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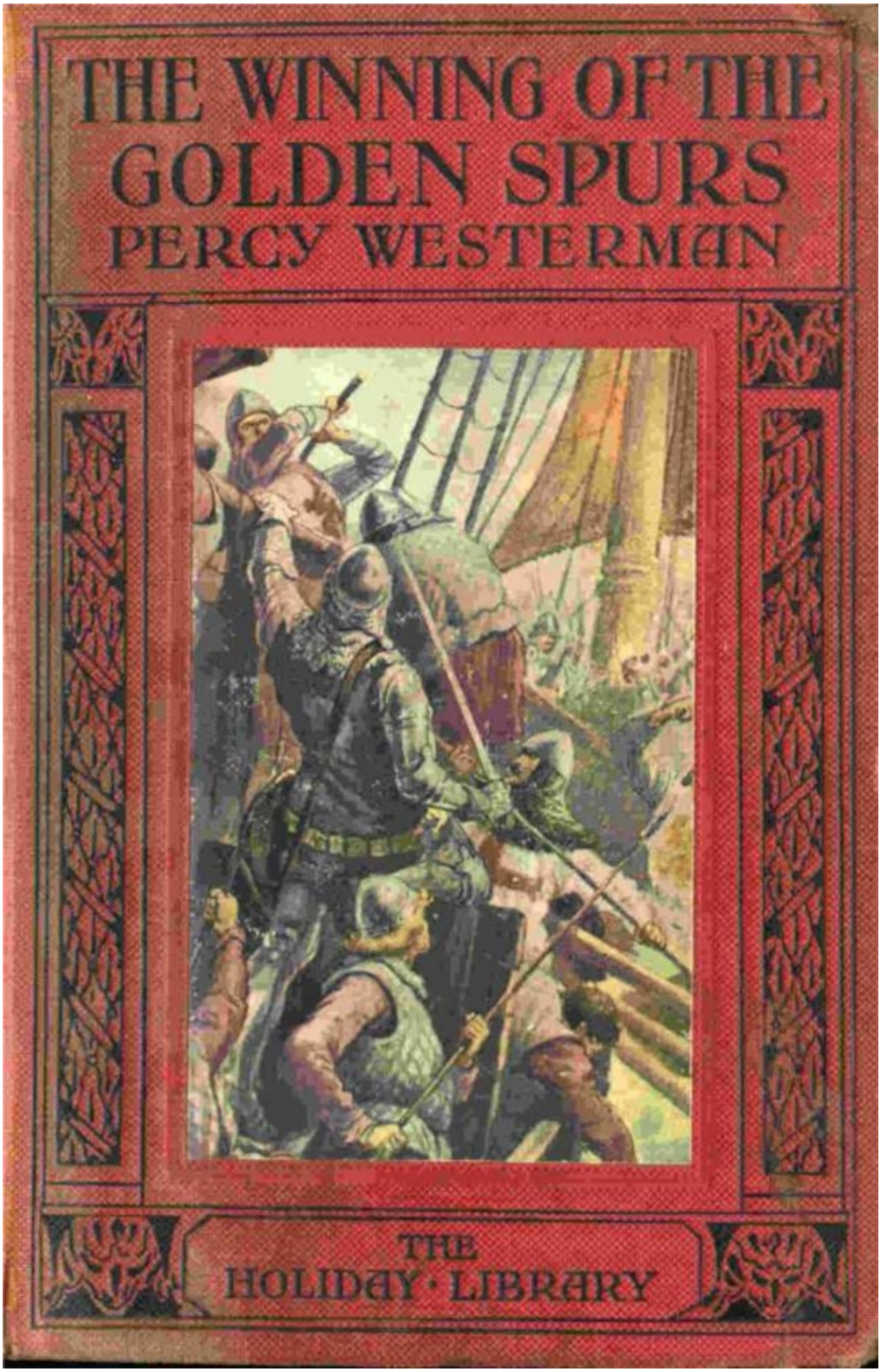

**THE WINNING OF
THE GOLDEN SPURS**

RAYMOND SAVES THE BLACK PRINCE

THE WINNING OF THE GOLDEN SPURS

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

AUTHOR OF "A LAD OF GRIT," "THE SEA MONARCH,"
"THE TREASURE OF THE SAN PHILIPO," ETC.

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CONTENTS

THE WINNING OF THE GOLDEN SPURS

PROLOGUE

IT was early morning on the 5th day of August, 1303, the Royal City of Winchester. The sun had not yet risen, but a cold grey light filtered in through a narrow window and dimly illumined a small, scantily-furnished room overlooking the city walls.

Seated on a rough wooden stool, his face buried in his hands, was a young fellow of about twenty years of age. His body swayed with uncontrollable grief, and, though dry-eyed, deep sobs of mingled remorse and despair showed the anguish that rent his body and distracted his mind.

In a corner of the room a torch, burnt low in its iron socket, threw a yellow light that was fast being overmastered by the growing dawn, yet the glimmer was sufficient to play upon the naked blade of a sword, the steel of which was discoloured towards its point by a dull, rust-coloured stain.

Suddenly the sound of a heavy footstep was heard on the stairs. The youth started to his feet and gazed wildly around, as if seeking a place of concealment or some means of escape. He was tall, well formed, and, in spite of his haggard looks, comely of face, and his clothes, though rent and covered with chalk and dust, showed that he was of no mean position.

Realising the impossibility of hiding himself, he stood erect and alert, awaiting the arrival of what he took to be his fate; but, instead of a thundering summons of the officers of the law, there came a gentle rap, and the door was slowly pushed ajar.

"Hist! Art there, Master Revyngton? 'Tis I, Nicholas Hobbes!"

"Enter, Nicholas! Certes I thought 'twas the watch."

The new arrival was a man some few years older than the fugitive. He was clad in a rough leather suit, frayed at elbows and knees, and to which shavings and feathers still clung—a silent witness to his trade of fletcher.

"'Tis a sorry pass, Master Revyngton. How came it about?"

"Ay, that I will say right willingly; but first tell me—how knowest thou that I am here?"

"Easily said! Dick Ford told me that thou wert a fugitive in his house, and asked me to use my scatterbrain wits to find a way to smuggle thee out of the city. That being so, 'twere best I saw thee, and to that purpose I am here. But, again, how came it to pass?"

"Faith! I can scarce say. 'Twas in the meads, yestereven. Young Stephen Scarsdale and Reginald, his brother, were on this side of the stream, I on the nether bank, with Wulf, my favourite hound. 'Ho there!' cried Stephen. 'What meanst thou by trespassing on the ground of my Lord Bishop?' 'I do not trespass,' I replied. 'The Mead hath ever been free to the men of this city, and no one hath yet said me nay.' 'I'll warrant thou art after my Lord Bishop's trout. By the rood, I'll send a bolt through the head of thy lurcher.' 'Thy aim must be more sure than when I beat thee at the butts,' I replied, little thinking but that he spoke in jest, but in answer he levelled his crossbow, and ere I was aware of it poor Wulf was lying transfixed on the ground."

"Then I was seized by a thousand devils, and sprang across the narrow plank bridge to hurl the slayer of my hound into the river, but Stephen, whipping out his blade, bade me do likewise. In less time than it takes to tell our swords crossed, though, mark ye, I meant not to harm him; yet, like a fool, he ran in upon my blade, and 'twas all over in an instant."

"And then?"

"The younger Scarsdale, who is a worthy gentleman compared with his witless brother, tried to stop me as I fled. There was no help for it, so he, too, went down, though I trow he is not much hurt. Hast heard aught of Stephen?"

"Naught save that he is as dead as a door-nail. But, Master Revyngton, 'tis, as I said, a sorry pass. What wilt thou do?"

"Do? Give myself into the hands of the law. What else wouldst thou have me do?"

"Anything but that. Consider! Thou art young and full of life. Why shouldst thou grace a halter if it can be avoided, for, mark well, the Scarsdales are a powerful family, and moreover Stephen was of the Bishop's household. How thinkst thou to make good thy case before thy peers when the weight of title and position is set against thee? Be sober, young master, and think on't."

"Ay, 'tis hard to die thus."

"No need to die at all—at any rate, just yet. Flee the country. France or the States of the Rhine ever offer an attraction for a roving blade, and peradventure in a few years the affair will have blown over."

"But how can I escape?"

"There thou hast me. Where is Dick Ford?"

"Gone to gather tidings. He will be here anon."

Both men relapsed into silence, staring moodily at the narrow window, through which could be seen the battlements of the city gilded by the rising sun, while ever and again came the sweet strains of a lark as it soared heavenwards from the dew-sodden meadows without the walls.

Again came the sound of footsteps, and Dick Ford, the bowyer, entered. He was a short, red-complexioned man, with a cheerful countenance, as if nothing could upset his good nature, though at times his looks belied him, and the worthy citizens of Winchester oft had cause to remember his tongue when it ran riot. Like the fletcher, his appearance betrayed him, for the sharp wittle that hung from his girdle, the daubs of beeswax, and the faint reek of varnish marked his calling as a maker of the famous English longbows.

"A pretty hornet's nest thou hast raised, Master Revyngton," he exclaimed, shaking his head. "Yesternight the city crier called thee at the market-cross, and on the Soke Bridge. The Bishop's Court hath claimed thee, and in default of thy appearance thou wilt be declared outlaw. Furthermore, the gates are doubly guarded, and men are even now in ambush on the road to the sanctuary at St. Cross if so be thou seekest refuge therein. By the saintly Swithun, I trow thou art the most sought-for man in Winton."

"He hath made up his mind, Dick," exclaimed Hobbes. "Better an outlaw with a heavy conscience than a corpse with none at all."

"Ay, let me but get once clear of the city and I'll reck not what I become."

"Bravely spoken, Master Revyngton! And now, how canst thou make good thine escape? Thou canst count on us to a surety, for 'twould ill requite thy father's kindness to us in times past if we let thee fall into the hands of the Bishop's men. Where is thine arrow-wain, Dick?"

"Below, in the barn."

"And laden?"

"Nay, but it soon could be. Wherefore?"

"Place Master Revyngton in the cart and cover him with arrows. 'Tis the day thou journeyest to Bishopstoke and Botley. He would then be well on his way to the abbey at Netley."

"Steady, Dick, steady! Should the guard at Kingsgate search the wain my neck is as good as if fitted with a halter. Yet I'll take the risk; but see to it, young master, if the plan goeth amiss, thou'lt bear me witness that I wot not of thy presence?"

"Ay, good Nicholas. But if they question thee and search the cart I must make a bid for freedom, so stand in the way, and I'll warrant I'll knock thee down just to give colour to the deceit."

"But strike not too hard, Master Revyngton, neither on the face, for I am in no mind to go home to my good wife with my nose awry or mine eyes closed up. A gentle tap, I pray thee—like this—and I'll warrant I'll fall as surely as if I were smitten with the club of the Southampton giant Ascupart."

"After all's said and done," remarked the fletcher, "there may be no need to smite thee, Nick, for 'tis unlikely that they will search thy cart. But the day groweth apace. If it is to be done, the sooner the better, say I."

"Then make a good meal, Master Revyngton," said Hobbes, setting a loaf of brown bread, some cheese, and a jack of ale, "for if not thou'lt feel the want of it ere long. Now set to like a good trencherman, though, being but plain men, our fare is likewise plain. Thou knowest the road?"

"Passably well, save the latter part."

"Then keep close, but not on it if perchance thou art pursued, for it is to Southampton that they'll think thou art bound. Take the by-road to Botley, whence the abbey lies but a league or so away."

While the fletcher and the bowyer were giving advice the younger man did justice to the food; then, at a sign from Ford, his companion stole softly down the rough ladder that did duty as a staircase, and peered cautiously up and down the street. Another moment, and the three men had darted across the narrow road to a small barn, the mutual property of several of the inhabitants of that quarter, and shortly afterwards a rough cart, laden with bundles of newly-feathered arrows, was jolting over the rough stones towards Kingsgate, Nicholas Hobbes leading the sorry nag and whistling a lively air as well as the anticipation of being floored would permit.

"Thou art early abroad, Nick," quoth one of the guards, as he made ready to throw open the heavy door. "There's naught but arrows in thy wain, I take it?"

"What meanest thou?"

"Why, hast heard naught of the slaying of Master Scarsdale, that tall youth belonging to the Bishop's household? Surely thou hast him in mind?"

"Ay, I knew him; is he dead?"

"Where hath been thine eyes and thine ears since yesternoon?"

"I have but small time for gossip, Tom, above all towards the end of the week, when my stock hath to be renewed. But I'll hear the story anon, for time is precious."

The heavy gate swung slowly open, the fletcher called to his horse, and the cart with its living burden moved towards the open country and safety.

"Hold!" cried a hoarse voice. "Tom, thou arrant rascal, wouldst let the cart through unsearched What were thine orders from the captain of the gate?"

And, to the fletcher's terror, a burly man-at-arms came down a flight of steps at the side of the gate, and advanced towards him.

The first soldier sullenly strolled over to the back of the cart, but, suddenly recovering himself, Nicholas Hobbes backed his horse, causing the man to be pinned between the wheel and the stonework of the arch. There was a sudden scattering of the arrows, an indistinct mass hurtling through the air, and the fletcher found himself, as he had foretold, lying prone in the dust. When he sat up the soldiers were calling wildly to the rest of the guard, while a fleeing figure, already growing small in the distance, showed that the fugitive Revyngton was well on his way to freedom.

With the din of the soldiers' shouts still ringing in his ears, Revyngton ran steadily onwards with a long, steady swing, his elbows pressed against his sides, and breathing easily, for he was no mean runner.

Away in front rose the gaunt outline of St. Catherine's Hill, with the square tower of the Hospital of St. Cross, which sanctuary he knew was denied him, slightly to the right. Between ran the swift-flowing river Itchen, and the fugitive realised that he would have to run the gauntlet of the watchers before the sanctuary ere he could reach the ford where the river swept the base of the hill. His way lay through the meadows where, but a few hours ago, he had wandered in blissful, though then unappreciated, freedom, and shudderingly, and with averted face, he raced past the scene of the fatal encounter. Fortunately his local knowledge prevented him from crossing the narrow plank bridge that led solely to a marshy meadow enclosed by two arms of the river, so, keeping close to the shadow of the pollard willows, he held steadily on his way, the babbling of the river as it flowed with sparkling eddies in the bright sunshine sounding like soothing music to the hunted man.

Just as he reached the ford his movements were observed by a party of the officers of the law who had been keeping a toilsome vigil around the outer wall of St. Cross, and a crossbow bolt, shot at a high angle, boomed through the air and buried itself less than twenty yards from him.

There was a general scene of confusion, some of the men running after him afoot, others rushing off to where their horses stood tethered in a clump of trees.

It being the hot season, the river was but ankle-deep at the ford, and, refreshed by the coldness of the water, Revyngton hastened his pace up the long, dusty road towards the hamlet of Twyford. As he ran he could not resist the inclination to look back, and from the elevated position of the highway he could see the whole of the distance betwixt him and the cathedral city.

To his satisfaction he saw that he was more than holding his own with those who pursued afoot, and even now they were giving up the pursuit and the horsemen of the party had not yet started, but away along the city road a number of dark, swiftly-moving objects showed that a troop of mounted soldiers and retainers of the episcopal authorities were rapidly covering the distance between them and their quarry.

The sun, though the morning was yet young, smote down upon him with relentless strength, and there was not the faintest zephyr to cool his heated frame, yet onwards he sped, though the strain of the pursuit was gradually yet surely telling upon him.

Through the almost deserted village of Twyford he ran, one or two of the earlier risers looking with open-mouthed astonishment at the fugitive, while a little way further a black-robed monk gazed amazedly at the approaching man, till, fearing violence, he gathered up his ragged gown and fled across a field at the roadside, his sandals clattering as he ran.

At length, worn out by his exertions, Revyngton reached a spot where a road branched off to his left, while between it and the highway he was following lay a large pond, surrounded by trees and fringed with clusters of reeds. Here he threw himself down on the spongy turf, thrust his head and arms in the limpid water, and lay panting on the grass, oblivious of his danger, till the regular thud of horses' hoofs roused his jaded energies.

Quickly he looked around, and to his joy he perceived the gnarled trunk of a tree that had fallen into a horizontal position over the pond, its branches forming a dark, shady shelter. Silently and swiftly as an eel he plunged into the water, and a few powerful strokes brought him to the friendly refuge. Secure from observation, he drew himself upon a branch and waited the arrival of the horsemen.

In a cloud of dust they appeared—five bronzed men-at-arms, with long, straight swords strapped against their thighs; four lay servants of the Bishop, with hard-set mouths and scowling faces that ill-matched their calling as members of an ecclesiastical house; and three of the city watch, more lightly armed than their companions, carrying crossbows across their backs. Revyngton realised that scant mercy could be expected at their hands.

At a word from their leader the party halted, there was a hurried consultation, and two of the men trotted their horses to the edge of the pond, while the rest resumed their headlong pursuit.

Then Revyngton felt that he stared death in the face, for less than five paces from him were the two soldiers, sitting motionless on their steeds and staring fixedly at the spot where he lay concealed, their reflections being clearly mirrored in the still water. To the fugitive it seemed as if his leafy bower were rent asunder, and that he lay exposed to his pursuers in utter helplessness; but at length, to his great relief, one of the men spoke.

"Why this fool's errand for the sake of a hot-blooded youth? Faith, I am not averse to earning the five marks reward, yet 'tis a useless quest. Far rather would I be in a snug inn, for my throat is as dry as a friar's sermon."

"There's drink for thee," replied the other, indicating the pond with a nod of his steel-capped head.

"Water!" exclaimed the first with an oath; "I like it not, neither inside nor out, to be plain-spoken. Art game to return to Twyford, where the ale is of the best?"

"Give them time to get out of hearing, thou dolt. Why doth the sheriff keep bloodhounds and use them not, eh, Giles?"

"'Twould have been the better way. But now, comrade, let's away!"

Revyngton waited till the sound of their horses' hoofs had died away, then, swimming softly back to the bank, he emerged and resumed his way.

Now the dangers were doubled, for not only had his pursuers placed themselves between him and his refuge, but he knew not but that every bush or hedge concealed a foe. Thus he was compelled to forsake the high road and follow it at some distance away, keeping as close as possible to the shelter of the coppices and dells that formed the chief features of the district.

As he neared the village of Fair Oak he struck the highway between Bishopstoke and the Bishop's hunting lodge at Waltham, and for a long time he lay hidden in the bracken ere the road was free from the seemingly endless cavalcade of huntsmen that journeyed towards the famous Waltham Chase, while hucksters from Southampton and Romsey, intent on doing a good business, were hurrying in the same direction.

At length the opportunity came, and the fugitive darted across the road and gained the fields beyond. Here the nature of the country changed, the ground offering less shelter, but away to the south rose the dark, fir-clad hills that lay close to his goal.

He had now left the Botley road well on his left, and he could perceive the haze of smoke that marked the hollow where the village lay. His clothes were long dried, and the heat was well-nigh unbearable, so, overcoming his fears, he turned aside to a cottage, the thatched roof of which rose amid a thicket. Here he found that another by-road or lane crossed his path, but there was no sign of any one passing; the cottage itself looked deserted.

As the fugitive approached a dog barked, and there was a sound of some one moving about in an outhouse, and to the tortured man the sight of several pails of milk was irresistible. The yelping of the cur brought a woman to the door of the shed, a strong-limbed, coarse-featured creature, with a face lined with innumerable wrinkles and a back bent with years of toil in the fields.

"What lack ye?" she demanded sourly.

"Am I on the right road for the abbey at Netley?"

"Yea. Turn to thy left hand at the cross-roads."

"Also, I prithee, give me a draught of milk."

"Begone, for a worthless clown! Begone, I say, or the dog shall fly at thee," she shrieked, wild with fury; but Revyngton heeded her not, and seizing a small earthenware pitcher, drained its contents, then turning on his heel, he resumed his fearsome journey.

"Haste, Tom, run up to the village and get help!" shouted the woman. "'Tis a gadabout churl, or a riever, or worse," and as the fugitive ran he heard the farm-servant making off towards Botley, while the woman unloosed the dog.

Ere Revyngton had gone a bowshot from the cottage the cur was barking and yelping at his heels, showing its teeth, but fearing to close, till at length it drew off, leaving the man to wonder at the churlishness of the hard-faced woman compared with the reception of wayfarers on his father's manor in Devon, where meat and drink were ever at the disposal of even the most humble stranger.

At the brow of the hill he saw the tower of the abbey amid the trees a mile or more away, with the beautiful expanse of Southampton Water as a fitting background to the peaceful scene. Yet the fugitive had neither time nor inclination to appreciate the natural surroundings; to him the abbey meant rest and safety, and with renewed hope he sped towards the monastic buildings.

Weary and footsore he reached the outer door, his senses reeling with the effects of his exertions. Seeing his plight the porter gave him wine, and sent a lay brother to summon the abbot.

As the venerable head of the establishment appeared, Revyngton raised himself with an effort and knelt before him.

"Thy blessing, father."

"*Benedicite*, my son; what wouldst thou?"

"Sanctuary, father."

The abbot shook his head sorrowfully.

"'Tis not permitted, my son; such blessed privileges belong only to our parent abbey at Beaulieu and to the Hospital of St. Cross. I trow there is no other within the jurisdiction of the Lord Bishop of Winchester. What crime bast thou committed?"

"I slew a man in anger, and even now my pursuers are hard at my heels."

The abbot turned to a lay brother.

"Tell Brother Balthazar to repair to the tower and to quickly bring me word if any soldiers appear." Then to the fugitive he added, "Confess thy sin and seek God's pardon; then perchance the means of thy earthly salvation may be vouchsafed to thee. Follow me, my son."

To the venerable abbot Revyngton told the whole of the circumstances of the case; then, having eased his soul, the abbot took care to relieve his body, causing food and drink to be set before him, while a brother washed his cut and travel-worn feet.

"Thou must make for the Abbey of the Blessed Mary at Beaulieu, where thou shalt find sanctuary. Knowest thou the way?"

"Nay, father," replied the man, sad at heart at the prospect of another journey at the peril of his life.

"Then listen, my son. Two of the brethren will take thee across the arm of the sea that thou canst see yonder. Thence it is but an hour's sharp travel across the heath to the abbey, the path being well worn by reason of many of the brethren who travel thereby. There are three ways from the spot where thou wilt land the one on the left hand goeth towards Fawley and the town of Lepe, the one on the right to the village of Hythe, but the way thou must take goeth neither right nor left, but leads towards the sun just before the hour of vespers——Ah! What is thy message, my son?"

The last question was addressed to a novice, who, panting breathlessly, was standing in the doorway with folded arms and bent head, awaiting the abbot's pleasure.

"Horsemen, father; a score or more have appeared on the hill and are making towards the abbey."

"Then summon Brother Angelique and Brother Petrox. Hasten, for 'tis no season for leisure."

Quickly the two brethren—tall, gaunt, yet sinewy men, with faces and arms tanned a deep red by reason of their calling as boatmen of the abbey—answered the behest, and with the reverence due to their superior awaited his commands.

"Take this man across and put him fairly on his way to our parent abbey. Tarry not on thy journey, for the matter is urgent."

"Is it thy wish, father, to land him at Ashlett or Cadland?" asked one of the monks.

"At Cadland, should the tide prove aright. Now, my son," he added to the refugee, "take mine

earnest blessing and go, and may the blessed Saints Mary and Edward, the patrons of our abbey, be with thee."

There was little time to lose, for already the horsemen were within two bow-shots of the abbey, and with a loud clatter of sandals the two monks led the way, Revyngton following closely at their heels, the brethren of the abbey speeding him on his way with prayers and cries of encouragement.

At the end of a little causeway a boat, broadbeamed and lofty of head and stem, rode on the little wavelets. With a sign Brother Petrox motioned the fugitive to step aboard, then unfastening the rope that held the craft to the quay, he followed Brother Angelique and pushed off.

Both monks rolled the sleeves of their gowns above their elbows, seized the two heavy ash oars, and rowed with a will, Revyngton sitting on a rough fishing-tray at the stern of the boat and drinking in the cool sea breezes. The rush of events had well-nigh bewildered him, and listlessly he watched the rhythmical motion of the sinewy arms as the rowers urged the boat towards the opposite shore.

Suddenly his reveries were broken by an exclamation from one of the monks. "They follow us; pull thy hardest!"

Revyngton turned and looked astern. From the place they had left but a quarter of an hour before half a score of men were dragging a heavy boat down the steep beach.

"By the blessed Peter, my holy namesake," groaned one of the monks, "I had overlooked that, and the oars are in the boat. See, already they have launched it."

"'Tis after all but a crare."

"With a crew of lusty fellows to make amends for its weight. The saints forfend them!"

"Let us trust that they cannot handle the sails, for, mark well, the wind bloweth fair."

The rowers relapsed into silence, and with long, heavy strokes, that seemed far too slow to the hunted fugitive, they resolutely and unfalteringly lessened the distance betwixt them and the nether shore. The hour of noon had already passed, and the sun's rays attained a greater strength than they had previously in the day, yet, though streaming with moisture, the monks laboured in their efforts to shake off their pursuers.

"We hold our own," muttered one over his shoulder.

"Nay, I doubt it; but we must needs make for Ashlett Creek, for the other channel is yet uncovered."

Accordingly the boat's head was turned towards a distant opening in the mud-fringed shore, and the pursuing craft followed suit, thereby gaining considerably on the fugitive, who could now distinguish the dress of the men.

"They overtake us," quoth he, speaking for the first time since the abbey gates had closed behind him. "See, a bowman makes ready!"

Gradually the distance between the boats lessened, but the monks' craft was now close to the creek, and Revyngton saw in front an apparently closed-in basin surrounded by a high bank of slimy mud. A few more strokes and the boat was within the creek, which wound its sinuous way up to the shore, while the little waves caused by their rapid motion through the water lapped the sides of the narrow channel.

Just as they were about to round the first bend the bowman let loose, and an arrow sung over their heads and struck the mud with a dull swish. Revyngton instinctively bent his head, but his companions, though men of peace, barely took notice of the deadly shaft.

"Safe for the time," commented Brother Angelique, as the boat shot behind a sheltering bank.

"But how about thy safety?" asked the fugitive.

"By St. Edward, 'tis not to be thought of," replied the monk, thrusting back his sleeve, which in his exertions had slipped down. "They seek not us."

"But thou hast aided a fugitive from justice."

"Nay, that I wot not of. Besides, how am I to know that these men are the officers of justice They might well be but water-pikers for aught I know.... Oh!"

An exclamation of pain interrupted his words, for an arrow, shot haphazard from the bend of the creek over the intervening bank, had pierced his forearm betwixt elbow and wrist, while another shaft trembled with its head buried in the thwart.

"On, Brother Petrox! On! 'Tis but a small matter," he gasped, and as the other monk seized his

companion's oar, the wounded man, shutting his eyes tightly, snapped off the head of the arrow with his free hand and drew the broken shaft from the wound.

A gush of blood followed, but the brave monk, gripping the wounded member to stop the crimson flow, never ceased to urge the rower to greater effort, while ever and again a shaft shot by their still invisible pursuers flew perilously close to their heads.

At length the boat grounded on the hard bed of the channel, and Brother Petrox called to Revyngton to jump out. Wading through the shallow water the two started for the shore, leaving the wounded monk calmly seated in the deserted craft.

From the mud hovels of the village of Ashlett wimpled women and rough-haired children looked interestedly at the two runners, the layman in his travel-stained apparel and the monk in his sombre garb. Men there were none, for the hours of toil had called them to the fields or out on the waters, where they sought a livelihood by fishing; but had there been, the sight of the two speeding along would hardly have excited anything but curiosity in the minds of these dull-witted sons of the soil.

"I can go with thee no farther," panted the monk, as they reached the cross-roads. "Follow yonder path, and God be with thee." And as Revyngton sped onwards towards the rolling expanse of purple heather, he saw the solitary figure of his benefactor waving encouragingly towards the distant and invisible goal.

Settling down to a steady pace, the fugitive kept doggedly on his way, his eyes fixed on a distant clump of trees that marked the brow of the hill overlooking the valley of the Exe where lay the abbey.

Narrower and narrower became the road, till it deteriorated into a mere footpath, the prickly gorse encroaching on either side and hurting his feet as he ran. Yet, spurred onward by renewed hope, his strength seemed well-nigh inexhaustible.

Suddenly, from behind a low heather-clad hillock at the side of the road, four wild-looking men sprang up and barred his progress.

"Hold, stranger!" shouted one, brandishing a club. "Whither goest thou? Hast aught in thy scrip that we would relieve thee of, for the lighter thou art the easier thou'lt run."

"I have nothing in the world. Let me pass, I pray; 'tis a matter that brooks no delay."

"Nay, not so fast, young master. What is thine errand?"

"My errand?" replied Revyngton, with a mirthless laugh. "I seek sanctuary."

"Art without the pale of the law?"

"Of that there is little doubt."

"Then throw in thy lot with us. A free life in the forest glades, with many a weighty scrip to balance the lightness of our minds, is better than being cooped up in yonder monastery."

The fugitive shook his head.

"Nay, 'tis not to my liking."

"Neither is the other, I trow, but look!"

Following the direction of his hand, Revyngton saw coming over the brow of a distant hill which he had crossed but a short while ago a number of his pursuers. Three had procured horses, while the rest, some five in number, ran by their side, holding on to the stirrups to aid their speed.

Instantly the robbers vanished into the tangle of bracken, leaving the fugitive alone on the narrow path, and once again he broke into a headlong pace, his pursuers thundering along but three arrow-flights behind him.

Fortunately the unevenness of the path prevented the horsemen from riding their hardest, and when at length Revyngton, exhausted and faint, reached the brow of the hill, he saw that the situation was still in his favour. Blindly plunging onwards, with laboured breathing and aching sides, he ran down the hill, at the foot of which clustered the extensive buildings of the abbey.

Through a gap in the trees on his left he caught a glimpse of the silvery river as it wound in majestic splendour towards the sea, but to the hunted man the beauty of the scene was lost; all that concerned him was the thought of the possibility of being overtaken ere he could cover the last stretch of dusty road.

He was dimly conscious of hearing a crash behind him, and of looking round for one brief moment, thereby catching a glimpse of two of the horsemen mingled in utter confusion on the rough path. And still the sound of the rapidly approaching hoofs of the remaining horse thudded in his ears.

Now he had gained the angle of the abbey wall. The gate, with its massive iron knocker, was within his grasp. The noise of the footfalls of the pursuer's steed ceased; there was a sharp hiss, and an arrow pierced the fugitive's leg just above the knee. Then, with a final effort, he thundered at the portal, and, as his head swam and his limbs gave way under him, he was dimly aware that he was surrounded by a group of grey-robed figures. He had found sanctuary.

CHAPTER I

THE ARCHER, REDWARD BUCKLAND

IT was early morning in the month of August, 1338, so early that the slanting rays of the sun still lit up the north side of the Norman church of St. Andrew, and cast a shadow seven times its height across the dew-soaked meadows.

Betwixt the high ground where stood the church and the narrow creek, known as the Hamble River, clustered the mud-walled and thatched-roof houses of the village of Hamble-le-Rice. Away to the north could be traced the course of the tree-fringed creek till it lost itself behind a range of low hills, while in the other direction lay the estuary of the river, where it mingled itself with the salt waves of Southampton Water, which, in its turn, was backed by the dark, dense masses of trees that formed that tract of country so well known in history and romance—the New Forest.

Peaceful, indeed, was the situation of this quiet little Hampshire village, and peaceful also was the general existence of its inhabitants. Situated on an out-of-the-way angle, far from the old Roman highway that led from Clausentum to Portchester, and at that period, as now, formed the highway between Southampton and Portsmouth, Hamble village was all but cut off from the rest of the world. Save for an occasional visit by the grey-robed monks from the Priory of St. Mary and St. Edward at Netley, a chance journey of a huckster or Chapman from Southampton or Winchester fairs, or the unpreventable arrival of some vessel driven by stress of weather to shelter in the estuary, strangers in the village were few and far between.

Slow in thought, slower in speech, and backward in giving or taking offence, yet terrible when roused to anger, the Hamble folk were typical examples of the mediaeval English peasant whose descendants have made history in all parts of the globe.

For years past the social condition of England had been in a deplorable state. The strife between King Edward II. and De Spenser on the one hand, and Queen Isabella and Mortimer on the other, had encouraged lawlessness in all grades of society. Robbers, thieves, murderers, and criminals of all kinds had multiplied to an enormous degree, and were openly protected by the great barons, as being useful tools in their hands. Guilds, founded for self-protective measures, became instruments of oppression, and, generally speaking, every man looked solely to his own interest.

But in the village of Hamble there was little to ruffle the even tenor of its existence. Little did it matter whether the seamen of Southampton had a feud with the men of the Cinque Ports, or whether the monks of Beaulieu or Netley had a difference with the Bishop of Winchester; but should a strange craft appear in the river, or a band of marauders attempt to swoop down from the leafy fastnesses of Waltham Chase, 'twas only necessary to ring the great bell of St. Andrew's, and instantly the peaceful villagers would be turned into an angry array of armed men, ready to sell their lives dearly in defence of their hearths and homes.

But the time was at hand when Englishmen would have to sink their differences and unite against a common foe. Edward III. had laid claim to the throne of France, and, though the stake was a great one, the enterprise was popular, inasmuch as the possibilities of individual gain in the shape of plunder held out great inducements to all classes of these island warriors.

On this particular morning early a man emerged from one of the houses on the outskirts of the village, which, by reason of being built of stone and being fair-sized, betokened that its owner was a man of position—as far as the place was concerned. The house lay some two hundred yards away from the rest, occupying the summit of an even-crested ridge, and was surrounded by a palisade of stout pointed stakes, that afforded complete protection against the attacks of any ordinary band of adventurers.

The man was a tall, well-made individual, with a bronzed face surmounted by a thick crop of reddish hair, and partially concealed by a heavy beard, that grew high upon his cheeks. Bushy eyebrows helped to further conceal his face, but any one could see from the grey glint of his blue eyes that the profusion of hair covered a comely countenance.

A well-worn leather jerkin, that had once been of a vivid red colour, but was now nearly black with hard usage, failed to conceal the mighty expanse of his chest, while the short sleeves of the garment fitted tightly over the gnarled muscles of his arms. His lower limbs were also covered by leathern hose, which, by reason of exposure to salt water and the rough wear and tear of daily toil, were now colourless and frayed till all semblance of dressed leather was lacking. His legs, however, though of great size, did not betoken an equality with the strength of his arms, and, moreover, he walked with a slight limp.

A crimson scarf, bound tightly round his head, did duty for a head-dress, while from a narrow black belt hung a short dagger on his right side, counterbalanced by a leather purse or pouch on his left.

Over his shoulder he bore a pair of long ash oars, their blades still covered with a deposit of dry

mud, while in his left hand he carried a six-foot yew-bow, which, unstrung, was as straight as a lance.

Redward Buckland, for such was his name, was not a Hamble man in the strict sense of the word, yet so good-natured and easy-going was he, so upright in his dealings, and withal a man of such great bodily strength, that he was a popular member of the little community.

Of his past he said little, and was asked but little. He had been master bowman in a company, had served against the Scots at Bannockburn, with the Gascons in their feudal bickerings, and there was hardly a castle in Normandy, Maine, Touraine, Anjou, Poitou, or Limousin that he did not know.

Eleven years prior to the time of this story he suddenly appeared at Hamble, bringing with him his son Raymond, then a child five years of age. Men often talked of their coming; the bowman, in rusty brigandine and dented headpiece, the boy, a lusty, laughing youngster, perched on his shoulder, a wain jogging behind with a heavy load of rich stuff—booty from many a foreign part—the like of which had never before been seen in Hamble.

Thereupon he purchased a farmhouse, and settled down with the intention of passing the rest of his days in comfort. Being a highly religious man—though, like most of his companions in arms, he could swear roundly at times—Redward Buckland acted in accordance with the custom of the times. Four marks and a seven-pound candle of pure wax he gave to the priory at Netley, and a gold-embroidered cloth to the church of St. Andrew at Hamble.

These presents he accounted sufficient atonement and thank-offering alike for delinquencies and deliverances from peril during his sojourn abroad, and thence-forth he meant to live a quiet, well-ordered life, though, unable to resist the call to arms, he had served in short campaigns against the Scots, and had but a year previously crossed the Channel to take part in the Battle of Cadsand. Yet Hamble was his home, and to Hamble he returned as soon as each particular expedition had ended.

Raymond Buckland, now a lad of sixteen, had little in common with his father as far as appearance went. He was tall, slim, yet well-knit, with curly flaxen hair, though the colour had a redeeming tinge of reddish-gold that is necessary to impart a warmth to what would otherwise be a lustreless head of hair. He moved with a grace and ease that contrasted vividly with his father's comparatively awkward gait, but his limbs were not wanting in strength.

A vigorous outdoor life had done much to develop his frame. Mentally Raymond was well educated, according to the standard of the age, having but recently returned from the Cistercian priory at Netley, where for the last seven years he had been a novice. His long intercourse with a monastic life had somewhat deadened his natural inclinations, but since his return to the outside world the active delights of youth seemed sweeter still.

"Hasten, Raymond," said his father, pausing to look back towards the house, where the youth still lingered. "The young flood hath just begun, and tide tarries for no man! And," he added, "fail not to bring my quiver with the black-feathered arrows."

"And can I bring my crossbow?" inquired Raymond.

His father gave a gruff yet good-natured assent, and, resuming his walk, sauntered gently towards the river.

Before he had passed the church Raymond had overtaken him, carrying the quiver in his left hand, while across his back was slung a short yet powerful crossbow, his own quiver with its stock of heavy quarrels hanging from his belt.

"Ha! That crossbow again!" exclaimed Redward, in good-natured contempt. "'Tis strange that an English boy should lean towards a windlac-drawn weapon rather than a sturdy yew-bow. An thou wert a Provençal or Genoese I could have understood it."

"Why, father?"

"Why, forsooth! Thou wert made a sturdy Englishman, with sinews and muscles wherewith to bend an honest longbow—not to have to turn a handle, like a butter-making wench, ere the bolt can be shot. And, moreover, suppose thou wert matched against an archer; before thy weapon were levelled I'll warrant there would be a dozen cloth-yard shafts bristling in thine hide—though one would be enough, I trow!"

"But the Genoese?"

"The Genoese, my son, were ever underhanded fighters, preferring to cause a gaping wound with a quarrel rather than a wholesome hole with an arrow. 'Tis said that on more than one occasion the Pope hath forbidden the use of the crossbow, and that the Second Lateran Council, a hundred years ago, did likewise."

"How, then, do we find the crossbow still in use?"

"I cannot tell, Raymond, save it be the natural perversity of men. But here we are at the shore."

They had passed through the village, between rows of thatched cottages. Smoke was already beginning to issue from the hole in the roof that did duty for a chimney, showing that the inhabitants were early astir. The narrow road plunged sharply down to the mud-fringed shores of the river, for the tide was low, and long flats of treacherous slime extended almost from bank to bank, save for a channel of deep water midway between.

With the air of a man who is thoroughly acquainted with the place, Redward Buckland followed an almost invisible path—termed throughout uncountable ages a Hard—that led across the mud flats to the edge of the water, Raymond treading carefully at his heels. At the end of the Hard lay a large, bluff-bowed boat, and, pulling the craft ashore by a length of rope, the archer tossed the oars into it and beckoned to his son to jump on board.

"Whither are we going, father?" asked Raymond, as his sire pushed off, stepped awkwardly into the boat, and began to haul on board the heavy stone that served as an anchor.

"Up the river to Botley, my son there to see Master Nicholas Hobbes."

"And who is he?" rejoined Raymond with the inquisitiveness of youth.

"Master Hobbes, of the city of Winton, is a fletcher, and his arrows are well known as the very best in the country. Also he brings with him a stock of bows made by Master Ford, whose fame as a bowyer extends well beyond the borders of Hamptonshire."

"But why buy arrows, father; surely thou canst make thine own?"

"Ah, Raymond! Raymond!" replied his father, shaking his head doubtfully, "thou hast yet to learn that though I could fashion mine own weapons, yet custom demands that I get them from a member of the honourable guild of bowyers and fletchers. Didst ever hear of a belted knight welding his own coat of mail?"

The boy, in truth, had yet to learn of the existence of the powerful guilds, or combinations of trades, which, founded for the purpose of self-protection against the rapacity of the barons and the lawlessness of their retainers, became strong enough to be regarded with respect by these turbulent personages. As the guilds grew they obtained charters from their sovereign, till they reached a state that enabled them to deal harshly with those without the pale. Thus, for instance, any man following the occupation of a tanner "not being free"—*i.e.* made a member of a guild—was amerced, or fined, or even subjected to corporal punishment.

Urged by the archer's long, powerful strokes the boat shot up-stream with the tide, passing between steeply rising banks, where the freshly leafed trees cast dark shadows across the verdant fields. Raymond sat on the stern-thwart, looking with silent admiration on the scene, for, as far as he could remember, it was his first experience of a journey by water.

At length they came to a place where on the western side a smaller creek joined the river. Redward rested on his oars and looked towards the mud banks, which were even now nearly covered by the rising water.

"We have hurried apace," he remarked, "and 'tis even too soon to go right up to the town. This is called Badnam Creek, and, by St. George, I'll wager we'll find some waterfowl amongst the reeds. Take thy crossbow, Raymond, and I'll pit my six-foot bow against it."

Eagerly the boy took his weapon and wound the windlac till the highly-drawn string clicked against the catch. Then he fitted a bolt, and, having done so, turned to watch his sire's movements. The archer had already notched the cord, and the bow, with a couple of arrows, lay on the thwart by his side.

