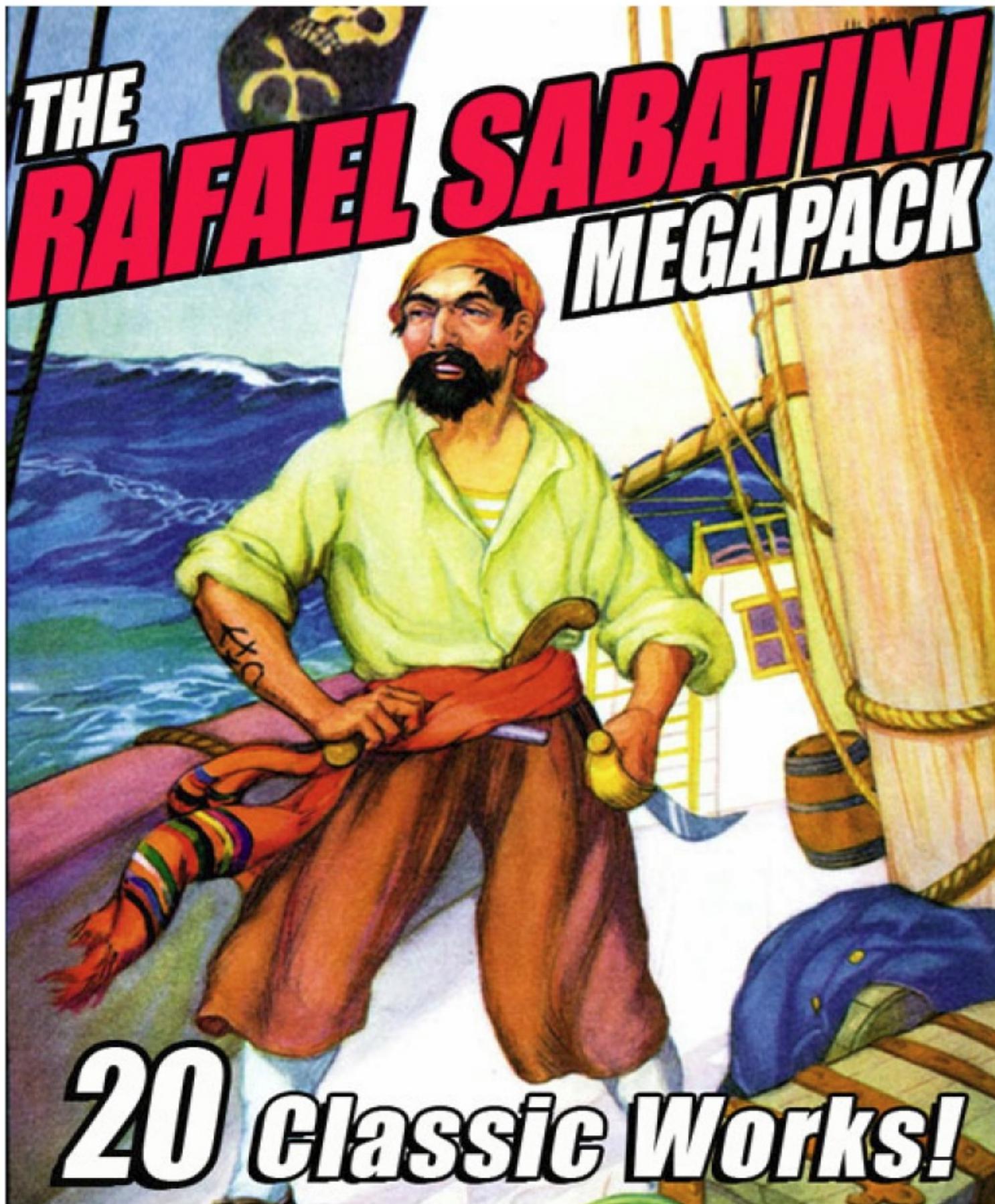


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MISTRESS WILDING

Complete Novel

CHAPTER I
POT-VALIANCE

Then drink it thus, cried the rash young fool, and splashed the contents of his cup full into the face of Mr. Wilding even as that gentleman, on his feet, was proposing to drink to the eyes of the young fool's sister.

The moments that followed were full of interest. A stillness, a brooding, expectant stillness, fell upon the company—and it numbered a round dozen—about Lord Gervase's richly appointed board. In the soft candlelight the oval table shone like a deep brown pool, in which were reflected the gleaming silver and sparkling crystal that seemed to float upon it.

Blake sucked in his nether-lip, his florid face a thought less florid than its wont, his prominent blue eyes a thought more prominent. Under its golden periwig old Nick Trenchard's wizened countenance was darkened by a scowl, and his fingers, long, swarthy, and gnarled, drummed fretfully upon the table. Portly Lord Gervase Scoresby—their host, a benign and placid man of peace, detesting turbulence—turned crimson now in wordless rage. The others gaped and stared—some at young Westmacott, some at the man he had so grossly affronted—whilst in the shadows of the hall a couple of lacqueys looked on amazed, all teeth and eyes.

