

Chapter 1

THE UNEVEN PAVEMENTS of old Kidderminster sparkled and glistened. Their wet surface caught and threw back the gleams of the lanterns that hung over the front doors of many of the houses. The rain had stopped falling, but the cobbles were still wet. Here and there a puddle reflected several of these glimmering lamps. The light twisted and turned in grotesque patterns as the breeze ruffled the surface of the water.

A middle-aged woman and her smartly dressed daughter were picking their way carefully along under the shadow of tall, leaning, angular houses that made up the north side of High Street. Watchful to keep clear of the worst of the mud, they hurried toward the river bridge, under which the dark waters of the Stour rushed on their way to join the Severn, for this was West England.

"How quiet it all is, Mother!" said the girl. "You would think it was the Sabbath already! Why, on a Saturday night in Oxford two people like ourselves would hardly have dared to expose themselves in this manner on the public highway. There would be singing and dancing in the taverns, and the streets would be full of noisy young people. I hope Kidderminster can offer something livelier than this—or I shall be thinking of taking the coach back to Oxford again, much as I love you."

"There are many of us who find the quietness pleasing, Margaret. After all, it has at least the virtue of safety. You, yourself, confessed to that."

"Yes, but it isn't natural for a town to be as still as this one is! Where are all the young men and women? Do they keep to

their homes in the evenings? Don't people enjoy themselves in Kidderminster?"

"There are more ways than one of enjoying yourself, Margaret. I expect the young people here would gladly tell you how they spend their time, if you would allow them. You haven't given them much time, you know! I have heard that Kidderminster was as noisy and wicked a place as any before Mr. Baxter came; but he has changed all that. Now the town is quiet and safe and, as some of us think, happier than ever."

"Oh, your Mr. Baxter again! Since I arrived yesterday I have heard nothing but 'Mr. Baxter this' and 'Mr. Baxter that'! If this dead place is the result of his efforts, I cannot say that I am excited at the prospect of meeting him, or of living under his influence!"

Mother and daughter were approaching the end of High Street where it opened on to the Bull Ring and the narrow river bridge. Suddenly a raucous shout broke the quiet of the evening.

"There lives the wicked priest, the blind leader of the blind! Beware, good people, he is a false prophet!"

Margaret and her mother stopped, the girl startled by this sudden scream, her mother in a half-amused fashion, as if she were quite accustomed to this sort of thing.

Again the voice burst out, high-pitched and almost demented: "There lives the wicked priest, the blind leader of the blind! Beware, good people, he is a false prophet!"

Margaret could see the indistinct shape of a tall, lean man, standing on the street corner, pointing upward to a top-story window behind which a light was burning. The few passersby hardly seemed to pay any attention to the shouting; apparently this was no unusual event in Kidderminster.

"There lives the hireling priest"

Margaret's mother caught her arm and hurried her along.

"That is one of Mr. Fox's followers," she explained, "the Quakers, you know. That is where Mr. Baxter lives, a mean apartment for such a man; but he will not allow the magistrates to take action against these interrupters. He says the truth he

preaches will overcome in the end. It's the book which he wrote against them which makes them so angry."

"Well," said Margaret, somewhat unkindly, "it's refreshing to know that there is someone in Kidderminster who doesn't regard Richard Baxter as some kind of lesser angel!"

"Margaret! You must not speak of him like that! Mr. Baxter is a very great man."

"Your son-in-law at Oxford does not think so, I fear."

"Roger Upton may be a very good Canon of Christ Church, but I cannot say that I set a very high store on his judgment of Mr. Baxter. It will be time enough for him to speak when he has done as much good for Oxford as Richard Baxter has for Kidderminster."

"I don't think that very likely, Mother. Canon Upton is not one of your stern Puritans, going about to take away people's lawful pleasures, and calling it 'doing good.' "

"Your stay with your sister does not seem to have been of much advantage to your soul, Margaret. However, I think you will get different ideas when you have met Mr. Baxter."

"I can only say that I have learned to give little respect to Cromwell and his Puritans. They have taken the heart out of the nation, and"

"Margaret, hush! You must not speak out loud in that way. Kidderminster is not Oxford. The Protector has many friends hereabouts. Besides, there is much good in what Cromwell has done."

"Oh, I know, 'Mr. Baxter says'; we all know that he's a thoroughgoing Roundhead; but some of my friends at Oxford used to speak quite openly of the day when a Stuart would"

"Margaret, really, you must be careful! I am still regarded as a newcomer here. It would be unwise for any suspicion to be attached to me; in any case, I do not like to hear such sentiments."

