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London Pride Or When the World Was Younger

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CHAPTER I.

A HARBOUR FROM THE STORM.

The wind howled across the level fields, and flying showers of sleet rattled against the old leathern coach as it drove through the thickening dusk. A bitter winter, this year of the Royal tragedy.

A rainy summer, and a mild rainy autumn had been followed by the hardest frost this generation had ever known. The Thames was frozen over, and tempestuous winds had shaken the ships in the Pool, and the steep gable ends and tall chimney-stacks on London Bridge. A never-to-be-forgotten winter, which had witnessed the martyrdom of England's King, and the exile of her chief nobility, while a rabble Parliament rode roughshod over a cowed people. Gloom and sour visages prevailed, the maypoles were down, the play-houses were closed, the bear-gardens were empty, the cockpits were desolate; and a saddened population, impoverished and depressed by the sacrifices that had been exacted and the tyranny that had been exercised in the name of Liberty, were ground under the iron heel of Cromwell's red-coats.

The pitiless journey from London to Louvain, a journey of many days and nights, prolonged by accident and difficulty, had been spun out to uttermost tedium for those two in the heavily moving old leathern coach. Who and what were they, these wearied travellers, journeying together silently towards a destination which promised but little of pleasure or luxury by way of welcome—a destination which meant severance for those two?

One was Sir John Kirkland, of the Manor Moat, Bucks, a notorious Malignant, a grey-bearded cavalier, aged by trouble and hard fighting; a soldier and servant who had sacrificed himself and his fortune for the King, and must needs begin the world anew now that his master was murdered, his own goods confiscated, the old family mansion, the house in which his parents died and his chil-

dren were born, emptied of all its valuables, and left to the care of servants, and his master's son a wanderer in a foreign land, with little hope of ever winning back crown and sceptre.

Sadness was the dominant expression of Sir John's stern, strongly marked countenance, as he sat staring out at the level landscape through the unglazed coach window, staring blankly across those wind-swept Flemish fields where the cattle were clustering in sheltered corners, a monotonous expanse, crossed by ice-bound dykes that looked black as ink, save where the last rays of the setting sun touched their iron hue with blood-red splashes. Pollard willows indicated the edge of one field, gaunt poplars marked the boundary of another, alike leafless and unbeautiful, standing darkly out against the dim grey sky. Night was hastening towards the travellers, narrowing and blotting out that level landscape, field, dyke, and leafless wood.

Sir John put his head out of the coach window, and looked anxiously along the straight road, peering through the shades of evening in the hope of seeing the crocketed spires and fair cupolas of Louvain in the distance. But he could see nothing save a waste of level pastures and the gathering darkness. Not a light anywhere, not a sign of human habitation.

Useless to gaze any longer into the impenetrable night. The traveller leant back into a corner of the carriage with folded arms, and, with a deep sigh, composed himself for slumber. He had slept but little for the last week. The passage from Harwich to Ostend in a fishing-smack had been a perilous transit, prolonged by adverse winds. Sleep had been impossible on board that wretched craft; and the land journey had been fraught with vexation and delays of all kinds—stupidity of postillions, dearth of horseflesh, badness of the roads—all things that can vex and hinder.

Sir John's travelling companion, a small child in a cloak and hood, crept closer to him in the darkness, nestled up against his elbow, and pushed her little cold hand into his leathern glove.

"You are crying again, father," she said, full of pity. "You were crying last night. Do you always cry when it grows dark?"

"It does not become a man to shed tears in the daylight, little maid," her father answered gently.

"Is it for the poor King you are crying—the King those wicked men murdered?"

"Ay, Angela, for the King; and for the Queen and her fatherless children still more than for the King, for he has crowned himself with a crown of glory, the diadem of martyrs, and is resting from labour and sorrow, to rise victorious at the great day, when his enemies and his murderers shall stand ashamed before him. I weep for that once so lovely lady—widowed, discrowned, needy, desolate—a beggar in the land where her father was a great king. A hard fate, Angela, father and husband both murdered."

"Was the Queen's father murdered too?" asked the silver-sweet voice out of darkness, a pretty piping note like the song of a bird.

"Yes, love."

"Did Bradshaw murder him?"

"No, dearest, 'twas in France he was slain—in Paris; stabbed to death by a madman."

