

England, 1643. Civil war rages. Royalist Corfe Castle is under attack. Verity, a vivid Puritan, resides with her vituperative cat as enemy-guests. They dispute with all the occupants, on virtue, monarchy, Salvation, the classics and the castle mice--but Verity falls into sin by losing her heart to the exasperating Peregrine--who is betrothed to another.

CASTLE ADAMANT

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# CASTLE ADAMANT

by

Sally Watson

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This is a work of historical fiction. The historical events are painstakingly researched and very accurate. Some characters (the Bankes family in particular) were real people, but lovingly fictionalized where history leaves off. (See Historical Notes.)

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## CHAPTER TWO

### DEFIANCE

“Shan’t!” said Verity, dry-eyed and stubborn and feeling like a small animal trapped between savage lions and a cliff edge. Her fearlessness had unfairly vanished; nor had God, in the past three days, bothered to restore it even when she begged Him. Now she was indeed without refuge, and she was about to be torn from her fortress, and those men, rough-faced and brutal and large, seemed altogether menacing. All she could do was imitate courage and try to make that officer ashamed again. One cheek had now become a glorious livid purple edged with green, and she displayed it. “I shan’t go with you, and you can’t make me, no matter how often you smite me. For Jesus said ‘Resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.’ Of course, you got it wrong and smote me first on the left, but I shouldn’t think that matters.” She tilted the right side of her face toward him challengingly. The major reddened; rather more with anger--and perhaps temptation resisted--than shame, but he did, she noticed with satisfaction, shuffle his feet just the tiniest bit.

“Your granny-- nurse-- that old woman-- said--”

The corners of her mobile mouth pulled tight. She looked and felt altogether mulish, and her voice dropped another note. “I don’t care *what* Fynch said: *she’s* not the one who’s being Abducted; she’s safely dead.”

A pale sun shone diffidently in at the tall windows. Mistress Fynch (who had died promptly and neatly as soon as she had ordered things to her satisfaction) was buried. All the livestock and food and fuel had been consumed. It was long past time for Major Rawlins to deliver his two detestable charges to their destination and continue proper army business--and now this.

“By God’s pantofles, you *will* go,” he said. “We *can* make you. It will be easier on everybody if you come nicely, but we can make you.”

She knew it was true. She also knew that she could not stay here: not and survive: not without food or fuel or protection. But to be taken away to an unknown fate with these dreadful men seemed even worse. She felt altogether pigheaded.

“Why?” She confronted him. “‘The way of the Lord is strength to the upright, but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity,’ and besides, I’m

perfectly certain God doesn't have teeth or wear pantofles or nightgowns, so you're blaspheming. And I know quite well you'd hate taking me; you've said so. And I'd hate going. So I shan't."

"Don't then," he growled, goaded. "You're right; we don't want a whining female along. You'd be a great nuisance, and there's no one to chaperone you, and we don't want you crying rape. So stay." That would call her bluff.

Verity was not bluffing. Well, not entirely. Certainly, she would not back down. Her brows met. "Excellent good," she said under those sharp cheekbones. "Farewell. Shut what's left of the door when you leave." She turned to go up to her cold and lonely bedchamber, fighting despair. Well, she'd been here virtually alone before they came, hadn't she? Aunt Huldah had died last summer, and then Fynch had got sick and then the servants ran away with all the silver and horses, leaving Verity alone to tend Fynch. It would be much easier now, she assured herself, with no one but Naomi to keep fed and warm, or worry about-- And she knew she was lying. The old house loomed at her full of shadows and loneliness, and she would certainly starve and freeze. She would not for worlds have said so.

She looked at the fop, who had not moved. None of them had. They were looking disconcerted. They, she realized, had been bluffing as much as she. It seemed to be an impasse, and one she was no longer certain she wanted to win. "I shall ask God about it," she temporized.

The fop looked pained. Probably he did not even believe in God. (Actually, he did, but it had been his experience that those who kept consulting Him in public were using Him for expediency.) "Tell Him to find you a chaperone," he suggested dryly.

Verity gave him a stern look. "You shouldn't just *tell* God to do things, as if you knew better than He does," she said virtuously. It was advice she herself found it hard to follow--although ever since Fynch had made her write "*Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas*" a hundred times, she tended not to bother Him when she thought she probably knew the answer. Just now, she did not, and she badly needed one. "Anyway, I'm going to ask him about it right now," She did so, face turned upward, mind open to divine suggestion, which usually took the form of being comfortable or uncomfortable about a possibility. Somewhat, she supposed, like Socrates' daemon, who was probably really God, only the ancient Greeks had not known about Him, having many false gods instead.

Peregrine watched cynically as her forehead crinkled. She would presently announce--as Puritans always did--that God was on her side.

