

Despatches for the King!

By
MORTON
PIKE



Mystery and thrills—Cavaliers and Roundheads, and a ghost—provided an all-too-stirring Christmas for the folk at Old Hillingdon Hall

THE FIRST CHAPTER Captain Newbury's Mission.

THROUGH the gathering gloom of the December afternoon a man came galloping into the village of Goose Green. His horse was enveloped in a cloud of steam as he reined up before the door of the Fox and Grapes, whose red curtains were already drawn to shut out the winter twilight and the bitter cold.

The sentinel, who had been stamping his feet, and casting envious glances at his more fortunate comrades within the hostelry, had thrown forward his carbine, and called upon the horseman to halt, and the sentinel now stood looking at the hard-ridden beast, which he had tethered to a ring in the wall.

"Odds life, my beauty," he muttered, "thy rider has not spared thee. The news for my lord must be of grave importance."

He glanced at the casement of the window overhead, where the bright light of several candles and a roaring fire threw a cheerful glow upon the snow on the window-sill; but, it being no business of his, he fell to striding backwards and forwards once more, muffling himself in his cloak,

and longing for the moment when he would be relieved from his post, and could get him to the stone-flagged kitchen and a tankard of mulled ale.

In the room overhead sat two men, examining a bundle of papers on the table before them, and it was easy to see, from the richness of their clothes, that they were officers of distinction.

"My lord," said one of them, a broad-shouldered, hard-visaged man, with the scar of an old sword-cut traversing his face from cheek-bone to chin, "the King must have this news without delay."

"I am entirely of your opinion, colonel," replied the other, who was no less a personage than my Lord Byron, commander of Charles' forces in the county of Cheshire. "Who have you among your officers who can ride hard, and hold his tongue if he should have the ill-luck to fall into the hands of the crop-ears?"

"Captain Walter Newbury is our man," said the colonel. "He has faced fire and smoke a hundred times, and ninety miles in the dark will not daunt him."

My lord rang a little bell at his elbow, the door opened, and an orderly appeared and saluted.

"Bid Captain Newbury come hither with all speed," said my lord.

And ere a man might count twenty, the jingle of spurred heels sounded on the landing without, and a young officer entered the room.

He was a strikingly handsome man, with a mass of black, silky lovelocks framing his oval face. His high yellow boots reached almost to the skirts of his buff coat, which was laced with silver, and a broad sash girded his middle, bright scarlet in colour, like the feather in his hat.

His sword hung in a baldrick that crossed his cuirass, and he carried in his hand a pair of doeskin gauntlets, as though he were ready for instant service.

"Be good enough to close the door, Captain Newbury," said Lord Byron, "and come hither. What I have to say to thee must not be heard by an idle ear."

As my lord spoke he poured out a brimming goblet of French wine, which he handed to the young man.

"Drink this," said he. "You will need it, Captain Walter Newbury."

"To the King," said the young Cavalier, his eyes flashing and a bright smile lighting up his face.

"It is to the King you are going to-night," said my lord. "And now, listen! News of that arch-rebel, Fairfax, has just reached us from the Marquis of Newcastle—news which must be in the King's hands as fast as horse can carry it."

And my lord looked straight into the eyes of his messenger, who returned the glance with a proud toss of the head, drawing on his gloves the while.

My lord took a sheet of parchment from the table, placed the papers within it, folded it into an oblong packet, and sealed it with his gold signet.

"You will defend this with your life, captain," he said. "This must not fall into the Roundhead hands."

"And if it does, my lord," said Walter

Newbury, "it will be because my heart has ceased to beat. I am to go now?"

"As soon as you can set foot in stirrup, and God go with you, Walter Newbury, for you are a brave man!"

The young Cavalier kissed the packet entrusted to his charge, and thrust it deep down in his yellow leather boot; and then, bowing to the general, the door closed behind him, and he was gone.

"I fear we have spoiled his Christmas for him," said my lord, with a smile; "but if he gets through 'twill mean a colonel's commission for him."

And as he spoke he pulled aside the curtain and looked out on the village green.

Already there was a clatter of hoofs in the stable-yard, and as my lord gazed across the darkening expanse of snow he saw the sentinel step briskly aside as a figure trotted out of the archway.

A little throng of men clustered under the archway to see him go, and one and all raised their flagons, and crying "God and the King!" drank to their departing comrade. Then they went back to their comfortable quarters and the firelight and the good cheer that was to be found at the Fox and Grapes, and silence once more fell upon the green without, broken only by the muffled tread of the sentinel and the whistle of the frost wind that creaked the overhanging sign.

"Now, Carlos, old fellow," said the young Cavalier, patting the neck of his Spanish charger, "we have far to go, and we must make our road warily."

He slackened his pace into a brisk trot, the level fields stretching white and silent on either side, and the road wound ever and anon through frozen woods and feathery coppices. Now and again the gables of a timbered house, with warm light glowing from the windows, caught his eye, and made him think of Christmas cheer; but one after another they passed behind, and he drew his cloak closer about his shoulders, for a bitter wind was blowing.

Sometimes he passed an ice-bound mere, where happy boys were skating, and once, as he clattered through a village street, a

woman, watching no doubt for her man's return, threw open her cottage door and cried "God speed you, sir!" as the Cavalier went on into the night.

Then the moon rose—a great full moon that flung the shadows of the snow-covered trees across the roadway, guiding his course, it is true, but adding much to the dangers, for he had to pass through a country filled with enemies.

In those old days it was the custom for armies to sheath their swords on the approach of cold weather and go into winter quarters, suspending hostilities until the spring-time came again. Still, there was great danger for anyone trying to pass through the Roundhead lines.

Chance foraging parties might be encountered, patrols and pickets, and the like. And when some sixteen leagues had been left behind him, Captain Walter Newbury pulled up on the top of a hill, where the wood on either side was thick, and listened intently.

It seemed to him that the wood had tossed back an echo of tramping hoofs that was not of his own making. For some time he sat motionless in his saddle, with no sound but the heavy breathing of his horse, and the creak of the stirrup leather as the good beast's flanks rose and fell.