"And was the Queen sorry?"

"Ay, sweetheart, she has drained the cup of sorrow. She was but a child when her father died. She can but dimly remember that dreadful day. And now she sits, banished and widowed, to hear of her husband's martyrdom; her elder sons wanderers, her young daughter a prisoner."

"Poor Queen!" piped the small sweet voice, "I am so sorry for her."

Little had she ever known but sorrow, this child of the Great Rebellion, born in the old Buckinghamshire manor house, while her father was at Falmouth with the Prince—born in the midst of civil war, a stormy petrel, bringing no message of peace from those unknown skies whence she came, a harbinger of woe. Infant eyes love bright colours. This baby's eyes looked upon a house hung with black. Her mother died before the child was a fortnight old. They had christened her Angela. "Angel of Death," said the father, when the news of his loss reached him, after the lapse of many days. His

fair young wife's coffin was in the family vault under the parish church of St. Nicholas in the Vale, before he knew that he had lost her.

There was an elder daughter, Hyacinth, seven years the senior, who had been sent across the Channel in the care of an old servant at the beginning of the troubles between King and Parliament.

She had been placed in the charge of her maternal grandmother, the Marquise de Montrond, who had taken ship for Calais when the Court left London, leaving her royal mistress to weather the storm. A lady who had wealth and prestige in her own country, who had been a famous beauty when Richelieu was in power, and who had been admired by that serious and sober monarch, Louis the Thirteenth, could scarcely be expected to put up with the shifts and shortcomings of an Oxford lodging-house, with the ever-present fear of finding herself in a town besieged by Lord Essex and the rebel army.

With Madame de Montrond, Hyacinth had been reared, partly in a mediaeval mansion, with a portcullis and four squat towers, near the Château d'Arques, and partly in Paris, where the lady had a fine house in the Marais. The sisters had never looked upon each other's faces, Angela having entered upon the troubled scene after Hyacinth had been carried across the Channel to her grandmother. And now the father was racked with anxiety lest evil should befall that elder daughter in the war between Mazarin and the Parliament, which was reported to rage with increasing fury.

Angela's awakening reason became conscious of a world where all was fear and sadness. The stories she heard in her childhood were stories of that fierce war which was reaching its disastrous close while she was in her cradle. She was told of the happy peaceful England of old, before darkness and confusion gathered over the land; before the hearts of the people were set against their King by a wicked and rebellious Parliament.

She heard of battles lost by the King and his partisans; cities besieged and taken; a flash of victory followed by humiliating reverses; the King's party always at a disadvantage; and hence the falling away of the feeble and the false, the treachery of those who had seemed friends, the impotence of the faithful.

Angela heard so often and so much of these things—from old Lady Kirkland, her grandmother, and from the grey-haired servants at the manor—that she grew to understand them with a comprehension seemingly far beyond her tender years. But a child so reared is inevitably older than her years. This little one had never known childish pleasures or play, childish companions or childish fancies.

She roamed about the spacious gardens, full of saddest thoughts, burdened with all the cares that weighed down that kingly head yonder; or she stood before the pictured face of the monarch with clasped hands and tearful eyes, looking up at him with the adoring compassion of a child prone to hero-worship—thinking of him already as saint and martyr—whose martyrdom was not yet consummated in blood.

King Charles had presented his faithful servant, Sir John Kirkland, with a half-length replica of one of his Vandyke portraits, a beautiful head, with a strange inward look—that look of isolation and aloofness which we who know his story take for a prophecy of doom—which the sculptor Bernini had remarked, when he modelled the royal head for marble. The picture hung in the place of honour in the long narrow gallery at the Manor Moat, with trophies of Flodden and Zutphen arranged against the blackened oak paneling above it. The Kirklands had been a race of soldiers since the days of Edward III. The house was full of war-like decorations—tattered colours, old armour, memorials of fighting Kirklands who had long been dust.

There came an evil day when the rabble rout of Cromwell's crop-haired soldiery burst into the manor house to pillage and destroy, carrying off curios and relics that were the gradual accumulation of a century and a half of peaceful occupation.