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God surprised them both. Verity took a deep breath and opened her eyes wide in startlement, for she had never had such a direct hint before. “He says I should *let* you Abduct me!” she exclaimed. “Well!” she told the eaves very imperiously for one who has just denied dictating to God Almighty, “You had better provide a chaperone, then, or I’ll know you’re really Satan just pretending.”

At this point Naomi sauntered casually down the stairs, staring with feline calm at the score of strangers in her hall. She was an aristocrat, was Naomi: a perfectly groomed dilute tortoise-shell, her longish coat a swirl of gray and pale peach, with one blonde eyebrow. Somehow the argument suspended itself as she descended. At the foot of the stairs she halted, tidied a bit of shoulder fur, and strolled over to Major Rawlins. While he stood torn between doubt and gratification, she sniffed his fine bucket-top boots with interest, and then wove a figure-eight around his ankles, purring loudly.

Gratification won. With the smug kindness that some males use for females and small animals, he reached down to stroke her silken head.

“She swears,” Verity murmured artlessly just as Naomi did so. Loudly and luridly. Sergeant Sowerbutts, who had once served aboard ship, reckoned language like that would put the most hardened sailor in a pudder, come how. The major jerked his hand back as if bitten (which it wasn’t) and did a bit of swearing, himself. Peregrine grinned, and Verity looked virtuous.

“Well, you can hardly blame her, the way you just burst into her home without so much as an invitation, all noise, and eating her food, too. Cats are civilized people, you know, and they resent that sort of thing.”

Major Rawlins had had enough of the baggage. Both baggages. “Go up and pack your things,” he snapped. “We shall go as soon as you’re ready, and if you dawdle, I’ll send some of my men up to help you.”

Verity, trying not to look as relieved as she felt, mounted the stairs with dignity, and began to pack. Her Bible and Fynch’s precious books went into the clothes-chest first. Then all Fynch’s other treasures: comb, eyebrow tweezers, reticule, needle-case, kerchief, quills, horn spoon, her silver-and-mother-of-pearl musical box (which she had never played outside her own room because of Aunt Huldah thinking music to be sinful) and the clove-stuck oranges to ward off plague. Things to remember her by--as if Verity needed any help. One small salt tear escaped, but any others were banned. Fynch had said she was ready to join God, and that Verity was not to mourn her. Anyway, a woman had her pride! Next she stuffed the chemises and stockings and shifts and sleeves and skirts and bodices and kirtles and petticoats and

fichus and caps and aprons in. Finally she rammed the unstrung bow corner-to-corner on top, and all the arrows, and closed the lid.

"I need some one to carry my chest down," she announced from the top of the stairs, "and also some one to put holes in another one for Naomi."

"Who?"

"Naomi. My cat. Well, she can hardly ride horseback, can she? Naomi washed a paw and eyed the major's boots, which hastily backed up a step. "We're not taking any cat."

"Then," pronounced Verity flatly, "you're not taking me. What would God say about leaving one of His creatures to starve?"

"It's only an animal." He regarded her with dislike.

She lifted her chin and quoted at him. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

The major virtually brayed. "*Human* brethren! By God's toenails, you gooseish wench, it means humans!"

"It doesn't say humans."

"Well, it means it."

"How do you know? Are you God?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, tried for the attitude proper in addressing a mere female. "Animals." he explained with elaborate patience, "don't matter: they don't even have souls." He looked at her bellicose face. He looked at the furry creature on the herb-covered floor, now sharpening her claws in what seemed casual menace. He gritted his teeth.

Peregrine saw that Major Rawlins was doomed, one way or another, to lose this battle, too. It might or might not be a good thing: Peregrine was not sure he altogether liked cats, himself. They sometimes seemed to have an arrogance not suitable for soulless animals. Still--

"Why not take it?" he shrugged. "As we have to take her other things, what's one more chest?"

"A lot," began Major Rawlins. "If--"

No one ever knew how the argument might have ended. Excited voices rose from the cellars, one of them female. Two astonished soldiers appeared, with a stout woman covered in dust, cobwebs and querulence. Into the silence, Verity's voice rang like silver bells.

"Peggotty! Wherever have you been and whatever took you so long? Didn't you hear God calling you? We're going to Corfe Castle, and you don't have to be a scullery maid any more. God says you're to be my chaperone. You see?" she added to the amazed men before her, "God did as He promised. And He wants you to leave a note for Father to say where you've taken me;

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and you're also to fix the door, because he would *not* like to find the house filled with foxes and badgers and hedgehogs and stoats. 'Poverty and shame shall be to him that refuseth instruction, but he that regardeth reproof shall be honoured.'"

Somehow, bowing to common sense, decency and possibly God, Major Rawlins found himself resentfully obeying. Verity read his expression easily.

"I do think," she observed, "that if you'd lived in the days of Jeanne d'Arc, you'd probably have approved of burning her."