Mr. Wilding stood, very still and outwardly impassive, the wine trickling from his long face, which, if pale, was no paler than its habit, a vestige of the smile with which he had proposed the toast still lingering on his thin lips, though departed from his eyes. An elegant gentleman was Mr. Wilding, tall, and seeming even taller by virtue of his exceeding slenderness. He had the courage to wear his own hair, which was of a dark brown and very luxuriant; dark brown too were his sombre eyes, low-lidded and set at a downward slant. From those odd eyes of his, his countenance gathered an air of superciliousness tempered by a gentle melancholy. For the rest, it was scored by lines that stamped it with the appearance of an age in excess of his thirty years.

Thirty guineas' worth of Mechlin at his throat was drenched, empurpled and ruined beyond redemption, and on the breast of his blue satin coat a dark patch was spreading like a stain of blood.

Richard Westmacott, short, sturdy, and fair-complexioned to the point of insipidity, watched him sullenly out of pale eyes, and waited. It was Lord Gervase who broke at last the silence—broke it with an oath, a thing unusual in one whose nature was almost woman-mild.

“As God's my life!” he spluttered wrathfully, glowering at Richard. “To have this happen in my house! The young fool shall make apology!”

“With his dying breath,” sneered Trenchard, and the old rake's words, his tone, and the malevolent look he bent upon the boy increased the company's malaise.

“I think,” said Mr. Wilding, with a most singular and excessive sweetness, “that what Mr. Westmacott has done he has done because he apprehended me amiss.”

“No doubt he'll say so,” opined Trenchard with a shrug, and had caution dug into his ribs by Blake's elbow, whilst Richard made haste to prove him wrong by saying the contrary.

“I apprehended you exactly, sir,” he answered, defiance in his voice and wine-

flushed face.

“Ha!” clucked Trenchard, irrepressible. “He’s bent on self-destruction. Let him have his way, in God’s name.”

But Wilding seemed intent upon showing how long-suffering he could be. He gently shook his head. “Nay, now,” said he. “You thought, Mr. Westmacott, that in mentioning your sister, I did so lightly. Is it not so?”

“You mentioned her, and that is all that matters,” cried Westmacott. “I’ll not have her name on your lips at any time or in any place—no, nor in any manner.” His speech was thick from too much wine.

“You are drunk,” cried indignant Lord Gervase with finality.

“Pot-valiant,” Trenchard elaborated.

Mr. Wilding set down at last the glass which he had continued to hold until that moment. He rested his hands upon the table, knuckles downward, and leaning forward he spoke impressively, his face very grave; and those present—knowing him as they did—were one and all lost in wonder at his unusual patience.

“Mr. Westmacott,” said he, “I do think you are wrong to persist in affronting me. You have done a thing that is beyond forgiveness, and yet, when I offer you this opportunity of honourably retrieving...” He shrugged his shoulders, leaving the sentence incomplete.

The company might have spared its deep surprise at so much mildness. There was but the semblance of it. Wilding proceeded thus of purpose set, and under the calm mask of his long white face his mind worked wickedly and deliberately. The temerity of Westmacott, whose nature was notoriously timid, had surprised him for a moment. But anon, reading the boy’s mind as readily as though it had been a scroll unfolded for his instruction, he saw that Westmacott, on the strength of his position as his sister’s brother, conceived himself immune. Mr. Wilding’s avowed courtship of the lady, the hopes he still entertained of winning her, despite the aversion she was at pains to show him, gave Westmacott assurance that Mr. Wilding would never elect to shatter his all too slender chances by embroiling himself in a quarrel with her brother. And—reading him, thus, aright—Mr. Wilding put on that mask of patience, luring the boy into greater conviction of the security of his position. And Richard, conceiving himself safe in his entrenchment behind the bulwarks of his brotherhood to Ruth Westmacott, and heartened further by the excess of wine he had consumed, persisted in insults he would never otherwise have dared to offer.

“Who seeks to retrieve?” he crowed offensively, boldly looking up into the other’s face. “It seems you are yourself reluctant.” And he laughed a trifle stridently, and looked about him for applause, but found none.

“You are overrash,” Lord Gervase disapproved him harshly.

“Not the first coward I’ve seen grow valiant at a table,” put in Trenchard by way of explanation, and might have come to words with Blake on that same score, but that in that moment Wilding spoke again.

“Reluctant to do what?” he questioned amiably, looking Westmacott so straightly between the eyes that the boy shifted uneasily on his high-backed chair.

Nevertheless, still full of confidence in the unassailability of his position, the mad youth answered, “To cleanse yourself of what I threw at you.”

“Fan me, ye winds!” gasped Nick Trenchard, and looked with expectancy at his

friend Wilding.

Now there was one factor with which, in basing with such craven shrewdness his calculations upon Mr. Wilding's feelings for his sister, young Richard had not reckoned. He was not to know that Wilding, bruised and wounded by Miss Westmacott's scorn of him, had reached that borderland where love and hate are so merged that they are scarce to be distinguished. Embittered by the slights she had put upon him—slights which his sensitive, lover's fancy had magnified a hundredfold—Anthony Wilding's frame of mind was grown peculiar. Of his love she would have none; his kindness she seemingly despised. So be it; she should taste his cruelty. If she scorned his wooing and forbade him to pursue it, at least it was not hers to deny him the power to hurt; and in hurting her that would not be loved by him some measure of fierce and bitter consolation seemed to await him.