"Steady, my son!" exclaimed the archer in alarm. "Be careful where thou pointest that hell-designed toy. 'Tis bad enough to have a foeman's shaft through one leg without having mine own son's bolt through the other. Hold it over the side, I pray thee!"

The boat was run amid a cluster of reeds, and the twain waited silently and eagerly for some sign of feathered life. They were not kept long in suspense, for from a marsh hard by came two wild geese, their necks extended and their wings flapping noisily as they flew.

"Quick, Raymond!" whispered his father, "loose directly they are overhead!"

In his excitement the youth sprang to his feet, and poised his crossbow.

But alas for his inexperience! Unaccustomed to the swaying of the boat he lost his balance and fell backwards across the thwart; his crossbow twanged, and with a deep humming sound the quarrel flew aimlessly into space.

In a moment Raymond raised himself into a sitting position, only to see his father loose his second arrow.

"And thou hast missed also!" he exclaimed in a tone of reproach.

"Peace, lad; wait and see!"

The birds still continued their passage, one gliding with wings outstretched, the other still beating the air with redoubled haste; then, even as they looked, both birds swayed in their flight, and fell into the water within two score paces of each other.

Without further remark Redward pushed the boat clear of the reeds, and rowed towards his spoil. One of the geese was still transfixed by an arrow, the other's neck had a small wound, showing that the shaft had passed completely through it.

"Another groat gone!" exclaimed the archer, ruefully contemplating the bird that had failed to stop the arrow. "But that was a grand shot of thine, Raymond, I trow," he added in a bantering tone; "'twas not learned of the monks of Netley?"

Then, observing a flush of mortification overspread the boy's features, he continued, "Never mind, my son, even the best archer in the kingdom would be at a loss in a small boat at first."

Presently they rounded an abrupt spur of land on their left, and came to a spot where the creek narrowed considerably, being enclosed by lofty hills on either side. A broad white road descended these hills to the water's edge, where it was broken by the flowing tide. A rough wooden hut, with a large open boat close at hand, marked the spot where wayfarers were ferried across to the opposite side, where a horn, chained to a post, was blown as a signal to attract the ferryman.

"This is the road 'twixt Southampton and Portsmouth," said the archer, indicating the dusty streak by a nod of his head. "At Bursledon, on this side, is the fortalice of the Hewitts, though from here 'tis hidden by the trees. On the other side is Swanwick Shore, whence come some of the best mariners who man the cogs of Southampton. But, mark ye! Here comes a great company of armed men; by St. Etienne of Tours, it makes my heart glad to hear the clatter of harness once more! I wonder under whose banners they march?"

And resting on his oars, Redward Buckland shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun, and peered steadfastly up the hill where the white road was now alive with men, a grey cloud of dust hanging over them like a marsh mist in autumn, through which the Cross of St. George blazoned on the white surcoats of the archers stood out bravely against the dark foliage.

When the vanguard reached the foot of the hill, a bowshot from where the watchers sat in their little craft, a tucket sounded and the company halted.

Then Redward's accustomed eyes lighted upon their banner, which bore a golden half-moon on an azure field, and unable to contain himself, he stood upright, waving his cap in boisterous delight.

"By Our Lady, 'tis as I thought—the company of the Governor of Portchester! Haste we to the shore, Raymond, that I may welcome mine old comrades!"

CHAPTER II

THE SHADOW OF WAR

A FEW strokes and the boat's keel grated on the shingle. Redward sprang out, hastily secured the craft, and strode towards the crowd of armed men, Raymond following closely at his heels.

Again a tucket sounded, and the ranks broke, most of the archers throwing themselves down by the roadside, as if weary of foot; the mounted men-at-arms led their horses to the grassy glades of the wood, while a couple of squires rode towards the water's edge to summon the ferryman.

On reaching the outskirts of the throng the old archer looked around to try and recognise some of his former comrades; nor did he look in vain.

"Red Buckland, by the Rood!" exclaimed a bronzed and bearded man-at-arms, seizing him vigorously by the hand. "Right glad am I to see thee again. Ho, Giles, Wat, Dick!" he shouted to some of his comrades, "come hither and greet an old friend!"

The pair were instantly surrounded by a mob of archers—burly, bearded men, rough in speech and coarse in manner, yet full-hearted, honest soldiers, the backbone of the feudalism of mediaeval England.

Raymond stood at the edge of the circle of men, gazing open-mouthed at the unusual sight and listening with youthful eagerness, not unmixed with feelings of awe, as the archers talked, fighting their battles o'er again, or discussed their future movements.

"'Twill be Francewards again ere long," remarked one, a man-at-arms, who, having removed his headpiece, disclosed a close crop of hair furrowed by a long white mark, the legacy of a Norman's axe. "Word came yesternight that we had to repair to Hampton to join the army that the King leads across the Channel."

"Would I were with you, comrades," said Redward, wistfully gazing on the accoutrements of the troops, the sight of which roused old memories of camp and battlefield.

"And wherefore not," replied another. "There's more to be made in a week's march in France than ten years' delving in Merry England. Ay, and I'll warrant that ere long there'll be nought but old men, women, and babes left to guard our hearths."

"Then I must be reckoned amongst the old men," replied Redward, with a mirthful laugh. "Though, methinks, at two score and fifteen years, I am not yet too aged to strike a shrewd blow or to receive hard knocks!"

"Then why tarry?"

"Didst ever have a son, Dickon?"

"Nay," replied the man, shaking his head. "Neither kith nor kin have I in this world, save my comrades."

"Then thou knowest not how a man's whole being can be wrapped up in his child. I have a son—he stands yonder. How could I leave him—a boy of sixteen—to fare for himself while I follow the banners of England in foreign parts?"

"But thou hast done so aforetimes?"

"Ay, but then the boy was in safe keeping in the abbey of Netley. Now that he is too old, seeing that it is my wish and his desire not to remain within the priory walls, I must needs stay with him."

"Red Buckland, thou art becoming chicken-hearted in thine old age. The boy—a lusty youth he looks—cannot remain with thee for ever," argued the soldier. "Now, what say you; join our company once again, and bring him with thee? Methinks there are many such, nay, even younger and of less frame and brawn, who have already set out for the wars. Come, now; again I ask thee, wilt join?"

"Dickon, thou dost press me hard so that I can scarce refuse. Yet no answer will I give till I have spoken with my boy."

At that moment a trumpet sounded, and the men stood to their arms, forming up in two lines on either side of the road. The archers, armed with short swords or axes in addition to the deadly longbow, faced the men-at-arms, who, protected with breastplate, iron helmet, gorget and greaves, grasped their twelve-foot spears, gazing steadfastly in front as their leader rode slowly between the lines.

Sir John Hacket, Constable of the King's Castle at Portchester, and Governor of the Town of

Portsmouth (to give him his official title), was then in his fortieth year, yet, from the effects of campaigning under exceptional circumstances in all parts of Western Europe, he looked considerably older, his hair being a snowy white, contrasting vividly with his brick-red complexion.

He was accoutred *cap-à-pie* in banded mail with aillettes, rerebraces, vambraces, and roundels, his richly embroidered surcoat being emblazoned with his arms.

By his left side hung a long falchion, while over the right hip was the *misericorde*, or dagger, with which a knight demanded his dismounted adversary's surrender or else gave him a *coup de grâce*.

On his head he wore a flat cap of crimson velvet, his steel bascinet being carried by a squire; while a mounted man-at-arms bore his lance.

As he proceeded between the lines of armed men, noting with undisguised satisfaction their martial bearing, Sir John's glance fell upon Redward and his son as they stood, with a knot of spectators from the neighbouring village, a little way behind the archers.

"Certes," he cried to one of his attendant squires, "'tis my old master-bowman! Bring him hither."

Thus Redward, with doffed cap, found himself once again before his beloved chief.

"Ah, Buckland, I see the blood of a good old stock still flows in thy veins," he said, after questioning him over various matters pertaining to his welfare, "I trust I shall see thee again under my banner anon!" And setting spurs to his charger the knight rode to the edge of the river, leaving the old archer tormented with thoughts of the rival claims of home and camp.

The work of transporting the detachment across the Hamble river proceeded apace, the whole of the operations being under the personal supervision of the Constable; and, true to the usages of warfare, the task was carried out in strictly military fashion.

First a vanguard of archers and men-at-arms was ferried across, the party taking up an extended formation on the opposite shore. Then came the main body, with the mounted men-at-arms, the horses being conveyed across in a large flat-bottomed boat. Leaving only a rear-guard, Sir John and his personal attendants then crossed, and finally the rear-guard followed, leaving Redward Buckland and his son gazing wistfully after them from the other shore.

"Heart alive, Raymond," said his father. "We, too, must be on the move, for the tide will not serve much longer." And pushing off, they turned the boat's head up-stream and continued their journey.

"Didst hear what the archers said but now?" inquired Redward, resting on his oars, and looking doubtfully at his son, as if half afraid that the fighting strain would not manifest itself.

"Ay, father!"

"And what thinkest thou?"

"I would go Francewards with thee."

"Heaven be praised, my son! I was afraid that the monks of Netley had made thee fitted for nought but a life within a monastery; yet thou wouldst do well to ponder over this matter, for a life midst the sound of arms is not lightly taken up. Thou hast seen but little of the world, and look only on the glowing side of a soldier's life. The risks and hardships of forced marches, famine, sickness, ay, and possibly defeat, cannot be lightly put aside, though, when once passed, one is apt to look back upon them as but trifling adventures."

"Nevertheless, I would fain go to France and fight for our King to help him in his just enterprise."

Poor Raymond! little did he think that there would be fighting in plenty in store for him ere he set foot on French soil!

There were nearly four miles to be covered ere their destination was reached, and, though favoured by the tide, the work of pulling a heavy boat began to tell even on the hardy frame of the archer, so, in reply to Raymond's entreaty to be allowed to take the oars, his sire consented and relinquished the heavy sticks.

But his son's attempt at rowing failed to please his exacting father, especially when the blades threw up showers of spray under the vigorous yet inexperienced efforts of the young man.

"Steady, Raymond! I would fain arrive at Botley with a dry skin, and methinks, a little less strength would avail better! Put thy back into it, my boy, rather than thine arms—so! I call to mind when I rowed down the Scheldt in a pitch-dark night, when the splash of an oar or the creaking of a thole would have loosened a hail of arrows from five hundred archers on either bank."

"Tell me about it, father?"

"Nay, lad; the story will keep. But look ahead. Dost mark a row of black posts standing above the water on yonder side?"

Raymond looked.

"Yes; but what are they?"

"All that is left of what was once a Danish galley, the scourge of our shore. There she lies, much the same as when burned by the great Alfred, now five hundred years or more ago. May a like fate befall every foreign craft that comes to harry our coasts!"

Soon the channel became yet narrower, till the trees on the opposite banks met overhead. Redward had resumed the oars, and bend after bend of the river soon slipped past.

"There's Botley Mill," said he, pointing to a low building, thatched-roofed and enclosed by walls of timber and mud, while above the rustle of the trees could be heard the dull roar of the stream as it swept under the water-wheel.

At a landing-place close to the road they left the boat and walked up a short, steep incline to where the houses of the town encompassed the market-place.

"Ah, there is Master Hobbes," said Redward, indicating a short, full-bodied man, clad in a suit of green cloth, who, surrounded by a crowd of yeomen and villagers, was disposing of his stock of arrows to the accompaniment of the latest news of the city of Winchester, and the prospects of the war against the French.

"Ho, gossip!" cried the archer. "Hast aught of thy stock left for me?"

"Ay, Master Buckland," replied the other, "'twould be an evil day for me if I failed to supply the good folk of Hamble with arrows—particularly thy noble self," he added with a servile bow.

"Tut! tut!" growled the archer deprecatingly. "A truce to such compliments. These the arrows? A goodly bundle! But—stand aside with me a moment—how fares it with him?" he added in a mysterious manner.

"As before no better, though perchance a trifle worse!"

"But has he ceased to——"

"Nay, nay! Far from it."

"Ah!" muttered the archer moodily, "'tis as I feared, though not for myself. Then, perchance he has had tidings?"

"That I cannot say."

"That being so, Nick, I had best be on the move overseas, under Sir John Hacket's banner once again. That I'll do, and take Raymond with me! Thanks, good Master Hobbes," he added in a louder tone. "'Tis as I said before, a goodly bundle. God speed you!"

And taking the arrows from the fletcher's hand, Redward called to his son to follow him and strode rapidly back to the boat.

During the return journey Raymond noticed that something was amiss. His sire relapsed into a stony silence, treating any question with an unusual disregard that showed that his thoughts were far away. This puzzled Raymond, and he strove to find some reason for this unlooked-for reticence, the reference to the mysterious "he" which he had overheard persistently coming uppermost in his mind. Yet never a word on the subject did the boy let fall, and it was in no little bewilderment that he followed his father from the Hard back to the house on the hill-top.

The interior of Buckland's home was plainly yet well furnished after the style of the age. Glass in the windows there was none, oiled linen doing duty for that then costly material. The floor of the living-room was strewn with rushes, the walls hung with woven material and skins of animals. Portions of armour such as were worn by men-at-arms, a few bucklers, and a medley of arms also found places on the walls, while in a corner was a bundle of bows and two cases of arrows. In the centre was a log fire, the sweet-smelling reek of the pine logs finding its way through a hole in the roof. The sleeping apartment opened out of this room, the building being but one-storeyed.

As darkness set in Redward secured the doors with a massive bar of wood, heaped more logs on the fire, and lighted a couple of rushlights.

His fit of depression had passed, and he resumed his usual cheerfulness of manner. Going into one of the adjoining rooms he caught hold of a huge oak chest, which, in spite of his strength, took all the power at his command to move. At length the chest was dragged across the threshold into the larger room; then, sitting down on a settle, the archer breathlessly gazed upon it with evident satisfaction.

"Since it is fated that we go to the wars together," said he, "'tis fitting that thou shouldst be properly attired and armed. Let us see what this chest will provide."

And, unlocking a strange yet strongly made clasp, Redward threw open the lid, and for a moment the boy's eyes were dazzled with the martial nature of its contents. There was a complete suit of armour, similar to that worn by the Constable of Portchester, though lacking the rich ornamentations, other portions of armour, and a small store of equipments such as were worn by mounted men-at-arms and soldiers of superior quality.

Redward noticed the flash of excitement in his son's eyes as they lighted upon the suit of armour.

"Nay, my son," said he, "'tis not for thee—at least, not till thou hast proved worthy of it. Here is a suitable garb, a quilted and padded coat—a trifle large for thee, perhaps, yet 'tis better to err on the generous side. This I found at the sack of Tournay, and 'tis warranted to turn a sword-cut or to stop an arrow at two score paces. This breastplate will also serve—and this steel cap. Now as to thy arms. Here is a sword, slightly heavy for thee, yet anon thou'lt become accustomed to the feel of it, though a bowman stands an ill chance should he suffer a troop of lances to come within striking distance! Now into yonder corner throw thy crossbow, for, as I have shown, 'tis but a clumsy and unwieldy tool for an Englishman. Here is a better—a full-sized English longbow; that is the king of weapons! To-morrow we'll hie to the butts, and ere a week hath passed a sturdy archer thou'lt be or thou art no son of mine!"

Raymond took the proffered articles and, with the pride of youth, fitted them on, to the no small satisfaction of his sire. Still garbed in his martial attire, he remained for a space listening to his father's tales of past campaigns, till at length, worn out with excitement, he retired for the night.

When he had gone, Redward pored over the contents of the chest, handling each article with an almost reverent care, then replacing everything save Raymond's accoutrements, he relocked the heavy box, and was soon tossing uneasily on his rough couch.

For over an hour Redward lay awake pondering over the events of the day, but just as sleep was about to gain the mastery, a hoarse shout fell upon his ear. Another followed, and a veritable babel of shrieks betokened that something untoward was happening in the village.

CHAPTER III

OF THE MIDNIGHT DESCENT OF THE FRENCH INVADERS

THE first shout was enough to rouse the old archer into active alertness, for, with his experience of camp life, he was accustomed to awaken readily at the least noise. Hastily springing up, he rushed to the window, swung aside the wooden flap and the flimsy fabric that served to admit the light, and looked out. The darkness was intense, save for some small tongues of dark red flame that were beginning to shoot up from one of the houses near the waterside, the fire casting a dull glare upon the neighbouring buildings and serving but to intensify the inky blackness of the night.

"A fire," he said aloud, yet on second thoughts the ever-increasing shrieks, groans, shouts, and curses that were borne on the air belied his surmise. Moreover, his quick ear detected commands and ejaculations in a foreign language—the tongues of Picardy, Normandy, and Spain.

His ready brain grasped the situation—it must be a raid by the French and Spaniards, who at that time swarmed in the English Channel.

These inroads upon our shores by the French during the Hundred Years' War are apt to be ignored or lightly passed over by modern historians, yet during a time when England was busy pouring the best of her blood and treasure into France there was hardly a town on the South Coast that escaped the ravages of the French and their allies, the Spaniards and Genoese.

"Awake! awake! Raymond!" shouted his father. "The French are upon us!"

Raymond sprang up and began to hastily don his clothes, while the archer laid hands on every heavy article in the room, barricading the door and securing the windows. Then, having made ready his bow, he again looked out towards the village.

By this time a series of unequal combats were taking place in the narrow streets or within the houses, where the terrified inhabitants were being routed out like rabbits. All who came across the path of the ruthless invaders were cut down without mercy—men, women, and children—while their homes were being plundered and afterwards fired by men to whom the sacking of a town was almost a familiar task.

To add to the din the church bell was ringing a violent tocsin, and all who were able to escape fled either to the stout Norman tower to seek shelter, or else across the open country towards the town of Southampton.

Raymond, white-faced with pardonable fear and shaking in every limb, now joined his father. Flight for them was now out of the question, for already some of the foemen had passed the house, hard in pursuit of a party of fugitives, the slowest of whom fell under the weapons of the relentless marauders. Like bloodhounds on the trail, this band of pursuers passed by the solitary house, ignoring its existence or else meaning to plunder it at their leisure after the chase of the fugitives was ended.

Suddenly four or five dark figures, silhouetted against the now bright glare of the burning village, came running up the hill and headed straight for the house.

"Quickly, Raymond, notch a shaft!" hissed the archer, and setting an example, he fitted an arrow to his bow and waited, with the weapon slightly bent, the opportunity to let fly.

"By St. George, they are our friends!" exclaimed Redward.

"Andrew Walter! Dick!" he shouted. "This way, for your lives, and ye are safe!" And throwing his great bulk against the barricade behind the door, he moved it sufficiently to enable the door to be opened to admit the fugitives.

Then the furniture was replaced against the door, and the men sank breathless and panic-stricken on the floor. There were six in all, so that the little garrison now amounted to eight men, whereof three had had experience in warfare.

"Get ye up!" ordered Redward roughly. "Think ye that I opened my doors to allow a set of cowardly curs to lie about my hearth? Up with ye!"

Stung by the rebuke, the men armed themselves with bow and sword, gripping their weapons with newborn resolve.

"Ah, by Our Lady, 'tis well ye look on the right side o' things. But if we are to see the light of another day we must stand firm," said the archer grimly. "And," he added, "let no man loose bow till I give the word, and may God and St. George look favourably upon us this night!"

"Ay, gossip!" replied Walter Bevis, a veteran of Falkirk. "An' if we cannot live we can at least die like Englishmen! But, who comes?"

Another dark figure came flying up the hill, hotly pursued by half a score of Frenchmen.

"'Tis Will Lightfoot, of Hook!" replied one of the defenders. "Run, Will, run!"

"Now loose!" cried Redward, and immediately five arrows flew on their deadly errand. It was the first time that Raymond had seen a shaft sped in anger, and the sight thrilled him strangely. The pursuers, standing out strongly against the glare, made easy marks; four of them fell face forwards on the ground, writhing in mortal agony; the fifth, struck in the right fore-arm, dropped his sword and yelled lustily. The others, amazed at meeting with any attempt at organised resistance, turned and fled towards the village, two more falling as the result of a second flight of the deadly arrows.

Will Lightfoot, holding a dagger in his left hand and a broken sword in his right, came up to the improvised fortress with an easy stride, for his name well suited him amid the encouraging shouts of his friends.

"Wait while I unbar the door," called Redward to the fugitive, at the same time directing the others to assist him in removing the barricade.

"Nay, keep the door fast; the villains will be here anon," replied Lightfoot. "I'll find a way in."

And suiting the action to the word, he sprang on a low fence, and from thence vaulted easily on to the thatched roof. Getting a grip with his broken sword and dagger, he ran up the sloping roof of thatch like a cat, and dropped through the aperture that did duty for a chimney, and alighted in the midst of the smouldering logs on the hearth.

"Pardon, friends, for my mode of entry," he exclaimed. "But methinks the mischief I have done to thy roof, Master Buckland, will ill compare with the damage that our attackers will do ere a few hours are spent."

In the lull that followed the besieged took steps to strengthen their defences. Redward brought out a large oaken chest filled with arrows, whereat his son wondered all the more at the reason for the journey to Botley on the previous day. Thick boards were spiked to the windows, dividing each opening into two oylets, or slots for discharging arrows, while on the side where no windows existed a few of the stones were removed so as to form an additional outlook commanding the hitherto invisible ground on the north.

Food they had sufficient for three or four days, but water was scarce. This necessary they must procure, so once again the door was opened, and Raymond crept out stealthily with two leathern jacks to procure some of the precious fluid from the well, while the others crowded to the loopholes to cover his retreat if molested.

With an indescribable feeling of fear, mingled with the dread of being thought a coward by the defenders, Raymond did his work silently and quickly. Thrice did he go to the well, till there was sufficient water stored in the house to last for a considerable time.

All the while the shouts, groans, and cries continued, the crackling and roaring of the flames making a fitting accompaniment, and giving evidence that resistance was still being kept up in another quarter.

At length the pale dawn began to show a welcome change to the anxious men, on whom the weary waiting told far more than the actual struggle.

Gradually the daylight increased, and by its aid the besieged were able to realise more fully their hazardous position. Nearly every house was in flames, some even now reduced to a heap of glowing ashes. Here and there the corpse of a Spaniard or a Frenchman showed that, in spite of the surprise, the attack had been fiercely opposed. Those villagers who had taken refuge in the church tower still resisted, though, from the desultory arrows that came from the top of the structure, it was evident that their store of missiles was well-nigh exhausted.

The invaders, too, were aware of this, for those wearing armour advanced also to the base of the tower, avoiding, however, the pieces of stone that the desperate men detached from the pinnacles and hurled down on their adversaries. Others, keeping further off, shot their bolts at the tower, stamping and jumping as if to terrify their quarry. Some of the foreign crossbowmen were so close to the house that sheltered Buckland's party that they could hear the clicking of their moulinets and the deep bass hum of the strings as the quarrels sped towards the mark.

Out in mid-stream, their hulls swinging to the tide, lay three long, low-lying galleys, and between them and the shore a number of small boats were rowing to and fro, those putting off being full of plunder; and as fast as each little craft discharged its load into the capacious hold of its parent galley it returned to the shore to remove some of the huge heap of booty, which was still being replenished by parties of foragers.

Loud and long were the maledictions of the men in Redward's house, as they saw their homes

given to the flames and their kinsfolk and friends either cruelly murdered or else houseless fugitives; but soon their attention was riveted on the final scene in the resistance of those on the church tower.

The crossbowmen redoubled their fire, and, covered by the heavy rain of missiles, a party of men-at-arms advanced with their shields held over their heads. A shower of blows with their heavy battle-axes soon splintered the oaken door, and when at length only a few fragments of wood and the bent and battered remains of the massive hinges remained, the men retreated in the same order, though two were left lying crushed beneath a ponderous piece of coping that the assailed had toppled over.

Already the church was sacked. Crucifixes, candlesticks, altar-cloths, rich vestments, and tapestries had been ruthlessly taken off to the galleys; while the priest, with a score of persons, men, women and children, who had vainly sought sanctuary, lay dead within the altar rails.

And now a body of lightly-armed men—Spaniards, judging by their swarthy complexions—advanced, bearing bundles of straw and faggots, almost unmolested, for the arrows of the besieged had long given out, and the hail of bolts from the crossbows skimmed across the top of the parapet like hail. The men reached the base of the tower, where they heaped their burdens within the doorway.

A lighted torch was applied to the fuel, and a tongue of flame, darting from amid the thick cloud of suffocating smoke, licked the grim stone walls, while the spiral staircase, acting like a lofty chimney, fanned the fire till it glowed like a potter's furnace.

A ring of armed men surrounded the tower. The crossbowmen, their work done, ceased their firing, discharging only an occasional bolt as the tormented wretches on the tower, unable to bear the choking heat, showed themselves above the protection of the parapet. Some of the defenders, maddened by their agony, threw themselves headlong; others, sword in hand, attempted to descend the stairs, and hurl themselves upon their enemies, though they perished in the flames long before they reached the ground; others, defying and cursing the invaders, shook their weapons in impotent rage, till a well-directed quarrel or the rapidly-increasing flames claimed the last of the gallant band of forgotten heroes.

When resistance in this quarter was at an end, the invaders were free to direct their energies against the solitary stone house that had already wrought great mischief upon them; and, led by two knights in complete armour, the men-at-arms began to fall in in close order at a distance of two hundred paces from where Redward Buckland and his devoted companions awaited the onslaught.

"With yonder ruin to serve as an example," said the master-bowman, pointing to the flaming tower, "we must fight to the death. While there is yet time it would be well that each man doth confess his sins for the betterment of his soul."

So saying, all the defenders knelt down reverently, though Redward, trained soldier that he was, kept an eye on their gathering foes. The prayers *in extremis* were hurriedly said; then, in the absence of a friar, they confessed to each other, according to the Roman custom when in peril of death. One of the villagers produced a slip of the Holy Thorn, brought from the miraculous tree of Glastonbury, and this they all kissed devoutly in the hope of obtaining spiritual consolation.

This done, they arose from their knees, embraced each other, and hurried to their posts.

All preparations for the attack having apparently been completed, the leaders advanced to the head of their men and harangued them, though the distance was too great for the Englishmen to hear what was said. This done, one of the knights closed his visor, and the other tried to follow his example, but the calque, dented from the effects of a blow, refused to allow the visor to descend. A couple of squires sprang forward to aid their lord, and the group, standing well in front of the rest, made a tempting mark.

Redward was quick to act.

"Quickly, Dick; nine score paces, and no windage!"

Dick, a lusty yet experienced archer, had already notched his bow and fitted an arrow. Leaning slightly forward, and throwing all his weight into the act of drawing the six-foot bow, the man loosed the shaft. Even as it sped Buckland also let fly, and the defenders anxiously awaited the result of their comrades' skill.

The first arrow struck and shivered itself against the uplifted visor of the French knight; but Redward's fared better, for, hitting the mail-clad figure under the raised arm, it sank deeply into the leader's body. Amid a roar of execrations on the invaders' side, and a hearty English cheer on the part of the bowmen, the knight staggered and fell on his face. The two squires stood their ground bravely, and with difficulty raised the ponderous armour-clad body of their master and bore it to the rear.

"Here they come!" shouted the master-bowman. "See, they shoot! On your faces, men!"

Crouching down behind the friendly shelter of the stone walls, the eight defenders awaited the onslaught, Redward alone watching the advance through a loophole, his head protected by an iron cap, while he held a stout buckler over the aperture as an additional protection against the deadly hail of arrows and bolts.

Raymond, crouching close to his father, felt that the bitterness of death had passed; his terror had vanished, and he was as ready as the rest to strike a blow in self-defence, though against tremendous odds. The unfamiliar sound of the arrows striking the woodwork and quivering with an indescribable *ping*, or shattering themselves against the stonework, the invaders' war cry of "St. Denis," and the metallic clanging of the advancing men-at-arms were signs of an invisible enemy whom he was on the point of meeting in mortal combat, and when, after a seemingly long and weary wait, the hail of arrows slackened and he heard his father cry, "To arms!" he actually welcomed what might prove to be his death-summons.

At the word of command the defenders sprang to their feet, rushed to the loopholes, and fired as fast as they were able into the dense masses of the advancing enemy. At that short range neither leathern coat nor iron hauberk was proof against the deadly arrows, and man after man fell writhing on the ground, their fall serving to dismay their comrades and to cheer their antagonists.

Clambering over the low fencing, the men-at-arms still advanced; the air was thick with the groans of the wounded and the shouts of "St. Denis!" "Tuez les miserables!" "A bas les poltrons!" To which the defenders answered not a word, but in grim silence discharged their arrows into the disorderly press before them.

By sheer weight of numbers the French men-at-arms gained the front of the house, and with reckless bravery attempted to tear away the improvised defences. Bows were cast aside, and the defenders, seizing swords and spears, made vicious thrusts through the loopholes as the shadows of the enemy were thrown across them.

At length the planks across one of the windows gave way, and a crowd of mail-clad warriors essayed to clamber through. Thereupon the defenders retreated to the opposite wall, and resuming their bows, volleyed their deadly shafts against the rash intruders, who, overwhelmed by the concentration of arrows in the narrow space, gave back in disorder.

Suddenly a figure clad from head to foot in plate armour—a form of defensive mail only just coming into use—appeared in the window. In vain the arrows rattled on the thrice-welded plate, and for a moment it seemed certain that the intaking was accomplished. But Redward, dropping his weapon, sprang forward, and before the mail-clad warrior could swing his long and heavy sword, the archer had thrown himself bodily upon the Frenchman.

Realising the danger, the man tried to return, but Redward, seizing him in his powerful grip, strove to drag him into the house. Lying across the window ledge, his bulk filling the whole aperture, the Frenchman effectually prevented any of his comrades from coming to his assistance, his mail-clad legs, kicking and sprawling without, keeping his would-be helpers at a discreet distance.

Then came a terrific struggle, Redward heaving and hauling on his enemy's bascinet, while the other tried his utmost to shake off the relentless grip. Nothing short of the breaking of the laces of the Frenchman's calque would release the man, and even then his unprotected head would be pierced by a ready arrow.

The knight's resistance grew feebler, till at length a hollow voice exclaimed, "Je me rends!"

"No quarter to base ravagers!" was the stern reply, and with a final mighty heave Redward dragged the steel-clad warrior through the window, and cast him with a sickening clang upon the stone floor. Then, drawing the knight's own *misericorde*, he cut the laces of his bascinet and plunged the dagger into his Adversary's throat.

CHAPTER IV

OF THE GALLANT STAND OF THE NINE ARCHERS

DISMAYED by the fall of their second leader, the attackers retired out of bowshot, leaving the nine defenders weary and spent, yet exultant over their success.

Their respite, however, was short, for, joined by another body of men from the galleys, the invaders again advanced, this time led by another knight, a short, broad-shouldered man, cased, like his unfortunate predecessor, in plate armour, over which he wore a yellow surcoat charged with the arms of the Spinola family.

"Ah! A rascally Genoese!" exclaimed Redward as he saw the device. "Now we must look to ourselves, for these Genoese combine the skill of the French and the roguery and treachery of the Spaniards; moreover, they have rendered a good account of themselves both by land and sea in their wars with the State of Venice."

Halting at a safe distance, the crossbowmen, protected by mantlets, faced the side of the house where the last attack had been made; a body of men-at-arms deployed and took up a position on each of the two adjacent sides; while a strong detachment of routiers, or lightly-armed men, worked round to the rear, the house thus being entirely surrounded.

Once again the hail of bolts began, and under the cover of this heavy discharge the men-at-arms gained the walls without the slaughter that marked their previous attempt.

With their axes they commenced a violent onslaught on the door, while the defenders were almost without the means of replying, firing only through the loopholes whenever a head appeared or a chance missile was thrown into the room.

At length, emboldened by the slight resistance, one of the men-at-arms was hoisted on the shoulders of two of his comrades, whence he climbed upon the roof. Here he began to vigorously attack the thatch for the purpose of annoying the besieged and diverting their attempts to hold the door.

Alarmed by the noise overhead, Raymond took his despised crossbow, and firing haphazard, sent a bolt through the roof. There was a loud cry, and with a mass of thatch and broken rafters the body of the soldier came crashing down, his chest transfixed by the thick, heavy bolt.

Immediately Redward was hoisted up to the gaping hole, and, regardless of the danger of being picked off by an arrow, he hurled a small sack of quicklime upon the men who were battering at the door.

Blinded by the powerful chemical they gave way, and ran screeching with agony, their leader circling round in an aimless manner, striving the while to tear off his bascinet and clear his eyes from the dust that was slowly and surely depriving him of sight.

Once more the English took heart at the repulse, taunting their enemies as they fell back. Again they had a short respite, though the inaction told more on their wearied bodies than the excitement of the fight.

Raymond felt a warm stream trickle down his arm, and found, to his surprise, that he had received a clean cut on his left shoulder. How or when it occurred he was unable to understand, for in the heat of the struggle he had been blind to his surroundings and the sense of pain.

The rest of the garrison all showed signs of the tremendous odds. Buckland was gashed across the forehead by an arrow, while his hands were bruised and bleeding from the effects of his struggle with the knight at the window.

Walter Bevis was sitting in a corner of the room, trying to extricate a crossbow shaft that had all but buried itself in the upper part of his right leg, and in spite of the excruciating pain was slowly drawing out the barbed head, muttering the while prayers to the Virgin and his patron saints.

The others, having bound up their slighter injuries, cheered the sufferer, and in response to his entreaties, withdrew the bolt. A gush of blood followed, and the man, unable to bear the agony, fainted. Hastily applying a bandage, with the rude knowledge of surgery that they possessed, his comrades left him and returned to their posts to await the next assault.

"Certes! They do not mean to let us be," exclaimed Redward; "it passeth my understanding why they should waste time and many lives in attempting to take our little fortress. Courage, my friends! Another repulse and they will leave us in peace."

But, notwithstanding his repeated encouragements, the master-bowman looked doubtfully on the new phase of the attack. A party of men were bringing a huge mangonel ashore from one of the galleys, and setting it in position, prepared to bombard the house with heavy stones, each

capable of tearing a jagged hole in the stonework. At the same time, the French archers advanced on all sides with wisps of burning tow affixed to the heads of their arrows.

At a score paces from the house stood a solitary gnarled trunk of a dead tree, and towards this the bowman cast a hasty yet anxious glance. Then noting with satisfaction that the little wind there was blew from that direction, he gave a sigh of relief.

In the meanwhile the men about the mangonel had set the powerful spring, and a mass of rock lay poised on the gigantic spoon, awaiting only the release of the engine to cast the deadly missile towards the doomed house.

In terrible suspense the garrison crouched behind the stoutest part of the masonry, expecting each moment to find the huge stone crashing over their heads.

The noise of the spring as it was released could be distinctly heard, then with a whirlwind of dust the stone struck the ground at a short distance from the house and rolled harmlessly against the wall.

The next discharge sent the projectile fairly into the roof, knocking away the greater part and half filling the house with fragments of rafters, beams, and thatch.

"'Twill be less thatch to burn!" remarked Buckland encouragingly, though the moral effect of the mangonel was beginning to tell.

Suddenly there was a crash that shook the building to its foundations, and amid a shower of stones and dust a piece of rock forced its way into a corner of the building, leaving a gap a bow's length in width, through which the daylight streamed in, dazzling the defenders with the sudden change from semi-darkness.

At the same time a shower of firebrands descended on the remains of the roof, and in a moment the house was enveloped in flames.

"We are lost!" shouted one and another of the little garrison in dismay. "Let us sally out and die like men, rather than rats in a trap!"

But the master-bowman, cool and collected in the hour of trial, shook his head, and, shouting—for the din was deafening—to his comrades to bear a hand, he seized an iron bar and attacked a large flag in the floor, plying the tool with skill and celerity.

The square stone was dislodged, disclosing a gaping hole in the ground, the top of a rough ladder being dimly visible against its edge.

"Down with ye!" he shouted, and once more hope sprang up in the breast of the despairing men. One by one they vanished into the chasm, till only Redward, Dick, and the unconscious Walter Bevis remained.

There was not a moment to be lost; the flames were already scorching their hair and clothing, while the thick, suffocating fumes caused them to gasp and splutter. Raising their wounded comrade, the other two men lowered him into the arms of those who had already gained safety. Dick then descended, but Redward, after giving a glance at the attackers, who still maintained a respectful distance, suddenly stooped, dragging the body of the hapless French knight across the floor, and dropped it down the hole. Then he swiftly followed, pausing for a moment to draw a large, steel-plated shield over the aperture, and joined his companions in the security of their underground chamber.

For a while they remained motionless, as if unable to realise the turn of fortune, and listening to the dull roar of the flames and the muffled crash of the falling timbers, while the confined air grew hot as the furnace overhead grew fiercer, and the clammy atmosphere of the vault began to give off a humid vapour.

"Silence!" said Redward sternly, as some of the men began to talk excitedly. "Or, if ye do speak, speak only in whispers; for if the rascals discover us they'll smoke us out."

Through a narrow shaft at the far end of the chamber a streak of light faintly filtered, and ere long the men's eyes became accustomed to the darkness. The underground room was about ten paces by four, with a stone-vaulted ceiling. A rough wall of later date cut off one end, but it was evident that this apartment was at one time a portion of a subterranean tunnel which, it was rumoured, led from the church towards the Abbey of Netley, but for some reason was uncompleted.

Again motioning his friends to keep silent, Buckland walked over to the shaft, and, ascending by a rough wooden ladder, gained the hollow trunk of the decayed tree, where, without being seen, he could observe the movements of the invaders.

Four blackened walls and a heap of smoking timbers was all that remained of what was but a short time back his home. Satisfied by destroying the house and, as they thought, its determined inmates, the foe had now retired, and were busy preparing a meal, save a few of the common

soldiers, who were either despoiling the dead of their weapons and armour or carrying the wounded back to the shore to embark on board the galleys.

Reassuring himself that their presence was unsuspected, the archer returned to his companions and reported the state of affairs.

"By St. George, thou hast done a clever thing," said Dick admiringly. "But for thee we would have been roast meat ere now. But why didst thou keep us without knowledge of the place so long?"

"To make thee fight the more lustily," replied Redward bluntly. "Hadst thou but known that an asylum awaited thee, thou wouldst have hurried here like a fox to earth, and the Frenchmen, finding the house still standing, would have discovered us and burned us out. Do I not speak aright?"

"Ay, Master Redward! And 'twas as well ye did!"

"And having, as ye admit, saved your lives, I demand a promise in return. I require ye to swear, on pain of forfeiting your eternal salvation, that not a word concerning this place shall pass your lips to any other living creature. Moreover, if I fail to come out alive, my son, Raymond, shall have undisputed possession of this place and its contents, for all I have on this earth is now stored herein."

In solemn silence each man, save the still unconscious Walter, took the required oath, kissing the hilt of a sword in confirmation of his sacred promise. Then, as if a load were lifted off his mind, Redward again ascended the shaft to resume his observations.

Slowly the long day passed. The sun was now overhead, yet the invaders remained inactive, neither advancing into the country nor returning to their ships. Gradually the fires died out, leaving only a number of thin columns of smoke, rising into the still sultry air, to mark what had but lately been a prosperous English village.

After a while Redward again descended into the vault, his place being taken by Will Lightfoot. The opening in the hollow tree only commanded the village and the river, so another hole was laboriously cut in the trunk so as to look towards Southampton, whence Redward expected a speedy arrival of the companies then encamped outside the town.

An hour later there was a stir amongst the foreign soldiers. A trumpet sounded, and they stood to arms, forming in a line on the brow of the hill where Buckland's house formerly stood.

As there was only room for one person in the tree-trunk, Lightfoot had to announce the movements to his comrades below, and, to their joy, they heard him cry out that a vast host of armed men was advancing.

The invaders were unaware of the presence of a large force in the neighbourhood, and, dismayed by the numbers of their attackers, they turned and fled in a disorderly mob to their boats. At the same time the watcher espied the lofty hulls and bellying sails of five English ships standing down Southampton Water with the intention of cutting off the three hostile galleys.

Barely had the boats made a second journey to the galleys with their load of panic-stricken men than a troop of lances, displaying the banners of Lord Willoughby and Sir Charles Bassett, came charging across the undulating ground and through the smouldering street of the village, sweeping aside all opposition and driving the remnant of the Genoese and Spaniards into the river.

It was now high tide, and in the treacherous mud scores of the miserable wretches died a horrible death, for quarter was neither asked nor given. A few of those unencumbered by armour succeeded in swimming off to the galleys, though their companions, with abject cowardice, thought only of getting to sea, letting many of the fugitives drown alongside their ships without even throwing a rope to save them.

Close at the heels of the lances came a body of mounted archers, who, on arriving at the shore, dismounted and poured volleys of arrows into the galleys. Notwithstanding the hail of darts that wrought havoc amongst the slaves who banked the oars, the three vessels slipped their cables and stood towards the mouth of the river, endeavouring to reach Southampton Water before the advancing English ships should bar their passage.

The moment had arrived for Buckland and his companions to leave their underground refuge. Tying three spears together to form a stout battering ram, they applied one end to the mass of metal and charred wood that was once a shield, and which formed the door of their prison.

With a mighty thrust the obstruction was removed, and through a smouldering pile of charred timbers emerged the eight men, their faces disfigured with dried blood and blackened with soot and smoke. Bevis they left, till, on Redward's suggestion, two of them returned and brought him up, semi-conscious and weak from the effect of his wounds.

At that moment the companies of the Constable of Portchester and the Constable of

Southampton came swinging along, the sun shining on their arms and accoutrements, while at their head rode Sir John Hacket and Walter de Brakkeleye, one of the Bailiffs of Southampton.

"Certes!" exclaimed Sir John, reining in his horse and gazing open-eyed with astonishment at Redward and his band. "What have we here?"