"If she was anything like you," he told her earnestly, "I'd have lit the fire myself."

Verity believed him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MAYDAY

The caravan with the yellow wagon lingered through most of April, though Lady Bankes and Peregrine had already given them the letters for Oxford.

“They will take their time, but yet do better than most,” Lady Bankes said tranquilly. “Once they give their faith, they can be trusted.”

Peregrine hoped so.

Everyone caught cold, and Cook needed to make a tisane for their coughs, so the children with Bess and Verity were let out of the sallyport behind Dungeon Tower, where they slid giggling all the way down the steep grassy slope to the stream that surrounded the castle hill. Both robins, fearless, hopped close, singing and chittering their friendly curiosity and eyeing all the heads of hair. On the hillside a pair of badgers were spring-cleaning their sett. An otter family sported further along the stream with soft clear flute-like sounds as they slid and dived. In the meadow beyond, a wily fox rolled around and chased his tail while a couple of unwise rabbits crept nearer and nearer in fascination until Jennet’s warning yell frightened them off and cheated the fox of his dinner. He gave her a baleful glance and loped off.

Along the banks, the coltsfoot seed heads rose white and fluffy from a thick green carpet of leaves. “We’ll gather as much as we can,” said Bess, who managed to be unfairly beautiful even with a red nose. “Cook’ll be needing a good much for the tisane, and what’s left, we can dry for when we need it next.” She glanced up to the octagonal bulk of Dungeon Tower (Butevant Tower was its true name) which adorned the arrow-like point of the west bailey. There, old Edward Short kept a keen watch on the western part of the valley.

Having filled the baskets, they idled for a while in the warm sunshine. The younger children romped joyously, even hampered as they were by coughs and long bunchy petticoats. Arabella came and delivered a long hoarse speech to Verity, who could not understand a single word; and Charles refused to translate. Bridget pretended she could have done so had she chosen. Jerome, who should have known better, tried to bully Jennet and received a small hard fist in the belly for his pains. Bridget at once claimed that Jennet

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had broken Jerome's leg and liver. Joan, who really did not much like the Trio, called her a lying scullion. No one else paid any attention.

Verity turned from Arabella and stared around. The valley and hillsides were viridescent with vivid spring foliage that seemed to shine from within itself. High before them, the West Hill rose. Over to the left, a stream joined the moat.

"That's the Wicken," said Joan, pointing southward. "See, it flows from those hills, and past the village, and that's all our land: and so is the Powl farm, and some village cottages, and the mill over there--" She jerked a chin to the right where the mill of Purbeck stone rose strong beside the stream. "--where Tom Gloys grinds everyone's grain." Her eyes became soulful. (Jennet snorted. Tom Gloys, Verity assumed, had taken Joan's romantic fancy.) Upstream to their left, one could just glimpse the tidy farm worked by Enoch Powl. The willows and elders that edged the stream, newly-leaved, reached long branches over the brook to form a watery tunnel. Soon the leaves would hide it altogether.

"Could the enemy creep up on us from here?" Verity asked, forgetting her enemy-guest role--which was, in fact, harder and harder to keep in mind. "From the town? Once all the leaves are out--and look, there's hawthorn, too: that's very dense--surely a number of men could stay well-hidden, right up to the moat."

"Mayhap. I don't think the villagers would: they're our friends. We'll ask Mama." But Bess glanced uneasily along the stream. It was indeed due soon to be a well-shaded tunnel. "Last summer before the war started, we girls, and even Molly and Nurse and Grissel--but not Mama or Lucy or Cook or Barbary or Emmot--used to come down here on hot days and cross the moat and go upstream where no one could see, and bathe. With nothing on!" (Verity felt shocked--and then oddly envious. She imagined warm sunshine on her bare skin, and liked the thought, even though God must surely disapprove.) Bess was pointing her creamy dimpled chin. "There's a clearing up there where the sun comes, but the trees and bushes hide it from the Powl farm and the mill and even the watchmen on the towers." She sighed. "Certes, 'twould be sad to cut them down!"

Jennet, who had begun to wander along the moat toward the Wicken, suddenly came rushing back. "I hear a babe crying!"

They listened. Then they all heard it: not like Will's grizzle, but a small, tired, despairing whimper that went even to Verity's unmaternal heart. In a moment they were all across the moat and wetly following the sound

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upstream, the younger ones held firmly by Joan, who was much firmer with them than was the idle Bess.

It was, predictably, a Gypsy toddler, sprawled half on the stream bank, legs in the water, unable to climb out. Tiny brown fists clutched at a flimsy willow branch. He wailed anew when he saw them.

"The poor babe!" Bess flew to the rescue--and just in time, too, for the grubby hands were slackening. He roared and struggled when he found himself in her arms--perhaps fearing the stream less than the strange Gorgio who had snatched him from it.

