

*A Sword
to the Heart*

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Author's Note

The Labourers' revolt in 1830 was extremely serious. Several Counties in the South of England were in a state bordering on insurrection. The Government was in a panic. The rebellion failed completely although there was some improvement in the farm workers' wages. Six men were hanged, four hundred imprisoned and four hundred and fifty-seven transported. Three boats carried the convicts to Van Dieman's Land and New South Wales. The list of prisoners shows they came from thirteen different Counties, but there was no-one from Herefordshire.

There are innumerable legends about the famous "Captain Swing," whose threatening letters spread terror among the landowners of England. It has never been satisfactorily established if he was or was not hanged with several other leaders of the riots.

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Chapter One

1830

"Lord Colwall to see you, Sir James."

A middle-aged man sitting by the fire reading a newspaper rose with an exclamation of surprise.

Advancing towards him across the room was a young man, elegantly attired with a meticulously tied high cravat and a jewelled fob glittering below his cut-away coat.

He was in fact extremely handsome with fine-cut features and dark hair above a square forehead, but there was an expression on his face which at first acquaintance seemed almost repellent.

It was hard to believe that a man so young in years should look so cynical and at the same time so proudly aloof that a stranger might instinctively shrink from contact with him.

But Sir James Parke was an old friend, and the way in which he held out his hand and the smile on his lips showed that he was sincerely pleased by the intrusion.

"Ranulf!" he cried. "Why did you not let me know you were coming? But none the less it is a great pleasure to see you."

Lord Colwall did not smile in response. Instead, he joined Sir James in front of the log-blazing fire and replied in a cold, almost expressionless, voice:

"I made up my mind to visit you only yesterday evening."

Sir James looked at the young man's face a little apprehensively.

"Is there anything wrong at the Castle?"

"No, nothing."

Sir James waited as if for more information, and when it was not forthcoming, he said genially:

"Do sit down, Ranulf. What will you have to drink? A glass of Port? Or would you prefer Madeira at this hour of the morning?"

He put out his hand towards the bell-pull as he spoke.

"Thank you, but I have not long breakfasted," Lord Colwall said before he could ring the bell.

"I have just been reading *The Times*," Sir James said, "about the threatening letters written to landlords in the Southern Counties and signed 'Swing.' It seems extraordinary that no-one knows who this man is."

The two gentlemen seated themselves opposite each other at the fireside.

"When they do discover his identity," Lord Colwall replied, "he will surely be hanged, or at least transported."

"There are all sorts of rumours about him," Sir James said, "that he is a disgruntled Peer or a criminal who has escaped the gallows, or a lawyer who has been barred from practising."

Lord Colwall did not reply and Sir James went on:

"Whoever he may be—and I imagine he is an educated man from the manner in which he writes—he is undoubtedly responsible for the riots around Canterbury. Farm-workers could never organise such a rebellion by themselves. There must be someone behind them."

"That is obvious," Lord Colwall said in a hard voice, "and they have been inoculated with this man's poison. Did you hear what a labourer said to the High Sheriff of Kent?"

"No, tell me," Sir James said.

"Apparently the High Sheriff attended one of the College meetings to remonstrate with the rioters. They

listened to his homily with attention. But before they dispersed a man said:

"This year we will destroy the corn-stacks and the threshing machines, next year we will have a turn with the parsons, and the third we will make war upon the Statesmen.' "

"Good God!" Sir James ejaculated. "That will be Civil War!"

"It will be now if the Government does not use a firmer hand than they are doing at the moment," Lord Colwall remarked.

"Reading some of the letters in *The Times*," Sir James said, "I cannot help feeling that the labourers have a case."

"A case?" Lord Colwall ejaculated sharply. "They have nothing of the sort! They are paid for their work, and to burn ricks and break up farm machinery is sheer anarchy, as you well know."

There was now almost a note of violence in the cold voice and, because Sir James Parke was a man who enjoyed peace and disliked argument, he said in a conciliatory tone:

"Let us talk of something more pleasant. What brings you on this most welcome visit?"

Lord Colwall hesitated as if he was considering his words, then he replied slowly:

"I came to ask you, Sir James, if you would be best man at my wedding."

For a moment Sir James Parke stared incredulously, then he exclaimed:

"At your wedding? My dear boy I can assure you that nothing would give me greater pleasure! I had no idea—no-one told me that you were even contemplating matrimony. Have I missed the announcement of your engagement?"

"There has been no announcement," Lord Colwall replied.

"And who is the bride? Do I know her?"

"No, you do not know her."

As Lord Colwall spoke he rose to his feet and

walked across the room to the window to stand staring out at the elaborate garden, to which his host devoted a great deal of his time and thought.

