

CHAPTER XII
HOW ALLEYNE LEARNED MORE THAN HE COULD TEACH.

And now there came a time of stir and bustle, of furbishing of arms and clang of hammer from all the southland counties. Fast spread the tidings from thorpe to thorpe and from castle to castle, that the old game was afoot once more, and the lions and lilies to be in the field with the early spring. Great news this for that fierce old country, whose trade for a generation had been war, her exports archers and her imports prisoners. For six years her sons had chafed under an unwonted peace. Now they flew to their arms as to their birthright. The old soldiers of Crecy, of Nogent, and of Poitiers were glad to think that they might hear the war trumpet once more, and gladder still were the hot youth who had chafed for years under the martial tales of their sires. To pierce the great mountains of the south, to fight the tamers of the fiery Moors, to follow the greatest captain of the age, to find sunny cornfields and vineyards, when the marches of Picardy and Normandy were as rare and bleak as the Jedburgh forests — here was a golden prospect for a race of warriors. From sea to sea there was stringing of bows in the cottage and clang of steel in the castle.

Nor did it take long for every stronghold to pour forth its cavalry, and every hamlet its footmen. Through the late autumn and the early winter every road and country lane resounded with nakir and trumpet, with the neigh of the war horse and the clatter of marching men. From the Wrekin in the Welsh marches to the Cotswolds in the west or Butser in the south, there was no hilltop from which the peasant might not have seen the bright shimmer of arms, the toss and flutter of plume and of pensil. From bye path, from woodland clearing, or from winding moorside track these little rivulets of steel united in the larger roads to form a broader stream, growing ever fuller and larger as it approached the nearest or most commodious seaport. And there all day, and day after day, there was bustle and crowding and labour, while the great ships loaded up, and one after the other spread their white pinions and darted off to the open sea, amid the clash of cymbals and rolling of drums and lusty shouts of those who went and of those who waited. From Orwell to the Dart there was no port which did not send forth its little fleet, gay with streamer and bunting, as for a joyous festival. Thus in the season of the waning days the might of England put forth on to the waters.

In the ancient and populous county of Hampshire there was no lack of leaders or of soldiers for a service which promised either honour or profit. In the north the Saracen's head of the Brocas and the scarlet fish of the De Roches were waving over a strong body of archers from Holt, Woolmer, and Harewood forests. De Borhunte was up in the east, and Sir John de Montague in the west. Sir Luke de Ponynges, Sir Thomas West, Sir Maurice de Bruin, Sir Arthur Lipscombe, Sir Walter Ramsey, and stout Sir Oliver Buttethorn were all marching south with levies from Andover, Arlesford, Odiham and Winchester, while from Sussex came Sir John Clinton, Sir Thomas Cheyne, and Sir John Fallislee, with a troop of picked men-at-arms, making for their port at Southampton. Greatest of all the musters, however, was that of Twynham

Castle, for the name and the fame of Sir Nigel Loring drew towards him the keenest and boldest spirits, all eager to serve under so valiant a leader. Archers from the New Forest and the Forest of Bere, billmen from the pleasant country which is watered by the Stour, the Avon, and the Itchen, young cavaliers from the ancient Hampshire houses, all were pushing for Christchurch to take service under the banner of the five scarlet roses.

And now, could Sir Nigel have shown the bachelles of land which the laws of rank required, he might well have cut his forked pennon into a square banner, and taken such a following into the field as would have supported the dignity of a banneret. But poverty was heavy upon him, his land was scant, his coffers empty, and the very castle which covered him the holding of another. Sore was his heart when he saw rare bowmen and war hardened spearmen turned away from his gates, for the lack of the money which might equip and pay them. Yet the letter which Aylward had brought him gave him powers which he was not slow to use. In it Sir Claude Latour, the Gascon lieutenant of the White Company, assured him that there remained in his keeping enough to fit out a hundred archers and twenty men-at-arms, which, joined to the three hundred veteran companions already in France, would make a force which any leader might be proud to command. Carefully and sagaciously the veteran knight chose out his men from the swarm of volunteers. Many an anxious consultation he held with Black Simon, Sam Aylward, and other of his more experienced followers, as to who should come and who should stay. By All Saints' day, however ere the last leaves had fluttered to earth in the Wilverley and Holmesley glades, he had filled up his full numbers, and mustered under his banner as stout a following of Hampshire foresters as ever twanged their war bows. Twenty men-at-arms, too, well mounted and equipped, formed the cavalry of the party, while young Peter Terlake of Fareham, and Walter Ford of Botley, the martial sons of martial sires, came at their own cost to wait upon Sir Nigel and to share with Alleyne Edricson the duties of his squireship.

Yet, even after the enrolment, there was much to be done ere the party could proceed upon its way. For armour, swords, and lances, there was no need to take much forethought, for they were to be had both better and cheaper in Bordeaux than in England. With the longbow, however, it was different. Yew staves indeed might be got in Spain, but it was well to take enough and to spare with them. Then three spare cords should be carried for each bow, with a great store of arrowheads, besides the brigandines of chain mail, the wadded steel caps, and the brassarts or arm guards, which were the proper equipment of the archer. Above all, the women for miles round were hard at work cutting the white surcoats which were the badge of the Company, and adorning them with the red lion of St. George upon the centre of the breast. When all was completed and the muster called in the castle yard the oldest soldier of the French wars was fain to confess that he had never looked upon a better equipped or more warlike body of men, from the old knight with his silk jupon, sitting his great black warhorse in the front of them, to Hordle John, the giant recruit, who leaned carelessly upon a huge black bow stave in the rear. Of the six score, fully half had seen service before, while a fair sprinkling were men who had followed

the wars all their lives, and had a hand in those battles which had made the whole world ring with the fame and the wonder of the island infantry.

Six long weeks were taken in these preparations, and it was close on Martinmas ere all was ready for a start. Nigh two months had Alleyne Edricson been in Castle Twynham — months which were fated to turn the whole current of his life, to divert it from that dark and lonely bourne towards which it tended, and to guide it into freer and more sunlit channels. Already he had learned to bless his father for that wise provision which had made him seek to know the world ere he had ventured to renounce it.

