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A
LEGEND OF READING ABBEY.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'THE CAMP OF REFUGE.'



LONDON:
CHARLES KNIGHT & Co., LUDGATE STREET.

1845.

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I.

It was in the year of Grace eleven hundred and thirty-seven (when the grace of God appeared to be entirely departing from the sinful and unhappy land of England), and Stephen of Blois, nephew of the deceased King Henry Beauclerc, sat upon the throne, lawfully and honestly, as some men said, but most unlawfully, according to others. And the woe I have to relate arose from this divergency of opinion, but still more from the change-ableness of men's minds, which led our bishops, lords, and optimates to side now with one party and now with the other, and now change sides again, to the great perplexing of the understanding of honest and simple men, to the undoing of their fortunes, and well nigh to the utter ruin of this realm, which that learned clerk and right politic King Henricus Primus had left in so flourishing and peaceful a condition.

Our great religious house of Reading (may the hand of sacrilege and the flames of war never more reach it!), founded and endowed by the Beauclerc, had then been newly raised on that smiling, favoured spot of earth which lies on the bank of the Kennet, hard by the juncture of that clear and swift stream with our glorious river Thamesis; and in sooth our noble house was not wholly finished and furnished at this time; for albeit the first church, together with most of its chapels and shrines, was in a manner completed, and our great hall was roofed in, and floored and lined with oak, the lord abbat's apartment, and the lodging of the prior, and the dormitory for the brethren, and the granary and the stables for my lord abbat's horses, were yet unfinished; and, except on Sundays and the feast days of Mother Church, these parts of the abbey were filled by artisans and well-skilled workmen who had been collected from Windsor, Wallingford, Oxenford, Newbury, nay even from the right royal city of Winchester, which abounded with well-skilled masons and builders, and the capital city of London, where all the arts be most cultivated. Moreover, sundry artists we had from beyond the seas, as masons and hewers of stone, who had been sent unto us from Caen in Normandie by the defunct king, and some right skilful carvers in wood and in stone, who had been brought out of Italie by Father Michael Angelo Torpietro, a member of our house, who had quitted the glorious monastery of Mons Casinium, which had been raised and occupied by the founder of our order, the blessed Benedict himself, when he was in the flesh, in order to live among us and instruct us in humane letters and in all the rules and ordinances of our order, wherein we Anglo and Anglo-Norman monks, in verity, needed some instruction. And this Father Torpietro of happy memory had also been enabled by the liberality of our first lord abbat to bring from the city of Pisa in Italie a right good limner, who painted such saints and Virgins upon gilded panels as had not before been seen in England, and who was now painting the chapel of our Ladie with rare and inappreciable art, as men who have eyes and understanding may see at this day. All the learned and periti do affirm that for limning and gilding our chapel of the Ladie doth excel whatever is seen in the churches of Westminster and Winchester in the south, or in the churches of York and Durham in the north, or in the churches of Wells and Exeter in the west, or in Ely and Lincoln in the east. [I speak not of the miracles performed by our relics: they are known to the world, and be at least as great as those performed by our Ladie of Walsingham.] Albeit our walls of stone and flint were not all finished in the inner part, our house was girded and guarded by ramparts of royal charters and papal bulls. Two charters had we from our founder, and one from King Stephen, confirmatory of those two. And great were the immunities and privileges contained in these charters. No scutage had we to pay; no stallage, no tolls, no tribute; no customs in fair or market, no tithing penny or two-penny, no ameracements or fines or forfeitures of any kind! Our mills were free, and our fisheries and our woods and parks. No officer of the king was to exercise any right in the woods and chases of the lord abbat, albeit they were within the limits of the forests royal; but the lord abbat and the monks and their servitors were to hold and for ever enjoy the same powers and liberties in their woods and chases as the king had in his. Hence was the House of Reading ever well stocked with the succulent meat of the buck. Too long were it to tell all that our founder Henricus did for us. At the beginning of his reign, he abolished the ancient power of abbats to make knights; yet, in order to distinguish our house, he did, by a particular clause in our charter of foundation, give unto the lord abbat of Reading and to his successors for ever, authority to make knights, whether

clerks or laymen, provided only that the ceremony should be performed by the abbat in his clerical habit and capacity, and not as a layman, and that he should be careful to advance none but men of manly age and discreet judgment. Of all the royal and mitred abbeys in the land ours was chiefest after Glastonbury and St. Albans; and assuredly we have some honours and privileges which those two more ancient houses have not. I, who have taken up the pen in mine old age to record upon enduring parchment some of the passages I witnessed in my youth and ripe manhood, would not out of any unseemly vanity perpetuate my name and condition; I would lie, unnamed, among the humblest of this brotherhood who have lived or will live without praise, and have died or will die without blame; but as the world in after-time may wish to know who it was that told the story I have now in hand, and what were my opportunities of knowing the truth, it may be incumbent on me to say so much as this:—John Fitz-John of Sunning was my secular name and my designation in the world of poms and vanities; my mother was of the Saxon, my father of the Norman race; my mother (I say a requiem for her daily) descended from a great Saxon earl, or, as some do say, prince; and my father's grandfather, who fought at the battle of Hastings, was cup-bearer to William the Conqueror, in sort that if I could be puffed up with mundane greatness I have the wherewithal: my name in religion is Felix, of the order of St. Benedict and of the Abbey of Reading; and as a servant of the servants of the Lord, I have filled without discredit, in the course of many years, the several high offices of sub-sacrist and sacrist, refectorarius, cellarer, chamberlain, and sub-prior; and mayhap when I shall be gone hence some among this community will say that there have been worse officials than Father Felix.

In the year eleven hundred and thirty-seven I was but a youthful novice, still longing after the flesh-pots of Egypt, and mourning for the loss of the worldly liberty I had enjoyed or abused in my mother's house at Sunning, which was a goodly house near the bank of Thamesis, on a wooded hill hard by the wooden old Saxon bridge of Sunning. But I was old enough to comprehend most of the passing events; and being much favoured and indulged by the lord abbat and several of the brotherhood, I heard and saw more than the other novices, and was more frequently employed upon embassages beyond the precincts of the abbey lands. It was a common saying in the house that Felix the Sunningite, though but little given to his books within doors, was the best of boys for out-door work. By the favour of our Ladie, the love of in-door studies came upon me afterwards at that time when I was first assailed by podagra, and since that time have I not read all the forty and odd books that be in our library, and have I not made books with mine own hand, faithfully transcribing the Confessions of St. Augustin, and the whole of the Life of St. Benedict, and missals not a few? But not to me the praise and glory, *sed nomini tuo!*

As I was born in the house at Sunning (may the sun ever shine upon that happy village, and upon the little church wherein rests the mortal part of my mother) on the eve of St. John the Evangelist, in the year of our Redemption eleven hundred and twenty, being the twentieth year of the Beauclerc's reign, I was, on the feast of St. Edbert, Bishop and Confessor, in the year eleven hundred and thirty-seven, close upon the eighteenth year of mine age.

St. Edbert's festival, falling in the flowering month of May, is one which my heart hath always much affected. The house had kept it right merrily; and notwithstanding the unfinished state of portions of the abbey, I do opine that our ceremonies in church and choir were that day very magnificent, and fit to be a pattern to some other houses. All labours were suspended; for he is a niggard of the worst sort that begrudgeth even his serfs and bondmen rest at such a tide; and eager as was our lord abbat Edward for the completion of our stately edifice, and *speciliater* for the finishing of our dormitory, he would not allow a man to chip a stone, or put one flint upon another, or hew or shape wood upon St. Edbert's day; and he was almost angered at the Italian limner for finishing part of a glory which he had begun in our Ladie's chapel. It was a memorable day, and, *inter alia*, for this: it was the first night that the good lord abbat slept within the walls of the abbey; for hitherto, on account of the cold and dampness of the new walls, he had betaken himself for his nightly rest either to a house close by in the town of Reading, or to the house of a God-fearing relation, who dwelt on the other side of Thamesis at Caversham.

After the completorium and supper (we had both meat and wine of the best at that *cœna*), the weather being warm, and the evening altogether beautiful, the abbat and reverend fathers, as well as the younger members of the house, gathered together in my lord abbat's garden at the back of the abbey, and sat there for a season on the green bank of the Kennet, looking at the bright river as it glided by, and at the young moon and twinkling stars that were reflected in the water, or discoursing with one another upon sundry cheerful topics. Good cheer had made me cheerful, and it remembers me that I made little coronals and chains of the violets that grew by the river bank, and of the bright-eyed daisies that covered all the sward, and threw them upon the gliding and ever-changing surface of the Kennet, and said, as I had done in my still happier childhood, "Get ye down to Sunning bridge, and stop not at this bank or on that, but go ye right down to Sunning, and tell my mother that I am happy with my shaven crown."

The lord abbat, looking back upon the tall tower of our church, and the broad massive walls of our Aula Magna, said—

"In veritate, this is a goodly and substantial house, and one fitted to beautify holiness."

"In truth is it," said that good and learned Italian father who had brought the limner from Pisa.

"Torpietro," said the abbat, "this soil grows no marble; we have not hereabout the nitent blocks of Carrara, or the soberer marble of Lucca; we have neither granite nor freestone; but rounded chalk-hills have we, and flints love the chalk-pit, and the pits of Caversham are inexhaustible; and with our mortar, rubble, and flints, we have built walls three fathoms thick, and have made an

abbey which will stand longer than your Italian temples, built of stone and marble; for time, that corrodes and consumes other substances, makes our cement the harder and stronger. Somewhat rough are they on the outside, like the character of our nation; but they are compact and sound within, and not to be moved or shaken—no, scarcely by an earthquake."

"'Tis a substantial pile," quoth Torpietro. "Balestra, nor catapult, nor manginall, nor the mightiest battering-ram, will ever breach these walls; and therefore is the house safe against any attack of war, and therefore will it stand, entire as it now is, when a thousand years are gone."

"Nay," said the abbat, "name not war: a sacred place like this is not to be assaulted; and our good and brave King Stephen is now firmly and rightfully seated, and we shall have no intestine trouble. We have no fig-trees, or I would quote to thee, Brother Torpietro, that passage which saith.... Felix, my son, leave off throwing flowers in the stream; run unto the gate, and see what is toward, for there be some who smite upon the gate with unwonted violence, and it is now past the curfew."

When the abbat first spoke to me, I heard a mighty rapping, which I had not heard before, or had not heeded, being lost in a reverie as I watched my coronals on their voyage towards Sunning bridge; but when his lordship spake to me, I hurried across the narrow garden, and into the house, and up to the outer gate, where I found Humphrey, the old janitor, and none but he. Humphrey had opened the wicket, and had closed it again, before I came to the gate. "Felix, thou good boy of Sunning," said he unto me, "thou art as nimble as the buck of the forest, and art ever willing to make thy young limbs save the limbs of an old man, so prithee take this corbel, and bear it to my lord abbat's presence forthwith, and bear it gently and with speed, for those who left it said there was delicate stuff within, which must not be shaken, but which must be opened by the lord abbat right soon. So take it, good Felix, for there is no lay-brother at hand, and the weight is nought."

I took up the corbel gently under my left arm, and began to stride with it to the abbat, down at the Kennet banks. I was presently there, for albeit the corbel was of some size, the weight thereof was indeed as nothing.

"So, so," said my lord abbat, as he espied me and my burthen, "What have we here?"

"Doubtless," said the then refectorarius, "some little donation from the faithful. Venison is not as yet; but lamb is in high perfection at this season."

"Nay," quoth the coquinarius, "from the shape of the wicker, I think it is rather some sizeable pike, sent down by our friends and brothers at Pangbourne."

"Bethinks me rather," said the lord abbat, waving his right hand over the corbel (the jewels and bright gold of his finger-rings glittering in the young moon as he did it), "bethinks me rather that it is a collation of simnels from our chaste sisters the nuns of Wargrave, who ever and anon do give a sign of life and love to us the Benedictines of Reading Abbey. But open, Felix! cut the withies, and undo the basket-lid, and let us see with our own eyes."

As my curiosity was now at the least as great as that of any of my superiors in age and dignity, I cut the slight bindings, and undid the corbel; and then there lay, uncovered and revealed to sight—the most beautiful babe mine eyes ever beheld withal!

"Benedicamus!" said the lord abbat, gazing and crossing himself.

"Miserere! The Lord have mercy upon us! But what thing have we here?" quoth the prior.

"'Tis a marvellous pretty infant," said the limner from Pisa, "and would do to paint for one of the cherubim in the chapel of our Ladie."

"A marvellously pretty devil," said our then sub-prior, a sourish man, and somewhat overmuch given to suspicious and evil thoughts of his brothers and neighbours: "What have we celibatarians and Benedictines to do with little babies? I smell mischief here—mischief and irregularity. Felix, what knowest thou of this corbel? I hope thou knowest not all too much! But know all or know nothing, why, oh boy, didst bring this arcanum into this reverend company?"

"Father," said I, "'twas Humphrey bade me bring it, and for all the rest I know nothing;" and this being perfectly true, yet did I hold down my head, for that I felt the blood all glowing in my face, not knowing how or why it should be so.

"Bid the janitor to our presence," said the lord abbat.

Humphrey, who had nothing doubted that the basket contained some creature comforts, such as the faithful not unfrequently sent to our house, soon appeared, and was not a little amazed to see the amazement of the monks, and the high displeasure of the abbat; for as age had somewhat dimmed his sight, and as the last gleams of twilight were now dying away, the good janitor did not perceive the sleeping babe.

"Humphrey," said the abbat, "what is this thou hast sent us? Tell me, in the name of the saints, who gave thee this basket?"

As the abbat spoke the infant awoke from its slumber, and began to cry out, and lay its arms about, as if feeling for its nurse; and hereat our old janitor's wonderment being manifoldly increased, he started back, and crossed himself, and said, "Jesu Maria! Jesu Maria!"

"Say what thou hast to say," cried our sacrist; "my lord abbat would know who left this corbel at the gate, and why thou didst take it in?"

"But," said the old janitor, making that reverence to his superiors which he was bounden to do, "may I ask what it is that the corbel holds?"

"A babe," said the prior.

"And of the feminine gender—to make the matter worse," said the teacher of the Novices.

"'Tis witchcraft," said Humphrey—"tis nought but witchcraft! What Christian man, or woman either, could ever think of sending a babe to the monks of Reading!"

"But who sent the basket?" said the abbat.

"That know I not," said old Humphrey, still crossing himself.

"Then who left it with thee?" asked the sacrist.

"Two serfs that I have seen at this house aforetime," said Humphrey—"two honest-visaged churls, who were out of breath when they came to the wicket, and who went away to the westward so soon as they had put the basket in my hands, and told me to handle it gently, and carry it to my lord abbat forthwith."

"And said they nothing more?" quoth the prior.

"Yea, they did say there was delicate stuff within."

"And what stuff didst thou think it was?" said the coquinarius.

"Verily something to eat or drink."

"Thou art stolid," said the sour sub-prior; "thou art stolid, oh Humphrey, to take a corbel from strange men. Wouldst know the serfs again?"

"I should know them again if I could but see them again. Seen them I have aforetime. Whose men they be I know not; but I thought I had seen them before bring gifts and offerings to our house; and it is not in my office to open anything that is shut, except the convent-door; and ill would it have beseemed me to have been prying into a basket left for my lord abbat."

"But said the churls nothing else?" asked the abbat. "Bethink thee, oh Humphrey! said the churls nought else?"

"Methinks that when I asked them whose men they were, and who had sent this present, one of them did make reply that my lord abbat would know right well."

Here all our eyes were bent upon the good abbat, who, to tell the truth, did look somewhat conturbated. But when the head of our house had recovered from this sudden emotion, he said to the janitor, "Were those the very words the man did speak?"

"The matter of the words was that," said Humphrey; "yet I do think the slaves subjoined that if your lordship knew not who sent the gift, your lordship would soon know right well. But as the churl was walking away while he was speaking, I cannot say that these were his *ipsissima verba*."

"Janitor," quoth the abbat, "knowest thou what festival of mother church it is we have celebrated this day?"

"The feast of the blessed Saint Edbert," responded Humphrey, with a genuflexion and an *ora pro nobis*.

"Then from this day forward," quoth the lord abbat, "take not and admit not within these gates any donation or thing whatsoever from men that thou knowest not, and that run from our door instead of tarrying to refresh themselves in the hospitium."

"That last unwonted and unnatural fact," quoth the cellarer, "ought to have warned thee, oh Humphrey, that there was mischief in the corbel."

"But," replied the janitor, "it was past the time of even' prayer, nay, after supper-time; and they did place the basket in my hands, and vanish away all in a minute, and I could not throw the corbel after them, nor could I leave it outside the gate. But mischief did I suspect none."

Humphrey being dismissed, the elders of our house debated what had best be done with the child, which had not ceased crying all this while, and which moved my heart to pity, for it was a beautiful babe to look upon, and it seemed right hungry, and witchcraft could there be none about it; for our sub-prior, who had adventured to take it up in his arms, had espied a little golden cross round its neck, and an Agnus Dei sewed to its clothes. The lord abbat, whose heart was always kind to man, woman, and child, nay, even unto the beasts in the stable and field, and the hounds of the chase, said that albeit it had been cast into a wrong place, it was assuredly a sweet innocent and most Christian-looking child, and that as the hour was waxing very late, it would be well to keep it in the house until the morrow morn. But the sub-prior bade his lordship bethink himself of the sex of the child, and of the rigid rule of our order, which, in its strictest interpretation, would seem to imply that nothing of the sex feminine should ever abide by night within our cloisters. "In spite of its cross and agnus," subjoined the sour suspicious man, "I must

opine that this piping baby hath been sent hither by some secret enemy, in order to bring down discredit and aspersions upon our community."

"But what, in the name of the Virgin, wouldst have us do with the little innocent?" said the abbat.

"Peradventure," quoth the sub-prior, "it were not badly done to set the brat afloat in its basket down the Kennet into Thamesis. It may ground among the rushes, and be found by the country people, or it may——"

"Brother," said the abbat, "thy heart is waxing as hard as the flint of our walls! I would not do that thing, or see it done, to escape all the calumnies which all the evil tongues of England could heap upon me."

"No, assuredly, nor would I," said the sub-prior; "for upon after-thought it doth appear that the babe perchance might drown. Still, my lord abbat, it is not well that it should stay where it is, or that the townfolk of Reading should know that it hath been brought to our door; for they have too many bad stories already, and some of them do remember the wicked marrying priests of the days of the Red King."

"True, oh sub-prior," quoth the lord abbat; "true and well-bethought. We must not, therefore, send the child into Reading town; but I will have it conveyed unto my good nephew at Caversham, and his wife will have care of it until we shall learn whose babe it is, and why so mysteriously sent hither. There is gentle blood in those veins; this is no churl's child. I never saw a more beautiful babe, and in my time I have baptized many an earl's daughter, ay, and more than one little princess. It must be a strange tale that which shall explain how the mother could ever part with such an infant. But it grows dark; so, Philip, take up the basket, and bear it straightway and with all care and gentleness to Caversham; and Felix, do thou go with Philip, and salute my kinsman in my name, and relate unto him the strange and marvellous manner in which the basket hath been brought into our house, and tell him I will see him in the morning after service."

Philip was an honest lay-brother of the house, and between him and me there had always been much friendship; for on my first coming to the abbey, to be trained to religion and learning, he had procured many little indulgences for me, and had oftentimes taken me behind him on his horse when he rode towards Sunning to look after a farm which my lord abbat had near to that place. He was a mirthful man, and so fond of talk, that when he had not me riding behind him he usually discoursed all the way with his horse. Now he took up the corbel with as much gentleness as a lady's nurse, and we began to go on our way, the dear child still piping and bewailing. The sub-prior followed us to the gate to give Humphrey the needful order to open, for at that hour the janitor would not have allowed egress to any lay-brother or novice. "Beshrew me," said old Humphrey as the sub-prior withdrew, "but this foundling hath brought trouble upon me and sharp words; yet let me see its face, good Philip, for I hear 'tis a Christian child, and a lovely ..."

Hereupon we took the basket into Humphrey's cell by the gate, where a light was burning; and the janitor having peered in its face, vowed, as others had done, that he had not seen so fair a babe. "'Tis nine months old, at the very least," said he; "and ye may tell by its shrill piping that 'tis a strong and healthy child. Mayhap it cries for hunger;" and at this timeous thought the old janitor brought forth a little milk and honey and gave it to the babe, who partook thereof, and then smiled and dropped fast asleep.

We took the shortest path across the King's Mead to Caversham bridge. As we walked along Philip ceased not from talking about the child and the unprecedented way in which it had been left at the abbey. Being a man much given to speculation and the putting of this thing and that together, he made sundry surmises which I will not repeat, for they touched the good lord abbat, and the next morning proved that though very ingenious they had no foundation in truth. When we came to the long wooden bridge, we found, as we had expected, that part of it was raised, and that the old man that levied the toll for the baron was fast asleep. But our shouting soon roused the toll-man, and he soon challenged us and lowered the draw-bridge, though not without sundry expressions of astonishment that two monks should be abroad at so late an hour. When we told him whither we were going, he bade us make haste, for the lights were disappearing in the mansion, and the family would soon be buried in sleep. He then lowered the draw-bridge at the other end, and we went on towards the hill side with hasty steps, the only light visible in the mansion being one that shone brightly through the casement of the southern turret.

"Ralpho, the toll-man," said I, "must have been more than half asleep, or assuredly he would have asked what we were carrying in the basket at this time o'night."

"May the babe have an extra blessing," quoth Philip, "for that it sleeps on and did not wake on the bridge! A pretty tale would gossip Ralpho have had to tell about us Benedictines if the babe had set up its piping on the bridge!"

The castellum or baronial mansion stood on the top of Caversham hill at the point where that hill is steepest; the village lay at its feet, and the church then stood midway between the castle and the village. We were soon at the edge of the dry moat; but the draw-bridge was up, and we had to shout and blow the cow-horn for some time before we could make ourselves heard by any one within; and when the warder awoke and looked forth he was in no good humour. But as we made ourselves known, and told him that we came from the lord abbat upon an occasion that brooked no delay, he altered his tone; and after telling us that though bedward, he believed his lord and ladie were not yet in bed, as he could see a light in their bower above, he lowered the draw-

bridge and unbarred the wicket. That which Ralpho had omitted to do on the bridge, the warder did under the gateway of the castle; for, pointing to the basket, he said, "What have we here, brother Philip? Cates and sweetmeats for my lord and ladie? Ay, Reading Abbey is famed for its confections!"

He had scarcely said the words when a noise came from the basket which made him start back and cross himself; for the dear child began to pipe and scream, and much more loudly methought that I had heard it do before. We, however, stayed not to talk with the astonished warder; for a waiting-woman had come down from the southern turret to inquire what was toward, and we followed this good woman, who was still more astonished than the warder, to the chamber where the lord and ladie were. Sir Alain de Bohun was a bountiful lord, ever kind of heart and gentle in speech; and the Ladie Alfgiva, his wife, descended from the Saxon thanes who had once owned and held all the country from Caversham to Maple-Durham, was the gentlest, truest ladie, and at this season one of the fairest that lived anywhere in Berkshire or Oxfordshire. Before hearing the short tale we had to tell, Sir Alain vowed that the little stranger was welcome, and that so sweet a foundling should never want home or nurture while he had a roof-tree to sit under; and the ladie took the child in her arms, and kissed it, and pacified it; and before I had gotten half through my narration, and the message from my lord abbat, the babe went to sleep on the ladie's bosom. Our limner from Pisa ought to have seen that sight; for the Madonna and Child he did afterwards paint for the chapel of our Ladie was not so beautiful and tender a picture as that presented to mine eye by the wife of Sir Alain de Bohun and our little foundling. Much marvelled the gentle ladie at the tale; but her other feelings were stronger than her curiosity and astonishment; and she soon withdrew to place the child with her own dear children—a little boy some four or five years old, and a little girl not many months older than the stranger. Sir Alain gave to the lay-brother Philip a piece of money, and to me a beaker of wine, and so dismissed us with a right courteous message to our abbat and his good and right reverend uncle.

The warder would have stayed us to explain how it was that monks went about in the hours of night with a babe in a basket; but as he had a sharp wit and a ribald tongue, we forbore to answer his questions, and recommending him to the saints that keep watch by night, and telling him it was too late for talk, we began to return rapidly by the way we had come. As Ralpho let us across Caversham bridge he bemoaned the hardness of his life, and complained that Sir Alain put him to much unnecessary trouble in a time of peace and tranquillity, when the bridge might very well be left open by night and by day without fear of the passage of foes. Alack! before the next morning dawned Ralpho was made to know that Sir Alain's caution was very needful. Scarcely had Philip and I gotten a rood from the bridge-end when that honest lay-brother shouted "Fire! Fire! a fire!" and looking to the west, the sky behind the town and hills of Reading seemed all in a blaze. The young moon had set; but as we came to the King's Mead our path was lighted by a glaring red light, which seemed every instant to become stronger and redder. "Eheu!" said Philip, who knew every township better than I then knew my Litany; "Eheu! there is mischief afoot! The flames mount in the direction of Tilehurst and Sulham and Charlton! More than one township is a-burning!"

I looked down the river, and joyed to see that there was no sign of conflagration at Sunning, and returned thanks therefore to my patron saint.

We were now running across the mead as fast as we could run; but before we came to the abbey-gate the alarm-bell rung out from the tower, and a loud shouting and crying came from the town of Reading, and the sounds of another alarm-bell from Sir Alain's castellum at Caversham.

"What can this mean?" said Philip. "The two serfs that brought the babe to our house came from the westward, or did go back in that direction, or so said old Humphrey. After twenty years and more of a happy peace, is this land to be wasted again by factions and civil war?"

Alas! Philip had said it! This night witnessed the beginning of those troubles which carried woe into every part of England, and which ended not until sixteen long years had passed over our heads, sending some of our brotherhood with sorrow to the grave, and making others old men before their time; for, to say nothing of our personal sufferings and hazards, there was not one among us but had a brother or a sister and friends near and dear to him tortured or butchered in these the worst wars that were ever waged in England.

When we returned into the abbey we found that the lord abbat had called up his men-at-arms, and the three good knights who did military service for the abbey in return for the lands they held; that one of these knights and divers of the men-at-arms were mounting and about to go forth; and that the better conditioned of the town people of Reading were already bringing their goods and chattels to our house for protection; for the walls of the town had been allowed to fall into ruin during the long and happy peace which Henricus Primus had kept in the land, and our burghers had almost wholly lost the art military. Some of these men, who had been to the hills, said that the whole country was on fire from Inglesfield to Tilehurst, and from Tilehurst to Purley, which news destroyed the hope our good abbat had been entertaining that the fire might be accidental and confined to the thatch-covered houses of one village or township. And, in very deed, by this time the whole west seemed to be burning, and the welkin to be overcast by smoke and flame, and a reflected lurid and horrible light. The swift stream of the Kennet looked as though its waters had been transmuted into red wine, and the broad Thames shined like a path of fire. No eye closed for sleep in the abbey that night; and it was not until a full hour after the scarcely perceptible dawn of day that certain intelligence was brought us as to the causes and parties which had thus begun to turn our pleasant and fruitful land into a wilderness.

II.

We had sung matins in the choir, and had nearly finished chanting lauds, when three knights of good fame, to wit, Sir Hugh de Basildon, Sir Hugh Fitzhugh, of Purley, and Sir Walter de Courcy, from Inglesfield, arrived at the abbey, and demanded speech of our superiors. So soon as the service permitted, the lord abbat, the prior, and the other obedientiarii of our house retired into the abbat's garden with these worthy knights, who were in great haste, insomuch that they would neither stay to partake of my lord's collation, which was now nigh upon being ready, nor allow the saddles to be taken from their wearied horses. They stayed but a short while in the garden, and then remounting their steeds, they spurred away for Caversham, bidding the burghers of Reading and a number of serfs, who had collected outside our gates, to look after their bows and arrows, and to get such other weapons as they could, and to stand upon their defence, as traitors to King Stephen were abroad and might be soon upon them. These good people made loud lamentation, for they were ill prepared and provided, and they could not divine who these enemies and night burners could be. We, the humbler members of the house, were alike ignorant; but after he had refreshed his inward man, the good abbat came forth and addressed us all, and the people without the gate, in this wise:—

"My brothers and children, and ye good men of Reading, who be also my children, lift up your voices and say with me, God save King Stephen, the rightful king of this realm, and down with the traitors who would shake his throne!"

Having all of us shouted as we were bidden to do, and with right good will, for King Stephen at this time was much loved in the land, my lord abbat continued his oration.

"The case," said he, "stands thus. That ungodly restless woman, the undutiful daughter of our late pious King Henry, whose body rests within these walls—that presumptuous Matilda, once Empress, but now nought but Countess of Anjou, hath sent over her bastard half-brother Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to claim the throne of England as her right; as if the martial nobility and bold people of this land could ever be governed by a woman, and as if Stephen, our good king and the well-beloved nephew of our late King Henry, who appointed him to be his successor, had not been elected with the consent of the baronage, clergy, and people of England, and confirmed in his lawful seat by our lord the Pope! Now this traitorous Earl of Gloucester, after taking the oaths of fealty and homage to King Stephen, and obtaining by the act possession of his great estates in this realm, hath suddenly lifted up the mask and thrown down the gauntlet, and sundry false barons like himself have followed his pernicious example, and are now raging through the country, seizing upon the king's towns and castles, treacherously surprising the castles of honest lords and good knights, and burning the homes and destroying the lives of all such as will not join them, or of all such as hold the manors and lands these traitors desire to be possessed of. In the east Hugh Bigod, steward of the late king's household, and the very man who made oath before the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other great lords of the realm, as well lay as ecclesiastic, that King Henry on his death-bed did adopt and choose his nephew Stephen to be his successor, because this Matilda, Countess of Anjou, had been an undutiful child unto him, and had given him many and grievous offences, and was by her sex disqualified for the succession; this Hugh Bigod, I say, hath in the east seized Norwich Castle and hoisted thereupon the banner of this Angevin Countess. In the west the Earl of Gloucester hath armed all his vassals, and is calling upon all such friends as hope to better their worldly fortunes by deluging the country with blood and wasting it with fire. Some of these evil men have raised the banner of war in our quiet neighbourhood, and have fallen with merciless fury upon some of our noblest and best neighbours, taking them by foul treachery and surprisal, and waging war upon women and children, and unarmed serfs, in the absence of their lords. Yesterday a great band of these traitors marched from the vicinage of Windsore, and, last night, after a foul plunder and butchery of the people, the townships of Basildon, Whitechurch, Purley, Tidmersh, Tilehurst, Sulham, Theal, and Speen were given to the flames. Sir Ingelric, of Huntercombe, who hath ever been held as a loyal and fearless knight, and whose noble mate could trace her Saxon ancestry beyond the days of King Alfred, was not at his home, but his fair young wife being forewarned of their coming, made fast the gates and defended the manor-house for divers hours: but, woe is me! the evil men set fire to the house, and—*combusta est*, it is burned, with the gentle dame and all that were in it! The brave Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe was not there, or mayhap—"

"Ingelric of Huntercombe is here," cried that dark and sad-looking knight, who had just arrived on a panting steed; "Ingelric of Huntercombe is here, with a soul athirst for vengeance! But, my child! My lord abbat, tell me of my babe!"

The fearful conflagration, which had made us all think of the day of judgment, had caused my lord abbat, as well as the rest of us, to forget the little stranger that had come in the basket, not without bringing some trouble to him and to some of us; but his lordship soon collected his thoughts, and seeing how the matter stood, he clasped in his arms the knight, who had dismounted from his horse, and said to him in his kind fatherly voice, "Sir Ingelric, may the saints vouchsafe thee strength to bear the woe that hath befallen thee; but thy child is safe."

"Let me see her," said the knight; "let me hold her in mine arms; her mother shall I never see more! Her sweet body hath been consumed in the fire that hath left me without a home! I can see my wife no more—no, not even in death! But let me have sight of my child!"

The abbat then explained in a few words where the child was, and in what good and tender keeping; and while he was doing this, Humphrey, our old janitor, looking steadfastly at a churl who had dismounted to hold Sir Ingelric's horse, and at another serf, who remained mounted, he said aloud, "These be the two knaves that gave me the basket!" and then entering into short converse with the men, Humphrey brought out these facts:—At the near approach of the danger, of which she had been forewarned, their mistress had given her child to them, with charge to hasten with it to Reading Abbey, and then to make all possible speed back to Tilehurst, whither, as she had fondly hoped, her lord would be returned before his enemies could do her harm, for Sir Ingelric had gone to no greater distance than to Wallingford, and a messenger had been despatched after him on the only fleet horse he had left in the stable, and well did she know that the love her husband bore her would bring him rapidly to her rescue. This was all we learned now, but we afterwards learned that the messenger on the fleet horse had been intercepted and slain; that the manor-house had been stormed and set on fire before the two serfs who had brought the child to Reading could get back; and that, at this sad sight, the said two bondmen, full of devotion for their lord, had thrown themselves into the woods, and had gone a wearisome journey on foot in search of him, and had met their master between night and morning near North Stoke Ford, for the conflagration had been seen at Wallingford, and had filled the heart of Sir Ingelric with awful presentiments, albeit he and no other man could at first conceive the cause and nature of the mischief which had so suddenly broken out in a time of the most perfect tranquillity. When Sir Ingelric had understood that which had befallen, he had well nigh died of sudden horror; but, rousing himself to vengeance, he had collected a few honest men and some horses, and had ridden with all speed to our abbey, being but too surely confirmed on his way, by a few of his serfs who had escaped, of the fate his fair young wife had met in the manor-house. Never did I see a face fuller of woe than was that of Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe when our good abbat, taking him by the hand, led him within the house, to give him ghostly consolation, and to commune with him upon the measures which ought to be adopted for the defence of the country. But I should tell how that, before our lord abbat quitted the outer gate, he gave commandment that the draw-bridge, which had not been raised for many a day, should be hauled up, and that the serfs of our abbey lands should be set to work to deepen the ditch, and to dig a new trench right down to the Kennet. Albeit no enemy was visible, the townfolk of Reading and all the simple hinds that had assembled were seized with a mighty consternation when we began to take measures for heaving up the bridge and closing our strong iron-bound gate. By order of the prior many of the better sort were admitted into our outer court, with their wives and children, as well as their property. Those who remained without wrung their hands, but departed not, for they felt that the very shadow of our holy walls would be a better protection unto them than any other they could find; and certes we would have brought them within those walls in case of extremity; for was not our house the asylum of the unhappy as well as the *refugium peccatorum*?