"I'm sorry, Mother," said Margaret, more softly. "I cannot help my feelings. Besides, not all the people of Kidderminster agree with you. Sir Ralph Clare, now"

"Sir Ralph Clare! What do you know of him?"

"Sir John Ducannon, heir to the Earl of Marfield, told me

of him, and suggested that I should try to meet him when I came here. He would doubtless put me in touch with some like-minded friends. I hope he will, otherwise it looks as if I am in for a dull time."

"Sir Ralph Clare is certainly no friend of Cromwell, nor of Richard Baxter. It is rumored that he is in closer touch with Charles than a loyal citizen ought to be. I cannot say that it is likely he will introduce you to anyone very helpful. More likely, he will involve you in trouble or even danger."

By this time they had reached the tall house, almost next to the churchyard, which Mrs. Charlton had bought on her removal to Kidderminster two years previously. They climbed the stone steps, and passed into the candle-lit hall, just as the bell in St. Mary's clock tower boomed out eight reverberating strokes to mark the evening hour.

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It was a very gay—and, certainly a very attractive—Margaret, who later joined her mother at the supper table.

"You have been a long time preparing, Margaret," said her mother, as she came into the circle of light shed by the candelabra, hung low over the table. Then, after a pause, "And I don't know that I altogether approve of that evening gown, my dear. I suppose it is one of your purchases at Oxford. Is it quite necessary to expose so much of your shoulders and throat in that way?"

Margaret, a charming picture in the soft, uncertain glow of the candles, rays of light from the logs in the fireplace reflecting added beauty from her golden hair, was not in the mood to be suppressed. She had decided that the moment had come to make it plain that she was a very different person from the meek girl who had gone to Oxford two years previously. Her stay in the University town, where she had mixed with a group of Cavalier-minded young men and their dashing young ladies, had given her a new outlook. She had tasted the sweets of worldly delight, and a hunger for more had been awakened in her.

"But, Mother," she replied, suppressing a mischievous smile, "this dress is modest, indeed, compared with some that I have seen

in Oxford. Why, one night, the Lady Fairweather”

“That’s enough, Margaret! There was a time when I was taken up with such things; I no longer am. I must say again that I hardly consider that gown a seemly one for a daughter of mine to wear. I hope you will not go parading it in Kidderminster, to say the least.”

With such a beginning, it was not surprising that supper should have been such a formal affair. Conversation dragged, and it was not long after the church clock had struck nine that Mrs. Charlton and her daughter made their way to their respective bedrooms.

Before she fell asleep, Margaret lay thinking of the Sunday ahead. A day under the ministry of Richard Baxter was hardly an attractive prospect; yet it would be interesting to watch the man, and to try to discover the secret of the strong hold which he seemed to have upon the life of Kidderminster and its citizens. She was well-armed with ideas which she had picked up from her brother-in-law at Oxford, however. She was quite sure that her own defenses against Baxter’s persuasiveness were strong and sufficient. She might even meet with some of the Royalist Party, who, she understood, still attended certain of the services at St. Mary’s; it might not be such a dull day after all!

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THE COACH which brought Margaret from Oxford also brought a visitor to Sir Ralph Clare. His house, Caldwell Hall, in its own wide parkland, was on rising ground to the northwest of Kidderminster. His carriage had been waiting in the Bull Ring to promptly carry the newcomer there.

The fresh arrival, a young man of some twenty-five years of age and obviously of good breeding, had been shown into Sir Ralph’s study. His host had pounced on him, eager for news, having first arranged for wine to be provided for his guest.

“Indeed I am glad to see you, Sir Laurence,” he exclaimed. “What tidings from Whitehall, of the usurper and his fellow-criminals? Have you any message from our rightful ruler?”

Sir Laurence Reynal looked around him cautiously for a moment. "We may talk freely here, I take it? Lord Clarendon said that we should have no fears; but in London, where I have been, the very walls turn informers; Puritans have long ears. They are so sensitive to criticism that one wonders what condition their consciences must be in!"

"Certainly you may speak freely. It is generally known around here that I am no friend of the Roundheads¹. All my household are reliable, trustworthy people. Have no fears; Worcestershire air is not tainted as London's is. Tell me the news. What brings you here now?"

