



*Drawn by Arthur Becher.*

*"Hugged to his breast he held a brown dispatch box."*

# ACTORS ALL

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

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ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR BECHER



It was on the Pantiles, in full sight of the major part of the company at the Wells, that Captain Audaine was apprehended. He hummed a scrap of song—*Oh, gin I were a bonny bird*—and shrugged, but when Miss Allonby, with whom he had been chatting, swayed and fell, the captain caught her in his arms, and, standing thus, turned angrily upon the emissaries of the law.

"Look you, you rascals," said he, "you have spoiled a lady's afternoon with your foolish warrant." He relinquished the unconscious girl to her brother's keeping, tenderly kissed one insensate hand, and afterward strolled off to jail, *en route* for a perfunctory trial and a subsequent traffic with the executioner that he did not care to think of.

Tunbridge buzzed like a flytrap with the ensuing rumors; while Dorothy Allonby wept a little and presently called for cold water and a powder puff, and afterwards for a sedan chair.

She found my lord Duke of Ormskirk deep in an infinity of papers. But at her entrance he rose and dismissed his secretary.

His Grace was a handsome man, stoutish and possessing the too-perfect complexion of a wax doll. His pale blue eyes seemed always half-asleep, and the left one was noticeably the larger. They said of him that he manifested a certain excitement on the day after Culloden, when he had seventy-two prisoners shot *en masse*; but this was doubted, and in any event, such *battues* being comparatively rare, he by ordinary appeared to regard the universe with a composed and catlike indifference.

"Child, child!" he now began, and made a tiny gesture of deprecation, "I perceive you are about to appeal to my better nature, and

so I warn you in advance that the idiotic business has worked me into a temper absolutely ogreish."

"The Jacobite conspiracy, you mean?" said Miss Allonby. "Oh, I dare say! I am not particularly interested in that, though; I came, you understand, for a warrant, or an order, or whatever you call it, for them to let Frank out of that horrid filthy gaol."

The duke's face was gravely humorous as he gazed at her for a moment or two in silence. "You know quite well," he said at last, "that I can give you nothing of the sort."

Miss Allonby said, "Upon my word, I never heard of such nonsense! How else is he to take me to Lady Mackworth's ball to-night?"

"It is deplorable," his Grace of Ormskirk conceded, "that Captain Audaine should be thus snatched from circles which he, no doubt, adorns. Still, I fear you must look for another escort; and frankly, child, if you will be advised by me, you will permit us to follow out our present intentions and take off his head—no great deprivation when you consider that he has so plainly demonstrated its contents to be of the most inferior quality."

She had drawn close to him, with wide, frightened eyes. "You mean, then," she demanded, seeming not to breathe at all, "that Frank's life is in danger?"

"This is very unfair," the duke complained. "You are about to go into hysterics forthwith and thus bully me into letting the man escape. You are a minx. You presume upon the fact that in the autumn I am to wed your kinswoman and bosom companion, and that my affection for her is widely known to go well past the frontier of common sense; and also upon the fact that Marian will give me the devil if I don't do exactly as you ask. I consider that you abuse your power. I consider

you to be a second Delilah. However, since you insist upon it, this Captain Audaine must, of course, be spared the fate he richly merits."

Miss Allonby had seated herself beside a table and was pensively looking up at him. "Naturally," she said, "Marian and I, between us, will badger you into saving Frank. I shall not worry about that, and I must trust to Providence, I suppose, that the poor boy does not catch his death of cold in that damp gaol yonder. And now I would like to know precisely of what he has been most unjustly accused."

"His crime," the duke retorted, "is the not unusual one of being a fool. Oh, I am candid! All Jacobites are fools. We gave the Stuarts a fair trial, Heaven knows, and nobody but a fool would want them back."

"I am not here to discuss politics," a dignified Miss Allonby stated, "but simply to find out what Frank has done."