When Sir Ingelric had communed until the beginning of tierce with our lord abbat, and had been somewhat restored by prayer and exhortation, and by meat and wine, he came out and called for his horse. But the abbat noted that the knight's horse needed rest, and so he ordered a fresh steed to be brought from his own stable, together with his own quiet grey palfrey, telling the brethren that he was minded to ride over to Caversham with Sir Ingelric to deliberate with his well-beloved nephew, who was too good a man of war to have omitted making some preparations against the threatening storm. "You will put up a prayer or twain for my safety," said the abbat to the prior, "and cause a *Miserere, Domine*, to be sung in the church. And thou wilt hold thyself ready, oh prior, to hurl an anathema at the head of the rebels, if they should come near unto this godly house; and moreover thou wilt see to such war-harness and weapons as we do possess, and station the strongest-armed of our monks and lay-brothers, and the stoutest-hearted of our serfs, with our men-at-arms, in the tower and turrets, with bows and cross-bows; for it may chance that those who respect not the Lord's anointed will have no respect for holy church that hath anointed him; and when the children of Ishmael fall on, the children of Jacob may defend themselves with the arms of the flesh."

Now our prior was a man of a very martial and fearless temperament, and one that well remembered how, in the times that were passed, bishops and abbats had put chain armour over their rockets and albs, and had ridden forth with lay-lords and men of war, and had oftentimes done battle for the cause which they held to be the just one, or the cause of the church. It is not for a humble servant of mother church like me to decide whether such actions be altogether conformable to the councils of the church and the canons therein propounded; but this I do know, that the sword and battle-axe have wrought their effects upon stubborn and impenitent minds when our spiritual arms had failed, ay, when the wicked had laughed to scorn our interdicts and our very excommunications. But not to press further this *casus conscientiae*, I will only record that our prior responded with a firm voice and willing heart to the warlike portions of our lord abbat's instructions, and that he, with marvellous alacrity, did arm the house and prepare to do battle.

As the gate was unbarred and the draw-bridge again lowered to allow the abbat and Sir Ingelric to go forth for Caversham, those of our knights and men-at-arms who had ridden at an earlier hour to make reconnoissance, came back with loose bridle to report that a great battalia of the rebels was advancing upon the town of Reading by the western road.

"Then," quoth our abbat, "is there no time to lose;" and putting his foot in the bright silver stirrup, he got into his saddle without the least assistance, albeit he was a corpulent man, and had had podagra. Two of our knights and half of our men-at-arms rode after the lord abbat and Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, but the rest tarried with us.

"Remember," said the abbat, turning the head of his palfrey, and addressing the townfolk and the serfs, "remember well that ye be all true men unto King Stephen!"

The poor people made a very feeble essay to shout "Long live King Stephen!" and then prayed that we would admit them in at the postern-gate if the rebels came nearer; which thing we did now promise them to do.

The lord abbat and his party, riding away at a hard gallop, were soon seen crossing at Caversham bridge; and very soon after they had crossed, a goodly band of armed men was seen to take post on the opposite bank of the river, a little below the bridge. Except these armed men, not a man, woman, or child could be discovered anywhere; for the shepherds and cowherds had driven their flocks and herds to the other side of Thamesis, and all the serfs and labouring people had fled either to our abbey walls or unto Caversham Castle. Only yesterday morning our green meadows and fruitful corn-fields had been full of life and joy and thoughtless song, but now they were solitary, and as sad and still as the grave. The wind, which blew freshly from the westward, still brought with it hideous drifts of smoke, which dirtied the bright blue sky, and a coarse pungent smell, which overcame the sweet odours that were emitted by our flowering hedge-rows and by the myriads of flowers which grew in the bright green meads and along the moist banks by the river side. It was all a Tartarus now; but on that sunny, happy May morning of yesterday it was like being in paradise to stand on our outer turret and scent the breeze, and feast the eye on plain and hill, meadow, river, and woodland, and to hear the lark singing in the clear sky over our head, and the blackbird whistling in the brake at our feet. Not a bird of all that choir was left now: the foul smoke and the pungent smell had scared them all away, as Ætna and Vesuve are said to do when they vomit their sulphureous fires.

I was roused from some meditations of this sort by the scream of a trumpet, and by a chorus of rude voices that shouted, "The Empress for England! Down with the usurper Stephen! Long life to the Queen, and death to all who gainsay it!"

And presently after hearing these sounds I saw the head of a great column wind round the castle-mound (whereon there was not now any castle deserving of the name), and take the high road which runs from Reading town to Caversham bridge. Saint John the Evangelist to my aid, but it seemed a formidable host! And there were many men-at-arms in the midst, and a company of well-mounted and fully appointed knights rode at the head of it. But our prior, after waxing very red and wrathful at the first sight, did say, upon better observance, that the mass of that host were but rascaille people, serfs that had slipped their collars, knaves that had no arms but staves and bludgeons, and that would not stand for a moment against a charge of horse, nay, nor even against a good flight of quarrels or long-bow arrows.

"They will not win across the bridge," said the prior, "for the chains be up, and pass the river they cannot, for the skiffs be all on the other side, and there is no ford hereabout. But see, they halt! And now they wheel round for the King's Mead! Will the caitiffs hitherward? Let them come—our walls be of flint. By the founder of our house, it is this way they come!"

And in little more time than it takes to say the credo and pater-noster, the rebels crossed a brook which runs into Thamesis, and came midway into the King's Mead, with the head of their column pointing straight for our main gate. But who be those that follow them on the grey palfrey and dapple jennet? By Saint John and Saint James, the patrons of our house, it is our good lord abbat, and it is that right-hearted man the mass-priest of Caversham, and the latter hath a white flag fastened to his saddle, and he upholds a golden banner whereon is depicted the effigies of Him who died for our sins, and taught that there was to be peace upon earth and good will among all men! And see, the rebels halt, and our abbat and the mass-priest fearlessly ride up to their leaders, and discourse with them. Word can we hear not at this distance, but plainly do we discern, by the abbat's gestures, and by the frequent up-lifting of the holy standard, that the head of our house is earnestly recommending peace and repentance, the truce of God for the present, and agreement and reconciliation hereafter. Gentle are our lord abbat's actions, and no doubt his speech, albeit the rebels have set their impious feet upon the lands of our abbey; but rude and outrageous are the gestures of those mailed knights that do confer with him.... And can their ungodly rage amount to this?... Yea, verily, so it is! One of them rides his big war-horse against the grey palfrey, and the lord abbat of Reading is jostled out of his seat, and lies prostrate on the grass—may it be soft beneath him!

Judge ye of the choler of our prior, and of the grief and anger of all of us that saw this shameful and sacrilegious sight. We shouted from our tower and turrets, "*O turpissime!*" and the prior, standing upon the loftiest battlement, stretched out his hands towards the traitors in the King's Mead, even as Pope Leo did from the walls of Rome, when Attila and his pagans came on for the assault of the holy city. But the prior's first anathema was not said before our good abbat, assisted by the mass-priest of Caversham, was on his feet, and to all seeming not much the worse for his fall. He now spoke so loudly to the knights that we could hear the sound of his voice and distinguish some of his words, *specialiter* when he conjured them to depart quietly thence, and avoid the shedding of blood. It was plain that the savage crew would not listen to him; and we saw him remount his palfrey, and turn his head back towards the bridge. We much feared that the rebels would lay violent hands upon him, and keep him as their prisoner; but, *nemo repente*, this was but the beginning of the great wickedness; and albeit impious factions did afterwards load the servants of the church with chains, and throw even bishops into noisome dungeons, and keep them there for ransom among toads and snakes, Jews and thieves, and other unclean men, this present band did offer no let or hindrance to our lord abbat or to the mass-priest, who went

back at a good pace to Caversham bridge.

"And now," quoth our prior, with a brightening eye, "we shall surely see some feat of war if Sir Alain be alive! The foul rebels have refused to parley, and have atrociously wronged the would-be peace-maker. Ay, by the bones of King Henry, 'tis as I thought! The trumpets sound! Sir Alain's lances are on the bridge! May the saints give them the victory!"

I, Felix the novice, being at the topmost part of all the abbey with Philip, the lay brother, who had been teaching me how to use the long bow, did now see a battalia rushing across the bridge, a mixed force of horse and foot, and did further perceive a good company of cross-bowmen descend the left bank of Thamesis as if their intent was to march below our abbey to Sunning. The battalia which crossed the bridge divided itself into two parts, of the which one marched hastily along the road that leads right to the Castle-hill and town of Reading, while the other and major part struck across the meadows for the King's Mead, never halting or pausing until it was right in front of the rebels. With the party in the mead were seen the pennon and cognizances of Sir Alain de Bohun: it seemed but a small force compared with that which was opposed to it, but of horse Sir Alain seemed to have rather more than the adverse party. There was a short parley, the words of which we could not hear, but it was very short, and then we heard right well, from the one side the shout of "God for King Stephen!" and from the other "God for the Empress-queen!" and when they had thus shouted for a space, they joined battle. At first their superiority in number seemed to give the rebels the advantage; and our prior was so transported at this, that he clapped a coat of mail over his black gown, took a lance in his hand, and called for his horse, and would fain have gone forth with our knights and men-at-arms to charge the enemy in the rear. But, lo! the cross-bows, of whom we had lost sight, appeared on the river in skiffs, and in less than an Ave they landed on the right bank; and then they formed in good order, and came on with quick steps to the right wing of the foe, and shooting close and all together, smote it sorely with their quarrels. And hereupon the rascaille people fell off from their leaders, and ran in much disorder across the meadows. Now that part of Sir Alain's battalion which had marched towards the Castle-hill set up a triumphant shout, and drove the fugards back again, and moved upon the other flank of the disordered rebel host. The serfs of the abbey-lands and the townfolk and others who had been cowering under our walls and even in our ditches, became full of heart at sight of the great success of Sir Alain's cross-bows and the easy victory the good knight of Caversham was now completing; and this encouraged the prior to distribute bows and bills among them, and to throw open the abbey-gate and form a third line or battalia round the discomfited foe. Divers of our brotherhood did go forth with the prior, and even take a post in advance upon the Falbury-hill; but I, Felix, having no commandment to the contrary, stayed where I was, in a very safe place, whence I could see all that chanced below. After making sundry desperate attempts to stop the flight of their pedones and bring them to a head again, the Empress's knights, not without holes in their chain jerkins, began to fly themselves and to knock down and ride pitilessly over their own people. They could go no other gait than close by our abbey and across the Falbury; and when they came near unto our force on the hillock, a stiffish flight of arrows and quarrels made them swerve and draw rein. At this juncture, Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, whose lance was red with blood, and whose casque had been knocked from his head by some terrible blow, and whose face was covered with blood in a manner fearful to look upon, came thundering among the rebel knights calling upon his mortal foe, that caitiff knight Sir Jocelyn de Brienne, to tarry and receive his inevitable doom as a felon traitor, coward, and foul murtherer. At these hard words Sir Jocelyn, who was aforetime a man of a very evil reputation, wheeled round his horse, and with his lance in rest charged Sir Ingelric, who was charging him. Sir Jocelyn, the prime leader of this first rebellion, and main actor in the horrible deeds of the over-night, was wounded and unhorsed, and lay on the hard ground of the Falbury (not on a soft mead like that on which he made fall our lord abbat) crying "Rescue! rescue! Help me or I perish!"

Ay! there lay the proud strong man, struck down in his pride and strength, looking towards our abbey-gate, and upon the hospital for lepers, called the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalen, which Aucherius, the second abbat of our house, did build near to the great gate, and I ween that Sir Jocelyn would have changed his present estate even for that of a leper! and still he cried "Rescue! rescue! Will no true man stop and save me?" But the knights and men-at-arms that had ridden with him could not stay to lift him up or give him any aid, for that Sir Alain de Bohun and his horsemen were now again close upon them, and therefore did they spur their steeds and gallop madly past some of the townfolk our prior had armed. Rings still in my ear the horrible voice with which the fallen and disabled Sir Jocelyn cried "Quarter! quarter!" and called upon his foe to show mercy, and name what ransom he would; and still my blood runs cold as I recall the manner in which Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, dismounting, lifted up his enemy's coat of mail and drove under it into Sir Jocelyn's heart his long thick dagger, screaming, "Where was thy mercy last night! Die unconfessed!" And Sir Jocelyn perished, and another knight and ten men-at-arms perished unshrievd upon our abbey lands, yea, and close unto our church and sacristy. Many that escaped were sorely wounded, and well upon two score of the commoner sort were made prisoners, either in the King's Mead or in the Falbury. Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, mad with revenge, would have butchered all these captives on the Falbury-hill as a sacrifice to the manes of his beloved wife, but Sir Alain de Bohun stood between the wretched serfs and this great fury, and when our good and merciful lord abbat rode up on his grey palfrey, Sir Ingelric was somewhat pacified at his discourse. By the foundation charter which the Beauclerc had given us, it appertained to the lord abbat, and to none but him, to judge of offences committed upon the lands of the abbey; yea, our lord abbat had the privileges of the hundred courts, and all manner of pleas, with soc and sac, infangtheof, and hamsocna; that is to say, he could try all causes, impose forfeitures, judge bondmen and villeins, with their children, goods and chattels, and try

and punish any thief or housebreaker, or other evil-doer taken within our jurisdiction. All these rights and privileges were granted to the abbat of Reading Abbey in their fullest extent, with judicial power in all cases of assault, murder, breach of the peace, and the like; in short, in as full extent as belonged to the royal authority. Lord Edward might have hanged every one of those prisoners by the neck to the trees on the Falbury, and none could have said him nay; or he could have chopped off their hands and feet. But being of a merciful nature, he only made cut off the ears and slit the noses of a few of the churls, and then dismissed them all, as to keep them in prison would be troublesome and costly. And when this last thing was done, all the victorious party came into our church, where we the monks and novices did chant the *Te Deum laudamus*, after which our abbat delivered a learned discourse upon the rights of King Stephen, and put up a prayer for his preservation on the throne.

Much bloodshedding and many horribly vindictive acts did the lord abbat prevent on this unhappy day: nevertheless much blood was shed, and a new score of vengeance was commenced. The kin and friends of Sir Jocelyn could no more forgive and forget his death than Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe could forgive the burning of his house and the murther of his wife; every man that had fallen in the field left some behind him who were sure to call for vengeance.

III.

Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe and the other knights whose houses had been destroyed by the so sudden onset of their enemies, regained possession of their lands; and, in other parts of the kingdom, Stephen, by force of arms, or by treaty, recovered nearly all the castles which had been taken from him. Merciful was the soul of King Stephen, even as that of our lord abbat; for, although he lopped off the hands of some few of the mean sort, he took not the life of one lord or knight, but, upon submission made, did pardon them all their late rebellion. The empress's illegitimate half-brother, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, fled beyond sea; and when he was safe in Anjou, he sent his defiance to Stephen, wherein he renounced his homage, and called the king usurper. But before he fled out of England, Earl Robert had made a great league with many of our barons, and had induced the Scottish king to engage to invade our land with all the forces he could collect. King Stephen was again triumphant over his many foes; he took castle after castle from the English barons, and rarely began a siege which did not end prosperously. When the Scots, and Gallowegians, and Highlanders, and men of the Isles, burst into Northumberland and advanced into Yorkshire, Stephen was not there; but the army that was collected for him by Thurstan, my lord archbishop of York, and that was commanded for him in the field by Ranulph, my lord bishop of Durham, and by William Peveril and Walter Espee of Nottinghamshire, and Gilbert de Lacy and his brother Walter de Lacy of Yorkshire, gained a glorious and most complete victory over the Scottish barbarians at Northallerton in the great battle of the Standard, slaying twelve thousand of them. The country, and the poor people of it, suffered much during these sieges, and intestine wars, and foreign invasions; but they came not near to Reading Abbey, and King Stephen was everywhere successful, until, in an evil hour for him and for all of us, he did violence to the church in order to satisfy the rapacity of his ungodly men of war. For ye must know that King Stephen, in order to gain the affections of the lay baronage, had given away so many lands and so much money, that he had now nought left to give, and still those barons cried "Give! give! or we will declare for the empress." "I see a flaw in your title, therefore give me two more castles," said one great lord. "I see two flaws, therefore give me four more castles that I may support your right," said another great lord. "I fought for thee at Northallerton, and therefore must have some domain for my guerdon," said another. But castles, domains, all had been given away already; there remained not of the crown lands enough to keep the king and his household, and as for the treasury, it had long been empty. Seeing that Stephen was like a sponge that had been squeezed, and that nothing was to be gotten except by war and change of government, sundry of these great lords withdrew to the strongest of their castles, and renewed their correspondence with the Earl of Gloucester. In these great straits, and while Stephen was holding his court in Oxenford, threatened by foreign invasion, and not knowing how to distinguish his friends from his foes, he was advised by the worst of his enemies to lay his hands upon the property of churchmen. The most potent and wealthy churchman of that day was old Roger, bishop of Sarum, who had been justiciary and treasurer to Henry Beauclerc, and who had for a season filled the same offices under Stephen; and next to the Bishop of Winchester, Stephen's own brother, no man had done more than this Bishop Roger to bar the claim of the empress, and secure the crown for the king. Moreover, this great Bishop of Sarum had two episcopal nephews almost as great as himself; the first of them being Alexander, bishop of Lincoln; the second, Nigel, bishop of Ely. All three had been great builders of castles, and men of a bold and martial humour. I find not in the canons or in the fathers that bishops ought to make their houses places of arms; but it is to be remembered King Stephen, to please the baronage, had, at the commencement of his reign, given every baron permission to fortify his old castle or castles, and to build new ones; nor is it to be forgotten that in the midst of so many places of arms, the simple unfortified manor-house of a bishop could never have been a safe abiding place, or have afforded any protection to the serfs who cultivated the soil, and the rest of my lord bishop's people. If Bishop Roger and his nephews did build some castles for the defence of their manors and the people upon them, and did expend much money in temporalities, they did also raise splendid edifices to the glory of God. Witness the great church at Sarum, which Bishop Roger rebuilt after it had been injured by fire and by tempest—witness the beautiful works done

at Lincoln by Bishop Alexander, who nearly rebuilt the whole of that cathedral; and at Ely, by Bishop Nigel. And these three great prelates did make noble use of their wealth, in bringing over from foreign parts good builders and artisans, and men of letters and doctrine, to improve and teach in their several ways the people of this island; and if Bishop Nigel was somewhat overmuch given to hunting and hawking, and spent much time, as well as much money, upon his falcons and falconers, doubtlessly it was because the climate of Ely is cold and damp, and requireth much exercise of the body for the conservation of health, and because the circumjacent fen country doth incredibly and most temptingly abound with wild-fowl proper for the hawk to fly at. But to the propositus. King Stephen, being minded to plunder these three great prelates, did summon them all three to his court at Oxenford, where many ravenous lay lords and some foreign lords had previously assembled. The two nephews, apprehending no mischief, and being young men and active, went willingly enough; but it was otherwise with the uncle, who was now a very old man. Bishop Roger had lost his relish for courts, and seemingly had some presentiment; for, as he started on his journey, he was heard to say, "By my Ladie St. Mary, I know not wherefore, but my heart is heavy; but this I do know for a surety, that I shall be of much the same service at court as a fool in battle." At Oxenford the three bishops were received with a great show of courtesy, as men who had done notable service to the king, and as men whom the king delighted to honour; but they had not been long in the town when a fierce quarrel arose about quarters and purveyance between the retainers of Bishop Roger and the followers of that outlandish man the Earl of Brittany. The aged prelate would have stilled this tumult, but the Bretons, who had been purposely set on by those about the king, would not desist, and swords being drawn on both sides, the affray did not end until many men of the commoner sort were wounded, and one knight was slain. And hereupon it was wickedly given out that the bishops' people had begun the affray, and that the three bishops had set them on to break the king's peace, and murder his guests within the precincts of his royal court. Bishop Roger, the uncle, was seized in the king's own hall, and Alexander, the bishop of Lincoln, at his lodgings in the town; but Bishop Nigel, who had taken up his quarters in a house outside the town, getting to horse, galloped across the country, and threw himself into the castle of Devizes, the strongest of all his uncle's strongholds. And it was thought that the Bishop of Ely would not have been able to do this, and to distance his pursuers by leaping hedge and ditch, if he had not providentially practised hunting and hawking in his easy days. Bishop Roger, and his less fortunate nephew Alexander, bishop of Lincoln, were confined in separate dungeons at Oxenford. They were severally told that the king held them as traitors, and that the price of their liberation would be surrender unto Stephen of all their castles and manors, with whatsoever treasure they contained; and those who delivered the message chuckled at it, seeing that they hoped to have a share in the great spoil. At first Bishop Roger and Bishop Alexander did manfully refuse to give up anything, but bishops in dungeons and in chains are weak, and kings be sometimes very strong; and after they had been menaced with torture and death, the two prelates put their names and seals to an act of surrender and renunciation, and the castles which Roger had built at Malmsbury and Sherborne, and that which he had enlarged and strengthened at Sarum, and the magnificent castle which Bishop Alexander had built at Newark, together with other places of strength, were taken possession of by the king's people, in virtue of the orders of the two bishops to their own people. But the alert, hard-riding, and warlike Bishop of Ely would not give up the castle of Devizes, into which he had thrown himself on his escape from Oxenford; and, counting on the strength of his uncle's best fortress, and on the affection the garrison and the people of the neighbouring country bore to his family, Nigel did defy the power of King Stephen. Our unhappy ill-advised king, whom I have so often seen, and with whom I have so often spoken in this our house at Reading, had not the head to conceive, nor the heart to execute, the foul trick which followed. No! it was all the contriving and the doing of some of his ill-advisers, of the Earl of Brittany, or Sir Alberic de Vere, or some other or others of those children of perdition. Fasting is commendable at some seasons, but starvation is horrible at all. If a man starve himself, he is guilty of the worst and most unnatural species of suicide; and if a man starve another, certes he is guilty of the cruellest of murders. That which impresses on my mind the belief that the aforesaid Sir Alberic de Vere was deep in this guilt, are the facts of which I have had assurance; to wit, that Sir Alberic never afterwards gave a feast in his own castle, without seeing the apparitions of two ghastly, pale, starving bishops take their stand opposite to him, and knit their brows, and wave their right hands, as if they were pronouncing a curse each time his plate was laid before him or his wine-cup filled; and that the said Sir Alberic did die at the last of angina, which closed up his throat and allowed no food to pass. Bethink ye whether the knight did not then think of Bishop Roger and his episcopal nephew! But the procedure to force the Bishop of Ely to give up the strong castle of Devizes was this:—Bishop Roger and his nephew, the Bishop of Lincoln, were loaded in their dungeons with more chains, and orders were given that they should be kept without food until the castle was delivered up to King Stephen. When Bishop Nigel was told of this intent he could not believe it, nor was it easy, even in those wicked days, for any man to conceive the world wicked enough to starve two prelates. "I will keep mine uncle's castle for him," said Bishop Nigel, "for they dare not do the thing they speak of." But, alack! his lordship was soon convinced to the contrary; for Bishop Roger himself, already pale and emaciated, was carried to Devizes, and made to state his own case in front of his own castle. And the old man implored his nephew to surrender, and so save the life of his uncle and that of his brother: and then Bishop Nigel gave up that great fortress, and thereupon Bishop Roger and Bishop Alexander were allowed to have food, after they had been three days and three nights in a fearful fast. Before long all three of the bishops were set at liberty, but they had been plundered of nearly all they possessed. The evil advisers of King Stephen got most of the spoil. The robbery did not even a momentary good to the king, and terrible was the penalty he was made to pay for it. The whole body of the dignified clergy turned against him; and even his own brother, Henry, bishop of Winchester, who was now the Pope's

legatus for all England, did join the other bishops in charging Stephen with sacrilege. It was his own brother, the legatus, who summoned the king to appear before a synod of bishops at Winchester; and what is brotherly love when weighed in the balance with the duty of every churchman to the church? King Stephen would not attend *personaliter*, but he sent unto Winchester that Sir Alberic de Vere of whom I have spoken; and Sir Alberic went into the hall of synod with a great company of armed knights, and did there much misuse the prelates of the land, and did refuse, in Stephen's name, to make restitution to Bishop Roger and his two nephews of that of which they had been despoiled; and when he had done these things, Sir Alberic made appeal to the pope and dissolved the council, the wicked knights with him drawing their swords to enforce obedience. The bishops separated for that present, but every one of them saw that madness and much wickedness had prepared the downfall of King Stephen. Bishop Roger died of old age, and grief and indignation, and of the fatal effects of that dread fast; and while he was dying, the plate and money which he had saved from the king's rapacity, which he had devoted to the completion of his glorious church at Sarum, and which he had layed for safety upon the high altar, were seized and carried off by some who cared not for the guilt of sacrilege, and who were so blind that they could not see in what such crimes must end. Forty thousand marks, by our Ladie, was the value of that which was stolen from the shadow of the Holy of Holies!

Now some of the baronage and clergy did send messengers into Anjou to invite the Empress Matilda into England, and to give her assurance good that they would place her upon the throne of her late father. And the ex-empress, being a woman of a high spirit, did presently come over with her half-brother the Earl of Gloucester, and one hundred and forty knights; and the two nephews of the late Bishop Roger and many of the optimates did renounce their allegiance to King Stephen and join her standard. Bishop Nigel, who would have continued to hold the castle of Devizes if it had not been for that fearful fast, went into the Isle of Ely, his own diocese, and there amidst the bogs and fens, and on the very spot where Hereward the Lord of Brunn had withstood William the Conqueror, he raised a great rampart and collected a great force against Stephen. In other parts our bishops were seen mounted on war-horses, clad in armour, and directing in the battle or the siege: and many and bloody were the battles which were fought during two years, and until King Stephen was surprised and defeated in the great battle of Lincoln, and taken prisoner by the Earl of Gloucester, the half-brother of the empress. Stephen was now thrown into a dungeon in Bristowe Castle, and his brother the Bishop of Winchester and legatus acknowledged the right and title of the empress, and led her in triumph to his cathedral church at Winchester, and there blessed all who should be obedient to her, and cursed all who should refuse to submit to her authority. And this being done, Stephen's brother, the bishop and legate aforesaid, did convene an assembly of churchmen to ratify her accession. At this synod the said legate bore testimony against his brother, and said that God had pronounced judgment against him; and the great churchmen, to whom it chiefly belongs to elect kings and ordain them, did elect Matilda to fill the place which Stephen's demerits had vacated. Yet some of the clergy there were who did not think that they could be so easily discharged of the oaths they had taken unto Stephen, or move so far in this matter without a direct command from our lord the pope, and many lords there were, as well of the laity as of the clergy, who did not like Matilda the better for knowing more of her. But not one felt more unhappy at these changes than our good lord abbat, who came back from the last meeting of the clergy at Winchester well nigh broken-hearted; for, albeit he lamented his errors, he had much affection for King Stephen and great reverence to the obligations of an oath, and very earnestly desired peace and happiness to the country.

Also was he and all of us of the house at Reading and all devout and considerate men in the land, much consternated by great signs in the heavens: for on the twenty-first of the kalends of March in the year of our redemption eleven hundred and forty, while we were sitting at dinner, there was so great an eclipse of the sun that we could not see to eat our meat, and were forced to light candles, and when lights were brought in our appetites were gone because of our great fear; and when we went out to gaze at the obscured sun and blackened heavens we did plainly see divers stars twinkling near the sun. And these sad sights were seen all over the land, making men believe, while they lasted, that chaos was come again, and that this day was to be the day of judgment. Abbat Edward did interpret these things as omens of our future woe.

"I do foresee," said he, "that infinite woe will arise out of these our distractions, and I can plainly see with only half of an eye that too many of our magnates be looking to nothing but their own worldly advantage. With this classis of men 'twill be down with Stephen and up with Matilda to-day, and down with Matilda and up with Stephen to-morrow; just as they hope to gain by the change. They will all find in the end that they have miscalculated, but that will not heal the wounds that will have been inflicted on the country through their selfish unsteadiness, and lack of principle, and oath-breaking. The ex-empress hath brought a pestilent set of hungry foreigners over with her; and every one of them is looking for some great estate or bishopric or abbey; others will follow, and they will have no bowels of compassion for the people of this land. 'Tis true King Stephen hath done much amiss or hath allowed evil things to be done in his name, but Matilda will do worse, and will have less power than he to prevent the rapacity and bloodthirstiness of others! Steel-clad barons and knights will not yield obedience to the distaff. Even the church will be divided. St. John and St. James to our aid! but my heart trembles for this house, and for the poor townfolk of Reading, and the freemen and the serfs who have so long lived in peace upon our manors; I am an old man—this journey to Winchester hath added the weight of ten more years—I shall not live to see an end to these troubles which have already lasted four years. Death will relieve me from witnessing the worst; but when I am gone hence, oh my brethren and children, put your faith in heaven, and remember that the honestest policy is

aye the best, and meditate night and day, and labour hard, in order to lessen the sufferings of our poor vassals and dependants."

Grieves me to say that some of our house who made many solemn protestations now, did not in after-time do that which they ought to have done.

Affairs were in this state, and the flames of civil war were raging all round us, and the health of our good lord abbat was daily breaking more and more, when the Empress Matilda passed through Reading without stopping at our abbey to say an orison at her father's grave, being on her way to Westminster, there to be crowned and anointed by those who had crowned King Stephen only six years ago. But the citizens of London, who were very bold and powerful, loved Stephen more than Matilda, and before the coronation dresses could be got ready they rose upon her and drove her from the city, flying on horseback and at first almost alone, as she did. This time the daughter of the Beauclerc found it opportune to come to our abbey, for she wanted food, lodging, and raiment, and knew not where else to procure them. A messenger on a foundered horse announced that she was coming, and by the time the man had put his beast into our lord abbat's stable, a great cloud of dust was seen rolling on the road beyond the Kennet from the eastward. "*Medea fert tristes succos*—she is coming, and will bring poisons with her! She cometh in a whirlwind," said our good lord abbat, "and albeit she is her father's daughter—the lawfully begotten daughter of the founder of this house, (though some men do say the contrary,) it grieves me that she cometh at all. Last year, and at this same season of the year, we did lodge and entertain King Stephen, and prayed God to bless him; and now must I feast this wandering woman and cry God save Queen Matilda? The unlettered and rustical people be slow of comprehension, yet will they not have their hearts turned from us by seeing these rapid shiftings and changings? And so soon as the commoner sort lose their faith or belief in the principles of their betters, crime and havoc will have it all their own way. This people—this already mixed people of Saxons and Normans—will go backwards into blood, and there will be war between cottage and cottage as well as between castle and castle!"

The empress-queen arrived at our gates, and with a numerous attendance; for some had followed by getting stealthily out of London, and some had joined her on the road. Sooth to say she was an imperious, and despotical, and loud-voiced, manlike woman, and of a very imposing presence. Maugre her hasty flight she had a coronet of gold on her head, and a jewel like a star on her breast, and her garments were of purple and gold. A foreign lord, with a truculent countenance, bore a naked sword before her, and another knight, with a visage no less stern, carried a jewelled sceptre.

"'Tis mine own father's house," said she as she came within our gates, "'tis the gift and doing of mine own father, of blessed memory, and much, oh monks! did you wrong him and me by entertaining within these walls the foul usurper Stephen. The usurper is rotting in the nethermost dungeon of Bristowe Castle, and there let him die; but, oh abbat, lead me to my dear father's tomb, that I may say a prayer for the good of his soul; and see in the coining place what money thou hast in hand, for much do I lack money and must for the nonce be a borrower! Bid thy people make ready a banquet in the hall, for we be all fasting and right hungry; and send into the township and call forth each man that hath a horse and a sword, in order that he may follow us to Oxenford, and help to be our guard upon the way. Do these few things, oh abbat, and I will yet hold thee in good esteem. The land rings with thy great wealth and power. By Notre Dame of Anjou! 'tis a goodly house, and the walls be strong, and the ditch round about broad and deep,—by the holy visage of St. Luke! I will not hence to-night though all the rebel citizens of London, that do swarm like bees from their hives, should follow me so far."

Our good lord abbat could do little more than bow and cross himself, and our prior of the bellicose humour, who partook in our abbat's affection for King Stephen, reddened in the face and turned aside his face and grinded his teeth, and muttered down his own throat, "Beshrew the distaff! The Beauclerc, her sire, was more courteous unto clerks!"

Our sub-prior, being of a more supple nature, and being, moreover, not without his hopes of being nominated to the abbatial dignity so soon as our lord abbat should be laid under the chancel of the abbey church, kneeled before the empress-queen, and then formed some of the monks *in processionale*, and began lead the way to the sepulchre of Henricus Primus. But this roused the abbat and threw the thoughts of our prior into another channel, and the lord abbat said in a grim and loud whisper unto the sub-prior, "I am chief here, and none must move without my bidding;" and the prior said without any essay at a whisper, "Oh, sub, seek not to climb above me!"

The proud woman reddened and said, "If ye would honour me, oh monks, as your queen, make haste to do it! An ye will not, I can get me in without your ceremonies. No time have I to lose, and money and aid must be forthcoming!"

Then up spake the lord abbat Edward, and said in a loud voice, "Oh dread ladie, when that king of peace and lion of justice, *Rex pacis et leo justitiæ*, did found this house, he did give us his royal charter, wherein it is said, 'Let no person, great or small, whether by violence or as a due custom, exact anything or take anything from the persons, lands, or possessions whatsoever belonging unto the monastery of Reading; nor levy any money, nor ask any tax for the building of bridges or castles, for carriages or for horses for carrying; nor lay any custom or subsidy, whether for ship-money or tribute-money or for presents; nor....'"

"Oh abbat of the close fist," said Matilda, "I only want to borrow."

"But we may not lend without full consent of all our chapter monks in chapter assembled," quoth the prior.

"And the foundation charter of Henricus Primus," said our abbat, "recommends all the successors of the said royal founder to observe the charter as they wish for the divine favour and preservation, and pronounces a malediction upon any one that shall infringe or diminish his donations. Dread ladie, thou art the Beauclerc's daughter: the curse of a father is hard to bear!"

There was some whispering and sign-making among her followers; but the imperious woman said not a word: she only stretched out her right hand and pointed forward, into the interior of our abbey.

We now formed in more proper order and went through the church to the Beauclerc's grave, on the broad slab of which there burned unceasing lamps, and sweet incense renewed every hour, and at the edge of which there was ever some brother of the house telling his beads and praying for the defunct king, the founder of the house. Dim was the spot, for death is darkness, and too much light suits ill with the decaying flesh and bones of mortal man, be he king or plough-hind; yet, as the empress-queen entered, our acolytes touched the tips of three hundred and sixty-five tapers—sweet smelling tapers made of the wax brought from Gascony and Spain and Italie—and in an instant that dim sepulchral place was flooded with light, the converging rays meeting and shining brightest upon the black slab and the graven epitaph which began with the proud titles of the Beauclerc king, and which ended with that passage from holy writ which saith that all is vanity here below.