The winter stillness was all around him.

"Gadzooks, Roger," cried the captain, "thou didst not think to see Walter Newbury here to-night, I warrant me!" (See Chapter I.)



Sometimes a frozen twig cracked without any apparent cause; sometimes the snow would slip from heavily-laden branches, and a twig released from its weight would sway backwards and forwards. A fox barked on the other side of the copse, but that was all, and, after watching his horse's ears, the captain shook his bridle and broke into a trot again.

The moonlight showed a smile upon his face and an unwonted glitter in his eye, for he was coming into a country he knew well—the country of his boyhood—and his

own home was but a few miles from the high road.

"Steady, boy—steady!" he said sharply as his horse floundered on the slippery hill slope and nearly lost its footing. "Methinks 'twere well to stop at Hillingdon, and let Roger, the smith, roughen thy shoes, for the King's dispatches must not be hazarded by a chance fall."

The square church tower now loomed ahead, and, slackening his pace to a walk, Walter Newbury turned aside to the mouth of a lane, from whence came the musical ring of the hammer and anvil.

A large door like that of a barn stood open as he bent his head and rode in, and at the clatter of his hoofs the blacksmith, who held his hammer in one hand and a half-made shoe by a pair of pincers in the other, turned and looked at the newcomer, his sturdy, bare-armed figure telling strong against the red glow of the fire.

"Gadzooks, Roger," cried the captain, "thou didst not think to see Walter Newbury here to-night, I warrant me!"

The moment the words had passed his lips, he felt that he had been indiscreet, for the smith made a warning gesture towards the corner, where a man, heavily cloaked, paused at the bellows. And the Cavalier saw a grey horse tied to the wall.

"I will attend to thy bidding in a few minutes," said the smith, "for this shoe is well-nigh done."

And as he brought his hammer down upon it again he made a strange gesture, which the messenger understood.

The shower of sparks ceased, and the fire died down to a ruby glow as the stranger paused at the bellows, and the captain saw that he was a stout, hard-featured man, wearing a high-crowned hat that proclaimed him a Puritan.

"I am in no haste, Roger," said the captain, leaning his back upon the wall and eyeing the stranger from beneath the shadow of his hat-brim.

"Would I could say the same!" said the man at the bellows. "I have far to ride. Thy pardon, sir, but do you take the

London road, for I would willingly have thy company."

"Nay, sir, I follow it for but a mile or so; so I fear me our ways do not lie together."

The stranger inclined his head curtly, and as his services were no longer required, stood there eying the newcomer.

"Good luck!" he was thinking to himself. "This must be the son of that arch malignant, John Newbury, of Fallowash. 'Twould be an acceptable thing an he fell into the hands of the Lord's anointed; and worthy Captain Cephas Cripplegate is the man to put his hand to the plough."

In the meantime the smith had finished the shoe, lost no time in putting it on, and when he had paid him the stranger mounted and rode out of the smithy with a curt "Good-night to ye!"

"How now, Master Newbury? What folly is this?" said the smith, in a low voice. "Know ye not that Ireton's men are at Fallowash and in the villages hereabouts, and you thrust yourself in their very midst?"

"Nay, good Roger," said the Cavalier; "Fallowash will not see me this night. I ride upon the King's business—urgent business—Roger, and to that end rough ye these shoes, and that right speedily."

The smith looked grave as he went about his business.

"I trust yonder stranger heard not your name," he said. "From the length of his sword and his visage, I set him down a crop-ear."

"An he falls foul of me," laughed the young captain, "he shall be a crop-ear indeed! Truth to say, methought he regarded me somewhat sourly. What, finished already? Here's for thy pains, Roger." And he placed a piece of money in the smith's hands. "Now, tell me—how fares it with Sir John, my father?"

"Well," said the smith, "save for an injury to his leg, which keeps the poor gentleman prisoner."

"And where do the enemy lie? Is the road clear between this and Massy?"

"For aught I know, yes," replied the

smith; "but pass not through Brunton, nor yet Lisie, for Ireton hath his quarters at the first town and there is a regiment of Hazelrigs at the other."

Walter Newbury swung himself into the saddle, and, with a wave of his gauntlet, rode out of the smithy, leaving the smith standing there until the sound of the hoofs had died away in the distance.

There were lights in Hillingdon village as the Cavalier rode through it, and when he reached the park wall, which stretched along the road for half a mile, there were lights in Hillingdon Hall, and an unconscious sigh broke from the messenger's lips.

"I would give something to turn aside," he muttered to himself, "and break in unexpectedly upon stout Sir Jeffrey, my uncle, this Christmastide. Little Phyllis, too, my old playmate, she must be a sweet maid by now, for 'tis long since I was at the Hall."

He looked over his shoulder many times before he came out of the shelter of the park wall into the keen north wind again, and though he kept his eyes and ears keenly alert, his thoughts were full of memories of his kith and kin.

A mile went by, and he reached the hill that overlooked the little village of Massy, and, slackening his pace, for the descent into the village was steep, he rode down, a conspicuous figure in the brilliant moonlight.

A large tythe barn stood at one side of the road, and scarcely had he passed it and come in sight of the inn than he realised that all was not well. A man, who had just dismounted from a grey horse, stood at the inn door, talking to one whose dress betrayed him to be an officer of musketeers, and both turned towards him with a shout.

"Hold, sir, in the name of the Parliament!" cried the officer, drawing his long tuck. "Who are ye that rides so late on the highway?"

"One who brooks no questioning from a Roundhead dog!" cried the Cavalier.

And, shortening his reins and drawing a holster pistol, he touched his horse with the spur and broke into a gallop.

Another moment and he would have been safe, but a shrill whistle from the officer brought a party of musketeers hurrying from the inn, and, levelling their matchlocks, they fired at the flying figure.

Walter Newbury reeled in his saddle as his left arm dropped powerless by his side, and as he seized the reins with his right hand a groan burst from his lips, for he knew that his gallant horse was also wounded.