"Sir Knight," replied Redward, raising the hilt of his sword to his battered headpiece, "here thou dost see all that is left of the six score inhabitants of Hamble!" And, overcome by the loss of blood from no less than six wounds, he reeled and fell heavily on his face before the amazed Constable.

CHAPTER V

THE MEN OF HAMPSHIRE AND THE GENOESE GALLEY

HAVING given orders to some of his followers to convey the wounded men on litters to the shelter of Netley Abbey, the Constable and his troops resumed their march to the shore, to aid their advance-guard in the pursuit of the galleys.

The lances and mounted archers had already galloped along the right bank of the river towards the Salterns at its mouth; while a body of men-at-arms crossed the stream by means of the abandoned boats, and followed the galleys on the other shore.

As if by magic, the men-at-arms were joined by vast numbers of countrymen from the neighbouring villages of Hook, Swanwick, Titchfield, and Stubbington. All of them were tolerably good bowmen, and from both sides of the stream a well-directed fire of arrows was maintained on the fugitive vessels.

The wind, though favourable to the English ships that were rapidly nearing the scene of action, was too much abeam to enable the galleys to hoist their sails, and the slaves toiled at the oars to gain the open water. Thus sped, and with the favouring tide, the vessels slipped rapidly past the shore.

Many an anxious eye was turned towards the advancing English ships, and many an opinion was offered upon the foreigners' chances, for once they weathered the long mud spit, their sails would be hoisted and their superior speed would soon bear them out of sight.

Holding their own, yet scarcely able to reply to the stinging hail of arrows, the three galleys bore steadily onwards. The foremost, bearing the red cross of Genoa emblazoned upon its lofty stern, led the forlorn procession, a Spaniard being second, while in the rear floundered a French vessel, one of the famous fleet of Sluys, her sides, like those of her consorts, bristling with English arrows.

Soon the leading vessel, ill-judging her distance, turned towards the Solent, hoisting her huge sail, on which flamed the arms of Luigi Spinola. Shouts of anger and disappointment rose from the English as they saw the sail drawing, and the hated Genoese cleaving through the water with increased speed. But their cries quickly turned into a roar of delight as the galley ran hard and fast upon the treacherous and unseen mud-bank, her mast going by the board with a resounding crash!

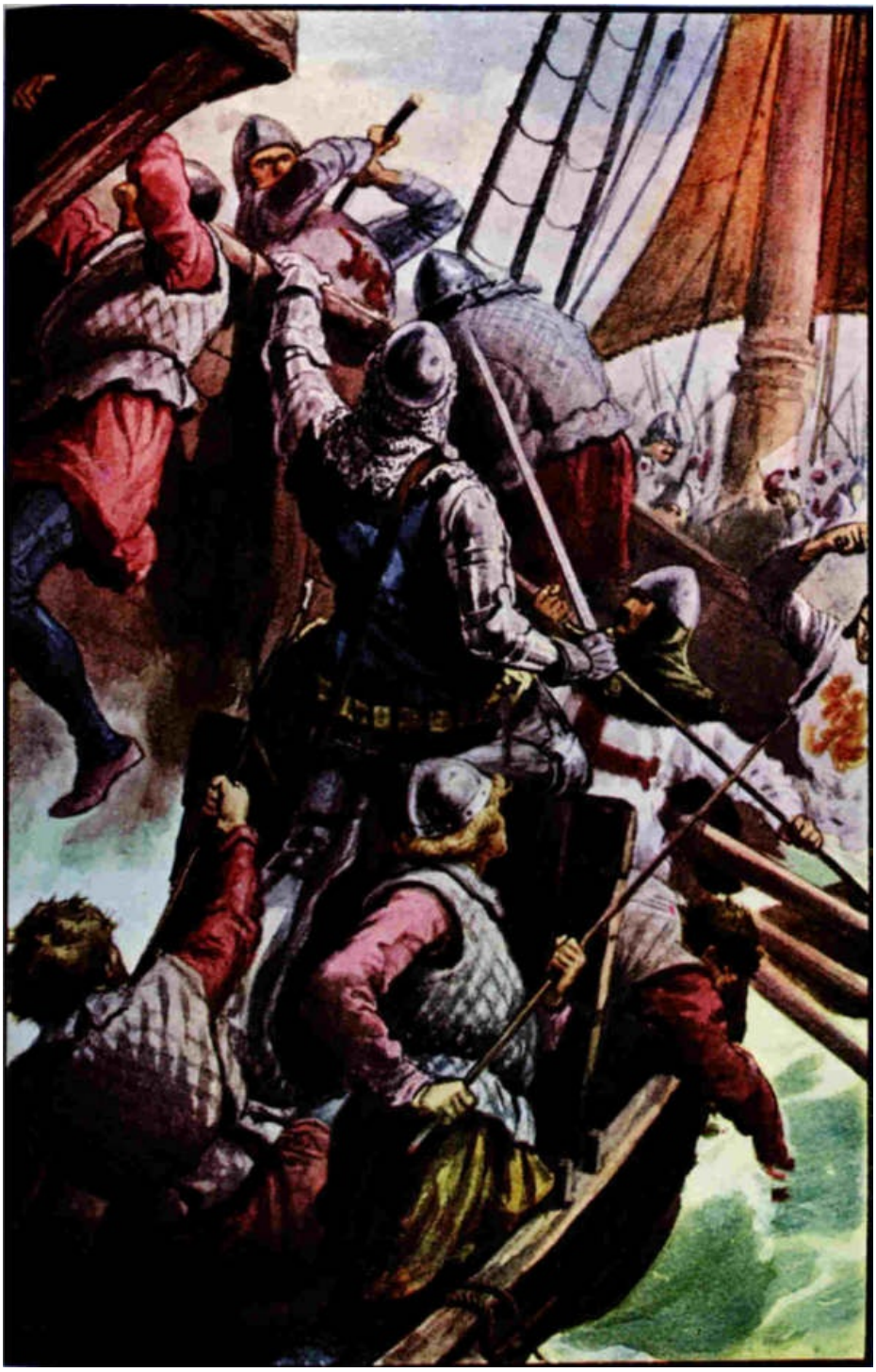
In spite of the frantic efforts of the rowers, the crew were unable to back the long, snake-like hull from the deadly embrace of the mud, and with the fast falling tide it was evident that the galley was doomed to capture.

Taking warning from their consort's misfortune, the other vessels gave her a wide berth, and, avoiding the mud spit, turned south-eastward. The Spaniard hoisted her sail with all speed, the white foam flying from her sharp bows; but the French galley, having had her halliards cut through by a chance bolt, was soon overhauled by the Southampton ships.

In less than five minutes she was boarded on both quarters and carried, the Frenchmen being either slain or driven overboard, and the watchers on shore beheld the Cross of St. George hoisted over the Fleur-de-Lys. A fanfare of trumpets from the conquering vessels announced that the English mariners had again proved themselves worthy of their traditions.

The prize and three of the English ships anchored to await a favourable tide to bear them back to the town of Southampton, while the two remaining vessels stood towards the stranded galley of Genoa. The tide had now left her high and dry, with a slight list towards the sea, at two hundred paces from the nearest shore. The deep-draughted English ships could not approach within that distance, so they were compelled to cast anchor within easy bow-shot.

Under the terrible cross-fire the galley remained, her crew seeking shelter from the shower of arrows, not daring to show so much as a hair above the low bulwarks.



BOARDING THE GENOESE GALLEY

"By our Lady! The rogues lie close," exclaimed the Constable. "'Tis but a waste of good arrows. And yet we must have at them ere long, for already the sun is low in the heavens."

"Once darkness falls they will, of a surety, escape, for with the next tide they can make across the shallows, where our ships dare not follow," replied the Bailiff.

"If I mistake not, they left a mangonel behind them——"

"Ay; but 'twould take a good five hours to bring it hither."

Sir John saw the truth of this statement, and puckered his brows in his perplexity.

"Craving thy pardon, sir," said a grizzled man-at-arms, standing within earshot of the two officers, "I know how the galley can be held till the morrow."

"How so, sirrah?" demanded the Constable.

"For over thirty years I was a marshman of Poole——"

"Forbear to speak of what thou hast been," replied Sir John Hacket curtly, "and tell us what thou dolt propose to do."

"As a marshman I know how to walk over this mud. Give me leave, with five of my comrades,

and I'll warrant that the galley will never float again."

"How can the man possibly reach the vessel by walking on the mud?" demanded Lord Willoughby, who at that moment had joined the Constable in order to confer with him on a plan of action. "Even now two score or more of the knaves lie swallowed up by the filthy slime."

"Let him have his way, my Lord," replied the Constable; "and," he added, addressing the soldier, "get ye gone, and do your work quickly. A rose-noble apiece shall be your reward if ye succeed."

The man-at-arms departed, and, with his chosen comrades, crossed the river and followed the bank till they came as close to the galley as they could without leaving the firm ground.

Here they divested themselves of their armour, and, clad in their leather jerkins, gripping no other weapon but a heavy hammer and a short iron spike apiece, they looked more like peaceful village smiths than soldiers setting out on a desperate venture.

From the rude huts where the Hamble fishermen kept their stores came a man bearing a dozen square boards, each having four small holes bored through it with leathern thongs attached. These the men-at-arms, with the quickness of frequent use, bound to their feet.

"Are ye ready, comrades?"

A gruff yet determined assent was given, and the men, walking with short, ungainly steps, gained the edge of the mud.

"Now, hark ye," exclaimed their leader, turning to the master-bowman who commanded the archers, "give the word that the bowmen keep up a dropping fire to cover our approach. And I pray thee, let no man shoot who cannot be depended upon, for, little as I reck a shaft in fair fight, I am not in a mind to be feathered in the back by an English arrow!"

The sun was now low down beyond the dark outlines of the New Forest, shining straight into the eyes of the archers. Nevertheless, they shot rapidly and well, the arrows making graceful curves as they sped towards the mark. No sign of life was visible on board the Genoese ship, as slowly and steadily the six men-at-arms plodded, with their boards squelching in the liquid mud, towards their goal.

As they drew near, the covering volleys ceased; but, suspecting a ruse to draw them from shelter, the Genoese refused to show themselves. Thus, without opposition, the Englishmen reached the shelter of the lofty hull of the stranded galley, so that they were protected by her bulging sides from any missile the enemy might launch overboard.

Soon the terrified crew were still more panic-stricken by hearing a succession of dull blows against their ship's side. Lustily swinging their mauls as well as their precarious foothold would allow, the Englishmen drove their iron spikes deep into the seams of the doomed vessel. Oaken tree-nails and iron bolts were unable to stand the wrench, and in a few moments a gaping hole four ells in length and a span in breadth proved that the boast of the man-at-arms that the galley would never again float was an accomplished fact.

But now the startled crew were lashed into active resistance. Over the side, lowered by stout ropes, came the figure of a man fully clad in plate armour—the dreaded Luigi Spinola himself. Though deprived of the sight of one eye and nearly blind in the other—thanks to Redward Buckland's reception at the attack on his house—the Genoese knight could dimly see the forms of his attackers, and that sufficed.

Before the Englishmen could realise their danger the keen blade of the Italian had cleft the skull of the nearest. Preventing himself from turning like a sack at the end of a rope, Spinola stretched out his left hand to steady himself against the side of the vessel, while he raised his right arm to repeat the deadly stroke. One of the men-at-arms seized his opportunity, and floundering in on the knight's blind side, smashed his gauntleted left hand into a shapeless mass by a blow from his maul.

With a roar of agony and fury his arm fell helpless against his side, his body swung round, and in a moment the heavy hammer again descended, this time on the visor of the knight's bascinet. With a groan the Genoese died—literally at the rope's end; and, their work accomplished, the five Englishmen began their hazardous retreat, leaving the body of their hapless companion slowly sinking in the pitiless mire.

Again the covering flight of arrows sped towards the galley; but, with the courage of despair, some of the Genoese crossbowmen sprang upon the towering forecastle and fired at the retreating men-at-arms. One of the latter fell with a heavy bolt between his shoulder-blades; another had a shaft completely transfixing his arm, while their intrepid leader was menaced by two of the best crossbowmen of the galley.

By pure chance a stray arrow pierced the brain of one of the Genoese just as he was about to pull the trigger. As he fell he struck his companion, whose aim was affected by the sudden jolt, and the quarrel flew aimlessly over the Englishmen's heads.

Unable to stand against the arrows of the English bowmen, the remainder of the Genoese again sought shelter in the waist, and, amid the cheers of their comrades, the four men-at-arms regained the shore.

All that night the English slept on their arms, sentinels being posted to give the alarm should any of the foemen attempt to leave their water-logged craft. It was a still, moonless night, and the time of spring tides, and as the water ran inch by inch over the waist of the doomed galley, the watchers could distinctly hear the cries and lamentations, and appeals to the saints, borne on the night air from the demoralised Crew, as they clustered in frightened groups upon the raised forecastle and poop.

At break of day the Englishmen stood at their arms and gazed seaward. There, in the same place, lay the galley, though sunk a little lower in the mud, while her sides were covered with seaweed that on the now falling tide had been caught by the arrows which bristled in her sides.

Plenty of provisions were brought in from the countryside for the English forces, and, seated round roaring fires, for the morning air was sharp even for the time of year, the archers and men-at-arms ate and were merry, while the famished and disheartened Genoese, their stores spoiled by the water in the hold, gazed despairingly on their implacable enemies.

The Constable of Portchester and the Bailiff of Southampton crossed the river about three hours after daybreak, and visited the troops on the east side of the stream, their arrival being greeted with acclamation.

Calling the remnant of the men-at-arms who had so effectually performed their hazardous task, Sir John Hacket thanked them before their comrades and bestowed upon them the promised guerdon.

"We have these Genoese rascals safe enough!" exclaimed the Constable. "But what do they?"

At that moment there were signs of activity in the galley. Men were busily engaged in cutting away the broken mast and its tangled gear and cordage, while others were seen to be dividing the great sail into long strips.

"They mean to stop the leaks by nailing the flaxen cloth over the outside," replied Walter de Brakkeleye. "Then, perchance, they can float off on the next tide."

"But to what purpose?" questioned the knight. "With our two ships lying in the stream how can they, without mast and sail, hope to escape?"

"I know not, Sir Knight, except it be to forestall the end, and they would close with us."

"Then, I pray you, make them desist. A score of archers will keep them in play; in the meantime send mounted messengers along the banks to order every boat in the river to be sent down without delay!"

These orders were promptly carried out, and long before the next high water twenty open boats of all sizes were lying off the Hard, while the Constable had already summoned the masters of the two Southampton ships to confer with them on the plan of attack.

"By St. George!" exclaimed Sir John, "I already see the remnants of these foreign scoundrels under lock and key in the King's Castle of Portchester!"

"Nay, by the Rood!" replied Walter Brakkeleye; "for I have sworn that, ere to-morrow's sun hath set, the rogues will grace a line of gibbets outside the Water Gate of Southampton!"

"Ah, an' ye would flout my authority?" demanded the choleric knight. "Am I, Constable of Portchester and Governor of the town of Portsmouth, to be overridden by a mere Bailiff of Southampton?"

"But the galley now lies in this river, which is within my bailiwick," retorted Brakkeleye stoutly. "Nay, she lies on the other side of the low water channel, which, you will accept, is within the bailiwick of Titchfield. That being so, as Governor I hold authority over that half of the river."

The dispute waxed hot, the question of precedence outweighing the common cause of destroying a national foe. To what length the disputants would have gone it is impossible to say, but the opportune arrival of Lord Willoughby and Sir Charles Bassett settled the wordy strife.

"'Tis our duty to settle our account with the Genoese," quoth Lord Willoughby. "And as ye both claim the river and all it contains, methinks your difference is best settled thus—all the prisoners taken on this side shall belong to the Bailiff of Southampton; all those who are taken on yonder side Sir John can hale to the castle of Portchester. Now be content and sink your differences in a common cause."

This they agreed to, little knowing that neither authority would in the end claim a single Genoese.

Directly the tide served the boats were filled with men-at-arms and archers, and a long

procession rowed down the stream to carry the galley by escalade, a mantlet being raised in each boat to protect the men from any arrows or bolts that might assail them.

Already the sea was four feet deep over the mud, and the galley, her waist full of water and her bulwarks awash amidships, resembled two lofty castles joined by a low wooden wall.

Grim and determined, though faint with hunger and fatigue, the Genoese stood to their arms. Knowing that death in some form awaited them, they preferred to die in the heat of battle to dangling from a gallows. On the aftercastle, or poop, stood Guido and Andrea Spinola, brothers of the ill-fated Luigi, with two score men-at-arms and a number of lightly-armed slaves, though the latter were not to be relied upon. On the forecastle nearly a like number clustered round Simon and Chigi Doria, brothers of the famous Rafaele Doria, the ruler of the State of Genoa.

On the approach of the English the trumpets blared a note of defiance, and the noble leaders, drawing their swords, cast their scabbards into the sea as a sign that they scorned to give or accept quarter.

The poop, being nearest the deep water, was the first object of attack. The English archers fired but one volley, then, casting aside their bows, drew sword or grasped their hammers and axes and made ready to spring directly the boats ran alongside the galley.

A huge stone, thrown from the highest part of the after-castle, came crashing through the bottom of the first boat, which instantly sank. Those of her crew who were unable to maintain their foothold on the submerged boat perished miserably in the mud and water, for those in the other boats, filled with the mad desire of fight, paid slight heed to their misfortunes, being only intent on gaining a foothold on their enemy's decks.

In a short space the after-part of the galley was surrounded by nine large boats, while the remaining ten headed for the forecastle, and with shouts of fury the English strove to effect an entrance.

The lofty sides and stern rendered their task very difficult and hazardous, the Genoese striking lustily with sword, axe, and mace whenever a foeman's head appeared, and it was not until, by Sir John Hacket's order, a portion of the amidship bulwarks were cut through and some of the boats floated over the submerged waist, that a living Englishman stood on the decks of the Genoese.

Headed by the Constable, a party of men-at-arms carried the poop ladder by a determined rush and gained the poop. Here they were met by Guido and Andrea Spinola and some of the best swordsmen amongst the Genoese, and for a while a fierce struggle ensued, though, profiting by the diversion, another party of Englishmen secured a foothold on the stern of the galley.

Unable to withstand the sweeping blows of the Constable's sword, the Genoese gave back, two of their number going down with their headpieces shattered and their skulls cleft to the chin, and Guido and Andrea alone remained in the van to bar the Englishman's passage.

With lightning rapidity their blades met, Sir John warding off the double attack with marvellous skill. Suddenly the elder brother, putting all his strength into the blow, delivered a mighty stroke with his heavy sword at the Constable's head.

Stepping nimbly aside, the knight avoided the deadly sweep of the weapon, and ere the Italian could recover himself Sir John cut him through the gorget till the blade met the top of his enemy's breastplate.

Guido fell forward, and the Constable, unable to withdraw his weapon from the corpse, was obliged to relinquish his sword and take to his mace. With this ponderous instrument of offence Sir John pressed his antagonist so strongly that the latter could but attempt to guard himself. At last, with a crashing blow, the Englishman beat down the defence of the Genoese, shattering his sword and crushing his helmet like an egg-shell.

Disheartened by the fall of both their leaders, and pressed before and behind by increasing numbers, the Genoese retreated till they gathered in a small ring of steel, surrounded by their incensed attackers. Fighting to the last, they fell, till none but those wearing the surcoat of St. George stood upon the after-castle, and close on five score bodies littered the narrow blood-stained poop.

By the Constable's order one of his squires displayed his banner, and this was the signal for a hearty cheer from the crews of the two Southampton ships and the crowd of armed men on shore.

But the combat was not yet over. Those of the forecastle still stoutly resisted, and as yet none of the Southampton men, headed by the brave and impetuous Walter de Brakkeleye, had gained any advantage, though, by the Bailiff's order, some of the archers had rowed a short distance off, firing anew on the Genoese whenever they attempted to show themselves above the side.

With the fall of the after-castle, the Genoese were additionally assailed by the English bowmen, who now held the captured part of the galley; and, on the arrival of a fresh supply of arrows, the

deadly hail smote the scanty remnant, who strove in vain to seek shelter.

At length, when no one was left standing upon the forecastle, the English men-at-arms rushed the hard-won stronghold, mercilessly killing those who yet remained alive, and casting their bodies overboard, and the shattered galley was given to the flames.

Then, with shouts and rejoicings, the soldiers returned to the shore. The countrymen dispersed to their homes, the two English ships hoisted sail and made for Southampton, whither Lord Willoughby's lances had already gone. The Constable of Portchester and the Bailiff of Southampton marshalled their followers, and marched through the devastated village towards their camp at Woolston.

All that was left to mark the raid were the charred remains of what had been a prosperous hamlet and the blazing timbers of the once-dreaded galley of Luigi Spinola.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE ABBEY

CALM and peaceful appeared the grey Abbey to the war-worn defenders, as, carried in litters or supported by the men of the Constable of Portchester's company, the nine archers passed through the great gateway.

The vesper bell had just ceased its tuneful tolling, and in its place rose the deep, lusty voices of the monks, who, having completed yet another day of hard manual labour, were uniting once more in prayer and thanksgiving.

For awhile, save for the porter, a lay brother of gigantic size and jovial mien, the secular portions of the Abbey were deserted, but the arrival of this host of rough soldiers and their wounded charges contrasted ill with the pious solitude of the place.

The Cistercian Abbey, founded as the Priory of Saints Mary and Edward in 1237, was at that time in the zenith of its prosperity. Favoured by royal charters, the natural zeal of the monks exerted itself to such an extent that within a few years of its birth the Abbey bade fair to outshine its parent foundation at Beaulieu, and a large triple-aisled church, a sumptuous Abbot's house, lofty dormitories, architecturally perfect cloisters, a number of extensive outbuildings, and two artificial fish-ponds testified to the work of these pioneers of civilisation.

Awed by the solemnity of their surroundings, the soldiers clustered in small, silent knots, looking around with open-mouthed astonishment at the unaccustomed beauty of the delicate architecture and listening to the distant chanting of the monks.

If an archer dared even to whisper his comrades silenced him by a look, while, when a man-at-arms dropped his short spear on the tiled floor, the culprit stooped, picked up the weapon guiltily, and crossed himself for very shame.

At length the singing ceased, the doors of the church were thrown wide open, and out came a long line of grey-gowned monks, walking two and two with bent heads and downcast eyes, while at the rear of the procession came the Sub-Prior and the Abbot. The former was a comfortable-looking, well-fed personage, with a benign countenance that neither fast nor penance could subdue, while the Abbot, a tall, gaunt man with wan features, redeemed by a pair of glittering eyes, looked a man whose natural sternness was increased by the strict rigidity of a celibate.

Immediately the soldiers drew themselves up into two lines, looking straight in front in military style, though as the Abbot passed they bent their heads to receive his benison, even the wounded, save Walter Bevis, standing unaided to share in the blessing.

It was a stirring and picturesque sight. The grey stones of the arched cloisters, the green patch of grass in the cloister court, and the still evening quiet were fitting surroundings for a procession of monks as their sandals clattered on the tiled floor; but the white surcoats bearing the red cross, the armour and weapons of the soldiers, and the pallid features of the wounded bespeaking strife and suffering, presented a strange contrast to the peacefulness of the Abbey.

Attended by two novices, the Abbot presently returned, and, learning the cause of the unusual visit, gave orders for the wounded men to be taken care of in the Abbey infirmary. He had already learned of the sack and burning of Hamble, but the deed of Redward Buckland and his comrades moved him greatly, and he desired to speak with the master-bowman.

Redward, his head still bound with a blood-stained bandage, was led before the Abbot. He had removed his steel cap, and the dying sunlight played on his thickly-cropped head and heightened the reddish hue of his beard. The Abbot gave an involuntary start of recognition, but, composing himself, he asked:

"How art thou, my son? I see thou art sore hurt."

"Nay, Father, it is but a scratch."

"A brave man to speak so lightly of so great a matter. And thou didst keep the press of enemies back till help arrived?"

"'Twas also a little matter, seeing we were behind stout walls."

"And yet, by God's grace, thy valour saved us."

"Saved you, Father?"

"Yea, my son. Saved the priory of the blessed Saints Mary and Edward; for, had ye not been there to bar the way, the Frenchmen would of a certainty have ravaged our holy retreat."

"This knowledge is beyond my understanding, yet, the saints be praised, I was but an

instrument to that end."

"The gratitude of us all is due to you, my son, and if in any way we can render thee a service, do but ask it. Thou'rt weary; return to thy friends and rest well."

The master-bowman bent his head for the Abbot's blessing, then he turned and hobbled slowly back to join his comrades.

Great was the astonishment and delight of the monks, on washing the thick cake of dried blood, slime, and soot from the face of their youngest patient, to find that it was none other than their late novice, Raymond, whose wound—a deep cut in his left shoulder—had been skilfully dressed by the monks, to whom surgery was a special feature of their work. He was now sleeping peacefully, a draught of cooling medicine having completely taken away all symptoms of fever.

Walter Bevis, his leg swathed in bandages, was lying on a pallet, his eyes rolling and his hands tightly clenched as he strove to suppress a groan. Already he was in a state of semi-delirium, and in spite of the constant attention of two of the monks, he strove at intervals to rise from his couch and fly at some imaginary foe.

As for the rest, with the exception of Will Lightfoot, who was busily devouring a platter of soup, they all were sleeping off the effects of a terrible mental strain. Submitting himself to the hands of two of the brethren, Redward had his injuries dressed, and was cleansed from the effects of the fire and battle; then, staggering to a couch, he lay down and was soon lost in dreamless sleep.

The sun was high in the heavens ere Buckland awoke, feeling vastly refreshed and filled with renewed energy. His first inquiry was for his son and his comrades, then for the latest tidings of the raiders.

On this latter point he could not be enlightened, save that a mounted messenger had passed the Abbey that morning without drawing rein. Though giving no news by word of mouth, the man had shown by a gesture that the English had been successful, though at that time the fate of the Genoese galley had not yet been decided.

One by one the wounded archers began to awaken, till all, save Raymond and Bevis, were up and about. For some time Redward sat by his son's bedside, looking anxiously at his pale and pain-racked features.

The master-bowman was torn by conflicting emotions. On the one hand he wanted to be again on the scene of action to revenge himself on his enemies—for the destruction of his home, and also to take steps to safeguard his chattels that lay in the underground chamber. On the other hand, he felt it impossible to tear himself away from his son, in whose welfare he was so much absorbed, till he was satisfied that there was no cause for anxiety on his account.

While deep in this mental debate Redward was summoned by a novice to proceed to the private apartment of the Abbot.

Following closely at the heels of his guide, Buckland was ushered into a room which, in the frigid plainness of its appearance, differed little from the cells of the ordinary brethren, only it was larger.

The stone floor was strewn with rushes, and the walls were bare and unbroken, save for two narrow lancet windows and the low, Gothic-arched door by which the archer entered. In the centre of the room stood a plain oaken table, on which was a small ivory crucifix, which, together with a number of richly-bound books of illuminated vellum—the most highly-prized objects within the monastery walls—gave a fitting setting to the gaunt figure of the stern yet revered Abbot. Two heavy wooden stools completed the furniture of the apartment, one of which was for the head of the Abbey himself, the other for the use of any visitor of equal or higher rank; otherwise, all who were called into the presence of the Abbot were obliged to stand, with bent head, patiently waiting to be addressed, and not daring to speak save when spoken to.

"Well, my son," quoth the Abbot, after the customary benediction had been given. "I have a small matter of which I would speak. Raymond, thy son, was until recently with us as a novice."

"Yes, Father."

"But thou didst send for him?"

"I could not do without him."

"Yet he was ill spared by us a youth of much promise. Did he not ask to be allowed to take the vows of chastity and obedience?"

"Nay, Father."

"What, then, is in thy mind with regard to his up-bringing?"

"But two days agone he did ask to go with me to the wars."

"Alas! Alack!" groaned the Abbot, speaking half to his visitor, half to himself. "To think that one brought up in the sanctity of this place should have a mind for the horror of war! It but shows that men's minds are by nature inclined to strife, and that we must ever be subduing the desires of malice and hatred, which, though dormant for years, are too often ready to burst forth with renewed strength. Ah me! And I did think Raymond was a brand plucked from the burning. Thinkst thou that 'tis not too late to turn him from his purpose and bring him into the brotherhood?"

"Father," replied the master-bowman earnestly, "many a time have I pondered the matter over in my heart, for he is very dear to me. In my wanderings I knew him to be in safe keeping in this peaceful place, yet I look to my son as a tried companion of my old age, for I have no other kith or kin in the world. To the wars he would go, yet Heaven forfend that ill should happen to him."

"But if he wish to stay?"

"Then he may do so, though as a monk he will be as far from me as ever."

"Then he shall be asked, my son. Should he remain with us the Order profiteth; should he go Franceward, then the saints be with him and bring him safely home again. But, I ask," he added, fixing his dark eyes intently on the archer, "when Raymond left us didst thou fetch him away?"

"Nay, Father, I——"

"Then where have I met thee before?"

For a moment a pallor, quickly succeeded by a deep flush, overspread the tanned features of the master-bowman, and his mind travelled back for nigh two score years. Then in quick, short sentences he replied, telling the story of the tragedy which had darkened his life.

"Ah! I thought my memory played me not false," returned the Abbot. "But of that enough! I knew it! And, for an archer, thou art certainly apt in speech. Canst read?"

"Yea, Father."

"And write?"

"Yea, Father. Many a time have I acted as scrivener to Sir John Hacket, the Constable of the Castle of Portchester."

"'Tis well; and rest assured, my son, that, by my holy calling, no word of thy past shall fall from my lips."

"And there is another small matter of which I would speak," said Redward.

The Abbot frowned, for the archer had taken the initiative, but, nevertheless, he signed for Redward to continue.

"When we are gone to the wars," quoth the archer, "'twill be necessary for me to leave my small belongings in safe keeping, and no better place can I think of than this Abbey."

"Think not to turn this holy place into a house of merchandise, my son!"

"Nay, Father, not merchandise, but treasure."

"Treasure?" interrupted the Abbot, his interest kindling. "How say you?"

"Ay, a trifle saved from the wreck of my past, together with a little I have amassed during some twenty years of wandering. Of a surety I would offer the Abbey a good percentum for the care thereof, together with the right to retain all profits from its use."

"My son, thou art generous to Holy Mother Church."

"Nay, but I go farther. Should aught amiss happen to Raymond or me, the whole of my worldly goods I leave to the Abbey, without condition."

"Then, my son, I accept, in the name of the Order, the charge confided to us. I will see to it this instant that Brother Aloysius, our scribe, will draft the agreement thereunto." And going to the door, the Abbot, his eyes shining at the thought of adding to the treasury, rang a bell that brought one of the lay servitors hastening to his presence.

"Bring Brother Aloysius hither."

With little loss of time the scrivener arrived, and the agreement was drawn up and signed. This done, the Abbot dismissed Redward, and, once more alone, leaned back in his chair with intense satisfaction.

Keep Raymond within the Abbey, let him take the oaths of the Order, and all would be well. The Abbey would benefit considerably, for, once a monk, Raymond would be heirless. On the other hand, should father and son go to the wars—well, there were chances that they might not return,

and then——. The Abbot sighed, for, in spite of his pious greed, he chid himself for his momentary satisfaction at the thought of harm happening to the young man, of whose presence as a novice he had many pleasing recollections.

On Redward's return to his son's bedside he found, to his great delight, that Raymond was awake.

"How fares it with thee, Raymond?" he asked, taking the lad's limp hand in his great palm and gently patting it.

"I feel much better, father, and hope soon to be abroad again."

"I trust so; but I have something to tell thee. Even now the Abbot has asked me to let thee stay with him. He himself will ask thee anon."

"But I do not wish to, father. My one desire is to follow the banner of the Constable."

"I like thy pluck, Raymond, seeing what thou hast been through. 'Twas an ill start for a soldier's life."

"Yet we came out with honour," replied the boy, his eyes glistening at the thought of the unequal encounter. "When thinkest thou that we shall be able to leave this place?"

"A matter of a few days. For my part, I must hasten back to Hamble to gather together the remains of my goods and chattels, and also to ease the dead Frenchman of his harness, for 'tis, a goodly suit of armour. Also, there is a fair portion of plate and money which I am leaving in the care of the Abbot. Some day 'twill be thine, Raymond, but of that matter I'll speak more anon."

Towards eventide the peacefulness of the Abbey was disturbed by the tramp of armed men—the victorious troops returning to their camp at Southampton; and by the Abbot's leave most of the wounded men, with their escort of archers, passed out of the gate and lined the dusty road to welcome their rescuers and comrades. Even the monks, carried away by their feelings, crowded round the gateway to catch a glimpse of the gallant companies. News of the capture of one galley and the destruction of the other had already reached them, and enthusiasm ran high as the bronzed and dust-covered soldiers tramped homewards.

Redward Buckland knew most of the banners of the various companies, and imparted his knowledge to his companions, while the archers who formed their escort cheered lustily as their fellow-soldiers turned to throw out words of pleasant banter.

At length the master-bowman gave a loud shout. "Look, comrades, the company of the Constable of Portchester! See the crescent *or* on a field *azure!*"

Marching four abreast, their white surcoats soiled with mud, water, and dust, came the Portchester garrison. For, save a few who remained to hold the castle and the adjacent town of Portsmouth, the whole of Sir John Hacket's men were with the army now encamped at Woolston, on the outskirts of Southampton.

At their head rode the fiery knight, attended by his squires, while at his bridle-arm, mounted on a white jennet, was Walter de Brakkeleye, the Bailiff of Southampton, whose men had already passed by. The two leaders were engaged in animated conversation, all traces of their bickering on the question of precedence having completely vanished.

Suddenly the knight caught sight of the little knot of men outside the Abbey gate.

"By the Rood, 'tis my old master-bowman and his party of villagers who held the Frenchmen at bay!" he exclaimed. "When I sent them to the Abbey I little thought to see any of them out and about so soon."

In obedience to an order, the company halted and faced about. Sir John rode up to the little band, who respectfully saluted him, following Redward's example in military etiquette.

"By St. George," said the knight, "'tis hard to do justice to your bravery; for I have only now had time to ponder over your deeds. But this I know—had ye not held the rascals in check the countryside would have been laid bare far more than it is."

"But," he went on reflectively, "ye are, for the most part, homeless men; why not serve under my banner? Francewards riches and honour await you. I'll warrant ye will gain more in one campaign than in a lifetime in England. Buckland, I have heard, will rejoin my company. He will be, as before, one of my sub-officers, and if ye come with him, in his division ye'll be placed. I am loth to lose any of you. So who's for an archer's life?"

With one accord Redward's companions signified their eagerness to follow the yellow crescent, and Sir John's face beamed with delight at their decision. "Then get ye back to the Abbey till ye be thoroughly healed of your wounds," he said, "and join the camp as soon as possible. I thought aright that the taste of fighting would but whet your appetites."

"And you, Hubert," he added, addressing one of his squires, "take this purse and present to the

Abbot as a token of my esteem for the kindly treatment of these men. Also make excuses for me, as the night draws on apace."

Then, commanding the archers who had conveyed Redward's party to the Abbey to fall in with the rest of his company, Sir John gave the order to march. The column moved onwards, leaving behind it the new recruits to the banner of the Constable of the King's Castle of Portchester.

CHAPTER VII

THE SACK OF SOUTHAMPTON

TWO months have elapsed since Redward Buckland and his companions made their gallant stand against the foreign raiders; Raymond had developed into a full-fledged archer. Making a rapid recovery from his wound, the lad, with his seven companions, joined the Constable's banner at Southampton, whither Redward, having settled his affairs, had preceded them.

The badly-wounded Bevis made but slow progress; fighting, he vehemently declared, was not in his line, so one morning he limped slowly through the Abbey gateway to make his way back to Hamble, there to rebuild his cottage and again to ply his calling as a fisherman.

Lack of money compelled King Edward III. to remain inactive. A tax on wool was levied and grudgingly paid, for his subjects, finding that no great deed of arms was likely to ensue, lacked the enthusiasm that the glorious victories of later years were bound to create. Thus the greater part of the huge host was dispersed; many of the troops were moved to Rye and Winchelsea, others sent back to their own homes, and, save for a few soldiers, the town of Southampton resumed its normal appearance.

By the King's special command, however, a portion of Sir John Hacket's company was retained at Southampton to man some of the ships that were to be fitted out against the rovers who still lingered in the Channel, and thus Raymond found himself quartered in Saint Barbara's Tower, a small defensive work on the south walls.

Before dealing with the stirring events that happened in this ancient and distinguished town, it would be well to briefly describe the Southampton of the fourteenth century.

Roughly, the town formed an irregular rectangle, with the south-western corner rounded off. On the north side the walls were pierced by the Bargate, and protected by several small towers, with a larger erection, termed the Polymond Tower, at the north-eastern angle. The eastern side was defended by a wall nearly 800 yards in length, further protected by twenty-seven half-round towers, and pierced by the East Gate and two posterns.

On the south the walls were in a somewhat ruinous condition, though it ought to have been clear that these were more open to attack. Here were two entrances—the God's House Tower gate at the south-eastern angle and the Water Gate. Several towers added to the defensive works at this point, the chief being the God's House Tower, the Watch Tower, the Square Tower, St. Barbara's Tower, and the Bugle Tower.

The western face was by far the best protected, the arcaded walls being of great height, terminating at Catchcold Tower near the north-western angle. Two large gates—West Gate and Biddlesgate—gave access to the water-front on the western shore, and in addition were several posterns, one of which, the Water Gate, led to the courtyard of the Castle, whose keep, a large circular Norman tower standing on an artificial mound, dominated the whole town.

Sunday, the 14th of October, 1338, was a black day in the annals of Southampton.

A few days previously more of the troops had been withdrawn, thus leaving practically only the men of Southampton to guard the town. Rumours of a large hostile fleet within the sheltered waters of the Solent caused bodies of men to be hastily dispatched to Lepe, Lymington, and other neighbouring sea-coast towns, while Sir John Hacket, hurriedly summoned to Portsmouth on an urgent matter of defence, had taken the greater part of his company with him.

Redward's sub-division was amongst those left at Southampton, but he himself had crossed to Hythe, where he hired a horse and rode to the town of Lepe to gather tidings of the foemen. Thus there remained of his party some two score archers and men-at-arms, under the command of Richard Wyatt, the grizzled old warrior who had recognised his old comrade Redward at the passage of the Hamble River.

On this particular Sunday a white mist overspread Southampton. So dense was the fog that even the oldest inhabitants could not recall the like. Raymond and his comrades were busily engaged in overhauling their bows and shafts, for on that afternoon a shooting match had been arranged between ten men of the Constable's company and ten of the town guard of Southampton, for displays of archery were then usual at the close of church service.

"A pest take the fog!" grumbled the old man-at-arms. "If it does not lift 'twill be too thick to hold the contest."

"Even this room is full of it," cried an archer, twanging his bow-string with his thumb. "Look, this cord is as dead as the giant Ascupart, whom these Southampton folk brag so much about!"

"At all events, both parties fare alike. If we but win a groat apiece the weather can bide—that is, so long as we can see the butts!"

Just then the bells of St. Michael's and the Maison Dieu struck out to summon the townspeople to Mass, and soon the streets were teeming with gaily dressed folk, all hastening to their respective churches, though to the men in the tower they appeared but ghostly shapes gliding in the misty air.

"Who will come with me on to the top of the tower?" asked one of the archers. "I'd as lief get wet through in the open as perish with cold in this fog-laden room."

"I am with thee," replied Raymond.

"And I—and I," said several voices.

Ascending a narrow spiral flight of stone steps, the comrades gained the summit of St. Barbara's Tower. Rearing itself sixty feet above the ground and thirty feet above the line of battlemented walls, this building was crowned by a low breastwork, and roofed with large slabs of stone sufficiently sloping to carry off the rainwater, but at the same time capable of being walked upon without difficulty.

"Ha! The mist rises a little!" exclaimed one. "Though 'twill be only for a time."

"I can perceive the watch-fire," remarked another, indicating the dull glow of the burning wood in an open brazier that at night or in thick weather was always fired on the summit of the Water Gate.

"Ho! Peterkin—Simon!" shouted a hoarse voice immediately below them. "Out on ye for scurvy knaves! Hasten and bring oars, or I'll lay my staff athwart your backs!"

"'Tis old John Draper, the water-bailiff," remarked one of the archers. "Some vessel hath found her way up the Water, and he's going to board her."

They heard the oars tossed into the boat, and the rasping voice of the water-bailiff as he descended the stone steps of the quay and stepped into the boat. Then the sound of oars straining against the tholepins grew fainter and fainter, till the little craft was lost to sight and sound in the dense fog.

Suddenly a piercing shriek, followed by the dull noise of a heavy splash, fell upon the ears of the archers in the tower.

"What's that?" inquired one, his indifference changed into alert activity.

"Nothing, thick head—except, perhaps, that old Draper hath missed his foothold and received a ducking!"

"I like it not," replied the first archer. "There's black devilment afoot."

"Thou art ever looking for trouble, Hal. Didst ever——"

"Nay, methinks he's right," interrupted Will Lightfoot. "Hearken!"

Leaning over the edge of the parapet the archers strove to ascertain the meaning of a subdued splashing that every moment grew louder.

"Oars, comrades, oars! And not a score not two score, either. The water's *alive* with them!"

And now through the mist loomed scores of great indistinct shapes that only too soon resolved themselves into the outlines of long galleys, their size magnified by the thick veil of vapour. Before the astonished archers could realise their danger the huge craft ran alongside the quay or beached themselves with a grinding crunch on the gravel of the foreshore abreast the Water Gate, and from them leaped hordes of armed men, shouting and giving orders in half the tongues of Southern Europe.