He realized, perhaps, not quite all this—and to the unworthiness of it all he gave no thought. But he realized enough as he toyed, as cat with mouse, with Richard Westmacott, to know that in striking at her through the worthless person of this brother whom she cherished—and who persisted in affording him this opportunity—a wicked vengeance would be his.

Peace-loving Lord Gervase had heaved himself suddenly to his feet at Westmacott's last words, still intent upon saving the situation.

"In Heaven's name..." he began, when Mr. Wilding, ever calm and smiling, though now a trifle sinister, waved him gently into silence. But that persisting calm of Mr. Wilding's was too much for old Nick Trenchard. He rose abruptly, drawing all eyes upon himself. It was time, he thought, he took a hand in this.

In addition to his affection for Wilding and his contempt for Westmacott, he was filled with a fear that the latter might become dangerous if not crushed at once. Gifted with a shrewd knowledge of men, acquired during a chequered life of much sour experience, old Nick instinctively mistrusted Richard. He had known him for a fool, a weakling, a babbler, and a bibber of wine. Out of such elements a villain is soon compounded, and Trenchard had cause to fear the form of villainy that lay ready to Richard's hand. For it chanced that Mr. Trenchard was second cousin to that famous John Trenchard, so lately tried for treason and acquitted to the great joy of the sectaries of the West, and still more lately—but yesterday, in fact—fled the country to escape the rearrest ordered in consequence of that excessive joy. Like his more famous cousin, Nick Trenchard was one of the Duke of Monmouth's most active agents; and Westmacott, like Wilding, Vallancey, and one or two others at that board, stood, too, committed to the cause of the Protestant Champion.

Out of his knowledge of the boy Trenchard was led to fear that if he were leniently dealt with now, tomorrow, when, sober, he came to realize the grossness of the thing he had done and the unlikelihood of its being forgiven him, there was no saying but that to protect himself he might betray Wilding's share in the plot that was being hatched. That in itself would be bad enough; but there might be worse, for he could scarcely betray Wilding without betraying others and—what mattered most—the Cause itself. He must be dealt with out of hand, Trenchard opined, and dealt with ruthlessly.

"I think, Anthony," said he, "that we have had words enough. Shall you be disposing of Mr. Westmacott tomorrow, or must I be doing it for you?"

With a gasp of dismay young Richard twisted in his chair to confront this fresh and unsuspected antagonist. What danger was this that he had overlooked? Then, even as he turned, Wilding's voice fell on his ear, and each word of the few he spoke was like a drop of icy water on Westmacott's overheated brain.

"I protest you are vastly kind, Nick. But I intend, myself, to have the pleasure of killing Mr. Westmacott." And his smile fell now in mockery upon the disillusioned lad.

Crushed by that bolt from the blue, Richard sat as if stunned, the flush receding from his face until his very lips were livid. The shock had sobered him, and, sobered, he realized in terror what he had done. And yet even sober he was amazed to find that the staff upon which with such security he had leaned should have proved rotten. True he had put much strain upon it; but then he had counted that it would stand much strain.

He would have spoken, but he lacked words, so stricken was he. And even had he done so it is odds none would have heard him, for the late calm was of a sudden turned to garboil. Every man of that company—with the sole exception of Richard himself—was on his feet, and all were speaking at once, in clamouring, excited chorus.

Wilding alone—the butt of their expostulations—stood quietly smiling, and wiped his face at last with a kerchief of finest lawn. Dominating the others in the Babel rose the voice of Sir Rowland Blake—impecunious Blake; Blake lately of the Guards, who had sold his commission as the only thing remaining him upon which he could raise money; Blake, that other suitor for Miss Westmacott's hand, the suitor favoured by her brother.

"You shall not do it, Mr. Wilding," he shouted, his face crimson. "No, by God! You were shamed forever. He is but a lad, and drunk."

Trenchard eyed the short, powerfully built man beside him, and laughed unpleasantly. "You should get yourself bled one of these days, Sir Rowland," he advised. "There may be no great danger yet; but a man can't be too careful when he wears a narrow neckcloth."

Blake—a short, powerfully built man—took no heed of him, but looked straight at Mr. Wilding, who, smiling ever, calmly returned the gaze of those prominent blue eyes.

"You will suffer me, Sir Rowland," said he sweetly, "to be the judge of whom I will and whom I will not meet."

Sir Rowland flushed under that mocking glance and caustic tone. "But he is drunk," he repeated feebly.

"I think," said Trenchard, "that he is hearing something that will make him sober."

Lord Gervase took the lad by the shoulder, and shook him impatiently. "Well?" quoth he. "Have you nothing to say? You did a deal of prating just now. I make no doubt but that even at this late hour if you were to make apology..."

"It would be idle," came Wilding's icy voice to quench the gleam of hope kindling anew in Richard's breast. The lad saw that he was lost, and he is a poor thing, indeed, who cannot face the worst once that worst is shown to be irrevocable. He rose with some semblance of dignity.

"It is as I would wish," said he, but his livid face and staring eyes belied the valour of his words. He cleared his huskiness from his throat. "Sir Rowland," said he, "will you act for me?"

“Not I!” cried Blake with an oath. “I’ll be no party to the butchery of a boy unfledged.”

“Unfledged?” echoed Trenchard. “Body o’ me! ’Tis a matter Wilding will amend tomorrow. He’ll fledge him, never fear. He’ll wing him on his flight to heaven.”