For it was a different place from that which he had pictured — very different from that which he had heard described when the master of the novices held forth to his charges upon the ravening wolves who lurked for them beyond the peaceful folds of Beaulieu. There was cruelty in it, doubtless, and lust and sin and sorrow; but were there not virtues to atone, robust positive virtues which did not shrink from temptation, which held their own in all the rough blasts of the workaday world? How colourless by contrast appeared the sinlessness which came from inability to sin, the conquest which was attained by flying from the enemy! Monk bred as he was, Alleyne had native shrewdness and a mind which was young enough to form new conclusions and to outgrow old ones. He could not fail to see that the men with whom he was thrown in contact, rough tongued, fierce and quarrelsome as they were, were yet of deeper nature and of more service in the world than the ox-eyed brethren who rose and ate and slept from year's end to year's end in their own narrow, stagnant circle of existence. Abbot Berghersh was a good man, but how was he better than this kindly knight, who lived as simple a life, held as lofty and inflexible an ideal of duty, and did with all his fearless heart whatever came to his hand to do? In turning from the service of the one to that of the other, Alleyne could not feel that he was lowering his aims in life. True that his gentle and thoughtful nature recoiled from the grim work of war, yet in those days of martial orders and militant brotherhoods there was no gulf fixed betwixt the priest and the soldier. The man of God and the man of the sword might without scandal be united in the same individual. Why then should he, a mere clerk, have scruples when so fair a chance lay in his way of carrying out the spirit as well as the letter of his father's provision. Much struggle it cost him, anxious spirit questionings and midnight prayings, with many a doubt and a misgiving; but the issue was that ere he had been three days in Castle Twynham he had taken service under Sir Nigel, and had accepted horse and harness, the same to be paid for out of his share of the profits of the expedition. Henceforth for seven hours a day he strove in the tilt-yard to qualify himself to be a worthy squire to so worthy a knight. Young, supple and active, with all the pent energies from years of pure and healthy living, it was not long before he could manage his horse and his weapon well enough to earn an approving nod from critical men-at-arms, or to hold his own against Terlake and Ford, his fellow servitors.

But were there no other considerations which swayed him from the cloisters towards the world? So complex is the human spirit that it can itself scarce discern the deep springs which impel it to action. Yet to Alleyne had been

opened now a side of life of which he had been as innocent as a child, but one which was of such deep import that it could not fail to influence him in choosing his path. A woman, in monkish precepts, had been the embodiment and concentration of what was dangerous and evil — a focus whence spread all that was to be dreaded and avoided. So defiling was their presence that a true Cistercian might not raise his eyes to their face or touch their fingertips under ban of church and fear of deadly sin. Yet here, day after day for an hour after nones, and for an hour before vespers, he found himself in close communion with three maidens, all young, all fair, and all therefore doubly dangerous from the monkish standpoint. Yet he found that in their presence he was conscious of a quick sympathy, a pleasant ease, a ready response to all that was most gentle and best in himself, which filled his soul with a vague and newfound joy.

And yet the Lady Maude Loring was no easy pupil to handle. An older and more worldly man might have been puzzled by her varying moods, her sudden prejudices, her quick resentment at all constraint and authority. Did a subject interest her, was there space in it for either romance or imagination, she would fly through it with her subtle, active mind, leaving her two fellow students and even her teacher toiling behind her. On the other hand, were there dull patience needed with steady toil and strain of memory, no single fact could by any driving be fixed in her mind. Alleyne might talk to her of the stories of old gods and heroes, of gallant deeds and lofty aims, or he might hold forth upon moon and stars, and let his fancy wander over the hidden secrets of the universe, and he would have a rapt listener with flushed cheeks and eloquent eyes, who could repeat after him the very words which had fallen from his lips. But when it came to almagest and astrolabe, the counting of figures and reckoning of epicycles, away would go her thoughts to horse and hound, and a vacant eye and listless face would warn the teacher that he had lost his hold upon his scholar. Then he had but to bring out the old romance book from the priory, with befingered cover of sheepskin and gold letters upon a purple ground, to entice her wayward mind back to the paths of learning.

At times, too, when the wild fit was upon her, she would break into pertness and rebel openly against Alleyne's gentle firmness. Yet he would jog quietly on with his teachings, taking no heed to her mutiny, until suddenly she would be conquered by his patience, and break into self-revilings a hundred times stronger than her fault demanded. It chanced however that, on one of these mornings when the evil mood was upon her, Agatha the young tirewoman, thinking to please her mistress, began also to toss her head and make tart rejoinder to the teacher's questions. In an instant the Lady Maude had turned upon her two blazing eyes and a face which was blanched with anger.

"You would dare!" said she. "You would dare!" The frightened tirewoman tried to excuse herself. "But my fair lady" she stammered, "what have I done? I have said no more than I heard."

"You would dare!" repeated the lady in a choking voice. "You, a graceless baggage, a foolish lack-brain, with no thought above the hemming of shifts. And

he so kindly and hendy and long suffering! You would — ha, you may well flee the room!”

She had spoken with a rising voice, and a clasping and opening of her long white fingers, so that it was no marvel that ere the speech was over the skirts of Agatha were whisking round the door and the click of her sobs to be heard dying swiftly away down the corridor.

Alleyne stared open eyed at this tigress who had sprung so suddenly to his rescue. “There is no need for such anger” he said mildly. “The maid’s words have done me no scath. It is you yourself who have erred.”

“I know it” she cried “I am a most wicked woman. But it is bad enough that one should misuse you. Ma foi! I will see that there is not a second one.”

“Nay, nay, no one has misused me” he answered. “But the fault lies in your hot and bitter words. You have called her a baggage and a lack-brain, and I know not what.”

“And you are he who taught me to speak the truth” she cried. “Now I have spoken it, and yet I cannot please you. Lack-brain she is, and lack-brain I shall call her.”