"Sir, the news is bad, and therefore good; concerning Cromwell, it is bad; he is a dying man. One of our informers is secretary to his principal physician, and it is agreed that he cannot last more than a month or so. Therefore, concerning the nation, it is good. There is no knowing what will happen when Cromwell goes—but at least it gives us an opportunity which we shall never have while that tyrant breathes. As to His Majesty—the news was never better. He is well and hopeful, and already he is busy laying plans for his return. It is on that account that I have come to you."

"What is it that you would ask of me? His Majesty's commands are law with me; give me but the word."

"He would have you press ahead with your plans for rallying Worcestershire to his standard; he would know how you are situated now and what your prospects are. But he is especially concerned to know if you can persuade Mr. Baxter to support his return. He would have you cultivate his acquaintance more closely. Drop what seeds of suggestion you can in his fertile mind.

"Why, as to Worcestershire—there will be but little change from the days of the recent war; Cromwell is well enough liked in these parts. His Major General has been reasonable and just in his dealings; and the people are prosperous, thankful for peace and quiet; the more religious sort are positively enjoying the liberty

1. A Puritan or member of Parliamentary party, hair cut short (reign of Charles II),

with which the usurper artfully baits them. But Mr. Baxter, now. Why should His Majesty be so concerned for his allegiance?"

"You do not realize, Sir Ralph, what influence Mr. Baxter has. Last time he visited the capital, great crowds attended his preaching; his books circulate from end to end of the Kingdom; he is looked on as the leader of the more independent party in the Church. In fact, though he does not claim the title, he is leader of the 'Presbyterians,' as they are coming to be called. If his influence can be allied to the King's cause, many will follow his lead."

"But he has always appeared to favor the King's enemies; I know that he has spoken almost sternly to Cromwell, face to face, and that he does not hesitate to criticize the usurper's policies; but he has given little evidence of becoming a fervent Royalist. He and I are not sworn enemies, nor are we on friendly terms. He blames me for what he considers my faulty example—I refuse to take the blessed sacrament in his barbarous and novel fashion, and he refuses to administer it to me if I adopt the old and regular posture of kneeling—except at a private service, specially arranged. I do not know that I can do very much with Mr. Baxter."

"There is also this letter, Sir Ralph. It was given to me by the Lord Ducannon, at Oxford. He said he could not trust it to the mails in case inquisitive eyes should read it."

The stately squire took the envelope, broke the seal, and read the paper which he pulled from it. There was a moment's silence.

"Why, this is good news—and timely, too!" exclaimed Sir Ralph. "You will be interested in this—in more ways than one, I think." A twinkle came into his eye as he spoke. "I will read it to you.

"Honored Sir,

You will no doubt be interested to know that a young lady, by name Margaret Charlton, has just left Oxford to live with her mother at Kidderminster. She has been one of our company for over a year and might be of help to you. I have spoken to her about you, and it may be possible for you to arrange to meet her. She is quite a handsome young woman, I may add."

"Margaret Charlton, indeed! Will she be useful! Her mother, misguided woman, is one of Mr. Baxter's most devoted followers; mixes with the common people and seems to have lost all sense of natural dignity. She has apparently decided to lower herself from her former station in life, and all because of Mr. Baxter and his preaching. Now, if we can persuade Miss Charlton to join our confederacy, we shall have a direct link with Mr. Baxter's innermost circle. She is attractive, is she? That will be all to the good, as I'm sure you will agree. We must arrange for you to meet her. Can you stay a few days?"

"I would gladly do so. London was getting very uncomfortable for me, and I had to deceive a rather inquisitive army officer, who would persist in following me about, as to my destination. A little payment to the coach driver enabled me to jump from the Exeter coach on which he had seen me safely embarked; I then came hither *via* Oxford. A few days spent in the quiet Worcestershire countryside will be good for my health in more ways than one!"

"Then, Sir Laurence, we will endeavor to secure Miss Charlton's attendance at the ball which my friend, Roger de Lavering, has arranged for Wednesday next. This letter will serve as a sufficient introduction. We must win her over completely. No doubt she'll be glad to have a change from the Puritan atmosphere of her mother's house. What other news have you?"

"Little more beyond what you will have gathered from your *Mercurius Pragmaticus*. The Irish have been restless, and the Scots are threatening trouble again. Everything suggests that Cromwell is secure enough, but when he goes—then the trouble will begin. Every man will want to be his own 'Protector'; the only thing left unprotected will be the nation!"

