

CHAPTER V
HOW A STRANGE COMPANY GATHERED AT THE "PIED MERLIN"

The night had already fallen, and the moon was shining between the rifts of ragged, drifting clouds, before Alleyne Edricson, footsore and weary from the unwonted exercise, found himself in front of the forest inn which stood upon the outskirts of Lyndhurst. The building was long and low, standing back a little from the road, with two flambeaux blazing on either side of the door as a welcome to the traveller. From one window there thrust forth a long pole with a bunch of greenery tied to the end of it — a sign that liquor was to be sold within. As Alleyne walked up to it he perceived that it was rudely fashioned out of beams of wood, with twinkling lights all over where the glow from within shone through the chinks. The roof was poor and thatched; but in strange contrast to it there ran all along under the eaves a line of wooden shields, most gorgeously painted with chevron, bend, and saltire, and every heraldic device. By the door a horse stood tethered, the ruddy glow beating strongly upon his brown head and patient eyes, while his body stood back in the shadow.

Alleyne stood still in the roadway for a few minutes reflecting upon what he should do. It was, he knew, only a few miles further to Minstead, where his brother dwelt. On the other hand, he had never seen this brother since childhood, and the reports which had come to his ears concerning him were seldom to his advantage. By all accounts he was a hard and a bitter man.

It might be an evil start to come to his door so late and claim the shelter of his roof. Better to sleep here at this inn, and then travel on to Minstead in the morning. If his brother would take him in, well and good.

He would bide with him for a time and do what he might to serve him. If, on the other hand, he should have hardened his heart against him, he could only go on his way and do the best he might by his skill as a craftsman and a scrivener. At the end of a year he would be free to return to the cloisters, for such had been his father's bequest. A monkish upbringing, one year in the world after the age of twenty, and then a free selection one way or the other — it was a strange course which had been marked out for him. Such as it was, however, he had no choice but to follow it, and if he were to begin by making a friend of his brother he had best wait until morning before he knocked at his dwelling.

The rude plank door was ajar, but as Alleyne approached it there came from within such a gust of rough laughter and clatter of tongues that he stood irresolute upon the threshold. Summoning courage, however, and reflecting that it was a public dwelling, in which he had as much right as any other man, he pushed it open and stepped into the common room.

Though it was an autumn evening and somewhat warm, a huge fire of heaped billets of wood crackled and sparkled in a broad, open grate, some of the smoke escaping up a rude chimney, but the greater part rolling out into the room, so

that the air was thick with it, and a man coming from without could scarce catch his breath. On this fire a great cauldron bubbled and simmered, giving forth a rich and promising smell. Seated round it were a dozen or so folk, of all ages and conditions, who set up such a shout as Alleyne entered that he stood peering at them through the smoke, uncertain what this riotous greeting might portend.

“A rouse! A rouse!” cried one rough looking fellow in a tattered jerkin. “One more round of mead or ale and the score to the last comer.”

“’Tis the law of the ‘Pied Merlin’ ” shouted another. “Ho there, Dame Eliza! Here is fresh custom come to the house, and not a drain for the company.”

“I will take your orders, gentles; I will assuredly take your orders” the landlady answered, bustling in with her hands full of leathern drinking cups. “What is it that you drink, then? Beer for the lads of the forest, mead for the gleeman, strong waters for the tinker, and wine for the rest. It is an old custom of the house, young sir. It has been the use at the ‘Pied Merlin’ this many a year back that the company should drink to the health of the last comer. Is it your pleasure to humour it?”

“Why, good dame” said Alleyne “I would not offend the customs of your house, but it is only sooth when I say that my purse is a thin one. As far as two pence will go, however, I shall be right glad to do my part.”

“Plainly said and bravely spoken, my suckling friar” roared a deep voice, and a heavy hand fell upon Alleyne’s shoulder. Looking up, he saw beside him his former cloister companion the renegade monk, Hordle John.

“By the thorn of Glastonbury! ill days are coming upon Beaulieu” said he. “Here they have got rid in one day of the only two men within their walls — for I have had mine eyes upon thee, youngster, and I know that for all thy baby face there is the making of a man in thee. Then there is the Abbot, too. I am no friend of his, nor he of mine; but he has warm blood in his veins. He is the only man left among them. The others, what are they?”

“They are holy men” Alleyne answered gravely.

“Holy men? Holy cabbages! Holy beanpods! What do they do but live and suck in sustenance and grow fat? If that be holiness, I could show you hogs in this forest who are fit to head the calendar. Think you it was for such a life that this good arm was fixed upon my shoulder, or that head placed upon your neck? There is work in the world, man, and it is not by hiding behind stone walls that we shall do it.”

“Why, then, did you join the brothers?” asked Alleyne.

“A fair enough question; but it is as fairly answered. I joined them because Margery Alspaye, of Bolder, married Crooked Thomas of Ringwood, and left a

certain John of Hordle in the cold, for that he was a ranting, roving blade who was not to be trusted in wedlock. That was why, being fond and hot-headed, I left the world; and that is why, having had time to take thought, I am right glad to find myself back in it once more. Ill betide the day that ever I took off my yeoman's jerkin to put on the white gown!"

Whilst he was speaking the landlady came in again, bearing a broad platter, upon which stood all the beakers and flagons charged to the brim with the brown ale or the ruby wine. Behind her came a maid with a high pile of wooden plates, and a great sheaf of spoons, one of which she handed round to each of the travellers. Two of the company, who were dressed in the weather stained green doublet of foresters, lifted the big pot off the fire, and a third, with a huge pewter ladle, served out a portion of steaming collops to each guest. Alleyne bore his share and his ale mug away with him to a retired trestle in the corner, where he could sup in peace and watch the strange scene, which was so different to those silent and well-ordered meals to which he was accustomed.

The room was not unlike a stable. The low ceiling, smoke-blackened and dingy, was pierced by several square trap-doors with rough-hewn ladders leading up to them. The walls of bare unpainted planks were studded here and there with great wooden pins, placed at irregular intervals and heights, from which hung over-tunics, wallets, whips, bridles, and saddles. Over the fireplace were suspended six or seven shields of wood, with coats-of-arms rudely daubed upon them, which showed by their varying degrees of smokiness and dirt that they had been placed there at different periods. There was no furniture, save a single long dresser covered with coarse crockery, and a number of wooden benches and trestles, the legs of which sank deeply into the soft clay floor, while the only light, save that of the fire, was furnished by three torches stuck in sockets on the wall, which flickered and crackled, giving forth a strong resinous odour. All this was novel and strange to the cloister-bred youth; but most interesting of all was the motley circle of guests who sat eating their collops round the blaze. They were a humble group of wayfarers, such as might have been found that night in any inn through the length and breadth of England; but to him they represented that vague world against which he had been so frequently and so earnestly warned. It did not seem to him from what he could see of it to be such a very wicked place after all.

