CHAPTER VIII
THE THREE FRIENDS.

His companions had passed on whilst he was at his orisons; but his young blood and the fresh morning air both invited him to a scamper. His staff in one hand and his scrip in the other, with springy step and floating locks, he raced along the forest path, as active and as graceful as a young deer. He had not far to go, however; for, on turning a corner, he came on a roadside cottage with a wooden fence-work around it, where stood big John and Aylward the bowman, staring at something within. As he came up with them, he saw that two little lads, the one about nine years of age and the other somewhat older, were standing on the plot in front of the cottage, each holding out a round stick in their left hands, with their arms stiff and straight from the shoulder, as silent and still as two small statues. They were pretty, blue eyed, yellow haired lads, well made and sturdy, with bronzed skins, which spoke of a woodland life.

"Here are young chips from an old bow stave!" cried the soldier in great delight. "This is the proper way to raise children. By my hilt! I could not have trained them better had I the ordering of it myself."

"What is it then?" asked Hordle John. "They stand very stiff, and I trust that they have not been struck so."

"Nay, they are training their left arms, that they may have a steady grasp of the bow. So my own father trained me, and six days a week I held out his walking staff till my arm was heavy as lead. Hola, mes enfants! how long will you hold out?"

"Until the sun is over the great lime tree, good master" the elder answered.

"What would ye be, then? Woodmen? Verderers?"

"Nay, soldiers" they cried both together.

"By the beard of my father! But ye are whelps of the true breed. Why so keen, then, to be soldiers?"

"That we may fight the Scots" they answered. "Daddy will send us to fight the Scots."

"And why the Scots, my pretty lads? We have seen French and Spanish galleys no further away than Southampton, but I doubt that it will be some time before the Scots find their way to these parts."

"Our business is with the Scots" quoth the elder; "for it was the Scots who cut off daddy's string fingers and his thumbs."

“Aye, lads, it was that” said a deep voice from behind Alleyne’s shoulder. Looking round, the wayfarers saw a gaunt, big-boned man, with sunken cheeks and a sallow face, who had come up behind them. He held up his two hands as he spoke, and showed that the thumbs and two first fingers had been torn away from each of them.

“Ma foi, camarade!” cried Aylward. “Who hath served thee in so shameful a fashion?”

“It is easy to see, friend, that you were born far from the marches of Scotland” quoth the stranger, with a bitter smile. “North of Humber there is no man who would not know the handiwork of Devil Douglas, the black Lord James.”

“And how fell you into his hands?” asked John.

“I am a man of the north country, from the town of Beverley and the wapentake of Holderness” he answered. “There was a day when, from Trent to Tweed, there was no better marksman than Robin Heathcot. Yet, as you see, he hath left me, as he hath left many another poor border archer, with no grip for bill or bow. Yet the king hath given me a living here in the southlands, and please God these two lads of mine will pay off a debt that hath been owing over long. What is the price of daddy’s thumbs, boys?”

“Twenty Scottish lives” they answered together.

“And for the fingers?”

“Half a score.”

“When they can bend my war bow, and bring down a squirrel at a hundred paces, I send them to take service under Johnny Copeland, the Lord of the Marches and Governor of Carlisle. By my soul! I would give the rest of my fingers to see the Douglas within arrow flight of them.”

“May you live to see it” quoth the bowman. “And hark ye, mes enfants, take an old soldier’s rede and lay your bodies to the bow, drawing from hip and thigh as much as from arm. Learn also, I pray you, to shoot with a dropping shaft; for though a bowman may at times be called upon to shoot straight and fast, yet it is more often that he has to do with a town guard behind a wall, or an arbalestier with his mantlet raised when you cannot hope to do him scathe unless your shaft fall straight upon him from the clouds. I have not drawn string for two weeks, but I may be able to show ye how such shots should be made.” He loosened his longbow, slung his quiver round to the front, and then glanced keenly round for a fitting mark. There was a yellow and withered stump some way off, seen under the drooping branches of a lofty oak. The archer measured the distance with his eye; and then, drawing three shafts, he shot them off with such speed that the first had not reached the mark ere the last was on the string. Each arrow passed hig h over the oak; and, of the three, two stuck fair

into the stump; while the third, caught in some wandering puff of wind, was driven a foot or two to one side.

"Good!" cried the north countryman. "Hearken to him lads! He is a master bowman. Your dad says amen to every word he says."

"By my hilt!" said Aylward "if I am to preach on bowmanship, the whole long day would scarce give me time for my sermon. We have marksmen in the Company who will notch with a shaft every crevice and joint of a man-at-arm's harness, from the clasp of his bassinet to the hinge of his greave. But, with your favor, friend, I must gather my arrows again, for while a shaft costs a penny a poor man can scarce leave them sticking in wayside stumps. We must, then, on our road again, and I hope from my heart that you may train these two young goshawks here until they are ready for a cast even at such a quarry as you speak of."

Leaving the thumbless archer and his brood, the wayfarers struck through the scattered huts of Emery Down, and out on to the broad rolling heath covered deep in ferns and in heather, where droves of the half wild black forest pigs were rooting about amongst the hillocks. The woods about this point fall away to the left and the right, while the road curves upwards and the wind sweeps keenly over the swelling uplands. The broad strips of bracken glowed red and yellow against the black peaty soil, and a queenly doe who grazed among them turned her white front and her great questioning eyes towards the wayfarers. Alleyne gazed in admiration at the supple beauty of the creature; but the archer's fingers played with his quiver, and his eyes glistened with the fell instinct which urges a man to slaughter.

"Tete Dieu!" he growled, "were this France, or even Guienne, we should have a fresh haunch for our none-meat. Law or no law, I have a mind to loose a bolt at her."

"I would break your stave across my knee first" cried John, laying his great hand upon the bow. "What! man, I am forest-born, and I know what comes of it. In our own township of Hordle two have lost their eyes and one his skin for this very thing. On my troth, I felt no great love when I first saw you, but since then I have conceived over much regard for you to wish to see the verderer's flayer at work upon you."

