

CHAPTER XXX
HOW THE BRUSHWOOD MEN CAME TO THE CHATEAU OF
VILLEFRANCHE

It was late ere Alleyne Edricson, having carried Sir Nigel the goblet of spiced wine which it was his custom to drink after the curling of his hair, was able at last to seek his chamber. It was a stone flagged room upon the second floor, with a bed in a recess for him, and two smaller pallets on the other side, on which Aylward and Hordle John were already snoring. Alleyne had knelt down to his evening orisons, when there came a tap at his door, and Ford entered with a small lamp in his hand. His face was deadly pale, and his hand shook until the shadows flickered up and down the wall.

“What is it, Ford?” cried Alleyne, springing to his feet.

“I can scarce tell you” said he, sitting down on the side of the couch, and resting his chin upon his hand. “I know not what to say or what to think.”

“Has aught befallen you, then?”

“Yes, or I have been slave to my own fancy. I tell you, lad, that I am all undone, like a fretted bowstring. Hark hither, Alleyne! It cannot be that you have forgotten little Tita, the daughter of the old glass-stainer at Bordeaux?”

“I remember her well.”

“She and I, Alleyne, broke the lucky groat together ere we parted, and she wears my ring upon her finger. ‘Caro mio’ quoth she. when last we parted, ‘I shall be near thee in the wars, and thy danger will be my danger.’ Alleyne, as God is my help, as I came up the stairs this night I saw her stand before me, her face in tears, her hands out as though in warning — I saw it, Alleyne, even as I see those two archers upon their couches. Our very fingertips seemed to meet, ere she thinned away like a mist in the sunshine.”

“I would not give overmuch thought to it” answered Alleyne. “Our minds will play us strange pranks, and bethink you that these words of the Lady Tiphaine Du Guesclin have wrought upon us and shaken us.”

Ford shook his head. “I saw little Tita as clearly as though I were back at the Rue des Apotres at Bordeaux” said he. “But the hour is late, and I must go.”

“Where do you sleep, then?”

“In the chamber above you. May the saints be with us all!” He rose from the couch and left the chamber, while Alleyne could hear his feet sounding upon the winding stair. The young squire walked across to the window and gazed out at the moonlit landscape, his mind absorbed by the thought of the Lady Tiphaine, and of the strange words that she had spoken as to what was going

forward at Castle Twynham. Leaning his elbows upon the stonework, he was deeply plunged in reverie, when in a moment his thoughts were brought back to Villefranche and to the scene before him.

The window at which he stood was in the second floor of that portion of the castle which was nearest to the keep. In front lay the broad moat, with the moon lying upon its surface, now clear and round, now drawn lengthwise as the breeze stirred the waters. Beyond, the plain sloped down to a thick wood, while further to the left a second wood shut out the view. Between the two an open glade stretched, silvered in the moonshine, with the river curving across the lower end of it.

As he gazed, he saw of a sudden a man steal forth from the wood into the open clearing. He walked with his head sunk, his shoulders curved, and his knees bent, as one who strives hard to remain unseen. Ten paces from the fringe of trees he glanced around, and waving his hand he crouched down, and was lost to sight among a belt of furze bushes. After him there came a second man, and after him a third, a fourth, and a fifth stealing across the narrow open space and darting into the shelter of the brushwood. Nine and seventy Alleyne counted of these dark figures flitting across the line of the moonlight. Many bore huge burdens upon their backs, though what it was that they carried he could not tell at the distance. Out of the one wood and into the other they passed, all with the same crouching, furtive gait, until the black bristle of trees had swallowed up the last of them.

For a moment Alleyne stood in the window, still staring down at the silent forest, uncertain as to what he should think of these midnight walkers. Then he bethought him that there was one beside him who was fitter to judge on such a matter. His fingers had scarce rested upon Aylward's shoulder ere the bowman was on his feet, with his hand outstretched to his sword.

"Qui va?" he cried. "Hola! Mon petit. By my hilt! I thought there had been a camisade. What then, mon gar?"

"Come hither by the window, Aylward" said Alleyne. "I have seen four score men pass from yonder shaw across the glade, and nigh every man of them had a great burden on his back. What think you of it?"

"I think nothing of it, mon camarade! There are as many masterless folk in this country as there are rabbits on Cowdray Down, and there are many who show their faces by night but would dance in a hempen collar if they stirred forth in the day. On all the French marches are droves of outcasts, reivers, spoilers, and drawlatches, of whom I judge that these are some, though I marvel that they should dare to come so nigh to the castle of the seneschal. All seems very quiet now" he added, peering out of the window.

"They are in the further wood" said Alleyne.

“And there they may bide. Back to rest, mon petit; for, by my hilt! Each day now will bring its own work. Yet it would be well to shoot the bolt in yonder door when one is in strange quarters. So!” He threw himself down upon his pallet and in an instant was fast asleep.

It might have been about three o'clock in the morning when Alleyne was aroused from a troubled sleep by a low cry or exclamation. He listened, but, as he heard no more, he set it down as the challenge of the guard upon the walls, and dropped off to sleep once more. A few minutes later he was disturbed by a gentle creaking of his own door, as though some one were pushing cautiously against it, and immediately afterwards he heard the soft thud of cautious footsteps upon the stair which led to the room above, followed by a confused noise and a muffled groan. Alleyne sat up on his couch with all his nerves in a tingle, uncertain whether these sounds might come from a simple cause — some sick archer and visiting leech perhaps — or whether they might have a more sinister meaning. But what danger could threaten them here in this strong castle, under the care of famous warriors, with high walls and a broad moat around them? Who was there that could injure them? He had well nigh persuaded himself that his fears were a foolish fancy, when his eyes fell upon that which sent the blood cold to his heart and left him gasping, with hands clutching at the counterpane.