Matilda knelt and put her lips to that black slab (which she safely might do, for it was kept clear of all dirt and dust, it being the sole occupation of one of the lay brothers of our house to rub it every day and keep it clean), and she said an orison, of the shortest, and made some show of shedding tears; but then she quickly rose, and would have gone forth from the vault or cappella. But the lord abbat was not minded that the first visit paid by his daughter to the tomb of her father should pass off with so little ceremony and devotion; and, he himself taking the lead with his deep solemn voice, the *Officium de Functorum*, or Service for the Dead, was recited and chanted. The empress-queen was somewhat awed and moved, and there seemed to be penitential tears in her eyes as we chaunted "Beati Mortui qui in Domino moriuntur;" but at the last requiem "Æternam" she flung away from the place and began to talk with a loud shrill voice of worldly affairs and of battles and sieges—for the royal-born woman had the heart of a man and warrior, and her grandfather the great Conqueror was not more ambitious or avid of dominion than she.

When we had well feasted Matilda and those who followed her in the abbat's apartment, we hoped she would be gone, for it was a long and fine day of June, well nigh upon the feast of St. John, and she well might have ridden half way to Oxenford before nightfall; but she soon gave the abbat to understand that she had no intention of going so soon. Without blushing she did ask how and where we monks could lodge her and her women for the night, telling us that she could not think of sleeping in the town, seeing that it was but poorly defended by walls and bulwarks. The abbat looked at the prior, and all the fathers looked at one another with astonishment, but the ungodly waiting-women, who came all from Anjou and other foreign parts, only smiled and simpered as they gazed at one another and observed our exceeding great confusion.

"In truth, royal dame," said our lord abbat, "it is against the rule of our order to lodge females within our walls."

"But I am your queen, oh abbat," said Matilda, "and this is a royal abbey, and my sire founded it and endowed it! Have I not, as my father's daughter and lawful sovereign of this realm, the right to an exemption from the severity of your ordinances?"

"Ladie," quoth the abbat, "I wit not that you have such right, or that the rule of St. Benedict is in any case to be set aside."

"But it hath been set aside," said Matilda, "and queens and their honourable damsels have slept in royal abbeys before now."

"That," quoth the abbat, "was before the Norman conquest, when, through the indolence, carelessness, and gluttony of the Saxon monks, the statutes of our order were generally ill-observed."

"But I tell thee, oh stubborn monk, that I, the empress-queen, that I, thy liege ladie Matilda, have slept and sojourned in half the abbeys and priories of England!"

"'Tis because of these civil wars which have so long raged to the destruction of all discipline and order, and to the utter undoing of this poor people of England! I, by the grace of God, abbat of Reading, would not shape my conduct after the pattern of some abbats and priors that be in this land, or willingly allow that which they perchance may have permitted without protest, and to the spiritual dishonour of their houses."

Here the eyes of the empress-queen flashed fire, and wrathful and scornful was the voice with which she said unto our good lord abbat, in presence of most of the community, "Shaveling, I am here, and will here tarry so long as it suits my occasions! I believe thy traitorous affection for my false cousin Stephen hath more to do with thine obstinacy than any reverence thou bearest to the rules of thine order. But, monk, 'tis too late! thou shouldst have kept thy gates closed! I and my maidens are within thy house, and these my faithful knights will see thee and thy brethren slain

between the horns of the altar rather than see the Queen of England thrust out like a vagrant beggar from the abbey her own father founded!"

As the empress-queen said these words the knights knit their brows and made a rattling with their swords. This did much terrify the major part of our community, and I, Felix, being then of a timorous nature, and a great lover of peace, as became my profession, did creep towards the door of the hall. But our prior spoke out with a right manful voice against the insults put upon our good abbat, telling the empress-queen to her face that respect and reverence were due to the church even from the greatest of princes; that her father, of renowned and happy memory, would not so have treated the humblest servant of the church; and that if this unseemly business should be put to the issue of arms—if swords should be drawn over her royal father's grave—it might peradventure happen that the armed retainers of the abbey would prove as good men as these outlandish knights, and that the fathers and brothers of the house would fight for their lives, as other servants of the church had oftentimes been constrained to do in these turbulent, lawless, ungodly days.

At this discourse of our bellicose prior the empress-queen turned pale and her lip quivered, though more through wrath than fear, as it seemed to me; but her knights left off noising with their swords; and one of them, a native knight, spoke words of gentleness and accommodation, and put it as an entreaty rather than as a command, that the queen should be allowed to infringe our rules for only one night.

"My conscience doth forbid it," said our lord abbat, "for it may be made a precedent, to the great injury and decay of our discipline. Therefore do I solemnly enter my protest against it. But as I would not see this holy house defiled by strife and blood, nor attempt a forcible expulsion, I will quit mine apartments." And so saying, the lord abbat withdrew, and was followed by all of us. The queen slept in the abbat's bed; her maidens on the rushes, which were carried into that chamber from the abbat's hall; and the knights and men-at-arms slept in the Aula Magna. And, as our good abbat had foreseen, this evil practice was taken as a precedent, in such sort that empresses and queens, and other great princesses, have in these later times been often lodged in Benedictine and in other houses; yet, wherever the abbats and monks entertain a proper sense of their duty, they lodge these visitors in the lord abbat's house, apart from the religious community.

But before sleeping, the empress-queen did many things, for it still wanted some hours of the Ave Maria, and many were the stormy thoughts that were working in her brain. Two of her knights we allowed to go out of the house by the postern-gate, but farther ingress we granted to none; and not only did our armed retainers keep watch for us, but our monks, under the vigilant eye of the prior, did also keep watch and ward all through that evening and night, for we feared some extreme mischief; and it would not have failed to happen if Matilda had been enabled to get her partisans in greater force within the house. In truth, not many of our community knew that night what sleep was. The materials for an abundant supper were furnished to the empress-queen and her people; and some of these last were singing ungodly songs in the abbat's great hall when our church-bell told the midnight hour; yea, there was a noise of singing, and a running to and fro, and a squealing of womanly voices long after that, to the great sorrow and shame of the fathers of our house. I, Felix, albeit only a novice, was of those who slept not. And I saw a great sight. Watching in the eastern turret, I did see a fiery meteor, hirsute like a comet, but not so big, shoot up from the marshes on the other side of the Kennet, not far from the back of our abbey; and this meteor, as it passed over our house, did divide itself into three several parts, and these did rush away to the westward as quick as lightning, and there drop and disappear. Before the night came again I was made to understand what these things meant.

IV.

From all ungodly guests *libera nos!* Although they had feasted so late at night, the people of the empress did make an early call for a matutinal refection; and our good chamberlain and coquinarius and cellarius were made to bestir themselves by times, and sundry of our lay brothers and servitors, to the great endangering of their souls, were made to run with viands and drink into our lord abbat's hall, and there wait upon the daughter of the Beauclerc and her foreign black-eyed damsels, who did shoot love-looks at them and discompose their monastic sobriety and gravity by laying their hands upon their sleeves and twitching their hoods for this thing and that (for the young Jezebels spoke no English), and by singing snatches of love songs at them, even as the false syrens of old did unto the wise Ulysses. Certes, the founder of our order, the blessed Benedict, did know what he was a-doing when he condemned and prohibited the resort of women to our houses and their in-dwelling with monks. Monks are mortal, and mortal flesh is weak: *et ne nos inducas in tentationem.*

It was still an early hour, not much more than half way between prima and tertia, when more troubles came upon us. The two knights who had been sent forth by the daughter of the Beauclerc to make an espial into the condition of the country, and to summon her friends unto her, returned to our gate with a large company of knights and men-at-arms, and demanded to be readmitted. Our good abbat, calling together the fathers of the house, held counsel with them; and it was agreed that to admit so great a company of men of war would be perilous to our community; and even our bellicose prior did opine that our people would be too few to protect

the abbey if these men without should be joined to those the empress had within. It was our prior who addressed that great company from the porter's window over the gateway, telling them that the two knights who had come from London with the empress might be readmitted, but that our doors would not be unbarred even unto them unless the rest of that armed host went to a distance into the King's Mead. Hereat there arose a loud clamour from those knights and men-at-arms, with great reproaches and threats. Yea, one of those knights, Sir Richard à Chambre, who was in after time known for a most faithless man, and a variable, changing sides as often as the moon doth change her face, did call our lord abbat apostate monk and traitor, and did threaten our good house with storm and spoliation. The major part of us had gathered in front of the house to see and hear what was passing; but, alack! we were soon made to run towards the back of the abbey, for while Sir Richard à Chambre was discoursing in this unseemly strain, and shaking his mailed fist at the iron bars through which he could scantily see the tip of our prior's nose, a knight on foot, who wore black mail and a black plume in his casque, and who never raised his visor and scarce spoke word after these few, came running round the eastern angle of the abbey walls, shouting "'Tis open! 'tis ours! Win in, in the name of Matilda!" The voice that said these few words seemed to not a few of us to have been heard before, but we had no time to think of that. The armed host set up a shout, and ran round for our postern gate, which openeth upon the Kennet, and we all began to run for the same, our lord abbat wringing his hands, and saying "The postern! the postern! some traitor hath betrayed us!"

Now our postern was secured by two great locks of rare strength and ingenuity of workmanship, and the keys thereof were not intrusted to the portarius, but were always kept by the sub-prior, and without these keys there was no undoing the door either from within or from without. As he ran from the great gateway, I heard our prior say in an angry voice unto the sub-prior, "Brother Hildebrand, how is this? Where be the keys?" And I heard the sub-prior make response, "On my soul, I know not how it is, but verily the keys I did leave under the pallet in my cell."

When we came into the paved quadrangle, we found some of our retainers hastily putting on their armour; but when we came into the garden, we found it thronged with men already armed, and we saw the postern wide open and many more warriors rushing in through it: the evil men who had stayed with the queen, and who had so much abused our hospitality, had already joined the new comers, and the united and still increasing force was so great that we could not hope to expel them and save our house from robbery and profanation. Our very prior smote his breast in despair. But our good abbat, though of a less bellicose humour, had no fear of the profane intruders, for he stood up in the midst of them and upbraided them roundly, and threatened to lay an interdict upon them all for the thing that they were doing. But anon the empress herself came forth with one that waved a flag over her head, and at sight hereof the sinful men set up a shouting and fell to a kissing, some the flag, which was but a small and soiled thing, and some—on their knees—the hand of the Beauclerc's daughter; and while this was passing, those foreign damsels came salting and skipping, and clapping their hands and talking Anjou French, into the garden. There was one of them attired in a short green kirtle that had the smallest and prettiest feet, and the largest and blackest eyes, and the longest and blackest eyelashes, and the laughingest face, that ever man did behold in these parts of the world; and she danced near to me on those tiny pretty feet, and glanced at me such glances from those black eyes, that my heart thumped against my ribs; but the saints gave me strength and protection, and I pulled my hood over my eyes and fell to telling my beads, and thus, when others were backsliders, I, Felix the novice, was enabled to stand steadfast in my faith.

The empress had taken no heed of our lord abbat, or of any of us; but when she had done welcoming the knights that came to do her service, and, imprimis, to escort her on her way to Oxenford, she turned unto the abbat and said, "Monk, thou art too weak to cope with a queen, the daughter of a king, the widow of an emperor, and one from whom many kings will spring. But by thy perversity, which we think amounts to treason, thou hast incurred the penalty of deprivation; and when we have time for such matters, or at the very next meeting of a synod of bishops and abbats, I will see that thou art both deprived and imprisoned."

"That synod," said our abbat very mildly, "will not sit so soon, and from any synod I can appeal to his holiness the Pope."

"Fool!" quoth Matilda, with the ugliest curl of the lip I ever beheld; "obstinate fool! the Pope's legate is our well-beloved subject and friend the Bishop of Winchester."

"See that you keep his allegiance! He hath put you upon a throne, and can pull you down therefrom!" So spake our prior, who could not stomach the irreverent treatment the Countess of Anjou put upon his superior, and who knew that Matilda had in various ways broken her compact with him, and done deeds highly displeasing to King Stephen's brother, the tough-hearted Bishop of Winchester.

"Beshrew me!" quoth Matilda; "but these Reading monks be proud of stomach and rebellious! Sir Walleren of Mantes, drive them into their church, and see that they quit it not while we tarry here."

"I will," said the foreign knight; "and also will I see that they do sing the *Salve, Regina*."

And this Sir Walleren and other unknighly knights drew their swords and called up their retainers; and before this ungodly host the abbat and prior and the monks were all compelled to retreat into the church, leaving the whole range of the abbey to those who had so unrighteously invaded it. But as soon as we were in the choir, instead of singing a *Salve, Regina*, we did chant

A strong guard was put at the church-door and in the cloisters; but it was not needed, as we could oppose no resistance to those who were now robbing our house; and as it had been determined therefore that all who had come into the church should remain, with psalmody and prayer, until these men of violence should take their departure from the abbey, or complete their wickedness by driving us from it. As they ransacked our house, as though it had been a castle taken by storm, and as they shouted and made such loud noises as soldiers use when a castle or a town hath been successfully stormed, we only chanted the louder in the choir. For full two hours did these partisans of Matilda ransack the abbey, with none to say them nay. At the end of that time, when they had gotten all that they considered worth taking, that ill-visaged knight Sir Walleren of Mantles came to the church-door, and called forth the abbat and prior, saying that the queen would speak with them before she went, and give them a lesson which they might remember. Though thrice summoned in the name of the queen, the heads of our house did not move, nor would they have gone forth at all if the fierce Sir Walleren aforesaid had not sent in a score of pikes to drive them, or prick them from their seats. Nay, even then, the prior would have run not unto the door, but unto the altar; but the good abbat, fearing that God's house might be desecrated by blood, took the prior by the sleeve, and whispered a few soothing words to him, and so led him out into the cloisters; and then all we who had been driven into the church followed the abbat and the prior, and went to the quadrangle, where was the queen on horseback, mounted on the lord abbat's own grey palfrey, which had been stolen from the stable, together with every horse and mule that our community possessed. It was a sad sight; and the lord abbat's master of the horse and his palfrey-keeper were wringing their hands at it. Our good cattle, save and except the lord abbat's palfrey and a fine war-horse which had appertained to one of our knights, but which was now mounted by that silent knight in the black mail, who never raised his visor, were loaded with the spoils of our own house, to wit, the coined money taken out of our mint, provisions, corn, wine, raiment, and goodly furnishings. The masked knight had a plain shield, carried by his page, and no cognizance whereby he might be known: he held in his hand one of the queen's reins, and by his gestures, and his constant looking to the great gate of our house, which was now thrown wide open, he seemed very eager to be gone. As our lord abbat, with his hand still upon the prior's sleeve, came through the crowd and nigh to the space where Matilda sat upon his own palfrey, she first frowned upon him and then laughed at him, and between laughing and frowning said—"Oh abbat that shalt not be abbat long, thou hast comported thyself like a traitor and a very churl in stinting thy queen of that which she needed, in begrudging hospitality to these fair damsels, and in barring thy doors against these my gallant knights and faithful people. For this have we, for the present, relieved thy house of some of its superfluous stuff. It is not well that disloyal monks be so well supplied and furnished, when a queen, and noble ladies, and high-born knights be unprovided and bare, and forced by treasons foul to flee from place to place as if they were accursed Israelites. Light meals are followed by light digestion, and abstinence is favourable to prayer and devotion. Yet have we taken nothing from ye, O monks, but what is rightfully ours, or was given ye by my father of thrice glorious memory."

"Oh Empress, or Countess of Anjou, or Queen of England, if so must be, the deeds which have been done in this holy house, built and endowed by thy father for the expiation of his sins, will make the bones of thy father turn in his grave, and will bring down a curse upon the heads of thee and thy party. Bethink thee, and repent while it is yet time! Thy father, the father of his people and the peace of his country, *Pax patriæ, gentisque suæ Pater*, did for the good of his own soul found this abbey, and endow it with the town and manor of Reading, and with all the lands which had aforetime belonged to the nunnery of Reading and the monasteries of Cholsey and Leominster (which houses had been destroyed in our old wars), and he did make it one of the royal mitred abbeys, and did give the lord abbat privilege to coin his own money, by having a mint and mintmaster. Other donations did he make, and other privileges and honours did he confer upon our community. And hath not our lord the pope by a special bull confirmed and sanctified this kingly grant, and taken our house, with all its possessions and appurtenances, to wit, lands cultivated and uncultivated, its manors, meadows, woods, pastures, mills, fisheries, and all other, under the protection of the holy Roman see? And hath not his holiness decreed that none are to disturb our house, or to lay an impious hand on our possessions, or to keep, or diminish the same, or in any other way give us trouble; but that all that we have and hold is to be kept under the government of the monks, and for the pious uses for which it was given? And in the same bull hath not the pope blessed those who keep this commandment, and cursed those who in any way break it? Unless thou makest restitution thou wilt be denied the viaticum on thy death-bed—*et a sacratissimo corpore et sanguine Dei et Domini nostri aliena fiat.*"

At these words spoken, the countess did somewhat tremble on the palfrey, and turn pale; but one of her wicked advisers from beyond sea said that she did but borrow, and would make restitution at the fitting time, and that we, being so rich, could well spare some of our substance.

Our treasurer, who would not deign to speak to this foreign marauder, said to the countess, "Oh, ill-advised ladie, we be none so rich, and much is expected from us. By thy father's endowment full two hundred monks are to be kept for aye in this his royal abbey, and we be as yet scantily more than one hundred and two score. Also do the good people that we have drawn to this township of Reading look to us for present employment and support; and herein have we much laboured, for the good of the realm, and the happiness of the commoner sort. In the days of thy grandfather, the dread Conqueror of this kingdom, when the Domesday-book was made, Reading had only twenty-nine houses; but now look abroad, and see how new houses have risen, and men

have increased under the shadow of our peaceful walls."

"There will be woe and want among that industrious people," said abbat Edward, "if thou carriest away from us this great spoil, and all the money that we have minted! The curse of the poor, which is the next terriblest thing to the curse of God and holy church, will cling to thee, oh countess, or queen! Look to it, oh Matilda! I see the crown already dropping from thy head."

"This is treason!" said the silent knight with his visor down, in a voice which made all of us start, for it sounded like that of one who had lately been our fast friend.

Matilda, rising in her saddle, with glaring eyes and reddened cheek, said, "And I, rebel monk, do see the mitre falling from thy head. Thou wilt not be abbot of Reading this time next month."

"*Fiat voluntas*, let the will of God be done," replied our lord abbat.

"And now," quoth the violent daughter of the Beauclerc, "let us ride on our way for Oxenford. Methinks we be now strong enough to defy all traitors on the road." And she struck with her riding-wand the grey palfrey, which it much grieved our abbat to lose, and followed by her knights and her leering and laughing foreign damsels, she rode out at our gate, and with a great host departed from Reading.

When the evil-doers were all gone we made fast our doors, and proceeded to examine the condition of our house and its community. They had completely emptied the buttery, the storehouse, the granary, the wine-cellar; they had so stripped the lord abbat's house and the lodging of the prior that there was nothing left in them save the tables and chairs, the mats and rushes; they had broken open both treasury and sacristy, and had stolen thence all our most precious relics, and all our gold and silver vessels, and all our portable pictures and crucifixes; they had not left us so much as a patera, a chalice, or an encensoire; they had even laid their impious thievish hands upon the silver lamp which had been used to burn day and night at the head of the Beauclerc's tomb, and they had carried off with them the Agnus Dei and the jewelled cross which Henricus Primus had worn for many years of his life, and which, at his order, had been laid upon his tomb. That silver lamp had been sent to the abbey by Queen Adelise, the Beauclerc's second and surviving wife, who, on the first anniversary of the Beauclerc's death, gave us the manor of Aston in Hertfordshire, offering a pall upon the altar in confirmation of the grant; and who likewise gave us the land of Reginald, the Forester, at Stanton-Harcourt, nigh unto Oxenford, and afterwards the patronage and revenues of the church of Stanton-Harcourt, to supply the cost of the silver lamp, which she herself did order should burn continually before the pix and the tomb of her late husband. Yet Matilda and her plundering band had carried off this precious cresset—and long did they prevent us getting any rent or revenues from the lands which Queen Adelise had granted us. Not the most recondite and secret part of our house had escaped their search. Much did we marvel at this, until, calling over the roll, we found that three members of our community did not answer to their names. The three missing were, two novices, to wit, young Urswick, the whiteheaded, from Pangbourne, and John Blount from Maple-Durham, and one full monk, to wit, Father Anselm, of Norman birth, who had but lately taken the vows, but who had been much employed by our treasurer in offices of trust. The two novices (may their souls be assoiled!) had been wiled away by those young Jezebels, and had put on warlike harness, and had gone with Matilda to serve her as men-at-arms: Father Anselm, being a well-favoured man, had found favour in the sight of the Countess of Anjou, and had gone with her to be her mass-priest, and to aim at some vacant bishopric or abbey. Well had it been for us if he had never come back to Reading. Heavy suspicions had fallen upon our sub-prior Hildebrand, touching the postern gate; but it was ascertained upon inquiry, that Urswick, the whiteheaded, who had been wont to wait upon the sub-prior, did, at the bidding of Matilda, or of one of her damsels, steal the keys and undo the door.

Besides the three deserters from our own body, we found that divers of our armed retainers had taken service with the errant countess, and had gone away with her with their arms and horses; and that even one of our knights, who did service for the lands of the abbey he held, had forgotten his bounden duty and his honour in a sudden fantastic affection for a pair of black eyes.

We were bemoaning our losses, and our exceeding great calamity and disgrace, and wondering where we should get a dinner, when, some three hours after the departure of Matilda, and the host that followed her standard, another great body of horse and foot, bearing the banner of King Stephen, marched towards our gates, demanding meat and drink, and vowing, with many soldier-like profane oaths, that they would burn and destroy all such as were not for Stephen. The new alarm thus created was, however, but short, for some noble barons and knights, who had been riding in the rear, came spurring up to the van, which was now halting in the Falbury, and among these we saw, with his visor down, that right noble lord Sir Alain de Bohun, Lord of Caversham and the well-beloved nephew of our lord abbat, whose sad heart was much rejoiced at his so sudden appearance.

"Be it King Stephen or Queen Matilda," said the abbat, "let us throw open our gates to our well-beloved nephew, for he will not see harm done to us, and now, verily, we have nothing to lose but lives not worth the taking." And the gates were thrown open, and Sir Alain was welcomed and affectionately greeted by his uncle; and after many expressions of astonishment and indignation at the wrongs which had been done us, Sir Alain and divers of the lords and knights with him retired for a space to the lord abbat's despoiled and naked apartment, with the lord abbat and our prior, and some other fathers. I was not of that council, being but a novice, nor can I say it that I ever learned in after times *all* that was said in it; but I do know that when it was finished

(and it lasted not long) the prior came forth with a very confident countenance, and told us all that the Bishop of Winchester, the pope's Legatus à latere, had changed sides, that Stephen of Blois was still King Stephen, and that we must sing a *Te Deum laudamus* for that same. And we all went forthwith into our church, and the barons and knights went in after us, and we admitted as many as the church would hold of those men-at-arms, and bill-men and bow-men, that had halted in the Falbury with King Stephen's banner, and albeit we were hungry and faint, we sang the *Te Deum* for Stephen with sonorous voices.

Sir Alain de Bohun, one of the very few lords of England that never changed sides during these nineteen years of revolutions and wars, had fought bravely for King Stephen in the great battle at Lincoln, where other barons and knights had deserted with all their forces to Matilda's illegitimate brother and commander the Earl of Gloucester; and after Stephen had been taken prisoner (not until both his sword and battle-axe had been broken), Sir Alain had escaped from the field and had joined one of the many leagues of nobles who vowed never to submit to the distaff, or allow the Countess of Anjou to be Queen of England. In the five months which had passed since the battle of Lincoln, Sir Alain had fought in sundry other battles, and had given heart to many a knight, who, after the synod of Winchester, had despaired of the cause of King Stephen. He had appeared with a good body of horse, and the standard of Stephen, on the southern side of Thamesis, opposite the city of London, and his appearance had encouraged the citizens to rise and drive out Matilda. And the day before, appearing in the suburb of London, Sir Alain de Bohun had been at Guildford, and had there conferred with Stephen's queen, the good Maud, and also with Stephen's brother, the Bishop of Winchester, who did already repent him of that which he had done in synod. But that the bishop had met either Queen Maud or Sir Alain was for the present kept secret.

The Lord of Caversham and his friends had crossed the river, and entered London city within an hour of Matilda's flight. Having toiled far that same day, the horses of the king's party were weary, and could not give pursuit; but after short rest they followed the flying queen along the great road which leads to the westernmost parts of our island. Jesu Maria! had they come unto Reading a few hours sooner, before the arrival of that battalia which the two knights Matilda had sent forth from our abbey had collected, the violent woman might have been made prisoner, and our house have been saved from plunder. But now the horses of King Stephen's friends were again aweary, and though Sir Alain and the noble barons with him were stronger in foot soldiers, they were much weaker in horse than the host which had left Reading with the countess, who, upon these sundry considerations, and for that she had been gone more than two hours, was let go on her road to Oxenford without pursuit.

The burghers of Reading who had endeavoured to save themselves from plunder and violence by throwing up their caps and shouting for the errant queen, but who had been plundered and beaten all the same (nay, divers of them were wounded by sword and lance, and cruelly maimed), now came to our abbey-gates, making their throats hoarse with shouting for King Stephen and the good and gracious Lord of Caversham; and some of the richer franklins of the township and neighbourhood, who had escaped being plundered by Matilda's party, upon learning the sad case in which we, the monks, had been left, hastened to bring us meat and drink.

Sir Alain de Bohun, who had not seen his wife or his home for many a sad day, was about to ride across the fields homeward, when his ladie's page was seen running across the King's Mead towards our abbey.

"Yonder comes one from Caversham," said Sir Alain; "and I read by his looks and his hurry that he bringeth no good news!"

"Fear not," said the abbat, who saw that his nephew's cheek was growing pale, "for the saints have ever defended thy roof-tree, and as I told thee before, the Ladie Alfgiva and the children were as well as well could be at the hour of noon of yesterday, when I did see them."

Nevertheless, the little page did bring bad news, or tidings which much afflicted Sir Alain and our lord abbat. There had been treachery at Caversham, and a fast friend had played loose. That sweet babe, the daughter of Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, who had caused our household so much dismay four years ago, and had sent me and Philip the lay-brother on the night-journey to Sir Alain de Bohun's castle, had dwelt in that castle ever since, and had been nurtured with all delicacy and honour, like a child of the house. For a long season Sir Ingelric, her father, had no safe home unto which he could take her; for since the beginning of these unhappy wars, no house in England could be called safe that was not moated and battlemented, and strongly garrisoned; and if Sir Ingelric had possessed a castellum, he had no gentle dame unto whom he could confide his infant female child. But the Ladie Alfgiva was as tender as a mother to this babe, and this tenderness became the greater when death deprived her of her own little daughter. Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, who had taken vengeance on the destroyer of his wife and home, Sir Jocelyn de Brienne, in the Falbury almost at our abbey gates, seemed engaged for life in a blood-feud with Sir Jocelyn's family and friends, and to be for ever wedded to the party of King Stephen by the strong ties of necessity and revenge. Many were the combats he had fought between that time his house and wife were burned, and the time when King Stephen prepared for that campaign which had ended so disastrously at Lincoln. During this long and busy interval he went not often to Caversham, so that his child grew up with little knowledge of him. The little Alice was wont to call Sir Alain de Bohun her father, even as she called the Ladie Alfgiva mother. Once or twice within the last twelve months Sir Ingelric had said, that since his house was well nigh rebuilt, he should have a safe bower for his daughter, and that Alice must soon home with him; and each

time he had said the words the child had run from him to the Ladie Alfgiva, and had clung round her neck, weeping and saying that she would not leave her mother; and her playmate and champion, that right gallant boy Arthur de Bohun, the only son, and now the only child, of Sir Alain, who was some four years older than Alice, said that she must not leave him. It was noticed upon these occasions, that although Sir Ingelric began as in a jest, his countenance soon grew dark and his voice harsh, and that he almost shook his child when he took her on his knee and told her that she must love her father, and must not always be a burthen unto other people. Nay, the last time that he said these words he pressed the little Alice's arm so violently that he left the blackening marks of his fingers upon it. Other things were noted as well by Sir Alain de Bohun as by the Ladie Alfgiva. It is not every man that is chastened by calamity. Sir Ingelric's great misfortune had made him fierce, proud, and rebellious to the will of Heaven; and, in losing his fair young wife, he had lost his best guide and monitor. He became hard of heart, and grasping, and covetous; and as for more than three years the party of King Stephen had been almost everywhere victorious, he had abundant opportunities of satisfying his appetite for havoc and booty. But the more he gained the more he wished to get, and by degrees he gave up his whole soul to avarice and ambition. Sir Alain de Bohun, who looked for no advantage unto himself, who adhered to King Stephen out of loyalty and affection, and who kept out of the horrible and unnatural warfare as much as he thought his duty would allow him, entertained apprehensions that his friend Sir Ingelric loved the war for what he gained by it, and would not be very steady to any losing party. Sir Ingelric, however, had fought bravely for King Stephen at Lincoln, and had there been taken prisoner. But he had paid a ransom to his captor, and had been some time at large, busied in putting the finishing hand to the strong castle which he had raised on his lands at Speen. Though the distance was so short to Caversham, he had not gone once thither until the evening of the unhappy day on which the Countess of Anjou had come to our abbey—that is, the evening of yesterday—but then he had told the Ladie Alfgiva that as the weather was so fine and the country so tranquil (alack! the good people at Caversham had not seen the arrival of Matilda and her young Jezebels at our abbey), he would take the two children forth for a walk in the meadows by the river side; and the false knight had gone forth with the children, and neither he nor the children had since been seen or heard of. As the little page came to this point in his dismal story, not only our prior, but several of us less entitled to speak in such a presence, cried out, "That knight in the black mail who kept his vizor down, and that went away with the countess, was none other than Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe;" and our abbot said, "Verily, the voice was that of Sir Ingelric!"

"Woe for these changes!" said Sir Alain de Bohun, "woe and shame upon them. If men have no faith even with old friends—if men do shift from side to side like the inconstant wind, this war will never know an end, and truth, and honour, and mercy will depart the land! Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe! I aided thee in thy wretchedness, and King Stephen did afterwards hand thee on the road to riches and greatness. I first gave thee money and the labour of my serfs that thou mightest re-edify thy house, but now thou hast built to thyself a strong castle, wherein thou thinkest thou canst defy me, now thou believest the cause of Stephen to be desperate, and therefore dost thou raise thy hand against me, and steal away, like a thief, not only the child that was thine own, but also mine only son, that the woman of Anjou may have my dearest hostage in her power. May God of his mercy protect my dear boy! But, oh Sir Ingelric, thy treachery is ill-laid and ill-timed, thy cunning is foolishness. Great things have happened since thou hast been castle-building, and thou wilt find that thou hast quitted the stronger for the weaker party. Hereafter will I make thee pay, if not for thy black ingratitude to me, for thy disloyalty to thy too bountiful king, and for the tears my ladie wife will shed for her double loss!"

Here moisture very like a tear stood in the eyes of the Lord of Caversham: but grief gave way to wrath as he said that the felon knight might have taken his own child, which would long since have been in its grave but for the Ladie Alfgiva, without robbing him of his son.

Our good abbat, who had his prophetic seasons, said, "Grieve not, my well-beloved nephew. The two children will do well together, and thou wilt soon have them restored to thy house: they were born to be together and love one another, and so will not be separated. Alice will repay thee hereafter for the ingratitude and treasons and other evil doings of her father."

Here I, Felix the novice, and Philip the lay-brother, who had carried little Alice from the abbey unto Caversham, and who had loved the child ever since, did say "Amen! amen! So be it."

"The children," said an honest franklin who had stood by all the time of these discourses, "be surely gone with the Countess of Anjou for Oxenford; as on the road beyond the town I saw a blue-eyed boy riding before a man-at-arms, and a little girl in the arms of a waiting-woman who rode close to the countess on a piebald horse, and both the children were crying piteously."

"Then will we recover them at Oxenford," said one of the knights.

Sir Alain de Bohun, with a part of the company who had come with him, mounted for Caversham; and when Sir Alain began to ride, I could see that he rode hotly and impatiently. The rest of the knightly company we entertained in the abbey as best we could, and lodged them for that night, the good franklins having brought us in some clean straw and rushes for that purpose. The commoner sort slept in the open air on the Falbury, with their weapons by their sides.

But before the troublous day was finished, other dismal tidings and sights of woe were brought to our house. John Appold and Ralph Wain, two franklins whilome of good substance, who farmed some of our outstanding abbey lands beyond Pangbourne, came to tell us that their houses had been burned, their granaries emptied, and the plough-hinds and shepherds and all the serfs

driven away by Matilda's people, who had chained them together by their iron neck-collars, and had goaded them before them like cattle with the points of their lances. And before these sad tales were well ended, Will Shakeshaft, a faithful steward who dwelt in a house our lord abbat had at Purley, arrived on a maimed horse, and with a ghastly cut across his face, to let us know that violence had been done to his wife, and that that fair house had been burned also. A little later there came three of our poor serfs howling so that it was dreadful to hear, and holding in the air their red and still bleeding stumps. They had been amputated and then liberated, in order that they might go forth and show all the people what they had to expect if they opposed or so much as forbore to aid and join the empress-queen. As the night became dark, we could trace the march of the countess by a line of fire and smoke. Such were the things which drove the poor people of England into impiety and blasphemy, making them say that Christ and the saints had fallen asleep! And these things lasted in the land for fifteen more years.

V.

When baptized Christian men did steal the children of other Christian men, yea, and torture and slay them, no marvel was it that the unconverted Israelites, who had been allowed to come into the land in great numbers since the Norman conquest, should do deeds of the like sort. So it was, that in King Stephen's reign the rich Jews of Norwich did buy a Christian child from its poor parents a little before Easter, and on the Long Friday, when the church was mourning for the crucifixion of our Lord, they tortured him after the same manner as our Lord was tortured, and did nail him on a rood in mockery of our Saviour; and afterwards buried him. These sacrilegious and cruel Jews thought that their horrible crime would be concealed, but it was revealed from above, and the people of Norwich smote the Jews and tortured them as they merited; and the Lord showed that the Christian child was a holy martyr: and the monks took him and buried him with all honour and reverence in Norwich Minster; and he is called Saint William, and through our Lord wonderful miracles are wrought at his tomb even in our own day, and his festival is kept with becoming solemnity on the twenty-fifth of the kalends of March.