Three or four of the men round the fire were evidently underkeepers and verderers from the forest, sunburned and bearded, with the quick restless eye and lithe movements of the deer among which they lived. Close to the corner of the chimney sat a middle-aged gleeman, clad in a faded garb of Norwich cloth, the tunic of which was so outgrown that it did not fasten at the neck and at the waist. His face was swollen and coarse, and his watery protruding eyes spoke of a life which never wandered very far from the wine pot. A gilt harp, blotched with many stains and with two of its strings missing, was tucked under one of his arms, while with the other he scooped greedily at his platter. Next to him sat two other men of about the same age, one with a trimming of fur to his coat, which gave him a dignity which was evidently dearer to him than his comfort, for he still drew it round him in spite of the hot glare of the faggots. The other,

clad in a dirty russet suit with a long sweeping doublet, had a cunning, foxy face with keen, twinkling eyes and a peaky beard. Next to him sat Hordle John, and beside him three other rough unkempt fellows with tangled beards and matted hair — free labourers from the adjoining farms, where small patches of freehold property had been suffered to remain scattered about in the heart of the royal demesne. The company was completed by a peasant in a rude dress of undyed sheepskin, with the old-fashioned galligaskins about his legs, and a gaily dressed young man with striped cloak jagged at the edges and parti-coloured hosen, who looked about him with high disdain upon his face, and held a blue smelling-flask to his nose with one hand, while he brandished a busy spoon with the other. In the corner a very fat man was lying all a-sprawl upon a truss, snoring stentoriously, and evidently in the last stage of drunkenness.

“That is Wat the limner” quoth the landlady, sitting down beside Alleyne, and pointing with the ladle to the sleeping man. “That is he who paints the signs and the tokens. Alack and alas that ever I should have been fool enough to trust him! Now, young man, what manner of a bird would you suppose a pied merlin to be — that being the proper sign of my hostel?”

“Why” said Alleyne, “a merlin is a bird of the same form as an eagle or a falcon. I can well remember that learned brother Bartholomew, who is deep in all the secrets of nature, pointed one out to me as we walked together near Vinney Ridge.”

“A falcon or an eagle, quotha? And pied, that is of two several colours. So any man would say except this barrel of lies. He came to me, look you, saying that if I would furnish him with a gallon of ale, wherewith to strengthen himself as he worked, and also the pigments and a board, he would paint for me a noble pied merlin which I might hang along with the blazonry over my door. I, poor simple fool, gave him the ale and all that he craved, leaving him alone too, because he said that a man’s mind must be left untroubled when he had great work to do. When I came back the gallon jar was empty, and he lay as you see him, with the board in front of him with this sorry device.” She raised up a panel which was leaning against the wall, and showed a rude painting of a scraggy and angular fowl, with very long legs and a spotted body.

“Was that” she asked, “like the bird which thou hast seen?”

Alleyne shook his head, smiling.

“No, nor any other bird that ever wagged a feather. It is most like a plucked pullet which has died of the spotted fever. And scarlet too! What would the gentles Sir Nicholas Boarhunte, or Sir Bernard Brocas, of Roche Court, say if they saw such a thing — or, perhaps, even the King’s own Majesty himself, who often has ridden past this way, and who loves his falcons as he loves his sons? It would be the downfall of my house.”

“The matter is not past mending” said Alleyne. “I pray you, good dame, to give me those three pigment pots and the brush, and I shall try whether I cannot better this painting.”

Dame Eliza looked doubtfully at him, as though fearing some other stratagem, but, as he made no demand for ale, she finally brought the paints, and watched him as he smeared on his background, talking the while about the folk round the fire.

“The four forest lads must be jogging soon” she said. “They bide at Emery Down, a mile or more from here. Yeomen prickers they are, who tend to the King’s hunt. The gleeman is called Floyting Will. He comes from the north country, but for many years he hath gone the round of the forest from Southampton to Christchurch. He drinks much and pays little but it would make your ribs crackle to hear him sing the ‘Jest of Hendy Tobias.’ Mayhap he will sing it when the ale has warmed him.”

“Who are those next to him?” asked Alleyne, much interested. “He of the fur mantle has a wise and reverent face.”

“He is a seller of pills and salves, very learned in humours, and rheums, and fluxes, and all manner of ailments. He wears, as you perceive, the vernicle of Sainted Luke, the first physician, upon his sleeve. May good St. Thomas of Kent grant that it may be long before either I or mine need his help! He is here tonight for herbergage, as are the others except the foresters. His neighbour is a tooth-drawer. That bag at his girdle is full of the teeth that he drew at Winchester fair. I warrant that there are more sound ones than sorry, for he is quick at his work and a trifle dim in the eye. The lusty man next him with the red head I have not seen before. The four on this side are all workers, three of them in the service of the bailiff of Sir Baldwin Redvers, and the other, he with the sheepskin, is, as I hear, a villein from the midlands who hath run from his master. His year and day are well-nigh up, when he will be a free man.”

“And the other?” asked Alleyne in a whisper. “He is surely some very great man, for he looks as though he scorned those who were about him.”

The landlady looked at him in a motherly way and shook her head. “You have had no great truck with the world” she said “or you would have learned that it is the small men and not the great who hold their noses in the air. Look at those shields upon my wall and under my eaves. Each of them is the device of some noble lord or gallant knight who hath slept under my roof at one time or another. Yet milder men or easier to please I have never seen: eating my bacon and drinking my wine with a merry face, and paying my score with some courteous word or jest which was dearer to me than my profit. Those are the true gentles. But your chapman or your bearward will swear that there is a lime in the wine, and water in the ale, and fling off at the last with a curse instead of a blessing. This youth is a scholar from Cambrig, where men are wont to be blown out by a little knowledge, and lose the use of their hands in learning the laws of the Romans. But I must away to lay down the beds.

So may the saints keep you and prosper you in your undertaking!”

Thus left to himself, Alleyne drew his panel of wood where the light of one of the torches would strike full upon it, and worked away with all the pleasure of the trained craftsman, listening the while to the talk which went on round the fire. The peasant in the sheepskins, who had sat glum and silent all evening, had been so heated by his flagon of ale that he was talking loudly and angrily with clenched hands and flashing eyes.

“Sir Humphrey Tennant of Ashby may till his own fields for me” he cried. “The castle has thrown its shadow upon the cottage over long. For three hundred years my folk have swinked and sweated, day in and day out, to keep the wine on the lord’s table and the harness on the lord’s back. Let him take off his plates and delve himself, if delving must be done.”

“A proper spirit, my fair son!” said one of the free labourers. “I would that all men were of thy way of thinking.”

“He would have sold me with his acres” the other cried, in a voice which was hoarse with passion. “The man, the woman and their litter’ — so ran the words of the dotard bailiff. Never a bullock on the farm was sold more lightly. Ha! He may wake some black night to find the flames licking about his ears — for fire is a good friend to the poor man, and I have seen a smoking heap of ashes where over night there stood just such another castlewick as Ashby.”

“This is a lad of mettle!” shouted another of the labourers. “He dares to give tongue to what all men think. Are we not all from Adam’s loins, all with flesh and blood, and with the same mouth that must needs have food and drink? Where all this difference then between the ermine cloak and the leathern tunic, if what they cover is the same?”

“Aye, Jenkin” said another “our foeman is under the stole and the vestment as much as under the helmet and plate of proof. We have as much to fear from the tonsure as from the hauberk. Strike at the noble and the priest shrieks, strike at priest and the noble lays his hand upon glaive. They are twin thieves who live upon our labour.”

“It would take a clever man to live upon thy labour, Hugh” remarked one of the foresters, “seeing that the half of thy time is spent in swilling mead at the ‘Pied Merlin.’”

“Better that than stealing the deer that thou art placed to guard, like some folk I know.”

“If you dare open that swine’s mouth against me” shouted the woodman. “I’ll crop your ears for you before the hangman has the doing of it, thou long-jawed lackbrain.”

“Nay, gentles, gentles!” cried Dame Eliza, in a singsong heedless voice, which showed that such bickerings were nightly things among her guests. “No brawling or brabbling, gentles! Take heed to the good name of the house.”

“Besides, if it comes to the cropping of ears, there are other folk who may say their say” quoth the third labourer. “We are all freemen, and I trow that a yeoman’s cudgel is as good as a forester’s knife. By St. Anselm! It would be an evil day if we had to bend to our master’s servants as well as to our masters.”

