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BLACK PRINCE ***

In the Days of Chivalry

A Tale of the Times of the Black Prince

by Evelyn Everett-Green.

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CHAPTER I. THE TWIN EAGLETS.

Autumn was upon the world -- the warm and gorgeous autumn of the south -- autumn that turned the leaves upon the trees to every hue of russet, scarlet, and gold, that transformed the dark solemn aisles of the trackless forests of Gascony into what might well have been palaces of fairy beauty, and covered the ground with a thick and soundless carpet of almost every hue of the rainbow.

The sun still retained much of its heat and power, and came slanting in between the huge trunks of the forest trees in broad shafts of quivering light. Overhead the soft wind from the west made a ceaseless, dreamy music and here and there the solemn silence of the forest was broken by the sweet note of some singing bird or the harsh croak of the raven. At night the savage cry of the wolf too often disturbed the rest of the scattered dwellers in that vast forest, and made a belated traveller look well to the sharpness of his weapons and the temper of his bowstring; but by day and in the sunlight the forest was beautiful and quiet enough -- something too quiet, perhaps, for the taste of the two handsome lads who were pacing the dim aisles together, their arms entwined and their curly heads in close proximity as they walked and talked.

The two lads were of exactly the same height, and bore a strong likeness one to the other. Their features were almost identical, but the colouring was different, so that no one who saw them in a good light would be likely to mistake or confuse them. Both had the oval face and delicate regular features which we English sometimes call "foreign-looking;" but then again they both possessed the broad shoulders, the noble height, the erect carriage, and frank, fearless bearing which has in it something distinctively English, and which had distinguished these lads from their infancy from the children of the country of their adoption. Then, though Raymond had the dark, liquid eyes of the south, Gaston's were as blue as the summer skies; and again, whilst Gaston's cheek was of a swarthy hue, Raymond's was as fair as that of an English maiden; and both had some golden gleams in their curly brown hair --- hair that clustered round their heads in a thick, waving mass, and gave a leonine look to the bold, eager faces. "The lion cubs" had been one of the many nicknames given to the brothers by the people round, who loved them, yet felt that they would not always keep them in their quiet forest. "The twin eaglets" was another such name; and truly there was something of the keen wildness of the eagle's eye in the flashing blue eyes of Gaston. The eager, delicate features and the slightly aquiline noses of the pair added, perhaps, to this resemblance; and there had been many whispers of late to the effect that the eaglets would not remain long in the nest now, but would spread their wings for a wider flight.

Born and bred though they had been at the mill in the great forest that covered almost the whole of the district of Sauveterre, they were no true children of the mill. What had scions of the great house of the De Brocas to do with a humble miller of Gascony? The boys were true sons of their house -- grafts of the parent stock. The Gascon peasants looked at them with pride, and murmured that the day would come when they would show the world the mettle of which they were made. Those were stirring times for Gascony -- when Gascony was a fief of the English Crown, sorely coveted by the French monarch, but tenaciously held on to by the "Roy Outremer," as the great Edward was called; the King who, as was rumoured, was claiming as his own the whole realm of France. And Gascony, it must be remembered, did not in those days hold herself to be a part of France nor a part of the French monarchy. She held a much more important place than she would have done had she been a mere fief of the French Crown. She had a certain independence of her own -- her own language, her own laws, her own customs and she saw no humiliation in owning the sovereignty of England's King, since she had passed under English rule through no act of conquest or aggression on England's part, but by the peaceful fashion of marriage, when nearly two centuries ago Eleanor of Aquitaine had brought to her lord, King Henry the Second, the fair lands of which Gascony formed a part. Gascony had grown and flourished apace since then, and was rich, prosperous, and content. Her lords knew how important she might be in days to come, when the inevitable struggle between the rival Kings of France and England should commence; and like an

accomplished coquette, she made the most of her knowledge, and played her part well, watching her opportunity for demanding an increase of those rights and privileges of which she had not a few already.

But it was not of their country's position that the twin brothers were so eagerly talking as they wandered together along the woodland paths. It was little indeed that they knew of what was passing in the wide world that lay beyond their peaceful home, little that they heard of the strife of party or the suspicious jealousy of two powerful monarchs -- jealousy which must, as all long-sighted men well knew, break into open warfare before long. It was of matters nearer to their own hearts that the brothers spoke as they sauntered through the woodland paths together; and Gaston's blue eyes flashed fire as he paused and tossed back the tangled curls from his broad brow.

"It is our birthright -- our land, our castle. Do they not all say that in old days it was a De Brocas, not a Navailles, that ruled there? Father Anselm hath told us a thousand times how the English King issued mandate after mandate bidding him give up his ill-gotten gains, and restore the lands of his rival; and yet he failed to do it. I trow had I been in the place of our grandsire, I would not so tamely have sat down beneath so great an affront. I would have fought to the last drop of my blood to enforce my rights, and win back my lost inheritance. Brother, why should not thou and I do that one day? Canst thou be content for ever with this tame life with honest Jean and Margot at the mill? Are we the sons of peasants? Does their blood run in our veins? Raymond, thou art as old as I -- thou hast lived as long. Canst thou remember our dead mother? Canst thou remember her last charge to us?"

Raymond had nodded his head at the first question; he nodded it again now, a glance of strange eagerness stealing into his dark eyes. Although the two youths wore the dress of peasant boys -- suits of undyed homespun only very slightly finer in make than was common in those parts -- they spoke the English tongue, and spoke it with purity and ease. It needed no trained eye to see that it was something more than peasant blood that ran in their veins, albeit the peasant race of Gascony in those days was perhaps the freest, the finest, the most independent in the whole civilized world.

"I remember well," answered Raymond quickly; "nay, what then?"

"What then? Spoke she not of a lost heritage which it behoved us to recover? Spoke she not of rights which the sons of the De Brocas had power to claim -- rights which the great Roy Outremer had given to them, and which it was for them to win back when the time should come? Dost thou remember? dost thou heed? And now that we are approaching to man's estate, shall we not think of these things? Shall we not be ready when the time comes?"

Raymond gave a quick look at his brother. His own eyes were full of eager light, but he hesitated a moment before asking:

"And thinkest thou, Gaston, that in speaking thus our mother would fain have had us strive to recover the castle and domain of Saut?"

"In good sooth yea," answered Gaston quickly. "Was it not reft from our grandsire by force? Has it not been kept from him ever since by that hostile brood of Navailles, whom all men hate for their cruelty and oppression? Brother, have we not heard of dark and hideous deeds done in that same castle -- deeds that shame the very manhood of those that commit them, and make all honest folk curse them in their hearts? Raymond, thou and I have longed this many a day to sally forth to fight for the Holy Sepulchre against the Saracens; yet have we not a crusade here at home that calls us yet more nearly? Hast thou not thought of it, too, by day, and dreamed of it by night? To plant the De Brocas ensign above the walls of Saut -- that would indeed be a thing to live for. Methinks I see the banner already waving over the proud battlements."

Gaston's eyes flashed and glowed, and Raymond's caught an answering gleam, but still he hesitated awhile, and then said:

"I fain would think that some day such a thing might be; but, Brother, he is a powerful and wily noble, and they say that he is high in favour with the Roy Outremer. What chance have two striplings like ourselves against so strong a foe? To take a castle, men must be found, and money likewise, and we have neither; and all men stand in deadly terror of the wrath of the Sieur de Navailles. Do they not keep even our name a secret from him, lest he should swoop down upon the mill with his armed retainers and carry us off thence -- so hates he the whole family that bears the name of De Brocas? What could we do against power such as his? I trow nothing. We should be but as pygmies before a giant."

Gaston's face had darkened. He could not gainsay his brother's reluctant words, but he chafed beneath them as a restive horse beneath the curb rein tightly drawn.

"Yet our mother bid us watch and be ready. She spoke often of our lost inheritance, and she knew all the peril, the danger."

Raymond's eyes sought his brother's face. He looked like one striving to recall a dim and almost lost memory.

"But thinkest thou, Gaston, that in thus speaking our mother was thinking of the strong fortress of Saut? I can scarce believe that she would call that our birthright. For we are not of the eldest branch of our house. There must be many whose title would prove far better than our own. We might perchance win it back to the house of De Brocas by act of conquest; but even so, I misdoubt me if we should hold it in peace. We have proud kinsfolk in England, they tell us, whose claim, doubtless, would rank before ours. They care not to cross the water to win back the lands themselves, yet I trow they would put their claim before the King did tidings reach them that their strong and wily foe had been ousted therefrom. We win not back lands for others to hold, nor would we willingly war against our own kindred. Methinks, my Brother, that our mother had other thoughts in her mind when she spoke of our rightful inheritance."

"Other thoughts! nay, now, what other thoughts?" asked Gaston, with quick impatience. "I have never dreamed but of Saut. I have called it in my thoughts our birthright ever since we could walk far enow to look upon its frowning battlements perched upon yon wooded crag."

And Gaston stretched out his hand in the direction in which the Castle of Saut lay, not many leagues distant.

"We have heard naught save of Saut ever since we could run alone. What but that could our mother's words have boded? Sure she looked to us to recover yon fortress as our father once meant to do?"

"I know not altogether, and yet I can scarce believe it was so. Would that our father had left some commands we might have followed. But, Brother, canst thou not recall that other name she spoke so many a time and oft as she lay a-dying? Sure it was some such name as Basildon or Basildene -- the name of some fair spot, I trow, where she must once have lived. Gaston, canst thou remember the day when she called us to her, and joined our hands together, and spoke of us as 'the twin brothers of Basildene'? I have scarce thought of it from that hour to this, but it comes back now clearly to my mind. In sooth, it might well have been of Basildene she was thinking when she gave us that last charge. What could she have known or cared for Saut and its domain? She had fled hither from England, I know not why. She knew but little of the ways and the thoughts of those amongst whom she had come to dwell. It might well have been of her own land that she was thinking so oft. I verily believe that Basildene is our lost inheritance."

"Basildene!" said Gaston quickly, with a start as of recollection suddenly stirred to life; "sure I remember the name right well now that thy words bring it back to mind. Yet it is years since I have heard it spoke. Raymond, knowest thou where is this Basildene?"

"In England, I well believe," was the answer of the other brother. "Methinks it was the name of our mother's home. I seem to remember how she told us of it -- the old house over the sea, where she had lived. Perchance it was once her own in very sooth, and some turbulent baron or jealous kinsman drove her forth from it, even as we of the house of De Brocas have been ousted from the Castle of Saut. Brother, if that be so, Basildene is more our inheritance than yon gloomy fortress can be. We are our mother's only children, and when she joined our hands together she called us the twins of Basildene. I trow that we have an inheritance of our very own, Gaston, away over the blue water yonder."

Gaston's eyes flashed with sudden ardour and purpose.

Often of late had the twins talked together of the future that lay before them, of the doughty deeds they would accomplish; yet so far nothing of definite purpose had entered into their minds. Gaston's dreams had been all of the ancient fortress of Saut, now for long years passed into the hands of the hostile family, the terrible and redoubtable Sieur de Navailles, who was feared throughout the length and breadth of the country round about his house. Raymond had been dimly conscious of other thoughts and purposes, but memory was only gradually recalling to his mind the half-forgotten days of childhood, when the twin eaglets had stood at their mother's knee to talk with her in her own tongue of the land across the water where was her home -- the land to which their father had lately passed, upon some mission the children were too young to understand.

Now the faint dim memories had returned clear and strong. The long silence was broken. Eagerly the boys strove to recall the past, and bit by bit things pieced themselves together in their minds till they could not but marvel how they had so long forgotten. Yet it is often so in youth. Days pass by one after the other unnoticed and unmarked. Then all in a moment some new train of thought or purpose is awakened, a new element enters life, making it from that day something different; and by a single bound the child becomes a youth -- the youth a man.

Some such change as this was passing over the twin brothers at this time. A deep-seated dissatisfaction with their present surroundings had long been growing up in their hearts. They were happy in a fashion in the humble home at the mill, with good Jean the miller, and Margot his wife who had been their nurse and a second mother to them all their lives; but they knew that a great gulf divided them from the Gascon peasants amongst whom they lived -- a gulf recognized by all those with whom they came in contact, and in nowise bridged by the fact that the brothers shared in a measure the simple peasant life, and had known no other.

Their very name of De Brocas spoke of the race of nobles who had long held almost sovereign rights over a large tract of country watered by the Adour and its many tributary streams; and although at this time, the year of grace 1342, the name of De Brocas was no more heard, but that of the proud Sieur de Navailles who now reigned there instead, the old name was loved and revered amongst the people, and the boys were bred up in all the traditions of their race, till the eagle nature at last asserted itself, and they felt that life could no longer go on in its old accustomed groove. Had they not been taught from infancy that a great future lay before them? and what could that future be but the winning back of their old ancestral lands and rights?

Perhaps they would have spoken more of this deeply-seated hope had it not been so very chimerical -- so apparently impossible of present fulfilment. To wrest from the proud and haughty Sieur de Navailles the vast territory and strong castle that had been held by him in open defiance of many mandates from a powerful King, was a task that even the sanguine and ambitious boys knew to be a hundred times too hard for them. If they had dreamed of it in their hearts, they had scarce named the hope even to each other. But today the brooding silence had been broken. The twins had taken counsel one with the other; and now burning thoughts of this other fair inheritance were in the minds of both. What golden possibilities did not open out before them? How small a matter it seemed to cross the ocean and claim as their own that unknown Basildene! Both were certain that their mother had held it in her own right. Sure, if there were right or justice in the kingdom of the Roy Outremer, they would but have to show who and what they were, to become in very fact what their mother had loved to call them -- the twin brothers of Basildene.

How their young hearts swelled with delighted expectation at the thought of leaving behind the narrow life of the mill, and going forth into the wide world to seek fame and fortune there! And England was no such foreign land to them, albeit they had never been above ten leagues from the mill where they had been born and brought up. Was not their mother an Englishwoman? Had she not taught them the language of her country, and begged them never to forget it? And could they not speak it now as well as they spoke the language of Gascony -- better than they spoke the French of the great realm to which Gascony in a fashion belonged?

The thought of travel always brings with it a certain exhilaration, especially to the young and ardent, and thoughts of such a journey on such a quest could not but be tinged with all the rainbow hues of hope.

"We will go; we will go right soon!" cried Gaston. "Would that we could go tomorrow! Why have we lingered here so long, when we might have been up and doing years ago?"

"Nay, Brother, we were but children years ago. We are not yet sixteen. Yet methinks our manhood comes the faster to us for that noble blood runs in our veins. But we will speak to Father Anselm. He has always been our kindest friend. He will best counsel us whether to go forth, or whether to tarry yet longer at home --"

"I will tarry no longer; I pant to burst my bonds," cried the impetuous Gaston; and Raymond was in no whit less eager, albeit he had something more of his mother's prudence and self-restraint.

"Methinks the holy Father will bid us go forth," he said thoughtfully. "He has oft spoken to us of England and the Roy Outremer, and has ever bidden us speak our mother's tongue, and not forget it here in these parts where no man else speaks it. I trow he has foreseen the day when we should go thither to claim our birthright. Our mother told him many things that we were too young to hear. Perchance he could tell us more of Basildene than she ever did, if we go to him and question him thereupon."

Gaston nodded his head several times.

"Thou speakest sooth, Brother," said he. "We will go to him forthwith. We will take counsel with him, albeit --"

Gaston did not finish his sentence, for two reasons. One was that his brother knew so well what words were on his lips that speech was well-nigh needless; the other, that he was at that moment rudely interrupted. And although the brothers had no such thought at the time, it is probable that this interruption and its consequences had a very distinct bearing upon their after lives, and certainly it produced a marked effect upon the counsel they subsequently received from their spiritual father, who, but for that episode, might strongly have dissuaded the youths from going forth so young into the world.

The interruption came in the form of an angry hail from a loud and gruff voice, full of impatience and resentment.

"Out of my path, ye base-born peasants!" shouted a horseman who had just rounded the sharp angle taken by the narrow bridle path, and was brought almost to a standstill by the tall figures of the two stalwart youths, which took up the whole of the open way between the trees and their thick undergrowth. "Stand aside, ye idle loons! Know ye not how to make way for your betters? Then, in sooth, I will teach you a lesson;" and a thick hide lash came whirling through the air and almost lighted upon the shoulders of Gaston, who chanced to be the nearer.

But such an insult as that was not to be borne. Even a Gascon peasant might well have sprung upon a solitary adversary of noble blood had he ventured to assault him thus, without support from his train of followers. As for Gaston, he hesitated not an instant, but with flashing eyes he sprang at the right arm of his powerful adversary, and had wrested the whip from him and tossed it far away before the words were well out of the angry lord's mouth.

With a great oath the man drew his sword; but the youth laughed him to scorn as he stepped back out of reach of the formidable weapon. He well knew his advantage. Light of foot, though all unarmed, he could defy any horseman in this wooded spot. No horse could penetrate to the right or left of the narrow track. Even if the knight dismounted, the twin brothers, who knew every turn and winding of these dim forest paths, could lead him a fine dance, and then break away and let him find his way out as best he could. Fearless and impetuous as Gaston ever was, at this moment his fierce spirit was stirred more deeply within him than it had ever been before, for in this powerful warrior who had dared to insult both him and his brother, ay, and their mother's fair fame too -- he recognized the lineaments of the hated Sieur de Navailles.

The more cautious Raymond had done the same, and now he spoke in low though urgent accents.

"Have a care, Brother! Knowest thou who it be?"

"Know? ay, that I do. It is he who now holds by force and tyranny those fair lands which should be ours -- lands which our forefathers held from generation to generation, which should be theirs now, were right and justice to be had, as one day it may be, when the Roy Outremer comes in person, as men say he will one day come, and all men may have access to his royal presence. And he, the tyrant, the usurper, dares to call us base born, to call us peasants, we who own a nobler name than he!

"The day will come, proud man, when thou shalt rue the hour when thou spakest thus to me -- to me who am thy equal, ay, and more than thy equal, in birth, and who will some day come and prove it to thee at the sword's point!"

Many expressions had flitted over the rider's face as these bold words had been spoken -- anger, astonishment, then an unspeakable fury, which made Gaston look well to the hand which held the shining sword; last of all an immense astonishment of a new kind, a perplexity not unmixed with dismay, and tinged with a lively curiosity. As the youth ceased speaking the knight sheathed his sword, and when he replied his voice was pitched in a very different key.

"I pray you pardon, young sirs," he said, glancing quickly from one handsome noble face to the other. "I knew not that I spoke to those of gentle birth. The dress deceived me. Tell me now, good youths, who and whence are ye? You have spoken in parables so far; tell me more plainly, what is your name and kindred?"

Raymond, who had heard somewhat of the enmity of the Sieur de Navailles, and knew that their identity as sons of the house of De Brocas had always been kept from his knowledge, here pressed his brother's arm as though to suggest the necessity for caution; but Gaston's hot blood was up. The talk they had been holding together had strung his nerves to

the utmost pitch of tension. He was weary of obscurity, weary of the peasant life. He cared not how soon he threw off the mask. Asked a downright question, even by a foe, it was natural to him to make a straightforward answer, and he spoke without fear and without hesitation.

"We are the sons of Arnald de Brocas. De Brocas is our name; we can prove it whenever such proof becomes needful. Our fathers held these fair lands long ere you or yours did. The day may come when a De Brocas may reign here once more, and the cursed brood of Navailles be rooted out for ever."

And without waiting to see the effect produced by such words upon the haughty horseman, the two brothers dashed off into the wood, and were speedily lost to sight.

CHAPTER II. FATHER ANSELM.

The mill of Sainte-Foi, which was the home of the twin brothers of the De Brocas line, was situated upon a tributary stream of the river Adour, and was but a couple of leagues distant from the town of Sauveterre -- one of those numerous "bastides" or "villes Anglaises" built by the great King Edward the First of England during his long regency of the province of Gascony in the lifetime of his father. It was one of those so-called "Filleules de Bordeaux" which, bound by strong ties to the royal city, the queen of the Garonne, stood by her and played so large a part in the great drama of the Hundred Years' War. Those cities had been built by a great king and statesman to do a great work, and to them were granted charters of liberties such as to attract into their walls large numbers of persons who helped originally in the construction of the new townships, and then resided there, and their children after them, proud of the rights and immunities they claimed, and loyally true to the cause of the English Kings, which made them what they were.

It is plain to the reader of the history of those days that Gascony could never have remained for three hundred years a fief of the English Crown, had it not been to the advantage of her people that she should so remain. Her attachment to the cause of the Roy Outremer, her willing homage to him, would never have been given for so long a period of time, had not the people of the land found that it was to their own advancement and welfare thus to accord this homage and fealty.

Nor is the cause for this advantage far to seek. Gascony was of immense value to England, and of increasing value as she lost her hold upon the more northerly portions of France. The wine trade alone was so profitable that the nobility, and even the royal family of England, traded on their own account. Bordeaux, with its magnificent harbour and vast trade, was a queen amongst maritime cities. The vast "landes" of the province made the best possible rearing ground for the chargers and cavalry horses to which England owed much of her warlike supremacy; whilst the people themselves, with their strength and independence of character, their traditions of personal and individual freedom which can be clearly traced back to the Roman occupation of the province, and their long attachment to England and her King, were the most valuable of allies; and although they must have been regarded to a certain extent as foreigners when on English soil, they still assimilated better and worked more easily with British subjects than any pure Frenchman had ever been found to do.

Small wonder then that so astute a monarch as the First Edward had taken vast pains to draw closer the bond which united this fair province to England. The bold Gascons well knew that they would find no such liberties as they now enjoyed did they once put themselves beneath the rule of the French King. His country was already overgrown and almost unmanageable. He might cast covetous eyes upon Gascony, but he would not pour into it the wealth that flowed steadily from prosperous England. He would not endow it with charters, each one more liberal than the last, or bind it to his kingdom by giving it a pre-eminence that would but arouse the jealousy of its neighbours. No: the shrewd Gaseous knew that full well, and knew when they were well off. They could often obtain an increase of liberty and an enlarged charter of rights by coquetting with the French monarch, and thus rousing the fears of the English King; but they had no wish for any real change, and lived happily and prosperously beneath the rule of the Roy Outremer; and amongst all the freemen of the Gascon world, none enjoyed such full privileges as those who lived within the walls of the "villes Anglaises," of which Sauveterre was one amongst the smaller cities.

The construction of these towns (now best seen in Libourne) is very simple, and almost always practically the same -- a square in the centre formed by the public buildings, with eight streets radiating from it, each guarded by a gate. An outer ditch or moat protected the wall or palisade, and the towns were thus fortified in a simple but effective manner, and guarded as much by their own privileges as by any outer bulwarks. The inhabitants were bound together by close ties, and each smaller city looked to the parent city of Bordeaux, and was proud of the title of her daughter.

Sauveterre and its traditions and its communistic life were familiar enough, and had been familiar from childhood to the twin brothers.

Halfway between the mill and the town stood a picturesque and scattered hamlet, and to this hamlet was attached a church, of which a pious ecclesiastic, by name Father Anselm, had charge. He was a man of much personal piety, and was greatly beloved through all the countryside, where he was known in every hut and house for leagues around the doors of his humble home. He was, as was so frequently the case in those times, the doctor and the scribe, as well as the spiritual adviser, of his entire flock; and he was so much trusted and esteemed that all men told him their affairs and asked advice, not in the confessional alone, but as one man speaking to another in whom he has strong personal confidence.

The twin brothers knew that during the years when their dead mother had resided at the mill with honest Jean and Margot (they began greatly to wonder now why she had so lived in hiding and obscurity), she had been constantly visited by the holy Father, and that she had told him things about herself and her history which were probably known to no other human being beside. Brought up as the youths had been, and trained in a measure beneath the kindly eye of the priest, they would in any case have asked his counsel and blessing before taking any overt step in life; but all the more did they feel that they must speak to him now, since he was probably the only person within their reach who could

tell them anything as to their own parentage and history that they did not know already.

"We will go to him upon the morrow," said Gaston with flashing eyes. "We will rise with the sun -- or before it -- and go to him ere his day's work is begun. He will surely find time to talk with us when he hears the errand upon which we come. I trow now that when he has sat at our board, and has bent upon our faces those glances I have not known how to read aright, he has been wondering how long it would be ere we should awake to the knowledge that this peasant life is not the life of the De Brocas race, guessing that we should come to him for counsel and instruction ere we spread our wings to flee away. They call us eaglets in sooth; and do eaglets rest for ever in their mountain eyry? Nay, they spread their wings as strength comes upon them, and soar upwards and onwards to see for themselves the great world around; even as thou and I will soar away, Brother, and seek other fortunes than will ever be ours here in Sauveterre."

With these burning feelings in their hearts, it was no wonder that the twins uttered a simultaneous exclamation of satisfaction and pleasure when, as they approached the mill, they were aware of the familiar figure of Father Anselm sitting at the open door of the living house, engaged, as it seemed, in an animated discussion with the worthy miller and his good wife.

The look which the Father bent upon the two youths as they approached betrayed a very deep and sincere affection for them; and when after supper they asked to speak with him in private, he readily acceded to their request, accepting the offer of a bed from the miller's wife, as already the sun had long set, and his own home was some distance away.

The faces of Jean and Margot were grave with anxious thought, and that of the priest seemed to reflect something of the same expression; for during the course of the simple meal which all had shared together, Gaston had told of the unlooked-for encounter with the proud Sieur de Navailles in the forest, and of the defiance he had met with from the twin eaglets. As the good miller and his wife heard how Gaston had openly declared his name and race to the implacable foe of his house, they wrung their hands together and uttered many lamentable exclamations. The present Lord of Saut was terribly feared throughout the neighbourhood in which he dwelt. His fierce and cruel temper had broken forth again and again in acts of brutality or oppression from which there was practically no redress. Free as the Gascon peasant was from much of the serfdom and feudal servitude of other lands, he was in some ways worse off than the serf, when he chanced to have roused the anger of some great man of the neighbourhood. The power of the nobles and barons -- the irresponsible power they too often held -- was one of the crying evils of the age, one which was being gradually extinguished by the growing independence of the middle classes. But such changes were slow of growth, and long in penetrating beyond great centres; and it was a terrible thing for a brace of lads, unprotected and powerless as these twin brothers, to have brought upon themselves the hostility and perchance the jealousy of a man like the Sieur de Navailles. If he wished to discover their hiding place, he would have small difficulty in doing so; and let him but once find that out, and the lives of the boys would not be safe either by night or day. The retainers of the proud baron might swoop down at any moment upon the peaceful mill, and carry off the prey without let or hindrance; and this was why the secret of their birth and name had been so jealously kept from all (save a few who loved the house of De Brocas) by the devoted miller and his wife.

But Gaston little recked of the threatened peril. The fearless nature of his race was in him, and he would have scorned himself had he failed to speak out boldly when questioned by the haughty foe of his house. If the De Brocas had been ruined in all else, they had their fearless honour left them still.

But the priest's face was grave as he let the boys lead him into the narrow bedchamber where they slept -- a room bare indeed of such things as our eyes would seek, but which for the times was commodious and comfortable enough. He was pondering in his mind what step must now be taken, for it seemed to him as though the place of safety in the mill in which their mother had left her sons could hide them no longer. Go they must, of that he felt well assured; but where? That was a question less easily answered offhand.

"Father," began Gaston eagerly, so soon as the door had closed behind the three, and Raymond had coaxed the dim taper into its feeble flicker -- "Father, we have come to thee for counsel -- for help. Father, chide us not, nor call us ingrate; but it has come to this with us -- we can no longer brook this tame and idle life. We are not of the peasant stock; why must we live the peasant life? Father, we long to be up and doing -- to spread our wings for a wider flight. We know that those who bear our name are not hiding their heads in lowly cots; we know that our sires have been soldiers and statesmen in the days that are past. Are we then to hide our heads here till the snows of age gather upon them? Are we, of all our race, to live and die obscure, unknown? Father, we cannot stand it; it shall not be! To thee we come to ask more of ourselves than yet we know. To thee our mother commended us in her last moments; to thee she bid us look in days to come when we needed guidance and help. Wherefore to thee we have come now, when we feel that there must surely be an end to all of this. Tell us, Father, of our sire; tell us of our kinsfolk. Where be they? Where may we seek them? I trow thou knowest all. Then tell us, I beseech thee tell us freely all there is to know."

The good priest raised his eyes and thoughtfully scanned the faces of the two eager youths. Gaston was actually shivering with repressed excitement; Raymond was more calm, but not, as it seemed, one whit less interested. What a strong and manly pair they looked! The priest's eyes lighted with pride as they rested on the stalwart figures and noble faces. It was hard to believe that these youths were not quite sixteen, though man's estate was then accounted reached at an age which we should call marvellously immature in these more modern days.

"My children," said the good old man, speaking slowly and with no small feeling, "I have long looked for this day to come -- the day when ye twain should stand thus before me and put this selfsame question."

"You have looked for it!" said Gaston eagerly; "then, in very sooth, there is something to tell?"

"Yes, my children, there is a long story to tell; and it seemeth to me, even as it doth to you, that the time has now come to tell it. This day has marked an era in your lives. Methinks that from this night your childhood will pass for ever away, and the life of your manhood commence. May the Holy Mother of God, the Blessed Saints, and our gracious Saviour Himself watch over and guard you in all the perils and dangers of the life that lies before you!"

So solemn were the tones of the Father that the boys involuntarily sank upon their knees, making the sign of the Cross as they did so. The priest breathed a blessing over the two, and when they had risen to their feet, he made them sit one on each side of him upon the narrow pallet bed.

"The story is something long -- the story which will tell ye twain who and what ye are, and why ye have been thus exiled and forced to dwell obscure in this humble home; but I will tell all I know, and ye will then see something of the cause.

"My children, ye know that ye have a noble name -- that ye belong to the house of De Brocas, which was once so powerful and great in these fair lands around this home of yours. I wot that ye know already some thing of the history of your house, how that it was high in favour with the great King of England, that first Edward who so long dwelt amongst us, and made himself beloved by the people of these lands. It was in part fidelity to him that was the cause of your kinsfolk's ruin: for whilst they served him in other lands, following him across the sea when he was bidden to go thither, the treacherous foe of the house of Navailles wrested from them, little by little, all the lands they had owned here, and not even the many mandates from the Roy Outremer sufficed to gain them their rights again. It might have been done had the great Edward lived; but when he died and his son mounted the throne, men found at once how weak were the hands that held the sovereign power, and the Sieur de Navailles laughed in his beard at commands he knew there was no power to enforce. But listen again, my sons; that feeble King, despite many and great faults, was not without some virtues also; and he did not forget that the house of De Brocas had ruined itself in the cause of himself and his father."

"Did he do aught to show his gratitude?"

"Thou shalt hear, my son. The younger Edward had not been many years upon his father's throne before a great battle was fought by him against the Scottish race his father had vanquished and subdued. These rebel subjects revolted from under his hand, and he fought with them a battle on the field of Bannockburn, in which he was overthrown and defeated, and in which your grandsire, Arnald de Brocas, lost his life, fighting gallantly for England's King."

"Our grandsire?" cried both the boys in a breath. "Tell us more of him."

"It is little that I know, my children, save what I have just said. He served the King faithfully in life and death, and his sons reaped some reward for their father's fidelity. At first, whilst they were quite young, his three sons (of whom your father was the third) were sent to dwell with their mother's relatives -- the De Campaines of Agen, of whom, doubtless, ye have heard; but as they grew to man's estate, they were recalled to the English Court, and received offices there, as many another noble Gascon has done before them."

"Have we then uncles in England?" asked Raymond eagerly. "Then, if we find but our way across the water, we may find a home with one of them? Is it not so, good Father?"

The priest did not exclaim at the idea of the boys journeying forth across the seas alone, but he shook his head thoughtfully as he continued his narrative as if there had been no interruption.

"The English King was not unmindful of the service done him by the father of these youths, and he promoted them to places of honour about his Court. First, they were all made serviens of his own royal person, and were brought up with his son, who is now the King; then, as I have heard, they greatly endeared themselves to the Prince by loyalty and faithful service. When he ascended the throne, and purged the Court of the false favourites from this and other lands who had done so much ill to that country, he was ably helped in the task before him by thy father and thy two uncles; and I can well believe that this was so, seeing that they were speedily advanced to posts of honour in the royal service."

"What posts?" asked the eager youths.

"The head of your branch of this noble house," continued the priest, "is your uncle Sir John de Brocas, who is the King's Master of the Horse, and the lord of many fair Manors and wide lands in England, and high in favour with his master. Second in the line is your uncle Master Bernard de Brocas, a clerk, and the Rector (as it is called in the realm of England) of St. Nicholas, in or near a town that is called Guildford -- if I can frame my lips aright to the strange words. He too is high in favour with the Roy Outremer, and, as I have heard, is oft employed by him in these parts to quell strife or redress grievances; but I know not how that may be. It is of thy father that I would fain speak to thee, Gaston, for thou art heir to his name and estate if thou canst make good the claim, as in time thou mayest yet. Listen whilst I tell all that I know. Thy father -- Arnald -- was the youngest of the three sons of him who died on the field of Bannockburn, and to him was given the post of Master of the Horse to Prince John of Eltham. I misdoubt me if that Prince is living yet; but of that I cannot speak with certainty. He was also valettus or serviens to the King, and might have carved out for himself as great a career as they, had it not been that he estranged himself from his kindred, and even offended the King himself, by the marriage that he made with Mistress Alice Sanghurst of Basildene."

The brothers exchanged quick glances as the name passed the priest's lips. Their memory had not then played them false.

"But why were they thus offended? Was not our mother rightful owner of Basildene? and is it not a fair heritage?"

"The reason for the ill will, my sons, I know not. Your mother did not fully understand it, and from her lips it was I heard all this tale. Perchance some nobler alliance was wished by the family and by the King himself, perchance the young man acted something hastily, and gave umbrage that might have been spared. I know not how that may have been. All I for certainty know is that your father, Arnald, brought hither his wife, flying from some menaced peril, fearful of capture and discovery; and that here in this lonely mill, amongst those who had ever loved the name of De Brocas, the sweet lady was able to hide her head, and to find a place of safe refuge. Jean, then a youth, had been in the service of Arnald, having been seized with a love of wandering in his boyhood, which had led him to cross the sea to England, where he had fallen in with your father and attached himself to his person. The elder Jean, his father, was miller then and right glad was he to welcome back his son, and give a shelter to the lady in her hour of need. Good Margot, as you know, was your nurse when you were born; she had married Jean a short time back, and her own babe had died the

very week before you came into the world. She has always loved you as her own, and though your mother was taken from you, you have never lost a mother's love. Do not forget that, my children, in the years to come; and if the time should ever be when you can requite the faithful attachment of these two honest hearts, be sure that you let not the chance slip."

"We will not," answered the boys in a breath. "But the rest of your story, good Father."

"You shall hear it all, my sons. It was in the year of grace 1329 that your father first brought his wife here, and in the following year you twain were born. Your father stayed till he could fold you in his arms, and bestow upon you the blessing of a father; but then his duties to his master called him to England, and for a whole long year we heard no news of him. At the end of that time a messenger arrived with despatches for his lady. She sent to ask my help in reading these; and together we made out that the letter contained a summons for her to join her lord in England, where he would meet her at the port of Southampton, into which harbour many of our vessels laden with wine put in for safe anchorage. As for the children, said the letter, she must either bring or leave them, as seemed best to her at the time; and after long and earnest debate we resolved that she should go alone, and that you should be left to good Margot's tender care. I myself escorted our gentle lady to Bordeaux, and there it was easy to find safe and commodious transport for her across the sea. She left us, and we heard no more until more than a year had passed by, and she returned to us, sorely broken down in mind and body, to tell a sorrowful tale."

"Sorrowful? Had our proud uncles refused to receive her?" asked Gaston, with flashing eyes. "I trow if that be so --"

But the Father silenced him by a gesture.

"Wait and let me tell my tale, boy. Thou canst not judge till thou knowest all. She came back to us, and to me she told all her tale, piece by piece and bit by bit, not all at once, but as time and opportunity served. And this is what I learned. When your father summoned her back to join him, it was because her one brother was dead -- dead without leaving children behind -- and her father, now growing old, wished to see her once again, and give over to her before he died the fair domain of Basildene, which she would now inherit, but to which she had had no title when she married your father. It seemed like enow to both of them that if Arnald de Brocas could lead a well-dowered bride to his brothers' halls, all might be well between them and so it came about when the old man died, and the lady had succeeded to the lands, that he started forth to tell the news, not taking her, as the weather was inclement, and she somewhat suffering from the damp and fog which they say prevail so much in England, but faring forth alone on his embassy, trusting to come with joy to fetch her anon."

"And did he not?" asked the boys eagerly.

"I will tell you what chanced in his absence. You must know that your grandsire on your mother's side had a kinsman, by name Peter Sanghurst, who had long cast covetous eyes upon Basildene. He was next of kin after your mother, and he, as a male, claimed to call the property his. He had failed to make good his claim by law; but so soon as he knew your mother to be alone in the house, he came down upon it with armed retainers and drove her forth ere she well knew what had befallen; and she, not knowing whither her lord had gone, nor how to find him, and being in sore danger from the malice of the wicked man who had wrested from her the inheritance, and would gladly have done her to death, knew not what better to do than to fly back here, leaving word for her lord where she was to be found; and thus it came that ere she had been gone from us a year, she returned in more desolate plight than at the first."

Gaston's face was full of fury, and Raymond's hands were clenched in an access of rage.

"And what did our father then? Sure he waged war with the vile usurper, and won back our mother's lands for her! Sure a De Brocas never rested quiet under so foul an insult!"

"My sons, your father had been taught patience in a hard school. He returned to Basildene, not having seen either of his brothers, who were both absent on the King's business, to find his wife fled, and the place in the firm grasp of the wily man, who well knew how to strengthen himself in the possession of ill-gotten gains. His first care was for your mother's safety, and he followed her hither before doing aught else. When he found her safe with honest Jean and Margot, and when they had taken counsel together, he returned to England to see what could be done to regain the lost inheritance and the favour of his kinsmen who had been estranged. You were babes of less than three summers when your father went away, and you never saw him more."

"He did not come again?"

"Nay, he came no more, for all too soon a call which no man may disobey came for him, and he died before the year was out."

"And had he accomplished naught?"

"So little that it must needs come to naught upon his death. He sent a trusty messenger -- one of his stout Gascon henchmen -- over to us with all needful tidings. But there was little of good to tell. He had seen his brother, Sir John, the head of the family, and had been received not unkindly by him; but in the matter of the recovery of Basildene the knight had but shaken his head, and had said that the King had too many great matters on hand just then to have leisure to consider so small a petition as the one concerning a Manor of no repute or importance. If Arnald had patience to wait, or to interest Prince John in the matter, something might in time be done; but Peter Sanghurst would strive to make good his claim by any means bad or good, and as he held possession it might be difficult indeed to oust him. The property belonged to one who had been a cause of much offence, and perchance that weighed with Sir John and made him less willing to bestir himself in the matter. But be that as it may, nothing had been done when Arnald de Brocas breathed his last; and his wife, when she heard the tale, looked at you two young children as you lay upon the grass at play, and she said with a sigh and a smile, 'Father, I will wait till my boys be grown, for what can one weak woman do alone? and then we will go together to the land that is mine by birth, and my boys shall win back for me and for

themselves the lost inheritance of Basildene."

"And so we will!" cried Gaston, with flashing eyes; "and so we will! Here as I stand I vow that we will win it back from the false and coward kinsman who holds it now."

"Ay," answered Raymond, with equal ardour and enthusiasm, "that, Brother, will we do; and we will win for ourselves the name that she herself gave to us -- The Twin Brothers of Basildene."

CHAPTER III. THE UNKNOWN WORLD.

So that was the story of their past. That was why they two, with the blood of the De Brocas running in their veins, had lived all their past lives in the seclusion of a humble mill; why they had known nothing of their kinsfolk, albeit they had always known that they must have kindred of their own name and race; and why their mother upon her deathbed had spoken to them not of any inheritance that they might look to claim from descent through their father, but of Basildene, which was theirs in very right, as it had been hers before, till her ambitious and unscrupulous kinsman had driven her forth.

And now what should they do? Whither should they go; and what should be the object of the lives -- the new lives of purpose and resolve which had awakened within them?

Gaston had given voice to this feeling in vowing them to the attempt to recover their lost heritage of Basildene, and Father Anselm did not oppose either that desire or the ardent wish of the youths to fare forth into the great world alone.

"My sons," he said a few days later, when he had come to see if the twins held yet to their first resolve. "You are something young as yet to sally forth into the unknown world and carve for yourselves your fortunes there; but nevertheless I trow the day has come, for this place is no longer a safe shelter for you. The Sieur de Navailles, as it is told me, is already searching for you. It cannot be long before he finds your hiding place, and then no man may call your lives safe by night or day. And not only would ye yourselves be in peril, but peril would threaten good Jean and Margot; and methinks you would be sorely loath that harm should come to them through the faithful kindness they have ever shown to you and yours."

"Sooner would we die than that one hair of their head should be touched!" cried both the boys impetuously; "and Margot lives in fear and trembling ever since we told her of the words we spoke to yon tyrant and usurper of Saut. We told her for her comfort that he would think us too poor and humble and feeble to vent his rage on us; but she shook her head at that, and feared no creature hearing the name of De Brocas would be too humble to be a mark for his spite. And then we told her that we would sally forth to see the world, as we had ever longed to do and though she wept to think that we must go, she did not bid us stay. She said, as thou hast done, good Father, that she had known that such day would surely come; and though it has come something early and something suddenly, she holds that we shall be safer facing the perils of the unknown world, than living here a mark for the spite and malice of the foe of our house. If no man holds us back, why go we not forth tomorrow?"

The priest's face was grave and even sorrowful, but he made no objection even to so rapid a move.

"My sons, if this thing is to be, it is small use to tarry and linger. I would not that the Sieur de Navailles should know that you have hidden your heads here so long; and a secret, however faithfully kept, that belongs to many, may not be a secret always. It is right that you should go, and with the inclement winter season hard upon us, with its dangers from heavy snows, tempests at sea, and those raids from wolves that make the peril of travellers when the cold once sets in, it behoves you, if go ye must, to go right speedily. And in the belief that I should find your minds made up and your preparations well-nigh complete, I have brought to you the casket given into my charge by your mother on her dying bed. Methinks that you will find therein gold enough to carry you safe to England, and such papers as shall suffice to prove to your proud kinsmen at the King's Court that ye are in very truth the sons of their brother, and that it is of just and lawful right that you make your claim to Basildene."

The brothers looked eagerly at the handsome case, wrought and inlaid with gold, in which certain precious parchments had lain ever since they had been carried in haste from England. The boys looked at these with a species of awe, for they had but very scant knowledge of letters, and such as they had acquired from the good Father was not enough to enable them to master the contents of the papers. Learning was almost entirely confined to the ecclesiastics in those days, and many were the men of birth and rank who could scarce read or write their own name.

But the devices upon the parchments told a tale more easily understood. There was the golden lion rampant upon the black ground -- the arms of the De Brocas family, as the Father told them; whilst the papers that referred to Basildene were adorned with a shield bearing a silver stag upon an azure ground. They would have no difficulty in knowing the deeds apart; and good Margot sewed them first into a bag of untanned leather, and then stitched them safely within the breast of Gaston's leathern jerkin. The golden pieces, and a few rings and trinkets that were all that remained to the boys of their lost inheritance, were sewn in like manner into Raymond's clothing, and there was little more to be done ere the brothers went forth into the unknown world.

As for their worldly possessions, they were soon numbered, and comprised little more than their clothing, their bows and arrows, and the poniards which hung at their girdles. As they were to proceed on foot to Bordeaux, and would probably journey in the same simple fashion when they reached the shores of England, they had no wish to hamper themselves with any needless encumbrances, and all that they took with them was a single change of under vest and hose, which they were easily able to carry in a wallet at their back. They sallied forth in the dress they commonly wore all through the inclement winter season -- an under-dress of warm blue homespun, with a strong jerkin of leather, soft and well-dressed, which was as long as a short tunic, and was secured by the girdle below the waist which was worn by almost all ranks of the people in that age. The long hose were likewise guarded by a species of gaiter of the same strong

stuff. And a peasant clad in his own leather garments was often a match for a mailed warrior, the tough substance turning aside sword point or arrow almost as effectually as a coat of steel, whilst the freedom and quickness of motion allowed by the simpler dress was an immense advantage to the wearer in attack or defence.

The good Father looked with tender glances at the brave bright boys as they stood forth on the morning of their departure, ready to sally out into the wide world with the first glimpse of dawn. He had spent the previous night at the mill, and many words of fatherly counsel and good advice had he bestowed upon the lads, now about to be subjected to temptations and perils far different from any they had known in their past life. And his words had been listened to with reverent heed, for the boys loved him dearly, and had been trained by him in habits of religious exercise, more common in those days than they became, alas in later times. They had with them an English breviary which had been one of their mother's most valued possessions, and they promised the Father to study it with reverent heed; for they were very familiar with the petitions, and could follow them without difficulty despite their rudimentary education. So that when they knelt before him for his last blessing, he was able to give it with a heart full of hope and tender confidence; and he felt sure that whether the lads went forth for weal or woe, he should (if they and he both lived through the following years) see their faces again in this selfsame spot. They would not forget old friends -- they would seek them out in years to come; and if fate smiled upon their path, others would share in the sunshine of their good fortune.

And so the boys rose to their feet again to meet a proud, glad smile from the eyes of the kind old man; and though Margot's face was buried in her apron, and honest Jean was not ashamed to let the tears run down his weatherbeaten face, there was no attempt made to hinder or to sadden the eager lads. They kissed their good nurse with many protestations of love and gratitude, telling her of the days to come when they would return as belted knights, riding on fine horses, and with their esquires by their side, and how they would tell the story of how they had been born and bred in this very mill, and of all they owed to those who had sheltered them in their helpless infancy.

The farewells once over, with the inevitable sadness that such scenes must entail, the boys' spirits rose with wonderful celerity. True, they looked back with fond glances at the peaceful homestead where their childhood had been passed, as they reached the ridge of the undulating plain from which the last glimpse of the red roofs and tumbling water was to be had. Raymond even felt a mist rise before his eyes as he stood and gazed, and Gaston dashed his hand impatiently across his eyes as though something hindered his vision; but his voice was steady and full of courage as he waved his right arm and cried aloud:

"We will come back! we will see this place again! Ah, Raymond, methinks I shall love it better than I do today; for though it has been a timely place of shelter, it has not been -- it never could be -- our true home. Our home is Basildene, in the fair realm of England's King. I will rest neither day nor night until I have looked upon the home our mother dwelt in, and have won the right to call that home our own."

Then the brothers strode with light springy steps along the road which would in time lead them to the great seaport city of Bordeaux, towards which all the largest roads of the whole province converged.

The royal city of the Garonne was full forty leagues away -- over a hundred British miles -- and the boys had never visited it yet, albeit their dream had long been to travel thither on their feet, and see the wonders of which travellers spoke. A day's march of ten leagues or more was as nothing to them. Had the days been longer they would have done more, but travelling in the dark through these forest-clad countries was by no means safe, and the Father had bid them promise that they would always strive to seek shelter ere the shades of night fell; for great picks of wolves ravaged the forests of Gascony until a much later date, and though the season of their greatest boldness and fierceness had not yet come, they were customers not to be trifled with at any time, and a hunting knife and a crossbow would go but a small way in defence if a resolute attack were to be made by even half-a-dozen of the fierce beasts.

But the brothers thought not of peril as they strode through the clear crisp air, directing their course more by the sun than by any other guide, as they pursued their way engrossed in eager talk. They were passing through the great grazing pastures, the Landes of Gascony, which supplied England with so many of her best horses, and walking was easy and they covered the ground fast. Later on would come dark stretches of lonely forest, but here were smiling pasture and bright sunshine and the brothers talked together of the golden future before them, of their proud kinsmen at the King's Court, of the Roy Outremer himself, and of Basildene and that other treacherous kinsman there. As they travelled they debated within themselves whether it were better to seek first the countenance of their uncles on their father's side, or whether to make their way first to Basildene and see what manner of place it was, and what likelihood there seemed of ousting the intruder.

How to decide this point themselves the brothers did not know; but as it chanced, fortune was to decide it for them in her own fashion, and that before many suns had set.

Two days of travel had passed. The brothers had long left behind them every trace of what had been familiar to them in the old life. The evening of the third day was stealing fast upon them, and they were yet, as it seemed, in the heart of the vast forest which they had entered soon after noon, and which they had hoped to pass completely through before the daylight waned. They had been told that they might look, if they pushed on fast, to reach the town of Castres by nightfall; but the paths through the forest were intricate: they had several times felt uncertain as to whether they were going right. Now that the darkness was coming on so fast they were still more uncertain, and more than once they had heard behind and before them the unmistakable howl of the wolf.

The hardy twins would have thought nothing of sleeping in the open air even at this somewhat inclement season; but the proximity of the wolves was unpleasant. For two days the cold had been sharp, and though it was not probable that it had yet seriously interfered with the supplies of the wild beasts, yet it was plain that they had emerged from their summer retreats in the more remote parts of the forest, and were disposed to venture nearer to the habitable world on the outskirts. If the brothers slept out of doors at all, it would have to be in the fork of some tree, and in that elevated position they would be likely to feel the cold rather keenly, though down below in some hollow trunk they could make themselves a warm nest enough. Mindful of their promise to the priest, they resolved to try yet to reach some hut or

place of shelter, however rude, before the night absolutely closed in, and marched quickly forward with the practised tread of those born to forest life.

Suddenly Gaston, who was a couple of paces in the front, paused and laid a hand upon his brother's arm.

"Hist!" he said below his breath. "Methought I heard a cry."

Raymond stopped short and listened, too. Yes; there was certainly some tumult going on a little distance ahead of them. The brothers distinguished the sound of human voices raised in shrill piercing cries, and with that sound was mingled the fierce baying note that they had heard too often in their lives to mistake at any time.

"It is some traveller attacked by wolves!" cried the brothers in a breath, and without a single thought of their own peril the gallant boys tore headlong through the dark wood to the spot whence the tumult proceeded.

Guided by the sound of shouts, cries, and the howling of the beasts, the brothers were not long in nearing the scene of the strife.

"Shout aloud!" cried Gaston to his brother as they ran. "Make the cowardly brutes believe that a company is advancing against them. It is the best, the only chance. They will turn and fly if they think there be many against them."

Raymond was not slow to act upon this hint. The next moment the wood rang again to the shouts and calls of the brothers, voice answering to voice till it seemed as though a score of men were approaching. The brothers, moreover, knew and used the sharp fierce call employed by the hunters of the wolves in summoning their dogs to their aid -- a call that they knew would be heard and heeded by the savage brutes, who would well know what it meant. And in effect the artifice was perfectly successful; for ere they had gained the spot upon which the struggle had taken place, they heard the breaking up of the wolf party, as the frightened beasts dashed headlong through the coverts, whilst their howling and barking died away in the distance, and a great silence succeeded.

"Thank Heaven for a timely rescue!" they heard a voice say in the English tongue; "for by my troth, good Malcolm, I had thought that thou and I would not live to tell this tale to others. But where are our good friends and rescuers? Verily, I have seen nothing, yet there must have been a good dozen or more. Light thy lantern, an thou canst, and let us look well round us, for by the mass I shall soon think we have been helped by the spirits of the forest."

"Nay, fair sir, but only by two travellers," said Gaston, advancing from the shadow of the giant trees, his brother closely following him. "We are ourselves benighted in this forest, having by some mischance lost our road to Castres, which we hoped to have sighted ere now. Hearing the struggle, and the shouts with which you doubtless tried to scare off the brutes, we came to see if we might not aid, and being well acquainted with the calls of the hunters of the wolves, succeeded beyond our hopes. I trust the cowardly and treacherous beasts have done you no injury?"

"By my troth, it is strange to hear my native tongue in these parts, and so fairly spoken withal. I trust we are not bewitched, or the sport of spirits. Who art thou, brave boy? and whence comest thou? How comes it that thou, being, as it seems, a native of these parts, speakest so well a strange language?"

"It was our mother's tongue," answered Gaston, speaking nevertheless guardedly, for he had been warned by the Father not to be too ready to tell his name and parentage to all the world. "We are bound for Bordeaux, and thence to England, to seek our mother's kindred, as she bid us ere she died."

"If that be so, then let us join forces and travel on together," said he whom they had thus succoured, a man well mounted on a fine horse, and with a mounted servant beside him, so that the brothers took him for a person of quality, which indeed he was, as they were soon to learn. "There is safety in numbers, and especially so in these inhospitable forest tracks, where so many perils beset the traveller. I have lost my other stout fellows in the windings of the wood, and it were safer to travel four than two. Riding is slow work in this gloom. I trow ye will have no trouble in keeping pace with our good chargers."

The hardy Gascon boys certainly found no difficulty about that. Gaston walked beside the bridle rein of the master, whilst Raymond chatted amicably to the man, whose broad Scotch accent puzzled him a little, and led in time to stories of Border warfare, and to the tale of Bannockburn, told from a Scotchman's point of view; to all of which the boy listened with eager interest. As for Gaston, he was hearing of the King's Court, the gay tourneys, the gallant feats of arms at home and abroad which characterized the reign of the Third Edward. The lad drank in every item of intelligence, asking such pertinent questions, and appearing so well informed upon many points, that his interlocutor was increasingly surprised, and at last asked him roundly of his name and kindred.

Now the priest had warned the boys at starting not to speak with too much freedom to strangers of their private affairs, and had counselled them very decidedly not to lay claim at starting to the name of De Brocas, and thus draw attention to themselves at the outset. There was great laxity in the matter of names in ages when penmanship was a recondite art, and even in the documents of the period a name so well known as that of De Brocas was written Broc and Brook, Brocaz and Brocazt, and half-a-dozen more ways as well. Wherefore it mattered the less what the lads called themselves, and they had agreed that Broc, without the De before it, would be the best and safest patronymic for them in the present.

"We are twin brothers, may it please you, fair sir; English on our mother's side, though our father was a Gascon. Our father was much in England likewise, and, as we hear, held some office about the Court, though of its exact nature we know not. Both our parents died many long years since; but we have never ceased to speak the tongue of England, and to dream of one day going thither. Our names are Gaston and Raymond Broc, and we are going forth at last in search of the adventures which men say in these warlike days may be found by young and old, by rich and poor. Our faces are set towards England. What may befall us there kind Fortune only knows."

Something in the frank and noble bearing of the lad seemed to please the knightly stranger. He laid a friendly hand on Gaston's shoulder as the youth paced with springy strides beside him.

"I trow thou art a mettlesome knave, and I owe thee and thy brother something more than fair words for the service ye have rendered me this night. I have lost three or four of my followers by disease and accident since I left the shores of England. Boy, what sayest thou to taking service with me for a while -- thou and thy brother likewise -- and journeying to fair England as two of my young esquires? I like you well, and in these days it is no small thing to rank in one's train those to whom the language of Gascony is familiar. I trow ye be able to speak the French tongue likewise, since ye be so ready with our foreign English?"

"Ay, we can both speak and understand it," answered Gaston, whose cheeks had crimsoned with eager delight; "but we speak English better. Good Sir, we could desire nothing better than to follow you to the world's end; but we have not been trained to the use of arms, nor to knightly exercises. I know not if we could make shift to please you, be our service never so faithful."

"In such a case as that, sure I should be a hard master to please," returned the other, and Gaston knew from his voice that he was smiling. "But we need not settle it all out here in this dark wood. You must wait awhile to see what manner of man it is you speak of serving. And you may at least be my companions of voyage across the sea, though once on English shores you shall please yourselves whether or not you serve me farther. As for my name, it is James Audley, and I am one of the King's knights. I am now bound for Windsor -- thou hast doubtless heard of Windsor, the mighty fortress where the King holds his Court many a time and oft. Well, it hath pleased his Majesty of late to strive to bring back those days of chivalry of which our bards sing and of which we hear from ancient legend -- days that seem to be fast slipping away, and which it grieves our most excellent King to see die out in his time. Hast heard, boy, of the great King Arthur of whom men wrote and sung in days gone by? Has his fame reached as far as thy Gascon home?"

"Yea, verily," answered Gaston eagerly. "Our mother in long-past days would speak to us of that great King, and of his knights, and of the Round Table at which they sat together, their King in their midst --"

"Ay, truly thou knowest well the tale, and it is of this same Round Table I would speak. The King has thought good to hold such a Round Table himself, and has sent forth messages to numbers of his knights to hold themselves in readiness to attend it early in the year which will soon be upon us. Men say that he is building a wondrous round tower at his fortress of Windsor, wherein his Round Table will be placed and the feast celebrated. I know not with what truth they rumour this, but it is like enough, for his Majesty hath the love of his people and a kingly mind; and what he purposes he makes shift to carry out, and that right speedily. But be that as it may, there is no mistaking his royal summons to his Round Table, and I am hastening back across the water to be at Windsor on the appointed day; and if it will pleasure you twain to journey thither with me, I trow you will see things the like of which you have never dreamed before; and sure a better fashion of entering life could scarce be found than to follow one of the King's knights to one of the fairest assemblies of chivalry that the world has ever locked upon."

And indeed Gaston thought so too. His breath was taken away by the prospect. He was dazzled by the very thought of such a thing, and his words of eager thanks were spoken with the falterings of strong emotion.

The road had widened out here, and the travellers had got free of the forest. Lights sparkled pleasantly in front of them, and Raymond had come up in time to hear the offer just made. The eager delight of the two lads seemed to please the brave Sir James, who was not much more than a youth himself, as we should reckon things now, though four-and-twenty appeared a more advanced age then.

As the travellers at last found themselves within the precincts of a fairly comfortable hostelry, and the horsemen dismounted at the door and entered the inn, Sir James pushed the two lads into the lighted room before him, and looked them well over with a pair of searching but kindly blue eyes. He was himself a fine man, of noble stature and princely hearing. His face was pleasant, though it could be stern too on occasion, and the features were regular and good. The boys had never seen such a kingly-looking man, and their hearts went out to him at once. As for him, he looked from one bright face to the other, and nodded his head with a smile.

"Methinks you will make a pair of gallant squires," he said. "So long as it pleases you to remain in my service, you may call yourselves my men, and receive from my hands what my other servants do."

CHAPTER IV. THE MASTER OF THE HORSE.

What a wonderful experience it was for the twin brothers to find themselves for the first time in their lives upon the great ocean of which they had so many times heard! As the little vessel, with her cargo of wine, plunged merrily through the white-crested waves, bearing her freight northward through the stormy Bay of Biscay to the white shores of Albion, the brothers loved to stand in the pointed prow of the brave little craft, feeling the salt spray dashing in their faces, and listening to the swirl of water round the ship's sides as she raced merrily on her way. Now indeed, were they well embarked upon a career of adventure and glory. Were they not habited like the servants of an English knight -- their swords by their sides (if need be), their master's badge upon their sleeves? Were they not bound for the great King's Court -- for the assembly of the Round Table, of which, as it seemed, all men were now talking? Would they not see their own kinsmen, feel their way perhaps to future friendship with those who bore their own name? For the present they were dubbed Brook by the English servants with whom they associated, though more frequently they went by their Christian names alone.

It was the fashion in these times to think well of the Gascon race. The King set the example, knowing how useful such men were like to be to him in days to come; and these lads, who spoke English almost as their mother tongue, and were so full of spirit, grace, and vivacity, rapidly rose in favour both with Sir James himself and with his retinue. No auspices could well have been more favourable for the lads upon their first entrance into the great world, and they only wished that Father Anselm could hear of their good fortune.

They had settled now to let the visit to Basildene stand over for a time. They had but the vaguest idea where to seek their mother's home. The priest could not help them to any information on this point, and the way to Windsor was open. Their kinsfolk there could possibly give them news of Basildene, even did they decide to keep their own true name a secret for a time. There could be no doubt as to the wisdom of learning something of their mother's country and the ways of its sons before they launched themselves upon a difficult and possibly dangerous quest.

With what strange feelings did the brothers first set eyes upon the shores of England, as the little sloop slid merrily into the smoother Solent, after a rough but not unpleasant passage! How they gazed about them as they neared the quays of Southampton, and wondered at the contrast presented by this seaport with the stately and beautiful city of Bordeaux, which they had seen a fortnight back! Certainly this English port could not compare with her a single moment, yet the boys' hearts bounded with joyful exhilaration as they first set foot on English soil. Was not the first step of their wild dream safely and prosperously accomplished? Might they not augur from this a happy and prosperous career till their aim and object was accomplished?

Their master had some business to transact in and about Southampton which detained him there many days; but the Gaston lads found no fault with this arrangement, for everything they saw was new and full of interest; they were well lodged and well fed without cost to themselves, and had full license to go where they would and do what they would, as their master had no present use for their services.

Gaston and Raymond had no desire to idle away their time without profit to themselves, and after taking counsel with honest Malcolm, who had a great liking for the boys, they put themselves under the instruction of a capable swordsman, who undertook to teach them the art of using those weapons with skill and grace. As their natural quickness of eye and strength of hand made them quickly proficient in this exercise, they became anxious to try their skill at the more difficult sport of tilting, then so much in vogue with both knights and gentlemen -- a sport which the King greatly encouraged as likely to be excellent training for those charges of his picked horsemen which so often turned the fortunes of the day in his favour in the sterner game of war.

Both the Gascon youths were good horsemen; not that they had ever owned a horse themselves, or had ridden upon a saddle after the fashion of knights and their esquires, but they had lived amongst the droves of horses that were bred upon the wide pasture lands of their own country, and from childhood it had been their favourite pastime to get upon the back of one of these beautiful, unbroken creatures, and go careering wildly over the sweeping plain. That kind of rough riding was as good a training as they could have had, and when once they had grown used to the feel of a saddle between their knees, and had learned the right use of rein and spur, they became almost at once excellent and fearless riders, and enjoyed shivering a lance or carrying off a ring or a handkerchief from a pole as well as any of their comrades. So that the month they passed in the seaport town was by no means wasted on them, and when they took to horse once again to accompany Sir James on his way to Windsor, they felt that they had made great strides, and were very different from the country-bred Gascon youths of two months back.

There was one more halt made in London, that wonderful city of which time fails us to speak here; and in that place a new surprise awaited the young esquires, for they and their comrades who wore Sir James Audley's livery were all newly equipped in two new suits of clothes, and these of such a sumptuous description as set the boys agape with wonder.

Truly as we read of the bravery in which knights and dames and their servants of old days were attired, one marvels where the money came from to clothe them all. It could have been no light thing to be a great man in such times, and small wonder was it that those who lived in and about the Court, whose duty it was to make a brave show in the eyes of royalty, were so often rewarded for trifling services by the gifts of Manors, benefices, or wardships; for the cost of keeping up such state as was required was great indeed, and could not have been done without some adequate compensation.

Sir James had always been a favourite with the King, as he was with the Prince of Wales -- the Black Prince of the days to come. He had at various times received marks of the royal favour by substantial grants, and was resolved to appear at this festival of the Round Table in such guise as should be fitting to his rank and revenues.

Thus it came about that the Gascon youths found themselves furnished with tunics of blue and silver, richly embroidered with their master's cognizances, and trimmed with costly fur, with long mantles of blue cloth fastened with golden clasps, with rich girdles, furnished with gipciere and anelace, and hose and long embroidered shoes, such as they began to see were the fashion of the day in England. Their stout nags, which had carried them bravely thus far, were now exchanged for handsome animals of a better breed, horses trained to knightly exercises, and capable of carrying their masters bravely through any game of battle or tourney such as the King loved to organize when he had his knights round him. It was often that the esquires as well as the knights competed in these contests of skill and strength, or followed their masters into some great melee, and it was a point of honour with the latter that their followers should be well and suitably equipped for the sport.

"By my faith, but I wish good Margot and the holy Father could see us now," quoth Gaston, laughing, as Sir James and his followers sallied forth one bright December morning to take their last stage on the journey to Windsor.

They had traversed the main distance the day previously, for Sir James had no wish to arrive weary and travel stained at the King's Court. Orders had been given for every man to don his best riding dress and look well to the trappings of his steed, and it was a gallant-looking company indeed that sallied out from the door of the wayside hostelry and took the road towards the great Castle, glimpses of which began from time to time to be visible through the trees.

"I trow they would scarce know us! There be moments, Raymond, when I scarce know myself for the same. It seems as though years had passed since we left the old home, and by the Mass I feel as though I were a new being since then!"

"Yea, verily, and I also," answered Raymond, looking round him with eager eyes. "Gaston, look well about thee; for by

what Malcolm says, these very woods through which we shall pass, and the Manor of old Windsor hard by, are the property of our uncle Sir John de Brocas, the King's Master of the Horse; and by what I hear, methinks we shall see him in the flesh ere the day has passed."

"Ha!" exclaimed Gaston, with interest; "if that be so let us heed him well, for much of our future may hang on him. He is in the King's favour, they say, and if he did but plead our cause with the Roy Outremer, we might well look to call Basildene our home ere long."

"We must call him no longer the Roy Outremer," said Raymond, with a smile. "If we are to be the brothers of Basildene, we must be English subjects and he our liege lord."

"True," answered Gaston readily; "and methinks, if he be what all men say, it will be no hardship to own ourselves his subjects. I would ten thousand times sooner call myself so than be servant to yon weak and treacherous King of France."

At that moment an interruption occurred to delay the little cavalcade for a few moments. The road they were traversing led them past a solid gateway, which showed that upon one side at least the property was that of a private individual; and just as they were approaching this gateway the portal swung open, and out of it rode a fine-looking man of middle age and imposing aspect, followed by three youths richly attired, and by some dozen mounted attendants. The leader of the party wore a dress that was evidently the livery of some office -- a tunic of blue and a cape of white Brussels cloth. His cap was of white and blue, and the King's badge of a silver swan was fastened in the front.

As he rode out, the esquires round Gaston and Raymond drew rein and whispered one to another:

"It is the King's Master of the Horse!"

Eagerly and curiously the two lads gazed at the face and figure of the kinsman now before them, whilst Sir James spurred his horse forward, a smile lighting up the grave face of the King's servant.

"Marry well met, good Sir James!" was the hearty greeting of the latter, as the two men grasped hands. "I warrant you will be welcome at the Castle, whither, I doubt not, your steps are bent. It was but two days since that his Majesty was asking news of you, no man knowing rightly whither you had gone, nor upon what errand. There be fine musterings already at the Court, and every day brings some fresh faces to the gathering assembly. I trow that such a sight as will shortly be witnessed within those walls has scarce been seen by England before."

"Nay, nor since the days of good King Arthur, if all be true that I have heard," answered Sir James. "Be these gallant youths your sons, Sir John? Verily time flies! I have not been in these parts for full three years. I scarce know them once again."

"Yes, these be my three sons," answered the father, with a proud glance at the handsome youths, who came up at a sign from him to be presented to the knight. "It may well be many long years since you saw them, for they have often been away from my side, travelling in foreign parts with my good brother, and learning the lessons of life as I have been able to see occasion. This is John, my first born. Oliver and Bernard follow after him. I trust in years to come they will live to win their spurs in the King's service. They are often about the Court, and the Prince has chosen them amongst his serviens. But they have not yet seen war, albeit I trow they will not be missing when the day for fighting shall come, which I verily believe will not be long now."

The youths made their salute to the knight, and then dropped behind. Sir James rode in advance, still in earnest converse with the Master of the Horse; whilst the attendants of the two bands, some of whom were acquainted, mixed together indiscriminately, and rode after their masters in amicable converse.

Sir John's three sons rode a few paces behind the knights, and as it chanced the Gascon brothers were the next behind them, studying these cousins of theirs with natural interest and curiosity. They had heard their names distinctly as their father had presented them to his friend, and gladly would they have fallen into converse with them had they felt certain that the advance would be taken in good part. As it was, they were rather fearful of committing breaches of good manners, and restrained themselves, though their quick, eager glances towards each other betrayed what they were feeling.

All of a sudden something unseen by the rider caused Gaston's horse to take fright. It was a very spirited and rather troublesome animal, which had been passed on by two or three riders as too restive for them, and had been ridden more successfully by Gaston than by any of its former masters. But the creature wanted close watching, and Gaston had been for a time off his guard. The knowing animal had doubtless discovered this, and had hoped to take advantage of this carelessness to get rid of his rider and gain the freedom of the forest himself. With a sudden plunge and hound, which almost unseated Gaston, the horse made a dash for the woodland aisles; and when he felt that his rider had regained his seat and was reining him in with a firm and steady hand, the fiery animal reared almost erect upon his hind legs, wildly pawing the air, and uttering fierce snorts of anger and defiance. But Gaston's blood was up now, and he was not going to be mastered by his steed, least of all in presence of so many witnesses. Shouting to Raymond, who had dismounted and appeared about to spring at the horse's head, to keep away, he brought the angry creature down by throwing himself upon his neck; and though there were still much plunging and fierce kicking and struggling to be encountered before the day was won, Gaston showed himself fully equal to the demands made upon his horsemanship; and before many moments had passed, had the satisfaction of riding the horse quietly back to the little cavalcade, which had halted to witness the struggle.

"That was good riding, and a fine animal," remarked the Master of the Horse, whose eyes were well trained to note the points of any steed. "I trow that lad will make a soldier yet. Who is he, good Sir James?"

"One Gaston Brook, a lad born and brought up in Gascony, together with his twin brother who rides by his side. They

came to my help in the forest round Castres; and as I was in need of service, and they were faring forth to seek their fortunes, I bid them, an it pleased them, follow me. One parent was a native of Gascony, their mother I trow, since their name is English. I did hear somewhat of their simple tale, but it has fled my memory since."

"They are proper youths," said Sir John, not without a passing gleam of interest in any persons who hailed from his own country. "Half Gascon and half English makes a fine breed. The lads may live to do good service yet."

Meantime the three sons of Sir John had entered into conversation with the two youthful esquires, and were making friends as fast as circumstances would allow. They were some years older than the Gascon brothers -- that is to say that John was close upon twenty, and Oliver and Bernard followed, each a year younger than his predecessor. They had seen far more of the world than these country-bred lads, and had been reared more or less in the atmosphere of the Court; still they were bright, high spirited, and unaffected youths, who were ready enough to make advances to any comrades of their own standing across whose path they might be thrown.

Gaston and Raymond had about them an air of breeding which won them notice wherever they went. Their speech was refined for the times, and their handsome figures and faces gained them speedy and favourable attention. Very soon the five youths were chatting and laughing together as though they were old friends. The sons of Sir John heard all about the encounter in the forest, and how the wolves had been scared away; whilst the Gascon brothers, on their side, heard about the vast round tower built by the King for his Round Table to assemble at, and how busily everybody had been employed in hastening on the work and getting everything in readiness for the great festival that was at hand.

"Shall we see the feast?" asked Gaston eagerly. "Men say it will be a sight not to be forgotten."

"We shall see it like enough," answered John, "but only belted knights will sit at the board. Why, even the Prince of Wales himself will not sit down at the table, but will only stand to serve his father; for his spurs are not yet won, though he says he will not be long in winning them if kind fortune will but give him the chance he craves. A great assembly of esquires will be in attendance on their masters, and I trow ye twain might well be amongst these, as we hope ourselves to be. Your master is one of the bidden knights, and will sit not very far from the King himself. If you can make shift to steal in through the press and stand behind his chair, I doubt not but what ye will see all right well; and perchance the King himself may take note of you. He has a marvellous quick eye, and so has the Prince; and he is ever on the watch for knightly youths to serve him as valetus -- as we do."

"We are going to win our spurs together," cried Bernard, who in some ways was the leading spirit amongst the brothers, as he was afterwards the most noted man of his house. "We have talked of it a thousand times, and the day will come ere long. The King has promised that when next he is called forth to fight the recreant King of France, he will take the Prince with him, and he has promised that we shall go with him. The day will come when he will lay claim once more to that crown of France which by rights is his to wear, and we shall all sally forth to drive the coward Louis from the throne, and place the crown on Edward's royal brow."

Bernard's eyes flashed fire at the bare thought of the unchecked career of victory he saw for England's arms when once she had set foot on the long-talked-of expedition which was to make Edward king over the realm of France.

"And we will fight for him too!" cried Gaston and Raymond in a breath; "and so, I trow, will all Gascony. We love the English rule there. We love the Roy Outremer, as he is called there. If he would but come to our land, instead of to treacherous Flanders or feeble, storm-torn Brittany, for his soldiers and for his starting place, I trow his arms would meet with naught but victory. The Sieur d'Albret, men whisper, has been to the Court, and has looked with loving eyes upon one of the King's daughters for his son. That hope would make him faithful to the English cause, and he is the greatest Lord in Gascony, where all men fear his name."

"Thou shalt tell all that to the King or to the Prince," said John in a low tone to Raymond, as they fell a little behind, for the road grew rough and narrow. "I trow he will be glad to learn all he may from those who know what the people of the land speak and think -- the humbler folks, of whom men are growing now to take more account, at least here in England, since it is they, men now say, who must be asked ere even the King himself may dare to go to war. For money must be found through them, and they will not always grant it unless they be pleased with what has already been done. The great nobles say hard things of them they call the 'Commons;' they say that England's doom will surely come if she is to be answerable to churls and merchant folk for what her King and barons choose to do. But for my part it seems but just that those who pay the heavy burden of these long wars should know somewhat about them, and should even have the power to check them did they think the country oppressed beyond what she could bear. A bad king might not care for the sufferings of his people. A weak king might be but the tool of his barons -- as we have heard the King's father was -- and hear nothing but what they chose for him to know. For my own part, I think it right and just enough that the people should have their voice in these things. They always grant the King a liberal supply; and if they demand from him the redress of grievances and the granting of certain privileges in return, I can see in that naught that is unfair; nor would England be happier and more prosperous, methinks, were she governed by a tyrant who might grind her down to the dust."

John de Brocas was a very thoughtful youth, very different in appearance from his younger brothers, who were fine stalwart young men, well versed in every kind of knightly exercise, and delighting in nothing so much as the display of their energies and skill. John was cast in quite a different mould, and possibly it was something of a disappointment to the father that his first born should be so unlike himself and his other sons. John had had weak health from his cradle, which might account in part for his studious turn of mind; and the influence of his uncle's training may have had still greater effect. As the damp air of Windsor did not appear to agree with the boy, he had been sent, when seven years old, to his uncle's Rectory of St. Nicholas, and brought up in the more healthy and bracing air of Guildford. Master Bernard de Brocas, though by no means a man of exclusively scholarly tastes, was for the days he lived in a learned man, and feeling sure that his eldest nephew would never make a soldier, he tried to train him for a statesman and for an ecclesiastic -- the two offices being in those days frequently combined. The great statesmen were nearly always men in the Church's employ, and the scholarship and learning of the age were almost entirely in their keeping.

John showed no disposition to enter the Church -- probably the hope of winning his spurs was not yet dead within him; but he took very kindly to book lore, and had often shown a shrewdness and aptness in diplomatic negotiation which had made Master Bernard prophesy great things for him.

Raymond had never heard such matters discussed before, and knew little enough about the art of government. He looked with respect at his companion, and John, catching the glance, smiled pleasantly in reply.

"I trow thou wouldest sooner be with the rest, hearing of the King's Round Table and the knightly jousts to follow. Let me not weary thee with my graver words. Go join the others an thou wilt."

"Nay, I will stay with thee," answered Raymond, who was greatly attracted by John's pale and thoughtful face, and could not but pity him for his manifest lack of strength and muscle. The youth was tall and rode well, but he was slight to the verge of attenuation, and the hollow cheek and unnaturally bright eyes sunk in deep caverns told a tale that was not hard to read. Young De Brocas might make a student, a clerk, a man of letters, but he would never be a soldier; and that in itself appeared to Raymond the greatest deprivation that could befall a man. But he liked his companion none the less for this sense of pity.

"I would fain hear more of England -- England's laws, England's ways. I have heard that in this land men may obtain justice better than in any other. I have heard that justice is here administered to poor as well as rich. I would learn more of this. I would learn more of you. Tell me first of yourself. I know well the name of De Brocas. We come from the very place where once you held sway. The village (as you would call it) of Brocas was not so very far away. Tell me of yourself, your father, your uncle. I know all their names right well. I would hear all that you can tell."

John's face lighted with interest. He was willing enough to tell of himself, his two brothers, two sisters, and their many homes in and about the Castle of Windsor. Besides his post as Master of the Horse, John explained to Raymond, his father held the office of Chief Forester of Windsor Forest (equivalent to the modern Ranger), and besides the Manor of Old Windsor, possessed property and Manors at Old and New Bray, Didworth and Clewer. He was high in the King's favour and confidence, and, as may well be believed, led a busy and responsible life. Upon him devolved the care of all those famous studs of horses on which the King relied when he sent his armies into the field; and if his expenditure in these matters has been condemned in more recent days, the best answer will be found in the disasters and the ruinous expenditure of the later campaigns of the reign, when the King, thinking that he had reduced his French possessions to complete order, and that his magnificent cavalry would not longer be wanted to career over the plains of France, broke up and sold off his studs; so that when his calculation as to the future proved mistaken, he had no longer any organized supply of war horses to draw upon.

Raymond's interest in John's talk so won the heart of that youth that a warm friendship sprang up rapidly between them, whilst the younger brothers appeared to take almost the same liking for Gaston. By-and-by it became known that the Castle was crowded almost beyond its capacity for accommodation; and as much of the responsibility of seeing to the lodging of guests fell upon Sir John de Brocas, he gave up his house at Clewer for the time being for the use of some of the guests of humbler rank, his son John acting as host there; and to this house the Gaston brothers were asked, amongst many other youthful esquires of like degree. Thus it came about that the merry yuletide season was spent by them actually beneath their uncle's roof, although he had no idea that he was entertaining kinsmen unawares.

Mindful of the good priest's warning, and knowing their ignorance of the new life and the new people amongst whom their fortunes had led them, the twins still carefully preserved the secret of their identity. They knew too little of the cause of estrangement between their father and his brothers to have any confidence how his sons would be received. They were both of opinion that by far their wisest course was to wait quietly and patiently, and watch what befell them; and the only question which Raymond ever dared to put to John in the days that followed which savoured of their own affairs, was an inquiry as to whether he had ever heard of a place called Basildene.

"Basildene?" repeated John slowly. "Yes, I have heard the name. It is the name of a Manor not very many miles from my uncle's house in Guildford. Dost thou know aught of it?"

"Nay; I knew not rightly if there were such a spot. But I have heard the name. Knowest thou to whom it belongs?"

"Yes, I know that too. It belongs to one Peter Sanghurst, of whom no man speaks aught but evil."

CHAPTER V. THE KING AND THE PRINCE.

King Edward's assembly of knights that met at his first Round Table was as typical a gathering as could well have been found of that age of warlike chivalry. The King's idea was likewise typical of the age he lived in. He had begun to see something of that decline of chivalry which was the natural outcome of a real advance in general civilization, and of increasing law and order, however slow its progress might be. Greatly deploring any decay in a system so much beloved and cherished by knights and warriors, and not seeing that its light might merely be paling in the rise of something more truly bright and beneficent, the King resolved to do everything in his power to give an impetus to all chivalrous undertakings by assembling together his knights after the fashion of the great King Arthur, and with them to take counsel how the ways and usages of chivalry might best be preserved, the old spirit kept alive, and the interests of piety and religion (with which it should ever be blended) be truly considered.

