

"All is lost! Sir Geoffrey Gates still holds out, but it is butcher work. The troops of Lord Hastings gather round him as a net round the fish!"

Hastings!—that name!—he was at hand!—he was near!—they would be saved! Sibyll's heart beat loudly.

"And the captain?" asked Porpustone.

"Alive, when I last saw him; but we must be off. In another hour all will be hurry and skurry, flight and chase."

At this moment from one of the barns there emerged, one by one, the female vultures of the battle. The tymbesteres who had tramped all night to the spot, had slept off their fatigue during the day, and appeared on the scene as the neighbouring strife waxed low, and the dead and the dying began to cumber the gory ground. Graul Skellet, tossing up her timbrel, darted to the fugitives and grinned a ghastly grin when she heard the news—for the tymbesteres were all loyal to a king who loved women, and who had a wink and a jest for every tramping wench! The troopers tarried not, however, for further converse, but having satisfied their thirst, hurried and clattered from the yard. At the sight of the ominous tymbesteres Sibyll had drawn back, without daring to close the lattice she had opened; and the women, seating themselves on a bench, began sleeking their long hair and smoothing their garments from the scraps of straw and litter which betokened the nature of their resting-place.

"Ho, girls!" said the fat landlord, "ye will pay me for board and bed, I trust, by a show of your craft. I have two right worshipful lodgers up yonder, whose lattice looks on the yard, and whom ye may serve to divert."

Sibyll trembled, and crept to her father's side.

"And," continued the landlord, "if they like the clash of your musicals, it may bring ye a groat or so, to help ye on your journey. By the way—whither wend ye, wench?"

"To a bonny, jolly fair," answered the sinister voice of Graul—

"Where a mighty SHOWMAN dyes
The greenery into red;
Where, presto! at the word
Lies his Fool without a head—
Where he gathers in the crowd
To the trumpet and the drum,
With a jingle and a tinkle,
Graul's merry lasses come!"

As the two closing lines were caught by the rest of the tymbesteres, striking their timbrels, the crew formed themselves into a semicircle, and commenced their dance. Their movements, though wanton and fantastic, were not without a certain wild grace; and the address with which, from time to time they cast up their instruments and caught them in descending, joined to the surprising agility with which, in the evolutions of the dance, one seemed now to chase, now to fly from, the other, darting to and fro through the ranks of her companions, winding and wheeling—the chain now seemingly broken in disorder, now united link to link, as the whole force of the instruments clashed in chorus—made an exhibition inexpressibly attractive to the vulgar.

The tymbesteres, however, as may well be supposed, failed to draw Sibyll or Warner to the window; and they exchanged glances of spite and disappointment.

"Marry," quoth the landlord, after a hearty laugh

at the diversion, "I do wrong to be so gay, when so many good friends perhaps are lying stark and cold. But what then? Life is short—laugh while we can!"

"Hist!" whispered his housekeeper; "art wode, Ned? Wouldst thou have it discovered that thou hast such quality birds in the cage—noble Yorkists—at the very time when Lord Hastings himself may be riding this way after the victory?"

"Always right, Meg—and I'm an ass!" answered the host, in the same undertone. "But my good nature will be the death of me some day. Poor gentle-folks, they must be unked dull, yonder!"

"If the Yorkists come hither—which we shall soon know by the scouts—we must shift Sir John and the damsel to the back of the house, over thy tap-room."

"Manage it as thou wilt, Meg—but, thou seest, they keep quiet and snug. Ho, ho, ho! that tall tymbestere is supple enough to make an owl hold his sides with laughing. Ah! hollo, there, tymbesteres—*ribaudes*—tramps—the devil's chickens—down, down!"

The host was too late in his order. With a sudden spring, Graul, who had long fixed her eye on the open lattice of the prisoners, had wreathed herself round one of the pillars that supported the stairs, swung lightly over the balustrade—and with a faint shriek, the startled Sibyll beheld the tymbestere's hard, fierce eyes, glaring upon her through the lattice, as her long arm extended the timbrel for largess. But no sooner had Sibyll raised her face than she was recognised.