“No man is my master save the King” the woodman answered. “Who is there, save a false traitor, who would refuse to serve the English king?”

“I know not about the English king” said the man Jenkin. “What sort of English king is it who cannot lay his tongue to a word of English? You mind last year when he came down to Malwood, with his inner marshal and his outer marshal, his justiciar, his seneschal, and his four and twenty guardsmen. One noontide I was by Franklin Swinton’s gate, when up he rides with a yeoman pricker at his heels. ‘Ouvre’ he cried ‘ouvre,’ or some such word, making signs for me to open the gate; and then ‘Merci’ as though he were adrad of me. And you talk of an English king?”

“I do not marvel at it” cried the Cambrig scholar, speaking in the high drawling voice which was common among his class. “It is not a tongue for men of sweet birth and delicate upbringing. It is a foul, snorting, snarling manner of speech. For myself, I swear by the learned Polycarp that I have most ease with Hebrew, and after that perchance with Arabian.”

“I will not hear a word said against old King Ned” cried Hordle John in a voice like a bull. “What if he is fond of a bright eye and a saucy face. I know one of his subjects who could match him at that. If he cannot speak like an Englishman I trow that he can fight like an Englishman, and he was hammering at the gates of Paris while alehouse toppers were grutching and grumbling at home.”

This loud speech, coming from a man of so formidable an appearance, somewhat daunted the disloyal party, and they fell into a sullen silence, which enabled Alleyne to hear something of the talk which was going on in the further corner between the physician, the tooth drawer and the gleeman.

“A raw rat” the man of drugs was saying “that is what it is ever my use to order for the plague — a raw rat with its paunch cut open.”

“Might it not be broiled, most learned sir?” asked the tooth drawer. “A raw rat sounds a most sorry and cheerless dish.”

“Not to be eaten” cried the physician, in high disdain. “Why should any man eat such a thing?”

“Why indeed?” asked the gleeman, taking a long drain at his tankard.

“It is to be placed on the sore or swelling. For the rat, mark you, being a foul-living creature, hath a natural drawing or affinity for all foul things, so that the noxious humours pass from the man into the unclean beast.”

“Would that cure the black death, master?” asked Jenkin.

“Aye, truly would it, my fair son.”

“Then I am right glad that there were none who knew of it. The black death is the best friend that ever the common folk had in England.”

“How that then?” asked Hordle John.

“Why, friend, it is easy to see that you have not worked with your hands or you would not need to ask. When half the folk in the country were dead it was then that the other half could pick and choose who they would work for, and for what wage. That is why I say that the murrain was the best friend that the borel folk ever had.”

“True, Jenkin” said another workman; “but it is not all good that is brought by it either. We well know that through it corn land has been turned into pasture, so that flocks of sheep with perchance a single shepherd wander now where once a hundred men had work and wage.”

“There is no great harm in that” remarked the tooth-drawer “for the sheep give many folk their living. There is not only the herd, but the shearer and brander, and then the dresser, the curer, the dyer, the fuller, the webster, the merchant, and a score of others.”

“If it come to that.” said one of the foresters “The tough meat of them will wear folks teeth out, and there is a trade for the man who can draw them.”

A general laugh followed this sally at the dentist’s expense, in the midst of which the gleeman placed his battered harp upon his knee, and began to pick out a melody upon the frayed strings.

“Elbow room for Floyting Will!” cried the woodmen. “Twang us a merry lilt.”

“Aye, aye, the ‘Lasses of Lancaster’ ” one suggested.

“Or ‘St. Simeon and the Devil’.”

“Or the ‘Jest of Hendy Tobias’.”

To all these suggestions the jongleur made no response, but sat with his eye fixed abstractedly upon the ceiling, as one who calls words to his mind. Then, with a sudden sweep across the strings, he broke out into a song so gross and

so foul that ere he had finished a verse the pure-minded lad sprang to his feet with the blood tingling in his face.

“How can you sing such things?” he cried. “You, too, an old man who should be an example to others.”

The wayfarers all gazed in the utmost astonishment at the interruption.

“By the holy Dicon of Hampole! our silent clerk has found his tongue” said one of the woodmen. “What is amiss with the song then? How has it offended your babyship?”

“A milder and better mannered song hath never been heard within these walls” cried another. “What sort of talk is this for a public inn?”

“Shall it be a litany, my good clerk?” shouted a third; “or would a hymn be good enough to serve?”

The jongleur had put down his harp in high dudgeon. “Am I to be preached to by a child?” he cried, staring across at Alleyne with an inflamed and angry countenance. “Is a hairless infant to raise his tongue against me, when I have sung in every fair from Tweed to Trent, and have twice been named aloud by the High Court of the Minstrels at Beverley? I shall sing no more tonight.”

“Nay, but you will so” said one of the labourers. “Hi, Dame Eliza, bring a stoup of your best to Will to clear his throat. Go forward with thy song, and if our girl-faced clerk does not love it he can take to the road and go whence he came.”

“Nay, but not too fast” broke in Hordle John. “There are two words in this matter. It may be that my little comrade has been over quick in reproof, he having gone early into the cloisters and seen little of the rough ways and words of the world. Yet there is truth in what he says, for, as you know well, the song was not of the cleanest. I shall stand by him, therefore, and he shall neither be put out on the road, nor shall his ears be offended indoors.”

“Indeed, your high and mighty grace” sneered one of the yeomen “have you in sooth so ordained?”

“By the Virgin!” said a second, “I think that you may both chance to find yourselves upon the road before long.”

“And so belaboured as to be scarce able to crawl along it” cried a third.

“Nay, I shall go! I shall go!” said Alleyne hurriedly, as Hordle John began to slowly roll up his sleeve, and bare an arm like a leg of mutton. “I would not have you brawl about me.”

“Hush! lad” he whispered, “I count them not a fly. They may find they have more tow on their distaff than they know how to spin. Stand thou clear and give me space.”

Both the foresters and the labourers had risen from their bench, and Dame Eliza and the travelling doctor had flung themselves between the two parties with soft words and soothing gestures, when the door of the “Pied Merlin” was flung violently open, and the attention of the company was drawn from their own quarrel to the newcomer who had burst so unceremoniously upon them.

CHAPTER VI
HOW SAMKIN AYLWARD WAGERED HIS FEATHER BED

He was a middle sized man, of most massive and robust build, with an arching chest and extraordinary breadth of shoulder. His shaven face was as brown as a hazelnut, tanned and dried by the weather, with harsh, well-marked features, which were not improved by a long white scar which stretched from the corner of his left nostril to the angle of the jaw. His eyes were bright and searching, with something of menace and of authority in their quick glitter, and his mouth was firm-set and hard, as befitted one who was wont to set his face against danger. A straight sword by his side and a painted longbow jutting over his shoulder proclaimed his profession, while his scarred brigandine of chain mail and his dented steel cap showed that he was no holiday soldier, but one who was even now fresh from the wars. A white surcoat with the lion of St. George in red upon the centre covered his broad breast, while a sprig of new-plucked broom at the side of his head-gear gave a touch of gayety and grace to his grim, warworn equipment.

“Ha!” he cried, blinking like an owl in the sudden glare. “Good even to you, comrades! Hola! a woman, by my soul!” and in an instant he had clipped Dame Eliza round the waist and was kissing her violently. His eye happening to wander upon the maid, however, he instantly abandoned the mistress and danced off after the other, who scurried in confusion up one of the ladders, and dropped the heavy trapdoor upon her pursuer. He then turned back and saluted the landlady once more with the utmost relish and satisfaction.