The surprise was complete. The Water Gate was rushed ere the massive gates could be closed, and the foe, with the quickness of martial experience, wedged the grooves of the double portcullis to prevent the lowering of the heavy iron slides. Into the town they poured, slaying all who crossed their path, and before the startled inhabitants, most of whom were still at Mass, could grasp the situation, close upon five thousand French and Genoese soldiers had gained possession of the greater part of the town.

To add to the tumult, the bell over the watchtower began a dismal tocsin, and continued till a party of soldiers, climbing to the summit, hurled the devoted bellman crashing down upon the stones beneath. But other bells took up the warning note, till the Bar Gate, at the northern end of Southampton, gave a more timely alarm to the dwellers about the upper part of the town.

In the meantime the archers of St. Barbara's Tower, lashed into activity by the orders and example of Dick Wyatt, had closed, barred, and bolted the great oaken door, and hastily arming themselves, ascended the tower, where they crouched, arrow on string, behind the low, battlemented parapet.

"Methinks 'tis all up with Southampton," exclaimed the grizzled warrior. "But lie close, and do not loose string till they find us out."

"But what can we do?"

"Very little till the fog lifts. Then it will be seen, which of the towers still hold out."

"Have they carried the Castle, think you?"

"Not if the garrison have had the least warning, and, thank Heaven, there's enough noise to waken the Seven Sleepers. Hearken!"

Above the noise of the still disembarking foreign soldiery could be heard pitiful screams and cries for mercy, as men, women, and children were cut down indiscriminately by the ruthless foe, while a distant clash of arms showed that in some quarters of the town the invaders were meeting with some amount of resistance.

As if by magic, the mist suddenly rolled away, and the pale October sun streamed down upon a sight that was but too common in those days. Two score and ten galleys lay along the sea-front, their prows touching the shore just as the first high water was beginning to ebb, while in mid-stream fifty-five heavier vessels rode at anchor. From this powerful fleet close on twelve thousand Normans, Picards, Genoese, and Spaniards had landed.

Already the southern portion of the town, with the exception of St. Barbara's and God's House Towers, was in their hands. Robert de la Barre, one of the bailiffs, held the Castle and the West Gate; Walter de Brakkeleye, the other, lay within Catchcold Tower; while through the Bar Gate poured a mob of terrified citizens, some of whom fled hot-foot even as far as Winchester.

Having made sure of the lower part of the town, the invaders began their accustomed excesses, plundering and burning in all directions.

A strong body of Genoese could be seen coming down the road that followed the inner side of the South Wall.

"Stand fast, if ye would see to-morrow's sun!" cried the old man-at-arms warningly. "And do not give any sign till they discover us: then an arrow for each black heart!"

On the opposite side of the street, which, for military reasons, was wider than those away from the walls, was a house of superior quality to its neighbours. It was a two-storeyed, half-timbered building, standing in a large extent of ground. Attracted by its more imposing appearance, three of the marauders stopped and began to batter on the outer gate with their short, heavy axes.

"'Tis the house of Sir Reginald Scarsdale," quoth one of the archers, a Southampton man. "'Tis out of the frying-pan into the fire, I trow, with him."

"What dost thou mean?" asked Raymond.

"Why, this: twice his castle in the county of Yorks hath been burned by the Scots; so, to keep his womenfolk out of harm's way, he sends them down here, while he keeps watch and ward at Berwick."

"His womenfolk?"

"Ay! His wife, the Lady Hilda, and his daughter, the Lady Audrey. Pray Heaven they be not in the house!"

"But they are!" exclaimed another. "I heard from one of their servants but a few hours back that the old lady was seized with an ague. And the younger, a sweet little lass, left to the mercies of those wretches! Alas! And we can do nothing!"

Raymond's only reply was to compress his lips tightly and clutch the hilt of his short sword. Carefully he peered over the edge of the parapet, and looked down on the scene below.

Already the gate was giving way before the lusty blows of the axes. Then, throwing his ponderous body against the shattered woodwork, a burly Genoese burst the remaining fragments with a resounding crash, and, with wild shouts of triumph, the three plunderers rushed across the grounds and attacked the door of the house, while the screams of terrified women rent the air.

Without a moment's hesitation Raymond seized a coil of rope which was used for hauling up materials to the top of the tower, and hastily knotted one end round his body. He looked down. The street was now clear of any wandering soldiers. Taking his bow and quiver, as well as his sword, the youth persuaded his comrades to lower him with all despatch.

Round and round he spun in his hazardous descent, till, with bleeding hands and a swimming sensation in his head, Raymond found himself on the ground. Instantly he unloosed the rope, darted quickly across the road and gained the outer gateway.

By this time the inner door had been wrenched open, and the three Genoese were holding a debate amongst themselves, gesticulating and talking volubly till it seemed as if a quarrel was likely to ensue. Finally two entered the house, the third keeping guard outside, possibly to prevent any fugitive from leaving, or to keep others of their comrades from sharing in what promised to be a rich haul.

Raymond saw and seized his chance. The man's back was turned towards him, yet—the raiders being mere pirates and deserving of no mercy—without hesitation, the youth drew string, and the next instant the soldier was lying on his face, his back pierced by an arrow.

Guided by the redoubled sound of shrieks, the lad sped across the ground, grasping his drawn sword in his hand, and ascended the stairs with quick yet noiseless footsteps.

At the head of the stairs lay the corpse of an old man, evidently a servitor, the blood welling in a crimson flood from a gaping wound in his throat. Without stopping, Raymond sprang over the body and burst into a room whence the shrieks came with terrifying shrillness.

There a sight met his gaze that transformed him into a terrible avenging spirit rather than a human being. On the floor lay an elderly lady, her eyes rolling in semi-stupor, while the two ruffians were maltreating a young and beautiful girl, whose age could not have been more than sixteen. In spite of her furious struggles and piercing cries the two Genoese were dragging her out of the room, and her strength was well-nigh exhausted.

With a loud shout of anger Raymond rushed upon the two men, who were totally unprepared for any onslaught while engaged in their work of cruelty and rapine. A strong sweeping blow with his sword and one of the villains fell lifeless to the ground, but, before the young archer could strike again, the second turned upon him, and in a moment both were struggling on the floor in a deadly embrace, the Genoese, a great lusty fellow, being uppermost. Raymond still retained his sword, though unable to shorten it, while his enemy strove to draw a dagger that he wore at his belt. Seeing this the lad dropped his sword and grasped the other's wrist, while, in turn, Raymond's arm was gripped to prevent him from drawing his own knife.

At length the weight of his foeman's body began to tell, and slowly the breath was forced out of the lad's lungs by the relentless pressure. Raymond thought that the end was near, his face was turning black, red lights flashed across his eyes, and, as in a dream, he saw the Genoese wrench his hand free from the retaining grasp and seize the hilt of his dagger.

"Flee!" gasped Raymond, glancing towards the maiden, and he had steeled himself to receive the expected *coup de grace*, suddenly he felt his enemy's body grow limp and a flood of hot blood rained upon his face.

Struggling to his feet, faint, dazed, and unable for the moment to realise that it was not his own life's blood, Raymond gazed vacantly upon the body of his foeman. Then, as his scattered senses began to return, the youth realised that his miraculous deliverance was due to the prompt action of the girl to whose aid he had flown; for seeing how matters were turning, and desperate for her own and her rescuer's safety, she had possessed herself of the dagger of the slain ruffian and had plunged it up to the hilt in the neck of the other.

For the first time Raymond could take notice of the girl. Looking at her white face, he could see that she was a maiden of quality and unquestionable beauty. As she stood there, with flashing eyes and the reeking dagger in her hand, she seemed in the eyes of the young archer like one of the mythological heroines of whom he had read in the library of the Abbey. But with the sense of safety came the inevitable reaction. She dropped the knife, and, falling beside her mother, burst into tears.

Raymond, in spite of his inexperience, saw only too clearly that the elder lady was beyond pain and suffering.

"Come," he said gently. "We must needs go quickly. Thy mother is—" He was unable to finish the sentence, but the girl understood.

"I am ready," she said, in a far-away voice, "but whither shall we go?"

Pausing to throw a coverlet over the still form of the lady, Raymond gave a final glance at the bodies of his late adversaries; then, taking the girl by the hand, he drew her gently from the room.

The cool, fresh air revived his scattered wits considerably, so that he was able to take the necessary precautions to regain St. Barbara's Tower. Bidding the girl wait behind a thick shrubbery, Raymond looked cautiously out of the gate. The street seemed to be clear, while his comrades were alert and waiting his return.

Calling the girl, he led her quickly across the street; the end of a rope was thrown down, and hastily the lad looped it round her supple form. Then at a signal the little garrison pulled up the rope, and its precious burden was safe within the shelter of St. Barbara's Tower!

"Haste thee, boy!" shouted old Dicky Wyatt, the grizzled man-at-arms. "The French be upon

thee!"

There was not a moment to be lost. The lad seized the end of the rope as it descended, and hanging on like a jackanapes, was soon dangling in the air. A party of the enemy were running down the street, and already a few quarrels and arrows were whistling past his ears or splintering themselves against the stonework of the tower. Then a well-directed flight of cloth-yard shafts held the enemy in check, and aided by willing hands, Raymond was helped over the parapet.

"A plucky deed," growled Wyatt, "but thou hast sold us, my lad. See, they have gone to bring reinforcements to carry the tower by escalade!"

"Certes, Raymond," exclaimed an archer, "thou dost look like a butcher What hast thou been about?"

"Never mind that: the tale will keep," interrupted the man-at-arms. "I'll warrant we'll all look worse than that ere long! Here, Lightfoot! Away with Ye to the kitchen, and see that plenty of water is put to boil. And you, Ned, fetch an axe and hew off some of this lead and melt it. Methinks the townsmen of Southampton will not amerce us with the damage, whether we hold the tower or not!"

While the preparations for defence were in progress a loud shout from one of the archers gave warning that the enemy were returning to the attack, and the two score Englishmen from the height of the tower looked down upon ten times their number of Picards, Normans, and Spaniards, to whom the assault on a fortress or the sack of a defenceless town were looked upon as ordinary occurrences.

CHAPTER VIII

OF THE ASSAULT ON ST. BARBARA'S TOWER

WITH fierce cries and menacing gestures the foreigners rushed down the street, many of them carrying axes and torches, while others bore a stout beam for the purpose of battering down the door of the tower. Their archers and crossbowmen, eager to join in the fray, had slung their bows, and with knives, swords, or short spears in their hands, surged along in a confused mass with the men-at-arms.

"Now! Altogether! Loose, my lads!" shouted old Richard, and with the well-known twang nearly a score of bows sent their missiles crashing into the armed mob below.

Many of the advancing foemen fell, transfixed by the deadly shafts, while those in the rear, pressing blindly forward, stumbled over those who lay writhing on the ground. When, at length, the foremost had reached the base of the tower, where they were safe from the stinging shower, they were met with a stream of molten lead, which, burning through hauberk and leathern jerkin with equal ease, sent the assailants reeling back with screams of agony.

The men bearing the beam were all shot down, and the main body retiring hastily, in a few moments the street was deserted but for a number of corpses, and the solitary standing figure of a man in full armour. Disdaining to turn his back upon the foe, the knight walked slowly backwards, shaking his ponderous mace in speechless anger, while the arrows rattled harmlessly off his proof-plate mail.

"Save your arrows, comrades, and give him a heavy stone or a dose of hot lead should he approach," said old Wyatt. "Methinks I've seen his device before. 'Tis Enrico, son of the King of Sicily."

Just then the prince, his spurred heels tripping on the body of a man-at-arms, fell prostrate on his back, amid a roar of laughter from the Englishmen.

"Now stand by," exclaimed one of the archers, "and directly he moves a limb, let fly at his armpits or behind his knees!"

But the Italian was not lacking in cunning, for knowing that the weight of his armour would effectually prevent his rising, he lay perfectly quiet, his arms pressed closely to his side, till some varlets, bearing a heavy mantlet before them, came running up and lifted their master on his feet. Then, with measured step, the prince retired out of sight.

"Ah! As I thought, the rascals have learned a trick or two!" growled Wyatt, pointing to the Woolhouse Tower, a structure of greater height than St. Barbara's Tower, and standing less than three hundred paces distant.

Abandoned by its garrison at the first alarm, the Woolhouse Tower was occupied by a strong body of French archers, while an equally formidable band of crossbowmen took possession of the lofty Woolhouse hard by, so that a flight of missiles was poured upon the Englishmen from two different points.

"Lie down, men; 'tis useless to return their fire!" commanded the man-at-arms. But before his advice could be acted upon five archers and two soldiers were hit, one of the latter, his brain pierced by a bolt, toppling forwards over the parapet, and falling with a sickening thud upon the wall below.

"Would it not be well to abandon the roof and seek shelter below?" inquired one.

"And give the rascals an easy chance to carry the tower," rejoined old Wyatt derisively. "Nay, we must hold the flats at all cost. Quickly, my lads! Bring up everything ye can find that will do to raise a mantlet! There are plenty of hides in the store, and planks and poles as well."

Swiftly the archers fell to work, and in a very short space they had stretched some stout ox-hides on poles and had raised them above the parapet. Strengthening their hasty barricade with several heavy planks, they were soon in comparative security; while through the narrow space betwixt the top of the battlement and the lower edge of the hides they could keep up a brisk discharge of arrows upon their assailants, while the muffled thud of shafts and quarrels striking upon the loosely hung hides showed both the vehemence of the attack and the efficacy of the defence.

The defenders had now time to survey their surroundings; and, to every one's surprise, the Lady Audrey, calm and self-possessed, was busily engaged in making bandages for the wounded men.

"My faith!" exclaimed Dick Wyatt, roughly yet kindly. "'Tis no place for thee, girl! Away with thee to the room below, and, if nursing be thy desire, I'll warrant there'll be enough work for thee ere long!"

Reluctantly, the maiden obeyed; and the wounded archers were taken below so that their hurts could receive attention, while the survivors would be less encumbered on the narrow extent of the roof.

"Stand to it once more!" shouted their leader. "They come again! Now, Will, be ready with the molten lead and the boiling water!"

Assailed on three sides at once, the defenders were hard put to it to keep the attackers in check. In addition to the showers of arrows and stones, the enemy had gained a lodgment on the town wall, and two long ladders were placed against the tower, their ends resting or projecting above the battlements. Up swarmed a number of heavily-armed men, till the ladders creaked and groaned under their weight. Harassed by the hail of missiles, and impeded by the curtains of bulls' hides, the defenders could not repel the assault, and, to their consternation, the leaders of the attack appeared above the battlements.

Once the mailed warriors gained the roof, all would be lost! But at the critical moment Richard Wyatt, seizing a massive crowbar, loosened a heavy coping-stone. Then, calling a couple of strong archers to his aid, the ponderous stone was deftly toppled over the battlements. Missing the first man, the stone hurled the next two from their swaying foothold, then, crashing through the woodwork of the ladder, it fell upon the heads of the men who were supporting those who had already ascended.

The ladder cracked and broke, bringing down the other ladder in its fall, the fragments descending in opposite directions athwart the wall, where a ghastly litter of woodwork and mangled corpses marked the failure of the enterprise.

The man who had first gained the edge of the parapet, feeling the ladder give beneath him, sprang for the roof; but, encumbered by his heavy armour, he slipped, and, clinging only by his mailed gauntlets, he hung dangling over the abyss.

Through the bars of his visor the defenders could see his eyes starting from his head in his terror. But it was no time for pity. With gibes and fierce jests the Englishmen watched his desperate struggles, till, his fingers growing numb with the strain, he relaxed his hold and fell, with a hoarse cry, to join the crushed and mangled bodies of his comrades.

Carried away by his enthusiasm, old Richard tore aside side the curtain of hides, and stood upon the parapet to view the scene of his triumph; but his imprudence cost him dear, fora crossbow bolt struck him in the side, and he fell backwards into the arms of two of the archers.

"Lay me down," he cried feebly. "I am done for at last!" Presently he added, "Send Raymond to me."

Quickly the young archer came and knelt beside the dying soldier, across whose eyes a misty film was already beginning to gather.

"Raymond," he gasped, "thou'rt but a lad, but thou hast a cool head. Take charge of the Tower, and yield to no man. If the saints bring ye out scatheless, tell my master, Sir John, that I did my duty.... And now, Pearce," he added, addressing another of the archers who crowded around, "thou hast a strong steady hand. Grasp the bolt, I pray thee, and pluck it out. It would ease and hasten my passing."

But the archer could not bring himself to hasten the end, in spite of the faint entreaties of the dying man. Then, by a supreme effort, Dick Wyatt struggled to his feet and tore out the deadly shaft. A rush of dark blood followed, and, with a loud cry of "St. George for England!" the old man-at-arms fell dead.

The little garrison was now in sore straits. Of the original two score men nine were killed and twelve grievously wounded, and of the survivors only eleven were left to guard the roof of the Tower and eight to man the oylets and windows of the lower storeys.

At Raymond's suggestion the steel caps of the killed and wounded were shown above the walls to deceive the enemy as to the strength of the garrison. Then, leaving two men to keep a sharp look-out, the remainder of the worn and famished warriors descended into a lower room to partake of a hasty yet plentiful meal.

"I would we had a sack or two of quicklime," remarked Raymond to Will Lightfoot, who had charge of the defence of the lowermost storey. "We would then give them a warm welcome such as my father did at Hamble."

Will was evidently thinking.

"There is very little that will burn," he said at last reflectively. "They threw in some flaming wood, but, methinks, they had a good exchange—molten lead is not much to the taste of these rogues!"

"True, the Tower cannot be fired, but why didst thou mention it?"

"Because in the cellar are several bundles of straw and hay. I would counsel that we set them alight and hurl them on the scaling ladders!"

"By St. George! A good device!"

Once more the invaders renewed the assault, and this time ladders were brought against two opposite sides of the building. But, thanks to the trusses of flaming straw and hay, the attackers could not bring themselves to face the hazardous ascent.

Neither did the attack upon the door at the base of the Tower meet with better success, for the arrows of the besieged kept the battering-ram inactive, while those bolder than their fellows who attacked the door with axes found that, however accustomed they were to give or receive hard knocks, molten lead and boiling water were more than they could stand.

At length night drew on, and, save for an occasional arrow, the garrison were unmolested. Many of the French and Genoese, having had their fill of plunder, were busy removing their booty to the galleys. Others, mad with drink, paraded the streets uttering wild oaths and strange cries.

Those houses that had been plundered were set on fire, and, as darkness fell over the ill-fated town, the glare of fifty burning buildings illuminated the country for miles around, and served to lash the surviving inhabitants into a host of desperate and revengeful defenders of their country's shores.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE HEELS OF THE ENEMY

ALTHOUGH the two bailiffs, Walter de Brakkeleye and Robert de la Barre, had remained disgracefully inactive within their defences, the men of Winchester, Romsey, and other neighbouring towns and villages were massing to aid the men of Southampton, and a large and well-appointed army had gathered at Bassett, ready to wrest the pillaged town from the invaders and drive them back to their ships.

Throughout the night the defenders of St. Barbara's Tower kept anxious vigil. Of the preparations for their relief they knew nothing. But hardly had the pale dawn begun to gather in the east than the foreigners were astir, taking steps to keep the galleys afloat on the now falling tide, as if they purposed embarking once more.

Then, with a crash and a roar, the sound of fighting was heard towards the centre of the town, and from their elevated position the sorry remnant of the defenders saw the lances of the English charge down the High Street, bearing all before them. In other quarters the invaders, entangled in the narrow streets, were cut off by swarms of the infuriated inhabitants, who, knowing the peculiarities of their town, moved with consummate ease, hurling down stones and shooting arrows from the houses upon their entrapped enemy.

And now, from the Castle and the West Gate and Catchcold Towers poured the liberated garrison, eager to avenge their disgrace. Many were the encounters between the Southampton men and their foes in this quarter of the town, till, driven back by weight of numbers, the enemy, who were mostly Genoese, returned slowly past St. Barbara's Tower, contesting every inch of ground.

The little band of defenders now occupied themselves by annoying the retreating Italians with well-directed arrows, while, all danger of an assault being at an end, the barricades behind the door were removed so that the garrison could sally out and join their friends.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of conflict, till Raymond and his comrades perceived the red-crossed surcoats of the Englishmen pressing back the discomfited Genoese. At length, unable to withstand the flanking fire of arrows, the enemy fled past out of bowshot of the Tower—all save one, whom Raymond recognised as the son of the King of Sicily. Burning to achieve a further deed of honour, Raymond threw open the door and rushed out to intercept the mailclad knight, who, with sweeping strokes of his sword, kept the men-at-arms at a respectful distance. But the lad was forestalled. A huge countryman, who had lost his all in the sack of the town, had crept behind the Prince, and, with a swinging blow of a massive club, smote the Italian behind the knees.

With a snarl of rage and pain the Prince fell to the ground, and, with a shout of triumph, his assailant stood over him with his club upraised to give the fatal blow. Finding further resistance impossible, the knight dropped his sword.

"*Je me rends!*" he exclaimed. "*Je vous donnerai rançon!*"

"Yea, I know thou art a Françon," thundered the Englishman, misunderstanding the Prince's appeal for mercy, "and therefore thou shalt die!" And, notwithstanding a warning shout from Raymond and several of the Englishmen, the club descended with tremendous force, and the Italian lay dead upon the ground.

"I'll trouble thee to mind thy own business, my master!" hissed the countryman, turning fiercely on Raymond.

"But he was a gentleman of quality. He surrendered to thee, and he was worth a heavy ransom!"

"Ransom, forsooth!" rejoined the man, in a frenzy. "What ransom can atone for a wife and five children slain? Speak not to me of ransom!" And, shouldering his club, the man rushed off in pursuit of the fugitives as they hastened towards the Water Gate.

Beaten back at every point, the invaders crowded on board their galleys, and during the embarkation the slaughter was greater; for, from the walls, as well as from the shore, a heavy fire of arrows was hailed upon them by the infuriated townsmen.

At length, with the exception of a few galleys that, caught by the falling tide, were burned and their crews slaughtered, the hostile ships withdrew, and, with a steady north-west breeze, bore away down Southampton Water, leaving behind them a half-burned and pillaged town—the terrible penalty of unpreparedness!

After the *mêlée* Raymond returned with the remnant of the Constable's detachment to the Tower they had held so well, and, to his surprise and delight, found his father awaiting him, though Redward hardly recognised his son. Stained with his own blood and the blood of the

Genoese, covered with dust and grime from head to foot, Raymond looked a very different person from the gentle youth of three months back.

"By St. Edward of Netley!" exclaimed Redward, "wherever I go, whether Francewards or otherwise, thou shalt go too; for methinks there is as much danger in Merrie England as in the land of the Fleur-de-Lys!"

"But how camest thou here, father?" asked Raymond. "I thought thou wert at Lepe."

"Ah, lad! it was there I saw the foemen sail towards Southampton; so I rode hot-foot to Hythe. [1] There I took a boat—stole it, I fear—and tried to cross; but in the fog I nearly ran into the thick of the galleys. Then I knew I was too late; so back to the shore I rowed, and came round the head of the Water by land. 'Twas a long journey by Totton, and by the time I reached Millbrook it was daylight, and the men of Romsey were marching in upon the town."

By this time Raymond had washed his face and hands, and had brushed most of the grime from his clothes, having removed his white surcoat and breastplate.

"We have had a hot time, father. They pressed us hard. Fourteen men lie stretched upon the straw, and nine are dead. Poor old Dick Wyatt is no more."

"Heaven rest his soul!" exclaimed Redward, piously crossing himself. "He was a good and true comrade to me through thick and thin, and I trow 'tis hard to be stricken down almost within sight of home."

Together father and son ascended the winding stair that led to the upper rooms. There lay the wounded defenders, carefully tended by the Lady Audrey. As Raymond entered the room, she looked at him in a puzzled manner. Then, holding out her hand, she exclaimed:

"Why, 'tis my gallant preserver! And what a difference a clean face doth make ye are but a boy, and a handsome one at that!"

A deep flush overspread the youth's face. Redward, knowing nothing of the circumstances of her rescue, could but express his astonishment, and, leaving the pair engaged in eager talk, he ascended to the roof, where lay the bodies of Richard Wyatt and the other soldiers, each grim and stern in death.

From Will Lightfoot he learned most of the particulars of the defence, including his son's intrepid act of rescue.

"Ay! Buckland," said Will, "'tis not every archer who hath the good fortune to rescue a noble lady such as the Lady Audrey Scarsdale!"

"Scarsdale?" repeated Redward.

"Ay Scarsdale—daughter of Sir Reginald Scarsdale."

The master-bowman staggered as if struck by an invisible blow; then, recovering himself by an effort, asked Lightfoot if there were any tidings of Sir John Hacket.

Even Will Lightfoot could not fail to notice the change in Redward's appearance; but, putting it down to the fearful strain of the fight, suggested adjourning to partake of refreshment.

The task of laying to rest the bodies of their comrades was next proceeded with. Then Raymond, with two of his fellow-archers, entered the ill-fated house of the Lady Scarsdale, and removed the bodies of the three Genoese.

Placing the corpse of the Lady Hilda reverently on a bed, they locked up the house and gave the keys into the custody of the Sheriff, who, knowing the Scarsdale family, took the necessary steps to ensure a fitting burial of the knight's wife, while Lady Audrey was taken care of by some relatives who resided in another part of Hampshire.

Early the following morning Sir John Hacket, having assured himself that the enemy had made for the Channel and were not likely to return to raid some other coast town, rode into Southampton from Portsmouth, attended by his squires and a troop of lances and mounted archers.

Proudly, yet sadly, the stern old knight gazed upon the sorry remnant of the detachment he had left at Southampton but a week before.

"By St. George!" he exclaimed, "ye are a credit to me, and the one bright jewel in the sable field of incompetence and neglect! The King shall hear of your deeds! Ye see," he added aside to his squires, "what that ranter, Walter de Brakkeleye, and his co-bailiff, de la Barre, have done. Had they given more thought to the safe keeping of the town, instead of bickering, as Brakkeleye did with me respecting the jurisdiction of his bailiwick, not a house in Southampton would have been touched by foreign foemen, not one of the townsfolk harmed. Should the King think fit to hang them on the battlements 'twould be but their deserts!"

"And now," he continued, addressing the archers, "I will take care that bravery hath its reward. Another penny a day shall be added to your pay, and, as for Raymond Buckland, who, I am told, undertook the defence after my trusted Wyatt's death, from this time forth he shall be one of my squires! Let him but acquit himself as he hath done since he hath been in my company, and he will be on the road to win a pair of gilded spurs!"

[1] Not, of course, the well-known coast town in Kent, but the ancient village of that name on the New Forest side of Southampton Water.

CHAPTER X

FATHER AND SON SET OUT FOR HENNEBON

NEARLY four years have elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapter—years full of national interest. The naval battle of Sluys had been fought and won, and for the time the English fleet ruled the Channel, so that scarce a French or Spanish vessel dared to show itself betwixt Ushant and Cape Grisnez.

After the siege of Tournay, a treaty had been concluded between King Edward III. and Philip of France, but the former was ever on the alert to seize a favourable opportunity of renewing hostilities, and late in 1341 an incident occurred that gave the King the excuse to prosecute the war once more—a step that led to the glorious victory at Crécy and the overrunning of nearly the whole of France by the victorious arms of England.

The Duchy of Brittany was disputed between John of Montfort and Charles of Blois, and, while the latter was pressing his claims at the French Court, Montfort, by force or intrigue, had acquired the fortresses of Rennes, Nantes, Brest, and Hennebon; and in order to obtain a powerful supporter he had journeyed to England and concluded an offensive and defensive alliance with King Edward, at the same time offering to do him homage for the Duchy of Brittany.

Keeping this treaty a deep secret, Montfort did not hesitate to return to Paris to defend his case, but realising that the French King did not favour him, and fearing violence at his hands, the Earl retired to Brittany and declared war against the Count of Blois.

Philip sent his son, the Duke of Normandy, with a powerful force to aid Charles of Blois, and Montfort, after sending urgent requests for assistance to the King of England, shut himself up in Nantes, which was immediately besieged by the French.

By the treachery of the inhabitants Nantes fell, and Montfort, taken prisoner, was hurried to Paris, where he was loaded with chains and thrown into a loathsome dungeon in the Louvre.

But, though low, the fortunes of the Montforts were destined to recover. The cause was taken up by the Countess Joan of Montfort, the heroic wife of the imprisoned Earl, and being loyally supported by the Bretons, she withdrew her forces to the town of Hennebon, where she awaited the onslaught of the French, trusting in the expected aid from England.

* * * * *

But to return to Raymond Buckland and his adventures. As squire to Sir John Hacket, the Constable of the King's Castle of Portchester, he was now a member of the knight's household, spending the greater part of his time within the grey walls of the fortress.

Four years had made a great change in Raymond's appearance. He was now a youth of twenty, tall and well built. Thanks to his surroundings, he was skilled in the arts of warfare, and few could withstand him at the jousts and spear-runnings that were frequently held in the extensive grass-grown square that formed the outer bailey of the castle. Moreover, his monkish training admirably fitted him for the more clerkly duties that fell to him, and by his diligence, intelligence, and courage he was held in high esteem by the fiery old knight.

Redward, too, for his tried devotion and experience was made head master-bowman of the Constable's company, and, when occasion served, Sir John was not above asking his advice in the ordering of the castle and its defences.

But over Raymond hung a dark cloud of perplexity. The image of the fair Lady Audrey was ever present in his mind, and, encouraged by the Constable's prediction that in due course he might be entitled to wear the gilded spurs of knighthood, his hopes ran high of one day being in a position to win the maiden's heart and hand. But to his unbounded surprise, Raymond found that his father was tacitly opposed to this, his dearest wish. With difficulty Redward had been persuaded to allow the young squire to wait upon Sir Reginald Scarsdale, when that knight wished to thank him for his services. Any mention of the name of Scarsdale served to plunge the master-bowman into moodiness and silence, and any question that the lad put to his sire on the subject was turned in a way that puzzled Raymond in no small degree.

One day an event happened that was to transfer the lad from the pleasant life of ease at the castle to a far more active and dangerous sphere.

How well Raymond remembered it in after years. That morning he and another squire had mounted the four-storeyed Norman keep, and from the battlements looked down upon the scene below. It was a striking picture; the keep stood at the north-west-angle of the huge fortified enclosure. Immediately beneath the east and south faces of the donjon lay the inner bailey. In the far corner of the outer bailey stood the church, and close by was the water-gate, at which lay the Constable's state barge. Away to the south stretched the wide expanse of Portsmouth Harbour, its waters dotted with the sails of high-sided cogs and other merchant vessels, as they threaded

their way up the sinuous deep-water channels that led to the castle.

Immediately opposite the water-gate was the landport, or gateway giving access to the castle from the land. The lads could follow the line of the dusty road as it passed through the little village, swept round the head of the harbour, and eventually was lost in the distance as it ran towards the City of London.

"Look, Raymond," exclaimed his companion, a Hampshire lad named Oswald Mant. "A horseman approaches, and, my faith, he does not spare his steed!"

"'Tis not one of the company?"

"Nay, look at the livery—murrey slashed with green—he is of the household of Sir John Chandos."

"Then something of importance hath taken place. I would 'twere good tidings from France!"

Leaving a dense white cloud of chalky dust behind him, the messenger clattered down the road, pulled up for a moment at the outer gateway to reply to the challenge of the guard, then spurred madly across the courtyard to the foot of the steps leading to the keep. Here a page ran forward to hold his horse, and, throwing himself wearily from the saddle, the rider staggered up the steps and disappeared under a low archway that gave access to the Constable's quarters.

An hour passed ere the messenger reappeared, and, after draining a cup of wine, he remounted and spurred his horse on his homeward journey.

While the two squires were debating over the matter, a page sought them, summoning Raymond to instantly repair to Sir John's apartment.

With beating heart, as if anticipating some good fortune, Raymond followed the page, and was ushered into the Constable's presence, where he found that Redward was already before him. It was a long, narrow room, lighted with lancet windows and hung with rich arras. At one end was a heavy table littered with papers and plans, and, for the nonce, unmindful of the dignity of his position, Sir John was sitting on its edge, swinging one leg, with the air of a man who is occupied by a perplexing problem.

Directly the page had retired, the Constable signed to Redward to draw a thick hanging over the door.

"Raymond," quoth he, "the King hath done us a signal honour. A messenger hath arrived with orders for me to send a trusty squire to the Countess of Montfort, who, as ye know, is beleaguere in Hennebon. 'Twill be a grave and hazardous task, yet withal one of great honour. To my mind, I cannot name a more promising messenger than thee. Art willing to take the risk?"

"To have a chance to distinguish myself in the King's service is my ardent desire, sir!"

"'Tis well. Now listen. Hennebon is on the sea coast of Brittany, betwixt the great River Loire and the town of Brest. As the foemen lie thick around it, and have also, I doubt not, a strong water-guard, 'tis a matter of stratagem rather than open work. But, in any case, this packet must be delivered into the hands of the Countess at all costs—at all costs, I repeat. I give thee a free hand in the matter. Take what men thou dost deem fit—though, methinks, the smaller the party the more chance of success."

"Methinks my father will be sufficient company for me, sir."

"Ah! as I thought. Thou hast chosen wisely. Now take this map and mark it well—'tis by the hand of the King's own guide—and get you gone to prepare for thy journey, for to-morrow morn a stout little craft will lie off the water-gate ready to bear thee over the sea."

Overjoyed at the prospects of such an adventure Raymond withdrew, and consulted with his father on the best means of getting through the cordon that was drawn round the beleaguered town.

As night drew on, father and son repaired to the little church within the walls, and for seven long hours kept an earnest vigil before the altar, praying fervently for the success of their enterprise, and invoking the protection of their patron saints against the perils of land and sea. Then, as daylight dawned, they arose, weary and stiff, to partake of food and drink ere embarking.

Tidings of their mission had already spread throughout the garrison of the castle, and when, accompanied by the Constable himself, the two travellers made their way to the water-gate, a large concourse of soldiers and members of the household flocked behind them to cheer them on their way and to wish them God-speed.

Riding easily at her hempen cable, on the first of the ebb tide, lay the staunch vessel that was to carry them across the Channel. On her stern were engraved the words *Les Trois Frères de Guernesey*, showing her to be one of the Channel Islands boats, whose crew, brave and hardy fishermen, were the best pilots obtainable.

They were, in fact, the only vessels that in those days were capable of making any pretence of sailing into the wind, and even then only, in nautical language, "full and bye." The usual type of ships, with their huge square sail, could only run before the breeze.

The skiff of *Les Trois Frères* was waiting at the little Hard, and the farewells were quickly said. The precious despatch was sewn in the hem of Raymond's jerkin, and once again the stern old knight impressed upon his squire the necessity of the utmost caution. Then he extended his hand to the lad.

"God be with thee, and bring thee safely home again. I would be loth to lose so promising a lad!" exclaimed Sir John.

"Thanks for thy good wishes, fair sir," replied Raymond. "And should I not return," he added, with a faint catch in his voice which, in spite of his stout heart, he was unable to conceal, "I pray you send this packet to the lady whose superscription appears hereon." And, thrusting into the knight's hand a bulky missive, Raymond turned quickly on his heel, to hide his rising colour, and stepped into the skiff.

The Constable watched the Guernsey bark hoist her sails, and waited till she was well on her way down towards the harbour's mouth; then he returned slowly towards his quarters.

Glancing at the packet, he deciphered with difficulty the superscription, written in a scrawling hand: "To ye richt worshippefulle Ladye Audrey Scarsdale."

"Heaven bless the lad," he mused. "Certes I am of a mind to forward this missive whether he returns or not!"

CHAPTER XI

THE CHIRURGEON OF LÉGUÉ

WITH a powerful following wind, *Les Trois Frères* made a rapid passage down the harbour, and, before Raymond fully realised the fact, the little vessel was lifting to the gentle heave of the Channel.

By midday the chalk cliffs of the Isle of Wight were all that was visible of the shores of England, and, though a careful watch was kept for hostile ships, not a sail was to be seen on the wide expanse of water.

The master, Pierre de la Corbière, was a huge-limbed, swarthy Guernseyman, who spoke in a guttural patois that was almost unintelligible to the young squire, though Redward, to whom most of the dialects of France were familiar, could make himself understood with comparative ease.

Nine men and a boy composed the crew, a large one for so small a craft; but the perils of war, added to the dangers of the sea, were a sufficient excuse for their numbers. Each man, picturesquely clothed and wearing silver earrings, was a trained pilot, and most of them had served in that capacity on board the ships that had on past occasions taken the King and his troops to France and Flanders. All of them carried short daggers or knives in their belts, while a large chest, lashed to ringbolts in the deck, contained a good supply of swords and axes.

"If this wind lasts," remarked the master, "we shall sight Cap de la Hogue within a couple of hours. Whither would ye land, good sir?"

"Nay, I know not," replied Redward. "And, moreover, I care not, so long as it be not too close to the town."

"There are the ports of Quimper, Doualan, Auray, and Morbihan," said Pierre, counting them on his fingers. "All of easy distance from Hennebon—though, perchance, we may receive a rough handling when we arrive. Ma foi! And the passage of the Chenal du Four 'Twould be quicker and safer to run into St. Brieuc."

"St. Brieuc!" exclaimed Redward, referring to a very rough plan. "Why, 'tis at least twenty leagues from the town to which we journey."

"Twenty leagues by land, as ye say," replied the Guernseyman doggedly. "But if 'tis a question of time, commend me to St. Brieuc, for if we lose the wind or have a contrary wind off Ushant, it may mean a week's buffeting in the Chenal du Four, with a score of reefs and unseen rocks on each side of us."

"As ye will, then," assented Redward; and he moved away to tell Raymond of the alteration of their plans.

But the young squire was in no fit mood to be informed. The long, swinging motion and the heat of the sun had done their work, and he lay prone on the deck in the miseries of sea-sickness. Knowing that any attempt at consolation would only aggravate the malady, the master-bowman turned away, and, leaning against the low bulwarks, gazed intently towards the still invisible French coast.

Late in the afternoon the grey cliffs of La Hogue and the dark outline of the Isle of Aurigny were sighted; but just before sundown the wind died utterly away, leaving the little craft wallowing heavily in the long swell, her sail flapping idly against the mast.

The sky, hitherto clear and cloudless, was now overcast, and away towards the southward a succession of flashes of lightning betokened an approaching storm.

Even Pierre de la Corbière, bold fisherman as he was, looked anxious, for the vessel was now beginning to feel the influence of the dreadful Race of Alderney, and, with a lack of wind and a dark night to boot, the terrors of the Race were considerably magnified.

About midnight they were in the thick of it. A slight breeze had sprung up, but barely sufficient to give the boat steerage-way. All around were tremendous broken waves, and, although Pierre stood gripping the tiller in an endeavour to avoid the heaviest breakers, the boat was urged onwards through the Race at the rate that a horse would trot, her mast threatening to snap under the irregular action of the vicious cross seas.

Throughout the tumult Raymond lay like a log, utterly unmindful of the danger, his illness having completely overcome him. His father took the precaution to lash him to the mast, and throughout that fearful night Redward remained by his side, making endless vows to the saints, which he heartily meant to fulfil should they ever again reach dry land.

Fortunately the threatened storm passed away, and as daylight broke *Les Trois Frères* was

beyond the influence of the Race, Guernsey and its attendant islands, Sark and Herm, being plainly visible.

With a skill acquired by long years of experience, the Guernseyman steered his craft between the islands, taking advantage of every current that would help to bear them south, and, before the sun was high, the Island of Jersey was abeam. The waters, too, were dotted with the sails of fishing boats, forming a pleasing contrast to the dreary waste of water they had traversed on the previous day.

Worn out and faint from the effect of his long fast, Raymond sat up and looked around, as if unable to bring himself to recall his surroundings; but after a scanty meal of dry bread and water, he felt the giddiness leave him, and with an effort he stood on his feet, gripping his father tightly for fear of falling.

"Where are we?" he asked dejectedly.

"Nearly there," replied Redward. "A sailorman thou'lt be some day, but beshrew me if thou lookest like one now! An hour ashore will make all the difference; but rest awhile, my son, for there's work enow ere long for both of us."

Late in the afternoon *Les Trois Frères* entered St. Brieuc Bay, the high ground showing up distinctly, while far away they could discern the lofty Bretagne hills, that lay between them and their destination; and, just as the sun was sinking low behind the Brittany coast, the little craft brought up under the shadow of the gloomy castle of Cesson.

Redward and the master conferred long and anxiously on the subject of how to gain the shore without observation, but at length a light dawned upon the dull mind of the Guernseyman.

"Thou hast said well," he remarked. "Of a truth we cannot make sure whether they of St. Brieuc are for the Countess of Montfort or against her. And none of us wishes to put his head into the wolf's mouth. But I know of a man—a foster-brother of mine—at whose house ye could stay until the way is clear for ye to journey across country. He dwells at Légué, but a mile from St. Brieuc, and I will go ashore and converse with him."

Silently and in the now black night the little skiff was lowered, and Pierre de la Corbière was rowed ashore by two of his men.

For nearly two hours Redward and the young squire remained on board, anxiously listening for the sound of oars, till at length the little boat shot noiselessly alongside, and the master sprang upon the deck.

"'Tis easily done, though they of Blois hold the town," he exclaimed breathlessly. "Raoul de Rohein, of whom I spoke, is willing to receive you, for which service he demands five sols. He is a barber and chirurgeon, and lives in the Rue Mortbec. Hasten, ere it be light, for we must leave on top o' the tide."

Once more the skiff, deeply laden, started for the shore. Raymond, in his light armour, had discarded his surcoat with the conspicuous cross of St. George, Redward in his harness could hardly be distinguished from a Breton, and could rely upon his knowledge of the French tongue to pass for a Gascon, or a Burgundian, as occasion served. With them went Pierre de la Corbière and a sailor, both of whom rowed while the squire and his father sat in the stern-sheets.

