

THE CRIMSON SIGN

S. R. Keightley



“GERVASE DROPPED NOISELESSLY INTO THE WATER”

THE CRIMSON SIGN

*A Narrative of the Adventures of
Mr. Gervase Orme, Sometime
Lieutenant in Mountjoy's
Regiment of Foot*

BY

S. R. KEIGHTLEY

AUTHOR OF "THE CAVALIERS"

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1898

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

THE CAVALIERS. A Novel. By S. R. KEIGHTLEY. Illustrated. Post 8vo, Cloth, Ornamental, \$1 50.

“The Cavaliers” is healthy in tone, spirited in treatment, and written in a manner calculated to attract lovers of historical adventure.... A capital book.--*Academy*, London.

PUBLISHED BY HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"GERVASE _____ DROPPED
NOISELESSLY INTO THE WATER"

"THE STRANGER CAUGHT HIS
HORSE BY THE REIN"

"SHE STOPPED SHORT AND
LOOKED _____ ROUND _____ HER
CAUTIOUSLY"

"JASPER BUCKLING HIS SWORD
ABOUT HIM"

THE CRIMSON SIGN.

CHAPTER I.

OF WHAT BEFELL ON THE ROAD TO ENNISKILLEN.

In the year of grace 1689 men were not a whit more long-suffering nor more patient than they are to-day. The choleric captain who had been pacing the guard-room for a quarter of an hour showed evident signs that he was fast losing what temper he possessed. As he marched with a hasty stride up and down the oaken floor, and wheeled with military abruptness on the broad stone that formed the hearth, the rafters of black oak rang with the clank of his sword and the jingling of the spurs on his heavy jack-boots. He pulled with a gesture of impatience at the grizzled white moustache that concealed his mouth, and muttered anathemas which, had they been heard in the pious city of Londonderry, would have been deemed little in keeping with his reputation. Nor did he seem a man with whom others would take unwarrantable liberties, or keep dangling upon their careless will and pleasure.

At first sight there was no mistaking him for anything but a soldier, and one who had seen lengthened service where hard blows had been struck and long marches had to be made. His lean face was brown and seamed with lines, each of which had in all likelihood its history; and a great scar, half concealed by his broad beaver, ran from the temple almost to his chin. His mouth was firm and resolute, giving its character to a face that did not seem apt either to lighten in humour or to soften in pity. He wore his own hair, which was nearly white, and, though he must have been close on sixty, his carriage was upright and soldierly, with a certain stiffness, probably learnt in early life from the drill-master.

The Town clock struck five. Halting suddenly in his walk he turned to the door, and his hand was on the latch when a young man entered hurriedly and stumbled against him. When they recovered themselves, they stood looking at one another inquiringly for a moment. Then the young fellow,

who wore a military uniform, drew back a step and saluted gravely. "You are Captain Macpherson, I think?"

"I was Captain Macpherson, sir," the other answered, "a moment since, but what I am now I hardly know till my wits come back. You have a strange way of forcing your company on your neighbours."

"Such sudden acquaintanceship was wholly unexpected, I assure you, sir," the young man answered, with a pleasant smile that lit up his handsome face. "I was directed to meet you here. My name is Orme."

The old soldier, without speaking, retired into the embrasure of the window followed by the younger man, and then turned round sternly.

"Mr. Orme, you must know it hath struck five by the Town clock. A soldier's first duty is discipline, and here have I, your commanding officer, for such I take myself to be, been awaiting your coming a full quarter of an hour. I have been in countries where the provost-marshal would have known how to deal with such offences. Cities have been sacked and great battles lost and won, by less delay than that."

"I have left the Colonel but now, sir. He said nothing of the time, but told me that I should meet you here."

"Very like, very like," growled the other. "I know the breed of old. Feather-bed soldiers who need a warming-pan in camp. They take no heed of time. I was brought up in a different school, and would have you know that while you keep me company, you must learn my ways. How long have you served?" He asked the question abruptly, bending on his companion a keen and penetrating look that nothing seemed to escape.