The old Dowager's grey hairs had barely saved her from outrage on that bitter day. It was only her utter helplessness and afflicted condition that prevailed upon the Parliamentary captain, and prevented him from carrying out his design, which was to haul her off to one of those London prisons at that time so gorged with Royalist captives that the devilish ingenuity of the Parliament had devised floating gaols on the Thames, where persons of quality and charac-

ter were herded together below decks, to the loss of health, and even of life.

Happily for old Lady Kirkland, she was too lame to walk, and her enemies had no horse or carriage in which to convey her; so she was left at peace in her son's plundered mansion, whence all that was valuable and easily portable was carried away by the Roundheads. Silver plate and family plate had been sacrificed to the King's necessities.

The pictures, not being either portable or readily convertible into cash, had remained on the old panelled walls.

Angela used to go from the King's picture to her father's. Sir John's was a more rugged face than the Stuart's, with a harder expression; but the child's heart went out to the image of the father she had never seen since the dawn of consciousness. He had made a hurried journey to that quiet Buckinghamshire valley soon after her birth—had looked at the baby in her cradle, and then had gone down into the vault where his young wife was lying, and had stayed for more than an hour in cold and darkness alone with his dead. That lovely French wife had been his junior by more than twenty years, and he had loved her passionately—had loved her and left her for duty's sake. No Kirkland had ever faltered in his fidelity to crown and king. This John Kirkland had sacrificed all things, and, alone with his beloved dead in the darkness of that narrow charnel house, it seemed to him that there was nothing left for him except to cleave to those fallen fortunes and patiently await the issue.

He had fought in many battles and had escaped with a few scars; and he was carrying his daughter to Louvain, intending to place her in the charge of her great-aunt, Madame de Montrond's half sister, who was head of a convent in that city, a safe and pious shelter, where the child might be reared in her mother's faith.

Lady Kirkland, the only daughter of the Marquise de Montrond, one of Queen Henrietta Maria's ladies-in-waiting, had been a papist, and, although Sir John had adhered steadfastly to the principles of the Reformed Church, he had promised his bride, and the Marquise, her mother, that if their nuptials were blessed with offspring, their children should be educated in the Roman faith—a promise difficult

of performance in a land where a stormy tide ran high against Rome, and where Popery was a scarlet spectre that alarmed the ignorant and maddened the bigoted. And now, duly provided with a safe conduct from the regicide, Bradshaw, he was journeying to the city where he was to part with his daughter for an indefinite period. He had seen but little of her, and yet it seemed as hard to part thus as if she had prattled at his knees and nestled in his arms every day of her young life.

At last across the distance, against the wind-driven clouds of that stormy winter sky, John Kirkland saw the lights of the city—not many lights or brilliant of their kind, but a glimmer here and there—and behind the glimmer the dark bulk of masonry, roofs, steeples, watch-towers, bridges.

The carriage stopped at one of the gates of the city, and there were questions asked and answered, and papers shown, but there was no obstacle to the entrance of the travellers. The name of the Ursuline Convent acted like a charm, for Louvain was papist to the core in these days of Spanish dominion. It had been a city of refuge nearly a hundred years ago for all that was truest and bravest and noblest among English Roman Catholics, in the cruel days of Queen Elizabeth, and Englishmen had become the leading spirits of the University there, and had attracted the youth of Romanist England to the sober old Flemish town, before the establishment of Dr. Allan's rival seminary at Douai, Sir John could have found no safer haven for his little ewe lamb.

The tired horses blundered heavily along the stony streets, and crossed more than one bridge. The town seemed pervaded by water, a deep narrow stream like a canal, on which the houses looked, as if in feeble mockery of Venice—houses with steep crow-step gables, some of them richly decorated; narrow windows for the most part dark, but with here and there the yellow light of lamp or candle.

The convent faced a broad open square, and had a large walled garden in its rear. The coach stopped in front of a handsome doorway, and after the travellers had been scrutinised and interrogated by the portress through an opening in the door, they were admitted into a spacious hall, paved with black and white marble, and

adorned with a statue of the Virgin Mother, and thence to a parlour dimly lighted by a small oil lamp, where they waited for about ten minutes, the little girl shivering with cold, before the Superior appeared.

She was a tall woman, advanced in years, with a handsome, but melancholy countenance. She greeted the cavalier as a familiar friend.

