

CHAPTER XXIV
HOW A CHAMPION CAME FORTH FROM THE EAST

The Bordeaux lists were, as has already been explained, situated upon the plain near the river upon those great occasions when the tilting ground in front of the Abbey of St. Andrew's was deemed to be too small to contain the crowd. On the eastern side of this plain the countryside sloped upwards, thick with vines in summer, but now ridged with the brown bare enclosures. Over the gently rising plain curved the white road which leads inland, usually flecked with travellers, but now with scarce a living form upon it, so completely had the lists drained all the district of its inhabitants. Strange it was to see such a vast concourse of people, and then to look upon that broad, white, empty highway which wound away, bleak and deserted, until it narrowed itself to a bare streak against the distant uplands.

Shortly after the contest had begun, any one looking from the lists along this road might have remarked, far away in the extreme distance, two brilliant and sparkling points which glittered and twinkled in the bright shimmer of the winter sun. Within an hour these had become clearer and nearer, until they might be seen to come from the reflection from the headpieces of two horsemen who were riding at the top of their speed in the direction of Bordeaux. Another half hour had brought them so close that every point of their bearing and equipment could be discerned. The first was a knight in full armour, mounted upon a brown horse with a white blaze upon breast and forehead. He was a short man of great breadth of shoulder, with vizor closed, and no blazonry upon his simple white surcoat or plain black shield. The other, who was evidently his squire and attendant, was unarmed save for the helmet upon his head, but bore in his right hand a very long and heavy oaken spear which belonged to his master. In his left hand the squire held not only the reins of his own horse but those of a great black warhorse, fully harnessed, which trotted along at his side. Thus the three horses and their two riders rode swiftly to the lists, and it was the blare of the trumpet sounded by the squire as his lord rode into the arena which had broken in upon the prizegiving and drawn away the attention and interest of the spectators.

"Ha, John!" cried the prince, craning his neck, "who is this cavalier, and what is it that he desires?"

"On my word, sire" replied Chandos, with the utmost surprise upon his face, "it is my opinion that he is a Frenchman."

"A Frenchman!" repeated Don Pedro. "And how can you tell that, my Lord Chandos, when he has neither coat armour, crest, or blazonry?"

"By his armour, sire, which is rounder at elbow and at shoulder than any of Bordeaux or of England. Italian he might be were his bassinet more sloped, but I will swear that those plates were welded betwixt this and Rhine. Here comes

his squire, however, and we shall hear what strange fortune hath brought him over the marches.”

As he spoke the attendant cantered up the grassy enclosure, and pulling up his steed in front of the royal stand, blew a second fanfare upon his bugle. He was a raw-boned, swarthy-cheeked man, with black bristling beard and a swaggering bearing.

Having sounded his call, he thrust the bugle into his belt, and, pushing his way betwixt the groups of English and of Gascon knights, he reined up within a spear’s length of the royal party.

“I come” he shouted in a hoarse, thick voice, with a strong Breton accent, “as squire and herald from my master, who is a very valiant pursuivant-of-arms, and a liegeman to the great and powerful monarch, Charles, king of the French. My master has heard that there is jousting here, and prospect of honourable advancement, so he has come to ask that some English cavalier will vouchsafe for the love of his lady to run a course with sharpened lances with him, or to meet him with sword, mace, battle axe, or dagger. He bade me say, however, that he would fight only with a true Englishman, and not with any mongrel who is neither English nor French, but speaks with the tongue of the one, and fights under the banner of the other.”

“Sir!” cried De Clisson, with a voice of thunder, while his countrymen clapped their hands to their swords. The squire, however, took no notice of their angry faces, but continued with his master’s message.

“He is now ready, sire” he said “albeit his destrier has travelled many miles this day, and fast, for we were in fear lest we come too late for the jousting.”

“Ye have indeed come too late” said the prince, “seeing that the prize is about to be awarded; yet I doubt not that one of these gentlemen will run a course for the sake of honour with this cavalier of France.”

“And as to the prize, sire” quoth Sir Nigel, “I am sure that I speak for all when I say this French knight hath our leave to bear it away with him if he can fairly win it.”

“Bear word of this to your master” said the prince, “and ask him which of these five Englishmen he would desire to meet. But stay; your master bears no coat armour, and we have not yet heard his name.”

“My master, sire, is under vow to the Virgin neither to reveal his name nor to open his vizor until he is back upon French ground once more.”

“Yet what assurance have we” said the prince, “that this is not some varlet masquerading in his master’s harness, or some caitiff knight, the very touch of whose lance might bring infamy upon an honourable gentleman?”

“It is not so, sire” cried the squire earnestly. “There is no man upon earth who would demean himself by breaking a lance with my master.”

“You speak out boldly, squire” the prince answered; “but unless I have some further assurance of your master’s noble birth and gentle name I cannot match the choicest lances of my court against him.”

“You refuse, sire?”

“I do refuse.”

“Then, sire, I was bidden to ask you from my master whether you would consent if Sir John Chandos, upon hearing my master’s name, should assure you that he was indeed a man with whom you might yourself cross swords without indignity.”

“I ask no better” said the prince.

“Then I must ask, Lord Chandos, that you will step forth. I have your pledge that the name shall remain ever a secret, and that you will neither say nor write one word which might betray it. The name is —”. He stooped down from his horse and whispered something into the old knight’s ear which made him start with surprise, and stare with much curiosity at the distant Knight, who was sitting his charger at the further end of the arena.

“Is this indeed sooth?” he exclaimed.

“It is, my lord, and I swear it by St. Ives of Brittany.”

“I might have known it” said Chandos, twisting his moustache, and still looking thoughtfully at the cavalier.

“What then, Sir John?” asked the prince.

“Sire, this is a knight whom it is indeed great honour to meet, and I would that your grace would grant me leave to send my squire for my harness, for I would dearly love to run a course with him.”

“Nay, nay, Sir John, you have gained as much honour as one man can bear, and it were hard if you could not rest now. But I pray you, squire, to tell your master that he is very welcome to our court, and that wines and spices will be served him, if he would refresh himself before jousting.”

“My master will not drink” said the squire.

“Let him then name the gentleman with whom he would break a spear.”