Sir James looked at his broad shoulders in perplexity.

"What is all this about, Ranulf?" he said at length. "As you well know, nothing would delight me more than to see you married."

"I am aware of that," Lord Colwall said, turning from the window. "It is because you were a friend of my father, Sir James, and because until I was twenty-five you acted as my Trustee, that you are the first person to learn of my intended nuptials."

"I am indeed honoured by your confidence," Sir James said, "but why is it a secret?"

"It is no secret," Lord Colwall answered. "It is in fact something I have planned for a long time."

"You have planned?"

Lord Colwall came back from the window to the fireplace.

"When Claris left me," he said slowly, as if he forced the words between his lips, "I swore that I would never marry again."

"You were distraught at the time," Sir James said quietly. "You had been badly treated, Ranulf, as we know, and at the same time you were very young. You had not even reached your twenty-first year, and under such circumstances one says things that one does not mean."

"I meant every word of it!" Lord Colwall contradicted, "but three years ago, when I was twenty-five and came into full possession of my properties, I realised that, whatever my personal feelings in the matter, I must for the sake of the family beget an heir."

Sir James looked at him quickly before he said:

"You are right, of course. There have been Colwalls at the Castle since the twelfth century."

"Exactly!" Lord Colwall agreed. "And that is why the inheritance must continue in the direct line. I intend, Sir James, when I die to hand the Castle over to my son!"

"That of course is what we would all wish to happen!" Sir James agreed. "And I would like above all else, Ranulf, to see you happy."

"I am entirely content as I am," Lord Colwall said coldly, "but since I cannot have a legitimate son without a wife, I have therefore chosen one!"

"Who is she?" Sir James asked. "One of our local belles? Or have you found some 'Incomparable' in London who will bring grace and beauty to our rather dull countryside?"

"I told you," Lord Colwall went on, as if he had not listened to what Sir James was saying, "that I have planned my marriage with care. That is precisely the truth."

There was a note in his voice which brought a little frown between Sir James's eyes.

"What are you trying to tell me, Ranulf?"

"I am attempting to explain what I have done," Lord Colwall replied, "not because I need your approval, but simply because I feel that you, who have always been so closely concerned with my affairs, should know the truth."

"And what is the truth?" Sir James enquired.

"When I decided to get married again," Lord Colwall replied, "I knew that the one thing I could not face was to marry another wife who might behave like Claris. I have learnt, Sir James, by bitter experience that what is loosely called love can be a weapon of self-destruction."

"Now, Ranulf, you are still bitter, still resentful of what happened eight years ago," Sir James interposed. "Surely you can understand now that the emotions through which you passed were unusual, to say the least of it, in fact a disaster which might happen to perhaps one man in a million."

"I can only hope your figures are right!" Lord Colwall said with a cynical twist of his lips.

"Now that you are older and wiser," Sir James went on, "you can forget the past. You have your life in front of you. You have a position that men envy. You have great possessions, a heritage which is steeped

in the history of England, and a name which is respected throughout the land."

"Exactly!" Lord Colwall ejaculated, "and that is why, since my name is respected, and since I was fool enough to put at risk both the honour and the pride of my family, I shall not make the same mistake again."

"You could not have known at your age what Claris was like," Sir James said. "You were infatuated with her beauty, and who shall blame you? No-one could have anticipated what occurred."

"You yourself warned me that I was taking a risk in marrying her," Lord Colwall said harshly, "but I would not listen."

"You were in love," Sir James said quietly, "and all must be forgiven if a man loses his head in such circumstances."

"I was besotted, infatuated and bewitched until I behaved like a damned idiot!" Lord Colwall said roughly. "It will never happen again."

"We all make mistakes in our lives," Sir James said soothingly. "We all make jackasses of ourselves at some time or another. But what I had always hoped, Ranulf, is that as the years passed you would forget; your bitterness would pass and one day you would find a woman you could love and who would love you."

"I remember telling you when I learned the truth about Claris, that I would never love anyone again," Lord Colwall answered. "It was not the statement of an hysterical boy, Sir James. It was in the nature of a vow, a vow to which I shall adhere to my dying day."

"And yet you are to be married?"

"I am to be married for the reason I have given you," Lord Colwall answered. "I chose my wife three years ago when she was fifteen. She has now passed her eighteenth birthday and she is at this moment on her way from Cumberland, where she lives, to the Castle. She will arrive next Wednesday and the marriage has been planned for the following day at which I hope you will support me."

"What do you mean—you chose her when she was fifteen?" Sir James enquired.

