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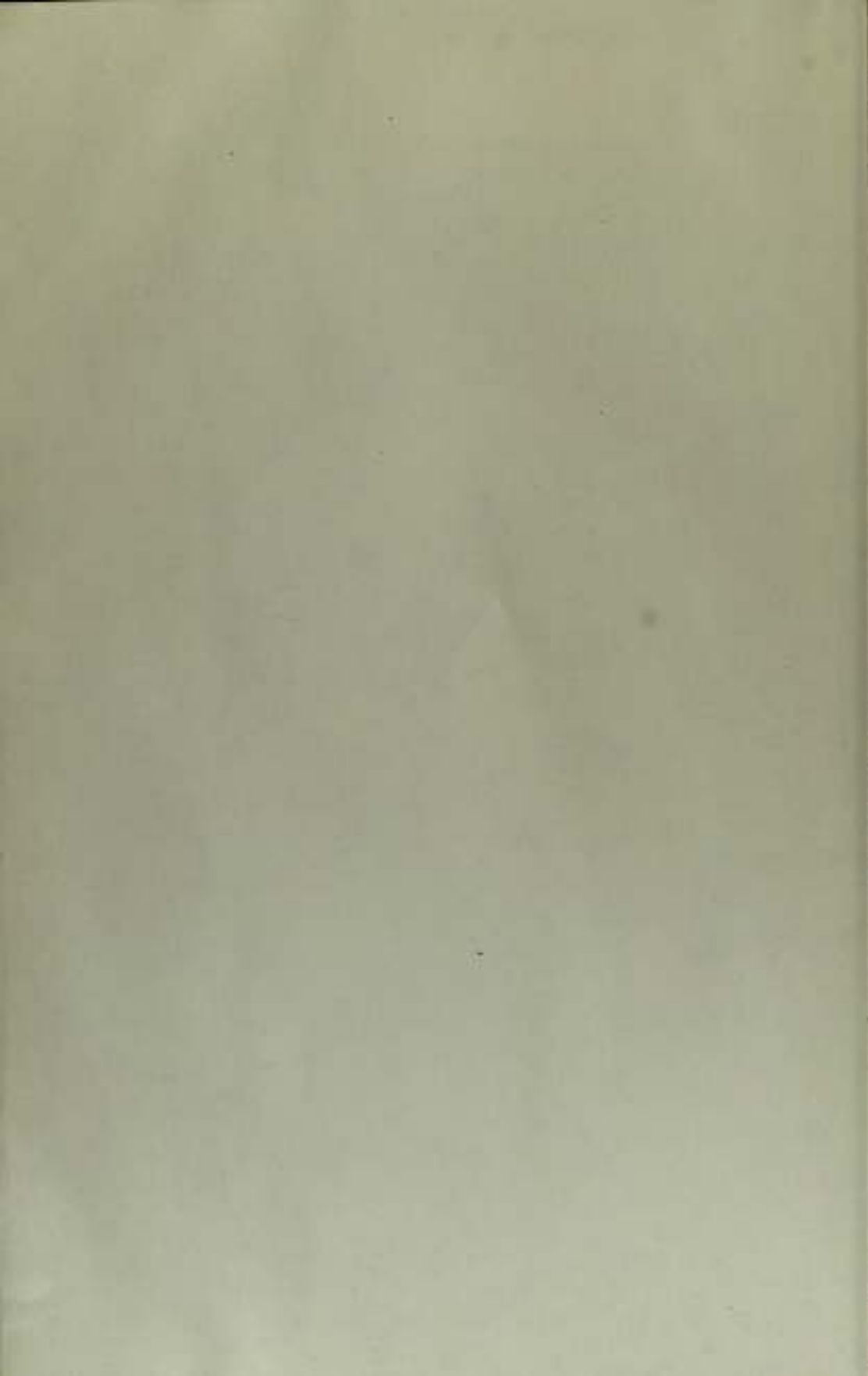
Beyond the weir bridge

