

CHAPTER VII

INTERLUDE

ARMADA

THE Spanish fleet had been sighted off the Lizard.

What England had been expecting for thirty years had come to pass at last. King Philip's Invincible Armada was on its way to these shores, bringing fire and sword, bringing back Rome, the priests and the torturing irons.

The Queen was advised in Council that she would do wisely to arrest and lock up the principal Catholics of her realm. Pope Sixtus had excommunicated her and proclaimed a crusade of all Europe against her country; a revolt in the north had been plotted to coincide with the landing of the Spaniards in the south. She refused to take any such measures. If she was not very much mistaken, she said, she believed that the body of her Catholic subjects liked the thought of foreign rule in England as little as she did. She had better notions in her head than that.

My Lord Treasurer, old Lord Burleigh, was confined to his house in the Strand with an attack of the gout, and his royal mistress went to visit him. Out of his bed my Lord Treasurer had got in spite of his pain, and caused himself to be properly dressed. When she arrived he was seated in a chair as neat as a daisy, an antique gentleman white haired, white barbed, with a pink

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face and a pair of the wisest watery old blue eyes in the world. His shoulders were somewhat huddled in a furred gown of black velvet that matched his cap with ear-flaps, but his lower parts were clad as if for a festival in plum-coloured breeches, and on his uninjured leg he wore a white silk stocking and a white leather shoe with an enormous ribbon rosette and a scarlet heel. His other leg, swaddled in clean linen bandages, rested on a cushion set upon a stool, and against the arm of his chair lay his white wand of office. At the little door to his apartment the gentleman holding up the tapestry for the Queen to pass through begged her grace in a humble whisper to bend her neck. He was all a'shake lest her headdress should get caught. They said she looked terrifying without her wig nowadays. "For your master's sake," said she ducking gloriously, "I will stoop, but never for the King of Spain!" That was the mood she came in. Nearly every sentence that had passed her lips since the Spanish fleet had left the mouth of the Tagus had been worth repeating.

The Queen's printer, Mr. Christopher Barker, had been summoned to attend this interview, two very quietly dressed young gentlemen who collected news for Sir Francis Walsingham, and my Lord Treasurer's chief secretary, and for a whole July afternoon they stayed closeted together in that sick-room, the secretary passing certain scraps of paper to my lord, my lord passing them on to his mistress and she, running through their matter with narrowed eyes, flicking some away with her talon-like pointed finger nails, saying briefly of others "Print that," or "This will serve." She did not waste time in any show of indignation even when one of the spies read aloud the report of Cardinal Allen's mace-bearer who had overheard his master

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saying that King Philip had instructed Medina-Sidonja at all costs to take the Queen of England alive! This was work, and she only once showed emotion during the interview. That was when Mr. Barker suggested a groat as the price to be charged for the result of their labours. The Queen was all for sixpence. With dusk she took her leave, Mr. Barker ran off to set his presses a'slapping, and by noon the next day the first numbers of *The English Mercury* were on sale in the streets of London. It arrived in great bundles to the booksellers of Paternoster Row in exact time to catch the City as it went to its dinner. Merchant after merchant unpouched, purchased and stood in the street to read with staring eyeballs that the Spanish fleet was out of the Tagus with the Pope's blessing, that Don Martin Alorcon, Vicar-General of the Inquisition with a hundred monks and Jesuits occupied a vessel loaded with nothing but whips and knives for the conversion of the English, that their Queen was to be sent prisoner over the Alps, to be led in triumph through the streets of Rome barefoot, dishevelled, before being put to death. There was an English translation of a little Spanish poem supposed to be spoken by a Grandee's daughter, who said that her brother Don John to England had gone to kill the Drake and the Queen to take. . . . And in the second verse he had promised her an English lad with a chain round his neck and for her grand-dam a fair English maid to serve as a slave. That ditty, the picture of our blubbering Tom being shipped for Spain in an iron collar, of Moll, Nell and Bess slaves in a Spanish devil's halls, brought more recruits to the Guildhall than all the proclamations ever penned. There was comforting stuff in the sheet too—a brief note telling that King Philip had asserted his

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claim to the throne of England and immediately under that the Scots Ambassador begging an instant audience to present to the Queen a most cordial letter from his master, assuring her and every Protestant in her realm of his resolution to adhere to her interest.