"Exactly what I have said," Lord Colwall answered. "I made a list of my relations and close connections who had girls of about the right age. I visited them."

There was a faint note of amusement in his voice as he said:

"In Lincolnshire I found that a third cousin once removed had a daughter of the right age, but her mother was a hopeless drunkard!"

Sir James said nothing and Lord Colwell continued:

"Sixty miles further north another relative produced a girl with a squint and the suspicion of a harelip! Hardly encouraging characteristics!"

There was still no response from Sir James.

"Then at Pooley Bridge in Cumberland," His Lordship continued, "I found my father's second cousin, Lady Margaret Graystoke, had a daughter aged fifteen."

Lord Colwall glanced at Sir James, who was sitting listening intently, his eyes on his face.

"Lady Margaret's antecedents are impeccable," he continued, "and Graystoke comes from an old and respected Cumberland family. His brother is the fifth Baronet. They have little money, but their breeding is faultless!"

"Are you telling me," Sir James asked with an astonished note in his voice, "that you chose this girl whom you are to marry as if you were buying a foal?"

"Why not?" Lord Colwall answered. "After all, the reason I require her as a wife is simply that she should produce children."

"Have you told the girl this?"

"I have not seen her since I visited her father's Vicarage three years ago."

"You have not—seen her?"

Sir James rose to his feet.

"My dear Ranulf, this is monstrous! This is the most crazy, insane action I have ever heard! You cannot do such a thing!"

Lord Colwall looked at him in surprise.

"What is wrong with it?" he enquired. "If I had met a girl in London, spoken to her perhaps two or three times under the eyes of her mother, and then asked if

I might pay her my addresses, you would not have been in the least surprised. But I would know as much or as little about her as I know about Natalia."

"A girl you saw once as a child?" Sir James insisted. "What was she like?"

"She was pleasant-looking," he replied, "with no apparent physical imperfections. A little short perhaps, but doubtless she has grown. As I have already said, she comes of good stock, and I cannot imagine that the daughter of a poverty-stricken Vicar would not feel honoured to be the Chatelaine of Colwall Castle."

"In other words, you take for granted that she is selling herself for your title and your position, and you are buying her to act as a breeding machine!" Sir James said.

For the first time Lord Colwall gave a faint smile.

"You are very dramatic, Sir James, but I assure you that a *mariage de convenance* is far more likely to be successful than one which rests upon throbbing hearts, passionate declarations, and that deceptive emotion called love."

"Supposing when you meet the girl again you dislike one another?" Sir James asked. "What then?"

"She will still have her position as my wife," Lord Colwall explained patiently. "and I shall hope to have not only an heir, but several children."

"It is the most unnatural thing I have ever heard," Sir James said crossly. "Now listen to me, Ranulf, for one moment."

"I am listening," Lord Colwall replied.

"You are an extremely attractive young man. There is not a young woman in the whole length and breadth of Herefordshire who would not fall into your arms if you gave her the slightest encouragement. The girls have told me how you seem to rebuff every overture they have made in your direction. That is not to say they would not go on making them!"

"I am well aware of that!" Lord Colwall replied.

"And surely," Sir James went on, "there have been women in London whose company you have enjoyed."

There was a cynical twist to Lord Colwall's lips as he replied:

"Many of them, but they were hardly suitable, either by birth or by education to sit at the top of my table."

"I am not talking about strumpets!" Sir James said sharply. "You have moved in the society of what in my day, when the Regent considered himself a gay Lothario, we used to call 'The Dandy Set.' Surely in that crowd there must have been beautiful women who attracted your attention?"

"Quite a number," Lord Colwall replied frankly, "but they had the great advantage, from my point of view, of already having a husband, even if he was a complaisant one. And while they certainly pleased my eye and, shall we say, excited my interest, I did not find any difficulty in parting from them once they bored me."

"Good God, Ranulf! You must have a heart somewhere in that handsome body of yours?"

"A heart?" Lord Colwall inquired mockingly. "I assure you, my dear Sir James, I tore that vacillating vessel from my breast and replaced it with a stone! I have no heart! No tenderness! No love! And, I hope, no vulnerability left in what you call 'my handsome body.'"

"I am a man with the normal passions of a man, but I am completely armoured against the wiles and the deceits of women."

"And you really think you can live the rest of your life in such a state?" Sir James asked.

"I am sure of it," Lord Colwall answered confidently, "and let me tell you that I am absolutely content with myself as I am. People speak of me as a hard man—I am well aware of that! I am hard! I am ruthless! And I intend to stay that way. I do not wish to be beguiled and enticed up the aisle by any designing female, who covets my name."