Of set purpose did Trenchard add this fuel to the blazing fire. It was no part of his views that this encounter should be avoided. If Richard Westmacott were allowed to live after what had passed, there were too many tall fellows might go in peril of their lives.

Richard, meanwhile, had turned to the man on his left—young Vallancey, a notorious partisan of the Duke of Monmouth’s, a hair-brained gentleman who was his own worst enemy.

“May I count on you, Ned?” he asked.

“Aye—to the death,” said Vallancey magniloquently.

“Mr. Vallancey,” said Trenchard with a wry twist of his sharp features, “you grow prophetic.”

CHAPTER II
SIR ROWLAND TO THE RESCUE

From Scoresby Hall, near Weston Zoyland, young Westmacott rode home that Saturday night to his sister's house in Bridgwater, a sobered man and an anguished. He had committed a folly which was like to cost him his life tomorrow. Other follies had he committed in his twenty-five years—for he was not quite the babe that Blake had represented him, although he certainly looked nothing like his age. But tonight he had contrived to set the crown to all. He had good cause to blame himself and to curse the miscalculation that had emboldened him to launch himself upon a course of insult against this Wilding, whom he hated with all the currish and resentful hatred of the worthless for the man of parts.

But there was more than hate in the affront that he had offered; there was calculation—to an even greater extent than we have seen. It happened that through his own fault young Richard was all but penniless. The pious, nonconformist soul of Sir Geoffrey Lupton—the wealthy uncle from whom he had had great expectations—had been so stirred to anger by Richard's vicious and besotted ways that he had left every guinea that was his, every perch of land, and every brick of edifice to Richard's half-sister Ruth. At present things were not so bad for the worthless boy. Ruth worshipped him. He was a sacred charge to her from their dead father, who, knowing the stoutness of her soul and the feebleness of Richard's, had in dying imposed on her the care and guidance of her graceless brother. But Ruth, in all things strong, was weak with Richard out of her very fondness for him. To what she had he might help himself, and thus it was that things were not so bad with him at present. But when Richard's calculating mind came to give thought to the future he found that this occasioned him some care. Rich ladies, even when they do not happen to be equipped in addition with Ruth's winsome beauty and endearing nature, are not wont to go unmarried. It would have pleased Richard best to have had her remain a spinster. But he well knew that this was a matter in which she might have a voice of her own, and it behoved him betimes to take wise measures where possible husbands were concerned.

The first that came in a suitor's obvious panoply was Anthony Wilding, of Zoyland Chase, and Richard watched his advent with foreboding.

Wilding's was a personality to dazzle any woman, despite—perhaps even because of—the reputation for wildness that clung to him. That he was known as Wild Wilding to the countryside is true; but it were unfair—as Richard knew—to attach to this too much importance; for the adoption of so obvious an alliteration the rude country minds needed but a slight encouragement.

From the first it looked as if Ruth might favour him, and Richard's fears assumed more definite shape. If Wilding married her—and he was a bold, masterful fellow who usually accomplished what he aimed at—her fortune and estate must cease to be a pleasant pasture land for bovine Richard. The boy thought at first of making terms with Wilding; the idea was old; it had come to him when first he had counted the chances of his sister's marrying. But he found himself hesitating to lay his proposal before Mr. Wilding. And whilst he hesitated Mr. Wilding made obvious headway. Still Richard dared not do it. There was a something in Wilding's eye that cried him danger.

Thus, in the end, since he could not attempt a compromise with this fine fellow, the only course remaining was that of direct antagonism—that is to say, direct as Richard understood directness. Slander was the weapon he used in that secret duel; the countryside was well stocked with stories of Mr. Wilding's many indiscretions. I do not wish to suggest that these were unfounded. Still, the countryside, cajoled by its primitive sense of humour into that alliteration I have mentioned, found that having given this dog its bad name, it was under the obligation of keeping up his reputation. So it exaggerated. Richard, exaggerating those exaggerations in his turn, had some details, as interesting and unsavoury as they were in the main untrue, to lay before his sister.

Now established love, it is well known, thrives wondrously on slander. The robust growth of a maid's feelings for her accepted suitor is but further strengthened by malign representations of his character. She seizes with joy the chance of affording proof of her great loyalty, and defies the world and its evil to convince her that the man to whom she has given her trust is not most worthy of it. Not so, however, with the first timid bud of incipient interest. Slander nips it like a frost; in deadliness it is second only to ridicule.

Ruth Westmacott lent an ear to her brother's stories, incredulous only until she remembered vague hints she had caught from this person and from that, whose meaning was now made clear by what Richard told her, which, incidentally, they served to corroborate. Corroboration, too, did the tale of infamy receive from the friendship that prevailed between Mr. Wilding and Nick Trenchard, the old ne'er-dowell, who in his time—as everybody knew—had come so low, despite his gentle birth, as to have been one of a company of strolling players. Had Mr. Wilding been other than she now learnt he was, he would surely not cherish an attachment for a person so utterly unworthy. Clearly, they were birds of a plumage.

And so, her maiden purity outraged at the thought that she had been in danger of lending a willing ear to the wooing of such a man, she had crushed this love which she blushed to think was on the point of throwing out roots to fasten on her soul, and was sedulous thereafter in manifesting the aversion which she accounted it her duty to foster for Mr. Wilding.

