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The Reavers

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Extract

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FOREWORD

This book is nonsense. It's meant to be. If I were a "serious" writer, which I'm not (I have the word of an eminent critic for this, and I know he meant it as a compliment, because he put the word in quotes) I might describe it as an octogenarian's rebuke to a generation which seems to have forgotten fun and become obsessed with misery, disaster, illness, operations, violence, climate change, guilt, obesity, cookery, football, racism, politics, and a general sense of doom. But not being serious as the literary world understands the term, I can offer no such pretentious excuse. *The Reavers* is simply G.M.F. taking off on what a learned judge would call a frolic of his own.

It began with a novel I wrote fourteen years ago, *The Candlemass Road*, an Elizabethan swashbuckler set on the Anglo-Scottish border. That in turn had its origin in a play written much earlier; it was never produced, so I used its plot for *Candlemass*, which was kindly received by readers and critics, being full of bloodshed, brutality, treachery, and betrayal. By one of those ironies of the writing business, I was then able to turn it back into a play, for BBC Radio.

So much for *Candlemass*, a plain enough tale, but since I can never resist comic experiment, and the wilder the better, I found myself considering a different approach, first imagining and then inevitably writing *The Reavers* as a fantasy in the style of another book of mine, *The Pyrates*. Both are eccentric, as advertised by the fanciful archaic spelling of their titles; both are completely over the top, written for the fun of it. In that spirit I offer *The Reavers*, with gratitude to the happy band of *Pyrates*-lovers and

any others of like mind, now that sufficient time has elapsed for the original *Candlemass Road* to slip quietly into the shadows of bygone fiction.

G.M.F.

It was a dark and stormy night in Elizabethan England, a night of driving rain and howling wind, God save the mark! when even the stately oaks bowed their great heads and giant ash trees clawed with spidery fingers at the tempest, duck ponds and horse-troughs were lashed into foam, chimbley pots toppled on the heads of honest citizens, staring owls clung to their perches with difficulty, and broom-riding witches circled crazily over blasted heaths, stacked and waiting in vain for clearance to land, Steeple Bumpstead was whirled away leaving a gaping hole in the middle of Essex, cows and domestic animals were overturned, slates and washing flew every which way, and stout constables, their lanthorns awash, kept out of the way of sturdy beggars and thanked God they were rid of a knave, leaded casements rattled in stately Tudor homes, causing the noble inhabitants to give thanks for roaring fires and bumpers of mulled posset what time they brooded darkly about sunspots, global warming, and the false forecasts of Master Michael Fishe, he o' the isobars, who had predicted only light airs gentle as zephyrs blowing below the violets, would you believe it, while out yonder, in lonely hamlet and disintegrating hovel, the peasantry scratched their fleas and gnawed lumps of turnip and blamed it on the Almighty (poor churls, what did they know of warm fronts and depressions o'er Iceland?) or on the hag next door, her wi' the Evil Eye and black familiar Grimalkin and devilish spells, curse her, and wagged their unkempt heads as haystacks and livestock crashed through their thatches, and asked each other in fearful whispers whether such raging fury of the elements portended the end of the world, or the Second Coming,

or another bloody wet week, and agreed that it was alle happenynge, gossip, and where would it end?

Well, that takes care of the weather, and before meteorologists start hunting through their almanacks for the date of this monumental tempest, we shall tell them that it befell on a certain February 2 – but make no mention of the year, save that it was sometime between the foundation of Kiev University and the discovery of Spitzbergen, and they can make what they will of that, my masters. Why such reticence? Because the moment a romantic story-teller starts committing himself to actual years, and similar pretensions to strict historical fact, his character is gone, being at the mercy of nit-picking critics who will take gloating delight in pointing out (for example) that Attila the Hun couldn't possibly have studied Monteverdi's second madrigal book, because it hadn't been published in his day, see? Nor were pretzels available in the '45 Rebellion. Out upon them, pedants.

Another reason is that many of the principal characters in our little moral social fantasy wouldn't have known what year it was anyway, they being carefree primitives chiefly concerned with sheer survival, clobbering their neighbours, armed robbery, animal (other people's animals) husbandry, protection racketeering, arson, kidnapping, irregular warfare, and general mischief, all of which, being natural poets, they described as "shifting for a living". Now and then they pondered about which religion they ought to belong to, inevitably deciding that on the whole they'd let the hereafter take care of itself, thus freeing themselves for any amount of boozing, guzzling, dicing, hunting, racing, and swiving, this last being a popular pastime of the period, and still carried on today under a variety of names.

Indeed, they were a stark and ignorant lot, and if you'd asked them what day it was, it wouldn't have occurred to them to reply "February the second, good neighbour"; they would more probably have responded with "Candlemass, ye iggerant booger", because that is how they talked, and they were used to reckoning by their old Christian festivals in that happy, far-off time when there were no desk diaries or wall-planners (though even then the precocious

Flemish schoolboy, P. P. Rubens, may well have been making furtive sketches of sporty nudes in his exercise books, in anticipation of the *Playboy* and Pirelli calendars).