How far this festival succeeded in its object can scarcely be told now. The days of chivalry (in the old acceptance of the term) were drawing to a close, and an attempt to galvanize into life a decaying institution is seldom attended with any but very moderate success. From the fact that we hear so little of the King's Round Table, and from the few times it ever met, one is led to conclude that the results were small and disappointing. But the brilliance of the first assembly cannot be doubted; and for the twins of Gascony it was a wonderful day, and marked an epoch in their lives; for on that occasion they saw for the first time the mighty King, whose name had been familiar to them from childhood, and had actual speech with the Prince of Wales, that hero of so many battlefields, known to history as the Black Prince.

So great was the crowd of esquires who waited upon the knights sitting around the huge Round Table, that the Gascon brothers only struggled for a few minutes into the gay assemblage to look at what was going on there. The table was itself a curiosity -- a huge ring round which, in beautifully carved seats, the knights sat, each seat fitting into the next, with an arm to divide them, the backs forming a complete circle round the table. The King's seat was adorned with a richer carving, and had a higher back, than the others, but that was its only distinction. Within the circle of the table were pages flitting about, attending on the guests; and the esquires who thronged the corridors or supplemented the attentions of the pages were considerably more numerous than the occasion required, so that these were to be seen gathering in groups here and there about the building in the vicinity of the feast, discussing the proceedings or talking of public or private matters.

Very wonderful was all this to Gaston and Raymond, but not quite so bewildering as it would have been a month ago. They had been about the Court some little time now, and were growing used to the fine dresses, the English ways of speech, and the manners and customs which had perplexed them not a little at first. They were greatly entertained by watching the shifting throng of courtiers, and their one glimpse at the royal countenance of the King had been fraught with keen pleasure and satisfaction; but so far as they knew it, they had not yet seen the Prince of Wales, and they had not caught sight either of their cousins Oliver or Bernard, though they had found John sitting in the embrasure of a window in the corridor, watching the scene with the same interest which they felt in it themselves.

When they saw him they joined him, and asked the names of some of the gay personages flitting about. John good-naturedly amused them with a number of anecdotes of the Court; and as the three were thus chatting together, they were suddenly joined by another group of three, who advanced along the corridor talking in low tones but with eager excitement.

"Here comes the Prince," said John, rising to his feet, and the twin brothers turned eagerly round.

They knew in an instant which of the three was the Prince, for his companions were John's two brothers, Oliver and Bernard. Young Edward was at that time not quite fourteen, but so strong, so upright, so well grown, and of such a kingly presence, that it was hard to believe he had scarcely left his childhood behind. His tunic was of cloth of gold, with the royal arms embroidered upon it. He wore a golden collar round his neck, and his golden girdle held a dagger with a richly-jewelled hilt. A short velvet mantle lined with ermine hung over his shoulder, and was fastened by a clasp richly chased and set with rubies. His face was flushed as if with some great purpose, and his eyes shone brightly with excitement.

"It shall never be true -- I will not believe it!" he was saying, in urgent accents. "Let chivalry once die out, and so goes England's glory. May I die ere I live to see that day! Better a thousand times death in some glorious warfare, in some knightly deed of daring, than to drag out a life of ease and sloth with the dying records of the glorious past alone to cheer and sustain one. Good John, thou art a man of letters -- thou canst read the signs of the times -- prithee tell me that there be no truth in this dark whisper. Sure the days of chivalry are not half lived through yet!"

"Nor will be so long as you are spared to England, gentle Prince," answered John, with his slight peculiar smile. "You and your royal Sire together will keep alive the old chivalry at which was dealt so sore a blow in your grandsire's days. A reign like that of weakness and folly and treachery leaves its mark behind; but England's chivalry has lived through it --"

"Ay, and she shall awake to new and fuller life!" cried the ardent boy. "What use in being born a prince if something cannot thus be done to restore what has been lost? And why should princes stand idle when the world is all in arms? Comrades, do ye long as I do to show the world that though we have not yet won our knighthood's spurs, we are yet ready and willing to sally forth, even as did the knights of old, upon some quest of peril or adventure? Why is it that I, who should by rights be one to show what may be done by a boy's arm with a stout heart behind, am ever held back from peril and danger, have never seen fighting save in the tilt yard, or wound worse than what splintered spear may chance to inflict? I burn to show the world what a band of youths can do who go forth alone on some errand of true chivalry. Comrades, give me your ears. Let me speak to you of the purpose in my heart. This day has my father, in the hearing of all men, lamented the wane of chivalry, has spoken brave words of encouragement to those who will strive with him to let it be no hollow name amongst us. Then who more fit than his own son to go forth now -- at once, by stealth if need be -- upon such a quest of peril and glory? nay, not for the glory -- that may or may not be ours -- but upon a mission of chivalrous service to the weak and helpless? This thing I purpose to do myself, together with some few chosen comrades. Brothers of Brocas, will ye go with me?"

"We will! we will!" cried the three brothers in a breath.

"We will!" echoed the twins of Gascony, forgetting all but their eager desire to share the peril and the glory of the Prince's enterprise, whatever it might be.

Young Edward heard the sound of the strange voices, and turned a quick glance of inquiry upon the youths. He saw that they wore the livery of Sir James Audley, who was a great favourite even then with the Prince. The true kingly courtesy of the Plantagenets was ingrained in the nature of this princely boy, and he looked with a smile at the two eager faces before him.

"And who be ye, fair gentlemen?" he asked. "Methinks the badge you wear is answer almost enough. I know your good lord well, and love him well, and sure there be none of his esquires, be they never so young, who would disgrace their master by fleeing in an hour of peril. Wherefore if ye would fain be of the band I seek to muster round me, I will bid you ready welcome. I seek none that be above twenty years of age.

"Good John, you shall be the wise man of our party. These lads have not lived many more years than I have myself, or I am much mistaken."

"We are twin brothers," said Gaston frankly, "and we are nigh upon sixteen. We have been with Sir James a matter of

two months. We --"

"They met him in the woods of Gascony," cried Oliver, "and rescued him from the attacks of a pack of fierce wolves. I trow they would bear themselves bravely be your quest what it may."

"Are you Gascons?" asked the Prince, looking with keener interest at the two youths; for he shared some of his father's instincts of government, and was always well disposed towards Gascon subjects.

"We are half Gascon and half English, may it please you, fair Prince," answered Gaston readily, "and we will follow you to the death."

"I well believe it, my good comrades," answered the Prince quickly; "and right glad shall we be of your company and assistance. For our errand lies amidst dark forests with their hidden perils and dangers, and I wot that none know better what such dangers are nor how they may be escaped than our brethren of Gascony."

"Then you know on what quest we are bent, sweet Prince?"

Edward nodded his head as he looked over his shoulder. "Ay, that I do right well, and that will I tell you incontinently if no eavesdroppers be about. Ye know that of late days brave knights and gentlemen have been mustering to our Court from all parts of this land? Now amongst these is one Sir Hugh Vavasour, who comes from his house of Woodcrych, not half a day's ride from our Royal Palace of Guildford; and with him he has brought his son, one Alexander, with whom I yestere'en fell into converse. I say not that I liked the youth himself. He seemed to me something over bold, yet lacking in those graces of chivalry that are so dear to us. Still it was in talking with him that I heard this thing which has set my blood boiling in my veins."

"What thing is that, fair Prince?" asked John.

And then the young Edward told his tale. It was such a tale as was only too often heard in olden days, though it did not always reach the ears of royalty. The long and expensive, and as yet somewhat fruitless, wars in which Edward had been engaged almost ever since he came to the throne, had greatly impoverished his subjects, and with poverty there arose those other evils inseparable from general distress -- robbery, freebooting, crime in its darkest and ugliest aspects; bands of hungry men, ruined and beggared, partly perhaps through misfortune, but partly through their own fault, wandering about the country ravaging and robbing, leaving desolation behind them, and too often, if opposed, committing acts of brutal cruelty upon defenceless victims, as a warning to others.

A band such as this was just now scouring the woods around Guildford. Young Vavasour had heard of depredations committed close against the walls of his own home, and had heard of many outrages which had been suffered by the poor folks around. Cattle had been driven off, their hardly-gathered fuel had vanished in the night; sometimes lonely houses were attacked, and the miserable inhabitants, if they offered resistance, stabbed to the heart by the marauders. One or two girls had been missed from their homes, and were said to have fallen a prey to the robber band. All these things, and the latter item especially, stirred the hot blood in the young Prince's veins, and he was all on fire to do some doughty deed that should at once exterminate such evildoers from the face of the earth, strike terror into the hearts of other bands, and show that the spirit of chivalry was yet alive in the kingdom, and that the King's son was the first to fly to the succour of the distressed and the feeble.

"For I will go myself and hunt these miscreants as though they were dogs or wolves -- beasts of prey that needs must be put down with a strong hand. I will not tell my father the tale, else might he appoint warriors of his own to see to the matter, and the glory be theirs and not ours. No, this is a matter for my arm to settle. I will collect around me a band of our bravest youths -- they shall all be youths like myself. Our good John knows well the country around our Palace of Guildford -- in truth I know it indifferently well myself. We will sally forth together -- my father will grant me leave to go thither with a body of youths of my own choosing -- and thence we will scour the forests, scatter or slay these vile disturbers of the peace, restore the lost maidens to their homes, and make recompense to our poor subjects for all they have suffered at their hands."

It was just the scheme to fascinate the imagination and fire the ardour of a number of high-spirited and generous boys. The proximity of the Royal Palace of Guildford gave them every facility for carrying out the plan speedily and yet secretly, and the Prince had quickly enlisted a score of well-trained, well-equipped lads to follow him on his chivalrous quest. Sir James gave ready consent to his petition that the Gascon twins might join his train for a few days. The King, when he gave his sanction to the proposed expedition to Guildford, believed that his son was going there bent on sport or some boyish pastime, and scarce bestowed a second thought upon the matter. The royal children had each their own attendants and establishment, following wherever their youthful master or mistress went; and to the eldest son of the King a very decided liberty was given, of which his father had never yet had cause to repent.

Thus it came about that three days after the King's great feast of the Round Table had ended, the Prince of Wales, with a following of twenty young comrades, in addition to his ordinary staff of attendants, rode forth from the Castle of Windsor in the tardy winter's dawn, and before night had fallen the gay and gallant little band had reached the Palace of Guildford, which had received due notice of the approach of the King's son. Those who were sharp-eyed amongst the spectators of this departure might have noted that the Prince and his immediate followers each wore round his arm a band of black ribbon with a device embroidered upon it. The device was an eagle worked in gold, and was supposed to be emblematic of the swiftness and the strength that were to characterize the expedition of the Prince, when he should swoop down upon the dastardly foes, and force them to yield up their ill-gotten gains. These badges had been worked by the clever fingers of Edward's sisters, the youthful princesses Isabella and Joanna. Joanna, as the wardrobe rolls of the period show, was a most industrious little maiden with her needle, and must have spent the best part of her time in her favourite pastime of embroidery, judging by the amount of silk and other material required by her for her own private use. Both the sisters were devotedly attached to their handsome brother, and were the sharers of his confidences. They knew all about this secret expedition, and sympathized most fully with it. It was Joanna's ready wit

which had suggested the idea of the badge, which idea was eagerly caught up by Edward; for to go forth with a token woven by the fair hands of ladies would give to the exploit a spice of romantic chivalry that would certainly add to its zest. So for the past three days the royal sisters had been plying their needles with the utmost diligence, and each of the gallant little band knew that he wore upon his arm a token embroidered for him by the hands of a youthful princess.

Of the Royal Palace of Guildford nothing now remains -- even the site is not known with any certainty, though it is supposed to have occupied the spot where Guildford Park farm now stands. Its extensive park covered a large area of ground, and was a favoured hunting ground for many of the illustrious Plantagenets.

It need hardly be said with what interest and curiosity the twin brothers gazed about them as they neared the little town of Guildford, where their uncle, Master Bernard de Brocas, possessed a gradually increasing property. They felt that this journey was the first step towards Basildene; and utterly ignorant as they were of its exact locality, they wondered if they might not be passing it by whenever some ancient Manor House reared its chimneys or gables above the bare encircling trees, and their hearts beat high at the thought that they were drawing near to their own lost inheritance.

The Palace was warmly lighted in honour of the arrival of the Prince of Wales; and as the little cavalcade dismounted at the door and entered the noble hall, a figure, habited after the fashion of the ecclesiastics of the day, stepped forth to greet the scion of royalty, and the twin brothers heard their comrades mutter,

"It is the good Rector, Master Bernard de Brocas."

The young Prince plainly knew the Rector well, and after just bending his knee to ask the blessing, as was his reverent custom, he led him into the banqueting hall, where a goodly meal lay spread, placing him in a seat at his own right hand, and asking him many things as the meal progressed, leading the talk deftly to the robbers' raids, and seeking, without betraying his purpose, to find out where these miscreants might most readily be found.

The good Rector had heard much about them, but knew little enough of their movements. One day they were heard of in one place, and again they would vanish, and no man would know whither they had gone till they appeared in another. Everywhere they left behind them desolated homes, and bloodshed and ruin followed in their track. Master Bernard had heard too many such tales from all parts of the kingdom to heed overmuch what went on in this particular spot. He knew that the winter's privation and cold acted upon savage men almost as it did upon wolves and ravenous beasts, and that in a country harassed and overtaxed such things must needs be. He never suspected the cause of the Prince's eagerness. He believed that the youths had come down bent on sport, and that they would take far more interest in the news he had to give them, that a wild boar had recently been seen in the forest aisles of the Royal Park, and that the huntsmen would be ready to sally forth to slay it at a single word from the Prince.

Edward's eyes lighted at this. It seemed to him a fortunate coincidence. Also he would be glad enough to see the killing of the boar, though he was more interested in the expedition it would involve into the heart of the forest.

"Prithee give orders, good Master Bernard, that the huntsmen be ready tomorrow morning at dawn of day. I trow there be horses and to spare to mount us all, as our own beasts will be something weary from the journey they have taken today. We will be ready ere the sun is up, and if kind fortune smiles upon us, I trust I shall have the good fortune to have a pair of fine tusks to offer to my sisters when they join us here, as they shortly hope to do."

Master Bernard, who was a man of no small importance all through this neighbourhood, hastened away to give the needful orders. He had come from his own Rectory hard by to receive the Prince and his comrades, and he suspected that the King would be well pleased for him to remain beneath the roof of the castle so long as this gay and youthful party did so.

When night came and the youths sought the rooms which had been made ready for them, the Prince signed to a certain number of his comrades to repair with him to his chamber, as though he desired their services at his toilet. Amongst those thus summoned were the three sons of Sir John de Brocas, and also the Gascon twins, for whom young Edward appeared to have taken a great liking, and who on their part warmly returned this feeling. Shutting the door carefully, and making sure that none but friends were round him, the Prince unfolded his plan.

He had learned from the Master Huntsman, whom he had seen for a few minutes before going to his room, that the boar lay concealed for the most part in some thick underwood lying in the very heart of the forest many miles distant, right away to the southwest in the direction of Woodcrych. This part of the forest was fairly well known to the Prince from former hunting expeditions, and he and John both remembered well the hut of a lonely woodman that lay hidden in the very depths of the wood near this spot. It had occurred to Edward as likely that old Ralph would be better acquainted with the habits of the robbers than any other person could be. He was too poor to be made a mark for their rapacity, yet from his solitary life in the forest he might likely enough come across their tracks, and be able to point out their hiding places. Therefore the Prince's plan was that he and the picked companions he should choose should slip away from the main body of the huntsmen, and make their way to this lonely cabin, joining their comrades later when they had discovered all that they could do from the old man. The shouts of the huntsmen and the baying of the dogs would guide them to the scene of the chase, and if the rest who remained all the while with the foresters and the dogs missed the Prince from amongst their ranks, they were not to draw attention to the fact, but were rather to strive to conceal it from the Master Huntsman, who might grow uneasy if he found the young Edward missing. It was of importance that all inquiries respecting the robbers should be conducted with secrecy, for if the Prince's curiosity on the subject were once to be known, suspicion might be aroused, or a regular expedition against them organized, the glory and credit of which would not belong in anything but empty name to the Prince.

It was not, perhaps, unnatural that the six lads who had first conned over the plan together should be selected as the ones to make this preliminary inquiry. John was chosen for his seniority and the prudence of his counsels, his brothers for their bravery and fleetness of foot, and the Gascon twins for their close acquaintance with forest tracks, and their

greater comprehension of the methods employed in following the trail of foes or fugitives through tangled woods. They would likely enough understand the old man's counsel better than any of the others; and as the sport of hunting the boar was more esteemed by the other youths than the expedition to the woodman's hut, no jealousy was aroused by the Prince's choice, and the scheme was quickly made known to the whole of the party.

The morrow proved a first-rate day for a hunting party in the forest. A light crisp snow lay on the ground, melting where exposed to the sun's rays, but forming a sparkling white carpet elsewhere. It was not deep enough to inconvenience either men or horses, and would scarce have fallen to any depth beneath the trees of the forest; but there was just sufficient to be an excellent guide in tracking down the quarry, and all felt confident that the wily old boar had seen his last sunrise.

Merrily rode the party forth through the great gateway and across the fine park in the direction of the forest. The Prince and his five chosen comrades rode together, sometimes speaking in low tones, sometimes joining in the gay converse on the subject of hunting which went on around them. But the Prince's thoughts were far less with sport than with the wrongs of his father's subjects, and the cruel outrages which they had suffered unredressed and almost unpitied. His heart burned within him to think that in merry England, as he liked to call it, and in the days of chivalry, such things were possible; and to put down cruelty and rapacity with a strong hand seemed of infinitely more importance to him than the pursuit of a fine sport.

Thus musing, and thus talking in low tones to the thoughtful John, the Prince dropped a little behind the muster of huntsmen. His chosen comrades followed his example, and straggled rather aimlessly after the main body, till at last a turn in the forest shut these completely from their view.

"Now," said the Prince, turning to his five selected comrades, "this, if I mistake not, is our road. We will soon see if we cannot get upon the track of the miscreants whom I am burning to punish and destroy!"

CHAPTER VI. THE PRINCE'S EXPLOIT.

The woodman's cottage was quickly reached. It was a little rush-thatched cabin of mud, lying in the very heart of the dim wood. The party had to dismount and tie up their horses at some short distance from the place; but they had the good fortune to find the occupant at home, or rather just outside his cabin, gathering a few dried sticks to light his fire.

He was a grizzled, uncouth-looking old man, but a certain dignity was imparted to him by a look of deep and unspeakable melancholy upon his face, which gave it pathos and character of its own. The rustic face is apt to become vacant, bovine, or coarse. Solitude often reduces man almost to the level of the beasts. This old man, who for many years had lived hidden away in this vast forest, might well have lost all but the semblance of humanity; but such was not the case. His eyes had light in them; his very melancholy showed that the soul was not dead. As he saw the bright-faced boys approaching him, he first gave a great start of surprise, eagerly scanning one face after another; then, as he did so the light of hope died out from his eyes, and the old despairing look came back.

Something of this was observed by the Prince and his followers, but they were at present too much bent upon their own mission to have thought to spare for any other concerns. They formed a circle round him, and asked him of the robbers - if he ever saw them; if he knew their haunts; if they had been near these parts during the past days?

For a moment it seemed as though the old man was disappointed by the questions asked him. He muttered something they did not rightly comprehend about robbers worse than these, and a quick fierce look passed across his face, and then died out again. The young Prince was courteous and patient: he allowed the old man's slow wits time to get to work; and when he did begin to speak he spoke to some purpose, and the boys listened and questioned with the most eager attention.

It took some time to extract the necessary information, not from any reluctance to speak on the old man's part, but from his inability to put his thoughts into words. Still when this was by degrees achieved, the information was of the highest possible importance.

The robbers, said the old man, were at that very moment not far away. He had seen them sally forth on one of their nocturnal raids about dusk the previous evening; and they had returned home laden with spoil two hours before the dawn. He was of the opinion that they had carried off some captive with them, for he had heard sounds as of bitter though stifled weeping as they passed his hut on their return. Did he know where they lay by day? Oh yes, right well he did! They had a hiding place in a cave down in a deep dingle, so overgrown with brushwood that only those who knew the path thither could hope to penetrate within it. Once there, they felt perfectly safe, and would sleep away the day after one of their raids, remaining safely hidden there till supplies were exhausted, when they sallied forth again. The old woodman showed them the tracks of the party that had passed by that morning, and to the eyes of the Gascon brothers these tracks were plain enough, and they undertook to follow them unerringly to the lair. The old woodman had no desire to be mixed up in the matter. If he were to be seen in the company of the trackers, he firmly believed that he should be skinned alive before many days had passed. He plainly did not put much faith in the power of these lads to overcome a large band of desperate men, and strongly advised them to go home and think no more of the matter. But his interest was only very partially aroused, and it was plain that there was something on his own mind which quite outweighed with him the subject of the forest outlaws.

John would fain have questioned him about himself, being a youth of kindly spirit; but the moment was not propitious, for the Prince was all on fire with a new idea.

"Comrades," he said gravely and firmly, "the hour has come when we must put our manhood to the proof. This very day, without the loss of a needless moment, we must fall, sword in hand, upon yon dastard crew, and do to them as they have done. You have heard this honest man's tale. Upon the day following a midnight raid they lie close in their cave asleep -- no doubt drunken with the excesses they indulge in, I warrant, when they have replenished their larder anew.

This, then, is the day they must be surprised and slain. If we wait we may never have such another chance. My brothers in arms, are you ready to follow me? Shall the eagles fail for lack of courage when the prey is almost within sight?"

An unanimous sound of dissent ran through the group. All were as eager as the Prince for the battle and the victory; but the face of John wore an anxious look.

"We must not go alone," he said. "We must summon our comrades to join us. They are bound on the quest as much as we."

"True," answered the Prince, looking round him. "It were madness, I trow, for the six of us to make the attack alone. Yet did not Jonathan and his armour bearer fall unawares upon a host and put them to flight? Methinks some holy Father has told such a tale to me. Still thou art right, good John. We must not risk losing all because it has been given to godly men in times of old to work a great deliverance. See here, friends, what we will do. Our comrades cannot be very far away. Hark! Surely it is the baying of the hound I hear yonder over that wooded ridge! Good Bernard, do thou to horse, gallop to them as fast as thou canst, and tell them of the hap upon which we have fallen. Bid them follow fast with thee, but leave the dogs and horses behind with the huntsmen, lest their noise betray our approach. Master Huntsman may seek to withhold them from the quest, but when he knows that I, the Prince, with but four of my comrades to help me, have gone on in advance, and that we are even then approaching the robbers' cave, he will not only bid them all go, but will come himself doubtless, with the best of his followers, and give us what help he may. Lose no time. To horse, and away! And when thou hast called the band together, come back in all haste to this spot. The forest trackers will be put upon the trail, and will follow us surely and swiftly. You will find us there before you, lying in ambush, having fully reconnoitred. Be not afraid for us. Honest John will see that we run not into too great peril ere we have help. Is it understood? Good! Then lose not a moment. And for the rest of us, we will follow these sturdy Gascons, who will secretly lead us to the haunt of the outlaws."

Bernard was off almost before the last words had been spoken, and very soon they heard from the sounds that he had mounted his horse and was galloping in the direction in which, from the faint baying of the hounds, he knew the hunting party to be.

John looked somewhat anxious as the Prince signed to Gaston and Raymond to lead the way upon the robbers' track; but he knew the determined nature of the Prince, and did not venture open remonstrance. Yet Edward's quick eye caught the uneasy glance, and he replied to it with frank goodwill.

"Nay, fear not, honest John; I will run into no reckless peril, for my sweet mother hath ever been forward to counsel me that recklessness is not true bravery. Some peril there must needs be -- without it there could be no glory; but that danger shall not be added to by any hardihood such as my royal Sire would chide in me. Trust me; I will be prudent, as I trust I may yet show that I can be bold. We will use all due caution in approaching this hiding place, and if it will pleasure thee, I will promise not to leave thy side before our friends come to our aid."

John was glad enough of this promise. As the eldest of this ardent band, and the one who would be most harshly taken to task did any harm come of the enterprise, he was anxious above all things to insure the safety of the Prince. If Edward would remain beside him, he could certainly make sure of one thing -- that he himself did not survive his royal master, but died at his side fighting for his safety. The younger spirits thought only of the glory of victory. John, with his feebler physique and more thoughtful mind, saw another possible ending to the day's adventure. Still his heart did not fail; only his unspoken prayer was that no harm should befall the brave young Prince, who was so eager to show the world that chivalry was not yet dead.

The brothers from Gascony had no trouble whatever in finding and keeping the trail the robbers had left behind them. Slowly but surely they pursued their way through the labyrinth of the gloomy forest. Neither John nor any of his companions had ever been here before. The dense wood was gloomy enough to be almost terrible. Craggy rocks were visible from time to time as the party proceeded, and the thickness of the forest was so great that almost all light was excluded.

At last a spot was reached where the forest-bred boys paused. They looked back at those who were following, and beckoned them silently forward. So quietly had the party moved that the stillness of the forest had scarce been broken. Mute and breathless, John and his companion stole up. They found that they had now reached the edge of a deep ravine, so thickly wooded as to appear impassable to human foot. But just where they stood there were traces of a narrow pathway, well concealed by the sweeping boughs of a drooping willow; and that this was the dell and the path of which the old woodman had spoken the little party did not doubt for a moment.

"It is doubtless the place," said the Prince, in a whisper. "Let us softly reconnoitre whilst our forces are assembling."

"I and my brother will make the round of the dell," answered Gaston, in a like cautious tone. "Sweet Prince, stay you hither, where the rest will doubtless find us. It boots not for us to make too much stir. Sound carries well in this still frosty air."

The Prince made a sign of assent, and Gaston and Raymond crept away in different directions to make the circuit of this secluded hollow, and try to ascertain how the land lay, and what was the chance of capturing the band unawares. In particular they desired to note whether there were any other pathway into it, and whether, if the robbers were taken by surprise and desirous of flight, there was any way of gaining the forest save by the overgrown path the exploring party had already found.

The dell proved to be a cup-like hollow of no very great extent. On the side by which the party had approached it the ground shelved down gradually, thickly covered with bushes and undergrowth; but on the opposite side, as the Gascon boys discovered, the drop was almost sheer, and though trees grew up to the very edge of the dell, nothing could grow upon the precipitous sandy sides.

"We have them like rats in a trap," cried Gaston, with sparkling eyes, as he once more joined the Prince, his brother with him. "They can only escape up these steep banks thickly overgrown, and we know that there is but this one path. On the other side it is a sheer drop; a goat could not find foothold. If we can but take them by surprise, and post an ambush ready to fall upon escaped stragglers who reach the top, there will not be one left to tell the tale when the deed is done."

The Prince set his teeth, and the battle light which in after days men learned to regard with awe shone brightly in his eyes.

"Good," he said briefly: "they shall be served as they have served others -- taken in their slumber, taken in the midst of their security. Nay, even so it will not be for them as it has been for their victims, for doubtless they will have their arms beside them, and will spring from their slumber to fight like wild wolves trapped; but I trow the victory will lie with us, and he who fears may stay away. Are we not all clad in leather, and armed to repulse the savage attacks of the wild boar of the woods? Thus equipped, need we fear these human wild beasts? Methinks we shall sweep this day from the face of the earth a fouler scourge than ever beasts of the forest prove."

"Hist!" whispered Oliver de Brocas cautiously; "methinks I hear a sound approaching. It is our fellows joining us."

Oliver was right. The trail had now been cautiously followed by the huntsmen and their young charges, and the next moment the whole twenty stood at the head of the pathway, together with the Master Huntsman, and some half-dozen stout fellows all armed with murderous-looking hunting knives, and betraying by their looks the same eagerness for the fight as the band of youthful warriors.

It was vain to plead with the Prince to be one of those told off to remain in ambush in order to intercept and slay any fugitive who might escape the melee below. No, the young heir of England was resolved to be foremost in the fray; and the utmost that he would consent to was that the party should be led down by the Master Huntsman himself, whilst he walked second, John behind him, the rest pressing on in single file, one after the other, as quickly as might be. Down went the gallant little band -- with the exception of two stalwart huntsmen and four of the younger amongst the boys, who were left to guard the head of the path -- not knowing the risk they ran: whether they would find an alert and well-armed foe awaiting them at the bottom, or whether they might fall upon the enemy unawares. Very silent and cautious were their movements. The Huntsman and the Gascon brothers moved noiselessly as cats, and even the less trained youths were softly cautious in their movements. Downwards they pressed in breathless excitement, till they found themselves leaving the thick scrub behind and emerging upon a rocky platform of rude shape. Here the Master Huntsman made an imperative sign to the Prince to stop, whilst he crept forward a few paces upon hands and knees, and peeped over the edge.

After gazing for a moment at something unseen to those behind, he made a cautious sign to the Prince to approach. Edward at once did so, and Gaston and Raymond followed him, their agile, cat-like movements being as circumspect as those of the leader himself.

What they saw as they peeped down into the heart of the dell was a welcome spectacle indeed. Some distance below them, but in full view, was the opening into what looked like a large cavern, and at the entrance to this cavern lay two stout ruffians, armed to the teeth, but both in a sound sleep, their mouths open, their breath coming noisily between their parted lips. There were no dogs to be seen. Nothing broke the intense stillness that prevailed. It was plainly as the old woodman had said. Their nocturnal raid had been followed by a grand carouse on the return home, and now the party, overcome by fatigue and strong drink, and secure in the fancied privacy of their isolated retreat, had retired to rest within the cave, leaving two fellows on guard, to be sure, but plainly without the smallest apprehension of attack.

"Good!" whispered the Prince, with eyes that shone like his father's in the hour of action; and softly rising to his feet, he made a sign to his comrades to draw their long knives and follow him in a compact body.

"No quarter," he whispered, as he surveyed with pride the brave faces round him: "they have shown no mercy; let no mercy be shown to them. Those who rob the poor, who slay the defenceless, who commit brutal outrages upon the persons of women and children, deserve naught but death. Let them fight like men; we will slay them in fair fight, but we will give no quarter. We will, if God fights for us, sweep the carrion brood from off the very face of the earth!"

And then, to the dismay of the Master Huntsman, who had hoped to step upon the sleeping sentries unawares, and rid themselves of at least two of the foe before the alarm was given, the Prince raised his voice in a shrill battle cry, and dashing down the slope with his comrades at his heels, flung himself upon the taller of the guards and plunged his knife into the fellow's throat.

Gaston and Raymond had simultaneously sprung upon the other, and with a sharp cry of astonishment and rage he too fell lifeless to the ground.

But the Prince's shout, the man's cry, and the sound of clashing arms aroused from their deep slumbers the robber crew within the cavern, and with the alertness that comes of such a lawless life, every man of them sprang to his feet and seized his weapon almost before he was awake.

The Master Huntsman, however, had not waited to see the end of the struggle upon the platform outside. At the very moment that the Prince buried his weapon in the sentry's throat, this bold fellow, with three of his underlings at his side, had sprung inside the cave itself, and luckily enough it was upon the prostrate figure of the chief of the band that his eye first lighted. Before the man could spring to his feet, a blow from that long shining knife had found its way to his heart. The other hunters had set each upon his man, and taken unawares, those attacked were slain ere they had awakened sufficiently to realize what was happening. Thus the number had been diminished by six before the rest came swarming out, as bees from a disturbed hive.

It was well indeed then for the brave boys, who had thought themselves the match for armed men, that these latter

were dazed with deep potations and but half armed after throwing aside their weapons ere lying down to rest. Well was it also that they had amongst them the Master Huntsman and his trusty satellites, who had the strength of men, as well as the trained eye, quick hand, and steady nerve that belong to their calling in life. Then, again, the dress of these huntsmen was so like in character to that worn by many of the band, that the robbers themselves suspected each other of treachery, and many turned one upon the other, and smote his fellow to the earth. Yet notwithstanding all these things in their favour, the Prince's youthful followers were hardly beset, and to his rage and grief young Edward saw more than one bright young head lying in the dust of the sandy platform.

But this sight filled him with such fury that he was like a veritable tiger amongst the assailants who still came flocking out of the cave. His battle cry rang again and again through the vaulted cavern, his shining blade seemed everywhere, dealing death and destruction. Boy though he was, he appeared endued with the strength of a man, and that wonderful hereditary fighting instinct, which was so marked in his own sire, seemed handed down to him. He took in the whole scope of the scene with a single glance. Wherever there was an opening to deal a fatal blow, that blow was dealt by the Prince's trusty blade. It almost seemed as though he bore a charmed life in that grim scene of bloodshed and confusion, though perhaps he owed his safety more to the faithful support of the two Gascon brothers, who together with John de Brocas followed the Prince wherever he went, and averted from his head many a furious stroke that else might have settled his mortal career for ever.

But the robbers began to see that this boy was their chiefest foe. If they could but slay him, the rest might perchance take flight. Already their own ranks were terribly thinned, and they saw that mischief was meant by the deadly fury with which their assailants came on at them. They were but half armed, and the terror and bewilderment of the moment put them at great disadvantage; but amongst those who still retained their full senses, and could distinguish friend from foe, were three brothers of tall stature and mighty strength, and these three, taking momentary counsel together, resolved to fling themselves upon the little knot surrounding the person of the Prince, and slay at all cost the youthful leader who appeared to exercise so great a power over the rest of the gallant little band.

It was a terrible moment for good John de Brocas, already wearied and ready to drop with the exertions of the fight -- exertions to which he was but little habituated -- when he saw bearing down upon them the gigantic forms, as they looked to him, of these three black-browed brothers. The Prince had separated himself somewhat from the rest of the band. He and his three immediate followers had been pursuing some fugitives, who had fallen a prey to their good steel blades. They were just about to return to the others, round whom the fight still raged, though with far less fierceness than at first, when these new adversaries set upon them from behind. John was the only one who had seen the approach, and he only just in time to give one warning shout. Before the Prince could turn, an axe was whirling in the air above his head; and had not John flung himself at that instant upon the Prince, covering his person and dragging him aside at the same moment, a glorious page in England's history would never have been written. But John's prompt action saved the young Edward's life, though a frightful gash was inflicted upon his own shoulder, which received the weight of the robber's blow. With a gasping moan he sank to the ground, and knew no more of what passed, whilst Gaston and Raymond each sprang upon one of their assailants with a yell of fury, and the Prince flung himself upon the fellow who had so nearly caused his death, and for all he knew had slain the trusty John before his very eyes.

The Prince soon made sure of his man. The fellow, having missed his stroke, was taken at a disadvantage, and was unable to free his axe or draw his dagger before the Prince had stabbed him to the heart. Gaston and Raymond were sore beset with their powerful adversaries, and would scarce have lived to tell the tale of that fell struggle had not help been nigh at hand from the Master Huntsman. But he, missing the Prince from the cave's mouth, and seeing the peril he was in, now came running up, shouting to his men to follow him, and the three giant brothers were soon lying together stark and dead, whilst poor John was tenderly lifted and carried out of the melee.

The fighting was over now. The robbers had had enough of it. Some few had escaped, or had sought to do so; but by far the greater number lay dead on or about the rocky platform, where the fiercest of the fighting had been. They had slain each other as well as having been slain by the Prince's band, and the place was now a veritable shambles, at which some of the lads began to look with shuddering horror.

Several of their own number were badly hurt. Three lay dead and cold. Victory had indeed been theirs, but something of the sense of triumph was dashed as they bore away the bodies of their comrades and looked upon the terrible traces of the fray.

But the Prince had escaped unscathed -- that was the point of paramount importance in the minds of many -- and he was now engrossed in striving to relieve the sufferings of his wounded comrades by seeing their wounds skilfully bound up by the huntsmen, and obtaining for them draughts of clear cold water from a spring that bubbled up within the cavern itself.

Gaston and Raymond had escaped with minor hurts; but John's case was plainly serious, and the flow of blood had been very great before any help could reach him. He was quite unconscious, and looked like death as he lay on the floor of the cave; and after fruitless efforts to revive him, the Prince commanded a rude litter to be made wherein he might be transported to the Palace by the huntsmen who had not taken part in the struggle, and were therefore least weary. The horses were not very far away, and the rest of the wounded and the rescued captives could make shift to walk that far, and afterwards gain the Palace by the help of their sturdy steeds.

Thus it came about that Master Bernard de Brocas, who had believed the Prince and his party to be engaged in the harmless and (to them) safe sport of tracking and hunting a boar in the forest, was astounded beyond all power of speech by seeing a battered and ghastly procession enter the courtyard two hours before dusk, bearing in their midst a litter upon which lay the apparently inanimate form of his eldest nephew, his brother's first-born and heir.

CHAPTER VII. THE RECTOR'S HOUSE.

"It was well thought and boldly executed, my son," said the King of England, as he looked with fatherly pride at his bright-faced boy. "Thou wilt win thy spurs ere long, I doubt not, an thou goest on thus. But it must be an exploit more worthy thy race and state that shall win thee the knighthood which thou dost rightly covet. England's Prince must be knighted upon some glorious battlefield -- upon a day of victory that I trow will come ere long for thee and me. And now to thy mother, boy, and ask her pardon for the fright thou madest her to suffer, when thy sisters betrayed to her the wild chase upon which thou and thy boy comrades were bent. Well was it for all that our trusty huntsmen were with you, else might England be mourning sore this day for a life cut off ere it had seen its first youthful prime. Yet, boy, I have not heart to chide thee; all I ask is that when thou art bent on some quest of glory or peril another time, thou wilt tell thy father first. Trust him not to say thee nay; it is his wish that thou shouldst prove a worthy scion of thy house. He will never stand in thy path if thy purpose be right and wise."

The Prince accepted this paternal admonition with all becoming grace and humility, and bent his knee before his mother, to be raised and warmly embraced both by her and the little princesses, who had come in all haste to the Palace of Guildford before the good Rector had had time to send a message of warning to the King. Queen Philippa had heard from her daughters of the proposed escapade on the part of the little band surrounding the Prince, and the fear lest the bold boy might expose himself to real peril had induced the royal family to hasten to Guildford only two days after the Prince had gone thither. They had met a messenger from Master Bernard as they had neared the Palace, and the King, after assuring himself of the safety of his son, made kindly inquiries after those of his companions who had been with him on his somewhat foolhardy adventure.

John de Brocas was lying dangerously ill in one of the apartments of the Palace. The King was greatly concerned at hearing how severely he had been hurt; and when the story came to be told more in its details, and it appeared that to John's fidelity and the stanch support of Audley's two youthful esquires the heir of England owed his life, Edward and his Queen both paid a visit to the room where the sick youth lay, and with their own hands bestowed liberal rewards upon the twin brothers, who had stood beside the Prince in the stress of the fight, and had both received minor hurts in shielding him.

Sir James Audley was himself in the King's train; but he was about to leave the south for a secret mission in Scotland, entrusted to him by his sovereign. He was going to travel rapidly and without any large escort, and for the present he had no further need for the services of the Gascon twins. Neither of the lads would be fit for the saddle for more than a week to come, and they had already made good use of their time in England, and had interested both the King and the Prince in them, and had also earned liberal rewards. In their heart of hearts they were anxious to remain in the neighbourhood of Guildford, for they knew that there they were not far from Basildene. Wherefore when they understood that their master had no present occasion for any further service from them, they were not a little excited and pleased by the thought that they were now in a position to prosecute their own quest in such manner as seemed best to them.

They had made a wonderfully good beginning to their life of adventure. They had won the favour not only of their own kinsfolk, but of the King and the Prince. They had money and clothes and arms. They had the prospect of service with Sir James in the future, when he should have returned from his mission and require a larger train. Everything seemed to be falling in with their own desires; and it was with faces of eager satisfaction that they turned to each other when the knight had left them alone again, after a visit to the long rush-carpeted room, by the glowing hearth of which they were sitting when he had come to seek them soon after the King had visited John's couch.

John lay in a semi-conscious state upon the tall canopied bed, beneath a heavy pall of velvet, that gave a funereal aspect to the whole room. He had been aroused by the King's visit, and had spoken a few words in reply to the kind ones addressed to him; but afterwards he had sunk back into the lethargy of extreme weakness, and the brothers were to all intents and purposes alone in the long dormitory they had shared with John, and with two more comrades who had also received slight hurts, but who had now been summoned to attend the Prince on the return journey to Windsor, which was to be taken leisurely and by short stages.

Oliver and Bernard de Brocas had likewise gone, and John was, they knew, to be moved as soon as possible to Master Bernard's rectory, not far away. The kindly priest had said something about taking the brothers there also till they were quite healed of their wounds and bruises, and John invariably asked for Raymond if ever he awoke to consciousness. What was to be the end of it all the twins had no idea, but it certainly seemed as though for the present they were to be the guests of their own uncle, who knew nothing of the tie that existed betwixt them.

"Shall we say aught to him, Gaston?" asked Raymond, in a low whisper, as the pair sat over the glowing fire together. "He is a good man and a kind one, and perchance if he knew us for kinsmen he might --"

"Might be kinder than before?" questioned Gaston, with a proud smile. "Is it that thou wouldst say, brother? Ay, it is possible, but it is also likely enough that he would at once look coldly and harshly upon us. Raymond, I have learned many lessons since we left our peaceful home, and one of these is that men love not unsuccess. It is the prosperous, the favoured of fortune, upon whom the smiles of the great are bent. Perchance it was because he succeeded not well that by his own brothers our father was passed by. Raymond, I have seen likewise this -- if our kinsmen are kind, they are also proud. They have won kingly favour, kingly rewards; all men speak well of them; they are placed high in the land. Doubtless they could help us if they would; but are we to come suing humbly to them for favours, when they would scarce listen to our father when he lived? Shall we run into the peril of having their smiles turned to frowns by striving to claim kinship with them, when perchance they would spurn us from their doors? And if in days to come we rise to fame and fortune, as by good hap we may, shall we put it in their power to say that it is to their favour we owe it all? No -- a thousand times no! I will carve out mine own fortune with mine own good sword and mine own strong arm. I will be beholden to none for that which some day I will call mine own. The King himself has said that I shall make a valiant knight. I have fought by the Prince's side once; I trow that in days to come I shall do the like again. When my knighthood's spurs are won, then perchance I will to mine uncle and say to him, 'Sire, I am thy brother Arnald's son -- thine own nephew;' but not till then will I divulge the secret. Sir John de Brocas -- no, nor Master Bernard either -- shall never say that they have made Sir Gaston's fortune for him!"

The lad's eyes flashed fire; the haughty look upon his face was not unlike the one sometimes to be seen upon that of the King's Master of the Horse.

Raymond listened with a smile to these bold words, and then said quietly:

"Perhaps thou art right, Gaston; but I trust thou bearest no ill will towards our two uncles?"

Gaston's face cleared, and he smiled frankly enough.

"Nay, Brother, none in the world. It is only as I think sometimes of the story of our parents' wrongs that my hot blood seems to rise against them. They have been kind to us. I trow we need not fear to take such kindness as may be offered to us as strangers; but to come as suppliant kinsmen, humble and unknown, I neither can nor will. Let us keep our secret; let us carve out our own fortunes. A day shall come when we may stand forth before all the world as of the old line of De Brocas, but first we will win for ourselves the welcome we would fain receive."

"Ay, and we will seek our lost inheritance of Basildene," added Raymond. "That shall be our next quest, Gaston. I would fain look upon our mother's home. Methinks it lies not many miles from here."

"I misdoubt me if Basildene be aught of great moment," said Gaston, shaking back his curly hair. "Like enough it is but a Manor such as we have seen by the score as we have ridden through this land. It may be no such proud inheritance when we do find it, Raymond. It is of our lost possessions in Gascony that I chiefly think. What can any English house, of which even here scarce any man has heard, be as compared with our vast forest lands of Gascony -- our Castle of Saut -- of Orthez -- where the false Sieur de Navailles rules with the rod of iron? It is there that I would be; it is there that I would rule. When the Roy Outremer wages war with the French King, and I fight beneath his banner and win his favour, as I will do ere many years have passed, and when he calls me to receive my rewards at his kingly hands, then will I tell him of yon false and cruel tyrant there, and how our people groan beneath his harsh rule. I will ask but his leave to win mine own again, and then I will ride forth with my own knights in my train, and there shall be once again a lord of the old race ruling at Saut, and the tyrant usurper shall be brought to the very dust!"

"Ay," answered Raymond, with a smile that made his face look older for the moment than that of his twin brother, "thou, Gaston, shalt reign in Saut, and I will try to win and to reign at Basildene, content with the smaller inheritance. Methinks the quiet English Manor will suit me well. By thy side for a while will I fight, too, winning, if it may be, my spurs of knighthood likewise; but when the days of fighting be past, I would fain find a quiet haven in this fair land -- in the very place where our mother longed to end her days."

It may be seen, from the foregoing fragment of talk, that already the twin brothers were developing in different directions. So long as they had lived in the quiet of the humble home, they had scarce known a thought or aspiration not shared alike by both; but the experiences of the past months had left a mark upon them, and the mark was not altogether the same in the case of each. They had shared all adventures, all perils, all amusements; their hearts were as much bound up as ever one with the other; but they were already looking at life differently, forming a different ideal of the future. The soldier spirit was coming out with greater intensity in one nature than in the other. Gaston had no ambition, no interest beyond that of winning fame and glory by the sword. Raymond was just beginning to see that there were other aims and interests in life, and to feel that there might even come a day when these other interests should prove more to him than any laurels of battle.

In the days that followed, this feeling grew more and more upon him. His hurt was more slow to heal than Gaston's, and long after his brother was riding out daily into the forest with the keepers to slay a fat buck for the prelate's table or fly a falcon for practice or sport, Raymond remained within the house, generally the companion of the studious John; and as the latter grew strong enough to talk, he was always imparting new ideas to the untutored but receptive mind of the Gascon boy.

They had quickly removed from the Royal Palace to the more cozy and comfortable quarters within the Rectory, which belonged to Master Bernard in right of his office. John was as much at home in his uncle's house as in his father's, having spent much of his youth with the priest. Indeed it may be questioned whether he felt as much at ease anywhere as he did in this sheltered and retired place, and Raymond began to feel the subtle charm of the life there almost at once.

The Rector possessed what was for that age a fine collection of books. These were of course all manuscripts, and very costly of their kind, some being beautifully illuminated and others very lengthy. These manuscripts and books were well known to John, who had read the majority of them, and was never weary of reading them again and again. Some were writings of the ancient fathers; others were the works of pagan writers and philosophers who had lived in the dark ages of the world's history, yet who had had thoughts and aspirations in advance of their day, and who had striven without the light of Christianity to construct a code of morals that should do the work for humanity which never could have been done till the Light came into the world with the Incarnation.

As Raymond sat day by day beside John's couch, hearing him read out of these wonderful books, learning himself to read also with a sense of quickened pleasure that it was a surprise to experience, he began to realize that there was a world around and about him of which he had had no conception hitherto, to feel his mental horizon widening, and to see that life held weightier questions than any that could be settled at the sword's point.

"In truth I have long held that myself," answered John, to whom some such remark had been made; and upon the pale face of the student there shone a light which Raymond had seen there before, and marked with a dim sense of awe. "We hear men talk of the days of chivalry, and mourn because they seem to be passing away. Yet methinks there may be a holier and a higher form of chivalry than the world has yet seen that may rise upon the ashes of what has gone before, and lead men to higher and better things. Raymond, I would that I might live to see such a day -- a day when battle and bloodshed should be no longer men's favourite pastime, but when they should come to feel as our Blessed Lord has bidden us feel, brothers in love, for that we love Him, and that we walk forward hand in hand towards the light, warring

no more with our brethren of the faith, but only with such things as are contrary to His Word, and are hindering His purpose concerning the earth."

Raymond listened with but small comprehension to a thought so vastly in advance of the spirit of the day; but despite his lack of true understanding, he felt a quick thrill of sympathy as he looked into John's luminous eyes, and he spoke with reverence in his tone even though his words seemed to dissent from those of his companion.

"Nay, but how would the world go on without wars and gallant feats of arms? And sure in a good cause men must fight with all their might and main? Truly I would gladly seek for paynim and pagan foes if they might be found; but men go not to the Holy Land as once they did. There be foes nigher at home against whom we have to turn our arms. Good John, thou surely dost not call it a wicked thing to fight beneath the banner of our noble King when he goes forth upon his wars?"

John smiled one of those thoughtful, flickering smiles that puzzled his companion and aroused his speculative curiosity.

"Nay, Raymond," he answered, speaking slowly, as though it were no easy matter to put his thought in such words as would be comprehensible to his companion, "it is not that I would condemn any man or any cause. We are placed in the midst of warlike and stirring times, and it may be that some great purpose is being worked out by all these wars and tumults in which we bear our share. It is only as I lie here and think (I have, as thou knowest, been here many times before amongst these books and parchments, able for little but study and thought) that there comes over me a strange sense of the hollowness of these earthly strivings and search after fame and glory, a solemn conviction -- I scarce know how to frame it in words -- that there must be other work to be done in the world, stronger and more heroic deeds than men will ever do with swords and spears. Methinks the holy saints and martyrs who went before us knew something of that work; and though it be not given to us to dare and suffer as they did, yet there come to me moments when I feel assured that God may still have works of faith and patience for us to do for Him here, which (albeit the world will never know it) may be more blessed in His eyes than those great deeds the fame of which goes through the world. Perchance were I a man of thews and sinews like my brothers, I might think only of the glory of feats of arms and the stress and strife of the battle. But being as I am, I cannot but think of other matters; and so thinking and dreaming, there has come to me the sense that if I may never win the knighthood and the fame which may attend on others, I may yet be called upon to serve the Great King in some other way. Raymond, I think that I could gladly die content if I might but feel that I had been called to some task for Him, and having been called had been found faithful."

John's eyes were shining brightly as he spoke. Raymond felt a slight shiver run through his frame as he answered impulsively:

"Thou hast done a deed already of which any belted knight might well be proud. It was thou who saved the life of the Prince of Wales by taking upon thy shoulder the blow aimed at his head. The King himself has spoken in thy praise. How canst thou speak as though no fame or glory would be thine?"

A look of natural pride and pleasure stole for a moment over John's pale face; but the thoughtful brightness in his eyes deepened during the silence that followed, and presently he said musingly:

"I am glad to think of that. I like to feel that my arm has struck one good blow for my King and country; though, good Raymond, to thee and to Gaston, as much as to me, belongs the credit of saving the young Prince. Yet though I too love deeds of glory and chivalry, and rejoice to have borne a part in one such struggle undertaken in defence of the poor and the weak, I still think there be higher tasks, higher quests, yet to be undertaken by man in this world."

"What quest?" asked Raymond wonderingly, as John paused, enwrapped, as it seemed, in his own thoughts.

It was some time before the question was answered, and then John spoke dreamily and slow, as though his thoughts were far away from his wondering listener.

"The quest after that whose glory shall not be of this world alone; the quest that shall raise man heavenward to his Maker. Is that thought new in the heart of man? I trow not. We have heard of late much of that great King Arthur, the founder of chivalry, and of his knights. Were feats of arms alone enough for them? or those exploits undertaken in the cause of the helpless or oppressed, great and noble as these must ever be? Did not one or more of their number feel that there was yet another and a holier quest asked of a true knight? Did not Sir Galahad leave all else to seek after the Holy Grail? Thou knowest all the story; have we not read it often together? And seems it not to thee to point us ever onward and upward, away from things of earth towards the things of heaven, showing that even chivalry itself is but an earthly thing, unless it have its final hopes and aspirations fixed far above this earth?"

John's face was illumined by a strange radiance. It seemed to Raymond as though something of the spirit of the Knight of the Grail shone out from those hollow eyes. A subtle sympathy fired his own soul, and taking his cousin's thin hand in his he cried quickly and impetuously:

"Such a knight as that would I fain be. Good John, tell me, I pray thee, where such a quest may be found."

At that literal question, put with an air of the most impulsive good faith, John's face slightly changed. The rapt look faded from his eyes, and a reflective smile took its place, as the young man gazed long and earnestly into the bright face of the eager boy.

"Why shouldst thou come to me to know, good lad?" he questioned. "It is of others that thou wilt learn these matters better than of me. Do they not call me the man of books -- of dreams -- of fancies?"

"I know not and I care not," answered Raymond impetuously. "It is of thee and of thee only that I would learn."

"And I scarce know how to answer thee," replied the youth, "though gladly would I help thee to fuller, clearer

knowledge if I knew how. I trow that many men would smile at me were I to put my thoughts into words, for it seems to me that for us who call ourselves after the sacred name of Christ there can be no higher or holier service than the service in which He himself embarked, and bid His followers do likewise -- feeding the hungry, ministering to the sick, cheering the desolate, binding up the broken heart, being eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. He that would be the greatest, let him be the servant of all. Those were His own words. Yet how little do we think of them now."

Raymond sat silent and amazed. Formerly such words would have seemed comprehensible enough to him; but of late he had seen life under vastly different aspects than any he had known in his quiet village home. The great ones of the earth did not teach men thus to think or speak. Not to serve but to rule was the aim and object of life.

"Wouldst have me enter the cloister, then?" he asked, a look of distaste and shrinking upon his face; for the quiet, colourless life (as it seemed to him) of those who entered the service of the Church was little to the taste of the ardent boy. But John's answer was a bright smile and a decided negative; whereupon Raymond breathed more freely.

"Nay; I trow we have priests and monks enow, holy and pious men as they are. It has often been asked of me if I will not follow in the steps of my good uncle here; but I have never felt the wish. It seems to me that the habit of the monk or the cassock of the priest too often seems to separate betwixt him and his fellow man, and that it were not good for the world for all its holiest men to don that habit and divide themselves from their brethren. Sir Galahad's spotless heart beat beneath his silver armour. Would he have been to story and romance the star and pattern he now is had he donned the monkish vesture and turned his armed quest into a friar's pilgrimage?"

"Nay, verily not."

"I think with thee, and therefore say I, Let not all those who would fain lead the spotless life think to do so by withdrawing from the world. Rather let them carry about the spotless heart beneath the coat of mail or the gay habit. Their quest need not be the less exalted --"

"But what is that quest to be?" cried Raymond eagerly; "that is what I fain would know. Good John, give me some task to perform. What wouldst thou do thyself in my place?"

"Thou wouldst laugh were I to tell thee."

"Try me and see."

"I will. If I were sound and whole tomorrow, I should forth into the forest whence we came, and I should seek and find that aged woodman, who seemed so sorely bowed down with sorrow, and I should bid him unfold his tale to me, and see if in any wise I might help him. He is poor, helpless, wretched, and by the words he spoke, I knew that he had suffered heavy sorrow. Perchance that sorrow might be alleviated could one but know the story of it. His face has haunted my fevered dreams. To me it seems as though perchance this were an errand of mercy sent to me to do. Deeds of knightly prowess I trow will never now be mine. It must be enough for me to show my chivalry by acts of love and care for the helpless, the sorrowful, the oppressed."

Raymond's eyes suddenly glowed. Something of the underlying poetry of the thought struck an answering chord in his heart, though the words themselves had been plain and bald enough.

"I will perform that task for thee, good John," he said. "I well remember the place, ay, and the old man and his sorrowful mien. I will thither tomorrow, and will bring thee word again. If he may be helped by any act of mine, be assured that act shall not be lacking."

John pressed his comrade's hand and thanked him; but Raymond little knew to what this quest, of apparently so little moment, was to lead, nor what a link it was to form with the story of the lost inheritance of Basildene.

CHAPTER VIII. THE VISIT TO THE WOODMAN.

"Raymond, I am glad of this chance to speak alone together, for since thou hast turned into a man of books and letters I have scarce seen thee. I am glad of this errand into these dark woods. It seems like times of old come back again -- and yet not that either. I would not return to those days of slothful idleness, not for all the gold of the King's treasury. But I have wanted words with thee alone, Brother. Knowest thou that we are scarce ten miles (as they measure distance here in England) from Basildene?"

Raymond turned an eager face upon his brother.

"Hast seen it, Gaston?"

"Nay. It has not been my hap to go that way; but I have heard enough and to spare about it. I fear me that our inheritance is but a sorry one, Raymond, and that it will be scarce worth the coil that would be set afoot were we to try to make good our claim."

"Tell me, what hast thou heard?" asked Raymond eagerly.

"Why, that it is but an ancient Manor, of no great value or extent, and that the old man who dwells there with his son is little different from a sorcerer, whom it is not safe to approach -- at least not with intent to meddle. Men say that he is in league with the devil, and that he has sold his soul for the philosopher's stone, that changes all it touches to gold. They say, too, that those who offend him speedily sicken of some fell disease that no medicine can cure. Though he must have wondrous wealth, he has let his house fall into gloomy decay. No man approaches it to visit him, and he goes nowhither himself. His son, Peter, who seems as little beloved as his father, goes hither and thither as he will. But it is whispered that he shares in his father's dealings with the Evil One, and that he will reap the benefit of the golden

treasure which has been secured to them. However that may be, all men agree that the Sanghursts of Basildene are not to be meddled with with impunity."

Raymond's face was very thoughtful. Such a warning as this, lightly as it would be regarded in the present century, meant something serious then; and Raymond instinctively crossed himself as he heard Gaston's words. But after a moment's pause of thoughtful silence he said gravely:

"Yet perhaps on this very account ought we the rather to strive to win our inheritance out of such polluted hands. Have we not others to think of in this thing? Are there not those living beneath the shelter of Basildene who must be suffering under the curse that wicked man is like to bring upon it? For their sakes, Gaston, ought we not to do all in our power to make good our rights? Are they to be left to the mercy of one whose soul is sold to Satan?"

Gaston looked quickly into his brother's flushed face, and wondered at the sudden enthusiasm beaming out of his eyes. But he had already recognized that a change was passing over Raymond, even as a change of a different kind was coming upon himself. He did not entirely understand it, neither did he resent it; and now he threw his arm across his brother's shoulder in the old caressing fashion of their boyhood.

"Nay, I know not how that may be. There may be found those who dare to war against the powers of darkness, and with the help of the holy and blessed saints they may prevail. But that is not the strife after which my heart longs. Raymond, I fear me I love not Basildene, I love not the thought of making it our own. It is for the glory of the battlefield and the pomp and strife of true warfare that I long. There are fairer lands to be won by force of arms than ever Basildene will prove, if all men speak sooth. Who and what are we, to try our fortunes and tempt destruction by drawing upon ourselves the hatred of this wicked old man, who may do us to death in some fearful fashion, when else we might be winning fame and glory upon the plains of France? Let us leave Basildene alone, Brother; let us follow the fortunes of the great King, and trust to his noble generosity for the reward of valour."

Raymond made no immediate reply, though he pressed his brother's hand and looked lovingly into his face. Truth to tell, his affections were winding themselves round his mother's country and inheritance, just as Gaston's were turning rather to his father's land, and the thought of the rewards to be won there. Then, within Raymond's heart were growing up those new thoughts and aspirations engendered by long talks with John; and it seemed to him that possibly the very quest of which he was in search might be found in freeing Basildene of a heavy curse. Ardent, sensitive, full of vivid imagination -- as the sons of the forest mostly are -- Raymond felt that there was more in the truest and deepest chivalry than the mere feats of arms and acts of dauntless daring that so often went by that name. Hazy and indistinct as his ideas were, tinged with much of the mysticism, much of the superstition of the age, they were beginning to assume definite proportions, and to threaten to colour the whole future course of his life; and beneath all the dimness and confusion one settled, leading idea was slowly unfolding itself, and forming a foundation for the superstructure that was to follow -- the idea that in self-denial, self-sacrifice, the subservience of selfish ambition to the service of the oppressed and needy, chivalry in its highest form was to be found.

But in his brother's silence Gaston thought he read disappointment, and with another affectionate gesture he hastened to add:

"But if thy heart goes out to our mother's home, we will yet win it back, when time has changed us from striplings to tried warriors. See, Brother, I will tell thee what we will do. Men say that it can scarce be a year from now ere the war breaks out anew betwixt France and England, and then will come our opportunity. We will follow the fortunes of the King. We will win our spurs fighting at the side of the Prince. We will do as our kindred have done before us, and make ourselves honoured and respected of all men. It may be that we shall then be lords of Saut once more. But be that as it may, we shall be strong, rich, powerful -- as our uncles are now. Then, if thou wilt so have it, we will think again of Basildene; and if we win it back, it shall be thine, and thine alone. Fight thou by my side whilst we are yet too young to bring to good any private matter of our own. Then will I, together with thee, think again of our boyhood's dream; and it may be that we shall yet live to be called the Twin Brothers of Basildene!"

Raymond smiled at the sound of that name, as he had smiled at Gaston's eager words before. Full of ardent longings and unbounded enthusiasm, as were most well-born youths in those adventurous days, he was just a little less confident than Gaston of the brilliant success that was to attend upon their feats of arms. Still there was much of the fighting instinct in the boy, and there was certainly no hope of regaining Basildene in the present. So that he agreed willingly to his brother's proposition, although he resolved before he left these parts to look once with his own eyes upon the home that had sheltered his mother's childhood and youth.

And then they plunged into the thickest of the forest, and could talk no more till they had reached the little clearing that lay around the woodman's hut. The old man was not far away, as they heard by the sound of a falling axe a little to the right of them. Following this sound, they quickly came upon the object of their search -- the grizzled old man, with the same look of unutterable woe stamped upon his face.

Gaston, who knew only one-half of the errand upon which they had come, produced the pieces of silver that the Rector and John had sent, with a message of thanks to the old woodman for his help in directing the Prince and his company to the robbers' cave at such a favourable moment. The old man appeared bewildered at first by the sight of the money and the words of thanks; but recollection came back by degrees, though he seemed as one who in constant brooding upon a single theme has come to lose all sense of other things, and scarce to observe the flight of time, or to know one day from another.

This strange, wild melancholy, which had struck John at once, now aroused in Raymond a sense of sympathetic interest. He had come to try to seek the cause of the old man's sorrow, and he did not mean to leave with his task unfulfilled.

Perhaps John could have found no fitter emissary than this Gascon lad, with his simple forest training, his quick sympathy and keen intelligence, and his thorough knowledge of the details of peasant life, which in all countries

possess many features in common.

It was hard at first to get the old man to care to understand what was said, or to take the trouble to reply. The habit of silence is one of the most difficult to break; but patience and perseverance generally win the day: and when it dawned upon this strange old man that it was of himself and his own loss and grief that these youths had come to speak, a new look crossed his weatherbeaten face, and a strange gleam of mingled fury and despair shone in the depths of his hollow eyes.

"My sorrow!" he exclaimed, in a voice from which the dreary cadence had now given place to a clearer, firmer ring: "is it of that you ask, young sirs? Has it been told to you the cruel wrong that I have suffered?"

Then suddenly clinching his right hand and shaking it wildly above his head, he broke into vehement and almost unintelligible invective, railing with frenzied bitterness against some foe, speaking so rapidly, and with such strange inflections of voice, that it was but a few words that the brothers could distinguish out of the whole of the impassioned speech. One of those words was "my son -- my boy," followed by the names of Sanghurst and Basildene.

It was these names that arrested the attention of the brothers, causing them to start and exchange quick glances. Raymond waited till the old man had finished his railing, and then he asked gently:

"Had you then a son? Where is he now?"

"A son! ay, that had I -- the light and brightness of my life!" cried the old man, with a sudden burst of rude eloquence that showed him to have been at some former time something better than his present circumstances seemed to indicate. "Young sirs, I know not who you are; I know not why you ask me of my boy. But your faces are kind, and perchance there may be help in the world, though I have found it not. I know not how time has fled since that terrible sorrow fell upon me. Perchance not many years by the calendar, but in misery and suffering a lifetime. Listen, and I will tell you all. I was not ever as you see me now. I was no lonely woodman buried in the heart of the forest. I was second huntsman to Sir Hugh Vavasour of Woodcrych, in favour with my master and well contented with my lot. I had a wife whom I loved, and she had born me a lovely boy, who was the very light of my eyes and the joy of my heart. I should weary you did I tell you of all his bold pranks and merry ways. He was, I verily believe, the loveliest child that God's sun has ever looked down upon. When it pleased Him to take my wife away from me after seven happy years, I strove not to murmur; for I had still the child, and every day that passed made him more winsome, more loving, more mettlesome and bold. Even the master would draw rein as he passed my door to have a word with the boy; and little Mistress Joan gave me many a silver groat to buy him a fairing with, and keep him always dressed in the smartest little suit of forester's green. The priest noticed him too, and would have him to his house to teach him many things, and told me he would live to carve out a fortune for himself. I thought naught too good for him. I would have wondered little if even the King had sent for him to make of him a companion for his son.

"Perchance I was foolish in the boastings I made. But the beauty and the wisdom of the boy struck all alike -- and thence came his destruction."

"His destruction?" echoed both brothers in a breath. "What! is he then dead?"

"He is worse than dead," answered the father, in a hollow, despairing voice; "he has been bewitched -- undone by foul sorcery, bound over hand and foot, and given to the keeping of Satan. Even the priest can do nothing for us. He is lost, body and soul, for ever."

The brothers exchanged wondering glances as they made the sign of the cross, the old man watching the gesture with a bitter smile in his eye. Then Raymond spoke again:

"But what was it that happened? we do not yet understand."

"I will tell you all. If you know this part of the world, young sirs, you have doubtless heard of the old Manor of Basildene, where dwells one, Peter Sanghurst by name, who is nothing more nor less than a wizard, who should be hunted to death without pity. Men have told me (I know not with what truth) that these wizards, who give themselves over to the devil, are required by their master from time to time to furnish him with new victims, and these victims are generally children -- fair and promising children, who can first be trained in the black arts of their earthly master, and are then handed over, body and soul, to the devil, to be his slaves and his victims for ever."

The old man was speaking slowly now, with a steady yet despairing ferocity that was terrible to hear. His sunken eyes gleamed in their sockets, and his hands, that were tightly clinched over the handle of his axe, trembled with the emotion that had him in its clutches.

"I was sent upon a mission by my master. I was absent from my home some seven days. When I came back my boy was gone. I had left him in the care of the keeper of the hounds. He was an honest man, and told me all the tale. Perchance you know that Sir Hugh Vavasour is what men call a spendthrift. His estates will not supply him with the money he needs. He is always in debt, he is always in difficulties. From that it comes that he cares little what manner of men are his comrades or friends, provided only that they can supply his needs when his own means fail. This is why, when all men else hate and loathe the very name of Sanghurst, he calls himself their friend. He knows that the old man has the secret by which all things may be turned into gold, and therefore he welcomes his son to Woodcrych. And men say that Mistress Joan is to be given in marriage to his son one day, because he will take her without dowry; for she is the fairest creature in the world, and he has vowed that she shall wed him and none else."

The brothers were intensely interested by this tale, but were growing a little confused by all the names introduced, and they wanted the story of the woodman's son complete.

"Then was it the old man who took your boy, or was it his son? Are they not both called Peter?"

"Ay, they have both the same name -- the same name and the same nature: evil, cruel, remorseless. I know not how nor where the old man first set eyes upon my boy; but he must have seen him, and have coveted possession of him for his devilish practices; for upon the week that I was absent from home, he left the solitude of his house, and came with the master himself to the house where the boy was. And then Sir Hugh explained to honest Stephen, who had charge of him, that Master Peter Sanghurst had offered the lad a place in his service, where he would learn many things that would stand him in good stead all the days of his life. It sounded fair in all faith. But Stephen stoutly refused to let the boy go till I returned; whereupon Sir Hugh struck him a blow across the face with his heavy whip, and young Peter Sanghurst, leaping to the ground, seized the child and placed him in front of him upon the horse, and the three galloped off laughing aloud, whilst the boy in vain implored to be set down to run home. When I came back he had gone, and all men said that the old man had thus stolen him to satisfy the greed for souls of his master the devil."

"And hast thou not seen him since?" asked the boys breathlessly. "What didst thou do when thou camest back?"

For a moment it seemed as though the old man would break out again into those wild imprecations of frenzied anger which the brothers had heard him utter before; but by a violent effort he checked the vehement flow of words that rose to his lips, and replied with a calmness far more really impressive:

"I did all that a poor helpless man might do when his feudal lord was on the side of the enemy, and met every prayer and supplication either with mockery or blows. I soon saw it all too well. Sir Hugh was under the spell of the wicked old man. What was my boy's soul to him? what my agony? Nothing -- nothing. The wizard had coveted the beautiful boy. He had doubtless made it worth my master's while to sell him to him; and what could I do? I tried everything I knew; but who would listen to me? Master Bernard de Brocas of Guildford, whom I met upon the road and begged to listen to my tale, promised he would see if something might not be done. I waited and waited in anguish, and hope, and despair, and there came a day when his palfrey stopped at my door, and he came forward himself to speak with me. He told me he had spoken to the Master of Basildene, and that he had promised to restore me my son if I was resolved to have him back; but he had told the good priest that he knew the boy would never be content to stay in a woodland cottage with an unlettered father, when he had learned what life elsewhere was like. But I laughed this warning to scorn, and demanded my boy back."

"And did he come?"

A strange look swept over the old man's face. His hands were tightly clinched. His voice was very low, and full of suppressed awe and fury.

"Ay, he came back -- he came back that same night -- but so changed in those few months that I scarce knew him. And ah, how he clung to me when he was set down at my door! How he sobbed on my breast, entreating me to hold him fast -- to save him -- to protect him! What fearful tales of unhallowed sights and sounds did his white lips pour into my ears! How my own blood curdled at the tale, and how I vowed that never, never, never would I let him go from out my arms again! I held him fast. I took him within doors. I fastened the door safely. I fed him, comforted him, and laid him in mine own bed, lying wakeful beside him for fear even then that he should be taken from me; and thus the hours sped by. But the rest -- ah, how can I tell it? It wrings my very heart. O my child, my son -- my own heart's joy!"

The old man threw up his arms with a wild gesture of despair, and there was something in his face so terrible that the twins dared ask him no question; but after that one cry and gesture, the stony look returned upon his face, and he went on of his own accord.

"Midnight had come. I knew it by the position of the moon in the heavens. My boy had been sleeping like one dead beside me, never moving or stirring, scarce breathing; and I had at last grown soothed and drowsy likewise. I had just fallen into a light sleep, when I was aroused by feeling Roger stir beside me, and hastily sit up in the bed. His eyes were wide open, and in the moonlight they seemed to shine with unnatural brilliance. It was as if he were listening -- listening with every fibre of his being, listening to a voice which he could hear and I could not; for he made quick answers. 'I hear, Sire,' he said, in a strange, muffled voice. And he rose suddenly to his feet and cried, 'I come, Master, I come.' Then a great rage and fear possessed me, for I knew that my boy was being called by some foul spirit, and that he was bewitched. I sprang up and seized him in my arms. 'Thou shalt not go!' I cried aloud. 'He has given thee back to me. I am thy father. Thy place is here. I will not let thee go!' But I might have been speaking to a dead corpse for all the understanding I received. My boy's eyes were opened, but he saw me not. His ears, that heard other voices, were deaf to mine. He struggled fiercely against my fatherly embrace; and when I felt the strength that had come into that frame, so worn and feeble but a few short hours ago, then I knew that it was the devil himself who had entered into my child, and that it was his voice that was luring him back to his destruction. O my God! May I never have to live again through the agony of that hour in which I fought with the devil for my child, and fought in vain. Like one possessed (as indeed he was) did he wrestle with me, crying out wildly all the while that he was coming -- that he would quickly come; hearing nothing that I could hear, seeing nothing that I could see, and all the time struggling with me with a strength that I knew must at last prevail, albeit he was but a tender child and I a man in the prime of manhood's strength. But the devil was in him that night. It was not my boy's own hand that struck the blow which forced me to leave my hold, and sent me staggering back against the wall. No, it was but the evil spirit within him; and even as I released him from my embrace, he glided to the door, undid the fastenings, and still calling out that he was coming, that he would be there anon, he slipped out into the still forest, and vanished amongst the trees."

"Did he return to Basildene?"

"Ay, like a bird to its nest, a dog to its master's home. Spent and breathless, despairing as I was, I yet gathered my strength and followed my boy -- weeping and calling upon his name, though I knew he heard me not. Scarce could I keep the gliding figure in sight; yet I could not choose but follow, lest some mischance should befall the child by the way. But he moved onwards as if he trod on air, neither stumbling nor falling, nor turning to the right hand or to the left. I watched him to the end of the avenue of trees that leads to Basildene. As he reached it a dark figure stepped forth, and the child sank to the ground as if exhausted. There was the sound of laughter -- fiends' laughter, if ever devils

do laugh. It chilled the very blood in my veins, and I stood rooted to the spot, whilst the hair of my head stood erect. The dark form bent over the boy and seemed to raise it.

"You shall suffer for this," I heard a cruel voice say in a hissing whisper; 'you will not ask to leave again!' and at those evil words a cry of anguish -- a human cry -- broke from my boy's lips, and with a yell of fury I sprang forward to save him or to die with him. But what happened then I know not. Whether a human hand or a fiend's struck me down I shall never now know. I remember a blow -- the sense that hell's mouth was opening to receive me; that the mocking laughter of devils was in my ears. Then I knew no more till (they tell me it was many weeks later) I awoke from a long strange sleep in yon cabin where I live. An old woodman had found me, and had carried me there. Sir Hugh had given him a few silver pieces to take care of me. He had filled my place, and my old home was occupied by another; but had it not been so, no power on earth would have taken me back there. I had grown old in one night. I had lost my strength, my cunning, my heart. I stayed on with the old man awhile, and as he fell sick and died when the next snow fell upon the ground, Master Bernard de Brocas appointed me as woodman in his stead, and here I have remained ever since. I know not how the time has sped. I have no heart or hope in life. My child is gone -- possessed by fiends who have him in their clutches, so that I may never win him back to me. I hate my life, yet fear to die; for then I might see him the sport of devils, and be, as before, powerless to succour him. I have long ceased to be shriven for my sins. What good to me is forgiveness, if my child will be doomed to hellfire for evermore? No hope in this world, no hope after death. Woe is me that ever I was born! Woe is me! woe is me!"

The energy which had supported the old man as he told his tale now appeared suddenly to desert him. With a low moan he sank upon the ground and buried his face in his hands, whilst the boys stood and gazed at him, and then at one another, their faces full of interest and sympathy, their hearts burning with indignation against the wicked foe of their own race, who seemed to bring misery and wrong wherever he moved.

"And thou hast never seen thy son again?" asked Raymond softly. "Is he yet alive, knowest thou?"

"I have never seen him again: they say that he still lives. But what is life to one who is sold and bound over, body and soul, to the powers of darkness?"

Then the old man buried his face once more in his hands, and seemed to forget even the presence of the boys; and Gaston and Raymond stole silently away, with many backward glances at the bowed and stricken figure, unable to find any words either to help or comfort him.

CHAPTER IX. JOAN VAVASOUR.

It was with the greatest interest that John de Brocas listened to the story brought home by the twin brothers after their visit to the woodman's hut. Such a story of oppression, cruelty, and wrong truly stirred him to the very soul; and moreover, as the brothers spoke of Basildene, they told him also (under the promise of secrecy) of their own connection with that place, of their kinship with himself, and of the wrongs they had suffered at the hand of the Sanghursts, father and son; and all this aroused in the mind of John an intense desire to see wrong made right, and retribution brought upon the heads of those who seemed to become a curse wherever they went.

"And so ye twain are my cousins?" he said, looking from one face to the other with penetrating gaze. "I knew from the very first that ye were no common youths; and it was a stronger tie than that of Gascon blood that knit us one to the other. But I will keep your secret. Perchance ye are wise in wishing it kept. There be something too many hangers-on of our house already, and albeit I know not all the cause of the estrangement, I know well that your father was coldly regarded for many years, and it may be that his sons would receive but sorry welcome if they came as humble suppliants for place. The unsuccessful members of a house are scarce ever welcomed, and the claim to Basildene might be but a hindrance in your path. Sir Hugh Vavasour is high in favour at Court. He is a warm friend of my father and my uncle; and he and the Sanghursts are bound together by some close tie, the nature of which I scarce know. Any claim on Basildene would be fiercely resented by the father and son who have seized it, and their quarrel would be taken up by others of more power. Gaston is right in his belief that you must first win credit and renown beneath the King's banners. As unknown striplings you have no chance against yon crafty fox of Basildene. Were he but to know who and what you were, I know not that your very lives would be safe from his malice."

The twins exchanged glances. It seemed as though they were threatened on every hand by the malice of those who had usurped their rights and their lands; yet they felt no fear, rather a secret exultation at the thought of what lay before them. But their curiosity was strongly stirred about the strange old man at Basildene, and they eagerly asked John of the truth of those reports which spoke of him as being a tool and slave of the devil.

A grave light came into John's eyes as he replied:

"Methinks that every man is the tool of Satan who willingly commits sin with his eyes open, and will not be restrained. I cannot doubt that old Peter Sanghurst has done this again and again. He is an evil man and a wicked one. But whether or no he has visible dealings with the spirits of darkness, I know not. Men can sin deeply and darkly and yet win no power beyond that vouchsafed to others."

"But the woodman's son," said Raymond, in awestruck tones, "him he most certainly bewitched. How else could he have so possessed him that even his own father could not restrain him from going back to the dread slavery once again?"

A thoughtful look was on John's face. He was lying on his couch in the large room where his learned uncle stored all his precious books and parchments, safely locked away in carved presses; and rising slowly to his feet -- for he was still feeble and languid in his movements -- he unlocked one of these, and took from it a large volume in some dead language, and laid it upon the table before him.

"I know not whether or no I am right, but I have heard before of a strange power that some men may possess over the

minds and wills of others -- a power so great that they become their helpless tools, and can be made to act, to see, to feel just as they are bidden, and are as helpless to resist that power as the snared bird to avoid the outstretched hand of the fowler. That this power is a power of evil, and comes from the devil himself, I may not disbelieve; for it has never been God's way of dealing with men to bind captive their wills and make them blind and helpless agents of the will of others. Could you read the words of this book, you would find many things therein as strange as any you have heard today. For myself, I have little doubt that old Peter Sanghurst, who has spent years of his life amongst the heathen Moors, and is, as all men avow, steeped to the lips in their strange and unchristian lore, has himself the art of thus gaining the mastery over the minds and wills of others, and that it was no demoniacal possession, but just the wicked will of the old man exercised upon that of his helpless victim, which drew the boy back to him when his father had him safe at home (as he thought) once more. In this book it is written that young boys, especially if they be beautiful of form and receptive of mind, make the best tools for this black art. They can be thrown into strange trances, in which many things are revealed to them. They can be sent in the spirit to places they have never seen, and can be made to describe what is passing thousands of miles away. I cannot tell how these things may be, unless indeed it is the devil working in them; yet here it is written down as if it were some art which certain men with certain gifts may acquire, as they may acquire other knowledge and learning. In truth, I think such things smack of the Evil One himself; yet I doubt if there be that visible bond with Satan that is commonly reported amongst the unlettered and ignorant. It is a cruel and a wicked art without doubt, and it says here that the children who are caught and subjected to these trances and laid under this spiritual bondage seldom live long; and that but for this, there seems no end to the wonders that might be performed. But the strain upon their spirits almost always results in madness or death, and thus the art never makes the strides that those who practise it long to see."