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Beyond the
✧ Weir Bridge



Thomas Y. Crowell Company ❖ *New York*

Beyond the
Weir Bridge

By Hester Burton

illustrated by Victor G. Ambrus



First published in the United States of America in 1976

Originally published in Great Britain under the title *Thomas*

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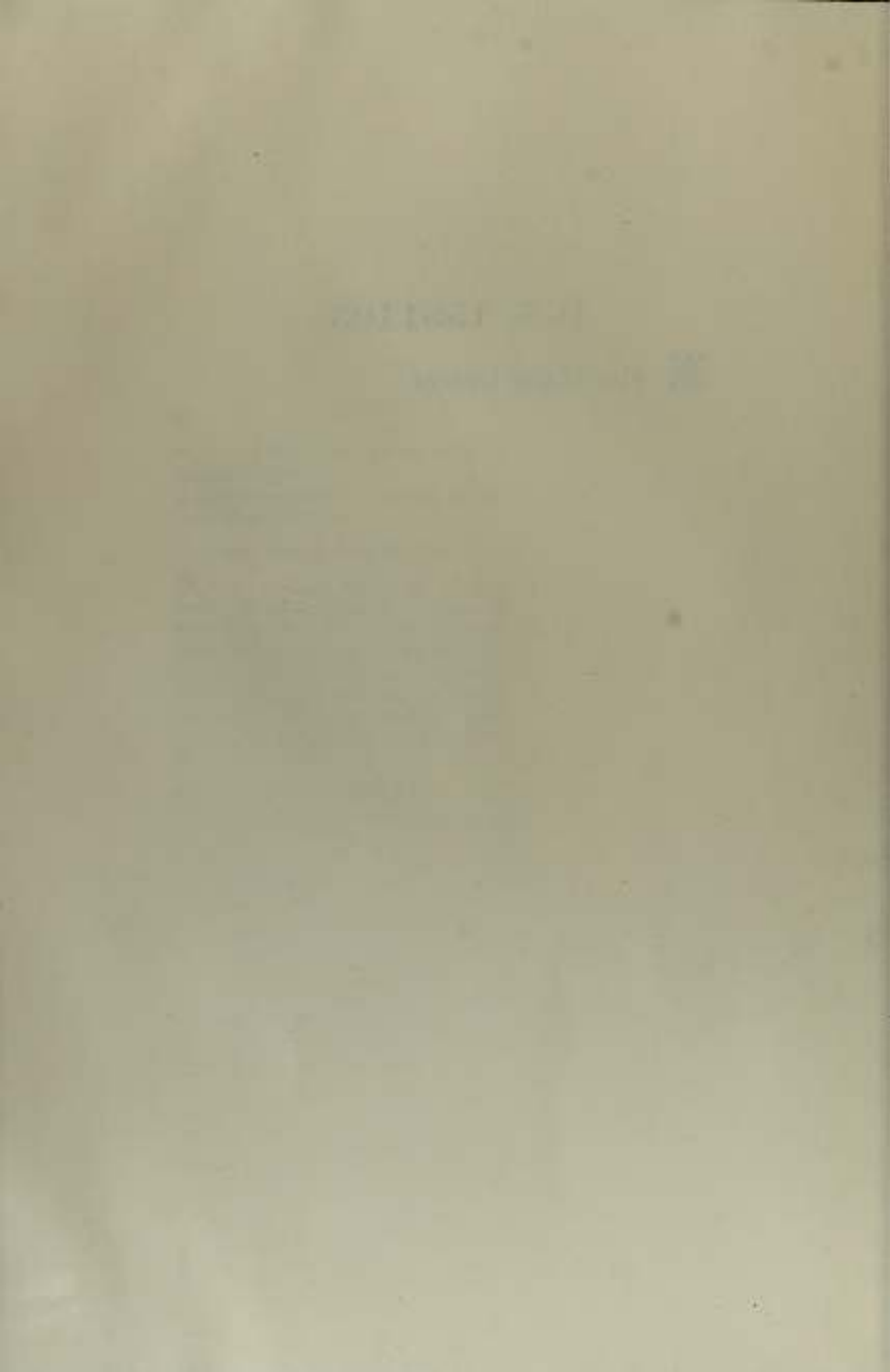
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❖ *For Mabel George*



☼ Author's Note

All the characters in this story are fictional except for Margaret, widow of Judge Fell of Swarthmoor Hall, who later married George Fox, the famous Quaker.