The Queen's Ministers asked the City of London for recruits and ships. The Spaniards were said to have 150 great ships of war manned by 32,000 souls, reckoning soldiers, sailors, priests and galley-slaves. Their cost of sustenance was 30,000 ducats a day, and they had laid in bread, biscuit and pipes of wine for six months. "How many fellows and how many boats did her Grace require?" asked the Lord Mayor. They told him 5,000 men and 15 vessels. After asking for two days to consult his colleagues, he reappeared to lay at her Majesty's feet in the name of his fellow citizens, 10,000 men and 30 well-appointed vessels. He also opened an Armada Fund, an example that every large town in the country made haste to follow, and the Queen had been right, even Catholic gentlemen dipped deep in their purses.

And all this time, while the Greenwich workshops thundered and roared day and night turning out armour, while the fresh-water recruits learnt to march and carry a musket in Finsbury Fields, while country squires arrived clattering into town at the head of oafish tenants pressed into old harness and badged jackets, the Spanish fleet was bearing slowly down upon England shrouded by a midsummer heat haze, but helped along by a slight favourable breeze.

On the twentieth morning of July the sea fog parted for a few moments and through wisps and tatters of mist watchers off the Lizard descried the Spanish ships at last, just as they had been described, yet larger than

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any save in dreams, with towering turrets like castles, clogged with gold paint, a'flutter with scarlet streamers and sewn Popish banners, sailing in the formation of a crescent moon, covering a distance of seven miles of glassy pointed sea-waves, moving very slowly though with full sails, the winds being, as it were, tired of carrying them and the ocean groaning beneath their weight. Overhead a pale round sun cast rays like tarnished gold thread.

Outside the Guildhall in London waited the tail of a long procession, although it was yet but eight o'clock in the morning. Inside, seated behind a long table at the head of the hall, and looking like pigmies in such large surroundings, six officials were pricking able-bodied men for active service. The officials were a Justice of the Peace, an Alderman of this Ward, nigh seventy and fussing like an old hen, an overbearing Captain of Horse from the Earl of Leicester's army stationed at Tilbury, another captain from Lord Hunsdon's defences of the Metropolis termed the Army Royal, a middle-aged pirate bearing a Scottish name sent up from the Plymouth fleet, a young doctor from the College of Physicians and the brother of the master of the Greenwich workshops, a German, Master Jakob Spielmann.

The doors had been opened quarter of an hour ago, but the company behind the table had only got to greetings while a sergeant was taking the volunteers by the shoulders and shoving them into a single line ready to be beckoned up to stand in front of the table one by one. There had been news of an engagement in the chops of the Channel last night, and it had brought in a fresh flood of late recruits, many most unsoldierly-looking, too old, too young, too thin, too fat, as if the

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garrets and cellars of London town had loosed forth their curiosities, as if we were getting to the dregs at last. The Justice had brought with him a roll giving the names and ages of persons in his Ward. "Come on, come on, come on. Captain Dawtry, give me your hand, sir. An early stirrer! Hot again by Faith! And how do all your brave companions down at Thames mouth? Open the doors, Sergeant! What? what? what? They are open? Then call up your bullocks to the slaughter. These gentlemen are waiting, ha! ha! Give me your hand, Master Spielmann. Here is Captain Fleming of the vice-admiral's squadron come up to steal away all our tallest men, ay, ay, ay, come to sit in commission with us. . . ."