Not that everyone was backward and unlettered in Good Queen Bess's day, mind you. Sir John Harington, for one, was a man of much learning and science, but since at the time our story opens he had just installed the world's first flush toilets in Her Majesty's palace of Richmond, and the royal apartments were ankle-deep in water, with little Tudor plumbers going hairless, hammering pipes and crying "Good lack!" and "Where's the stopcock, missus?", he had more to do than worry about what year it was. He plays no part in our tale, by the way, but has been introduced merely to provide a little period colour, like the scenes and characters in the next couple of pages. Irrelevant they may be, but they are familiar and therefore may be useful in evoking the spirit of the Elizabethan Age and letting the audience know what is going on behind the scenes of our tale.

So . . . on that tempestuous night of February 2, 15—, when Merrie Englande was being sore buffeted by storm, and the plumbers were warning a distraught Sir John that he was flying in the face of nature and the union wouldn't let them mop up . . .

In the Mermaid smoker, two playwrights were engaged in a game of envious one-upmanship, with Marlowe snidely advising his rival to get out of drama and into poetry ("because your Saturday-morning serials are a real dead end, I mean, three parts of *Henry VI*, for God's sake, people are beginning to ask what next, *Kemp and Somers Meet Henry VI*?") and Shakespeare was countering with back-handed compliments about *Dr Faustus* ("loved the costumes, Chris") while wondering if he dared hi-jack the character of the grizzled old fatso at the next table, who was being extremely coarse and funny, and didn't look like the kind who would sue . . .

and at Richmond, Gloriana herself was standing for her portrait to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, in a raging temper and a tent-like gown of cloth of gold with enormous winged sleeves which she was convinced would make her look like a vulture about to

take flight,* wherefore she would crop his ears, by God, and that went for that knock-kneed rascal Harington, too, him and his gang of splashing tatterdemalions wi' their honeyed promises and leave it to us, your grace, shalt have no need o' chamber-pots hereafter, forsooth! And that reminded her, that pack of upstarts in her Parliament needed instruction "not to speak every one what he listeth – your privilege is *Aye* or *Noe*". And it had better be Aye, or there would be a few by-elections pending . . .

while in his cabinet her minister, Lord Burleigh, was wrapping cold towels round his head as he struggled to make sense of a list of "those malefactoures of the name of Graham who doo infeste oure Skottische border", and finding it no easier because his agents" reports spelled the name variously Graeme, Grime, Grim, Gremme, Groom, and even Greene, godamercy, and wishing he had a computer . . .

a convenience which had not yet been invented, although had Burleigh but known it, the next best thing was in the office across the way, functioning smoothly between the ears of Sir Francis Walsingham, the original "M" who ran Elizabeth's espionage and dirty tricks operations, and was so secretive that if he wanted a new feather for his hat, he would buy three separate pieces at three different shops and sew them together in the dark. It cost him a fortune in sticking-plaster, and his bedraggled headgear cracked up the mocking gallants in Paul's Walk, but as Sir Francis dryly observed, you don't need to be in *Esquire* to combat the devildoms of Spain . . .

which at that very moment were preoccupying King Philip II in the Escurial, where he was scoffing pastry (as was his wont) and planning that second forgotten Armada which came to grief in 1597 in an unforeseen hurricane (loyal Master Fishe strikes again!) and wondering if it might not be a better idea to build holiday villas on the Costa del Sol and bankrupt the heretics by luring them into time-share deals . . .

while in Edinburgh another monarch, James VI (shortly to be

* See the National Portrait Gallery, and sympathise with Her Majesty

James Numero Uno) was hugging himself with glee as he conned the proofs of his new sure-fire best-seller, *Daemonologie, or Alle Ye Ever Wantit Tae Ken Aboot Witchcraft But Were Feart Tae Speer*, a natural for the MacBooker – a confidence not shared by Master Napier down the street, who was wondering gloomily if his projected treatise on logarithms would even be noticed by the reviewers . . .

but at least he knew they would work, which was more than could be said for his fellow-savant in distant Pisa of Italy, where Galileo wasn't sure whether he'd invented the thermometer or not (that at least is how we interpret a cryptic entry in a learned work which states that sometime in the 1590s "Galileo invented thermometer (uncertain)" . . .

and in the far-off Caribbean a splendid old pirate was being laid to rest in his hammock by grieving shipmates who could not guess, as the deep sea swallowed him off Nombre de Dios, that far from being dead he would live for ever . . .

And while all these important things were happening, give or take a year or two, elsewhere an ingenious cobbler was creating the first stiletto heels, Henri Quatre was deciding that Paris was worth a Mass, an English eccentric named Fitch was removing his boots after *walking* much of the way home from Malaya, the game of cricket was receiving its first mention in print, an excited alchemist was identifying a new element and dreaming of Nobel prizes as he christened it "zink" (all unaware that Paracelsus had beaten him to it by half a century), Sir Walter Raleigh was encountering poisoned arrows on the Orinoco, a French physician diagnosed whooping-cough, an absent-minded Italian composed the first opera and promptly lost the score, religious persecution reached a point where *autos da fe* were causing industrial pollution and Jesuits were being wait-listed for priests' holes, Japan banned missionaries and invaded Korea, and English vagrants were making a bee-line for the new parish workhouses in the ill-founded hope that these would offer a relaxing change from delving, spinning, swinking, and being turfed out by brutal landlords.