Richard had watched and smiled in secret, taking pride in the cunning way he had wrought this change—that cunning which so often is given to the stupid by way of compensation for the intelligence that has been withheld them.

And now what time discountenanced, Wilding fumed and fretted all in vain, Sir Rowland Blake, fresh from London and in full flight from his creditors, flashed like a comet into the Bridgwater heavens. He dazzled the eyes and might have had for the asking the heart and hand of Diana Horton—Ruth's cousin. Her heart, indeed, he had without the asking, for Diana fell straightway in love with him and showed it, just as he showed that he was not without response to her affection. There were some tender passages between them; but Blake, for all his fine exterior, was a beggar, and Diana far from rich, and so he rode his feelings with a hard grip upon the reins. And then, in an evil hour for poor Diana, young Westmacott had taken him to Lupton House, and Sir Rowland had his first glimpse of Ruth, his first knowledge of her fortune. He went down before Ruth's eyes like a man of heart; he went down more lowly still before her possessions like a man of greed; and poor Diana might console herself with whom she

could.

Her brother watched him, appraised him, and thought that in this broken gamester he had a man after his own heart; a man who would be ready enough for such a bargain as Richard had in mind; ready enough to sell what rags might be left him of his honour so that he came by the wherewithal to mend his broken fortunes.

The twain made terms. They haggled like any pair of traders out of Jewry, but in the end it was settled—by a bond duly engrossed and sealed—that on the day that Sir Rowland married Ruth he should make over to her brother certain values that amounted to perhaps a quarter of her possessions. There was no cause to think that Ruth would be greatly opposed to this—not that that consideration would have weighed with Richard.

But now that all essentials were so satisfactorily determined a vexation was offered Westmacott by the circumstance that his sister seemed nowise taken with Sir Rowland. She suffered him because he was her brother's friend; on that account she even honoured him with some measure of her own friendship; but to no greater intimacy did her manner promise to admit him. And meanwhile, Mr. Wilding persisted in the face of all rebuffs. Under his smiling mask he hid the smart of the wounds she dealt him, until it almost seemed to him that from loving her he had come to hate her.

It had been well for Richard had he left things as they were and waited. Whether Blake prospered or not, leastways it was clear that Wilding would not prosper, and that, for the season, was all that need have mattered to young Richard.

But in his cups that night he had thought in some dim way to precipitate matters by affronting Mr. Wilding, secure, as I have shown, in his belief that Wilding would perish sooner than raise a finger against Ruth's brother. And his drunken astuteness, it seemed, had been to his mind as a piece of bottle glass to the sight, distorting the image viewed through it.

With some such bitter reflection rode he home to his sleepless couch. Some part of those dark hours he spent in bitter reviling of Wilding, of himself, and even of his sister, whom he blamed for this awful situation into which he had tumbled; at other times he wept from self-pity and sheer fright.

Once, indeed, he imagined that he saw light, that he saw a way out of the peril that hemmed him in. His mind turned for a moment in the direction that Trenchard had feared it might. He bethought him of his association with the Monmouth Cause—into which he had been beguiled by the sordid hope of gain—and of Wilding's important share in that same business. He was even moved to rise and ride that very night for Exeter to betray to Albemarle the Cause itself, so that he might have Wilding laid by the heels. But if Trenchard had been right in having little faith in Richard's loyalty, he had, it seems, in fearing treachery made the mistake of giving Richard credit for more courage than was his endowment. For when, sitting up in bed, fired by his inspiration, young Westmacott came to consider the questions the Lord-Lieutenant of Devon would be likely to ask him, he reflected that the answers he must return would so incriminate himself that he would be risking his own neck in the betrayal. He flung himself down again with a curse and a groan, and thought no more of the salvation that might lie for him that way.

The morning of that last day of May found him pale and limp and all a-tremble. He rose betimes and dressed, but stirred not from his chamber till in the garden under his

window he heard his sister's voice, and that of Diana Horton, joined anon by a man's deeper tones, which he recognized with a start as Blake's. What did the baronet here so early? Assuredly it must concern the impending duel. Richard knew no mawkishness on the score of eavesdropping. He stole to his window and lent an ear, but the voices were receding, and to his vexation he caught nothing of what was said. He wondered how soon Vallancey would come, and for what hour the encounter had been appointed. Vallancey had remained behind at Scoresby Hall last night to make the necessary arrangements with Trenchard, who was to act for Mr. Wilding.

Now it chanced that Trenchard and Wilding had business—business of Monmouth's—to transact in Taunton that morning; business which might not be delayed. There were odd rumours afloat in the West; persistent rumours which had come fast upon the heels of the news of Argyle's landing in Scotland; rumours which maintained that Monmouth himself was coming over from Holland. These tales Wilding and his associates had ignored. The Duke, they knew, was to spend the summer in retreat in Sweden, with (it was alleged) the Lady Henrietta Wentworth to bear him company, and in the mean time his trusted agents were to pave the way for his coming in the following spring. Of late the lack of direct news from the Duke had been a source of mystification to his friends in the West, and now, suddenly, the information went abroad—it was something more than rumour this time—that a letter of the greatest importance had been intercepted. From whom that letter proceeded or to whom it was addressed, could not yet be discovered. But it seemed clear that it was connected with the Monmouth Cause, and it behoved Mr. Wilding to discover what he could. With this intent he rode with Trenchard that Sunday morning to Taunton, hoping that at the Red Lion Inn—that meeting-place of dissenters—he might cull reliable information.

