

THE KING'S GENERAL

by

Daphne du Maurier



Garden City

New York

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

1946

21834

The King's General

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AT

THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

TO MY HUSBAND

Also a General, but, I trust, a more discreet one.

Menabilly,

May 5-July 19, 1945

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to tender my grateful thanks to John Cosmo Stuart Rashleigh of Throwleigh, and William Stuart Rashleigh of Stoke-ton, for giving me permission to print this blend of fact and fiction.

I trust that they, and especially Aeonie Johnson, whose labour in copying family papers proved so helpful, will enjoy this glimpse of their forebears at Menabilly, in days long vanished and forgotten.

My gratitude also to Miss Mary Coats, Mr. A. L. Rouse, and Mr. Tregonning Hooper, for their great kindness in lending books and manuscript.

D. DU M.

MENABILLY stands bare and desolate on the Cornish coast, its ivy-covered walls hiding the secret which two people will carry to their graves: Honor Harris, so injured as a girl that she never walked again, and Sir Richard Grenvile, the King's General in the West, resentful, proud, bitter to the end. The only man Honor ever loved.

She saw him for the first time on the night of her eighteenth birthday at the Duke of Buckingham's ball. Richard was already a veteran of foreign wars and on his way to fame and power. She bade him a final farewell years later when, his cause lost and Menabilly surrounded by the forces of the enemy, he vanished through a secret passage from her life.

To tell more of the story here would be unfair. Only Miss du Maurier is able to do justice to the hairbreadth escapes and exciting events which punctuate this tale of three hundred years ago, told as if it happened yesterday.

SEPTEMBER 1653. The last of summer. The first chill winds of autumn. The sun no longer strikes my eastern window as I wake, but, turning laggard, does not top the hill before eight o'clock. A white mist hides the bay sometimes until noon and hangs about the marshes, too, leaving, when it lifts, a breath of cold air behind it. Because of this the long grass in the meadow never dries, but long past midday shimmers and glistens in the sun, the great drops of moisture hanging motionless upon the stems. I notice the tides more than I did once. They seem to make a pattern to the day. When the water drains from the marshes and little by little the yellow sands appear, rippling and hard and firm, it seems to my foolish fancy lying here that I, too, go seaward with the tide, and my old hidden dreams that I thought buried for all time lie bare and naked to the day, just as the shells and the stones do on the sands.

It is a strange, joyous feeling, this streak back to the past. Nothing is regretted, and I am happy and proud. The mist and cloud have gone, and the sun, high now and full of warmth, holds revel with my ebb tide. How blue and hard the sea as it curls westward from the bay, and the Blackhead, darkly purple, leans to the deep water like a sloping shoulder. Once again—and this I know is fancy—it seems to me the tide ebbs always in the middle of the day, when hope is highest and my mood is still. Then, half consciously, I become aware of a shadow, of a sudden droop of the spirit. The first clouds of evening are gathering beyond the Dodman. They cast long fingers on the sea. And the surge of the sea, once far off and faint, comes louder now,

creeping towards the sands. The tide has turned. Gone are the white stones and the cowrie shells. The sands are covered. My dreams are buried. And as the darkness falls the flood tide sweeps over the marshes and the land is covered. . . . Then Matty will come in to light the candles and to stir the fire, making a bustle with her presence, and if I am short with her or do not answer, she looks at me with a shake of her head and reminds me that the fall of the year was always my bad time. My autumn melancholy. Even in the distant days, when I was young, the menace of it became an institution, and Matty, like a fierce clucking hen, would chase away the casual visitor. "Miss Honor can see nobody today."

My family soon learnt to understand and left me in peace. Though "peace" is an ill word to describe the moods of black despair that used to grip me. Ah well . . . they're over now. Those moods at least. Rebellion of the spirit against the chafing flesh, and the moments of real pain when I could not rest. Those were the battles of youth. And I am a rebel no longer. The middle years have me in thrall, and there is much to be said for them. Resignation brings its own reward.