Such was a sample of the sudden janglings which marred the peace of that little class. As the weeks passed, however, they became fewer and less violent, as Alleyne’s firm and constant nature gained sway and influence over the Lady Maude. And yet, sooth to say, there were times when he had to ask himself whether it was not the Lady Maude who was gaining sway and influence over him. If she were changing, so was he. In drawing her up from the world, he was day by day being himself dragged down towards it. In vain he strove and reasoned with himself as to the madness of letting his mind rest upon Sir Nigel’s daughter. What was he — a younger son, a penniless clerk, a squire unable to pay for his own harness — that he should dare to raise his eyes to the fairest maid in Hampshire? So spake reason; but, in spite of all, her voice was ever in his ears and her image in his heart. Stronger than reason, stronger than cloister teachings, stronger than all that might hold him back, was that old, old tyrant who will brook no rival in the kingdom of youth.

And yet it was a surprise and a shock to himself to find how deeply she had entered into his life; how completely those vague ambitions and yearnings which had filled his spiritual nature centred themselves now upon this thing of earth. He had scarce dared to face the change which had come upon him, when a few sudden chance words showed it all up hard and clear, like a lightning flash in the darkness.

He had ridden over to Poole, one November day, with his fellow squire, Peter Terlake, in quest of certain yew staves from Wat Swathling, the Dorsetshire armourer. The day for their departure had almost come, and the two youths spurred it over the lonely downs at the top of their speed on their homeward

course, for evening had fallen and there was much to be done. Peter was a hard, wiry, brown faced, country bred lad who looked on the coming war as the schoolboy looks on his holidays. This day, however, he had been sombre and mute, with scarce a word a mile to bestow upon his comrade.

“Tell me Alleyne Edricson” he broke out, suddenly, as they clattered along the winding track which leads over the Bournemouth hills, “has it not seemed to you that of late the Lady Maude is paler and more silent than is her wont?”

“It may be so” the other answered shortly.

“And would rather sit distraight by her oriel than ride gayly to the chase as of old. Methinks, Alleyne, it is this learning which you have taught her that has taken all the life and sap from her. It is more than she can master, like a heavy spear to a light rider.”

“Her lady mother has so ordered it” said Alleyne.

“By our Lady! And withouten disrespect” quoth Terlake “it is in my mind that her lady mother is more fitted to lead a company to a storming than to have the upbringing of this tender and milk white maid. Hark ye, lad Alleyne, to what I never told man or woman yet. I love the fair Lady Maude, and would give the last drop of my heart’s blood to serve her.” He spoke with a gasping voice, and his face flushed crimson in the moonlight.

Alleyne said nothing, but his heart seemed to turn to a lump of ice in his bosom.

“My father has broad acres” the other continued “from Fareham Creek to the slope of the Portsdown Hill. There is filling of granges, hewing of wood, malting of grain, and herding of sheep as much as heart could wish, and I the only son. Sure am I that Sir Nigel would be blithe at such a match.”

“But how of the lady?” asked Alleyne, with dry lips.

“Ah, lad, there lies my trouble. It is a toss of the head and a droop of the eyes if I say one word of what is in my mind. Twere as easy to woo the snow dame that we shaped last winter in our castle yard. I did but ask her yesternight for her green veil, that I might bear it as a token or lambrequin upon my helm; but she flashed out at me that she kept it for a better man, and then all in a breath asked pardon for that she had spoke so rudely. Yet she would not take back the words either, nor would she grant the veil. Has it seemed to thee, Alleyne, that she loves any one?”

“Nay, I cannot say” said Alleyne, with a wild throb of sudden hope in his heart.

“I have thought so, and yet I cannot name the man. Indeed, save myself, and Walter Ford, and you, who are half a clerk, and Father Christopher of the Priory, and Bertrand the page, who is there whom she sees?”

“I cannot tell” quoth Alleyne shortly; and the two squires rode on again, each intent upon his own thoughts.

Next day at morning lesson the teacher observed that his pupil was indeed looking pale and jaded, with listless eyes and a weary manner. He was heavy hearted to note the grievous change in her.

“Your mistress, I fear, is ill, Agatha” he said to the tirewoman, when the Lady Maude had sought her chamber.

The maid looked aslant at him with laughing eyes. “It is not an illness that kills” quoth she.

“Pray God not!” he cried. “But tell me, Agatha, what it is that ails her?”

“Methinks that I could lay my hand upon another who is smitten with the same trouble” said she, with the same sidelong look. “Canst not give a name to it, and thou so skilled in leechcraft?”

“Nay, save that she seems aweary.”

“Well, bethink you that it is but three days ere you will all be gone, and Castle Twynham be as dull as the Priory. Is there not enough there to cloud a lady’s brow?”

“In sooth, yes” he answered; “I had forgot that she is about to lose her father.”

“Her father!” cried the tirewoman, with a little trill of laughter. “Oh simple, simple!” And she was off down the passage like arrow from bow, while Alleyne stood gazing after her, betwixt hope and doubt, scarce daring to put faith in the meaning which seemed to underlie her words.

CHAPTER XIII
HOW THE WHITE COMPANY SET FORTH TO THE WARS

St. Luke's day had come and had gone, and it was in the season of Martinmas, when the oxen are driven in to the slaughter, that the White Company was ready for its journey. Loud shrieked the brazen bugles from keep and from gateway, and merry was the rattle of the war drum, as the men gathered in the outer bailey, with torches to light them, for the morn had not yet broken. Alleyne, from the window of the armoury, looked down upon the strange scene — the circles of yellow flickering light, the lines of stern and bearded faces, the quick shimmer of arms, and the lean heads of the horses. In front stood the bowmen, ten deep, with a fringe of under officers, who paced hither and thither marshalling the ranks with curt precept or short rebuke. Behind were the little clump of steel-clad horsemen, their lances raised, with long pinsels drooping down the oaken shafts. So silent and still were they, that they might have been metal-sheathed statues, were it not for the occasional quick, impatient stamp of their chargers, or the rattle of chamfron against neck plates as they tossed and strained. A spear's length in front of them sat the spare and long limbed figure of Black Simon, the Norwich fighting man, his fierce, deep lined face framed in steel, and the silk guidon marked with the five scarlet roses slanting over his right shoulder. All round, in the edge of the circle of the light, stood the castle servants, the soldiers who were to form the garrison, and little knots of women, who sobbed in their aprons and called shrilly to their name saints to watch over the Wat, or Will, or Peterkin who had turned his hand to the work of war.