"And we may yet be able to secure a *true* Protector! I thank you indeed for your kindness and courage in bringing me this news; I gladly offer you the hospitality of Caldwell Hall for just as long as you desire it."

"Sir Ralph, we share one common hope; I thank you for your offer, and trust that our co-operation may be fruitful indeed.

If you will join me, I will pledge a toast—His Majesty King Charles II!"

The two men stood, glasses raised. There followed a moment of silence and then they drank the toast.

"God bless him," added Sir Ralph. "And now, Sir Laurence, I will have you shown to your chamber—we shall dine in another hour. You will wish to prepare yourself, I am sure."

"Thank you, Sir Ralph. I have but little luggage—it is not convenient when one has to avoid spying officers—but I shall be glad to have a change of clothing after an arduous journey."

The manservant was waiting outside the study door and showed the guest to his room. Sir Ralph settled back in his chair, pondering over the message which had just reached him.

Chapter 2

BREAKFAST at No. 2 St. Mary's Place was as formal and strained as supper had been the previous evening. Like her mother, Margaret was soberly attired in a dark dress, and felt the more restrained because of the strange Sabbath quiet which seemed to pervade the atmosphere of the town. Outside in the streets all was still; a few passersby made their way across the open square, on one side of which stood the Charltons' house, and on another, the gateway into St. Mary's Churchyard. A couple of horsemen clattered over the cobblestones toward the narrow bridge which crossed the Stour at this point, providing a convenient short-cut to the great water-mill which stood on the opposite bank of the river. One or two carriages began to arrive, toward the end of breakfast, bringing families in from the surrounding countryside for the morning service at the church.

The windows of the Charltons' dining room looked out over the open square. They could see the newcomers as they unharnessed their horses and made them comfortable, preparing them for a long wait.

"They mean to be in time, Mother," observed Margaret. "There is well over half an hour to go before the service begins."

"I expect they have made better progress than they hoped for on their journeys into the town," was the reply. "Some of them have come many miles; no doubt there will be others from London who are staying at the inns, and have come expressly to hear Mr. Baxter. We must ourselves shortly be ready, for the crowd becomes thick soon after nine o'clock. We must be in our

place in good time. Now let us read a passage from the Bible, and then we must get ready for church."

A large leather-bound Bible was lying on a small table nearby. Mrs. Charlton picked it up, waited for the servants to come in and take their stand respectfully at the end of the room, and then read the chapter for the day.

Margaret paid but little heed to the reading. She was watching the increasing crowd of people that were now passing the front of the house on their way to St. Mary's Church. Once or twice she took no pains to conceal her lack of interest in the reading, for she caught the sound of singing. Then she would look eagerly out of the window, disgust written all over her face, as the groups of singers, men and women, passed on their way. They were singing metrical Psalms—whole families joining in together, having learned the words by heart. This, she thought, was a strange idea of enjoyment. It was bad enough to have to endure the Sabbath day, but to appear to enjoy it, to sing in the streets on the way to church—this was going too far! These must be regular religious fanatics; she had no time for such folk.

When the reading was over, she went, without much enthusiasm, to her room, to make her final preparations for the service. By several adroit touches she sought to impart an air of youthful daring to her otherwise somber outfit. A few curls were left artfully astray, a flash or two of scarlet added to her garb, a rakish feather to her hat—and so she was ready for the ordeal ahead.

At a quarter past nine Mrs. Charlton and Margaret made their way with the steady stream of parishioners through the gate, along the churchyard path, and under the massive stone porch of St. Mary's Church. Margaret had been inside on two occasions during the few weeks when she had stayed at Kidderminster before, but then had not taken a great deal of notice. Now, however, she was all eyes, and missed no detail of the church and its congregation.

As they proceeded to the family pew, well down the front of the church (and close under the pulpit, she noted, to her dismay) Margaret looked carefully around at the congregation. Humble,

ordinary folk, these, she thought. Weavers and farmers, in rough homespun clothing, with hands coarsened by labor, and stiff unwieldy bearing. Here and there a splash of color and the glow of silks betrayed the presence of a wealthier family. On the whole, Margaret concluded, her worst fears were justified; her mother had become entangled with a set of very common people, lacking culture and refinement and the graces of an aristocratic environment. No wonder Mr. Baxter won such triumphs! How could such poor and ignorant folk know better? Mr. Baxter wouldn't have made such a mark in Oxford—of that she felt sure.