Right in front of him was the broad window of the chamber, with the moon shining brightly through it. For an instant something had obscured the light, and now a head was bobbing up and down outside, the face looking in at him, and swinging slowly from one side of the window to the other. Even in that dim light there could be no mistaking those features. Drawn, distorted and blood-stained, they were still those of the young fellow-squire who had sat so recently upon his own couch. With a cry of horror Alleyne sprang from his bed and rushed to the casement, while the two archers, aroused by the sound, seized their weapons and stared about them in bewilderment. One glance was enough to show Edricson that his fears were but too true. Foully murdered, with a score of wounds upon him and a rope round his neck, his poor friend had been cast from the upper window and swung slowly in the night wind, his body rasping against the wall and his disfigured face upon a level with the casement.

“My God!” cried Alleyne, shaking in every limb. “What has come upon us? What devil's deed is this?”

“Here is flint and steel” said John stolidly. “The lamp, Aylward! This moonshine softens a man's heart. Now we may use the eyes which God hath given us.”

“By my hilt!” cried Aylward, as the yellow flame flickered up, “It is indeed young master Ford, and I think that this seneschal is a black villain, who dare not face us in the day but would murder us in our sleep. By the twang of string! If I do not soak a goose's feather with his heart's blood, it will be no fault of Samkin Aylward of the White Company.”

“But, Aylward, think of the men whom I saw yesternight” said Alleyne. “It may not be the seneschal. It may be that others have come into the castle. I must to Sir Nigel ere it be too late. Let me go, Aylward, for my place is by his side.”

“One moment, mon gar. Put that steel headpiece on the end of my yew stave. So! I will put it first through the door; for it is ill to come out when you can neither see nor guard yourself. Now, camarades, out swords and stand ready! Hola, by my hilt! It is time that we were stirring!”

As he spoke, a sudden shouting broke forth in the castle, with the scream of a woman and the rush of many feet. Then came the sharp clink of clashing steel, and a roar like that of an angry lion — “Notre Dame Du Guesclin! St. Ives! St. Ives!” The bowman pulled back the bolt of the door, and thrust out the headpiece at the end of the bow. A clash, the clatter of the steel cap upon the ground, and, ere the man who struck could heave up for another blow, the archer had passed his sword through his body. “On, camarades, on!” he cried; and, breaking fiercely past two men who threw themselves in his way, he sped down the broad corridor in the direction of the shouting.

A sharp turning, and then a second one, brought them to the head of a short stair, from which they looked straight down upon the scene of the uproar. A square oak floored hall lay beneath them, from which opened the doors of the principal guest chambers. This hall was as light as day, for torches burned in numerous sconces upon the walls, throwing strange shadows from the tusked or antlered heads which ornamented them. At the very foot of the stair, close to the open door of their chamber, lay the seneschal and his wife: she with her head shorn from her shoulders, he thrust through with a sharpened stake, which still protruded from either side of his body. Three servants of the castle lay dead beside them, all torn and draggled, as though a pack of wolves had been upon them. In front of the central guest chamber stood Du Guesclin and Sir Nigel, half clad and unarmoured, with the mad joy of battle gleaming in their eyes. Their heads were thrown back, their lips compressed, their bloodstained swords poised over their right shoulders, and their left feet thrown out. Three dead men lay huddled together in front of them: while a fourth, with the blood squirting from a severed vessel, lay back with updrawn knees, breathing in wheezy gasps. Further back — all panting together, like the wind in a tree — there stood a group of fierce, wild creatures, bare armed and bare legged, gaunt, unshaven, with deep-set murderous eyes and wild beast faces. With their flashing teeth, their bristling hair, their mad leapings and screamings, they seemed to Alleyne more like fiends from the pit than men of flesh and blood. Even as he looked, they broke into a hoarse yell and dashed once more upon the two knights, hurling themselves madly upon their sword points; clutching, scrambling, biting, tearing, careless of wounds if they could but drag the two soldiers to earth. Sir Nigel was thrown down by the sheer weight of them, and Sir Bertrand with his thunderous war cry was swinging round his heavy sword to clear a space for him to rise, when the whistle of two long English arrows, and the rush of the squire and the two English archers down the stairs, turned the tide of the combat. The assailants gave back, the knights rushed forward,

and in a very few moments the hall was cleared, and Hordle John had hurled the last of the wild men down the steep steps which led from the end of it.

“Do not follow them” cried Du Guesclin. “We are lost if we scatter. For myself I care not a denier, though it is a poor thing to meet one’s end at the hands of such scum; but I have my dear lady here, who must by no means be risked. We have breathing space now, and I would ask you, Sir Nigel, what it is that you would counsel?”

“By St. Paul!” answered Sir Nigel, “I can by no means understand what hath befallen us, save that I have been woken up by your battle cry, and, rushing forth, found myself in the midst of this small bickering. Harrow and alas for the lady and the seneschal! What dogs are they who have done this bloody deed?”

“They are the Jacks, the men of the brushwood. They have the castle, though I know not how it hath come to pass. Look from this window into the bailey.”

“By heaven!” cried Sir Nigel, “it is as bright as day with the torches. The gates stand open, and there are three thousand of them within the walls. See how they rush and scream and wave! What is it that they thrust out through the postern door? My God! it is a man-at-arms, and they pluck him limb from limb like hounds on a wolf. Now another, and yet another. They hold the whole castle, for I see their faces at the windows. See, there are some with great bundles on their backs.”