"I have carried the colours for nearly two years in Mountjoy's regiment."

"And never seen man stricken in fair fight, I warrant; that is before you and will come speedily. Hath Colonel Lundy spoken of the work we are about to take in hand?"

“Only that I was to receive my instructions from you, and place myself under your orders.”

“That is well, at any rate. You are green and tender for the business, but you may show the right stuff when the time comes. Things are going crookedly here in Londonderry and elsewhere, Mr. Orme. We go neither back nor forward, but stand swaying like men who know not whether to turn to the right hand or to the left. We would fight but we dare not; we would flee but we cannot. And all the while there are stout fellows here who would handle a musket or trail a pike with the best troops in Europe, if there were a man to lead them. These cursed councils and divided plans breed nothing but failure. You will see Hamilton with his levies across the Bann and round the wall of Londonderry, before the month is out.”

“I humbly trust not, but if we do never fear but we shall give a good account of ourselves.”

The old soldier smiled dubiously. “There is plenty of talk and furbishing of weapons, but little of the strict drill and discipline that makes soldiers; I am but a plain man myself and I have spoken out plainly. The city is open as a village. There are ramparts to be strengthened, ravelines and fascines to be constructed, supplies to be furnished, and arms to be collected. We talk of standing a leaguer, as if these things would do themselves. But needs must when the Devil drives, and I know whither that carries. These councils have many tongues and no head. They put forth declarations and think all is done when they set their hands to paper with much spluttering of ink. I remember when Francesco de Mello and de Fuentes----But that is an old story and may be told again.”

“I doubt not,” said Orme, “you have ripe experience, but I would do my own work like a simple gentleman, and leave these things to those whose business they are.”

“Fairly rebuked. You are right, my lad, and I am an old fool to stand prating of what hath no concern for you. But ’tis an old trick of mine to find fault where I cannot mend. Natheless, the onfall at the castle of Carrickfergus

and the break of Dromore give me cause to grumble, and Rawdon and Beresford and the rest of them might have taken a lesson from a plain soldier like myself, that they might have profited by. They think me only good enough to fetch and carry, spaniel-like--and you say that Colonel Lundy hath told you nothing?"

"Merely that I should place myself at your disposal; nothing else."

"We ride pell-mell for Enniskillen; you and I and some dozen troopers, less or more, without drawing bridle or tarrying by the way. There is a precious cartel these Enniskilleners must digest forthwith, inviting them to leave the safety of their water-walls and, as I hear, good store of provender, to take their chance with us and fight it out behind these petty dykes and fences here. If they ask counsel of mine--but it is our business to see that it carries safely."

"I had hoped," said Orme, "that we might have seen some service; this doth not hold out much hope of that."

"Hear how these young cockerels are given to crowing!" cried Macpherson; "I promise you this means no evening stroll upon the battlements, but a work of danger which may try your mettle. I mean not the gathering of the desperadoes who make war upon the defenceless, though these have stood to their half-pikes and other outlandish weapons ere now, but I am much mistaken if the royal troops be not on the roads and give us play enough. In this barbarous country we do not look for the courtesies of war, or even the interchange of prisoners; my Lord Galmoy and others, whom I hope to remember, have shown that a gentleman can play the hangman, and a soldier hath other trades than fighting. The journey is like to prove adventurous though it end in nothing. See that your horse be sure and fresh, and your pistols such that a man may place his life on them. I remember me when my life was placed in jeopardy once by a rotten girth. It was in Flanders in sixty-nine--but this gossip hath no interest for you. It were more to the purpose that I told you we set out at three in the morning with what secrecy we can observe, and that you meet

me at the Bishop's gate. Hackett, who is, I am told, a sergeant of your company, and knows the country, will bring our horses to the gate. You know the man; of what character is he?"

"As true and loyal as any in the city--the best man, I think, in the regiment."

"And discreet? these good men are oftentimes inconsiderate."