"Welcome to Flanders!" she said. "You have fled from that accursed country where our Church is despised and persecuted — —"

"Nay, reverend kinswoman, I have fled but to go back again as fast as horses and sails can carry me. While the fortunes of my King are at stake, my place is in England, or it may be in Scotland, where there are still those who are ready to fight to the death in the royal cause. But I have brought this little one for shelter and safe keeping, and tender usage, trusting in you who are of kin to her as I could trust no one else—and, furthermore, that she may be reared in the faith of her dead mother."

"Sweet soul!" murmured the nun. "It was well for her to be taken from your troubled England to the kingdom of the saints and martyrs."

"True, reverend mother; yet those blasphemous levellers who call us 'Malignants' have dubbed themselves 'Saints.'"

"Then affairs go no better with you in England, I fear, Sir John?"

"Nay, madam, they go so ill that they have reached the lowest depth of infamy. Hell itself hath seen no spectacle more awful, no murder more barbarous, no horrider triumph of wickedness, than the crime which was perpetrated this day se'nnight at Whitehall."

The nun looked at him wistfully, with clasped hands, as one who half apprehended his meaning.

"The King!" she faltered, "still a prisoner?"

"Ay, reverend lady, but a prisoner in Paradise, where angels are his guards, and saints and martyrs his companions. He has regained his crown; but it is the crown of martyrdom, the aureole of slaughtered saints. England, our little England that was once so great un-

der the strong rule of that virgin-queen who made herself the arbiter of Christendom, and the wonder of the world— —"

The pious lady shivered and crossed herself at this praise of the heretic queen—praise that could only come from a heretic.

"Our blessed and peaceful England has become a den of thieves, given over to the ravening wolves of rebellion and dissent, the peniless soldiery who would bring down all men's fortunes to their own level, seize all, eat and drink all, and trample crown and peerage in the mire. They have slain him, reverend mother, this impious herd—they gave him the mockery of a trial—just as his Master, Christ, was mocked. They spurned and spat upon him, even as our Redeemer was spurned; and then, on the Sabbath day, they cried aloud in their conventicles, 'Lord, hast Thou not smelt a sweet savour of blood?' Ay, these murderers gloried in their crime, bragged of their gory hands, lifted them up towards heaven as a token of righteousness!"

The cavalier was pacing to and fro in the dimness of the convent parlour, with quick, agitated steps, his nostrils quivering, grizzled brows bent over angry eyes, his hand trembling with rage as it clutched his sword-hilt.

The reverend mother drew Angela to her side, took off the little black silk hood, and laid her hand caressingly on the soft brown hair.

"Was it Cromwell's work?" she asked.

"Nay, reverend mother, I doubt whether of his own accord Cromwell would have done this thing. He is a villain, a damnable villain—but he is a glorious villain. The Parliament had made their covenant with the King at Newport—a bargain which gave them all, and left him nothing—save only his broken health, grey hairs, and the bare name of King. He would have been but a phantom of authority, powerless as the royal spectres Aeneas met in the underworld. They had got all from him—all save the betrayal of his friends. There he budged not, but was firm as rock."

"'Twas likely he remembered Strafford, and that he prospered no better for having flung a faithful dog to the wolves," said the nun.

"Remembered Strafford? Ay, that memory has been a pillow of thorns through many a sleepless night. No, it was not Cromwell who sought the King's blood—it has been shed with his sanction. The Parliament had got all, and would have been content; but the faction they had created was too strong for them. The levellers sent their spokesman—one Pride, an ex-drayman, now colonel of horse—to the door of the House of Commons, who arrested the more faithful and moderate members, imposed himself and his rebel crew upon the House, and hurried on that violation of constitutional law, that travesty of justice, which compelled an anointed King to stand before the lowest of his subjects—the jacks-in-office of a mutinous commonalty—to answer for having fought in defence of his own inviolable rights."

"Did they dare condemn their King?"

"Ah, madam, they found him guilty of high treason, in that he had taken arms against the Parliament. They sentenced their royal master to death—and seven days ago London saw the spectacle of judicial murder—a blameless King slain by the minion of an armed rabble!"

"But did the people—the English people—suffer this in silence? The wisest and best of them could surely be assembled in your great city. Did the citizens of London stand placidly by to see this deed accomplished?"