“It is dried wood from the forest. They pile them against the walls and set them in a blaze. Who is this who tries to check them? By St. Ives! It is the good priest who spake for them in the hall. He kneels, he prays, he implores! What! villains, would ye raise hands against those who have befriended you? Ah, the butcher has struck him! He is down! They stamp him under their feet! They tear off his gown and wave it in the air! See now, how the flames lick up the walls! Are there none left to rally round us? With a hundred men we might hold our own.”

“Oh, for my Company!” cried Sir Nigel. “But where is Ford, Alleyne?”

“He is foully murdered, my fair lord.”

“The saints receive him! May he rest in peace! But here come some at last who may give us counsel, for amid these passages it is ill to stir without a guide.”

As he spoke, a French squire and the Bohemian knight came rushing down the steps, the latter bleeding from a slash across his forehead.

“All is lost!” he cried. “The castle is taken and on fire, the seneschal is slain, and there is nought left for us.”

“On the contrary” quoth Sir Nigel “there is much left to us, for there is a very honourable contention before us, and a fair lady for whom to give our lives. There are many ways in which a man might die, but none better than this.”

“You can tell us, Godfrey” said Du Guesclin to the French squire: “how came these men into the castle, and what succors can we count upon? By St. Ives! If we come not quickly to some counsel we shall be burned like young rooks in a nest.”

The squire, a dark, slender stripling, spoke firmly and quickly, as one who was trained to swift action. “There is a passage under the earth into the castle” said he “and through it some of the Jacks made their way, casting open the gates for the others. They have had help from within the walls, and the men-at-arms were heavy with wine: they must have been slain in their beds, for these devils crept from room to room with soft step and ready knife. Sir Amory the Hospitaller was struck down with an axe as he rushed before us from his sleeping chamber. Save only ourselves, I do not think that there are any left alive.”

“What, then, would you counsel?”

“That we make for the keep. It is unused, save in time of war, and the key hangs from my poor lord and master’s belt.”

“There are two keys there.”

“It is the larger. Once there, we might hold the narrow stair; and at least, as the walls are of a greater thickness, it would be longer ere they could burn them. Could we but carry the lady across the bailey, all might be well with us.”

“Nay; the lady hath seen something of the work of war” said Tiphaine coming forth, as white, as grave, and as unmoved as ever. “I would not be a hamper to you, my dear spouse and gallant friend. Rest assured of this, that if all else fail I have always a safeguard here” — drawing a small silver-hilted poniard from her bosom — “which sets me beyond the fear of these vile and blood-stained wretches.”

“Tiphaine” cried Du Guesclin, “I have always loved you; and now, by Our Lady of Rennes! I love you more than ever. Did I not know that your hand will be as ready as your words I would myself turn my last blow upon you, ere you should fall into their hands. Lead on, Godfrey! A new golden pyx will shine in the minster of Dinan if we come safely through with it.”

The attention of the insurgents had been drawn away from murder to plunder, and all over the castle might be heard their cries and whoops of delight as they dragged forth the rich tapestries, the silver flagons, and the carved furniture. Down in the courtyard half clad wretches, their bare limbs all mottled with bloodstains, strutted about with plumed helmets upon their heads, or with the Lady Rochefort’s silken gowns girt round their loins and trailing on the

ground behind them. Casks of choice wine had been rolled out from the cellars, and starving peasants squatted, goblet in hand, draining off vintages which De Rochefort had set aside for noble and royal guests. Others, with slabs of bacon and joints of dried meat upon the ends of their pikes, held them up to the blaze or tore at them ravenously with their teeth. Yet all order had not been lost amongst them, for some hundreds of the better armed stood together in a silent group, leaning upon their rude weapons and looking up at the fire, which had spread so rapidly as to involve one whole side of the castle. Already Alleyne could hear the crackling and roaring of the flames, while the air was heavy with heat and full of the pungent whiff of burning wood.

CHAPTER XXXI
HOW FIVE MEN HELD THE KEEP OF VILLEFRANCHE

Under the guidance of the French squire the party passed down two narrow corridors. The first was empty, but at the head of the second stood a peasant sentry, who started off at the sight of them, yelling loudly to his comrades. "Stop him, or we are undone!" cried Du Guesclin, and had started to run, when Aylward's great war bow twanged like a harp string, and the man fell forward upon his face, with twitching limbs and clutching fingers. Within five paces of where he lay a narrow and little used door led out into the bailey. From beyond it came such a Babel of hooting and screaming, horrible oaths and yet more horrible laughter, that the stoutest heart might have shrunk from casting down the frail barrier which faced them.

"Make straight for the keep!" said Du Guesclin, in a sharp, stern whisper. "The two archers in front, the lady in the centre, a squire on either side, while we three knights shall bide behind and beat back those who press upon us. So! Now open the door, and God have us in his holy keeping!"

For a few moments it seemed that their object would be attained without danger, so swift and so silent had been their movements. They were halfway across the bailey ere the frantic, howling peasants made a movement to stop them. The few who threw themselves in their way were overpowered or brushed aside, while the pursuers were beaten back by the ready weapons of the three cavaliers. Unscathed they fought their way to the door of the keep, and faced round upon the swarming mob, while the squire thrust the great key into the lock.

"My God!" he cried, "it is the wrong key."

"The wrong key!"

"Dolt, fool that I am! This is the key of the castle gate; the other opens the keep. I must back for it!" He turned, with some wild intention of retracing his steps, but at the instant a great jagged rock, hurled by a brawny peasant, struck him full upon the ear, and he dropped senseless to the ground.

"This is key enough for me!" quoth Hordle John, picking up the huge stone, and hurling it against the door with all the strength of his enormous body. The lock shivered, the wood smashed, the stone flew into five pieces, but the iron clamps still held the door in its position. Bending down, he thrust his great fingers under it, and with a heave raised the whole mass of wood and iron from its hinges. For a moment it tottered and swayed, and then, falling outward, buried him in its ruin, while his comrades rushed into the dark archway which led to safety.

