



# The MANCHESTER REBELS of the FATAL '45: New Edition

*William Harrison Ainsworth*

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About midnight, in the autumn of 1724, two persons cautiously approached an old moated mansion, situated in Cheshire, though close to the borders of Lancashire. The night being almost pitch-dark, very little of the ancient fabric could be distinguished; but the irregular outline of its numerous gables showed that it was of considerable size. It was, in fact, a large picturesque hall, built in the early days of Elizabeth, and was completely surrounded by an unusually broad, deep moat. The moat was crossed by a drawbridge, but this being now raised, access to the mansion could only be obtained by rousing the porter, who slept over the gateway. All the inmates of the house seemed buried in repose. Not a sound was heard. No mastiff barked to give the alarm. A melancholy air had the old hall, even when viewed by daylight. Of late years it had been much neglected, and portions were allowed to go to decay. Several rooms were shut up. Its owner, who died rather more than a year before the date of our story, preferred a town residence, and rarely inhabited the hall. Extravagant, and fond of play, he had cut down the fine timber that ornamented his park to pay his debts. Death, however, put an end to his career before he had quite run through his fortune. He left behind him a wife and an infant son—the latter being heir to the property. As there would be a long minority, the estates, by prudent management, might be completely retrieved. On the demise of her husband, the widow quitted her town house, and took up her abode with her child at the old hall. With a greatly reduced establishment, she lived in perfect seclusion. As she was young, very beautiful, and much admired, people wondered that she could thus tear herself from the world. But her resolution remained unchanged. Her affections seemed centred in her infant son. She had few visitors, declined all invitations, and rarely strayed beyond the limits of the park. She had got it into her head that her child would be taken from her, and would not, therefore, let him out of her sight. The infant was as carefully watched as if he had been heir to a dukedom; and at night, for fear of a surprise, the drawbridge was always raised. In the event of the young heir dying under age, the estates passed to the brother of her late husband, and of him she entertained dark suspicions that did not seem altogether unwarranted. Having offered this brief explanation, we shall return to the mysterious pair whom we left making their way to the hall. As their design was to enter the house secretly, they did not go near the drawbridge, being provided with other means of crossing the moat. One of them carried a coracle—a light boat formed of a wicker framework covered with leather. Though they had now reached the margin of the moat, which was fringed with reeds and bulrushes, they did not put their plan into immediate execution, but marched on in silence, till a light was observed glimmering from one of the windows. A taper had been thus placed to guide them, proving that they had a confederate in the house. On perceiving this light, which streamed from the partly-opened casement on the dusky water beneath it, the foremost of the twain immediately halted. He was a tall man wrapped in a long black cloak, with a broad-leaved hat pulled over his brows, and was well-armed. As soon as the coracle was launched, he stepped into it, and was followed by his attendant, who pushed the frail bark noiselessly across the moat. On reaching the opposite side, the chief personage sprang ashore, leaving his follower in the boat, and made his way to a postern, which he found open, as he expected. Before entering the house, he put on a mask. The postern communicated with a back staircase, up which the midnight visitor quickly mounted, making as little noise as possible.

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