None of which really matters to our story, except as a brief erratic survey of the distant background, and to set our narrative tone, which

may already have convinced the reader that he has not stumbled on a supplement to the Cambridge Modern History. Far from it: this is just a tale, and if it takes occasional liberties of style and speech, who cares? If Shakespeare can have clocks striking in Caesar's Rome, and give his plebs the street-smart backchat of Tudor London, a poor romantick can surely have similar licence. If we seem to treat history lightly in this regard, that is not to say we are false to it; mad fancy may go hand in hand with sober fact so long as the two remain distinct. So, in confidence that you'll spot the difference, we return to that wild Candlemass night and our story, which is at last getting under way in a desolate waste on the Anglo-Scottish frontier, that blood-red Borderland where the laws of shrewd Queen Bess and canny King Jamy do not run, except for cover, and the motto of the wild frontier tribes (those carefree primitives to whom we referred earlier) is "Thou shalt want ere I want" – a widely held philosophy in any age and clime, recently imputed to the Thatcher and Blair governments, and to trade unions by employers (and vice versa), but only the old borderers were honest and dumb enough to inscribe it on their coats of arms, holler it aloud in their cups, and scribble it on the Roman Wall when the Wardens weren't looking.

A shocking place, the border, and for those unfamiliar with the works of Sir Walter Scott a brief word of explanation may be in order. As any schoolboy and football supporter knows, England and Scotland beat the bejeezus out of each other during the Middle Ages (Bannockburn, Flodden, and all that), and those unfortunates caught in the middle (i.e., the borderers) were ravaged, savaged, and put upon to such an extent that, when peace finally broke out around the 1550s, they found it uncongenial, and continued to practise the techniques they had learned over three centuries (murder, armed robbery, cattle rustling, extortion, rape, ravagery, savagery, etc.). Well, it was the only trade they knew, and better fun than farming, and if in consequence the border country made our modern inner cities look like eighteenth-century drawing-rooms, the borderers didn't mind, because anarchy was what they were used to.

The English and Scottish governments, of course, denounced this state of affairs as "totallie unacceptable" – which meant, as it still

does, that they accepted it wholesale, and made only a few futile gestures, like confirming (under a sort of Anglo-Scottische Agreement) a special code of laws for the area, which didn't work, and setting up international commissions which drank deep and stuffed their guts at a safe distance in places like Kendal and Peebles Hydro, surfacing occasionally to issue joint communiqués and assure broadsheet conferences that "thaire wolde bee noe surrender to terrorisme".

Now and then the March Wardens, sorely tried and underpaid officials with inadequate forces, got exasperated and visited the worst offenders with fyre and the sworde, but since the borderers had forgotten more about both than Genghiz Khan ever knew, and were expert at fading into the hills or defying the Wardens from rather impregnable stone peel towers, Authority could only burn a few villages, pose for pictures by the smoking ruins while the reporters took notes for Ballads and Laments (later collected by W. Scott in "Border Minstrelsie"), and withdraw, followed by raspberries and even coarser noises from the peels. Of course they rounded up the usual suspects, whose convictions were invariably held to be unsound because of sloppy forensic evidence – after all, if your worst enemy turns blue and explodes at your dinner table, the traces of ratsbane on your hands *may* have come from chessmen used by warlocks at the Necromancers' Social Club which you visited a couple of months back. One result of this was that the Wardens' officers took to hanging suspects on the spot (known as "Jeddart justice", from the town of Jedburgh where the authorities were unusually liverish), but only if they weren't important people with dangerous friends.

All this was water off a duck's back to the borderers, who carried on killing and robbing each other as before, and since they never bothered anyone more than fifty miles from the frontier (except on the notable occasion when some of them raided Edinburgh and surprised a Very Important Person in the lavatory, much to his embarrassment[*]) the two governments were inclined to take a

[*] True, really

why-the-hell-should-we-care-it's-a-long-way-off-thank-God attitude, and recommend another Publicke Inquirie.

So that's the border for you, and we apologise for the brief history lesson. Actually, we haven't told you the half of it – for example, that in addition to the reivers and robbers, the place was crawling with agents, spies, messengers, plotters, double-0 triggermen, moles and other assorted Smyllii Personae, as they were called, intriguing away like anything between London and Edinburgh. Secret diplomacy was in a fair old state, the question being: would James collect the royal English franchise when Elizabeth fell off her twig, as might happen any day? Rumours abounded that His Majesty was already being fitted out with tropical kit, Scottish courtiers were practising drawls and trying to stop saying "whilk" and "umquhile", the Scottish National Party were preparing banners reading "Home Rule *in* England" and "It's Scotland's Cheddar!", London merchants were taking options on supplies of Japanese haggis, and Home Counties landowners were preparing to turn their estates into golf courses. But alle was uncertayne, and remayned to be seene.