"It is my trade to risk my skin" growled the archer; but none the less he thrust his quiver over his hip again and turned his face for the west.

As they advanced, the path still tended upwards, running from heath into copses of holly and yew, and so back into heath again. It was joyful to hear the merry whistle of blackbirds as they darted from one clump of greenery to the other. Now and again a peaty amber coloured stream rippled across their way, with ferny over-grown banks, where the blue kingfisher flitted busily from side to side, or the grey and pensive heron, swollen with trout and dignity, stood ankle deep among the sedges. Chattering jays and loud wood pigeons flapped

thickly overhead, while ever and anon the measured tapping of Nature's carpenter, the great green woodpecker, sounded from each wayside grove. On either side, as the path mounted, the long sweep of country broadened and expanded, sloping down on the one side through yellow forest and brown moor to the distant smoke of Lymington and the blue misty channel which lay alongside the skyline, while to the north the woods rolled away, grove topping grove, to where in the furthest distance the white spire of Salisbury stood out hard and clear against the cloudless sky. To Alleyne whose days had been spent in the low lying coastland, the eager upland air and the wide free countryside gave a sense of life and of the joy of living which made his young blood tingle in his veins. Even the heavy John was not unmoved by the beauty of their road, while the bowman whistled lustily or sang snatches of French love songs in a voice which might have scared the most stout hearted maiden that ever hearkened to serenade.

"I have a liking for that north countryman" he remarked presently. "He hath good power of hatred. Couldst see by his cheek and eye that he is as bitter as verjuice. I warm to a man who hath some gall in his liver."

"Ah me!" sighed Alleyne. "Would it not be better if he had some love in his heart?"

"I would not say nay to that. By my hilt! I shall never be said to be traitor to the little king. Let a man love the sex. Pasques Dieu! They are made to be loved, les petites, from whimple down to shoe-string! I am right glad, mon garçon, to see that the good monks have trained thee so wisely and so well."

"Nay, I meant not worldly love, but rather that his heart should soften towards those who have wronged him."

The archer shook his head. "A man should love those of his own breed" said he. "But it is not nature that an English born man should love a Scot or a Frenchman. Ma foi! You have not seen a drove of Nithsdale raiders on their Galloway nags, or you would not speak of loving them. I would as soon take Beelzebub himself to my arms. I fear, mon gar, that they have taught thee but badly at Beaulieu, for surely a bishop knows more of what is right and what is ill than an abbot can do, and I myself with these very eyes saw the Bishop of Lincoln hew into a Scottish hobeler with a battle axe, which was a passing strange way of showing him that he loved him."

Alleyne scarce saw his way to argue in the face of so decided an opinion on the part of a high dignitary of the Church. "You have borne arms against the Scots, then?" he asked.

"Why, man, I first loosed string in battle when I was but a lad, younger by two years than you, at Neville's Cross, under the Lord Mowbray. Later, I served under the Warden of Berwick, that very John Copeland of whom our friend spake, the same who held the King of Scots to ransom. Ma foi! It is rough

soldiering, and a good school for one who would learn to be hardy and war wise."

"I have heard that the Scots are good men of war" said Hordle John.

"For axemen and for spearmen I have not seen their match" the archer answered. "They can travel, too, with bag of meal and gridiron slung to their sword belt, so that it is ill to follow them. There are scant crops and few beeves in the borderland, where a man must reap his grain with sickle in one fist and brown bill in the other. On the other hand, they are the sorriest archers that I have ever seen, and cannot so much as aim with the arbalest, to say nought of the longbow. Again, they are mostly poor folk, even the nobles among them, so that there are few who can buy as good a brigandine of chain mail as that which I am wearing, and it is ill for them to stand up against our own knights, who carry the price of five Scotch farms upon their chest and shoulders. Man for man, with equal weapons, they are as worthy and valiant men as could be found in the whole of Christendom."

"And the French?" asked Alleyne, to whom the archer's light gossip had all the relish that the words of the man of action have for the recluse.

"The French are also very worthy men. We have had great good fortune in France, and it hath led to much bobance and campfire talk, but I have ever noticed that those who know the most have the least to say about it. I have seen Frenchmen fight both in open field, in the intaking and the defending of towns or castlewicks, in escalados, camisades, night forays, bushments, sallies, outfalls, and knightly spear runnings. Their knights and squires, lad, are every whit as good as ours, and I could pick out a score of those who ride behind Du Guesclin who would hold the lists with sharpened lances against the best men in the army of England. On the other hand, their common folk are so crushed down with gabelle, and poll tax, and every manner of cursed tallage, that the spirit has passed right out of them. It is a fool's plan to teach a man to be a cur in peace, and think that he will be a lion in war. Fleece them like sheep and sheep they will remain. If the nobles had not conquered the poor folk it is like enough that we should not have conquered the nobles."

"But they must be sorry folk to bow down to the rich in such a fashion" said big John. "I am but a poor commoner of England myself, and yet I know something of charters, liberties, franchises, usages, privileges, customs, and the like. If these be broken, then all men know that it is time to buy arrowheads."

"Aye, but the men of the law are strong in France as well as the men of war. By my hilt! I hold that a man has more to fear there from the inkpot of the one than from the iron of the other. There is ever some cursed sheepskin in their strong boxes to prove that the rich man should be richer and the poor man poorer. It would scarce pass in England, but they are quiet folk over the water."

"And what other nations have you seen in your travels, good sir?" asked Alleyne Edricson. His young mind hungered for plain facts of life, after the long course of speculation and of mysticism on which he had been trained.

"I have seen the low countryman in arms, and I have nought to say against him. Heavy and slow is he by nature, and is not to be brought into battle for the sake of a lady's eyelash or the twang of a minstrel's string, like the hotter blood of the south. But ma foi! Lay hand on his wool bales, or trifle with his velvet of Bruges, and out buzzes every stout burgher, like bees from the tee-hole, ready to lay on as though it were his one business in life. By our lady! they have shown the French at Courtrai and elsewhere that they are as deft in wielding steel as in welding it."