Half-an-hour's steady pulling and the skiff grounded on the sandy shore. Silently the three disembarked, leaving the seaman to look after the boat, and quickly they made their way towards the house of refuge.

Suddenly the master stopped. "*Mon Dieu*," he exclaimed, "*c'est les gardes!*"

Coming straight towards them was a body of halberdiers, accompanied by an officer. Retreat, without arousing suspicion, was impossible; but in a few words the ever-resourceful Redward had devised a plan. Raymond lay down in the road, his father lifted him by the shoulders while Pierre took him by the feet, and, staggering under their heavy burden, they advanced to meet the watch.

"*Halte! Qui v'la?*" demanded the officer, flashing a lantern upon the trio.

"'Tis le Sieur d'Erqui, Monsieur," replied the Guernseyman, speaking in a patois which is common between the Bretons and the Channel Islanders. "He has been roystering and brawling, and has been sore hurt."

"One cannot put old heads on young shoulders," remarked the officer, with a deprecating shrug. "What folly has he been at?"

"I cannot say, monsieur."

"Eh, bien! All the wine-shops will have the tale to-morrow! *En avant, mes enfants!*" he added to his men, and to the great relief of Raymond and his companions the watch shouldered their halberts and moved on towards St. Brieuc.

"A narrow escape," exclaimed Pierre, crossing himself. "If we were discovered, three against seven would be long odds."

"I've been in a worse fix before to-day," replied Redward sturdily. "And we could have taken them by surprise."

"Nevertheless, fighting is not in my line—on land, at least—and I am thankful it did not come to blows."

At length they arrived at a narrow street, where storeys of the houses projected beyond those below, till the uppermost ones appeared almost to meet, shutting out even the dim gloom of the now starlit sky.

With the air of a man who feels certain of his ground Pierre strode rapidly ahead, the others following closely at his heels. Presently he stopped outside a house, and drawing his dagger, struck lightly upon the door with the hilt. After a few seconds' delay they heard the sound of some one moving within, and the door was carefully unbarred and thrown open.

Pierre whispered a few words to the occupant, then, bidding his former passengers farewell, he turned on his heel and walked swiftly and silently towards the shore.

The Englishmen followed their host into a low, ill-lighted room, and for the first time they were able to see what manner of man he was.

A misshapen, undersized body, surmounted by a lean, yellow-skinned face, and furnished with a pair of long arms, the hands of which, shaking as if with ague, resembled the claws of a bird, formed the outward appearance of the barber and chirurgeon of Légué; and Raymond could not repress a shudder as he gazed upon this caricature of a human being.

"Ye are for Hennebon?" he asked in a quavering tone, rolling his lustreless eyes from one to the other.

"Ay," replied Redward, "but how, by Saint Gregoire of Brittany, didst thou know?"

"The shipman, my foster-brother, hath told me. But the money, the money?" he added, opening his withered hand.

"A curse on the shipman," growled Redward to himself, "his tongue will be our undoing. Here, take this," he added, counting out a sum of money equivalent to the five sols demanded. "Canst furnish us with a horse apiece?"

Ignoring the question, the barber counted the pieces, putting each coin between his toothless gums, as if doubtful of their quality.

"Didst hear me—respecting the use of two horses?" demanded Redward sternly.

"Yea, noble master," replied the barber. "But there are none to be had."

"None?"

"None! They have all been seized by those of Blois till the affair is over. Therefore, by necessity, ye must go afoot—and the roads are very unsafe for travellers at present, especially Englishmen bound for Hennebon!"

"A pest on your words! What would ye have us do?"

The old man advanced a step, peering with his bleared eyes into the face of the master-bowman.

"For money there is much to be had!" he croaked, a sardonic smile overspreading his withered face, while his long fingers clawed invisible heaps of gold.

"Out on thee for an arrant cheat! Give thy plan and name the price."

Slowly and deliberately, his voice hardly above a whisper, the Breton replied: "Did it ever occur to thy noble self that the dress of a leper would make the best protection?"

Redward recoiled, in spite of his hardened nerves, for sufferers from that loathsome and incurable disease were far from rare in Western Europe in those days. In France they were compelled by law to wear long grey gowns and hoods, and to carry a "barillet," or rattle, to give due warning of their approach. Under severe penalties they were forbidden to remain in the larger cities and towns, or to beg or use their rattle for the purpose of exciting pity. Thus it was common to see them wandering over the countryside in pairs, their approach being the signal for other wayfarers to pass them at a safe distance.[1]

"But the dress?" asked Redward.

"That is easily to be had. I have a stock of them in this house. And the price——"

"They have not been used?" interrupted the master-bowman anxiously.

"Certainly not, monsieur," replied the barber, with a hideous leer. "'Twould be impossible. But the price I ask—and they be of good quality—is but one livre, five sols—quite a small sum for a wealthy gentleman like monsieur!"

At that moment a loud rapping was heard. The squire and his father sprang up, and, suspecting danger, their hands flew to their sword-hilts.

With a motion of his hand, their host indicated that they should hide behind a heavy curtain; then, taking a torch from its socket, he made towards the door.

After considerable parleying the nocturnal visitor was admitted, and, through a small hole in the mouldy curtain, Redward could see him without risk. That he was a man of quality was apparent by the long furred gown he wore; and further, by the length of the garment and its rich violet colour, and the mortier or silk cap, ornamented with Valenciennes lace, worn instead of the hat affected by the bourgeois, his rank was of importance.

"Art thou Raoul de Rohein, the chirurgeon?" he asked, in a lisping voice, flourishing a musk-perfumed handkerchief as if to ward off the hideous shape before him.

"At thy service, my lord—barber, chirurgeon, apothecary, having been duly examined and licensed by the great John Pitart, surgeon of the Châtelet of Paris."

"'Tis well! I am the Sieur d'Erqui, and I am bound for the army of Charles of Blois, that lieth before Hennebon. In camps one has always the fear of plague. Therefore, believing that forewarned is forearmed, I come to thee for a remedy or, rather, a preventative—'gainst the fell disorder."

"I have the very thing, monsieur! But five sols nine deniers the box—the nine deniers being devoted to the funds of the hospital of St. Brieuc, *bien entendu!* By the holy St. Mark, the very thing! A mixture of sulphur, viper's cake, powder of pearls, confection of hyacinth, and an extract of the juice of *scorsonera*, all prepared according to the recipe of the learned John Pitart, and made into tablets covered with gold foil. One drachm three times a week, in the morning, is the dose, monsieur, and if exposed to the infection two drachms before going to bed!"

"And is that all?" inquired the Sieur anxiously, as if the presence of the barber was a presage of the plague.

"Nay, of thine own ordering there is much to be done. I perceive that monsieur carries the perfume of musk about with him. That is wrong. Instead, let him take a citron pricked with cloves. Never walk out fasting, neither drink wine immoderately; and, in the case of immediate danger, take a little theriaque; and I'll warrant Erqui will welcome its Sieur home in due course. And the fee, monsieur, is, as I said, seven sols nine deniers."

"But now thou didst ask five sols and nine deniers!"

"Two sols in addition for the advice—excellent advice, monsieur. *Merci, monsieur, et bon voyage!*"

The Sieur had gone, and Raymond and his father came from their hiding-place. Redward explained to his son, in a few words, the nature of their disguise. Once again the talon-like hand of the miserly Raoul closed over the money, and away he went to look for the required garments.

In a few moments he returned. The Englishmen donned the repulsive insignia of the leper, and took the barillets in their hands. The barber again unfastened the door and listened intently for any sound. There was none.

"Take the road through the village; it leads to Pontivy. There, perchance, ye may find horses. Fare ye well!"

And, passing out into the darkness of the night, the Englishmen began their long journey afoot, stealing silently through the almost deserted streets towards the frowning hills of Brittany.

[1] It was not until thirty years later that the hospitals of St. Lazare and St. Germain were founded in Paris for the relief of these unfortunate sufferers. On systematic steps being taken to deal with the malady, the number of its victims quickly diminished; till the scourge was practically wiped out.

CHAPTER XII

THE JOURNEY PERILOUS

LONG before the grey morn began to dawn Redward and his son had covered a couple of leagues, and were at the foot of a long range of hills. Slowly they began the ascent, and, ere the summit was reached, the light was sufficient for them to see their grotesque and horrible garb.

"A safe disguise," exclaimed Raymond, "yet right glad will I be when we can doff these garments."

"A safe disguise enough, should the barber not play us false," replied his father. "I liked not his looks, though I trow he is in no ways to blame for the cut of his face."

"But dost think that he will play us false?"

"'Tis not unlikely; so the more leagues we place between us and St. Brieuc the better. Canst get at thy sword-hilt?"

"Not easily. Wherefore dost thou ask?"

"Danger might come apace and at any time. See, I have cut a slit in my gown so that I can grasp my sword without delay. I pray thee do likewise."

On the brow of the first hill was a long farmstead, sheltered more or less by a clump of stunted pine-trees. Behind the house was an orchard, its branches laden with fruit, while amongst the trees were several cows, their heads tethered to their forefeet, after the manner of those parts, so that the animals could not tear down the branches of the fruit-trees.

"A sight to gladden the eyes of an old campaigner!" exclaimed the master-bowman, and, taking his steel cap from beneath his cowl, he stole cautiously towards the cattle, Raymond waiting behind a sheltering tree.

With the deftness born of old experience Redward did his work, and soon returned with his casque filled to the brim with warm milk. Having drunk their fill, the travellers helped themselves to a bounteous supply of fruit, and proceeded on their way, the fruit, together with some dry bread they had brought with them, making a passable breakfast.

At the bottom of the hill they entered a small village. Although still early, most of the inhabitants were astir, and the Englishmen had their first experience of the efficacy of their disguise. For directly they rattled their barillets the villagers ran hither and thither to avoid the supposed sufferers, save a horseman and an old woman. The former passed them at a distance of a few paces, throwing them a couple of deniers. With his usual presence of mind Redward stooped, picked up the coins, and louted to the donor. The woman threw them a rusk loaf, and this was caught and quickly concealed beneath the sheltering cloaks.

Once clear of the village they mended their pace, and, with the exception of a pair of shepherds, and a peasant clattering along in his heavy sabots, not a soul did they meet till close on midday, when the travellers arrived at a cross-road, where the monotony of the outlook was broken by four avenues of trees.

"I would fain have rested here awhile," exclaimed Redward. "But with that for company methinks we shall do better if we get about a bow-shot further on!"

"A corpse?"

"Ay, lad; a malefactor hanged close to the scene of his crime. See, already the crows have begun their work."

With averted heads the twain passed the gallows; but on giving a glance down the cross-road they saw a sight that filled them with misgiving, for plodding wearily along were two figures dressed like themselves!

"Lepers, indeed!" exclaimed Redward. "My faith, they would bear us company."

Waving their arms to attract and arrest their supposed fellow-sufferers, the two grey-robed men quickened their pace, but, directly the Englishmen had gained the cover of the tree-lined road, they, too, hastened to avoid being overtaken, so that by the time the lepers had turned the corner, Raymond and his father were some distance ahead.

"We more than hold our own," quoth Redward, glancing over his shoulder. "Directly we shake them off we'll have a well-earned rest."

It was as he said. The well-knit frames of the Englishmen were vastly superior to the diseased bodies of the lepers, and long before the bottom of the hill was reached their two pursuers were

but dimly visible on the dusty road.

Once again the road led upwards. Not a village was to be seen, only a vast undulating plain, unbroken except for an occasional clump of trees, while in the distance the blue outlines of a lofty range of hills showed that some stiff climbing would be necessary ere Hennebon was in sight.

An hour later and they had all but gained the ridge of the next hill. By the roadside was a heather-covered bank, while between a mass of rocks a spring gushed forth, the water making a pleasant sound in the ears of the weary travellers.

Father and son drank at the spring, then clambering over the bank, lay down on the springy heather, where, without being seen, they could command the road for nearly a league.

"'Tis quite evident that we can outpace those poor wretches," said Raymond, stretching out his limbs to their fullest extent in appreciation of his natural bed. "Here we can rest in comfort till they draw nigh; then, refreshed, we can hasten onwards once more."

For nearly an hour they remained, sleep all but claiming them. Not a word was spoken, though Redward gave an occasional grunt as he raised himself on his elbow at intervals to watch the advancing lepers.

The heat, too, was terrific, the sun beating down with fierce violence on their unprotected resting-place.

Suddenly Raymond raised himself and looked along the road they had just traversed. There were the two grey-robed figures moving slowly up the hill, but away in the distance the sun glittered upon a swiftly-moving mass of steel, followed by a thick cloud of dust.

"Soldiers!" he exclaimed.

Redward raised himself. "I like it not," he exclaimed. "They are following us. That rogue of a barber hath betrayed us. Lie low, Raymond, and let them pass; I perceive 'twill mean a journey by night for us."

Stretching side by side, and concealing their hoods with sprays of heather, father and son waited and watched. The two lepers were within two hundred paces ere they heard the thunder of the horses' hoofs behind them. With a cry of terror one of the twain turned and fled; the other, ignorant of the intentions of the pursuing horsemen, held his ground, flourishing his rattle with the vigour that danger bestowed upon him.

Like a flash the foremost soldier was upon him; a back-handed sweeping cut with his sword and the grey-robed figure was dashed to the earth, and ere his companion had come level with the spot where the Englishmen were concealed, he was transfixed by a lance-thrust and was trampled beneath the horses' hoofs.

With wild cries of exultation the troop of horsemen reined in their steeds and surveyed the result of their fell work.

"Quickly, Geoffroi! Strip those cloaks from the bodies of these accursed English and search them for concealed papers," ordered their leader. "By St. Denis, 'tis a smart piece of work, though I little thought the rogues would have died so tamely!"

The soldier addressed dismounted, handed his still reeking lance to a comrade, and bent over the corpse of the man he had slain. With a quick motion he tore aside the robe. But the next instant, uttering a shriek of terror, he jumped backwards, covering his eyes with his hands as if to ward off a blow.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the captain, craning over the neck of his charger. "What have we done? They are in truth real lepers! Dolt of a barber! A curse upon Raoul de Rohein! He hath deceived us! Is it the same with the other?"

The first victim had fallen on his back, and his hood, stained with his blood, had slipped from off his head, disclosing the repulsive disease-eaten features of a man whose malady was far advanced.

"Stand back, all of you!" shouted the captain, beside himself with rage and mortification. "Stand back! Do thou, Jehan, cast thy sword and its sheath from thee lest thou die! And do thou, Geoffroi, ride fifty paces behind us, and hold communication with no man till the law respecting contagion is complied with. Now back to the town with all speed, *mes enfants*, for I have an account to settle with Maitre Raoul! What will they say of us when they hear we have vanquished nought but a pair of lepers?"

The troop galloped away down the dusty road towards St. Brieuc, the unfortunate soldier following in the rear, his face ashen with terror at the thought of the loathsome death he had courted, while two mottled grey corpses, a discarded sword, and the imprints of the hoofs of the cavalry alone remained to mark the scene of so swift and terrible a tragedy.

Shuddering at the thought of their narrow escape, Raymond and his father rose, and with

averted faces, left behind them the bodies of the ill-fated men, and pursued their journey. Not till they were two leagues from the spot did they halt; then, selecting a secluded coppice, they threw themselves on the ground and were soon deep in dreamless slumber.

The sun had set and the stars were beginning to twinkle in the darkening sky ere the travellers awoke stiff and cramped with lying on the bare earth; but stern duty urged them onwards, and with swinging stride they resumed their way.

Along the deserted highway, past the slumbering village of Ploeue they jogged, too discomforted and weary even to engage in conversation.

About two hours after midnight they were startled by hearing the sound of horsemen behind them. Without hesitation Redward sprang to the side of the road, dragging the squire with him; then kneeling down and placing his ear to the ground he listened intently.

"'Tis but a pair of horsemen," he whispered. "See to thy sword, for there will be work afoot for us!"

The riders had now slackened down to a slow trot, and by their conversation the Englishmen recognised that one of them was an old acquaintance—none other than the Sieur d'Erqui.

"Once have we met him, and once at least hath he done us a service," muttered the bowman in a low tone. "Methinks yet another service will he render us. Now, follow me!"

Giving a tremendous salute with his rattle, Redward, with Raymond close at his heels, sprang into the road and barred the Sieur's way. Taken aback, his face livid with superstitious fear, d'Erqui reined in his steed, while his companion, evidently a retainer, did likewise.

"Dismount, monsieur, lest I lay hands on thee and thou diest a horrible death," exclaimed Redward in a sepulchral voice, relying on the cowardice of the foppish Frenchman to gain his end.

Without a word the Sieur leapt, or, rather, rolled, from the saddle and cowered down in the darkness by the roadside. Seizing the horse's bridle by the left hand, the soldier advanced towards the other horseman.

Made of sterner stuff, the latter had recovered from the first surprise, and, perceiving that he had no supernatural foes to deal with, he drew his sword and rode towards his challenger. Avoiding with ease a terrific sweep of the heavy weapon, Redward returned the blow without effect, but, ere the man could shorten his sword, the young squire rushed in, seized him round the waist and hurled him from the saddle to the ground, where he had enough reason to remain quiet.

It was the work of a moment for the Englishmen to mount the captured steeds, then, giving a parting salute to the discomforted Sieur, they pricked the horses with the points of their weapons, and urged them into a brisk canter.

"Bravely done, Raymond," exclaimed his father. "It will fare ill with us now if Hennebon sees us not by to-morrow's dawn!"

"But how can we ride in this disguise?" asked Raymond. "It is not the custom for lepers to go about on horseback."

"There is a good two hours ere daybreak, and by that time, I trow, we shall be at least five leagues from here. Then, I hope, the saints being with us, that thou wilt be the Sieur d'Erqui, and I his man!"

"The Sieur d'Erqui?"

"Yea, and why not? Thou hast played the part of the Sieur before to good purpose, and why not now? But, oh for a plentiful repast! Dry bread and apples are but a sorry meal when one is used to English beef!"

Maintaining a hot pace the travellers rode through the night; then just as day was breaking they halted, watered their horses, and, after hobbling them, turned them out to graze. They then divested themselves of their hideous cloaks and hoods, rolled the garments into a small compass, and resumed the rôle of soldiers.

About eight o'clock they arrived at the village of Pontivy, and reining-in at the inn, Redward dismounted and strode up to mine host, who saw in every armed man a spoiler, whether he were for Montfort or for Blois.

"Hark ye, garçon!" exclaimed the master-bowman, "thy best food and wine in plenty, and provender for our horses! And, as thou valuest thy hide, say not one word to my master, the worthy Sieur d'Erqui, for he is in a bad mood, and woe betide the man who addresses him!"

Their steeds were led away, and Raymond and his father were shown into the largest room of the inn, while the waiting-maids, urged by the host, bustled about preparing the meal.

Raymond did not belie the character his father had given him as the Sieur, but his reticence was due to bodily fatigue. For, while awaiting the meal, fitful sleep claimed him, but it was only to awaken with a start as his head fell forward on his chest.

Never was a repast better enjoyed, and never was the desire to sleep so irresistible, but Redward, though weary himself, was inexorable.

"Maybe swift pursuit is already at our heels," said he. "So onward we must go. Holà!" he shouted, hammering on the trestled board with his sword-hilt.

In answer to the summons the host appeared, trembling in his shoes.

"How is the army ordered before Hennebon And where shall my master find the banners of the Duke Charles?"

"Sir, report hath it that the force of Blois lieth thickest about where this road approaches the town, so, without doubt, the banners of the Duke are there."

Throwing down a coin to pay for their repast (whereat the host marvelled greatly, seeing it was not the custom of the times), Redward followed the supposed Sieur from the inn; their horses were brought round, and soon they were clattering over the pavé of the village towards the open country.

Redward glanced backwards several times to see if there were any signs of pursuit, but to his great satisfaction none could be detected.

"Thou hast heard what the rogue said the foe lie thickest along this road? Should any follow us we have laid a false scent, for I do not wish to ride straight into the camp of Blois. To that end let us turn off along the road to Aurai, and thence follow the coast to the walls of Hennebon."

Accordingly they turned aside at a cross-road, having learned from a peasant that it led to the town of Aurai. A league or so farther on they again left the road and rested in a wood, sleeping without molestation till late in the afternoon.

Darkness was drawing on as they struck the road between Hennebon and Aurai, about a bow-shot from the latter place. Avoiding the town the travellers turned towards their goal, now but a short four leagues distance.

"We must be doubly cautious, Raymond," said his father, "for methinks another troop of horsemen is approaching."

Once again they withdrew from the road, and, hiding beneath the shadow of some tall trees, they waited. Nearer and nearer came the sound, till, like a whirlwind, a large body of knights and mounted men-at-arms dashed by in the darkness, and, with a thunder of hoofs and a cloud of dust that rose slowly in the still night air, they vanished into the gloom.

"By St. George! What doth it mean?" exclaimed Raymond.

"Nay, I cannot say, save it be they of Blois fleeing from those of Montfort; every man was riding for dear life, and, mark you, with loose rein and hot spur!"

"Then onwards, father! An hour will decide whether we reach Hennebon unscathed, or have to fight our way in."

Almost before they were aware of the fact they rode right into the camp of the besiegers, but, instead of being instantly challenged and taken prisoners, it was like a progress through a city of the dead. Most of the tents were cut down, several of the temporary wooden huts still smouldered, while here and there their horses had to step aside to avoid treading on the corpse of an unarmoured man.

Still wondering at this unlooked-for sight, the Englishmen spurred on till they drew rein outside the twin towers that guarded the gate of Hennebon. A hoarse voice challenged them, and torches flickered on the battlements as the garrison stood to their arms.

"Open! We would see the Countess!" roared Redward, standing in his stirrups.

"Who are ye, and whence come ye?" was the reply.

"Messengers from the King of England."

Cries of delight greeted this announcement, the drawbridge fell with a ponderous clang, the great gates were thrown wide open, and, conscious that a great duty had been well carried out, Raymond, followed by his father, entered the town of Hennebon.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RELIEF OF HENNEBON

"THY name and style, fair sir?"

"My name is Raymond Buckland, squire to Sir John Hacket, Constable of the King's Castle of Portchester and Governor of the town of Portsmouth. Lead me, I pray, to her grace the Countess of Montfort, for I have a letter which I have to give her by my own hand."

"Nay," was the reply, "that cannot be—at least not at this moment. The Countess led a sortie yesterday at noon, and, alas, hath not yet returned. I, Henri Barbenoire, seigneur of the castle of Ploeac and Seneschal, in the absence of the Countess of this town will receive thy message."

"That cannot be," replied Raymond courteously, "for to the Countess alone must I hand this letter."

Barbenoire, a Breton whole-heartedly devoted to his mistress, did not press the point, but ordering a hasty meal to be prepared, remained with the young squire. It was but a sorry repast, for already the supplies were low, nevertheless Raymond did justice to the simple fare, listening awhile to the narrative of the events of the siege.

Cheered by the touching confidence that the heroic Countess had given to the townsmen of Hennebon, the garrison had fought bravely and well. The Countess herself wore armour, and rode on a huge warhorse through the narrow streets, encouraging her people to make good defence, reminding them of the help she hoped would be forthcoming from the King of England. Nor did she spare the womenfolk, for she caused them to discard their long trains and heavy skirts and to don short kirtles so that they could move with freedom. This done, they were employed in carrying stones and arrows to the walls to replenish the missiles of the defenders, and so emboldened were they by the example of their mistress that the women did not hesitate to hurl the stones down upon the invaders.

At length one day the Frenchmen massed outside the northern wall for a grand assault, and, ascending a lofty tower, the Countess perceived that their camp was empty. Instantly calling together a body of knights and mounted men-at-arms the lady mounted her steed and, placing herself at their head, rode straight for the French camp, cutting down tents and setting fire to everything that would readily burn.

The watchers on the walls saw the French host desist from the assault and retire to intercept the Countess. Finding herself cut off from the town, she called in her followers, and rode furiously away to Aural, hotly pursued by Sir Louis d'Espagne, the second in command of Charles of Blois.

Thus it was that Raymond had seen the Countess and her troops pass by him without knowledge of their identity; and now the garrison was ignorant of the fate of their beloved leader, none knowing whether she had been killed or taken, or whether she had baffled pursuit.

On the morning following the arrival of Raymond and his father, the host of Blois still encompassed the town, yet no attempt was made to renew the assault.

The two Englishmen were enrolled as members of the garrison, and as the days went past they with their foreign comrades gazed eagerly from the battlements in the hope of seeing the banners of the returning Countess.

On the fifth day, Barbenoire had ascended the lofty east tower. Despair for his mistress had filled his soul, yet, inspiring the townsfolk by word and deed, he gave no sign of misgiving, being resolved to hold Hennebon as long as a single fighting-man was left.

The rising sun dazzled his vision, but a movement on the skyline riveted his attention. Calling one of his captains, he pointed out the spot, and both agreed that it was a body of troops approaching.

A very short time sufficed to spread the news, though Barbenoire commanded that no demonstration should be made lest it should attract the notice of the besiegers.

Soon it was beyond doubt that the Countess was returning. Collecting a body of one hundred archers and spearmen, the Seneschal ordered them to make a feint sortie from the western side while the gateway on the opposite side was thrown open to receive the Countess. Then, when safely within the walls with all her company and an additional force of five hundred spears, the redoubtable Châtelaine was greeted with a great noise of trumpets to the cheers of the delighted townsfolk.

The besiegers, finding themselves tricked, could not refrain from praising the boldness and skill of the Countess of Montfort. Nevertheless, they advanced to the assault, and the struggle waxed fierce until noon, when, unable to gain a lodgment, the partisans of Blois sullenly

retreated to their camp.

Directly the attack was repulsed, Raymond hastened to the presence of the Countess. She had now divested herself of her bascinet and steel jupon, and the young squire saw before him a tall, stately lady of about thirty years of age. Her finely chiselled face was crowned by a wealth of auburn hair, which, ruffled by the removal of her headpiece, served to hide the somewhat lofty brow.

Raymond could but marvel that such a truly feminine form possessed the courage and endurance of a man, and his astonishment was increased when she addressed him in low, sweet tones, for he had heard of the Countess's soul-stirring speech, when, holding her little son by the hand, she had so successfully appealed to the chivalrous instincts of her knights and to the loyalty of the townsfolk.

Concealing her agitation at the arrival of such important news from England, the Countess broke the seals and opened the letter. Her face flushed with pleasure as she read its contents.

"Hearken, my fair lords, to the message of our noble overlord the King of England," she cried, turning to those who were with her. "Four score ships by now are on their way to aid us, and ere long three thousand men, under Sir Robert of Artois and Sir Walter Manny, will be on the heels of our enemies."

Shouts of exultation greeted this announcement, and, the news quickly spreading, the whole town was given over to rejoicing.

But meanwhile active preparations were being made by Charles of Blois to make another general assault, and the arrival of some formidable siege-engines enabled him to breach the walls in several places; while the garrison, kept in a state of constant alarm, were worn with toil and endless vigil.

Every morning at sunrise, for nearly two months, the Countess would ascend the loftiest tower in Hennebon and gaze towards the distant Cape of Ushant in the hope of catching sight of the sails of the English fleet. But her expectations remained unrealised, for seaward the horizon was unbroken, while around the town lay the close lines of her relentless foes.

At length one of her partisans, the Bishop of Leon, informed her that his nephew, Henri de Rohan, who was in the camp of Blois, desired to hold converse with her; and, being granted safe conduct, the knight entered the town for the purpose of inducing the besieged to surrender, promising an honourable capitulation, with permission for the garrison to withdraw.

For a while it seemed as if De Rohan's words would gain the day, till the Countess, supported by Barbenoire, again harangued her knights, and the ecclesiastic withdrew discomfited.

Thereupon the French advanced to the grand assault, while the besieged caught up their arms and silently yet resolutely awaited their approach.

But ere the archers could begin their hail of arrows which was to open the attack, the ringing voice of the Countess was heard from the summit of the tower:—

"Voilà, le secours! Voilà le secours anglais! Courage, enfans; nous sommes sauvés!"

"Will they be in time?" asked Raymond anxiously, as he stood by his father on the shattered wall.

"If we can but make good the battlements for one hour all will be well. Canst see aught of the ships?"

"Not as yet."

"Then heaven forfend the Countess be not mistaken. Stand to it, Raymond, for here they come!"

All conversation was stopped by the on-coming foemen. The squire closed his visor, and crouching behind his shield, awaited the attack. Under cover of the archers the men-at-arms advanced. Though some fell before the darts of the besieged, the main body pressed steadily onward, till they reached the breach in the shattered masonry.

The impact of the two forces was terrific; men went down on both sides, and, as sword and lance were shattered, axes, mauls, and maces continued the deadly work. The air was rent with the clash of arms, the shouts of the combatants, and the groans of the dying; but the townsfolk held their own, and after an hour's desperate struggle the attacking party retired.

"'Tis hot work!" exclaimed Redward breathlessly, throwing down a heavy axe and removing his steel cap to cool his heated head. "Run and see if our comrades are yet in sight."

To gain the summit of the tower was the work of a moment, and to the squire's great delight he saw the English ships already within easy distance of the harbour, their sails bellying out before the favouring breeze, and the water churned by the lash of the oars.

"They come! They come!" he shouted joyously.

"And so doth the foe," replied Redward grimly. "Haste back to the breach, for, by St. George, 'tis touch-and-go with Hennebon!"

Again the attackers advanced, one knight, utterly regardless of his life, urging his horse towards the gap in the wall. Crouching, with lance in rest, the Frenchman spurred over the shattered stones, received yet recked not a hail of arrows, and rode furiously towards Raymond, who, sword in hand, awaited his approach.

It would have gone hardly with the young squire had it not been for the unevenness of the ground, for the horse stumbled over a loose stone, throwing its rider heavily on the ground.

In spite of the weight of his armour and the shock of his fall, the knight, a man of gigantic strength, rose to his feet, dropping his lance and wrenching his mace from the saddle-bow. As he did so Raymond struck him a heavy blow with his weapon, but the steel turned against the crest of his casque and was shattered close to the hilt. In a moment the mace beat down the squire's shield and descended upon his head, and without a cry the squire dropped senseless to the ground.

But his fall was speedily avenged. Wielding his heavy axe, Redward sprang forward and smote at the Frenchman's helm. Realising his danger, the knight sprang aside; but, though avoiding a fatal blow, he did not escape, for the axe, glancing off the crest, caught the projecting visor. Unable to stand the strain, the leathern laces of his helmet burst, and the bascinet, though prevented by the camail from falling off, was turned back to front, so that the unfortunate wearer was unable to see through the openings of the visor.

Dazed by the blow and in total darkness, the Frenchman staggered blindly about, still striking feeble and aimless blows, till the defenders, with taunts and execrations, beat him to the ground and despatched him with their axes.

Meanwhile Redward bent over the prostrate form of his son, but ere he could ascertain whether the blow had been fatal the main attack had commenced. Gallantly the besieged met the shock; many fell on both sides, and for the space of a quarter of an hour the issue hung in the balance.

At length, reinforced by a band of knights under Louis d'Espagne, the assailants bore back all before them. Barbenoire, fighting gallantly to the last, fell covered with wounds. Redward, standing over his son's body, kept back the press for a time, till, borne down by the weight of numbers, he was struck to the earth, but ere he lost consciousness he was dimly aware of the sound of English voices and the renewed clash of arms.

At the critical moment the long-expected aid had arrived!

Once more the tide of battle turned, and the followers of the House of Blois, unable to withstand the fierce onslaught of the English, fled panic-stricken before the reinforcements, the knights and mounted men-at-arms of Sir Walter Manny riding down all who came in their way.

When at length the victorious Manny returned from the pursuit, the Countess of Montfort came forth and warmly greeted him.

"Of a truth, fair sir," she exclaimed, as the warrior knelt and kissed her hand, "I cannot but liken you to the Archangel Michael sent from heaven in answer to our prayers!"

Meanwhile the inhabitants of the town were busy pillaging the camp of their enemies, bringing in additional food supplies and tending their own wounded—for those of their assailants who were left in their hands were mercilessly despatched, save where their rank made them likely subjects for ransom.

Redward and his son were found surrounded by the bodies of friend and foe, senseless but still breathing. The Countess had been apprised of the fall of her gallant messenger, and had ordered the young squire and his father to be carried into her own house within the castle. Sir Walter Manny himself also came frequently to see how fared the forerunner of his arrival, and brought with him his own chirurgeon to attend the two.

For four days Raymond lay unconscious, till one morning his scattered senses returned, and he opened his eyes to find himself in a roomy apartment overlooking the town walls. Instead of the clash of arms the sun was shining brightly and the birds were singing. Beside him were the Countess and a group of Englishmen of quality; a little distance off lay Redward on a soft couch, his gaze fixed intently upon his son.

Then the young squire realised that Hennebon was saved, and that his father was still with him; and with a sigh of contentment he fell into a deep and natural slumber.

The wounds of both Raymond and his father were severe, and a considerable time elapsed ere they were capable of moving about, while their complete recovery, in spite of the kindly climate of fair Brittany, was a tedious business. Thus they missed the remaining portion of the Brittany

campaign, in which Robert of Artois captured Vannes, and was soon afterwards driven from that town by a surprise attack on the part of some Breton adherents of Charles of Blois.

Shortly after, the existing treaty between England and France was terminated, for during the struggle in Brittany a truce was nominally in force, the armies of England and France ostentatiously supporting the claim of the rival dukes; but on the expiration of the treaty war was openly resumed between the two great nations.

The King of England landed at Marbain with 12,000 men, and simultaneously laid siege to Vannes, Rennes, and Mantes, but the triple task was beyond his power, and under the influence of the Pope's legates he agreed to observe a truce for three years.

Immediately following this pacific arrangement King Edward re-embarked for his own dominions, and with the army went Raymond and Redward, the former despondent at the news of the truce, regarding it as being fatal to his cherished hopes of winning the golden spurs of knighthood.

CHAPTER XIV

RAYMOND'S ERRAND

NEARLY four years have elapsed since the young squire's mission to Hennebon. They have been years of comparatively uneventful waiting. To him the dark clouds of unkind fate showed no signs of the silver lining of good fortune, for he fully realised that until he had risen above the rank of squire he dare not hope for the hand of the fair Lady Audrey Scarsdale.

Thus, there was nothing to do but wait patiently, under the orders of kindly Sir John Hacket, fervently hoping for the call to arms that would give him the opportunities of winning his spurs upon the soil of France.

The three years' truce had been ill-kept. Already the Earl of Derby had crossed into Guienne, but news, though scanty, was far from reassuring, and daily the Constable of Portchester was awaiting the summons to assemble his men and march to join the King's forces at Southampton.

One afternoon, in the month of May 1346, the watch on the keep of the castle perceived a man limping towards the gate. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and bronzed-faced, yet bent with physical infirmity, being compelled to use a rough crutch to aid his tottering footsteps.

"Ho, Watkin!" exclaimed one of the soldiers to a comrade. "Surely that looks like Long Edney, of Wickham, yet methinks I am mistaken."

"If't be, then, certes, he hath made a grievous error; for he went to Guienne, hoping to return speedily with much booty. This man hath pain to carry himself, let alone the plunder he hath not!"

"'Tis Edney, of a surety. See, he waves his hand to us!"

In a few moments the luckless man-at-arms was within the castle, surrounded by a crowd of rough sympathisers. Hearing the sound of voices, Sir John Hacket appeared, and, recognising the man as one who had left his service some time previously to join the forces under Lord Norwich, sent Raymond to lead Edney into his presence.

"'Tis a sad home-coming for thee," exclaimed the knight sympathetically. "Yet Heaven knows there are many such. The highways are thick with broken soldiers."

"Ay, Sir John," returned the man despondently. "A bolt through the thigh is a sorry return for my trouble, and not a silver penny's worth of spoil to show for it! Nevertheless, the saints helping me, I hope to adventure myself again in this matter."

"And with better luck," rejoined the Constable. "And, now tell me, how goes the war in Guienne?"

"Faith, it goeth against us in the main. Pembroke and Sir Walter Manny are shut up in Aiguillon, and when I left Bordeaux they had sent urgent appeals for succour. For my part I know but little of Aiguillon, being besieged with Lord Norwich in Angoulême."

"And how fared Norwich?"

"As crafty as ever."

"How so?"

"The Duke of Normandy pressed him sorely, so that the French looked likely to take the town by escalade. Thereupon Norwich beat a parley. 'How, now!' exclaimed the Duke. 'Dost wish to give in?' 'Nay,' replied our leader, 'but as to-morrow is the Feast of the Virgin, to whom we both bear great devotion, I desire a cessation of strife for that day.' 'Right willingly,' replied the Duke, and Norwich, nigh bursting with badly-concealed merriment, descended from the walls. That night he ordered us to prepare our baggage, and early next morning we marched out straight for the enemy's camp. The Frenchmen flew to arms, but Norwich, forbidding our men to draw, sent a knight to remind the Duke of his promise."

"And what did the Duke?"

"He kept his word. 'I see the sly fox has outwitted us, but let us be content with gaining the town,' he exclaimed; and right between the lines of astonished Frenchmen we marched, without losing as much as a single stick."

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed Sir John. "A clever trick, but, methinks, 'twill not pass another time. And Pembroke hath sent an urgent message to the King for aid, didst thou say?"

"Ay, directly our ship tied up alongside the quay at Southampton the messenger rode off at headlong speed to Windsor, although he could scarce keep his seat by reason of sea-sickness."

"Then, Raymond," exclaimed the Constable, turning to his squire, "the summons will be here anon. But, mark my word, this will be no child's-play, for, methinks, the King will be loth to let Guienne slip through his fingers. And now, bring me the tally of the bows, arrows, and spears, for no time must be lost."

Joyfully the squire hastened away to get the required information, and the castle was soon alive with excitement at the thought of active service.

The old knight was not wrong; the call to arms came, and, thanks to his sagacity and forethought, the Constable was soon ready to take the field. Ere June had arrived Sir John's company had marched into Southampton to await the King's good pleasure.

Raymond saw great changes as he gazed around the old familiar place. The walls had been raised and strengthened; larger houses had taken the place of the charred ruins that the French invaders had left behind them, while a fleet of large ships showed that Southampton had quickly recovered from the horrors of pillage.

The fleet was typical of the resources of Hampshire, for Southampton contributed twenty-one ships manned by 476 mariners, Lymington sent nine, Portsmouth five, Leepe, Newtown, and Yarmouth two each, while the county of Dorset supplied twenty-five vessels, of which Weymouth sent twenty-one and Poole four.

Farther down the Water towards Hythe lay a larger fleet, composed of vessels from the Cinque Ports, London, Ipswich, and Great Yarmouth, while towards the Netley side were the West Country ships from Dartmouth, Sutton, Fowey, and Falmouth.

Altogether there were not far short of eight hundred sail, assembled in less than fourteen days, to bear across the Channel the huge army destined for the conquest of France.

On Midsummer Day, the Feast of St. John the Baptist, the news came that the King had left the Queen in the care of his cousin, the Earl of Kent, and was on the road to Southampton.

Instantly the work of embarking the troops, horses, and baggage began, and never before did the good townsmen of Southampton behold such a fair and martial sight. Throughout the long June day the task proceeded, and a seemingly endless procession wended through the West Gate, each division having its appointed order.

The Portsmouth ships were to form the rearguard, so that it was the duty of the Constable of Portchester to embark last of all. From his quarters, close to the West Gate, Sir John watched the embarkation, pointing out to his squires the respective devices and banners of the various contingents.

From all parts of the kingdom, save the northern counties, whose men were required to watch the restive Scots, had this army foregathered, the flower of chivalry and the stoutest of the yeomen of England. There were the lions rampant of the Percies, Mowbrays, and d'Albini, each distinguishable by the "field," the ruddy chevrons of the de Claves, the gilded cockle-shell of the de Malets, and the more complicated devices of de Montfichet, Quince, Fortibus, de Bohun, de. Vere, and Fitz-Walter. Each baron had his following of men-at-arms and archers, the former having to lower the points of their long slender spears as they passed beneath the vaulted archway. After the feudal army, numbering four thousand men-at-arms and ten thousand archers, came a horde of fierce-eyed, hairy men of short stature, each armed with a long knife and a double-bladed axe.

"Ah," exclaimed Sir John, noting the look of inquiry on Raymond's face. "Heaven help the Frenchman who falls wounded in the field, for these are the Welsh levies. I have marked their method of fighting before to-day, and, certes, I am of no mind to praise them for it."

The Welshmen were succeeded by a straggling body of tall, gaunt-looking men, armed with a small shield and short spear. They lacked the grim stolidity of the Englishmen, and marched with merry laugh and careless jest uttered in a strange tongue.

"The Irish levies from Leinster," remarked the Constable, "good-natured in peace, honest fighting-men, yet terrible when roused. I can recall a little affair before Cadsand, but 'tis too long to relate at the moment. But hark!"

Redoubled cheering echoed down the narrow sloping street, and the knight and his squires strained their ears to ascertain the cause. The last of the troops had passed, yet still the archers who lined the route pushed back the excited townsmen with their six-foot staves.

"The King!" exclaimed the Constable.

Attended by a number of lords and barons, Edward rode slowly through the crowded street, acknowledging the acclamations by the faintest inclination of his head. He was then in his thirty-fourth year, yet the cares of his kingdom and the claims of his Lombard and Flemish creditors had made him look considerably older. A longish dark beard partially concealed a hard, firm mouth, while his dark piercing eyes, glittering beneath his broad forehead and bushy eyebrows, betokened a war-like temperament. His coat of plate-armour, fashioned in the latest style, was

covered by a surcoat, upon which were embroidered his newly-assumed arms, the fleur-de-lis of France, quartered with the silver lions of England, while a velvet cap took the place, for the time being, of his plumed bascinet.