It was in consequence of this that the meeting with Richard Westmacott was not to take place until the evening, and therefore Vallancey came not to Lupton House as early as Richard thought he should expect him. Blake, however—more no doubt out of a selfish fear of losing a valued ally in the winning of Ruth's hand than out of any excessive concern for Richard himself—had risen early and hastened to Lupton House, in the hope, which he recognized as all but forlorn, of yet being able to avert the disaster he foresaw for Richard.

Peering over the orchard wall as he rode by, he caught a glimpse, through an opening between the trees, of Ruth herself and Diana on the lawn beyond. There was a wicket gate that stood unlatched, and availing himself of this Sir Rowland tethered his horse in the lane and threading his way briskly through the orchard came suddenly upon the girls. Their laughter reached him as he advanced, and told him they could know nothing yet of Richard's danger.

On his abrupt and unexpected apparition, Diana paled and Ruth flushed slightly, whereupon Sir Rowland might have bethought him, had he been book-learned, of the axiom, "*Amour qui rougit, fleurette; amour qui plit, drame du coeur.*"

He doffed his hat and bowed, his fair ringlets tumbling forward till they hid his face, which was exceeding grave.

Ruth gave him good morning pleasantly. "You London folk are earlier risers than we are led to think," she added.

"'Twill be the change of air makes Sir Rowland matutinal," said Diana, making a gallant recovery from her agitation.

“I vow,” said he, “that I had grown matutinal earlier had I known what here awaited me.”

“Awaited you?” quoth Diana, and tossed her head archly disdainful. “La! Sir Rowland, your modesty will be the death of you.” Archness became this lady of the sunny hair, tip-tilted nose, and complexion that outvied the apple-blossoms. She was shorter by a half-head than her darker cousin, and made up in sprightliness what she lacked of Ruth’s gentle dignity. The pair were foils, each setting off the graces of the other.

“I protest I am foolish,” answered Blake, a shade discomfited. “But I want not for excuse. I have it in the matter that brings me here.” So solemn was his air, so sober his voice, that both girls felt a premonition of the untoward message that he bore. It was Ruth who asked him to explain himself.

“Will you walk, ladies?” said Blake, and waved the hand that still held his hat riverwards, adown the sloping lawn. They moved away together, Sir Rowland pacing between his love of yesterday and his love of today, pressed with questions from both. He shaded his eyes to look at the river, dazzling in the morning sunlight that came over Polden Hill, and, standing thus, he unburdened himself at last.

“My news concerns Richard and—Mr. Wilding.” They looked at him. Miss Westmacott’s fine level brows were knit. He paused to ask, as if suddenly observing his absence, “Is Richard not yet risen?”

“Not yet,” said Ruth, and waited for him to proceed.

“It does credit to his courage that he should sleep late on such a day,” said Blake, and was pleased with the adroitness wherewith he broke the news. “He quarrelled last night with Anthony Wilding.”

Ruth’s hand went to her bosom; fear stared at Blake from out her eyes, blue as the heavens overhead; a grey shade overcast the usual warm pallor of her face.

“With Mr. Wilding?” she cried. “That man!” And though she said no more her eyes implored him to go on, and tell her what more there might be. He did so, and he spared not Wilding. The task, indeed, was one to which he applied himself with a certain zest; whatever might be the outcome of the affair, there was no denying that he was by way of reaping profit from it by the final overthrow of an acknowledged rival. And when he told her how Richard had flung his wine in Wilding’s face when Wilding stood to toast her, a faint flush crept to her cheeks.

“Richard did well,” said she. “I am proud of him.”

The words pleased Sir Rowland vastly; but he reckoned without Diana. Miss Horton’s mind was illumined by her knowledge of herself. In the light of that she saw precisely what capital this tale-bearer sought to make. The occasion might not be without its opportunities for her; and to begin with, it was no part of her intention that Wilding should be thus maligned and finally driven from the lists of rivalry with Blake. Upon Wilding, indeed, and his notorious masterfulness did she find what hopes she still entertained of winning back Sir Rowland.

“Surely,” said she, “you are a little hard on Mr. Wilding. You speak as if he were the first gallant that ever toasted lady’s eyes.”

“I am no lady of his, Diana,” Ruth reminded her, with a faint show of heat.

Diana shrugged her shoulders. “You may not love him, but you can’t ordain that he shall not love you. You are very harsh, I think. To me it rather seems that Richard

acted like a boor.”

“But, mistress,” cried Sir Rowland, half out of countenance, and stifling his vexation, “in these matters it all depends upon the manner.”

“Why, yes,” she agreed; “and whatever Mr. Wilding’s manner, if I know him at all, it would be nothing but respectful to the last degree.”

“My own conception of respect,” said he, “is not to bandy a lady’s name about a company of revellers.”

“Bethink you, though, you said just now, it all depended on the manner,” she rejoined. Sir Rowland shrugged and turned half from her to her listening cousin. When all is said, poor Diana appears—despite her cunning—to have been short-sighted. Aiming at a defined advantage in the game she played, she either ignored or held too lightly the concomitant disadvantage of vexing Blake.

“It were perhaps best to tell us the exact words he used, Sir Rowland,” she suggested, “that for ourselves we may judge how far he lacked respect.”