"He is no babbler, sir," Orme answered, somewhat nettled by the tone of his companion, "though a pious man and God-fearing."

"I, Ninian Macpherson, like him none the worse for that, young gentleman," answered the other gravely. "Our religion hath placed you and me, I humbly trust, in arms this day, and sends us forth on this embassy to the no small peril of our lives. But the ways of grace are not always the ways of worldly prudence, and it behoves me who am answerable for our safety to act with diligence. Now, look you, Mr. Orme, I have watched you carefully, and I think you honest--dull it may be but honest, and I speak you plainly. I am suspicious of your colonel--I do not understand his ways. There is treason in the air, though who is free and who is touched I hardly know, but I who have lived among designing men for nigh on seven-and-fifty years think I know somewhat of honest work, and I was fearful this was but another trap."

"I think, sir, Colonel Lundy is honest and devoted to Their Majesties."

"I do not doubt you do, but we shall see. The citizens will give him a short shrift if they find him a rogue. But I had liked to see such zeal as befits one who commands a city, and would not be taken unprepared. When the regiments arrive from England they will find their entertainment of the poorest. If empty magazines and disordered companies are evidence of loyalty you might find a sign to hang up before every house in the city. But Ulster hath a proud heart and a stiff neck and will fight when she is pushed."

“The Kingdom’s safety and the Protestant religion depend upon her stoutness; she will die hard.”

“It may come to that. Now, young gentleman, get you gone. He that would be early afoot should be early abed, and see that you get to rest betimes. Let there be no late revelling. We meet at three.”

Gervase Orme who had been lately an ensign in Mountjoy’s regiment of foot, had been quartered with his company in Londonderry, when his Colonel was appointed Governor of the City. Like other gentlemen of his faith he had not wavered in his allegiance or dreamed of taking up arms against the House of Stuart, till loyalty had become a crime and resistance an imperative duty. His own slender patrimony was in peril; his faith was threatened and in danger of being proscribed; his friends, whose safety and honour were his own, were placed at the mercy of their bitter and hereditary foes. Civil war was imminent and he could not hesitate as to the course he should adopt. James had broken faith with his people; the native Celtic population, steadfast in this, while they were wayward and fickle in all else, were determined to drive the English garrison into the sea, and the instincts of religion and of race intensified their hatred of the dominant caste.

When Colonel Lundy took the oath of allegiance to William and Mary, Gervase Orme willingly followed the example of his Colonel, and embarked with enthusiasm on the impending struggle. To him it was the one course left open, and he felt, like the other simple gentlemen of his time, that when he drew his sword it was for fatherland, for faith, and even for life itself. Nor did he very much doubt the result. The descendent of a Saxon colonist he looked down on the men of Munster and of Connaught as a race fit only for hewing wood and drawing water, for Fontenoy and other stricken fields had yet to be fought in which the Irish proved their splendid qualities as fighting men. And he had the Saxon’s profound faith in himself and his people.

Therefore it was when Colonel Lundy had directed him to place himself under Macpherson's orders, with some prospect of service, he had obeyed with alacrity, hopeful that their destination might be one of those towns upon the Bann where the Protestant forces were awaiting the coming of the Irish army which was rapidly advancing north. In this he had been disappointed, but he was glad to forsake for a time the comparative inactivity of garrison life, and almost hoped that Macpherson's anticipation of danger might be realized.

The night was raw and cold when he arose unwillingly from his bed, and his preparations being complete overnight, hurriedly dressed and endeavoured to partake of the meal his careful landlady had provided the evening before. When he reached the gate Macpherson was already there before him. The old soldier, wrapped in a long military cloak, was standing with his back to the wall, reading from a small volume in a loud monotonous tone, and the men were drawn in a circle round him, holding their horses by the bridle. One of the troopers held a lantern for the reader, who closed the book as Orme came up, and thrust it into his breast.

"You are close on your time, Mr. Orme. We have just been having our stirrup-cup from the Word, that, mayhap, will put us in heart for our cold ride. 'Tis an excellent morning dram. The sergeant hath seen to the arms and tells me they will serve."