John was turning the leaves of the book as he spoke, reading a word here and there as if to refresh his memory. The Gascon brothers listened with breathless interest, and suddenly Raymond started to his feet, saying:

"John, thou hast spoken of a knightly quest that would win no praise from man, but yet be such as a true knight would fain undertake. Would not the rescue of yon wretched boy from the evil thralldom of that wicked sorcerer be such a task as that? Is not Basildene ours? Is it not for us to free it from the curse of such pollution? Is not that child one of the oppressed and wronged that it is the duty of a true servant of the old chivalry to rescue at all costs?"

"Gaston, wilt thou go with me? Shall we snatch from the clutches of this devilish old man the boy whose story we have heard today? Methinks I can never rest happy till the thing is done. Will not a curse light upon the very house itself if these dark deeds go on within its walls? Who can have a better right to avert such curse than we -- its rightful lords?"

Gaston sprang to his feet, and threw back his head with a proud and defiant gesture.

"Verily I will go with thee, Brother. I would gladly strike a blow for the freedom of the boy and against the despoiler of our mother's house. I would fain go this very day."

Both brothers looked to John, as if asking his sanction for the act. He closed his book, and raised his eyes with a smile; but he advocated prudence, and patience too.

"In truth, methinks it would be a deed of charity and true chivalry, yet one by no means without its peril and its risk. Old Sanghurst is a wily and a cruel foe, and failure would but mean more tyranny and suffering for the miserable victim he holds in his relentless hands. It might lead also to some mysterious vengeance upon you yourselves. There are ugly whispers breathed abroad about the old man and his evil practices. Travellers through these forest tracks, richly laden, have been known to disappear, and no man has heard of them more. It is rumoured that they have been seized and done to death by the rapacious owners of Basildene, and that the father and son are growing wealthy beyond what any man knows by the plunder they thus obtain."

"But if they hold the secret of the philosopher's stone, sure they would not need to fall upon travellers by the way!"

John slowly shook his head, a thoughtful smile upon his face.

"For mine own part," he said quietly, "I have no belief in that stone, or in that power of alchemy after which men since the beginning of time have been vainly striving. They may seek and seek, but I trow they will never find it; and I verily believe if found it would but prove a worthless boon. For in the hands of a rapacious master, so quickly would gold be poured upon the world that soon its value would be lost, and it would be no more prized than the base metals we make our horseshoes of. It is not the beauty of gold that makes men covet it. It is because it is rare that it is precious. If this philosopher's stone were to be found, that rareness would speedily disappear, and men would cease to prize a thing that could be made more easily than corn may be grown."

The brothers could scarce grasp the full meaning of these words; but it was not of the philosopher's stone that their minds were full, and John's next words interested them more.

"No: I believe that the wealth which is being accumulated at Basildene is won in far different fashion, and that this miserable boy, who is the helpless slave and tool of his master's illicit art, is an unwilling agent in showing the so-called magician the whereabouts of hapless travellers, and in luring them on to their destruction. But that the old man is wealthy above all those about him may not now be doubted; and it is this growing wealth, gotten no man knows how, that makes men believe in his possession of the magic stone."

"And if we rescue the boy, some part of his power will be gone, and he will lose a tool that he will not easily replace," cried Gaston, with eager animation. "Brother, let us not delay. We have long desired to look upon Basildene; let us sally forth this very day."

But John laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Nay now, why this haste? Thou art a bold lad, Gaston, but something more than boldness is needed when thou hast

such a subtle foe to deal with. Then there is another thing to think of. What will it avail to rescue the boy, if his master holds his spirit so in thrall that he can by no means be restrained from rising in the dead of night to return to him again? There be many things to think of ere we can act. And we must take counsel of one who knows Basildene, as we do not. I have never seen the house, and know nothing of its ways. Till these things were recalled to my memory these last days, I had scarce remembered that such a place existed."

"Of whom then shall we take counsel?" asked Gaston, with a touch of impatience, for to him action and not counsel was the mainspring of life. "Of thine uncle, who thou sayest is a friend of this unholy man?"

"Scarce a friend," answered John, "albeit he has no quarrel with Master Sanghurst; and if thou knewest more of the temper of the times, thou wouldst know that the King's servants must have a care how they in any wise stir up strife amongst those who dwell in the realm. We have enemies and to spare abroad -- in Scotland, in Flanders, in France. At home we must all strive to keep the peace. It behoves not one holding office under the crown to embroil himself in private quarrels, or stir up any manner of strife. This is why I counsel you to make no claim on Basildene for the nonce, and why my uncle could give no help in the matter of this boy, kindly as his heart is disposed towards the poor and oppressed. He moved once in the matter, with the result that you know. It could scarce be expected of him to do more."

"Who then will help or counsel us?"

"I can think of but one, and that is but a slim maiden, whom ye bold lads might despise. I mean Mistress Joan Vavasour herself."

"What!" cried Gaston in amaze -- "the maiden whom Peter Sanghurst is to wed? Sure that were a strange counsellor to choose! Good John, thou must be dreaming."

"Nay, I am no dreamer," was the smiling answer; and a slight access of colour came slowly into John's face. "I have not seen fair Mistress Joan of late; yet unless I be greatly mistaken in her, I am very sure that by no deed of her own will she ever mate with one of the Sanghurst brood. I have known her from childhood. Once it was my dream that I might wed her myself; but such thoughts have long ago passed from my mind never to enter it again. Yet I know her and I love her well, and to me she has spoken words which tell me that she will never be a passive tool in the hands of her haughty parents. She has the spirit of her sire within her, and I trow he will find it no easy task to bend the will even of a child of his own, when she is made after the fashion of Mistress Joan. If Peter Sanghurst has gone a-wooing there, I verily believe that the lady will by this time have had more than enough of his attentions. It may be that she would be able to give us good counsel; at least I would very gladly ask it at her hands."

"How can we see her?" asked the brothers quickly.

"So soon as I can make shift to ride once more we will to horse and away to Woodcrych. It is time I paid my respects to fair Mistress Joan, for I have not seen her for long. I would that you twain could see her. She is as fair as a lily, yet with all the spirit of her bold sire, as fearless in the saddle as her brother, as upright as a dart, beautiful exceedingly, with her crown of hair the colour of a ripe chestnut. Ah! if she were but taken to the King's Court, she would be its fairest ornament. But her sire has never the money to spend upon her adornment; and moreover if she appeared there, she would have suitors and to spare within a month, and he would be called upon to furnish forth a rich dower -- for all men hold him to be a wealthy man, seeing the broad lands he holds in fief. Wherefore I take it he thinks it safer to betroth her to this scion of the Sanghurst brood, who will be heir to all his father's ill-gotten wealth. But if I know Mistress Joan, as I think I do, she will scarce permit herself to be given over like a chattel, though she may have a sore fight to make for her liberty."

Raymond's eyes brightened and his hands closely clinched themselves. Surely this quest after Basildene was bringing strange things to light. Here was a miserable child to be rescued from bondage that was worse than death; and a maiden, lovely and brave of spirit, to be saved from the clutches of this same Sanghurst faction. What a strange combination of circumstances seemed woven around the lost inheritance! Might it not be the very life's work he had longed after, to fulfil his mother's dying behest and make himself master of Basildene again?

That night his dreams were a strange medley of wizards, beauteous maidens, and ruinous halls, through which he wandered in search of the victim whose shrill cries he kept hearing. He rose with the first of the tardy light, to find that Gaston was already off and away upon some hunting expedition planned overnight. Raymond had not felt disposed to join it; the attraction of John's society had more charm for him.

The uncle was absent from home on the King's business. The two cousins had the house to themselves. They had established themselves beside the glowing hearth within their favourite room containing all the books, when the horn at the gate announced the arrival of some guest, and a message was brought to John saying that Mistress Joan Vavasour was even then dismounting from her palfrey, and was about to pay him a visit.

"Nay now, but this is a lucky hap!" cried John, as he went forward to be ready to meet his guest.

The next moment the light footfall along the polished boards of the anteroom announced the coming of the lady, and Raymond's eager eyes were fixed upon a face so fair that he gazed and gazed and could not turn his eyes away.

Mistress Joan was just his own age -- not yet seventeen -- yet she had something of the grace and dignity of womanhood mingling with the fresh sweet frankness of the childhood that had scarcely passed. Her eyes were large and dark, flashing, and kindling with every passing gust of feeling; her delicate lips, arched like a Cupid's bow, were capable of expressing a vast amount of resolution, though now relaxed into a merry smile of greeting. She was rather tall and at present very slight, though the outlines of her figure were softly rounded, and strength as well as grace was betrayed in every swift eager motion. She held John's hands and asked eagerly after his well-being.

"It was but two days ago I heard that you lay sick at Guildford, and I have been longing ever since for tidings. Today my

father had business in the town, and I humbly sued him to let me ride with him, and rest, whilst he went his own way, in the hospitable house of your good uncle. This is how I come to be here today. And now tell me of thyself these many months, for I hear no news at Woodcrych. And who is this fair youth with thee? Methinks his face is strange to me, though he bears a look of the De Brocas, too."

A quick flush mounted in Raymond's cheek; but John only called him by the name by which he was known to the world, and Mistress Joan spoke no more of the fancied likeness. She and John, who were plainly well acquainted, plunged at once into eager talk; and it was not long before the question of Joan's own marriage was brought up, and he plainly asked her if the news was true which gave her in wedlock to Peter Sanghurst.

A change came over Joan's face at those words. A quick gleam shot out of her dark eyes. She set her teeth, and her face suddenly hardened as if carved in flint. Her voice, which had been full of rippling laughter before, now fell to a lower pitch, and she spoke with strange force and gravity.

"John, whatever thou hearest on that score, believe it not. I will die sooner than be wedded to that man. I hate him. I fear him -- yes, I do fear him, I will not deny it -- I fear him for his wickedness, his evil practices, his diabolic cruelty, of which I hear fearful whispers from time to time. He may be rich beyond all that men credit. I doubt not he has many a dark and hideous method of wringing gold from his wretched victims. Basildene holds terrible secrets; and never will I enter that house by my own free will. Never will I wed that man, not if I have to plunge this dagger into mine own heart to save myself from him. I know what is purposed. I know that he and his father have some strange power over my sire and my brother, and that they will do all they can to bend my will to theirs. But I have two hopes yet before me. One is appeal to the King, through his gentle and gracious Queen; another is the Convent -- for sooner would I take the veil (little as the life of the recluse charms me) than sell myself to utter misery as the wife of that man. Death shall call me its bride before that day shall come. Yet I would not willingly take my life, and go forth unassailed and unshriven. No; I will try all else first. And in thee, good John, I know I shall find a trusty and a stalwart friend and champion."

"Trusty in all truth, fair lady, but stalwart I fear John de Brocas will never be. Rather enlist in thy service yon gallant youth, who has already distinguished himself in helping to save the Prince in the moment of peril. I trow he would be glad enough to be thy champion in days to come. He has, moreover, a score of his own to settle one day with the present Master of Basildene."

Joan's bright eyes turned quickly upon Raymond, who had flushed with boyish pride and pleasure and shame at hearing himself thus praised. He eagerly protested that he was from that time forward Mistress Joan's loyal servant to command; and at the prompting of John, he revealed to her the fact of his own claim on Basildene (without naming his kinship with the house of De Brocas), and gave an animated account of the recent visit to the woodman's hut, and told the story of his cruel wrongs.

Joan listened with flashing eyes and ever-varying colour. At the close of the tale she spoke.

"I have heard of that wretched boy -- the tool and sport of the old man's evil arts, the victim of the son's diabolic cruelty when he has no other victim to torment. They keep him for days without food at times, because they say that he responds better to their fiendish practices when the body is well-nigh reduced to a shadow. Oh, I hear them talk! My father is a dabbler in mystic arts. They are luring him on to think he will one day learn the secret of the transmutation of metals, whilst I know they do but seek to make of him a tool, to subdue his will, and to do with him what they will. They will strive to practise next on me -- they have tried it already; but I resist them, and they are powerless, though they hate me tenfold more for it, and I know that they are reckoning on their revenge when I shall be a helpless victim in their power. Art thou about to try to rescue the boy? That were, in truth, a deed worth doing, though the world will never praise it; though it might laugh to scorn a peril encountered for one so humble as a woodman's son. But it would be a soul snatched from the peril of everlasting death, and a body saved from the torments of a living hell!"

And then John spoke of the thoughts which had of late possessed them both of that chivalry that was not like to win glory or renown, that would not gain the praise of men, but would strive to do in the world a work of love for the oppressed, the helpless, the lowly. And Joan's eyes shone with the light of a great sympathy, as she turned her bright gaze from one face to the other, till Raymond felt himself falling beneath a spell the like of which he had never known before, and which suddenly gave a new impulse to all his vague yearnings and imaginings, and a zest to this adventure which was greater than any that had gone before.

Joan's ready woman's wit was soon at work planning and devising how the deed might best be done.

"I can do this much to aid," she said. "A day will come ere long when the two Sanghursts will come at nightfall to Woodcrych, to try, as they have done before, some strange experiments in the laboratory my father has had made for himself. We always know the day that this visit is to be made, and I can make shift to let you know. They stay far into the night, and only return to Basildene as the dawn breaks. That would be the night to strive to find and rescue the boy. He will be almost alone in yon big house, bound hand and foot, I doubt not, or thrown into some strange trance that shall keep him as fast a prisoner. There be but few servants that can be found to live there. Mostly they flee away in affright ere they have passed a week beneath that roof. Those that stay are bound rather by fear than aught beside; and scarce a human being will approach that house, even in broadest daylight. There are many doors and windows, and the walls in places are mouldering away, and would give easy foothold to the climber. It is beneath the west wing, hard by the great fish ponds, that the rooms lie which are ever closed from light of day, and in which the evil men practise their foul arts. I have heard of a secret way from the level of the water into the cellars or dungeons of the house; but whether this be true I do not rightly know. Yet methinks you could surely find entrance within the house, for so great is the terror in which Basildene is held that Master Sanghurst freely boasts that he needs neither bolt nor bar. He professes to have drawn around the house a line which no human foot may cross. He knows well that no man wishes to try."

Raymond shivered slightly, but he was not daunted, Yet there was still the question to be faced, what should be done with the boy when rescued to hold him back from the magician's unholy spell. But Joan had an answer ready for this

objection. Her hands folded themselves lightly together, her dark eyes shone with the earnestness of her devotion.

"That will I soon tell to you. The spell cast upon the boy is one of evil, and therefore it comes in some sort from the devil, even though, as John says, men may have no visible dealings with him. Yet, as all sin is of the Evil One, and as the good God and His Holy Saints are stronger than the devil and his angels, it is His help we must invoke when the powers of darkness strive to work in him again. And we must ask in this the help of some holy man of God, one who has fasted and prayed and learned to discern betwixt good and evil, has fought with the devil and has overcome. I know one such holy man. He lives far away from here. It is a small community between Guildford and Salisbury -- I suppose it lies some thirty miles from hence. I could find out something more, perchance, in time to acquaint you farther with the road. If you once gain possession of the boy, mount without loss of time, and draw not rein till you reach that secluded spot. Ask to be taken in in the name of charity, and when the doors have opened to you, ask for Father Paul. Give him the boy. Tell him all the tale, and trust him into his holy hands without fear. He will take him; he will cast out the evil spirit. I misdoubt me if the devil himself will have power over him whilst he is within those hallowed walls. At least if he can find entrance there, he will not be able to prevail; and when the foul spirit is cast out and vanquished, you can summon his father to him and give him back his son -- as the son of the father in Scripture was restored to him again when the devil had been cast out by the voice of the Blessed Jesus."

"I truly think that thou art right," said John. "The powers of evil are very strong, too strong to be combated by us unaided by the prayers and the efforts of holy men."

"Raymond, it shall be my work to provide for this journey. My uncle will be long absent. In his absence I may do what I will and go where I will. I would myself pay a pilgrimage to the house where this holy man resides, and make at the shrine of the chapel there my offering of thanksgiving for my recovery from this hurt. We will go together. We will take the boy with us; and the boy's father shall be one of our party. He shall see that the powers of evil can be vanquished. He shall see for himself the restoration of his child."

CHAPTER X. BASILDENE.

It was in the bright moonlight of a clear March evening that the twin brothers of Gascony stood hand in hand, gazing for the first time in their lives upon their lost inheritance of Basildene. It was not yet wholly dark, for a saffron glow in the sky behind still showed where the sun had lately sunk, whilst the moon was shining with frosty brightness overhead. Dark as the surrounding woods had been, it was light enough here in the clearing around the house. Behind the crumbling red walls the forest grew dark and close, but in the front the larger trees had been cleared away, and the long low house, with its heavy timbers and many gables, stood clearly revealed before the eager eyes of the boys, who stopped short to gaze without speaking a single word to one another.

Once, doubtless, it had been a beautiful house, more highly decorated than was usual at the period. The heavy beams, dark with age, let into the brickwork were many of them richly carved, and the twisted chimneys and quaint windows showed traces of considerable ingenuity in the builder's art. Plainly, too, there had been a time when the ground around the house had been cared for and kept trim and garden-like.

Now it was but a waste and wilderness, everything growing wild and tangled around it; whilst the very edifice itself seemed crumbling to decay, and wore the grim look of a place of evil repute. It was hard to believe that any person lived within those walls. It was scarce possible to approach within the precincts of that lonely house without a shudder of chill horror.

Gaston crossed himself as he stood looking on the house, which, by what men said, was polluted by many foul deeds, and tenanted by evil spirits to boot; but upon Raymond's face was a different look. His heart went suddenly out to the lonely old house. He felt that he could love it well if it were ever given to him to win it back. As he stood there in the moonlight gazing and gazing, he registered anew in his heart the vow that the day should come when he would fulfil his mother's dying behest, and stand within those halls as the recognized lord of Basildene.

But the present moment was one for action, not for vague dreamings. The brothers had come with a definite purpose, and they did not intend to quit the spot until that purpose was accomplished. The Sanghursts -- father and son -- were far away. The gloomy house -- unless guarded by malevolent spirits, which did not appear unlikely -- was almost tenantless. Within its walls was the miserable victim of cruel tyranny whom they had come to release. The boys, who had both confessed and received the Blessed Sacrament from the hands of the priest who had interested himself before in the woodman's son, felt strong in the righteousness of their cause. If they experienced some fear, as was not unlikely, they would not own it even to themselves. Gaston was filled with the soldier spirit of the day, that scorned to turn back upon danger however great. Raymond was supported by a deep underlying sense of the sacredness of the cause in which he was embarked. It was not alone that he was going to deal a blow at the foes of his house; it was much more to him than that. Vengeance might play a part in the crusade, but to him it was a secondary idea. What he thought of was the higher chivalry of which he and John had spoken so much together -- the rescue of a soul from the clutches of spiritual tyranny; a blow struck in the defence of one helpless and oppressed; risk run for the sake of those who would never be able to repay; the deed done for its own sake, not in the hope of any praise or reward. Surely this thing might be the first step in a career of true knightliness, albeit such humble deeds might never win the golden spurs of which men thought so much.

Gaston's eyes had been scanning the whole place with hawk-like gaze. Now he turned to his brother and spoke in rapid whispers.

"Entrance will be none too easy here. The narrow windows, with their stone mullions, will scarce admit the passage of a human body, and I can see that iron bars protect many of them still farther. The doors are doubtless strong, and heavily bolted. The old sorcerer has no wish to be interrupted in his nefarious occupations, nor does he trust alone to ghostly terrors to protect his house. Methinks we had better skirt round the house, and seek that other entrance of which we

have heard. Raymond, did not our mother tell us oft a story of a revolving stone door to an underground passage, and the trick by which it might be opened from within and without? I remember well that it was by a secret spring cleverly hidden -- seven from above, three from below, those were the numbers. Can it be that it was of Basildene she was thinking all that time? It seems not unlikely. Seven from the top, three from the bottom -- those were certainly the numbers, though I cannot recollect to what they referred. Canst thou remember the story, Raymond? Dost thou think it was of Basildene she spoke?"

"Ay, verily I do!" cried the other quickly, a light coming into his face. "Why had I not thought of it before? I remember well she spoke of dark water which lay upon the outside of the house hard by the entrance to the underground way. Rememberest thou not the boat moored in the lake to carry the fugitive across to the other side, and the oars so muffled that none might hear? And did not Mistress Joan say that the secret way into Basildene was hard by the fish ponds on the west side of the house? It can be nothing else but this. Let us go seek them at once. Methinks we have in our hands the clue by which we may obtain entrance into Basildene."

Cautiously, as though their foes were at hand, the brothers slipped round the crumbling walls of the house, marking well as they did so that despite the half-ruinous aspect of much of the building, there was no ready or easy method of access. Every gap in the masonry was carefully filled up, every window that was wide enough to admit the passage of a human form was guarded by iron bars, and the doors were solid enough to defy for a long time the assault of battering rams.

"It is not in ghostly terrors he mainly trusts to guard his house," whispered Raymond, as they skirted round into the dim darkness of the dense woodland that lay behind the house. "Methinks if he had in very truth a guard of evil spirits, he would not be so careful of his bolts and bars."

Gaston was willing enough to believe this; for though he feared no human foe, he was by no means free from the superstitious terrors of the age, and it needed all his coolness of head, as well as all his confidence in the righteousness of his cause, to keep his heart from fluttering with fear as they stepped along beneath the gloom of the trees, which even when not in leaf cast dense shadows around them. It was in truth a weird spot: owls hooted dismally about them, bats flitted here and there in their erratic flight, and sometimes almost brushed the faces of the boys with their clammy wings. The strange noises always to be heard in a wood at night assailed their ears, and mingled with the quick beating of their own hearts; whilst from time to time a long unearthly wail, which seemed to proceed from the interior of the house itself, filled them with an unreasoning sense of terror that they would not confess even to themselves.

"It is like the wail of a lost spirit," whispered Raymond at the third repetition of the cry. "Brother, let us say a prayer, and go forward in the power of the Blessed Virgin and her Holy Son."

For a moment the brothers knelt in prayer, as the priest had bidden them if heart or spirit quailed.

Then rising, strengthened and supported, they looked carefully about them, and Gaston, grasping his brother by the arm, pointed through the trees and said:

"The water, the water! sure I see a gleam of moonlight upon it! We have reached the fish ponds, I verily believe! Now for the secret way to the house!"

It was true enough. A few steps brought them to the margin of a large piece of water, which was something between a lake and a series of fish ponds, such as are so often seen by old houses. Once the lake had plainly been larger, but had partially drained away, and was now confined to various levels by means of a rude dam and a sort of gate like that of a modern lock. Still the boys could trace a likeness to the lake of their mother's oft-told tale, and by instinct they both turned to the right as they reached the margin of the water, and threaded their way through the coarse and tangled sedges, decaying in the winter's cold, till they reached a spot where brushwood grew down to the very edge of the water, and the bank rose steep and high above their heads.

Gaston was a step in advance, Raymond following at his heels, both keenly eager over the quest. An exclamation from the leader soon showed that something had been discovered, and the next minute he had drawn aside the sweeping branches of a great willow, and revealed a dark opening in the bank, around which the giant roots seemed to form a protecting arch.

"This is the place," he said, in a muffled whisper. "Raymond, hast thou the wherewithal to kindle the torch?"

The boys had not come unprovided with such things as were likely to prove needful for their search, and though it was a matter of some time to obtain a light, they were skilful and well used to the process, and soon their torch was kindled and they were treading with cautious steps the intricacies of the long and tortuous passage which plainly led straight to the house.

"We never should have found it but for our mother's story," said Gaston, with exultation in his voice. "Raymond, methinks that this is the first step in our career of vengeance. We have the key to Basildene in our hands. It may be that upon another occasion we may use it with a different purpose."

It seemed to the brothers that they had walked a great distance, when their steps were arrested by what appeared in the first instance to be a solid wall of stone. Had they not had some sort of clue in their heads, they would certainly have believed that this natural tunnel ended here, and that further progress was impossible. But as it was, they were firmly convinced that this was but the door of masonry of which their mother had told them in years gone by. Neither could recollect the story save in fragments; but the numbers had clung to Gaston's tenacious memory, and now he stood before the door saying again and again -- "Seven from the top, three from the bottom" -- scanning the wall in front of him with the keenest glances all the while.

"Ha!" he exclaimed at length; "bring the torch nearer, Raymond. See here. This is not one block of stone, as seems at

first, but a mass of masonry so cunningly joined together as to look like one solid piece. See, here are the joints; I can feel them with my fingernail, though I can scarce see them with my eyes. Let us count the number of the stones used. Yes; there are nine in all from top to bottom, each of the same width. Therefore the seventh from the top is the third counting from the bottom. This is the stone which is the key."

So saying, Gaston set his knee against it and pressed with all his might. Almost to his own surprise he felt it give as he did so, and Raymond uttered a short cry of astonishment: for the whole of what had looked like a solid wall revolved slowly inwards, revealing a continuation of the passage which they had been traversing so long, only that now the passage was plainly one in the interior of the house; for the walls were of masonry, and the dimensions were far more regular.

"This is the secret door," said Gaston exultingly. "It is in truth a cunning contrivance. Let me have the light here a moment, Brother. I will see what the trick of the door upon this side is."

This point was quickly settled by an inspection of the ingenious contrivance, which was one purely of balance, and not dependent either upon springs or bolts. Probably it dated back from days when these latter things were hardly known, and was so satisfactory in the working that it had never been improved upon.

"The way to Basildene is always open to us," murmured Raymond, with a quick thrill of exultation, as the brothers passed through the doorway and let it close behind them; and then they forgot all else in the excitement of the search after the woodman's miserable son.

What strange places they came upon in this underground region below the ill-famed house! Plainly these cells had been built once for prisoners; for there were fragments of rusty chains still fastened to the stone floors, and in one spot a grinning skull lying broken in a corner sent thrills of horror through the brothers' hearts. From time to time the sound of that unearthly wailing reached their ears, though it was almost impossible to divine from what direction it proceeded; and it had a far less human sound now that the boys were within the precincts of the house than had been the case when they were still outside.

Whether this was more alarming or less they hardly knew. Everything was so strange and dreamlike that they could not tell whether or not all were real. They pressed on eager to accomplish the object of their search, resolved to do that at all cost, and anxious to keep themselves from thinking or feeling too much until that object should be accomplished.

They had mounted some stairs, and had reached a different level from the underground passages, when they found their further progress barred by a strong door. This door was bolted, but from the outside, and they had no difficulty in withdrawing the heavy bolts from their sockets. When this had been done the door opened of itself, and they found themselves in a large vaulted room utterly unlike any place they had ever seen before. They grasped each other by the hand and gazed about in wonder.

"It is the magician's laboratory!" whispered Raymond, whose recent readings with John had taught him many things.

He recognized the many crucibles and the strange implements lying on the table as the things employed by dabblers in magic lore, whilst the great sullen wood and charcoal fire, which illumined the place with a dull red glow, was all in keeping with the nature of the occupations carried on there, as was the strange pungent smell that filled the air.

Rows of jars and bottles upon shelves, strange-looking mirrors and crystals, some fixed and some lying upon the tables, books and parchments full of cabalistic signs propped open beside the crucibles or hung against the wall, all gave evidence of the nature of the pursuits carried on in that unhallowed spot. The brothers, burning with curiosity as well as filled with awe, approached the tables and looked into the many vessels lying upon them, shuddering as the crimson contents made them think of blood.

Gaston put forth his hand cautiously and touched an ebony rod tipped with crystal that lay beside the largest crucible. As he did so a heavy groan seemed to arise from the very ground at his feet, and he dropped the implement with a smothered exclamation of terror. Raymond at the same moment looking hastily round the dim place, grasped his brother's arm, and pointed to a dark corner not many paces from them.

"Brother, see there! see there!" he whispered. "Sure there is the boy we have come to save!"

Gaston looked and made a quick step forward. Sure enough, there upon the floor, bound hand and foot with leather thongs that had been pulled cruelly tight, lay the emaciated figure of what had once been a handsome and healthy boy, but was now little more than a living skeleton. His face still retained its beauty of outline, though these outlines were terribly pinched and sharpened, but the expression of abject terror in the great blue eyes was pitiful to behold, and as Gaston and Raymond bent over the boy, a shrill cry, as of agony or terror, broke from his pale lips.

"Who are you?" he gasped. "How have you come? Oh, do not touch me -- do not hurt me! Go -- go quickly from this evil place, or perchance those devils will return and capture you as they have captured me, that they may torture you to death as they are torturing me. Oh, how did you come? I know the doors are locked and bolted. Are you devils in human guise, or hapless prisoners like myself? Oh, if you are still free, go -- go ere they can return! They know that they cannot keep me much longer; they are thirsting for another victim. Let them not return to find you here; and plunge your own dagger into your heart sooner than be made a slave as I have been!"

These words were not all spoken at once, but were gasped out bit by bit whilst the twin brothers, with wrath and fury in their hearts, cut the tough thongs that bound the wrists and ankles of the boy, and raised his head as they poured down his throat the strong cordial that had been given to them by John, and which was a marvellous restorer of exhausted nature.

They had food, too, in a wallet, and they made the boy eat before they told him aught of their mission; and after the first

gasping words of warning and wonder, it seemed as though he obeyed their behests mechanically, most likely taking it all for part and parcel of some strange vision.

But as the sorely-needed nourishment and the powerful restorative did its work upon the boy, he began to understand that this was no vision, and that something utterly inexplicable had befallen him, whether for weal or woe his confused senses would not tell him. He heard as in a dream the hurried explanations of the boys, drawing his brows together in the effort to understand. But when they spoke of flight he shook his head, and pointed to the door leading into the house.

"No man may pass out of that," he said, in low despairing tones. "How you came in I cannot even guess. It is guarded by a fierce hound, who will tear in pieces any who approaches save his master. There is no way of escape for me. If you are blessed spirits from the world above, fly hence the way you came. For me, I must ever remain the slave of him who, if not the devil himself, is his sworn servant."

"We will go, and that quickly," answered Raymond; "but thou shalt go with us. We are no spirits, but let us be such to thee for the nonce. Fear nothing; only trust us and obey us. If thou wilt do both these things, thou shalt this very night escape for ever from the tyranny of him whom thou hast served so long in such cruel bondage."

The boy looked at the face bending over him, instinct with courage and a deep sympathy and brotherly love, and a strange calm and security seemed to fall upon him. He rose to his feet, though with some difficulty, and laid his hand in Raymond's.

"I will go with thee to the world's end. Be my master, and break the hated yoke of that monster of wickedness, and I will serve thee for ever. Thou art a ministering spirit sent from Heaven. I verily believe that thou canst free me from this slavery."

"Kneel then and lift thy heart in prayer to the Great God of Heaven and earth," answered Raymond, a strange sense of power and responsibility falling upon him at this moment, together with a clearer, purer perception of divine things than had ever been vouchsafed him before -- "ay, here in this very place, polluted though it may be; for God's presence is everywhere, and it may be He will give thee, even in this fearful chamber of abominations, that release of soul which is the right of each of His human creatures. Kneel, and lift thy heart in prayer. I too will pray with thee and for thee. He will hear us, for He loves us. Be not afraid; pray with boldness, pray with love in thine heart. God alone can loose the bands of the thralldom which binds thee; and He wilt do it if thou canst trust in Him."

First making the sign of the cross over the kneeling boy, and then kneeling by his side, Raymond directed his crushed spirit to rise in an act of devotion and supplication; and the child, believing that most assuredly a divine messenger had come to deliver him from the hand of his persecutor, was able to utter his prayer in a spirit of trust and hope that brought its own immediate answer in a strange calm and confidence.

"Come," said Gaston cautiously; "we must not longer delay. We have a long night's ride before us, and John will be wondering what detains us this long while."

Together they supported the feeble steps of the boy, who was passive and quiet in their hands. He was scarce amazed by the opening of the mysterious inner door within a vaulted arch, through which he saw from time to time his captors disappear, but which was ever firmly bolted and barred upon the outer side. He did not even hang back through dread of what might befall him if he were again recalled, as on a former occasion, by the diabolic arts of his master. He was so firmly persuaded of the supernatural character of these visitors, that he had faith and strength to let them do with him what they would without comment, question, or remonstrance.

When they reached the outer air, after having successfully passed the secret door again, he gave one great gasp of surprise and reeled as if almost intoxicated by the sweet freshness of the spring night; but the strong arms of his protectors supported him, and hurrying along through the woodland tracks already traversed earlier in the evening, they quickly approached the appointed place just on the outskirts of the Basildene lands, where John, attended by three trusty serving men, together with the old woodman, were impatiently awaiting the return of the twins.

"We have him safe!" cried Gaston, as he bounded on a few paces in advance; and as the words were spoken there broke from the lips of the old woodman a strange inarticulate cry.

He sprang forward with a swiftness and agility that seemed impossible in one so bent and bowed, and the next minute he had clasped his son in his arms, and was weeping those terrible tears of manhood over the emaciated form clasped to his breast.

Leaving the father and son for a few moments together, the brothers in rapid words told their tale to John, who heard it with great satisfaction. But time was passing, and there was no longer any need for delay. The journey before them was somewhat rough and tedious, and all were anxious to put many miles of forest road between themselves and Basildene ere the dawn should break.

John did not greatly fear pursuit. He did not believe that the old man's occult powers would enable him to track the fugitive; but he was not certain of this, and the rest were all of opinion that he both could and would follow, and that remorselessly, the moment he discovered the loss of his captive.

Certainly it could do no harm to put all possible distance betwixt the boy and his master, and the party got to horse with the smallest possible delay. Once let the boy be placed within the precincts of the Sanctuary for which he was bound, in the keeping of the holy man of God whose power was known to be so great, and none feared for the result. But if the boy should be seized upon the road with one of his fits of frenzy, no one could tell what the result might be, and so there was no dissentient voice raised when a quick start and a rapid pace was suggested by Gaston.

The woodman took his boy in front of him upon the strong animal he bestrode. Roger was plainly unfit to sit a horse unsupported by a strong arm, and as they rode through the chill night air a dull lethargy seemed to fall upon him, and he slept in an uneasy, troubled fashion. Every moment his father feared to hear him answer an unheard call, feared to feel him struggle wildly in his encircling arm; but neither of these things happened. Mile after mile was traversed; the moonlight enabled the party to push rapidly onward. Mile after mile slipped away; and just as the first dim rays of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, John, who was himself by this time looking white and jaded, pointed eagerly towards a spire rising up against the saffron of the sky to the south.

"That is the spire of St. Michael's church," he cried. "The abode of the holy men of whom Father Paul is one is nigh at hand. Ride on, good Gaston, and bid the holy man come forth in the name of the love of the Blessed Saviour. If we may once put the child in his keeping, the powers of hell will not prevail to snatch him thence."

Gaston, who was the freshest of the little band, eagerly pressed onward with his message. His tired horse, seeing signs of habitation, pricked up his ears, and broke into an eager gallop. The youth quickly disappeared from the eyes of his companions along the road; but when they reached the monastery gate they saw that his errand had been accomplished. A tall monk, holding in his hand a crucifix, advanced to meet them, with a word of blessing which bared all heads; and advancing to the side of the woodman's horse, he took the apparently inanimate form of the boy in his arms, and looking into the wan face, said:

"Peace be with thee, my son. Into the care of Holy Church I receive thee. Let him who can prevail against the Church of God pluck thee from that keeping!"

CHAPTER XI. A QUIET RETREAT.

Little did Raymond de Brocas think, as he stepped across the threshold of that quiet monastic home, that the two next years of his own life were to be spent beneath that friendly and hospitable roof. And yet so it was, and to the training and teaching he received during his residence there he attributed much of the strength of mind and force of character that distinguished him in days to come.

The small community to which they had brought the persecuted victim of the sorcerer's evil practices belonged to the order of the Cistercians, who have been described as the Quakers of their day. At a time when many of the older orders of monks were falling from their first rigid simplicity -- falling into those habits of extravagance which in days to come caused their fall and ultimate suppression -- the Cistercians still held to their early regime of austere simplicity and plainness of life; and though no longer absolutely secluding themselves from the sight or sound of their fellow men, or living in complete solitude, they were still men of austere life and self-denying habits, and retained the reputation for sanctity of life that was being lost in other orders, though men had hardly begun to recognize this fact as yet.

From the first moment that Raymond's eyes fell upon the wonderful face of Father Paul, his heart was touched by one of those strange attractions for which it is difficult to account, yet which often form a turning point in the history of a human life. It was not the venerable appearance of the holy man alone; it was an indescribable something that defied analysis, yet drew out all that was best and highest in the spirit of the youth. But after the first glance at the monk, as he came forward and received the inanimate form of the woodman's son in his strong arms, Raymond's attention was differently occupied; for on looking round at his companions, he saw that John's face was as white as death, and that he swayed in his saddle as though he would fall.

It then occurred to the boy for the first time that this long and tiring night's ride was an undertaking for which John was little fit. He had but recently recovered from a bout of sickness that had left him weak and fit for little fatigue, and yet the whole night through he had been riding hard, and had only yielded to exhaustion when the object for which the journey had been taken had been accomplished.

The kindly monks came out and bore him into their house, and presently he and the woodman's son lay side by side in the room especially set apart for the sick, watched over by Father Paul, and assiduously tended by Raymond, to whom John was by this time greatly attached.

As for Gaston, after a rest extending over two nights and days, he was despatched to Windsor with the escort who had accompanied them on their ride hither, to tell John's father what had befallen the travellers, and how, John's wound having broken out afresh, he purposed to remain for some time the guest of the holy Fathers.

Thus, for the first time in their lives, were the brothers separated; for though Gaston had no thought but of speedy return when he set out on his journey, they saw him no more in that quiet cloistered home, and for two long years the brothers did not meet again. Truth to tell, the quiet of a religious retreat had no charm for Gaston, as it had for his brother, and the stirring doings in the great world held him altogether in thrall. The King of England was even then engaged in active preparations for the war with France that did not commence in real earnest till two years later. But all men believed that the invasion of the enemy's land was very near. Proclamations of the most warlike nature were being issued alike by King and Parliament. Edward was again putting forward his inconsistent and illogical claim to the crown of France. Men's hearts were aflame for the glory and the stress of war, and Gaston found himself drawn into the vortex, and could only send an urgent message to his brother, bidding him quickly come to him at Windsor. He had been taken amongst the number of the Prince's attendants. He longed for Raymond to come and share his good fortune.

But Raymond, when that message reached him, had other things to think of than the clash of arms and the struggle with a foreign foe; and he could only send back a message to his brother that for the time at least their paths in life must lie in different worlds. Doubtless the day would come when they should meet again; but for the present his own work lay here in this quiet place, and Gaston must win his spurs without his brother beside him. So Gaston threw himself into the new life with all the zest of his ardent nature, following sometimes the Prince and sometimes the King, according as it was demanded of him, making one of those who followed Edward into Flanders the following year, only to be thwarted of their object through the most unexpected tragedy of the murder of Van Artevelde.

Of wars, adventures, and battles we shall have enough in the pages to follow; so without farther concerning ourselves with the fortunes of Gaston through these two years of excitement and preparation, we will rather remain with Raymond, and describe in brief the events which followed upon his admission within the walls of the Cistercian monks' home.

Of those first weeks within its walls Raymond always retained a vivid remembrance, and they left upon him a mark that was never afterwards effaced. He became aware of a new power stirring within him which he had never hitherto dreamed of possessing.

As has before been said, Roger the woodman's son was carried into the bare but spotlessly clean room upon the upper floor of the building which was used for any of the sick of the community, and John was laid in another of the narrow pallet beds, of which there were four in that place. All this while Roger lay as if dead, in a trance that might be one simply of exhaustion, or might be that strange sleep into which the old sorcerer had for years been accustomed to throw him at will. Leaving him thus passive and apparently lifeless (save that the heart's action was distinctly perceptible), Father Paul busied himself over poor John, who was found to be in pitiable plight; for his wound had opened with the exertion of the long ride, and he had lost much blood before any one knew the state he was in. For some short time his case was somewhat critical, as the bleeding proved obstinate, and was checked with difficulty; and but for Father Paul's accurate knowledge of surgery (accurate for the times he lived in, at any rate), he would likely enough have bled to death even as he lay.

Then whilst the kindly monks were bending over him, and Father Paul's entire time and attention were given up to the case before him, so that he dared not leave John's bedside for an instant, Roger suddenly uttered a wild cry and sprang up in his bed, his lips parted, his eyes wide open and fixed in a dreadful stare.

"I come! I come!" he cried, in a strange, muffled voice; and with a rapidity and energy of which no one would have believed him capable who had seen him lifted from the horse an hour before, he rose and strove to push aside his father's detaining hand.

The old man uttered a bitter cry, and flung his arms about the boy.

"It has come! it has come! I knew it would. There is no hope, none! He is theirs, body and soul. He will go back to them, and they will --"

The words were drowned in a wild cry, as the boy struggled so fiercely that it was plain even the old man's frenzied strength would not suffice to detain him long. Father Paul and the monk who was assisting him with John could not move without allowing the bleeding to recommence. But Raymond was standing by disengaged, and the keen eyes of the Father fixed themselves upon his face. He had heard a brief sketch of the rescue of Roger as the boy had been undressed and laid in the bed, and now he said, in accents of quiet command,

"Take the crucifix that hangs at my girdle, and lay it upon his brow. Bid him lie down once again -- adjure him in the name of the Holy Jesus. It is not earthly force that will prevail here. We may save him but by the Name that is above every name. Go!"

Again over Raymond's senses there stole that sense of mystic unreality, or to speak more truly, the sense of the reality of the unseen over the seen things about and around us that men call mysticism, but which may be something widely different; and with it came that quickening of the faculties that he had experienced before as he had knelt in the sorcerer's unhallowed hall, the same sense of fearlessness and power. He took the crucifix without a word, and went straight to the frenzied boy, struggling wildly against the detaining clasp of his father's arms.

"Let him go," he said briefly; and there was that in the tone that caused the astonished old man to loose his hold, and stand gazing in awe and amaze at the youthful face, kindling with its strange look of resolve and authoritative power.

It seemed as though the possessed boy felt the power himself; for though his open eyes took in no answering impression from the scenes around him, his arms fell suddenly to his side. The struggles ceased, he made no attempt to move; whilst Raymond laid the crucifix against his brow, and said in a low voice:

"In the Name of the Holy Son of God, in the Name of the Blessed Jesus, I forbid you to go. Awake from that unhallowed sleep! Call upon the Name of all names. He will hear you -- He will save you."

His eyes were fixed upon the trembling boy; his face was shining with the light of his own implicit faith; his strong will braced itself to the fulfilment of the task set him to do. Confident that what the Father bid him accomplish, that he could and must fulfil, Raymond did indeed resemble some pictured saint on painted window, engaged in conflict with the Evil One; and when with a sudden start and cry the boy woke suddenly to the sense of passing things, perhaps it was small wonder that he sank at Raymond's feet, clasping him round the knees and sobbing wildly his broken and incoherent words:

"O blessed Saint George -- blessed and glorious victor! thou hast come to me a second time to strengthen and to save. Ah, leave me not! To thee I give myself; help, O help me to escape out of this snare, which is more cruel than that of death itself! I will serve thee ever, blessed saint. I will be thine in life and death! Only fight my battle with the devil and his host, and take me for thine own for ever and ever."

Raymond kindly lifted him up, and laid him upon the bed again.

"I am no saint," he said, a little shamefacedly; "I am but a youth like thyself. Thou must not pray to me. But I will help thee all I may, and perchance some day, when this yoke be broken from off thy neck, we will ride forth into the world together, and do some service there for those who are yet oppressed and in darkness."

"I will follow thee to the world's end, be thou who thou mayest!" exclaimed the boy ecstatically, clasping his thin hands together, whilst a look of infinite peace came into his weary eyes. "If thou wouldst watch beside my bed, then might I sleep in peace. He will not dare to come nigh me; his messengers must stand afar off, fearing to approach when they see by whom I am guarded."

It was plainly useless to try to disabuse Roger of the impression that his visitor was other than a supernatural one, and Raymond saw that with the boy's mind so enfeebled and unhinged he had better let him think what he would. He simply held the crucifix over him once again, and said, with a calm authority that surprised even himself:

"Trust not in me, nor in any Saint however holy. In the Name of the Blessed Jesus alone put thy faith. Speak the prayer His lips have taught, and then sleep, and fear nothing."

With hands locked together, and a wonderful look of rest upon his face, Roger repeated after Raymond the long-unused Paternoster which he had never dared to speak beneath the unhallowed roof of his master at Basildene. With the old sense of restful confidence in prayer came at once the old untroubled sleep of the little child; and when Raymond at last looked up from his own devotions at the bedside, it was to see that Roger had fallen into the tranquil slumber that is the truest restorer of health, and that Father Paul was standing on the opposite side of the bed, regarding him with a very gentle yet a very penetrating and authoritative gaze. He bent his head once more as if to demand a blessing, and the Father laid a hand upon his head, and said, in grave, full tones:

"Peace be with thee, my son."

That was all. There was no comment upon what had passed; and after partaking of a simple meal, Raymond was advised to retire to rest himself after his long night's ride, and glad enough was he of the sleep that speedily came to him.

All the next day he was occupied with Gaston, who had many charges to undertake for John; and only when his brother had gone was he free to take up his place at John's bedside, and be once again his nurse, companion, and fellow student.

Roger still occupied the bed in the same room where he had first been laid. A low fever of a nature little understood had fastened upon him, and he still fell frequently into those strange unnatural trances which were looked upon by the brothers of the order as due to purely satanic agency. What Father Paul thought about them none ever knew, and none dared to ask.

Father Paul was a man who had lived in the world till past the meridian of life. He was reported to have travelled much, to have seen many lands and many things, and to have been in his youth a reckless and evil liver. Some even believed him to have committed some great crime; but none rightly knew his history, and his present sanctity and power and holiness were never doubted. A single look into that stern, worn, powerful face, with the coal-black eyes gleaming in their deep sockets, was enough to convince the onlooker that the man was intensely, even terribly in earnest. His was the leading spirit in that small and austere community, and he began at once to exercise a strong influence upon each of the three youths so unexpectedly thrown across his path.

This influence was the greatest at first over Raymond, in whom he appeared to take an almost paternal interest; and the strange warfare that they waged together over the mental malady of the unhappy Roger drew them still closer together.

Certainly for many long weeks it seemed as though the boy were labouring under some demoniacal possession, and Raymond fully believed that such was indeed the case. Often it seemed as though no power could restrain him from at least the attempt to return to the tyrant whom he believed to be summoning him back. Possibly much of the strange malady from which he was suffering might be due to physical causes -- overstrained nerves, and even an unconscious and morbid craving after that very hypnotic condition (as it would now be termed) which had really reduced him to his present pitiable state; but to Raymond it appeared to proceed entirely from some spiritual possession, and in helping the unhappy boy to resist and conquer the voice of the tempter, his own faith and strength of spirit were marvellously strengthened; whilst Roger continued to regard him in the light of a guardian angel, and followed him about like a veritable shadow.

Father Paul watched the two youths with a keen and observant interest. It was by his command that Raymond was always summoned or roused from sleep whenever the access of nervous terror fell upon Roger and he strove to obey the summoning voice. He would watch with quiet intensity the struggle between the wills of the two lads, and mark, with a faint smile upon his thin lips, the triumph invariably attained by Raymond, and his growing and increasing faith in the power of the Name he invoked in his aid. Seldom indeed had he himself to come to the aid of the boy. He never did so unless Roger's paroxysm lasted long enough to try Raymond's strength to the verge of exhaustion, and this was very seldom.

The calm smile in the Father's eyes, and his quiet words of commendation, "Well done, my son!" were reward sufficient for Raymond even when his strength had been most severely tasked; and as little by little he and his charge came to know the monk better, and to receive from him from time to time words of teaching, admonition, or encouragement, they found themselves growing more and more dominated by his strong will and personality, more eager day by day to please him, more anxious to win the rare smile that occasionally flashed across the austere face and illuminated it like a gleam of sunshine.

John felt almost the same sense of fascination as Raymond, and was by no means impatient of the tardy convalescence that kept him so long a prisoner beneath the walls of the small religious house. He would indeed have fain tarried longer yet, but that his father sent a retinue of servants at length to bring him home again.

But Raymond did not go with him. His work for Roger was not yet done, and warmly attached as he was to John, his heart was still more centred upon Father Paul. Besides, no mention was made of him in the letter that accompanied the summons home. His brother was he knew not where, and his duty lay with Roger, who looked to him as to a saviour and

protector.

There was no thought of Roger's leaving the retreat he had found in his hour of need. He scarce dared put foot outside the quiet cloistered quadrangle behind whose gates and walls he alone felt safe. Besides, his father lay slowly dying in the hospital hard by. It seemed as though the very joy of having his son restored to him had been too much for his enfeebled frame after the long strain of grief that had gone before. The process of decay might be slow, but it was sure, and all knew that the old man would ere long die. He had no desire for life, if only his boy were safe; and to Raymond he presented a pathetic petition that he would guard and cherish him, and save him from that terrible possession which had well-nigh been his ruin body and soul.

To Raymond it seemed indeed as if this soul had been given him, and he passed his word with a solemnity that brought great comfort to the dying man.

An incident which had occurred shortly before had added to Raymond's sense of responsibility with regard to Roger, and had shown him likewise that a new peril menaced his own path in life, though of personal danger the courageous boy thought little.

One day, some six weeks after his admission to the Monastery, and shortly before John's departure thence, Roger had been strangely uneasy and depressed for many hours. It was no return of the trance-like state in which he was not master of his own words and actions. Those attacks had almost ceased, and he had been rapidly gaining in strength in consequence. This depression and restless uneasiness was something new and strange. Raymond did not know what it might forebode, but he tried to dissipate it by cheerful talk, and Roger did his best to fight against it, though without much success.

"Some evil presence is near!" he exclaimed suddenly; "I know it -- I feel it! I ever felt this sick shuddering when those wicked men approached me. Methinks that one of them must even now be nigh at hand. Can they take me hence? Do I indeed belong to them? O save me -- help me! Give me not up to their power!"

His agitation became so violent, that it was a relief to Raymond that Father Paul at this moment appeared; and as this phase in Roger's state was something new, and did not partake of the nature of any spiritual possession, he dismissed Raymond with a smile, bidding him go out for one of the brief wanderings in the woods that were at once pleasant and necessary for him, whilst he himself remained beside Roger, soothing his nameless terrors and assuring him that no power in the land, not even that of the King himself, would be strong enough to force from the keeping of the Church any person who had sought Sanctuary beneath her shadow.

Meantime Raymond went forth, as he was wont to do, into the beech wood that lay behind the home of the monks. It was a very beautiful place at all times; never more so than when the first tender green of coming summer was clothing the giant trees, and the primroses and wood sorrel were carpeting the ground, which was yet brown with the fallen leaves of the past autumn. The slanting sunbeams were quivering through the gnarled tree trunks, and the birds were singing rapturously overhead, as Raymond bent his steps along the trodden path which led to the nearest village; but he suddenly stopped short with a start of surprise on encountering the intent gaze of a pair of fierce black eyes, and finding himself face to face with a stranger he had never seen in his life before.

Never seen? No; and yet he knew the man perfectly, and felt that he changed colour as he stood gazing upon the handsome malevolent face that was singularly repulsive despite its regular features and bold beauty. In a moment he recollected where he had seen those very lineaments portrayed with vivid accuracy, even to the sinister smile and the gleam in the coal-black eyes.

Roger possessed a gift of face drawing that would in these days make the fortune of any portrait painter. He had many times drawn with a piece of rough charcoal pictures of the monks as he saw them in the refectory, the refined and hollow face of John, and the keen and powerful countenance of Father Paul. So had he also portrayed for Raymond the features of the two Sanghursts, father and son. The youth knew perfectly the faces of both; and as he stopped short, gazing at this stranger with wide-open eyes, he knew in a moment that Roger's malevolent foe was nigh at hand, and that the sensitive and morbidly acute faculties of the boy had warned him of the fact, when he could by no possibility have known it by any other means.

Sanghurst stood looking intently at this bright-faced boy, a smile on his lips, a frown in his eyes.

"Methinks thou comest from the Monastery hard by?" he questioned smoothly. "Canst tell me if there be shelter there for a weary traveller this night?"

"For a poor and weary traveller perchance there might be," answered the boy, with a gleam in his eye not lost upon his interlocutor; "but it is no house of entertainment for the rich and prosperous. Those are sent onwards to the Benedictine Brothers, some two miles south from this. Father Paul opens not his gates save to the sick, the sorrowful, the needy. Shall I put you in the way of the other house, Sir? Methinks it would suit you better than any place which calls Father Paul its head."

The gaze bent upon the boy was searching and distinctly hostile. As the dialogue proceeded, the look of malevolence gradually deepened upon the face of the stranger, till it might have made a timid heart quail.

"How then came John de Brocas to tarry there so long? For aught I know he may be there yet. By what right is he a guest beneath this so hospitable roof?"

"He was sick nigh to the death when he craved admittance," answered Raymond briefly. "He --"

"He had aided and abetted the flight from his true masters of a servant boy bound over to them lawfully and fast. If he thinks to deceive Peter Sanghurst or if you do either, boy that you are, though with the hardihood of a man and the

recklessness of a fool -- you little know with whom you have to deal. It was you -- you who broke into our house -- I know not how, but some day I shall know -- and stole away with one you fondly hope to hold against my power. Boy, I warn you fairly: none ever makes of Peter Sanghurst an enemy but he bitterly, bitterly rues the day. I give you one chance of averting the doom which else will fall upon you. Give back the boy. Lure him out hither some day when I am waiting to seize him. Place him once again in my hands, and your rash act shall be forgiven. You have the power to do this. Be advised, and accept my terms. The Sanghursts never forgive. Refuse, and the day will come when you will so long to have done my bidding now, that you would even sell your soul to undo the deed which has brought my enmity upon you. Now choose. Will you deliver up the boy, or --"

"Never!" answered Raymond, with flashing eyes, not even waiting to hear the alternative. "I fear you not. I know you, and I defy you. I will this moment to Father Paul, to warn him of your approach. The gates will be closed, and you will be denied all entrance. You may strive as you will, but your victim has taken Sanctuary, and not all the powers of the world or the devil you serve can prevail against the walls of that haven of refuge. Go back whence you came, or stay and do your worst. We fear you not. The Holy Saints and the Blessed Jesus are our protectors and defenders. You have tried in vain your foul spells. You have seen what their power is against that which is from above. Go, and repent your evil ways ere it be too late. You threaten me with your vengeance; have you ever thought of that vengeance of God which awaits those who defy His laws and invoke the powers of darkness? My trust is in Him; wherefore I fear you not. Do then your worst. Magnify yourself as you will. Your fate will be like that of the blaspheming giant of Gath who defied the power of the living God and fell before the sling and the stone of the shepherd boy."

And without waiting to hear the answer which was hurled at him with all the fury of an execration, Raymond turned and sped back to the Monastery, not in any physical fear of the present vengeance of his foe, but anxious to warn the keeper of the gate of the close proximity of one who was so deadly a foe to Father Paul's protegee.

Not a word of this adventure ever reached Roger's ears, and indeed Raymond thought little of it after the next few weeks had passed without farther molestation from the foe. The old woodman died. Roger, though sincerely mourning his father, was too happy in returning health and strength to be over-much cast down. His mind and body were alike growing stronger. He was never permitted to speak of the past, nor of the abominations of his prison house. Father Paul had from the first bidden the boy to forget, or at least to strive to forget, all that had passed there, and never let his thoughts or his words dwell upon it. Raymond, despite an occasional access of boyish curiosity, ever kept this warning in mind, and never sought to discover what Roger had done or had suffered beneath the roof of Basildene. And so soon as the boy had recovered some measure of health, both he and Raymond were regularly instructed by Father Paul in such branches of learning as were likely to be of most service to them in days to come.

Whether or not he hoped that they would embrace the religious life they never knew. He never dropped a hint as to his desires on that point, and they never asked him. They were happy in their quiet home. All the brothers were kind to them, and the Father was an object of loving veneration which bordered on adoration.

Two years slipped thus away so fast that it seemed scarce possible to believe how time had fled by. Save that they had grown much both in body and mind, the boys would have thought it had been months, not years, they had spent in that peaceful retreat.

The break to that quiet life came with a mission which was entrusted by His Holiness himself to Father Paul, and which involved a journey to Rome. With the thought of travel there came to Raymond's mind a longing after his own home and the familiar faces of his childhood. The Father was going to take the route across the sea to Bordeaux, for he had a mission to fulfil there first. Why might not he go with him and see his foster-mother and Father Anselm again? He spoke his wish timidly, but it was kindly and favourably heard; and before the spring green had begun to clothe the trees, Father Paul, together with Raymond and his shadow Roger, had set foot once more upon the soil of France.

CHAPTER XII. ON THE WAR PATH

"Raymond! Is it -- can it be thou?"

"Gaston! I should scarce have known thee!"

The twin brothers stood facing one another within the walls of Caen, grasping each other warmly by the hand, their eyes shining with delight as they looked each other well over from head to foot, a vivid happiness beaming over each handsome face. It was more than two years since they had parted -- parted in the quiet cloister of the Cistercian Brotherhood; now they met again amid scenes of plunder and rapine: for the English King had just discovered, within the archives of the city his sword had taken, a treaty drawn up many years before, agreeing that its inhabitants should join with the King of France for the invasion of England; and in his rage at the discovery, he had given over the town to plunder, and would even have had the inhabitants massacred in cold blood, had not Geoffrey of Harcourt restrained his fury by wise and merciful counsel. But the order for universal pillage was not recalled, and the soldiers were freebooting to their hearts' content all over the ill-fated city.

Raymond had seen sights and had heard sounds as he had pressed through those streets that day in search of his brother that had wrung his soul with indignation and wonder. Where was the vaunted chivalry of its greatest champion, if such scenes could be enacted almost under his very eyes? Were they not true, those lessons Father Paul had slowly and quietly instilled into his mind, that not chivalry, but a true and living Christianity, could alone withhold the natural man from deeds of cruelty and rapacity when the hot blood was stirred by the fierce exultation of battle and victory, and the lust of conquest had gained the mastery over his spirit?

The hot July sun was beating down upon the great square where were situated those buildings of which the King and the Prince and their immediate followers had taken temporary possession. The brothers stood together beneath the shadow of a lofty wall. Cries and shouts from the surrounding streets told tales of the work being done there; but that work had carried off almost all the soldiers, and the twins were virtually alone in the place, save for the tall and slight

youth who stood a few paces off, and was plainly acting in the capacity of Raymond's servant.

"I thought I should find thee here, Gaston," said his brother, with fond affection in his tones. "I knew that thou wouldst be with the King at such a time; and when I entered within the walls of this city, I said in my heart that my Gaston would have no hand in such scenes as those I was forced to witness as I passed along."

Gaston's brow darkened slightly, but he strove to laugh it off.

"Nay, thou must not fall foul of our great and mighty King for what thou hast seen today. In truth I like it not myself; but what would you? The men were furious when they heard of yon treaty; and the King's fierce anger was greatly kindled. The order went forth, and when pillage once begins no man may tell where it will end. War is a glorious pastime, but there must ever be drawbacks. Sure thine own philosophy has taught thee that much since thou hast turned to a man of letters. But tell me of thyself, Raymond. I am hungry for news. For myself, thou mayest guess what has been my life, and thou knowest how these past two years have been spent -- wars and rumours of wars, fruitless negotiations, and journeys and marches for little gain. I am glad enough that we have shaken hands with peace and bid her adieu for a while. She can be a false and treacherous friend, and well pleased am I that the bloody banner of true warfare is unfurled at last. England is athirst for some great victory, for some gallant feat of arms which shall reward her for the burdens she has to pay to support our good soldiers. For his people's sake, as well as for his own honour, the King must strike some great blow ere he returns home and we who follow the Prince have sworn to follow him to the death and win our spurs at his side.

"Brother, say that thou wilt join our ranks. Thou hast not forgotten our old dreams? Thou hast not turned monk or friar?"

"Nay, or I should not now be here," answered Raymond. "No, Gaston, I have forgotten naught of the old dream; and I too have seen fighting in the south, where the King of France has mustered his greatest strength. For we believed the Roy Outremer would land at Bordeaux and march to the help of my Lord Derby, who is waging war against the Count of Lille Jourdain and the Duke of Bourbon in and around Gascony. And, Gaston, the Sieur de Navailles has joined the French side, and is fighting in the van of the foe. He has long played a double game, watching and waiting till victory seems secure for either one King or the other. Now, having seen the huge force mustered by the King of France in the south, he seems to have resolved that the victory must remain with him, and has cast in his lot against the English cause. So, Brother, if the great Edward wins his battles, and drives from his own fair territories the invading hosts of France, it may be that the Sieur de Navailles may be deprived of his ill-gotten lands and castles; and then, if thou hast won thy spurs --"

Raymond paused, and Gaston's eyes flashed at the thought. But he had learned, even in these two years, something of the lesson of patience, and was now less confident of winning fame and fortune at one stroke than he had been when he had made his first step along the path that he believed would lead him by leaps and bounds to the desired haven.

"Then thou hast been there? Hast thou seen the old places -- the old faces? Truly I have longed to visit Sauveterre once more; but all our plans are changed, and now men speak of naught but pressing on for Calais. Where hast thou come from?"

"From the old home, Gaston, where for three months I and Roger have been. What! dost thou not know Roger again? In truth, he looks vastly different from what he did when thou sawest him last. We are brothers in arms now, albeit he likes to call himself my servant. We have never been parted since the day we snatched him from that evil place within the walls of Basildene. We have been in safe shelter at the mill. Honest Jean and Margot had the warmest welcome for us, and Father Anselm gave us holy words of welcome. Everything there is as when we left. Scarce could I believe that nigh upon three years will soon have fled since we quitted its safe shelter. But I could not stay without thee, Brother. I have greatly longed to look upon thy face again. I knew that thou wert with the King, and I looked that this meeting should have been at Bordeaux. But when news was brought that the English ships had changed their course and were to land their soldiers in the north, I could tarry no longer, and we have ridden hard through the land northward to find thee here. Tell me, why this sudden change of plan? Surely the King will not let his fair province of Gascony be wrested from his hand without striking a blow in its defence in person?"

Gaston laughed a proud, confident laugh.

"Thou needst scarce ask such a question, Raymond; little canst thou know the temper of our King and thou thinkest for a moment such a thing as that. But methinks we may strike a harder blow here in the north against the treacherous French monarch than ever we could in the south, where his preparations are made to receive us. Here no man is ready. We march unopposed on a victorious career. The army is far away in the south; the King has but a small force with him in Paris. Brave Geoffrey of Harcourt, by whose advice we have turned our course and landed here at La Hague, has counselled us to march upon Calais and gain possession of that pirate city. With the very key of France in our hands, what may not England accomplish? Wherefore our march is to be upon Calais, and methinks there will be glory and honour to be won ere this campaign closes!"

And, indeed, for a brief space it did seem as though King Edward's progress was to be one of unchecked victory; for he had already routed the French King's Constable, sent to try to save Caen; had taken and pillaged that city, and had marched unopposed through Carbon, Lisieux, and Louviers to Rouen, leaving terrible devastation behind, as the soldiers seized upon everything in the way of food from the hapless inhabitants, though not repeating the scenes which had disgraced the English colours at Caen.

But at Rouen came the first of those checks which in time became so vexatious and even perilous to the English army. The French, in great alarm, had realized that something must be done to check Edward's victorious career; and as it was plain that if he turned his steps northward there would be no chance of opposing him, their aim and object was to pen him as far in the south as possible, so that the army in Gascony, perhaps, or failing that the new one mustering

rapidly round the King in Paris, might close in upon the alien army and cut them to pieces by sheer force of numbers, before they could reach the coast and their ships. So Philip, recovering from his first panic, sent orders that all the bridges between Rouen and Paris should be broken down; and when Edward reached the former city, intending to cross there to the north side of the Seine, he found only the broken piers and arches of the bridge left standing, and the wide, turbid waters of the great river barring his further progress.

Irritated and annoyed, but not really alarmed as yet, the English King turned his steps eastward toward Paris, still resolved to cross by the first bridge found standing. But each in turn had been broken down; and the only retaliation he could inflict upon the people who were thwarting and striving to entangle him in a net, was to burn the towns through which he passed; Pont de l'Arche, Vernon, and Verneuil, until he arrived at last at Poissy, only a few miles from Paris, to find the bridge there likewise broken down, whilst messengers kept arriving from all sides warning him that a far mightier host was gathering around Philip than he had with him, and advising instant retreat along the course by which he had come.

But Edward well knew that retreat was impossible. He had so exhausted the country and exasperated its inhabitants by his recent march and its attendant ravages, that it would be impossible to find food for his soldiers there again, even if the people did not rise up in arms against them. Rather would he face the French foe, however superior to his own force, in open fight, than turn his back upon them in so cowardly a fashion.

Meantime, as Philip did not move, he set to work with his soldiers to repair the bridge, sending out detachments of his army to harass and alarm the inhabitants of Paris, ravaging the country up and down, and burning St. Germain, St. Cloud, and Montjoie.

These expeditions, so perilous and so singularly successful, were just of the kind to delight the eager spirits of the camp, and keep enthusiasm up to a high pitch. Why Philip suffered these ravages, when his army already far outnumbered that of the English, and why the French permitted their foes to repair and cross the bridge at Poissy without stirring a finger to hinder them, are questions more easily asked than answered. Possibly the knowledge that the Somme still lay between their enemies and the sea, and that the same difficulties with regard to the bridges was to be found there, kept the French army secure still of final victory. Possibly they thought that, hemmed in between the two great rivers, the army of Edward would be so well caught in a trap that they need not bestir themselves to consummate the final scene of the drama. At any rate, Philip remained inactive, save that his army was rapidly augmenting from all sides; whilst the English finished their bridge and marched northward, only opposed by a large body of troops sent out from Amiens to meet them, over which they obtained an easy victory.

Nevertheless the position of the English was becoming exceedingly critical, and their march certainly partook something of the nature of a retreat, little as they themselves appeared to be aware of the fact. Philip with his host was advancing from behind, the great river Somme lay before them, all its bridges either broken down or so well fortified as to be practically impassable; and though their allies in Flanders had raised the siege of Bovines in order to march to the assistance of the English King, there appeared small chance of their effecting a junction in time to be of any use.

At Airaines a pause was made in order to try to discover some bridge or ford by which the river might be passed. But Philip's work had been so well done that not a whole bridge could anywhere be found; and the French army was pressing so hard upon the English that in the end they had to break up their camp in the greatest haste, leaving their cooked provisions and tables ready spread for their foes to benefit by. They themselves hastened on to Abbeville, keeping slightly to the west of the town so as to avoid provoking attack, and be nearer to the coast, though as no English ships could be looked for in the river's mouth, the seacoast was of small service to them.

Such is the brief outline of the facts of Edward's well-known march in this campaign, destined to become so famous. The individual action of our Gascon twins must now be told in greater detail.

Their reunion after so long a separation had been a source of keen delight to both the brothers. Each had developed in a different direction, and instead of being shadows the one of the other as in old days, they were now drawn together by the force of contrast. Gaston was above all else a soldier, with a soldier's high spirit, love of adventure, and almost reckless courage. He fairly worshipped the King and the Prince, and was high in favour with the youthful Edward, whose first campaign this was. Raymond, whilst imbued with the same high courage, though of a loftier kind, in that it was as much spiritual as physical, and with much of the chivalrous love of adventure so common to the gallant youths of that age, was far more thoughtful, well instructed, and far-seeing than his brother. He looked to the larger issues of life. He was not carried away by wild enthusiasm. He could love, and yet see faults. He could throw in his lot with a cause, and ardently strive for the victory, and yet know all the while that there were flaws in that same cause, and admit with sorrow, yet firm truthfulness, that in this world no cause is ever altogether pure, altogether just. He was not of the stuff of which hot partisans are made. He had a spirit in advance of his times, and the chances were that he would never rise to the same measure of success as his brother. For those who try to keep a stainless name in times of strife, bloodshed, and hostile jealousy, seldom escape without making bitter enemies, and suffer the penalty that will ever attend upon those who strive after a higher ideal than is accepted by the world at large.

But if growing apart in character, the bond of warm love was but drawn closer by the sense that each possessed gifts denied to the other. Raymond found in Gaston the most charming and enlivening comrade and friend. Gaston began unconsciously to look up to his brother, and to feel that in him was a power possessed by few of those by whom he was surrounded, and to which he could turn for counsel and help if ever the time should come when he felt the need of either.

In Raymond's presence others as well as Gaston began to curb some of that bold freedom of speech which has always characterized the stormy career of the soldier. Those who so curbed themselves scarce knew why they did so. It was seldom that Raymond spoke any word of rebuke or admonition, and if he did it was only to some youth younger than himself. But there was something in the direct grave look of his eyes, and in the pure steadfastness of his expression, which gave to his aspect a touch of saintliness quickly felt by those about him. For in those days men, in spite of many

and great faults, were not ashamed of their religion. Much superstition might be mingled with their beliefs, corruption and impurity were creeping within the fold of the Church, darkness and ignorance prevailed to an extent which it is hard in these times to realize; yet with all this against them, men were deeply and truly loyal to their faith. It had not entered into their minds that a deep and firm faith in God was a thing of which to be ashamed; that to trust in special providence was childish folly; to receive absolution upon the eve of some great and perilous undertaking a mere empty form, or a device of cunning priestcraft. It has been the work of a more "enlightened" age to discover all this. In olden times -- those despised days of worn-out superstition -- men yet believed fully and faithfully in their God, and in His beneficent care of His children. Raymond, then, with his saint-like face and his reputation of piety, together with the story of his residence beneath the care of Father Paul, quickly obtained a certain reputation of his own that made him something of a power; and Gaston felt proud to go about with his brother at his side, and hear the comments passed upon that brother by the comrades he had made in the past years.

During the exciting march through the hostile country Gaston and Raymond had known much more of the feeling of the people than their comrades. The French tongue was familiar to them, and though they did not speak it as readily as English or their Gascon dialect, they had always known it from childhood, and never had any difficulty in making themselves understood. Despite their English sympathies and their loyalty to England's King, they felt much natural compassion for the harried and distracted victims of Edward's hostile march; and many little acts of protective kindness had been shown by both the brothers (generally at Raymond's instigation) towards some feeble or miserable person who might otherwise have been left in absolute destitution. These small acts of kindness won them goodwill wherever they went, and also assisted them to understand the words and ways of the people as they would scarcely have done without.

Then, as in all countries and all times the old proverb holds good that one good turn deserves another, they picked up here and there several valuable hints, and none more valuable than the knowledge that somewhere below Abbeville, between that town and the sea, was a tidal ford that could be crossed twice in the twelve hours by those who knew where to seek it. Thus whilst the King's Marshals were riding up and down the river banks, vainly seeking some bridge over which the hard-pressed army could pass, the twin brothers carefully pursued their way down the stream, looking everywhere for the white stone bottom which they had been told marked the spot where the water was fordable.

But the tide was rolling in deep and strong, and they could see nothing. Still cautiously pursuing their way -- cautiously because upon the opposite bank of the river they saw a large gathering of archers and footmen all belonging to the enemy -- they lighted presently upon a peasant varlet cutting willow wands not far from the river's brink. The boys entered into talk with him, and Raymond's kindly questioning soon elicited the information that the man's name was Gobin Agace, that he was a poor man with little hope of being anything else all his days, and that he knew the river as well as any man in the realm.

"Then," said Raymond, "thou needest be poor no longer; for if thou wilt come with us to the camp of the English King a short league away, and lead him and his army to the ford of the Blanche Tache which lies not far from here, he will make thee rich for life, and thou wilt be prosperous all thy days."

"If the King of France do not follow and cut off my head," said the man doubtfully, though his eyes glistened at the prospect of such easily-won wealth.

"By holy St. Anthony, thou needst not fear that!" cried Gaston. "Our great King can protect thee and keep thee from all harm. See here, good knave: it will be far better for thee to win this great reward than for us, who have no such dire need of the King's gold. If thou wilt not aid us, we must e'en find the place ourselves; but as time presses we will gladly lead thee to the King, and let him reward thee for thy good service. So answer speedily yea or nay, for we may not linger longer whilst thou debatest the matter in that slow mind of thine."

"Then I will e'en go with you, fair sirs," answered the fellow, who was in no mind to let the reward slip through his fingers; and within an hour Gaston and Raymond led before the King the peasant varlet who held the key of the position in his hands.

Every hour was bringing fresh messages of warning. The French King was in pursuit of his flying foe (as he chose to consider him), and though he felt so certain of having him in a trap that he did not hasten as he might have done, there was no knowing when the van of the French army would be upon them; and the moment that the King heard of this ford, and was assured by the peasant that at certain states of the tide twelve men abreast could ford it, the water reaching only to the knee, he broke up his camp at an hour's notice, and with Gobin Agace at his side proceeded in person to the water's edge, the flower of his army crowding to the spot beside him, whilst the mass of his troops formed in rank behind, ready to press forward the moment the water should be fordable.

Night had fallen before the trumpets had sounded, warning the soldiers of the breaking up of the camp. All night long they had been working, and then marching to the fordable spot: but now the tide was rolling in again; and worse than that, the English saw upon the opposite shore a compact band of twelve hundred men -- Genoese archers and picked cavalry -- posted there by the now vigilant Philip, ready to oppose their passage if they should chance upon the ford.

"Knights and gentlemen," said the King, as he sat his fine charger and looked round upon the gallant muster around him, "shall we be daunted by the opposing foe? They are but a handful, and we know the coward temper of yon Italian crossbowmen. Who will be the first to lead the charge, and ride on to victory?"

A hundred eager voices shouted a reply. The enthusiasm spread from rank to rank. Foremost of those beside the water's edge stood Oliver and Bernard de Brocas; and when at last the ebb came, and the word was given to advance, they were amongst the first who dashed into the shallow water, whilst Gaston and his brother, though unable to press into the foremost rank, were not far behind.

Thick and fast fell round them the bolts of the crossbows; but far thicker and more deadly were the long shafts of the

English archers, which discomfited the foreign banners and sent them flying hither and thither. In vain did their brave leader, Godemar de Fay, strive to rally them and dispute the passage of the main body of the army, even when the horsemen had passed across. Edward's splendid cavalry rode hither and thither, charging again and again into the wavering band. Quickly the Genoese hirelings flung away their bows and ran for their lives; whilst the English army, with shouts of triumph, steadily advanced across the ford in the first quivering light of the dawning day, and looked back to see the banners of Philip of France advancing upon them, whilst a few stragglers and some horses were actually seized by the soldiers of that monarch.

"Now God and St. George be praised!" cried Edward, as he watched the approach of the foe, who had so nearly trapped him upon ground which would have given every advantage to the French and none to his own army. "Methinks had our good brother but pressed on a day's march faster, it would have gone hard with us to save the honour of England. Now I stand on mine own ground. Now will I fight at my ease. There is bread for my soldiers. They shall rest ere they be called upon to fight. Let Philip do his worst! We will be ready with an English welcome when he comes. Let his host outnumber ours by three to one, as men say it does, shall we be afraid to meet him in fair field, and show him what English chivalry may accomplish?"

A tumultuous cheer was answer enough. The whole of the English army now stood upon the north bank of the Somme, watching, with shouts of triumph and gestures of defiance, the futile efforts of the French to plunge over the ford. The tide was again flowing. The water was deep and rapid. In a moment they knew themselves to be too late, and a few well-aimed shafts from English longbows showed them how futile was now any effort in pursuit of the foe who had eluded them.

Sullenly and with many menacing gestures, that were replied to by shouts of derisive laughter from the English soldiers, the French army turned hack towards Abbeville, where they could cross the river at their leisure by the bridge which had been strongly fortified against Edward. Careless confidence had lost Philip the advantage he might have gained through clever generalship; he was now to see what he could do by force of arms when he and Edward should stand face to face in their opposing hosts in the open field of battle.

CHAPTER XIII. WINNING HIS SPURS.

"Tomorrow, good comrades in arms, we will show yon laggard King of what stuff English chivalry is made!" cried the young Prince of Wales, as he rose to his feet and held a bumper of wine high above his head. "We have our spurs to win, and tomorrow shall be our chance. Here is to the victory of the English arms! May the mighty St. George fight upon our side, and bring us with glory and honour through the day!"

Every guest at the Prince's table had leaped to his feet. Swords were unsheathed and waved in wild enthusiasm, and a shout went up that was like one of triumph, as with one voice the guests around the Prince's table drained their cups to the victory of the English cause, shouting with one voice, as if formulating a battle cry:

"St. George and the Prince! St. George and the Prince!"

In the English camp that night there were elation and revelry; not the wild carousing that too often in those days preceded a battle and left the soldiers unfit for duty, but a cheerful partaking of good and sufficient food before the night's rest and ease which the King had resolved upon for his whole army, in preparation for the battle that could scarce be delayed longer than the morrow.

It was early on Thursday morning, the twenty-fourth day of August, that the ford of the Blanche Tache had been crossed. Thursday and Friday had been spent by the English in skirmishing about in search of provisions, of which great abundance had been found, and in deciding upon the disposition of their troops in a favourable position for meeting the advance of the French.

The King had selected some wooded and rising ground in the vicinity of the then obscure little village of Crecy. Then having made all his arrangements with skill and foresight, and having ordered that his men should be provided with ample cheer, and should rest quietly during the night, he himself gave a grand banquet to the leaders of his army; and the young Prince of Wales followed his father's example by inviting to his own quarters some score of bold and congenial spirits amongst the youthful gentlemen who followed his father's banner, to pass the time with them in joyous feasting, and to lay plans for the glory of the coming day.

It is difficult in these modern days to realize how young were some amongst those who took part in the great battles of the past. The Black Prince, as he was afterwards called from the sombre hue of the armour he wore, was not yet fifteen when the Battle of Crecy was fought; and when the King had summoned his bold subjects to follow him to the war, he had called upon all knights and gentlemen between the ages of sixteen and twenty to join themselves to him for this campaign in France. Lads who would now be reckoned as mere schoolboys were then doughty warriors winning their spurs in battle; and some of the most brilliant charges of those chivalrous days were led and carried through mainly by striplings scarce twenty years old. Inured from infancy to hardy sports, and trained to arms to the exclusion almost of all other training, these bold sons of England certainly proved equal to the demands made upon them. True, they were often skilfully generalled by older men, but the young ones held their own in prowess in the field; and child as the Prince of Wales would now be considered, the right flank of the army was to be led by him upon the morrow; and though the Earls of Warwick and Hereford and other trusty veterans were with him, his was the command, and to him were they to look.

