

The Pretender

by AGNES AND EGERTON CASTLE

A GRAY place, in sooth, Edinburgh town seemed to me, fresh from the sunshine and gay colors of France; and it was a bleak wind that came hurrying up the steep street when I reached the corner of the Canongate. Yet my heart was blithe enough, for was I not back in my long dreamed-of native land, and I my own master for the first time in twenty years!

In St. Germain and Versailles, as you may guess, a lad in the *Gendarmes Ecosais*, with his mother's brother keeping guardian's watch over him the while, slips of liberty so little that he scarce knows the taste of it upon his tongue. And further, if all I had heard of him were true, my noble father was little like to give me docilely the run of my youth once I got beneath those smoky rafters of Craigmalloch I duly recollected from the hours of childhood.

So this week which I allowed myself in Auld Reekie was stolen as it were, from rightful authority; all by the good fortune of a marvellous favorable wind that ran us into Leith harbor so many days before our computation.

Now, says I to myself, shall I break my fast in some merry tavern? and after that—why, I'll go with the wind, says I, just as a gust caught me.

Even as I paused, a youth swung by me. He was followed at a little distance by a couple of serving men.

The arrogant glance, the tilt of the head, the pride of his carriage, the fashion in which the youth eyed me passing, as if it were my duty to make way for him, spoke eloquently enough. I turned and stared at the three a moment or two and started in pursuit, down the High Street once more.

My lad of the rowan-sprig made a straight course of it for a while. Just before reaching the Nether Bow, he suddenly veered down a wynd on the right, with his retainers in full tramp behind. I drew up close and thought myself fortunate indeed when I saw that the cellar entrance into which they presently plunged was that of a tavern; the sign was painted over the door, "The Fox and Grapes."

I elattered down in my turn and swaggered into the house with as good an imitation of my guide's conquering grace as I could muster in the uncertainty of my passage through unaccustomed gloom. A lusty wench, that brought back memories of childhood and my Highland nurse, received me. She motioned me to a solitary table, and then requested my will.

With the tail of my eye on Master Rowan-sprig, I ordered at hazard the messes she suggested in her pretty, insinuating way. Meanwhile he, who was evidently master of the establishment, a burly, elderly man, attended to the wants of his more important patron. But I, intent in watching, was quick to apprehend that they conversed earnestly together; and that in the Gaelic, in which tongue I was not as proficient as my uncle Craigmalloch would have wished. Thus, the drift of their speech escaped me; yet I could not be mistaken that both looked towards me ever and anon, sharply, and as though expectantly. Finally, loudly, and in English, the host said:

"And I have not forgotten your honor's liking," and caught up from a cupboard, a flagon, daintily incrustated and cobwebbed.

"A man cannot have too good wine for a good toast," cried Master Rowan-sprig. His voice had a bright, imperious ring that echoed gratefully in my ear. Again he flung a look at me, which I returned as bravely and as invitingly as I might. I was burning to have my knees under the same board, and clink a glass with one who had taken my youthful fancy as freshly as the spring wind.

"And what wine will your honor wish?" said the soft voice of the girl in my ear.

"I'll have," said I, starting round to her, "a bottle from the same bin as yonder gentleman."

Her pale eyes grew round. She hesitated, looked almost frightened.

"The old clary?"

"Why not, my love?" and with the corner of my glance upon my hero, who sat, his hand encircling a brimming glass, fixing me now very steadily. "Why not, if wine be measured here by toasts, shall not my glass be of the best?"

"I believe," said he, "the old clary is growing scarcer. And, indeed, when heads should be clear, 'tis better to share a bottle than to drain it alone—however good—the toast!"

My answer need scarce be recorded. I made him my best French bow. In a twinkling my desire was accomplished, I was stretching my legs under the same table as those arrogant limbs that had swung his coat skirts as if they had been the free kilt; I was clinking my glass—my hand trembled—with that held by his steady fingers.

"Take my lads to the kitchen, Duncan," said the young chieftain, "and give them their due fill, but no more. And as this gentleman and I evidently have matters to talk over, we will profit at once of your empty hour."

The instant we were alone, my entertainer lifted his glass; and his bright hazel eyes deep in mine: "From St. Germain," he said in a sharp whisper.

"From St. Germain," I said, "to Holyrood."

Hereupon the watchful intensity, that sat so curiously on his boyish face, vanished. He drew a deep breath. "So may it be," he cried solemnly and I realized that his toast was no other than a proper, loyal one, upon which, none being more loyal than myself, I thought myself bound to look mighty knowing, to echo, "So may it be."

"You landed this morning?" queried he.

"Aye, quoth I, with mortification, thinking I must indeed bear 'foreigner,' stamped in my hat.

"You're before time," he added, drawing his watch.

"Aye," said I, speaking of the fair winds; "tis all a piece of mighty luck."

"Luck," echoed he, with a quick frown, "would be a dangerous comrade to trust! I marked you, Sir, from the first, in the Lanarkmarket."

"And I you, Sir," cried I, flattered out of my suspicions. I uttered a few words about the delay of my meal at which his temper seemed to rise. Controlling himself with an effort, he added:

"You are right to be cautious, no doubt. But surely—"

"Did all go off well? Was the landing safe?"