Although there were still some ten minutes before the service began, the atmosphere was already subdued. There was a low murmur of whispered conversation against the background of shuffling feet, as new members of the congregation made their way to their places—but nothing more. Then, quite suddenly, Margaret became aware of a deeper hush—a tense silence—and a number of people turned quickly around, glancing in the direction of the door, and as quickly turned their heads to face the front again. Striding into the church, his head held high, the picture of haughtiness and courtly grandeur, came a silver-haired gentleman, accompanied by his wife and family, among them two young men—apparently his sons—more gaily dressed than any others Margaret had seen. They looked like Cavaliers, and they obviously felt little regard for the people around them. Stiffly the gentleman led his party to an empty pew, waited while those following opened the little doorway which shut it off from the aisle, and then took his place.

"Who is that?" whispered Margaret to her mother, having looked round with others of the congregation. "Sir Ralph Clare," replied Mrs. Charlton, "and that is his family. Hush now, the service is about to begin."

In the now complete quiet, the procession of choir boys and men, with the leader, followed by two ministers, made its way down the central aisle into the seats in the choir stalls. Both the ministers wore plain black Geneva gowns. One was somewhat younger than the other; the elder being a tall, rather long-faced

man, with a sharp, pointed nose, and dark, piercing eyes. His black wavy hair hung low around his neck, and his closely-trimmed black beard showed up the more clearly against the white Puritan collar which he wore outside his gown. He was obviously well past his fortieth birthday, though there was no sign of baldness or grayness in his hair. He did not look as if he enjoyed robust health; yet, he was fully alive—a man of sternness and sympathy, judged by his appearance, thought Margaret. He, no doubt, would be Richard Baxter; the younger man, one of his assistants.

By this time the church was filled with people; the gallery which had been built along one side and was divided into five sections, with one of the thick main roof-pillars between each section, was also filled. There was an atmosphere of keen expectancy everywhere. Having been used to the formal services at her brother-in-law's church, Margaret could not help noticing the difference. These people had not come merely by the force of habit; they had a purpose—they expected something definite; they had not dragged unwilling feet to the house of God; they had come on the wings of prayer and faith, and knew that their coming would not be in vain.

The service was begun by the younger minister, "Thomas Baldwin," whispered Mrs. Charlton. He led in prayer and then called on the congregation to stand while he recited the Apostles' Creed. Then followed the recitation of the Ten Commandments and of some sentences from the Psalms. These, in turn, were followed by a prayer of confession and finally the Lord's Prayer.

Margaret could not but realize the depth of feeling which possessed the hearts of most of those present; the assistant minister's voice was echoed by a fervent, many-toned response. She had already noted the large proportion of young people present; seated in family groups, they added the fresh enthusiasm of immature voices to the imposing volume of sound. Here was no dry formality; here was life, the outworking of a fresh and vivid experience. Margaret could only dismiss the whole of the proceedings as a demonstration of what fanaticism could do. Her Oxford friends had, at least, taught her to sneer.

The service followed out its regular routine. Psalm, and Old Testament reading, the *Te Deum*, the New Testament reading, prayers for those in authority ("I won't pray for Cromwell," said Margaret to herself), the Magnificat and a set of prayers. These proceedings occupied some three-quarters of an hour—nothing was hurriedly carried through. Though there was no elaborate or complicated ritual, there was nonetheless a deep, true reverence—the reverence of loyal, loving hearts; not the superstitious awe of fear-driven, habit-guided formality.

After the prayers there was a hush of expectancy; the congregation settled back in its hard pews as if the greatest moment of all was come upon them. The tall, slender figure of Richard Baxter (for Margaret had rightly guessed) made its way up the pulpit steps into the limited space provided the preacher. The pulpit—of beautifully-carved design—was overspread by the great sounding-board which helped to keep the preacher's voice from being lost in the high rafters of the tall dark-timbered roof.

Then, after a moment spent in the attitude of prayer, Richard Baxter began to speak. Slowly his eyes ranged over the crowded church, pausing from time to time as he seemed to take special note of one and another present. There was something compelling about his look; he seemed to fix upon one and then to look straight into his listener's inner life. Once he looked hard at Margaret, but she was determined to resist his influence, and was then busy trying to assess the reasons for his extraordinary power over people.