"And the men of Spain?"

"They too are very hardy soldiers, the more so as for many hundred years they have had to fight hard against the cursed followers of the black Mahound, who have pressed upon them from the south, and still, as I understand, hold the fairer half of the country. I had a turn with them upon the sea when they came over to Winchelsea and the good queen with her ladies sat upon the cliffs looking down at us, as if it had been joust or tourney. By my hilt! It was a sight that was worth the seeing, for all that was best in England was out on the water that day. We went forth in little ships and came back in great galleys — for of fifty tall ships of Spain, over two score flew the Cross of St. George ere the sun had set. But now, youngster, I have answered you freely, and I trow it is time that you answered me. Let things be plat and plain between us. I am a man who shoots straight at his mark. You saw the things I had with me at yonder hostel: name which you will, save only the box of rose-coloured sugar which I take to the Lady Loring, and you shall have it if you will but come with me to France."

"Nay" said Alleyne, "I would gladly come with ye to France or where else ye will, just to list to your talk, and because ye are the only two friends that I have in the whole wide world outside of the cloisters; but, indeed, it may not be, for my duty is towards my brother, seeing that father and mother are dead, and he my elder. Besides, when ye talk of taking me to France, ye do not conceive how useless I should be to you, seeing that neither by training nor by nature am I fitted for the wars, and there seems to be nought but strife in those parts."

"That comes from my fool's talk" cried the archer; "for being a man of no learning myself, my tongue turns to blades and targets, even as my hand does. Know then that for every parchment in England there are twenty in France. For every statue, cut gem, shrine, carven screen, or what else might please the eye of a learned clerk, there are a good hundred to our one. At the spoiling of Carcasonne I have seen chambers stored with writing, though not one man in our Company could read them. Again, in Arles and Nimes, and other towns that I could name, there are the great arches and fortalices still standing which were built of old by giant men who came from the south. Can I not see by your brightened eye how you would love to look upon these things? Come then with

me, and, by these ten finger bones! there is not one of them which you shall not see."

"I should indeed love to look upon them" Alleyne answered; "but I have come from Beaulieu for a purpose, and I must be true to my service, even as thou art true to thine."

"Bethink you again, mon ami" quoth Aylward, "that you might do much good yonder, since there are three hundred men in the Company, and none who has ever a word of grace for them, and yet the Virgin knows that there was never a set of men who were in more need of it. Sickerly the one duty may balance the other. Your brother hath done without you this many a year, and, as I gather, he hath never walked as far as Beaulieu to see you during all that time, so he cannot be in any great need of you."

"Besides" said John "the Socman of Minstead is a byword through the forest, from Bramshaw Hill to Holmesley Walk. He is a drunken, brawling, perilous churl, as you may find to your cost."

"The more reason that I should strive to mend him" quoth Alleyne. "There is no need to urge me, friends, for my own wishes would draw me to France, and it would be a joy to me if I could go with you. But indeed and indeed it cannot be, so here I take my leave of you, for yonder square tower amongst the trees upon the right must surely be the church of Minstead, and I may reach it by this path through the woods."

"Well, God be with thee, lad!" cried the archer, pressing Alleyne to his heart. "I am quick to love, and quick to hate and 'fore God I am loth to part."

"Would it not be well" said John "that we should wait here, and see what manner of greeting you have from your brother. You may prove to be as welcome as the king's purveyor to the village dame."

"Nay, nay" he answered; "ye must not bide for me, for where I go I stay."

"Yet it may be as well that you should know whither we go" said the archer. "We shall now journey south through the woods until we come out upon the Christchurch road, and so onwards, hoping tonight to reach the castle of Sir William Montacute, Earl of Salisbury, of which Sir Nigel Loring is constable. There we shall bide, and it is like enough that for a month or more you may find us there, ere we are ready for our viage back to France."

It was hard indeed for Alleyne to break away from these two new but hearty friends, and so strong was the combat between his conscience and his inclinations that he dared not look round, lest his resolution should slip away from him. It was not until he was deep among the tree trunks that he cast a glance backwards, when he found that he could still see them through the branches on the road above him. The archer was standing with folded arms, his bow jutting from over his shoulder, and the sun gleaming brightly upon his

head-piece and the links of his chain mail. Beside him stood his giant recruit, still clad in the homespun and ill-fitting garments of the fuller of Lymington, with arms and legs shooting out of his scanty garb. Even as Alleyne watched them they turned upon their heels and plodded off together upon their way.

CHAPTER IX
HOW STRANGE THINGS BEFELL IN MINSTEAD WOOD

The path which the young clerk had now to follow lay through a magnificent forest of the very heaviest timber, where the giant bowls of oak and of beech formed long aisles in every direction, shooting up their huge branches to build the majestic arches of Nature's own cathedral. Beneath lay a broad carpet of the softest and greenest moss, flecked over with fallen leaves, but yielding pleasantly to the foot of the traveller. The track which guided him was one so seldom used that in places it lost itself entirely among the grass, to reappear as a reddish rut between the distant tree trunks. It was very still here in the heart of the woodlands. The gentle rustle of the branches and the distant cooing of pigeons were the only sounds which broke in upon the silence, save that once Alleyne heard afar off a merry call upon a hunting bugle and the shrill yapping of the hounds.