"Both arms and men, sir," said Hackett, in a low tone, "I will answer for them with my life."

"'Tis well. Now open the gate and get to horse, for we must put many a mile between us and the city before daybreak. A mile at the start is worth two at the end."

Macpherson leapt with surprising activity on the grey charger that Hackett had brought down to the gate, and the little troop sat patiently on their horses waiting till the drawbridge had been lowered and the great gate swung open. With a solemn "God speed" from the men on duty, they rode

silently out into the darkness, Hackett leading at a round trot over the rough and broken road.

For three hours they pursued their way in a silence broken only by an occasional word of command, or by a cry of warning from one of the troopers who had stumbled over some obstacle, or had floundered deep in the bog by the road side. They were all rejoiced to see the first grey streak of light that gave promise of the coming day.

The morning had broken red through the mists that lay thick along the valley as they gained the top of the hill up which they had been climbing. The road was already visible, winding through a deep gorge, and skirted by great masses of rock, green with ferns and bramble. Here and there scattered through the uplands lay a farm steading, surrounded by its stretch of tilth and orchard close. But no sound of morning labour could be heard. The fields were lying waste and untilled, and the homesteads stood deserted. The clank of the horses hoofs made a melancholy music in the silence. The life and movement of the little troop brought into still greater relief the desolation round them.

Macpherson halted on the top of the hill, and dismounting loosened his horse's girths. Then he removed the saddle and taking off his gloves, began to rub down the charger.

"That is my prince of steeds," he said, contemplating his task and caressing the glossy neck with pride and affection; "nearly four hours' hard riding and never turning a hair! An old soldier, my young friend," he continued, turning to Gervase, "learns a good many things on his rough journey through the world. He learns to weigh a prince's promises and favours, the strength of friendship and the worth of love. And he finds they are all vanity, even the vanity of vanities, as the Hebrew hath it. But he grows to love his horse. Together they have faced the scathe of the battle, and the privations of the march. Often and often this sleek skin hath been my pillow, and but for him these useless bones had been whitening on the sandy plains of Utrecht, or the rolling uplands of the Maas. And for beauty-

-you youths go mad for beauty--is there aught in the world to compare with him for comeliness? That little head and graceful neck, those swift strong legs and deep shoulders fashioned as if by a cunning sculptor--there is perfect beauty. And he is faithful even to death. He will carry me till he drops and leave a royal stable at the whistle of his homeless master. I tell you, young sir, there is nothing in the world like a noble horse and the joy of battle in a righteous cause."

"In truth," said Gervase, "you are proud of your horse with reason, but I trust there are other things in the world one may love with as good cause."

"Aye," answered the other bitterly, "you are young, and youth is full of hope and trust. The man you call your friend cajoles and tricks you, and the woman whose favour is the breath of your nostrils, deserts you at the first whisper of misfortune. These things are of the world and they endure for an hour; the son of perdition baits his traps with them, but the man whose hope is fixed, learns to shun them as a snare."

"I have been taught otherwise," said Gervase, "and I have had no reason to question what I have learnt. I have no trick of speech, but I hold by love and friendship."

"And I tell you they are but shadows. Here there is no abiding city, and these things but wean our hearts from the eternal. Seven-and-fifty years have been the days of my pilgrimage, and at eighteen I saw my first battle. The blood of the youth is hot, the lusts of the flesh are strong upon him, and he is slow to see the finger of God writing upon the tablets of the heart. Mine was a wild youth and a wayward, and like another prodigal I went forth to riotous living. Surely I dwelt in the tents of Meshech, but God hath seen good to open the eyes of his servant."

"Captain Macpherson," said Gervase gravely, "I do not ask you to vouchsafe me your confidence, and I leave theology to the parson. I serve God after the fashion of the Church of England, and will do my duty as becomes my name and manhood. In all other things I am at your service, but in this we cannot walk together."

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