No wonder then that the comrades who had marched with him through these last hazardous days, and who had been with and about him for many months -- some of them for years -- should rally round him now with the keenest enthusiasm. The De Brocas brothers were there -- Oliver and Bernard (John had not left England to follow the fortunes of the war) -- as well as Gaston and his brother, whose return had been warmly welcomed by the Prince. He had heard about the rescue of the woodman's son, and had been greatly interested and taken by Raymond and his story. Student

though he might be by nature, Raymond was as eager as any for the fight that was to come. He had caught the spirit of the warlike King's camp, and his blood was on fire to strike a blow at the foe who had so long harassed and thwarted them.

And it was not all rioting and feasting in the camp that night. The soldiers supped well and settled to rest; but the King, when his guests had departed, went to his oratory and spent the night upon his knees, his prayer being less for himself than for his gallant boy; less for victory than that England's honour might be upheld, and that whatever was the issue of the day, this might be preserved stainless in the sight of God and man.

Then very early in the morning, whilst almost all the camp slept, the King was joined by his son, the Prince being followed by Raymond, who had also kept vigil upon his knees that night, and they, with some half score of devout spirits, heard mass and received the Sacrament; whilst a little later on the monks and priests were busy hearing the confessions of the greater part of the soldiers, who after receiving the priestly absolution went into battle with a loftier courage than before.

When this had been done and still the French army appeared not, the King gave orders that the men should be served with something to eat and drink, after which they might sit down at their ease to wait till their adversaries appeared.

Meantime the French were having anything but a comfortable time of it. They had remained inactive in Abbeville for the whole of Friday as well as the preceding Thursday, after they had retreated thither from the ford where the English had given them the slip; and on Saturday they were marched off none too well fed, to meet their English foes.

Philip was so confident that his immense superiority in numbers was certain to give him the victory, that he thought little of the comfort of his men, the consequence being that they grew jaded and weary with the long hot march taken in an ill-fed state; and his own marshals at last very earnestly entreated their lord to call a halt for rest and refreshment before the troops engaged in battle, or else the men would fight at a terrible disadvantage.

Philip consented to this, and a halt was called, which was obeyed by the ranks in front; but those behind, eager to fall upon the English, and confident of easy victory, declined to wait, and went steadily forward, shouting "Kill! kill!" as they went, till all the alleys became filled up and choked. The press from behind urged forward the men in front, and the army moved on perforce once again, though now no longer in order, but in a confused and unmanageable mass.

Just as they came in sight of the English line of battle a heavy tempest of thunder and rain came upon them. The clouds seemed to discharge themselves upon the French host, and those birds of evil omen, the ravens, flew screaming overhead, throwing many men into paroxysms of terror who would never have blenched before the drawn blade of an armed foe.

Worse than this, the rain wet and slackened the strings of the Genoese crossbowmen, who marched in the foremost rank; and hungry and weary as they were, this last misfortune seemed to put the finishing touch to their discomfiture. Hireling soldiers, whose hearts are not in the cause, have been the curse of many a battlefield; and though these Genoese advanced with a great shouting against the foe, as though hoping to affright them by their noise, they did little enough except shout, till their cries were changed to those of agony and terror as their ineffectual shower of bolts was answered by a perfect hail of shafts from the English archers' dreaded longbows, whilst the sun shining full into their dazzled eyes rendered ineffectual any farther attempt on their part to shoot straight at the foe. The hired archers turned and fled, and throwing into confusion the horsemen behind who were eager to charge and break the ranks of the English archers, the luckless men were mown down ruthlessly by their infuriated allies, whose wrath was burning against them now that they had proved not only useless but a serious hindrance.

This was by no means a promising beginning for the French; but still, with their overwhelming superiority of numbers, they had plenty of confidence left; and the English, though greatly encouraged by the breaking and havoc in the ranks of the foe, were by no means recklessly confident that the day was theirs.

Presumably the English King, who with the reserves was posted upon the highest ground at some distance behind the two wings, had the best view of the battle. The left wing, commanded by the Earls of Northampton and Arundel, occupied the stronger position, being protected on their left by the little river Maye. The young Prince was in the position of the greatest danger; and as he and his companions stood in their ranks, watching the onset of the battle with parted lips, and breath that came and went with excitement, they began to see that upon them and their men the brunt of the day would fall.

It had been the King's command that the battle should be fought on foot by the English, probably owing to the wooded and uncertain nature of the ground, else his far-famed cavalry would hardly have been dismounted. The Prince then stood still in his place, gazing with kindling eyes at the confusion in the ranks of the foe, till the glint of a blood-red banner in their ranks caught his eye, and he cried aloud to his men,

"The oriflamme! the oriflamme, good comrades! See ye that, and know ye what it means when the King of France unfurls it? It is a signal that no lives will be spared, no quarter granted to the foe. If we go not on to victory, we march every man to his death!"

A shout that was like a cheer was the response of the gallant little band who stood shoulder to shoulder with the Prince, and the word being passed from mouth to mouth was received everywhere with like courageous enthusiasm, so that the cheer went ringing down from line to line, and hearts beat high and hand grasped sword ever harder and faster as the tide of battle rolled onward, until the word was given and the trumpets sounded the advance.

"Keep by my side and the Prince's, Raymond," breathed Gaston, as slowly and steadily they pressed down the hill towards the spot where the French horse under the Count of Alencon were charging splendidly into the ranks of the archers and splitting the harrow into which they had been formed by Edward's order into two divisions. The Count of Flanders likewise, knowing that the King's son was in this half of the battle, called on his men to follow him, and with a

fine company of Germans and Savoyards made for the spot where the young Prince was gallantly fighting, and cheering on his men to stand firm for the honour of England.

Shoulder to shoulder, fearless and dauntless, stood the little band of gallant knights and gentlemen who formed the bodyguard of the Prince. Again and again had the horsemen charged them; but the soldiers threw themselves beneath the horses of the foe and stabbed them through the body, so that hundreds of gallant French knights were overthrown and slain ere they well knew what had befallen them. But in the press and the heat of battle it was hard to say how the tide would turn. The commanders of the left wing of the English, the Earls of Northampton and Arundel, were forcing their way inch by inch to reach the Prince's side and divert from his immediate neighbourhood the whole stress of the opposing force now concentrated there. They could see that the Prince was still unharmed, fighting with the gallantry of his soldier race. But the odds for the moment were heavily against him; and they despatched a messenger to the King, who remained with the reserves, begging him to go to the assistance of the Prince. Ere the messenger returned, they had fought their own way into the melee, and had joined issue with the gallant youth, who, fearless and full of spirit, was encouraging his men alike by the boldness of his demeanour and by his shouts of encouragement and praise, though his breath was coming thick and fast, and the drops of exhaustion stood upon his brow.

"Fear not, sweet Prince," cried Arundel, raising his voice so that all who were near could hear: "we have sent word to your Royal Sire of the stress of the battle round you, and he will soon be here himself with the help that shall enable us to rout this rebel host;" and he turned his eyes somewhat anxiously towards the height where the King and his company still remained motionless.

But a messenger was spurring back through the open ground which lay between the reserves and the right wing where such hot work was going on. He made straight for the spot where the Prince was fighting, and both the Earls turned eagerly towards him.

"What said the King?" they asked quickly. "When will he be with us?"

"He asked," replied the messenger, "whether the Prince were killed or wounded; and when I told him nay, but in a hard passage of arms wherein he needed his Sire's help, the King folded his arms and turned away, saying, 'Let the boy win his spurs; for I will that the glory of this day be his, and not mine.'"

As those words were spoken it seemed as if new life were infused into the young Prince himself and all those who surrounded him. A ringing cheer rose from all their throats. They formed once again under their young leader, and charged the enemy with a fury that nothing was able to resist. The horsemen were forced back the way they had come. The Counts who had led them boldly and well were unhorsed and slain. Dismay and terror fell upon the breaking ranks of the French, and they turned and fled; whilst the excited and triumphant young Prince pursued them with shouts of exultation and triumph, till he found himself with his few most faithful followers in the midst of the flying but hostile ranks some little distance away from the English army.

"Sweet Prince, beware! have a care how you adventure your life thus in the enemy's ranks," whispered Raymond in his ear, he alone keeping a cool head in the midst of so much that was exciting. "See, here come some score of horsemen who know thee and would fain cut off thy retreat. Let us here make a stand and receive the charge, else shall we all be overthrown together."

This cautious counsel came only just in time. Young Edward looked round to see that his reckless bravery had placed him for the moment in imminent peril; but he had all the courage of his race, and his heart quailed not for an instant. Giving the word to his comrades to form a compact square, he placed himself where the onset was like to be the fiercest; nor was there time for his companions to interfere to place him in a position of greater safety.

With a great shout of rage and triumph the band of horsemen, who had recognized the person of the Prince, now rushed upon him, resolved either to carry him off a prisoner or leave him lying dead upon the field, so that the English might have little joy in their victory. So fierce was the attack that the Prince was borne to the ground; and the Battle of Crecy might have been a dark instead of a bright page in England's history, but for the gallantry of a little band of Welshmen headed by Richard de Beaumont, the bearer of the banner portraying the great red dragon of Merlin, which had floated all day over the bold Welsh contingent.

Flinging this banner over the prostrate form of the Prince, the brave soldier called on his men to charge the horses and cut them down. This they did in the way before mentioned -- throwing themselves underneath and stabbing them through the heart. So their riders, finding even this last effort futile, joined in the headlong flight of their compatriots; and the Prince's faithful attendants crowded round him to raise him up again, greatly rejoicing to find that though breathless and confused by the shock of his fall, he was none the worse for his overthrow, and was quickly able to thank the brave Welshmen who had so opportunely come to the rescue of him and his comrades.

"Now, we will back to the ranks and find my father," said the Prince, when he had spoken his courteous thanks and looked round about to see if his comrades had suffered more than himself.

One or two had received slight wounds, and Raymond was leaning upon Gaston's shoulder looking white and shaken; but he quickly recovered, and declared himself only bruised and breathless, and still holding fast to Gaston's arm, followed the Prince up the hill amongst the heaps of dying and dead.

Gaston was flushed with his exertions, and in his heart was room for nothing but pride and joy in the glorious victory just achieved. But whilst Raymond looked around him as he slowly moved, suffering more bodily pain than he wished his brother to know, his heart felt bruised and crushed like his body, and a sudden sense of the vanity of human life and ambition came suddenly upon him, so much so that he scarce knew whether he was in the flesh or in the spirit as he moved slowly and quietly onwards.

Everywhere he saw before him the bodies of men who but a few short hours ago had been full of strong vitality, instinct

with the same passions of hatred and loyalty as had animated their own ranks that day. How strange it seemed to look into those dead faces now, and wonder what those freed spirits thought of those same passions that had been raging within them but a few short hours before! Did it seem to them, as it almost seemed to him, that in all the world around there was nothing of moment enough to arouse such tumult of passion and strife; that only the things eternal the things that pass not away were worthy to be greatly sought after and longed for?

But his reverie was quickly interrupted by an exclamation from Gaston.

"See, Brother, the King! the King He is coming to meet his son, and his nobles with him!"

It was a sight not soon to be forgotten, that meeting between the warlike Edward and his bold young son, after the splendid triumph just achieved by the gallant boy. The King embraced the Prince with tears of joyful pride in his eyes, whilst the nobles standing round the King shouted aloud at the sight, and the soldiers made the welkin ring with their lusty English cheers.

Young Edward had received knighthood at his father's hand upon landing on the shores of France, though truly it was this day's fighting which had won him his spurs. But as the King was resolved to mark the occasion by some rewards to those who had stood by his gallant boy in the thick of the press, he quickly picked out from the cluster of noble youths who stood behind their young leader some six of gentle blood and known bravery, and thereupon dubbed them knights upon the bloody battlefield. Amongst those thus singled out for such honourable notice were the two sons of the King's Master of the Horse, Oliver and Bernard de Brocas, the latter of whom was destined to be the Prince's chosen and trusted comrade through many another warlike campaign.

Gladly and proudly did the royal boy stand by and see the reward of valour thus bestowed upon his chosen comrades of the day; but he seemed scarce satisfied by all that was done. His eye wandered quickly over the little knot grouped upon the knoll around the King, and then his glance travelling yet farther to the remoter outskirts, he suddenly detached himself from the centre group, and ran quickly down the hillside till he reached the spot where the twin brothers were standing watching the scene with vivid interest, Raymond still leaning rather heavily upon his brother's arm.

"Nay now, why tarry ye here?" eagerly questioned the Prince. "Sure ye were amongst the most steadfast and fearless in the fight today.

"Good Raymond, but for thy quick eye and timely word of warning, we had been fallen upon and scattered unawares, and perhaps had been cut to pieces, ere we knew that we were vanquished rather than victors. My father is even now bestowing upon my gallant comrades the reward their good swords have won for them. Come, and let me present you twain to him; for sure in all the gallant band that fought by my side none were more worthy of knighthood than you. Come, and that quickly!"

A quick flush crossed Gaston's cheek as the guerdon so dear to the heart of the soldier was thus thrust upon him; but a whisper in his ear held him back.

"Gaston, we have no name; we cannot receive knighthood without revealing all. Has the time yet come to speak? Of that thou shalt be the judge. I will follow thy wishes in this as in all else."

For a moment Gaston stood debating with himself. Then the counsel of prudence prevailed over that of youthful ambition. How were he and his brother worthily to support the offered rank? Even did they make known their true parentage, that would not put money in their purses; and to be poor dependents upon the bounty of relatives who had rejected their mother and driven forth their father to seek his fortune as he could, was as repugnant to Gaston's pride now as it had been two years before.

"Sweet Prince," he answered, after this brief pause for thought, "we have but done our duty today, and knighthood is far too great a reward for our poor merits. Sure it has been honour and glory enough to fight by your side, and win this gallant day. We are but poor youths, without home or friends. How could we receive a reward which we could not worthily wear? A penniless knight without servant or esquire would cut but a sorry figure. Nay then, sweet Prince, let it be enough for us this day to have won these gracious words at your lips. It may be when fair fortune has smiled upon us, and we are no longer poor and nameless, that we will come to you to crave the boon you have graciously offered this day. We will remain for the nonce in our present state, but will ever look forward to the day when some other glorious victory may be won, and when we may come to our Prince for that reward which today we may not receive at his hands."

"So be it," answered the Prince, his face, which had clouded over with regret a few moments earlier, lighting up again at these latter words. "Be assured I will not forget you, nor the services ye have done me this day. I too in days to come shall have knighthood to bestow upon those who have earned the right to wear it. Fear not that Edward ever will forget. Whenever the day comes that shall bring you thus to me for the reward so nobly earned today, that reward shall be yours. The King's son has promised it."

CHAPTER XIV. WINTER DAYS.

"Nephew John, I have brought thee a companion to share thy winter's solitude."

John de Brocas, who was in his old and favourite retreat -- his Rector-uncle's great library -- rose to his feet with a start at hearing the familiar voice of Master Bernard (whom he believed to be far away in France), and found himself face to face not with his cheery uncle alone, but with a tall, white, hollow-eyed youth, upon whose weary face a smile of delighted recognition was shining, whilst a thin hand was eagerly advanced in welcome.

"Raymond!" exclaimed John, with a look that spoke volumes of welcome.

"Good mine uncle, welcome at all times, thou art doubly welcome in such company as this. But I had not looked to see you in merry England again for long. Men say that Calais is closely besieged by the King, and methought he had need of thee and my father likewise whilst the campaign across the water lasted."

"True, lad, the King has need of those he graciously dubs his trusty counsellors; and I have but come hither for a short while. The King is full of anxiety about this outbreak of the hardy Scots, which has been so gallantly frustrated at Neville's Cross by our gracious Queen, worthy to be the mate of the world's greatest warrior. I am come hither charged with much business in this matter, and so soon as all is accomplished I am desired to bring the Queen to join her royal spouse before the walls of Calais. It is not long that I may linger here. I have but a few short hours to set mine own affairs in order. But thinking I should be like to find thee here, Nephew John, as the autumn weather in low-lying Windsor generally drives thee forth from thence, I hastened hither to bring to thee a companion for thy winter's loneliness. Methinks thou hast known and loved him before. Treat him as a cousin and a friend. He will tell thee all his story at his leisure."

The slight stress laid upon the word "cousin" by the prelate caused John to glance quickly and curiously at Raymond, who answered by a slight smile. Just at that moment there was no time for explanations. Master Bernard engrossed the whole of John's time and attention, being eager to learn from that young man every detail of the campaign in the north which had reached his ears. And John, who took a wide and intelligent interest in all the passing affairs of the day, and from his position was able to learn much of what went on in the world, sat beside his uncle at the hastily-spread board, and told all the leading facts of the brief and triumphant campaign in terse and soldier-like fashion.

Meantime Raymond sat at ease in the corner of a deep settle beside the fire, leaning back against the soft fur rug which draped it, unable to eat through very weariness, but eagerly interested in all the news his uncle was hearing from John.

Master Bernard had to push on to London that night. He and his companion had landed at Southampton the previous day, and had taken Guildford upon their way to the capital. There Raymond was to remain under the kindly care of John; and as soon as the Rector had set off with fresh horses and his own retinue of servants, his nephew turned eagerly back to the hall, where his cousin was still resting, and taking him warmly by the hands, gazed into his face with a glance of the most friendly and affectionate solicitude.

"Good my cousin, I have scarce had time to bid thee welcome yet, but I do so now with all my heart. It is as a cousin I am to receive and treat thee? What meant my good uncle by that? Hast thou told him what I myself know? Methought he spoke like one with a purpose."

"Yes, it is true that he knows," answered Raymond; "but he counsels us to keep our secret awhile longer. He thinks, as does Gaston, that we were wiser first to win our way to greater fame and fortune than mere boys can hope to do, and then to stand revealed as those sprung from a noble line. How came he to know? That I will tell thee when I am something rested. But I am so weary with our journey that I scarce know how to frame my thoughts in fitting words. Yet I am glad to see thy face again, good John. I have been wearying long for a sight of thee."

"Thou art indeed sadly changed thyself, my cousin," said John. "In truth, men who go to these wars go with their lives in their hands. Was it on the glorious field of Crecy that thou receivedst some hurt? Sure thou hast been sore wounded. But thou shalt tell me all thy tale anon, when thou art something rested and refreshed."

The tale was told that same evening, when, after Raymond had slept for a few hours and had been able then to partake of some food, he felt, in part at least, recovered from the fatigues of the long ride from the coast, and could recline at ease beside the glowing fire, and talk to John of all that had befallen him since they had parted two and a half years before.

The account of the victory at Crecy was eagerly listened to, and also that of the subsequent march upon Calais, when the King of France, choosing to consider the campaign at an end, had disbanded both his armies, leaving the victorious King of England to build unmolested a new town about Calais, in which his soldiers could live through the winter in ease and plenty, and complete the blockade both by sea and land undisturbed by hostile demonstrations.

"It seems to me," said Raymond, "that did our great Edward wish to make good his claim on the crown of France, he has only to march straight upon Paris and demand coronation there. When after the victory at Crecy and the subsequent triumphs I have told you of, over band after band of troops all going to the support of Philip, we could have marched unopposed through the length and breadth of the land, none daring to oppose us, the soldiers all thought that Paris, not Calais, would be the next halting place."

"What thinkest thou, good John? Thou knowest much of the true mind of the King. Why, after so glorious a victory, does he not make himself master of all France?"

John smiled his thoughtful smile.

"Verily because our King is statesman as well as soldier; and though he boldly advances a claim on the crown of France, to give the better colour to his feats of arms against its King, he knows that he could not rule so vast an empire as that of France and England together would be, and that his trusty subjects at home would soon grow jealous and discontented were they to find themselves relegated to the second place, whilst their mighty Edward took up his abode in his larger and more turbulent kingdom of France. England rejoices in snatching portions of territory from the French monarch, in holding off his grasping hand from those portions of France that lawfully belong to our great King. She will support him joyfully through a series of victories that bring spoil and glory to her soldiers; but jealousy would soon arise did she think that her King was like to regard France as his home rather than England, that England was to be drained of her gold and her best men to keep under control the unwieldy possession she had won but could never peacefully hold. Methinks the King and his best counsellors know this well, and content themselves with their glorious feats of

arms which stir the blood and gratify the pride of all loyal subjects.

"But now, I pray thee, tell me of thyself; for thou hast sadly altered since we parted last. What has befallen thee in these wars? and where is thy brother Gaston, whom thou wentest forth to seek? and where the faithful Roger, whose name thou hast spoken many times before?"

"I have left them together in the camp before Calais," answered Raymond. "Roger would fain have come with me, but I thought it not well that he should place himself so near his ancient foes and masters, even though I trow the spell has been snapped once and for ever. He loves Gaston only second to me, and was persuaded at length to stay with him. I, too, would have stayed likewise, but they said the winter's cold would kill me, and I could no longer bear arms or serve in the ranks. So I was fain to leave them and come to England with our uncle. And the thought of spending the winter months with thee and with the books made amends for all I left behind beneath the walls of Calais."

"What ails thee then, Raymond? Is it some unhealed wound?"

The youth shook his head.

"Nay, I have no wound. It was some hurt I got in that last melee on the field of Crecy, when the Prince nearly lost his life just as the day was won. I was hurled to the ground and trampled upon. Methought for many long minutes that I should never rise again. But for days afterwards I knew not that the hurt was aught to think about or care for. It pained me to move or breathe, but I thought the pain would pass, and heeded it but little. We rode gaily enough to the walls of Calais, and we set about building a second city without its walls (when the governor refused to surrender it into our hands), which the King has been pleased to call Newtown the Bold. I strove to work with the rest, thinking that the pain I suffered would abate by active toil, and liking not to speak of it when many who had received grievous wounds were to be seen lending willing service in the task set us. But there came a day when I could no more. I could scarce creep to the tent which Gaston, Roger, and I shared together; and then I can remember naught but the agony of a terrible pain that never left me night or day, and I only longed that I might die and so find rest."

"Ah, poor lad, I too have known that wish," said John. "Doubtless it was some grave inflammation of the hidden tissues of the body from the which you so grievously suffered. And how came it that our uncle found you out? He is a notable leech, as many men have found ere now. Was it as such that he then came to thee?"

"Yes, truly; and our generous and kindly Prince sent him. He heard through Gaston of the strait I was in, and forthwith begged our uncle to come and visit me. John, dost thou know that Gaston and I each wear about our neck the halves of a charm our mother hung there in our infancy? It is a ring of gold, each complete in itself, yet which may be so joined together as to form one circlet with the two halves of the medallion joined in one;" and Raymond pulled forth from within his doublet a small circlet of gold curiously chased, with a half medallion bearing certain characters inscribed upon it.

John examined it curiously, and said it was of Eastern workmanship.

"I know not how that may be. I know not its history," answered Raymond; "but Gaston tells me that when our uncle saw the ring about my neck he seemed greatly moved, and asked quickly how it came there. Gaston told him it was hung there by our mother, and showed his own half, and how they fitted together. At that our uncle seemed yet more moved; and after he had done what he could to ease my pain, he left me with Roger, and bid Gaston follow him to his own tent. There he told him the history of that ring, and how for many generations it had been in the De Brocas family, its last owner having been the Arnald de Brocas who had quarrelled with his kindred, and had died ere the dispute had been righted. Seeing that it was useless to hide the matter longer, Gaston told our uncle all; and he listened kindly and with sympathy to the tale. At the first he seemed as if he would have told your father all the story likewise, and have had us owned before the world. But either Gaston's reluctance to proclaim ourselves before we had won our way to fortune, or else his own uncertainty as to how your father would take the news, held him silent; and he said we were perchance right and wise to keep our secret. He added that to reveal ourselves, though it might gain us friends, would also raise up many bitter and powerful enemies. The Sieur de Navailles in the south, who by joining the French King's standard had already made himself a mark for Edward's just displeasure when the time should come for revenging himself upon those treacherous subjects in Gascony, would be certain to hold in especial abhorrence any De Brocas who would be like to cast longing eyes upon the domain he had so long ruled over; whilst in England the fierce and revengeful Sanghursts would have small scruple in seeking the destruction of any persons who would rise to dispute their hold on Basildene. The King's time and thought were too much engrossed in great matters of the state to give him leisure to concern himself with private affairs. Let the youths then remain as they were for the present, serving under his banner, high in favour with the youthful Prince, and like to win fame and honour and wealth through the victorious war about to be waged in France. When that war had triumphantly ended, and the King was rewarding those whose faithful service had gained him the day, then might the time come for the brothers of Basildene to make themselves known, and plead for their own again."

"I trow he is in the right," said John, "and I am glad that he knows all himself. So would he take the more interest in you, good Raymond; and thus it was, I take it, that he brought you to England himself when he came hither."

"Ay, truly his kindness was great; and after he knew all, I was moved to better quarters, and a prince could not have been better treated. But it was long before I could stand upon my own feet, and save for the hope of seeing you once again, I would gladly have been spared the journey to England. But the sea passage was favourable, and gave me strength, though the wind from the east blew so strong that we could not make the harbour of Dover, and were forced to beat westward along the coast till we reached the friendly port of Southampton. Then we took horse and rode hither, and glad am I to be at the journey's end. But our uncle tells me that in a few short weeks I shall be sound and whole again, and before the winter ends I may hope to join my brother beneath the King's banner."

"I hope it will be so," answered John; "and if rest is what thou needest for thy recovery, it will not be lacking to thee

here. It is well that the sword is not the only weapon thou lovest, but that the quill and the lore of the wise of the earth have attractions for thee likewise."

It quickly seemed to Raymond as if the incidents of that stirring campaign had been but part and parcel of a fevered dream. He was disposed to believe that he had never quitted the retreat of his uncle's roof, and took up his old studies with John with the greatest zest. John found him marvellously advanced since the days they had studied together before. His two years with Father Paul in the Brotherhood had wonderfully enlarged his mind and extended his field of vision. It was a delight to both cousins to exchange ideas, and learn from one another; and the time fled by only too fast, each day marked by a steady though imperceptible improvement in Raymond's state of health, as his fine constitution triumphed over the serious nature of the injury received.

Although he often thought of Basildene, he made no attempt to see the place. The winter cold had set in with severity; John had little disposition to face it, and quiet and rest were far more congenial to him than any form of activity or amusement. John believed that the Sanghursts were still there, engaged in their mysterious experiments that savoured so strongly of magic. But after hearing of Raymond's bold defiance of the implacable Peter in the forest near to the Brotherhood, John was by no means desirous that the fact of Raymond's residence at the Rectory of St. Nicholas should become known at Basildene. Without sharing to the full the fears of the country people with regard to the occult powers of the father and son in that lonely house, John believed them to be as cruel and unscrupulous a pair as ever lived, even in those half-civilized times. He therefore charged his servants to say nothing of Raymond's visit, and hoped that it would not reach the ears of the Sanghursts.

But there was another person towards whom Raymond's fancy had sometime strayed during the years of his absence from Guildford, and this person he was unaccountably shy of naming even to John, though he would have been quite unable to allege a reason for his reticence.

But fortune favoured him in this as in other matters, for on entering the library one day after a short stroll around the Rector's garden, he found himself face to face with a radiant young creature dressed in the picturesque riding gear of the day, who turned to him with a beaming smile as she cried:

"Ah! I have been hearing of thee and of thy prowess, my fair young sir. My good brother Alexander, who has followed the King's banner, would gladly have been in thy place on the day of Crecy. Thou and thy brother were amongst that gallant little band who fought around the Prince and bore him off the field unhurt. Did not I say of thee that thou wouldst quickly win thy knighthood's spurs? And thou mightest already have been a belted knight if thy prudence and thy modesty had not been greater than thine ambition. Is it not so?"

Raymond's face glowed like a child's beneath the praises of Mistress Joan Vavasour, and the light of her bright eyes seemed fairly to dazzle him. John came to the rescue by telling Raymond's own version of the story; and then he eagerly asked Joan of herself and what had become of her these past years, for he had seldom seen her, and knew not where she was living nor what she was doing -- knew not even if she were wedded, nor if Peter Sanghurst's suit were at an end or had been crowned by success.

At the sound of that name the girl's face darkened quickly, and a spark of fire gleamed in her eyes.

"Talk not of him," she said; "I would that he were dead! Have I not said that I would never wed him, that I would die first? Fair fortune hath befriended me in this thing. Thou knowest perchance that my father and brother have been following the King's banner of late, first in Flanders and then in France. My mother and I meantime have not been residing at Woodcrych, but in London, whither all news of the war is first known, and where travellers from the spot are like to come. We are here but for a short space, to spend the merry Yuletide season with my mother's brother, who lives, as thou knowest, within the town of Guildford. After that we return once more to London, there to await the return of my father and brother. Alexander, in truth, has once visited us, but has returned to the siege of Calais, hoping to be amongst those who will reap plenteous spoil when the city is given over to plunder, as Caen was given. Of the Sanghursts, I thank my kindly saints, I have heard naught all this while. My mother loved them not, albeit she was always entreating me in nowise to thwart or gainsay my father. I cannot but hope that these long months of absence will have gone far to break the spell that those evil men seemed to cast about him. Be that as it may, I myself have grown from a child to a woman, and I say now, as I said then, that no power in the world shall induce me to give my hand in marriage to Peter Sanghurst. I will die first!"

The girl threw back her handsome head, and her great eyes glowed and flashed. Raymond looked at her with a beating heart, feeling once more that mysterious kindling of the soul which he could not understand, and yet of which he had been before in the presence of Joan so keenly conscious. She appeared to him to be far older than himself, though in reality he was a few months the senior; for at eighteen a girl is always older in mind than a boy, and Joan's superb physique helped to give to her the appearance of a more advanced age than was really hers. Just then, too, Raymond, though grown to his full height, which was stately enough, was white and thin and enfeebled. He felt like a mere stripling, and it never occurred to him that the many glances bent upon him by the flashing eyes of the queenly maiden were glances of admiration, interest, and romantic approval. To her the pale, silent youth, with the saint-like face and the steadfast, luminous eyes, was in truth a very *preux chevalier* amongst men. She had seen something too much of those knights of flesh and blood and nothing else, who could fight gallantly and well, but who knew nothing of the deeper and truer chivalry of the days of mythical romance in which her own ardent fancies loved to stray. Feats of arms she delighted in truly with the bold spirit of her soldier race; but she wanted something more than mere bravery in the field. It was not physical courage alone that made Sir Galahad her favourite of all King Arthur's knights. Ah no! There was another quest than that of personal glory which every true knight was bound to seek. Yet how many of them felt this and understood the truer, deeper meaning of chivalry? She knew, she felt, that Raymond did; and as she turned her palfrey's steps homeward when the twilight began to fall that cold December day, it was with her favourite Sir Galahad that her mind was engrossed, and to him she gave a pale, thin face, with firm, sweet lines and deep-set dreamy eyes -- eyes that looked as though they had never quailed before the face of foe, and which yet saw far into the unseen mysteries of life, and which would keep their sweet steadfastness even to the end.

As for Raymond, an unwonted restlessness came over him at this time. He was growing stronger and better. Moderate exercise was recommended as beneficial, and almost every day during the bright hours of the forenoon his steps were turned towards the town of Guildford, lying hard by his uncle's Rectory house. Scarce a day passed but what he was rewarded by a chance encounter with Mistress Joan -- either a glimpse of her at a window, or a smile from her bright eyes as she passed him upon her snow-white palfrey; or sometimes he would have the good hap to meet her upon foot, attended by her nurse, or some couple of stout retainers, if her walk had been in any wise extended; and then she would pause and bring him to her side by a look, and inquire after his own health and that of John, who seldom stirred out in the bitter cold of winter. Then he would ask and obtain her permission to accompany her as far as the gate of her own home -- the place where she was staying; and though he never advanced beyond the gate -- for she knew not what her relatives might say to these encounters with a gallant without money and without lands -- they were red-letter days in the calendar of two young lives, and were strong factors moulding their future lives, little as either knew it at the time.

Had either the radiant maiden or the knightly youth had eyes for any but the other, they might have observed that these encounters, now of almost daily occurrence, were not unheeded by at least one evil-faced watcher. The servants who attended Mistress Joan were all devoted to her, and kept their own counsel, whatever they might think, and Raymond's fame as one of the heroes of Crecy had already gone far and wide, and won him great regard in and about the walls of his uncle's home; but there was another watcher of Mistress Joan's movements who took a vastly different view of the little idyll playing itself out between the youth and the maiden, and this watcher was none other than the evil and vengeful Peter Sanghurst the younger.

Once as Raymond turned away, after watching Joan's graceful, stately figure vanish up the avenue which led to her uncle's house, he suddenly encountered the intensely malevolent glance of a pair of coal-black eyes, and found himself most unexpectedly face to face with the same man who had once confronted him in the forest and had demanded the restitution of the boy Roger.

"You again!" hissed out between his teeth the dark-browed man. "You again daring to stand in my path to thwart me! Have a care how you provoke me too far. My day is coming! Think you that I threaten in vain? Go on then in your blind folly and hardihood! But remember that I can read the future. I can see the day when you, a miserable crushed worm, will be wholly and solely in my power; when you will be mine mine to do with what I will, none hindering or gainsaying me. Take heed then how you provoke me to vengeance; for the vengeance of the Sanghurst can be what thou dreamest not of now. Thwart me, defy me, and the hour will come when for every pang of rage and jealousy I have known thou shalt suffer things of which thou hast no conception now, and none shall be able to rescue thee from my hand. Yon maiden is mine -- mine -- mine! Her will I wed, and none other. Strive as thou wilt, thou wilt never pluck her from my hand. Thou wilt but draw down upon thine own head a fearful fate, and she too shall suffer bitterly if thou failest to heed my words."

And with a look of hatred and fury that seemed indeed to have something positively devilish in it, Sanghurst turned and strode away, leaving Raymond to make what he could of the vindictive threats launched at him. Had this man, in truth, some occult power of which none else had the secret; or was it but an idle boast, uttered with the view of terrifying one who was but a boy in years?

Raymond knew not, could not form a guess; but his was a nature not prone to coward fears. He resolved to go home and take counsel with his good cousin John.

CHAPTER XV. THE DOUBLE SURRENDER.

On a burning day in July, nearly a year from the time of their parting, the twin brothers met once more in the camp before Calais, where they had parted the previous autumn. Raymond had been long in throwing off the effect of the severe injuries which had nearly cost him his life after the Battle of Crecy; but thanks to the rest and care that had been his in his uncle's house, he had entirely recovered. Though not quite so tall nor so broad-shouldered and muscular as Gaston, who was in truth a very prince amongst men, he was in his own way quite as striking, being very tall, and as upright as a dart, slight and graceful, though no longer attenuated, and above all retaining that peculiar depth and purity of expression which had long seemed to mark him out somewhat from his fellow men, and which had only intensified during the year that had banished him from the stirring life of the camp.

"Why, Brother," said Gaston, as he held the slim white hands in his vise-like clasp, and gazed hungrily into the face he had last seen so wan and white, "I had scarce dared to hope to see thee again in the camp of the King after the evil hap that befell thee here before; but right glad am I to welcome thee hither before the final act of this great drama, for methinks the city cannot long hold out against the famine within and our bold soldiers without the walls. Thou hast done well to come hither to take thy part in the final triumph, and reap thy share of the spoil, albeit thou lookest more like a youthful St. George upon a church window than a veritable knight of flesh and blood, despite the grip of thy fingers, which is well-nigh as strong as my own."

"I will gladly take my share in any valorous feat of arms that may be undertaken for the honour of England and of England's King. But I would sooner fight with warriors who are not half starved to start with. Say not men that scarce a dog or a cat remains alive in the city, and that unless the citizens prey one upon the other, all must shortly perish?"

"Yea, in very truth that is so; for, as perchance thou hast heard, a vessel was sighted leaving Calais harbour but a few short days ago, and being hotly pursued, was seen to drop a packet overboard. That packet at ebb tide was found tied to an anchor, and being brought to the King and by him opened, was found to contain those very words addressed to the King of France by the governor of the city, praying him to come speedily to the rescue of his fortress if he wished to save it from the enemy's hand. Our bold King having first read it, sent it on posthaste to his brother of France, crying shame upon him to leave his gallant subjects thus to perish with hunger. Methinks that message will shame yon laggard monarch into action. How he has been content to idle away the year, with the foe besieging the key of his kingdom, I know not. But it is a warm welcome he shall get if he comes to the relief of Calais. We are as ready to receive him here

as we were a year ago on the field of Crecy!"

"Ay, in fair fight with Philip's army would I gladly adventure my life again!" cried Raymond, with kindling eyes; "but there be fighting I have small relish for, my Gaston, and I have heard stories of this very siege which have wrung my heart to listen to. Was it true, brother, that hundreds of miserable creatures, more than half of them women and little children, were expelled from the city as 'useless mouths,' and left to starve to death between the city walls and the camp of the English, in which plenty has all the winter reigned? Could that be true of our gallant King and his brave English soldiers?"

A quick flush dyed Gaston's cheek, but he strove to laugh.

"Raymond, look not at me with eyes so full of reproach. War is a cruel game, and in some of its details I like it little better than thou. But what can we soldiers do? Nay, what can even the King do? Listen, and condemn him not too hastily. Long months ago, soon after thou hadst left us, the same thing was done. Seventeen hundred persons -- men, women, and children -- were turned out of the town, and the King heard of it and ordered some of them to be brought before him. In answer to his question they told him that they were driven from the city because they could not fight, and were only consuming the bread, of which there was none to spare for useless mouths. They had no place to go to, no food to eat, no hope for the future. Then what does our King do but give them leave to pass through his camp; and not only so, but he orders his soldiers to feed them well, and start them refreshed on their way; and before they went forth, to each of them was given, by the royal order, two sterlings of silver, so that they went forth joyously, blessing the liberality and kindness of the English and England's King. But thou must see he could not go on doing these kindly acts if men so took advantage of them. He is the soul of bravery and chivalry, but there must be reasonable limits to all such royal generosity."

Raymond could have found in his heart to wish that the limit had not been quite so quickly reached, and that the hapless women and children had not been left to perish miserably in the sight of the warmth and plenty of the English camp; but he would not say more to damp his brother's happiness in their reunion, nor in that almost greater joy with which Roger received him back.

"In faith," laughed Gaston, "I believe that some of the wizard's art cleaves yet to yon boy, for he has been restless and dreamy and unlike himself these many days; and when I have asked him what ailed him, his answer was ever the same, that he knew you were drawing nigh; and verily he has proved right, little as I believed him when he spoke of it."

Roger had so grown and improved that Raymond would scarce have recognized in him the pale shrinking boy they had borne out from the house of the sorcerer three years before. He had developed rapidly after the first year of his new life, when the shackles of his former captivity seemed finally broken; but this last year of regular soldier's employment had produced a more marked change in his outward man than those spent in the Brotherhood or at Raymond's side. His figure had widened. He carried himself well, and with an air of fearless alertness. He was well trained in martial exercises, and the hot suns of France had bronzed his cheeks, and given them a healthy glow of life and animation. He still retained much of his boyish beauty, but the dreaminess and far-away vacancy had almost entirely left his eyes. Now and again the old listening look would creep into them, and he would seem for a few moments to be lost to outward impressions; but if recalled at such moments from his brief lapse, and questioned as to what he was thinking, it always proved to be of Raymond, not of his old master.

Once or twice he had told Gaston that his brother was in peril -- of what kind he knew not; and Gaston had wondered if indeed this had been so. One of these occasions had been just before Christmastide, and the date being thus fixed in his mind, he asked his brother if he had been at that time exposed to any peril. Raymond could remember nothing save the vindictive threat of Peter Sanghurst, and Gaston was scarce disposed to put much faith in words, either good or bad, uttered by such a man as that.

And now things began to press towards a climax in this memorable siege. The French King, awakened from his long and inexplicable lethargy by the entreaties of his starving subjects so bravely holding the town for a pusillanimous master, and stung by the taunts of the English King, had mustered an army, and was now marching to the relief of the town. It was upon the last day of July, when public excitement was running high, and all men were talking and thinking of an approaching battle, that word was brought into the camp, and eagerly passed from mouth to mouth, to the effect that the King of France had despatched certain messengers to hold parley with the royal Edward, and that they were even now being admitted to the camp by the bridge of Nieulay -- the only approach to Calais through the marshes on the northeast, which had been closely guarded by the English throughout the siege.

"Hasten, Raymond, hasten!" cried Gaston, dashing into the small lodging he and his brother now shared together. "There be envoys come from the French King. The Prince will be with his father to hear their message, and if we but hasten to his side, we may be admitted amongst the number who may hear what is spoken on both sides."

Raymond lost no time in following his brother, both eager to hear and see all that went on; and they were fortunate enough to find places in the brilliant muster surrounding the King and his family, as these received with all courtesy the ambassador from the French monarch.

That messenger was none other than the celebrated Eustache de Ribeaumont, one of the flower of the French chivalry, to whom, on another occasion, Edward presented the celebrated chaplet of pearls, with one of the highest compliments that one brave man could give another. The boys, and indeed the whole circle of English nobility, looked with admiration at his stately form and handsome face, and though to our ears the message with which he came charged sounds infinitely strange, it raised no smile upon the faces of those who stood around the royal Edward.

"Sire," began the messenger, "our liege lord, the King of France, sends us before you, and would have you know that he is here, and is posted on the Sandgatte Hill to fight you; but intrenched as you are in this camp, he can see no way of getting at you, and therefore he sends us to you to say this. He has a great desire to raise the siege of Calais, and save

his good city, but can see no way of doing so whilst you remain here. But if you would come forth from your intrenchments, and appoint some spot where he could meet you in open fight, he would rejoice to do it, and this is the thing we are charged to request of you."

A shout, led by the Prince of Wales, and taken up by all who stood by, was proof enough how acceptable such a notion was to the ardent spirits of the camp; for it was not a shout of derision, but one of eager assent. Indeed, for a moment it seemed as though the King of England were disposed to give a favourable reply to the messenger; but then he paused, and a different expression crossed his face. He sat looking thoughtfully upon the ground, whilst breathless silence reigned around him, and then he and the Queen spoke in low tones together for some few minutes.

When Edward looked up again his face had changed, and was stern and set in expression.

"Tell your lord," he said, speaking slowly and distinctly, "that had he wished thus to fight, he should have sent his challenge before. I have been near a twelvemonth encamped before this place, and my good people of England have been sore pressed to furnish me with munitions for the siege. The town is now on the point of falling into my hands, and then will my good subjects find plunder enough to recompense them for their labour and loss. Wherefore tell your lord that where I am there will I stay; and that if he wishes to fight he must attack me in my camp, for I assuredly have no intention of moving out from it."

A slight murmur of disappointment arose from the younger and more ardent members of the crowd; but the older men saw the force of the King's words, and knew that it would be madness to throw away all the hardly-earned advantages of those long months just for a piece of chivalrous bravado. So De Ribeaumont had to ride back to the French camp with Edward's answer; and ere two more days had passed, the astonishing news was brought to the English lines that Philip had abandoned his camp, which was now in flames, and was retreating with his whole army by the way he had come.

"Was ever such a craven coward!" cried the Prince, in indignant disappointment; for all within the English camp had been hoping for battle, and had been looking to their arms, glad of any incident to vary the long monotony of the siege. "Were I those gallant soldiers in yon fortress, I would serve no longer such a false, treacherous lord. Were my father but their king, he would not leave them in such dire strait, with an army at his back to fight for him, be the opposing force a hundredfold greater than it is!"

And indeed it seemed as though the brave but desperate garrison within those walls saw that it was hopeless to try to serve such a master. How bitter must their feelings have been when Philip turned and left them to their fate may well be imagined. Hopeless and helpless, there was nothing but surrender before them now; and to make the best terms possible was the only thing that remained for them. The day following Philip's dastardly desertion, the signal that the city was ready to treat was hung out, and brave Sir Walter Manny, whose own history and exploits during the campaigns in Brittany and Gascony would alone fill a volume either of history or romance, was sent to confer on this matter with the governor of the city, the gallant De Vienne, who had been grievously wounded during the long siege.

Raymond's sympathies had been deeply stirred by what he had heard and imagined of the sufferings of the citizens, and with the love of adventure and romance common to those days, he arrayed himself lightly in a dress that would not betray his nationality, and followed in the little train which went with Sir Walter. The conference took place without the walls, but near to one of the gates. Raymond did not press near to hear what was said, like the bulk of the men on both sides who accompanied the leaders, but he passed through the eager crowd and made for the gate itself, the wicket of which stood open; and so calm and assured was his air, and so deeply were the minds of the porters stirred by anxiety to know the fate of the town, that the youth passed in unheeded and unchallenged, and once within the ramparts he could go where he chose and see what he would.

But what a sight met his eyes! Out into the streets were flocking the inhabitants, all trembling with anxiety to hear their fate. Every turn brought him to fresh knots of famine-stricken wretches, who had almost lost the wish to live, or any interest in life, till just stirred to a faint and lingering hope by the news that the town was to be surrendered at last. Gaunt and hollow-eyed men, women little better than skeletons, and children scarce able to trail their feeble bodies along, were crowding out of the houses and towards the great marketplace, where the assembly to hear the conditions was likeliest to meet. The soldiers, who had been better cared for than the more useless townsmen, were spectre-like in all conscience; but the starving children, and the desperate mothers who could only weep and wring their hands in answer to the piteous demand for bread, were the beings who most stirred Raymond's heart as he went his way amongst them.

Again that sense of horror and shrinking came upon him that he had experienced upon the field of Crecy amongst the dying and the dead. If war did indeed entail such ghastly horrors and frightful sufferings, could it be that glorious thing that all men loved to call it?

Curious glances began to be levelled at him as he passed through the streets, sometimes pausing to soothe a wailing child, sometimes lending a hand to assist a tottering woman's steps, and speaking to all in that gentle voice of his, which with its slightly unfamiliar accent smote strangely upon the ears of the people. He wore no helmet on his head, and his curly hair floated about his grave saint-like face, catching golden lights from the glory of the August sunshine.

"Is it one of the blessed saints?" asked a little child of his mother, as Raymond paused in passing by to lay a caressing hand upon his head, and speak a soft word of encouragement and hope to the weary mother.

And the innocent question was taken up and passed from mouth to mouth, till it began to be whispered about that one of the holy saints had appeared in their midst in the hour of the city's deadly peril. As Raymond passed on his way, many a knee was bent and many a pleading voice asked a blessing; whilst he, feeling still as one who moves in a dream, made the sign of the cross from time to time over some kneeling suppliant without understanding what was said of him or why all eyes were bent upon him.

But the great town bell was ringing now to summon the citizens to assemble themselves together to hear the final terms

agreed upon for the capitulation of the city, and all else was forgotten in the overwhelming anxiety of that moment; for none could form a guess what terms would be granted to a town in such sore straits as was theirs. The English King could be generous and merciful, but he could also be stern and implacable; and the long resistance made by the town was like to have stirred his wrath, as well as the fact that the sea port of Calais had done more harm to his ships and committed more acts of piracy than any other port in France.

Raymond himself had great fears for the fate of the hapless town, and was as eager as any to hear what had been decreed.

"Sure if the King could see the famished gathering here his heart would relent," murmured the youth to himself, as he looked round at the sea of wan faces gathered in the open square.

But the grave and sorrowful expression upon the governor's face told that he had no very happy tidings to impart. He stood upon a flight of steps where all men could well behold him, and in the dead silence that fell upon the multitude every word spoken could be distinctly heard.

"My friends," he said, in grave, mournful accents, "I come to you with news of the only terms of capitulation that I have been able to win from England's King. I myself offered to capitulate if he would permit all within the walls to depart unharmed, whilst his demand was for unconditional surrender. The brave knight who came forth to confer with me went back more than once to strive to win for us better terms, and his intercession was thus far successful. The King will take the rest of the citizens to mercy if six of their chief burgesses be given up to his vengeance, and appear before him bareheaded and barefooted, with halters about their necks and the keys of the city in their hands. For such there will be no mercy. Brave Sir Walter Manny, who bore back this message with so sorrowful a countenance, bid me not hope that the lives of these men would be spared. He said he saw the fierce sparkle in Edward's eyes as he added, grinding his teeth, 'On them will I do my will.' Wherefore, my good friends, we are this day in a great strait, and I would that I might myself give up my life to save the town; but the King's command is that it shall be six of the burgesses, and it is for you and them to say if these hard conditions shall be accepted."

The deepest silence had hitherto prevailed in that vast place, but now it was broken by the weeping and wailing of a great multitude. Raymond's throat swelled and his eyes glistened as he looked around upon that sea of starving faces, and tried to realize all that this message must mean to them. If his own life could have paid the ransom, he would have laid it down that moment for these miserable weeping beings; but he was helpless as the brave governor, and could only stand and see the end of the drama.

Slowly up the steps of the marketplace, where stood the governor of the city, advanced a fine-looking man in the prime of life, and a hushed murmur ran through the crowd, in which Raymond caught the name of Eustache de St. Pierre. This man held up his hand in token that he wished to speak, and immediately a deathlike silence fell again upon the crowd.

"My friends," spoke the clear deliberate voice, "it would be a great pity and mischief to let such a people as this assembled here die by famine or any other way, if a means can be found to save them; and it would be great alms and great grace in the sight of the Lord for any one who could save them from such harm. I have myself so great hope of finding grace and pardon in the sight of our Lord, if I die to save this people, that I will be the first, and will yield myself willingly, in nothing but my shirt, with my head bare and a halter round my neck, to the mercy of the King of England."

As these simple but truly heroic words were spoken a burst of weeping and blessing arose from the crowd, women pressed forward and fell at the feet of the worthy citizen, and Raymond said in his heart:

"Sure if the King of England could but see it, there is more chivalry in yon simple merchant than in half the knights who stand about his throne."

It is seldom that a noble example is thrown away upon men. Hardly had the burst of weeping died away before two more men, brothers, to judge by their likeness to each other, mounted the steps and stood beside St. Pierre. He held out his hand and greeted them by name.

"My good friends Jacques and Peter de Wisant, we go hand in hand to death, as we have gone hand in hand in other ventures of another kind. And hither to join us comes our good friend Jehan d'Aire. Truly if we march to death, we shall march in good company."

The full number was soon made up. Six of the wealthiest and best known of the citizens came forward and stood together to be disrobed and led before the King.

But Raymond could bear the sight no longer. With a bursting heart he hurried through the crowd, which made way wonderingly for him as he moved, and went straight towards the gate by which he had entered, none hindering his path.

"It is the blessed saint who came amongst us in our hour of need," said the women one to another, "and now perchance he goes to intercede with the mighty conqueror! See how his face is set towards the gate; see the light that shines in his eyes! Sure he can be no being of this earth, else how could he thus come and go in our beleaguered city!"

The guard at the gate looked with doubtful eyes at the stranger, and one man stood in his path as if to hinder him; but Raymond's eyes seemed to look through and beyond him, and in a clear, strange voice he said:

"In the name of the Blessed Son of God, I bid thee let me pass. I go upon an errand of mercy in that most Holy Name."

The man fell back, his comrades crossed themselves and bent the knee. Raymond passed out of the gate, scarce knowing how he had done so, and sped back to the English camp as if his feet had wings. With that same strangely rapt expression upon his face, he went straight to the lodging of the Prince of Wales, and entering without ceremony found

not only the Prince there, but also his royal mother, the gracious Queen Philippa.

Bending his knee to that fair lady, but without one thought beyond the present urgent need of the moment, Raymond told all his tale in the ear of the Queen and the Prince. With that power of graphic description which was the gift of his vivid imagination and deep sense of sympathy with the needs of others, he brought the whole scene before the eyes of his listeners the crowded marketplace, the famine-stricken people in their extremity and despair, the calm heroism of the men who willingly offered their lives to save those of their townspeople, and the wailing multitude watching the start of the devoted six going forth to a shameful and ignominious death on their behalf.

And as Raymond spoke the Prince's cheek flushed, and the eyes of the beautiful Queen kindled and filled with sudden tears; and rising to her feet she held out her hand to Raymond and said:

"Good lad, I thank thee for thy tale, and the request thy lips have not spoken shall be granted. Those men shall not die! I, the Queen of England, will save them. I pledge thee here my royal word. I will to my noble husband and win their pardon myself."

Raymond sank upon his knee and kissed the fair hand extended to him, and both he and the Prince hastened after the Queen, who hoped to find her royal husband alone and in a softened mood, as he was wont to be after the stress of the day was over.

But time had fled fast whilst Raymond had been telling his tale, and already notice had been brought to Edward of the approach of the six citizens, and he had gone forth into a pavilion erected for his convenience in an open part of the camp; and there he was seated with grim aspect and frowning brow as his Queen approached to speak with him.

"I will hear thee anon, good wife," he said, seeing that she craved his ear. "I have sterner work on hand today than the dallying of women. Stay or go as thou wilt, but speak not to me till this day's work is carried through."

Raymond's heart sank as he heard these words, and saw the relentless look upon the King's face. None realized better than he the cruel side to the boasted chivalry of the age; and these middle-aged burgesses, with no knightliness of dress or bearing, would little move the loftier side of the King's nature. There would be no glamour of romance surrounding them. He would think only of the thousands of pounds the resistance of the city had cost him, and he would order to a speedy death those whom he would regard as in part the cause of all this trouble and loss.

The Queen made no further effort to win his notice, but with graceful dignity placed herself beside him; whilst the Prince, quivering with suppressed excitement, stepped behind his father's chair. Raymond stood in the surrounding circle, and felt Gaston's arm slipped within his. But he had eyes only for the mournful procession approaching from the direction of the city, and every nerve was strained to catch the lightest tone of the Queen's voice if she should speak.

The governor of Calais, though disabled by wounds from walking, was pacing on horseback beside the devoted six thus giving themselves up to death; and as he told how they had come forward to save their fellow citizens from death, tears gathered in many eyes, and brave Sir Walter Manny, who had pleaded their cause before, again threw himself upon his knees before his sovereign, and besought his compassion for the brave burgesses.

But Edward would not listen -- would not allow the better feelings within him to have play. With a few angry and scathing words, bidding his servants remember what Calais had cost them to take, and what the obstinacy of its citizens had made England pay, he relentlessly ordered the executioner to do his work, and that right quickly; and as that grim functionary slowly advanced to do the royal bidding, a shiver ran through the standing crowd, the devoted six alone holding themselves fearlessly erect.

But just at the moment when it seemed as if all hope of mercy was at an end, the gentle Queen arose and threw herself at her husband's feet, and her silvery voice rose clear above the faint murmur rising in the throng.

"Ah, gentle Sire, since I have crossed the sea with great peril, I have never asked you anything; now I humbly pray, for the sake of the Son of the Holy Mary and your love of me, that you will have mercy on these six brave men!"

Raymond's breath came so thick and fast as he waited for the answer, that he scarce heard it when it came, though the ringing cheer which broke from the lips of those who stood by told him well its purport.

The King's face, gloomy at first, softened as he gazed upon the graceful form of his wife, and with a smile he said at last:

"Dame, I wish you had been somewhere else this day; but I cannot refuse you. I put them into your keeping; do with them what you will."

Raymond felt himself summoned by a glance from the Prince. The Queen-mother had bidden him take the men, and feast them royally, and send them away with rich gifts.

As the youth who had done so much for them forced his way to the side of the Prince, his face full of a strange enthusiasm and depth of feeling, the citizens looked one upon another and whispered:

"Sure it was true what the women said to us. That was the youth with the face of painted saint that we saw within the walls of the city. Sure the Blessed Saints have been watching over us this day, and have sent an angel messenger down to deliver us in our hour of sorest need!"

CHAPTER XVI. IN THE OLD HOME.

The memorable siege of Calais at an end, Edward, his Queen and son and nobility generally, set sail for England, where

many matters were requiring the presence of the sovereign after an absence so prolonged.

When the others of the Prince's comrades were thronging on board to accompany him homewards, Gaston and Raymond sought him to petition for leave to remain yet longer in France, that they might revisit the home of their youth and the kind-hearted people who had protected them during their helpless childhood.

Leave was promptly and willingly given, though the Prince was graciously pleased to express a hope that he should see his faithful comrades in England again ere long.

It had begun to be whispered abroad that these two lads with their knightly bearing, their refinement of aspect, and their fearlessness in the field, were no common youths sprung from some lowly stock. That there was some mystery surrounding their birth was now pretty well admitted, and this very mystery encircled them with something of a charm - a charm decidedly intensified by the aspect of Raymond, who never looked so much the creature of flesh and blood as did his brother and the other young warriors of Edward's camp. The fact, which was well known now, that he had walked unharmed and unchallenged through the streets of Calais upon the day of its capitulation, but before the terms had been agreed upon, was in itself, in the eyes of many, a proof of some strange power not of this world which encircled the youth. And indeed Gaston himself was secretly of the opinion that his brother was something of a saint or spirit, and regarded him with a reverential affection unusual between brothers of the same age.

Through the four years since he had left his childhood's home, Gaston had felt small wish to revisit it. The excitement and exaltation of the new life had been enough for him, and the calm quiet of the peaceful past had lost, its charm. Now, however, that the war was for the present over, and with it the daily round of adventure and change; now that he had gold in his purse, a fine charger to ride, and two or three stout men-at-arms in his train, a sudden wish to see again the familiar haunts of his childhood had come over him, and he had willingly agreed to Raymond's suggestion that they should go together to Sauveterre, to ask a blessing from Father Anselm, and tell him how they had fared since they had parted from him long ago. True, Raymond had seen him a year before, but he had not then been in battle; he had not had much to tell save of the cloister life he had been sharing; and of Gaston's fortunes he had himself known nothing.

Both brothers were for the present amply provided for. They had received rich rewards from the Prince after the Battle of Crecy, and the spoils of Calais had been very great. They could travel in ease through the sunny plains of France, sufficiently attended to be safe from molestation, even if the terror of the English arms were not protection enough for those who wore the badge of the great Edward. From Bordeaux they could find easy means of transport to England later; and nothing pleased them better than the thought of this long ride through the plains of France, on the way to the old home.

They did not hurry themselves on this pleasant journey, taken just as the trying heats of summer had passed, but before the winter's cold had made its first approach. The woods were scarce showing their first russet tints as the brothers found themselves in familiar country once again, and looked about them with eager glances of recognition as they traversed the once well-known tracks.

"Let us first to Father Anselm," said Raymond, as they neared the village where the good priest held his cure. "He will gladly have us pass a night beneath his roof ere we go onward to the mill; and our good fellows will find hospitable shelter with the village folks. They have been staunch and loyal in these parts to the cause of the Roy Outremer, and any soldier coming from his camp will be doubly welcome, as the bearer of news of good luck to the English arms. The coward King of France is little loved by the bold Gascons, save where a rebel lord thinks to forward his private ends by transferring his allegiance from England to France."

"To the good Father's, then, with all my heart," answered Gaston heartily; and the little troop moved onwards until, to the astonishment of the simple villagers clustered round the little church and their cure's house, the small but brilliant cavalcade of armed travellers drew up before that lowly door.

The Father was within, and, as the sound of trampling feet made itself heard, appeared at his door in some astonishment; but when the two youths sprang from their horses and bent the knee before him, begging his blessing, and he recognized in them the two boys who had filled so great a portion of his life not so many years ago, a mist came before his eyes, and his voice faltered as he gave the benediction, whilst raising them afterwards and tenderly embracing them, he led them within the well-known doorway, at the same time calling his servant and bidding him see to the lodging of the men without.

The low-ceiled parlour of the priest, with its scanty plenishing and rush-strewn floor, was well known to the boys; yet as Raymond stepped across the threshold he uttered a cry of surprise, not at any change in the aspect of the room itself, but at sight of a figure seated in a high-backed chair, with the full sunlight shining upon the calm, thin face. With an exclamation of joyful recognition the lad sped forward and threw himself upon his knees before the erect figure, with the name of Father Paul upon his lips.

The keen, austere face did not soften as Father Anselm's had done. The Cistercian monk, true to the severity of his order, permitted nothing of pleasure to appear in his face as he looked at the youth whose character he had done so much to form. He did not even raise his hand at once in the customary salutation or blessing, but fixed his eyes upon Raymond's face, now lifted to his in questioning surprise; and not until he had studied that face with great intentness for many long minutes did he lay his hand upon the lad's head and say, in a low, deep voice, "Peace be with thee, my son."

This second and most unexpected meeting was almost a greater pleasure to Raymond than the one with Father Anselm. Whilst Gaston engrossed his old friend's time and thought, sitting next him at the board, and pacing at his side afterwards in the little garden in which he loved to spend his leisure moments, Raymond remained seated at the feet of Father Paul, listening with breathless interest to his history of the voyage he had taken to the far East (as it then seemed), and to the strange and terrible sights he had witnessed in some of those far-off lands.

Raymond had vaguely heard before of the plague, but had regarded it as a scourge confined exclusively to the fervid heat of far-off countries -- a thing that would never come to the more temperate latitudes of the north; but when he spoke these words to the monk, Father Paul shook his head, and a sudden sombre light leaped into his eyes.

"My son, the plague is the scourge of God. It is not confined to one land or another. It visits all alike, if it be God's will to send it in punishment for the many and grievous sins of its inhabitants. True, in the lands of the East, where the paynim holds his court, and everywhere is blasphemy and abomination, the scourge returns time after time, and never altogether ceases from amongst the blinded people. But of late it has spread farther and farther westward -- nearer and nearer to our own shores. God is looking down upon the lands whose people call themselves after His name, and what does he see there but corruption in high places, greed, lust, the covetousness that is idolatry, the slothful ease that is the curse of the Church?"

The monk's eyes flashed beneath their heavily-fringed lids; the fire that glowed in them was of a strange and sombre kind. Raymond turned his pure young face, full of passionate admiration and reverence, towards the fine but terribly stern countenance of the ecclesiastic. A painter would have given much to have caught the expression upon those two faces at that moment. The group was a very striking one, outlined against the luminous saffron of the western sky behind.

"Father, tell me more!" pleaded Raymond. "I am so young, so ignorant; and many of the things the world praises and calls deeds of good turn my heart sick and my spirit faint within me. I would fain know how I may safely tread the difficult path of life. I would fain choose the good and leave the evil. But there be times when I know not how to act, when it seems as though naught in this world were wholly pure. Is it only those who yield themselves up to the life of the cloister who may choose aright and see with open eyes? Must I give up my sword and turn monk ere I may call myself a son of Heaven?"

The boy's eyes were full of an eager, questioning light. His hands were clasped together, and his face was turned full upon his companion. The Father's eyes rested on the pure, ethereal face with a softer look than they had worn before, and then a deep sadness came into them.

"My son," he answered, very gravely, "I am about to say a thing to thee which I would not say to many young and untried as thou art. There have been times in my life when I should have triumphed openly had men spoken to me the words that I shall speak to thee -- times when I had gladly said that all which men call holiness was but a mask for corruption and deceit, and should have rejoiced that the very monks themselves were forced to own to their own wanton disregard of their vows. My son, I see the shrinking and astonishment in thine eyes; but yet I would for a moment that thou couldst see with mine. I spoke awhile ago of the judgment of an angry God. Wherefore, thinkest thou, is it that His anger is so hotly burning against those lands that call themselves by His name -- that call day by day upon His name, and make their boast that they hold the faith whole and undefiled?"

Raymond shook his head. He had no words with which to answer. He was beginning slowly yet surely to feel his eyes opened to the evil of the world -- even that world of piety and chivalry of which such bright dreams had been dreamed. His fair ideals were being gradually dashed and effaced. Something of sickness of heart had penetrated his being, and he had said in the unconscious fashion of pure-hearted youth, "Vanity of vanities! is all around but vanity?" and he had found no answer to his own pathetic question.

As an almost necessary consequence of all this had his thoughts turned towards the holy, dedicated life of the sons of the Church; and though it was with a strong sense of personal shrinking, with a sense that the sacrifice would be well-nigh bitterer than the bitterness of death, he had asked himself if it might not be that God had called him, and that if he would be faithful to the love he had ever professed to hold, he ought to rise up without farther delay and offer himself to the dedicated service of the Church.

And now Father Paul, who had always seemed to read the very secrets of his heart, appeared about to answer this unspoken question. Greatly had Raymond longed of late to speak with him again. Father Anselm was a good and a saintly man, but he knew nothing of the life of the world. To him the Church was the ark of refuge from all human ills, and gladly would he have welcomed within its fold any weary or world-worn soul. But with Father Paul it was different. He had lived in the world; he had sinned (if men spoke truth), and had suffered bitterly. One look in his face was enough to tell that; and having lived and sinned, repented and suffered, he was far more able to offer counsel to one tempted and sometimes suffering, though perhaps in a very different fashion.

The Father's eyes were bent upon the faint glow in the sky, seen through the open casement. His words were spoken quietly, yet with an earnestness that was almost terrible.

"My son," he said, "I have come back but recently from lands where it seems that holiness should abound -- that righteousness should flow forth as from a perpetual fountain, where the Lord should be seen walking almost visibly in the midst of His people. And what have I seen instead? Luxury, corruption, unspeakable abominations -- abominations such as I may not dare to speak in thy pure ears, such as I would not have believed had not mine own eyes seen, mine own ears heard. Where is the poverty, the lowliness, the meekness, the chastity of the sons of the Church? Ah, God in Heaven only knows; and let it be our solemn rejoicing that He does know where His own faithful children are to be found, for assuredly man would miserably fail if he were sent forth to find and to gather them. Leaving those lands which thou, my son, hast never seen, and coming hither to France and England, what do we find? Those who have vowed themselves to the service of the Church walking gaily in the dress of soldiers, engaged in carnal matters, letting their hair hang down their shoulders curled and powdered, and thinking scorn of the tonsure, which is the mark of the Kingdom of Heaven. And does not God see? Will He not recompense to His people their sins? Yea, verily He will; and in an hour when they little think it, the wrath of God shall fall upon them. It is even now upon its way. I have seen it; I have marked its progress. Ere another year has passed, if men repent not of their sins, it will be stalking amongst us. And thou, my son, when that day comes, fear not. Think not of the cloister; keep thy good sword at thy side, but keep it bright in the cause of right, of mercy, of truth, and keep thy shield stainless and unspotted. Then when the hour of

judgment falls upon this land, and men in wild terror begin to call upon the God they have forgotten and abused, then go thou forth in the power of that purity of heart which He in His mercy has vouchsafed to thee. Fear not the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor the sickness that destroyeth at noonday. A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. With thine eyes shalt thou behold the destruction of thine enemies; but the angels of God shall encamp around thy path, and guard thee in all thy ways. Only be true, be fearless, be steadfast. Thou shalt be a knight of the Lord; thou shalt fight His battle; and from Him, and from no earthly sovereign, shalt thou reap thy reward at last!"

As the Father continued speaking, it seemed as if something of prophetic fire had lighted his eyes. Raymond held his breath in awe as he heard this strange warning, benediction, and promise. But not for a moment did he doubt that what the Father spoke would come to pass. He sank upon his knees, and his heart went up in prayer that when the hour of trial came he might be found faithful at his post; and at once and for ever was laid to rest that restless questioning as to the life of the Church. He knew from that moment forward that it was in the world and not out of it that his work for his Lord was to be done.

No more of a personal nature passed between him and Father Paul that night, and upon the morrow the brothers proceeded to the mill, and the Father upon his journey to England.

"We shall meet again ere long," was Father Paul's parting word to Raymond, and he knew that it would be so.

It was a pretty sight to witness the delighted pride with which honest Jean and Margot welcomed back their boys again after the long separation. Raymond hardly seemed a stranger after his visit of the previous year, but of Gaston they knew not how to make enough. His tall handsome figure and martial air struck them dumb with admiration. They never tired of listening to his tales of flood and field; and the adventures he had met with, though nothing very marvellous in themselves, seemed to the simple souls, who had lived so quiet a life, to raise him at once to the position of some wonderful and almost mythical being.

On their own side, they had a long story to tell of the disturbed state of the country, and the constant fighting which had taken place until the English King's victory at Crecy had caused Philip to disband his army, and had restored a certain amount of quiet to the country.

The quiet was by no means assured or very satisfactory. Though the army had been disbanded, there was a great deal of brigandage in the remoter districts. So near as the mill was to Sauveterre, it had escaped without molestation, and the people in the immediate vicinity had not suffered to any extent; but there was a restless and uneasy feeling pervading the country, and it had been a source of considerable disappointment to the well-disposed that the Roy Outremer had not paid a visit to Gascony in person, to restore a greater amount of order, before returning to his own kingdom.

The Sieur de Navailles had made himself more unpopular than ever by his adhesion to the French cause when all the world had believed that Philip, with his two huge armies, would sweep the English out of the country. Of late, in the light of recent events, he had tried to annul his disloyalty, and put another face upon his proceedings; but only his obscurity, and the remoteness of his possessions in the far south, would protect him from Edward's wrath when the affairs of the rebel Gascons came to be inquired into in detail.

Gaston listened eagerly, and treasured it all carefully up, feeling sure he could place his rival and the usurper of the De Brocas lands in a very unenviable position with the royal Edward at any time when he wished to make good his own claim.

The visit of the De Brocas brothers (as they were known in these parts) was not made by stealth. All the world might know it now for all they cared, protected as they were by their stout men-at-arms, and surrounded by the glamour of the English King's royal favour. Gaston and Raymond ranged the woods and visited their old haunts with the zest of youth and affectionate memories, and Gaston often hunted there alone whilst his brother paid a visit to Father Anselm, to read with him or talk of Father Paul.

It was after a day spent thus apart that Gaston came in looking as though some unwonted thing had befallen him, and when he and his brother were alone in their room together, he began to speak with eager rapidity.

"Raymond, methinks I have this day lost my heart to a woodland nymph or fairy. Such a strange encounter had I in the forest today! and with it a warning almost as strange as the being who offered it."

"A warning, Gaston? what sort of warning?"

"Why, against our old, old enemy the Navailles, who, it seems, knows of our visit here, and, if he dared, would gladly make an end of us both. So at least the fairy creature told me, imploring me, with sweetest solicitude, to be quickly gone, and to adventure myself in the woods alone no more. I told her that our visit was well-nigh at an end, and that we purposed to reach England ere the autumn gales blew shrill. At that she seemed mightily pleased, and yet she sighed when we said adieu. Raymond, she was the loveliest maiden my eyes have ever beheld: her hair like silk, and of the deepest golden hue; her eyes of the colour of violets nestling beneath brown winter leaves. Her voice was like the rippling of a summer's brook, and her form scarce of this earth, so light, so airy, so full of sylvan grace. She was like the angelic being of a dream. I have never seen a daughter of earth so fair. Tell me, thinkest thou it was some dream? Yet it is not my wont to slumber at my sport, and the little hand I held in mine throbbed with the warmth of life."

"Asked you not her name and station?"

"Yea verily, but she would tell me naught; only the soft colour crept into her cheeks, and she turned her eyes for a moment away. Raymond, I have heard men speak of love, but till that moment I knew not what they meant. Now methinks I have a better understanding, for if yon sweet maiden had looked long into my eyes, my very soul would sure

have gone out to her, and I should have straightway forgot all else in the world but herself. Wherefore I wondered if she could be in truth a real and living being, or whether some woodland siren sent to lure man to death and destruction."

Raymond smiled at the gravity of Gaston's words. Mystic as he was in many matters, he had outgrown that belief in woodland nymphs and sirens which had woven itself into their life whilst the spell of the forests remained upon them in their boyhood. That evil and good spirits did hover about the path of humanity, Raymond sincerely believed; but he was equally certain that they took no tangible form, and that the vision Gaston had seen in the wood was no phantom form of spirit.

"Sure she came to try to warn and save," he answered; "that should be answer enough. Gaston, methinks we will take that warning. We are still but striplings and our men are few, though brave and true. The land is disturbed as in our memory it never was, and men are wild and lawless, none being strong enough to put down disorder. Wherefore we had best be gone. It is no true bravery to court danger, and our errand here is done. When the King comes, as one day he will, to punish rebels and reward faithful loyalty, then we will come with him, and thou shalt seek out thy woodland nymph once more, and thank her for her good counsel. Now wilt thou thank her best -- seeing she came express to warn thee of coming peril -- by taking her at her word. Honest Jean and Margot will not seek to stay us longer. They have a secret fear of the Sieur de Navailles. We will not tell them all, but we will tell them something, and that will be enough. Tomorrow will we take to horse again; and we will tell in the ears of the King how restless and oppressed by lawlessness and strife are his fair lands of Gascony."

Raymond's advice was followed. Gaston had had enough of quiet and repose, and only the desire to see again the face of the woodland sprite could have detained him. Not knowing where to seek her, he was willing enough to set his face for Bordeaux; and soon the brothers had landed once again upon the shores of England.

CHAPTER XVII. THE BLACK DEATH

The glorious termination of Edward's campaign, and the rich spoil brought home from the wars by the soldiers, had served to put the nation into a marvellous good temper. Their enthusiasm for their King amounted almost to adoration, and nothing was thought of but tourneys, jousts, and all sorts of feasting and revelry. Indeed, things came to such a pass that at last an order was given that tournaments might be held only at the royal pleasure, else the people were disposed to think of nothing else, and to neglect the ordinary avocations of life. As the King appointed nineteen in six months, to be held in various places throughout the kingdom, it cannot be said that he defrauded his subjects of their sports; and he himself set the example of the extravagant and fanciful dressing which called forth so much adverse criticism from the more sober minded, appearing at the jousts in all manner of wonderful apparel, one of his dresses being described as "a harness of white buckram inlaid with silver -- namely, a tunic, and a shield with the motto:

'Hay, hay, the wythe swan!
By Goddes soul I am thy man;'

whilst he gave away on that occasion five hoods of long white cloth worked with blue men dancing, and two white velvet harnesses worked with blue garters and diapered throughout with wild men."

Women disgraced themselves by going about in men's attire and behaving themselves in many unseemly fashions. The ecclesiastics, too, often fell into the prevailing vices of extravagance and pleasure seeking that at this juncture characterized the whole nation, and, as Father Paul had said to Raymond, disgraced their calling by so doing far more than others who had never professed a higher code. Amongst the graver and more austere men of the day heads were gravely shaken over the wild burst of enthusiasm and extravagance, and there were not wanting those who declared that the nation was calling down upon itself some terrible judgment of God -- such a judgment as so often follows upon a season of unwonted and sudden prosperity.

As for the twin brothers, they spent these months in diverse fashion, each carrying out his own tastes and preferences. Gaston attached himself to Sir James Audley once again, and travelled with him into Scotland, where the knight frequently went upon the King's business. When in or about the Court, he threw himself into the jousting and sports with the greatest enthusiasm and delight, quickly excelling so well in each and every contest that he made a name and reputation for himself even amongst the chosen flower of the English nobility. Real fighting was, however, more to his taste than mock contests, and he was always glad to accompany his master upon his journeys, which were not unfrequently attended by considerable peril, as the unsettled state of the Border counties, and the fierce and sometimes treacherous nature of the inhabitants, made travelling there upon the King's business a matter of some difficulty and danger. There was no fear of Gaston's growing effeminate or turning into a mere pleasure hunter; and he soon made himself of great value to his master, not only by his undaunted bravery, but by his success in diplomatic negotiation -- a success by no means expected by himself, and a surprise to all about him.

Perhaps the frank, free bearing of the youth, his perfect fearlessness, and his remarkably quick and keen intelligence, helped him when he had any delicate mission entrusted to him. Then, too, the hardy and independent nature of the Scots was not altogether unlike that of the free-born Gascon peasant of the Pyrenean portion of the south of France; so that he understood and sympathized with them better, perhaps, than an average Englishman could have done.

A useful life is always a happy one, and the successful exercise of talents of whose very existence we were unaware is in itself a source of great satisfaction. Gaston, as he grew in years, now began to develop in mind more rapidly than he had hitherto done, and though separated for the most part from his brother, was seldom many months without meeting him for at least a few days.

Raymond was spending the time with his old friend and comrade and cousin, John de Brocas. It had become evident to all who knew him that John was not long for this world. He might linger on still some few years, but the insidious disease we now call consumption had firm hold upon him, and he was plainly marked as one who would not live to make any name in the world. He showed no disposition to seclude himself from his kind by entering upon the monastic life,

and his father had recently bestowed upon him a small property which he had purchased near Guildford, the air and dryness of which place had always been beneficial to him.

This modest but pleasant residence, with the revenues attached, kept John in ease and comfort. He had spent the greater part of his income the year previous in the purchase of books, and his uncle's library was always at his disposal. He had many friends in and about the place; and his life, though a little lonely, was a very happy one -- just the life of quietness and study that he loved better than any other.

When his cousin Raymond came home from the wars without any very definite ideas as to his own immediate career in the future, it had occurred to John that if he could secure the companionship of this cousin for the coming winter it would be a great boon to himself; and the suggestion had been hailed with pleasure by the youth.

Raymond would gladly have remained with the King had there been any fighting in the cause of his country to be done; but the round of feasting and revelry which now appeared to be the order of the day had no charms for him. After breaking a lance or two at Windsor, and seeing what Court life was in times of triumphant peace, he wearied of the scene, and longed for a life of greater purpose. Hearing where his cousin John was located, he had quickly ridden across to pay him a visit; and that visit had lasted from the previous October till now, when the full beauty of a glorious English summer had clothed the world in green, and the green was just tarnishing slightly in the heat of a glaring August.

As Raymond had seen something of the fashion in which the world was wagging, his thoughts had oftentimes recurred to Father Paul and that solemn warning he had uttered. He had spoken of it to John, and both had mused upon it, wondering if indeed something of prophetic fire dwelt within that strong, spare frame -- whether indeed, through his austerities and fasts, the monk had so reduced the body that the things of the spiritual world were revealed to him, and the future lay spread before his eyes.

At first both the cousins had thought week by week to hear some news of a terrible visitation; but day had followed day, and months had rolled by, and still the country was holding high revel without a thought or a fear for the future. So gradually the two studious youths had ceased to speak of the visitation they had once confidently looked for, and they gave themselves up with the zest of pure enjoyment to their studies and the pursuit of learning. Raymond's spiritual nature was deepened and strengthened by his perusal of such sacred and devotional lore as he could lay hands upon; and though the Scriptures, as they were presented to him, were not without many errors and imperfections and omissions, he yet obtained a clearer insight into many of the prophetic writings, and a fuller grasp of God's purposes towards man, than he had ever dreamed of before. So that though strongly tinged with the mysticism and even with the superstition of the times, his spiritual growth was great, and the youth felt within him a spring of power unknown before which was in itself a source of exaltation and power.

And there was another element of happiness in Raymond's life at this time which must not be omitted from mention. Seldom as he saw her -- jealously as she was guarded by her father and brother, now returned from the war, and settled again at Woodcrych -- he did nevertheless from time to time encounter Mistress Joan Vavasour, and each encounter was fraught with a new and increasing pleasure. He had never spoken a word of love to her; indeed he scarce yet knew that he had lost his heart in that fashion which so often leads to wedlock. He was only just beginning to realize that she was not many years older than himself -- that she was not a star altogether beyond the firmament of his own sky. He had hitherto regarded her with one of those boyish adorations which are for the time being sufficient in themselves, and do not look ahead into the future; and then Raymond well knew that before he could for a moment dream of aspiring to the hand of the proud knight's daughter, he must himself have carved his way to moderate fortune and fame.