One glance showed him a Roundhead picket running out into the centre of the street at the other end of the village. There was nothing for it but to retrace his steps, and, with a prayer to Heaven, he pulled his charger round and spurred as he had never spurred before.

The enemy at the inn were fifty yards from him, and all their matchlocks were empty. He had one chance, if his horse could only stay the distance, and, bending low over his holsters, he faced the steep rise that led to the top of the hill. He heard the Roundheads yell as he passed out of sight for a moment behind the barn. The horse leaped and bounded up the slippery slope, but those behind him had reloaded with haste, and as he gained the crest of the hill he felt a bullet strike his ankle, and with a quiver and a deep groan his steed plunged forward and rolled in the road, flinging him a yard off into the snow.

As he picked himself up a shout of triumph came up the hill, and, limping along, leaving a tell-tale stain at every step, the King's messenger knew that he was being pursued.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Coming of the Enemy.

"**C**AST another log upon the hearth, good Simon, and set the wicker-flask here at mine elbow," cried Sir Jeffrey Hillingdon, settling himself in the wide inglenook of the great fireplace. "And give me my pipe, little daughter, filled with Indian weeds that my soul loveth. There is not a Roundhead knave within ten miles of us; and, if we be not as merry as of yore at this gay season, thanks to this cruel war, we may at

least spend our evening together by our own fireside."

It was Christmas Eve at Hillingdon Hall, and red-berried holly decorated the walls. Outside, everything seemed hushed and muffled under the heavy mantle of fallen snow. For two days and nights the keen north wind had filled the air with whirling flakes, and when they had suddenly ceased to whirl about nine o' the clock the whole landscape was white as far as the eye could scan. It covered the gables, it outlined the mullions of the great hall windows that looked upon the park; there were drifts full five feet deep in the avenue of stately elms that wound away to the high road, and as the moon rose slowly above the feathery fringe of woodland the scene became one of dazzling beauty.

A real, old-fashioned Christmas Eve, with the frost ferns gleaming on the window-panes, and every tree glittering as though it had been set with diamonds. It wanted only the mummers and the jaybells and the lord of misrule to make it perfect; but, alas! folk had little heart for frivolity while King and Commons were up in arms, and Cavaliers and Roundheads only waited for the coming of spring to fly at each other's throats.

It was a cosy room, with its huge fireplace and the great iron dogs, on which the logs lay burning, and it was panelled from floor to ceiling with dark-brown oak that reflected the warm glow. One hardly wanted the candles that stood upon the long table, with that flood of warm light falling from the hearth; and sweet Phyllis, who sat beside her father upon a low stool at his feet, breathed a little sigh of contentment, and clasped her hands idly in her lap.

On the other side of the fireplace sat Basil and Ralph—the one dark-eyed and dreamy, seeing pictures in the blaze; the other regretting that his fifteen years had kept him at home, away from the fighting that had fallen to his absent brother's share.

"I fear we must give up all hope of Raymond's joining us," said Sir Jeffrey. "This snowstorm will have made the roads impassable."

"Ay, and there is more to come!" said Basil. "'Twas as much as I could do to get back from the village this afternoon. My mare was girth deep more than once, and well-nigh as white as your jennet, Blanche Flower, Phyllis."

"Now, I warrant me," said Sir Jeffrey, smiling, "had any of the womenfolk met thee in the gloaming, they would have thought it the Grey Lady of Hillingdon. You know, she rides to-night."

The handsome old Cavalier drew a long cloud of smoke, and looked down with a twinkle in his eye at Phyllis, whose hand had crept into his own as she sat peering into the glowing heart of the fire.

"Poor Mistress Amaryllis!" she said, breaking the pause which followed Sir Jeffrey's words. "Didst ever see her, father?"

"See her, child! Why, the tragedy happened a century ago, more than fifty years before I was born!"

"I meant not that," said Phyllis, with a little awe creeping into her voice. "Did you ever see her ghost?"

Sir Jeffrey laughed, and played with the soft brown curls that clustered so prettily about the girl's face.

"No, child, I never saw it, nor do I believe that ever anyone else did. At best I deem these things but old wives' tales. though, indeed, 'twould be hard to convince the serving-maids—or the men, for the matter of that—that she doth not walk on Christmas Eve; and as for one of them setting foot across the threshold of the Red Room this night, I verily think they would sooner die."

"Tell us the legend again, father," said Basil, from the other side of the fireplace. "'Tis the one night of all others for a ghost story."

Sir Jeffrey smiled, and looked at the leaping flame, which made the pine-logs hiss and sputter.

"Why, in truth, you know it as well as I," he said; "and even what little there be to tell, I doubt not it has gained as the years roll on."

He poured some wine into a goblet of

Venetian glass on the table beside him, and, smoking for awhile in silence, began the family legend, which was always fresh to them, although they had heard it a dozen times.

"As you all know," said Sir Jeffrey, "our family was knighted by King Henry VII., after Bosworth Field, and the second of our house to carry the title was Sir Jasper Hillington, who flourished under bluff King Hal, and had the reputation of being a great miser.

"'Twas he who built this house, as you doubtless know, making the secret passage upstairs that leads from the Red Room to the stables, without a thought of the terrible tragedy to which it also led.



Ralph Hillington, tearing the curtain aside, uttered a cry. Pressed against the pane was the face of a man—a man pale and bareheaded! (See Chapter 2.)

"Sir Jasper had two children—your grandfather, Philip, who was my own sire, and a daughter, Amaryllis, the celebrated Grey Lady of Hillingdon.

"Money was at the bottom of it all, for Sir Jasper was very rich, while our cousins, the Newburys of Denham, had no fortunes but their swords.

"I have often thought, sweetheart, how like you are in face to the portrait of Mistress Amaryllis on the wall yonder; but, thank Heaven, my little daughter has not the unfortunate self-will of the Grey Lady."

They all turned and gazed across the room at a painting by Zuccherò, which represented a very pretty young woman in the stiff ruff of the Tudor period, set in the oak panelling.

