobbing woman and then drew ropes from their saddlebags, tying nooses with the skill and speed of long practice, throwing them over the limbs of the tree. They hanged the old man first, hauling him up into the air where he swung back and forth like a twitching pendulum, his intestines oozing from his belly wound. The woman stared in shock, and then as they dragged her to her feet and swiftly lashed her hands behind her back she realized that it was her turn, and she began to scream and struggle. They hauled her up into the cart, and after some delay due to the frantic twisting and rolling of her head they got the noose around her neck and then shoved her forward. The tree limb bent beneath her weight. She kicked frantically in the air, her toes straining for the ground. Her hands wrenched convulsively at the thongs binding them behind her back, her globular breasts bounced as her chest heaved frantically for breath, and her face turned blue and then black above the knot. The soldiers laughed and bowed to the naked woman writhing on the rope, complimenting her on what a pretty dance she did. As her body began to die her internal muscles relaxed, and there was a thin splatter of liquid on the ground as her bladder and bowels emptied themselves down her legs. When she swung lifeless they hanged the girl almost as an afterthought, while they sorted out their meagre plunder and mounted up to leave. One man cut her down from the cart wheel and hoisted her limp body up to a companion on horseback, who dropped over her head, pulled the long dark tresses through the loop, and then slid her carelessly off the saddle. She twirled limply in the breeze, without struggling. Probably she was dead before they strung her up. The English then passed a jug among themselves, yet another indulgence their chaplains frowned upon, and rode off laughing and singing, leading the skinny mule.

Denzil rode slowly up to the scene of the carnage. He was irked by the inefficiency of the Norfolks who had left behind three perfectly good hanging ropes. Despite the quartermaster's best efforts, the Kilmallock troops were short on cordage, and what they had was frayed and spliced through constant re-use. They could certainly make good use of these lengths that the improvident Ironsides had left behind. Denzil dismounted and worried at one of the knots where a rope had been tied off at the tree trunk. He didn't want to damage it by cutting it, and after a few moments of tugging the hastily-tied knot came undone and one of the bodies dropped to the ground. It was the girl. He reached down and tugged open the slip knot which had crushed a livid weal into her soft white neck, and pulled the noose off her head. Then, to his surprise, she stirred and moaned. He stood up, throwing the rope aside, and he drew his sword from the scabbard where it hung on the horse's saddle, meaning to despatch her without wasting a bullet.

Yet as he stood over her he stopped. He looked around at the sunny glade and heard the rush of the river shallows. Somehow, Denzil was suddenly conscious in a deep way he had not felt for a long time. More than ever, his thoughts hung on that August so many years before, when he and Katherine had loved. *Dear God, what has my life come to?* he thought with abysmal bitterness. Here he stood with a broken body at his feet and a sword in his hand to take the life of a stranger. What in God's name could this girl have done, that she deserved to die? What in God's name gave him the right to take her life? He was almost thirty years old, his life half done. Ahead of him was nothing, an incomprehensible blackness. He never understood afterwards how or why the decision was made. It certainly wasn't lust for the girl. Her face was bruised black and blue beyond recognition. Her hair was stiff, gooed into long ropey strands with blood from her oozing scalp wounds, hardly enticing. Had it been in March or October the blade would have slashed downward and she would have died, but it was warm and sunny August, and Denzil somehow knew he must pull back from the brink now or never again would the opportunity offer. He decided.

*Not this time. Tomorrow and the next day and countless days after that, my hand shall deal death aplenty. I know that. But not today. Not this one. No man shall decide when this woman dies, not me nor any other. God gave her into life, and God alone shall decide when she shall leave it. This I swear. In memory of what might have been, for me and for the old Katherine who once was, this vow I take.*

"I don't know who you are, lass," he sighed, sheathing his sword. "But saint or she-devil, you just acquired a lifelong protector. I'd best get you cleaned up."

He picked her up and carried her down to the water's edge, where he laid her on the soft grass and pulled off her gown to examine her. God's will and Denzil's notwithstanding, the pounding she had gotten from the Roundhead's garrison belt might have finished her. He judged her to be seventeen or eighteen, but as battered as she was it was hard to say. Her face was pulped and every inch of her body showed welts and bruises. He felt her over carefully, with fingers skilled from years of treating his own men's battle wounds, and to his astonishment he could not find any obvious broken bones or ribs. He found a cracked basin in the debris of the cart's baggage and filled it with water, washing the blood off her body, pouring brandy from his flask onto his own fairly clean neck cloth and carefully soaking it into the cuts and abrasions. She jerked and moaned at the alcohol's touch on her raw flesh, but did not awaken. "Good strong pulse, good deep breathing," he muttered. "You're tough, lass, I'll give you that. That thumping you got would have killed many full grown men." Nor would her broken flesh get infected or gangrened. God knew why, but long observation had taught Denzil that the late Dr. Bray was right. Wounds washed clean with strong waters seldom festered.

Denzil carried her back to the cart and laid her inside on her own torn and bloodstained dress. Drawing his blanket from his saddle roll, he covered her with it. He sat down to wait, striking a small fire with flint and steel, then filling his pipe and lighting it with a burning twig. He sat and smoked while the wind whispered in the trees and the grass, and the hanged bodies turned slowly overhead, ropes creaking, their shadows lengthening on the ground. It was some time before she stirred. Denzil stood up and took her the brandy flask, holding it to her lips. She swallowed several gulps of the amber liquid, her eyes still tightly closed.

*"Non, pas le vin, mais l'eau, pour le doucé clemence de le bon Dieu, donnez-moi l'eau! Ah, pardieu, ma tête..."* Astonished, Denzil uncorked his water bottle and held it to her mouth. She gulped greedily, then opened her eyes. She stared at him, still dazed, and Denzil got another shock. *"Cad is annam dhuit? An Gael dho? Chlann Ù Niall? An Fianna na hEireann dho? Nì hea, an saighdaur naGall...you're English! You bastard! Sweet Jesu, man, can you not let me die? Finish it, damn you!"*

"First French, then Irish, now English," said Denzil, curious. "Who are you?"

"I'm a woman you beat half to death. You hanged me as well, didn't you? My neck feels like it has been flayed. I can hardly speak. You cut me down to torture me some more. I hope wherever I end up I will someday watch your soul burn in hell. Now finish it!"

"I didn't hang you," said Denzil. "Those were Norfolks. I cut you down. I am the Lieutenant Colonel of the Tenth Dragoons, out of Kilmallock. I won't hurt you."

She struggled to a sitting position and discovered that beneath the blanket she was naked. "You are a liar as well as a murderer. You raped me already!"

"No, I didn't. I undressed you because I had to look you over for any broken bones after that wallop you got. I couldn't find any. I won't hurt you." Then the girl caught sight of the hanging bodies and shrieked wildly, collapsing into the back of the cart, sobbing. Denzil let her cry, puffing quietly on his pipe. There was nothing he could do or say and he wasn't stupid enough to try. After a while she began to plead with him. "Bury them, please, bury them! Don't let my mother and my grandfather hang there like that! Bury them, bury poor brave Brendan, and say a few words over them in the name of Christ Jesus!"

"I'm not a Catholic," warned Denzil.

"I don't care and neither does God!" she wailed desolately. "Please, Englishman, bury them and then do whatever you want with me!"

Denzil knocked out his pipe and picked up a mattock which the plundering Roundheads had not deigned to take with them, another piece of inexcusable carelessness in view of the men whom Denzil had seen with their heads split open by a mattock or a shovel in Irish hands. He scraped out a shallow trench beneath the tree and dragged the young man's body over to it, rolling it in. Carefully working the knots around the tree trunk, for he still intended to save the ropes, he lowered first the old man's mutilated corpse and the woman, and dragged them over to the grave as well. He dug some more to deepen the slit trench and then rolled the bodies in on top of the first one. He slid the woman's body in last, then picked up the shredded gown which her executioners had ripped from her body and covered her with it as best he could. He filled in the grave with earth, and hauled stones up from the river that he piled up on top of the excavation. The girl in the cart had made no sound during the interment, but now she slid out onto the ground and painfully pulled on her woolen gown, and helped him wordlessly as he piled up the long, low cairn of stones. For a while she knelt at the crude grave, staring dully, her eyes welling with tears in her ruined face. She did not cross herself.

*"Adieu, chère famille," she whispered dismally. "Adieu, Brendan, mon Père en Dieu et mon cher ami. Dormé-tu bien dans cette pays vert et terrible."*

*"Le jeune homme, il était un prêtre Catholique?"* asked Denzil.

"*Oui.* Yes, he was a priest." She looked up at him. "I thank you, sir. I have only one more boon to ask, and that is that you do the same for me when you've done with me. I don't want to be eaten by wild creatures or rooted up by dogs. Put me as near to them as you can. We won't need a marker. God will know where we lie, and no one else will care."

"You're not going to die, although I can't say as I blame you for disbelieving that," said Denzil, re-lighting his pipe

"Do you think I have not seen what you people are doing here in Ireland?" she responded bleakly. "You're just trying to cozen me before you rape me and kill me. There's no need. I'm ready. I'll do whatever you want, let's just get on with it. I want to be with them again, soon. Throw that rope back over the tree when you're finished, and I'll put the noose around my own neck and jump off the cart if it amuses you."

"I thought your Church prohibited suicide," said Denzil.

"Must you mock me as well?" cried the girl miserably, shaking her fists in the air in agony. "Can you not understand? My mother is dead, my grandfather is dead, my only friend in the world is dead, all because of me! I want to be dead too! *Do it! Do it! Kill me, please kill me, I can't stand it...!*" She broke down into uncontrollable sobbing and convulsions in the dirt. After a while Denzil reached over and pulled her over onto his lap, holding her unresistingly, until eventually she cried herself out in exhaustion. Then he spoke.

"Listen to me," he said in a gentle voice. "I won't hurt you, nor will I allow anyone else to do so. I know that you have no reason at all to trust any man of my country who wears this thrice-damned orange sash, but you can trust me. I will take you back to Kilmallock with me and care for you."

"You mean make me your camp-follower slut, so you can have a quick one whenever you want without putting yourself to the trouble of fining some wild Irish girl to rape and murder," she replied dully. "In a way I suppose that's mercy from one of your kind, but I won't trade the last shred of dignity I have left for a life I no longer desire. I meant it when I said I wanted to die. I should thank you for saving my life, I know, but I don't want it. If you're not going to kill me, then let me go. I won't be your whore, Colonel."

"It's Lieutenant Colonel, actually. The Colonel of the Tenth is a man named Pelham. Where would you go?" he asked.



"Galway," she said. "We were trying to cross the river when the Lobsters caught us. We have been travelling for weeks, mostly at night, but Brendan didn't want to risk the ford in the darkness."

"When did you eat last?" asked Denzil.

"Yesterday morning. I had a potato and a bird's egg Brendan found in a nest." Denzil went to his horse and pulled out his saddle rations. There was a round loaf of coarse barley bread, a pound wedge of cheese, several baked potatoes, and a flask of Spanish wine. He broke the bread in half and handed a portion to her. She looked at him warily, but could not resist and snatched it from him, eating all of before Denzil was through with his half. He gave her the cheese and gestured for her to eat all of it, which she did, as well as all the potatoes. "Thank you," she said, after she had devoured every crumb and drunk half the wine. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Help you, if you'll let me. What is your name?"

"Mary."

"My name is Denzil Redmond." The girl turned as white as she could beneath her bruised face and drew back from him in horror.

"You're a witch-man, a devil-worshipper!" she cried. "You are the English long rider who sold his soul to Satan, who gave you pistols which never miss their target and a cloak which makes you invisible so the rapparee can never see you approach! You ride a horse with claws instead of hoofs, given to you as a familiar by Lucifer himself!"

"The cloak of invisibility is a horse blanket," said Denzil. "It covered you while you lay unconscious in the cart. There it lies. You can see it. Incitatus is indeed a fine mount, but he has quite ordinary hooves, as you can again see for yourself."

"What did you say his name is?" asked Mary

"Incitatus. A rather arcane joke on my part which I won't go into now."

"Oh, the chariot-racing horse which the Emperor Caligula made a Roman senator, and then consul. You English have an odd kind of wit, I've heard."

"Witty or not, there's nothing devilish about me, at least not in the way your Irish rumour tells it. As for my sure shot, for all I know it may be a gift from the devil, but it's a gift I've found handy."

"What do you mean?" asked Mary, curious.

"I first discovered it at Edgehill," said Denzil. He chewed on a blade of grass and refilled his pipe. "That was in 1642. You may have heard tell of it, the first big battle in England between King Charles and Parliament."

"I recall hearing of it, although I was very young. You bloody Roundheads lost!"

"I wasn't a Roundhead then, I was a king's man, riding in Prince Rupert's cavalry. I'd shot at butts and hunted pheasant and such like before, back home in county Hereford, where I'm from, but this was the first time I had ever fired at men. That day I found out something very strange about myself, something I really don't understand to this day. I found that I could make a gun become a *part* of me, and without practice or even without aiming, really, I could make a ball go where I want I wanted it to go, and hit what I wanted to hit. It was like I was reaching out and *touching* the target with a long finger."

"Maybe it's like the Second Sight," said Mary. "Sir Francis Bacon wrote that God has made manifest in Nature all knowledge, and that man must seek it out, because that's why God put it there, for people to find."

"See here, where did you read Sir Francis Bacon and learn about Roman emperors like Caligula?" demanded Denzil. "For that matter, where did you learn to read at all?"

"In a convent school."

"There are no convents in Ireland. They're against the law. Where did you study in one?"

"The Carmelite house in Paris," she told him.

"That explains the French. Come on, lass, out with it. What's your full name?"

"Mary Allucquere Francoise Manigault O'Donnell," she told him. "My father was an Irish officer in the service of the king of France. He died two years ago."

My mother whom we just now buried was a Huguenot. She came all the way from France to be stripped, raped, and hanged by her fellow Protestants."

"Then why were you in the company of a priest?" asked Denzil. "And why didn't you tell that Norfolk patrol you were Protestants?"

"Brendan was a family friend from France, and he volunteered to bring us here and take us to my father's people in Connaught. In Paris we were destitute and things are becoming very unpleasant for Huguenots. When the soldiers came on us here, *maman* and he could speak no English, and it would have done them no good anyway. I tried to tell them but one of them grabbed me, pulled down his breeches, and pushed me down on my knees to make me suck his cock, so I bit his balls. When he stopped howling he tied me to the cart wheel and began to beat me. Oh, why could I not have died with them?" She broke down and wept again for a time, rocking back and forth on the ground.

Denzil thought her explanation of poor and persecuted Huguenots fleeing Catholic France to poorer and violently more Catholic Ireland was tenuous, but decided not to pursue it for the time being. *She's lying*, he thought. *They were going to join the rebels*. But it made no difference to his self-imposed oath. "Mary, I want you to know something," he told her after a time. "You almost got your wish. After I cut you down and saw that you still lived, I drew my sabre from the saddle there. I was going to cut off your head. Quicker that way, and it saves powder. But something stopped me. For some reason I don't understand, I have decided that you are going to live as long as God intended you to live, at least as far as I can ensure that happens. But you've got to let me help you. I won't keep you against your will, but if you go wandering off into the wilds of Galway alone, you will be taken by another English patrol who will put you through the same ordeal again, fuck you fore and aft and then kill you. If not that, then some gang of rapparee will take you into their war band, and you will spend your nights servicing all comers in front of a turf fire in a cave or a hut or on some barren hillside. When you're caught you'll swing alongside all the others. At least the English strumpets who follow the drum eat regularly."

"My father's people are to the north," she said

"If they are anywhere in Connaught then they are either starving on the heath or in arms against England, dead either way. Mary, I just spent the last year in Donegal. There's nothing left up there, believe me. We made sure of that. Munster is a garden by comparison. Please, come back to Kilmallock with me. I give you my word, which I never broke in my life, that I won't compel you

to become my mistress. You'll have to stay in my quarters, do my washing and cleaning and cooking, and make it appear as if we were bundling together, because that is the only status an unmarried woman has in a military camp, but you won't have to share my bed. As soon as I can, I'll get you to England and from there back to France. There's nothing for you here in Ireland except suffering and death. You won't get another chance like this, lass."

"I understand that," she sighed. "I don't know if you're telling me the truth, but very well. I will go with you. If you break your word and rape me I'll run away, and you'll have to let me go or kill me. Also, I want you to pay me something, even if it's only a few token pennies. That way I will be your servant, not living off your charity, not your whore. It won't be the first time I have had to work for a few centimes. When my father died the money ran out, I had to leave school, and I went to work as a seamstress and a housemaid. I still want to die, but you're right, the Church does forbid suicide."

"I thought you said you were Huguenot?"

"I am, sometimes. I can also be *bonne Catholique* to get along. It depends on who I'm with at the time."

"With an attitude like that, both faiths want you dead!" laughed Denzil.

"Yes, I know. Let us go now." She looked at the long, low mound of stones. "I will never see their resting place again, never place a flower on it. Dear God, life is cruel!"

"Life is actually rather pleasant," said Denzil, stamping out the small fire. "People are cruel, Mary."

"Even you? You saved my life and you've promised me my honour. If you keep your word to me when you've no need to, then you must be good man. Sometimes."

"There are those who would disagree," said Denzil with a bitter chuckle. He helped her mount pillion on Incitatus. "It will be a short ride back to my detachment's camp, then a longer one back to Kilmallock," he told her. "I'll get you a mule to ride on but you'll have a painful time, I'm afraid. You will be feeling those bruises for a while."

"Sir," she said, "I will be feeling these bruises for the rest of my life."

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## XII.

The Tenth wintered that year in new barracks at Kilmallock, their brigade a vital link between Cork and Limerick. They were highly regarded by Dublin Castle for the damage that they had inflicted against O'Neill, who had been forced back into the northwest barrens of Sligo and Mayo. Munster was now officially free of rebel activity and open for Protestant settlement, should any care to come.

Miles showed no interest in Mary other than a perfunctory interview where he accepted her assertion that she was a Huguenot refugee who had come to France as a just such a Protestant settler, whom Denzil had rescued from a lethal encounter with Irish outlaws. "I told him more or less the truth," she reported to Denzil. "I said my father was Irish and a Catholic, and he had me educated by Irish Carmelites so that I would learn my country's history and language, but that my mother was a Huguenot and that I have become staunch in the reformed faith, renouncing all Romish error, all the usual things I say when I'm being examined for Protestant orthodoxy. I threw in a few Scriptures to make it sound authentic."

"And he bought it?" mused Denzil. "Odd."

"He said he wanted to make sure I was sufficiently genteel and educated to be your mistress," Mary laughed. "What was the phrase he used? 'Worthy of a New Model officer's patronage and protection' was the way he put it. I don't think he's really very interested in me."

"Oh, he's interested," said Denzil.

Mary's presence signaled a general relaxation of the no-fraternization rule. The soldiers were men, and men needed women. The English imports from the stews of London and Bristol had never fully filled the need, either in quantity or quality, and by now their ranks had been attenuated through natural wastage. Some ran away, some married their soldier clients, some died of sickness or in childbirth, some were executed for theft or stabbing their customers in drunken quarrels. There were now a number of Irish women living in the lines, many with children, washing and cooking and swiving for the soldiers. Denzil himself found this out when he walked through his troopers' line of huts beneath the timbered walls of the palisade which had been built up above a fosse. Colonel Bradford had designed the stockade, based on forts he had seen

in Massachusetts and New Amsterdam on the American frontier, where Indian attacks were common.

Wending his way through the huts and around a corner, he came on a scene of domesticity unexpected in that rude setting. A dragoon was sitting on a stool in front of a wattle and daub hut, a pot over a cooking fire emitted a delicious smell of stew, and several small children in ragged Irish tunics were playing in the dirt. It was Corporal Syme, Denzil's former orderly, a man who had swung Irish infants by their feet and bashed out their brains against tree trunks, and held the faces of Irish women under the water of ponds and streams while they thrashed and died. Yet now he knelt on the ground playing with a small Irish boy, shooting marbles with musket balls. A slim brown-haired girl was stirring the pot. She looked up in fear as she saw Denzil. Syme stood up, and he and his commanding officer looked at one another. There was no need for comment.

"What if we have to go out again, Jack?" asked Denzil.

"I looks at it like this, Colonel sir," said Syme slowly. "If a rapparee comes at me wiv an axe or a sword, that's one thing. But that other, what we been doin'....I ain't going to do that no more." He looked Denzil in the eye. "Colonel, you know if you was to order me to charge the gates of hell itself I'd do it. Any man in the Tenth would. But I've had enough of that other, what we been doin'. No more. I ain't going to let anyone hurt her, or this little 'un. It ain't right."

"No, Jack, it isn't right," agreed Denzil with a sigh. "We don't belong here. But what about when the regiment goes home? The government won't let you take her to England unless she turns Protestant, and even if she did she'd be miserable there."

"I figger to take me discharge in Dublin, sir. They's giving away land in Ireland these days, and I'll get me some, or work for a master joiner in Dublin. I was a journeyman in Coventry, but there's no work there anymore. Nobody has any money. That's why I went for a soldier. You'll square things up with Colonel Pelham, sir? I ain't the only one with a Sheena in the lines now. You got one yourself, you know how it is."

"Try to keep them away from the castle," said Denzil. "I doubt Colonel Pelham is so blind as to be unaware of what is going on, but watch out for that Puritan ass Bradford. He and some of those Grindalls in the Sussex might make trouble."

"I reckon we can handle any trouble from that lot, sir," said Syme confidently.

"One more thing, Jack. Pass the word good and strong: *no priests!* For God's sake, don't let any of these girls talk you into letting a priest into the lines or having the Mass sung anywhere Bradford or Pelham might hear of it."

"I calculate there's a few skulking about, sir," said Syme. "A couple of the Sheenas had babies and took them away into the woods at night. Rumour says 'twas for Papist baptising."

"Lovely! If Bradford hears of that he'll turn it into a witches' sabbath, and if Pelham hears of it he'll have me leading the congregation in homage to the Black Man. Damn! Shagging Sheenas is only a morals charge, but mucking about with Popery is a political offence, and if you get dragged into it I can't help you. Understand?"

"Aye, sir. I'll do my best to make Rosie understand as well, but she don't speak much English."

"Rosie?" asked Denzil. "How did you make that out?"

"Roisìn," spoke up the girl softly, her eyes downcast.

"My own lady speaks Irish," said Denzil. "I'll send her down to act as interpreter. I need to have some idea of how many of these women there are, and some way of communicating with them so I can tell them what to do to stay safe."

Thus Mary filled a badly needed gap. Since she was the only fluent speaker of both English and Irish in the camp she was often of use. Sometimes even Miles Pelham requested her services to communicate his orders to labourers in Gaelic, or to translate occasional written documents. She settled in and became Denzil's housekeeper, maintaining his hut and bedding and clothing in unwonted states of cleanliness and neatness. She was a very good cook, and served him up spicy French dishes which she somehow managed to create out of the camp rations and whatever the quartermasters and army cooks could scrounge. Denzil's hut had become a kind of unofficial mess for Rutland, Smeaton, Carey, and half a dozen other ex-Royalist officers. With Mary's exotic pottages, this circle tended to grow. Denzil began to look forward to his meals and to flesh out a bit. She mended his torn garments and scolded him for not taking care of them. She learned to polish his leather and brass and steel as

well as any orderly, so that his burnished cuirass shone on the parade ground and his boots gleamed. His turf cabin was swept, aired, and free from lice.

From Lord Fairfax, Denzil received a warm letter of commendation, and a large canvas-wrapped box of the Cuban *cigarros* he had so enjoyed at their last meeting. The same courier, a middle-aged captain named Coverdale who had fought for King Charles, quietly stopped by Denzil's hutment in the dark of night, and from a concealed pocket in his vest he drew a second document, unsigned and in an unknown hand. The second letter detailed political developments back home. The previous spring, Cromwell had dismissed Parliament itself at the point of a sword, crying out "Begone! Ye have sat here too long!", the only thing Oliver Cromwell ever said that Denzil agreed with. "Now the Lord Protector rules alone in isolation," said Coverdale as he sat in Denzil's hut over a tankard, his face shadowed in the dim firelight. He glanced over at Mary, who sat in a corner sewing. Denzil nodded his head wordlessly, and the visitor took this as a signal to continue. "He is making clumsy attempts to keep English Catholics out of Royalist conspiracy by granting them greater civil and religious liberty."

"Thus angering his Puritan and Protestant following," commented Denzil.

"Noll has angered the great Catholic powers of Spain and France with his policies of murder and repression here in Ireland, Colonel. Even though the Hell or Connaught policy is now effectively over, the damage to England's international reputation is done. But there is more folly. In a deed of inexplicable lunacy, Cromwell has also destroyed our relationship with the only other major Protestant power in the world, the Netherlands. He has initiated a petty and greedy trade war with the Dutch at the behest of certain London mercantile interests. These interests profit, but Cromwell doesn't and England doesn't," said the agent. "Shipping is now unsafe, what with men-o'-war and privateers cruising the sea lanes."