"Up the steps, Tiphaine!" cried Du Guesclin. "Now round, friends, and beat them back!" The mob of peasants had surged in upon their heels, but the two

trustiest blades in Europe gleamed upon that narrow stair, and four of their number dropped upon the threshold. The others gave back, and gathered in a half circle round the open door, gnashing their teeth and shaking their clenched hands at the defenders. The body of the French squire had been dragged out by them and hacked to pieces. Three or four others had pulled John from under the door, when he suddenly bounded to his feet, and clutching one in either hand dashed them together with such force that they fell senseless across each other upon the ground. With a kick and a blow he freed himself from two others who clung to him, and in a moment he was within the portal with his comrades.

Yet their position was a desperate one. The peasants from far and near had been assembled for this deed of vengeance, and not less than six thousand were within or around the walls of the Chateau of Villefranche. Ill armed and half starved, they were still desperate men, to whom danger had lost all fears: for what was death that they should shun it to cling to such a life as theirs? The castle was theirs, and the roaring flames were spurting through the windows and flickering high above the turrets on two sides of the quadrangle. From either side they were sweeping down from room to room and from bastion to bastion in the direction of the keep. Faced by an army, and girt in by fire, were six men and one woman; but some of them were men so trained to danger and so wise in war that even now the combat was less unequal than it seemed. Courage and resource were penned in by desperation and numbers, while the great yellow sheets of flame threw their lurid glare over the scene of death.

“There is but space for two upon a step to give free play to our sword-arms” said Du Guesclin. “Do you stand with me, Nigel, upon the lowest. France and England will fight together this night. Sir Otto, I pray you to stand behind us with this young squire. The archers may go higher yet and shoot over our heads. I would that we had our harness, Nigel.”

“Often have I heard my dear Sir John Chandos say that a knight should never, even when a guest, be parted from it. Yet it will be more honour to us if we come well out of it. We have a vantage, since we see them against the light and they can scarce see us. It seems to me that they muster for an onslaught.”

“If we can but keep them in play” said the Bohemian, “it is likely that these flames may bring us succor if there be any true men in the country.”

“Bethink you, my fair lord” said Alleyne to Sir Nigel, “that we have never injured these men, nor have we cause of quarrel against them. Would it not be well, if but for the lady’s sake, to speak them fair and see if we may not come to honourable terms with them?”

“Not so, by St. Paul!” cried Sir Nigel. “It does not accord with mine honour, nor shall it ever be said that I, a knight of England, was ready to hold parley with men who have slain a fair lady and a holy priest.”

“As well hold parley with a pack of ravening wolves” said the French captain. “Ha! Notre Dame Du Guesclin! Saint Ives! Saint Ives!”

As he thundered forth his war cry, the Jacks who had been gathering before the black arch of the gateway rushed in madly in a desperate effort to carry the staircase. Their leaders were a small man, dark in the face, with his beard done up in two plaits, and another larger man, very bowed in the shoulders, with a huge club studded with sharp nails in his hand. The first had not taken three steps ere an arrow from Aylward's bow struck him full in the chest, and he fell coughing and spluttering across the threshold. The other rushed onwards, and breaking between Du Guesclin and Sir Nigel he dashed out the brains of the Bohemian with a single blow of his clumsy weapon. With three swords through him he still struggled on, and had almost won his way through them ere he fell dead upon the stair. Close at his heels came a hundred furious peasants, who flung themselves again and again against the five swords which confronted them. It was cut and parry and stab as quick as eye could see or hand act. The door was piled with bodies, and the stone floor was slippery with blood. The deep shout of Du Guesclin, the hard, hissing breath of the pressing multitude, the clatter of steel, the thud of falling bodies, and the screams of the stricken, made up such a medley as came often in after years to break upon Alleyne's sleep. Slowly and sullenly at last the throng drew off, with many a fierce backward glance, while eleven of their number lay huddled in front of the stair which they had failed to win.

"The dogs have had enough" said Du Guesclin.

"By Saint Paul! there appear to be some very worthy and valiant persons among them" observed Sir Nigel. "They are men from whom, had they been of better birth, much honour and advancement might be gained. Even as it is, it is a great pleasure to have seen them. But what is this that they are bringing forward?"

"It is as I feared" growled Du Guesclin. "They will burn us out, since they cannot win their way past us. Shoot straight and hard, archers; for, by St. Ives! our good swords are of little use to us."

As he spoke, a dozen men rushed forward, each screening himself behind a huge fardel of brushwood. Hurling their burdens in one vast heap within the portal, they threw burning torches upon the top of it. The wood had been soaked in oil, for in an instant it was ablaze, and a long, hissing, yellow flame licked over the heads of the defenders, and drove them further up to the first floor of the keep. They had scarce reached it, however, ere they found that the wooden joists and planks of the flooring were already on fire. Dry and worm-eaten, a spark upon them became a smoulder, and a smoulder a blaze. A choking smoke filled the air, and the five could scarce grope their way to the staircase which led up to the very summit of the square tower.