It was not without some emotion that he looked upon the scene around him, for, in spite of his secluded life, he knew enough of the ancient greatness of his own family to be aware that the time had been when they had held undisputed and paramount sway over all that tract of country. His father could trace his pure Saxon lineage back to that Godfrey Malf who had held the manors of Bisterne and of Minstead at the time when the Norman first set mailed foot upon English soil. The afforestation of the district, however, and its conversion into a royal demesne had clipped off a large section of his estate, while other parts had been confiscated as a punishment for his supposed complicity in an abortive Saxon rising. The fate of the ancestor had been typical of that of his descendants. During three hundred years their domains had gradually contracted, sometimes through royal or feudal encroachment, and sometimes through such gifts to the Church as that with which Alleyne's father had opened the doors of Beaulieu Abbey to his younger son. The importance of the family had thus dwindled, but they still retained the old Saxon manor house, with a couple of farms and a grove large enough to afford pannage to a hundred pigs — "sylva de centum porcis" as the old family parchments describe it. Above all, the owner of the soil could still hold his head high as the veritable Socman of Minstead — that is, as holding the land in free socage, with no feudal superior, and answerable to no man lower than the king. Knowing this, Alleyne felt some little glow of worldly pride as he looked for the first time upon the land with which so many generations of his ancestors had been associated. He pushed on the quicker, twirling his staff merrily, and looking out at every turn of the path for some sign of the old Saxon residence. He was suddenly arrested, however, by the appearance of a wild looking fellow armed with a club, who sprang out from behind a tree and barred his passage. He was a rough, powerful peasant, with cap and tunic of untanned sheepskin, leather breeches, and galligaskins round legs and feet.

"Stand!" he shouted, raising his heavy cudgel to enforce the order. "Who are you who walk so freely through the wood? Whither would you go, and what is your errand?"

"Why should I answer your questions, my friend?" said Alleyne, standing on his guard.

"Because your tongue may save your pate. But where have I looked upon your face before?"

"No longer ago than last night at the 'Pied Merlin' " the clerk answered, recognizing the escaped serf who had been so outspoken as to his wrongs.

"By the Virgin! yes. You were the little clerk who sat so mum in the corner, and then cried fy on the gleeman. What hast in the scrip?"

"Naught of any price."

"How can I tell that, clerk? Let me see."

"Not I."

"Fool! I could pull you limb from limb like a pullet. What would you have? Hast forgot that we are alone far from all men? How can your clerkship help you? Wouldst lose scrip and life too?"

"I will part with neither without fight."

"A fight, quotha? A fight betwixt spurred cock and new hatched chicken! Thy fighting days may soon be over."

"Hadst asked me in the name of charity I would have given freely" cried Alleyne. "As it stands, not one farthing shall you have with my free will, and when I see my brother, the Socman of Minstead, he will raise hue and cry from vill to vill, from hundred to hundred, until you are taken as a common robber and a scourge to the country."

The outlaw sank his club. "The Socman's brother!" he gasped. "Now, by the keys of Peter! I had rather that hand withered and tongue was palsied ere I had struck or miscalled you. If you are the Socman's brother you are one of the right side, I warrant, for all your clerkly dress."

"His brother I am" said Alleyne. "But if I were not, is that reason why you should molest me on the king's ground?"

"I give not the pip of an apple for king or for noble" cried the serf passionately. "Ill have I had from them, and ill I shall repay them. I am a good friend to my friends, and, by the Virgin! An evil foeman to my foes."

"And therefore the worst of foemen to thyself" said Alleyne. "But I pray you, since you seem to know him, to point out to me the shortest path to my brother's house."

The serf was about to reply, when the clear ringing call of a bugle burst from the wood close behind them, and Alleyne caught sight for an instant of the dun side and white breast of a lordly stag glancing swiftly betwixt the distant tree trunks. A minute later came the shaggy deerhounds, a dozen or fourteen of them, running on a hot scent, with nose to earth and tail in air. As they streamed past the silent forest around broke suddenly into loud life, with galloping of hoofs, crackling of brushwood, and the short, sharp cries of the hunters. Close behind the pack rode a fourrier and a yeoman pricker, whooping on the laggards and encouraging the leaders, in the shrill half-French jargon which was the language of venery and woodcraft. Alleyne was still gazing after them, listening to the loud "Hyke-a-Bayard! Hyke-a-Pomers! Hyke-a-Lebryt!" with which they called upon their favorite hounds, when a group of horsemen crashed out through the underwood at the very spot where the serf and he were standing.

The one who led was a man between fifty and sixty years of age, warworn and weather-beaten, with a broad, thoughtful forehead and eyes which shone brightly from under his fierce and overhung brows. His beard, streaked thickly with grey, bristled forward from his chin, and spoke of a passionate nature, while the long, finely cut face and firm mouth marked the leader of men. His figure was erect and soldierly, and he rode his horse with the careless grace of a man whose life had been spent in the saddle. In common garb, his masterful face and flashing eye would have marked him as one who was born to rule; but now, with his silken tunic powdered with golden fleurs-de-lis, his velvet mantle lined with the royal minever, and the lions of England stamped in silver upon his harness, none could fail to recognize the noble Edward, most warlike and powerful of all the long line of fighting monarchs who had ruled the Anglo-Norman race. Alleyne doffed hat and bowed head at the sight of him, but the serf folded his hands and leaned them upon his cudgel, looking with little love at the knot of nobles and knights-in-waiting who rode behind the king.

"Ha!" cried Edward, reining up for an instant his powerful black steed. "Le cerf est passe? Non? Ici, Brocas; tu parles Anglais."

"The deer, clowns?" said a hard-visaged, swarthy-faced man, who rode at the king's elbow. "If ye have headed it back it is as much as your ears are worth."

"It passed by the blighted beech there" said Alleyne, pointing, "and the hounds were hard at its heels."

"It is well" cried Edward, still speaking in French: for, though he could understand English, he had never learned to express himself in so barbarous and unpolished a tongue. "By my faith, sirs" he continued, half turning in his saddle to address his escort, "unless my woodcraft is sadly at fault, it is a stag of six tines and the finest that we have roused this journey. A golden St. Hubert

to the man who is the first to sound the mort." He shook his bridle as he spoke, and thundered away, his knights lying low upon their horses and galloping as hard as whip and spur would drive them, in the hope of winning the king's prize. Away they drove down the long green glade — bay horses, black and grey, riders clad in every shade of velvet, fur, or silk, with glint of brazen horn and flash of knife and spear. One only lingered, the black-browed Baron Brocas, who, making a gambade which brought him within arm sweep of the serf, slashed him across the face with his riding whip. "Doff, dog, doff" he hissed, "when a monarch deigns to lower his eyes to such as you!" — then spurred through the underwood and was gone, with a gleam of steel shoes and flutter of dead leaves.