“He would contend with these five knights, each to choose such weapons as suit him best.”

“I perceive” said the prince, “that your master is a man of great heart and high of enterprise. But the sun already is low in the west, and there will scarce be light for these courses. I pray you, gentlemen, to take your places, that we may see whether this stranger’s deeds are as bold as his words.”

The unknown knight had sat like a statue of steel, looking neither to the right nor to the left during these preliminaries. He had changed from the horse upon which he had ridden, and bestrode the black charger which his squire had led beside him. His immense breadth, his stern composed appearance, and the mode in which he handled his shield and his lance, were enough in themselves to convince the thousands of critical spectators that he was a dangerous opponent. Aylward, who stood in the front row of the archers with Simon, big John, and others of the Company, had been criticising the proceedings from the commencement with the ease and freedom of a man who had spent his life under arms and had learned in a hard school to know at a glance the points of a horse and his rider. He stared now at the stranger with a wrinkled brow and the air of a man who is striving to stir his memory.

“By my hilt! I have seen the thick body of him before today. Yet I cannot call to mind where it could have been. At Nogent belike, or was it at Auray? Mark me, lads, this man will prove to be one of the best lances of France, and there are no better in the world.”

“It is but child’s play, this poking game” said John. “I would fain try my hand at it, for, by the black rood! I think that it might be amended.”

“What then would you do, John?” asked several.

“There are many things which might be done” said the forester thoughtfully. “Methinks that I would begin by breaking my spear.”

“So they all strive to do.”

“Nay, but not upon another man’s shield. I would break it over my own knee.”

“And what the better for that, old beef and bones?” asked Black Simon.

“So I would turn what is but a lady’s bodkin of a weapon into a very handsome club.”

“And then, John?”

“Then I would take the other’s spear into my arm or my leg, or where it pleased him best to put it, and I would dash out his brains with my club.”

“By my ten finger bones! old John” said Aylward, “I would give my feather bed to see you at a spear running. This is a most courtly and gentle sport which you have devised.”

“So it seems to me” said John seriously. “Or, again, one might seize the other round the middle, pluck him off his horse and bear him to the pavilion, there to hold him to ransom.”

“Good!” cried Simon, amid a roar of laughter from all the archers round. “By Thomas of Kent! we shall make a camp marshal of thee, and thou shalt draw up rules for our jousting. But, John, who is it that you would uphold in this knightly and pleasing fashion?”

“What mean you?”

“Why, John, so strong and strange a tilter must fight for the brightness of his lady’s eyes or the curve of her eyelash, even as Sir Nigel does for the Lady Loring.”

“I know not about that” said the big archer, scratching his head in perplexity. “Since Mary hath played me false, I can scarce fight for her.”

“Yet any woman will serve.”

“There is my mother then” said John. “She was at much pains at my upbringing, and, by my soul! I will uphold the curve of her eyelashes, for it tickleth my very heart root to think of her. But who is here?”

“It is Sir William Beauchamp. He is a valiant man, but I fear that he is scarce firm enough upon the saddle to bear the thrust of such a tilter as this stranger promises to be.”

Aylward’s words were speedily justified, for even as he spoke the two knights met in the centre of the lists. Beauchamp struck his opponent a shrewd blow upon the helmet, but was met with so frightful a thrust that he whirled out of his saddle and rolled over and over upon the ground. Sir Thomas Percy met with little better success, for his shield was split, his vambrace torn and he himself wounded slightly in the side. Lord Audley and the unknown knight struck each other fairly upon the helmet; but, while the stranger sat as firm and rigid as ever upon his charger, the Englishman was bent back to his horse’s cropper by the weight of the blow, and had galloped halfway down the lists ere he could recover himself. Sir Thomas Wake was beaten to the ground with a battle axe — that being the weapon which he had selected — and had to be carried to his pavilion. These rapid successes, gained one after the other over four celebrated warriors, worked the crowd up to a pitch of wonder and admiration. Thunders of applause from the English soldiers, as well as from the citizens and peasants, showed how far the love of brave and knightly deeds could rise above the rivalries of race.

“By my soul! John” cried the prince, with his cheek flushed and his eyes shining, “this is a man of good courage and great hardiness. I could not have

thought that there was any single arm upon earth which could have overthrown these four champions.”

“He is indeed, as I have said, sire, a knight from whom much honour is to be gained. But the lower edge of the sun is wet, and it will be beneath the sea ere long.”

“Here is Sir Nigel Loring, on foot and with his sword” said the prince. “I have heard that he is a fine swordsman.”

“The finest in your army, sire” Chandos answered. “Yet I doubt not that he will need all his skill this day.”

As he spoke, the two combatants advanced from either end in full armour with their two-handed swords sloping over their shoulders. The stranger walked heavily and with a measured stride, while the English knight advanced as briskly as though there was no iron shell to weigh down the freedom of his limbs. At four paces distance they stopped, eyed each other for a moment, and then in an instant fell to work with a clatter and clang as though two sturdy smiths were busy upon their anvils. Up and down went the long, shining blades, round and round they circled in curves of glimmering light, crossing, meeting, disengaging, with flash of sparks at every parry. Here and there bounded Sir Nigel, his head erect, his jaunty plume fluttering in the air, while his dark opponent sent in crashing blow upon blow, following fiercely up with cut and with thrust, but never once getting past the practised blade of the skilled swordsman. The crowd roared with delight as Sir Nigel would stoop his head to avoid a blow, or by some slight movement of his body allow some terrible thrust to glance harmlessly past him. Suddenly, however, his time came. The Frenchman, whirling up his sword, showed for an instant a chink betwixt his shoulder piece and the rerebrace which guarded his upper arm. In dashed Sir Nigel, and out again so swiftly that the eye could not follow the quick play of his blade, but a trickle of blood from the stranger’s shoulder, and a rapidly widening red smudge upon his white surcoat, showed where the thrust had taken effect. The wound was, however, but a slight one, and the Frenchman was about to renew his onset, when, at a sign from the prince, Chandos threw down his baton, and the marshals of the lists struck up the weapons and brought the contest to an end.

“It were time to check it” said the prince, smiling, “for Sir Nigel is too good a man for me to lose, and, by the five holy wounds! if one of those cuts came home I should have fears for our champion. What think you, Pedro?”

