

A Knight of the Road

By Thomas F. Hart

IT was a black night on the eastern coast of England. The sea ran high with what sailors call a "dry storm." The wind blew a regular gale, which dashed the spray up on the beach under the cliffs until sometimes one reached over them, and had the appearance, from the windows of Combe manor house, of a dancing white specter.

Two children held their faces against the narrow panes of the stairway casement, looking out anxiously. An hour before they had said good by to their father, who had held them close in his arms as though he never expected to see them again.

Nobody had told them of trouble, but the very atmosphere held a sense of danger in it. They knew that there must be some dreadful reason for their father saying good by to them, and for starting out on the sea on such a night as this.

They were quaint looking little figures; the girl in a dress of stiff brocade, with a little velvet cap on her curly head, rather on one side now, where it had been pushed against her father's shoulder. Nobody had righted it, and nobody had thought to put her to bed.

Suddenly her little brother thought of it.

"Anne," he said in a shocked tone, "it is long past the hour when you should be asleep."

"And not you, I suppose. Master Walter," the little maid replied jeeringly.

"Not I, indeed! I am the man of the house now. Father and George have gone away. I have to watch."

He had scarcely finished speaking

when there came a tremendous clang at the door, which echoed through the hall and startled the nine year old protector of the mansion until his mouth opened and his face turned white.

Both children put out their hands and clasped each other's tightly. In these times of trouble anything might happen.

But in an instant curiosity overcame their fear, and they walked softly, still holding each other, and lifted the tapestry which hid them from the door.

Old Gregory stood parleying there, the chain still on.

"Let me in at once," they heard the gruff voice of their cousin Harold say, and Gregory, with a muttered word of thankfulness, opened to a large figure of an elderly man in a cloak.

"Where is your master?"

"He's gone!" old Gregory said.

"Gone! Who told him of the—
Gone *where*?"

"I'll call her ladyship."

"Well, be in a hurry about it. Where's Master George?"

"I'll call——"

But her ladyship was already coming down the stairs; a pale lady, with eyes which were red with recent tears.

When she saw her visitor she ran toward him with a cry.

"Oh, Harry." she exclaimed, "you have come to tell us that Sir John and my boy need not leave me, and they have just left—left on this stormy night."

"That is the first good news I have had for many a day. So they are off?" He took both of Lady Combe's hands and

shook them with great satisfaction.

"They are safe."

"Safe on a night like this," as the wind swept down with an extra howl and a slate from some chimney fell with a crash to the eaves.

"Are we quite alone?" Mr. Candern's voice sank almost to a whisper. "I have hastened up from London to tell Jack to hurry over to Holland with the greatest speed. What we have feared has come to pass. Malten has turned traitor, and a warrant has been made out for your husband's arrest. The messenger from London is on his way now with the papers for the sheriff to deliver Malten told of" — here his voice sank so low that even the listening children could not hear—"of the king's having been here for that night. Sir John is named a traitor. The messenger left London three hours after I did, or that was his plan."

"Thank God! Sir John has gone!"

Lady Combe clasped her hands devoutly.

"But, Harry, you have had nothing to eat. You must be thirsty and dying of hunger, and your coat is wet," putting her hand upon it. "Rest by the fire."

"No, no! It is not raining. I will take a quatern of ale, and a bit of beef, and go. It will not be good for me to be discovered here if they come with the warrant. I may find the next visit paid to my own house."

"You are our best friend," Lady Combe said gratefully.

She knew how much her cousin was risking in coming to them, in the days when men were thrown into the tower or beheaded for befriending the "Pretender," as Prince Charlie was called.

Sir John Combe owed much to the Stuarts and he was not one to turn his back upon a friend in adversity, such as that

which had come upon the young exiled prince of that house, who had been in hiding among his loyal subjects, trying to raise an army to regain his throne.

Some weeks before, a man had slipped into Combe Manor, and though he bore the appearance of being a young groom, he was treated with the greatest deference, and helped to a boat to cross the Channel. It was this same boat in which Sir John and his eldest son George were braving the elements tonight.

Sir Harry bade his cousin good by, and slipping through a side door, mounted his horse and rode away, leaving Lady Combe thankful that her husband was out of present danger.

The two little faces peering from behind the tapestry caught her eye, and she flew up the stairs and clasped them in her arms, kissing them over and over again.