"Why, doubtless," I laughed, "since I am here."

"And he?" his lips were nearly on my ear.

"He?" I echoed; and from sheer vagueness, laughed again.

"By the rood, you are young to be so cautious!" he said, constrainedly. "Let us exchange credentials before another word passes."

I deemed this a fair opening, at last, for the smoothing of matters out between us; and my smile was ingratiating as I answered him:

"Willingly, my dear sir, so that you gratify me first with your credentials."

This answer seemed to fill him with indignation.

"Impostor!" he shouted. "Spy!" and was at my throat.

We had a silent death grapple; and then I shook him off. He raised a second screech before he was for me again:

"Duncan! Robber! Here, lads!—A spy! A Traitor!"

Whether it was the meanness of his calling for aid when he had only one to deal with, or whether that tussle for sheer life had roused the fighting devil with-

Conceive me, then, introduced into an apartment at the top of the mansion. The lady, mere girl as she was, seemed mistress of the establishment. At the top-most passage, an old woman in a white cap met us and funged out her hand with a quivering gesture of inquiry.

"Aye, Meenie," said my guide, "the visitor has come." Whereupon the other dropped in obeisance:

"Glory be to God, Miss Rachel!" she cried.

Together, they brought me into the guest chamber, with a delicate reverence that shames me even now to think on, and there they left me. I let myself drop into the great carved oak chair, with its high back and blazoned tapestry, glad of the solitude, trying to think, to plan. Yet there was but one course left open to me.

"I shall make a clean breast of the whole story," said I to myself. "She will forgive me; my name will be warrant for me; none of my house were ever doubted."

fore this!" I folded the sheet, sealed and addressed it: "For the hand of MISS RACHEL DRUMMOND in this house."

My task accomplished, a new calm descended on my spirit. The great bell of St. Giles was striking some hour—three said my watch.

It was a good hour for my escape. Tiptoe I crept about the room and extinguished the candles already guttering in their sockets. A small silver night-lamp had been placed at the foot of the bed. I lit the wick; it burned with a small demure glow. I stole to the door.

On the very threshold my foot struck against a barrier. Had my step been less timid, I must have fallen across it. Instantly a figure reared itself into what seemed to me a giant stature.

My countenance looking down at me, blinking in the dim light, beneath a short crop of tousled yellow hair.



WITH A DEEP GROAN HE STAGGERED AND THEN FELL ACROSS THE TABLE

She scratched at the door, like a deliberate mouse, and came in, followed by old Meenie who bore a tray with wine and ylands.

"You must forgive me," she said, "that neither of my brothers is here to attend upon you. Julian is abroad at the harbor side, watching, and Alistair has just been brought home to us, sorely wounded."

My teeth clicked suddenly against the glass. "Good God!" I exclaimed, a horrible suspicion falling like a cloud upon my brain.

"Yes," said the girl, "there is a traitor at work somewhere. A spy, who pretended to be your messenger, met Alistair at the appointed place and when unobserved tried to murder him. They have just brought him in from the tavern. It is a dangerous wound, and he is now unconscious."

"What a misfortune!" I stammered at last.

"Aye, indeed, for Alistair is the cleverest of us all. And the villain has escaped. The traitor!—oh, could I but reach him!"

I turned my head away. I think I groaned.

At this she whispered something to the servant.

"Oh, you must rest," murmured Rachel then to me: "Oh, I have done wrong to trouble you with our trouble. You can sleep without a thought, to be strong for to-morrow's great day. God is above us, the cause is just, we are your true servants."

Then she courted deep before me, and, as she courted, kissed the hand that had shed her brother's blood.

The room reeled with me. Confusedly, I saw her withdraw backwards, sinking into a reverence, her silks ballooning around her and next I was alone.

I took a taper from its sconce and went to examine my countenance in the mirror. I ought to have been flattered to pass so readily for one whose good looks were a by-word. The personage for whom I was here had hardly been seen in France these last years, but every brown-eyed, fair-skinned, well-built slim lad must bear a family look in a French wig. How heartily I wished myself swarthy and ill-favored! I flung me down on the huge bed; then, in a terror lest I should sleep too deep, rose again and fell to writing my confession for Rachel to read when I was far away. I wrote a dozen letters; and none pleased me. At length wearied brain and sore heart dictated between them an abrupt statement of facts, clear of either self-enthusiasm or penitence. After some hesitation I scrawled underneath: "Would I had died be-

fore present at the great meeting. But he bids me add that this morning your Highness will at last know his friends." It was a long speech for the big lad—and he recited it something as a child his task. Then as Julian glanced at me with surprise, muttering that our time was short, I turned to follow him, and my eye caught sight of last night's letter, which I had clean forgotten.

"I pray you," said I, on the impulse, "to give this letter to your sister, when I am gone—or, I added, in a less assured tone, 'if aught should hap to me.'"

Now comes that scene of my life which, to look back on is more like the confusion of a dream than aught that could ever have happened.

I was conducted by Julian into a long room on the ground floor. Some dozen people were grouped at the end of it, conversing in low tones. As I entered, silence fell. All eyes were upon me.

