

Letter from the Countess Dowager of Nithsdale to her
Sister the Countess of Traquair, giving an account of the
Earl's escape out of the Tower in 1716.*

DEAR SISTER,

MY LORD'S escape is now such an old story that I have almost forgotten it; but, since you desire me to give you a circumstantial account of it, I will endeavour to recal it to my memory, and be as exact in the narration as I possibly can; for I owe you too many obligations to refuse you any thing that lies in my power to do.

I think I owe myself the justice to set out with the motives which influenced me to undertake so hazardous an attempt, which I despaired of thoroughly accomplishing, foreseeing a thousand obstacles which never could be surmounted but by the most particular interposition of Divine Providence. I confided in the Almighty God, and trusted that he would not abandon me, even when all human succours failed me.

I first came to London upon hearing that my Lord was committed to the Tower. I was at the same time informed, that he had expressed the greatest anxiety to see me, having, as he afterwards told me, no body to console him till I arrived. I rode to Newcastle, and from thence took the stage to York. When I arrived there, the snow was so deep, that the stage could not set out for London. The season was so severe, and the roads so extremely bad, that the

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* This sensible, spirited Lady, who saved her husband's life, and preserved the family estate for her son, was the daughter of William Marquis of Powis.

post itself was stopt : However, I took horses and rode to London through the snow, which was generally above the horse's girth, and arrived safe and sound, without any accident.

On my arrival, I went immediately to make what interest I could among those who were in place. No one gave me any hopes ; but all, to the contrary, assured me, that, although some of the prisoners were to be pardoned, yet my Lord would certainly not be of the number. When I inquired into the reason of this distinction, I could obtain no other answer, than that they would not flatter me : But I soon perceived the reasons which they declined alledging to me. A Roman Catholic upon the frontiers of Scotland, who headed a very considerable party ; a man whose family had always signalized itself by its loyalty to the Royal House of Stewart, and who was the only support of the Catholics against the inveteracy of the Whigs, who were very numerous in that part of Scotland, would become an agreeable sacrifice to the opposite party. They still retained a lively remembrance of his grandfather, who defended his own castle of Calaverock to the very last extremity, and surrendered it up only by the express command of his Royal Master. Now having his grandson in their power, they were determined not to let him escape from their hands.

Upon this I formed the resolution to attempt his escape, but opened my intentions to nobody but to my dear Evans. In order to concert measures, I strongly solicited to be permitted to see my Lord, which they refused to grant me, unless I would remain confined with him in the Tower. This I would not submit to, and alledged for excuse, that my health would not permit me to undergo the confinement. The real reason of my refusal was, not to put it out of my power to accomplish my designs : However, by bribing the guards, I often contrived to see my Lord, till the day upon which the

the prisoners were condemned ; after that, we were allowed for the last week to see and take our leave of them.

By the help of Evans, I had prepared every thing necessary to disguise my Lord, but had the utmost difficulty to prevail upon him to make use of them : However, I at length succeeded by the help of Almighty God.

On the 22d February, which fell on a Thursday, our petition was to be presented to the House of Lords, the purport of which was, to intreat the Lords to intercede with his Majesty to pardon the prisoners. We were, however, disappointed the day before the petition was to be presented ; for the Duke of St Albans, who had promised my Lady Derwentwater to present it, when it came to the point failed in his word : However, as she was the only English Countess concerned, it was incumbent upon her to have it presented. We had but one day left before the execution, and the Duke still promised to present the petition ; but, for fear he should fail, I engaged the Duke of Montrose, to secure its being done by the one or the other. I then went in company of most of the ladies of quality who were then in town, to solicit the interest of the Lords as they were going to the House. They all behaved to me with great civility, but particularly my Lord Pembroke, who, though he desired me not to speak to him, yet promised to employ his interest in our favour, and honourably kept his word ; for he spoke in the House very strongly in our behalf. The subject of the debate was, Whether the King had the power to pardon those who had been condemned by Parliament ? And it was chiefly owing to Lord Pembroke's speech that it passed in the affirmative : However, one of the Lords stood up and said, that the House would only intercede for those of the prisoners who should approve themselves worthy of their intercession, but not for all of them indiscriminately. This salvo quite

quite blasted all my hopes ; for I was assured it aimed at the exclusion of those who should refuse to subscribe to the petition, which was a thing I knew my Lord would never submit to ; nor, in fact, could I wish to preserve his life on such terms.

