

The Nest of the Sparrowhawk

by

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PART I

I. The House Of A Kentish Squire

Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy folded his hands before him ere he spoke:

"Nay! but I tell thee, woman, that the Lord hath no love for such frivolities! and alack! but 'tis a sign of the times that an English Squire should favor such evil ways."

"Evil ways? The Lord love you, Master Hymn-of-Praise, and pray do you call half an hour at the skittle alley 'evil ways'?"

"Aye, evil it is to indulge our sinful bodies in such recreation as doth not tend to the glorification of the Lord and the sanctification of our immortal souls."

He who sermonized thus unctuously and with eyes fixed with stern disapproval on the buxom wench before him, was a man who had passed the meridian of life not altogether--it may be surmised--without having indulged in some recreations which had not always the sanctification of his own immortal soul for their primary object. The bulk of his figure testified that he was not averse to good cheer, and there was a certain hidden twinkle underlying the severe expression of his eyes as they rested on the pretty face and round figure of Mistress Charity that did not necessarily tend to the glorification of the Lord.

Apparently, however, the admonitions of Master Hymn-of-Praise made but a scanty impression on the young girl's mind, for she regarded him with a mixture of amusement and contempt as she shrugged her plump shoulders and said with sudden irrelevance:

"Have you had your dinner yet, Master Busy?"

"'Tis sinful to address a single Christian person as if he or she were several," retorted the man sharply. "But I'll tell thee in confidence, mistress, that I have not partaken of a single drop more comforting than cold water the whole of to-day. Mistress de Chavasse mixed the sack-posset with her own hands this morning, and locked it in the cellar, of which she hath rigorously held the key. Ten minutes ago when she placed the bowl on this table, she called my attention to the fact that the delectable beverage came to within three inches of the brim. Meseems I shall have to seek for a less suspicious, more Christian-spirited household, whereon to bestow in the near future my faithful services."

Hardly had Master Hymn-of-Praise finished speaking when he turned very sharply round and looked with renewed sternness--wholly untempered by a twinkle this time--in the direction whence he thought a suppressed giggle had just come to his ears. But what he saw must surely have completely reassured him; there was no suggestion of unseemly ribaldry about the young lad who had been busy laying out the table with spoons and mugs, and was at this moment

vigorously--somewhat ostentatiously, perhaps--polishing a carved oak chair, bending to his task in a manner which fully accounted for the high color in his cheeks.

He had long, lanky hair of a pale straw-color, a thin face and high cheek-bones, and was dressed--as was also Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy--in a dark purple doublet and knee breeches, all looking very much the worse for wear; the brown tags and buttons with which these garments had originally been roughly adorned were conspicuous in a great many places by their absence, whilst all those that remained were mere skeletons of their former selves.

The plain collars and cuffs which relieved the dull color of the men's doublets were of singularly coarse linen not beyond reproach as to cleanliness, and altogether innocent of starch; whilst the thick brown worsted stockings displayed many a hole through which the flesh peeped, and the shoes of roughly tanned leather were down at heel and worn through at the toes.

Undoubtedly even in these days of more than primitive simplicity and of sober habiliments Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy, butler at Acol Court in the county of Kent, and his henchman, Master Courage Toogood, would have been conspicuous for the shabbiness and poverty of the livery which they wore.

The hour was three in the afternoon. Outside a glorious July sun spread radiance and glow over an old-fashioned garden, over tall yew hedges, and fantastic forms of green birds and heads of beasts carefully cut and trimmed, over clumps of late roses and rough tangles of marguerites and potentillas, of stiff zinnias and rich-hued snapdragons.

Through the open window came the sound of wood knocking against wood, of exclamations of annoyance or triumph as the game proceeded, and every now and then a ripple of prolonged laughter, girlish, fresh, pure as the fragrant air, clear as the last notes of the cuckoo before he speaks his final farewell to summer.