"Would one of those London mercantile interests be a Hereford knight named Sir Francis Staton?" asked Denzil.

"You are well informed, sir. Finally, in an act that defies rational analysis, Cromwell has also allowed the Jews to return to England, as partial repayment for massive loans with which he financed his military campaigns and paid the army. He has given Jewish bankers extensive mortgages on former Crown lands and even such of the Crown jewels as Queen Henrietta was unable to get to France."



"Thus horrifying Protestants and Catholics alike, and putting paid for all time to any pretense that his régime is based on Christian principles," chuckled Denzil. "This is getting better and better! He has slapped every Christian man and woman in England of whatever observance right in the face! Go on."

"In his attempt to conciliate every minority and stabilize his government by being all things to all men, the Lord Protector has failed wretchedly. His policies contain something to offend everyone and satisfy no one completely. The good will of the people of England is eroding, fast. He is still popular with the army, since he has maintained them in existence and stripped the country bare to pay for their upkeep, and he has been fortunate in that we have won a series of brilliant victories at sea against the Dutch. Admiral Blake is turning out to be something of a naval genius. But economically, Cromwell is floundering. Inflation is on the rise at home, for the first time in living memory. All the minimum wage levels and price controls established by royal edict and set by charters in the olden times have been revoked, every safeguard and privilege for the poor which has been enshrined in tradition down through the centuries has been swept away."

"Unemployment?" put in Denzil keenly.

"Widespread and rising, Lieutenant Colonel. Groups of jobless men tramp the countryside with their families in tow, homeless, hostile, and aggressive. Crime is running rampant and every gallows is heavy-laden. Debtors and their families are seized and herded onto slave hulks for Virginia and Barbados."

"My Lord Fairfax judged the situation well," said Denzil. "Cromwell is an idol with feet of clay. Someday soon, he will fall."

"How are your relations with Colonel Bradford of the Sussex?" asked Coverdale. "You have realized, I presume, that he was brigaded with your regiment to keep a watch on you?"

"Aye. Fortunately, like so many Puritans Bradford is prone to the sin of gluttony and the result is that he has intermittent bouts of gout, which keep him confined to more comfortable quarters up in the castle. It keeps him out of our lines down here and limits his officious interference in military matters, to the relief of everyone. The man is foolhardy, stupid as a bull, and left in command he would have blundered into a dozen Irish ambushes before now. I'm surprised the Red Indians in America never scalped him. Perhaps that's where he acquired the habit of wearing his hair cropped so short."

"Lord Fairfax also asked how you were getting on with your new Colonel."

"We have reached a *modus vivendi*," said Denzil carelessly. "He watches me and I watch him. One day when the time is right, he will kill me or I will kill him."

After Coverdale had gone Mary asked him quietly, "I don't know what it is exactly you're involved in, but do you think it's wise?"

"It's not a matter of wisdom or unwisdom, Mary. It is a matter of duty. I have no choice."

"Thank you," she said.

"Eh? For what?"

"For trusting me to overhear such a conversation, even though I didn't fully understand what it was about."

"Is my trust misplaced?" he asked.

"No. I won't say anything to anyone." Denzil watched her by the fire. Now that her bruises had subsided she was truly lovely, with a finely chiseled face, clear green eyes and a slender waist below high breasts which swelled her bodice. At night she slept in a bedroll by the fire, while he used the wooden bedstead. Denzil kept his promise scrupulously, and made no advances to her. Once he came back to the hut while she was bathing in the canvas hip-bath which doubled as a laundry-vat, and he caught a tantalizing glimpse of her creamy shoulders and breasts. She had blushed and covered herself modestly, and he had apologized and withdrawn, but from then on he had eyed the supple lines of her body beneath the gown of wool while she worked or slept. He began to regret his promise, but made no attempt to violate it. Rape had never appealed to him. His power was in his guns, real power to deal out death in heavy doses, and he had no need to prove himself by forcing a woman, nor could he ever understand what fulfillment other men got from it.

Denzil also discovered that he enjoyed simply talking with her. She had received a surprisingly eclectic and high quality education at the Carmelite convent, something her father had insisted on. Denzil did not fully understand why. There was no point in educating a woman to that degree other than the highest of nobility, which a char in the homes of Protestant Paris bourgeoisie certainly was not. Mary's flexibility on religious matters bemused Denzil, pragmatic agnostic though he was. She appeared to be equally at home with

Roman Catholicism or with Protestant worship. She could trade Scriptural homilies with the sour chaplain of the Sussex regiment, who thought the world of her and who dared to admonish Denzil to make an honest woman of her, but she could also recite Aves or Paternosters with the camp women in Irish or in Latin. Denzil had to have a serious talk with her when he heard she was doing this. "It's simple," she said. "When I am around Catholics I'm a Catholic so they won't burn me, and when I am among Protestants I'm a Huguenot so they won't hang me."

"It didn't stop them from hanging you once," Denzil returned, exasperated. "Mary, I can't find it in me to be angry with you for showing kindness to those women. None of us wants to be here, them least of all, but can you not understand what a terrible risk you are taking, endangering yourself, and me, and them as well? If Bradford or Miles Pelham hear about you leading Roman Catholic prayers in a New Model Army encampment, there is going to be more trouble than you can imagine. I won't let them hurt you, and men like Syme aren't going to let them turn out all their Rosies and Maureens and the children. If it comes down to it we are going to have a bloody pitched battle right here in camp between my men and the Sussex regiment. It will probably come to that one day, but when it does I want it to happen in the name of King Charles the Second, not some soldier's Irish doxy!"

"Have you any idea how terribly hurt and lonely and confused those women are, how they hate themselves?" Mary asked him. "In most cases their husbands were killed by the English, although to tell the whole truth some were also murdered by O'Neill and his men. Their homes have been destroyed, their families are scattered or dead, and they have lost everything they ever had. Now the only way they can survive is to give themselves as slaves and concubines to men whom they fear and despise as heretics, while their children learn foreign ways and a foreign tongue. If the boys grow up in a barracks they may well come to trail a musket and kill other people for the English shilling. I am French born and only came to Ireland a short time ago, but already I hate what you people have done to this land."

"Do you hate me, Mary?" asked Denzil gently.

"No, Den," she sighed. "How could I? You saved my life. There are times when I still wish you'd never come along and I'd died down by the river. I'm the same as the others. I've given myself to one of my nation's enemies in exchange for life and food and safety, at least as far as everyone in camp believes. I personally don't believe God cares at all whether we pray in Latin or sing hymns in our own language or whether there are rails around the altar, but for some of these women and girls sheltering here the only consolation they

have got is the belief that so long as they stay Catholic in their hearts, God will forgive them and won't torture them in hell as they have been tortured on earth."

"I understand. I hope you understand that if it were up to me I would never deny them that consolation," Denzil told her. "But Mary, you must at least be circumspect. Winter is coming on now, and we're all going to be in close quarters. No good at all can come of forcing this issue. What is going to happen in spring, I don't know. We may be kept on as garrison, but at some point I am going to have to settle some personal matters of mine, and I will have to leave the regiment. When that happens I want you to come with me. I haven't forgotten my promise to get you back to France. As for the others, some may take Syme's solution and settle here in Ireland, or perhaps emigrate to Virginia with their Irish camp wives, but most of them will end up being dumped by the roadside again when the regiment pulls out. War causes more casualties than those who fall in battle, Mary."

"I know," she said. "All anyone really wants is to be left alone, but they won't. The priests and nuns and kings and lords and generals and preachers and judges and lawyers, the parliaments and the tax collectors and the officials who wave pieces of paper about and make people miserable. They're all horrid little people, really, because they can't be happy unless everyone else is doing what they're told. All these functionaries have nothing in their own lives, and if it weren't for telling everyone else what to do, they'd all shrivel up and blow away."

"Oddly enough, I understand exactly what you mean," laughed Denzil.

On Christmas night, Denzil sat in his cabin sipping a mug of sour ale. Mary sat on a small stool by the fire, sewing a shirt for him. "You really should buy some new linen," she importuned him. "I can't keep on patching your clothes for you when you wear them until they fall off. The army pays you, at least sometimes they do, but you won't spend any money to dress decently."

"Where am I going to buy gentlemanly attire in the middle of an Irish war zone?" demanded Denzil. "You've seen the stuff these Irish weavers in Kilmallock turn out."

"That's because you people killed all the sheep, so all the weavers can get is horsehair and fleeces from wild goats," she said. "Some of the Irish girls in the lines have a few scraps of garments which were made before Cromwell came, and it's better than any fabric made in England or Flanders. But you can order

new shirts and jackets from Cork. While you're doing so, I need some new dresses. If we're to maintain the pretence that I'm your mistress you should start treating me like it and stop making me go about in frayed wool and unbleached linen."

"The Irish burned all the spinning mills and bleach greens in Coleraine and Portadown years ago," said Denzil, puffing on his pipe. "Ordering satin and velvet from England will pauperize me. God's bones, woman, you're supposed to be my baggage, not my wife! You'd think we were married the way you nag sometimes."

"Reverend Cullipher says we ought to be wed," said Mary.

"And I suppose that priest who's hiding in Kilmire forest says the same thing?" asked Denzil.

"As a matter of fact, he does," replied Mary, her voice strained. She stopped sewing and gazed into the fire. There was a silence

"Even if you'd agree, which you'd be bloody mad to, I think too much of you to do that to you, Mary," said Denzil after a time, watching his pipe smoke curl in the still air. "Too much unfinished business. I've got a millstone chained around my neck, lass, and it will only grow heavier with each passing year. That aside, there are practical objections. This wretched sod roof and these camp rations are all I'll ever be able to offer you, and they aren't enough. You deserve better than me, Mary. The woman was never born who doesn't deserve better than me."

"I know you want me," she said quietly. "You could have had me any time since I've been here. I'm in no position to object. All I could have done would have been to run away. I'm not sure I would have done even that."

"That's not the way I play the game, Mary," he said

"No, so it would seem," she agreed. "I have heard stories about you in camp. They say you sold your soul to Satan, which I don't believe any more. They say you kill quickly and unerringly and with no more regret than if you'd crushed a flea, and I know that's true. But you didn't kill me. I have had nothing but kindness from you. You live with me in the same hut, you have me completely in your power, yet you don't force me to lie with you, and you've never beaten me once, even when you were in a bad mood. How can you be the same man who has done such terrible things?"

"The people I killed in England were traitors. I regret the Irish I've slain, for they were only defending their homes and their people. I chose to come here and place myself in their way as a target, so I can't very well hold any grudges against them for trying to kill me. If I hadn't come here, someone else would have done, and maybe a lot more of these farm lads and out-of-work men in this regiment would have died when they only joined the army to eat. It's a bad world, Mary, and I'm a bad man. I've never concealed that from you. I know in my heart what I have to do, and I do it."

"But why?" she asked.

"In order to live up to what I expect from myself. I'm sorry, that's the best explanation I can give you."

There was a rattle at the door and Denzil snatched up a pistol, but the door opened in a freezing burst of cold and snowy air to admit Miles Pelham, wrapped in a heavy winter cloak. He closed the door and stamped the snow off his boots. "Put it away, Redmond," he said with a sardonic smile. "Tonight is not the night. I am not drunk and looking for the chamber pots."

"The picquets are posted on the fosse and in the towers, and the horses are fed and bedded down," Denzil told him. "As per the orders of Colonel Bradford, twenty men are patrolling the village and the regimental lines on the lookout for any holly, mistletoe, or other indications of idolatrous observance. They will be conducting spot checks among the Irish households to look for any suspiciously large logs in the hearth or excessive meat on the table, not that there is likely to be any surfeit either of fuel or food in these wretched hovels where we keep our civil Irish. I detailed godly men from the Sussex Horse for this pious duty, since I'm sure they won't object to trudging through the snow and freezing their assorted extremities off in furtherance of the Lord's work."

"They won't, you know," Miles replied. "I am making the rounds of the camp myself, in fact, to ensure that no manifestations of unseemly recusancy are present, possibly influenced by some of the unsuitable female companionship the men of your unit have taken up."

"You are the Colonel of that unit, sir," Denzil reminded him.

"And what will I find when I tour the lines of my regiment, Redmond?"

"Probably a good deal of drunkenness and a bit of jolly familiarity. I don't mind that kind of thing, although you probably do. You've made no friends in the regiment but to give you your due, you've made no serious enemies either. The lads need no mistletoe to kiss their wenches, I ween, and if you'd rather they be kissing English wenches then write a letter to Old Noll and tell him to get off his arse and bring us home. As you can see, my own quarters are suitably sombre as befits an officer of God's own bloody Commonwealth. You may recall that I have my own way of celebrating Christmas."

"A vile jape, and blasphemous as well, which shall be added to your account. But you're right, these are sombre surroundings, drab indeed for so illustrious an occupant."

"Illustrious?" said Denzil, irked. "Sounds like you've been supping a bit of Christmas wassail yourself, Colonel."

Miles ignored him, and to Denzil's astonishment he turned and bowed low to Mary. "Good night to you, my lady," he said, without a trace of irony or sarcasm in his voice. Then he turned back into the snow-filled night, closing the door behind him. Denzil tossed another log and a couple of lumps of turf on his hearth fire.

"Stupid ass," he said.

"What is this hatred between you?" asked Mary. "I feel it every time you are together."

"It goes way back, Mary, back to England and things done a lifetime ago. I'll not say more."

"Is it something to do with Katherine?" asked Mary, to Denzil's utter shock.

"What the devil do you know about Katherine?" he asked sharply.

"Not much. You talk in your sometimes. I only know I wouldn't want to be Katherine, that's all." She gazed into the fire for a time. "Denzil, he knows about me."

"Eh? Knows what about you?"

"I suppose I had best tell you. It's time. You've been good to me, Denzil. You've kept your word to me, and now I have become a danger to you."

You're going to be angry with me and possibly you are going to hate me."  
Tears welled briefly in her eyes

"Tell me," said Denzil. "Tell me why you came to Ireland. I guessed long ago that there is more to that story than you have admitted. What's Pelham found out?"

Mary sighed. "I told you my father was an officer in the French army. You never asked who he was."

"I assumed he was a soldier in the Wild Geese, Mazarin's elite Irish corps. There are a lot of Irish exiles serving in the various Catholic armies of Europe."

"Not many named O'Donnell," said Mary. "That should have warned you, although you don't know much Irish history. Few Englishmen do. My father was the commanding general of the Wild Geese. His name was Rory More O'Donnell. His father, my paternal grandfather, was Red Hugh O'Donnell, Earl of Tyrconnell and hereditary Prince of Donegal, descended from the High Kings of Tara and from Somerled, Lord of the Isles. He was the foremost war leader under the rebel Earl of Tyrone during the time of Elizabeth, the Irish commander at the Battle of the Yellow Ford, the last among the Ulaidh to surrender when defeat finally came. In 1607 he sailed away from Ireland with along with Tyrone and the entire surviving Gaelic chieftainship of Ulster. My father sailed on the same ship, a baby in arms. They called it the Flight of the Earls."

In a flash Denzil remembered the dull history lessons his tutor had pounded into him during the long afternoons in the Whitewood schoolroom. "The Red Earl of Tyrconnell? The one who married the Lady Grace Stuart, natural daughter to King James the First?" he demanded incredulously.

"The very one, although the proper term for my grandmother would be bastard."

"Sweet Jesu!" breathed Denzil. "Then King James was your great-grandfather! Charles the Second is your cousin! *You're a royal Stuart!*" In awe he went down on one knee before her and kissed her hand. She laughed and kissed him back on the cheek, then rose and pulled him to his feet, embracing him.

"Don't be a dramatic fool, sir! It's true King Charles is a distant cousin of mine on the wrong side of the blanket, but I very strongly doubt he is even aware of my existence. I am not a princess, I'm your laundress and your cook,



and in the eyes of the world I'm your doxy as well! My royal blood comes from a poor little girl who lived a very unhappy life long ago. She was pushed aside and practically hidden in a closet in Edinburgh until she was thirteen years old, when her father, whom she had seen perhaps three times in her entire life, decided he wanted to stir some trouble for Queen Elizabeth of England. So he killed two birds with one stone, getting rid of her by shipping her off to a political marriage with an Irish clan chieftain more than twice her age, whom James no doubt privately considered to be a savage. On my mother's side, my ancestors were blacksmiths and wheelwrights in La Rochelle, not kings. It will be a long time before I sit on any thrones, dear."

"Yet the royal blood is there, madam, and in sufficient quantity to make you a wanted woman by this government," said Denzil urgently. "Even more wanted by the rebels, for they would revere you as a princess of Fine Tir Conaill---damnation! So that's why you people were headed for Connaught when the Norfolks caught you at that river ford! You were trying to reach O'Neill! Mary, you must tell me all of it!"

"Yes, I will tell you all," she said with a sigh. "I really didn't want to do it, Den. I wanted to stay in France. But you must try to understand how poor and miserable we were after my father died and my mother took me home, how persecuted and outcast the Huguenots are in France. I might have kept on with my education, gotten a small dowry from the French court, possibly even married some provincial gentleman with a small chateau in some remote part of the country, but the Sisters demanded that I renounce my Protestant family and their faith. I couldn't do that to Maman. Later Father Brendan found me. He was that young priest who died with Maman and Granpere by the river that day. He was most persuasive." She smiled in remembrance.

"He was your lover?" asked Denzil gently.

"He could have been, for the asking. But he was dedicated to a higher service, not just the Church. It was Ireland he loved most of all. He wanted me to rejoin my father's people. Denzil, I came to this country for the same reason my grandmother did, to contract a political marriage. To Liam Bann O'Neill, the rebel leader."

"Christ's bones!" exclaimed Denzil with a whistle. "How did this priest plan on getting O'Neill and O'Neill's followers to accept a Protestant bride?"

"Oh, I was to go fully Roman, of course. It wasn't just politics with Brendan. He spent most of the trip to Dieppe and then on the small smuggler's ship that

brought us here arguing theology with me, in the most gentle and charming way, trying to convert me. He wanted to save my soul. I'm sure he wanted my body as well, but he took his priestly vows seriously. That's two honourable men I've known in Ireland."

"Honourable he may have been, but it was a lunatic scheme, doomed to failure!" exclaimed Denzil. "Your Protestant mother and grandfather went along with this?"

"Henri Quatre said that Paris was worth a mass," Mary replied. "To make a long story short, they decided that the chance of me becoming a queen in the Irish bogs was worth a mass. Oh, I know how it sounds, Den, and you're right, it was quite mad. I think we knew it. All I can say is that when a young girl is poor and miserably unhappy, and cozened by a handsome young man with persuasion and flattery, she does stupid things."

"You could never have defeated the New Model Army, but once your identity became known you certainly could have raised one last upsurge of holy hell in Ireland," mused Denzil. "You would have been the first of Tyrconnell to return since the Flight of the Earls, and your marriage to a descendant of Hugh O'Neill of Tyrone would have been a deeply symbolic act, especially in Ulster. The Irish would have thought they had their Earls and chiefs back. It wouldn't have lasted long, but it would have been a damned hot fire while it burned, and it would have consumed what little is left of this island. That could still happen, you know. Now Miles has got me dead to rights, harbouring a part-time Catholic and a royal Stuart princess as well here in my own regiment, which is stacked from top to bottom with men who are still loyal to the house of Stuart. He won't have much trouble conjuring a plot out of this."

"What do you think the government will do to me?" she asked anxiously.

"You've just admitted what you came to Ireland to do, Mary," he said grimly. "That's treason. You might have sparked a nasty revolt in Ulster, and the Ulster Protestant settlers are very sensitive about that kind of thing. If Peter Carey finds out, I'll have to kill him to keep him from killing you. The government in London can't possibly let you remain free, Mary. You can cause trouble beyond imagining, just by the fact of your existence. Under the monarchy you'd be imprisoned for life in the Tower. Cromwell kills his own soldiers without hesitation if they dispute his policies, and he murdered King Charles the First. He'll sign your death warrant in a heartbeat."

"Now your colonel has somehow found out who I am, so there's an end to me," she said calmly. "If I'm supposed to be a princess, do you think they'll give the royal privilege of the axe, like King Charles? I hope so. Hanging hurts." She smiled ruefully and fingered the scar that encircled her neck below her jaw.

"You won't die, Mary," said Denzil. He sat down and began pulling on his boots.

"Why not? You just said Cromwell will execute me."

"Thwarting Old Noll is my life's vocation, and I've become quite good at it," said Denzil, checking the priming on his pistols. "Besides, it's time I made another payment on the Pelham family's account. Odd, Christmas seems to be the time when this particular bill falls due."

"I don't understand," said Mary. "What are you going to do?"

"Another woman asked me that a few Christmases ago, or rather a girl she was. I don't have time to explain now, Mary." He took out paper and a quill, warmed the ink in the pot over the candle so it would flow, and then he wrote out a note, folded it, and handed it to her. "If I don't come back, I want you to take this to George Rutland and Andy Smeaton. Tell them exactly what you have told me. I ask them here, for the love they bear me and the duty of our common service to take care of you, and to preserve you from your enemies, who are also the enemies of the king. Bar the door, and admit no one unless it is myself, Captain Rutland or Captain Smeaton."

"Denzil, don't!" she cried. "Whatever you mean to do, don't destroy yourself to save me! You didn't know who you were taking in that day down by the river."

"It would have made no difference if I had, my lady. It was just something I had to do. But this knave Pelham is out for my head however he can get it, and he has finally found his opening. If it hadn't been you it would have been something else, and soon. He had to contrive something before we return to England, and you were but a fortuitous accident. Remember what I said, Mary, and admit no one but myself or my two captains."

Denzil picked up a dark lantern and lit it, then stepped out into the silent snowfall, unusual for the south of Ireland which was famed for moderate winters. Yet he was glad of the unseasonable snow, for it would mask his

purpose admirably. He went to the magazine, where he left the lantern on a hook outside the door, unwilling to risk an accidental explosion. The tin mantle hissed and crackled as snowflakes hit the hot metal. Fumbling in the darkness, he found what he wanted, a segmented iron bomb known as a petard, packed with six pounds of black powder. He slid the bomb into a small burlap sack of the kind used to hold powder charges for the cannon. With the lantern in one hand and the sack in the other, he went in search of Miles Pelham, and found his quarry at a covered sentry post on one corner of the palisade wall. He stepped into the small shack and set the bag down on the floor with a clunk. "What time do you go off watch?" he asked the sentry.

"Another twenty minutes, sir," the man replied.

"Go back to the guardroom now. I need to have a word with Colonel Pelham. We'll cover the post until your relief reports. Send him along at the hour." The trooper shouldered his arquebus and waded off through the snowdrifts, grateful to be heading for the guardroom and the ale keg earlier than he had anticipated. "I suppose you think that you have caught me making that slip you have long awaited?" asked Denzil.

"You refer to your resetting of an Irish noblewoman of particularly dangerous lineage, against the interests of the realm?" said Miles. "A report from Master John Thurloe arrived yesterday from London, by a special messenger whose presence in the camp I took care to conceal from you while he was here. The report was in answer to a query I sent regarding your lovely dulcinea in your cabin, along with a detailed description of her beauteous person and certain discrepancies I remarked in her story. Her French is a bit too educated for a demoiselle of the Huguenot artisan class, and I simply didn't buy her tale about her father teaching her Irish out of sentiment. There could be no conceivable need for her to learn an obscure language spoken by a barbarous people on the edge of the world, unless someone felt that she would need it someday. Nor did I believe that she and her family were would-be Huguenot planters strolling through the heart of rebel country looking for a likely acre or two, and that you of all people happened to come riding along just in time to save her from the jackeens. I don't know what really happened, and when I first saw her someone certainly had beaten the girl very badly, but I meant to know all and now I do. Master Thurloe is no end keen, let me tell you. Commonwealth intelligence has heard rumours of her impending arrival in Ireland for months, but lost track of her. And where does she turn up? In the middle of the Tenth Dragoons, a regiment whose loyalty is suspect, to put it mildly. In conjunction with your careful assemblage over the past months of scores of former Royalists in this regiment, a very sinister construction indeed

can be placed on all of this. You wouldn't know anything about plots, would you, Redmond? Heaven forfend!" Miles was gloating, unable to restrain his glee.

He was also not telling the full story. Denzil's mind raced. Why had he not been arrested? The despatch from London would surely have included an order for Mary and himself to be detained. Miles spoke of the messenger from London in the past tense, so he had been sent on. To where? To Cork or more likely to Limerick, for reinforcements, because Miles knew full well that the Royalist Tenth would resist any attempt to pack their revered commander and a beautiful Stuart princess off in chains to their death. Miles quite rightly didn't feel sufficiently confident to risk arresting them now, with only the Sussex to back him up. If Miles had been able to resist making that foolish obeisance to Mary in the cabin, and further resist blabbing about his triumph now, then Denzil might have been taken by surprise. Mayhap the devil did indeed look after his own. Denzil hung his lantern on a nail in the wall, and calmly removed the petard from its burlap carrier. Miles's eyes widened. "What are you doing with that?"

