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Opening England's Secret Trap Doors

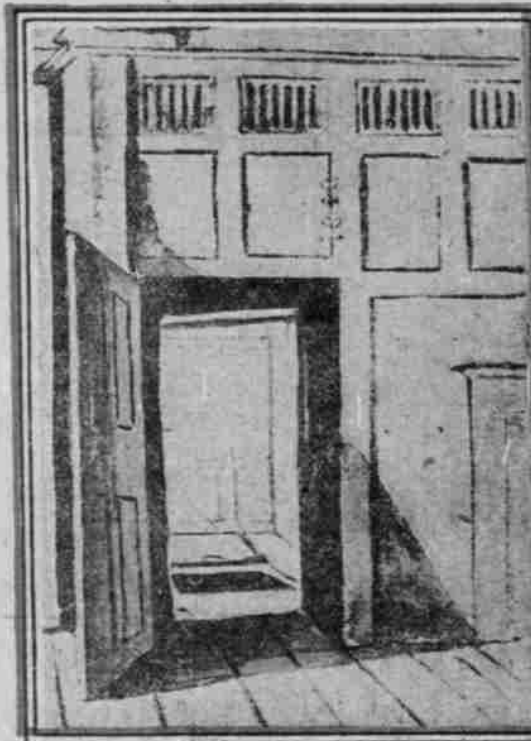
*How the Threats Imposed by a Terrible War
Have Loosened the Old Locks and Bolts
of Hidden Chambers and Passages
That Might Once More be
Needed as Places of Safety.*

THE possibility that Britain might be invaded has turned back the minds of men to the precautions of the dark ages when human beings were hunted down like beasts of prey. An Englishman who has come to this country to place a large contract for munitions is authority for the statement that a number of prominent English families have, to his personal knowledge, renovated secret chambers in their old country mansions as places of refuge for their women and children.

If the invader comes, and the land is overrun by soldiers bent on pillage, they will find these old manor houses apparently closed and untenanted. The desire of the officers for luxurious quarters would probably save such houses from the torch. A few tragedies might result if the buildings were set on fire and the inmates were unable to escape, but it is more likely that they would be able to remain safely under the same roofs that sheltered their enemies, secure from discovery, supplied with provisions and enabled to endure long confinement.

A romance could be written—as many romances have been written—dealing with the stories of secret passages, staircases and chambers in British castles and palaces. It would reveal the secret loves of kings and queens, of princes and princesses and the great personages of various times. It would thrill with strange adventures and dramatic scenes, with legends of ghosts, with torture, murders and blackest crime. There is Berkeley Castle, dozing now in the sunlight, where the shrieks of Edward II. rang out one midnight in a little dungeon; Kenilworth Castle, where Amy Robsart died; and Woodstock, where Henry II. kept his fair Rosamund in a tower that could be entered only through a labyrinth underground.

The novelists owe a heavy debt to the traditions of secret rooms. Dumas makes frequent use of them. In his novel of "Woodstock" Scott describes a painting in the hall of



Entrance to the Secret Chamber in the Garret Chapel at Boscobel.

Hiding
Place in
the Squire's
Bedroom
at
Boscobel.

him. Ages afterward a laborer opened an underground room and was confronted by the body of Lord Lovel, sitting before him, arrayed in gorgeous robes.

After the Reformation the observance of the Roman Catholic religion was forbidden in England, but many of the powerful Catholic families worshipped in secret chapels and maintained priests without the knowledge of the authorities. Most of the hiding places for priests were designed by one man, Nicholas Owen, who himself performed the work of construction to insure absolute secrecy. So ingenious were these retreats that search parties usually failed to find refugees whom they had tracked to the very threshold. These searches often lasted ten days or a fortnight, and were conducted with the help of masons and carpenters, who removed wainscoting, took up floors and made comparative measurements of both sides of walls and partitions, floors and ceilings.

An old manuscript in the British Museum gives information concerning secret chambers in most of the large houses in the counties of England, as well as many Scottish mansions, including the capture of a number of accomplices in the Gunpowder Plot. These men sought refuge at Hindlip Hall, near Worcester, a fine old Tudor mansion. Few places could have been more completely honeycombed with secret chambers and passages, for it was found to contain no less than eleven hidden rooms. The mansion belonged to Thomas Abington, who volunteered to be hanged at his own gate if any of the men sought were sheltered in his house.

The search lasted for days. Finally, in the gallery over the gate two very artful holes were found in the main brick wall, while in and about the chimneys other skilfully built cavities were found in which two of the traitors were close hidden. Several of the funnels or flues of the huge chimney stacks, it was discovered, had been constructed to ventilate tiny chambers. It was at Hindlip Hall that Owen was finally caught.