The young squire was leaning forward, gazing at the stirring and martial scene, when he heard a short, quick gasp at his shoulder, and there was the Lady Maude, with her hand to her heart, leaning up against the wall, slender and fair, like a half-plucked lily. Her face was turned away from him, but he could see, by the sharp intake of her breath, that she was weeping bitterly.

"Alas! alas!" he cried, all unnerved at the sight "why is it that you are so sad, lady?"

"It is the sight of these brave men" she answered; "and to think how many of them go and how few are like to find their way back. I have seen it before, when I was a little maid, in the year of the Prince's great battle. I remember then how they mustered in the bailey, even as they do now, and my lady mother holding me in her arms at this very window that I might see the show."

"Please God, you will see them all back ere another year be out" said he.

She shook her head, looking round at him with flushed cheeks and eyes that sparkled in the lamplight. "Oh, but I hate myself for being a woman!" she cried, with a stamp of her little foot. "What can I do that is good? Here I must bide, and talk and sew and spin, and spin and sew and talk. Ever the same dull round, with nothing at the end of it. And now you are going too, who could carry

my thoughts out of these grey walls, and raise my mind above tapestry and distaffs. What can I do? I am of no more use or value than that broken bow stave.”

“You are of such value to me” he cried, in a whirl of hot, passionate words, “that all else has become nought. You are my heart, my life, my one and only thought. Oh, Maude, I cannot live without you, I cannot leave you without a word of love. All is changed to me since I have known you. I am poor and lowly and all unworthy of you; but if great love may weigh down such defects, then mine may do it. Give me but one word of hope to take to the wars with me — but one. Ah, you shrink, you shudder! My wild words have frightened you.”

Twice she opened her lips, and twice no sound came from them. At last she spoke in a hard and measured voice, as one who dare not trust herself to speak too freely.

“This is over sudden” she said; “it is not so long since the world was nothing to you. You have changed once; perchance you may change again.”

“Cruel!” he cried “Who hath changed me?”

“And then your brother” she continued with a little laugh, disregarding his question. “Methinks this hath become a family custom amongst the Edricsons. Nay, I am sorry; I did not mean a jibe. But, indeed, Alleyne, this hath come suddenly upon me, and I scarce know what to say.”

“Say some word of hope, however distant — some kind word that I may cherish in my heart.”

“Nay, Alleyne, it were a cruel kindness, and you have been too good and true a friend to me that I should use you despitefully. There cannot be a closer link between us. It is madness to think of it. Were there no other reasons, it is enough that my father and your brother would both cry out against it.”

“My brother, what has he to do with it? And your father —”

“Come, Alleyne, was it not you who would have me act fairly to all men, and, certes, to my father amongst them?”

“You say truly” he cried “you say truly. But you do not reject me, Maude? You give me some ray of hope? I do not ask pledge or promise. Say only that I am not hateful to you — that on some happier day I may hear kinder words from you.”

Her eyes softened upon him, and a kind answer was on her lips, when a hoarse shout, with the clatter of arms and stamping of steeds, rose up from the bailey below. At the sound her face set her eyes sparkled, and she stood with flushed cheek and head thrown back — a woman’s body, with a soul of fire.

“My father hath gone down” she cried. “Your place is by his side. Nay, look not at me, Alleyne. It is no time for dallying. Win my father’s love, and all may follow. It is when the brave soldier hath done his devoir that he hopes for his reward. Farewell, and may God be with you!” She held out her white, slim hand to him, but as he bent his lips over it she whisked away and was gone, leaving in his outstretched hand the very green veil for which poor Peter Terlake had craved in vain. Again the hoarse cheering burst out from below, and he heard the clang of the rising portcullis. Pressing the veil to his lips, he thrust it into the bosom of his tunic, and rushed as fast as feet could bear him to arm himself and join the muster.

The raw morning had broken ere the hot spiced ale had been served round and the last farewell spoken. A cold wind blew up from the sea and ragged clouds drifted swiftly across the sky.

The Christchurch townfolk stood huddled about the Bridge of Avon, the women pulling tight their shawls and the men swathing themselves in their gaberdines, while down the winding path from the castle came the van of the little army, their feet clanging on the hard, frozen road. First came Black Simon with his banner, bestriding a lean and powerful dapple-grey charger, as hard and wiry and warwise as himself. After him, riding three abreast, were nine men-at-arms, all picked soldiers, who had followed the French wars before, and knew the marches of Picardy as they knew the downs of their native Hampshire. They were armed to the teeth with lance, sword, and mace, with square shields notched at the upper right-hand corner to serve as a spear-rest. For defence each man wore a coat of interlaced leathern thongs, strengthened at the shoulder, elbow, and upper arm with slips of steel. Greaves and knee-pieces were also of leather backed by steel, and their gauntlets and shoes were of iron plates, craftily jointed. So, with jingle of arms and clatter of hoofs, they rode across the Bridge of Avon, while the burghers shouted lustily for the flag of the five roses and its gallant guard.

Close at the heels of the horses came two-score archers bearded and burly, their round targets on their backs and their long yellow bows, the most deadly weapon that the wit of man had yet devised, thrusting forth from behind their shoulders. From each man’s girdle hung sword or axe, according to his humour, and over the right hip there jutted out the leathern quiver with its bristle of goose, pigeon, and peacock feathers. Behind the bowmen strode two trumpeters blowing upon nakirs, and two drummers in parti-coloured clothes. After them came twenty seven sumpter horses carrying tentpoles, cloth, spare arms, spurs, wedges, cooking kettles, horseshoes, bags of nails and the hundred other things which experience had shown to be needful in a harried and hostile country. A white mule with red trappings, led by a varlet, carried Sir Nigel’s own napery and table comforts. Then came two score more archers, ten more men-at-arms, and finally a rear guard of twenty bowmen, with big John towering in the front rank and the veteran Aylward marching by the side, his battered harness and faded surcoat in strange contrast with the snow white jupons and shining brigandines of his companions. A quick crossfire of greetings and questions and

rough West Saxon jests flew from rank to rank, or were bandied about betwixt the marching archers and the gazing crowd.