"Ho! the wizard and the wizard's daughter! Ho! the girl who glammers lords, and wears sarcenet and lawn! Ho! the nigromancer, who starves the poor!"

At the sound of their leader's cry, up sprang, up climbed the hellish sisters! One after the other, they darted through the lattice into the chamber.

"The ronions! the foul fiend has distraught them!" groaned the landlord, motionless with astonishment. But the more active Meg, calling to the varlets and scullions, whom the tymbesteres had collected in the yard, to follow her, bounded up the stairs, unlocked the door, and arrived in time to throw herself between the captives and the harpies, whom Sibyll's rich super-tunic and Adam's costly gown had inflamed into all the rage of appropriation.

"What mean ye, wretches?" cried the bold Meg, purple with anger. "Do ye come for this into honest folk's hostelries, to rob their guests in broad day—noble guests—guests of mark! Oh, Sir John! Sir John! what will ye think of us?"

"Oh, Sir John! Sir John!" groaned the landlord, who had now moved his slow bulk into the room. "They shall be scourged, Sir John! They shall be put in the stocks—they shall be brent with hot iron—they—"

"Ha, ha!" interrupted the terrible Graul, "Guests of mark—noble guests, trow ye! Adam Warner, the wizard, and his daughter, whom we drove last night from their den, as many a time, sisters, and many, we have driven the rats from the charnel and cave."

"Wizard! Adam! Blood of my life!" stammered the landlord—"is his name Adam, after all?"

"My name is Adam Warner," said the old man, with dignity; "no wizard—a humble scholar, and a poor gentleman, who has injured no one. Wherefore, women—if women ye are—would ye injure mine and me?"

"Faugh—wizard!" returned Graul, folding her arms. "Didst thou not send thy spawn, yonder, to spoil our mart with her gittern? Hast thou not taught

her the spells to win love from the noble and young? Ho, how daintily the young witch robes herself? Ho! laces, and satins, and we shiver with the cold, and parch with the heat—and—doff thy tunic, minion!”

And Graul's fierce gripe was on the robe, when the landlord interposed his huge arm, and held her at bay.

“Softly, my sucking dove, softly! Clear the room, and be off!”

“Look to thyself, man. If thou harbourest a wizard, against law—a wizard whom King Edward hath given up to the people—look to thy barns, they shall burn; look to thy cattle—they shall rot; look to thy secrets—they shall be told. Lancastrian, thou shalt hang! We go—we go! We have friends among the mailed men of York. We go—we will return! Woe to thee, if thou harbourest the wizard and the succuba!”

With that, Graul moved slowly to the door. Host and housekeeper, varlet, groom, and scullion, made way for her, in terror; and still, as she moved, she kept her eyes on Sibyll, till her sisters, following in successive file, shut out the hideous aspect; and Meg, ordering away her gaping train, closed the door.

The host and the housekeeper then gazed gravely at each other. Sibyll lay in her father's arms breathing hard and convulsively. The old man's face bent over her in silence.

Meg drew aside her master. “You must rid the house at once of these folks. I have heard talk of yon tymbesteres; they are awesome in spite and malice. Every man to himself!”

“But the poor old gentleman, so mild—and the maid, so winsome!”

The last remark did not over-please the comely Meg. She advanced at once to Adam, and said, shortly—

“Master—whether wizard or not, is no affair of a poor landlord, whose house is open to all; but ye have had food and wine—please to pay the reckoning, and God speed ye—ye are free to depart.”

“We can pay you, mistress!” exclaimed Sibyll, springing up. “We have moneys yet. Here—here!” and she took from her gipsire the broad pieces which poor Madge's precaution had placed therein, and which the bravoes had fortunately spared.

The sight of the gold somewhat softened the housewife.—“Lord Hastings is known to us,” continued Sibyll, perceiving the impression she had made; “suffer us to rest here till he pass this way, and ye will find yourselves repaid for the kindness.”

“By my troth,” said the landlord, “ye are most welcome to all my poor house containeth; and as for these tymbesteres, I value them not a straw. No one can say Ned Porpustone is an ill man or inhospitable. Whoever can pay reasonably, is sure of good wine and civility at the Talbot.”