Ormskirk lifted one eyebrow. "It is not a matter of politics. It is a matter of common sense. Under the Stuarts England was a prostitute among the nations, lackey in turn to Spain and France and Italy; under the Guelph the three per cents are to-day very nearly at par. The question as to which is preferable thus resolves itself into a choice between common sense and bedlamite folly. But, unhappily, you cannot argue with a Jacobite; only four years ago Cumberland and Hawley and I rode from Aberdeen to the Highlands and left the intervening country bare as the palm of your hand; I forget how many Jacobites we killed, but evidently not enough to convince the others. Very well! we intend to have no more such nonsense, and we will settle this particular affair by the simple device of hanging or beheading every man Jack concerned in it." He spoke without vehemence, rather regretfully than otherwise.

Miss Allonby was very white. "But what has Frank done?" she said presently.

"He has been conspiring," said the duke, "and with conspicuous clumsiness. It appears, child, that it was their common idiocy which o' late brought together some two hundred gentlemen in Lancashire. Being every one of them most unmitigated fools, they desired, you conceive, that sot at Avignon to come over once more and 'take back his own'; Heaven save the mark! He would not stir without more definite assurances. So these men drew up a petition pledging their all to the Chevalier's cause and—again, Heaven help us!—signed it. I protest," the

duke sighed, "I cannot understand these people! A couple of pen strokes, you observe—and there is your life at the mercy of chance, at the disposal of a puff of wind or the first blunderer who stumbles on the paper."

"Doubtless that is entirely true," said Miss Allonby, "but what about Frank?"

Ormskirk shrugged his shoulders. "Captain Audaine was one of the party," said he, "and it was Captain Audaine who brought the petition to Tunbridge, whence Vanringham was to carry it to Avignon."

"Francis Vanringham—the play actor?" Miss Allonby demanded sharply.

"Yes—a play actor. And for years a Jacobite emissary. And a knave, besides—the most thorough knave unchanged in England, I dare say, excluding, of course, the higher classes of society."

"And then?" Miss Allonby prompted him.

"And then," Ormskirk resumed, "we got wind of the affair—as we always do. And I came down to Tunbridge—for the waters. And I had Audaine arrested. An utterly tyrannical and unjustifiable act," he conceded with his sweetest smile, "since his lodgings were searched to-day and nothing found there. Vanringham has the petition. But Vanringham is an intelligent fellow. I dare make this assertion, because I am fresh from an interview with him," his Grace of Ormskirk ended, and allowed himself a reminiscent chuckle.

She had risen. "Oh, ungenerous! Vanringham has been bribed!"

"I pray you," said the duke, "give vent to no such idle scandal. Vanringham's life would not be worth a farthing if he had done such a thing, and he knows it. No, I have planned it more neatly. To-night Mr. Vanringham will be arrested—merely on suspicion—and all his papers brought to me; and it is possible that among them we may find the petition. And it is possible that, somehow, when he is tried with the others, Mr. Vanringham alone may be acquitted. And it is possible that an aunt—in Wales, say—may die about this time and leave him a legacy of some five thousand pounds. Oh, yes, all this is quite possible!" said the duke; "but should we therefore shriek *Bribery*? For my part, I esteem Mr. Vanringham, as the one sensible man in the two hundred."

"He has turned king's evidence," she said, "and his papers will be brought to you—" Miss Allonby paused, her face ashen. "All his papers!" said Miss Allonby.

"And very interesting they will prove, no

doubt," said his Grace. "I can assure you, child, I look forward with a deal of interest to my inspection of Mr. Vanringham's correspondence."

"Yes," Miss Allonby assented—"all his papers! Yes, they should be diverting. I must be going home now," she added, with a fine irrelevancy.

And when she had left him the duke sat for a long while in meditation.

"That is an admirable girl. I would that I could oblige her in the matter and let this Audaine live. But that is out of the question. The man is the very heart of the conspiracy."

Presently Ormskirk took a miniature from his pocket and sat thus in the dusk considering it. It was the portrait of a young girl with hazel eyes and abundant hair the color of a dead oak leaf. And now his sleepy face was curiously moved.