“Hola, Gaffer Higginson!” cried Aylward, as he spied the portly figure of the village innkeeper. “No more of thy nut brown, mon gar. We leave it behind us.”

“By St. Paul, no!” cried the other. “You take it with you. Devil a drop have you left in the great kilderkin. It was time for you to go.”

“If your cask is leer, I warrant your purse is full, gaffer” shouted Hordle John. “See that you lay in good store of the best for our homecoming.”

“See that you keep your throat whole for the drinking of it archer” cried a voice, and the crowd laughed at the rough pleasantry.

“If you will warrant the beer, I will warrant the throat” said John composedly.

“Close up the ranks!” cried Aylward. “En avant, mes enfants! Ah, by my finger bones, there is my sweet Mary from the Priory Mill! Ma foi, but she is beautiful! Adieu, Mary ma cherie! Mon coeur est toujours a toi. Brace your belt, Watkins, man, and swing your shoulders as a free companion should. By my hilt! Your jerkins will be as dirty as mine ere you clap eyes on Hengistbury Head again.”

The Company had marched to the turn of the road ere Sir Nigel Loring rode out from the gateway, mounted on Pommers, his great black warhorse, whose ponderous footfall on the wooden drawbridge echoed loudly from the gloomy arch which spanned it. Sir Nigel was still in his velvet dress of peace, with flat velvet cap of maintenance, and curling ostrich feather clasped in a golden brooch. To his three squires riding behind him it looked as though he bore the bird’s egg as well as its feather, for the back of his bald pate shone like a globe of ivory. He bore no arms save the long and heavy sword which hung at his saddle bow; but Terlake carried in front of him the high wivern-crested bassinet, Ford the heavy ash spear with swallow-tail pennon, while Alleyne was entrusted with the emblazoned shield. The Lady Loring rode her palfrey at her lord’s bridle arm, for she would see him as far as the edge of the forest, and ever and anon she turned her hard lined face up wistfully to him and ran a questioning eye over his apparel and appointments.

“I trust that there is nothing forgot” she said, beckoning to Alleyne to ride on her further side. “I trust him to you, Edricson. Hosen, shirts, cyclas, and under jupons are in the brown basket on the left side of the mule. His wine he takes hot when the nights are cold, malvoisie or vernage, with as much spice as would cover the thumbnail. See that he hath a change if he come back hot from the tilting. There is goose grease in a box, if the old scars ache at the turn of the weather. Let his blankets be dry and —”

“Nay, my heart’s life” the little knight interrupted, “trouble not now about such matters. Why so pale and wan, Edricson? Is it not enow to make a man’s heart dance to see this noble Company, such valiant men-at-arms, such lusty

archers? By St. Paul! I would be ill to please if I were not blithe to see the red roses flying at the head of so noble a following!”

“The purse I have already given you, Edricson” continued the lady. “There are in it twenty three marks, one noble, three shillings and fourpence, which is a great treasure for one man to carry. And I pray you to bear in mind, Edricson, that he hath two pair of shoes, those of red leather for common use, and the others with golden toe chains, which he may wear should he chance to drink wine with the Prince or with Chandos.”

“My sweet bird” said Sir Nigel, “I am right loth to part from you, but we are now at the fringe of the forest, and it is not right that I should take the chatelaine too far from her trust.”

“But oh, my dear lord” she cried with a trembling lip, “let me bide with you for one furlong further — or one and a half perhaps. You may spare me this out of the weary miles that you will journey along.”

“Come, then, my heart’s comfort” he answered. “But I must crave a gage from thee. It is my custom, dearling, and hath been since I have first known thee, to proclaim by herald in such camps, townships, or fortalices as I may chance to visit, that my lady love, being beyond compare the fairest and sweetest in Christendom, I should deem it great honour and kindly condescension if any cavalier would run three courses against me with sharpened lances, should he chance to have a lady whose claim he was willing to advance. I pray you then my fair dove, that you will vouchsafe to me one of those doeskin gloves, that I may wear it as the badge of her whose servant I shall ever be.”

“Alack and alas for the fairest and sweetest!” she cried. “Fair and sweet I would fain be for your dear sake, my lord, but old I am and ugly, and the knights would laugh should you lay lance in rest in such a cause.”

“Edricson” quoth Sir Nigel “you have young eyes, and mine are somewhat bedimmed. Should you chance to see a knight laugh, or smile, or even, look you, arch his brows, or purse his mouth, or in any way show surprise that I should uphold the Lady Mary, you will take particular note of his name, his coat armour, and his lodging. Your glove, my life’s desire!”

The Lady Mary Loring slipped her hand from her yellow leather gauntlet, and he, lifting it with dainty reverence, bound it to the front of his velvet cap.

“It is with mine other guardian angels” quoth he, pointing at the saints’ medals which hung beside it. “And now, my dearest, you have come far enow. May the Virgin guard and prosper thee! One kiss!” He bent down from his saddle, and then, striking spurs into his horse’s sides, he galloped at top speed after his men, with his three squires at his heels. Half a mile further, where the road topped a hill, they looked back, and the Lady Mary on her white palfrey was still where they had left her. A moment later they were on the downward slope, and she had vanished from their view.

