



## CHAPTER I

### I

THERE should be no sight more happy than a young man riding to meet his love. His eyes should shine, his lips should sing; he should slap his mare upon her shoulder and call her his darling. The puddles upon his way should be turned to pure gold, and the stream that runs beside him should chatter her name.

Yet, as Robin rode to Marjorie none of these things were done. It was a still day of frost; the sky was arched above him, across the high hills, like that terrible crystal which is the vault above which sits God—hard blue from horizon to horizon; the fringe of feathery birches stood like filigree-work above him on his left; on his right ran the Derwent, sucking softly among his sedges; on this side and that lay the flat bottom through which he went—meadowland broken by rushes; his mare Cecily stepped along, now cracking the thin ice of the little pools with her dainty feet, now going gently over peaty ground, blowing thin clouds from her red nostrils, yet unencouraged by word or caress from her rider; who sat, heavy and all but slouching, staring with his blue eyes under puckered eyelids, as if he went to an appointment which he would not keep.

Yet he was a very pleasant lad to look upon, smooth-faced and gallant, mounted and dressed in a manner that should give any lad joy. He wore great gauntlets on his hands; he was in his habit of green; he had his steel-buckled leather belt upon him beneath his cloak and a pair of daggers in it, with his long-sword looped up; he had his

felt hat on his head, buckled again, and decked with half a pheasant's tail; he had his long boots of undressed leather, that rose above his knees; and on his left wrist sat his grim falcon Agnes, hooded and belled, not because he rode after game, but from mere custom, and to give her the air.

He was meeting his first man's trouble.

Last year he had said good-bye to Derby Grammar School—of old my lord Bishop Durdant's foundation—situated in St. Peter's churchyard. Here he had done the right and usual things; he had learned his grammar; he had fought; he had been chastised; he had robed the effigy of his pious founder in a patched doublet with a saucepan on his head (but that had been done before he had learned veneration)—and so had gone home again to Matstead, proficient in Latin, English, history, writing, good manners and chess, to live with his father, to hunt, to hear mass when a priest was within reasonable distance, to indite painful letters now and then on matters of the estate, and to learn how to bear himself generally as should one of Master's rank—the son of a gentleman who bore arms, and his father's father before him. He dined at twelve, he supped at six, he said his prayers, and blessed himself when no strangers were by. He was something of a herbalist, as a sheer hobby of his own; he went to feed his falcons in the morning, he rode with them after dinner (from last August he had found himself riding north more often than south, since Marjorie lived in that quarter); and now all had been crowned last Christmas Eve, when in the enclosed garden at her house he had kissed her two hands suddenly, and made her a little speech he had learned by heart; after which he kissed her on the lips as a man should, in the honest noon sunlight.

All this was as it should be. There were no doubts or disasters anywhere. Marjorie was an only daughter as he

an only son. Her father, it is true, was but a Derby lawyer, but he and his wife had a good little estate above the Hathersage valley, and a stone house in it. As for religion, that was all well too. Master Manners was as good a Catholic as Master Audrey himself; and the families met at mass perhaps as much as four or five times in the year, either at Padley, where Sir Thomas' chapel still had priests coming and going; sometimes at Dethick in the Babingtons' barn; sometimes as far north as Harewood.

And now a man's trouble was come upon the boy. The cause of it was as follows.

Robin Audrey was no more religious than a boy of seventeen should be. Yet he had had as few doubts about the matter as if he had been a monk. His mother had taught him well, up to the time of her death ten years ago; and he had learned from her, as well as from his father when that professor spoke of it at all, that there were two kinds of religion in the world, the true and the false—that is to say, the Catholic religion and the other one. Certainly there were shades of differences in the other one; the Turk did not believe precisely as the ancient Roman, nor yet as the modern Protestant—yet these distinctions were subtle and negligible; they were all swallowed up in an unity of falsehood. Next he had learned that the Catholic religion was at present blown upon by many persons in high position; that pains and penalties lay upon all who adhered to it. Sir Thomas FitzHerbert, for instance, lay now in the Fleet in London on that very account. His own father, too, three or four times in the year, was under necessity of paying over heavy sums for the privilege of not attending Protestant worship; and, indeed, had been forced last year to sell a piece of land over on Lees Moor for this very purpose. Priests came and went at their

peril. . . . He himself had fought two or three battles over the affair in St. Peter's churchyard, until he had learned to hold his tongue. But all this was just part of the game. It seemed to him as inevitable and eternal as the changes of the weather. Matstead Church, he knew, had once been Catholic; but how long ago he did not care to inquire. He only knew that for a while there had been some doubt on the matter; and that before Mr. Barton's time, who was now minister there, there had been a proper priest in the place, who had read English prayers there and a sort of a mass, which he had attended as a little boy. Then this had ceased; the priest had gone and Mr. Barton come, and since that time he had never been to church there, but had heard the real mass wherever he could with a certain secrecy. And there might be further perils in future, as there might be thunderstorms or floods. There was still the memory of the descent of the Commissioners a year or two after his birth; he had been brought up on the stories of riding and counter-riding, and the hiding away of altar-plate and beads and vestments. But all this was in his bones and blood; it was as natural that professors of the false religion should seek to injure and distress professors of the true, as that the foxes should attack the poultry-yard. One took one's precautions, one hoped for the best; and one was quite sure that one day the happy ancient times his mother had told him of would come back, and Christ's cause be vindicated.

And now the foundations of the earth were moved and heaven reeled above him; for his father, after a month or two of brooding, had announced, on St. Stephen's Day, that he could tolerate it no longer; that God's demands were unreasonable; that, after all, the Protestant religion was the religion of her Grace, that men must learn to move with the times, and that he had paid his last fine. At

Easter, he observed, he would take the bread and wine in Matstead Church, and Robin would take them too.

## II

The sun stood half-way towards his setting as Robin rode up from the valley, past Padley, over the steep ascent that led towards Booth's Edge. The boy was brighter a little as he came up; he had counted above eighty snipe within the last mile and a half, and he was coming near to Marjorie. About him, rising higher as he rose, stood the great low-backed hills. Cecily stepped out more sharply, snuffing delicately, for she knew her way well enough by now, and looked for a feed; and the boy's perplexities stood off from him a little. Matters must surely be better so soon as Marjorie's clear eyes looked upon them.

Then the roofs of Padley disappeared behind him, and he saw the smoke going up from the little timbered Hall, standing back against its bare wind-blown trees.

A great clatter and din of barking broke out as the mare's hoofs sounded on the half-paved space before the great door; and then, in the pause, a gagging of geese, solemn and earnest, from out of sight. Jacob led the outcry, a great mastiff, chained by the entrance, of the breed of which three are set to meet a bear and four a lion. Then two harriers whipped round the corner, and a terrier's head showed itself over the wall of the herb-garden on the left, as a man, bareheaded, in his shirt and breeches, ran out suddenly with a thonged whip, in time to meet a pair of spaniels in full career. Robin sat his horse silently till peace was restored, his right leg flung across the pommel, untwisting Agnes' leash from his fist. Then he asked for Mistress Marjorie, and dropped to the ground, leaving his mare and falcon in the man's hands, with an air.