"I shall have to lie to you. And you will believe me, for you are not particularly clever. But I wish it were not necessary, my dear. I wish it were possible to make you understand that my concern is to save England rather than a twopenny captain. As it is, I will lie to you, and you will believe. And Dorothy will get over it in time, as one gets over everything in time. But I wish it were not necessary, sweetheart.

"Bah! I am falling into my dotage."

Ormskirk struck upon the gong. "And now, Mr. Langton, let us get to business."

There came that evening, after dusk, to Mr. Francis Vanringham's apartments, at the *Three Gudgeons*, a young spark in pink and silver. He appeared startled at the sight of so much company; recovered his composure with a gulp, and subsequently presented himself to the assembled gentlemen as Mr. Osric Allonby, unexpectedly summoned from Cambridge, and in search of his brother, the Ensign Gerald. At his stepmother's villa they had fancied Gerald might be spending the evening with Mr. Vanringham. He apologized for the intrusion; was their humble servant; and with a profusion of *congés* made as though to withdraw.

Mr. Vanringham lounged forward. At first glance you recognized in the actor a personage; he compelled your eye with a certain monstrous vividness of color and gesture. He had a vogue among the younger men, since at all games of chance they had found him untiring and tolerably honest.

His apartments were, in effect, a gambling parlor.

He now took the boy's hand, very genially. "You have somewhat the look of your sister," he observed, after a prolonged appraisal. "And by your leave, you will not quit us thus unceremoniously, Master Osric. I am by way of being a friend of your brother's, and it is more than possible that he may during the evening honor us with his presence. Will you not linger awhile on the off chance?" And Mr. Osric Allonby assented.

He was in due form made known to the three gentlemen—Colonel Denstroude, Mr. Babington-Herle, and Sir Gresley Carne—who sat over a bowl of punch. Sir Gresley was then permitted to conclude the narrative which Mr. Allonby's entrance had interrupted: The evening previous, being a little tipsy, he had strolled about Tunbridge in search of recreation and, with perhaps excessive playfulness, had slapped a passer-by, broken his nose with his fist, and gouged both thumbs into his eyes. He conceded the introduction of these London pastimes into the rural quiet of Tunbridge to have been an error in taste, especially as the man proved upon inquiry to be a respectable haberdasher and the sole dependence of four children; and since he had unfortunately blinded the fellow, Sir Gresley wished to ask of the assembled company what in their opinion was a reasonable reparation. "For though I am hopelessly poor," Sir Gresley concluded, "I sincerely regret the entire affair and am desirous to do the gentlemanly thing."

"Indeed," said Mr. Vanringham, "I am afraid the rape of both eyes was a trifle extreme; for by ordinary a haberdasher is neither a potato nor an Argus, and, remembering that, even the high frivolity of brandy and water should have respected his limitations and have been content with the theft of one."

The hands of Mr. Allonby had screened his face during the recital. "Oh, the poor man!" he sobbed. "I cannot bear—" And then, with swift alteration, he tossed back his head (tears on his cheeks) and laughed. "Are we gentlemen to be denied all amusement? Sir Gresley acted quite within his privilege, and in terming him severe you have lied, Mr. Vanringham. I repeat, sir, you have lied!"

Vanringham was on his feet within the instant, but Colonel Denstroude, who sat beside him, laid a hand upon his arm. "Tush, man," says the colonel; "infanticide is a crime."

The actor shrugged his shoulders. "Doubtless you are in the right, Mr. Allonby," he said, "though, as you were perhaps going on to observe, you express yourself somewhat obscurely. Your meaning, I take it, is that I may not criticise the doings of my guests?—I stand corrected, and concede Sir Gresley acted with commendable moderation, and that Cambridge is, beyond question, the paramount expositor of morals and manners."

The lad stared about him with a bewildered face. "Will he not fight me now?" he demanded of Colonel Denstroude, "now, after I have called him a liar?"