"Mistress Amaryllis was eighteen, only two years older than you, when she fell in love with her cousin, young Walter Newbury, a gallant lad enough, like all the lads of his family; but from the very outset Sir Jasper would have none of it, and promptly forbade him the house. Folk said he grudged his daughter's dowry, but if that be true I know not.

"Hark how the wind is rising!" And, raising their heads, they all listened to the rumbling of the blast that suddenly swept against the windows of the hall. "Odds life, I had rather be indoors than out to-night!"

Even the great boarhound that crouched by his master's side raised his head also, and moved uneasily.

"Now, Mistress Amaryllis, being remarkably self-willed, set her father at defiance, and the story goes that, by means of the secret passage which opened from Sir Jasper's bedchamber, she was wont to steal forth after nightfall, saddle her white palfrey with her own hands, and ride away to meet her lover, returning before daybreak and gaining her own room, unknown to any of the household.

"But in time Master Walter Newbury received command of a company of pikes in garrison at Calais, which, as you know, was then held by the English, and when the time came for him to cross the water, these

unfortunate young people determined to marry, in order that the soldier of fortune might take his bride with him.

"All was arranged. A divine was found willing to tie the knot, and Mistress Amaryllis, attiring herself in a grey gown that still remains in the oak chest upstairs, stole from her room on that fatal Christmas Eve, and crept on tiptoe across the corridor.

"In vain had Sir Jasper locked and barred his chamber door, for there was a sliding panel that gave access to his room, which, somehow, this self-willed young lady had discovered, and, with beating heart no doubt, she passed through it, and paused a moment to gaze for the last time at the sleeping father she was betraying.

"The snow was on the ground, as it might be to-night, and the moon was at its full. Whether or not she had grown careless with repeated success, as she reached the opposite panel, which leads to the staircase concealed in the thickness of the west wall, she must have made some sound that roused Sir Jasper.

"The iron-clamped coffer in which he kept his wealth still stands where it did that night, and as he drew the curtains of his bed aside he saw a figure bending over it. No doubt she waited, trembling, when she heard him move; but Sir Jasper was a man of action, and, thinking that some robber had got into the room, he seized the loaded gun which he kept ready to his hand, and fired, with fatal effect.

"Poor Mistress Amaryllis! In another moment she would have been safe within the panel and have joined the anxious soldier who waited with the horses below; but the aim was true, and, shot through the heart, she fell lifeless at Sir Jasper's feet."

Phyllis and her brothers had all turned their gaze towards the picture, and were looking at it with keen interest, but no one spoke, for on a sudden the wind rose again in its fury, clashing the branches in the avenue together, and driving the snow-flakes that had begun to fall again against the window-panes. With a half-amused smile, Sir Jeffrey, his head slightly on one side, was looking at the faces of his two

boys, marking the difference in their expressions, and possibly thinking what future lay before them, when the great boarhound suddenly rose, and, lifting up his shaggy muzzle, gave a prolonged low howl, and then lay down again, whimpering a little, as if ashamed of himself.

"What ails the dog?" said Sir Jeffrey, bending over him.

"Does he hear the Grey Lady?" said Basil, in a hushed voice, his eyes glowing in the firelight. "'Tis said she glides across the Red Room on Christmas Eve, down the dark stairs and so to the stables, and then rides forth upon her white horse, traversing the avenue until she reaches the gate on the high road, where she waits, and waits, and then turns and rides slowly back again."

"Hold thy silly prate, Basil!" said his brother sharply. "Grey Lady or none, I heard something mighty like a cry for help in the lull of the wind just now."

He walked to the window as he spoke, but ere his hand could grasp the curtain, Caesar, the boarhound, sprang up once more, and, leaping to the centre of the room, stood glaring at the window, with every hair bristling, his lip curled back to show the strong, white fangs.

Ralph Hillington looked over his shoulder at the dog, and, tearing the curtain aside, sprang back a pace and uttered a cry, for pressed against the pane was the face of a man—a man pale and bare-headed, who leaned heavily against the sill and beat upon the window with a doekin glove, richly embroidered with silver.

"Stay where thou art, Phyllis!" cried Sir Jeffrey, snatching up his rapier, which hung over the back of a chair. "Summon the men, Basil, and come thou with me, Ralph, to unbar the hall door. 'Tis Walter Newbury, thy cousin, of Byron's regiment, and he is in sore need!"

"Thank Heaven!" gasped the wounded Cavalier as Sir Jeffrey and Ralph between them hauled him up the steps into the dining-room. "Alas! my name seems fated to bring misfortune upon this house. The Roundheads are upon my track, and in a few moments they will be here. For the

love of the good cause conceal me somewhere! I carry dispatches for the King!"

He sank insensible upon the floor as he uttered these words, and Sir Jeffrey, checking his first impulse, which was to kneel beside him and examine his hurts, raised his hand and listened.

"Quick!" he commanded in a low, stern voice. "Carry him to the secret room in the south wing. I hear the rogues on the terrace already."

And even as he spoke his words were drowned by the thunder of matchlock butts on the hall door, and a loud voice, crying:

"Open, in the name of the Parliament!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER

How the Grey Lady of Hillington Walked for the Last Time.

"Now, malignant, for the last time, wilt thou come to reason, and tell us where this man is hidden? That he is in the house we know."

Captain Cephas Cripplegate, of Ireton's Musketeers, stood in front of the great fireplace, in his huge boots of untanned calfskin, and before him, bound hand and foot in his own elbow-chair, was Sir Jeffrey Hillington, his rapier lying broken on the floor, and his black velvet doublet showing signs of recent rough usage.

"I deny not that the lad is here," said Sir Jeffrey sternly; "but he is my own nephew, and our secret hiding-places have baffled more clever men than you, crop-ear, in times gone by."

"Tut, tut! Bandy no words with me," said the Roundhead, who was a short, smug-visaged man, very much impressed with the idea of his own importance, and formerly a linen-draper in Cheapside before the war began. "I warn you, malignant, I am a very lamb an thou use me properly, but I am a lion when I am aroused!" And Captain Cephas Cripplegate roared in a high falsetto.