Denzil held the eighteen-inch fuse to the lantern wick and lit it. "You are a fool, Miles, and you are about to pay folly's fee," he said calmly. "I am going to live to carry out multifarious plots which will render sweet sister's life an unspeakable nightmare from which she will not awaken. You won't be around to see it happen, which is a pity, for I intend to do it with a style and a panache that you alone of all the Pelhams are capable of appreciating. I'm going to kill you now, Miles. This bomb is going to detonate in a few seconds. Your only hope is to draw on me yourself. If you can kill me first then perhaps you can toss this before it explodes."

"You're mad!" said Miles, his face suddenly sweating in the torchlight. He glanced down and started, for a small French dag pistol was in Denzil's left hand.

"Conjuror's trick," explained Denzil. "Misdirection. You were so busy staring at the bomb and the fuse you didn't see me slip out this little toy. It is the gun which will kill you."

Miles gibbered and clawed for one of his pistols. Denzil shot him between the eyes, splattering bone and brain over the back wall of the guard shack. Miles was dead before he hit the floor, but he had managed to cock one of his weapons partially, and the flintlock slipped out of his grip and fired the handgun into his own leg, the muzzle flash setting his trousers on fire. The two

reports nearly deafened Denzil in the close confines of the shack, and he inhaled choking powder fumes. He carefully laid the spluttering grenade on Miles's smouldering corpse, then grabbed up Pelham's other pistol and fired it out into the snow through the small open window. He drew his own two Zelnors and blasted away into the darkness, the muzzle flashes illuminating the wet falling snowflakes. He ran out the door of the shack shouting for the guards, leaping headlong through the snow. A roar erupted as the petard exploded within the shack, sending splintered wood and iron fragments whizzing through the air, wounding one of the sentries who came running, raising a cloud of steaming melted snow vapourised by the heat and the smoke from the now burning wooden hut.

Mary was awake when he returned just before dawn. "In God's name, what has happened?" she asked urgently. "I heard shots and then an explosion, then more shooting and some kind of riot."

"A night attack by the Irish," said Denzil, setting down a leather pouch on the table. He sat down and pulled off his wet boots, setting them in front of the fire to dry, then stripped off his snow-sodden garments. "The clever devils no doubt thought they could catch us befuddled with Christmas cheer. They crept up on the barracks and grenaded a guard post, then escaped. The regiment turned out, but for some reason a good many of them were drunk. I can't imagine why. Military regulations clearly forbid celebrations of idolatrous Romish holidays and the excessive consumption of strong drink. There was a lot of wild shooting. Three men were slightly wounded, and one was killed, Colonel Miles Pelham. A sad loss to God's Commonwealth."

"Did you have to kill him?" cried Mary dismally. "Did you have to put another life on my conscience?"

"Yes, madam, as a matter of fact I *did* have to kill him. He was planning on killing both of us. His life is not on your conscience, my lady, it is on his own. He came to this land with the intention of doing me harm. Whether he is now plunking a harp with the cherubim, or sizzling in hell, or mucking about with a three-headed dog at the gates of the Underworld, or whether his soul shall be transmigrated into the body of a blowfly in Araby, he has only his own decisions to thank for dying tonight. In the name of all common sense, don't mourn him, Mary! This idea that all human life is of equal value is fatuous nonsense. Human lives most certainly do have different value, and other human beings must make the appraisal every day. Your life is more precious to me than a thousand of his. Or do you still want to die?"

"No," she said quietly. "Not any more."

"Then I am proud and happy to have been of service, my lady. What changed your mind?"

"I changed my mind while I sat here waiting, wondering if you were coming back, if I would ever see you again. I changed my mind when I realized that I love you."

Denzil had been pouring himself a tankard of cider to mull, for he needed a hot drink. He stopped and looked at her. She sat calmly of the stool by the fire, her face expressionless. "Are you sure you want to tell me that?" he asked. "I am probably not capable of returning your love, or anybody else's. I have some deep moral obligation to you that I don't understand, although it is also my duty as an English subject to my country's royal house to help you. Do you understand that you are making a very bad mistake?"

"If I am, I will pay the price," she said. "I won't press you over your feelings towards me, now or ever. Just don't make me leave you. I will do anything you want, just let me be with you."

"You understand that I have blood on my hands now, and there will be more blood in the future?"

"Yes. God forgive me."

Denzil sat down the tankard and walked over to her. His voice was hoarse, his hands trembling. "Stand up!" he croaked, swallowing. She stood. He made a vague gesture with his hand. "I want you naked. Quickly, or I will rip it off you." She slid the gown off her shoulders, then pulled the linen shift over her head in a fluid motion. She was the whitest of carven marble, perfect breasts tipped with pink nipples rearing hard and pointed, flat belly and loins in curved shadow, firm round buttocks and slim, muscled legs. Denzil dropped his trousers and stepped out of them, and Mary pulled off his shirt. He pushed her down onto her back on the straw mattress of his cot, then lowered himself down on top of her. It was done in silence except for a wild cry of bestial pleasure from Mary when he entered her, and another when the explosion racked her flesh. He wouldn't stop, pumping into her, bringing her to wrenching climax again and again until her arching naked body roiled and slid against his, sweat soaking into the palliasse. Finally his own time came, and for long minutes afterward he gripped her, pressing his body against hers as if trying to meld them together. Their breathing finally became more even. Gray

dawn filtered in through the shutters of the narrow cabin windows, and the sounds of men stirring outside were heard. "I won't always be that rough," he said.

"You waited a long time, sir. What are we going to do now?"

"I took the liberty of rifling Miles Pelham's quarters after his untimely demise," said Denzil, pointing to the leather pouch on the table. "There is Thurloe's report on you, and also the warrants for the arrest of both of us. We're going to have to get you out of here, out of Ireland. All of us, the entire regiment. It's going to be the Tenth against the Sussex, and maybe against our own third troop and the Scots artillery as well. I have no idea how Archie Robertson is going to take all this, and I know Peter Carey isn't going to order his men to fight against British Protestants in order to save an Irish princess."

"Perhaps you're mistaken there," said Mary. "Perhaps Sinéad can convince him."

"Who?"

"Sinéad. The Irish woman Captain Carey has been living with in his cabin for the past two months."

"That staunch Ulster Kirk man? Bloody hell! Although if all Irish women make love like you did just now, I'm not surprised even Carey's heart of stone was melted. Why didn't I know this?"

"I'm sure you've seen Sinéad around camp. Tall, black hair with a grey streak running through it, an older woman but still quite beautiful. She has a daughter about my age who's bundling with Captain Smeaton."

"Now Evie I know, all right."

"Actually it's Aoife," said Mary. "I think Sinéad will agree with the idea of getting out of Ireland. You have to realize that these women in camp who have taken up with English soldiers to save themselves and their children are now marked forever in the eyes of their own people, as whores and traitors. They understand that when the regiment goes back to England they are going to be left behind. They can never return to whatever may be left of their clans and villages. They will either be killed outright or driven into the wild, forever outcast." They were both up now. Denzil broke the ice in his basin and gave himself a quick scrub down, before pulling on his now dried clothing. Mary



dropped her shift and her gown back over her head and poked up the fire, throwing on a few lumps of turf.

"Mary, how many of these Irish women and children are there in the camp?"

"About a hundred women and fifty or sixty children," she said. "Every officer has an Irish mistress except for Major Robertson, who doesn't seem interested in anything but his cannon."

"Including Ferguson and Sutherland, the other two Scots gunnery officers?"

"Yes, sisters in fact, two O'Connell girls."

"A lot is going to depend on how the men feel about their Sheenas, if they care for them enough to want to keep them and marry them," ruminated Denzil. "On whether the men care enough to revolt rather than leave them behind here to starvation and death. How many of the women do you guess might turn Protestant if it was their ticket out of Ireland as a legal wife to a soldier?"

"Almost none," replied Mary. "They'll pay with their bodies for food and shelter for themselves and their children, but not with their souls."

"Which means that the only way the men will be able to keep their Irish helpmeets and new families with them will be to take an unofficial departure from this emerald isle. An interesting way to persuade troops to mutiny."

"But then what will we do?" asked Mary anxiously. "Ireland is an island. How do you propose to get a small army of men, women and children off of it?"

"We'll swim if we have to," said Denzil grimly.

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### XIII.

The regiment had stood to arms during the night, and there were many sore heads and hungover troopers. Denzil went the rounds of the encampment, quietly speaking to each officer and asking them to come to his hut within an hour's time. Bradford had already made the first move; the lines of the Sussex Horse were deserted. His men told him that the Puritan regiment had decamped

at dawn and withdrawn into the castle whose forbidding walls towered over the stockade containing the wooden barracks. To his immense relief, Denzil saw that the artillery were still in their park.

"Yon sour bodach wanted the guns hauled up intae the castle," Major Robertson told him. "I dinna like his eye. I'm gang tae wait until I thole me just what the de'il has gang aglae in this camp. Colonel Redmond, I ken weel that there was nothing sweet 'twixt you and Miles Pelham, and I've mah suspicions aboot that affray last nicht where he ended up a mickle deid. If 'twas the jackeens wha did it, then they must hae sprouted wings, for there was nae tracks in the snow beyond the stockade. I didnae like Pelham especially, and I'm willing tae listen tae what ye have tae say. But my guns gang nowhere until I know the reason why."

"Come to my hut and I'll tell you why, Archie. First I have to speak with Peter Carey."

Denzil had decided to brace the Ulster captain separately, since he was unsure how Three Troop would react. He went into their company street, and he saw that the men had their horses saddled, and they stood around the doorways of their huts in cuirass and buffcoat, swords and pistols at their sides. There were about sixty men remaining in the troop after the long, grueling campaign, a hardened veteran force that Denzil didn't want to leave at his back when he left. He entered Carey's hut and found Carey with his two lieutenants sitting at a table, breakfasting on gruel with a few rashers of bacon. Several Irish women worked over the fire or sat on stools, talking softly in Gaelic. One was a tall, handsome woman with long black hair through which a white shock ran. "What's going on, Colonel?" asked Carey without preamble.

"The king's men in the Tenth are leaving," said Denzil, even though he was not yet absolutely certain he spoke the truth. "We'd like for you lads to come with us, but if you choose not to, then I at least need an assurance from you that you won't join Bradford try to prevent us."

"We've been wondering when you lot were going to try something," said Carey. "Colonel, we've been through too many fights and long marches and long night watches together for my lads to turn on you now. We decided long ago we'd not help Bradford when the time came, nor Miles Pelham. But you no longer have a problem with Pelham, do you?"

"It isn't just a personal matter, Peter," said Denzil. "There's something else." Briefly and concisely, he told of Mary's royal lineage and the arrest order

from London. "She is the Prince of Wales's cousin, albeit fourth or fifth removed and on the backhanded side, but a Stuart nonetheless. It's now a matter of our old allegiance, Peter. That allegiance was never yours, but still I'd dearly love to have every man jack of Three Troop. Will you come with me?"

Carey puffed on his pipe. "I'll leave it up to my lads. Most of them are ready for a sea change. As to myself?" He turned to the woman who stood behind him.

"Where will you go, Colonel?" she asked Denzil in softly accented English.

"France, at first, then we all go our separate ways, back to England or the Low Countries, to the prince's court at Breda, wherever. We are experienced soldiers, and we can earn a living. It will be a hard life for you, following the drum, living in garrison towns in a foreign land, but better than anything you could look forward to if you stay behind here in Ireland."

"Andrew Smeaton goes with you?" asked Sinéad.

"Yes." Denzil was sure of Smeaton.

"Aoife must go to France," she told Carey. "She lives in sin, as do I, and for her soul's sake she must take confession and the sacraments often, without being forced to walk miles into a dark forest to do so. I will go with you, wherever you decide."

"I am of Ireland, as are you, *mo chridhe*," said Carey. He turned to Denzil. "We're British and Irish at the same time, if you can understand that, Colonel. I've been to England a few times, but I never really felt at home there. We haven't been paid in months and we are all long overdue for discharge. I think I'll just write out me own papers and be on my way. My brother has some looms and a bleach green in Londonderry, or I might go back to Portadown."

"Bradford may try to punish you for not trying to stop us," warned Denzil.

"Devil take him. If it comes to that, I'll have me a wee carve of those blue-shaven jowls of his."

"Talk to your men, and tell any of them who want to come with us that we pull out at noon," Denzil said. Carey rose and escorted Denzil outside. "Peter, I

don't really have the time, but I have to ask...what's your story?" Denzil nodded back into the cabin. "I thought you hated them all unto death."

"So I did," said Carey, taking a long draw on his pipe and sending a plume of smoke and frosted breath into the crystal cold air. "My story is pretty much the same as yours, I should think. I looked into her eyes before I pulled the trigger. It wasn't that I couldn't have killed her, you understand. I just didn't *want* to anymore. In '41 the jackeens burned my house in Portadown, with my two young children inside it. Before they set it alight they dragged my wife outside, and after they were through with her they pushed her into a pond and held her down with pikes while she drowned. I was never stupid enough to think that killing would bring them back, but I thought it might make them rest easier, and it damned sure made *me* rest easier, for a time. But eventually hatred burns itself out. At least it did in me. Sinéad hates me now, of course, and before God, she's every right to. If she'll stay with me, I'll try to change that, and maybe someday hers will burn out as well. She wants her daughter to go to France with young Andy Smeaton, where she can be a Papist in the open. I wish she wouldn't, because I know that Sinéad will suffer every day and night for lack of her, but from her viewpoint I'm barely one cut above a rapist and I understand that I haven't the right to interfere. Ach, I'm blathering, Colonel, and I know you've got other things on your mind and work to do. But a last word, if you don't mind, sir?"

"And that is?" asked Denzil.

"I've never felt better in my life than when I realized that at long last I had let it all go, that it was all over and done with," said Carey carefully. "We've heard things even over here, about you and Pelham and Pelham's family. We knew when he came to Ireland that one of you wouldn't be leaving. Miles Pelham is dead now, and I'm glad it's not the other way around. Bury it all with Pelham's bones, if you can, sir. Time spent in hatred is wasted time. I of all men can tell you that."

"Well meant and well taken, Peter," said Denzil, clasping the Ulsterman's hand. "Good luck to you."

"And to you, sir. I'll speak with my lads, and I suspect some of them will be along directly."

Denzil's cabin was crowded with a dozen grim-faced men, certain that a confrontation with the Puritans was in the offing. Denzil was reasonably sure of all of them with the exception of the Scots cannoneers, but still he made his

presentation with great care. The surprise of the dragoons when told that they had a royal Stuart princess in their midst was great, but there was no disbelief. The men of the Tenth trusted their leader's word implicitly. His loyalty to the king's cause was openly known, and they immediately assumed that this was part of some arcane plot to restore the monarchy, which was why most of them had agreed to join the Cromwellian army and wear the hated lobster-tailed helmet and orange sash. Denzil passed around the Thurloe report and the arrest warrant for himself and Mary, and these clinched any possible doubt.

Denzil looked fearlessly into the eyes of his assembled officers. "The situation now lies thus," he told them. "Bradford and his tub-thumpers are holed up in the castle. They may make an attempt to apprehend myself and this noble lady, but that would involve an outright attack on the Tenth, and they have seen how we deal with our enemies. For some reason, the godly colonel of the Sussex Horse seems content to remain where he is." There was a low rumble of laughter. "However, in a few days, strong reinforcements will arrive from Cork, or more likely from Limerick. Understand that were I alone in peril over some personal affair of mine, I would never ask a single man of you to hazard your lives in an act of treason against our beloved lords and masters in Whitehall." More laughter. "But it is not merely my own life which is at stake. The regime desires to send my lady Mary to an unjust death at the hands of the executioner, as they did to her uncle King Charles the First of honoured memory. Or else they mean to hold her in durance and use her as a hostage to pressurize our present lord, who in the fullness of time shall be crowned King Charles the Second." Charles had quite likely never even heard of his cousin Mary O'Donnell from the Faubourg Saint Antoine, but Denzil did not burden his men with such speculation. He was painting a picture of a beautiful princess in danger. "Many of you have undertaken this long and perilous service in Ireland very much against the dictates of your conscience, as I have done," he continued. "You have fought a long and bloody campaign to uphold a dictatorship which you detest. You have done this on firm assurances, from myself and from other high and noble persons in England who are known to you, that it was a necessary thing, that someday contingencies might arise wherein you might best serve the realm and the monarchy from here within the enemy's camp. Some of us have given up our lives on foot of those assurances. I say to you now that the time has come! Both your duty to your king, and your honour as Cavaliers and English gentlemen demand that you escort this lady beyond the reach of her enemies, over the seas to France, where all of us may take our rightful places once more in the company of loyal men to await the rightful return of kingship and justice to our homeland. Will you undertake this perilous enterprise with me?"

There was a shout of approval and agreement. Andrew Smeaton drew his sword theatrically and knelt at Mary's feet, offering it to her. "This and all I have is yours, my lady!" he cried. Mary nodded and smiled at him, raising him to his feet. "I thank you so much, *mon capitaine gallant*," she said. "I am so very happy to find such a friend during this time of danger for me." Denzil noted with approval that her bearing was just a bit regal and yet her dress plain, of Protestant sobriety, and she had even managed to find a white wing collar from somewhere. Her speech had taken on a slight but detectable French accent, as opposed to the equally slight but definitely Irish accent with which she normally spoke English. It was just the right combination to impress these men. She fully understood the role that she had to play and the balance she must strike. They had to feel that they were fighting for a Huguenot princess, not an Irish laundress.

"Archie?" asked Denzil. "If you can't go with us, fair enough, but in view of all that your gunners and the men of the Tenth have gone through together, surely you won't fire on us if Bradford orders it?"

The tall, saturnine Scotsman whispered briefly with his battery captains and then stepped forward awkwardly. The Scots were called a dour people, and by and large so they were, but like all dour peoples they were capable of sudden rushes of maudlin sentiment. It was this that Denzil counted on, and rightly. The Major knelt before Mary and kissed her hand. "Lady, tha great-grandsire was Scotland's last king, at least tae say the last wha was born and raised in Scotland, wha was truly of our nation. Were I tae forsake any o' the line of Stuart, especially a lass in need, I could ne'er return to Kirkcudbright or call myself a Scotsman again. Ye shall have the twa batteries, lady, and if Bradford or anyone else tries tae take you they'll get a load of grapeshot in their guts. We'll see ye safely over the seas tae France." It was the longest speech anyone had ever heard Archibald Robertson make.

The officers went among the men and conveyed the situation to them. They were easy to persuade, for Denzil had picked them well. Most of them were veterans of the Royalist army more than willing to tweak Cromwell's nose and who would go wherever Denzil Redmond told them the king was best served. The issue of the Irish concubines was unspoken, but in the forefront of many of the men's minds. Most were sick and tired of the cold and wet and sudden death in Ireland, and found the prospect of France's warm sun and warm wine appealing. A few went along out of a healthy reluctance to stay around and explain to Colonel Bradford why they had done nothing to stop treason and desertion.

Preparations were made quickly. A party of the Sussex Horse who had been off on a foraging expedition returned, and were disarmed and locked in the guardroom. The guns were limbered, and anything which could not be packed in mule panniers, yet which might be useful to a pursuing enemy was destroyed. No carts were to be taken, only pack mules. To Denzil's pleasure, about thirty of the Ulstermen rode over from their lines to join the expedition. Fires were doused, bags were stuffed and possessions rolled up into blankets, fodder shoveled into sacks, and children were snatched up and dressed as warmly as possible. At noon the gates of the cantonment opened. A column of slightly over six hundred people and as many mules and horses struggled forth into the snowdrifts. About three hundred and fifty of the column were fighting men. The rest were drummer boys and powder monkeys, Irish women and children, a few farriers and smiths, and two surgeons with their assistants. There were shouts and a few scattered shots from the castle, but Bradford did not attempt a sortie. "I don't blame him," said Denzil, watching his troops move out, along with Captain Rutland, Captain Smeaton, and Mary O'Donnell who rode beside him on a white mare belonging to the late Colonel Miles Pelham. "From his point of view, where can we go?"

"Where *are* we going, sir?" asked Rutland anxiously. "Have you a plan to get us transport to France?"

"Ireland has warm water ports all along the southern coast," Denzil told him. "We will march south until we reach the sea and then seize whatever is available. We may have to split the regiment up, sending the women and children on to the Continent first in whatever vessels come to hand."

Mary spoke up. "I won't go without you," she said. Further conversation was curtailed when a dark-haired young Irish girl trudged up to the group. She looked up at Smeaton. "I am to go to France with you," she said bleakly.

"You'll go everywhere with me, Evie," said Smeaton softly. "This is a terrible day, but good will come of it for you. I swear it." The girl pulled her shawl over her head and shoulders, then moved away to join the column, forcing her way through the snow. A short distance away, Peter Carey and the remaining thirty-odd Ulster troopers were leaving as well, riding north rather than bandy words with Bradford and military authority. The woman Sinéad rode beside Carey on a mule, and she looked long at the slender figure of her daughter. Aoife did not look back.

The little column climbed the defile in the Ballyhoura hills, heading southeast towards the coast. It was slow going. Fortunately the snow got less deep at the

higher elevations, and the mule teams were able to pull the gun carriages along without getting stuck too often. Denzil rode up and down the line, ensuring that the column stayed together and no one straggled, because now every hand in Ireland was against them, and they had to worry about meeting Roundheads as well as Irish insurgents. After some thought, Denzil had decided to march on the town of Youghal, to the east of Cork city, at the head of the Munster Blackwater. Cork was too big and well garrisoned, but the prosperous whaling and trading port at Youghal could well have ships wintering in the harbour large enough to carry them to Europe.

They rode through the Galtee foothills and across snow-covered gorse downs, through forests and low valleys. At dusk they made a crude fortified encampment in the open, and foraged what firewood they could. It was one of the worst nights Denzil ever spent in the field. The officers shared out saddle rations to all in small, equal proportions, hardtack and cold bacon with a cup of wine per man and woman. It was a night of bright stars in an inky black sky and bitter cold. Many of the men slept standing with their horses, leaning on their necks and hugging them for warmth. The scant firewood was exhausted after midnight, and those who slept in scraped-out hollows in the earth piled up on one another for body heat. A baby died during the night, and Denzil helped Mary and the Irish mother scrape out a grave. Mary recited a few Latin Aves and Paternosters, and they moved on in the light of dawn.

The column marched all that day through clear, wan sunlight that felt totally devoid of any warmth at all, but as the altitude lowered, the snow vanished, and the hard frozen ground made hauling the guns easier. At noon Rutland rode up beside Denzil. "You know we've got company, sir?" he asked. "Rapparee, off on our right flank."

"I know it," replied Denzil. "I caught a glimpse of them at a dip in that ridge back there, moving parallel with us about five hundred yards off. I'd estimate about a hundred of them, mostly polearms and blades with only a few muskets, if they've any powder."

"Do you want me to take Two Troop and do a sweep from the rear?"  
"No. The men and horses are tired and cold and ill-fed, and you'd be charging into broken ground where more of them may be hiding. We're not campaigning now, George, we're running for our lives. Let Oliver Cromwell fight his own war against the Irish from now on. But we'll be coming to a ford in the Blackwater in a few miles, and we're going to be vulnerable. Break out the muskets."



It was a wise precaution. At the ford, Denzil sent half his force across first, and Smeaton deployed them with loaded muskets and lit match leveled on the forked swinefeather rests, covering the close-pressing fells from across the river. Rutland and the rest of the dragoons assumed a similar defensive posture at the rear of the column, and Denzil started the women and children across, hoping the Irish would choose discretion as the better part of valour and refrain from attacking. They did not. They burst from cover and charged, swinging axes and mattocks and reaping hooks. The Tenth's musketeers opened fire and cut them down, but not before some of them got in close. A number of mules and panniers were seized, but Denzil led a mounted sortie that recovered most of them. In the confusion, one of the outlaws crept close and shot a woman through the heart with a crossbow. The killer was captured alive, and after listening to him rave and curse, Mary told Denzil that the woman he had killed was once his wife. Denzil let him go. The Irishman ran screaming down to the river, hurled himself into the freezing water, and was swept away in a torrent.

It was now almost dark, and the column encamped on the southern bank of the Blackwater. They were almost halfway between Fermoy and Lismore, both garrisoned towns, but fortunately not so diligent in sending out patrols at this time of year. Denzil's men were completely exhausted, and they needed what little light remained to gather combustibles for the fires. One stroke of luck occurred, when a ruined church with a good half of the roof left was found, and a cellar full of turf below it that had somehow escaped looting. Denzil had turf fires laid on the floor of the church, and herded all the women and children into the tumbledown building. "Unload the cooking pots," he told Rutland. "We'll make a skilly." The pots were filled with water and set to boil, and every edible they had was tossed in, salt beef, potatoes, oat porridge, dried turnips and onions, all of which was cooked down into a kind of gruel or stew and served out in pannikins to the ravenous column. The men shoveled the mess into their mouths with hard squares of army biscuit, while mothers dipped biscuit into the stew and gave it to their children to suck. It tasted as superb to them as any feast in Hampton Court might have done. That night the cold let up, as a warm wet breeze came in from the sea, and the men and women of the Tenth were able to sleep. The next day they moved southward, on a course parallel to the river. Denzil and his officers speculated as to what kind of transport they might find to take them overseas. "We'll have to sell everything we have of value to pay for the passage, including the horses and mules, and most likely spike the guns and leave them behind." Denzil told them. "Two or three middling sized merchant vessels could take us all, and I'm certain that the good burghers of Youghal will be willing to assist us in coming to an arrangement with the

masters of such ships as we may encounter in order to rid themselves of the presence of hundreds of armed men in their midst."