"They were like sheep before the shearer. They were dumb. Great God! can I ever forget that sea of white faces under the grey winter sky, or the universal groan that went up to heaven when the stroke of the axe sounded on the block, and men knew that the murder of their King was consummated; and when that anointed head with its grey hairs, whitened with sorrow, mark you, not with age, was lifted up, bloody, terrible, and proclaimed the head of a traitor? Ah, reverend mother, ten such moments will age a man by ten years. Was it not the most portentous tragedy which the earth has ever seen since He who was both God and Man died upon Calvary? Other judicial sacrifices have been, but never of a victim as guiltless and as noble. Had you but seen the calm beauty of his countenance as he turned it towards the people! Oh, my King, my master, my beloved friend, when shall I see that face in Paradise, with the blood

washed from that royal brow, with the smile of the redeemed upon those lips!"

He flung himself into a chair, covered his face with those weather-stained hands, which had broadened by much grasping of sword and pistol, pike and gun, and sobbed aloud, with a fierce passion that convulsed the strong muscular frame. Of all the King's servants this one had been the most steadfast, was marked in the black book of the Parliament as a notorious Malignant. From the raising of the standard on the castle-hill at Nottingham—in the sad evening of a tempestuous day, with but scanty attendance, and only evil presages—to the treaty at Newport, and the prison on the low Hampshire coast, this man had been his master's constant companion and friend; fighting in every battle, cleaving to King and Prince in spite of every opposing influence, carrying letters between father and son in the teeth of the enemy, humbling himself as a servant, and performing menial labours, in those latter days of bitterness and outrage, when all courtly surroundings were denied the fallen monarch.

And now he mourned his martyred King more bitterly than he would have mourned his own brother.

The little girl slipped from the reverend mother's lap, and ran across the room to her father.

"Don't cry, father!" she murmured, with her own eyes streaming. "It hurts me to see you."

"Nay, Angela," he answered, clasping her to his breast. "Forgive me that I think more of my dead King than of my living daughter. Poor child, thou hast seen nothing but sorrow since thou wert born; a land racked by civil war; Englishmen changed into devils; a home ravaged and made desolate; threatenings and curses; thy good grandmother's days shortened by sorrow and rough usage. Thou wert born into a house of mourning, and hast seen nothing but black since thou hadst eyes to notice the things around thee. Those tender ears should have heard only loving words. But it is over, dearest; and thou hast found a haven within these walls. You will take care of her, will you not, madam, for the sake of the niece you loved?"

"She shall be the apple of my eye. No evil shall come near her that my care and my prayers can avert. God has been very gracious to our order—in all troublous times we have been protected. We have many pupils from the best families of Flanders—and some even from Paris, whence parents are glad to remove their children from the confusion of the time. You need fear nothing while this sweet child is with us; and if in years to come she should desire to enter our order— —"

"The Lord forbid!" cried the cavalier. "I want her to be a good and pious papist, madam, like her sweet mother; but never a nun. I look to her as the staff and comfort of my declining years. Thou wilt not abandon thy father, wilt thou, little one, when thou shalt be tall and strong as a bulrush, and he shall be bent and gnarled with age, like the old medlar on the lawn at the Manor? Thou wilt be his rod and staff, wilt thou not, sweetheart?"

The child flung her arms round his neck and kissed him. It was her only answer, but that mute reply was a vow.

"Thou wilt stay here till England's troubles are over, Angela, and that base herd yonder have been trampled down. Thou wilt be happy here, and wilt mind thy book, and be obedient to those good ladies who will teach thee; and some day, when our country is at peace, I will come back to fetch thee."

"Soon," murmured the child, "soon, father?"

"God grant it may be soon, my beloved! It is hard for father and children to be scattered, as we are scattered; thy sister Hyacinth in Paris, and thou in Flanders, and I in England. Yet it must needs be so for a while!"

"Why should not Hyacinth come to us and be reared with Angela?" asked the reverend mother.

"Nay, madam, Hyacinth is well cared for with your sister, Madame de Montrond. She is as dear to her maternal grandmother as this little one here was to my good mother, whose death last year left us a house of mourning. Hyacinth will doubtless inherit a considerable portion of Madame de Montrond's wealth, which is not insignificant. She is being brought up in the precincts of the Court."