Like our story, which is coming up at last, honestly, without further discursions; any more need-to-know history will be sprinkled in lightly as we pursue our headlong tale of adventure, romance, knavery, ambush, disguise, escape, abduction, seduction, and Kindred Mischiefs, deploying an all-star cast of steely-eyed heroes, noble ladies, unspeakable villains, gorgeous wantons, corrupt creeps, maniacs, freebooters, freeloaders, and hordes of colourful extras, in a variety of Great Locations, including lonely fortresses, mysterious mansions, hide-outs, dungeons, boudoirs, bawdy houses, wizard's caves, dens, kens, and the occasional shed and hovel – for while there will be ample cut-and-thrust, passion tender and blazing, splendid costumes, Technicolored set decoration, and four-page menus, we'll not neglect the squalid social material for those in search of a Ph.D.

But now we cry "Quiet, everybody, let's try to get it right first time, action! camera! QUIET!!" – for Scene One, a desperate encounter between one of our Principals and a Supporting Heavy,

is opening up with a long shot of that desolate waste which we mentioned several pages ago. Since then the storm has blown itself out, farther south the last witch has taxied thankfully to a standstill ("Talk about fog and filthy air – never been so glad to get off a bloody broom in my life!"), and we pan slowly across dripping bushes wreathed in clinging mist with icy patches which should clear towards dawn, pale moonlight gleams cold on the gullies and moss-hags, and no sound is heard save the plaintive wail of a sodden rabbit and the muffled crackling and swearing of someone trying to get to sleep in a patch of wet bracken, and making nothing of it.

Peering through the fronds we can see that he is a scarecrow figure, ragged and besmirched, hair unkempt, boots leaking, shirt and breeches sadly out of crease, and hasn't shaved for a fortnight. A pathetic sight, as he writhes vainly to snuggle down on his couch of wet heather, rocks, and mud, but make the most of him, for this bedraggled bum is one of our heroes – yes, he is. Never, you exclaim, not in those trousers! Relax, peer more closely, and note that while he is one who has clearly fallen on evil days (and a couple of dunghills en passant), yet is he modelled on the lines of Gary Cooper crossed with Steve McQueen, six feet two of lean, muscular modesty; the matted stubble cannot conceal the resolute manliness of firm chin and interesting nostrils, nor the caked muck the steady brilliance of grey eyes ready to dance with gentle mirth or harden in stern resolve, whichever is appropriate. Quiet humour sits relaxed on his mobile lips, integrity keeps his ears at a proper angle, humanity will shine in every strand of his fair hair once it's been blow-waved, and wit, intelligence, and responsibility are evenly distributed over the rest of his active frame. All right?

But at the moment he looks awful, having been pinched for vagrancy in Northumberland two weeks ago, set in the stocks, and then confined in Haddock's Hole, the most verminous chokey in all the wide border. Paroled a couple of days since, flea-ridden and friendless, he has nowhere to go but up. He is English, goes by the name of Archie Noble, and is a broken man – which doesn't mean

he is a spent force, but is the local term for one who has no chief or protector to vouch for him or sign his passport application, no allegiance, no home, no visible means of support. A wanderer on the Marches, a denizen of Cardboard Hamlet, of no account, but don't worry, he's literate and normally quite couth, well-spoken when he wants to be, and once he's had a bath and a shave and his rags pressed, you won't know him.

For the nonce he wriggles in damp discomfort, munching a tuft of grass to allay his hunger, and trying to sing himself to sleep with one of those lovely, sentimental old border ballads which were to cast their spell over Wordsworth and the Grasmere Gang two centuries later:

We hangit twa cows on the gallows tree,
We hangit them high, wi' screech and shudder,
They twisted and turned in the wild, wild wind,
And ye couldnae tell one frae the udder

quite unaware that in the neighbouring gully Destiny is approaching . . .

. . . in the unlikely and repulsive shape of Black Dod Pringle, a fell Scotch thief of Teviotdale, returning with his thuggish associates from a raid into Cumberland; he is a squat, ugly, villainous figure clad all in steel and leather, has bad breath, bites his nails, and is commonly called Bangtail – all reivers had weird nicknames, usually based on appearance or behaviour, and Bangtail's signifies that he is not immune to the allurement of the female form. His gang are called Fire-the-Sheep, Blacklugs, Grunt, Slackarse, and Wandered Tom, and all are members of the Pringle family except the last, who thinks he's a Turnbull but can't be sure because he has lost his birth certificate (he says). Like the Mafia, borderers operated in family groups, with close friends and allies to make up the numbers; the big tribes, like the Armstrongs, Elliots, Johnstones, and Maxwells (of Scotland), and the Fenwicks, Grahams, and Forsters (of England) could sally forth hundreds strong, but the Pringles, although under the protection of the powerful Kerr family,

were second division players, and Bangtail's was a typical small raid.

It was also a disgruntled one, because they'd had no luck. Bangtail had got them all excited with big talk of descending like a thunderbolt on the Foulbogsyke Women's Institute during its annual meeting, raping the committee, and making off with their prize entries of crochet and home-made jam, but the ladies had word of his coming and defied the raiders from the W.I. tower, hurling down missiles of potted meat, jellies, raffia-work, and blazing handbags. Foiled, Bangtail had to be content with running off the livestock, which consisted not of cattle and sheep, but of half a dozen hens and a couple of cats. So it is a sorry band of ruffians that we see riding through the murk, herding their clucking plunder before them, while Bangtail rides well ahead, gritting his teeth in frustration at the memory of the plump and roguish Institute treasurer flaunting her curves on the battlements as she blew him jeering kisses and invited him to climb up and show her his muscles.