"My poor little bairns," she said. "You are all that is left to me. Come, and mother will put you into her own bed."

She gathered them before her and started down the stairs, when suddenly she stopped. Her face blanched, and her knees trembled under her.

A voice was coming from the back of the house which she surely knew.

Little Anne cried out joyously, "It's brother George! I know it's brother George! I hear him!" and started to run.

Lady Combe was half way down the oak stair, when her son George, his face full of trouble, came to meet her.

His broad hat was heavy with wet, and his coat clung about his figure as though he had been dipped in water. His face was pale and agitated.

He was only eighteen, but in those days boys were made early into men, when men were badly needed.

"Mother," he said, as she flew toward him, her lips forming the words

she could not bring out, "father is here, safe, but a little knocked about. We could not get the boat out in such a heavy sea. We must wait."

"But you cannot! Oh, George, you cannot. Harry has been here to say that the messenger from London is on the way with the warrant for your father's arrest.

"We will hide him in the secret chamber."

"Malten has turned traitor!"

George whirled about, putting his hand to his face and knitting his black brows.

Malten knew every secret of Combe house. They had shown him the place where the prince might bide.

Lady Combe did not stop a moment to discuss the matter. She rushed on through the passage to the great dining room where her husband lay. She found him with a broken arm, which Father Greylock, the priest, who was a good surgeon, was setting and bandaging. Sir John was weak from loss of blood, from a wound in his head, which he had received at the same time that his arm had been broken.

The high wind had dashed the venturesome little craft back upon the beach. The boat was not injured seriously, and when the winds went down they would be able to try again if—oh that if! The warrant had not yet arrived making Sir John to be one of the hopeless ones in the Tower.

As Lady Combe rushed toward her husband, George caught her about the waist for an instant and held her fast.

"Do not tell him—yet," he said. "Let us get him to bed in comfort. I will send Father Greylock to warn the skipper to get ready to leave at the first moment. One room in this house is as safe as another now. Get him comfortably to sleep

if you can."

Then George sent the nurse to put his little brother and sister to bed, had the lights put out, and walked up and down the stone floor of the great hall, thinking.

When young George Combe set his wits to work something was likely to come of it.

He went once to the window where the children had stood and looked out.

The wind was dying down. He could see that the trees were not ready to crack with the rushing weight of the storm as they had been a little earlier in the night; and the white specters no longer danced above the cliff.

"By morning he must go. He must. Once safe in Holland they will let him alone. There is no warrant for my arrest I am only a boy. I am not old enough to meddle in a man's affairs. I know that tavern beyond the Lady Cross. The warrant bearer did not pass that. He is sleeping there this instant, or he would have been here, according to Harry's account."

George went to the side of the hall and took down a dagger from the wall, and slowly drew it from its sheath. It was sharp and glittering. He held it carefully in one hand, and went back to the fireplace.

In one part of the old oak carving over the chimney, there rested a wax taper. He lighted this by the logs and walked softly up the stairs.

On down the corridor he went until he reached his mother's dressing room. He knocked softly, but she was not there. He opened the door and slipped inside, and holding the candle so that none of the wax would fall, he began a careful inspection of his mother's gowns.

At last he found one of black velvet. He held up the full skirt and looked at it comically.

"I suppose I've got to spoil it!"

Then a sleeve of the bodice fell over, and he snatched at that. In an instant the sharp blade of the dagger had separated the sleeve and like some guilty creature, George was slipping away.

He sat down on the side of the bed, and put the velvet sleeve on a little stand beside him, and with a sure hand began to cut out a velvet mask. It seemed a curious time to be thinking of such follies, but he was in deadly earnest.

When it was finished, he fastened strings to the side of it and standing before the oval mirror which some ancestor had brought from Venice long ago, he tried it on his face under his big hat.

"It will do," he said, "but I must make doubly sure;" and from a drawer he brought forth a bristling false mustache, the relic of some bygone frolic.

Then he changed his sea drenched clothing for dry garments, looked carefully after his pistols, put the mask in his pocket and walked out of the house.

The key to the stables was in his pocket, and he saddled his mare and was off and away, as the first streaks of dawn began to appear.

He rode away at a brisk gallop on the London road.

The sheriff of the county, whose duty it would be to deliver the warrant with sufficient armed force to take Sir John, lived only a mile away.