With these and many similar protestations and assurances, which were less heartily re-echoed by the housewife, the landlord begged to conduct them to an apartment not so liable to molestation; and after having led them down the principal stairs, through the bar, and thence up a narrow flight of steps, deposited them in a chamber at the back of the house, and lighted a scone therein—for it was now near the twilight. He then insisted on seeing after their evening meal, and vanished with his assistant. The worthy pair were now of the same mind: for guests known to Lord Hastings, it was worth braving the threats of the tym-

besteres; especially since Lord Hastings, it seems, had just beaten the Lancastrians.

But, alas! while the active Meg was busy on the hippocras, and the worthy landlord was inspecting the savoury operations of the kitchen, a vast uproar was heard without. A troop of disorderly Yorkist soldiers, who had been employed in dispersing the flying rebels, rushed helter skelter into the house, and poured into the kitchen, bearing with them the detested tymbesteres who had encountered them on their way. Among these soldiers were those who had congregated at Master Sancroft's the day before, and they were well prepared to support the cause of their griesly paramours. Lord Hastings himself had retired for the night to a farm-house nearer the field of battle than the hostel; and as in those days discipline was lax enough after a victory, the soldiers had a right to licence. Master Porpustone found himself completely at the mercy of these brawling customers, the more rude and disorderly from the remembrance of the sour beer in the morning, and Graul Skellet's assurances that Master Porpustone was a malignant Lancastrian. They laid hands on all the provisions in the house, tore the meats from the spit, devouring them half raw; set the casks running over the floors; and while they swilled and swore, and filled the place with the uproar of a hell broke loose, Graul Skellet, whom the lust for the rich garments of Sibyll still fired and stung, led her followers up the stairs towards the deserted chamber. Mine host perceived, but did not dare openly to resist the foray; but as he was really a good-natured knave, and as, moreover, he feared ill consequences might ensue if any friends of Lord Hastings were spoiled, outraged—nay, peradventure, murdered—in his house, he re-

solved, at all events, to assist the escape of his guests. Seeing the ground thus clear of the tymbesteres, he therefore stole from the riotous scene, crept up the back stairs, gained the chamber to which he had so happily removed his persecuted lodgers, and making them, in a few words, sensible that he was no longer able to protect them, and that the tymbesteres were now returned with an armed force to back their malice, conducted them safely to a wide casement only some three or four feet from the soil of the solitary garden, and bade them escape and save themselves.

"The farm," he whispered, "where they say my Lord Hastings is quartered, is scarcely a mile and a half away; pass the garden wicket—leave Gladsmore Chase to the left hand—take the path to the right, through the wood, and you will see its roof among the apple-blossoms. Our Lady protect you and say a word to my lord on behalf of poor Ned."

Scarce had he seen his guests descend into the garden, before he heard the yell of the tymbesteres, in the opposite part of the house, as they ran from room to room after their prey. He hastened to regain the kitchen; and presently the tymbesteres, breathless and panting, rushed in, and demanded their victims.

"Marry," quoth the landlord, with the self-possession of a cunning old soldier—"think ye I cumbered my house with such cattle, after pretty lasses like you had given me the inkling of what they were? No wizard shall fly away with the sign of the Talbot, if I can help it. They skulked off, I can promise ye, and did not even mount a couple of broomsticks which I handsomely offered for their ride up to London."

"Thunder and bombards!" cried a trooper, already half-drunk, and seizing Graul in his iron arms—"put

the conjuror out of thine head now, and buss me, Graul—buss me!”

Then the riot became hideous; the soldiers, following their comrade's example, embraced the grim glee-women, tearing and hauling them to and fro, one from the other, round and round, dancing, hallooing, chanting, howling, by the blaze of a mighty fire—many a rough face and hard hand smeared with blood still wet, communicated the stain to the cheeks and garb of those foul feres, and the whole revel becoming so unutterably horrible and ghastly, that even the veteran landlord fled from the spot, trembling and crossing himself:—And so, streaming athwart the lattice, and silvering over that fearful merry-making, rose the moon!