Strange was the scene which met their eyes from this eminence. Beneath them on every side stretched the long sweep of peaceful country, rolling plain, and tangled wood, all softened and mellowed in the silver moonshine. No light, nor movement, nor any sign of human aid could be seen, but far away the hoarse clangor of a heavy bell rose and fell upon the wintry air. Beneath and

around them blazed the huge fire, roaring and crackling on every side of the bailey, and even as they looked the two corner turrets fell in with a deafening crash, and the whole castle was but a shapeless mass, spouting flames and smoke from every window and embrasure. The great black tower upon which they stood rose like a last island of refuge amid this sea of fire but the ominous crackling and roaring below showed that it would not be long ere it was engulfed also in the common ruin. At their very feet was the square courtyard, crowded with the howling and dancing peasants, their fierce faces upturned, their clenched hands waving, all drunk with bloodshed and with vengeance. A yell of execration and a scream of hideous laughter burst from the vast throng, as they saw the faces of the last survivors of their enemies peering down at them from the height of the keep. They still piled the brushwood round the base of the tower, and gambolled hand in hand around the blaze, screaming out the doggerel lines which had long been the watchword of the Jacquerie:

Cessez, cessez, gens d'armes et pietons,
De piller et manger le bonhomme
Qui de longtemps Jacques Bonhomme
Se nomme.

Their thin, shrill voices rose high above the roar of the flames and the crash of the masonry, like the yelping of a pack of wolves who see their quarry before them and know that they have well nigh run him down.

“By my hilt!” said Aylward to John “It is in my mind that we shall not see Spain this journey. It is a great joy to me that I have placed my feather bed and other things of price with that worthy woman at Lyndhurst, who will now have the use of them. I have thirteen arrows yet, and if one of them fly unfleshed, then, by the twang of string! I shall deserve my doom. First at him who flaunts with my lady’s silken frock. Clap in the clout, by God! Though a hand’s breadth lower than I had meant. Now for the rogue with the head upon his pike. Ha! To the inch, John. When my eye is true, I am better at rovers than at long-butts or hoyles. A good shoot for you also, John! The villain hath fallen forward into the fire. But I pray you, John, to loose gently, and not to pluck with the drawing hand, for it is a trick that hath marred many a fine bowman.”

Whilst the two archers were keeping up a brisk fire upon the mob beneath them, Du Guesclin and his lady were consulting with Sir Nigel upon their desperate situation.

“’Tis a strange end for one who has seen so many stricken fields” said the French chieftain. “For me one death is as another, but it is the thought of my sweet lady which goes to my heart.”

“Nay, Bertrand, I fear it as little as you” said she. “Had I my dearest wish, it would be that we should go together.”

“Well answered, fair lady!” cried Sir Nigel. “And very sure I am that my own sweet wife would have said the same. If the end be now come, I have had great

good fortune in having lived in times when so much glory was to be won, and in knowing so many valiant gentlemen and knights. But why do you pluck my sleeve, Alleyne?"

"If it please you, my fair lord, there are in this corner two great tubes of iron, with many heavy balls, which may perchance be those bombards and shot of which I have heard."

"By Saint Ives! it is true" cried Sir Bertrand, striding across to the recess where the ungainly, funnel shaped, thick ribbed engines were standing. "Bombards they are, and of good size. We may shoot down upon them."

"Shoot with them, quotha?" cried Aylward in high disdain, for pressing danger is the great leveller of classes. "How is a man to take aim with these fool's toys, and how can he hope to do scath with them?"

"I will show you" answered Sir Nigel; "for here is the great box of powder, and if you will raise it for me, John, I will show you how it may be used. Come hither, where the folk are thickest round the fire. Now, Aylward, crane thy neck and see what would have been deemed an old wife's tale when we first turned our faces to the wars. Throw back the lid, John, and drop the box into the fire!"

A deafening roar, a fluff of bluish light, and the great square tower rocked and trembled from its very foundations, swaying this way and that like a reed in the wind. Amazed and dizzy, the defenders, clutching at the cracking parapets for support, saw great stones, burning beams of wood, and mangled bodies hurtling past them through the air. When they staggered to their feet once more, the whole keep had settled down upon one side, so that they could scarce keep their footing upon the sloping platform. Gazing over the edge, they looked down upon the horrible destruction which had been caused by the explosion. For forty yards round the portal the ground was black with writhing, screaming figures, who struggled up and hurled themselves down again, tossing this way and that, sightless, scorched, with fire bursting from their tattered clothing. Beyond this circle of death their comrades, bewildered and amazed, cowered away from this black tower and from these invincible men, who were most to be dreaded when hope was furthest from their hearts.

"A sally, Du Guesclin, a sally!" cried Sir Nigel. "By Saint Paul! They are in two minds, and a bold rush may turn them." He drew his sword as he spoke and darted down the winding stairs, closely followed by his four comrades. Ere he was at the first floor, however, he threw up his arms and stopped. "Mon Dieu!" he said "we are lost men!"

"What then?" cried those behind him.

"The wall hath fallen in, the stair is blocked, and the fire still rages below. By Saint Paul! Friends, we have fought a very honourable fight, and may say in all humbleness that we have done our devoir, but I think that we may now go back

to the Lady Tiphaine and say our orisons, for we have played our parts in this world, and it is time that we made ready for another.”

The narrow pass was blocked by huge stones littered in wild confusion over each other, with the blue choking smoke reeking up through the crevices. The explosion had blown in the wall and cut off the only path by which they could descend. Pent in, a hundred feet from earth, with a furnace raging under them and a ravening multitude all round who thirsted for their blood, it seemed indeed as though no men had ever come through such peril with their lives. Slowly they made their way back to the summit, but as they came out upon it the Lady Tiphaine darted forward and caught her husband by the wrist.

“Bertrand” said she, “hush and listen! I have heard the voices of men all singing together in a strange tongue.”

Breathless they stood and silent, but no sound came up to them, save the roar of the flames and the clamor of their enemies.

“It cannot be, lady” said Du Guesclin. “This night hath over wrought you, and your senses play you false. What men are there in this country who would sing in a strange tongue?”

“Hola!” yelled Aylward, leaping suddenly into the air with waving hands and joyous face. “I thought I heard it ere we went down, and now I hear it again. We are saved, comrades! By these ten finger bones, we are saved! It is the marching song of the White Company. Hush!”