"I'll fetch Psammis," Verity offered, for it was doubtful how long Bess could hang on to the frantic child. And picking sodden blue kirtle and gown up to her knees she raced, with Jennet close behind, through the fringe of trees toward where the caravans rested. They were met halfway by most of the tribe. Presently, in a welter of confusion and alien speech (to which Arabella added her bit) the baby was placed in the arms of a large wild-eyed mother, who at once examined him all over to be sure the Gorgios had not taken anything important. This included a certain feature of male anatomy which much astonished Verity. Did all boys have this extra bit? She had never even suspected such a thing, and could not imagine what they would do with it. It looked to be both inconvenient and vulnerable, and not at all beautiful. Was it Adam's punishment for the apple? (She had always felt that Eve had an unfair share of the blame.) The Bible did not say. She did not think she could ask anyone. It probably came well within the range of Forbidden Conversations, or Fynch would surely have told her about it.

Dinki was found to be whole, and his mother nodded at them and mumbled in Romany, uncertain how to treat a Gorgio. One did not mingle with them on social terms. Sheba clutched her own babe with one firm hand, hauled Willow away from Bess's tempting silken pocket, and nodded like a queen. "We owe you," she said simply. "We will take your letters nearer Oxford than we had planned, and at once; and although we do not enter Gorgio cities, we will send them the rest of the way safely--though I do not know how long it may take."

Well, that was understood, of course. Three or four years ago, there had been no less than eight postal lines running over England, but now with the war, letters were again chancy things that could wander for months before finding their goal--if they ever did. This was a great service, and Bess produced her adorable smile. They turned to go. But Willow and Jennet were exploring each other's eyes again, and Arabella had found some one else who

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spoke a different language. She had thought herself the only one. She planted herself in front of Dinki's mother.

"Cammer hiff, ettle mott purvil mott daggin," she announced earnestly. The Gypsies stared, deeply impressed. Then Willow leaned forward and spoke in Romany. Arabella beamed, patted the filthy hand. "Umper ettle muck, yurra yurra yurra," she replied, and looked around at the astonished faces with satisfaction.

"What did she say?" Jennet asked Charles, but he was scowling.

"She said," Willow smirked, "that she likes our baby better than your baby, because yours always says yurra-yurra."

"Yes, he does," Jennet confirmed. The two girls flicked glances again.

Charles, bewildered at suddenly being unneeded, grumped. That ragged girl had taken his special role! Moreover, if she and Arabella could understand each other, why then could he not understand the ragged girl? Disgruntled, he turned back toward the castle, stomping, determined to throw Arabella's doll right across the nursery. But Jennet and Willow, mutually fascinated, each stared back over her own shoulder as long as the other was in sight.

In the morning the Gypsy caravan was gone.

Lady Bankes, when the coltsfoot--not too wilted--had been delivered to Cook and they had all, snuffling and coughing, drunk the tisane, agreed that it would be a pity to cut the trees. "I'll talk to Captain Bond, but I doubt 'twill be necessary. Even if our tenants didn't see invaders, our guard would, when they reached the moat, and of course that's kept clear of undergrowth. And they'd have to cross it, and then come up that steep bare slope with no protection, under fire from the towers and walls. I'm more concerned about May Day."

John suddenly sat straight. "Perdy!" he said "The stag hunt! I'd forgot!"

"I hadn't," said his mother grimly, and turned to explain to her bemused guests. "'Tis an old custom. Every Mayday the mayor of Corfe and all the gentry and barons living near have permission to course a stag in this valley, beyond--"

"Last year we slew seven hundred and forty-two," interrupted Bridget, her eyes shining with candor. "Maybe eight hundred and fifty-seven," she added with artistic verisimilitude.

"--the farms. 'Tis a great occasion, with processions, and people coming from all over Purbeck and even Dorchester; and of course most are friends so 'tis wondrous fun. But now--" She shrugged, nose and chin fierce.

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“--how ill all’s here about my heart,” Verity murmured, unheard by any but Peregrine who turned a startled head and then shook it. Coincidence. No Puritan read plays--much less knew them well enough to quote them! The half-forgotten Shakespeare least of all.

“We shall still hold the hunt,” Her Ladyship was saying, “but with our blessing rather than our presence, I think. After all, we’ve all had those terrible colds, haven’t we? I may be over-suspicious--but better that than over-trust and rue it. We need to plan for emergencies. John, you and Peregrine might ride over to Creech Grange and ask Sir Edward if he can come discuss it. And--”

“Tis market day tomorrow: I’ll see if I can hear anything,” Verity volunteered, and then sat still in dismay. Was Satan teasing her? Or God testing? Whose side was she on, anyway?

Somewhere outside those walls, the cuckoo called derisively.

