







THE KNIGHT OF
THE GOLDEN CHAIN

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BY

R. D. CHETWODE

AUTHOR OF JOHN OF STRATHBOURNE



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1898



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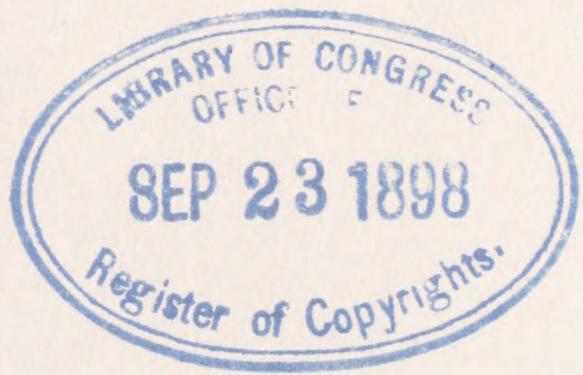
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TO
HENRY GARRARD.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE SLAYING OF BALDWIN	I
II.—I SET OUT FOR WINCHESTER	13
III.—I AM CAST INTO DUNGEON	22
IV.—GUNDULF THE THRALL	31
V.—WE ESCAPE FROM THE WOLF	39
VI.—A FRIEND IN THE FOREST	47
VII.—THE LITTLE MAID	55
VIII.—A TIMELY WARNING	63
IX.—AMONG THE OUTLAWS	73
X.—I LOSE THE LITTLE MAID	84
XI.—THE BISHOP WILL HAVE NONE OF ME	94
XII.—WE MARCH INTO LONDON	103
XIII.—HENRY OF BLOIS TURNS AGAIN	114
XIV.—I SEEK ROBERT OF GLOUCESTER	123
XV.—THE BISHOP'S RIDDLE	132
XVI.—THE BURNING OF THE CONVENT	138
XVII.—I PLIGHT MY TROTH	149
XVIII.—RANULF THE WOLF	158
XIX.—WE LOSE OXFORD	167
XX.—GUNDULF RETURNS	176
XXI.—THE LADY ESCAPES	185
XXII.—DAME JOAN ASSERTS HERSELF	193

viii THE KNIGHT OF THE GOLDEN CHAIN.

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIII.—I AM CAPTURED	201
XXIV.—A HUNTING PARTY	210
XXV.—IN THE TOWER	219
XXVI.—THE COUNTESS ADELA	230
XXVII.—THE FATE OF THE COUNTESS	237
XXVIII.—I BECOME LORD OF BRIABOIS	247
XXIX.—THE LADY ALIONORA	254
XXX.—A BAD DREAM	263
XXXI.—MY BROTHER'S SECRET	272
XXXII.—I PLAY THE PRIEST	284
XXXIII.—I RESCUE ELA	294
XXXIV.—MY STORY ENDS	304

THE KNIGHT OF THE GOLDEN CHAIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE SLAYING OF BALDWIN.

I HEARD the sound of voices in fierce quarrel, and as, by the aid of my pole, I leaped the dyke that separated us, Aylmer suddenly drew dagger from sheath, and plunged it into young Baldwin's side. Nay, he did not stop there; in his mad fury, he struck his helpless foe again and again, until I wrenched the weapon from his hand and threw it far across the marsh. They were foul blows, foully given, and Aylmer was my only brother. He was all I had. My mother died soon after I was born, and when my father fell fighting in Normandy, Henry, the first king of that name, gave us in wardship to Earl Alberic of Wodebrig.

I could not blame Aylmer overmuch; I felt more pity for him than anger. He was in general most peaceful; many a time have I been up in arms for trifles at which he would only smile. Folk said it was because he was slight of frame and somewhat weakly; and though all knew he was no coward,

yet was he more able with his head than with his hands. But when roused his passion was terrible, nothing could stay him; for within his veins there flowed the fierce blood of the sea-kings which came to us through our grandsire. Happily, these fits of passion were as short-lived as they were rare. By the time I cast away the knife, his fury was over, and he burst into sobs and tears. This also was Aylmer's way, and I waited in gloomy silence until it passed.

For, look you, this was a serious matter indeed. Young Baldwin, who now lay dead before us, his blood soaking into the wet grass, was no mere thrall whose death might be compounded for by money. He was of noble blood, the only son of his father, and one of the most favoured squires of our lord. He and I were enemies of old; and he was ever a meddlesome braggart, trying to fasten a quarrel on any one weaker than himself. Many a cracked crown had he given me, which I did my utmost to return; though, as he was the older and bigger, he generally came off victor. But this was not fair fight, else should I have cared little; it would surely bring us great trouble. And even while I thought thus, the sharp fit was over, Aylmer sat up, and was himself again.

“Is he dead?” he asked moodily, though in truth I think he scarce felt the trouble as I did.

“Ay, dead enough. It was a foul blow that killed him.”

“Maybe; I know naught of how it chanced.

He chafed and taunted me past endurance; then all turned red before my eyes, and I remember nothing more."

"Will that tale content my lord, think you? Will it content King Stephen? Be sure if Alberic do not satisfy Baldwin's kinsmen, they will carry their cry to the King himself, and he is none so certain of his throne that he dare withstand them."

For King Stephen, who, now in the year of grace 1139, had been lord of England for near upon four years, had little right to reign; all men knew that the crown belonged of right to Henry's daughter, the Empress Matilda. Yet partly because the great barons liked not a woman ruler; partly because Stephen was brave and debonair, a favourite with all, they chose him for their king, and would have none of her whom they called Countess of Anjou.

Aylmer looked at me in some surprise; I was not wont to use so many words.

"Methinks we have changed places, oh my brother," he cried mockingly. "And what does your new-born wisdom counsel me to do?"

"There is nothing to be done, save to fly to St. Edmund's Convent with the best speed you may, before they can lay hands on you."

"Take sanctuary as if I were some Saxon villein? If that is all you can say, thank you for naught; I will take counsel with myself;" and he hid his face in his hands. I held my peace; for Aylmer was wise beyond his age, he having at that

time some seventeen years, whilst I was a twelve-month younger.

Presently he began slowly: "You were right in one thing just now; Baldwin has many friends while we have few, and in this Earl Alberic will scarce uphold me. At the least they will fine me to the last mark my lands are worth; they will take away my lordship; they will strip us bare. Now I have no mind to this; therefore, go you straight to St. Edmund's, ask for our uncle the Prior, and tell him all. For his sister's, our mother, sake, he will stand our friend; and he is the wisest man in all the land. No one has seen us?"

Rising, he glanced round warily. The sun had disappeared, the sky was grey and lowering, dusk was slowly descending upon the dreary marsh; whilst, as if to meet it, every rush-fringed ditch sent up a film of misty vapour, which grew thicker each minute. Nothing was heard save now and again the rustling of a water-rat; nothing was to be seen but the dead lad, with wide-open, lack-lustre eyes, the blood still slowly oozing from his wounds.

"Baldwin did not leave the castle with me," Aylmer continued.

"He came out with me," I interrupted. "Only we quarrelled on the way, as usual, and he turned back again."

"Then who is to accuse me? I was trying my new hawk, alone save for Adam, my thrall, whom I sent home with the bird ere I encountered Baldwin. I will go back and sit in hall as if nothing

had happened, and by the time he is found the Prior will have counselled us. Tell my uncle I will abide by his word, and will be guided by him in all. I fear no man's wrath, yet would I not have our name brought to shame; I would not have men know I struck foully. Go not by the road lest you should be seen and questioned. Strike with pole across the marsh, and you will reach St. Edmund's ere nightfall. It will cost you a beating for being absent without leave, but that you can put up with. Baldwin—a plague on him for giving us so much trouble—we must e'en leave as he is; if we moved him worse might come of it. Are you willing to do this?"

"I am willing enough, as you know—much more than this would I do for you." (I loved my brother well, and he was ever my good friend.) "Best take my knife; it will not do for your belt to be empty; if not sunk in the marsh, maybe I can find the other as I go."

I was always glad afterward that the thought of giving Aylmer my knife came from me; for the ills that followed were thus of my own doing.

With that we parted, Aylmer to Wodebrig, I to St. Edmund's Convent to lay the matter before our uncle, the Prior. But first I spent some time searching for the knife I had cast away. When at last I gave it up, the mist had grown so thick I could not see a yard before me, and, though I made all haste, it was too late. Before I was half across, I lost my way, and, finding a dry corner

backed with osiers, sat me down to wait until the moon should rise. Here, by bad luck, I fell asleep till daybreak, and it was long after cock-crow before I reached my destination.

The busy monks had been up and about for some time. Matins and the first mass of the day had long been sung, and many were the wondering looks cast upon my disordered state, for I was in sad plight. While wandering in the mist, I had fallen many times, my garments were torn and caked with mire. I had speech with my uncle as soon as possible, and told him all just as it had chanced, repeating Aylmer's message word for word.

The good man listened in silence, though he shook his head often and sorrowfully.

"'Tis bad, very bad," he said, when I had finished, "yet am I not surprised. I often feared Aylmer's fiery temper would bring trouble."

"But Aylmer is gentle as a woman, as you know yourself, reverend father, save when he is tried too far," I cried indignantly. "And Baldwin had ever a vile tongue, though, coward-like, he taunted but the weak."

"My son, we are all gentle until we are tried too far," returned the monk. "When the hour of temptation comes, we show what we are made of. It is a grievous matter indeed, and one that I fear will cost you dear. If good King Henry still ruled over us, there would be no doubt what course to take. Aylmer would confess his faults and make

amends; the King would see that right was done. But now that Count Stephen hath the upper hand, though he is a fair man to speak and promised to keep the laws of King Edward, every man is a law to himself; there is no justice in the land. The right of the strongest rules, and Baldwin's friends are rich and powerful. Therefore, hath Aylmer done well to promise in this to be guided by me, and I will do my utmost to help him. I will consult with my lord Abbot first, who is no friend to Baldwin's kin; together we may hit upon a plan. Go you now to the cellarer and ask for the pasty sent from my lord's table this morning, and a cup of small ale; but speak of your errand to no one."

An hour or so later, when I had eaten my fill and made myself more presentable, the Prior came to me again, staff in hand, and his skirts looped over his elbow ready for travelling.

"I am for Wodebrig, my son," he said. "Brother Roger has business that way, and I have leave to accompany him. When I return I may have news. Meantime keep within convent bounds, stray not the length of your foot outside. Such are my lord Abbot's orders."

I marvelled somewhat at this; for I was a frequent visitor to the convent, and had been wont to go in and out as I would; but it was not my place to ask questions. Afterward, I understood only too well. The two old men had foreseen what in truth came to pass.

The hours fled but slowly, the sun shone,

there was a soft breeze just enough to ruffle a lady's locks; it was one of the first spring days of the year. I grew tired of being cooped up within bounds, and thought with regret of the merry hunting-party I was to have joined that morning, and how my hawk on its perch would wonder I came not near. Then I remembered that there would scarce be hunting that morning, save for the man who had slain Baldwin; and I wondered how it fared with Aylmer, and what was passing at Wodebrig. It was not until near sundown that the Prior returned, and, after a long conference with my lord Abbot, came to seek me.

"Here is a ravelled coil indeed, my son," he began. "Before I can go one step farther in the matter, I must know how far you are minded to shield your brother."

"Surely to the utmost limit of my powers, good father. You know me well enough for that."

"Even so far as to take his fault upon yourself?"

"Even so far as that if needs be," I answered slowly, though I must confess this was not to my liking. There was not the excuse for me there would have been for Aylmer. I was not hot-blooded, but slow and deliberate in my actions always, so that such a blow from me would be foul murder. Yet I took care not to show my thought in my face.

"Ah, I knew you would answer thus," cried the Prior joyfully; "and so I assured my lord Ab-

bot, telling him you were not the one to fail us. And it is but for a time, my son. When this distracted land hath quiet, and Aylmer can avow his fault, and do penance as he ought, your name shall be cleared before all men. Meantime, it will be worth something to save your father's lands. For, look you, I tell you—I who know—Reginald of Balgham, your ancient enemy, hath had his eye on those lands for long. Were Aylmer banished out of the land be sure he would take possession. Now, you being the younger and thus of no account, he can do no harm."

"Do you wish me to avow that I killed Baldwin?"

"Nay, my son, St. Edmund forbid I should do such grievous wrong. Cry your innocence aloud. Lay hold on our holy shrine, and swear it boldly; only, if they ask you aught else hold your peace; let them find out what they can."

"That is easy enough," I answered with glad heart, relieved to find it was no more. "Nay, why should they accuse me at all?"

"That has come already," he answered drily, "or I should not waste so much breath in counsel. Baldwin left the castle in your company; you were known to be ever quarrelling; and when his death was discovered you alone of all the household were missing. He did not fall in fair fight; his knife was in his belt, unstained. Men cry aloud that you stole upon him by surprise, and fled here to seek sanctuary. We feared something of the kind;

therefore, did we charge you not to leave the convent. A *posse* of them, headed by Earl Alberic in person, is on the way even now to accuse you to my lord Abbot, and I hurried forward to give you warning. Have no fear, I will stand by you to the end. And a word in your ear—my lord Abbot is for you, though for appearance sake he may treat you somewhat harshly."

All came to pass exactly as my uncle the Prior forewarned me; for I was loudly accused, and scarce a man but believed in my guilt. I defended myself all I could, as my uncle counselled, offering to swear my innocence upon the sacred shrine, where lamps burn ever, night and day. My foes agreed to this willingly enough, thinking that at the appointed time I should draw back. But some two days later, when folk crowded the chapel from far and near, I stepped forward after mass had been sung, and, placing my right hand upon the shrine, where rested relics of the holy saint, called Heaven to witness my innocence of Baldwin's blood. As I stood thus alone before them all, Aylmer came to my side.

"Be silent," I whispered in haste, seeing he was about to speak. "They can not hurt me; it might be death to you. Remember your promise to the Prior."

"Then it will be your own doing," he muttered gloomily; but, though he heeded my words and held his peace, he moved not from his place, and kept beside me to the end. Nay, he did more; for

he stood forward as my oath-helper, which as my nearest kinsman was his right, and swore that my oath was clean and true.

When all was over, seeing that men's faces were still turned against me (it was plain that I had taken refuge in the convent), I knelt before Earl Alberic, my lord, and prayed to be allowed wager of battle.

"I will prove my innocence with my body," I cried. "I will even take up the glove of any man who dares to accuse me."

Instantly, one Milo Fitz-Henry, near kinsman to Baldwin, cast down his gauntlet.

But my lord sternly forbade me to touch it.

"Nay, if I am too young," I cried (it was sometimes forbidden for those under age to take up wager of battle), "sure am I that Heaven will provide me a champion. I pray you, my lord, suffer me to take it up?"

"Touch it not," Earl Alberic repeated, turning away from me. "Milo, of your friendship, I pray you lift your glove. This is too weighty a matter to be adjudged now; let it wait until the father of the dead lad returns from over-sea." Nor would he listen to another word, but commanded instant preparation to be made for his departure.

My lord spoke to me but once again, and that was when he rode through the convent gate, where I knelt bareheaded to see him pass.

"You have appealed to Heaven, Alain of Tointe," he said, "and to Heaven's justice I leave

you; but come no more to Wodebrig. I have no mind for your company."

He shook his rein and rode off, followed by all his train. Aylmer rode among them with bowed head and trembling lips, his punishment as great as mine. He would have confessed all even then, but he had vowed to be guided by the Prior, and could but keep his word.

CHAPTER II.

I SET OUT FOR WINCHESTER.

AFTER Earl Alberic and his following had departed I felt sad at heart, as though already an outcast. Baldwin's father might not return for many long months. To be shut up in a convent till then would be hard indeed, yet where else could I go? What was to become of me? Yet not for one moment did I regret what I had done; it would have been worse for Aylmer than for me. However, I was not allowed to remain in my perplexity for long. Within a short week my uncle sought me out, and brought me good tidings.

"My son," he began, "the worst is over now, and right well have you behaved. If Heaven will, ere the father of the dead lad returns, there may be peace in the land, and justice done. Meantime, there are too many of Baldwin's friends about, who might think it no sin to fall upon you. It will be best for you to quit the neighbourhood, unless, indeed, you join our brotherhood, as I urged you long ago, when I found you would have no patrimony. Here would you be safe, in truth. It is a peaceful life, my son, and a holy, and this unhappy

land—if Earl Robert brings the Empress from over-sea as he threatens—may soon again be torn with strife.”

I shook my head. I had no mind to become a monk, as I had ever told him. Besides, if hard blows were at hand, and I had heard enough at Wodebrig to know they were expected, all the more reason I should be free to take my share.

My uncle frowned reprovingly. “Alas! youth is ever foward. One day, perchance, you may sigh in vain for the refuge you now so thanklessly cast aside.”

“Not thanklessly, good father. Nay, I am grateful for your kindness from my heart. But Heaven, you know, has not made all men alike. I should pine in the cloister like the poor caged bird I set free the other day that was beating its life out against the bars.”

“Heaven grant, my son, that, like that bird, you may not come back to us with torn plumage and broken wing. Brother Ordric had to wring its neck this morning. But enough; you must have your way; I pray only that your wilfulness be not punished. My lord Abbot has already writ a letter to Henry of Winchester, brother to Stephen the King, entreating him to grant you a place in his household. Bear yourself well, and your advancement is certain. Hush! not a word!” as, starting to my feet, I strove to thank him; for Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester, was second in the realm only to the King himself. “Hush, I say,

wait until I come to an end. This have I done because you have acted well by your brother, but it is not to be spoken of to all. There are evil men abroad, and it will be well that you leave us somewhat secretly, that the time of your departure be not known. A worthy merchant in the guest-house at this moment, is journeying to his home in London. He travels with a strong company, and has but turned aside to do business with the convent. He leaves at daybreak, to-morrow, to rejoin his friends. You shall travel in his train. He will see you safe to London, and set you on the road to Winchester. Come to me in my cell after vespers, and I will give you the letter and a bag of money to pay your charges. I go even now to see about your horse"; and my good uncle hurried off intent upon the business.

This conversation had taken place in the cloisters which at that hour were usually deserted; but when, presently, I arose from the stone bench whereon I had been seated, and stretched forth my arms, weary to death of doing nothing, I was startled by discovering one of the brothers close beside me. He was snugly ensconced in a narrow recess behind a pillar, quite hidden from sight until I came upon him, fast asleep, his head low sunk upon his breast. Had I turned the other way and followed my uncle, I had not seen him.

If he had been awake, he must have heard every word that had been spoken, and I wondered whether I ought to tell the Prior. Such a thought, how-

ever, passed quickly as it came; even if he had, what mattered it? To be sleeping at such an hour and in such a place was clean against rule. Scanty fare and many orisons would have been his lot for such a breach of discipline. Instead, I shook him by the arm, saying:

“Awake, Brother Ordric, awake I say. The Prior was here but now. Had he seen you, heavy would have been your penance.”

The monk opened his eyes, scowled at me, then slouched off without a word of thanks, muttering something I could not catch.

“Next time I will let you sleep on, good Brother,” I cried after him. “Maybe you will have a civil tongue for those who wake you more roughly.” Then I turned away, and thought no more of the matter.

Had I known then what I found out too late, I should not have been so considerate. Brother Ordric was in the confidence of my enemies outside, and had already, by making report of the disordered condition in which I arrived, done no little to turn men against me. Had I warned my uncle, as I ought, that his plans had probably been overheard by Brother Ordric, he would have divined the truth, and the misfortunes that afterward befell me might have been averted. But how should I guess there could be such treachery within convent walls?

Next morning, whilst it was still dark, I bade farewell to my uncle who had been so good to me,

and left the convent in company with Walter the merchant, a worthy burgher of the City of London. Brother Roger, the cellarer, rode with us at first, as the Prior had arranged; but as soon as we joined the merchant's friends he turned back and left us.

At starting we rode as hard as we could—as hard, that is, as Brother Roger would suffer us. The merchant had but a couple of serving-men with him, and the roads were not as in King Henry's days, when men could travel without hindrance. We had to pass close under the walls of my old home, and since Earl Alberic had enlarged and strengthened the castle, he had been wont to sally forth and take toll of all merchants passing by. I had ever been among the foremost at such times, laughing often to see how the chapmen would scatter at mere sight of us. Now that I was with the chapmen myself, the game did not promise to be quite so amusing. However, nothing happened this time. Either the watchmen were sleepy and we were unseen in the dim light, or we were too small a party to be worth robbing. We rode by without hindrance, and in due time joined Walter's friends.

There was little further to fear I thought, for we formed quite a strong band. Each merchant had a following of servants and apprentices, all stout fellows well armed; and, besides, they had hired a score of archers to protect their goods. These were carried on pack-horses, a string of

about fifty, the merchants having been so harassed of late, they had joined together to make the journey in safety. Cumbered thus, as you may guess, our progress was but slow.

The travellers, as was their wont, beguiled the way with lively song and merry tale and converse; and when it was found I had some small skill with the harp, I took my turn with the rest. Sometimes I would ride beside Walter of London, and he would tell me of the royal city of Winchester, whither I was bound. He stood up for London stoutly, it being his own town; but when I put him to it, he was obliged to confess it could not compare with Winchester. The good man's account was no more than the truth I found after, and his glowing words came back to me when I saw fair Winchester a prey to devouring flames.

For the first week all went well. We journeyed on in peace, our party being so strong that no one cared to interfere with us. But, though we knew it not then, Brother Ordric had sent forth word that I was of the company, and a well-laid plan was already devised for my arrest.

On the last day that I travelled with the merchants some of us pushed forward at dusk to find a resting-place for the night, the main body following behind with the goods. Walter of London was one, and I, guessing nothing of danger, rode by his side. Suddenly our way was barred by four horsemen in full armour, who were drawn up across our path. They had chosen their post well,

where the track made a sharp turn through a thicket of beech, so that we rode right into the midst of them. We were too startled at first to do more than pull up short, so that before drawing sword we had time to note how few they were, and how they made no motion to attack us. Then one who appeared to be their leader, a man of uncommon size, with the collar of his hauberk drawn up to meet the nasal of his helm, so that his face could not be seen, came forward and spoke us fairly, saying in courteous tone:

“Good sirs, do not fear. I have no quarrel with you, neither do I seek your goods. I but demand the person of a murderer who travels in your company.”

“We are not afraid,” quoth the chief merchant stoutly. “We have too many men at our back, not far behind. As for the murderer you speak of, I know him not; we be here all good men and true.”

At this a second knight, also with face concealed, spurred to the leader’s side, and, saying something in a low tone, pointed at me. Instantly the first one spoke again.

“Nay, there you err, good merchant, for yonder he stands,” and he rode up close, as if to seize me. “ ’Tis one Alain of Totinge, who hath committed foul murder, and in his lord’s name I claim him.”

But Walter of London thrust himself speedily in between us. “ ’Tis false,” he cried; “I heard of the matter at the Convent of St. Edmund. The youth has cleared himself by oath, and offered to

submit to wager of battle. He is innocent; I have my lord Abbot's word for it."

"That may well be," returned the knight mockingly, "seeing that the Abbot is an old man guided in all things by the Prior, who in turn is the lad's uncle. It is a good thing, I wot, to have for kinsman one who has my lord Abbot's ear." Then turning to the chief merchant again. "Bethink you now, is it worth while to fall out for such an one as this? I came in friendly guise because I deemed you honest men, but I have force enough within sound of my horn. I have but to blow a blast and my men will be with me. Small chance for your goods then; if it come to blows we take all."

The merchant looked at Walter as if in doubt whether he should risk his goods for sake of a stranger. "I know nothing of the youth; he was not placed in my charge," he said hesitatingly. "Best give him up, I should say, on promise of fair trial."

But Walter of London resisted stoutly. "Give him up? Not I. He has had fair trial already. I was warned he might find enemies on the road. Hold you the King's warrant, sir knight, that you ride abroad arresting malefactors so boldly?"

The knight laughed aloud.

"Little power has the King over my lands; I do not answer to him for my doings. Come, we are losing time; give up the boy."

"No, that will I never. Alain, draw sword and defend yourself. Hugh, Benet, Richard, help all of

you, to me here!" And he shouted loudly for his servants and apprentices, who, alas, with the archers, were far behind, guarding the goods.

It was all over in a very short time; the merchants did not mean to lose their wares for a chance comer. Walter was but a man of small stature, and, being advanced in years, somewhat scant of breath; yet he fought for me right manfully until overpowered by his own friends and pulled down from his horse. I seconded him all I could; but as soon as the brave Walter fell, there came a buffet from behind which knocked me senseless.

CHAPTER III.

I AM CAST INTO DUNGEON.

WHEN I recovered consciousness I was far away from the scene of strife, bound hand and foot, and thrown across a horse, face downward. My captors rode at a good pace. If I tried to move, a sharp prick from a dagger soon made me still. They kept on thus for an hour or more, when they turned aside from the main track, and, alighting in a wood, cast me to the ground like a log. By the time the swimming in my head had somewhat subsided, they were spread about at their ease, laughing and jesting noisily. I soon found out that the cause of their mirth was the ease with which they had taken me. There were but four of them in all, and their pretended force hard by had been but a ruse to frighten the merchants. It seemed to tickle their fancy, so that they laughed loud and long.

After a time the second knight—he who had pointed me out—arose and came over to where I lay. Now that his collar was dropped, I knew him well—knew him for Milo, kinsman of the dead Baldwin, he who had cast down his glove. He was

not laughing now, but regarded me sternly enough as he said:

“How goes it, Alain of Totinge? You have scarce escaped so easily as you thought.”

“Unbind me—let me loose!” I muttered hoarsely, my throat so parched that I could scarcely speak. “When my lord Abbot knows of this, it will be the worse for you.”

“And who is to tell my lord Abbot?”

“Walter the merchant without doubt—he under whose protection I was placed.”

“Not he; he values his own hide far too highly to ride back alone, and sure am I none of his fellows will turn with him. Even if perchance my lord Abbot doth come to hear of your misadventure, where are they to look for you? Not in the castle of Ranulf Fitz-Dru—Ranulf the Wolf—you have heard of him maybe—what has he to do with feud of mine? Yet he is my very good friend, and for love of me will hold you fast until Count Baldwin comes from over the sea. As for me, I return to my own lands even now; if any man question me I know naught.”

“Why do you persecute me thus?” I cried. “Have I not offered to maintain my innocence in the lists? Have I not sworn——”

“Ay, perjured one, you have sworn,” he interrupted, “though in truth it seems strange one so young should be so hardened. But whilst you were perjuring yourself, Heaven brought the truth to light; we found the blood-stained dagger in the

marsh. It was yours or Aylmer's; and we soon found that whereas Aylmer wore his in his belt that night, you reached the convent without one."

"And Aylmer knew of this?" I exclaimed.

"That were hardly likely, unless we had wanted him to give you warning. Neither did we tell the good fathers, lest perchance they might juggle you out of reach. I took my own measures. I mean not my kinsman's blood to go unavenged." And with that he turned on his heel, and, after some parting words with his friend, rode away alone.

The others, Ranulf the Wolf—so called because a wolf's head was usually depicted upon his shield, matching his pitiless ferocity—and his two retainers did not stir until after dusk, the better, I suppose, to escape notice. Then I was lifted to horse as before, still bound hand and foot, so that I could make no movement to help myself. And thus we rode all through the night, meeting none to stay us. My foes had laid their plans well; there was no one to tell tales, for no one saw us; it would be difficult indeed for my friends to find out what had become of me.

After cock-crow we arrived at our destination, a castle but lately built, stronger than any I had ever seen. The moat was wide and deep, the keep more massive even than usual, the walls well guarded. My heart sank within me. I foresaw small hope for those imprisoned there.

They cast loose my bonds in the inner court-yard, and I fell like a stone, for my limbs were too

numbed to support me. Ranulf the Wolf laughed loudly, crying as my head struck the ground: "Up with him, up with him; 'tis fair pastime to see the fool fall"; and the churls and horse-boys crowded round to share their lord's coarse merriment. Three times they raised me, and each time I fell; then I struck my head harder than before and all became a blank.

When next I opened my eyes I was in a foul dungeon, with irons on hands and feet, and a heavy chain about my waist, fastened to a staple in the wall. It was indeed a vile den, sunk deep below the level of the soil, its low-arched roof and stone walls dripping over with perpetual damp. Worse still, the place swarmed with loathsome life. I put out my hand—it fell upon a bloated toad; speckled newts and slimy slugs hid beneath the uneven stones; and at the clanking of my chain when I strove to rise, there was a rush and scurry; I had disturbed a family of rats. The only light, just enough to make darkness visible, came through a narrow slit high up in the wall toward the moat; and when the water rose it would trickle in so fast that I was flooded to the knees. It was too vile a hole for the meanest churl, the lowest malefactor; to thrust me therein, a Norman born, was wrong unspeakable. In my fury I shouted at the top of my voice, hoping some one would come, if only to silence me. Had I been calm enough to reflect, I should have spared myself the trouble. That deep vault had too often resounded with louder cries

than mine—cries drawn from strong men in agony; but no echo of their lamentations ever reached the upper air. In my rage I recked not of this, and shouted until my voice failed me.

In the deep silence that succeeded—when hoarse and faint I leant against the wall, half choked by the clammy air and foul odours—I was suddenly startled by the sound of a deep groan. I could have sworn I was alone; for I had looked and felt all around as far as I could reach when I first recovered consciousness. Now, with eyes more accustomed to the dim light, I peered again into every corner, and still I could discover nothing. It was fancy, a trick, my eyes had played me false. Perchance it was but the reverberating echo of my own complainings. Then the groan was repeated, so hollow, so unearthly—more horrible still, so very near to me—that I shook with terror; my limbs refused to support me, I sank on my knees a very craven. I was not afraid of man, but I did fear to be the sport of demons, and I felt sure that I was surrounded by the spirits of those who had perished there unshriven.

I muttered a prayer to Heaven and to good St. Edmund to intercede for me, vowing to sell my best falcon as a gift for his shrine if he would but help me now. After I had forced my trembling fingers to make the sign of holy cross, my terror somewhat abated. So much so, indeed, that when the dismal sound came again, as it did full soon, I called out aloud, “ Speak, whatsoever thou art; in

the name of Heaven and St. Edmund I adjure thee. Speak, or depart to thy own place."

Then followed a long silence, and I rejoiced, thinking I had driven the fiend away. But the groaning recommenced, and continued with such maddening persistence that at last I could do nothing but await it. Of the worst fear, however, I was soon disabused; for, growing more accustomed to the sound, I made certain that the voice was certainly human. There was some inner dungeon, some dark recess to which my sight could not penetrate, holding a prisoner even more unfortunate than myself; some wretched villein perhaps who had been put to the torture.

I must have fallen asleep while listening to those unearthly groans; for the next I knew it was pitch dark, only high up on the wall, exactly opposite the window slit, was a faint reflection as of moonlight. All was still; my fellow-prisoner was dead or sleeping.

That first night was, I think, the longest I ever spent, for the sad, slow hours would not pass. The pale ray of moonlight soon faded, and there was black darkness that could almost be felt. And ever those noisome things crept and crawled, rendering forgetfulness impossible. To add to my misery I was tormented with consuming thirst, until I longed to lick the foul drops that trickled down the walls. But it was too horrible; I drew back in disgust and eagerly watched where the light would first fall, the only means I had of knowing the morn's arrival.

It came at last, a pale glimmer, a thin streak scarcely to be seen, save by one who watched for it as I did; and at once I took heart and roused myself, clapping my hands and shaking my chains to scare my unclean visitants. Surely some one must come soon, I thought, for old Nicholas at Wodebrig ever fed the prisoners at daybreak. But Earl Alberic was a kindly man; more often than not his dungeon was empty. The lazy loons at this place came not near until nigh noon, when I heard the heavy bolts drawn back and the great key slowly turned, and there entered two ill-looking fellows clad in leathern tunics. The elder, who had a bunch of keys at his waist, carried a lantern; the other bore a basket of cakes of bread and a couple of pitchers of water. I clutched hold of one of these as he came within reach, and, raising it with both hands to my lips, drained it at a draught.

The fellow drew back at first, thinking I was about to attack him, then said scowlingly: "Make the most of it, my young lord; it is all you will have till to-morrow. Yet you will have enough, I warrant, when the floods come." Then, taking a hammer from his belt, he tested my chains, whilst his comrade held aloft the lantern.

I knew it was useless to say much to such varlets, yet did I beg of them to carry a message to their lord. I would have parleyed with him for ransom, or defied him to single combat, for entreating me so roughly. But they answered not a word, save that as I grew louder they roughly

bade me stop my prating. When my fetters had been tested to their satisfaction, and tightened somewhat by means of a key, they took the second pitcher and half the bread, and disappeared through a dark corner I had taken to be wall. Presently I heard the elder cry aloud, "He is dead at last; see how the rats are in a hurry!" And there was a clapping of hands, followed by the scurrying sound I had already learned to know so well.

"It was time too," returned the other. "He lasted longer than I thought. Had I known, we might have brought the mattock and have done with it. It would have saved a journey."

"What matter?" replied the first. "To-morrow will do as well. There will be less of him to put away—the rats will save us trouble." And they laughed and chuckled until they made my flesh creep with their gruesome jests.

"And the bread and the pitcher?" said one.

"Give them to the boy. No need to carry them up again."

So the dead man's food was set down by my side, and I was left once more to solitude and darkness. The rats did not trouble me much that day; they had more profitable work in hand. I could imagine them scampering to and fro, could almost in the dead silence hear the crunching of their teeth, and tried to turn my mind away. I thought of Aylmer, and wondered how long it would be before any came to help me. I pictured to myself the green fields of Wodebrig, where I was wont to stray

at will; I thought upon my favourite hound, my cherished falcon; how long they would look for me in vain; until tears streamed down my cheeks and my frame shook with sobs. Ah me, how long it was before I again saw the blessed light of Heaven! Had I known what was before me, I think my heart must have broken.

I have been told since, what I then found out for myself, that the first days in dungeon are always the worst. Be the den never so vile, one in time grows accustomed to it. It can not but be so, else would few live to be released. When my childish passion passed, I comforted myself by remembering that Aylmer, my brother, and my good uncle, the Prior, would never forsake me. They would find out ere long into whose hands I had fallen, and would take steps for my release.

CHAPTER IV.

GUNDULF THE THRALL.

THE two gaolers returned next day with pick and mattock, and, digging a hole not very far from my feet, dragged a man's body forth from the corner and flung it in. The earth and stones were stamped down again, and all was at an end. After that, days came and went until I lost count of time—it seemed as if I had dwelt in that dungeon all my life. I raged at first, storming at the gaolers until they would beat me with their fists; sometimes, I even tried to dash my head against the wall. Later, I fell into a mood of dull apathy, feeling nothing, caring for nothing; my senses, I think, were slowly leaving me.

From this gloomy state I was aroused at last by the arrival of fresh prisoners—a couple of villeins, who, having offended their lord, were awarded a few weeks of dungeon to bring them to reason; but at least it was human companionship, voices from the outer world. From them I learned something of the disposition of my captor; they spoke of him as the most ruthless tyrant in the country round.

"When our lord King Henry was alive," quavered one, a starved-looking old thrall, with fingers all distorted from past torture, "there was law in the land even for the meanest churl. No man durst misdo against another in his time; he made peace for man and beast. But now these Norman robbers deal with us as they list; there is no one to say them nay. If you have been without company, 'tis because the Wolf has been absent. You will have plenty of fellows ere long."

The old man was right. Even before he was released new victims were brought in, and in no long time I saw Ranulf Fitz-Dru himself. He came down into the dungeon to superintend the torture of an unhappy villein whom he suspected of trying to deceive him. A knotted string was wound about the man's head, and tied and twisted until his eyes started from their sockets, whilst he writhed and howled in agony. When all was over, and the miserable wretch, dead or dying, was flung to one side, Ranulf turned to me.

"And how like you your lodgings, young sir? Scarce so soft, I doubt, as convent cell?"

Had he come to me when I was first imprisoned, I might have paid him back scorn for scorn, threatening him with dire vengeance in time to come. But now my spirit was all broken, and, kneeling at his feet, I craved, with sobs, for mercy. He laughed, and seemed amused, and drew me on, pretending to heed me; then roughly spurned me with his foot, and passed out.

Ranulf did not come again for some time; but he continued to give his wicked orders, and a merchant suspected of stealing money was tied up by his thumbs with a slow fire beneath his feet. As he cried to Heaven in his torture for the mercy that men denied him, a Saxon archer—a sturdy fellow loaded with chains so heavy it was much as both gaolers could do together to lift them—cried aloud:

“ You may spare your breath, good friend, to cool your burning limbs. Know you not that Christ and His saints are sleeping? Shout your utmost; they will not hear, else had the Wolf long ago perished in torment.” He would have said more (he was a fearless varlet), but a burning brand thrust into his mouth compelled him to silence.

The scenes I witnessed in that dungeon dwelt with me long, and often did I vow that if kind Heaven would but set me free I would ever be merciful to prisoners.

Days, weeks, months dragged themselves slowly along, though only by the lengthening and shortening of that slender ray of light could I guess the seasons. Summer’s heat, winter’s snow, made little difference; we shivered in summer, we were scarce colder in winter; only, it was dark longer, and that was how we knew. I had lost all count of time, lost even hope of deliverance. Aylmer, my uncle, all, had forgotten me; they had left me to perish.

How I lived through it I can scarce now tell; I think it was because, even in that awful place, I

found a friend. They brought in one day a Saxon bondman, a mean thrall, yet a stout knave of notable strength, who, after enduring great torture without flinching, had been cast in a corner to die. Instead of dying, however, he lingered on, and though he could never be as sound a man again, his strength in some measure came back to him. He was within reach of my chain, so that I was able to aid him; to hold a cup of water to his parched lips when athirst; to drive away the hungry rats when they attacked him. As he grew better he told me his offence, how that by accident he had killed his lord's favourite hound, and then had fled to the woods for safety. After hiding there for a time he had sought tidings of his wife, and, venturing too near his old home, had been captured and brought to the castle, to be used as I had seen. Truly it was a great fault to kill a good hound, yet, seeing it was done by misadventure, methought the punishment too severe for the offence.

For long, I expected my new companion to die every day, then, as he slowly mended, we became in dumb fashion—for misery makes a man chary of his words—comrades, nay friends. He helped to keep life in me, I am sure. I did not feel so abandoned when Gundulf the thrall was beside me. He could not stand upright, but lay always close to my feet; I had but to put out my hand to touch him. Fortunately, although we spoke always Norman-French at Wodebrig, I knew the Saxon speech

well, so well, indeed, that Baldwin had been wont to jeer at me as no true Norman. When my mother died I had been given to a Saxon woman to nurse; it was from her lips I learned it; and it stood me in good stead now. I had been a prisoner in that vile dungeon for hard upon two years, when we became aware of unusual festivities going forward in the castle. No sound penetrated to our remote depths, but when, as oft happened, some of the prisoners were dragged above to afford sport to the lord after supper, they brought word down that the Wolf's son had taken a wife, and there was much feasting and merriment. Thrice they were sent for, and the third time they came back no more; Gundulf and I were alone.

I had been spared such indignity so far, perchance lest tidings of my imprisonment should be spread abroad; but on the last evening of the festivities, Ranulf's heart being uplifted with wine, he sent for me. My chain was unfastened, the fetters unlocked from my feet, though my hands were still left shackled; and, blinking like an owl at the unaccustomed light, I was led into the hall. The guests were at their cups, merry with drink, even to the youngest squire; for the Norman nobles, once so temperate, soon learned to drink deep as the Saxons. Yet they had not swallowed enough to drown their senses, and they mocked and tormented me grievously. Had my hands been free I would have made some of them eat their words, had I died for it. As it was, I cried on them for

cowards and nidering Saxons, the greatest insult I could lay my tongue to; also did I proclaim my name and quality before them all, beseeching if there were a true man among them he would send word to Alberic of Wodebrig, or to St. Edmund's Convent. But there was no true man I think, or else they were heavy with wine; for they only mocked at me the more.

At last, growing tired, Ranulf the Wolf ordered me to be taken back again, giving me first a word that filled me with despair. "Back to lair, boy, and sleep while you can," he said. "In three days Count Baldwin will be here. He has sent word he means to deal mercifully with you; he will spare your life, but blind your eyes, so that they never see to thrust dagger again. Ha, do you not like the news? Does thought of searing copper scare you? Methinks it will be better than music of my best hound to listen to your howls."

That this was no idle threat I knew well; it was too common a way of dealing with an enemy. Was there not Lucas the minstrel, who, when blinded for writing verses against the king, had dashed his brains out against the prison wall. Nay, was it not whispered that King Henry himself had put out the eyes of his brother Robert? I answered naught—all power of speech seemed suddenly to have left me—I could scarce walk, and stumbled as they dragged me out. Then one at the lower table, touched, I think, by my woeful condition, held out to me a horn of wine. I gulped it down at a

draught, lest my warders should stay me, and I believe that timely drink of good wine gave me strength for all that followed. When presently we descended to the dungeon again, only one gaoler—he who bore the keys at his waist—was in charge of me, and, as he stooped to replace the fetters on my ankles, I raised my chained hands and struck him so fair a blow he fell as one dead. It was a blow struck upon impulse, without purpose, without motive, save to pay the fellow back some of his ill-usage. If they killed me for it, so much the better—better to die than to be blinded.