The villein took the cruel blow without wince or cry, as one to whom stripes are a birthright and an inheritance. His eyes flashed, however, and he shook his bony hand with a fierce wild gesture after the retreating figure.

"Black hound of Gascony" he muttered "evil the day that you and those like you set foot in free England! I know thy kennel of Rochecourt. The night will come when I may do to thee and thine what you and your class have wrought upon mine and me. May God smite me if I fail to smite thee, thou French robber, with thy wife and thy child and all that is under thy castle roof!"

"Forbear!" cried Alleyne. "Mix not God's name with these unhallowed threats! And yet it was a coward's blow, and one to stir the blood and loose the tongue of the most peaceful. Let me find some soothing simples and lay them on the weal to draw the sting."

"Nay, there is but one thing that can draw the sting, and that the future may bring to me. But, clerk, if you would see your brother you must on, for there is a meeting today, and his merry men will await him ere the shadows turn from west to east. I pray you not to hold him back, for it would be an evil thing if all the stout lads were there and the leader a-missing. I would come with you, but sooth to say I am stationed here and may not move. The path over yonder, betwixt the oak and the thorn, should bring you out into his nether field."

Alleyne lost no time in following the directions of the wild, masterless man, whom he left among the trees where he had found him. His heart was the heavier for the encounter, not only because all bitterness and wrath were abhorrent to his gentle nature, but also because it disturbed him to hear his brother spoken of as though he were a chief of outlaws or the leader of a party against the state. Indeed, of all the things which he had seen yet in the world to surprise him there was none more strange than the hate which class appeared to bear to class. The talk of labourer, woodman and villein in the inn had all pointed to the widespread mutiny, and now his brother's name was spoken as though he were the very centre of the universal discontent. In good truth, the commons throughout the length and breadth of the land were heart-weary of this fine game of chivalry which had been played so long at their expense. So long as knight and baron were a strength and a guard to the kingdom they might be endured, but now, when all men knew that the great

battles in France had been won by English yeomen and Welsh stabbers, warlike fame, the only fame to which his class had ever aspired, appeared to have deserted the plate-clad horsemen. The sports of the lists had done much in days gone by to impress the minds of the people, but the plumed and unwieldy champion was no longer an object either of fear or of reverence to men whose fathers and brothers had shot into the press at Crecy or Poitiers, and seen the proudest chivalry in the world unable to make head against the weapons of disciplined peasants. Power had changed hands. The protector had become the protected, and the whole fabric of the feudal system was tottering to a fall. Hence the fierce mutterings of the lower classes and the constant discontent, breaking out into local tumult and outrage, and culminating some years later in the great rising of Tyler. What Alleyne saw and wondered at in Hampshire would have appealed equally to the traveller in any other English county from the Channel to the marches of Scotland.

He was following the track, his misgivings increasing with every step which took him nearer to that home which he had never seen, when of a sudden the trees began to thin and the sward to spread out onto a broad, green lawn, where five cows lay in the sunshine and droves of black swine wandered unchecked. A brown forest stream swirled down the centre of this clearing, with a rude bridge flung across it, and on the other side was a second field sloping up to a long, low lying wooden house, with thatched roof and open squares for windows. Alleyne gazed across at it with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes — for this, he knew, must be the home of his fathers. A wreath of blue smoke floated up through a hole in the thatch, and was the only sign of life in the place, save a great black hound which lay sleeping chained to the door-post. In the yellow shimmer of the autumn sunshine it lay as peacefully and as still as he had oft pictured it to himself in his dreams.

He was roused, however, from his pleasant reverie by the sound of voices, and two people emerged from the forest some little way to his right and moved across the field in the direction of the bridge. The one was a man with yellow flowing beard and very long hair of the same tint drooping over his shoulders; his dress of good Norwich cloth and his assured bearing marked him as a man of position, while the sombre hue of his clothes and the absence of all ornament contrasted with the flash and glitter which had marked the king's retinue. By his side walked a woman, tall and slight and dark, with lithe, graceful figure and clear cut, composed features. Her jet black hair was gathered back under a light pink coif, her head poised proudly upon her neck, and her step long and springy, like that of some wild, tireless woodland creature. She held her left hand in front of her, covered with a red velvet glove, and on the wrist a little brown falcon, very fluffy and bedraggled, which she smoothed and fondled as she walked. As she came out into the sunshine, Alleyne noticed that her light gown, slashed with pink, was all stained with earth and with moss upon one side from shoulder to hem. He stood in the shadow of an oak staring at her with parted lips, for this woman seemed to him to be the most beautiful and graceful creature that mind could conceive of. Such had he imagined the angels, and such he had tried to paint them in the Beaulieu missals; but here there was something human, were it only in the battered hawk and discoloured dress,

which sent a tingle and thrill through his nerves such as no dream of radiant and stainless spirit had ever yet been able to conjure up. Good, quiet, uncomplaining mother Nature, long slighted and miscalled, still bides her time and draws to her bosom the most errant of her children.

The two walked swiftly across the meadow to the narrow bridge, he in front and she a pace or two behind. There they paused, and stood for a few minutes face to face talking earnestly. Alleyne had read and had heard of love and of lovers. Such were these, doubtless — this golden-bearded man and the fair damsel with the cold, proud face. Why else should they wander together in the woods, or be so lost in talk by rustic streams? And yet as he watched, uncertain whether to advance from the cover or to choose some other path to the house, he soon came to doubt the truth of this first conjecture. The man stood, tall and square, blocking the entrance to the bridge, and throwing out his hands as he spoke in a wild eager fashion, while the deep tones of his stormy voice rose at times into accents of menace and of anger. She stood fearlessly in front of him, still stroking her bird; but twice she threw a swift questioning glance over her shoulder, as one who is in search of aid. So moved was the young clerk by these mute appeals, that he came forth from the trees and crossed the meadow, uncertain what to do, and yet loth to hold back from one who might need his aid. So intent were they upon each other that neither took note of his approach; until, when he was close upon them, the man threw his arm roughly round the damsel's waist and drew her towards him, she straining her lithe, supple figure away and striking fiercely at him, while the hooded hawk screamed with ruffled wings and pecked blindly in its mistress's defence. Bird and maid, however, had but little chance against their assailant who, laughing loudly, caught her wrist in one hand while he drew her towards him with the other.