A huge Roundhead sergeant, followed by half a dozen musketeers, entered the room noisily, and in their midst came Ralph and Basil, white and shamefaced, with their

heads hung down as they caught the searching eye of their father.

"Whom have ye here, Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains?" said the Roundhead captain.

"Two young whelps whom we found attempting to escape across the terrace, sons of the old wolf here, no doubt in the hope of bringing succour."

"Ah! Tie them, even as you tied the old dog," said Master Cripplegate. "Still no trace of the fugitive?"

"None, captain, though we have ransacked the house from top to bottom. We have discovered nothing beyond a great store of wine in the cellar." And the sergeant grinned a meaning grin at his officer.

"'Twill make our stay the pleasanter," said Captain Cephas. "And you, malignant, listen well to my words and ponder well on them. To-night I shall take up my quarters here, where my men can make merry at thy expense. To-morrow, if this fugitive nephew of thine is not forthcoming, I will order them to burn the house about your ears, as a warning to all traitors!"

The little man struck a fierce attitude, which made him look all the more like a gigantic cock robin.

"Friend Abimelech," he continued, "see that the sentinels are at their duty, and bid that bottled-nosed rogue, Simon, the butler, place a posset of hot sack by the bed in the Red Room above, and warm the sheets against my retiring."

"And the other prisoners, captain, the serving-men and the maids!" said Sergeant Abimelech.

"Let them sit at one end of the kitchen, taking care that none escape," replied Cripplegate. "They will thus profit by the edifying discourse, and forget the sinful revels in which they would have indulged but for our coming."

"Hypocrite and hound, you shall pay dearly for this night's work!" exclaimed Sir Jeffrey, in a low voice of great bitterness.

"Not so cheerful as thou for thy burned mansion, malignant!" And the little officer, setting his legs wide apart, twinkled his eyes maliciously.

Simon, the butler, came out of the kitchen, carrying a long brass warming-pan in his trembling hands, and his gait was the gait of a man who goes to the funeral of his dearest friend. His rosy face was pale and sickly, and with every step he heaved a profound sigh as he mounted the broad staircase to the floor above, leaving the smoky odour of burning coals behind him.

"Alack, that I have lived to see this night!" he muttered to himself as he heard the wind howling and sobbing about the doomed mansion.

The stairs were in full sight of the open door of the dining-room, and the disconsolate retainer could feel the eye of the Roundhead captain upon him, but as he gained the landing an idea struck him. There were two doors to the Red Room, one that could be seen by anyone sitting in the dining-hall below, the other opening into a long corridor that divided the north from the south wing.

"Dear heart alive," muttered the old man to himself, "she must be mad for news of what is gone forward. All the enemy are below, and this is my opportunity."

He proceeded a few yards down the corridor, and, looking cautiously backwards and forwards, tapped three times on the oak-lined wall, and instantly a square of misty moonlight fell on the floor at his feet as Phyllis Hillington slid the panel back.

The moonlight, which poured through a tall window, illumined every corner of the little hiding-place, a mere cupboard, artfully contrived between two bedchambers. If you had looked at the south wing, you would have seen seven windows in a row. The two bedchambers had three apiece; the seventh was the window through which the moon now poured, revealing Captain Walter Newbury stretched at full length upon the floor, and Mistress Phyllis bending forward, with her fingers to her lips.

"Heaven forgive me, but I bring bad news!" whispered the butler. "Your brothers were both taken, and are now tied to their chairs in the dining-hall, with Sir Jeffrey. The boarhound flew at the Roundhead's throat, and to save the dog Sir

Jeffrey drew his rapier, and now there's no hope. The house will be burned in the morning unless the captain gives himself up."

"And that will he do," said Walter Newbury, turning his face towards the speaker.

"Hush, cousin—implored Phyllis. "Much may happen 'twixt this and sunrise. But whither go thou, Simon?"

"To warm the scoundrel's bed!" replied the old retainer, gripping the warming-pan fiercely. "Would I might heap these coals of fire upon his head—the knave!"

"The Red Room," said Phyllis, in a scarcely audible whisper. "It will add to the danger; but, after all, what is danger to a Hillingdon when the King's cause is at stake?"

Simon looked at her blankly, not understanding the meaning of her words. Then, fearful lest some sneaking Roundhead might discover them, he was turning away, when Phyllis laid her little hand upon his sleeve.

"Simon," she whispered, "mark well what I say to you! To-night is Christmas Eve. Tell them below the legend of our house—the legend of Mistress Amaryllis and the Walter Newbury of old. The rogues must not come prowling through the upper rooms, for the

They could not move or utter a sound, though the cold sweat beaded on their brows . . . In an instant the apparition had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared! (See Chapter 3.)



Grey Lady of Hillingdon will walk to-night!"

And, without giving him an opportunity to speak, Phyllis slid the panel to again, and, blotting out the moonlight, left worthy old Simon, the butler, in mental and physical darkness most profound.

"Cousin Walter," said Phyllis, kneeling down beside the wounded man, a curious look in her eyes, and her sweet face more than ever like that of her ill-fated ancestress in the picture downstairs, "your life is your own, but the papers you carry belong to the King. Wilt thou give the dispatch to me,

and trust me to place it in a safe spot, where the Roundheads can never find it?"

"Odds life, 'tis a brave little cousin!" said the young Cavalier, a smile coming into his pale face. "Pass thy hand down into my boot, and thou wilt find it there."

She did as he bade her, and drew forth my lord's packet, reddened with Walter Newbury's blood, and, kissing it, she thrust it into her bosom and rose lightly to her feet.

"Now must I leave you for a little space; but do not fear, I will return anon."

And opening yet another panel, which gave entrance into one of the bedchambers the Roundheads had already searched, Phyllis glided through the opening and disappeared.

It was midnight, and silence reigned in Hillingdon Hall. Captain Cripplegate had betaken himself to the Red Room, and Sergeant Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains kept watch in the dining-hall, whither he had invited Simon, the butler, to quaff a bumper of wine with him.