The trouble is that I cannot read now as I used to do. At twenty-five, at thirty, books were my great consolation. Like a true scholar, I worked away at my Latin and Greek so that learning was part of my existence. Now it seems profitless. A cynic when I was young, I am in danger of becoming a worse one now I am old. So Robin says. Poor Robin. God knows I must often make a poor companion. The years have not spared him either. He has aged much this year. Possibly his anxiety over me. I know they discuss the future, he and Matty, when they think I sleep. I can hear their voices droning in the parlour. But when he is with me he feigns his little air of cheerfulness, and my heart bleeds for him. My brother . . . Looking at him as he sits beside me, coldly critical as I always am towards the people I love, I note the pouches beneath his eyes and the way his hands tremble when he lights his pipe. Can it be that he was ever light of heart and passionate of mind? Did he really ride into battle with a hawk on his wrist, and was it only ten years ago that he led his men to Braddock Down, side by side with Bevil Gren-

vile, flaunting that scarlet standard with the three gold rests in the eyes of the enemy? Was this the man I saw once, in the moonlight, fighting his rival for a faithless woman?

Looking at him now, it seems a mockery. Poor Robin, with his greying locks shaggy on his shoulders. Yes, the agony of the war has left its mark on both of us. The war—and the Grenvilles. Maybe Robin is bound to Gartred still, even as I am to Richard. We never speak of these things. Ours is the dull, drab life of day by day.

Looking back, there can be very few amongst our friends who have not suffered. So many gone, so many penniless. I don't forget that Robin and I both live on charity. If Jonathan Rashleigh had not given us this house we should have had no home, with Lanrest gone and Radford occupied. Jonathan looks very old and tired. It was that last grim year of imprisonment in St. Mawes that broke him, that and John's death. Mary looks much the same. It would take more than a civil war to break her quiet composure and her faith in God. Alice is still with them, and her children, but the feckless Peter never visits her.

I think of the time when we were all assembled in the long gallery, and Alice and Peter sang, and John and Joan held hands before the fire—they were all so young, such children. Even Gartred with her calculated malevolence could not have changed the atmosphere that evening. Then Richard, my Richard, broke the spell deliberately with one of his devastating cruel remarks, smiling as he did so, and the gaiety went, and the careless joy vanished from the evening. I hated him for doing it, yet understood the mood that prompted him.

Oh, God confound and damn these Grenvilles, I thought afterwards, for harming everything they touch, for twisting happiness into pain with a mere inflection of the voice. Why were they made thus, he and Gartred, so that cruelty for its own sake was almost a vice to be indulged in, affording a sensuous delight? What evil genius presided at their cradle? Bevil had been so different. The flower of the flock, with his grave courtesy, his thoughtfulness, his rigid code of morality, his tenderness to his own and to other people's children. And his boys take after him. There is no vice in Jack or Bunny that I have ever seen. But

Gartred . . . Those serpent's eyes beneath the red-gold hair; that hard, voluptuous mouth; how incredible it seemed to me, even in the early days when she was married to my brother Kit, that anyone could be deceived by her. Her power to charm was devastating. My father and my mother were jelly in her hands, and as for poor Kit, he was lost from the beginning, like Robin later. But I was never won, not for a moment.

Well, her beauty is marred now, and I suppose forever. She will carry that scar to the grave. A thin scarlet line from eye to mouth where the blade slashed her.

Rumour has it that she can still find lovers, and one of the Careys is her latest conquest, having come to live near by her at Bideford. I can well believe it. No neighbour would be safe from her if he had a charm of manner, and the Careys were always presentable. . . . I can even find it in my heart to forgive her, now that everything is over. The idea of her dallying with George Carey—she must be at least twenty years the elder—brings a flash of colour into a grey world. And what a world! Long faces and worsted garments, bad harvests and sinking trade, everywhere men poorer than they were before, and the people miserable. The happy aftermath of war. Spies of the Lord Protector (God, what an ironic designation!) in every town and village, and if a breath of protest against the state is heard the murmurer is borne straight away to jail. The Presbyterians hold the reins in their grasping hands, and the only men to benefit are upstarts like Dick Buller and Robert Bennett and our old enemy John Robartes, all of them out for what they can get and damn the common man. Manners are rough, courtesy a forgotten quality; we are each one of us suspicious of our neighbour. O brave new world!