“What signify the words!” cried Blake, now almost out of temper. “I don’t recall them. It is the air with which he pledged Mistress Westmacott.”

“Ah yes—the manner,” quoth Diana irritatingly. “We’ll let that be. Richard threw his wine in Mr. Wilding’s face? What followed then? What said Mr. Wilding?”

Sir Rowland remembered what Mr. Wilding had said, and bethought him that it were impolitic in him to repeat it. At the same time, not having looked for this cross-questioning, he was all unprepared with any likely answer. He hesitated, until Ruth echoed Diana’s question.

“Tell us, Sir Rowland,” she begged him, “what Mr. Wilding said.”

Being forced to say something, and being by nature slow-witted and sluggish of invention, Sir Rowland was compelled, to his unspeakable chagrin, to fall back upon the truth.

“Is not that proof?” cried Diana in triumph. “Mr. Wilding was reluctant to quarrel with Richard. He was even ready to swallow such an affront as that, thinking it might be offered him under a misconception of his meaning. He plainly professed the respect that filled him for Mistress Westmacott, and yet, and yet, Sir Rowland, you tell us that he lacked respect!”

“Madam,” cried Blake, turning crimson, “that matters nothing. It was not the place or time to introduce your cousin’s name.

“You think, Sir Rowland,” put in Ruth, her air grave, judicial almost, “that Richard behaved well?”

“As I would like to behave myself, as I would have a son of mine behave on the like occasion,” Blake protested. “But we waste words,” he cried. “I did not come to defend Richard, nor just to bear you this untoward news. I came to consult with you, in the hope that we might find some way to avert this peril from your brother.”

“What way is possible?” asked Ruth, and sighed. “I would not... I would not have Richard a coward.”

“Would you prefer him dead?” asked Blake, sadly grave.

“Sooner than craven—yes,” Ruth answered him, very white.

“There is no question of that,” was Blake’s rejoinder. “The question is that Wilding said last night that he would kill the boy, and what Wilding says he does. Out of the affection that I bear Richard is born my anxiety to save him despite himself. It is in

this that I come to seek your aid or offer mine. Allied we might accomplish what singly neither of us could.”

He had at once the reward of his cunning speech. Ruth held out her hands. “You are a good friend, Sir Rowland,” she said, with a pale smile; and pale too was the smile with which Diana watched them. No more than Ruth did she suspect the sincerity of Blake’s protestations.

“I am proud you should account me that,” said the baronet, taking Ruth’s hands and holding them a moment; “and I would that I could prove myself your friend in this to some good purpose. Believe me, if Wilding would consent that I might take your brother’s place, I would gladly do so.”

It was a safe boast, knowing as he did that Wilding would consent to no such thing; but it earned him a glance of greater kindness from Ruth—who began to think that hitherto perhaps she had done him some injustice—and a look of greater admiration from Diana, who saw in him her beau-ideal of the gallant lover.

“I would not have you endanger yourself so,” said Ruth.

“It might,” said Blake, his blue eyes very fierce, “be no great danger, after all.” And then dismissing that part of the subject as if, like a brave man, the notion of being thought boastful were unpleasant, he passed on to the discussion of ways and means by which the coming duel might be averted. But when they came to grips with facts, it seemed that Sir Rowland had as little idea of what might be done as had the ladies. True, he began by making the obvious suggestion that Richard should tender Wilding a full apology. That, indeed, was the only door of escape, and Blake shrewdly suspected that what the boy had been unwilling to do last night—partly through wine, and partly through the fear of looking fearful in the eyes of Lord Gervase Scoresby’s guests—he might be willing enough to do today, sober and upon reflection. For the rest Blake was as far from suspecting Mr. Wilding’s peculiar frame of mind as had Richard been last night. This his words showed.

“I am satisfied,” said he, “that if Richard were to go today to Wilding and express his regret for a thing done in the heat of wine, Wilding would be forced to accept it as satisfaction, and none would think that it did other than reflect credit upon Richard.”

“Are you very sure of that?” asked Ruth, her tone dubious, her glance hopefully anxious.

“What else is to be thought?”

“But,” put in Diana shrewdly, “it were an admission of Richard’s that he had done wrong.”

“No less,” he agreed, and Ruth caught her breath in fresh dismay.

“And yet you have said that he did as you would have a son of yours do,” Diana reminded him.

“And I maintain it,” answered Blake; his wits worked slowly ever. It was for Ruth to reveal the flaw to him.

“Do you not understand, then,” she asked him sadly, “that such an admission on Richard’s part would amount to a lie—a lie uttered to save himself from an encounter, the worst form of lie, a lie of cowardice? Surely, Sir Rowland, your kindly anxiety for his life outruns your anxiety for his honour.”

Diana, having accomplished her task, hung her head in silence, pondering.

Sir Rowland was routed utterly. He glanced from one to the other of his companions,

and grew afraid that he—the town gallant—might come to look foolish in the eyes of these country ladies. He protested again his love for Richard, and increased Ruth's terror by his mention of Wilding's swordsmanship; but when all was said, he saw that he had best retreat ere he spoiled the good effect which he hoped his solicitude had created. And so he spoke of seeking counsel with Lord Gervase Scoresby, and took his leave, promising to return by noon.