"Can you give me half a hundred roaring fellows from your wharf-sides? That's all I ask," said the sea-captain gaily. He could afford to be gay, for three-quarters of the younger men who presented themselves begged to be sent to Drake's squadron. Everyone in London had been to see that old ship lying in the river down by Lime Hurst, everyone knew Sir Francis Drake's fine mansion of the Erber in Dowgate, everyone at some time or other had been accosted by a wild figure with a brown face, gold rings in its ears and a head tied up in a handkercher, quite lost in the London streets, searching for my old captain's house where he bade me cast anchor any night when I lacked a pint and a welcome. Having the Queen herself down to knight him on his own decks, all the gold and pearls he had brought back from lands where natives walked about with their heads under arms and sticky fruit grew on the tops of trees, hadn't made a jot of difference to England's stoutest sea-dog. He was out in the Channel now, and it was common knowledge that

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Drake could not afford to be taken alive by the Spaniards. Watch him standing with his hands on his hips and his ruddy pointed beard jerked up, laughing at the chance, a great curly-headed broadening fellow with sparkling blue eyes and the soft tongue of the West, where the violets come early and lads are born bold with the sound of the billows in their ears.

"You have missed an action then, sir. The report is that your admiral fell on Medina ere he could make joint with Parma last night," snapped the truculent Captain of Horse, hating all sailors for their own sakes. "Let us see some of these creatures, I beseech."

"Marry let us, sirs, sit won't you, sit?"

The sergeant beckoned up the first volunteer, and the Justice began to plague himself.

"Of Bucklersbury, eh? Where's my roll? where's my roll? where's my roll? Let me see, let me see, let me see. Mouldy, ay, married man, nine children, grocer, thirty-five years of age, is that you?"

A dignified-looking merchant answered briskly: "Here an't please your worships."

"What say you to him, Captain?" asked the Justice proudly. "Strong, sober and of good friends. I know the man. I have it here, perfect, grocer of Bucklersbury."

"He'll serve for me if Master Surgeon says so," nodded the sea-captain. "Is thy name Mouldy? 'Tis time thou wert used, eh?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Justice, "most excellent. I'faith things that are mouldy lack use. Very singular good. Mouldy, you are pricked for the Fleet, stand aside." And away went Mouldy, thinking "My wife!" and then with a kind of shamed wonder: "Twelve years since I had a holiday like a single man."

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The next called up was so eager a spirit that he had sat on the Guildhall steps all night so as to be the first in at the doors, but the doctor frowned as he gave his name.

"Francis Feeble, sirs."

"What brings you out with such a cough, Feeble?"

Feeble wrung his hands and skipped about as he answered with eyes dancing from one face to another: "Only a little cold, gentlemen, a little cold which I caught ringing in the Queen's birthday. I get it every summer. It will pass. I am stronger than I seem."

"Or sound," yawned the Captain of Horse behind his hand.

"And of what trade art thou?"

In a low quick voice, as if ashamed to mention it in such military company, the man said:

"Woman's tailor, sir."

"Well," said the Justice, looking round, "can we prick him?"

"He might serve for the Greenwich workshops," suggested the Captain of Horse, negligently picking a gilt thread off his puffed and slashed upper sleeve where he bore a scarf with the badge of the bear and ragged staff sewn in gold.

This brought the German craftsman up in arms. Flaxen bearded, ox-eyed, with long smooth hair falling from a centre parting over a broad linen collar and a doublet of plain buff, Master Spielmann spoke in slow indignant English.

"Gentlemen, these things are not as you think. You all mistake. For my brother's business we cannot take men that are thewless, bandy-legged, thick-sighted, anything as you seem to think that is not good enough for the Army or the Fleet. Our workmen have to handle

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weights that are a strong man's load. Our hours are long. . . ."

The third recruit was so likely-looking that the Earl of Leicester's deputy snapped him up at sight. Peter Bullcalf, single man, had walked in from the village of Kentish Town. He was all for the Fleet himself, but in the end the Greenwich workshops got him, to his amazed chagrin, for when they came to his profession he had been a blacksmith for thirteen years.

"And a good soldierly sounding name too," commented the Justice, unable to resist a quip on the next called, bringing with it a man that looked as if he should have been smart and should have been young, but either nature or fortune had been dealing hardly with him or he must be older than the age he gave—twenty-four. His appearance was dejected, from the one horn button that did not match the six leather ones on his crumpled patched doublet to the faded twisted hat which he turned in his hands. He had a longish sad nose, heavy pouches under his eyes and a high brow from which the hair was already receding. The doctor was studying him as he answered the inquisition.