“La petite is frightened” said he. “Ah, c’est l’amour, l’amour! Curse this trick of French, which will stick to my throat. I must wash it out with some good English ale. By my hilt! Camarades, there is no drop of French blood in my body, and I am a true English bowman, Samkin Aylward by name; and I tell you, mes amis, that it warms my very heart roots to set my feet on the dear old land once more. When I came off the galley at Hythe, this very day, I down on my bones, and I kissed the good brown earth, as I kiss thee now, ma belle, for it was eight long years since I had seen it. The very smell of it seemed life to me. But where are my six rascals? Hola, there! En avant!”

At the order, six men, dressed as common drudges, marched solemnly into the room, each bearing a huge bundle upon his head. They formed in military line, while the soldier stood in front of them with stern eyes, checking off their several packages.

“Number one — a French feather-bed with the two counter-panes of white sendall” said he.

“Here, worthy sir” answered the first of the bearers, laying a great package down in the corner.

“Number two — seven ells of red Turkey cloth and nine ells of cloth of gold. Put it down by the other. Good dame, I prythee give each of these men a bottrine of wine or a jack of ale. Three — a full piece of white Genoan velvet with twelve ells of purple silk. Thou rascal, there is dirt on the hem! Thou hast brushed it against some wall, coquin!”

“Not I, most worthy sir” cried the carrier, shrinking away from the fierce eyes of the bowman.

“I say yes, dog! By the three kings! I have seen a man gasp out his last breath for less. Had you gone through the pain and unease that I have done to earn these things you would be at more care. I swear by my ten finger bones that there is not one of them that hath not cost its weight in French blood! Four — an incense boat, a ewer of silver, a gold buckle and a cope worked in pearls. I found them, camarades, at the Church of St. Denis in the harrying of Narbonne, and I took them away with me lest they fall into the hands of the wicked. Five — a cloak of fur turned up with minever, a gold goblet with stand and cover, and a box of rose-coloured sugar. See that you lay them together. Six — a box of monies, three pounds of Limousine goldwork, a pair of boots, silver tagged, and, lastly, a store of naping linen. So, the tally is complete! Here is a great apiece, and you may go.”

“Go whither, worthy sir?” asked one of the carriers.

“Whither? To the devil if ye will. What is it to me? Now, ma belle, to supper. A pair of cold capons, a mortress of brawn, or what you will, with a flask or two of the right Gascony. I have crowns in my pouch, my sweet, and I mean to spend them. Bring in wine while the food is dressing. Buvons my brave lads; you shall each empty a stoup with me.”

Here was an offer which the company in an English inn at that or any other date are slow to refuse. The flagons were regathered and came back with the white foam dripping over their edges. Two of the woodmen and three of the labourers drank their portions off hurriedly and trooped off together, for their homes were distant and the hour late. The others, however, drew closer, leaving the place of honour to the right of the gleeman to the free-handed newcomer. He had thrown off his steel cap and his brigandine, and had placed them with his sword, his quiver and his painted longbow, on the top of his varied heap of plunder in the corner. Now, with his thick and somewhat bowed legs stretched in front of the blaze, his green jerkin thrown open, and a great quart pot held in his corded fist, he looked the picture of comfort and of good fellowship. His hard-set face had softened, and the thick crop of crisp brown curls which had been hidden by his helmet grew low upon his massive neck. He might have been forty years of age, though hard toil and harder pleasure had left their grim marks upon his features. Alleyne had ceased painting his pied merlin, and sat, brush in hand, staring with open eyes at a type of man so strange and so unlike any whom he had met. Men had been good or had been bad in his catalogue, but here was a man who was fierce one instant and gentle the next, with a curse on his lips and a smile in his eye. What was to be made of such a man as that?

It chanced that the soldier looked up and saw the questioning glance which the young clerk threw upon him. He raised his flagon and drank to him, with a merry flash of his white teeth.

“A toi, mon garçon” he cried. “Hast surely never seen a man-at-arms, that thou shouldst stare so?”

“I never have” said Alleyne frankly “though I have oft heard talk of their deeds.”

“By my hilt!” cried the other “if you were to cross the narrow sea you would find them as thick as bees at a tee-hole. Couldst not shoot a bolt down any street of Bordeaux, I warrant, but you would pink archer, squire, or knight. There are more breastplates than gaberdines to be seen, I promise you.”

“And where got you all these pretty things?” asked Hordle John, pointing at the heap in the corner.

“Where there is as much more waiting for any brave lad to pick it up. Where a good man can always earn a good wage, and where he need look upon no man as his paymaster, but just reach his hand out and help himself. Aye, it is a goodly and a proper life. And here I drink to mine old comrades, and the saints be with them! Arouse all together, mes enfants, under pain of my displeasure. To Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!”

“Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!” shouted the travellers, draining off their goblets.

“Well quaffed, mes braves! It is for me to fill your cups again, since you have drained them to my dear lads of the white jerkin. Hola! Mon ange, bring wine and ale. How runs the old stave? —

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

He roared out the catch in a harsh, unmusical voice, and ended with a shout of laughter. “I trust that I am a better bowman than a minstrel” said he.

“Methinks I have some remembrance of the lilt” remarked the gleeman, running his fingers over the strings. “Hoping that it will give thee no offence, most holy sir” — with a vicious snap at Alleyne — “and with the kind permit of the company, I will even venture upon it.”

Many a time in the after days Alleyne Edricson seemed to see that scene, for all that so many which were stranger and more stirring were soon to crowd upon him. The fat, red-faced gleeman, the listening group, the archer with upraised finger beating in time to the music, and the huge sprawling figure of

Hordle John, all thrown into red light and black shadow by the flickering fire in the centre — memory was to come often lovingly back to it. At the time he was lost in admiration at the deft way in which the jongleur disguised the loss of his two missing strings, and the lusty, hearty fashion in which he trolled out his little ballad of the outland bowmen, which ran in some such fashion as this:

What of the bow?
The bow was made in England:
Of true wood, of yew wood,
The wood of English bows;
So men who are free
Love the old yew tree
And the land where the yew tree grows.

What of the cord?
The cord was made in England:
A rough cord, a tough cord,
A cord that bowmen love;
So we'll drain our jacks
To the English flax
And the land where the hemp was wove.

What of the shaft?
The shaft was cut in England:
A long shaft, a strong shaft,
Barbed and trim and true;
So we'll drink all together
To the grey goose feather
And the land where the grey goose flew.

What of the men?
The men were bred in England:
The Bowman — the yeoman —
The lads of dale and fell
Here's to you — and to you;
To the hearts that are true
And the land where the true hearts dwell.

“Well sung, by my hilt!” shouted the archer in high delight. “Many a night have I heard that song, both in the old wartime and after in the days of the White Company, when Black Simon of Norwich would lead the stave, and four hundred of the best bowmen that ever drew string would come roaring in upon the chorus. I have seen old John Hawkwood, the same who has led half the Company into Italy, stand laughing in his beard as he heard it, until his plates rattled again. But to get the full smack of it ye must yourselves be English bowmen, and be far off upon an outland soil.”

Whilst the song had been singing Dame Eliza and the maid had placed a board across two trestles, and had laid upon it the knife, the spoon, the salt,

the tranchoir of bread, and finally the smoking dish which held the savoury supper. The archer settled himself to it like one who had known what it was to find good food scarce; but his tongue still went as merrily as his teeth.

“It passes me” he cried “how all you lusty fellows can bide scratching your backs at home when there are such doings over the seas. Look at me — what have I to do? It is but the eye to the cord, the cord to the shaft, and the shaft to the mark. There is the whole song of it. It is but what you do yourselves for pleasure upon a Sunday evening at the parish village butts.”