"My dear," the colonel retorted, "he may possibly deprive you of your nursing bottle, or he may even birch you, but he will most assuredly not fight you, so long as I have any say in the affair. What the devil! we are all friends here, I hope. Do you think Mr. Vanringham has so often enacted *Richard III* that to strangle infants is habitual with him? Fight you, indeed! By my soul!" roared the colonel, "I will cut the throat of any man who dares to speak of fighting in this friendly company! Gimme some more punch," said the colonel.

And thereupon in silence Mr. Allonby resumed his seat.

Now, to relieve the somewhat awkward tension, Mr. Vanringham cried: "So, being neighborly again, let us think no more of the recent difference in opinion. Pay your beggarly haberdasher what you like, Gresley; or rather, let Osric here fix the remuneration. I confess to all and sundry," he added, with a smile, "that I dare not say another word in the matter. Frankly, I am afraid of this youngster. He breathes fire like *Ætna*."

"He's a lad of spirit," said Mr. Babington-Herle, with an extreme and not very convincing sobriety. "He's a lad eshtromary spirit. Less have game hazard."

"Agreed!" said Vanringham, "and I warn you, you will find me a daring antagonist. I had to-day an extraordinary—the usual prejudice, my dear Herle, is, I believe, somewhat inclined to that pronunciation of the word—the most extraordinary windfall. I am rich, and I protest that *Croesus* himself shall not intimidate me to-night. Come!" he gayly cried, and drew from his pocket a plump purse and emptied its contents upon the table; "come, lay your wager!"

"There's that tomfool boy again!" The colonel groaned a guttural oath. "Gimme some more punch."

For Osric Allonby had risen to his feet and had swept the littered gold and notes toward him. He stood thus, his pink-tipped fingers caressing the money, while his eyes fixed those of Mr. Vanringham. "And the chief priests," said Osric Allonby, "took the silver pieces and said, 'It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.' Are they, then, fit to be touched by gentlemen, Mr.—er—I forget your given name."

Vanringham, too, had risen, his face paper. "My sponsors in baptism were pleased to christen me Francis Vanringham."

"I entreat your pardon," the boy drawled, "but I have the oddest fancies. I had thought it had been Judas Vanringham." And so they stood, warily regarding each other.

"Boy's drunk," Mr. Babington-Herle explained at large, "and now presents to eye of disinterested speckletator *most* deplorable results incidental to combination of immaturity and brandy. Don't I rismember in *Sustonius*—" And he launched upon an anecdote of the Roman emperor *Vespasian*, "And moral of it is," Mr. Babington-Herle perorated, "that money's always a good thing. *Non olet—non olet!* Clashical scholar by Jove! Now, less have game hazard."

Meanwhile those two had stood like statues eternally postured. And presently:

"I ask your forgiveness, gentlemen," said Mr. Vanringham, "but I am suddenly ill. If you will permit me to retire——"

"Not 'tall," said Mr. Babington-Herle; "late in evening, anyhow. *We* will go—colonel and old Carne and me will go kill watchman. Persevorate him, by Jove—like sieve."

"I thank you," said Mr. Vanringham, withdrawing up the stairway toward his bedroom. "I thank you. Mr. Allonby," he called in a firmer tone, "you and I have had some words together, and you were the aggressor. But I think we may pass it over."

Below the four gentlemen were unhooking their swords from the wall, where they had hung during the preceding conversation. Mr. Allonby now smiled with cherubic sweetness. "I, too," said he, "think that all our differences might be amicably arranged by ten minutes' private discourse." He ran nimbly up the stairs. "You had left your sword," he said to Mr. Vanringham, "but I fetched it, you see."

Vanringham stared down at him, his lips working oddly. "I am no *Siegfried*," said he, "and ordinarily my bedfellow is not cold

and—deplorable defect in such capacity!—somewhat unsympathetic steel.”