At his right hand rode his fifteen-year-old son, Edward, afterwards known to fame as The Black Prince; while at his left rode Lord Godfrey of Harcourt, the King's much-esteemed councillor.

Burning with ill-concealed impatience Edward, with his suite, embarked that very evening, and ere morning dawned the fleet had left the shelter of Southampton Water, and was heading westward for the English Channel, the Portsmouth ships, with the Constable and his company, rolling sluggishly in the rear, about a league astern of the main body.

With the favouring north-easterly breeze all went well, and steadily the floating army neared the coasts of France; but on the third day came a flat calm, so that the ships were compelled to use their sweeps to prevent themselves drifting into one another.

The calm was succeeded by a strong south-westerly gale, so that all advantage of the previous favourable breeze was totally lost; and, unable to make headway, the fleet was driven back towards the English coast, taking shelter in the Cornish harbour of Fowey.

For six days the fleet lay weather-bound, till Sir Godfrey of Harcourt counselled the King to give up the idea of landing in Gascony.

"Sire," he exclaimed, "Normandy is one of the plenteous countries of the world. On jeopardy of my head, if thou wouldst land there, there is none to resist thee. The people of Normandy are not used to war, and all the knights and squires of the country are now at the siege before Aiguillon."

The advice, though hardly correct, the King took, and, the wind moderating and blowing more in their favour, the fleet again put to sea, and reached La Hogue without further incident.

Arrived on the coast of Normandy, the English began to make a revengeful attack on the ports of Cherbourg and Barfleur, the ships of these ports having harried the coasts of England in times past, and with fierce shouts the soldiers pillaged the defenceless towns, burning every ship they found in the harbours.

One night, Sir John Hacket, who had been in audience with the King, returned to his quarters in high glee.

"Raymond," he exclaimed, "the King hath again done signal honour to my Company. News hath reached us that the Count of Tancarville, who is the most puissant noble in Normandy, lieth at a hunting lodge near the village of Brique, within five leagues of the camp. He hath, we are told, no knowledge of our presence. Could we but entrap him and bring him a prisoner into the camp, it will clear the way for our advance, for, bereft of the counsel of the Count of Tancarville, all Normandy would be masterless. Now, consider; I have a free hand in this small matter, and can use the whole of my Company to my advancement. What think ye? Is it better to take but a few mounted men, or adventure with them all?"

"In my humble opinion, Sir John," replied Raymond, "the matter is best undertaken by but a few. Too many would give alarm. A few would, in the case of our plans miscarrying, be but little missed, and if they do succeed, then the greater the honour!"

"Thy words do thee credit, Raymond, and, by St. George, a better leader for the enterprise than thou I cannot choose. Take your choice of mounted men, and begone. A guide is even now detained in the camp, who will lead you to Brique. Now, remember, alive or dead, bring the Count into the camp, but alive by choice."

Quickly the young squire went about preparations for his mission. Five trusted men-at-arms were chosen, and their arms and horses carefully inspected by their young leader, who resolved to leave nothing to chance. Then, placing their guide, a heavy-limbed Norman peasant, upon a spare horse, and attaching a light chain to his wrist (one end being held by a soldier with orders to despatch the man at the first sign of treachery), the little party left the camp, passed the outlying cordon of sentries, and plunged into the darkness.

By degrees the horsemen became accustomed to the gloom, and, riding closely together, with the guide in their midst, they maintained a brisk pace towards their goal, and ere long the camp-fires of their comrades were lost to sight behind them.

The night was sultry; not a leaf stirred on the branches of the trees that lined the road, and a dull oppressive feeling pervaded the atmosphere.

Suddenly the faint rumble of distant thunder was borne to their ears, and instinctively the horsemen glanced at one another, for a thunder-storm was looked upon by the mediaeval soldier as a harbinger of evil.

Nearer and nearer came the storm, till the lightning flashed across their path, illuminating the horizon with its sulphurous glow, but as yet not a drop of rain had fallen.

Meanwhile their guide had kept perfectly silent, answering the questions put to him with either a nod or a shake of his head. Though Raymond had acquired a smattering of the French language he was unable to understand the patois of the peasant, so one of the men-at-arms was deputed to put any necessary question to their impassive guide.

At length they reached the confines of a dense forest, and hardly had they gained the dangerous shelter of the trees than down came the rain, accompanied by almost incessant flashes of lightning.

Dazzled by the appalling light, and almost deafened by the sharp detonating rattle of the thunder, the little party rode in fear and trembling till their guide stopped them with a motion of his hand, and indicating an almost invisible avenue that forked from the road they were following, exclaimed, "V'là, m'sieurs!"

"Ask him how far it is to the Count's hunting-lodge!" exclaimed Raymond.

"He says 'not far.'"

"Certes, I am as wise as before. Ask him again." The man mumbled something unintelligible, then held up two fingers.

"A murrain on his thick-headedness; fair Sir, I cannot rightly tell what he doth mean."

"Then be cautious. Remember, directly we catch sight of the place, one man remains with the guide and the rest follow me!"

The path was too narrow for two to ride abreast, so they proceeded in single file, the guide leading, with a soldier, leaning over his crupper to give the necessary length of chain, following closely behind and through the avenue, so dense that even the lightning almost failed to illumine, Raymond's party rode on their desperate errand.

CHAPTER XV

TRAPPED!

BEFORE the raiders had proceeded very far a short exclamation from one of the men-at-arms caused them to pull up sharply.

"What's amiss?" demanded Raymond in a whisper.

"The peasant's horse hath gone lame," replied one of the soldiers. "Can we not despatch the guide, for, certes, he is of no further use, and it will save us the trouble of looking after him?"

"Nay!" replied Raymond sturdily. "I am loth to cause a harmless peasant to be slain. Make him mount behind thee, Robert, but keep a tight hold on his chain."

Once again the advance was resumed, the horses floundering over the slippery, leaf-strewn path, their riders being put to great trouble by reason of the overhanging branches that often almost swept them from their saddles.

Presently they began to descend a steep declivity, the slope requiring all the skill of the horsemen to keep their steeds on their feet, while the rain, now falling in torrents, had transformed the little path into a foaming stream.

Suddenly a vivid flash of lightning rent the darkness of the night, and in the dazzling glare Raymond beheld, with a thrill of horror, two of the men who were leading disappear into a yawning chasm almost at his feet, their cries drowned by the appalling crash of the accompanying thunder. By dint of reining in his horse till the animal was almost on its haunches, the young squire saved himself from a similar fate, and slipping to the ground he awaited, in terrible suspense, the next flash that would give some idea of his position. The succeeding period of darkness seemed to weigh upon him like a suffocating shroud, while the silence was broken only by the frantic prancing of the remaining horses, the feeble groans of one of the fallen men, and a low gurgling sound a short distance away—a sound that caused indescribable terror in the mind of the young squire.

Then came another crash and a ponderous mass fell across the path he had just passed, and another shriek of agony rent the air. To the horrified Raymond, whose superstitious feelings were aroused by the war of the elements and the tragedy of his surroundings, the place savoured of the infernal regions; and gazing with wide-open eyes into the inky blackness, he dumbly awaited the next gleam of blinding light.

At length, after a seemingly endless suspense, it came—a double flash. Short as was the duration of the glare it served to intensify the horror of his position.

At his feet yawned the pit, wherein the feebly-moving limbs of two of his men still writhed in the throes of death, while their horses were frantically kicking each other in the confined space. Behind him lay another man-at-arms, the blood welling from a gaping wound in his throat, while a fourth lay crushed—beyond recognition by a heavy tree-trunk that, falling across the path, effectually prevented a retreat. There was no sign of their guide, but the fifth soldier was leaning against a tree-trunk, his hands pressed tightly over his eyes as if trying to shut out the ghastly scene.

The next flash showed that he, too, had vanished, and Raymond was alone, though the shouts and cries of the unfortunate man-at-arms betokened that he was being haled off through the forest by some invisible agency—whether by men, animals, or spirits the squire dared not imagine.

And now the underwood on either side seemed alive with movement, and Raymond felt, or fancied he felt, rough hands groping towards him. Frenzy took possession of his shaking body, and, lashed into the energy of despair, he unsheathed his sword and slashed madly about him. The blade came in violent contact with an overhanging bough and snapped off close to the hilt; at the same moment the squire felt a pair of sinewy arms encircle his feet, and with a lusty heave he was upset and thrown with a crash to the ground, the point of a knife pressing against his throat warning him of the utter uselessness of further resistance.

Bound hand and foot, the unfortunate squire was carried or dragged through a thick growth of underwood, till at length his captors gained a large clearing. By the aid of a momentary flash he saw the outlines of a low building. In response to a violent knocking he heard the sound of bolts being withdrawn, and, borne on the shoulders of four strong men, he was carried into the house, and dropped unceremoniously upon the rush-strewn floor.

Some one took a torch from its socket and bent over the prostrate squire. Raymond recognised the features—it was the traitorous guide! But gone was the heavy lustreless expression of his eyes and the stolid set of his swarthy jaws; instead a look of malevolent intelligence overspread his face, and by the subservience with which he was treated by his comrades it was evident that

he was a man of authority.

"Ah! Dolt, fool, beast of an Englishman! How nicely hast thou borne the Count of Tancarville back to the camp of the cursed invader of Normandy! Dead or alive, eh? Little didst thou know how near thy purpose was fulfilled when thy base *routier* made to pass a knife across my throat. I —even I—am the Count of Tancarville!"

He paused to observe the effect of this startling announcement, but Raymond preserved a dignified silence.

"And that simpleton the Constable, thy master," he resumed. "To think that the Count of Tancarville would be dallying at a hunting lodge when base English defile the coasts of Normandy! Ah! That was a near one," he added as another blinding flash of lightning lit up the room.

"Knowest thou, thou miserable fool," he continued as soon as the crash of the thunder permitted, "that did that fiery fork but touch this place thou and I would be scattered, so that all the armies of Philip and Edward would fail to find a fragment? Eh, I interest thee? 'Tis well; I'll tell thee more, seeing that the knowledge will profit thee but little. Henri! Cut asunder the bonds that bind this Englishman's legs, and do thou and Etienne stand close lest he do himself an injury!"

Handing the torch to a serving-man, the Count led the way, closely followed by Raymond and his two guards. In an adjoining apartment, so open to the winds that the torch was almost extinguished, lay seven sinister-looking objects, which the squire readily recognised as bombards.

These early cannon were composed of straight lengths of flat iron, held together by shrunk-on iron hoops, and lashed down to a heavy baulk of timber, so that in training these clumsy contrivances, carriage and gun were practically one piece.

"These are the beasts I hunt in this forest," quoth the Count. "King Philip hath need of them, and, by our Lady of Nîmes, 'twill be a sight to see the vaunted English bowmen being bowled over by these bombards. And food these beasts must have! Forward, garçons, and show this dolt mine animals' food. But, Bertrand, stand aside with that torch. I am in no mind to go heavenwards yet awhile."

The next room was little better than a cell, lightened by the feeble light of an oil lamp that glimmered through a horn lanthorn. In a far corner could be discerned the bent figure of a monk, his cowl thrown back on his shoulders and his arms bared to the elbow. Ignoring the interruption, he continued his labours, working a pestle with untiring energy.

"Behold the worthy successor to Michael Schwartz! My faith! It does my heart good to show the accursed English the resources of la belle France; yet, 'tis passing strange that the secret of the making of the devil's powder should be divulged to a priest of God. Five score barrels full of the powder are ready for the use of our forces, and I'll warrant—— Ah! What wouldst thou? Down with him, mes garçons!"

For Raymond, suddenly fired with a reckless determination, had thrown himself upon the torch-bearer, and with a shower of sparks the burning brand was dashed upon the floor, missing the bench with its dangerous compound by less than a span!

The Count and the monk, both white with fear, stamped upon the blazing embers, while the guards with no gentle hand had forced their prisoner to the ground.

"A senseless piece of folly," growled the Norman. "And little credit to thyself."

"'Twould have rid the King of England of a dangerous foe," replied Raymond stoutly, opening his lips for the first time since his capture.

"Away with him, till I find a means to make use of him, Etienne!" exclaimed the Count, taking no notice of the squire's remark.

"To the oubliette?"

"Nay; two of these accursed Englishmen in one den would plague us far more than if kept apart. One never knows what the rogues get up to when they plan amongst themselves. Lock him in the old arrow-store."

The old arrow-store was a damp and dismal chamber next to the cell where Raymond had seen the monk at his researches. It was on the ground floor, and lighted only by one lancet-shaped window, far too narrow to admit the passage of a man. The roof was vaulted, the arches springing from a central pillar, while the floor was paved with heavy slabs set in strong cement.

This much the young squire saw while the men were making a cursory examination by the aid of two additional torches; and after removing an old chest they quitted the room, bolting and locking the heavy iron-plated door behind them.

Left to himself, Raymond fell a prey to the deepest despondency. The failure of his ill-starred attempt, the comparative ease of his capture, and the mortification which the Constable would feel at his non-return, weighed upon the unhappy squire far more than the danger of his hopeless position, and, grief-stricken, he lay on a stone bench, listlessly marking the sound of the rapidly-retreating storm, till a feeble glimmer through the lancet window betokened that the day was dawning. He had one consolation, sorry though it was—there remained another Englishman within the stronghold, the solitary survivor of five picked men-at-arms.

Presently Raymond stood up and stretched his cramped limbs, then standing on the bench he found that he could just reach the window. Grasping the stone ledge with his hands, he raised himself sufficiently to look out.

It was a cheerless outlook. In front, a bow-shot away, lay the dense masses of the forest, still hazy with the morning mist. An open space, broken only by a moat full of slimy water, lay between the forest and the stronghold, though no drawbridge was visible on that side.

And beyond the forest lay, at an unknown distance, the English camp, where even now Sir John Hacket was doubtless expecting his return with the expected captive. Overcome with the irony of the situation, Raymond clambered down from the window and relapsed into his moody and despondent attitude.

For several hours he remained thus, till aroused by the drawing back of the bolts of his prison door. The door was thrown open, and an armed man entered, bearing a pitcher of water and a trencher of black bread, while another man stood without, for fear of an outburst of the prisoner. Without a word the jailer set down the meal and retired.

Twice daily was this done, and thus the days sped, slowly and cheerlessly, but no visit from the Count of Tancarville served to break the dismal monotony.

On the fifth day Raymond heard the sound of martial preparations, and climbing to the window he caught a brief glimpse of a body of armed and mounted men riding past his prison; one of whom, he had no doubt, was the Count. Then came the rumble of heavily-laden wains, but in which direction the party disappeared the squire was unable to see.

Evidently the little garrison of this sylvan fortress was considerably depleted, for Raymond noticed that his jailer came into his prison alone. He thought, though, that this might have been through a sense of familiarity at his prisoner's dejected mien. Yet daily, for hours together, the sound of the pestle, dimly heard through the thick adjoining wall, showed that the taciturn old monk still pursued his dangerous task.

Four more days passed in dreadful solitude, till, maddened by the hopelessness of his condition, Raymond resolved on desperate measures to attempt his escape. Plan after plan flashed through his brain, only to be put aside as impracticable. Feigning death, burrowing through the stone walls of his prison, attacking his jailer, all seemed hopeless, till at length a scheme, hazardous in the extreme, yet capable of meeting with possible success, matured in his mind and hourly increased his hopes of ultimate success.

Usually the jailer found him sitting dejectedly upon the stone bench, practically invisible in the gloom to any one entering from the dazzling sunlight without. But on this particular morning Raymond, awaiting the jailer's footsteps, carefully removed his surcoat and hid behind the door. Directly the man entered he made, as was his wont, direct for the bench, when the squire, springing upon him from behind, muffled his head in the surcoat and bore him to the ground. The jug and platter fell with a resounding crash, and Raymond, seizing the broken pitcher, struck the jailer such a shrewd blow that it all but split his skull, leaving him senseless on the floor.

Hastily dragging his body across to the darkest corner, Raymond possessed himself of his dagger and escaped from his prison.

Without a moment's hesitation he burst into the adjoining apartment, where the old monk, engrossed in his work, did not take the slightest notice of his abrupt entry. Raymond had argued with himself that a priest engaged in warlike pursuits thereby puts himself without the pale of the Church; so, overcoming his scruples, he wrenched the pestle from the hand of the astonished monk and stunned him ere he could utter a sound.

Then with feverish haste he stripped off and donned the monk's capacious gown, pulling the cowl well down over his eyes; then, strapping the wooden sandals over his own pointed shoes, he walked boldly into the corridor, with bent head and clattering gait.

At the end of the passage was another heavily-barred door, at which a spearman stood on guard. Holding his dagger firmly in his right hand and concealing it within the folds of his long sleeve, Raymond moved straight up to the man. The sentinel opened the door, and with bowed head stood aside to let the supposed monk pass. In a well-feigned highly-pitched voice the young squire gave the customary blessing; then, almost amazed at his good fortune, he gained the free air once more.

But his difficulties were not yet over. The road from the stronghold ran under the shelter of the low walls for some distance, then turned abruptly and crossed the moat by a drawbridge, at the

end of which was a small postern and barbican.

All went well till Raymond was upon the bridge, and the gate-keeper was making ready to throw open the outer gate, when the sham monk dropped one sandal upon the bridge, where it lay conspicuously in the dazzling sunshine.

For a moment the guard paused, gazing in undisguised astonishment at the tell-tale object, then with a crash he closed the gate and raised a horn to his lips. But ere he could blow a blast Raymond was upon him; a glint of cold steel, and the man uttering a choking cry, threw up his arms and fell in a huddled heap.

Disguise was no longer necessary, and the squire, opening the gate and casting off his gown as he ran, sped over the open space towards the sheltering forest.

He heard some one behind him shouting the alarm, but by the time the watchers on the wall could wind their cross-bows Raymond was almost out of range, though a dropping bolt, shot at a venture, hummed close to his head and buried itself in the springy turf at the foot of the nearest tree.

Though skilled in finding a course by observing the position of the sun, Raymond was but indifferently versed in woodcraft, and in the gloom of the forest all idea of direction was beyond him. Onward he plunged, crashing through the bracken and undergrowth, till to his great delight he struck a narrow path. This he followed, till at length he came upon the scene of his ambuscade. A yawning pit, partially concealed by a screen of hurdles and bracken, lay across the narrow way, while a score of paces beyond was a tree trunk, which, having been skilfully cut through close to its base, needed but little effort to fall into its present position, effectually barring the road to any but unmounted men.

With a sickening feeling of horror Raymond gazed into the pit, where lay the mangled remains of two of his men-at-arms, though it was evident that the plunderer had already been there, as the corpses were stripped of their arms and accoutrements, while the trappings of the horses had vanished.

Under the fallen trunk lay the body of the third soldier, plundered also as far as the ponderous timber would allow, while of the fourth no trace remained but a dark stain on the clayey soil.

Clambering over the last obstacle, the squire found himself on the steep path that had been so dangerous a road but a short fortnight before. On and on he hastened, till he emerged on the high road that led to the camp, which he estimated to be about four and a half leagues distant, provided a general advance had not taken place in the meantime.

He was hatless and without his surcoat, having left that garment with his late jailer, and there were no distinguishing marks to show that he belonged either to the army of the King of England or of Philip of France.

Tying his blood-stained scarf over his chin, he strode boldly forward, trusting in the rôle of a wounded soldier to avoid being questioned. At length he gained the summit of a hill, from which he looked down upon a lovely fertile valley, and in the distance the blue waters of the English Channel.

A spur of rising ground hid the view on his right, but a few minutes sufficed to gain its crest, and on looking down he saw a sight that filled him with joy, for below lay a large unwalled town, which he rightly guessed to be Caen, while a league off was the English host in battle array, and between him and the army was a motley array of Frenchmen issuing from the town to join battle with the invaders.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TABLES TURNED

ONLY one thing could Raymond do. He sat down on the grassy hillock and watched, knowing well that the fight could but end in one way.

A little group of Norman knights led the van of the French, whose forces were composed mostly of townsmen, desperate in their vain attempt to save their town from pillage. Eagerly the keen eyes of the squire followed their disorderly advance, till they were almost lost to view in the distance.

To him it seemed as if the white-coated lines of English archers stirred neither hand nor foot, but he knew full well that the blast of deadly arrows had sped, for as if by magic the dark masses of the Frenchmen broke and fled, without coming to hand-grips. Already the English cavalry were in hot pursuit, and the white winding road leading to the town was outlined with clouds of dust, which almost concealed the disorderly remnants of the defeated fugitives.

Directly the advance guard of the fleeing army began to draw near, Raymond rose from the grass and ran swiftly towards the road. The Frenchmen, each intent upon his own safety, rushed past him, throwing off their armour to aid their flight, the mounted fugitives ruthlessly riding down their less fortunate countrymen.

Seated by the roadside was a man-at-arms, who, sorely wounded in the shoulder, was endeavouring to divest himself of his hauberk in order to ease the pain. Actuated both by his own requirements and a feeling of pity, Raymond helped him to unburden himself of the steel-ringed coat, and having donned the Frenchman's discarded armour, he bathed his wound, a deep lance-thrust, with water obtained from a rivulet that ran by the roadside.

After rendering this service he proceeded to complete his own equipment. A heavy sword and a light shield were soon found, and it did not require much effort on the part of the active squire to seize a riderless horse.

With difficulty curbing the restlessness of his newly-acquired steed, Raymond urged it into an adjoining field to avoid being swept away by the panic-stricken horde of fugitives, and eagerly awaited the arrival of the English host.

Soon the tide of fleeing Frenchmen slackened, and the braver spirits, maintaining a running fight, alone remained to uphold the honour of the ill-assorted army of the citizens of Caen.

Suddenly Raymond's attention was drawn to a knot of mailed figures, who, surrounded by a press of Englishmen, fought savagely with the courage of despair. One by one the French mounted men-at-arms and squires fell, till only two knights remained.

The pair, keeping side by side, held their enemies at bay by a shower of blows from sword and mace, till one, his horse slain by a Welshman, who paid for his act by having his head cleft by a back-handed sweep, was dashed to the ground and made prisoner.

On seeing his comrade's fate, the other knight urged his horse through the crowd of assailants and made a dash for the open field, where Raymond awaited the chance to join his friends.

Directly the squire caught sight of his emblazoned surcoat and shield he recognised the Frenchman—it was none other than the Count of Tancarville!

Shaking off his pursuers, who preferred to return to squabble over their rights to the ransom of the captive knight, the Count rode straight for the place where Raymond was concealed. When he was twenty paces off the squire rode forward and barred his way.

"Yield thyself, Sir Knight!" exclaimed Raymond.

For a moment the Count gazed with undisguised astonishment at the man whom he had last seen as a prisoner in his stronghold, then, recovering himself, he put spur to his horse and rode furiously at the squire.

The combatants were evenly matched, for the advantage of the Frenchman's complete coat of mail was balanced by the comparative freshness of his opponent and his steed. The knight had lost his lance, so that the fight was with swords.

Reining back his horse, Raymond skilfully avoided the first rush, the Count's sword-point missing his unguarded face by a hand's breadth, while the squire's return blow fell harmlessly on his adversary's shield. Instantly Raymond closed in, and before the knight could turn his steed to meet the counter-attack, the squire's sword had bit deeply into his enemy's thigh. Then their blades met, and amid a shower of sparks and the clicking and rasping of steel, Raymond found himself at pains to defend his unvisored face, and it was not long before the blood was flowing freely from a cut on his cheek. But the Count's previous exertions and the loss of blood from

several deep wounds were beginning to tell. His blows did not fall with the same strength that marked his first rush, though the squire could not break down his guard.

Long they fought, their horses prancing and curveting as if realising that their efforts would materially aid their masters' sword-play, till Raymond's untried blade snapped off close to the hilt, and, with the exception of a short knife, he was left weaponless.

A quick pull at the reins, and the squire's horse ranged alongside that of the Norman. The next instant Raymond had grasped his opponent round the body, and with a mighty heave sought to tear him from the saddle.

Between the two plunging steeds the combatants fell, locked in a close embrace, Raymond uppermost; but before he could make good his advantage and demand his enemy's surrender a stunning kick from the Count's horse left its master at the Englishman's mercy.

Raymond rose to his feet bruised and breathless, and at that moment a band of soldiers came hurrying towards them. The newcomers were the wild-looking Welsh mercenaries, intent on plunder; and, unable to make them understand who he was, the squire was for a while in danger of being set upon by these lawless booty-seeking warriors. Standing over the body of the prostrate knight, he beckoned, shouted, and threatened, till a highly-pitched voice behind him demanded who and what he was.

Raymond turned and saw a gigantic, swarthy, and black-bearded man, clad in a bronze-coloured suit of armour, having a green dragon emblazoned on his surcoat and shield.

"Squire to Sir John Hacket of Hamptonshire," he replied breathlessly. "I pray thee bid these rascals desist."

A word from the stranger in an unknown tongue, and the Welshmen retired.

"Rascals, iss what ye call tem?" asked the new arrival, laughing boisterously. "I would haf yes know, poy, tat tey are from Glamorgan—from Glamorgan, I tell you! And tey are the best men in the Army, I tell ye, poy, for tey are my men, I, David Evans, knight off Glamorgan. I pray ye pear tat in mind. I myself tought ye wass a Norman, or at pest a Gascon, seeing ye wass to wear a Frenchman's hauberk."

The Welsh leader rode off, leaving Raymond to wonder how he could escape molestation from his friends and still stand by his captive. Most of the pursuers kept to the highway, and only a few came close to where he stood. In vain he begged and entreated the passing soldiers to give a hand to carry off the unconscious Count. Even the promise of a silver penny had no effect, for the English, intent on plunder, were already streaming into Caen with the last of their foes, and the comparatively bountiful offer of payment was invariably rejected with contempt.

At length, despairing of obtaining assistance, Raymond left his prisoner and made his way back to the road, hoping to see a familiar face amongst the victorious soldiers who were hurrying forward to join in the sack of the town, but there were none of the Hampshire companies.

Picking up another sword to replace his broken weapon, the squire preferred to go back to guard his captive, consoling himself with the thought that on the Count's return to consciousness he could lead him into the camp; then, suddenly bethinking himself of the rivulet higher up the road, he hastened towards it to slake his burning thirst.

This he did, and thereupon made his way back by a different route to where the Count lay. Barely had he gone half the distance than he came to a dry ditch, where, to his surprise, he found two fugitives cowering in the long grass that grew in the trench.

"Je me rends!" they both exclaimed, grovelling at his feet in fear of instant death, for, being but peasants, they knew that scant mercy was shown to those who were unable to offer ransom.

In a moment Raymond saw and seized his chance. "Vous êtes mes prisonniers," he exclaimed, brandishing his weapon. "Venez avec moi."

Driving them before him, the squire soon reached the place where he had left the Count of Tancarville, and indicated by signs that they should carry him. This they did, panting with their exertions, for the knight in his complete armour was a heavy burden. Their progress was slow, till on arriving on the highway Raymond made them take two broken lances, and forming a rough litter, they were able to make a better pace.

At length, they came in sight of the camp, and to his great joy Raymond saw the well-known banner of the crescent on the blue field, waving close to the pavilion over which floated the royal standard of England, for the Constable of Portchester's company was that day detailed as guard to the camp.

Great was the delight and astonishment of Sir John Hacket and his men on Raymond's reappearance, for he had been given up for lost; and greater was the Constable's surprise when his squire, pointing to the litter, exclaimed with pardonable pride: "Behold, sir, I bring thee the Count of Tancarville according to thy instructions."

Having handed over his three prisoners and given a brief account of his adventures, Raymond retired to a tent to enjoy a well-earned meal and a rest. From one of the archers he learned that his father, maddened by grief and rage at the supposed loss of his son, had obtained permission to join for the time being the Sussex company of Sir Guy of Bramber, vowing that twenty Norman lives would but ill-balance Raymond's death.

The squire's leisure was of short duration, for Sir John Hacket came in person to inform him that the King had ordered him to appear before him.

Raymond's eyes sparkled with delight, for this was a step at least towards his coveted reward, and hastily attiring himself suitably for the royal presence, he followed the Constable to the King's pavilion.

It was a large tent, hung with damask, and divided into two parts by a heavy curtain. In the ante-room were crowds of knights awaiting an audience, their names and titles being carefully set down by a herald, while another, stationed at the flap of the partitioning curtain, where two knights in full armour stood on guard, announced the various personages who had business with their Sovereign.

Each knight who was ushered into the inner apartment had but a short stay in the royal presence, and to Raymond, as he waited in breathless expectation, it seemed as if there was a continuous procession of warriors, some elated with the prospect of praise and honour, others nervously ignorant of why they were summoned thither; while others, knowing that their master had cause for displeasure, were pacing the crowded ante-chamber, biting their lips in their anxiety.

All the while a buzz of suppressed voices was heard from the inner room, and occasionally Edward's hearty voice could be clearly distinguished as he praised or chid according to the merits or demerits of the person before him.

Suddenly the sound of a galloping horse was heard, coming rapidly nearer, then, amid a hum of ill-concealed excitement, a knight, covered in mud from head to foot, and breathless from hard riding, burst into the ante-chamber.

"Ah, Sir William!" he exclaimed to the royal herald, "I pray thee announce me to the King with all despatch. The matter brooks not delay!" And clanking in his heavy armour at the heels of the herald he disappeared behind the curtain that concealed the royal presence from the crowd of waiting knights.

"'Tis Lord Bassett," whispered Sir John to his squire. "Certes, some event of much moment hath occurred to bring him from the field. Hearken!"

The newcomer's voice was distinctly audible to those who waited without. "The men of Caen are holding out stubbornly, Sire, every house being closed to our troops, and our losses from the darts of those within are exceeding great. The Welsh levies, aye, and our own men as well, are killing without mercy man, woman, and child, yet their acts do but increase the fury of the men of Caen. I pray you, Sire, that the word goes forth that every soldier shall withdraw from the city, for otherwise they threaten to destroy it with fire."

"But wherefore should we hold our hand?" inquired the King. "They of Caen set themselves in battle against our hosts, and must of necessity abide the consequences."

"But the spoil, Sire, the spoil! 'Tis the richest town in all Normandy. If we can but prevail on the citizens to lay down their arms, then the sack can be resumed with more profit and less risk."

"There's wisdom in thy words," replied Edward, "but thy advice is every whit the same as the Cardinal Legates gave to us but an hour agone. These we told that it was our resolve to brook no interference of the Holy Father in matters appertaining to war, but, by my halidome, the suggestion commends itself to us. Therefore withdraw our troops. Beat a parley with the townsmen, and demand their surrender with promise of quarter. Stay! I'll to the front myself! Herald! Dismiss the knights in waiting, and inform them that we will receive them on the morrow."

Thus Raymond's opportunity had passed for the present, for when the morrow came, the King in person met the chief magistrate of Caen, and in the presence of the Papal Envoys, agreed to accept the unconditional surrender of the town, pledging his kingly word, however, that the massacre should cease, and before the evening came the squire was detailed for another errand.

"Raymond," quoth Sir John Hacket, "I have it in mind that a slight advancement and no little honour can be obtained if we can seize the stronghold of the Count of Tancarville, and gain possession of the store of powder and the bombards of which thou hast spoken. What think ye? All the powder was not taken away by the Count?"

"I think not, sir."

"And the bombards?"

"I saw none go; nevertheless they may have sent them away."

"Then I'll go to Chandos and crave permission to lead the company against this strange hunting-lodge in the Forest of Brique. Meanwhile have thy two prisoners closely questioned, for, methinks, they know exactly where this stronghold lieth."

The Constable hastened to the tent of Sir John Chandos to obtain the required boon, while Raymond sent for the two Normans whose lives he had spared. They were, so the squire ascertained, brothers, and one had been in the service of the Count of Eu, and knew the precise position of the Count of Tancarville's forest castle.

Soon Sir John returned, having succeeded in his mission. One of the prisoners was made to act as guide, and to avoid another blunder he was told that should the enterprise fail through his neglect or treachery his brother's life would be forfeit. Rations were served out to the company, and an hour later Sir John's command, consisting of three squires, thirty men-at-arms, and fifty mounted archers, moved out of camp amid the encouraging shouts of their comrades, and disappeared in the gathering gloom towards the dark masses of the Forest of Brique.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FALL OF THE COUNT'S STRONGHOLD

UNDER the guidance of the Norman, the company proceeded by a different route to that by which Raymond made his escape; and, as night fell, they dismounted and off-saddled in a clearing within half a league of the Count's stronghold.

Sentries were posted, and every precaution taken against surprise, but nothing untoward occurred to disturb the camp.

Day dawned, but a thick, fleecy mist prevailed, the moisture dripping from the steel caps of the soldiers, who, in spite of it being a summer's morn in fair Normandy, actually shivered with cold. No fires were allowed to be lighted for fear of giving warning of their approach, and after a hasty breakfast the company started on the last portion of the journey.

The way lay through a narrow avenue, similar to that in which Raymond's ill-fated men-at-arms met with disaster, and the Norman guide, anxious for his own and his brother's safety, used all his skill and cunning as a woodman to ensure a successful surprise.

Presently through the mist two gnarled trunks attracted his attention, and, halting, he beckoned to the Constable to dismount. In low tones he explained that he wanted a riderless horse to be driven in front of the company, and, the Constable assenting, one of the archers dismounted and urged his steed to the head of the column.

To Raymond, who knew the perils of the path, the act occasioned no surprise, but most of the soldiers watched the action with wonderment.

The horse had proceeded but a short distance when it stumbled over some invisible obstacle, and before it could recover itself, a heavy beam, furnished with a metal barb, came crashing down from the mist—hidden branches above, pinning the devoted animal to the earth.

A score of willing hands dragged the timber and its victim from the path. "I pray you send another horse on ahead," exclaimed the Constable calmly, as if unmoved by his narrow escape, for had he been in his customary place at the head of the company his fate would have been sealed.

Silently, and fully anticipating a fresh trap, the troop advanced, the successor to the ill-fated horse walking cautiously as if instinctively aware of its perilous mission. A bow-shot farther it stopped, and, in spite of the application of the point of a dagger, it refused to move another step.

"Prenez garde, messieurs, c'est un piège," whispered the Norman. "Mais sans doute c'est le dernier empêchement."

"Step forward, Lavant," exclaimed the Constable in a low tone to one of the men-at-arms. "Thrust out thy spear and see what lieth here."

The man did so, and almost without resistance the weapon sank in turf. A twist of the spear and a large piece of what looked to be green sward gave way, disclosing a yawning cavity, its length being too great to permit a horse to leap across, while its depth was sufficient to kill or maim any man or beast that had the misfortune to fall therein.

At a sign from their leader the soldiers dismounted. One man was told off to every four horses, a party set silently to work to cut a way through the dense thicket, so as to make a detour round the pitfall, and the rest of the soldiers stood where they were, resting on their arms till the path was cleared.

This done, the company, now diminished in fighting numbers by one-fourth, resumed their march, and, as the guide had foretold, were unmolested by any other obstacle till they emerged from the forest at the edge of the extensive clearing in which stood the stronghold of the Count of Tancarville.

The sun was now above the tree-tops, and slowly the mist was dispersing, so that the outlines of the fortress were just visible in the clouds of lifting vapour.

Ordering his men to lie down within the shelter of the undergrowth, Sir John called his squires, the master bowman who had taken the place of the absent Redward, and the oldest man-at-arms, and held a hasty consultation upon the plan of attack.

Though Raymond had not seen the castle from without, he found that his idea of the place did not differ greatly from the appearance of the actual building. It was a long, low structure, but one story in height, save at one corner, where a low tower commanded the rest of the stronghold. The walls were pierced with narrow loopholes for the discharge of arrows, and crowned by a battlemented breastwork. Around the walls was, as Raymond already knew, a ditch or moat. The drawbridge was raised, and the outer fortalice or barbican was furnished with a massive door.

There were no signs of the garrison, which, at the most, numbered less than two score men, but the possibility of a surprise was guarded against by the fact that the doorway of the barbican was closed.

For several hours the little English force lay in front of the stronghold, the soldiers prone on the grass, their leaders standing behind a dense thicket, so that no assailant was visible to the still unsuspecting inmates of the castle.

At length some of the archers who had remained with the horses joined the main body, dragging with them two peasants who were captured while on their way to the Count's fortress. The two men bore huge baskets full of bread on their backs, and the booty was distributed and eagerly devoured by the soldiers, while the peasants, securely bound, were detained a short distance in the forest under a guard of three archers.

Presently one of the men-at-arms approached Raymond. "I beg of thee, sir, to ask the Constable that he give me leave to force an entry into yonder fortress."

"How so, Peter? Wouldst essay the task alone?"

"Nay, Master Raymond, but with my comrade, Myles of Fareham, 'tis easy to attempt."

"And easier to fail? What wouldst thou do?"

"If we don the peasant's clothes and carry their baskets filled with stones on our backs, I trow 'twill be an easy business to fool those that are within. Once they open the gate two honest Englishmen can hold it against a score of Frenchmen till the main body hath time to come to our aid."

"By St. George! Thou sayest aright; I'll speak to Sir John at once."

The Constable received the project with delight, and preparations for the assault were instantly made. The two men-at-arms drew the gabardines of the peasants over their armour, so that they closely resembled the thick-set, shambling Normans, and shouldering their heavy baskets, they advanced boldly towards the outwork.

Meanwhile their comrades were eager and alert. The bowmen had chosen their arrows and strung their bows; the men-at-arms had drawn their swords and had discarded their belts and sheaths to enable them to run the quicker to the aid of the two devoted men, and with eyes intently fixed on the gate of the barbican they awaited the signal to rush headlong across the open space that lay between them and the fortress.

To the waiting soldiers it seemed hours ere their two comrades drew near to the outer work, but when within a few paces of it a sentinel stood forth on the wall and challenged them. Then, apparently suspicious of their errand, he blew a loud blast on a horn, which was immediately answered by the appearance of five or six men from within the barbican, while over a score lined the walls of the main stronghold, some of whom began to wind their cross-bows.

At the same time the door was thrown open, and a man, apparently a captain, stood on the threshold. Up to now these preparations were simply a matter of form, no matter who the newcomer might be, and fortunately the iron-nerved Englishmen understood this, for, staggering under their loads, they still advanced with bent heads to avoid recognition.

Suddenly the guardian of the gate realised that it was not a pair of ignorant peasants that he had to parley with. But the knowledge came too late. Peter of Purbrook had thrown down his load and dashed, sword in hand, at the astonished Norman. Before the latter could retreat a step he had fallen with his head cleft to the chin. His body lay athwart the threshold, and ere the others could rush to close the gate the Englishmen had pushed their baskets, filled with stones, against the door, and were awaiting the onslaught of their foes.

With hoarse shouts of encouragement the English men-at-arms rose from their ambush and rushed madly to their comrades' aid, while the archers, shooting rapidly and coolly, directed a dropping fire of arrows at the defenders on the walls. But they of the outwork had gathered to defend the gate, and already a fierce struggle was taking place, the two gallant Englishmen being hard pressed by the enraged Normans.

With axe, spear, and mace the defenders strove to thrust back the daring intruders, while the latter, regardless of their own safety, essayed to keep open the gate. Two of the Normans fell, their bodies adding to the ghastly pile at the entrance to the barbican, but directly afterwards Myles of Fareham was slain by a savage spear-thrust.

Undismayed by the fall of his comrade, Peter of Purbrook hurled an axe at the helm of the slayer of his friend, then, clearing at a bound the heap of corpses, bade fair to drive back the defenders single-handed, while his comrades, with Raymond well in the fore, were already halfway across the intervening space.

Carried away by the heat of battle, Raymond saw as in a dream the figure of the devoted man-at-arms clearing a path for his countrymen; the next instant there was a blinding flash, a

deafening roar, and a thick, choking cloud of sulphurous smoke.

One of the defenders, with the fury of despair, had fired off a bombard, the huge stone ball crashing through friend and foe alike, and bounding over the springy turf till it came to a stop a few paces from the edge of the forest.

Appalled by the sound, the soldiers hesitated, but when the smoke had partially cleared away the gateway was deserted.

Then the Constable's voice was heard amid the din, "Onwards, men, the place is ours," and regaining their wits, the Englishmen rushed forward and reached the deserted barbican.

The discharge from the bombard, by which the remaining Frenchmen, save one, and four English men-at-arms, including the ill-fated Peter, had been swept away, was attended by one good result. The drawbridge had been lowered, and, after applying the linstock, the cannonier had darted back across it to take refuge in the fortress, while the heavy bombard, wrenching asunder the leather thongs that bound it to the carriage, had recoiled till its weight rested on the end of the drawbridge, effectually preventing it from being raised by the defenders.

In the meanwhile the English archers, while engaged in keeping down the fire of the cross-bowmen, had marked the fugitive cannonier as he sped back to gain the entrance. Ere he had run but half the distance he fell, transfixed by a dozen arrows, while the attacking party roared with excitement and jubilation.

Even if the defenders had had another bombard available they would have been prevented by the hail of shafts from training it on their adversaries; and, led by the Constable and his squires, the men-at-arms crossed the drawbridge and thundered at the main gate with their axes, while the archers, advancing in close order, kept up a hot fire against every point where a Norman dared show the crest of his steel cap.

Under the furious blows the door was splintered; then with a united effort the shattered woodwork gave way, and the victorious Englishmen rushed headlong into the castle, only to find that not a man of the garrison was to be seen.

With his own hands the Constable tore down the scarlet wolves' heads of the banner of the Count of Tancarville, and the blue guidon with the demi-lune floated in its place, amidst a fanfare of trumpets and the cheers of the victors.