Archie Noble came out of his doze at the sound of the reiver's hoof-beats, starting up from his bed among the bracken. Bangtail saw the bedraggled figure not ten paces away, concluded that here was some lonely wanderer on whom to vent his ill-temper, and with a "Har-har!" of wicked glee clapped in his spurs, couched his lance, and charged, intending to open him up just for laughs. But it wasn't a good night for Pringles, for the victim leaped smartly aside, whipped a poniard from the back of his waist, and with a tricky underarm throw planted it neatly in Bangtail's neck, causing him to crash to the turf, his sensibilities outraged and his throat cut. After which there was nothing for Bangtail to do but thrash about a bit, go limp, gasp the word "Rosebud" (which was the name of the plump W.I. treasurer, actually), and expire.

And that's Bangtail out of the story, and Archie Noble nicely into it. Moving with cat-like agility he retrieved his poniard, glanced keenly about him in alarm (for even heroes don't expect to find themselves committing manslaughter before they're properly awake), congratulated himself on his reflexes – and then his eye

fell on the dead face glaring irritably up at the pale moon, and a startled wince caused the clotted debris to fall from his unwashed brow.

"Black Dod Pringle, alias Bangtail!" he exclaimed. "Dead by my hand, all unintentional! Now, harrow and alas, but here was dire mischance, and as for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, forget it! Nay, he's past mending, and I in jeopardy o' my life, for those hoof-beats I hear betoken not th'arrival o' the Salvation Army, I warrant!"

It was customary, you see, for Elizabethan performers to speak their thoughts aloud, for the benefit of the groundlings. But having got his dismay off his chest, our hero moved like a well-oiled ferret (belying his nickname of Waitabout, from his habit of philosophic loafing). Trained frontiersman that he was, his senses told him that five riders, driving hens and cats, were just over the hill (Slackarse's shout of "Keep them bloody poultry away from the moggies, you four, or the boogers'll stampede!" merely confirmed his deduction), and with Teviotdale's top gun going into rigor mortis at his feet, and a bloody poniard in his hand, Archie could see awkward questions being asked by the deceased's buddies if he lingered. On foot he was coffin-bait, for those expert trackers would read his trail like motorway signs, wheresoe'er he turned and doubled. On the other hand, Pringle's horse was hanging about, looking bored . . . yet our hero, hard man though he was, hesitated to take away a vehicle without the owner's consent, and that was now unobtainable. Anyway, broken men got hung for horse-rustling, didn't they? Decisions, decisions . . . and then as a frantic cat came rocketing out of the mist, with an enraged chicken in hot pursuit, and Slackarse's cry of "What did I tell ye – the bastard hen's run amok!" reached his ears, Archie Waitabout waited no longer. With one bound he was in the saddle, accelerating smoothly from nought to twenty-five in four seconds flat, and by the time the Famous Five had come on their defunct leader and were speculating about suicide, divine retribution, or (Wandered Tom's theory) whether Bangtail had stopped to shave and ballsed it up, our hero was a mile away and going like the clappers o'er the misty moor,

muttering "Land's End or bust!" as he counted the cost of his fatal encounter.

Why, what's to worry, you may wonder – no witnesses, no incriminating broken cuff-links or cigar ash left behind . . . file the serial number off the poniard, ditch it, and he's well away, surely? Oh, yeah – what about the horse? In these parts, where everyone knows everyone else, including their livestock, he might as well carry a full confession in Day-glo on his chest. But dammit, you point out, he's on the moral high ground (self-defence), and no previous record, your honour . . . But unfortunately, there is: Archie's past is not entirely unspotted; necessity has driven him to hire out now and then to heavy mobs like the Charltons and the Maxwells; he has lent a hand, and reluctantly committed G.B.H., in those just-lawful pursuits picturesquely called "hot trods", he has no references or paid-up insurance, and being a broken man and therefore heavily suspicioned of *everything*, he is ripe to be put in the frame for *anything.* Like killing, however innocently, the local equivalent of a Chicago *capo*, whose family have been known to pursue a feud as far as York, and Batley even.

Our boy, in fact, is now without a future. Either the Pringle hitmen will sign him off, or the Wardens will give him a suspended sentence eight feet up in the air – for while a well-connected reiver may get off with a fine plus interest and a promise to behave, broken men can expect only the gallows, decapitation, or the drowning-pit in which offenders were economically dunked to death.

Either way, a parlous plight, and Archie's brow is furrowed with care beneath the grime, and even the horse is shaking its head and shooting him glances of concern as he leads it through the wreathing mist a couple of hours before dawn. They are cold, wet, fed up with tripping over rocks and falling in bogs; Archie's stomach is starting to rumble – that last clump of grass had definitely been off – and the horse is burping with fatigue; sustenance they must have, and that right speedily. And just as they are starting to eye each other cannibal-wise, the mist thins suddenly, and in the distance a light gleams in the gloom. The mist thins a bit more, and the outline of a large building comes into view, and then with a final ghostly

whiffle the mist packs up entirely, and lo! it's a great fortified mansion, with crenellations and mullions and a massy stone wall all around with a frowning gateway flanked by a sullen sally-port and a mildly annoyed tradesmen's entrance above which is a battered notice board reading:

Thrashbatter Tower plc.
Scots KEEPE OUTTE!
Forays by appointment onlie.
Nobilitie, gentrie, Wardens fairlie welcome.
Broken menne are you kidding?