"If there are any ships in port," someone put in.

"How will we get into the town?" asked Rutland.

"I've got a line I think can talk us in, and if all else fails I think Archie Robertson and his cannon can persuade," said Denzil. "The problem is that we don't know what is wintering in the port by way of sea transport."

"What if there are no ships at all, Colonel?" asked Rutland.

"We move on up the coast towards Waterford, but if we can't find any shipping between here and there it's going to become perilous. There will be ships enough at Waterford for sure, but we will have to fight off or buy off a strong garrison, and somehow get crews and masters to cooperate and take us on board. Pray for ships at Youghal."

The river estuary was widening, and now they could hear gulls and smell the salt sea tang in the air. Smeaton rode forward with ten men to scout, and came back with good news that Denzil's breath away. A fleet of five ships rode the swells in the Youghal cove. "I got a good look at them through the spyglass, Colonel," said Smeaton. "They're flying the Danish flag. Whalers, unless I miss my guess. Their decks are laden down with great casks and barrels which are like as not full of rendered blubber and whale oil. If we can get all of them to take us on there will be room enough for every man, woman, horse and cannon."

*Lucifer, I know not if you are in truth my master,* thought Denzil to himself. *But if you have done this, then I praise and reverence you.* Aloud he said, "Our enterprise is well favoured thus far, gentlemen. We've passed the first hurdle. The next is to gain entry into the town. I don't want us to spend another night in the open. Let us hope that the commander of whatever garrison they have down there isn't very quick-witted. Keep the train to the rear. Number One Troop, come with me. Also a couple of four-pounders, Archie. Charge the guns and be ready to spin them around and blast the gate if they try to shut it. I'll try to talk us in, but we may have to spring for it."

One Troop boldly cantered up to the double wooden gate in the low city wall, up from the river bank through the huddled cabins of the Irish inhabitants who worked as dock labour and servants, but who were kept a musket-shot beyond

the wall after dark. The Irish stared at them sullenly as they moved up the single mushy street. More Sassenach butchers. As the train of Irish women and children came through on foot, there were a few catcalls and curses from the cottagers, and a few handfuls of mud hurled at the Irish women, and then came a few stones. Some of the troopers dismounted and swung fists and sabre flats, chasing the Youghal Irish back into their hovels. Beneath the gate in the east wall was a small guardroom with a postern door, and there Denzil met the commander of the garrison, a corpulent major named Sumrall who was hurriedly buttoning up his tight buffcoat which strained, leather creaking, against his bulging belly. Sumrall was a middle-aged man with a bristling beard, surprised but not apprehensive at the sudden appearance of a full regiment of dragoons on his doorstep. "Tenth, eh?" he said after Denzil had identified himself. "Heard you lot were up Kilmallock way, cutting down Paddies right, left, and centre. I've had no word of your coming. Where's Colonel Pelham?"

"The rebels attacked Kilmallock on Christmas night," said Denzil. "I regret to inform you that Colonel Pelham was among the slain. We captured one of the rapparee, and under questioning he revealed that Liam Bann O'Neill is moving south, towards your town. They are desperate for some kind of victory to raise their flagging hopes, and they need a port facility because they expect to receive aid from Spain or possibly from the Dutch. It would appear that Youghal has drawn the short straw. The Irish are massing up the Blackwater; we saw signs of it as we marched downriver, and we had to fight off a serious attack at one of the fords. They are going to descend on this town by the thousands and sack the place, just like the great Rebel Earl of Desmond did seventy-four years ago, like the Barbary pirates devastated Baltimore on the coast of Cork not twenty years gone. They seek the food and gold and horses they know your community of merchants here possesses. Colonel Bradford obviously could not abandon Kilmallock entirely, but he has divided the brigade and sent us here to fortify the town and hold off the rebels while he gets reinforcements from Cork and Limerick."

Major Sumrall slowly turned green in the face under the impact of this detailed, plausible lie. The sack of Youghal by the Desmond army in the sixteenth century had been an event so bloody and cataclysmic that it had imprinted itself on the memory of the town to the present day, and the brutal assault on the coastal village of Baltimore by the Moroccan corsairs was still a matter of living recollection. Denzil was afraid that Sumrall would ask for some kind of written orders or despatch from Colonel Bradford, but he saw with relief that the stout Major believed him implicitly. "Sweet Jesu, my thanks indeed to

Colonel Bradford for sending you!" he cried fervently. "I will own that I have heard somewhat ill of you, Colonel Redmond, but with a ravening horde of Papist jackeens bearing down upon us I am glad of your stout fellows within the walls!"

"Then had we best not get ourselves within the walls?" asked Denzil casually.

"Eh? Oh, certainly sir, certainly!" He shouted an order and the gate swung open. The Tenth Dragoons began to file into the town. "Will you assume command of the garrison, Colonel?" asked Sumrall hopefully. "I am not here to supplant you, Major, merely to assist in the defense of the town," said Denzil soothingly.

"Not at all, sir, not at all," said Sumrall. "See here, I'll be honest with you. I am a quartermaster. My job here is one of supply and transport, victualing the various inland garrisons in south Cork and Tipperary with what comes through our little port here. On paper, I have two hundred men, eighty shot and the rest pikes, but that muster roll is twenty years old and I actually have a little over half that number. The men die or get invalided out or else they desert, and they don't get replaced. I've got a yeomanry company of sorts, about a hundred men drawn from the local Protestant guilds and business establishments, but they're good for nothing except swaggering around the countryside and flogging the civil Irish. I blench at the thought of a pitched battle here. You are the most experienced commander in Ireland, sir, and you outrank me as well. I urge you to assume full command!"

This was better than Denzil had dared to hope for. "If such is your wish, major. Where can my men be quartered? We could use some refreshment, as it has been a long and cold forced march. By the by, since we will probably be here for some time we brought a light train and some Irish whores with us. We'll billet them out of sight so as not to cause offence to the good ladies of the town."

"We will commandeered the taverns and the warehouses, and I know that our town's men of business and commerce would be pleased to host your officers in their homes," said Sumrall, eager to please. "After all, it is their own property you are here to preserve from pillage."

"Indeed, we may even hold their lives in our hands," said Denzil with a straight face.

The perfect way in which events played into their hands delighted the renegades. Within an hour's time their horses were stabled and fed, the men

were relaxing and catching up on their sleep in billets across town, and the officers put up in the best inns and private homes Youghal had to offer, courtesy of the mercantile community who gladly provided them with hearty roast meats and fine wines in gratitude for their presence. In one bedroom of the well-appointed Golden Lamb inn beside the Customs house, there lodged a quiet, cloaked female figure. By that afternoon Denzil and the Tenth Dragoons had taken over the town without a shot being fired. He posted sentries on all the gates, took possession of the arms and powder of the garrison troops for "inspection" purposes, and placed the cannon strategically in the public square before the Customs house to quell any possible hostile demonstration. Later that evening Denzil summoned Major Sumrall, his officers, and all of the major burgesses and merchants in the town to a conference at the Golden Lamb. "I want you to stay up here and not interfere in any way," Denzil told Mary. "This is going to be unpleasant and possibly bloody, but it's necessary."

"Considering all I have been through, I am hardly likely to faint at the sight of blood, sir," Mary observed drily.

"I don't doubt it. It's just that I'd like you to see as little of this side of me as can be avoided, my love. You know what kind of man I am."

"Yes, Den, I know."

"Then you've no need to watch."

Denzil descended the stairs and gave certain orders to his men. When the invited participants in the conference arrived, expecting to hear a situation report on a non-existent army of attacking Irish, they were disarmed by Denzil's dragoons and herded protesting and dithering into the taproom, a broad chamber where hams and rows of sausages and baskets of onions hung from the ceiling beams, in ironic contrast to the starvation in the countryside about. Sumrall was the last to be ushered into the room at gunpoint, with indignant splutterings. "Colonel Redmond, what is the meaning of this, sir? I demand an explanation!"

"Coming up," said Denzil pleasantly. "I fear that the initial reports of an impending attack by Liam O'Neill and his men were rather exaggerated. To the best of my knowledge there are no rebels south of the Shannon other than a few ragtag bands of starving people who probably would storm the town for food if they had the strength, but who are no real threat."

"Then why...what...?" gasped Sumrall.

"My regiment and I are on a chivalrous mission to protect a lady of noble birth against ill usage, a natural daughter of the royal house of Stuart, and to this end we require your assistance, gentlemen all. We intend to board those whaling ships in your cove and take them to France, with all our cannon and gear."

"Assist you to desert?" asked Sumrall incredulously. "Ridiculous!"

"It is not so much your help we require, Major Sumrall, as theirs," replied Denzil, gesturing to the twenty-odd wealthy citizens who stood huddled in a corner, dazed and trembling in their satin doublets and silver buckled shoes. "My friends, all of you have made a pretty penny out of the past years of devastation in Ireland, for it is you who have fueled the holocaust. It is you who export the wool and the Killarney oak, the tanned hides and the salted fish, the tubs of butter and great round white cheeses of Ireland, cattle on the hoof and bolts of linen. Among you are labour contractors who have shipped thousands of Irish prisoners to burn in the Barbados sugar cane fields, men and women and children packed onto leaky hulks at ten shillings per head, crammed below decks in chains so that barely half survived the crossing. You have filled your coffers with jewels and gold melted down from the artifacts of ancient Celtic kings, whose last resting places you have looted on the grounds of suppressing Romish heresy. These people had little enough before their ill-conceived and hopeless rebellion against England, but you took it all. Men like myself and my troopers here have inflicted death and destruction on the Gael for years, true enough, but more than a few of us have died or been maimed in the process, while it is you who have fattened on it all like maggots on a corpse. You have turned this orgy of mass murder into golden guineas through military contracting, supply and haulage, shipfitting and marine jobbing, weaving and brewing and re-selling Irish horses which the New Model stole for you right back to the army. You have transmuted this river of blood into a river of gold, and I require a heady draught from that river of bloodstained wealth that has nurtured this goodly and godly plantation of God's Commonwealth in wildest Hibernia. I require every last coin, every last jewel, and every last quarter-ounce of gold and silver in the town. Specie, plate, bullion, cups, utensils, candlesticks, snuffboxes, heirlooms, brooches from the bosoms of your wives, buttons off your coats, and indeed we can start with those buckles off your shoes. Syme!" As Denzil continued, Corporal Syme and another trooper started pushing the stunned merchants down onto benches, lifting up their feet, and cutting the buckles off their footgear. "Everything, gentlemen! Every last speck of precious metal! If it is of gold or silver, then it is to be brought here to this inn by midnight tonight!"

"Robbery! Pillage! Piracy!" bellowed Sumrall

"You will ruin us!" shrieked a crabbed old hide merchant in anguish.

"Not at all, Master Felton," Denzil assured him. "You will retain your other goods and chattels, your businesses and shops, such of your foodstuffs as we don't need, your homes, the clothing on your back so you won't freeze to death, and above all, if you cooperate you will have your lives. My little tithing tonight will allow you to save far more than you let the Irish keep. With these things and the hard work that you godly types are so wont to praise, you can recoup your losses. If you whine loudly enough, Cromwell may even give you a few pence in the pound compensation for your sufferings on behalf of God's Commonwealth. It's only money, gentlemen!"

"You bandit!" raved Sumrall. "My men shall resist your foul design!"

"They will do nothing of the kind. What will they resist with? You may recall that you very considerately handed over control of the town to my regiment and me this morning. I appreciate the keys to your stores and your armoury, major; having them has saved us a good deal of trouble. Of course, I don't imagine your superiors in Dublin and Whitehall will be equally pleased."

"Gadzoons!" howled Sumrall, the full impact of his folly hitting home. "I'm ruined! They'll cashier me!" Beside himself with fury, the fat man waved his arms like some absurd windmill. "Plotter and miscreant! They will cashier me, but they'll hang you!"

"Ah, I'm glad you brought up the subject of hanging, major," said Denzil genially. "In order to facilitate the collection of this little whip-round of mine, I desire to set an example to these worthy gentry of just what they can expect if they attempt to resist or to conceal their wealth."

"What? What?" muttered Sumrall suspiciously.

"You need not fear being cashiered, major. Captain Rutland, would you do the honours on this slovenly Roundhead pig, in the king's name?"

"My pleasure, Colonel," growled Rutland grimly, stepping forward with a rope in his hand, a noose dangling from one end. Two dragoons jumped forward and passed a thick leather belt lightly around Sumrall's torso, pinioning his arms to his side, and one of them whipped off his hat. Rutland flipped the rope over a beam. Sumrall's face turned fish-belly white and sweat beads leaped onto his forehead and puffing cheeks. At the sight of the halter he nearly fainted and had to be supported on either side while Rutland dropped the noose over his head and fitted it snug beneath his left jaw.

"Nay, nay, I say!" the doomed man gabbled in a voice made idiot with fear. "For the love of God, Redmond!" he croaked, before Rutland and the two dragoons hauled away on the loose end of the rope, and his kicking booted toes left the floor. He twirled in the air while Rutland tied off the rope, his eyes and tongue bulging. There was a loud crack as his neck snapped beneath the weight of his heavy body, and a foul smell as his bowels and bladder emptied into his breeches. For a moment the body twitched convulsively and then drooped and swung, the rope creaking. Several of the merchants cursed, others fell to their knees faintly, while others muttered prayers. Sumrall's officers looked on in mingled pity and disgust. Then more ropes appeared as if by magic and snaked over the beams, until it looked as if the taproom had suddenly been transformed into some sinister jungle of hempen vines.

"A single half-crown hidden or refused, gentlemen, and you join him!" said Denzil. "Captain Rutland, Captain Smeaton, take your lieutenants and form your troops into details for house to house collection. Tell the families of these men what you have seen, and let them know that their menfolk are standing here with nooses before their eyes. Each squad will take sacks to carry the valuables and also a horsewhip, to be used as needed. And no drink until I'm satisfied we've gotten it all. I don't begrudge the lads their grog, but I don't want them getting drunk and sloppy and missing hidden money caches and maybe setting fire to the houses. Now move out, and let me see the colour of metal in here."

"By midnight you'll think you're in Aladdin's cave, sir!" said Smeaton with a laugh.

All through the night the Golden Lamb's taproom was piled high with gleaming treasure, glowing softly in the candle and fire light, shadows from the dangling ropes writhing sinuously on the walls. An increasing mountain of gold and silver coin rose on the bar, and rows of heavy sacks and precious objects lay on the floor. Officially sanctioned plunder was a rare pleasure for soldiers, and the dragoons took advantage of it, hunting down the wealth of Youghal with enthusiasm and energy. The house-to-house squads roamed the streets shouting in merriment, entering every dwelling and stripping it bare down to the floorboards, sometimes even ripping those up, swinging their whips freely and with vigour. A military contractor's wife was caught trying to hide a bag of gold coins in her chimney, and this dereliction was duly reported. The man jerked into the air and swung beside Sumrall, while the wife was stripped naked and turned out of the city gate by raucous dragoons who prodded her screaming into the freezing night with pike points, popping their knotted whip-ends playfully on her ample flanks and rear. She ran wailing from door to door



among the Irish hovels, begging to be let in, but she was driven away with Gaelic curses. Her body was found the next day by the riverside, slashed with rusty knives, her head beaten in with a rock. The offender's house was plundered from attic to cellar, and what the men didn't eat or couldn't use they piled in the town square and burned in a jolly bonfire. They even ripped the door and the window shutters off the hinges. After that, there were no more attempts at concealment.

During the night Rutland returned to the inn. "Those Danish sailors are bedded down in some inns and hostels down by the docks," he informed Denzil. "They put in to take on water and food and do some refitting; I heard they hit some rough weather in the North Atlantic and they still haven't fully mended their sails and tackle. Their commander is a fleet commodore named Palle Jorgenson. Some of our lads saw him passing out cutlasses and pistols to his tars. They know something is happening."

"Post some reliable guards very discreetly in the nearby streets to make sure his sailors and our dragoons don't have a run-in," said Denzil. "Then get a couple of kegs of the best ale this inn has got, put them on barrows, and take them down to the Danes with my compliments, and a request that the commodore and his ship captains come and see me here at noon tomorrow. I don't imagine his confidence is bolstered watching us loot the town, but we have to get his voluntary cooperation. Let the lads have a bit of a knees-up tonight, they deserve a bit of fun, but no incidents with the sailors!"

By midnight the rich flow had slacked off to a trickle, and Denzil estimated that they had accumulated something on the order of eight to nine thousand pounds, perhaps two thousand of it in ready coin, and an even larger trove of jewels. The captives were marched off to the local Anglican established church in the town square, where he locked them up inside with food and tuns of water to wash in, and chamber pots for sanitation. Before he barred the doors he had the dead bodies of Major Sumrall and the contractor with the overly thrifty wife strung up over the altar as a gentle reminder to the good merchants of Youghal to behave themselves. "Right, lads, you can broach the kegs now," said Denzil, as a cheer went up. "George, keep a sentry squad sober, keep the harbour area sealed, and make sure nobody sets any fire to any houses. Remember, leave those Danish sailors be! For the rest, tell the lads the town is theirs. They may not get too many more chances to kick over the traces together."

The rest of the night was given over to drunken merriment. It could not be called an outright sack of the town. The dragoons were very well pleased with themselves after their long march and the bloodless capture, so they were not

feeling overly hostile. There was feasting and singing around bonfires which kept off the chill but not too cold sea damp, lovemaking for those with Irish women and some casual rape for those without. A local parson tried to prevent some troopers from ravishing his maidservant and was thoroughly flogged for his trouble. A young man similarly tried to save his sister and was beaten to the ground and kicked to death, while a woman who resisted too violently and angered her attackers had her head flipped from her shoulders by one powerful slash from a sergeant's heavy sabre. Sentries shot several of the townspeople who tried to slip over the walls and escape. "It could be worse," commented Denzil to Rutland before he went to bed himself. "The Irish might have really captured the town. If there is any sign that those Danes are slipping anchor and trying to leave, let me know. Also keep a lookout on the walls. By now we are bound to have a force pursuing us." Then he went upstairs and practically collapsed into bed fully clothed; he had not gotten a full night's sleep since the night before Christmas. He was tired, but Mary was not, and it was longer yet before he got to sleep.

They awoke several hours later, with grey dawn winkling through the shutters, the fire burned low in the grate. They lay in one another's arms in the great canopied bed, the best the inn afforded. "Thank you for making me want to live again, Denzil," she whispered. "Religion says that despair is a sin, and I was guilty of it. It almost destroyed me down by the river Shannon that day, but you came. You didn't just save my life, you saved my soul."

"I once asked someone to save mine," said Denzil. "She refused."

"Then she was wicked. Was it Katherine?"

"Yes." To his amazement, he found himself telling her everything, the entire story from the beginning. When he had finished she was sitting up in bed, staring at him.

"Sweet Saviour have mercy, you hate hard!" she whispered in stunned astonishment.

"Hate is all I've ever had, so naturally I've become very good at it. But it isn't even hate, Mary. It goes beyond that. It's something I can't really put into words. What she was wrong and I simply will not allow it. I told her no, and I meant it."

*"Nemo me impune lacessit?"* she queried.

"Something like that."

"One of her brothers dead, the other worse than dead, and a murder warrant hovering over all their heads? How far do you mean to go, Denzil?"

"Until everything in her life has been destroyed, and she walks alone in the same empty wasteland where I must dwell."

"Why not simply kill her and have done with it?" asked Mary.

"I don't want her dead. I want her to suffer. She has to be alive for that."

"What...what if I had refused you, Denzil? What if I had asked you to let me go?"

"Mary, it was a completely different situation with you. For one thing, you remember you *did* refuse me for some months. I would have kept my word for good and all, if you'd wanted. You owed me nothing. I saved you as much for myself as for your sake. Katherine owed me a debt she refused to honour. She owed me her life, bound to mine, for all our lives, but she wouldn't give it to me. So I'm taking it, in pieces. One way or another, she is going to pay that debt. One way or another, she and I will be forever bound together."

"May God pity her," murmured Mary.

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#### XIV.

At noon that day Denzil faced Commodore Palle Jorgenson and his shipmasters in the taproom of the Golden Lamb, minus the previous night's ropey motif. This would require diplomacy and tact rather than force. Jorgenson was a chunky, weatherbeaten mariner about forty years old, who had sailed from the Greenland ice cap to the Horn, on voyages of trade and exploration and in search of the whale. His crews were cut from the same cloth, and men who hunted the great behemoths of the sea in cockleshell wooden boats with nothing but harpoons and raw courage were as hard as Denzil's dragoons. They had slaved and starved and risked life and limb for months in order to accumulate their holds full of oil, blubber, and bone along with lumps of golden ambergris. Now Denzil was asking them to dump it all in the sea to make room for a regiment of mutinous English troops. It was a formidable problem of persuasion.

Fortunately, Jorgenson's English was good, if slow and accented. Denzil explained the situation to him logically and concisely. "I have examined your ships from the quay, and I believe that with some rearrangement the largest

three, those two square-rigged schooners and the barque, would carry us all, together with our cannon and our best horses. The two smaller sloops could still sail on to Denmark with the bone and the ambergris and some of the whale oil. It will be crowded, but with a good wind we should only be a few days to France, and it won't be much of a detour since you'll be sailing up the Channel anyway."

He did not mention the fact that Major Robertson's cannon were now positioned at both ends of Youghal strand, muzzles pointing inland to defend the beach against attack. He did not have to. Jorgenson knew that it would be the work of a few moments to swing the guns around and cover down on his vessels riding at anchor, should Denzil give the word. Jorgenson's ships were well armed against pirates, and Robertson's light fieldpieces probably could not sink the larger ships outright, but there would be damage and he might lose the sloops before he could silence the Scots batteries. Half his crew was still ashore, as were needed water and supplies. His sailors were rough and able fighters and good shots, and he could probably cut his way out of the harbour, but did he *need* a pitched battle on shore with a veteran dragoon regiment and an artillery exchange which would cost him dead men and lost cargo?

"You mentioned treasure?" inquired Jorgenson. Denzil signaled to a trooper who pulled aside a red velvet tapestry that curtained off the rear of the taproom. In the clear sunlight which streamed through the diamond-paned windows of the inn, gold and silver and jewels gleamed like the hoard of Croesus. The startled Danish captains leaped to their feet, sudden greed flashing into their eyes at the sight of gold. The pirate instincts of their Viking ancestors stirred in the depth of their souls. "May I?" asked Jorgenson.

"By all means," said Denzil suavely. Jorgenson walked over and carefully examined the assembled loot, looking over the plate and the contents of the two jewel caskets. He seemed especially impressed with the neat stacks of gold and silver coin that covered a green baize cloth on the table. "Mostly English and Irish specie, of course, but almost everything else is in there somewhere," said Denzil. "Youghal is a busy trading port in the summer, and vessels of every nation on earth stop here. You'll find many of your own Danish kroner, some of which your lads doubtless laid down in the taverns and cookshops and will be glad to get back. There are also Dutch guilders, Spanish réals and dollars, French écus and Louis d'Or, fifty florins of Milan, the odd doubloon or two, and even a few Turkish bezants. Nice, untraceable, readily exchangeable coin."

"Who divides?" asked Jorgenson.

"You and I. You get half of that total lot there, for we can't rock up in France as penniless beggars. My own lads haven't been paid in months. I looked over the jewels this morning by daylight, with the assistance of our regimental clerk who was born a Jew and knows the trade from his family business."

"I thought there were no Jews in England," remarked Jorgenson.

"There weren't until Cromwell invited them in last year. This lad is from Amsterdam. He had a spot of difficulty there, something to do with missing receipts, a rabbi's daughter, and a goat getting into some patroon's tulip bed. I didn't quite follow it all, but he jumped on the first ship out of port. It turned out to be heading for Dublin, where he ended up in our quartermaster section. At any rate, Corporal Margolies can still appraise, and he tells me that the gems are worth about ten thousand pounds. He helped me divide them up into those two caskets, as close to five thousand pounds worth each as he can work out. If you want to exchange a few pieces we'll haggle, but we're not trying to cheat you. You take your choice of the jewel chests, half the cash money, and we'll sort out the plate and other gimcracks on a one-for-you-one-for-me basis."

Jorgenson motioned his senior captains up to the treasure trove and they spoke for several minutes in Danish, picking up several items and examining them. Finally he turned to Denzil. "I know where you get all this. The rich men of this town will not be happy we take their money and plate. They will complain to my king in Copenhagen, they will say Jorgenson is thief, he is in league with Redmond who his soul give to the devil. I get in trouble with Cromwell and maybe next time I sail he tell Admiral Blake to shoot a cannon ball up my arse. Maybe he do that anyway, because my king in Copenhagen is friend to the Prince of Orange. But it is more important to me that if we do this thing, we cannot stop here in Ireland any more when we are on our way to the Grand Banks."