CHAPTER XIV
HOW SIR NIGEL SOUGHT FOR A WAYSIDE VENTURE

For a time Sir Nigel was very moody and downcast, with bent brows and eyes upon the pommel of his saddle. Edricson and Terlake rode behind him in little better case, while Ford, a careless and lighthearted youth, grinned at the melancholy of his companions, and flourished his lord's heavy spear, making a point to right and a point to left, as though he were a paladin contending against a host of assailants. Sir Nigel happened, however, to turn himself in his saddle — Ford instantly became as stiff and as rigid as though he had been struck with a palsy. The four rode alone, for the archers had passed a curve in the road, though Alleyne could still hear the heavy clump, clump of their marching, or catch a glimpse of the sparkle of steel through the tangle of leafless branches.

“Ride by my side, friends, I entreat of you” said the knight, reining in his steed that they might come abreast of him. “For, since it hath pleased you to follow me to the wars, it were well that you should know how you may best serve me. I doubt not, Terlake, that you will show yourself a worthy son of a valiant father; and you, Ford, of yours; and you, Edricson, that you are mindful of the oldtime house from which all men know that you are sprung. And first I would have you bear very steadfastly in mind that our setting forth is by no means for the purpose of gaining spoil or exacting ransom, though it may well happen that such may come to us also. We go to France, and from thence I trust to Spain, in humble search of a field in which we may win advancement and perchance some small share of glory. For this purpose I would have you know that it is not my wont to let any occasion pass where it is in any way possible that honour may be gained. I would have you bear this in mind, and give great heed to it that you may bring me word of all cartels, challenges, wrongs, tyrannies, infamies, and wronging of damsels. Nor is any occasion too small to take note of, for I have known such trifles as the dropping of a gauntlet, or the flicking of a breadcrumb, when well and properly followed up, lead to a most noble spear running. But, Edricson, do I not see a cavalier who rides down yonder road amongst the nether shaw? It would be well, perchance, that you should give him greeting from me. And, should he be of gentle blood it may be that he would care to exchange thrusts with me.”

“Why, my lord” quoth Ford, standing in his stirrups and shading his eyes, “it is old Hob Davidson, the fat miller of Milton!”

“Ah, so it is, indeed” said Sir Nigel, puckering his cheeks; “but wayside ventures are not to be scorned, for I have seen no finer passages than are to be had from such chance meetings, when cavaliers are willing to advance themselves. I can well remember that two leagues from the town of Rheims I met a very valiant and courteous cavalier of France, with whom I had gentle and most honourable contention for upwards of an hour. It hath ever grieved

me that I had not his name, for he smote upon me with a mace and went upon his way ere I was in condition to have much speech with him; but his arms were an allurion in chief above a fess azure. I was also on such an occasion thrust through the shoulder by Lyon de Montcourt, whom I met on the high road betwixt Libourne and Bordeaux. I met him but the once, but I have never seen a man for whom I bear a greater love and esteem. And so also with the squire Le Bourg Capillet, who would have been a very valiant captain had he lived.”

“He is dead then?” asked Alleyne Edricson.

“Alas! it was my ill fate to slay him in a bickering which broke out in a field near the township of Tarbes. I cannot call to mind how the thing came about, for it was in the year of the Prince’s ride through Languedoc, when there was much fine skirmishing to be had at barriers. By St. Paul! I do not think that any honourable cavalier could ask for better chance of advancement than might be had by spurring forth before the army and riding to the gateways of Narbonne, or Bergerac or Mont Giscar, where some courteous gentleman would ever be at wait to do what he might to meet your wish or ease you of your vow. Such a one at Ventadour ran three courses with me betwixt daybreak and sunrise, to the great exaltation of his lady.”

“And did you slay him also, my lord?” asked Ford with reverence.

“I could never learn, for he was carried within the barrier, and as I had chanced to break the bone of my leg it was a great unease for me to ride or even to stand. Yet, by the goodness of heaven and the pious intercession of the valiant St. George, I was able to sit my charger in the ruffle of Poitiers, which was no very long time afterwards. But what have we here? A very fair and courtly maiden, or I mistake.”

It was indeed a tall and buxom country lass, with a basket of spinach leaves upon her head, and a great slab of bacon tucked under one arm. She bobbed a frightened curtsy as Sir Nigel swept his velvet hat from his head and reined up his great charger.

“God be with thee, fair maiden!” said he.

“God guard thee, my lord!” she answered, speaking in the broadest West Saxon speech, and balancing herself first on one foot and then on the other in her bashfulness.

“Fear not, my fair damsel” said Sir Nigel “but tell me if perchance a poor and most unworthy knight can in any wise be of service to you. Should it chance that you have been used despitefully, it may be that I may obtain justice for you.”

“Lawk no, kind sir” she answered, clutching her bacon the tighter, as though some design upon it might be hid under this knightly offer. “I be the milking wench o’ fairmer Arnold, and he be as kind a maister as heart could wish.”

“It is well” said he, and with a shake of the bridle rode on down the woodland path. “I would have you bear in mind” he continued to his squires “that gentle courtesy is not, as is the base use of so many false knights, to be shown only to maidens of high degree, for there is no woman so humble that a true knight may not listen to her tale of wrong. But here comes a cavalier who is indeed in haste. Perchance it would be well that we should ask him whither he rides, for it may be that he is one who desires to advance himself in chivalry.”

The bleak, hard, windswept road dipped down in front of them into a little valley, and then, writhing up the heathy slope upon the other side, lost itself among the gaunt pine-trees. Far away between the black lines of trunks the quick glitter of steel marked where the Company pursued its way. To the north stretched the tree country, but to the south, between two swelling downs, a glimpse might be caught of the cold grey shimmer of the sea, with the white fleck of a galley sail upon the distant skyline. Just in front of the travellers a horseman was urging his steed up the slope, driving it on with whip and spur as one who rides for a set purpose. As he clattered up, Alleyne could see that the roan horse was grey with dust and flecked with foam, as though it had left many a mile behind it. The rider was a stern faced man, hard of mouth and dry of eye, with a heavy sword clanking at his side, and a stiff white bundle swathed in linen balanced across the pommel of his saddle.

“The king’s messenger” he bawled as he came up to them. “The messenger of the king. Clear the causeway for the king’s own man.”

“Not so loudly, friend” quoth the little knight, reining his horse half round to bar the path. “I have myself been the king’s man for thirty years or more, but I have not been wont to halloo about it on a peaceful highway.”