The whole place looks as though it's been built in a bad temper, bats squeak round its dark central tower, bloodhounds growl in its outhouses, and in its cellar the very mice are bickering in their straw.

Archie is still too far off to hear them, or to read the notice, but even if he could it wouldn't matter; his eye is fixed on that one small lighted window, which his reiver's instinct tells him is a pantry containing a half-finished game pie, a mortress of brawn, savoury pasties, toothsome pizzas, sundry kickshaws, and enough booze to raise the Titanic. Slavering slightly, he mounts his steed, murmuring "Hi-yo, Silver!", and is hurled headlong as the beast rears obediently on its hind legs, whinnying. Picking himself up, and with the William Tell overture whispering gently o'er the moss, he steals forward like a ragged ghost, ears pricked, eyes gleaming like grey fog-lamps, gastric juices fermenting, while the horse takes a dyspeptic glance at the gloomy mansion, obeys its animal instinct, and leans despondently against a convenient tree reflecting that it's not *that* hungry . . .

Well, it's probably not the Inn on the Park, but it should furnish our hero a quick snack and a packed lunch for later. Unless . . . who knows what lurks within this estate agent's nightmare – phantasms, man-traps, burglar alarms, a police stake-out? Does he realise he isn't dressed for dining out? But let's wish him Bon Appetit anyway, and move on to the rest of the cast, wherever they are . . . a Mad Villain, perhaps? A spy? A corrupt plumber? No, we've had enough of Heavies in Chapter One, and it's time for a touch of glamour, the rustle of silk and whiff of perfume, as we bring on the girls . . .

It's quite a commentary on our so-called scientific progress that while we can send men to the moon (well, possibly you can, even if this correspondent can't), getting stuck on the high fell road between Scotch Corner and Carlisle is just as liable to happen now as it was in the sixteenth century. In some ways it's worse nowadays, when your carburettor's flooded, not a call-box in sight, and nothing for it but a ten-mile walk; in the 1590s you could always huddle up in a corner of your satin-lined luxury coach, swathed in silks and furs, beguiling your impatience with peach brandy and sweetmeats o' Peru, while outside in the raging blizzard your lackeys heaved and whimpered to get the show on the road, and Coachman Samkin clumphed around giving futile instructions to the grooms, like "Keep them nags in low gear, the chestnut's over-revving!" – assuming, of course, that you weren't just any old wayfarer, but the pampered and wealthy Lady Godiva Dacre, proud flower of the nobility, owner of half East Anglia, and accustomed to having every whim, let alone crisis, attended to instanter by droves of head-knuckling servitors. There were a round dozen of these floundering knee-deep in slush as they strove to force the great gilded carriage ahead, and Coachman Samkin waved his lantern and vanished in a snowdrift.

Inside, her ladyship tapped dainty foot and drummed slender fingers in Krupa-like crescendo, signs which her companion, mischievous little Mistress Kylie, watched with covert amusement as she waited for Krakatoa to blow, and tried to think of some remark which would get the eruption going.

"Perchance," she ventured brightly, "the weather will clear ere

long, or mayhap some travellers will fare this way, bringing timely succour. Or a road scout, wi' spanners and gadgets –"

"– and a team of oxen, and wainropes, and a fork-lift truck!" stormed Lady Godiva, finally giving vent. "God's light!" she seethed, "was ever poor debutante so sorrily served? Twelve reeking fat knaves that have gorged and swilled enough for a regiment since we left London, and cannot shift me a featherweight coach through a pinch of snow! Yeomen of England, yet! How we beat the Spaniards I'll never know! Can nothing stir them, jelly-muscled churls?"

"Have 'em lashed with horse-whips," suggested sweet Kylie. "Mind you, they're probably too numb to feel it by now, but it's worth a try."

"And have 'em run whining to an industrial tribunal!" The fine eyes of scornful Lady Godiva flashed like violet detonators. "With my fair name bandied in the gutter press as merciless employer! Thank you, Mistress Thinktank! Who are you working for, me or the *Sunday Sport*?"

"Marry, 'tis a thought," admitted Kylie. "Certes, the tabloids would eat it. 'My Flogging Frolic i' the snow with Gorgeous Goddy', by Postillion Tim . . . And 'twould be just like them to use that kinky picture of you in Ben Jonson's last masque – remember, Diana chastising the fauns? All right, all right," she added hastily as her mistress began to gnash pearly teeth, "just speculating. I always said amateur court theatricals were a lousy idea, but you would fancy yourself in tights . . . Here, have another snifter."