With upraised forefinger and slanting head, he stood listening. Suddenly there came swelling up a deep voiced, rollicking chorus from somewhere out of the darkness. Never did choice or dainty ditty of Provence or Languedoc sound more sweetly in the ears than did the rough tongued Saxon to the six who strained their ears from the blazing keep:

We'll drink all together
To the grey goose feather
And the land where the grey goose flew.

“Ha, by my hilt!” shouted Aylward, “it is the dear old bow song of the Company. Here come two hundred as tight lads as ever twirled a shaft over their thumbnails. Hark to the dogs, how lustily they sing!”

Nearer and clearer, swelling up out of the night, came the gay marching lilt:

What of the bow?
The bow was made in England.
Of true wood, of yew wood,
The wood of English bows;
For men who are free
Love the old yew tree

And the land where the yew tree grows.

What of the men?
The men were bred in England,
The bowmen, the yeomen,
The lads of the dale and fell,
Here's to you and to you,
To the hearts that are true,
And the land where the true hearts dwell.

“They sing very joyfully” said Du Guesclin, “as though they were going to a festival.”

“It is their wont when there is work to be done.”

“By Saint Paul!” quoth Sir Nigel “It is in my mind that they come too late, for I cannot see how we are to come down from this tower.”

“There they come, the hearts of gold!” cried Aylward. “See, they move out from the shadow. Now they cross the meadow. They are on the further side of the moat. Hola camarades, hola! Johnston, Eccles, Cooke, Harward, Bligh! Would ye see a fair lady and two gallant knights done foully to death?”

“Who is there?” shouted a deep voice from below. “Who is this who speaks with an English tongue?”

“It is I, old lad. It is Sam Aylward of the Company; and here is your captain, Sir Nigel Loring, and four others, all laid out to be grilled like an Easterling’s herrings.”

“Curse me if I did not think that it was the style of speech of old Samkin Aylward” said the voice, amid a buzz from the ranks. “Wherever there are knocks going there is Sammy in the heart of it. But who are these ill-faced rogues who block the path? To your kennels, canaille! What! You dare look us in the eyes? Out swords, lads, and give them the flat of them! Waste not your shafts upon such runagate knaves.”

There was little fight left in the peasants, however, still dazed by the explosion, amazed at their own losses and disheartened by the arrival of the disciplined archers. In a very few minutes they were in full flight for their brushwood homes, leaving the morning sun to rise upon a blackened and bloodstained ruin, where it had left the night before the magnificent castle of the Seneschal of Auvergne. Already the white lines in the east were deepening into pink as the archers gathered round the keep and took counsel how to rescue the survivors.

“Had we a rope” said Alleyne “there is one side which is not yet on fire, down which we might slip.”

“But how to get a rope?”

“It is an old trick” quoth Aylward. “Hola! Johnston, cast me up a rope, even as you did at Maupertuis in the war time.”

The grizzled archer thus addressed took several lengths of rope from his comrades, and knotting them firmly together, he stretched them out in the long shadow which the rising sun threw from the frowning keep. Then he fixed the yew stave of his bow upon end and measured the long, thin, black line which it threw upon the turf.

“A six foot stave throws a twelve foot shadow” he muttered. “The keep throws a shadow of sixty paces. Thirty paces of rope will be enow and to spare. Another strand, Watkin! Now pull at the end that all may be safe. So! It is ready for them.”

“But how are they to reach it?” asked the young archer beside him.

“Watch and see, young fool’s head” growled the old bowman. He took a long string from his pouch and fastened one end to an arrow.

“All ready, Samkin?”

“Ready, camarade.”

“Close to your hand then.” With an easy pull he sent the shaft flickering gently up, falling upon the stonework within a foot of where Aylward was standing. The other end was secured to the rope, so that in a minute a good strong cord was dangling from the only sound side of the blazing and shattered tower. The Lady Tiphaine was lowered with a noose drawn fast under the arms, and the other five slid swiftly down, amid the cheers and joyous outcry of their rescuers.

CHAPTER XXXII
HOW THE COMPANY TOOK COUNSEL ROUND THE FALLEN TREE

“Where is Sir Claude Latour?” asked Sir Nigel, as his feet touched ground.

“He is in camp, near Montpezat, two hours’ march from here, my fair lord” said Johnston, the grizzled Bowman who commanded the archers.

“Then we shall march thither, for I would fain have you all back at Dax in time to be in the prince’s vanguard.”

“My lord” cried Alleyne, joyfully, “here are our chargers in the field, and I see your harness amid the plunder which these rogues have left behind them.”

“By Saint Ives! you speak sooth, young squire” said Du Guesclin. “There is my horse and my lady’s jennet. The knaves led them from the stables, but fled without them. Now, Nigel, it is great joy to me to have seen one of whom I have often heard. Yet we must leave you now, for I must be with the King of Spain ere your army crosses the mountains.”

“I had thought that you were in Spain with the valiant Henry of Trastamare.”

“I have been there, but I came to France to raise succor for him. I shall ride back, Nigel, with four thousand of the best lances of France at my back, so that your prince may find he hath a task which is worthy of him. God be with you, friend, and may we meet again in better times!”

“I do not think” said Sir Nigel, as he stood by Alleyne’s side looking after the French knight and his lady, “that in all Christendom you will meet with a more stouthearted man or a fairer and sweeter dame. But your face is pale and sad, Alleyne! Have you perchance met with some hurt during the ruffle?”

“Nay, my fair lord, I was but thinking of my friend Ford, and how he sat upon my couch no later than yesternight.”