But when fatigue and drunkenness had done their work, and the soldiers fell one over the other upon the floor, the tables, the benches, into the heavy sleep of riot, Graul suddenly rose from amidst the huddled bodies, and then, silently as ghouls from a burial-ground, her sisters emerged also from their resting-places beside the sleepers. The dying light of the fire contended but feebly with the livid rays of the moon, and played fantastically over the gleaming robes of the tymbesteres. They stood erect for a moment, listening, Graul with her finger on her lips; then they glided to the door, opened and reclosed it—darted across the yard, scaring the beasts that slept there; the watch-dog barked, but drew back, bristling, and showing his fangs, as Red Grisell, undaunted, pointed her knife, and Graul flung him a red peace-sop of meat. They launched themselves through the open entrance, gained the space beyond, and scoured away to the battle-field.

Meanwhile, Sibyll and her father were still under

the canopy of heaven, they had scarcely passed the garden and entered the fields, when they saw horsemen riding to and fro in all directions. Sir Geoffrey Gates, the rebel leader, had escaped; the reward of three hundred marks was set on his head, and the riders were in search of the fugitive. The human form itself had become a terror to the hunted outcasts: they crept under a thick hedge till the horsemen had disappeared, and then resumed their way. They gained the wood; but there again they halted at the sound of voices, and withdrew themselves under covert of some entangled and trampled bushes. This time it was but a party of peasants, whom curiosity had led to see the field of battle, and who were now returning home. Peasants and soldiers both were human, and therefore to be shunned by those whom the age itself put out of the pale of law. At last, the party also left the path free; and now it was full night. They pursued their way—they cleared the wood—before them lay the field of battle; and a deeper silence seemed to fall over the world! The first stars had risen, but not yet the moon. The gleam of armour from prostrate bodies, which it had mailed in vain, reflected the quiet rays; here and there flickered watchfires, where sentinels were set, but they were scattered and remote. The outcasts paused and shuddered, but there seemed no holier way for their feet; and the roof of the farmer's homestead slept on the opposite side of the field, amidst white orchard blossoms, whitened still more by the stars. They went on, hand in hand—the dead, after all, were less terrible than the living. Sometimes a stern, upturned face, distorted by the last violent agony, the eyes unclosed and glazed, encountered them with its stony stare; but the weapon was powerless in the stiff hand—the

menace and the insult came not from the hueless lips—persecution reposed, at last, in the lap of slaughter. They had gone midway through the field, when they heard from a spot where the corpses lay thickest piled, a faint voice calling upon God for pardon; and, suddenly, it was answered by a tone of fiercer agony—that did not pray, but curse.

By a common impulse, the gentle wanderers moved silently to the spot.

The sufferer, in prayer, was a youth scarcely passed from boyhood: his helm had been cloven, his head was bare, and his long light hair, clotted with gore, fell over his shoulders. Beside him lay a strong-built, powerful form, which writhed in torture, pierced under the arm, by a Yorkist arrow, and the shaft still projected from the wound—and the man's curse answered the boy's prayer.

"Peace to thy parting soul, brother!" said Warner, bending over the man.

"Poor sufferer!" said Sibyll to the boy; "cheer thee; we will send succour; thou mayst live yet!"

"Water! water!—hell and torture!—water, I say!" groaned the man; "one drop of water!"

It was the captain of the marauders who had captured the wanderers.

"Thine arm! lift me! move me! That evil man scares my soul from heaven!" gasped the boy.

And Adam preached penitence to the one that cursed, and Sibyll knelt down and prayed with the one that prayed.—And up rose the moon!

Lord Hastings sat, with his victorious captains,—over mead, morat, and wine—in the humble hall of the farm.

"So," said he, "we have crushed the last embers of

the rebellion! This Sir Geoffrey Gates is a restless and resolute spirit; pity he escapes again for further mischief. But the house of Nevile, that over-shadowed the rising race, hath fallen at last—a waisall, brave sirs, to the new men!"

The door was thrown open, and an old soldier entered abruptly.