And while tactful Kylie sets the decanter merrily a-glug, and Lady Godiva extends smouldering goblet, let us cast an eye over these two ladies fair – or rather, in Godiva's case, let us gaze in stricken admiration, for they're not making them like that any more. Superbly tall, with the flawless ivory beauty of some Nordic ice queen, and a shape whose curvature could not be concealed even by the voluminous finery of the day, our heroine (yes, it is she) was a breathtaking mixture of Marlene above the neck and Jane Russell below. Her white brow was lofty, her eyes of deepest midnight blue, her nose classically sculpted, her lips an imperious

rosebud, and her ears shell-like gems peeping from beneath magnificent fiery tresses which cascaded like glossy red curtains to shoulders of alabaster smoothness. Her chin and teeth were all right, too. Add to this assemblage a mien before whose frigid disdain accountants trembled and barristers fairly grovelled, clothe her in cloth of silver (by Balmain), and let Van Cleef (or Arpels) loose wi' gewgaws of price wherewith to deck her slim hands and snowy bazoom, and you have a picture of feminine perfection that would take the paper off the wall. Rumour had it that she had been Master Spenser's original model for the Faerie Queene before wiser counsels led him to ascribe his inspiration to Her Majesty's person, and that Shakespeare himself had her in mind when he penned that immortal line in *Much Ado* which begins "Here's a dishe . . ."

In short, Lady Godiva Dacre was the ultimate Elizabethan knockout, and if among the sonnets, songs, wolf-whistles and cries of "Gaw!" with which courtiers paid tribute to her peerless oomph, there were occasional murmurs of "Haughty piece", "Stuck-up icicle", and "Payne i' the butte", this was no matter for wonder.

For, as our description and the foregoing snatch of small talk suggest, our leading lady's temper was wilful, headstrong, passionate, and proud to busting. Spoiled from infancy by a doting grandsire and squads of devoted nurses, grooms, and hangers-on, our orphaned heiress had realised at the age of about three that beauty, money, and blue blood had placed in her tiny hand the throttle of a steamroller on Life's highway, and she had been winding it on ever since. Sent to court as a child, she had modelled herself on the Queen's Grace, to whom she had been maid-in-waiting for several years; hence those outbursts of tantrum when any inconvenience (like having to sit in a coach moving at one mile an hour through a snowstorm) came to disturb the rose-strewn progress of her existence. We see her now aged twenty-two, journeying north to visit the distant estate of her late grandfather, old Lord Waldo Dacre, recently succumbed to a surfeit of reivers. She wouldn't have come – too far, too rude, and oh, sweet coz, the *people!* – had she not been commanded away by the Queen who, it was rumoured, had

been itching for an excuse to get shot of an attendant who gave herself impossible airs and whose naturally flame-coloured coiffure was a maddening reproach to Her Majesty's weekly gallon of henna.

So there's Lady Godiva . . . sorry? Lovers, you ask? Well, none of your business, really. Yes, granted, a lady with her equipment and ardent spirit, when aroused by Cupid, might well make the Maneaters of the Kumaon look like stuffed mice . . . and, indeed, there has been talk, but that's the court for you. Suffice to say that while she has had legions of open admirers with whom she has dallied coolly before giving them the old-sock treatment, we are not prepared to speculate about anything steamier. Don't worry, her passionate nature will take off before we're finished . . . but mum.

Now, if you can tear your eyes away from our heroine, we turn to little Kylie, her attendant, a perfect complement to Lady G. Kylie is petite, blonde, pert, and chocolate-box pretty, with those generous contours common among saucy milkmaids and well described by the modern expression "stacked". Inseparable since they won the two-woman bob-sleigh title at their Swiss finishing school, they spar almost continuously, for Kylie couldn't care less about her imperious employer's outbursts, and needles her freely, a familiarity which Lady Godiva secretly enjoys because she feels such tolerance becomes her aristocracy. Just let anyone but Kylie try it.

Having brimmed her companion's goblet with the electric soup, Kylie remarked that it would keep out the cold, and got her head in her hands for her pains.

"Cold, quotha!" withered haughty Godiva. "What shouldst thou know of cold, overweight and padded wi' blubber as thou art! Nay, had I thy surplus tissue I might sit me starkers on an ice floe and be warm as toast, I'll warrant!"

"Pleasingly plump and eight stone in my pantyhose, I," murmured Kylie, no whit abashed. "And who tipped the scale at nine stone two last Twelfth Night? Do I hear the name Dacre?"

"But then I'm not a midget, am I?" riposted Godiva with acid sweetness. "I don't roll for miles when I fall over, like some butterballs I could mention. Sure, nine-two is nought to one o' my stately

inches; 'tis but sweet proportion. Oh, come on, top me up again, and if it makes me car-sick, what the hell, it's better than freezing."

"Aye, let's get loaded," sighed Kylie, dispensing joy-juice. "'Twill make our present plight seem the less woeful, and banish fond regrets that we might ha' been snug at Greenwich, simpering at Her Grace, dancing corantos, and sizing up the Yeoman Warders . . . if only someone had had the sense to wear a black wig . . ."

Lady Godiva's lovely eyes glinted like dangerous sapphires. "If you're trying to wind me up, dear heart," she purred, "you're getting perilously warm. Well ye know that I am up to here, repining this unlooked for voyage to my Cumbrian estate – but what could I do, with Her Grace insistent and Grandpops handing in his bucket untimely?" Moodily she plucked seed pearls from her ruff and flicked them at the decanter, her bosom quivering in a sigh that would have had strip-club patrons clambering over the seats. "Aye, me, I suppose someone's got to mind the store, and who but the old goat's heiress? 'Tis the penalty of uncountable riches and social status that they bring Care and Duty in their wake. Ah, sweet Kylie, sometimes I wish I had been born a poor beggar maid, with no cares but ducks and manure. Or whatever," she added vaguely.