Sir Nigel shook his head sadly. “Two brave squires have I lost” said he. “I know not why the young shoots should be plucked, and an old weed left standing, yet certes there must be some good reason, since God hath so planned it. Did you not note, Alleyne, that the Lady Tiphaine did give us warning last night that danger was coming upon us?”

“She did, my lord.”

“By Saint Paul! my mind misgives me as to what she saw at Twynham Castle. And yet I cannot think that any Scottish or French rovers could land in such force as to beleaguer the fortalice. Call the Company together, Aylward; and let us on, for it will be shame to us if we are not at Dax upon the trysting day.”

The archers had spread themselves over the ruins, but a blast upon a bugle brought them all back to muster, with such booty as they could bear with them stuffed into their pouches or slung over their shoulders. As they formed into ranks, each man dropping silently into his place, Sir Nigel ran a questioning eye over them, and a smile of pleasure played over his face. Tall and sinewy, and brown, clear eyed, hard featured, with the stern and prompt bearing of experienced soldiers, it would be hard indeed for a leader to seek for a choicer following. Here and there in the ranks were old soldiers of the French wars, grizzled and lean, with fierce, puckered features and shaggy, bristling brows. The most, however, were young and dandy archers, with fresh English faces, their beards combed out, their hair curling from under their close steel hufkens, with gold or jewelled earrings gleaming in their ears, while their gold spangled baldrics, their silken belts, and the chains which many of them wore round their thick brown necks, all spoke of the brave times which they had had as free companions. Each had a yew or hazel stave slung over his shoulder, plain and serviceable with the older men, but gaudily painted and carved at either end with the others. Steel caps, mail brigandines, white surcoats with the red lion of St. George, and sword or battle axe swinging from their belts, completed this equipment, while in some cases the murderous maule or five foot mallet was hung across the bowstave, being fastened to their leathern shoulder belt by a hook in the centre of the handle. Sir Nigel's heart beat high as he looked upon their free bearing and fearless faces.

For two hours they marched through forest and marshland, along the left bank of the river Aveyron; Sir Nigel riding behind his Company, with Alleyne at his right hand, and Johnston, the old master bowman, walking by his left stirrup. Ere they had reached their journey's end the knight had learned all that he would know of his men, their doings and their intentions. Once, as they marched, they saw upon the further bank of the river a body of French men-at-arms, riding very swiftly in the direction of Villefranche.

"It is the Seneschal of Toulouse, with his following" said Johnston, shading his eyes with his hand. "Had he been on this side of the water he might have attempted something upon us."

"I think that it would be well that we should cross" said Sir Nigel. "It were pity to balk this worthy seneschal, should he desire to try some small feat of arms."

"Nay, there is no ford nearer than Tourville" answered the old archer. "He is on his way to Villefranche, and short will be the shrift of any Jacks who come into his hands, for he is a man of short speech. It was he and the Seneschal of Beaucaire who hung Peter Wilkins, of the Company, last Lammastide; for which, by the black rood of Waltham! They shall hang themselves, if ever they come into our power. But here are our comrades, Sir Nigel, and here is our camp."

As he spoke, the forest pathway along which they marched opened out into a green glade, which sloped down towards the river. High, leafless trees girt it

in on three sides, with a thick undergrowth of holly between their trunks. At the farther end of this forest clearing there stood forty or fifty huts, built very neatly from wood and clay, with the blue smoke curling out from the roofs. A dozen tethered horses and mules grazed around the encampment, while a number of archers lounged about: some shooting at marks, while others built up great wooden fires in the open, and hung their cooking kettles above them. At the sight of their returning comrades there was a shout of welcome, and a horseman, who had been exercising his charger behind the camp, came cantering down to them. He was a dapper, brisk man, very richly clad, with a round, clean-shaven face, and very bright black eyes, which danced and sparkled with excitement.

“Sir Nigel!” he cried. “Sir Nigel Loring, at last! By my soul we have awaited you this month past. Right welcome, Sir Nigel! You have had my letter?”

“It was that which brought me here” said Sir Nigel. “But indeed, Sir Claude Latour, it is a great wonder to me that you did not yourself lead these bowmen, for surely they could have found no better leader?”

“None, none, by the Virgin of L’Esparre!” he cried, speaking in the strange, thick Gascon speech which turns every *v* into a *b*. “But you know what these islanders of yours are, Sir Nigel. They will not be led by any save their own blood and race. There is no persuading them. Not even I, Claude Latour Seigneur of Montchateau, master of the high justice, the middle and the low, could gain their favour. They must needs hold a council and put their two hundred thick heads together, and then there comes this fellow Aylward and another, as their spokesmen, to say that they will disband unless an Englishman of good name be set over them. There are many of them, as I understand, who come from some great forest which lies in Hampi, or Hampti — I cannot lay my tongue to the name. Your dwelling is in those parts, and so their thoughts turned to you as their leader. But we had hoped that you would bring a hundred men with you.”

“They are already at Dax, where we shall join them” said Sir Nigel. “But let the men break their fast, and we shall then take counsel what to do.”

“Come into my hut” said Sir Claude. “It is but poor fare that I can lay before you — milk, cheese, wine, and bacon — yet your squire and yourself will doubtless excuse it. This is my house where the pennon flies before the door — a small residence to contain the Lord of Montchateau.”

Sir Nigel sat silent and distraught at his meal, while Alleyne hearkened to the clattering tongue of the Gascon, and to his talk of the glories of his own estate, his successes in love, and his triumphs in war.

“And now that you are here, Sir Nigel” he said at last, “I have many fine ventures all ready for us. I have heard that Montpezat is of no great strength, and that there are two hundred thousand crowns in the castle. At Castelnau also there is a cobbler who is in my pay, and who will throw us a rope any dark

night from his house by the town wall. I promise you that you shall thrust your arms elbow deep among good silver pieces ere the nights are moonless again; for on every hand of us are fair women, rich wine, and good plunder, as much as heart could wish."