Every time that echo of youth and gayety penetrated into the oak-raftered dining-room, Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy pursed his thick lips in disapproval, whilst the younger man, had he dared, would no doubt have gone to the window, and leaning out as far as safety would permit, have tried to catch a glimpse of the skittle alley and of a light-colored kirtle gleaming among the trees. But as it was he caught the older man's stern eyes fixed reprovingly upon him, he desisted from his work of dusting and polishing, and, looking up to the heavy oak-beam above him, he said with becoming fervor:

"Lord! how beautifully thou dost speak, Master Busy!"

"Get on with thy work, Master Courage," retorted the other relentlessly, "and mix not thine unruly talk with the wise sayings of thy betters."

"My work is done, Master."

"Go fetch the pasties then, the quality will be in directly," rejoined the other peremptorily, throwing a scrutinizing look at the table, whereon a somewhat meager collation of cherries, raspberries and gooseberries and a more generous bowl of sack-posset had been arranged by Mistress Charity and Master Courage under his own supervision.

"Doubtless, doubtless," here interposed the young maid somewhat hurriedly, desirous perhaps of distracting the grave butler's attention from the mischievous oglings of the lad as he went out of the room, "as you remark--hem--as thou remarkest, this place of service is none to the liking of such as ... thee ..."

She threw him a coy glance from beneath well-grown lashes, which caused the saintly man to pass his tongue over his lips, an action which of a surety had not the desire for spiritual glory for its mainspring. With dainty hands Mistress Charity busied herself with the delicacies upon the table. She adjusted a gooseberry which seemed inclined to tumble, heaped up the currants into more graceful pyramids. Womanlike, whilst her eyes apparently followed the motions of her hands they nevertheless took stock of Master Hymn-of-Praise's attitude with regard to herself.

She knew that in defiance of my Lord Protector and all his Puritans she was looking her best this afternoon: though her kirtle was as threadbare as Master Courage's breeches it was nevertheless just short enough to display to great advantage her neatly turned ankle and well-arched foot on which the thick stockings--well-darned--and shabby shoes sat not at all amiss.

Her kerchief was neatly folded, white and slightly starched, her cuffs immaculately and primly turned back just above her round elbow and shapely arm.

On the whole Mistress Charity was pleased with her own appearance. Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse and the mistress were seeing company this afternoon, and the neighboring Kentish squires who had come to play skittles and to drink sack-posset might easily find a less welcome sight than that of the serving maid at Acol Court.

"As for myself," now resumed Mistress Charity, after a slight pause, during which she had felt Master Busy's admiring gaze fixed persistently upon her, "as for myself, I'll seek service with a lady less like to find such constant fault with a hard-working maid."

Master Courage had just returned carrying a large dish heaped up with delicious looking pasties fresh from the oven, brown and crisp with butter, and ornamented with sprigs of burrage which made them appear exceedingly tempting.

Charity took the dish from the lad and heavy as it was, she carried it to the table and placed it right in the very center of it. She rearranged the sprigs of burrage, made a fresh disposition of the baskets of fruit, whilst both the men watched her open-mouthed, agape at so much loveliness and grace.

"And," she added significantly, looking with ill-concealed covetousness at the succulent pasties, "where there's at least one dog or cat about the place."

"I know not, mistress," said Hymn-of-Praise, "that thou wast over-fond of domestic pets ... 'Tis sinful to ..."

"La! Master Busy, you ... hem ... thou mistakest my meaning. I have no love for such creatures--but without so much as a kitten about the house, prithee how am I to account to my mistress for the pasties and ... and comfits ... not to speak of breakages."

"There is always Master Courage," suggested Hymn-of-Praise, with a movement of the left eyelid which in the case of any one less saintly might have been described as a sly wink.

"That there is not," interrupted the lad decisively; "my stomach rebels against comfits, and sack-posset could never be laid to my door."

"I give thee assurance, Master Busy," concluded the young girl, "that the county of Kent no longer suits my constitution. 'Tis London for me, and thither will I go next year."

"'Tis a den of wickedness," commented Busy sententiously, "in spite of my Lord Protector, who of a truth doth turn his back on the Saints and hath even allowed the great George Fox and some of the Friends to languish in prison, whilst profligacy holds undisputed sway. Master Courage, meseems those mugs need washing a second time," he added, with sudden irrelevance. "Take them to the kitchen, and do not let me set eyes on thee until they shine like pieces of new silver."