“But you forget,” the boy urged, “that the room is public. And see, the hilt is set with jewels. Ah, Mr. Vanringham, let us beware how we lead others into temptation—!” The door closed behind them.

Said Mr. Babington-Herle judicially: “That’s eshtornary boy—most eshtornary boy, and precisely unlike brother.”

“But you must remember,” the colonel pointed out, “that since his marriage Gerald is a reformed man; he has quite given up hazard, they say, and taken to beer and cattle-raising.”

“Mrs. Lascelles will be inconsolable,” Sir Gresley considered. “Hey, what’s that? Did you not hear a noise upstairs?”

“Yes, faith! I dare say that tipsy boy has turned over a table. Oh, the devil!” cried Colonel Denstroude, “they are fighting above!”

“Good for Frank!” observed Mr. Babington-Herle. “Hip-hip! Stick young pup! Persevorate him, by Jove!”

But the other men had run hastily up the stairway and were battering at the door of Vanringham’s chamber. “Locked!” said the colonel. “Oh, the unutterable cur! Open, open, I tell you, Vanringham! Faith, I’ll have your blood for this if you hurt the boy!”

“Break in the door!” said a voice from below. The colonel paused in his objurgations and found that the Duke of Ormskirk, followed by four attendants, had entered the hallway of the *Three Gudgeons*. “Benyon,” said the duke more sharply, and wheeled upon his men, “break in yonder door!”

They found Mr. Francis Vanringham upon the floor, a tousled heap of flesh and finery, insensible, with his mouth gaping, in a great puddle of blood. To the rear was a boy in pink and silver, beside the writing desk he had just got into with the coöperation of a poker. Hugged to his breast he held a brown dispatch box.

Ormskirk strode toward the boy and with a convulsive inhalation paused. He stood tense for a moment. Then silently he knelt beside the prostrate actor and inspected his wound. “You have killed him,” the duke said at last.

“I—I suppose so,” said the boy. “But it was in fair fight.”

The duke rose, a man of bronze. “Ben-

yon,” he rapped out, “do you and Minchin take this body to the room below. Let a surgeon be sent for. Bring me word if he find any sign of life. Gentlemen, I must ask you to avoid the chamber. This is a state matter. I am responsible for yonder person.”

“Then your Grace’s ’sponsible bloody-minded young villain!” said Mr. Babington-Herle. “He’s murderer Frank Vanringham, lemme tell you. Hang him high’s Haman, your Grace, and *at once*.”

“Colonel Denstroude,” said the duke, “I will ask you to assist your friend in retiring; the stairs are steep. I wish you a good evening, gentlemen.”

He closed the door behind them; then he turned. “I lack words,” the duke said, in a stifled voice. “Oh, believe me, speech fails before this spectacle! To find you here, at this hour! To find you—my betrothed wife’s kinswoman and lifelong associate—here, in this garb! A slain man at your feet, his blood yet reeking upon that stolen sword! His papers—pardon me!”

Ormskirk sprang forward and caught the dispatch box from her grasp as she strove to empty its contents into the open fire. “Pardon me,” he repeated; “you have unsexed yourself; do not add high treason to the list of your misdemeanors. Mr. Vanringham’s papers, as I have previously had the honor to inform you, are the state’s property.”

She stood now with void inefficient hands that groped vaguely. “I could trust no one,” she said. “I have fenced so often with Gerald. I was not afraid—at least, I was not very much afraid. And it was so difficult to draw him into a quarrel—he wanted so much to live, you see, because at last he had the money his dirty little soul had craved. Ah, I had sacrificed so much to get these papers, my lord duke, and now you rob me of them! You!”

The duke bent pitiless brows upon her. “I rob you of them,” he said—“aye, I am discourteous and I rob, but not for myself alone. For your confusion tells me that I now hold within my hands the salvation of England. Child, child!” he cried, in sudden tenderness, “I trusted you to-day, and could you not trust me? I promised you the life of the man you love. I promised you—” He broke off, in a contention of rage and horror. “And you betrayed me! You came hither, trousered and shameless, to save these enemies of England. Oh, vile! And now,” the duke said calmly, “this Captain Audaine shall die.