“And the wage?” asked a labourer.

“You see what the wage brings” he answered. “I eat of the best, and I drink deep. I treat my friend, and I ask no friend to treat me. I clap a silk gown on my girl’s back. Never a knight’s lady shall be better betrimmed and betrinketed. How of all that, mon garcon? And how of the heap of trifles that you can see for yourselves in yonder corner? They are from the South French, every one, upon whom I have been making war. By my hilt! camarades, I think that I may let my plunder speak for itself.”

“It seems indeed to be a goodly service” said the tooth drawer.

“Tete bleu! yes, indeed. Then there is the chance of a ransom. Why, look you, in the affair at Brignais some four years back, when the companies slew James of Bourbon, and put his army to the sword, there was scarce a man of ours who had not count, baron, or knight. Peter Karsdale, who was but a common country lout newly brought over, with the English fleas still hopping under his doublet, laid his great hands upon the Sieur Amaury de Chatonville, who owns half Picardy, and had five thousand crowns out of him, with his horse and harness. ‘Tis true that a French wench took it all off Peter as quick as the Frenchman paid it; but what then? By the twang of string! It would be a bad thing if money was not made to be spent; and how better than on woman — eh, ma belle?”

“It would indeed be a bad thing if we had not our brave archers to bring wealth and kindly customs into the country” quoth Dame Eliza, on whom the soldier’s free and open ways had made a deep impression.

“A toi, ma cherie!” said he, with his hand over his heart. “Hola! There is la petite peeping from behind the door. A toi, aussi, ma petite! Mon Dieu! But the lass has a good colour!”

“There is one thing, fair sir” said the Cambridge student in his piping voice, “which I would fain that you would make more clear. As I understand it, there was peace made at the town of Bretigny some six years back between our most gracious monarch and the King of the French. This being so, it seems most passing strange that you should talk so loudly of war and of companies when there is no quarrel between the French and us.”

“Meaning that I lie” said the archer, laying down his knife.

“May heaven forbend!” cried the student hastily. “*Magna est veritas sed rara*, which means in the Latin tongue that archers are all honourable men. I come to you seeking knowledge, for it is my trade to learn.”

“I fear that you are yet a ’prentice to that trade” quoth the soldier; “for there is no child over the water but could answer what you ask. Know then that though there may be peace between our own provinces and the French, yet within the marches of France there is always war, for the country is much divided against itself, and is furthermore harried by bands of flayers, skimmers, Brabacons, tardvenus, and the rest of them. When every man’s grip is on his neighbour’s throat, and every five sous piece of a baron is marching with tuck of drum to fight whom he will, it would be a strange thing if five hundred brave English boys could not pick up a living. Now that Sir John Hawkwood hath gone with the East Anglian lads and the Nottingham woodmen into the service of the Marquis of Montferrat to fight against the Lord of Milan, there are but ten score of us left, yet I trust that I may be able to bring some back with me to fill the ranks of the White Company. By the tooth of Peter! it would be a bad thing if I could not muster many a Hamptonshire man who would be ready to strike in under the red flag of St. George, and the more so if Sir Nigel Loring, of Christchurch, should don hauberk once more and take the lead of us.”

“Ah, you would indeed be in luck then” quoth a woodman; “for it is said that, setting aside the prince, and mayhap good old Sir John Chandos, there was not in the whole army a man of such tried courage.”

“It is sooth, every word of it” the archer answered. “I have seen him with these two eyes in a stricken field, and never did man carry himself better. Mon Dieu! Yes, ye would not credit it to look at him, or to hearken to his soft voice, but from the sailing from Orwell down to the foray to Paris, and that is clear twenty years, there was not a skirmish, onfall, sally, bushment, escalado or battle, but Sir Nigel was in the heart of it. I go now to Christchurch with a letter to him from Sir Claude Latour to ask him if he will take the place of Sir John Hawkwood; and there is the more chance that he will if I bring one or two likely men at my heels. What say you, woodman: wilt leave the bucks to loose a shaft at a nobler mark?”

The forester shook his head. “I have wife and child at Emery Down” quoth he; “I would not leave them for such a venture.”

“You, then, young sir?” asked the archer.

“Nay, I am a man of peace” said Alleyne Edricson. “Besides, I have other work to do.”

“Peste!” growled the soldier, striking his flagon on the board until the dishes danced again. “What, in the name of the devil, hath come over the folk? Why sit ye all moping by the fireside, like crows round a dead horse, when there is man’s

work to be done within a few short leagues of ye? Out upon you all, as a set of laggards and hang-backs! By my hilt I believe that the men of England are all in France already, and that what is left behind are in sooth the women dressed up in their paltocks and hosen.”

“Archer” quoth Hordle John, “you have lied more than once and more than twice; for which, and also because I see much in you to dislike, I am sorely tempted to lay you upon your back.”

“By my hilt! then, I have found a man at last!” shouted the bowman. “And, ’fore God, you are a better man than I take you for if you can lay me on my back, mon garcon. I have won the ram more times than there are toes to my feet, and for seven long years I have found no man in the Company who could make my jerkin dusty.”

“We have had enough bobance and boasting” said Hordle John, rising and throwing off his doublet. “I will show you that there are better men left in England than ever went thieving to France.”

“Pasques Dieu!” cried the archer, loosening his jerkin, and eyeing his foeman over with the keen glance of one who is a judge of manhood. “I have only once before seen such a body of a man. By your leave, my red-headed friend, I should be right sorry to exchange buffets with you; and I will allow that there is no man in the Company who would pull against you on a rope; so let that be a salve to your pride. On the other hand I should judge that you have led a life of ease for some months back, and that my muscle is harder than your own. I am ready to wager upon myself against you if you are not afeard.”

“Afeard, thou lurden!” growled big John. “I never saw the face yet of the man that I was afeard of. Come out, and we shall see who is the better man.”

“But the wager?”

“I have nought to wager. Come out for the love and the lust of the thing.”

“Nought to wager!” cried the soldier. “Why, you have that which I covet above all things. It is that big body of thine that I am after. See, now, mon garcon. I have a French feather bed there, which I have been at pains to keep these years back. I had it at the sacking of Issodun, and the King himself hath not such a bed. If you throw me, it is thine; but, if I throw you, then you are under a vow to take bow and bill and hie with me to France, there to serve in the White Company as long as we be enrolled.”

“A fair wager!” cried all the travellers, moving back their benches and trestles, so as to give fair field for the wrestlers.

“Then you may bid farewell to your bed, soldier” said Hordle John.

“Nay; I shall keep the bed, and I shall have you to France in spite of your teeth, and you shall live to thank me for it. How shall it be, then, mon enfant? Collar and elbow, or close-lock, or catch how you can?”

“To the devil with your tricks” said John, opening and shutting his great red hands. “Stand forth, and let me clip thee.”

“Shalt clip me as best you can then” quoth the archer, moving out into the open space, and keeping a most wary eye upon his opponent. He had thrown off his green jerkin, and his chest was covered only by a pink silk jupon, or undershirt, cut low in the neck and sleeveless. Hordle John was stripped from his waist upwards, and his huge body, with his great muscles swelling out like the gnarled roots of an oak, towered high above the soldier. The other, however, though near a foot shorter, was a man of great strength; and there was a gloss upon his white skin which was wanting in the heavier limbs of the renegade monk. He was quick on his feet, too, and skilled at the game; so that it was clear, from the poise of head and shine of eye, that he counted the chances to be in his favor. It would have been hard that night, through the whole length of England, to set up a finer pair in face of each other.