The docile English may endure it for a while, but not we Cornish. They cannot take our independence from us, and in a year or so, when we have licked our wounds, we'll have another rising, and there'll be more blood spilt and more hearts broken. But we shall still lack our leader. . . . Ah, Richard—my Richard—what evil spirit in you urged you to quarrel with all men, so that even the King now is your enemy? My heart aches for you in this last disgrace. I picture you sitting lonely and bitter at your window, gazing out across the dull, flat lands of Hol-

land, and you put the final words to the Defence that you are writing and of which Bunny brought me a rough draft when he came to see me last.

“Oh, put not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man, for there is no help in them.”

Bitter, hopeless words that will do no good and only breed further mischief.

Sir Richard Grenvile for his presuming loyalty must be by a public declaration defamed as a Banditto and his very loyalty understood a crime. However, seeing it must be so, let God be prayed to bless the King with faithful Councillors, and that none may be prevalent to be any way hurtful to him or to any of his relations. As for Sir Richard Grenvile, let him go with the reward of an old soldier of the King's. There is no present use for him. When there shall be the Council will think on it, if not too late. Vale.

Resentful, proud, and bitter to the end. For this is the end. I know it and you know it too. There will be no recovery for you now; you have destroyed yourself forever. Feared and hated by friend and foe.

The King's General in the West. The only man I love . . .

It was after the Scillies fell to the Parliament, and both Jack and Bunny were home for a while, having visited Holland and France, that they rode over from Stowe to see the Rashleighs at Menabilly and came down to Tywardreath to pay their respects to me. We talked of Richard, and almost immediately Jack said, “My uncle is greatly altered; you would hardly know him. He sits for hours in silence, looking out of the window of his dismal lodging watching the eternal rain—God, how it rains in Holland—and he has no wish for company. You remember how he used to quip and jest with us and with all youngsters? Now if he does speak it is to find fault, like a testy old man, and crab his visitor.”

“The King will never make use of him again, and he knows it,” said Bunny. “The quarrel with the Court has turned him sour. It was madness to fan the flame of his old enmity with Hyde.”

Then Jack, with more perception, seeing my eyes, said quickly, "Uncle was always his own worst enemy; Honor knows that. He is damnably lonely, that's the truth of it. And the years ahead are blank."

We were all silent for a moment. My heart was aching for Richard, and the boys perceived it.

Presently Bunny said in a low tone, "My uncle never speaks of Dick. I suppose we shall never know now what wretched misfortune overtook him."

I felt myself grow cold and the old sick horror grip me. I turned my head so that the boys should not see my eyes.

"No," I said slowly. "No, we shall never know."

Bunny drummed with his fingers on the table, and Jack played idly with the pages of a book. I was watching the calm waters of the bay and the little fishing boats creeping round the Blackhead from Gorran Haven. Their sails were amber in the setting sun.

"If," pursued Bunny, as though arguing with himself, "he had fallen into the hands of the enemy, why was the fact concealed? That is what always puzzles me. The son of Richard Grenville was a prize indeed."

I did not answer. I felt Jack move restlessly beside me. Perhaps marriage had given him perception—he was a bridegroom of a few months' standing at that time—or maybe he was always more intuitive than Bunny, but I knew he was aware of my distress.

"There is little use," he said, "in going over the past. We are making Honor tired."

Soon after they kissed my hands and left, promising to come to see me again before they returned to France. I watched them gallop away, young and free and untouched by the years that had gone. The future was theirs to seize. One day the King would come back to his waiting country, and Jack and Bunny, who had fought so valiantly for him, would be rewarded. I could picture them at Stowe, and up in London at Whitehall, growing sleek and prosperous, with a whole new age of splendour opening before them.

The civil war would be forgotten, and forgotten, too, the gen-

eration which had preceded them, which had fallen in the cause, or which had failed. My generation, which would enter into no inheritance.