CHAPTER III
DIANA SCHEMES

Notwithstanding the brave face Ruth Westmacott had kept during his presence, when he departed Sir Rowland left behind him a distress amounting almost to anguish in her mind. Yet though she might suffer, there was no weakness in Ruth's nature. She knew how to endure. Diana, bearing Richard not a tenth of the affection his sister consecrated to him, was alarmed for him. Besides, her own interests urged the averting of this encounter. And so she held in accents almost tearful that something must be done to save him.

This, too, appeared to be Richard's own view, when presently—within a few minutes of Blake's departure—he came to join them. They watched his approach in silence, and both noted—though with different eyes and different feelings—the pallor of his fair face, the dark lines under his colourless eyes. His condition was abject, and his manners, never of the best—for there was much of the spoiled child about Richard—were clearly suffering from it.

He stood before his sister and his cousin, moving his eyes shiftily from one to the other, rubbing his hands nervously together.

“Your precious friend Sir Rowland has been here,” said he, and it was not clear from his manner which of them he addressed. “Not a doubt but he will have brought you the news.” He seemed to sneer.

Ruth advanced towards him, her face grave, her sweet eyes full of pitying concern. She placed a hand upon his sleeve. “My poor Richard...” she began, but he shook off her kindly touch, laughing angrily—a mere cackle of irritability.

“Odo!” he interrupted her. “It is a thought late for this mock kindness!”

Diana, in the background, arched her brows, then with a shrug turned aside and seated herself on the stone seat by which they had been standing. Ruth shrank back as if her brother had struck her.

“Richard!” she cried, and searched his livid face with her eyes. “Richard!”

He read a question in the interjection, and he answered it. “Had you known any real care, any true concern for me, you had not given cause for this affair,” he chid her peevishly.

“What are you saying?” she cried, and it occurred to her at last that Richard was afraid. He was a coward! She felt as she would faint.

“I am saying,” said he, hunching his shoulders, and shivering as he spoke, yet, his glance unable to meet hers, “that it is your fault that I am like to get my throat cut before sunset.”

“My fault?” she murmured. The slope of lawn seemed to wave and swim about her. “My fault?”

“The fault of your wanton ways,” he accused her harshly. “You have so played fast and loose with this fellow Wilding that he makes free of your name in my very presence, and puts upon me the need to get myself killed by him to save the family honour.”

He would have said more in this strain, but something in her glance gave him pause. There fell a silence. From the distance came the melodious pealing of church bells.

High overhead a lark was pouring out its song; in the lane at the orchard end rang the beat of trotting hoofs. It was Diana who spoke presently. Just indignation stirred her, and, when stirred, she knew no pity, set no limits to her speech.

“I think, indeed,” said she, her voice crisp and merciless, “that the family honour will best be saved if Mr. Wilding kills you. It is in danger while you live. You are a coward, Richard.”

“Diana!” he thundered—he could be mighty brave with women—whilst Ruth clutched her arm to restrain her.

But she continued, undeterred: “You are a coward—a pitiful coward,” she told him. “Consult your mirror. It will tell you what a palsied thing you are. That you should dare so speak to Ruth...”

“Don’t!” Ruth begged her, turning.

“Aye,” growled Richard, “she had best be silent.”

Diana rose, to battle, her cheeks crimson. “It asks a braver man than you to compel my obedience,” she told him. “La!” she fumed, “I’ll swear that had Mr. Wilding overheard what you have said to your sister, you would have little to fear from his sword. A cane would be the weapon he’d use on you.”

Richard’s pale eyes flamed malevolently; a violent rage possessed him and flooded out his fear, for nothing can so goad a man as an offensive truth. Ruth approached him again; again she took him by the arm, seeking to soothe his over-troubled spirit; but again he shook her off. And then to save the situation came a servant from the house. So lost in anger was all Richard’s sense of decency that the mere supervision of the man would not have been enough to have silenced him could he have found adequate words in which to answer Mistress Horton. But even as he racked his mind, the footman’s voice broke the silence, and the words the fellow uttered did what his presence alone might not have sufficed to do.

“Mr. Vallancey is asking for you, sir,” he announced.

Richard started. Vallancey! He had come at last, and his coming was connected with the impending duel. The thought was paralyzing to young Westmacott. The flush of anger faded from his face; its leaden hue returned and he shivered as with cold. At last he mastered himself sufficiently to ask:

“Where is he, Jasper?”

“In the library, sir,” replied the servant. “Shall I bring him hither?”

“Yes—no,” he answered. “I will come to him.” He turned his back upon the ladies, paused a moment, still irresolute. Then, as by an effort, he followed the servant across the lawn and vanished through the ivied porch.

As he went Diana flew to her cousin. Her shallow nature was touched with transient pity. “My poor Ruth...” she murmured soothingly, and set her arm about the other’s waist. There was a gleam of tears in the eyes Ruth turned upon her. Together they came to the granite seat and sank to it side by side, fronting the placid river. There Ruth, her elbows on her knees, cradled her chin in her hands, and with a sigh of misery stared straight before her.

“It was untrue!” she said at last. “What Richard said of me was untrue.”

“Why, yes,” Diana snapped, contemptuous. “The only truth is that Richard is afraid.”

Ruth shivered. “Ah, no,” she pleaded—she knew how true was the impeachment. “Don’t say it, Diana.”