Master Courage would have either resisted the order altogether, or at any rate argued the point of the cleanliness of the mugs, had he dared; but the saintly man possessed on occasions a heavy hand, and he also wore boots which had very hard toes, and the lad realized from the peremptory look in the butler's eyes that this was an occasion when both hand and boot would serve to emphasize Master Busy's orders with unpleasant force if he himself were at all slow to obey. He tried to catch Charity's eye, but was made aware once more of the eternal truth that women are perverse and fickle creatures, for she would not look at him, and seemed absorbed in the rearrangement of her kerchief.

With a deep sigh which should have spoken volumes to her adamant heart, Courage gathered all the mugs together by their handles, and reluctantly marched out of the room once more.

Hymn-of-Praise Busy waited a moment or two until the clattering of the pewter died away in the distance, then he edged a little closer to the table whereat Mistress Charity seemed still very busy with the fruit, and said haltingly:

"Didst thou really wish to go, mistress ... to leave thy fond, adoring Hymn-of-Praise ... to go, mistress? ... and to break my heart?"

Charity's dainty head--with its tiny velvet cap edged with lawn which hardly concealed sufficiently the wealth of her unruly brown hair--sank meditatively upon her left shoulder.

"Lord, Master Busy," she said demurely, "how was a poor maid to know that you meant it earnestly?"

"Meant it earnestly?"

"Yes ... a new kirtle ... a gold ring ... flowers ... and sack-posset and pasties to all the guests," she explained. "Is that what you mean ... hem ... what thou, meanest, Master Busy?"

"Of a surety, mistress ... and if thou wouldst allow me to ... to ..."

"To what, Master Busy?"

"To salute thee," said the saintly man, with a becoming blush, "as the Lord doth allow his creatures to salute one another ... with a chaste kiss, mistress."

Then as she seemed to demur, he added by way of persuasion:

"I am not altogether a poor man, mistress; and there is that in my coffer upstairs put by, as would please thee in the future."

"Nay! I was not thinking of the money, Master Busy," said this daughter of Eve, coyly, as she held a rosy cheek out in the direction of the righteous man.

'Tis the duty even of a veracious chronicler to draw a discreet veil over certain scenes full of blissful moments for those whom he portrays.

There are no data extant as to what occurred during the next few seconds in the old oak-beamed dining-room of Acol Court in the Island of Thanet. Certain it is that when next we get a peep at Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy and Mistress Charity Haggett, they are standing side by side, he looking somewhat shame-faced in the midst of his obvious joy, and she supremely unconcerned, once more absorbed in the apparently never-ending adornment of the refreshment table.

"Thou'lt have no cause to regret this, mistress," said Busy complacently, "we will be married this very autumn, and I have it in my mind--an it please the Lord--to go up to London and take secret service under my Lord Protector himself."

"Secret service, Master Busy ... hem ... I mean Hymn-of-Praise, dear ... secret service? ... What may that be?"

"'Tis a noble business, Charity," he replied, "and one highly commended by the Lord: the business of tracking the wicked to their lair, of discovering evil where 'tis hidden in dark places, conspiracies against my Lord Protector, adherence to the cause of the banished tyrants and ... and ... so forth."

"Sounds like spying to me," she remarked curtly.

"Spying? ... Spying, didst thou say?" he exclaimed indignantly. "Fie on thee, Charity, for the thought! Secret service under my Lord Protector 'tis called, and a highly lucrative business too, and one for which I have remarkable aptitude."

"Indeed?"

"Aye! See the manner in which I find things out, mistress. This house now ... thou wouldst think 'tis but an ordinary house ... eh?"

His manner changed; the saintliness vanished from his attitude; the expression of his face became sly and knowing. He came nearer to Charity, took hold of her wrist, whilst he raised one finger to his lips.

"Thou wouldst think 'tis an ordinary house ... wouldst thou not?" he repeated, sinking his voice to a whisper, murmuring right into her ear so that his breath blew her hair about, causing it to tickle her cheek.

She shuddered with apprehension. His manner was so mysterious.