As the gaoler fell, Gundulf muttered in his thick voice—he had no strength yet to speak aloud: “Well done, well done, but finish your work, my young lord. Take the knife from his belt and make an end of him.”

I shook my head. “What use? He is a dog, but I will not kill him; if it were his master, I would not fail. Yet will I have his knife; it will serve maybe for myself; for, know you, in three days I am to be blinded.”

“Then you will be worse off than me,” returned Gundulf, looking at me curiously. “If ever they let me out, at least I shall need no guide.”

“Neither shall I. Think you I shall be contented to live after it? If there be no other way, I will dash my head against the wall as others have done before me.”

“Not so: life is sweet to the young; you will think better of it.”

As I stooped to draw the knife from the man's belt, my fettered hands encountered the hanging keys—the keys he used to lock my chains.

"Can you unloose me?" I cried, thrusting them upon Gundulf. "By holy St. Edmund, I should be glad to strike one blow before I die." And I crouched down by his side so that he might the better reach me.

It took some time. The thrall knew not the trick of it, and his very eagerness made him the longer. At last, one quick turn, they fell with a clang, and I lifted my arms in thanksgiving. Nigh upon two years had I worn those weary chains, until they seemed to have become part of me.

"What next?" cried Gundulf, jumping upright. He fell back directly with a low moan. His feet had been burned to the bone. Even now, after all this time, it was torment only to touch them. He made no attempt to rise again, but lay looking at me piteously.

CHAPTER V.

WE ESCAPE FROM THE WOLF.

ONCE released from those vile fetters, something of my old spirit came back to me. I would make one effort for freedom be the cost what it might. My extremity was such, that death had lost its terrors. It was a desperate venture at best. Still, if those above continued drinking as when I left them, they must soon be stupefied. And the varlets were drunken, too. I had noted great buckets of ale and mead, from which all who would were helping themselves freely. It was partly the thick ale he had swallowed that made the gaoler succumb so readily.

But Gundulf! There was the rub! I liked not to leave him behind, yet if he could not walk—and I heard the poor thrall breathing heavily, and knew that his eyes were fixed upon me. I could not leave him, that was certain.

“I am for escape, Gundulf,” I cried. “Will you try it? The chance is but slender, yet better than dying by inches here.”

“Will you carry me on your back then, my good lord?” he answered bitterly.

"Ay, that will I, if I be stout enough. It is the only thing to do. I will put on the gaoler's garment—my own foul rags would soon betray me—with your head held down, they will but think you too drunk to stand. We may win to the courtyard without discovery. After that, I know not what may chance. The walls are high, the bridge will scarce be down."

"Can you swim, my lord?"

"Not well, but far enough to cross the moat, if we can reach it."

"Then you might get away if unhindered by me. Leave me to my fate."

"That were ill done when we have been comrades for so long, if you care to chance it. Be sure if we are caught, they will kill us out of hand."

"Better so than lying here; but would you risk your safety for a thrall, my lord? Or is it only that you think I dare not venture, that my heart will fail?"

"Wait and see." With all haste I stripped the senseless gaoler. Under my rough handling the fellow revived somewhat, so, to make all sure, I clapped my irons about his legs and fastened him to the chain. I was not afraid of his calling out. Well I knew that none could hear him.

I was soon equipped in the gaoler's leathern tunic, which reached near to my feet. Turning to Gundulf, I bade him mount upon my back.

Gundulf gave a grim little laugh. "You have forgotten you did not come hither yesterday. You

will soon learn you have no strength to swim the moat."

The thrall was right. When bowing my back I essayed to raise him, I trembled, and sank to earth like a child. Gundulf laughed again at my cry of discomfiture.

"Nay, my good lord—and if we win through this, I vow before Heaven to serve no lord but you, and to serve you truly—I am not quite so helpless as I seem. I fell at first through coming upon my feet too sudden; afterwards, I pray your pardon, it was but to try you. Think you I could bear the burning brand for so long without flinching, and not be able to suffer something to gain freedom? Help me to rise if you will, and I warrant I can walk so that none shall guess there is much amiss with me." And he did; with my aid he stood upright upon his feet and walked, though well I knew what pain the effort cost him.

When we passed through the door we drew the dungeon bolts behind us, shutting in the gaoler hard and fast. Then I helped my maimed comrade to mount the steps.

"Do you know the run of the castle, my lord?" he whispered, as we stole upward.

"I know naught save the hall where they took me but now; I know neither the castle nor the country."

"Then I am wiser than you. I know both well, and may be able to help you yet. They forced me help build the walls not so very long ago, but

—hist! One comes. Let me have the knife I pray you, and lower your head, my lord. Remember you are no knight, but a mean thrall."

I did as he bade me, and Gundulf made ready to strike; but the danger passed us by; ere we reached the last step the man had gone, it was but some varlet staggering to his lair. The hour had grown late; the revels were ending even before I was dismissed; and it had taken some time to unlock the chains, so that by now it was night. The dungeon, according to the usual custom, was below the keep. When we reached the upper floor, where stores were kept, we found the door half open, just as the gaoler had left it. Moonlight was shining within as we halted for a while that Gundulf might rest his feet, keeping in the deep shadow of the archway, where we could not well be seen.

The courtyard was quite deserted; the drawbridge raised, the warder's tower still and dark; there was no one stirring without, save two watchmen on the walls. Lights, however, still flickered from the hall. Even as we looked, a small side door opened, and Ranulf the Wolf came forth alone. He passed close to where we were hidden, and we dared not move, dared hardly to breathe, nor could we fall upon him because of the watchmen. He was so drunk that he staggered as he walked. When he mounted the outer stair that led to the chamber above, I thought more than once he would fall.

"Well for him he lies not in the hall to-night,"

muttered Gundulf, "or my knife had found the way to him."

Other eyes were watching also. Directly he disappeared, the two men came down from the walls and stole into the hall.

"Now they have gone to drink what is left," whispered Gundulf in my ear. "Our task to-night will be easy."

"The faithless varlets, if they were under me they would keep better watch," I said; for, although it was in our favour, it seemed an evil thing a fair castle should be left so unguarded.

Gundulf laughed. "Well for us they do not. I warrant me they will linger there till daybreak."

He was wrong. Scarce had the words left his lips when the two came out again, bearing between them a bucket of ale and a couple of drinking-cups, which they carried up to the battlements. Gundulf followed them with his eyes for awhile, then said softly, as he struggled to his feet:

"They are more wary than I thought; yet it matters not. There is a snug corner near the warder's tower, well-sheltered from the winds; they will hob and nob there together, and trouble us no more. Time to be moving now, my lord; our path lies the other side. Pray only that none be waking in hall. We must pass the open door."

When we came near, all was so quiet that, feeling safe in the gaoler's dress, I pulled my hood close and looked in. The candles still flickered on their long spikes, the trestles had not been moved;

and upon the benches and under the tables, knight and squire and serving-man lay sleeping around; noble born at the upper end, common folk near the door. Though the cups were empty, there were plenty of half-filled platters, and, thinking a mouthful of fresh meat would not come amiss to those who had lived on bread and beans for so long, I crossed the threshold and seized the nearest dish. A sleepy varlet half raised his head, then, before I could take alarm, fell back again. Gundulf, seeing all was safe, hobbled to my side, and, in less time than I can tell, the contents of the platters near were hidden amongst his rags. He peered around for a draught of ale or wine; but the watchmen had taken care of that—all the vessels were empty. We stole out again, and, keeping always in the shadow, lest wakeful eyes might spy us, crept to the corner most remote from the warder's tower, and mounted to the walls. But first, on the way, as we went around the courtyard, Gundulf crawled on all fours to the well, returning with something wound about his hand.

"See what it is to know the ways of a place," he whispered, as once more we crept onward. "'Tis but a strip of knotted hide that carried the buckets, yet will it save us a heavy fall."

And so indeed it did; for, when fastened securely, the hide hung down outside to within a foot of the water. We had but to slide down and slip in. But now that we had got so far, nought would satisfy Gundulf but he must set to and eat some

of the victuals he had carried off. In vain I urged him to wait until we were in safety, or, at least, until we were out of the castle—nothing would move him.

“Nay, my lord, I know what I am doing,” he returned, with his mouth full. “Best follow my example without delay. The moat is wide and deep, we shall need all our strength to cross it; a mouthful of flesh will put heart into us. Try it, my young lord, else may you not succeed.”

But although I was provided with a tempting morsel of venison, I was so eager to be gone I could not swallow. Gundulf had pity upon my impatience at last, and, after carefully stowing away all he had left, stripped off his rags, and made them into a bundle, bidding me do the same, that we might swim the easier. He even insisted upon taking my tunic as well as his own, carrying the roll upon his head.

“In the water my feet will not fail me,” he said. “It is but fair I should do what I can. Now, my lord, if you are ready I will go first to show the way.”

We descended with little trouble. The knotted hide bore us so well that we made scarce a splash as we entered the water. But it struck ice cold to my enfeebled limbs, and before we reached the further side a great stiffness suddenly came upon me. I could move neither hand nor foot; had it not been for Gundulf I must have been drowned. Happily, we were not far from the bank, and, casting

the bundle to shore, he caught my hair and dragged me out. Then, sinking down by my side, he rubbed me with all his power, until I was myself again.

"Now, my lord, put your best foot to it," he cried as soon as we had donned our raiment, "and see if I am not able to keep up with you. With sweet air above and green turf below, by our Lady I am a new man. I will lead if you like it. I know where to look for friends. Hurry on, my good lord, I pray you hurry on."

And truly that poor fellow kept ever by my side, make the best speed I might, which was but little; for my legs were so stiff from long disuse, it was exceeding hard at first to stretch them. When the track was rough, Gundulf would hold on by my shoulder, hobbling upon his heels; at times he would drop to the ground and bound along on hands and knees. In one fashion or another he failed not to press forward, not heeding the pain of it nor halting once.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIEND IN THE FOREST.

THE path we took led us into the forest, where Gundulf pressed forward, threading devious ways into the very heart of it. Nor did he pause nor stay for rest until we emerged upon a little clearing. Suddenly, he stopped short as if an arrow had pierced his breast, giving utterance to a cry more like some wild beast than a human being. I feared at first that we had fallen again into the power of our enemies; then as he hobbled hither and thither, wringing his hands and cursing those who had destroyed him, I discovered the cause of his distress. In the midst of the clearing stood the remains of what had once been a wattled hut. It was his old home, and my lord's foresters had burnt it.

"And all for a dog," he wailed. "The foul fiend take every hound that ever gave cry. My dame, my child, my pretty one, have they burned them also, or cast them out into the forest to perish?" And, throwing himself upon the ground where had once been his home, he fell to crying and sobbing.

Now, I had seen churl's huts burned often. I

had given a hand to it myself when it came in my way, and it seemed a strange thing to me he should take it so much to heart.

"By my faith, man!" I exclaimed, "one would think by your cries a hut could ne'er be built up again. Touching your dame and child, is there no place where they could have sought shelter, no friendly convent willing to help them? As for the rest, it is naught; huts are burned every day."

"Ay, by you nobles," he retorted bitterly; "and churls are tortured to death every day, yet are their lives dear to them. Ah, it is well to be a noble! When you fall out, the poor churl pays for all. 'Tis the churl's poor huts are razed to the ground, not my lord's strong castle; 'tis the churl receives the death-blow, not my lord cased in iron. At the worst you are but held to ransom, and even that you drag from the churl. Were not our dues doubled when the Wolf—curses be on his head—was taken prisoner over-sea? The place was poor enough, but I built it with my own hands, and loved every stick of it."

All this was poured forth in breathless fashion, and when he paused I knew not what to say. It was, as he said, though I had not seen the matter in that light before. Yet how could things be otherwise? Churl and noble there must be, I doubt not, until the day of doom; and the churl must ever have the worst of it. Yet did I feel sorry for having reproached the poor man. But Gundulf did not want for sense; he knew also that it must be

so, and, after a space, wherein he seemed to gulp down great strangling sobs, he said more quietly:

" My lord, I pray you pardon me. I mean no offence, though when my blood is up my words are somewhat wild. It is the will of Heaven, and you, my lord, have been very good to me. I should have died long ago in yonder dungeon but for your tendance, and you might well have left me there. Touching what you say concerning my dame and little one, there is reason in your words. If she had warning of their coming, she would have fled beforehand, and hid where they could not find her. If so, she would have left Dickon; maybe we shall find a friend to help us spite of all. Heaven knows we are in need of one!" Putting two fingers into his mouth, he gave a strange, oddly sounding whistle, not very loud, yet clear enough to penetrate some distance.

" What is that for?" I asked in surprise.
" Have you friends among the outlaws?"

" No outlaws near here, my good lord, else it might be the better for us. Yet had I once a trusty friend who may do us good service if he be only within call. If he come not, there is nothing for it but to jog on as before. But by your leave we will rest here awhile first; there is a brook hard by will give us drink, and cool my tender feet." And he limped along a well-worn track that led down to a stream. Presently, when we had quenched our thirst, Gundulf put fingers to his lips again; but I

said no more of his friend in the woods at that hour, thinking it best to ask no questions.

There was a shrewd touch of frost in the air, the night-wind was biting cold, and, as the trees had hardly yet begun to bud, there was not much shelter if our foes should come in pursuit of us. I trembled to think we were still so near the Wolf's abode, yet, for all my impatience, I would not hurry Gundulf. We sat for a time, a long time it seemed to me, in silence; Gundulf's feet lapped about the running water, his ear pressed often to the earth to listen. At length he broke the silence.

"Whither would you wend, my lord? What place would you make for?"

"To London city first. I have friends there who will set me right for Winchester." For I felt that I must seek out Walter, the merchant, who carried my letter to the bishop and my bag of money. And as I knew naught of what had happened in the land during my imprisonment, my mind was still set on going to Winchester.

But whilst I had been pining in dungeon there had come to pass great changes. When I left the convent on that ill-fated journey, Stephen was on the throne, the bishops and barons all thronging to his side. When I escaped in the early spring, of the year of grace, 1141, Stephen was prisoner at Bristol Castle, and the Empress Matilda supreme at Winchester. Aided by her half-brother, Robert Earl of Gloucester—a most noble and valiant knight—the Empress had crossed the seas to claim her

fair realm of England. King Stephen had fought right gallantly, yet in the end he was overcome before Lincoln Castle, and taken prisoner. Then was the Empress escorted into the royal city, with a splendid procession, and exceeding great festivities, and proclaimed Sovereign of England before all the people. Henry of Blois—in whose household I hoped to take service—the most powerful bishop in the land, and Stephen's own brother, was one of the first to do homage to her.

This will explain what is to follow; but that night in the forest I knew not but that Stephen was ruler still.

Gundulf whistled yet once more. “Should he come not this third time, our labour is vain. If you wend Londonward, my lord, it is south we must go, two or three weeks' journey at the least. For look you, at the first we must hide by day and travel by night. As we go forward, we may get on quicker. But now, my lord, tell me in good sooth, will you take me for your man—will you let me serve you?”

“Ay, that would I with good will,” I answered quickly, “if only you were free. But you are a bondman; your true lord would have a word to say in the matter.”

“Nay, I have altogether done with him. If he caught me now, he would tear me limb from limb. I take you for my lord henceforth.”

Rising to his knees, the thrall put his hands between mine and took oath to serve me faithfully.

I did not hinder him. What mattered it? If Ranulf the Wolf did not catch us, we might well fare forth together.

Scarce had Gundulf spoken the last words when there was a trampling among the bushes, a low fierce whinny, and a rough forest pony broke out upon us. It drew back at sight of me, and made as if it would have fled again, but Gundulf, with a cry of joy, called it near, and presently the creature was fondling its master with affection almost human.

"See now!" he cried. "Said I not I had a trusty friend, a friend worth waiting for? Well I knew if Dickon were within reach of my voice he would come to my call. Mount, mount behind me; no fear of the Wolf now;" and he jumped upon the pony's back, his long legs hanging close to the ground. "We need not saddle nor bridle; Dickon will answer to my slightest touch."

I jumped up behind as he bade me, the little pony shaking its shaggy sides and trotting on as if it carried no double burden. Through the forest paths we went, where trees grew so close we had to bend low down to escape the branches, and our legs were torn with brambles. It was pitch dark in some places, or when more open it would be fetlock deep in bog; but the brave beast never faltered until we came out upon the open road. By this time it was break of day, the sun was rising, our flight must soon be discovered. We halted now for a space to give Dickon time to breathe, and Gundulf said to me over his shoulder:

"My lord, I have a boon to beg of you."

"I am ill able to grant favours," I answered, "seeing it is you who are helping me. First you drew me forth from the moat, then you found the beast—"

"Nay, if you will go back to that," he interrupted with a laugh, "I owed you my life beforehand. I should have died in the dungeon but for you. But I am loth to go without knowing of my pretty ones, and would crave leave to quit you for a space to find out what has befallen them. I know where to seek for tidings, but it would be dangerous to drag you thither; it is far out of your way, which leads through a village called Infylde. I could rejoin you there. If I come not, it is that the Wolf has caught me and I am a dead man."

"Then why risk it? Why not come back later when he has forgotten?"

Gundulf shook his head. "You are young, my lord. You know not how dame and little one pull at the heart-strings. I shall be but half a man until I find out their fate. I would leave Dickon if I could, but I fear much he would not obey you."

"Neither could I take him, seeing how it is with your feet. So tell me what way to bend my steps, and when we shall be likely to meet. It will be safe to travel by day now, I suppose?"

"Safe enough now, my lord. They will not look for us so far afield."

As we rode on again, he gave me directions for finding my way to Infylde, where, if all went well

with him, we should meet again. With Dickon and knowing the by-roads, he expected to be there first. "But if I am not, my lord, do you not wait. If I live, be sure I will follow you."

I, on my part, told him of Walter of London, who dwelt in the Chepe, where he might learn tidings of me.

Soon after this we parted, Gundulf riding northward on his wild pony, I striding lustily toward the south, resolved to sell my life dearly should any man try to stay me. For I liked not my last abode, and vowed roundly that Ranulf the Wolf should never take me alive again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LITTLE MAID.

MY first day's journey was but short. Long imprisonment had so weakened my limbs that nightfall was yet far off when I found I could scarce drag myself along. Compelled to halt, much against my will, I took refuge in a half-burnt barn and slept until the morning. I still had a portion of the venison I brought away from the castle, else should I have fared badly; for in the whole of that second day's journey I met with none to help me. The fields lay all untilled, a little village I passed through was in ruins and deserted, and more than once I came upon the dead body of some famine-stricken serf lying by the roadside just as he fell. To such a pass had the wars between rival factions brought a once fruitful country! As I went farther I found it much the same. Besides the constant quarrels of the barons, the outlanders—the Flemings and Brabançons brought from over-sea by King Stephen to fight his battles—had worked their will upon the wretched people.

On the third day I walked for some hours without meeting a living creature, and, as I had eaten

nothing since the morning before, I began to feel somewhat sharp set. Suddenly, the track took a turn, and I saw a castle, built on the summit of a low hill. As I drew nearer, I came upon a few mean hovels clustered at its foot. Ere I reached the foremost, I saw the whole population slowly wending their way up to the gate. It was past the ninth hour, their lord would be at dinner; when he had eaten, they would rush in and seize upon what was left. If I begged, they would bid me come with them, that was certain, and a stranger would surely be questioned.

I dared not; I might be caged again. So I drew my belt tighter and hastened on. I had not fared so well of late but I could bear a little hunger.

I rested that night at a small convent, where the monks were so poor they had not even barley bread, only a mess of salted beans for supper which they shared with passing wayfarers. I was glad enough of a portion; but the one traveller besides myself, a sturdy beggar long used to the road, grumbled sorely. He took care, however, not to let the good monks hear him. In their presence he whined and protested his thankfulness; whilst I, who heartily devoured my mess and said little, was taken to be ungrateful.

This same man did me next day a grievous wrong. Under pretence of showing me a shorter route to Infylde, he took me far out of my road, leading me, in truth, in quite another direction. Why, I know not, save that my company pleased

him, and he was loth to travel alone. It was long before I discovered this, for the rogue was wise and witty, full of good stories which amused me well, so that I walked on without noting. Something aroused my suspicion at length, and, laughing heartily, he confessed the truth. Had he not been so sturdy and strong, I would have dusted his jacket. As it was, I could only vow vengeance at some future time; at which he laughed the more.

Parting from the rascal in hot anger, I made back at my best speed; but must have gone wrong again, for it was fast growing dark, when I found myself upon a desolate, wind-swept waste, not a path or track upon it. Looking around for some sheltered hollow where I might lay me down for the night, I caught sight of a bright gleam, flickering now high, now low, as from some far-off fire. I made for it at once, but, unable to see my steps, soon plunged into a bog, and, sinking above my knees, floundered about helplessly. I extricated myself at last, though not without much trouble, and struggled, scant of breath, to firmer ground. Here I was compelled to rest for a space, when suddenly the stillness was broken by a shrill, piercing scream, followed by piteous cries for mercy, in the voice of a child. Fearing some ill was afoot, I made on as fast as possible, until only a clump of bushes hid me from those round the fire.

There were three men and a woman—wandering jongleurs by their parti-coloured garments, and by harp and viol lying near—and a little dark-haired

maiden, whom the oldest man of the party was beating cruelly. She was so delicately fashioned she appeared to me a child of some ten or a dozen years, though, as you will see presently, she was older; but, even then, as the fire flickered upon her face, I noticed her soft, dark eyes, her hair black as a raven's wing. The others lay around unconcerned, the woman tending a pot which simmered among the embers. I doubted at first how best to interfere. It was plain I could do no good by force; then a thought took me, and, stepping forward, I caught the fellow's upraised arm, saying in jesting fashion: "Good master, that little back is scarce broad enough for such a lusty arm; lay on to me instead!"

He threw me off roughly, but my sudden appearance startled them not a little; the woman rushed away with the pot, and the two men jumped up and stood before her. When they found I was alone, they questioned me eagerly—whence I came, and whither I was going, and how it chanced I was wandering on the waste. This last question I answered easily enough—I had lost my way—which was the truth; as to the rest, I made up some lame tale they might believe if they would. They seemed satisfied, however, and when the alarm subsided, the leader, who through it all had not released his hold upon the child, raised the stick and began again to beat her. Once more I caught his arm and cried:

"Good master, did you not hear me? Yon back is too slight, your arm too brawny."

He turned upon me fiercely. "Why meddle you in other men's matters? She is my bought slave. Can I not do what I will with my own? Is a varlet like you to hinder me?"

"You mistake, I hinder you not. If you must use the stick, I proffer my broad back in exchange."

"You will take her beating?"

"Even so, if in return you will let the little maid go free;" for in truth I pitied the poor child. She looked so slight of frame, I feared his heavy blows might kill her.

"I shall not spare you, mind. It has been owing to the slut this week past. She is shrewish and unruly, she would not dance when I piped, she shamed me before them all in my lord's castle but yesterday. I vowed then I would beat her soundly."

"Lay on, master, lay on; you will not find me flinch."

The fellow loosed the child, who tarried not for half a moment, but scurried out of sight like a wounded bird. Then did I receive the warmest drubbing that ever came to me. It was more than I bargained for, truly; but my pride was concerned, I would not cry enough, but let him keep on until he tired. The game mightily diverted the others; it was not often they had such fine sport; and they stood around laughing and cracking coarse jests, enjoying themselves thoroughly. At length the jongleur's arms dropped from sheer weariness, and I hastily jumped aside, lest on taking breath he should fall to again.

"Said I not well you had a brawny arm?" I cried, a little ruefully. "My back will smart for days."

There was a roar of laughter, in which I joined as best I might, and thus we became good friends. They spoke me fair, made room for me to sit by the fire, and when the pot was ready, I plunged my knife in with the rest. It was a savoury mess, and plentiful, and I saw now why my sudden appearance had so alarmed them. Had the forest-keepers caught us at supper that night, most assuredly we ourselves had been food for crows before morning. Once, with a sidelong glance at me, one muttered something about swine's flesh. I nodded my head and said it was toothsome, feigning not to know what meat it was. And all the time the little maid, whom the woman had fetched back again, kept close to my side. Sometimes, when no one was looking, she would softly stroke my poor back, or slip her small hand into mine.

After the meal the harp was passed round. When it came to my turn I forgot the part I was playing, and sung them a merry ditty in good Norman-French, such as I had been wont to sing in hall. This was not extremely foolish; for it showed at once I was not the ragged villein I seemed, and I might have paid dear for it. Their suspicions were aroused; there was a quick glance round, which I was too simple to interpret, and the leader —Jocellus by name—suddenly caught my wrists, where fetter marks were plain.

"Hast been in bonds?" he asked, with a laugh.

"Aye, I angered my lord, and he did not spare me—the fiends take him!" I answered shortly.

"Best stay with us, then. Your song will serve at a pinch; we shall be a merry company."

"That would not do; I will sing in no lord's castle. I have been free of bonds too lately to risk being caught again. I can make no merriment for my lords in hall."

"That matters not; it is to London city we are wending. There will be brave doings there if it be true there is a new Queen."

"But I am for Infylde, where I have promised to meet a friend."

"And Infylde is in the lordship of Herbert Fitz-Hugh. His officers have sharp eyes; they will soon lay you by the heels."

This made me hesitate; there might be truth in the fellow's words, for these strollers who travelled far and wide know much of the different lordships. It concerned them to know who would give them largesse, who would send them empty away, who would threaten them with gyves as thieves and vagabonds. Besides, as I had come so far out of my way that Infylde was now behind me, it was not worth while to travel back. As to Gundulf, like as not he had gone on already, and I should find him in London. It never came to me to wonder why the jongleurs should be so anxious for my company—why they pressed me so eagerly to remain with them. I did not give that a thought. In one re-

spect only did I display any prudence; I said not that I also was bound for London. It was a mere chance, yet did they ever imagine that Infylde was my real destination, and that they had turned me from it.

For near upon three weeks I travelled with these jongleurs, though it irked me much that our progress was so slow. And ever they told me that London was close at hand, that we should reach the city the next day or the next; and I, who had never travelled so far before, was foolish enough to believe them. We visited not any castle, but at the slightest excuse—a wayside ale-house, a village green where they were little like to earn even a meal—they would linger for hours, saying when I grumbled, it was to use me to the work, and that it was good to try new songs on the road. Then they would halt for the night long ere the sun went down, nor start again until late morning. I harped and sang for them; Jocellus threw balls and knives, so that it was a sight to see him; and one they called Godric, the fool, played the viol, whilst the little maid danced right nimbly. As for the third fellow, he had quitted us the morning after I joined them, Jocellus saying carelessly his comrade had business on the road, and would rejoin us later. Had I guessed that his business was mine, that he was travelling back on my steps to find whence I had escaped, meaning to obtain money by betraying me, I should not have been quite so easy.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TIMELY WARNING.

It was Ela, the little maid, whom I had to thank for my escape. We had become very good friends, though for all she was so small she did not scruple to jibe at me, calling me slow and dull of wit when I did not happen to understand. She herself was quick beyond all I ever knew; a word, nay, a look, would reveal to her your meaning.

It was one of my duties to give the damsel each day some practice upon the harp, when it was my turn to laugh if she did not touch the strings aright. Yet did I jest at her but once, and was sorry for it after, she took her failures so to heart. On this particular day when we halted for the evening upon an open waste, I looked for her in vain, neither could I see Jocellus. Of this last I was glad; for had he known she missed her lesson he might have punished her. That last night dwells in my memory still. When Jocellus came back, he brought with him the absent member of our company. He had met him on the way, he said. Though we had been hard put to it all day even to gain a meal, yet were they all in merry heart, laughing and jesting

about the fine things that were to come to pass in London. I said not even then that I meant to quit them there, nor a word about Walter, the merchant. Indeed, I suspected nothing, and knew no reason why they should betray me; surely, my good angel laid a finger upon my tongue.

After a time, seeing Ela glance toward me with some impatience, I sat down by her side.

"In what have I offended now, gracious damsel?" I asked, with a laugh. "It is you who ran away; the fault this time is surely not with me." Yet as I saw her close, a look of terror in her eyes made me add quickly: "Jocellus has not been promising you another beating?"

"Nay," she returned, almost in a whisper. "I have been taking your beating this time; I have heard something that has frightened me sorely. Good Brother Simple, can you make-believe for once? Can you play at pull-straw, as we did last night, so that I may speak to you without their noticing?" And, plucking some rushes that grew near, she thrust them in front of me.

"Turn your head this way, else may your face betray you," she went on, throwing her hand this way and that, as if teasing me. All the time, a laugh was on the child's face for the others to see; only to me her eyes spake pitifully. "Good brother," she began, "I have bad news. Jocellus has found out you are no Saxon, but a Norman lord late escaped from dungeon, and he has sold you to your enemies. To-morrow at dawn they are to

come and seize you. Nay, start not for your life. Sing a stave, if you will; they are looking at us over-closely."

I would not be outdone by the child, and, without turning my head, I trolled forth a verse or two, though I fear my voice quavered grievously. Then, plucking at the reeds, I muttered under my breath:

"And how learned you this? How came they to let you into the secret?"

"Thanks be to Heaven, they guess not that I know; but I have been watching them. I have doubted Jocellus from the beginning—ever since he prayed you to stay with us. He is not wont to be fond of strangers. Then he sent the harper I knew not where, and tarried on the way, as is not his custom. Besides, his speech was all so fair, I knew mischief was brewing, and that it must have to do with you."

"Why did you not warn me?"

"How could I warn you of I knew not what? I might guess a little, but you never told me; though truly, in your place, I should have needed no warning. I did not dub you 'Brother Simple' for nothing. This noonday I saw Jocellus steal forth as if in secret, and followed him close, creeping up a ditch when I found he went to meet the harper. Look," and she showed me her short skirt, soaked with water to the waist and covered with green weed. "I had to tell old Ursula I fell, and she scolded me rarely. I durst not tell you all they said, it would take too long; but one they call the

Wolf is coming with his horsemen at dawn. He has taken oath, they say, to put out your eyes before another night. Now, poor brother, what will you do?"

"Thanks to you, little one, that is easily settled. I were Brother Simple indeed if I stayed for my foes to take me. As soon as it is dark and the treacherous villains wrapped in slumber, I will fly. My limbs are not stiff now as when first I came out of dungeon; they must be fleet of foot to overtake me."

"My lord"—and she put her hands together prettily, unclasping them the next moment lest they should spy us—"My lord, largesse for my tidings. A boon, a boon!"

"It is granted, damsel, ere uttered;" and I laughed without any pretence, though, indeed, my mirth was bitter. "What is it? A chain of gold, or that I should wear your glove at the next tourney? Methinks one is as easily granted as the other." And I laughed again so boisterously, that the jongleurs looked up, then turned away well satisfied.

"Nay, my lord, such honours are not for me. I would pray only that you take me with you."

"Take you with me!" My laughter stopped on the instant, though I thought at first she was but jesting.

"Aye, indeed; and now that you have promised my boon, I care for nothing! Though, truly, dear brother, I knew you would not fail me."

"That is more than I do," I cried bluntly. "I owe you much for your warning, I do not deny it; but how can I take you when I am flying for my life, and know no place to hide me?"

"Ah, there spoke Brother Simple again. Sure am I you will fare badly without my help. Besides, you could not leave me here. They would guess that I had told you, and beat me nigh to death."

I saw there was truth in this, and shame would it be to me if I escaped and left the damsel to suffer. Yet what was I to do with a woman-child? How could I dispose of her? I had grown very fond of the little maid, and pitied her hard fate with all my heart; yet it was impossible—it could not be—not thus could I help her. Then as I looked up to say her nay, I caught her big eyes fixed upon me so pitifully that the words died upon my lips. What could I do? There was small space for thought. Already it was time, and more than time, that we separated. Then it came to me that if I left Ela behind I should be so ill at ease to know how she fared, I might be drawn back to seek her out again. That would be foolish indeed, yet I could not answer for myself. After all, it would be well to take her. If I reached Walter of London he might receive her into his household; or, at the worst, I could leave her in some convent, where the good nuns would have pity on her.

The maid knew my altered determination even before I did myself. There was no need to put it

into words. She bent her head and touched my hand with her lips before I could stay her.

“Heaven help us, Ela, for I know not how it will end,” I said sadly. “If they capture you with me, your fate will but be the worse. But since it is your own wish—and in truth I like not over much to leave you—soon as the woman sleeps steal out and meet me under yon low tree. I will wait as long as I dare; but if you come not before the moon rise I must go alone.”

“Never fear, I shall not fail. Ursula sleeps sound o’ nights; she will not miss me.” Then louder, in a different tone. “Nay, I will play no more, yon long straw was to me, it is not well done to cheat a poor maiden;” and she turned away in pettish fashion as if offended.

When I looked up, Jocellus was nigh at hand, walking softly, as if to trap us. His guilty conscience made him uneasy; he had never troubled to spy upon us before. Yet did he gain nothing for his pains; the little maid was too quick for him.

After Ela quitted me, I went back to my old place, and played the good fellow, and merry jester, amongst those false friends who had sold me. We were encamped upon the waste, because, although there was a village with an ale-house hard by, when we essayed to enter they had driven us forth with foul speech as a set of idle vagabonds. We had played our best, and they had given us no food or drink, nothing but churlish words, until my fingers itched to smite them. The harper, however,

had money—earnest penny, I doubt not, of what he was to receive for me—and presently he went down to the tavern, and came back with a big pitcher of strong ale, which he invited us all to share with him. This was good, for it would make them sleep the sounder; so, though pretending to drink deep, I but wetted my lips, to leave more for the others. Although to my excited apprehensions, it seemed later than ever before all was quiet, I left them at last sleeping like swine, and went to keep tryst with the little maid. She was there first, waiting for me beneath the tree, a dark cloak concealing her tattered garments, a bag tied fast round her waist.

“Which way shall we turn our steps, brother?” she asked, slipping her little hand into mine. “We must be wary, for if you make at once for Infylde be sure they will overtake us.”

“Why should I go back there?” I said, in surprise.

“Will you not? Then I am glad; it was Jocellus thought you would. If you left us, he said once, soon after you came, it would be easy to find you again, because it was in Infylde you had friends.”

“The old fox was wrong, Ela; my friends are in London city. Once safe within the walls, even Ranulf dare not touch me where the merchants rule. Do you know the road?”

“Not one step of it; never have they travelled this way before. Yet am I certain, from what I heard but yestermorn, that their faces were truly set

toward London. Therefore, we will keep on, and while they look for us on the other track, we shall cheat them finely. Come now, let us run; it is not safe to linger here."

Hand in hand we set off together, sometimes running, sometimes walking with good speed, while ever the little maid kept pace with me. When I lagged, thinking to ease her, she would always spur me on.

We journeyed thus all night, following a track made by pack-horses, plainly to be discerned. At first the ground was open on both sides; but when dawn came there was the fringe of a thick forest on our right hand, round which the track skirted.

"The sun is up, soon men will be abroad," I said. "Let us hide in the wood till nightfall. It will scarce be safe to go on until the first pursuit is over; they may come this way after all."

Ela praised me for my wariness, and we plunged into the forest, pushing where the trees grew thickest, to find a hiding-place. After a time we came to where a brook flowed deep down, its high banks covered with bush and bramble on each side. I had scrambled down to give Ela a drink, and there I found a little space by the water-side, a gnarled tree bending over it, that seemed made for us. I called to her to follow, and we were in high glee; no man, we thought, could find us; we were safe as if already at our journey's end. And so it might have been, had not one too early abroad spied us entering the wood, and told others of it

afterward. But this we could not guess; and we sat down well pleased, glad to rest our weary feet. Nor was food wanting, though it was not the time of year for berries; for now the little maid opened the bag she wore at her waist, and brought out some broken cakes of bread.

“ You can not go so fast when you are hungry. I learned that long ago,” she said sagely, soaking a hard crust in the water before giving it to me. “ I have been hiding the pieces these two weeks ready for our flight.”

“ You always meant to come with me, then?”

“ Ay, that I did; I am tired of Jocellus—I meant not to stay with him after you left us. And now I will tell you something you might have guessed for yourself, though well I know the thought has not come to you. I am no slave, as he called me, no Saxon even, but Norman born as you, though I know not my name or lineage. It was old Ursula told me, one day she quarrelled with Jocellus. When he found she had spoken of it, he well-nigh killed her. By that I knew it was the truth; had it been an idle tale, he would not have minded.”

“ How came you into his hands, then? Said she aught of that?”

“ Not much, save that he had money for taking me, and that I came from over-sea. But I have this; perchance it may help some day to show my name;” and she took from her neck a length of fine golden chain, broken at one end.

"Did they let you keep this? It is of great price," I cried in astonishment; for it was of rare Eastern workmanship. I had seen just such another at St. Edmund's Convent, brought by a holy palmer from Jerusalem.

Ela laughed. "Jocellus will rage when he finds it gone; I took it myself. Old Ursula showed it to me when she told the story. I knew where she hid it, and thought it no wrong to take my own."

"Hide it well," I said, as I gave it back into her keeping. "Many a man has been slain for less. If we get safe to Walter the merchant, we will take counsel with him on the matter."

After we had finished our crusts, I made Ela a bed of leaves beneath a bush, half-way up the bank, for the low ground was swampy. I pulled the branches over well, so that even one wandering to the brook to drink would not espy her. Then I dropped under the bank again, and, feeling secure from all danger, threw myself down to pass the time in slumber.

CHAPTER IX.

AMONG THE OUTLAWS.

IT has ever been my misfortune to sleep too soundly. I can keep watch with any man, but to sleep with one eye open, broad awake at the slightest alarm, as some do, I can not, and more than once has my heaviness brought me into trouble. It was so now; and even the little maid, over weary from her exertions of the previous night, was caught napping.

The sun had been high in the sky when I lay down. It was sinking fast when I was rudely roused by rough hands laid upon me. I had vowed I would never be taken alive, where were my brave words now? My foes had stolen upon me while I slept, I was seized and bound before I had time to defend myself. My struggles availed nothing, it was too late; for the second time I was tied hand and foot, a helpless prisoner. Happily, the Wolf was not one of my captors. Harkening to Jocellus, he had made toward Infylde, sending forward his followers to beat every strip of country on the way. Had this been all, we should have escaped; but to make quite sure he dispatched also

four of his band—well-armed outlanders—by the road we had really gone, to see if they could learn aught of us. This I found by their talk afterward, and also how some meddling bondman had told of our entering the wood, where they had traced us step by step.

The scuffle over, my first thought was for Ela, who, to my joy, had not shown herself, nor made the slightest sound. She was so hid that unless they searched well they were not likely to find her. My chief dread was lest she should come forth to share my captivity. So I cried aloud, as if addressing the men:

“I have a message for one Walter of London; if any man here will carry him word of what has befallen me, great will be his reward.”

A loud laugh went round at my supposed simplicity.

“Call again, my lord, call again,” jeered one. “The birds will hear you, I doubt not. There be none else to carry your message; we put not our necks into the halter.”

“Walter of London, who dwells in Chepe,” I cried yet once more. “Bid him warn my brother of what has chanced to me.”

“Hold your peace, fool,” said another, striking me on the mouth so that the blood flowed. “Spare your breath to plead with Ranulf; there is none here to do your bidding.”

But I was content. I had seen the bush move as if the wind stirred it; the little maid guessed

well my meaning. If naught chanced to her on the way, she would find a friend in the merchant. As to myself, there was small doubt but I should be past help long before she could reach him.

After this, they untied my legs and bid me march, but as we were about to mount the bank, one cried, suddenly: "Stay, was there not another? Did they not speak of some dancing-maid?" He twisted the rope about my arms till it grew a torture. "What has come of the woman, sirrah? Where hast thou hidden her?"

"There is no woman here," I answered stoutly; and that was truth, as I deemed it, taking Ela but for a child. "You came upon me by stealth, as you know. I had no time to hide."

"Come along, and stay your prating," shouted the one who seemed their chief. "What matters the woman to us; it is the man my lord is after. Leave her to the wolves if she is here; we want her not. Come, it is dark beneath the trees even now. If we linger, we shall miss the way."

There was no more delay after that. They climbed the bank quickly, pricking me with their knives when I stumbled, and pushed on as fast as possible, taking in their haste the wrong path. I saw it well enough, but I said no word; it mattered not to me where they went, though I was glad to be gone. I could not lose the fear of Ela coming forward, for I knew it would be a sore trial to see me go from her. We walked on, and it was plain they knew not much of woodcraft, or they would

have seen we were going ever deeper into the heart of the forest. They had come upon a faintly-trodden track, trampled down by men or beasts, and were bent on following it. The head man swore lustily it would lead them out of the wood.

"See you now, the forest grows less dense," he cried. "Were it not so dark we should see the edge of it."

The trees grew fewer indeed; but it was because we were nearing a space of bog, and, as the ground turned soft beneath our feet, we plunged deeper at every step. It became plain, even to them, that they had lost their way, and there was hot dispute, each accusing the other of being in fault. When they had had their quarrel out, and struggled back to dry ground, they agreed to halt until the moon rose to guide their steps. The night was chill, and presently they began gathering wood to light a fire, though one muttered uneasily about bringing the outlaws down upon them. But the others, chafed in temper already, laughed scornfully.

"Here are four of us," cried the leader. "We be stout men, well armed, and not a crown, I warrant, among the lot of us. If it were some fat burgher now, or Saxon yeoman trotting home from market, I would not answer for it; but the cowardly swine know better than to meddle with sturdy men." And he heaped on the wood till the flames blazed merrily.