"You can stop here again in a few years' time, when King Charles the Second is restored to the throne of England. Then you will be welcomed as friends who rendered a great service to His Majesty in a time of need," replied Denzil.

"I think so, too," said Jorgenson with a grin. "I don't think Cromwell sit in Whitehall forever, and maybe it is better we do this thing for King Charles now and maybe sail the Baltic for a few years until the world changes. And this is such a very much of money. But I must not be accused of receiving stolen goods, which I must then sell at low value with many questions. We want all of

the coin money and this jewel box here, on the left. You keep the plate and all the rest, you sell it in France, your smart Jewboy can tell you where."

"Done!" said Denzil. He knew that all the money and the jewels in one box would bring Jorgenson and his captains three times the worth of their whale catch. He also knew that he had very little option, and he knew Jorgenson knew it. Dragoons could not sail ships. Sea transport at the moment was a seller's market and the rebellious Tenth was incredibly lucky to get the terms they had gotten.

The mutineers began preparations to embark, and the whalers' crews set to work to convert their three largest vessels into troop transports, the schooners *Kristina* and *Sten Sture*, and the barque *Cleng Peerson*. The sailors dumped tons of blubber and thousands of gallons of whale oil into the harbour, leaving a greasy film on the water and a stench in the air. In the reeking holds thus emptied the ships' carpenters hastily knocked together berths for the passengers and stalls for the horses. The passage would be made in fairly comfortable if odoriferous quarters. In view of Mary's few drops of royal blood Jorgenson gallantly vacated his own cabin on board the *Kristina*. "It is lucky," said Jorgenson. "Kristina was Queen of Sverige, that is Sweden, and is lucky to have a princess sail in ship with her name." These preparations took time, and Denzil was getting jumpy. He knew that some of the local inhabitants had successfully gotten out of the occupied town, and by now the pursuing Parliamentary force which was surely after them must know the mutinous Tenth was in Youghal.

On the morning of December thirty-first, Denzil began to line up his troops for embarkation. "I can't believe our luck!" he told Robertson and Smeaton as they watched the quays from horseback. "George Rutland is taking a patrol out beyond the gate to have one last look around, but if we can get under way by noon we will have escaped right out from under Old Noll's nose." The three newly fitted transport ships had been docked and gangplanks were being laid down. "Get the horses on board first and get them below and stalled. Hobble them so they don't get the wind up at sea and start kicking about. Then get the women and children on board, and then the men. Have them stand to on the decks with muskets loaded and matches lit. Andy, I want you and your fifty best riders from Number One Troop to stay saddled and armed, so we'll have a mobile force available to handle any problems, right up to the last minute. Archie, keep the guns in place until everyone is on board except myself and the fifty men, then break down your carriages and get the batteries onto the *Sten Sture* and the *Kristina*. The ship's guns will cover you while you're breaking down. Once they know we're almost gone, the Irish will probably start killing

and looting. Money-grubbing smockfaces though they be, I don't want to leave these people at the mercy of the Gael, unable to defend themselves. At the last moment we will hand the yeomanry back the keys to their armoury and let the prisoners out of the church. I imagine Sumrall and that other old sod swinging in there are starting to get a bit ripe, so they'll be glad of the fresh air."

Suddenly a rider came pounding up at full gallop. He wheeled and saluted smartly. "Captain Rutland's compliments, sir. Scouting party reports a reinforced brigade approaching the town, riding in open order, sabres drawn and carbines at the rest. They know we're here. All cavalry, with a battery of five fieldpieces."

"It would seem our luck just ran out. Can you tell what units?" asked Denzil

"Yes, sir. Captain Rutland observed them through his spyglass. Sussex Horse, Norfolk Ironsides out of Athlone, Fleetwood's Lifeguards from Dublin."

"The commander-in-chief must have known Pelham and Bradford would need reinforcements and sent his own corps to assist!" laughed Denzil. "We may take that as a compliment, gentlemen! Andrew, come with me." Hastily, Denzil made his dispositions. The bulk of the Tenth were lined up on the quays awaiting embarkation, amid horses and braying mules and crying children, while loadmasters shouted orders and sailors worked the rigging on board, and gulls wheeled screaming in the air overhead. "We've got to keep them out of the town, Andy. Robertson's grapeshot can protect the ships and the quays from attack, but if the New Model gains the seaward walls once we shove off, they can rake us with musket and artillery fire before we get out of the cove. Get your fifty men together. I'm going to put the Lady Mary on board now, so that whatever happens she will get away. But before I do, she has something for all of us." Denzil rode to the end of the quay where Mary sat in a cart. "We've got Roundheads approaching the town," he told her. "I know we were going to wait until we got to France before you did your presentation, but the men can use a lift of spirit now."

"*Certainement, chérie,*" she said. Denzil helped her off the cart, and she took a parcel down from the seat. They walked to where the men of the Tenth stood lined along the quay, many with their handfasted Irish women and children by their side. Word of the approaching enemy had flown along the quay, and the men were ramming powder charges and bullets down musket barrels and shifting packs to the women to leave themselves free to move and fight. Denzil swung back up into Incitatus's saddle and stood in his stirrups.

"Soldiers of the king!" he cried. "During the time she has sheltered under my protection at the Golden Lamb, my lady Mary Stuart has not been kept idle!" Laughter arose from the ranks, which made Mary blush, but Denzil went on. "When not otherwise occupied, she has been plying her needle to make a gift for the loyal men of the Tenth Dragoons, in anticipation of that day when we would give over all pretence and resume once more our fealty to the cause of England's laws and England's monarch! The merchants of Youghal were kind enough to donate goodly lengths of the finest silk, and here is the product of my lady's handiwork!" From the parcel Denzil drew a heavy bolt of cloth, fringed and embroidered. He quickly lashed it to a fourteen-foot pikestaff through grommets that had been sewn along one side, and then he let fall the length of bright silk, and a thunderous cheer roared from the ranks. It was a flag, a square standard quartered in gold and scarlet and azure, in each quarter the golden leopards of England, the rampant lion of Scotland, the *fleur-de-lys* of France, and the harp of Ireland. In sewn scrollwork was worked the proud motto "*Dieu Et Mon Droit*". From the standard fluttered two pointed swallowtails, one blue and one red. For the first time in many years, the soldiers beheld the royal arms of England flying above them.

The flag had been Mary's inspiration, but Denzil had expanded on it and set the Tenth's Irish camp wives to work making gold and crimson sashes and hat bands, which were now passed out among the men by Mary, giving each trooper a word and a smile with his new emblem of allegiance. Denzil's heart swelled with pride. *Perhaps she's not a real princess*, he thought, *but by God, she ought to be!*

The men felt so too; more than one knelt before her as Mary gave him his Royalist sash. Mary then took the banner from Denzil's hand and gave the staff to Andrew Smeaton. "*Mon capitaine gallant*, will you carry this for me with honour today?" she asked. "My *chevalier* Sir Denzil will soon be much occupied, and he will need his hands free." Smeaton took the banner with one hand and drew his sword with the other, touching the blade to his lips in fervent salute. Denzil leaned over to her. "My darling, I now have to ask a very hard thing of you. There is danger in the town and I must deal with it. You must go on board *Kristina* and get to your cabin. I ask you to let me go into this next battle of mine secure in the knowledge that you are safe."

"Have I learned to love life again only to lose everything once more?" she asked bleakly.

"It would indeed be ironic if I were to fall in this petty skirmish today, after all I have survived, now that I too have reason to live," he said. "But the Roundheads approaching the town gate have no consideration for our feelings.



Mary, saving you was the one good thing, the one decent act I ever performed. Even if I cannot live with you, I ask that you live for me." She could not speak. He kissed her, and she turned to the gangplank with her small bag of possessions, her lips pressed together and her eyes moist. Jorgenson helped her on board.

Denzil rode through the town gathering in his sentries and outposts, sending them back to the quay if they had no mounts, flaunting his new Royalist sash and glorying in the royal banner which billowed behind him, held high by Andrew Smeaton. He mounted the parapet over the gate just in time to see the long mounted columns of horsemen come within musket shot. Denzil's sentries on the walls fired, and the Roundheads turned fluidly and withdrew. There were easily a thousand of them, all mounted, and the light battery of field artillery was clattering forward. Smoke and flames rose behind them; they were firing the Irish village on general principles. Smeaton waved the royal banner aloft in defiance, and Denzil saw the gouty old Bradford, on horseback despite his bad leg, gesture and point to it. Even at that distance his bull-like roar could be heard. *"See! See there! Belial at last flies his true colours, the standard of the Anti-Christ! Arise ye hosts, and fight ye the battle of the Lord!"*

"You were less inclined to fight the Lord's battles a few days ago at Kilmallock, Roderick, when it was just your host against my lads!" yelled Denzil in derision. Bradford did not answer, nor could Denzil tell if he had been heard. Two troops of horse peeled off to Denzil's left and rode along the riverbank down along the southwest walls, probing down onto the beach. A minute or two later came the dull thump of Robertson's battery and a rattle of musketry. There were several more cannon shots, as Commodore Jorgenson offered his paying passengers some naval support. Moments later the scouting party came back at the gallop, minus a few riders and with some bloodstained men and horses. Their captain rode up to Bradford, doubtless to report that the Tenth was boarding ships and the quarry was about to escape. An assault on the beach was out of the question; they would be mown down on the narrow strand by the massed broadsides from the vessels and musket fire from the dragoons on the decks.

Bradford drew the obvious conclusion, that he had to get into the town quickly and deploy his own cannon on the quays. He ordered his battery forward, and they began to unlimber about three hundred yards from the gate, just out of effective musket range. Two more troops dismounted, advanced on foot with carbines, and began a desultory peppering of the walls to make Denzil's men keep their heads down. The gunners swung around a twelve-pounder, two seven-pounders, and two four-pounders. A single well-aimed salvo would

splinter the gate to matchwood, and then there would be a bloody mess defending the breach, with no chance for the defending Royalists to break contact and make a run for the ships that would carry them to freedom. Once the gate went down, the only way the ships could clear the harbour without coming under shellfire would be a suicidal defense to the last man to buy time. But Denzil had no intention of committing suicide. Commodore Jorgenson's cabin on board *Kristina* had a cozy berth that he fully intended to share with the voluptuous body of Mary O'Donnell. "We've got to take out those guns!" he said decisively.

A few moments later, time stopped and then for a few long moments, turned backward. The gates of Youghal opened and a fifty-strong squadron of Cavaliers flying the king's standard and sporting sashes of crimson and gold hurtled out into a world where Oliver Cromwell reigned supreme. Sabre and cuirass flashed in the wan winter sunlight. The stunned Roundheads stared, then one of them yelled out in disbelief, "By Heaven, lads, it's bloody Johnny Stuart himself, just like the old days! *God for Cromwell!*"

At the sound of their old battle cry the front ranks of the Roundheads broke into a disorderly charge at the hopelessly outnumbered Royalists, who were riding pellmell for the guns. Three hundred yards is a short distance over level ground at full gallop, and in a matter of seconds the Cavaliers were swirling around the half-limbered cannon, slashing madly at gunners and dismounted hussars who swung ramrods and carbine butts at men and horses. Denzil rode straight for a caisson of powder and shot the mule hauling it; the animal collapsed in the traces, immobilizing the cart. Denzil reached down, pulled up a powder keg with one hand and set it on top of another in the cart-bed, the iron rim of the keg protruding upward, and the Royalist horsemen turned and galloped back towards the gate in apparent flight. Mounted hussars pursued them, sabres slashing. A dozen musketeers on the wall shot down those who pursued too close. Denzil was about halfway back to the gate when he wheeled Incitatus, whipped out a Nicholson petronel, stood in his stirrups as he snapped the weapon down into his two-handed shooting stance, and fired. The bullet hit the iron band around the top of the powder keg Denzil had stood on end in the caisson, striking a spark and detonating the entire powder load. The earth shook, and a mountainous eruption of dirt and wood and shattered horse and human flesh leaped into the sky. The five cannon were flung over the ground end to end like children's toys. The mighty Incitatus was knocked to his knees and several men on both sides in Denzil's vicinity were wounded by flying wood and shrapnel. Denzil quickly rounded up the last of his troops and got them inside. The gate slammed shut, and the Royalists piled overturned carts,

furniture from nearby houses, and hunks of stone and masonry up against the inside of the gate to serve as a barricade. The Parliamentary forces would eventually force their way inside, but it would take them some time.

In fact it took over an hour, until the remaining Protestant male population of Youghal realized that their occupiers were gone. Some of them left their houses, ran to the gate and heaved away the debris to admit Bradford and his battered forces. The Roundheads clattered through the cobbled streets to the sea wall, still hoping to catch the mutineers, but by then the flotilla was clearing the harbour. On a pike at the end of the quay floated a spiked piece of parchment, John Thurloe's arrest warrant for the traitor Denzil Redmond.

. The next day, Denzil and Mary O'Donnell were married on board ship by Commodore Jorgenson to the thunderous cheers of the entire fleet resounding across the water. Every man was filled with a sense that they had made history and participated in the birth of a legend. After one bad storm and one brief flight from English men-of-war off Hove, Denzil Redmond landed at Dieppe with his men, his horses, his cannon, and his princess on the fourth day of January, *Anno Domini* 1654 by the old Julian calendar, 1655 by the Gregorian.

Katherine Staton was expecting her first child when news of events in Ireland came to Pelham Hall. Miles Pelham was dead, murdered by Denzil Redmond, and the forces of God's Commonwealth had been drubbingly humiliated. The shocking scope of Denzil's bloody march to the sea combined with the death of her brother were too much for Katherine. She fell into a state of alternating depression and hysteria. She burst into fits of uncontrollable weeping, would eat nothing for days on end, and she would sit in a corner staring into space or else wander the house in a daze. During one of her wandering spells she tripped over a loose carpet on the stairs and tumbled down a flight to the landing. Within hours she was delivered of a stillborn male infant. Denzil Redmond had dug another grave at Pelham.

Sir Edward locked himself in his chamber, seeing no one, drinking heavily for the first time in his life. He was stunned and devastated by the loss of the son who had been his true heir and his right arm, and his friend as well. Lewis Pelham also developed a penchant for the claret and brandy bottle. He would sit alone in the hall or before a low fire in the library, staring at shadows, sometimes getting the mad idea that Denzil Redmond was behind the curtains or about to drop down on him from the ceiling, or rise up through the floorboards with his pistol cocked. What if the rumours about Denzil's

diabolic pact were true? Surely Satan could give his servant just that sort of supernatural powers to work his evil will in the world? Denzil was now reported to be on the Continent, but what if the stories about the clawprints in the snow on Christmas night were fact, and that chestnut stallion were really a demon that could fly? Then Denzil might mount up and fly through the air from France to Herefordshire in a single night! Lewis even stopped bugging the washerwoman's twelve-year-old daughter, for he could take no pleasure in it, and he could not shake the idea that Denzil was in the walls watching him, that somehow Denzil knew about The Secret.

Sometimes Lewis crept up to a certain room upstairs, where he would peep in at that which had been his brother Robert. It was now a babbling idiot, drooling, fouling itself, and laughing pointlessly at nothing for hours on end. Katherine had devoted herself to Robert's care, accepting it as her cross to bear, and with every drudging day of nursing the living lich, Denzil ground her down a bit more. The house was often dark and gloomy now, for there were few guests and a shortage of servants. The lesson of the wretched Leander's fate had not been lost on local country folk, but beyond that they had begun to whisper that the Pelham family was cursed, and few could be found who would come to work at the Hall or remain there long. It had gotten to the point where the family could employ only daytime help because no one would stay in the manor house after dark. Francis Staton had become a man of affairs in London. He found much to detain him in the capital, and less and less time for the long journey to Hereford, but when Katherine lost her baby he came home. He roved the house raging against Denzil, threatening him wildly with the direst of destruction. At other times he sat with his heads buried in his hands, trembling. Lewis became worried that Francis was losing his sanity. Lewis became worried he might lose his own.

Kate lay in her bedchamber. The miscarriage had been a bad one. She had almost died and was still very weak. Francis sat with her one afternoon. "I will kill him," he muttered to himself. "I will go to France and find him and kill him, shoot him down like a dog!"

"Francis, *please* stop saying stupid things like that," sighed Kate. "You are going to do nothing of the kind, and you know it. We don't even know where he is, and if we did it would make no difference."

"It is a judgment on me for my cowardice!" raved Francis. "And yours as well, all of you! You should have let me fight him when he came back to Whitewood! I could have done it then!"

"You had your chance. You killed an innocent boy instead," his wife reminded him.

"You rate me? How dare you, madam? I'll not have it! By Heaven, it was bad enough living with Miles's silent contempt, bad enough taking it from your father and even bloody little Lewis, always the unspoken implication that I shot that boy in the back because I was afraid to face Denzil!"

"It is the truth, Francis, is it not?"

"And just who the devil are you to judge me or anyone else, in view of what's buried out in the garden?" shouted Francis.

Katherine clenched her fists over her eyes and shuddered. "Jesus, beloved Saviour, is there never to be any mercy?" she wailed. "Francis, don't, please, please don't!"

He was silent for a time. "Kate, I am truly sorry," he said in a low voice. "That was unforgivable of me." He was silent again for a time. "You're right, of course. I am a coward. I know it. I was able to brazen it out during the war, generally managing some perfectly legitimate excuse to be somewhere else when the bullets and the steel came at my regiment. And on the few occasions when I couldn't avoid it, I was surrounded by other Parliament men and I just blanked my out mind and went along with them. Somehow I made it through. Yes, Denzil terrifies me. Yes, I know if I ever face him I will die, and I will do anything to avoid death. Does that satisfy you, Kate?"

"It's no longer a matter of whether I am satisfied about anything," said Katherine. "This is what our lives have become. Somehow we've got to salvage something out of it. How, Francis? He is still out there. Who will be next? Father? Lewis? Me? You? Francis, in God's name, think of something! We've got to do something!"

"Other than someone getting lucky and killing him, there is only one thing I can think of which might end it. You can guess what that is. If it ever came to that, would you do it?"

Katherine closed her eyes. "Francis, how can you ask me something like that? I'm your wife!"

"I told you," he said sullenly. "I don't want to die."

A longer silence, then she spoke. "Francis, why did you marry me? Why did you *want* to marry me?"

He understood exactly what she was asking, and to his credit, on this one occasion he didn't dissemble. "I wanted to take you away from Denzil. I've wanted to take you away from Denzil ever since I was ten years old."

"Dear God!" she muttered.

"And don't tell me you never knew that, deep down," said Francis.

"Yes, I knew," she admitted with a sigh. "We deserve one another. We both wanted the same thing. We wanted to hurt Denzil."

"It would appear we succeeded," said Francis with a wry smile.

"So we did. And for that we will burn in hell beside him." She turned her face to the wall, and would speak to him no more.

In the Crowned Head tavern in far away London, Arthur Hornby smiled grimly at the news brought to him by a furtive, ill-dressed little man who whispered across the stained planks of the bar. He drew a large pewter tankard of the best October ale of Lancashire, and plunked it down in front of the man. "On the house, Jonas, in thanks for your tidings. Mind ye drink the health of the king over the water with fun! The goodwife will cut you off a chop as well. Our Ruthie will be chuffed to hear that Cap'n Denzil is safe." The big man chuckled to himself, a low rumble of mirth that shook his mighty belly. "Told that bloody Roundhead bastard, I did! Told him that if he ever found Cap'n Denzil he wasn't coming back!"

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# *England*

## *Spring, 1660*

Denzil Redmond returned to England on a cold, wet morning early in April of 1660. He stepped from the deck of the channel packet at Greenwich and walked down the quay, muffled in a heavy brown cloak. The folds of his garment concealed two pistols in his belt and he had his two small French dags concealed in his boots; the rest of his weapons were in his trunk. He hoped he could collect it. This was the most risky and dubious mission he had yet undertaken in the service of the monarchy. Around his waist, beneath his shirt, was strapped a money belt heavy with foreign coinage. He had no horse; the faithful and powerful Incitatus had been killed by a cannon ball outside Vilna several years before. At the end of the dock two officers of the New Model Army in sash and buffcoat awaited him. Their faces were expressionless. Denzil steeled himself, for despite all precautions he was unsure of his reception. If there had been a leak and the plan had been betrayed, he was headed for the Tower. One of the men approached him. "Master Smith?" he asked.

"I am Smith," replied Denzil. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Master Green?"

"I am Green. I have a friend whose name is George."

"And I have a friend whose name is Charles," replied Denzil. The authentication completed, the officer smiled at him.

"Welcome home, Colonel Redmond. I am Colonel Theophilus Burroughs, Lifeguards, of the Military Committee staff. We have never met, but I caught a glimpse of you in Ireland, that day you blew up our guns outside the Youghal gate. An outstanding feat of arms and horsemanship, sir. Please come with me. We are expected in Whitehall."

They had a horse for him, and they rode into London occasionally offering polite small talk. In view of the coming national reconciliation, any further reference to past battles was avoided. The meeting held in the administration chambers at Whitehall was brief and businesslike. Denzil was ushered into a room filled with senior army men and government officials. A beefy, florid-faced man was seated behind a mahogany desk, with a balding pate and a thin black moustache. Denzil saluted him formally, got a salute in return, and then handed him a sealed leather pouch. The man at the desk was General George Monck. A short time previously he had ordered his troops to turf out the incompetent and dithering son of the late Lord Protector, Richard Cromwell, and his allies in Parliament, among them Sir Francis Staton and Sir Edward Pelham. The order had been obeyed, and Monck was now dictator *pro tem*. He

opened the pouch and drew forth several sheets of closely written parchment, bearing a seal in red wax. As he began reading, Monck motioned Denzil silently toward a sideboard by the hearth wherein a warm fire crackled. Denzil doffed his cloak and poured himself a brandy, his mission essentially over. He stood silently by for a quarter of an hour while the documents were passed around and a low-voiced discussion took place among the assembled officers and bureaucrats. Finally Monck mentioned him forward. "You are aware of the contents of this correspondence, Colonel Redmond?" he asked.

"I am, sir," replied Denzil. "I had to memorize the protocols in case it became necessary to dispose of the written despatches. The king agrees to all points and will issue a proclamation to that effect from his present domicile at Breda. I am also to confirm that you yourself shall receive an earldom in exchange for your role in this glorious act of Restoration. His Majesty looks forward to his imminent return to his realm, and to his loyal and affectionate subjects."

"That's it, then," said Monck. "Down Commonwealth, up king. The wheel of fortune has turned again and the world has changed." There was a sudden relaxation of tension in the room. It was over. "What's it been now since Edgehill, Colonel?" asked Monck conversationally. "Eighteen years or so, I should think?"

"Seventeen years, five months, twelve days, four hours, and six minutes since the first shot was fired at Edgehill, sir," said Denzil. "A pistol shot. It killed a journeyman baker named John Williams from the London trained bands."

"Eh? How do you know that?" asked Monck, taken aback

"There was a letter from his wife in his pocket. Our patrols ran into one another by accident in the woods just before dawn, and he swung at me with a sword. I was seventeen years old. I am eighteen years old today."

"Eh?" asked Monck, looking askance at Denzil and wondering if he was indeed mad as rumour said.

"1642 has been a very long year, General," replied Denzil with a wintry smile. "I'm glad it's finally over."

"Ah, yes, I take your meaning," said Monck. "We are all glad that long, long year is over, Colonel. But I suppose it's now Sir Denzil once again, eh what?"



"I shall be resigning the family title in favour of my brother Thomas," said Denzil. "He will carry it better than ever I could. I still have some personal matters to take care of."

"You interest me, sir. I must admit we were rather surprised to hear that you would be replacing our usual courier in these ongoing negotiations."

"His Majesty desired to keep Mrs. Palmer with Breda for, ah, further consultations, General Monck."

"So I understand," laughed Monck. "They say this new king of ours will make England a merry monarch."

"He will that, sir."

"A change from these grim tub thumpers who've been running things, eh what? Once you attend to those personal matters you mentioned, Colonel, you might wish to consider returning to the service of your country," said Monck. "We are to have a standing army from now on, you know. Part of the Restoration terms. Can't put the lads out of work, can we?"

"I will keep the offer in mind, general."

"Good, good. Now, one more thing. You must keep these developments very closely, sir. No one must know the exact nature of your mission here. Rumour is already fling on wingéd tongue that Restoration is in the offing, and any premature disclosure would cause difficulties. There are still disaffected elements who prospered under the old order and who are opposed to any return of the monarchy."

"I think I can promise you that some of those elements in Herefordshire will be neutralized soon," said Denzil.

"You refer to a certain gentleman who affects an Elizabethan ruff, I take it, and his financier son in law? Frankly I think it might be as well if they had other matters to occupy themselves with during this sensitive time of transition, but I entreat you, sir, no eye gouging or other such flamboyance, eh what?"