"Yes ... yes ..." she murmured, terrified.

"But I tell thee that there's something going on," he added significantly.

"La, Master Busy ... you ... you terrify me!" she said, on the verge of tears. "What could there be going on?"

Master Busy raised both his hands and with the right began counting off the fingers of the left.

"Firstly," he began solemnly, "there's an heiress! secondly our master--poor as a church mouse--thirdly a young scholar--secretary, they call him, though he writes no letters, and is all day absorbed in his studies ... Well, mistress," he concluded, turning a triumphant gaze on her, "tell me, prithee, what happens?"

"What happens, Master Hymn-of-Praise? ... I do not understand. What does happen?"

"I'll tell thee," he replied sententiously, "when I have found out; but mark my words, mistress, there's something going on in this house ... Hush! not a word to that young jackanapes," he added as a distant clatter of pewter mugs announced the approach of Master Courage. "Watch with me, mistress, thou'lt perceive something. And when I have found out, 'twill be the beginning of our fortunes."

Once more he placed a warning finger on his lips; once more he gave Mistress Charity a knowing wink, and her wrist an admonitory pressure, then he resumed his staid and severe manner, his saintly mien and somewhat nasal tones, as from the gay outside world beyond the window-embrasure the sound of many voices, the ripple of young laughter, the clink of heeled boots on the stone-flagged path, proclaimed the arrival of the quality.

II. On A July Afternoon

In the meanwhile in a remote corner of the park the quality was assembled round the skittle-alley.

Imagine Sir Marmaduke de Chavassee standing there, as stiff a Roundhead as ever upheld my Lord Protector and his Puritanic government in this remote corner of the county of Kent: dour in manner, harsh-featured and hollow-eyed, dressed in dark doublet and breeches wholly void of tags, ribands or buttons. His closely shorn head is flat at the back, square in front, his clean-shaven lips though somewhat thick are always held tightly pressed together. Not far from him sits on a rough wooden seat, Mistress Amelia Editha de Chavassee, widow of Sir Marmaduke's elder brother, a good-looking woman still, save for the look of discontent, almost of suppressed rebellion, apparent in the perpetual dark frown between the straight brows, in the downward curve of the well-chiseled mouth, and in the lowering look which seems to dwell for ever in the handsome dark eyes.

Dame Harrison, too, was there: the large and portly dowager, florid of face, dictatorial in manner, dressed in the supremely unbecoming style prevalent at the moment, when everything that was beautiful in art as well as in nature was condemned as sinful and ungodly; she wore the dark kirtle and plain, ungainly bodice with its hard white kerchief folded over her ample bosom; her hair was parted down the middle and brushed smoothly and flatly to her ears, where but a few curls were allowed to escape with well-regulated primness from beneath the horn-comb, and the whole appearance of her looked almost grotesque, surmounted as it was by the modish high-peaked beaver hat, a marvel of hideousness and discomfort, since the small brim afforded no protection against the sun, and the tall crown was a ready prey to the buffetings of the wind.

Mistress Fairsoul Pyncheon too, was there, the wife of the Squire of Ashe; thin and small, a contrast to Dame Harrison in her mild and somewhat fussy manner; her plain petticoat, too, was embellished with paniers, and in spite of the heat of the day she wore a tippet edged with fur: both of which frivolous adornments had obviously stirred up the wrath of her more Puritanical neighbor.

Then there were the men: busy at this moment with hurling wooden balls along the alley, at the further end of which a hollow-eyed scraggy youth, in shirt and rough linen trousers, was employed in propping up again the fallen nine-pins. Squire John Boatfield had ridden over from Eastry, Sir Timothy Harrison had come in his aunt's coach, and young Squire Pyncheon with his doting mother.

And in the midst of all these sober folk, of young men in severe garments, of portly dames and frowning squires, a girlish figure, young, alert, vigorous, wearing with the charm of her own youth and freshness the unbecoming attire, which disfigured her elders yet seemed to set off her own graceful form, her dainty bosom and pretty arms. Her kirtle, too, was plain, and dull in color, of a soft dovelike gray, without adornment of any kind, but round her shoulders her

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