"'Tis hell in the trenches," sniffed cynical Kylie. "But when her ancestors collar the monosodium glutamate monopoly from Henry the Seventh, what can a girl do but wallow lamenting in the dividends? Heart-breaking, I call it."

"It keeps you in tights and Chanel," flashed Godiva, "so knock it not. Skip off the gravy train an ye list, but remember, baby, it's cold outside. Aye," she resumed in pensive mood, "this same wild wind will be sighing its plaintive dirge through the battlements of Thrashbatter Tower, where I was born, 'neath the grim shadow of the lonely fells. We'll be seeing it shortly, assuming these layabouts get us moving before Easter – a stark and lonely hold, gentle Kylie, fronting the grim border. And yet . . ." Godiva's marble beauty seemed to soften in creamy-dreamy reminiscence ". . . and yet 'twas there I played, as tender little child, by rippling beck and oozing bog, and harkened me to the murmuring of butterflies and badgers in the greenwood, all carpeted with daisies . . . And what the hell

do you want, clodpole?" she concluded as the coach window flew open to admit a rush of freezing air and the empurpled face of Coachman Samkin under a thin sheet of ice.

"'Tis of no avail, my lady!" he quavered through chattering teeth. "My big end's gone!"

A dozen crisp rejoinders jostled for priority on the red lips of quick-witted Kylie, but Lady Godiva ignored the opportunity, so great was her fury.

"Have ye not tried kick-starting, fool?" she railed.

"Aye, mistress, but 'tis vain! Boot their buttocks as I may, they stagger like men stoned! The wheels slip, wi'out purchase, and us wi' no chains nor grit –"

"Then find something else!" stormed her ladyship. "Where are your wits, looby? Lay two o' the smaller lackeys 'neath the wheels, so shall ye find purchase enough! Stay, dolt – cover them with blankets lest their liveries be soiled. Jesu, must I think of everything! And close the dam' window!"

"Oh, kindly mistress! Oh, sweet consideration!" grovelled Samkin. "'Tis done in a moment, wi' all despatch! I go, see how I . . . aaargh!"

His fawning protestations ended in a sudden yowl as tender Kylie closed the window on his fingers, and while he is bathing them in snow and calling for volunteers to prostrate themselves beneath the wheels, we pan and zoom dramatically to the night skyline far above the road. You know the shot – usually it reveals Comanches or Riffs gazing down on the unsuspecting wagon train or Legion column, but this is something more sinister by far: a dozen steel-capped border riders sitting their hobblers like black phantoms in the swirling snow, motionless save for the play of their cloaks in the wind and the fidgeting of the man on the end whose chilblains are killing him. A fearsome sight, and worse when you get close and see the gaunt profiles of the long horse-like faces – and the riders are nothing to write home about either, grim and bony villains with wolfish expressions and hungry sunken eyes, for these are Charltons and Milburns of Tynedale, the hardest of hard men on the English side. Plagued by a power cut in their valley, they have been raiding their own countrymen (nothing unusual on the frontier, believe us)

for firelighters and primus stoves; now, on their homeward road, heavy with plundered matches and kindling and a-reek with paraffin, they have spotted the stranded coach, and are arguing not about the practicality but – would you believe? – the morality of attacking it.

You see, if we haven't already mentioned it, the border reivers had eccentric notions of what was fair game. Livestock of any kind, and the contents (what they called the "insight", a definition probably unknown to C. P. Snow) of farms, crofts, churches, and other people's peel towers, were legitimate loot, and murder, arson, kidnapping, extortion, and terrorism were simply part of their business – *and none of these things did they consider criminal.* But there was a line which no respectable reiver would cross, if he could help it: mugging, pocket-picking, fraud, embezzlement, highway robbery, or oath-breaking – these things were out, as the State Papers testify, and if you think the borderers were crazy, well, that was their code. The line got a bit blurred sometimes, admittedly – which was why the Charltons and Milburns were getting all het up as they eyed the great gilded coach with hungry doubt and their extremities froze. They were talking, or rather growling, in Northumbrian, a form of English incomprehensible to outsiders, chiefly because it features a deep guttural noise as of a motor starting up, in place of the consonant "r". In translation:

"Ye cannut tooch it, man!" The leading Charlton, a gaunt cadaver known as Wor Jackie, was adamant. "The bloody thing hez wheels, sista! Rob that, an' yer a flamin' highwayman!"

"If it's got a roof, an' isn't moovin', it's a hoose!" objected a Milburn, producing his dog-eared *Reiver's Year-book*. "Haud up the lantern, Sandie! Aye, theer y'are . . . 'Any immobile dwellin' or sim'lar accommodation may be visited, ploondered, th'inhabitants assaulted, the thatch boorned –'"

"An' wheer's the thatch on that friggin' thing?" demanded Oor Kid Charlton, who always supported his big brother.

"Haud on a minnit," demurred an awkward Robson. "Peel towers hezn't got thatches, an' we boorn *them*."

"Peel towers hezn't got wheels, ye daft git! A coach isna an immobile dwellin', neether!"