"I have mellowed somewhat with age, general," said Denzil with a smile.

"I am glad to hear it. Well, best of luck to you." It was dismissal, and Denzil bowed to take his leave, but Monck stopped him. "Oh, I almost forgot to offer

you my belated condolences upon the death of your lady wife. In view of what you and a regiment of England's finest soldiers were willing to undertake on her behalf, she must have been a remarkable woman."

"She was that indeed, general."

Denzil stepped from the doors of Whitehall a free man and an English subject once again. His first stop was the establishment of his former regimental clerk, Abraham Margolies, now a moneychanger in Threadneedle Street. He renewed old acquaintance and changed his foreign currency into good golden guineas, most of which he left with Margolies to open an account with the Amsterdam bank he now represented. Then he partook of a gammon steak and a pint of the good English ale he had so missed during his travels on the Continent. Even the wines of France can become tiring after a time to the palate of the true devotee of the hops, while the raw grain spirit of Poland had been unspeakable. Had it not been for the lager-swilling German mercenaries he had fought alongside, Denzil might have turned as abstemious as any Puritan.

It was in Poland that Mary had died, in a cold garret room in Lodz a day after bearing him the dead body of their son. The physician was a famous one, a Jew from Kiev who had fled before Khmelnitski's rampaging Cossacks. He told Denzil that Mary's intestine had been ruptured by the breach birth and that evil humours had flooded her belly. He had forced large quantities of the searing grain spirit down her throat and into her abdominal cavity in hope of unctuating the malign humours, but in this case Dr. Bray's old remedy and failed and all that was accomplished was pointless torture of the dying woman. Denzil had ridden all night from the king of Poland's army at Rawa Maz when he heard of her labour, but he had arrived only in time for the last few minutes of her life. He thought she had been forcing herself to stay alive until he got there, that she might bid him farewell. He had gripped her hand, sobbing, cursing death, on the verge of madness, and he could remember almost nothing he had said to her, but after a while she was able to calm him down somewhat and get his attention.

"My love forever, in a little while I must keep that appointment I missed on that summer's day in Ireland by the river Shannon, when first we met," she said.

"I'm not afraid, because I know Maman and Granpère and my father are waiting for me, and our precious child as well. You kept your vow, Denzil, for I have lived as long a life as God has allotted me. I don't know if God is a Protestant or a Catholic, I just hope He won't be too upset with me for jumping about all the time from one to the other. If it's allowed, I'll try to come back to you and tell you which is the right religion, so you can do as God

really wants you to do. I'm afraid God might send you to hell, Denzil, but I'm going to ask Him to let me go with you when the time comes."

"You won't go to hell, Mary," he told her gently. "You are leaving it. This world is where God punishes the souls who have offended Him. What did you do to deserve a death like this? If you and our baby might live I would die right now, but God won't take me. He is taking you instead. God is a monster! I hate Him!"

"He doesn't mind it when you say that, Den, for He knows what is in your heart and why you are what you are. But you should try not to hate Him, darling. God is like the sea and the earth and the sky, simply there, whether you love Him or hate Him. Den, I'd like to ask you a last favour."

"What is that?"

"Once you had mercy on me. Have mercy on Katherine now. If you can."

Denzil had said nothing, and she had drifted off shortly afterwards, passing like a summer's evening. She never fulfilled her promise to come back to him and tell him whether God was a Protestant or a Catholic, unless the dream meant something. But Denzil could make no sense of the dream. Denzil found John Sharples in his chambers at the Inns of Court, and he immediately disregarded Monck's instructions on confidentiality and informed the attorney of everything that pertained to the coming return of Charles the Second. Rumours of Restoration had been flung for months, and so Sharples was pleased but not completely taken aback. Denzil asked for the depositions that he and Ruth had made over seven years before. "Are you sure now is the time?" asked the lawyer. "With the king coming back, all we need do is wait until our party is triumphant and back in power, then go after all of these stinking traitors in one fell swoop of vengeance!"

"No, we have to move on the Pelhams now," said Denzil. "Fortunately my duty required me to memorize the exact protocols of the agreement, and part of it is a general amnesty for all Parliament's supporters with the exception of those who were actually and immediately responsible for the judicial murder of Charles the First. It's an Act of Oblivion similar to the one Tom and I returned under in '52. The Pelhams and Francis Staton are prominent Roundheads right enough, but not actual regicides. More's the pity, because if Pelham or Staton had signed the old king's death warrant I could hound them to the ends of the earth with all the new king's power and authority behind me. As things stand, they will receive an automatic pardon unless we act now."

"But the killing of the boy Harris was not a political act, by any stretch of the imagination," argued the ferret-faced lawyer. "Surely ordinary crimes against life and property are not covered by the amnesty? Otherwise every cutpurse and coiner and highwayman in England could slip through the loophole by claiming their acts were political!"

"Exactly," agreed Denzil. "Yes, ordinary felonies indicted and tried under the Commonwealth judiciary are excluded from the amnesty, which is why we must get a Commonwealth warrant drawn up and served now, before the change-over. If we go back to the old legal system before the Pelhams are clapped in irons we'd have to take the case before a Hereford grand jury, and Sir Edward still has enough wealth and influence in the shire to make the outcome problematical. We'll use the law of the very dictatorship they created to avoid a grand jury and get a Star Chamber or military warrant. Poetic justice, eh?"

"An Attorney General's warrant!" exclaimed Sharples, snapping his fingers. "Once we lay a formal information against Pelham and Staton, he will have no choice but to issue a mittimus. He won't like it, though. He'll drag his feet and word will get out. They'll know you're coming."

"They've known I'm coming for a long time," said Denzil with a grin.

"Even with the dollymop's testimony, though, we may have a shaky case," warned Sharples. "We are speaking of events which took place seven years ago. One of the two actual participants in the murder is dead---good job that, Colonel, the odious man came here with constables and gave me all manner of bother---and of the two required witnesses against the other participant, only you can actually connect Staton with the scene of the crime."

"They won't come to court," said Denzil. "I just need a legal warrant to back me up while I take care of the matter myself. It will knock them off balance and hopefully make them desperate, provoke them into doing something foolish like they did when they killed the boy. Is the girl Ruth still working at the Crowned Head?"

"She is," said Sharples. "The Hornbys have grown very fond of her, and treat her like their own daughter."

"Thought she'd be married by now," remarked Denzil.

"Ahem. Sir Denzil, there is something you need to know."

He found her in the yard behind the tavern, drawing water from the cistern. In the years since he had left her alone on that cold December night, the gawky girl had grown into a woman, tall and lithe and handsome, and the stringy carrot hair had become a flowing river of s and back. The freckles had lightened until they were almost invisible now. There was a livid white scar on one cheek, but it seemed to heighten her cheekbones and enhance her beauty. He watched her for a moment, holding his breath, stunned. Then she looked up and saw him. "Hello, Ruth," he said.

"Oh." She stared at him for a long moment, her lips trembled and her eyes filled with tears of joy. "My captain...Denzil..." He stepped forward and kissed her on the forehead. She embraced him, her whole body shaking. "Can you stay long?" she quavered.

"For a while," he said. "I want to...what the devil?" A stone whacked into the back of his head, thrown accurately and hard. Behind him a robust, tow-headed little boy about six years old advanced on him threateningly, his face scowling and his fists clenched.

"Get away from me mum!" he ordered. "Orf ye go and sober up, or I'll put a ball in you!" The boy whipped out a toy pistol carved out of wood and brandished it.

"I need not ask who this is," said Denzil. "I see you have no worries about drunken customers making too free with their attentions."

"You know?" asked Ruth, her eyes shining.

"Not until an hour ago when John Sharples told me," said Denzil urgently. "Ruth, before God I swear I never knew before today! If I had known I would have sent money, I would have come back!"

"You couldn't have come back," said Ruth practically. "I knew that. The government would have killed you. We all understood that. We heard of you now and then, over the years. We knew that you were a soldier in Ireland, and then in France, but we never knew where to send word to you. Then I heard you were married, and I didn't want to cause you embarrassment." She took

his hands. "You made me no promises, Denzil. You said so yourself, that last night we were together at the inn in Southwark. I came to accept that."

"But how?" Denzil gestured towards the boy, who stood regarding him suspiciously. "I thought you said you could count the days so you wouldn't quicken? Did you lose count?"

"No, sir, I didn't lose count," she said softly. "You recall I said that I had only one Christmas gift I could give you before you left? He is that gift."

Denzil swallowed, then turned and squatted down to the little boy. "What is your name, fine fellow that you are?"

"Denzil," said the child. "Are you Cromwell?"

"Not even close!" laughed Denzil senior. "No, my name is Denzil also. Oliver Cromwell is dead."

"And a very good fing too!" asserted the child. "Bet me Pa killed him!"

"And who is your Pa?"

"A great Cap'n Cavalier," the boy answered. "Arfur tole me. Me Pa's got big pistols and he shoots Roundheads!"

"A pleasant and worthwhile pastime. Your father is a man after my own heart. Does he have big pistols like this?" He pulled out the Zelner wheel locks.

The boy was fascinated. He reached for one. "Give it me!"

"No, not now. These are loaded. When you get bigger I will teach you how to load and fire them."

"I gots me one too," said little Denzil, flourishing the toy. "Arfur made it for me. It don't shoot, though. Do them shoot?"

"They have been known to, yes."

"Shoot somefing!" commanded the boy.

Denzil stood up and looked around while he wound the locks with the spanner from his belt. "Well, now, what might I shoot?" Suddenly he whirled and fired, and the weathercock on the roof spun wildly. Pigeons took flight in panic at the

roar. With a dexterous toss Denzil flipped both pistols up in a spinning inward arc, caught the empty gun in his left hand and the loaded one in his right in what was commonly called a highwayman's spin, and blasted one of the birds out of the air in a spectacular explosion of blood and feathers. Ruth wrinkled her nose at the powder smoke and held her ears with a smiling grimace, while little Denzil leaped up and down with delight. "Do it again! Do it again!" he shrieked.

The bellowing voice of Arthur Hornby was heard from the tavern, and the wooden back steps shook as he charged out into the yard, blunderbuss in hand. "Oo's doing all that bloody shooting out ere?" he roared. "You want the bloody watch and the knobsticks on us? Put em up, I say, and get the ell out---why, sod me!" he cried, a grin splitting his fat, ferocious face. "It's Cap'n Denzil! Bloody ell, sir, tis good to see you again! In wiv you and we'll drink a health to the king over the water despite every knobstick and spy in London!"

"Within a few weeks he won't be over the water any longer, Arthur." Denzil told him. "King Charles is coming home, and by summer every one of Cromwell's beadles and wardens will be gelded rams. Don't ask me how I know, my friend, but trust me, it's true."

"Strewth!" gasped Hornby, stunned and overjoyed. "That's the best news I've 'eard since Oliver bleeding Cromwell descended into the grave! In wiv you, Cap'n, although I reckon tis Sir Denzil again now, innit? Every man in the Crowned Head eats and drinks on the house tonight!"

Later on Denzil took Ruth out into the darkened yard to talk. "I'm going to leave some money here for you and the boy," he told her. "You must start sending him to school, as little as he will like it at first. From this day on you will be able to afford the best schoolmaster in the workingmen's district. Later on we'll make a permanent arrangement, but from now on you don't have to worry about anything to do with money. If I can't bring it in person I'll arrange for Sharples to set up a fund in trust for the two of you."

"I understand, Denzil," said Ruth. "I won't cause any trouble. Has your lady wife returned to England with you?"

"I'm a widower, Ruth. My wife died in Poland, in childbirth, as did the baby. She wanted to give me the same gift you gave me."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Denzil! I didn't know. Did she make you happy?"

"Yes. To my amazement, she did, and that wasn't easy moving around all over Europe like we did."

"Then may God bless her memory. Now that the king is coming back, you want my help against the Pelhams again, don't you? You mean to put the law on them?"

"I mean to bring them to justice," said Denzil.

"You mean your justice?"

"Yes. There's an old Latin saw my tutor used to drum into me back in the Whitewood schoolroom, *nemo me impune lacessit*. No one offends me with impunity. Are you reluctant, Ruth?"

"No. You know I'll do anything you ask me to, Denzil. I still hate them for killing Jemmy, and for using me as they did, Master Lewis bumfucking me and making me bleed and hurt, Major Robert trying to give me money and make me a whore. Then Miles came here to the tavern. He whipped me and burned my cheek on the grate."

"Sharples told me. I killed Miles in Ireland."

"Yes, we heard, and I'm glad!" she said fiercely. "And I'll be glad when the rest of them are dead! Will they be hanged for killing Jem? God, I want to watch them climb the ladder and then swing in the air! Cept Miss Barbara, who was good to me, and I know she's married to your brother now."

"I can't say whether or not any of them will actually make it to the gallows, but I can promise you they won't get off," Denzil assured her. "It may still take some time, but I swear to you that they will be punished."

"Even Miss Katherine?" asked Ruth pointedly.

"Her most of all." They were silent for a time, and then Ruth spoke again.

"I loved Jem. He was the first boy I ever cared about. I still think about him sometimes, about what it would have been like if we had gone to America and spent our lives living in the forest and hunting elephants."

"There are no elephants in America," Denzil reminded her.



"I know that now, but I didn't then," she said. "Now every time I think of Jem I think of America and elephants. What was your wife like?"

The question caught Denzil off guard. "What can I tell you?" he said. "She was a fine and noble woman, and through some inconceivable grace of God she loved me."

"Was she really a princess?"

"Of a left-handed sort, yes, way back on her father's side. Her great-grandfather was King James. You wouldn't remember him, he was before your time, and mine too. I was about three years old when he died. Mary was common-born, though. She was a seamstress and a servant, just like you."

"How could a noble lady be a seamstress and a servant?" asked Ruth.

"Irish. We don't recognize their nobility. God's bones, we don't even recognize their humanity."

"Did you love her?" asked Ruth.

"Yes, and no one was more surprised at that than I. I long ago decided that I was incapable of loving anyone, but I was wrong."

"Could...could you ever love me?" she whispered in quiet desperation.

"Ruth, I still have much to do, and I may yet come short in the doing of it. Why on earth would you even *want* me to love you? I fathered a bastard on you and then walked out and left you for seven years. I've spent my entire life killing people."

"And it savages your soul, even though you confess it not," she said. "Years ago, even as a girl-child, I saw your pain deep down where you thought you had hidden it even from yourself. That arrogant bitch Katherine Pelham threw away something that all these years I have longed to take up. I have re-lived our last night together at the Southwark inn every night for seven years. I told you then, I don't want anyone but you. I meant it."

"I am honoured and awed, Ruth," Denzil told her. "But surely you've had other offers? The scar isn't that bad, and you're a handsome woman now. Surely others have come to court you?"

"Aside from drunken patrons of the Crowned Head looking for a roll in the hay?" she laughed. "Arthur made short work of those, but aye, there have been a few of the better sort, I suppose you'd call them suitors. I told them I loved another who'd gone over the seas for a soldier."

"Christ, Ruth, what if I'd been killed in Ireland or Poland?"

"You weren't. I just knew that someday you would return. Now you're here, and my bed upstairs is warm. The only way you will ever hurt me is if you refuse to come up those stairs with me."

"It would take a saint to refuse that," said Denzil, giving her a long and deep kiss. Her arms slid around him. "And the one thing I have never been called is saintly. But I don't feel right about marking you as a bawd...God's bones, I'm an idiot! I'd clean forgot about all these damned Grindalls here and their sanctimonious dirty minds! What happened to you when little Denzil was born?"

"It wasn't too bad," she replied carelessly. "I got thirty-nine lashes in the Marshalsea, but the sergeant who flogged me was a nice old duffer who felt sorry for me, so he pulled his swing a bit, and my back healed up quickly. You'll see, I've hardly a scar anymore. I used to get worse lickings from Leander at Pelham Hall, and Colonel Miles bloody sure beat me worse when he came here. Then I had to stand in the pillory for an afternoon, but Arthur stood by and made sure nobody threw any fish guts or rubbish at me. I had to stand up in church at Mary-le-Bow one Sunday and listen to some Grindall preacher tell me all about what a wanton slut I am. It was a long time ago. No one remembers, or cares. As for being a bawd, I care not. I know you can't marry me, you being a gentleman and now a lord of the manor again, but there's many a gentleman who keeps a common woman and children off to the side, Denzil."

"That's true enough. Ruth, there is a name for such women. Is that what you want? Could you be content to have the world look at you and your children, and know what they called you when you were beyond earshot?"

"So long as they were your children."

"And what would you tell them when they grew old enough to understand and question? What will you tell little Denzil?"

"What I have already begun to tell him, in simple speech a child can understand. That his father is the bravest and most loyal of all the Cavaliers who ever served King Charles the First, or the Second. That his father could not be with him during his childhood because he holds his duty and his honour sacred above all things, and so he fought on when everyone else surrendered. That his father gave a frightened and wretchedly unhappy young girl the first kindness and consideration and respect that anyone ever gave her, and when a man beat her and burned her cheek on a hot iron, he gave her justice when no one else on earth would. That he can be proud of his father, and that he can find no better example to follow and build his life upon."

Denzil shook his head, stunned. "Ruth, I don't deserve that. Surely you know I don't. The boy doesn't, either. Bloody hell, woman, you ought to be down on your knees praying to God that he *doesn't* turn out like me!"

"Well, perhaps not exactly like you, but then he won't need to be, will he? You didn't make the world or the war, Denzil, they made you. Now the king is coming back, largely because you and a small handful like you never gave up. There will be peace and justice and the true laws of England once again. All will be as it was."

"I see you've been listening to Arthur's nightly declamations over the bar in there," chuckled Denzil.

"On many an evening, yes, dear, but it's true, you know. Because of what you have done, our child won't have to take up a gun when he is seventeen. He owes that to you, and by giving him that future, in a sense you gave him more than you could have if you'd been here. He will learn all he really needs to know from you. He will learn never to bow down to wrong, never to give up no matter what the odds, and always to deal justly with both enemies and friends."

"I seem to have been something laggard in aiding and comforting the few friends I have had, and I won't add to the injury I have done you any further if I can help it," said Denzil. "Ruth, it may be that we can't be together for a long time. I just don't know at this point. But when I come back to you it will be for good and all, and you shall become my wife."

"Lords don't marry red-headed tavern girls!" she exclaimed.

"I'm not going to be a lord much longer," he explained. "I'm resigning my title in favour of my brother, Tom. That will leave me complete freedom of action to do with my life as I see fit, and that includes marrying you, if you'll

agree. You're right, lords in this country don't generally marry tavern wenches, redheaded or otherwise, although my Yorkist ancestor Sir John Redmond seems to have gotten away with it. Unfortunately he is supposed to have murdered his wife or driven her to suicide in the tower at Whitewood in order to do it. I never could get that particular story straight, but we've had Lady Jen's ghost pestering us for a couple of hundred years. I seem to be repeating a lot of the old family scandals, although I confess I've never been able to work up an interest in alchemy."

"We all heard the stories about that tower," sad Ruth. "That night I came to Whitewood, when Jem was killed, do you know I almost didn't come because I was afraid to go there after dark?"

"I'm glad you came, Ruth, and not just because of the testimony you provided against the Pelhams."

"That tower was where your grandsire was supposed to have, well, *done* things. Denzil, oh my dearest love, my captain, I've got to know, before I can marry you," she said, beginning to cry. "You know what the country people say about you. I've even heard it in London. Did you do what they accuse you of?"

"Did I sell my soul to Satan?" he asked her gently.

"Did you?"

"No, little one, not in the sense they mean," he said, clasping her hand.

"I'm not little any more."

"No. No, you're not. Ruth, if it worries you, I never conjured up any demons, or signed a pact in my own blood or any of that rubbish. Lucifer had no need to buy my soul with some paltry chest of gold or gift of eternal life in a world I despise. I gave it to him outright, of my own accord. I did his work of my own free will and I will doubtless do more of it, at least until the Pelhams are brought down."

"And you've never seen the Black Man?" asked Ruth timidly.

"Only in a mirror. It still astounds me that you could possibly want anything to do with me. Think about this, Ruth. Think about it hard until this thing with the Pelhams is over."

"And then?"

"And then I think I'll ask you to come to America with me and hunt elephants."

"There are no elephants in America," said Ruth, weeping softly in pure joy.

"Well, it's a big country," said Denzil fondly. "Perhaps they're hiding. If so, we will find them."

They talked on, knowing that soon they would go upstairs and that this night there would be no tears on her pillow. He spoke to her of the places he had been and the things he had seen, of Europe and Ireland although he left out much of the brutality, and finally he talked of Mary and their life together, and of her death. He told her of his wife's dying plea. "I knew even then I couldn't do what she asked," he said sadly. "She knew it too. She knew me, and yet so good a person was she that of all the dying requests she might have made of me, she chose that."

"But did she ever come back, like she said she would, and tell you whether God is a Protestant or a Catholic?" asked Ruth in fascination.

"Well, I'm not really sure," said Denzil, shaking his head. The affair still puzzled and disturbed him. "The night after she died I had a strange dream."

"Tell me!" urged Ruth.

"It doesn't make any sense. I was asleep in the same room where she had died, and I dreamed that I woke up. It was pitch black all around, but Mary stood before me dressed in spotless white, not sick and wasted any more, but as beautiful as ever I had seen her in life. I tried to speak, but I could make no sound, and then I heard her voice inside my mind, as sweet and tender as ever she spoke to me. She just said three words: "God is love!" Then she disappeared.

"That's all?" asked Ruth in surprise.

"I told you it didn't make any sense," said Denzil.

A few days later, a special post rider pounded up the graveled carriage drive at Pelham Hall in Hereford. The courier delivered an urgent letter to Sir Edward Pelham from a close associate in London. Within the hour the remaining members of the Pelham family were gathered once more in the stately home's library, where they had laid previous futile plots to stop Denzil. The reduced family circle now consisted of Sir Edward, Katherine, her husband Francis, and Lewis Pelham. Tom Redmond was in Bristol on business, and Barbara was at Whitewood recovering from her latest lying-in, having just been delivered of her fourth child. Relations between the two sisters had grown somewhat strained over the years, given unavoidable jealousy on Katherine's part. After that first miscarriage she had never quickened again, largely due to the fact that she and Francis now slept in separate bedchambers during his increasingly infrequent visits to the Hall. He seemed to have developed a distaste for the physical side of their marriage. Barbara's happy and healthy brood was a stark contrast to her own barren life at Pelham, caring for a drooling idiot mass of flesh which was once her brother and married to an absentee husband.

Sir Edward Pelham's face was pale and the hand that held the letter shook as if he had the ague. The last few years had been calm and peaceful, relatively free of manifestations of Denzil Redmond, but now disaster had overtaken them. "My children, our world is at an end!" he quavered disbelievingly. "We are to witness the triumph of evil in our time! Lucifer again stalks our unhappy house! I have here certain confirmation of something I have long suspected. General Monck has betrayed the revolution. Charles Stuart the younger is recalled to England, and the monarchy is to be restored!"

"What?" shouted Francis, stunned. "That cannot be! The Commons would never approve of such a thing!"

"It is done, and done without any pretence of consultation," said Sir Edward bitterly. "We are not yet completely without friends in London, Francis, and I trust the word of the man who has written these black tidings. Parliament no longer matters, Francis, else why are you here instead of in London? Have you forgotten that Monck sent the lot of you packing? Parliament no longer commands a single sword or musket."

"We make the laws!" cried Francis Staton.

"We also made the army, and now the army has unmade us," said Sir Edward. "We forged a sword to cut off the head of the king, but it was a sword with two edges."

"God's love, how Denzil Redmond and those like him must be laughing at us!" said Lewis Pelham.

"Sweet Jesu, then all the blood and death and suffering of the past twenty years has gone for nothing?" wailed Katherine desolately. "How could God so betray us?"

"God has done worse than that," continued Sir Edward grimly. "He has delivered us into the hands of Satan's living marshal on earth. A charge has been laid before the Attorney General of the Commonwealth in Whitehall. A charge of murder, against myself, against, Francis, and against Lewis. We are accused of conspiracy with malice aforethought to kill one Jeremy Harris, bachelor, upon the eighteenth day of November, 1652. My late son Miles is also named. Katherine is not. Denzil seems to be keeping his word about not harming you directly."

"Denzil?" gasped Katherine in horror. She turned deathly white and began to shake uncontrollably. "Denzil has done this? He has returned to drink the blood of my family once again? No, no, oh God, no, Father! I couldn't stand it, I couldn't go through more of his cruelty and torture! I will go mad!"

"Murder?" muttered Francis dully. "Murder? Me, charged with murder? But they can't charge me with murder. It was an accident. They can't...merciful God, they'll hang me! Denzil means to see me hang!" His voice cracked; he was on the edge of hysterics.

"Denzil seems to favour that method," said Lewis drily. "I'm told they use it a lot in Ireland, to save powder and shot. The regiments even carried portable gallows with them into the field. I imagine Denzil viewed the whole exercise as practice against the day when he can set us to dancing the nubbing-jig. Father, who laid the information? There must be at least two deponents in a capital case."