Sad and sinful was it for Christian parents to sell their children to Jew, or even to Gentile. The evil practice had once been common in England, and in the port of Bristowe children were once sold in great numbers to be carried into Ireland and elsewhere; but the church had put down the unnatural traffic, and when King Stephen came to the throne no freeman would have sold his child. But want and hunger now severed the natural tie, and starving parents sold their starving children rather than see them die before their eyes and they unable to help them. Yea, frantic mothers would give their infants from their dried-up breasts to any strangers that would promise to nourish them. *Horresco repetens!* I do shudder in the telling of it, but so it was. Fair English children were again sold to traffickers on the western coast, who carried them into Ireland, and in such numbers that the slave-market of the Irishry was all over-stocked with them. In the happy and plentiful days which now be in the land such things are hard to believe; but I, as a novice, did often see them with mine own eyes, and the causes that led thereunto. Yea, have I seen the poor people of England roaming by the wayside and eating garbage which scarcely the fox or the fowl birds of the air would touch, rambling in the woods and fields in search of roots and berries, ay, grazing on the bank-side like cattle, or that great sinner Nebuchadnezzar; for flocks and herds were swept away, and slaughtered, and wasted by the armed bands that ever ranged the country, or were kept penned up within the castles of the strong men—those pestilent barons and knights that were now for Matilda and now for Stephen, and always for plunder and all crime, living and fattening upon great and bloody thievings—*magna et sanguineolentia latrocinia*: and the fields could not be cultivated because of the continual passing and repassing, and burning, and fighting, and slaying of these armed hosts and bands of robbers, who did worse than the heathen had ever done; for after a time they spared neither church nor churchyard, neither a bishop's land nor an abbat's land, and not more the lands of a priest than the fields of a franklin, but plundered both monks and clerks! And so it came to pass that nearly every man that could, robbed another, and carried away his wife or daughter, and did with her what he list. If two men or three came riding to a town, all the township fled, concluding them to be robbers. Some of our bishops and learned men continually did excommunicate them and curse them; but the effect thereof was nought, for they were one and all accursed, and forsworn, and abandoned; and grieves me to say that too many bishops and churchmen were men of violent and unsteady councils and castle-builders themselves, waging war like the lay lords, and being as void as they of steadiness and loyalty, and mercy for the people. Verily I myself have seen prelates clad in armour and mounted on war-horses, even as at the time of the Conquest, and in that guise directing the siege or the attack, or drawing lots with the rest for the booty. The strong men constantly laid gilds on the towns, and called it by a Norman name which signifyeth *torture*; and when the poor townfolk had no more to give, then they plundered and burned the towns; so that thou mightest go a whole day's journey and never behold a man sitting in a town or see a field that was tilled. To till the ground was as useless as to plough the sea, for no man could hope to reap that which he sowed. Thus the earth bare little or no corn; and bread became of a fearful dear price; and flesh, and cheese, and butter were there none for the poor. Ay, franklins who had been rich men, and who had kept good house and been bountiful to the poor and to mother church, were seen begging alms on the road. Many of the poorest died of hunger on a soil which God had blessed with fertility, but which sinful men had turned into a wilderness; and many, going distraught, threw themselves into the rivers, or hanged themselves in the woods. This was

greater woe than England had witnessed during the long wars of the Norman conquest; and it was in this abyss of misery that fathers and mothers sold their children.

On the morning after his going to Caversham Sir Alain de Bohun returned unto our house with the knights who had gone with him; and before it was time to begin the service of tertia in the church, he and all the company, as well foot as horse, marched away to the north-west. They intended for Oxenford, but did not take the direct road; for they had learned from scouts that Matilda's party had been strengthened by some bands from the eastward, and Sir Alain and his friends hoped to get an increase of strength in the westward before they turned round upon the countess. But while the partisans of King Stephen were marching to the westward and gaining great strength on the borders of Wiltshire, the Countess of Anjou suddenly decamped from Oxenford and began a march for Winchester, for she had at length conceived suspicion and alarm at the conduct of the Bishop of Winchester, the king's brother, and our lord the pope's legate. Intending to pass through Berkshire into Hampshire and unto Winchester, she took her course by Cumnor, Abingdon, and Wallingford. The news of her approach was a death-blow to our good abbat. He had been for some time past declining. He could not away with the thought of Matilda's evil doings unto our house. Being a man formerly addicted to hospitality, good company, cheerful conversation, music, and innocent mirth, he was observed to forsake all this with much melancholy and pensiveness, and so to droop and pine away; but yet was it the news of the countess's coming that gave the finishing stroke. Eheu! and Miserrimus! A better monk or a nobler lord abbat was never slain by princely violence and the wickedness of excommunicate men. He was at Sir Alain de Bohun's castle, and I and Philip the lay-brother were in attendance upon him when our scouts brought the intelligence that Matilda was at Abingdon with the heads of her columns pointing along the road towards Reading. The good, kind-hearted man had gone to Caversham in order to console the Ladie Alfgiva, whom he found, like Rachel, mourning for her children, yet not mourning like one that would not be comforted. But comfortless and sad was the face of our lord abbat when he gave his niece the parting blessing, and warned her to look well to her castle, and bade the warder to keep close the gates, and not admit so much as a strange dog within the walls. There had been a slow fever in his veins ever since the bad visit of the Angevin countess, and now his limbs shook and his eyes seemed to swim in his head, and he had much ado to mount the rough upland horse which had been procured for him in lieu of his gentle-paced palfrey. "Felix, my boy," said he unto me as we descended the slopes of Caversham towards the river, "ride close to my bridle-hand, for I am faint, and a heavy sickness is upon my heart." As he rode across the meads, the breeze, which blew freshly and coolly from the broad river, did somewhat revive him; but anon he complained of the rough motion of his steed, and gently lamented the loss of his ambling grey, which Matilda had stolen from him so foully. When near to the great gate of the abbey he turned round and looked towards the river and the Caversham hills that were shining in the setting sun; and then, as he went under the archway, I saw tears drop from his eyes, and I heard him mutter to himself, "'Tis a right beauteous sight, but I shall see it no more." And that night, and before the middle watches thereof, praying for the community of Reading and all England besides, and imploring the saints to protect the house at Caversham and the two sweet children, he turned his face to the wall and died, to the unspeakable grief of every honest member of the house. He left this troubled world in such good repute as a virtuous and holy man, that assuredly he merited beatification, if not the higher glories of canonization.—*In Domino moritur.*

Before going to his bed, our good abbat held council with all the obedientiarii and sworn monks of the abbey, and I was of the number of those who thought that this exertion, and his long and anxious speaking, hastened his demise. His opinions were, that the monks ought to keep close their gates, and call in their retainers and some of the townfolk of Reading to help them to defend the house; that Matilda could not tarry long for a siege or any other object, as Sir Alain de Bohun and his party would soon retrace their steps; and that the monks, having made good their house by standing on the defensive, should remain neutral in the horrible war, taking no step and raising no voice either for King Stephen or Queen Matilda, until they saw what course was taken by the pope's legate or a synod of the church. All present at this council, whether cloister monks or monks holding office, agreed that this advice was the best that could be given, and protested that they would follow it; and Hildebrand, the sub-prior, was the loudest of any in his prayers that St. James and St. John the Evangelist, patrons of our house, would long preserve the life of our good old abbat, who had governed the abbey for many years with great wisdom and gentleness; and, sooth to say, in all that time he had ruled as a fond father rules his own children, and never did he sadden the heart of an honest man and faithful servant of the church, or cause a tear to flow until he died.

But, woe the while! the wickedness, the treachery, and malice of the times, had spread themselves on every side and to every community; and some members of our once quiet and loving brotherhood there were that hid Judas hearts under fawning countenances; and before the passing bell ceased to toll for our abbat's death, these unhappy men took secret council with one another, and resolved to act in a manner altogether different from that which had been advised, and that which they had promised and vowed to follow. And, lo! on the second evening after the death of our good abbat, when the Angevin woman and her host came again unto our house, like a whirlwind, with lances in the air, and clouds of dust rolling before their path, the sub-prior and his factors, including as well some of the franklins and retainers, as monks and novices, and lay brothers of the abbey, did drive away the other party, and lower our draw-bridge, and throw wide open our great gate, and sing hosannas, and cry, "Long live the empress-queen! God bless the sweet face of Queen Matilda, the lawful sovereign of this realm!" And again Matilda came within the cloisters, and took possession of our house with her lawless men of war and her gadabout

damself. This time they could not rob, for we had not the wherewithal, unless they took our gowns, hoods, and sandals, and our flesh and bones; but they did worse things than steal. Matilda ordered that on the instant the fathers of the house should proceed to elect and appoint a new abbat.

"Dread ladie," said Reginald, our prior, now the highest in office, "This cannot be! It is against the rules of our order; it is against the canons of holy church; it is against the feelings of humanity; it is contrary to common decency! Our late lord abbat lies as yet unburied within our walls. He must be first interred honorably, and as becometh the dignity of the house; and before we, the fathers of the house, can open a Chapter, many masses of requiem must be said, and the guidance of the Spirit must be invoked to help us in our election, and notice must be sent unto the head of our order, and alms must be given unto the poor. Albeit, I see not what alms we can give, since our house hath been so——"

"Rebel monk," cried Matilda, "reproach not thy queen! But I do perceive that thou art a fautor of Stephen, like the old rebel that hath departed. I told him that the mitre was falling from his head, and I now tell thee that it shall never drop upon thine."

"Would that it had pleased the saints to keep it on the head which wore it so long, and with so much honour," said our bold prior. "I never aimed at it, or had a wish for it. I would not stoop my body, or stretch out my hand, to pick it up, if it lay at my feet. I would never wear it except forced so to do by canonical election, and the free and strong will of my brothers. Matilda, thou that ransackest houses of religion, and the very tomb of thy father, and tramplest on the monks that live to pray for the soul of thy father, I would not accept the mitre and crozier from thee if thou wert to fall on thy knees and implore me to do it! I stand here as an humble but faithful servant of this community—as a lowly member of the great family of St. Benedict; and if I raise my voice, it is only for the sake of our religion and unchangeable rules. Thy men-at-arms need not grind their teeth, and point their lances at me. I fear them not; and in this cause would face torture and death."

"By the splendour!" cried Matilda, "we do but waste time in speech with such as thou art. I tell thee, thou traitor and malignant, that the election shall be made forthwith; and that before I quit this house I will see an honest man put into the abbatial chair, and confirm him therein by our royal deed. Thou wilt not question, oh monk, that the election of a Chapter is nought without the assent and confirmation of the lawful sovereign; and as I have weighty matters in hand, and will soon be far away from Reading, there might be great delay in obtaining my confirmation if it were not given now."

At this passage the sub-prior, bowing before Matilda more lowly than he was ever seen to bow before the effigies of our Ladie in the Ladie's chapel, said yea and verily, and that this last was a weighty consideration before which the rule of St. Benedict might, in some points, give way; and that in times of trouble and discord and anarchy like these we were living in, the royal abbey of Reading could not with safety be left for a single day without a head.

This discourse of the sub-prior much chafed our fearless and honest prior, Reginald, who well knew the man and his ungodly designs; but before the prior's wrath allowed him to speak, our sacrist brought forth the book and opened the rules of our order, and read the same with an audible yet gentle voice, and with the same gentleness did show that much time must be allowed for mature deliberation; that a Chapter could not be assembled while the house was full of strangers and armed men, for that elections must be free and unbiassed by fear or by any other worldly consideration; and then he did fall to quoting the charters of the Beauclerc, which direct that on the death of a lord abbat possession of the monastery, with all its rights and privileges, shall remain in the prior, and at the disposal of the prior and the monks of the Chapter, and that none shall in any ways meddle in the election of the new abbat: and when the sacrist had thus spoken, the cellarer or bursar, the second father of the convent, who had charge of everything relating to the food of the monks, and who always knew best, by the eating, who were present and who absent, did beg it might be observed that three cloister monks were absent, one disobediently and contumaciously (meaning hereby Father Anselm, who had absconded with the countess on her previous visit); but two, to wit, the chamberlain and the almoner, on the business of the abbey—and without the votes of these two named fathers no election could be legal or canonical.

"But my good cellarius," said the sub-prior, in a very dulcet and persuasive tone of voice, "it yet behoves us to think of the dangers of the times, and to provide for the security of this royal abbey and God-fearing community, even though we should depart from the rigid letter of some of our minor rules. Remember, oh cellarius, that these be days of trouble, and that we be living in the midst of discord and anarchy, and treachery, and——"

"Treachery, quotha! I wis there was no treachery in this community until thou didst bring it amongst us," cried our prior; "nor did we know discord or anarchy in our abbey, or in any part of the manors and hundreds appertaining unto this house until thou, oh Matilda, didst come to our gates! Troubles there were around us, and for those troubles the good men of our house grieved—not without labouring to alleviate them; but we were a quiet community when thou didst come thundering at our gates, bringing with thee thy subtle maidens and thy violent men of war! and hadst thou never come we had still been at peace. If thou wouldst listen to me now, I would say Get thee gone and cease from troubling us! But *orgueil mesprise bon conseil*, pride despiseth good counsel, and pride and hardness of heart will lead to thy undoing."

Tradition reporteth that the wrath of William the Conqueror was a thing fearful to behold; that the rage of the Red King was a consuming fire; and that the slower and stiller but deeper hate of Henry the Beauclerc was like unto the grim visage of death; yet do I doubt whether the wrath of all these three preceding kings, if put all together, could be so dreadful as that which the choleric daughter of the Beauclerc did now display: and certes the extreme passion of rage in a woman, even when she hath not a regal and tyrannical power, is fearful to behold. From the redness of the fire she became pale as ashes; but then she reddened again as she shouted "Ho! my men-at-arms, gag me that old traitor!"

"Tyrannous woman, that the sins of the land have brought into England, the truth will endure and be the same though I speak it not. Thou hast violated the sanctuary—thou hast dishonoured and plundered the very grave of thy father! See that he rise not from the grave to rebuke thee."

"Drag the traitor hence; put chains upon him; cast him into the dungeon," cried the unfaithful wife of the Angevin count; and the men-at-arms who had laid their rude hands upon the prior to gag him, did drag the prior out of the Aula Magna. And when he was gone, Matilda swore oaths too terrible to be repeated, that, seeing she must herself away on the morrow, she would leave a garrison of her fiercest fighting men in the abbey, and devastate all the abbey lands that lay on her march, if our fathers did not forthwith elect and appoint a lord abbat true to her party and obedient to her will. Most of the officials and cloister monks held down their heads and were sore afraid. Not so the sacrist and cellarer, who cried "Charter! Charter!" and repeated that such election could not be, and who were thereupon dragged forth and put in duress with the bold prior. And now the sub-prior, who never doubted that the choice was to fall upon him, did entreat those who had the right of voting to submit to the will of God and the commandment of the queen, and so save the house from ruin: and some he did terrify, and some cajole, talking apart with them, and telling them that he would be good lord and indulgent abbat unto them all. At last the timid gave way, and the monks of delicate conscience would resist no longer; and the sub-prior, with a smile upon his countenance, said to Matilda, in his blindest voice, that the community was ready to elect whomsoever her grace might be pleased to name.

"'Tis prudent and wise in the community," said Matilda; and then she clapped her hands thrice, as great lords or ladies use to do when they would summon a menial or call in their fool to make them sport; and as she clapped her hands she said, "Come in, my Lord Abbat elect!"

And then, from an inner apartment, where he had been listening all the while, there glided into the great hall, and stood before us, with an unblushing and complacent countenance, that rule-breaker and deserter—Father Anselm.

I did think that our sub-prior would have fallen to the ground in a swoon, for his legs trembled beneath him, and his face became as ashy with grief and disappointment as that of the countess had lately been with rage: his eye, fixed immoveably on Father Anselm, became glazed and dull, like the eye of a dead fish, and instead of a cry of wonderment, I heard a rattling in his throat. But in a while the sub-prior recovered, and ventured to say that the Chapter could by no means elect one who had broken his vow of obedience, and who was thereby under censure and interdict.

"In absenting myself from the house, I did but obey the command laid on me by the queen's grace," said Father Anselm.

"Not the sovereign ladie, nay, nor the sovereign lord of the land, can give such command without the foreknowledge and consent of the Lord Abbat, or of the prior in the abbat's absence," said the sub-prior, whose voice was growing bolder; "and dread ladie, I tell thee again, that the chapter cannot elect this monk—I tell thee that I myself will protest against such choice, and defeat such election."

"Ha!" cried Matilda, "sayest thou so? Then shalt thou join the other rebel monks. Men-at-arms, away with him! He but wanted the mitre for his own ugly head; but my dear mass-priest, thou shalt have it, and none but thee, for I can rely on thy faith and love, and thou art the handsomest monk that ever shaved a crown or wore a hood." And as she spake the last words, she looked so lovingly at him that it was a shame to see.

Well! our false and double-dealing sub-prior was whirled away to the dungeon, and the remaining officials and cloister monks were commanded by Matilda to begin the election of Father Anselm and finish it off hand, the countess vowing by the visage of St. Luke that she would not take food again until the thing was done.

The terrible threats of the countess and the subtle arguments which Father Hildebrand, the sub-prior, had made use of, in the belief that he was to be our abbat, had such weight with the fathers that they kissed the jewelled hand of Matilda, and went into the chapter-house; and there, in less time than had been wont to be spent in deliberation on the slightest business of the house (mailed knights and fierce men-at-arms standing by the chapter-door the while), they did name and elect the runagate Anselm to be our lord abbat, the monks of tender conscience merely holding up their hands in assent, and saying no word, but uttering in their secret souls that they acted under fear and violence, and that all this was uncanonical work and foul, and against the rule of St. Benedict. And then they all came forth from the chapter-house, singing *Benedictus Dominus*; and the countess and her painted damsels looked out from the windows of the abbat's house and laughed, and the armed and ungodly multitude set up a shout, as though they had gained a great victory. I will not tell how, in Father Anselm's inauguration in the church, the

rules of our order, the canons, the decretals of councils, and the bulls of the pope, were all transgressed, or turned into a jest and mockery: these things are not to be forgotten, but I will not relate them. Instead of a godly bishop, it was the countess herself that placed the mitre on the head, and the ring on the finger of Father Anselm, and that gave him the first kiss and accolade—*Osculum Pacis*, while *Te Deum laudamus* was being sung in the choir; but verily was it sung in so faint and plaintive a manner, that it sounded more like a *Miserere Domine*. But when it was over, the intrusive abbat was kissed by all the convent, according to rule; and *Benedicite* having been said, Father Anselm gave thanks to the monks for that they had chosen him, the least of them all, to be their lord and shepherd, not on account of his own merits, but solely by the will of God. O! sinful and sacrilegious Anselm, better had it been for thee that thou hadst never been born!

The will of the wicked woman was thus accomplished, but it brought her neither future worldly success nor present peace. That same night as I, Felix the Novice, lay in my cell unable to sleep, mourning for the loss of our good lord abbat, and ruminating on all which had since befallen us, I heard a cry, a piercing shriek, which rang through our cloisters and corridors, and through every part of our great abbey. Yea, as I afterwards learned, it was heard by the prior and by those that were with him in the prison underground. Cardiff castle did not ring and echo with so shrill a shriek of agony when the red-hot copper basin was held over the face of the Beauclerc's unhappy brother Duke Robert to sear his eyes and destroy his sight, as did now the abbey of Reading, which was mainly built in expiation of that great crime of Henricus. It was followed by a loud call for lights—lights in the queen's sleeping chamber. And lights were carried thither, and Matilda slept no more that night; and before the dawn of day preparations were made for her departure. The shriek was from her, the vision was hers. *O beate virgine!* save us from ill deeds and an ill conscience, and the dreams they do bring. The vision of the Beauclerc's daughter, as it afterwards came to my knowledge, was this:—her father appeared before her, holding in his right hand his heart, which had not been brought to our abbey with his body, but which had been deposited in the church of St. Mary at Rouen, which his mother had founded; and this heart did distil great goutts of blood, as if in agony for the wrong which had been done our abbey, and the insults which had been heaped upon his grave; and the face of the spectrum was menacing and awful, and the visionary voice full of dread—the words so terrible that the countess would never repeat them save to her confessor.

In the same watches of the night there were moans and groans in the prison underground. Nor was it only the upbraiding of an evil conscience that caused Hildebrand, our sub-prior, so to lament and cry out. For our bellicose and choleric prior Reginald did beat him, and tweak him by the nose, reviling him as a Judas Iscariot; and, peradventure, he would have slain him outright, or have done him some great bodily harm, if the gentler and more circumspect sacrist and cellarer had not been there to intercede and intervene. Our prior was the strongest man that then lived in all these parts. A terrible man in his wrath was our prior! But his wrath was never kindled except against evil-doers, and the swinkers and oppressors of the poor. With all others he was as gentle as a lamb, and he was ever indulgent to error and all minor offences, as I, who lived long under his rule, can well testify—*REQUIEM ÆTERNAM*.

I, Felix, having in the bye-gone times had much familiarity and friendship with our two backsliding novices, Urswick the Whiteheaded from Pangbourne, and John-à-Blount from Maple-Durham, did much marvel how it fared with them since their apostacy, and did diligently seek them out in the great press which came with the countess, to the end that I might talk gently with them upon their transgressions, and obtain from them some knowledge of what had become of the little Alice and my prime friend young Arthur de Bohun, hoping hereby to gain tidings grateful and cheerful to the ear of the good and bountiful Ladie Alfgiva. But neither in the evening nor in the morning could I see Urswick or John among the people of the countess. Yet in the morning, just before the departure, I gave a bowman my only piece of money, and learned from him that a part of Matilda's host with sundry wains and horse-litters had not come with her unto Reading, but had taken a shorter road for Winchester; and so I did conclude that my two quondam comrades had gone with that company, and I did comfort myself with thinking that they had yet so much grace left in them as to have been averse to come back and witness our exceeding great misery. Yet did the archer spoil this my comfort by telling me that two black-eyed damsels had gone with that division, riding like men upon big war-horses. Of children the man knew nought; nor he nor any man of the meaner sort had been allowed to look into the wains or to approach the litters. There might be children, he said, among this moveable and vagrant host, but he had seen none. Here again did I grieve, for I loved Alice and Arthur right well, and would have laid down an untold treasure in gold to have it in my power to speak comfortably unto the Ladie Alfgiva.

At the command of Father Anselm the monks of the house, and we the novices likewise, did form in processional order, and accompany Matilda from our gates even unto the Hallowed Brook, that branch of the swift and clear Kennet which floweth by the township; and halting on the bank of that holy and peaceful water, which ought not to have heard such notes, Father Anselm made us chaunt *Hosanna* and *Jubilate*, and promised to the Angevin countess a bloody and complete victory over all her enemies. And hence, upon *famam vulgi*, the trifling and ungrounded talk of the common people, who, in parts remote from Reading, knew not the violence which had been used, it was proclaimed to the world that the abbat and monks of Reading, in this unhappy year eleven hundred and forty-one, had received the empress-queen with the highest honours, and had made themselves her servants and beadsmen. *Pater de Cœlis, Deus, miserere nobis!*

VI.

While she was yet at Oxenford, Matilda had rudely summoned the Bishop of Winchester, legate to the pope and brother to King Stephen, to appear in her presence and give an account of his actions and intentions. The bishop had replied that he was getting ready for her; and this was true enough, for he was manning and victualling the castles which he had built within his diocese as at Waltham, Farnham, and divers other places. Upon quitting our house at Reading, Matilda hoped, by a rapid march, to surprise the bishop within Winchester, and to make him captive, and to send him loaded with chains to join the king his brother in Bristowe Castle, in despite of his legatine and episcopal character and the authority of the holy see. But the lord bishop was ever wary and well advised, and before the countess could reach Winchester he withdrew from that most royal city, having first fortified his episcopal residence therein, and set up his brother's standard on the roof. Matilda was treacherously admitted into the royal castle at Winchester, whither she summoned her half-brother the great Earl of Gloucester, and her uncle David, king of Scots, who had been for some time in England vainly endeavouring to make her follow mild and wise counsels. The Scots king and Gloucester, and the Earls of Hereford and Chester, went straight to Winchester and abided with the queen and her court in the castle. But the bishop had made his palace as strong as the castle, and when the party of Matilda laid siege to it, the bishop's garrison, being resolved not to yield, did many valorous and some very sinful deeds. They sallied more than once against the people of Matilda, and put them to the rout; and they hurled combustibles from the palace, and set fire to the houses of the town that stood nearest to the palace in order to drive thence the enemy's archers; but by their thus doing, the abbey of nuns within the town, and the monastery called the Hide without the town walls were consumed, to their great sin and shame. Here was a crucifix made of gold and silver and precious stones, the gift of King Canute, the Dane; and it was seized by the ravenous flames, and was thrown from the rood-loft to the ground, and was afterwards stripped of its ornaments by order of the bishop-legate himself, and more than five hundred marks of silver and thirty marks of gold were found in it, and given as largesse to the soldiers; for, whether they stood for Stephen or for Matilda, or whether they did battle with the sanction of the church or warred against its authority, these fighting men did mainly look to pay and plunder. And at a later season the abbey of nuns at Warewell was also burned by William de Ypres, an abandoned man, who feared neither God nor men, and who did change sides as often as any one; but at this season he was for King Stephen, and he set fire to the religious house for that some of Matilda's people had secured themselves within it.

Having made a ruin all round the episcopal palace, the bishop's garrison, being confident of succour, waited the event. The legate did not make them wait long. Being reinforced by Queen Maud and the stout citizens of London, who to the number of two thousand took the field for King Stephen, clad in coats of mail, and wearing steel casques on their heads, like noble men of war (more money, I wis, had they in their pouches than most of our noble knights or pseudo proceres), he turned rapidly back upon Winchester, and besieged the besiegers there. By the first day of the Kalends of August, or nigh upon the festival of Saint Afra, saint and martyr, the bishop did gird with a close siege the royal castle of Winchester. Herein were Matilda, the King of Scots, the Earls of Gloucester, Hereford, and Chester, and many others of note; and of all these not one would have escaped if it had not been for the respect paid by the bishop and the party of King Stephen for the festivals of the church, which verily ought to be held by all parties as Truces of God, neither party doing anything while such truce lasts. But when the siege had endured the space of forty and two days, and when those within the royal castle had eaten up all their victual, the 14th day of September arrived, which blessed day was the festival of the Holy Rood, and a sabbath-day besides; and lo! at a very early hour in the morning of that day—*Festa duplex*, while my lord bishop's host were hearing mass, or confessing their sins—which alas! were but too numerous—Matilda mounted a swift horse, and, attended by a strong and well-mounted escort, crept secretly and quietly out of the castle. Her half-brother the Earl of Gloucester followed her at a short distance of time, with a number of knights, English, Angevins and Brabançons, who had all engaged to keep between the countess and her pursuers, and to risk their own liberty for the sake of securing hers. They all got a good way upon the Devizes road before the beleaguers knew that they were gone. But so soon as it was known that they had broken the Truce of God, the bishop's people were to horse, and began a hot pursuit; and at Stourbridge the Earl of Gloucester and his band of knights were overtaken, and, after a fierce battle, were for the most part made prisoners. But while the long fight lasted, the countess, still pressing on her swift steed, reached Devizes, the work of, and the cause of so much woe unto, the magnificent castle-building Roger, late bishop of Sarum. But the strong castle of Devizes was not furnished with victual, so that the countess could not tarry there; and being in a great fear as to what might befall her on the road, she put herself upon a feretrum or death-bier, as if she were dead, and caused herself to be drawn in a hearse from Devizes unto Gloucester, whereat she arrived in that guise, not without the wonderment of men and the anger of the saints. Of all who had formed her strong rearward guard on her flight from Winchester castle, the Earl of Hereford alone reached Gloucester castle, and he arrived in a wretched state, being wounded and almost naked. The other barons and knights who escaped from the fight of Stourbridge threw away their arms and essayed to escape in the disguise of peasants; but some of them, betrayed by their foreign speech, were seized by the English serfs, who bound them with cords and drove them before them with whips to deliver them up to their enemies. Yea some of the churls did cruelly maltreat and maim these proud knights from beyond sea, thereby taking vengeance for the great wrongs

and cruelties which by them had been committed. Nay men of prelatical dignity were not respected, for they had had no bowels for the people, who now stripped them naked and scourged them. The King of Scots, Matilda's uncle, got safe back to his own kingdom; but her half-brother, the most important prisoner that could be taken, was conveyed to Stephen's queen Maud, who laid him fast in Rochester castle, but without loading him with chains as Matilda had done unto Stephen, for Queen Maud was merciful and generous of heart.

Sir Alain de Bohun, who had joined the legate with a good force before the siege of Winchester Castle was begun, made haste to enter into that castle when it was abandoned by Matilda and given up by the few soldiers that remained in it. It was no thirst for blood and no appetite for plunder that made our good Caversham lord enter into the fortalice; but it was his fatherly love for his only boy, and his tenderness for the little Alice, who had grown up as his daughter. He thought that in so hurried and rough a departure the children whom he had traced to Winchester Castle must have been left therein; but although he searched every part of the castle, as well below ground as above, he could not find the children, or any trace of them, nor could he from the prisoners taken learn more than that a fine young boy and a beautiful little girl, together with sundry foreign damsels, had been sent from Winchester a day or twain before the legate commenced the siege of the castle. Sir Alain, albeit sorely disappointed, thanked Heaven that the children had not been separated. A little later in this year's terrible war, when Sir Alain de Bohun had discomfited a force commanded by Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, his once cherished friend, but now his deadliest foe, and had well nigh taken Sir Ingelric prisoner, a writing was in secret delivered unto the good lord of Caversham by one who wore pilgrim's weeds, but who was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and, in verity, a fautor and spy of the countess. Sir Alain being competently learned, and well able to read without the assistance of his mass-priest, who was not there to aid him, did peruse the secret missive, which did tell him in the name of Matilda that she had his son in sure-keeping, and would never deliver him up or permit the eye of father or mother to be blessed with the sight of him until Sir Alain should have abandoned the traitor Stephen and have joined the rightful queen of England; and that if he long failed so to do, the boy would be sent beyond sea and immured in an Angevin castle, where all traces of him would be for ever lost, and where, doubtlessly, he would soon perish. "But if," said the letter, "Sir Alain de Bohun will follow the loyal and wise example of his once friend Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe and come join the queen, her grace will receive him with honour, and Sir Ingelric will forget that which is passed, and the boy shall be restored, and the little maiden likewise, and they shall be contracted in marriage, and the queen will give a rich dower to Alice out of her own royal domains, and Sir Ingelric and Sir Alain may live neighbourly and happily together as aforetime."

Sir Alain, who could write as well as read, replied in few words that his conscience forbade his breaking oaths to King Stephen; that he could not change sides either through fear or through interest; that he could not subject his lance to the distaff, or believe that the warlike baronage of England would ever live quietly under the rule of a woman; that he must trust to God and his saints for the protection of his only child, as also for the well-being of his not less than daughter; and that if it were the will of Heaven that the children, who had been brought up so lovingly together, should be conjoined at some future day in holy matrimony (of which in happier days there had been some talk between him and the little maiden's father), it would not be in the power of empress or queen to prevent it. "If," said Sir Alain de Bohun in terminating his epistle, "if, oh Matilda! thou shouldest so far forget the tender feelings of a woman and mother as to do harm to mine only son, and thereby bring my wife with sorrow to the grave, God will so strengthen mine arm in battle as to enable me to take a fearful vengeance upon thy party and upon some that are nearest to thee. But thou wilt not do that which thou sayest. So let me have no more secret, tampering missives. When Thamesis flows backward from Caversham to Oxenford instead of pursuing its course to the everlasting sea, then, but not until then, will Sir Alain de Bohun prove false to his oath and traitor to King Stephen."

Circa id tempus, or nigh upon the time that Sir Alain sent this response unto Matilda, Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, having composed his feud with that family and kindred, espoused the rich widow of that Sir Jocelyn who had burned his wife, the mother of the little Alice, in his house, and who had been by him slain in the Falbury of Reading, almost at our gates. The ladie of Sir Jocelyn had acquired an ill-fame during her widowhood, for she was greedy of other people's goods and avaricious of her own, faithless unto her friends, merciless to her foes, and to her vassals and serfs haughty and cruel. It was as much from the darkness of her deeds as from her foreign and dark complexion, that she had gotten all through the country the name of The Dark Ladie. But she was rich, passing rich, and aspiring, and allied with some of our greatest men, and Sir Ingelric had given up his whole soul to ambition and gold. This unseemly matrimony was mainly brought about by the countess, and there were others of the like sort, which all terminated in misery and woe, and in visible manifestations of God's wrath and vengeance.

The Dark Ladie, who had done much mischief in the land in her widowed condition, became still more terrible as the wife of Sir Ingelric, and that lost knight became all the worse for his union with her. They crammed their castle at Speen with a most ungodly garrison, and with prisoners they kept and tortured for ransom.

King Stephen being a close prisoner in the castle of Bristowe, and the Earl of Gloucester being well guarded in Rochester Castle, each of the contending parties was, in a manner, without a head, for Stephen's brother, the bishop-legate, was, after all, but a priest, and the woman Matilda was nothing without her half-brother. A negociation was therefore set on foot for a mutual release of prisoners. This was several times interrupted, and at each interruption the party of

King Stephen threatened to send the Earl of Gloucester out of the land unto Boulogne, there to be buried in a castle-prison deep under the ground, and the party of Matilda threatened to send King Stephen over to Ireland and consign him to the wild Irishry; but at last, on the first of the kalends of November, it was agreed between them that the great Earl of Gloucester should be exchanged for King Stephen; and the earl and the king being both liberated, each betook himself to the head-quarters of his friends and partisans. Both factions now stood much as they did previously to the battle of Lincoln; but fearfully had the people of England suffered in the interim. And yet, after all these sufferings, neither faction did turn its thoughts *ad regnum tranquillandum*; but both did prepare for more battles and sieges, sending forth their bands of foreigners and leaving the cruel castle-holders to seize, torture, plunder and kill. While the land was thus weeping tears of blood, the king and his brother, the bishop, made repair unto London, where the king had his best friends, and where the legate did summon a great ecclesiastical council to meet at Westminster on the 7th of the kalends of December, *ad pacem componendam*, for the composing of peace unto the church and kingdom. When this council met on the appointed day, which was in the octaves of Saint Andrew, King Stephen addressed the prelates: he mildly and briefly complained of the wrongs and hardships he had suffered from his vassals, unto whom he had never denied justice when asked for it; he said that if it would please the nobles and bishops of the realm to aid him with men and money, he trusted so to work as to relieve them from the fear of a shameful submission to the yoke of a woman, and so to succeed in his enterprises as to put an end to intestine war and havoc, and establish his throne in peace. When the king had done speaking, the legate his brother, who only nine months before had in the synod held at Winchester declared for Matilda, rose and proclaimed that the pope had ordered him to release and restore his brother, that Matilda had observed nothing of what she had sworn to him; that the great barons of England had performed their engagements towards her, and that she, not knowing how to use her prosperity with moderation, had violated all her engagements and oaths; that she had even made attempts against his, the legate's, liberty and life; and that this freed him from the obligations of the oaths he had taken to the Countess of Anjou, for he would not longer call her queen. The legate further said that the judgment of Heaven was visible in the prompt punishment of her perfidy, and that God himself now restored his brother the rightful King Stephen to the throne. Albeit there were some among them who had but lately quitted the party of Matilda, the prelates and great men at Westminster assembled did agree that all loyal men ought forthwith to arm for King Stephen, and that the adherents of the countess should be everywhere stripped of their usurped authority, whether in church or civil government; that forced elections should be all annulled, and that sentence of excommunication should go forth against all the obstinate and irreclaimable partisans of the countess. And the Bishop of Winchester, as legatus à latere, did stand up with a new bull of the pope in his right hand, and pronounced the dread sentence against all such as should disturb the peace in favour of the Countess of Anjou, or should build new castles in the land, or invade the rights and privileges of the church, or wrong the poor and defenceless.