“I think, Edward, that the little man was very well able to take care of himself. For my part, I should wish to see so well matched a pair fight on while a drop of blood remained in their veins.”

“We must have speech with him. Such a man must not go from my court without rest or sup. Bring him hither, Chandos, and, certes, if the Lord Loring hath resigned his claim upon this goblet, it is right and proper that this cavalier

should carry it to France with him as a sign of the prowess that he has shown this day.”

As he spoke, the knight errant, who had remounted his warhorse, galloped forward to the royal stand, with a silken kerchief bound round his wounded arm. The setting sun cast a ruddy glare upon his burnished arms, and sent his long black shadow streaming behind him up the level clearing. Pulling up his steed, he slightly inclined his head, and sat in the stern and composed fashion with which he had borne himself throughout, heedless of the applauding shouts and the flutter of kerchiefs from the long lines of brave men and of fair women who were looking down upon him.

“Sir knight” said the prince, “we have all marvelled this day at this great skill and valour with which God has been pleased to endow you. I would fain that you should tarry at our court, for a time at least, until your hurt is healed and your horses rested.”

“My hurt is nothing, sire, nor are my horses weary” returned the stranger in a deep, stern voice.

“Will you not at least hie back to Bordeaux with us, that you may drain a cup of muscadine and sup at our table?”

“I will neither drink your wine nor sit at your table” returned the other. “I bear no love for you or for your race, and there is nought that I wish at your hands until the day when I see the last sail which bears you back to your island vanishing away against the western sky.”

“These are bitter words, sir knight” said Prince Edward, with an angry frown.

“And they come from a bitter heart” answered the unknown knight. “How long is it since there has been peace in my hapless country? Where are the steadings, and orchards, and vineyards, which made France fair? Where are the cities which made her great? From Providence to Burgundy we are beset by every prowling hireling in Christendom, who rend and tear the country which you have left too weak to guard her own marches. Is it not a byword that a man may ride all day in that unhappy land without seeing thatch upon roof or hearing the crow of cock? Does not one fair kingdom content you, that you should strive so for this other one which has no love for you? Pardieu! A true Frenchman’s words may well be bitter, for bitter is his lot and bitter his thoughts as he rides through his thrice unhappy country.”

“Sir knight” said the prince “you speak like a brave man, and our cousin of France is happy in having a cavalier who is so fit to uphold his cause either with tongue or with sword. But if you think such evil of us, how comes it that you have trusted yourselves to us without warranty or safe conduct?”

“Because I knew that you would be here, sire. Had the man who sits upon your right been ruler of this land, I had indeed thought twice before I looked to

him for aught that was knightly or generous." With a soldierly salute, he wheeled round his horse, and, galloping down the lists, disappeared amid the dense crowd of footmen and of horsemen who were streaming away from the scene of the tournament.

"The insolent villain!" cried Pedro, glaring furiously after him. "I have seen a man's tongue torn from his jaws for less. Would it not be well even now, Edward, to send horsemen to hale him back? Bethink you that it may be one of the royal house of France, or at least some knight whose loss would be a heavy blow to his master. Sir William Felton, you are well mounted, gallop after the caitiff, I pray you."

"Do so, Sir William" said the prince, "and give him this purse of a hundred nobles as a sign of the respect which I bear for him; for, by St. George! He has served his master this day even as I would wish liegeman of mine to serve me." So saying, the prince turned his back upon the King of Spain, and springing upon his horse, rode slowly homewards to the Abbey of Saint Andrew's.

CHAPTER XXV
HOW SIR NIGEL WROTE TO TWYNHAM CASTLE

On the morning after the jousting, when Alleyne Edricson went, as was his custom, into his master's chamber to wait upon him in his dressing and to curl his hair, he found him already up and very busily at work. He sat at a table by the window, a deerhound on one side of him and a lurcher on the other, his feet tucked away under the trestle on which he sat, and his tongue in his cheek, with the air of a man who is much perplexed. A sheet of vellum lay upon the board in front of him, and he held a pen in his hand, with which he had been scribbling in a rude schoolboy hand. So many were the blots, however, and so numerous the scratches and erasures, that he had at last given it up in despair, and sat with his single uncovered eye cocked upwards at the ceiling, as one who waits upon inspiration.

"By Saint Paul!" he cried, as Alleyne entered, "you are the man who will stand by me in this matter. I have been in sore need of you, Alleyne."

"God be with you, my fair lord!" the squire answered. "I trust that you have taken no hurt from all that you have gone through yesterday."

"Nay; I feel the fresher for it, Alleyne. It has eased my joints, which were somewhat stiff from these years of peace. I trust, Alleyne, that thou didst very carefully note and mark the bearing and carriage of this knight of France; for it is time, now when you are young, that you should see all that is best, and mould your own actions in accordance. This was a man from whom much honour might be gained, and I have seldom met any one for whom I have conceived so much love and esteem. Could I but learn his name, I should send you to him with my cartel, that we might have further occasion to watch his goodly feats of arms."

"It is said, my fair lord, that none know his name save only the Lord Chandos, and that he is under vow not to speak it. So ran the gossip at the squires' table."

"Be he who he might, he was a very hardy gentleman. But I have a task here, Alleyne, which is harder to me than aught that was set before me yesterday."

"Can I help you, my lord?"

"That indeed you can. I have been writing my greetings to my sweet wife; for I hear that a messenger goes from the prince to Southampton within the week, and he would gladly take a packet for me. I pray you, Alleyne, to cast your eyes upon what I have written, and see if they are such words as my lady will understand. My fingers, as you can see, are more used to iron and leather than to the drawing of strokes and turning of letters. What then? Is there aught amiss, that you should stare so?"

"It is this first word, my lord. In what tongue were you pleased to write?"

“In English; for my lady talks it more than she doth French.

“Yet this is no English word, my sweet lord. Here are four t’s and never a letter betwixt them.”

“By St. Paul! it seemed strange to my eye when I wrote it” said Sir Nigel. “They bristle up together like a clump of lances. We must break their ranks and set them farther apart. The word is ‘that’. Now I will read it to you, Alleyne, and you shall write it out fair; for we leave Bordeaux this day, and it would be great joy to me to think that the Lady Loring had word from me.”