As the motion had passed generally, I thought I could draw some advantage in favour of my design. Accordingly, I immediately left the House of Lords, and hastened to the Tower, where, affecting an air of joy and satisfaction, I told all the guards I passed by, that I came to bring joyful tidings to the prisoners. I desired them to lay aside their fears, for the petition had passed the House in their favour. I then gave them some money to drink to the Lords and his Majesty, though it was but trifling ; for I thought, that, if I were too liberal on the occasion, they might suspect my designs, and that giving them something would gain their good humour and services for the next day, which was the eve of the execution.

The next morning I could not go to the Tower, having so many things in my hands to put in readiness ; but in the evening, when all was ready, I sent for Mrs Mills, with whom I lodged, and acquainted her with my design of attempting my Lord's escape, as there was no prospect of his being pardoned ; and this was the last night before the execution. I told her, that I had every thing in readiness, and that I trusted she would not refuse to accompany me, that my Lord might pass for her. I pressed her to come immediately, as we had no time to lose. At the same time I sent for a Mrs Morgan, then usually known by the name of Hilton, to whose acquaintance my dear Evans has introduced me, which I look upon as a very singular happiness. I immediately communicated my resolution to her. She was of a very tall and slender make ; so I begged her to put under her own riding-hood, one that I had prepared for Mrs Mills, as she was to lend her's to my Lord, that, in coming out,
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he might be taken for her. Mrs Mills was then with child ; so that she was not only of the same height, but nearly of the same size as my Lord. When we were in the coach, I never ceased talking, that they might have no leisure to reflect. Their surprise and astonishment, when I first opened my design to them, had made them consent, without ever thinking of the consequences. On our arrival at the Tower, the first I introduced was Mrs Morgan ; for I was only allowed to take in one at a time. She brought in the clothes that were to serve Mrs Mills, when she left her own behind her. When Mrs Morgan had taken off what she had brought for my purpose, I conducted her back to the stair-case ; and, in going, I begged her to send me in my maid to dress me ; that I was afraid of being too late to present my last petition that night, if she did not come immediately. I despatched her safe, and went partly down stairs to meet Mrs Mills, who had the precaution to hold her handkerchief to her face, as was very natural for a woman to do when she was going to bid her last farewell to a friend, on the eve of his execution. I had, indeed, desired her to do it, that my Lord might go out in the same manner. Her eye-brows were rather inclined to be sandy, and my Lords were dark, and very thick : However, I had prepared some paint of the colour of her's, to disguise his with. I also bought an artificial head-dress of the same coloured hair as her's ; and I painted his face with white, and his cheeks with rouge, to hide his long beard, which he had not had time to shave. All this provision I had before left in the Tower. The poor guards, whom my flight liberality the day before had endeared me to, let me go quietly with my company, and were not so strictly on the watch as they usually had been ; and the more so, as they were persuaded, from what I had told them the day before, that the prisoners would obtain their pardon. I made Mrs Mills take off her own hood, and put on that which I had brought for her. I then took her by the hand, and led her out of my Lord's chamber ; and, in passing through the next
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room, in which there were several people, with all the concern imaginable, I said, My dear Mrs Catherine, go in all haste, and send me my waiting maid: She certainly cannot reflect how late it is: She forgets that I am to present a petition to night; and, if I let slip this opportunity, I am undone; for to-morrow will be too late. Hasten her as much as possible; for I shall be on thorns till she comes. Every body in the room, who were chiefly the guards wives and daughters, seemed to compassionate me exceedingly; and the centinel officiously opened the door. When I had seen her out, I returned back to my Lord, and finished dressing him. I had taken care that Mrs Mills did not go out crying as she came in, that my Lord might the better pass for the lady who came in crying and afflicted; and the more so, because he had the same dress which she wore. When I had almost finished dressing my Lord in all my petticoats, excepting one, I perceived that it was growing dark, and was afraid that the light of the candles might betray us; so I resolved to set off. I went out, leading him by the hand; and he held his handkerchief to his eyes. I spoke to him in the most piteous and afflicted tone of voice, bewailing bitterly the negligence of Evans, who had ruined me by her delay. Then said I, My dear Mrs Betty, for the love of God, run quickly and bring her with you. You know my lodging; and, if ever you made despatch in your life, do it at present: I am almost distracted with this disappointment. The guards opened the doors; and I went down stairs with him, still conjuring him to make all possible despatch. As soon as he had cleared the door, I made him walk before me, for fear the centinel should take notice of his walk; but I still continued to press him to make all the despatch he possibly could. At the bottom of the stairs I met my dear Evans, into whose hands I confided him. I had before engaged Mr Mills to be in readiness before the Tower to conduct him to some place of safety, in case we succeeded. He looked upon the affair so very improbable to succeed, that his astonishment, when he saw us, threw

threw him into such consternation, that he was almost out of himself; which Evans perceiving, with the greatest presence of mind, without telling him any thing, lest he should mistrust them, conducted him to some of her own friends, on whom she could rely, and so secured him, without which we should have been undone. When she had conducted him, and left him with them, she returned to find Mr Mills, who by this time had recovered himself from his astonishment. They went home together; and, having found a place of security, they conducted him to it.