“I ride in his service” cried the other, “and I carry that which belongs to him. You bar my path at your peril.”

“Yet I have known the king’s enemies claim to ride in his same” said Sir Nigel. “The foul fiend may lurk beneath a garment of light. We must have some sign or warrant of your mission.”

“Then must I hew a passage” cried the stranger, with his shoulder braced round and his hand upon his hilt. “I am not to be stopped on the king’s service by every gadabout.”

“Should you be a gentleman of quarterings and coat armour” lisped Sir Nigel, “I shall be very blithe to go further into the matter with you. If not, I have three very worthy squires, any one of whom would take the thing upon himself, and debate it with you in a very honourable way.”

The man scowled from one to the other, and his hand stole away from his sword.

“You ask me for a sign” he said. “Here is a sign for you, since you must have one.” As he spoke he whirled the covering from the object in front of him and showed to their horror that it was a newly severed human leg. “By God’s tooth!” he continued, with a brutal laugh, “you ask me if I am a man of quarterings, and it is even so, for I am officer to the verderer’s court at Lyndhurst. This thievish leg is to hang at Milton, and the other is already at Brockenhurst, as a sign to all men of what comes of being over fond of venison pasty.”

“Faugh!” cried Sir Nigel. “Pass on the other side of the road, fellow, and let us have the wind of you. We shall trot our horses, my friends, across this pleasant valley, for, by Our Lady! a breath of God’s fresh air is right welcome after such a sight.”

“We hoped to snare a falcon” said he presently, “but we netted a carrion crow. Ma foi! But there are men whose hearts are tougher than a boar’s hide. For me, I have played the old game of war since ever I had hair on my chin, and I have seen ten thousand brave men in one day with their faces to the sky, but I swear by Him who made me that I cannot abide the work of the butcher.”

“And yet, my fair lord” said Edricson, “there has, from what I hear, been much of such devil’s work in France.”

“Too much, too much” he answered. “But I have ever observed that the foremost in the field are they who would scorn to mishandle a prisoner. By St. Paul! It is not they who carry the breach who are wont to sack the town, but the laggard knaves who come crowding in when a way has been cleared for them. But what is this among the trees?”

“It is a shrine of Our Lady” said Terlake “and a blind beggar who lives by the alms of those who worship there.”

“A shrine!” cried the knight. “Then let us put up an orison.” Pulling off his cap, and clasping his hands, he chanted in a shrill voice: “Benedictus dominus Deus meus, qui docet manus meas ad proelium, et digitos meos ad bellum.” A strange figure he seemed to his three squires, perched on his huge horse, with his eyes upturned and the wintry sun shimmering upon his bald head. “It is a noble prayer” he remarked, putting on his hat again, “and it was taught to me by the noble Chandos himself. But how fares it with you, father? Methinks that I should have ruth upon you, seeing that I am myself like one who looks through a horn window while his neighbors have the clear crystal. Yet, by St. Paul! There is a long stride between the man who hath a horn casement and him who is walled in on every hand.”

“Alas! fair sir” cried the blind old man “I have not seen the blessed blue of heaven this two score years, since a levin flash burned the sight out of my head.”

“You have been blind to much that is goodly and fair” quoth Sir Nigel, “but you have also been spared much that is sorry and foul. This very hour our eyes have been shocked with that which would have left you unmoved. But, by St.

Paul! We must on, or our Company will think that they have lost their captain somewhat early in the venture. Throw the man my purse, Edricson, and let us go."

Alleyne, lingering behind, bethought him of the Lady Loring's counsel, and reduced the noble gift which the knight had so freely bestowed to a single penny, which the beggar with many mumbled blessings thrust away into his wallet. Then, spurring his steed, the young squire rode at the top of his speed after his companions, and overtook them just at the spot where the trees fringe off into the moor and the straggling hamlet of Hordle lies scattered on either side of the winding and deeply rutted track. The Company was already well nigh through the village; but, as the knight and his squires closed up upon them, they heard the clamour of a strident voice, followed by a roar of deep chested laughter from the ranks of the archers. Another minute brought them up with the rear guard, where every man marched with his beard on his shoulder and a face which was agrin with merriment. By the side of the column walked a huge red-headed bowman, with his hands thrown out in argument and expostulation, while close at his heels followed a little wrinkled woman who poured forth a shrill volley of abuse, varied by an occasional thwack from her stick, given with all the force of her body, though she might have been beating one of the forest trees for all the effect that she seemed likely to produce.

"I trust, Aylward" said Sir Nigel gravely, as he rode up, "that this doth not mean that any violence hath been offered to women. If such a thing happened, I tell you that the man shall hang, though he were the best archer that ever wore brassart."

"Nay, my fair lord" Aylward answered with a grin "it is violence which is offered to a man. He comes from Hordle, and this is his mother who hath come forth to welcome him."

"You rammucky lurden" she was howling, with a blow between each catch of her breath, "you shammocking, yaping, overlong good-for-nought. I will teach thee! I will baste thee! Aye, by my faith!"

"Whist, mother" said John, looking back at her from the tail of his eye, "I go to France as an archer to give blows and to take them."

"To France, quotha?" cried the old dame. "Bide here with me, and I shall warrant you more blows than you are like to get in France. If blows be what you seek, you need not go further than Hordle."

"By my hilt! the good dame speaks truth" said Aylward. "It seems to be the very home of them."

"What have you to say, you clean-shaved galley beggar?" cried the fiery dame, turning upon the archer. "Can I not speak with my own son but you must let your tongue clack? A soldier, quotha, and never a hair on his face. I have seen a better soldier with pap for food and swaddling clothes for harness."

“Stand to it, Aylward” cried the archers, amid a fresh burst of laughter.

“Do not thwart her, comrade” said big John. “She hath a proper spirit for her years and cannot abide to be thwarted. It is kindly and homely to me to hear her voice and to feel that she is behind me. But I must leave you now, mother, for the way is over-rough for your feet; but I will bring you back a silken gown, if there be one in France or Spain, and I will bring Jinny a silver penny; so goodbye to you, and God have you in His keeping!” Whipping up the little woman, he lifted her lightly to his lips, and then, taking his place in the ranks again, marched on with the laughing Company.