His voice was even more compelling than his glance; there was a slight huskiness about it, an attractive roughness, which seemed to hook itself on to a listener's emotions and carry him along. His language was in the familiar style of everyday speech; his points were illustrated with illuminating word-pictures; he was the complete preacher, possessing and using all the gifts of a great orator.

But there was one quality which stood out above everything else and which gave all his words a special, almost irresistible, force. It was his fiery enthusiasm, his complete confidence in the message he spoke, and his obviously deep concern that those who heard

him should see the issues crystal clear. Plain, downright, tremendously forceful, he threw himself with utter abandon into his task. After a quiet, logical, thoughtful beginning, he moved steadily on until the whole congregation was being swayed by his eloquence as the ripe ears of wheat are moved in the summer breeze.

Margaret was so busy studying the scene from an "outsider's" point of view that she hardly noticed what the subject was with which Mr. Baxter was dealing. She caught occasional sentences but made no attempt to follow the thread of his argument. She watched different individuals, and noted their response. Sir Ralph Clare was sitting upright, looking straight ahead, showing no sign of emotion; the servant girl, in the near-by family pew broke down and bowed her head, sobbing softly, as Mr. Baxter drove home a point with especial vigor; the plainly dressed weavers, and heavy-handed farmers, some with mouths wide open, were drinking in the words which flowed from the great preacher's lips.

The sermon lasted nearly two hours, and well before the end of it, Margaret was tired and uncomfortable; she fidgeted and changed her position, but nothing could ease the aching provoked by the angular pew. Her mother sat perfectly still, as did most of those present; they had lost count of time, and were, for a brief space, in the borderland of eternity, all their thought being taken up with the great themes of the sermon. Margaret's mind was only concerned with counting the minutes before the end of what she felt to be a painful ordeal, and she was bitterly uncomfortable.

At last the sermon was ended; there followed a momentary pause, and then an outbreak of coughing and shuffling as people relaxed from the physical and mental tension in which they had been held by Mr. Baxter's oratory. The assistant announced a paraphrase of one of the Psalms; the leader gave the note; and the congregation stood to sing the rhythmical verse. Such singing was something of a novelty; some preachers condemned it outright; but Mr. Baxter was an enthusiastic advocate and went so far as to support the singing of hymns which were not direct paraphrases of the Psalms. The congregation joined lustily in the slow and

not particularly melodious singing; the Psalm of praise came with obvious warmth from hearts full of deep thanksgiving.

The benediction followed, two hours and fifty minutes after the commencement of the service. Margaret sighed with relief and prepared to leave, her glance continually returning to the pew where Sir Ralph Clare and his family sat. By very skillful maneuvering she managed to make her way out of her pew into the center aisle just as the Clare family was passing. The sound of their cultured voices came as music to her ear after the uncouth style of speaking and singing which had marked the congregation's responses, and the less uncouth, but definitely unpolished tones of Mr. Baxter. She strained her ears to catch something of their conversation, and rather unceremoniously pushed her way along in order to keep near to them. Her mother followed, protesting weakly, but not discerning Margaret's motive.

The Clare family had little difficulty in reaching their carriage; as soon as they were recognized, a way was made for them by the townsfolk, who stood respectfully on one side, some of the menfolk touching their hats as the squire passed by.

Margaret had to rest content with the sight of them for a short distance, but she had made up her mind that she would secure an introduction at an early date; these represented the Kidderminster she could understand and enjoy. The Kidderminster of Mr. Baxter—and apparently, of her mother—was not her world at all. It was a hotbed of that very Puritanism which her Oxford friends had taught her to despise, and from which her youthful spirits recoiled. If her mother really liked *that* world—it was for her mother to decide; but she, Margaret, knew what world she wanted—and it bore little resemblance to the Kidderminster of which she had seen and heard that Sunday morning at St. Mary's Church.

* * *

MOTHER! That letter which came for me this morning! You'd never guess what it contained!"

"Margaret, dear—you sound as if the world were coming to an end!"

"Not an end, Mother—a beginning! It is an invitation to a ball; we are both invited!"

"An invitation to a ball? But where?"

"In Kidderminster, next Wednesday evening."

"But who in Kidderminster would be inviting you to a ball?—very few folk in this town go in for such entertainment. The only one I can think of at the moment is Roger de Lavinger, who lives in the mansion along the Worcester Road. He has never heard of you, I am sure."

"But it is he who has sent the invitation! My friends from Oxford have written, telling him of my presence in Kidderminster, and he has written to say that I shall no doubt value an opportunity of making some new acquaintances here."