Market day seemed, on the surface, quite normal. Well, almost. Salamon Soames was not in the stocks, for a wonder. Was it her imagination that people’s faces seemed tense behind their skins? Sowerbutts certainly was. He hovered, his beaky once-broken nose turning suspiciously from side to side, especially when Salamon and Oliver strolled innocently by; one looking altogether too interested in her purse, the other in her person.

Verity bought tiny new carrots and onions and sparrowgrass from Enoch, and eggs from Dorcas. Dick Brine had prunes and raisins and a few of those exotic luxuries from afar, dates. These kept forever, and Lady Bankes would very much want them--but Dick scowled when she offered to buy them all.

“Marry, why not?” she demanded. “Sell them all to me, and then you can go home and sleep for the rest of the day.”

“Thee dunnot know my wife,” he grumbled, but shoved them into her basket.

Noah had eels as well as winkles, but his wide mouth turned down at her. “Thee take ‘em quick, and go back and tell her leddyship to stay to home,” he murmured, low. “Tesn’t right for folk to go make war on women and childer, I say. Go home.”

But Noah’s stall was up by Market Cross, and before she could get back across the town square, Mayor Bastwick had halted his portly figure in front of her. She had had no chance to get to know him or even decide anything about him. He wore lettuce-green taffetas today, and an odd expression on his round rosy face. The jovial crinkles alongside his eyes drooped.

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“You’re the lass they’re keeping hostage at t’castle?” he murmured, eyes flicking under brows angled like rooftops. “But you seem unshackled?” His chuckle seemed to the wary Verity a little too rich, like warm butter. “My good lady would like thee to visit us for a bit and meet our little lad, an’ it please you.”

Sowerbutts suddenly appeared. His body was all sinew and muscle, quite lacking Mayor Bastwick’s impressive portliness--and yet it looked vaguely menacing. The mayor retreated a step. Verity, reassured, shoved a finger from the depths of her full gray linsey-woolsey skirts into Sowerbutts’ thigh, and curtsyed deeply. “I thank you, good sir,” she began, and her voice dropped two notes. She faltered, unsure what to say. Everything suddenly felt somehow sinister. “Tis very kind of her. If I-- Some day--”

“Nay, what’s wrong with now?” The mayor had his assurance back. Verity’s was oozing. An avowed enemy, she could handle; but she knew nothing of tact, nor could she lie: she did not know how. His plump hand had taken hold of her arm. He was saying that her man, there, could easily deliver her purchases to the castle and tell them where she was. Lady Bankes was a friend, he said: good old Basil Bastwick and his dear wife. She did not believe it. But Lady Bankes had told Verity to get to know him. So far, she liked him very little.

She flung a silent yelp for assistance to a God she desperately hoped was in a good mood. ‘Make haste to help me, oh Lord!’--and found herself once more cool in crisis. Apparently it was only the prospect of lying that ‘mazed her. But she need not lie. She cast silken lashes toward her own small shoes, and clasped her hands demurely around the basket handle. “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the sun,” she said, low-voiced but clear to hear. “Ecclesiastes. Truly, Master Bastwick, ‘tis not now the time for me to visit you--”

But he knew his Bible, too. “A time to weep and a time to laugh,” he added, jovial. “In sooth, hast not wept enough? Come stay with us a while and see our little son, and smile.”

She trusted him no whit! Nor did Sowerbutts, lurking behind her. But she must not anger him, neither. She heard herself reciting a line that had never yet been found in any Bible. “A time to stay and a time to go.” And she smiled without her dimple.

He knew, of course. His eyebrows fairly bounded. She watched with fascination. “Saucy baggage! Now what could make thee loth to come away from the castle for a day or two? You’re not in love, surely? Lusting for some man there?”

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Marry, she would just have to lie, then! She lifted sharp cheekbones and took a deep breath. “Well, aye,” she murmured, feeling totally unconvincing. “If you must know.”

He believed her! He looked shocked, disillusioned. Then he shrugged regret. Never mind; he had tried. “Your servant, Mistress,” he muttered. She curtseyed deeply. He flourished his tall feathered hat and turned on his heel.

“Eh, lass,” croaked a voice behind her, “but tha didst have me in a fair sweat! Coom along home!”

Verity came, deeply shaken, for she realized in dismay that she had not lied! For she *did* lust--and for another woman's betrothed! And Scripture said lust of the heart was as bad as sin of the flesh. Moreover, her conscience said naggingly, she was again forgetting where her loyalty lay.

And God, when asked about it, unfairly offered no sense either of right or wrong. It was really too bad of Him!

Mayday dawned fair and bright and early. A skylark flung himself invisibly at the sky, singing in ecstasy. The top windows of the keep became filled with humans. The robins watched with fearless interest. A song thrush, curious, perched on the west wall and gave them a concert: singing each phrase twice over before going on to a totally different one. His beady eyes were alert for any careless snail that might not have reached shelter yet. But then he flew away, annoyed, because the valley was suddenly thronged with crowds of people running after men on horseback, who in turn seemed to be hunting something else. (It was, in fact, stags--but no stag had yet been foolish enough to show up.) The hunters drifted around the base of West Hill for a bit, staring around, but never quite out of sight of the castle's towers and keeps.