Alleyne sat down as ordered, with a pen in his hand and a fresh sheet of parchment before him, while Sir Nigel slowly spelled out his letter, running his forefinger on from word to word.

“That my heart is with thee, my dear sweeting, is what thine own heart will assure thee of. All is well with us here, save that Pepin hath the mange on his back, and Pommers hath scarce yet got clear of his stiffness from being four days on shipboard, and the more so because the sea was very high, and we were like to founder on account of a hole in her side, which was made by a stone cast at us by certain sea rovers, who may the saints have in their keeping, for they have gone from amongst us, as has young Terlake, and two score mariners and archers, who would be the more welcome here as there is like to be a very fine war, with much honour and all hopes of advancement, for which I go to gather my Company together, who are now at Montaubon, where they pillage and destroy; yet I hope that, by God’s help, I may be able to show that I am their master, even as, my sweet lady, I am thy servant.”

“How of that, Alleyne?” continued Sir Nigel, blinking at his squire, with an expression of some pride upon his face. “Have I not told her all that hath befallen us?”

“You have said much, my fair lord; and yet, if I may say so, it is somewhat crowded together, so that my Lady Loring can, mayhap, scarce follow it. Were it in shorter periods —”

“Nay, it boots me not how you marshal them, as long as they are all there at the muster. Let my lady have the words, and she will place them in such order as pleases her best. But I would have you add what it would please her to know.”

“That will I” said Alleyne, blithely, and bent to the task.

“My fair lady and mistress” he wrote, “God hath had us in His keeping, and my lord is well and in good cheer. He hath won much honour at the jousting before the prince, when he alone was able to make it good against a very valiant man from France. Touching the moneys, there is enough and to spare until we reach Montaubon. Herewith, my fair lady, I send my humble regards, entreating

you that you will give the same to your daughter, the Lady Maude. May the holy saints have you both in their keeping is ever the prayer of thy servant,

“ALLEYNE EDRICSON.”

“That is very fairly set forth” said Sir Nigel, nodding his bald head as each sentence was read to him. “And for thyself, Alleyne, if there be any dear friend to whom you would fain give greeting, I can send it for thee within this packet.”

“There is none” said Alleyne, sadly.

“Have you no kinsfolk, then?”

“None, save my brother.”

“Ha! I had forgotten that there was ill blood betwixt you. But are there none in all England who love thee?”

“None that I dare say so.”

“And none whom you love?”

“Nay, I will not say that” said Alleyne.

Sir Nigel shook his head and laughed softly to himself, “I see how it is with you” he said. “Have I not noted your frequent sighs and vacant eye? Is she fair?”

“She is indeed” cried Alleyne from his heart, all tingling at this sudden turn of the talk.

“And good?”

“As an angel.”

“And yet she loves you not?”

“Nay, I cannot say that she loves another.”

“Then you have hopes?”

“I could not live else.”

“Then must you strive to be worthy of her love. Be brave and pure, fearless to the strong and humble to the weak; and so, whether this love prosper or no, you will have fitted yourself to be honoured by a maiden’s love, which is, in sooth, the highest guerdon which a true knight can hope for.”

“Indeed, my lord, I do so strive” said Alleyne; “but she is so sweet, so dainty, and of so noble a spirit, that I fear me that I shall never be worthy of her.”

“By thinking so you become worthy. Is she then of noble birth?”

“She is, my lord” faltered Alleyne.

“Of a knightly house?”

“Yes.”

“Have a care, Alleyne, have a care!” said Sir Nigel, kindly. “The higher the steed the greater the fall. Hawk not at that which may be beyond thy flight.”

“My lord, I know little of the ways and usages of the world” cried Alleyne, “but I would fain ask your rede upon the matter. You have known my father and my kin: is not my family one of good standing and repute?”

“Beyond all question.”

“And yet you warn me that I must not place my love too high.”

“Were Minstead yours, Alleyne, then, by St. Paul! I cannot think that any family in the land would not be proud to take you among them, seeing that you come of so old a strain. But while the Socman lives — Ha, by my soul! If this is not Sir Oliver’s step I am the more mistaken.”

As he spoke, a heavy footfall was heard without, and the portly knight flung open the door and strode into the room.

“Why, my little coz” said he “I have come across to tell you that I live above the barber’s in the Rue de la Tour, and that there is a venison pasty in the oven and two flasks of the right vintage on the table. By St. James! A blind man might find the place, for one has but to get in the wind from it, and follow the savory smell. Put on your cloak, then, and come, for Sir Walter Hewett and Sir Robert Briquet, with one or two others, are awaiting us.”

“Nay, Oliver, I cannot be with you, for I must to Montaubon this day.”

“To Montaubon? But I have heard that your Company is to come with my forty Winchester rascals to Dax.”

“If you will take charge of them, Oliver. For I will go to Montaubon with none save my two squires and two archers. Then, when I have found the rest of my Company I shall lead them to Dax. We set forth this morning.”

“Then I must back to my pasty” said Sir Oliver. “You will find us at Dax, I doubt not, unless the prince throw me into prison, for he is very wroth against me.”

“And why, Oliver?”

“Pardieu! because I have sent my cartel, gauntlet, and defiance to Sir John Chandos and to Sir William Felton.”

“To Chandos? In God’s name, Oliver, why have you done this?”

“Because he and the other have used me spitefully.”

“And how?”

“Because they have passed me over in choosing those who should joust for England. Yourself and Audley I could pass, coz, for you are mature men; but who are Wake, and Percy, and Beauchamp? By my soul! I was prodding for my food into a camp kettle when they were howling for their pap. Is a man of my weight and substance to be thrown aside for the first three half-grown lads who have learned the trick of the tilt yard? But hark ye, coz, I think of sending my cartel also to the prince.”

“Oliver! Oliver! You are mad!”

“Not I, i’ faith! I care not a denier whether he be prince or no. By Saint James! I see that your squire’s eyes are starting from his head like a trussed crab. Well, friend, we are all three men of Hampshire, and not lightly to be jeered at.”

“Has he jeered at you than?”