In the mean while, as I had pretended to have sent the young lady on a message, I was obliged to return up stairs, and go back to my Lord's room, in the same feigned anxiety of being too late; so that every body seemed sincerely to sympathize with my distress. When I was in the room, I talked to him as if he had been really present, and answered my own questions in my Lord's voice as nearly as I could imitate it. I walked up and down, as if we were conversing together, till I thought they had time enough thoroughly to clear themselves of the guards. I then thought proper to make off also. I opened the door, and stood half in it, that those in the outward chamber might hear what I said; but held it so close, that they could not look in. I bid my Lord a formal farewell for that night; and added, that something more than usual must have happened, to make Evans negligent on this important occasion, who had always been so punctual in the smallest trifles, that I saw no other remedy than to go in person: That, if the Tower were still open when I finished my business, I would return that night; but that he might be assured I would be with him as early in the morning as I could gain admittance into the Tower; and I flattered myself I should bring favourable news. Then, before I shut the door, I pulled through the string of the latch, so that it could only be opened on the inside. I then shut it with some degree of force,

force, that I might be sure of its being well shut. I said to the servant as I passed by, who was ignorant of the whole transaction, that he need not carry in candles to his master till my Lord sent for him, as he desired to finish some prayers first. I went down stairs, and called a coach. As there were several on the stand, I drove home to my lodgings, where poor Mr Mackenzie had been waiting to carry the petition, in case my attempt had failed. I told him there was no need of any petition, as my Lord was safe out of the Tower, and out of the hands of his enemies, as I hoped; but that I did not know where he was.

I discharged the coach, and sent for a sedan chair, and went to the Dutchess of Buccleugh, who expected me about that time, as I had begged of her to present the petition for me, having taken my precautions against all events, and asked if she were at home; and they answered, that she expected me, and had another Dutchess with her. I refused to go up stairs, as she had company with her, and I was not in a condition to see any other company. I begged to be shown into a chamber below stairs, and that they would have the goodness to send her Grace's maid to me, having something to say to her. I had discharged the chair, lest I might be pursued and watched. When the maid came in, I desired her to present my most humble respects to her Grace, who they told me had company with her, and to acquaint her, that this was my only reason for not coming up stairs. I also charged her with my sincerest thanks for her kind offer to accompany me when I went to present my petition. I added, that she might spare herself any further trouble, as it was now judged more advisable to present one general petition in the name of all: However, that I should never be unmindful of my particular obligations to her Grace, which I would return very soon to acknowledge in person.

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I then desired one of the servants to call a chair, and I went to the Dutchess of Montrose, who had always borne a part in my distresses. When I arrived, she left her company to deny herself, not being able to see me under the affliction which she judged me to be in. By mistake, however, I was admitted; so there was no remedy. She came to me; and, as my heart was in an ecstasy of joy, I expressed it in my countenance as she entered the room. I ran up to her in the transport of my joy. She appeared to be extremely shocked and frightened; and has since confessed to me, that she apprehended my trouble had thrown me out of myself, till I communicated my happiness to her. She then advised me to retire to some place of security; for that the King was highly displeased, and even enraged at the petition that I had presented to him, and had complained of it severely. I sent for another chair; for I always discharged them immediately, lest I might be pursued. Her Grace said she would go to court, to see how the news of my Lord's escape were received. When the news was brought to the King, he flew into an excess of passion, and said he was betrayed; for it could not have been done without some confederacy. He instantly despatched two persons to the Tower, to see that the other prisoners were well secured, lest they should follow the example. Some threw the blame upon one, some upon another: The Dutchess was the only one at court who knew it.