They had made me fast to a tree as soon as they halted, so that I was separated from them

some small space where they sat round the fire. Thus I became aware of a low rustling among the bushes, which they heard not, though at first I gave little heed to it. Some wolf, most likely, prowling round, I thought to myself; or a boar, maybe, roused from its lair, seeking to escape unseen. Then presently it came again nearer still, close almost to my elbow, as if to attack me. I liked not the thought of being mangled, and was on the point of shouting, to alarm them, when an arrow whizzed so close past my ear that I felt the wind of it. It pierced the breast of him who had been feared of the outlaws, striking him with so true an aim that the head came out at his back, and he fell dead without a groan. His comrades jumped to their feet; but the flames played upon them, whilst their assailants were unseen, and two more fell the next moment, never to rise again. There was but one left now, and he made a desperate rush for the trees; then something bounded out upon him. I could scarce tell in the dusk whether it were man or beast, until I saw a flash of steel, and he was still.

All this had taken place so swiftly that I had scarce time to draw a breath. As I stood expecting my turn to come next, I felt soft hands about my limbs, and lo! there was the little maid hacking away at my bonds, and striving her utmost to undo them.

"What, Ela, are these your friends?" I cried in amazement, hardly sure I was not dreaming.

"I know not yet whether they be friends or foes,"

she returned breathlessly. "I would you were free, a knife in your hands, to confront them."

Fortunately her fears proved groundless. There were three men in the glade now, wild-looking fellows clad in skins with the hair still on. Rough, tangled beards nearly hid their faces; and long shaggy locks matted close together formed their only headgear. It is little wonder I doubted at first what they might be. Each wore a long bow in his hand, and a sheaf of arrows at belt, besides a sharp hunting-knife cased in skin. But they spoke me fair, and one of them, with a stroke of his keen blade, severed the bonds that had baffled Ela.

"It is he I told you of," cried the little maid, ere I could speak, placing herself between us as if to protect me. "My brother, who flies from Ranulf the Wolf."

The outlaw looked at me keenly. My condition was rude and unkempt enough even for him, and he nodded in kindly fashion. "Join with us," he said. "It is a fair life in the wild woods, where no lords come to trouble us." Then he turned aside to where his companions were stripping the dead men, not to lose his share of the spoil.

"How found you these new friends?" I asked Ela in low tones, chafing my numbed arms.

"It was they who found me, good brother, as I was weeping in the wood alone. I was asleep—fie on me—when the outlanders came; they jumped out so suddenly that you were in their hands before I knew. I was coming out to bid them take me

also, when you cried for one to carry your message to Walter. I knew that you were speaking to me, and I kept close, thinking it would help you most to do your bidding. Yet after you were gone I was so feared ill would come to you before I could get word to him, that I wept as I went, and it was then these wild men found me. I told them all, just as it had chanced, save that you were a Norman noble. I said not a word of that, Alain; it would not be wise; they think we are Saxon bondmen like themselves."

"And so they came to rescue me. How can I thank them?"

"No need to trouble," rejoined Ela coolly. "Little thought had they of you when their steps turned this way. This is the road to their home, wherever that may be, whither they were compelling me by force. I prayed to be let go, that I might give tidings to one who was your friend. They paid no heed to my tears but made me come with them. We walked for long, until my heart began to sink within me, for fear I should never find the way back. Then all at once they stopped short in alarm. Strangers had travelled along their path, and they made sure their retreat was discovered. It was I who spied the fire. They were frightened at first; but when I said it might perchance be your captors wandered from the way, they were ready to jump for joy. They crept softly until they were quite close, and the rest you know."

The spearmen by this time had been stripped to

the skin and dragged a short distance away. Then the wild outlaws gathered around where we stood, looking at us curiously. There were but the three of them in all, and he who had cut my bonds—he was the eldest, his beard almost white—said to me: “Will you live in the greenwood and be one of us, or will you go your way?”

“If I am free to choose,” I answered quickly, “I would fain go on my way. I have friends who will aid me can I but reach London town.”

“I have heard of the place,” he answered kindly. “It is where the chapmen go; but you will find no fair forest there to hide you in. You may go an you list, we hold no man against his will; but first must you take oath not to betray us: you have come too near our borders.”

“That will I gladly, seeing that but for you and your arrows I had been prisoner still.”

“Stretch forth your arm, then.” And with the point of his knife he pierced a vein in my arm and his own, making me catch the blood in my right palm. When it was mingled to his fancy, he bade me hold my stained hand aloft in the light of the rising moon, whilst I repeated certain words after him. I mind not now what they were; but they so savoured of heathen incantations not fit for a Christian man, that I muttered a prayer in secret and made sign of the holy cross when he had done.

“If you betray us now,” he said, “foul fiends will come on the third night at this hour, and tear

you limb from limb. Never was a man known to escape them. Best join us after all; we are not so many but there is room for another, and yours is a stout arm. The maid too has sense; we will find a mate for her."

But when he saw my mind was set on going, he did not further try to stay me, save by showing that he thought me a craven. In spite of this he did us a great service, offering to guide us out of the forest as far as it was safe for him to go. We thanked him with all our hearts, and when presently the two others, laden with the spoils of the dead men, and the produce of their hunt, passed on into the darkness, the old man stayed with us. "Wait," he said, "until the moon tops yonder beech; then will I guide you straight as an arrow flies. Mean-time we will eat."

Loosing a great hare he carried at his belt, he thrust it just as it was into the embers. Whilst waiting, he told us of the refuge whither he would have taken us if we had joined his band. There was a great bog hard by, not to be traversed save by those who knew the stepping-places; and in the midst was a little islet of firm ground, whereon they had made their camp.

"We have women there and children too," he went on. "Your sister would have had company. One brought his wife thither, and I found mine after. They were willing enough to share our fortunes. We hunger not, the woods are full of fresh meat, neither can we thirst while a brook flows.

Best of all, we have escaped our lord, and have no tyrant to oppress us."

" Yet did they lay hands upon you, short would be your shrift," I said.

" What matters? A man can die but once. Better a rope on the nearest tree and have done with it, than lie in dungeon to be tortured at my lord's pleasure. I have tried it and I know." He showed me deep scars upon his shoulders where he had been branded. " While we live here, our lives are our own. At sign of danger we keep close, and there is only one way they can reach us. They might set fire to the rushes and smoke us out. It was thought of that frightened us when we saw your fire just now. But as yet you are the first who has come so near to us. If we have made the path too plain, we must seek another. Yet all is safe so far"; and he rubbed his hands with glee. " You are sworn, and dead men tell no tales. The wolves will feast this night."

He drew forth the half-cooked hare and, scraping off the ashes and the fur together, divided it into three portions. It suited not the little maid (her dry crusts pleased her better), so we ate her share between us, and then started on our journey. At dawn our good guide left us. He came even to the outskirts of the wood, showing where we could pick up the pack-horse track farther on. And now, having come so far—for crossing the forest had saved many a long mile where the track wound around—I had no fear about travelling by day. So

we kept on our road until near noon, when we turned aside, and, crossing a meadow foot-deep in lush grass and yellow blossoms the little maid gathered to deck her with, sat down on the banks of a wide river to rest awhile.

CHAPTER X.

I LOSE THE LITTLE MAID.

ELA still had a few crusts at the bottom of her bag; the little woman had husbanded them so carefully. I ate with thankfulness, seeing that otherwise we must have gone fasting; yet am I bound to confess that Ela seemed to find them far more toothsome than I did. Then we lingered for a time, I feigning to be very tired, so that the little maid might rest the longer. The sun shone warm, I was near falling asleep, when Ela, touching my arm, pointed to a boat coming round a bend of the river, floating slowly toward us with the stream. It was laden with osiers heaped high above the sides, and, though there appeared to be some one in charge, the course of the boat was strangely devious—this way and that, just as the current drove it. At last, just abreast of where we sat, it ran into the bank at our feet, and a feeble old man, emerging from behind the osiers, took pole to try and push it off again. Seeing the boat stuck so fast that the old fellow could not move it, I went to his help.

“Are you alone, friend?” I said in good broad

Saxon, seeing he was a villein from the country-side.

“Ay, master, for my sins, I lost my fellow over-night. He went ashore and came back with a jar of mead—St. Guthlac only knows how he got it—and when he had drunk his fill, the addlebate fell into the water. I threw him a rope, but it was no good; he sank like a stone, and came not up again. I have had to fend for myself all day, and much ado it is to get the boat along.”

“Whither are you bound?”

“Even so far as London. Will you come along? I will find you in victual for your help.”

“Can you make room for this little maid, my sister?”

“Why not? She will not eat much, and we can fix her a nest among the rushes.”

A few minutes later we were in the boat gliding down the river. I made Ela a cosy corner where she could lie at her ease and watch all that passed, and a hat of plaited straw belonging to the dead boatman covered me so well that no one from the bank would be able to recognise me.

It was indeed a pleasant mode of travelling after our toilsome flight. I had but to keep the boat in midstream and the current did the rest. When the water flowed against us we drew to land, and, tying a rope to the nearest tree, waited until it turned again. Better than all—better even than the rest to poor Ela’s weary feet—we had baffled our pursuers, for we saw no more of the jongleurs nor of the

Wolf's men. I have no doubt they searched for us far and wide; but they would scarce have thought of looking for us on the river.

We were on the boat for three days, pulling up for the last night hard by the king's palace near the convent of St. Peter—which they call now the West Minster—where was the fine new hall built by William the Red, wherein to hold his banquets. I little thought I should be feasting there myself in no very long time, or in what a strange scene I should take part.

We were near to London now, and, soon after day dawn, the tide being in our favour, we set forth upon the last stage of our journey. It was still quite early when the old tower of Mountfichet and brave Castle Baynard came in sight; but we turned off before reaching them, and entered the Fleet, the current still serving to bear us on. Here navigation became more difficult, and, I having small skill, the old villein had to bestir himself. For not only was the river they called the Fleet more narrow than the Thames we had just left, but there was more traffic than we had hitherto encountered. Tall vessels from over seas, filled with wares for city merchants; barges laden with stone for the rebuilding of the Church of St. Paul, near destroyed of late in the great fire; and divers other craft, too many to mention—all these crowded close together, making toward the mooring-place at foot of the hill leading to Lud Gate, where the cargoes were wont to be discharged.

I helped to make the boat fast; then my task was done, and, taking Ela by the hand, we mounted the hill, passed through the postern beside the great gate, and asked of the wayfarers whereabout was the Chepe. We found it close at hand; a wide, open space, with streets of booths, where the citizens sold their goods—booths easily removed when they wanted the ground for a tournament or procession. Yet were they fair to look upon, being filled to the doors with wares rich and curious, which pleased our country eyes right well. And there was one I noted in especial—though Ela cares not for it overmuch—so savoury were the smells that came forth, so many the people passing in and out. It was a cook's shop, with all sorts of victual for sale—venison, fowl, small birds, and fish, roasted or baked, fried or boiled. Folk could sit down and regale themselves, as many were doing, until my mouth watered but to peep in at them; or the victual could be carried home all ready to place on table. But we tarried not long; we had no money to spend, and, seeing our poor garments, one came out and would have driven us off only I saved him the trouble.

Noise and confusion reigned around: apprentices bawling their wares, men with pack-horses trying to thread their way 'mid the throng, and now and again a knight with armed train would ride slowly past, his followers shouting loudly to clear the way. Round about Chepe were many fair houses built of timber, and to one of these I was

directed as the dwelling-place of Walter the merchant. The door was half open, and we stepped straight from the bustle of the market-place into a wide hall, where Walter himself, clad in robes of office—he had but just entered from a meeting of his guild—advanced to meet us. Although he had been forewarned that it was likely I might come to him, it was some minutes before he recognised me, so changed was I from the ruddy stripling who had been torn from his protection. Even my long wandering had not sufficed to restore a wholesome colour to my hollow cheeks. And whereas before I had been but short of stature for my age, though sturdy withal, I had now shot up nigh upon a head taller, whilst my tattered garb hung loosely around my wasted limbs. When, however, I had made myself known, my reception was hearty indeed, and a welcome extended at once to my companion.

“In good truth, my young lord, I thought you dead long ago,” Walter said; “and since you had been under my charge it grieved me sorely. I did what I could, sent messengers to the Prior to let him know what had chanced, and tried to trace you out. But all was to no purpose, and I gave you up for lost. Then of late came one seeking you here with a marvellous tale of cruel imprisonment and a wonderful escape. He was much concerned at finding I had heard nothing, and has gone back on his steps to see if he can find you. He will return, I doubt not, before long. And now if it

please you to come and refresh yourself, afterwards we will provide garments more suited to your condition. I have still the money in my hands given me by your uncle. The land is so disturbed it has not been safe to send it back."

We sat down presently to a feast from the same eating-house I had so much admired; the good merchant, thinking we must be weary from our journey, choosing not to make us wait for the buying and cooking of meat. Nor was this all. He gave us the best chambers where he was wont to lodge noble knights who came to London to do business with him, and in everything treated us as honoured guests.

After the first few days, in that his household was not suited for a maiden, his dame being long since dead, he placed Ela under the charge of some friends. "It is too free a bird, methinks," he said, "to chirp behind convent walls, and dame Joan of late has lost her only daughter; she will receive the damsels right gladly."

I was loth to part from the little maid; she had crept closer to my heart than I knew, and truly I owed her much. Yet did I still look upon her as a child until I paid my first visit after she had tarried for a space in her new home. I vow then that I scarce recognised the Ela I had known so well, and truly it was no longer my little maid; she had suddenly changed into a damsels fair and stately. Instead of the short skirts of divers colours in which, with bare arms and flying limbs, she had

been wont to dance, she was clad in fine kirtle reaching to the ground, with a silken robe of another colour over. And her dark hair, lately floating loose on every breeze, was now gathered into two long plaits braided with threads of gold, which hung down almost to her waist.

I also was differently clad. In place of the churl's clothing I had worn before, my long mantle lined with fur covered a fair tunic, with other raiment to correspond. But in myself I was still the same, whilst, to my wonder, Ela herself was changed. And yet the reason was very simple, though it took me a long time to find it out. Though small in stature, Ela in truth was not the child I thought—she was nigh seventeen years of age, scarce a twelvemonth younger than myself. I made a low reverence as to a noble Norman lady; she returned it lower still, then broke into merry laughter. She rejoiced so much in her new home that she was brimming over with joy and happiness.

"They are so good to me—so good," she repeated again and again; "and I owe it all, dear brother, to you. Dame Joan saith I am to live with them always, that she will care for me as her own. I showed the chain as you bade me, and Master Gilbert, the dame's husband, says it is rare goldsmith's work, brought from the East as you thought, and must have belonged to some great noble. If he finds Jocellus in the city, he has promised to clap him into bonds until he confesses

whence he had it. Yet I care not much about it now. Since I am rid of those who treated me so ill, I would fain forget all about them. I can find no better friends than I have here, nor a better brother."

Whilst I remained in London I went often to see Ela, and spent much time with her. Master Gilbert dwelt in a fine house close upon the walls with a large garden around it, well furnished with trees, spacious and beautiful. I walked much with her here, when the weather was fair, sometimes in company with Dame Joan, who ever welcomed me warmly, sometimes with Ela alone; and always we found much to say to each other. I told her of my past life, even to the death of Baldwin, wotting well she was not one to prate, that she would keep the secret. Also, I boasted much, I fear, of the fine things I meant to do when I entered the bishop's household.

I had been many days with Walter before, to my great joy, Gundulf returned, and I know not which of us was the more glad to meet again. He had found dame and child both safe; they had fled from the hut before their lord's men came, and had hidden with humble friends. His kinsfolk had long ago given him up for lost, so that they received him as one raised from the dead, with great rejoicings.

For some weeks, I waited in the city for fit opportunity to travel to Winchester. A number of the chief men were expected to journey thither

shortly, sent by their fellow-citizens to make complaint before the Empress; and it was arranged that I should travel in their company.

"Our good city is in parlous condition," quoth Walter the merchant, shaking his head gloomily. "Our last state seems like to prove worse than the first. This Empress, daughter of good Queen Maud though she be, has already oppressed us grievously. Before even the crown is placed upon her head she has appointed the Earl of Essex our over-lord, with the Tower for his castle, as if we held no charters at all. Already has he set about new fortifications to overawe us; if we bestir not ourselves, he will think we be his villeins. We are sending now to unfold our grievances and speak her fair; but if she listen not, if the Norman woman mend not her ways before she come to London, by St. Peter and St. Paul, she may go back whence she came. We will have none of her."

I thought Walter overbold, and smiled a little to myself at what I considered his vapouring. Surrounded by her gallant knights, little, I deemed, would the Empress have to fear from a pack of discontented citizens. In this I was wrong, as events speedily showed, and I felt more respect for the men of London ever after.

The day before starting I paid a farewell visit to Ela. The maid was somewhat saucy again, not sparing me even before Dame Joan, and when I spoke of the fine things I meant to do she dubbed

me Brother Simple, as of old. Yet her sauciness, methinks, was but put on to hide her sorrow at parting; for before I left, her bright eyes filled with tears, and she prayed me more than once not to forget her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BISHOP WILL HAVE NONE OF ME.

WE set forth for Winchester, a goodly cavalcade of knights and merchants and attendants, all armed to the teeth, because the roads were infested with marauders. I made as brave a show as the best of them, thanks to good Walter of London, and Gundulf rode at my heels on his trusty Dickon. Nothing of importance occurred during our journey—we were too strong a band to be meddled with—and in no very long time the noble towers of Winchester rose before us. We saw them from afar off at first, rising as it were from the bare, chalky down, and I marvelled at their stateliness. Truly this royal city, the favourite dwelling-place of kings, was far fairer to look upon than London. Nor did my wonder lessen when, after crossing the river by St. Swithin's bridge, we passed through the East Gate, and, leaving my lord Bishop's palace of Wolvesey behind us, rode up the Cyp, as they called the chief street, on our way to the castle, which was built against the western walls. I halted not at the palace at first, as I wished to remove the dust of travel before waiting upon Henry of Blois. This

great prelate, younger brother of Stephen, had now for some years been one of the most prominent men in the kingdom. Half monk and half knight, a keen politician and ambitious man, he aimed at making himself Archbishop of Winchester, equal with my lords of Canterbury and York. He had helped greatly to put his brother upon the throne; but when Stephen fell out with the Church, the Bishop went over to Matilda, hoping to gain more from her. This had taken place not very long before my arrival; thus it chanced that Henry of Blois was still a partisan of the Empress when I waited upon him to deliver my letter.

It was at his palace of Wolvesey that the Bishop gave audience, a strong place which had of late been newly fortified. I had to wait my turn in a crowded ante-chamber; ecclesiastics, men-at-arms, citizens, and artificers of all sorts were constantly coming and going, their business in many cases dispatched by my lord's secretaries and servants. They would have used me thus if they could, bidding me leave my letter and come again; but I refused to deliver it save to my lord in person, and, after long waiting, I was called in.

I found the Bishop seated in a carved chair, on a daïs, clad in the rich garb of his office, with many attendants standing about him. As I fell to my knees, I caught sight also of a noble-looking man somewhat past middle age, in half-armour, who was seated near scanning some papers upon a table. This, though I knew it not at first, was the greatest

man in all England—Robert, Earl of Gloucester, half-brother to the Empress Matilda. He was truly a knight without fear and without reproach, the wisest in the council chamber, the foremost in the field. Had he fought for his own hand instead of for his sister, the realm might have had a king indeed. But he strove for the Empress to the last day of his life, and never had monarch a more faithful servant.

My lord of Winchester perused my letter with scant attention, scrutinising most the seal and date. Then looking up he cried harshly:

“ You have been long on the road, sirrah. The date of this is near two years old.”

“ May it please you, my lord, I have been stayed on the way;” and I told him how Ranulf Fitz-Dru had cast me into dungeon. What was Fitz-Dru’s feud against me? he then asked, and I was compelled to say how they accused me. I saw Earl Robert look up as I was speaking, and his keen eyes read me through. But he spoke no word, and the Bishop broke in again.

“ How came Ranulf to let you go? He whom they call the Wolf is wont to keep what he holds;” and my lord smiled sourly.

“ Ay, and he meant to keep me,” I answered with anger, for the Bishop seemed almost to uphold Fitz-Dru; “ only, thanks be to Heaven and to good St. Edmund, I broke dungeon and escaped! May I lose my right hand if I do not make him suffer for it some day.”

"Softly, sirrah, softly! You forget in whose presence you are speaking. If the good knight deemed you had dealt treacherously by his friend he was well within his rights. As to the rest, we will not have you about our person, as my lord Abbot and your uncle, the Prior, would pray; but out of love to them, that we may not reject their petition altogether, you may join the band of Turstan the Black. I doubt not he will curb your foward temper."

"Craving your pardon, my lord," interrupted Robert of Gloucester, "I would have a word in that. The lad looks too good to hang by the way-side, as will be the fate of Turstan's varlets. Give him to me; I can find better use for him. As for his saucy speech, I mind it not. Had we been two years in hold, I wot our words would not be of the mildest."

"Nay, there is more," replied the Bishop. "The youth hath an ill report already. He has been dismissed his lord's services for striking a foul blow; that is why he seeks my protection. Yonder lies the paper; read and see for yourself."

"By your leave, my lord," said the Earl again, when he had read the letter carefully through, whilst I knelt with flaming cheeks not daring to utter a word. "By your leave, it is not writ quite as you say. See here, the Prior vouches for the boy's innocence of his own certain knowledge. He will answer for him as for himself."

"I read not that; but it matters little," returned

the Bishop carelessly, “seeing that, though it is my lord Abbot’s seal, the missive is penned by the boy’s uncle. It is an ill bird that would foul its own nest—the good father is right to stand up for his own; but it does not follow that I give heed to him.”

“Then if you forbid me not, I would try the lad, my lord. I like his looks, and it will go hard if I find not out the truth. At the worst I can do better for him than Turstan. Give him to me, my lord, give him to me.”

“It is a boon soon granted, my lord Earl. I would all your requests were as easy. I am not sorry to wash my hands of him. Begone, sirrah; you serve my lord of Gloucester now. Trouble me not again, or it may be the worse for you.” And almost before I could rise to my feet, the attendants had hustled me out of the chamber.

A short half-hour, and I was riding through the streets in the train of the great Earl, every man we met doing him obeisance. Yet was my heart sad within me. That fatal blow seemed to dog my footsteps wherever I turned, as if I were never to escape from it. My new lord presently called me to his side to give me some directions, and I think he noticed my downcast mien, for soon after we arrived at the castle he sent for me to speak with him privily.

“Rise, boy, and speak without fear,” he said, as I knelt low before him. “If you can clear yourself I am willing to listen; I condemn no man without

a hearing. Look me in the face. Folk say I can read books well, but I vow I can read man better. You will have short shrift if you attempt to deceive me. Now, this foul blow they speak of, how was it? Tell me the whole story from the first."

But though his words were stern his manner was kindly, and I plucked up fresh heart to reply to him.

"And they did not believe though you swore on St. Edmund's shrine," he said thoughtfully, when I had come to an end of my tale. "Yet you are over-young to be man-sworn; they must have had strong reason."

Then was I constrained by the look in his eyes to tell him of the finding of the knife, which at first I had not mentioned.

"Ah, now we come nearer to the kernel of the matter," he cried sharply. "How came your knife to be there?"

"It was not my knife, my lord," I answered in a low voice, for the first time not daring to look up.

"You will swear to that?"

"Ay, my lord, on whatsoever holy relic you will;" and I raised my head again.

"And you know not the real owner?" I must have changed colour or shown my apprehension in some way, for he cried almost gleefully: "Ah, that touches you close, sir squire. Said I not that I could read men? Now will you swear to me what the dolts seem never to have asked, that you know nothing of the matter at all; that you can not point

me out the man who slew the lad—though, truly, it seems strange you should have kept silence.”

I gasped for breath, all power of speech seemed to have left me, I stood stricken dumb. The Earl’s mood changed directly. He came to my side, and, placing his hand upon my shoulder, said in gentle tone: “Tell me all, my lad; it will be best. If there be a secret, on the honour of a knight I can keep it well as you. Speak to me as if I were your father.”

Thus adjured I had no choice but to tell the truth, though I showed my lord over and over again how it was no murder. “It was the caitiff’s foul taunts first made my poor brother mad,” I said. “Then his Viking blood rose hot within him, and he struck.”

“And your brother allowed that you should take his fault upon you?”

“Craving your pardon, my lord,” I answered stoutly, “I protested my innocence all the time. Aylmer stood by my side at the shrine, and would have spoken even then had I not entreated him to be silent. He knew naught of the knife, naught of my captivity. I wot well he thought me safe with the Bishop long since. My uncle the Prior who is known to be a wise man, counselled that, else had we lost our lands, and Aylmer promised to obey him.”

“All the same, I think he counselled you wrongly, and that it would have been better if your brother had stood the brunt. But I blame not you,

my young squire; you have suffered more than enough. If any man throw the matter in your teeth again, you may tell him Robert of Gloucester will stand your sponsor."

I cast myself upon my knees, and raised his hand to my lips. Truly it was worth all I had gone through to have found such a noble protector.

I had been in the service of the Earl for scarce three weeks when, to my grief, he appointed me other duties. He gave me a post in the household of the Lady of England, a position of trust, where it was my duty to attend to her always. It was great advancement for a poor squire, yet was I loth to quit the Earl, and he knew it.

"You will serve me best by serving your Sovereign Lady," he was pleased to say. "Be as faithful to her as you were to your brother, and I will not forget it. It is a mark of my trust that I place you about her; she has need of faithful servants."

I had seen the Lady often from afar—she was not to be called Queen until she was crowned, which never came to pass—but had not yet stood in her near presence. Now, however, the Earl led me to her chamber himself, and humbly entreated her favour for her new servant. She received my lord graciously enough, but deigned not to waste a glance upon me. That was her way with all, even with the great nobles. Matilda was ever haughty. It suited the Germans, subjects of her first husband; she won golden opinions among them—they had naught but praise for her demeanour. But it

is ever thus with the German peoples, and I suppose it ever will be; they honour most a master who treats them as serfs and bondsmen.

Unfortunately for the Lady's prospects, the Norman nobles and English citizens would not long brook such treatment. It cost her London, and was the chief reason why, in the end, so many fell away from her. I served my mistress faithfully for sake of the good Earl, not because I cared overmuch for her cause—and, of a certainty, not because I loved her. She was more wont to inspire fear among her followers than affection.

CHAPTER XII.

WE MARCH INTO LONDON.

WE remained at Winchester for many weeks, and it was hard upon midsummer before the Empress set forth for London, where she was to be solemnly crowned, the citizens, after much discontent and grumbling, having at length consented to receive her. David, King of Scots, Matilda's gallant uncle, who fought for her long and valiantly, rode at her right hand when we entered the city, the noble Earl, her half-brother, on her left; behind followed a strong band of knights and squires and men-at-arms, and a numerous company of archers. We made a brave show as we rode through the streets, the sunlight shining on our arms, our banners and pennons dancing in the breeze, whilst the rabble and the citizens who were of our party loudly acclaimed us. Who could have foretold, as they saw us riding proudly by, in how short a time all would be altered, how soon we should be fugitives flying for our lives. Not I, for one, and the change was so sudden, all took place so swiftly, that even now, when I look back upon those days, that ignoble flight from London seems but as some fleeting dream.

At the time, however, all looked well with us. Nearly the whole kingdom, save only the men of Kent, who still held out for Stephen, had made submission, and our hearts beat high with triumph. For the short space we remained in the city I spent all the time I could with Ela, and the damsel grew upon me more and more. Dame Joan was having her instructed in all things pertaining to a noble maiden. She spoke Norman-French now as if bred in hall, and if she had not ever been so kind to me her sweet face would have made me feel abashed. For, indeed, she had shot up into a maiden exceedingly fair to see, and Dame Joan took care to let me know I was not the only one who thought so. I could have loitered thus for some time with much pleasure, but all too soon came the end, our fair prospects were rudely dashed to the ground. And the Lady herself was the cause of it all.

Even before her arrival, the Empress had been much incensed by the constant grumbling of the citizens; they were for ever complaining of what they called infringement of their rights, and prating about the great charter given to them by Henry, her father. Once in the city, however, with her knights at her back, she thought all was safe; and when the Chamberlain and chief citizens waited upon her at the royal palace of Westminster, she demanded from them a large subsidy to be paid upon the spot, just as if she had entered as a conqueror. I saw them glance from one to the other in dismay; then presently the Chamberlain stand-

ing forth humbly implored her clemency, or at the least that she would allow them a little time. But the Empress would not listen, and rated them openly. "Make no mention of charters and privileges to me, when you have just been supporting my enemies," she cried, with stern eyes and frowning brow.

This language so incensed the citizens that the wise Earl, who stood by his sister's side, took up the word and endeavoured by fair speech to conciliate them. Even the King of Scots, whose own subjects were wild beyond compare, did not hold with the lady's demeanour; he spake some strong words to her, which I, who was hard by, could not help hearing.

"Nay, it is my brother who has the silver tongue," cried the Empress jeeringly. "See how, with open mouth, they hearken to him. As for me, I would not stoop to palter with low-born knaves, these townsmen are rebellious ever. A strong arm, an iron hand, and they know their master."

"You mistake, I think, fair niece, the men you have to do with," King David answered. "Gloucester hath soothed them somewhat. Speak them fair now, and all may yet be well."

But the Empress would not be persuaded to alter her arrogant demeanour, and once more, in imperious tones, demanded the subsidy. Hard words were bandied to and fro, the citizens for long remaining obstinate. At last, they craved

leave to retire to their hall of common council, that they might take steps to provide the money.

“Said I not so, my lords?” exclaimed Matilda exultingly, when the last citizen had departed; “the craven knaves dare not resist my demands. By our Lady, but I will bring them to their senses. My father was too easy with them. I will renew no charters till it be my good pleasure; they shall pay me for my grace in gold.”

Only Earl Robert was sore grieved that the citizens had been so mishandled, and meant later to ride in and confer with them. They had quitted us with dark and lowering brows, sorrowful and unsatisfied, and muttering fiercely among themselves; yet we knew so little it only caused the most of us to laugh, and to wish them a better temper. I had marked both Walter and Master Gilbert amid the deputation; but they were too troubled and anxious to give heed to me, so much were they dismayed by their reception.

Had we only known, had we guessed aught of what would happen, we might have taken precautions, and the result would have been different. As it was, no one had the slightest apprehension of danger, and our archers and men-at-arms were dispersed about the city, not a man near when he was needed. Presently the Empress Matilda and her knights sat down to dinner in the new banqueting-hall, seasoning their repast with laugh and merry jest anent the bags of gold they expected the citizens would presently bring in. Even when, after a

time, the alarm bells began to peal from the London steeples, we took little note, save that a couple of messengers were sent to find out what was passing.

I was at the upper end of the table, serving my mistress with some roasted larks upon the spit, when the end came. I had not yet risen from my knees, when suddenly there was a great commotion near the door, men pouring tumultuously into the hall, crying out, with white faces and scared looks, that the enemy were upon us—all was lost—until the place was filled with their clamour. The Empress alone retained her composure—for, in truth, she was ever a woman of high courage—and continued picking daintily at her birds, as if naught were amiss.

There was such confusion that it was difficult at first to understand what it was all about, until the Earl's voice, thundering above the rest, compelled a little silence. Then we learned that, enraged by the report brought back by their fellow-citizens, the Londoners had risen with one accord, and, armed with bows and bills, were swarming in the streets, like bees issuing from their hives, making ready to fall upon us.

Before the tale was half told, Earl Robert and King David and most of the nobles in hall called for horse, and hastily rode off to try and allay the storm. But they seemed scarce to have left us ere they were back, and the Empress, who made very light of the matter, was still seated at the table when they burst in again, the Earl crying loudly:

"To horse, fair sister, to horse! Haste, I pray you, ere the rabble be upon us!"

"Are we to fly, then, like cravens, without a blow?" exclaimed the lady, starting to her feet in hot anger. "Where be our own knaves?"

"Melted as the mist before the sun. Some have fled; more have joined the enemy. The little band you see around are all."

The Empress turned upon her friends: "And you, Normans, and my own brave Angevins, are you willing to fly before a pack of noisy churls, who durst not withstand you for an hour?"

"By our Lady, you wrong us," cried Arnald de Cereville, a noble of Anjou. "In open field we would mow them down, ride over them like the vermin they are. But in their own narrow streets we have no chance; they are too many for us."

"It is not only the citizens," broke in another. "There is a band of horsemen the other side the river, and the banner they display belongs to Maud of Boulogne, the wife of Stephen."

"Ay, it is true," said Earl Robert, seeing that Matilda looked incredulous. "Heaven helping us, we may fight another day; but now if you mount not with all speed it will be your turn to pray in vain for ransom."

This allusion to Stephen, still fast in ward in Bristol Castle, touched the Empress closely. For my lord had advised that he should be set free long ago, when his wife had promised for him that he should quit the country or enter a cloister. But the

Empress would not hear of her enemy's release. There had been love passages, it was whispered—though I say not there was any truth in the tale—between her and Stephen in their youth, so that besides being the rival claimant for the throne, she had the anger of a jealous woman to gratify. At all events, the Lady Matilda heard reason now. Directly she knew of the horsemen she was as eager to be gone as we. Mounting in haste, she took her place in the midst of us, and all made off at a gallop. Scarce had we passed beyond the village when we heard the shouts and cries of the rabble breaking into the palace we had just quitted. They found none to oppose them, and plundered and destroyed everything we had left behind us.

At first, we cast many a backward glance, and the best armed among us guarded the rear; but there was no pursuit. The citizens did not attempt to follow, but seemed satisfied at being quit of us. After a time, seeing that there was no danger of attack, the Earl called a short halt to decide upon our future movements. There was much hurried talk, some advising one thing, some another; but at length it was decided that we should make for the city of Oxford and take refuge in the strong castle until we could hold our own again. Meantime David of Scotland was to ride northwards and seek for succour among his friends. He quitted us soon after, and we rode on with heavy hearts, no mirth among us now, only gloom and dismal forebodings.

Had we fought and lost, it would have been but the fortune of war; but to fly without a blow, to count for so little that the enemy troubled not even to pursue us, our fall was great indeed.

Only the Earl seemed no whit dismayed, though, after all, it might have been but his policy. He rode cheerily on, now talking with his sister, now casting to his friends some merry jest, or more often speaking gravely upon what he purposed as soon as we were safe in Oxford.

After it grew dusk a strange thing happened. All those gallant nobles upon whom the Empress placed so much reliance—forgetting their mistress and thinking only of their own escape—gradually left us. Not at once in a body—they stole off one by one, down by-ways or cross-roads as they found opportunity, so that at first they were scarce missed save by those who rode beside them. I heard the Earl mutter an oath under his breath when he first noticed our scanty numbers; but he said naught, only curled his lip in disdain, and, laying his hand upon his sister's bridle, rode on without a pause.

He never looked back again, never turned once, until we reached the gates of Oxford. Then was he wroth indeed. Out of all the knights who had ridden in the Lady's train when she quitted London he himself alone remained; every one of the others had deserted her. There followed behind him none but his own two squires and myself. “By St. Edward! but I will remember it to them!” he cried fiercely. The Empress said naught. She seemed over-

whelmed at the sudden change, and, besides, was near worn out by the hurried journey.

We had some ado to get into the town; the gates had long been closed. The guard would not believe that it was the Earl of Gloucester who summoned them, and that the drooping woman by his side was the haughty Lady of England. They little thought to see us come in such guise. They feared treachery even though we were so few, and summoned Robert D'Oilgi, the warden of the city, before suffering us to enter. Once within, however, our troubles for the time were over; we were among trusty friends, and the Empress soon recovered her high courage. Unhappily, her misfortunes had taught her nothing. She remained as haughty and imperious as before, and, of all men in the world, chose now to offend the powerful Bishop of Winchester. He had proposed that his nephew Eustace, son to King Stephen, a boy of tender years, should be made Count of Boulogne, as his father had been before him; at least for so long as Stephen remained in captivity. But the Empress would not hearken to him, and it was rumoured that she had already promised the countship to another. My lord Bishop was greatly offended by this repulse, and withdrew himself from the Lady's Court.

Gundulf had not shared in our hurried flight to Oxford; he had been out of the way when the alarm was given, and there was no time to summon him. It was not until quite a week later that he appeared before me.

"I felt so sure, my lord, you would make for Winchester," he said half guiltily, "that I rode thither without a question. You have led me a pretty dance, truly; yet I think not that my pains have been wasted, for——" And here, lowering his voice, he told me what he had gathered on the way. How it was whispered that my lord of Winchester had held a friendly conference with Queen Maud, Stephen's wife, at Guilford, and being wrought upon by her tears and the concessions she made to him, had promised to set his mind to the deliverance of her husband. The Bishop was also speaking openly against the Empress, accusing her of breaking her word and the engagements she had sworn to him. I thought Gundulf's news of such import that I took him at once to Earl Robert, who heard it all with little surprise.

"I ever feared something of the kind," he muttered gloomily, "though I hoped that for very shame's sake Henry of Blois would not turn again. Still he hath not yet openly declared himself, and if my sister of England give way in the matter of the countship, he may hold to us spite of all. We shall know soon; I am sending Hugo Fitz-Clare even now on a special mission to my lord Bishop. Not that I put overmuch faith in Hugo, but he hath asked for the service and I may not refuse him. You, Alain, shall ride in his train and carry privily a letter to the Provost of the city. He is a true man, and will give us wise counsel; if he order you in aught it will be best to obey

him. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, yet look not too overwise as now, lest others should suspect you by your bearing."

For, on hearing how my lord meant to honour me, I had drawn up erect, and assumed the air of a person of consequence.

"Be content to look the foolish youth you are," the Earl added with a grim smile; "and it would be a wise man, I trow, who guessed you in my confidence."

I looked foolish enough then, I warrant you, and my lord concluded his directions without further ado.

CHAPTER XIII.

HENRY OF BLOIS TURNS AGAIN.

MY ostensible errand at Winchester was to take certain commands for my mistress to her goldsmith and her mercer; women's business, which even at this stress of fortune she assumed not to lay aside. My comrades jeered at me somewhat for being set to such work, dubbing me, though it was all in good humour, the silken squire, my lady's page. Their contempt served one good purpose, as doubtless my lord intended. When we reached the city they were in nowise curious as to my movements, I could go in and out unquestioned.

I found Winchester apparently just as we had left it. The banner of the Empress still floated from palace and castle, the townspeople pursued their business as usual, the men-at-arms idled about the streets. So calm everything seemed, so unruffled, almost I thought it had been a false alarm. That was at first, because I was so slow to perceive; but after, when I had strolled about for awhile waiting to get private speech with the Provost, it gradually came to me that the Bishop's men were strangely few. They were wont at most times to pervade the

place, drinking at taverns, jesting with the citizens' wives, brawling with any who opposed them. Now there seemed scarce a trace of them abroad, almost every man I passed belonged to the castle. "Oh ho," thought I to myself, "so my lord keeps his men in ward. Then is something afoot indeed, and the good Bishop means mischief."

The Provost received me somewhat coldly. He was disappointed, I fear, at the insignificance of the messenger, he had looked to receive his token from the hands of Fitz-Clare himself. It was not my place to tell the worthy man the Earl but half trusted that good knight, so I held my peace, begging only to know if he had any word for me.

"Nothing, nothing," he cried testily—"that is, not as yet; I must wait until my news be sure. My lord has bidden us of the city to a great banquet to-morrow; something of import is in the wind, I doubt not—he is little used to be so gracious. Come to me after, say at three of the clock—I may, perchance, have an answer to your letter, if I can trust you with it"; and he muttered something under his breath of affairs of State and beardless boys which I pretended not to hear.

The Provost had been surly enough, but his words showed I might need to ride at short notice, and I took measures accordingly. Fitz-Clare and his train—I, of course, among them—were quartered in the castle, and I gave orders to Gundulf to watch well the horses that we might be able to depart at any moment.

"Then, by your leave, my lord," he returned directly, "I will find some excuse to change their stalls. It is too public here to bring them forth without questioning, and he rides safest, methinks, who slips away."

"Be that as you will, Gundulf; only see that they be ready without delay when I call for them."

After that I troubled no more, knowing how well I could trust my faithful follower.

Next day, after dinner, I was lounging on the battlements over the gateway, passing the hours in idle fashion with some of my fellow-squires until it should be time for me to wait upon the Provost. The gateway overlooked both town and castle, so that we could gaze at our choice upon courtyard within or street without, and it was seldom there was not something going on to pleasure us. Thus, now, in one corner of the courtyard were a couple of ragged jongleurs, one man lightly twanging his harp, whilst the other played with balls, reminding me of my old companions, and causing me to think of the little maid. The dexterity of the fellow was something marvellous; he far outdid Jocellus, and the archers and grooms crowded round, applauding loudly, whilst we looked on from above. We were still absorbed in watching him when Hugo Fitz-Clare came down the steps from one of the upper chambers, followed by his armourer, whom he was rating fiercely.

"Turn quick, ere we be seen," cried one, a youth who was but just out of his pageship, "lest

my lord call us down to him. He has been in a hot temper all day. My shoulders ache yet from the drubbing he gave me this morning."

"Perchance it is because he has not been invited to the Bishop's banquet," cried another, as we crossed to the other side.