“Pardieu! Yes, ‘Old Sir Oliver’s heart is still stout’ said one of his court. ‘Else had it been out of keeping with the rest of him’ quoth the prince. ‘And his arm is strong’ said another. ‘So is the backbone of his horse,’ quoth the prince. This very day I will send him my cartel and defiance.”

“Nay, nay, my dear Oliver” said Sir Nigel, laying his hand upon his angry friend’s arm. “There is naught in this, for it was but saying that you were a strong and robust man, who had need of a good destrier. And as to Chandos and Felton, bethink you that if when you yourself were young the older lances had ever been preferred, how would you then have had the chance to earn the good name and fame which you now bear? You do not ride as light as you did, Oliver, and I ride lighter by the weight of my hair, but it would be an ill thing if in the evening of our lives we showed that our hearts were less true and loyal than of old. If such a knight as Sir Oliver Buttethorn may turn against his own prince for the sake of a light word, then where are we to look for steadfast faith and constancy?”

“Ah! my dear little coz, it is easy to sit in the sunshine and preach to the man in the shadow. Yet you could ever win me over to your side with that soft voice of yours. Let us think no more of it then. But, holy Mother! I had forgot the pasty, and it will be as scorched as Judas Iscariot! Come, Nigel, lest the foul fiend get the better of me again.”

“For one hour, then; for we march at midday. Tell Aylward, Alleyne, that he is to come with me to Montaubon, and to choose one archer for his comrade. The rest will to Dax when the prince starts, which will be before the feast of the Epiphany. Have Pommers ready at midday with my sycamore lance, and place my harness on the sumpter mule.”

With these brief directions, the two old soldiers strode off together, while Alleyne hastened to get all in order for their journey.

CHAPTER XXVI
HOW THE THREE COMRADES GAINED A MIGHTY TREASURE

It was a bright, crisp winter's day when the little party set off from Bordeaux on their journey to Montaubon, where the missing half of their Company had last been heard of. Sir Nigel and Ford had ridden on in advance, the knight upon his hackney, while his great warhorse trotted beside his squire. Two hours later Alleyne Edricson followed; for he had the tavern reckoning to settle, and many other duties which fell to him as squire of the body. With him came Aylward and Hordle John, armed as of old, but mounted for their journey upon a pair of clumsy Landes horses, heavy headed and shambling, but of great endurance, and capable of jogging along all day, even when between the knees of the huge archer, who turned the scale at two hundred and seventy pounds. They took with them the sumpter mules, which carried in panniers the wardrobe and table furniture of Sir Nigel; for the knight, though neither fop nor epicure, was very dainty in small matters, and loved, however bare the board or hard the life, that his napery should still be white and his spoon of silver.

There had been frost during the night, and the white hard road rang loud under their horses' irons as they spurred through the east gate of the town, along the same broad highway which the unknown French champion had traversed on the day of the jousts. The three rode abreast, Alleyne Edricson with his eyes cast down and his mind distraught, for his thoughts were busy with the conversation which he had had with Sir Nigel in the morning. Had he done well to say so much, or had he not done better to have said more? What would the knight have said had he confessed to his love for the Lady Maude? Would he cast him off in disgrace, or might he chide him as having abused the shelter of his roof? It had been ready upon his tongue to tell him all when Sir Oliver had broken in upon them. Perchance Sir Nigel, with his love of all the dying usages of chivalry, might have contrived some strange ordeal or feat of arms by which his love should be put to the test. Alleyne smiled as he wondered what fantastic and wondrous deed would be exacted from him. Whatever it was, he was ready for it, whether it were to hold the lists in the court of the King of Tartary, to carry a cartel to the Sultan of Baghdad, or to serve a term against the wild heathen of Prussia. Sir Nigel had said that his birth was high enough for any lady, if his fortune could but be amended. Often had Alleyne curled his lip at the beggarly craving for land or for gold which blinded man to the higher and more lasting issues of life. Now it seemed as though it were only by this same land and gold that he might hope to reach his heart's desire. But then, again, the Socman of Minstead was no friend to the Constable of Twynham Castle. It might happen that, should he amass riches by some happy fortune of war, this feud might hold the two families aloof. Even if Maude loved him, he knew her too well to think that she would wed him without the blessing of her father. Dark and murky was it all, but hope mounts high in youth, and it ever fluttered over all the turmoil of his thoughts like a white plume amid the shock of horsemen.

If Alleyne Edricson had enough to ponder over as he rode through the bare plains of Guienne, his two companions were more busy with the present and less thoughtful of the future. Aylward rode for half a mile with his chin upon his shoulder, looking back at a white kerchief which fluttered out of the gable window of a high house which peeped over the corner of the battlements. When at last a dip of the road hid it from his view, he cocked his steel cap, shrugged his broad shoulders, and rode on with laughter in his eyes, and his weather-beaten face all ashine with pleasant memories. John also rode in silence, but his eyes wandered slowly from one side of the road to the other, and he stared and pondered and nodded his head like a traveller who makes his notes and saves them up for the retelling.

“By the rood!” he broke out suddenly, slapping his thigh with his great red hand, “I knew that there was something a-missing, but I could not bring to my mind what it was.”

“What was it then?” asked Alleyne, coming with a start out of his reverie.

“Why, it is the hedgerows” roared John, with a shout of laughter. “The country is all scraped as clear as a friar’s poll. But indeed I cannot think much of the folk in these parts. Why do they not get to work and dig up these long rows of black and crooked stumps which I see on every hand? A franklin of Hampshire would think shame to have such litter upon his soil.”

“Thou foolish old John!” quoth Aylward. “You should know better, since I have heard that the monks of Beaulieu could squeeze a good cup of wine from their own grapes. Know then that if these rows were dug up the wealth of the country would be gone, and mayhap there would be dry throats and gaping mouths in England, for in three months’ time these black roots will blossom and shoot and burgeon, and from them will come many a good shipload of Medoc and Gascony which will cross the narrow seas. But see the church in the hollow, and the folk who cluster in the churchyard! By my hilt! It is a burial, and there is a passing bell!” He pulled off his steel cap as he spoke and crossed himself, with a muttered prayer for the repose of the dead.

“There too” remarked Alleyne, as they rode on again, “that which seems to the eye to be dead is still full of the sap of life, even as the vines were. Thus God hath written Himself and His laws very broadly on all that is around us, if our poor dull eyes and duller souls could but read what He hath set before us.”