The background, however, against which these characters move—and the trials which they had to endure—are as historically accurate as I, living three centuries later, am able to make them. Luckily, the years 1651–67, covered by the story, are exceptionally rich in diaries, journals, and autobiographies. In trying to recreate the period, I have learned much from the writings of Anthony à Wood, John Aubrey, John Evelyn, Samuel Pepys, and the Verney family. For details of domestic life, I am indebted to E. Godfrey's *Home Life Under the Stuarts*, and for particulars about the seventeenth-century grammar schools, I am indebted to Foster Watson's paper *The English Grammar Schools to 1660, Their Curriculum and Practice*.

The sufferings of the Quakers of this period are particularly well documented. Among the most rewarding sources, I found the contemporary account given in George Fox's *Journal* and Thomas Ellwood's *Life*. I am indebted, also, to two works of modern scholarship: Isabel Ross's *Margaret Fell, Mother of Quakerism* (Longmans, Green, 1949) and William Braith-

viii · AUTHOR'S NOTE

waite's exhaustive *The Second Period of Quakerism (1660-1714)* (Macmillan, 1921).

My information about the plague of London comes from Walter Bell's *The Great Plague of London, 1665* (John Lane and Bodley Head, 1924).

☼ Note on the English Civil War

Some readers may not be familiar with the historical events which form the background of this story. The English Civil War (1642-1651) was the outcome of a long-standing quarrel between the Crown and Parliament over the extent to which Parliament should share in the government of the country. When Parliament, in 1641, demanded wide constitutional changes and the raising of an army controlled by Parliament and not by the king, King Charles I refused to agree and, in the following year, gathered a small army of his own to challenge Parliament's power. Civil warfare broke out.

The king's men were called Royalists or Cavaliers; his opponents Roundheads (because they cut their hair short), Puritans, or Parliament Men. Most of King Charles's support came from great landowners and their tenants, including the Roman Catholic minority, in the North and West of the country. The greatest strength of Parliament was in the East and South, among merchants, smaller landowners, and yeoman farmers, many of whom were Puritan in religion. But there was no exact geographical or social division.

After Charles I's final defeat and execution on January 30, 1649, his son, Charles II, carried on the war with the help of his Scottish allies. But after their disastrous defeat at the Battle of Worcester on September 3, 1651, the young king fled to France and the Civil War came to an end. Oliver Cromwell, the great Parliament military commander, ruled supreme.

x · NOTE ON THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

The story of *Beyond the Weir Bridge* opens six days after the Battle of Worcester, while the fugitive young king was still making his way in disguise to the south coast of England.

Adapted from *The Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia*

Sir James Egerton = Mary Fanshawe
of Maplechampden (d. 1651)
(a dispossessed Royalist officer)