Big John stood waiting in the centre with a sullen, menacing eye, and his red hair in a bristle, while the archer paced lightly and swiftly to the right and the left with crooked knee and hands advanced. Then with a sudden dash, so swift and fierce that the eye could scarce follow it, he flew in upon his man and locked his leg round him. It was a grip that, between men of equal strength, would mean a fall; but Hordle John tore him off from him as he might a rat, and hurled him across the room, so that his head cracked up against the wooden wall.

“Ma foi!” cried the bowman, passing his fingers through his curls, “you were not far from the feather bed then, mon gar. A little more and this good hostel would have a new window.”

Nothing daunted, he approached his man once more, but this time with more caution than before. With a quick feint he threw the other off his guard, and then, bounding upon him, threw his legs round his waist and his arms round his bull neck, in the hope of bearing him to the ground with the sudden shock. With a bellow of rage, Hordle John squeezed him limp in his huge arms; and then, picking him up, cast him down upon the floor with a force which might well have splintered a bone or two, had not the archer with the most perfect coolness clung to the other’s forearms to break his fall. As it was, he dropped upon his feet and kept his balance, though it sent a jar through his frame which set every joint a-creaking. He bounded back from his perilous foeman; but the other, heated by the bout, rushed madly after him, and so gave the practised wrestler the very vantage for which he had planned. As big John flung himself upon him, the archer ducked under the great red hands that clutched for him, and, catching his man round the thighs, hurled him over his shoulder — helped as much by his own mad rush as by the trained strength of the heave. To Alleyne’s eye, it was as if John had taken unto himself wings and flown. As he hurtled through the air, with giant limbs revolving, the lad’s heart was in his

mouth; for surely no man ever yet had such a fall and came scathless out of it. In truth, hardy as the man was, his neck had been assuredly broken had he not pitched head first on the very midriff of the drunken artist, who was slumbering so peacefully in the corner, all unaware of these stirring doings. The luckless limner, thus suddenly brought out from his dreams, sat up with a piercing yell, while Hordle John bounded back into the circle almost as rapidly as he had left it.

“One more fall, by all the saints!” he cried, throwing out his arms.

“Not I” quoth the archer, pulling on his clothes, “I have come well out of the business. I would sooner wrestle with the great bear of Navarre.”

“It was a trick” cried John.

“Aye was it. By my ten finger-bones! It is a trick that will add a proper man to the ranks of the Company.”

“Oh, for that” said the other “I count it not a fly; for I had promised myself a good hour ago that I should go with thee, since the life seems to be a goodly and proper one. Yet I would fain have had the feather bed.”

“I doubt it not, mon ami” quoth the archer, going back to his tankard. “Here is to thee, lad, and may we be good comrades to each other! But, hola! what is it that ails our friend of the wrathful face?”

The unfortunate limner had been sitting up rubbing himself ruefully and staring about with a vacant gaze, which showed that he knew neither where he was nor what had occurred to him. Suddenly, however, a flash of intelligence had come over his sodden features, and he rose and staggered for the door. “Ware the ale!” he said in a hoarse whisper, shaking a warning finger at the company. “Oh, holy Virgin, ’ware the ale!” and slapping his hands to his injury, he flitted off into the darkness, amid a shout of laughter, in which the vanquished joined as merrily as the victor. The remaining forester and the two labourers were also ready for the road, and the rest of the company turned to the blankets which Dame Eliza and the maid had laid out for them upon the floor. Alleyne, weary with the unwonted excitements of the day, was soon in a deep slumber broken only by fleeting visions of twittering legs, cursing beggars, black robbers, and the many strange folk whom he had met at the “Pied Merlin”.

CHAPTER VII
HOW THE THREE COMRADES JOURNEYED THROUGH THE
WOODLANDS

At early dawn the country inn was all alive, for it was rare indeed that an hour of daylight would be wasted at a time when lighting was so scarce and dear. Indeed, early as it was when Dame Eliza began to stir, it seemed that others could be earlier still, for the door was ajar, and the learned student of Cambridge had taken himself off, with a mind which was too intent upon the high things of antiquity to stoop to consider the fourpence which he owed for bed and board. It was the shrill outcry of the landlady when she found her loss, and the clucking of the hens, which had streamed in through the open door, that first broke in upon the slumbers of the tired wayfarers.

Once afoot, it was not long before the company began to disperse. A sleek mule with red trappings was brought round from some neighboring shed for the physician, and he ambled away with much dignity upon his road to Southampton. The tooth drawer and the gleeman called for a cup of small ale apiece, and started off together for Ringwood fair, the old jongleur looking very yellow in the eye and swollen in the face after his overnight potations. The archer, however, who had drunk more than any man in the room, was as merry as a grig, and having kissed the matron and chased the maid up the ladder once more, he went out to the brook, and came back with the water dripping from his face and hair.

“Hola! My man of peace” he cried to Alleyne, “whither are you bent this morning?”

“To Minstead” quoth he. “My brother Simon Edricson is socman there, and I go to bide with him for a while. I prythee, let me have my score, good dame.”

“Score, indeed!” cried she, standing with upraised hands in front of the panel on which Alleyne had worked the night before. “Say, rather what it is that I owe to thee, good youth. Aye, this is indeed a pied merlin, and with a leveret under its claws, as I am a living woman. By the rood of Waltham! But thy touch is deft and dainty.”

“And see the red eye of it!” cried the maid.

“Aye, and the open beak.”

“And the ruffled wing” added Hordle John.

“By my hilt!” cried the archer “it is the very bird itself.”

The young clerk flushed with pleasure at this chorus of praise, rude and indiscriminate indeed, and yet so much heartier and less grudging than any which he had ever heard from the critical brother Jerome, or the short-spoken

Abbot. There was, it would seem, great kindness as well as great wickedness in this world, of which he had heard so little that was good. His hostess would hear nothing of his paying either for bed or for board, while the archer and Hordle John placed a hand upon either shoulder and led him off to the board, where some smoking fish, a dish of spinach, and a jug of milk were laid out for their breakfast.

“I should not be surprised to learn, mon camarade” said the soldier, as he heaped a slice of fish upon Alleyne’s tranchoir of bread, “that you could read written things, since you are so ready with your brushes and pigments.”

“It would be shame to the good brothers of Beaulieu if I could not” he answered “seeing that I have been their clerk this ten years back.”

The Bowman looked at him with great respect. “Think of that!” said he. “And you with not a hair to your face, and a skin like a girl. I can shoot three hundred and fifty paces with my little popper there, and four hundred and twenty with the great war bow; yet I can make nothing of this, nor read my own name if you were to set ‘Sam Aylward’ up against me. In the whole Company there was only one man who could read, and he fell down a well at the taking of Ventadour, which proves that the thing is not suited to a soldier, though most needful to a clerk.”

“I can make some show at it” said big John; “though I was scarce long enough among the monks to catch the whole trick of it.

“Here, then, is something to try upon” quoth the archer, pulling a square of parchment from the inside of his tunic. It was tied securely with a broad band of purple silk, and firmly sealed at either end with a large red seal. John pored long and earnestly over the inscription upon the back, with his brows bent as one who bears up against great mental strain.

“Not having read much of late” he said “I am loth to say too much about what this may be. Some might say one thing and some another, just as one Bowman loves the yew, and a second will not shoot save with the ash. To me, by the length and the look of it, I should judge this to be a verse from one of the Psalms.”

The Bowman shook his head. “It is scarce likely” he said “that Sir Claude Latour should send me all the way across seas with nought more weighty than a psalm verse. You have clean overshot the butts this time, mon camarade. Give it to the little one. I will wager my feather bed that he makes more sense of it.”