I saw Julian meant for me to advance; and I advanced. All I saw wore the sprig of the rowan-berly at their breasts.

The devil that had spoken for me before spoke up now:

"Gentlemen," said I, "I am glad to be here among ye. But it is given me to understand that our time is short; it would be best that we should speak first and do your will."

There was no reply.

"Pray, gentlemen—" I began again—and the true Chevalier could scarce have delivered himself with a finer mixture of urbanity and command.

As upon my entrance a quick silence fell upon them, and into this silence came a voice. Rachel's voice. Like the and of it, conversing in low tones. As I entered, silence fell. All eyes were upon me.

"Treachery!" it said. And again: "Treachery!"

"We are betrayed, betrayed!"

The cry came waiving towards us from the passage. Now she stood on the threshold, her delicate hand on the sleeve of a young man who went beside her in silence.

A second her eyes fixed upon me, as I sat and then—her sweet singing—she spoke again:

"You are all betrayed, and it is my fault! That man—it was I brought him into your midst—he is a spy."

"Here is our Prince!"

Clamor sprang up again; deep murmurs. Again she controlled all. "First we must secure his safety. That man has our secret, he must die."

"Pray gentlemen," said the Prince very quietly, "put up your swords. I do not wish to have blood spilt in my presence."

"Mr. Drummond," he added, then addressing Julian, "will you give me the favor of your attention for a few moments apart?"

Only Rachel, clenching and unclenching her little hands, took yet a step nearer to me, and dropped her sweet voiced hatred into my ear:

"You must die, oh, you must die! Don't think you can escape death!"

"I see my brother's blood upon your hands!"

It would like to have uttered the words, "Kill me then, you," but I was stricken dumb by the rapid and constant succession of events when a gentleman entered, causing much surprise and confusion among the conspirators.

"Murray!" exclaimed the Chevalier, in tones of relief.

The new-comer, a middle-aged man of extraordinary masterful appearance, cast a flaming look from face to face to end upon the Prince.

"Aye, Chevalier," he said in a low rapid voice, "you've done me finely this time with your secret voyage. Aye, and done well for the cause too!—Wretched boobies!" he turned back upon the boys, spitting the words in his rage; "you'd be leaving your own Association, would ye? That of your elders is too slow and too cautious, and you'd lure your Prince into the heart of danger in spite of us!—Death! You'd be setting up the throne again, such as you! And 'tis to the whipping block I'd send ye!"

With a gesture of sudden warning, his countenance changing indescribably, he lifted a thin voice:

"By the rood, I am too late. The mischief's done!"

The echo of a cry unaturally cut into dumbness was in our ears. In the garden the shuffle of footsteps and the repeated clicks of swords and firelocks could be heard and before the lapse of many minutes the cry of a command from without caused a death-silence in the room and the entrance of four uniformed men, and a mass of soldiers in the passage behind them.

"'Twas then that the divine suggestion that was to redeem me sprang into my mind. I saw, now, as in a flash, how out of my very baseness, I could play the hero; pass for my Liege in earnest and take his danger to myself. Raising, I called out commandingly:

"Surely, gentlemen, is not God with us? Draw, my friends, and let your Prince lead you! Draw, my friends, and let your Prince lead you!"

So saying, I drew with a flourish, and hurled myself upon the foremost officer.

Before my point could reach him, I felt as if a rock had been cast against my breast, dashing me, as it were, down some sudden yawning precipice. And as I fell, I heard the crash of a world exploding, into the reverberating echoes of which rang the words: "His blood is on his own head."

It was many weeks later that I myself had the last words of that circumstantial epigram. Then I learned how, chafing in weary reaction month after month, at Gravelines—in consequence of the failure of Rouffesville's expedition against England—the young Prince had allowed himself to be tempted by the enthusiastic pledges of a band of hot-headed Highland youths, and had come over to lend his personal sanction to a new loyalist movement.

But, be it as it may, had it not been for me—who you may well, in truth, style the Young Pretender of that day—there would have been no Preston Falls, no Holyrood and no Culloden.

All attention was turned to the question of the Chevalier's immediate safety, and not a creature (save one) thought of seeing whether breath remained in him who had proved himself the best loyalist of them all.

But she, Rachel—true heart, whether in hate or in love—saw like a bird to my stroke again:

"I have dim visions of the days that followed. In spite of the pain and fever they are sweet."

Her tender face comes between me and the void; her exquisite hand alone holds me back; and fate gives me the precious revenge to hear the sweet crooning voice that once demanded my death now bid me again and again to live.

Then there falls an evening when Rachel confesses that she would have pierced my heart only the blade resisted her. "I would have plunged it in your heart," she croons.

Then I tell her she had already reached my heart more surely; and I watch the trembling of her grave, wistful lip and am deeply happy.

In her mystic way she will have it that it was written in heaven that her house should save the Prince at this moment of a deadly peril. Therefore was it destined for Alistair to mistake me for his messenger. Therefore, above all, was I held in silence when I sought to have spoken.

It would ill become me, would it not, to quarrel with so pious and comforting a conclusion!