"It would be easy for a woman to love you for yourself," Sir James said quietly.

"That is where you are wrong!" Lord Colwall con-

tradicted. "No woman will ever love me again because I do not intend that she should do so. I will take her body if it amuses me, but I am not interested in her mind, in her feelings and certainly not in her affections!"

There was a sneer on his lips as he finished.

"Most women, after a few plaintive protestations, are content to take my money or whatever I am prepared to give them and leave me alone."

Sir James gave a deep sigh.

"You were one of the most attractive boys I have ever known. You were a very charming young man. I am not being dramatic, Ranulf, when I say I would have given my right hand to save you from the tragedy which altered your whole character. It should never have happened."

"But it did happen!" Lord Colwall said quietly. "And, as you say, it altered my character and my outlook. There can be no going back. I have therefore made my life my own way! And I can say with complete honesty that it is the way I prefer."

"Perhaps one day . . ." Sir James began tentatively.

"No, no, Sir James," Lord Colwall interrupted. "You are a romantic! This is reality. A man may suffer once from being burnt by a raging fire, but a second time he is too wary to approach it. I have suffered, as you rightly said, but it has made me wise and I shall not make a fool of myself a second time."

"And what about this child that you intend to marry?" Sir James asked.

"Doubtless her parents have explained to her the advantages of such a match," Lord Colwall said loftily, "Incidentally I have paid quite a considerable sum over the years for her education."

"You wanted her educated then?"

"Not for my own benefit," Lord Colwall answered, "but because the mother of my children should be cultured and have a certain amount of learning. After all, a mother is the first teacher a child knows."

There was silence for a moment and then Sir James said:

"It is a pity you did not know your mother. She was very beautiful and very understanding. I have always been convinced that, had she been alive, you would not have been deceived by Claris."

"She died when I was only a year old, and therefore I cannot remember her," Lord Colwall replied. "On the other hand, I remember my father distinctly. I endured eighteen years of his severity and his unmis-takeable indifference."

"Your father was never the same after the death of your mother," Sir James said. "It was his love for her which made him resent that you were alive, and he blamed you because she never recovered from the very difficult time she had when you were born."

"I know that, Lord Colwall remarked, "and it only proves my point, Sir James, that love, obsessive, possessive and demanding is something to be avoided at all costs."

"Perhaps you will be unable to avoid it," Sir James suggested. "It conquers us all at some time in our lives."

"You are living in cloud-cuckoo land!" Lord Colwall sneered. "Now I must ask you if, having heard the truth about my impending wedding, you will still act as my best man?"

"I will do anything you ask of me," Sir James answered simply, "but I am no less worried and perturbed by what you have told me."

"Leave me to do the worrying," Lord Colwall said. "The marriage will take place in the afternoon, and we shall sit down to what will be a Medieval Wedding Feast at about five o'clock."

"Medieval?" Sir James questioned.

"I found some difficulty in discovering amongst the archives any precedent for a marriage feast of the owner or his son taking place in the Castle." Lord Colwall replied. "Of course, the Reception was usually given at the home of the Bride."

"Naturally," Sir James agreed.

"But in 1496," Lord Colwall went on, "Randolph, the elder son of Sir Hereward Colwall, was married at the Castle to a bride who came to him from Northum-

bria. It seemed, when I found the reference, an interesting coincidence that my wife comes from Cumberland."

"Were they happy?" Sir James enquired.

"As they had eleven children how could they be anything else?" Lord Colwall replied mockingly.

"Then let us hope that for your sake history repeats itself," Sir James said, but he spoke without conviction.

The Dritchka chariot moved along the highway at a quicker pace than had been possible on the previous days of the journey.

"Look, Papa, it has hardly rained here at all!" Natalia exclaimed.

"I believe it has been a dry October in the South," the Reverend Adolphus Graystoke replied in a tired voice.

He had found the long journey somewhat exhausting while it appeared that his daughter was fresher and in gayer spirits than when they had first left their home in Pooley Bridge.

Everything en route was of interest to Natalia; even the rough, muddy roads that they had encountered on the first part of their journey had been no hardship.

This was due to the well-sprung travelling chariot which Lord Colwall had sent for them. When it arrived at the Vicarage, its silver accoutrements and four magnificent horses had evoked the admiration of the whole village.

Even the Vicar had been astonished at the luxury at which they travelled.

His Lordship's horses had been waiting at every Posting Inn, and the journey had been made easy by frequent halts, while a courier in another carriage containing the servants and their luggage left well ahead to see that everything was in order before their arrival.

"We might be Royalty!" Natalia said in awe-struck tones, at their first stop.

They had been ushered into a private Sitting-Room