The snow had ceased falling, but the wind still moaned lugubriously in the chimney, and the sentinels on the terrace sought what shelter they could from the icy blast, and thought regretfully of the quarters they had left at Massy.

True to his trust, the butler had told the story of Mistress Amaryllis and her ghost, and he had told it so well, too, that Captain Cripplegate regretted his choice of the Red Room not a little, and would have changed it at the eleventh hour had not he feared to incur the scorn of Sergeant Abimelech, who declared loudly "that he believed in no such things as ghosts."

Nevertheless, when the captain had retired, Abimelech sat with his eyes riveted on the portrait, and more than once he shivered a little nervously as the wind moaned more dismally than usual.

Poor Basil and his brother had fallen asleep in their bonds, but Sir Jeffrey's eyes gleamed redly in the firelight as he nursed

his wrath, and thought of what the morrow would bring forth.

"'Twas a grim story of thine, Simon," said the sergeant, suddenly breaking the silence; "all the grimmer that 'tis a Walter Newbury we seek to-night. Spake you ever with any who hath seen the Grey Lady?"

"That have I," replied the butler. "My father saw her many times. Boy and man, my folk have served this family for nigh upon two hundred years."

"Ay, and served it faithfully, too!" said a deep voice that made Sergeant Abimelech start in his chair, to meet the eyes of Sir James Hillingdon fixed upon him with curious intentness.

"What ails thee, Roundhead?" said the knight. "Thou art over pale, man, for one who hath made such inroad into my wine."

The sergeant frowned, but made no answer. Strong man that he was, there lurked deep down in his nature that taint of superstition which we all possess, however much we may delude ourselves to the contrary, and the moaning of the wind, the melancholy howling of a bloodhound chained to his kennel behind the stables, the butler's story, and the curious situation in which he found himself, were all having their effect.

"Pass me that flask," he said savagely. "I will go and visit my sentinels, after I have taken a dram of strong waters. A tented field is more to my liking than such a haunted house as this."

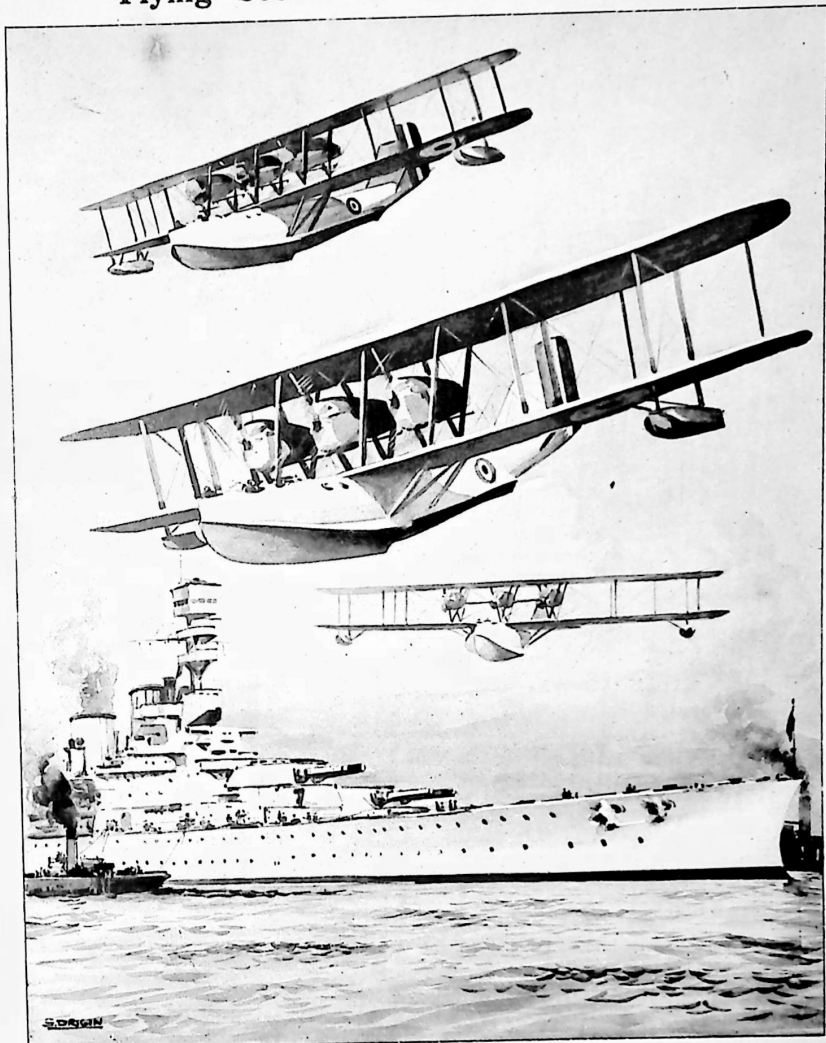
For all that, as he set his glass down on the table, his eyes returned to the picture on the wall, as if some curious fascination drew them thither and held them there.

Simon, the butler, had risen from his chair, on which he had sat all the time in great discomfort, by reason of the presence of that master whom he was powerless to help; and, going across to the hearth, he placed another log on the smouldering fire.

"The house was well enough before you came," muttered Simon, looking around.

"'Twill be better for all honest men when we leave it," said the sergeant, "since we shall leave it a heap of ruins. I warrant

Flying Scouts of the British Navy!



To face page 220.

Drawn by S. Drigin.

British Flying-boats Passing H.M.S. Renown after a Reconnaissance Flight.

me there will be no ghosts and grey ladies at noon to-morrow!"

The words died away on his lips, for as he glanced at Simon he saw a curious sight. The old retainer, his back still bent in the attitude of placing the log upon the fire, was staring wildly out of the open door into the hall, quivering in every limb, as one stricken with the palsy.

"Odds death!" exclaimed the sergeant. "What is it you see, man?"

But as his eyes followed the direction of the butler's gaze, Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains also grew pale as ashes; for there, passing noiselessly along the gallery at the top of the staircase, glided the Grey Lady of Hillingdon!