“That was ever his way” she cried, appealing to Sir Nigel, who reined up his horse and listened with the greatest courtesy. “He would jog on his own road for all that I could do to change him. First he must be a monk forsooth, and all because a wench was wise enough to turn her back on him. Then he joins a rascally crew and must needs trapse off to the wars, and me with no one to bait the fire if I be out, or tend the cow if I be home. Yet I have been a good mother to him. Three hazel switches a day have I broke across his shoulders, and he takes no more notice than you have seen him today.”

“Doubt not that he will come back to you both safe and prosperous, my fair dame” quoth Sir Nigel. “Meanwhile it grieves me that as I have already given my purse to a beggar up the road I —”

“Nay, my lord” said Alleyne, “I still have some moneys remaining.”

“Then I pray you to give them to this very worthy woman.” He cantered on as he spoke, while Alleyne, having dispensed two more pence, left the old dame standing by the furthest cottage of Hordle, with her shrill voice raised in blessings instead of revilings.

There were two crossroads before they reached the Lymington Ford, and at each of then Sir Nigel pulled up his horse, and waited with many a curvet and gambade, craning his neck this way and that to see if fortune would send him a venture. Crossroads had, as he explained, been rare places for knightly spear runnings, and in his youth it was no uncommon thing for a cavalier to abide for weeks at such a point, holding gentle debate with all comers, to his own advancement and the great honour of his lady. The times were changed, however, and the forest tracks wound away from them deserted and silent, with no trample of warhorse or clang of armour which might herald the approach of an adversary — so that Sir Nigel rode on his way disconsolate. At the Lymington River they splashed through the ford, and lay in the meadows on the further side to eat the bread and salt meat which they carried upon the sumpter horses. Then, ere the sun was on the slope of the heavens, they had deftly trussed up again, and were swinging merrily upon their way, two hundred feet moving like two.

There is a third crossroad where the track from Boldre runs down to the old fishing village of Pitt's Deep. Down this, as they came abreast of it, there walked two men, the one a pace or two behind the other. The cavaliers could not but pull up their horses to look at them, for a stranger pair were never seen journeying together. The first was a misshapen, squalid man with cruel, cunning eyes and a shock of tangled red hair, bearing in his hands a small unpainted cross, which he held high so that all men might see it. He seemed to be in the last extremity of fright, with a face the colour of clay and his limbs all ashake as one who hath an ague. Behind him, with his toe ever rasping upon the other's heels, there walked a very stern, black-bearded man with a hard eye and a set mouth. He bore over his shoulder a great knotted stick with three jagged nails stuck in the head of it, and from time to time he whirled it up in the air with a quivering arm, as though he could scarce hold back from dashing his companion's brains out. So in silence they walked under the spread of the branches on the grass-grown path from Boldre.

"By St. Paul!" quoth the knight "But this is a passing strange sight, and perchance some very perilous and honourable venture may arise from it. I pray you, Edricson, to ride up to them and to ask them the cause of it."

There was no need, however, for him to move, for the twain came swiftly towards them until they were within a spear's length, when the man with the cross sat himself down sullenly upon a tussock of grass by the wayside, while the other stood beside him with his great cudgel still hanging over his head. So intent was he that he raised his eyes neither to knight nor squires, but kept them ever fixed with a savage glare upon his comrade.

"I pray you, friend" said Sir Nigel "to tell us truthfully who you are, and why you follow this man with such bitter enmity?"

"So long as I am within the pale of the king's law" the stranger answered, "I cannot see why I should render account to every passing wayfarer."

"You are no very shrewd reasoner, fellow" quoth the knight; "for if it be within the law for you to threaten him with your club, then it is also lawful for me to threaten you with my sword."

The man with the cross was down in an instant on his knees upon the ground, with hands clasped above him and his face shining with hope. "For dear Christ's sake, my fair lord" he cried in a crackling voice "I have at my belt a bag with a hundred rose nobles, and I will give it to you freely if you will but pass your sword through this man's body."

"How, you foul knave?" exclaimed Sir Nigel hotly. "Do you think that a cavalier's arm is to be bought like a packman's ware. By St. Paul! I have little doubt that this fellow hath some very good cause to hold you in hatred."

"Indeed, my fair sir, you speak sooth" quoth he with the club, while the other seated himself once more by the wayside. "For this man is Peter Peterson, a

very noted rieve, draw-latch, and murtherer, who has wrought much evil for many years in the parts about Winchester. It was but the other day, upon the feasts of the blessed Simon and Jude, that he slew my younger brother William in Bere Forest — for which, by the black thorn of Glastonbury! I shall have his heart's blood, though I walk behind him to the further end of earth."

"But if this be indeed so" asked Sir Nigel, "why is it that you have come with him so far through the forest?"

"Because I am an honest Englishman, and will take no more than the law allows. For when the deed was done this foul and base wretch fled to sanctuary at St. Cross, and I, as you may think, after him with all the posse. The prior, however, hath so ordered that while he holds this cross no man may lay hand upon him without the ban of church, which heaven forfend from me or mine. Yet, if for an instant he lay the cross aside, or if he fail to journey to Pitt's Deep, where it is ordered that he shall take ship to outland parts, or if he take not the first ship, or if until the ship be ready he walk not every day into the sea as far as his loins, then he becomes outlaw, and I shall forthwith dash out his brains."

At this the man on the ground snarled up at him like a rat, while the other clenched his teeth, and shook his club, and looked down at him with murder in his eyes. Knight and squire gazed from rogue to avenger, but as it was a matter which none could mend they tarried no longer, but rode upon their way. Alleyne, looking back, saw that the murderer had drawn bread and cheese from his scrip, and was silently munching it, with the protecting cross still hugged to his breast, while the other, black and grim, stood in the sunlit road and threw his dark shadow athwart him.