"Thy trade?"

"A player's, sir."

"Oho! thou art a player. He speaks gentlemanly," commented the Justice, one remark as loud as the other.

"All the players have run in," murmured the Captain of Horse to Lord Hunsdon's officer. "Everyone sees himself a Tamburlaine, ready to die for Queen and Country in a new piece. Most of 'em drink."

"Walk over to that window," commanded the doctor.

It was a twenty yards walk, as this hall was of noble proportions, its hammer-beam roof guarded by winged

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angels with blown back hair, its windows deep-set fifteen feet up and filled with glass dyed strawberry-red, sea-green and azure. Before he had accomplished half his journey, although he held himself erect and did not hurry, the fellow's secret was out and he was called sharply back.

"When didst thou break thy leg?" asked the doctor, leaning forward.

"A year ago, sir."

"And by what accident?"

"I was kicked by a horse."

"Your horse has kicked you out of the army then, as I told you yesterday. Did you not come up before me yesterday?"

With a flickering smile of apology the player confessed.

"Sir, I have tried you before and after your dinner as you might say."

"Tut, tut!" the doctor frowned him away. "You waste these gentlemen's time. Get back to your theatre and help to put on a rousing piece shall inflame the groundlings and lighten the spirits of those of worship in the armies."

"What piece dost thou play in?" asked the Captain of Horse, who liked such things.

There was a second's pause before the man replied gently: "I appear in no piece at the present, sir," and with a bow that had an air limped out into the sun and dust of the streets where the warmth struck gratefully after his two hours' wait in that hewn stone hall. He went up to West Smithfield, where he often picked up a morning's employment as a skip-jack, that is to say an active fellow ready to ride horses up and down in front of purchasers, but there was little doing in the

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horse market this week, for all the world that could scrape holiday was hastening down to Thames-mouth to see the Queen review her assembled forces.

The river had been deliberately blocked by a bridge of fortified barges, so all roads converging on Tilbury camp were choke full, and now and then, scattering the eager civilians to right and left, companies of volunteers came marching through to the sound of pipe and tabor, with drums beating and ensigns flying. An army cannot be raised in six weeks without showing signs of it. There were little soldiers nosing out of large helmets and large soldiers pinched into little breastplates, scarcely a soul had his due equipment of sword, *lands-knecht* dagger, and central-spiked fist-shield, and halberds lay across shoulders of all colours, but nobody was in the mood to complain of small things. Besides, their officers, young gentlemen from the Universities, the Inns of Court and remote country houses, riding dreaming or stepping swaggering along, thinking a bed made of green boughs and dinner eaten off an earthen bank the right life for a man at last, saw nothing wrong with them. The volunteers sang, they cheered, they called back witty answers to the men and women whom their arrival pressed into the dusty Essex hedges, to the lasses and children who ran alongside throwing nosegays of wilting wild flowers at them.

The same heat haze that was shrouding the enemy fleet in the Channel had lain waist-high over the estuary flats early this morning, but now the sun was established in a leaden grey sky and a finer August day for England could not have been found. If there was to be a change in the weather it would come with thunder. There had been a drought for a fortnight past, a providential thing, for there was a notable shortage of tents at

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Tilbury, indeed a notable shortage of all military requirements when you had excepted stout hearts and good humour. Good humour was the keynote of the day, good humour and something more. It might have been the thunder in the air, but something intangible seemed to be drawing this vast assembly together as certainly as if they had entered a ring of fire or were all holding hands to sing a song. The most unsuited people spoke to one another, and just as in this plain full of shifting arms the sun was continually catching a reflection from some shield or breastplate, bursts of cheering kept breaking out for no known reason.

When the Queen was mounted and on her way down the hill from the church nobody needed to be told, for a swelling roar ran through the waiting ranks long before her procession could be sighted. She had arrived at the camp the night before in a gilded coach blazing with flowers made of precious stones tied up with true lovers' knots, but to-day the General of England's army of defence was coming as a prince should on a Horse of Strength. Her steed was a grey: nothing shows up so well.