"The best rose has ever the longest thorns" said he. "Quiet, little one, or you may do yourself a hurt. Must pay Saxon toll on Saxon land, my proud Maude, for all your airs and graces."

"You boor!" she hissed. "You base underbred clod! Is this your care and your hospitality? I would rather wed a branded serf from my father's fields. Leave go, I say — Ah! good youth, Heaven has sent you. Make him loose me! By the honour of your mother, I pray you to stand by me and to make this knave loose me."

"Stand by you I will, and that blithely" said Alleyne. "Surely, sir, you should take shame to hold the damsel against her will."

The man turned a face upon him which was lion-like in its strength and in its wrath. With his tangle of golden hair, his fierce blue eyes, and his large, well-marked features, he was the most comely man whom Alleyne had ever seen, and yet there was something so sinister and so fell in his expression that child or beast might well have shrunk from him. His brows were drawn, his cheek flushed, and there was a mad sparkle in his eyes which spoke of a wild, untamable nature.

"Young fool!" he cried, holding the woman still to his side, though every line of her shrinking figure spoke her abhorrence. "Do you keep your spoon in your own broth. I rede you to go on your way, lest worse befall you. This little wench has come with me and with me she shall bide."

"Liar!" cried the woman; and, stooping her head, she suddenly bit fiercely into the broad brown hand which held her. He whipped it back with an oath, while she tore herself free and slipped behind Alleyne, cowering up against him like the trembling leveret who sees the falcon poising for the swoop above him.

"Stand off my land!" the man said fiercely, heedless of the blood which trickled freely from his fingers. "What have you to do here? By your dress you should be one of those cursed clerks who overrun the land like vile rats, poking and prying into other men's concerns, too caitiff to fight and too lazy to work. By the rood! if I had my will upon ye, I should nail you upon the abbey doors, as they hang vermin before their holes. Art neither man nor woman, young shaveling. Get thee back to thy fellows ere I lay hands upon you: for your foot is on my land, and I may slay you as a common draw-latch."

"Is this your land, then?" gasped Alleyne.

"Would you dispute it, dog? Would you wish by trick or quibble to juggle me out of these last acres? Know, base-born knave, that you have dared this day to stand in the path of one whose race have been the advisers of kings and the leaders of hosts, ere ever this vile crew of Norman robbers came into the land, or such half-blood hounds as you were let loose to preach that the thief should have his booty and the honest man should sin if he strove to win back his own."

"You are the Socman of Minstead?"

"That am I; and the son of Edric the Socman, of the pure blood of Godfrey the thane, by the only daughter of the house of Aluric, whose forefathers held the white horse banner at the fatal fight where our shield was broken and our sword shivered. I tell you, clerk, that my folk held this land from Bramshaw Wood to the Ringwood road; and, by the soul of my father! it will be a strange thing if I am to be bearded upon the little that is left of it. Begone, I say, and meddle not with my affair."

"If you leave me now" whispered the woman, "then shame forever upon your manhood."

"Surely, sir" said Alleyne, speaking in as persuasive and soothing a way as he could, "if your birth is gentle, there is the more reason that your manners should be gentle too. I am well persuaded that you did but jest with this lady, and that you will now permit her to leave your land either alone or with me as a guide, if she should need one, through the wood. As to birth, it does not become me to boast, and there is sooth in what you say as to the unworthiness of clerks, but it is none the less true that I am as well born as you."

"Dog!" cried the furious Socman, "there is no man in the south who can say as much."

"Yet can I" said Alleyne smiling; "for indeed I also am the son of Edric the Socman, of the pure blood of Godfrey the thane, by the only daughter of Aluric of Brockenhurst. Surely, dear brother" he continued, holding out his hand, "you have a warmer greeting than this for me. There are but two boughs left upon this old, old Saxon trunk."

His elder brother dashed his hand aside with an oath, while an expression of malignant hatred passed over his passion-drawn features. "You are the young cub of Beaulieu, then" said he. "I might have known it by the sleek face and the slavish manner too monk-ridden and craven in spirit to answer back a rough word. Thy father, shaveling, with all his faults, had a man's heart; and there were few who could look him in the eyes on the day of his anger. But you! Look there, rat, on yonder field where the cows graze, and on that other beyond, and on the orchard hard by the church. Do you know that all these were squeezed out of your dying father by greedy priests, to pay for your upbringing in the cloisters? I, the Socman, am shorn of my lands that you may snivel Latin and eat bread for which you never did hand's turn. You rob me first, and now you would come preaching and whining, in search mayhap of another field or two for your priestly friends. Knave! My dogs shall be set upon you; but, meanwhile, stand out of my path, and stop me at your peril!" As he spoke he rushed forward, and, throwing the lad to one side, caught the woman's wrist. Alleyne, however, as active as a young deerhound, sprang to her aid and seized her by the other arm, raising his iron shod staff as he did so.

"You may say what you will to me" he said between his clenched teeth — "it may be no better than I deserve; but, brother or no, I swear by my hopes of salvation that I will break your arm if you do not leave hold of the maid."

There was a ring in his voice and a flash in his eyes which promised that the blow would follow quick at the heels of the word. For a moment the blood of the long line of hotheaded thanes was too strong for the soft whisperings of the doctrine of meekness and mercy. He was conscious of a fierce wild thrill through his nerves and a throb of mad gladness at his heart, as his real human self burst for an instant the bonds of custom and of teaching which had held it so long. The socman sprang back, looking to left and to right for some stick or stone which might serve him for weapon; but finding none, he turned and ran at the top of his speed for the house, blowing the while upon a shrill whistle.