Then a systematic search of the stronghold was undertaken, but no trace of the Normans was found till an archer stumbled over a heavy trap-door, which, on being raised, disclosed a flight of dank stone steps leading to a subterranean passage. Listening intently, the Constable and his squires heard the faint sounds of retreating footsteps echoing along the stone walls of the tunnel.

"It matters not," quoth Sir John. "I doubt whether there be any person of quality amongst them. Their burrow doubtless leads to some spot in the forest, and I can ill-afford to risk more lives in a needless undertaking."

To close the entrance, pieces of heavy timber weighted with stone were thrown down the yawning pit, and having made all chance of a return by this outlet impossible, the soldiers devoted their energies to the exploration of the building.

It was more of a fortified arsenal than a castle, the Count's principal fortress being ten leagues off, but the spoils of war were both numerous and useful.

In all, including the bombard in the barbican, there were eleven pieces of ordnance, a score barrels of powder, steel caps, hauberks, and weapons of all descriptions. Unwilling to leave the booty where it might again fall into the hands of the Normans, the Constable made preparations to carry off the whole of the munitions of war.

Dragging long planks across the open ground, a party of archers returned to where the horses had been left. By bridging the pitfall, the steeds were led safely across the fatal trap, and in less than an hour were within the stronghold, where rough carts in abundance were ready to be loaded up with the spoil.

Meanwhile Raymond had not forgotten the unfortunate man-at-arms who had been captured with him in the first attempt to seize the Count. Aided by a couple of archers, he searched vainly for the secret oubliette, till at length he bethought him of the two peasants who had been taken earlier in the day.

These were brought before him, and without much difficulty were compelled to lead the way. In the floor of the lowest apartment the peasants pointed out a small door, almost invisible in the deep gloom. Procuring a torch, Raymond and the archers shot back the bolts, and on lifting the trapdoor, a dark, evil-smelling dungeon was disclosed, unlighted and almost unventilated. Mingled with the noise of scores of rats a low moaning was heard, and in the fitful glare of the torchlight a narrow circular hole could be distinguished in the centre of the dungeon, its mouth unprotected by a barrier of any kind.

"Art there, Robert?" asked the squire, his voice shaking with pity and emotion.

The only reply was another low moan, as of a human being in direst distress. Sending one of the archers back for assistance, Raymond impatiently waited by the yawning pit. The man soon returned, and with him four lusty men-at-arms, one of whom carried a coil of stout rope and two more torches.

Directing the men to lower him slowly and carefully, Raymond knotted one end of the rope under his arms and boldly descended, holding a flaming torch above his head. The light flickered on the slimy walls of the pit, which, as he descended, began to increase in size, till at length he reached the bottom of a deep, bottle-shaped cavity, the only approach to which being the narrow neck through which he had been lowered.

The floor was ankle-deep in filth and slime; and, by the aid of the torch, the squire saw, crouched in the corner, apparently heedless of the presence of his rescuer, the figure of a man.

Bending over him, Raymond failed at first to recognise his ill-fated companion-in-arms, for the soldier's face, instead of being the deep-bronzed, healthy colour that comes of a life in the open air, was of a ghastly greenish hue, and his eyes, dazzled by the glimmer of the torch, blinked with a peculiar vacant expression that suggested madness.

Finding that the man was too weak to stand the strain of the rope round his chest, Raymond, placing the torch on the ground, lifted him to his feet, and taking him in his arms, called out to those above to haul up. Shielding the soldier as well as he could from the rough sides of the shaft, the squire with his pitiful burden came slowly to the surface, where rough but kindly hands took charge of the rescued prisoner, who was little more than a corpse.

A PITIFUL DISCOVERY

On rejoining the Constable, Raymond found that a discovery had been made of another score of barrels filled with powder, and the question of transport was troubling Sir John sorely. For not only was the quantity too great for the numbers of men and waggons at their disposal, but the difficulty arose how to reach the highway, the path by which they had come being quite unsuitable for the carts.

Two scouts were therefore sent out with instructions to follow the cart-tracks, and to find out whether any of the late garrison still remained in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XVIII

REDWARD'S CONFESSION

IT was close on nightfall ere the two scouts sent out by Sir John Hacket returned to the captured fortress. They reported that there was a fairly wide road which joined the highway to Caen about three leagues from that town, and that there were no signs of any hostile force in the district they had explored.

So that night the company made merry in the stronghold of the Count of Tancarville, wine and food being found in abundance, although Sir John did not for one moment relax the vigilance so necessary in a strange country.

At daybreak preparations were made for the evacuation of the fortress, and, headed by the two scouts, the little force set out on its march to the camp.

First came a strong party of men-at-arms, ready for instant action in case of attack. Then followed the Constable and his squires, accompanied by the two peasants and the Norman guide, and surrounded by a body of dismounted archers, who marched with their bows strung and their quivers swinging from the hip.

The carts came next, drawn by the horses of the dismounted archers, and piled high with the spoils of the fortress, including the captured bombards and as much powder as they could possibly hold.

Next came a small troop of men-at-arms, followed by some more carts, in which the wounded, including the rescued soldier, lay on heaps of hay and straw; while the rear was composed of the rest of the men-at-arms and mounted archers.

In this order they issued under the great gateway, passed over the drawbridge, and crossed the wide belt of open ground. When the head of the column reached the edge of the gloomy forest a tucket sounded and the soldiers came to a halt.

Seeing Sir John and his squires gazing intently at the abandoned stronghold the men did likewise. They saw the grim and gaunt pile standing clearly out against the dark background of the forest, and from the black flag-staff fluttered the blue banner of the company, with its well-known device of the golden crescent.

Even as they watched, the figure of a man made its appearance on the battlements; the banner was slowly lowered, and the man disappeared.

A few moments later the same man, mounted on a swift steed, emerged from the gateway and thundered across the turf. Reining in his horse before Sir John, the rider handed the banner to the guidon-bearer, saluted, and fell in with his comrades; but still the Constable kept his eyes steadfastly on the fortress.

What could it mean?

Slowly the moments sped. To the perplexity of the soldiers, the castle had an irresistible fascination for their leaders, and, following their example, they, too, looked in silent wonderment at the gaunt masses of masonry.

Suddenly, with a flash, a roar, and a cloud of smoke and dust, the castle appeared to split asunder; huge masses of stone flew skyward, then with an appalling crash the walls subsided, and in place of the massive outlines of the fortress there was nothing to be seen save a pile of blackened stones, over which floated a heavy pall of dense vapour.

The remainder of the powder had been fired, and the sylvan stronghold of the Count of Tancarville was no more!

"'Tis well done," was Sir John's only comment, then, on receiving the word of command, the company resumed its march, and plunged into the sombre shadows of the forest.

Almost unnoticed, the little force reached the camp, for in the excitement of the sack of the rich town of Caen the absence of the company on their successful raid was of small moment to the rest of the army intent as they were on the gain of booty.

There were two exceptions at least. One was Redward Buckland, who, being apprised of his son's safety, had left the Sussex company, only to find to his great disappointment that his comrades had departed on their raid.

The other was the great Chandos, who, recognising more than most Englishmen of his day the possibilities of artillery, showed the greatest interest in Sir John Hacket's report of the expedition, promising at the first available opportunity to inform the King of the great service rendered by the Constable of Portchester and his favourite squire.

But other events were taking place that effectually eclipsed for the time being the glory of the brilliant raid. Edward, having plundered Caen, described by Froissart as "large, strong, full of draperies and all sorts of merchandise; rich citizens, noble dames, damsels, and fine churches," had reserved for his own share all the plate, jewels, and choice cloths. The plunder, together with three hundred of the more opulent citizens, was placed on board the English ships and sent over the Channel; then, hoping to sack Rouen in a similar manner, the King advanced with his army up the fertile valley of the Seine.

Foiled in this attempt, he continued his march towards Paris, only to find the bridges broken down, with a strong hostile force on the nether bank, and Philip with a large army rapidly approaching from Guienne.

A desolate track, dotted with the ashes of countless towns and villages, marked the ruthless advance of the English, till at the very gates of Paris the flood-tide of invasion became the ebb of retreat, and Edward, hard pressed, was in danger of being cut off by overwhelming numbers.

One night, when lying near the village of Poissy, the camp was aroused, and orders given to prepare to march.

"Whither are we bound?" asked Raymond of his father as they met in the semi-darkness.

Redward shook his head. "'Tis not a soldier's part to question orders," quoth he. "I did hear that the King would try to reach Flanders, but methinks this way leadeth to Paris."

There was no occasion for silence, and, talking freely amongst themselves, the soldiers struck their tents, and at daybreak were well on the road to Paris, while the light-armed horsemen attached to the French army, who hovered around the flanks, wheeled about and galloped off to inform the French King of the advance of the invaders.

Hardly had the cavalry disappeared than a halt was ordered; then, with great celerity, the whole English army turned and retraced its footsteps.

The Hampshire companies, which at the outset formed the rearguard, now found themselves in the van, and great was their delight when it was rumoured that the King had entrusted to them the task of forcing the passage of the Seine.

"'Tis Sir John Chandos' own doing," remarked Redward, "and as clever a feint as ever I met with. While the French are massing to prevent our supposed march on Paris, we are quietly slipping away towards Flanders."

As they came in sight of the turbid river a horseman spurred madly towards them. "The bridge! The bridge is broken down!" he shouted, then without slackening his speed he rode onwards towards the main body which the King had under his own command.

"The bridge!" growled Redward, "what of the bridge? 'Tis easily repaired, provided the enemy do not line the farther bank."

"Then show all men what we can do," exclaimed the Constable. "Pull down that house for me, and I'll warrant there will be a goodly stock of timber sufficient to build a bridge, let alone patch one up."

The men worked with a will, and soon the house was a shapeless mass of wood and plaster, while the soldiers, selecting the largest and strongest beams, dragged them to the spot where the jagged ends of the riven bridge gaped a good ten yards apart.

Meanwhile Redward and two score of his comrades had thrown off their armour and quilted jackets, and, with ropes fastened to their waists, plunged into the swift-flowing river.

To clamber up the woodwork of the broken arch was the work of a few minutes; then, hauling at the ropes with a will, they dragged two of the largest beams across the chasm, and after this was done the work of completing the temporary bridge was a comparatively easy matter.

By this time the whole English army had crowded on its advance guard, and many anxious glances were thrown backwards in the direction from which the French attack was expected, but to every one's relief no enemy appeared till the last waggon of the retreating host had rumbled over the swaying structure. Then, as the van of the French army came in sight, the temporary span, together with two additional arches, crashed into the river, effectually preventing all pursuit for a considerable period.

The retreat continued, the King making towards Flanders, yet at the same time gradually approaching the shores of the English Channel, so as to be able to re-embark should he find himself hemmed in by the hordes of infuriated Frenchmen.

As the English came on swiftly and in good order, a considerable force, under Godemar de Faye, fell back before them, seeking a favourable chance to hinder their advance, while in their rear came the hundred thousand armed men of King Philip, who had meantime found means of crossing the Seine and were swiftly pursuing.

At length the English reached the valley of the Somme. Here the same difficulty awaited them. The bridges were broken down by the redoubtable Godemar, after he had crossed and drawn up his troops on the right bank to oppose the passage of the retreating army.

Edward was sore puzzled with the problem of how to effect a crossing, till a miserable Norman peasant, one Gobin Agace, was brought before him. Not by threats, but by promises of rich reward, was this unworthy Frenchman induced to betray his country; and, on his informing the King of a certain ford, the order for a general advance was at once given.

Led by the peasant, the English rushed towards the ford. In front flowed the river, lapping over the white stones and shingle as it babbled along, an apparently peaceful stream, towards the sea.

On the opposite bank lay the troops of Godemar; but not for one moment did the King hesitate. Commanding the archers to pour a heavy covering fire into the masses of Frenchmen, he drew his sword, and setting himself at the head of his knights and mounted troops, Edward dashed across the river. Short and fierce was the conflict, but unable to withstand the fierce onslaught, the Frenchmen gave way, and were soon in headlong flight.

"Haste, sir," exclaimed Sir John Chandos; "command the main body to cross." And even as he spoke the dark outlines of the pursuing army appeared on the crest of a distant hill.

Never was a ford crossed with such celerity. The waggons were dragged or lifted by the united efforts of crowds of archers, and though waist-deep in water, the whole army crossed in safety.

Then the order was given to resume the march, the Hampshire companies being given the post of honour—the task of covering the retreat.

As Raymond stood with his men watching the advancing Frenchmen, their innumerable banners waving like a reed-covered pond, the archers had slipped into a long, extended line, and quietly, yet resolutely, awaited the oncoming enemy.

Suddenly the squire noticed a change in the appearance of the river. Instead of a silently-flowing stream that ran towards the sea, a wave of foaming water rushed up in the opposite direction, and almost instantly the river became a mass of broken water, impassable to man or beast. The flood-tide had begun, and for six hours at least King Philip was doomed to rave in fruitless anger on the wrong side of the Somme.

"We are safe enough for the present," remarked Redward to his son, "but methinks before daybreak there will be few of us left, for the best we can do is to hold them in check for an hour after the tide has run out. Many a tight corner have we been in ere now, but, certes, this is the worst."

But the master-bowman was wrong, for presently a messenger came to Sir John Hacket with an urgent order from the King. With an irrepressible shout of delight, the fiery old knight summoned his sturdy little band around him.

"It is not fated that our bones bleach on the banks of this river, *mes enfans*," he exclaimed. "News hath arrived that the King intends to give battle with the enemy, and hath already ordered his forces in a strong position but three leagues hence. Thither we are to repair with all haste. Forward, then, and ere night we shall be with the main body!"

Eagerly the company fell in, and with hope renewed they set out for the camp.

"Mark my word, Raymond," said his father, "'tis but putting off the evil day. A great fight is before us, and, by the rood, 'tis hard to say how it will end. But I have a small matter on my mind of which I would speak anon. As soon, therefore, as we arrive in camp, come aside with me for one brief hour."

Raymond assented, and in silence they rode onwards towards their destination, a journey which was to many the last they would ever make on earth.

The sun was sinking low ere they heard the trumpets of the English host. The place Edward had chosen to make a stand was one of great natural strength. The army was encamped on the edge of a low plateau, the right wing being additionally protected by a narrow stream, while in the rear was a small wood. On the summit of the hill a wooden windmill stood out clearly against the sky, while but a bowshot away was the little village of Crécy, its houses, though ransacked by the invaders, still standing—a contrast to those which had previously stood in the path of the ruthless army.

As the Constable's company moved towards the quarters assigned them, Raymond noticed that the archers were already hard at work digging trenches and cutting stakes for palisades, for the King had given orders that everything should be ready ere night, so as to allow his troops a well-earned rest.

After a good repast, for provisions were plentiful in that fertile valley, Raymond sought his father, and together they walked through the camp towards the solitude of the neighbouring wood. On the way they passed the royal pavilion, where, with his chief lords, King Edward sat at

supper, and, judging by the cheerful voices of the company, it was evident that few doubts were entertained as to the issue of to-morrow's conflict.

But, silent and sad, the master-bowman and his son went on their way, for Raymond knew instinctively that there was a great burden on his father's mind. At length they reached the dark shadows of the wood, and here Redward halted.

"Raymond, my beloved son," he exclaimed in a voice broken with emotion, "'tis hard that I should have to tell thee what I am about to utter, but, before Heaven, I must do it, both for mine own peace of mind and for thine own. Two score and three years ago this very day I slew a man. The quarrel was of his own seeking, 'tis true, but, nevertheless, the law was set against me, and I was made outlaw!"

The master-bowman paused to note the effect of this announcement, but, beyond a tightening of his lips, Raymond betrayed no sign of dismay at this astounding confession.

"Then I fled from the country, and assumed a name to which I have no right," resumed Redward. "In this I did thee a great injustice, for the ban falls on the outlaw's children equally with himself; and on this account I ought never to have taken a wife or to have had a son."

"I care not for myself, father. But what if, even now, thou art recognised?"

"It matters not, my son. A secret kept for over two score years may well remain a secret; but I have a misgiving that I shall never see the sun set to-morrow."

"Father!"

"Nay, Raymond, 'tis but a small matter. I cannot live much longer, and to fall in battle is a worthy end. But the worst is to be told. Thou wouldst marry the Lady Audrey!"

The young squire shuddered at the altered prospect.

"Alack a day!" he groaned.

"Ay, Raymond. I fear thou wilt curse the day thou camest into the world, for to my sorrow I must tell thee—the brother of that lady's father was the man I slew!"

For a moment the squire was incapable of speech, then, recovering himself with an effort, he exclaimed, "Nay, father, I blame you not. It is rather the fate of circumstances and my own foolish pride that made me look so high. I cannot for one moment continue my suit for the hand of the Lady Audrey, neither can I ever hope to wear the spurs of knighthood; but I am still thy son."

"And wouldst thou know thy true name?"

"Not unless it please thee, father; 'Raymond Buckland' hath served me well these four-and-twenty years; but," he added with pardonable curiosity, "if I may I would desire to know."

"Dost call to mind Sir Edmund Revyngton?"

"Indifferently so; I wot he is a knight of Devon."

"He is also my brother, and, being without issue, his heir would be, but for the bar of outlawry, Redward Revyngton, now known to all men as Redward Buckland."

It was a long story, that narrative of life marred by an act committed in a moment of anger, but breathlessly Raymond listened till the master-bowman had finished.

"And if so be thou comest scatheless from the wars," he added, "the abbot of Netley will deliver into thy hands certain documents pertaining to thy welfare, and, should Heaven grant that this decree of outlawry be rescinded (though I shall never live to see the day), I pray that thou wilt ever acquit thyself as an honourable gentleman of Devon."

Slowly father and son returned towards the camp, and as they passed between the long lines of tents, Redward paused before a lodging in front of which was a shield displaying a mailed hand argent on a field azure.

Leaving Raymond standing in the gloom, the master-bowman went up and spoke to a man-at-arms who stood outside the tent.

"My master cannot hold converse with any one this night, especially an archer," exclaimed the man roughly.

"Convey my message to thy master and leave him to decide the point, sirrah!" replied Redward in a tone of authority, and, on seeing that a squire had joined him, the soldier obeyed.

Soon he reappeared, and holding open the flap of the tent, signed for the visitors to enter.

Following his father, Raymond saw a tall, well-built man, who in spite of his grey hairs and

carefully-trimmed white beard, carried his years with ease. He had laid aside his armour, and, judging by the still lighted candles in front of a prie-dieu, he had but just risen from his orisons.

With a knightly courtesy he waited for the master-bowman to speak, thinking that one of his followers had come to ask a boon, when to his surprise Redward addressed him by name.

"Sir Maurice," he exclaimed. "Dost thou not know me? I am thy brother Redward!"

"Redward? Back from the dead after all these years? Nay, it cannot be! But yet——"

Drawing nearer he looked closely into the master-bowman's rugged and bronzed face, then, "Thank Heaven! I have found thee!" he exclaimed, and Raymond beheld the extraordinary sight of a belted knight and a surcoated archer falling on one another's necks in a transport of joy.

Then the squire had to be presented to his uncle. "A fine and gallant youth, and a credit to the old stock of Revyngtons," declared the knight. "But, tell me, Redward, why didst thou not seek me out ere now, knowing I was in the camp?"

"But for one thing, Maurice, I had as lief let it be thought that Redward Revyngton was no longer in this world. It is Raymond of whom I think, for I know that to-morrow's battle will count me amongst the slain. How think ye, Maurice? Is there hope that the King will set aside the outlawry, and free my son from its curse?"

The knight shook his head sorrowfully. "Sir Reginald Scarsdale is ever with the King, and his wrath against his brother's slayer dies not."

"And to make matters worse Raymond, ignorant of my past, seeks his daughter's hand in marriage."

Sir Maurice smiled grimly.

"I'll do my best, even if it be to beg a favour of Scarsdale himself! But sit down, Redward, and let us talk at ease, for the hours of darkness fly quickly, and there is much to be said."

It was after midnight before the brothers bade each other farewell, and Redward and Raymond returned to their tents.

On gaining the lines of the Hampshire companies, father and son parted, the former to compose his mind for his anticipated death, the latter to ponder over the astounding revelations he had just heard. Sleep was banished from Raymond's eyes, and long he tossed uneasily on his hard pallet, till the dawn grew ruddy in the east and the trumpets heralded the advent of the eventful day.

CHAPTER XIX

CRÉCY

FOR a short space after the trumpets had sounded all was bustle, men running hither and thither, each with a fixed purpose. Directly Raymond had donned his armour he emerged from his tent to find all the Hampshire companies busily engaged in breaking their fast, as were most of the troops, the King having ordered that every man should make a hearty meal, so as to be sustained throughout the day.

This over, the men formed into their accustomed ranks, and instantly there was a long procession of camp-followers and lackeys leading the horses to the enclosure behind the camp, for the order had gone forth that all combatants were to fight afoot.

Long was that parade remembered by the young squire. The white-surcoated archers, with their well-filled quivers and, in most cases, an additional sheaf of arrows in their belts, the heavily-armed men-at-arms with rusty headpieces and war-worn accoutrements, all standing fast in regular lines, made a picture that gladdened the hearts of their leaders as they gazed upon the stern, bronzed faces of their men.

Already the more remote columns were deploying, and soon the order came for the first division to march to the ground where the King had decided to make his stand. The battlefield was well chosen, being on the edge of the plateau overlooking the little valley that lay between the English and the direction from which the French attack was expected.

On arriving at the allotted station, Raymond found that the supreme command of his division was entrusted to the Prince of Wales, a mere youth of fifteen, who had already shown great promise of a notable military career. With him were the Earls of Warwick and Oxford and a host of noble lords, the brunt of the fight being expected to fall upon this division.

Raymond found that this division was drawn up in two lines, the two thousand bowmen being in front and the men-at-arms, numbering eight hundred, in the second rank, while right behind were the wild-looking Welsh and Irish auxiliaries, each man eagerly whetting his long knife for use when the time came for them to be let loose on their discomfited foes.

Away on the left was another large division of archers and men-at-arms drawn up in similar order, under the command of the Earl of Northampton; while, glancing backwards towards the windmill-crowned hill, Raymond saw the close ranks of the reserve division, composed of seven hundred men-at-arms and two thousand archers, under the direct command of the King.

Looking in the direction of Abbeville, Raymond could see no signs of the French host, and, after all, he wondered whether the attack would be made, seeing the strength of the natural defences occupied by the English.

At length a dull hum of excitement ran along the ranks. The voices of the company-commanders could be heard ordering their men to stand to their arms, and in a few moments, mounted on a white palfrey and bearing a white rod in his hand, the King rode slowly along the front of those rigid lines of warriors.

At intervals he reined in his steed in order to address the troops, bidding them stand stoutly to their arms and take heed to his honour in the fight. A roar of cheering greeted the monarch as he left the first division to inspect the second, and the men were told to stand at ease, and again refresh themselves with food and rest.

Although awaiting an attack is one of the worst ordeals that can be undergone, Raymond was amazed at the coolness of the soldiers, as with merry laugh and jest they sat or sprawled on the ground. Many were busily engaged in fixing new strings to their bows, smoothing out the feathers of their arrows, or waxing or greasing the heads of their deadly shafts to enable them to pierce an obstacle with greater ease, while others crowded round the master-bowmen, asking advice or information on the coming struggle.

Redward had shaken off his depression, and greeted his son with a cheerfulness that was all the more remarkable by reason of his confession on the eve of battle.

"A goodly sight," he exclaimed, "and never can I hope to be in better company. Look at the lads! One would think they were about to try their turn at the butts."

"And think'st thou that the French will fight?"

"Assuredly; they seek to overwhelm and crush us with the weight of numbers. Can the archers but hold the ridge for one hour the day will go with us."

"But 'twill be eventide ere the enemy come to blows?"

"Ay; but if mine eyes do not deceive me, there they are, right on the skyline."

Raymond looked, and in the distance he saw the cloud of dust that invariably envelops an army on the march. Others had detected the sight, and there was a general stir amongst the troops. Exclamations of satisfaction burst from all lips at the prospect of the approach of the French host.

"'Twill be six or seven hours ere they draw nigh," remarked Redward, "and footsore and weary will they be after a three leagues' march in battle array. But, see, Raymond, there is thine uncle, Sir Maurice Revyngton, at the head of the men of Totnes, and, mark you, Sir Reginald Scarsdale is in close converse with him. What doth it mean, I wonder?"

A little later in the day the sun, which had been shining brightly in the eyes of the English host, disappeared behind a thick bank of clouds. The air was close and sultry, and at midday the gloom was so intense that it seemed as if night was drawing nigh. With raucous cries a vast number of crows, ever regarded as birds of ill-omen, flew across the front of the army and alighted on the plain beneath; then resuming their flight they disappeared in the direction of the advancing Frenchmen.

"It will go ill with the King of France," remarked Sir John Hacket to his squire. "If he reads the sign aright methinks he will stay his hand. But see, a thunder-storm approaches rapidly!"

"Pass the word for the archers to protect their bow-strings," exclaimed the Earl of Warwick to the nearest Constable, and in obedience to the order the bowmen either drew waterproof cases over their bows or, if unprovided with these, unstrung their weapons and placed the cords under their quilted coats.

Hardly were these preparations completed than the rain descended in a torrential downpour, blotting out the horizon in a mirky blur, then, as suddenly as it came, the cloud passed over on its way towards Abbeville, and the sun again shone brilliantly, its warmth soon drying the sodden clothing of the soldiers.

Nearer and nearer came the dark masses of Frenchmen, till within a league of their enemies they halted. Shortly afterwards a group of horsemen could be seen riding towards the English position, and, amid breathless excitement, it was observed that four French knights were approaching.

Either from absolute contempt for their enemies or relying on the chivalrous instincts that frequently show themselves between opposing enemies, the Frenchmen rode within a bow-shot of the English lines, then, calmly trotting along the whole front of the army, they appeared to be making careful observations of the dispositions of their foe.

Several knights besought the Prince of Wales to be allowed to have their chargers brought them, so that they might earn a slight advancement by engaging the intrepid Frenchmen; others requested that the archers should shoot them down; but to all entreaties the Prince firmly but courteously returned a refusal, and in perfect silence the English allowed the French knights to complete their reconnaissance, and to retire in safety to their own host.

Slowly the hours passed, and still the French army showed no signs of advancing. The sun was now shining well behind the English, and would serve to dazzle the eyes of their attackers. Meanwhile the archers had planted their pointed stakes, and the men-at-arms in charge of the bombards had loaded these cumbersome engines and trained them on the plain across which the enemy must advance.

Once again the wearisome monotony was broken by the appearance of a man who was observed to make his way steadily and rapidly towards the English lines. When within bowshot he waved his arms in token of friendship, and four archers were sent out to escort him to the Prince. The new-comer was a tall, lightly-built man, with long, spider-like legs and arms, and sharp, projecting elbow-joints and knees. He was attired in a close-fitting dress of blue cloth that served to increase his angularities, and from his belt hung an ink-horn counterbalanced by a short knife.

"Mark ye," quoth Sir John Hacket to his squire, "yonder sly fox is on no lawful errand, and, certes, 'twill go hard with him if he plays the traitor with our Prince. Look at his protruding forehead and his shifty, blinking eyes. A creature like that would fawn to one's face and plunge a dagger into one's back! Hark to what he has to say."

The man spoke in a deep yet quavering voice, yet so loudly that Raymond could hear every word.

"My name, fair sir, is Alexandre Gourdain, and I am clerk in the household of King Philip."

"Forbear to trouble me with thy name and calling," replied the Prince curtly, "but deliver thy message."

"Message, fair sir? Nay, I bear no message, but have come to tell thee that, though counselled to tarry till to-morrow, my master has decided to begin the fight——"

"One moment! Thou bring'st this news on thy own behalf?"

"Yea, fair sir."

"And seekest a guerdon?"

"Yea, fair sir; I do but ask——"

"Enough, thou recreant! Think'st thou that I would list to a double-faced rogue to learn the movements of a gallant foe? Hence with ye! Ho, archers! Strip this coward's coat from off his back, and give him a score lusty stripes with your bow-cords. Then turn him loose, and if he go not back to his master, feather him with shafts. Get thee gone, knave."

"Is it not as I said?" remarked the Constable of Portchester in an undertone. "See, the archers take a delight in their task."

The twenty strokes were laid on with all the force of the soldiers' sinewy arms, then, threatened by a hundred drawn bows, the miserable wretch was pushed out of the lines and sent on his way towards the army he had stooped to betray.

Signs of animation were now observed in the dense masses of the enemy. The heavily-armed cavalry rode forth in a disorderly mob, brandishing their arms and shouting; then, retiring on the main body, their places were taken by a body of archers, nearly two thousand strong, who slowly advanced towards the foot of the rising ground, where the English were posted in firm array.

"'Tis the crossbowmen of Genoa. Steady, my lads; their bolts will be singing over our heads anon," shouted Sir John, and at the same moment the Prince of Wales gave the signal for the archers to stand and make ready.

Silently yet swiftly the white-surcoated lines of bowmen sprang to their feet and took up their allotted stations in the formation of a harrow. With feet planted firmly, and with arrows notched to their six-foot bows, they stood ready for action.

At length the Genoese came within bowshot, the clicking of their windlacs as they drew the cords of their crossbows sounding like the chirping of myriad crickets. Then with a loud shout they leaped from the ground. Another shout, and the leap was repeated.

"Do they take us for a crowd of yokels at a country fair?" asked one archer of his fellow. "They prance for all the world like a dog-baited bear."

"They'll dance higher ere long, I'll warrant," replied his comrade grimly.

Once more the Genoese leapt, then levelling their crossbows, they let fly a volley of short bolts.

A shout of derision greeted this discharge, for, without exception, the bolts fell far short of the proper distance, sticking in the ground at a sharp angle and rendering the advance of the French cavalry, when it should take place, full of additional peril.

"That shows what the rain did for the strings of their crossbows," said Sir John Hacket to the Constable of Lewes, who had joined him at the beginning of the advance. "Steady, men. At the word, loose wholly together."

The long-drawn tension was broken by the voice of the great Lord Chandos. "In the name of God and St. George—shoot!"

The twang of two thousand longbows reverberated along the line. The intervening space between the armies was white with a sleet of arrows. Looking towards the Genoese, Raymond saw a dense mass of men bending over their crossbows and working their windlacs in desperate haste to reload their cumbersome weapons. The next moment the Genoese were literally swept away. Hardly an arrow failed to find a mark; heads, breasts, arms, and legs were transfixed by stinging shafts. Dead, wounded, and unscathed were mixed in a writhing, struggling mass, and the confusion was increased by the unwounded striving to fall back upon the main body of the French host.

All the while the English archers shot straight and true at the disorganised Genoese. The squire, though unable to see the faces of the bowmen in front of him, was astonished at the quiet, collected manner in which they loosed their bows.

Then, as he glanced towards the panic-stricken foemen, the squire observed a strong body of French mounted troops charging down, as he supposed, to the support of the ill-fated crossbowmen. The ground trembled beneath the feet of the cavalry, as with loose rein and wildly brandished weapons their riders pressed forward in a headlong charge.

But to Raymond's surprise, instead of deploying right and left of the fugitives, the Frenchmen cut right through their Genoese mercenaries, slashing at the miserable men with sword and axe.

In this tangled web horsemen fell in scores. Genoese and Frenchmen fought each other with the madness of fury and self-preservation, and all the time the hail of English arrows swept down knight and crossbow-man in indiscriminate slaughter.

To add to the confusion, the bombards on the right of the Prince's division opened fire, and amid clouds of thick, suffocating smoke the heavy stone balls went crashing through the dense masses of the foe, and, for the first time in warfare, it was seen that thrice-tempered armour was useless before the power of artillery.

Then a trumpet sounded from the English ranks, and the hail of arrows ceased as by magic. There was a loud discordant shout, the trampling of hundreds of feet, and through the now rapidly clearing smoke Raymond saw the Welsh and Irish levies dash out upon the demoralised foe. With their long knives they threw themselves on the Frenchmen, and, in the heat of the fight, all thought of quarter was ignored, and knights, worth a rich ransom, were slaughtered as they lay helpless on the ground with as little compunction as if they were peasants.

So intently was Raymond engaged in watching the struggle before him that for the time being he did not notice what was happening on the flanks of the first division, till suddenly the hoarse voice of the Earl of Oxford was heard shouting, "Stand to your arms, fair knights and squires! The French are upon us!"

For the first time on that memorable day a desperate hand-to-hand conflict was about to take place.

CHAPTER XX

HIS LIFE FOR HIS FOE

UNSHEATHING his sword and holding his shield firmly on his left arm, the squire followed the example of the knights and men-at-arms, and hastened towards the left flank.

Already the French cavalry, led by the Duke of Alençon, had, by sheer weight of numbers, forced their way to within striking distance of their foes, and the long rows of white-coated archers, who formed the first rank of the defence, were swept aside by the rush of the mounted French knights, for at close quarters the bowmen were useless against the lances, swords, and axes of their mailed antagonists.

Before Raymond and his companions could throw themselves into the press, the horsemen had hewn a way right to the foot of the Royal Standard, beneath which the Prince of Wales and a chosen body of knights fought with magnificent courage.

The French and German knights, intent on securing the Prince, hurled themselves in a compact body towards the Standard, and as fast as one warrior fell, two more took his place, till it seemed that the desperate bravery of the attackers would attain its purpose.

Raymond found himself engaged by a tall, broad-shouldered antagonist, who bore on his shield the cognisance of the House of Luxemburg. For a space they rained blows at each other, striving by sheer force to cut down their respective guards, till, by a sweeping blow, the Frenchman shivered the squire's sword, and only by swiftly leaping backwards was Raymond able to avoid the deadly stroke: So narrow was his escape that the point of the descending blade cut a long, clean gash in his surcoat ere it buried itself a foot deep in the carcase of a slain charger. Instantly the squire rushed in, struck the Luxemburger with the edge of his shield, then, ere the man could recover himself, plunged his dagger to the hilt in his brawny throat.

Without pausing to recover his breath, Raymond rushed towards a group of French knights who were surrounding a little knot of Englishmen. It was the Prince's own bodyguard, who, hard pressed, strove their utmost to defend their young master. Sir Reynold Cobham, beaten to the ground, lay pinned down by the weight of his armour; the Earl of Warwick, wounded in the face by a lance thrust, was fiercely beset by two knights of Cologne, while Edward, though unscathed, was the mark of nigh a score of determined Frenchmen. Nimbly avoiding one stroke, parrying another, and diverting a thrust with his shield, the Prince fought like a trained veteran rather than a mere lad of fifteen.

At length a knight, armed with a huge double-handed sword, made a swinging cut at the Prince just as the latter had all his attention drawn by the fierce onslaught of a mounted knight of Sicily. For the moment it seemed as if nothing could save the Prince from instant death; but Raymond, regardless of his own safety, sprang forward, and with his shield and his own body strove to stay the blow. The knight's sword struck the squire's shield just above the upper leathern loop that held it to the wearer's arm. The tough metal plate was sheared through as if made of paper, and the blade, glancing upwards against the squire's bascinet, struck the Prince a harmless blow, merely slicing the crest of his helmet.

Raymond fell at the Prince's feet, but the Constable of Portchester, seeing his squire stricken to the earth, dashed out the swordsman's brains with a crashing blow of his mace. For a short space Raymond lay breathless on the ground, then, feeling terribly dazed, he raised himself and looked around. To his utmost satisfaction he saw that the Prince of Wales was unhurt. Already the danger was past, for the Earls of Arundel and Northampton had brought up their division to the aid of the sorely pressed Prince, and the attackers, beaten at every point, were giving way in headlong flight.

At length the squire staggered to his feet, and, assisted by an archer of his company, he slowly and painfully made his way towards the camp. Darkness was falling, and the English, having been ordered to refrain from hazardous pursuit, stood in their ranks, while a vast plain, dotted with thousands of corpses, of which but few wore the red cross surcoats, silently testified to the hard-fought fight.

As Raymond passed the ranks of his own company Sir John Hacket came forward and grasped him by the hand.

"My brave squire," he exclaimed. "Right nobly hast thou borne thyself this day. The Prince hath spoken highly of thy courage and devotion, and, without doubt, tidings of thy deeds will come to the cars of the King. But, Raymond," he added sadly, "I have ill tidings for thee."

"My father?" gasped the squire, reading the Constable's unspoken words.

"Ay, my boy, 'tis thy father. He fell in the thickest of the fight, and thou hast lost a noble sire and I a brave soldier. Now, bear up, Raymond, and get thee to the camp and attend to thy hurts, for thou wilt be required anon."

Wounded in body and mind, the young squire was led to the camp, where it was found that the Frenchman's sword had driven the stout steel bascinet heavily against his temple, leaving a dark blue bruise to show how near he had been to death. Simple remedies were applied, and, having divested himself of his armour, Raymond recovered himself sufficiently to set out to find the body of his father, bearing a torch to aid him in his quest.

He remembered well the place where he had last seen him, close to a little stunted thorn that grew on the edge of the slope which the Prince's division had held so well.

A veritable mound of bodies showed how firmly the archers had stood, and how fierce had been the contest, for in a circle around the tree lay a heap of red-crossed surcoats, their wearers lying still in death with their faces to the foe, while around lay the bodies of their attackers, three deep in places, their rich dress and armour proving that the flower of French chivalry was unable to vanquish, although it had broken through, that double line of English archers and men-at-arms.

The men of the Hampshire companies had suffered more severely than any, and Raymond, as he pursued his quest, came across many faces which he sadly recognised.

Here and there, dotted over the ghastly field, were feeble glimmers of torches showing that others were engaged in the doleful task of looking for their fallen comrades, though in some instances ghouls were engaged in their dastardly work of robbing the dead.

At length the ruddy glare of the torch threw its beams upon the form which Raymond recognised only too well. Stretched on his back, his sightless eyes staring up at the starry sky, lay Redward, the outlaw and master-bowman, the body bearing the ghastly traces of eight separate wounds, all of which were in front, proving that to the last he had fought with his face to the foe.

Sorrowfully Raymond gazed upon his slain sire; then, realising that the sooner he performed the last rites there would be the less chance of the spoiler's fell work, he proceeded to carefully remove the body to the shelter of the stunted tree, so that he could return to the camp to find, if possible, the priest attached to the company.

As he lifted the heavy corpse he was startled to hear a feeble voice exclaim, "Blessings on thy kindness, noble sir; I pray thee assist me."

Recovering from his astonishment, the squire discovered, pinned beneath his father's body, a wounded knight. Swiftly Raymond bent to his aid, and, cutting asunder the laces of his bascinet, he found the stranger to be none other than Sir Reginald Scarsdale!

"Faith! I did think this would have been the end of me," quoth the knight. "Hast a draught of wine?"

Raymond shook his head. "I am returning to the camp, an' if it please thee, I'll help thee back to thy company."

"Do so, squire, for, what with a crack over the head with a Frenchman's mace, and the weight of yon bowman atop o' me, I feel too weak to stand of mine own will. What dost thou here?"

"Yonder lies my father."

"Thy father? By St. Wilfrid of Ripon, he was a gallant man! Had he not stood over me the rascals would have settled my account. I pray thee tell me his name?"

For a moment Raymond paused, then, in a sudden outburst of confidence, he exclaimed, "Redward Revyngton!"

"What! Redward Revyngton! And to think that the man whom I, with a mad desire for vengeance, hounded out of the country should have given his life for me! Did he wot whom I was?"

"Ay," said Raymond. "For but a few hours agone he and I saw thee in converse with his brother, Sir Maurice."

"Then out on me for my revengeful spirit! When it lay in his power to thrust me through the back with a dagger, or even to let me be slain by my enemies, what did he do? He saved my life! This indeed is rendering good for evil."

"And ye forgive him his trespass?"

"Ay, young squire. Right willingly."

"Then in my sorrow I thank Heaven," replied Raymond, and in silence they returned slowly to the camp, Sir Reginald leaning heavily on the arm of the outlaw's son.

The moment the wounded knight was given into safe hands Raymond hastened to his quarters, where he enlisted the services of the priest and four stout archers. The latter took spades and torches with them, and the melancholy procession set out for the scene of Redward's last stand, Raymond with Sir John Hacket, who wished to pay his last respects to his trusted servant, leading

the way.

Rapidly the bowmen plied their spades, and soon a deep grave gaped at the foot of the solitary thorn. Raymond bent and kissed the cold brow, then, amid the solemn voice of the priest reciting the psalm, *Domine, refugium*, the body of the brave old master-bowman was laid to rest.

Bare-headed and dry-eyed, Raymond watched the dark earth being shovelled down upon the mortal remains of his sire, then, when the task was accomplished, he turned and walked slowly back to the camp. There, in the retirement of his tent, his pent-up feelings found relief, and throwing himself on the ground, he burst into a flood of passionate weeping.

CHAPTER XXI

THE REJECTED GUERDON

MORNING came, and with it the trumpets again sounded for the troops to assemble. Was it that a renewal of the fight was expected? Nay, for the French were in headlong flight, their King being already well on the way to La Broye. But Edward, sensible of the advantage gained, had determined to advance on Calais.

Silently the weary soldiers fell into their ranks. The archers, their white surcoats soiled with mud and stained with blood, the men-at-arms, with battered armour, and, in many cases, roughly-bandaged wounds, stood grimly in their martial array, conscious of the many comrades who had stood thus but a day before and had gone to their last account.

Suddenly a fanfare of trumpets announced the approach of the King. With his eyes shining with pardonable pride, the monarch rode slowly down the war-worn lines, stopping at intervals to bestow honours and praise as cases of individual merit were pointed out to him. At his right hand rode the Prince of Wales, and attending him were Sir John Chandos, the Earls of Warwick, Arundel, Oxford, and Southampton.

When in front of the Hampshire companies the King again drew rein, and surveyed the stern, determined faces of the men on whom the brunt of the attack had fallen. Sir John Hacket, attended by his three squires, stood in front of his command, the banners, according to custom, being lowered to the ground in the presence of the Sovereign.