When I left the Dutchess, I went to a house which Evans had found out for me, and where she promised to acquaint me where my Lord was. She got thither some few minutes after me, and told me, that, when she had seen him secure, she went in search of Mr Mills, who, by the time, had recovered himself from his astonishment; that he had returned to her house, where she had found him; and that he had removed my Lord from the first place, where she had desired him to wait, to the house of a poor woman, directly

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opposite to the guard-house. She had but one small room up one pair of stairs, and a very small bed in it. We threw ourselves upon the bed, that we might not be heard walking up and down. She left us a bottle of wine and some bread, and Mrs Mills brought us some more in her pocket the next day. We subsisted on this provision from Thursday till Saturday night, when Mrs Mills came and conducted my Lord to the Venetian Ambassador's. We did not communicate the affair to his Excellency; but one of his servants concealed him in his own room till Wednesday, on which day the Ambassador's coach and six was to go down to Dover to meet his brother. My Lord put on a livery, and went down in the retinue, without the least suspicion, to Dover, where Mr Mitchell (which was the name of the Ambassador's servant) hired a small vessel, and immediately set sail for Calais. The passage was so remarkably short, that the captain threw out this reflection, that the wind could not have served better if his passengers had been flying for their lives, little thinking it to be really the case. Mr Mitchell might have easily returned without being suspected of having been concerned in my Lord's escape; but my Lord seemed inclined to have him continue with him, which he did, and has at present a good place under our young master.

This is as exact and as full an account of this affair, and of the persons concerned in it, as I could possibly give you, to the best of my memory, and you may rely on the truth of it.

For my part, I absconded to the house of a very honest man in Drury Lane, where I remained, till I were assured of my Lord's safe arrival on the continent. I then wrote to the Dutchess of Buccleugh, (every body thought till then that I was gone off with my Lord), to tell her that I understood I was suspected of having contrived my Lord's escape, as was very natural to suppose; that, if I could

could have been happy enough to have done it, I should be flattered to have the merit of it attributed to me: But that a bare suspicion, without proof, could never be a sufficient ground for my being punished for a supposed offence, though it might be motive enough to me to provide a place of security; so I intreated her to procure leave for me to go with safety about my business. So far from granting my request, they were resolved to secure me if possible. After several debates, Mr Solicitor General, who was an utter stranger to me, had the humanity to say, that, since I showed so much respect to government as not to appear in public, it would be cruel to make any search after me: Upon which it was decided, that if I remained concealed, no further search should be made; but, if that I appeared either in England or Scotland, I should be secured. But that was not sufficient for me, unless I could submit to expose my son to beggary. My Lord sent for me up to town in such haste, that I had no time to settle any thing before I left Scotland. I had in my hands all the family papers: I dared trust them to nobody. My house might have been searched without warning, consequently they were far from being secure there. In this distress, I had the precaution to bury them under ground; and nobody but the gardener and myself knew where they were. I did the same with other things of value. The event proved, that I had acted prudently; for, after my departure, they searched the house; and God knows what might have transpired from these papers.

All these circumstances rendered my presence absolutely necessary, otherwise they might have been lost; for, though they retained the highest preservation, after one very severe winter; for, when I took them up, they were as dry as if they came from the fire-side; yet they could not possibly have remained so much longer without prejudice. In short, as I had once exposed my life for the safety of the father, I could not do less than hazard it once more for the fortune

tune of the son. I had never travelled on horseback but from York to London, as I told you; but the difficulties did not now arise from the severity of the season, but from the fear of being known and arrested. To avoid this, I bought three saddle horses, and set off with my dear Evans and a very trusty servant, whom I brought with me out of Scotland. We put up at all the smallest inns on the road that could take in a few horses, and where I thought I was not known; for I was thoroughly known in all the considerable inns on the north road. Thus I arrived safe at Traquair, where I thought myself secure; for the lieutenant of the county being a friend of my Lord's, would not permit any search to be made for me, without sending me previous notice to abscond. Here I had the assurance to rest myself for two whole days, pretending that I was going to my own house with the leave of the government, and sent no notice to my own house, lest the magistrates of Dumfries might make too narrow inquiries about me: So they were ignorant of my arrival in the country till I were at home, where I still feigned to have permission to remain. To carry on the deceit the better, I sent for all my neighbours, and invited them to come to my house. I took up my papers at night, and sent them off to Traquair. It was a peculiar stroke of Providence that I made the despatch I did; for they soon suspected me; and, by a very favourable accident, one of them was overheard to say to the magistrates of Dumfries, that the next day they would insist upon seeing my leave from government. This was bruited about; and, when I was told of it, I expressed my surprize that they had been so backward in coming to pay their respects; but, said I, better late than never: Be sure to tell them that they shall be welcome whenever they choose to come. This was after dinner; but I lost no time to put every thing in readiness, but with all possible secrecy; and the next morning before day-break I set off again for London with the same attendants; and, as before, I put up at the smallest inns, and arrived safe once more.