The sergeant's long sword lay on the table in front of him, but he seized the arms of his chair and crouched like a frightened lion. The candles guttered in their sconces in the outer hall, but they threw a strong light on the carved balusters, flinging a pattern of black shadows against the oaken panelling and the closed door of the Red Room.

Clad in the dim grey gown of ancient shape, her neck encircled by the stiff ruff of Tudor times, the ghost passed on, and Mistress Amaryllis turned her face and looked down the stairs towards them. The face was the face of the picture! They could not move nor utter sound, though the cold sweat beaded on their brows; and, laying her hand on the panel beside the Red Room door, it seemed to open at the touch, and in an instant the apparition had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared!

Captain Cephas Cripplegate lay tossing uneasily in the great bed in the haunted chamber. He had drained the sack posset to the dregs, but it failed to bring slumber to his eyes, and at every blast of wind that shook the high casement the Roundhead started and peered nervously round, with his nose protruding over the bedclothes. The moonlight flooded the room, and the fire burned low, and, like the sentinels out-

side, the captain was already regretting that he had come upon that errand, and heartily wished himself back in his quarters at the village inn.

How the wind moaned! It seemed to him like the despairing sorrow of old Sir Jasper after he had fired the fatal shot, and several times he was in the mind to get up and dress himself.

Then on a sudden a low click fell upon his ear from the opposite side of the room, and, turning his eyes in that direction, Cephas Cripplegate gave a gasp of terror, his hair rose, and he went gooseflesh all over. For an instant a square of bright light illumined the darkness at the far end of the chamber. The door closed noiselessly, and then the Grey Lady of Hillingdon stood before him, with one hand raised, as though motioning him to silence.

He could not move; his voice died away in his throat. And, as the storm shrieked with unusual violence in the chimney, the Grey Lady of Hillingdon glided slowly past the foot of the bed, keeping those piercing eyes turned full upon him.

The wretched little linen-draper, who had swaggered so boldly in all the bravery of his buff coat and his big boots, wished that the earth might open and swallow him up.

And still the apparition glided on and on, the moonlight glistening on the silver embroidery of her gown and the handle of the riding-whip she carried in her raised right hand.

For an instant she paused motionless over the very spot by the iron-bound coffer, where her father's bullet had slain her two centuries before; and then the panel opened, the eyes glowed with peculiar intensity, and, gliding apparently through the solid wall, the Grey Lady of Hillingdon had gone!

For several moments after the apparition had disappeared into the sleeping-room of his officer, Sergeant Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains remained motionless, with mouth and eyes wide open.

The sight had shaken him to the very centre of his being, but the muffled tread of

a sentinel outside brought him back to his senses again, and, overturning the heavy carved chair with a tremendous crash, Sergeant Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains seized his long sword with one hand and snatched up a silver candlestick with the other.

"Stay, man—stay!" cried Simon, starting forward to hold him. "'Tis death to interfere with the ghost of the Grey Lady!"

"Silence, fool! This is some trick!" exclaimed the sergeant.

And with one bound he dashed from the room, and sprang up the stairs, three steps at a time.

Simon was about to follow him, still pale and trembling, and, as yet, all unsuspecting, when Sir Jeffrey's voice stayed him, and made him turn towards his captive master.

"Cut these bonds, thou fool!" exclaimed the knight, his face livid, and distorted with pain and anger. "To think that thou, of all men, should lend thyself to such madness as this!"

"Madness, master?" cried the honest old butler, who had been as greatly terrified as the sergeant.

"Ha! And worse than madness!" cried Sir Jeffrey, struggling with the thongs about him. "To let my sweet Phyllis masquerade in the midst of such dangers! My loyalty to King Charles carries me not to such a length as that!"

On a sudden it all dawned upon Simon, the butler, and he knew now what Mistress Phyllis had meant when she said the Grey Lady of Hillingdon would walk to-night!

But as he raised his hands in mute horror, two pistol-shots rang out in quick succession from the floor above, and, reeling backwards with a cry of agony, Sergeant Abimelech-Bind-the-Foe-in-Chains staggered from the open door of the Red Room, and fell heavily upon the landing!

In an instant there was a mighty uproar from the stone kitchen, where the Roundheads were sleeping, and those on guard on the terrace without came rushing into the mansion, blowing upon their matches.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Cephas Cripples-

gate, appearing half-dressed in the doorway, a smoking pistol in each hand. "What have I done?"

But there was no answer to his words. In his sudden terror, he had fired too surely, and Sergeant Abimelech lay dead upon his back, his head hanging over the topmost stair, with the shaven chin pointing upwards to the ceiling.

No one saw the Grey Lady, who rode forth on her white horse from the now unguarded stables, and flitted silently away among the oaks and beeches, across the snowy park.

Walter Newbury, alone, aroused by the pistol-shots, started up on to his unwounded elbow, and heard the soft trampling of hoofs under the casement. But he knew what it meant, and wondered whether pretty Cousin Phyllis would come back to him, as she had promised.

And meanwhile, when the trees of the avenue had hid her from all sight of the mansion, the shade of Mistress Amaryllis became very flesh and blood indeed, and, shortening her reins, set that white palfrey at the park paling, as surely never ghost rode yet!

"Now Heaven help me, and I shall save them!" cried the Grey Lady. "'Tis but ten miles to Coventry, and gallant Rupert lies there with his Cavaliers!"

Daylight came streaming in through the windows of Hillingdon Hall, for it was morning, and outside the red sun was doing his best to warm the frozen world. The wind had dropped, and wintry stillness chained the landscape; but within the Hall preparations were in progress for a terrible tragedy.

The Roundhead musketeers leaned grimly on their muskets, drawn up in a row before the three chairs in which sat Sir Jeffrey and his boys, all three of them very pale, but bravely defiant.

Clad once more in his soiled buff coat and huge calfskin boots, with his large ears standing out on either side from his round, bullet head, Captain Cephas Cripplegate strode backwards and forwards between the

file of musketeers and the three prisoners, his eyes resting thoughtfully upon the ground, and his hand playing nervously with his unshaven chin.