"That is scarce likely, seeing the Bishop entertains but the citizens and such-like. I marvel, rather, that Henry of Blois condescends so far. And besides, my lord is to sup at the palace to-night. The Bishop has something for my lord's own ear; I heard the messenger say so myself."

"And prate of it afterward before all the world," exclaimed an older one who had not yet spoken. "No wonder your shoulders are sore. Pray, if my lord come to hear of it, that his stirrup-leather be not close at hand, or I warrant you they will ache for a week."

"If he do hear, I shall know who told him," retorted the boy angrily; and how the quarrel would have ended I know not. Most like in blows, only there chanced at that moment a sudden interruption.

"See! See who comes yonder, riding as with outstretched wings!" was the cry; and with one consent we all craned forward, forgetting everything but the sight before us.

It was indeed a strange-looking figure we now saw advancing. A man riding at full speed, wearing a long furred coat, blown about in such grotesque fashion by the wind, one could not help bursting into laughter. One moment it would be

flying wide, truly, as they said, as if the rider had wings; the next it would suddenly drop, enveloping horse and man alike, until I wonder they came not to a stand.

"Faith, I know that mantle," cried Milo of Rutherford, he who had rebuked the page for prating. "I rode close behind when the Empress entered Winchester. By St. Edward, it is the Provost himself, and it is not gone noon—the banquet can scarce be over. What brings him hither in such a hurry?"

It was indeed the Provost, as now that he came nearer I could see for myself. He had quitted the palace in such haste he had not stayed even to gather up his robes.

"Our Lady preserve us, but there is something afoot;" and we raced below, almost tumbling over one another in our eagerness to be foremost.

The drawbridge had been down all the morning, and by the time we reached it the warder had thrown the gate open, so that the Provost rode on with unslackened speed until within the castle walls. Then he pulled up short, and, after a keen glance, which seemed to take in everything—the sentry looking down from the battlements, the men still loitering in the courtyard, our puzzled faces as we gathered round—muttered with an air of satisfaction:

"St. Swithin be praised, I am in time; the old fox hath not forestalled me here." Then ordering the drawbridge to be raised and the portcullis low-

ered with all speed, he called for the captain of the garrison, and spoke with him aside.

When the captain presently hurried away I drew near, as if to help the Provost with his robe, at which he was now tugging impatiently. I was in hopes he might have a word for me; but instead, he waved me aside as if I had been one of his apprentices, and went into the castle with Fitz-Clare.

"A lesson to you, my squire of dames, not to proffer service to a fat citizen," cried Milo, laughing at my rebuff. "Best keep to your mistress, my silken page; her tire-woman will spirit you more gently."

His gibe was half earnest; he was still sore from his quarrel with his fellow; but I only laughed, and soon, eager to find out the news, they all dispersed.

As I stood for a moment alone, Gundulf, who had been watching his opportunity, came to my side.

"Shall I make the horses ready, my lord?" he asked in a low tone. "Think you to be riding soon?"

"It is hard to say, Gundulf. If the Provost chooses Fitz-Clare for his messenger methinks there will be time enough; the good knight is not wont to hurry himself. Still, there can be no harm in making ready. I will follow within—though the Provost was so surly just now he may yet send for me after Hugo has left him."

Neither the Provost nor Fitz-Clare could be seen in the hall, but I knew the little private cham-

ber where they would be, and, taking up my post near the door, climbed into a high window-niche to escape observation. I could hear nothing, the door was fast closed, and the walls were thick; but at least I should be at hand if the Provost called for me.

There seemed a long time of waiting; then the door was flung open violently, and Hugo Fitz-Clare strode out. He came with a great appearance of anger, stamping his feet and swearing big oaths, yet the instant the door swung to his face changed; he broke into a fit of silent laughter. He did not observe me, and walked off, not knowing he had been watched. After that I did not hesitate, but, jumping down, slipped into the room. The Provost did not perceive me at first; he was seated with his back to the door; but from the words to which he was giving utterance there was no pretence about his anger. Then he turned quickly and saw me.

"How now, sirrah, what brings you here?" he thundered.

"Did you not bid me wait upon you at three of the clock?" I returned, with courtesy scant as his own. "It is not yet the hour, but I thought perchance you might have need of me."

"I may have need enough, but if you are like your master, little good shall I get from you, I trow."

"Hugo Fitz-Clare is not my master. I serve the Lady of England and Robert the Earl," I in-

terrupted; but he went on as if he heard me not:

"My lord can not ride to-day, forsooth, his horses need shoeing, his armour hath come unwrought, his men are scattered, and I know not what other excuses. Perdition take him for a slothful knave. He will ride forth to-morrow—aye, to-morrow—and by then, maybe, they will hold the road. William of Ypres is not to be caught napping."

He paused here for very fury, and I broke in:

"Perchance the knight prefers rather to keep his tryst with the Bishop. He sups at the palace to-night; my lord of Winchester hath something for his private ear."

The Provost looked up startled. "Oh ho, is that how the wind blows? Fool that I am, I might have known it. By St. Swithin, an he go out he shall not come in again. I want no traitors here."

"Then, good Master Provost, since the man hath failed you, why not try the beardless boy? I will not wait until to-morrow. Give me letter or message to the Earl, and it shall reach his hands, I vow, ere midnight."

He looked at me coldly, though I could see my speech moved him.

"Brave words, brave words, but small warrant, I doubt, for performance. What canst do to show thou art in earnest?"

"My horse is waiting for me even now," I re-

plied. “ Give but the word and my foot is in stirrup.”

“ You would ride alone?”

“ With one follower only, a faithful servant who would carry on the message should aught befall me.”

“ Then, in Heaven’s name, have it your own way. I shall know soon enough if you fail me! I have no time to write; I must see to provisioning the castle; we are but poorly victualled if it come to a siege. Tell my lord the Earl that Henry of Blois plays us false, and that ere long the banner of Stephen will float from Wolvesey Palace. It would have been raised here also, but I was too quick for him. Tell my lord, the Bishop bade the chief men of the city to a banquet this day, and there unfolded his purpose. I left them listening like sheep whilst I slipped forth before the gates were barred, and galloped off to make sure of the castle. Tell him also, that if he come not at once, the fortress will be lost to him. Stephen’s general, William of Ypres, is leading his Flemish hirelings hither as fast as they can march, and we have no force to withstand them. Now go, and Heaven be your guide. If my message reach the Earl in time, I will crave pardon for distrusting you.”

“ If it do not, I am prisoner or dead man,” I cried quickly; and without another word I left him.

CHAPTER XIV.

I SEEK ROBERT OF GLOUCESTER.

I MADE all haste into the courtyard, but at first looked around in vain for Gundulf. The scene was now much changed. The jongleurs had disappeared, men were hurrying to and fro intent upon their various duties, and a half-score of archers were busied about a couple of waggons they were to take into the city for provision. The drawbridge was upon the very point of being lowered to let them out; Fitz-Clare and his followers were not visible; there could not be better opportunity for me to slip away unseen. Where was Gundulf? I thought impatiently, for I knew not where to seek him, or in what corner he had bestowed the horses. Surely he was not going to fail me!

Even as the fear entered my mind, Gundulf came forth from behind the second waggon. He was mounted on Dickon, leading my horse by the bridle. Without a word I sprang into my seat, and we fell in with the escort as if belonging to them. The Provost came forth to give some last orders as we were setting forth, and his grim start of surprise on perceiving me was a sight to see. He had not be-

lieved me after all; he had thought my boast of being ready mere idle vaunting. He made no sign, but I could see he was well pleased, and, taking it as a good omen, I went on my way stout-hearted.

We rode beside the waggons until they were well within the city streets; then I turned and made for the northern gate. The west postern was our nearest; but it was too close to the castle walls, and I cared not for my late friends to know I was quitting the city. On our way I told Gundulf what I had heard from the Provost, and how it behoved us to reach Oxford with all speed.

"If William of Ypres is at hand, my lord," he replied, "needs must that we ride warily; he ever sends out small parties to scour the roads around. If you think fit, we will quit the main track for a time, and take a by-path until we are well on the way. It is somewhat rough, but it will keep us out of his road. As for reaching Oxford ere midnight that is no great thing, provided only that the beasts hold out. I can answer for Dickon here, I know not so much of the horse you are bestriding. If we can find a fresh mount on the road, it will be well. We turn off here, my lord. By your leave, I will ride first to show the way."

It was by a lonely track indeed that Gundulf led me, across bare down and heathy waste, into thick forest of holly and yew, and oak and beechen dells; where the trees met above our heads, and the horses footed it softly on fallen leaves. So close in places was the leafy screen, the setting sun could not even

pierce through to glint upon my armour. When the forest ceased we came upon more miles of open waste, desolate land without a sign, save one, of human habitation. This was in a little hollow between two hills, where we rode through the remains of what had been a fair hamlet beside a flowing stream. A few of the rude huts were still partly standing, but the greater number were in ruins, whilst the fields around, which had once been carefully tilled, were fast going back to waste.

"What has chanced to the people here, Gundulf?" I asked. "How comes it that the place is left desolate?"

"It is the wars, my lord," he answered gloomily. "It is naught but the wars. I told you long ago that the poor churls have to pay for all. They sowed here, and they planted; the fields were green with oats and rye. But their lord was for Stephen, so Earl Robert's men came down upon them, and set fire to the crops and houses as you see. If Heaven grant not the wars to cease, soon there will be no corn grown in all England; already have the people been perishing for lack of food. No wonder they have to bring over Flemish dogs to fight their battles, ravening wolves who—hist! what is that?" And he drew rein quickly, holding up his hand for silence.

Gundulf's ears were sharper than mine, for at first I could hear nothing. There was the cry of a night-hawk sailing above our heads, a distant barking from some restless dog, a rustling of the leaves

in the rising wind. But cause for alarm I could find none, until Gundulf said once more:

“Hist again; listen now.”

Then at last I distinguished a faint sound not belonging to the night, which grew plainer to my ears every moment. Yet for the life of me I could not tell what it was.

“What is it, Gundulf?” I whispered.

He laughed.

“Listen yet once more, my lord; they are far off as yet. Presently it will sound clearer.”

But even as he spoke, a sudden gust of wind blew the sound my way, and I knew it. A low rumbling that might have been taken for distant thunder—the tramping of many horses—mingled with sharper sounds—the ringing clatter of steel.

“By St. Edmund, it is the tramp of men-at-arms!” I cried aloud. “I can hear the clank of their armour.”

“Ay, 'tis so,” Gundulf returned calmly. “We did well to turn aside. The Earl's men on the march would scarce come that way. 'Tis a troop, I doubt not, belonging to William of Ypres. We can ride on; they will not hear us—they make too much noise themselves—and they will be far off ere we strike the road.”

We heard the tramp of them nearer and nearer, until I thought surely they must become aware of us, though Gundulf rode on unheeding; then they were past, the sounds slowly died away, and all was quiet again. It was near upon fifty miles from

Winchester to Oxford, by the way we went; and, though we had not quitted the castle until hard upon the third hour after noon, I calculated that with good fortune I might easily keep my word, and come at the Earl before midnight. Had we been able to obtain a fresh horse we could have done it in less time; but, though we tried once, they brought out such sorry nags I chose rather to keep my own. Thus we were compelled perforce to stay now and again to give the beasts breathing space, and to go gently when the way was rough, lest a sudden fall should undo us. At least that is what chanced to me—Dickon was surefooted enough and did not need much easing.

All went well for the greater part of the way, even until we were within a few miles of our goal. True, the horses were much blown; I had to ply spur unceasingly, but the distance was so short now, I made sure all was safe.

“We shall do it!” I cried joyfully. “The crabbed Provost will have to crave my pardon as he promised.” But as the words left my lips my horse stopped short so suddenly it is a marvel I went not over his head. I recovered my seat in a moment; but on attempting to spur the brute on again, found he had fallen dead lame. I strove with him all I knew, but he could scarce walk. I fell into a fine rage; I had so set my mind on getting the better of the Provost, and he would style me a bragging boy after all.

“Trouble not yourself, my lord,” cried Gun-

dulf; "there is no reason why you should not keep your word. Leave the horse to me and take Dickon. There is still some strength in him, and your weight is lighter than mine."

"I will make it lighter still," I exclaimed. "Unbuckle my corselet, cast that helmet to the ground, off with this heavy sword." I was not fully armed, and Gundulf had carried my helmet at his saddlebow; but I had enough mail about me to make me ride heavily.

"And if night-birds be about, my lord? It is scarce safe to ride unarmed."

"I fear them not. I keep my knife, and my jerkin is stout enough to turn away an ill-aimed arrow; be sure I shall not give them time to shoot straight. I pray Dickon do not fail me. If all go well I will send help to you when I reach the gate; it will be a sure token I am safe." And with that I was off, Dickon, freshened by his short rest and my lighter weight, bearing me along bravely.

I scarce used either whip or spur, yet we reached the city soon enough even for my impatience. I was not kept long at the gates; the guard were on the watch for news from Winchester; and, after ordering assistance to be sent to Gundulf, I clattered through the streets to the castle, and soon stood before my lord. The Earl was in bed and asleep; but when told of my arrival he waited not even to dress, he had me brought to his bedside. I gave my message, telling all that had chanced exactly

as the Provost had bidden me, and it moved him to hot anger against the Bishop.

"Now is my lord of Winchester thrice perjured," he cried bitterly. "Scarce is it three months since he swore allegiance to my sister. It was a bad day for us when she angered those London citizens. But all is not lost yet. We still have Stephen fast in hold; and, thanks to the Provost, the Bishop may find his claws clipped. Since you left, David of Scotland is with us again. He has brought a strong troop with him. Perchance Henry of Blois may turn yet once more when he hears of it. As for you, Alain Totinge, go now and rest awhile; for when we march at dawn you shall carry the banner before the Empress. I will tell her of your zeal, and she shall reward you. We have not so many faithful followers that we can afford to neglect them."

At that moment, they struck midnight upon the castle bell.

"I crave but one boon, my lord," I cried. "That you tell the Provost with your own lips his message reached you ere midnight."

"Set you store by that?" And he smiled grimly, as if he understood. "The worthy man misliked it, I fear, that my messenger was but a strippling. By my patron saint I will not fail to tell him; it is a small thing to ask. And for the beast you have lost, you shall have one out of my own stables. Send thither before we start; it will be ready for you. Now begone, and order in my var-

lets. I must be up and doing; there is no time to lose."

I had my good horse, which truly was all I had expected; and later, when to my triumph the Provost kept his word and craved my pardon, he gave me some silver pieces for Gundulf. But from the Empress got I nothing, not even a gracious word. I cared not, I was the Earl's man, whatever befell; but it was not thus the good Queen Maud treated her followers, else had they scarce held her so faithfully.

When I left the Earl I went to see that Dickon had been well cared for; then returned to hall until it should be time to wait upon my mistress. I had not meant to sleep, but was so wearied by my long ride that scarce had I sat down, when Gundulf was shaking my shoulder, and, lo! it was day-dawn.

"I have brought your sword and mail, my lord," he said. "Will it please you to put them on? The Empress is presently starting."

I was on my feet in an instant. "You are back, Gundulf? That is well. You know that I was in time?"

"I had little doubt about that when I saw how Dickon made off with you. The other beast will not be much the worse. I brought him in slowly, and a few days' rest will put him on his feet again."

"Then shall I have the spare horse you so much wanted for me; the Earl has given me one but now from his own stables;" and whilst he was arming me, I told him how gracious my lord had been.

“ That is good, you will make a brave show before your fellows such as I love to see. The rascal grooms talk of naught but their masters’ riches. Now, I shall be able to brag me with the rest of them.”

“ Nay, brag not lest there come a fall, Gundulf,” I answered, laughing. “ But have done quick, and let me be gone. I am to bear the banner before my royal mistress.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE BISHOP'S RIDDLE.

It was drawing toward sundown when we came in sight of the spires of Winchester, and whilst we were yet far off the Empress—who would not believe that the Bishop meant to forsake her—dispatched a herald in advance summoning him to a conference at the castle. She had matters of import to impart, was her word, and she prayed him to attend her. Then she rode on, accompanied only by Earl Robert and a few knights, leaving the body of her troops to follow at leisure.

The herald was not long in returning, he met us still on the way; but to the lady's gracious message the Bishop sent for answer only the two words, "*Parabo me.*"

"*Parabo me!* I will prepare myself!" cried Robert the Earl. "My lord of Winchester will prepare himself! Now who can read to us the Bishop's riddle?" And he drew aside for a space with Milo of Hereford and another, to confer together with the Empress.

Yet did my lord Bishop not leave us long in doubt as to his meaning. We had halted at a short

distance to await the issue of their discussion, when Robert D'Oilgi, warden of Oxford, who rode with us, exclaimed in startled tones:

"What make you, friends, of that cloud of dust yonder?"

"It is a body of horsemen riding at full gallop," returned another, after a long look. "If there were not also a cloud by the way we have just come, showing that our own men are close at hand, I much fear it might portend evil."

We all turned with one accord, and lo! it was true. There was a second cloud nearer than the first. We could catch the echoes of the ringing steel. As we watched I doubted much in my heart whether those advancing so rapidly were indeed our friends, but it was not for me to speak. I was only among them because I bore the banner; it would have been presumption for me to interfere. But yet a few minutes and the doubt spread to others.

"By our Lady, those be not our men!" cried D'Oilgi. "They are the Bishop's troops; they have ridden round to cut us off. They mean to capture the Empress; it was ill done of her to ride forward with so few. Haste thee now, my lord of Gloucester, the foe are upon us! Quick for the castle; it is our only chance!"

Matilda did not wait for a second word; she was becoming used to these sudden surprises; and, setting spurs to her horse, galloped ahead of all, we following close behind her. It was as stiff a race as ever I took part in, they were so near upon our

heels. Had they overtaken us we had all been captured for a certainty, and the fate of England might have changed. They did not quit until we were beneath the walls of the citadel, when at last very reluctantly they drew rein, lamenting much, I doubt not, their ill luck. And thus it was that my lord of Winchester showed the Empress what he meant by his message: "I will prepare myself."

After this, men gathered to the Bishop's standard every day, and directly he felt strong enough he openly raised the banner of Stephen. Nor did the Empress remain idle. She summoned her partisans by proclamation, and the earls and barons who yet remained faithful to her cause mustered their followers in great force, until all England was there in arms, and the struggle began in earnest. Yet was it the Bishop's men who destroyed the city. Earl Robert had more regard for it. "What use to burn the town?" he said. "It will not avail us aught, and will scarce teach the citizens to serve us better." But William of Ypres had no such scruples, and my lord Bishop retired to his abbey of Walthamstow directly he knew the Empress had reached the castle in safety, leaving the freebooter to work his will.

They cast fireballs from the high tower of Wolvesey upon the houses where many of our men were quartered, and St. Mary's Abbey for nuns was soon burnt to the ground. This was but the beginning; the high wind carried the flames across the Cyp, and the north quarters were soon ablaze even to the

walls. And this continued day after day. The unfortunate citizens did what they could to subdue the flames; but as fast as they were extinguished in one place, they would break out in another, so ceaselessly did the ruthless Flemings hurl their burning brands. In the end the city was reduced almost to ashes, and the people were houseless. St. Swithin's Cathedral and the buildings around alone escaped, and this the monks owed to Earl Robert. It stood so close to Wolvesey that the fireballs passed over; had my lord but once cast missiles from his side, as he well might have done, nothing could have saved it. I thought of Walter the merchant's brave words when I looked upon Winchester in its desolation.

And, besides the fire, there was ever fighting in the streets, perpetual skirmishes, attended with great losses on both sides. The castle was too strong to be assaulted, else had their greater numbers, perhaps, undone us; for all too soon the garrison of the palace was strongly reinforced, Stephen's wife, Queen Maud, marching in at the head of a large body of Londoners and men of Kent. But if they could not assault us, they could reduce us by famine. They sent out roving bands far and near, and carefully watched every road to prevent provisions reaching us.

At this crisis Earl Robert called a council of the chief men, and it was decided by common consent that a strong garrison should be placed within the town of Andover, and a fort constructed at a

place called Wherwell, where was a nunnery built by Queen Elfrida after the death of Edward the Martyr. It was close upon the banks of the river Test, hard by the ford; if we were to obtain supplies at all it was necessary that this passage should be well guarded. To my joy, I was allowed to join the expedition. I was tired of being cooped up within walls, and, though I struck many a good blow in the streets, it was inglorious work at best; little honour was to be gained from it. Now to build a fort at Wherwell was a work of some danger; the enemy would be sure to attack us; we should have to fight hard to hold our own.

Forth we rode, about three hundred strong, under command of a gallant knight, one Haimo of Ivri, to whose especial service I was attached. We set to work with a will, and in a very short time erected a small fort from whence we could sally forth to protect the ford. Scarce a bow-shot from our building, and close upon the great forest of Harewood, stood the peaceful nunnery I have already spoken of, wherein holy women offered up their orisons night and day. We laughed a little as we noted how fast they kept their gates barred against us, and one said to another that if the foe came in force the poor ladies were likely to be rudely fluttered. Had I guessed who was among them I should scarce have taken the matter so lightly.

We had slight alarms now and again. Small bodies of horsemen made raids on the country round, but when they saw our numbers and the

preparations we had made to receive them, they kept at a safe distance.

At last, late one night, when the walls of our fort were not more than half-raised, came a breathless messenger bringing word that Andover was burnt to the ground. Our men had fought right gallantly, but the foe were over strong; they had been forced to yield. This was bad enough, but there was more to come. William of Ypres, with a chosen band of his hireling Flemings, was marching directly to attack us.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BURNING OF THE CONVENT.

LITTLE rest had we that night, but though we looked for the foe by early dawn it was nearer noon before they appeared. They laughed at our half-built walls, and called upon us to surrender without further ado, taunting us with the fate of those at Andover. But Haimo of Ivri had given his word to my lord the Earl, and meant to hold the post to the last. Then without further delay they made their first onset, assaulting us on every side.

Little recks it to tell how time after time we beat them back, whilst arrows flew thick and fast, entering by every crevice. At last the stones we had so hastily raised began to crumble about our ears. Many of our brave friends were slain, and if we did not wish to be buried beneath the ruins, it was high time for the rest of us to be gone. Yet were we still unconquered; Haimo had another stronghold to fall back upon.

“To the nunnery!” he shouted aloud. “Ride you first, my Lord of Lowedale, with Alain of Tottinge and Dennis, my banner-bearer, and half a score spearmen. Stay for nothing, but cut your

way through as best you can, then hold the convent gate till all have entered. You, my comrades, good knights and true, will lead the main body; I will guard the rear. Keep together, and we will foil them yet. If any dastard turns to flee, cut him down!"

The enemy had drawn off a little, expecting us to surrender, when suddenly we sallied out, cutting and hewing our way through them. They were so taken by surprise that our task at first was easy; then presently rallying, they gathered from all parts of the field, and broke through our ranks until we were cut quite in two. We of the foremost pressed on until between us and the convent we came upon a small body of spearmen standing side by side, holding their shields close together as a solid wall. There was no other way, we must yield or ride them down. "Follow me!" cried De Lowedale, a valorous knight and one of the wealthiest of the earl's party, and, dropping the reins on his horse's neck, he wielded his heavy sword in both hands, whilst I, riding close beside, held his shield before him. At his fierce onslaught the line wavered, then broke; another minute and we were in the midst of them. It was too close quarters to use spears; mace and battle-axe were plied instead. We were nearly through, the gates were close at hand, when a sword-thrust pierced De Lowedale's horse, bringing the brave knight to the ground.

"I yield me," he cried, waving me off as I would have sprung to help him. "Ride you on,

Alain of Totinge, and hold the gate; remember the words of Sir Haimo."

As the foe gathered round intent upon securing so valuable a prisoner unhurt, for great would be his ransom, we won our way through to the convent. It was then for the first time I discovered how our troops had been separated. Our little band alone had arrived, the others were still battling on the plain, split up into groups, each man fighting fiercely for his own hand. But they took heart when they saw there was place of refuge, so that now and again a knight and his followers would succeed in forcing their way through and joining us. But many were killed, more were taken prisoners, and ever Haimo of Ivri held the rear. Happily his armour was so covered with dust and blood the enemy did not guess his rank; William of Ypres was seeking him further afield. Yet had he enough to contend against. He did all that a brave leader could, but now he was near defenceless. One of his squires had already yielded himself prisoner, and whilst I gazed an arrow struck the other, piercing his eye even to the brain. He must have been dead ere he fell.

And now was Haimo left alone. Though hard beset he would not yield, but still fought on valourously. The hot blood rushed to my cheeks with shame that I should be in safety behind the gates whilst so brave a knight was in dire peril outside. And not one of his friends gave any heed to him. Some were gathering their followers together with-

in, others were engaged in noisy consultation, not one had a thought to spare for their leader. I turned to old Dennis, the banner-bearer, who, the blood flowing from a gash in his temple, was calmly binding up his hurt beside me.

"Canst keep the gate as my lord bade whilst I go to his help yonder?" I cried breathlessly. "You must not close it lest any of our men draw near, but for your life suffer no foe to enter."

"Trust me, my young lord," he answered gruffly, and catching up his ponderous battle-axe, for Dennis was a mighty man of great strength, he placed himself before the opening. I called a couple of spearmen to support me, and with Gundulf at my heels we rode forth.

The space before the convent was comparatively clear; for when the foe saw we had attained shelter they left off pursuit, and turned their attention to those scattered about the field. Thus it chanced I was able to ride straight to my lord, and arrived but just in time. He had overthrown many, but the spearmen were now closing in around; worse still, two young knights, burning to distinguish themselves, were bearing down upon him full tilt. I shouted a warning cry, and my lord of Ivri spurred his horse and pushed forward to meet the foremost; the attack of the other I diverted to myself. I had lost my spear long since, and he made at me feeling sure of victory. But just ere we met I caused my horse to swerve aside, his lance glanced harmlessly by, and, rising in the stirrups, I smote him with all

my might. Such was the force of my blow that his helm was cloven asunder, he fell to the ground like a log, and his horse dashed riderless away.

Sir Haimo, already worn and weary from his exertions, had not fared so well. He had disabled his adversary, but in turn had been overthrown, and, cumbered by his armour, could not rise. Gundulf reached him first, though I was not long after, and together we got him to horse again. Yet was he sore wounded; when we set him up he had no strength to stay upright, but leant forward swaying downwards until it was as much as Gundulf could do to hold him. Nevertheless he kept his wits, and knew well what was going on, whispering hoarsely now and again to direct us. I had but two to help me now, and we had all our work cut out to keep back the foe. We were hard set; but as yet there were no horsemen, only men on foot, and our stout mail withstood their blows. We kept them at bay until Gundulf had near reached the convent, then one of the Flemings, wise too late, sent his spear through my good horse. The poor brute staggered and fell, but I jumped from stirrup before he touched ground, and, whirling my sword above my head, shouted our battle-cry, "A Totinge! a Totinge!" and attacked them fiercely. My rush made them recoil, and my two followers seconded me well; still, they were so many that we must have perished had not Gundulf, having hurried my lord inside the gate, sallied forth again with Dennis to our aid. It was high time. I lost both my brave

men; one turned and fled, the other was struck down; but I caught at Gundulf's stirrup—there was no time to get to horse—Dennis clutched my collar, and, dragging me between them, they galloped into safety. My lord of Ivri had refused to quit the gate until we returned. They had laid him down just within, and, as I fell breathless to the ground beside him, he cried, “Well done, boy, well done! If I live to see the Earl again I will tell him how you have borne yourself this day.”

We carried him into the convent, where the Abbess was so wrath at having her precincts invaded she would at first scarce allow the nuns to tend him. The knights in making preparations for defence had already exasperated her sorely. The good lady, however, soon relented, and before I left my commander, she herself was directing the binding up of his wounds, whilst another ancient nun prepared a strong cordial to revive him. I was somewhat hurt myself; but I would not trouble the good women, and was turning away to seek help from Gundulf, when a soft touch was laid upon my arm, and there before me stood Ela. I was so astonished I could not speak, but stood still, gazing blankly upon her.

“ You are still Brother Simple, then? ” she said, with a saucy smile. “ Yet, when I marked you in the field just now I thought you had gained wit.”

“ How came you here? ” I stammered. “ I thought you safe in London.”

"Good lack, do you think none can travel but you, Brother Simple?" Then her face falling, "Nay, I do ill to jest; there has been sore trouble, Alain, since we parted. Good Master Gilbert, the old man who was so kind to me, was taken with the sweating sickness, and died in three days. Then his son was master, and the young mistress was not fond of me. She has an ill tongue, she could not leave even Dame Joan in peace. So your good friend Walter the merchant made suit for me for a place in the household of Queen Maud. I fear, by the way, brother, you have chosen the wrong side; all men say the Countess of Anjou has no chance. The queen had already set out for Winchester, but part of her retinue were yet to follow, and she left orders that I should accompany them. Dame Joan came with me; she has a sister in this convent of Wherwell, and purposed to end her days here. We turned aside from the road but for a time, just to place the dame in safety, when lo! our passage was barred by the coming of your troops, and our following stole away at night to seek assistance. It was my friends you have been fighting, good brother, and some hard knocks you have given them, I trow. But whilst I am prating, you are wounded, the blood is trickling down fast. Oh, why did you not tell me?" and with white face and shaking fingers she strove to undo my corselet.

"Nay, it is nothing," I said, trying to reassure her, for indeed it was but a prick or two. But the maid would not be content until she had seen my

hurts laid bare, and helped to bind them up with her own hands.

By this time there arose a mighty commotion within the building. The nuns were running here and there in consternation and affright; the foe without swarming to attack us; our men mustering for the defence.

"Saw ye ever the like in peaceful convent?" cried the lady Abbess, wringing her hands. "I will forth to my lord Bishop and he shall solemnly ban ye with bell and candle." Then again as we were striving to strengthen the walls, she sallied forth upon us in most unholy fury, reproaching us as cravens and niddering Saxons because we had not fought it out in the open field. And indeed the good lady's anger was soon justified, when the Flemings took to casting blazing brands, and the convent began to burst into flames around us. Yet, strange to say, when the danger became extreme the courage of the lady Abbess returned to her. She ceased railing, and, ordering the great bell to be rung for prayers, walked at the head of her nuns into the chapel. Ela, supporting the trembling footsteps of Dame Joan, brought up the rear. The poor ladies were quaking with terror, but the Abbess had them well in hand, and presently above the din we heard their shrill voices chanting the vesper psalms.

We strove to stay the flames, but burning brands came thick and fast. The convent was doomed, naught could save it. We were beaten again and

there was nothing for it but to yield us prisoners. So the gates were thrown open, and, as knights and men rushed out pell-mell together to surrender at discretion, the Flemings, flushed with triumph, poured in. Haimo of Ivri had been carried into the chapel when the assault commenced; and hither many of us fled at the last, some to seek safety on the steps of the sanctuary, others to stand by their lord.

The psalms had sunk to silence now; the Abbess prostrate before the altar, was absorbed in prayer, the nuns striving to follow her example. It was upon this quiet scene that we burst with noisy uproar, crying: "All is lost, the convent burns!" The poor sisters lost their wits entirely, and would no longer listen to the Abbess, who, raising the great cross, entreated them to follow her in orderly array. They rushed forth, filling the air with shrieks and lamentations, and close upon our heels came the foe, mailed soldiers trampling recklessly on the floor of that consecrated house of prayer. In one corner men were struck down and butchered even while they cried for mercy; in another, prisoners were dragged forth and bound with thongs, to be held to ransom.

Yet did the confusion help a few of us. The church was so full of smoke that none noticed a little group behind the great screen where Sir Haimo had been set to rest. The burgher's widow and Ela were kneeling close beside him; throughout the uproar neither of them had stirred. Besides,

there were Dennis, the banner-bearer, and three of my lord's followers, with Gundulf and myself. The old woman held the maid fast with one shaking hand, otherwise she seemed unmoved.

"Ela, Ela, the flames are coming fast!" I cried. "Why did you not fly with the good sisters?" The roof was now all ablaze, even the Flemings were falling back.

"Dame Joan forbade it," she answered calmly. "She says, 'Better perish here than to trust to those ravening wolves outside.' And she is right. They may respect the nuns because of their holy habit—little mercy would they have on me, I know."

"But they are your own friends," I expostulated, though indeed there was much truth in what she said.

Dame Joan shook her head vigorously.

"Friends or foes," she quavered, "it is all the same when men are drunk with battle. I have seen a town given up to the sack, and I know. To your prayers, child, to your prayers; Heaven is more merciful than men."

Scarce had the words left her lips when a burning mass came down almost upon us; the flame darted out and set Ela's dress ablaze.

"Help, help—we burn!" cried one of the men, making as though he would rush forth, only Dennis caught him such a buffet in the mouth that he fell back, the rest of his cry choked in blood. Fortunately, his words were unheard amid the commo-

tion, for the lower end of the church was still the scene of combat.

I flew to Ela's side, and crushed out the fire with my hands before it harmed her, and whilst still tearing off the burnt fragments, I heard her whisper softly:

"There is a little door behind the third pillar yonder, though I know not whither it leads."

I needed no second telling, but ran off without a word to see for myself; if it but gave on to the turmoil outside, I would say naught. The door was hardly to be seen at first, the smoke was so thick; had there not come a sudden burst of flame, I must have missed it. It was fast closed, but my knife soon pushed back the lock, and I passed into a narrow passage within the wall where as yet the fire had not reached. After a space came another door, bolted from within, which turned out to be—
holy St. Edmund be praised!—a little postern in the outer wall with nothing but a strip of meadow betwixt us and the forest. We had only to make a rush for the woods, and we should be in safety.

CHAPTER XVII.

I PLIGHT MY TROTH.

I WAS back again almost before they had missed me. "There is a way out," I cried, "if only you follow quietly;" and I gave them hasty directions. I went first to lead the way, Dennis followed bearing his master upon his sturdy shoulders, then came Ela and Dame Joan under charge of Gundulf, the spearmen bringing up the rear. Our great danger was lest the foe should spy us as we crossed the meadow; for although it was now growing dusk, so long had the struggle lasted, yet the flames lighted up all around. Fortunately the little postern was somewhat hid by a tangle of bush the fire had not reached, which came right up to the wall. From behind this I gazed out upon the meadow, and when presently the wind blew a dense cloud of smoke our way, I gave the word to rush across. Gundulf caught up Dame Joan in his arms, and Ela ran swiftly by his side.

"Think not of me, see to my lord!" she cried, as I drew near to aid her. "Dennis is staggering like to fall, and the others make for the wood without helping him."

It was as she said; the bannerman, owing to his wounds, had not his proper strength, and I ran to his side with a prayer on my lips that Ela might escape. For already had a cry been raised after us; the smoke had lifted, we were seen.

But the wood was close now; a few more strides and its friendly shades concealed us, Gundulf and Ela, Heaven be thanked, close at my heels. The enemy cared not to pursue us among the trees; a few fugitives on foot were scarce worth the trouble. Had they known Sir Haimo was of our number we should scarce have got off so easily.

Soon as we were all together again we hastened to put some greater distance between us and the foe, and, under guidance of one of the men, who said he knew the forest well, hurried on until it grew too dark to see. Then we halted in a grassy glade close beside a running brook; and here by light of a blazing brand we bound up my lord's wounds anew, and gave him water to quench his thirst. He had suffered somewhat in body from our rough handling; but he cared not for that, he was well satisfied not to be prisoner to William of Ypres.

"If we reach Winchester in safety, Alain of Totinge," he said loud enough for all to hear, "I will pray my lord of Gloucester to dub you knight without further delay. I myself will present you with horse and arms. But for you I had been prisoner even now; you have fairly won your spurs."

I flushed with pride as I strove to stammer forth

my thanks. It would, indeed, be great honour to be knighted before full age; the pity was I had done so little to deserve it.

We were minded to stay in the glade until the moon rose, and Gundulf presently relieved me of my armour, for I was not a little weary. Then, after asking leave, he stole off to seek for Dickon.

"He will come if I call him, my lord," he said. "I turned him loose ere we entered the convent. But it would scarce be safe to whistle for him here —we know not how many may hear us."

When Gundulf had departed, I laid me down to rest hard by Ela and Dame Joan, who were sitting a little apart in a hollow, screened from the wind by a fringe of brambles. The dame was slumbering peacefully, her head pillow'd upon a heap of leaves, and presently Ela came and sat by my side, and we discoursed together in whispers. This night first taught me I loved Ela; that if I could, I would win her for my wife. She had been so brave, so cool, when the other women were crying and shrieking; she had faced death so undauntedly; never a maid in Christendom had done the like. All my heart went out to her in joy and longing; I knew at last that no one in the world could be so much to me as Ela.

I was shamefaced at first, and when I would have spoken she put me aside easily, guessing ever what I meant to say before it came. But I was not to be stayed for that, else had I been simple indeed. I seemed to fall in with her humour when she began

to speak of the old days with Jocellus; then suddenly I caught her hand in mine, saying: "If my lord of Ivri keeps his word, if indeed I gain my spurs, will you take me for your knight, Ela?"

She hesitated for a moment, then answered in so gentle a tone it took off the sharp edge of her speech.

"Now there we have good Brother Simple again who would take for his lady a poor maid like to me. If you have won your spurs, you will still be landless. You must keep the Earl's favour, and in good time he will give you a wealthy heiress to wife."

There was wisdom in her words as ever, but I cared for Ela more than for house or land.

"I want no heiress," I answered quickly. "When the wars are over, Aylmer will help me somewhat. What I need more I will gain for myself. Give me your glove and I will fight for you in camp and tourney."

"Not so, good brother, I have not even a name; you would be shamed before them all. Nay, we have but a jongleur's word for it that I am Norman born. You can do better, dear Brother Simple—much better. I thank you for your courtesy, but indeed you must go your ways and forget me."

"That can I never, though I live to be fourscore. And you are of noble blood, I swear, else had you not borne yourself so bravely. Yet it is true I am but simple. Small wonder you can not care for me."

"Nay, it is not that," she began. Her voice fal-

tered, and I could see, though it was dark, that her eyes were filled with tears near to falling.

"You do care for Brother Simple spite of all, sweetheart?" And she could not say me nay.

Bending forward, I kissed her with all reverence upon the lips.

"Now are we troth-plight before Heaven, Ela, and when I am my own man I will seek you at the hands of your guardians with all due ceremony. I vow by St. Edmund, my patron saint, I will wed with none but you."

"It is early days to talk of wedding," she laughed as some of her old sauciness came back. "Dame Joan may have a word to say in that matter. A penniless maid, a landless knight—in truth, brother, I fear you have much to learn before 'tis time to wed."

"Maybe, but if you care for me, I fear nothing! You have wit enow to bend Dame Joan to your will. All will go well now I have your word."

"Hark to him, one woul'd think—" she began, when she held up her hand. "Hist! Some one comes!"

I listened, but there was no sound save the rising wind moaning through the trees. "It is but the wind," I answered. "Your sharp ears have played you false for once."

"Not so; it was more than the wind, though it might have been wolf or boar, or maybe even our old friends the outlaws. Think you those wild Flemings would come so far in pursuit of us?"

"No; Gundulf would have warned us had they been at our heels. Besides, they could scarce find us in the darkness. Most like it is Gundulf himself, and we lie so close he can not hit upon us. I will let him know;" and I hooted three times like an owl, a cry Gundulf had taught me.

A few moments and it was answered, though the cry came from so far it showed Ela's ears were sharp indeed. Then I hooted once more, and presently there was a trampling in the bushes, and Gundulf, mounted upon Dickon, and followed by half a score of men on foot, came out upon us. I seized my sword, for in the dim light I could scarcely descry them, but Gundulf cried hastily:

"Fear not, my lord; these be our own men. They escaped to the woods instead of taking refuge in the convent; I have picked them up one by one on the way."

Together with this addition to our party Gundulf brought word that the enemy had not attempted to enter the forest; they were busy collecting their spoil, numbering their prisoners, and making preparations to depart. This set us more at ease, and as soon as the moon rose I bade the men hack down great branches from the trees, of which we constructed a rude litter to carry Sir Haimo. Ela and Dame Joan mounted together upon Dickon, and so we set forth.

We made but slow progress, for the knight was heavy, and the bearers had oft to be changed. It was past midnight when we arrived at Winchester

Castle, a pitiful remnant of the band that had ridden out so gallantly; yet had we hearty welcome, for news of our ill-success had travelled fast. Word had been brought by one of the foremost fugitives that we had perished to a man, and the Earl had mourned much the loss of Sir Haimo. Defeat was almost forgotten in joy at our successful retreat, and my lord of Ivri kept his word and gave me all the credit of it.

Thus it fell out that I came to great honour in that I was made a knight so young. Sir Haimo craved the boon; my mistress, the Empress, cared nothing one way or the other; and Earl Robert, nothing loth, declared my lord of Ivri should have his will. We were so closely beset that many of the usual ceremonies had to be abridged, save only the prescribed days of fasting; they were but too easily observed, our platters were ever growing emptier. All night I watched my armour in the chapel within the castle, and in the morning, after high mass, my sword was blessed, I took the solemn vows, received the accolade, and arose a knight. My lord of Ivri stood my sponsor according to his word, and presented me with a suit of armour and a horse.

“ You have earned them well, Alain of Tottinge,” he was gracious enough to say. “ Truly, it would have cost me much more for my ransom.”