“Why, it is written in the French tongue” said Alleyne “and in a right clerkly hand. This is how it runs: ‘A le moult puissant et moult honourable chevalier, Sir Nigel Loring de Christchurch, de son tres fidele ami Sir Claude Latour, capitaine de la Compagnie blanche, chatelain de Biscar, grand seigneur de Montchateau, vavasseur de le renomme Gaston, Comte de Foix, tenant les droits de la haute justice, de la milieu, et de la basse.’ Which signifies in our speech:

‘To the very powerful and very honourable knight, Sir Nigel Loring of Christchurch, from his very faithful friend Sir Claude Latour, captain of the White Company, chatelain of Biscar, grand lord of Montchateau and vassal to the renowned Gaston, Count of Foix, who holds the rights of the high justice, the middle and the low.’”

“Look at that now!” cried the bowman in triumph. “That is just what he would have said.”

“I can see now that it is even so” said John, examining the parchment again. “Though I scarce understand this high, middle and low.”

“By my hilt! You would understand it if you were Jacques Bonhomme. The low justice means that you may fleece him, and the middle that you may torture him, and the high that you may slay him. That is about the truth of it. But this is the letter which I am to take; and since the platter is clean it is time that we trussed up and were afoot. You come with me, mon gros Jean; and as to you, little one, where did you say that you journeyed?”

“To Minstead.”

“Ah, yes. I know this forest country well, though I was born myself in the Hundred of Easebourne, in the Rape of Chichester, hard by the village of Midhurst. Yet I have not a word to say against the Hampton men, for there are no better comrades or truer archers in the whole Company than some who learned to loose the string in these very parts. We shall travel round with you to Minstead lad, seeing that it is little out of our way.”

“I am ready” said Alleyne, right pleased at the thought of such company upon the road.

“So am not I. I must store my plunder at this inn, since the hostess is an honest woman. Hola! Ma cherie, I wish to leave with you my goldwork, my velvet, my silk, my feather bed, my incense boat, my ewer, my napping linen, and all the rest of it. I take only the money in a linen bag, and the box of rose coloured sugar which is a gift from my captain to the Lady Loring. Wilt guard my treasure for me?”

“It shall be put in the safest loft, good archer. Come when you may, you shall find it ready for you.”

“Now, there is a true friend!” cried the bowman, taking her hand. “There is a bonne amie! English land and English women, say I, and French wine and French plunder. I shall be back anon, mon ange. I am a lonely man, my sweeting, and I must settle some day when the wars are over and done. Mayhap you and I — Ah, mechante, mechante! There is la petite peeping from behind the door. Now, John, the sun is over the trees; you must be brisker than this when the bugleman blows ‘Bows and Bills’.”

“I have been waiting this time back” said Hordle John gruffly.

“Then we must be off. Adieu, ma vie! The two livres shall settle the score and buy some ribbons against the next kermesse. Do not forget Sam Aylward, for his heart shall ever be thine alone — and thine, ma petite! So, marchons, and may St. Julian grant us as good quarters elsewhere!”

The sun had risen over Ashurst and Denny woods, and was shining brightly, though the eastern wind had a sharp flavor to it, and the leaves were flickering thickly from the trees. In the High Street of Lyndhurst the wayfarers had to pick their way, for the little town was crowded with the guardsmen, grooms, and yeomen prickers who were attached to the King’s hunt. The King himself was staying at Castle Malwood, but several of his suite had been compelled to seek such quarters as they might find in the wooden or wattle-and-daub cottages of the village. Here and there a small escutcheon, peeping from a glassless window, marked the night’s lodging of knight or baron. These coats-of-arms could be read, where a scroll would be meaningless, and the bowman, like most men of his age, was well versed in the common symbols of heraldry.

“There is the Saracen’s head of Sir Bernard Brocas” quoth he. “I saw him last at the ruffle at Poitiers some ten years back, when he bore himself like a man. He is the master of the King’s horse, and can sing a right jovial stave, though in that he cannot come nigh to Sir John Chandos, who is first at the board or in the saddle. Three martlets on a field azure, that must be one of the Luttrells. By the crescent upon it, it should be the second son of old Sir Hugh, who had a bolt through his ankle at the intaking of Romorantin, he having rushed into the fray ere his squire had time to clasp his solleret to his greave. There too is the hackle which is the old device of the De Brays. I have served under Sir Thomas de Bray, who was as jolly as a pie, and a lusty swordsman until he got too fat for his harness.”

So the archer gossiped as the three wayfarers threaded their way among the stamping horses, the busy grooms, and the knots of pages and squires who disputed over the merits of their masters’ horses and deer hounds. As they passed the old church, which stood upon a mound at the left hand side of the village street the door was flung open, and a stream of worshippers wound down the sloping path, coming from the morning mass, all chattering like a cloud of jays. Alleyne bent knee and doffed hat at the sight of the open door; but ere he had finished an ave his comrades were out of sight round the curve of the path, and he had to run to overtake them.

“What!” he said “not one word of prayer before God’s own open house? How can ye hope for His blessing upon the day?”

“My friend” said Hordle John “I have prayed so much during the last two months, not only during the day, but at matins, lauds, and the like, when I could scarce keep my head upon my shoulders for nodding, that I feel that I have somewhat over-prayed myself.”

“How can a man have too much religion?” cried Alleyne earnestly. “It is the one thing that availeth. A man is but a beast as he lives from day to day, eating and drinking, breathing and sleeping. It is only when he raises himself, and concerns himself with the immortal spirit within him, that he becomes in very truth a man. Bethink ye how sad a thing it would be that the blood of the Redeemer should be spilled to no purpose.”

“Bless the lad, if he doth not blush like any girl, and yet preach like the whole College of Cardinals” cried the archer.

“In truth I blush that any one so weak and so unworthy as I should try to teach another that which he finds it so passing hard to follow himself.”

“Prettily said, mon garcon. Touching that same slaying of the Redeemer, it was a bad business. A good padre in France read to us from a scroll the whole truth of the matter. The soldiers came upon him in the garden. In truth, these Apostles of His may have been holy men, but they were of no great account as men-at-arms. There was one, indeed, Sir Peter, who smote out like a true man; but, unless he is belied, he did but clip a varlet’s ear, which was no very knightly deed. By these ten finger bones! Had I been there with Black Simon of Norwich, and but one score picked men of the Company, we had held them in play. Could we do no more, we had at least filled the false knight, Sir Judas, so full of English arrows that he would curse the day that ever he came on such an errand.”

The young clerk smiled at his companion’s earnestness. “Had He wished help” he said “He could have summoned legions of archangels from heaven, so what need had He of your poor bow and arrow? Besides, bethink you of His own words — that those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword.”

“And how could man die better?” asked the archer. “If I had my wish, it would be to fall so — not, mark you, in any mere skirmish of the Company, but in a stricken field, with the great lion banner waving over us and the red oriflamme in front, amid the shouting of my fellows and the twanging of the strings. But let it be sword, lance, or bolt that strikes me down: for I should think it shame to die from an iron ball from the fire-crake or bombard or any such unsoldierly weapon, which is only fitted to scare babes with its foolish noise and smoke.”

“I have heard much even in the quiet cloisters of these new and dreadful engines” quoth Alleyne. “It is said, though I can scarce bring myself to believe it, that they will send a ball twice as far as a bowman can shoot his shaft, and with such force as to break through armour of proof.”