Better, aye, far better that every man whose name is written here should perish miserably rather than England perish."

She had heard him with defiant eyes; her head was flung back and she laughed discordantly. "You thought I had come to destroy that Jacobite petition! Heavens! what had I to do with such nonsense? You had promised me Frank's pardon, and the other men I had never even seen. Idiot, idiot!" she wailed, in a hasty access of fury, "do you think that shallow fool who lies dead below would have intrusted the paper that meant life and wealth to the keeping of a flimsy dispatch box?"

"Indeed, no," his Grace of Ormskirk replied, and appeared a thought abashed; "I was quite certain it would be concealed somewhere about his person, and I have already given Benyon orders to search for it. Still, I confess that for the moment your agitation misled me into believing that these were the important papers; and I admit, my dear creature, that unless you came hither prompted by a mad design somehow to destroy the incriminating documents and thereby to insure your lover's life—why, otherwise, I repeat, I am quite unable to divine your motive."

She was silent for a while. Presently, "You told me this afternoon," she began, in a dull voice, "that you anticipated much amusement from your perusal of Mr. Vanringham's correspondence. All his papers were to be seized, you said; and all of them were to be brought to you, you said. And so many love-sick misses write to actors."

"As I recall the conversation," his Grace conceded, "that which you have stated is quite true." He spoke with admirable languor, but his countenance was vaguely troubled.

And now the girl came to him and laid her finger tips ever so lightly upon his. "Trust me," she pleaded. "Give me again the trust that I have not merited. Aye, in spite of reason, my lord duke, restore to me these papers unread that I may destroy them. For otherwise, I swear to you that without gain to yourself—without gain, indeed!—you wreck alike the happiness of an innocent woman and of an honest gentleman. And otherwise—Oh, infatuate!" she wailed, and wrung impotent hands.

But Ormskirk shook his head. "I cannot leap in the dark."

She found no comfort in his face, and presently lowered her eyes therefrom. He remained motionless. The girl went, like a

caged thing, to the farther end of the apartment, and then, her form straightening on a sudden, turned and listlessly came back toward him.

"I think God hardens your heart, as He hardened Pharaoh's heart of old, to your own destruction. My woman's modesty I have put aside, and death and worse than death I have dared to encounter to-night—ah, my lord, I have walked through hell this night for your sake and another's! And in the end it is you yourself who rob me of what I had so nearly gained! Take your fate then."

"*Integer vixit*," said the Duke of Ormskirk; and with more acerbity: "Go on!" For momentarily she had paused.

"The man who lies dead below was loved by many women. Heaven pity them! But women are not sensible like men, you know. And always the footlights were as a halo about him—and when you saw him as *Castio* or *Romeo*, all beauty and love and vigor and nobility, how was a woman to understand his splendor was a sham, taken off with his wig, removed with his pinchbeck jewelry and as false? No, they thought it native, poor wretches. Yet one of them at least, my lord—a young girl—found out her error before it was too late. The man was a villain through and through. I pray that he may sup in hell to-night!"

"Go on," said Ormskirk. But by this he knew all that she had to tell.

"Afterwards he demanded money of her. He had letters, you understand—mad, foolish letters—and these he offered to sell back to her at his own price. And their publicity meant ruin. And we had so nearly saved the money, my lord—pinching day by day, a little by a little, for his price was very high—and that in the end they should be read by you—" Her voice broke.

"Go on," said Ormskirk, and now the words came hollowly through lips that seemed shaken by, rather than to form, the sound.

But her composure was gone. "I would have given my life to save her," the girl babbled. "Ah, you know that I have tried to save her! And I was not very much afraid. And it seemed the only way. So I came hither, my lord, as you see me, to get back the letters before you, too, had come."