After I was dubbed knight my comrades fastened on my golden spurs and buckled my corselet; but

it was Ela's fair hands—so I prayed—that girt my sword to my side, and I fastened her favour in my helm. She gave me her length of gold chain, the most precious thing she had, and because it was no common emblem I was known ever after as the Knight of the Golden Chain. There was much merry jesting, some vowing to win my token in tourney, some saying I had fixed upon my lady too soon; but I gave no heed, only to my lord did I tell the truth, that it was the little maid who had helped me to escape, and that I hoped one day to wed her.

As it chanced Ela was only just in time to perform the office, for the next day, when a few prisoners were exchanged between the castle and the Bishop's palace, she and the dame went with them. When I heard talk of the matter I begged earnestly she might be given some small place among the following of the Empress, fearing lest the fortunes of war might separate us altogether. But Earl Robert would not hear of it.

“Nay, they would swear we had carried her off,” he said; “that we kept her by force of arms. And it will be better for the damsel without a doubt,” he added in low tone, for he was speaking with me in the courtyard where were many who perchance might have sharp ears. Our state is growing more parlous every day; if matters do not mend the trenchers will soon be empty. Would to Heaven the Empress were safe at Oxford!”

And truly, since we lost the ford of Wherwell
we had been sore straitened for lack of provision.
The town was a heap of ashes, the citizens dying
of famine and want, and we ourselves threatened
with a like calamity.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RANULF THE WOLF.

SOON after Ela left the castle—and we parted so hastily there was scarce time for a word of farewell—news was brought in secretly of a small herd of cattle within a few miles of the city, if we could send men to fetch them. This was good news indeed, but as it pleased not the elder knights to become drivers of beasts, the Earl entrusted this duty to me. It was my first independent command, and I set forth with much pride at the head of a score of men, Gundulf riding as usual at my heels. For although I wore the spurs I had no esquires, no following of my own; I was as yet but a landless knight, a poor servant in the Lady's household. But Gundulf answered all my needs; he buckled on my armour and carried my shield; he was page, and esquire, and faithful follower all in one.

It was late in the afternoon when we started, the design being to drive the cattle in after dusk, when we might escape the flying bands of the enemy's horsemen. For a time all went well. The beasts were hidden in a deep hollow, with brambles growing so thick about the sides no one could spy them.

We had some ado to get them out, but it was done at last; then, keeping to the low ground where the trees might hide us, we pricked them on fast as we could to Winchester.

The castle walls were almost in sight when I caught the clank of arms, the galloping of horsemen coming fast in pursuit. A little before us was a deep marsh we needs must cross, a low causeway running through it for passage of man and beast. By straining every nerve we contrived to get the cattle upon this path, and leaving three men only to drive them on, I drew the rest together, and prepared to hold the passage. It was in our favour that our pursuers could not ride round, they would have floundered in the bog; there was no possible road but the causeway we were guarding.

They came up without a pause, their leader at their head—a burly figure cased in mail—and as he charged down upon us I spurred forward to meet him. The encounter was sharp and short. My lance was couched true, I made for his helm and struck it so fairly, that had not the fastenings burst he must have been unhorsed; but he bore me down horse and all, hurling me to earth with such force that I lay bruised and bleeding, unable to stir hand or foot. In the very act of falling, as his helm rolled down, I recognised him. It was my old enemy Ranulf Fitz-Dru, Ranulf the Wolf, he who had so cruelly entreated me. He had forgotten me or he would not have hesitated, for, springing to the

ground, he raised his sword crying: "Yield thee, Sir Knight, or I strike!"

I had no time to answer even could I have found words; for, as he bent over me bareheaded, Gundulf pushed up between us shouting madly, "The Wolf! the Wolf!" Then he let fall his reins, and, standing in his stirrups, raised his battle-axe in both hands and severed Ranulf's head at a blow. It was all over in a moment. The blood spurted up like a fountain, the head rolled to one side, the unwieldy form, after swaying for a moment, fell upon me until I was near suffocated. But Gundulf gave no heed, he was beside himself. He spurred madly on, whirling aloft the blood-stained axe and crying to our men to follow. And they held not back, his fury was contagious; had not the headless body served as a shield, sure am I they would have ridden over me.

The struggle, if so it might be called, did not last long. The enemy outnumbered us, but the sudden death of their lord had startled them not a little, and the sight of Gundulf charging down upon them, covered with Ranulf's blood from head to foot, completed their discomfiture.

"'Tis no man, 'tis the foul fiend himself!" shouted one aloud. "It is a judgment upon our lord for his deed of yesterday."

What that deed was we never knew, for at once with one consent they turned and fled, Gundulf and his fellows pursuing them.

By the time they returned I had recovered from

the first shock of my fall, and had withdrawn myself from beneath the Wolf. But I was stiff and sore, I could stand upright with difficulty, and had much pain in drawing breath. Gundulf, who by the time he came back had recovered his wits, was full of grief for having so neglected me.

"By St. Dunstan, when I saw the Wolf I forgot all, my lord," he cried. "If I could I would have slain them one and all. Yet we slew but two or three of the hindmost; they were too fleet for us."

"In truth it was a mighty blow, Gundulf. Never have I seen the like."

"Yet it was far too easy a death," he returned gloomily, spurning the headless corpse with his foot as he spoke. "The Wolf was not wont to give his prisoners so quick an end." Then with joy: "But thanks be to good St. Dunstan, he will never claim me as his thrall now; the holy saint and my good axe have rid me of that."

When they unarmed me to discover my hurts, it was found my side was badly bruised, which accounted for the difficulty I felt in breathing. Otherwise I had sustained little harm; no bones were broken, and the spear had not pierced my mail. My horse, which had been wandering near, was speedily caught, and when they lifted me to saddle, though riding was none too easy, I could hold on. Before we quitted the spot I stripped the Wolf of all he had about him, which I gave to Gundulf for his own proper spoil; and after we had loaded the armour upon the dead man's horse, we set off to follow the

cattle. The body itself we left where it was, knowing well that when his friends had recovered from their fright they would come back to seek it.

To this mean end came Ranulf Fitz-Dru, one of the proudest of Stephen's barons. For a mean end it was truly, to be slain ingloriously by one of his own villeins. But I felt no pity for him, no, not I; he had used me too evilly.

Meeting no further adventures on the way, we overtook the beasts in due course. All were safe, the men had not lost one. We brought them in triumph to the castle, and thus furnished meat for that night, and the next day, and a day or so after; then came pinching times again, and hunger slowly did its work among us. There was much want, and when men could bear it no longer they stole forth and fled. The Empress endured every hardship without a murmur, for, in spite of her arrogance, she was truly a brave lady. She had a heart of iron in times of adversity, and in the frame of a woman she carried the nature of a man. If I never loved my mistress, at least I learned to have great respect for her.

At length there came a time when we could hold on no longer—we must either yield as prisoners or fight our way out. There was little doubt, with the Empress and Earl Robert at our head, which it was to be. But my lord the Earl bore in mind that last flight from London when all the Lady's followers forsook her on the way. He took his precautions this time, and the day before we were to leave, after

mass in the chapel, he assembled a chosen band of knights, who took a solemn oath not to desert their liege lady, but to die rather than let her be taken. All held up their hands and swore, though more than one, I fancied, seemed not a little unwilling. But unless they would be perjured there was no escape, and I laughed in my sleeve to see them caught so finely. Some, I doubt not, had meant to turn and make their peace with the Bishop.

After that little device of my lord's, we made ready in haste, on the morning of the Feast of the Holy Rood—when there should have been peace between contending armies, the truce of God as ordered by Holy Church—the gates were thrown open, and we marched out in a body. The Earl had decided to make for Devizes, and we rode forth at earliest dawn, hoping to be some miles on our way before our flight was discovered. The Empress was among the foremost, under charge of her uncle, the King of Scots, and Brian Fitz-Count, Lord of Wallingford, a staunch and trusty friend; whilst Earl Robert with the sworn knights guarded the rear.

Our hope of stealing forth unperceived came to naught; the Bishop's men were on the watch, and soon poured upon us from all sides in countless numbers. In no long time our ranks were broken; our men scattered in flight, throwing down their arms as they ran. The Earl himself and the little band around him alone remained to withstand the enemy. My post was with the Empress, though

had I been free to follow my own will I had never left my lord. We stayed for nothing, but galloped hard as we could drive the horses along, though more than once the foe nearly laid hands upon us. Thanks be to Heaven, we outrode them at last, though we drew not rein until we reached Lutgershall; the Empress sad and sorrowful at the loss of her brave army.

Here we halted for a while to wait for Earl Robert, if perchance he might be able to overtake us. Soon, however, came a flying messenger bearing the most disastrous tidings—my lord was prisoner in the hands of the enemy. He had halted his little party on the banks of the Test, hard by Wherwell, where we had fought so hotly, and here he held the passage of the river against the enemy until the Empress should have time to escape. He held the ford, but he stayed too long for his own safety. William of Ypres and his Flemings hemmed him in, falling upon him in such overwhelming numbers that he was taken prisoner with all his followers. This was the worst blow the Lady Matilda had had yet, the worst, in truth, that could be, save my lord had been slain. We got to horse again sorrowfully indeed, and for the first few miles rode in sad silence, wondering what would be the end. At length one spake out what was in the mind of all. “Now will they demand that Stephen of Blois be set free, and offer to render us my lord in exchange for him.”

We turned toward the Empress with one accord, and her brow was black as thunder.

"By my Lady St. Mary, it shall not be so!" she exclaimed fiercely, and as she spoke she smote her clenched fist upon the saddle with such force I looked to see the blood come. "Not even for my good brother will I give up that arch traitor." And her displeasure endured for long; she spoke to us no word more, good or bad, until near fainting with fatigue we lifted her from her horse at Devizes.

And she would have held fast to her word spite of them all, if it had been in her power, such was her bitterness against Stephen.

We would fain have rested for a while at Devizes, for the Lady was well nigh spent. We had not halted, save for that short space at Lutgershall, since we left Winchester, and many had fallen by the way unable to keep up with us. But we dared not stop even now; the enemy were still in hot pursuit, and it was reported, that William of Ypres had sworn a vow not to draw rein until he had captured the Empress.

"Why tarry we here, then?" cried Matilda, directly the rumour reached her ears, her stout spirit still unbent. "If my weak body play me false so that I can ride no longer, not even though I sit man fashion"—for in such wise had she come from Lutgershall—"you can tie me on, I trow, unless you be all traitors. Bring up the horses, I linger not here another minute."

We hastened to and fro, seizing fresh beasts wherever we could lay hands on them, when as luck would have it, we came full upon a funeral train re-

turning from a burial, the long bier still strapped to the horse's back.

"By my faith, if our liege lady must be carried this will do right well for us," cried Brian Fitz-Count, and without further ado he caught the bridle and hurried to the Empress.

It was a gruesome plan, but our need was pressing, and the Lady cared for naught so she might continue her journey. We placed her, already nearly half-dead, upon the bier, and, heaping the grave-clothes about her form, bound her on with cords as a corpse.

"If we meet the foe now," quoth Brian with a grim laugh, "we have but to look sad and solemn, and none, I dare swear, will interfere with us."

And in that dismal plight did the Empress travel even as far as Gloucester; for we tarried not until safe within the walls of that strong city, where we could bid defiance to all who came against us.

CHAPTER XIX.

WE LOSE OXFORD.

SOON as the Empress was somewhat recovered from the hardships of her late flight, she sent messengers to Stephen's wife at Winchester to treat for Earl Robert's release, offering much money and many noble prisoners in exchange for him. But the Queen would not listen; she would have none other than her husband, whom the Empress was just as firm to keep.

Meantime word was brought us that my lord the Earl, though most courteously entreated by Queen Maud, steadfastly refused to counsel his sister to exchange him for Stephen. "Twenty earls," he said, "would not be of sufficient importance to ransom a king; how then could he so far forget the interest of the Empress, his sister, as to exchange him but for one?" Thus steadfastly did the great Earl uphold what he held to be the righteous cause of his sister.

When Queen Maud found she could prevail nothing, she delivered my lord to the custody of William of Ypres, and he was confined in the castle of Rochester; yet did she never suffer a bond of any

kind to be put upon him, nor did she treat him in the least with dishonour. How it would have ended I know not, but, fortunately for those who loved my lord, there was another woman concerned in the matter, his wife, the Countess of Gloucester, who had the care of Stephen in Bristol Castle. When the Queen found the Empress so obdurate, she turned to the Countess instead, and they made an agreement whereby Queen Maud and her son surrendered themselves as hostages to the Countess until Stephen and Earl Robert should change places. The Empress was sore angered; but she had no power to stay anything, and the Countess of Gloucester was resolved that her lord should be released.

It was on the feast of All Saints, the first day of the month of November, that Stephen rode forth from Bristol a free man, and a few days later Robert, the Earl, was restored to us. My lord did not come back alone; he was accompanied by a goodly train of knights and barons, who had been prisoners and were now exchanged, and with them came a few of Stephen's following to visit their friends in the opposite camp. Among these latter, to my great joy, was my brother Aylmer. It was the first time I had seen him since we parted at St. Edmund's Convent, and you may imagine how warm were our greetings, how much we had to say to each other. He was eager to hear how I had sped, rejoicing to know that I already wore my spurs, and I told him all that had chanced to me, including my troth-plight

with Ela. He, on his side, had little to relate. He had remained quietly at Wodebrig until—when the Empress was chased from London—Earl Alberic finally cast in his lot with Stephen's party. Thereupon Aylmer had followed his lord to the field, though it was only of late he had come to Winchester. I had passed somewhat lightly over my imprisonment—it was over and done with, what mattered it now?—yet was Aylmer sore distressed.

“And I knew naught,” he cried angrily. “The Prior assured me ever you were well, and that he had secured you a place about Henry of Blois. When we came to Winchester, I made sure I should find you in the Bishop's household. But I could learn naught of you at all, until this same Ela sought me out, and told me of your deeds at Wherwell. She spoke no word, however, of what had passed between you; she said not even that you were friends. And truly, Alain, in this I think you are wrong, and that Earl Alberic will have none of it. You are his ward. You can not plight your troth save he bids you.”

I laughed. Aylmer seemed to think I was still the boy from whom he had parted, whereas I knew myself to be a man. I left my boyhood behind me for ever when I fell into the hands of Ranulf the Wolf.

“It is you who forget,” I replied; “Alberic cast me off for good and all when he bade me come no more to Wodebrig. He has no authority over me now. I serve the Lady of England

and my lord the Earl. It is to them I have sworn fealty."

"Then if you are so high in their favour, and it must be so or you would scarce have been dubbed knight, surely they will bestow upon you some wealthy ward with broad lands for her dowry. Half of all I have is yours, but for you I had been outcast and landless; yet is Totinge but a small fief, as you know, and it behooves both of us to wed wisely. I wot our uncle of St. Edmund's would say the same."

"Maybe he would, so wed you wisely, good brother," I returned lightly; "my choice is made past undoing."

"Yet think once more," he persisted, this wise brother of mine, and yet he meant me well. "The maid is no fit mate for one of the house of Totinge. She is fair to look upon maybe, I say nothing of that; but she has led a strange life, her lineage is unknown. You can not be sure even that her birth is noble."

"That I will swear it is. But whatever she may be, Heaven helping me, I mean to wed no maid but her, and thereto have I plighted my word. And you will do me no service, Aylmer, if you whisper aught of what you have been saying to Ela. She knows it all better than you can tell her, and I want not to go over the old ground again. Rather, if you think you owe me aught, pay me for it by holding your peace to Alberic and the Prior, and pleading my cause with the damsel. Watch over

her all you may; guard her for me like a loving brother."

He shook his head gloomily, as if he liked not my words, then suddenly put his hand in mine. "My hand upon it, Alain, if you will not be guided. I owe you that much at least, though still I think you wrong. But a wilful man must have his way. I will hold the maid as my sister."

And well I knew that Aylmer would keep his word. Ela could not have a more loyal protector. My brother could make no long stay with us at Gloucester. He had come but on the chance of seeing me, and when he departed Gundulf rode in his train as far as Winchester. My faithful follower had craved leave for a time to look once again upon his dame and child; now that Fitz-Dru was dead he no longer feared to show himself.

"And I have good store to take them," he cried gleefully, showing a bag of silver he had received for the Wolf's horse and armour. "Blithe will they be to think I have found so good a lord. If all go well I can be back in a month at most; there will scarce be blows again ere then."

Soon after Aylmer left us the war recommenced, though at first there was little done. We had marvelled rather that Stephen left us alone for so long, having expected him to fall upon us, full of fury for his long imprisonment; but presently we heard he was lying ill at Northampton, grievously sick and like to die. Yet were our prospects growing desperate. The barons were falling from us one by

one, so that it was agreed to send to Count Geoffrey, of Anjou, entreating him to come to the defence of his wife's inheritance. Messengers were sent forthwith, but the Count would treat with none but Earl Robert in person, and the Empress so worked upon her good brother, that at last he consented to cross the seas himself, and pray her husband to come and aid us. But first he made all provision for the safety of his sister, conducting her to the impregnable castle of Oxford, there to abide until his return.

And during all this time Gundulf had not come back to me, neither could I gain any tidings of him. There was little doubt but that he had fallen on the way. It grieved me sorely thus to lose my faithful follower; long I lamented him, and found none to take his place.

Now as it fell out, the Count of Anjou had no mind to aid us at all. He still delayed to keep his word, finding ever fair excuse when my lord pressed him. It was many long months before the Earl was able to return, and meantime events were going badly with us in England. Stephen, recovering from his sickness, came down upon us like a raging lion, eager to take advantage of the Earl's absence. One by one he gained all our posts, until only Oxford was left to us. But in that good city we had no fear of him; for Oxford is a place strongly fortified, and almost inaccessible from the deep waters which flow around it.

We had no apprehension, as I said, of the city

being taken, but Stephen, resolving to dare all while still fortune favoured him, at once came up against us, taking his ground on the opposite side of the river. Then did the whole town pour forth on foot to laugh and jeer at him, knights and men-at-arms and citizens, shouting abuse across the water, whilst the archers let fly a cloud of arrows. But suddenly there ensued a marvellous change. There was an ancient ford thereabouts, fallen out of use, it was so deep and difficult. Hearing of this, Stephen boldly plunged in at the head of his troops, and swimming, rather than wading, made his way across, charging us with such impetuosity that we fell back in shameful rout, even to the walls. Through the gates we passed, friend and foe together, and though we turned and fought hard in the streets, in less space than I can tell it the enemy were in possession. The wooden houses were set ablaze, and in our extremity we sought shelter with the Empress in the citadel.

In Oxford streets, in the very thickest of this turmoil, I came near to slaying my brother. For the moment I was alone; there had come a sudden rush, separating me from my friends, and I was bestirring myself vigorously to rejoin them. I had near cut my way through when I came face to face with one so begrimed with blood and dust that in the heat of the battle I did not recognise him. I beat him to his knee, my arm was raised in the very act to strike home, when, Heaven be praised, he caught sight of the chain upon my helm, and

shouted aloud: "Strike not, Alain; it is I, Aylmer, your brother."

I was so startled, my arm dropped helpless to my side, my sword fell to the ground with a clang. I stood shaking and trembling, the veriest coward, until the foe hemmed me in and I could not help myself. It was Aylmer's quickness that saved me then. Pushing me before him, as if I were his prisoner, he cleared a way through the throng until we reached a clear space, where men were so busy firing the houses, they gave no heed to us.

"Take it not so much to heart, Alain," he said with a laugh, seeing that even yet I had scarce recovered myself. "Since we are both in the field, it is but the fortune of war, we were bound to meet some time. Ela charged me long ago to look out for her knight of the chain."

"And I, Heaven forgive me!" I stammered. "I never once gave it a thought. Well has she named me Brother Simple. Had I harmed you, I vow by St. Edmund I would have turned monk and prayed for your soul night and day."

"Then thank the good saint that I cried out in time, for sure am I you would have grown very tired of it. I will have a device on my shield ere we meet again—two hands clasped fast, yours and mine; then can you pass me by. Now quick, get you gone, the varlets yonder are turning this way. Take my sword," and he pressed it into my hand. "Pass there where the smoke is thickest. If any seek to stay you, make at them as you did at me just now,

and I'll warrant you have little trouble." And he hurried me off with such haste I had not time for another word.

I soon fell in with some of my own friends, and we fought our way to the castle, where alone was safety. Here we found men bewailing the loss of the strong town, saying that had Robert the Earl been with us, it could not have come to pass.

And now did Stephen proceed closely to invest us, taking up his quarters in the palace of Beaumont just without the north gate. He pressed the siege with the utmost vigour, so that in no long time we were enduring the hardships of Winchester over again. He sought at first to take us by assault, erecting engines of wonderful power, and storming the ramparts under cover of flights of arrows, but all was in vain; our garrison resisted so stoutly, he was fain to cease his attacks and assail us by the surer means of famine. Vigilant guards had orders to keep strict watch day and night; he held us fast from the feast of St. Michael even unto Christmas, and no man was able to help us.

We were in these dire straits when word was brought that the Earl of Gloucester had landed at Wareham, accompanied by young Henry, Matilda's son. Yet was the force he brought so small, that he had no power to aid us; he had to wait until the partisans of the Empress could gather to his assistance. Unhappily, all this took time, and we in the castle were stricken with famine almost beyond endurance.

CHAPTER XX.

GUNDULF RETURNS.

Now that the assaults had ceased, we had little to do in the castle, save watch from the walls for aid that came not. One morning when I was loitering idly on the battlements, I heard some one softly call my name. I looked up and down, before me and behind; I could not guess whence the voice came. I thought it must have been fancy. Then, again, I heard it clearer, and behold—swimming beneath me in the river that washed the walls, his head peeping forth from amongst the rushes—there was Gundulf. I could scarce believe my eyes, I had made so sure he was dead.

“Hist, my lord!” he cried, peering up cautiously. “I have been waiting for this hour these weeks past. Did you think I had forsaken you?”

“Not for a minute, good Gundulf; we have been comrades too long for you to forget me. Heaven be thanked you are still alive; I have missed you sorely. In truth I believed you dead. Well I knew that only evil of some sort would keep you from me.”

“And evil there was, else had I been with you

long ago. But I dare not stay to tell of it now; I am one of the king's guard set to watch your walls. You are too careless, my lord. I could have sent an arrow through you easily. I have left my post to discover myself to you, and if my captain knows of it I am undone. If you will come to this same place in the first hours of the night it will be my watch again, and in the dark they will not see us."

The brave fellow dived suddenly out of sight, swimming a few strokes under water, as he had a knack of doing, and, reappearing presently quite close to land, reached his post unseen.

I told no one aught of what had chanced. I would hear what Gundulf had to say first, and I hastened to the walls at the appointed time, to find my faithful follower awaiting me. As soon as my eyes could pierce the darkness, I saw him standing at the foot of the wall.

"Glad am I, my lord, to get speech with you," he said softly, after our first greetings were over; "I began to fear you had gone over-seas with the Earl. I was not of those who took the city so easily, or perchance I had met you sooner. I have not been in the camp a month. And is all well with you, my lord? You have not come to any hurt?"

"Nothing but a little blood-letting when your new friends took us so by surprise. Had the Earl been here their task had not been so easy. But to your tale, man, lest we be interrupted. Tell me how it chanced to you from the beginning."

"Ay, that will I gladly, my lord; then you shall

tell me what to do. I left you, as you know, to seek out my dame and child, and journeyed to the place where I had left them without mishap. No man guessed I carried treasure, or it might have been different. But my dame was gone. Ranulf the Wolf had found her out and sought to lay hands upon her—the foul fiend give him the reward of his deeds—and she had fled by night to the wilds. I followed after and saw a strange sight enow. Whilst we are fighting here, pulling down, and burning, and destroying, new monks from over-sea are raising fair buildings among the swamps, and the helpless and the homeless and the outlaw all alike take refuge with them. They have been good to my dame, good to her and to the child, and it pleased me much I was able to repay the cost. It did my heart good, my lord, to set eyes upon them once again, and the boy has grown such a sturdy rogue, already has his mother to take stick to him. I abode with them a few happy days; then methought it was time to be on the way. All went well as before for the first part of the journey, and Dickon got over the ground merrily. Then, as ill luck would have it, I fell into the hands of a troop belonging to William of Ypres. I claimed to be the thrall of Ranulf Fitz-Dru—that dead Wolf might serve me here I thought—but they were short of men, and vowed to string me up on the nearest tree unless I joined them. It was a choice I liked not, but if I were hung it was certain I could serve you no more, so I consented to them for a time. I

joined them with such good heart that they soon became my friends; not one of them has a doubt of me to this day. Only they kept poor Dickon—I bear them a lasting grudge for that—never again have I set eyes on the beast. Since then I have fought oft, and once been sore wounded; we have marched, and burned, and plundered, but ever have I kept my eyes and ears open for news of you. It is only of late I have been put on guard round the castle here, and no one, I vow, has watched the walls more closely. And now, my lord, if you cast me a rope, I can be with you, unless, perchance, I can do you better service outside. Men say that you are in straits for lack of food, that hunger will soon make the Empress surrender. But in sooth she will hold out till you are all dead. Can I bring you aught? With a fat capon or two at my belt I could swim across easily. Provisions are plentiful with us."

"So are trees plentiful, and hempen ropes, and strips of hide, my good Gundulf, if an arrow do not speed you the sooner," I replied. "If you risk your life for me it shall be for something better than a fat capon. Couldst aid the Empress to escape now? That were indeed a feat worth doing."

He shook his head.

"If she were our side of the river I would not say but I could guide her through the camp; but how to win across is another thing. An she had wings like a bird, or feet like a duck, it might be done; but I see no other way. It is easy for me

to cross; I make no sound, and at least sign of danger I dive out of sight. Be the night never so dark, no boat could cross unseen."

I could not gainsay him, and in truth I had expected nothing. I had scarce spoken of the matter in earnest.

We talked yet a little longer, and then Gundulf departed, counselled by me to abide for a time where he was. He could do us little service within the walls, besides being another to feed; whilst from without he might be able to give us news of the enemy's doings. We agreed upon a sign—a rag hanging from a bush—when I was to look out for him. I also warned him to keep out of sight of Aylmer—who, luckily, was on the further side of the camp—lest my brother should suspect aught.

Gundulf swam the moat thrice again, though it was more because he craved speech with me than for aught he had to tell. The last time the cold caught his limbs, and he dared not stay, lest he should be too numbed to get back.

"It is still the cursed Wolf; his works live after him," he cried bitterly. "I have swum in drifting ice ere now and scarce felt it; his tortures have made a woman of me."

I waited in fear and trembling for some sign he had got back safely—it was so dark a night I could not watch his movements—and glad indeed I was to hear an arrow presently strike the wall below me. I knew then that all was well.

The winter set in unusually early that year; although it was but the beginning of November the snow was knee deep, the river coated with thin ice. We were cold without and within, we had little fuel and less food, the rations grew scantier daily. And still Earl Robert came not, and Stephen drew his men ever closer and closer. The garrison began to mutter among themselves, talking openly of surrender, though it was long before any dared breathe the word before the Empress. She bore, as ever, a brave front, and made light of every hardship, vowing to hold out until my lord of Gloucester came to relieve us.

But at last, all too soon, there came a day when hunger prevailed, and men would hold their peace no longer. There seemed nothing for it but that Matilda must yield herself prisoner. It was her turn to fall into the hands of the man she had so harshly entreated.

The cold grew more biting, piercing to the very marrow of our bones, until at last the river froze so hard that one night Gundulf walked across. He had put up the signal ere sundown, so that I was on the look out, and as I watched him stealing over, I saw the way opened out before us. Heaven had been kinder than we thought. Whilst we had been railing at the cold like puling women, because we were so empty, the blessed saints had been interceding for us; their prayers were about to be answered. I was so eager to open the matter I could not stay for Gundulf to

tell his news, but broke out directly he was safe within hearing:

“Gundulf, remember your word, that you could guide the Empress through the camp? Needs no wings now, nor duck’s feet either; the holy saints have made a passage for us.”

He answered not at first; I had taken him so on the sudden he needed time to collect his thoughts. Then he said in thoughtful fashion, and without much heart, the matter was so weighty he had scarce a mind for it.

“It might perhaps be done, my lord, if only she get over unseen. I can have nothing to do with that. If all went well—and I will not answer for it—I might take her through the sentries as far as Abingdon. Once there all would be safe; she could get to horse and fly whither she would. Only pray you take good heed, I will in no wise warrant that she can pass in safety; for truly will she incur great danger. What man can do, I will.”

“You can say no more than that, Gundulf, but I see not why we should fail.”

“If the lady care to risk it,” Gundulf continued, seeing well by my manner that I was bent upon it, “it would be best she lost no time. The king is preparing another assault, and it is said you are so weakened by hunger that this time he will gain the castle. My lord of Gloucester is assembling his troops in all haste, but he will come too late: it will all be over by then.”

"Can you wait while I go and speak to my mistress?" I cried eagerly. "Right sure am I she will venture."

"I can stay for a while, but be not long, my lord. If the moon rise before I cross I am lost."

I shall have shown you little what kind of woman was the Empress if you can not guess how she received my news. Casting a large cloak about her, that she might not be recognised, she went at once to the walls, accompanied by one Ermenald, an old knight in whom she put all confidence. She spoke with Gundulf herself, questioning him shrewdly. Then, turning to me:

"And you, Alain of Totinge, you vouch that this be true man?" she asked.

"I will answer for his good faith as for my own," I returned.

"If you answer for him—and Robert, my brother, has already answered for you—I will e'en risk it. Not a word, good Ermenald," as that cautious knight was about to interfere, "my mind is made up; I am not to be dissuaded. At the worst, I can but fall into my enemy's hands; and there was some talk this morning, or I much mistake, of surrender. The unruly varlets seemed even to threaten; maybe they will ope the gates and yield me prisoner behind my back. I like not the prospect; I will quit the castle to-morrow night. Be sure, if I win through, that you shall be richly rewarded."

We arranged the place of meeting and the

hour, and Gundulf hastily departed. The Empress watched as he stole across the ice, and her woman's wit caught at something of which we should never have thought.

"See you now," she cried, pointing with one hand to the dark figure, "were yonder churl but garbed in white the enemy could not see him, not even if they passed within spear's length."

"By the bones of my father but the Empress is right," exclaimed Sir Ermenald. "She has hit the clout fairly. If we all wore white mantles, I believe we might pass through unseen."

He would have said more, but there came rather a startling interruption. The Empress was still following Gundulf with her eyes, and, as he stole up to the bank, she moved forward and leant over the embrasure the better to see him. The moon was just beginning to peep forth. Its faint light fell full upon her figure, and at once an arrow whizzed so close by her head that it stirred her hood. Had it been aimed but a hand's breadth lower, the Lady's earthly troubles would have ended. Without a start or cry she turned and looked where it hung quivering in a crevice of the wall.

"I accept the omen," she cried joyfully. "Death has passed me by, I shall succeed, and my son will not arrive to find his mother prisoner. Haste we now to have all in readiness; I would not miss this chance for my kingdom." And she quitted the battlements with all speed, eager for this new enterprise.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LADY ESCAPES.

OUR design was kept very secret, and few within the castle were allowed to know what was in contemplation. Had traitors been about, as was very like, and news of our intent got wind, all would have been lost. So it was but a small party of us assembled on the walls the next night; just the few in the secret who came to speed us.

We had thought at first of stealing through a small postern which gave on to the frozen river, and creeping round beneath the walls to where Gundulf would await us; but on making the attempt we found the watch was much too close, we had to draw back again in a hurry. There was nothing for it but to keep to the side where our friend was on guard; therefore was it needful that we should be lowered from the battlement by ropes. Even that did not quell the brave Lady's courage. When we gathered on the walls, clad in white from head to foot, with white hoods drawn closely over our heads, she helped with her own hands adjust the rope that was to let her down, and mocked me for my gloomy countenance.

For, now it was too late, my heart misgave me. I had cause to look doleful. It was I first suggested the plan, I had brought her to speech with Gundulf; if we failed they might even call me traitor. And again, Gundulf might have promised more than he could perform; the guard might have been changed; he might not be there to meet us—a hundred things, until I liked not the enterprise at all. But the Empress for once was kind; indeed, of late, she had been softer to all. “Fear not, O knight of the rueful countenance,” she said just ere I went down, “I had good dreams last night. Remember how the arrow passed me by. Have no fear; we shall succeed.”

I was lowered first in order to meet Gundulf, the others coming presently after me. I crossed the ice without difficulty, but on the further side found myself alone. Gundulf was not there. He was to have been at a certain spot awaiting us, but I could find no sign of him. By stooping down I could discern traces of footprints in the snow as if one had been thither and made away again; but I durst not follow them far lest it should be some other than Gundulf, and I should fall into the hands of the foe. I did not doubt my faithful servant, yet it seemed as if my fears were to prove well founded. My dismay was great. Presently my mistress would be by my side and what was I to say to her.

I bent down to examine the footmarks yet again. Had Gundulf been forced to return, he

might have made some sign. As I rose, my hood fell back and left my head uncovered. At once, a dark figure slowly rose from behind a snow-covered bush, and a startled voice muttered softly, "My lord, my lord, is it you indeed?" It was the voice of Gundulf.

"It is I myself; who else should it be, seeing I was to meet you here?" I retorted with some anger. "A fine fright you have given me. Why hide yourself so closely? It is past the time you promised to be waiting."

"I have been waiting long, my lord, and I have been looking to see you come over the walls this half-hour. But there has been nothing save snow-drifts which came down somewhat strangely. I thought perchance you were clearing away the snow to make it easier for the Lady, and feared lest you might be discovered. I saw you not until your hood fell back, although you must have passed within a few paces of me; it is your white garments against the snow. By St. Dunstan if you all be garbed like that, we shall win through without trouble."

"It was the Lady's own contrivance, Gundulf," I said, well pleased the device answered so well, though I had been frightened not a little through it. "Not a man of us had wit enough to think of such a thing. But come, she will be waiting, wondering what has become of us."

We hastened back to the river-side, and so true was the disguise, although I knew exactly where

they should be, I came plump upon the little group before I saw them.

A mantle had been brought for Gundulf and, soon as he folded it about him, we set forth in single file. Gundulf led the way, glancing every moment to right and left of him warily. I followed, then came the Empress and the two knights, her companions. We proceeded thus for some space without a word, winding right through the midst of the enemy's lines. It was in our favour, though it added much to the hardships of the way, that very soon the snow began to fall again, and as we climbed the hill the wind drove whirling flakes full in our faces until at times we were well-nigh blinded. But it helped to hide us as we passed, and nothing else mattered.

Yet was our road full of peril. More than once we came within a few yards of some watchful sentinel pacing to and fro on his beat, but we glided noiselessly past like shadows upon the drifting snow. One hard by us called and challenged his fellow. For the moment, my heart well nigh stopped beating. I thought he had seen us; then presently came the answering cry which showed us all was safe. But so often was the silence of night broken by the clang of the trumpet and cry of the guard, that we were every moment in fear, expecting to be espied.

Once only did we really come nigh to discovery. Suddenly, without the slightest warning—for the horses in the soft snow made no sound—

there came a jangling of arms right across our path, a little troop of horsemen were almost upon us. They were so close there was no time even to turn aside; our moving figures would have been seen. "Down, down all of ye as I do," cried Gundulf under his breath, throwing himself flat upon the snow.

We followed his example, the Empress, brave lady, quick as any, and, although they came so close that a horse trod on my cloak, yet went they past and did not see us. They rode on, looking neither to right nor to left, with mantles folded close and heads downbent to escape the storm.

"It is the captain of the guard making his round," muttered Gundulf, as he rose to his feet again. "I knew not that he came this road. We can make more speed now; the worst is over."

No further incident befell us, and we stumbled on with what haste we could. Six weary miles we had of it all the way to Abingdon, now plunging through snowdrifts that threatened to bury us, now falling headlong over hidden obstacles, an icy blast blowing in our faces all the time. If it were hard for us, what must it have been for the Empress? She was half-frozen with cold, her wet garments clung about her limbs, at times she could scarce walk. Yet did she make light of all, caring for naught so she might escape falling into the hands of Stephen.

Gundulf had horses in waiting for us at Abingdon, and the Empress, worn and weary though she

was, would tarry not one moment for rest or warmth. She rode on at once, nor drew rein until safe under the protection of Brian Fitz-Count in his fortress of Wallingford.

Great were the rejoicings at her unexpected arrival; for her friends had given her up as lost, knowing full well that Earl Robert could not arrive in time. Soon as we were gone the castle surrendered; but the king had little satisfaction in it, for he had lost his prey.

News of the Lady's escape was sent on at once to my lord the Earl, who was even then marching upon Oxford. He turned aside with great joy, bringing with him the young Henry. And now were the Lady's troubles all forgotten in delight at embracing her son. The young prince—now our gracious lord, King Henry, whom may Heaven long preserve!—being at that time a boy of some nine years, full of energy even then, and not easily daunted or discouraged.

Robert the Earl did not linger long at Wallingford, but continued his march against Stephen, and there was fought a great battle without the walls of Wilton. This time did it please Heaven to bless our arms. Had he not sought safety by ignominious flight, Stephen himself had been again our prisoner. He almost fell into my hands, though few men ever knew how near I came to capturing the king.

Since Oxford, the Empress had been more gracious to me, and by her desire I was given a fol-

lowing of horsemen under my command. I had been among the foremost, when, the tide of battle ebbing, I was left somewhat outside. Gathering my men together, I was scanning the field to see where I could best strike in again, when I became aware of a little party of horsemen galloping my way. At first I took them for our own men, until I caught sight of two tall figures sheathed in bright armour, one with a golden circlet about his helm.

"It is the king and my lord of Winchester," I cried, setting spurs to my horse. "They fly the field. On, on! and we shall capture them."

At sight of my pursuit, the horsemen swerved aside, though without lessening their pace. As I neared them, the greater number dropped behind to stay me whilst those surrounding the king continued their flight. A few minutes, just long enough unfortunately to give the little band time to range in order, and I was upon them. I tried to push through, to ride over them by weight of numbers; but their leader, a stripling from his size, had so well disposed his men, and had them so well in hand I was foiled at every point.

We slew some, trampled down more—no respite, no breathing time was allowed; and still they held the road. We must overcome in the end; but, meantime, the king was escaping, and, full of fury, I made for the youth who led them so well, and who had hitherto eluded me. And when we met face to face it was Aylmer. He bore the two hands clasped upon his shield as he had prom-

ised, and, as he wiped the heat of battle from his brow, he laughed.

“Be content, good brother,” he said. “The fortune of the day is with you, but you will not catch the king. You may ride over our dead bodies if you will; in no other way can you pass us. What say you? Fight it out, or let us go?”

I sheathed my sword without a word, bitterly disappointed at losing my prey, yet proud that it should have been Aylmer who so bravely withstood me.

“Nay, look not so gloomy, man,” he continued. “The battle is not always to the strong, else would it fare ill with me.”

“Needs no strong arm where is a head like yours,” I replied half angrily. “But for you, I had scattered your men like chaff. Go your ways; if your king be grateful you should come to high honour, you have saved him from bonds this day.” And I drew off my men—who were nothing loth—they had had enough of it—whilst Aylmer slowly retreated, keeping always in battle array, ready to turn and fight on the instant.

CHAPTER XXII.

DAME JOAN ASSERTS HERSELF.

AFTER Wilton, open warfare almost ceased for a time, though there came no peace to the land not even for a day. The Empress held her court at Gloucester, acknowledged ruler of all the West, whilst the young prince abode with his uncle at Bristol. A year or so after the Empress had retired to Gloucester, there was brought about a meeting between her and Stephen to treat for peace. But it came to nothing, as might have been expected from two such obstinate natures, and matters remained just as before. Yet if the conference gave no peace to the realm, thanks to Aylmer it brought some good to me. When the king came to the appointed meeting-place, Aylmer was one of those who rode in his train, and blithe were we to meet again. He brought messages from Ela, who, thanks be to Heaven, was safe and well. Then he put into my mind to ask boldly for her hand.

“If you do not make sure in this short time of peace, she may be given to some other,” he said. “Though the maid has neither lands nor name her

face is fair, and the queen is well enough pleased with her to bestow a dowry. Then might you blame me and say I had taken little care of her."

I lost not a moment in taking his advice, and seeking my lord the Earl begged he would demand the damsel in marriage for me. He was somewhat reluctant at first, because she was landless; but when he found my mind was set on the matter he gave way, vowing with a laugh I should repent my haste when I grew older. He wrote a most courteous letter to Queen Maud, sending it by the hand of a knight of rank, to do more honour to me.

Thereupon, Aylmer having leave from his king, we rode together to Lincoln, where the wife of Stephen was then residing. She received us graciously and gave her consent at once—solely for love of the good Earl, she said, she liked not parting from her favourite maid. I was in brave spirits, thinking all my troubles were at an end, when Dame Joan interposed. The old woman would have none of it; Ela, she declared, had made solemn vow to remain with her as long as she lived. I prayed the dame to come with us, promising her a safe home at Gloucester; but she cried aloud, rating the Empress with hard words, calling us all ill-men and robbers. She stormed and raved, then entreated with tears and loving words, until Ela's tender heart was fain to give in to her.