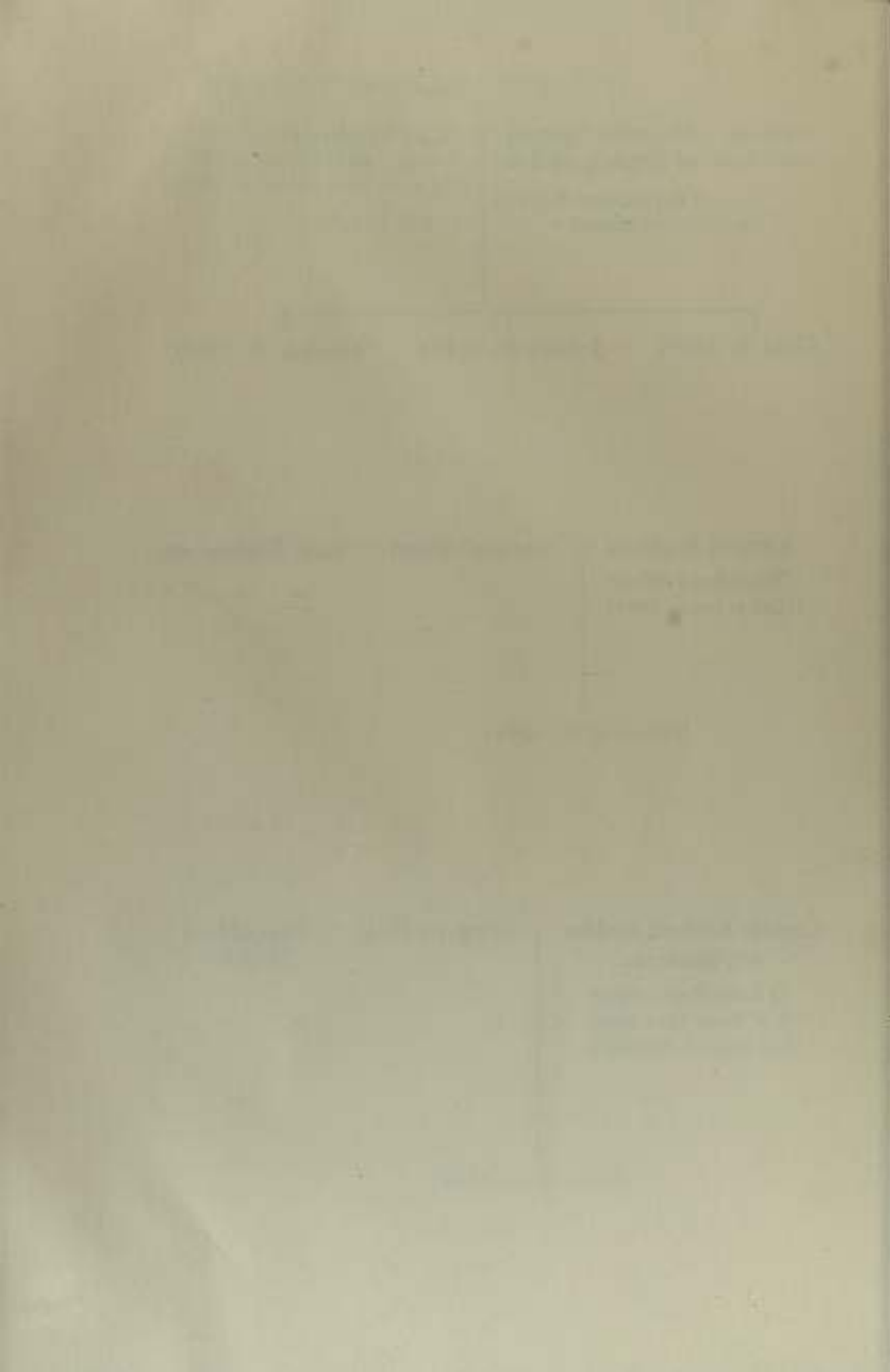
Celia (b. 1639) Jocasta (b. 1640) Thomas (b. 1644)

Richard Bradford = Susannah Bland = Isaac Bennerton
(Roundhead officer killed in battle, 1644)

Richenda (b. 1644)