Judge ye if the news of these high proceedings at Westminster did not bring with them joy and comfort unto the friends of the late Lord Abbot Edward and all the honest monks of Reading abbey! Besides the sin and shame of his forced election, we had suffered many things at the hands of Anselm during the few months that he had held rule over us. In all that time he had kept the stout-hearted prior Reginald in the prison underground, and had maliciously devised penances and punishments for all such members of the community as had pitied the prisoner. He had alienated and sold some of the abbey lands to furnish out men-at-arms for his countess. He had half-starved the brotherhood, and no hospitality had he exercised unto strangers except to some Angevin marauders; and when he went away to see the countess, which more than once he did, he left in the abbey some of these outlandish men to keep us in submission and dread. But now his evil reign was over, for so soon as they had learned what had passed at Westminster, and had gotten a rescript from the legate, the elders of our house took counsel together and resolved to liberate Reginald the prior, and offer him the mitre, and to throw Father Anselm into the prison instead of the prior. And the thing was easy to do, for by this time Anselm had given offence to every cloister monk, novice, and lay-brother, and the warier sort did all opine that now that King Stephen was liberated, and his enemies excommunicated by the legate, the cause of the countess must be altogether desperate. And so with one voice and one will Anselm was seized and thrown into the underground cell, and the prior was brought forth, and conducted in triumph to the abbat's house, and there told that he must be our lord abbat. Most true it was that he had never wished for this post of eminence, and now prayed the brotherhood to elect the chamberlain or the sacrist or any experienced cloister-monk rather than him; but the universal will and voice of the community would not be gainsayed, and in the course of a few days the prior was unanimously elected, by those who had the right of voting in the Chapter, to be our abbat; and then we all carried him into the church in procession, sang *Te Deum laudamus*, with loud and jubilant voices, rang the bells until they well nigh cracked, and set him on the abbat's throne, and did him all the homage that is due unto the mitred abbat of a royal abbey; and then brought up Father Anselm, and drove him out of our gates with many kicks behind, for our new lord abbat would not have him linger and pine in that cold dark cell underground, saying that he knew to his cost how sad a thing it was, and that to hold any captive therein would be to make the wholesome air of the house infaust and insalubrious.

As he was crossing the Holy Brook the townfolk of Reading, who no more loved Anselm than did we the monks, caught him by the girdle and threw him into the stream, so that he was nearly drowned at the place where he had forced us against our conscience to psalmodize for Matilda. He took these things so much to heart that he got him back into Normandie. It was said by some

that he falsified his history and his very name, and so gained admission into the abbey of Bec, but from the volatile nature of the man, I did rather give my belief to another report—to wit, that he turned himself into a jongleur or trouvère, and went about France with women and menestrels and other lewd people.

Sundry times he promised, and did in his heart intend, to visit our house, and force the restitution of the lands which the usurping Anselm had alienated to ungodly men; yet King Stephen came not to Reading for many a year, and when he came he could not tarry with us. But the king sent Sir Alain de Bohun to build up and restore the ruinous castle of Reading; and when this had been done, and when, by the vassals and serfs of the abbey, the walls of the township had been strengthened, we entered upon the enjoyment of such peace and tranquillity as we had not known during five long years; for the Philistines could not come suddenly upon us, or easily break through our defences. At Reading, indeed, we did live as in a little Goshen, while war was raging all round about; and albeit we could not always defend our outlying manors and houses from fire and sword, but suffered many and grievous losses in serfs, cattle, corn, hay, farm-houses, and granges; we yet suffered less than other communities, and nothing at all in comparison with the abbat and monks of Abingdon, our neighbours, but not always friends. Driven from their once quiet seat at Oxenford, or too sorely troubled in their residence there by the people of the countess, and the constant coming and going of warlike and plundering bands, many of the professors and pupils, *doctores et alumni*, did come unto Reading, and under the shadow of our secure and peaceful walls, pursue those studies which were destined to give to England a learned priesthood and a universal increase of civility. Our brotherhood too did attend to that learning and to the making of many good books which had done honour to the Benedictines ever since their first foundation and in whatsoever country their order was established. Our scribes and copyists once more worked amain in their quiet cells, multiplying with a slow but correct pen the precious works of antiquity, and the holy books, and the lives of saints; and need there was for this labour, since other religious houses had no peace or leisure, and great and fearful was the destruction of books and codices in the conflagrations and stormings of this long intestine war. But for the labours of the Benedictines and some few learned monks of other orders in England, and but for the blessed saints, who kept alive their love of letters and books, and gave them heart and strength to work even in a season of horror and despair, the land would have been plunged back into utter barbarism, and would have been void of learning and of books as when the great Alfred came to the throne. In the tranquil easy days in which I now write, for the solace of my lonely hours and for the preservation of the fading memory of the times of trouble, and for no fame or vain glory, the sense of these things hath already become faint in men's minds, and mayhap, in after ages, when the world shall have made great strides in learning and all civility, these labours of the Benedictines will be altogether forgotten, or be treated as nought. Yet was it they that did mainly save the land from a great retrograde step; and I, Felix, *servus servorum*, the humblest or least worthy member of the order (who have so often seen shining in our western turret the midnight lamp which lighted our copyists and makers of books at their solitary labours, and who have seen those labours steadily pursued when the country was ringing with the din of arms, and was blazing with midnight fires, and when no earthly honour or reward whatsoever seemed to attend their toil), would fain put upon record some faint notice of that which was done in the evil times by our house and order: but not unto us the praise, but unto thee, oh Lord! They, themselves, sought for no applause—*Celata virtus*—their virtue is all hidden: not so much as the name is preserved of these good and laborious monks who did so much for learning and religion.

It was about the time in which Sir Alain de Bohun did re-edify Reading Castle, that I, Felix, recovering from my early podagra, under the instruction and guidance of old father Ambrosius (he hath now been many years at rest in the chancel of our church, and I in gratitude do say a daily prayer over his grave), did first addict myself to the use of the pen, beginning with a missal, which our Pisan limner did richly illuminate; and when this my first essay was finished, I did present it unto the Ladie Alfgiva in her house at Caversham, and that bountiful and right noble ladie did acknowledge the gift by sending unto the abbey five milch cows and a goodly stock of Caen fowls, which our community at that time much needed, for there had been a murrain among cattle, and the spoilers had again swept bare our best farms.

Many were the tears shed by me, and many the masses and prayers said by our house for the said Ladie Alfgiva and the two missing children. Grief and anxiety for her son and foster daughter did at times almost bow that noble dame to the earth, and her grief was the greater because of her frequent loneliness and the hazards her lord was running in the many sieges and battles of the times; but although her health declined and her cheek became wan, hope and trust in heaven's goodness did not forsake her. A pious dame was Ladie Alfgiva, and of a nature high and noble in all things. Though thinking day and night of her only son and her only living child, she never once implored Sir Alain to purchase the boy's release and his restoration to her arms by proving false to his oath and untrue to the king, and every time that her lord came to his home she dried her tears and did all that she could to conceal her great grief so long as he tarried with her. The virtuous woman is a crown unto her husband, and verily there be wives as well as virgins that merit the crown the church awards to saints and martyrs. Saint Catherine on the wheel, or Saint Agatha at the fiery stake, suffered not pangs so acute as those of this bereaved mother; and their torture was soon over, and while they suffered they saw from the wheel and stake the heavens opening to the eye, and they heard heavenly music in the air which made them deaf to the shouts of the infidel rabble that were slaying them. So much bliss and so great a foretaste of celestial joy was not vouchsafed unto the secular Ladie Alfgiva, and could not be expected by her: nevertheless had she her happy visions and sweet soothing sounds during her

long bereavement. More than once, in her great loneliness, when her lord was away fighting for King Stephen, as she stood on the battlements of her castle at eventide, she saw her boy and his playmate Alice sitting on the flowery bank which slopes down to the river, as they used often to sit before Sir Ingelric did steal them away; and she heard their merry little voices on the breeze, and their frolicsome laugh. Some would say that she but took two stray lambs for the lost children, and that the sounds she heard were only made by the evening breeze among the tall growing grass and the leafy coppices; but I, Felix, could never so interpret it unto her. But constantly did I strive to give her comfort, and to conceal from her the cruelties that were daily committed in the land, and to stop the thoughtless indiscreet tongue of her people who would have filled her ears with horrible tales of murdered children and babes, for not the massacre of the Innocents in Judea was so fierce as the slaughter that raged in England.

VII.

When our good lord abbat Edward had been dead well nigh a year, to wit, in the summer season of eleven hundred and forty-two, King Stephen, from great fatigue of body and uneasiness of mind, fell sore sick, and lay for a long while like one that was dying. While this lasted the barons of his party did many evil deeds, there being no authority strong enough to check their lawlessness; and, at the same troublous season, the partisans of Matilda and the foreign mercenaries in her pay did ravage all the western parts; and more robbers came over from Anjou, Normandie, and Picardie, asking no pay, but only free quarters, and the right of plundering the poor English. It was a Benedictine from Rome that had studied medicine in the school of Salerno, that brought a healing potion to the king, and snatched him back to life from the jaws of the grave.

So soon as Stephen could mount his war-horse he marched with a great force unto Oxenford, where the countess had fixed her court; and he invested that unhappy city with a firm resolution never to move thence until he had gotten his troublesome rival into his hands. After some fighting, in which many lives were lost by both parties, Stephen burst into the town, and having set fire to a large part thereof, he laid siege unto the castle into which Matilda and her people had retired. Now the castle of Oxenford, standing in the midst of waters, was very strong. From St. Michael's mass well nigh unto Christ's mass, *à festo Michæelis usque ad natali Domini*, did King Stephen persevere in the siege, telling all men that complained of the hard service that he must have the castle, and in it the countess, and that then there would be peace in England.

In the mid siege, our new lord abbat, who had had much correspondence with the lord abbat of Abingdon, with the prior and monks at Hurley, and with other Benedictine houses, for the good purpose of saving the remnant of the Christian people in those parts, and putting an end to the cruelties and many deadly sins which were daily committed, received from the Abingdon cell at Cumnor, nigh unto Oxenford, a missive from the abbat of that community, who entreated him, now that the country was clear of Matilda's people, to repair unto Cumnor that they might take council together, and together confer with King Stephen, who seemed at that moment to be in a heavenly disposition, and to have an exceeding great desire to tranquillize the land, and to consult with the loyal abbat of Reading. Now albeit Stephen had, by means of Sir Alain de Bohun, expressed his great contentment at the expulsion of Father Anselm, and at all that had been done by our community since the great meeting of the synod at Westminster, the election of the prior to be our lord abbat had not yet been formally confirmed by the king; and therefore Dominus Reginaldus did make haste to accept the invitation of the abbat of Abingdon, and to get him unto Cumnor. Not for any merit of mine own, but through the kind favour he was ever pleased to show me, I was chosen to be of the travelling party. Philip the lay-brother went likewise; but Philip was a brave and ready man, quick-witted, and well-trained aforetime in the use of arms, and in the riding of the great horse. Although the nerve of the Angevin faction was shut up in Oxenford Castle, my Lord Reginald was too wise a man to put himself on the road with a weak escort; for he well knew that there were many barons and knights, calling themselves King Stephen's friends and the friends of mother church, that would not scruple to plunder an abbat, or to keep him in their donjons for the sake of a great ransom; and well nigh every castle between Reading and Oxenford, and between Oxenford and Bristowe, was a den of thieves, and worse; and Lord Reginald had not lost his bellicose humour by being promoted to the highest dignity. "By the head of Saint John the Baptist," said he, as we were about to take our departure, "not a robber of them all shall lay me in his crucet house without having a hard fight for it! Before I bear the weight of their sachtenges, I will make them taste the sharpness of my lance, and the weight of my mace." And so was it that we went forth from Reading forty and one strong, and every man of us armed cap-à-pie, and most of us well mounted. The lord abbat wore a steel cap under his hood, and a coat of mail and steel hose under his robes; and he had a two-edged sword at his side and a heavy mace at the pommel of his saddle, and a good lance resting on stirrup-iron; yea, and I, Felix the novice, wore ringed armour and a steel casque, and had my sword and lance: Englehard de Cicomaco, that famed and well-judging knight, who was one of the retainers of our abbey, doing military service for the abbey lands he held near Hurley Common, did say that I looked a very proper man-at-arms, and did bestride my steed like a knight—but these are vanities, and I by my vows did renounce all vanity. Yet can I but mark that when we came to Cumnor a great baron asked who was that gallant well-favored young soldier that rode in the van, near to the lord abbat of Reading.

On our way we tarried for a night at Berecourt by Pangbourne, where we had a goodly house among the hills which had wont to be a summer residence of our abbats. But this goodly house had been robbed and spoiled, and our vassals and serfs had not yet been enabled to restore it. We were therefore roughly lodged and not over well fed; but that which affected me more grievously than this was the sad condition of the poor people of Pangbourne, who had been so prosperous and happy before these accursed wars began. Sad were the tales they told, and not the least sad of them all was this: my quondam friend and brother novice, Urswick the Whiteheaded, had been in the spring season of this year at Pangbourne with a great band of English and foreign robbers, ransacking the place of his birth and maltreating the friends among whom he had been born and bred; and his aged father had to his face pronounced a curse upon him; and in a quarrel with some savage men from Anjou touching the division of spoil, Urswick had been slain on the bank of Thamesis, before he could recross the river or get out of sight of his native village: and, since that black morning, or so our serfs did say, his well-known voice had been heard at midnight, and he had been seen by the light of the moon, now habited as a monk, and wringing his hands by the river side where he fell, looking piteously towards the abbey of Reading, from which he had fled, and now equipped as a man-at-arms, and galloping on a great black horse, across the country and up the steep hills and down the precipices—fire flashing from the eyes and nostrils of the infernal steed, and from the burning heart of the lost novice.

On our march from Pangbourne we shunned the townships and castles as much as we could, and took especial heed not to get near unto Wallingford; for the strong castle there was held by Brian Fitzcount, the most terrible of all Matilda's partisans, and the greatest robber of them all; and the castle at this very time was known to be full of unfortunate prisoners whom he kept and daily tortured in order to make them disclose their supposed hidden treasures, or to pay a heavier ransom than any they had the means of paying. Christian burghers and franklins, noble knights who had warred against the heathen in Palestine, nay churchmen, the highest in the hierarchy, were known to be in his foul prison, pent up with Jewish traffickers and money-dealers; the noblest and the purest with the vilest and foulest of the earth: and the gaolers and torturers of Brian Fitzcount treated the Christians no whit better than the Israelites that were chained at their sides, contaminating them with their touch and poisoning the air they breathed. Night after night, such of the poor townfolk as had contrived to live in the midst of these horrors without deserting Wallingford, were startled in their sleep by the cries and shrieks which came from the grim castle; and when in the morning they adventured to ask what had been toward in the night watches, the Count's people would tell them jestingly from the battlements that it was nothing, or that Brian Fitzcount had only been coining a little more money, or that a Jew had had his teeth drawn, or that a traitor to the empress-queen had been questioned about his treason and treasure.

The great prison in this castle of Wallingford was called Brian's Hell, and it was deserving of the name. But the fiends were abroad, as well as within those abominable walls—the spirit of the arch-fiend was everywhere. The village churches and the chapels and hospitia in solitary places had been destroyed or turned into fortalices; deep trenches were cut in the churchyards among the consecrated abodes of the dead; the sweet sounding church bells had been thrown down, and engines of war had been set up on the church towers. Yea! the resting places which the church and the piety of the faithful had built and stocked for the poor and hungry wayfarers in the desert had been plundered and destroyed—the last holy resting-places had been profaned! The temple of peace and mercy had been turned into a place of arms!

As we came near to Hanney mead and the river Ock—that pleasant little river that wells from the ground near Uffington and drops into Thamesis by Abingdon, and that has the most savoury pike that be fished in these parts—we came suddenly upon a castellum which we could by no means avoid; for it had been lately built, and we knew not of it, and it lay so low among marshes that we saw it not until we were close upon it. It lay close to the only road that led to the ford across the river. To a trumpet which sounded a challenge from the walls our party replied with sound of trumpet, and then at the abbat's commandment proceeded deliberately onward. As we came nearer, the warder of the castle shouted "For whom be ye?"

"What if I say for King Stephen?" quoth our lord abbat, rising in his stirrups and waving his lance over his head.

"Long live King Stephen! an thou wilt," said the warder, "but thou must pay toll ere thou mayest pass the river."

"The lord abbat of Reading pays not even bridge toll, and here there is no bridge," said our lord abbat, "and fords be ever free. Go read our charter: *In terris et aquis, in transitibus pontium*, by land and by water, and in the passing of bridges, we be free from all tolls or consuetudinary payments. If thou wilt have toll from me, i'faith, thou must come forth and take it."

"Thou art but a traitor," cried the warder. "Long live the empress-queen!" shouted divers armed men who ran to the battlement, and as they did shout did also bend their cross-bows. But by this time we had all put spurs to our horses, and we dashed past the ugly castellum and across the ford without receiving any hurt, albeit a quarrel did hit the lord abbat's steed near unto the tail and make him caper. Had our party been less numerous and warlike, doubtless we had been lodged that night among Brian Fitzcount's prisoners.

The town and abbey of Abingdon we did also avoid, keeping a little to the westward thereof; for another tyrant and man destroyer had built himself a great castle in that vicinage, and there had been many feuds and factions and changing of sides among the monks of Abingdon, while the

best and most trusty of that community were known to be at the house at Cumnor with their abbat. The roads were deep and miry, the way was long, the days were short, and the weather of the saddest; but on the third evening after our departure from Reading we arrived at the Cell of Cumnor, where our lord abbat was hospitably received by the abbat of Abingdon, and where we of less note found good lodging and entertainment, to wit, a blazing wood fire whereat to dry our clothes, clean straw to sleep upon, and salted meats and manchets to eat, and good Oxenford ale to drink.

On the morrow, when it wanted but two days of the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, King Stephen with a few lords and knights rode from the beleaguer of Oxenford Castle to Cumnor, and did there confer with the two abbats and other ecclesiastics. What passed in the council chamber I cannot tell; but it was seen by all of us that the king wore a cheerful aspect, and it was told unto us all that the castle was reduced to extremity, and that, there being no escape thence, the countess must soon surrender or die of starvation. When the conference was over, and when the king had been entertained as royally as the abbat of Abingdon could do it in that place and at that time—and when Stephen had laid his offering upon the altar in the church, he rode back to the siege, and our lord abbat of Reading, and all of us who had come with him, attended the king to Oxenford, intending there to tarry until the surrender of Matilda.

"With the saints to my aid," said our abbat, "I may prevail upon this perverse daughter of the Beauclerc to deliver herself quietly up, and upon King Stephen to be merciful unto her in her captivity. If the Angevin countess should still persevere in the wickedness of her ways, and attempt to escape again on a bier instead of putting an end to the woes of the land by a surrender, forty good swords the more may do service for the king. My children, my friends, ye will all be vigilant in this matter, and do duty like good soldiers, if it should be required of ye!" And as the good lord Reginald went into Oxenford town and saw the palace which the Beauclerc king had there builded, and saw the engines of war, and heard the horrid noise of war all about, he heaved a sigh and said, "*Eheu! quantum mutatur!* How be all things changed! Here in the days of Henricus Primus, that peace-loving king, *Rex pacis*, have I seen nothing but quiet scholars and learned men, and the court of a king that was an academe and a sanctuary of letters. Wot ye, my boy Felix, why it was that Henricus did build him a palace here?" And I having confessed my ignorance as became me, our abbat went on to say, "Felix, my son, the Beauclerc had collected in his most royal park at Woodstock many wild beasts from foreign parts, such as lions and bears, leopards and lynxes, and porcupines, and of these he had a wonderful great liking, and here at Oxenford learned men were collecting every year in greater numbers, and in the company of these scholars his grace did take marvellous delight: in truth it were not easy to say whether he liked the beasts better than the bookish men, or the bookish men better than the beasts; but, to have the enjoyment of both, he oftentimes fixed his residence between them; and therefore was it, my son, that Henricus Primus raised this royal dwelling, and preferred it above his other houses." That very night, albeit I knew it not then, there came to King Stephen the very unfavourable news that the countess's half-brother, the great Earl of Gloucester, who for some months had been absent, had returned into England with a great body of Angevin and Norman troops, and had brought with him Henry Fitz-empress, Matilda's young son and heir, had stormed and taken the castle of Wareham, had been joined by many traitorous barons who had but lately given fresh oaths of fidelity to Stephen, and was marching through the land to relieve his sister in Oxenford Castle and fall upon her besiegers. Maugre the pains that were taken to conceal this intelligence, it got abroad, and was by some double-dealer conveyed to Matilda within the castle.

That night there fell a great fall of snow, and after the snow a sharp and most sudden frost did set in, which in less than twenty-four hours did cover the river Isis and the moat of the castle and the circumjacent marshes with thick ice. The beleaguers made themselves great fires, and seemed not to remit in their watchfulness. I, Felix, with Philip the lay-brother, and Sir Englehard de Cicomaco, did mount guard and stand wakeful all that bitter night, opposite to a postern gate of the castle. From time to time some great officer of King Stephen went from watch to watch, and all round the lines to see that the people did their duty and slept not. Joy came to my heart, and the deadening cold seemed to quit my body, when I saw Sir Alain de Bohun come to the place where I stood.

"Watch well to-night, oh Felix," said that brave and always courteous lord; "watch well to-night, and to-morrow will we have our enemy in our hands—and dear friends, too. Felix! I have had assurance that my son and thy little friend is within those walls! To-morrow Matilda must yield; so watch well that postern."

I kissed Sir Alain's hand, and vowed that not so much as a famished cat or rat should come forth of that gate, nor did there while my watch lasted.

On the next day, the vigil of St. Thomas, as soon as it was light, a white flag was raised in the camp in token of peace or truce, and our lord abbat, with a goodly train of ecclesiastics, bearing church banners and elevated crucifixes, came down to the very edge of the castle moat, and demanded speech of the countess; and Matilda ascended to the battlements, but rather to rebuke them than to hear them. I, Felix, being relieved from my night watch, did see that stern woman of many adventures and indomitable pride stand on the castle top in that cold, grey, leaden air. Thin was she, and gaunt and pale, like one that had suffered long fasting and sickness; but she had the same flashing eye and resolute look as at the time when she dictated her will to our house at Reading; and if her voice was more hollow, it was not less imperious and awe-commanding now than it was then. The lord abbat entreated her to give up the castle, promising, in the name of King Stephen, that no harm should be done to her or to any that were with her; that she should

be honorably escorted to the coast, and there embarked for Anjou; that lands and money should be given to her and her adherents with a liberal hand; and that the king would take all her partisans into his peace, if they would but be true to treaty, and give up a war which had already lasted so many years to the reproach of Christendom, and to the utter undoing of the people of England. The abbat told her that her famishing state was known, and that hope of escape there was none.

"And who told thee, oh meddling monk, that I ever thought of escape? Dost not know that the Earl of Gloucester is at hand, to do the thing which he did aforetime at Lincoln? We have meat and meal yet, and will abide the earl's coming. I will not throw open these gates, or quit these walls, until I see the false recreant Stephen in chains at my feet, praying again for that life which I ought to have rid him of long since."

As the proud woman said these words, I could see that many of our bystanders looked at one another with perplexity and alarm, and that divers even of the churchmen put on very thoughtful countenances, and did nothing and said nothing to aid our lord abbat, or to rebuke the countess, who in a great passion of wrath threatened to have him hanged for a felon under the archway of his own abbey.

Some there were that would have counselled an immediate assault upon the fortress; for albeit no breach had been made in those formidable walls, the moat was so frozen that it would bear any weight, and scaling ladders and other needful materials were not wanting. But the more cautious sort said that the famishing garrison were very numerous and very desperate; that it would be better to wait a day or two, and have the castle upon composition; that the Earl of Gloucester had yet sundry days of march to perform; and that if he came with ever so great a host, he would find it no easy work to break through our barricades and defences, and get into the town. Some of the churchmen, moreover, did say that no enterprise of war would prosper during the festivals of the church; and, certes, the major part of King Stephen's soldiers did seem fully determined to keep this the vigil, and to-morrow the festival of St. Thomas the Apostle, according to the rubric, whether the king would have it so or not. Hence there was a very visible relaxation of vigilance. Refreshed by a short sleep in the day, I did watch again that night with the beleaguers; but my post was not where it had been the night before, and in the morning, before I could be relieved, I learned that the countess had escaped through the postern which I had watched so well. Marvellous, truly, was the skill and fortune of the Beauclerc's daughter! She had escaped from Devizes by putting on the semblance and trappings of the dead, and now she had escaped from Oxenford like a sheeted ghost! A little after the midnight hour she had dressed herself all in white, and had thrown white sheets over Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, and three others of her knights; and she and these four sheeted warriors had stolen out of the castle by the postern gate, and had crossed the moat on the ice and traversed the ice-bound Isis, and creeping on their hands and knees over the deep white snow, they had escaped detection, and got safely through our lines and all our outposts. On foot, in the deep snow, Matilda with her attendant spectres travelled to Abingdon; but there they found friends and horses, for the news of the coming of the Earl of Gloucester had reached the place, and had been very fatal to men's loyalty unto Stephen. From Abingdon, without resting there, the countess rode through that cold night to Wallingford Castle, where Brian Fitzcount received her very joyfully. But these things came to my knowledge afterwards; and when it was first heard that the countess was gone, none could tell how she was gone, or whither she had betaken herself. The notice was not given until more than seven hours after her departure, when, as the day began to dawn, a starving man-at-arms cried out from the battlements that the garnison were ready to throw open the gates unto King Stephen, and so save themselves from death by hunger, as the queen had fled thence, and was no longer in any danger. At first the news was not credited by any of the king's people; but soon the governor of the castle sounded trumpets for a parley, and held out a flag of truce, and offered to deliver up the castle upon condition that his life and the lives of his people should be spared. King Stephen himself came rushing to the post opposite the castle gate to learn the truth, and settle the conditions of surrender; and with him came Sir Alain de Bohun, mortified yet rejoiced, a much perplexed yet a happy man; for though it should be found that the scourge of England had escaped, he had a confident hope that she could not have carried away his son with her.

King Stephen spoke aloud to the castellan, and said, "This is but a fabulous rumour! The countess of Anjou is where she hath been these last three months! Unsay what hath been said! Tell me that she is within those walls, and, starving as thou art, I will give thee more than the conditions thou askest—I will give thee wealth and honours! Only say that she hath not escaped."

"Earl of Moriton and Boulogne!" shouted the proud castellan, "if the empress queen were within these walls I would starve and die, but never open these gates unto thee! Let mine offer to surrender be a proof that she is gone hence. I swear, by the holy rood, that she hath been gone ever since midnight."

"Whither hath she gone?" cried Stephen.

"I know not, and would not tell thee if I did know; but 'tis likely she will soon tell thee where she is."

While the castellan was talking in this guise on the outer walls, many of our lords and knights, with their men-at-arms, got them to horse, and, dividing into different parties, went scouring over the country in all directions, some along the road that leads to Woodstock, some on the Abingdon road, some down the river towards Newnham, some towards Forest Hill, and some across the hills towards Islip and Weston-on-Green.

Many slips and falls had they on the frozen ice and slippery roads; yet was it all but a bootless chase. The party that went along the Abingdon road, and that came back even faster than they went, as Sir Brian Fitzcount had advanced a body of horse to the township of Abingdon, had met on their advance an aged shepherd who had been out in the night in search of some sheep that had been lost in the snow drifts; and this aged man had told them that about the midnight hour he had seen gliding along the road between Oxenford and Abingdon five ghosts or revenants all in white, which he took to be the uneasy spirits of some who had perished in our diurnal slaughters; and this was all that was learned by our too late pursuing companies.

In the first heat of his wrath and bitterness of his disappointment the king refused to admit the garnison to capitulation, and threatened to hang them all, together with many of his own watch; but our lord abbat moderated his wrath. Sir Alain de Bohun, eager for sight of his boy, and always averse to bloodshed, did recommend mercy and moderation; and so, about mid-day, terms were granted, and the castle was given up to Stephen. I was among the first that entered with our good Lord of Caversham. Sir Alain found many friends among those who had been kept as prisoners by the Countess; but for some time he could not find his son, or hear anything concerning him, save that the boy had been seen in the castle a few days ago. Fearful thoughts agitated the loving father, and made him turn ghastly pale. Had the Countess in her rough nocturnal flight carried the boy with her? No, there was a knight who opened the postern-gate for her, and who swore upon his cross that none had gone forth but the empress-queen, Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, and the three other knights. Had the desperate woman in her fury against one of the most constant of her enemies taken the life of the dear boy? None would confess to the atrocious deed, yet none seemed to know what had befallen Sir Alain's son. In truth they were all ravenous and stupified with their excess of hunger, and were only eager to get out into the town, and at the meat and drink which had been mercifully promised them; and for many a day few of them had taken any note of what was doing within the castle or in the lodging of Matilda. But the Lord of Caversham and the best of his own people, and I, Felix, and Philip, the lay-brother, did rush into the apartment of the Countess and ransack it well; and while we were in an inner room in the tower that looks upon Isis, we heard a feeble voice as of one lamenting, and pulling aside some hangings on the wall, we discovered a small low door under an arch, and thereupon Sir Alain, all of a tremble, cried out in a voice that went unto the hearts of all of us, "Who lieth within? Is it thou, mine only son?" and the faint voice said "My father," and said no more. The iron-bound door was locked, and the key was gone; but spite of its thickness and strength, we soon burst the door open with a mighty crash. I did enter that foul hole in the wall with Sir Alain, and did see and hear that which passed when he raised his boy from the dirty straw upon which he had fainted; but I have not the power to narrate that which I saw and heard. Nay, to speak more soothly, I did see but faintly, for the light that came into the cell through a narrow loophole was but scant, and my gushing tears did almost blind me. But we soon carried the boy out into wholesome air, and put wine to his lips; and he recovered and knew his father. And when he had eaten and gained strength, he told his sire, who had never before been seen so wrathful, that he had not tasted meat or drink for two whole days and nights. Verily it did seem that the Countess had destined him to die of starvation, and that she had herself secreted him in that hideous hole in the castle-wall, for none of her attendants would confess any knowledge of the thing. But Sir Alain would not give credit to these protestations of ignorance, saying that some of the Countess's people must have known what was done in her own apartment, and sorely did he beat with the flat of his sword an old foreign hag that had been the Countess's chamber-woman, and two Angevins that had been in constant attendance upon her; and he swore more oaths than had ever come from his lips, that were it not for the love of the king his master, and for the king's honour, and for his own religious respect for compacts and treaties and capitulations of war, he would hang them all three on the top of that accursed tower.

So soon as I saw that the hope of the house of Caversham was restored to some of his strength (and he gave me a proof thereof by saluting me and taking me by the hand as an old friend), I went forth to try if I could gain some intelligence of the little Alice, who was not born to live separated from Arthur, and likewise of my whilom friend and companion John-à-Blount from Maple-Durham, who had fled from our house at Reading with the novice Urswick, of unhappy memory. I soon learned from some retainers of Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe that the little maiden, before the coming of King Stephen to Oxenford, had been bestowed with her step-mother in the strong castle at Old Speen, which Sir Ingelric had rebuilt; but the fellows knew not, or pretended not to know, anything touching our fugitive novice John-à-Blount. Therefore did I put my soul and body in peril by going into the very midst of the Countess Matilda's black-eyed damsels; for I thought in the nature of things that he should be among those young Jezebels who had first led him astray. Albeit the merciful terms of capitulation were faithfully observed, and knights of good repute were stationed in the castle to see that no harm was done to those that had surrendered; the interior of the fortress was still a scene of unspeakable confusion and alarm. Fierce knights that had not prayed for many a day, and rough outlandish soldiers who knew not how to say a credo or an ave, were muttering orisons and telling their beads, or holding their crucifixes in their hands, crying ever and anon to the more truculent visaged of the king's people, "We have all rendered upon paction—We be all in the king's mercy and honour—Touch not our lives or limbs, or eyes, but give us to eat, or we perish!"

The women of the countess, whose eyes were much less bright and dangerous than when I last saw them in their pride and insolency at our abbey, lay all huddled and crouching together in a corner of the castle-yard, where divers clerks of Oxenford, with the marshal of King Stephen's camp, were making lists of the names and qualities of the prisoners. Many men, as well English

as foreign, were standing near these affrighted and more than half-famished women; and a few young knights and esquires seemed to be speaking words of comfort to divers of them; but among these men I could not see John-à-Blount, from Maple-Durham, nor any young man that resembled him; and when I asked of many, they all told me that they knew nothing of the said John: which was grievous unto my soul, for I had hoped to find him there, and to reclaim him, and thereby save him from the fate of the unhappy Urswick. As I was about to turn from that company of women, I was brought to a pause by a pair of eyes, swimming in tears, that did bind me to the spot, like one spell-bound. They were the large black eyes of that damsel in the short green kirtle, and of the incomparably small feet and ankles that had come salting and dancing up to me in the garden of our house at Reading; but alack, she danced not now, and seemed scarcely able to stand, and instead of the laughingest she had the saddest face; and she was all thin and haggard as the poorest of the wandering houseless beggars we had met on our march from Reading to Oxenford. I had the remnant of a manchet in the sleeve of my monastic gown, and though many eyes were upon me, and others might be as hungry as she was, I took forth the blessed piece of bread, and thrust it into her skinny hands, and then hurried away to Sir Alain de Bohun, who did forthwith order some meat and drink to be given to those poor outlandish starvelings.