"A little patience, Alain," she prayed, seeing that I was angered. "The dame was good to me when I had no friend but you. She gave me a

home, she has treated me ever as her own child; Heaven would not bless us if I forsook her. It can not be for long, and surely we can afford to wait awhile. You do not doubt my faith, dear Alain?"

"If I doubted you, I think I should doubt of Heaven itself. But these are ill times, and we know not what may befall us. I would make sure of you while I can."

"That is just what the good dame says," Ela returned, yet there was a tear in her eye. "The times are ill is ever her word, and were aught to befall you I should have no protector. She is sore afraid of the wild Welsh, Earl Robert has around him in the West."

"The Welsh would not hurt you whilst my lord is there to control them. They are no worse, nay they are not near so bad, as your king's hireling Flemings."

"Yet would the poor woman fall sick of fright did we venture to take her among them, and never could I be happy if I brought ill to her."

"It shall be as you will, you must have your way as ever," I replied sullenly, though I felt shame for it directly after.

It was ill done to give her more pain. Was it not as hard for Ela as for me? and I added quickly, in softer tones: "If we can not wed, at least we may plight our troth openly before the priest, then can they not give you to another."

And thus it ended. We were solemnly be-

trothed before the whole court, the good queen aiding and consenting, and speaking to me many gracious words afterward, promising to befriend Ela until I came to claim her. With that I was forced to be content, returning as I came, instead of with a fair bride beside me. Our parting was full sorrowful, though had I guessed how long it would be ere she was my wife in earnest, my heart would have been even heavier.

"Fret not yourself, good brother," cried Aylmer, to cheer me, as he rode in my company for part of the way. "If you have not gained all, you have something and that not a little; she is yours to claim when you may. And I can now watch over her by right. I had to act in secret before lest men should question what was the maid to me, and so speak lightly of her. Now, she is my sister in good truth. By St. Edmund, brother, have no fear; the old dame—plague take her—can not last much longer."

"I fret not," I answered, speaking lightly as I could. "I am no puling boy to cry for what I can not get, else would Ela be shamed for me."

"I think Ela will ne'er be shamed for her knight, and if this conference come to naught, as all men seem to think, soon will fresh blows help you to forget your troubles."

"Would you were by my side to direct me," I cried to this. "With your wiser head to guide my strong arm not a man could stand against us. I would you followed my lord the Earl."

"That were foolish indeed, to be both on the same side and thus risk all, whereas now one or the other must win. If the Countess of Anjou became Lady of England again, which I deem little likely, you can take me under your wing, and all will be right for both."

With talk like this we beguiled the way until we were near our parting. Then after a short space of silence, Aylmer said abruptly, "Can you spare a thought, Alain, for that far-off day when I slew the lad Baldwin? I ask not if you remember what you suffered for it."

"That was not your fault," I cried quickly, knowing well how Aylmer, spite of his light words, ever felt upon that matter. "And the caitiff who worked the ill received his deserts long since. Did I not tell you at Gloucester how Gundulf brought him to his end! But why speak of it now?"

"Because when your name was bruited abroad as one of those who helped the Countess to escape from Oxford—we call her never Empress or Lady like to you—there came one who spake ill of you before the king, telling that old tale with many lies added thereto. Also must my lord of Winchester join in—that you had come to him and he would have none of you, but that Robert of Gloucester, who cared not what cut-throats were in his train, had taken you into his service."

"The Bishop said that, he the friend of William of Ypres?" I exclaimed.

"Even so, and men laughed a little, knowing

what sort he holds in his pay at Winchester. But touching that other matter, after craving leave to speak, I stood forth before them all and told the truth."

" You told them that you slew Baldwin?"

" That did I; did I not promise to avow it when the time came? They can do me no harm now; since Wilton the king makes much of me, he will stand my friend. And I mean to avow it yet once more; I swore it to myself when I stood by your side and all men shrank from you. If all go well, in that same place, before St. Edmund's shrine and Baldwin's kin, we will stand together again, whilst I confess myself his slayer."

" Not with my good will——" I was beginning, when he stayed me with:

" It matters not, the time is yet far off, perchance may never come. My friends seemed to think no worse of me for what I avowed; at least they showed it not, and truly there has been so much blood spilt since, a man more or less matters little. But one who loved not my lord Bishop said softly, yet so as all might hear, ' Then it is to my lord of Winchester we owe it that the Countess was snatched from our grasp so cleverly. It is a pity we lost the youth, but it matters not, the saints be praised, my lord has no ill-doers in his household.' There was great mirth, even the king joining in, though it is a sore subject with him, and had you seen the Bishop's face, Alain, you would have felt avenged. But I have ridden

too far already, it is time I turned." And with that he drew rein, and after a few more words we parted, Aylmer wending his way back, whilst I continued my journey to Gloucester.

And at Gloucester, in the service of the Empress, I abode for four long years, taking my part in all that went on, and having my full share of hard blows. For there was ever fighting on hand, castles to be taken or held against the foe, skirmishing with small bodies of the king's troops, or the putting down of some rebellious baron thinking to join the king. Yet it troubled me that I could hear so little of Ela. Aylmer would send a letter now and again, when by some rare chance there was a safe messenger; he could write well as any clerk, it irked him not to take pen in hand. As for me, the trick of writing never came to me. I might fashion a word or two, I could make my name; but set down what was in my mind that could I never, nor could I tell it to others to write for me. I used to send back tokens to Ela, once a jewel, part of a ransom I received for a prisoner, another time a piece of ivory from the East cunningly carved, that I bought from a holy palmer; I had only that way to let her know I was alive and ever thinking of her.

I might have obtained a safe-conduct and ridden south to claim my bride had not Dame Joan continued to stand in the way. Every time Aylmer wrote me she was as vigorous as ever, nor did her opposition abate. I fear rather that as time went

on it increased. She forgot she had once favoured me, and grew ill-inclined to the match altogether, wishing Ela to wed with one of the king's party. Did aught happen to me—as might chance any day—the damsel would be free; or could she gain Ela to her own way of thinking, there would be small difficulty in annulling the betrothal. Heaven forgive me if I wrong the old dame; she had been kind to me once and I tried hard to wish her no ill; but had she retired to a convent to end her days as once she purposed, much trouble would have been spared to us.

CHAPTER XXIII.

I AM CAPTURED.

WHEN hard upon three years out of the four I spent at Gloucester had gone by, of a sudden there came a change. Out of misfortune there befell me a great joy, though as usual a sting was not wanting in the tail of it. My misfortune was to be taken prisoner; my joy once again to see Ela.

On one of our marauding expeditions a little troop of us, led by my old friend Haimo of Ivry—who had completely recovered of the wounds he received at Wherwell—fell into a cunningly contrived ambuscade, so that we were forced to yield. Sir Haimo was detained until the king's pleasure might be known; the rest of us were held to ransom or exchanged. Unfortunately for me a rumour had got abroad that I was high in favour with Earl Robert and the Empress, and my ransom was fixed accordingly. It was an outrageous sum for a landless knight of no renown; I had no means of my own, and my lord, very justly, refused to pay it. He would exchange a knight of equal rank, he said, or treat for me soon as my captors would listen to reason; until then I must remain a prisoner.

I had fallen to the share of one Bevis of Streteham, who, save for his exorbitant demands, used me full courteously. Soon as I gave him my word, he made me free from all constraint; and when, after a time he set forth to Lincoln, where the king then held his court, I rode beside him more as an honoured guest than a prisoner. And at the court of Stephen I found Queen Maud, his wife, and her train of damsels. Ela held but a lowly post among them, and often I fear she was flouted for her unknown lineage; yet did many men deem her fair, and many a knight sought to break lance in her favour. I saw her oft, thanks to Sir Bevis, who put no more constraint upon me than before; I went to and fro at my pleasure, just as if I were a free man. There wanted only Aylmer to make my content complete; but he was absent on the king's business, I saw him not at all.

My days at first passed pleasantly enough. I made many good friends and all went well, until an adventure befell me I care not to think of even now, though it was long before I saw the drift of it.

Amongst the noble ladies I met at the queen's palace was one Adela, Countess of Clapa, sister to Sir Bevis, my captor. Her husband had fallen at Wilton; she was a widow with a goodly inheritance, a strong castle and large estates, besides a small stronghold not many miles from Lincoln. Now this Lady Adela, though a widow, was still young, and considered exceeding fair, and of a verity I do not deny it. She had eyes blue and

soft as the sky on a summer's morning; her hair was of the colour of new gold; and, having dwelt some time at the court of Provence, she had learned there many witching ways and tricks of speech which took men's fancies mightily. There were more great lords than I know of making suit to wed her, but the king would bestow her upon none. She had bewitched him also, it was said, and he vowed she should make her choice as she pleased. But as yet the lady seemed not in a hurry to take any new master; she smiled upon all, but showed especial favour to none. It is ill-done to leave women thus to their own devices, for few there be wise like Ela, and evil came of it.

I was thrown much in the company of the young Countess, she dwelling in her brother's house. I met her daily in hall and at board, and ever as the days went on she showed me increasing kindness. I thought naught of it, I was unused to her ways, I knew not even that she was more gracious to me than to others. When with Ela I had no eyes, no thoughts but for her; out of her presence the other pleased me well enough, she served to pass the time. I was grateful for the lady's courtesy, and, besides, in that she was sister to my captor, I felt bound to obey her behests, to carry out the small duties she oft imposed on me.

It was Ela who first gave me a hint of danger, though she did not speak plain enough for my dull wit to understand.

"Good Brother Simple," she said to me one

day somewhat sharply, when no one chanced to be near us, “is it not time that you were ransomed?”

I made no answer but for a foolish smile, so pleased was I to hear the old name again.

“Art grown deaf? canst not hear?” she repeated, tapping her foot impatiently upon the ground. “When, I say, is your lord to pay your ransom?”

“Not until Sir Bevis lowers his price, I fear,” I returned. “When Aylmer comes back, perchance he may bring him to reason. Yet am I well content to wait, seeing that my captivity has brought me to you.”

“And I am not content at all. I would you were safe back among your wild Welsh, though truly I shall be loth to lose you.”

“Come with me, then,” I cried quickly. “Surely Dame Joan has had you long enough; it is time you thought of me.”

Ela shook her head with more sadness than I had yet seen in her, but her tone was firm as ever as she answered, “I can not forsake the poor dame. She is growing feeble, she looks to me more and more every day.”

“Then why wish me gone, unless indeed you are tired of me.”

That was speech my little maid would not condescend to answer. She only looked at me wistfully, with something in her glance I could not understand. Then abruptly again: “Alain, you

are in danger here. I would Sir Bevis kept you closer in bond."

"That would not I. I love not prison walls. And what danger can there be? What man would harm me when he would have to answer for it to Sir Bevis?"

"I said not you were in danger from any man;" and there came a little frown upon her brow as if she were displeased.

"What is the trouble, Ela?" and I took her hand. "Tell me plainly what you fear."

Yet would she not speak out, but said only, "I would Aylmer were here; his wits are as quick as yours are slow."

"That is true enough; I should be the last to gainsay it, yet I need not Aylmer to defend me. Show me where the danger lies and I will answer for the rest."

"It is not for me to show you," and she withdrew her hand with a petulance that surprised me. "If you see not for yourself, perchance after all it matters little. Yet——" and here she broke off abruptly as the Lady Adela came into view.

We had been talking in hall, and the Countess was at the far end; but there was that in Ela's face made me cry, "You would not have me think the Lady Adela my enemy? Then, Ela, you are wrong; she has ever been most gracious. It is owing partly to her that Sir Bevis treats me so well; she has told me so herself."

"And for that reason I suppose she uses you as her page." Ela's eyes sparkled with anger.

"Maybe—I know not; at least it makes me bound to obey her. She bade me wait upon her this morning. I ought to have been with her ere now, but seeing you I forgot everything."

"Yet, Alain, beware——" She had no time for more, the lady was near at hand, and both of us made deep obeisance as befitted her superior rank. The young Countess seemed in a marvellous ill-temper, and chided me for my default in no very soft tones; then she whispered a word in Ela's ear I could not catch. That it was something ill-natured, I doubted not, for my little maid flushed crimson as with another deep courtesy she retired. This angered me, so that I answered the lady very shortly when presently she turned to me again, and for a few days there was ill-humour between us.

I cared nothing; it mattered not to me; but unhappily it lasted not long. The Countess sent for me privily, and craved my pardon for her ill-temper in such gracious fashion I must have been churlish indeed not to hearken. After that, though she showed me not so much favour in public, the lady was for ever sending for me on some pretence or other; until at last even to my dull wits there came what was meant by it, what Ela had feared. Yet for long was I reluctant to believe. I had no great conceit of myself that I should deem such a thing likely.

Now as to what chanced next, and all that fol-

lowed after it is hateful for a man to speak; yet as I am put to telling the whole truth needs must that I set it down. I gave my word once to keep silence, but Sir Bevis is long since dead, my lips are now unsealed. Passing over all those eager suitors who would so fain have wed her, the Lady Adela unluckily fixed her mind upon me, a man troth-plight already. Truly had I been free, it would have made no difference. She was never the woman for me, as I was forced one day to tell her somewhat bluntly. For, finding me still deaf and blind to what she fain would have me understand, the lady at length spoke out her mind in plain fashion. She told me of her possessions—her lands, her strong castle, her store of money—and offered to make me lord of all. And, moreover, she showed me well she had no thought I could hold back.

By my faith, I was hard put to it. No youthful knight was ever in such strait before. It was truly a great honour the lady intended me, though some might think her over-bold in proffering it, and I wished not to anger her more than needful. I stammered something, I scarce knew what, save that I was as good as married already; but the Countess, who knew that full well, put it by with a smile.

“ Nay, if that is all, you are not so far bound but the knot can easily be loosed,” she said, and went on with other foolish talk to persuade me. At last she spoke some slighting word of Ela,

which made me wrath, and without further ado I gave her all my mind. When it was over I had much fear. I have ever been afraid of an angry woman, and at first the lady's fury was terrible. Then suddenly, to my exceeding wonder, there came a strange change; she burst into a fit of shrieking laughter, pointing her finger at me in scorn.

"See you now, the fool takes it all for earnest," she cried, laughing again until the tears came. "Oh, you simpleton, not to guess I was but jesting! Now, have you made me lose my wager?" And betwixt laughing and sobbing she explained how she had staked a costly jewel, vowing I was too wise to be deceived by her.

"There was talk of you in hall," she went on, "and one avowed your head was turned because I had showed you some slight favour. 'Tis false,' I answered; 'he is not so witless;' so we agreed I should put some small play upon you to show the truth, and, lo! you have proved me wrong."

And I, like the simpleton I was, believed her. It was much easier to think she had been fooling me, playing upon me an idle jest after the manner of fair ladies, than to deem her words were true.

Then the Lady Adela's mood changed again, and she turned upon me with fierce anger.

"Begone, sirrah, why linger here? I care not to lose my fair jewels. Begone to your black-browed love and tell her how you have been fooled.

I warrant we shall have the laugh of you in hall this night."

I slunk away, my face red to my ears, too confused even to sue for pardon. I breathed not a word of what had passed, not even to Ela; I was too ashamed. The Countess had made a fool of me in truth, though scarcely in the way I first imagined. Yet, after a time, when I found men did not laugh or jeer, neither could I see they made a mock of me behind my back, my courage returned and I took heart again. The lady had been kinder than her word; she had not told my tale to all. Unhappily the Countess had not done with me. I had offended her mightily, and she meant to take her revenge.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HUNTING PARTY.

DURING the first period of my discomfiture I had some talk with Sir Bevis concerning my ransom. I had come to be of the same mind as Ela, to think it high time I were gone. He acknowledged to me he had been misled concerning my position; that I was not so important a personage as he thought; and he agreed at length to reduce his claim to a more moderate sum such as I thought my lord would pay. Messengers were sent to Bristol forthwith, and when I told Ela what I had done, it pleased her well. I would have said naught of the Lady Adela—I cared not to speak of her—yet Ela knew without telling that something more than ordinary had passed between us.

“Tell me truly, Alain,” she said—and in her earnestness she laid her hand upon my arm—“have you angered the Countess?”

“Maybe; I care not,” I answered indifferently. “It is rather that she has angered me.”

Ela gave me one long look, until it seemed to me she had divined all.

"Bid me say the word, and I will tell you how it chanced," I went on, "though I am loath to speak. Suffice it that she fooled me until I grow red only to think of it. She made a sport of me for amusement."

"Then it must be that you——" And her voice faltered. She turned white as death, and there was that in her eyes I could not read, though she withdrew her hand hastily. I should know now the word she was waiting for quick enough; but then I was a witless oaf, and guessed nothing save that my little maid was pained, and I wondered why. At last her words came, "Dost care for her, Alain?"

She spoke so soft I scarce could hear, yet a thunderbolt would not have startled me more. "Care for her?" I exclaimed, and stood staring open-mouthed in dumb surprise that she should imagine such a thing.

As ever with Ela, my simpleness stood me in good stead. No word could have served so well as my amaze. The pained look died from her face, and, though her eyes were full of tears, yet did they glance and shine like tears of joy. But for all that she would finish her speech, and she continued gravely:

"Sure am I, Alain, that the Lady Adela favours you, and it would be a great match. It would raise you at once to wealth and power. I told you long since it was thus you ought to wed. And, remember, the troth-plight is easily broken.

I would not hold you for an hour an you would be free."

"Do you want to be free, Ela?" I cried, a dreadful fear coming upon me in my turn.

"It is not I who am in question, silly boy," and she grew more joyous every minute. "Listen." She enumerated the lady Adela's possessions one by one, ticking them off upon her fingers. "All these may be yours to deal with as you list, so you but pay your court to the fair Countess. And Aylmer would like it well. He thinks, as I do, that it is not wise to wed with me."

"Speak you this in good sooth, Ela, or are you but saying it to try me?"

"What if I am?" and her eyes danced blithely. "There is good reason in my words, and you have not answered them."

"I would not court the Countess did she have all England for her dowry, and that you know full well," I cried angrily. "Neither would she heed me if I did. If you are tired of me, as may well chance, seeing you are so sharp of wit and I so slow, say it out in plain words a simple man can understand, and I will let you go. It will be like cutting myself in twain, yet would it hurt me more to hold you against your will. Say truly now, art weary of me?"

For the first time in her life Ela put her arms about my neck and laid her cheek close to mine. "I am not weary yet of good Brother Simple. I would not change him for all the world."

"Then why vex me thus, sweet?" for indeed I had been much moved.

"Did I begin it?" and she looked into my face; then, seeing I still did not understand, went on quickly, "Ay, verily I did, and I am to blame. Canst forgive me, Alain?"

I answered not in words, and presently we fell to foolish lovers' talk, which concerns no one but ourselves.

This encounter with Ela cheered me mightily. I held up my head and cared for no man; neither did I shrink, as aforetime, from meeting the Countess. And now it was that, somewhat to my surprise, that lady began once more to speak me fair. But although I observed all due courtesy, I held aloof from her much as I could. I wanted not to be her sport again.

Matters were thus between us, when King Stephen marched forth to punish a rebellious baron, and Sir Bevis went with him, bidding me abide his return. They had not gone many days, when, to divert Queen Maud, who was always sad at heart when her lord was absent, there was arranged a great party to hunt the stag, and I was invited to take share in it. We sallied forth in the early morning, after brief hunting mass, the horns sounding merrily, the good hounds eager as we; and, after a space, we roused a tall stag. It was a gallant beast, and a brave run he gave us, over hill and dale and marsh, until at last he was brought to bay in thick forest, and the knife drawn

across his throat. Ela and I rode together and merry sport we had, and a right happy time. But after the stag was killed I had to leave her for a while, and help keep the hounds from straying, until we made on again.

Whilst thus apart from her, the hounds having picked up a fresh scent, yet at first being somewhat at fault, I was riding slowly, waiting to see which way the chase would break, when the young Countess suddenly drew rein close beside me. It was in a narrow glade bordered by beech-trees, whither I had made thinking to meet Ela, and, save one solitary horseman standing motionless in the far distance, no one else was near. The sounding of horns, the baying of hounds, and shouts of huntsmen were all about us, yet for the moment no man could be seen. I was vexed to be caught thus, and would have made onward, but the ydal stayed me.

"Know you this?" she said, holding out her hand with her brother's ring.

"It is the signet of Sir Bevis wherewith he seals his name," I answered, looking closely that I might not be deceived.

"Even so; and he sends it as a token by me; needs must that you obey him."

"I am perfectly willing to obey him," I replied. "Sir Bevis knows it; he does not doubt me."

"Then will you have the less difficulty in fulfilling his commands. It has been whispered in

his ear that, tired of waiting for ransom, you meditate flight. He is loath to think so ill of you, yet lest there be truth in the words he has sent his ring to me. If you be false I am to put you under ward; if you be true man you will go with his messenger."

"I am ready to go, and you know it," I returned, looking at her steadily. "It is a foul lie to say I thought of breaking my plighted word;" for I had it in my mind that perchance out of revenge it might be the lady herself who had defamed me to Sir Bevis.

"I knew it of a truth, and also did I know how the charge would touch you," and she laughed in such strange fashion I marvelled at her. Then calming herself, "Yet will it be well you delay not to speak with my brother in person. His messenger is there," and she pointed to the man in the distance. "He has his orders concerning you. You are to go back with him even now."

"I am ready," and I turned my horse about. "I stay but to take leave of——"

But the Countess wheeled round and blocked the narrow track so that I could not pass. "If it is Ela of—nay, her heritage escapes me; I know not even that I have heard it," and her eyes flashed as she delivered the gibe—"If it is the damsel called Ela you mean, I will make fair excuse for your absence. You may leave it to me."

"There needs no excuse but the simple truth," I said in haste, "and she is hard by. It would take

me but a minute to have a word with her." For in that matter I trusted the lady not at all. If she did speak with Ela truly it would be only to hurt her.

But the Countess raised her hand menacingly. "By this ring I forbid you. See yonder the messenger waits. Ride back one step, and I will have you put in ward as recreant knight."

I was sore vexed at giving Ela no word of my abrupt departure, but nothing more. I did not suspect the Countess of aught but malice. Nevertheless I was too angry to answer, and, turning my horse again, I rode on to where the man was awaiting me beneath the trees. The hunt had recommenced, the hounds were in full cry; but alas! they were making off in quite another direction. There was no chance of Ela passing. And, as if she divined my thought and feared I might turn aside after all, the Countess kept pace with me stride by stride, until her brother's messenger came forth to meet us.

As the horseman drew near I gazed upon him in astonishment. Never had I seen so big a man. I had thought Gundulf a stout varlet, but he was a pigmy beside this fellow, so greatly did he tower above me. And he was strong, too, in proportion; for I noted the muscles on his hairy hands and arms standing out like iron bands; yet for all he was so big he was in no way fierce to look upon. His ruddy countenance was smiling and cheerful, and his blue eyes beamed mildly through a bush

of shaggy hair. He was a Northman from oversea, I found out after, passing by the name of Big Sweyn, and had been thrall to the Countess from her childhood. Besides his great size, Sweyn had another peculiarity which made him fit servant for his mistress; but this I did not discover until later. At the time I noted only his height and bulk, and pitied the poor beast that had to carry him.

"This is the knight, Sweyn," said the Countess Adela, as we drew rein. "He needs no constraint; he rides with you willingly. You have your orders; you know what is to be done; see you to it that you obey me."

The giant made no answer, save to look at me hard and nod his head in uncouth fashion. I wondered rather that his mistress did not rate him; she was wont to exact much respect from all about her. But she seemed not to mind, and, bidding him take good care of me, wheeled her horse round and departed to rejoin her friends.

Big Sweyn looked to see if I were ready; then, shaking his reins, we rode off in the opposite direction, and soon left the forest and the merry hunt far behind.

I was too sullen at first, too angry at being sent off in such summary fashion, to open my lips; but after a few miles I bethought me it might be as well to know whither we were bound. I slackened speed a little and questioned my conductor. The fellow would make no answer good or bad, though it was plain he understood my speech.

"If you are bidden to hold your peace, why not say so once for all, and I will forbear asking," I cried angrily; but still he spoke no word.

This offensive behaviour did not make my vexation any less, as you may well believe, and I rode on in undisguised ill-humour, resolved to make my complaint to Sir Bevis as soon as I encountered him. It seemed hard that, having given me his trust for so long, he should suddenly withdraw it in such rude fashion through his sister.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE TOWER.

WE rode at no great speed. My horse was already weary with the chase, and Sweyn seemed in no hurry, so that night was almost upon us before we reached our destination. This, as far as I could perceive through the darkness, was a square tower with a few low buildings around, enclosed by strong walls and standing in the midst of waste land. There was no moat or drawbridge; but the walls were so high and massive, it might well have stood a siege. The warder scanned us through the gate by the light of a blazing torch ere he opened. When we passed into the courtyard it was deserted; there was no one even to take our horses. I looked around wondering what had become of Sir Bevis and his men.

“Where is your lord, sirrah?” I shouted loudly, hoping if the knight were near he would come forth. But there came no answer, only an aged crone peeped forth from a shed, who, on perceiving me, louted low and disappeared.

The giant swung himself heavily to the ground, and, going back to the gate, brought the warder’s torch and pointed to the door.

"Mean you that I am to go within?" I asked.
"Nay, if Sir Bevis is there why does he not show himself?" For sure was I by the continued silence the good knight was not at hand. And the place daunted me. All was dark and still, I felt sure I had somewhat to fear.

Even now the varlet would not speak, but put his hand upon my shoulder as if to urge me onward. But I planted my back against the wall and drew my hunting-knife, the only weapon I had.

"Give me good reason or I will not stir," I said sternly; "I like it not that you make me no answer when I speak."

He looked at me for a short space as if in doubt, then, coming closer, opened his mouth and held the torch so that I could see.

The poor wretch had no tongue; it had been cut out nearly to the root, so that it was impossible for him to speak. It was dreadful to look upon, this great tongueless mouth. Coming upon me so unexpectedly, I was startled, and jumped aside. The next moment I felt ashamed, and a great pity came to me. This huge man who looked so strong was yet so helpless.

Sweyn saw the change in my face, and, lowering the torch, stood as if awaiting my pleasure. Yet, did he mean me ill or well? If he could not speak at least he could make signs, and I asked again, though in altered tone, "Let me know, friend, if Sir Bevis be within."

Sweyn shook his head in the negative. That

made me more satisfied. Had he signed yes I must have distrusted him again, so I went on: "It is by his orders you have brought me here?"

Once again he nodded, pointing to the weary horses who had not moved a pace, as if for explanation. I laughed within myself at my foolishness. We must have halted somewhere for the night, and, maybe, this empty tower was the handiest spot, though it promised small accommodation. I thrust my knife back in belt on the instant.

"Lead on, my friend, I follow, and crave pardon for distrusting you."

There were more surprises awaiting me within. The giant mounted a steep winding-stair almost to the top of the building, instead of turning in at the nearest door as I expected. And then, in place of the rude quarters I thought to find—a bench to sit me down, a bundle of straw, or pallet bed at most, to sleep on—he ushered me into a chamber appointed as for a king. The walls were hung with rich arras, the bed softly dight with silken curtains; there were chairs with cushions, and fresh rushes upon the floor, while to crown all a small table decked with pasty and flagon was set before a blazing fire.

"This for me! There must be some mistake, it is more like a fair lady's bower," I exclaimed as I looked around, and would have drawn back had not Sweyn by looks and gestures encouraged me to enter.

"I am to stay here?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It has been made ready for me; I was expected?"

He nodded again vigorously, and, after lighting the candle which stood upon a spike above the hearth, drew forward a chair, made me sit, and removed my heavy boots and the hauberk I wore beneath my hunting garb. Then he brought water to cleanse the soil of the road, and acting as my squire served me nigh as well as Gundulf.

When I had eaten and drank—and so good wine I never tasted at the king's palace—Sweyn left me, and I threw myself upon the bed to sleep, expecting to be on the road again in the early morning. But when day came and I essayed to go down, lo! the door was fast without. I was a prisoner. I thought little of it at first. I was in Sweyn's charge, it was but to be expected he would make sure of me, and I waited with patience until he should come. There were but two narrow loopholes for windows, high up in the wall and covered with thick horn, so that I could not see much of the sun; but well I knew it was high in the heavens before Sweyn made his appearance. "Art come at last, thou lazy varlet!" I saluted him; "I thought to have been long on the road ere now."

He laughed good-humouredly, and shook his shaggy head, then set to blowing up the embers to prepare my breakfast. But although it was so late as to be well nigh dinner time instead of the first meal, Sweyn went about his work with such de-

liberation that a sudden thought striking me, I cried sharply:

“ Ride we on to-day or not?”

He shook his head with a laugh that seemed to say I might have known that without asking.

“ Then comes Sir Bevis here?”

He stood still now looking troubled, as if it were not in his power to satisfy me.

“ You do not know? Is that it?”

I was puzzled. If not to meet Sir Bevis why had I been brought hither, and for what purpose? For right well I knew that if the knight meant to keep me in hold it would not be in such quarters. My thoughts flew to the Countess Adela, but only for a moment; it could scarce be her doing. She had sent me away, I was well quit of her, and my mind went back to Sir Bevis. He was a man fond of playing merry jests, perchance he meant to have some sport with me before I left him. At all events it behooved me to know just how I stood, and I asked again, “ I am to remain here under your charge?” and Sweyn nodded assent.

“ May I quit this room?”

There was an emphatic “ no,” and he made as though turning a key in the lock to show I was prisoner.

“ You are my gaoler, then?”

Once more he signified assent, a kindly look in his bright blue eyes.

“ A more courteous one than the last, I warrant, yet I love not to be cooped within walls. And

for how long? That I suppose you can not tell?"

Sweyn made a motion as of one riding with whip and spur, until I cried, "I see, I see; until the coming of your lord," and once more I guessed aright. At least I thought I did, and felt relieved; it was some jest of Sir Bevis after all. He would soon appear with his merry companions, and we should ride forth together.

The thought of this brought Ela to my mind again. Could I not send word to her of what had chanced to me? Drawing money from my pouch I offered it to Sweyn if he would find a messenger. But he would not hear of it, making me plainly understand it was not to be done. Neither did he take my money nor despoil me of a penny, by which I plainly saw the varlet was obeying orders.

After Sweyn left me the hours passed but slowly. I discovered a harp in one corner of the room, and for a time diverted myself by playing and singing; but I soon grew weary, and was glad to see the dumb giant come back that I might strive to talk with him. But when Sweyn found what I would be at it pleased him not so well, and he showed me a better way to pass the time. He fetched up a chequered board, and a set of figures for the game of chess, and we fell to play. I remember, I thought it would be an easy task to beat a thrall, nay, never before had I met one who knew the game. But Sweyn proved more than my match.

True, in the end I generally came off victor, but I have often thought since it was because the big fellow willed it so to keep me in good-humour.

Three long days I passed thus, sometimes straining my ears for sounds from without, sometimes striving to extract information from Sweyn. He would bear with me for a while, though I know he ill-liked so much questioning; then with a smile on the great mouth that almost cut his face in twain, he would bring forward the chess-board. And all the time I fared of the best until I began to loathe the good food, longing rather for a crust of bread and liberty. A drink from some clear brook, with the blue sky above and the green turf below, would have tasted far better than the choice wine Sweyn supplied me with so bountifully.

But on the fourth day, some two hours before noon, as near as I could guess, a change came; I caught the sound of horses' hoofs in the court-yard. It was not much, just a clink or two against the stones, and I made sure it must be some one riding in advance of Sir Bevis, surely a messenger with a word for me. I was too impatient to sit still, and paced restlessly to and fro, expecting every moment that Sweyn would come. But instead of hastening, it was past his usual time before he appeared, and even then it was only to bring in my food and hurry out again, taking no notice whatever of my eager questions. I was disappointed, yet I did not lose hope; that the newcomer, whoever it might be, concerned me in some way I felt

certain. And I was not wrong, though would to Heaven it had been otherwise; for when dusk fell, and Sweyn had been and gone again—making up the fire, adjusting another candle, putting finger to lip the while to bid me not speak—the door opened yet once more, and the Countess Adela, richly arrayed in bright-coloured garments, stood upon the threshold. She regarded my astonishment with a smile half mocking, half tender, and said in low, soft tones:

“Sweyn tells me you are aweary of your prison, Sir Alain; that you find the time hang long upon your hands. Therefore have I come to keep you company.”

I answered nothing, the words would not come. I stood staring at her, pondering in my troubled brain what this might mean.

“Have you grown dumb also like to your gaoler? Have you no welcome for me at all?” Then as I still spoke not—she was not welcome and I would have her know it—she said reproachfully: “You have ill manners, sir; I have ridden far to do you a service and you give me no word of greeting, are too churlish even to bid me sit.”

This recalled me somewhat to myself, and with a muttered word for pardon I drew forward the best chair, placed a footstool hard by, then stood awaiting her pleasure. As to her tale of doing me a service, I did not believe it one whit, neither would I ask her meaning.

Yet such was my weariness of seeing none but

the dumb man, that when presently she fell to talk, telling me of the king, and of my friends, and the latest news from the field, her soft voice fell on my ears like sweet music, my sullenness gradually melted away. She spoke not of Ela by name, yet gave me to understand that all was well with her, and that she knew Sir Bevis had sent for me. This was a lie like all the rest of it, but that I had yet to find out. The Countess was careful to say no word that could offend me, and with winning ways and beguiling speech did she so work upon my weakness, that when at length she rose to depart, saying she had stayed over long already, almost was I sorry to let her go. And she saw it, and staying her foot at the door, where Sweyn stood torch in hand to light her down, said with a little laugh:

“Will you invite me to come again, Sir Alain, or do you prefer Sweyn’s company to mine?”

“It is not for me to invite,” I returned, bending knee to the ground, “I could not presume so far. The castle is yours to come and go as you will, I a poor captive at your pleasure.”

“Yet have I seen many a captive worse lodged,” and she looked around. “And your fare—if you have aught to complain of it shall be amended.”

“It would ill become me to complain, nothing is lacking save——”

“Save a friend for company,” she interrupted, taking the word from my lips. “I will have pity upon you, Sir Alain. I will be your friend, I will return.”

But I would have my say and went on as if she had not spoken.

"Nothing is lacking to me save liberty. If you would indeed be my friend, noble Countess, grant this boon, bring me to speech with Sir Bevis." For when I had asked of him before she had put me by. She would not say if he were near, if I were to go to him or he to come to me, or wherefore I was kept in hold.

The lady's face darkened as I had seen it once before, but she was too sure of me now to lose her temper.

"You are ungrateful, Sir Alain," she answered languidly, gathering her robe together to descend the stair. "I have talked enough for once, I am weary of prating to amuse you."

"Yet tell me one thing," and I fell on my knees and clasped her dress. "Will Sir Bevis come to me in truth?"

Something, I know not what, a turn of the head, a flash of the deep blue eyes, some trifle I can not explain, made me think for a moment that maybe Sir Bevis had not sent for me at all, that I was prisoner to the Countess. Yet it passed again with her next words, and I thought myself a fool for imagining it. She looked me full in the face, a strange smile playing about her lips.

"A little patience, Sir Alain, a little patience," she said, "and truly I think my brother will come. Nay, my life upon it, I vow by my life he will come shortly."

Her words came back to me after; she vowed by her life, and her life it was—truly, I care not to think of it.

“To-morrow, Sir Alain,” she went on, “we will speak of this again;” and she extended her hand in farewell. I raised it to my lips as in duty bound, and at last she departed; nor did I remember until some time after she had not once spoken of the service she had ridden so far to do me.

My prison room seemed emptier after the Lady Adela was gone, yet methought I breathed the freer; and presently, finding a fine kerchief she had let fall, impregnated with some subtle essence from the East, in a sudden fit of rage I cast it upon the glowing embers, stamping it down with my heel. Big Sweyn came in and caught me in the act, and looked at me in reproachful fashion. The poor dumb giant was devoted to his mistress heart and soul; it troubled him that I should seem thus to belittle her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COUNTESS ADELA.

THE Countess came not to me the next day, nor the next, neither did Sweyn give me any of his company. I had plenty of time to grow weary of solitude before the Lady Adela presented herself again. Then once more I was charmed against my will. It is marvellous what pains she took to beguile me. But what boots it to harp so long on the same string, to tell the same tale again? Spite of my dislike, she soon gained such power over my weak will, that I became as wax in her hands, she could make me pleased or sad as she listed. I saw her daily, and the hours passed more swiftly in her presence; yet I cared not for her as she wished—no, not for a single moment. At my very weakest I would have rejoiced never to see her more, for one short half-hour with Ela.

To a certain point the Lady Adela had all power over me; beyond that she could go no further, and one day she overstepped the mark until there came hot words between us. Forgetting her high station, casting away her womanhood, she pleaded boldly for my love, vowing that my unkindness was

killing her. And indeed it was truth that her cheeks were strangely flushed, her hands dry and burning, as with fever. The poor lady must not be blamed overmuch. From what followed after it is plain she was already distraught, past answering for herself. But I knew not that and spoke her harshly, bidding her remember how she had used me before, was it likely I could be fooled again?

“Would to Heaven you would choose some one else for your sport!” I cried with anger. “I see not why you should make wagers upon me.”

“There was no wager, Alain, as any but you would have known. It was but a word on the spur of the moment because you would not give heed to me. Yet I bethought me afterward that perchance I had been too sudden, that you scarce apprehended the honour I designed you. Maybe, I thought, he repents even now, and by my silly talk of befooling I have driven him from me. I felt so sure it must be so, I caused you to be brought hither where we could have free converse, with none to interrupt us.” She paused, looking at me as if in appeal.

“I thank you for the honour, but I will have none of it,” I replied brusquely. Had it been Aylmer he would have put her aside with soft words and yet held his own, but the scene irked me. I wanted her gone.

“You will not wed me?”

“I can not.” And I turned on my heel.

“Yet men say that I am fair.”

"Only one woman in the world is fair to me," I returned, unmoved.

She threw back her little head and her lips parted, showing her white teeth in angry menace.

"Have a care, you witless fool, else may it go ill with you. All is not quite so simple as you seem to think. I hold you like this." She opened and closed her hand. "Honoured knight or recreant knave, men shall call you as I list."

"I give not my honour into your hands," I began scornfully, but she stayed me with a spiteful laugh.

"You give not, no, yet have I taken it. You are my prisoner, do you understand—mine, mine. Sir Bevis knows not that you are here. I took his ring by subterfuge. If he come back and find you missing, men will say you broke your word. Ah, have I touched you there, false knight?" (My countenance changed as I saw what a trap she had set for me.) "Yet so it will be unless I undo it. I told them naught at the court, not one word—why should I? When men marvelled that you came not from the chase I marvelled also, then to spite the black-visaged maid I said I had seen you in close converse with a fair dame. Was it not so? Had we not been together? Then men marvelled no longer but laughed and turned aside. I wot you are no better than your fellows."

She paused as if for answer but I made her none, and kept my countenance well as I could lest she should see how her speech troubled me.

"Had you fallen in with my will," she continued, seeing I meant not to speak, "all would have gone well, I would have made it known as if my brother had summoned you. But think you I will let you go free now?" Her voice rose almost to a scream. "Let you go free to boast how I sued to you, to make a mock of me with your dark love? That will I never, you shall die first. This castle is mine, the varlets are mine, and here shall you remain. Not in this my own bower, which I had made ready for you, but deep down in dungeon hold with dumb Sweyn for gaoler; there shall you stay until your bones rot. Your fame in the dust, your name a byeword, what think you of that, proud Sir Alain? As I can love, so I can hate, and I vow I will not spare you. Will you change these quarters for a dungeon?"

"Ay, gladly, so it free me from your company," I rejoined cruelly, instead of soothing her and seeking to escape by cunning. It only made me the more incensed to find how easily she had tricked me, how completely I was in her power.

The Countess darted forward, and struck me on the face with such right good will that my cheek tingled again. She would have repeated the blow, snatching the knife from her girdle, only I caught her arm until her passion should be past. Then she fell to weeping dolorously, her face flushing in strange fashion red and white, her breath coming in short, deep gasps. At length, finding I made no motion to comfort her, that I seemed not to

heed her at all, she rose up and called aloud for Sweyn. He answered at once, opening the door with such celerity I fear he must have been listening outside.

As she left, the Lady Adela, her tears now dried, turned to say with mocking laugh, "Sleep well, Sir Alain, and fair dreams to you. Another night and you may not lodge so well. It will be your turn to call upon me soon; but I know not that I shall answer. Sleep well and dream of her you love. Long ere you meet again she will have found a husband." And with that parting scoff she was gone. The door closed. I heard the key turned, there was a bolt let down; I was faster in ward than before.

And now did I begin to bend my thoughts toward escape. If I were not prisoner to Sir Bevis my word did not hold; it behooved me to get free before worse came. By standing upon the table I could touch the windows easily, but the walls were too thick, the openings too narrow, I could scarce reach them with my hands. I could not, even though I broke the sheet of horn, bring my head near enough the aperture to see below. I tried the door next, but as I expected it was closed too fast; I might have forced it open before, but not now. I could see no way save to offer bribe to Sweyn who had used me so well, a plan that failed lamentably. Soon as he came in the morning I tempted him all I could, and when he heeded me not I threatened him with the anger of Sir Bevis. I

might have spared my breath; the dumb giant cared for no one in the world but his mistress, and this he contrived to let me know—I was more apt now at understanding his signs and gestures. He left me, and I waited all the remainder of that day, expecting every hour to be hauled forth and taken to dungeon. And I planned again how, feigning submission, I would go forth as it were, willingly, then suddenly endeavour to break away. Better die with my back to the wall, I thought, than pine again in dungeon hold.