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On my arrival, the report was still fresh of my journey into Scotland, in defiance of their prohibition. A lady informed me, that the King was extremely incensed at the news; that he had issued orders to have me arrested; adding, that I did whatever I pleased, in despite of all his designs; and that I had given him more anxiety and trouble than any woman in all Europe. For which reasons, I kept myself as closely concealed as possible till the heat of these rumours had abated. In the mean while, I took the opinion of a very famous lawyer, who was a man of the strictest probity; he advised me to go off as soon as they had ceased searching for me. I followed his advice; and, about a fortnight after, I escaped without any accident whatever.

The reason he alledged for his opinion was this, that although, in other circumstances, a wife cannot be prosecuted for saving her husband; yet, in cases of high treason, according to the rigour of the law, the head of a wife is responsible for that of a husband; and, as the King was so highly incensed, there could be no answering for the consequences; and he therefore intreated me to leave the kingdom.

The King's resentment was greatly augmented by the petition which I presented, contrary to his express orders; but my Lord was very anxious that a petition might be presented, hoping that it would be at least serviceable to me. I was, in my own mind, convinced that it would answer no purpose; but, as I wished to please my Lord, I desired him to have it drawn up; and I undertook to make it come to the King's hand, notwithstanding all the precautions he had taken to avoid it. So the first day I heard that the King was to go to the drawing-room, I dressed myself in black, as if I had been in mourning, and sent for Mrs Morgan, (the same who accompanied me to the Tower); because, as I did not know his Majesty personally

ally, I might have mistaken some other person for him. She staid by me, and told me when he was coming. I had also another lady with me; and we three remained in a room between the King's apartments and the drawing-room; so that he was obliged to go through it: And, as there were three windows in it, we sat in the middle one, that I might have time enough to meet him before he could pass. I threw myself at his feet, and told him in French, that I was the unfortunate Countess of Nithsdale, that he might not pretend to be ignorant of my person. But, perceiving that he wanted to go off without receiving my petition, I caught hold of the skirt of his coat, that he might stop and hear me. He endeavoured to escape out of my hands; but I kept such strong hold, that he dragged me upon my knees from the middle of the room to the very door of the *drawing-room*. At last one of the *blue ribbons* who attended his Majesty took me round the waist, whilst another wrested the coat out of my hands. The petition which I had endeavoured to thrust into his pocket fell down in the scuffle, and I almost fainted away through grief and disappointment.

One of the gentlemen in waiting picked up the petition; and, as I knew that it ought to have been given to the Lord of the Bed-Chamber who was then in waiting, I wrote to him, and intreated him to do me the favour to read the petition which I had had the honour to present to his Majesty. Fortunately for me it happened to be my Lord Dorset, with whom Mrs Morgan was very intimate. Accordingly, she went into the drawing room, and delivered him the letter, which he received very graciously. He could not read it then, as he was at cards with the Prince; but, as soon as ever the game was over, he read it, and behaved, as I afterwards learned, with the warmest zeal for my interest, and was seconded by the Duke of Montrose, who had seen me in the anti-chamber, and wanted to speak to me. But I made him a sign not to come near me,
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left his acquaintance might thwart my designs. They read over the petition several times, but without any success; but it became the topic of their conversation the rest of the evening; and the harshness with which I had been treated soon spread abroad, not much to the honour of the King. Many people reflected, that they had themselves presented petitions to the late King, and that he had never rejected any, even from the most indigent objects; but that this behaviour to a person of my quality was a strong instance of brutality.

These reflections, which circulated about, raised the King to the highest pitch of hatred and indignation against my person, as he has since allowed: For, when all the ladies whose husbands had been concerned in the affair, presented their petition for dower, mine was presented among the rest; but the King said I was not entitled to the same privilege; and, in fact, I was excluded; and it was remarkable, that he would never suffer my name to be mentioned. For these reasons, every body judged it prudent for me to leave the kingdom; for, so long as this hatred of the King subsisted, it was not probable that I could escape from falling into his hands. I accordingly went abroad.

This is the full narrative of what you desired, and of all the transactions which passed relative to this affair. Nobody living, besides yourself, could have obtained it from me; but the obligations I owe you, throw me under the necessity of refusing you nothing that lies in my power to do.

As this is for yourself alone, your indulgence will excuse all the faults which must occur in this long recital. The truth you may depend upon. Attend to that, and overlook all deficiencies.

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My Lord desires you to be assured of his sincere friendship.—I am, with the strongest attachment, my dear Sister, your's most affectionately,

(Signed) WINEFRED NITHSDALE.