"Come!" gasped the woman. "Fly, friend, ere he come back."

"Nay, let him come!" cried Alleyne. "I shall not budge a foot for him or his dogs."

"Come, come!" she cried, tugging at his arm. "I know the man: he will kill you. Come, for the Virgin's sake, or for my sake, for I cannot go and leave you here."

"Come, then" said he; and they ran together to the cover of the woods. As they gained the edge of the brushwood, Alleyne, looking back, saw his brother come running out of the house again, with the sun gleaming upon his hair and his beard. He held something which flashed in his right hand, and he stooped at the threshold to unloose the black hound.

"This way!" the woman whispered, in a low eager voice. "Through the bushes to that forked ash. Do not heed me; I can run as fast as you, I trow. Now into the stream — right in, over ankles, to throw the dog off, though I think it is but a common cur, like its master." As she spoke, she sprang herself into the shallow stream and ran swiftly up the centre of it, with the brown water bubbling over her feet and her hand outstretched toward the clinging branches of bramble or sapling. Alleyne followed close at her heels, with his mind in a whirl at this black welcome and sudden shifting of all his plans and hopes. Yet, grave as were his thoughts, they would still turn to wonder as he looked at the twinkling feet of his guide and saw her lithe figure bend this way and that, dipping under boughs, springing over stones, with a lightness and ease which made it no small task for him to keep up with her. At last, when he was almost out of breath, she suddenly threw herself down upon a mossy bank, between two holly bushes, and looked ruefully at her own dripping feet and bedraggled skirt.

"Holy Mary!" said she, "what shall I do? Mother will keep me to my chamber for a month, and make me work at the tapestry of the nine bold knights. She promised as much last week, when I fell into Wilverley bog, and yet she knows that I cannot abide needlework."

Alleyne, still standing in the stream, glanced down at the graceful pink and white figure, the curve of raven black hair, and the proud, sensitive face which looked up frankly and confidingly at his own.

"We had best on" he said. "He may yet overtake us."

"Not so. We are well off his land now, nor can he tell in this great wood which way we have taken. But you — you had him at your mercy. Why did you not kill him?"

"Kill him! My brother!"

"And why not?" — with a quick gleam of her white teeth. "He would have killed you. I know him, and I read it in his eyes. Had I had your staff I would have tried — aye, and done it, too." She shook her clenched white hand as she spoke, and her lips tightened ominously.

"I am already sad in heart for what I have done" said he, sitting down on the bank, and sinking his face into his hands. "God help me! — All that is worst in me seemed to come uppermost. Another instant, and I had smitten him: the

son of my own mother, the man whom I have longed to take to my heart. Alas! that I should still be so weak."

"Weak!" she exclaimed, raising her black eyebrows. "I do not think that even my father himself, who is a hard judge of manhood, would call you that. But it is, as you may think, sir, a very pleasant thing for me to hear that you are grieved at what you have done, and I can but rede that we should go back together, and you should make your peace with the Socman by handing back your prisoner. It is a sad thing that so small a thing as a woman should come between two who are of one blood."

Simple Alleyne opened his eyes at this little spurt of feminine bitterness. "Nay, lady" said he "that were worst of all. What man would be so caitiff and thrall as to fail you at your need? I have turned my brother against me, and now, alas! I appear to have given you offence also with my clumsy tongue. But, indeed, lady, I am torn both ways, and can scarce grasp in my mind what it is that has befallen."

"Nor can I marvel at that" said she, with a little tinkling laugh. "You came in as the knight does in the jongleur's romances, between dragon and damsel, with small time for the asking of questions. Come" she went on, springing to her feet, and smoothing down her rumpled frock, "let us walk through the shaw together, and we may come upon Bertrand with the horses. If poor Troubadour had not cast a shoe, we should not have had this trouble. Nay, I must have your arm: for, though I speak lightly, now that all is happily over I am as frightened as my brave Roland. See how his chest heaves, and his dear feathers all awry — the little knight who would not have his lady mishandled." So she prattled on to her hawk, while Alleyne walked by her side, stealing a glance from time to time at this queenly and wayward woman. In silence they wandered together over the velvet turf and on through the broad Minstead woods, where the old lichen draped beeches threw their circles of black shadow upon the sunlit sward.

"You have no wish, then, to hear my story?" said she, at last.

"If it pleases you to tell it me" he answered.

"Oh!" she cried tossing her head, "if it is of so little interest to you, we had best let it bide."

"Nay" said he eagerly, "I would fain hear it."

"You have a right to know it, if you have lost a brother's favor through it. And yet — Ah well, you are, as I understand, a clerk, so I must think of you as one step further in orders, and make you my father confessor. Know then that this man has been a suitor for my hand, less as I think for my own sweet sake than because he hath ambition and had it on his mind that he might improve his fortunes by dipping into my father's strong box — though the Virgin knows that he would have found little enough therein. My father, however, is a proud man,

a gallant knight and tried soldier of the oldest blood, to whom this man's churlish birth and low descent — Oh, lackaday! I had forgot that he was of the same strain as yourself."

"Nay, trouble not for that" said Alleyne "we are all from good mother Eve."

"Streams may spring from one source, and yet some be clear and some be foul" quoth she quickly. "But, to be brief over the matter, my father would have none of his wooing, nor in sooth would I. On that he swore a vow against us, and as he is known to be a perilous man, with many outlaws and others at his back, my father forbade that I should hawk or hunt in any part of the wood to the north of the Christchurch road. As it chanced, however, this morning my little Roland here was loosed at a strong-winged heron, and page Bertrand and I rode on, with no thoughts but for the sport, until we found ourselves in Minstead woods. Small harm then, but that my horse Troubadour trod with a tender foot upon a sharp stick, rearing and throwing me to the ground. See to my gown, the third that I have befouled within the week. Woe worth me when Agatha the tire woman sets eyes upon it!"