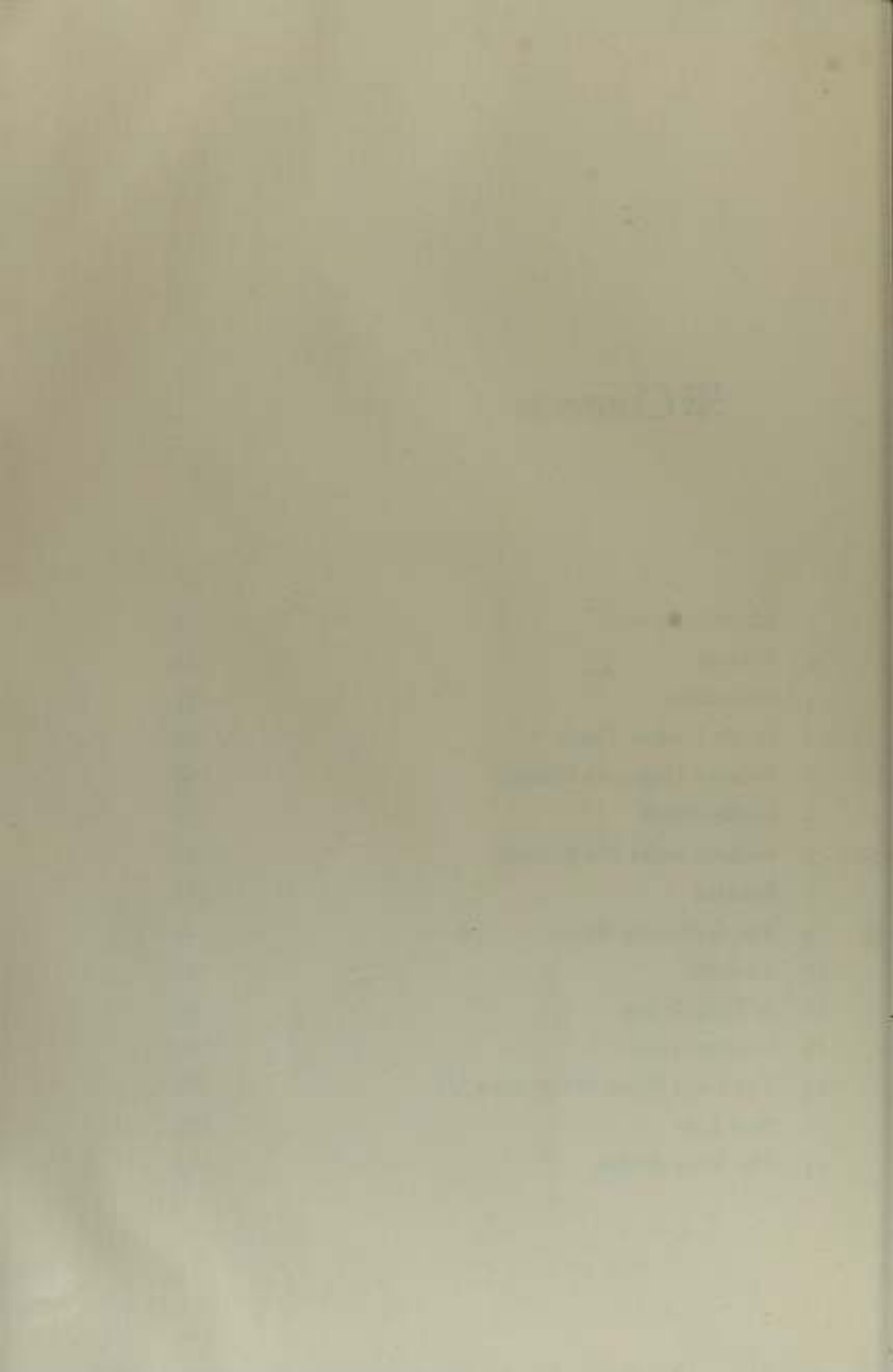
Captain Richard Holder = Margaret Field = Philip Drew
of Atheldene (widower)
(a Roundhead officer d. of fever 1644, after 2nd siege of Arundel)

Richard (b. 1644)