His dreams of late had concerned themselves little with his worldly estate, and therefore his deep reverential admiration for Joan had not developed into anything of a definite purpose. If he dreamed dreams of the future in which she bore a part, it was only of laying at her feet such laurels as he should win, without thinking of asking a reward at her hands, unless it was the reward of being her own true knight, and rescuing her from the power of the Sanghursts, father and son, who appeared to have regained their old ascendancy over Sir Hugh and his son, and to be looking forward still to the alliance between the two families.

Joan was of more than marriageable age. It was thought strange by many that the match was not yet consummated. But the quietly determined resistance on the part of the girl herself was not without some effect; and although there were many rumours afloat as to the boundless wealth of the ill-famed father and son, it was not yet an affair of absolute certainty that they were in possession of the secret of the transmutation of metals. So the match still hung fire, and Raymond received many bewitching smiles from the lady on the rare occasions when they met; and he thought nothing of the threat of Peter Sanghurst, being endowed with that fearless courage which does not brood upon possible perils, but faces real ones with quiet resolution.

John was sitting over his books in the pleasant western window one evening at the close of a hot September day, when he heard a quick footstep crossing the anteroom, and Raymond came in with a strange look upon his face.

"John," he said, before his cousin could ask a single question, "it has come at last!"

"What has come?"

"The visitation -- the sickness -- the scourge of God. I knew that Father Paul was looking into the future when he pronounced the doom upon this land. It has come; it is amongst us now!"

"Not here -- not in this very place! We must have heard something of it had it been so nigh."

"It has not yet reached this town," answered Raymond, the same strange light shining in his eyes that John had observed there from his entrance. "Listen, and I will tell thee all I myself know. Thou knowest that I have been to Windsor, to meet my brother who is there. Him I found well and happy, brave as ever, knowing naught of this curse and

scourge. But even as we talked together, there came a messenger from London in hot haste to see thy father, good John. He had been straight despatched by the King with a message of dire warning. A terrible sickness, which already men are calling by the name of Black Death, has broken out in the south and west of the land, and seems creeping eastward with these hot west winds that steadily blow. It attacks not only men, but beasts and cattle -- that is, it seems to be accompanied by a plague something similar in nature which attacks the beasts. Word has been passed on by the monks of what is happening far away, and already a great terror has seized upon many, and some are for flying the country, others for shutting themselves up in their houses and keeping great fires burning around them. The message to thy father was to have a care for the horses, and to buy no new ones that might by chance carry the seeds of the sickness within them. Men say that the people of London are very confident that they can keep the sickness away from entering their walls, by maintaining a careful guard upon the city gates. At Windsor, I left the town in a mighty fear, folks looking already askance at each other, as if afraid they were smitten with the deadly disease. The news of its appearance is passing from mouth to mouth faster than a horseman could spread the tidings. It had outridden me hither, and I thought perchance thou mightest have heard it ere I reached home."

"Nay, I have heard naught; but I would fain hear more now."

"I know little but what I have already told thee," answered Raymond. "Indeed, it is but little that there is to know at present. The disease seems to me somewhat to resemble that described by Lucretius as visiting Athens. Men sometimes suddenly fall down dead; or they are seized with violent shiverings, their hair bristling upon their heads. Sometimes it is like a consuming fire within, and they run raving mad to the nearest water, falling in perchance, and perishing by drowning, leaving their carcasses to pollute the spring. But if it do not carry off the stricken person for some hours or days, black swellings are seen upon their bodies like huge black boils, and death follows rapidly, the victim often expiring in great agony. I have heard that the throat and lungs often become inflamed before the Black Death seizes its victim, and that in districts where the scourge has reached, any persons who appear to have about them even a common rheum are cast forth from their homes even by those nearest and dearest, for fear they are victims to the terrible scourge."

"Misfortune makes men cruel if it do not bind them closer together. Raymond, I see a purpose in thy face -- a purpose of which I would know the meaning. That light in thine eyes is not for nothing. Tell me all that is in thine heart. Methinks I divine it somewhat already."

"Belike thou dost, good John," answered Raymond, speaking very calmly and steadily, "for thou knowest the charge laid upon me by my spiritual Father. 'Fear not, be not dismayed. A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.' Such was the burden of his charge; and shall I shrink or falter when the hour I have waited and watched for all these years has come like a thief in the night? Good John, thou wast the first to teach me that there was a truer, deeper chivalry than that of the tourney or the battlefield. Thou wast the first to understand, and to make me understand, that the highest chivalry was that of our Lord Himself, when He laid down His life for sinners, and prayed for His enemies who pierced and nailed Him to the Cross. His words are ever words of mercy. Were He here with us today upon earth, where should we find Him now? Surely where the peril was greatest, where the need sorest, where the darkness, the terror, the distress blackest. And where He would be, were He with us here, is the place where those who would follow Him most faithfully should be found. Not all perchance; there be claims of kindred, ties of love that no man may lightly disregard: But none such ties bind me. I have but my brother to love, and he is out in the world -- he needs me not. I am free to go where the voice within calls me; and I go forth to-morrow."

"And whither goest thou?" asked John, in a low, awestruck tone.

"I go to Father Paul," answered Raymond, without hesitation, as one who has thought the matter well out beforehand. "Wherever the need is sorest, the peril greatest, there will Father Paul be found. And the Brotherhood stands in the heart of the smitten regions; wherefore at his very doors the sick will be lying, untended perchance and unassailed, save in those places whither he can go. I fare forth at sunrising tomorrow, to seek and to find him. He will give me work, he will let me toil beside him; better than that I ask not."

John had risen from his seat. An answering light had sprung to his eyes as he had heard and watched Raymond. Now he laid his hand upon his cousin's arm, and said quietly:

"Go, then, in the name of the Lord; I too go with thee."

Raymond turned his head and looked full at his cousin, marking the thin, sunken lines of the face, the stooping pose of the shoulders, the hectic flush that came and went upon the hollow cheek; and seeing this and knowing what it betokened, he linked his arm within John's and commenced walking up and down the room with him, as though inaction were impossible at such a moment. And as he walked he talked.

"Good John," he said, "I would fain have thee with me; but I well know thou hast no strength for the task thou hast set thyself. Even the long day's ride would weary thy frame so sorely that thou wouldst fall an easy victim to the sickness ere thou hadst done aught to help another. Thou hast thy father, thy mother, and thy good uncle to think of. How sad would they be to hear whither thou hadst gone! And then, my cousin, it may well be that for thee there is other work, and work for which thou canst better prepare thyself here than in any other place. I have thought of thee as well as of myself as I have ridden homeward this day. Shall I tell thee what my thought -- my dream of thee was like?"

"Ay, tell me; I would gladly hear."

"I saw in my spirit the advance of this terrible Black Death; I saw it come to this very place. Dead and dying, cast out of their homes by those who would neither bury the one nor tend the other, were left lying in the streets around, and a deadly fear was upon all the place. And then I saw a man step forth amongst these miserable wretches, and the man had thy face, dear cousin. And he came forward and said to those who were yet willing to touch the sick, 'Carry them into my house; I have a place made ready for them. Bring them to my house; there they will be tended and cared for.'

And then I thought that I saw the bearers lift and carry the sick here to this house, and that there they were received by some devoted men and women who had not been driven away by the general terror, and there were clean and comfortable beds awaiting the sick, and great fires of aromatic herbs burning upon the hearths to keep away the fumes of the pestilence from the watchers. And as the wretched and stricken creatures found themselves in this fair haven, they blessed him who had had this care for them; and those who died, died in comfort, shriven and assoiled by holy priests, whilst some amongst the number were saved, and saved through the act of him who had found them this safe refuge."

Raymond ceased speaking, and looked out over the fair landscape commanded by the oriel window of the room in which they were standing; and John's pale face suddenly kindled and glowed. The same spirit of self-sacrifice animated them both; but the elder of the pair realized, when it was put before him, how little he was fit for the work which the younger had set himself to do, whilst he had the means as well as the disposition to perform an act of mercy which in the end might be a greater boon to many than any service he could offer now. And if he did this thing -- if he turned his house into a house of mercy for the sick of the plague -- he would then have his own opportunity to tend and care for the sufferers.

Only one thought for a moment hindered him from giving an answer. He looked at Raymond, and said:

"Thinkest thou that this sickness will surely come this way?"

"In very truth I believe that it will ravage the land from end to end. I know that Father Paul looked to see the whole country swept by the scourge of God. Fear not but that thy work will find thee here. Thou wilt not have to wait long, methinks. Thou wilt but have fair time to make ready all that thou wilt need -- beds, medicaments, aromatic wood, and perfumes -- and gather round thee a few faithful, trusty souls who will not fly at the approach of danger. It may be no easy task to find these, yet methinks they will be found here and there; for where God sends His scourges upon His earth, He raises up pious men and women too, to tend the sufferers and prove to the world that He has still amongst the gay and worldly His own children, His own followers, who will follow wherever He leads."

John's mind was quickly made up.

"I will remain behind and do this thing," he said. "Perchance thou and I will yet work together in this very place amongst the sick and dying."

"I well believe it," answered Raymond, with one of his far-away looks; and the cousins stood together looking out over the green world bathed in the light of sunset, wondering how and when they would meet again, but both strangely possessed with perfect confidence that they would so meet.

Then Raymond went to make his simple preparations for the morrow's ride. He had intended travelling quite alone, and chancing the perils of the road, which, however, in these times of peace and rejoicing, were not very great; for freebooters seldom disturbed travellers by day, save perhaps in very lonely forest roads. But when Roger, the woodman's son, heard whither his master's steps were bent, and upon what errand he was going, he fell at his feet in one of his wild passions of devotional excitement, and begged to be allowed to follow him even to the death.

"It may well be to the death, good Roger," answered Raymond gravely. "Men say that death is certain for those who take the breath of the smitten persons; and such as go amongst them go at the risk of their lives. I do not bid thee follow me -- I well believe the peril is great; but if thou wilt to do this thing, I dare not say thee nay, for methinks it is a work of God, and may well win His approval."

"I will go," answered Roger, without the slightest hesitation. "Do I not owe all -- my body and soul alike -- to you and Father Paul? Where you go, there will I go with you. What you fear not to face, I fear not either. For life or for death I am yours; and if the Holy Saints and the Blessed Virgin will but give me strength to fight and to conquer this fell foe, I trow they will do it because that thou art half a saint thyself, and they will know that I go to be with thee, to watch over thee, and perchance, by my service and my prayers, guard thee in some sort from ill."

Raymond smiled and held out his hand to his faithful servant. In times of common peril men's hearts are very closely knit together. The bond between the two youths seemed suddenly to take a new form; and when they rode forth at sunrise on the morrow, with John waving an adieu to them and watching their departure with a strange look of settled purpose on his face, it was no longer as master and servant that they rode, but as friends and comrades going forth to meet a deadly peril together.

It seemed strange, as they rode along in the bright freshness of a clear September morning, to realize that any scenes of horror and death could be enacting themselves upon this fair earth not very many miles away. Yet as they rode ever onwards and drew near to the infected districts, the sunshine became obscured by a thick haze, the fresh wind which had hitherto blown in their faces dropped, and the air was still with a deadly stillness new to both of them -- a stillness which was oppressive and which weighed upon their spirits like lead. The first intimation they had of the pestilence itself was the sight of the carcasses of several beasts lying dead in their pasture, and, what was more terrible still, the body of a man lying beside them, as though he had dropped dead as he came to drive them into shelter.

Raymond looked at the little group with an involuntary shudder, and Roger crossed himself and muttered a prayer. But they did not turn out of their way; they were now nearing the gates of the Monastery, and it was of Father Paul that Raymond's thoughts were full. Plainly enough he was in the heart of the peril. How had it gone with him since the sickness had appeared here?

That question was answered the moment the travellers appeared within sight of the well-known walls. They saw a sight that lived in their memories for many a day to come.

Instead of the calm and solitude which generally reigned in this place, a great crowd was to be seen around the gate,

but such a crowd as the youths had never dreamed of before. Wretched, plague-stricken people, turned from their own doors and abandoned by their kindred, had dragged themselves from all parts to the doors of the Monastery, in the hope that the pious Brothers would give them help and a corner to die in peace. And that they were not disappointed in this hope was well seen: for as Raymond and his companion appeared, they saw that one after another of these wretched beings was carried within the precincts of the Monastery by the Brothers; whilst amongst those who lay outside waiting their turn for admission, or too far gone to be moved again, a tall thin form moved fearlessly, bending over the dying sufferers and hearing their last confessions, giving priestly absolution, or soothing with strong and tender hands the last agonies of some stricken creature.

Raymond, with a strange, tense look upon his face, went straight to the Father where he stood amongst the dying and the dead, and just as he reached his side the Monk stood suddenly up and looked straight at him. His austere face did not relax, but in his eyes shone a light that looked like triumph.

"It is well, my son," he said. "I knew that thou wouldst be here anon. The soldier of the Cross is ever found at his post in such a time as this."

CHAPTER XVIII. WITH FATHER PAUL.

All that evening and far into the night Raymond worked with the Brothers under Father Paul, bringing in the sick, burying the dead, and tending all those for whom anything could be done to mitigate their sufferings, or bring peace either of body or mind.

By nightfall the ghastly assemblage about the Monastery doors had disappeared. The living were lying in rows in the narrow beds, or upon the straw pallets of the Brothers, filling dormitories and Refectory alike; the dead had been laid side by side in a deep trench which had been hastily dug by order of Father Paul; and after he had read over them the burial service, earth and lime had been heaped upon the bodies, and one end of the long trench filled in. Before morning there were a score more corpses to carry forth, and out of the thirty and odd stricken souls who lay within the walls, probably scarce ten would recover from the malady.

But no more of the sick appeared round and about the Monastery gates as they had been doing for the past three days; and when Raymond asked why this was so, Father Paul looked into his face with a keen, searching glance as he replied:

"Verily, my son, it is because there be no more to come -- no more who have strength to drag themselves out hither. Tomorrow I go forth to visit the villages where the sick be dying like beasts in the shambles. I go to shrive and confess the sick, to administer the last rites to the dying, to read the prayers of the Church over those who are being carried to the great common grave. God alone knows whether even now the living may suffice to bury the dead. But where the need is sorest, there must His faithful servants be found."

Raymond looked back with a face full of resolute purpose.

"Father, take me with thee," he said.

Father Paul looked earnestly into that fair young face, that was growing so intensely spiritual in its expression, and asked one question.

"My son, and if it should be going to thy death?"

"I will go with thee, Father Paul, be it for life or for death."

"God bless and protect thee, my son!" said the Father. "I verily believe that thou art one over whom the Blessed Saints and the Holy Angels keep watch and ward, and that thou wilt pass unscathed even through this time of desolation and death."

Raymond had bent his knee to receive the Father's blessing, and when he rose he saw that Roger was close behind him, likewise kneeling; and reading the thought in his mind, he said to the Father:

"Wilt thou not give him thy blessing also? for I know that he too will go with us and face the peril, be it for life or death."

Father Paul laid his hand upon the head of the second lad.

"May God's blessing rest also upon thee, my son," he said. "In days past thou hast been used as an instrument of evil, and hast been forced to do the devil's own work. Now God, in His mercy, has given thee work to do for Him, whereby thou mayest in some sort make atonement for the past, and show by thy faith and piety that thou art no longer a bondservant unto sin."

Then turning to both the youths as they stood before him, the Father added, in a different and less solemn tone:

"And since your purpose is to go forth with me tomorrow, you must now take some of that rest without which youthful frames cannot long dispense. Since early dawn you have been travelling and working at tasks of a nature to which you are little used. Come with me, therefore, and pass the remaining hours of the night in sleep. I will arouse you for our office of early mass, and then we will forth together. Till then sleep fearlessly and well. Sleep will best fit you for what you will see and hear tomorrow."

So saying, the Father led them into a narrow cell where a couple of pallet beds had been placed, and where some slices of brown bread and a pitcher of spring water were likewise standing.

"Our fare is plain, but it is wholesome. Eat and drink, my sons, and sleep in peace. Wake not nor rise until I come to you

again."

The lads were indeed tired enough, though they had scarcely known it in the strange excitement of the journey, and amid the terrible scenes of death and sickness which they had witnessed around and about the Monastery doors since their arrival there. Now, however, that they had received the command to rest and sleep (and to gainsay the Father's commands was a thing that would never have entered their minds), they were willing enough to obey, and had hardly laid themselves down before they fell into a deep slumber, from which neither awoke until the light of day had long been shining upon the world, and the Father stood beside them bidding them rise and follow him.

In a few minutes their simple toilet and ablutions had been performed, and they made their way along the familiar passage to the chapel, from whence a low sound of chanting began to arise. There were not many of the Brothers present at the early service, most of them being engaged in tending the plague-stricken guests beneath their roof. But the Father was performing the office of the mass, and when he had himself partaken of the Sacrament, he signed to the two boys, who were about to go forth with him into scenes of greater peril than any they had witnessed heretofore, to come and receive it likewise.

The service over, and some simple refreshment partaken of, the youths prepared for their day's toil, scarce knowing what they would be like to see, but resolved to follow Father Paul wherever he went, anxious only to accomplish successfully such work as he should find for them to do.

Each had a certain burden to carry with him -- some of the cordials that had been found to give most relief in cases of utter collapse and exhaustion, a few simple medicaments and outward applications thought to be of some use in allaying the pain of those terrible black swellings from which the sickness took its significant name, and some simply-prepared food for the sufferers, who were often like to perish from inanition even before the plague had done its worst. For stricken persons, or those supposed to be stricken, were often turned out of their homes even by their nearest relatives, and forced to wander about homeless and starving, none taking pity upon their misery, until the poison in their blood did its fatal work, and they dropped down to die.

That loosening of the bands of nature and affection in times of deadly sickness has always been one of the most terrible features of the outbreaks of the plague when it has visited either this or other lands. There are some forms of peril that bind men closer and closer together, and that bring into bond of friendship even those who have been before estranged; and terrible though these perils may be, there is always a deep sense of underlying consolation in the closer drawing of the bond of brotherhood. But when the scourge of deadly sickness has passed over the land, the effect has almost always been to slacken this tie; the inherent love of life, natural to human beings, turning to an almost incredible selfishness, and inducing men to abandon their nearest and dearest in the hour of peril, leaving them, if stricken, to die alone, or turning them, sick to death though they might be, away from their doors, to perish untended and without shelter. True, there were many bright exceptions to such a code of barbarity, and devoted men and women arose by the score to strive to ameliorate the condition of the sufferers; but for all that, one of the most terrible features of the period of death and desolation was that of the fearful panic it everywhere produced, and the inhuman neglect and cruelty with which the early sufferers were treated by the very persons who, perhaps only a few days or even hours later, had themselves caught the contagion, and were lying dead or dying in the homes from which they had ejected their own kith and kin before.

Of the fearful havoc wrought in England by this scourge of the Black Death many readers of history are scarcely aware. Whole districts were actually and entirely depopulated, not a living creature of any kind being left sometimes within a radius of many miles; and at the lowest computation made by historians, it is believed that not less than one-half of the entire population perished during the outbreak.

But of anything like the magnitude of such a calamity no person at this time had any conception, and little indeed was Raymond prepared for the sights that he was this day to look upon.

The Father and his two assistants went forth after they had partaken of food, and turned their faces westward.

"There is a small village two miles hence that we will visit first," said the Father, "for the poor people have no pastor or any other person to care for their bodies or souls, and I trow we shall find work to do there. If time permits when we have done what we may there, we will pass on to the little town round the church of St. Michael, whose spire you see yonder on the hillside. Many of the stricken folks within our walls came from thence. The sickness is raging there, and there may be few helpers left by now."

The same sultry haze the travellers had noticed in the infected regions was still hanging over the woods today as they sallied forth; and though the sun was shining in the sky, its beams were thick and blood-red instead of being clear and bright, and there was an oppression in the air which caused the birds to cease their song, and lay on the spirit like a dead weight.

"The curse of God upon the land -- the curse of God!" said the Father, in a low, solemn tone, as he led the way, bearing in his hands the Holy Sacrament with which to console the dying. "Men have long been forgetting Him. But He will not always be forgotten. He will arise in judgment and show men the error of their ways. If in their prosperity they will not remember Him, He will call Himself to their remembrance by a terrible day of adversity. And who may stand before the Lord? Who may abide the day of His visitation?"

Moving along with these and like solemn words of warning and admonition, to which his followers paid all reverent heed, the woodland path was quickly traversed, and the clearing reached which showed the near approach to the village. There was a break in the forest at this point, and some excellent pasture land and arable fields had tempted two farmers to establish themselves here, a small hamlet growing quickly up around the farmsteads. This small community supplied the Brothers with some of the necessaries of life, and every soul there was known to the Father. Some dozen persons had come to the Monastery gates during the past two days, stricken and destitute, and had been taken in there.

But all these had died and no others had followed, and Father Paul was naturally anxious to know how it fared with those left behind.

Raymond and Roger both knew the villagers well. The two years spent within the walls of the Brotherhood had made them fully acquainted with the people round about. The little hamlet was a pretty spot: a number of low thatched cottages nestled together beside the stream that watered the meadows, whilst the larger farmsteads, which, however, were only modest dwelling houses with their barns and sheds forming a background to them, stood a little farther back upon a slightly-rising ground, sheltered from the colder winds by a spur of the forest.

Generally one was aware, in approaching the place, of the pleasant homely sounds of life connected with farming. Today, with the golden grain all ready for the reaper's hand, one looked to hear the sound of the sickle in the corn, and the voices of the labourers calling to each other, or singing some rustic harvest song over their task. But instead of that a deadly and death-like silence prevailed; and Raymond, who had quickened his steps as he neared the familiar spot, now involuntarily paused and hung back, as if half afraid of what he would be forced to look upon when once the last turning was passed.

But Father Paul moved steadily on, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left. There was no hesitation or faltering in his step, and the two youths pressed after him, ashamed of their moment's backwardness. The sun had managed to pierce through the haze, and was shining now with some of its wonted brilliancy. As Raymond turned the corner and saw before him the whole of the little hamlet, he almost wished the sun had ceased to shine, the contrast between the beauty and brightness of nature and the scene upon which it looked being almost too fearful for endurance.

Lying beside the river bank, in every attitude and contortion of the death agony, were some dozen prostrate forms of men, women, and children, all dead and still. It seemed as though they must have crawled forth from the houses when the terrible fever thirst was upon them, and dragging themselves down to the water's edge, had perished there. And yet if all were dead, as indeed there could be small doubt from their perfect stillness and rigidity, why did none come forth to bury them? Already the warm air was tainted and oppressive with that plague-stricken odour so unspeakably deadly to the living. Why did not the survivors come forth from their homes and bury the dead out of their sight? Had all fled and left them to their fate?

Father Paul walked calmly onwards, his eyes taking in every detail of the scene.

As he reached the dead around the margin of the stream, he paused and looked upon the faces he had known so well in life, then turning to his two followers, he said:

"I trow these be all dead corpses, but I will examine each if there be any spark of life remaining. Go ye into the houses, and if there be any sound persons within, bid them, in the name of humanity and their own safety, come forth and help to bury their brethren. If they are suffered to lie here longer, every soul in this place will perish!"

Glad enough to turn his eyes from the terrible sight without, Raymond hurried past to the cluster of dwelling places beyond, and entering the first of these himself, signed to Roger to go into the second. He had some slight difficulty in pushing open the door, not because it was fastened, but owing to some encumbrance behind. When, however, he succeeded in forcing his way in, he found that the encumbrance was nothing more or less than the body of a woman lying dead along the floor of the tiny room. Upon a bed in the corner two children were lying, smiling as if in sleep, but both stiff and cold, the livid tokens of the terrible malady visible upon their little bodies, though the end seemed to have been painless. No other person was in the house, and Raymond, drawing a covering over the children as they lay, turned from the house again with a shudder of compassionate sorrow. Outside he met Roger coming forth with a look of awe upon his face.

"There be five souls within you door," he said -- "an old woman, her two sons and two daughters. But they are all dead and cold. I misdoubt me if we find one alive in the place."

"We must try farther and see," answered Raymond, his face full of the wondering consternation of so terrible a discovery; and by mutual consent they proceeded in their task together. There was something so unspeakably awful in going about alone in a veritable city of the dead.

And such indeed might this place be called. Roger was fearfully right in his prediction. Each house entered showed its number of victims to the destroyer, but not one of these victims was living to receive comfort or help from the ministrations of those who had come amongst them. And not man alone had suffered; upon the dumb beasts too had the scourge fallen: for when Roger suddenly bethought him that the creatures would want tendance in the absence of their owners, and had gone to the sheds to seek for them, nothing but death met his eye on all sides. Some in their stalls, some in the open fields, some, like their masters, beside the stream, lay the poor beasts all stone dead.

It seemed as if the scourge had fallen with peculiar virulence upon this little hamlet, in the warm cup-like hollow where it lay, and had smitten it root and branch. Possibly the waters of the stream had been poisoned higher up, and the deadly malaria had reached it in that way; possibly some condition of the atmosphere predisposed living things to take the infection. But be the cause what it might, there was no gainsaying the fact. Not a living or breathing thing remained in the hamlet; and little as Raymond knew it, such wholesale destruction was only too common throughout the length and breadth of England. But such a revelation coming upon him suddenly, brought before his very eyes when he had come with the desire to help and tend the living, filled him with an awe that was almost terror, although the terror was not for himself. Personally he had no fear; he had given himself to this work, and he would hold to it be the result what it might. But the thought of the scourge sweeping down upon a peaceful hamlet, and carrying off in a few short days every breathing thing within its limits, was indeed both terrible and pitiful. He could picture only too vividly the terror, the anguish, the agony of the poor helpless people, and longed, not to escape from such scenes, but rather to go forward to other places ere the work of destruction had been accomplished, and be with the sick when the last call came. If he had been but two days earlier in coming forward, might he not have been in time to do a work of mercy and

charity even here?

But it was useless musing thus. To act, and not to think, was now the order of the day. He went slowly out from the yard they had last visited, his face as pale as death, but full of courage and high purpose.

"There is nothing living here," he said, as he reached the Father, who had not left the side of the dead. "We have been into all the houses, we have looked everywhere, but there is nothing but dead corpses: man and beast have perished alike. Nothing that breathes is left alive."

The Father looked round upon the scene of smiling desolation -- the sunny harvest fields, the laughing brook, the broad meadows -- and the ghastly rows of plague-stricken corpses at his feet, and a stern, sad change passed across his face.

"It is the hand of the Lord," he said, "and perchance He smites in mercy as well as in wrath, delivering men from the evil to come. Let us arise and go hence. Our work is for the living and not the dead."

For those three to have attempted to bury all that hamlet would have been an absolute impossibility. Dreadful as was the thought of turning away and leaving the place as it was, it was hopeless to do otherwise, and possibly in the town men might be found able and willing to come out and inter the corpses in one common grave.

With hearts full of awe, the two lads followed their conductor. He had been through similar scenes in other lands. To him there was nothing new in sights such as this. Even the sense of personal peril, little as he had ever regarded it, had long since passed away. But it was something altogether new to Raymond and his companion; and though they had seen death in many terrible forms upon the battlefield, it had never inspired the same feelings of horror and awe. It was impossible to forget that they might at any moment be breathing into their lungs the same deadly poison which was carrying off multitudes on every side, and although there was no conscious fear for themselves in the thought, it could not but fill them with a quickened perception of the uncertainty of life and the unreality of things terrestrial.

In perfect silence the walk towards the little town was accomplished; and as they neared it terrible sights began to reveal themselves even along the roadside. Plainly indeed to be seen were evidences of attempted flight from the plague-stricken place; and no doubt many had made good their escape, but others had fallen down by the wayside in a dying state, and these dead or dying sufferers were the first tokens observed by the travellers of the condition of the town.

Not all were dead, though most were plainly hopeless cases. Raymond and Roger had both learned something during the hours of the previous night, when they had helped the good Brothers over their tasks; and they fearlessly knelt beside the poor creatures, moistening their parched lips, answering their feeble, moaning plaints, and summoning to the side of the dying the Father, who could hear the feeble confession of sin, and pronounce the longed-for absolution to the departing soul.

Passing still onwards -- for they could not linger long, and little enough could be done for these dying sufferers, all past hope -- they reached the streets of the town itself; and the first sight which greeted their eyes was the figure of a man stripped naked to the waist, his back bleeding from the blows he kept on inflicting upon himself with the thick, knotted cord he held in his hands, a heavy and rough piece of iron being affixed to the end to make the blows more severe. From the waist downwards he was clothed with sackcloth, and as he rushed about the streets shrieking and castigating himself, he called aloud on the people to repent of their sins, and to flee from the wrath of God that was falling upon the whole nation.

Yet, though many dead and dying were lying in the streets about him, and though cries and groans from many houses told that the destroyer was at work there, this Flagellant (as these maniacs, of which at that time there were only too many abroad, were called) never attempted to touch one of them, though he ran almost over their prostrate bodies, and had apparently no fear of the contagion. There were very few people abroad in the streets, and such as were sound kept their faces covered with cloths steeped in vinegar or some other pungent mixture, and walked gingerly in the middle of the road, as if afraid to approach either the houses on each side or the other persons walking in the streets.

A cart was going about, with two evil-looking men in it, who lifted in such of the dead as they found lying by the roadside, and coolly divested them of anything of any value which they chanced to have upon them before conveying them to the great pit just outside which had been dug to receive the victims of the plague.

A wild panic had seized upon the place. Most of the influential inhabitants had fled. There was no rule or order or oversight observed, and the priest of the church, who until this day had kept a certain watch over his flock, and had gone about encouraging and cheering the people, had himself been stricken down with the fell malady, and no one knew whether he were now living or dead.

As the Father passed by, people rushed out from many doors to implore him to come to this house or the other, to administer the last rites to some one dying within. There were other houses marked with a red cross on the doors, which had been for many days closed by the town authorities, until these had themselves fled, being assured that no person could live in that polluted air. What had become of the wretched beings thus shut up, when the watchers who were told off to guard them had fled in terror, it was hard to imagine; and whilst the Father responded to the calls of those who required spiritual assistance at the last dread hour, Raymond beckoned to Roger to follow him in his visitation to those places where the distemper had first showed itself, and where people had hoped to confine it by closing the houses and letting none go forth.

The terribly deadly nature of the malady was well exemplified by the condition of these houses. Scarce ten living souls were found in them, and of these almost all were reduced to the last extremity either by disease or hunger; for none had been nigh them, and they had no strength to try to make their wants known.

Raymond had the satisfaction of seeing some amongst these wretched beings revive somewhat under his ministrations.

It was not in every case the real distemper from which they suffered; in not a few the patients had sunk only from fright and the misery of feeling themselves shut away from their fellows. Whenever any persons ailed anything in those days, it was at once supposed that the Black Death was upon them, and they were shunned and abhorred by all their friends and kindred. To these poor creatures it seemed indeed as though an angel from heaven had come down when Raymond bent over them and put food and drink to their lips. Many an office of loving mercy to the sick and dying did he and Roger perform ere daylight faded from the sky; and before night actually fell, the Father had by precept and example got together a band of helpers ready and willing to tend the sick and bury the dead, and the people felt that the terrible panic which had fallen upon them, and caused every one to flee away, had given place to something better and more humane.

Men who had fled their stricken homes and had spent their time carousing in the taverns, trying to drown their fears and their griefs, now returned home to see how it fared with those who had been left behind. Women who had been almost distracted by grief, and had been rushing into the church sobbing and crying, and neglecting the sick, that they might pour out their hearts at the shrine of their favourite saint, were admonished by the Holy Father, so well known to them, to return to their homes and their duties. As the pall of night fell over the stricken city, and the three who had entered it a few hours before still toiled on without cessation, people breathed blessings on them wherever they appeared, and Raymond felt that his work for the Lord in the midst of His stricken people had indeed begun.

CHAPTER XIX. THE STRICKEN SORCERER.

"Thou to Guildford then, my son, and I and the Brethren to London."

So said Father Paul some three weeks later, as he stood once again inside the precincts of the Monastery, with Raymond by his side, looking round the thinned circle of faces of such of the Brothers as had survived the terrible visitation which had passed over them, and now gone, as it seemed, elsewhere. Quite one-half of the inhabitants of that small retreat had fallen victims to the scourge. Scarce ten souls out of all those who had sought shelter within those walls had risen from their beds and gone forth to their desolated homes again. The great trench in the burying ground had received the rest; and of the Brothers who gathered round Father Paul to welcome him back, several showed, by their pinched and stricken appearance, how near they themselves had been to the gates of death.

Few stricken by the fatal sickness itself ever recovered; but there were many others who, falling ill of overwork or some other feverish ailment, were accounted to have caught the distemper, and many of these did amend, though all sickness at such a time seemed to get a firmer hold upon its victims. But Father Paul and both his young assistants had escaped unscathed, though they had been waging a hand-to-hand fight with the destroyer for three long weeks, that seemed years in the retrospect.

The Brothers came crowding round them as about those returned from the grave. Indeed, to them it did almost seem as though this was a resurrection from the dead; for they had long since given up all hope of seeing their beloved Superior and Father again in the flesh.

But the Father himself only accounted his work begun. Although the pestilence appeared to have passed from the immediate district, and such cases as occurred amid the few survivors of the visitation were by no means so fatal as they had been in the beginning, yet the sickness itself in its most virulent form was sweeping along northward and eastward, spreading death and desolation in its track; and Father Paul had but one purpose in his mind, which was to follow in the path of the destroyer, performing for the sufferers wherever he went the same offices of piety and mercy that he had been wont to undertake all these past days; and the Brothers, who had finished their labour of love within the walls of their home, and had grown fearless before the pestilence with that fearlessness which gradually comes to those who look long and steadily upon death, were not wanting in resolve to face it even in its most terrible shape.

So that they one and all vowed that they would go with Father Paul; and his steps were bound for the capital of the kingdom, where he knew that the need would be the sorest.

It seemed to the Brothers, who had long lived beneath his austere but wise and fatherly rule, that not only did he himself bear a charmed life, but that all who worked with him felt the shelter of that charm. Raymond and Roger had returned, having suffered no ill effects from the terrible sights and scenes through which they had passed. Though the country in these almost depopulated districts literally reeked with the pestilence, owing to the effluvia from the carcasses of men and beasts which lay rotting on the ground unburied, yet they had passed unscathed through all, and were ready to go forth again upon the same errand of mercy.

Raymond was much divided in mind as to his own course of action. Much as he longed to remain with Father Paul, whom he continued to revere with a loving admiration that savoured of worship, he yet had a great desire to know how it was faring with his cousin John. He could not but be very sure that the pestilence would not pass Guildford by, and he knew that John would go forth amongst the sick and dying, and bring them into his own house for tendance, even though his own life paid the forfeit. It was therefore with no small eagerness that he longed for news of him; and when he spoke of this to the Father, the latter at once advised that they should part company -- he and such of the Brethren as were fit for the journey travelling on to London, whilst the two youths took the direct road to Guildford, to see how matters fared there.

"Ye are but striplings," said the Father kindly, "and though ye be willing and devoted, ye have not the strength of men, nor are ye such seasoned vessels. In London the scenes will be terrible to look upon. It may be that they would be more than ye could well brook. Go, then, to Guildford. They will need helpers there who know how best to wrestle with the foul distemper, and ye have both learned many lessons with me. I verily believe that your work lies there, as mine lies yonder. Go then, and the Lord be with you. It may be we shall meet again in this world, but if not, in that world beyond into which our Blessed Saviour has passed, that through His intercession, offered unceasingly for us, we too may obtain an entrance through the merits of His redeeming Blood."

Then blessing both the boys and embracing them with a tenderness new in one generally so reserved and austere, he sent them away, and they set their faces steadily whence they had come, not knowing what adventures they might meet upon the way.

This return journey was by no means so rapid as the ride hither had been. Both the horses they had then ridden had perished of the sickness, and as none others were to be found, and had they been obtainable might but have fallen down by the wayside to die, the youths travelled on foot. And they did not even take the most direct route, but turned aside to this place or the other, wherever they knew of the existence of human habitations; for wherever such places were, there might there be need for human help and sympathy. And not a few acts of mercy did the boys perform as they travelled slowly onwards through an almost depopulated region.

Time fails to tell of all they saw and heard as they thus journeyed; but they found ample employment for all their skill and energy. The lives of many little children, whose parents had died or fled, were saved by them, and the neglected little orphans left in the kindly care of some devoted Sisterhood, whose inmates gladly received them, fearless of the risk they might run by so doing.

Wandering so often out of their way, they scarce knew their exact whereabouts when darkness fell upon them on the third day of their journeying; but after walking still onwards for some time in what they judged to be the right direction, they presently saw a light in a cottage window, and knocking at the door, asked shelter for the night.

Travellers at such a time as this were regarded with no small suspicion, and the youths hardly looked to get any answer to their request; but rather to their surprise, the door was quickly opened, and Roger uttered a cry of recognition as he looked in the face of the master of the house.

It was no other, in fact, than the ranger with whom as a boy he had found a temporary home, from which home he had been taken in his father's absence and sold into the slavery of Basildene. The boy's cry of astonishment was echoed by the man when once he had made sure that his senses were not deceiving him, but that it was really little Roger, whom he had long believed to be dead; and both he and his companion were eagerly welcomed in and set down to a plentiful meal of bread and venison pasty, whilst the boy told his long and adventurous story as briefly as he could, Stephen listening with parted lips and staring eyes, as if to the recital of some miraculous narrative.

And in truth the tale was strange enough, told in its main aspects: the escape from Basildene, which to himself always partook of the nature of a miracle, the conflict with the powers of darkness in the Monastery, his adventures in France, and now his marvellous escape in the midst of the plague-stricken people whom he had tended and helped. The ranger, who had lost his own wife and children in the distemper, and had himself escaped, had lost all fear of the contagion -- indeed he cared little whether he lived or died; and when he heard upon what errand the youths were bent, he declared he would gladly come with them, for the solitude of his cottage was so oppressive to him that he would have welcomed even a plague-stricken guest sooner than be left much longer with only his hounds and his own thoughts for company.

"If I cannot tend the sick, I can at least bury the dead," he said, drawing his horny hand across his eyes, remembering for whom he had but lately performed that last sad office. And Raymond, to whom this offer was addressed, accepted his company gladly, for he knew by recent experience how great was the need for helpers where the sick and the dead so far outnumbered the whole and sound.

He had gone off into a reverie as he sat by the peat fire, whilst Roger and the ranger continued talking together eagerly of many matters, and he heard little of what passed until roused by the name of Basildene spoken more than once, and he commanded his drowsy and wearied faculties to listen to what the ranger was saying.

"Yes, the Black Death has found its way in behind those walls, men say. The old sorcerer tried all his black arts to keep it out; but there came by one this morning who told me that the old man had been seized, and was lying without a soul to go near him. They have but two servants that have ever stayed with them in that vile place, and these both thought the old man's dealings with the devil would at least suffice to keep the scourge away, and felt themselves safer there than elsewhere. But the moment he was seized they both ran away and left him, and there they say he is lying still, untended and unwatched -- if he be not dead by now. For as for the son, he had long since made his own preparations. He has shut himself up in a turret, with a plentiful supply of food; and he burns a great fire of scented wood and spices at the foot of the stairway, and another in the place he lives in, and never means to stir forth until the distemper has passed. One of the servants, before he fled, went to the stair foot and called to him to tell him that his father lay a-dying of the plague below; but he only laughed, and said it was time he went to the devil, who had been waiting so long for him; and the man rushed out of the house in affright at the sound of such terrible blasphemy and unnatural wickedness at a time like this."

Raymond's face took a new expression as he heard these words. The lassitude and weariness passed out of it, and a curious light crept into his eyes. Roger and the ranger continued to talk together of many things, but their silent companion still sat motionless beside the hearth. Over his face was stealing a look of purpose -- such purpose as follows a struggle of the spirit over natural distaste and disgust.

When the ranger presently left them, to see what simple preparations he could make for their comfort during the night, he motioned to Roger to come nearer, and looking steadily at him, he said:

"Roger, I am going to Basildene tonight, to see what human skill may do for the old Sanghurst. He is our enemy -- thine and mine -- therefore doubly is it our duty to minister to him in the hour of his extremity. I go forth this night to seek him. Wilt thou go with me? or dost thou fear to fall again under the sway of his evil mind, or his son's, if thou puttest foot within the halls of Basildene again?"

For a moment a look of strong repulsion crossed Roger's face. He shrank back a little, and looked as though he would have implored his young master to reconsider his resolution. But something in the luminous glance of those clear bright eyes restrained him, and presently some of their lofty purpose seemed to be infused into his own soul.

"If thou goest, I too will go," he said. "At thy side no harm from the Evil One can come nigh me. Have I not proved that a hundred times ere now? And the spell has long been broken off my neck and off my spirit. I fear neither the sorcerer nor his son. If it be for us -- if it be a call -- to go even to him in the hour of his need, I will go without a thought of fear. I go in the name of the Holy Virgin and her Son. I need not fear what man can do against me."

Great was the astonishment of the worthy ranger when he returned to hear the purpose upon which his guests were bent; but he had already imbibed some of that strange reverential admiration for Raymond which he so frequently inspired in those about him, and it did not for a moment occur to him to attempt to dissuade him from an object upon which his mind was bent.

The October night, though dark and moonless, was clear, and the stars were shining in the sky as the little procession started forth. The ranger insisted on being one of the number. Partly from curiosity, partly from sheer hatred of solitude, and a good deal from interest in his companions and their errand of mercy, he had decided to come with them, not merely to show them the way to Basildene, which he could find equally well by night as by day, but to see the result of their journey there, and take on with him to Guildford the description of the old sorcerer's home and his seizure there.

As they moved along through the whispering wood, the man, in low and awe-stricken tones, asked Roger of his old life there, and what it was that made him of such value to the Sanghursts. Raymond had never talked to the lad of that chapter in his past life, always abiding by Father Paul's advice to let him forget it as far as possible.

Now, however, Roger seemed able to speak of it calmly, and without the terror and emotion that any recollection of that episode used to cause him in past years. He could talk now of the strange trances into which he was thrown, and how he was made to see things at a distance and tell all he saw. Generally it was travellers upon the road he was instructed to watch, and forced to describe the contents of the mails they carried with them. Some instinct made the boy many times struggle hard against revealing the nature of the valuables he saw that these people had about them, knowing well how they would be plundered by his rapacious masters, after they had tempted them upon the treacherous swamp not far from Basildene, where, if they escaped with their lives, it would be as much as they could hope to do. But the truth was always wrung from him by suffering at last -- not that his body was in any way injured by them, save by the prolonged fasts inflicted upon him to intensify his gift of clairvoyance; but whilst in these trances they could make him believe that any sort of pain was being inflicted, and he suffered it exactly as though it had been actually done upon his bodily frame. Thus they forced from his reluctant lips every item of information they desired; and he knew when plunder was brought into the house, and stored in the deep underground cellars, how and whence it had come -- knew, too, that many and many a wretched traveller had been overwhelmed in the swamp who might have escaped with life and goods but for him.

It was the horror of this conviction, and the firm belief that he had been bound over body and soul to Satan, that was killing him by inches when the twin brothers effected his rescue. He did not always remember clearly in his waking moments what had passed in his hours of trance, but the horror of great darkness always remained with him; and at some moments everything would come upon him with a fearful rush, and he would remain stupefied and overwhelmed with anguish.

To all of this Raymond listened with great interest. He and John had read of some such phenomena in their books relating to the history of magic; and little as the hypnotic state was understood in those days, the young student had gained some slight insight into the matter, and was able to speak of his convictions to Roger with some assurance. He told him that though he verily believed such power over the wills of others to be in some sort the work of the devil, it might yet be successfully withstood by a resolute will, bound over to the determination to yield nothing to the strong and evil wills of others. And Roger, who had long since fought his fight and gained strength and confidence, was not afraid of venturing into the stronghold of wickedness -- less so than ever now that he might go at Raymond's side.

It was midnight before the lonely house was reached, and Raymond's heart beat high as he saw the outline of the old walls looming up against the gloomy sky. Not a light was to be seen burning in any of the windows, save a single gleam from out the turret at the corner away to the left; and though owls hooted round the place, and bats winged their uncertain flight, no other living thing was to be seen, and the silence of death seemed to brood over the house.

"This is the way to the door that is the only one used," said Stephen, "and we shall find it unlocked for certain, seeing that the servants have run away, and the young master will not go nigh his father, not though he were ten times dying. My lantern will guide us surely enough through the dark passages, and maybe young Roger will know where the old man is like to be found."

"Below stairs, I doubt not, amongst his bottles and books of magic," answered Roger, with a light shiver, as he passed through the doorway and found himself once again within the evil house. "He would think that in yon place no contagion could touch him. He spent his days and nights alike there. He scarce left it save to go abroad, or perchance to have a few hours' sleep in his bed. But the treasure is buried somewhere nigh at hand down in those cellars, though the spot I know not. And he fears to leave it night or day, lest some stealthy hand filch away the ill-gotten gain. Men thought he had the secret whereby all might be changed to gold, and indeed he would oftentimes bring pure gold out from the crucibles over his fire; but he had cast in first, unknown to those who so greedily watched him, the precious baubles he had stolen from travellers upon the road. He was a very juggler with his hands. I have watched him a thousand times at tricks which would have made the fortune of a travelling mountebank. But soft! here is the door at the head of the stairs. Take heed how that is opened, lest the hound fly at thy throat. Give me the lantern, and have thou thy huntsman's knife to plunge into his throat, else he may not let us pass down alive."

But when the door was opened, the hound, instead of growling or springing, welcomed them with whines of eager welcome. The poor beast was almost starved, and had been tamed by hunger to unwonted gentleness.

Raymond, who had food in his wallet, fed him with small pieces as they cautiously descended the stairs, for Basildene

would furnish them with more if need be; the larder and cellar there were famous in their way, though few cared to accept of their owner's hospitality.

Roger almost expected to find the great door of that subterranean room bolted and locked, so jealous was its owner of entrance being made there; but it yielded readily to the touch, and the three, with the hound, passed in together.

In a moment Raymond knew by the peculiar atmosphere, which even in so large a place was sickly and fetid, that they were in the presence of one afflicted with the true distemper. The place was in total darkness save for the light of the lantern the ranger carried; but there were lamps in sconces all along the wall, and these Roger quickly lighted, being familiar enough with this underground place, which it had been part of his duty to see to. The light from these lamps was pure and white and very bright, and lit up the weird vaulted chamber from end to end. It shone upon a stiffened figure lying prone upon the floor not far from the vaulted fireplace, upon whose hearth the embers lay black and cold; and Raymond, springing suddenly forward as his glance rested upon this figure, feared that he had come too late, and that the foe of his house had passed beyond the power of human aid.

"Help me to lift him," he said to Stephen; "and, Roger, kindle thou a fire upon the hearth. There may be life in him yet. We will try what we know. Yes, methinks his heart beats faintly; and the tokens of the distemper are plainly out upon him. Perchance he may yet live. Of late I have seen men rise up from their beds whom we have given up for lost."

Raymond was beginning to realize that the black boils, so often looked upon as the death tokens, were by no means in reality anything of the kind. As a matter of fact, of the cases that recovered, most, if not all, had the plague spots upon them. These boils were, in fact, nature's own effort at expelling the virulent poison from the system, and if properly treated by mild methods and poultices, in some cases really brought relief, so that the patient eventually recovered.

But the intensity of the poison, and its rapid action upon the human organs, made cases of recovery rare indeed at the outset, when the outbreak always came in its most virulent form; and truly the appearance of old Peter Sanghurst was such as almost to preclude hope of restoration. Tough as he was in constitution, the glaze of death seemed already in his eyes. He was all but pulseless and as cold as death, whilst the spasmodic twitchings of his limbs when he was lifted spoke of death rather than life.

Still Raymond would not give up hope. He had the fire kindled, and it soon blazed up hot and fierce, whilst the old man was wrapped in a rich furred cloak which Roger produced from a cupboard, and some hot cordial forced between his lips. After one or two spasmodic efforts which might have been purely muscular, he appeared to make an attempt to swallow, and in a few more minutes it became plain that he was really doing so, and with increasing ease each time. The blood began to run through his veins again, the chest heaved, and the breath was drawn in long, labouring gasps. At last the old man's eyes opened, and fixed themselves upon Raymond's face with a long, bewildered stare.

They asked him no questions. They had no desire that he should speak. His state was critical in the extreme. They had but come to minister to his stricken body. To cope with a mind such as his was a task that Raymond felt must be far beyond his own powers. He would have given much to have had Father Paul at this bedside for one brief hour, the more so as he saw the shrinking and terror creeping over the drawn, ashen face. Did his guilty soul know itself to be standing on the verge of eternity? and did the wretched man feel the horror of great darkness infolding him already?

All at once he spoke, and his words were like a cry of terror.

"Alicia! Alicia! how comest thou here?"

Raymond, to whom the words were plainly addressed, knew not how to answer them, or what they could mean; but the wild eyes were still fixed upon his face, and again the old man's excited words broke forth -- "Comest thou in this dread hour to claim thine own again? Alicia, Alicia! I do repent of my robbery. I would fain restore all. It has been a curse, and not a blessing; all has been against me -- all. I was a happy man before I unlawfully wrested Basildene from thee. Since I have done that deed naught has prospered with me; and here I am left to die alone, neglected by all, and thou alone -- thy spirit from the dead -- comes to taunt me in my last hour with my robbery and my sin. O forgive, forgive! Thou art dead. Spirits cannot inherit this world's goods, else would I restore all to thee. Tell me what I may do to make amends ere I die? But look not at me with those great eyes of thine, lightened with the fire of the Lord. I cannot bear it -- I cannot bear it! Tell me only how I may make restoration ere I am taken hence to meet my doom!"

Raymond understood then. The old man mistook him for his mother, who must have been about his own age when her wicked kinsman had ousted her from her possessions. Had they not told him in the old home how wondrous like to her he was growing? The clouded vision of the old man could see nothing but the face of the youth bending over him, and to him it was the face of an avenging angel. He clasped his hands together in an agony of supplication, and would have cast himself at the boy's feet had he not been restrained. The terrible remorse which so often falls upon a guilty conscience at the last hour had the miserable man in its clutches. His mind was too far weakened to think of his many crimes even blacker than this one. The sight of Raymond had awakened within him the memory of the defrauded woman, and he could think of nothing else. She had come back from the dead to put him in mind of his sin. If he could but make one act of restitution, he felt that he could almost die in peace. He gripped Raymond's hand hard, and looked with agonizing intensity into his face.

"I am not Alicia," he answered gently. "Her spirit is at rest and free, and no thought of malice or hatred could come from her now. I am her son. I know all -- how you drove her forth from Basildene, and made yourself an enemy; but you are an enemy no longer now, for the hand of God is upon you, and I am here in His name to strive to soothe your last hours, and point the way upwards whither she has gone."

"Alicia's son! Alicia's son!" almost screamed the old man. "Now Heaven be praised, for I can make restitution of all!"

Raymond raised his eyes suddenly at an exclamation from Roger, to see a tall dark figure standing motionless in the doorway, whilst Peter Sanghurst's fiery eyes were fixed upon his face with a gaze of the most deadly malevolence in

them.

CHAPTER XX. MINISTERING SPIRITS.

"The sickness in the town! Alackaday! Woe betide us all! It will be next within our very walls. Holy St. Catherine protect us! May all the Saints have mercy upon us! In Guildford! why, that is scarce five short miles away! And all the men and the wenches are flying as for dear life, though if what men say be true there be few enough places left to fly to! Why, Joan, why answerest thou not? I might as well speak to a block as to thee. Dost understand, girl, that the Black Death is at our very doors -- that all our people are flying from us? And yet thou sittest there with thy book, as though this were a time for idle fooling. I am fair distraught -- thy father and brother away and all! Canst thou not say something? Hast thou no feeling for thy mother? Here am I nigh distracted by fear and woe, and thou carriest about a face as calm as if this deadly scourge were but idle rumour."

Joan laid down her book, came across to her mother, and put her strong hand caressingly upon her shoulder. Poor, weak, timid Lady Vavasour had never been famed for strength of mind in any of the circumstances of life, and it was perhaps not wonderful that this scare, reaching her ears in her husband's absence, should drive her nearly frantic with terror.

For many days reports of a most disquieting nature had been pouring in. Persons who came to Woodcrych on business or pleasure spoke of nothing but the approach of the Black Death. Some affected to make light of it, protested that far too much was being made of the statements of ignorant and terrified people, and asserted boldly that it would not attack the well-fed and prosperous classes; whilst others declared that the whole country would speedily be depopulated, and whispered gruesome tales of those scenes of death and horror which were shortly to become so common. Then the inhabitants of isolated houses like Woodcrych received visits from travelling peddlers and mountebanks of all sorts, many disguised in Oriental garb, who brought with them terrible stories of the spread of the distemper, at the same time offering for sale certain herbs and simples which they declared to be never-failing remedies in case any person were attacked by the disease; or else they besought the credulous to purchase amulets or charms, or in some cases alleged relics blessed by the Pope, which if always worn upon the person would effectually prevent the onset of the malady. After listening greedily (as the servants in those houses always loved to do) to any story of ghastly horror which these impostors chose to tell them, they were thankful to buy at almost any price some antidote against the fell disease; and even Lady Vavasour had made many purchases for herself and her daughter of quack medicines and talismans or relics.

But hitherto no one had dared to whisper how fast the distemper was encroaching in this very district. Men still spoke of it as though it were far off, and might likely enough die out without spreading, so that now it was with terror akin to distraction that the poor lady heard through her servants that it had well-nigh reached their own doors. One of the lackeys had had occasion to ride over to the town that very day, and had come back with the news that people there were actually dying in the streets. He had seen two men fall down, either dead or stricken for death, before he could turn his beast away and gallop off, and the shops were shut and the church bell was tolling, whilst all men looked in each other's faces as if afraid of what they might see there.

Sir Hugh and his son were far away from Woodcrych at one of their newer possessions some forty miles distant, and in their absence Lady Vavasour felt doubly helpless. She shook off Joan's hand, and recommenced her agitated pacing. Her daughter's calmness was incomprehensible apathy to her. It fretted her even to see it.

"Thou hast no feeling, Joan; thou hast a heart of stone," she cried, bursting into weak weeping. "Why canst thou not give me help or counsel of some sort? What are we to do? What is to become of us? Wouldst have us all stay shut up in this miserable place to die together?"

Joan did not smile at the feeble petulance of the half-distracted woman. Indeed it was no time for smiles of any sort. The peril around and about was a thing too real and too fearful in its character to admit of any lightness of speech; and the girl did not even twit her mother with the many sovereign remedies purchased as antidotes against infection, though her own disbelief in these had brought down many laments from Lady Vavasour but a few days previously.

Brought face to face with the reality of the peril, these wonderful medicines did not inspire the confidence the sanguine purchasers had hoped when they spent their money upon them. Lady Vavasour's hope seemed now to lie in flight and flight alone. She was one of those persons whose instinct is always for flight, whatever the danger to be avoided; and now she was eagerly urging upon Joan the necessity for immediate departure, regardless of the warning of her calmer-minded daughter that probably the roads would be far more full of peril than their own house could ever be, if they strictly shut it up, lived upon the produce of their own park and dairy, and suffered none to go backwards and forwards to bring the contagion with them.

Whether Joan's common-sense counsel would have ever prevailed over the agitated panic of her mother is open to doubt, but all chance of getting Lady Vavasour to see reason was quickly dissipated by a piece of news brought to the mother and daughter by a white-faced, shivering servant.

The message was that the lackey who had but lately returned from Guildford, whilst sitting over the kitchen fire with his cup of mead, had complained of sudden and violent pains, had vomited and fallen down upon the floor in a fit; whereat every person present had fled in wild dismay, perfectly certain that he had brought home the distemper with him, and that every creature in the house was in deadly peril.

Lady Vavasour's terror and agitation were pitiful to see. In vain Joan strove to soothe and quiet her. She would listen to no words of comfort. Not another hour would she remain in that house. The servants, some of whom had already fled, were beginning to take the alarm in good earnest, and were packing up their worldly goods, only anxious to be gone. Horses and pack horses were being already prepared, for Lady Vavasour had given half-a-dozen orders for departure before she had made up her mind what to do or where to go.

Now she was resolved to ride straight to her husband, without drawing rein, or exchanging a word with any person upon the road. Such of the servants as wished to accompany her might do so; the rest might do as they pleased. Her one idea was to be gone, and that as quickly as possible.

She hurried away to change her dress for her long ride, urging Joan to lose not a moment in doing the same; but what was her dismay on her return to find her daughter still in her indoor dress, though she was forwarding her mother's departure by filling the saddlebags with provisions for the way, and laying strict injunctions upon the trusty old servants who were about to travel with her to give every care to their mistress, and avoid so far as was possible any place where there was likelihood of catching the contagion. They were to bait the horses in the open, and not to take them under any roof, and all were to carry their own victuals and drink with them. But that she herself was not to make one of the party was plainly to be learned by these many and precise directions.

This fact became patent to the mother directly she came downstairs, and at once she broke into the most incoherent expression of dismay and terror; but Joan, after letting her talk for a few minutes to relieve her feelings, spoke her answer in brief, decisive sentences.

"Mother, it is impossible for me to go. Old Bridget, as you know, is ill. It is not the distemper, it is one of the attacks of illness to which she has been all her life subject; but not one of these foolish wenches will now go near her. She has nursed and tended me faithfully from childhood. To leave her here alone in this great house, to live or die as she might, is impossible. Here I remain till she is better. Think not of me and fear not for me. I have no fears for myself. Go to our father; he will doubtless be anxious for news of us. Linger not here. Men say that those who fear the distemper are ever the first victims. Farewell, and may health and safety be with you. My place is here, and here I will remain till I see my way before me."

Lady Vavasour wept and lamented, but did not delay her own departure on account of her obstinate daughter. She gave Joan up for lost, but she would not stay to share her fate. She had already seen something of the quiet firmness of the girl, which her father sometimes cursed as stubbornness, and she felt that words would only be thrown away upon her. Lamenting to the last, she mounted her palfrey, and set her train of servants in motion; whilst Joan stood upon the top step of the flight to the great door, and waved her hand to her mother till the cortege disappeared down the drive. A brave and steadfast look was upon her face, and the sigh she heaved as she turned at last away seemed one of relief rather than of sorrow.

Lonely as might be her situation in this deserted house, it could not but be a relief to her to feel that her timid mother would shortly be under the protection of her husband, and more at rest than she could ever hope to be away from his side. He could not keep the distemper at bay, but he could often quiet the restless complaints and causeless terrors of his weak-minded spouse.

As she turned back into the silent house she was aware of two figures in the great hall that were strange there, albeit she knew both well as belonging to two of the oldest retainers of the place, an old man and his wife, who had lived the best part of their lives in Sir Hugh's service at Woodcrych.

"Why, Betty -- and you also, Andrew -- what do ye here?" asked Joan, with a grave, kindly smile at the aged couple.

With many humble salutations and apologies the old folks explained that they had heard of the hasty and promiscuous flight of the whole household, headed by the mistress, and also that the "sweet young lady" was left all alone because she refused to leave old Bridget; and that they had therefore ventured to come up to the great house to offer their poor services, to wait upon her and to do for her all that lay in their power, and this not for her only, but for the two sick persons already in the house.

"For, as I do say to my wife there," said old Andrew, though he spoke in a strange rustic fashion that would scarce be intelligible to our modern ears, "a body can but die once; and for aught I see, one might as easy die of the Black Death as of the rheumatics that sets one's bones afire, and cripples one as bad as being in one's coffin at once. So I be a-going to look to poor Willum, as they say is lying groaning still upon the kitchen floor, none having dared to go anigh him since he fell down in a fit. And if I be took tending on him, I know that you will take care of my old woman, and see that she does not want for bread so long as she lives."

Joan put out her soft, strong hand and laid it upon the hard, wrinkled fist of the old servant. There was a suspicious sparkle in her dark eyes.

"I will not disappoint that expectation, good Andrew," she said. "Go if you will, whilst we think what may best be done for Bridget. Later on I will come myself to look at William. I have no fear of the distemper; and of one thing I am very sure -- that it is never kept away by being fled from and avoided. I have known travellers who have seen it, and have been with the sick, and have never caught the contagion, whilst many fled from it in terror only to be overtaken and struck down as they so ran. We are in God's hands -- forsaken of all but Him. Let us trust in His mercy, do our duty calmly and firmly, and leave the rest to Him."

Later in the day, upheld by this same lofty sense of calmness and trust, Joan, after doing all in her power to make comfortable the old nurse, who was terribly distressed at hearing how her dear young lady had been deserted, left her to the charge of Betty, and went down again through the dark and silent house to the great kitchen, where William was still to be found, reclining now upon a settle beside the glowing hearth, and looking not so very much the worse for the seizure of the afternoon.

"I do tell he it were but the colic," old Andrew declared, rubbing his crumpled hands together in the glow of the fire. "He were in a rare fright when I found he -- groaning out that the Black Death had hold of he, and that he were a dead man; but I told he that he was the liveliest corpse as I'd set eyes on this seventy years; and so after a bit he heartened up, and found as he could get upon his feet after all. It were naught but the colic in his inside; and he needn't be afraid of nothing worse."

Old Andrew proved right. William's sudden indisposition had been but the result of fright and hard riding, followed by copious draughts of hot beer taken with a view to keeping away the contagion. Very soon he was convinced of this himself; and when he understood how the whole household had fled from him, and that the only ones who had stayed to see that he did not die alone and untended were these old souls and their adored young lady, his heart was filled with loving gratitude and devotion, and he lost no opportunity of doing her service whenever it lay in his power.

Strange and lonely indeed was the life led by those five persons shut up in that large house, right away from all sights and sounds from the world without. The silence and the solitude at last became well-nigh intolerable, and when Bridget had recovered from her attack of illness and was going about briskly again, Joan took the opportunity of speaking her mind to her fully and freely.

"Why do we remain shut up within these walls, when there is so much work to be done in the world? Bridget, thou knowest that I love not my life as some love it. Often it seems to me as though by death alone I may escape a frightful doom. All around us our fellow creatures are dying -- too often alone and untended, like dogs in a ditch. Good Bridget, I have money in the house, and we have health and strength and courage; and thou art an excellent good nurse in all cases of sickness. Thou hast taught me some of thy skill, and I long to show it on behalf of these poor stricken souls, so often deserted by their nearest and dearest in the hour of their deadliest peril. If I go, wilt thou go with me? I trow that thou art a brave woman --"

"And if I were not thou wouldst shame me into bravery, Sweetheart," answered the old woman fondly, as she looked into the earnest face of her young mistress. "I too have been thinking of the poor stricken souls. I would gladly risk the peril in such a labour of love. As old Andrew says, we can but die once. The Holy Saints will surely look kindly upon those who die at their post, striving to do as they would have done had they been here with us upon earth."

And when William heard what his young mistress was about to do, he declared that he too would go with her, and assist with the offices to the sick or the dead. He still had a vivid recollection of the moments when he had believed himself left alone to die of the distemper; and fellow feeling and generosity getting the better of his first unreasoning terror, he was as eager as Joan herself to enter upon this labour of love. Bridget, who was a great botanist, in the practical fashion of many old persons in those days, knew more about the properties of herbs than anybody in the country round, and she made a great selection from her stores, and brewed many pungent concoctions which she gave to her young mistress and William to drink, to ward off any danger from infection. She also gave them, to hang about their necks, bags containing aromatic herbs, whose strong and penetrating odour dominated all others, and was likely enough to do good in purifying the atmosphere about the wearer.

There was no foolish superstition in Bridget's belief in her simples. She did not regard them as charms; but she had studied their properties and had learned their value, and knew them to possess valuable properties for keeping the blood pure, and so rendering much smaller any chance of imbibing the poison.

At dusk that same evening, William, who had been out all day, returned, and requested speech of his young mistress. He was ushered into the parlour where she sat, with her old nurse for her companion; and standing just within the threshold he told his tale.

"I went across to the town today. I thought I would see if there was any lodging to be had where you, fair Mistress, might conveniently abide whilst working in that place. Your worshipful uncle's house I found shut up and empty, not a soul within the doors -- all fled, as most of the better sort of the people are fled, and every window and door fastened up. Half the houses, too, are marked with black or red crosses, to show that those within are afflicted with the distemper. There are watchmen in the streets, striving to keep within their doors all such as have the Black Death upon them; but these be too few for the task, and the maddened wretches are continually breaking out, and running about the streets crying and shouting, till they drop down in a fit, and lie there, none caring for them. By day there be dead and dying in every street; but at night a cart comes and carries the corpses off to the great grave outside the town."

"And is there no person to care for the sick in all the town?" asked Joan, with dilating eyes.

"There were many monks at first; but the distemper seized upon them worse than upon the townfolks, and now there is scarce one left. Soon after the distemper broke out, Master John de Brocas threw open his house to receive all stricken persons who would come thither to be tended, and it has been full to overflowing night and day ever since. I passed by the house as I came out, and around the door there were scores of wretched creatures, all stricken with the distemper, praying to be taken in. And I saw Master John come out to them and welcome them in, lifting a little child from the arms of an almost dying woman, and leading her in by the hand. When I saw that, I longed to go in myself and offer myself to help in the work; but I thought my first duty was to you, sweet Mistress, and I knew if once I had told my tale you would not hold me back."

"Nay; and I will go thither myself, and Bridget with me," answered Joan, with kindling eyes. "We will start with the first light of the new-born day. They will want the help of women as well as of men within those walls."

"Good Bridget, look well to thy store of herbs, and take ample provision of all such as will allay fever and destroy the poison that works in the blood. For methinks there will be great work to be done by thee and me ere another sun has set; and every aid that nature can give us we will thankfully make use of."

"Your palfrey is yet in the stable, fair Mistress," said William, "and there be likewise the strong sorrel from the farm, whereupon Bridget can ride pillion behind me. Shall I have them ready at break of day tomorrow? We shall then gain the town before the day's work has well begun."

"Do so," answered Joan, with decision. "I would fain have started by night; but it will be wiser to tarry for the light of day. Good William, I thank thee for thy true and faithful service. We are going forth to danger and perchance to death; but we go in a good cause, and we have no need to fear."

And when William had retired, she turned to Bridget with shining eyes, and said:

"Ah, did I not always say that John was the truest knight of them all? The others have won their spurs; they have won the applause of men. They have all their lives looked down on John as one unable to wield a sword, one well-nigh unworthy of the ancient name he bears. But which of you gay knights would have done what he is doing now? Who of all of them would stand forth fearless and brave in the teeth of this far deadlier peril than men ever face upon the battlefield? I trow not one of them would have so stood before a peril like this. They have left that for the true Knight of the Cross!"

At dawn next day Joan said adieu to her old home, and set her face steadily forward towards Guildford. The chill freshness of the November air was pleasant after the long period of oppressive warmth and closeness which had gone before, and now that the leaves had really fallen from the trees, there was less of the heavy humidity in the air that seemed to hold the germs of distemper and transmit them alike to man and beast.

The sun was not quite up as they started; but as they entered the silent streets of Guildford it was shining with a golden glory in strange contrast to the scenes upon which it would shortly have to look. Early morning was certainly the best time for Joan to enter the town, for the cart had been its round, the dead had been removed from the streets, and the houses were quieter than they often were later in the day. Once in a way a wild shriek or a burst of demoniacal laughter broke from some window; and once a girl, with hair flying wildly down her back, flew out of one of the houses sobbing and shrieking in a frenzy of terror, and was lost to sight down a side alley before Joan could reach her side.

Pursuing their way through the streets, they turned down the familiar road leading to John's house, and dismounting at the gate, Joan gave up her palfrey to William to seek stabling for it behind, and walked up with Bridget to the open door of the house.

That door was kept wide open night and day, and none who came were ever turned away. Joan entered the hall, to find great fires burning there, and round these fires were crowded shivering and moaning beings, some of the latest victims of the distemper, who had been brought within the hospitable shelter of that house of mercy, but who had not yet been provided with beds; for the numbers coming in day by day were even greater than the vacancies made by deaths constantly occurring in the wards (as they would now be called). Helpers were few, and of these one or another would be stricken down, and carried away to burial after a few hours' illness.

Of the wretched beings grouped about the fires several were little children, and Joan's heart went out in compassion to the suffering morsels of humanity. Taking a little moaning infant upon her knee, and letting two more pillow their weary beads against her dress, she signed to Bridget to remove her riding cloak, which she gently wrapped about the scantily-clothed form of a woman extended along the ground at her feet, to whom the children apparently belonged. The woman was dying fast, as her glazing eyes plainly showed.

Probably her case was altogether hopeless; but Joan was not yet seasoned to such scenes, and it seemed too terrible to sit by idle whilst a fellow creature actually died not two yards away. Surely somewhere within that house aid could be found. The girl rose gently from her seat, and still clasping the stricken infant in her arms, she moved towards one of the closed doors of the lower rooms.

Opening this softly, she looked in, and saw a row of narrow pallet beds down each side of the room, and every bed was tenanted. Sounds of moaning, the babble of delirious talk, and thickly-uttered cries for help or mercy now reached her ears, and the terrible breath of the plague for the first time smote upon her senses in all its full malignity. She recoiled for an instant, and clutched at the bag around her neck, which she was glad enough to press to her face.

A great fire was burning in the hearth, and all that could be done to lessen the evil had been accomplished. There was one attendant in this room, which was set apart for men, and he was just now bending over a delirious youth, striving to restrain his wild ravings and to induce him to remain in his bed. This attendant had his back to Joan, but she saw by his actions and his calm self-possession that he was no novice to his task; and she walked softly through the pestilential place, feeling that she should not appeal to him for help in vain.

As the sound of the light, firm tread sounded upon the bare boards of the floor, the attendant suddenly lifted himself and turned round. Joan uttered a quick exclamation of surprise, which was echoed by the person in question.

"Raymond!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Joan! Thou here, and at such a time as this!"

And then they both stood motionless for a few long moments, feeling that despite the terrible scenes around and about them, the very gates of Paradise had opened before them, turning everything around them to gold.

CHAPTER XXI. THE OLD, OLD STORY

The scourge had passed. It had swept over the length and breadth of the region of which Guildford formed the centre, and had done its terrible work of destruction there, leaving homes desolated and villages almost depopulated. It was still raging in London, and was hurrying northward and eastward with all its relentless energy and deadliness; but in most of the places thus left behind its work seemed to be fully accomplished, and there were no fresh cases.

People began to go about their business as of old. Those who had fled returned to their homes, and strove to take up the scattered threads of life as best they might. In many cases whole families had been swept out of existence; in others (more truly melancholy cases), one member had escaped when all the rest had perished. The religious houses were crowded with the helpless orphans of the sufferers in the epidemic, and the summer crops lay rotting in the fields for want of labourers to get them in.

John's house in Guildford had by this time reassumed its normal aspect. The last of the sick who had not been carried to the grave, but had recovered to return home, had now departed, with many a blessing upon the master, whose act of piety and charity had doubtless saved so many lives at this crisis. The work the young man had set himself to do had been nobly accomplished; but the task had been one beyond his feeble strength, and he now lay upon a couch of sickness, knowing well, if others did not, that his days were numbered.

He had fallen down in a faint upon the very day that the last patient had been able to leave his doors. For a moment it was feared that the poison of the distemper had fastened upon him; but it was not so. The attack was but due to the failure of the heart's action -- nature, tried beyond her powers of endurance, asserting herself at last -- and they laid him down in his old favourite haunt, with his books around him, having made the place look like it did before the house had been turned into a veritable hospital and mortuary.

When John opened his eyes at last it was to find Joan bending over him; and looking into her face with his sweet, tired smile, he said:

"You will not leave me, Joan?"

"No," she answered gently; "I will not leave you yet. Bridget and I will nurse you. All our other helpers are themselves worn out; but we have worked only a little while. We have not borne the burden and heat of that terrible day."

"You came in a good hour -- like angels of mercy that you were," said John, feeling, now that the long strain and struggle was over, a wonderful sense of rest and peace. "I thought it was a dream when first I saw your face, Joan -- when I saw you moving about amongst the sick, always with a child in your arms. I have never been able to ask how you came hither. In those days we could never stay to talk. There are many things I would fain ask now. How come you here alone, save for your old nurse? Are your parents dead likewise?"

"I know not that myself," answered Joan, with the calmness that comes from constantly standing face to face with death. "I have heard naught of them these many weeks. William goes oftentimes to Woodcrych to seek for news of them there. But they have not returned, and he can learn nothing."

And then whilst John lay with closed eyes, his face so white and still that it looked scarce the face of a living man, Joan told him all her tale; and he understood then how it was that she had suddenly appeared amongst them like a veritable angel of mercy.

When her story was done, he opened his eyes and said:

"Where is Raymond?"

"They told me he was sleeping an hour since," answered Joan. "He has sore need of sleep, for he has been watching and working night and day for longer than I may tell. He looks little more than a shadow himself; and he has had Roger to care for of late, since he fell ill."

"But Roger is recovering?"

"Yes. It was the distemper, but in its least deadly form, and he is already fast regaining his strength.

"Has Raymond been the whole time with you? I have never had the chance to speak to him of himself."

And a faint soft flush awoke in Joan's cheek, whilst a smile hovered round the corners of her lips.

"Nor I; yet there be many things I would fain ask of him. He went forth to be with Father Paul when first the Black Death made its fatal entry into the country; and from that day forth I heard naught of him until he came hither to me. We will ask him of himself when he comes to join us. It will be like old times come back again when thou, Joan, and he and I gather about the Yule log, and talk together of ourselves and others."

A common and deadly peril binds very closely together those who have faced it and fought it hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder; and in those days of divided houses, broken lives, and general disruption of all ordinary routine in domestic existence, things that in other times would appear strange and unnatural were now taken as a matter of course. It did not occur to Joan as in any way remarkable that she should remain in John's house, nursing him with the help of Bridget, and playing a sister's part until some of his own kith or kin returned. He had been deserted by all of his own name. She herself knew not whether she had any relatives living. Circumstances had thrown her upon his hospitality, and she had looked upon him almost as a brother ever since the days of her childhood.

She knew that he was dying; there was that in his face which told as much all too well to those who had long been looking upon death. To have left him at such a moment would have seemed far more strange and unnatural than to remain. In those times of terror stranger things were done daily, no man thinking aught of it.

So she smiled as she heard John's last words, trying to recall the day when she had first seen Raymond at Master Bernard's house, when he had seemed to her little more than a boy, albeit a very knightly and chivalrous one. Now her feelings towards him were far different: not that she thought less of his knightliness and chivalry, but that she was half afraid to let her mind dwell too much upon him and her thoughts of him; for of late, since they had been toiling together in the hand-to-hand struggle against disease and death, she was conscious of a feeling toward him altogether new in her experience, and his face was seldom out of her mental vision. The sound of his voice was ever in her ears; and she always knew, by some strange intuition, when he was near, whether she could see him or not.

She knew even as John spoke that he was approaching; and as the latch of the door clicked a soft wave of colour rose in her pale cheek, and she turned her head with a gesture that spoke a mute welcome.

"They tell me that thou art sick, good John," said Raymond, coming forward into the bright circle of the firelight.

The dancing flames lit up that pale young face, worn and hollow with long watching and stress of work, and showed that Raymond had changed somewhat during those weeks of strange experience. Some of the dreaminess had gone out of the eyes, to be replaced by a luminous steadfastness of expression which had always been there, but was now greatly intensified. Pure, strong, and noble, the face was that of a man rather than a boy, and yet the bright, almost boyish, alertness and eagerness were still quickly apparent when he entered into conversation, and turned from one companion to another. It was the same Raymond -- yet with a difference; and both of his companions scanned him with some curiosity as he took his seat beside John's couch and asked of his cousin's welfare.

"Nay, trouble not thyself over me; thou knowest that my life's sands are well-nigh run out. I have been spared for this work, that thou, my Raymond, gavest me to do. I am well satisfied, and thou must be the same, my kind cousin. Only let me have thee with me to the end -- and sweet Mistress Joan, if kind fortune will so favour us. And tell us now of thyself, Raymond, and how it fared with thee before thou camest hither. Hast thou been with Father Paul? And if so, why didst thou leave him? Is he, too, dead?"

"He was not when we parted; he went forward to London when he bid me come to see how it fared with thee, good John, and bring thee his blessing. I should have been with thee one day earlier, save that I turned aside to Basildene, where I heard that the old man lay dying alone."

"Basildene!" echoed both his hearers quickly. "Has the Black Death been there?"

"Ay, and the old man who is called a sorcerer is dead. To me it was given to soothe his dying moments, and give him such Christian burial as men may have when there be no priest at hand to help them to their last rest. I was in time for that."

"Peter Sanghurst dead!" mused John thoughtfully; and looking up at Raymond, he said quickly, "Did he know who and what thou wert?"

"He did; for in his delirium he took me for my mother, and his terror was great, knowing her to be dead. When I told him who I was, he was right glad; and he would fain have made over to me the deeds by which he holds Basildene -- the deeds my mother left behind her in her flight, and which he seized upon. He would fain have made full reparation for that one evil deed of his life; but his son, who had held aloof hitherto, and would have left his father to die untended and alone --"

Joan had uttered a little exclamation of horror and disgust; now she asked, quickly and almost nervously:

"The son -- Peter Sanghurst? O Raymond, was that bad man there?"

"Yes; and he knows now who and what I am, whereby his old hatred to me is bitterly increased. He holds that I have hindered and thwarted him before in other matters. Now that he knows I have a just and lawful claim on Basildene, which one day I will make good, he hates me with a tenfold deadlier hatred."

"Hates you -- when you came to his father in his last extremity? How can he dare to hate you now?"

Raymond smiled a shadowy smile as he looked into the fire.

"Methinks he knows little of filial love. He knew that his father had been stricken with the distemper, but he left him to die alone. He would not have come nigh him at all, save that he heard sounds in the house, and feared that robbers had entered, and that his secret treasure hoards might fall into their hands. He had come down armed to the teeth to resist such marauders, being willing rather to stand in peril of the distemper than to lose his ill-gotten gold. But he found none such as he thought; yet having come, and having learned who and what manner of man I was, he feared to leave me alone with his father, lest I should be told the secret of the hidden hoard, which the old man longed to tell me but dared not. Doubtless the parchment he wished to place in my hands is there; but his son hovered ever within earshot, and the old man dared not speak. Yet with his last breath he called me lord of Basildene, and charged me to remove from it the curse which in his own evil days had fallen upon the place."

"Peter Sanghurst will not love you the more for that," said John.

"Verily no; yet methinks he can scarce hate me more than he does and has done for long."

"He is no insignificant foe," was the thoughtful rejoinder. "His hate may be no light thing."

"He has threatened me oft and savagely," answered Raymond, "and yet no harm has befallen me therefrom."

"Why has he threatened thee?" asked Joan breathlessly; "what hast thou done to raise his ire?"

"We assisted Roger, the woodman's son, to escape from that vile slavery at Basildene, of which doubtless thou hast heard, sweet lady. That was the first cause of offence."

"And the second?"