I lay there in my chair, watching the deepening shadows, and presently Robin came in and sat beside me, enquiring, in his gruff, tender way, if I were tired, regretting that he had missed the Grenville brothers, and going on to tell me of some small pother in the courthouse at Tywardreath. I made pretence of listening, aware with a queer sense of pity how the trifling events of day by day were now his one concern. I thought how once he and his companions had won immortality for their gallant and so useless defence of Pendennis Castle in those tragic summer months in '46—how proud we were of them, how full our hearts—and here he was rambling on about five fowls that had been stolen from a widow in St. Blazey.

Perhaps I was no cynic after all, but rotten with sentiment. . . .

It was then that the idea came first to me, that by writing down the events of those few years I would rid myself of a burden. The war and how it changed our lives, how we were all caught up in it, and broken by it, and our lives hopelessly intermingled one with another. Gartred and Robin, Richard and I, the whole Rashleigh family, pent up together in that house of secrets, small wonder that we came to be defeated.

Even today Robin goes every Sunday to dine at Menabilly, but not I. My health pleads its own excuse. Knowing what I know, I could not return.

Menabilly, where the drama of our lives was played, is vivid enough to me three miles distant here in Tywardreath. The house stands as bare and desolate as it did when I saw it last in '48. Jonathan has neither the heart nor the money to restore it to its former condition. He and Mary and the grandchildren live in one wing only. I pray God they will always remain in ignorance of that final tragedy. Two people will carry the secret to the grave. Richard and I. He sits in Holland, many hundred miles away, and I lie upon my couch in Tywardreath, and the shadow of the buttress is upon us both.

When Robin rides each Sunday to Menabilly I go with him, in imagination, across the park and come to the high walls sur-

rounding the house. The courtyard lies open; the west front stares down at me. The last rays of the sun shine into my old room above the gatehouse, for the lattice is open, but the windows of the room beside it are closed. Ivy tendrils creep across it. The smooth stone of the buttress outside the window is incrustated with lichen.

The sun vanishes, and the west front takes once more to the shadows. The Rashleighs eat and sleep within, and go by candlelight to bed, and dream; but I, down here three miles away in Tywardreath, wake in the night to the sound of a boy's voice calling my name in terror, to a boy's hands beating against the walls, and there in the pitch-black night before me, vivid, terrible, and accusing, is the ghost of Richard's son. I sit up in bed, sweating with horror, and faithful Matty, hearing me stir, comes to me and lights the candle.

She brews me a warm drink, rubs my aching back, and puts a shawl about my shoulders. Robin, in the room adjoining, sleeps on undisturbed. I try to read awhile, but my thoughts are too violent to allow repose. Matty brings me paper and a pen, and I begin to write. There is so much to say and so little time in which to say it.

For I do not fool myself about the future. My own instinct, quite apart from Robin's face, warns me that this autumn will be the last. So while my Richard's Defence is discussed by the world and placed on record for all time amongst the archives of this seventeenth century, my apologia will go with me to the grave, and by rotting there with me, unread, will serve its purpose.

I will say for Richard what he never said for himself, and I will show how, despite his bitter faults and failings, it was possible for a woman to love him with all her heart, and mind, and body, and I that woman.

I write at midnight then, by candlelight, while the church clock at Tywardreath chimes the small hours, and the only sounds I hear are the sigh of the wind beneath my window and the murmur of the sea as the tide comes sweeping across the sands to the marshes below St. Blazey Bridge.

THE FIRST TIME I saw Gartred was when my eldest brother Kit brought her home to Lanrest as his bride. She was twenty-two and I, the baby of the family except for Percy, a child of ten.

We were a happy, sprawling family, very intimate and free, and my father, John Harris, cared nothing for the affairs of the world, but lived for his horses, his dogs, and the peaceful concerns of his small estate Lanrest, which was no large property, but lay high amidst a sheltering ring of trees, looking down upon the Looe Valley, and was one of those placid, kindly houses that seem to slumber through the years, and we loved it well.