"I have other plans" answered Sir Nigel curtly; "for I have come hither to lead these bowmen to the help of the prince, our master, who may have sore need of them ere he set Pedro upon the throne of Spain. It is my purpose to start this very day for Dax upon the Adour, where he hath now pitched his camp."

The face of the Gascon darkened, and his eyes flashed with resentment. "For me" he said, "I care little for this war, and I find the life which I lead a very joyous and pleasant one. I will not go to Dax."

"Nay, think again, Sir Claude" said Sir Nigel gently; "for you have ever had the name of a true and loyal knight. Surely you will not hold back now when your master hath need of you."

"I will not go to Dax" the other shouted.

"But your *devoir* — your oath of fealty?"

"I say that I will not go."

"Then, Sir Claude, I must lead the Company without you."

"If they will follow" cried the Gascon with a sneer. "These are not hired slaves, but free companions, who will do nothing save by their own good wills. In very sooth, my Lord Loring, they are ill men to trifle with, and it were easier to pluck a bone from a hungry bear than to lead a Bowman out of a land of plenty and of pleasure."

"Then I pray you to gather them together" said Sir Nigel "and I will tell them what is in my mind; for if I am their leader they must to Dax, and if I am not then I know not what I am doing in Auvergne. Have my horse ready, Alleyne; for, by St. Paul! come what may, I must be upon the homeward road ere midday."

A blast upon the bugle summoned the bowmen to counsel, and they gathered in little knots and groups around a great fallen tree which lay athwart the glade. Sir Nigel sprang lightly upon the trunk, and stood with blinking eye and firm lips looking down at the ring of upturned warlike faces.

"They tell me, bowmen" said he, "that ye have grown so fond of ease and plunder and high living that ye are not to be moved from this pleasant country. But, by Saint Paul! I will believe no such thing of you, for I can readily see that you are all very valiant men, who would scorn to live here in peace when your prince hath so great a venture before him. Ye have chosen me as a leader, and a leader I will be if ye come with me to Spain; and I vow to you that my pennon

of the five roses shall, if God give me strength and life, be ever where there is most honour to be gained. But if it be your wish to loll and loiter in these glades, bartering glory and renown for vile gold and ill-gotten riches, then ye must find another leader; for I have lived in honour, and in honour I trust that I shall die. If there be forest men or Hampshire men amongst ye, I call upon them to say whether they will follow the banner of Loring.”

“Here’s a Romsey man for you!” cried a young bowman with a sprig of evergreen set in his helmet.

“And a lad from Alresford!” shouted another.

“And from Milton!”

“And from Burley!”

“And from Lymington!”

“And a little one from Brockenhurst!” shouted a huge-limbed fellow who sprawled beneath a tree.

“By my hilt! lads” cried Aylward, jumping upon the fallen trunk, “I think that we could not look the girls in the eyes if we let the prince cross the mountains and did not pull string to clear a path for him. It is very well in time of peace to lead such a life as we have had together, but now the war banner is in the wind once more, and, by these ten finger bones! If he go alone, old Samkin Aylward will walk beside it.”

These words from a man as popular as Aylward decided many of the waverers, and a shout of approval burst from his audience.

“Far be it from me” said Sir Claude Latour suavely “to persuade you against this worthy archer, or against Sir Nigel Loring; yet we have been together in many ventures, and perchance it may not be amiss if I say to you what I think upon the matter.”

“Peace for the little Gascon!” cried the archers. “Let every man have his word. Shoot straight for the mark, lad, and fair play for all.”

“Bethink you, then” said Sir Claude “that you go under a hard rule, with neither freedom nor pleasure — and for what? For sixpence a day, at the most; while now you may walk across the country and stretch out either hand to gather in whatever you have a mind for. What do we not hear of our comrades who have gone with Sir John Hawkwood to Italy? In one night they have held to ransom six hundred of the richest noblemen of Mantua. They camp before a great city, and the base burghers come forth with the keys, and then they make great spoil; or, if it please them better, they take so many horse loads of silver as a composition; and so they journey on from state to state, rich and free and feared by all. Now, is not that the proper life for a soldier?”

“The proper life for a robber!” roared Hordle John, in his thundering voice.

“And yet there is much in what the Gascon says” said a swarthy fellow in a weather-stained doublet; “and I for one would rather prosper in Italy than starve in Spain.”

“You were always a cur and a traitor, Mark Shaw” cried Aylward. “By my hilt! If you will stand forth and draw your sword I will warrant you that you will see neither one nor the other.”

“Nay, Aylward” said Sir Nigel “we cannot mend the matter by broiling. Sir Claude, I think that what you have said does you little honour, and if my words aggrieve you I am ever ready to go deeper into the matter with you. But you shall have such men as will follow you, and you may go where you will, so that you come not with us. Let all who love their prince and country stand fast, while those who think more of a well-lined purse step forth upon the farther side.”

Thirteen bowmen, with hung heads and sheepish faces, stepped forward with Mark Shaw and ranged themselves behind Sir Claude. Amid the hootings and hissings of their comrades, they marched off together to the Gascon’s hut, while the main body broke up their meeting and set cheerily to work packing their possessions, furbishing their weapons, and preparing for the march which lay before them. Over the Tarn and the Garonne, through the vast quagmires of Armagnac, past the swift flowing Losse, and so down the long valley of the Adour, there was many a long league to be crossed ere they could join themselves to that dark war cloud which was drifting slowly southwards to the line of the snowy peaks, beyond which the banner of England had never yet been seen.