“Ha! mon petit” cried the bowman “you take me back to the days when you were new fledged, as sweet a little chick as ever pecked his way out of a monkish egg. I had feared that in gaining our debonair young man-at-arms we had lost our soft-spoken clerk. In truth, I have noted much change in you since we came from Twynham Castle.”

“Surely it would be strange else, seeing that I have lived in a world so new to me. Yet I trust that there are many things in which I have not changed. If I have turned to serve an earthly master, and to carry arms for an earthly king, it

would be an ill thing if I were to lose all thought of the great high King and Master of all, whose humble and unworthy servant I was ere ever I left Beaulieu. You, John, are also from the cloisters, but I trow that you do not feel that you have deserted the old service in taking on the new.”

“I am a slow witted man” said John, “and, in sooth, when I try to think about such matters it casts a gloom upon me. Yet I do not look upon myself as a worse man in an archer’s jerkin than I was in a white cowl, if that be what you mean.”

“You have but changed from one white company to the other” quoth Aylward. “But, by these ten finger bones! it is a passing strange thing to me to think that it was but in the last fall of the leaf that we walked from Lyndhurst together, he so gentle and maidenly, and you, John, like a great red-limbed overgrown mooncalf; and now here you are as sprack a squire and as lusty an archer as ever passed down the highway from Bordeaux, while I am still the same old Samkin Aylward, with never a change, save that I have a few more sins on my soul and a few less crowns in my pouch. But I have never yet heard, John, what the reason was why you should come out of Beaulieu.”

“There were seven reasons” said John thoughtfully. “The first of them was that they threw me out.”

“Ma foi! Camarade, to the devil with the other six! That is enough for me and for thee also. I can see that they are very wise and discreet folk at Beaulieu. Ah! Mon ange, what have you in the pipkin?”

“It is milk, worthy sir” answered the peasant maid, who stood by the door of a cottage with a jug in her hand. “Would it please you, gentles, that I should bring you out three horns of it?”

“Nay, ma petite, but here is a two sous piece for thy kindly tongue and for the sight of thy pretty face. Ma foi! But she has a bonne mine. I have a mind to bide and speak with her.”

“Nay, nay, Aylward” cried Alleyne. “Sir Nigel will await us, and he in haste.”

“True, true, camarade! Adieu, ma cherie! Mon coeur est toujours a toi. Her mother is a well-grown woman also. See where she digs by the wayside. Ma foi! The riper fruit is ever the sweeter. Bon jour, ma belle dame! God have you in his keeping! Said Sir Nigel where he would await us?”

“At Marmande or Aiguillon. He said that we could not pass him, seeing that there is but the one road.”

“Aye, and it is a road that I know as I know the Midhurst parish butts” quoth the bowman. “Thirty times have I journeyed it, forward and backward, and, by the twang of string! I am wont to come back this way more laden than I went. I have carried all that I had into France in a wallet, and it hath taken four sumpter mules to carry it back again. God’s benison on the man who first

turned his hand to the making of war! But there, down in the dingle, is the church of Cadillac, and you may see the inn where three poplars grow beyond the village. Let us on, for a stoup of wine would hearten us upon our way."

The highway had lain through the swelling vineyard country, which stretched away to the north and east in gentle curves, with many a peeping spire and feudal tower, and cluster of village houses, all clear cut and hard in the bright wintry air. To their right stretched the blue Garonne, running swiftly seawards, with boats and barges dotted over its broad bosom. On the other side lay a strip of vineyard, and beyond it the desolate and sandy region of the Landes, all tangled with faded gorse and heath and broom, stretching away in unbroken gloom to the blue hills which lay low upon the furthest skyline. Behind them might still be seen the broad estuary of the Gironde, with the high towers of Saint Andre and Saint Remi shooting up from the plain. In front, amid radiating lines of poplars, lay the riverside townlet of Cadillac — grey walls, white houses, and a feather of blue smoke.

"This is the 'Mouton d'Or' " said Aylward, as they pulled up their horses at a whitewashed straggling hostel. "What ho there!" he continued, beating upon the door with the hilt of his sword. "Tapster, ostler, varlet, hark hither, and a wannion on your lazy limbs! Ha! Michel, as red in the nose as ever! Three jacks of the wine of the country, Michel — for the air bites shrewdly. I pray you, Alleyne, to take note of this door, for I have a tale concerning it."

"Tell me, friend" said Alleyne to the portly red-faced inn-keeper "has a knight and a squire passed this way within the hour?"

"Nay, sir, it would be two hours back. Was he a small man, weak in the eyes, with a want of hair, and speaks very quiet when he is most to be feared?"

"The same" the squire answered. "But I marvel how you should know how he speaks when he is in wrath, for he is very gentle-minded with those who are beneath him."

"Praise to the saints! It was not I who angered him" said the fat Michel.

"Who, then?"

"It was young Sieur de Crespigny of Saintonge, who chanced to be here, and made game of the Englishman, seeing that he was but a small man and hath a face which is full of peace. But indeed this good knight was a very quiet and patient man, for he saw that the Sieur de Crespigny was still young and spoke from an empty head, so he sat his horse and quaffed his wine, even as you are doing now, all heedless of the clacking tongue."

"And what then, Michel?"

"Well, messieurs, it chanced that the Sieur de Crespigny, having said this and that, for the laughter of the varlets, cried out at last about the glove that

the knight wore in his coif, asking if it was the custom in England for a man to wear a great archer's glove in his cap. Pardieu! I have never seen a man get off his horse as quick as did that stranger Englishman. Ere the words were past the other's lips he was beside him, his face nigh touching, and his breath hot upon his cheeks. 'I think, young sir,' quoth he softly, looking into the other's eyes, 'that now that I am nearer you will very clearly see that the glove is not an archer's glove.' 'Perchance not' said the Sieur de Crespigny with a twitching lip. 'Nor is it large, but very small' quoth the Englishman. 'Less large than I had thought' said the other, looking down, for the knight's gaze was heavy upon his eyelids. 'And in every way such a glove as might be worn by the fairest and sweetest lady in England' quoth the Englishman. 'It may be so,' said the Sieur de Crespigny, turning his face from him. 'I am myself weak in the eyes, and have often taken one thing for another' quoth the knight, as he sprang back into his saddle and rode off, leaving the Sieur de Crespigny biting his nails before the door. Ha! By the five wounds, many men of war have drunk my wine, but never one was more to my fancy than this little Englishman."