On the day next after the surrender of the castle, the foreign women—praise and thanks to the Lord for that same!—were all sent away under a strong and reliable escort for the city of London, there to be kept by Stephen's good queen Maud until they should be ransomed or exchanged for other prisoners. And in the current of that same day we did hear but too surely what the escaped countess was a-doing. She had gone forth from Wallingford Castle with Brian Fitzcount and a great host of foreign mercenaries, and was marching to the westward to meet the Earl of Gloucester, who was not so near to Oxenford as had been reported, and she was again marking her evil path with blood and flames. King Stephen resolved to follow her and bring the great earl to battle; but the countess and her half-brother having met in Wiltshire, retreated rapidly to the west, where lay their great strength in partisans and castles, and they threw themselves into the castle of Bristowe, which was their strongest hold all through the war. The king would have turned back to lay siege to Wallingford Castle, in the absence of its terrible lord the merciless Brian Fitzcount; but a plot broke out in the vicinage of London, and sundry barons raised the banner of Matilda in Essex, thereby obliging Stephen to march with all speed to the eastward. So Wallingford Castle remained in the hands of the robbers, to be a curse to the country and a den of torture: but we, the monks of Reading, with little aid but what the saints sent us, and with no loss of life to our party, did prevail over another band of thieves and destroy their den, to the inestimable relief and comfort of that country side.

VIII.

The day before King Stephen marched from Oxenford to pursue the countess, our lord abbat, who grieved to see that his brother of Abingdon was influenced by the changes of the times and by the rumour of the great force which the Earl of Gloucester had brought with him, took his departure for his own abbey, and with us went Sir Alain de Bohun, who needs must restore his beloved son to his ladie and home ere he tried again the fortune of war or entered upon any new emprise. The lord of Caversham took with him a score of retainers, so that we were now sixty-two well-armed men. The young Lord Arthur sometimes rode before his father, and sometimes a manèged horse by himself, for the boy was now in his tenth year, and had been taught by times to do that which befits a knight. A proud and happy man I wis was Sir Alain as he looked upon his only son and thought of the great joy their return would give to the Ladie Alfgiva. Much also did I converse with the young Lord Arthur on the road, and he did tell me how much he had grieved when Sir Ingelric had carried away from him his little playmate who had travelled with him so many days in horse litters, and who had abided with him in so many castles that he could not tell the names of half of them. A shrewd brave boy was the young Lord Arthur, and for his age marvellously advanced in letters; and I, Felix, had at times given him instruction before that Sir Ingelric did steal him away from his home so feloniously. Again, though through no fear, since our party was so strong and warlike, we shunned the townships and castles that lay near our road. Also did we choose another ford whereby to cross the river Ock without passing near the walls of that uncivil castellum that lay in the swamps; for we were all anxious to be home and had no tools for trying a siege; nay, had we not among us so much as a single scaling ladder. Yet when we came to our poor house at Pangbourne we heard that which did put us in heart to undertake the storming of a castle. It was dark night when we arrived there, and the day had been a day of heavy snow with rain, and I was sitting with a few others by the kitchen fire in the chimney nook drying myself, when a little boy of the village came in and tugged me by the sleeve, and said that there was one without who would speak with me. Such message liked me not, nor did the time of night, for I thought of Urswick and his hell-horse; nevertheless I soon followed the boy to the house porch, and thereby I found a lonely man, sitting on a cold wet stone, with his face muffled, and his body bent to the earth like one sore afflicted. Started I not back with the thought that the form that I saw was but the spectrum of Urswick! It spake not, nor did it move. I turned me round to grasp my conductor by the arm, but the boy was gone; and I stood alone with that lone and dolorous figure which I could but faintly see, for there was no moon, and the stars were overcast with black clouds, and verily my fears or my exceeding great awe did not aid my eyesight. But at last the figure rose from the cold stone and said, "Is it thou, oh Felix? Is it thou, my once friend?"

The voice was that of John-à-Blount from Maple-Durham; and before I could say "It is even I," that erring novice clasped me by the hand and peered into my face, and turned me towards the faint uncertain light, and then fell upon my neck, and wept aloud. I led him farther from the house-door, and when he grew calmer I communed with him where none might overhear his words; but I took not this step until he vowed to me that his soul was penitent, and that he had come unto Pangbourne only to do a good deed. He confessed unto me that the love of woman had been his undoing, that one of the countess's foreign damsels had practised upon him and bewitched him, and that he had done many deadly sins on her account in battles and nightly surprisals, and the burning and storming of towns. But after a season the young cockatrice had scorned his love, and had told him that she must mate with a great lord, and not with a runagate shaveling, who had neither house nor lands: and at her own prayer her mistress, the Countess Matilda, had sent poor John-à-Blount away to serve with Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, and Sir Ingelric had for a long time left him in his castle with a gang of robbers and cut-throats.

"Oh, John-à-Blount!" said I, "these foreign women be worse than painted sepulchres. I doubt not that Urswick was entreated in like manner by his leman."

"He was, and worse," quoth John; "and it did drive him into a boiling madness, and into the doing of the most savage deeds."

"Urswick had ever a wild heart and volage thoughts; Urswick perished in his guilt," said I: "but thou art more fortunate in that thou livest to repent."

"I know his fate," said John, "and may the saints now spare us the sight of him on his infernal steed! By all the saints that preside over our house at Reading, I was penitent before; but the tale of these nightly visitings of my comrade Urswick did complete my guerdon, and make me resolve to do that which I have now come hither to propose."

"What good and expiatory deed is that?"

"The delivering up of Sir Ingelric's detestable castle," replied John-à-Blount.

"That were a good deed if thou couldst do it."

"I can," said John, "if a few will march thitherward with me; for there be those within that will help me, captives that I can release from their chains, and unwilling vassals of Sir Ingelric. Dost comprehend me, Felix?"

I then asked whether the little Alice were safe within the castle, and whether Sir Ingelric's second wife were a mate worthy of such a husband, for fame reported her to be so, and it was hard to think well of one who had married the slayer of the husband of her youth. John gave me assurance that Alice was there, and harshly used by her step-mother, and that the said dame was well nigh as merciless and rapacious as her present lord, keeping prisoners in the donjon and putting them to the torture for their money.

"But we lose time," said John; "the deed in hand must be done to-night, or some within the hellish cavern will be racked to-morrow morning. So lead me to the prior—to the new lord abbat I would say—that I may propound my plan unto him or unto Sir Alain de Bohun. When the deed shall be done they will throw me into the abbey prison; but I am past caring for that, and have not long to live."

I told him that our new abbat, the Lord Reginald, was the most indulgent of men, and Sir Alain the most generous, but he would not be comforted. While walking back to the porch of the Pangbourne house I did inquire of him how he so well knew about our coming and our party; and to this he made answer that Sir Ingelric's castellan, who had gotten by his stealthy movements and savage assaults the name of the Wolf, did constantly keep in his pay some wretched serfs who acted as scouts and spies, and oftentimes lured heedless men to their destruction. "Ye were watched," said John, "at your going unto Oxenford, and would have been attacked if you had not been so well provided; and ye have been tracked and watched on the return, and I, upon the report of those espials, and upon a feigned show of great zeal, have been sent hither by Sir Ingelric's fit mate to see whether an attack might not be made during the darkness of the night upon my lord abbat's horses and baggage."

"May the foul fiend reward that same unwomanly ladie for the impious intention," said I.

"He will," quoth John, "if the good lords will but take counsel of so lowly and miserable a man as I am."

When we came near unto the porch, the heart of my sad companion failed him, and he said that he could not face the lord abbat so suddenly, and that it were better I went in to prepare the way for him. I had no suspicion of his penitence or his present good faith, but my short experience in war had made me wary, and I called to some men-at-arms that were tending their horses in the stable, and bade them look to the stranger. My lord abbat and Sir Alain were already at their supper, and savoury was the smell of the fried fish of Thamesis and the roasted meats that were spread on the table before them; but before he heard half of that which I had to say, the abbat thrust aside his platter and gave thanks to Heaven as for the return of a prodigal son, and thanked the patron saints of our abbey for so good a prospect of destroying a nest of robbers; and Sir Alain gave thanks for the same, and for so fair a hope of recovering the gentle little Alice; and the young Lord Arthur, who was eating at a side table placed near the fire, started to his feet and said that he would go with sword and pike to break open the wicked castle and recover his

playmate; and they all three bade me hasten to the porch and bring in John-à-Blount. Many a hardened sinner would have been brought to repentance if he could but have seen in how kindly a manner the lord abbat received the penitent stray sheep of his flock. He raised John from the earth, he told him that his sins would be forgiven him, he bade him be of good cheer, and to put some little present cheer into the haggard trembling young man he gave him a cup of wine in his own silver cup. Although he had been straitened by no siege and had undergone no compulsory fast, the face of that black-eyed damsel that wore a green kirtle was not more changed than that of John-à-Blount: and I almost shuddered as I looked upon it in the bright light of that room. The abbat and Sir Alain listened with eager attention to the unhappy youth; and when they had heard him out his plan was speedily agreed. He would hasten back to the foul den he had left, and tell Sir Ingelric's people that the weary travellers were buried in sleep, and that there was the fittest opportunity in the world for seizing their cattle and baggage, and bringing off a rich booty. The entire garrison of the castle was barely two-score men. One half of these would sally to make the booty, and these might all be seized on their march by an ambuscade of my lord abbat's followers. Of those that would remain within the castle sundry were ready to revolt, and John-à-Blount would release the many prisoners, and slay the castellan, that ravenous wolf, in the den.

"My son," said the abbat, as John was taking his hasty departure, "do what thou wilt with the Wolf, but spare Sir Ingelric's wife."

"And," said Sir Alain, "as thou valuest thine own life, or the future health of thy repentant soul, have a care of the little Alice in the affray."

John laid his right hand upon his breast, and bowed lowly. Following him almost to the door of the room our kind-hearted lord abbat said, "Still there is one thought that doth spoil my present hope and joy: thou mayest fail in thine enterprise, and if thou art but suspected thou wilt be murdered by that bloody Wolf. Bethink thee, my son! Peradventure it may be better that thou stayest in safety where thou art, and that we leave this vile castellum to be reduced by regular siege at some future day."

"My lord and father," said John, dropping on his knee, and kissing the abbat's hand, "should I die in the attempt to perform a good deed, thou wilt have prayers and masses said for me. But I shall not die to-night, and I see no chance of miscarriage. I could wish that for me the danger were greater, that it might the better stand as an atonement for my many transgressions."

"Go then, my son, and God speed thee! And then will we ourselves shrieve thee, and absolve thee after some due penitence, and make thee sound in conscience, and heart-whole and happy again."

John-à-Blount kissed the abbat's hand once more, and prayed the saints to bless him: but as he rushed out at the door we saw big tears in his eyes, and heard him mutter that he should never be happy again in this world.

"That poor boy," quoth Sir Alain, "hath not yet forgotten the young syren that led him astray."

"'Tis witchcraft and sortilege, *maleficium et sortilegium*," said the abbat. "But by the help of our prayers and relics we will disenchant him."

Sir Alain shook his head, but said no word.

Forty men of us put on harness and followed in the track of John-à-Blount when he had been gone some short time. Sir Alain would have willed the lord abbat to tarry in the house with Arthur, but the abbat would on no account be left out of the adventure, saying, that his presence and exhortations might spare unnecessary bloodshed; yet while he was saying the words he was feeling the point of his lance, and he took with him his heavy battle mace. We all journeyed on foot, for war horses would be but an incumbrance at Sir Ingelric's castle, and by neighing or making other noise they might spoil our ambuscade on the road. That road was a very rough one, and the night continued rather dark; hence divers of us stumbled, and fell more than once: nevertheless we kept up a good pace, and in little more than an hour came to a wooded hollow, about midway between Pangbourne and Speen, through which the robbers must pass on the way from their castle to our manor-house. The trees were all leafless and bare; but the trunks of the ancient oaks were thick, and so every man of us got him behind an oak, twenty on this side the narrow road and twenty on that, and there we all stood concealed from view, and silent as grave stones. I, Felix, had a bad catarrh, yet did I neither cough nor sneeze all the while I was there, for I had prayed unto the saint that hath controul over coughs and colds. For a space that seemed to us very long we heard no sound, and in that wooded hollow and night-darkness we could see but a very little way. I began to think that the good strategem had miscarried, and to moan inwardly for John-à-Blount as a murdered man. But at last we heard, not voices, for the ungodly Philistines were as silent as we, but the heavy tread of footsteps on the broad heath, just above the hollow; and these sounds rapidly came nearer; and then, by peeping round the bole of my covering tree, I did faintly discern a score or more of dark figures descending in loose and careless array into the hollow. As we had been bidden, we all stood stock still until the robbers were at the bottom of the hollow, and between us; but so soon as they were there as in a trap, Sir Alain shouted "Now for the onslaught in the name of King Stephen!" and our abbat shouted "Down, traitors, down!" and the valorous Lord of Caversham and our not less valorous lord abbat, and every man of us, from this side of the pathway and from that, sprung from behind the trees and hemmed in the evil-doers; and in less time than I can say it the heavy mace of our lord abbat laid two of the robbers on the earth with bleeding pates, and Sir Alain's lance went through the

body of one that seemed the leader, and pinned him to the very oak behind which I had been standing. The rest, after making vain effort to retreat the way they had come, laid down their arms and cried piteously for quarter and for that mercy which they had never shown to other men. There were a score of them besides the three that had gotten their death-warrants. We bound the score with the cords and thongs we had brought with us, and putting them in motion with the sharp heads of our lances, we proceeded rapidly to the foul donjon at Speen, our lord abbat saying that thus far was well, and some of our captives already beginning to say to Sir Alain that they would change banners and fight for King Stephen if his lordship would spare their lives and accept their services. The dark wintry clouds rolled away, and the stars shone out brightly as if in approbation of our enterprise, and in no long while we did see that equable little river the Lambourne, which neither overflows in winter nor shrinks in summer, but is at all seasons the same (its pike be pale in colour, and in taste not to compare with those of Ock), gliding to join our own swift, sweet Kennet at the township of Shaw; and we saw still clearer the swift Kennet gliding before us, on its way from Speen to our abbey walls at Reading and the broad Thamesis. And then, as we hurried on our way, and as the stars shone out with still more brightness, we discovered broken columns and fragments of walls, standing up from the ground like spectres on a heath; and anon we heard the owls hooting to one another among these ancient ruins. And ancient in sooth they were, for the Romans in the days of the Cæsars had built them a city at Spinæ which men do now call Speen, and these dark and fantastically shaped fragments and ruins were all that remained of it; for the men of Newbury, who have ever had a great envy to other townships and a great liking for the property of other men, had levelled most of the Roman walls and had carried away the stones and bricks thereof to enlarge their own town; and people of other townships had helped themselves at Spinæ as though it had been a common quarry. Such fate befalls towns in decay; but such will never befall our glorious abbey at Reading, for the saints and angels have custody thereof, even as we have meetly expressed, in large letters graven upon the left door of our gate-house under the abbey arms, ANGELI TUI CUSTODIANT MUROS EIUS. But I wis it was not on this night that I did think of the renowned Romans, or make these sanctifying reflections. True, I walked in the paths of pensive thought; but it was only to think of John-à-Blount and of the emprise we had in hand. And when we reached the lonely mill on the Kennet, a few bow-shots below Sir Ingelric's castle at Speen, we hid ourselves behind the mill and blew three blasts upon a trumpet, for this was the only signal which John-à-Blount had asked for. "And now," said our lord abbat, telling his beads, "may the saints befriend the brave boy from Maple-Durham. The token of his success will be three corresponding blasts. Let us be motionless and silent until we hear them." For a space the sound of our own brazen instrument floated along the waters, and was given back in echoes by the sleeping hills; and then for a longer space, during which an expeditious mass-priest might have said a camp-mass, nought was heard but the splash and ripple of the ever sweet and clear Kennet, and the faint moaning of some trees whose bare branches were shaken by the fresh gale which had blown away the clouds, and brought forth the lustrous and approving stars. But then, I wis, there came from the evil den the sounds of a mighty crash and clangour of arms that made us all start, and then sounds of woe and lamentation, shrieks and yells like those of the damned, which made us all shudder and cross ourselves. And, anon, upon these hellish sounds came three blasts from a trumpet, loud and shrill; and at the hearing thereof our lord abbat clasped his hands and said joyously, "The bold youth is safe, the deed is done; so now to the castle, which is ours!"

And we all ran from behind the mill to the foul den, driving our captives with us at the spear point as before. Short was the distance, and great our speed; yet before we reached the castle moat the draw-bridge was down, the gate was open, and under the archway, in the midst of a company of men who had still chains and fetters on their legs, but who held flaming torches in their hands, stood John-à-Blount with the gashful, blood-dripping head of the Wolf fixed on his lance. John had released the army of prisoners at the opportune moment, and being joined by some of Sir Ingelric's people, he had made himself master of the castle without need of any aid from us: but the Wolf and some of his evil band who could expect no quarter had made a desperate resistance, and had been slain to a man. The warder who had raised the portcullis and the few others who had aided in the emprise were now shouting for King Stephen, and Sir Alain de Bohun and the lord abbat of Reading, and the terrified captives we had with us, joined in these cries with such voice as their fears and astonishment allowed them to raise. As we all marched in at the gate the abbat said, "John, my son, I fear thou hast been somewhat too hasty and violent! I would have put some questions to that wild beast before sending him hence; yet is the Wolf better dead than alive! But, my son, I trust thou hast not allowed harm to be done unto the dark ladie of this most dark and bloody lair?"

"The evil woman is safe in her bower; I did lock her up before I unlocked the prisoners whose hearts were steeled against her," said John.

"And where," asked Sir Alain, "is the gentle flower that was not made to bloom in this horrent place?"

"There," quoth John, pointing to one of the female captives who came running across the quadrangle of the castle with the little Alice in her arms. "She is there, the true and worthy child of her gentle and martyred mother, and may she long live to make compensation to the world for the many cruelties and crimes of her unnatural father;" and as he spake John threw far from him into a dark corner the bleeding head of the Wolf, lest Alice should be scared by the sight thereof.

The dear child was presently in the arms of the good Lord of Caversham; and though she had not seen his face for eighteen long months, and though she had not quite recovered from her great

terror on being startled from her sleep by the clashing of arms and those shrieks and yells, she soon knew Sir Alain, and clung round his neck with many a fond kiss, and with many a fond inquiry after her own dear mother the Ladie Alfgiva and her companion and champion Arthur, whom she had left in sad case at Oxenford.

The first thing we did within the castle was to secure our prisoners with the chains which Sir Ingelric's unhappy captives had been wearing, and to hurl them into that horrible and feculent prison where so many good and peaceful men had long been rotting. Next we gave food to some of the released captives who had been so tortured by fast that their bones were cutting through their skin. And then we did all assemble in the great hall with a great glare of torches and tapers, and the lord abbat and Sir Alain being seated on the dais at the head of the hall in the massy chairs in which Sir Ingelric and his dame had been wont to sit in the days of their pride and evil power, that dark ladie was summoned from her uneasy bower to that august presence. A dark dame was she, and fierce as an untamed she-wolf as she came into the hall, screaming that the empress-queen and her husband Sir Ingelric would know how to avenge the traitorous deeds of this night, and the foul surprisal of a loyal castle. These her words, and others that were more vituperative, chafed our good lord abbat, and with a solemn and severe countenance he said unto her, "Peace, woman! peace! these be not words to be heard by the company here assembled, who be all true men and faithful lieges to King Stephen. Most fit mate for a bloodthirsty and ungodly lord who hath changed his party as men change their coats, who hath never had in view ought else than his own interest, and who for these eighteen months last past hath stopped at no crime whereby he might enrich himself; dost call it loyalty to the queen or countess to turn thy castle into a den of robbers and torturers, to waste the country round about it until it looks like unto a Golgotha,—to seize, rob, imprison, and torment all manner of men, as well the secret partisans of Matilda as the open partisans of King Stephen, as well the poor and lowly as the rich and great, and as well the quiet franklins and toiling serfs, who be of no party and who only seek to live in peace, as the knights and trained men of war that go forth to battle? Call ye this loyalty and faithfulness to a party? Honourable men, alas! may have honestly differed in these unhappy disputes, but thy husband hath been but a robber, and it is for that there be so many like him in the land that these wars have lasted so long. Dost call the seizing of priests and monks upon the highway loyalty? Dost call it Christian duty and reverence to mother church to kidnap the servants of the altar and put them to the rack as thy people have done? Oh, woman, the holy water that baptised thee was thrown away! But thou shalt away hence to some sure keeping in a lonely cell, where thou mayest have time for repentance and prayer. We did only send for thee that we might remind thee of thy many sins, and get from thee the keys of thy ill-acquired treasures, and some list or knowledge of those who have been robbed by thee, to the end that we may make restitution."

No ways humbled or abashed, the dark ladie of the castle called my lord abbat robber and housebreaker, and said that she had only levied tolls and baronial droits; that Sir Ingelric had taken away most of the money to give it to the misused and distressed queen; and that it was but a small matter that which remained in the house. And then, with great pride and insolency, she threw down upon the table one heavy key, saying that that was the key to the only treasure.

"The foul dame lies in her throat," cried one of her own people, "she hath treasure in other places; she hath gold, and silver, and jewels, aye, and church-plate stolen from the very altar, hid in most secret hiding-places; and, my lords, ye will not get to the full knowledge thereof unless ye do put her in her own crucet-house!"

Albeit, they were fully resolved to come at this great wealth, Sir Alain de Bohun shuddered at the mention of that terrible engine of torture, and the lord abbat said that such things were accursed by the church, and that verily he would never crucet a woman.

"Then will ye never get at the silver and gold!" said the man who had before spoken.

But at this juncture the repentant old warder of the castle stood up, and said that his daughter, who had been handmaiden to Sir Ingelric's wife, knew the whole secret, having watched her mistress with feminine curiosity, and could so point out every recess and hiding-place; and at the hearing of these words the dark woman uttered a shriek, and fell to the ground as if her heart had been cleft in twain; so fearfully had she and her lord sold themselves to Lucifer, and made a god of money. The sight of blood and of the foe standing triumphant on her own hearth had not made her quail, nor had the mention of the crucet-house caused her to tremble; but the thought of losing all her accursed spoil had gone through her like a knife. We could not leave her where she was, lest some of her lately released captives should lay violent hands upon her; so we carried her to a turret-chamber, and having bound her so that she should not lay violent hands upon herself in a maniacal mood, and having placed one of her women to watch by her, we made fast that door and went in search of the treasure, being guided by the warden and his daughter. It was, in truth, but a small matter that which we found under the lock to which the dark ladie had given us the key; but, in the hiding-places, within the thick walls, and under the stone floors of the dark ladie's bower (places so invisible and recondite that of ourselves we never could have found them), were piled silver and gold, and wrought-plate and jewels, that seemed to me enough to pay a king's ransom, and that made mine eyes twinkle as I looked upon them by that light from many torches. When he had gathered it all together in a mighty great heap, in the middle of the room, our abbat made fast that door also, and hung a crucifix to the door-post, and threatened with excommunication all such as should approach the door until ordered by him so to do. "Souls have been lost," said he, "in the getting together of that heap, and his soul will assuredly perish that touches it for his own use. It is all the property of the church, or the property of the poor, or

the heavy ransom of tortured victims. The malison of heaven will go along with every part of it that is not restored to its rightful owners. So now, my children all, follow me down these flinty stairs to refresh yourselves with meat and drink; for the day is dawning in the east, and we shall have hard work at daylight. This infamous donjon must down: not a stone must be left upon another."

"I did help to build it," said Sir Alain, "but will now be more happy in destroying it! Not a nook must be left to be repaired of my false-hearted ravenous friend, or of any other wolf of his choosing."

"Humanity will bless the destruction! Tears of joy will be shed for leagues round about," said one of the released captives; "and when all dens of the like sort be a-level with the earth, England will be England again."

It was a marvellous and a provoking thing to see how well the foul robbers had been victualled and provided; gaunt hunger ranged all round them, and filled the fertile but untilled valleys with its cries and screams; but their buttery was crammed with the best of meat, their stalls were filled with beeves and sheep, their cellars were full of ale, mead, and wine, their granaries with corn, their stables with the best of horses. Rarely have I seen so sumptuous a feast as that to which we did sit down in the castle hall, with our sharp winter-morning appetites.

By the time this goodly collation was finished it was broad daylight. "So now," said the lord abbat, "will we think of carrying out these goods and chattels, and then of destroying tougher crusts than those of venison-pasties. Bring me forth the rascaille-people from the prison-house, that they may lend us their shoulders and aid us in destroying their own foul nest."

Being boyishly and unwisely curious to see with mine own eyes the abominable pit of which I had heard so much, I went with those that repaired to the house of captivity and torture, and one who had been released over-night did follow me thither to explain its horrible mysteries, as one who had full experience of them all. Misericordia Dei, into what a bolge of hell did my staggering feet carry me! And what an atmosphere was that which made my head turn giddy and my stomach sick! Deep in the bowels of the earth, within the foundations of the keep of the castellum, was a great chamber paved with the sharpest flints, and, dimly lighted from above by a few chinks, so narrow that the bats could scarce have crept through them. The noisome air, never fanned by the sweet breath of heaven, was made more foul and poisonous by accumulated filth and stagnant pools of blood, and a fetid smell of smoke. The torches we brought in to give us light to discover all the mysteries of the place burned with a sickly and uncertain flame.

"Can man live here?" said I.

"I lay dying here the full length of nine moons," said my guide.

"And what is this?" said I, looking into a short narrow chest not much unlike the coffin of a child, but half-filled within with sharp stones and spikes of iron.

"Curses on it, that is the crucet-house," replied the man, "and therein they did thrust the body of a full-grown man, breaking his limbs and causing him exquisite torture. That was one of their processes for gratifying their cruelty or for extorting money. And this," continued the man, kicking a monstrous great beam which seemed loaded with iron, and to be heavy enough to bear down and crush two or three of the strongest men, "this is one of their sachtenges, which they would lay upon one poor man, and these iron collars with the sharp steel spikes are what they put round men's throats and necks, so that they could in no direction sit, or lie down, or sleep, for these collars be fastened by these strong iron chains to the stone walls. In my time I have seen two men and a woman perish with these hell-collars about their necks."

"And what be these sharp knotted strings?" said I, growing more and more faint and sick.

"These strings," replied the man, "they twisted round the head until the pain went to the brain. And see! these be the thumb-screws. And see above-head that pulley and foul rope! At times they pulled us up by the thumbs, and hung heavy coats of mail to our feet; at other times they hanged us up by the feet and smoked us with foul smoke until our blood and brain...."

"By our Ladie of Mercy, say no more—show me no more;" and so saying, I rushed out of the infernal place with a cold sweat upon my brow and my limbs all quivering.

"I am told," said the old captive, who followed me, "that there be still worse prison-houses than this, and that there be many scores of them in the land."

"May they all down!" said I; "and may men in after days not believe that they ever stood! But, franklin, I do pray thee say no more, for I feel those collars on mine own neck, and the anguish at the brain!" And, in truth, I was in so bad case that I could do nothing until Philip the lay-brother did bathe my brow with some cold Kennet-water, and make me drink a cup of wine.

The evil castle was soon cleared of whatsoever it contained (not even excepting a poor maimed Jew that had been so misused in the crucet-house that he could neither walk nor crawl), and so soon as everything was taken up we began to demolish the abominable walls. Many poor men who lived in that neighbourhood came to our assistance, and being first refreshed by meat and drink, they laboured with astonishing vigour, giving joyous shouts whenever a great piece of the building was brought down. By commandment of our lord abbat the instruments of torture were all heaped together in that foul cell under the keep, and a great supply of wood, brush-wood, and

straw being placed therein, fire was set to the whole, and so mighty a combustion was made that the stones cracked, and the flints seemed to melt, and every beam or other piece of timber taking fire, the greater part of the tower fell in with a terrific noise, and a most hellish smoke. While the castle was burning it was terrible to see how the impenitent dark ladie did gnash her teeth and stamp her feet, as likewise to hear how she did curse Sir Alain de Bohun and our good abbat, and all of us that were there present. Surely in that horrid frenzy she would have died the death of Judas Iscariot if we had not bound her hands, and kept a strong guard over her. When the smoke cleared away, and we saw that the keep was nearly all down, our lord abbat distributed the victual and sheep and cattle among the famishing men who had come to help us, and who engaged not to leave the place until the moat should be filled up, and the walls all made level; and then we departed with our prisoners and all the treasure to Pangbourne, rejoicing as we went. Only no joy could be gotten into the sad heart of John-à-Blount; the commendations of that great man of war, the Lord of Caversham, did not cheer him, nor was he made the happier by our good abbat's telling him that he would provide well for him in some other manner of life than the monastic, for which he never could have had the due vocation. John thanked the lord abbat, but there was no joy in his gratitude. As I walked by his side I did try to comfort him by telling him that he had broken none of the greater vows of our order, as he was happily only in his noviciate; but he only shook his head at this my remark, and said, "Felix, it is not so much a wounded conscience and remorse, as something else that is leading me to the grave!" And then I saw that he was thinking of that foreign damsel that had led him into sin, and had then spurned his love, and I did thrice cross myself and fall to telling my beads, for verily phantasms of that other black-eyed maiden in the green kirtle came flashing through mine own weak brain, aye, lively effigies of her, both as I saw her first in her pride and beauty in our abbey garden, and as I saw her last, famine-wasted and crushed with fear in the castle-yard at Oxenford. But the saints gave me strength to expel the visions, and I never saw those living perilous eyes again.

To me the most tender and beautiful thing in all this our great adventure and emprise was the meeting of little Arthur and Alice. Our good abbat was certainly of my mind, for he almost danced with joy at the sight thereof, and kept long repeating in his most joyous tones, "These children were made the one for the other! It is not man that can separate them, or keep them long asunder! My predecessor abbat Edward said the words, and the gift of prophecy was in him before he died."

The day being far advanced before we got back from the evil castle, we tarried that night at our poor-house at Pangbourne, keeping good watch; for albeit we knew that our great enemies were afar off, yet were we and our poor serfs but as lambs among most ravenous wolves, bears, and lions—*in medio luporum rapicissimorum, ursorum, et leonum*. A trusty messenger had been sent to Reading Abbey and the castle of Caversham the night before, and now we despatched another to bid the stay-at-home monks prepare a Te Deum, and a feast for us on the morrow.

IX.

By times in the morning, the treasure, which filled six coffers of the largest, was put into boats to be floated down Thamesis unto our abbey; and some of us going by water and some by land, we all proceeded thitherward, amidst the rejoicings and blessings of all the people. Right glad were they all for the destruction of Sir Ingelric's stronghold! Had it been the fitting season they would have carried palm-branches before us, as was used at that blessed entrance into Jerusalem; but it was dead winter, and the morning, though bright and clear, was nipping cold. The first time it was I did see our hardy lord abbat muffle his chin, in a skin or fur brought from foreign parts. A glorious reception, I ween, was that which awaited us! Our brotherhood, to the number of one hundred and fifty, formed in goodly order of procession with the banners of our church displayed, and with the prior at their head bearing our richest rood, met us at the edge of the Falbury, all singing—"Beati qui veniant,"—"Blessed are those that come in the name of the Lord; blessed are those that come from the doing of good." And our good vassals of the township, and the franklins of Reading and the vicinage, were all there in their holiday clothes, and our near-dwelling serfs in their cleanest sheep-skin jackets, shouting and throwing up their caps; our abbey bells ringing out lustily and merrily the while. Needs not to say that we sang our best in the choir at that Te Deum, or that the feast which was ready by the hour of noon was sumptuous and mirthful. Nor was the joy less that evening in the castle at Caversham, whither I and some few others went with Sir Alain and the abbat; for the lord of Caversham being ever of a pleasant humour and oftentimes jocose, did say that forasmuch as I, Felix the novice, and Philip the merry lay-brother, did first carry Alice by night in the little basket unto the castle, to the scandal of some and to the amazement of all, so ought we now to carry back and present to the ladie Alfgiva the restored damsel; and hereat the young Lord Arthur had clapped his hands, and said so it ought to be.

And from this happy evening the bountiful ladie of Caversham grew well and strong, and the children grew up together in all love and loveliness. Somewhat squalid were they both when they were first brought home, but in a brief space of time they were plump and ruddy with health. The little maiden was then in her sixth year; the little lord, as hath been said, only in his tenth. Truly it is wondrous to think how soon they grew up into womanhood and manhood! And I the while was passing from blooming manhood to sober age; yet did I not grieve with Horatius—*Eheu! Fugaces*.

When at our leisure we did examine the great treasure brought from the evil castellum at Speen, we found much money that bore the impress of the mint of our house, and divers pieces of plate which had been stolen by the countess's people out of our church. These things, as of right, we did keep; but the rest of the plate we restored to the lawful owners thereof when we could discover them, which, sooth to say, did not happen on every occasion. Of the money which was not thought to be our own we did make two portions, and gave one to the poor and sent the other to King Stephen, who ever needed more money than he could get. But let men do ever so right and be ever so just and holy, they will still be exposed to evil constructions, and the sharp malice of evil tongues; and therefore no marvel was it that many did say we made a great profit unto ourselves out of the sacking of Sir Ingelric's castle.

And now, touching Sir Ingelric's dark wife; she was shut up for a short season in Reading Castle, and was then carried away to the eastern parts, and was there confined in a solitary and very strong house of religion that stood on the sea-shore. Of the other prisoners, some, being foreigners, were shipped and sent beyond sea, and the rest of them, being native, were sent unto King Stephen's army.

By the time we had returned unto our abbey, from Oxenford, it was hard upon the feast of the Epiphany, of the year of grace eleven hundred and forty-three. At the first coming of spring the king, who had been to London and the eastern parts to collect a great force, marched through Reading and tarried a few hours at our house, without doing any notable damage thereunto, excepting always that he did *borrow* from us all the coined money in our mint, which he did intend to repay so soon as the country should be settled. But it grieved us much to learn that he, too, had hired and brought into England great tumultuary companies of Flemings and Bourguignons and other half-baptized, unholy, ungodly men, who had no bowels of compassion for the people of England, no respect for our holy places, but an insatiate appetite for plunder. And these black bands, on marching away to the westward, brake open divers nunneries and burned sundry towns and churches, maugre all that the legate bishop of Winchester, who was with his brother the king, could say or do to prevent them. This sacrilege brought down vengeance and discomfiture upon the king's cause, and did drive away from his banner for that time our good Lord of Caversham. Matilda and her princely boy Henry remained in Bristowe Castle, or about that fair western country by the shores of the broad Severn, or on the banks of the Avon; but some of her partisans had made themselves formidable at Sarum; and to check the incursions of these the king turned the nunnery at Wilton into a castle, driving out the chaste sisterhood and girding their once quiet abode with bulwarks and battlements. But while he was upon this ill-judged work the great Robert, Earl of Gloucester, on the first of the kalends of July, fell suddenly upon his encamped army, and by surprise and superiority of force did gain a great victory over King Stephen. The king with his brother the bishop fled with shame, and the earl's men took the king's people and his plate and money-chest, and other things. Among the men of name that were taken at Wilton was William Martell, the great favourite and sewer to the king, who was sent to Wallingford Castle, that terrible stronghold of Brian Fitzcount, which few men could mention without turning pale. Thus sundry more years passed with variable successes, and every year heaped on each side fresh calamities, to the great ruin of the whole land. And still both parties brought over their hungry bands of adventurers, and still many of our great men, caring neither for one party nor for the other, continued their castle-building and their plundering for their own account, and still the poor and despairing people of England said that Christ and his saints were asleep. Villages and hamlets were fast disappearing, and that our towns were not *all* sacked and burned in these nineteen years of war, and that the substance of every man was not taken from him, was owing to the prayers of the church, and to the leagues and confederations which the franklins and free burghers did make among themselves, binding themselves by a solemn covenant each to assist the others. At first those who were men of war did laugh at these leagues, but after they had sustained many a check and defeat they were taught to respect the valour of our free men. I have known the weaver quit his shuttle and go forth to battle with sword and spear, and bring back captive from the field a knight and great lord; and when numerous deeds of the like sort had been done by the honest folk who took up arms only for the defence of their own houses and properties and lives, the great lords and powerful men did either avoid these townships, or treat them with more gentleness and justice.