After an hour or so, Bridget, staring out the keep's highest windows, became greatly excited, and almost at once a large flag was waved from the top turret toward the hunt. The hunters saw it, instantly turned and raced their horses out of the valley in all directions, leaving the crowds of commoners on foot to stare in puzzlement. Ee, then, what ailed they? But seeing the hunt abandoned, they shrugged and had begun leaving as well when a large troop of soldiers galloped over the western hills from the direction of Dorchester. As that road was no better than any other Dorset road, the troop was much scattered, their mounts slipping and shying and even rearing; so that by the time the troopers reached the floor of the valley, it was deserted. For quite a while they cantered around the emptiness in no pleasant frame of mind. They trampled crops, disturbed the songbirds and infuriated several nesting jays and

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the cuckoo; but found only a few bewildered tenants heading homeward, and a contemptuous fox. They conferred. They frowned at the castle. Ralph leaned out the keep window and waved at them cheekily. Jerome, who tended to be more majestic than bold in a crisis, moved out of sight, but Jennet took his place and shook a threatening small fist. She was fond of her fists, was Jennet.

They waited.

“Here they come,” said Lady Bankes quietly.

Sure enough several of the troopers were heading vengefully toward the castle. The castle failed to tremble. Every tower had its guard, and John and Peregrine were atop one of the two high towers that flanked the front gate. They had watched with interest the antics in the valley, and now had a splendid view when the troopers, having splashed through the Wicken, found themselves balked by the moat. Having perforce to follow it around to the front, they found themselves balked again. There, far under the bridge and gate and still across the moat, they reined their horses, staring upward in angry frustration. They held another conference, fixed insincere smiles on grumpy faces, waved to the castle. Then they made their way under the bridge, along to the road, back up to the town and thence across the bridge, where they reined in front of the raised drawbridge. Their smiles were by now distinctly strained.

“Tis Mayday,” called their leader, a bulky man with skimpy hair and yet too little forehead. “We’ve come to visit. Let us in.”

The drawbridge stayed where it was. So, behind it, did the lowered portcullis. Atop their tower, Peregrine and John grinned at each other, unworried. Before the gate, the friendly visitors became increasingly less friendly.

“Let us in, ye muddy-mettled carbuncles!” bawled the leader at last, and the others joined in. Their wrath fell particularly upon Lady Bankes. Brazen-faced strumpet, unnatural shrew and pernicious Jezebel were the kindest epithets Peregrine heard--and the only ones he cared to repeat later. “You’ll be sorry!” they yelled. “We’ll come back and take this God-cursed castle, and when we do, you’ll regret it. We’ll have our fun with you, we will!”

Peregrine was no longer grinning. Not because he thought there was any danger, but because of the raw vitriol that seemed to pour from them. He had never felt anything like it before. He shuddered, thinking of other women who might perhaps fall foul of it. One knew, of course, what conquering armies had always done. Look at the Trojan women! But he had not supposed, somehow, that modern men could be so bad. Oh, looting baggage trains, as Prince Rupert’s cavalry did once--that was fair enough (though it had turned

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out to be a very bad idea, with the battle still going on and their infantry unprotected.) And of course both sides destroyed property; the Puritans having particular loathing for sinfully decorated Catholic churches. But those were mere *things*--

He turned as Lady Bankes came along the top of the wide wall and up to the tower.

“Churlish tempers,” she said chidingly, and then as the sounds out there changed, she looked down between the crenellations. John and Peregrine joined her. Some officers had arrived, and were berating the troopers savagely, threatening to have them hanged, driving them away.

“Lackaday,” murmured the lady, and there was no softness in that pointed smile nor in the large brown eyes. “In sooth, we’re about to learn, ‘twas all a sad mistake. The troopers simply got overexcited, out of hand, disobeyed orders: I make no doubt of it. There was never a commission to take the castle; none at all; and if we’ll just let them in, they’ll be happy to apologize in person.”

“Hello the gate?” called a cultured voice from below. “We’re heartily sorry about that! ‘Twas all a mistake, you know! They got carried away--”

Lady Bankes’ smile widened, but grew no whit more kindly.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE SIEGE

Peregrine and Sowerbutts paced the eastern wall. This was not their assigned position. Lawrence's troopers were spread thinly along most of the lengthy defenses, while Lady Bankes and her people were responsible for the northeast area: the keep, queen's tower, gloriette and garden. The wall there was at the highest and steepest part of the vast cone: over two hundred feet of hill and thirty more of wall. On the inside, the projecting bay and its flight of stone steps to the top made easy climbing for women and children. Large stones were piled along there; and it was close to a constant supply of hot coals from the kitchen. But both Peregrine and Sowerbutts kept a sharp eye all along this wall southward, agreeing with no words needed that one had the brains and the other the experience to see whatever needed to be seen.