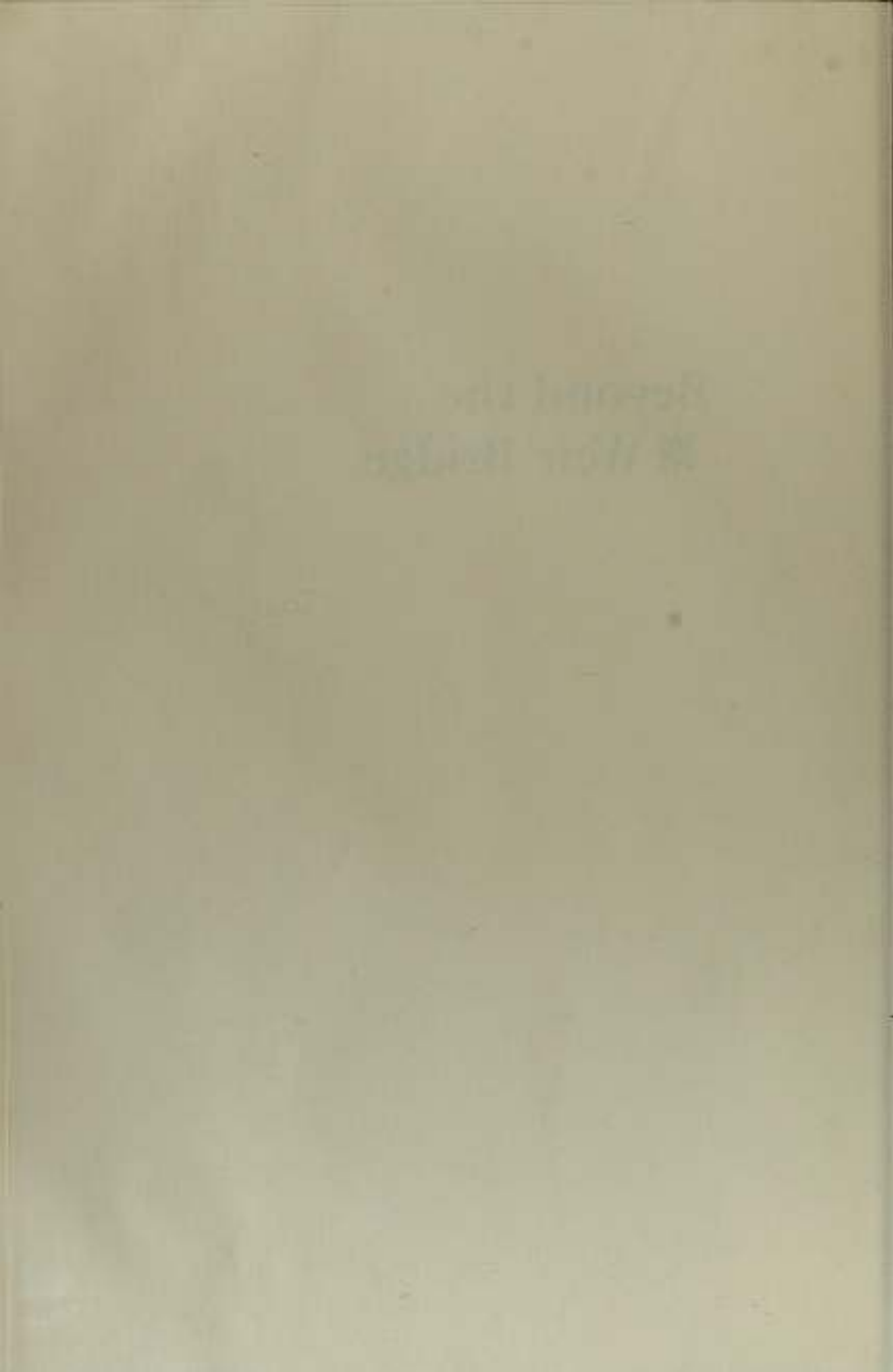


❖ Contents

1	Maplehampton	1
2	Parents	14
3	Schooldays	35
4	In the Broken Times	49
5	Richard Disgraces Himself	68
6	In the North	78
7	Richard Seeks His Fortune	94
8	Benfield	111
9	The Gathering Storm	124
10	Thomas	135
11	A Time of Joy	153
12	London, 1665	165
13	The Lord Have Mercy upon Us	184
14	New Life	202
15	The Weir Bridge	213



Beyond the
✦ Weir Bridge



1

❖ Maplehampden

RICHARD Holder never forgot his first coming to Maplehampden. Every detail of the visit remained sharp in his mind. The great house. The river. The upward curve of the beech covered Chiltern Hills. Even the quaint little net cap that Richenda was wearing. All were imprisoned in radiance, like flies caught in amber.

The distinctness of his memory puzzled him in after years, for there had been so many other things that he might have remembered from his childhood. Hatred, unspeakable things.

Richard had been born in the blackened ruin of his father's house at Atheldene, a bare week after his father's death in battle. And, if this were but a hearsay grief told him by Marty, his nurse, it was not so with the other horrors of the times. He and his mother and Marty had spent the next five years journeying fitfully through an England torn by civil war. The blare of trumpets, the distant booming of guns, and the smell of smoldering farms were part and parcel of his early life. When he was four years old he had heard the clatter of horses' hoofs in the lane below his grandmother's house. Marty had clutched him in her arms, and together they had listened to the soldiers dismounting and shouting to one another as they surrounded his

grandmother's barn. They had clung to each other in an agony of fear, knowing that the troopers had come to shoot the two wounded deserters who had crept into the hayloft earlier that day. A volley of musket-fire. The scream of women. The tears running down old Marty's face. What more was there to learn of the bitterness of war?

Yet there was more—much more.

Three months later, in a summer season, he was running through a sea of grass. The sun was hot on his head. There was a buzzing of bees. He was laughing. He was making for the buttercups which grew along the ditch. On its very brink he had stumbled and fallen on his knees. And there he had remained, staring and staring, struck with wonder and alarm at the white-faced bundle of uniform, moldering and forgotten in the ditch. He had not understood at first what it was that he saw. And then he knew. It was death. It was what happened to men when they were dead.