Raymond's clear gaze sought her face for a moment, and Joan's dark eyes kindled and then slowly dropped.

"The second was on thy account, sweet Joan," said Raymond, with a curious vibration in his voice. "He saw us once together -- it is long ago now -- and he warned me how I meddled to thwart him again. I scarce understood him then, though I knew that he would fain have won this fair hand, but that thou didst resolutely withhold it. Now that I have reached man's estate I understand him better. Joan, he is still bent upon having this hand. In my hearing he swore a

great oath that by fair means or foul it should be his one day. He is a man of resolute determination, and, now that his father no longer lives, of great wealth too, and wealth is power. Thou hast thwarted him till he is resolved to humble thee at all cost. I verily believe to be avenged for all thou hast cost him would be motive enough to make him compass heaven and earth to win thee. What sayest thou? To withstand him may be perilous --"

"To wed him would be worse than death," said Joan, in a very low tone. "I will never yield, if I die to save myself from him."

Unconsciously these two had lowered their voices. John had dropped asleep beside the fire with the ease of one exhausted by weakness and long watching. Joan and Raymond were practically alone together. There was a strange light upon the face of the youth, and into his pale face there crept a flush of faint red.

"Joan," he said, in low, firm tones that shook a little with the intensity of his earnestness, "when I saw thee first, and knew thee for a very queen amongst women, my boyish love and homage was given all to thee. I dreamed of going forth to win glory and renown, that I might come and lay my laurels at thy feet, and win one sweet answering smile, one kindly word of praise from thee. Yet here am I, almost at man's estate, and I have yet no laurels to bring to thee. I have but one thing to offer -- the deep true love of a heart that beats alone for thee. Joan, I am no knightly suitor, I have neither gold nor lands -- though one day it may be I may have both, and thy father would doubtless drive me forth from his doors did I present myself to him as a suitor for this fair hand. But, Joan, I love thee -- I would lay down my life to serve thee -- and I know that thou mayest one day be in peril from him who is also mine own bitter foe. Wilt thou then give me the right to fight for thee, to hold this hand before all the world and do battle for its owner, as only he may hope to do who holds it, as I do this moment, by that owner's free will? Give me but leave to call it mine, and I will dare all and do all to win it. Sweet Mistress Joan, my words are few and poor; but could my heart speak for me, it would plead eloquent music. Thou art the sun and star of my life. Tell me, may I hope some day to win thy love?"

Joan had readily surrendered her hand to his clasp, and doubtless this had encouraged Raymond to proceed in his tale of love.

He certainly had not intended thus to commit himself, poor and unknown and portionless as he was, with everything still to win; but a power stronger than he could resist drew him on from word to word and phrase to phrase, and a lovely colour mantled in Joan's cheek as he proceeded, till at last she put forth her other hand and laid it in his, saying:

"Raymond, I love thee now. My heart is thine and thine alone. Go forth, if thou wilt, and win honour and renown -- but thou wilt never win a higher honour and glory than I have seen thee winning day by day and hour by hour here in this very house -- and come back when and as thou wilt. Thou wilt find me waiting for thee -- ever ready, ever the same. I am thine for life or death. When thou callest me I will come."

It was a bold pledge for a maiden to give in those days of harsh parental rule; yet Joan gave it without shrinking or fear. That this informal betrothal might be long before it could hope to be consummated, both the lovers well knew; that there might be many dangers lying before them, they did not attempt to deny. It was no light matter to have thus plighted their troth, when Raymond was still poor and nameless, and Joan, in her father's estimation, plighted to the Sanghurst. But both possessed brave and resolute spirits, that did not shrink or falter; and joyfully happy in the security of their great love, they could afford for a time to forget the world.

Raymond drew from within his doublet the half ring he had always carried about with him, and placed it upon the finger of his love. Joan, on her side, drew from her neck a black agate heart she had always worn there, and gave it to Raymond, who put it upon the silver cord which had formerly supported his circlet of the double ring.

"So long as I live that heart shall hang there," he said. "Never believe that I am dead until thou seest the heart brought thee by another. While I live I part not with it."

"Nor I with thy ring," answered Joan, proudly turning her hand about till the firelight flashed upon it.

And then they drew closer together, and whispered together, as lovers love to do, of the golden future lying before them; and Raymond told of his mother and her dying words, and his love, in spite of all that had passed there, for the old house of Basildene, and asked Joan if they two together would be strong enough to remove the curse which had been cast over the place by the evil deeds of its present owners.

"Methinks thou couldst well do that thyself, my faithful knight," answered Joan, with a great light in her eyes; "for methinks all evil must fly thy presence, as night flies from the beams of day. Art thou not pledged to a high and holy service? and hast thou not proved ere now how nobly thou canst keep that pledge?"

At that moment John stirred in his sleep and opened his eyes. There was in them that slightly bewildered look that comes when the mind has been very far away in some distant dreamland, and where the weakened faculties have hardly the strength to reassert themselves.

"Joan," he said -- "Joan, art thou there? art thou safe?"

She rose and bent over him smilingly.

"Here by thy side, good John, and perfectly safe. Where should I be?"

"And Raymond too?"

"Raymond too. What ails thee, John, that thou art so troubled?"

He smiled slightly as he looked round more himself.

"It must have been a dream, but it was a strangely vivid one. Belike it was our talk of a short while back; for I thought thou wast fleeing from the malice of the Sanghurst, and that Raymond was in his power, awaiting his malignant rage and vengeance. I know not how it would have ended -- I was glad to wake. I fear me, sweet Joan, that thou wilt yet have a hard battle ere thou canst cast loose from the toil spread for thee by yon bad man."

Joan threw back her head with a queenly gesture.

"Fear not for me, kind John, for now I am no longer alone to fight my battle. I have Raymond for my faithful knight and champion. Raymond and I have plighted our troth this very day. Let Peter Sanghurst do his worst; it will take a stronger hand than his to sunder love like ours!"

John's pale face kindled with sympathy and satisfaction. He looked from one to the other and held out his thin hands.

"My heart's wishes and blessings be with you both," he said. "I have so many times thought of some such thing, and longed to see it accomplished. There may be clouds athwart your path, but there will be sunshine behind the cloud. Joan, thou hast chosen thy knight worthily and well. It may be that men will never call him knight. It may be that he will not have trophies rich and rare to lay at thy feet. But thou and I know well that there is a knighthood not of this world, and in that order of chivalry his spurs have already been won, and he will not, with thee at his side, ever be tempted to forget his high and holy calling. For thou wilt be the guiding star of his life; and thou too art dedicated to serve."

There was silence for a few moments in the quiet room. John lay back on his pillows panting somewhat, and with that strange unearthly light they had seen there before deepening in his eyes. They had observed that look often of late -- as though he saw right through them and beyond to a glory unspeakable, shut out for the time from their view. Joan put out her hand and took that of Raymond, as if there was assurance in the warm human clasp. But their eyes were still fixed upon John's face, which was changing every moment.

He had done much to form both their minds, this weakly scion of the De Brocas house, whose life was held by those who bore his name to be nothing but a failure. It was from him they had both imbibed those thoughts and aspirations which had been the first link drawing them together, and which had culminated in an act of the highest self-sacrifice and devotion. And now it seemed to him, as he lay there looking at them, the two beings upon earth that he loved the best (for Raymond was more to him than a brother, and Joan the one woman whom, had things gone otherwise with him, he would fain have made his wife), that he might well leave his work in their hands -- that they would carry on to completion the nameless labour of love which he had learned to look upon as the highest form of chivalry.

"Raymond," he said faintly.

Raymond came and bent down over him.

"I am close beside thee, John."

"I know it. I feel it. I am very happy. Raymond, thou wilt not forget me?"

"Never, John, never."

"I have been very happy in thy brotherly love and friendship. It has been very sweet to me. Raymond, thou wilt not forget thy vow? Thou wilt ever be true to that higher life that we have spoken of so oft together?"

Raymond's face was full of deep and steadfast purpose.

"I will be faithful, I will be true," he answered. "God helping me, I will be true to the vow we have made together. Joan shall be my witness now, as I make it anew to thee here."

"Not for fame or glory or praise of man alone," murmured John, his voice growing fainter and fainter, "but first for the glory of God and His honour, and then for the poor, the feeble, the helpless, the needy. To be a champion to such as have none to help them, to succour the distressed, to comfort the mourner, to free those who are wrongfully oppressed, even though kings be the oppressors -- that is the true courage, the true chivalry; that is the service to which thou, my brother, art pledged."

Raymond bent his head, whilst Joan's clasp tightened on his hand. They both knew that John was dying, but they had looked too often upon death to fear it now. They did not summon any one to his side. No priest was to be found at that time, and John had not long since received the Sacrament with one who had lately died in the house. There was no restlessness or pain in his face, only a great peace and rest. His voice died away, but he still looked at Raymond, as though to the last he would fain see before his eyes the face he had grown to love best upon earth.

His breath grew shorter and shorter. Raymond thought he made a sign to him to bend his head nearer. Stooping over him, he caught the faintly-whispered words:

"Tell my father not to grieve that I did not die a knight. He has his other sons; and I have been very happy. Tell him that -- happier, I trow, than any of them --"

There were a brief silence and a slight struggle for breath, then one whispered phrase:

"I will arise and go to my Father --"

Those were the last words spoken by John de Brocas.

CHAPTER XXII. THE BLACK VISOR.

"Brother, this is like old times," said Gaston, his hand upon Raymond's shoulder as they stood side by side in the extreme prow of the vessel that was conveying them once again towards the sunny south of France.

The salt spray dashed in their faces, the hum of the cordage overhead was in their ears, and their thoughts had gone back to that day, now nigh upon eight years back, when they, as unknown and untried boys, had started forth to see the world together.

Gaston's words broke the spell of silence, and Raymond turned his head to scan the stalwart form beside him with a look of fond admiration and pride.

"Nay, scarce like those old days, Sir Gaston de Brocas," he answered, speaking the name with significant emphasis; and Gaston laughed and tossed back his leonine head with a gesture of mingled pride and impatience as he said:

"Tush, Brother! I scarce know how to prize my knighthood now that thou dost not share it with me -- thou so far more truly knightly and worthy. I had ever planned that we had been together in that as in all else. Why wert thou not with me that day when we vanquished the navy of proud Spain? The laurels are scarce worth the wearing that thou wearest not with me."

For Gaston was now indeed a knight. He had fought beside the Prince in the recent engagement at sea, when a splendid naval victory had been obtained over the Spanish fleet. He had performed prodigies of valour on that occasion, and had been instrumental in the taking of many rich prizes. And when the royal party had returned to Windsor, Gaston had been named, with several more youthful gentlemen, to receive knighthood at the hands of the Prince of Wales. Whereupon Master Bernard de Brocas had stood forward and told the story of the parentage of the twin brothers, claiming kinship with them, and speaking in high praise of Raymond, who, since the death of John, had been employed by his uncle in a variety of small matters that used to be John's province to see to. In every point the Gascon youth had shown aptitude and ability beyond the average, and had won high praise from his clerical kinsman, who was more the statesman than the parish priest.

Very warmly had the de Brocas brothers been welcomed by their kinsmen; and as they laid no claim to any lands or revenues in the possession of other members of the family, not the least jealousy or ill-will was excited by their rise in social status. All that Gaston asked of the King was liberty some day, when the hollow truce with France should be broken, and when the King's matters were sufficiently settled to permit of private enterprise amongst his own servants, to gather about him a company of bold kindred spirits, and strive to wrest back from the treacherous and rapacious Sieur de Navailles the ancient castle of Saut, which by every law of right should belong to his own family.

The King listened graciously to this petition, and gave Gaston full encouragement to hope to regain his fathers' lost inheritance. But of Basildene no word was spoken then; for the shrewd Master Bernard had warned Raymond that the time had not yet come to prosecute that claim -- and indeed the neglected old house, crumbling to the dust and envired by an evil reputation which effectually kept all men away from it, seemed scarce worth the struggle it would cost to wrest it from the keeping of Peter Sanghurst.

This worthy, since his father's death, had entered upon a totally new course of existence. He had appeared at Court, sumptuously dressed, and with a fairly large following. He had ingratiated himself with the King by a timely loan of gold (for the many drains upon Edward's resources kept him always short of money for his household and family expenses), and was playing the part of a wealthy and liberal man. It was whispered of him, as it had been of his father, that he had some secret whereby to fill his coffers with gold whenever they were empty, and this reputation gave him a distinct prestige with his comrades and followers. He was not accused of black magic, like his father. His secret was supposed to have been inherited by him, not bought with the price of his soul. It surrounded him with a faint halo of mystery, but it was mystery that did him good rather than harm. The King himself took favourable notice of one possessed of such a golden secret, and for the present the Sanghurst was better left in undisturbed possession of his ill-gotten gains.

Raymond had learned the difficult lesson of patience, and accepted his uncle's advice. It was the easier to be patient since he knew that Joan was for the present safe from the persecutions of her hated suitor. Joan had been summoned to go to her father almost immediately upon the death of John de Brocas. He had sent for her to Woodcrych, and she had travelled thither at once with the escort sent to fetch her.

Raymond had heard from her once since that time. In the letter she had contrived to send him she had told him that her mother was dead, having fallen a victim to the dreaded distemper she had fled to avoid, but which had nevertheless seized her almost immediately upon her arrival at her husband's house. He too had been stricken, but had recovered; and his mind having been much affected by his illness and trouble, he had resolved upon a pilgrimage to Rome, in which his daughter was to accompany him. She did not know how long they would be absent from England, and save for the separation from her true love, she was glad to go. Her brother would return to the Court, and only she and her father would take the journey. She had heard nothing all these weeks of the dreaded foe, and hoped he might have passed for ever from her life.

And in this state matters stood with the brothers as the vessel bore them through the tossing blue waves that bright May morning, every plunge of the well-fitted war sloop bringing them nearer and nearer to the well-known and well-loved harbour of Bordeaux.

Yet it was on no private errand that they were bound, though Gaston could not approach the familiar shores of Gascony without thinking of that long-cherished hope of his now taking so much more solid a shape.

The real object of this small expedition was, however, the relief of the town of St. Jean d'Angely, belonging to the English King, which had been blockaded for some time by the French monarch. The distressed inhabitants had contrived to send word to Edward of their strait, and he had despatched the Earl of Warwick with a small picked army to its relief.

The Gascon twins had been eager to join this small contingent, and had volunteered for the service. Gaston was put in command of a band of fine soldiers, and his brother took service with him.

This was the first time for several years that Raymond had been in arms, for of late his avocations had been of a more peaceful nature. But he possessed all the soldier instincts of his race, and by his brother's side would go joyfully into battle again.

He did not know many of the knights and gentlemen serving in this small expedition, nor did Gaston either, for that matter. It was too small an undertaking to attract the flower of Edward's chivalry, and the Black Death had made many gaps in the ranks of the comrades the boys had first known when they had fought under the King's banner. But the satisfaction of being together again made amends for all else. Indeed they scarce had eyes for any but each other, and had so much to tell and to ask that the voyage was all too short for them.

Amongst those on board Raymond had frequently noticed the figure of a tall man always in full armour, and always wearing his visor down, so that none might see his face. His armour was of fine workmanship, light and strong, and seemed in no way to incommode him. There was no device upon it, save some serpents cunningly inlaid upon the breastplate, and the visor was richly chased and inlaid with black, so that the whole effect was gloomy and almost sinister. Raymond had once or twice asked the name of the Black Visor, as men called him, but none had been able to tell him. It was supposed that he was under some vow -- a not very uncommon thing in the days of chivalry -- and that he might not remove his visor until he had performed some gallant feat of arms.

Sometimes it had seemed to the youth as though the dark eyes looking out through the holes in that black covering were fixed more frequently upon himself than upon any one else; and if he caught full for a moment the fiery gleam, he would wonder for the instant it lasted where and when he had seen those eyes before. But his mind was not in any sense of the word concerned with the Black Visor, and it was only now and then he gave him a passing thought.

And now the good vessel was slipping through the still waters of the magnificent harbour of Bordeaux. The deck was all alive with the bustle of speedy landing, and the Gascon brothers were scanning the familiar landmarks and listening with delight to the old familiar tongue.

Familiar faces there were none to be seen, it is true. The boys were too much of foreigners now to have many old friends in the queenly city. But the whole place was homelike to them, and would be so to their lives' ends. Moreover, they hoped ere they took ship again to have time and opportunity to revisit old haunts and see their foster parents and the good priest once more; but for the present their steps were turned northward towards the gallant little beleaguered town which had appealed to the English King for aid.

A few days were spent at Bordeaux collecting provisions for the town, and mustering the reinforcements which the loyal city was always ready and eager to supply in answer to any demand on the part of the Roy Outremer.

The French King had died the previous year, and his son John, formerly Duke of Normandy, was now upon the throne; but the situation between the two nations had by no means changed, and indeed the bitter feeling between them was rather increased than diminished by the many petty breaches of faith on one side or another, of which this siege of St. Jean d'Angely was an example.

On the whole the onus of breaking the truce rested more with the French than the English. But a mere truce, where no real peace is looked for on either side, is but an unsatisfactory state of affairs at best; and although both countries were sufficiently exhausted by recent wars and the ravages of the plague to desire the interlude prolonged, yet hostilities of one kind or another never really ceased, and the struggles between the rival lords of Brittany and their heroic wives always kept the flame of war smouldering.

Gascony as a whole was always loyal to the English cause, and Bordeaux too well knew what she owed to the English trade ever to be backward when called upon by the English King. Speedily a fine band of soldiers was assembled, and at dawn one day the march northward was commenced.

The little army mustered some five thousand men, all well fed and in capital condition for the march. Raymond rode by his brother's side well in the van, and he noticed presently, amongst the new recruits who had joined them, another man of very tall stature, who also wore a black visor over his face. He was plainly a friend to the unknown knight (if knight he were) who had sailed in their vessel, for they rode side by side deep in talk; and behind them, in close and regular array, rode a number of their immediate followers, all wearing a black tuft in their steel caps and a black band round their arm.

However, there was nothing very noteworthy in this. Many men had followers marked by some distinctive badge, and the sombre little contingent excited small notice. They all looked remarkably fine soldiers, and appeared to be under excellent discipline. More than that was not asked of any man, and the Gascons were well known to be amongst the best soldiers of the day.

The early start and the long daylight enabled the gallant little band to push on in the one day to the banks of the Charente, and within a few miles of St. Jean itself. There, however, a halt was called, for the French were in a remarkably good position, and it was necessary to take counsel how they might best be attacked.

In the first place there was the river to be crossed, and the one bridge was in the hands of the enemy, who had fortified it, and would be able to hold it against great odds. They were superior in numbers to their assailants, and probably knew their advantage.

Gaston, who well understood the French nature, was the first to make a likely suggestion.

"Let us appear to retreat," he said. "They will then see our small numbers, and believe that we are flying through fear of

them. Doubtless they will at once rush out to pursue and attack us, and after we have drawn them from their strong position, we can turn again upon them and slay them, or drive them into the river."

This suggestion was received with great favour, and it was decided to act upon it that very day. There were still several hours of daylight before them, and the men, who had had wine and bread distributed to them, were full of eagerness for the fray.

The French, who were quite aware of the strength of their own position, and very confident of ultimate victory, were narrowly watching the movements of the English, whose approach had been for some time expected by them. They were certain that they could easily withstand the onslaught of the whole body, if these were bold enough to attack, and they well knew how terribly thinned would the English ranks become before they could hope to cross the bridge and march upon the main body of the French army encamped before the town.

Great, then, was the exultation of the French when they saw how much terror they had inspired in the heart of the foe. They were eagerly observing their movements; they saw that a council had been called amongst the chiefs, and that deliberations had been entered into by them. But so valiant were the English in fight, and so many were the victories they had obtained with numbers far inferior to those of the foe, that there was a natural sense of uncertainty as to the result of a battle, even when all the chances of the war seemed to be against the foreign foe. But when the trumpets actually sounded the retreat, and they saw the whole body moving slowly away, then indeed did they feel that triumph was near, and a great shout of derision and anger rose up in the still evening air.

"To horse, men, and after them!" was the word given, and a cry of fierce joy went up from the whole army. "My Lords of England, you will not get off in that way. You have come hither by your own will; you shall not leave until you have paid your scot."

No great order was observed as the Frenchmen sprang to horse and galloped across the bridge, and so after the retreating foe. Every man was eager to bear his share in the discomfiture of the English contingent, and hardly staying to arm themselves fully, the eager, hot-headed French soldiers, horse and foot, swung along in any sort of order, only eager to cut to pieces the flower of the English chivalry (as their leaders had dubbed this little band), and inflict a dark stain upon the honour of Edward's brilliant arms.

In the ranks of this same English contingent, now in rapid and orderly retreat, there was to the full as much exultation and lust of battle as in the hearts of their pursuing foes. Every man grasped his weapon and set his teeth firmly, the footmen marching steadily onwards at a rapid and swinging pace, whilst the horsemen, who brought up the rear -- for they were to be the first to charge when the trumpet sounded the advance -- kept turning their heads to watch the movement of the foe, and sent up a brief huzzah as they saw that their ruse had proved successful, and that their foes were coming fast after them.

"Keep thou by my side in the battle today, Raymond," said Gaston, as he looked to the temper of his weapons and glanced backwards over his shoulder. "Thou hast been something more familiar with the pen than the sword of late -- and thy faithful esquire likewise. Fight, then, by my side, and together we will meet and overcome the foe. They will fight like wolves, I doubt not, for they will be bitterly wrathful when they see the trick we have played upon them. Wherefore quit not my side, be the fighting never so hot, for I would have thee ever with me."

"I wish for nothing better for myself," answered Raymond, with a fond proud glance at the stalwart Gaston, who now towered a full head taller above him, and was a very king amongst men.

He was mounted on a fine black war horse, who had carried his master victoriously through many charges before today. Raymond's horse was much lighter in build, a wiry little barb with a distinct Arab strain, fearless in battle, and fleet as the wind, but without the weight or solidity of Gaston's noble charger. Indeed, Gaston had found some fault with the creature's lack of weight for withstanding the onslaught of cavalry charge; but he suited Raymond so well in other ways that the latter had declined to make any change, and told his brother smilingly that his great Lucifer had weight and strength for both.

Scarcely had Gaston given this charge to his brother before the trumpets sounded a new note, and at once the compact little body of horse and foot halted, wheeled round, and put themselves in position for the advance. Another blast from those same trumpets, given with all the verve and joyousness of coming victory, and the horses of their own accord sprang forward to the attack. Then the straggling and dismayed body of Frenchmen who had been pushing on in advance of their fellows to fall upon the flying English, found themselves opposed to one of those magnificent cavalry charges which made the glory and the terror of the English arms throughout the reign of the great Edward.

Vainly trying to rally themselves, and with shouts of "St. Dennis!" "St. Dennis!" the Frenchmen rushed upon their foes; and the detachments from behind coming up quickly, the engagement became general at once, and was most hotly contested on both sides.

Gaston was one of the foremost to charge into the ranks of the French, and singling out the tallest and strongest adversary he could see, rode full upon him, and was quickly engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand conflict. Raymond was close beside him, and soon found himself engaged in parrying the thrusts of several foes. But Roger was quickly at his side, taking his own share of hard blows; and as the foot and horse from behind pressed on after the impetuous leaders, and more and more detachments from the French army came up to assist their comrades, the melee became very thick, and in the crush it was impossible to see what was happening except just in front, and to avoid the blows levelled at him was all that Raymond was able to think of for many long minutes -- minutes that seemed more like hours.

When the press became a little less thick about him, Raymond looked round for his brother, but could not see him. A body of riders, moving in a compact wedge, had forced themselves in between himself and Gaston. He saw the white plume in his brother's helmet waving at some distance away to the left, but when he tried to rein in his horse and reach him, he still found himself surrounded by the same phalanx of mounted soldiers, who kept pressing him by sheer weight

on and on away to the right, though the tide of battle was most distinctly rolling to the left. The French were flying promiscuously back to their lines, and the English soldiers were in hot pursuit.

Raymond was no longer amid foes. He had long since ceased to have to use his sword either for attack or defence, but he could not check the headlong pace of his mettlesome little barb, nor could he by any exertion of strength turn the creature's head in any other direction. As he was in the midst of those he looked upon as friends, he had no uneasiness as to his own position, even though entirely separated from Gaston and Roger, who generally kept close at his side. He was so little used of late to the manoeuvres of war, that he fancied this headlong gallop, in which he was taking an involuntary part, might be the result of military tactics, and that he should see its use presently.

But as he and his comrades flew over the ground, and the din of the battle died away in his ears, and the last of the evening sunlight faded from the sky, a strange sense of coming ill fell upon Raymond's spirit. Again he made a most resolute and determined effort to check the fiery little creature he rode, who seemed as if his feet were furnished with wings, so fast he spurned the ground beneath his hoofs.

Then for the first time the youth found that this mad pace was caused by regular goading from the silent riders who surrounded him. Turning in his saddle he saw that these men were one and all engaged in pricking and spurring on the impetuous little steed; and as he cast a keen and searching look at these strange riders, he saw that they all wore in their steel caps the black tuft of the followers of the Black Visor and his sable-coated companion, and that these two leaders rode themselves a little distance behind.

Greatly astonished at the strange thing that was befalling him, yet not, so far, alarmed for his personal safety, Raymond drew his sword and looked steadily round at the ring of men surrounding him.

"Cease to interfere with my horse, gentlemen," he said, in stern though courteous accents. "It may be your pleasure thus to ride away from the battle, but it is not mine; and I will ask of you to let me take my way whilst you take yours. Why you desire my company I know not, but I do not longer desire yours; wherefore forbear!"

Not a word or a sign was vouchsafed him in answer; but as he attempted to rein back his panting horse, now fairly exhausted with the struggle between the conflicting wills of so many persons, the dark silent riders continued to urge him forward with open blows and pricks from sword point, till, as he saw that his words were still unheeded, a dangerous glitter shone in Raymond's eyes.

"Have a care how you molest me, gentlemen!" he said, in clear, ringing tones. "Ye are carrying a jest (if jest it be meant for) a little too far. The next who dares to touch my horse must defend himself from my sword."

And then a sudden change came over the bearing of his companions. A dozen swords sprang from their scabbards. A score of harsh voices replied to these words in fierce accents of defiance. One -- two -- three heavy blows fell upon his head; and though he set his teeth and wheeled about to meet and grapple with his foes, he felt from the first moment that he had no chance whatever against such numbers, and that the only thing to do was to sell his life as dearly as he could.

There was no time to ask or even to wonder at the meaning of this mysterious attack. All he could do was to strive to shield his head from the blows that rained upon him, and breathe a prayer for succour in the midst of his urgent need.

And then he heard a voice speaking in accents of authority: where had he heard that voice before?

"Hold, men! have I not warned you to do him no hurt? Kill him not, but take him alive."

That was the last thing Raymond remembered. His next sensation was of falling and strangulation. Then a blackness swam before his eyes, and sense and memory alike fled.

CHAPTER XXIII. IN THE HANDS OF HIS FOE.

How long that blackness and darkness lasted Raymond never really knew. It seemed to him that he awoke from it at occasional long intervals, always to find himself dreaming of rapid motion, as though he were being transported through the air with considerable speed. But there was no means of telling in what direction he moved, nor in what company. His senses were clouded and dull. He did not know what was real and what part of a dream. He had no recollection of any of the events immediately preceding this sudden and extraordinary journey, and after a brief period of bewilderment would sink back into the black abyss of unconsciousness from which he had been roused for a few moments.

At last, after what seemed to him an enormous interval -- for he knew not whether hours, days, or even years had gone by whilst he had remained in this state of unconscious apathy, he slowly opened his eyes, to find that the black darkness had given place to a faint murky light, and that he was no longer being carried rapidly onwards, but was lying still upon a heap of straw in some dim place, the outlines of which only became gradually visible to him.

Raymond was very weak, and weakness exercises a calming and numbing effect upon the senses. He felt no alarm at finding himself in this strange place, but after gazing about him without either recollection or comprehension, he turned round upon his bed of straw, which was by no means the worst resting place he had known in his wanderings, and quickly fell into a sound sleep.

When he awoke some hours later, the place was lighter than it had been, for a ray of sunlight had penetrated through the loophole high above his head, and illuminated with tolerable brightness the whole of the dim retreat in which he found himself. Raymond raised himself upon his elbow and looked wonderingly around him.

"What in the name of all the Holy Saints has befallen me?" he questioned, speaking half aloud in the deep stillness, glad to break the oppressive silence, if it were only by the sound of his own voice. "I feel as though a leaden weight were pressing down my limbs, and my head is throbbing as though a hammer were beating inside it. I can scarce frame my thoughts as I will. What was I doing last, before this strange thing befell me?"

He put his hand to his head and strove to think; but for a time memory eluded him, and his bewilderment grew painfully upon him. Then he espied a pitcher of water and some coarse food set not far away, and he rose with some little difficulty and dragged his stiffened limbs across the stone floor till he reached the spot where this provision stood.

"Sure, this be something of the prisoner's fare," he said, as he raised the pitcher to his lips; "yet I will refresh myself as best I may. Perchance I shall then regain my scattered senses and better understand what has befallen me."

He ate and drank slowly, and it was as he hoped. The nourishment he sorely needed helped to dispel the clouds of weakness and faintness which had hindered the working of his mind before, and a ray of light penetrated the mists about him.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "I have it now! We were in battle together -- Gaston and I rode side by side. I recollect it all now. We were separated in the press, and I was carried off by the followers of the Black Visor. Strange! He was in our ranks. He is a friend, and not a foe. How came it, then, that his men-at-arms made such an error as to set upon me? Was it an error? Did I not hear him, or his huge companion, give some order for my capture to his men before their blades struck me down? It is passing strange. I comprehend it not. But Gaston will be here anon to make all right. There must be some strange error. Sure I must have been mistaken for some other man."

Raymond was not exactly uneasy, though a little bewildered and disturbed in mind by the strangeness of the adventure. It seemed certain to him that there must have been some mistake. That he was at present a prisoner could not be doubted, from the nature of the place in which he was shut up, and the silence and gloom about him; but unless he had been abandoned by his first captors, and had fallen into the hands of the French, he believed that his captivity would speedily come to an end when the mistake concerning his identity was explained. If indeed he were in the power of some French lord, there might be a little longer delay, as a ransom would no doubt have to be found for him ere he could be released. But then Gaston was at liberty, and Gaston had now powerful friends and no mean share in some of the prizes which had been taken by sea and land. He would quickly accomplish his brother's deliverance when once he heard of his captivity; and there would be no difficulty in sending him a message, as his captor's great desire would doubtless be to obtain as large a ransom as he was able to extort.

"They had done better had they tried to seize upon Gaston himself," said Raymond, with a half smile. "He would have been a prize better worth the taking. But possibly he would have proved too redoubtable a foe. Methinks my arm has somewhat lost its strength or cunning, else should I scarce have fallen so easy a prey. I ought to have striven harder to have kept by Gaston's side; but I know not now how we came to be separated. And Roger, too, who has ever been at my side in all times of strife and danger, how came he to be sundered from me likewise? It must have been done by the fellows who bore me off -- the followers of the Black Visor. Strange, very strange! I know not what to think of it. But when next my jailer comes he will doubtless tell me where I am and what is desired of me."

The chances of war were so uncertain, and the captive of one day so often became the victor of the next, that Raymond, who for all his fragile look possessed a large fund of cool courage, did not feel greatly disturbed by the ill-chance that had befallen him. Many French knights were most chivalrous and courteous to their prisoners; some even permitted them to go out on parole to collect their own ransoms, trusting to their word of honour to return if they were unable to obtain the stipulated sum. The English cause had many friends amongst the French nobility, and friendships as well as enmities had resulted from the English occupation of such large tracts of France.

So Raymond resolved to make the best of his incarceration whilst it lasted, trusting that some happy accident would soon set him at large again. With such a brother as Gaston on the outside of his prison wall, it would be foolish to give way to despondency.

He looked curiously about at the cave-like place in which he found himself. It appeared to be a natural chamber formed in the living rock. It received a certain share of air and light from a long narrow loophole high up overhead, and the place was tolerably fresh and dry, though its proportions were by no means large. Still it was lofty, and it was wide enough to admit of a certain but limited amount of exercise to its occupant.

Raymond found that he could make five paces along one side of it and four along the other. Except the heap of straw, upon which he had been laid, there was no plenishing of any kind to the cell. However, as it was probably only a temporary resting place, this mattered the less. Raymond had been worse lodged during some of his wanderings before now, and for the two years that he had lived amongst the Cistercian Brothers, he had scarcely been more luxuriously treated. His cell there had been narrower than this place, his fare no less coarse than that he had just partaken of, and his pallet bed scarce so comfortable as this truss of straw.

"Father Paul often lay for weeks upon the bare stone floor," mused Raymond, as he sat down again upon his bed. "Sure I need not grumble that I have such a couch as this."

He was very stiff and bruised, as he found on attempting to move about, but he had no actual wounds, and no bones were broken. His light strong armour had protected him, or else his foes had been striving to vanquish without seriously hurting him. He could feel that his head had been a good deal battered about, for any consecutive thought tired him; but it was something to have come off without worse injury, and sleep would restore him quickly to his wonted strength.

He lay down upon the straw presently, and again he slept soundly and peacefully. He woke up many hours later greatly refreshed, aroused by some sound from the outside of his prison. The light had completely faded from the loophole. The place was in pitchy darkness. There is something a little terrible in black oppressive darkness -- the darkness which may

almost be felt; and Raymond was not sorry, since he had awakened, to hear the sound of grating bolts, and then the slow creaking of a heavy door upon its hinges.

A faint glimmer of light stole into the cell, and Raymond marked the entrance of a tall dark figure habited like a monk, the cowl drawn so far over the face as entirely to conceal the features. However, the ecclesiastical habit was something of a comfort to Raymond, who had spent so much of his time amongst monks, and he rose to his feet with a respectful salutation in French.

The monk stepped within the cell, and drew the door behind him, turning the heavy key in the lock. The small lantern he carried with him gave only a very feeble light; but it was better than nothing, and enabled Raymond to see the outline of the tall form, which looked almost gigantic in the full religious habit.

"Welcome, Holy Father," said Raymond, still speaking in French. "Right glad am I to look upon face of man again. I prithee tell me where I am, and into whose hands I have fallen; for methinks there is some mistake in the matter, and that they take me for one whom I am not."

"They take thee for one Raymond de Brocas, who lays claim, in thine own or thy brother's person, to Basildene in England and Orthez and Saut in Gascony," answered the monk, who spoke slowly in English and in a strangely-muffled voice. "If thou be not he, say so, and prove it without loss of time; for evil is purposed to Raymond de Brocas, and it were a pity it should fall upon the wrong head."

A sudden shiver ran through Raymond's frame. Was there not something familiar in the muffled sound of that English voice? was there not something in the words and tone that sounded like a cruel sneer? Was it his fancy that beneath the long habit of the monk he caught the glimpse of some shining weapon? Was this some terrible dream come to his disordered brain? Was he the victim of an illusion? or did this tall, shadowy figure stand indeed before him?

For a moment Raymond's head seemed to swim, and then his nerves steadied themselves, and he wondered if he might not be disquieting himself in vain. Possibly, after all, this might be a holy man -- one who would stand his friend in the future.

"Thou art English?" he asked quickly; "and if English, surely a friend to thy countrymen?"

"I am English truly," was the low-toned answer, "and I am here to advise thee for thy good."

"I thank thee for that at least. I will follow thy counsel, if I may with honour."

It seemed as though a low laugh forced its way from under the heavy cowl. The monk drew one step nearer.

"Thou hadst better not trouble thy head about honour. What good will thy honour be to thee if they tear thee piecemeal limb from limb, or roast thee to death over a slow fire, or rack thee till thy bones start from their sockets? Let thy honour go to the winds, foolish boy, and think only how thou mayest save thy skin. There be those around and about thee who will have no mercy so long as thou provest obdurate. Bethink thee well how thou strivest against them, for thou knowest little what may well befall thee in their hands."

The blood seemed to run cold in Raymond's veins as he heard these terrible words, spoken with a cool deliberation which did nothing detract from their dread significance. Who was it who once -- nay, many times in bygone years -- had threatened him with just that cool, deliberate emphasis, seeming to gloat over the dark threats uttered, as though they were to him full of a deep and cruel joy?

It seemed to the youth as though he were in the midst of some dark and horrible dream from which he must speedily awake. He passed his hand fiercely across his eyes and made a quick step towards the monk.

"Who and what art thou?" he asked, in stifled accents, for it seemed as though a hideous oppression was upon him, and he scarce knew the sound of his own voice; and then, with a harsh, grating laugh, the tall figure recoiled a pace, and flung the cowl from his head, and with an exclamation of astonishment and dismay Raymond recognized his implacable foe and rival, Peter Sanghurst, whom last he had beheld within the walls of Basildene.

"Thou here!" he exclaimed, and moved back as far as the narrow limits of the cell would permit, as though from the presence of some noxious beast.

Peter Sanghurst folded his arms and gazed upon his youthful rival with a gleam of cool, vindictive triumph in his cruel eyes that might well send a thrill of chill horror through the lad's slight frame. When he spoke it was with the satisfaction of one who gloats over a victim utterly and entirely in his power.

"Ay, truly I am here; and thou art mine, body and soul, to do with what I will; none caring what befalls thee, none to interpose between thee and me. I have waited long for this hour, but I have not waited in vain. I can read the future. I knew that one day thou wouldst be in my hands -- that I might do my pleasure upon thee, whatsoever that pleasure might be. Knowing that, I have been content to wait; only every day the debt has been mounting up. Every time that thou, rash youth, hast dared to try to thwart me, hast dared to strive to stand between me and the object of my desires, a new score has been written down in the record I have long kept against thee. Now the day of reckoning has come, and thou wilt find the reckoning a heavy one. But thou shalt pay it -- every jot and tittle shalt thou pay. Thou shalt not escape from my power until thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."

The man's lips parted in a hideous smile which showed his white teeth, sharp and pointed like the fangs of a wolf. Raymond felt his courage rise with the magnitude of his peril. That some unspeakably terrible doom was designed for him he could not doubt. The malignity and cruelty of his foe were too well understood; but at least if he must suffer, he would suffer in silence. His enemy should not have the satisfaction of wringing from him one cry for mercy. He would

die a thousand times sooner than sue to him. He thought of Joan -- realizing that for her sake he should be called upon, in some sort, to bear this suffering; and even the bare thought sent a thrill of ecstasy through him. Any death that was died for her would be sweet. And might not his be instrumental in ridding her for ever of her hateful foe? Would not Gaston raise heaven and earth to discover his brother? Surely he would, sooner or later, find out what had befallen him; and then might Peter Sanghurst strive in vain to flee from the vengeance he had courted: he would assuredly fall by Gaston's hand, tracked down even to the ends of the earth.

Peter Sanghurst, his eyes fixed steadily on the face of his victim, hoping to enjoy by anticipation his agonies of terror, saw only a gleam of resolution and even of joy pass across his face, and he gnashed his teeth in sudden rage at finding himself unable to dominate the spirit of the youth, as he meant shortly to rack his body.

"Thou thinkest still to defy me, mad boy?" he asked. "Thou thinkest that thy brother will come to thine aid? Let him try to trace thee if he can! I defy him ever to learn where thou art. Wouldst know it thyself? Then thou shalt do so, and thou wilt see thy case lost indeed. Thou art in that Castle of Saut that thou wouldest fain call thine own -- that castle which has never yet been taken by foe from without, and never will be yet, so utterly impregnable is its position. Thou art in the hands of the Lord of Navailles, who has his own score to settle with thee, and who will not let thee go till thou hast resigned in thy brother's name and thine own every one of those bold claims which, as he has heard, have been made to the Roy Outremer by one or both of you. Now doth thy spirit quail? now dost thou hope for succour from without? Bid adieu to all such fond and idle hopes. Thou art here utterly alone, no man knowing what has befallen thee. Thou art in the hands of thy two bitterest foes, men who are known and renowned for their cruelty and their evil deeds -- men who would crush to death a hundred such as thou who dared to strive to bar their way. Now what sayest thou? how about that boasted honour of thine? Thou hadst best hear reason ere thou hast provoked thy foes too far, and make for thyself the best terms that thou canst. Thou mayest yet save thyself something if thou wilt hear reason."

Raymond's face was set like a flint. He had no power to rid himself of the presence of his foe, but yield one inch to persuasion or threat he was resolved not to do. For one thing, his distrust of this man was so great that he doubted if any concessions made by him would be of the smallest value in obtaining him his release; for another, his pride rose up in arms against yielding anything to fear that he would not yield were he a free man in the midst of his friends. No: at all costs he would stand firm. He could but die once, and what other men had borne for their honour or their faith he could surely bear. His lofty young face kindled and glowed with the enthusiasm of his resolution, and again the adversary's face darkened with fury.

"Thou thinkest perhaps that I have forgot the art of torture since thou wrested from me one victim? Thou shalt find that what he suffered at my hands was but the tithe of what thou shalt endure. Thou hast heard perchance of that chamber in the heart of the earth where the Lord of Navailles welcomes his prisoners who have secrets worth the knowing, or treasures hidden out of his reach? That chamber is not far from where thou standest now, and there be willing hands to carry thee thither into the presence of its Lord, who lets not his visitors escape him till he has wrung from their reluctant lips every secret of which he desires the key. And what are his clumsy engines to the devices and refinements of torture that I can inflict when once that light frame is bound motionless upon the rack, and stretched till not a muscle may quiver save at my bidding? Rash boy, beware how thou provokest me to do my worst; for once I have thee thus bound beneath my hands, then the devil of hatred and cruelty which possesses me at times will come upon me, and I shall not let thee go until I have done my worst. Bethink thee well ere thou provokest me too far. Listen and be advised, ere it be too late for repentance, and thy groans of abject submission fall upon unheeding ears. None will befriend thee then. Thou mayest now befriend thyself. If thou wilt not take the moment when it is thine, it may never be offered thee again."

Raymond did not speak. He folded his arms and looked steadily across at his foe. He knew himself perfectly and absolutely helpless. Every weapon he possessed had been taken from him whilst he lay unconscious. His armour had been removed. He had nothing upon him save his light summer dress, and the precious heart hanging about his neck. Even the satisfaction of making one last battle for his life was denied him. His limbs were yet stiff and weak. His enemy would grip him as though he were a child if he so much as attempted to cast himself upon him. All that was now left for him was the silent dignity of endurance.

Sanghurst made one step forward and seized the arm of the lad in a grip like that of a vice. So cruel was the grip that it was hard to restrain a start of pain.

"Renounce Joan!" he hissed in the boy's ear; "renounce her utterly and for ever! Write at my bidding such words as I shall demand of thee, and thou shalt save thyself the worst of the agonies I will else inflict upon thee. Basildene thou shalt never get -- I can defy thee there, do as thou wilt; besides, if thou departest alive from this prison house, thou wilt have had enough of striving to thwart the will of Peter Sanghurst -- but Joan thou shalt renounce of thine own free will, and shalt so renounce her that her love for thee will be crushed and killed! Here is the inkhorn, and here the parchment. The ground will serve thee for a table, and I will tell thee what to write. Take then the pen, and linger not. Thou wouldst rejoice to write whatever words I bid thee didst thou know what is even now preparing in yon chamber below thy prison house. Take the pen and sit down. It is but a short half-hour's task."

The strong man thrust the quill into the slight fingers of the boy; but Raymond suddenly wrenched his hand away, and flung the frail weapon to the other end of the cell. He saw the vile purpose in a moment. Peter knew something of the nature of the woman he passionately desired to win for his wife, and he well knew that no lies of his invention respecting the falsity of her young lover would weigh one instant with her. Even the death of his rival would help him in no whit, for Joan would cherish the memory of the dead, and pay no heed to the wooing of the living. There was but one thing that would give him the faintest hope, and that was the destruction of her faith in Raymond. Let him be proved faithless and unworthy, and her love and loyalty must of necessity receive a rude shock. Sanghurst knew the world, and knew that broken faith was the one thing a lofty-souled and pure-minded woman finds it hardest to forgive. Raymond, false to his vows, would no longer be a rival in his way. He might have a hard struggle to win the lady even then, but the one insuperable obstacle would be removed from his path.

And Raymond saw the purpose in a moment. His quick and sharpened intelligence showed all to him in a flash. Not to save himself from any fate would he so disgrace his manhood -- prove unworthy in the hour of trial, deny his love, and by so doing deny himself the right to bear all for her dear sake.

Flinging the pen to the ground and turning upon Sanghurst with a great light in his eyes, he told him how he read his base purpose, his black treachery, and dared him to do his worst.

"My worst, mad boy, my worst!" cried the furious man, absolutely foaming at the mouth as he drew back, looking almost like a venomous snake couched for a spring. "Is that, then, thy answer -- thy unchangeable answer to the only loophole I offer thee of escaping the full vengeance awaiting thee from thy two most relentless foes? Bethink thee well how thou repeatest such words. Yet once again I bid thee pause. Take but that pen and do as I bid thee --"

"I will not!" answered Raymond, throwing back his head in a gesture of noble, fearless defiance; "I will not do thy vile bidding. Joan is my true love, my faithful and loving lady. Her heart is mine and mine is hers, and her faithful knight I will live and die. Do your worst. I defy you to your face. There is a God above who can yet deliver me out of your hand if He will. If not -- if it be His will that I suffer in a righteous cause -- I will do it with a soul unseared by coward falsehood. There is my answer; you will get none other. Now do with me what you will. I fear you not."

Peter Sanghurst's aspect changed. The fury died out, to be replaced by a perfectly cold and calm malignity a hundred times more terrible. He stooped and picked up the pen, replacing it with the parchment and inkhorn in a pouch at his girdle. Then throwing off entirely the long monk's habit which he had worn on his entrance, he advanced step by step upon Raymond, the glitter in his eye being terrible to see.

Raymond did not move. He was already standing against the wall at the farthest limit of the cell. His foe slowly advanced upon him, and suddenly put out two long, powerful arms, and gripped him round the body in a clasp against which it was vain to struggle. Lifting him from his feet, he carried him into the middle of the chamber, and setting him down, but still encircling him with that bear-like embrace, he stamped thrice upon the stone floor, which gave out a hollow sound beneath his feet.

The next moment there was a sound of strange creaking and groaning, as though some ponderous machinery were being set in motion. There was a sickening sensation, as though the very ground beneath his feet were giving way, and the next instant Raymond became aware that this indeed was the case. The great flagstone upon which he and his captor were standing was sinking, sinking, sinking into the very heart of the earth, as it seemed; and as they vanished together into the pitchy darkness, to the accompaniment of that same strange groaning and creaking, Raymond heard a hideous laugh in his ear.

"This is how his victims are carried to the Lord of Navailles's torture chamber. Ha-ha! ha-ha! This is how they go down thither. Whether they ever come forth again is quite another matter!"

CHAPTER XXIV. GASTON'S QUEST.

When Gaston missed his brother from his side in the triumphant turning of the tables upon the French, he felt no uneasiness. The battle was going so entirely in favour of the English arms, and the discomfited French were making so small a stand, that the thought of peril to Raymond never so much as entered his head. In the waning light it was difficult to distinguish one from another, and for aught he knew his brother might be quite close at hand. They were engaged in taking prisoners such of their enemies as were worthy to be carried off; and when they had completely routed the band and made captive their leaders, it was quite dark, and steps were taken to encamp for the night.

Then it was that Gaston began to wonder why he still saw nothing either of Raymond or of the faithful Roger, who was almost like his shadow. He asked all whom he met if anything had been seen of his brother, but the answer was always the same -- nobody knew anything about him. Nobody appeared to have seen him since the brothers rode into battle side by side; and the young knight began to feel thoroughly uneasy.

Of course there had been some killed and wounded in the battle upon both sides, though the English loss was very trifling. Still it might have been Raymond's fate to be borne down in the struggle, and Gaston, calling some of his own personal attendants about him, and bidding them take lanterns in their hands, went forth to look for his brother upon the field where the encounter had taken place.

The field was a straggling one, as the combat had taken the character of a rout at the end, and the dead and wounded lay at long intervals apart. Gaston searched and searched, his heart growing heavier as he did so, for his brother was very dear to him, and he felt a pang of bitter self-reproach at having left him, however inadvertently, to bear the brunt of the battle alone. But search as he would he found nothing either of Raymond or Roger, and a new fear entered into his mind.

"Can he have been taken prisoner?"

This did not seem highly probable. The French, bold enough at the outset when they had believed themselves secure of an easy victory, had changed their front mightily when they had discovered the trap set for them by their foes, and in the end had thought of little save how to save their own lives. They would scarce have burdened themselves with prisoners, least of all with one who did not even hold the rank of knight. This disappearance of his brother was perplexing Gaston not a little. He looked across the moonlit plain, now almost as light as day, a cloud of pain and bewilderment upon his face.

"By Holy St. Anthony, where can the boy be?" he cried.

Then one of his men-at-arms came up and spoke.

"When we were pursuing the French here to the left, back towards their own lines, I saw a second struggle going on away to the right. The knight with the black visor seemed to be leading that pursuit, and though I could not watch it, as I had my own work to do here, I know that some of our men took a different line, there along by yon ridge to the right."

"Let us go thither and search there," said Gaston, with prompt decision, "for plainly my brother is not here. It may be he has been following another flying troop. We will up and after him. Look well as you ride if there be any prostrate figures lying in the path. I fear me he may have been wounded in the rout, else surely he would not have stayed away so long."

Turning his horse round, and closely followed by his men, Gaston rode off in the direction pointed out by his servant. It became plain that there had been fighting of some sort along this line, for a few dead and wounded soldiers, all Frenchmen, lay upon the ground at intervals. Nothing, however, could be seen of Raymond, and for a while nothing of Roger either; but just as Gaston was beginning to despair of finding trace of either, he beheld in the bright moonlight a figure staggering along in a blind and helpless fashion towards them, and spurring rapidly forward to meet it, he saw that it was Roger.

Roger truly, but Roger in pitiable plight. His armour was gone. His doublet had been half stripped from off his back. He was bleeding from more than one wound, and in his eyes was a fixed and glassy stare, like that of one walking in sleep. His face was ghastly pale, and his breath came in quick sobs and gasps.

"Roger, is it thou?" cried Gaston, in accents of quick alarm. "I have been seeking thee everywhere. Where is thy master? Where is my brother?"

"Gone! gone! gone!" cried Roger, in a strange and despairing voice. "Carried off by his bitterest foes! Gone where we shall never see him more!"

There was something in the aspect of the youth and in his lamentable words that sent an unwonted shiver through Gaston's frame; but he was quick to recover himself, and answered hastily:

"Boy, thou art distraught! Tell me where my brother has gone. I will after him and rescue him. He cannot be very far away. Quick -- tell me what has befallen him!"

"He has been carried off -- more I know not. He has been carried off by foulest treachery."

"Treachery! Whose treachery? Who has carried him off?"

"The knight of the Black Visor."

"The Black Visor! Nay; thou must be deceived thyself! The Black Visor is one of our own company."

"Ay verily, and that is why he succeeded where an open foe had failed. None guessed with what purpose he came when he and his men pushed their way in a compact wedge, and sundered my young master from your side, sir, driving him farther and farther from all beside, till he and I (who had managed to keep close beside him) were far away from all the world beside, galloping as if for dear life in a different direction. Then it was that they threw off the pretence of being friends -- that they set upon him and overpowered him, that they beat off even me from holding myself near at hand, and carried me bound in another direction. I was given in charge to four stalwart troopers, all wearing the black badge of their master. They bound my hands and my feet, and bore me along I knew not whither. I lost sight of my master. Him they took at headlong speed in another direction. I had been wounded in the battle. I was wounded by these men, struggling to follow your brother. I swooned in my saddle, and knew no more till a short hour ago, when I woke to find myself lying, still bound, upon a heap of straw in some outhouse of a farm. I heard the voices of my captors singing snatches of songs not far away; but they were paying no heed to their captive, and I made shift to slacken my bonds and slip out into the darkness of the wood.

"I knew not where I was; but the moon told me how to bend my steps to find the English camp again. I, in truth, have escaped -- have come to bring you word of his peril; but ah, I fear, I fear that we shall never see him more! They will kill him -- they will kill him! He is in the hands of his deadliest foes!"

"If we know where he is, we can rescue him without delay!" cried Gaston, who was not a little perplexed at the peculiar nature of the adventure which had befallen his brother.

To be taken captive and carried off by one of the English knights (if indeed the Black Visor were a knight) was a most extraordinary thing to have happened. Gaston, who knew little enough of his brother's past history in detail, and had no idea that he had called down upon himself any particular enmity, was utterly at a loss to understand the story, nor was Roger in a condition to give any farther explanation. He tottered as he stood, and Gaston ordered his servants to mount him upon one of their horses and bring him quietly along, whilst he himself turned and galloped back to the camp to prosecute inquiries there.

"Who is the Black Visor?" -- that was the burden of his inquiries, and it was long before he could obtain an answer to this question. The leaders of the expedition were full of their own plans and had little attention to bestow upon Gaston or his strange story. The loss of a single private gentleman from amongst their muster was nothing to excite them, and their own position was giving them much more concern. They had taken many prisoners. They believed that they had done amply enough to raise the siege of St. Jean d'Angely (though in this they proved themselves mistaken), and they were anxious to get safely back to Bordeaux with their spoil before any misadventure befell them.

Gaston cared nothing now for the expedition; his heart was with his brother, his mind was full of anxious questioning. Roger's story plainly showed that Raymond was in hostile hands. But the perplexity of the matter was that Gaston had no idea of the name or rank of his brother's enemy and captor.

At last he came upon a good-natured knight who had been courteous to the brothers in old days. He listened with interest to Gaston's tale, and bid him wait a few minutes whilst he went to try to discover the name and rank of the Black Visor. He was certain that he had heard it, though he could not recollect at a moment's notice what he had heard. He did not keep Gaston waiting long, but returned quickly to him.

"The Black Visor is one Peter Sanghurst of Basildene, a gentleman in favour with the King, and one likely to rise to high honour. Men whisper that he has some golden secret which, if it be so, will make of him a great man one of these days. It is he who has been in our company, always wearing his black visor. Men say he is under some vow, and until the vow is accomplished no man may look upon his face."

Gaston drew his breath hard, and a strange gleam came into his eyes.

"Peter Sanghurst of Basildene!" he exclaimed, and then fell into a deep reverie.

What did it all mean? What had Raymond told him from time to time about the enmity of this man? Did not Gaston himself well remember the adventure of long ago, when he and his brother had entered Basildene by stealth and carried thence the wretched victim of the sorcerer's art? Was not that the beginning of an enmity which had never been altogether laid to sleep? Had he not heard whispers from time to time all pointing to the conclusion that Sanghurst had neither forgotten nor forgiven, and that he felt his possession of Basildene threatened by the existence of the brothers whose right it was? Had not Raymond placed himself almost under vow to win back his mother's lost inheritance? And might it not be possible that this knowledge had come to the ears of the present owner?

Gaston ground his teeth in rage as he realized what might be the meaning of this cowardly attack. Treachery and cowardice were the two vices most hateful in his eyes, and this vile attack upon an unsuspecting comrade filled him with the bitterest rage as well as with the greatest anxiety.

Plain indeed was it that Raymond had been carried off; but whither? To England? that scarce seemed possible. It would be a daring thing indeed to bring an English subject back to his native land a prisoner. Yet where else could Peter Sanghurst carry a captive? He might have friends amongst the French; but who would be sufficiently interested in his affairs to give shelter to him and his prisoner, when it might lead to trouble perhaps with the English King?

One thought of relief there was in the matter. Plainly it was not Raymond's death that was to be compassed. If they had wished to kill him, they would have done so upon the battlefield and have left him there, where his death would have excited no surprise or question. No; it was something more than this that was wanted, and Gaston felt small difficulty in guessing what that aim and object was.

"He is to be held for ransom, and his ransom will be our claim upon Basildene. We both shall be called upon to renounce that, and then Raymond will go free. Well, if that be the only way, Basildene must go. But perchance it may be given to me to save the inheritance and rescue Raymond yet. Would that I knew whither they had carried him! But surely he may be traced and followed. Some there must be who will be able to give me news of them."

Of one thing Gaston was perfectly assured, and that was that he must now act altogether independently, gain permission to quit the expedition, and pursue his own investigations with his own followers. He had no difficulty in arranging this matter. The leaders had already resolved upon returning to Bordeaux immediately, and taking ship with their spoil and prisoners for England. Had Gaston not had other matters of his own to think of, he would most likely have urged a farther advance upon the beleaguered town, to make sure that it was sufficiently relieved. As it was, he had no thoughts but for his brother's peril; and his anxieties were by no means relieved by the babble of words falling from Roger's lips when he returned to see how it fared with him.

Roger appeared to the kindly soldiers, who had made a rude couch for him and were tending him with such skill as they possessed, to be talking in the random of delirium, and they paid little heed to his words. But as Gaston stood by he was struck by the strange fixity of the youth's eyes, by the rigidity of his muscles, and by the coherence and significance of his words.

It was not a disconnected babble that passed his lips; it was the description of some scene upon which he appeared to be looking. He spoke of horsemen galloping through the night, of the Black Visor in the midst and his gigantic companion by his side. He spoke of the unconscious captive they carried in their midst -- the captive the youth struggled frantically to join, that they might share together whatever fate was to be his.

The soldiers naturally believed he was wandering, and speaking of his own ride with his captors; but Gaston listened with different feelings. He remembered well what he had once heard about this boy and the strange gift he possessed, or was said to possess, of seeing what went on at a distance when he had been in the power of the sorcerer. Might it not be that this gift was not only exercised at the will of another, but might be brought into play by the tension of anxiety evoked by a great strain upon the boy's own nervous system? Gaston did not phrase the question thus, but he well knew the devotion with which Roger regarded Raymond, and it seemed quite possible to him that in this crisis of his life, his body weakened by wounds and fatigue, his mind strained by grief and anxiety as to the fate of him he loved more than life, his spirit had suddenly taken that ascendancy over his body which of old it had possessed, and that he was really and truly following in that strange trance-like condition every movement of the party of which Raymond was the centre.

At any rate, whether he were right or not in this surmise, Gaston resolved that he would not lose a word of these almost ceaseless utterings, and dismissing his men to get what rest they could, he sat beside Roger, and listened with attention to every word he spoke.

Roger lay with his eyes wide open in the same fixed and glassy stare. He spoke of a halt made at a wayside inn, of the rousing up with the earliest stroke of dawn of the keeper of this place, of the inside of the bare room, and the hasty refreshment set before the impatient travellers.

"He sits down, they both sit down, and then he laughs -- ah, where have I heard that laugh before?" and a look of strange terror sweeps over the youth's face. "I may now remove my visor -- my vow is fulfilled! My enemy is in my hands. My Lord of Navailles, I drink this cup to your good health and the success of our enterprise. We have the victim in our own hands. We can wring from him every concession we desire before we offer him for ransom."

Gaston gave a great start. What did this mean? Well indeed he remembered the Sieur de Navailles, the hereditary foe of the De Brocas. Was it, could it be possible, that he was concerned in this capture? Had their two foes joined together to strive to win all at one blow? He must strive to find this out. Could it be possible that Roger really saw and heard all these things? or was it but the fantasy of delirium? Raymond might have spoken to him of the Lord of Navailles as a foe, and in his dreams he might be mixing one thought with the other.

Suddenly Roger uttered a sharp cry and pressed his hands before his eyes. "It is he! it is he!" he cried, with a gasping utterance. "He has removed the mask from his face. It is he -- Peter Sanghurst -- and he is smiling -- that smile. Oh, I know what it means! He has cruel, evil thoughts in his mind. O my master, my master!"

Gaston started to his feet. Here was corroboration indeed. Roger no more knew who the Black Visor was than he had done himself an hour back. Yet he now saw the face of Peter Sanghurst, the very man he himself had discovered the Black Visor to be. This indeed showed that Roger was truly looking upon some distant scene, and a strange thrill ran through Gaston as he realized this mysterious fact.

"And the other, Peter Sanghurst's companion -- what of him? what likeness does he bear?" asked Gaston quickly.

"He is a very giant in stature," was the answer, "with a swarthy skin, black eyes that burn in their sockets, and a coal-black beard that falls below his waist. He has a scar upon his left cheek, and he has lost two fingers upon the left hand. He speaks in a voice like rolling waves, and in a language that is half English and half the Gascon tongue."

"In very truth the Sieur de Navailles!" whispered Gaston to himself.

With every faculty on the alert, he sat beside Roger's bed, listening to every word of his strange babble of talk. He described how they took to horse, fresh horses being provided for the whole company, as though all had been planned beforehand, and how they galloped at headlong pace away -- away -- away, ever faster, ever more furiously, as though resolved to gain their destination at all cost.

The day dawned, but Roger lay still in this trance, and Gaston would not have him disturbed. Until he could know whither his brother had been carried, it was useless to strive to seek and overtake him. If in very truth Roger was in some mysterious fashion watching over him, he would, doubtless, be able to tell whither at length the captive was taken. Then they would to horse and pursue. But they must learn all they could first.

The hours passed by. Roger still talked at intervals. If questioned he answered readily -- always of the same hard riding, the changes of horses, the captive carried passive in the midst of the troop.

Then he began to speak words that arrested Gaston's attention. He spoke of natural features well known to him: he described a grim fortress, so placed as to be impregnable to foes from without. There were the wide moat, the huge natural mound, the solid wall, the small loopholes. Gaston held his breath to hear: he knew every feature of the place so described. Was it not the ancient Castle of Saut -- his own inheritance, as he had been brought up to call it? Roger had never seen it; he was almost assured of that. What he was describing was something seen with that mysterious second sight of his, nothing that had ever impressed itself upon his waking senses.

It was all true, then. Raymond had indeed been taken captive by the two bitter enemies of the house of De Brocas. Peter Sanghurst had doubtless heard of the feud between the two houses, and of the claim set up by Gaston for the establishment of his own rights upon the lands of the foe, and had resolved to make common cause with the Navailles against the brothers. It was possible that they would have liked to get both into their clutches, but that they feared to attack so stalwart a foe as Gaston; or else they might have believed that the possession of the person of Raymond would be sufficient for their purpose. The tie between the twin brothers was known to be strong. It was likely enough that were Raymond's ransom fixed at even an exorbitant sum, the price would be paid by the brother, who well knew that the Tower of Saut was strong enough to defy all attacks from without, and that any person incarcerated in its dungeons would be absolutely at the mercy of its cruel and rapacious lord.

The King of England had his hands full enough as it was without taking up the quarrel of every wronged subject. What was done would have to be done by himself and his own followers; and Gaston set his teeth hard as he realized this, and went forth to give his own orders for the morrow.

At the first glimpse of coming day they were to start forth for the south, and by hard riding might hope to reach Saut by the evening of the second day. Gaston could muster some score of armed men, and they would be like enough to pick up many stragglers on the way, who would be ready enough to join any expedition promising excitement and adventure. To take the Castle of Saut by assault would, as Gaston well knew, be impossible; but he cherished a hope that it might fall into his hands through strategy if he were patient, and if Roger still retained that marvellous faculty of second-sight which revealed to his eyes things hidden from the vision of others.

He slept all that night without moving or speaking, and when he awoke in the morning it was in a natural state, and at first he appeared to have no recollection of what had occurred either to himself or to Raymond. But as sense and memory returned to him, so did also the shadow of some terrible doom hanging over his beloved young master; and though he was still weak and ill, and very unfit for the long journey on horseback through the heat of a summer's day, he would not hear of being left behind, and was the one to urge upon the others all the haste possible as they rode along southward after the foes who had captured Raymond.

On, on, on! there were no halts save for the needful rest and refreshment, or to try to get fresh horses to carry them

forward. A fire seemed to burn in Gaston's veins as well as in those of Roger; and the knowledge that they were on the track of the fugitives gave fresh ardour to the pursuit at every halting place.

Only a few hours were allowed for rest and sleep during the darkest hour of the short night, and then on -- on -- ever on, urged by an overmastering desire to know what was happening to the prisoner behind those gloomy walls.

Roger's sleep that night had been disturbed by hideous visions. He did not appear to know or see anything that was passing; but a deep gloom hung upon his spirit, and he many times woke shivering and crying out with horror at he knew not what; whilst Gaston lay broad awake, a strange sense of darkness and depression upon his own senses. He could scarce restrain himself from springing up and summoning his weary followers to get to horse and ride forth at all risks to the very doors of Saut, and only with the early dawn of day did any rest or refreshment fall upon his spirit.

Roger looked more himself as they rode forth in the dawn.

"Methinks we are near him now," he kept saying; "my heart is lighter than it was. We will save him yet -- I am assured of it! He is not dead; I should surely know it if he were. We are drawing nearer every step. We may be with him ere nightfall."

"The walls of Saut lie betwixt us," said Gaston, rather grimly, but he looked sternly resolute, as though it would take strong walls indeed to keep him from his brother when they were so near.

The country was beginning to grow familiar to him. He picked up followers in many places as he passed through. The name of De Brocas was loved here; that of De Navailles was loathed, and hated, and feared.

Evening was drawing on. The woods were looking their loveliest in all the delicate beauty of their fresh young green. Gaston, riding some fifty yards ahead with Roger beside him, looked keenly about him, with vivid remembrance of every winding of the woodland path. Soon, as he knew, the grim Castle of Saut would break upon his vision -- away there in front and slightly to the right, where the ground fell away to the river and rose on the opposite bank, crowned with those frowning walls.

He was riding so carelessly that when his horse suddenly swerved and shied violently, he was for a moment almost unseated; but quickly recovering himself, he looked round to see what had frightened the animal, and himself gave almost as violent a start as the beast had done.

And yet what he saw was nothing very startling: only the light figure of a young girl -- a girl fair of face and light of foot as a veritable forest nymph -- such as indeed she looked springing out from the overhanging shade of that dim place.

For one instant they looked into each other's faces with a glance of quick recognition, and then clasping her hands together, the girl exclaimed in the Gascon tongue:

"The Holy Saints be praised! You have come, you have come! Ah, how I have prayed that help might come! And my prayers have been heard!"

CHAPTER XXV. THE FAIRY OF THE FOREST

Gaston sat motionless in his saddle, gazing at the apparition as though fascinated. He had seen this woodland nymph before. He had spoken with her, had sat awhile beside her, and her presence had inspired feelings within him to which he had hitherto been a complete stranger. As he gazed now into that lovely face, anxious, glad, fearful, all in one, and yet beaming with joy at the encounter, he felt as if indeed the denizens of another sphere had interposed to save his brother, and from that moment he felt a full assurance that Raymond would be rescued.

Recovering himself as by an effort, he sprang from his saddle and stood beside the girl.

"Lady," he said, in gentle accents, that trembled slightly through the intensity of his emotion -- "fairest lady, who thou art I know not, but this I know, that thou comest ever as a messenger of mercy. Once it was to warn me of peril to come; now it is to tell us of one who lies in sore peril. Lady, tell me that I am not wrong in this -- that thou comest to give me news of my brother!"

Her liquid eyes were full of light. She did not shrink from him, or play with his feelings as on a former occasion. Her face expressed a serious gravity and earnestness of purpose which added tenfold to her charms. Gaston, deeply as his feelings were stirred with anxious care for his brother's fate, could not help his heart going out to this exquisite young thing standing before him with trustful upturned face.

Who she was he knew not and cared not. She was the one woman in the world for him. He had thought so when he had found her in the forest in wayward tricky mood; he knew it without doubt now that he saw her at his side, her sweet face full of deep and womanly feeling, her arch shyness all forgotten in the depth and resolution of her resolve.

"I do!" she answered, in quick, short sentences that sounded like the tones of a silver bell. "You are Gaston de Brocas, and he, the prisoner, is your twin brother Raymond. I know all. I have heard them talk in their cups, when they forget that I am growing from a child to a woman. I have long ceased to be a child. I think that I have grown old in that terrible place. I have heard words -- oh, that make my blood run cold! that make me wish I had never been born into a world where such things are possible! In my heart I have registered a vow. I have vowed that if ever the time should come when I might save one wretched victim from my savage uncle's power -- even at the risk of mine own life -- I would do it. I have warned men away from here. I have done a little, times and again, to save them from a snare laid for them. But never once have I had power to rescue from his relentless clutch the victim he had once enclosed in his net, for never have I had help from without. But when I heard them speak of Raymond de Brocas -- when I knew that it was

he, thy brother, of whom some such things were spoken -- then I felt that I should indeed go mad could I not save him from such fate."

"What fate?" asked Gaston breathlessly; but she went on as though she had not heard.

"I thought of thee as I had seen thee in the wood. I said in my heart, 'He is noble, he is brave. He will rest not night nor day whilst his brother lies a captive in these cruel hands. I have but to watch and to wait. He will surely come. And when he comes, I will show him the black hole in the wall -- the dark passage to the moat -- and he will dare to enter where never man has entered before. He will save his brother, and my vow will be fulfilled!'"

Gaston drew his breath hard, and a light leaped into his eyes.

"Thou knowest a secret way by which the Tower of Saut may be entered -- is that so, Lady?"

"I know a way by which many a wretched victim has left it," answered the girl, whose dark violet eyes were dilated by the depth of her emotion. "I know not if any man ever entered by that way. But my heart told me that there was one who would not shrink from the task, be the peril never so great. I will see that the men-at-arms have drink enough to turn their heads. I have a concoction of herbs which if mingled with strong drink will cause such sleep to fall upon men that a thunderbolt falling at their feet would scarce awaken them. I will see that thou hast the chance thou needest. The rest wilt thou do without a thought of fear."

"Fear to go where Raymond is -- to share his fate if I may not rescue him!" cried Gaston. "Nay, sweet lady, that would be indeed a craven fear, unworthy of any true knight. But tell me more. I have many times wandered round the Tower of Saut in my boyhood, when its lord and master was away. Methinks I know every loophole and gate by heart. But the gates are so closely guarded, and the windows are so narrow and high up in the walls, that I know not how they may be entered from without."

"True: yet there is one way of which doubtless thou knowest naught, for, as I have said, men go forth that way, but enter not by it; and the trick is known only to a few chosen souls, for the victims who pass out seek not to come again. They drop with sullen plash into the black waters of the moat, and the river, which mingles its clearer water with the sluggish stream encircling the Tower, bears thence towards the hungry sea the burden thus entrusted to its care."

Gaston shivered slightly.

"Thou speakest of the victims done to death within yon gloomy walls. I have heard dark tales of such ere now."

"Thou hast heard nothing darker than the truth," said the girl, her slight frame quivering with repressed emotion and a deep and terrible sense of helpless indignation and pity. "I have heard stories that have made my blood run cold in my veins. Men have been done to death in a fashion I dare not speak of. There is a terrible room scarce raised above the level of the moat, into which I was once taken, and the memory of which has haunted me ever since. It is within the great mound upon which the Tower is built; and above it is the dungeon in which the victim is confined. There is some strange and wondrous device by which he may be carried down and raised again to his own prison house when his captor has worked his hideous will upon him. And if he dies, as many do, upon the fearful engines men have made to inflict torture upon each other, then there is this narrow stairway, and this still narrower passage down to the sullen waters of the moat.

"The opening is just at the level of the water. It looks so small from the opposite side, that one would think it but the size to admit the passage of a dog; you would think it was caused by the loosening of some stone in the wall -- no more. But yet it is large enough to admit the passage of a human body; and where a body has passed out, sure a body may pass in. There is no lock upon the door from the underground passage to the moat; for what man would be so bold as find his way into the Castle by the grim dungeons which hold such terrible secrets? If thou hast the courage to enter thus, none will bar thy passage --"

"If!" echoed Gaston, whose hand was clenched and his whole face quivering with emotion as he realized the fearful peril which menaced his brother. "There is no such thing as a doubt. Raymond is there. I come to save him."

The girl's eyes flashed with answering fire. She clasped her hands together, and cried, with something like a sob in her voice:

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew that thou wert a true knight that thou wouldst brave all to save him."

"I am his brother," said Gaston simply, "his twin brother. Who should save him but I? Tell me, have I come in time? Have they dared to lay a finger upon him yet?"

"Dared!" repeated the girl, with a curious inflection in her voice. "Of what should they be afraid here in this tower, which has ever withstood the attacks of foes, which no man may enter without first storming the walls and forcing the gates? Thinkest thou that they fear God or man? Nay, they know not what such fear is; and therein lies our best hope."

"How so?" asked Gaston quickly.

"Marry, for two reasons: one being that they keep but small guard over the place, knowing its strength and remoteness; the other, that being thus secure, they are in no haste to carry out their devil's work. They will first let their prisoner recover of his hurts, that he slip not too soon from their power, as weaklier victims oftentimes do."

"Then they have done naught to him as yet?" asked Gaston, in feverish haste. "What hurts speakest thou of? Was he wounded in the fight, or when they surrounded him and carried him off captive?"

"Not wounded, as I have heard, but sorely battered and bruised; and he was brought hither unconscious, and lay long

as one dead. When he refused to do the bidding of Peter Sanghurst, they took him down to yon fearsome chamber; but, as I heard when I sat at the hoard with mine uncle and that wicked man, they had scarce laid hands upon him, to bend his spirit to their will through their hellish devices, before he fell into a deep swoon from which they could not rouse him; and afraid that he would escape their malice by a merciful death, and that they would lose the very vengeance they had taken such pains to win, they took him back to his cell; and there he lies, tended not unskilfully by my old nurse, who is ever brought to the side of the sick in this place. Once I made shift to slip in behind her when the warder was off his guard, and to whisper in his ear a word of hope. But we are too close watched to do aught but by stealth, and Annette is never suffered to approach the prison alone. She is conducted thither by a grim warder, who waits beside her till she has done her office, and then takes her away. They do not know how we loathe and hate their wicked, cruel deeds; but they know that women have ere this been known to pity helpless victims, and they have an eye to us ever."

Gaston drew his breath more freely. Raymond, then, was for the moment safe. No grievous bodily hurt had been done him as yet; and here outside his prison was his brother, and one as devoted as though the tie of blood bound them together, ready to dare all to save him from the hands of his cruel foes.

"They are in no great haste," said the maiden; "they feel themselves so strong. They say that no man can so much as discover where thy brother has been spirited, still less snatch him from their clasp. They know the French King will not stir to help a subject of the Roy Outremer, They know that Edward of England is far away, and that he still avoids an open breach of the truce. They are secure in the undisturbed possession of their captive. I have heard them say that had he a hundred brothers all working without to obtain his release, the walls of the Tower of Saut would defy their utmost efforts."

"That we shall see," answered Gaston, with a fierce gleam in his eye; and then his face softened as he said, "Now that we have for our ally the enchanted princess of the Castle, many things may be done that else would be hard of achievement."

His ardent look sent a flush of colour through the girl's transparent skin, but her eyes did not waver as she looked frankly back at him.

"Nay; I am no princess, and I have no enchantments -- would that I had, if they could be used in offices of pity and mercy! I am but a portionless maiden, an orphan, an alien. Ofttimes I weep to think that I too did not die when my parents did, in that terrible scourge which has devastated the world, which I hear that you of England call the Black Death."

"Who art thou then, fair maid?" questioned Gaston, who was all this time cautiously approaching the Tower of Saut by a winding and unfrequented path well known to his companion. Roger had been told to wait till the other riders came up, and conduct them with great secrecy and caution along the same path.

Their worst fears for Raymond partially set at rest, and the hope of a speedy rescue acting upon their minds like a charm, Gaston was able to think of other things, and was eager to know more of the lovely girl who had twice shown herself to him in such unexpected fashion.

It was a simple little story that she told, but it sounded strangely entrancing from her lips. Her name, she said, was Constanza, and her father had been one of a noble Spanish house, weakened and finally ruined by the ceaseless internal strife carried on between the proud nobles of the fiery south. Her mother was the sister of the Sieur do Navailles, and he had from time to time given aid to her father in his troubles with his enemies. The pestilence which had of late devastated almost the whole of Europe, had visited the southern countries some time before it had invaded more northerly latitudes; and about a year before Gaston's first encounter with the nymph of the wood, it had laid waste the districts round and about her home, and had carried off both her parents and her two brothers in the space of a few short days.

Left alone in that terrible time of trouble, surrounded by enemies eager to pounce upon the little that remained of the wide domain which had once owned her father's sway, Constanza, in her desperation, naturally turned to her uncle as the one protector that she knew. He had always showed himself friendly towards her father. He had from time to time lent him substantial assistance in his difficulties; and when he had visited at her home, he had shown himself kindly disposed in a rough fashion to the little maiden who flitted like a fairy about the wide marble halls. Annette, her nurse, who had come with her mother from France when she had left that country on her nuptials, was a Gascon woman, and had taught the language of the country to her young mistress. It was natural that the woman should be disposed to return to her native land at this crisis; and for Constanza to attempt to hold her own -- a timid maiden against a score of rapacious foes -- was obviously out of the question. Together they had fled, taking with them such family jewels as could easily be carried upon their persons, and disguised as peasants they had reached and crossed the frontier, and found their way to Saut, where the Lord of Navailles generally spent such of his time as was not occupied in forays against his neighbours, or in following the fortunes either of the French or English King, as best suited the fancy of the moment.

He had received his niece not unkindly, but with complete indifference, and had soon ceased to think about her in any way. She had a home beneath his roof. She had her own apartments, and she was welcome to occupy herself as she chose. Sometimes, when he was in a better humour than usual, he would give her a rough caress. More frequently he swore at her for being a useless girl, when she might, as a boy, have been of some good in the world. He had no intention of providing her with any marriage portion, so that it was superfluous to attempt to seek out a husband for her. She and Annette were occasionally of use when there was sickness within the walls of the Castle, or when he or his followers came in weary and wounded from some hard fighting. On the whole he did not object to her presence at Saut, and her own little bower was not devoid of comfort, and even of luxury.

But for all that, the girl was often sick at heart with all that she saw and heard around her, and was unconsciously pining for some life, she scarce knew what, but a life that should be different from the one she was doomed to now.

"Sometimes I think that I will retire to a Convent and shut myself up there," she said to Gaston, her eyes looking far away over the wooded plain before them; "and yet I love my liberty. I love to roam the forest glades -- to hear the songs of the bird, and to feel the fresh winds of heaven about me. Methinks I should pine and die shut up within high walls, without the liberty to rove as I will. And then I am not *devote*. I love not to spend long hours upon my knees. I feel nearest to the Blessed Saints and the Holy Mother of God out here in these woods, where no ribald shouts of mirth or blasphemous oaths can reach me. But the Sisters live shut behind high walls, and they love best to tell their beads beside the shrine of some Saint within their dim chapels. They were good to us upon our journey. I love and reverence the holy Sisters, and yet I do not know how I could be one of them. I fear me they would soon send me forth, saying that I was not fit for their life."