"The first was Denzil Redmond, knight," said Sir Edward. "The second was one Ruth Hobbs, spinster. Our missing dollymop from seven years ago, I presume." The letter slipped from the old man's fingers. "Miles was right. There was collusion between Denzil and that wretched little tart, right from the beginning. Miles should have kept on her track after she disappeared from that low dive of Royalist conspirators he found her in, but once we found out where Denzil was we didn't think she'd be any further threat. Dear God, what fools we've been! He's been planning this for seven years, holding back his

accusation until the king returned so our friends would be unable to protect us. What devilish, insane hatred!"

"Denzil Redmond must die!" shrieked Francis, waving his arms maniacally. "This is the Lord's judgment on all us! I'll challenge him! I'll kill him!"

"Oh, do be silent, you pompous ass!" snapped Lewis angrily. "We have heard that refrain for seven years now, and that's long enough. If you desire to commit suicide there are trees aplenty in the grounds to hang yourself upon, and there's a nice deep pond down by the old mill where Kate and Denzil did their swiving."

"What that really necessary, Lewis?" asked Katherine dismally.

"Oh, blast, Kate, I'm sorry!" sighed her brother. "I apologize. It's just that I'm starting to get an itchy feeling in my neck."

"There is only one thing left to do," said Sir Edward decisively. "You three must go to Bristol and take ship for Massachusetts. The Bay Colony is still in the hands of a Nonconforming government and likely to remain so. Someone must remain here and take care of that upstairs which was once my son Robert. I will take my chances in court against the word of a sluttish scullery maid and an infamous slayer of men. Since I was not present at the actual shooting, I think I can make it past a jury. I will simply deny all prior knowledge and claim it was a hunting accident. The main thing is to get you, my remaining children, out of danger and out of this evil madman's reach."

"If we go, then you and Robert must go with us, Father," Katherine insisted. "God commands us to honour our parents. This whole situation has arisen because I disregarded the word of the Lord, and I cannot crown all of it with the impiety of leaving you alone to face Satan's myrmidon alone."

"To flee would be an admission of guilt!" argued Staton.

"In case you have forgotten, Francis, we *are* guilty," said Lewis.

"Suppose he tries to bring Katherine into it?" asked Sir Edward. "God knows what kind of influence Denzil Redmond will wield with the Stuarts back on the throne. Even if he keeps his demented promise about not harming Kate bodily, will Ruth Hobbs, spinster be so scrupulous to a former mistress who as I recall oft chided her for her wanton sluttish ways? I've no idea what kind of



testimony she will offer, presumably whatever Denzil has told her to say, but suppose she accuses my daughter?"

"Father, I participated in the conspiracy as well," said Kate. "At least I offered no opposition to it."

"All the more reason not to be here when the court is holden," said her father. "The Puritans rule in Massachusetts, and you will not be the only English adherents of the Nonconforming faith emigrating there in order to regain the religious freedom you shall lose under Charles Stuart. I have had extensive correspondence with some of the leading men in the colony. Indeed, your old commanding officer Colonel Roderick Bradford now resides in the Bay Colony again. He of all people bears no love for Denzil Redmond, having suffered humiliation at his hands in Ireland. Building upon your old acquaintance and the doors he can open for you, you could soon become one of the leading men in the colony. I'm sure they need advocates in the courts and civil service, so Lewis can get employment. It's about time you practiced your profession, my boy! The family is still sufficiently wealthy so that you will not land in Massachusetts as penniless beggars, and you can live there with Kate as a gentleman and a lady should, until Francis can get back into trade or acquire an estate."

To Lewis Pelham, the conversation was taking an appalling turn. He found the proffered alternatives of either swinging by his neck at rope's end, or else a two month trip in a leaky wooden coffin across a stormy sea to a land of red savages and white religious fanatics to be utterly unacceptable. If the truth were known, he was secretly looking forward to Restoration. They said that King Charles the Second was a sensualist and a libertine; perhaps under his régime, a man of Lewis's bent predilections could practice his heretofore only fantasized lusts, provided he used discretion. The idea of spending the rest of his days in some crabbed law office in Boston or freezing in some crude cabin in the wilderness in a wholly Puritan society where it was too dangerous even to sodomize servant girls repelled him frantically. "There has to be another way out!" he said. "Father, how much time do you think we've got?"

"Our friends in London will delay as much as they dare, but the warrant will be out in a few weeks regardless of anything they can do."

"It strikes me that up to this point, my own part in the defence of this family has been remarkably small. It is time I shouldered my share of this terrible weight," said Lewis slowly.

"What can you do, my son?" asked Sir Edward wearily. "You are a lawyer, but you've never practiced. I have. If you see a legal way out of this mess that has escaped my notice, then by all means, enlighten us."

"No legal way out, no. I repeat, we are all of us in fact guilty of the crime with which we have been charged. But this is an extremity that calls for extreme measures. Francis, will you loan me your pistols?"

"Oh, bosh!" said Sir Edward sharply. "We have spent the past seven years trying to restrain Francis from committing suicide in that very manner, as you yourself pointedly reminded him just now. If your two older brothers, both of whom were battle-tested soldiers, couldn't defend themselves against Denzil Redmond, just what makes you think you could out-shoot the most renowned gunman in all Europe?"

"I do not intend to try," said Lewis. "The law says that in order to hang a man two corroborating witnesses are required at an open trial. This slut Ruth is the second witness. I can't beat Redmond with a gun and would never attempt it, but I can kill a perfidious serving girl. It is not honourable, but then honour went by the board in this affair a long time ago. This is now a matter of pure self-preservation and survival. It is true that the problem of Denzil Redmond and his insane hatred for this family will remain, nor will he be pleased to lose his vital second witness and his chance to watch us all dangle on the gallows. There will still be deadly danger from him, but at least we will be out from under the shadow of the noose. Father, I want you to give me a letter of introduction to a couple of our friends in London, close to the Attorney General's clerks. I need to find out where Mistress Ruth Hobbs is dwelling at the moment, if she's still at that Royalist tavern or back in service, or whoring in a brothel, wherever. I must find her and kill her before the warrant is drawn up, so we'd best get on with it. Once she is dead we will still have Denzil to contend with, and his temper will not be sweet, but at least we can at least forget about this wild Massachusetts scheme."

It was a grey, drizzling spring day in Cheapside when Lewis located the Crowned Head tavern. He was certain he would still recognize Ruth, even after the intervening years, although his memory of her consisted primarily of sweaty little encounters in her attic room, and her squeals as he had rutted between her freckled buttocks. Bent over her narrow truckle bed, her skinny back had enabled him to fantasize it was the stable boy Jeremy he was sodomizing. It was those past peccadilloes with Ruth that had driven him to

volunteer for this terribly dangerous task. He knew that Denzil almost certainly hovered somewhere nearby to protect his precious second witness against the Pelhams, and the thought of Denzil made his stomach churn with wrenching fear, but what if she had told him The Secret? At the time, he had blithely assured Ruth that it was all "...purely a matter of individual taste, my child. Aesthetics, although of course someone of your station wouldn't understand what that means. Some gentlemen simply prefer the back door, that's all. Now drop your shift and turn around, there's a good girl..."

But Denzil would understand, and the idea of Denzil knowing The Secret drove him almost insane. He had to silence Ruth, not just to save himself and his family, but to ensure that she never told any one about The Secret.

Lewis had yearned for boys every since he was an adolescent, but a pragmatic prudence and intelligent observation of the world around him prevented him from ever attempting actually to put his cravings into practice. God's Commonwealth might make a pretence of tolerating Jews but would never tolerate sodomy, and men who got caught yielding to their perverse lusts were hanged alive in chains and left turning slowly in the wind on creaking gibbets, raving and talking to themselves until they died of shock and exposure. Lewis had never actually done it to a boy, but contented himself with the most boyish young girls he could gain access to. They never really satisfied him. Again, he wondered if things would improve under King Charles. But first, Ruth had to be silenced.

Lewis prepared himself assiduously for his task. He practiced at length with Francis's flintlocks until he could load and prime efficiently and was a good enough shot to bring down a man or woman-sized target at twenty paces. He rummaged about in Sir Edward's extensive library looking for appropriate reference material, accounts of the Borgias and their murderous methods, annals of the drug-taking Assassin cult of the Middle East who smoked hashish to prepare themselves for their suicide missions, lurid stories of Roman emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Elagabalus who practiced homicide as a diabolical art form. He armed himself carefully. In addition to the pistols he carried two daggers, one in his belt and a second long, thin blade in his boot. He also made himself a garrote, a length of leather thong with two sticks or grips at each end, for strangling. In his saddlebag he placed a bottle of port wine, poisoned with a home-made concoction he brewed up from the lethal berries of the yew tree and which he had tested on a dog, watching the animal die in agony. He wanted to obtain some *cantarella*, the supposedly undetectable poison favoured by the Borgias, but no one seemed to know just how this deadly substance was manufactured, so he had to make do with juice

he pressed from yew berries. Lewis was beginning to fancy himself quite the desperado, like some sinister assassin of the Italian Renaissance. Who could tell? Perhaps after he killed the girl he could somehow seize an opportunity and dispose of Denzil as well. Wouldn't that be something? Meek, bookish little Lewis succeeding where his two warlike brothers had failed?

Now he circled the Crowned Head on his horse, trying to look casual. As he turned a corner he was certain he saw Ruth out in the back yard behind the tavern, through a small alleyway. He knew that she would now be a grown woman as opposed to the girl he remembered, but he was sure he recognized that red hair. Lewis left his horse in the stable of his own inn about half a mile away, had a bite to eat in the common room, and as it began to get dark he walked back to the Crowned Head. Regretfully, he left the bottle of poisoned wine in his saddlebags, since he doubted he would get a chance to use it. He slipped through the darkening streets of London as the sun was going down. A number of merchants' shops and stalls were still open, apprentices standing outside with lighted torches hawking their masters' wares and urging pedestrians to come in and buy. Piemen, lamplighters, labourers and idlers filled the streets and jostled Lewis as he pushed his way through the courtyard of St. Paul's, making sure to keep a firm grip on his purse while he did so to avoid the ubiquitous "coneycatchers" or pickpockets. But Lewis appreciated the crowded streets, for they provided him with anonymity. The Pelham family had finally figured out the technique which Denzil had used to infiltrate their home on the Christmas night of the disastrous double wedding, and Lewis emulated that technique now, opening a small flask of brandy, spilling a little on himself so he would smell of drink. As he approached the alleyway into the back yard of the Crowned Head, he began to stagger a bit, so that if he were approached or questioned he could appear to be a drunken gentleman who had lost his way. But there was no groom in the stables, nor was there any sign of that big chestnut stallion with the odd Latin name that Redmond used to ride. Lewis was intelligent enough to realize that Denzil might have sold or lost Incitatus somewhere between Pelham Hall on Christmas night of 1552 and the present day, but in view of the stories about the horse and the claw prints in the snow, he was nonetheless a bit reassured.

Lewis found himself a dark corner and hid, watching the yard, fairly certain that even in the dim light he would be able to recognize Ruth if she came outside. Fortune favoured him still further; the drizzle had cleared and by and by the moon arose. It was warm enough to make the inside of the tavern stuffy, so the back door stood open, and from within he could hear laughter and conversation and the chunking of pewter and goblets on the bar. The tavern

seemed to be lightly patronized tonight. Periodically men would come out the door in search of the jakes, a wooden earth closet to the side of the yard. Lewis hoped against hope that he could catch Ruth alone. The close presence of customers and passers-by who might call the watch dictated silence; if he got an opportunity, Lewis knew with a thrill that he would have to use one of his knives or else the strangling rope. He decided to try the rope; a blade would get blood on his clothing and incriminate him if he were stopped while making his getaway. There was enough noise coming from the tavern and from the surrounding streets so that anything short of a full-throated scream would go unheard. A strange excitement began to build in him. *I am going to kill*, he thought to himself. *What an incredible thing! I am going to kill someone tonight!*

A female figure stepped out into the yard with a bucket. She was outlined in the light of the doorway. It was Ruth, grown big and full-busted, but the flaming red hair seemed to gleam in the moonlight. No one was in the jakes, and as she bent over the cistern her back was turned. It was perfect. Once he got the noose around her neck he would try to drag her back into the stable out of sight while she strangled to death.

He tiptoed up behind her swiftly and silently, and with desperate swiftness he tried to whip the garrote around her neck. Not being as practiced an assassin as a Borgia, his first attempt was clumsy. Ruth's long red hair caught up in the noose and bunched up into a slippery coil as he tried to tighten it, plus he lost his balance as she struggled wildly and bashed at him with the bucket. They rolled in the dirt, Lewis frantically trying to throttle her with the leather thong, Ruth kicking and clawing, trying to throw him off. She was easily as strong as he was and she fought like a wildcat, reaching behind her head to beat at him with her fists and scratch at his face, but because he was behind her she couldn't hit him hard. He understood that she could not break his deadly hold, and he got up to a kneeling position and pressed her face down into a puddle with one knee, while her body writhed and her hands clawed at the cord around her neck and her feet scrabbled. Her struggles subsided and her body relaxed. Soon she would be dead. He had done it!

Then a blow slammed into his head. Lewis saw a starburst of fantastic colour, then blackness.

When Lewis Pelham awoke, he knew right away that he was dead and that he was in hell. He knew he was in hell because he saw Denzil Redmond, and

Denzil Redmond was a demon. He sat at the end of a long wooden table with another demon, a huge fat one with a large moustache wearing a greasy apron, playing cards. From both demons' mouths protruded long black sticks with glowing coals at the end, and they belched smoke. A dozen sputtering candles lighted the stone walls of hell, and there was a smell of hot metal in the air, no doubt from the inconceivably hot fires and rivers of molten lava nearby. Lewis was lying face down at the other end of the table, bent forward at the waist, his wrists manacled in a spread-eagle position, his legs spread and tied at the ankles and knees with strong ropes to the heavy table legs, and a chain around his torso just below his shoulders lashing his body firmly to the table top. He was completely naked. The fat demon looked up at him. "Looks like the bugger is back in the land of the living, sir," said he.

"Good," said Denzil. "Go and check on Ruth, will you, sergeant major? I'll need your help when I'm through in here. I'll call you."

"Aye, sir." Hornby arose and stepped over to the dazed Lewis, leaning over him and taking his chin in one hand, twisting Lewis' face towards him while reaching out with his left hand and cupping Lewis' testicles in his fat fingers. Hornby spoke. "The wife and I never had a child of our own," he said in a low, terrible rumble. "That girl you tried to murder tonight wasn't born ours, but she was given to us like a gift from God and became as beloved to us as ever our own daughter might have been. In turn she was a little boy who is our grandchild in every way except by blood. I will go to my grave praising God that Captain Denzil were missed her and got worried and stepped out back when he did. I know who you are, Pelham. I know what you did to Ruth when she was your dollymop. Your brother came into my kitchen and beat her and burned a brand on her for life, and now you come here and try to strangle her. If it was up to me I'd rip these stones off you by main force and jam them down your throat. But I was to admit that, like always, Captain Denzil was a better idea in these matters. You've got something nasty coming to you, lad, even by my standards, and as much as I despise you I don't want to be around when it's done. Might get between me and my sleep." The fat man laughed uproariously, gave Lewis' balls a crushing squeeze which made him cry out and arch his body in pain, and then slapped him heartily on the rump before leaving, opening and closing a heavy door that Lewis could hear but not see.

Lewis strained to get a glimpse of his surroundings. He seemed to be in a dungeon of some sort, but that was absurd. Cheapside taverns did not come equipped with dungeons. Denzil divined his thoughts, and began speaking in a conversational tone. "Do you recall the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Lewis? John of Gaunt had a house on this site in those days, where he could keep Kate

Swinford and visit her discreetly when he was in town. It had a good stout wine cellar wherein to store vintages worthy of a Plantagenet duke, solid stone construction to keep out the damp. The peasant rebels drank the wine and burned the house. Since then a series of taverns have stood here, and they have all found use for this sturdy deep crypt. Mostly to store wine and beer in, of course, along with the odd bit of highwayman's swag or contraband smuggled up the Thames, but I understand that Roman priests have hidden here, and in the time of King James Guy Fawkes met with his conspirators here once or twice. For the past eighteen years, ever since Charles the First left London for Oxford just before the war began, this chamber has served as a secret headquarters for the city's loyal king's persons to meet in, and to take care of business requiring discreet and secure premises. Nothing at all may be heard through these thick stone walls, Lewis, not even in the taproom above. You may scream as loudly as you like, and no one will hear you. You won't be the first to die here."

"Die?" gasped Lewis unbelievably. But surely he was already dead, for was this not hell? Surely he didn't have to undergo death yet again? "No," he began to whimper, "Please, Denzil, don't..."

"Shut up and attend. I am going to bore you with some more fourteenth century history, but please bear with me. I assure you it is relevant to your imminent demise, and after all, as long as I'm talking I'm not killing you, am I? You have read of King Edward the Second? He should be of interest to you, Lewis, for he was a sodomite. Like you."

"No!" cried Lewis, hysterical. "I never did it! I swear I never did it with a boy!"

"But you wanted to, didn't you, Lewis? You used Ruth like a sodomite uses boys, didn't you? Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote that the thought is father to the deed and if the deed is sinful then the thought is sinful as well. St. Paul said that to lust in one's heart was the same as adultery, or was that St. Peter? No matter, you get my drift. To return to Edward the Second, he married a French princess, Isabella, daughter of King Philip the Fair. He was a bugger-

boy and she was a whore. Bad combination, that. Isabella took a lover, the Earl of Mortimer, and in 1327 they overthrew Edward, hacked off the heads and other bodily parts of his catamites, and imprisoned him in Berkeley Castle. Now they had to think of a way to get rid of him. Being noble-born themselves, they were not as crude as your Cromwell and his recent pack of regicides. They had the good taste to recognize that there was an aesthetic principle involved. I believe you understand aesthetics, don't you, Lewis? Or so I've heard. One

should dispose of an anointed monarch with a certain amount of discretion and finesse, with no embarrassing marks on the body. There was poison, of course, but that takes time if the pretence of natural death is to be maintained, and the royal adulterers were impatient. Finally, they had an idea. Do you remember what they did, Lewis?"

Lewis remembered. The Queen's henchmen had stripped the deposed Edward, held him down, and then inserted a hollow horn into his fundament through which they shoved a white-

hot iron poker into his intestines. Lewis stared as Denzil set on the table a bronze brazier of glowing coals from which a poker handle protruded, hence the hot metal smell. Realization hit him. *"Not that!"* he shrieked. "In the name of Jesus, have pity! A bullet, the rope, a knife, anything but that!"

"Like this, Lewis," said Denzil, drawing forth a long leather funnel of the kind surgeons used for draining wounds and flushing enemas into the bowels. Lewis Pelham writhed and groaned as Denzil quickly worked the funnel up his anus, forcing it past the sphinctre and into the lower bowel. "I thought you perverts liked having things rammed up your bung-hole?" queried Denzil.

"Don't do it! For the sweet love of God, don't do it!" gabbled Lewis, wild with hideous fear. "I'll do anything! I'll testify in court! I'll send them all to the gallows for you, Francis, my father, Kate, anybody you name! You can watch them hang! I'll confess! You can watch me hang too! Anything but this!" Denzil withdrew the iron from the coals, glowing white hot, and blew on it until it pulsed and shimmered like a living thing. Lewis Pelham saw the iron and screamed in pure animal terror.

A moment later, he screamed even louder.

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## XVII.

"The coroner writes to me that he has never seen anything quite like it," mumbled Sir Edward to Francis, Kate, and Tom Redmond. "They found him in an alley in Cheapside near that damnable tavern, fully clothed, his purse intact, and not a mark or a visible injury on his body save one bruise on his head



which could not have been sufficient to kill him, but might possibly have knocked him unconscious for a time. Yet his face was distorted in the most hideous way, a mask of agony as if he died in sight of the devil himself. It must be wizardry. The rumours must be true! Denzil Redmond has infernal powers at his command! I never fully believed in witchcraft before this, but what other explanation is there?"

"I just don't know any more," said Tom, shaking his head. "I doubt that my brother requires any assistance in anything to do with evil and murder. What does the magistrate in Cheapside say?"

"He suggests poison," replied the broken old man, staring at the table before him in the empty main hall at Pelham, where they sat. "There was poisoned wine in Lewis's saddle bags. It would seem that a stable boy at the inn where he was lodged got hold of it and helped himself to a long drink, and died of it." The old man cackled thinly. "That's where the score stands. Denzil has murdered two of my sons and butchered a third alive, and in return we've killed two stable boys, both of them by accident."

"Not quite," Tom flatly. "Katherine killed Denzil's son."

"And Denzil killed my second baby just as surely as if he had shot it in the cradle," said Katherine, raising her gaunt face to him. "Does that content you, Tom?" The atmosphere was palpable with defeat and dejection. Sir Edward looked even older than his age, grey and shriveled, utterly devastated. Francis was puffy and red-eyed, pale spongy flesh jiggling on his body as he walked and sagging against his clothing. Katherine was still a remarkably beautiful woman, Tom had to admit, but her face was lined with suffering and her cornsilk tresses streaked with white. "What now, Father?"

"I can only implore you and Francis to flee," said Edward Pelham. "God has forsaken us. By now the warrant for Francis and myself will have been drawn and the way things are going for us that means the first step to the gallows. Our friends in London and on the county committee are in a state of confusion and can no longer help us. In Shrewsbury and Gloucester I am told government officials are burning documents, converting everything they can to cash, and fleeing the king's return themselves. Tom tells me the Parliamentary mayor and aldermen in Bristol have been overthrown and arrested by Royalists newly released from the prisons. It seems that Miles was right, and there was massive long-term subversion within the army, because a number of regiments have mutinied and hoisted the Royal standard. The Commonwealth is collapsing around us even as we speak. Our party no longer holds any power. The last

mercy we might hope for is that the sheriff of Hereford will refuse to serve the warrant, but I am sure there will not lack vengeful Cavaliers in plenty who will volunteer for such a task. I no longer have any fear or hope for myself. All of my sons are dead save Robert, who is worse than dead. My only consolation is that Barbara is safe in your arms, Tom."

"They were her brothers too, sir," said Tom. "Denzil has never cared a jot for the fact that by pursuing this deranged vendetta against you, he hurt Barbara and me as well."

"Barbara has her children," said Katherine bleakly. "I have nothing."

"You have me!" whined Francis. Kate ignored him.

"But at least we can hope Denzil won't murder Barbara," said Sir Edward. "Francis and Kate, you are in deadly danger. Flee, my children, flee!"

"We still have one last card to play," said Katherine steadily. "Forgive me for using such an ungodly simile, but it is an apt one. There is now one final act to be carried out, the act which will crown his seven long years of lunatic vengeance with its ultimate success."

"Eh?" asked Sir Edward.

"There is still one among us who has not assayed to kill Denzil, nor do I mean my insipid wreck of a husband."

"Kate!" said Francis, hurt. "Wait, I see where you lead, and I won't allow..."

"Please do not argue, Francis. I am going to do what has to be done. You will recall that back at the beginning of this march of horror, Denzil told me that I was the only one among us he would never hurt. He has been nothing if not consistent. I am the only one who can get close enough to kill him. I will do it."

"And the one to hang?" cried Francis.

"No," she replied with a cold smile. "I shall be defending my virtue. He will assume that I came to plead with him for mercy, and offer myself to him as a bribe to make him cease this relentless persecution. He will come to our meeting confident in his victory, and at the appropriate moment I will stab him and then rip my garments. I will tell the officers of the law that he tried to ravish me."

"And how will you find Denzil?" asked Francis suspiciously. "How could you know where he is? Have you been...?"

"Oh, yes, have you not seen the post riders galloping to and fro along the carriage drive over the past seven years, carrying our passionate love letters to one another?" snapped Katherine bitterly. "The ones I write in between feeding Bob and wiping the drool from his chin and changing his soiled breeches? But I forget, you haven't been here often enough to detect the wild abandoned affair I've been conducting with Denzil Redmond all this time behind your back, have you?"

"How *do* you propose to get in touch with him, Kate?" asked Tom, trying to defuse an argument.

"Tom, I respect your desire not to become an active participant, but you are a former Cavalier yourself. Would you agree that a letter sent to Denzil in care of that known Royalist alehouse in Cheapside would reach him, if he were in London?"

"The Crowned Head? Aye, I should think so. The innkeeper is a former sergeant major in Prince Rupert's cavalry named Hornby. You might also try the chambers of an attorney named John Sharples at the Temple. Dammit, Kate, you're making me an accomplice to my own brother's murder!"

"Tom, at this point, can you really call it murder?" asked Kate gently.

"I...I suppose not. Oh, God damn and blast Denzil!" moaned Tom. "Kate, I have to ask this. You know what has happened to every attempt thus far. How can you hope to succeed?"

"I will write to him and ask him to meet with me one week from Wednesday, at the same place and the same time. He will understand what I mean."

"Down by the mill, where you met for carnal sin? He will think you are offering him another such rendezvous!" wailed Francis, shattered.