Peregrine now peered cautiously between crenellations at a sudden and suspicious activity on the road below. Then, seeing a musket turned his way, he ducked quickly. They had been very active down there today, harassed by that officer. Probably Sir Walter Erle, who usually stayed safely out of range. Captain Lawrence said he was known for that: 'twas how he got his nickname of Old Wat. In any case, the muskets were--so far--more to be feared than the cannon and culverin. Those, though they might possibly breach the walls given enough time, were doing no real damage. True, Corfe was not built to withstand modern warfare--but its defendants felt that even modern warfare might find Corfe more than it could handle.

Shots at and over the wall were something else again. There had been two minor wounds among the troopers, and one serious one; and a lamb had been killed outright. Not, alas, the plump ram destined for the table, but the little ewe lamb the children had named Dolly and treated as a pet. There was deep mourning about that, and when it was duly served up as dinner (for they could not afford to waste food) no one from Bess down would touch it. Especially, for some reason, the supposedly tough-minded little Bridget.

Peregrine did not bother his head about Bridget; he was having enough trouble figuring out his own feelings. Who would have thought he would miss Verity so atrociously that his adored Bess was almost out of his thoughts? Was it just that shapely leg that had roused Peregrine's passion? Ridiculous! He had always prided himself on his reasonable mind! He was, he decided

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disgustedly, as bad as Naomi, who was in a terrible sulk, guarding the tower room savagely, and even swearing at her friends Dinner, Lady Bankes and Sowerbutts.

Having crept invisibly along several crenellations, he raised a cautious head and peered down again. They were building something down on the road. Boards were being raised, fastened together in--what? Shields? Siege engines? He lowered his head again.

"They'll catch cold at that," observed Sowerbutts, appearing at Peregrine's side. A number of interested eyes were now cautiously watching as the structure began to take form under the direction of either Sir Wat or one of his captains. Two structures, actually. "A sow and a boar," added Sowerbutts, and the unmilitary Peregrine was not sure whether this was a common name for such things or not. In any case, the building of them took time and attention from shooting at the castle, and everyone relaxed a trifle.

Not that they were in serious crisis. There was enough food for at least three months: more if they were careful. They squandered neither that nor ammunition. Spirits were quite good. In fact, the arrows over the wall urging the defenders to treachery were funny rather than tempting. As if they'd change Captain Lawrence and Her Leddyship for Old Wat and Parlyment! Not even if they believed his offers for a moment, which they didn't.

One such message caused joy rather than derision, for it brought news of Verity. "Virty bee wel an gradely," it read. "Us is washing out fer shee. Gideon."

The note was read aloud to all who could fit into the great keep dining hall. "Verity," said Arabella clearly, and looked around. "Verity Verity Verity sum hoorish bor aiggin Dinner?" Naomi rushed into the room expectantly, looked around, failed to see her very own Human, swore luridly and stalked out again. Captain Lawrence, who had not yet got used to her, looked startled.

The sow and boar seemed to be finished. A row of heads peering over the castle wall watched with deep interest as what seemed to be woolen lining was inserted along the front walls of these wooden shed-like affairs, and they slowly came upright. Lady Bankes eyed them, and called on her own troops not to lower their guard at the inner ward, just in case this silly affair was merely a ruse. Peregrine at once felt as chagrined as Sowerbutts looked--but they stayed where they were. The Lady would not appreciate their presence now.

The boar, too, was now upright, but it was the sow that took the lead. Some dozen men pushed into the structure from the back, lifted it, and started

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walking blindly, twenty or so legs visibly tripping over one another beneath, toward the castle where the defenders watched, relaxed and amused.

“Eh, they’re fair caper-witted,” said Sowerbutts in disbelief. “Happen they’re too throng to notice the moat.”

Happen they were. They reached it. The front legs dithered while the rear ones tried to keep going. The sow fell over. A great discussion went on, punctuated by furious yells from Old Wat. Then everyone crawled out, the sow was towed with difficulty across the moat, erected again, filled once more with invisible bodies on visible legs, and started climbing the steep slope.

The castle shook its collective head almost pityingly. Not pityingly enough to resist temptation, though. They waited for the climbers to come nearer, and to make its legs more visible. And they fired on--and above--them. They were all quite accurate shots by now.

As the Royalist paper *Mercurius Rusticanus* subsequently wrote, ‘not being musket-proof, the sow cast nine of the eleven of her farrow.’ It was true enough. Two Roundheads limped and rolled back down the hill as fast as their punctured legs could carry them. Nine lay still in the wreckage of the sow. As for the boar, it was having none of it. Despite yells from the officers, it stayed firmly where it was, unmanned and unmoving. The troopers carried their wounded back up to the town, and for a few days peace reigned around Corfe Hill.