But night came yet once more, and there was no change; I was still undisturbed. The Countess would scarce have relented; maybe the hold was not ready, perchance a smith was needed to strengthen the chains. I felt it but a respite, my fate was but delayed.

Two more days passed thus; big Sweyn brought me food and wood as usual, but his face was dark and gloomy; he paid no heed when I sought to speak, and departed always in haste. I thought it was anger because I had striven to tempt him to betray his mistress, but I know now that he was in sore trouble. His absorption gave me a new idea. Whilst he was busied about his duties, could I not slip through the door which he left only on the latch, and drop the bolt so that he could not overtake me. I knew not who else might be in the tower, but I feared none save Sweyn. He I knew would be too strong for me. So I made ready, pretending even to be sleeping when he entered in the

early morn, then whilst he knelt on the hearth, his head bent down blowing up the embers, I made a rush for the door. I was quick, but big Sweyn was quicker still. He had no time to rise, but that mattered not to him; rolling his great bulk across the floor, he stretched forth one long arm, caught my foot, and I fell headlong. I thrust at him with my knife. He wrenched it from me, then threw me aloft, caught me as I fell, and swung me backwards and forwards, as if about to dash my brains out against the wall. My struggles affected him no more than if I had been a child. After thus showing what he could do an he would, he deposited me, breathless but unhurt, upon a bench; I had not even a bruise. Then with grim, reproachful look he surveyed me for a short space, and turned on his heel and departed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FATE OF THE COUNTESS.

My attempt at escape had certainly been unfortunate, and I remained all the rest of that day covered with shame at my ignominious defeat and vowing vengeance upon the Countess. Sweyn took his own revenge. Next time he came he opened the door but a chink, thrust in his basket, and left me to tend myself. He served me thus twice or thrice, then for a whole day he came not at all, and I wondered if it were some new device to starve me into submission.

But toward evening, as I sat in the dusk, no light and no fire, the door opened violently and Sweyn rushed in, making signs for me to come. His looks were wild, the torch shook in his hand so that I drew back from him. He would not have been so moved were it only to take me to dungeon; it was some trick of the Countess again.

"Art come to put me in hold?" I cried; but he shook his head vehemently.

"Then it is your mistress?" He signed assent.

"She has sent for me; you are to take me to her?"

He nodded again, at the same time pulling my arm as if to bid me come quickly.

"Then will I not stir one step," I said with decision. "I have had overmuch of her company already;" and I sat down again resolved not to move.

Sweyn looked at me as if in despair, then suddenly he flung his torch upon the hearth, caught me in his arms, and carried me, kicking and struggling, down the stairs. A story lower he paused and set me on my feet, holding me fast all the time. I had ceased to struggle; it was useless, and but made me feel my helplessness the more. I suffered him to drag me where he would. The woman should see that I was brought to her presence by force. As it chanced, however, I might have spared myself the indignity.

Sweyn held me with one hand as he opened a low door and we stood within a little antechamber. He bent his head here and listened, and there came sounds as of one talking fast without a pause, save only for bursts of unmeaning laughter. It was a woman's voice, yet a stranger's. The thought came to me there was another with the Countess, and I felt glad. Then we passed on into the inner room, where I saw that which made me start in affright. It was the Lady Adela who was speaking after all, yet was she so terribly changed that at first sight I scarce knew her. She was lying half-dressed upon a bed, her eyes deep sunk in her head and glowing like burning coals, her face a strange leaden hue frightful to look upon. Of all her mar-

vellous beauty not one trace remained, save the yellow hair strewn over the pillow. And withal she moved her head incessantly to and fro, ceasing not to speak wild words in a strange, hoarse voice, breaking now and again into laughter. A woman thrall was by her side—Sweyn's wife I found presently—who ever and anon wiped the foam from the poor lady's lips, or strove to give her to drink.

I was too horror-stricken at first to speak, and, forgetting his infirmity, looked at Sweyn for explanation. At once he cast himself at my feet, and with extended hands as if beseeching me to grant some petition, made dreadful inarticulate noises in his throat, tears streaming down his cheeks the while. The woman came forward and placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"He is begging you to have compassion upon his mistress, my lord. He thinks maybe you can help her."

"Alas, poor lady, I can do naught," I said.
"What is it that has befallen her?"

"It is the black fever, my lord; it has been much about of late, and my lady must have caught it on the way. She will die; there is no help for it. I have tended more than one in the same disorder."

"But has no leech been to her? Is she all alone here save for you two?"

"There are none save us and the warder, a feeble old man past work who can scarce ope the gate. My mistress brought a woman with her, but

soon as the sickness declared itself the faithless wench fled shrieking. She may have footed it to Lincoln by now for aught I know. And my lady would have no leech. She charged us straitly to send for no man; she would have none to know she was here. I gave her healing drinks made from herbs gathered at full of the moon, and she thought it would soon pass. Besides, of late we durst not leave her for a moment. See there now!" With an exceeding loud cry the distraught Countess sought to fling herself to the floor.

Sweyn rushed to her side and held her down, making at the same time wild signs to me I could in nowise understand.

"He would have you speak to her, my lord," the woman interpreted. "He has a strange notion your voice might give her rest. He would have sought you before but I would not have it; it is but an idle fancy, as I told him. Nevertheless, when but now my poor mistress grew more unquiet even than before, he would have his way. If my lord would speak to her but once—she would not heed, she is past it—yet might Sweyn be content."

I leant over and spoke some words to the sick Countess, though what I said I scarce could tell you. At first there was no difference, and the woman looked as if to say, "I told you so;" but Sweyn signed to me to keep on, and presently there came a change. The fierce paroxysm gradually abated, the head turned less restlessly to and fro, the eyes met mine with something almost of meaning in

their gaze. But all too soon my speech came to an end, words failed me, try as I would I could say nothing. Then at once she grew unquiet again, and began to laugh and cry and cast herself about so that there was some ado to hold her. On her ceasing a little to struggle, Sweyn rushed away, but almost before I missed him he was back again, bringing the harp from my room whereon I had played to the Countess when she visited me. He thrust it now into my hands, signing me to use it, and I harped and sang full soft and low, the poor lady becoming calmer every minute. At last, when some time had passed, the tired eyelids closed; she was asleep.

"If she sleep, she may do well," I whispered to the woman, still touching the strings lightly.

She shook her head.

"It is but for a space. The fever has too fast hold. Naught now can save her."

"Then where is the priest? Would you suffer her soul to perish as well as her body?" and I looked at Sweyn in anger. It seemed a shameful thing this noble lady should be left to die thus with only mean thralls about her.

The dumb man stretched forth his hands to me with more of those frightful sounds, and again did his wife read his meaning.

"Sweyn has feared to leave his sick mistress only to me, but if my lord will stand by her until his return he will take word to Sir Bevis and the priest."

"Sir Bevis, is he near at hand?" I cried with a great feeling of relief.

Sweyn nodded.

"Then go you for him with all speed. Bring him and a holy father both, and I will stay until your return. I give you my word for it, I will not leave her."

Sweyn made as though he would kiss my feet, and next moment was gone. In no very long space I heard his horse in the courtyard, heard the gate open and close again. No need bid the faithful servant hasten; I wished only he were a lighter weight that his horse might carry him the faster.

Now that I was thus left in charge I bade the woman throw the doors wide, and opened the casement in the outer room myself, that sweet air might enter. Spices were already burning in a chafing-dish, and the place was filled with their fragrance; but over all there hung a clammy, fetid odour plainly to be discerned. I was not feared of the fever; if it were Heaven's will that I should have it naught could prevent; if otherwise naught could hurt me; but I was sad at heart for the unfortunate Countess. As I beheld her in such grievous condition, her fresh beauty all withered, her low, sweet voice changed to harsh mutterings, I repented me I had felt such hot anger against her. I would have taken back my hard words if I could.

The Lady Adela's sleep lasted not long. Presently the fever came back, and by times she grew distraught, and, calling for her palfrey, strove to

rise. But even at the worst I had power to soothe her. She knew me not, but the sound of my harp never failed, and, sitting in the outer room that my voice might come the softer, all night long I played and sang.

It was thus Sir Bevis found me, when in the grey dawn he came riding in alone, having in his haste outstripped all his attendants. For Sir Bevis loved his sister with exceeding great love; there had ever been the closest attachment between them. I feared the knight would marvel how I came to be at such work, and doubted how he would take it; but soon as we were alone I found he had learned the truth on the way. From long use Sweyn was able to make his lord understand almost as if he had speech, and he told him how he brought me to the tower, and what had come of it. But now at the first, Sir Bevis had thought only for his sister, and, motioning me to play on, he passed into the inner room. He was out again almost directly, his face white, his limbs shaking as if with the ague.

"I can not look upon her," he muttered hoarsely, his eyes wide-staring with terror. "It is not Adela, not my beautiful sister; some devil surely must have bewitched her."

Hiding his face in his hands, he fell to bitter weeping. I could say naught to comfort him, for tears came to my eyes also, and there was a choking in my throat, so that I could not sing; but I kept the harp going, and the sound of it still calmed her.

We waited for a time, scarce a word passing between us, until Sweyn arrived with leech and priest, and in the bustle of their entering I stole away, and went back to my old quarters, not knowing what else to do with myself. But first I hailed one I found waiting outside—there were plenty of men about the place now the knight's train had come—and bade him bring me meat and drink, for I was faint with hunger. I ate and was refreshed, and some hours later, hard upon noon it must have been, Sir Bevis came to me.

Weary of waiting I had fallen asleep, and he shook me roughly, saying, as I jumped to my feet, "I have been seeking you everywhere. I guessed not she had lodged you here; truly your captivity has been made easy." Then regarding me with a look of surprise not unmingled with contempt, "You are brave in field, I know, though not more than scores of other men; but in lady's bower I see not that you shine. I marvel she wasted a glance upon you."

"Not more than I do," I cried with such fervour, that had he not been so sad he must have laughed. "And in truth, Bevis, I give you my word for it, never did I in any way seek to gain her favour."

"And for that very reason did she seek to win you. It was ever thus with my poor sister. Cross but her will, and never would she rest content until she had her way. Had you wooed her as the others, all would have been well. She would have

flouted you speedily. And she was not fair enough for you?"

"A man can love but one," I answered shortly.

"I am not with you there. I have a fair maid whom I love passing well, yet can I find room in my heart for many others. But it is best so; you were not of rank to wed her; there would have been trouble. My poor sister is sunk into a stupor now, which will last, they say, until she die; yet did her senses come back for a time when the leech let blood and relieved her. She has seen the priest, and made her peace with Heaven, for which the saints be praised. Also did she speak somewhat with me, and confirmed the tale of Sweyn. She had used you but ill, she said, and prayed you would have the grace to forgive her."

"I forgive her with all my heart, poor lady," I cried quickly, "and grieve sorely for her fate. Nay, I know not that I have anything to forgive; she was not to blame at all; it was the sickness; she was distraught."

"Maybe. Yet I care not men should know what has passed. Therefore when we have eaten together—Sweyn told me but now he was so hard beset all yesterday he could bring you no food—you shall ride forth a free man. I will trust to your word to send the ransom. No need for you to go back to Lincoln. I will give it out you have been with me from the first."

"No man shall hear of the matter from me," I

answered. “But there is one in the city I would fain take leave of before I depart.”

“You mean your maid, would you take the fever to her?” he cried with anger. “You may have it upon you even now, or it may be on me;” and he shuddered violently. “You are my man. You must do as I bid. I will not have you go to Lincoln.”

Well I knew his fear was not for Ela, but lest my tongue should wag. Yet was there sense in his words. It was hard to leave my little maid without farewell, we were not likely to meet again for a word long. Then there came to me the Lady Adela’s discoloured face, her piteous sighs and groans. Should such evil come to Ela through me, we were undone indeed. Never could I forgive myself. Therefore did I consent to the knight’s desire, the more willingly as I called to mind Gundulf. Most like I should meet the messengers with my ransom on the way. I doubted not he would be with them, and he would do my errand to Ela.

All fell out exactly as I had forecast. I rode forth, two of Sir Bevis’s men accompanying me as my following, and we had scarce started on the second day’s journey when I met my friends, Gundulf among them as I expected. Blithe were we to meet again. He did my errand gladly, and Ela knew at last that all was well with me.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I BECOME LORD OF BRIABOIS.

THE next event that befell after my return was the departure of Prince Henry, who was sent for by his father, the Count of Anjou. We were loth to lose the youth, for he gave promise even then of the mighty king he was afterwards to become, and we little guessed that uncle and nephew would not meet again. A few months later and the great Earl fell grievously sick of a fever, and yielded his last breath in the good city of Gloucester.

It was the worst disaster possible for the Empress, the heaviest stroke that could have been dealt her. Wise and valiant, true-hearted and faithful to his word as was none other, a greater man has England yet to see.

We bore him to his burial at Bristol with tears and bitter lamentations, and truly of all men I had cause to grieve the most. I had lost my best friend. If he had been my father he could not have used me more kindly, and as for a father I mourned for him.

Even the Empress was broken down at last, though not for an instant did she yield her rights.

Sad at heart she quitted England, returning to her duchy of Normandy to wait for better times. And I followed in her train. Downcast and gloomy were we all, I not the least because of Ela. I knew not when we might meet again.

When I had been in Normandy for some months I entered the service of Prince Henry, the Empress at the same time bestowing upon me a small estate. She gave it, she was pleased to say, for love of her good brother. It had ever been his wish that she should thus reward me. Thus even after his death did I owe to the great Earl my advancement.

Now touching this same fief—a lordship of no great extent compared with some, though to me it was much indeed—thereby hangs a strange tale in which was the hand of Heaven marvellously shown. It had fallen into the hands of the Empress through rebellion of Gerald, the lord, who, joining the King of France, had turned his arms against his liege lady. Thereupon his lands and goods had been confiscated, and his castle of Briabois and the lands adjacent bestowed upon me. He had been but a far kinsman of the former lord, who died early, with none to succeed save an infant child, who came to an untimely end through falling in the river. Upon that Gerald stepped in as of right, and did homage for the land as next of kin. Nigh upon a score years had passed since then, and no man had ever gainsaid his right to be lord of Briabois. Had not his ill-fortune tempted

him to rebel, the truth might never have transpired.

Quite a year elapsed before I was formally invested with my lordship, which took place at Rouen, where the Empress had her court. As I held the fief direct from her, she conveyed the lands to me herself by delivery of a wand, whilst I did homage before her and the young prince. There was a feast after, at which we all made merry, and next morning I rode forth, my small train behind me, to take possession. Who so proud as I when the turrets came into view, and I saw for the first time the fair domain of which I was the lord. The castle was of no great size, but exceeding strong, perched on a rocky height, with the river on one side washing the walls. Around the base were clustered a number of huts, whose inhabitants, my vassals all, received me somewhat gloomily. Gerald had been but a harsh lord, exacting his dues to the uttermost; yet better the evil you know than the evil you fear. They were used to him. They knew his ways. I was a stranger from over-sea. They were troubled at having a new master.

Their apprehensions were somewhat allayed the next day, when on the chief men assembling to take the oaths I spake them fair, promising if they gave me good service to make their burdens lighter. When all this had been set in order—remembering the vow I made whilst in the dungeon of Ranulf the Wolf, ever to be merciful to poor prisoners—I made strict inquiries what men might be in hold, com-

manding all to be brought before me. Gundulf with right good will saw to this, and made sure none were overlooked. Happily there were but few, all, save one, villeins undergoing punishment for withholding their dues. These I set free, with a warning to be careful in future; the remaining prisoner was more difficult to deal with. He had been found apart from the others, shut in an inner cell, bound hand and foot with heavy fetters, and those who kept the dungeons professed not to know his offence or whence he came. The old warder was dead; they had not long been in charge; they knew nothing, save that he was dumb, for never once he had spoken to them.

I looked at the man curiously. There was something about him seemed familiar; yet when I looked closer it faded away. So pitiful a wretch I had never encountered. Bent almost double—either from age or the weight of his chains—his long locks, caked and matted with dirt, had intermingled with his beard until his protruding eyes and swollen nose peered forth from a forest of hair, so that he looked scarce human. He sat dazed and motionless, just as they had put him down, the only signs of life the restless motions of his claw-like hands, the blinking eyes unable to bear the light. Yet when food was brought he clutched at it ravenously, gulping down all they gave him like a famished wolf.

“Here is no dumb man,” cried Gundulf; “he has his tongue as much as you or I; it is but grown

rusty with disuse. Give him into my care, my lord; I warrant in no long time I will have something out of him."

I let it be as Gundulf said. A few days later there came a sudden summons from the prince to join him in the field, and I had to depart in haste. Before I left, however, I gave orders for the poor wretch to be well tended until I should return.

It was close upon six months before I saw Briabois again, and at first there was so much to set in order, I did not remember the old prisoner. Then one morning, as I was riding home after business afield, something brought him to my mind, and I asked Gundulf how he fared.

"Indifferent well, my lord," was the reply. "He has found his speech, as I knew he would, but his legs will never serve again. He has to hobble upon two sticks.

"And what account does he give of himself?"

"He will say nothing, but vows he has been in cell so long he has forgot his name and country, or why he was put there. It is a wise varlet, I warrant you. Soon as his wits came back he asked concerning the one who had been lord before, and when he found he was but banished, then quoth he shrewdly, 'It is only the dead who never come back; perchance one day he may be lord again.'"

"You think it is because of that he holds his tongue?"

"It would be a good reason, my lord, seeing that he is crippled, and unable to get away. It

might move his old master to have compassion upon him. Maybe if you spoke him yourself, he would have more confidence, that is if you care enough about the matter to pursue it. The old fellow—old Peter they call him—wants for nothing. The warder's wife has him in charge, and she is a kind soul."

"I will see him. I am curious," I answered.
"I would know why he was used so hardly."

"Then yonder he is. He hobbles out always at this time to sit in the sun. The warder's little maid is with him." And as Gundulf spoke I saw the old man seated upon a bench, his sticks beside him, a child playing about his feet.

He did not notice us. We had been riding upon the soft sward; besides, I doubt not he had grown dull of hearing. Now that the fellow's head had been trimmed and his beard shaven, he appeared not so very old after all, though his hair was snow-white and his form bent and shrunken. As I drew rein and watched, I knew the man, knew him well, though had it been to save my life I could put no name to him. It was the white hair that so changed the knave from my remembrance. Had it been black as the sloe, as before, I had recognised him on the instant. It was a simple thing that presently revealed the truth to me. The little maid, a child of some four or five years, placed a ball in her playfellow's hands, and he set to throwing it up and down to pleasure her. Then in a flash I knew. The hands were feeble and shaking,

but they still retained some of their old deftness; it was none other than Jocellus, he who had so treacherously betrayed me—he who held the secret of Ela's birth.

I started involuntarily, and my horse taking it as a signal to move on, the jongleur looked up and saw me. He threw back his hood to bare his head, clutched his sticks, and tottered to his feet, then humbly craving pardon for lack of power to kneel, tried to thank me for my grace. I cut short his thanks, but halted to ask some questions, watching him hard the while to see if he would know me. But no, there was not a sign of it. Truly it would have been difficult, I think, to recognise me in my present trim for the rough, unkempt boy who had burst upon him on the waste, and harped afterwards at his bidding. I said nothing more then, and rode on until I reached the courtyard, only presently I bade them bring the old man to me in my private chamber.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LADY ALIONORA.

THE jongleur was quaking when they brought him in, fearing he knew not what; but I spake him softly, and Gundulf brought a cup of wine; Jocellus was ever the easier to manage when thus put in good humour. Then sitting me down I questioned him concerning his past life, and soon found that his old cunning had not deserted him. He answered me so fairly, with such simple protestings, such piteous shakings of the head, that had I not known better I must have believed him. His name was Peter, it was so they called him, and truly he knew no other. He would tell my lord if he could—Heaven knows my lord had been good to him—belike the dungeon had taken his wits away, for strove he his hardest he could remember naught. He said much more than this, speaking many words, as if he had nothing to conceal, and I let him ramble on until he tired. When he paused at length, giving me one sharp glance to make sure all was well, for notwithstanding his sufferings his eyes had not lost their keenness, I returned with careless air:

"It is a pity you know nothing else; had you committed no great offence you might have been restored to your friends."

"I have no friends, gracious lord," he interrupted quickly. "I am an old, old man; they must all be dead long since. If my lord will but grant me a little corner to end my days in, I will pray for him as long as breath lasts."

I waved him aside as if I cared not to be interrupted, and went on. "Perchance we may find out something even yet. I once knew a holy palmer who had learned strange things in the East, and he taught me somewhat of his lore. Stretch forth your hand, old man. Maybe if I look upon it some of your life will be revealed to me."

He dared not refuse, though I could see he was exceeding loth, and, gripping his unwilling fingers fast in mine, I bent low so he could not scan my face. Now that I was so close to him he might remember too much, and I had no mind he should know me before the time. There was a broad scar, the mark of some old wound, right across the palm, and pointing to it, I said in slow, hushed tones, "That shows itself to me as deep water, it is in a strange land over-sea I have to seek you."

He started, and would have drawn his hand back, but I held him firmly, gazing on for a time without speaking. Then I began again:

"It is difficult, it comes and goes so oft; it must be that you were ever moving, never staying

long in one place. There is music too, and dancing—couldst have been a reveller, a frequenter of light taverns? Keep still, I pray you. Ah, now it is coming clearer, the marks shape themselves into letters; it is your name. Is it John? No, it is longer—Joseph. Stay, I have it—Jocellus. And you are playing with balls, there are others with pipe and harp, and a little maid dancing. Nay, why do you pull your hand away, man, do not you want to know your history?" And happening to look up I became aware of Gundulf peering over my shoulder into the fellow's empty palm, his mouth wide open in amaze. He fell back directly, regarding me almost with fear, so much did my utterances astonish him.

As for Jocellus, his terror was pitiable. He was shaking in every limb, and thought me the devil himself. But I durst not spare him—the varlet was too full of deceit; and I went on:

"Give me your hand again, I have yet to learn what brought you hither."

"No, I will have no more of it," he answered roughly. "It is not lawful to practise the Black Art."

"It is but White magic, my friend, not Black. Did I not tell you I learned it from a holy man? Needs must that I know all, else were my task ill-done—unless maybe your memory has somewhat returned, then you can tell me of yourself."

Finding I was thus determined, he answered,

though it was with some sullenness, "Methinks my wits do feel clearer now. I mind me my name was Jocellus, and by trade I was a jongleur."

"What brought you in yon dungeon, can you tell me that?" I asked. I would not be too fast to speak what I really wanted lest he should grow suspicious. Then, seeing he was in no hurry to reply, but sat with troubled eyes gazing upon the ground, I added sternly, "The truth, mind; make up no tale. You must know by now that only the truth will serve."

"And if I tell you the truth, and Gerald of Briabois come to hear, he will tear me limb from limb. I hold a secret of his. It was but for fear I should speak he used me ill. Times were hard and I came to him for help; he thrust me into dungeon. But if I must——"

"Stay," I interrupted, for Gerald's secrets were naught to me. "Speak not of your lord's matters, I care not for them; tell me rather of the little maid I saw in your hand, she who danced so blithely, I would fain know more concerning her. She was no kin to you that I could see. Whence came she, who gave her into your hands?"

He glared at me angrily. "What use bid me hold my peace, then ask me again in another fashion?"

Had Ela been there she would have guessed the man's meaning in a twinkling; all would have been plain to her; I was simple as ever, and thought he was putting me by.

"Dare not to play with me," I cried. "Tell me of the dancing maid, and that right quickly."

Then he fell to trembling again. "My lord, be merciful to me, for right well do I see you know the whole story. The child stood between Gerald and the lands, yet did he fear to kill it lest the innocent blood should drag his soul down to hell, so he made appear the little one was drowned and gave her to me instead."

I was so startled I could not keep my countenance, but jumping to my feet walked to and fro. This was a revelation indeed. That Ela was of noble birth I had felt sure always; but that she should be of the line of Briabois—that it was her land I should be holding now—her inheritance that had been bestowed upon me, was most marvellous. After a space I returned to my seat and continued calmly as I could:

"Then this girl-child whom you made dance to your pipe, whom you called your slave, was truly heiress to this castle of Briabois?"

"I said not I called her slave," he muttered uneasily, eyeing me again askance.

"Ay, but you did, and beat her cruelly too by times. And Gerald gave you money for carrying her off. Gave he aught else—any jewel, any chain?"

"No jewel, but the child had a chain about her neck, though Gerald, I wot, knew nothing of it. I kept it long, meaning that one day the maid should have it back, but it was basely stolen from me."

"Not so, it was but taken by the rightful owner. What became of the maid?"

"Dread sir, I know not. As I hope for mercy I swear I know not whether she be alive or dead; know naught of what hath chanced to her. She was taken from me by one I had befriended, a youth I found starving on the waste and took into my company."

"And afterwards betrayed to his enemies for money. I hoped they trounced you well when they found him missing."

Forgetting his useless limbs Jocellus made as though he would rise, then fell back helpless, his eyes wide staring with terror.

"An thou art not the devil, thou art next door to him; I would pray thee on my knees to let me go."

"Not the devil, good Jocellus, it is your weak memory still plays you false. Look at me now, look closely, say, have you never seen me before?"

He gazed with all his might, puzzled even as I had been, then remembering the balls, I raised my hands as twanging a harp, and softly hummed one of my old tunes.

"By St. Nicholas it is the lad himself! It is I have been the fool, he has been playing upon me as he listed." And remembering his past treachery he was afraid again, and putting his quaking hands together cried, "My lord, have mercy, have mercy, I beg of you, for truly I have been sore punished."

"Ay, I think you have had your deserts, good

Jocellus, and therefore fear nothing from me. Nay, more, if you tell your tale before those to whom I will bring you—tell of Gerald's treachery to the little maid, I mean—I will have a care of you for the rest of your days. No need to fear Gerald's vengeance."

"Will you swear that?"

"Ay, by St. Edmund the martyr, my own patron saint, who helped me escape the trap you so cunningly set for me."

"Then, my lord, I will be your man, you shall do with me as you will. Gerald of Briabois dealt with me hardly indeed, though had you not tricked me into speech I had never betrayed him. I feared he might come back. But truly I owe him nothing; I will avow his misdeeds before all."

As soon as I could possibly arrange my affairs, I had Jocellus carried to where Prince Henry held his court, and made him tell his tale. Then, afterward, I told him I knew of the maid myself, and how that she was betrothed to me. There were some few who cast doubt upon the story; men who envied me my new possessions and affected to believe it was but a device to ensure my fief in case Gerald should be pardoned. But even here Heaven willed that all should be made clear, for a short time after Gerald himself was taken prisoner. He was grievously wounded and like to die; therefore did he confess the truth of Jocellus's words. When I showed him the chain I still wore on my helm, he knew it for part of one brought from the holy

city of Jerusalem by Ela's father. The other half he had pledged with a Jew, whose name he told me, from whom I afterward redeemed it. He died soon after, repenting much of all his wickedness, and I prayed, as Ela would have bidden me, that Heaven would have mercy upon his sinful soul.

When the matter had thus been brought to an ending, and the little maid's lineage established beyond doubt, I prayed my lord, whose ward she had now become, to confirm her to me as my bride, and send me across the sea to fetch her. I knew not whether Dame Joan were alive or no, but she could no longer say me nay when I came to restore the damsel her inheritance.

Henry bestowed the Lady Alionora—for such was now the little maid's title, though to me she would ever be Ela—upon me readily enough, but he ever found some excuse to keep me by him.

At length there began to be made great preparation for the prince to cross the sea in order to seek knighthood at the hands of his uncle David, King of Scots, and thereafter perhaps to invade England. When I new of this I became exceeding impatient; for should war break out again, I feared, spite of our betrothal, Ela would be lost to me, and I pressed my suit with such vigour that at last the Prince Henry gave heed. Messengers were sent to England to announce the maiden's true birth, and to demand a safe conduct for her betrothed lord.

Having succeeded so far, I gathered my follow-

ing, making as brave a show of them as I could—as befitted a bridegroom about to meet his bride—and we rode to the seaport of St. Vallery ready to embark the instant the messengers should return. But weeks passed and still they came not; my feet grew tired of pacing the strand. Meanwhile, news of Henry's project began to be noised abroad; once King Stephen came to hear of it, small hope would there be for me.

CHAPTER XXX.

A BAD DREAM.

THE messengers still delayed, and I was already half-minded to risk my fate alone, when there happened something which decided me. I dreamed that Ela was in dire peril and calling to me for help; I saw her plainly as I see those standing before me now. There was a look of terror upon her face, her hands were outstretched in supplication, and I woke up to her cry of “Alain! Alain!” Aylmer would fain persuade me it was because my mind was so filled with her. Surely it is better to think with me it was a warning sent by Heaven in answer to the maid’s prayers. For Ela truly was in peril, as you will presently hear, and I had some share in her deliverance.

That strange dream decided me to start at once, and as soon as it was light I went down to the shore to make inquiries about the shipping. There was but one vessel starting that day, a small boat laden with merchandise, and at first the mariners would not consent to take me; they had no room for passengers, they were overladen already. But it was so borne in upon me I must not delay, that I bribed

them with a goodly sum, until at length they agreed to carry two of us; provided we came as we stood, without horses or baggage.

I left command of my train with my chief squire, a youth of quick parts whom I could trust to keep counsel, giving him orders to let no man know I had gone on. I chose Gundulf for companion as ever, and before embarking I laid aside all sign of my rank, meaning to pass as a common soldier. If I rode without disguise I should soon be clapped in hold until the king's pleasure was known, or at the least held to ransom. But in the disturbed state of the country two plain men might easily pass without much questioning, and it would go hard if we could not make up a tale. My purpose was to ride to Aylmer with all speed, thinking I should find him with the king, where also would be Ela. It was so long since I had heard from them I knew not what might be doing, but doubted not that my brother would make all right for me.

We had a much better passage than the mariners expected; for although the sea was exceeding high, threatening at times to overwhelm us, the wind was in our favour and blew us along bravely. They said we had brought them good luck, and made much of us. Gundulf, who was hearty as a mariner, took his turn at the oars from the beginning, as had been agreed upon ere we started, and I had my share as soon as I had won through the strange sickness that so oft falls upon men at sea. It lasted not long this time, however, for which I

was not sorry; and soon as I could sit upright I helped pull with good-will, for did not every stroke carry us nearer to England? Glad at heart was I when the white cliffs slowly rose to view, and after a few more hours of toil we were beneath them.

At my desire the mariners landed us some little distance from the port whither they were bound. I wanted it not known that we came from over-sea, lest men should be curious about our errand. So the boat pulled in at a lone spot, so near to land as they durst, and we waded to shore knee-deep in water, climbing over slippery stones where the treacherous seaweed more than once sent us headlong. It was early morning when we landed, and, after sitting awhile upon the sand for the sun to dry our garments, we climbed the cliff and struck inland. We knew little of the country, the mariners had been bound farther east than the port of Wareham where I had embarked before, and the place at first was strange to us.

To continue our journey two things were needful: to obtain horses with all speed, and to discover where King Stephen was holding his court. For this purpose we halted at the first village where was a tavern, and after calling for victual, Gundulf—who now took the lead, I keeping in the background the better to escape observation—set to work warily, making a hard bargain as if money were scarce with us. We obtained better beasts than we had hoped for, albeit they were somewhat

ungainly to look at; but we could hear no word of the king's movements—the village was too remote. By the time our business was completed dusk was well upon us, so we made no further that night, but shared a bundle of straw with some country fellows—a welcome change after the late heaving and tossing. We were up betimes and on our way again, and made a good day's journey; riding ever north, and picking up what news he could on the road.

We learned at last that the king was at Northampton, and thither we directed our steps, giving out—now we had left the sea behind—that we were followers of Sir Aylmer of Totinge, riding on business for our lord. Our horses carried us so well that we came within a day's ride of the city much sooner than expected, when something befell that changed our destination.

We had halted at a small tavern to rest the beasts, having ridden them hard since daybreak, and after seeing to their needs we went within and called for meat. Adjoining the tavern was a smithy, and as we sat eating there rode up some half-dozen horsemen, shouting loudly for the smith to mend a shoe. At once there gathered a little crowd to learn the news—there be ever idle villeins around a tavern wasting their lord's time—and Gundulf slipped forth among them to hear what was going. I kept fast to my seat, my back toward the door, for now we were so near the court I feared to chance upon some who might know me. I was

alone in the room, every man had gone forth, when suddenly there arose a great commotion; the door was burst open and a horseman strode in pushing Gundulf before him at point of sword.

“Where hides the other varlet who dares to say he serves my lord of Totinge?” he was crying at the top of his voice, when Gundulf slipped aside and we came face to face. His sword fell, his mouth opened so wide I feared his jaws would crack; scarce could he believe his eyes. It was Aylmer’s squire, one with whom I had spoken oft.

“My lord—I pray—I did not know—I——” he began to stammer, when I stayed him in a hurry.

“No need to tell all the world, fool,” I cried sharply. “Turn these out,” for the room was filling with men expectant of a fray; “I would speak with you alone.”

He soon had them all gone, and setting Gundulf to keep the door, he gave me news concerning my brother, who was not at Northampton, but at Wodebrig.

“And what is he doing there?” I asked. “Is aught amiss with Earl Alberic?”

The squire stared at me again. “How, you know not what has chanced—it is not my lord’s messenger that has brought you? I thought it a great wonder you should have come so soon.”

“I know nothing,” I cried; “I sent messengers to crave a safe conduct, but they returned not and I grew weary, therefore it is I am here in secret hoping to get speech with my brother. Word from

him I have not had this long time. Wherefore is he with Alberic?"

"Alberic is dead these two months, and Raymond his son is now Earl in his stead."

"Heaven rest the old man's soul; once he did well by me. But what does your lord at Wodebrig now, seeing that the burial must be long since past and over?" I persisted, for there was that in the squire's manner showed me he was keeping something back. "Is all well with Sir Aylmer, or is the Lady Ela?"—my thoughts flying to my dream. "Speak quickly, I like not to be kept waiting."

"Then blame me not if my tidings do not please you. Raymond hath carried off the Lady Ela by force, and my master is striving to regain her."

"Raymond hath carried off the Lady Ela!" I repeated stupidly, scarce understanding, the blow was so sudden. "And what can the Lady Ela be to him, seeing that she is betrothed to me? I have not come too soon, methinks. Tell me all of it, tell me how it chanced."

The squire's story, set down in few words, was that Raymond had set his mind on the maid for long, though whilst his father the Earl was alive he was forced somewhat to hide it. Unfortunately old Dame Joan—who also of late was dead—had favoured him with all her power. Then Alberic died, Raymond was his own master, and on top of this came the tidings that the lady was of noble birth and her betrothed lord was coming to wed her.

"Though so young, Raymond is crafty as a fox," the squire went on, "or else he has others to guide him. He made no sign to alarm my lord, who has been watching him for long, but remained quietly at Wodebrig, giving out he was mourning for his father. Yet all the time he was secretly working that your messengers should be delayed, and scheming to get the lady into his power. And three days agone he succeeded. On pretence of message from my lord Aylmer he lured the lady forth, and straightway carried her off to his castle at Wodebrig. He was well on the way before aught was known, and though we followed in hot pursuit he was safe within the walls before we could overtake him. He has sent out word he is using the lady with all honour, but means to keep her fast until she is his wife. My lord returned defiance, bidding him come forth and fight as became a knight, but Raymond answered that he should not stir until his lady Countess could grace the lists.

"And what did my brother do then?" I cried.

"He has set him down before the castle, sending out far and near for help to besiege it—it is on that errand I am bound even now."

"But Raymond can not wed her; she is plight to me!"

"So my lord reminded him, and he laughed in our faces. Once the priest hath joined them, he cares naught, he said, to whom she plighted troth. The queen has promised to help us. She is sore wrath at her maid being stolen away; but it is little

she can do just now, all men are with the king. It is rumoured Henry of Normandy is making ready to land in the North, and Stephen is gathering forces to repel him. He quitted Northampton some days since and is marching upon York as fast as his men can move. My lord would be with him but for this."

"And where left you my brother?"

"Before the castle of Wodebrig. He has set himself down before the gates and swears he will not stir until Raymond come forth to give him battle. If he can only gather men enough he will storm the walls."

How I lamented then that I had left my following behind. With the king absent no one would have dared interfere with us, and I knew the castle so well I doubted not to surprise it. And Raymond, I knew him well also, remembered him as a headstrong boy, some three years older than myself; Alberic's youngest and only living son, spoiled and indulged by his over-fond father. He had been chosen companion of the dead Baldwin, one of the loudest to clamour for revenge; it might even be some spice of malice against me was at bottom of his pursuit of Ela. Yet was he honourable too in his way; if he said he would not harm the maid I believed him; she was safe from all but being forced to wed. Truly that was hard enough; Ela was not one to give in, but she was like to suffer sorely. Once the squire had told his tale I was on fire to get away, and, leaving him to con-

tinue his journey and summon aid, I rode with Gundulf to Wodebrig as fast as our horses could gallop. When they could carry us no farther, we changed them for others and journeyed on without stopping, pausing not once for rest.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MY BROTHER'S SECRET.

It was late at night when we arrived at Wodebrig. The moon had risen and the stars were shining, yet we found Aylmer pacing to and fro, scarce a bowshot from the castle gates. A tent had been erected hard by, and at a little distance was a fire, round which, wrapped in their cloaks, his men had disposed themselves to slumber. Aylmer marvelled much at seeing me, and I told him in short space how it chanced I had crossed the sea alone, and how I had fallen in with his squire. In turn I heard from him what I already knew, Aylmer blaming himself bitterly for having been so hoodwinked. He was exceeding angry—angry on his own part, besides troubled for Ela. Never had I seen him so moved.

“The knave has fooled me all through,” he cried. “I who thought myself so wise! I knew well he was ever working to turn the king against me; it was through him your messengers were sent away empty. You did well not to wait; Stephen will grant you no safe-conduct, and when I would have entreated him he turned his back. That was

before the news of your duke's expedition reached us. After that I could say no word on your behalf. You should have come sooner, brother."

"Ay, if it had only rested with me," I groaned; "but serve your lord faithfully as you will, little cares he what betides you. It was not until he was coming to fight for his own hand I got leave at the last."

"We must keep your arrival secret, else short will be your shrift." And then we fell to talking of what Aylmer had already done, and how he was at his wits' end to compass Ela's deliverance. He watched the castle night and day—Raymond had not men enough to drive him off—yet had he no chance of getting within; the walls were too strong, the garrison too vigilant.

Aylmer's chief hope was that a certain baron of influence, one Hubert Fitz-Hugh, then leading his followers to join the king, might turn aside for a short space and help bring Raymond to reason.

"I did him good service once," quoth Aylmer; "it is his turn to help me now, yet Heaven only knows if he will heed my call. Meantime"—and he clenched his fist fiercely—"Ela's heart may grow so faint with fear she may consent to wed him. It is for that I will not suffer a priest to enter, though twice has Raymond endeavoured to send for one. And they will give me no help at the convent. The Prior has gone to Rome on business of the Abbot, and Brother Ordric is acting in his stead. He bears us no goodwill, as you

know of old, and they are loth to offend the new lord."

"Ela would not marry Raymond though fifty priests were there," I returned stoutly. "She is not one to faint with fear. Had you seen her facing death at Wherwell, choosing rather to perish by fire than trust to the mercy of the Flemish ruffians, you would have little doubt of Ela's firmness. And it is death she is looking on again, dear heart, for sure am I she will die before she give way to him. And she is all alone—no friendly voice to breathe a word of hope, no one to tell her that help is near." And in a flash my dream came back to me, I saw Ela's look of terror, heard her supplicating cry. "By St. Edmund there will come a day of reckoning between us, my young Earl!" I cried, near choking with grief. "Heaven only send it quickly!" And I shook my fist at the strong walls I knew so well which frowned down upon us through the gloom.

Aylmer stood beside me, and when I turned there was that on his face stabbed me on the sudden as with a knife. It came to me on the instant, without a question, without a doubt; he loved my little maid himself. He had forgotten almost that I was near; he knew not, knows not to this day, how his countenance betrayed him, how I surprised his secret. For a moment the earth seemed to sink from under me. Had I lost all—Ela, Aylmer, both; in the whole world there was nothing left to me? I stretched forth my hands gasping for

breath, stricken dumb with the greatness of my suffering. And Aylmer, so sharp of wit, so quick to perceive, saw nothing, guessed nothing; his whole mind was with Ela, he had not a thought for me. Then did my pain quickly turn to mad rage, and, falling upon him with wild words, I cried:

"If I had been here this had not happened. Yet it is you who were wont to be the wise one. Call to mind your old cunning; have you no plan at all? have your wits all deserted you? Did you not swear to watch over her, and has your care come only to this?"

Unjust reproaches truly, for Aylmer had done all that he could; he had shielded her from more than I knew. But in my unreason I recked not what I said.

He shrank back without making any answer. I think he feared that had he spoken he might have said too much. But his silence only made me the more angry, and, meaning to hurt him all I could, to make sure to myself of what I already knew—though even in my madness I did not dare accuse him openly—I went on:

"It is because you thought light of her, maybe, because she had no name, her lineage was unknown, because she was no fit mate for one of the house of Totinge. That touches you? They are your words, not mine; you spoke them to me long ago. Ah, if you had but cared for her as I do!"