Two old maids who lived until recently at Pickersleigh Court, an ancient building near Malvern, made practical use of a false floor as a burglar trap. Each night before retiring, they had the false floor in the corridor removed, so that any one unfamiliar with the secrets of the house would have fallen from the second story to the bottom of the cellar in attempting to approach their bedrooms in the dark. It would have been difficult for the old ladies to escape in case of fire, but they were in greater dread of burglars. There were staircases in certain castles in which only every other step was safe after a spring had been pressed. To step on one of the others would mean a fall into a deep vault.

ham Castle, by which the young King Edward III. and his loyal supporters gained access to the fortress and captured the murderous regent and usurper, Mortimer, Earl of March, is known to this day as Mortimer's Hole.

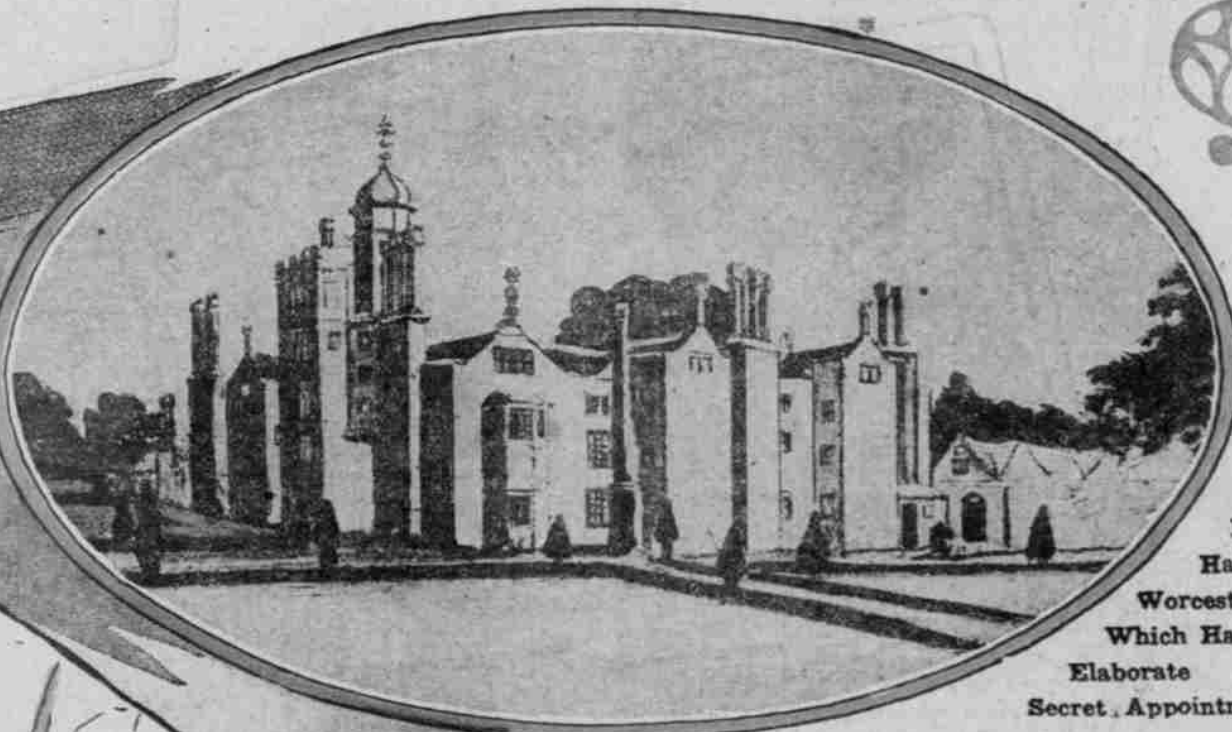
It has been asserted in behalf of various places that distinction is due them for having sheltered Charles II. after the battle of Worcester. Among these the hunting lodge of Boscobel House has the best substantiated claim. It is doubtful, in fact, that the King was sheltered elsewhere after his crushing defeat and before he was able to escape from the country.

There are some gloomy stories told of these hiding holes, such as the one concerning Lord Lovel, a rebel against Henry VII., who was tracked to a certain house, in which he disappeared. His concealment baffled all search and finally the house was burned down without producing

the castle which opens on hinges, revealing the passage leading to the labyrinth. He made effective use of this property, taking considerable liberties with the facts, as he did in "Kenilworth."

Secret chambers were not restricted to the dwellings of the great. There were times when every English country house of importance had secure hiding places. Special reasons for their construction existed during three extensive periods, the Wars of the Roses, the time of religious persecution under Elizabeth and the civil war between the royalists and the commoners.

The famous secret passage of Notting-



Hindlip
Hall,
Worcestershire,
Which Has
Elaborate
Secret Appointments.