Not so, Corfe town. Soames and his servers found themselves suddenly idle as all the soldiers were called urgently away. Presently horrific banging brought them to the alehouse door, to see the church being assaulted as if it were the castle itself.

““Tes, in a way,” reflected Master Soames wryly as broken organ pipes were hauled out and turned into cases for powder and shot. The doors were being ripped off to serve as cover for the soldiers, the churchyard was being used as a battery for the siege guns, and it was clear that all the beauty within was being righteously destroyed.

Verity was, she found, surprised only that it had not happened sooner; for any strict God-fearing Calvinist would see it as a religious duty to destroy this satanic church of music and paintings and stained-glass windows. Aunt Huldah would certainly have thought so--though Fynch would not. (After all, had Fynch not given her Shakespeare and Sophocles to read?) Verity was not sure about her father, for she knew him very little. Still, she was sorry about the organ. Music was, she had decided, altogether godly. (She once asked

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God--challengingly--whether He had not, in fact, actually created music Himself, and was almost sure she received that comfortable sense of approval.)

The destruction of the church went on whilst they watched. Soldiers cut off all the lead they could find and rolled it up for bullets without even trying to cast it into a mould. Verity eyed it with mixed hope and fear. With any luck it would stick in the barrels and not fire. On the other hand, if it did fly over the walls, it would make a vicious wound on any it hit. The surplice was born out triumphantly. Two soldiers appeared to be trying to make it into shirts. The watching town said nothing aloud--but it seemed to Verity that few now would pray for Parlyment--including herself.

She turned back into the alehouse. Oliver followed, smiled engagingly and put his arm around her. Verity stiffened and treated him to a pair of arctic blue daggers. He was opening himself to reprisal from his uncle as well as Old Wat's officers, and for good measure, Gideon. She was too proud and fearless to mention this; just regarded him with contempt. Unfortunately, he quite misinterpreted the situation.

"Just a little buss," he said, and tightened his grip. She trod heavily on his toe, and then when he merely yelped, tightened his hold, and lowered his shapely nose purposefully toward her, she slammed the heel of her hand up against it with all her might. She had no idea that this was a virtually-lethal attack: his nose was merely the nearest target, her hand the likeliest weapon, and the upward angle the only one available to her. She was quite astonished when he let go and fell back against the wall with anguished if muffled wails--nor was she in the least sorry. Bess would have been, but Verity was a strong believer in hard justice instantly applied. She watched with clinical and unpitiful interest while, in response to his yells, he was tended and borne off home. And she hoped it would be some time before he could get around again, for it was quite certain to her that Oliver was a vengeful young man.

And the days passed, and half of July was gone. Sir Walter Erle, in angry frustration, pressed his men harder and harder to storm the walls, ignoring his captains' advice and exposing himself to gunfire--until one day he came rushing into the square and the mayor's house like a dismayed hare, leaving soldiers and civilians staring curiously after him. He couldn't be wounded, they agreed regretfully. Ran too sprightly for that, look 'ee.

It was Gideon who enlightened them, coming up from the road with a grin splitting his hairy face.

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“Got in range, choose how,” he told them cheerily. “Chance it happened t’bullet went plumb through his coat, and when he saw it, he came all-a-bits, the cabby gowk.”

It was not merely the townsfolk who hid grins, Verity noted. No soldier likes to be under the command of a muddy-mettled wagtail.

The castle had witnessed the abrupt departure of Sir Wat from the danger area with bright interest. “Think we got him?” the musketeers asked one another, hopeful. They considered it. They shook regretful heads. “Ran away too sprightly,” they decided.

For whatever reason, the shooting almost stopped for a day or two. Bridget, blatantly disobedient, dared to climb the wall and peer through the crenellations. Her whoop scared them all silly. “There’s a big animal out there! A bear, I think! Right out there with the enemy!”

They rushed to look. Indeed, it did seem to be a bear, on all fours, creeping along the slope between bridge and town. Baffled, they peered. Jennet, feeling herself superior to her sister in intelligence if not far-sightedness, strutted up to look, and turned to them.

“’Tis no animal at all, ‘tis that Sir Wat. All wrapped in a fur, being doltish.”

Bridget frowned, puzzled. “Will all that fur keep bullets from hitting him? Because then why didn’t it keep them from hitting our Dolly?”

England, 1643. Civil war rages. Royalist Corfe Castle is under attack. Verity, a vivid Puritan, resides with her vituperative cat as enemy-guests. They dispute with all the occupants, on virtue, monarchy, Salvation, the classics and the castle mice--but Verity falls into sin by losing her heart to the exasperating Peregrine--who is betrothed to another.

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