She had staged her appearance excellently, for she presented herself quite alone and bare-headed, riding at a good distance from anyone accompanying her, easily to be seen and perfectly unmistakable. The furthest off must be able to identify, even if they saw it only for a flickering instant and the size of an atom, that small figure moving resolutely across the green-sward towards a forest of spears, the colour of those piled scarlet locks, the turn of that hooky profile outlined against a ruff only equalled in exaggeration by the billowing farthingale that sat so unsuitably on a caparisoned war-horse. She wore a corselet of polished

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steel and behind her (with deadly secret instructions to drop it and jump for her horse's head at an instant's notice) walked a single page carrying her royal helmet. The middle-aged Lieutenant General had driven the handsome young Master of the Horse half crazy with his nervous fears of a shot fired from the ranks. Anyone who did that would be torn in pieces on the spot, still there were fanatics who would count such a martyr's death, and then there was always the chance that a blare of trumpets or the prolonged cheering would madden that unaccustomed steed. When they had got her into her saddle the Queen's had been the only face on which there was a confident smile to-day.

The Earl of Ormond carrying the sword of state before her was the signal for all ensigns to drop and pikes couch towards the faded grass, and next behind the Queen rode her first in command, her Lieutenant General, a nobleman so corpulent, heavy-breathing and plethoric that any stranger must get a shock at the vision of those pendulous red cheeks above such an expanse of breastplate and array of collars and orders. But the Queen arriving followed by the Earl of Leicester was a sight as natural to all Londoners as the moon arising accompanied by a certain star. Thirty-four years ago mistress and man had been prisoners together in the Tower. Twenty-eight years ago when his first wife had died people had trembled lest the Queen meant to marry her favourite. She had never done that, and he had since married two other ladies, and each time after a storm that would have sickened a thinner-skinned man he had somehow climbed back into his old place, still always her lover in public. His present wife had been a gay widow and before that a gayer maid of honour. She was said to be making a

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fool of him with someone nearer her own age, one of those slight young courtiers of whom his jealousy was a thing startling to witness. They had better be careful, and so had he. The suspicion of murder clung to his name already, but after more than quarter of a century of loving and hating him the Queen must know most things about him. Bah! she must know everything. He had just managed a campaign in the Netherlands with conspicuous incapacity, yet when she had to choose a leader for her army of defence, without question she had named her sweet Robin. That was what she had called him when he had been the best made man in her England and she young enough still and able to sing songs in a high girl's voice. They had the same Nativity, would both strike fifty-five this autumn, perhaps that had something to do with it, or perhaps she really still saw him as the same bold, loud-voiced, full-coloured, passionate creature who had suited her so well thirty years ago. He had never looked or been quite a gentleman, but he suited her still. In their moment of danger they had turned to one another like the old friends they were, and a week ago the Queen had received a letter from the Earl of Leicester which she had drawn apart to read, and put away with a tear in her eye. It had covered eight pages, was particularly ill-spelt and the gist of it all was only that the Earl begged the Queen to take care of herself.

She had a dig at him for that in the speech which she made as soon as she had reached the empty square in the centre of her assembled forces, as soon as the heralds had silenced the cheers for her and the gentlemen following her had swerved their horses into place behind her solitary figure.

Very few present could hear all that she said, but

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even the knots of watchers up on the block-house could judge from her gestures what spirit informed her. Her speech came out of her lips like smoke rising to Heaven, and as if they had been so many faggots touched by fire her listeners took flame from her. When she said that some of her over-careful counsellors had entreated her not to expose her person as she was doing this day, she got such a full-throated answer that she had to hold up her hand for peace before she could add with a shake in her voice that she did not desire to live to distrust her loving people. She twisted herself round in her saddle and shouted at the staring faces to her right hand that she knew she had but the body of a weak feeble woman, but, drawing a long breath while they roared back at her, she had the heart and stomach of a King, and of a King of England, too, and she thought foul shame that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade her realm. With her great horse backing and fidgeting about beneath her, her hoop swaying and her ruff tilted askew by her vehemence, she wagged her marshall's baton at the clouds overhead and cried that she was resolved to live or die amongst her armies. After she had turned to her left side and clapped her hand on her heart with "I myself will be your general!" the applause was so tremendous that the cows grazing in the green water-meadows out of sight of the show looked up wondering for a moment before they fell to work again deciding that nought was amiss with England.