George knew the place very well, and he hesitated as he reached the park gates. It might be that the messenger was already within.

One thing he knew. That the sheriff, who was no friend of his father, would not hesitate an instant in delivering the warrant after it was once in his hands.

George gazed up and down the road, and seeing no one, sprang from his

horse and looked attentively at the hoof prints leading in at the gates.

There were no fresh ones.

With a sigh of relief he again sprang to his saddle and went on.

He did not know how long he must wait, and he did not know exactly what force he must encounter. If it were man to man, he did not fear, and as he settled his pistols in his holsters he said to himself that if it were two men he would still be bold.

He waited along a turn in the road around which the messenger must come.

Perhaps that was the longest hour that George Combe ever spent in his life. The fear that he might have made a mistake took possession of him.

What if, even now, the messenger had taken the warrant by another way, and his father was being made ready to go to the Tower? A coach passed him, and he drew back from the road out of sight. Then he felt like rushing after it. Maybe it had held the messenger, although he had seen only a woman's head.

At last when he saw figures coming along the road his heart bounded with joy, although there were three of them.

George did not hesitate for a moment. With firm fingers he tied the velvet mask over his features, and with a pistol in each hand waited.

He had brought up spirited Jenny, his mare, from colthood. He knew that he could depend upon her, as though she were part of himself.

The three horsemen were riding along in a leisurely fashion, looking as though they had breakfasted abundantly. George saw that the man in the center was the messenger of whom he was in search. The other two were farmers, tradesmen from the vicinity.

He knew their faces, and in a flash he wondered if they would know Jenny.

He might have spared himself that anxiety, for as they saw the knight of the road, the dreaded masked highwayman, appear before them, they had but one thought.

George leveled his two pistols, one straight at the eyes of the Londoner, who returned his glance with one as keen as his own.

It had been George's intention to let the tradesmen go unmolested until he saw that look, and realized that his object might be suspected.

"Throw up your hands!" he said in a hoarse voice.

The hands of the two farmers were already raised. George pushed his pistol a trifle closer to the Londoner's face, and he also lifted his hands into the air.

He had made one effort to reach his pistol, but he saw death before him.

"Gentlemen," George said suavely, "I am sorry to request you to take so much trouble, but I must ask you to search each other. Will the gentleman on the right be good enough to take from the gentleman in the gray cloak everything which may be about his person?"

The tradesman hesitated, but a look at George's pistol determined him.

"Villain!" said the man from London, "do you know that you will be burnt alive? That you are molesting a messenger of the commonwealth in the performance of his duty?"

"Then," replied George calmly, "I will probably find something of value for my morning's work. Proceed, citizen."

The men had by this time been allowed to dismount. And the Londoner, grinding his teeth, saw his pistols, his wallet, his timekeeper from France, and all of his valuables laid out in the road. But

the paper with the seal was not there.

"Take off his boots."

The man began to protest, but the boots came off, and George's search was rewarded.

He was glad that the mask was on his face, for he could feel the exultation tingling along his cheeks, as he saw the stiff sealed paper. He wanted to stop then, and fly back home as fast as Jenny could go, but he made the tradesmen search each other, piling their gold from their recent sales, in separate piles. Then he started them—walking—back toward London, giving their horses a cut which sent them off trotting.

As soon as they were out of sight, he dismounted, gathered up his plunder, and set Jenny to the gallop, tearing the mask and mustache from his face.

The wind was gradually falling away, and while the whitecaps were running across the channel, it was going to be a clear day, and the winds were shifting about.

George, with his knowledge of the country, made his way into the grounds at Combe, unobserved, jumping Jenny over the park wall, where it was low.

He walked straight to the great fireplace in the hall, and flung the warrant for his father's arrest into the flames. It would be at least a week before he could be molested, and in that week they could surely get to Holland.

George had committed an offense punishable with death, but he had killed no one, and his heart was light.

A few years later, when the Pretender came to the throne, there were two tradesmen who were surprised to receive the arms and coins that the highwayman had taken from them. It made a thrilling addition to the story when they

told it on winter nights.

As for the messenger, I am afraid he never recovered his goods. But George Combe once recommended him to Charles the Second as a faithful servant; and the

messenger, looking at his benefactor, expressed no surprise.

Times had changed. The friend of the king cannot be called a highwayman.