"Nay, truly such a life is not for thee!" cried Gaston, with unwonted heat. "Sweet maiden, thou wert never made to pine away behind walls that shelter such as cannot stand against the trials and troubles of life. For it is not so with thee. Thou hast courage; thou hast a noble heart and a strong will. There is other work for thee to do. Lady, thou hast this day made me thy humble slave for ever. My brother once free, as by thy aid I trust he will be ere another day has dawned, and I will repay thy service by claiming as my reward the right to call myself thine own true knight. Sweet Constanza, I will live and, if need be, die for thee. Thou wilt henceforth be the light of my path, the star of my life. Lady, thy face hath haunted me ever since that day, so long gone by, when I saw thee first, scarce knowing if thou wert a creature of flesh and blood or a sprite of the woodland and water. Fair women have I looked upon ere now, but none so fair as thee. Let me but call myself thy true and faithful knight, and the day will come when I will stand boldly forth and make thee mine before all the world!"

Gaston had never meant to speak thus when he and his companion first began this walk through the winding woodland path. Then his thoughts had been filled with his brother and him alone, and there had been no space for other matters to intrude upon him. But with a mind more at rest as to Raymond's immediate fate, he could not but be aware of the intense fascination exercised upon him by his companion; and before he well knew what he was saying, he was pouring into her ears these ardent protestations of devotion.

Her fair face flushed, and the liquid eyes, so full of softness and fire, fell before his ardent gaze. The little hand he had taken in his own quivered in his strong clasp, and Gaston felt with a thrill of ecstatic joy that it faintly returned the pressure of his fingers.

"Lady, sweetest Lady!" he repeated, his words growing more and more rapid as his emotion deepened, "let me hear thee say that thou wilt grant me leave to call myself thy true knight! Let me hear from those sweet lips that there is none before me who has won the love of this generous heart!"

The maid was quivering from head to foot. Such words were like a new language to her, and yet her heart gave a ready and sweet response. Had she not sung of knightly wooers in the soft songs of her childhood, and had she not dreamed her own innocent dreams of him who would one day come to seek her? And had not that dream lover always worn the knightly mien, the proud and handsome face, of him she had seen but once, and that for one brief hour alone? Was it hard to give to him the answer he asked? And yet how could she frame her lips aright to tell him she had loved him ere he had asked her love?

"Fair Sir, how should a lonely maid dwelling in these wild woods know aught of that knightly love of which our troubadours so sweetly sing? I have scarce seen the face of any since I have come to these solitudes; only the rough and terrible faces of those wild soldiers and savages who follow mine uncle when he rideth forth on his forays."

Gaston's heart gave a throb of joy; but it was scarce the moment to press his suit farther. Who could tell what the next few hours might bring forth? He might himself fall a victim, ere another day had passed, to the ancient foe of his house. It was enough for the present to know that the fair girl's heart was free.

He raised the hand he held and pressed his lips upon it, saying in tenderest tones:

"From henceforth -- my brother once standing free without these walls -- I am thy true knight and champion, Lady. Give me, I pray thee, that knot of ribbon at thy neck. Let me place it in my head piece, and feel that I am thine indeed for life or death."

With a hand that trembled, but not from hesitation, Constanza unfastened the simple little knot she wore as her sole ornament, and gave it to Gaston. They exchanged one speaking glance, but no word passed their lips.

By this time they had approached very near to the Tower, although the thick growth of the trees hindered them from seeing it, as it also concealed them from the eyes of any persons who might be upon the walls. The evening light was now fast waning. Upon the tops of the heights the sun still shone, but here in the wooded hollow, beside the sullen waters of the moat, twilight had already fallen, and soon it would be dark as night itself. The moon rose late, and for a space there would be no light save that of the stars.

Constanza laid her finger upon her lips, and made a sign demanding caution. Gaston understood that he was warned not to speak, and to tread cautiously, which he did, stealing along after his fairy-like companion, and striving to emulate her dainty, bird-like motions. He could see by the glint of water that they were skirting along beside the moat, but he had never approached so near to it before, and he knew not where they were going.

Some men might have feared treachery, but such an idea never entered Gaston's head. Little as he knew of his companion, he knew that she was true and loyal, that she was beloved by him, and that her heart was already almost won.

Presently the girl stopped and laid her hand upon his arm.

"This is the place," she whispered. "Come very softly to the water's edge, and I will show you the dark hole opposite,

just above the waterline, where entrance can be made. There be no loopholes upon this side of the Tower, and no watchman is needed where there be no foothold for man to scale the wall beneath.

"Look well across the moat. Seest thou yon black mark, that looks no larger than my hand? That is the entrance to a tunnel which slopes upward until it reaches a narrow doorway in the thickness of the solid wall whereby the underground chamber may be reached. Once there, thou wilt see let into the wall a great wheel with iron spokes projecting from it. Set that wheel in motion, and a portion of the flooring of the chamber above will descend. When it has reached the ground, thou canst ascend by reversing the wheel, leaving always some one in the chamber below to work the wheel, which will enable thee to bring thy brother down again. That accomplished, all that remains will be to creep again through the narrow passage to the moat and swim across once more. Thou canst swim?"

"Ay, truly. Raymond and I have been called fishes from our childhood. We swam in the great mill pool almost ere we could well run alone. Many of my stout fellows behind are veritable water rats. If my brother be not able to save himself, there will be a dozen stout arms ready to support him across the moat.

"And what will be the hour when this attempt must be made? What if the very moment I reached my brother his jailer should come to him, and the alarm be given through the Castle ere we could get him thence?"

"That it must be my office to prevent," answered the girl, with quiet resolution. "I have thought many times of some such thing as this, hoping as it seemed where no hope was, and Annette and I have taken counsel together. Leave it to me to see that all the Castle is filled with feasting and revelry. I will see that the mead which circulates tonight be so mingled with Annette's potion that it will work in the brains of the men till they forget all but rioting and sleep. For mine uncle and his saturnine guest, I have other means of keeping them in the great banqueting hall, far away from the lonely Tower where their prisoner lies languishing. They shall be so well served at the board this night, that no thought of aught beside the pleasure of the table shall enter to trouble their heads. And at ten of the clock, if I come not again to warn thee, cross fearlessly the great moat, and do as I have bid thee. But if thou hearest from the Castle wall the hooting of an owl thrice repeated like this" -- and the girl put her hands to her mouth, and gave forth so exact an imitation of an owl's note that Gaston started to hear it -- "thrice times thrice, so that there can be no mistake, then tarry here on this side; stir not till I come again. It will be a danger signal to tell that all is not well. But if at the hour of ten thou hast heard naught, then go forward, and fear not. Thy brother will be alone, and all men far away from the Tower. Take him, and go forth; and the Blessed Saints bless and protect you all."

She stretched forth her hand and placed it in his. There was a sudden sadness in her face. Gaston caught her hand and pressed it to his lips, but he had more to say than a simple word of parting.

"But I shall see thee again, sweet Constanza? Am I not thy true knight? Shall I not owe to thee a debt I know not how to pay? Thou wilt not send me forth without a word of promise of another meeting? When can I see thee again to tell thee how we have fared?"

"Thou must not dream of loitering here once thy object is secured," answered the girl, speaking very firmly and almost sternly, though there was a deep sadness in her eyes. "It will not be many hours ere they find their captive has escaped them, and they will rouse the whole country after you. Nay, to linger is certain death; it must not be thought of. In Bordeaux, and there alone, wilt thou be safe. It is thither that thou must fly, for thither alone will the Sieur de Navailles fear to follow you. For me, I must remain here, as I have done these many years. It will not be worse than it hath ever been."

"And thinkest thou that I will leave thee thus to languish after thou hast restored to me my brother?" asked Gaston hotly. "Nay, lady, think not that of thine own true knight! I will come again. I vow it! First will I to the English King, and tell in his ears a tale which shall arouse all his royal wrath. And then will I come again. It may not be this year, but it shall be ere long. I will come to claim mine own; and all that is mine shall be thine. Sweet Lady, wouldst thou look coldly upon me did I come with banners unfurled and men in arms against him thou callest thine uncle? For the lands he holds were ours once, and the English King has promised that they shall one day be restored, as they should have been long ago had not this usurper kept his iron clutch upon them in defiance of his feudal lord. Lady, sweet Constanza, tell me that thou wilt not call me thy foe if I come as a foe to the Lord of Navailles!"

"Methinks thou couldst never be my foe," answered Constanza in a low voice, pressing her hands closely together; "and though he be mine uncle, and though he has given me a home beneath his roof, he has made it to me an abode of terror, and I know that he is feared and hated far and wide, and that his evil deeds are such that none may trust or love him. I would not show ingratitude for what he hath done for me; but he has been paid many times over. He has had all my jewels, and of these many were all but priceless; and he gives me but the food I eat and the raiment I wear. I should bless the day that set me free from this life beneath his roof. There be moments when I say in mine heart that I cannot live longer in such an evil place -- when I have no heart left and no hope."

"But thou wilt have hope now!" cried Gaston ardently. "Thou wilt know that I am coming to claim mine own, and with it this little hand, more precious to me than all else besides. Sweetest Constanza, tell me that I shall still find thee as thou art when I come to claim thee! I shall not come to find thee the bride of another?"

He could not see her face in the dimness, but he felt her hand flutter in his clasp like a bird in the hand of one who has tamed it, and whom it trusts and loves. The next moment his arm was about her slight figure, and her head drooped for a moment upon his shoulder.

"I shall be waiting," she whispered, scarce audibly. "How could I love another, when thou hast called thyself my knight?"

He pressed a passionate kiss upon her brow.

"If this is indeed farewell for the present hour, it is a sweet one, my beloved. I little thought, as I journeyed hither today,

what I was to find. Farewell, farewell, my lady love, my princess, my bride. Farewell, but not for ever. I will come again anon, and then we will be no more parted, for thou shalt reign in these grim walls, and no more dark tales of horror shall be breathed of them. I will come again; I will surely come. Trust me, and fear not!"

She stood beside him in the gathering darkness, and he could almost hear the fluttering of her heart. It was a moment full of sweetness for both, even though the shadow of parting was hanging over them.

A slight rustle amongst the underwood near to them caused them to spring apart; and the girl fled from him, speeding away with the grace and silent fleetness of a deer. Gaston made a stride towards the place whence the sound had proceeded, and found himself face to face with Roger.

"The men are all at hand," he whispered. "I would not have them approach too close till I knew your pleasure. They are all within the wood, all upon the alert lest any foe be nigh; but all seems silent as the grave, and not a light gleams from the Tower upon this side. Shall I bid them remain where they are? or shall I bring them hither to you beside the water?"

"Let them remain where they are for a while and see that the horses be well fed and cared for. At ten o'clock, if all be well, the attempt to enter the Tower is to be made; and once the prisoner is safe and in our keeping, we must to Bordeaux as fast as horse will take us. The Sieur de Navailles will raise the whole country after us. We must be beyond the reach of his clutches ere we draw rein again."

CHAPTER XXVI. THE RESCUE OF RAYMOND.

The appointed hour had arrived. No signal had fallen upon Gaston's listening ears; no note of warning had rung through the still night air.

From the direction of the Castle sounds of distant revelry arose at intervals -- sounds which seemed to show that nothing in the shape of watch or ward was being thought of by its inmates; and also that Constanza's promise had been kept, and potations of unwonted strength had been served out to the men.

Now the appointed hour had come and gone, and Gaston commenced his preparations for the rescue of his brother. That he might be going to certain death if he failed, or if he had been betrayed, did not weigh with him for a moment. If Constanza were false to him, better death than the destruction of his hopes and his trust. In any case he would share his brother's fate sooner than leave him in the relentless hands of these cruel foes.

He had selected six of his stoutest followers, all of them excellent swimmers, to accompany him across the moat; and Roger, as a matter of course, claimed to be one of the party. To Roger's mysterious power of vision they owed their rapid tracing of Raymond to this lonely spot. It was indeed his right to make one of the rescue party if he desired to be allowed to do so.

The rest of their number were to remain upon this farther side of the moat, and the horses were all in readiness, rested and refreshed, about half-a-mile off under the care of several stout fellows, all stanch to their master's interests. The story they had heard from Gaston of what had been devised against his brother filled the honest soldiers with wrath and indignation. Rough and savage as they might show themselves in open warfare, deliberate and diabolical cruelty was altogether foreign to their nature. And they all felt towards Raymond a sense of protecting and reverent tenderness, such as all may feel towards a being of finer mould and loftier nature.

Raymond had the faculty of inspiring in those about him this reverential tenderness; and not one of those stalwart fellows who were silently laying aside their heavy mail, and such of their garments as would be likely to hinder them in their swim across the moat, but felt a deep loathing and hatred towards the lord of this grim Tower, and an overmastering resolve to snatch his helpless victim from his cruel hands, or perish in the attempt.

All their plans had been very carefully made. Lanterns and the wherewithal for kindling them were bound upon the heads of some of the swimmers; and though they laid aside most of their defensive armour and their heavy riding boots, they wore their stout leather jerkins, that were almost as serviceable against foeman's steel, and their weapons, save the most cumbersome, were carried either in their belts or fastened across their shoulders.

Dark though it had become, Gaston had not lost cognizance of the spot whither they were to direct their course; and one by one the strong swimmers plunged into the sullen waters without causing so much as a ripple or plash, which might betray their movements to suspicious ears upon the battlements (if indeed any sort of watch were kept, which appeared doubtful). They swam with that perfect silence possible only to those who are thoroughly at home in the water, till they had crossed the dark moat and had reached the perpendicular wall of the Tower, which rose sheer upon the farther side -- so sheer that not even the foot of mountain goat could have scaled its rough-hewn side.

But Gaston knew what he had to search for, and with outstretched hand he swam silently along the solid masonry, feeling for that aperture just above watermark which he had seen before the daylight faded. It took him some little time to find it, but at last it was discovered, and with a muttered word of command to the men who silently followed in his wake, he drew himself slowly out of the water, to find himself in a very narrow rounded aperture like a miniature tunnel, which trended slightly upwards, and would only admit the passage of one human being at a time, and then only upon hands and knees.

It was pitchy dark in this tunnel, and there was no space in which to attempt to kindle a light. Once the thought came into Gaston's head that if he were falling into a treacherous pitfall laid for him with diabolic ingenuity by his foes, nothing could well be better than to entrap him into such a place as this, where it would be almost impossible to go forward or back, and quite out of his power to strike a single blow for liberty or life.

But he shook off the chill sense of fear as unworthy and unknightly. His Constanza was true; of that he was assured.

The only possible doubt was whether she herself were being used as an unconscious tool in the hands of subtle and perfectly unscrupulous men.

But even so Gaston had no choice but to advance. He had come to rescue his brother or to die with him. If the latter, he would try at least to sell his life dearly. But he was fully persuaded that his efforts would be crowned with success.

He had time to think many such things as he slowly crept along the low passage in the black darkness. It seemed long before his hand came in contact with the door he had been told he should presently reach, and this door, as Constanza had said, yielded to his touch, and he felt rather than saw that he had emerged into a wider space beyond.

This place, whatever it was, was not wholly dark, though so very dim that it was impossible to make out anything save the dull red glow of what might be some embers on a distant hearth. Gaston did not speak a word, but waited till all his companions had reached this more open space, and had risen to their feet and grasped their weapons. Then all held their breath, and listened for any sound that might by chance reveal the presence of hidden foes, till they started at the sound of Roger's voice speaking softly but with complete assurance.

"There is no one here," he said. "We are quite alone. Let me kindle a torch and show you."

Roger, as Gaston had before observed, possessed a cat-like faculty of seeing in the dark. Whether it was natural to him, or had been acquired during those days spent almost entirely underground in the sorcerer's vaulted chamber at Basildene, the youth himself scarcely knew. But he was able to distinguish objects clearly in gloom which no ordinary eye could penetrate; and now he walked fearlessly forward and stirred up the smouldering embers, whose dull red glow all could see, into a quick, bright, palpitating flame which illumined every corner of the strange place into which they had penetrated.

Gaston and his men looked wonderingly around them, as they lighted their lanterns at the fire and flashed them here and there into all the dark corners, as though to assure themselves that there were no ambushed foes lurking in the grim recesses of that circular room. But Roger had been quite right. There was nothing living in that silent place. Not so much as a loophole in the wall admitted any air or light from the outer world, or could do so even in broad noon. The chamber was plainly hollowed out in the mass of earth and masonry of which the foundations of the Tower were composed, and if any air were admitted (as there must have been, else men could not breathe down there), it was by some device not easily discovered at a first glance.

It was in truth a strange and terrible place -- the dank walls, down which the damp moisture slowly trickled, hung round with instruments of various forms, all designed with a terrible purpose, and from their look but too often used.

Gaston's face assumed a look of dark wrath and indignation as his quick eyes roved round this evil place, and he set his teeth hard together as he muttered to himself:

"Heaven send that the Prince himself may one day look upon the vile secrets of this charnel house! I would that he and his royal father might know what deeds of darkness are even now committed in lands that own their sway! Would that I had that wicked wretch here in my power at this moment! Well does he deserve to be torn in pieces by his own hideous engines. And in this very place does he design to do to death my brother! May God pardon me if I sin in the thought, but death by the sword is too good for such a miscreant!"

Words very similar to these were being bandied about in fierce undertones by the men who had accompanied Gaston, and who had never seen such a chamber as this before. Great would have been their satisfaction to let its owner taste something of the agony he had too often inflicted upon helpless victims thrown into his power. But this being out of the question, the next matter was the rescue of the captive they had come to save; and they looked eagerly at their young leader to know what was the next step to be taken.

Gaston was searching for the wheel by which the mechanism could be set in motion which would enable him to reach his brother's prison house. It was easily found from the description given him by Constanza. He set his men to work to turn the wheel, and at once became aware of the groaning and grating sound that attends the motion of clumsy machinery. Gazing eagerly up into the dun roof above him, he saw slowly descending a portion of the stonework of which it was formed. It was a clever enough contrivance for those unskilled days, and showed a considerable ingenuity on the part of some owner of the Castle of Saut.

When the great slab had descended to the floor below, Gaston stepped upon it, Roger placing himself at his side, and with a brief word to his men to reverse the action of the wheel, and to lower the slab again a few minutes later, he prepared for his strange passage upwards to his brother's lonely cell.

Roger held a lantern in his hand, and the faces of the pair were full of anxious expectation. Suppose Raymond had been removed from that upper prison? Suppose he had succumbed either to the cruelty of his foes or to the fever resulting from his injuries received on the day of the battle?

A hundred fears possessed Gaston's soul as the strange transit through the air was being accomplished -- a transit so strange that he felt as though he must surely be dreaming. But there was only one thing to be done -- to persevere in the quest, and trust to the Holy Saints and the loving mercy of Blessed Mary's Son to grant him success in this his endeavour.

Up, up into the darkness of the vaulted roof he passed, and then a yawning hole above their heads, which looked too small to admit the passage of the slab upon which they stood, swallowed them up, and they found themselves passing upwards through a shaft which only just admitted the block upon which they stood. Up and up they went, and now the creaking sound grew louder, and the motion grew perceptibly slower. They were no longer in a narrow shaft; a black space opened before their eyes. The motion ceased altogether with a grinding sensation and a jerk, and out of the darkness of a wider space, pitchy dark to their eyes, came the sound of a familiar voice.

"Gaston -- Brother!"

Gaston sprang forward into the darkness, heedless of all but the sound of that voice. The next moment he was clasping his brother in his arms, his own emotion so great that he dared not trust his voice to speak; whilst Raymond, holding him fast in a passionate clasp, whispered in his ear a breathless question.

"Thou too a prisoner in this terrible place, my Gaston? O brother -- my brother -- I trusted that I might have died for us both!"

"A prisoner? nay, Raymond, no prisoner; but as thy rescuer I come. What, believest thou not? Then shalt thou soon see with thine own eyes.

"But let me look first upon thy face. I would see what these miscreants have done to thee. Thou feelest more like a creature of skin and bone than one of sturdy English flesh and blood.

"The light, Roger!

"Ay, truly, Roger is here with me. It is to him in part we owe it that we are here this night. Raymond, Raymond, thou art sorely changed! Thou lookest more spirit-like than ever! Thou hast scarce strength to stand alone! What have they done to thee, my brother?"

But Raymond could scarce find strength to answer. The revulsion of feeling was too much for him. When he had heard that terrible sound, and had seen the slab in the floor sink out of sight, he had sprung from his bed of straw, ready to face his cruel foes when they came for him, yet knowing but too well what was in store for him when he was carried down below, as he had been once before. Then when, instead of the cruel mocking countenance of Peter Sanghurst, he had seen the noble, loving face of his brother, and had believed that he, too, had fallen into the power of their deadly foes, it had seemed to him as though a bitterness greater than that of death had fallen upon him, and the rebound of feeling when Gaston had declared himself had been so great, that the whole place swam before his eyes, and the floor seemed to reel beneath his feet.

"We will get him away from this foul place!" cried Gaston, with flaming eyes, as he looked into the white and sharpened face of his brother, and felt how feebly the light frame leaned against the stalwart arm supporting it.

He half led, half carried Raymond the few paces towards the slab in the floor which formed the link with the region beneath, and the next minute Raymond felt himself sinking down as he had done once before; only then it had been in the clasp of his most bitter foe that he had been carried to that infernal spot.

The recollection made him shiver even now in Gaston's strong embrace, and the young knight felt the quiver and divined the cause.

"Fear nothing now, my brother," he said. "Though we be on our way to that fearful place, it is for us the way to light and liberty. Our own good fellows are awaiting us there. I trow not all the hireling knaves within this Castle wall should wrest thee from us now."

"I fear naught now that thou art by my side, Gaston," answered Raymond, in low tones. "If thou art not in peril thyself, I could wish nothing better than to die with thine arm about mine."

"Nay, but thou shalt live!" cried Gaston, with energy, scarce understanding that after the long strain of such a captivity as Raymond's had been it was small wonder that he had grown to think death well-nigh better and sweeter than life. "Thou shalt live to take vengeance upon thy foes, and to recompense them sevenfold for what they have done to thee. I will tell this story in the ears of the King himself. This is not the last time that I shall stand within the walls of Saut!"

By this time the heavy slab had again descended, and around it were gathered the eager fellows, who received their young master's brother with open arms and subdued shouts of triumph and joy. But he, though he smiled his thanks, looked round him with eyes dilated by the remembrance of some former scene there, and Gaston set his teeth hard, and shook back his head with a gesture that boded little good for the Sieur de Navailles upon a future day.

"Come men; we may not tarry!" he said. "No man knows what fancy may enter into the head of the master of this place. Turn the wheel again; send up the slab to its right place. Let them have no clue to trace the flight of their victim. Leave everything as we found it, and follow me without delay."

He was all anxiety now to get his brother from the shadow of this hideous place. The whiteness of Raymond's face, the hollowness of his eyes, the lines of suffering traced upon his brow in a few short days, all told a tale only too easily read.

The rough fellows treated him tenderly as they might have treated a little child. They felt that he had been through some ordeal from which they themselves would have shrunk with a terror they would have been ashamed to admit; and that despite the youth's fragile frame and ethereal face that looked little like that of a mailed warrior, a hero's heart beat in his breast, and he had the spirit to do and to dare what they themselves might have quailed from and fled before.

The transit through the narrow tunnel presented no real difficulty, and soon the sullen waters of the moat were troubled by the silent passage of seven instead of six swimmers. The shock of the cold plunge revived Raymond; and the sense of space above him, the star-spangled sky overhead, the free sweet air around him, even the unfettered use of his weakened limbs, as he swam with his brother's strong supporting arm about him, acted upon him like a tonic. He hardly knew whether or not it was a dream; whether he were in the body or out of the body; whether he should awake to find himself in his gloomy cell, or under the cruel hands of his foes in that dread chamber he had visited once before.

He knew not, and at that moment he cared not. Gaston's arm was about him, Gaston's voice was in his ear. Whatever

came upon him later could not destroy the bliss of the present moment.

A score of eager hands were outstretched to lift the light frame from Gaston's arm as the brothers drew to the edge of the moat. It was no time to speak, no time to ask or answer questions. At any moment some unguarded movement or some crashing of the boughs underfoot might awaken the suspicions of those within the walls. It was enough that the secret expedition had been crowned with success -- that the captive was now released and in their own hands.

Raymond was almost fainting now with excitement and fatigue, but Gaston's muscles seemed as if made of iron. Though the past days had been for him days of great anxiety and fatigue, though he had scarce eaten or slept since the rapid march upon the besieging army around St. Jean d'Angely, he seemed to know neither fatigue nor feebleness. The arm upholding Raymond's drooping frame seemed as the arm of a giant. The young knight felt as though he could have carried that light weight even to Bordeaux, and scarce have felt fatigue.

But there was no need for that. Nigh at hand the horses were waiting, saddled and bridled, well fed and well rested, ready to gallop steadily all through the summer night. The moon had risen now, and filtered in through the young green of the trees with a clear and fitful radiance. The forest was like a fairy scene; and over the minds of both brothers stole the softening remembrance of such woodland wonders in the days gone by, when as little lads, full of curiosity and love of adventure, they had stolen forth at night into the forest together to see if they could discover the fairies at their play, or the dwarfs and gnomes busy beneath the surface of the earth.

To Raymond it seemed indeed as though all besides might well be a dream. He knew not which of the fantastic images impressed upon his brain was the reality, and which the work of imagination. A sense of restful thankfulness -- the release from some great and terrible fear -- had stolen upon him, he scarce knew how or why. He did not wish to think or puzzle out what had befallen him. He was with Gaston once more; surely that was enough.

But Gaston's mind was hard at work. From time to time he turned an anxious look upon his brother, and he saw well how ill and weary he was, how he swayed in the saddle, though supported by cleverly-adjusted leather thongs, and how unfit he was for the long ride that lay before them. And yet that ride must be taken. They must be out of reach of their implacable foe as quickly as might be. In the unsettled state of the country no place would afford a safe harbour for them till Bordeaux itself was reached. Fain would he have made for the shelter of the old home in the mill, or of Father Anselm's hospitable home, but he knew that those would be the first places searched by the emissaries of the Navailles. Even as it was these good people might be in some peril, and they must certainly not be made aware of the proximity of the De Brocas brothers.

But if not there, whither could Raymond be transported? To carry him to England in this exhausted state might be fatal to him; for no man knew when once on board ship how contrary the wind might blow, and the accommodation for a sick man upon shipboard was of the very rudest. No; before the voyage could be attempted Raymond must have rest and care in some safe place of shelter. And where could that shelter be found?

As Gaston thus mused a sudden light came upon him, and turning to Roger he asked of him a question:

"Do not some of these fellows of our company come from Bordeaux; and have they not left it of late to follow the English banner?"

"Ay, verily," answered Roger quickly. "There be some of them who came forth thence expressly to fight under the young knight of De Brocas. The name of De Brocas is as dear to many of those Gascon soldiers as that of Navailles is hated and cursed."

"Send then to me one of those fellows who best knows the city," said Gaston; and in a few more minutes a trooper rode up to his side.

"Good fellow," said Gaston, "if thou knowest well you city whither we are bound, tell me if thou hast heard aught of one Father Paul, who has been sent to many towns in this and other realms by his Holiness the Pope, to restore amongst the Brethren of his order the forms and habits which have fallen something into disuse of late? I heard a whisper as we passed through the city a week back now that he was there. Knowest thou if this be true?"

"It was true enow, Sir Knight, a few days back," answered the man, "and I trow you may find him yet at the Cistercian Monastery within the city walls. He had but just arrived thither ere the English ships came, and men say that he had much to do ere he sallied forth again."

"Good," answered Gaston, in a tone of satisfaction; and when the trooper had dropped back to his place again, the young knight turned to his brother and said cheerily:

"Courage, good lad; keep but up thy heart, my brother, for I have heard good news for thee. Father Paul is in the city of Bordeaux, and it is in his kindly charge that I will leave thee ere I go to England with my tale to lay before the King."

Raymond was almost too far spent to rejoice over any intelligence, however welcome; yet a faint smile crossed his face as the sense of Gaston's words penetrated to his understanding. It was plain that there was no time to lose if they were to get him to some safe shelter before his strength utterly collapsed, and long before Bordeaux was reached he had proved unable to keep his seat in the saddle, and a litter had been contrived for him in which he could lie at length, carried between four of the stoutest horsemen.

They were now in more populous and orderly regions, where the forest was thinner and townships more frequent. The urgent need for haste had slightly diminished, and though still anxious to reach their destination, the party was not in fear of an instant attack from a pursuing foe.

The Navailles would scarce dare to fall upon the party in the neighbourhood of so many of the English King's fortified

cities; and before the sun set they hoped to be within the environs of Bordeaux itself -- a hope in which they were not destined to be disappointed.

Nor was Gaston disappointed of his other hope; for scarce had they obtained admission for their unconscious and invalided comrade within the walls of the Cistercian Monastery, and Gaston was still eagerly pouring into the Prior's ears the story of his brother's capture and imprisonment, when the door of the small room into which the strangers had been taken was slowly opened to admit a tall, gaunt figure, and Father Paul himself stood before them. He gave Gaston one long, searching look; but he never forgot a face, and greeted him by name as Sir Gaston de Brocas, greatly to the surprise of the youth, who thought he would neither be recognized nor known by the holy Father. Then passing him quickly by, the monk leaned over the couch upon which Raymond had been laid -- a hard oaken bench -- covered by the cloak of the man who had borne him in.

Raymond's eyes were closed; his face, with the sunset light lying full upon it, showed very hollow and white and worn. Even in the repose of a profound unconsciousness it wore a look of lofty purpose, together with an expression of purity and devotion impossible to describe. Gaston and the Prior both turned to look as Father Paul bent over the prostrate figure with an inarticulate exclamation such as he seldom uttered, and Gaston felt a sudden thrill of cold fear run through him.

"He is not dead?" he asked, in a passionate whisper; and the Father looked up to answer:

"Nay, Sir Knight, he is not dead. A little rest, a little tendance, a little of our care, and he will be restored to the world again. Better perhaps were it not so - better perchance for him. For his is not the nature to battle with impunity against the evil of the world. Look at him as he lies there: is that face of one that can look upon the deeds of these vile days and not suffer keenest pain? To fight and to vanquish is thy lot, young warrior; but what is his? To tread the thornier path of life and win the hero's crown, not by deeds of glory and renown, but by that higher and holier path of suffering and renunciation which One chose that we might know He had been there before us. Thou mayest live to be one of this world's heroes, boy; but in the world to come it will be thy brother who will wear the victor's crown."

"I truly believe it," answered Gaston, drawing a deep breath; "but yet we cannot spare him from this world. I give him into thy hands, my Father, that thou mayest save him for us here."

CHAPTER XXVII. PETER SANGHURST'S WOOING.

"Joan -- sweetest mistress -- at last I find you; at last my eyes behold again those peerless charms for which they have pined and hungered so long! Tell me, have you no sweet word of welcome for him whose heart you hold between those fair hands, to do with it what you will?"

Joan, roused from her reverie by those smoothly-spoken words, uttered in a harsh and grating voice, turned quickly round to find herself face to face with Peter Sanghurst -- the man she had fondly hoped had passed out of her life for ever.

Joan and her father, after a considerable period spent in wanderings in foreign lands (during which Sir Hugh had quite overcome the melancholy and sense of panic into which he had been thrown by the scourge of the Black Death and his wife's sudden demise as one of its victims), had at length returned to Woodcrych. The remembrance of the plague was fast dying out from men's minds. The land was again under cultivation; and although labour was still scarce and dear, and continued to be so for many, many years, whilst the attempts at legislation on this point only produced riot and confusion (culminating in the next reign in the notable rebellion of Wat Tyler, and leading eventually to the emancipation of the English peasantry), things appeared to be returning to their normal condition, and men began to resume their wonted apathy of mind, and to cease to think of the scourge as the direct visitation of God.

Sir Hugh had been one of those most alarmed by the ravages of the plague. He was full of the blind superstition of a thoroughly irreligious man, and he knew well that he had been dabbling in forbidden arts, and had been doing things that were supposed in those days to make a man peculiarly the prey of the devil after death. Thus when the Black Death had visited the country, and he had heard on all sides that it was the visitation of God for the sins of the nations, he had been seized with a panic which had been some years in cooling, and he had made pilgrimages and had paid a visit to his Holiness the Pope in order to feel that he had made amends for any wrongdoing in his previous life.

He had during this fit of what was rather panic than repentance avoided Woodcrych sedulously, as the place where these particular sins which frightened him now had been committed. He had thus avoided any encounter with Peter Sanghurst, and Joan had hoped that the shadow of that evil man was not destined to cross her path again. But, unluckily for her hopes, a reaction had set in in her father's feelings. His blind, unreasoning terror had now given place to an equally wild and reckless confidence and assurance. The Black Death had come and gone, and had passed him by (he now said) doing him no harm. He had obtained the blessing of the Pope, and felt in his heart that he could set the Almighty at defiance. His revenues, much impoverished through the effects of the plague, made the question of expenditure the most pressing one of the hour; and the knight had come to Woodcrych with the distinct intention of prosecuting those studies in alchemy and magic which a year or two back he had altogether forsworn.

Old Sanghurst was dead, he knew -- the devil had claimed one of his own. But the son was living still, and was to be heard of, doubtless, at Basildene. Peter Sanghurst was posing in the world as a wealthy man, surrounded by a halo of mystery which gave him distinction and commanded respect. Sir Hugh felt that he might be a very valuable ally, and began to regret now that his fears had made him so long an exile from his country and a wanderer from home.

Many things might have happened in that interval. What more likely than that Sanghurst had found a wife, and that his old affection for Joan would by now be a thing of the past? The knight fumed a good deal as he thought of neglected opportunities. But there was just the chance that Sanghurst might be faithful to his old love, whilst surely Joan would have forgotten her girlish caprice, and cease to attempt a foolish resistance to her father's will. Had he been as much in

earnest then as he now was, the marriage would long ago have been consummated. But in old days he had not felt so confident of the wealth of the Sanghursts as he now did, and had been content to let matters drift. Now he could afford to drift no longer. Joan had made no marriage for herself, she was unwed at an age when most girls are wives and mothers, and Sir Hugh was growing weary of her company. He wished to plunge once again into a life of congenial dissipation, and into those researches for magic wealth which had always exercised so strong a fascination over him; and the first step necessary for both these objects appeared to be to marry off his daughter, and that, if possible, to the man who was supposed to be in possession of these golden secrets.

Joan, however, knew nothing of the hopes and wishes filling her father's mind. She was glad to come back to the home she had always loved the best of her father's residences, and which was so much associated in her mind with her youthful lover.

She believed that so near to Guildford she would be sure to hear news of Raymond. Master Bernard de Brocas would know where he was; he might even be living beneath his uncle's roof. The very thought sent quick thrills of happiness through her. Her face was losing its thoughtful gravity of expression, and warming and brightening into new beauty. She had almost forgotten the proximity of Basildene, and Peter Sanghurst's hateful suit, so long had been the time since she had seen him last, until the sound of his voice, breaking in upon a happy reverie, brought all the old disgust and horror back again, and she turned to face him with eyes that flashed with lambent fire.

Yet as she stood there in the entrance to that leafy bower which was her favourite retreat at Woodcrych, Peter Sanghurst felt as though he had never before seen so queenly a creature, and said in his heart that she had grown tenfold more lovely during the years of her wanderings.

Joan was now no mere strip of a girl. She was three-and-twenty, and had all the grace of womanhood mingling with the free, untrammelled energy of youth. Her step was as light, her movements as unfettered, as in the days of her childhood; yet now she moved with an unconscious stately grace which caused her to be remarked wherever she went; and her face, always beautiful, with its regular features, liquid dark eyes, and full, noble expression, had taken an added depth and sweetness and thoughtfulness which rendered it remarkable and singularly attractive. Joan inspired a considerable amount of awe in the breasts of those youthful admirers who had flitted round her sometimes during the days of her wanderings; but she had never given any of them room to hope to be more to her than the passing acquaintance of an hour. She had received proffers of life-long devotion with a curious gentle courtesy almost like indifference, and had smiled upon none of those who had paid her court.

Her father had let her do as she would. No suitor wealthy enough to excite his cupidity had appeared at Joan's feet. He intended to make a wealthy match for her before she grew much older; but the right person had not yet appeared, and time slipped by almost unheeded.

Now she found herself once again face to face with Peter Sanghurst, and realized that he was renewing, or about to renew, that hateful suit which she trusted had passed from his mind altogether. The face she turned towards him, with the glowing autumn sunshine full upon it, was scarcely such as could be called encouraging to an ardent lover. But Peter Sanghurst only smiled as she stood there in her proud young beauty, the russet autumn tints framing her noble figure in vivid colours.

"I have taken you by surprise, sweet lady," he said; "it is long since we met."

"Long indeed, Master Peter -- or should I say Sir Peter? It hath been told to me that you have been in the great world; but whether or not your gallantry has won you your spurs I know not."

Was there something of covert scorn in the tones of her cold voice? Sanghurst could not tell, but every smallest stab inflicted upon his vanity or pride by this beautiful creature was set down in the account he meant to settle with her when once she was in his power. His feelings towards her were strangely mixed. He loved her passionately in a fierce, wild fashion, coveting the possession of that beauty which maddened whilst it charmed him. She enthralled and enthralled him, yet she stung him to the quick by her calm contempt and resolute avoidance of him. He was determined she should be his, come what might; but when once he had won the mastery over her, he would make her suffer for every pang of wounded pride or jealousy she had inflicted upon him. The cruelty of the man's nature showed itself even in his love, and he hated even whilst he loved her; for he knew that she was infinitely his superior, and that she had read the vileness of his nature, and had learned to shrink from him, as purity always shrinks from contact with what is foul and false.

Even her question stung his vanity, and there was a savage gleam in his eye as he answered:

"Nay, my spurs are still to be won; for what was it to me whether I won them or not unless I might wear them as your true knight? Sweetest mistress, these weary years have been strangely long and dark since the light of your presence has been withdrawn from us. Now that the sun has risen once again upon Woodcrych, let it shine likewise upon Basildene. Mistress Joan, I come to you with your father's sanction. You doubtless know how many years I have wooed you -- how many years I have lived for you and for you alone. I have waited even as the patriarch of old for his wife. The time has now come when I have the right to approach you as a lover. Sweet lady, tell me that you will reward my patience -- that I shall not sue in vain."

Peter Sanghurst bent the knee before her; but she was acute enough to detect the undercurrent of mockery in his tone. He came as a professed suppliant; but he came with her father's express sanction, and Joan had lived long enough to know how very helpless a daughter was if her father's mind were once made up to give her hand in marriage. Her safety in past days had been that Sir Hugh was not really resolved upon the point. He had always been divided between the desire to conciliate the old sorcerer and the fear lest his professed gifts should prove but illusive; and when he was in this mood of uncertainty, Joan's steady and resolute resistance had not been without effect. But she knew that he owed large sums of money to the Sanghursts, who had made frequent advances when he had been in difficulties, and it

was likely enough that the day of reckoning had now come, and that her hand was to be the price of the cancelled bonds.

Her father had for some days been dropping hints that had raised uneasiness in her mind. This sudden appearance of Peter Sanghurst, coupled with his confident words, showed to Joan only too well how matters stood.

For a moment she stood silent, battling with her fierce loathing and disgust, her fingers toying with the gold circlet her lover had placed upon her finger. The very thought of Raymond steadied her nerves, and gave her calmness and courage. She knew that she was in a sore strait; but hers was a spirit to rise rather than sink before peril and adversity.

"Master Peter Sanghurst," she answered, calmly and steadily, "I thought that I had given you answer before, when you honoured me by your suit. My heart is not mine to give, and if it were it could never be yours. I pray you take that answer and be gone. From my lips you can never have any other."

A fierce gleam was in his eye, but his voice was still smooth and bland.

"Sweet lady," he said, "it irks me sore to give you pain; but I have yet another message for you. Think you that I should have dared to come with this offer of my heart and hand if I had not known that he to whom thy heart is pledged lies stiff and cold in the grip of death -- nay, has long since mouldered to ashes in the grave?"

Joan turned deadly pale. She had not known that her secret had passed beyond her own possession. How came Peter Sanghurst to speak of her as having a lover? Was it all guesswork? True, he had been jealous of Raymond in old days. Was this all part of a preconcerted and diabolical plot against her happiness?

Her profound distrust of this man, and her conviction of his entire unscrupulousness, helped to steady her nerves. If she had so wily a foe to deal with, she had need of all her own native shrewdness and capacity. After a few moments, which seemed hours to her from the concentrated thought pressed into them, she spoke quietly and calmly:

"Of whom speak you, Sir? Who is it that lies dead and cold?"

"Your lover, Raymond de Brocas," answered Sanghurst, rising to his feet and confronting Joan with a gaze of would-be sympathy, though his eyes were steely bright and full of secret malice -- "your lover, who died in my arms after the skirmish of which you may have heard, when the English army routed the besieging force around St. Jean d'Angely; and in dying he gave me a charge for you, sweet lady, which I have been longing ever since to deliver, but until today have lacked the opportunity."

Joan's eyes were fixed upon him wide with distrust. She was in absolute ignorance of Raymond's recent movements. But in those days that was the fate of those who did not live in close contiguity. She had been a rover in the world, and so perchance had he. All that Sanghurst said might be true for aught she could allege to the contrary.

Yet how came it that Raymond should confide his dying message to his sworn and most deadly foe? The story seemed to bear upon it the impress of falsehood. Sanghurst, studying her face intently, appeared to read her thoughts.

"Lady," he said, "if you will but listen to my tale, methinks I can convince you of the truth of my words. You think that because we were rivals for your hand we were enemies, too? And so of old it was. But, fair mistress, you may have heard how Raymond de Brocas soothed the dying bed of my father, and tended him when all else, even his son, had fled from his side; and albeit at the moment even that service did not soften my hard heart, in the times that followed, when I was left alone to muse on what had passed, I repented me of my old and bitter enmity, and resolved, if ever we should meet again, to strive to make amends for the past. I knew that he loved you, and that you loved him; and I vowed I would keep away and let his suit prosper if it might. I appeal to you, fair mistress, to say how that vow has been kept."

"I have certainly seen naught of you these past years," answered Joan. "But I myself have been a wanderer."

"Had you not been, my vow would have been as sacredly kept," was the quick reply. "I had resolved to see you no more, since I might never call you mine. I strove to banish your image from my mind by going forth into the world; and when this chance of fighting for the King arose, I was one who sailed to the relief of the English garrison."

She made no response, but her clear gaze was slightly disconcerting; he looked away and spoke rapidly.

"Raymond de Brocas was on board the vessel that bore us from England's shores: ask if it be not so, an you believe me not. We were brothers in arms, and foes no longer. I sought him out and told him all that was in my heart. You know his nature -- brave, candid, fearless. He showed his nobility of soul by giving to me the right hand of fellowship. Ere the voyage ended we were friends in truth. When the day of battle came we rode side by side against the foe."

Joan's interest was aroused. She knew Raymond well. She knew his nobility of nature -- his generous impulse to forgive a past foe, to bury all enmity. If Sanghurst had sought him with professions of contrition, might he not have easily been believed? And yet was such an one as this to be trusted?

"In the melee -- for the fighting was hard and desperate -- we were separated: he carried one way and I another. When the French were driven back or taken captive I sought for Raymond everywhere, but for long without avail. At last I found him, wounded to the death. I might not even move him to our lines. I could but give him drink and watch beside him as he slowly sank.

"It was then he spoke of thee, Joan." Sanghurst's voice took a new tone, and seemed to quiver slightly; he dropped the more formal address hitherto observed, and lapsed into the familiar "thou." "The sole trouble upon that pure soul was the thought of thee, left alone and unprotected in this harsh world. He spoke of thee and that love he bore thee, and I, who had also loved, but had resigned all my hopes for love of him, could but listen and grieve with him. But he knew my secret -- his clear eyes had long ago divined it -- and in talking together of thee, Joan, as we had many times done

before, he had learned all there was to know of my hopeless love. As he lay dying he seemed to be musing of this; and one short half-hour before he breathed his last, he spoke in these words --

"Sanghurst, we have been rivals and foes, but now we are friends, and I know that I did misjudge thee in past days, as methinks she did, too.' (Joan, this is not so. It was not that ye misjudged me, but that I have since repented of my evil ways in which erst I rejoiced.) 'But thou wilt go to her now, and tell her what has befallen her lover. Tell her that I died with her name on my lips, with thoughts of her in my heart. And tell her also not to grieve too deeply for me. It may be that to die thus, loving and beloved, is the happiest thing that can befall a man. But tell her, too, that she must not grieve too bitterly -- that she must not lead a widowed life because that I am taken from her. Give to her this token, good comrade; she will know it. Tell her that he to whom she gave it now restores it to her again, and restores it by the hand of his best and truest friend, trusting that this trusty friend will some day meet the reward he covets from the hand of her who once gave the token to him upon whom the hand of death is resting. Give it her, and tell her when you give it that her dying lover's hope is that she will thus reward the patient, generous love of him who shall bring it to her.'"

As he spoke these words, Sanghurst, his eyes immovably fixed upon the changing face of the beautiful girl, drew from his breast a small packet and placed it within her trembling hands.

He knew he was playing a risky game, and that one false move might lose him his one chance. It was all the veriest guesswork; but he believed he had guessed aright. Whilst Raymond had been stretched upon the rack, swooning from extremity of pain, Sanghurst's eyes, fixed in gloating satisfaction upon the helpless victim, had been caught by the sight of this token about his neck, secured by a strong silver cord. To possess himself of the charm, or whatever it might be, had been but the work of a moment. He had felt convinced that it was a lover's token, and had been given to Raymond by Joan, and if so it might be turned to good account, even if other means failed to bend the stubborn will of the youth who looked so frail and fragile.

Raymond had escaped from his hands by a species of magic, as it had seemed to the cruel captors, when he had tasted but a tithe of what they had in store for him. Baffled and enraged as Sanghurst was, he had still the precious token in his possession. If it had been given by Joan, she would recognize it at once, and coupled with the supposed dying message of her lover, surely it would not be without effect.

Eagerly then were his eyes fixed upon her face as she undid the packet, and a gleam of triumph came into them as he saw a flash of recognition when the little heart was disclosed to view.

Truly indeed did Joan's heart sink within her, and every drop of blood ebbed from her cheek; for had not Raymond said that he would never part from her gift whilst he had life? and how could Peter Sanghurst have become possessed of it unless his tale were true? He might be capable of robbing a dead body, but how would he have known that the token was given by her?

A mist seemed to float before the girl's eyes. At that moment she was unable to think or to reason. The one thought there was room for in her mind was that Raymond was dead. If he were lost to her for ever, it was little matter what became of herself.

Sanghurst's keen eyes, fixed upon her with an evil gleam, saw that the charm was working. It had worked even beyond his hopes. He was so well satisfied with the result of this day's work, that he would not even press his suit upon her farther then. Let her have time to digest her lover's dying words. When she had done so, he would come to her again.

"Sweet lady, I grieve that thou shouldst suffer though any words I have been forced to speak; but it was a promise given to him who is gone to deliver the message and the token. Lady, I take my leave of thee. I will not intrude upon thy sacred sorrow. I, too, sorrow little less for him who is gone. He was one of the brightest ornaments of these days of chivalry and renown."

He caught her hand for a moment and pressed it to his lips, she scarce seeming to know what he did or what he said; and then he turned away and left her alone with her thoughts, a strangely malicious expression crossing his face as he knew himself hidden from her eyes.

That same evening, when father and daughter were alone together in the room they habitually occupied in the after part of the day, Sir Hugh began to speak with unwonted decision and authority.

"Joan, child, has Peter Sanghurst been with thee today?"

"He has, my father."

"And has he told thee that he comes with my sanction as a lover, and that thou and he are to wed ere the month is out?"

"He had not said so much as that," answered Joan, who spoke quietly and dreamily, and with so little of the old ring of opposition in her voice that her father looked at her in surprise.

She was very pale, and there was a look in her eyes he did not understand; but the flush of anger or defiance he had thought to see did not show itself. He began to think Sanghurst had spoken no more than the truth in saying that Mistress Joan appeared to have withdrawn her opposition to him as a husband.

"But so it is to be," answered her father, quickly and imperiously, trying to seize this favourable moment to get the matter settled. "I have long given way to thy whimsies -- far too long -- and here art thou a woman grown, older than half the matrons round, yet never a wife as they have long been. I will no more of it. It maketh thee and me alike objects of ridicule. Peter Sanghurst is my very good friend. He has helped me in many difficulties, and is ready to help me again. He has money, and I have none. Listen, girl: this accursed plague has carried off all my people, and labourers are

asking treble and quadruple for their work that which they have been wont to do. Sooner would I let the crops rot upon the ground than be so mulcted by them. The King does what he can, but the idle rogues set him at defiance; and there be many beside me who will feel the grip of poverty for long years to come. Peter Sanghurst has his wealth laid up in solid gold, not in fields and woods that bring nothing without hands to till or tend them. Marry but him, and Woodcrych shall be thy dower, and its broad acres and noble manor will make of ye twain, with his gold, as prosperous a knight and dame (for he will soon rise to that rank) as ye can wish to be. Girl, my word is pledged, and I go not back from it. I have been patient with thy fancies, but I will no more of them. Thou art mine own daughter, my own flesh and blood, and thy hand is mine to give to whom I will. Peter Sanghurst shall be thy lord whether thou wilt or no. I have said it; let that be enough. It is thy part to obey."

Joan sat quite still and answered nothing. Her eyes were fixed upon the dancing flames rushing up the wide chimney. She must have heard her father's words, yet she gave no sign of having done so. But for that Sir Hugh cared little. He was only too glad to be spared a weary battle of words, or a long struggle with his high-spirited daughter, whose force of character he had come to know. That she had yielded her will to his at last seemed only right and natural, and of course she must have been by this time aware that if her father was really resolved upon the match, she was practically helpless to prevent it.

She was no longer a child; she was a woman who had seen much of the world for the times she lived in. Doubtless she had begun to see that she must now marry ere her beauty waned; and having failed to make a grander match during her years of wandering, was glad enough to return to her former lover, whose fidelity had doubtless touched her heart.

"Thou wilt have a home and a dowry, and a husband who has loved thee long and faithfully," added Sir Hugh, who felt that he might now adopt a more paternal tone, seeing he had not to combat foolish resistance. "Thou hast been a good daughter, Joan; doubtless thou wilt make a good wife too."

Still no reply, though a faint smile seemed to curve Joan's lips. She presently rose to her feet, and making a respectful reverence to her father -- for daily embraces were not the order of the day -- glided from the room as if to seek her couch.

"That is a thing well done!" breathed the knight, when he found himself once more alone, "and done easier than I had looked for. Well, well, it is a happy thing the wench has found her right senses. Methinks good Peter must have been setting his charms to work, for she never could be brought to listen to him of old. He has tamed her to some purpose now."

Meantime Joan had glided up the staircase of the hall, along several winding passages, and up and down several irregular flights of narrow steps, till she paused at the door of a room very dim within, but just lighted by the gleam of a dying fire. As she stepped across the threshold a voice out of the darkness accosted her.

"My ladybird, is it thou, and at such an hour? Tell me what has befallen thee."

"The thing that thou and I have talked of before now, Bridget," answered Joan, speaking rapidly in a strange low voice -- "the thing that thou and I have planned a hundred times if the worst should befall us. It is tenfold more needful now than before. Bridget, I must quit this house at sunset tomorrow, and thou must have my disguise ready. I must to France, to find out there the truth of a tale I have this day heard. Nat will go with me -- he has said so a hundred times; and I have long had money laid by for the day I ever knew might come. Thou knowest all. He is a man of the sea; I am his son. We have planned it too oft to be taken unawares by any sudden peril. Thus disguised, we may wander where we will, molested by none. Lose no time. Rise and go to Nat this very night. I myself must not be seen with him or with thee. I must conduct myself as though each day to come were like the one past. But thou knowest what to do. Thou wilt arrange all. God bless thee, my faithful Bridget; and when I come back again, thou shalt not lack thy reward!"

"I want none else but thy love, my heart's delight," said the old nurse, gathering the girl into her fond arms; and Joan hid her face for one moment upon that faithful breast and gave way to a short burst of weeping, which did much for her overcharged heart.

Then she silently stole away and went quietly to her own chamber.

CHAPTER XXVIII. GASTON'S SEARCH.

"He would get better far more quickly could the trouble be removed from his mind."

Gaston raised his head quickly, and asked:

"What trouble?"

Father Paul's face, thin and worn as of old, with the same keen, kindling glance of the deep-set eyes, softened almost into a smile as he met the questioning glance of Gaston's eyes.

"Thou shouldst know more of such matters than I, my son, seeing that thou art in youth's ardent prime, whilst I wear the garb of a monk. Sure thou canst not have watched beside thy brother's sickbed all these long weeks without knowing somewhat of the trouble in his mind?"

"I hear him moan and talk," answered Gaston; "but he knows not what he says, and I know not either. He is always feeling at his neck, and calling out for some lost token. And then he will babble on of things I understand not. But how I may help him I know not. I have tarried long, for I could not bear to leave him thus; and yet I am longing to carry to the King my tale of outrage and wrong. With every week that passes my chance of success grows less. For Peter Sanghurst may have been before me, and may have told his own false version of the tale ere I may have speech with King or

Prince. I know not what to do -- to stay beside Raymond, or to hasten to England ere time be farther flown. Holy Father, wilt thou not counsel me? I feel that every day lost is a day lived in vain, ere I be revenged upon Raymond's cruel foes!"

The youth's eyes flashed. He clenched his hands, and his teeth set themselves fast together. He felt like an eagle caged, behind these protecting walls. For his brother's sake he was right glad of the friendly shelter; but for himself he was pining to be free.

And yet how was he to leave that dearly-loved brother, whose eyes followed him so wistfully from place to place, who brightened up into momentary life when he entered the room, and took so little heed of what passed about him, unless roused by Gaston's touch or voice? Raymond had been very, very near to the gates of death since he had been brought into the Monastery, and even now, so prostrated was he by the long attack of intermittent fever which had followed his wonderful escape from Saut, that those about him scarce knew how the balance would turn. The fever, which had at first run high and had been hard to subdue, had now taken another turn, and only recurred at intervals of a few days; but the patient was so fearfully exhausted by all he had undergone that he seemed to have no strength to rally. He would lie in a sort of trance of weakness when the fever was not upon him, scarce seeming to breathe unless he was roused to wakefulness by some word or caress from Gaston; whilst on the days when the fever returned, he would lie muttering indistinctly to himself, sometimes breaking forth into eager rapid speech difficult to follow, and often trying to rise and go forth upon some errand, no one knew what, and struggling hard with those who held him back.

Father Paul had watched over the first stages of the illness with the utmost care and tenderness, after which his duties called him away, and he had only returned some three days since. The long hot summer in Bordeaux had been a very trying one for the patient, whose state prohibited any attempt at removal to a cooler, fresher air. But as August was merging into September, and the days were growing shorter and the heat something less oppressive, it was hoped that there might be a favourable change in the patient's state; and much was looked for also from Father Paul's skill, which was accounted something very great.

Gaston and Roger had remained within the Monastery walls in close attendance upon the patient; but the restraint had been terribly irksome to the temper of the young knight, and he was panting to be free to pursue his quest, and to tell his story in the King's ears. He could not but dread that in his absence some harm might befall his Constanza. Suppose those two remorseless men suspected her to be concerned in the flight of their victim, what form might not their vengeance take? It was a thing that would scarce bear thinking of. Yet what could he do to save her and to win her until he could make an organized attack upon Saut, armed with full authority from England's King?

And now that Father Paul was back, might it not be possible that this could be done? Gaston felt torn in twain betwixt his love for his brother and his love for his betrothed. Father Paul would be able to advise him wisely and well.

The Father looked earnestly into the ardent and eager face of the youth, and answered quietly:

"Methinks thou hast been here long enough, my son. Thou mayest do better for Raymond by going forth upon the mission thou hast set thyself. But first I would ask of thee a few questions. Who is this lady of whom thy brother speaks so oft?"

"Lady?" questioned Gaston, his eyes opening wide in surprise. "Does he indeed speak of a lady?"

The Father smiled at the question.

"Thy thoughts must have been as wandering as his if thou dost not know as much as that," he said, with a look that brought the hot blood into Gaston's cheek, for he well knew where his own thoughts had been whilst he sat beside his brother, scarce heeding the ceaseless murmur which babbled from his unconscious lips.

It had never occurred to him that he could learn aught by striving to catch those indistinct utterances; and his mind had been full to overflowing with his own affairs.

"I knew not that he spoke of any lady," said the young knight, wondering for a moment, with love's irrational jealousy, whether Raymond could have seen his Constanza and have lost his heart to her.

Had she not spoken of having slipped once into his cell to breathe in his ear a word of hope? Might not even that passing glimpse at such a time have been enough to subjugate his heart? He drew his breath hard, and an anxious light gleamed in his eye. But the Father continued speaking, and a load seemed to roll from his spirit with the next words.

"It is of a lady whose name is Joan that he speaks almost ceaselessly when the fever fit is on him. Sometimes he speaks, too, of his cousin, that John de Brocas who lost his life in the Black Death through his ceaseless labours amongst the sick. He is in sore trouble, as it seems, by the loss of some token given him by the lady. He fears that some foul use may be made by his foes of this same token, which he would sooner have died than parted from. If thou knowest who this lady is and where she may be found, it would do more for thy brother to have news of her than to receive all the skilled care of the best physicians in the world. I misdoubt me whether we shall bring him back to life without her aid. Wherefore, if thou knowest where she may be found, delay not to seek her. Tell her her lover yet lives, and bring him some message from her that may give him life and health."

Gaston's eyes lighted. To be given anything to do -- anything but this weary, wearing waiting and watching for the change that never came -- put new life into him forthwith.

"It must sure be Mistress Joan Vavasour thou meanest, Father," he said. "Raymond spoke much of her when we were on shipboard together. I knew not that his heart was so deeply pledged; but I see it all now. It is of her that he is dreaming night and day. It is the loss of her token that is troubling him now.

"Stop! what have I heard? Methinks that this same Peter Sanghurst was wooing Mistress Joan himself once. Sure I see

another motive in his dastard capture of my brother. Perchance he had in him not only a rival for the lands of Basildene, but for the hand of the lady. Father, I see it all! Would that I had seen it before! It is Peter Sanghurst who has robbed Raymond of his token, and he may make cruel use of what he has treacherously filched away. I must lose not a day nor an hour. I must to England in the wake of this villain. Oh, why did I not understand before? What may he not have done ere I can stop his false mouth? The King shall hear all; the King shall be told all the tale! I trow he will not tarry long in punishing the coward traitor!"

Father Paul was less certain how far the King would interest himself in a private quarrel, but Peter Sanghurst's recent action with regard to Raymond might possibly be such as to stir even the royal wrath. At least it was time that some watch should be placed upon the movements of the owner of Basildene, for he would be likely to make a most unscrupulous use of any power he might possess to injure Raymond or gain any hold over the lady they both loved.

Roger being called in to the conference, and giving his testimony clearly enough as to the frequent intercourse which had existed between Mistress Joan Vavasour and Raymond de Brocas, and the evident attraction each bore for the other, the matter appeared placed beyond the possibility of all doubt. Gaston's resolve was quickly taken, and he only waited till his brother could be aroused to fuller consciousness, to start forth upon his double quest after vengeance and after Joan.

"Brother," he said, taking Raymond's hands in his, and bending tenderly over him, "I am going to leave thee, but only for a time. I am going to England to find thy Joan, and to tell her that thou art living yet, and how thou hast been robbed of thy token."

A new light shone suddenly in Raymond's eyes. It seemed as though some of the mists of weakness rolled away, leaving to him a clearer comprehension. He grasped his brother's hand with greater strength than Gaston believed him to possess, and his lips parted in a flashing smile.

"Thou wilt seek her and find her? Knowest thou where she is?"

"No; but I will go to seek her. I shall get news of her at Guildford. I will to our uncle's house forthwith. Sir Hugh Vavasour can easily be found."

"He has been wandering in foreign lands this long while," answered Raymond. "I know not whether he may have returned home. Gaston, if thou findest her, save her from the Sanghurst. Tell her that I yet live -- that for her sake I will live to protect her from that evil man. He has robbed me of the pledge of her love; I am certain of it. It was a trinket not worth the stealing, and I had it ever about my neck. It was taken from me when I was a prisoner and at their mercy, when I did not know what befell me. He has it -- I am assured of that -- and what evil use he may make of it I know not. Ah, if thou canst but find her ere he can reach her side!"

"I will find her," answered Gaston, firmly and cheerfully. "Fear not, Raymond; I have had harder tasks than this to perform ere now. Be it thy part to shake off this wasting sickness. I will seek out thy Joan, and will bring her to thy side. But let her not find thee in such sorry plight. Thou lookest yet rather a corpse than a man. Thou wouldst fright her by thy wan looks an she came to thee now."

Wan and white and wasted did Raymond indeed appear, as though a breath would blow him away. Upon his face was that faraway, ethereal look of one who has been lingering long beside the portal of another world, and scarce knows to which he belongs. It sometimes seemed as though the angel song of the unseen realm was oftener heard and understood by him than the voices of those about him. But the fever cloud was slowly lifting from his brain, and today the first impulse to a real recovery had been given by these few words with his brother.

Raymond's recollection of past events was coming back to him connectedly, and the thought of Joan acted like a tonic upon him. For her sake he would live; for her sake he would make a battle for his life. Had he not vowed himself to her service? and did any woman stand more in need of her lover's strong arm than the daughter of Sir Hugh Vavasour?

Raymond had gauged the character of that knight before, and knew that he would sell his daughter without scruple to any person who would make it worth his while. It had been notorious in old days that the Sanghursts had some peculiar hold upon him, and was it likely that Peter Sanghurst, who was plainly resolved to make Joan his wife, would allow that power to rest unused when it might be employed for the furtherance of his purpose? To send Gaston forth upon the quest for Joan was much; but he himself must fight this wasting sickness, that he might be ready to go to her when the summons came that she was found, and was ready to welcome her faithful knight.

From that hour Raymond began to amend; and although his progress was slow, and seemed doubly slow to his impatience, it was steady and sure, and he was as one given back from the dead.

"Mistress Joan Vavasour, boy? why, all the world is making that inquiry. How comes it that thou, by thine own account but just home from Gascony, shouldst be likewise asking the same question?"

Master Bernard de Brocas turned his kindly face towards Gaston with a look of shrewd inquiry in his eyes. His nephew had arrived but a short half-hour at his house, somewhat jaded by rapid travelling, and after hurriedly removing the stains of the journey from his person, was seated before a well-supplied board, whilst the cleric sat beside him, always eager for news, and exceedingly curious to know the history of the twin brothers, who for the past six months seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. But for the moment Gaston was too intent upon asking questions to have leisure to answer any.

"How?" he questioned; "what mean you, reverend Sir? Everybody asking news of her? How comes that about?"

"Marry, for the reason that the lady hath disappeared these last three weeks from her father's house, and none can tell

whither she has fled, or whether she has been spirited away, or what hath befallen her. Sir Hugh is in a mighty taking, for he had just arranged a marriage betwixt her and Peter Sanghurst, and the lady had given her consent (or so it is said, albeit there be some who doubt the truth of that), and he is sorely vexed to know what can have become of her."

"Peter Sanghurst! that arch-villain!" cried Gaston, involuntarily laying his hand on the hilt of his dagger. "Mine uncle, I have come to ask counsel of thee about that same miscreant. I am glad that he at least has not fled the country. He shall not escape the fate he so richly merits."

And then, with flashing eyes and words eloquent through excess of feeling, Gaston related the whole story of the past months: the appearance on board the vessel of the Black Visor; the concerted action against Raymond carried out by Sanghurst, thus disguised, and the Sieur de Navailles; and the cruelty devised against him, from which he had escaped only by something of a miracle.

And as Master Bernard de Brocas listened to this tale of treachery, planned and carried out against one of his own name and race, an answering light shone in his eyes, and he smote his palms together, crying out in sudden wrath:

"Gaston, the King shall hear of this! Thou shalt tell to him the tale as thou hast told it to me. He will not hear patiently of such indignities offered to a subject of his, not though the King of France himself had done it! That Sieur de Navailles is no friend to England. I know him well, and his false, treacherous ways. I have heard much of him ere now, and the King has his eye upon him. Gaston, this hollow truce cannot long continue. The nobles and the King are alike weary of a peace which is no peace, and which the King of France or his lords are continually breaking. A very little, and the flame of war will burst out anew. It may be that even this tale of thine may put the spark to the train (as they say of these new artillery engines that are so astonishing men by their smoke and noise), and that the Prince, when he hears of it, will urge his father to march once more into France, and put an end to the petty annoyances and treacherous attacks which are goading the royal lion of England to wrath and fury."

"Pray Heaven it may!" cried Gaston, starting to his feet and pacing up and down the hall. "Thou knowest, uncle mine, how the Prince and the King did long ago confirm to me the rights of the De Brocas to the ancient Castles of Orthez and Saut. If he would but give me his royal warrant for mustering men and recovering mine own, I trow, be the walls of Saut never so strong, that I would speedily make mine entrance within them! Uncle, the Sieur de Navailles is hated and feared and reviled by all men for miles around his walls. I trow that, even amongst those who bear arms for him, some would be found who would gladly serve another master. Stories of the punishments he is wont to inflict upon all who fall beneath his displeasure have passed from mouth to mouth, and bitter is the rage burning in the breasts of those whose helpless kinsfolk have suffered through his tyrant cruelty. I trow an armed band, coming in the name of the English King, could soon smoke that old fox out of his hole; whilst all men would rejoice at his fall. Let me to the King -- let me tell my tale! I burn to be on the wing once more! Where may his Majesty be found?"

"Softly, softly, boy! We must think somewhat more of this. And we have two foes, not one alone, to deal with. Peter Sanghurst is, as it were, beneath our very hand. He is at Basildene, fuming like a wild thing at the sudden disappearance of Mistress Joan. There be, nevertheless, some who say that this wrath is all assumed; that he has captured the lady, and holds her a prisoner in his hands, all the while pretending to know naught of her. I know not what truth there may be in such rumours. The Sanghurst bears an evil name, and many are the stories whispered about him."

"What!" almost shouted Gaston, in the fierceness of his excitement, "Mistress Joan a prisoner in Basildene, the captive of that miscreant! Uncle, let us lose not an hour! Let us forthwith to the King. He will give us his royal warrant, and armed with that we will to Basildene, and search for her there, and free her ere the set of sun. Oh, it would be like him -- it would be all in a piece with his villainy! I cannot rest nor breathe till I know all. Uncle, may we not set forth this very day -- this same night?"

The worthy ecclesiastic laid a hand upon Gaston's shoulder.

"Boy," he said, "I will myself to the King this very day. The moon will soon be up, and the way is familiar to me and my men. But thou shalt tarry here. Thou hast travelled far today, and art weary and in need of rest. Perchance, in this matter of the Sanghurst, I shall do better without thee. Thou shalt see the King anon, and shalt tell him all thy tale; but methinks this matter of Basildene had best be spoken of betwixt him and me alone. Thou knowest that I have for long been in the King's favour and confidence, and have managed many state matters for him. Thou mayest therefore leave thy cause in my hands. I have all the papers safe that thou broughtest from Gascony long since, and have left in my care these many years. I have been awaiting my opportunity to lay the matter of Basildene before the King, and now I trow that the hour has come."

Gaston stopped short in his restless pacing, a bright light in his eyes.

"Thou thinkest to oust the Sanghurst thence -- to gain Basildene for Raymond?"

"Ay, verily I do. It is your inheritance by right; the papers prove it. Ye were deprived of it by force, and now the hour of restitution has come. As to thee are secured the Gascon lands, when they can be wrested from the hand of the foe, so shall Basildene be secured to Raymond, albeit he has not won his spurs as thou hast done, boy, and that right lustily. But I know much good of Raymond. He will worthily fill his place. Go now to rest, boy, and leave this matter in mine hands. I warrant thee the cause shall not suffer for being intrusted to me. Get thee to rest. Fear not; and ere two days be passed thou shalt have tidings of some sort from me."

Gaston would fain have been his uncle's companion on the road, but he knew better than to insist. Master Bernard de Brocas well knew what he was about, and was plainly deeply interested in the story he had heard. Raymond had long been high in his favour. To cause to recoil upon the head of the treacherous Sanghurst the vengeance he had plotted against his own nephew, to punish him for his treachery -- to wrest from his rapacious grasp the lands and the Manor of Basildene, was a task peculiarly agreeable to the statesman, who knew well what he was about and the master whom he

served. Basildene was no great possession, but it might be greatly increased in value, and there was rumour of buried hoards there which might speedily restore the old house to more than its former splendour. At any rate, its lands and revenues would be a modest portion for a younger son, who still had the flower of his life before him, and was like to rise in the King's favour. The romantic story of his love, his sufferings, his rescue from the two foes of his house, was certain to appeal to the King and his son, whilst the treachery of those foes would equally rouse the royal wrath.

Master Bernard departed for Windsor with the rising of the moon; and Gaston passed a restless night and day wondering what was passing at Windsor, and feeling, when he retired to rest upon the second night, as though his excitement of mind must drive slumber from his eyes. Nor did sleep visit him till the tardy dawn stole in at the window, and when he did sleep he slept long and soundly.

He was aroused by the sound of a great trampling in the courtyard below; and springing quickly from his couch, he saw the place full of men-at-arms, all wearing either the badge of the De Brocas or else that of the Prince of Wales.

Throwing on his clothes in great haste, and scarce tarrying to buckle on his sword, Gaston strode from his chamber and hastened down the great staircase. At the foot of this stood one whom well he knew, and with an inarticulate exclamation of delight he threw himself upon one knee before the young Prince, and pressed his lips to the hand graciously extended to him.

"Nay, Gaston; thy friend and comrade, not thy sovereign!" cried the handsome youth gaily, as he raised Gaston and looked smilingly into his face, his own countenance alight with satisfaction and excitement. "Ah, thou knowest not how glad I am to welcome thee once more! For the days be coming soon when I must needs rally all my brave knights about me, and go forth to France for a new career of glory there. But today another task is ours, and not as thy Prince, but thy good comrade, have I come. I will forth with thee to the den of this foul Sanghurst, and together will we search his house for the lady men say he has so cunningly spirited away; and if she be found indeed languishing in captivity there, then in very truth shall the Sanghurst feel the wrath of the royal Edward. He shall live to feel the iron hand of the King he has outraged and defied! But he shall pay the forfeit of his life. England shall be rid of one of her greatest villains when Peter Sanghurst feels the halter about his neck!"

CHAPTER XXIX. THE FALL OF THE SANGHURST.

"Is that the only answer you have for me, sweet lady?"

"The only one, Sir; and you will never have another. Strive as you will, keep me imprisoned as long as you will, I will never yield. I will never be yours; I belong to another --"

A fierce gleam was in Sanghurst's eyes, though he retained the suave softness of speech that he had assumed all along.

"He is dead, fair mistress."

"Living or dead, I am yet his," answered Joan unfalteringly; "and were I as free as air -- had I never pledged my faith to him -- I should yet have none other answer for you. Think you that your evil deeds have not been whispered in mine ear? Think you that this imprisonment in which you think fit to keep me is like to win my heart?"

"Nay, sweetest lady, call it not by that harsh name. Could a princess have been better served or tended than you have been ever since you came beneath my humble roof? It is no imprisonment; it is but the watchful care of one who loves you, and would fain save you from the peril into which you had recklessly plunged. Lady, had you known the dangers of travel in these wild and lawless days, you never would have left the shelter of your father's house with but one attendant to protect you. Think you that those peerless charms could ever have been hidden beneath the dress of a peasant lad? Well was it for you, lady, that your true love was first to follow and find you, ere some rude fellow had betrayed the secret to his fellows, and striven to turn it to their advantage. Here you are safe; and I have sent to your father to tell him you are found and are secure. He, too, is searching for you; but soon he will receive my message, and will come hastening hither. Then will our marriage be solemnized with all due rites. Your obstinate resistance will avail nothing to hinder our purpose. But I would fain win this lovely hand by gentle means; and it will be better for thee, Joan Vavasour, to lay down thine arms and surrender while there is yet time."

There was a distinct accent of menace in the last words, and the underlying expression upon that smiling face was evil and threatening in the extreme. But Joan's eyes did not falter beneath the searching gaze of her would-be husband. Her face was set in lines of fearless resolution. She still wore the rough blue homespun tunic of a peasant lad, and her chestnut locks hung in heavy natural curls about her shoulders. The distinction in dress between the sexes was much less marked in those days than it has since become. Men of high degree clothed themselves in flowing robes, and women of humble walk in life in short kirtles; whilst the tunic was worn by boys and girls alike, though there was a difference in the manner of the wearing, and it was discarded by the girl in favour of a longer robe or sweeping supertunic with the approach of womanhood. In the lower ranks of life, however, the difference in dress between boy and girl was nothing very distinctive; and the disguise had been readily effected by Joan, who had only to cut somewhat shorter her flowing locks, clothe herself in the homespun tunic and leather gaiters of a peasant boy, and place a cloth cap jauntily on her flowing curls before she was transformed into as pretty a lad as one could wish to see.

With the old henchman Nat to play the part of father, she had journeyed fearlessly forth, and had made for the coast, which she would probably have reached in safety had it not been for the acuteness of Peter Sanghurst, who had guessed her purpose, had dogged her steps with the patient sagacity of a bloodhound, and had succeeded in the end in capturing his prize, and in bringing her back in triumph to Basildene.

He had not treated her badly. He had not parted her from the old servant under whose escort she had travelled. Perhaps he felt he would have other opportunities of avenging this insult to himself; perhaps there was something in the light in Joan's eyes and in the way in which she sometimes placed her hand upon the hilt of the dagger in her belt

which warned him not to try her too far. Joan was something of an enigma to him still. She was like no other woman with whom he had ever come in contact. He did not feel certain what she might say or do. It was rather like treading upon the crust of some volcanic crater to have dealings with her. At any moment something quite unforeseen might take place, and cause a complete upheaval of all his plans. From policy, as well as from his professed love, he had shown himself very guarded during the days of their journey and her subsequent residence beneath the roof of Basildene; but neither this show of submission and tenderness, nor thinly-veiled threats and menaces, had sufficed to bend her will to his. It had now come to this -- marry him of her own free will she would not. Therefore the father must be summoned, and with him the priest, and the ceremony should be gone through with or without the consent of the lady. Such marriages were not so very unusual in days when daughters were looked upon as mere chattels to be disposed of as their parents or guardians desired. It was usual, indeed, to marry them off at an earlier age, when reluctance had not developed into actual resistance; but still it could be done easily enough whatever the lady might say or do.

Peter Sanghurst, confident that the game was now entirely in his own hands, could even afford to be indulgent and patient. In days to come he would be amply avenged for all the slights now inflicted upon him. He often pictured the moment when he should tell to Joan the true story of his possession of the love token she had bestowed upon Raymond. He thought that she would suffer even more in the hearing of it than he had done upon the rack; and his wife could not escape him as his other victim had. He could wring her heartstrings as he had hoped to wring the nerves of Raymond's sensitive frame, and none could deliver her out of his hand.

But now he was still playing the farce of the suppliant lover, guessing all the while that she knew as well as he what a farce the part was. He strove to make her surrender, but was met by an invincible firmness.

"Do what you will, Peter Sanghurst," she said: "summon my father, call the priest, do what you will, your wife I will never be. I have told you so before; I tell it you again."

He smiled a smile more terrible than his frown.

"We shall see about that," was his reply, as he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

When he was gone Joan turned suddenly towards the old man, who was all this while standing with folded arms in a distant window, listening in perfect silence to the dialogue. She made a few swift paces towards him and looked into his troubled face.

"Nat," she said, in a low voice, "thou hast not forgotten thy promise made to me?"

"My mistress, I have not forgotten."

"And thou wilt keep thy word?"

"I will keep it."

He spoke with manifest effort; but Joan heaved a sigh of relief. She came one step nearer, and laid her soft hand upon the old servant's shoulder, looking into his face with affectionate solicitude.

"I know not if I should ask it of thee; it may cost thee thy life."

"My life is naught, if I can but save thee from that monster, sweet mistress; but oh, if it might be by another way!"

"Nay, say not so; methinks now this is the best, the sweetest way. I shall the sooner find him, who will surely be waiting for me upon the farther shore. One blow, and I shall be free for ever. O Nat, this world is a sore place for helpless women to dwell in. Since he has gone, what is there for me to live for? I almost long for the hour which shall set my spirit free. They will let me see the Holy Father, who comes to wed us. I shall receive the Absolution and the Blessing; and methinks I am not unprepared. Death has no terrors for me: I have seen him come so oft in the guise of a friend. Nay, weep not, good Nat; the day will come when we all must die. Thou wouldst rather see me lying dead at thy feet than the helpless captive of the Sanghurst, as else I must surely be?"

"Ay, lady," answered the old man, between his shut teeth, "ten thousand times rather, else would not this fond hand strike the blow that will lay thy fair young head in the dust. But sooner than know thee the wife of yon vile miscreant, I would slay thee ten times over. Death is soon past -- death comes but once; but a life of helpless misery and agony, that I could not bear for thee. Let them do what they will to me, I will set thee free first."

Joan raised the strong, wrinkled hand to her lips and kissed it, before the old retainer well knew what she was doing. He withdrew it in some confusion.

"Good Nat, I know not how to thank thee; but what I can do to save thee I will. I do not think my father will suffer thee to be harmed if when I am dead thou wilt give him this packet I now give to thee. In it I have told him many things he would not listen to whilst I lived, but he will read the words that have been penned by a hand that is cold and stiff in death. To his old love for me I have appealed to stand thy friend, telling him how and why the deed has been done, and thy hand raised against me. I think he will protect and pardon thee -- I think it truly.

"How now, Nat? What seest thou? What hearest thou? Thy thoughts are not with me and with my words. What is it? Why gazest thou thus from the casement? What is there to see?"

"Armed men, my mistress -- armed men riding towards Basildene!" answered the old man, in visible excitement. "I have seen the sunlight glinting on their headpieces. I am certain sure there be soldiers riding to this very door. What is their business? How have they come? Ah, lady, my sweet mistress, pray Heaven they have come to set thee free! Pray Heaven they have come as our deliverers!"

Joan started and ran to the casement. She was just in time to see the flash of the November sunlight upon the steel caps of the last of the band of horsemen whose approach had been observed by Nat. Only a very small portion of the avenue leading to Basildene could be seen from these upper casements, and the riders must have been close to the house before their approach was marked by the old man.

Now Joan flung open the casement in great excitement, and leaned far out.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, in great excitement, "I hear the sound of heavy blows, and of voices raised in stern command."

"Open in the King's name; open to the Prince of Wales!"

These words were distinctly borne to Joan's listening ears as she stood with her head thrust through the lattice, every faculty absorbed in the strain of eager desire to hear.

"The King! the Prince!" she cried, her breath coming thick and fast, whilst her heart beat almost to suffocation. "O Nat, good Nat! what can it mean? The Prince! what can have brought him hither?"

"Doubtless he comes to save thee, sweet lady," cried the old retainer, to whom it seemed but natural that the heir of England should come forth to save his fair young mistress from her fate.

But Joan shook her head, perplexed beyond measure, yet not able to restrain the wildest hopes.