The words of Sergeant Abimelech were dinning in his brain: "Ireton will have no bloodshed!" But blood had been shed, and by Cripple-gate's own hand, too; and his craven soul thirsted to avenge his own folly on the three helpless captives before him.

At the other end of the room, under the guard of half a dozen men, stood the terrified manservants and the scowling grooms, and among them old Simon, the butler, his lip trembling, and his face as white as the snow without.

The Roundhead captain stopped suddenly before Sir Jeffrey.

"For the last time, malignant," he said sternly, "wilt thou surrender the prisoner we seek, or must I pass judgment upon thee?"

"Neither will I give him up, nor do I recognise your right to pass what you please to call judgment."

"Silence!" cried Cephas Cripple-gate. "And listen to me." And as he spoke he drew from his belt a well-thumbed Bible. "Lest men should say that I judged thee out of my own mouth, this Book shall speak. How say ye?" And he turned to the musketeers. "The Book shall open where it listeth, and by the first text upon which my finger falls shall ye three live or die!"

"Agreed!" cried the musketeers, in hoarse chorus. And dead silence fell upon the room.

Laying the vellum-bound volume on his outstretched palm, the Book slowly opened, and he placed his forefinger in the centre of the page.

With a smile of triumph, he read as follows, through his nose:

"In the 1st Book of Kings, the eighteenth chapter, and the fortieth verse, it is written: 'And Elijah said unto them, "Take the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape."' Musketeers, look to your priming." And, closing the Book with a snap, he took out a large silver watch. "To your



Captain Cripple-gate strode backwards and forwards between the musketeers and the three prisoners, his eyes on the ground, and his hand playing nervously with his unshaven chin.
(See previous page.)

prayers, old man; to your prayers all three of you, for in five minutes by this timepiece you will have done with this world and its vanity!"

One of the maids screamed, and fell fainting on the floor, and Sir Jeffrey, roused by the sound, turned his fine old head firmly towards the other end of the room, and spoke with a mingled ring of scorn and sadness in his voice:

"Silence, good folk! There never lived a Hillingdon yet who betrayed his friend, nor one who was afraid to give his life for the King's cause!"

"Nor yet a Newbury!" cried a ringing voice.

And, turning in surprise, they saw the King's messenger, pale and haggard from loss of blood, leaning against the open door.

"Unbind Jeffrey Hillingdon!" he said. "I am the man you seek!"

"Zounds, men, upon him!" cried Captain Cephas Cripplegate, taking out his sword. "He shall pay for the life of Sergeant Abimelech!"

But ere any of them could move a hand, a flourish of trumpets sounded on the terrace, the hall door was flung open, with loud shouts of "Down with the crop-ears!" And a troop of Cavaliers, who had swung out of their saddles, poured into the house.

"Throw down your arms! The first shot that is fired is the signal for the death of every man-jack of you!" cried a commanding voice, with a strong foreign accent, and, flushed with his hard gallop, Prince Rupert himself strode into the dining-room, and stood still in blank amazement.

"By my sword," cried the gallant young prince, "'tis the first time we have met, Sir Jeffrey Hillingdon, and it seems to me we were within an ace of not meeting at all in this world! Disarm this crop-head scum!"

And in the twinkling of an eye the rustily musketeers stood there, a group of craftfallen prisoners.

"How can I thank your Highness?" said the old knight as he rose, stiff from his bonds.

"Tut, man! You owe us no thanks. All

the praise is due to this sweet little lady of thine. Where is the maid?"

And, taking her by the hand, he led the blushing girl forward, and placed her in her father's arms.

High revel did they hold in the Hall that Christmas Day, for Rupert and his Cavaliers stayed to garrison it, lest General Ireton should come in search of the missing company. He would have found them securely locked in one of the great cellars, where they spent a doleful Christmas enough, until Mistress Phyllis made entreaty with Sir Jeffrey that some meat and drink should be carried to them.

The surgeon, who had accompanied the Cavaliers from the prince's quarters at Coventry, dressed Walter Newbury's hurts, and pronounced them to be less serious than they had feared. The intense cold had stopped the bleeding, and in a few weeks he would be in the saddle again, for the Round-head bullet had passed through the arm without breaking any bones, and the other was found in the long yellow boot that had held the King's dispatch.

He sat at the long table, propped up with cushions, thankful to Heaven to be there at all, and though his eye roved from the scarlet holly-berries to the huge chine of beef, and his pale visage nodded in response to the clamour of the company who drank to his speedy recovery, that eye always returned to pretty Phyllis, beside him.

She had laid aside the old-world garb of her ancestress, and very sweet she looked in her white silk gown, with its knots of cherry-coloured ribbon, which were scarcely redder than her cheeks, when Prince Rupert rose, and called for the health of the Grey Lady of Hillingdon.

Out flashed the bright swords, and the rafters rang with the roar of cheering as those gallant Cavaliers sprang to their feet, and clashed their blades together.

If you go to Hillingdon Hall to-day, you will see two portraits on the panelled wall, close to that of Mistress Amaryllis.

They were painted after the restoration by Sir Peter Lely, the famous Court painter, and one represents a handsome officer in the



Prince Rupert rose, and called for the health of the Grey Lady of Hillington. As those gallant cavaliers sprang to their feet, out flashed their bright swords and the blades clashed together. (See *previous page*.)

scarlet uniform of the Royal Guards—Colonel Walter Newbury by name; the other is Dame Phyllis, his wife. She stands beside a white horse, and in the distance is a representation of the Hall, looking very much as you may see it now.

No one knows what became of Captain Cripplegate; but the long, steel-mounted pistols that once figured in his belt now hang

harmless enough beneath the portraits on the wall. Their explosion on that famous Christmas Eve would seem to have broken the spell for ever, for when Mistress Phyllis reined in her panting charger at the terrace steps, and Prince Rupert sprang from his saddle into the snow, the Grey Lady of Hillington had taken her last ride!

THE END