"Forbear, forbear!" he cried, and the anguish in his voice should have stayed me. But I was

past pity. "Or is it that you have played me false also?" and striding forwards I raised my hand as if I would have struck him.

My cruel words went home; for was I not hitting a wound already raw? His face blanched, then turned red as blood, and he flew at my throat with such a mighty cry that the men rose from their slumbers to look toward us. But before I could cast him off he loosed his hold himself, and fled away into the darkness. One of his Viking fits had overpowered him, and he had taken flight before he did me an evil.

And it was I who had brought about this thing, I, who when I needed help most, had quarrelled with my brother. For now my passion was passed I new well that Aylmer had been true to me. If he had learned to love my little maid it was no fault of his; of all the men in the world I, who knew her so well, had least cause to wonder. But that he had played me false, that he had spoken of his love by word or sign—thank Heaven my senses were come back to me—I doubted him no more. I would have sought his pardon with tears, but he had left me. It was too late, and I cast myself upon the ground lamenting bitterly.

Then after as it seemed no very long space, a hand was laid upon my shoulder and Aylmer himself stood beside me.

"Trouble not, Alain," he said calmly, his fit all spent. "I have been to blame, I should have taken better care of her. It was the truth in your

words hit me so sorely, yet glad am I you spoke them."

"That am not I," I returned quickly, "but grievously ashamed and sorry."

"Ay, I guessed that, and therefore have I come. If I am glad it is because you have showed at last we are of the same blood. You have always been so reasonable I have felt at times to doubt it. You were beside yourself; no need to tell me that. Who should know it so well as I?" he added mournfully. And for a short time there was silence between us, only we sat hand in hand as when we were children.

Then Aylmer continued, "And now, brother, we are at peace again, I will tell you of what came to me even now, whilst I strove with evil spirits in the darkness. If you are so sure Ela will not be prevailed upon to be his wife, it might be as well to let a priest go in with secret message how things stand with us. It would give her fresh heart to know you are near. Maybe even if we sent money, she might bribe her keepers. I have offered fair ransom already, but Raymond will have none of it."

"Could you trust the priest to act on our behalf?" I asked.

"Ay, if they sent Father Wilfrid, as would be most like; he is ever wishful to please the Prior. If some other came, I need not let him pass. What think you of the device?"

"It may serve until we can do better," I answered sadly, for indeed it seemed but little; "yet

would it be something only to hear how it fared with her."

"Then I see not that we need wait; I will send for the father directly morning dawn. I was feared before lest it should bring about the marriage. Now I will to my post again; it irks Raymond to know I am ever on guard."

And we paced to and fro, side by side, until the long hours of night had passed and the chill dawn broke slowly about us. My heart grew full of pity for Aylmer; he suffered even as I did, yet could not show it. More, even were Ela free again she was not for him; no wonder that in the morning light his face looked old and worn, all youthful joy gone out of it. Yet even as she had drawn him in spite of himself, even as against his own will he had come to care for the maid, so now did he force his lips to speak of her unmoved. He strove to cheer me by telling how she had looked always for my return, how often they had conversed together of me. He dropped no word, showed no sign now that he felt for her other than as a sister; he meant to keep his secret to the end.

You will think, perhaps, that seeing it was thus with my brother there would have come to me some doubt of Ela; and I will not deny that in the first shock of discovery, when all the world seemed reeling about me, such a thought might have come. Aylmer's quick parts would suit her well. Little wonder had she grown to love him. But for all my dull wit I knew my little maid. I had but to

think of her arms about my neck, her words breathed soft in my ear—she would not change her Brother Simple for all the world—and my mind was at rest again. Yet to think that both might lose her, that she was so near to us, and yet so far; truly it was enough to render a man beside himself. Glad was I when morning came and we were able to be up and doing.

As luck would have it, whilst our men were yet preparing for their ride, a small boat pushed forth from the castle and was rowed across the moat. There were but two men in it—he who used the oars, and another who held up his hands to show he was unarmed. Aylmer went down to the bank to hear what they had to say, whilst I stood a little aloof mingled with his followers. It was not that I feared any at Wodebrig would recognise me after so many years, but in my hours of watching a plan had slowly shaped itself, and I wished not the messengers to see me.

They had come for a priest; Raymond was growing impatient. If we suffered not one to come, he sent word, he would do without. There was some little parleying, then Aylmer seemed reluctantly to yield. Horses were brought forth and the two men sent on their way, accompanied by a guard to see that they went only to the convent.

“If it is a priest you want, a priest you shall have,” said Aylmer sternly. “But if you seek to raise help for your lord either in the town or on the way, it will go hard with you.” And he sent

further a secret word of his own to Father Wilfrid, entreating he would be the one to come."

As for me I cared not whether it were Wilfrid or another, so long as one came. Whosoever it might be I was minded to take his place and go into the castle myself. Once within, and with speech of Ela, it would go hard if I could not deliver her.

Soon as the messengers had departed I told my plan to Aylmer, and he liked it not at all.

"It means that Raymond will have two in his power instead of one," he said. "He will hold Ela just the same, and you will have to pay your whole estate to him for ransom."

"Trouble not for that; if he discover me short will be the shrift for one of us. There will be no talk of ransom." And my mind was fixed. Nothing Aylmer said could dissuade me, so sure was I all would go well once I got word with Ela.

"And if it be not Father Wilfrid, what then?" he asked next.

"That must be your part. Whoever comes hither, I must be the one to go in."

"And what will you do when there?"

"I know not; it is no use making plans, I must act as comes to me."

Aylmer mused awhile. "Pity you did not speak before; then could I have kept his men here and sent mine. The frock will not change your visage; they will tell soon enough you are not he they brought with them."

I yawned and stretched my limbs. Now that my course was decided, my mind was more at ease and I began to feel full weary. I had had no rest since I learned the news. I had been riding hard for long hours, and busy all night quarrelling, watching, troubling concerning Ela; yet, since Raymond had grown so crafty, it behooved me have all my wits before embarking on my new adventure. So I returned short answer:

"That also I leave to you, my good brother. Sure am I you will be able to devise something. I mean now to take my rest until they return, lest hereafter Raymond should catch me napping."

And with that I threw myself upon the ground and knew no more until Aylmer shook me by the shoulder, and his face was troubled.

"They have returned," he said in a low tone, "and it is not Wilfrid but a stranger monk late come from Bec on business to the convent. The good fathers are wise in their way." He smiled sourly. "If trouble come of the matter, they can disown him."

"From Bec, you say? Then fear not; they be all my good friends there. Bring him this way and keep the messengers at a distance. I doubt not he will serve us."

To understand why this should be you must know that when William the Norman bestowed the fief of Totinge upon my father's father, he gave at the same time much land around to the Norman abbey of Bec. The monks made no great settle-

ment at Totinge, but we were ever good neighbours, and Prior Lanfranc, the king's especial friend, who afterwards rose to be Archbishop of Canterbury, often sojourned with my father as his guest. Thus it came about that when I visited the abbey in train of Prince Henry, Alain of Totinge was welcomed ever as a friend.

It was in Aylmer's tent I had laid me down to sleep, and now, when he brought the monk, he dropped the curtain behind that none might see. It was Brother Francis, one who knew me well, and surprised indeed was he to see me. They had told him nothing at the convent, save that he would do them a service by coming to Wodebrig, and the messengers had a barbarous tongue he could not understand. The monk gave close heed to our tale, and though he spoke not his mind I could see he was angered at being sent on such an errand without knowledge.

"It was the Sub-prior, Brother Ordric, spoke with me," he said shortly. "I trow the lord Abbot knew little of the matter." And with that he was eager to go into the castle and threaten Raymond with ban of holy Church for his misdoings. But I would have none of that, and pleaded so earnestly I might have my way, that at last he consented. He gave me command only to make no pretence at any holy office.

"It is as a priest you are going," he said solemnly; "make no mock of sacred things."

I agreed willingly enough, then urged him

make haste to give over his gown lest the messengers should grow suspicious.

"I am near your height and build, father; if you did not speak much they may not know the difference," I said, as I girt his frock around me.

"Have no fear, my son. That I was a stranger they knew from Brother Ordric; and the winds on the way were so shrewdly chill I kept my face well covered."

"Draw your hood well down," interrupted Aylmer. "If it fall back and he see your unshorn head, all will be lost."

"I will be careful, trust me," I cried almost with glee, so glad was I at what was coming. "I will be under a vow to keep my head ever bowed. It will be well for me too," I muttered in Aylmer's ear; "for if I looked into his false face I might forget, and fly at him too soon."

I felt beneath my gown to see my dagger was loose in sheath, then, dropping my hood and tightening the knotted cord about my waist, I was ready to set forth.

CHAPTER XXXII.

I PLAY THE PRIEST.

AYLMER accompanied us to the boat, giving me command, in the men's hearing, to treat for ransom, and threatening the king's wrath if the Earl did not accede.

"Tell my lord," he cried loudly, "that Fitz-Hugh is even now hastening to my side. If my sister be not set free before he arrives, heavy will be the Earl's punishment."

And all this and more did I presently set forth, when with bowed head and folded hands I stood in hall before Earl Raymond.

The old place was not changed one whit. Almost could I have deemed I had been there but yesterday. There was the bench where I used to sit and quarrel with Baldwin—by some chance it had been overturned just as we left it that fatal morning. There was the perch whereon my favourite hawk was wont to light—I could scarce keep from looking up, expecting to see him. Only at the head, where Alberic was wont to sit in serene dignity, the young Earl now strode to and fro with bent brow and moody face, seeming but ill at ease.

He started with an air of relief as we entered, crying:

"Art come at last then, sir priest. You have been long on the way. Who is it—Father Wilfrid? Nay, a stranger! How comes that?" And he looked at me suspiciously.

I muttered something, I know not what; my wrath was so stirred by sight of him I could not trust myself at first to speak. Fortunately, my conductors intervened, relating what had taken place at the convent, and how a stranger monk, who spoke no Saxon, had been sent with them.

It was plain enough they had no suspicion of the change. This gave me time to compose myself and to think of what I should say when my turn came. The Earl laughed somewhat, though there was little mirth in his tone.

"The good fathers would run with the stag and hunt with the hounds," he said. "They fear to anger me, yet if ill come of it, it is none of their doings. Ay, they be wise in their way, these holy men."

I stole one glance upwards while he was speaking. They were almost Aylmer's words, and Raymond as a boy had not been thought so sharp. Yet, save that he was grown older, he seemed little changed. If I am not more altered, I thought to myself, surely he will remember me. But he gave no sign of it then; only when I began to speak, repeating what Aylmer had commanded me, he stayed me once with:

"Have we not met before? Your voice has a familiar ring. Why keep your head so downcast?"

"It is because of a vow, my son," I returned boldly. "It is nearly fulfilled now; I doubt not thou wilt see my face before we part."

Such vows were too common to excite suspicion, and he said no more but heard my speech to the end. When he had finished, he made answer:

"Touching Sir Aylmer and his threats, you may tell him I care not one rush, neither will I yield the maid to ransom. Yet I wish her no harm. I would do her great honour and take her for my wife. It is for that I have sent for you this day."

"How can that be, my son, when the knight yonder assures me the woman is already troth-plight to his brother?"

"That is an old tale, it is naught. He is an ill fellow of the Anjou party, and he fights against the king. My lord of Winchester has promised me a dispensation; I can marry her when I will. And it is no use prating"—as I was about to lift up my voice again—"they may tear my walls down stone by stone, but I will still hold on to her."

And I knew well he meant what he said, for Raymond was half Saxon, he had the doggedness of the race. Once his mind was fixed nor threats nor persuasion could move him, he held stubbornly to his own way.

"If my lord the Bishop declare the woman free to marry, the knight has no power to gainsay thee,"

I forced my lips to speak. "But he told me also that the maid was unwilling."

He laughed harshly. "Women are hard to please at times, but all goes well when they know their master. Willing or unwilling, she mates with me."

I held my hands tightly, else might I have fallen upon him and forced his masterful words down his throat. But compelling myself for Ela's sake, I replied only:

"Perchance it is the old betrothal that is troubling the maid. If I could have some speech with her, she might open to me her mind."

"Bring her to hear reason, good father, and rich shall be the gift you take home to your convent; women ever listen to the priest. I was much troubled but now because of her. I placed her among my women, treating her with all honour, and though she scorned and flouted me whenever I came near, at first all went well. But now they bring me word she refuses to eat, and will not be comforted."

"And how long has this been so?" I asked, striving hard that my voice should not tremble.

"Since yester morn, therefore was I so earnest you might come. "But an she die"—and he smote his fist upon the bench until the cups jumped again—"I will yield her to none. Make her see that, sir priest, and it will be well."

"I will do my best, my son, at least I can show her how it is a grievous sin to refuse good food;

I doubt not I may induce her to eat. As for the other, we will see afterward. Best not come with me, she may listen more heedfully if you be not there."

"That may well be; she treats me with scant courtesy. Ho there, let the lady Ela know a holy father awaits her pleasure. If she give you not permission to enter, you must even go in without, as I do."

However, word was brought presently that the lady would see the holy father, provided that he came alone; she had no mind for the company of my lord the Earl.

"See you now," said Raymond, with a wry face, "You would scarce think the maid was my prisoner; that she was in my power to deal with as I list."

I turned in silence, my heart beating so fast I could not speak, and followed his servants to the upper chamber which once had been his mother's, where he held Ela in captivity. Two women were waiting for me here, and as they unbarred the door the elder poured into my ears a voluble discourse of the lady's obstinacy, of her ill return to my lord's gracious kindness. Her words came so quick I could not stay them, we were within the room ere she ceased. Ela was at the far end seated upon a low bench, her head resting against the bed as if she had no strength to sit upright.

"Hast come to shrive me, good father?" she said faintly. "If so, you are welcome indeed."

"Not to shrive but to bid thee be of good cheer, daughter," I returned, raising my hood for one half moment.

Ela gave me one wild glance, half sprang to her feet, then sank back and fell to weeping as if her heart would break.

The women looked at me startled. "Dost bear a holy relic about thee, good father? For already hast thou wrought a marvel. It is the first time she has shed a tear, perchance her heart may now turn softer."

"It is softer already," cried Ela between her sobs. "I have been to blame, I thought Heaven had abandoned me, and lo! you come as Heaven's own messenger. Mind not these tears, good father—they will pass—I am not wont to be so weak. It is only——" and as I bent down and took her hand, she whispered low, "Alain, dear Alain, I knew you would come; I feared only you might be too late."

I held her fast for a moment, making as though I would feel her wrist after the manner of a learned leech, then said aloud:

"The maid is weak and overwrought for lack of food. They told me below, daughter, you would not eat. It is a sin to be repented of. Will you take food now?"

"I will eat if you bid me, father; for truly, as I said, my heart is changed;" and she turned her face to the wall, lest the joy in her eyes should betray her.

Straightway one of the women left us in all haste, but the elder remained behind watching us curiously. I moved a little aside lest she should suspect, and set her tongue going again by asking her a question. One word was enough; she started prating instantly, and never ceased until her fellow returned bearing the victuals. I now sat me down on a bench whilst Ela ate—taking, as was ever her wont, but delicate little snippets scarce enough to serve a mouse—and I turned over in my mind the while how best to get rid of the women.

It was but trouble wasted, for presently word was brought that Earl Raymond would speak with me again, and I was compelled perforce to obey.

Ela looked up in alarm—not for herself this time, but for me—and the cup she was holding dropped from her grasp so that the wine ran along the floor.

“Have a care, daughter, have a care,” I exclaimed, and making a quick turn as if to avoid the spilt liquor, I whispered her not to fear, all would go well.

I found Raymond in high good humour, and soon as I entered he pressed upon me a jewel which had once belonged to Alberic.

“Put this in your wallet, good father,” he cried; “it is of price, yet but earnest of what I will give you hereafter. You have brought the maid to take food; it is well. Said I not that women ever give ear unto the priest? Now bring her to wed me of her own good will, and you shall load a mule with

what I will bestow upon you. They are making ready in the chapel even now. I mean to have all done in order."

"That may be a harder matter," I began, and I must have spoken incautiously, for on the sudden he leant forward, trying hard to scan my face. I feared I was discovered, but forced myself to keep quiet, waiting in silence for what might come.

"It is strange," he muttered, "how well your speech seems known to me. You are from oversea, they say. Where is your convent?"

"I am an unworthy son of the abbey of Bec," I replied, "sent over with letters to my lord of St. Edmunds. I have come direct from across the sea even now. If you doubt me, let me go. Truth to tell, your work is not much to my mind."

"I doubt you not, good father; it must be a trick of my fancy. You have done well so far, I pray you do not fail me now."

"I will do my best, my son, but if the woman stay obstinate I dare not espouse her to you against her will, else might evil come to me afterwards." This I said lest he should forthwith command the marriage ceremony. "Peradventure, had I some talk with her alone she might heed more my words."

"You shall, you shall; and forget not what I have promised you. The women shall be called off; you shall shrive the maid, and give her godly counsel. Fright her with the wrath of Holy Church if she listen not to your reasoning. It is a better

way than thrusting on the ring by force, though if need be that shall be done. Ay, and evil will come to you here and now if you refuse to bind us. But I threaten not," he added quickly—he had no wish to anger me—"sure I am you will do your best. Speak cleverly to the maid, and all will go well I warrant me." And presently I was once more conducted to Ela's chamber, where after a short space the women left us.

It needs not to set down our first joy, our forgetfulness of everything save that we were together again. I will pass on to when we fell considering what we were to do, how best to get out of Raymond's clutches. But first I had to tell her how it was I had arrived so opportunely, and how Aylmer was encamped without.

"Ah, poor Aylmer, I knew he would be sore angered," she cried. "He has ever been a good brother to me. It was his name they used to lure me forth after night had fallen. I thought he had news of you he was minded to impart secretly. Then a thick cloak was cast about my head, I was lifted to horse and brought here. Be not so moved, dear Alain, save for that the Earl has used me with gentleness. And at first I had little fear; I thought he would soon be compelled to release me. But later, when I found how well he had laid his plans, how he had waited until Aylmer's friends had ridden north, I began to lose heart, and trembled lest you should not come in time."

"And to mend matters you would have starved

like prisoner in dungeon hold," I said, touching her white cheek softly. "Methinks for once you almost changed places with Brother Simple."

"It was when I thought upon you and what your grief would be, the food choked me. It was easier to die than to wed Raymond."

What we should have attempted in the end I know not; for even Ela could hit upon no plan that seemed likely to succeed. Fortunately for us in one way, the matter was taken out of our hands.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

I RESCUE ELA.

THE hour was waning fast. It was time we should be gone, and as yet we saw not our way.

"I much fear we have rejoiced too soon," Ela said sadly. "You are in most peril now. Scant mercy would Raymond show you."

"Scant mercy indeed!" exclaimed a voice close by, and Raymond himself stood in the doorway. He had stolen upon us unheard, and Ela's hand was fast clasped in mine, her head resting against my shoulder.

"Your wise counsels took over long, false priest," the Earl went on; "I feared your fair penitent would tire, therefore have I come to haste you. Nay, hang not head like a dog"—I had bent down to whisper a word to Ela—"methinks for once you must break vow, and let me see your face." Then changing his mocking tone to a shout of thunder, he strode into the room with, "Who art thou? No priest, I ween, but one come to flout me. It was not fancy that I knew your voice; would I had given heed to the warning. Who is it? Hold up your head; I would look upon your false perjured visage ere I beat you with stripes like a dog."

I jumped to my feet, and, throwing back my hood, confronted him.

"Look well, Raymond, though it is so long since we met, you may, perchance, have forgotten me. It is Alain of Totinge, your old comrade, he you would have robbed of his bride. I prayed last night that we might meet soon, and Heaven has been kind to me."

Raymond wasted no words. He was no coward. He had left his sword below, but the knife was in his belt, and, drawing it, he sprang at me with fury. I closed with him full willingly, calling to Ela to hold the door lest help should come from without.

We fought, for a time neither getting the better, until our blades clashed, and the dagger flew from his hand with such force it stuck quivering in the wall.

Raymond started back.

"Would you slay me as you did my friend Baldwin?" he cried. "It is a way you have, perchance, to strike down unarmed men."

For all answer I threw my knife after his, and we set to again with naked hands. We were about matched in strength, but my gown clung about my limbs so that at first he had the advantage, and his eyes began to sparkle in triumph. Yet never for a moment did I doubt the issue, not even when his fingers tightened about my neck, and my breath came in pants and gasps. It was a warning from Heaven had brought me to Ela, Heaven would not

forsake me now. Raymond had me down at last, and we rolled over whilst he strove with all his might to plant his knee upon my chest, so that he might crush the life out of me. Once when I was undermost I caught sight of Ela. The brave maid would utter no cry lest it should distract me, but she held my abandoned knife clasped fast to her breast—whether for herself or for Raymond she never afterwards would tell me.

I came so near to being strangled the young Earl made sure he was the victor, but, gathering my remaining strength for one last effort, I gripped his head between my two hands, and banged it again and again upon the oaken boards, until he was near stunned. Even then his fingers did not leave my throat, I had to tear them off by force ere I was free.

But I could not pursue my advantage, I was too far gone. I could only stagger to my feet, and wait until the breath came back. Raymond recovered sooner than I did, and, leaping up, plucked his knife from the wall, and thrust full at my heart. I had but just time to throw up my arm and jump but aside, so that it grazed my shoulder.

“Shame upon you!” cried Ela, springing forwards to place my weapon in my hand. “Who is striking the foul blow now?”

He answered not, save with a look of rage, and we set to now more warily. Had it been sword or battleaxe we could have made better play, we were not skilled in fighting with the knife. It were

tedious to tell of every blow—pin-pricks most, for neither had chance to push home—it is enough that in the end I had him at my mercy, as I knew I should, and raised my arm to strike. But as he glanced up at me with bloodshot eyes and foaming mouth, disdaining to utter one cry for mercy, my heart softened. He had been my comrade; he was the son of Alberic, who once stood to me in place of my father.

"Yield thee," I cried, "rescue or no rescue." But he answered fiercely, "Kill me, if you will; I care not. I will never yield me to you."

"Nay, hurt him not," interposed Ela's soft voice. "Bind him so that he can give no alarm, and let us steal forth quietly. See, here are the cords that were bound about me."

Raymond glanced toward her as she spoke with such a look of baffled longing, almost I was compelled to pity him. But I held him fast, and was making ready the thongs, when suddenly his tone changed.

"You are the stronger, I will yield me," he said sullenly; and at once I loosed my hold and helped him to rise. Yet was there a gleam in his eyes I liked not, and I stood on my guard prepared for treachery.

And he foiled me after all; I deemed not sworn knight could act so foully. Once upon his feet he gave a sharp glance round, as if to measure his distance, then springing upon Ela, felled her to the ground with one blow of his strong fist.

"I yielded to thee; I said naught of the woman," he shouted. "If she is not mine, I swear she shall never be yours;" and he raised his booted foot to stamp upon her face.

It was done so quickly there was scarce space to draw a breath. I sometimes wake from a dream of it even now. But Heaven was on our side. I hurled myself against him just in time, though it was so near a thing his iron heel cut her temple as he fell. It is scarcely to be seen save by those who know, but Ela carries the mark of that dastardly deed to this day.

The caitiff would have found scant mercy now, had not Ela interfered again. Too dizzy to stand, swaying to and fro even as she knelt, the blood streaming from her forehead, she yet clung to my arm so that I could not strike, imploring me to have mercy.

"Spare him, Alain; spare him yet once more," she cried and entreated. "I am not hurt; it is but a scratch. See!" She pushed back her dishevelled hair. "Remember, he spared me. If you kill him, sure am I you will be sorry after."

Her prayers prevailed and I gave way, but soon as Raymond saw my fury was assuaged he set to shouting loudly. It was the first time he had called for help since the struggle began. I soon stayed that, however, cramming into his mouth his own garments; then I tied him hand and foot so he could not stir. I was bleeding not a little myself by this time, but Ela bound up my hurts with strips

torn from the coverlet of the bed, and, tying a kerchief about her head, we were ready to depart if only the road might be clear.

"Remain you here and watch beside him," I said, "whilst I go and see who is below. If we have trouble, I will drag him forth with me. They dare not hinder us, I warrant you, if my dagger be at their lord's throat."

It was in our favour that we needed not to go through the hall; for the chamber where Ela had been confined was approached by a flight of stone steps from without. Could we but descend to the courtyard unseen (the boat that brought me was moored beneath the walls) we should have but to pass the warder. It was fortunate that I went forth alone, for at the foot of the steps I met the two women just about to mount.

"My lord told us to wait in hall," began the foremost, "but now came Balso the groom, saying the Earl was crying out upon us."

"He mistook, my lord called not for you," I answered, speaking in no haste. "He was rating the lady somewhat loudly. But all is well now; she has repented of her stubbornness, though, indeed, it was hard at first to make her hear reason. I have come forth even now to know if all is ready."

"Quite ready, good father. The tapers are lit, the book set forth, there is wanting nothing but the priest."

"Then must you gather all in chapel and hall ready for the bride when my lord leads her through.

There will be a brave feast after, and the wine will flow."

"And will the bride want no tiring?" cried the chatterpate. "I have a fair robe ready I could slip upon her in a trice."

"Go to; being a woman may she not change her mind again? Think you my lord will give her time? Haste you to hall, let Balso the groom and every varlet be there. He who lingers will not share the feast. Such is my lord's will. See you to it without delay."

They needed no second bidding. Very speedily the courtyard was deserted, and I hurried back to fetch Ela. Spite of all Raymond had done, I found her binding up his hurts, even as she had bound mine, though it was with trouble because of his bonds.

"You would not leave him to bleed to death?" she said, in answer to my expostulations. "It is punishment enough to be thus outwitted in his own castle."

"We must leave him now, though. Come quickly, while there are none about. If the warder do not spy us too soon we shall escape easily."

"If he see a woman in the boat, he will surely spy us too soon, and arrows will be flying. Give me the gown, and put you on Raymond's mantle; they will take you for the Earl himself. I shall make a fair priest," she added, as I hastily wrapped the gown, now sore rent and torn from the late strife, about her, "though truly the skirts be some-

what long." And, indeed, they trailed on the ground near half a foot until she tucked them through the waist-cord.

When Raymond saw us thus preparing to depart his fury was terrible. He could not cry out, but his eyes told what was passing within, and, in spite of his bonds, he rocked backwards and forwards, striving to do himself an injury.

"Be comforted, Earl Raymond," I said, ere I crossed the threshold. "The maid is lost to you, yet have you gained life. Had ill come to her, had you wed her by force according to your purpose, nothing could have saved you from my vengeance. Husband your strength now, else you will have no breath left when presently you strive to overtake me. Here is your jewel of price," and I threw it at his feet. "Say not after that I robbed you." And with that I shut the door fast and left him.

Thanks to the women there was not one in the courtyard to spy us, and we made for the little postern without hindrance. Well I knew the way; oft had I stolen out after dusk and none had been the wiser. The key was in the lock now, the bolts undrawn just as it had been left on my arrival, and outside, moored almost underneath the drawbridge, lay the boat.

"I will take the oars," whispered Ela. "It would not do for my lord to row. I have handled them more than once with Jocellus. If I lack skill it matters not; they will but think the good father somewhat awkward."

With the oars in her hands, the monk's hood falling over her face, Ela passed very well for the priest who had crossed before, whilst I sat with my face muffled in Raymond's cloak. The warder had not yet seen us; he was in the gate tower watching the opposite shore, but as soon as we shot forth from beneath the walls we were in his ken.

"He sees us, Alain," Ela muttered presently under her breath, "and stays his steps. Shake the cloak out as if the wind took it. Ah, that is well; he thinks you are the Earl."

I dared not move, though I expected every moment that an arrow would follow us, but I bent forward as if speaking that I might shield her with my body. And Ela rowed steadily on, until she cried again:

"Now has he gone within to find out the meaning of it;" and, putting out all her little strength, with a few vigorous strokes she brought us to land, where Aylmer was awaiting us, his troop drawn up just beyond bowshot. He was more wise than the warder, and had guessed the truth soon as he saw us push off. Right glad was he to greet us both, though much I marvelled at his self-possession. For joy of her escape I had feared he might betray somewhat, but even Ela would never have guessed from his bearing what she was to him. Soon as Aylmer knew all that had chanced, he declared it best to seek safety in flight, lest the country should be roused upon me as the king's enemy. He would not stay even to take down the tent, but rode off at

once with all speed. Father Francis accompanied us for part of the way, then turned aside for Totinge with a guide we gave him. I heard not afterwards that any ill came to him for his good deed. It may be that Raymond never knew the rights of it; all his anger was turned against St. Edmund's.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MY STORY ENDS.

OUR course now was toward the north, Aylmer to join the king at York, I to slip past for Carlisle, where I expected to find Henry of Anjou. I was feared at first that Aylmer might lose the king's favour for his share in my adventure, but he made light of it.

"Raymond has always worked against me," he said with a laugh. "It will be no new thing for him to bring ill tales. I shall join the king as if nothing had chanced; he needs every man's help, and will ask no questions."

Near the end of the second day's journey we encountered Aylmer's friend, Fitz-Hugh, riding with some half-score followers at his back to our assistance. He was proceeding leisurely, as if he had no great mind to the enterprise, and evidently relieved to find we had no need of him. He turned and rode with us. Though I marked he eyed me strangely, treating me with scant courtesy, I gave little heed; I was too much occupied with Ela. When we halted for the night I had to find her safe quarters, and women to attend her; it mattered not to me if Fitz-Hugh disliked my company.

It was Gundulf who first discovered that mischief was brewing, and he carried his suspicions to Aylmer. I was so taken up with the lady, he told me afterwards, he feared I might not listen. The first I knew was in the dead of night, when Aylmer roused me from sound slumber. He had finger on lip, for others were close around, and I followed him in all haste, fearing something was amiss with Ela. Soon we were out of ear-shot.

"You must mount and ride," he said, leading the way through the darkness, "else will Fitz-Hugh make you prisoner. He is my friend, but all is fair in war, and you are of the enemy. Gundulf brought me the first word, and soon I found it was true. Fitz-Hugh has sent in secret for the rest of his company—he has not men enough now if I resist him, and to-morrow they are to surround us on the way. This I learned some hours since, but I remembered your hurts and troubled you not until all was ready."

"And Ela?" I cried, stopping short. "I can not leave her again."

"Be easy, she goes with you. She is waiting yonder. I have given you two men. More would but delay you, and you must ride night and day until in safety. One of them will serve as guide; he knows the by-roads well, and will keep you from running into danger."

And we came out upon an open space where was a little group of horsemen, Ela in the midst, my horse ready saddled and bridled by her side.

One grasp of the hand, one “Heaven speed you, sister,” from Aylmer, and we were off, and all that night we urged our beasts to the uttermost, avoiding ever the main track. The wounds received in my combat with Raymond vexed me much, and Ela’s head was still heavy from that cruel blow; but we dared not stay to rest, for every moment was precious.

Space fails to tell the incidents of our headlong flight, save that once, hard by the city of York, we were near pounced upon by the king’s men. By some means—surely thanks to my Lord Fitz-Hugh—they got wind of our coming, and scouts were sent out to intercept us. It was Ela who saved us here. The only road left open led direct to York, where the king was with his army. They had not thought we should make thither. Yet it was by that way we escaped. Our two followers were sent a different road to mislead those who were after us, whilst we, changing clothes with some country people carrying provisions into the city, passed unnoticed through the camp. It was Ela and Gundulf who managed it all. My hurts had brought a fever upon me. I rode as in a maze, now hot, now cold, and consumed ever by a parching thirst. Yet had I sense enough left to refuse to halt so long as I could sit my horse.

Beyond York the roads were open again, and we rode without let or hindrance. Neither had we to make so much haste, but halted until my fever should have left me. I was almost recovered when

at length we made our joyous entry into Carlisle. I found friends enough there, the Prince and all his train, all my old companions, and many I had known before when serving the Empress in England. I sent at once for my following, who were still waiting at St. Vallery, but long before they arrived Ela was my wife, Prince Henry himself bestowing upon me my bride.

My story draws to an end now. I have no space to tell how I served my lord in Normandy and Anjou. Then some four years later, the Empress having bestowed upon him her rights, the Prince once more crossed the seas to claim his realm. All know how that attempt ended; how it was at last agreed upon at Wallingford that Stephen should be king as long as he lived, and that Henry should come after him.

A short time after this treaty had been solemnly confirmed Prince Henry returned to Anjou to wait until the crown should be his own; but by Aylmer's desire, Ela and I abode for a time in England. I knew not at first that Aylmer had any purpose, save to wish our company, and we remained at Totinge hunting and hawking, and passing the time in pleasurable diversions. Never had I seen my brother so gay and light-hearted, and one day I said as much to him.

"It is because I am about to be wed," he cried joyfully. "One short week and we start for the espousals."

Then was I glad indeed; it showed he had quite

overcome his passion for Ela. And yet I marvelled he had said no word of the matter.

"You have kept it secret indeed," I said.
"Were it not such good news I should be vexed with you. Why, I know not even the lady's name."

"Trouble not, brother, you shall hear all in good time. I have an old vow to keep before I wed. If you love me ask no questions; you will know all when we reach St. Edmund's."

And there was that in his manner forced me to be content.

Nor could Ela help me when I put to her some questions, though she seemed somewhat sad.

"I know nothing," she answered. "Aylmer has not confided in me, and it would not be fair to speak my thoughts. Let us wait as he bids us; be sure whatever he does it will be well."

No more was said then, but immediately after the holy feast of Christmas, when all men's hearts are glad within them for the joy that has come to earth, we set forth upon our journey with a goodly following, Aylmer's train and mine—a numerous company. As we drew near to the castle of Wodebrig I looked at Ela, who was riding close behind me.

"Sweet, I near lost you there," I said softly, thinking of her dear head beneath Raymond's foot; but she made answer only, "Poor Raymond; we may not blame him now." For the young Earl was not at Wodebrig. When Eustace, Stephen's lawless son, had set upon and plundered the con-

vent of St. Edmund's, Raymond had been among the foremost, wreaking, men said, some private grudge of his own. Eustace had died shortly after, but Raymond lost the king's favour and was a banished man. Later, when my lord Henry came to the throne, the young Earl made his peace, the past was forgotten, and he dwelt in amity with all of us.

As it was Christmastide the convent was crammed with guests come to keep the feast. There was no room for us within the walls, and we had to take up our quarters in the little town, with many other noble knights and ladies. Only Aylmer was admitted without question, as if the monks had been expecting him, and we saw him no more until on the appointed day we met within the chapel. Never had I seen the place so full; for word had got abroad that something more than common was in doing. Yet looked I in vain for the bride and her friends; not a sign could I see of them.

Then for the first time it came to me what Aylmer might intend. Only part of his design, however; none but Ela, who knew his mind more than most—knew, indeed, more than I had thought—had any inkling of the rest. But it was too late for me to stay him now; he had laid his plans too well. And thus it came about we stood forth together as when we were boys, and Aylmer, with hand upon the shrine as mine had been, told the true story of Baldwin's death. But the people were not stirred one whit; nay, I saw one laugh and jog

his neighbour's elbow, as if to say what a coil about nothing. All had happened so long ago Baldwin was clean forgotten. Alberic was dead, Milo Fitz-Henry was dead, the lad's father had long since perished over-sea; of his kin not one remained. Then after a silence, seeing that no one spake, Aylmer raised his voice again:

"Do none among you cry for vengeance? Is there no man to ask Baldwin's blood at my hands?"

And still there came no answer, and I was glad. I thought all was at an end.

But Aylmer spoke yet once more. "Then seeing that no man condemns me, needs must that I condemn myself. Great is my sin and sore, for long has it burdened me grievously; now through Heaven's mercy I find peace. My goods and my lands have I devised unto my brother, the holy monks of St. Edmund have consented to receive me among them. Henceforth is Aylmer of Tottinge dead; there is only Brother Bernard."

"No, no!" I cried, springing forward, but Aylmer caught my arm.

"Brother, would you keep me from Heaven's peace? It is no hasty resolve, I have pondered it well. My mind has been set upon it for long, and I waited only until you could take my place. Sorrow not, Alain. Be merry rather; it is the day of my espousals, and I rejoice."

I could say no more and sank to my knees, covering my face lest the unmanly tears should be spied. The monks struck up a joyful chant, and

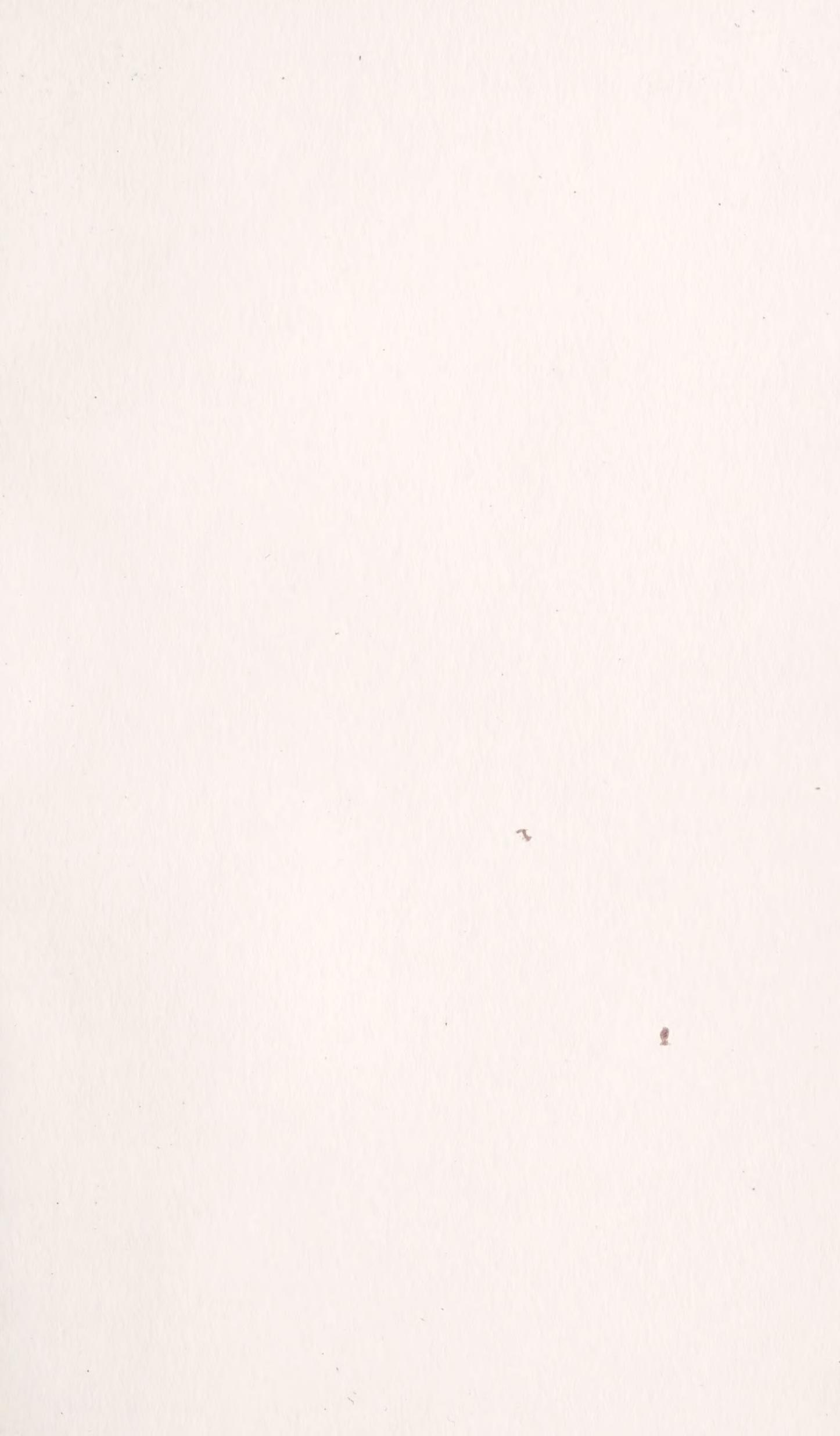
filed out two and two, carrying Aylmer with them; and the chapel emptied, and still I knelt on, lamenting sore for my brother. For well I knew it was not only the slaying of Baldwin sent him there, but the love still in his heart for Ela. Nor did I move until Ela herself came to my side, and with her own eyes full of tears, led me away with loving words, striving to give me comfort.

Yet after a time, when my first trouble was passed, I came to see that Aylmer, as usual, had acted in wise fashion. Besides that it brought peace unto his soul; he was happier serving Heaven than in the world. He had never taken pleasure in battle for its own sake as I did; he had fought only to serve his king, and a cloistered life suited him well. And Aylmer has since risen to high honour. When our uncle became lord Abbot, Brother Bernard was made Prior in his stead, and some day he may mount even higher.

A few months after Aylmer entered the convent, Stephen died, and Henry of Anjou came to his own. He was crowned and consecrated king of England amid universal rejoicings, and thus—as saith a learned clerk, friend to Brother Bernard, whose words have aided me much in setting down this story—thus, through Heaven's mercy, after a night of misery, peace dawned upon the realm of England.

THE END.





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