"By my hilt! He is our master, Michel" quoth Aylward "and such men as we do not serve under a laggart. But here are four deniers, Michel, and God be with you! En avant, camarades! for we have a long road before us."

At a brisk trot the three friends left Cadillac and its winehouse behind them, riding without a halt past St. Macaire, and on by ferry over the river Dorpt. At the further side the road winds through La Réole, Bazeille, and Marmande, with the sunlit river still gleaming upon the right, and the bare poplars bristling up upon either side. John and Alleyne rode silent on either side, but every inn, farmsteading, or castle brought back to Aylward some remembrance of love, foray, or plunder, with which to beguile the way.

"There is the smoke from Bazas, on the further side of Garonne" quoth he. "There were three sisters yonder, the daughters of a farrier, and, by these ten finger bones! A man might ride for a long June day and never set eyes upon such maidens. There was Marie, tall and grave, and Blanche petite and gay, and the dark Agnes, with eyes that went through you like a waxed arrow. I lingered there as long as four days, and was betrothed to them all; for it seemed shame to set one above her sisters, and might make ill blood in the family. Yet, for all my care, things were not merry in the house, and I thought it well to come away. There, too, is the mill of Le Souris. Old Pierre Le Caron, who owned it, was a right good comrade, and had ever a seat and a crust for a weary archer. He was a man who wrought hard at all that he turned his hand to; but he heated himself in grinding bones to mix with his flour, and so through over-diligence he brought a fever upon himself and died."

"Tell me, Aylward" said Alleyne, "what was amiss with the door of yonder inn that you should ask me to observe it."

"Pardieu! yes, I had well nigh forgot. What saw you on yonder door?"

“I saw a square hole, through which doubtless the host may peep when he is not too sure of those who knock.”

“And saw you naught else?”

“I marked that beneath this hole there was a deep cut in the door, as though a great nail had been driven in.”

“And naught else?”

“No.”

“Had you looked more closely you might have seen that there was a stain upon the wood. The first time that I ever heard my comrade Black Simon laugh was in front of that door. I heard him once again when he slew a French squire with his teeth, he being unarmed and the Frenchman having a dagger.”

“And why did Simon laugh in front of the inn door!” asked John.

“Simon is a hard and perilous man when he hath the bitter drop in him; and, by my hilt! He was born for war, for there is little sweetness or rest in him. This inn, the ‘Mouton d’Or,’ was kept in the old days by one Francois Gourval, who had a hard fist and a harder heart. It was said that many and many an archer coming from the wars had been served with wine with simples in it, until he slept, and had then been stripped of all by this Gourval. Then on the morrow, if he made complaint, this wicked Gourval would throw him out upon the road or beat him, for he was a very lusty man, and had many stout varlets in his service. This chanced to come to Simon’s ears when we were at Bordeaux together, and he would have it that we should ride to Cadillac with a good hempen cord, and give this Gourval such a scourging as he merited. Forth we rode then, but when we came to the ‘Mouton d’Or,’ Gourval had had word of our coming and its purpose, so that the door was barred, nor was there any way into the house. ‘Let us in, good Master Gourval!’ cried Simon, and ‘Let us in, good Master Gourval!’ cried I, but no word could we get through the hole in the door, save that he would draw an arrow upon us unless we went on our way. ‘Well, Master Gourval,’ quoth Simon at last ‘this is but a sorry welcome, seeing that we have ridden so far just to shake you by the hand.’ ‘Canst shake me by the hand without coming in,’ said Gourval. ‘And how that?’ asked Simon. ‘By passing in your hand through the hole,’ said he. ‘Nay, my hand is wounded’ quoth Simon, ‘and of such a size that I cannot pass it in.’ ‘That need not hinder,’ said Gourval, who was hot to be rid of us, ‘pass in your left hand.’ ‘But I have something for thee, Gourval,’ said Simon. ‘What then?’ he asked. ‘There was an English archer who slept here last week of the name of Hugh of Nutbourne.’ ‘We have had many rogues here,’ said Gourval. ‘His conscience hath been heavy within him because he owes you a debt of fourteen deniers, having drunk wine for which he hath never paid. For the easing of his soul, he asked me to pay the money to you as I passed.’ Now this Gourval was very greedy for money, so he thrust forth his hand for the fourteen deniers, but Simon had his dagger ready and he pinned his hand to the door. I have paid the Englishman’s debt,

Gourval! quoth he, and so rode away, laughing so that he could scarce sit his horse, leaving mine host still nailed to his door. Such is the story of the hole which you have marked, and of the smudge upon the wood. I have heard that from that time English archers have been better treated in the auberge of Cadillac. But what have we here by the wayside?"

"It appears to be a very holy man" said Alleyne.

"And, by the rood! He hath some strange wares" cried John. "What are these bits of stone, and of wood, and rusted nails, which are set out in front of him?"

The man whom they had remarked sat with his back against a cherry tree, and his legs shooting out in front of him, like one who is greatly at his ease. Across his thighs was a wooden board, and scattered over it all manner of slips of wood and knobs of brick and stone, each laid separate from the other, as a huckster places his wares. He was dressed in a long grey gown, and wore a broad hat of the same colour, much weatherstained, with three scallop shells dangling from the brim. As they approached, the travellers observed that he was advanced in years, and that his eyes were upturned and yellow.

"Dear knights and gentlemen." he cried in a high crackling voice "Worthy Christian cavaliers, will ye ride past and leave an aged pilgrim to die of hunger? The sight hath been burned from mine eyes by the sands of the Holy Land, and I have had neither crust of bread nor cup of wine these two days past."

"By my hilt! Father" said Aylward, looking keenly at him "it is a marvel to me that thy girdle should have so goodly a span and clip thee so closely, if you have in sooth had so little to place within it."