"Roger de Lavinger is hardly—"

"The type of person you would like me to become acquainted with; oh, Mother, please don't go into that again! I have told you that now I am of age I am resolved to choose my own friends. I can't be kept within your strict limits, Mother; you forget that I have tasted freedom, and I have no wish to go back again to bondage."

"But you will not know anyone there; it will be a dull evening with only your mother's company!"

"I think that need can be met, too. I did not tell you that I made another new acquaintance while shopping in the town this morning. I was making my way through the crowd passing the shops in High Street when a young man was pushed against me by a passerby. He apologized, and then introduced himself, saying that he recognized me from the description a friend had given him. This friend, it seems, was none other than my Oxford acquaintance, Lord Ducannon. The stranger was Sir Laurence Reynal, and it appears that Lord Ducannon, knowing that Sir Laurence was visiting Kidderminster, had told him about me. He is staying at the home of Sir Ralph Clare, and I seem to remember his saying something about a ball next week."

"I see—you seem to have the whole matter well worked out. What with a guest of Sir Ralph Clare's and a ball at the de

Laverings, you are not doing too badly in your first days here!"

"As a matter of fact, he has invited me to visit Sir Ralph's mansion. They would like us both to join them at dinner on Thursday. I was going to mention it to you when I had an opportunity."

"The last time I was entertained at Sir Ralph's table was shortly after my arrival here. He had heard, through a friend, of the destruction by the Parliament soldiers, of our old home at Apley, and appeared to think that I would be ready to join myself to his party. When I told him of my regard for Mr. Baxter and that I had come here expressly to enjoy his ministry, Sir Ralph's attitude became distinctly cooler. And when we had had occasion to discuss some other matters of mutual interest, he appeared to regard me in a very different light. I have not been invited there since; no doubt he thinks he will fare better with the daughter than he did with the mother! However, I shall be interested to have a further opportunity of enjoying his generous hospitality—and also of meeting your latest acquaintance, Sir Laurence—er . . .?"

"Reynal, Mother. He tells me that his father was killed at Edge Hill, and he succeeded to the knighthood when but a boy at school. He has never enjoyed the family estates—they were stolen from him by the Roundheads."

"It would be interesting to know from whom his forefathers stole them in their turn! There is little untainted property about, Margaret. I also had something to tell you; I am expecting Mr. Baxter to dinner tonight. He has not been here for some weeks now, and I am sure he is not properly cared for in those wretched apartments of his. I have offered him a home—he could have the whole of the top floor of this house—but he refuses to take it, saying that he would lose touch with his people if they saw him living in what they regarded as a wealthy person's house. So long as he is in that very small apartment, they feel that he is one of them—for even the master-weavers have little better. And so I try to make up a little for his lack by giving him a welcome here; he usually comes once a fortnight, but other duties have kept him away."

"Mr. Baxter coming, is he? That indeed will be interesting.

I hardly think *he* will like the idea of my being drawn into the circle of Sir Ralph Clare and his friends."

"Mr. Baxter is too large-hearted to condemn anyone—even Sir Ralph Clare—for views sincerely held; in spite of their differences, they are personally on good terms. In any case, he is bound to find out, sooner or later, so there will be little point in deliberately concealing it. There is very little that goes on in Kidderminster of which he is ignorant."

"He also has his spies, then."

"No, not spies; but he is a diligent pastor, visits his parishioners most regularly. They go to him with their problems and he goes to them with questions about their eternal state, and the result is that he is familiar with their lives. And why not? That is his task as a shepherd of souls."

"He seems to be as much a sheepdog, worrying the sheep, as a shepherd, tending them. Always fussing around them to see that they don't get into the wrong fold! I should have thought he could have trusted them to use their own senses a little more."

"But sheep—and men—are stupid and willful creatures, Margaret. If a man takes on himself the responsibilities of a servant of God, he must be faithful to his calling; it's those lazy, money-seeking clergymen, like Vicar Dance here, who leave people to use their senses. The result is that the whole town becomes defiled, as Kidderminster was before Mr. Baxter came."

"Well, we shall see; I'm not in the mood to be 'worried' into everlasting rest; I have my life here to live and to enjoy; the gloomy side can be dealt with later."

Mrs. Charlton said no more; she knew better than to argue when her daughter spoke that way. She went to her desk to check her household accounts.