The Prince -- that noble youth so devoted to chivalry, so generous and fearless, and the friend of the twin brothers, one of whom was her lost Raymond! Oh, could it be that some rumour had reached his ears? Could it be that he had come to set her free? It seemed scarce possible, and yet what besides could have brought him hither? And at least with help so near she could surely make her woeful case known to him!

For the first time for many days hope shot up in Joan's heart -- hope of release from her hated lover by some other means than that of death; and with that hope came surging up the love of life so deeply implanted in human nature, the wild hope that her lover might yet live, that she had been tricked and deceived by the false Sanghurst -- all manner of vague and unformed hopes, to which there was no time to give definite form even in her thoughts. She was only conscious that a ray of golden sunshine had fallen athwart her path, and that the darkness in which she had been enwrapped was changing -- changing to what?

There were strange sounds in the house -- a tumult of men's voices, the clash of arms, cries and shouts, and the tread of many feet upon the stairs.

Joan's colour came and went as she listened. Yes, surely she heard a voice -- a voice that sent thrills all through her -- and yet it was not Raymond's voice; it was deeper, louder, more authoritative. But the footsteps were approaching, were mounting the turret stair, and Joan, with a hasty movement, flung over her shoulders a sweeping supertunic lined with fur, which Peter Sanghurst had placed in the room for her use, but which she had not hitherto deigned to wear. She had but just secured the buckle and girdle, and concealed her boy's garb by the means of these rich folds of velvet, before a hand was upon the latch of the door, and the same thrilling voice was speaking through the panels in urgent accents.

"Lady -- Mistress Joan -- art thou there?"

"I am within this turret -- I am here, fair sir," answered Joan, as calmly as her beating heart would allow. "But I cannot open to thee, for I am but a captive here -- the captive of Peter Sanghurst."

"Now a prisoner bound, and answering for his sins before the Prince and some of the highest nobles of the land. Lady, I and my men have come to set thee free. I come to thee the bearer of a message from my brother -- from Raymond de Brocas. Give my stout fellows but a moment's grace to batter down this strong door, and we will set thee free, and take thee to the Prince, to bear witness against the false traitor, who stands in craven terror before him below!"

But these last words were quite lost upon Joan. She had sunk, trembling and white, upon a couch, overcome by the excess of joy with which she had heard her lover's name pronounced. She heard heavy blows dealt upon the oaken panels of the door. She knew that her deliverance was at hand; but a mist was before her eyes, and she could think of nothing but those wonderful words just spoken, until the woodwork fell inwards with a loud crash, and Gaston, springing across the threshold, knelt at her feet.

"Lady, it is many years since we met, and then we met but seldom; but I come from him whom thou lovest and therefore I know myself welcome. Fair mistress, my brother has been sorely sick -- sick unto death -- or he would be here himself to claim this fair hand. He has been sick in body and sick in mind -- sick with fear lest that traitor and villain who robbed him of your token should make foul use of it by deceiving thee with tales of his death or falsity.

"Lady, he was robbed by Peter Sanghurst of that token. Sanghurst and our ancient foe of Navailles leagued themselves together and carried off my brother by treachery. He was their prisoner in the gloomy Tower of Saut. They would have done him to death in cruel fashion had not we found a way to save and rescue him from their hands. They had done him some hurt even then, and they had robbed him of what had become almost dearer to him than life itself; but he was saved from their malice. It was long ere he could tell us of his loss, tell us of thee; for he lay sick of a wasting fever for many a long month, and we knew not what the trouble was that lay so sore upon him. But no sooner had he recovered so as to speak more plainly than we learned all, and I have been seeking news of thee ever since. I should have been here long ago but for the contrary winds which kept us weeks at sea, unable to make the haven we sought. But I trow I have not come too late. I find thee here at Basildene; but sure thou art not the wife of him who calls himself its lord?"

"Wife! no -- ten thousand times no!" answered Joan, springing to her feet, and looking superb in her stately beauty, the

light of love and happiness in her eyes, the flush of glad triumph on her cheek. "Sir Knight, thou art Raymond's brother, thou art my saviour, and I will tell thee all. I was fleeing from Sanghurst -- fleeing to France, to learn for myself if the tale he told of Raymond's death were true; for sorely did I misdoubt me if those false lips could speak truth. He guessed my purpose, followed and brought me back hither a captive. To force me to wed him has long been his resolve, and he has won my father to take his side. He was about to summon my father and a priest and make me his wife, here in this very place, and never let me stir thence till the chain was bound about me. But I had a way of escape. Yon faithful servant, who shared my perils and my wanderings, had given me his word to strike me dead ere he would see me wedded to Sanghurst. No false vow should ever have passed my lips; no mockery of marriage should ever have been consummated. I have no fear of death. I only longed to die that I might go to my Raymond, and be with him for ever."

"But now thou needest not die to be with him!" cried Gaston, enchanted at once by her beauty, her fearless spirit, and her loyalty and devotion to Raymond. "My brother lives! He lives for thee alone! I have come to lead thee to him, if thou wilt go. But first, sweet mistress, let me take thee to our Prince. It is our noble Prince who has come to see into this matter his own royal self. I had scarce hoped for so much honour, and yet I ever knew him for the soul of generosity and chivalry. Let me lead thee to him. Tell him all thy tale. We have the craven foe in our hands now, and this time he shall not escape us!"

Gaston ground his teeth, and his eyes flashed fire, as he thought of all the wickedness of Peter Sanghurst. He was within the walls of Basildene, his brother's rightful inheritance; the memory of the cruelty and the treachery of this man was fresh in his mind. The Prince was hearing all the tale; the Prince would judge and condemn. Gaston knew well what the fate of the tyrant would be, and there was no room for aught in his heart beside a great exultant triumph.

Giving his arm to Joan, who was looking absolutely radiant in her stately beauty, he led her down into the hall below, where the Prince was seated with some knights and nobles round him -- Master Bernard de Brocas occupying a seat upon his right hand -- examining witnesses and looking at the papers respecting the ownership of Basildene which were now laid before him. At the lower end of the hall, his hands bound behind him, and his person guarded by two strong troopers, stood Peter Sanghurst, his face a chalky-white colour, his eyes almost starting from his head with terror, all his old ease and assumption gone, the innate cowardice of his nature showing itself in every look and every gesture.

A thoroughly cruel man is always at heart a coward, and Peter Sanghurst, who had taken the liveliest delight in inflicting pain of every kind upon those in his power, now stood shivering and almost fainting with apprehension at the fate in store for himself. As plentiful evidence had been given of his many acts of barbarity and tyranny, there had been fierce threats passed from mouth to mouth that hanging was too good for him -- that he ought to taste what he had inflicted on others; and the wretched man stood there in an agony of apprehension, every particle of his swaggering boldness gone, and without a vestige of real courage to uphold him in the hour of his humiliation.

As the Prince saw the approach of Joan, he sprang to his feet, and all the assembled nobles did the same. With that chivalrous courtesy for which he became famous in history, the Prince bent the knee before the lady, and taking her by the hand, led her to a seat of honour beside himself, asking her of herself and her story, and listening with respectful attention to every word she spoke.

Gaston then stood forward and told again his tale of Raymond's capture, and deep murmurs of indignation ran through the hall as he did so. The veins swelled upon the Prince's forehead as he heard the tale, and his eyes emitted sparks of fierce light as they flashed from time to time upon the trembling prisoner.

"Methinks we have heard enough, gentlemen," said he at length, as Gaston's narrative drew to a close.

"Marshal, bring hither your prisoner.

"This man, gentlemen, is the hero of these brave deeds of valour of which we have been hearing. This is the man who dares to waylay and torture English subjects to wring from them treasure and gold; the man who dares to bring this vilely-won wealth to purchase with it the favour of England's King; the man who wages war on foreign soil with the friends of England, and treacherously sells them into the hand of England's foe; who deals with them as we have heard he dealt and would have dealt with Raymond de Brocas had not Providence worked almost a miracle in his defence. This is the man who, together with his father, drove from this very house the lawful owner, because that she was a gentle, tender woman, and was at that moment alone and unable to defend herself from them. This is the man who is not ashamed to call himself the master of Basildene, and who has striven to compass by the foulest ends the death of the true owner of the property -- though Raymond de Brocas braved the terrors of the Black Death to tend and soothe the last dying agonies of that man's father. This is the man who would wed by force this fair maiden, and strove to deceive her by the foulest tricks and jugglery. Say, gentlemen, what is the desert of this miscreant? What doom shall we award him as the recompense of his past life?"

A score of hideous suggestions were raised at once, and the miserable Peter Sanghurst shook in his shoes as he saw the fierce, relentless faces of the soldiers making a ring round him. Those were cruel days, despite the softening influence of their vaunted chivalry, and the face of the Prince was stern and black. It was plain that he had been deeply roused by the story he had heard.

But Joan was there, and she was a woman; and vile as had been this man's life, and deeply as he had injured her and him she loved tenfold more than her own life, he was still a human creature, and a creature without a hope either in this world or the world to come. She could not but pity him as he stood there cowering and shuddering, and she turned swiftly towards the Prince and spoke to him in a rapid undertone.

Young Edward listened, and the dark cloud passed from his brow. He was keenly susceptible to the nobler emotions, and an appeal to his generosity was not unheeded. Raising his hand in token that he demanded silence, he turned towards the quaking criminal, and thus addressed him:

"Peter Sanghurst, you stand convicted of many and hideous crimes -- witchcraft, sorcery, treachery to your King, vile

cruelty to his subjects -- crimes for which death alone is scarce punishment enough. You well merit a worse fate than the gallows. You well merit some of those lingering agonies that you have inflicted upon your wretched victims, and have rejoiced to witness. But we in England do not torture our prisoners, and it is England's pride that this is so. This fair lady, who owes you naught but grievous wrong, has spoken for you; she says that were Raymond de Brocas here, he would join with her in praying that your fate might be swift and merciful. Therefore I decree that you are led forth without the gates of Basildene, and hanged upon the first tree out of sight of its walls.

"See to it, marshal. Let there be no delay. It is not fit that such a wretch should longer cumber the earth. Away with him, I say!"

The soldiers closed around the condemned man and bore him forth, one of the marshals following to see the deed done. Joan had for a moment covered her face with her hand, for even so it was rather terrible to see this tyrant and oppressor led forth from his own house to an ignominious death, and she was unused to such stern scenes. But those around the table were already turning their attention to other matters, and the Prince was addressing himself to certain men who had come into the hall covered with cobweb and green mould.

"Has the treasure been found?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire," answered the leader of this strange-looking band. "It was cleverly hidden, in all truth, in the cellars of the house, and we should scarce have lighted on it but for the help of some of the people here, who, so soon as they heard that their master was doomed to certain death, were as eager to help us as they had been fearful before. It has all been brought up for you to see; and a monstrous hoard it is. It must almost be true, I trow, that the old man had the golden secret. So much gold I have never seen in one place."

"It is ill-gotten gold," said the Prince, sternly, as he rose, and, followed by the nobles and Master Bernard de Brocas, went to look at the coffers containing the treasure hoarded up and amassed by the Sanghursts during a long period of years. "But I trow since the Black Death has so ravaged these parts, it would be idle to strive to seek out the owners, and it would but raise a host of false claims that no man might sift.

"Master Bernard de Brocas, I award this treasure to Raymond de Brocas, the true lord of Basildene, to whom and to whose heirs shall be secured this house and all that belongs to it. Into your hands I now intrust the gold and the lands, to be kept by you until the rightful owner appears to lay claim to them. Let a part of this gold be spent upon making fit this house for the reception of its master and this fair maiden, who will one day be the mistress here with him. Let it be thy part, good Master Bernard, to remove from these walls the curse which has been brought upon them by the vile sorceries and cruelties of this wicked father and more wicked son. Let Holy Church do her part to cleanse and purify the place, and then let it be made meet for the reception of its lord and lady when they shall return hither to receive their own."

The good Bernard's face glowed with satisfaction at this charge. It was just such a one as pleased him best, and such as he was well able to fulfil. Nobody more capable could well have been found for the guardianship and restoration of Basildene; and with this hoard to draw upon, the old house might well grow to a beauty and grandeur it had never known before.

"Gracious Prince, I give you thanks on behalf of my nephew, and I will gladly do all that I may to carry out your behest. The day will come when Raymond de Brocas shall come in person to thank you for your princely liberality and generosity."

"Tush, man, the gold is not mine; and some of it may have been come by honestly, and belong fairly enough to the Sanghurst family. You say the mother of these bold Gascon youths was a Sanghurst: it follows, then, that Basildene and all pertaining to it should be theirs. Raymond de Brocas has suffered much from the Sanghursts. By every law of right and justice, it is he who should reap the reward, and find Basildene restored to its former beauty before he comes to dwell within it."

"And he shall so find it if I have means to compass it," answered the uncle, with glad pride.

His eye was then drawn to another part of the hall; for Sir Hugh Vavasour had just come galloping up to the door in hot haste, having heard all manner of strange rumours: the first being that his daughter had been found, and was in hiding at Basildene; the second, which had only just reached his ears, that Peter Sanghurst was dead -- hanged by order of the Prince, and that Basildene had been formally granted as the perpetual right of Raymond de Brocas and his heirs.

"And Raymond de Brocas is the plighted husband of thy daughter, good Sir Hugh," said Master Bernard, coming up to help his old friend out of his bewilderment -- "plighted, that is, by themselves, by the right of a true and loyal love. Thy daughter will still be the Lady of Basildene, and I think that thou wilt rather welcome my nephew as her lord than yon miscreant, whose body is swinging on some tree not far away. Thou wert something too willing, my friend, to sell thy daughter for wealth; but fortune has been kind to her as well as to thee, and thou hast gained for her the wealth, and yet hast not sacrificed her brave young heart. Go to her now, and give her thy blessing, and tell her she may wed young Raymond de Brocas so soon as he comes to claim her hand."

CHAPTER XXX. WITH THE PRINCE.ⁱ

"Sanghurst dead! Joan free! her father's consent won! I the Lord of Basildene! Gaston, thou takest away my breath! Art sure thou art not mocking me?"

"Art sure that thou art indeed thyself, my lord of Basildene?" was Gaston's merry response, as he looked his brother over from head to foot with beaming face; "for, in sooth, I scarce should know thee for the brother I left behind -- that wan and wasted creature, more like a corpse than a man. The good Brothers have indeed done well by thee, Raymond."

Save that thou hast not lost thine old saintly look, which stamps thee as something different from the rest of us, I should scarce have thought it could be thee. This year spent in thine own native clime has made a new man of thee!"

"In truth I think it has," answered Raymond, who was indeed wonderfully changed from the time when Gaston had left him, rather more than ten months before. "We had no snow and no cold in the winter gone by, and I was able to take the air daily, and I grew strong wondrous fast. Thou hadst told me to be patient, to believe that all was well if I heard nothing from thee; and I strove to follow thy maxim, and that with good success. I knew that thou wouldst not let me go on hoping if hope meant but a bitterer awaking. I knew that silence must mean there was work which thou wert doing. Many a time, as a white-winged vessel spread her sails for England's shores, have I longed to step on board and follow thee across the blue water to see how thou wast faring; but then came always the thought that thou mightest be on thy way hither, and that thou wouldst chide me for having left these sheltering walls. And so I stayed on day after day, and week after week, until months had rolled by; and I began to say within myself that, if thou camest not before the autumn storms, I must e'en take ship and follow thee, for I could wait no longer for news of thee -- and her."

"And here I am with news of her, and news that to me is almost better. Raymond, I have not come hither alone. The Prince and the flower of our English chivalry are here at Bordeaux this day. The hollow truce is at an end. Insult upon insult has been heaped upon England's King by the King of France, the King of Navarre (who called himself our ally till he deserted us to join the French King, who will yet avenge upon him his foul murder of Charles of Spain), and the Count of Blois in Brittany. England has been patient. Edward has listened long to the pleadings of the Pope, and has not rushed into war; but he cannot wait patiently for ever. They have roused the lion at last, and he will not slumber again till he has laid his foes in the dust.

"Listen, Raymond: the Prince is here in Bordeaux. The faithful Gascon nobles -- the Lord of Pommiers, the Lord of Rosen, the Lord of Mucident, and the Lord de l'Esparre -- have sent to England to say that if the Prince will but come to lead them, they will make gallant war upon the French King. John has long been striving to undermine England's power in his kingdom, to rid himself of an enemy's presence in his country, to be absolute lord over his vassals without their intermediate allegiance to another master. It does not suffice that our great King does homage for his lands in France (though he by rights is King of France himself). He knows that here, in these sunny lands of the south, the Roy Outremer is beloved as he has never been. He would fain rob our King of all his lands; he is planning and plotting to do it."

"But the Roy Outremer is not to be caught asleep," cried Raymond, with a kindling glance, "and John of France is to learn what it is to have aroused the wrath of the royal Edward and of his brave people of England."

"Ay, verily; and our good Gascons are as forward in Edward's cause as his English subjects," answered Gaston quickly. "They love our English rule, they love our English ways; they will not tamely be transformed into a mere fief of the French crown. They will fight for their feudal lord, and stand stanchly by his banner. It is their express request that brings the Prince hither today. The King is to land farther north -- at Cherbourg methinks it was to be; whilst my Lord of Lancaster has set sail for Brittany, to defend the Countess of Montford from the Count of Blois, who has now paid his ransom and is free once more. His Majesty of France will have enough to do to meet three such gallant foes in the field.

"And listen still farther, Raymond, for the Prince has promised this thing to me -- that as he marches through the land, warring against the French King, he will pause before the Castle of Saut and smoke out the old fox, who has long been a traitor at heart to the English cause. And the lands so long held by the Navailles are to be mine, Raymond -- mine. And a De Brocas will reign once more at Saut, as of old! What dost thou think of that?"

"Brother, I am glad at heart. It seemeth almost like a dream. Thou the lord of Saut and I of Basildene! Would that she were living yet to see the fulfilment of her dream!"

"Ay, truly I would she were. But, Raymond, thou wilt join the Prince's standard; thou wilt march with us to strike a blow for England's honour and glory? Basildene and fair Mistress Joan are safe. No harm will come to them by thine absence. And thou owest all to the Prince. Surely thou wilt not leave him in the hour of peril; thou wilt march beneath his banner and take thy share of the peril and the glory?"

Gaston spoke with eager energy, looking affectionately into his brother's face; and as he saw that look, Raymond felt that he could not refuse his brother's request. For just a few moments he hesitated, for the longing to see Joan once again and to clasp her in his arms was very strong within him; but his brother's next words decided him.

"Thy brother and the Prince have won Basildene for thee; surely thou wilt not leave us till Saut has yielded to me!"

Raymond held out his hand and grasped that of Gaston in a warm clasp.

"We will go forth together once again as brothers in arms," he said, with brightening eyes. "It may be that our paths in life may henceforth be divided; wherefore it behoves us in the time that remains to us to cling the more closely together. I will go with thee, brother, as thy faithful esquire and comrade, and we will win back for thee the right to call the old lands thine. How often we have dreamed together in our childhood of some such day! How far away it then appeared! and yet the day has come."

"And thou wilt then see my Constanza," said Gaston, in low, exultant tones -- "my lovely and gentle mistress, to whom thou, my brother, owest thy life. It is meet that thou shouldst be one to help to set her free from the tyranny of her rude uncle and the isolation of her dreary life in yon grim castle walls. Thou hast seen her, hast thou not? Tell me, was she not the fairest, the loveliest object thine eyes had ever looked upon, saving of course (to thee) thine own beauteous lady?"

"Methought it was some angel visitor from the unseen world," answered Raymond, "flitting into yon dark prison house, where it seemed that no such radiant creature could dwell. There was fever in my blood, and all I saw was through a misty veil, I scarce believed it more than a sweet vision; but I will thank her now for the whispered word of hope

breathed in mine ear in the hour of my sorest need."

"Ay, that thou shalt do!" cried Gaston, with all a lover's delight in the thought of the near meeting with the lady of his heart. "And when, in days to come, thou and I shall bring our brides to Edward's Court, men will all agree that two nobler, lovelier women never stepped this earth before -- my fairy Constanza, a creature of fire and snow; thy Joan, a veritable queen amongst women, stately, serene, full of dignity and courage, and beautiful as she is noble."

"And thou art sure that she is safe?" questioned Raymond, his heart still longing for the moment of reunion after the long separation, albeit those were days when the separation of years was no infrequent thing, even betwixt those most closely drawn by bonds of love. "There is none else to come betwixt her and me? Her father will not strive to sunder us more?"

"Her father is but too joyous to be free from the power of the Sanghurst; and the Prince spoke words that brought the flush of shame tingling to his face. An age of chivalry, and a man selling his daughter for filthy lucre to one renowned for his evil deeds and remorseless cruelties! A lady forced to flee her father's house and brave the perils of the road to escape a terrible doom! I would thou hadst heard him, Raymond our noble young Prince, with scorn in his voice and the light of indignation in his eyes. And thy Joan stood beside him; he held her hand the while, as though he would show to all men that the heir of England was the natural protector of outraged womanhood, that the upholder of chivalry would stand to his colours, and be the champion of every distressed damsel throughout the length and the breadth of the land. And the lady looked so proud and beautiful that I trow she might have had suitors and to spare in that hour; but the Prince, still holding her hand, told her father all the story of her plighted troth to thee -- that truest troth plight of changeless love. And he told him how that Basildene and all its treasure had been secured to thee, and asked him was he willing to give his daughter to the Lord of Basildene? And Sir Hugh was but too glad that no more than this was asked of him, and in presence of the Prince and of us all he pledged his daughter's hand to thee, I standing as thy proxy, as I have told thee. And now thy Joan is well-nigh as fully thine as though ye had joined your hands in holy wedlock. Thou hast naught to fear from her father's act. He is but too much rejoiced with the fashion in which all has turned out. His word is pledged before the Prince; and moreover thou art the lord of Basildene and its treasure, and what more did he ever desire? It was a share in that gold for which he would have sold his daughter."

Raymond's face took a new look, one of shrinking and pain.

"I like not that treasure, Gaston," he said. "It is like the price of blood. I would that the King had taken it for his own. It seemeth as though it could never bring a blessing with it."

"Methinks it could in thy hands and Joan's," answered Gaston, with a fond, proud glance at his brother's beautiful face; "and as the Prince truly said, since this scourge has swept through the land, claiming a full half of its inhabitants, it would be a hopeless task to try to discover the real owners; and moreover a part may be the Sanghurst store, which men have always said is no small thing, and which in very truth is now thine. But thou canst speak to Father Paul of all that. The Church will give thee holy counsel. Methinks that gold in thy hands would ever be used so as to bring with it a blessing and not a curse."

"But come now with me to the Prince. He greatly desires to see thee again. He has not forgot thee, brother mine, nor that exploit of thine at the surrender of Calais."

Father Paul was not at that time within the Monastery walls, his duties calling him hither and thither, sometimes in one land and sometimes in another. Raymond had enjoyed a peaceful time of rest and mental refreshment with the good monks, but he was more than ready to go forth into the world again. Quiet and study were congenial to him, but the life of a monk was not to his taste. He saw clearly the evils to which such a calling was exposed, and how easy it was to forget the high ideal, and fall into self indulgence, idleness, and sloth.

Not that the abuses which in the end caused the monastic system to fall into such contempt were at that time greatly developed; but the germs of the evil were there, and it needed a nature such as that of Father Paul and men of his stamp to show how noble the life of devotion could be made. Ordinary men fell into a routine existence, and were in danger of letting their duties and even their devotions become purely mechanical.

Raymond said adieu to his hospitable entertainers with some natural regrets, yet with a sense that there was a wider work for him to do in the world than any he should ever find between Monastery walls. Even apart from all thoughts of love and marriage, there was attraction for him in the world of chivalry and warfare. His ambition took a different form from that of the average youth of the day, but none the less for that did it act upon him like a spur, driving him forth where strife and conflict were being waged, and where hard blows were to be struck.

Gaston's brother was warmly welcomed in the camp of the Prince. Many there were who remembered the dreamy-faced lad, who had seemed like a young Saint Michael amongst them, and still bore about with him something of that air of remoteness which was never without its effect even upon the rudest of his companions. Indeed the ordeal through which he had passed had left an indelible stamp upon him. If the face looked older than of yore, it was not that the depth and spirituality of the expression had in any wise diminished.

The two brothers standing together formed a perfect picture in contrasted types -- the bronzed, stalwart soldier in his coat of mail, looking every inch the brave knight he was; and the slim, pale-faced Raymond, with the haunting eyes and wonderful smile, which irradiated his face like a gleam of light from another world, bearing about with him that which seemed to stamp him as somewhat different from his fellows, and yet which always commanded from them not only admiration, but affection and respect.

The Prince's greeting was warm and hearty. He felt towards Raymond all that goodwill which naturally follows an act of generous interference on behalf of an injured person. He made him sit beside him in his tent at supper time, and tell him all his history; and the promise made to Gaston with reference to the tyrant Lord of Saut was ratified anew as the wine circulated at table. The chosen comrades of the Prince, who had most of them known the twin brothers for many

years, vowed themselves to the enterprise with hearty goodwill; and had the Lord of Navailles been there to hear, he might well have trembled for his safety, despite the strong walls and deep moat that environed Saut.

"Let his walls be never so strong, I trow we can starve or smoke the old fox out!" quoth young Edward, laughing. "There be many strong citadels, many a fortified town, that will ere long open their gates at the summons of England's Prince. How say ye, my gallant comrades? Shall the old Tower of Saut defy English arms? Shall we own ourselves beaten by any Sieur de Navailles?"

The shout with which these words were answered was answer sufficient. The English and Gascon lords, assembled together under the banner of the Prince, were bent on a career of glory and plunder. The inaction of the long truce, with its perpetual sources of irritation and friction, had been exasperating in the extreme. It was an immense relief to them to feel that war had at last been declared, and that they could unfurl their banners and march forth against their old enemy, and enrich themselves for life at his expense.

With the march of the Prince through south France we have little concern in this history. It was one long triumphal progress, not over and above glorious from a military standpoint; for there were no real battles, and the accumulation of plunder and the infliction of grievous damage upon the French King's possessions seemed the chief object of the expedition. Had there been any concerted resistance to the Prince's march, doubtless he might have shown something of his great military talents in directing his forces in battle; but as it was, the country appeared paralyzed at his approach: place after place fell before him, or bought him off by a heavy price; and though there were several citadels in the vanquished towns which held out for France, the Prince seldom stayed to subdue them, but contented himself with plundering and burning the town. Not a very glorious style of warfare for those days of vaunted chivalry, yet one, nevertheless, characteristic enough of the times. Every undertaking, however small, gave scope for deeds of individual gallantry and the exercise of individual acts of courtliness and chivalry; and even the battles were often little more than a countless number of hand-to-hand conflicts carried on by the individual members of the opposing armies. The Prince and his chosen comrades, always on the watch for opportunities of showing their prowess and of exercising their knightly chivalry towards any miserable person falling in their own way, were doubtless somewhat blinded to the ignoble side of such a campaign.

However that may be, Raymond often felt a sinking at heart as he saw their path marked out by blazing villages and wasted fields; and almost all his own energies were concentrated in striving to do what one man could achieve to mitigate the horrors of war for some of its helpless victims.

Narbonne, on the Gulf of Lions, was the last place attacked and taken by the Prince, who then decided to return with his spoil to Bordeaux, and pass the remainder of the winter in the capture of certain places that would be useful to the English.

Nothing had all this time been spoken as to Saut, which lay out of the line of their march in the heart of friendly Gascony. But the project had by no means been abandoned, and the Prince was but waiting a favourable opportunity to carry it into effect.

The Sieur de Navailles had not attempted to join the Prince's standard, as so many of the Gascon nobles had done, but had held sullenly aloof, probably watching and waiting to see the result of this expedition, but by no means prepared to adventure his person into the hands of a feudal lord against whom his own sword had more than once been drawn. He was well aware, no doubt, that there were pages in his past history with regard to his relations with France that would not bear inspection by English eyes, and perhaps he trusted to the remoteness and obscurity of his two castles to save him from the notice of the Prince.

The terror inspired by the English arms in France is a thing that must always excite the wonder and curiosity of the readers of history. It was displayed on and after the Battle of Crecy, when Edward's army, if numbers counted for anything, ought to have been simply annihilated by the vast musters of the French, who were in their own land surrounded by friends, whilst the English were a small band in the midst of a hostile and infuriated population. This same thing was seen again in the march of the Prince of Wales, soon to be called the Black Prince, when city after city bought him off, hopeless of resisting his progress; and when the army mustered by the Count of Armagnac to oppose the retreat of the English to Bordeaux with their spoil was seized with a panic after the merest skirmish, and fled, leaving the Prince to pursue his way unmolested.

If the conduct of the English army was somewhat inglorious, certainly the behaviour of their foes was still more so. The English were always ready to fight if they could find an enemy to meet them. Possibly the doubtful character of the Prince's first campaign was less his fault than that of his pusillanimous enemies.

Bordeaux reached, however, and the Gascon soldiers dismissed to their homes for the winter months, the Prince promising to lead them next year upon a more glorious campaign, in which fresh spoil was to be won and more victories achieved, there was time for the consideration of objects of minor importance, and a breathing space wherein private interests could be considered.

Gaston had repressed all impatience during the march of the Prince. He had not looked that his own affairs should take the foremost place in the Prince's scheme. Moreover, he saw well that it would give a false colour to the expedition if the first march of the Prince had been into Gascony; nor was the capture of so obscure a fortress as the Castle of Saut a matter to engross the energies of the whole of the allied army.

But now that the army was partially disbanded, whilst the English contingent was either in winter quarters in Bordeaux or engaged here and there in the capture of such cities and fortresses as the Prince decided worth the taking, the moment appeared to be favourable for that long-wished-for capture of Saut; and Gaston, taking his brother aside one day, eagerly opened to him his mind.

"Raymond, I have spoken to the Prince. He is ready and willing to give me men at any time I ask him. Perchance he will

even come himself, if duty calls him not elsewhere. The thing is now in mine own hands. Brother, when shall the attempt be made?"

Raymond smiled at the eager question.

"Sir Knight, thou art more the warrior than I. Thou best knowest the day and the hour for such a matter."

Gaston passed his hand through his hair, and a softer light shone in his eyes. His brother knew of whom he was thinking, and he was not surprised at the next words.

"Raymond, methinks before I do aught else I must see her once more. My heart is hungry for her. I think of her by day and dream of her by night. Perchance there might be some more peaceful way of winning entrance to Saut than by battering down the walls, and doing by hap some hurt to the precious treasure within. Brother, wilt thou wander forth with me once again -- thou and I, and a few picked men, in case of peril by the way, to visit Saut by stealth? We would go by the way of Father Anselm's and our old home. I have a fancy to see the dear old faces once again. Thou hast, doubtless, seen them all this year that has passed by, but I not for many an one."

"I saw Father Anselm in Bordeaux," answered Raymond; "and good Jean, when he heard I was there, came all the way to visit me. But I adventured not myself so near the den of Navailles. The Brothers would not permit it. They feared lest I might fall again into his power. Gladly, indeed, would I come and see them once again. I have pictured many times how, when thou art Lord of Saut, I will bring my Joan to visit thee, and show her to good Jean and Margot and saintly Father Anselm. I would fain talk to them of that day. They ever feel towards us as though we were their children in very truth."

There was no difficulty in obtaining the Prince's sanction to this absence from Bordeaux. He gave the brothers free leave to carry out their plan by any means they chose, promising if they sent him word at any time that they were ready for the assault, he would either come himself or send a picked band of veterans to their aid; and saying that Gaston was to look upon himself as Lord of Saut, by mandate from the English King, who would enforce his right by his royal power if any usurping noble dared to dispute it with him.

Thus fortified by royal warrant, and with a heart beating high with hope and love, Gaston set out with some two score soldiers as a bodyguard to reconnoitre the land; and upon the evening of the second day, the brothers saw, in the fast-fading light of the winter's day, the red roofs of the old mill lying peacefully in the gathering shadows of the early night.

Their men had been dismissed to find quarters in the village for themselves, and Roger was their only attendant, as they drew rein before the door of the mill, and saw the miller coming quickly round the angle of the house to inquire what these strangers wanted there at such an hour.

"Jean!" cried Gaston, in his loud and hearty tones, the language of his home springing easily to his lips, though the English tongue was now the one in which his thoughts framed themselves. "Good Jean, dost thou not know us?"

The beaming welcome on the miller's face was answer enough in itself; and, indeed, he had time to give no other, for scarce had the words passed Gaston's lips before there darted out from the open door of the house a light and fairy-like form, and a silvery cry of rapture broke from the lips of the winsome maiden, whilst Gaston leaped from his horse with a smothered exclamation, and in another moment the light fairy form seemed actually swallowed up in the embrace of those strong arms.

"Constanza my life -- my love!"

"O Gaston, Gaston! can it in very truth be thou?"

Raymond looked on in mute amaze, turning his eyes from the lovers towards the miller, who was watching the encounter with a beaming face.

"What means it all?" asked the youth breathlessly.

"Marry, it means that the maiden has found her true knight," answered Jean, all aglow with delight; but then, understanding better the drift of Raymond's question, he turned his eyes upon him again, and said:

"You would ask how she came hither? Well, that is soon told. It was one night nigh upon six months agone, and we had long been abed, when we heard a wailing sound beneath our windows, and Margot declared there was a maiden sobbing in the garden below. She went down to see, and then the maid told her a strange, wild tale. She was of the kindred of the Sieur de Navailles, she said, and was the betrothed wife of Gaston de Brocas; and as we knew somewhat of her tale through Father Anselm, who had heard of your captivity and rescue, we knew that she spoke the truth. She said that since the escape, which had so perplexed the wicked lord, he had become more fierce and cruel than before, and that he seemed in some sort to suspect her, though of what she scarce knew. She told us that his mind seemed to be deserting him, that she feared he was growing lunatic. He was so fierce and wild at times that she feared for her own life. She bore it as long as her maid, the faithful Annette, lived; but in the summer she fell sick of a fever, and died -- the lady knew not if it were not poison that had carried her off -- and a great terror seized her. Not two days later, she fled from her gloomy home, and not knowing where else to hide her head, she fled hither, trusting that her lover would shortly come to free her from her uncle's tyranny, as he had sworn, and believing that the home which had sheltered the infancy of the De Brocas brothers would give her shelter till that day came."

"And you took her in and guarded her, and kept her safe from harm," cried Raymond, grasping the hand of the honest peasant and wringing it hard. "It was like you to do it, kind, good souls! My brother will thank you, in his own fashion, for such service. But I must thank you, too. And where is Margot? for I trow she has been as a mother to the maid. I would see her and thank her, for Gaston has no eyes nor ears for any one but his fair lady."

Gaston, indeed, was like one in a dream. He could scarce believe the evidence of his senses; and it was a pretty sight to see how the winsome Constanza clung to him, and how it seemed as though she could not bear to let her eyes wander for a moment from his face.

Only at night, when the brothers stood together in the room they had occupied of yore, and clasped each other by the hand in warm congratulation, did Raymond really know how this meeting affected the object of their journey; then Gaston, looking grave and thoughtful, spoke a few words of his purpose.

"The Sieur de Navailles is a raging madman. That I can well divine from what Constanza says. Tomorrow we will to Saut, to see what we may discover there on the spot. It may be we may have no bloody warfare to wage; it may be that Saut may be won without the struggle we have thought. His own people are terrified before him. Constanza thinks that I have but to declare myself and show the King's warrant to be proclaimed by all as Lord and Master of Saut."

CHAPTER XXXI. THE SURRENDER OF SAUT.

"In the King's name!"

The old seneschal at the drawbridge eyed with glances of awed suspicion the gallant young knight who had ridden so boldly up to the walls of Saut and had bidden him lower the bridge. A few paces behind the leader was a compact little body of horsemen, all well mounted and well armed, though it was little their bright weapons could do against the solid walls of the grim old fortress, girdled as it was with its wide and deep moat. The pale sunshine of a winter's day shone upon the trappings of the little band, and lighted up the stone walls with something of unwonted brightness. It revealed to those upon the farther side of the moat the perplexed countenance of the old seneschal, who did not meet Gaston's bold demand for admittance with defiance or refusal, but stood staring at the apparition, as if not knowing what to make of it; and when the demand had been repeated somewhat more peremptorily, he still stood doubtful and hesitating, saying over and over to himself the same words:

"In the King's name! in the King's name!"

"Ay, fellow, in the King's name," repeated Gaston sternly. "Wilt thou see his warrant? I have it here. Thou hadst best have a care how thou settest at defiance the King's seal and signet. Knowest thou not that his royal son is within a few leagues of this very spot?"

The old man only shook his head, as if scarce comprehending the drift of these words, and presently he looked up to ask:

"Of which King speak you, good Sir Knight?"

"Of the English King, fellow, the only King I acknowledge! Whose servant doth thy master call himself? Thou hadst better go and tell him that King Edward of England has sent a message to him."

"Tell my master!" repeated the seneschal, with a strange gesture, as he lifted his hand and touched his head. "To what good would that be? My master understands no word that is said to him. He raves up and down the hall day by day, taking note of naught about him. Thou hadst best have a care how thou bearest him, Sir Knight. We go in terror of our very lives through him."

"Ye need go no longer in that fear," cried Gaston, with a kindling of the eyes, as he bared his noble head and looked forth at the old man with his fearless glance, "for in me ye will find a master whom none need fear who do their duty by him and by the King. Seneschal, I stand here the lawful Lord of Saut -- lord by hereditary right, and by the mandate of England's King, the Roy Outremer, as you call him. I am Gaston de Brocas, of the old race who owned these lands long before the false Navailles had set foot therein. I have come back armed with the King's warrant to claim mine own.

"Say, men, will ye have me for your lord? or will ye continue to serve yon raging madman till England's King sends an army to raze Saut to the ground, and slay the rebellious horde within these ancient walls?"

Gaston had raised his voice as he had gone on speaking, for he saw that the dialogue with the old seneschal had attracted the attention of a number of men-at-arms, who had gradually mustered about the gate to hear what was passing.

Gaston spoke his native dialect like one of themselves. The name of De Brocas was known far and wide in that land, and was everywhere spoken with affection and respect. The fierce rapacity of the Navailles was equally feared and hated. Even the stout soldiers who had followed his fortunes so long regarded him with fear and distrust. No man in those days felt certain of his life. If he chanced to offend the madman, a savage blow from that strong arm might fell him to the earth; whilst some amongst their companions had from time to time mysteriously disappeared, and their fate had never been disclosed.

A sense of fearfulness and uncertainty had long reigned at Saut. The mad master had his own myrmidons in the Tower, who would do his bidding whatever that bidding might be; and that there were dark secrets hidden away in those underground dungeons and secret chambers everybody in the Castle well knew. Hardly one of the men now gathered on the opposite side of the moat but had awakened at some time or other from a horrid dream, believing himself to have been spirited down into those gloomy subterranean places, there to expiate some trifling offence, according as their savage lord should give order. Many of these men had assisted at scenes which seemed frightful to them when they pictured themselves the victims of the cruelty of the fierce man they had long served, but whom now they had grown to fear and distrust.

A sense of horror had long been hanging over Saut, and since the disappearance of the maiden who once had

brightened the grim place by her presence, this horror had perceptibly deepened. Not one of all the men-at-arms dared even to his fellow to propose the remedy. Each feared that if he breathed what was in his own mind, the very walls would whisper it in the ears of their lord, and that the offender would be doomed to some horrible death, to act as a warning to others like-minded with himself. Since the loss of his niece, almost as mysterious to him as the escape of Raymond de Brocas from the prison, the clouds of doubt and suspicion had closed more and more darkly round the miserable man, who had let himself become the slave of his passions until these had increased to absolute madness. His unbridled fury and fits of maniac rage had estranged from him even the most attached of his old retainers, and in proportion as he felt this with the instinct of cunning and madness, the more did he exact from those about him protestations of zeal and faithfulness, the more did he watch the words and actions of his servants, and mark the smallest attempt on their part to restrain or thwart him.

Small wonder was it, then, when Gaston de Brocas stood forth in the sunshine, the King's warrant in his hand, words of good augury upon his lips, and a compact little body of armed men at his back, proclaiming himself the Lord of Saut, and inviting to his service the men who were now trembling before the caprices and cruel cunning of a madman, that they exchanged wondering glances, and spoke in eager whispers together, fearful lest the Navailles should approach from behind ere they were aware of it, and feeling that there was here such a chance of escape from miserable bondage as might never occur again.

And whilst they still hesitated -- for the fear of treachery was never absent from the minds of those bred up in habits and thoughts of treachery -- another wonder happened. Out from the little knot a few paces behind the young knight two more figures pressed forward, and the men-at-arms rubbed their eyes and looked on in silent wonder: for one of the pair was none other than the fairy maiden who had lived so long amongst them, and had endeared herself even to these rude spirits by her grace and sweetness and undefinable charm; the other, that youth with the wonderful eyes and saint-like face who had been captured and borne away to Saut after the battle before St. Jean d'Angely, and whose body they all believed had long ago been lying beneath the sullen waters of the moat, where so many victims of their lord's hatred had found their last resting place.

And as they stared and looked at one another and stared again, a silvery voice was uplifted, and they all held their breath to listen.

"My friends," said the lady, urging her palfrey till she reached Gaston's side, and could feel his hand upon hers, "I have come hither with this noble knight, Sir Gaston de Brocas, because he is my betrothed husband and liege lord, and I have the right to be at his side even in the hour of peril, but also because you all know me; and when I tell you that every word he has spoken is true, I trow ye will believe it. There he stands, the lawful Lord of Saut, and if ye will but own him as your lord, you will find in him a wise, just, and merciful master, who will protect you from the mad fury of yon miserable man whom now ye serve, and will lead you to more glorious feats of arms than any ye have dreamed of before. Hitherto ye have been little better than robbers and outlaws. Have ye no wish for better things than ye have won under the banner of Navailles?"

The men exchanged glances, and visibly wavered. They compared their coarse and stained garments, their rusty arms and battered accoutrements, with the brilliant appearance of the little band of soldiers standing on the opposite side of the moat, their armour shining in the sunlight, their steeds well fed and well groomed, arching their necks and pawing the ground, every man and every horse showing plainly that they came from a region of abundance of good things; whilst the military precision of their aspect showed equally well that they would be antagonists of no insignificant calibre, if the moment should come when they were transformed from friends to foes.

Constanza saw the wavering and hesitation amongst her uncle's men. She well knew their discontent at their own lot, their fearful distrust of their lord. She knew, too, that it was probably some fear of treachery alone that withheld them from making cause at once with the De Brocas -- treachery having been only too much practised amongst them by their own fierce master -- and again her voice rang out clear and sweet.

"Men, listen again to me. I speak to counsel you for your good; for fierce and cruel as ye have been to your foes, ye have ever been kind and gentle to me when I was with you in these walls. What think ye to gain by defying the great King of England? Think ye that he will spare you if ye arouse him to anger by impotent resistance? What more could King have done for you than send to be your lord a noble Gascon knight; one of your own race and language; one who, as ye all must know, has a far better right to hold these lands than any of the race of Navailles? Here before you stands Sir Gaston de Brocas, offering you place in his service if ye will but swear to him that allegiance he has the right to claim. The offer is made in clemency and mercy, because he would not that any should perish in futile resistance. Men, ye know that he comes to this place with the King's mandate that Saut be given up to him. If it be not peaceably surrendered, what think ye will happen next?"

"I will tell you. Ye have heard of the Prince of Wales, son of the Roy Outremer; doubtless even to these walls has come the news of that triumphal march of his, where cities have surrendered or ransomed themselves to him, and nothing has been able to stay the might of his conquering arm. That noble Prince and valiant soldier is now not far away. We have come from his presence, and are here with his knowledge and sanction. If we win you over, and gain peaceable possession of these walls, good; no harm will befall any living creature within them. But if ye prove obdurate; if ye will not listen to the voice of reason; if ye still hold with rebellious defiance to the lord ye have served, and who has shown himself so little worthy of your service, then will the Prince and his warriors come with all their wrath and might to inflict chastisement upon you, and take vengeance upon you, as enemies of the King.

"Say, men, how can ye hope to resist the might of the Prince's arm? Say, which will ye do -- be the free servants of Gaston de Brocas, or die like rats in a hole for the sake of yon wicked madman, whose slaves ye have long been? Which shall it be -- a De Brocas or a Navailles?"

Something in this last appeal stirred the hearts of the men. It seemed as though a veil were torn from their eyes. They seemed to see all in a moment the hopelessness of their position as vassals of Navailles, and the folly of attempting

resistance to one so infinitely more worthy to be called their lord. It was no stranger coming amongst them -- it was one of the ancient lords of the soil; and the sight of the youthful knight, sitting there on his fine horse, with his fair lady beside him, was enough to stir the pulses and awaken the enthusiasm of an ardent race, even though the nobler instincts had been long sleeping in the breasts of these men. They hated and distrusted their old lord with a hatred he had well merited; and degraded as they had become in his service, they had not yet sunk so low but that they could feel with the keenness of instinct, rather than by any reasoning powers they possessed, that this young knight was a man to be trusted and be loved -- that if they became his vassals they would receive vastly different treatment from any they had received from the *Sieur de Navailles*.

There was one long minute's pause, whilst looks and whispered words were exchanged, and then a shout arose:

"De Brocas! De Brocas! We will live and die the servants of De Brocas!" whilst at the same moment the drawbridge slowly descended, and Gaston, at the head of his gallant little band, with Raymond and Constanza at his side, rode proudly over the sounding planks, and found himself, for the first time in his life, in the courtyard of the Castle of Saut.

"De Brocas! De Brocas!" shouted the men, all doubt and hesitation done away with in a moment at sight of the gallant show thus made, enthusiasm kindling in every breast as the sweet lady rained smiles and gracious words upon the rough men, who had always had a soft spot in their heart for her; whilst Raymond's earnest eyes and Gaston's courtly and chivalrous bearing were not without effect upon the ruder natures of these lonely residents of Saut. It seemed to them as though they had been invaded by some denizens from another world, and murmurs of wonder and reverent admiration mingled with the cheering with which Gaston de Brocas was received as Lord of Saut.

But there was still one more person to be faced. The men had accepted the sovereignty of a new lord, and were already rejoicing in the escape from the dreaded tyranny they had not had the resolution to shake off unprompted; but there was still the *Sieur de Navailles* to be dealt with, and impotent as he might be in the desertion of his old followers, it was necessary to see and speak with him, and decide what must be done with the man who was believed by those about him to be little better than a raging maniac.

"Where is your master?" asked Gaston of the old seneschal, who stood at his bridle rein, his eyes wandering from his face to that of Raymond and Constanza and back again; "I marvel that this tumult has not brought him forth."

"The walls are thick," replied the old man, "and he lives for days together in a world of his own, no sound or sight from without penetrating his understanding. Then again he will awaken from his dream, and show us that he has heard and seen far more than we have thought. And if any man amongst us has dropped words that have incensed him -- well, there have been men who have disappeared from amongst us and have never been seen more; and tales are whispered of horrid cries and groans that have issued as from the very bowels of the earth each time following their spiriting away."

Constanza shuddered, and a black frown crossed Gaston's face as he gave one quick glance at his brother, who had so nearly shared that mysterious and terrible doom.

"The man is a veritable fiend. He merits scant mercy at our hands. He has black crimes upon his soul. Seneschal, lead on. Take us to him ye once owned as sovereign lord. I trow ye will none of you lament the day ye transferred your allegiance from yon miscreant to Gaston de Brocas!"

Another cheer, heartier than the last, broke from the lips of all the men. They had been joined now by their comrades within the Castle, and in the sense of freedom from the hateful tyranny of their old master all were rejoicing and filled with enthusiasm.

For once they were free from all fear of treachery. Gaston's own picked band of stalwart veterans was guarantee enough that might as well as right was on the side of the De Brocas. The sight of those well-equipped men-at-arms, all loyal and full of affectionate enthusiasm for their youthful lord, showed these rude retainers how greatly to their advantage would be this change of masters; and before Gaston had dismounted and walked across the courtyard towards the portal of the Castle, he felt, with a swelling of the heart that Raymond well understood, that Saut was indeed his own.

"This is the way to the *Sieur de Navailles*," said the old seneschal, as they passed beneath the frowning doorway into a vaulted stone hall. "He spends whole days and nights pacing up and down like a wild beast in a cage. He scarce leaves the hall, save when he wanders forth into the forest, and that has not happened since the cold winds have blown hard. You will find him within those doors, good gentlemen. Shall I make known your presence to him?"

It was plain that the old man had no small fear of his master, and would gladly be spared this office. Gaston looked round to see that some of his own followers were close behind and on the alert, and then taking Constanza's hand in his, and laying his right hand upon the hilt of his sword, he signed to the seneschal to throw open the massive oaken doors, and walked fearlessly in with Raymond at his side.

They found themselves in the ancient banqueting hall of the fortress -- a long, lofty, rather narrow room, with a heavily-raftered ceiling, two huge fireplaces, one at either end, and a row of very narrow windows cut in the great thickness of the wall occupying almost the whole of one side of the place; whilst a long table was placed against the opposite wall, with benches beside it, and another smaller table was placed upon a small raised dais at the far end of the apartment. On this dais was also set a heavy oaken chair, close beside the glowing hearth; and at this moment it was plain that the occupant of the chair had been disturbed by the commotion from without, and had suddenly risen to his feet, for he stood grasping the oaken arms, his wild gray hair hanging in matted masses about his seamed and wrinkled face, and his hollow eyes, in which a fierce light blazed, turned upon the intruders in a glare of impotent fury.

"Who are ye who thus dare to intrude upon me here? What is all this tumult I hear in mine own halls?"

"Seneschal, art thou there? Send hither to me my soldiers; bid them bind these men, and carry them to the dungeons. I will see them there. Ha, ha! I will talk with them there. I will deal with them there. What ho! Send me the jailer and his assistants! Let them light the fires and heat hot the irons. Let them prepare our welcome for guests to Saut. Ha, ha! Ho, ho! These brave gallants shall taste our hospitality. Who brought them in? Where were they found? Methinks they will prove a rich booty. Would that good Peter Sanghurst were here to help me in the task of entertaining these new guests!"

The man was a raving lunatic; that was plain to the most inexperienced eye from the first moment. He knew not his own niece, he knew not the De Brocas brothers, though Raymond's face must have been familiar to him had he been in his right senses. He was still in fancy the undisputed lord of these wide lands, scouring the country for English travellers or prisoners of meaner mould; acting here in Gascony much the same part as the Sanghursts had more cautiously done in England, and as the Barons of both France and England had long done, though their day of irresponsible and autocratic power was well-nigh at an end.

He glared upon the brothers and their attendants with savage fury, still calling out to his men to carry them to the dungeons, still believing them to be a band of travellers taken prisoners by his own orders, raving and raging in his impotent fury till the gust of passion had worn itself out, and in a sullen amaze he sank into his seat, still gazing out from under his shaggy brows at the intruders, but the passion and fury for a moment at an end.

"He will understand better what you say to him now, Sir Knight," whispered the old seneschal, who alone of the men belonging to the Castle dared to enter the hall where their maniac master was. "His mind comes back to him sometimes after he has raved himself quiet. We dread his sullen moods almost more than his wild ones.

"Have a care how you approach him. He is as cunning as a fox, and as crafty as he is cruel. He always has some weapon beneath his robe. Have a care, I say, how you approach him."

Gaston nodded, but he was too fearless by nature to pay much heed to the warning; he felt himself more than a match for that bowed-down old man. Giving Constanza into Raymond's charge, he stepped boldly up to the dais, and doffing his headpiece, addressed himself to his adversary in firm though courteous accents.

"My Lord of Navailles," he said, "I am come to claim mine own. If thou knowest me not, I will tell thee who I am -- Gaston de Brocas, the Lord of Saut in mine own right, and by the mandate of the King which I hold in mine hand. Long hast thou held lands to which thou hadst no right, but the day has come when I claim mine own again, and am prepared to do battle for it to the death. But here is no battle needed. Thine own men have called me lord; they have obeyed the mandate of the King, and have opened their gates to me. I stand here the Lord of Saut. Thy power and thy reign are over for ever. Grossly hast thou abused that power when it was thine. Now, like all tyrants, thou art finding that thy servants fall away in the hour of peril, and that thou, who hast been a cruel master, canst command no service from them in the time of need. I, and I alone, am Lord of Saut. Hast thou aught to say ere thou yieldest dominion to me?"

Did he understand? Those standing round and breathlessly watching the curious scene could scarce be sure; but there was a look of comprehension and of intense baffled rage and malice in those cavernous eyes that sent a shiver through Constanza's light frame.

"Have a care, Gaston; have a care!" she cried, with sudden shrillness, as she saw a quick movement of those knotted sinewy hands beneath the coarse robe the old man wore; and in another moment both she and Raymond had sprung forward, for there was a flash of keen steel, and the madman had flung himself upon Gaston with inconceivable rapidity of motion.

For a moment there was a hideous scuffle. Blood was flowing, they knew not whose. Gaston acted solely on the defensive. He would not raise his hand against one who was old and lunatic, and near in blood to her whom he held dear; but he wrestled valiantly in the iron grip of arms stronger than his own, and he felt that some struggle was going on above him, though for the moment his own breath seemed suspended, and his very life pressed out of him.

Then came a sudden sense of release. His enemy had relaxed his bear-like clasp. Gaston sprang to his feet to see his enemy falling backwards in a helpless collapse, the hilt of a dagger clasped between his knotted hands -- the sharp blade buried in his own heart.

"He has killed himself!" cried Constanza, with eyes dilated with horror, as she sprang to Gaston's side. It had all been so quick that it was hard to tell what had befallen in those few seconds of life-and-death struggle. Gaston was bleeding from a slight flesh wound in the arm, but that was the only hurt he had received; whilst his foe --

"He strove to plunge the dagger in thy breast, Gaston," said Raymond, who was supporting the head of the dying man; "and failing that, he thought to smother thee in his bear-like clasp, that has crushed the life out of enemies before now, as we have oftentimes heard. When he felt other foes around him unloosing that clasp, and knew himself balked of his purpose, he clutched the weapon thou hadst dashed from his hand and buried it in his own body. As he has lived, so has he died -- defiant to the very end. But the madness-cloud may have hung long upon his spirit. Perchance some of the worst of his crimes may not be laid to his charge."

As Raymond spoke, the dying man opened his eyes, and fixed them upon the face bending over him. The light of sullen defiance which had shone there but a few short moments ago changed to something strange and new as he met the calm, compassionate glance of those expressive eyes now fixed upon him. He seemed to give a slight start, and to strive to draw himself away.

"Thou here!" he gasped -- "thou! Hast thou indeed come from the spirit world to mock me in my last moments? I know thee now, Raymond de Brocas! I have seen thee before -- thou knowest how and where. Methinks the very angels of heaven must have spirited thee away. Why art thou here now?"

"To bid thee ask forgiveness for thy sins with thy dying breath," answered Raymond, gently yet firmly; "to bid thee turn thy thoughts for one last moment towards thy Saviour, and though thou hast scorned and rebelled against Him in life, to ask His pardoning mercy in death. He has pardoned a dying miscreant ere now. Wilt thou not take upon thy lips that dying thief's petition, and cry 'Lord, remember me;' or this prayer, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner'?"

A gray shadow was creeping over the rugged face, the lips seemed to move, but no words came forth. There was no priest at hand to listen to a dying confession, or to pronounce a priestly absolution, and yet Raymond had spoken as if there might yet be mercy for an erring, sin-stained soul, if it would but turn in its last agony to the Crucified One -- the Saviour crucified for the sins of the whole world.

It must be remembered that there was less of priestcraft -- less of what we now call popery -- in those earlier days than there came to be later on; and the springs of truth, though somewhat tainted, were not poisoned, as it were, at the very source, as they afterwards became. Something of the purity of primitive times lingered in the minds of men, and here and there were always found pure spirits upon whom the errors of man obtained no hold -- spirits that seemed to rise superior to their surroundings, and hold communion direct with heaven itself. Such a nature and such a mind was Raymond's; and his clear, intense faith had been strengthened and quickened by the vicissitudes through which he had passed. He did not hesitate to point the dying soul straight to the Saviour Himself, without mediation from the Blessed Virgin or the Holy Saints. Love and revere these he might and did; but in the presence of that mighty power of death, in that hour when flesh and heart do fail, he felt as he had felt when he believed his own soul was to be called away -- when it seemed as though no power could avail to save him from a fearful fate -- that to God alone must the cry of the suffering soul be raised; that into the Saviour's hands alone could the departing soul be committed. He did not speak to others of these thoughts -- thoughts which in later days came to be branded with the dreaded name of "heresy" -- but he held them none the less surely in the depths of his own spirit; and now, when all but he would have stood aside with pitiful helplessness, certain that nothing could be done for the dying man in absence of a priest, Raymond strove to lead his thoughts upwards, that though his life had been black and evil, he might still die with his face turned Godwards, with a cry for mercy on his lips.

Nor was this hope in vain; for at the last the old man raised himself with a strength none believed him to possess, and raising his hand he clasped that of Raymond, and said:

"Raymond de Brocas, I strove to compass thy death, and thou hast come to me in mine hour of need, and spoken words of hope. If thou canst forgive -- thou so cruelly treated, so vilely betrayed -- it may be that the Saviour, whose servant thou art, can forgive yet greater crimes.

"Christ have mercy upon me! Lord have mercy upon me! Christ have mercy upon me! My worldly possessions are fled: let them go; they are in good hands. May Christ pardon my sins, and receive me at last to Himself!"

He looked earnestly at Raymond, who understood him, and whispered the last prayers of the Church in his ear. A look of calm and peace fell upon that wild and rugged face; and drawing one sigh, and slightly turning himself towards his former foe, the old ruler of Saut fell asleep, and died with the two De Brocas brothers standing beside him.

CHAPTER XXXII. ON THE FIELD OF POITIERS.

The face of the Prince was dark and grave. He had posted his gallant little army in the strongest position the country afforded; but his men were ill-fed, and though brave as lions and eager for the battle, were but a handful of troops compared with the vast French host opposed to them.

Eight thousand against fifty or even sixty thousand! Such an inequality might well make the stoutest heart quail. But there was no fear in young Edward's eyes, only a glance of stern anxiety slightly dashed with regret; for the concessions just made to the Cardinal de Perigord, who was earnestly striving to arrange terms between the rival armies and so avoid the bloodshed of a battle, went sorely against the grain of the warrior prince, and he was almost disposed to repent that he had been induced to make them.

But his position was sufficiently critical, and defeat meant the annihilation of the gallant little army who had followed his fortunes through two campaigns, and who were to a man his devoted servants. He had led them, according to promise, upon another long march of unopposed plunder and victory, right into the very heart of France; whilst another English army in Normandy and Brittany had been harassing the French King, and averting his attention from the movements of his son.

Perhaps young Edward's half-matured plan had been to join the other English forces in the north, for he was too much the general and the soldier to think of marching upon Paris or of attacking the French army with his own small host. Indeed, a few reverses had recently taught him that he had already ventured almost too far into the heart of a hostile country; and he was, in fact, retreating upon Bordeaux, believing the French army to be behind him, when he discovered that it was in front of him, intercepting his farther progress, and he was made aware of this unwelcome fact by seeing the advance guard of his own army literally cut to pieces by the French soldiers before he could come to their assistance.

Realizing at once the immense peril of his position, the Prince had marched on till he reached a spot where he could post his men to some advantage amongst hedges and bushes that gave them shelter, and would serve to embarrass an attacking foe, and in particular any charge of cavalry. The place selected was some six miles from Poitiers, and possessed so many natural advantages that the Prince felt encouraged to hope for a good issue to the day, albeit the odds were fearfully to his disadvantage.

He had looked to be speedily attacked by the French King, who was in person leading his host; but the Saturday passed away without any advance, and on Sunday morning the good Cardinal de Perigord began to strive to bring matters to a peaceable issue.

Brave as the young Prince was, and great as his reliance on his men had always been, his position was perilous in the extreme, and he had been willing to listen to the words of the Cardinal. Indeed, he had made wonderful concessions to the messenger of peace, for he had at last consented to give up all the places he had taken, to set free all prisoners, and to swear not to take up arms against the King of France for seven years; and now he stood looking towards the French host with a frown of anxious perplexity upon his face, for the Cardinal had gone back to the French King with this message, and already the Prince was half repentant at having conceded so much. He had been persuaded rather against his will, and he was wondering what his royal father would say when he should hear.

He had been thinking rather of his brave soldiers' lives than his own military renown, when he had let himself be won over by the good Cardinal. Had he, after all, made a grand mistake?

His knights stood around, well understanding the conflict going on in his breast, and sympathizing deeply with him in this crisis of his life, but not knowing themselves what it were best to do. The sun was creeping to the horizon before the Cardinal was seen returning, and his face was grave and sorrowful as he was ushered into the presence of the Prince.

"My Liege," he said, in accents of regret, "it is but sorry news I have to bring you. My royal master of his own will would have gladly listened to the terms to which your consent has been won, save for the vicious counsel of my lord Bishop of Chalons, Renaud Chauveau, who hates your nation so sorely that he has begged the King, even upon his bended knees, to slay every English soldier in this realm rather than suffer them to escape just when they had fallen into his power, rather than listen to overtures of submission without grasping the victory of blood which God had put into his hands. Wherefore my liege the King has vowed that he will consent to nothing unless you yourself, together with one hundred of your knights, will give yourselves up into his hand without condition."

Young Edward's eyes flashed fire. A look more like triumph than dismay crossed his noble face. Looking at the sorrowful Cardinal, with the light of battle in his eyes, he said in ringing tones:

"My Lord Cardinal, I thank you for your goodwill towards us. You are a good and holy man, an ambassador of peace, and as such you are fulfilling your Master's will. But I can listen no longer to your words. Go back to the King of France, and tell him that I thank him for his last demand, because it leaves me no choice but to fight him to the death; and ten thousand times would I rather fight than yield, albeit persuaded to submit to terms by your eloquent pleading. Return to your lord, and tell him that Edward of England defies him, and will meet him in battle so soon as it pleases him to make the attack. I fear him not. The English have found no such mighty antagonists in the French that they should fear them now.

"Go, my Lord Cardinal, and carry back my message of defiance. Ere another sun has set I hope to meet John of France face to face in the foremost of the fight!"

A shout of joy and triumph rose from a hundred throats as this answer was listened to by the Prince's knights, and the cheer was taken up and echoed by every soldier in the camp. It was the signal, as all knew well, that negotiation had failed; and the good Cardinal went sorrowfully back to the French lines, whilst the English soldiers redoubled their efforts at trenching the ground and strengthening their position -- efforts which had been carried on ceaselessly all through this and the preceding day, regardless of the negotiations for peace, which many amongst them hoped would prove abortive.

Then up to the Prince's side stepped bold Sir James Audley, who had been his counsellor and adviser during the whole of the campaign, and by whose advice the coming battle was being arranged.

"Sire," he said, bending the knee before his youthful lord, "I long ago vowed a vow that if ever I should find myself upon the field of battle with the King of England or his son, I would be foremost in the fight for his defence. Sire, that day has now dawned -- or will dawn with tomorrow's sun. Grant me, I pray you, leave to be the first to charge into yon host, and so fulfil the vow long registered before God."

"Good Sir James, it shall be even as thou wilt," answered the Prince, extending his hand. "But if thou goest thus into peril, sure thou wilt not go altogether alone?"

"I will choose out four knightly comrades," answered Sir James, "and together we will ride into the battle. I know well that there will be no lack of brave men ready and willing to fight at my side. Gaston de Brocas has claimed already to be one, and his brother ever strives to be at his side. But he has yet his spurs to win, and I may but take with me those who are knights already."

"Raymond de Brocas's spurs unwon!" cried the Prince, with kindling eye, "and he the truest knight amongst us! Call him hither this moment to me. Shame upon me that I have not ere this rewarded such pure and lofty courage as his by that knighthood he so well merits!"

And then and there upon the field of Poitiers Raymond received his knighthood, amid the cheers of the bystanders, from the hands of the Prince, on the eve of one of England's most glorious victories.

Gaston's eyes were shining with pride as he led his brother back to their tent as the last of the September daylight faded from the sky.

"I had set my heart on sending thee back to thy Joan with the spurs of knighthood won," he said, affectionately pressing his brother's hands. "And truly, as they all say, none were ever more truly won than thine have been, albeit thou wilt ever be more the saint than the warrior."

Raymond's eyes were bright. For Joan's sake rather than his own he rejoiced in his new honour; though every man prided himself upon that welcome distinction, especially when bestowed by the hand of King or Prince. And the thought

of a speedy return to England and his true love there was as the elixir of life to Raymond, who was counting the days and hours before he might hope to set sail for his native land again.

He had remained with his brother at Saut all through the past winter. Gaston and Constanza had been married at Bordeaux very shortly after the death of old Navailles; and they had returned to Saut, their future home, and Raymond had gone with them. Greatly as he longed for England and Joan, his duty to the Prince kept him beside him till he should obtain his dismissal to see after his own private affairs. The Prince needed his faithful knights and followers about him in his projected expedition of the present year; and Gaston required his brother's help and counsel in setting to rights the affairs of his new kingdom, and in getting into better order a long-neglected estate and its people.

There had been work enough to fill their minds and hands for the whole time the Prince had been able to spare them from his side; and an interchange of letters between him and his lady love had helped Raymond to bear the long separation from her. She had assured him of her changeless devotion, of her present happiness and wellbeing, and had bidden him think first of his duty to the Prince, and second of his desire to rejoin her. They owed much to the Prince: all their present happiness and security were the outcome of his generous interposition on their behalf. Raymond's worldly affairs were not suffering by his absence. Master Bernard de Brocas was looking to that. He would find all well on his return to England; and it were better he should do his duty nobly by the Prince now, and return with him when they had subdued their enemies, than hasten at once to her side. In days to come it would grieve them to feel that they had at this juncture thought first of themselves, when King and country should have taken the foremost place.

So Raymond had taken the counsel thus given, and now was one of those to be foremost in the field on the morrow. No thought of fear was in his heart or Gaston's; peril was too much the order of the day to excite any but a passing sense of the uncertainty of human life. They had come unscathed through so much, and Raymond had so long been said to bear a charmed life, that he and Gaston had alike ceased to tremble before the issue of a battle. Well armed and well mounted, and versed in every art of attack and defence, the young knights felt no personal fear, and only longed to come forth with honour from the contest, whatever else their fate might be.

Monday morning dawned, and the two opposing armies were all in readiness for the attack. The fighting began almost by accident by the bold action of a Gascon knight, Eustace d'Ambrecicourt, who rode out alone towards what was called the "battle of the marshals," and was met by Louis de Recombes with his silver shield, whom he forthwith unhorsed. This provoked a rapid advance of the marshals' battle, and the fighting began in good earnest.

The moment this was soon to have taken place, the brave James Audley, calling upon his four knights to follow him, dashed in amongst the French in another part of the field, giving no quarter, taking no prisoners, but performing such prodigies of valour as struck terror into the breasts of the foe. The French army (with the exception of three hundred horsemen, whose mission was to break the ranks of the bowmen) had been ordered, on account of the nature of the ground, all to fight on foot; and when the bold knight and his four chosen companions came charging in upon them, wheeling their battle-axes round their heads and flashing through the ranks like a meteor, the terrified and impressionable Frenchmen cried out that St. George himself had appeared to fight against them, and an unreasoning panic seized upon them.

Flights of arrows from the dreaded English longbow added immeasurably to their distress and bewilderment. The three hundred horsemen utterly failed in their endeavour to approach these archers, securely posted behind the hedges, and protected by the trenches they had dug. The arrows sticking in the horses rendered them perfectly wild and unmanageable, and turning back upon their own comrades, they threw the ranks behind into utter confusion, trampling to death many of the footmen, and increasing the panic tenfold.

Then seeing the utter confusion of his foes, the Prince charged in amongst them, dealing death and destruction wherever he went. The terror of the French increased momentarily; and the division under the Duke of Normandy, that had not even taken any part as yet in the battle, rushed to their horses, mounted and fled without so much as striking a blow.

The King of France, however, behaved with far greater gallantry than either his son or the majority of his knights and nobles, and the battle that he led was long and fiercely contested.

If, as the chronicler tells us, one-fourth of his soldiers had shown the same bravery as he did, the fortunes of the day would have been vastly different; but though personally brave, he was no genius in war, and his fatal determination to fight the battle on foot was a gross blunder in military tactics. Even when he and his division were being charged by the Prince of Wales at full gallop, at the head of two thousand lances, the men all flushed with victory, John made his own men dismount, and himself did the same, fighting with his axe like a common soldier; whilst his little son Philip crouched behind him, narrowly watching his assailants, and crying out words of warning to his father as he saw blows dealt at him from right or left.

The French were driven back to the very gates of Poitiers, where a great slaughter ensued; for those gates were now shut against them, and they had nowhere else to fly. The battle had begun early in the morning, and by noon the trumpets were sounding to recall the English from the pursuit of their flying foes.

Such a victory and such vast numbers of noble prisoners almost bewildered even the victors themselves; and the Prince was anxious to assemble his knights once more about him, to learn some of the details of the issue of the day. That the French King had either been killed or made prisoner appeared certain, for it was confidently asserted that he had not left the field; but for some time the confusion was so great that it was impossible to ascertain what had actually happened, and the Prince, who had gone to his tent to take some refreshment after the labours of the day, had others than his high-born prisoners to think for.

"Who has seen Sir James Audley -- gallant Sir James?" he asked, looking round upon the circle of faces about him and missing that of the one he perhaps loved best amongst his knights. "Who has seen him since his gallant charge that

made all men hold their breath with wonder? I would fain reward him for that gallant example he gave to our brave soldiers at the beginning of the day."

News was soon brought that Sir James had been badly wounded, and had been carried by his knights to his tent. The Prince would have gone to visit him there; but news of this proposal having been brought to the knight, he caused himself to be transported to the Prince's tent by his knights, all of whom had escaped almost unscathed from their gallant escapade. Thus it came about that Gaston and Raymond stood within the royal tent, whilst the Prince bent over his faithful knight, and promised as the reward for that day's gallantry that he should remain his own knight for ever, and receive five hundred marks yearly from the royal treasury.

Then, when poor Sir James, too spent and faint to remain longer, had been carried hence by some of the bystanders, the Prince turned to the twin brothers and grasped them by the hand.

"I greatly rejoice that ye have come forth unhurt from that fierce strife in the which ye so boldly plunged. What can I do for you, brave comrades, to show the gratitude of a King's son for all your faithful service?"

"Sire," answered Gaston, "since you have asked us to claim our guerdon, and since your foes are at your feet, your rival a prisoner in your royal hands (if he be not a dead corpse), and the whole land subject to you; since there be no further need in the present for us to fight for you, and a time of peace seems like to follow upon this glorious day, methinks my brother and I would fain request your royal permission to retire for a while each to his own home, to regulate our private concerns, and dwell awhile each with the wife of his choice. Thou knowest that I have a wife but newly made mine, and that my brother only tarries to fly to his betrothed bride till you have no farther need of his sword. If ever the day dawns when King or Prince of England needs the faithful service of Gascon swords, those of Raymond and Gaston de Brocas will not be wanting to him. Yet in the present --"

"Ay, ay, I understand well: in the present there be bright eyes that are more to you than glittering swords, and a service that is sweeter than that of King or Prince. Nay, blush not, boy; I like you the better for that the softer passions dwell in your breast with those of sterner sort. Ye have well shown many a day ere now that ye possess the courage of young lions, and that England will never call upon you in vain. But now that times of peace and quiet seem like to fall upon us, get you to your homes and your wives. May Heaven grant you joy and happiness in both; and England's King and Prince will over have smiles of welcome for you when ye bring to the Court the sweet ladies of your choice. Do I not know them both? and do I not know that ye have both chosen worthily and well?"

A tumult without the tent now announced the approach of the French King, those who brought him disputing angrily together whose prisoner he was. The Prince stepped out to receive his vanquished foe with that winning courtesy so characteristic of one who so longed to see the revival of the truer chivalry, and in the confusion which ensued Gaston and Raymond slipped away to their own tent.

"And now," cried Gaston, clasping his brother's hand, "our day of service is for the moment ended. Now for a space of peaceful repose and of those domestic joys of which thou and I, brother, know so little."

"At last!" quoth Raymond, drawing a long breath, his eyes glowing and kindling as he looked into his brother's face and then far beyond it in the direction of the land of his adoption. "At last my task is done; my duty to my Prince has been accomplished. Now I am free to go whither I will. Now for England and my Joan!"

CHAPTER XXXIII. "AT LAST!"

"At last, my love, at last!"

"Raymond! My own true lord -- my husband!"

"My life! my love!"

At last the dream had fulfilled itself; at last the long probation was past. Raymond de Brocas and Joan Vavasour had been made man and wife by good Master Bernard de Brocas in his church at Guildford, and in the soft sunlight of an October afternoon were riding together in the direction of Basildene, from henceforth to be their home.

Raymond had not yet seen Basildene. He had hurried to Joan's side the moment that he left the ship which bore him from the shores of France, and the marriage had been celebrated almost at once, there being no reason for farther delay, and Sir Hugh being eager to be at the Court to receive the triumphant young Prince when he should return to England with his kingly captive.

All the land was ringing with the news of the glorious victory, of which Raymond's vessel was the first to bring tidings. He himself, as having been one of those who had taken part in the battle and having won his spurs on the field of Poitiers, was regarded with no small admiration and respect. But Raymond had thoughts of nothing but his beloved; and to find her waiting for him, her loving heart as true to him as his was to her, was happiness sweeter than any he had once dreamed could be his.

The time had flown by on golden wings. He scarce knew how to reckon its flight. He and Joan lived in a world of their own -- a world that reckons not time by our calendar, but has its own fashion of computation; and hours that once had crept by leaden footed, now flew past as if on wings. He and his love were together at last, soon to be united in a bond that only death could sunder. And neither of them held that it could be broken even by the stern cold hand of death. Such love as theirs was not for time alone; it would last on and on through the boundless cycles of eternity.

And now the holy vows had been spoken. At last the solemn ceremony was over and past. Raymond and Joan were man and wife, and were riding side by side through the whispering wood in the direction of Basildene.

Joan had not changed much since the day she and Raymond had plighted their troth beside the dying bed of John de Brocas. As a young girl she had looked older than her years; as a woman she looked scarce more. Perhaps in those great dark eyes there was more of softness; weary waiting had not dimmed their brightness, but had imparted just a touch of wistfulness, which gave to them an added charm. The full, curved lips were calmly resolute as of old, yet touched with a new sweetness and the gracious beauty of a great happiness.

Raymond had changed more than she, having developed from the youth into the man; retaining in a wonderful way the peculiar charm of his boyhood's beauty, the ethereal purity of expression and slim grace of figure, yet adding to these the dignity and purpose of a more advanced age, and all the stateliness and power of one who has struggled and suffered and battled in the world, and who has come forth from that struggle with a stainless shield, and a name unsullied by the smallest breath of slander.

Joan's eyes dwelt upon her husband's face with a proud, joyous light in them. Once she laid her hand upon his as they rode, and said, in low tones very full of feeling:

"Methinks I have found my Galahad at last. Methinks that thou hast found a treasure as precious as the Holy Grail itself. Methinks no treasure could be more precious than that which thou hast won."

He turned his eyes upon her tenderly.

"The treasure of thy love, my Joan?"

"I was not thinking of that," she answered; "we have loved each other so long. I was thinking of that other treasure -- the love which has enabled thee to triumph over evil, to forgive our enemies, to do good to those that have hated us, to fight the Christian's battle as well as that of England's King. I was thinking of that higher chivalry of which in old days we have talked so much. Perchance we should give it now another name. But thou hast been true and faithful in thy quest. Ah, how proud I am of the stainless name of my knight!"

His fingers closed fast over hers, but he made no reply in words. Raymond's nature was a silent one. Of his deepest feelings he spoke the least. He had told his story to Joan; he knew that she understood all it meant to him. It was happiness to feel that this was so without the need of words. That union of soul was sweeter to him than even the possession of the hand he held in his.

And so they rode on to Basildene.

But was this Basildene? Raymond passed his hand across his eyes, and gazed and gazed again. Joan sat quietly in her saddle, watching him with smiling eyes.

Basildene! yes, truly Basildene. There was the quaint old house with its many gables and mullioned casements and twisted chimneys, its warm red walls and timbered grounds around it; but where was the old look of misery, decay, neglect, and blight? Who could look at that picturesque old mansion, with its latticed casements glistening in the sun, and think of aught but home-like comfort and peace? What had been done to it? what spell had been at work? This was the Basildene of his boyhood's dreams -- the Basildene that his mother had described to them. It was not the Basildene of later years. How had the change come about?

"That has been our uncle's work these last two years," answered Joan, who was watching the changes passing over her husband's face, and seemed to read the unspoken thought of his heart. "He and I together have planned it all, and the treasure has helped to carry all out. The hidden hoard has brought a blessing at last, methinks, Raymond; for the chapel has likewise been restored, and holy mass and psalm now ascend daily from it. The wretched hovels around the gates, where miserable peasants herded like swine in their sties, have been cleared away, and places fit for human habitation have been erected in their stead. That fearful quagmire, in which so many wretched travellers have lost their lives, has been drained, and a causeway built across it. Basildene is becoming a blessing to all around it; and so long as thou art lord here, my Raymond, it will remain a blessing to all who come within shelter of its walls."

He looked at her with his dreamy smile. His mind was going back in review over all these long years since first the idea had formed itself in his brain that they two -- Gaston and himself -- would win back Basildene. How long those years seemed in retrospect, and yet how short! How many changes they had seen! how many strange events in the checkered career of the twin brothers!

"I would that Gaston were with me now; I would that he might see it."

"And so he shall, come next summer," answered Joan. "Is it not a promise that he comes hither with his bride to see thy home and mine, Raymond, and that we pass one of England's inclement winters in the softer air of sunny France? You are such travellers, you brethren, that the journey is but child's play to you; and I too have known something of travel, and it hath no terrors for me. There shall be no sundering of the bond betwixt the twin brothers of Basildene. Years shall only bind that bond faster, for to their faithful love and devotion one to the other Basildene owes its present weal, and we our present happiness."

"The twin brothers of Basildene," repeated Raymond dreamily, gazing round him with smiling eyes, as he held Joan's hand fast in his. "My mother, I wonder if thou canst see us now -- Gaston at Saut and Raymond here at Basildene? Methinks if thou canst thou wilt rejoice in our happiness. We have done what thou biddedst us. We have fought and we have overcome. Thine own loved home has been won back by thine own sons, and Raymond de Brocas is Lord of Basildene."

THE END.

[If any reader has taken the trouble to follow this story closely, he may observe that the expedition of the Black Prince](#)

has been slightly antedated. In order not to interrupt the continuity of the fictitious narrative, the time spent in long-drawn and fruitless negotiation at the conclusion of the truce has been omitted.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY: A TALE OF THE TIMES OF THE BLACK PRINCE ***

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