"Kind stranger" answered the pilgrim "you have unwittingly spoken words which are very grievous to me to listen to. Yet I should be loth to blame you, for I doubt not that what you said was not meant to sadden me, nor to bring my sore affliction back to my mind. It ill becomes me to prate too much of what I have endured for the faith, and yet, since you have observed it, I must tell you that this thickness and roundness of the waist is caused by a dropsy brought on by overhaste in journeying from the house of Pilate to the Mount of Olives."

"There, Aylward" said Alleyne, with a reddened cheek, "let that curb your blunt tongue. How could you bring a fresh pang to this holy man, who hath endured so much and hath journeyed as far as Christ's own blessed tomb?"

"May the foul fiend strike me dumb!" cried the bowman in hot repentance; but both the palmer and Alleyne threw up their hands to stop him.

"I forgive thee from my heart, dear brother" piped the blind man. "But, oh, these wild words of thine are worse to mine ears than aught which you could say of me."

“Not another word shall I speak” said Aylward; “but here is a franc for thee and I crave thy blessing.”

“And here is another” said Alleyne.

“And another” cried Hordle John.

But the blind palmer would have none of their alms. “Foolish, foolish pride!” he cried, beating upon his chest with his large brown hand. “Foolish, foolish pride! How long then will it be ere I can scourge it forth? Am I then never to conquer it? Oh, strong, strong are the ties of flesh, and hard it is to subdue the spirit! I come, friends, of a noble house, and I cannot bring myself to touch this money, even though it be to save me from the grave.”

“Alas! father” said Alleyne, “how then can we be of help to thee?”

“I had sat down here to die” quoth the palmer; “but for many years I have carried in my wallet these precious things which you see set forth now before me. It were sin, thought I, that my secret should perish with me. I shall therefore sell these things to the first worthy passersby, and from them I shall have money enough to take me to the shrine of Our Lady at Rocamadour, where I hope to lay these old bones.”

“What are these treasures, then, father?” asked Hordle John. “I can but see an old rusty nail, with bits of stone and slips of wood.”

“My friend” answered the palmer, “not all the money that is in this country could pay a just price for these wares of mine. This nail” he continued, pulling off his hat and turning up his sightless orbs, “is one of those wherewith man’s salvation was secured. I had it, together with this piece of the true rood, from the five and twentieth descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, who still lives in Jerusalem alive and well, though latterly much afflicted by boils. Aye, you may well cross yourselves, and I beg that you will not breathe upon it or touch it with your fingers.”

“And the wood and stone, holy father?” asked Alleyne, with bated breath, as he stared awestruck at his precious relics.

“This cantle of wood is from the true cross, this other from Noah his ark, and the third is from the doorpost of the temple of the wise King Solomon. This stone was thrown at the sainted Stephen, and the other two are from the Tower of Babel. Here, too, is part of Aaron’s rod, and a lock of hair from Elisha the prophet.”

“But, father” quoth Alleyne “the holy Elisha was bald, which brought down upon him the revilements of the wicked children.”

“It is very true that he had not much hair” said the palmer quickly “and it is this which makes this relic so exceeding precious. Take now your choice of

these, my worthy gentlemen, and pay such a price as your consciences will suffer you to offer; for I am not a chapman nor a huckster, and I would never part with them, did I not know that I am very near to my reward.”

“Aylward” said Alleyne excitedly “this is such a chance as few folk have twice in one life. The nail I must have, and I will give it to the abbey of Beaulieu, so that all the folk in England may go thither to wonder and to pray.”

“And I will have the stone from the temple” cried Hordle John. “What would not my old mother give to have it hung over her bed?”

“And I will have Aaron’s rod” quoth Aylward. “I have but five florins in the world, and here are four of them.”

“Here are three more” said John.

“And here are five more” added Alleyne. “Holy father, I hand you twelve florins, which is all that we can give, though we well know how poor a pay it is for the wondrous things which you sell us.”

“Down, pride, down!” cried the pilgrim, still beating upon his chest. “Can I not bend myself then to take this sorry sum which is offered me for that which has cost me the labours of a life. Give me the dross! Here are the precious relics, and, oh, I pray you that you will handle them softly and with reverence, else had I rather left my unworthy bones here by the wayside.”

With doffed caps and eager hands, the comrades took their new and precious possessions, and pressed onwards upon their journey, leaving the aged palmer still seated under the cherry tree. They rode in silence, each with his treasure in his hand, glancing at it from time to time, and scarce able to believe that chance had made them sole owners of relics of such holiness and worth that every abbey and church in Christendom would have bid eagerly for their possession. So they journeyed, full of this good fortune, until opposite the town of Le Mas, where John’s horse cast a shoe, and they were glad to find a wayside smith who might set the matter to rights. To him Aylward narrated the good hap which had befallen them; but the smith, when his eyes lit upon the relics, leaned up against his anvil and laughed, with his hand to his side, until the tears hopped down his sooty cheeks.

“Why, masters” quoth he “this man is a coquillart, or seller of false relics, and was here in the smithy not two hours ago. This nail that he hath sold you was taken from my nail box, and as to the wood and the stones, you will see a heap of both outside from which he hath filled his scrip.”

“Nay, nay” cried Alleyne, “this was a holy man who had journeyed to Jerusalem, and acquired a dropsy by running from the house of Pilate to the Mount of Olives.”

“I know not about that” said the smith; “but I know that a man with a grey palmer’s hat and gown was here no very long time ago, and that he sat on yonder stump and ate a cold pullet and drank a flask of wine. Then he begged from me one of my nails, and filling his scrip with stones, he went upon his way. Look at these nails, and see if they are not the same as that which he has sold you.”

“Now may God save us!” cried Alleyne, all aghast. “Is there no end then to the wickedness of humankind? He so humble, so aged, so loth to take our money — and yet a villain and a cheat. Whom can we trust or believe in?”

“I will after him” said Aylward, flinging himself into the saddle. “Come, Alleyne, we may catch him ere John’s horse be shod.”

Away they galloped together, and ere long they saw the old grey palmer walking slowly along in front of them. He turned, however, at the sound of their hoofs, and it was clear that his blindness was a cheat like all the rest of him, for he ran swiftly through a field and so into a wood, where none could follow him. They hurled their relics after him, and so rode back to the blacksmith’s the poorer both in pocket and in faith.