It was in this year, at the fall of the leaf, that John-à-Blount died at Maple-Durham, and was buried there. After that our indulgent abbat had confessed him and shrieved him (upon penances duly performed by the said John), and had quitted and fully released him from the cucullus, the poor youth again put on the steel cap, and went to Caversham to serve as one of the garnison of that good house. Good were the lord and the happy little lordling unto John, and I ween the Ladie Alfgiva had a great care taken of him when she saw how sad he was, and how fast wasting. But neither cook nor leach, neither generous wine nor comfortable words, could restore strength, or infuse hope, or induce a composure and tranquillity of mind, or keep poor John any long season among us. His heart seemed broken within him; and there was a flush on his wasted cheek, and then a terrible coughing. So at last my whilome companion being able to do nothing, quitted Caversham and went to Maple-Durham, that he might die there among some of his kindred, and be buried under the sward by the wattled hillock which marked the grave of his father. That young Angevin Herodias was as much John's murtheress as she could have been if she had put poison in his meat, or a dagger into his heart. May his soul find peace, and her great sin forgiveness! We did most of us weep as well as pray for poor John-à-Blount.

In the year next after the battle at Wilton, King Stephen gained a great victory in the meadows which lie near to the abbey of Saint Albans, and our Lord Abbat Reginald did plant a goodly

vineyard on the slopes by the side of our house at Reading, and did make an orchard a little beyond Kennet. Many other battles were there in this same year of woe; and that great partisan of the countess, Robert Marmion, was slain in a fierce fight at Coventry; and Geoffrey Mandeville, Earl of Essex, was slain at Burwell; and Ernulphus, Earl Mandeville's son, was taken after his father's death and banished the land. There seemed no end to these slayings and banishings and imprisonings in foul prisons. Verily those who made the mischief did not escape from its effects! The cup of woe they mixed for the nation was put to their own lips; turn and turn about they nearly all perished or suffered the extremities of evil fortune! None gained, all lost in the end, by this intestine and unnatural war.

In the year of grace eleven hundred and forty-five King Stephen again passed by Reading, and went and laid close siege to Wallingford Castle; but he could not prevail against that mighty robber and spoiler Brian Fitzcount; and on the feast of St. Benedict, at the close of this same year, I, with the saints' aid, having completed my noviciate, took the great vows and became a cloister-monk, with much credit and applause from the whole community, the sweetmeats and all delicate cates being furnished for that feast by the bountiful Ladie Alfgiva, and both Sir Alain de Bohun and his son Arthur being present at the feast. That night there came from the plashy margent of Thamesis a meteor of rare size and brightness, and it stopped for the space of an Ave Maria over our house, and shined in all its brightness upon the tower; as was noted by all the brotherhood, who did please to say that it was a good omen, portending that I should rise high in office, and be an ornament and shining light to the house: and truly since then I have passed through offices of trust and honour, and my name hath been made known unto some of our order in foreign parts, and I am now by the grace of our ladie sub-prior of this royal abbey of Reading. Also is it to be noted that in this important year we, the monks of Reading, were enabled to keep our great fair in the Falbury, on the day of St. Lawrence and the three days next following, according to the particular charter of privilege granted by our founder Henricus Primus, who commanded in the aforesaid charter that no people should be hindered or troubled either in their coming to the fair or in their going from it, under heavy penalties to be paid in fine silver. And the wise Beauclerc had thus ordered, for that the men of Newbury having a fair of their own about the same season, for the sale of cattle and much cheese, were likely to waylay and stop such as were coming to our fair, as in verity they afterwards did, despite of our charter and to the peril of their own souls. But the castle-builders and the robbers that were liege-men unto them, had done the Fair-wending franklins much more harm than had been done them by the wicked men of Newbury; and in this sort our fair of St. Lawrence had been thinly attended for some years, and had not brought to our house in tolls, fees, and droits, one-half so much as the value of the alms we distributed upon that saint's day.

In the year which followed upon my vows, the husband of Matilda, the Count of Anjou, much grieving for the long absence of his son Henry, and seeing that the presence of one so young did no good to his mother's cause in England, entreated that he might be sent back into Anjou, and young Henry was sent thither accordingly. It had been well for England if the count had gotten back his wife also, but he was too glad to leave Matilda where she was, for there had not been for many a year any love between them, and from the day of his marriage with her until Matilda's return to her own country to wage war in it, the count was said never to have known a day's peace. During his long abode in Bristowe Castle the boy Henry had been carefully nurtured and instructed by his uncle the Earl of Gloucester, and by some teachers gathered in England and in foreign parts; and, to speak the truth of all men, the said earl was well nigh as learned as his father the Beauclerc, and a great encourager of humanizing letters. That great earl was also much commended by his friends for his constancy to the cause of his half-sister Matilda, and for his perseverance in all manner of fortunes, and for the equanimity with which he bore defeat and calamity; but, certes, it had been better for us if his perseverance had been less, and if his equanimity had been disturbed by the woes and unutterable anguishes the people of England did suffer from his so long perseverance. But the hand of death was now upon him, and the great earl died soon after the departure of Henry Fitz-empress, and was buried at Bristowe in the choir of the church of St. James, which he had founded. And no long while after the departure of her son and the death of her valorous half-brother, the countess, to the great trouble of her husband, quitted England and went into Anjou; and King Stephen, surprising and vanquishing his enemy the Earl of Chester, who had gotten possession of Lincoln town, did triumphantly enter into that town and abide there, which no king durst do before him, for that certain wizards had prophesied evil luck to any king that went into Lincoln town. Being thus within Lincoln, and somewhat elated with the smiles of capricious fortune, King Stephen summoned the great barons and magnates of the land unto him, and at the solemnization of the Nativity of our Lord, he wore the regal crown upon his head, or, as others have it, he was re-crowned and consecrated anew in the mother church at Lincoln; and having the crown of England, to all seeming, firmly fixed on his brow, he caused the magnates all to swear allegiance to his son Prince Eustace as his lawful successor in the realm. No great man gainsayed the king, but all present made a great show of loyalty and affection as well to the son as to the father. Many there were of them who had no truth or steadiness in their hearts; but Sir Alain, our good Lord of Caversham, was there, and likewise the young Lord Arthur, and it was with a faith as pure and entire as that of a primitive Christian that the nobles twain placed their hands within the hands of Prince Eustace and vowed to be his true men for aye. And as it was now time that Arthur should enter upon a more active life, and put himself in training for the honours of knighthood, and as Prince Eustace conceived much affection for him, as did all who ever knew the hopeful youth, Arthur was left in the family of the prince to serve him as page and esquire. Yet was the young lord's absence from among us very short, for Prince Eustace came nigh unto Reading to prepare for the laying of another siege to

Wallingford Castle, which still lay upon the fair bosom of the country like a hugeous and hideous nightmare, and whensoever it was not beleaguered the wicked garnison went forth to do that which for so many years they had been doing. Brian Fitzcount, the lord of Wallingford, Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, and others not a few, had gone beyond sea with the countess; but they meditated a speedy return with more bands of foreign marauders, and many of their similars and factours shut themselves up in their home-castles, which were spread all over the country. These things prevented the entire blessing of peace; yet was England more tranquil than she had been since the Beauclerc's death, and by a succession of sieges Stephen would have gotten the men of anarchy within his power if other accidents had not happened.

As the king (who had long and grievously mourned for the license and castle-building he had permitted at the beginning of his reign, in the hopes of attaching the great lords to his interest) openly showed his resolution to curb the excessive power and fierce lawlessness of the feudal lords, a great outcry was raised against him, and divers of the lords of his own party began to plot and make league with the barons of Matilda's faction. Others fell from his side because he could give them no money or fiefs, unless he robbed other men or laid heavy tallages upon the poor people. As these selfish men deserted him. Stephen exclaimed, as he had done before, "False lords, why did ye make me king to betray me thus! But, by the glory of God, I will not live a discrowned king!" And so much was granted to him in the end, that Stephen did die with the crown upon his head. Peradventure might the king have had the better of his secular foes if in the midst of these troubles he had not quarrelled with the clergy and braved the wrath of the holy see. By the death of one pope and the election of another, the king's brother, the Bishop of Winchester, had ceased to be legatus à latere, and the legatine office had passed into the hands of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, who had ever leaned to the Angevin party. The said lord archbishop was no friend to our Lord Abbat Reginald, or to any of our community, but it becomes not me to rake up the ashes of the dead, or to disturb with a reproachful voice the grave of the primate of England; and it needs must be said that the king was over violent in his regard, and undutiful to our father the pope. For it must ever be acknowledged that the triple crown of Rome is more than the crown of England, and that the head of the holy Roman Apostolic and Catholic church hath a power supreme in spiritualities over all the kings of Christendom. Nevertheless did King Stephen in an ill hour give a doom of exile against the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, for that he had attended at the bidding of the pope, but without consent of the king, a great council of the church in the city of Rheims, in France. Instead of submitting to this sentence, the archbishop went and put himself under the protection of Hugh Bigod, the powerful Earl of Norfolk, who was of the Angevin faction, and then put forth a sentence of interdict against King Stephen, and all that part of the kingdom which obeyed the *usurper*. In the west country, and in some parts of the east and north, the priests shut up their churches and refused to perform any of the offices of religion. Good men went between the king and the primate, and after two years a reconciliation was brought about, Stephen agreeing to be the most bountiful king and the best friend of the church that the church had ever yet known in this land. Yet when Archbishop Theobald was called upon to recognise and anoint Prince Eustace as heir to the throne, he refused to do it, saying that he was forbidden by our lord the pope, and that Stephen, being a usurper, could not, like a legitimate sovereign, transmit his crown to his posterity. The king, unto whom the archbishop had taken the oath of allegiance, waxed wroth, and threatened the archbishop with a punishment sharper than banishment; but, when the first passion of anger was over, he did nothing. Men censured the archbishop at the time, but they afterwards thought he had taken the wisest course for putting an end to this long war. In the interim Henry Fitz-empress had been again in our island. In the year eleven hundred and forty-nine, having attained the military age of sixteen, Henry Plantagenet came over to Scotland with a splendid retinue, to be made a knight by his mother's uncle, King David. The ceremony was performed with much magnificence in the city of Carlisle, where the old Scottish king did then keep his court; and most of the nobles of Scotland and many of our great English barons were present at the celebration, and did then and there make note of the many high qualities of the truly great and ever to be remembered son of the Countess Matilda. All manner of honours and power alighted on the head of Henry Plantagenet soon after his being knighted at Carlisle. The death of his father Geoffrey left him in full possession of the dukedom of Normandie, which he had governed for him, and of the earldom of Anjou, which was his own birthright; and in that lucky year for the house of Plantagenet, the year of our redemption eleven hundred and fifty-two, by espousing Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry acquired that great dame's rights to the earldom of Poictou and the great duchy of Aquitaine. Henry was thus the greatest and richest prince in all the main land of Europe, and albeit he was only in his twentieth year, he already knew the arts of government and of war better than any of his neighbours. A great prince was he from his cradle: he was born to command.

Et interim, Eustace, the son of Stephen, being nearly of the same age as the son of Matilda, had become a very worthy soldier, and our young Lord of Caversham had grown up with him, and improved under him. They had miscarried in the siege of Wallingford Castle, because that house of the devil was so exceeding strong, and because they were called off to another more urgent enterprise; but in other quarters they had been more successful, beating divers of the castle-builders in the field, or taking them in their dens. Every castle that they took was burned and destroyed, like Sir Ingelric's castellum at Speen. They brought many offerings to our shrines, for they were much in our part of the country, to keep in check the Angevin party to the westward; and whenever he was not engaged in these duties of war, the young Lord Arthur came to his home. The winter season allowed him the longest repose, and thus it befel that the Ladie Alfgiva and that little maiden which I and Philip, the lay-brother, did first convey to Caversham, became

sad instead of gay at the advance of spring. But Alice was no longer the little maiden that could lie perdue in a basket, and there had already been many discourses and conjectures as to the day when she and the young Lord Arthur would be made one by holy church; for the great love that had been between them from the days of their childhood was known to all the country side. Strange it was, but still most true, that Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe never had made any attempt to recover his fair and good daughter. Great endeavours he made to get back that dark ladie of the castle, his wicked and impenitent second wife, and he had at last, by means, it was said, of the Archbishop of Canterbury, obtained her release from the nunnery on the eastern coast; but he had never set on foot any treaty, nor, as far as could be learned, had ever made any inquiry touching the gentle Alice, who in her heart could not think without trembling and turning pale of her dark, stern step-mother, and the days she had passed with her in that foul donjon at Speen.

Though his hair had grown grey and scant under the cap of steel, and his soul panted for peace as the hunted hart doth for running waters, Sir Alain de Bohun kept the field almost as constantly as his son; and his constancy to King Stephen knew no abatement. So much virtue and steadiness could not be understood in those changeable and treacherous times; and as it was thought that he put a monstrously high price upon his services, and was true to one side because he had not been sufficiently tempted by the other, in the course of the year eleven hundred and fifty-two there came a secret emissary to offer him one of the greatest earldoms in England, and one of the richest and noblest damsels in Anjou as a bride for his son. Sir Alain bound the emissary with cords, like a felon spy, and sent him and his papers and credential signets unto King Stephen. No mind was ruffled in Caversham Castle upon this occurrence except the tender mind of Alice, who bethought her that she was but a poor portionless maiden, the daughter of a proscribed man whose estates had long been confiscated and held by the king; but Arthur saw and soon chased away these vain grievings. His father had manors and lands enow, and he wished never to be greater or richer than his father, and Alice was rich in herself, and she was his own Alice, and a greater treasure than any that dukes or kings or emperors could bestow. Let there be peace; let there only be peace in the land for the herdsman and the tiller of the soil, and the industrious vassals, and what earthly luxury or comfort would be wanting in the house at Caversham? Fools might contend for more, and barter their souls away to get it, but his father's son would never be this fool.

I was myself at Caversham at the time of these occurrences, and it was not long after that I became sub-sacrist in our abbey, and did build at mine own cost a new rood-loft in the church.

Also in this year deceased, to King Stephen's great grief, the good Queen Maud, and she was buried at Feversham in Kent.

X.

Before the swallows made their next return to our meads and river sides, the flames of war were again kindled in our near neighbourhood. When that I heard Sir Ingelric had stolen back into the island with an Angevin band, and that Brian Fitzcount, through the treachery of some of King Stephen's people, had been allowed to win his way into his inexpugnable castle at Wallingford with great supply of munitions of war, I did foresee that the year eleven hundred and fifty-three would be a year of storm and trouble to Reading Abbey, and to all the country besides. Sir Ingelric's return was soon notified to us by the burning of divers villages between Reading and Speen, and by the sudden plunder and devastation of some of our own outlying manors; and while we were grieving at these things, news was brought to us that Brian Fitzcount had called upon all the castle holders in the west to take up arms, not for the Countess Matilda, but for her son Henry; and that the said Sir Brian had ravaged well nigh all the country from Wallingford to Oxenford, making a great prey of men and cattle.

Sir Alain de Bohun and our stout-hearted Abbat Reginald collected such force as they could, and marched in quest of Sir Ingelric; but that cruel knight fled at their approach, and then retreated into the far west. King Stephen made an appeal to the wealthy and warlike citizens of London, who were ever truer to him than were his great barons, and being well furnished with arms and men, and the great machines proper for the sieges of strong places, the king went straight to Wallingford with a determination not to remove thence until he had reduced that terrible castle. This time he came not unto our abbey, but the lord abbat sent some of our retainers to assist in the great siege; and as all the lords that were true to the king marched with the best of their vassals to Wallingford, a great army was collected there. Of the people of that vicinage, every free man that was at all able to work repaired to the king's camp, and offered his labour for the capture and destruction of Brian Fitzcount's den. A deep trench was speedily cut all round the castle, and such bulwarks and palisadoes were made that none could come out of the place or enter therein; and catapults were in readiness to batter the walls, and mines were digging that would have caused the keep to totter and fall. Certes, the emprise was close to a successful issue, when tidings were brought that Henry Plantagenet had landed in the south-west with one hundred and forty knights, and three thousand foreign foot soldiers, that all the great barons of the west were proclaiming him to be the lawful king of England, and were joining his standard, and that he was moving with a mighty force to lay siege to Malmesbury. King Stephen had found no more faith abroad than he had found at home. Ludovicus, the French king, having many weighty reasons to mislike and fear Henry Plantagenet, had made a treaty of alliance with

Stephen, had affianced his daughter Constance to Prince Eustace the son of Stephen, and had engaged to keep the powerful Angevin at home by threatening Anjou and Normandie with the invasion of a great French army; but, instead of a great army, the French king sent but a few ill-governed bands; and when these had been discomfited in a few encounters, Ludovicus listened to proposals of peace, and abandoned the interests of Stephen. And that great English earl, Ranulph, earl of Chester, whom King Stephen had driven out of Lincoln, went over to Anjou to invite Henry into England, and to engage soul and body in his service; first taking care to obtain from that young prince a deed of charter conveying to him, the said Earl Ranulph, in *foede et heriditate*, the lands of William de Peveril, and many fiefs and broad manors in Cheshire, Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire, and elsewhere, together with sundry strong castles which the said earl hoped to keep—but did not. Forced was King Stephen to raise his siege of Wallingford Castle, and to evacuate and destroy the wooden castle of Cranmerse which he had raised close to Brian Fitzcount's gates. He had scarcely drawn off his people, and begun a march along the left bank of Thamesis above Wallingford, ere Henry Plantagenet, having gotten possession of Malmesbury and of many strong castles, which the castle-builders, not foreseeing that which was to happen, had given up to him, appeared on the right bank of the river with his great army of horse and foot. The Plantagenet was of an heroic temper; and Stephen, who had fought in so many battles, was yet as brave as his young rival, and was transported with wrath at seeing how many barons who had repeatedly sworn allegiance to him were in array against him; moreover, Prince Eustace was with his father, and, like a valorous and passionate youth, was eager for the fight; and of a certainty there would have been a terrible and bloody battle, if battle could have been joined at the first confronting of these two forces; but a heavy and long-continuing rain had swollen all the rivers and brooks, and had poured such a volume of water into Thamesis that there was no crossing it. Therefore lay the two mighty armies opposite to each other for the space of several days; and during that interval certain of our prelates bestirred themselves as peace-makers, and sundry great lords on either side said that verily it was time this unnatural war should have an end. But Henry Plantagenet did want for his immediate wearing the kingly crown of England, and Stephen had vowed by the glory of God to keep that crown on his head until his death, and none durst speak to him of a present surrender of it. When the waters somewhat abated the king marshalled his host, as if determined to come at his foe by crossing the river at a ford not far off; but upon mounting his war-horse, which had carried him in many battles, the steed stumbled and fell, not without peril to his rider. The king mounted again, laughing as at a trifling accident; but when the horse fell a second time under him, his countenance became troubled. Nevertheless he essayed a third time, and for a third time the steed fell flat to the earth as though he had been pierced through poitrail and heart by an arrow. Then did the king turn pale, and his nobles 'gan whisper that this was a fearful omen.

"By our Ladie St. Mary," quoth Prince Eustace, "the steed hath grown old, and distemper hath seized him during his days of inactivity in this swampy and overflowed country! This is all the omen, and the death of the poor horse will be all our loss."

And the resolute young prince would have mounted his father on another steed, and have marched on to the ford, and then straight to battle. But the Earl of Arundel, being much inclined to peace, and a bold and eloquent man, took advantage of the consternation which the omen or horse-sickness had created in the king's army, and going up to Stephen, he did advise him to make a present convention and truce with Henry Plantagenet, affirming that the title of Duke Henry to the crown of England was held to be just by a large part of the nation, and by some who had never been willing to admit his mother to the throne; that the country was all too weary of these wars, and that the king ought by experience to know the little trust that was to be put in many of his present followers. "But I will not die a discrowned king," said Stephen. "Nor shalt thou," replied the great Earl of Arundel.

After many entreaties and prayers, the kingly mind of Stephen yielded so far as to allow a parley for a truce; and Henry Plantagenet, not being less politic than warlike, entered upon a convention, and then agreed to confer with Stephen.

The place for conference was so appointed that the river Thamesis, where it narrows a little above Wallingford, parted the two princes and the great lords that were with them; so that from either bank King Stephen and Duke Henry saluted each other, and afterwards conversed together. The conference ended in a truce, during which neither party was to attempt any enterprise of war, but both were to discuss and amicably settle the question of Duke Henry's right to the crown upon the demise of Stephen.

Prince Eustace had not been a prince if he had quietly submitted to an arrangement which went to deprive him of the succession to a great kingdom: he burst suddenly away from the king's camp, calling upon those who had taken the oaths to him to follow him to the east. Not many rode off with him; but our young Lord Arthur, feeling the obligations of his replicated vows and the ties of duty and friendship, would not quit his master; nor did his father Sir Alain, who had placed him in the prince's service, make any effort to restrain him. As for the good lord of Caversham himself, he returned to his home with the double determination of observing the truce, and of not giving up his allegiance to King Stephen, unless the king should voluntarily release him therefrom; for, much as he sighed for the return of peace, Sir Alain prized his honour, and did never think that a good settlement of the kingdom could be obtained through falsehood and perjury. But woful apprehensions and sadness did again fall upon the house at Caversham, for the course taken by Prince Eustace was full of danger to him and his few adherents, and it was reported that his great anger and desperation had driven him mad. But

short was the career of that hapless young prince, who, though born to a kingdom, lived not to see anything but the calamities thereof. I wis those men who had most flattered him, and had taken oaths to him as to the lawful heir to this glorious crown of England, did speak most evil of him in the days of his adversity, and after his death. I, who knew him and conversed with him oft times, did ever find him a youth of a right noble nature, valorous and merciful like his father, and as devout and friendly unto the church as his mother Queen Maud. Yet may I not deny that in his last despair he did some wicked deeds which sorely grieved our young Lord Arthur, who could not prevent them, and who yet would not abandon him in this extremity of his fortune. Coming into the countries of the east, and finding few to join him, he burst into the liberties of St. Edmund, and into the very abbey of St. Edmund, king and martyr, and demanded from the Lord Abbat Ording, and the monks of that holy house, money and other means for the carrying on of his heady designs; and when that brotherhood, as in duty bound, and like men that were unwilling to be wagers of new wars, did refuse his request and point out the unreasonableness and ungodliness of them, he ordered his hungry and desperate soldiers to seize all the corn that was in the abbey, and carry it into a castle which he held hard by, and then to go forth and plunder and waste the lord abbat's manors. The corn was carried to the castle, but before further mischief could be done the soul of Prince Eustace was required of him; for that very day, as he sat at dinner in his castle, he dropped down in a deadly fit, and was dead before the kind Arthur could get a monk to shrive him. The Countess Matilda, I ween, had done worse deeds at Reading than Eustace did at St. Edmund's Bury, and, certes, the patrons and protectors of our house, our Ladie the Virgin, and St. James, and St. John the evangelist, were not less powerful to punish than St. Edmund the king and martyr; nevertheless Matilda was let live, and the young Eustace perished in his prime. But these things are not to be scanned by mortal eye, and the judgments of heaven are not always immediate, and it might not have been so much in vengeance for Eustace's great sin in robbing the monks of St. Edmund's Bury of their corn, as in mercy to the suffering people of England, that the son of King Stephen was so suddenly smitten and removed. The monks of St. Edmund did, however, give out that it was their saint who slew him for his sin, causing the first morsel of the stolen victual he put into his mouth to drive him into a frenzy, whereof he died. Others there were who accounted for his opportune death by alleging that some subtile poison had been administered to him; but of this was there never any proof. Our young Lord Arthur, without denying the great provocation he had given unto St. Edmund, did always think that his brain had been touched ever since his father held the conference above Wallingford with Duke Henry, and that a great gust of passion killed him. But whatever was the cause of his death, and however sad was that event in itself, he was surely dead, and it was just as sure that the kingdom would be the better for it. If few had followed him while he was alive, still fewer stayed to do honour to his remains; but Arthur, with a very sincere grief, and with all respect and piety, carried the body of his master to the sea-side, and thence by water into Kent, and saw it interred at Feversham by the side of Queen Maud, with all the rites and obsequies of holy church. Fidelity could not go beyond this; the great arbiter, Death, had freed him from his allegiance and vows to the prince, and so from the honoured grave in Feversham Abbey, Arthur de Bohun rode with all possible speed unto Caversham. So true was it, that nothing that man could do could keep Alice and him long asunder.

Many of our wicked castle builders, who had not always respected the truce of God, would not now be bound by the truce concluded between two mortal princes; and when the term of that suspension had expired, some of the barons on either side would have renewed the war on a grand scale, and have carried it into all parts of the kingdom. Some few sieges were commenced, and some hostile movements made in the field, by King Stephen and Duke Henry; but since the unhappy death of Prince Eustace, the king cared not much about keeping the crown in his family, for he had but one other lawful son, and this son, the gentle-tempered William, was only a boy, and was without ambition; for his eyes had not been dazzled by any near prospect of the crown, and none of the baronage had ever sworn fealty to him. And thus, when the peace-makers renewed their blessed endeavours, King Stephen was easily induced to agree that Duke Henry should be his successor in this kingdom, provided that he left him a peaceable possession of the disputed throne for the term of his natural life, and bound himself to fulfil a few other engagements. The king's brother, the Bishop of Winchester, did now join with his old enemy, Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, in urging this accord, and on either side the great barons recommended the adjustment; for all were weary of the war except a few desperate robbers, whose crimes had been so numerous that they could not hope to escape punishment at the return of peace. Another great council of barons and prelates was, therefore, called together at Winchester; and in that royal and episcopal city, on the seventh of the Kalends of November, in this the last year of our woe, eleven hundred and fifty-three, the agreement was finished, and a charter naming Henry heir to the throne was granted by Stephen, and witnessed by Theobald the archbishop, the Bishop of Winchester, eleven other bishops, the prior of Bermondsey, the head of the knights Templars, and eighteen great lay lords. And a short season after this, the king and the duke travelled lovingly together to Oxenford, where the earls and barons, by the king's commandment, did swear fealty to the duke, saving the king's honour, so long as he lived; and the Plantagenet did pledge himself to behave to Stephen of Blois as a duteous and affectionate son, and to grant to him, all the days of his life, the name and seat of the kingly pre-eminence. In the presence of the best of our baronage, the king and duke did then confer about other state matters, and did fully agree and concur in this—that there must be an end of castle-building and castle-builders, that the donjons which remained must all down, and that the vengeance of the law must fall upon the robbers, whether they had been, or had pretended to be, followers of Matilda, or Stephen, or Duke Henry himself; for, being now acknowledged heir to the crown, Henry wished not to come into a wasted and impoverished land, and well he knew, at all times,

that the prosperity of the people maketh the wealth, and power, and glory of the ruler. Those castles in the west, which had been given up to him by their builders, were presently levelled with the earth; and even Brian Fitzcount was warned that he must quit his strong house at Wallingford, or abide the most fearful consequences. Some of the cruel oppressors of their country came in of their own will, and submitted to King Stephen and the law; but others held out stiffly, denying all allegiance whether to the king regnant or to Duke Henry as his successor; and in this sort the poor people in divers parts continued to be harrowed, and plundered, and captured, and tortured, as in the foregone time. Nay, some of our wicked barons, making league with the rapinous princes and wild chiefs of the Welsh mountains, did continue to keep the open fields in the western parts, and to desolate the land from the river Severn even unto the river Mersey.

Many were the private discourses which King Stephen held with the hopeful Plantagenet, for Stephen's heart was all for the commonalty of England, and he trusted that he could give such instruction and advice to Henry as would aid that prince in making his future government firm, and, at home, pacific, and in that sort a blessing to the people. But the Plantagenet had solemnly pledged his faith by treaty and by oath to leave unto Stephen, so long as he should live, the full exercise of the authority royal, and this could hardly have been if Henry had tarried in England; and, moreover, matters of high concernment called for the return of the duke to Anjou and Normandie. So, in the spring season of the year of grace eleven hundred and fifty-four, after some long consultations held at Dunstable to treat of the future state and peace of the kingdom, the king accompanied the duke to the sea-coast, and, with a loving leave-taking of Stephen, Henry embarked and sailed over to Normandie. Foul rumours there were, as that Stephen's young son with a party of Flemings would have waylaid the duke on Barham downs, and have there slaughtered him; but I wis all this was but a fable, for the boy William was too young for such matters, and being of a gentle and unambitious nature, and too well knowing that the crown of England had been a crown of thorns to his father, he was more than content with the lands and honours secured unto him by the Charta Conventionum.

Also was it nigh upon the time that William, archbishop of York, a kinsman of King Stephen, who had been deprived by the pope in the year eleven hundred and forty-seven, and who had been reinstated after the truce concluded at Wallingford, suddenly departed this life at York, and was buried with great haste and little ceremony in that minster. And here too there were evil reports spread through the land as that Archbishop William had been poisoned. Having no light wherewith to penetrate the darkness of this mystery, I will not affirm that King Stephen's kinsman was so disposed of; but verily the malice of men's hearts was great, and there was much secret poisoning in these times!

Stephen being thus left to govern by himself, sundry of our great men, having from that which they had seen and heard of Prince Henry come to the conclusion that if he should be king he would keep a bit in their mouths and keep a strong rein in his own hands, did repair to the king who had so often been betrayed by them, and did strongly urge him to break the treaty and trust to war and the valour and faith of his vassals for the continuance of his family on the throne. But Stephen having a respect for his oaths (which mayhap was the greater by reason of a sickness that was upon him), and knowing the trust that was to be put in the faith and steadiness of these men, said, "There hath been war enough, and too much woe!" and he would not give his ear unto them, but did command forces to be gathered for putting down the castle-builders and the robbers that had allied themselves with the Welsh.

And of a surety in these his last days King Stephen betook himself wholly to repair the ruins of the state, and heal the great afflictions of the church. He made a progress into most parts of the kingdom to reform the monstrous irregularities which had arisen by long war, to curb the too great baronial power, to get back to our abbeys and churches the things whereof they had been despoiled, and to speak and deal comfortably with all manner of peace-loving men. Some castles he reduced by force, others he terrified into submission, and others were taken by a few good lords like Sir Alain de Bohun. In all these occurrences nothing was heard of our impenitent neighbour Sir Ingelric, save that his wife the dark ladie of the castle had died, and that he himself was thought to have gone into the west. Of that greater and far more terrible chief, Brian Fitzcount, we did hear enough and more than enough, for in despite of the joint commandment of King Stephen and Duke Henry, he kept possession of his castle at Wallingford and continued his evil courses in all things. Yea, at a season when we did apprehend no such doing, one of his excommunicated companies, stealing by night down the vale of Thamesis, did set fire to our granaries at Pangbourne, and maim our cattle, and so sweep our basse-court that we had not left so much as one goose wherewith to celebrate the feast of St. Michael. The better to put down these atrocious doings, King Stephen called together within the city of London a great and godly meeting of barons and prelates and head men of towns; and sooth to say the spirit of peace and love presided over that great council, and many proper methods were taken by it and good laws passed. I, who went unto London city with our lord abbat, did see with mine own eyes the respect which was now paid unto the eldermen of great towns and boroughs, and likewise to the franklins, whether mixed by the marriages of their fathers or grandfathers with Norman women, or whether of the old and unmixed Saxon stock, the number of these last being as a score to one; and then did I say to myself that if these things continued, the day might arrive when the burghers and free plebeians of England might be something in the state. Nay, I did even dream that in process of time the collar might be taken from the neck of our serf, and the cultivator of the soil be no longer a villein, but a free man. But I concealed this my bright vision, lest it should expose me to censure and mockery.

When this great council at London was broken up King Stephen made repair unto Dover to meet and confer with his ancient ally and friend the Earl of Flanders. The king was well attended, and among the best lords of England that went with him was our neighbour Sir Alain de Bohun. We, the monks of Reading, or such of us as had gone to the great city, journeyed back to our abbey, in a great fall of autumnal rain; and when, at the end of three days, we in uncomfortable case did reach the abbey, we found that the swollen river had swept away good part of the mill which we had built on the Kennet, at a short space from our house, and had otherwise done us much mischief. Also was there seen a great falling star, and there were heard in the heavens, on one very dark and gusty night, some dolorous sounds, as of men wailing and lamenting. In a few days more some sad but uncertain rumours did begin to reach our house; but it was not until one stormy night in the early part of November, when Sir Alain de Bohun on his way homeward stopped at our gates, that we knew of a certainty that which had befallen. Ah, well-a-day, King Stephen was dead! He who for well nigh nineteen years had not known one day's perfect peace was now, inasmuch as the world and mortal man could affect him, at peace for ever! And may God have mercy on his soul in the world to come! After the politic conferences with the Earl of Flanders, and the departure of the said earl for his own dominions, the king was all of a sudden seized with the great pain of the Iliac passion, and with an old disease which had more than once brought him to the brink of the grave; and so, after short but acute suffering, he laid him down to die, and did die in the house of the monks of Canterbury, on the five and twentieth day of the kalends of October. *Sic mors rapit omne genus*. And our true-hearted lord of Caversham, who was true unto death, and who had tenderly nursed the dying king, conveyed the body to Feversham, and placed it in the same grave with his beloved wife Maud, and his son Stephen, in the goodly abbey which he and his queen had built and endowed in that Kentish township; and having in this guise done the last duty to his liege lord and king, and being by death liberated from the oaths of fealty and allegiance, which he had never broken by word or deed, Sir Alain, caring for none of the honours and advancements which other lords were ready to struggle for at the coming in of a new king, came quietly home, only hoping and praying that his country would be happy under Henry Plantagenet.