The bands began to play directly she had finished her speech. She was too old at the business to have had music before, music that must break off to give place to a single woman's voice piping in the open air. Now that she had spoken her part and put her trust in God

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for a glorious victory, let the drums beat and the trumpets call. To a great blare of martial harmony she rode up and down the ranks, bowing and smiling from side to side leaving nobody neglected.

The cheering never died down and even her trained soldiers could not contain themselves when she drew near to them. They shouted "God save your Grace!" and she shouted back "God bless you all!" Some of her volunteers who did not know what discipline was, called out "Don't fear, we'll die for you, Queen!" to which she answered "You may easily get a greater prince but never a more loving one!" But after a while she could not reply any more, she could only wave her truncheon and bow to her saddle-bow, and when she trotted off the field at last, those close about her had to take care not to notice that her pink painted cheeks were furrowed and her narrow bosom heaving under its military breastplate.

She had scarcely left the scene when the weather changed, the skies grew black as if curtains had been tugged across them and with thunder claps and forked lightning the storm which had been threatening for days broke over the South of England.

"This'll larn the Spanyers," screamed the Kentish farm-wives, rushing out into their gardens with their aprons cast over their heads to tear down from its pegs their wildly straining washing. "God save all our poor fellows out at sea this night," breathed the town-dwelling madams, fastening their slamming casements and calling for their maids to mop up the water flowing in under their doors. On the coast sailors' kin with mask-pale faces watched the waves rearing up like castle walls to topple and crash in clouds of smoke spray on their frowning cliffs.

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News of a most cheering nature had been coming from Lord Howard's fleet throughout the week; the lightly-handled English vessels captained by men like Frobisher, Hawkins and Drake, had already been plucking the Spaniards' feathers one by one, but not until the storm came was victory complete.

Blown and jammed together, helplessly exposed to the quick English fire, with their sails rent and masts shot away, the unwieldy galleons became mere slaughter-houses.

While the waves spat on his night-dark cabin windows and the whistle of the wind drowned the groans of eleven thousand dying men, by the light of a dancing lantern sweeping shadows up and down the gold plate sliding from his sideboard to crash upon his cabin floor, the black-bearded Duke of Medina-Sidonia held counsel with his admirals.

"We are lost!" he admitted in a whisper, clutching at the table that moved away from his shaking hands.

His bravest captain, Oquenda, could suggest nothing better than that they should make back for Spain by the only course left open, that of a circuit round the Orkneys.

So it came that long after the English fleet had given up the chase, for days and even weeks after the first appearance of the Invincible Armada in the Channel, Spanish galleons were shaking to pieces in the furious grips of the northern seas.

And presently women with shawls drawn over their heads and knives in their hands, chattering Gaelic and Erse, came scrambling down in kilted petticoats over the sharp rocks of their coastline to draw in fish worth the slitting—olive-skinned men with gold rings on their broken fingers and strange money in their pockets.

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Between the Giant's Causeway a shoal of eight thousand such was washed ashore, and on a strand near Sligo an English captain counted eleven hundred naked corpses laid out in rows for the quicker reckoning, only no reckoning could be exact, so many of these Things lacked faces or arms or legs or trunks.

Four months later the English victory was celebrated in London by a public day of thanksgiving with bonfires and illumination of houses and a general holiday. Indeed a young man from the country keeping an eye on gentlemen's horses tethered in the fields outside the Theatre in Shoreditch had not known attendance so good or customers so free with their halfpence since that February dusk when with the first snowflakes of the New Year the bells had rung out the glad news that the Queen of Scots' head was off.