Even now, some thirty years after, I have only to close my eyes and think of home, and there comes to my nostrils the well-remembered scent of hay, hot with the sun, blown by a lazy wind; and I see the great wheel thrashing the water down at the mills at Lametton, and I smell the fusty-dusty golden grain. The sky was always white with pigeons. They circled and flew above our heads and were so tame that they would take grain from our hands. Strutting and cooing, puffed and proud, they created an atmosphere of comfort. Their gentle chattering amongst themselves through a long summer's afternoon brought much peace to me in the later years, when the others would go hawking and ride away laughing and talking and I could no longer follow them.

But that is another chapter. . . . I was talking of Gartred as I saw her first. The wedding had taken place at Stowe, her home, and Percy and I, because of some childish ailment or other, had

not been present at it. This, very foolishly, created a resentment in me from the first. I was undoubtedly spoiled, being so much younger than my brothers and sisters, who made a great pet of me, as did my parents, too, but I had it firmly in my mind that my brother's bride did not wish to be bothered with children at her wedding and that she feared we might have some infection.

I can remember sitting upright in bed, my eyes bright with fever, remonstrating with my mother.

"When Cecilia was married Percy and I carried the train," I said. (Cecilia was my eldest sister.) "And we all of us went to Maddercombe, and the Pollexefens welcomed us, although Percy and I both made ourselves sick with overeating."

All that my mother could say in reply was that this time it was different, and Stowe was quite another place to Maddercombe, and the Grenvilles were not the Pollexefens—which seemed to me the most feeble of arguments—and she would never forgive herself if we took the fever to Gartred. Everything was Gartred. Nobody else mattered. There was a great fuss and commotion, too, about preparing the spare chamber for when the bride and bridegroom should come to stay. New hangings were bought, and rugs and tapestries, and it was all because Gartred must not be made to feel Lanrest was shabby or in poor repair. The servants were made to sweep and dust, the place was put into a bustle, and everyone made uncomfortable in the process.

If it had been because of Kit, my dear, easygoing brother, I should never have grudged it for a moment. But Kit himself might never have existed. It was for Gartred. And, like all children, I listened to the gossip of the servants.

"It's on account of his being heir to Sir Christopher at Radford that she's marrying our young master," was the sentence I heard amidst the clatter in the kitchen.

I seized upon this piece of information and brooded on it, together with the reply from my father's steward.

"It's not like a Grenville to match with a plain Harris of Lanrest."

The words angered me and confused me too. The word "plain" seemed a reflection on my brother's looks, whom I considered

handsome, and why should a Harris of Lanrest be a poor bargain for a Grenville? It was true that Kit was heir to our uncle Christopher at Radford—a great barracks of a place the other side of Plymouth—but I had never thought much of the fact until now. For the first time I realised, with something of a shock, that marriage was not the romantic fairy legend I had imagined it to be, but a great institution, a bargain between important families, with the tying up of property. When Cecilia married John Pollexfen, whom she had known since childhood, it had not struck me in this way, but now with my father riding over to Stowe continually, and holding long conferences with lawyers, and wearing a worried frown between his brows, Kit's marriage was becoming like some frightening affair of state, which, if worded wrong, would throw the country into chaos.

Eavesdropping again, I heard the lawyer say, "It is not Sir Bernard Grenville who is holding out about the settlement, but the daughter herself. She has her father wound round her finger."

I pondered over this awhile and then repeated it to my sister Mary.

"Is it usual," I asked, with no doubt irritating precocity, "for a bride to argue thus about her portion?"

Mary did not answer for a moment. Although she was twenty, life had barely brushed her as yet, and I doubt if she knew more than I did. But I could see that she was shocked.

"Gartred is the only daughter," she said after a moment. "It is perhaps necessary for her to discuss the settlement."

"I wonder if Kit knows of it," I said. "I somehow don't think he would like it."

Mary then bade me hold my tongue and warned me that I was fast becoming a shrew and no one would admire me for it. I was not to be discouraged, though, and while I refrained from mentioning the marriage settlement to my brothers I went to plague Robin—my favourite even in those days—to tell me something of the Grenvilles. He had just ridden in from hawking and stood in the stable yard, his dear, handsome face flushed and happy, the falcon on his wrist, and I remember drawing back, scared always by the bird's deep, venomous eyes and the blood on her beak. She would permit no one to touch her but