Next morning his mother had hurried them away, first to Norwich, then to Bedford, then to London—where they had often been before. And it was in London, on a bitter January day just before he was five, that she had come to him as he sat on an oriental rug in a dark-panelled room, tracing the letters on his hornbook—her voice high and her eyes bright with triumph.

"They have cut off the arch-tyrant's head!" she exclaimed.

"Who's the arch-tyrant?" he had asked absently, finishing the rich hodge of the letter "O."

"The king, you fool," she had rasped, tapping him sharply over his head with her bunch of keys.

She was always maddened by his childishness.

"Your father's enemy, the king, you dolt," she had shouted, turning from him in exasperation.

King Charles I's death had meant nothing at all to him. If the king had been his father's foe, then it was right that men should cut off his head. It was as simple as that.

But he had winced at the pain of the bunch of keys—and at his mother's lack of love.

Yet it was Maplehampden—not the war, nor his mother—which was caught in that shaft of light.

Perhaps it was small wonder, after all. For it was at Maplehampden, down by the River Thames, on that autumn day in 1651, that Thomas and Richenda first burst into his life.

It was then that the three of them made their wordless pact. Then that their strange story began.

The young Charles II had been defeated at the Battle of Worcester six days before and on that same afternoon was slipping, disguised, from one safe hiding-place to the next on his way to the coast. General Cromwell's soldiers were out scouring the countryside for the fugitive king. As the coach plunged over the open stubble field and rounded the bend in the river, old Mr. Bennerton pointed out a troop of them caught on the skyline on the ridge of Hampden Hill.

"We ought never to have come!" Richard's mother had exclaimed. "Never! Not at a time like this!"

The Egertons were Royalists. The accursed Charles Stuart, she said, might even now be lying hid in Maplehampden House. They might all of them be suspected. Disgraced. Undone.

Mr. Bennerton shook his head and drove on.

"The wars are over," he replied gently. "And they need us now."

Snap, snap, went the dry stubble under the carriage wheels. Above them, the silent beech trees seemed to hang upon the hills. Richenda, sitting opposite him, swung her slippered feet to the lurching of the clumsy coach and scowled her swift, strange scowl.

"Mary Egerton was our friend, Margaret," her mother said. "Our childhood friend."

"Childhood's a long time ago!" Richard's mother burst out bitterly.

He felt ashamed of her, he remembered. His cheeks ahlaze, he stared down over the wheels of the coach at the scarlet pimpernels clustered round the bottom of the wheat stalks. They were growing pale in the bleaching sun. He wondered angrily

why his father had not given him a mother of whom he could be proud. A strong, quiet mother, like Richenda's.

But it was not his mother's selfish fears nor yet the soldiers hunting the young king that set that day apart. It was not the grown-ups' world that he saw in his memory. It was their own: the children's. It was Richenda and Thomas and himself—all aged seven—who reached out their hands to him across the years.

This was how it was.

Over the weir, not three feet above the water, stretched a narrow plank bridge, less than a foot wide. It was used by the watermen when they cleared the reeds and dead leaves brought down by the winter gales.

Richard took one look at the roaring fall of water and the rickety thing that spanned it and felt the challenge of them both. Yet, to speak truth, it was more than a challenge. And worse. For he had stared in amazement at Thomas at their first meeting, and then stared at his father's great house, and had been stabbed by the injustice of so puny a boy—a Royalist at that—being heir to so much, while he—Richard Holder—had nothing at all.

That mad crossing of the weir was done to shame Thomas.

"I wager you've never done this," he hurled back at him, as he ran out over the River Thames.

The distance between one stout post driven into the river-bed and the next was so wide that the single plank that spanned the gap bent down and swung up under the weight of his running, as though it were alive. It surprised him. It took away his breath. On his right the river slid towards him, smooth and smiling and full of gale. On his left it roared downwards six feet or more into an angry whirl of white waters. He must hurry, hurry, he thought in a sudden flurry of fear, or else the plank would bounce him off into the water. His ears buzzed. It came to him that he had been a fool. A great fool. He vowed that he would never do such a stupid thing again. Never. Out in the middle of the river the roar of the weir seemed to batter all

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