King Stephen being gone, much evil was said of him on all sides and by all parties: yea, his own partisans, in the expectation that such words would be grateful to the ear of the new king, did affect to murmur and lament that he should so long have kept the great Henricus from the throne; and, generaliter, the great men did burthen the memory of Stephen with the past miseries of the people of England, of which they themselves had been the promoters. I have said it: the defunct king, in the straits and troubles into which he had been driven by the greed, ambition, and faithlessness of the baronage, had oftentimes done amiss, and, specialiter, had much travailed churchmen: yet be it remembered that he built more royal abbeys than any king that went before him; that he founded hospitals for the poor sick; and that during the whole of his troublous reign he laid no new tax or tallage upon the people; and that he was of a nature so mild and merciful that notwithstanding the many revolts and rebellions and treasons practised against him, he did never put any great man to death. I, Felix, who had seen how large he was of heart and how open of hand, and who had tasted of his bounty and condescension, could not forget these things when, in a few days, after saying a mass of Requiem for his soul, we chanted in our church a *Te Deum laudamus* for his successor.

XI.

I have said that we heard all too much of our powerful and wicked neighbour Brian Fitzcount. But now that he knew Henry Plantagenet was coming, and was one that would have power to destroy him and to put an end to all plundering and castle-building, a sudden repentance seized his time-hardened conscience. Some did much praise him for this, and greatly admired the seeming severity of his penance; but it is to be feared that he, like many others among our castle-builders and depredators, did only repent when he found that he could sin no more. So great had been his crimes, and so noted was Duke Henry for his strict execution of justice, that, notwithstanding his long adherence to Henry's mother, Sir Brian could not hope to escape a severe punishment, with forfeiture of the broad lands which had become his by marriage, and with deprivation of the great riches he had accumulated by plundering the country. In this wise no secure asylum was open to him except in the cloisters or in taking the cross. And before the Plantagenet returned into England Sir Brian Fitzcount did take upon him the cross, and giving up his terrible castle at Wallingford with all his fiefs, and abandoning all his riches—*relictis fortunis omnibus*—he joined other crusaders and took his departure for Palestine. His wife Maud, the rich daughter of Sir Robert d'Oyley, had before this time retired into a convent in Normandie, and there, being awakened to a sense of the wickedness of her past life, she did soon take the veil. As they had no issue, and left no knight near of kin, King Henry, soon after his coronation, took possession of Wallingford Castle and of the honour of Wallingford; and from that happy moment the troubles of the country and of our good house ceased. Such was the fate of our worst enemy; but of the scarcely less wicked Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe we still could learn nothing of certain, and the rumours which reached us were very contradictory, some saying that he had been slain by Welsh thieves, some that he had fled beyond sea, some that he had entered into religion under a feigned name, and was preparing to take the monastic vows in the Welsh house at Bangor, and some asserting that he had gone with a desperate band into Scotland to take service with that king and aid him in subjugating the wild mountaineers of the north. Nay, there was still another report

common among the poor country folk that dwelt upon Kennet near Speen, and it was to the effect that Satan had carried him away bodily. In short, none knew what had become of him, but all prayed that they might never see his face again.

Henry Plantagenet was busied in reducing the castles of some of his turbulent barons in Normandie when he received the news of King Stephen's demise. Being well assured that none in England would dare question his right to the vacant throne, and being moreover a wise prince, who always finished that which he had in hand before beginning any new thing, he prosecuted his sieges, and ceased not until he had reduced all the castles. Thus it was good six weeks after the death of Stephen, and hard upon the most solemn festival of the Nativity, when Henry came into England with his wife Eleanor and a mighty company of great men. He was received as a deliverer, and there was joy and exultation in the heart of every true Englishman at his coming. A wondrously handsome and strong prince he was, albeit his hair inclined to that colour which got for his great-uncle the name of Rufus or Red King. His forehead was broad and lofty, as if it were the seat of great wisdom, and a sanctuary of high schemes of government. His eyes were round and large, and while he was in a quiet mood, they were calm, and soft, and dovelike; but when he was angered, those eyes flashed fire and were like unto lightning. His voice!—it made the heart of the boldest quake when he raised it in wrath, or in peremptory command; but it melted the soul like soft music when he was in the gentle mood that was more common to him, and it even won men's hearts through their ears: it was by turns a trumpet or a lute. Great, and for a prince miraculous, was his learning, his grandfather, the Beauclerc, not having been a finer scholar: wonderful was his eloquence, admirable his steadiness, straightforwardness and sagacity in the despatch of all business. He breathed a new life, and put a new soul into the much worn and distracted body of England. There shall be peace in this land, said he; and peace sprang up as quick as the gourd of the prophet: there shall be justice among men of all degrees; and there was justice. Having taken the oaths to be good king and lord—to respect mother church and the ancient liberties of the people, the great Plantagenet was solemnly crowned and anointed in the royal city of Winchester on the 19th of the kalends of December, by Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury; and Eleanor, his wife, was crowned with him. In the speech which he did then deliver, he boasted of the Saxon blood which he inherited from his grandmother, Queen Maud, of happy memory, who descended in right line from Alfredus Magnus; and these his royal words did much gratify the English people, without giving offence to the lords and knights of foreign origin, who, by frequent intermarriages, had themselves become more than half Saxons, and who had long since prided themselves in the name of Englishmen, and would, in truth, be called by none other name. And full soon did Henricus Secundus make it a name of terror to Normandie, to the whole of France, and all circumjacent nations; and now that I write, in his happy time, hath he not filled the highest offices in church and state with men of English birth, and with many of the unmixed Saxon race? From his first entrance into the government of this realm, he was principally directed in matters of law and justice by our great lord archbishop, Thomas à Becket, then only archdeacon of Canterbury, provost of Beverley, and prebendary of Lincoln, and St. Paul's, London; and our Lord Thomas, as all men do know, is the son of Gilbert à Becket, merchant of the city of London.

King Henry kept his Christmas at Bermondsey; and it was from that place that he issued his royal mandate, that all the foreign mercenaries and companies of adventure that had done such terrible mischief in the wars between King Stephen and Matilda should depart the land within a given time, and without carrying with them the plunder they had made. Divers of these men had been created earls and barons, and still kept possession of fiefs and castles, but they nearly all yielded for the great dread they had of the new king, and so got them out of England by the appointed day, as naked and poor as they were when, for our sins, they first came among us; and many a Fleming and Brabanter, Angevin and Breton, from being a baron and castle-builder, returned to the plough-tail in his own country. As the spring season approached, our great king repaired unto Wallingford Castle, and there convened a great council of earls, bishops, abbats, and some few citizens of note and wealthy franklins. It was a pleasant and right joyous journey that which I had with our Lord Abbat Reginald, and Sir Alain de Bohun, and my young Lord Arthur. Already the hamlets which had been burned began to rear again their yellow-thatched roofs in the bright sun; the wasted and dispeopled towns were already under repair; the shepherd, with his snowy flock and skipping lambs, was again whistling on the hill sides like one that had nought to fear; the hind was singing at his labours in the fertile fields; the farmer and the trader were travelling with their wains and pack-horses, from grange to market and from town to town, without dread of being robbed, and seized, and castle-bound; skiffs and barks were ascending and descending the river with good cargaisons, and without having a single lance or sword among their crews; the trenches cut in the churchyards were filled up, the unseemly engines of war were taken down from the church towers, and the church bells, being replaced, again filled the air with their holy and sanctifying sounds. Even the wilderness and the solitary place partook of the spirit of this universal peace and gladness: there was sunshine in every man's face, whether bond or free. In summa, it seemed, in truth, a time when the wolf dwelt with the lamb, and the leopard lay down with the kid, and the lion with the fatted calf; when the iron of the great engines of war was turned into a ploughshare, the sword into a pruning-hook, and the lance into a pastoral crook. I, who did well remember the sad state of things only a few months ago, did much marvel that a country could so soon recover from the horrors of war, and the depth of a universal anarchy and havoc; and did, with a melting heart and moistened eye, offer up my thanks to the Giver of all good things that it should be so.

It was at Wallingford that I did see, for the first time, our far-renowned Thomas à Becket. There was no seeing him without discerning the great heights to which he was destined to rise, even

more by his natural gifts than by the king's favour. At this time he numbered some thirty-six or thirty-seven years; and from his childhood those years had been years of study or of active business, as well of a secular as of an ecclesiastical kind. A handsome man was he at that season, and blithe and debonnaire, and, mayhap, a trifle too much given to state affairs, and the pomps and vanities of this world, for a churchman: but, oh, John the Evangelist, what a mind was his! what readiness of wit and reach of thought! And what an eagerness was in him to raise his countrymen to honour, to make his country happy and full of glory, and to raise the church in power and dignity! "*Angli sumus*, we be Englishmen," said he to our lord abbat, "and we must see to raise the value of that name." Great and long experienced statesmen there were in this great council at Wallingford, men that had travailed in negotiation at home and abroad, and that had grown grey and bald in state offices; but verily they all seemed children compared with the son of our London merchant, and they one and all submitted their judgment to that of Thomas à Becket, who had barely passed the middle space of human life. Numerous were the wise and healing resolutions adopted in that great council, the most valuable of all being, that the crown lands which King Stephen had alienated, in order to satisfy his rapacious barons, should be resumed and re-annexed to the crown; and that not one of the eleven hundred and more castles, which the wicked castle-builders had made in Stephen's time, should be allowed to stand as a place of arms. Some few were to remain to curb the Welsh and Scots, or to guard the coast; but these were to be intrusted to the keeping of the king's own castellans: of the rest, not a stone was to be left upon another. This had been decreed before, but time had not been allowed King Stephen to do the work; and so easy and over indulgent was he, that it is possible the work would not have been done for many a year if he had continued to live and reign.

Even in these sun-shining days there were some slight clouds raised by the jealousies and ambitions and craving appetites of certain of our great men, who sought to raise themselves at the cost of others. Certain magnates whose names shall not soil this pure parchment—certain self-seeking men who had been allied with Brian Fitzcount and Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe, and who, like Sir Ingelric, had shifted from side to side, tried hard to fill the ears of King Henry and his secretarius Thomas à Becket with tales unfavourable to Sir Alain de Bohun and his son Arthur; as that they had made war against the king's mother, and had oppressed and plundered the lords that were favourable to her cause, and had ever been the steadiest and most devoted of all the partisans of the usurper Stephen. But neither the king nor à-Becket was to be moved by these evil reports. "I do see," said the sharp and short-dealing secretarius, "that all the good and quiet people of his country bear testimony in favour of the Lord of Caversham and his brave son: I do further see (and here à-Becket, with a light and quick thumb, turned over great scrolls of parchment which had affixed to them the name and seal of King Stephen) that in the nineteen years he so faithfully served the late king, the said Sir Alain de Bohun hath not added a single manor, nay, nor a single rood of land, to the estates bequeathed unto him by his father or inherited through his wife; and also do I see that he hath aspired after no new rank, or title, or office, or honour whatsoever, but is now, save in the passage of time and the wear of nineteen years' faithful and at times very hard service, that which he was at the demise of Henricus Primus; and having all these things in consideration, I do opine that the Lord of Caversham hath ever followed the dictates of a pure conscience, and hath ever been and still is a man to be trusted and honoured by our Lord the King Henricus Secundus."

"And I," quoth the right royal Plantagenet, "I who am come hither to make up differences, to reconcile factions, to heal the wounds which are yet bleeding, and to give peace to this good and patient and generous English people, will give heed to no tales told about the bygone times. The faith and affection which Sir Alain de Bohun did bear unto my unhappy predecessor, in bad fortune as well as in good, are proofs of the fidelity he will bear unto me when I have once his oath. My lords, there be some among ye that cannot show so clean a scutcheon! What with the turnings from this side to that and from that to this, and the castle-buildings and other doings of some of ye, I should have had a wilderness for a kingdom! But these things will I bury in oblivion, and this present mention of them is only provoked by ill-advised discourses, and the whisperings and murmurings of a few. But let that faction look to this—I am Henry Plantagenet, and not Stephen of Blois! With the laws to my aid I will be sole king in this land, and be obeyed as such! The reign of the eleven hundred kings is over! Let me hear no more of this. By all the saints in heaven and all their shrines on earth! I will hold that man mine enemy, and an enemy to the peace of this kingdom, that saith another word against Sir Alain de Bohun, or his son, or any lord or knight that hath done as they have done in the times that be past."

And so it was that our good Lord of Caversham was received by the king, not as an old enemy but as an old friend, and was admitted to sit with the greatest of the lords in consultation in Wallingford Castle, and there to give his advice as to the best means of improving the condition of his country. And a few days after this, when Sir Alain and his son Arthur had taken the oaths of allegiance and fidelity unto King Henry and his infant son, the king with his own hands made our young Lord Arthur knight, giving him on that great occasion the sword which he had worn at his own side, and a splendid horse which had been brought for his own use from Apulia in Italie, out of the stables of the great Count of Conversano, who hath long bred the best horses in all Christendom, to his no small profit and glory.

Upon the breaking up of the council of Wallingford our great Plantagenet prepared to march into the west with a well furnished army, in order to reduce by siege the castles of Hugh Mortimer and a few other arrogant barons who had the madness to defy him. Before quitting Brian Fitzcount's great house, the king said to Sir Alain de Bohun, "For forty days, and not longer, I may have my young knight Sir Arthur with me. Unto thee, in the meantime, I give commission to

level every castle whatsoever that hath been left standing in this fair country of Berkshire."

Seeing our lord abbat start a little at these words, the king said, in his sweetest voice, "Aye, my lord abbat, even Reading Castle must down with the rest; but ye will not feel the want of it, for with God's help none shall trouble thy house, or cause the least mischief to thy lands or vassals while I am king of England; and as a slight token of my trust and esteem, thy good and near neighbour Sir Alain shall keep his battlements standing. It were a task worthy of thee, good my lord, that thou shouldest even go with Sir Alain on his present mission, and sprinkle some holy water on the ground where these accursed castles have stood, and build here and there a chapel upon the spots."

Our abbat, who ever much affected the society of Sir Alain, and who loved the good work in hand, said he would perform this task; and for this the king gave him thanks.

"Before I go hence," said the king to the Lord of Caversham, "is there no grace or guerdon that thou wouldest ask of me?"

Sir Alain responded that he and his son had had grace and guerdon enow.

"By our Ladie of Fontevraud," quoth the king, "I have given thee nothing, and have only given thy son a horse and a sword and his knighthood. Bethink thee, good Sir Alain, is there no thing that thou canst ask, and that I ought to give?"

Sir Alain smiled and shook his head, and said that there was nothing he could ask for.

"By the bones of my grandfather," quoth the king, "thou art the first man I ever found in Anjou, Normandie, or England, of this temper of mind! But I have a wish to give if thou hast none to take; I charge thee with a service that is important to me and the people, and that must cost thee somewhat ere thou shalt have finished it; and, therefore, would I give thee beforehand some suitable reward.... What, still dumb and wantless?"

Here our lord abbat, bethinking himself of sundry things, whispered to his neighbour, "Sir Alain, say a word for Sir Arthur's marriage with the gentle Alice, and ask the king's grace for a free gift of the forfeited lands which once appertained to Sir Ingelric."

"Beshrew me," quoth the Lord of Caversham, "I never thought of the king's consent being necessary to my son's marriage. I thank thee, lord abbat, and will speak to that point." Yet when he spake, all that he told was the simple story of the nurture which had been given in his own house by his sweet wife to the fair daughter of Sir Ingelric, and of the long and constant love which had been between that maiden and his only son, and all that he asked was that the king, as natural guardian of all noble orphans, would allow the marriage.

The eyebrows of the Plantagenet kept arching and rising in amazement, until Abbat Reginald thought that they would get to the top of his forehead, high as it was. When he spake again, which he did not do for a space, he said, "And is this formula, that costs me nothing, all that thou hast to ask from the King of England, Duke of Normandie, and Earl of Anjou, Poictou, and Aquitaine?"

"Verily," replied Sir Alain, "'tis all that I can think of, and for that one favour I will ever be your bedesman."

"Sir Alain," said our abbat, tugging him by the skirt, "thou hast said no one word touching the lands of Sir Ingelric."

"We need them not," said the high-minded old knight, "we be rich enow without. If Sir Ingelric were alive and penitent, I might, in this happy time of reconciliation and oblivion of past wrongs, ask the fiefs for him; but as it is, let them go, or let the king keep them—he may need them more than I."

"Well!" quoth the Plantagenet, "I see thou hast taken counsel. So now, my trusty Sir Alain, tell me what guerdon I shall give thee for the services with which thou art charged."

"My liege lord," quoth the lord of Caversham, "I, who in the times that are past have so often done that which liked me not for no fee or reward, but only in discharge of the oaths I had sworn, would not now ask a guerdon for the performance of a task so grateful unto me. Let my son espouse the fair Alice, and I am more than content."

But the king, who had been turning things over in his mind while our abbat had been counselling Sir Alain, now called in Sir Arthur de Bohun, and said to him thus:—"Sir Knight of mine own making, I, the king, do give unto thee the hand of that little ladie Alice thou wottest of; and I do confer as a dower upon the said ladie Alice all the manors, honours, and lands whatsoever that were by her mother conveyed to Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe. It were not well that so noble a damsel should go portionless to her husband. Ye may be people of that rare sort that would care not for the fiefs, but the noble maiden might feel it. The less we say of her unnatural sire Sir Ingelric the better for him and for us. Whether he be dead or alive, the lands which were his through his two marriages are confiscated. It were but a common act of justice to give back to the maiden that which was her mother's, and I would as my free gift add the lands of the second marriage. À-Becket shall see to it, and draw up the grant before we go hence. Sir Arthur, I hail thee lord of Speen, and wish thee joy with thy bride. These forty days of war will soon be over, and with thy ladie's prayers to help us, we may finish with this mad Hugh de Mortimer in much

less time."

Arthur knelt at the feet of the Plantagenet, and kissed his royal hand, and said it was too much grace and over much greatness; and both father and son joined in telling the king that the lands of the mother of Alice would be more than enough without the inheritance of the dark ladie.

"Of a truth," said Sir Alain, "I should fear that that evil heritage would come to us burthened with a curse; for it was ill acquired by the father of the dark ladie, and was ever by her misused."

"Well," quoth the king, "we will keep part of those lands in our own hands, and give a part to the abbat and monks of Reading, who will know how to remove the curse with masses and prayer, and almsgiving to the poor."

It was now the turn of our lord abbat to give thanks, which he did like the noble and learned churchman that he was. And all these things being pre-arranged, Thomas-à-Becket penned the royal grant for the fair Alice, and a new charter for our house; and the king signed and sealed the twain. By the charter he confirmed all preceding charters and donations. And he gave to the abbey two good manors which had belonged to the dark ladie, together with permission to enclose a park, in the place called Cumba, for the use of the sick, whether monks or strangers. And very soon after, upon his returning out of the west country, the king, by a particular charter, gave the monks of Reading licence to hold a fair every year on the day of St. James and the three following days, and confirmed our old right to a Sunday market at Thatcham, commanding the inhabitants of the country to attend the said market, and the jealous men of Newbury not to hinder them or molest them. He also made us a grant of forty marks of silver, to be paid annually out of his exchequer until he should be enabled to secure unto us a revenue of the same value in lands. Verily, we the monks of Reading did no more suffer for that which we had done in the past time than did our noble neighbours of Caversham. When that the great men saw in what high esteem Sir Alain and Sir Arthur were held by the king, they spake to them cap in hand, and vexed their wit to make them fine flattering speeches; yea, the very lords who had essayed to work their ruin did now make them big professions of friendship.

So the Plantagenet departed and went unto Gloucester and Bridgenorth with his great battalia and engines of war, and the lord abbat and I, Father Felix, went with Sir Alain de Bohun to perambulate and perlustrate the country of Barkshire, bearing with us the royal mandate to all heads of boroughs and townships and all good men to assist in rooting out the foul donjons which disfigured the fair country like blots of ink let fall upon a pure skin of parchment. Expeditive and very complete was the work we made; for even as at Speen the country people of their own free will came flocking to us with their pickaxes and mattocks on their shoulders; and so soon as a castle was levelled, our lord abbat, in pontificalibus, did sprinkle holy water upon the spot to drive away the evil spirits that had so long reigned there; and did, in the tongue of the people, as well as in Latin, put up a prayer that such wickednesses might not be again known in the land. Divers strange things and many recondite holes and corners, and most secret and undiscoverable chambers, were brought to light in the course of these demolishings; but it was not until we broke down and took to pieces a castle near Shrivenham, on the confines of Barks, an outlying and little known place, that we laid open to the light of day a very tragic spectacle, which was in itself a conclusion to a part of this my narration. Upon our coming to it, this castellum, like all the rest, was deserted, the draw-bridge being down, and the portcullis and all other gates removed by the serfs of the neighbouring manors, who had made themselves good winter fires of the wood thereof. Nay, some poor houseless men had for a season dwelt within the keep, and penned their swine in the courtyard; but they had been terrified thence by unaccountable and horrible noises at midnight; and these men and their neighbours declared that it was the most accursed place in all the country. It was a wonderful thing to see how fast those walls toppled down, and how soon the deep moat was filled up. When the thick southern wall of the square keep was all but levelled, Sir Alain de Bohun's people came suddenly upon a secret chamber which had been contrived with much art and cunning within the said wall. The men reached it by demolishing the masonry above, but the access to it had been through a crooked passage which mounted from a cell underground, and then through a low narrow doorway, the door of which contained more iron than oak, and closed inward with certain hidden springs, the secret whereof was not to be apprehended by any of us until the door was knocked down and taken to pieces. Within this dark and narrow chamber was revealed a great heap of gold and silver, being well nigh as much as we had found at Speen; and, prone upon this heap, with the face buried among the gold and silver pieces, and with the arms stretched out as though he had died in the act of clutching the heap, was seen the body of a knight in black mail. At the first glance Sir Alain's people and the serfs that were helping them cried out joyously, "Gold! gold!" but then they took the knight in his armour for some scaled dragon or demon that was guarding the treasure, and they ran away, crying "Diabolus! It is the devil!"

As it especially concerned monks to deal with the great dragon, and lay evil spirits, Abbat Reginald and I, Father Felix, with an acolyte, who was but of tender age, and truth to say, sorely afear'd, hastened with Sir Alain to that pit within the wall.

"By the blessed rood!" said the Lord of Caversham, as he looked down into the hollow space—"That is no living devil, but the dead body of Sir Ingelric of Huntercombe! I know him by that black mail of Milan, and by the rare hilt of that sword, which I did give him when we were sworn friends and brothers."

"This is wonderful, and I see the finger of Heaven in it," said our abbat, crossing himself: and we all crossed ourselves for the amazement and horror that was upon us. The meaner sort, who had

fled from the dead knight, now bethought themselves of the glittering gold, and came back to the edge of that narrow pit; and when we, the monks, had thrown some holy water therein, and caused our acolyte to hold the cross over the gap, two of Sir Alain's men-at-arms descended, and re-ascending, brought forth the body and laid it at our feet upon its back, and with its face turned towards the heavens. Jesu Maria! but it was a ghostly sight! From the little air that had been in that narrow cell, and from the great siccidity or dryness of the place, betwixt stones, flint, and mortar, the body had not wasted away, or undergone the rapid corruption of the damp grave; and albeit the face was all shrivelled and shrunk, it was not hard to trace some of the lineaments of the unhappy Sir Ingelric. Within the cavity of the mouth were pieces of coined gold, as tho' he had set his famishing teeth in them; and within his clenched hands, clenched by the last agony and convulsion of death, were pieces of gold and silver. On the brow was the well-known mark of a wound which that unhappy knight had gotten in his early days in fighting for King Stephen; the Agnus Dei, and the little cross at the breast, were those of Sir Ingelric, and were marked with his name; and the blade of the sword bore the conjoined names of Sir Ingelric and Sir Alain. Having noted and pointed out all these things, Abbat Reginald, after another and more copious aspersion of the blessed water, which is holier than the stream which now floweth in Jordan, raised his right hand and said, "My children, there is a dread lesson and example in that which lieth before us! Crooked courses ever lead to evil ends, albeit not always in this nether world. But here is one that hath reaped upon earth the fruit of his crimes, and that hath perished by the demon that first led him astray—aye, perished upon a heap of gold and silver, and of famine, the cruellest of deaths, and in a miser's hole—a robber's hiding-place—unpitied, unheeded, unconfessed, with the fiend mocking him, and bidding him eat his gold, and with the interdict of holy mother church and the curses of ruined men pressing upon his sinful soul. And was it for this, oh Sir Ingelric, that thou didst soil thy faith, and betray thy king and friends, and waste the fair land of thy birth, and rack and torture the poor? Take hence the excommunicate body and bury it deep in unconsecrated earth; but remember, oh my children, all that which ye have this day seen!"

The gold and silver we removed and put into strong coffers, in order that we might use them with the same justice and regard to the poor that we had used with the treasure found in Sir Ingelric's own castle at Speen.

When we came to make inquiries among the people of those parts, and to put their several reports together, we made a good key to the awful enigma and mystery of Sir Ingelric's death. That castle by Shrivenham had been made by one of the very worst of the castle-building robbers, who had never raised any standard but his own over his donjon keep. In the autumnal season of the year preceding that in which we came to destroy the place, and at the time when the joint orders of King Stephen and Henry Plantagenet were sent forth against the castle-holders, there suddenly appeared at Shrivenham a band that came from the westward, and that were headed by a knight in black mail, and with a black plume to his casque; and by some of those reaches of treachery which were common among these evil doers, the new-comers got possession of this castellum, and made a slaughter of the builder of it, and of the men that were true to him. But the new comers had not been a day in possession of the castle when intelligence was brought them by a scout that a force of King Stephen, which had tracked them from the westward, was approaching Shrivenham; and thereupon, and for that the castle was too unfurnished with victual to withstand any beleaguer, the strangers fled from it more suddenly than they had come to it. As the vicinage was almost deserted, and as the few people fled and hid themselves, the black band had no communications with them during their brief stay; but two poor serfs who had watched their departure had described it as being full of panic, terror, and of a dread of other things besides that of the close approach of the king's force (which force never came at all); for they had heard the band bewailing that they had no longer a leader, that their chief had disappeared in the castellum, and that the devil must have carried him off bodily; and the serfs did well mark that the knight in the black mail was not among them, nor at their head, as they had seen him at their first coming. And as Sir Alain's people, in finishing their good work at the castellum, threw open the subterranean winding passage, of which mention hath been made, they found the body of an old man with a bundle of great keys at his girdle, and a long dagger sticking in his left side; and his head lay close to the strong door of the treasure chamber, and between the body and the door were picked up a strong bag and part of a long extinguished torch.

"By Saint Lucia, who presideth over man's blessed organ of sight and the glorious light of day," quoth our abbat; "by sweet Saint Lucia, I do see daylight through that dark passage. The bait of that gold drew Sir Ingelric hither, to be taken as in a trap. He was eager to have the first hantelling and most precious bits of the treasure, or mayhap to carry off the whole, or conceal it for his own use, counting upon more time than heaven allowed him. That old unshriven traitor was, doubtless, one of the men of the castle-builder, that betrayed their master, and him Sir Ingelric slew so soon as he had led him to the chamber and opened the door, with the intent that he should not divulge unto others the secret of the hiding place. Peradventure, the old man in his death-struggles dashed out the light and pulled to the open door; or Sir Ingelric, being left in darkness, and uninformed of the fastenings, did in his great haste kick the door and so cause it to fly to, and shut for ever upon him."

We did all think that the riddle was well read by Abbat Reginald, and that this was a natural conclusion to the other and better known incidents of Sir Ingelric's dark story.

By the time we had finished with the wicked castles of Barkshire, our great and ever victorious King Henry had finished with that perverse man Hugh de Mortimer; and as we came to our house at Pangbourne on our way back to Reading, we there met the young Lord of Caversham, Sir

Arthur de Bohun, who had been dismissed to his home by the king, and not without some further proof of the royal friendship, for, as it was ever in his nature to do, Sir Arthur had done manfully in the king's sieges and other emprises. It was a happy meeting to all of us, and there was no longer any public calamity to cloud or reproach our private happiness. The donjons were all down, or in good keeping; and, from end to end and in all its breadth England was at peace, and none of the baronage were so daring as to resist the king and the law. *Dulce mihi nomen pacis!*—ever sweet unto me was the name of peace, and now we had both the name and the substance of it. It was therefore resolved at Pangbourne that the marriage of Sir Arthur and the Lady Alice should be celebrated on the feast of St. Michael the Archangel, which was now near at hand.

Upon coming to Caversham Sir Alain de Bohun hung his shield upon the wall, intending to go forth to no more wars. Then he put into the hands of the gentle Alice the king's charter which conferred upon her the domains of her mother, telling her, in his jocose way, that as she had now so goodly an inheritance she might be minded to quit the humble house and poor people at Caversham, and get her to court to match with some great earl. And at this that fairest of maidens placed the king's charter in the hands of Sir Arthur, and with a blushing cheek and without words spoken, went out of the hall. Sir Arthur did afterwards inform her, in the gentlest manner, of the sure death of Sir Ingelric many months ago; and, albeit he had been so unnatural a father, Alice shed many tears, and made a vow to give money to the church and poor, that his sinful soul might be prayed for. The dreadful manner of Sir Ingelric's death was carefully concealed from the young bride, and hath never been fully made known unto her. She was united to Sir Arthur in our abbey church, on the happiest festival of St. Michael that our house had ever known, for the season was mild and beautiful, the harvest had been abundant, we had gotten in all our crops without hindrance, our granaries were filled with corn and our hearts with joy; and as all of us, from the lord abbat down to the obscurest lay brother, had a surpassing affection as well for the gentle bride as for her noble mate, who had in a manner been our son and pupil, and an old reverence and love for Sir Alain and his ladie, we could not but rejoice at the great joy we saw in them. But all good people, gentle or simple, bond or free, did jubilate on this happy day; and when the bride and bridegroom returned homeward, the procession which followed them, shouting and singing, and calling down blessings upon their young heads, was so long as to run in an unbroken line from the midst of the King's mead to the end of Caversham-bridge; for our good vassals of Reading town had all put on their holiday clothes and shut up their houses, and all the people of Caversham were afoot, and Tilehurst, and Sulham, and Charlton, and Purley, and Sunning, and Speen, and Pangbourne, and every other township and village for miles round-about had poured out their inhabitants; and not a franklin or serf, not a man, woman, or child among them all, but was feasted either by Sir Alain or Sir Arthur, or by us the monks of Reading. Methinks the sun never rose and set upon so beautiful a day! The air and the earth rejoiced, and the flowing waters; the full Thames and our own quick and resonant Kennet made music and thanksgiving together; and seemed it to me that I had never so loved the country of my birth, and the fair scenes in which my life had been past from infancy to ripe manhood; and yet had I ever loved that fair country above all that mine eyes had seen in much travelling. *Natale solum dulcedine cunctos mulcet.* Oh native soil, thou softenest man's heart, and fillest it with love of thee!

Now did the Ladie Alice more than verify the happy prediction which our good Abbat Edward put forth in the stormy time, to wit, that the little maiden which came to our house in the basket, and which I, Felix the novice, and Philip the lay-brother did convey by night unto Caversham, would make amends for the ingratitude and treasons and other wicked doings of her father. Betwixt that merry wedding-day and the day that now is, there have been nine long years, and they have all been years of peace and happiness to the good house at Caversham, with that increase and multiplication which God willed when the world was in its infancy and all unpeopled.

Happy, too, hath been our house at Reading, and great the increase of the abbey in beauty and splendour. Some few griefs and trials we have had; for earth, at the happiest, was never meant to be heaven; and we all live to die, and must die to live again. The good and bountiful Lord Abbat Reginald deceased on the fourth of the kalends of February, in the year of grace eleven hundred and fifty-eight; but he died full of years and honour, and verily, the Lord Abbat Roger that now is, hath been approved his very worthy successor. As our wealth increased under the blessed peace, and the sage government of our great king, and the favour of our Lord Thomas à Becket, for some while chancellor of the kingdom, and now and for the two years last past, by the grace of God, Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of England, we of the chapter did begin to think that our church was not sufficiently lofty and spacious, and that wondrous improvements might be made in it, if we devoted to the task some of our superfluous wealth. And six years ago, when our Lord Reginald was in the twelfth year of his government over us (may our Ladie the Virgin, and St. John and St. James ever have him in their holy keeping), we made a beginning; and the year last past, being the year of our redemption eleven hundred and sixty-four, we finished our great church, which hath been so much enlarged and altered that it may be called a new church; and Rex Henricus Secundus being present with ten suffragan bishops, and great lay barons too many to count, our Lord Archbishop Thomas did consecrate it with that solemnity and magnificence which he puts into all his doings: and on the very day on which the archbishop consecrated our church, the king, keeping his royal promise, granted us a land revenue of forty marks of silver out of the manor of Hoo in Kent, by assignment of Sir Robert Bardolph, the lord of that manor.

And our mighty and ever victorious king, who is no less a friend to learning and learned men, nor less a patron of the church than was his grandfather the Beauclerc, hath ordered books to be

bought for the enriching of our library, and hath given us another charter confirming our liberties and immunities, and enjoining all the kings that may come after him to observe the same, and calling upon the Lord to snatch them out of the land of the living, together with their posterity, if they or any one of them should seek to infringe our charter, or lessen our rights and properties. "*Quam qui infringere vel minuere presumpserit, extrahat eum dominus et evertat de terra viventium cum omni posteritate sua.*" These be the king's very words in the second great charter he hath given us.

Here I surcease from the pleasant labours which have amused the few lonely hours that my various duties left me. There cannot be a better time to stop and say *vale!* Henricus Secundus is king; Thomas à Becket is primate; Roger is lord abbat of Reading; and I, Felix the Sunningite, and novice that was, am poor sub-prior; and every monk of the house is a man of English birth. It hath been noted of late, that our prior declineth apace; and there hath been a talk among the cloister monks that I best merit that succession, which would place me next in dignity and greatness to the mitred lord abbat of this royal abbey. But, alas! what is increase of dignity but increase of care! I do hope that our good prior may live all through this winter; albeit, it is a very sharp one, and old men be falling fast around us.—*Vale et semper Vale!*

THE END.

LONDON: WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET.

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On the completion of the 'Penny Cyclopædia,' at Christmas, 1843, the following announcement was made:—"In the course of publication care has been taken, in all the great departments, to bring up the information to the most recent period, and also to make the later articles supplementary to, as well as corrective of, the earlier. But omissions, especially of new discoveries, improvements, and recent biographies, cannot have been avoided. These will be supplied by the publication, after a proper lapse of time, which will be at least a year, of a Supplement. A full Index will be published at a future day, which will not only materially increase the value of the Cyclopædia as a work of reference, but will enable the reader to place the later articles in proper connexion with the earlier, in the point of view just mentioned."

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