"Precisely. That is why he will come," said Katherine.

"Murder, false witness, and adultery as well, Kate?" Francis responded sullenly. "Tell me, do you plan to kill him before or after you...*do* it?"

"If you *did* it a bit more often you would have no cause to doubt me, you witling fool!" snapped Katherine. "I am thirty-five years old and childless because you....oh, damnation! Just be quiet, Francis!"

"If I were any kind of a father I would forbid this," groaned Sir Edward. "But I am old, and tired, and I want Denzil Redmond dead so badly I am willing to accede to anything."

"Kate, what did you mean when you said that this would crown Denzil's vengeance with success?" asked Tom curiously.

"Because after it is over, even in death he will have won," she explained. "He will have made me just like him."

On a fine and warm day in May, Kate Pelham and Denzil Redmond once more rode to the old mill. When Kate eased her mount down the path to the trace, by the flat mossy rocks, she saw a large black stallion tethered to a tree. It wasn't Incitatus, but two brace of sheathed pistols in the saddle holsters told her who the rider was. Kate slipped off her sidesaddle and tethered her pony to the same tree. She saw no sign of Denzil. In her hands was a heavy muff, and inside it she could feel the cool butt of the small pocket pistol she had decided to bring at the last moment, as well as the sharp dagger which she had slipped into a specially sewn pocket in her left sleeve. The gun was a finely wrought, all-metal "Turkish dag", with a flintlock which she had clumsily loaded and primed herself. She held the muff and looked around nervously for Denzil, a gentle breeze blowing her long hair beneath her severe Puritan cap. A strong hand reached from behind her and pulled the muff away from her, and she turned with a gasp to find herself face to face with Denzil. His face was lined beneath the wide felt Cavalier hat brim, his straggly pointed beard and moustache were streaked with grey, and his eyes were dark sunken pools. Suddenly she understood that these years had not left him unmarked, either.

"Rather an obvious ploy, Kate," he said, pulling the pistol from the muff. "In the first place, Puritan ladies eschew such worldly vanities, do they not? In the second place, why would you need this on a fine spring day like today?" He examined the pistol critically. "A nice piece, I admit. I think I'll keep it as a souvenir. I've always room for one more in my collection." He opened the pan. "Katherine, you have primed this weapon with gunpowder," he said disapprovingly. "There is a special priming powder you should have used, much finer and lighter. Francis probably keeps his in a little flask or bottle like

this." Denzil held up his own priming bottle. "I always carry two myself, in case one gets wet. If you use this heavy grained powder to prime the pan, as you have done here, you risk damaging the lock when you fire, and more often than not you will get *this*."

Denzil pointed the pistol in the air, cocked it, and pulled the trigger. The pan spluttered and hissed and sparked, but there was no shot. "I thank you for the lesson, kind sir," said Kate bitingly. "I'd rather you didn't keep it. It belonged to my brother Miles, whom you murdered. There is no need to steal from the dead. May I have it back?"

"Not yet. Wait for it." Denzil was still holding the pistol pointed in the air. Suddenly it went off with a hollow, spitting crack. Denzil winced. "Ugh! You also packed your charge too loosely. What do you think the ramrod is for? That, my lady, was a hang-fire, one of the common results of using gunpowder for priming. I've seen men flash a pan and tuck the weapon back into their belts, and a moment later blow their family jewels off."

"Are you quite through?" asked Katherine icily.

"I shall never be through with you, Kate," laughed Denzil. He threw the pistol away. "Were you planning on shooting me in the back? It seems to be a family tradition with you lot."

"I...I brought it because I didn't know what you would do. You mangled Robert, you killed Miles, you killed Lewis in some horrible manner. How was I to know...?" The dagger was still concealed in her sleeve; she knew she had to use it quickly or she would lose her courage. His throat was the most vulnerable point. "What's that?" she suddenly cried, pointing behind him. Denzil whirled around, and then whirled back with a laugh as the dagger slashed at him, wrenching it out of her hand. He slapped her face hard, twice, and then pushed her down onto the damp ground. He leaned back against the wall of the mill, laughing unmercifully as she wept in anger and humiliation in the mud before him.

"Kate, Kate," he finally choked out, "You really shouldn't try to play my own game with me. You're no good at it at all, even worse than that silly smockface Lewis with his garrote and his bottle of poisoned sack!"

"What did you do to Lewis?" she cried, weeping vehemently. "Monster! Devil! You killed him with witchcraft!"

"No, but I warrant me I gave him a foretaste of hell," replied Denzil, his voice like steel now. He jerked Katherine to her feet and hurled her back against the wall, pinning her shoulders to the stone as he spoke, looking directly into her grief-stricken and terrified eyes. "He tried to kill a woman who never did him any wrong, a woman whom in past times he would abuse in manner I won't soil your holy ears with. He was a treacherous little wretch who wouldn't stick at murder to preserve his filthy little secret. You people have doubtless convinced yourselves that I am the sole villain in this piece, Katherine, nor have I ever denied that I am an evil man. I told you as much myself, long ago in your garden. But you and your precious family aren't anywhere near the side of the angels, woman. Your eldest brother Robert was a traitor to his king and country who actively assisted in the establishment of a loathsome and brutal dictatorship, from which the whole lot of you have drawn profit for years. Your brother Miles was cut from the same cloth. His only redeeming feature was that he had the courage to face me eye to eye. If you count his first tour of duty in Ireland with Cromwell back in '49, Miles butchered even more Irish than I did, and so he'll do a few more millennia turning on roasting spit in hell that shall I for what we did to those noble and courageous people. Miles scarred one young woman for life trying to torture information out of her and in Ireland he plotted to send another to a cruel and blameless death because she was so ill advised as to choose politically incorrect grandparents. Your precious holy husband Francis is such a contemptible cream-faced coward that he shot a boy in the back because he was afraid his victim was me, and now he sends his wife out to kill man he doesn't dare to face himself. Your father is a weak-willed, self-indulgent, self-serving political weathercock changing with every wind that puts gold in his pocket, and he went along with every bit of this."

"And me?" snuffled Katherine. "Pray complete this contemptible catalog of abuse of your victims, sir. Tell me all about myself, how low and wicked I am."

"I intend to," said Denzil softly, releasing her. "Kate, back at the beginning of the war, do you recall a rather famous *bon mot* by which Sir Peter Warwick explained the difference between the Royalist army and your people? He said that we Cavaliers bore the sins of men, drinking and swearing and wenching and such, but that yours were the sins of devils. By that he meant pride, the arrogant and overweening pride which passes all bounds and cries out for a pistol ball in your brain-pain or a blade in your gut, a pikehead between your teeth to pin your ranting, prating tongues to your skull."

"One November day in your garden many years ago, Katherine, a human soul humbled itself before you and begged you for mercy. What I asked of you was hard, Kate. Never believe that I do not understand how hard it would have been

for you. But it was something that no one ever has any *right* to refuse to anyone else. I asked you to save my soul, Kate. It was my last chance to become a different man than I was, and you refused me. Why? Not because you loved Francis Staton. I deny that and if you are honest with yourself you know it was a lie as well. You denied me out of that hubris, that insufferably arrogant and overweening pride Warwick described as the besetting sin of you tub-thumping fools. Yes, I rode away from you back in '42 when the king summoned me. That was my offence, wasn't it? You were not the center of my world. I held something in my life higher than my love for you. And so you murdered our child in retaliation. Then you got scared, didn't you, Kate? So rather than true repentance, rather than come to me and confess what you'd done and do what you could to make it good, you chose to join the so-called elect of God and raise your snout in the air and shut me out. I laid my soul at your feet and begged you to save it, and you judged it instead."

"And what of your hubris in presuming to judge *me*, in spending the past seven years killing and maiming my family and humiliating my husband in order to punish me?" she demanded bitterly. "These things you speak of are between myself and God, and it is God's prerogative to weigh them and punish them, not yours."

"I haven't done it for God, Kate. I've done it for me."

"Why am I so important to you?" she whispered.

"That I couldn't tell you," said Denzil. "You're entitled to an explanation on that one, Kate, and I wish I could give you one. It's not love. Even I'm not so depraved as to claim that. I've loved one woman since last we met, and I am coming to love another. Perhaps we knew one another in lives past. The Chinese and the Hindu of the Orient believe in reincarnation and something called karma, if you know what that is."

"I have heard of it, yes. It is heathen superstition and blasphemy."

"Well, I don't insist on it. I suppose in a sense it all comes down to a struggle between you and I. You decided you had the right to put me away in a trunk somewhere in the attic of your life like a child puts away her toys, and maybe once every decade or so take me out and look at me, reminisce a bit, and then put me back into the trunk. That won't be the way of it. I said no, and I meant it."

"Power and control," she said. "I've often thought that was the way of it. That's why you won't kill me. You can't control me if I'm dead."

"Not quite, Kate," said Denzil gently. "You can't suffer if you're dead."

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "I have heard you, Den. Now you listen to me. To begin with, I'm glad I didn't kill you. No matter what you have done, it was sinful, and when I go to meet Him who truly has the right to judge me I am going to have enough to account for as things stand. The second thing I want to say is that the situation that existed between us seven years ago is now reversed. Your king will soon be back in power and my family is about to lose everything. Denzil, I give up. I surrender to you. I'm not rendering up my soul to you, for it is not mine to give. It belongs to God, and you shall never have it. Nor can I give you my heart, for you have burned it to ash. But my body you may have, and welcome, if by giving it up I can save the life of my wretched broken father and poor silly Francis. I will go with you wherever you wish to go, as your wife, as your mistress, as your servant, your chattel slave if you will. Every day, every night I will be yours, obedient and submissive, yours to enjoy however you desire, to punish and humiliate however the spirit moves you. Make me scrub floors like a dollymop, beat me bloody every night, send me out to prostitute myself, punish me in a thousand ways for daring to offend you. I will be marked as an adulteress, lost to the church, and look very, very foolish by going off with you now, after everything you've done. I will drink the cup of debasement to the dregs, and you can fill it up again and again. I understand you've taken up with our former serving girl, Ruth. Why not set her up as a kept harlot and make me her chambermaid? She can take a stick to me when I scorch some ironing. You see the endless possibilities? You can have everything you want in exchange for withdrawing that murder warrant and sparing two lives which surely mean nothing to you once you have me in your power. Then when you tire of me you can kick me out of doors in my shift to beg, or take me out on the heath and shoot me like an old sick dog if you like. I will never complain, never argue, and always submit. You've won, Denzil."

"No, no, not yet," Denzil told her. "It's a tempting offer, I must admit, but no."

"Then what in the name of heaven do you want?" cried Kate, trembling.

"Kate, I just told you. I want you to suffer, in the recesses of your soul. You deny it belongs to me, but I shall reach you there. I don't deny that I would take a great deal of personal satisfaction in hurting you and humiliating you bodily in the way you describe, but I don't want satisfaction, I want justice,



which is not quite the same thing. I want the scales to be balanced between us as evenly as possible, and that can't be accomplished by my manly organ or by a horsewhip or even scrubbing floors for Ruth. Besides, if I were allow you to take that route, you could still revel in your own private martyrdom, feel pride in the fact that through your debasement you are saving your loved ones. You could convince yourself that you are therefore still virtuous despite my rogering you every night, which I suspect you could then enjoy accordingly in view of Francis's no doubt deficient performance in that respect. No, Kate, I cannot accept the noble offer of your admittedly still delectable body in order to save the wretched lives of those other two. I can't accept it precisely because it *is* a noble offer. I don't want to leave you a grain of nobility, Kate. Edward Pelham and Francis Staton are going to hang for the murder of Jeremy Harris, and they will die in the knowledge that God after all is no Roundhead, but is staunch for King Charles, and that God and Satan both have agreed to deliver all of you into my hands."

*"You---are---MAD!"* breathed Kate, transfixed.

"Not mad, madam. Merely persistent," he said. He drew a parchment from inside his jacket. "Here is the warrant for their arrest. I'm meeting some friends of mine in Ludlow and then we're coming back out there to take those two. Tell them they have a few hours's head start, if they want to stretch things out a bit, or they can stand and fight if they feel like dying from a ball in the belly rather than a noose. If not, the hanging will probably be in Shrewsbury sometime about the middle of next month. I hope you can attend. Public executions are such gala events. By the by, did you know the term 'gala' derives from the word 'gallows'?" Katherine screamed in pure horror and ran to her horse, mounting and galloping away, fleeing as from a thing accursed.

Tom Redmond met him on horseback at the head of the Whitewood park. "Did you see Katherine?" he asked in agitation. "I heard a shot. Is she all right?"

"Oh, she tried to shoot me and knife me, but she bungled it," said Denzil with a laugh. "I promised I wouldn't hurt her, Tom, and I kept my word. Last I saw her she was pelting back to Pelham like the devil was after her, which in a way is true. It's almost over."

"I suppose you're coming back in triumph to claim Whitewood and become Squire Denzil," said Tom bitterly. "Fair enough. Now the king is coming back

this house and these lands are yours, but I'm taking Barbara and the children and leaving here. I don't want them anywhere near you."

"Save the mark, Tom," said Denzil. "I won't put you to the trouble. I only came here to give you this." He took a rolled document tied up in red thread from his saddlebag. "Sharples drew it up, and he will file a copy in chancery as soon as things get settled after King Charles resumes the throne. It is an affidavit breaking the entail on our inheritance and voluntarily ceding to you the family title, property, all appurtenances and enfeoffs thereupon, so forth and so on. Henceforth you hight Sir Thomas Redmond, eighth baronet of that ilk. Congratulations to you and Lady Barbara."

"Eh?" exclaimed Tom in surprise. "I thought this whole insane feud of yours with the Pelhams was because Kate turned you down, but also because they took our lands under the Parliamentary sequestration decree and you wanted them back. Now King Charles is finally coming back and you've got what you want, you give it all up. In God's name, *why?*"

"A number of reasons. For one thing, I will be getting married again and my intended isn't exactly cut out for a lady of the manor. You remember the little scullery girl, Ruth?"

"Jesu!" laughed Tom, relaxing. "Your first wife was a royal Stuart princess and your second will be a serving girl. Your tastes are certainly catholic!"

"The second reason is that the Pelham business may take a bit longer. I may have to chase them as far as Massachusetts, in fact. That's about the only logical place they could bolt for. I would be lost in an England at peace, Tom. I seem to have inherited all the Redmond family vices, including killing Pelhams and a penchant for red-headed tavern girls, but you are cut from the good wholesome material that forms the backbone of a peaceful and prosperous realm. You are the one who has stayed here and worked to build this place back up, and from what I can see of the stock in the fields and the grounds you've done a good job. You deserve the title and the right to pass this place on to your oldest son. I've got a son of my own, but he's the kind who needs the open air and a lot of elbow room, as do I."

"More soldiering in Europe?" asked Tom.

"No, I don't want to put the boy's mother through the kind of life my first wife had to go through. I think it will be Virginia. They say the king will be giving away plantations there as big as an English county! I'll build a new

Whitewood over there, and in your turn you will be able to re-unite the original Whitewood demesne as it was granted to Sir John Redmond in Yorkist times, before the Pelhams cut it in half."

"Eh? How do you make that out?" asked Tom.

"All the Pelhams will be gone soon, dead or fled the realm, and I will be in America hunting elephants."

"Elephants?" echoed Tom, puzzled. "There are no elephants in America!" But Denzil wheeled his horse and was gone

In the taproom of a Ludlow tavern, three men rose to greet Denzil Redmond as he entered. They gripped his hand in their turn: George Rutland, Andrew Smeaton, and Jack Syme. "I'm glad you came," he told them. "I need a spot of assistance."

"The chance of a final adventure with you, sir, in serving the king's cause before his return to the throne was one I couldn't pass up," said Smeaton.

"I wasn't sure you'd be able to make it, Andy. How long have you been back?"

"About a month," said Smeaton. "I left Aoife back in Cheshire. The old place is run down, but we'll be setting things right."

"You finally got her name right," said Denzil with a smile

"Yes, I got it right. We are married now, a year ago in France. It was hard to persuade her, but we have a son and a daughter now and she did it for their sake. There is one thing you need to know, sir," Smeaton went on seriously. "Before Aoife would marry me, I converted to the Roman faith. Is that going to compromise anything we must do?"

"I don't see that it would," replied Denzil. "King Charles is reputed to be tolerant of Catholicism and his brother the Duke of York is generally believed to be a convert as well. How about you, Jack?"

"I took the boat over from Dublin when I got your message, sir," said Syme. "Rosie and me has our own house and a few new weans ourselves. We slipped back to Ireland in '58. Nobody's give us any trouble."

"I got back last week and stopped by the Crowned Head, and Arthur Hornby gave me your message," said Rutland. "What exactly do you need us to do, Colonel?"

"Back me up while I serve a murder warrant on some prominent Roundheads who will probably try to escape."

"Who did they kill?" asked Syme.

"They shot a stable boy in the back. Four king's men to serve a Commonwealth warrant. Irony, eh? But there are legal reasons why it has to be done now."

At Pelham Hall they found Sir Edward Pelham sitting before a cold, burned-out fire, empty wine bottles on the floor at his feet. He was dead drunk, muttering to himself. A pistol lay in his lap. Rutland picked it up and sniffed it. "Recently fired, sir."

"I think I know where it was fired," said Denzil. "Jack, watch the old man. George, Andy, come with me."

"No servants in this place, sir?" asked Rutland as they ascended the darkened stairs, swords and pistols drawn. "These rooms could use a good airing."

"The murdered boy was a servant here," said Denzil. "I understand they had some difficulty getting help after that, especially after a certain visitation they had at Christmas time." In an upstairs room he found the dead body of Robert Pelham, lying in bed under a heavy quilt. The muzzle blast had scorched and blackened the quilt around the bullet hole. Further search revealed signs of hasty packing and the fact that the coach was missing. Francis and Katherine had fled. They threw Edward Pelham over a donkey's back and took him to Ludlow gaol.

"Now where to, sir?" asked Rutland after they had lodged their prisoner safely. "Some food, some sleep, some rest for the horses, and then we ride for Bristol," said Denzil. "Our birds are trying to fly across the sea."

They rode into the port city on a bright noon in May. The town was in an uproar, for the first royal troops since the siege of 1645 were marching in. Everywhere were flags, bunting, ribbons and streamers, and in every window a picture of King Charles the Second. The royal arms and the rampant lions and lilies of England waved proudly from every rooftop and steeple. The incoming troops marched to the thunderous roll of a hundred drums and as many fifes. Cuirass, pikehead, and drawn sabres gleamed at parade rest, and musket barrels sloped on the shoulders of men in serried ranks wearing the new blue trousers and bright scarlet coat of England's new standing army, some New Model veterans, some Cavaliers, now united in the service of King Charles. "They're already starting to call 'em redcoats!" said George Rutland, shouting over the thunderous cheers. "I'll be wearing one myself, soon. Another ten years with the colours and I can retire on His Majesty's pension!" It was a long-awaited sight, and the hearts of all four men swelled with joy and pride.

Logic and instinct told Denzil that the Statons had headed here. It was the largest port of embarkation to the Indies and the Americas, also the closest. "They would be seeking to take ship to one of the Puritan New England colonies, Plymouth or Massachusetts Bay or Connecticut," Denzil told them. "We'll head for the docks and check the outbound vessels with the harbour master. Then we'll start questioning the ships' captains. We take the ones for the mainland American colonies first, then the ones for Jamaica or Barbados." The *Dolphin*, bound for Jamestown, drew a blank, but then Virginia was full of Royalist supporters and Denzil doubted that the Statons would want to go there. For the same reason he excluded the *Daniel Davis*, bound for Lord Baltimore's Catholic settlement in Chesapeake Bay. Finally, though, Denzil located Captain Abishah Willet of the *Electra*, bound the very next day for the godly shores of Massachusetts. Denzil displayed his warrant and discoursed briefly upon the penalties involved in transport fugitives out of the jurisdiction of English justice. In return he received the address of a local Puritan minister.

"They are using the names of Master and Mistress Harvey," said Denzil as the four of them clattered through the cobbled streets. "The woman is not on the warrant we hold. When we get in, the man is mine. All I ask of you lads is that you prevent any interference by anyone who may be with them. There may be some diehard Roundheads skulking in the back alleys hereabouts." They tethered their horses down the street and approached the minister's house on foot, pistols drawn. It was a tall timbered structure with a gambrel roof and an overhang, set in a courtyard off the street. "George, you and Jack take the back," said Denzil. "Andrew, come with me." Denzil pounded the knocker on the elegant oaken door with eight panels. "*Open! Open, in the king's name!*"

he called out. This was not strictly true, because Francis was charged under a Commonwealth warrant, but it gave Denzil such pleasure to use the words that he shouted them out again. "Open, I say! Open in the name of the king's justice!" A frightened parlour maid opened the door, and the pair of them pushed inside. Simultaneously there was an uproar from the rear of the house as Rutland and Syme forced their way in the back way. A fat, florid man wearing clerical bands and Puritan garb bustled forward down the hall. "What will you here, sirrahs?" he expostulated. "I demand...!" But what the preacher demanded would never be known, because Smeaton clubbed him to the floor with a pistol butt and Syme kicked his teeth in with a well-aimed boot.

Sir Francis Staton appeared at the top of the wide polished stairs, disheveled and shouting gibberish, waving two pistols. "I have you now, Redmond!" he shrieked hysterically, seeing Denzil. "You walked right into my trap, you fool! Back! Back! Stay back, I say! I'll kill you, I swear I will! Set one foot on those stairs and you're a dead man, Redmond!" A stream of urine ran down Staton's leg and puddled on the floor at his feet, then began to overflow and drip down the stairs.

Denzil leveled a Zelner wheel lock. "Bullet now or rope later, Francis, your choice!" he yelled. Staton fired wildly. This shot missed completely and the ball buried itself with a crack and a shower of wood splinters in the floor at the bottom of the stairs. Denzil shot Francis in the belly. Staton screamed piercingly, for all the world like a hog at slaughter, but he had enough coordination left to fire his second weapon. The bullet hit Andrew Smeaton in the leg, and the captain fell to his knees, cursing. Denzil leaped up the stairs through the acrid powder smoke, three at a time, Syme and Rutland pounding up behind him. Francis was staggering into a room at the end of the hall, bent double. Denzil drew down and fired, shooting him in the buttocks, producing another animal scream of pain and mortal terror. As Denzil and his men got to the door Katherine tried to slam it in their faces. Denzil shoved his shoulder against the door panels, and there was a brief, unequal shoving match as she tried to shut and bar the door, then they forced their way in. Francis had crawled to a corner and now scrabbled against the wall trying vainly to escape through the paneling, howling and gabbling blood from his mouth. Katherine snatched up a pewter candlestick and clubbed at Denzil with it in a frenzy, but Rutland snatched it away from her and Syme grabbed her arms from behind, pushing her to her knees. Denzil leaped onto Francis like a panther, pulled him up by his hair, and punched him in the face.

"Bloody hell, colonel, he ain't likely to make it to the gallows wiv that belly wound," observed Syme.

"I think you're right, Jack," said Denzil, and as Katherine screamed in horror and anguish he picked up the now comatose Staton by the collar, gripped the seat of his breeches with the other hand, and hurled him through the diamond-paned glass window into the courtyard below. Denzil and Rutland looked out at the crumpled body on the flagstones, the head twisted beneath the body.

"Neck broke as good as the hangman could have done," commented Rutland. Katherine tore herself loose from Syme and ran to the window, staring.

"Leave her, lads," said Denzil. "Go down and see to Andy. He was hit."

After a time she turned away from the window. She was calm. "Father?" she asked.

"In Ludlow gaol, thence to Shrewsbury assizes. He'll hang."

"Robert?"

"Sir Edward killed him before we got there."

"A blessed mercy." Katherine clasped her hands before her and looked him in the eye, unafraid, completely accepting. "All right. Now me. Finish it."

Denzil drew one of his small French pistols from his boot, the one that had killed Miles Pelham. He cocked it and placed it on the windowsill between them. "You finish it," he said.

She picked up the gun. "What if I kill you with this?"

"Then I will die. But you'll live on in a world of my making, Kate. Not yours."

She turned without another word, and walked into the next room, a bedchamber, closing the door behind her. Denzil saw a fire burning in the grate. He drew forth a *cigarro*, bit off the end, and lit a broomstraw in the fire, which he applied to the open end of the tobacco. He extinguished the burning straw on the floor, grinding it into a pool of Francis Staton's blood with his toe. There was a muffled shot in the room next door. Boots pounded on the stairs. "Colonel Redmond?" shouted Rutland's voice.

"It's all right, George," called Denzil, stepping to the door. "Just winding things up." He opened the door and stepped into the bedroom. She lay on the

floor, the pistol in her hand, the muzzle still in her mouth. Her face was relaxed and serene, and her hair billowed out from her head in a spreading pool of blood. Denzil puffed deeply on the *cigarro*, inhaling the old smell of tobacco and gunpowder and blood. He looked around the room and spoke aloud, in case she was still close enough to hear him.

*"Nemo me impune lacessit!"*