"My lord! my lord! Oh! my poor son! he cannot be found! The women, who ever follow the march of soldiers, will be on the ground to despatch the wounded, that they may rifle the corpses! O God! if my son—my boy—my only son——"

"I wist not, my brave Mervil, that thou hadst a son in our bands; yet I know each man by name and sight. Courage! Our wounded have been removed, and sentries are placed to guard the field!"

"Sentries! O my lord, knowest thou not that they wink at the crime that plunders the dead? Moreover, these corpse-riflers creep stealthily and unseen, as the red earth-worms, to the carcase. Give me some few of thy men—give me warrant to search the field! My son—my boy—not sixteen summers—and his mother!"—

The man stopped, and sobbed.

"Willingly!" said the gentle Hastings, "willingly! And woe to the sentries if it be as thou sayest! I will go myself, and see!—Torches there—what ho?—the good captain careth even for his dead!—Thy son! I marvel I knew him not!—Whom served he under?"

"My lord! my lord! pardon him! He is but a boy—they misled him!—he fought for the rebels. He crossed my path to-day—my arm was raised—we knew each other, and he fled from his father's sword!—Just as the strife was ended I saw him again—I saw him

fall!—O mercy, mercy! do not let him perish of his wounds or by the rifler's knife, even though a rebel!"

"*Homo sum!*" quoth the noble chief, "I am a man! and, even in these bloody times, Nature commands when she speaks in a father's voice! Mervil! I marked thee to-day! Thou art a brave fellow. I meant thee advancement—I give thee, instead, thy son's pardon, if he lives—ten masses if he died as a soldier's son should die, no matter under what flag—antelope or lion, pierced manfully in the breast—his feet to the foe! Come, I will search with thee!"

The boy yielded up his soul while Sibyll prayed, and her sweet voice soothed the last pang; and the man ceased to curse while Adam spoke of God's power and mercy, and his breath ebbed, gasp upon gasp, away. While thus detained, the wanderers saw not pale, fleeting figures, that had glided to the ground, and moved, gleaming, irregular, and rapid, as marsh-fed vapours, from heap to heap of the slain. With a loud, wild cry, the robber Lancastrian half sprung to his feet, in the paroxysm of the last struggle, and then fell on his face—a corpse!

The cry reached the tymbesteres, and Graul rose from a body from which she had extracted a few coins smeared with blood, and darted to the spot; and so, as Adam raised his face from contemplating the dead, whose last moments he had sought to soothe, the Alecto of the battle-field stood before him, her knife bare in her gory hand. Red Grisell, who had just left (with a spurn of wrath—for the pouch was empty) the corpse of a soldier, round whose neck she had twined her hot clasp the day before, sprang towards Sibyll; the rest of the sisterhood flocked to the place, and laughed in glee as they beheld their unexpected prey.

The danger was horrible and imminent; no pity was seen in those savage eyes. The wanderers prepared for death—when, suddenly, torches flashed over the ground. A cry was heard—"See, the riflers of the dead!" Armed men bounded forward, and the startled wretches uttered a shrill unearthly scream, and fled from the spot, leaping over the carcasses, and doubling and winding, till they had vanished into the darkness of the wood.

"Provost!" said a commanding voice, "hang me up those sentinels at daybreak!"

"My son! my boy! speak, Hal—speak to me. He is here—he is found!" exclaimed the old soldier, kneeling beside the corpse at Sibyll's feet.

"My lord! my beloved! my Hastings!" And Sibyll fell insensible before the chief.

CHAPTER VI

THE SUBTLE CRAFT OF RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

It was some weeks after the defeat of Sir Geoffrey Gates, and Edward was at Shene, with his gay court. Reclined at length within a pavilion placed before a cool fountain, in the royal gardens, and surrounded by his favourites, the king listened indolently to the music of his minstrels, and sleeked the plumage of his favourite falcon, perched upon his wrist. And scarcely would it have been possible to recognise in that lazy voluptuary the dauntless soldier, before whose lance, as deer before the hound, had so lately fled, at bloody Erpingham, the chivalry of the Lancastrian Rose; but remote from the pavilion, and in one of the deserted