"By Our Lady! 'Tis our trusted Constable of Portchester!" exclaimed Edward. "And by report thou didst hold thyself right gallantly on yesterday's field. Ah, Sir John, we have something in store to make amends for our former forgetfulness. Advance thy banner!"

The Constable, taking his banner from the hands of the guidon-bearer, stepped forward, and, with bended knee, presented the blue silk emblazoned with the golden crescent to the King, who, drawing a dagger from his belt, deftly cut off the pointed end of the pennon. Handing the severed portion to a knight in attendance, the King returned the banner to Sir John.

The action, simple as it seemed, roused the company to the highest pitch of enthusiasm, for their adored leader had achieved the great distinction of being created a knight-banneret, the greatest honour to be paid by the sovereign, only on the field of battle.

Ere the cheering had died away, the Prince of Wales had plucked his father's sleeve, and whispered in his ear.

"Of a truth, 'tis the squire who brought the Count of Tancarville to our camp! And he is the man that came betwixt thee and thine enemies in the thickest of the fray! 'Tis our pleasure to bestow honours freely to-day, though, methinks, they be well deserved, and no man will chide us for being too freehanded. Thy squire's name, Sir John?"

"He is named Raymond Buckland, sire."

"Come hither, squire," commanded the King, alighting from his palfrey and taking a sword from the hand of the Earl of Warwick.

The supreme moment of Raymond's life was at hand, but the squire, instead of kneeling to receive the honour of knighthood, advanced a few paces and stood irresolutely before his sovereign.

"On thy knees, squire!" commanded Edward.

"Nay, sire, I cannot," replied the unhappy Raymond. Low murmurs of astonishment arose from the King's attendants, while Sir John Hacket, placing his hand heavily on his squire's shoulder, hissed into his ear, "Kneel, thou fool! Art bereft of thy senses?"

A dark cloud gathered on the King's face. Then a thought seemed to strike him, and he spoke again.

"Here, sirrah, tell us the reason of this strange refusal. Nay, have no fear," he added, in a more kindly tone, observing the squire's dejection, "for we perceive there is something amiss that will account for thy demeanour."

Encouraged by the King's words, and rendered bold by the desperate position in which circumstances had placed him, Raymond replied, in a low yet distinct voice, "Sire, I am the son of an outlaw, and therefore unworthy of the honour thou would'st bestow."

"Ah!" exclaimed the King. "This requires further consideration. Sir John, knowest aught of this?"

"Nay, sire," replied the amazed Constable.

Once again the young Prince of Wales whispered in his father's ear. The King nodded in response, and again addressed the squire.

"It is our desire to hear more of this matter. See to it that thou comest before us in our pavilion at noon, Sir John. I hold thee responsible for thy squire's appearance. And, Sir William," he added, turning to his scrivener, "I pray thee see to it that the worthy Constable of Portchester and his squire be instantly admitted to our presence at that hour."

Remounting his steed, the King, accompanied by his retinue, continued his tour of inspection, and, on this being completed, he returned to his pavilion. The ranks broke, and the men were told to enjoy a well-earned rest ere the march to Calais was begun on the morrow, while the camp-followers were put to the melancholy task of burying the dead who had fallen in the fight.

On hearing the story from Raymond's own lips, the kind-hearted Sir John Hacket's expressions of surprise and pity were unbounded. For not for one moment had he suspected that the sturdy master-bowman, though an outlaw, was at one time a gentleman of quality.

"Take it not too much to heart, Raymond," he said. "Many a man hath been in a worse scrape. I am of a mind to bring Sir Maurice Revyngton with us when we repair to the King's presence, and 'twould be well if I saw the knight at once."

So saying, the Constable hastened away, leaving his squire still torn with conflicting emotions of hope and fear—hope that his own stainless character and deeds of bravery would wipe out the undeserved blot that threatened to mar his prospects, and fear that the formidable barrier of social custom and royal etiquette would for ever debar him from the road to success.

In less than an hour Sir John returned, a broad smile of satisfaction overspreading his grim features. "Thy uncle will bear us company, ay, and another knight, if I mistake not, will interest himself on thy behalf. Now, bear thyself cheerfully, for I perceive that things will turn out aright. Waste no more time in gloomy meditations, but make thyself fit to appear in the King's presence, for the hour of audience is at hand."

"And the style of mine attire?"

"In full harness, Raymond, for the King will doubtless think fit to reward thee for bravery on the field, and on that score I have no doubt. 'Tis meet that thou shouldst appear in the garb of a soldier rather than in the dress of a common suppliant. And, moreover, our King delights in the wearing of harness, and looks with favour on those who doff their armour but rarely when they come to the wars. So again I tell thee, hasten!"

The squire repaired to his own tent and put on his complete suit of armour—the same that his father had given him years ago on the eve of the sack of Hamble—and well the dented and tarnished steel befitted his tall and erect figure. Then girding on his scabbard, wherein was thrust the remaining part of the broken blade, and grasping the fragment of the shield that had diverted the murderous sweep of the Frenchman's two-handed sword, Raymond repaired to his master's tent.

The Constable surveyed him with appreciation. "Eh, lad, thou dost well to bear the silent testimony of thy courage on thine arm. In any case but the present, when thy future is at stake, 'twould have been a braggart's ruse. But the King doth know full well that thou art no boaster, seeing that it was in thy power to accept honour at his hands, and thou didst shrink from it. But come, the hour of noon is near. Let us make for the royal pavilion."

Between the long lines of tents, where crowds of soldiers gathered, in silent wonder, to see the man who had so strangely withstood his sovereign, the knight and the squire walked side by side, and with a fresh wave of doubt and fear sweeping over him, Raymond found himself in the anteroom of the royal tent.

CHAPTER XXII

SIR RAYMOND

SIR JOHN HACKET, having formally announced his rank and that of his companion, as well as the nature of their business, to the herald, removed his velvet cap, though he held his bascinet in his left hand, and at the same time removed his right-hand gauntlet. His squire did likewise, and, breathing a fervent prayer for courage, he prepared to follow his master into the royal presence.

The heavy damask curtains were drawn aside by two knights in waiting, and Raymond heard the sonorous voice of the herald repeating the title and style of the Constable and his squire. Another moment and Raymond stood before, but at a respectful distance from, the royal daïs.

King Edward, who still wore the mailed coat in which he rode along the ranks earlier in the day, was attended by a number of earls and barons, while by his side stood the young Prince of Wales, who regarded the squire with an encouraging smile.

At the foot of the daïs, a little distance to the left, stood Raymond's uncle, Sir Maurice Revyngton, and his late father's former enemy, Sir Reginald Scarsdale, who, though still weak and suffering from his wounds, had, at Sir John's desire, appeared on the young squire's behalf.

"Ah, squire," quoth the King, fixing his dark, keen eyes upon the young man's face, "when we summoned thee to appear before us we looked for an explanation from thine own lips. But thou hast been forestalled, for these two knights have already told us of thy condition. Now, what hast thou to say why thou shouldst not be driven from the camp, being the son of an outlaw?"

"Nothing, sire; 'tis but the law."

"Thou couldst not have said much less," remarked the King, with a grim laugh. "How sayest thou, Sir Reginald Scarsdale. Hast thou a desire to press thy claims?"

"Nay, sire," replied the knight stoutly. "For his father, knowingly and willingly, came to my aid in the thickest of the fight, and but for his courage I should have been worsted."

"But thine oath of vengeance?"

"Sire, my desire for revenge departed the moment I heard from this squire the name of his father, who, in truth, slew my only brother. Furthermore, 'tis my intention to repair, as soon as this war is over, to the shrine of St. Swithin of Winchester and to seek absolution from mine oath."

"And thou hast no wish to harm this squire?"

"None, sire. On the contrary I wish him good——"

"Hold, Sir Knight," interrupted the King sharply. "We asked thee a plain question, to be answered by 'Yea' or 'Nay,' not by suggestions."

"And thou, Sir John," continued Edward, addressing the Constable. "Hast thou aught to add in favour of thy squire, beyond what thou didst tell us but a short time back?"

"Nothing more, sire."

"'Tis well. And now, squire, we have carefully considered thy case, and we are favourably disposed towards thee." Then, turning to his barons, he added, with a sly reference to the growing power of Parliament, "We take it, fair lords, that we shall not offend our faithful commoners assembled at Westminster by assuming a right to revoke a decree of outlawry?"

A low murmur of assent was the reply.

"Then, Raymond Revyngton, we hereby pardon thee for an offence that thou hast not committed—to wit, thou art no longer the son of an outlaw. Sir William de Saye, our scrivener, will draw up the deed of revocation, and a copy for the Lord Bishop of Winchester. Art content?"

"Sire, I thank thee," replied Raymond, bending low before his sovereign.

"There is yet another matter. Of thy valour there has been no question. We have in mind the affair with the Count of Tancarville, and, going farther back, thy journey to Hennebon. But more especially thy conduct in yesterday's fight, when our dear son, the Prince of Wales, was succoured by thine aid. We have a mind to inspect thy cloven shield, which, we do perceive, thou hast brought in case our memory were in need of a reminder."

The squire, still kneeling, handed his buckler to an attendant, who in turn presented it to the King.

"A lusty stroke," commented Edward, carefully examining the clean cut in the metal plate. "Our

cousin of France hath men of sinew who in open fight would be worthy and gallant opponents. Had their peasants been as good bowmen as our gallant archers but few of us would be here. Squire," he added, "arise and hand over thy sword."

With martial alertness, Raymond drew the fragment of steel, and a look of surprise o'erspread the King's face.

"Thine equipment seems at fault," he remarked, smiling a little grimly. "Nay, we know 'twas done in a gallant fight. Advance, squire, and kneel before us."

This time Raymond did not refuse, for was he not a man free from the fatal taint that had threatened to mar everything in his career? With rapid stride and uplifted head he advanced to the steps of the daïs, his armour clanking as he moved. Presenting the hilt of his weapon to the King, the squire sank on his knees.

As in a dream he felt the flat of the broken blade touch his right shoulder, and the King's voice, in bold and decisive tones, saying, "Arise, Sir Raymond Revyngton!"

When at length Raymond found himself without the royal pavilion, he was overwhelmed by the congratulations of his friends, including Sir Reginald Scarsdale.

"'Twould ill become a belted knight if I did not make amends for the past," quoth the latter. "And to that end all I can do for thee I'll do willingly."

"Then on thy knightly honour I hold thee to thy promise," replied Raymond, catching at the opportunity with new-born courage, "for I have a matter of much weight of which I would speak."

"Then say on."

Sir John and Sir Maurice, having an inkling of what was coming, exchanged a knowing smile, and Raymond continued, though his voice faltered a little.

"Sir Reginald, I love thy daughter Audrey, and would ask thy consent to win her hand in marriage."

For a while the old knight was too much astonished to reply, then, holding out his hand, he replied, "Then thou art the youth who rendered her service at that little affair with the French at Hampton? Out on me for a thickhead for not linking thee with that bold feat before. Certes! I will not be less good than my word. Take the maid, if she be willing to wed thee!" Thus it was that the newly-made knight found that success begets success, though in his heart he had not expected to win Sir Reginald's consent so readily. Yet in the midst of his good fortune the one dark shadow was the haunting thought of the loss of his father, and he grieved in his heart that death had deprived his sire of life just as his son was on the threshold of fame and honour.

Slowly the four knights, Sir Reginald being stiff with his hurts, proceeded towards the lines of the Hampshire companies, where Sir John had invited the others to partake of refreshment. Already the news of Raymond's advancement had preceded them, and the soldiers, with loud shouts, welcomed the new knight; for the master-bowman's son was ever popular in the ranks of the men of Portsmouth and Southampton.

"What are thy plans for the future," asked the Constable later in the day, "for as heir to Sir Maurice it is fitting that thou shouldst join him with the men of Devon."

"Nay, by the rood," answered Raymond warmly. "Thou hast ever been a good master to me, Sir John, and with thee I'll abide till the end of the war."

"I thank thee for thine appreciation, Raymond, for ever since thou wert my squire I have loved thee as a son. But now concerning the maid, the Lady Audrey?"

"Until Sir Reginald returns home I will not press my suit, but should he do so I hope I may be permitted to withdraw from the camp for a few weeks to accompany him. Even then, how can I tell that the Lady Audrey will deal favourably with me?"

"I know that she loves thee, Raymond."

"How so, Sir John, seeing that I know not myself?"

"Raymond, I am afraid thou art more forward with the art of war than with the affairs of the heart. Would a maid have sent a messenger to me every week whilst thou wert in Hennebon to know if there were tidings of thee, if she did not love thee?"

"But how knew she that I was in Brittany?" was the amazed question.

"How? Didst thou not give me a letter to send to her?"

"Only in case I did not return."

"Didst thou? Didst thou? Certes now I remember! But now I think on the matter, I must have

forgotten that, for I did send it," replied Sir John, with pardonable deceit and well-feigned dismay. "But mind it not, Raymond, 'twas after all for the best, and, mark my words, she'll have thee—sure enough."

On the morrow the march was resumed, the King having decided to lay siege to Calais, and slowly the long lines of English troops, every man heavily laden with booty, proceeded from the field of Crécy.

Edward had long looked with covetous eyes upon the port of Calais, for owing to the death of his Flemish ally, Jacques d'Artevelde, at the hands of fellow-countrymen, and the consequent estrangement with the Flemings, the King was in need of a continental port for the distribution of English wool, and, once Calais were taken, the nest of pirates who made their headquarters there, to the great annoyance of English ships, would be dispersed. Also an entry for his troops would be secured within easy distance from the English coast. So, with these strong incentives, Edward hastened to reduce the town.

Within a week of Crécy, the English lay in a triple ring around the land side of the town, while a strong fleet cruised constantly between Grisnez and Gravelines to prevent any succour being sent by sea, and, without attempting to carry the defences by assault, Edward relied upon famine to bring about the downfall of Calais.

Throughout the long winter of 1346-47 the blockade was maintained, and the works of the besiegers resembled the outer walls of a city rather than temporary trenches, so that the English were in a position both to keep the citizens of Calais within their walls and to repel any attempt on the part of the French to raise the siege.

Early in the spring dysentery broke out in the ranks of the English, and amongst those who were attacked was Sir Raymond. In spite of the rough yet devoted attention of his men, the skill of the harassed physicians, and the solicitude of his friends, the young knight was, for a time, in great danger, and even when the crisis was passed his progress towards recovery was slow and tedious.

One day as he lay alone in his tent, weak and worn, Raymond heard the well-known sound of troops marching hurriedly out of camp, and the blare of trumpets denoted that something untoward was afoot.

Feebly he called the names of the men who usually waited on him, but in vain; there was no response to his summons, and at length the tramp of feet died away, leaving the camp as silent as the grave, save for the flapping of the canvas as the keen wind whistled around the tents.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ADVENTURE AT THE RUINED MILL

IN his tent, in terrible suspense, the young knight, Raymond Revyngton, lay helpless, wondering how went the fight. In due course, through the opening of his tent, he saw a stream of wounded men returning, singly or in small parties, some with rough bandages round their limbs or their heads.

At length came one whom he knew—an archer of the Portchester company.

"Stephen! Stephen!" called Raymond, as loudly as he could.

In obedience to the knight's cry, the man entered the tent, nursing the maimed fingers of his right hand with his left, while the blood poured freely from the stumps and trickled in a crimson stream down his arm, soaking his sleeve.

Deftly and quickly, notwithstanding his weakness, Raymond bound the wounded hand, and poured out a cup of wine for the almost fainting archer. The draught revived him, and the colour began to steal back into his ashy-grey face.

"How goes the battle?" asked Raymond anxiously.

"'Tis not a battle, Sir Raymond, but a slight passage of arms, though I perceive that as a bowman my work is done. The French King hath tried to relieve the town, but my Lord Chandos and seven thousand of our men have withstood him amid the sand-hills and marshes. Save for a few hand-to-hand blows, the French never made a stand, and already they are in full flight."

"Dost feel well enough to walk?" the young knight asked, after a long pause.

"Yea, Sir Raymond."

"Then get thee outside the camp, and bring me fresh tidings."

The man obeyed, but ere long he returned, exclaiming: "'Tis all over. The enemy are nowhere in sight and our men are even now returning."

"Then do not tarry longer, but go to thine own tent, for thou needest better care for thy hurts than I can give thee. This flask of wine I give thee, for, by St. Thomas, thou hast need of it. Nay, do not thank me, but away!"

Once more the camp was alive with men, for the threatened attack of the huge army that Philip had gathered together for the relief of Calais had been ignominiously repelled, and it was known that the fate of the town was sealed. Raymond gathered a fairly true account of the fight from the conversation and joyous exclamations of the elated soldiery, and presently Sir John Hacket, covered with dust and showing signs of the conflict, entered the tent.

"Art feeling better, Raymond?"

"Ay, Sir John. But how goes it with us?"

"Passably well but ever I seem to be a messenger of momentous tidings to thee, whether of good or evil."

"Then there is something amiss?" questioned the young man eagerly, instinctively surmising that the news was unfavourable.

"Yea, Raymond. My speech was ever blunt, and methinks the sooner I unburden myself of a message of ill-tidings the easier 'tis for both of us. Briefly, Sir Maurice hath fallen like the true and gallant knight he was, and thou art the last of the Revyngtons of Churston."

"Alack-a-me that it should be so! For though I knew but little of him, I esteemed him a gallant, gentle, and honourable knight even before I wot he was my kinsman. And Sir Reginald Scarsdale—what of him?"

"His heart is stronger than his body. In the first impact he was swept from his saddle by a mere stripling."

"And he is killed, wounded, or taken?"

"Neither, save that he is shaken by the fall, and the King vows that since he cannot hold his own against a youth he will send him home, seeing that his fighting days are over."

"And does Sir Reginald know of this?"

"Ay, and if the King will not relent—and he is hard to turn from his purpose—'twill be the first

Scarsdale since the Conquest whose feet on his altar-tomb rest not upon a lion."

"Alas! the King's decision will hit him hard! Do you, Sir John, convey my expressions of regret to the gentle knight, and say that it will give me great pleasure should he deign to visit me."

For several days more Raymond lay weak and ill in his tent, but as April drew on and the weather became warmer his strength began slowly to return. At length, pale and wan, the young knight was able to walk slowly about the camp, supported by two of his archers.

Still the siege continued, a long-drawn, tedious task, with little chance of knightly deeds of daring to earn advancement. The close-drawn lines of the besiegers still kept tenacious grip upon the town, and, though famine and disease wrought havoc amongst its gallant defenders, the end seemed as far off as ever.

The return of summer found Sir Raymond Revyngton completely restored in health, though still chafing with impatience at the life of inactivity, for the younger knights looked with disfavour upon the King's methods of conducting the siege, and would rather have had the opportunity of leading their men to the assault than sit down before the town waiting for famine to do its fell work.

Friendly tilting-matches, hawking, and sports of a similar nature were indulged in, and Raymond, with an exuberance of energy, took a leading part in the pastimes. Many a pleasant afternoon was spent in the open country around the English lines, hunting or making sport with hounds and falcons, for not an armed Frenchman was to be seen within twenty leagues of Calais, save the starving wretches within its gates.

One afternoon in July Raymond and a score of young knights rode south-eastwards along the sand-dunes, each knight accompanied by a mounted serving-man and a number of hounds. The country was not of a nature to yield much sport, yet, eager to while away the time, the little cavalcade rode carelessly on over the low sandhills.

On their right spread the blue waters of the English Channel, in front towered the chalky heights of Gris-nez, while behind lay the red-tiled houses and grey walls of Calais, with the semicircle of tents that marked the English lines.

At length they reached the summit of a low hill, and here they reined in their steeds.

"No sign of a living creature," remarked one of the party, "though the land away on our left seemeth well wooded. How call you yonder forest, Armand?" he inquired, addressing one of the attendants, a Gascon who had spent the greater part of his life in the neighbourhood of Calais.

"'Tis the forest of Ambleteuse, sir," replied the man; "there the wild boar is to be found."

"Ah There is good sport, fair sirs Let us ride forward."

Half-an-hour's sharp canter brought them to the edge of the wood, and in a long, straggling line the gay-hearted Englishmen, with loud shouts and many a blast upon their horns, plunged into the gloom of the forest glades.

For a while no signs of animal life appeared, then suddenly there came from one of the rearmost horsemen shouts of "A boar!"

Instantly the party turned, and crashing through the underwood, made towards the sound. Raymond, who had been in the van, now found himself in the rear, and, spurring his steed and calling to his attendant to follow, he strove to overtake his companions, while the loud grunts of the hunted boar could be distinctly heard amid the snapping of the brushwood.

At length the glade descended towards a babbling brook, and here the press of horsemen became so thick that many were riding hip to hip. Suddenly Raymond's horse trod in a rabbit-hole, and before he could realise what had happened he found himself hurtling through the air and striking the soft earth with a heavy thud. Fortunately, the young knight was lightly clad, and fell without injury, but on leaping to his feet he saw his body-servant lying, senseless on the ground, while the two steeds, entangled in their fall, were madly kicking each other with their iron-shod hoofs.

In the excitement of the chase the rest of the cavalcade had rushed onwards, heedless of their companions' misfortunes, and the sound of feet was already dying away.

With a bound Raymond sprang to the side of his attendant and dragged him out of the reach of the perilous hoofs. Then he sought for his horn to summon assistance, but the instrument was crushed and rendered useless by the fall. Baffled in his purpose, he applied his energies to the task of restoring the unconscious man, bathing his forehead with water obtained from the brook.

His efforts at length were rewarded, for the servant sat up and gazed around in a dazed way.

"Art hurt, Thompson?" asked Raymond anxiously.

"Can scarcely tell, Sir Raymond, save that my head is swimming round like a roasting joint, and

my shoulder-blades seem growing out of my neck."

"'Tis of small moment. But stand up if thou canst." Thompson staggered to his feet, and to the knight's satisfaction he found that none of the man's limbs were broken.

"'Tis a sorry pass, for we must needs find our way back afoot. Pull thyself together, man, for 'tis a goodly step betwixt us and the camp."

Drawing his hunting-knife, Raymond put the two struggling horses—each of whom had a leg broken—out of their misery, then the twain set out on their homeward way. By the time they emerged from the forest their shadows fell far athwart the path, for the sun was sinking in the west; but Thompson was rapidly recovering, and their pace was well maintained.

"There is the hill from whence we first saw the wood," remarked the knight. "But methinks we can leave that well on our left, for the camp lies yonder."

"I deem thee to be right, fair sir. But, mark ye! Look at yonder clouds."

Raymond looked in the direction indicated, and saw that a storm was rapidly driving towards them.

"Night cometh on apace, and with it a tempest," quoth he. "Hasten, or we shall be benighted in this dreary plain."

Hardly had they traversed a distance of three arrow-flights than the wind, hitherto a faint westerly breeze, sprang up with terrific violence. The sand rose in thick clouds, shutting out everything except in their immediate vicinity, and the sun, in a mist of pale yellow sky, sank beneath the indigo-coloured clouds.

Onward they steadily plodded through the heavy yielding sand, the swiftly-falling darkness bringing with it a heavy storm of rain and hail. Wondering whether his comrades were faring as badly, the young knight stumbled and plunged resolutely onwards, his serving-man following closely at his heels, the whistling of the wind making conversation impossible.

For over two hours the twain pursued their uncomfortable walk, till at length a dark object blocked their path. It was a ruined windmill. Making their way round its massive base, the weary travellers found some slight shelter from the force of the wind, and, panting from their exertions, they leaned against the stonework to recover their breath.

"Dost know where we are?" shouted Raymond, his voice almost inaudible in the howling wind.

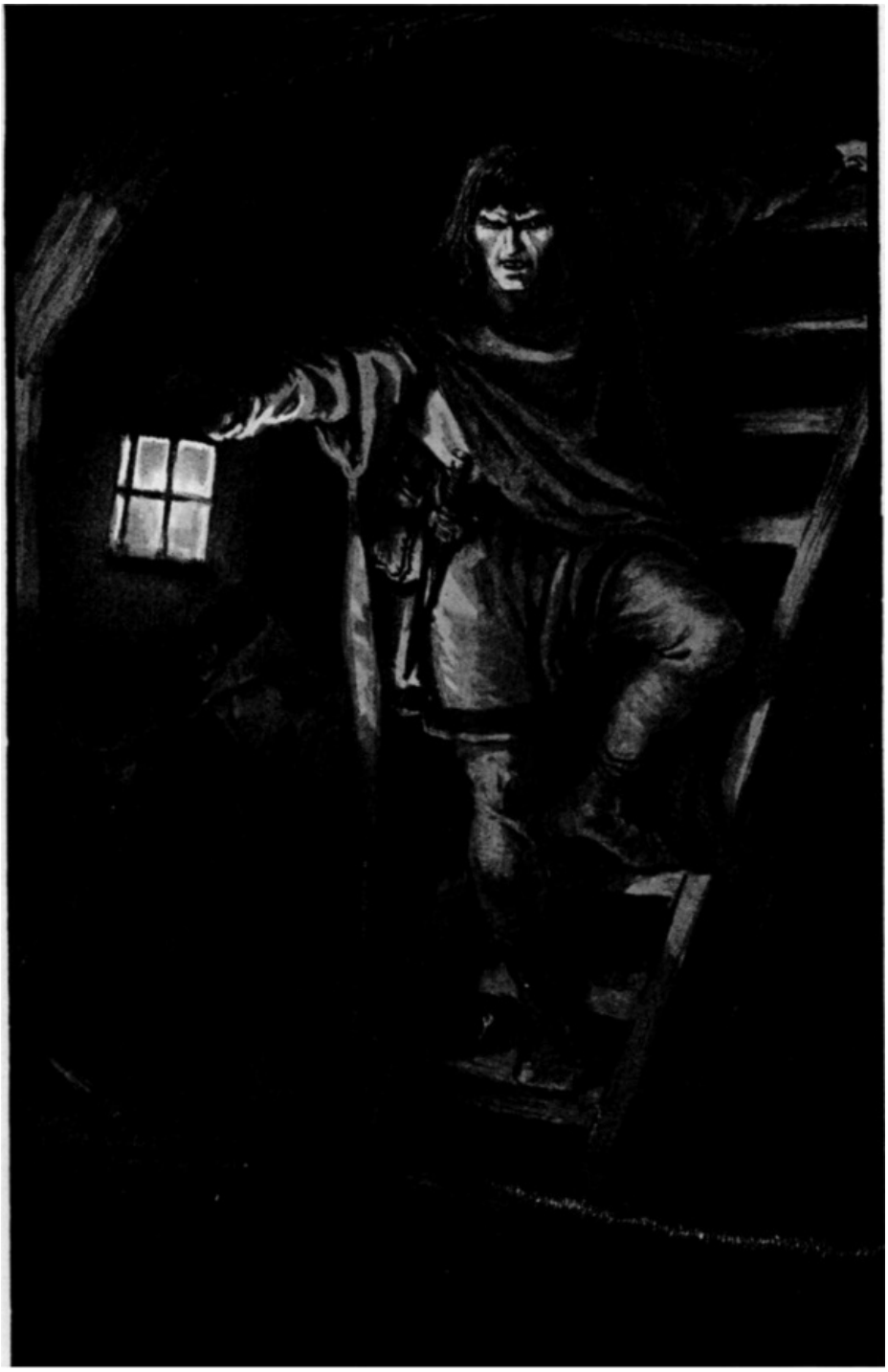
"No, sir," replied the man.

"But a short distance from where we left the wood, I marked this tower on our left, and, certes, we have been walking round and round for half the night."

"Then we must needs set out once more?"

"Nay. This will suffice for the present, and here we'll rest till daylight comes and the storm spends itself. The door is not barred, I hope."

Walking slowly round the mill, the knight felt for the opening, till he stumbled over a low stone step. Cautiously ascending, he found at the fourth step a flat ledge, protected by a broken rail, and here was the door hanging by a solitary rusted hinge.



TREACHERY AFOOT

Yielding to the pressure of his shoulder, the door flew open, and the knight and his companion carefully groped their way in, closing the door after them. Here, in absolute blackness, they found shelter, the storm howling wildly outside, yet scarcely to be heard within the massive stone walls. They had no means of procuring a light, but by continuing their investigations they felt a pile of broken hurdles and the lower-most rungs of a ladder.

Raymond was about to ascend, when his servant laid a detaining hand upon his arm. "Hist!" he exclaimed. "Some one moves in the room above."

"Nay, thou dreamest!... Ay, thou art right! Hide here, quickly. Art armed?"

"Nought but a knife."

"'Twill suffice. Now, hold thyself in readiness, but act not till I give the word."

Crouching behind the pile of hurdles, knight and servant waited in breathless silence. There was the sound of a heavy trap-door being raised, and a voice exclaimed in French: "Is it thou, Jehan?"

Receiving no reply, the questioner slowly descended a few steps of the ladder, and drawing a horn lantern from underneath a cloak, swung it around him, peering about the room.

Then, perceiving no one, he muttered: "Mon Dieu! It is but fancy, yet why doth he tarry?" And

again concealing the light, he ascended to the upper story and dropped the trap-hatch with a resounding thud.

"There's fell treachery afoot," whispered Raymond. "Dost know who it is?"

"'Tis René de Caux, of the following of the Captal de Buche, our King's trusted favourite. Wait patiently, for ere long no little advancement will be gained."

Silently the Englishmen waited, every fiercer blast of the storm causing them to imagine that the expected visitor had arrived. At last they heard the door pushed open, and a dark form made its way into the room with a confidence gained by long practice. A low whistle, like the cry of a night-bird, and the trapdoor was again removed.

"Ah, Jehan! 'Tis thou at last! Close the door ere I show a light."

"A thousand pests take the weather. This storm hath all but been my undoing."

The light of the lantern shone upon the face of the new arrival. He was a tall, slender man, with light hair and refined features, and on removing his sodden cloak a garment of slashed velvet was revealed, betokening that the wearer was a gentleman of quality. Armour he wore none, but a light sword hung from his belt, balanced by a large leather bag.

"And how fares Sir John de Vienne?"

"Strong in courage when last I saw him."

"And that was——?"

"But yesternight."

"And he agreed to allow you to poison the wells?"

"Nay, by Our Lady, he would not."

"Well spoken, like a brave and gallant knight, for, by St. Denis, the plan is not to my liking even though these insolent islanders deserve all that is evil. But, see here! This letter must be given to the Governor of the town by to-morrow, though, alas! it is cold comfort to Sir John. Canst arrange to deliver it?"

"They will admit me by the postern of the Boulogne Gate at midnight. 'Twill be done."

"Then take thy reward. Hold the light closer while I count, for I know a Gascon of old! See to it: all bright crowns, of good weight."

The Frenchman addressed as Jehan handed a sealed document to the Gascon, who placed it in his doublet; then, setting the lantern on the ground and extending his hand, the latter counted the coins as Jehan took them from his wallet.

Loosening his poignard and motioning to Thompson to draw his knife, Raymond prepared to spring from his hiding-place.

Ere the two conspirators could recover from their astonishment the young knight had leapt upon them, and with one thrust of his weapon laid the traitorous Gascon dead at his feet. Instinctively the Frenchman sprang backwards and whipped out his sword.

"Yield thee!" thundered Raymond.

"To no man!"

In an instant their blades met, the dull light of the lantern flashing on the glittering steel. Though Jehan had the longer weapon, he possessed neither the strength nor the skill of his antagonist, and in less than half a minute's swordplay the Frenchman's blade caught in the notch that the hilt of most poignards possess, and with a quick, powerful turn of the wrist Raymond snapped the sword off close to the guard.

"Now wilt yield?"

"If thou art a gentleman I will; if not, pass the dagger through me rather than let me disgrace myself."

"I am Sir Raymond Revyngton, knight."

"Then, Sir Raymond, I yield myself to thee; though I pray thee, certify my master that I fought well ere I yielded."

"And thy name and quality?"

"I am Jehan de Sous-Cahors, seneschal de Vimereux, and of the household of King Philip."

"Then I have had great honour in taking thee!" said Raymond with due courtesy. "And now have I thy promise that there shall be no attempt at escape? Otherwise, though it grieve me to mishandle a knight, thou must be brought bound into the camp."

"I swear, by St. Denis."

The grey dawn was beginning to break, and the storm was dying away. Raymond looked out of the door, and saw with great satisfaction the knight's horse stabled in a small adjoining hut that had been invisible on the previous night. There in the distance the smoke of the English camp-fires showed distinctly in the now clear air, while less than a bowshot from the mill lay the wood that had been the cause of their misfortune.

Suddenly the young knight heard the sound of scuffling and Thompson's voice shouting "Help, master, help!"

Darting back to the room, he found his servant engaged in a desperate struggle with the captive, who was endeavouring to destroy the letter he had entrusted to the double-dealing Gascon, a portion of which he had attempted to swallow.

With no gentle hand Raymond aided his man to throw the prisoner on his back and wrench the missive from him.

"Thy parole, Sir Knight!" he exclaimed.

"——has been kept," gasped the captive, "but I trow thou wilt admit that no farther compact was made. I am foiled in this matter, but I pray thee, of thy courtesy, give me leave to finish my work and destroy this missive."

"That I cannot do. This letter, which I doubt not is of great moment, I will take charge of, and hand over to my Lord Chandos. 'Tis now daylight, and we must needs return to the camp. I am loth to let thee walk, but as there is but one horse between two knights, 'tis better that neither ride."

Walking side by side, and followed by Thompson leading the captive's horse, Raymond and the French knight arrived at the camp without further incident, and, after handing his prisoner over to the camp-martial, the young knight repaired with all despatch to find Sir John Hacket.

On hearing Raymond's story the Constable accompanied him to the tent of Sir John Chandos, whose banner floated close to the royal pavilion.

Lord Chandos opened the letter which Raymond had gained possession of, and found that its contents were practically undamaged in the struggle.

"Canst read?" he asked of the Constable. "For this crabbed fist doth sorely try my one eye."

"Nay," replied Sir John Hacket with a grim smile. "Only enough for mine own use, for from my seventh year the sword ever proved a more pleasing companion than a scrawling, musty parchment."

"And canst thou, Sir Raymond?"

"I will try my best, fair sir."

Raymond took the missive and began to read the superscription, written in French: "To the very puissant knight, Sir John de Vienne, seneschal of our town of Calais, greeting."

The body of the letter began by thanking the Governor for his brave resistance, and expressing hopes of being able to speedily succour the besieged. It then confirmed the arrangements, previously made through the Gascon traitor, for a sally, in conjunction with an attempt on the part of the French forces to break the English lines from without. Should the French be unable to carry out their part and attack the English camp, three white lights were to be shown from the ruins of an old mill near Sangatte, and the besieged would then be at liberty to make the best terms they could for the surrender of Calais. The epistle was signed by no less a personage than King Philip of France.

"By St. George, we have them," exclaimed Chandos, striking his fist heavily upon an oaken chest. "Though I would rather that René de Caux were swinging from a gallows in view of the town than lying dead at thy hands in the ruined mill. No matter; this letter must reach the Governor of Calais. Five hundred lances and two thousand archers will suffice to keep the Frenchmen from advancing upon us; and to-morrow night will see three white lights from the old mill at Sangatte."

At nightfall a squire of the Captal de Buche crept cautiously to the postern of the Boulogne Gate, and, representing himself as an emissary of the false René de Caux, handed the fatal letter to the Governor, Sir John de Vienne. The presence of a strong force of Englishmen beyond the dunes of Sangatte prevented the expected French army from occupying the mill and signalling to their friends in the beleaguered city, and the following night three white lights flashed their message of despair to the hitherto undaunted garrison.

Thus the fall of Calais was hastened, but Raymond saw nothing of the final act in the drama, when the heroic Eustace de St. Pierre and his five companions were nearly sacrificed to appease the anger of the English King (Queen Philippa's intercession alone saved their lives), for the young knight was with the five hundred lances that guarded the approach from Boulogne; and on the 6th of August, two days after Edward had taken possession of the town, the Hampshire companies, with whom was Sir Reginald Scarsdale, embarked for the shores of England.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOMECOMING

AFTER four days of light but favourable winds the little fleet, consisting of seven vessels, that bore the Hampshire men homewards arrived off the Isle of Wight. Battle and disease had thinned their ranks, but the survivors returned in high spirits, flushed with victory and rich with the loads of spoil that lay in the holds.

At Spithead the flotilla separated, Sir John Hacket's two ships making for Portsmouth Harbour, three heading for Southampton, and the remaining two setting a course down the Solent for Lepe and Lymington respectively. Amid a fanfare of trumpets and the farewell shouts of the troops to their former companions in arms, the Constable's vessels pointed to the north-west in the direction of the even lines of Portsdown, under the shadow of which lay the Castle of Portchester.

The shields of the three knights were displayed over the side of the leading ship, while from her truck floated the blue banner with the device of the crescent and star, and on the poop were gathered Sir John Hacket, Sir Reginald Scarsdale, and Sir Raymond Revyngton, engaged in joyous conversation at the prospect of a speedy landing on their native soil.

"And what dost thou purpose to do, Raymond?" inquired the Constable. "Surely there is little need to hasten westwards to thy newly-gained estates; 'twould be better far to wait the return of the Devonshire men. Tarry awhile at Portchester, for methinks there is much to be done here before setting out on thy travels. And thou, Sir Reginald? Wilt accept such hospitality that my poor castle can offer?"

"I must first seek out my daughter Audrey," quoth Sir Reginald. "And I have but little doubt that Raymond will bear me company."

"Doth she know of thy return?"

"Nay, and I'll warrant the maid will be taken aback when we arrive at the town of Farnham."

A strange smile flitted over Sir John's face.

"Well, Raymond, what are thy plans?"

"I bear Sir Reginald company; then, having won or lost my suit, I will return to the castle, Sir John. For there are several small matters I must give attention to at Hamble and at the Abbey of Netley, without which I cannot go to Churston."

The vessel was now slipping through the water with a fair wind and favouring tide, and already the low-lying island of Portsea lay abeam, and the Castle of Portchester was momentarily growing more distinct.

"By St. George, they expect us!" exclaimed Raymond excitedly. "See, thy banner floats above the keep, and the walls are thick with people. And the garlands over the water-gate! Of a surety they were not placed there at an hour's notice."

"Now that I bethink me," remarked Sir John drily, "I did send a messenger to Winchelsea, so perchance he hath taken a horse and ridden hot-foot to Portchester."

For awhile they watched in silence the grey outlines of the castle topped with its living fringe. The master-shipman gave an order, and the long yard, with its bellying sail, sank from the masthead; and the vessel, carried onward by its momentum and the rush of the tide, came abreast of the fortress. Another order, and the anchor with its hempen cable fell with a sudden plunge into the water; the ship snubbed at the tautened rope, swung round and brought up, riding easily to wind and tide. The voyage was over.

"See, Raymond," suddenly exclaimed Sir Reginald, "thine eyes are younger than mine, yet if I mistake not.... There, to the right of the water-gate!"

"Ay, the saints be praised. 'Tis the Lady Audrey!"

A small boat, manned by men wearing the Constable's livery, was quickly alongside, and Sir John and Sir Reginald stepped aboard, Raymond following with unknightly haste. Amidst the shouts of the excited throng of soldiers and villagers the boat's fore-foot grated on the shingle, and the three distinguished warriors again set foot on their native land.

"See, Audrey," said her father, after the paternal salute had been given and returned, "I bring thee an old acquaintance—not the squire, Raymond Buckland, who saved they life at Southampton, but the gallant and worthy knight, Sir Raymond Revyngton."

* * * * *

Within a week a wedding was celebrated in the little chapel of St. Mary within the castle walls, and Sir Raymond Revyngton and the Lady Audrey Scarsdale were made man and wife. After the ceremony the kindly Constable congratulated the bride, and it must be confessed that the bridegroom's eyes were opened by Lady Audrey Revyngton's reply.

"To thee, Sir John, I owe much of my happiness, for Raymond was ever a bashful lover. An he were but a simple squire I would have married him, but when thou toldest me that he had been made a knight I was filled with joy. And for thy kindly thought in sending a special messenger to bring me hither to await your arrival I deem myself ever indebted to thee!"

"Nay, thank me not, fair lady," replied the gallant old warrior. "Is it not the bounden duty of a true knight to help another? For Raymond, though ever first in the field of war, hath been a laggard in the lists of love. Yet I am but a feeble instrument in this case, for against thy charms he would be powerless but in my heart I thank God for the part I played in bringing together two noble families estranged by a fatal feud."

* * * * *

Little remains to be told. Sir Reginald Scarsdale, in spite of his old age and infirmities, died as he wished, falling in defence of the Border against a band of Scottish raiders, and in a quiet Yorkshire church he rests, his altar-tomb showing his effigy with the lions at his feet, making a fitting addition to the four crossed-legged images of his crusading ancestors.

Sir John Hacket, after seeing further service in France, acquiring additional glory and renown at Poictiers, died peacefully at a great age within sight of the castle whose Constableship he had held so worthily.

And as for Sir Raymond and the fair Lady Audrey, they lived a life of unalloyed happiness in their manor of Churston, in the midst of the hills of Devon. Yet when the call to arms sounded, the redoubtable Sir Raymond did not shrink from its summons, and at Poictiers and at the slaughter of Najera in the wilds of Spain he added to his laurels. And does not the prowess of the head of the Revyngtons at the repulse of the French descent upon Dartmouth in 1377 still linger amongst the annals of the sons of Devon?

From the union of the rival Revyngton and Scarsdale families descended the successors of a noble heritage—men courageous and generous in war, noble and law-abiding in peace, men whose names have helped to make the British Empire what it is to-day, and whose motto has been, and let us hope will ever be—

"Non sibi, sed patriae."

THE END

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