“True enough, my lad. But while the armourer is thrusting in his devil’s dust, and dropping his ball, and lighting his flambeau, I can very easily loose six shafts, or eight maybe, so he hath no great vantage after all. Yet I will not deny that at the intaking of a town it is well to have good store of bombards. I am told that at Calais they made dints in the wall that a man might put his head

into. But surely, comrades, some one who is grievously hurt hath passed along this road before us.”

All along the woodland track there did indeed run a scattered straggling trail of blood marks, sometimes in single drops, and in other places in broad, ruddy gouts, smudged over the dead leaves or crimsoning the white flint stones.

“It must be a stricken deer” said John.

“Nay, I am woodman enough to see that no deer hath passed this way this morning; and yet the blood is fresh. But hark to the sound!”

They stood listening all three with sidelong heads. Through the silence of the great forest there came a swishing, whistling sound, mingled with the most dolorous groans, and the voice of a man raised in a high quavering kind of song. The comrades hurried onwards eagerly, and topping the brow of a small rising they saw upon the other side the source from which these strange noises arose.

A tall man, much stooped in the shoulders, was walking slowly with bended head and clasped hands in the centre of the path. He was dressed from head to foot in a long white linen cloth, and a high white cap with a red cross printed upon it. His gown was turned back from his shoulders, and the flesh there was a sight to make a man wince, for it was all beaten to a pulp, and the blood was soaking into his gown and trickling down upon the ground. Behind him walked a smaller man with his hair touched with gray, who was clad in the same white garb. He intoned a long whining rhyme in the French tongue, and at the end of every line he raised a thick cord, all jagged with pellets of lead, and smote his companion across the shoulders until the blood spurted again. Even as the three wayfarers stared, however, there was a sudden change, for the smaller man, having finished his song, loosened his own gown and handed the scourge to the other, who took up the stave once more and lashed his companion with all the strength of his bare and sinewy arm. So, alternately beating and beaten, they made their dolorous way through the beautiful woods and under the amber arches of the fading beech trees, where the calm strength and majesty of Nature might serve to rebuke the foolish energies and misspent strivings of mankind.

Such a spectacle was new to Hordle John or to Alleyne Edricson; but the archer treated it lightly, as a common matter enough.

“These are the Beating Friars, otherwise called the Flagellants” quoth he. “I marvel that ye should have come upon none of them before, for across the water they are as common as gallybaggers. I have heard that there are no English among them, but that they are from France, Italy and Bohemia. En avant, camarades! That we may have speech with them.”

As they came up to them, Alleyne could hear the doleful dirge which the beater was chanting, bringing down his heavy whip at the end of each line, while the groans of the sufferer formed a sort of dismal chorus. It was in old French, and ran somewhat in this way:

Or avant, entre nous tous freres
Battons nos charognes bien fort
En remembrant la grant misere
De Dieu et sa piteuse mort
Qui fut pris en la gent amere
Et vendus et trais a tort
Et bastu sa chair, vierge et dere
Au nom de ce battons plus fort.

Then at the end of the verse the scourge changed hands and the chanting began anew.

“Truly, holy fathers” said the archer in French as they came abreast of them, “you have beaten enough for today. The road is all spotted like a shambles at Martinmas. Why should ye mishandle yourselves thus?”

“C’est pour vos peches — pour vos peches” they droned, looking at the travellers with sad lacklustre eyes, and then bent to their bloody work once more without heed to the prayers and persuasions which were addressed to them. Finding all remonstrance useless, the three comrades hastened on their way, leaving these strange travellers to their dreary task.

“Mort Dieu!” cried the Bowman “There is a bucketful or more of my blood over in France, but it was all spilled in hot fight, and I should think twice before I drew it drop by drop as these friars are doing. By my hilt! Our young one here is as white as a Picardy cheese. What is amiss then, mon cher?”

“It is nothing” Alleyne answered. “My life has been too quiet, I am not used to such sights.”

“Ma foi!” The other cried, “I have never yet seen a man who was so stout of speech and yet so weak of heart.”

“Not so, friend” quoth big John; “it is not weakness of heart for I know the lad well. His heart is as good as thine or mine but he hath more in his pate than ever you will carry under that tin pot of thine, and as a consequence he can see farther into things, so that they weigh upon him more.”

“Surely to any man it is a sad sight” said Alleyne “to see these holy men, who have done no sin themselves, suffering so for the sins of others. Saints are they, if in this age any may merit so high a name.”

“I count them not a fly” cried Hordle John; “for who is the better for all their whipping and yowling? They are like other friars, I trow, when all is done. Let them leave their backs alone, and beat the pride out of their hearts.”

“By the three kings! There is sooth in what you say” remarked the archer. “Besides, methinks if I were le bon Dieu, it would bring me little joy to see a

poor devil cutting the flesh off his bones; and I should think that he had but a small opinion of me, that he should hope to please me by such provost marshal work. No, by my hilt! I should look with a more loving eye upon a jolly archer who never harmed a fallen foe and never feared a hale one.”

“Doubtless you mean no sin” said Alleyne. “If your words are wild, it is not for me to judge them. Can you not see that there are other foes in this world besides Frenchmen, and as much glory to be gained in conquering them? Would it not be a proud day for knight or squire if he could overthrow seven adversaries in the lists? Yet here are we in the lists of life, and there come the seven black champions against us Sir Pride, Sir Covetousness, Sir Lust, Sir Anger, Sir Gluttony, Sir Envy, and Sir Sloth. Let a man lay those seven low, and he shall have the prize of the day, from the hands of the fairest queen of beauty, even from the Virgin Mother herself. It is for this that these men mortify their flesh, and to set us an example, who would pamper ourselves overmuch. I say again that they are God’s own saints, and I bow my head to them.”

“And so you shall, mon petit” replied the archer. “I have not heard a man speak better since old Dom Bertrand died, who was at one time chaplain to the White Company. He was a very valiant man, but at the battle of Brignais he was spitted through the body by a Hainault man-at-arms. For this we had an excommunication read against the man, when next we saw our holy father at Avignon; but as we had not his name, and knew nothing of him, save that he rode a dapple grey roussin, I have feared sometimes that the blight may have settled upon the wrong man.”

“Your Company has been, then, to bow knee before our holy father, the Pope Urban, the prop and centre of Christendom?” asked Alleyne, much interested. “Perchance you have yourself set eyes upon his august face?”

“Twice I saw him” said the archer. “He was a lean little rat of a man, with a scab on his chin. The first time we had five thousand crowns out of him, though he made much ado about it. The second time we asked ten thousand, but it was three days before we could come to terms, and I am of opinion myself that we might have done better by plundering the palace. His chamberlain and cardinals came forth, as I remember, to ask whether we would take seven thousand crowns with his blessing and a plenary absolution, or the ten thousand with his solemn ban by bell, book and candle. We were all of one mind that it was best to have the ten thousand with the curse; but in some way they prevailed upon Sir John, so that we were blest and shriven against our will. Perchance it is as well, for the Company were in need of it about that time.”

The pious Alleyne was deeply shocked by this reminiscence. Involuntarily he glanced up and around to see if there were any trace of those opportune Levin flashes and thunderbolts which, in the “Acta Sanctorum” were wont so often to cut short the loose talk of the scoffer. The autumn sun streamed down as brightly as ever, and the peaceful red path still wound in front of them through the rustling, yellow-tinted forest, Nature seemed to be too busy with her own concerns to heed the dignity of an outraged pontiff. Yet he felt a sense of weight

and reproach within his breast, as though he had sinned himself in giving ear to such words. The teachings of twenty years cried out against such license. It was not until he had thrown himself down before one of the many wayside crosses, and had prayed from his heart both for the archer and for himself, that the dark cloud rolled back again from his spirit.