"There is but one woman in the world," the duke said quietly, "for whom you would have done this thing. Is this not so?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And therefore," he continued, "I am assured that you have lied to me. That

Marian Heleigh should have been guilty of a vulgar *liaison* with an actor is to me, who know her, unthinkable. No, madam! It was fear, not love, that drove you hither to-night, and now a baser terror urges you to screen yourself by vilifying her. The letters were written by you."

She raised one arm as though a physical blow impended. "No, no!" she cried.

"Therefore, take back your letters, madam," the duke said; "in Heaven's name, take them!"

The girl obeyed, turning them listlessly in her hands, what time her eyes were riveted to Ormskirk's face. And she began to smile in Aprilian fashion through her tears. "You are superb, my lord duke. You know very well that Marian wrote these letters, and that if you read them—and I knew it—your pride would force you to break off the match, since your notions as to what is befitting in a future Duchess of Ormskirk are somewhat precise. But you want Marian. Therefore, you give me the letters, because you realize that I will destroy them, and thus this inconvenient knowledge will be spared you. Oh, beyond doubt, you are superb!"

"I give them to you," Ormskirk answered, "because I have seen through your cowardly and clumsy lie, and have only pity for a thing so mean as you. I give them to you because to read one syllable of their contents would be to admit I had some faith in your preposterous fabrication."

But she shook her head. "Words, words, my lord duke! I know you to the marrow. And in part, I think that I admire you for it."

He was angry now. "Bah!" cried the Duke of Ormskirk, "let us burn the accursed things and have no more verbiage." He seized the papers and flung them into the fire.

Then these two watched them consume to ashes, and stood awhile in silence, the gaze of neither lifting higher than the andirons. Presently there was a tapping at the door.

"That will be Benyon," the duke said, with careful modulations. "Enter, man! What news is there of this Vanringham?"

"He will recover, your Grace, though he has lost much blood. Mr. Vanringham has regained consciousness and found occasion to whisper me your Grace would find the needful papers in his escritoire, in the brown box."

"That is well," the duke retorted. "You may go, Benyon." And when the door had closed, he began incuriously: "Then are you not a murderess at least, Miss Allonby. At

least—" He gave a smothered cry, gazing at the emptied dispatch box in his hand. "The brown box!" It fell to the floor. Ormskirk drew near to her, staring, moving stiffly like a hinged toy. "I must have the truth," he said, without a trace of any human passion. And now for the first time she was horribly afraid of him.

"Yes," she answered, "they were the Jacobite papers. You burned them."

"I!" said the duke.

Presently he said: "Do you realize what this farce has cost? Thanks to you, I have not one iota of proof against these men. I cannot touch these rebels. Oh, madam, I pray Heaven that you have not by this night's trickery destroyed England!"

"I did it to save the man I love," she proudly said.

"I promised you his life."

"But would you have kept that promise?"

"No," he answered simply.

"Then are we quits, my lord. You lied to me, and I to you. Oh, I realize that if I were a man you would kill me within the moment! But you respect my womanhood—Ah, me!" the girl cried shrilly, "what respect have you for womanhood, who burned those papers because you believed Marian had stooped to a painted mountebank!"

"I burned them—yes, in the belief that I was saving you."

She laughed in his face. "You never believed that—not for an instant."

But by this Ormskirk had regained his composure. "The hour is somewhat late and the discussion—if you will pardon the suggestion—not likely to be profitable. The upshot of the whole matter is that I am now powerless to harm anybody—I submit the simile of the fangless snake—and that Captain Audaine will have his release in the morning. Accordingly, you will now permit me to wish you a pleasant night's rest. Benyon!" he called, "you will escort Mr. Osric Allonby homeward."

He held open the door for her, and, bowing, stood aside that she might pass.

But afterward the great Duke of Ormskirk continued for a long while motionless and faintly smiling as he gazed into the fire. The girl had lied more skillfully than he, yet in the fact that she had lied he found a prodigal atonement. And in place of statecraft he fell to dreaming of two hazel eyes and of abundant hair the color of a dead oak leaf.