"And what then, lady?" asked Alleyne.

"Why, then away ran Troubadour, for belike I spurred him in falling, and Bertrand rode after him as hard as hoofs could bear him. When I rose there was the Socman himself by my side, with the news that I was on his land, but with so many courteous words besides, and such gallant bearing, that he prevailed upon me to come to his house for shelter, there to wait until the page return. By the grace of the Virgin and the help of my patron St. Magdalen, I stopped short ere I reached his door, though, as you saw, he strove to hale me up to it. And then — ah-h-h-h!" — she shivered and chattered like one in an ague fit.

"What is it?" cried Alleyne, looking about in alarm.

"Nothing, friend, nothing! I was but thinking how I bit into his hand. Sooner would I bite living toad or poisoned snake. Oh, I shall loathe my lips forever! But you — how brave you were, and how quick! How meek for yourself, and how bold for a stranger! If I were a man, I should wish to do what you have done."

"It was a small thing" he answered, with a tingle of pleasure at these sweet words of praise. "But you — what will you do?"

"There is a great oak near here, and I think that Bertrand will bring the horses there, for it is an old hunting tryst of ours. Then hey for home, and no more hawking to-day! A twelve-mile gallop will dry feet and skirt."

"But your father?"

"Not one word shall I tell him. You do not know him; but I can tell you he is not a man to disobey as I have disobeyed him. He would avenge me, it is true,

but it is not to him that I shall look for vengeance. Some day, perchance, in joust or in tourney, knight may wish to wear my colours, and then I shall tell him that if he does indeed crave my favour there is wrong unredressed, and the wronger the Socman of Minstead. So my knight shall find a venture such as bold knights love, and my debt shall be paid, and my father none the wiser, and one rogue the less in the world. Say, is not that a brave plan?"

"Nay, lady, it is a thought which is unworthy of you. How can such as you speak of violence and of vengeance. Are none to be gentle and kind, none to be piteous and forgiving? Alas! it is a hard, cruel world, and I would that I had never left my abbey cell. To hear such words from your lips is as though I heard an angel of grace preaching the devil's own creed."

She started from him as a young colt who first feels the bit. "Gramercy for your rede, young sir!" she said, with a little curtsey. "As I understand your words, you are grieved that you ever met me, and look upon me as a preaching devil. Why, my father is a bitter man when he is wroth, but hath never called me such a name as that. It may be his right and duty, but certes it is none of thine. So it would be best, since you think so lowly of me, that you should take this path to the left while I keep on upon this one; for it is clear that I can be no fit companion for you." So saying, with downcast lids and a dignity which was somewhat marred by her bedraggled skirt, she swept off down the muddy track, leaving Alleyne standing staring ruefully after her. He waited in vain for some backward glance or sign of relenting, but she walked on with a rigid neck until her dress was only a white flutter among the leaves. Then, with a sunken head and a heavy heart, he plodded wearily down the other path, wroth with himself for the rude and uncouth tongue which had given offence where so little was intended.

He had gone some way, lost in doubt and in self-reproach, his mind all tremulous with a thousand new-found thoughts and fears and wonderments, when of a sudden there was a light rustle of the leaves behind him, and, glancing round, there was this graceful, swift-footed creature, treading in his very shadow, with her proud head bowed, even as his was — the picture of humility and repentance.

"I shall not vex you, nor even speak" she said; "but I would fain keep with you while we are in the wood."

"Nay, you cannot vex me" he answered, all warm again at the very sight of her. "It was my rough words which vexed you; but I have been thrown among men all my life, and indeed, with all the will, I scarce know how to temper my speech to a lady's ear."

"Then unsay it" cried she quickly; "say that I was right to wish to have vengeance on the Socman."

"Nay, I cannot do that" he answered gravely.

"Then who is ungentle and unkind now?" she cried in triumph. "How stern and cold you are for one so young! Art surely no mere clerk, but bishop or cardinal at the least. Shouldst have crozier for staff and mitre for cap. Well, well, for your sake I will forgive the Socman and take vengeance on none but on my own wilful self who must needs run into danger's path. So will that please you, sir?"

"There spoke your true self" said he; "and you will find more pleasure in such forgiveness than in any vengeance."

She shook her head, as if by no means assured of it, and then with a sudden little cry, which had more of surprise than of joy in it, "Here is Bertrand with the horses!"

Down the glade there came a little green clad page with laughing eyes, and long curls floating behind him. He sat perched on a high bay horse, and held on to the bridle of a spirited black palfrey, the hides of both glistening from a long run.

"I have sought you everywhere, dear Lady Maude" said he in a piping voice, springing down from his horse and holding the stirrup. "Troubadour galloped as far as Holmhill ere I could catch him. I trust that you have had no hurt or scath?" He shot a questioning glance at Alleyne as he spoke.

"No, Bertrand" said she "thanks to this courteous stranger. And now, sir" she continued, springing into her saddle, "it is not fit that I leave you without a word more. Clerk or no, you have acted this day as becomes a true knight. King Arthur and all his table could not have done more. It may be that, as some small return, my father or his kin may have power to advance your interest. He is not rich, but he is honoured and hath great friends. Tell me what is your purpose, and see if he may not aid it."

"Alas! lady, I have now no purpose. I have but two friends in the world, and they have gone to Christchurch, where it is likely I shall join them."

"And where is Christchurch?"

"At the castle which is held by the brave knight, Sir Nigel Loring, constable to the Earl of Salisbury."

To his surprise she burst out a-laughing, and, spurring her palfrey, dashed off down the glade, with her page riding behind her. Not one word did she say, but as she vanished amid the trees she half turned in her saddle and waved a last greeting. Long time he stood, half hoping that she might again come back to him; but the thud of the hoofs had died away, and there was no sound in all the woods but the gentle rustle and dropping of the leaves. At last he turned away and made his way back to the high-road — another person from the light-hearted boy who had left it a short three hours before.